

Architecture, Urban Planning and Housing During the First Five Year Plans: Hannes Meyer in the USSR, 1930–1936

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Shortly after his arrival in the USSR in October 1930, the Swiss architect and former director of the Bauhaus, Hannes Meyer, was interviewed by *Pravda*. Meyer explained why he had left Central Europe for the opportunity to live in the Soviet Union. He had come, he said, to work with people who were ‘forging a true revolutionary culture, who [were] achieving socialism, and who [were] living in that form of society for which we have been fighting ... under the conditions of capitalism’. He and seven of his Bauhaus students had come to make a ‘gift to socialism and the revolution of all our knowledge, all our strength, and all the experience that we have acquired in the art of building’.¹ They could no longer work under the capitalist system, Meyer explained, because of the insoluble contradictions of a world built on ‘animal’ individualism and the reality of exploitation of one man by another.

Meyer’s enthusiasm and commitment seemed unbounded, and he became a member of a community of foreign architects, engineers, and technical experts who found in the Soviet Union’s Five Year Plans opportunities to engage in work on a scale and reflecting a moral commitment that was unparalleled, they believed. What Meyer knew about the USSR was second-hand at best, gleaned from such

Soviet visitors to the Bauhaus as Kasimir Malevich and Dziga Vertov, or from books by El Lissitzky and Erich Mendelsohn.² Clearly, much that Meyer heard appealed to him. The transformation of a backward agrarian country into a modern industrial one, the building of new urban settlements in virgin territories, the reconstruction of older capitalist cities into ‘socialist’ ones were all to be done on a scale impossible in a West sunk in economic depression. Individualism and privatism were to be replaced by collectivism, and a new ‘proletarian’ architecture and urban planning would transform the face of the old Russian land. The Soviet Union was enormously attractive for foreign planners. They would no longer be simply technicians, but something grander, participants in a great undertaking that seemed to have no parallel in history.

Meyer arrived in Moscow an uncompromising propagandist for modern functionalist architecture and scientific urban planning. When he left six years later, his views of building had been altered considerably, not solely by the extreme rigours of Stalinist construction in a backward country, but by an evolution of his political ideas as well. His allegiance to Marxism-Leninism, to the desires of the Soviet proletariat, and to the world’s first communist state

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¹ Meyer, quoted in Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning 1917–1935*, New York: George Braziller, 1970, p. 258.

² El Lissitzky, *Russland: Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion*, Vienna: 1930; Erich Mendelsohn, *Russland, Europa, Amerika: ein architektonischer Querschnitt*, Berlin: Rudolf Mosse Buchverlag, 1929.

fundamentally transformed him, his aesthetic beliefs, and his approach to building and urban planning. He came to the USSR when modernism in building and scientific functionalism in planning were still viable there. When he left they were, to a great extent, denigrated and rejected. He supported both positions. It is how the evolution in his views on architecture and urban planning took place, and how it reflected the political, social, and aesthetic changes occurring in Soviet society that will be the primary concern of this essay. Secondly, it will treat a broader issue: the role of the planner and architect in general in highly politicised surroundings where 'principles' are of less validity than ideological conformism.

By the late 1920s, Hannes Mayer (1889–1954) had long asserted that building was, above all, a social activity, and that it was the architect's duty to recognise his responsibility to society as a whole as well to his client and to his own aesthetic preferences. Meyer's earliest work had been with industrial workers' housing and cooperatives, and his approach to architecture and planning was scientific and pragmatic. His first buildings, he said, were intended to emphasise simplicity, equality, and truthfulness. Through a close architectural relationship to nature, he hoped to free urban industrial workers from their psychological 'exile' in gloomy city tenements.³ By the mid-1920s he had established a reputation as a proponent of pure scientific functionalism, and the social activism he had stressed earlier in his career seemed lost in his enthusiasm for buildings as 'structural inventions', constructed according to the demands of standardisation and mass production.⁴ 'Building', he wrote, 'is only organisation: social, technical, economic, psychic organisation'.⁵ It was this uncompromising functionalist 'modernism' propounded by Meyer that led Walter Gropius to appoint him head of the Bauhaus's new architecture department in 1926, and director of the school in 1928.

