Souvenirs Of a New Age
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Architecture

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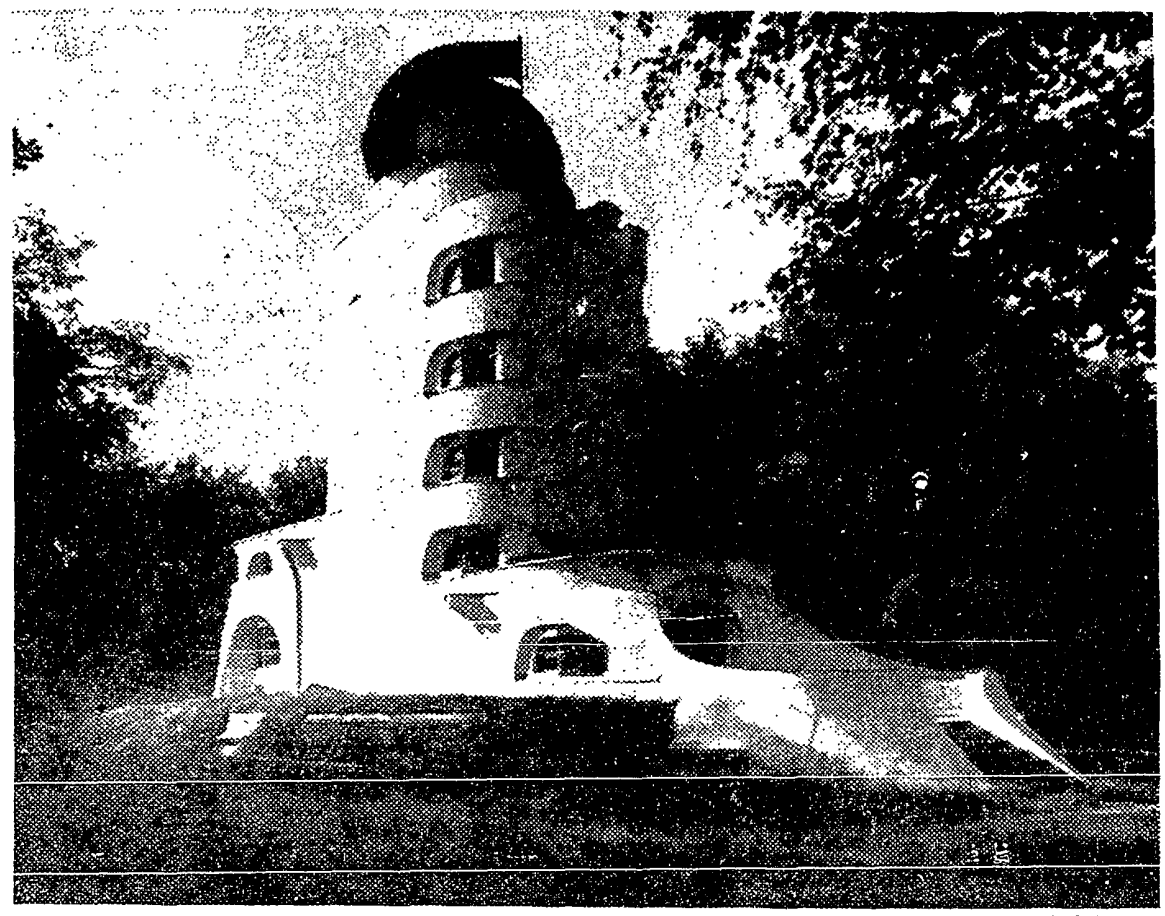

Vision into reality: Eric Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower, 1919 drawing, at top; and executed building, at right.
Genuine visions of the future

Cervin Robinson

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ERIC MENDELSOHN, the man who probably built more "modern architecture" more conspicuously in Europe in the 1920's than any of his fellow pioneers of the modern movement, settled on his style in 1914. "Guided by the conviction that the 20th century ushered in a new age replete with new laws," writes Susan King, "Mendelsohn elected to ignore the prejudices of traditional esthetics by venting his energies on architectural designs for a highly visonary future." These visionary designs, begun as thumbnail sketches of startling fluidity in the trenches of World War I, have become part of the legend and iconography of modern architecture.

Eighty of these drawings, in pencil, ink and crayon, done between 1914 and 1919, can be seen at the Museum of Modern Art through December 28. The exhibition, "Architectural Drawings of Eric Mendelsohn," installed by Ludwig Glaeser, curator of the Department of Architecture and Design, has been culled from a larger show at the University Art Museum at Berkeley, prepared in cooperation with the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. The quotation is from Miss King's essay in the catalogue that accompanied the California show.

