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The Journal
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Critique of an 'Artefactual' landscape: Erich Mendelsohn's engagement with the built and natural environment, 1919–1931

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Among German architects active following the First World War, Erich Mendelsohn was remarkable for his written essays, public presentations and celebrated *Bilderbücher* (picture books) which documented conditions in the United States, Europe and the Soviet Union. Although Germany and those foreign places were as different culturally as they were geographically, Mendelsohn's depiction of them reflected his consistent sensibility both towards architecture, *per se*, and towards architecture as part of a visual landscape. In fact, Mendelsohn's output during that period embodied a reversal of the typically Romantic relationship between landscape and an architect's vision. Rather than drawing inspiration for new man-made forms from nature, Mendelsohn evoked a world in which technical artefacts constituted the background against which his own new architecture might emerge. Over the course of more than a decade, Mendelsohn sought to critique this 'artefactual' landscape, characteristics of which demanded an architect's service towards reconfiguration or reassembly. Comparative review of work in all three media—print, photography, building design—testifies to Mendelsohn's unique position among his Modernist contemporaries and their handling of architecture's engagement with its environment.

(A preliminary version of this paper, much abridged, was presented at the annual conference of the Society for Architectural Historians, Chicago, 2010.)

Seize, construct, and convert the earth!
Erich Mendelsohn[1]

Introduction

Among German architects active following the First World War, Erich Mendelsohn was remarkable for his early projects conceived for sites far beyond the borders of his native land. Mendelsohn's travels to Holland, Palestine, the United States and the nascent Soviet Union[2] resulted, too, in extensive written and photographic descriptions, many of which were published by the popular press. Although Germany and those foreign places were as different culturally as they were geographically, Mendelsohn's letters, lectures and books reflected his consistent sensibility both towards architecture, *per se*, and towards architecture as part of a visual landscape. His architectural work was itself hardly less consistent. From 1919 through to 1931, the years of Mendelsohn's greatest professional success, Mendelsohn worked

 1360-2365 https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2017.1351771

within a clear conceptual framework by which he would relate his own designs to their surrounding environments.

In fact, Mendelsohn's output during that period embodied a reversal of the typically Romantic relationship between landscape and an architect's vision. Rather than having drawn inspiration for new man-made forms from nature, Mendelsohn evoked a world in which technical artefacts constituted the background against which his own new architecture might emerge. Mendelsohn, in his public lectures, depicted the contemporary landscape's constituent elements as primarily artificial or else, if natural, as merely abstract, geometrical entities. Throughout his photographic essays, Mendelsohn represented the natural landscape as subsumed *a priori* beneath material detritus, essentially inorganic and without connection to human values such as idealism or place-based identity. And, in his design work over the course of more than a decade, Mendelsohn sought to critique this 'artefactual' landscape, characteristics of which demanded his own architectural service towards reconfiguration or reassembly.

Already apparent as early as 1919, this perspective persisted in later presentations and in his books *Amerika: Bilderbüch eines Architekten* ('An Architect's Picture Book') and *Russland, Europa, Amerika*. Photographs taken or selected by Mendelsohn for these books point to a formal process by which man-made things came to substitute for the natural landscape and its generally-held moral oppositions: spirit versus rationality, fecundity versus barrenness, or joy versus dread.[3] Mendelsohn's most successful architectural designs of the mid-1920s may be interpreted similarly. Comparative review of work in all three media—print, photography, building design—testifies to Mendelsohn's unique position among his Modernist contemporaries and their handling of architecture's engagement with its environment.

Mendelsohn's architecture: landscape, context and criticism

In its September, 1927, issue, the satirical, Berlin-based magazine *Ulk* published a two-page spread by the artist Martin Koser, entitled *Die neue Bauform*: ('The New Design'; Fig. 1).[4] In this illustration, a grotesque building has been formed from a collage of architectural elements. Appendages to its form, such as an over-sized ship's ventilator and a human figure giving a military salute, have been culled from non-architectural sources; otherwise, the constituent elements of both the large building and its surrounding environment derive from modern buildings depicted at that time in the popular press. At the base of the large building, photographs of smaller, mostly domestic buildings have been placed to mimic the texture of the dense, contemporary city. A cartoon figure of an elderly man, dressed in an overcoat and capped by a bowler hat, regards the 'New Design' with apparent resignation. At the lower right-hand side of the illustration is an additional picture caption, which reads: 'If only we can change ourselves into "twisted people", then we can live quite comfortably in this place.'[5]

Readers of *Ulk* and its parent publication, *Berliner Tageblatt*, would likely have been less befuddled than the man in the picture. The most obvious

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 22
Number 5

Figure 1. Martin Koser, 'Die neue Bauform' from *Ulk*, 56 (1927), pp. 282–283 (Heidelberg University Library, *Ulk* 56.1927, pp. 282 and 283; originally-published image used with permission of the artist's estate).

Figure 2. Mendelsohn, *C.A. Herpich Sons Façade* (day and evening), from *Erich Mendelsohn, das Gesamtschaffen des Architekten: Skizzen, Entwürfe, Bauten* (Berlin, Rudolf Mosse, 1930), pp. 104 and 106; photographs attributed to Arthur Köster (Library of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation, University of Maryland, Arthur Köster © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; originally-published image used by permission of the family of Erich Mendelsohn).

target of this graphic satire should have been familiar as the C.A. Herpich Sons building by Mendelsohn, most of which had been completed in the year of Koser's photomontage (Fig. 2). As architect, too, of the Berlin headquarters of the Rudolf Mosse Publishing Company (which produced *Berliner Tageblatt*), Mendelsohn and his designs had been promoted extensively to Mosse's readership by both print and patronage. The Herpich store's façade renovation had been controversial among conservative city officials, and the extended battle for approval made the design and its architect emblematic of what others called *Neue Bauen*.[6] As portrayed by the jumbled, collage-like landscape at the base of Koser's photomontage, the background for this new architecture was essentially *more* new architecture, as though the process of design could be conceived as enlarging or deforming

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 22
Number 5

those visual elements already at hand. The magazine illustrator may have been ostensibly unflattering (if not unfair) towards Mendelsohn's Herpich design, but Koser made his point by making use of a visual language which derived in large part from the architect's own well-known picture books, the first of which had been published by the Mosse Company just the year before. Inspired by the architect's travels to the United States in 1924 and, later, to Russia, these books are essentially visual narratives by which the architect sought to promote his ideas about Europe's own potential architectural development. Yet to examine their photography's formal construction indicates another fundamental, if only implicit, concern: Mendelsohn's view of architecture's surrounding landscape.

Historians have tended to ignore the relationship of Mendelsohn's designs to their environment, particularly for projects conceived before 1933, the year he left Germany. Writers have found ample material of interest relating to Mendelsohn's clientele, the commercial nature of his work, his Zionism or his relationship with other architects throughout the world. In addition, and not surprisingly, writing about Mendelsohn continues to emphasise the importance of the architect's early sketches for imaginary projects, conceived during the last years of the First World War. The drawings occasioned his initial notice among clients and established his reputation as a visionary architect for both public and professionals alike (Fig. 3a). These illustrations typically included no mark of a surrounding context, as though Mendelsohn's designs were intended for a landscape neither yet constructed nor, even, yet conceived. The only exception was his rare inclusion of an arc, representing the sky, drawn above a few later sketches (Fig. 3b). The effect of this gesture is exceedingly generic and evokes mostly what Mendelsohn himself once called 'tellurian and planetary things'.[7]

Figure 3a. Mendelsohn, *Imaginary Project* (1917), from *Erich Mendelsohn, das Gesamtschaffen des Architekten: Skizzen, Entwürfe, Bauten* (Berlin, Rudolf Mosse, 1930), p. 60 (Library of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation, University of Maryland; originally-published image used by permission of the family of Erich Mendelsohn).

