From Messel to Mendelsohn: The Critical Dimension of German Department Stores

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INTRODUCTION

The dilemma faced by many architects today of how to practice within a consumer culture with which they are not entirely comfortable is not a new one, although the variety of ways that earlier architects addressed it has often been overlooked in accounts that privilege style, theory, and construction over issues of use. Furthermore, the common assumption that the work of the heroic figures of the modem movement provide an alternative to such commercialism often alienates us from what we often perceive to be a new, specifically postmodern condition. By delineating the ways in which two generations of German architects addressed their concerns about the department store, this paper provides some measure of precedent for an architecture which does in part critique its apparent program, while exposing the enthusiasm for the consumer face of mass production that existed within the modern movement during the twenties.

For a century after its emergence in the 1850s in Paris and New York, the department store was the building type which most completely embodied the fashionable urban face of the new industrial economy in buildings whose ornamental splendor was matched (incongruously according to many later critics) by the technical innovations of their construction.' The enormous glazed openings of such celebrated turn-of-the century stores as Franz Jourdain's Samaritaine in Paris, Victor Horta's Innovation in Brussels, and Louis Sullivan's Carson, Pirie, Scott in Chicago served not only as daring examples of metal and glass construction, but as richly embellished frames for carefully arranged displays of the goods available for purchase within. In Germany, however, Alfred Messel and Erich Mendelsohn incorporated critiques of this new consumer culture into designs for widely praised stores.

Messel's Wertheim department store on Berlin's Leipzigerplatz and Leipzigerstraße, erected between 1896 and 1904, and Mendelsohn's Schocken store in Stuttgart, which opened in 1928, represent two very different, even conflicting, approaches towards the department store. While Messel downplayed the advertising function of the type in favor of a reassuring image of historical and social continuity, Mendelsohn used advertising to dress up the austere industrial imagery that epitomized his rejection of conventional luxury. Although conditioned in part by the individual taste of the two architects and the different character of the department store chains who employed them, many of these differences are mirrored in the writings of two generations of German architectural critics, whose attitudes toward consumerism changed dramatically after World War I.

Both Messel and Mendelsohn excelled at giving orderly, but interesting form to urban building types (office and apartment buildings) more typically associated with the most chaotic aspects of contemporary real estate speculation. Each architect also managed to downplay the aspects of commercialism that most distressed him and his contemporaries while satisfying his patron's needs for environments suitable to selling. For Messel and his generation, the main problem posed by Germany's rapid industrialization and the urbanization which accompanied it was the abandonment of such cultural traditions as guild-sponsored craftsmanship and the small, family-owned shop. Messel thus crafted an image of cultural continuity that belied these disruptions. Two decades later, Mendelsohn instead rejected ornament and the discredited history to which it was often tied, choosing — in what was understood at the time as a highly democratic gesture — to expose the connection between the loci of mass production and consumption and equate the department store with the factory.

THE WERTHEIM STORE: AN EMBLEM OF PREWAR REFORM

In Germany, the efforts to reknit art and craft, industrial production and nature through the invention of a new decorative style, known in English and French as Art Nouveau and in German as the Jugendstil, made fewer inroads than in Belgium, France, and the United States. The connection, for instance, to ephemeral fashion represented by Art Nouveau department stores made the style's German critics uncomfortable.[2] They sought instead to tame the most threatening

visual manifestations of industrial capitalism in an effort that focused more on rationalization than style. Spearheaded by the founding in 1907 of the Werkbund, a coalition of businessmen and design reformers, Germans addressed ways in which art might redeem commerce.[3]

The precedent established by Messel's Wertheim store on Leipzigerstraße was crucial to Werkbund organizers. This was Germany's largest and most elegant department store.[4] The block of the store that turned the corner from Leipzigerstrafle, the city's most elegant shopping street, onto Leipzigerplatz, lined with mansions and ,embassies, contained in the eyes of contemporaries the key to a new architecture, one that was patriotic rather than French or American in outlook and distinguished as much by its historicism as its forthright expression of skeletal frame construction. Stripped of the decorative excrescences popular just a few years earlier, this building served, at a time when German cultural critics from the left and the right concurred in their condemnation of the commercialization of public life, for its champions as proof that trade and art could be as mutually beneficial as they had been in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In the Leipzigerplatz addition Messel replaced the typical *Art* Nouveau emphasis on expansive glazing and extravagantly florid ornament with acivic dignity worthy of Schinkel, whose Greek Revival guardhouses flanked the entrance to the opposite end of the octagonal plaza. Prohibited by the city's strict fire code from exposing the store's steel frame, the rhythm of whose piers nonetheless set the tone for his gothicizing detailing, Messel imbued his facades with an apparent permanence rooted in recollections of late medieval north German architecture. The result was a building that presented contemporary commerce as part of a long and distinguished national tradition and largely ignored the development of a new consumer culture dependent upon constant novelty.

