Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-57168-5 - Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism
Kathleen James
Excerpt
More information

INTRODUCTION

IN December 1919 an extraordinary exhibit of architectural drawings entitled *Erich Mendelsohn, Architecture in Steel and Reinforced Concrete* opened at the Paul Cassirer Gallery in Berlin.[1] The work of an entirely unknown thirty-two year old, the drawings were enlarged versions of the tiny sketches for imaginary buildings, mostly factories, which Mendelsohn had been making since early 1914 (Fig. 1).[2] Many dated to the time he had spent in 1917 and 1918 as an army engineer on the eastern front during the First World War. Although executed with little attention to plan, program, construction, or context, these deftly drawn perspectives offered a bold new vision of an unornamented, frankly modern architecture. Their considerable vitality sprang less from any ostensible function than from the compelling shapes into which Mendelsohn proposed molding monolithic reinforced concrete, shapes whose solid masses were relieved only by equally dazzling open-work grids of steel and glass. Here, in images which remain among the best-known designs from the war-torn 1910s, the architect accorded factories, as well as an airport, and, less surprisingly, a train station, an overblown scale and monumental presence worthy of a medieval cathedral or of the vast institutions of the nineteenth-century nation-state.

The authors of the reviews of the exhibit that appeared in several major art magazines paid only brief attention to Mendelsohn's debut, however, which they interpreted as an unpromising attempt to revive the Art Nouveau (better known in German as Jugendstil, or "youthful style") architecture popular for a short time two decades earlier.[3] For them, the small Mendelsohn exhibit was overshadowed by the larger and far more controversial *Exhibit of Unknown Architects*, sponsored earlier in 1919 by the Arbeitsrat für Kunst. The Arbeitsrat,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

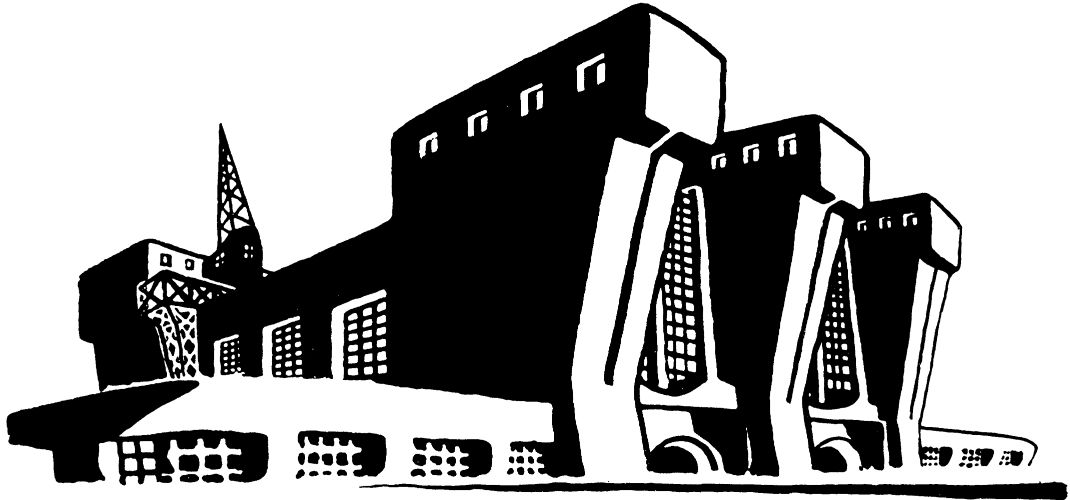

FIGURE 1

Erich Mendelsohn, project for an AEG factory, 1914. (Source: *Erich Mendelsohn: Das Gesamtschaffen des Architekten,* Berlin, 1930.)

a group of artists and architects whose leaders included Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut, had been formed in part to lobby the new Social Democratic government to support innovative art and architecture. On the other hand, three young visitors to the Mendelsohn exhibit, Oskar Beyer, Henricus Theodorus Wijdeveld, and Hermann George Scheffauer, were sufficiently impressed to write and publish articles which quickly brought Mendelsohn an international reputation.[4] From as far away as Oklahoma City and Los Angeles, architecture students soon came under his spell.[5]

