

Planning for «The New World». Hannes Meyer in the Soviet Union and Mexico

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- [B] What do we understand by taking a stand regarding architecture and design, and particularly of the Bauhaus and Modernism?

Architecture as a «Weapon»—
Convictions of a Marxist Architect

architecture as a weapon
history of architecture as history
of power/capital

capitalist planning and buiding
socialist planning and building

«Architecture is a weapon. A weapon the dominant class used to take advantage, for its very exclusive interests. We have stated that the destiny of architecture is indissolubly linked to the fate of the society of its epoch.»¹ This was Hannes Meyer's opening statement to his lecture «Experiences in Urbanism» held at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City in October 1938. In this lecture, he stressed the differences between planning under the capitalist and the Socialist systems as he had experienced them. In the former, though recognizing past contributions of the capitalist city, he saw speculation with the land, in construction, with power sources and real estate as the leading socio-economic force in nineteenth-century imperialism.

- [B] Although he supported garden cities and had studied them first-hand, as well as participating in their design, in his lecture he strongly condemned their development by large enterprises as a means of controlling the working class. In his view, industries that developed garden cities to «mitigate the housing crisis, [had as a second goal] to reinforce the workers' dependency on the patron and, through petit-bourgeois ways of life, take the interest in class struggle away»,² as in the case of the scheme developed by Krupp in Essen, a project on which Meyer had once worked. In contrast, he saw himself in the role of a Marxist architect and pointed out «how different the creative forces of national planning and urbanism act in every single sense in a Socialist society as presented to us today in the Soviet Union [where there is] no private property of the land and subsoil, speculation in energy and productive sources, contradictory interests between the state, the society and the individual, and real-estate rentals, these being determined by the tenant's income, amounting to between 3 and 5% of his salary.»³

Paradoxically, what sounded fantastic in paper was far from ideal in real life. Throughout the almost six years the architect spent in the country between 1930 and 1936, he was unable to get an adequate apartment beyond the 15 m² he shared with his wife Lena in what was known as the Bauhaus commune on Moscow's Arbat Square and was marginalized, with little scope to work on construction and architectural design; those were a couple of the reasons that convinced him to leave the Soviet Union in June 1936.⁴ Nevertheless, he agreed, out of either conviction or

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necessity, to play an active role in defending and promoting Soviet interests abroad.

This kind of propaganda-like lecture in which he argued in favour of state control was not new for Meyer and neither was his interest in housing, enhanced by the thorough work he had done in that sense while in the USSR. As an outcome of his trip to Western Europe between 1932 and 1933, including Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen, he arrived at a primarily economic analysis of housing in the sixteen cities he had visited, highlighting, as in the case of Berlin, how impossible it was for many to afford the rent in new housing estates, thus condemning them to live in slum-like accommodation.⁵ He criticized, for instance, the disappearance of the kitchen, not as the product of collectivization as in Socialist architecture, but as a result of economic shortages.

Between 1934 and 1935, he continued researching and reflecting on such topics, including developing plans for housing quarters that could serve as models, as he was entrusted with heading the housing department at the newly established Academy of Architecture in Moscow. As a Marxist architect, he reiterated his conviction that an architect never works alone, his role being that of an organizer of the scientific processes of construction.⁶ In Socialist practice, the building was never conceived in isolation but as an integral part of the productive or recreational centres of a *sozgorod* or *agropunkt*.⁷ In that sense, the construction systems in the Socialist city, in the housing areas, industrial complexes, information and recreational centres should have been as elastic as possible. The more elastic they were, the more useful they were as the masses progressively adopted a socialized use of space.⁸

Meyer recognized the power of architecture as a «weapon» in the defence of culture. He accepted Socialist Realism as a means of «national expression» and even defended it among his European friends, although, he understood that, as a foreigner, he had nothing to contribute in that sense.⁹ One such opportunity to engage with national expression came in 1933, when he was commissioned to develop the regional and urban planning of the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan as Chief Architect and Head of the East-Siberian and Far East Section at the GIPROGOR Planning Institute, Moscow.

housing

demand for affordable housing

collectivist ethos

social, functional, and scientific approach

socialist planning and building

socialist realism

«socialist in content and national in form»

[B]

- [C] How can we explore the kinds of stand taken by Bauhaus and Modernist architects and designers and their consistency?

The Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan—
Identity Building Rooted in the Dialectics
of Jewish Values and Socialist Consciousness

identity formation

- [C] The idea underpinning the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR), launched in 1928, was a renewed Stalinist attempt to settle Jews on the land after previous efforts had failed, both during Tsarist Russia and in the early 1920s, for example in Belarus, the Ukraine and Crimea. By allotting Jews a land of their own, a right they had been deprived of for centuries, the authorities believed they would be transformed from *Luftmenschen* with their petit-bourgeois «air professions», mainly retail, handicrafts and services, into productive peasants and would therefore «normalize» their national status, just like any other nationality.

The proposal of a secular, Socialist Jewish nation within the USSR to solve «the Jewish question» relied on the support and control of both Russian and foreign Jewish organizations,¹⁰ and even attracted Jews from countries as far as away as Argentina or the United States. In 1928, an area approximately the size of Belgium and the Netherlands, located between the Trans-Siberian railroad, the Bira and Bidzhan rivers (both subsidiaries of the Amur), and the Sino-Russian border was made available for Jewish colonization. However, it was not until 1934, «in spite of the slow migration of Jews to the area (totaling far less than 20 % of the population) and the disenchantment and desertion of most of the pioneers»,¹¹ that it was officially designated as an Oblast, a Jewish Autonomous Region with its capital, Birobidzhan (formerly the city of Tikhonkaya) in the Khabarovsk District.

Hannes Meyer arrived at Tikhonkaya Station on May 31st, 1933 along with two other comrades, as head of a brigade of specialists from the GIPROGOR Planning Institute. They were commissioned to inspect the site and produce a planning proposal to be presented to the authorities in Moscow in September of that year. What they found on the spot was far from what Meyer had imagined. He expected a «tight settlement and found [instead] a ragged place».¹²

The site, despite all the difficulties arising from a swampy region, had, in Meyer's view, favourable economic geography. Up in the Maly Khingan mountains, there was a wealth of gold, graphite, and iron. Forests with cedar woods and plenty of agricultural possibilities, a «favourable climate behaviour» and good communications, thanks to the Amur river and the railroad, were

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among the aspects the architect highlighted in his first appraisal;¹³ nevertheless, in his private correspondence he recognized the hardship of life in the region, the struggle against flooding, the inhospitable conditions in summers with temperatures over 45°C and a meagre diet due to poor harvests and inefficient distribution.¹⁴ The landscape was of overwhelming beauty Figs. 1, 2. He enjoyed the views from the *Sopka*, an extinguished volcano, and bathing in the Bira river. There, he was fine. There, he could let off steam as he had done back in Ziebigk.¹⁵

relationship to the landscape

integration buildings
into their respective regions
place-based approach

identity formation

[B] Hannes Meyer's relationship to the landscape was remarkable. During his childhood, he used to go walking with his father around the outskirts of Basel and developed a passion for hiking. His architecture was, thus, embedded in his understanding of place, not only in the physical sense, but as the cultural construction of identity. For him, «all creative action is determined by the fate of the landscape which is unique and unparalleled for the one settled down, the work being personal and localized. If a moving population lacks this native land, its work easily becomes stereotyped and standardized».¹⁶

collective building

Perhaps that sense of uprooting and transplanting a people alien to the site was the one Meyer perceived when arriving in Birobidzhan: «During our daily wandering through the site of Tikhonkaya, we unsuccessfully looked for an expression of a desire for collective building among its ca. 350 timber or adobe houses and almost 5,000 inhabitants. The preference for individually decorated, detached houses and the petty garden partitions are worthy of a Jewish theatrical piece with petit bourgeois tendencies!—with its colourful catalogue of different types of building methods, the village looks more like a somewhat chaotically erected housing exhibition of the different peoples on earth. The basic national materials for house construction are timber, reed, straw, adobe, sand, gravel, lime and limestone. Yet, during the process of the individual or collective enterprise of self-construction, they are transformed in the hands of the dweller, depending on his origin, into the block-houses of Latvian or White-Russian Jews, the lime-plastered clay buildings of Ukrainian Jews or the two-story adobe structures of German Jews.»¹⁷

national identity construction

How to achieve the «national character» of the Jewish Oblast? What would define it in the light of such diversity, not only among Jews but among the rest of the peoples that inhabited the region? Meyer did not see the answer in an artistic conception of



