

A Manchester Dialogue

On the Early Sketches of Eric Mendelsohn

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IH-G: Eric Mendelsohn [1887–1953] took pleasure in being called “the only born revolutionary of his generation”.¹ According to most scholars, EM’s main contribution to the new architecture lay in his spectacular early sketches, a tacit declaration of independence from all the rules of classicism and medievalism that had governed architecture for 500 years.²

RH: EM was part of the spirit of revolt and change that gripped Germany, and it almost certainly informed his own self-image, an image he chose not to see as “expressionistic” but which produced expressionistic work in spite of itself.

IH-G: It was the art critic Adolf Behne who dubbed EM an expressionist in the early twenties and the label stuck.³ He first used it in 1913 to define Bruno Taut’s work, which he praised for its freedom from traditional laws of form.⁴ However, the sketches Taut and his disciples produced were dematerialised dreams, translucent utopias rendering homage to some cosmic and mystic world. Their fantastic forms yield little as to function, construction, or even purpose.⁵

RH: And EM’s sketches, in contrast, were “concrete” visions?

IH-G: They were visionary but also intended to be in the here and now. Of the three new building materials — glass, steel and concrete — EM seems to have been interested primarily in the last. Large surfaces of glass play only a small part in his early ideas.

RH: What about steel? There are those “riveted” drawings of 1914 and 1915 that can only mean steel and have nothing to do with concrete. They are metal structures, as, for example, we see today in the work of Gehry and others pursuing warped surfaces.

IH-G: *Architecture in Steel and Concrete* was the title of EM’s first exhibition.⁶

RH: Some of those sketches could have been inspired by great engines of the type that drove ships or manufactured war machines. The “Car Chassis Factory” of 1915 seems to have the stamped image of a car in mind, yet steel was shunted aside later, and I always got the idea that for EM concrete was his idea of revolutionary.⁷

IH-G: In 1914 EM wrote about concrete as a material demanding a new expression. What he implied is that since walls no longer depended on the weight of roofs to hold them in place, surfaces could flow into one another without intermediate supports, and could “grow out of themselves with their own power and spirit and soul.”⁸

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RH: The drawings often illustrate that idea, yet in his writing there is sometimes an undercurrent of the supposed superiority of structure over form.

IH-G: But is that such a supposition? From the Sumerians onward it was a material's possibilities that had everything to do with a building's form.

RH: Yes, but look what has happened. Every technical advance and material development, from column and lintel through arch and dome to suspension and air pressure, has yielded a corresponding liberation of form. The standard skyscraper of today is essentially a post and beam structure — like the temples of Karnak and Horyuji. The real superiority belongs not to basic structural ideas but to the technology and materials employing them — and hence to their engendered form.

IH-g: I don't see the "standard skyscraper", as you call it, particularly liberated. It seems to me prescribed and predictable.

RH: Market forces also determine form, but let's not get into that! The skyscraper cage is simply under-using a material which has greater potential than merely extending the spans and heights of ancient construction.

IH-G: And EM saw that. Was first to see it.

RH: He saw how concrete and steel, could extend our vocabulary of form, and he showed us how to do it. The post and beam school continues even now with its insistent security that form follow structure. EM's security lay in having no security at all, and it was an enormous act of artistic courage

IH-G: What about Frank Lloyd Wright? Unity Temple of 1906 was well before EM's first sketches. Wasn't that even more courageous?

RH: The first monolithic pour? Wright boasted of that for the rest of his life. As an expression of moulded form, Unity Temple was a success in ways the Einstein Tower was not. When EM said "never again" to using warped concrete curves in some future building of his, he was admitting a failure.⁹ But I want to exonerate him on that point, because the deck was stacked against him.

IH-G: Wright didn't repeat Unity Temple either.

RH: The point is that, conceptually, the form of Wright's building is Egypto-Deco-Nouveau-Mayan, a style he stuck with for another 30 years. Unity Temple surpassed the Einstein Tower in most significant ways 15 years before the latter was built, only to be clung to, formally speaking, until the building — in the wrong material — of the Mendelsohnian Johnson Wax Building 15 years after the Tower.

