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SLIDE 1

Erich Mendelsohn's Multiple Passages into Exile and the Utopian Project for the Académie Européenne Méditerranée

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For the German architect Erich Mendelsohn, the project for the Académie Européenne Méditerranée, envisioned together with Dutch architect, Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld and French painter Amedée Ozenfant, was an antidote to the intellectual, artistic, and social pressures that made his political and artistic exile from Germany necessary. The project progressed from an idea to a near reality during a flurry of activity in 1933 and 1934 yet it ultimately floundered because the funds were insufficient and, in Mendelsohn's view, Wijdeveld, who was the driving force behind the project, harbored unrealistic expectations. For Wijdeveld, the Academy seems to have been a corrective to the Bauhaus model, a more complete arts school than the German one; for Ozenfant, the Academy was a more ambitious version of the structure he had already tried to implement in the Academie Ozenfant, established in Paris in 1932. A utopian vision for all three, for Mendelsohn the Academy was more, it represented a retreat, a safe haven from political persecution and social ostracism that drove him into exile, an arts paradise, a cultural Garden of Eden, the ideal location for artists, where he could pursue his design ideas in an environment of safety and mutual artistic support.[1]

[1] Ita Heinze-Greenberg suggests as much in her essay on the project, 463.

Mendelsohn's attraction to the Academy project represented a common response to persecution – the escapist desire to create and then retreat to a perfect world, devoid of all the nastiness of the "real" world. This was not a project that Mendelsohn engaged in once he arrived in exile, it was the project Mendelsohn worked on during his passage into exile between March 1933 and spring 1934; he abandoned the Academy once he decided that his first semi-permanent destination would be the city of London.[2]

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When the three artists decided to collaborate, Mendelsohn was at the height of his career in Germany. He had enjoyed tremendous success after returning from the First World War to establish a practice in Berlin in 1918; he constructed more buildings than any other young German architect during the period. Beginning with the Einstein Tower in Potsdam (1921), SLIDE 4 Mendelsohn received national and international acclaim for his unique designs. SLIDE 5 Wijdeveld was best known as the editor of the important Dutch journal, *Wendingen*, where he worked from 1918 until 1931. At *Wendingen*, Wijdeveld brought important international architects to the attention of the Dutch, including Mendelsohn and Frank Lloyd Wright. SLIDES 6 & 7 Wijdeveld was also known for his radical utopian schemes, like the design for the Amsterdam Vondel Park and a new collaborative arts academy, which are related to the Academy in their idealistic aims.[3] Ozenfant had studied architecture but was best known as a painter and collaborator of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier. SLIDE 8 Together with Le Corbusier, he founded the influential modern arts journal *L'esprit nouveau*, that appeared between 1920 and 1925. Ozenfant's theoretical writings were far more detailed and thoughtful than those produced with Le Corbusier, however. His *Bilan des arts modernes en France* (Review of Modern Art in France) of 1928 is typical of his work; the Review was an in depth and comprehensive overview of contemporary literature, visual arts, music, architecture, religion, science, and philosophy.[4]

The Academy idea first developed in 1928 or '29 at the same time that the political climate in Germany began to truly deteriorate; although Wijdeveld and Mendelsohn did not take it

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[t] Mendelsohn and his family moved from London to Palestine in 1938, then on to the United States in 1942, where they remained.

[3] Mariette van Stralen, "De land huizen van H. th. Wijdeveld," *Forum 37/3-4*, January 1995, 5.