Fig. 1
Bridge over the Bira River in Birobidzhan

Fig. 2
Landscape in Birobidzhan



Fig. 3
Construction in Birobidzhan

Fig. 4
Urban scene in Birobidzhan

relationship to the landscape

architecture, this being, probably, what he meant as his incapacity to contribute anything «national» to Soviet architecture. Instead, he understood that «national pride» could only find a place by creating ties to the new landscape. In Birobidzhan, it was only after members of the community were taken up to the viewing platform to admire the location of their future city at their feet that they were able to connect it to an idealized expression of Jewish values. The architect's goal was to foster those values as part of the Soviet policy of nationalities within the framework of a Socialist country. He noted that «they all exalted at the beauty of the natural park that covered, up the river, the depression between the «big and the small Sopka» and that formed the natural connecting element between the future city, the Bira river and an island covered with willows. In this scenic park, hardy flowers grew and flourished, so carefully cultivated as seen in English gardens. The comrades had rightly referred to the particular significance of the new city's architecture as an artistic creative expression of the Jewish people. We, constructors, were asked to collaborate with the large masses of Jewish workers in the projecting process that had to conclude with a work that would equally represent the values and cultural peculiarities of Judaism and the capital's role in a Socialist country.»¹⁸

architecture as a collective practice

identity formation

social, function, and scientific approach

socialist planning and building standardization

If the construction of a Jewish identity with local roots dealt with its connection to the landscape, building in a Socialist state had other implications, such as fostering class consciousness Figs. 3, 4. Meyer's conviction that architecture is not an aesthetic product but a scientific one also remained valid in his approach to the Socialist system: «Building is not a matter of feeling but of knowing. Hence building is not an act of composition dictated by feeling. Building is an act of premeditated organization».¹⁹ Standardization and typing were conceived as key elements of Socialist architecture, all under a strict economic plan. Proletarian architecture was not art in itself; its artistic mission was «to produce certain architectural solutions which lend themselves to the most varied manifestations of proletarian art».²⁰ In Socialist construction practice, the building was always conceived as part of a larger plan; it was never alone but «part of a productive or recreational centre in a *sosgorod* or *agrocenter*».²¹ Collective consciousness could consequently be enhanced by making use of the psychological organization of public space, developing, for instance, wide avenues for mass demonstrations, monuments and the like, culminating in the November 7th and May 1st parades, all made with

every possible elasticity, as «[t]he greater the elasticity of such centers of industry, housing, education, and recreation, the greater is the practical effect on the continuous process of socializing the life of the masses».²²

Birobidzhan was conceived in the light of dialectics concerning Jewish character and Socialist consciousness. The old town was connected to the housing areas through a timber bridge and a large avenue led to the administrative, social, and commemorative section of the city at the foot of the large and small *skopki*. The residential section, set on the second terrace on the opposite bank of the Bira, adhered to a grid of mega-blocks with a maximum height of four storeys, in contrast to the old town, where only two storeys were permitted. Even though some of the kolhozes were already taking shape, agriculture became inconceivable as the basis of economic development in the long run. The brigade concluded that Birobidzhan would only have a chance of surviving if light industry was established in a first stage, and later heavy industry, particularly given the wealth of minerals and raw materials found in the surroundings.

In spite of all the efforts, the establishment of a Jewish Republic based on Yiddish and Jewish culture under the Soviet Union was condemned to fail from the outset: Competition with the Zionist proposal and above all the problems inherent to the project itself, such as the huge distance from the traditional places of Jewish life, the frequent flooding, which made agriculture especially difficult, the lack of training and infrastructure, relations with the indigenous peoples in the region and subsequently the change of policies, which led to the great purges of 1937, prevented Birobidzhan from flourishing.

Meyer saw the project of Birobidzhan as a commission like any other; however, he devoted particular attention to promoting it among European Jews in his conference tour of 1936. Two of the twenty-two lectures he delivered dealt specifically with the topic of the Jewish Autonomous Region, one in Prague and the second in Brno. As soon as he returned to the Soviet Union in May of that year, he published his article «The Jewish Autonomous Region and the Czechoslovakian Jews» in the official Yiddish newspaper *Der Emes*.²³ In these lectures he answered questions regarding the way of life in the city, the possibility of sustaining religious practice, or the place of women in the Socialist realm, almost always with a question in return in order to avoid direct answers. In his article, Meyer blamed Zionism for prejudices against the Soviet project;

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nevertheless, years later, it sparked his curiosity about how Jewish nationalism was expressed in architecture, as he asked Arieh Sharon about this.²⁴

