Alwin Seifert on Roadways and Landscape (1941)

Abstract

Alwin Seifert was a landscape architect whose enthusiasm for conservation and nature brought him into contact with the German "Homeland Movement" [*Heimatbewegung*] during the 1920s. Seifert associated with various right-wing organizations throughout the 1920s, from the Thule Society to the German National People's Party (DNVP), and he had many contacts among high profile early Nazis, including Walther Darré. These connections led to his work as a government consultant on landscape and architecture after 1933 and to his later work under Fritz Todt. In the latter capacity, he proved an influential contributor to the massive public works project to construct the German Autobahn. The Autobahn was a network of state-owned highway systems that had been planned during the Weimar Republic but only started during the early years of the Third Reich. Seifert joined the NSDAP in 1937.

Seifert's approach to nature, landscape, and architecture sought to blend the natural and scientific/mechanical worlds. In this piece, written in 1936, Seifert explores the concept of the straight line as it pertains to road construction. He voices his opposition to the idea of the straight line as the most logical and efficient form of road construction—an idea widely espoused by previous experts, notably in America.

Source

"Meandering?"

It is in the nature of a turning point that what was considered particularly right yesterday is equally particularly wrong today. The ideal of yesterday's road builders, especially the Americans and Italians, was the longest possible straight line, and it was considered a distinct imperfection of this earth that it so seldom permits straight lines 30 or 40 kilometers long. Today we know that the straight line can have quite unpleasant downsides; there is no talk at all of 30 or 40 kilometers, rather of whether three are not already too many. In such uncertainty, the question has now been asked: "Does a modern road have to be winding?," and designs of stretched roads have been adapted to a new fashion by arbitrarily inserted windings – because the dethronement of the straight line had to appear as such.

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Time and again, we come across the compelling obligation to examine what we have handed down in terms of proven knowledge to see whether it still meets the requirements of our time. So many values, which were absolute yesterday, are valid today only in a very limited way, that it would not be surprising if the straight line, the former ideal of the fast road, would suffer the same fate.

The straight line is of cosmic origin; it does not come from this earth and does not occur in nature. No living being can move on a straight line. The common characteristic of all living things is the rhythm, the swinging from one pole to the other. Man is also subject to this law; the natural line of his locomotion is a kind of sine curve. With strained attention he can succeed in swinging only a little beyond the straight line; but the success is out of proportion to the effort. Only the dead thing, the shot arrow for example, follows willy-nilly the impulse once given and moves on a path which can be determined by casual mathematics. The living thing follows its course with an always new impulse of will, which resists the distracting environmental influences, and thus comes to oscillate, to pendulate, to the rhythm appropriate to it.

And yet the old winding roads seem to come only from the lowlands of road construction. The Roman as well as the Napoleonic roads preferred the long straight line just like the first modern fast traffic routes, the railroads.

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Now the road of modern times is not built for horse-drawn vehicles, marching foot troops, or rail vehicles, but for free-moving cars driven by people. The impersonal mass, which simply had to travel, has been replaced by the independent personality, which wants to travel. And this personality feels all the more free and comfortable, and is therefore all the safer and more efficient, if it does not have to follow a rigid guide that is foreign to its nature, but rather if the path oscillates in a rhythm that is appropriate to it and its speed. Certainly, the uninhibited speed that a long straight line allows the driver of a heavy, powerful car is exhilarating and can well be compared to a dashing rush down a ski slope. As a one-time experience, this is quite true, but not as a permanent condition. Even on skis, going in turns is less strenuous than shooting straight downhill and more enjoyable in the long run, and after all, mountains and snow were not created for the stopwatch.

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“So should the modern road meander?” Whether this question is meant seriously or mockingly, the answer is: No! One shall not do anything at all on purpose; one shall not create a straight line on purpose, nor shall one create a curve on purpose. One should not approach a task with a preconceived opinion, one should not approach a task with recipes, but at best, if one can, with a vision: for example, to crown a landscape with the right road. Just as the Cologne Cathedral and the Sistine Madonna, despite all triangulation, were created according to visions and not recipes.

The solution to every technical task that can be sensibly posed at all in a landscape space is already contained in it. It follows that it is easier to find with empathy than with a slide rule. The best and most beautiful road is created by those who let the landscape guide the line and prescribe every curvature, not by their thinking: I must now make a curve, otherwise the straight line will be too long. In all areas of artistic creation, and road construction is supposed to be art, arbitrariness is completely inartistic and only permitted to genius from time to time. The designer still has enough to do with checking how long he may make the straight line, how large he may make the radius of curvature, without doing harm to the landscape. […]

Source: Alwin Seifert, *Im Zeitalter des Lebendigen: Natur, Heimat, Technik*. Dresden/Planegg: Müllersche Verlagshandlung, 1941, pp. 114–17

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