

Purpose and Allusion: Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer, Petersschule in Basel, 1926, and Bundesschule–ADGB in Bernau, 1928–30

The Petersschule project by Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer is basically known through two frequently reproduced documents: a precise, quite dramatically receding perspective drawing and a presentation sheet comprising an axonometric rendering superimposed on a site plan, a graph of light curves, and, in the upper strip, a portion of an elevation and a cross section. Within the frame of this graphic sheet, the skewed position of the axonometry detaches the represented building from its background, isolating it as an object and suggesting unrest – perhaps a state of weightless floating, or at least a disregard for gravity. This graphic twist stresses the most obvious feature of the project: the building is paired with a startling system of projecting platforms. The perspective drawing is no less evocative. Beyond depicting a building, it also represents a device, a towering corpus as the mainstay for the jutting decks and a grafted set of glazed corridors and stairways. The structure plainly dominates the site. Though its base leaves an important part of the ground unoccupied, it overshadows it entirely. Both documents relate to a competition launched in 1926 for the design of a girls' primary school in Peterskirchplatz in the old part of Basel. Meyer and Wittwer considered the site to be overly small for the scope of the assignment. They calculated that the conventional development of a program encompassing eleven classrooms, an art room, a gymnasium, a swimming pool, a kitchen and a canteen would leave only about 500 square metres of playground for the children. They therefore proposed developing the school vertically, starting from a reduced base containing the sport facilities, stacking the classes in threes on the east side of the block, and providing the greater part of the recreational area above ground level on suspended platforms and roof terraces “where there is sunlight and fresh air”. When invited to publish their project in the *Bauhaus-Zeitschrift* (no. 2, 1927), Meyer and Wittwer subjected it to a thorough revision, retaining the main features but optimizing their intelligibility to the utmost. Therefore, they evicted the entire system of circulation from the inner volume and exposed it on the outside, revealing its nature as the spatial binding agent. They condensed the rather complicated corpus into an elementary prismatic compound, articulating it as a main block with attached service units. Furthermore, they maximized the suspended platforms and freed the entire ground area from any enclosure, thereby retroceding it to city traffic. The whole reworking of the project obviously aimed at intensifying its Constructivist character and at having it meet the terms of the new architecture they had helped to propagate through their involvement with the ABC group and its journal.

The publication in the *Bauhaus-Zeitschrift* consists of a single page displaying the graphic sheet mentioned above, a project statement and a note calculating the incidence of daylight in the school's interior. The addition of the lighting calculation conveys the idea that the practice of architecture should rely on objective data and technical activity, that building must be governed by purpose rather than composition. However, it also introduces a paradoxical element in the ideological argument of the project. As stated in the explanatory note, and as corroborated by the comparative light curves, an ideal design for a school would call for the skylighting of all classrooms, and thus require even more space for building than that which had been allocated to the Petersschule. Thus, while Meyer and Wittwer present their project as a showcase of vanguard architecture, they equally designate it as a "compromise solution". Just as the paradigmatic fibre is solicited to obviate the undermining effect of this incongruity, the astuteness of the graphic record is enlisted to rebut the deficiencies of reality: the soaring axonometric and perspective renderings supersede the surroundings – indeed, they obliterate the Peterskirche. The revised project is an indictment of the remnants of the past: old habits, burdensome conventions, obsolete traditions, and historic Basel.

In *Die neue Welt* (The New World), a manifesto published in 1926, Hannes Meyer drafted a daring portrait of the "age of mechanization" and requested that artistic production honour its prerogatives. He claimed that the authentic witnesses of the new era were "unburdened by classical airs and graces, by an artistic confusion of ideas or the trimmings of applied art . . . : industrial fairs, grain silos, music halls, airports, office chairs, standard goods – all these things are the product of a formula: function multiplied by economics." In accordance with an overall materialism, Meyer equated architecture with building. He endeavoured to dismantle architecture's aesthetic pretence and aligned design issues with societal conceptions.

