

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

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Good evening. Thanks for providing this forum for “in-progress” work, even if what I’ll be showing is a little bit different from the usual media of our professional practice.

Different in what way? Well, tonight I’ll be talking about some historical research which has yet to be concluded.

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I’m preparing a paper for an academic conference of Architectural Historians, who live in something of a parallel universe. As architects and designers, we tend to think that our own work is the main event – after all, it’s called “History of Architecture,” a phrase which certainly gives pride of place to our own activities – as *architects*. For better or worse, we tend to believe that our own creative process is what’s at the core of our material culture.

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Well, outside of our bubble, there are different standards and expectations. The written word still remains both king and subject in its own realm. At the

very least, I'd like to impress upon you the attractions of a discipline which ostensibly emphasizes clarity, research, and objective documentation – and not marketing. This detail from Vignola's treatise embodies, for me, the pleasure to be found in the joining of visual and verbal analysis.

Intriguingly, what led me to my current project was an odd theoretical linkage between historical books on architecture and the work of the 20th century. I had hoped to find an appropriate call-for-papers for this year's meeting of the Society for Architectural Historians. I came across this one:

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Alpenreisen und Wüstenwanderungen: Envisioning Landscapes of Early Modernity

Here's the entire session description, and I'll confess that even now I don't really understand what it's about. Look at this cast of characters: Fischer von Erlach, William Chambers, Boulee... Bruno Taut! It's like a slide from Jeopardy: Who are Random Figures in the History of Architecture?

But here's what interested me. First of all, Fischer von Erlach's treatise was known to me from my course on the rare books of the Fowler Collection, located in Baltimore at the Evergreen House.

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This volume, published in 1721, is titled “Outline for an Historical Architecture,” and includes a survey of architecture from around the world and from throughout history. Here you can see Fischer von Erlach’s reinvention of Solomon’s temple, but the book includes not only famous monuments in the Christian and Greco-Roman tradition, but also buildings from the Islamic Middle East, from India, and from China. As such, the book appeared to me to be a fascinating document about how Europe saw those places at that time – but also, especially, how Europe saw those places *through the filter of architectural form*, so to speak. We’re used these days to the exchange of images across cultural and geographic boundaries, but at the time of Fischer von Erlach’s book – early 18th century – it was unheard of.

I was also intrigued by the session’s emphasis on representations of landscape. The treatises I had examined for my course tended to focus exclusively on *architectural* form. The illustration of garden design or of environmental planning, even though significant activities throughout the Renaissance, came only later among architectural publications. Although this is probably due to the Vitruvian emphasis of the Renaissance’s earliest authors, I found it to be a curious omission.

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Palladio, for instance, almost nowhere includes scenes of the natural landscape in his treatise.

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He does, however, depict the landscape in his last book, an illustrated guide to Caesar's book *The Gallic Wars*. There are many interesting questions about Palladio's visual language in this series of engravings, not least of all the curious graphic marks with which he represents water, foliage, vernacular buildings, and even the soldiers' aggregate weaponry. And so a session concerning the representation of landscape was of great interest to me.

And this further statement caught my eye:

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"This session is particularly interested in exploring the extremes of mountainscapes and desertscapes as sites and countersites of early modernity."

Well, this rang a bell.

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I had for years been interested in the work of Erich Mendelsohn, whose commercial work in Germany

was perhaps the best architecture done anywhere on the planet during the 1920's.

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But he had also, in those years, done projects for sites well outside the familiar textures of the traditional European city. I was familiar, first-hand, with his designs for what was then Palestine under the British Mandate. Here you have a design, prepared together with Richard Neutra (that's right, Richard Neutra was his assistant at the time!), for a commercial center at the foot of Mt. Carmel, in the city of Haifa.

Mountains, deserts, Modern Architecture –
hey, that's it!

I was also aware that Mendelsohn was famous for his books of photographs, based on his visits to the United States and to Russia.

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There's a large literature about the use of photography at this time, and the place of Mendelsohn's published work in the German fascination with the United States as a model for a new social order.

So I thought I could make an interesting case for his innovative use of photography as an agent, too, for

qualitative change in the visual rhetoric of travel narratives.

As a way in to the topic, I proposed an additional connection with some of his contemporaries in the Berlin art scene. The call-for-papers mentioned Bruno Taut, in the context of his book “Alpine Architecture,” published just after World War I.

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Here’s a pre-war example of Taut’s “Crystalline” Architecture, influenced deeply by the writing of Paul Scheerbart, with whom Taut collaborated.

But the artists I had in mind were different, and had a different vision of architecture and the city.

