

Reflections on Hannes Meyer's trajectory of displacement and the idea and potential of a «marginal counter-history»

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It is hard to say where Hannes Meyer's home was. He was born in 1889 in Basel, Switzerland, into a family whose association with architecture extended two centuries into the past; and his own schooling as a builder began when he was about sixteen years old.¹ Meyer moved away from and returned to Switzerland on a number of occasions throughout his life, often spending years studying and working in foreign nations. Perhaps most famously, he worked at the Bauhaus Dessau for more than three years, first as a teacher of architecture then as director.² After his dismissal from the position of Bauhaus director Meyer spent several years in the Soviet Union, during which time he also traveled to many Western European countries delivering lectures.³ Aside from his childhood and adolescence in Basel, Meyer spent no lengthier continuous period of time anywhere else than in Mexico, where he lived until five years before his death in Switzerland in 1954. Though Meyer frequently found himself separated from the places he might have called home the path traced and forged by his lifelong trajectory suggests a comprehension of both home and homelessness that is critical of the borders and walls that too often define home, especially as an idealized destination.

homelessness as a concept

Was Mexico at home with itself when Meyer lived there? Two mid-century philosophers help us understand the postcolonial dilemma of the desire to build a national home, Octavio Paz (1914–1998) and Leopoldo Zea (1912–2004). One year after Meyer left Mexico Paz published *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), much of which the Mexican poet planned and wrote in Paris, where he moved in November 1945. For Paz, distance is essential to comprehension; but that comprehension becomes then distanced from its apparent subject: «Distance helped me: I lived in a world far from Mexico, immune to its ghosts. [...] Upon writing I took revenge on Mexico; an instant later my writing turned against me, and Mexico took its revenge.»⁴ The tensions among subjectivity, comprehension, distance, and proximity that Paz considers in relation to living in Paris reach, at the conclusion of *Labyrinth*, a still-relevant meditation on post-coloniality. In Paris, Paz witnessed first-hand the destruction of Europe, which may have influenced his observation that Mexicans «have exhausted the historical forms Europe possessed».⁵ At the end of his essay, this exhaustion is clearly part of a narrative of postcolonial homelessness: «All that remains for us is either nakedness or falsehood. After this general defeat of Reason and Faith [...] there remain no new or even old intellectual systems. [...] Nakedness and abandonment await us. There, in

open solitude, transcendence also awaits us: the hands of other solitary beings. We are, for the first time in our history, contemporary to all of humanity».⁶

being contemporary with the world vs.
european ideologies of progress

Being contemporary with the world coincides with the bankruptcy of teleology as understood in European Enlightenment ideologies of progress; thereby calling into question what contemporary might even mean. Paz's response is akin to saying: «I'm not sure, but it's open and exposed and lonely». Solitude for Paz is comparable with the accident for Zea, who, in *La esencia de lo americano* (The Essence of the American) (1971), juxtaposes universality with something difficult to define and that exposes the limits of teleological reason. Referring to the Conquest, Zea writes: «The question of the peculiarity of culture and humanity in America takes as its point of departure a consciousness of the accidental. And, precisely that which emerges as peculiar to one and the other is that selfsame accidentality. The American, unlike the European, has never felt universal. His concern has been, precisely, a concern for incorporating himself into the universal, to insert himself in it».⁷

accidentality vs. universality

Solitude, abandonment, exposure, and accidentality are key terms from these two thinkers of Mexican and Latin American identity, thinkers for whom identity is certainly not a simple question of origins and definitions but instead a dialogic concept whose development and potential, or impossible realization functions always in terms of irresolvable tensions between such poles as solitude and communion, distance and proximity, exposure and shelter, local and universal, and accidental and teleological.

identity as a dialogic concept

Transnationalism, as a scholarly approach, provides a way of contextualizing the postcolonial dilemmas that Paz, Zea and so many others have wrestled with. As the term suggests, transnational describes a dynamic process of intermingled and overlaid moments and places, in contrast to, say, the negotiations among discrete entities suggested by the term international. Unlike the word global, transnational avoids easy association with universal and dominant. Also clear in its contrast to global, transnational elucidates more the particular than the general. Its attention to processes that cross borders in unequal ways, to my mind, gives transnational more of a critical edge than cosmopolitan tends to imply. To remain critical, transnationalism should be a scholarly approach that resists the exchange-driven annulment of difference inherent to the global capital flows idealized by transnational business. On the other hand, transnationalism should avoid