Under his leadership, Meyer recalled, the Bauhaus emphasised the production of useful items through students' collective work, with the interests of society as a whole the paramount consideration.

Innovation and experimentation came to be associated with Meyer's tenure as head of the school, but so too did political radicalisation, as Meyer himself became increasingly sympathetic to Marxism. As early as 1925, Meyer had expressed his belief that only 'a total reorganisation of society [could] bring about that authentic integration between individual and community life that [my earlier projects] pretended to be'.⁶ In 1930, in an attempt to counteract what they saw as a public perception that Meyer had politicised the school, the Dessau city council fired Meyer and replaced him with Mies van der Rohe. As we have seen, the capitalist West offered few enticements to him as it fell ever deeper into an economic depression, but from Moscow an invitation came to help construct a new world, and Meyer accepted it.

If the USSR was building great urban and industrial centres, and planning even larger projects that were without precedent, it was not yet clear which approach to architecture and urban planning the country's increasingly centralised government would select. The Bolsheviks themselves had never been too precise in laying out their plans for post-revolutionary urban development, but they had never refuted Marx's call in the *Communist Manifesto* for 'a combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries, gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equable distribution of the population over the country'.⁷ During the 1920s two alternative groups in the USSR had put their ideas forward most forcefully. The 'urbanists' wanted to break up the existing large towns in the country because they were 'expressions of the capitalist regime'. The settlements should then be reassembled into agglomerations of large 'communist' apartment blocks in new collectivised, post-capitalist cities (each would have a population of about 50,000 inhabitants), with 'communes' of approximately 4,000 inhabitants sharing apartment houses and urban facilities. The 'disurbanists' planned to build smaller settlements that would be closely related to their natural surroundings, and which would avoid the problems associated with capitalist industrial cities. The 'Linear City' of the Spanish planner Soria y Mata appealed to them

³ Hannes Meyer, 'Die Siedlung Freidorf', in his *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1980, p. 14.

⁴ Meyer, 'Ein Völkerbundgebäude für Genf', in *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, p. 34.

⁵ Meyer, 'Bauen', in *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, p. 49.

⁶ Meyer, quoted in Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979, p. 168.

⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, New York: International Publishers, 1948, pp. 30–31.

especially as a model. These cities of 100,000 to 200,000 inhabitants would be divided into linear zones of 'communication', industry, open space, housing, public buildings, parks, and agriculture, for example. Dmitrii Miliutin's book, *Sotsgorod*, published late in 1930, seemed in the eyes of many of those in power in the Soviet government to provide the best answer for the USSR's needs for Marxist land development, acceleration of industrialisation, and encouraging of collectivisation. Yet no final official decision on urban planning had been made, and in the end a variety of planning approaches were adopted by the authorities. Meyer himself supported no group openly, but was engaged in a number of architectural and urban planning activities that related to them. He did join VOPRA (the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Architects) immediately after his arrival, however, because of its promotion of what it called the 'proletarian' basis of socialist architecture and for the application of Marxism-Leninism to planning.

Meyer worked first as a teacher in VASI, the Higher Architecture and Building Institute, where he emphasised practical building-site experience as well as the brigade system that he had used at the Bauhaus. His teaching concentrated on housing construction, and he repeated to his Soviet students what he had been saying for years, that a dwelling was not only a 'piece of machinery for living in', but was also a 'biological apparatus serving the needs of the soul and the body'.⁸ In any dwelling, he taught, the architect must consider the daily routine of the inhabitants, their interaction with the outside world (their 'conscious experience of the landscape'), as well as the projects' 'geobotany'.⁹ New housing was to be the product of specialists: 'economists, statisticians, hygienists, climatologists, industrial engineers, standard experts, heat engineers'. The architect, who had been an artist, was now to be a specialist in organisation.¹⁰

