

## Hannes Meyer in Mexico: Between the Lines

Hannes Meyer came to Mexico for the first time in 1938 to attend the 16<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Planning and Housing. In fact, it was only the pretext to evaluate the possibilities the country could offer for relocation, since his situation in the homeland didn't look promising. After leaving the Soviet Union in 1936, life in Switzerland had been difficult; having joined the Swiss Communist Party, his working opportunities were reduced to almost none, with the sole exception of the Mümliswil Children's Home designed for his former friend and client Bernhard Jaeggi as an initiative of the Swiss Cooperative Union (VSK). Instead, he had devoted some time to political activities and was looking for different alternatives abroad. One of such options, he imagined, could be to get a position in an American University, just as the other former Bauhaus directors. In that sense, through his friend the architect Simon Brines, he reached Alfons Goldschmidt for advice. Goldschmidt, an old acquaintance of Meyer, was at the time working in New York and saw no future for someone like him in the United States. After consulting with his former student, the Mexican Union leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano who could better orient Meyer, Goldschmidt suggested Mexico as a better fit to his political development, especially under the current leftist presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas<sup>1</sup>.

The trip exceeded Meyer's expectations in many senses. On the professional level, although he did not present a paper at the Planning conference, he got an invitation to present two lectures at the prestigious San Carlos Academy, the first on September 29 on the training of the architect and the second on October 1<sup>st</sup> on his experiences in urbanism. In those lectures, he praised the political orientation of the country, which he considered "*a State*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Cfr.*, Wolfgang Kießling, *Brücken nach Mexiko*, Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1989, p.260

*among the most progressive democracies in the world*<sup>2</sup> and reiterated the power of architecture as a weapon. He understood architecture as the outcome of a specific time and society that produces it. Art was again considered, as well as folklore and cultural heritage, components he had denied in the past. In that sense, he criticized certain architectural resources that resonated among his Mexican peers, for instance, the indiscriminate repetition of concrete, standardized volumes, regardless of place or weather, such as Juan O’Gorman’s schools, or the project for a socialist city presented by the newly founded Society of Socialist Architects, whose solution Meyer found obsolete according to the recent development of Soviet architecture and planning. The topics he chose were, however, well calculated; they responded to José Luis Cuevas’ presentation at the Conference where he stressed the need of professional training in urbanism. His strategy worked since he soon was requested to present a plan for the establishment of an institute for planning and urbanism within the National Polytechnic Institute and with it, the possibility to relocate became a fact. Beside the lectures, Meyer also got the opportunity to promote his work through the publishing of a special number of the journal *Arquitectura y Decoración* that would appear at the end of the year.

In the political milieu, he got as well a first glimpse of the current atmosphere, especially that of the left. Lombardo Toledano invited him to attend the inauguration of the CTAL (Confederation of Workers of Latin America) and introduced him to the artists of the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* (TGP). Meyer admired the politics of President Cárdenas, including the recent nationalization of the oil fields, the distribution of land to the peasants and the offer

---

<sup>2</sup>Meyer, Hannes, *Education of the Architect*. In Schnaidt, Claude, *Hannes Meyer: Buildings, Projects and Writings*. p.235

to grant asylum to the Republican refugees of the Spanish Civil war, including many Germans who fought in the international Brigades.

Meyer immediately bonded with the *Pro-German Culture League* and collaborated with them even upon his return to Europe while he was dealing with the immigration arrangements. During that first trip, he also got in touch with his former friend, the Basler communist Fritz Sulzbachner, aka Federico Bach who arrived in Mexico in 1926 as representative of the International Communist<sup>3</sup>. The encounter was so friendly that Meyer gave him as a reference in his visa application, not knowingly of Bach's expulsion from the Mexican Communist Party and his political shift to support in 1937 the asylum request of Trotsky, being even part of the welcoming committee<sup>4</sup>.

After preparing a first draft of the Curriculum for the Institute of Planning and Urbanism with Cuevas and Yáñez, Meyer returned on November 26 to the homeland and started the planning of his next trip. In the proposal, he suggested, as in the Bauhaus, to have the workshops at the core of the program, supplemented with lectures of specialists in related fields, such as archeology, hygiene, statistics, etc. He also envisioned an external source of income, coming from the state, the trade unions and any other organism that would benefit from their work; needless to say, work in vertical brigades was the basis of the curriculum that would deal during the first year with the process of analysis and during the second with that of synthesis.