[4] Amedee Ozenfant, *Bilan des arts modernes en France* (Paris: Jean Budry, 1928).

up in earnest until '33.[5] From the start, the two men wished to create a new kind of arts academy that encompassed all the arts, fine and performing, into one school on a remote site in the Mediterranean. It was important to both men that the school be located in a place replete with natural beauty. After considering various options, they ultimately decided to locate it on the Mediterranean coast of France, on the Côte d'Azur because the landscape there is stunning, the light is strong, the colors magnificent. It is a magical, mystical place and Mendelsohn believed that such a place was critical to the success of the project. It is also important to note that theirs was not the only project to idealize the Mediterranean region-- Gabriel Audisio and Albert Camus shared an idealistic vision of the Mediterranean as the epicenter of Western culture while Hermann Sörgel's Atlantropa posited a modern utopia on its shores.[6]

Equally important, the Mediterranean was the birthplace of classicism in the arts, both Greek and Italian. Wijdeveld, Mendelsohn, and Ozenfant were all committed modernists but unlike many members of the avant-garde who believed that modernism needed to break with traditional practice, Wijdeveld, Mendelsohn and Ozenfant shared the belief in the continuity of artistic traditions. The notion of continuity was central to the Purist art that Ozenfant and Le Corbusier developed and championed in the 1920s. For all three men, situating the new Academy in the cradle of Western civilization was a key symbolic act as well as a meaningful gesture towards the reconciliation of old and new into contemporary expression. Indeed, the advertising book for the Academy proclaims, that it has a "splendid view of the Sea of the Ancients" while the more concise brochure asserts that they love the Mediterranean because it is the birthplace of classicism.[7] The Mediterranean shores were also ideal because "the history of this sea counts the principles of the European community among its most characteristic possessions: principles of faith, law, and form," which must have seemed the antithesis of contemporary National Socialist policies in Germany.[8] For Mendelsohn, the Mediterranean situation also had other, deeper associations. The Jewish homeland, Palestine, was in the Mediterranean region. Beginning in 1923, he had

[5] EM to LM, 14 August 1932; Ita Heinze-Greenberg, "An Artistic Utopia at the Abyss of Time: The Mediterranean Academy Project, 1931-34," *Architectural History*, Vol. 45 (2002), 441-482.
[6] Wolfgang Voigt, *Atlantropa – Weltenbauen am Mittelmeer* ; Albert Camus, *The New Mediterranean Culture*; and Gabriel Audisio, *Jeunesse de la Mediterannee*.
[7] *Academie Européene Méditerannée*, (Spring 1933), 21; and a shorter paper brochure dating to 1933 as well.
[8] Ibid.

commissions there. For his wife, Luise, who felt the sting of anti-Semitism more acutely, Palestine represented a potential refuge. Both Mendelsohns viewed the Mediterranean location as an extension of Palestine, in a way, appealing because it was close to the Promised Land.

"Real utopians or utopian realists," Mendelsohn writes his wife, "our destiny, because only our feet touch the ground."[9] Although he recognized the fantasy aspects of the scheme, for the better part of a year, Mendelsohn wholeheartedly believed that it will succeed and throws most of his energy into the project. According to their agreement, Wijdeveld was responsible for the structure of the Academy; Ozenfant for the artistic vision and artistic pedagogy. Mendelsohn's responsibility was to elucidate the "future of European culture."[10] During this period, he and Luise had no home; not only were they exiles from Germany but they were constantly en route searching for a place to settle.

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Passages

Exile is usually discussed as the physical banishment from home and country but there are many gradations of exile. In Germany, "inner exile" is generally used to describe the cultural and political disengagement of Germans who remained in the country during the National Socialist era but inner exile existed prior to 1933 for those Germans, like Jews, who were marginalized. Mendelsohn experienced inner exile long before he left Germany permanently. His status as a Jew marked him as an outsider from birth; his difficult personality abetted that status.

Mendelsohn was the victim of a double paradox as well. He was marked as an outsider by virtue of his experimental new designs, typical treatment of the avant-garde as Hilton Kramer points out, and as an outsider in German avant-garde circles from the start not only because of his status as a Jew but also because of the originality of his artistic voice. Although a member of a couple of the avant-garde associations in the 1920s Mendelsohn never held a leadership position nor was he very active in these groups.

[9] EM to LM, 7 February 1933.
[10] Ibid.