While teaching at VASI, at the same time Meyer worked as chief architect for Giprovts, the Trust for the Building of Higher and Technical Schools, and as a consultant for Giprogor, the City Building Institute, where he put together development plans

for the cities of Kerch, Briansk, and Ivanovo-Voznesensk. Shortly afterwards, he was promoted to the position of chief architect for Giprogor, and worked on the development of Chita, Krasnoiarsk, Rybinsk, and the Perm-Molotovo region in the Ural Mountains. Always he applied to his teaching and project evaluations the rigorous scientific, functionalist principles that had governed his work in Central Europe, and demanded that his Soviet students do the same. In each case, before any building was begun, he and his team analysed the site's technical, economic, political, psychological, and ecological elements. He was appointed chief architect for the city building trust, Standardgorproekt, where he worked on the overall development plan for the industrial city of Nizhnyi Kurinsk in the Perm basin.

Meyer also participated in the competition for the Moscow city plan of 1931–32, and with his colleagues H. Geimanson and Peter Bücking produced a design calling for Moscow's major industrial area to be built as a satellite to the northeast of the centre. In the end, of course, neither Meyer's proposal nor anyone else's was adopted until the 'Stalin' plan of 1935 was chosen. Meyer explained, reasonably enough, that none could effectively be adopted during the First Five Year Plan because the city was simply growing too fast for planners to keep up with it. Finally, Meyer was also made a member of the commission charged with selecting a design, from a full range of styles and approaches, for the new Palace of Soviets. Nothing he was asked to do, and nothing taking place in architecture and urban planning in the USSR at this time seemed to contradict Meyer's own professional and aesthetic beliefs.

It was becoming clear to him that certain tendencies relating to planning and housing construction were beginning to be favoured by the Communist Party, however. Certainly, he understood that the experience of the first *piatiletka* was suggesting that the costs of capital investment in industry forestalled the construction of housing and the provision of social services dreamed of by the Bolsheviks of the 1920s.¹¹ *Pravda* confirmed this at the end of May 1930 by reporting a Central Committee decision: the

⁸ Meyer, 'Bauen', in *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, p. 47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49.

¹¹ S. Frederick Starr, 'Visionary Town Planning During the Cultural Revolution', in Sheila Fitzpatrick, (ed.), *Cultural Revolution in Russia 1928–1931*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 226.

'left-wing militants' who believed that it was possible to surmount 'in one leap' the obstacles in the path of the socialist transformation of life were mistaken; instead the process would be much slower, with the costs of construction an important consideration.¹² The recurring shortages which slowed economic growth during the First Five Year Plan meant that 'standard conventional construction', which in most areas implied housing built of wooden logs, would take precedence over the use of *defisitnyi* steel and cement needed for heavy industry. Everyone saw this as a pragmatic answer to a genuine, immediate problem, and it did not seem to indicate a fundamental decision by the Party on the future either of architectural styles or urban planning theories.¹³ This willingness to permit pluralism seemed confirmed by an exhibit devoted to the Bauhaus under Meyer's directorship held in 1931 in the State Museum of Modern Western Art. Meyer's work in Dessau and Berlin was admired and praised by those who saw the exhibition. Different political and technical priorities did not affect this appreciation.

It was within this context that Mayer expressed his own current ideas, in his 1931 article, 'On Marxist Architecture', in which he summarised what he had learned in the West and what he had become aware of in the USSR. First, he repeated his fundamental contention that architecture was thinking and organisation, not art, but science, and that the architect was an organiser and coordinator. Buildings were not art, but products of organisation. In a socialist society, they were shells for the display of true proletarian art, but they themselves could not be proletarian art. This meant, he continued, that it was wrong for modern builders, particularly those in socialist countries, to recreate buildings in the styles of the past, styles which were reflections of class antagonisms which no longer existed in socialist society. Meyer had moved away from historicist styles in his own work long before he arrived in the Soviet Union. His earliest works were almost baroque in their site planning and external aesthetics, although his interior layouts were always determined by social and hygienic concerns.¹⁴ They reflected the realities of working in a capitalist housing market,