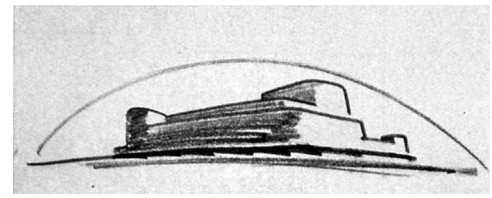

Figure 3b. Mendelsohn, *Sketch of Schocken Store for Stuttgart* (nd) from *Erich Mendelsohn, das Gesamtschaffen des Architekten: Skizzen, Entwürfe, Bauten* (Berlin, Rudolf Mosse, 1930), p. 150 (Library of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation, University of Maryland; originally-published image used by permission of the family of Erich Mendelsohn).

In his authoritative monograph on Mendelsohn's work, the historian Bruno Zevi argues that the architect's work before 1933 reflects a 'tenacious, intransigent, anti-naturalist approach'. Zevi continues:

> We look in vain for a tree, a hill in the background, a topographical feature... Mendelsohn frees the building from its natural context and despises environmental details. Only the ground and sky are of importance to him... Owing to their character, Mendelsohn's visions and later his constructions were both autonomous and open; they omit description and mimesis...[8]

Zevi's categorical insistence upon Mendelsohn's 'anti-naturalism' is belied by a series of sketches

entitled 'Dune Architecture', retained by Louise Mendelsohn and exhibited after her husband's death. Executed during a visit to the Baltic Sea in 1920, these drawings depicted the naturally occurring sand formations which he encountered there. In an interview conducted almost fifty years later, his wife would suggest that 'these shapes were in turn reflected in his actual working architectural drawings'.[9] But Mendelsohn himself excluded these drawings from publications during his lifetime, and so they are difficult, as isolated examples, to relate to his professional thinking. Part of the challenge of understanding Mendelsohn's view of landscape has to do with the elliptical character of his verbal comments about the subject. Although given to write a great deal throughout his career in Germany and afterwards, Mendelsohn's correspondence and essays were typically infused with rhetoric which had little room for description of natural surroundings. A typical example is an impressionistic account of Pittsburgh, dating to his first visit to the United States in 1924. The passage shifts quickly from a description of the city's environment to an emphasis upon artefact:

> An early glimpse from the Allegheny Mountains onto the rivers, the suburbs, and the city itself. The same disorderly skyline as New York. It is a tongue of land that re-enters the waters of the Ohio River, which starts here at the confluence of the Monongahela glacial stream and the Allegheny spring waters. All amid the mists of the American Ruhr, the collieries (which line the whole length of the track from Buffalo) and Carnegie's wells of steel.[10]

Mendelsohn's written rhetoric aside, another challenge may be the fact of his best work's almost exclusively urban settings. The commercial designs conceived at the time of his greatest professional success—the Herpich store, the Cohen & Epstein store, the Schocken department stores, the Petersdorff store or the Columbushaus—were those for whom urban relationships were fundamental to each building's unique plasticity and functional logic. In general, however, the architecture of cities and the morphology of their streets remain outside our considerations of 'landscape', except in the context of parks or gardens. That an understanding of landscape must include both rural *and* urban settings has been a repeated concern for much of the recent critical discussion about environmental design: 'A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring, or symbolizing surroundings'.[11] It is, therefore, through this filter that one can better understand those elements in Mendelsohn's vision which distinguished him from his contemporaries: the use of illumination for urban environments, his manipulation of formal discontinuities within his designs and his architecture's contrapuntal use of both new and existing architectural elements. Furthermore, even in his first public statements, as Mendelsohn attempted to stake out a unique position, he did so through a critique of *others'* use of landscape.

Word and image: Mendelsohn's public lectures and a critique of landscape

An early example is Mendelsohn's illustrated public lecture, 'The Problem of a New Architecture', conceived originally for his show at the Paul Cassirer Gallery in 1919 and given later under the auspices of the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* in 1920.[12] The place

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 22
Number 5

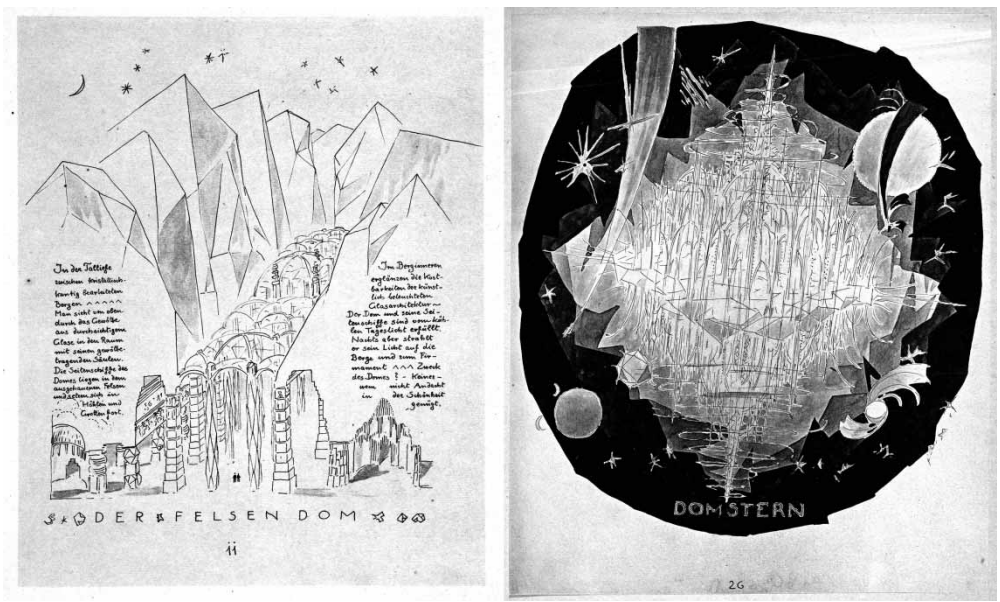

Figure 4. Bruno Taut, *The Cathedral in the Rocks* and *The Cathedral Star* (1917), from *Alpine Architektur* (Hagen, Folkwang-Verlag, 1919), plates 11 and 26 (Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University).

and audience of his lecture were themselves significant. The *Arbeitsrat* had been established by Bruno Taut and had been populated by many of the artists who were soon to contribute to the 'Crystal Chain' correspondence, in which the faceted forms of nature were explicitly evoked as the wellspring of a new architecture. Although Mendelsohn had been affiliated with the *Arbeitsrat* through his connection with the related *Novembergruppe*,[13] he rejected offers to participate in their gallery shows.[14] He accepted, however, their invitation to speak about his own work.

