

Hannes Meyer, “The New World” (1926)

Abstract

The Swiss architect Hannes Meyer (1889-1954) was one of the main representatives of the architectural movement known as *Neues Bauen*. He was appointed to the Bauhaus school in Dessau in 1927 and took over as director from Walter Gropius a year later. In this article, which appeared in the magazine *Das Werk* in 1926, Meyer describes the acceleration and transformation of the world through advancing technology, mass culture and standardization. As an architect who was primarily concerned with housing construction and was also interested in urban planning, Meyer also considered how architecture and urban planning could best meet the new demands of modern life. Due to his communist convictions, Meyer was dismissed as director of the Bauhaus as early as 1930. He initially went to the Soviet Union but left in 1936 for fear of the Stalinist “purges.” After working in Mexico for several years, he returned to Switzerland in 1949 and worked primarily as a publisher of architectural literature.

Source

The New World

The North Pole voyage of the *Norge*, the Zeiss Planetarium in Jena, and [Anton] Flettner’s propeller ship are the most recent heralds of the step-by-step mechanization of our planet. As fruits of conceptual precision of the highest degree, they offer visible proof of the ongoing permeation of the world around us by science. Thus does the diagram of the present everywhere display, amid the tangled web of its social and economic force fields, the straight lines of mechanical and scientific provenance. They offer palpable proof of the victory of human consciousness over amorphous nature. This knowledge shakes the foundations of existing values and alters their form. It decisively shapes our new world.

Automobiles storm the streets: in the evenings from six to eight o’clock on the pedestrian island of the Champs Élysées in Paris, we are surrounded by the grandest possible fortissimo of the metropolitan dynamic. Ford and Rolls-Royce burst the confines of the city center, nullify distance, and efface the boundaries between city and countryside. Airplanes glide through the air: “Fokker” and “Farman” increase our mobility and distance us from earth; disrespectful of national borders, they overcome the separation between one people and another. Neon lights glow, loudspeakers screech, sirens scream, billboards advertise, display windows shine: the simultaneity of events expands our concepts of time and space out of all proportion; it enriches our lives. We live faster and therefore longer. Our sense of speed is sharper than ever, with speed records signifying indirect winnings for all. Glider flights, parachute experiments, and Vaudevillian acrobatics refine our sense of balance. The precise division of hours in the plant and at the office and the minute-by-minute regulation of travel schedules impel us to live more consciously. With the swimming pool, sanitarium, and public lavatory, hygiene bursts onto the local scene, creating a new generation of sanitary pottery in water closets and Faenza sinks and tubs. Fordson tractors and Von Meyenburg rotary hoes displace residential settlements, accelerate the tilling of the soil, and intensify the cultivation of the fields. Burrough’s calculating machine frees the brain, the parlograph, our hands; Ford’s motor unsettles our sense of the stationary and Handley-Page liberates our earthbound spirit. The radio, Marconigram, and telephoto release us from national differentiation into the community of the world. Gramophone, microphone, orchestrion, and pianola accustom our ear to the sound of impersonal, mechanized rhythms: His Master’s Voice, Vox, and Brunswick regulate the musical needs of millions of our countrymen. Psychoanalysis explodes the all-too-narrow edifice of the soul, and graphology exposes the essence of individual being. Mazdaznan, [Émile] Coué, *Die Schönheit* are heralds of the will for renovation breaking out everywhere. Dress gives way to fashion and the outer

masculinization of woman manifests the inner equality of the sexes. Biology, psychoanalysis, relativity theory, and entomology are becoming the common intellectual property of all: [Anatole] France, Einstein, Freud, and [Alfred] Fabre are the saints of recent times. Our dwellings become more mobile than ever: mass apartment blocks, sleeping cars, residential yachts, and the Transatlantic undermine the local concept of the homeland. The fatherland fades away. We learn Esperanto. *We become citizens of the world.*

The steady improvement of graphic, photographic, and cinematographic processes makes it possible to reproduce the world ever more precisely. Our visual image of the landscape today is more polymorphic than ever: hangars and dynamo halls are the cathedrals raised to the spirit of our age. The impression they make derives its overwhelming power from the specific forms, lights, and colors of their up-to-the-minute elements: from radio antennas, storage dams, and iron trussing from the parabola of the airship, the triangle of the automotive warning sign, the circle of the railway signal, and the rectangle of the billboard; from the linearity of the lines of force in telephone cables, aerial trolley wires, and high-tension lines; and from broadcast towers, concrete pylons, flashing lights, and gasoline stations. Our children are already belittling the puffing steam locomotive, cool and measured in their confidence in the miracle of electrical power. [Gret] Palucca's dances, [Rudolf] von Laban's motion choirs, and [Bess] Mensendieck's functional gymnastics outstrip the aesthetic eroticism of painted nudes. The stadium vanquishes the art museum, and bodily reality replaces beautiful illusion. Sport unifies the individual with the masses. Sport is becoming the advanced school of collective feeling: hundreds of thousands were disappointed by Suzanne Lenglen's cancellation. Hundreds of thousands were shaken by [Hans] Breitensträter's defeat. Hundreds of thousands followed [Paavo] Nurmi's tenthousand-meter run on the cinder track. The standardization of our needs is manifest: the derby hat, the bobbed hairdo, the tango, jazz, co-op products, presized stationery, and Liebig's meat extracts. The typecasting of intellectual fare is illustrated by our rush to Harold Lloyd, Douglas Fairbanks, and Jackie Coogan. Charlot, Grock, and the three Fratellinis forge the masses—beyond distinctions of class and race—into a community of fate. Unions, cooperatives, Co., Inc., cartels, trusts, and the League of Nations are the expressive forms of modern social agglomerations, radio and rotary presses their instruments of information. Cooperation rules all the world. *Community rules over individual being.*