---

<sup>3</sup> Manuel De la Parra López, *El Pensamiento Económico de Fritz Bach*, UNAM, México, 2005, p. 23

<sup>4</sup> León Trotsky, *Los crímenes de Stalin*, México, Editorial Juan Pablos, 1973, tomo 10, p.153, quoted in *Idem.*, p.26

Only five days later, the first opposition to Meyer's plan came from the Head of the School of Architecture and Engineering, Guillermo Terrés, who not only objected the budget and structure of the program, but Meyer's adequacy to the position:

The necessity to take advantage of Mr. Hannes Meyer as a counselor and director of the office is very suggestive but (...) It has not been said what subjects he will teach? How many courses? I do not know but, even in such a case, he is not fluent in the language and only but a few would understand him, therefore, I believe that as a counselor in a public office on an ongoing work it is possible and fructiferous to profit from Mr. Hannes Meyer's knowledge but, as a Director in a school when he does not know our language enough, I consider it a nonsense.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of Terrés' recommendation, Meyer's scheme was approved and the contract process went on, together with the visa and travel preparations. The Meyer's were no longer able to travel through Germany, the only direct option, so they had to wait for the more expensive alternative to travel on the SS Normandie to New York and then on the SS Siboney to Veracruz. On May 10th, they were finally able to sail; in New York, they spent four days at the World's Fair, marveled by the technological development of the US, and in La Habana, they coincided with the unfortunate SS Saint Louis before getting to Veracruz on June 1<sup>st</sup> of 1939 and then to Mexico City.<sup>6</sup>

The launching of the Institute had to wait until the beginning of 1940, mainly because of the economic crisis derived from the reparations to be paid to the oil industries. Meyer was deeply annoyed by the bureaucracy he encountered in the way:

Practically I cannot start my professorship yet because of all kinds of bureaucratic-formalist humbug have been conducted on the way and so I spent my first weeks running from the Minister's antechamber to the *Jefes de Departamento, Subjefes, Directores*, etc., etc., Outside the Polytechnic Institute, however, the students are waiting for the implementation of our planning Seminar.

---

<sup>55</sup> Guillermo Terrés, "Letter to Miguel Bernard," November 30, 1938, DAM 82/1-508(2), DAM 82/1-508(3)

<sup>6</sup> Cfr., Hannes Meyer, "Letter to John Torcapel," June 6, 1939, DAM 82/1-919(13)a

– Luckily, I had sniffed for 6 years the Soviet bureaucracy so, comparatively, the scale holds between the local and that of the years 1930-36.<sup>7</sup>

His frustration on the inefficiency that prevented the launching of the Institute and, with it, the retention of his salary, soon altered the positive assessment he had made of the country and its people:

In your life you have never experienced a country where so many and so big vagabonds live, neither so many fraudsters, swindlers, spies, etc. This begins with the Minister and ends at the lowest. Such frauds can be found in some jokes, but here they are for real. And one is the victim of these dogs. Economically I am still miserable because the government cannot hold its word.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, his social life was starting to take shape. His friend Goldschmidt, already in the country, took the leadership of the Pro-German Culture League and Meyer was very excited about the arrival of new refugees that would enhance the intellectual production of the exile, among them, Ludwig Renn, Egon Erwin Kisch, etc<sup>9</sup>. The League didn't last long after the passing of Goldschmidt in 1940. Meyer worked hard conducting donation campaigns and trying to get visas and working permits for refugees, though not always successfully, as in the case of Simon and Helena Syrkus.

Just after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, of which Meyer preferred not to speculate, the first differences with Fritz Bach appeared. By December of 1939, the new political orientation of his former friend as a Trotskyite became clear; Meyer linked him to Diego Rivera's declaration to the DIES Committee of the American House of Representatives, inscribing him in a list of "Soviet spies" together with other Mexican intellectuals<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hannes Meyer to Otto Nathan, July 30, 1939, HM Collection, 82/1-910(4)

<sup>8</sup> Meyer, Hannes, *Letter to Paul Artaria*, December 16, 1939, (Frankfurt: DAM 82/1-784(31))

<sup>9</sup> *Cfr.* Hannes Meyer to Otto Nathan, Op.Cit.

