



ARQUITECTURA Y PAISAJE

transferencias históricas
retos contemporáneos

VOLUMEN II

A B A D A E D I T O R E S

**ARQUITECTURA
Y PAISAJE**
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retos contemporáneos

VOLUMEN II

LECTURAS

Serie **H.^a del Arte y de la Arquitectura**

DIRECTORES Juan Miguel HERNÁNDEZ LEÓN y Juan CALATRAVA

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Fuga de la vanguardia: arquitectura y paisaje en el Kinderheim en Mümliswil de Hannes Meyer (1938-39)

Escape from Avant-Garde: Architecture and Landscape in Hannes Meyer's Kinderheim in Mümliswil (1938-39)

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Abstract

Construido entre 1938 y 1939, el Kinderheim en Mümliswil representa el regreso de Hannes Meyer a Suiza después de su tiempo en la Bauhaus y después de seis años en la Unión Soviética. Es una obra muy diferente a las de su período funcionalista, porque coincide con un retorno más maduro y consciente a las ideas regionalistas. La atención al paisaje es ahora un punto decisivo del proceso de diseño y el edificio es impensable excepto en relación con el entorno y el sitio, elegido con sumo cuidado. A través de las elecciones de Meyer, entre los radicales más extremos de los precedentes años, pero también susceptibles de autocrítica, la crisis del funcionalismo radical en vísperas del estallido de la guerra emerge de forma clara y adelantada a su tiempo.

Built between 1938 and 1939, the Kinderheim in Mümliswil represents Hannes Meyer's return to Switzerland after his time at the Bauhaus and after six years in the Soviet Union. It is a very different work from those of his functionalist period, because it coincides with a more mature and conscious return to regionalist ideas. Attention to the landscape was now a decisive point of the design process and the building is unthinkable if not considered in relation to the environment and the site, chosen with extreme care. Through the choices made by Meyer, among the most extreme radicals in the preceding years but also capable of self-criticism, the crisis of radical functionalism on the eve of war becomes obvious and ahead of its time.

Keywords

Hannes Meyer, Kinderheim en Mümliswil, arquitectura suiza, regionalismo
Hannes Meyer, Kinderheim in Mümliswil, Swiss architecture, regionalism

Introduction

Without any doubt, Hannes Meyer represents one of the key figures of twentieth-century architecture. Known above all for his contribution to the Bauhaus, actually he was the first exponent of the avant-gardes of the 1920s to deny the previous radical, functionalist ideas and to embrace regionalist poetics, much more conciliating in the relationship with users, that means with the people themselves. This change of perspective was due to his stay in the Soviet Union between 1930 and 1936, after his Bauhaus years. In these period Meyer realized that the abstract forms of architectural rationalism were not understood by the proletarian masses. The Russian workers, faced with the presentation of a project in 1932, had asked how many columns would be provided, betraying Meyer's every expectation¹. In the time spent in the Soviet Union, the relationship between architecture and landscape also changed in his vision: in the previous years Meyer had considered the context in which a work was inserted to be irrelevant, as demonstrated, more than any other project, by that of the competition for the League of the Nations in Geneva in 1927. Thanks to a series of experiences, including in particular the plan for the city of Birobidžan in the Soviet Far East, he instead matured the conviction that the landscape was a decisive element for urban and architectural design.

However, the real test of this new approach was the Kinderheim in Mümliswil, a work built between 1938 and 1939 in Switzerland (fig. 1). In fact, in 1936 Meyer returned to Switzerland, his native country, embittered by the finding that the great hopes that had accompanied his move to Moscow were completely disregarded. Meyer will stay in Switzerland for three years, before moving to Mexico in 1939, where he will live for ten years². The period spent in Switzerland was quite difficult, both because of the world economic crisis, which affected also the most prosperous nations, and for the “stigma” of being communist that accompanied Meyer on his return from Stalinist Russia. In this period, characterized by economic difficulties for him, Meyer obtained only one architectural assignment, namely the one for the Kinderheim³. This project very clearly showed the change in Meyer's design methodology. In just seven years, his working method had been completely transformed and, in advance of international architectural culture, the experience of the “heroic” years of the avant-garde was not only updated but rather put into crisis.

