

# Image and the Space of the Modern City in Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*<sup>1</sup>

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In December 1925 the photobook *Amerika* by Erich Mendelsohn was published. This volume contains mainly the photographs, which the architect had taken or borrowed during his study journey to the United States of America one year before.<sup>2</sup>

The book became a successful bestseller. During the following two years five new editions appeared. Afterwards, in 1928 it was again presented in a revised and enlarged version. Mendelsohn's book participated indeed in the contemporary literary stream of the Americanism, which in Germany was particularly strong, but it should not be estimated as a merely American travel diary.<sup>3</sup>

The architect published a sort of travel diary from the letters to his wife partially in the daily paper *Berliner Tageblatt* and then in two architectural magazines: the German *Baukunst* and the Dutch *Architectura*. The Dutch version magazine was published in May 1925, in German language however, and is the only one complete and illustrated with many original photographs by the architect, most of which were not later used again. This diary is characterized by a fresh narrative style, due to its being an extract from personal letters. However, the idea expressed upon his experience is mainly similar to those of another German architect who also 1924 travelled to the United States, Adolf Rading.<sup>4</sup>

The proper photobook *Amerika* is a complexly structured work, which has above all the goal of explaining a new vision on the contemporary city. This new view should represent the probably future developments of the urban phenomena, those, which agreed with the ideas of the new modern architecture. This background constitutes the fascination of this ambiguous book. On the one hand the classical topics of the European Americanism are pointed out, that is the fundamental opposition between civilization and culture, which had been more extensively expressed in Mendelsohn's letters from America.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand there is the attempt of the architect to express the topics and the potentialities of new architecture inside the modern cities in a new language. This ambiguity is already in the title to recognize: *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*. That means the description of the brutal experience of the cultural shift between old and new world, but together a rethinking about it from a position of specific distance (i. e. led by an architect). It is not coincidence that Mendelsohn in his letters described this journey experience as a "voyage of investigation for eye and brain".<sup>6</sup>

He wanted to present to the readers straight this entire investigation and the practical developments resulting from it. Here the main difference of his volume compared with American reports or more elaborated studies by other European architects during the Twenties, like the later work by Walther C. Behrendt or the two books by his former employee Richard Neutra.<sup>7</sup>

In all these contributions the attached pictures are only illustrations; the emphasis is on the description, which tries to be a scientific one. So the experience of the reader must remain limited, as if he would observe a phenomenon under the microscope. Also in photobooks by professional photographers at that time, like the famous volume *The United States: The romantic America* by Emil O. Hoppé (1927), one feels the strong difference to Mendelsohn's book, which consists of the fact that a visual narration developing from the picture sequence is not to be recognized. The photographer seems to have the only one goal to create a broad documentation. The result is a series of arranged postcards, which do not communicate with one another.

In Mendelsohn's book the pictures are closely connected together and arranged as in a telling story.

"Tempo" and "Concentration" are the keywords, with which the architecture of this photobook could be described. In other words: a specification of the sensory experience of the metropolis, during simultaneous focusing on the emphasis points. The critic of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, Fritz Stahl, in the first review of the book wrote: "(...) Both the whole and the singularities [are] shown with the help of the unfailingly painting light proof-strongly and controllably, so that neither exaggerating, nor reducing of the existing things is longer possible."<sup>8</sup>

The objective naturalism of this describing model has one ideological basis inside the reflections by the sociologist Georg Simmel over the mental process of the metropolitan citizen as course of increasing dynamic life and consciousness towards the metropolis phenomenon. The use of modern means and instruments, i.e. the camera, is therefore a necessary condition for the inner construction of the book as representation of the contemporary

city. There was then the problem of the architecture of the book, which has to be adapted when describing the city and its buildings. Mendelsohn seems to have reflected over this question and selected those from the contemporary artistic experiments of the avant-garde, with which he believed to be able to represent the metropolis phenomena.

"Tempo; Tempo; Tempo" is the recurring key-word on the pages of the typofoto *Dynamik der Großstadt* by László Moholy-Nagy.<sup>9</sup>

Like Mendelsohn, the Hungarian artist wanted to represent the dynamics and the rhythm of the new city, by using a merged arrangement of photography and typographic elements. Mendelsohn instead used as few as possible a graphic arrangement in his book, because he regarded it as inconvenient to visual perception and distracting over the view.

