Figure 1: Erich Mendelsohn, Weizmann House, 1934–1936, Rehovot, Israel, exterior view.

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The Weizmann House: Staging the Nation-Building Process of Israel

Abstract In 1934, Chaim Weizmann, the President of the Zionist Organization and later first President of Israel, commissioned Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953) to build his residence on a hilltop in Rehovot, a small-town southeast of Tel Aviv. The Weizmann House served not only as a private home, but also as a stage for formal and social gatherings and has now found its place in the nation's history. Erich Mendelsohn, a German-Jewish architect, strove for an architectural language adapted to the specific environment, combining local building traditions with the paradigms of modern Western architecture. Mendelsohn's design for the Weizmann House illustrates most clearly his proposition of an East-West synthesis.

Keywords Architecture, 20th century, Nation building, Cultural transfer, Israel

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The Weizmann House stands isolated on a hilltop in Rehovot, a small town southeast of Tel Aviv that, in the 1930s, was surrounded by orange plantations and offered an unobstructed view of the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the Judean Mountains to the east. A sketch by Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953), its German-Jewish architect, reconstructs the path of a visitor to the house from four perspectives—each accompanied by descriptions of the visitor's point of view: "street ascending to the house," "in the curve before the house entrance," "in front of the house," and "the loop"—pointing to the careful calculation of perspective. The building is presented to the visitor, who is ascending along a meandering path, from all sides—as if it were a sculpture on a pedestal. As a result of the constantly changing viewpoint of the observer, a dynamic tension is created during their approach.

The private residence of Chaim Weizmann was built between 1934 and 1936. Weizmann, head of the World Zionist Organization, commissioned Mendelsohn not just with the planning of the building but also with the design of the surrounding landscape. This gave Mendelsohn the freedom to steer the approaching view. The property was acquired in April 1934 at the urging of Vera Weizmann, the wife of Chaim Weizmann, who was the driving force behind the project. She was well aware of the value of the property due to its exceptional location: "I was buying the view" (Weizmann, V. 1967, qtd. in Heinze-Mühleib 1986, 91).

Erich Mendelsohn had already achieved international recognition for his work when the political events in Germany forced him to leave Berlin in 1933.[1] He subsequently lived and practiced in London and Jerusalem until he finally emigrated to the United States in 1941. Previously established relationships to influential Jewish emigrants, such as Chaim Weizmann and Salman Schocken, secured Mendelsohn his first commissions in Palestine. The client's social standing determined the representative character of the Weizmann House, which therefore must be seen not just as a private home, but as the residence of a Zionist leader. The representative function only increased after Weizmann became president of the newly founded state of Israel in 1949 and the house came to serve as the presidential residence. The originally intended—and later projected—significance and especially the highly symbolic role the building was destined to assume in the nation-building process (‣**Nation**) are illustrative of the building's unique biography. A closer look at the building's architectural characteristics will further clarify how Mendelsohn's design concept of an "East-West

1 A frequent point of reference for Mendelsohn's architecture is one of his first commissions, the Einstein Tower in Potsdam, Germany (1919). A series of department stores built in the 1920s in Stuttgart, Chemnitz, and Nuremberg for the German-Jewish businessman Salman Schocken incorporate design principles for which Mendelsohn would gain recognition: Dynamic tensions achieved by streamlined facades respond to the urban surroundings, and a functional arrangement of the interior layout ensures efficient utilization of space.

Figure 2: Erich Mendelsohn, Weizmann House, 1934–1936, Rehovot, Israel, inner courtyard with swimming pool.

synthesis" is realized in reference to the location and how this specific form of cultural transfer (‣**Cultural Transfer**, ‣**East / West**) paved the way for the Weizmann House to become part of Israel's national history.

At the time, the only buildings in the immediate vicinity of the residence were the Agricultural College and the Daniel Sieff Research Institute, which was founded in 1934 by Chaim Weizmann and came to be known as the *Weizmann Institute* after 1949. Both buildings were also erected according to designs by Mendelsohn (Zevi 1999, 271–272). Beyond the representational function of the residence, landscape and climate were thus the only two external factors of relevance for the design. The walls of the U-shaped building are composed of whitewashed interlocked blocks of stone which are arranged symmetrically around the open courtyard. A utility wing attached to the northeast corner of the house breaks with the otherwise strict symmetry of the compound but is cleverly hidden from the eyes of the approaching visitor. The axis of symmetry runs from east to west and opens the inner courtyard towards the west, allowing the coastal winds to circulate within. The courtyard is flanked by two single-story wings that, together with the covered terrace to the west, obstruct the view of the inner courtyard, thus giving the building a closed and introverted character. The inner courtyard with pool is the cooling center of the house and all rooms have large windows opening to it. At the same time, the external walls prevent direct exposure to the sun. Small oculi windows rhythmically structure the facade and create a dialogue between openness and closure, providing ventilation, natural lighting, and views without exposing the interior to climatic conditions or revealing it to the surroundings (see Fig. 2).

The spiral staircase at the center of the building visibly extends beyond the height of the building, introducing a vertical axis. The verticality of the semi-cylindrical stairwell is further reinforced by vertical slats that shade the interior from the sun's glare and at the same time turn the central stairwell into an iconic design element; during the day they create a decorative light pattern inside and at night the experience is reversed, as a crown of emanating light rays adorns the hilltop building. This element was new to Mendelsohn's work and appears here for the first time on the exterior of a private residential house, pointing to its intended representational character. The semi-circular motif of the stairwell is taken up again on the opposite east side of the building in a half-round bay window on the second floor. The generously proportioned rooms on the ground floor, the large entrance and dining areas and, flanking the inner courtyard, a library and living room contrast with the small private rooms on the upper floor. In planning the building, Mendelsohn placed great emphasis on minimizing the size of the private rooms, yet without neglecting the comfort and individuality of the inhabitants. This design principle is already evident in the planning of his own house *Am Rupenhorn* in Berlin (Mendelsohn 1931). The symbolic function of the Weizmann House as the political and social stage of the President of the Zionist Organization—and later President of Israel—is reflected in its overall design, particularly in the floor plan and the towering staircase.

