

Erich Mendelsohn, “The Modern Commercial Building” (1929)

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 became famous for his design of the observatory in Potsdam, known as the “Einstein Tower,” which was completed in 1922. Despite the Great Depression 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 and harassment 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. In this excerpt from the manuscript of a lecture he gave in 1929, Mendelsohn lays out the architectural principles he applied to designing commercial buildings that reflected the rhythm and requirements of modern urban life.

Source

Merchants and public, sellers and buyers, all know the special connections between commerce and modern life. All of them also know how far the retail trade, as the main source for the distribution of everyday commodities for broad segments of the population, is connected to the wider economy. [...] Since it is a part of them, they also cannot separate themselves from the consequences of this economy, which links town and country, metropolis and people, nation and land, and finally continents into an international economy. Integrated into this great circle as a concentric structure, we recognize how all manifestations of life are drawn with a compass from the center, that is, the human being. Thus even the apparently most real things, the most perfect reality, just like individual life, with its comings and goings, is tied to birth and death.

[...]

It is therefore all the more surprising when, in contrast to this realization, to the dislocated structure of all phenomena, the realm of building and architecture follows the irreversible development only sluggishly and with great delay. We do not have to look very far for the reasons for such indifference. But it is necessary to call them by their name. –

We may think: *The clients are intimidated by previous experiments* (I remind you of the glass façade of the Tietz department store on Leipzigerstraße in Berlin). [...] Nevertheless, however, they are happy enough to bow to fashion. They often draw advantages from it, since it boosts their sales and creates a constant incentive for the average person’s desire for ownership and adornment.

We may think that most people hold the traditional to be irreversible and established, but merchants nonetheless eagerly seize upon every innovation, whether it is to capture the public’s interest, improve the company, or rationalize or standardize employee performance.

Often it depends on the false appearance of their palaces of commerce, of a genuine representation, on the delusions of grandeur of the dilettante who wishes to appear more or different than they are, but nevertheless they aspire in their enterprise to objectivity, clarity in all their arrangements, to simplicity of organization.

They like to borrow from history and adorn themselves with borrowed elegance, but all the same their affections lie with the smart technical line, with modern life with Packard, slow-motion and complete statistics.

Such thoughtlessness, however, is by no means the province of our nation alone. It goes wild in every country and most extensively in America, for reasons of records or snobbery. But this does not render it excusable, and it remains undeserving of a world that is quite consistent wherever it yields an audible utility, but all too inconsistent wherever money slowly, albeit extremely tenaciously, transforms itself into [illegible word], into culture.

[...]

Ladies and gentlemen, the meaning of any commerce is the commodity, that is, selling it as quickly as possible at the greatest profit. The *commodity* is thus the primary thing, that is, all commercial and architectural measures serve the need to promote it as impressively as possible. Buildings, in particular, have—alongside the self-evident observation of their technical requirements—to be guided in every phase of planning and execution by this basic condition of business.

Light and circulation are the test points of its quality. *Light*, that is, the adequate illumination of the salesrooms and the goods by day, through windows and atriums and effective and sales-promoting artificial lighting. *Circulation*, that is, connected salesrooms, a clear arrangement of the stockrooms, the proper placement of staircases and elevators, unobstructed entrance and egress. In sum: Ease of orientation for the public. The beginnings of *Wertheim's Department Store* on Leipzigerstraße are 30 years in the past. Pathbreaking at the time, it now offers us an entire manual of development.

In contrast to *Printemps in Paris* from the second half of the last century, whose highly ornate spiral staircase demonstrated the first possibilities of iron as a construction material as well as [illegible word] without regard to business and the display of goods, the *Wertheim atrium* already revealed an extraordinary modesty and self-discipline. Unfortunately, however, the American escalator thoroughly buried Messel's Pompeii once again and doubtless for all eternity.

Many years on, the *wooden structure of the KaDeWe*, with banquet hall chandeliers and masses of detail, overpowers the proportions of the display cases, in and upon which the goods eke out their existence as trivial afterthoughts.