The Kinderheim: a regionalist turn

In October 1937 the foundation of Bernhard Jäggi (or Jaeggi) and his wife Pauline allocated the sum of 25,000 Swiss marks for the construction of a community home shelter for children. In addition to four employees and two possible guests, the structure had to host between twenty and twenty-four children aged between six and sixteen, of both sexes, from

¹ Hannes Meyer, “Flucht ins Leben”, *Deutsche Zentralzeitung*, 15/1/35; part of the text is published in Lena Meyer Bergner, ed., *Hannes Meyer. Bauen und Gesellschaft. Schriften, Briefe, Projekte* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1980), 185-187.

² Raquel Franklin, “Als Bauhäusler in Mexico”, in *Hannes Meyer und das Bauhaus. Im Streit der Deutungen*, ed. Thomas Flierl and Philipp Oswald (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2018), 421-436.

³ Andrea Maglio, *Hannes Meyer: un razionalista in esilio. Architettura, urbanistica e politica 1930-1954* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2002), 63-70.

any Swiss cooperative structure, for a period ranging from one to three months. Jäggi was one of the most important exponents of the Swiss cooperative movement, as well as a politician with skills and links with the banking world. In 1937 he was the chairman of the board of directors of VSK (Verband Schweizerischer Konsumvereine), the Swiss Union of Consumer Cooperatives, which formally received the commission for the construction of the Kinderheim in the town of Mümliswil, Jäggi's birthplace. The relationship between Meyer and Jäggi dated back to 1919, when the Swiss architect had been commissioned to build the Siedlung Freidorf in Basel, already on behalf of the VSK. In the past eighteen years the international political situation had totally changed and even the cooperative movement could not have remained immobile over time. After being at the Bauhaus, Meyer spent six years in the Soviet Union, and in Switzerland his "aura" as a Stalinist communist was viewed with enormous suspicion. Anti-capitalist and anti-communist at the same time, Jäggi was one of the few to trust Meyer despite his radical change of political position⁴.



Figure 1: Hannes Meyer, *Kinderheim in Mümliswil*, view from the south-east (Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main).

At the beginning of October 1937 Meyer and Jäggi carried out an inspection in Mümliswil, on the site where the building was to be built. Only one month later, on the 10th of November, Meyer was able to show the first version of the project, in seven tables including

⁴ Klaus Jürgen Winkler, *Der Architekt Hannes Meyer. Anschauungen und Werke* (Berlin [east]: Verlag für Bauwesen, 1989), 34.

site plan, plans of the building, elevations and axonometric view⁵. Meyer’s working method had always involved a close dialogue with the clients and moreover, especially during the Soviet experience, he began to question the users of his architectures. In this case, in addition to a necessary discussion with VSK exponents, he promoted a meeting with the pupils of a class of the Freidorf school and an interview with the director of the Basel orphanage, Hugo Bein, as well as a meeting to discuss some objections raised to the observations of Bein by the two future directors, Fräulein Rudin and Fräulein Geissbühler. Thanks to these meetings, Meyer drew up a list in 37 points, including all the changes to be made to the project⁶.

In December 1937 the project was now completed, and only further slight modifications will be done. The two-level building consists of two wings forming a 90° angle, facing the east and south sides and linked by a circular hall at their intersection. The circular dining room contains a large round table and above it is covered by a terrace. In the southern wing on the ground floor are inserted a living room, the director’s office and two bathrooms, and upstairs the staff rooms. The east-facing wing has the form of a bridge, with five children’s rooms in the upper floor and the kitchen and the technical rooms downstairs (fig. 2). On the back of the building, on the mountain side, thanks to the presence of a playground and a row of trees on the northern side, a courtyard was created, which also represents the access to the Kinderheim.

The fulcrum of the composition, clearly visible in its function also outside, is the circular room, whose symbolic value is undoubted, also because Meyer and Jäggi followed the ideas of the well-known Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and in particular his concept of the “spheres of life”. This theory identifies different circles on the basis of which to organize the social and urban structure: first the sphere relating to the house and the family, then the subsequent one of the neighborhood and finally the wider one relating to the community (*Haus und Familie, Nachbarschaft, Gemeinde*). Even the table of the circular room, circular itself for the same reasons, has to keep the same distance between all the diners, who can be served from the inside of the circle⁷ (fig. 3). Clearly this image of equality reflects the principles of the cooperative world and their derivation from the ideas not only of Pestalozzi but also of the writer Jeremias Gotthelf⁸.

⁵ Letter of Hannes Meyer to Bernhard Jäggi, 10/11/37 [Deutsches Architekturmuseum Frankfurt, later on DAM, 82/1-485].