Therefore he took examples from the so-called 'absolute films' the possibility of visualizing the rhythm by displacing one picture inside the book page. The absolute films by Viking Ekkeling and by Hans Richter were exact representations of the rhythmic changes of geometrical basic figures, which are moved with different times on the screen. One finds the same geometrical structure of the picture in *Amerika*, when it is observed as frame strip (fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> It is evident that one may "read" the book like a motion picture, because the largest part of the volume actually consists of sequential photographs—Mendelsohn called it 'developing'—which the road perspectives in New York and Chicago shows.<sup>11</sup>

These picture series form mainly the first three parts of the book, which reproduce the experience of the metropolis according to the ideas of the rhythm and the eye-view. Enlarging the images and changing the picture position within the pages reproduce the rhythms in the urban space, as it were described in the words of the architect: "Terrific syncopations of the evening bells, percussive rhythm whipped 'with cream' (...) rhythm of the motors and 'speed of life', of which they partake, without understanding, that they understand without being able to analyse, analyse, without being able to pull it together."<sup>12</sup>

Mendelsohn wants to make the phenomena understandable and analysable, and refuses a simple representation of the confusion. The picture dimensions correspond with the sharpness of the visual field; the image cuts allow the concentration on a certain element, which separates thus from its environment.

The different cuts of the pictures, as far as it is on the still existing originals recognizable, have the purpose to compare the mechanical photographic capability of the camera with the actual optical perception, which the expert view of the architect can feedback. Therefore Mendelsohn's view of the modern city is not the layman's view of a tremendous phenomenon, but an accurate view suggested for a layman public. This fact explains Mendelsohn's private discontent with his finished book: "some points are missing—he wrote to his wife—and the logic of the image sequence must often be forced to prove its correctness."<sup>13</sup>

Two years later, while he prepared the revised edition together with a new photobook *Russland Europa Amerika*, the architect was still more concerned with this problem: "(...) nothing appeals more readily to modern man than picture. He wants to understand, but quickly, clearly, without a lot of furrowing of brows and mysticism. And with all this the world is mysterious as never before, impenetrable and full of daring possibilities."<sup>14</sup>

The possibilities Mendelsohn writes about should be briefly analysed in connection to his photobook with his own real architecture.

While the first three chapters of *Amerika* explain in general the conditions by means of an analytic view, the same view in the second part of the volume becomes synthetic: The more exact effects of the phenomena of the modern metropolis are precisely shown. But, again and again, these considerations are to be understood from a European point of view and in sight of Mendelsohn's own buildings.

The architect shows herein two different examples of the same sights of Broadway, one by day and night and in addition as anonymous, positive example a building by Ely Jacques Kahn, to underli-

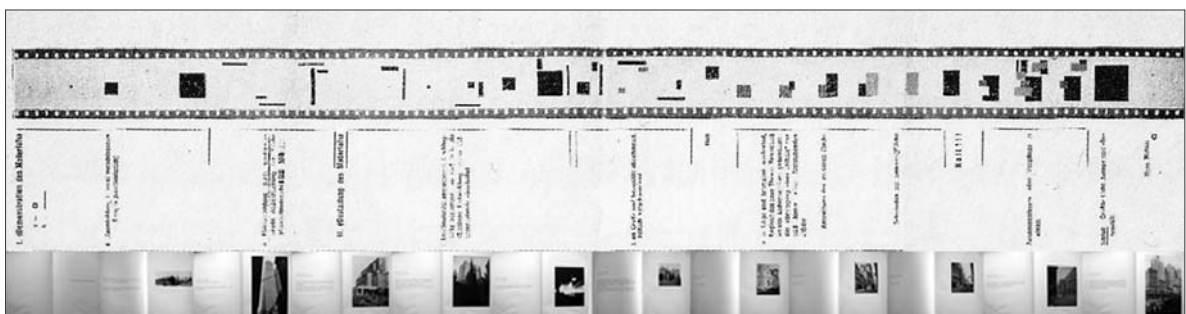


Fig. 1: Frame stripe from *Rhythmus 23* by Hans Richter, 1922–23 (above), Sequence of the first chapter from *Amerika*, Berlin 1926 (below)

