

Erich Mendelsohn: Place, Identity and Exile

Introduction

Erich Mendelsohn's work and his lasting Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) must be framed based on his construction as a figure within a more complex socio-political and historical narrative. Erich Mendelsohn's evolving relationship with modernity and his own situation within the greater context of the German Jewish diaspora forms a significant part of his historical and cultural legacy, particularly when framed as the figure of the German Jewish artist in exile. This central narrative should shape the overall rationale and criteria for Erich Mendelsohn's serial inclusion on the World Heritage List while simultaneously enshrining his invaluable role in the history and evolution of modern architecture as it spread across the globe that similar figures and subjects shared with him.

Recent publications hold the position that Mendelsohn's work, while unable to crystallize a national Jewish style, was deeply rooted in an ideological position tied to his figuration as a subject.¹ In considering Mendelsohn's work in dialogue with the notion of German Jewish exile, issues such as place, belonging and identity are included in the active deconstruction of the universal modern paradigm, while providing a richer understanding of a more nuanced and subjective modernity. Methods to achieve these kinds of broader readings can be seen in the work of human geographers (Harvey, Soja, et. al.), socio-spatial theorists (Le Febvre, Massey, et. al.), and Indigenous scholars (Land, Smith, et. al.). Considering Erich Mendelsohn's distinct trans-national oeuvre requires a more sensitive and contextual application of OUV dependent upon such methods and methodological frameworks, which must differ from those taken up in Le Corbusier's very conventional nomination.

Erich Mendelsohn's contributions to the field of architecture have had many nuanced lasting repercussions, and his contributions could be framed as being in service of defining the modern department store as a type, expanding the Streamline Moderne architectural style, shaping the architectural language of the state of Israel, defining how Judaism and modern architecture in the United States became intertwined after the war and as a method to understand the global spread and transformation of Bauhaus methods globally. Each of these

arguments is valid, but framing Mendelsohn's work as an oeuvre must also tell a uniquely Jewish story about how exile, diaspora, place and modernity would be conjoined within a greater shared narrative while deconstructing the dominant narrative of universal modernity.

UNESCO and representation

This project is particularly timely since the UNESCO World Heritage listing process has been actively undergoing reform and reconsideration in light of more timely critiques based in post-colonialism, anti-racism and other key social movements, which seek broader recognition and even reconciliation. A rejuvenated World Heritage list is slowly taking shape that extends the limits of Empire, rejects Eurocentrism and reckons with equity and difference in a productive way, while actively embracing other conceptual ontologies than Western universalism, while delaminating colonial notions ranging like property.

Deconstructing colonial and settler-colonial imaginaries might be seen as methods to correct and repair UNESCO's stored path. Recent nominations, such as Asmara, a modern African city², are able to not just represent previously neglected landmarks, but actively provoke discussions about colonialism and post-colonial structures at play. For example, "intangible cultural heritage"³ is having a positive effect on the re-framing of heritage, just as is the inclusion of modern architecture. The intangible culture designation was intended to recognize practices, events and traditions that are not tied to conventional physical sites but are still a unique part of a country's heritage and similarly rely on narratives of place. Since 2008, when the programme started, UNESCO has designated some 451 intangible cultural entities in the world. Among them are place-making techniques in Normandy, the summer solstice fire festivals in the Pyrenees and folk dances in Brittany. The ability of this reframing to embrace narratives and cultures outside of European gaze can be seen in the World Heritage listing of Kabuki theatre in Japan, the manufacture of batik cloth in Indonesia and the pre-Inca tradition in Peru of specialized judges who determine water rights. While this UNESCO designation has occasionally drawn criticism because of vagueness of the term and because some say it is used to

promote tourism and consumption rather than to encourage the study and preservation of local traditions and practices,⁴ the outcomes have been paradigm shifting and productive.

Narratives and particularity

While Mendelsohn's work may lack the singular authoritative stylistic consistency of many of his modern peers, his trans-national and episodic oeuvre in exile represents a cohesive complete body of work of another kind whose outstanding universal value lies in the artifacts produced as well as Mendelsohn's narrative that can be seen to have contributed to the shape of the modern movement as a global movement forged by others. Recognizing such an expanded intangible value produces a form of *particularity* that would foreground Mendelsohn's inclusion on the World Heritage List as a non-universal character whose work expresses an adaptability to context(s), rather than an absolute universal vision.

In my previous research, interviews conducted with UNESCO officials in Paris, New York and Toronto yielded a commonly expressed desire for more research around expanding the definition of OUV.⁵ Inasmuch, the goal of preserving Mendelsohn's work as a byproduct of a collective movement of German Jewish artists and architects into a state of exile abroad and its overall impact on the shaping of modern architecture, specifically, should be the primary objective of the Mendelsohn nomination. In that sense, Erich Mendelsohn cannot just be framed as yet another modern architectural "genius," whose masterpieces demonstrate modernity's universal impact on others, as was the clearly-stated case with Le Corbusier's nomination.