⁶ Letter of Hannes Meyer to Bernhard Jäggi, 24/11/37 [DAM, 82/1-491 (1-3)].

⁷ Hannes Meyer, “Das Kinderheim in Mümliswil”, *Das Werk* no. 7 (1953): 213; then in English translation in Claude Schnaidt, *Hannes Meyer. Bauten, Projekte und Schriften - Buildings, Projects and Writings* (Teufen: Niggli, 1965), 76; and then in Meyer Bergner, *Hannes Meyer. Bauen und...*, 202-203.

⁸ Hannes Meyer, *Genossenschaftliches Kinderheim in Mümliswil. Baubeschreibung*, February 1938 [DAM, 82/1-495 (1-5)]. Jeremias Gotthelf is the pseudonym chosen by the Swiss writer Albert Bitzius (Murten, Friborg, 1797 - Lützelflüh, Bern, 1854), son of a Protestant pastor and author of numerous works of educational intent, which reflect the influence of the pedagogical orientations of Rousseau and Pestalozzi.

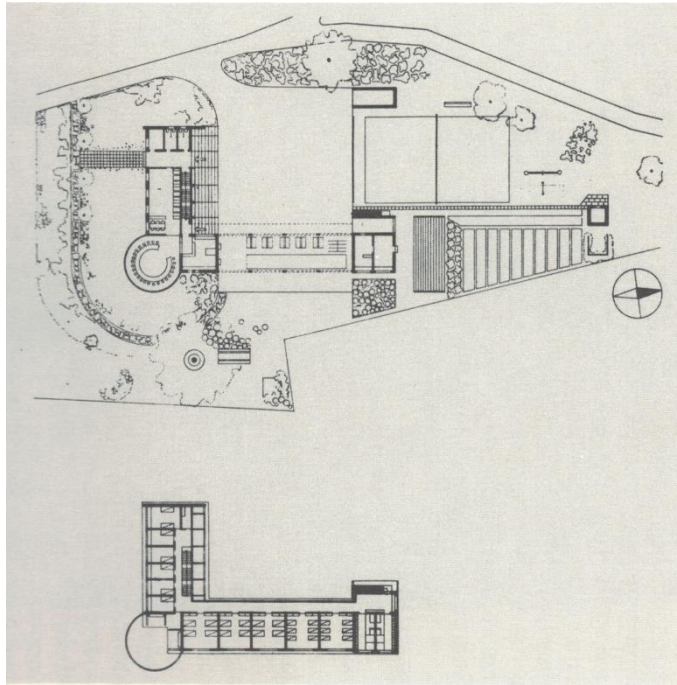


Figure 2: Hannes Meyer, *Kinderheim in Mümliswil, plans* (Winkler, *Der Architekt...*, 184).



Figure 3: Hannes Meyer, *Kinderheim in Mümliswil, the circular dining room* (catalogue *Hannes Meyer. Architekt Urbanist Lehrer. 1889-1954*, 308).

Another aspect of interest is the search for proportional relationships between the different parts of the building. In fact, the diameter of the circular hall measures 8.2 meters, the length of the body with the teachers' rooms 16.4 m and that of the block with the children's rooms 32.8 m. Meyer's aim consisted explicitly in the articulation of classically proportioned volumes⁹. It is no coincidence that as a young man Meyer had trained on the works of Palladio, a constant reference even in the Soviet period and in the last years he spent in Switzerland after his return from Mexico¹⁰. In the case of the Kinderheim the system of classical proportions is combined with the insertion in the natural context in order to obtain the maximum harmony between architecture and environment. The problem of architectural proportions does not simply concern the configuration of the building elevation, but involves the broader theme of deep cultural references. In a letter of 1952 Meyer clarified how in the project for Freidorf he had already considered whether to adopt “classic” proportions or those typical of the Swiss Jura region, in the belief that this choice betrayed a specific cultural position¹¹. If Meyer choose a classic system of proportions, this does not mean that he rejected the idea of a harmonious insertion into the context.

Meyer's regionalist approach is evident right from the formal choices and the materials used. In order for the building to adapt to the Alpine context, with particular reference to the typical tradition of the Swiss Jura, the use of wood was foreseen as a cladding material on the facade for the upper floor and in many interiors, in addition to the presence of wooden pillars supporting the “bridge”, as well as in correspondence with the attic on the northern side and above the circular terrace. Furthermore, the building did not follow the imperative principle of the rationalism of the previous decade, which provided for a flat roof, and has single-pitched roofs, inclined towards the internal courtyard (fig. 4).