[...]

Given the lack of consideration towards the products on sale in the interior, it is no wonder that the *exterior* also makes an effort to conceal its true nature, that is, to deny what is happening behind the façade.

[...]

The new department store in *The Hague—the Beehive*— still breathes the old, outmoded spirit. But it conceals it with new ornament. It arises not from the necessity of the interior, the many stories in which, as it was 30 years ago, stairs and circulation routes still impede an overview, and where an artist's hand, however masterful, offers décor that forbids the products to speak their own language.

The principle thus remains unchanged, but the *façade* is modern, as they say. The ornaments are novel, but the organism is not—any more than the remodel of Leonhard Tietz from 1927—4 years after the inflation, which cannot compare in size and especially in artistic quality with this virtuoso structure in the Hague! But this remodel differs from the original of 25 years ago only to the extent that the architectural set phrases differ, but not the architect's basic approach. This is fashion, even if it is "vertical." For vertical or horizontal architecture is no characteristic of a new era. Fashion is always external, and thus rapidly changes its face; it has nothing to do with the fundamentally altered way of thinking of very different historical periods. Horizontal or vertical: only the undiscerning believe in such outward signs, only hangers-on use other people's backs to cover their own lack of conviction.

But, you will ask, how did the young generation of architects—nowadays mainly men between the ages of 40 and 60—actually happen to prefer horizontalism where it is necessary? The new *Herpich*, which everyone in Berlin has tried to prevent up until now; let me take you behind the *façade*. The depth of the tract on Leipzigerstraße is so great that much light must be let in to brighten it. Therefore as much light as the supporting structures and building inspectors allow. The parapet between the stories required by building regulations, independent of the rising supports, with indirect lighting for effective advertisements or quick changes of advertising inscriptions.

You will admit: Business life nowadays would be unimaginable without advertising. Thus architects must take it into account from the outset, while for example the "white week" at Wertheim or the "Christmas trees" at Tietz have proven stronger and wider than the cathedral piers or temple columns permit.

Thus, quite apart from the imponderables of rapid circulation, namely the impossibility of having the leisure to observe beautiful architectural details—horizontalism emerged from reason, only logic, out of consideration for the needs of business.

[...]

The 1925 Schocken department store in Nuremberg, too, a medium-sized building, keeps its sales areas free of any obstructive indentations. The entrances, stairs and elevators are placed at the ends of the building. It is a new construction, so that the tract is only as deep as can be well illuminated. The windows have been moved to just under the ceiling. They begin above the cupboards, which are built in between the front supports and have finally relinquished their previous purpose as parlor furniture. The reflective ceiling provides flawless light for the shelves and sales counters, while the light falling directly from the high windows slants downwards. The windows are bottom-hung with mechanical transmission, the row lighting with individual lamp switches for reasons of economy. The lights are turned on only when they are truly needed.

The position of the cupboards under the windows, the location of the windows above the cupboards determines the appearance of the *façade*. The building emerges from a narrow street and forms the head of a large square. Here at the head stands the staircase, the high moment of the structure, the vertical moment, the entrance under the staircase, the recess under the canopy. Thus the structure of this building and the articulation of its *façade* correspond to a clear recognition and logic of the internal processes.

It is the magazine that has stacked its goods for sale above the windows in layers, story by story. This recognition creates a new type of commercial building in Nuremberg's Schocken department store.

The consistent implementation of the new building material, iron construction, also leads to this leap. It transforms the drama of stone into a technical article. That is, it abolishes the solidity of stone structures and lends the building the lightness and quality of a flexible skeleton, concentrating the load on a few support points rather than the continuous load-bearing stone wall, filling the spaces in between with

unloaded light walls.

[...]

Berlin by Night— Friedrichstraße

The petty bourgeois village street in contrast to America. Random points of light, climatic reflexes, confusion for passersby [...] We can never achieve the fantasy of New York at night, at least not to any great degree. Not even through the indiscriminate illumination of buildings. Here, what in America with its gigantic scale has a promotional, symbolic effect fails to achieve its goal; the height is too low, the buildings along the street are too uniform.