IH-G: You think the Johnson Wax Building should have been concrete?

RH: I love looking at it just as it is, but the truth is that the building is EM's concrete pieced together with bricks — probably for the same technical reasons as those which plagued the Einstein Tower. We can put our brains aside and love the visual effects, but both buildings strain credulity: the Tower for the inappropriateness of its elaborated form to the structure's purpose; the Johnson building for the

inappropriateness of its handcrafted material to the sweeping dynamism of its form. Of the two errors Wright's is the less forgivable.

IH-G: Because Wright was nearly 70 and EM was only 33 or so?

RH: Yes, and although Wright had had a huge career already, he was only then coming out of his EM closet. But that's okay. In 1937 building technology hadn't caught up with EM's warped forms, but Wright ingeniously got around that by breaking down wide curves into short arcs and creating domes from short sections. On the other hand, it may not have been ingenious at all, because, unlike the early EM, Wright was a confirmed Euclidean.

IH-G: Mendelsohn abandoned the effects of his own youthful ideas only to have them taken up by an aging man 25 years later.

RH: And Wright kept those curved surfaces until he died, whereas EM – except for his ad nauseam stair towers – virtually threw them out. Who knows why? I think it's sad. Wright's most audacious curves were never built either.

IH-G: I'd like to talk about the way building components were used by EM and others to create their own architectural realities. As in Unity Temple and the Einstein Tower, for example.

RH: Wright endlessly told the story of a building's "reality", of how he discovered it via Unity Temple. The idea that the reality of a vessel lies in its contained space, not in its material walls, is from Laozi, but it took Wright to convert the notion into an architectural idea that he, as he would have us believe, was the first man in history to build. He had it wrong, even by his own measure, because for Wright spatial reality had to flow, in which case architecture became a pretty leaky vessel. Not exactly a client grabber.

IH-G: But it sounded good and gave architecture some oriental cachet.

RH: Some Americans require all the cachet they can get. It lubricates the checkbook.

IH-G: In calling attention to themselves Wright's surfaces always seem to me at least as important as the space they subsume and have just as much to do with "reality".

RH: Yes, and *subsume* is the right word: in Wright's buildings surfaces often steal the space, but that's okay, because in time they give it back.

IH-G: EM came at this differently. In several of his earliest lectures his concerns were matter and energy, world order and cosmic relativity, and he linked them to the promise of concrete's future. He addressed form, structure and engineering but left no record of what the machine — which he believed had become "the constructive element of a new, living organism" — could accomplish spatially.¹⁰ He didn't single space out as a separate reality.

RH: It may be odd to equate physical realities with cultural hierarchies, but

perhaps something of the sort is what's going on here. I mean EM's writing is sometimes a little too lofty for the galaxy to handle.

IH-G: He was a Prussian for sure, but what comes across in the whole oeuvre of his writing is a great sense of balance in all things. He thought Einstein's ideas should have architectural manifestations. And of course there was Bach, the Blue Rider Group and all that. It was Germanic and genuinely revolutionary. Frank Lloyd Wright probably understood little about the root causes of what was going on in Europe at the time.

RH: Wright's roots were in Emersonian transcendentalism — a gentler take on cosmic activity and an eminently pragmatic approach to balance. Wright's space is of the sort you can find beneath a great tree, whereas EM's cosmic notions are so huge they make the human a small thing. None of the early sketches carries a single hint as to scale: neither tree, nor figure, nor automobile.

IH-G: I don't find them inhuman.

RH: I didn't mean that. There is internal scale to them, an intrinsic harmony and grace. One is awed yet oddly welcomed by their monumentality. But for Wright monumentality, when it existed at all, was always broken down into small chunks, a fact lending itself to craft and the trades. Scale had to be to our measure, intensely so, whereas for EM scale was apprehended self-referentially.