The publication of the Petersschule project coincided with Meyer's engagement to set up an architecture department at the Bauhaus. He reported that when he was invited to take over the directorship from Walter Gropius, merely a year later, he found himself in a "tragicomic situation": "As director of the Bauhaus I was fighting against the Bauhaus style." What is more, in the two years of his directorate (1928–30) he engaged the school in an extensive cooperative effort. Collective sense was strengthened by organizing the students in "vertical groups" in which older students helped with the development of younger ones. The workshops were restructured in economically independent units. Meyer attuned their activities to concrete demands and favoured the industrial production of their output. In order to acquaint the Bauhaus' "work brigades" with actual production conditions, he engaged

them on several building projects. The commission for the Bundesschule–ADGB (the Federal School of the German Trade Union League) in Bernau, which he acquired via a “keenly contested competition”, became the occasion for the most far-reaching of collective undertakings: along with the school’s building department, he also involved the weaving, wall-painting and metal workshops in the realization and furnishing of the complex. Consistent with his functional stance, he required that all pipes and fixtures be exposed. Allegedly, he would not even permit the recruited students to draw elevations, for he considered the latter to be a logical consequence of necessary window dimensions and forecast relationships. Yet this anecdote doesn’t convey the full extent of Meyer’s position. By his own account, his approach to “functional building” went far beyond purely technical questions: “It was our hope to give added depth and richness to architecture through an analysis of the social situation and a careful study of all biological factors.”

Meyer, who had to work out his entry for the Bundesschule competition at the very moment he was preparing to take the reins of the Bauhaus, once more called on Hans Wittwer for assistance. The Bundesschule was intended to provide the delegates from the trade unions with further training during one- or two-month stays. The amenities were to support the improvement of the trainees’ general condition, while the “novel surroundings” were supposed to raise their “standard of living and culture”. In an explanatory note Meyer underlined that he won the contest because he “not only designed a striking set of buildings but also put forward a new form of socio-educational organization”. His proposal was based on a rigid grouping of the residents: “The 120 students of both sexes were organized in twelve cells of ten members each. Students roomed together in twos, and five of these pairs formed a cell whose members lived together, separate from the others.” The cohesion of the cells would rest on the comradeship between room-mates, and thereby underpin the school’s communal life. Between the communal centre and the main school wing, the student lodgings were accommodated in an indented sequence of three-storey units, whose floors each hosted a cell comprised of five rooms. The dwellings for the teaching staff and their families were set apart in a staggered rank along the access road. According to Meyer, “The buildings were simply intended to reproduce these socio-educational functions in bricks and mortar.”

The complex is conceived as a deployment of distinct units. Meyer and Wittwer used the natural slope of the site to stress the planimetric indentation with stepped elevations. As in the Petersschule project, the main circulation is developed as a separate apparatus. In this case, however, it is not a ramified structure grafted onto the building mass that is intended to reveal flux and movement. In the Bundesschule, a cadence is given by the formation of the units.

The circulation system is cleansed of Constructivist symbolism. The glazed corridor is laid at the side of the building's recessed alignment, trailing the slope all the way down from the community block to the school wing, where it then climbs up a staircase along the side wall and finally terminates across the corner with a cantilevered structure. The roofline of the pitched corridor cuts through the fenestration. Both interior and exterior are built up in bare materials (glass, brickwork and concrete), anticipating Brutalist anti-aesthetics (which is itself, indeed, an aesthetic) by some twenty-five years.

When the time came to reconsider the credentials of international modernism, its self-declared "functionalism" was called into question. In his *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960), Reyner Banham observes that while the term was chosen as a label for the new architecture, and thus facilitated the emergence of an International Style, it entailed a thorough misunderstanding of the aims and achievements of the progressive architecture of the 1920s: "Functionalism as a creed or programme, may have a certain austere nobility, but it is poverty-stricken symbolically. The architecture of the Twenties, though capable of its own austerity and nobility, was heavily, and designedly, loaded with symbolic meanings that were discarded or ignored by its apologists in the Thirties." Banham doubts that the "ideas implicit in functionalism . . . were ever significantly present in the minds of any of the influential architects of the period". As a possible exception, he mentions the "short-lived G episode", not Hannes Meyer (to whom he paid little attention in his account).

Functionalism, since it presumes a comprehensive formal determination by forecasted usefulness, disregards an essential condition of the project, the fact that it still requires an exploration of possibilities, a set of choices and an act of judgement. Evidence for this is merged into the project; forethought is immanent to it. This plants the seed of its significance. The project's meaning is imparted by the recognition that it decidedly could have been different, that its singular state and actual form were the object of thorough deliberation and resolved preference. Thus, a work of architecture bears witness to an attitude towards reality. As such, while purpose anchors the artefact in straightforward reality, its purposeful appearance conveys conceptions about man's connection to things and about the sense of making things. Purposiveness therefore construes reality and engages architecture in its representation.