German sociologists, most notably Georg Simmel, portrayed the turn-of-the-century metropolis as a frenetic environment in which the nerves of inhabitants were overstimulated by the pace of traffic and the stress of competition.[5] Sirnmel noted the dependence of modern urban life upon money and the clock, in place of what he saw as the more organic quality of preindustrial communities. For many Germans department stores served as emblems of this transformation, environments in which impersonalized cash transactions replaced the ties of friendship (and often credit) which had supposedly once linked customer to small town merchant. They were also often troubled by the low quality of the goods for sale, as the craftsmanship for which the guilds of Nuremberg and Augsburg had once been famous was superseded by industrial production. The subject which attracted the most attention, however, in the pages of the country's many architectural journals was the artistic integration of architecture and advertising, especially but not exclusively in the design of shop windows and their displays.[6]

The dignity Messel's sedate Leipzigerplatz facade bestowed upon the nearly riotous burgeoning of Berlin's commercial district won him the almost unanimous admiration of his contemporaries.[7] Noting the absence of signs, banners, color, or illumination, Paul Göhre praised the understated way in which he had addressed the advertising functions implicit within the building type, agreeing with Alfred Weiner that the entire addition served as an advertisement of the firm's good taste, rather than of specific merchandise.[8] Although the facade of the first Leipzigerstrafle stage of the building had been little more than a giant shop window, a great wall of glass interrupted only by the structural grid of columns and floor slabs, on Leipzigerplatz the architect tucked the display windows behind a generous arcade. Offering windowshoppers protection from the elements, from a distance this arcade also muted the building's commercial function.

Inside the story was slightly different. Here Messel imbued the atria around which most French and American department store interiors were also organized with additional spatial and decorative drama. Developed originally to provide adequate illumination to block-long enclosures and to announce to inexperienced customers the existence of multiple floors of goods, atria became a key component of seductive marketing strategies, their imposing scale bestowing upon bourgeois shoppers a sense of vicarious aristocracy, especially when descending their grand staircases.[9] Messel did not challenge this arrangement but almost overwhelmed its purpose. The later and larger of his two major atria featured elaborate and eclectic marble facing and sculptural decoration; underneath its barrel-vaulted skylights and two dramatic bridges hung chains of electric lights, still a novelty. Almost lost amidst the architectural magnificence of a space which awestruck contemporaries equated with princely palaces was the mundane goal of selling.[10]

THE SCHOCKEN STUTTGART STORE: AN ADVERTISEMENT FOR MASS PRODUCTION

Messel's Wertheim store set the standard for department store architecture throughout Germany, imposing its orderly rhythm upon downtowns across the country. For the next generation, however, the greatest problem posed by the consumer face of the mass-production they lauded was its betrayal of its roots in the factory. Championing industry by the midtwenties as a rational force with the potential to create a more equitable society free of the outmoded social constraints (including historicist architectural ornament) than they associated with the discredited Wilhelmine empire, they welcomed many of the developments that made Messel and Simmel uncomfortable. The problem for Erich Mendelsohn in the three stores he built for Salman Schocken was not the integration of the department store into preindustrial culture but the invention of an appropriately technological and yet commercially effective version of this crucial building type. Inspired by the roar of traffic and what

he saw as the dynamic qualities of steel and concrete frame construction, he tailored his sleek facades to participate in rather than dam the frenetic movement that surrounded them." He also drew upon his memories of the factories he had visited during his trip to the United States in 1924 and the example of Gropius and Meyer's Model Factory for the Werkbund Exhibition held in Cologne in 1914.[12] But most importantly, he embraced the advertising that Messel had so carefully purged from the most prominent phase of the earlier Wertheim store.