IH-G: This suggests that perhaps EM's monumentality was arrived at by default, not by intent. Visitors, who come to see the Einstein Tower for the first time, are astonished by its small size, while the sketches suggest something huge.

RH: It's a very human building. In spite of the power of his work and personality EM was no dictator, and his admiration for Wright is proved by his response to the Wrightean realities of internal space and scale. I saw this evidenced first hand at Wright's Walker House in Carmel, where EM made a positive pedagogical point of it.

IH-G: Also, wouldn't you say that all of EM's drawings connote a feeling for *external* space?

RH: Yes, absolutely, and that's important; however, it's as much a part of sculpture as of architecture, for which *interior* space is the defining moment. What I found interesting in the EM buildings I have seen is not the spaces but the magical light filling them. With his limitation of monocular vision I've wondered whether EM's perception of light and colour were not — for him — of greater importance.¹¹

IH-G: The Einstein Tower seems not to concern itself with space at all.

RH: It's all form! Unity Temple is all form also – until you go inside. When you go inside the Einstein Tower, it's still all form, but less of it and not as good.

IH-G: But is it fair to compare the two? Unity Temple was for a congregation; the Einstein Tower for a handful of technicians who weren't there to think about God.

RH: No, just the speed of light.

IH-G: A matter of some gravity.

RH: Well, it's a gravity structure. It could be a grave, a big tombstone.

IH-G: With air holes?

RH: Sullivan's wonderful tombs had a few holes. Sullivan would have loved the Einstein Tower. He wouldn't have slept for a week. A month!

IH-G: You know that when the building was finished, Einstein went up to EM and whispered, "Organic!", almost as if he expected the building to move, to dance. As a young man, EM loved to dance, yet some of his early sketches do not suggest that kind of activity. They are muscular and athletic but seem to move with feet firmly planted.

RH: He wanted concrete to swing but knew it had to lose some weight.

IH-G: It took EM time to find his way. Michelangelo's architectural drawings, seen during a tour through Italy in 1911, gave him a jolt. He was surprised by inaccuracies in their details, a fact which hastened his liberation from academic dictums and revealed to him the architectural power latent within the quick sketch.²² Yet it took three more years before he reached the hesitant, yet monumental, sketches of 1913-14.

RH: I think of the earliest sketches as culminating with the "Large Factory with Crane" of 1915.²³ It displays a prodigious complexity, where the carving of form surpasses in scale and the bending of space both the playfulness of Wright's Midway Gardens of 1914 and his design for the Imperial Hotel of 1916. However, the same cannot be said for building interiors, where Wright's conceptions did indeed bend and flow. It is as if EM had turned Wright's earlier work inside out. This was the athleticism of real adventure — a decathlon with the possible.

IH-G: What about that crane? It's intriguing, but I've always found it odd.

RH: As drawn, the crane factory is the climax of a largely unseen building, shown as the coming together of masses in a burst of directional energy. Logically, the crane should extend from the structure's apex, but that would have made it appear transitory. In placing the crane where he did, EM announces the crane as part of the building's observable temporality. This is one of the very first examples of four dimensions manifesting as an architectural idea.

IH-G: Picasso and Braque played with time in only two dimensions, but that was *imagined* time. The fourth dimension of the working crane would be real — is that what you mean?

RH: Sure; however the individual forms of "Large Factory with Crane" are not — for EM — particularly original. Two quick toss-offs also done in 1915 — the two "Halls" — show what an inventive formalist he could be.²⁴ However, none of the sketches up to those of the Einstein Tower, concern themselves with the exploration of complex spatial relationships.

IH-G: We should keep in mind that the sketches of 1916 and 1917 were made during the extreme circumstances of trench warfare on the German front. Whatever he produced during that terrible period was probably a necessary reassessment of previous ideas.

RH: Then it is not surprising that EM returned to his crane with gusto, more than ever certain that the crane was central to the very idea of the building. Of seven crane factories sketched in 1917, at least five are virtuosic, and all of them explore anew an even richer interplay of form and directional relationships.²⁵ There is some evidence that they haunted him as he was drawn into the exigencies of professional practice and the ever more constricting world of the – as he later traduced – "rectangular mind".