It is a shock to find that the famous drawings are tiny —many of the most dramatic measure only three to six inches—and yet they suggest huge buildings in a few broad, bold strokes. Seen now as calligraphic curiosities, they were then genuine visions of the future. In this remarkable graphic shorthand Mendelsohn offered miniatures of modern monuments: imaginary factories, railroad stations and grain elevators in steel and concrete. It was an architecture of new forms and materials, in flowing contours often packed with power, for a new age and a new art. "Look at my sketch," he has been quoted as saying, "there is everything in it."

The most curious of all these designs was actually built. The Einstein Tower, a solar observatory near Potsdam constructed in 1920-21, brought Mendelsohn immediate fame and numerous commissions. It is pure romantic expressionism, and he never built anything quite like its plastic, sculptural fantasy again. (I have always thought of it as a kind of Art Nouveau illustration for the old woman who lived in a shoe.) But no one who has seen it in pictures or actuality has ever forgotten it, and the building has continued to catch the imagination of architects and historians—used as a rebuke to "functionalists," championed by exponents of "organic architecture," and serving as timeless fuel for polemicists. It is still standing, and still fascinating, as evinced by the recent photograph on this page.

As a result of this instant monument, Mendelsohn built a great many structures, through which the style called "modern" became known to a great many people. More saw his department stores and office buildings in Berlin, Stuttgart and other German cities than were familiar with the scattered work of Mies or Le Corbusier, and the curved facades and ribbon windows that became his almost too facile signature were later run into the ground as "modernistic" clichés.

He was far less successful in the United States, when he came in 1941, after eight years as a refugee in Holland, England and Palestine, and where he died, in 1953. There is an interesting analysis to be made of what happened to the work of such able men as Mendelsohn and Neutra when they were transplanted from the historical moment and the European milieu that nurtured their contributions to the different conditions, requirements and atmosphere of American life and environment. It is not how much they built, or even how well they built that counts; it is the changed significance and relationship of their buildings to the mainstream of history and culture, and even of art. Somehow, they always seem out of context.

But these vital and delicate relationships are not the only factors involved in reputations, or even in immortality. Taste, as is well known, also changes. It has been fashionable to look down on Mendelsohn's obvious style and too easy and early success. According to Wolf Von Eckardt in his sympathetic 1960 Braziller monograph on Mendelsohn, the rational rather than the intuitive architect has been more admired. Today Mendelsohn fits almost uncannily into the preferences of the younger generation, and is probably due for stylish, or campish revival.

Unfortunately, the Modern Museum's exhibition is not the historical exposition and evaluation that would be both desirable and timely. Mendelsohn was a member of "The Ring," the Berlin architectural group of avowed activists that included such disparate talents as Gropius, Mies and Bruno and Max Taut. The 20th-century architectural reformation included other groups, and a wide range of abilities and philosophies within its shared, quasi-religious conviction of the moral and esthetic necessity for a new order. But the tendency, still, is for historians and critics to do rigid "editing" in terms of their own conditioning and preferences. (Mendelsohn is not even mentioned in Sigfried Giedion's classic reference with its equally classic lacunae, Space, Time and Architecture.)

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No institution has been more dogmatic, in this sense, than the Museum of Modern Art. It pursues its severe and absolute standards, measuring each exhibition candidate on an inflexible scale of "greatness" with the tunnel vision of true faith. Many a potentially valuable subject flunks when it is graded by this inexorable single standard and in this frustrating vacuum. However, with history, art and environment increasingly revealed as a many-faceted interlocking of values and relationships, the method becomes more sterile and useless and consistently less revealing of anything except the most dated concepts of art and life. It is, of course, awfully safe. That is a sad commentary on a once-revolutionary institution.

The reality gap at the museum, in fact, is not unlike the reality gap of Mendelsohn's generation. It is even a kind of hangover from it. The new world was to be created in an approved image, and anything else was simply not there. To bring that new world into being it was only necessary to embrace technology and set the mind resolutely free of the baggage of the past. As can be seen in such examples as Le Corbusier's Voisin plan for Paris, these men would have been ruthless with the bulldozer.

I do not write this with cynicism, or lack of appreciation for the achievements of great men, but with half a century of hindsight. The pieces of past and present are only now being understood in terms of the future, and put back together again.

To Mendelsohn and his fellow innovators architecture was simpler then; the artist believed that he was in total control of his art and his universe. What didn't fit was ignored. It seems almost touchingly arrogant. "What dominates the artist in the present is at the same time the medium through which he dominates the future," Mendelsohn wrote from the front in 1917. "And so the world compels him to shape the world."