A new methodological approach: the landscape between territorial identity and political meaning

In addition to the choices relating to construction materials, another important novelty in Meyer's design methodology is the relationship with the landscape and with the territorial context. The Kinderheim is located on a hill overlooking the valley and the village of Mümliswil. As was normally the case in the Jura region, particular attention is paid to inserting the building into the nature, in an attempt not to upset the existing balance, so that the trees were fully included in the design. As emerges from the different drafts of the project report, Meyer carefully considers the site, evaluating it positively for the protection from the north winds thanks to the mountain and for the view and exposure to the south, east and west¹². It is therefore included in the project the fruit tree grove located on the

⁹ Hannes Meyer, *Genossenschaftliches Kinderheim in Mümliswil. Baubeschreibung*, unpublished, 24/12/37, 11 [DAM, 82/1-493 (1-11)].

¹⁰ Hannes Meyer, “Wie ich arbeite”, *Architektura SSSR*, no. 6 (1933); then published in Italian language by Francesco Dal Co, *Hannes Meyer. Architettura o rivoluzione. Scritti 1921-1942* (Padua: Marsilio, 1969), 126; the German text is in Meyer Bergner, *Hannes Meyer. Bauen und...*, 100-104.

¹¹ Letter of Hannes Meyer to Heinrich Starck, 14/3/1952 [DAM, 82/1-799 (45-46)].

¹² Hannes Meyer, *Baubeschreibung*, 9(?) / 12/37 [DAM, 82/1-492], then in *Hannes Meyer. Architekt Urbanist Lehrer. 1889-1954*, catalogue (Zurich-Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1989), 294-295.

northern side of the lot, which is flanked by the vegetable garden. To calculate the relation between building and nature the survey of the site, including the existing plants, was very useful¹³. This survey, which the construction manager Josef Moesch was in charge of, was therefore one of the first operations to be carried out.

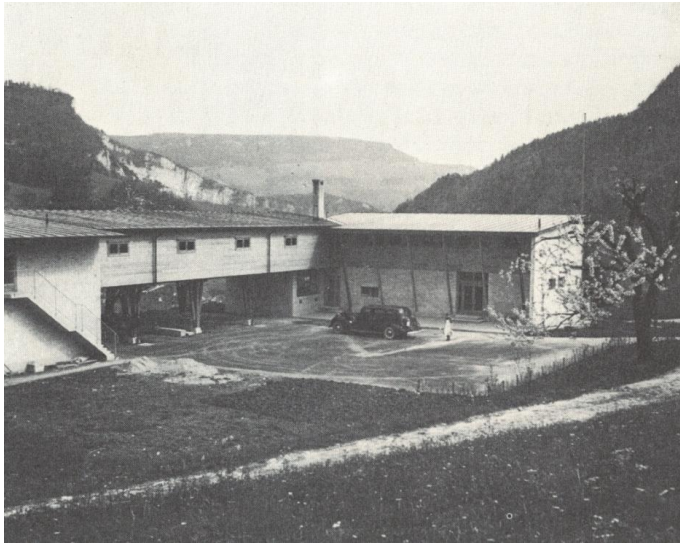


Figure 4: Hannes Meyer, *Kinderheim in Mümliswil, the courtyard and the rear facades* (Winkler, *Der Architekt...*, 184).

Particular attention was paid to determining the profile of the building, in order to calibrate its perception from the village and from the access road; therefore, the building is never seen from the front, but always offers different angles to those coming from the village (fig. 5). Hannes Meyer himself expressed this specific design intention through an analogy with the concept of “torque” in construction science: “As the visitor ascends to the top, he experiences the torque of the building through an ever-changing sequence of visual fields”¹⁴. Furthermore, the different rooms of the Kinderheim were arranged not only according to orientation, but also in relation to the view on the valley. Meyer produced a schematic plan of the Kinderheim by inserting sketches with views from different points of the building on the surrounding landscape (fig. 6). It therefore appears clear that the bridge body is motivated by the need to leave that part of the ground floor free and to allow a new view of the landscape to those coming from the access road. Similarly, the circular dining room has been located on the highest point with respect to the slope of the hill, so that the view extends to 360° and that the panorama is visible from every seat of the table.