IH-G: He said it jokingly after he had produced a great many rectangles himself, but his attitude proves where his heart really lay.

RH: I like to think the most important part of him never left the dunes he sketched. Where was that place?

IH-G: On the coast of what is now Lithuania. During the summer of 1920 Louise, [EM's wife] took him on a picnic to a voluptuous stretch of sand frequented by artists and nature lovers. As a young student, EM had made his living painting landscapes, but in the dunes he found something different.

RH: The "dune sketches" came near the end of that period which saw the explosive rise of EM's most vibrant and original ideas, dreams, and private realities.²⁶ Comprising these are the so-called "music sketches", in which sound was imagined as a timed unfolding of form, and the "dune sketches", which came almost ready-made, as it were, from the wind.

IH-G: Does "ready-made" imply that the dune sketches are not so original? Too literal in fact?

RH: Their literalness renders them less original as discrete ideas, yet in a funny way that makes them even more interesting. What EM effects with the dunes returns to the inspiration of nature. In a way he is like that double-s Mendelssohn who dug up a musical past by dusting off *The Art of Fugue*. Eric and Felix alike dished up cogent reminders to look again, not merely toward views of historical novelty, but to more or less specific morphological processes of artistic creation.

IH-G: Yet the impact was small. There weren't a lot of fugues written after Felix exhumed Johann Sebastian, and I can't think of a single "dune" that has followed from EM's sketches.

RH: Perhaps it's still too soon to know; the computer is changing everything.

IH-G: As you say, EM was hardly the first to imbue nature with his own imagination. The history of Egyptian architecture is practically catalogued in the Valley of the Kings' wind-swept erosions. And there are those Spanish caves and

landscapes that got Gaudi going. Flying buttresses can be seen even today along the coastal cliffs of Normandy.

RH: Those examples are also more or less literal — especially when compared with Wright's more metaphoric use of Nature — but the dune sketches carry that literalness in architecture further than anyone ever had before. EM wasn't so much "influenced" by nature: he saw integrated complexes, probably whole cities, right there in the dunes.

IH-G: I agree that the sketches are interesting, but they also lack the clarity, power and thoughtfulness of some of the earlier drawings. To me they seem just tossed off — amusing bagatelles roughed out during a picnic.

RH: That is perhaps exactly what they were. How else to explain that nothing like them ever occurred again? Music sketches were made over and over, but drawings from the world-out-there never were. This is so astonishing that I can only wonder whether EM knew what he was doing.

IH-G: What do you mean by this? That buildings should mimic natural forms and structures? Wouldn't that be Art Nouveau all over again? Hadn't EM already tried this in the Einstein Tower?

RH: EM visited those dunes before the agonies of the tower's construction phase had manifested themselves. If the dunes had not been seen until 1924, would they have been recorded at all? Whatever the rhetorical answer, they just made it before Bauhausian less-ism began cleaving the world into naked blocks of rectangles — before EM himself announced "never again" in reference to the Einstein Tower and took a hard right into modernism. So thank heaven for that 1920 picnic.

But the sketches are special in ways other than their historical happenstance. To make a sketch is to interpret an observation, and in so doing we interpret history, or at least our place in it. The dune sketches are important as evidence of someone's having pulled a whole architectural concept directly from a changing natural event. I'm not sure it had ever happened before. Momentarily, EM became that event — in his own time.

IH-G: I'm trying to think of an Art Nouveau precedent... There are plenty in part, in detail.

RH: Art Nouveau was a very particular view of nature — all languid and feminine. It could be beautiful but remained limited and, above all, stylized. EM apparently hated it, just as he hated musical impressionism. When I asked him his opinion of Debussy, he said he couldn't stand it. So much for *Jeux* and the *Etudes*!

IH-G: It could be that he didn't even know the late work of Debussy. I don't want to get sidetracked, but I don't think it's right to call it all feminine. There is all that structure of Gaudi's and firmly rooted form by people like Victor Horta and Hector Guimard.