Mendelsohn began to worry seriously about the political situation in 1928, long before the Nazis had a substantial share in government. In an incredibly clairvoyant moment he foresaw the possibility of the Second World War as well as what eventually came to pass: the need for him and his family to leave Germany because of the National Socialist extremist anti-Semitism.[11]

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It was in early February 1933 that Mendelsohn turned his attention to the Academy in earnest. By this time, Luise was sure that the coming parliamentary elections will only result in a dictatorship. Just three days after Hitler's assumption of power, on February 2, 1933, Mendelsohn writes Luise that he is now considering the Academy project seriously, "more than ever in the danger zone of our life here [in Germany]."[12] Mendelsohn and Luise vacillated over what to do for several weeks between Hitler's assumption of the Chancellorship and the parliamentary elections. Mendelsohn not only considered Germany dangerous for Jews but also Holland, Spain, and Switzerland because of their proximity to Germany – again, showing tremendous insight. He believed that England and America were the safest destinations.[13]

On March 31, the Mendelsohns left Germany for good. The first stop on their passage into exile, was Wijdeveld's home in Amsterdam, where work now began in earnest on the dream project. When he arrived, and was asked what he was doing there, Mendelsohn supposedly held up a pencil and declared, "Relocating my practice!"

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By the end of April 1933, he came to believe that his future safety and happiness were inextricably tied to the Academy project. "The Academy is the backbone for my new existence" Mendelsohn asserts. [14] He fantasizes that he and Luise will build a small house on the Academy grounds where they will grow old together and live out their lives in pastoral bliss.[15] The Academy represents both a utopia and an asylum, free from anti-

[11] EM to LM, 16 December 1928.
[12] Erich Mendelsohn, letter to Luise Mendelsohn, February 3, 1933, NL Mendelsohn, KBB.
[13] EM to LM, 17 April 1933.
[14] EM to LM, 23 April 1933.
[15] EM to LM. 23 April 1933.

Semitism and other forms of hate where Mendelsohn can freely practice his art and where the two Mendelsohns can grow old in peace.

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By late spring 1933, Mendelsohn and Wijdeveld have successfully raised 45,000 marks towards the purchase of 3,000,000 square meters, or 300 hectares, of land for the school.[16] They have also stirred interest in dozens of potential patrons and donors across Europe, successfully soliciting contributions from some.

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Garden of Eden as Art Academy

The Academy was a utopian scheme from the start; it imagined a new ideal model of residential art school in a remote, natural setting, removed from the distractions of urbanity. "Utopia" was Thomas Moore's conflation of the Greek "ou" for "no" and "Eu" for "Good," which he then combined with "topos" for "place" to create double entendre. "Utopia" therefore simultaneously means "no place" and "good place." Moore's word suggests that Utopia by its nature implies an impossibility, a location that can by definition never exist, but that is also extraordinarily good. The double meaning is particularly ironic in the context of the Academy, which was an idea ultimately too good to be realized.

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The Academy was conceived as a new kind of art school that combined the fine and performing arts into one institution thereby becoming more comprehensive in scope than anything that had preceded it. At the same time, it was meant to be international in its focus; both the academic staff and the students were to be recruited from around the world. The school would combine instruction in architecture, painting, sculpture, ceramics, textiles, typography, music, dance, theatre, photography, and film on a campus that also offered retreats and work spaces to resident artists who were not necessarily teaching in the school.[17] Contrary to the Bauhaus, which was famous for its embrace of mechanization and its resistance to history, the Academy planned to combine history, "and the desire for self-expression of our time and direct them towards the formulation of the future" and

[16] EM to LM, 13 August 1932.
[17] E. Mendelsohn, A. Ozenfant, H. T. Wijdeveld, *Académie Européenne Méditerranée* (1933)

work "towards the new classical unity."[18] That is, the program would build on the past in order to advance the art of the present and future. Almost every course description has some reference to history or tradition in it. Wijdeveld mentions, "the study of the history of theatre, as the expression of a period;" Hindemith cites "the tradition" of music;" Gill "the history of lettering;" Bonifas "old and contemporary productions;" Chermayeff the "study of materials as used in the past and present;" Gargallo "the connection between sculpture and architecture of all ages;" Ozenfant "The art of yesterday and today;" and Mendelsohn explains that his course "unifies tradition and the desire for self-expression of our time."[19] The future teachers unanimously stress the marriage of old techniques and approaches with new ideas, methods, and materials as the way forward in all the arts.