With little apparent irony, Mendelsohn's first two lecture slides were drawings selected from Taut's *Alpine Architecture:* 'The Cathedral in the Rocks' and 'Cathedral Star' (Fig. 4). In the published version of the lecture, Mendelsohn identified Taut's drawings with the first of 'three very different ways of realizing this future [architecture, which] will eventually merge. . .':

> I am going to read to you what the artist felt when he visualized it. 'In the deep valley between crystal-edged, carved mountains, one can see from above, through the transparent glass vault, into the room with its supporting columns' … Here the ideal experience is placed above the spatial one.[15]

Mendelsohn then drove his point home with a direct reference to *The Cathedral Star*: 'It is liberated from

any architectural vision... Here is the call: Create symbols, not forms.'[16]

Taut's drawings were among the few references to landscape throughout Mendelsohn's lecture.[17] In his direct quotation of Taut's own evocative language, Mendelsohn pointed his audience's attention towards the identification of landscape with a wellspring of feeling, not of form. From this perspective, landscape was not a meaningful context from which a design might derive its shape or its organisation. Rather, for Mendelsohn, Taut's words and drawings pointed back towards a source of an architect's emotion, the expression of which was purposeful only as a spur to his or her personal impulse towards design. To harness this impulse in the creation of 'New Architecture', two other factors would be required: the increasing abstraction of spatial geometry and greater technical or material determinism. Mendelsohn's lecture ended, in fact, with a strong emphasis upon the latter. But the architect did allow that 'all three impulses are necessary'.[18] To integrate them, Mendelsohn would turn to a familiar model. If, in 1920, Mendelsohn had explicitly omitted what Zevi calls 'mimetic' content from his scheme for a new architecture, within three years Mendelsohn came to promote mimesis of a different kind. Rather than calling for architecture's *visual* analogy to natural forms, derived from the landscape, Mendelsohn instead proposed a *systemic* analogy. The occasion was the second of his published promotional lectures, given in four cities throughout Holland in November, 1923.[19] Mendelsohn had made a visit to that country two years before, and so his awareness of Amsterdam's and Rotterdam's increasingly divergent architectural cultures influenced a significant part of his presentation.[20] In a letter to his wife earlier that year, Mendelsohn wrote:

> Analytic Rotterdam rejects vision. Visionary Amsterdam does not understand analytic objectivity. Certainly the primary element in architecture is function, but function without sensual contributions remains mere construction. More than ever do I stand by my programme of reconciliation. Both are necessary.[21]

To effect this reconciliation, the architect resorted to a common biological trope, that of a building as an *organism*. Throughout the speech, entitled 'The International Consensus on the New Architectural Concept, or Dynamics and Function', Mendelsohn referred to both machines and buildings as organisms; he invested the term with the positive values of vitality, integration and balance. As a rhetorical technique, reference to 'organism' provided an easily understood term by which to embody for an audience his concepts 'dynamics' and 'function'. An organism is often motile, of course, and its metabolism is both metaphorically and literally dynamic. A thing alive also obviously functions, and yet its function rests integrally with its physical form. So in his presentation of 1923, Mendelsohn referred to his most famous building in these very terms: 'The Einstein Tower, without question, is a clear architectural organism. That said, there are reasons why it is not a purely functional organism. But it seems to me that one cannot take any part away from it, neither from its mass, nor from its motion, nor even from its logical development, without destroying the whole.'[22]

The use of this metaphor was not, of course, unique to Mendelsohn. Architects throughout Europe and the United States had made reference

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 22
Number 5

to 'the organic' for over a century.[23] In Germany, architects since Gottfried Semper had identified Kant's influential concept of 'organism' in visible material systems, such as structure.[24] After 1910, Wasmuth Verlag's publication of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright occasioned for German architects a compelling visual example of this principle, filtered and transformed through the writings of American transcendentalists.[25] Wright's use of the term 'organic' in the Wasmuth volume accompanied a description of botanical forms, but he also described more generally 'the ideals of organic architecture' and their standing in opposition to the exigencies of traditional architectural practice.[26] In fact, Wright was soon to host Mendelsohn personally in his visit to the United States in 1924, and the latter's account of the occasion suggests that Wright echoed the sentiments of Mendelsohn's Dutch lectures: 'Wright says that the architecture of the future… is for the first time in history wholly architecture, space in itself… movement in three and four dimensions.'[27] Mendelsohn himself phrased this innovation in dialectical terms and responded to Wright 'that dualism disappears, just as it disappears in every organic whole, whether it is a living creature or a creature of man. The extent to which we achieve this is indeed a measure of our creative powers.'[28]

On the other hand, within the community of Berlin architects known as 'The Ring', of which Mendelsohn was a founding member, the notion of the organic in architecture had come to signify not form but the process by which form might be developed.[29] Before and after his visit to Wright, Mendelsohn used this sense of the metaphor and even extended its application from an individual architectural 'organism' to a complex one—the urban landscape. His 1923 lecture in Holland included the following proposition:

> If the close unity of the terms 'function' and 'dynamics' is true for the cell, the individual building, it is all the more so for the multi-cell system of the city. For even its smallest unit is not a disinterested spectator but a co-operating agent in the movement, and the street becomes, because of the speed of traffic, a horizontal track leading from focal point to focal point. The city of the future itself becomes a system of focal points that is, in panorama, the very fabric of space. Seen in this way, the biggest city of the modern world is, unlike the spatial miracles of the best old towns, an inorganic agglomeration of the most contrary elements. The cubist repetition of individual skyscrapers does not change this. But our era has before it, as few others in history have had, the need to create new cities, or at least to plan them.[30]

With little rhetorical preparation, Mendelsohn had transformed his organic metaphor. What had been a unique, integral entity—a building—became instead a constituent element of a spatial continuum. To be sure, each building (that is, each *cell*) was seen to participate in the life of the city as a 'co-operating agent'. Yet this point provided the basis for a comparative critique. 'The city of the future' engages the 'fabric of space', *but contemporary cities do not.* Mendelsohn's description of the emerging modern urban landscape was, for once, succinct: 'an inorganic agglomeration of the most contrary elements/[t]he cubist repetition of individual skyscrapers…'

Figure 5. Hamilton Maxwell, Inc., *Manhattan: South Ferry* (nd) (Milstein Division of United States History, Local History & Genealogy, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations).

The image which accompanied this passage was a view of the tip of Manhattan (Fig. 5). An aerial view, the scene supports no apparent geographical orientation, as if the rules of perspective have ceased to apply in 'the biggest city of the modern world'. Intriguingly, the visual character of the photograph supported a double meaning for Mendelsohn's use of the word 'cubist'. On the one hand, the bulk of each skyscraper is primarily rectilinear, and so its random-looking placement against the many others reinforces each building's prismatic, *cubic* characteristic. On the other hand, the relative anonymity of each building and the group's crowded placement suggest many facets of a single thing, akin to the visual language of painterly Cubism, to which the term obviously relates. Akin, too, are the layered contrasts evoked by collage, especially in the urban photomontages exhibited during that time by Berlin artists such as Hannah Hoch and Paul Citroen (Fig. 6). But for further illustration, Mendelsohn turned from New York to Le Corbusier's *Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants,* published only the year before, in 1922.[31] Referring neither to the project nor the architect

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 22
Number 5

Figure 6. Paul Citroen, *Metropolis* (1923) (Alinari/Art Resource, NY; Galleria Pictogramma, Rome, Italy; Citroen, Paul (b.1896) © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ c/o Pictoright Amsterdam).

by name, Mendelsohn presented the scheme as follows:

> In this French plan the paths of the main highway superbly sustain the rapid traffic in their horizontal placement and their cubist self-containment. The highway cuts through the suburbs and the city in a straight line. Yet the dominance of the central city district betrays too obvious a scheme to be able to impart to the organism of the entire system the inescapable vitality of our modern era. In addition, the high-rise buildings are placed abruptly upon the plane, without connection to the other 'cells'.[32]

The aerial perspective of Le Corbusier's image is similar to the view of New York's skyline—elevated, as though taken by an aeroplane—yet this scene is dominated by the effect of one-point perspective. Once again, Mendelsohn described as 'cubist' elements whose relationship appeared articulated and disjoint, although here the word related most obviously to the rectilinear geometry of the illustrated buildings. Mendelsohn alluded to the scheme's exaggerated functional zoning,[33] which in his view undermines the premise of an urban organism's 'vitality'. To Mendelsohn, Le Corbusier's towers seemed without physical (or even visual) continuity; for Mendelsohn, they were therefore indistinguishable from New York's skyscrapers. So instead of pointing towards a way forward, *Contemporary City* embodied for Mendelsohn merely urbanism's status quo, the datum against which his own 'New Architectural Concept' would rise.