Diaspora as context

Positioning Erich Mendelsohn's oeuvre of groundbreaking work within the framework of UNESCO's World Heritage List as a trans-national serial nomination demands a more complex historical and geographical analysis of how the intertwining of both *diaspora* and *place* are not just a condition of Mendelsohn's state of exile, but rather, an intertwined greater context that would shape Mendelsohn's architectural career, his work's outstanding universal value and prompt a revisit of the particularities of the German Jewish diaspora as a context.

For example, as Amos Elon explains in his description of the Schocken Library, "In designing the Schocken Library Mendelsohn drew his inspiration from the open landscape surrounding the city, a vista of bare mountaintops and the soft contours of solitary Arab villages still perched on the hills in 1935, fitting perfectly into the landscape and so pleasing to the eye, if only from a distance. Mendelsohn also designed all the details within the building, elegant steel banisters and door handles, bookshelves in blond lemon wood, tables, chairs, umbrella racks, and Bauhaus-inspired washrooms and mezuzahs. The library, with its delicate, pristine lines, walls chiselled in rosy Jerusalem stone, and elliptical glass-enclosed staircases and windows, is perhaps the most memorable modern building in the city."⁶

Mendelsohn's figuration

Erich Mendelsohn became forever associated with Expressionism as he developed his style and method of working at the Bauhaus, which would be highly experimental, deeply personal and easily recognizable. The resulting *image* of how most of us have come to know Mendelsohn as a figure is embedded within these sketches, despite a lengthy and productive and highly influential trans-national architectural career that needs to be recognized as such. Mendelsohn's most iconic building remains the Einstein Tower in Potsdam, which exemplifies his approach, yet forecloses a better understanding of his full impact and trajectory on the global spread of modern architecture as much more than a universalizing technological (and colonizing) set of occurrences. Less widely known, but perhaps much more significant, are the numerous products of Mendelsohn's thriving practice in Berlin, which produced a great number of iconic department stores and other commercial structures that would become associated with Streamline Moderne design, help shape the modern city and have lasting impact on the evolution of modern architecture as a representation of context and place.

Mendelsohn, like so many who had thrived in Germany during the Weimar Republic, was Jewish, and as a result, spent the bulk of his life in exile to survive. His life in exile produced artifacts in the UK, Israel (as one of the founding architects to establish a style of architecture for the emergent Zionist state), and the United States, where he would design a number of synagogues and other buildings while holding a faculty appointment at the University of California at Berkeley. His best-known buildings in the United States include the Maimonides Hospital in San Francisco and a number of Jewish Community centres and synagogues in the Midwest. These projects are all significant and tell a compelling part of the complete Mendelsohn story, when seen in context of a career spent in exile and in a state of adaptation.

Outstanding Universal Value

Modern architecture is a very particular art, one whose particularity lies in its attachment to values that are *universal* in nature. Values, such as abstraction, placelessness and universality shape the modern idiom, but can also be seen to be exclusive and often a-contextual, which presents a paradox when considering modern architecture as heritage. Mark Jarzombek writes: "Preservation is an instrument of modernity; stated differently, it is the means by which we define ourselves as moderns."⁷ Following Jarzombek's postulation, it is useful to think of UNESCO as a global institution that has been specifically charged with instituting and administering programs meant to encourage cooperative and coordinated action by member states in education, science, and the arts, but which now includes architectural heritage and modern architecture as a universally standard reaction to a world in flux. This is too limited.

Each UNESCO World Heritage nomination dossier usually must have a regional or locally situated meaning or geographical grounding in place to be specific enough to matter,

which can then be translated as also having a *universal* value while following UNESCO's World Heritage criteria as a metric, thus further perpetuating the paradox inherent in modern heritage. By opening-up and reframing OUV to be more contextual, less centred on individual *genius* and more open to individual voices, reframing modernity more inclusively, using such ideas as multiple modernisms can productively give voice to previously silenced (non-universal) voices as a methodology of reform. For example, the Bauhaus was framed not only a singular masterwork in the history of architecture and design, but also a "testament to the history of ideas of the twentieth century."

Le Corbusier's foreclosing presence

Today, when we read the official UNESCO press release for the Le Corbusier World Heritage listing, we can see the way that Le Corbusier's OUV was framed and nuanced as the results of an evolving message and process: "Chosen from the work of Le Corbusier, the seventeen sites comprising this transnational serial property are spread over seven countries and are a testimonial to the invention of a new architectural language that made a break with the past. They were built over a period of a half-century, in the course of what Le Corbusier described as "patient research."⁸

The question that haunts this process is how to treat Le Corbusier's landmark serial UNESCO nomination as a (potentially limiting) precedent. While it seems beyond obvious that the Le Corbusier case should serve as the most useful, relevant, and recent precedent for the Mendelsohn case, I argue that this may be a dangerous notion that may carry with it unnecessary limitations while homogenizing Mendelsohn's particular contribution, which may, in turn, foreclose opportunities to further expand and deconstruct OUV in the future. For nearly two decades, the political power behind Corbu's nomination was fueled by the French government and the well-organized and highly influential leadership of the *Fondation Le Corbusier*. However, despite being rejected in 2006, re-nominated in 2009 and rejected once again, the desire to include Le Corbusier's oeuvre on the World Heritage List continued. The reason was that there was a strong will to enshrine Le Corbusier as a valuable vehicle for national and cultural identity.