ne the necessity for a co-ordination of the advertising lights into the layouts of the buildings (fig. 2).<sup>15</sup> By showing a picture series of high-rise building to illustrate the historic development of the skyscraper-buildings and ending it with an image of the Larkin Co. Building by Frank Lloyd Wright, Mendelsohn directs the attention on the problem of the building proportions. No genuine style suggestion in all these images. But Mendelsohn is certainly self-aware of his own position in relation to those architectural themes. Already before his American journey he had developed his ideas about a commercial architecture for a 'dynamic' modern city. In the summer 1924 Mendelsohn had already completed the building project for the raising and the facade remodelling of the Herpich store. That was the first warehouse in Berlin, of which the front facade was arranged according to horizontal streamlines. Thus it gained continuous shop-window rows and a clever design for the advertising lights set inside the architectural facade. A further aspect of this project represented a strong innovation. For the first time a special kind of scaffolding was developed which allowed the building work without interfering with the activities inside the existing store. Moreover, the scaffold supplied an advertising surface on urban scale.

This scaffolding was projected in Mendelsohn's office via a rapid exchange of sketches and cable messages with the architect just arrived at New York. It shows clearly the architect's own reflection over the powerful effect on the urban space of these temporary architectures. Mendelsohn put many pictures in his book to this topic in order to emphasize the expression potentialities of those architectural elements (fig. 3).

In this way he took position in a debate, which had been already opened in the German culture long before. Above all the architect endorsed an economic and worth use of such building scaffolds. During his German career he carried out actually only twice similar projects. Both were urban renewals in strategic points of Berlin city centre. That was a factor, which made the use of economically

profitable temporary architecture particularly suitable.<sup>16</sup>

It still must be examined whether there is a clear statement concerning town planning in Mendelsohn's photobook. For this purpose it is worthwhile to quickly compare both the old and new editions of the volume. In 1928 appears the sixth edition, completely revised and extended. Indeed the content remains mainly the same, likewise the system of the development picture series. These are still strengthened with new added images. What changes, however, is the book layout: The photographs have more or less the same picture size and are now aligned together with the accompanying text rigorously on the pages. Thus is missing now that visual effect, which had to suggest the disorder of the city phenomenon, wherein the selecting eye of the architect finds the substantial and alive elements out. The representation of the urban whirling movement becomes however in other ways visible. In this new edition a group of pictures from the bird-eye-view are added to balance the diagonal close-up shots of the skyscrapers.

These new photographs mark the passages between the different picture series and interrupt rhythmically the visual narration with sudden images of the metropolitan chaos. Thus it clarifies, the problems Mendelsohn tried to describe. His substantial goal was not a realistic representation of the urban space, but the representation of the urban growth phenomena, which manifest themselves in the modern metropolis. The material instrument, i. e. the photography as optical representation of the eye-view, remains. The type of visual arrangement as expressing language is only a temporary mean and may be changed and/or revised. Exactly in these years there was a strong change in the language of the modern photography in Germany, also by the influence of photobooks like *Amerika* or *Malerei Photographie Film*. The new additional pictures are photographs by Mendelsohn's chief architect Erich Karweik, which travelled 1927 to New York. These pictures are partially influenced by the photographic style of the 'New Vision'.



Fig. 2: Ely J. Kahn, Zimmermann Saxe and Zimmerman Associated, New York, 1919 (left), Erich Mendelsohn, C. A. Herpich Sons, Furriers, Berlin, view by night (right)

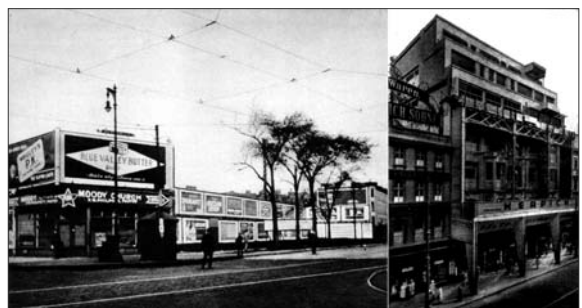


Fig. 3: New Street, Detroit, c. 1923–24 (left), Erich Mendelsohn, C. A. Herpich Sons, Furriers, Berlin, construction scaffolding (right)