After it closed in Berlin, the Mendelsohn exhibit traveled to Hanover, Hamburg, Breslau, Chemnitz, Stuttgart, and Cologne.[6] During the next fourteen years, Mendelsohn would build in four of these six cities. This was only one of the many ways the exhibit was prescient of his career in Germany (he emigrated in March 1933, less than two months after Hitler became chancellor). The emphasis in the Mendelsohn exhibit on the individual designer rather than on the larger community as in the Arbeitsrat's earlier effort was characteristic. Although Mendelsohn would become one of the Weimar Republic's most successful architects, he would always remain slightly outside the inner core of architects dominated by Taut, Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Ernst May with which he is most closely associated. Foreigners, however, continued to see him as more representative of modern German architecture than did his own compatriots. Nor did the central tenet of Mendelsohn's approach to

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-57168-5 - Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism
Kathleen James
Excerpt
More information

design vary much from that which was displayed in the exhibit. Even though only one of his buildings, the Einstein Tower, resembled, albeit remotely, the drawings at the Paul Cassirer Gallery, Mendelsohn developed the germ of each in perspectives drawn in the same freehand style and with the same predilection for curvilinear forms. Most important, for as long as he remained in Germany Mendelsohn continued to maintain a precarious balance between matter-of-fact representation of modern industry and technology and an expression of the vitality he believed to be inherent in these aspects of modern life as well as in the modern materials of which his buildings were constructed. This balance, and its relationship to other aspects of Weimar culture, is the subject of this study.

This approach, which I have chosen to call dynamic functionalism, integrates stylistic experimentation, constructional innovation, and disparate influences from the surrounding culture.[7] Mendelsohn was slow to articulate fully his theoretical position, but the exhibit at the Cassirer Gallery already displayed his talent for resolving the expression of often conflicting modernisms – in this case, Expressionist painting, reinforced concrete construction, and industrial imagery – into forms that were often complexly asymmetrical, but always visually unified. Unlike today's deconstructivists, Mendelsohn sought to transcend rather than to expose the contradictions which destabilized the modernity he prized. During the twenties, he expanded the elements of this synthesis to include a wider range of building materials and sources from the visual arts. Scientific theory (relativity), urbanization (especially increased automobile traffic), economic integration (department stores), and new forms of entertainment (movies) also triggered his invention of lively new architectural forms. Dynamic functionalism encompassed economical construction, efficient spaces, and the latest mechanical systems, but whereas other architects focused on industrial imagery and standardized construction, Mendelsohn excelled at making industry's effect upon life far from the factory floor thrilling rather than threatening.

"Is not mass consumption, rather than mass production, the definitive drive of modernity?" asks Terry Smith in *Making the Modern*. Later, he answers his own question, "The true move to modernity, then, was the move to consumerism. The true site was not the factory, but the creation and circulation of market imagery."[8] Today, Smith's view is shared by most historians of Weimar culture, but its implications for architectural history remain largely unexplored.[9] While the work of many of his colleagues in the modern movement,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-57168-5 - Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism
Kathleen James
Excerpt
More information

above all that of Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, often appear to be stepping stones on the path to the architecture of the 1940s, 1950s, and beyond, Mendelsohn's attention to contemporary life resulted in buildings which fell out of fashion exactly because of their distance from the more abstract aesthetics and theories that informed the seemingly timeless buildings of his colleagues. Furthermore, having created a modern architecture of mass consumption, which celebrated rather than disguised its origin in mass production, Mendelsohn found his contribution devalued when the spectacles he had excelled at staging became tainted during the thirties by the effective use that Albert Speer made of similar strategies at National Socialist (Nazi) Party rallies.[10]

Today, many people are profoundly uncomfortable with the environment within which Mendelsohn developed dynamic functionalism into some of the most exciting urban architecture of this century, preferring, instead, the obvious social benefits if more banal forms of the workers' housing constructed during the same years. At the time, however, the two projects were more closely related than they now seem. Although the modernization of distribution systems and mechanization of entertainment which Mendelsohn celebrated in his department stores and cinema were certainly part of the expansion of an often dehumanizing capitalism, most of those who condemned these phenomena during the 1920s were either Marxists or right-wing nationalists. Like many of his socialist and centrist contemporaries, Mendelsohn believed that mass production offered the best hope of a more democratic society, and he equated industrial imagery with a utopianism just as passionate as that expressed in Taut's dreams of crystalline community centers or the realization of thousands of apartments.[11] And as was the case for many of his fellow Jewish Germans, the attacks upon modernization made by Nazis and other anti-Semites buttressed Mendelsohn's belief in an economic system whose unalloyed identification with Enlightenment rationalism as a humanist project he might otherwise have questioned.