The Lomas de Becerra Cooperative Housing Estate in Mexico City—A Compromise between Socialist and Capitalist Planning

In 1938, after attending the 16th International Congress on Planning and Housing in Mexico City, Hannes Meyer accepted the challenge of setting up an Institute of Planning and Urbanism within Mexico's National Polytechnic Institute, relocating there the next year. The Socialist orientation of Lázaro Cárdenas's government, the exciting cultural and political atmosphere surrounding the various exiles, including the German speakers, and the opportunity to develop both in the professional and the ideological sense made Mexico a suitable destination for emigration, since he had no opportunities in rightist-oriented Switzerland, where he was living after leaving the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the process was harder than he had imagined. The Institute only opened in 1940, then closed a year later, facing pronounced pressure from within the Polytechnic Institute and beyond. The political panorama had changed with Manuel Ávila Camacho's presidency and the plans for this institute were dropped due to «budgetary reasons».

A year later, a new opportunity to work in the field of housing and urban planning arose as he was invited to the housing section of the Secretariat of Labour. An amendment to the labour law demanded that enterprises with more than 150 employees provide housing for their workers. The Secretariat, through its Department of Housing, developed a model scheme for an estate that was to have Meyer in charge of the design and was planned for a site in Tacubaya in Mexico City, close to the industries for which it was envisaged.

- [C] The Lomas de Becerra Housing Estate was conceived as a cooperative. It is not clear whether this was Meyer's proposal or was a socio-economic scheme suggested by the authorities or industries involved; nonetheless, it was a model Meyer knew well and could easily adjust to both his and the country's political orientation.

Back in 1919, when designing the cooperative housing estate of Freidorf in Muttenz, near Basel, he understood that a cooperative was as far to the left as he could get within a capitalist system.

emigration and exile

thinking from the perspective of diasporic conditions

cooperative housing construction

capitalist planning and building

Once again, when confronted with the Mexican reality of a country heavily dependent on the United States, especially after the Good Neighbor Agreement was signed, a cooperative could have represented such a compromise and enabled Lomas de Becerra to incorporate all the facilities he envisioned with the necessary elasticity foreseen in Socialist planning. As in Birobidzhan, he tried to incorporate the local populace's cultural background and way of life into his scheme of a housing unit supplied with educational, commercial, recreational and health facilities. The architect studied the urbanism of Mexico City and the history of Mexican dwelling in order to understand the social behaviour of the future inhabitants of the complex. He was positively impressed by the interactions of people living in the traditional *vecindad*, though criticizing the economic origin of its model: «This type of block is characterized by its great depth, by its considerable spaciousness and by its high economic proportion between the used surface and that of transit. The nucleus of the proletarian house of this kind does not intermingle as in the individualistic neighborhood, but they are grouped around an inner courtyard, organically incorporating some collective services such as laundry, warehouses, toilets, etc. Although the factor that has created this kind of block is the speculative element in plots and houses, it cannot be ignored that this type of family grouping represents the first step of a new urban coexistence that is already expressed in the traditional neighborhood party. Therefore, we believe that this type of collective housing is of vivid interest to the Mexican people.»²⁵

The estate consisted of six blocks designed under three different schemes with densities that varied between 331 and 550 inhabitants per hectare, from single family houses to blocks of three to four levels Figs. 5-8. The constructed area amounted to 14 to 20% of the block, making ample provision for open spaces for sport and recreation. A wide green corridor containing community services ran through the centre, and a green belt surrounded the estate. Circulation and infrastructure were peripheral as well. As for the buildings, the form resembled Meyer's gallery-access buildings in Dessau-Törten, with an external staircase connected to the apartments by open corridors. Lomas de Becerra was never realized. Meyer's boss, Ignacio García Tellez, left the Secretariat to lead the Mexican Institute of Social Security when it was established in 1944, inviting Meyer to serve as Head of the Hospitals and Clinics Planning Department, and as a result the entire Lomas de Becerra project was abandoned.