RH: True enough. And EM was a passionate admirer of van de Velde and Mackintosh. The excrescences of the movement gave it a smelly name in some quarters, but underneath there were powerful forces at work.

IH-G: It didn't cook long enough...

RH: Or the stove got too hot too fast. In any event the message of the dunes goes deeper, because the very literalness of that way of seeing teaches us the essential abstraction of the world.

IH-G: Obviously we can't pick up a dune and live in it.

RH: No, but we can insinuate within ourselves — as artists and observers — the formative dynamics of natural events. That's what EM was really doing. We become the wind, the water, and in that state we can make things.

IH-G: That's really playing God, isn't it? And isn't such an attitude even more likely to slip into sentimentality? Or something worse?

RH: Well, we are God, aren't we? Either as container or containee. Have it any way you like. Art is ultimately a religious manifestation of the senses. That's all there is. As for sentimentality, isn't that just a form of under developed perception?

IH-G: Kitsch can be pretty highly developed, and in the 19th century it was embraced by most of the intelligentsia. Today I suppose we resent its shallowness as being either a reflection of a secret self or of a self we once were — if that's not too Freudian.

RH: It's getting close. Every artist has a personal threshold for sticky stuff.

IH-G: There is something baroque in kitsch, as there is something baroque in the dunes, in nature generally. If the observation of nature is a way of creating harmony and all things good, it is hard to see that this won't lead all over again to romantic excess.

RH: No truth without temperance! It will always depend on who's doing the observing, and inherent in *that* dependency lie all the problems leading finally to formulations, fixations, architecture by the numbers, and notions that design of the built environment should be participatory. If the foolishness of this last idea isn't immediately obvious, just look at the results.

IH-G: Even that depends on the observers — observers as judges of results. It's the democratic way.

RH: Where the arts are concerned we need a few intractable laws — as we have for public health and safety. We've confused democracy with egalitarianism, and it's wrecking our landscapes and our cities. We have to plan, but if we're going to make art of it, it's not going to be done by just anyone and still less by just everyone.

IH-G: Abraham Akkerman in an essay on urbanism identifies a central phenomenon of cities planned by "experts" as being countered by their decay.²⁷ Of

what use is it then to plan buildings or cities based on observations of natural forms? Why not just let them happen as they have throughout history anyway?

RH: We have to make history. We can't avoid that, but trying to make yesterday into today is buffoonery. We need to find ways of making our environment thrilling and wonderful without submitting to follies of trickery. I'm saying that architects — artists generally — ought to become meditating naturalists, and that doing so is part of our particular responsibility to time and existence.

IH-G: Akkerman makes a pitch for the value of urban deconstruction as being serendipitous, implying that the allowance of "decay" or chaos is the way forward.

RH: I agree absolutely. It's what one finds in the observation of natural events, and it's an aspect of what EM found in those dunes. But I don't think Akkerman is implying that we shouldn't plan, at least I hope not. We have to keep trying by clarifying ourselves in relation to the world. Unless one is bogus and derivative, there is nothing much to do in a time like ours but to fumble with chance. The results are the memory-based styles we see in some of Frank Gehry's and Coop Himmelblau's latest work. It's exciting work, but it's brain stuff, calculated "accident". In addition to the influences of painting and steel sculpture, we could say the designers were observing while riding a bulldozer. After 9/11 that look of devastation is what did in Gehry's East River Guggenheim — a terrible, too prescient loss to architecture

IH-G: If it's only "brain stuff", why is it such a loss?

RH: I can't answer. There's a lot of emotion in piles of rubbish. We relate to it. It's what we are. Mozart wouldn't have understood that, nor Mies, nor Wright. But rubbish is not so different from sand, and it isn't far fetched to think of bulldozers as forces of nature. The history of modern art — and the modern world generally — has been to unzip the entire human sphere. The dangers are great, but when all this subsides or blows up, there will still be the wind and the waves, the perceptions of the senses and the perceptions of what the senses do not know. That is where the dunes drop us off.