What, therefore, would be the landscape upon which a future-minded architect would operate? To judge by these lectures alone, Mendelsohn's vision had apparently crystallised. A landscape could be characterised, first of all, as a 'fabric of space' and would be perceived visually, not through the experience of other senses. Its elements would be abstract ('focal points') or else, in its basic 'cellular' component, artificial. This landscape would have little connection to fundamental values such as idealism or place-based identity.[34] Mendelsohn's presentations evoked what might be termed an 'artefactual' landscape, the visual and systematic characteristics of which could provide, at best, merely the source of an environment's reconfiguration through the process of an architect's design.

Seen through an 'Architect's Eye': the world abroad and its representation

It was through foreign travel that Mendelsohn sought confirmation for this critique. His desire to travel came from his impulse to observe, itself an ethical judgement about one's relationship to the visual world: 'Our optical perception fails frequently—mostly from habit or indifference, only rarely from incapacity.'[35] Mendelsohn was inspired, too, by public discussions then at large in Germany: the media-based representations of *Amerikanismus,* which depended upon architecture for its iconography; the conservative reaction of Berlin's architectural establishment towards his own work and the work of his allies among the *avant-garde*; and the example, elsewhere in Europe, of competing architectural innovations, especially those which had already announced solutions to those problems of the New Architecture which Mendelsohn himself

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 22
Number 3

sought to solve. Of course, Mendelsohn was neither a critic nor a cultural historian. He was an architect, and as such his interest to describe the world around him was essentially twofold. First, Mendelsohn sought to promote his point of view among the general public, which included clients and supporters in the press. Second, he also sought to define with precision the cultural and technical parameters affecting his own designs. Mendelsohn's travel (and the resulting publications and architectural projects) therefore reflected not only the need for professional self-promotion, but also Mendelsohn's faith in his observational acuity and an intuitive affinity for the increasingly influential visual language of mass media.[36]

The outline of Mendelsohn's 1924 visit to the United States has been well established by other writers.[37] Mendelsohn's first book, *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten,* drew considerable attention, having attracted the notice of architects, critics and historians from the moment of its original publication in 1926. One writer has called *Amerika* 'the twenties' most sophisticated and most comprehensive attempt to use photography to decipher the metropolis—not only identifying the major forces shaping it but vividly conveying the new kinds of spatial feeling it engendered.'[38] For the Russian designer El Lissitzky, a friend of Mendelsohn's, the volume 'thrills us like a dramatic film. Before our eyes move pictures that are absolutely unique. In order to understand some of the photographs you must lift the book over your head and rotate it.'[39] Mendelsohn's own feelings for these photographs' impact were unequivocal, tempered only by his ambivalence about their audience: '[N]othing appeals more readily to modern man than pictures. He wants to understand, but quickly, clearly, without a lot of furrowing of brows and mysticism. And with all this the world is mysterious as never before, impenetrable and full of daring possibilities.'[40]

Visits to New York, Buffalo, Detroit and Chicago brought Mendelsohn in direct contact with many of the structures (including skyscrapers, grain silos, automotive factories and commercial buildings) already known to Germany's architectural vanguard (Fig. 7). What made Mendelsohn's book so influential was the directness with which he presented his material. *Amerika* illustrated these subjects with a compositional sensibility legible to its European audiences as the formal method of the *avant-garde*: haphazard juxtaposition, attenuated proportion and asymmetrical placement within the picture frame. The historian Jean-Louis Cohen has written of a cultural 'horizon of reception', relating to established German perceptions about the United States,[41] yet one must also include among those expectations the visual language of modern art. In his selection of photographs for *Amerika*, Mendelsohn was among the first to apply that language to subject matter which itself embodied modernity.[42]

In his travels to the Soviet Union, the first of which occurred in 1925, Mendelsohn carried with him different expectations. Mendelsohn's biographer, Kathleen James, has written that Mendelsohn's perceptions of Russia were based on his identification of the place with 'Eastern' spiritual values, distinct from those prevalent in the more-familiar societies of Western Europe.[43] Such values were essentially

Figure 7. Erich Mendelsohn, images from *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (Berlin, R. Mosse, 1928), pp. 17, 127, 141 (Library of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation, University of Maryland, p. 17; Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, pp. 127, 141; originally-published images used by permission of the family of Erich Mendelsohn).

pre-modern, described by Mendelsohn in his correspondence as a 'yearning for salvation' combined with an 'Eastern resignation'.[44] So it is not surprising that his photographs of Russia's physical environment represent both. One encounters salvation, in the form of ornate, ecclesiastical architectural forms or the utopian designs of contemporary architects. One also encounters resignation, in the form of crude, labour-intensive construction techniques or (for Mendelsohn) even cruder visual sentimentality (Fig. 8).

Russia's unique geographical extent also impressed Mendelsohn. One senses here another 'horizon of reception', since his mention of the Russian landscape was invariably tied to that same conceptual framework by which he understood Russian spirituality. After his second visit in 1926, he wrote to his wife that '[t]he endless space of Russia makes dream and aspiration—idea and action—impenetrable in the negative sense, infinite in the positive.'[45] To be sure, as merely another paraphrase for 'resignation' and 'salvation', these words tell us little. But his identification of these contradictory terms with 'space' recalls his earlier treatment of landscape. As before, in his 1923 presentation in Holland, Mendelsohn's experience of landscape remained essentially abstract and made possible, primarily, by vision. And, as before, Mendelsohn projected onto such abstraction opposing ideals, the dialectic of which would result, crucially, in some kind of *genius loci*. For Mendelsohn, that dialectic depended upon an architect's design, without which those elements would remain in visual and, essentially, moral conflict. His 1929 book *Russland*

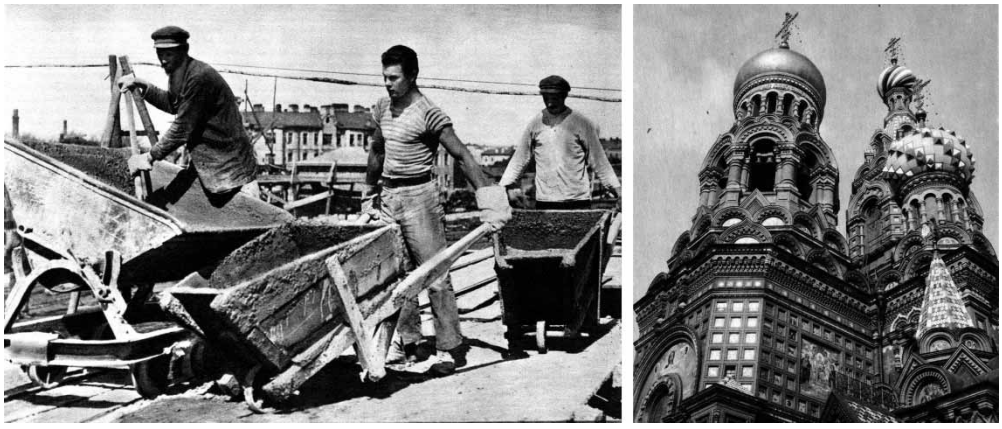

Figure 8. Erich Mendelsohn, photographs from *Russland Amerika Europa: ein architektonischer querschnitt* (Berlin, R. Mosse, 1929), plates 17 ('Bauplatz') and 48 ('*Leningrad/ Augerstehungkirche*') (Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University; originally-published images used by permission of the family of Erich Mendelsohn).