and even the cooperative societies for whom Meyer often worked were part of this capitalist system. Yet a truly Leninist architect, Meyer argued, must avoid deviating to the left in the direction of utopianism, or to the right towards classicism (or its post-war variant, he noted interestingly, 'aesthetic modernism'). Instead, he must be dedicated to 'revolutionary elasticity and scientific objectivity' in order to maintain architecture as a 'weapon in the class struggle'.¹⁵ He was no longer an 'aesthetic lackey' working for the glory of kings or popes, or for the profit of capitalists. He must use 'deficit' materials because that was what was demanded by the necessities of the First Five Year Plan, and because the Leninist architect was an organisational helper in the building of the planned socialist economy of the USSR. What Meyer did not understand as yet was that an official architectural language that did not correspond in aesthetic terms with his own was in the process of being approved by the Soviet Communist Party. Even VOPRA, to which Meyer owed at least nominal allegiance, had said form should express content, and should be a means of developing the proletariat's class consciousness. 'Scientific' planning and organisation of housing, industry, cities, and entire economic regions were being pushed to the wayside.

1932 was a year of important developments in Soviet architecture. Pressure was put on Soviet modernists and functionalists to reject many of their earlier pronouncements as 'social-fascist'. They were now expected to share the views of Party Secretary Lazar Kaganovich, who said that modernism was essentially bourgeois, that tradition should be the basis of Soviet design, and that expressiveness was more important than efficiency of design.¹⁶ The internationalist functionalism of the post-war decade, according to this increasingly nationalistic architectural aesthetic, was the product of decaying capitalism. Its excessive formalism and emphasis on engineering at the expense of beauty were not ideals to be emulated in a nation building a new culture. The German functionalism of the 1920s, it was argued, had resulted from Germany's need to make reparations to World War I's victors, and had no

¹² Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution*, New York: George Braziller, 1970, pp. 259–60.

¹³ Ernst May, quoted in El Lissitzky, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1970, p. 188.

¹⁴ See Meyer, 'Die Siedlung Freidorf', in *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, pp. 14–24.

¹⁵ Meyer, 'Thesen über marxistische Architektur', in *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, p. 99.

¹⁶ See Wojciech G. Lesnikowsky, *Rationalism and Romanticism in Architecture*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1982, p. 109.

justification in the USSR. The Soviet state stressed the need for symbolic expression in a monumental architecture whose mission was to be both artistic and ideological. Rationalisation and standardisation sought to destroy the past, the new Soviet architectural establishment announced, whereas socialism desired the preservation of the cultural values of the past because they were its heritage.¹⁷

Significantly, too, the Soviet state turned with favour toward large 'socialist' urban centres, and even Miliutin was forced to condemn his 'linear city' ideas as being 'social fascist'. 1932 was also the year in which all independent architectural organisations were dissolved, in anticipation of the formation of a single Union of Soviet Architects, which would work within officially-approved guidelines. Finally, it was in 1932 that Ivan Zholtovskii's historicist project for the Palace of Soviets was accepted, a decision that seemed to symbolise the rejection of modernist esthetics throughout Soviet intellectual life. The new officially-approved plans for the Moskva Hotel, the Soviet of Ministers building, the Central Red Army Theatre, and the downtown metro stations in Moscow proved that the Zholtovskii choice was not a fluke. Stalin's decision to support this new 'post-modernist' style of architecture made it clear to those in the Party that the functionalism of the 1920s was now defunct in the Soviet Union. Increasingly, everything Meyer read and heard seemed to contradict what he himself had written and believed. Here and there in his personal letters one can sense a certain disapproval of the direction the formerly innovative Soviet architecture was in the process of taking.¹⁸ As an advocate of what was coming to be rejected, and as a foreigner, he found himself in a particularly awkward position.