Dynamic functionalism has too often been confused with Expressionism. This is not to say that Mendelsohn was not an Expressionist, especially during the 1910s and early 1920s, but that Expressionism alone does not adequately define his distinctive position in the larger story of German architecture during the Weimar Republic. What now seems to be Mendelsohn's distortion of the Platonic forms proposed by contemporaries like Mies van der Rohe was more than the result of an individual's artistic temperament. It was usually closely

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-57168-5 - Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism
Kathleen James
Excerpt
More information

related to the function – and to the importance of a thrilling image of modernity to that function – of Mendelsohn's commissions. The number and range of his buildings remained unmatched throughout the decade among the adherents of the Neues Bauen (New Building), the term that was most commonly employed in Germany during the 1920s.

The split between organic architecture and the International Style, first posited by Bruno Zevi in the 1950s, like the later separation of Expressionism from the New Building, ignored the ideological continuities that often knit together what at first appear to be stylistic fault lines.[12] Mendelsohn's Expressionism was never identical with Taut's, nor was his romanticization of industry a reflection of Gropius's, but, as his contemporaries at home and abroad were well aware, Mendelsohn was no less central than Gropius and Taut to the architecture of his own day. Hans Hildebrant, for instance, who is best remembered today for translating Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* into German, believed that Mendelsohn's work was at once highly personal and entirely typical of contemporary architecture, "based," Hildebrant added, "on objective grounds, not generated by a raving drive and external formalism. The language is modern, because it is spoken by a man who is modern by nature, and because tasks which our period poses in this manner for the first time, can also only be solved in a new manner."[13]

Others echoed Hildebrant, while pointing to the components of Mendelsohn's success – fantasy and fashion – that were later seen as more problematic. Erwin Redslob praised Mendelsohn's substitution of "construction laws dictated by the materials, dynamics, fulfillment of function, logic, and the inexorability of reason" for outmoded materials and ornament and noted:

> Just as the many architectural fantasies drawn by him are also germ cells for functional buildings, so are his functional buildings at the same time very bold fantasies that independently of their functional fulfillment tower before us like monuments of a new will. This flow from the sphere of the real into the metaphysical, and from the metaphysical into the real, is a trait in which one can recognize the artistry of Erich Mendelsohn.[14]

Another influential German critic, Karl Scheffler, dwelt on the extent to which Mendelsohn, and by extension all contemporary architects, was more an engineer than an artist and described how Mendelsohn had recast curvilinear form in a fashion influenced by industry. Scheffler continued in a more critical vein, "Mendelsohn's buildings are

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-57168-5 - Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism
Kathleen James
Excerpt
More information

robust, but they lack strong nerve; therefore their effect is most powerful on first viewing after which they lose some of that effect. Nevertheless, the final result is that Mendelsohn manages to interest the whole world in his buildings so that people do not shy away from long walks in order to look at them."[15] The experience of a young Italian architect bore him out. Remembering the way he had marveled at Mendelsohn's "dazzling" Herpich store – "fully opened with glass, with large clear panes that hugged the sinuous body" – when he came upon it under construction in 1924, Carlo Belli continued, "The sense of magic that emanated from the windows radiant with electric brilliance made me ecstatic."[16]

Such praise demonstrates the degree to which architects and architectural critics identified Mendelsohn with modernism; even more compelling was the recognition accorded him by the popular illustrated press, whose representations of contemporary culture in visual terms included photographs of his architecture. The Ullstein press's *Berliner illustrirte [sic] Zeitung*, the German forerunner of Life magazine, published photographs of a number of his buildings; so did Ullstein's rival, the Mosse publishing firm, whose Berlin headquarters Mendelsohn renovated and expanded.[17] Nor was the suitability of such images entirely coincidental; Mendelsohn himself commissioned the photographs of his buildings by Arthur Köster, which were frequently reproduced in Germany's many art and architecture magazines.[18] He also wrote three books, all published by Mosse, only one of which was a conventional monograph devoted to his career. The other two chronicled Mendelsohn's travels to the United States and the Soviet Union; the first look in particular, illustrated in part with his own photographs, reached an audience stretching far beyond his profession.