Europa Amerika attracted, therefore, the endorsement of critics for whom *Neue Bauen*'s increasingly strident functionalism already appeared sterile. In the United States, Lewis Mumford reviewed the book and referred to 'the European tendency to isolate and caricature in architecture some single element of the modern scheme'.[46] To Mumford's eyes, Mendelsohn's photographic essay acknowledged and challenged that tendency.

> Erich Mendelsohn's arrangement of pictures is a method of thinking, not abstract and analytical, but concrete and synthetic. The two processes are complementary; but the abstract method, formed by mathematics and fostered by finance, until recently ruled out the architectonic mode.[47]

More recent writers have seen *Russland Europa Amerika* as a terminal statement of the positive phase of German *Amerikanismus,* after which the United States and Soviet Russia—alternative models by which to measure German society—came under more direct attack by parties from across the political spectrum.[48] As the work of a practising architect, of course, Mendelsohn's book suggests another consideration. How did Mendelsohn's own architectural design reflect the ideas put forth in his photographs? How would the constituent elements of the 'New Architecture' relate to the already-existing visual environment, as documented and framed by Mendelsohn's lectures, articles, and publications?

Image and building: composition from context

In retrospect, Martin Koser's satiric photomontage hit not far from its mark. By the mid-1920s, Mendelsohn's approach was to establish a limited vocabulary of architectural elements, each of which was recognisable for its contribution to a building's signature identity or its surroundings. Otherwise, Mendelsohn depended upon those surroundings to afford his work a datum, legible for its cultural

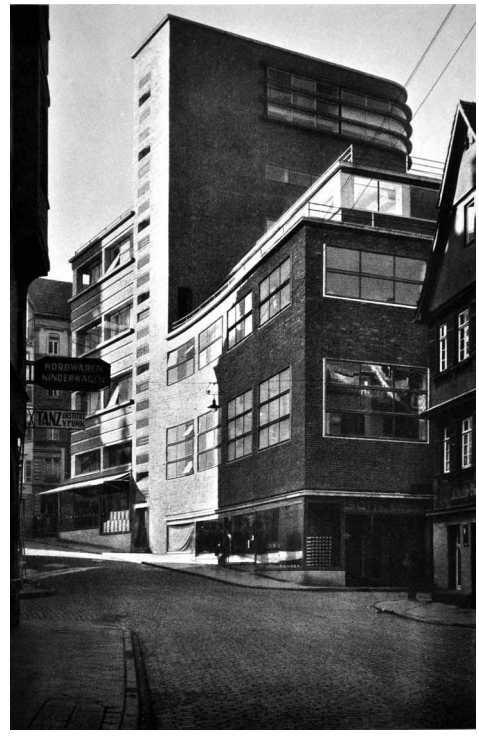

Figure 9. Mendelsohn, *Schocken Store, Stuttgart*, from *Erich Mendelsohn, das Gesamtschaffen des Architekten: Skizzen, Entwürfe, Bauten* (Berlin, Rudolf Mosse, 1930), p. 154; photographs attributed to Arthur Köster. (Library of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation, University of Maryland, Arthur Köster © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; originally-published image used by permission of the family of Erich Mendelsohn).

'meaning' as much as for its formal, visual contrast. An obvious example, conceived early in the period under consideration, was the *Berliner Tageblatt* Building, completed in 1923 with the collaboration of Richard Neutra. The project's celebrated contrast between new and old was tempered by the careful alignment of upper-level window openings with the previously existing structure's bays below; indeed, the latter supports the former both literally and figuratively. Similarly, the Cohen & Epstein store, completed in Duisburg in 1927, vigorously juxtaposed old with new. In both buildings, Mendelsohn meant for 'New Design' to contrast directly with traditional, stone-clad architecture, but their mutual coexistence was as no mere expedient. The interface between old and new became, in fact, the compositional locus for Mendelsohn's best-known architectural gestures: the oriel window, the light shelf and the shadow joint.

Most of Mendelsohn's commercial commissions, designed for active urban environments, explored the interrelationship between old and new in other ways. The three Schocken stores, for instance, appeared upon completion to be without obvious visual connection to previously existing structures.[49] Each building was composed of a limited number of strong, recognisable features: horizontal, projecting lines of mouldings and cornices; bands of fenestration, alternating with bands of masonry or stone; and light-coloured columns either interrupting the ribbon windows or, as in Chemnitz, placed just behind. No obvious reference to traditional architecture would have been discerned in such highly abstracted building elements, even if their functional roles—coping, windows and columns—should have been self-evident. Instead, it was the heterogeneity of the buildings' massing which created an architectural context *sui generis*. Stair towers, staggered setbacks and building bulks' stepping to match the fall of adjacent streets were together orchestrated to produce an experience of multiple perspectives and constantly-changing views of the building (Fig. 9). The risk of such heterogeneity was incoherence, but the architect's controlled purpose led not

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 22
Number 5

to chaos but to a rich, tightly-woven landscape of architectural forms.

The qualities of Mendelsohn's approach may be seen in contrast with his contemporaries'. Mendelsohn was not the only German Modernist to design for commerce, although he was certainly among the most successful.[50] Both established and rising talents such as Peter Behrens, Hans Poelzig, the Luckhardt brothers and others vied to apply the logic of their *Neue Bauen* to functional demands of retail display, sales and offices. A particularly useful example for comparison is Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's competition entry for the S. Adam department store, dating to 1928. Intended to expand S. Adam's existing store at a busy Berlin street corner, Mies' proposal was a single, rectilinear block, wrapped by the faceted glass skin that was his innovation for the 1921 Friedrichstrasse railway site competition.[51] Only two gestures served to inflect the building's massing towards its urban surroundings: the ground level was subtly set back from the face of the building bulk above, and the uppermost storey was pulled back from the interior property line to create space for a terrace. Such minimal gestures did little to stake out a new environmental position (as Mendelsohn did) or to temper the idealism with which Mies asserted his vision (as Mendelsohn had to). Emphasised by the technique of photomontage, Mies' architecture was meant to appear strong, unified and aloof from its context—in this last regard, the opposite of Mendelsohn's.

Only a few months later, in 1929, Mies joined Mendelsohn and three other architects in competition for a site adjacent to the Friedrichstrasse railway station.[52] Here, too, Mies' solution was as compositionally self-contained as Mendelsohn's was typically extroverted (Fig. 10). The latter included a variety of building elements arranged in contrapuntal fashion: curved base, rectilinear tower, penthouse-level projected roof and vertical bands of windows. Mendelsohn's design process was documented by a series of models, which illustrated the architect's testing alternative solutions in advance of selecting a final one. In this project, a diverse architectural palette was at the service of the Mendelsohn's critical assessment of the site's chaotic conditions. Written testimony about the competition by Charles du Vinage, Mendelsohn's foremost office assistant, described the architect's site-focused criteria for evaluating the design: '1. profitability, 2. sun position, 3. the shadow [cast upon the surrounding] area, 4. traffic, 5. [and the] aesthetic and urban design standpoint.'[53] Acknowledging even the financial rationale for the locale's commercial development, du Vinage's account illustrated the complexity of all architectural processes and of Mendelsohn's iterative process in particular.