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The decision to call the school an "academy" also reflected the intention to join old and new. "Academy" was the name for the traditional art school in Europe, steeped in several centuries of old fashioned teaching methods. Modernists had rebelled against the academy model, especially after the First World War, calling for reform to its instructional methods. The very first line of the very first page of the brochure states, "We call the school ACADEMY because after a century of experiments, the elements of a new style have already been revealed in their fundamental features. We have no intention, therefore, of propagating any other particular tendency or style."[20] The name therefore makes a link to history and tradition that these artists feel is possible after, and because of, the experiments of the 1920s. SLIDE 15 They make clear, however, that they do not intend to return to classicism or to reverse the gains made by modern artists. Instead, the Academy will instruct students in contemporary approaches to art that include abstraction, organic composition, rhythm, and color harmony, while also addressing the human figure, landscape, and realism. The subject descriptions are balanced between traditional approaches to art and new techniques, melding "contemporary theories and practices…arising out of the social and economic conditions of our time" to give students rich and varied instruction.[21]

SLIDE 16

The first brochure for the Academy states:

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid,1.
[20] E. Mendelsohn, A. Ozenfant, H. T. Wijdeveld, *Académie Européenne Méditerranée* (1933).
[21] Ibid, 11.

> State institutions for education are bound by dogmatic teaching methods. That is their power.
>
> They do not react immediately to the rhythm of the time…cannot look ahead. That is their weakness.
>
> The few strive through individual searches for the attainment of new ideas. That is the hope…its tragedy.[22]

The Academy faculty was chosen according to a pan-European idea; its composition was meant to mirror all the nations in Europe, a utopian vision for arts education that both acknowledged and integrated all viewpoints. "…We consider Europe as a unit, as a continent united by a common destiny. We look upon Europe not only as the mother of Western culture, and of world civilization, but also as the bearer of the new culture, which our work must serve. We see in this task the true vocation of the European spirit."[23] The faculty hailed from across Europe to integrate in a United Nations of art practice, to transcend national distinctions. The initial list of teachers had Mendelsohn for architecture and the composer Paul Hindemith for music both from Germany, Wijdeveld for theater from the Netherlands, Ozenfant for painting from France, SLIDE 17 Serge Chermayeff for interior design and Eric Gill for typography and graphic design from England, Pablo Gargallo for sculpture from Spain, and Paul Bonifas for ceramics from Switzerland. Mendelsohn was worried about the lack of an Italian representative although the intention was to expand the teaching staff once there were enough students to warrant doing so.[24]

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It is interesting to note that although Mendelsohn described the site for the Academy in numerous letters and in glowing, poetic terms, he never sketched a vision for the place. Wijdeveld did, however. His sketches often exhibit the utopian aspirations for the school, as in this view of the painting studio showing an enormous room with elegantly dressed

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[22] Brochure, 1933.
[23] Ibid,1.
[24] LM to EM, 29 April 1933.

students working on very large canvases. The projections of the academy, both visual and textual, that were developed by both men were contained in the official brochures and advertising material they produced.