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It seemed obvious to me that the collage work attributed to Berlin’s *Dada* group, which included folks like Raoul Hausman, Hannah Hoch, and the Dutch artist Paul Citroen, was directly analogous to how Mendelsohn chose to represent the New York skyline in his picture books. I asked myself what Mendelsohn was really getting at with views like these, and I proposed – prematurely, perhaps – that his photographic work reversed the usual way in which architects derive inspiration from the landscape. Rather than having drawn inspiration for new man-

made forms *from* nature, Mendelsohn's travel images evoked a world in which technical artifact appeared to constitute the background against which new architecture might -- or might not -- emerge.

So that was my pitch: To examine photographs taken or selected by Mendelsohn for his travel-based publications, in order to uncover a process by which man-made things came to substitute for the landscape and its more widely-held moral properties.

Now, I know I don't have too much time here, and so the amount of detail into which I can go is limited. But I'd like at least to show you the starting point of my argument, which derives from Mendelsohn's influence on the emerging mass-media in Germany during the 1920's.

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I found this photomontage among the pages of a weekly satirical magazine called "ULK," issued by the newspaper *Berliner Tagblatt*. In fact, the publishers of this paper were clients of Mendelsohn: the Berlin-based media group "Rudolph Mosse Company." Mosse had commissioned Mendelsohn a few years before to do their headquarters, and had paid for Mendelsohn's trip to the United States in 1924. Everything was all in the family, so to speak, and in fact readers of ULK would have been very familiar with the target of the satire.

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Of course, the photomontage is quite recognizable as a collage of pictures of Mendelsohn's well-known Herpich Store, which had been the subject of heavy media coverage by *Berliner Tagblatt* during the building's controversial approval process in 1924, 1925, and 1926.

In the pages of ULK, the picture itself is titled "Die neue Bauform," that is, The New Design, and is accompanied by the caption: "If only we can change ourselves into 'twisted people,' then we can live quite comfortably in this place."

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What interested me was the jumbled, collage-like landscape at the base of the photomontage. As satire, the image seems to suggest that the background for this new architecture is essentially *more* new architecture, as though the process of design can be conceived as enlarging or deforming those urban visual elements already at hand. In addition, although the magazine illustrator may have been ostensibly unflattering towards Mendelsohn's architectural design, the point had been made through the use of a visual language deriving directly from the architect's own well-known picture book on America – published

by, that's right, the Mosse Company just the year before.

All this suggested to me another question, which has been neglected by historians dealing with the architecture of Erich Mendelsohn: What was his concept of landscape, and how did that affect his architecture?

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Academic writing about Mendelsohn continues to emphasize the importance of the architect's early sketches for imaginary projects, conceived during the last years of World War I. These drawings occasioned his initial notice among clients and established his reputation as a visionary architect for both public and professionals alike. But these early sketches 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 only a few of his later sketches. In any case, the effect of this gesture is exceedingly generic, and evokes mostly what Mendelsohn himself once called "tellurian and planetary things."

Part of the challenge towards understanding Mendelsohn's view of landscape has to do with the elliptical character of his verbal comments about the

subject. But a more fundamental challenge may be the fact of his best architectural work's urban settings.

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The commercial designs conceived at the time of his greatest professional success were those for whom urban relationships were fundamental to each building's unique plasticity and functional logic.

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Yet, for too many of us, the architecture of cities and the morphology of their streets remain outside considerations about "landscape," except in the context of parks or gardens – or maybe that tree there.

Nevertheless, that our 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:

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"A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring, or symbolizing surroundings." So it is through this filter that one can begin to perceive those elements in Mendelsohn's vision which distinguished him from his contemporaries.

In any case, brief as this has been, I'd like to wrap things up with the following question:

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What, for any architect, defines the *landscape* upon which one should operate?

As most of us know, this is a fundamental question, which relates to something much deeper than the size of a lot or the contours of a site.

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For Erich Mendelsohn, I've found that a particular vision had crystallized very early in his career. A landscape could be characterized, first of all, as a "fabric of space" to be perceived visually – not, necessarily, spiritually or as a source of ethical inspiration.

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Its elements would be abstract or otherwise, in its basic "cellular" component, artificial. The natural landscape would have been subsumed *a priori* beneath our civilization's material detritus, which is essentially inorganic and, furthermore, without the meaningful presence of human values. Indeed, I've come to believe that Mendelsohn evoked what might

be termed an “oppositional landscape,” the visual and systematic characteristics of which would afford an architect with the means for its own reconfiguration and reassembly.

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It was through foreign travel that Mendelsohn sought confirmation for and counterpoint to this “oppositional landscape,” and it was through Mendelsohn’s own architectural work that he tried to challenge its pervasiveness. Even for those sites in which the context could not afford him an opportunity to do so, his architectural designs included elements to which other architectural features would respond.

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So, not unlike the *Frankenstein’s Monster*-like collage we saw before, Mendelsohn’s buildings sought to contrast “Die neue Bauform” with its own constituent elements, as though a site’s natural foundations had been indefinitely obscured by the elements of our own society.

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Well, as a critique, this view may be more appropriate than ever. And as a strategy for design, we could all do a lot worse. * * * Thank you.