transnationalism as a method



Fig. 1-3
Siedlung Freidorf, Photographs:
Ryan Fred Long, 2012

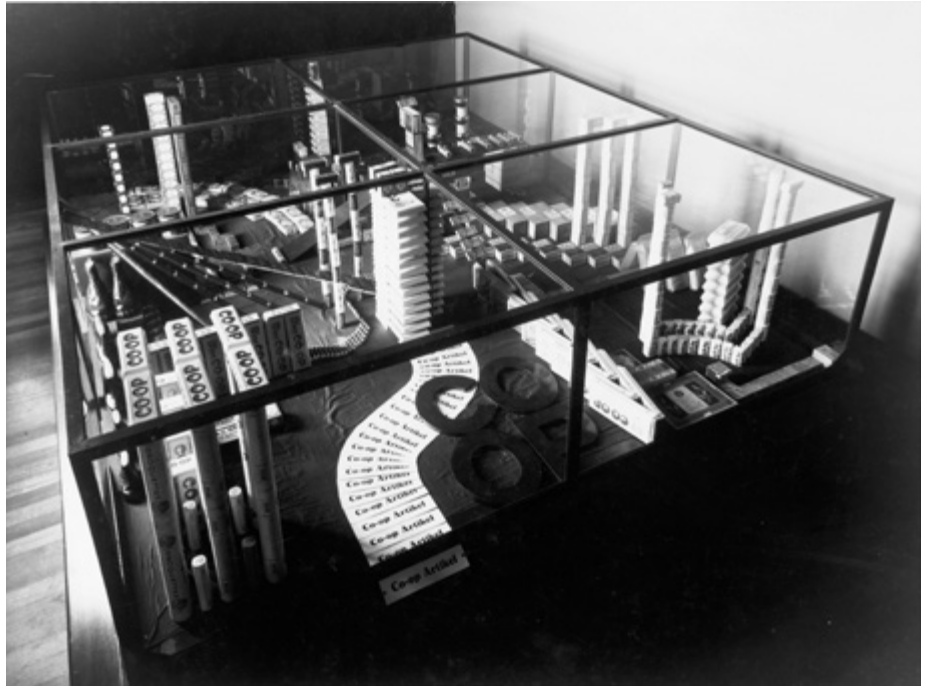


Fig. 4
Co-op Vitrine by Hannes Meyer,
Photograph: Theodor Hoffmann, 1924

Figs. 5, 6
ADGB Trade Union School, Photographs:
Andrea Bärnreuther, 2019



reifying difference in the form of poorly considered or defined national-cultural specificity.

transnationalism as a method

Regarding the Bauhaus, Meyer is certainly a case in point for the phenomenon and, I argue, scholarly importance of transnationalism as a method. His first major architectural accomplishment was the community housing development in MuttENZ, Switzerland, which, in 1919, was «commissioned by the Swiss Co-operative Union» and fully completed in 1924 ^{Figs. 1-3}.⁸ Meyer lived in the Siedlung Freidorf, as it is known, from 1921 to 1926, was a member of its housing co-operative, and the «head of its building commission».⁹ In the Swiss pavilion for the International Exhibition of Co-operatives in Ghent, Belgium, in 1924 Meyer spread the message of the Co-op in the form of theatrical productions and sculptures. His Co-op vitrine ^{Fig. 4} makes a city and an assembly line out of Swiss Co-op goods in order to promote collective production and socialization.¹⁰ The vitrine is also a visual allegory of transnationalism, with its multiple layers, implied dynamism, and entrances or exits that appear to move through its glass borders.

cooperative housing

co-op design

During his time as Bauhaus director in Dessau, Meyer completed together with Hans Wittwer the Trade Union School in Bernau, not far from Berlin, in Brandenburg ^{Figs. 5, 6}. This place, meant to educate workers and promote trade unionism, was in a sense made homeless without going anywhere when, under the Nazi regime, it became a training facility for the SS and the Gestapo. Between 1939 and 1949 Meyer lived and worked in Mexico City, where he continued his dedication to collectivism and the promotion of laborers, perhaps most significantly through his work with the socially critical printmaking collective known as the Taller de Gráfica Popular, or People's Graphic Workshop, best known by the acronym TGP. Its arguably most prominent figure was printmaker Leopoldo Méndez, whose 1945 print *What May Come* ^{Fig. 7} is another representation of a dynamic crossroad, this time with the artist still working on its necessarily unfinished image. *What May Come* is one of Méndez's best-known prints. It places its artist on the near side of the border between life and death, looking to an unknowable place with his back to different incarnations of repressions and state terror. It is an image of the artist at a revolutionary, postcolonial, and transnational intersection.