By 1934, Meyer had made his own decision about the discussion in Soviet architecture, but it was a choice tempered by the fact that he himself had given up designing individual buildings in favour of working solely in urban planning. In an article in the official *Arkhitektura SSSR* (*Architecture of the USSR*), Meyer attempted to explain his earlier positions. During the First Five Year Plan, he wrote, standardisation and the conservation of building materials had been essential, but with the Second,

beauty and comfort could be considered as well. The proletariat could (and should) have 'beautiful' houses if they wanted 'beautiful' houses. Buildings could now legitimately reflect a variety of local tastes, traditions, and preferences. In terms of style, the workers knew best, even if they wanted the exteriors of their apartment buildings to look like the homes of the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie, and seemed indifferent to their apartments' floor plans as long as the building's external design was attractive (or pretentious) enough. Meyer reconciled himself to his new position by adding that it was still the duty of the urban planner, through the use and application of scientific principles, to help organise the collective way of life in a socialist society. In Meyer's own work, that meant a scientifically-organised floor plan with provision for modern sanitary facilities, and buildings set into a rationally-planned urban context with transportation, shopping, and recreational amenities close at hand. His aesthetic ideals, then, did not necessarily have to contradict his Marxist commitment to the proletariat.

Meyer further explained his change in perspective in an article printed in German in Moscow in 1935.¹⁹ Looking back, he said that soon after he began work in the USSR he had come to realise that much of what he had taken for granted abroad had to be rejected as irrelevant because of the ever-increasing tempo of change and development typical of the Five Year Plans. He learned more about collaborative work, he added, and noted that it was through his Soviet and Communist Party acquaintances that he and his foreign comrades were able to reach the proper ideological path of Leninism.

What he had learned about 'style' in architecture was particularly significant, he felt. The lack of ornamentation typical of the modern movement, and of Meyer's own earlier work, was indeed, he explained, the product of capitalist demands to keep building prices down. Western architects had forgotten the inspirational role that art on and in buildings could have. He learned this in a building site along the Kama river, he said: when the workers who would live and work in the new city he was planning were shown the preliminary sketches for the new community, they did not ask about how many

¹⁷ These were ideas expressed by the jury for the Palace of Soviets competition; see Hans Schmidt, 'The Soviet Union and Modern Architecture', in Lissitzky, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, pp. 218–22.

¹⁸ See Mayer, 'Auf Kommandierung im Fernen Osten', in *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, p. 137.

¹⁹ Meyer, 'Flucht ins Leben', *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, pp. 185–187.

bedrooms their apartments would have, or about where the kitchens and bathrooms would be, or whether the apartments would be oriented toward the sun and away from the prevailing Siberian winds. Instead, they wanted to know what kind of statues, murals, columns, and frescoes would be used to decorate their new city. To them, Meyer found, decoration was what was essential to architecture, and was part of the process of creating the new form of art that proletarian art would be. His capitalist experiences had damaged his imagination, he came to believe, and he had failed to see the creative possibilities of socialism.²⁰ He had been enriched by his life in the USSR, Meyer concluded. He had arrived in the Soviet Union considering himself a 'fully-trained' architect, he wrote, but soon learned that a truly Leninist architect must never stop learning, must be willing to change his ideas, prejudices, and preconceptions according to the demands of the proletariat. Ideology predominated over aesthetics, or rather, determined aesthetics.

If Meyer defended developments in the Soviet Union within the foreign exile community, he propagandised for it on a number of trips abroad as well, while criticising the 'decadent' Europe he felt he had left behind. Writing for *Arkitektura SSSR* in 1933, he described a capitalist Europe sunk in economic depression, where misery, joblessness, exploitation and stagnation contrasted with the extraordinary construction projects of the Soviet Union, which suffered only a shortage of labour.²¹ In Germany, he noticed especially the large number of new modern functional apartments that remained empty because no one could afford to rent them, while the older slum buildings remained as crowded as they had been during the years of the Hohenzollern empire. It was in housing construction, he wrote, that the class struggle in the bourgeois world could be best seen and understood.²² An article Meyer wrote for a Soviet newspaper compared the bickering, indecision, and ideological mediocrity involved in Geneva's new League of Nations building with Soviet monumental architecture.²³ One essay he planned

for 1934 would have contrasted the motivations of Soviet architects and builders with those of their Western colleagues. An architecture based on Marxist morality and a sense of social responsibility, Meyer wrote, was clearly superior to one founded on rents, speculation, monopoly capitalism, reformist-social democratic cooperatives, or fascism.²⁴