The nocturnal blending of light effects, however, results in a genuine trick of light; instead of limitation, there is waste everywhere, instead of effect, only confusion, instead of vividness the dilettante's lack of self-control.

We Europeans of the early twentieth century will appear all the more unambiguous the more we adapt to *our*— more modest— scale. If our organized reason keeps the reins on light, then the shop windows are the real promotion of the varied goods: the company ribbon, the row effect of the illuminated balustrades, the architectural interplay of dark and light, of nothing and vivid life.

Also fantastic in its own way is the silhouette of the thin iron bars, the heightening of the individual courtyard wings of the Schocken building in Stuttgart with the glass surfaces directly illuminated by the lights in the rooms.

Inside, [...] fashionable decoration, of whatever type, or a myriad of lighting dummies cannot possibly contradict the meaning of the shop as a sales point or rather the economy of electric light. The shop, as in the case of this Parisian ladies' shoemaker, can be a luxurious backdrop, which, in its casual alternation between velvet and mirrored glass reminds visitors not unpleasantly of their own boudoirs, or the shop reveals from the outset the architectural solidity of its interior spaces, creating an organic whole of cabinets, display tables, round skylights and indirect ceiling illumination.

The spatial impression it leaves corresponds to the coherence of its ground-plan, which in the existing inconsistent reality has encircled a uniform figure, without leaving a single angle unused.

[...]

And where previously a shop window was confused with the abstract panopticon, a buttoned ensemble representing mere dead decoration, today real life takes pride of place, drawing the full luster of daylight and artificial lighting into the architecture of its own idiosyncratic existence.

Until very recently, the cry "light to the front" caught us completely unprepared. In exterior construction we can never vie with the soaring heights in America, where the fantastic nightscape actually reaches the sky, looming on an inhuman scale above the small dots of humanity standing before the shop windows, but we try to appear all the more unambiguous with our dimensions.

Gentlemen, I briefly pointed out at the beginning how much each individual phenomenon of life today can be understood only within the overall appearance of the times, and how far, at the intersection of a decaying old and an emerging new era, there is everywhere a demand for a fundamentally new attitude.

Take another look at the development we have all witnessed personally and whose consistency we cannot ignore. That is, the evolution within a comparatively short period of time from the villager's modest life to the *compulsion* to sell as a result of being flooded with industrial products. [...] It is

therefore inconceivable that we can turn back the clock. Instead, we face the reality of tangible life and not the illusion of the movie screen. It would be unthinkable to ignore the effects of technology and not make use of its daily expanding possibilities. To interpret machines as the enemies of humanity instead of mastering them as mighty tools. To take automobiles, airplanes and radios for granted, but base our personal lives on the tat left behind by our forefathers rather than entrusting our house keys to the new era. After all, this *new* time is our *own* time. Speaking of construction: It depends on the *architect's* sense of responsibility and talent how far he succeeds, beyond his own personal signature, in creating the respective type, and it depends on the intelligence of the *building trade* how far it seeks to follow the new knowledge in the form of building materials and methods. Finally, it depends on the client's consistency of thought to what extent he wishes to reach out to all those who in building aspire only to the economic organization of specific needs, the creation of a perfectly functioning organism, the architectural expression of objective clarity alone rather than the fake life of outmoded decoration. Never has a *strong* generation had *more* confidence in a *different* era than in itself.

Source of original German text: "Das neuzeitliche Geschäftshaus", undated handwritten manuscript of a lecture probably delivered in 1929, Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Erich Mendelsohn-Archiv, V 32; reproduced in Erich Mendelsohn, *Gedankenwelten, unbekannte Texte zu Architektur, Kulturgeschichte und Politik*, ed. Ita Heinze-Greenberg and Regina Stephan. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000, pp. 96–103.

Translation: Pam Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Erich Mendelsohn, "The Modern Commercial Building" (1929), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-4653>> [March 16, 2026].