collectivist ethos

Meyer's time in Mexico includes an exhibition project about school construction. Referring to this work for a federal government school-construction committee in Mexico, Meyer

place-based approach
integrating buildings into their
respective regions

critical regionalism as a concept

emphasized the importance of integrating buildings into their respective regions, a process for which windows and light were often of primary concern: «[...] in terms of construction in Mexico there is a great deal of freedom in relation to the development of regional culture, which reflects the wealth of forms and construction structures in accord with the economic and social situations of each region [...]. In the [...] tropical zone glass windows are to be avoided and the strong solar light must be shielded [...]. In the highland zone classrooms are almost always oriented toward the south».¹¹ Here the intersection of building and light is the window, which Kenneth Frampton also emphasizes, specifically in his discussion of how architecture negotiates place. In «Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance» Frampton writes, «The generic window is obviously the most delicate point at which these two natural forces [light and climate control] impinge upon the outer membrane of the building, fenestration having an innate capacity to inscribe architecture with the character of a region and hence to express the place in which the work is situated».¹²

Through his development of the concept of «Critical Regionalism» Frampton has delineated a theory of an «architecture of resistance» in a «more directly dialectical relation with nature» based on «topography, context, climate, light and tectonic form».¹³ This theory is in opposition to a conception of «modern building [that] is now so universally conditioned by optimized technology», and to a praxis of architecture that «seems to be increasingly polarized between, on the one hand, a so-called «high-tech» approach predicated exclusively upon production and, on the other, the provision of a «compensatory façade» to cover up the harsh realities of this universal system».¹⁴ Returning to the importance of the window, Frampton has emphasized the need to consider a «principle that applies to all fenestration», namely «the appearance of a place-conscious poetic—a form of filtration compounded out of an interaction between culture and nature, between art and light».¹⁵ I suggest that «fenestration» here is similar to transnationalism as a scholarly method, in a critical vein, one that foregrounds both connection and disconnection, or in Frampton's terms the joint and the dis-joint.

transnationalism as a method

place-based approach
critical regionalism as a concept

In a later publication, «Rappel à l'ordre, the Case for the Tectonic», Frampton complements the place-based architectural theory he developed in «Towards a Critical Regionalism» by formulating a way of avoiding what he calls, «the current tendency to

architecture as a mass medium

homelessness as a concept
accidentality vs. universality

reduce architecture to scenography»,¹⁶ in short, to risk alienating a structure's relationship to place through extreme commodification. I propose that Frampton's emphasis on the need to see «built form [as] a presence rather than something standing in for an absence»¹⁷ can be read not only as an insistence upon the importance of construction against postmodern architecture's tendency to provide interesting façades but also as a response to something akin to the homelessness and accidentality Paz and Zea negotiate. Emphasizing presence highlights the relationship between a building and its site, a relationship characterized by continuity and interruption, a «constructional articulation». ¹⁸ Frampton's method is worth noting, especially his use of etymology. He remarked that in Sappho, «the *tekton*, the carpenter, assumes the role of the poet»,¹⁹ or, citing Marco Frascari, that the word «joint» shares a history with the word «art». ²⁰ Frampton concludes by observing that, «the poetics of construction arise, in part, out of the inflection and positioning of the tectonic object». ²¹ The relationship between the tectonic object and its site, however, is not just one of joining. As Frampton writes, «something has to be said about the signification of the <break> or the <dis-joint> as opposed to the signification of the joint. I am alluding to that point at which things break against each other rather than connect; that significant fulcrum at which one system, surface or material abruptly ends to give way to another. Meaning may be thus encoded through the interplay between <joint> and <break> and in this regard rupture may have just as much meaning as connection.»²²

third space between center and periphery

In his discussion of Latin America's relation to purported universality (for example in a discourse of modernity), a discussion influenced by Frampton, Alberto Moreiras calls for the consideration of a third space, which emerges from the contact of center and periphery: «the space of intermediate localizations [...] locales of the zone of contact». ²³ For Moreiras the <joint> offers a promise, and the <disjoint> reveals the remains of failed connections, a failure, however, that may lead to a different possibility, one that acknowledges not just the failure of the disjuncture but also the failure of the promise. The promise's teleology distorts our understanding of history and its remains. Emphasis on the disjuncture and the presence of the tectonic, Frampton suggests, may help us «acquire entry to an anti-processual world wherein the <presencing> of things will once again facilitate the appearance and experience [of humankind]. Beyond the aporias of history and progress and outside the reactionary closures of Historicism and the