<sup>10</sup> *Cfr.* Letter from Hannes Meyer to Paul Artaria. Date unknown. DAM 82/1-784(17)

The opening of the Institute did not diminish his unrest, all the contrary. It began working with only 6 students and was constantly hampered not only by Terrés, but most significantly by Juan O’Gorman who, encouraged also by Bach, incriminated Meyer in Trotsky’s assassination, leading to his dismissal on June 21, 1941.<sup>11</sup> He wrote: “My difficulties here are very big, bigger than I have ever had: sharp fight from the side of the direction of the National Polytechnic Institute, of xenophobia, of political intrigue, of envy of my salary or knowledge. A professional that had once worked in the USSR can naturally be only a GPU agent!”<sup>12</sup>

The results after the first year were unsatisfactory due to the unpreparedness of the students and the lack of proper means to teach. With the end of Cárdenas presidency and the shift to the right under President Manuel Ávila Camacho, the Institute fell pray of budgetary cuts and closed following Meyer’s dismissal. The architect’s uncertain professional future soon found a respite after being asked by Juan de Dios Bátiz to join him at the Secretariat of Labor to work in the Department of Housing.

Other opportunities came as well in his independent praxis through the exile community; in 1940 he was invited to participate in the competition for the design of a Spanish Sporting Club. Of his project, José Luis Cuevas wrote:

Among the non-prize winners, Hannes Meyer especially stands out due to the exceptional width with which he saw and covered the complex, considering rhythms and accents, like he himself says, and foreseeing social and athletic parades, perhaps in the near future. Maybe I am not right, but this solution, the

---

<sup>11</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Hannes Meyer to Dr. R. Grosheintz-Laval. January 19, 1940. DAM 82/1-892(2)

most advanced of all, by the way, I believed from the beginning came better from an urbanist than from an architect.<sup>13</sup>

For the Swiss community, he designed as well a sporting club of a much smaller scale and with a completely different aesthetic approach, trying to represent Swiss culture on Mexican soil. Neither of the projects materialized, however, his activities within the exile groups, especially the German, and his connection to the Mexican Communist Party significantly increased. Leo Katz relates that

I made the comrades attentive that Hannes Meyer, from the first day of our arrival, had pronounced himself against the foundation of a German party group in Mexico and had denied its authorization; as he, on February 9, 1941, in his apartment, in the presence of a representative of the Mexican Party, [Dionisio] Encina, and a group of intellectuals, pointed out that there is no firm ground under the feet, but a dream of a German party group, that under no circumstance can be founded.<sup>14</sup>

Some days before, in January, the *Heinrich Heine Club* was founded by Anna Seghers, Bodo Uhse, Rudolf Feistmann and Ludwig Renn to fill the void left by the Pro-German Culture League. Meyer collaborated with them as well, as he did with the *Bewegung Freies Deutschland*, launched in 1942 among others, designing its magazine. Nevertheless, the differences with its leadership, especially with Paul Merker, soon alienated him from the organization.

When without permission, Meyer's signature appeared in the article "Homage of the German-speaking anti-fascist writers to the USSR", he reacted badly writing to the editors Merker, Abusch and Frei: "What responsibility do us, Swiss, have in front of the cruelties of the Hitlerite bands in the USSR? What is my right and what is my duty, as a Swiss, to

---

<sup>13</sup> Cuevas, José Luis, *Concurso Arquitectónico para la Casa de España en México*. In *Arquitectura* No. 5, April 1940, p.30

<sup>14</sup> Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentral-Komitee der SED, Zentrales Parteiarchiv #6512. Quoted in Kießling, Wolfgang, *Alemania Libre in Mexiko, 1941-46*, Band 1, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1974, pp. 46-47

suggest the German people what to do (or not) with the Hitlerite bands? I do not remotely think to feel responsible towards Herr Hitler and his bands. I say this to the "German group".<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of such differences, Meyer continued to collaborate with the group through the printing house "El Libro Libre", editing the *Black Book of Nazi Terror in Europe* which came to the light in 1943 with the support of President Ávila Camacho. He designed as well the pavilions for the Anti-fascist struggle and the support of the Soviet Union at the Book fair of that year.