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When describing his work in Freidorf, Meyer frequently used the term «compromise». Lomas de Becerra, a cooperative just like Freidorf, was again a place to reach compromises. It was clear to Meyer that Mexico was not the place for radical politics. In Lomas de Becerra there were no wide avenues, loudspeakers and lights for popular demonstrations to foster class consciousness, but nor was it the place for abusive exploitation of the land in the hands of speculators. It was conceived as a place where a community could develop freely, surrounded by green areas, sporting and recreational spaces, supplied with all the necessary facilities to ease the burden on the working class.

complexity of taking a stand

socialist planning and building
architecture as a weapon

capitalist planning and building

social, functional,
and scientific approach

relationship to the landscape

[C] In both the Soviet Union and Mexico, Meyer had to make compromises with the political system. In the former, he understood the power of architecture as a weapon in the hands of those in power and, thus, accepted Socialist Realism. In the latter, he had to soften his ideological discourse, at least in his architectural and urban planning approach, to accept the reality of working in the capitalist world. The elements that remained consistent throughout his life were a reliance on thorough research and scientific rigor as the basis of any enterprise, a commitment to serve society through architecture and the «fate of landscape» as a determinant of his creative contribution.

Notes

- 1 Hannes Meyer, «Experiencias de Urbanismo», in: *Arquitectura y Decoración* (1938), 12, p. 252.
- 2 Ibid., p. 253.
- 3 Ibid., p. 254.
- 4 Hannes Meyer, «Brief an Nikolai Kolli», July 29, 1937, in: Lena Meyer-Bergner (ed.), *Hannes Meyer. Bauen und Gesellschaft. Schriften, Briefe, Projekte*, Dresden 1980, pp. 197–198.
- 5 Hannes Meyer, «Aus dem Reisetagebuch eines Architekten. Reise nach dem Westen», in: *ibid.*, p. 119.
- 6 Hannes Meyer, «Thesen über marxistische Architektur», in: *ibid.*, p. 97.
- 7 Ibid., p. 98.
- 8 Ibid., p. 98.
- 9 Hannes Meyer, «Letter to Nikolai Kolli» (as Note 4), p. 198.
- 10 Including the KOMZET (Committee for the Settlement of Toiling Jews on the Land), the OZET, (Society for Settling Toiling Jews on the Land), and the American ICOR (Association for Jewish Colonization in Russia).
- 11 Raquel Franklin, «The Jewish Autonomous Region and the Czechoslovakian Jews: Hannes Meyer writes on Birobidzhan», in: *Architektúra & urbanizmus. Journal of Architectural and Town-planning Theory* 47 (2013), 1–2, p. 76.
- 12 Hannes Meyer, «Gorod Birobidzhan», in: *Bauen und Gesellschaft*, (as Note 4), p. 139.
- 13 Ibid., p. 140.
- 14 Hannes Meyer, «Auf Kommandierung im Ferner Osten», in: *ibid.*, p. 131–139.
- 15 Hannes Meyer, «Brief an Lisbeth Oestreicher» n/d, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin, Inv. 117–12/6.
- 16 Hannes Meyer, «Bauhaus and Society», in: *the co-op principle—Hannes Meyer and the Concept of Collective Design* (German edition: *das prinzip coop—Hannes Meyer und die Idee einer kollektiven Gestaltung*), exhib. cat., Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, Edition Bauhaus, No. 48, (ed.) Werner Möller in cooperation with Raquel Franklin, Leipzig 2015, p. 15.
- 17 Hannes Meyer, «Gorod Birobidzhan» (as Note 12), p. 143. Also quoted in Franklin 2013 (as note 11), p. 77.
- 18 Hannes Meyer, «Gorod Birobidzhan» (as Note 12), p. 146.
- 19 Hannes Meyer, «Über marxistische Architektur», in: *Bauen und Gesellschaft* (as Note 4), p. 94. [English translation: https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/08/10/hannes-meyer/#_ftn7 (Consulted May 25, 2020)]
- 20 Ibid., p. 98.
- 21 Ibid., p. 98.
- 22 Ibid., p. 98.
- 23 Hannes Meyer, «Di Yiddische Autonome Gegnt un di Tschekoslovakische Yidn», in: *Der Emes*, May 28, 1936, p. 4.
- 24 Hannes Meyer, «Letter to Arie Sharon», September 26, 1937, in: <https://www.ariesharon.org/Archive/Bauhaus-and-Berlin/Letters-from-Hannes-and-Lena/i-BXKjgFJ> (Consulted May 10, 2020).
- 25 Hannes Meyer, «La Ciudad de México: fragmentos de un estudio urbanístico», in: *Arquitectura* (1943), 12, p. 103. Quoted also in: Raquel Franklin, «Experiencias de Urbanismo: los proyectos urbanos de Hannes Meyer en México», in: *DeArq* (2013), 12, pp. 38–57.