

1919 Erich Mendelsohn: The problem of a new architecture (excerpt)

Erich Mendelsohn (b. 1887 in Allenstein, East Prussia, d. 1953 in San Francisco) was in 1919 a member of the Central Committee of the November Group. In the leaflet of the Berlin Arbeitsrat für Kunst (p. 44) he is listed as one of those friends who have expressed their support for the goals of the Arbeitsrat. The following text is an excerpt from a programmatic lecture with slides which Mendelsohn delivered to members of the Arbeitsrat. The lecture presupposes a knowledge of the Utopian designs assembled by the Arbeitsrat in its exhibition of April 1919. Mendelsohn compares these designs with those buildings already regarded as standard examples of the new development.

The simultaneous process of revolutionary political decisions and radical changes in human relationships in economy and science and religion and art give belief in the new form an *a priori* right to exercise control, and provide a justifiable basis for a rebirth amidst the misery produced by world-historical disasters.

When forms break up, they are merely thrust aside by new forms that are already present but only now come to light.

For the particular prerequisites of architecture, the reorganization of society taking place in response to the spirit of the times means new tasks arising out of the changed purposes of buildings which in turn result from changes in travel, economy, and religion, coupled with new possibilities presented by the new building materials: glass, iron, and concrete.

When we consider as yet unknown possibilities, we must not let ourselves be misled by that dulling of vision which comes from too close a viewpoint. That which seems today to be flowing with viscous slowness will later appear to history as having moved at a breakneck and thrilling speed. We are dealing here with an act of creation!

We are only at the early beginning, but we are already faced with the possibilities of its development.

Before such a future the great achievements of *historical* times step back of their own accord; the immediacy of the *present* loses its importance.

What will happen has value *only* if it comes into being in the intoxication of vision.

Criticism bears fruit *only* if it can embrace the whole problem. Tutelage fails, because the future speaks for itself. If we wish to pass on such a faith, to convey its palpable conclusions to a wider circle as self-evident facts, we must necessarily demonstrate that the young forces in architecture draw their architectonic experiences not from *history* nor from heaven, but solely from the fertility of their own visions of space. In this, up to the present, three paths may be distinguished, which, though fundamentally different, follow parallel courses towards the same goal and nevertheless will one day cross . . .

It cannot be chance that the three recognizable paths of the new architecture

coincide with the same number and nature of the new paths in painting and sculpture.

This coincidence of the volition behind them will find expression in the resulting work and will bring all the arts back into a unity. This unity will embrace the great achievements – the shrines of a new world – *as well as* the smallest objects in our everyday dwellings.

What today is a *problem* – will one day be a *task*; what today is the vision and faith of a single individual, will one day become a law for *all*.

Therefore *all* trends seem necessary to achieving the goal, and hence to solving the problem of a new architecture:

the apostles of glass worlds,

the analysts of spatial elements,

the seekers for new forms of material and construction.

Naturally, this era will not be brought into being by social classes in the grip of tradition.

Only a *new* will has the future in its favour in the unconsciousness of its chaotic impetus, in the pristine vigour with which it embraces the universal.

For just as every epoch that was decisive for the evolution of human history united the *whole* known globe under its spiritual will, so what we long for will have to bring happiness beyond our *own* country, beyond Europe, to *all* peoples. This does not mean that I am handing over the reins to internationalism. For *internationalism* means an aesthetic attitude with its basis in no one people in a disintegrating world. *Supra-nationalism*, however, embraces *national* demarcations as a *precondition*; it is free humanity that *alone* can re-establish an all-embracing culture.

Such a great will unites all those who are engaged in the work.

It comes into being, it awakens an adequate religious faith *only* after the fusion of the ultimate achievement of *all* peoples.

Here we can do no *more* than contribute the modest measure of our own work, in faith and in a willingness to serve.