His closest circle was, however, the Italian. He joined the *Allianza Giuseppe Garibaldi* and developed a long-lasting relationship with Mario and Isabel Montagnana. Among his friends were also Vittorio Vidali, Tina Modotti and Albe Steiner, whose mother-in-law hosted them in Italy upon their return.

In the Secretariat of Labor, work continued in the design of Housing prototypes. With the signing of the Good Neighbor Pact with the US and then their entry to war in 1941, Mexico became a strong provider of manufactured goods. Industry grew and with it, new regulations were established, including one demanding from every industry with more than 150 employees to provide adequate housing for its workers. In that sense, Meyer designed the Lomas de Becerra Housing Estate following his elastic scheme, previously used in the Soviet Union, consisting of an external circuit of circulations and infrastructure to serve the six housing blocks. Schools, markets and other public facilities were concentrated at the center of the composition. The project did not materialize and Meyer

---

<sup>15</sup> Hannes Meyer, Letter to Paul Merker, Alexander Abusch and Bruno Frei, Mexico City, November 6, 1942, DAM 82/1-927(2)

left the Secretariat to follow Bátiz to the recently established Mexican Institute of Social Security. There he worked as Secretary-Architect in charge of developing the medical-architectonic program for the first zone hospital “La Raza” to be built in Mexico City. Meyer encountered again opposition to his political position within the Institute. He left in 1945 arguing that: “When the outbreak of the reaction is perceptible to me, something completely different has to be undertaken”.<sup>16</sup>

New opportunities arrived when a group of architects invited him to curate the exhibition of the schools built between 1944 and 1946 under the Administrative Committee of the Federal Program for the Construction of Schools (CAPFCE). Besides the exhibition, he edited its catalog and coordinated the archive. The experience at the CAPFCE was short, once again arguing political animosity towards him.

The year of 1946 was of deep change; with the end of war, the institutions of the German exile almost disappear since most of their members returned to Europe. Paul Merker took a leading role at Central Committee of the SED and soon was denounced, tried, expelled from the party and imprisoned. Meyer didn't miss the opportunity to rejoice of his fate. Otto Katz, aka André Simone, had even worse luck, he was tried and hanged in 1952. Others like Anna Seghers, nonetheless, successfully reintegrated in the GDR. Besides, the economic growth of the Ávila Camacho period was about to finish. Employment in the US regained ground and Mexico entered recession after the arrival of Miguel Alemán to the presidency. The peso was devalued and Meyer lost, not only his savings, but the two projects he was working on: The Corpus Christi Block in downtown Mexico and the Agua Hedionda Spa in the State of Morelos, both commissioned by his

---

<sup>16</sup> Hannes Meyer, “Letter to Paul Artaria”, October 2, 1945, DAM 82/1-784 (26)

friend and former boss Juan de Dios Bátiz, now at the Banco Hipotecario y de Obras Públicas. Meyer resented heavily having to work for banking institutions; he considered he was prostituting himself architecturally, perhaps for his return to the glass-box, and undoubtedly for what it represented: the influence of the United State on Mexican life.

Stranded in Mexico, he worked as editor for the Workshop of Popular Graphics and tried to produce some albums on his own, including one on his Bauhaus period, one on Mexico and another on the establishment of the State of Israel. While the latter was mainly aimed at getting some income, the former was to reconnect with his milieu and try to find new working opportunities to contribute with the reconstruction. None of them achieved their goals. In 1949, they headed back home on the Andrea Gritti bound to Italy. They were received by their friends Montagnana and Vidali, but neither could help Meyer to reinsert into the political and professional life. The Meyers took a rental house in the Ticino where they remained until his passing in 1954.

The Mexican experience was a bittersweet one. He enjoyed the Mexican landscape and valued the indigenous people; there he took an active role in the politics of exile and achieved familiar stability. Nevertheless, he confronted as well the shift from left to right in Mexican politics and struggled with the corruption, xenophobia and inefficiency of a system that eventually hampered any possible professional success.