Developed by László Moholy-Nagy and promoted as photographic style, the New Vision aimed at a new photography, which could overstep the mark of the naturalistic representation by means of abstract images or strongly diagonal pictures. However, neither Karweik's photographs nor the new sharpened cuts of the old pictures did overpass clearly the mark of abstraction, as far as they had to support the idea of a still optical, conscious eye-view. These new pictures had a further function. By expanding the point-of-view up to a whole district or building block, they described the urban development or the same tendency, which might surpass the individual building. Although these bird-eye-views are distributed among the different book chapters, they show a townscape, which is gradually setting in order, up to a picture at the end of the book.

The photograph from the terrace of the Pennsylvania Hotel is taken by Mendelsohn and represents the only bird-eye-view in the first edition. The architect forces the real contents of the picture, to emphasize his position concerning the town planning or the remodelling of the urban space. Thus it contained a clear reference to his still unfinished redesign of the Herpich store. When *Amerika* was published, only the new storey addition was built, leaving the not yet refurbished old facade on the street. The building appearance resembled so perfectly the picture, being a powerful living proof of Mendelsohn's remarks (fig. 4).

His intervention model does not develop from a scientific analysis of the development processes of the metropolis. According to the architect, from these rough data may not be extracted a unique sample for the city. One must rather assume the living phenomena of the city, like traffic and building concentration, as genuine elements for a limited plan. After his return from the American journey Mendelsohn has not yet been appointed to do a town-planning project. Short time later he began to sketch the Woga complex in Berlin Kurfürstendamm. The project development and the building construction proceeded very slowly. Also the



Fig. 4: View from a terrace of the Pennsylvania-Hotel, New York, 1924 (left), Erich Mendelsohn, C. A. Herpich Sons, Furriers, Berlin, view before facade refurbishment, 1926 (right)

distance from the city centre limited the proportions and the influence of this town design on its immediate environs. Therefore it is worthwhile to evaluate Erich Karweik's contribution to the Linden-Wettbewerb. This design competition took place in February 1925 and was organized by the magazine *Städtebau*.<sup>17</sup>

Karweik's design concentrated the planning on the reconstruction of Pariser Platz by means of a yard building connected with a high-rise tower building. This project is not really an advanced design in his general features and strongly influenced by Eliel Saarinen's Chicago Lakefront project.<sup>18</sup>

However it is interesting to consider the perspectives drawing of Karweik's project. In the view from Unter den Linden, the projected tower building resembles some Mendelsohn's sketches. Besides, the building appears to arrange the edification along the whole avenue. The aim of the project seems to be the coordination of a whole urban district by means of only one object. That is exactly the urban intervention model suggested by Mendelsohn in his photobook: The concentration of the urban redevelopment instead of a complete reconstruction. This idea of a whole reconstruction was the basis of the winning project by Cor van Eesteren. This project shows clearly that the orthodox Functionalism had a different idea on the existing city. Here in the old town and the new city are next to each other, without mutual influence. Only towards the end of the 1920's Mendelsohn had direct opportunities to develop his city visions in planning projects, which could achieve such an urban dimensions. At that time the most important urban cluster in Berlin went under large structural remodelling. This town planning policy was promoted by the city-architect Martin Wagner. His aim was the attempt to include the private investors in a planned government of the town development.<sup>19</sup>

These factors were crucial to this kind of urban project, which arrange a concentration of the intervention zones for the urban redevelopment. Mendelsohn was no more alone, among the modern architects, to support this planning trend.