A store built in Breslau between 1927 and 1928 affords us the clearest example of Mendelsohn's method. The Petersdorff store explicitly incorporated the three convergent qualities identified by *Russland Europa Amerika*: imaginative spirit, technological know-how and counterpoint. The building's most noticeable feature, an outstanding glazed façade, was suspended above Schuhbrücke (now Szweska Street) and extended to the corner at Ohlauer Strasse (now Oławska). The effect of the façade, fully six storeys in height at the corner,

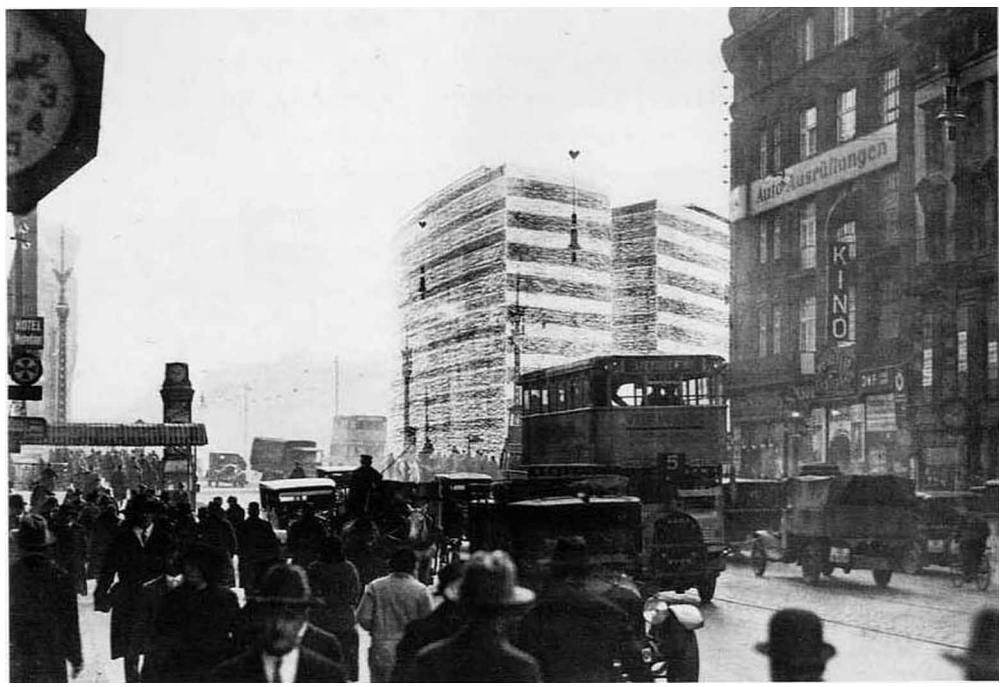

Figure 10. Mies van der Rohe, *Friedrichstrasse Railway Site,* Berlin (1929), from Werner Hegemann, 'Hochhaus Friedrichstrasse', in *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau*, 25 (1930), p. 194 (Library of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation, University of Maryland, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn).

is largely horizontal, so that only the delicate bronze window mullions add a contrasting, vertical accent. But it is the corner element itself which was most dramatic and visually dominant (Fig. 11a). Placement of this glazed 'bullnose', a recurrent motif in so many of Mendelsohn's projects, had in this case little to do with the building's interior functions. Instead, the rounded form was used primarily for contrast with the surrounding environment, which included—as a sort of architectural fiction—rectilinear elements located elsewhere within the building itself. The use of windows, traditional 'punched openings' despite their innovative bronze detailing, afforded the Petersdorff store consistency, not with its own iconic cantilevered corner, but with the urban fabric at the building's edges (Fig. 11b).

Like several of the other stores mentioned above, the Petersdorff project was an extensive alteration of a pre-existing building and so its design shows again that Mendelsohn's designs were not contextual in the sense used today to describe buildings within urban settings. His buildings were composed not merely to continue the profile of existing roofs

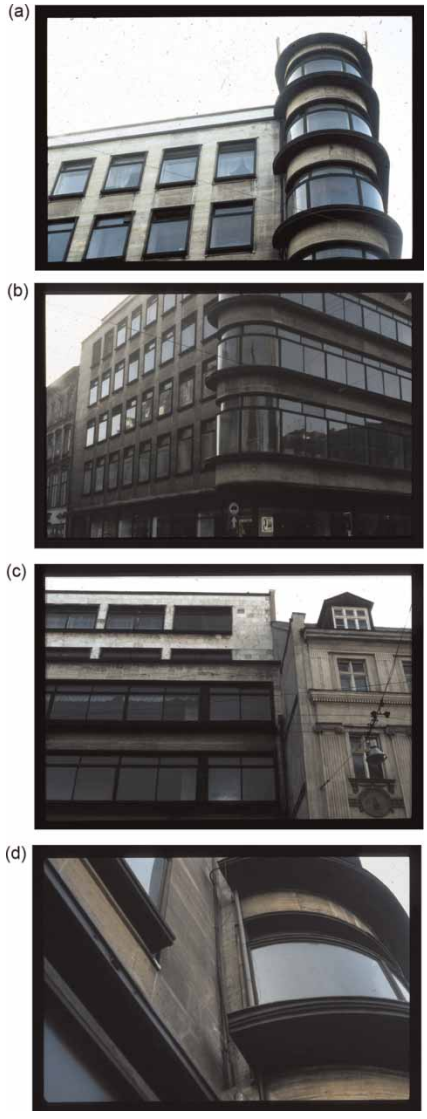

Figure 11a,b,c,d. Mendelsohn, *Petersdorff Store,* Breslau (1927–1928); existing conditions, December, 1991 (Jeremy Kargon © 2012).

and cornices (Fig. 11c), nor to celebrate a structure's place within a continuous historical trajectory. Rather, he sought first of all to afford his buildings a unique visual identity, distinct from either the past or the present; and, second, he chose to reinforce that identity through formal contrast: flat versus round, darkness versus light, stone versus metal or opaque versus transparent (Fig.11d). The result was, nevertheless, a human-scaled environment, artful yet founded in technology's expansion: 'culture' *and* 'civilization', in the formulation then current among German critics.[54] If Mendelsohn tried furthermore to create an *art* of disjunction—to balance disparate elements in exquisite tension, without irony—he by necessity depended upon the public's familiarity with the quotidian disjointedness of the surrounding urban landscape. Like Koser's grotesque *Die neue Bauform* on the printed page, Mendelsohn's work in three dimensions depended upon the popular expectations which his efforts in all media helped to create.

