DEALING WITH THE AMERICAN CITY ON TRANSNATIONAL GROUNDS: GERMAN-SPEAKING EUROPEAN ARCHITECTS AND URBAN PLANNERS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1930–1970

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In my dissertation project, I examine the life and work of a group of European-trained, German-speaking urban planners and architects who came to the United States during the late 1920s and 1930s. I analyze the ways in which the members of this group were involved in the development of the American man-made environment in the decades following their arrival. My research is part of a larger project analyzing postwar transatlantic connections in four different areas: social work, consumption, cities, and business. This larger project, Transatlantic Perspectives: Europe in the Eyes of European Immigrants to the United States, aims to trace transcultural perspectives on Europe, the emergence of hybrid European identities among European migrants – including long- and short-term immigrants as well as émigrés – in the United States, and the role these migrants played in transnational transfers between the 1930s and 1980s.

My project contributes to Transatlantic Perspectives by focusing on two core themes. One is a set of questions that deals with the development of individual careers in the context of migration and exile. How did urban planners and architects who made the journey across the Atlantic, integrate into the work environment in the United States? What material and theoretical impact did they have and how did the experience of emigration affect their perceptions of urban development and city life? Studies of emigration experiences have described how ideas and identities change through a complex process of adaptation that also affects the receiving cultural space. For architects and planners these aspects have until recently been neglected by researchers.

Transatlantic exchange processes are the second core topic of my study. The development of cities and the role of building had been discussed in international networks since the late nineteenth century. These networks connected the countries of Central European and also bridged the Atlantic. A striking example of the involvement of individual architects and planners in these processes is the British planning scholar Jacqueline Tyrwhitt. Tyrwhitt held academic position in
England and the U.S., and she was also instrumental in organizing the Delos Symposia, which brought together urbanists from more than twenty nations on a regular basis after World War II. How did the German-speaking émigrés and migrants fit into this picture? Did they facilitate transatlantic exchange in a distinctive way? Many of them closely followed architectural and urban developments in their former home countries and, at some point, returned to Europe, even if only temporarily.

The case studies I discuss in my dissertation include Victor Gruen, who became famous for his shopping mall designs and urban revitalization projects; Ludwig Hilberseimer, a former Bauhaus master who taught city planning in Chicago; and Konrad Wachsmann, who promoted the industrialization of building in a transatlantic context. A closer look at certain aspects of their careers will be combined with a broader perspective on the larger group in the context of the questions outlined above. Of course, this group also featured two of the most prominent names in modern architecture: Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. As internationally recognized experts, who had built a reputation during their time at the Bauhaus in Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin, Gropius and Mies quickly attained prestigious professional and academic positions in their host country. In the process, they gained considerable leverage on stylistic and educational developments in the architectural field. Others who had no connection to the prestigious Bauhaus or were at an earlier stage of their careers were faced with a more difficult transition period after their arrival in the United States. No matter where they stood professionally upon coming to America, all of the émigré planers and architect were forced to reconsider their work and their thoughts about the future of the city and building against the backdrop of their new environment.

This concentration on European immigrants engaging the American City provides the opportunity to address three interrelated themes that closely link aspects of perception and transfer. First, additional information can be provided about the transnational integration and production of knowledge by assessing modes, mechanisms, and long-term trends of exchange and cooperation on the micro level. Second, my work contributes to the contextualization of European and American urban history in its international framework. Third, I offer a new perspective on the actual and perceived similarities and differences between American and European cities, clarifying the background of an ongoing debate about distinct forms of urbanity.