Being one of the most dogged functionalists of the time didn't prevent Meyer from encountering this thorny question. Since the Petersschule opposed reality, and thus was fated to find its way merely as an image, compliance with architecture's double bind (its need to be both purposive and emblematic) was clearly part of the deal. The case of the Bundesschule

was different, however. At the time Meyer was fully engaged in the “proletarianization” of the Bauhaus. He obviously conceived his undertaking as part of an emerging collective effort that would reset production conditions and the division of labour. He probably thereby went so far as to infer an imminent transformation of the economical basis and thus of society. Manifestly, he had to commit himself to conceiving the Bundesschule in full compliance with his “new theory of building” – a theory he bizarrely envisioned as both a “system for organizing life” and an “epistemology of existence”. The last term must refer to some sort of ontology. In architecture, however, an essentialist approach doesn’t discard representation. In fact, the urge towards exemplarity was no less compelling here than in the case of the Petersschule. For the sake of articulation, he gratefully accepted the opportunities imparted by the building site. They allowed him to elevate the underlying functional diagram to the level of genuine architectural expression. As legitimate and formally efficient as this might be, he obviously sensed it didn’t merge perfectly with the framework of his “objective” theory. In *Bauhaus und Gesellschaft* (Bauhaus and Society), a radical pronouncement released in 1929 at the very moment of the Bundesschule’s realization, he concluded the text with this remark: “Finally all creative action is determined by the fate of the landscape – which for the man with roots there is peculiar and unique, and allows his work to be personal and localized.” And although up-and-coming cosmopolitanism had always had a part to play in his reasoning, here he took his argument further: “For people without roots, work easily becomes typical and standard.” This was obviously more of an afterthought than a concluding argument, a half-hearted recognition of the tedium to be expected from an architecture he had reframed as mere “building and social organization” that evidently unsettled his position. But he never went further in the avowal of functionalism’s reductive character.

Still, Meyer had already conceded that all artefacts must be “the result of our speculative dialogue with the world” in *Die neue Welt*. As this dialogue necessarily relies on experience and imagination, it settles productive activity on subjective ground. In *Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’état* (1970), Louis Althusser enounced that every practice is sited “under and through ideology” and that no ideology exists other than that which is “by and for subjects.” With ideology being “a representation of the imaginary relationship that individuals have with the real conditions of their existence”, every project is an ideological product and inevitably integrates imaginary conceptions of the world. To paraphrase Althusser, although these conceptions do not coincide with reality, and thus partake of illusion, they nonetheless “allude” to reality. It is then sufficient to interpret the artefacts as to recover, under the veil of their imaginary representation of the world, fragments of reality itself.

Meyer's inability to acknowledge the field of tension activated by architecture prevented him from sensing the critical capital attached to the paired research and representation of purposiveness. Yet it is precisely the call put out by the "illusive allusions" tagged onto projects like the Petersschule and the Bundesschule that continues to draw on architects' imaginations. Meyer despised allusions and chased illusions. This then drove him to failure and made him destined for a wandering life.

Adolf Loos emphatically promised that the defeat of ornamentation would lead to fulfilment and salvation: "Soon the streets of the cities will shine like white walls. Like Zion, the sacred city, heaven's capital." Le Corbusier, for his part, rhetorically invoked a Solon to promulgate "la loi du ripolin – le lait de chaux", a sweeping whitewash that would suppress ambiguity, restore purity and decency, and refit the world to the request of the "machine age". An enlightened autocrat would indeed have been necessary for this to occur. By itself, architecture is unable to restore congruence or instate propriety. It doesn't affect the base but meets with establishment in society's superstructure. There it can instil some visibility, some distinction in the midst of deceit. Architecture adds a vein to the stratification of reality.

Where it intrudes, it rarely achieves a whitewashing; rather, it calcimines our utensils. In the seclusion of his studio, Morandi purposively did the same thing with bottles, cans and pots. This provided him with the stock upon which to draw in painting still lifes as landscapes: at once, easing nearness and bringing in distance.