Multiple conclusions/alternative landscapes

Towards the end of his career in Germany, Mendelsohn's projects, writings and travel revealed a changing point of view. His design of his family home, completed in early 1930, afforded the architect an opportunity to work extensively within a dramatic, park-like environment. For the first time in his *oeuvre*, Mendelsohn had explicitly to compose with nature: diverse foliage, extensive views and what he called the 'variating [sic] play of the atmosphere'.[55] The house itself retained the technical and stylistic characteristics of his commercial work, but Mendelsohn attended just as carefully to the inter-

play between interior and exterior—the 'green chamber'[56] surrounding his house. In an amply illustrated publication (entitled, with little apparent self-consciousness, *Neues Haus, Neue Welt)* Mendelsohn documented his enchantment. The architect's home would reflect his personal mastery and invention, but the surrounding landscape, including Lake Havel, would throughout remain the focus of attention. Pictures selected by Mendelsohn extensively documented the home's verdant environment. Uniquely among his published photographs, Mendelsohn even included views from the interior *towards* the landscape (Fig. 12), yet the book's descriptive text and the pictures' captions betray a subtle ambivalence. For all its beauty, this 'new world' could be characterised as unreal, still 'a dream-like-landscape'.[57]

One discerns a more substantive change in another context. The spiritual and intellectual dialectic which underlay the previous decade's sustained critique of Europe's built environment receded, or else was effectively resolved through the agency of his great professional success up to that time. Instead, his attention turned to a different critique, the subject of which would soon cause the architect to abandon 'dream-like-landscapes' for more painfully realistic ones. A 1931 visit to Greece, made at the suggestion of Amédée Ozenfant,[58] sparked a sustained enthusiasm for the visual character of that region. From that point on, Mendelsohn's writing reflected more and more the emergence of a 'cross section' quite different from the East-West axis of his photograph-based publications. Instead, descriptions of Mediterranean places and their surrounding landscapes indicate an alternative, North-South alignment, by which a modern, 'northern' culture—and its architects!—might reclaim the original values of their 'southern' antecedents.[59] In these later voyages, Mendelsohn found little use for his camera, even for as famous a site as the Acropolis. As he wrote in Berlin's popular press, 'every photograph and every drawing detracts from the scale of the effect of the Parthenon and reduces it to the actual dimensions... For drawing and photography are incapable of reproducing one of the most essential elements of architecture, the enclosure by space.'[60] But a subsequent passage was especially evocative:

> This play between the brilliance of the atmosphere and the radiation back from the built space, i.e., the play between air and material, softness and hardness, limitlessness and limitation of space, the exhalation of the landscape and firm breath, the fluidity of nature and its stabilization in the architecture.
>
> Nature, with the geographical situation and climate, is every time specific, i.e., the carrier of the idea of the building. For on situation and climate equally depend its technical perfection—its use of materials and its construction—and its architectonic expression.[61]

Mendelsohn's written style remained here as fustian as ever. But what was different was the architect's sustained acknowledgement of the natural environment's reciprocal effect upon architecture, whether archaic or new. Here, within view of Piraeus and its Mediterranean port, Mendelsohn testified to an alternative grasp of a building's interaction with the elements of its surroundings. 'Fluidity' and 'stabilization', not contrast or counterpoint, had

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 22
Number 5

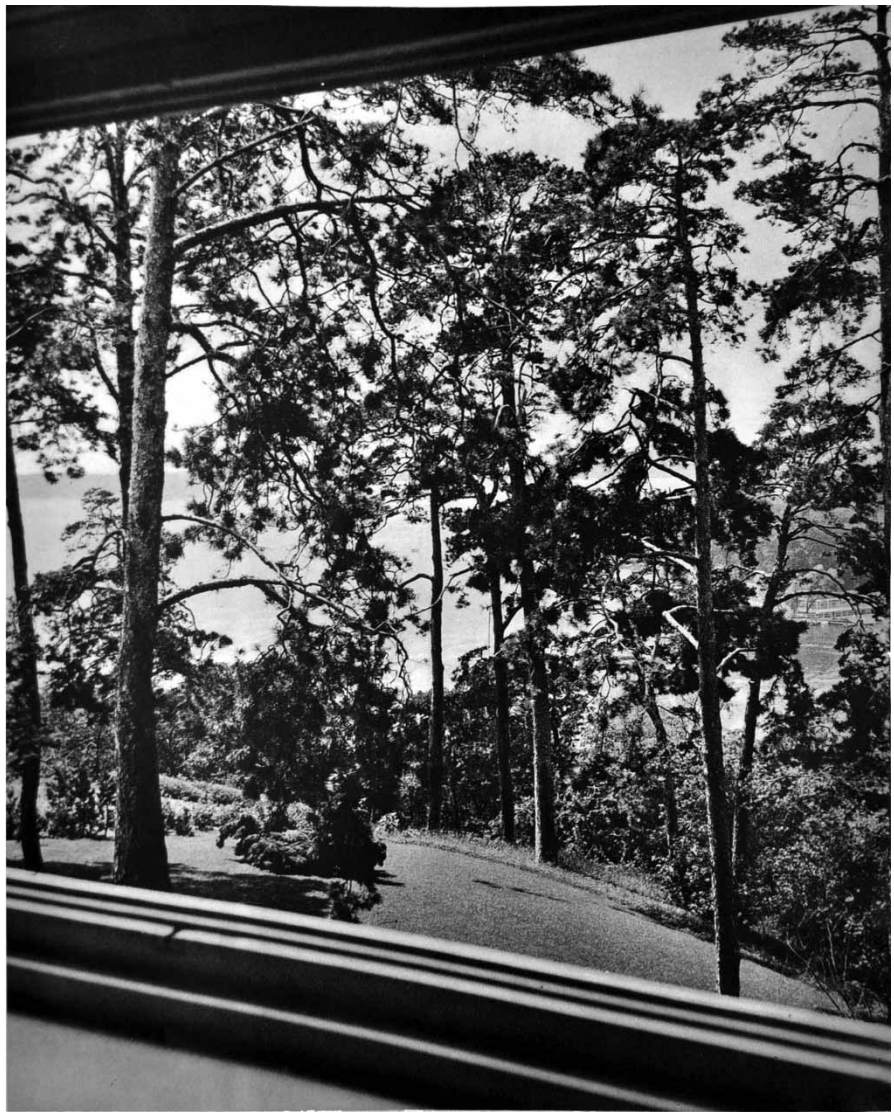

Figure 12. Mendelsohn, *A Dream-like Landscape*, from *Neues Haus, Neue Welt* (Berlin, R. Mosse, 1932), p. 56; photograph attributed to Arthur Köster (Library of Architecture, Planning, & Preservation, University of Maryland, Arthur Köster © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; originally-published image used by permission of the family of Erich Mendelsohn).

come to characterise a building's place in the landscape. Almost a decade earlier, at the end of his 1923 lecture in Holland, Mendelsohn exhorted his audience to 'Seize, construct, and convert the earth!' As a measure of his enchantment with the natural world, of course, Mendelsohn's hortatory words might have been perceived then as dismissive. But as the springboard for a critical method of reconciliation between architecture and landscape, his words should well have been inspirational.