Mendelsohn's Judaism, exceptionality and absence

While there are many dedicated scholars who have devoted their scholarly research to Mendelsohn's life and work, the dominant narrative has tended to neglect Mendelsohn as an equally contributing figure in the evolution and maturity of modern architecture. Notable examples of those telling Mendelsohn's story include Bruno Zevi's foundational study of Mendelsohn (1970), Arnold Whittick and Wolf von Eckhardt (1956), and by more contemporary scholars such as Stephan, Benton and Heinze-Greenberg (1999), James-Chakraborty (2000, 1997) and Nitzan-Shiftan (2017, 1996). Telling such a particular story requires seeking out excep-

tionality rather than universality as a strategy, which would require re-evaluating key modern ideologies such as universality itself, while abandoning seeking out *genius* as a World Heritage criterion within individual works of art. Given this re-evaluation, another argument for enshrining Mendelsohn's work as an oeuvre becomes evident.

Despite this own exceptionality, Mendelsohn is noticeably absent in the Pantheon of modern masters as reproduced through modern architectural history texts and in the canonization of the modern masters, despite his influence and impact on the evolution of modern architecture as witnessed in places like Berlin, Jerusalem and in small towns in the American Midwest where his synagogues have brought the lessons of the Bauhaus to the prairies. Mendelsohn's Jewishness, therefore, must be a significant part of this nomination. It would be neglectful to simply take his work at face value and not include his story as a German Jew in a state of exile as a means to position his work within a canon that remains overwhelmingly insular. While it remains debatable, and even dangerous to even consider if there is, or is not, a Jewish modern architecture at all,⁹ it is not debatable that the generation of Jewish architects that came after the modern masters would transform the profession itself and also change the role of diasporic Jews in reshaping a post-modern and often highly critical reaction to the modern canon.

The number of architects who emerged from the same milieu as Mendelsohn, including Breuer, Neutra, Schindler and others, mostly refrained from drawing upon their Jewish identities, for multiple reasons, but were united in a common attachment to shaping the modern movement, mainly "because modernism had rebelled against a historicist tradition that few Jews had a vested interest in preserving."¹⁰ In Mendelsohn's case, "...he unwaveringly championed the new against the old, espoused democracy over nationalism, and remained fiercely loyal to his embattled Jewish-German community." Moreover, "...in Palestine it was precisely the national instinct, which provoked Jewish immigrants to gather as an ethnic and linguistic community, that led architects and ideologists alike to embrace modern architecture as the appropriate expressions of Zionism. They clung to its attributes of progress as well to its lack of identity with forms associated with European nations."¹¹

Conclusion

Mendelsohn adapted modern architecture's innovations and technologies to reflect a very personal understanding within a universally expanded definition of place, belonging and culture. This approach positioned him apart from mainstream architectural figures and the modern masters simultaneously. Mendelsohn's unique consideration of cultural tradition and an adaptability to place shaped an oeuvre that lacked the universal singularity of vision and focus of his modern master peers, but in turn made Mendelsohn's work more particular and more valuable as a method to see how modernity would transcend the liminality of place, but not deny context. Erich Mendelsohn's contribution to the development of modern Israeli architecture is as distinct as his contribution to the evo-

lution of the modern department store and postwar synagogue. However, it is a challenge to see these contributions as components of a collective oeuvre stylistically, formally and even ideologically, but this is what is needed so importantly in enshrining Mendelsohn's master oeuvre of trans-national work.

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Notes

- ¹ **James-Chakraborty**, *In the Spirit*, 2000, Idem, *Erich Mendelsohn, 1997, Nitzan-Shiftan, Alternative Modernism, 1996*, et. al.
- ² UNESCO, *Asmara: A Modernist City of Africa*, 2017.
- ³ UNESCO, *Intangible Cultural Heritage*, n.d.
- ⁴ **Nay**, *Canonizing Le Corbusier*, 2018.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ **Elon**, *The Jewish Bismarck*, 2004.
- ⁷ **Jarzombek**, *Horse Shrines*, 2009, p. 31.
- ⁸ UNESCO, *The Architectural Work*, 2016.
- ⁹ **Goldberger**, *Is there a Jewish Architecture?*, 2011.
- ¹⁰ **Rosenfeld**, *Building after Auschwitz*, 2011, p.96.
- ¹¹ **Stephan, Benton** (eds.), *Erich Mendelsohn*, 1999, p. 56, 151.