In 1929 Wassily Luckhardt published his own American journey impressions in the magazine *Bauwelt*.<sup>20</sup> This small photographic portfolio, accompanied by short notes is strongly influenced by Mendelsohn's *Amerika*. That is clear recognizable in both the photographic language and the representation of architectural topics and solutions, like for example the recognition of traffic as strong architectural element. Still the high-rise building is emphasized as instrument for organizing the urban space. This position is stressed as "European influence" over American architecture. Therefore is hardly amazing to find Mendelsohn and Luckhardt together as main players in the two largest urban projects developed at this time. These were the

projects for the remodelling of Potsdamer Platz and Alexanderplatz in Berlin.

For Potsdamer Platz Mendelsohn designed different drafts concerning the square entrance. The late version developed the theme of the skyscraper as landmark for urban junctions. Two similar multi-storey buildings stand beside a high-rise tower, the Haus Berlin, to be designed by the Luckhardt brothers and Alfons Anker. The twin multi-storey buildings at the side of the Haus Berlin should form the new entrance of the Leipziger Platz implementing the effect of urban curtains. Mendelsohn as his last German work realized only one of these buildings, the Columbushaus (fig. 5).

The case of Alexanderplatz town planning was more complicated, whereas Mendelsohn played different roles. As a member of the competition jury he supported the urban project designed by the Luckhardt brothers and Alfons Anker. Their proposal developed mainly the suggestions of the competition notice to take the public traffic development plan as a default basis for the draft.

The architects used directly the traffic line shape as composition elements, so that the resulting streamlined buildings would enclose the square like a horseshoe. The horizontally arranged fronts extended the model of the Herpich store to a whole district. It was Mendelsohn however, which should design the most impressive proposal. He developed after the competition the project for a building block behind among the rounded side of the square. From Luckhardt's general plan Mendelsohn took the system of the facade organization and used it laterally along the block. This is arranged with two thin multi-storey buildings, which stand behind the round curtains of the new Alexanderplatz. It was an urban landmark, which directly carried out the vision, which Mendelsohn's eye had recognized inside of the American metropolis: "The effect of its arranged masses becomes so strong that, by ruling over itself, it prepares the rule over district and city. Daring and new enough, to become the independent expression of this new life."<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 5: Raymond M. Hood, *Beaux-Arts Apartments*, New York, 1928 (left), Hans and Wassily Luckhardt and Alfons Anker, project for the redesign of Potsdamer Platz, 1931, photomontage (right)

#### Notes:

- 1 This paper is a revised and expanded abstract from Michele Stavagna, *I fotolibri di Erich Mendelsohn e l'immagine del Moderno*, Ph.D. diss., Università IUAV, Venezia 2005.
- 2 The architect Knud Lönberg-Holm, who Mendelsohn met in Detroit, had done 16 among the 78 picture of the book. Mendelsohn borrowed one picture from the director Fritz Lang, who also did a study journey traveling with the architect towards the United States in the same ship.
- 3 For an extensive study on the Americanism and his influence among European architect, see Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come*, Paris 1995.
- 4 Rading did his American travel only one month before Mendelsohn. He published in February 1925 his impressions with many pictures in the magazine *Der Neubau*. Both architects had a similar travel schedule. Rading's statements on the United States reflect largely the typical European opinion on America shared even by Mendelsohn.
- 5 Americanism had to be the frame of Mendelsohn's book as that was the wish of publisher Hans Lachmann-Mosse, who was Mendelsohn's patron and had partially paid the journey expenses in exchange for some articles and a following travel book.
- 6 Erich Mendelsohn, letter to Luise Mendelsohn, October 16, 1924, in: Erich Mendelsohn, *Letters of an architect*, ed. Oskar Beyer, London New York Toronto, 1967, p. 67.
- 7 See Walter C. Behrendt, *Städtebau und Wohnungswesen in den Vereinigten Staaten*, Berlin 1926; Richard Neutra, *Wie baut Amerika?*, Stuttgart 1927; Richard Neutra, *Amerika: Die Stilbildung des neuen Bauens in den Vereinigten Staaten*, Wien 1930. All these books present themselves explicitly as scientific studies.
- 8 'Wie Amerika baut', *Berliner Tageblatt*, January 7, 1926. The article is not signed, but Fritz Stahl was the regular art critic for the *Tageblatt* at that time.