Inserting the image of the factory into downtown Stuttgart challenged the social pretensions of earlier stores and exposed the source of the goods for sale within. Industrial austerity was indequate, however, to the task of attracting shoppers. Manipulating light and glass — the almost immaterial ingredients widely associated with the visions of Expressionist utopias that had briefly flourished after the war — Mendelsohn created an architecture that advertised the Schocken chain's efficiency as well as the actual goods for sale. Skeletal frame construction, ample glazing, and electric lighting enabled him to substitute spacious display windows and dramatic night lighting for the circumspect ornament of Messel's facades, while the almost puritanical interiors were embellished with little more than lettering spelling out Schocken's business principles. The composition climaxed in the glazed corner tower. Here Mendelsohn turned Messel's Wertheim model inside out, displacing the technical prowess of its atria to the exterior where, he declared "Out of the staircase tower [I made] a mountain of glass-rings, an advertisement which requires to be paid for only once and ***works*** for *always*."[13]

Mendelsohn's patron shared his enthusiasm for efficiency and advertising and his rejection of the palatial character of most prewar department stores. Although Schocken emphasized the rationality of the goods he sold, he was also an astute advertiser, and he demanded an architecture which balanced the same qualities.[14] Architect and client were equally explicit about the degree to which the new Schocken department stores were a built response to industrialization. At the opening of an earlier Schocken store in Nuremberg housed in a renovated factory Mendelsohn defended his choice of architectural style with the argument that it fit the new spirit of the times, a spirit of "Bare knees and short haircuts/Radio and film/Car and airplane/Banana wholesalers and combines that run department stores." He justified its style in terms of the design of the goods it sold. "Do you want to be deceived by the things that surround you, by your house, the shops you buy from?" he asked. "Are they, then, things that do not belong to you, your electric cooker, your safetyrazor — so functional, so simple and so natural?'" At dedication ceremonies held two years later in Stuttgart, Schocken explained his adherence to the sachlich tenants of the New Building. "Architecture is apurely economic affair," he explained, in which "all technical perfections are exploited; examination of the beauty of the whole results technically from the new means [of production]."[16]

For both architect and merchant, their substitution of advertising for historicist ornament was also a rejection of the bourgeois nationalism embodied by Messel's store. Zionists at a time of revived prejudice, they did not share in an earlier generation's patriotism or its imitation of aristocratic taste." Instead they tended to ally themselves with the working class with whose internationally-oriented socialism they sympathized, although neither man ever actually joined or perhaps even voted for the Social Democratic Party. After the opening in 1929 of the Schocken store in Waldenburg (not designed by Mendelsoh) the local socialist newspaper credited it with increasing the purchasing power of the town's workers.[18] And two months after the Stuttgart store's opening its architect commented on the relationship between architectural change and its social and political equivalents in a response to a questionnaire from the ***Frankfurter Zeitung,*** "There is just as logical a connection between clinging to traditional forms and looking backwards politically as between supporting the new architectural purpose of our age and its revolutionary political ideas."[19]

Although the New Building is often assumed to have been, like Messel's earlier stores, a bulwark against the whims of fashion, for many the problem was not fashion or advertising, but the need to integrate both into an abstract industrial aesthetic.[20] Mendelsohn's dynamic functionalism created an up-to-date image for the postwar department store and corresponded with the belief — shared during the Weimar Republic by artists, architects, and business people and encouraged by the Werkbund as well as the newer Bauhaus — that the best advertisement was a straightforward, but lively, display of available goods, tinted with the implication that they were the products of modem, technological production, and aimed at the masses to whom their widespread availability would bring a higher standard of living.[21] Contemporary critics particularly prized advertising's ability to introduce new artistic styles into the daily lives of the middle and working classes. Adolf Behne, for instance, once defended the different forms of advertising adorning Berlin's stores and cinemas as the city's least expensive and most beautiful art exhibition.[22]

CONCLUSION

In their respective department stores, Messel and Mendelsohn balanced nuanced responses to contemporary criticism of consumerism with solutions that satisfied the functional needs of their patrons. Messel toned down the intrusive modernity of turn-of-the-century advertising, giving the Wertheim store an architectural dignity that enhanced its role as the flagship of Berlin's leading department store chain. Addressing the concerns of a different generation, Mendelsohn rejected historicism and luxury in favor of a celebration of the most progressive aspects of mass production.