The principle Academy brochure is a fascinating document. Although it advertises an art school, there are no images of art, the implements used to make art, or architecture, no diagrams illustrating pedagogy, no students or teachers, in its pages. There are also no images of the existing buildings on the site or what the school facility might look like even though Wijdeveld did execute some sketch studies for the future buildings late in 1933 and early in 1934.[25] These were not a part of any version of the Academy prospectus, however. SLIDE 19

The cover image features a map of the world with the Mediterranean Sea colored bright blue and located at the center of the otherwise black and white image, in an obvious gesture to suggest the importance of the new project. The name of the Academy and the text inside are in the modern sans serif script. The graphic style is straight forward and unoriginal, lacking the unusual and inventive graphics used at the Bauhaus, for instance. In short, the brochure does not look like something advertising an art academy (compare it with the first manifesto for the Bauhaus, with its famous lithograph by Lyonel Feininger or their exhibition catalogs using new graphics). SLIDE 20 Instead, the book features double-page spreads that typically have a photograph of the site on one side and an explanation of one aspect of the school's program on the other. But the photographs do not show the actual site for the Academy but rather each photograph presents a different view from the land on which the Academy will stand, looking out to the sea. SLIDE 21 There are no people, no buildings, no roads, no animals, and no trappings of civilization, except in one image that features a palm tree in the foreground and a peninsula with some tiny, barely visible white buildings in the distance.

The photographs are all black and white. SLIDE 22 They share a classical compositional technique; the split picture plane used by Piero della Francesca in the Renaissance and also adopted by Le Corbusier in the 1920s. In this technique, the picture plane is usually divided

[25] Reproduced in Heinze-Greenberg; from the Netherlands Architecture Institute, Wijdeveld Archive.

into one third and two thirds, with part of the image in the foreground and part in the background. SLIDE 23 The brochure images typically show some exotic Mediterranean vegetation in the foreground, close to the viewer, and a perspective vista of the landscape in the background, sometimes views of distant shores or islands are visible beyond. In this way, the images suggest the connection between near and far as well as present and past. The photographs stage the Academy as an art school located in nature, in paradise, an earthly Garden of Eden. By featuring images of the natural surroundings without showing any art or architectural context, the brochure suggests that the location is so breathtakingly beautiful that it will inspire great art. In fact, this is in keeping with the belief held by Ozenfant and Mendelsohn that contemporary art should not imitate, but be inspired by nature. The importance of nature to the Academy program was also stressed in the description, "The grounds are fertile, well-watered and of unparalleled beauty. They yield vegetables, fruit and flowers the whole year round. Work in the gardens attunes the student's body and mind to nature."[26] In other words, the brochure makes the site inordinately important to a place supposedly intended for art instruction and echoes the utopian aspects of the project.

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These references to health, the body, and nature reflect contemporary interests in the body beautiful evidenced in the popularity of the hiking groups, like the Wander Vogel, in Germany, of exercise clubs, nudist colonies, and healthy diets across the West. It is peculiar to emphasize the gardens with their flowers, fruit and vegetables in an art school setting but these contribute to the utopian atmosphere, reinforce the Garden of Eden notion underlying the scheme and the sense that Wijdeveld, Ozenfant, and Mendelsohn were going to establish a self-sustaining retreat, where it was possible to fully leave the world in order to create art.

Equally, the absence of any bodies or any trappings of civilization heightens the fantastic nature of the project and its status as an "unreal utopia." In spite of the words describing the Academy, the photographs make clear that it is still quite literally, "no place" and therefore cannot be pictured since it is impossible to photograph what does not exist.

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[26] E. Mendelsohn, A. Ozenfant, H. T. Wijdeveld, *Académie Européenne Méditerranée* (1933), 13.

SLIDE 25

The absolute importance of the site to Mendelsohn personally is apparent in his correspondence with Luise. In one extremely poetic moment Mendelsohn describes the site that he, Wijdeveld, and Ozenfant ultimately purchase for the Academy.