Mendelsohn's anomalous position in architecture as a wildly successful yet always slightly peripheral figure was also partly attributable to his religion. Jewish at a time of revived anti-Semitism in Germany, Mendelsohn could not hope for unquestioning acceptance from either the architectural community or the general public.[19] Mendelsohn's talent for overturning Alfred Messel's specifically patriotic precedents would be the source both of his fame and of controversy as, especially after 1924, Mendelsohn set the tone for the rapid expansion of downtowns during the Weimar Republic, designing department stores, office buildings, and a single, but extremely influential, cinema. Mendelsohn's career in Germany depended almost entirely upon the support of Jewish patrons, many of whom hired him in part because they shared his Zionist politics; at the same time,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-57168-5 - Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism
Kathleen James
Excerpt
More information

he was easily tarred with the Nazi brush that condemned all Jewish involvement in German culture and society, from Albert Einstein's theories of relativity to Hans Lachmann-Mosse's newspaper empire and Salman Schocken's department stores.

The purpose of this study is to reconstruct rather than deconstruct dynamic functionalism's original context, to identify the ways in which Mendelsohn's vivid forms emerged, for both their creator and his contemporaries, out of the conditions of modern (especially urban) life, out of its problems and its passions. Mendelsohn's buildings offer apparently sensible and pragmatic responses to many of modernity's problems without draining its corresponding passion from either individual cities or the culture as a whole. Finally, my subject is Mendelsohn's approach to the representation of modernity; I have not chosen to write a biography or to consider all aspects of his career. I have focused on those writings and especially those buildings that were most central to the creation and expression of dynamic functionalism. In particular, I concentrate on buildings rather than on projects and on those commissions in which economic viability most likely would have been an issue. Those facets of Mendelsohn's architecture which are not a part of my story, particularly his domestic commissions around Berlin; religious buildings in East Prussia; commissioned, but unrealized, schemes for sites in Europe and in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine; and the lively sketches he continued to make of entirely imaginary projects remain for others to explore.

The dual function of the Einstein Tower as a monument to and laboratory for research into relativity is the subject of Chapter 1, which also examines the impact of relativity upon Mendelsohn's thinking about architecture. Mendelsohn's proud association with a theory attacked by anti-Semitic nationalists as irrational established the pro-modern stance from which he would never waver. Following this initial exploration of dynamic functionalism, Chapter 2 looks at Mendelsohn's architectural theory in relation to his travels to the Netherlands, the United States, and the Soviet Union. While the first destination was of importance primarily to architects, the latter two countries were crucial to the broader debate in Germany during the 1920s about the appropriate relationship between industry, politics, and culture. Mendelsohn's writings helped shape that debate even as his firsthand experience of these places enhanced his stature with his colleagues and patrons. Because of his ability to express himself in the language of the popular press, his exposé of the gap between architectural image and technological fact in both American histori-

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-57168-5 - Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism
Kathleen James
Excerpt
More information

cist and Soviet constructivist architecture reached the same broad audience as his buildings.

Although it was the Einstein Tower, far more than the exhibit at the Paul Cassirer Gallery, that established Mendelsohn as one of Germany's leading architects, the gap between his purpose in designing the extremely unusual looking Tower and the way others understood it, as well as difficulty constructing it, led Mendelsohn in new directions. The stylistic aspects of his search, conducted against the backdrop of Germany's deepening economic crisis, are the subject of Chapter 3, which focuses upon the Steinberg, Hermann hat factory in Luckenwalde; the renovation and expansion of Mossehaus, an office building in Berlin; and the Mendelsohn office's first store, the Weichmann Silk Building in Gleiwitz (now Gliwice, Poland). These three works, all designed and built between 1921 and 1923, demonstrate the range of Mendelsohn's experimentation with new, formal expressions of dynamic functionalism, as well as the complex workings of his office, in which he shared credit with talented collaborators, above all Richard Neutra.