- [O] What is the significance and relevance of the Bauhaus and Modernism today—a historical phenomenon or a resource for the present? And what, if anything, constitutes their current relevance?

marginal counter-history

Neo-Avant-Gardes, lies the potential for a *marginal* counter-history». ²⁴ Marginal here connotes at least two things: the articulation, the connection, the joint and the dis-joint; and the non-centric (if not eccentric), or perhaps the minor; both of which relate to Hannes Meyer's trajectory of displacement.

displacement as a concept
homelessness as a concept

- [O] Leading to my conclusion, I turn now to Meyer's correspondence with Méndez and the theoretical value of distance, displacement, dis-jointedness, or homelessness suggested therein. In the summer and fall of 1948 Méndez toured Europe, including trips to Portugal, Poland, Czechoslovakia, France, and Italy. Writing to Meyer from the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace in Wrocław on August 28, 1948 ^{Fig. 8}, Méndez described the Hala Ludowa, or People's Hall, as «where earlier, as you know, Hitler held his meetings». Méndez continued: «The hall was truly impressive, with a real *pueblo*, 20,000 people, who before arrived walking from all corners with their banners both red and white, and this isn't a figure of speech, but they gave me the impression, seeing them along the destroyed streets, that they emerged from the very ruins of a silent protest».

Much of the letters Meyer and Méndez exchange while the latter is in Europe detail problems regarding the politics and leadership of the TGP. At one moment in a December 14, 1948 letter ^{Fig. 9} from Venice that reveals a particular aspect of Méndez's concerns, he writes, underlining the words «graphic workshop», that «the Workshop is far from being a graphic workshop. Maybe it's popular. Propaganda can make the popular but that other thing [...]». The ellipsis that follows «that other thing» (*lo otro*) in Méndez's letter becomes in a way akin to the space signaled in the August letter as the «ruins of a silent protest», and also akin to the unknowable horizon toward which Méndez's self-portrait looks in «What May Come».

Bauhaus as a collective call for action

The collective call to action that the Bauhaus embodied, that Meyer's work consistently promoted, and that Méndez praises in his assessment of the 1948 World Congress for Peace is a call that finds origins in the ruins of projects like the Bauhaus, the Trade Union School, and, more hopefully, in the defeat of Nazism in Méndez's print and in his allusions to the previous speaker in the Hala Ludowa. These are calls from displaced places, poetic, joined and dis-jointed, as in the figure of speech Méndez denies while mobilizing. They are also calls toward places not yet placed, destinations in something much less specific, but for that no less important: «*lo otro*», silence's ruins, and the artist's and architect's horizons.

Notes

- 1 Claude Schnaidt, *Hannes Meyer: Bauten, Projekte und Schriften. Buildings, Projects, and Writings*, Stuttgart: Hatje, 1965, p. 9.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 4 Quoted from Enrico Mario Santí, «Introducción», in: Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, ed. Enrico Mario Santí, Madrid 2001, pp. 43–44. English translation: by the author.
- 5 Paz 2001 (as Note 4), p. 34.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 340.
- 7 Leopoldo Zea, *La esencia de lo americano*, Buenos Aires 1971, p. 16.
- 8 Robert A. M. Stern, David Fishman, and Jacob Tilove, *Paradise Planned: The Garden Suburb and the Modern City*, New York 2013, p. 572.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 572.
- 10 Klaus-Jürgen Winkler, *Der Architekt Hannes Meyer: Anschauungen und Werk*, Berlin: Verl. für Bauwesen, 1989, p. 52.
- 11 Quoted from Patricia Rivadeneyra Barbero, *Hannes Meyer: Vida y obra*, Mexico City 2004, p. 190.
- 12 Kenneth Frampton, «Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance», in: *The Anti-Aesthetic*, (ed.) Hal Foster, Seattle 1983, p. 26.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 16 Kenneth Frampton, «Rappel à l'ordre, the Case for the Tectonic», in: *Architectural Design* 60 (1990), 3–4, p. 19.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 23 Alberto Moreiras, *Tercer Espacio: Literatura y duelo en América Latina*, Santiago de Chile 1999, p. 118.
- 24 Frampton 1990 (as Note 16), p. 25.