There seemed no doubt that Meyer had embraced the new Soviet aesthetics enthusiastically. In an interview with the Prague journal *Leva Fronta* (*Left Front*), he explained what had become the basis for his most fundamental aesthetic beliefs. The nature of contemporary architecture, and all its ramifications, he told the journal, was determined by one factor — that the revolutionary proletariat had seized power in the Soviet Union and were developing socialism on the basis of dialectical materialism. The new architecture of the socialist age was being born in the gigantic construction site that was the USSR. He said that he had learned three fundamental things in the Soviet Union: that the West's unemployment and housing crises could be ended only by the coming to power of the revolutionary proletariat; that a progressive architecture must have political awareness; and finally, that such an architecture could come about only through the victory of the proletariat, thereby making that architecture socialist.²⁵ Meyer's political conversion to Marxism-Leninism, begun in Dessau, was now complete. He had learned from the proletariat and from those he felt spoke for them, and he felt privileged to participate in the construction of the new world.

Meyer's own work in the USSR did not require him to design the kinds of buildings the proletariat (or their Stalinist mentors) wanted, of course, and that certainly made it easier for him to accept what would come to be known as Socialist Realism. He was actively engaged almost exclusively in urban planning, and left the details of architectural ornamentation in the hands of Soviet citizens, who in any case probably had a better sense of what it was the workers and those who spoke for the workers preferred. Meyer sincerely wished to participate in

²⁰ Meyer, *ibid.*, p. 187.

²¹ Meyer, 'Aus dem Reisetagebuch eines Architekten', *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, pp. 115–21.

²² See Meyer, 'Studie zur Wohnungsarchitektur (1935)', *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, pp. 173–85.

²³ Meyer, 'Der Völkerbundpalast in Genf', *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, pp. 147–55.

²⁴ Meyer, 'Deutsche Architektur der Nachkriegszeit (1919–1934)', pp. 156–60, and 'Kleinwohnungsbau im Westen', *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, pp. 160–68.

²⁵ Meyer, 'Antworten auf Fragen der Prager Architektengruppe "Leva Fronta" (1933)', *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, p. 128.

the socialist building programme of the Five Year Plans, and urban planning gave him that opportunity.

Meyer voiced his approval of the 1935 plan for the reconstruction of Moscow as an ideal socialist city, and served on a variety of committees, editorial boards, and educational planning commissions. The Moscow plan was one Meyer adapted for some of his own urban planning projects. In Moscow's case, what was envisioned was no full-scale reconstruction (as some of the radical urban theorists of the 1920s had suggested), but rather a reworking of the city's existing structure. The plan called for limiting Moscow's size, giving the old city centre a dominant ideological role, putting the allocation and administration of housing under the direction of a government office, establishing equality in the distribution of consumer and cultural services, and ensuring a limited travel time from home to work. Meyer's own project for Moscow's reconstruction did not coincide closely with the one adopted, but he had no difficulty supporting the one chosen.

Probably the most interesting assignment Meyer was given during these years dealt with the expansion of the city of Birobidzhan in the Soviet far east. The city was to be the capital of a new autonomous region established as a national homeland for Soviet and foreign Jews, and was expected to grow at an especially rapid rate. Meyer and his planning brigade travelled to the site, compiled a preliminary technical-economic description of the area, interviewed members of the local population (which included Russians, Ukrainians, and Koreans as well as Jews) in order to determine their desires and expectations, and made initial outlines for the work to be undertaken in 1933 and 1934. The plan itself reflected some of the general tenets of Meyer's own town-planning ideas (and was reminiscent particularly of the Törten housing estate in Dessau), while incorporating earlier Soviet theories about zone divisions, green space provision, and the need for low-rise (two to four storeys) rather than high-rise buildings, constructed in a style that fit the varying traditional preferences of the people who would live and work in them.