> "A wide view of foreshore, beach, sea in its entire width with the - circle of Isles d'Or lying in front, the sailors circling and we too traveling there, swimming from our own land, which we still need to buy. A sea that is transparent until the forests and flowers on its soil carry us outstretched as sources of pleasure -- the coming and going, the lifting and lowering of the blue surface. Blue like ... unspeakably unpaintable, violet, emerald all colors dissolved in the fundamental azure, of these tales the name gives the coast. Before the beach, white walls with Provencal giant vases from which, since Roman times, the red, pink, chrome yellow Pegonien the contrast, foreground, the perspective to reach, endlessness; to rest, dismissed in the Mediterranean.....In the end, the Academy will be located in the most beautiful location."[27]

This description is very painterly in its use of partial impressionistic phrases and vibrant color to convey Mendelsohn's passion for the area. Before this lovely description of the views, Mendelsohn evokes the exotic materiality of the place. "You know what magic I can make with trees – bay, cork, oaks, eucalyptus, cypresses and the evergreens, forever flowering shrubs. With all the balls from Margueritas, Bougainvilleas, lavender…lilies and bamboo…." And he describes the garden they can cultivate with potatoes and vegetables and grapes for wine. The vision is truly utopian, a world awash in color and perfume – the antithesis of the greyness of Berlin. At this magical place they can cultivate what they need and retreat from human society.

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His utter joy at the prospect of settling in Cavaliere, is apparent in frequent comments Mendelsohn makes to Luise. "The Mediterranean as the preliminary stage of a return to the land…[where] we both belong. Happy to know that. Happy about the fate that drove us,

[27] EM to LM, 30 May 1933.

that drives us."[28] He also calls the Mediterranean the "land of our heritage" referring to the Jewish return to the Holy Land on the banks of the Mediterranean.[29] It is clear that Mendelsohn sees the Academy, and its site, as special if not sacred locations with emotional meaning. Even more, the area offers solace, protection, the sense of coming home and belonging. He writes, "Mediterranean again refuge, new hope, hopefully foundation."[30]

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Conclusion

After devoting about a year to trying to raise funds for the Academy, Mendelsohn made an abrupt about face, suddenly accepting an offer to partner with Chermayeff in practice in London. It is unclear when Chermayeff made the offer or precisely why Mendelsohn accepted it. The correspondence charts some continuing frustrations Mendelsohn had with Wijdeveld although he also clearly liked the other man tremendously. Still, on several different occasions Mendelsohn complained about Wijdeveld's unrealistic expectations especially concerning the likely cost of the project and the legal implications and necessities and his romantic and utopian tendencies.[31] For his part, Wijdeveld seems to have been surprised by Mendelsohn's sudden decision to pull out of the project.[32] In a letter to Eric Gill, Wijdeveld wrote, "After several months of preparing, planning, visiting France, buying grounds, only one man had to do the job. Mendelsohn, who had fled from Berlin, took refuge in our home in Amsterdam, had no office, no work, could have started at once in Cavaliere. His character however made him long to live and work in the midst of the crowd and work out his projects alone. He suddenly went to London, then to Palestine…"[33] Apparently, Mendelsohn's withdrawal was the death knell for the project: without him, Wijdeveld was not able to realize the ambitious plans, although it is not clear whether that was because Mendelsohn's personality balanced Wijdeveld's, because Mendelsohn served as mediator between Wijdeveld and Ozenfant, or for another reason. Soon after

[28] EM to LM, 31 May 1933.
[29] EM to LM, 3 June 1933.
[30] EM to LM, 7 April 1933.
[31] EM to LM, 29 January 1933.
[32] Letter from H. Th. Wijdeveld to Eric Gill, Holland, December 1936, Wijdeveld Archive, The Institute, B4.16; cited in Heinze-Greenberg, 464.
[33] Letter from H. Th. Wijdeveld to Eric Gill, Holland, December 1936, Wijdeveld Archive, The Institute, B4.16; cited in Heinze-Greenberg, 464.

Mendelsohn withdrew, the others did as well leaving Wijdeveld on his own.

Real utopian or utopian realist? Wijdeveld was the real utopian who pursued such schemes throughout his life: Mendelsohn seems to have been a utopian realist. Although retreating from the world to an arts utopia seemed appealing in the immediate face of the National Socialist takeover in 1933, by 1934, Mendelsohn thought he saw better prospects for the future in England. He would not remain there long either moving on again to Palestine and finally the United States on his passages into exile.

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