In 1924, the same year as Mendelsohn's trip to America, the infusion of dollars under the Dawes Plan temporarily stabilized the German economy, ushering in a building boom that, although it lasted only five years, transformed German downtowns. Often overlooked in accounts of the period, which have paid far more attention to housing, this boom offered Mendelsohn his greatest opportunities to build new and to renovate and expand old commercial buildings, as well as to insert housing into increasingly dense urban cores. It enabled him to create an abstract, industrial face for exactly those same consumer-oriented building types that in other countries would continue to be dressed up with the most ornament.[20] By substituting lettering and lighting for allusions to the past, Mendelsohn invented a more democratic, but equally seductive architecture, one animated by sleek details and bold cantilevers, which replaced the Wilhelmine emphasis on taming, even disguising, the new world of consumerism.

Chapter 4 focuses on Mendelsohn's role in urban planning debates in Berlin, in which the architect sought to give order to the almost chaotic vitality of the modern metropolis without rejecting modernity itself. Throwing a light harness over the inevitable results of rapid urbanization and real estate speculation, he respected traditional street lines and mixed-use development while delighting in traffic, height, and new building types. The chapter opens with the controversy over the C. A. Herpich store, a furrier on the Leipzigerstraße, Berlin's most famous shopping street, in which Mendelsohn substi-

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-57168-5 - Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism
Kathleen James
Excerpt
More information

tuted horizontals, inspired in part by speeding automobiles, for the more stable verticality of Messel's commercial architecture. Analyses of Mendelsohn's WOGA development on Berlin's Kurfürstendamm and his involvement in the redevelopment of Potsdamerplatz in the same city – the site of his high-rise office building Columbushaus – illustrate Mendelsohn's approach to more comprehensive urban design projects. In all three cases, radically simplified, and often taller, buildings seem poised to respond to the energies of the city whirling around them, appear almost ready to spin into motion themselves.

The other two most effective magic wands in Mendelsohn's toolbox of dynamic effects were electric light and transparency. Originally developed just before the war in Bruno Taut's Steel and Glass Pavilions as well as, in the case of transparency, in the factories designed by Peter Behrens and Walter Gropius, by the early twenties both were indivisible from utopian Expressionism. Mendelsohn commercialized their use without rejecting their visionary connotations. In his hands, they became effective advertisements for a new generation of elegant stores and – following in the footsteps of Hans Poelzig – cinemas. Focusing on Herpich Furriers, the Petersdorff store, and the Universum Cinema, Chapter 5 examines Mendelsohn's role in this invention of a new immaterial and abstract image of modern luxury.

No architect works in a vacuum. Chapter 6 considers the more overtly functional aspects of Mendelsohn's department stores in relation to his most extraordinary patron, Salmann Schocken for whom Mendelsohn built stores in Nuremberg, Stuttgart, and Chemnitz. In place of the elegant details of the Herpich and Petersdorff stores, Schocken favored an explicit correlation of the sites of production and consumption: the factory and the department store. This emphasis upon mass production as a substitute for earlier Expressionist utopias is also the subject of Chapter 7, which demonstrates Mendelsohn's continuing exploration of functionalist imagery and his allegiance to architectural forms under attack by right-wing nationalists. The competitive spirit that kept him abreast of the latest designs by rival architects, including most notably Mies and Gropius, is also treated in this chapter in the coupling of the Schocken store in Chemnitz with the Mosse pavilion at the Press Exhibition in Cologne, with Mendelsohn's own Berlin house, and with Columbushaus. All were designed in 1928, the year after the controversial Weissenhof exhibit in Stuttgart. The book concludes with a brief appraisal of dynamic functionalism during Mendelsohn's career in exile in London, Jerusalem, New York, and San Francisco.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-57168-5 - Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism
Kathleen James
Excerpt
More information

Weimar Germany was the crucible in which a new approach to architecture was forged, one whose influence would eventually stretch around the world. Erich Mendelsohn was far more important to the original formulation of that architecture than he was to the approach that would later triumph abroad. Examining Mendelsohn's contribution in the context of its creation enables us to recover the complexity that existed within the New Building from its inception and remember the reasons for the initial popularity of its aesthetic.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org