What satisfied Meyer most about his work for

Birobidzhan, he said, was that the project gave him an opportunity to try to achieve that breaking down of the division between city and country that Marx called for. Meyer contended that his experiences proved that this goal was attainable only under a socialism that industrialised agriculture and associated it with cities designed for light industry, within the context of a Leninist nationality policy. Again, ideology was predominant, and Meyer concluded his account of his stay in Birobidzhan by noting that what impressed him particularly about the project was that he and his Soviet colleagues were able to travel to the most distant territories of the USSR to 'build socialism', under the protection of Soviet power. No other country, he felt, could boast of such stability, enthusiasm, and energy at a time of international economic and military crisis. Again, he felt fortunate to be able to live and work in the USSR.²⁶

If Meyer was content to remain in the Soviet Union, he was certainly aware that the Soviet government was increasingly less comfortable with those antifascist émigrés it had welcomed in the early 1930s. Many of the foreign 'specialists' who had come to the USSR during the First Five Year Plan were beginning to leave by 1933, expressing a certain amount of frustration over the direction the Revolution seemed to be headed. In 1936 the first large-scale roundup of foreigners had taken place in the country, and one of Meyer's close associates had been arrested and deported. The USSR seemed to be withdrawing from the rest of the world in these years, and this was reflected as much in architecture and urban planning as it was in politics. By the mid-1930s, official spokesmen were no longer simply indifferent to 'idealist' principles of urbanism and disurbanism, but were renouncing them and indeed all 'foreign' planning theories. Soviet planners espousing what were considered 'internationalist' ideas found themselves as out of place as did their foreign colleagues, and the Party began to favour traditional architects who had few ties with foreigners.²⁷ Meyer recognised the precariousness of his own position, but unlike many of his German-speaking friends in Moscow, was fortunate in that he had a homeland to return to. In June 1936, following a lengthy visit to Czechoslovakia, he left the USSR

²⁶ Meyer, 'Gorod Birobidzhan', *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, pp. 139–46.

²⁷ See Kenneth Frampton, 'Notes on Soviet Urbanism, 1917–32', in David Lewis, (ed.), *Urban Structure*, London: Elek Books, 1968, p. 252.

for good, for Switzerland, and a new life that would eventually lead him to yet another new world — Mexico.

It seems likely that Meyer would have stayed in the USSR had he been allowed to continue the work he had begun there in 1930. What forced him to leave was the new nationalist ethnocentrism promoted by Stalin and his government. The modernist aesthetic of the Soviet 1920s that had attracted Meyer to the USSR in the first place had now been replaced by a proletarian post-modernism. While Meyer himself could never employ this new aesthetic in his own work, he never broke ideologically with the USSR, as his subsequent political activity indicated. His allegiance to communism was not to be shaken by the aesthetic retrogression of Stalinism. And as he said, he had learned a great deal in the Soviet Union about building for real people rather than for people in the abstract, despite the fact that even in his earliest works he had been careful to take into account the desires of his proletarian clients. He learned too that political and ideological pragmatism was of greater importance in his life than was scientific functional architecture.

Meyer's evaluation of what had taken place in the Soviet Union during the years he spent there is seen best in an article he published in 1942 in Mexico City. 'The Soviet Architect'²⁸ began by explaining to Meyer's Mexican readers how fortunate he felt to have been able to work in the USSR during the 'heroic period' of the First and Second Five Year Plans. The intent of the article, however, was to explain to Meyer's colleagues how and why Soviet architecture and urban planning had followed a path different from theirs, and why the Soviet Union was justified in adopting the architectural aesthetics it had. To Meyer, the reason was quite simple: what was progressive and proper in the West had no relevance in the USSR. The West could be proud of its modern glass and steel architecture placed in confrontation with the architectural legacies of the past because there it was progressive to do so. This was not the case in the USSR, however, and as a result it was improper for Western architects to denigrate Soviet building of the late 1930s, for example, as reactionary and academic. The difference was rooted in the Marxist dialectic: the material and political-economic reality of the world's first

'modernist socialist state' meant that styles and approaches different from those used in the West were necessary. Socialist industrialisation, collectivisation, the elimination of the cultural division between town and country, meant that people were taking a great step up, from the hovels of their past into comfortable, convenient housing. And these people wished to maintain the memories of their past, of their previously rural existence. Soviet architects were compelled to keep this in mind when building for their proletarian clients, Meyer insisted. Since the Soviet architect was trained politically as well as technically, and worked in a land where there was no private practice, in which only building for the community was permitted, it was his duty and privilege to fulfill the needs of the people.