Notes and references

1. Erich Mendelsohn, 'The International Consensus on the New Architectural Concept, or Dynamics and Function', *Complete Works of the Architect,* trsl., Antje Fritsch (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 34.
2. Place names throughout this article will conform to the conventions of Mendelsohn's own period. For instance: 'Palestine', under the British mandate, for locations in what is now Israel; 'Breslau', the city in German Silesia, for what is now Wrocław, Poland.
3. See, for instance, the influence of Schiller's evocation of nature and similar ideas upon writers and artists at the beginning of the twentieth century, as documented in Kari Elise Lokke, 'The Role of Sublimity in the Development of Modernist Aesthetics', in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 40 (1982), p. 424.
4. Martin Koser, 'Die neue Bauform', *Ulk*, 56 (1927), p. 176. The attribution to Koser is based on the printed legend at the top of the illustration's page. The illustrator Martin Koser was a frequent contributor to *Berliner Tageblatt*'s supplemental publication *Ulk*; see Karsten Schilling's recent dissertation, *Das Zerstorte Erbe: Berliner Zeitungen der Weimarer Republik im Portrait* (Norderstedt, Books on Demand GmbH, 2011), 247 n. 427. An alternative attribution credits the image to 'Kosel', apparently Bernard Kosel, the Viennese graphic artist: Bruno Taut, *Modern Architecture* (London, The Studio, Ltd., 1929), p. 2. The attribution to Kosel is, however, most likely a transcription error.
5. *Nun brauchen wir bloss alle Spiralmenschen zu werden, dann muss sich's in solcher Bude ganz hubsch wohnen.*
6. Kathleen James, *Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 111–115.
7. Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 24th June, 1917; in, Oskar Beyer, ed., *Eric Mendelsohn: Letters of an Architect* (New York, Abelard-Schuman, 1967), p. 40.
8. Bruno Zevi, *Erich Mendelsohn: The Complete Works,* trsl., Lucinda Byatt (Boston, Birkhäuser Publishers, 1999), p. 44.
9. Susan King, *The Drawings of Erich Mendelsohn* (Berkeley, The Regents of the University of California, 1969), p. 26.
10. Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 22nd October, 1924; in Oskar Beyer, *op. cit*., p. 69.
11. Denis Cosgrove, Stephen Daniels, eds, *The Iconography of Landscape* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 1.
12. Kathleen James, *op. cit*., p. 26.
13. Bruno Zevi, *op. cit*., p. xix.
14. Oskar Beyer, *op. cit*., p. 51.
15. Erich Mendelsohn (1992), *op. cit*., pp. 8–9.
16. *Ibid*.
17. Mendelsohn's only other such mention of natural forms is, significantly, a reference to drawings by Hermann Finsterlin, another member of the 'Crystal Chain': '[T]he restrained energy of such utopian spatial fantasy plays with the image of organic nature, in which a snail's shell is placed in a tower

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 22
Number 5

instead of a glazed cupola, or the swelling of humus-laden earth is forced into an architectural posture.' *Ibid*., p. 18.

18. *Ibid*., p. 20.
19. Kathleen James, *op. cit*., p. 55.
20. Gilbert Herbert, Liliane Richter, *Through a Clouded Glass: Mendelsohn, Wijdeveld, and the Jewish Connection* (Berlin, Wasmuth Verlag, 2009), pp. 40–43.
21. Oskar Beyer, *op. cit*., p. 60.
22. Erich Mendelsohn (1992), *op. cit*., p. 33.
23. Peter Blundell Jones, *Hugo Häring: The Organic Versus the Geometric* (London, Edition Axel Menges, 1999), p. 83.
24. Mari Hvattum, 'Gottfried Semper: Between Poetics and Practical Aesthetics', in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 64 (2001), p. 543–544.
25. Mark Mumford, 'Form Follows Nature: The Origins of American Organic Architecture', in *Journal of Architectural Education*, 42 (1989), p. 27.
26. Frank Lloyd Wright, *Drawings and Plans of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1983), p. 3 (reprint of *Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright,* published in Berlin in 1910).
27. Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 5th November, 1924; in Oskar Beyer, *op. cit*., p. 72.
28. *Ibid*.
29. Peter Blundell Jones (1999), *op. cit*., pp. 77*ff*.
30. Erich Mendelsohn (1992), *op. cit*., p. 33.
31. Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1982), p. 253; Stanislaus von Moos, *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis (*Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1982), p. 223. *Une Ville Contemporaine pour 3 Millions d'Habitants* was first shown late in 1922. But the image included by Mendelsohn in his *Complete Works* (1992) appears to be a photograph of the diorama which appeared in the *Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau* no earlier than 1925. It is unknown which image was actually presented by Mendelsohn in Holland.
32. Erich Mendelsohn (1992), *op. cit*., pp. 33–34.
33. Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1982), pp. 190–191.
34. Miles David Samson, 'German-American Dialogues and the Modern Movement Before the "Design Migration", 1910–1933' (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1988), pp. 183*ff*. Samson places Mendelsohn and his contemporaries, such as Martin Wagner, in the context of an older German debate concerning *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. The material progress exemplified by technology's expansion (in the American context) was criticised by Wagner and others as bereft of spiritual values necessarily supported by a more healthy society's 'culture'. This widely-shared critique of Americanism underlies Mendelsohn's more general critique of landscape.
35. Erich Mendelsohn, *Russland Europa Amerika* (Basel, Birkhäuser Verlag, 1989), p. 164.
36. Miles David Samson, *op. cit*., p. 183.
37. Kathleen James, *op. cit*., pp. 57–70; see also Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come* (Paris, Flammarion, 1995), pp. 85–98.
38. Christopher Phillips, 'Twenties Photography: Mastering Urban Space', in *The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis*, ed., Jean Clair (Montreal, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), p. 218.
39. El Lissitzky, 'The Architect's Eye: A review of Erich Mendelsohn's *America*', in *Photography in the Modern Era,* ed., Christopher Phillips (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), p. 221.
40. Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 11th July, 1927; in Oskar Beyer, *op. cit*., p. 96.

41. Jean-Louis Cohen, postface to *Amerika: Livre d'images d'un Architecte*, by Erich Mendelsohn (Paris, Les Éditions du Demi-Cercle, 1992), p. 226.
42. Christopher Phillips, *op. cit*., p. 221.
43. Kathleen James, *op. cit*., p. 73.
44. Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 14th July, 1927; in Oskar Beyer, *op. cit*., p. 97.
45. Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 11th July, 1926; *ibid*., p. 90.
46. Lewis Mumford, 'Steel Chimneys and Beet-top Cupolas', in *Creative Art*, 4 (1928), p. xliv.
47. *Ibid*.
48. Jean-Louis Cohen (1995), *op. cit*., 98.
49. Schocken's Nuremberg store, completed in 1926, did involve a remodeling of an existing building, which was no longer visible after the renovation. The Stuttgart store stood alone on an entire city block. The store in Chemnitz, completed in 1929, maintained party walls to each side but did not integrate a previously existing building within its design.
50. The historian Regina Stephan has estimated that Mendelsohn's staff swelled to about forty persons by the end of 1928, at that time one of the largest offices in Europe: see her chapter 'Mendelsohn and His Assistants', in, Stephan, ed., *Eric Mendelsohn: Architect 1887–1953* (New York, The Monacelli Press, 1999), p. 155.
51. Adrian Sudhalter, 'S. Adam Department Store Project', in, Terrence Riley, Barry Bergdoll, eds, *Mies in Berlin* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2001), p. 230.
52. Werner Hegemann, 'Hochhaus Friedrichstrasse', in *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau*, 25 (1930), pp. 191–194. Hegemann's report is joined by a description of Mendelsohn's approach to the project, written by Charles du Vinage, pp. 194–195. An earlier competition for the same site, dating to 1921, included Mies' earliest 'glass tower' design.
53. *Ibid*., p. 194.
54. Miles David Samson (1988), *op. cit*., p. 183; see also Jean-Louis Cohen's treatment of this same theme in Mies' reading of Le Corbuisier's Voisin plan in 'German Desires of America', in Terrence Riley, Barry Bergdoll (2001), *op. cit*., p. 369 and n. 38.
55. The accompanying German text reads 'Wechselspiel der Atmosphäre': Erich Mendelsohn, *Neues Haus, Neue Welt* (Berlin, Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1997), p. 22; originally published by Rudolf Mosse Buchverlag in 1932.
56. *Ibid*., p. 16.
57. *Ibid*., p. 56.
58. Ita Heinze-Greenberg, 'An Artistic European Utopia at the Abyss of Time: The Mediterranean Academy Project, 1931–34', in *Architectural History,* 45 (2002), p. 448.
59. Gilbert Herbert, Liliane Richter (2009), *op. cit*., p. 113.
60. Erich Mendelsohn, 'Acropolis and Parthenon', *Berliner Tageblatt* (May, 1931); in Oskar Beyer, *op. cit*., p. 112.
61. *Ibid*.