

Erich Mendelsohn, “Architecture and Politics” (December 28, 1928)

Abstract

Born in East Prussia, the architect Erich Mendelsohn (1887-1953) is considered one of the most important pioneers and representatives of modern architecture. After studying in Berlin and Munich, Mendelsohn, who had a strong interest in music and art, initially worked as a stage and costume designer in addition to his architectural work. After the First World War, in which he had served as a medic, he opened his own architectural practice in Berlin. He was a member of the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* and later of the *Deutscher Werkbund*. Mendelsohn first became famous for his design of the observatory in Potsdam, known as the “Einstein Tower,” which was completed in 1922. Despite the global economic crisis and inflation, Mendelsohn’s office became one of the most successful in Germany and achieved international recognition, particularly through his designs for commercial buildings such as the Rudolf Mosse publishing house in Berlin. In 1933, Mendelsohn and his wife Luise, who were both Jewish, decided to emigrate in the face of the antisemitic propaganda under Hitler’s government. They first went to the Netherlands, then to Great Britain and from there to Palestine, before finally settling in the United States in 1941. This article on the connection between architecture and politics was first published at the end of December 1928 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, one of the most important liberal daily newspapers of the time.

Source

The work of the architect is more dependent than almost any other on the economic and socio-political foundations of its time. It is thus inevitably linked to general politics. The events of the environment, its political structure, determine the platform on which architectural work has to take effect.

Clinging to traditional forms and looking backwards politically is just as logical as affirming the new constructive will of our time and at the same time its revolutionary political preconditions. It depends on the political tension of the whole time as well as on the degree of dedication of the individual to his particular work - whether politics is a platonic matter for the hours of rest and the excitement of discussion or an inner necessity. For the whole world moves between sport and faith - including its politics.

That is why no one is uninvolved, only the degree of awareness is different; the range of vision and the feeling for the inner coherence of all contemporary phenomena. That is why it is impossible to stand aside as an object of politics. For our work only begins when politics is finished - it is doomed if politics fails to recognize the times. First the political barricade, then the artistic one. Often the two go in parallel.

Source: German and English manuscript, 1928, Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Erich Mendelsohn-Archiv, Mss 8; German version published in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, December 28, 1928; reprinted in Erich Mendelsohn, *Gedankenwelten, Unbekannte Texte zu Architektur, Kulturgeschichte und Politik*, ed. Ita Heinze-Greenberg and Regina Stephan. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000, p. 55.

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