¹³ Meyer, *Genossenschaftliches Kinderheim in Mümliswil. Baubeschreibung*, 24/12/37...

¹⁴ “Im Hinansteigen erlebt der Beschauer das, Drehmoment‘ des Bauwerkes durch eine abwechslungsreiche Folge von Blickfeldern”: Meyer, “Das Kinderheim in...”, 213.

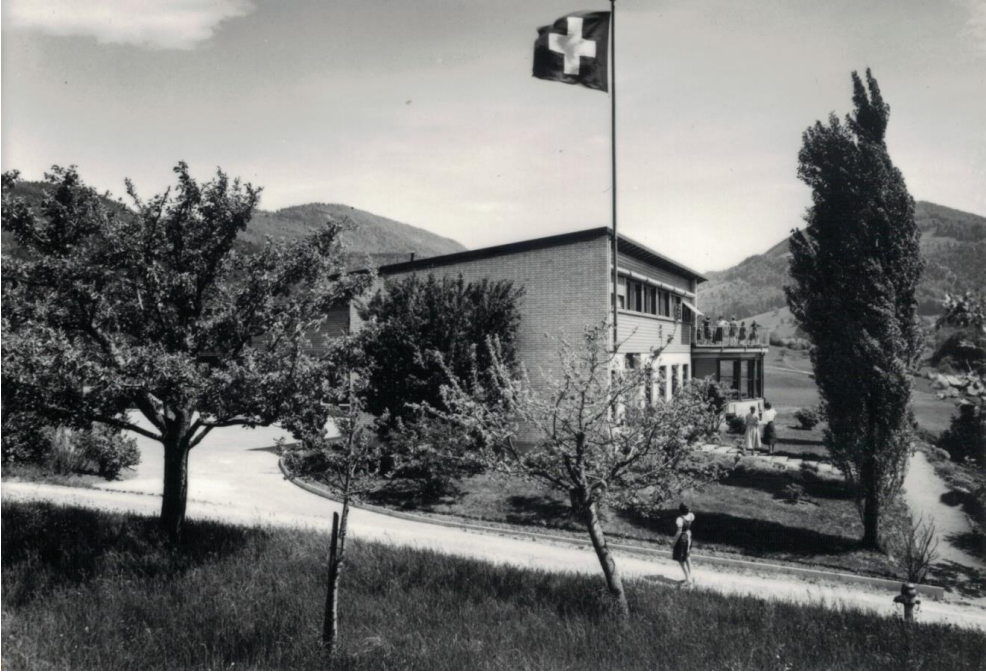


Figure 5: Hannes Meyer, *Kinderheim in Mümliswil*, view from the access road (Archiv gta-ETH, Zurich).

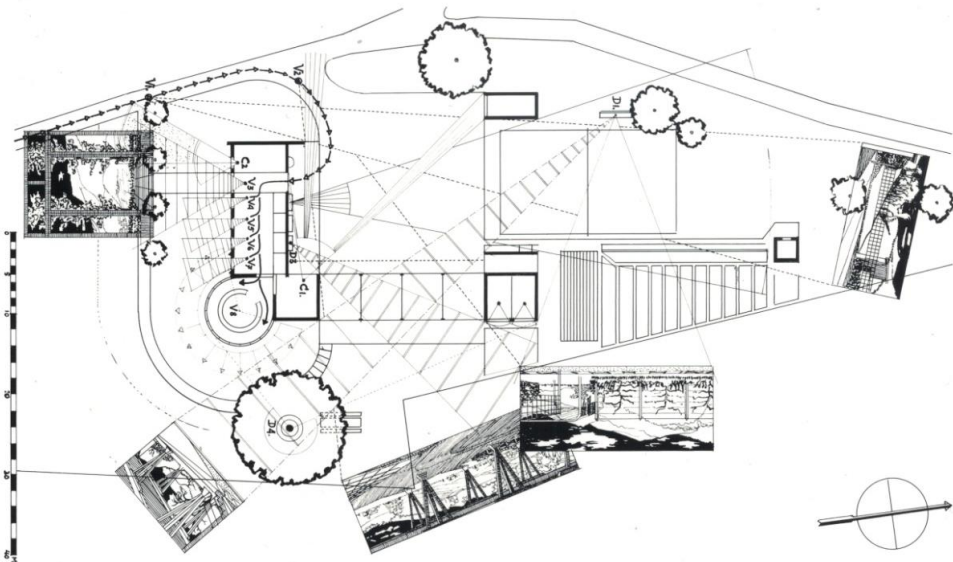


Figure 6: Hannes Meyer, *Kinderheim in Mümliswil*, schematic plan with sketches of the different views on the landscape (Archiv gta-ETH, Zurich).