The Soviet architect, Meyer explained, had to free himself from the mistaken modernist idea that building was only engineering, because that assumption contradicted the desires of the people for whom the new houses and cities were being built. The masses wanted statues, frescoes, and portraits of their new heroes of socialist construction; they wanted their metro stations to reflect the national riches of the USSR as well as its ethnic variety; because of their respect for the past, they wanted to restore older buildings, and they wanted new buildings to reflect the styles of the past. The Soviet architect had to be a master of Socialist Realism as well. Now that the foreign specialists (like Meyer himself, he might have added) had left, a new aesthetic synthesis of the old and the new, the national and the Soviet, was possible in the country. To Meyer, Boris Iofan's Soviet pavilion at the Paris international exhibition of 1937, surmounted by Vera Mukhina's sculpture of the worker and the collective farm woman, characterised the best of that synthesis. These symbols of the Revolution would satisfy the masses until the reality of planned cities and adequate housing could be achieved. What had resulted was not a cynical government manipulating the populace, Meyer believed, but a reflection of the genuine desires of the Soviet proletariat.

Not many modernist architects and planners in the West would have defended Soviet Socialist Realist architecture of the 1930s and 1940s with the enthusiasm Meyer did. But Meyer had undergone a sincere conversion when he became a 'Marxist-Leninist'

²⁸ Meyer, 'Der sowjetische Architekt', *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, pp. 213–22.

architect. He identified himself with the Soviet experience during the Five Year Plans, he called himself a 'Soviet architect'. He was swept up in the enthusiasm of construction of the early 1930s as were so many others, and like so many others was betrayed to a certain extent by a Stalinism which made life in the USSR impossible for him. Considering his devotion to communist ideology, it should then come as no surprise that he could accept what many Western architects considered 'retrograde' proletarian taste. Socialist Realism was, Meyer affirmed, a style that was sound, even necessary within the context of dialectical materialism. It is not 'astonishing' then, as one writer remarked,²⁹ that Meyer defended the 'grand historicism' of Stalinist Socialist Realism. Nor did it mean that Meyer was unprincipled as an architect or urban planner. Rather it is entirely consistent with his political beliefs. In the West Meyer had a reputation as a 'superfunctionalist', and there he had long rejected architecture's dependence on any historicist aesthetic principles. But in becoming a Marxist-Leninist, he had become an advocate for the proletariat. He modified his own aesthetics to fit his political beliefs, and if he could not bear to design buildings in the Stalinist style, he could work for the Revolution he had adopted as his own by contributing to a highly ideological yet nationalist tradition of city planning that even some of the harshest critics of Socialist Realism found admirable. Despite his own protestations to the contrary, Meyer was not simply a 'facilitator', either in the Soviet

Union or abroad. As an architect and planner, he was always something more. For Meyer, politics transcended aesthetics, and in the years following his conversion, he never turned away from his faith in Marxism-Leninism or the proletariat.

Few architects and planners are confronted with the moral and political choices Hannes Meyer had to make during his professional life. Few are offered the opportunities he was. Political commitment is increasingly rare among urban planners today, whether they work in communist or capitalist countries. For many among Meyer's generation, such commitment was essential to their definition of themselves and their careers. The results of Meyer's years of work, in the Soviet Union particularly, may have been disappointing, but the process involved was in his eyes vital to the fulfillment of his potential. If Meyer seemed to be a mere facilitator or technician, he was, after all, building a new world. If he seemed unprincipled in his lack of dedication to a single aesthetic vision, he was principled in his devotion to what he perceived to be Marxism-Leninism, an all-encompassing scientific philosophical system. What his career tells us about the nature of architecture and urban planning in general is problematic, but Meyer remains an important and little appreciated figure whose political, aesthetic, and professional experiences were typical of an entire generation of Soviet and European builders in the years between the two world wars.

²⁹ Lesnikowski, *Rationalism and Romanticism*, p. 252.