Accounts of modem architecture that marginalize the degree to which early twentieth-century commercial architecture both served and critiqued consumer culture slight the

realities of the modern movement in several important ways. First, since neither the Bauhaus nor most German factories needed to be sited with the same sensitivity, privileging the image of production over the realities of consumption favors an understanding of buildings as abstract objects, rather than rooted in complex urban contexts. Second, it ignores the degree to which few buildings exist as diagrams of architectural theories conceived independently of function. The design of the Wertheim and Schocken stores cannot be detached from their purpose as department stores. Rather than distorting some abstract notion of stylistic purity, Messel and Mendelsohn's understanding of their patron's needs was integral to their architectural solutions. Finally, these two store buildings testify to the existence of an often complicated terrain situated between the intellectual heights of cultural criticism and the often mundane specifics of individual building types. The original goals of the modern movement were not betrayed as it spread from origins in factory design and social housing to encompass the realities of commercial commissions for department stores and cinemas. Instead the Wertheim and Schocken stores remind us that many of the movement's pioneering monuments dealt directly with the place of consumerism in the modern city.

NOTES

I would like to acknowledge the impact upon my thinking about the Wertheim store of a unpublished paper by my former student Kai Gutschow.

[1] Meredith Clausen, "The Department Store — Development of the Type," *Journal of Architectural Education* 39:1 (1985): 20-29; Meredith Clausen, *Frantz Jourdain and the Samaritaine: Art Nouveau Theory and Criticism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987); Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Joseph Siry, *Carson, Pirie Scott, Louis Sullivan and the Chicago Department Store* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[2] Jost Hermand, "The Commercialization of the Avant-Garde," *New German Critique* 29 (1983): 71-83.

[3] Joan Campbell, *The German Werkbund: The Politics of Reform in the Applied Arts* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978). For the architectural dimension of these reforms see Karl Scheffler, *Großstadt Architektur* (Berlin, 1913) and, more recently, Julius Posener, *Berlin auf dem Wege zu einer neuen Architektur, Das Zeitalter Wilhelms II* (München: Prestel, 1979).

[4] Messel's original block dates to 1896-97, the additions along Leipziger- and Voßstrasse to 1899-1900, and the Leipzigerplatz extension to 1904-06. The final phase was built on Leipzigerplatz during the Weimar Republic by Ludwig Hoffmann. Recent accounts of the building include Helga Behn, "Die Architektur des deutschen Warenhauses von ihren Anfängen bis 1933," dissertation, University of Köln, 1984, 91-98; Julius Posener, *Auf dem Wege*, 353-85, 475-81; Peter Stürzebecher, "Warenhäuser." *Handel und Gewerbe*, Part A, of *Handel*, vol. 8 of *Berlin und Seine Bauten* (Berlin: Ernst, 1975) 12-18; and Klaus Konrad Weber and Peter Gürttler, "Die Architektur der Warenhäuser," *Handel und Gewerbe*, part A, 28-39.

[5] "The Metropolis and Modern Life," *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, Richard Sennett, ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1966), 47-60. See also David Frisby, "Social Theory, the Metropolis, and Expressionism," *Expressionist Utopias: Paradise, Metropolis, Architectural Fantasy*, Timothy O. Benson, ed. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1993), 88-111. For a critique of the nostalgia that permeates such accounts see James Sheehan, *German History, 1770-1866* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

[6] Franz Behring, "Moderne Schaufensterauslagen," *Baumeister* 4 (1905): 91; Cüddow, "Architektur und Reklame," *Bauwelt* 1.76 (1910): 5-7; Hans Haupmann, "Das Haus als Reklame," *Bauwelt* 3.2 (1912): 35-36; Leo Nachtlicht, "Das Schaufenster," *Bauwelt* 1.11 (1910): 1-2; Karl-Ernst Osthaus, "Das Schaufenster," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbundes* (1913): 59-69; Hans Schliepmann, "Das Geschäftshaus als Architekturproblem," *Bauwelt* 3.12 (1912): 10-12; and Ernst Schur, "Das Schaufenster," *Bauwelt* 1.51 (1910): 3-4.

[7] In addition to the sources cited above see Walter Curt Behrendt, Alfred Messel (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1911), 62-87; Paul Göhre, *Das Warenhaus* (Frankfurt a. M.: Rütten and Loening, 1907), 7-35; Karl Scheffler, "Alfred Messel," *Moderne Bauformen* 4 (1906): 38-40; Alfred Wiener, *Das Warenhaus: Kauf-, Geschäft-, Büro-Haus* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1912) esp. 174-82; and Alfred Wiener, "Das Warenhaus," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbundes* (1913): 49-50.

[8] Göhre, *Warenhaus*, 7, and Wiener, "Warenhaus," 45.

[9] Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982).