- 9 See László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei Photographie Film*, München 1925.
- 10 Mendelsohn knew these films. See Luise Mendelsohn, letter to Erich Mendelsohn, November 6, 1924, The Getty Research Institute, Mendelsohn Papers, box 10.
- 11 The Russian artist El Lissitzky underlined this remark in his review of Amerika. See El Lissitzky, *The Architect's Eye: A review of Erich Mendelsohn's Amerika*, in: Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the modern era*, New York 1989, pp. 221–226
- 12 Erich Mendelsohn, letter to Luise Mendelsohn, October 22, 1922. See also Kathleen James, *Erich Mendelsohn and the architecture of German modernism*, Cambridge 1997, p. 62.
- 13 Erich Mendelsohn, letter to Luise Mendelsohn, August 21, 1925, unpublished, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek, Mendelsohn Archiv, Briefe 41.
- 14 Erich Mendelsohn, letter to Luise Mendelsohn, July 11, 1927, in: Erich Mendelsohn, *Letters of an architect*, ed. Oskar Beyer, London New York Toronto, 1967, p. 96.
- 15 Mendelsohn shows two building by Ely J. Kahn: Zimmerman Axe and Zimmermann Associated Building and 550 Seventh Avenue Building. However he did mention neither Kahn nor any other architect, including Wright, in the whole book.
- 16 The second project was the scaffolding for the Galeries Lafayette in Berlin. The construction were delayed and then realized in lesser scale with the new name of Columbushaus. The scaffold remained for more than two years on place, carrying gigantic advertisement pictures.
- 17 For the competition entries, including Karweik's and van Eesteren's, see *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, 1925, pp. 217–218; *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, 1926, pp. 61–76; *Städtebau*, 1926, pp. 25–27.
- 18 Mendelsohn had met Saarinen in Ann Arbor near Detroit during his American journey.
- 19 See Ludovica Scarpa, *Martin Wagner e Berlino*, Roma 1983.
- 20 See Wassily Luckhardt, *Stand der Modernen Baugesinnung in Nordamerika. Reiseeindrücke, Bauwelt*, 1929, Heft 46, pp. 1–16.
- 21 With these words as accompanying text for a picture of a setback commercial warehouse along the Seventh Avenue in New York, Mendelsohn ends his photobook. See Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, Berlin, 1926, p. 77.

Credits:

- fig. 1: Above: Frame stripe from Rhythmus 23 by Hans Richter, 1922–23 (Source: G, 1923)  
 Below: Sequence of the first chapter from Amerika, Berlin 1926 (Source: Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, Berlin 1926, pp. 1–11)
- fig. 2: Left: Ely J. Kahn, Zimmermann Saxe and Zimmerman Associated, New York, 1919 (Source: Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, Berlin 1926, p. 25 [photo by K. Lönberg-Holm])  
 Right: Erich Mendelsohn, C. A. Herpich Sons, Furriers, Berlin, view by night (Source: Erich Mendelsohn, *Gesamtschaffen: Skizzen, Entwürfe, Bauten*, Berlin 1930, p. 106)
- fig. 3: Left: New Street, Detroit, c. 1923–24 (Source: Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, Berlin 1926, p. 57 [photo by K. Lönberg-Holm])  
 Right: Erich Mendelsohn, C. A. Herpich Sons, Furriers, Berlin, construction scaffolding (Source: *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, 1925.)
- fig. 4: Left: View from a terrace of the Pennsylvania-Hotel, New York, 1924 (Source: Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, 6th ed. Berlin 1928, p. 213 [photo by E. Mendelsohn])  
 Right: Erich Mendelsohn, C. A. Herpich Sons, Furriers, Berlin, view before façade refurbishment, 1926 (Source: *Der Neubau*, 1926.)
- fig. 5: Left: Raymond M. Hood, Beaux-Arts Apartements, New York, 1928 (Source: *Bauwelt*, 1929 [photo by W. Luckhardt])  
 Right: Hans and Wassily Luckhardt and Alfons Anker, project for the redesign of Potsdamer Platz, 1931, photomontage (Source: Kathleen James, *Erich Mendelsohn and the architecture of German modernism*, Cambridge 1997, p. 137)