



Erich Mendelsohn's Cosmopolitan Vision

A recent U.S. exhibition gave this German icon his due.

by Laura B. McGuire

In 1932, "THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE" EXHIBITION, curated by Phillip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Johnson and Hitchcock, who only grudgingly allowed Erich Mendelsohn's works into the show, described them several times as aesthetically inferior examples of the International Style. Ironically, 75 years later, the only United States stop on the world tour of a comprehensive retrospective of Mendelsohn's work was the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston, which Johnson designed in 1985.

The exhibition *Erich Mendelsohn, Dynamics and Function: Realized Visions of a Cosmopolitan Architect* was the largest collection of photographs, models, and drawings of the German architect's buildings ever displayed. Curated by Regina Stephan of the Technische Universität Darmstadt, the exhibition was organized and sponsored by the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations in Germany and co-sponsored by the Hines College of Architecture. It came to Houston last September 7 to October 11 through the efforts of Dietmar Froehlich, an associate professor of architec-

ture at UH. The accompanying catalog is an expanded version of Stephan's 1999 book *Erich Mendelsohn, Architect, 1887-1953*, and offers comprehensive historical essays on his work and life, as well as a broad selection of the photographs included in the exhibition.

Born in 1887, Erich Mendelsohn positioned himself on the cutting edge of architecture in Germany during the 1920s. His Einstein Tower, built in 1920 in Potsdam, brought him international recognition. Mendelsohn went on to become one of the most successful commercial architects in Germany, but as a Jew he was forced to flee at the height of his career in 1933. He established offices in London and Palestine, before finally settling in the United States in 1941.

Despite the quality and variety of Mendelsohn's buildings, traditional accounts of the development of modernist architecture and the International Style have largely overlooked his oeuvre. He has frequently been assigned footnote status in the history of architecture and regarded as an Expressionist of the 1920s whose work never truly adhered to the official tenets of international modernism. This exhibition, along with other recent scholarship, has sought to counter this unfortunate legacy by recognizing Mendelsohn's unique vision.

This exhibition shows that Mendelsohn's strength



OPPOSITE PAGE: *Universum Cinema*, Berlin, 1926-28.
 TOP: *Russell House*, San Francisco, 1949; BOTTOM: *Steinberg Hat Factory*, Luckenwalde, 1921-23.

as a designer lay in part in the fact that his buildings were not easily categorized within prevailing modernist idioms. His built works responded with a remarkable sensitivity to their sites, contexts, and uses by integrating a wide variety of modern forms into new and singular wholes. While this fact reduced his chances for inclusion in the modernist canon, it demonstrated Mendelsohn's quality as an architect. His buildings drew on many influences but maintained integrity of purpose and an aesthetic sensibility that favored both regionalism and sculptural composition over rationalist functionalism.

The drawings, photographs, and models on display at UH underlined this point. The meticulously crafted models (executed by students at the University of Stuttgart) allowed us to see the intensely sculptural quality of Mendelsohn's designs as well as the sophistication of his surface compositions. The perfect reproductions of his sketches were thrilling. Swooping curves, vivid colors, and thick charcoal lines made the structures leap forward and hover just above the page.

From his 1920s streamlined glass-and-steel business

buildings in Germany to the exquisite geometries of his American synagogues and community centers of the 1940s and 1950s, Mendelsohn fearlessly explored the possibilities of material, geometry, and context. While his early works have in the past received the most critical attention, his American and Israeli projects occupied a significant share of this exhibition's space—happily, because these later works showcase Mendelsohn's talent as a regional modernist.

One of the highlights is the house the architect designed for Leon B. Russell in 1949. Mendelsohn realized this now little-known masterpiece of midcen-

tury modern architecture atop a hill in San Francisco's Pacific Heights. The house integrates Corbusian and Wrightian forms to produce a modern house that nevertheless maintains a dialogue with its site. Supported in some areas by pilotis and in others by a plinth, the three floors of the house are encased behind bands of horizontal wooden cladding that unified the residence with its verdant surroundings. Balconies and wide glass windows occupy every level, providing residents multiple views of the hills and the bay beyond. Mendelsohn set a futuristic

circular observation deck into one corner of the uppermost story, evidencing his willingness to integrate unexpected geometries into his architecture in the face of the formal, rectilinear prescriptions of the International Style.

With this new exhibition, curator Regina Stephan has done a great service in bringing Mendelsohn's accomplishments into the public eye. Not only does the exhibition reveal Mendelsohn's great artistic sensitivity, but it also serves to highlight the true stylistic diversity of 20th-century modernism. ★