NOTES

- ¹ This was the phrase with which the Dean of Architecture, University of Michigan, introduced Eric Mendelsohn to his students in 1941. EM quotes him in his 1948 Los Angeles lecture "My Own Contribution," in Oskar Beyer (Ed.), *Erich Mendelsohn. Letters of an Architect* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1967), 162.
- ² EM's sketches are kept today in the Erich Mendelsohn Archiv of the Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (in the following: KB). Prior to their transfer to Berlin in 1975 they were published by Bruno Zevi, *Erich Mendelsohn. Opera Completa* (Milano: ETAS Kompass, 1970) and in an English edition: *Erich Mendelsohn. The Complete Works* (Basel/Boston/Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1999).
- ³ Adolf Behne, *Der moderne Zweckbau* (München: Masken, 1926), 38. Behne, however, was not the first to call EM an expressionist. Oskar Beyer, who was to publish EM's letters after his death, had already allocated EM's work to the mainstream of expressionist art and architecture in his review of EM's exhibition at the gallery of Paul Cassirer in Berlin; Oskar Beyer, "Eine neue Monumentalarchitektur," *Feuer* Vol. 1, No. 2 (February 1920): 111-115.
- ⁴ Adolf Behne, "Bruno Taut," *Pan* Vol. IV, No. 23 (March 1913): 538ff. Bruno Taut (1880-1938), like Mendelsohn, had studied under Theodor Fischer (1862-1938) in Munich.
- ⁵ See: Ian Boyd Whyte (Ed.), *The Crystal Chain Letters: Architectural Fantasies by Bruno Taut and his Circle* (Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 1985); Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist*

Architecture (New York: Praeger, 1973), and Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture in Drawings* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1985).

⁶ On EM's early sketches and their presentation at the Cassirer Gallery in Berlin in 1919 see also: Hans Rudolf Morgenthauer, *The Early Sketches of German Architect Erich Mendelsohn (1887-1953). No Compromise With Reality* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

⁷ Zevi, *Works* (fn. 2), 21, fig. 13.

⁸ Letter by EM to Louise Maas, Munich, March 14, 1914, in Beyer, *Letters* (fn. 1), 29-32. Louise Maas became EM's wife in 1915.

⁹ Difficulties with formwork in part of the tower during construction necessitated that brick be substituted for concrete in that part. For further information see Kathleen James, *Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism* (Cambridge/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 11-47.

¹⁰ Erich Mendelsohn, "Die internationale Übereinstimmung des neuen Baugedankens oder Dynamik und Funktion", Lecture at *Architectura et Amicitia*, Amsterdam 1923, published in Erich Mendelsohn, *Das Gesamt-schaffen des Architekten. Skizzen, Entwürfe, Bauten* (Berlin: Rudolf Mosse, 1930) 24; translation into English by the authors, original German wording: „Die Maschine ... wird zum konstruktiven Element eines neuen lebendigen Organismus“.

¹¹ In 1921 EM lost his left eye to a carcinoma.

²² Recollections of Julius Posener, "Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der neuen Architektur: Erich Mendelsohn," *Arch + Sondernummer zum 75. Geburtstag von Julius Posener* Vol. 8, no. 48 (Dezember 1979): 10.

²³ Of the several drawings EM did of the "Large Factory with Crane", KB no. 277 is certainly the most elaborated; see also Zevi, *Works* (fn. 2) 20.

²⁴ KB no. 274 and no. 266; see also Zevi, *Works* (fn. 2) 19.

²⁵ See Zevi, *Works* (fn. 2) 46.

²⁶ There are a total of eleven dune sketches: KB no. 256, nos. 642- 647, no. 658, no. 803, no. 846, no. 857, see also Zevi, *Works* (fn. 2) 51.

²⁷ Abraham Akkerman, "Philosophical Urbanism and Deconstruction in City-Form: An Environmental Ethos for the Twenty-First Century," *The Structurist* No. 43/44 (2003/2004): 48-53.