The design of open spaces was conceived to calibrate the relationship between architecture and nature. The ground in front of the southern elevation was slightly leveled and poplars and alpine flower plants were planted, while the cherry tree on the southeast was integrated into the overall design and used as a shading element thanks to the presence of a circular bench.

The use of local materials and traditional construction techniques was combined with that of reinforced concrete and was part of the new regionalist perspective, of which the relationship with the landscape was also a decisive element. Meyer considered Switzerland a particularly suitable country for developing a regionalist architectural culture thanks to its history, to its federal political structure and to the coexistence of different languages¹⁵. Just in 1939, when Kinderheim was finished, the Schweizerische Landesausstellung (Swiss National Exhibition) was held in Zurich, which according to Meyer contributed to the spread of the regionalist culture in the country¹⁶. Moreover, he would have liked to participate, however he was excluded. The exhibition, decided in 1933 and originally planned for 1936, was strongly inspired by the movement of the Geistige Landesverteidigung (Spiritual National Defence), which intended to promote Swiss culture as opposed to Fascism and National Socialism¹⁷. The Nazi threat pushed the authorities to finance this vast program in order to show – obviously not only through architecture – the cultural, social and economic capacity of the Swiss people. Alpine architecture became in some way the emblem of an identity tradition and took on a political value. In this sense, the position of Hannes Meyer, undoubtedly anti-fascist but “guilty” of being explicitly communist, was particularly delicate. It is not to be excluded that Meyer, in addition to having matured a radical change in his own design methodology and in his own conception of architecture, shared the idea that to recall the Swiss tradition also had to take on a political connotation, which was also important for enhancing the role of the commissioning association of the Kinderheim.

The point under discussion, however, was precisely the identification of what properly Swiss identity and culture were. In 1940 Meyer wrote that the country was rather a mosaic of countless different identities, which also affected the field of architecture. At the same time, as Switzerland was a technologically advanced country, modern construction techniques had spread, which had to be in balance with local traditions. Using traditional techniques and materials also meant offering an important possibility to artisans and workers – especially during the crisis in the construction sector of the years 1938-39 – in order to recognize a social role to architecture¹⁸. Consistent with these reflections, the Kinderheim on the one hand featured standardized elements, new products and modern

¹⁵ For a reflection by the architect on the Swiss context, see Hannes Meyer, “El regionalismo en la edificación de la vivienda Suiza”, *Arquitectura*, no. 7 (1941): 28-37; then published as “Regionale Wohnhausbauten in der Schweiz”, *Archithèse*, no. 6 (1989): 39-40; Hannes Meyer, “Svizzera”, *Edilizia Moderna*, no. 45 (1950): 103-112, then published in German translation as “Die Schweizer Volksarchitektur im Krieg und Nachkrieg 1939-1950”, in Meyer Bergner, *Hannes Meyer. Bauen und...*, 377-381.

¹⁶ Meyer, “Svizzera”.

¹⁷ *Die Schweiz im Spiegel der Landesausstellung 1939*, 2 voll. (Zurich: Atlantis Verlag, 1940).

¹⁸ Meyer, “Svizzera”.

installations and on the other hand it was made with materials and techniques typical of the Jura region. The building then took on “the appearance of a typical Jura farm” and workers from Mümliswil were employed for the construction¹⁹ (fig. 7).



Figure 7: Hannes Meyer, *Kinderheim in Mümliswil, view of the southern facade* (Archiv gta-ETH, Zurich).

Conclusion

The beginning of Meyer’s career was also characterized by a sensitivity towards regionalist themes: during the period he had been building the Freidorf district in Basel, the architect had been deeply influenced by the principles of the Heimatschutz movement, linked to the use of local materials and based on recognising the importance of the landscape. The landscape had been therefore already a topic for reflection, which was confronted with the industrial development of Switzerland and the mutation of its constituent elements²⁰. Later, that phase will then be completely renounced, starting in 1926, when Meyer joined the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the group linked to the *ABC* magazine. For example, in the 1926

¹⁹ Hannes Meyer, “Das Kinderheim in Mümliswil”, 1952 [DAM 82/1-503], then published in a shorter version in *Das Werk* no. 7 (1953): 213-216; and then in *Hannes Meyer. Architekt Urbanist...*, 314-315.