Every epoch demands its own form. Our task is to lend new form to our world by modern means. However, the burden of our knowledge of the past weighs upon us, and our institutions of higher education betray the tragedy of obstacles strewn along our path to the new. The unrestrained affirmation of the modern leads to a reckless denial of the past. The institutions of our elders become obsolete, the gymnasias and academies. City theaters and museums lose their audiences. The nervous perplexity of the applied arts is proverbial. Freed of the ballast of classical airs, artistic conceptual confusion, or the need for a decorative wrapping, the witnesses of a new epoch rise in their place: trade fair, grain silo, music hall, airport, office chair, standard ware. All of these things are products of the formula, function times economy. They are not artworks; art is composition, while purpose is function. The idea of the composition of a harbor strikes us as nonsense; the composition, however, of a city layout, an apartment house ...? But building is a technical not an aesthetic process, and the purposeful function of a building always contradicts artistic composition. Lent ideal and elementary form, *our apartment house becomes a residence machine.* Heating, sunning, natural and artificial light, hygiene, weatherproofing, garaging, cooking, radio reception, optimum convenience for the housewife, sex and family life, etc., are all the path-breaking force vectors, the components of which are built into the house. (Homeyness and status are not leitmotifs of apartment construction: the first resides in the human heart and not in a Persian rug, the second, in the personal attitude of the occupant and not on the apartment walls!) Modernity puts new building materials at the disposal of our new housing construction: panels, rods, and rungs of aluminum and duralumin, eubolite, rubberoid, torfoleum, eternite, rolled glass, triplex plates, reinforced concrete, glass bricks, Faenza pottery, steel frames, concrete slabs and pillars, troilite, galalite, cellon, ripoline, inanthracene colors. We organize these building elements, in conformity to purpose and the

principle of economy, into a constructive unity. Architecture as the further development of tradition or the creation of effect is no more. Individual form and overall contours as well as material colors and surface structure emerge automatically, and this functional understanding of building of all kinds leads to pure construction. *Pure construction is the mark of the new world of forms.* The constructivist form knows no fatherland; it is stateless and the expression of an internationalized way of thought. Internationalism is one of the virtues of our age.

The constructivist principle runs through all domains of our contemporary culture of expression. That it more clearly and directly prevails wherever the Greeks and Louis XIV have left no trace is to be explained by the law of human inertia: in the advertising industry, mechanical typography, light shows, and photographic processes. The new poster displays in a striking organization poster text and goods or trademarks. It is not a poster-art work, but a visual-sensation work. In the new display window, lighting is used to exploit the tensions of modern materials to psychological ends. Display window organization instead of display window decoration. It appeals to the vast differentiation in the modern person's feel for materials and exercises its effect across the range of expressive possibilities: FORTISSIMO = tennis shoes to Havana cigars to stain remover to chocolate with nuts! MEZZOFORTE = glass (as bottle) to wood (as crate) to paper (as wrapping) to tinplate (as box)! PIANISSIMO = silk pajama to batiste shirt to Valenciennes lace to "L'Origan de Coty"!

In Esperanto, following the law of least resistance, we are designing an international language in the standardized stenography of a traditionless script. The critical thing is the constructivist approach to city planning. As long as we fail to approach the city-planning problem with the lack of prejudice of a plant engineer, we suffocate the elegant life of the modern city in a cult of ruins and received notions of traffic axes and lines of sight. The city is the most manifold biological agglomeration that people have to master consciously and constructively form. The demands we make of modern life, either in general or by respective social standing, are of the same sort. The truest mark of community is the gratification of such needs by equivalent means. The result of such collective demands is the standard product. Typical standard wares of international origin and uniformity are: the folding chair, the rolltop desk, the light bulb, the bathtub, the portable gramophone. They are the instruments of mechanization in our daily life. Their standardized form is impersonal. Their manufacture proceeds serially. As serial item, serial equipment, serial component, serial house. The standardized cultural product is the hit tune. To the semi-nomad of contemporary economic life the standardization of residential, clothing, nutritional, and cultural requirements affords the vital quotient of mobility, economy, simplicity, and ease. *The degree of standardization is the index of our collective economy.*

Art's right to exist is uncontested, to the extent that the speculative spirit of the individual retains a need for a graphic-colored, plastic-constructivist, musical-kinetic expression of his worldview. (Advisedly, we do not speak in this context of "isms," of the specific attempts of individual artists; the best of whom, Piet Mondrian, recently termed what has already been achieved the surrogate of a yet-to-be-achieved better achievement.) New form can only come about on the ground of our time and with the tools of our time. Yesterday is dead: dead, the bohemian; dead, the mood and the value, the glaze and the brushstrokes of the accidental. Dead, the novel: we lack belief and time to read. Dead, painting and sculpture as a likeness of the empirical world: in the age of film and photography they seem to us a waste of effort, and the constant "embellishment" of our existing surroundings with interpretations by the "artist" is impudent. Dead, the artwork as a "thing in itself," as "L'art pour l'art": our collective consciousness tolerates no individualistic excess.

The artist's atelier becomes a scientific laboratory, and the artist's works are the product of mental acuity and the power of invention. The artwork of today, like every time-bound product, is subordinate to the conditions of life in our epoch, and the result of our speculative confrontation with the world can only be recorded in exact form. *The new artwork is a totality, not a detail, not an impression. The new*

artwork is formed elementarily through the application of primary means. [...] The new artwork is a collective work and intended for all; it is neither a prize for the collector nor an individual's private privilege.

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