[10] Göhre, *Warenhaus*, 21, and Behrendt, *Messel*, 86.

[11] Kathleen James, "Erich Mendelsohn: The Berlin Years, 1918-1933," diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1990, and Regina Stephan, *Studien zu Waren- und Geschäftshäusern Erich Mendelsohns in Deutschland* (München: Tudev, 1992). For the importance of traffic to the architect see Erich Mendelsohn, "The International Consensus of the New Architectural Concept, or Dynamics and Function," *Erich Mendelsohn: The Complete Works*, trans. Antje Frisch (New York: Princeton Architectural P, 1992), 22-34, and Erich Mendelsohn, "Das neuzeitliche Geschäftshaus," an undated manuscript in the Mendelsohn archives quoted in Stephan, *Studien*, 199-201.

[12] Erich Mendelsohn, *Russland, Europa, Amerika: Ein architektonisher Querschnitt* (1929, Basel: Birkhauser Verlag, 1989), 180, and Erich Mendelsohn, "Der moderne Industriebau auf dem Kontinent," *Europäische Revue* 5 (1929): 479.

[13] Erich Mendelsohn, "Own Work," unpublished typescript in the Mendelsohn Archive, Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 7.

[14] Konrad Fuchs, *Ein Konzern aus Sachsen: Das Kaufhaus Schocken als Spiegelbild deutscher Wirtschaft und Politik, 1900 bis 1953* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1992); Siegfried Moses, "Salman Schocken: His Economic and Zionist Activities," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 5 (1960): 73-104; Salman Schocken, *Die Entwicklung der Warenhäuser in Deutschland* (Leipzig: n.d.), which includes his critique of the Messel model; and "Werbedrucksache," *Die Form* 3 (1928): 372-73, which praises the advertising campaign that accompanied the opening of the Stuttgart store.

[15] Erich Mendelsohn, speech delivered at the opening of the Nuremberg Schocken store, 11 Oct. 1926, *Erich Mendelsohn: Letters of an Architect*, Oskar Beyer, ed., Geoffrey Strachem, trans. (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1967), 93-94.

[16] Schocken, 4 Oct. 1928 speech, typescript, Salman Schocken archive, Schocken Institue for Jewish Research of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Jerusalem, 2, 7.

[17] Moses, "Schocken," and Kurt Blumenfeld, *Im Kampf um den Zionismus, Briefe aus fünf Jarhzehnten*, eds. Miriam Sambursky and Jochanan Ginat (Stuttgart: Deutsche, 1976) 86.

[18] Moses, "Schocken," 79.

[19] Erich Mendelsohn, response to a questionnaire in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Dec. 1928, Beyer, *Letters*, 102.

[20] Deborah Fausch, Paulette Singley, Rodolphe El-Khoury, and Zvi Efrat, eds., *Architecture: in Fashion* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994).

[21] The most important review of the Stuttgart store is Karl Konrad Düssel, "Drei Kaufhauser Schocken in Niirnberg, Stuttgart und Chemnitz von Erich Mendelsohn," *Moderne Bauformen* 1! (1930): 480-82. Contemporary commentaries upon the relationship between art, architecture, and advertising include Adolf Behne, "Kultur, Kunst und Reklame," Heinz Hirdina, ed., *Neues Bauen, neues Gestalten: Das neue Frankfurt; Die neue Stadt: eine Zeitschrift zwischen 1926 und 1933* (Dresden : VEB Verlag der Kunste, 1984) 229-32; Adolf Behne, "Kunstausstellung Berlin," *Das neue Berlin* 1 (1929): 150-52; Walter Dexel, "Reklame in Stadtbild," *Das Neue Frankfurt* 1 (1926): 45-49; Hugo Häring, "Probleme um der Lichtreklame," *Bauhaus: Zeitschrift für Gestaltung* 2 (1928): 7; Ludwig Hilberseimer, "Die neue Geschäftstraße," Hirdina 235-240; and Ernst May, "Stadtebau und Lichtreklame," *Licht und Beleuchtung,* Wilhelm Lotz, ed. (Berlin: Reckendorf, 1928) 45 (a Werkbund publication), republished in translation as "Town Planning and Illuminated Advertisements," *Form and Function: A source book for the History of Architecture and Design 1890-1939,* Tim Benton and Charlotte Benton, eds. with Dennis Sharp (London: Crosby Lockwood Staples, 1975), 238-240.

[22] Behne, "Kunstausstellung Berlin," 150-52.