²⁰ See Martin Kieren, *Hannes Meyer. Dokumente zur Frühzeit* (Heiden: A. Niggli, 1990); Martin Kieren, “Bescheidenheit ist eine Zier. Hannes Meyer und der Heimatschutz”, *Archithese* XIX, no. 6 (1989): 37-38.

article entitled *Die neue Welt* (The New World), Meyer had reflected on the “beauty” of electricity pylons in the Swiss Alpine landscape²¹. The subsequent turning point on regionalist ideas was therefore more than anything else a ‘return’ – more aware and mature – to themes already rooted in his design approach, while the period of the functionalist internationalism lasted for him just over four years. Paradoxically enough, Meyer is better known for his production of those four years than for the ideas he sustained for the rest of his career – as also Meyer’s critical fortune after his death will demonstrate²².

Matured in the years spent in Russia, the regionalist turning point for Meyer was this time definitive and will be confirmed by the work carried out in Mexico between 1939 and 1949. In Mexico, regionalism would become an integral part of his design practice: the conference program prepared for the Universidad Obrera de Mexico (Workers University of Mexico) also included the theme *Tradición y folklor arquitectonicos - El regionalismo* (Architectural Tradition and Folklore - Regionalism)²³. However, in the conferences and notes of the courses held in Mexico, the Kinderheim did not take on the same weight as his Soviet experience, which instead took place within a social, political and economic laboratory with a much greater historical significance. Looking back on the evolution of Meyer’s architectural thought, the Kinderheim certainly represents a happy attempt to combine local identity and modernity, but it cannot represent a generalisable model: also, during the Mexican stay, while he was mainly working as an urban planner, the Swiss building did not represent a useful experience if not on a purely methodological level.

Because in his life Meyer “migrated” several times from one country to another, he always measured his work with the political, social and technological conditions of different contexts. The Kinderheim clearly represents the maturation of his ideas, related with the Swiss context of those years. Yet, it remains a work capable of showing his search for a delicate balance between modernity and tradition, in which the Alpine landscape plays a decisive role. The building is no longer “neither ugly nor beautiful”²⁴, as Meyer said in 1927 of his project for Geneva, but more than any other of his works manages to make ethics and aesthetics coincide.

²¹ Hannes Meyer, “Die neue Welt”, *Das Werk* no. 7 (1926); then published in a revisited version in *Kritysk Revy* (1927), and then in *Sovremennaja Arkhitektura* (1931); an English translation is in Schnaidt, *Hannes Meyer. Bauten...*, 91-95.

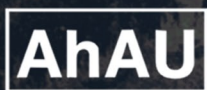
²² For the Italian debate, see Andrea Maglio “Die italienische ‘Architettura Razionale’”, in *Hannes Meyer und das Bauhaus...*, 537-548.

²³ Hannes Meyer, “Curso de 6 conferencias sobre la arquitectura”, 5/5/1943 [DAM, 82/1-143].

²⁴ Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer, “Ein völkerbundsgebäude für genf – 1927”, *Bauhaus*, no. 4 (1927): 6.

El paisaje es hoy un tema crucial en el debate arquitectónico, urbanístico, artístico, territorial, político, ecológico y antropológico. En la pregunta sobre qué es un paisaje se entrecruzan muchas de las grandes cuestiones que tienen que ver con la construcción y con la percepción de nuestro entorno, en un momento determinado por una crisis global que convierte a la mirada sobre nuestro hábitat en un asunto marcado por la urgencia. La centralidad del paisaje en la cultura contemporánea es un fenómeno tan reconocido que ha dado lugar a elaboraciones teóricas específicas tendentes a dar cuenta del mismo. Está claro que hoy las cuestiones relacionadas con el paisaje, en su sentido más amplio, constituyen uno de los núcleos conceptuales en los que en mayor medida se entrecruzan naturaleza, cultura, historia y contemporaneidad.

La complejidad y variedad de temas que el paisaje convoca solo puede abordarse desde una mirada transversal y desde la complementariedad de diferentes saberes y disciplinas. Tal fue el objetivo que se propuso el Congreso Internacional *Arquitectura y paisaje: transferencias históricas, retos contemporáneos*, celebrado en Granada del 26 al 28 de enero de 2022, cuyas aportaciones se recogen en el presente volumen.



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