The oculi, discussed earlier as an adaptation to climatic conditions, are particularly striking design elements. The circular shape of these windows may be seen as symbolically charged. The similarity to the portholes of large ships is obvious. Additional features reinforce this symbolism: The single-story wings flanking the inner courtyard appear like the hull of a ship and the staircase towering over the rest of the building like the ship's bridge. How is this symbolism to be interpreted? At the time, ship motifs were a common modernist design element, often referring to machine aesthetics and futuristic thinking. But in this case a different motivation is more likely. A ship implies movement. On the one hand, this points to Mendelsohn's design principle of dynamism and, on the other, to the movement of the Jewish people. The majority of Jewish immigrants came by ship to Palestine or *Eretz Israel*, as the area was also called by the Jewish inhabitants—the land of their salvation. The ship can be seen as a metaphor precisely for that intermediate state of limbo between departure and arrival (Heinze-Greenberg 1999, 251).

Mendelsohn who, like most German Zionists, was a follower of the strand of cultural Zionism advocated by Martin Buber in opposition to political Zionism, did not believe in the viability of a Jewish state, but was concerned about the identity crisis of modern Judaism. Martin Buber explains in his early writings that the "great spiritual traditions" of the Orient would balance out Western excesses of materiality and that the Jews serve as mediators for this mission (Nitzan-Shiftan 1996, 164). This statement serves as a basis for the East-West synthesis subsequently

professed by Mendelsohn. In his travels to Palestine, Mendelsohn was fascinated with the architecture of the organically formed Arab villages (Heinze-Greenberg and Stephan 2004, 87) and analyzed cultural traditions in depth, an approach rejected by many Zionist architects (notably those associated with the "Tel Aviv Chug"). Mendelsohn's designs in Palestine in the 1930s combine the adaptation to climatic conditions and local traditions with contemporary advances in Western building technologies. The Weizmann House embodies this synthesis. The building's calm and introverted character owing to the closed wall surfaces and its static, cubic character are a result of this leitmotif. During his time in Palestine, Erich Mendelsohn aspired to create a new architectural language adapted to the specific environment and combining local building traditions with the paradigms of modern Western architecture. In a pamphlet titled *Palestine and the World of Tomorrow*, Mendelsohn writes: "Palestine of today is symbolizing the union between the most modern civilization and the most antique culture. It is the place where intellect and vision, matter and spirit meet. In the arrangement commanded by this union, both Arabs and Jews, both members of the Semitic family, should be equally interested" (Whittick 1956, 132).

Mendelsohn was not alone in this architectural approach. The German architect Bruno Taut, in his book *Lessons on Architecture*, which he wrote while in exile in Istanbul in 1937, similarly claimed that a building could at the same time be "modern" and "traditional" and that common fashions can be overcome only if local preconditions are taken into account (Taut 1937, 61, 184). Mendelsohn always saw himself first and foremost as an architect and put his profession above everything else (Heinze-Greenberg and Stephan 2004, 124). Because he emigrated to the United States in 1941 and never returned to Palestine, Mendelsohn ended up playing a minor role in the nation-building process of Israel where opposing ideals soon gained prevalence. In the 1950s and 1960s, in particular, architecture was used to reinforce the progressive image of the Zionist state. Redeeming the soil and building the land were means to engineer a new society for the people. Modernism in Israel during the 1920s and 1930s must be seen as a pluralistic movement. Labels later used to describe it, such as *Bauhaus* or *International Style*, fail to account for the diversity of architectural approaches to building in the new surroundings. The absence of a shared Jewish visual heritage in the Diaspora and the lack of an immediate past or local Jewish culture gave rise to a variety of architectural approaches against a self-chosen backdrop. Just as there are multiple strands of Zionism, it is important to recognize the multiple forms of modernity. Any discussion of modern architecture in this time and space must also grapple with history and ideology.

As the residence of the President of the Zionist Organization and later first President of Israel, the Weizmann House served not just as a private home but also as a stage for formal and social gatherings. Unlike many other buildings built by Mendelsohn during his years in Palestine, the

Weizmann House has found its place in the nation's history and is preserved as a public memorial and museum open to visitors.[2] Children's tours dealing with "numerous topics, such as the symbols of the State of Israel, the institution of the Presidency, and the importance of education and science" (Weizmann House 2017) are offered at the site, thus continuing the building's narrative as a center of Israeli national identity.

Mendelsohn's design for the Weizmann House illustrates most clearly his demand for a dialogue with and adaptation to the *genius loci* and surroundings. His proposition of an East-West synthesis is an attempt to bridge the gap between biblical Palestine and the modern Western world. Different architectural languages are juxtaposed. A tension between introversion and openness is created: a sculptural volume defined by closed walls punctured by purposefully placed windows is contrasted with the interior view of an airy, open courtyard dominated by the monumental stairwell. A deliberate steering of the gaze is involved in creating such a work of art. Mendelsohn himself said about House Weizmann: "It is a house absolutely of our time, [...] and yet adapted as a residence in a subtropical climate. This, I feel, is a type of home which will again, after two thousand years, become popular throughout the Orient, as it was when Judea was a Roman Province" (interview in the Evening Standard, July 31, 1937, Heinze-Mühleib 1986, 112).

Figure

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2 By contrast, the private residence of Salman Schocken in Jerusalem, which was built at the same time as the Weizmann House in 1934–1936, has been converted beyond recognition.

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