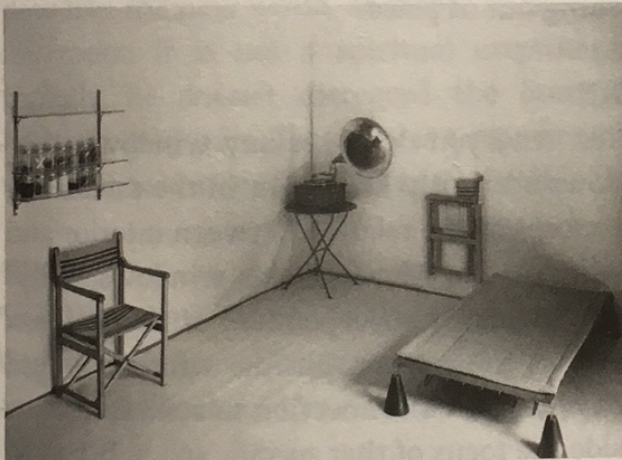


# Raquel Franklin

# A Reduction to the Very Minimum



Hannes Meyer: Co-op Interieur, 1926,  
© Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main

Wohnungsfrage:

What does this picture show?

Raquel Franklin:

The viewer sees the idea of a room. It is not a proper room, but a room-set within mobile panels. It is a very defined and specific arrangement which at the same time is completely open to the observer's imagination. And in that room there are some objects that have been carefully selected and arranged by Hannes Meyer. In the corner there is a simple, round folding table. On top of it is a gramophone which represents a new quality of life for the proletariat or whoever was supposed to inhabit this room. The folding chair attached to the wall is an important space-saving element for Meyer, but it is also a symbol of mass production. It is significant because of its capacity to transform the space. Its portability allows it to be used in different ways according to the necessities of the moment. And there is this camp bed-like abstraction

that fits into four cones, basic geometrical shapes.

In a second, lesser known version of the photo, on the left-hand side of the image, there is a wall-mounted unit with three glass shelves; the two lower shelves hold jars that contain a range of everyday consumables, such as chalk. Again the use of the space has to do with the concept of transformation: if the chairs are going to be used to sit down on to eat or to work, it makes sense to have some cues for these activities. Everything is a reminder of something else.

WF

For what purpose did Hannes Meyer produce this picture?

RF

The image was published together with his article "Die Neue Welt" ("The New World") in *Das Werk* in 1926.<sup>1</sup> In this manifesto he describes what the new world means for him, what elements constitute it, and how one should live there. The essay was accompanied by other pictures that represented new technologies and concepts of modernity. What the *Co-op. Interieur* picture does for the article is to summarize these principles epitomizing the new world.

WF

Among the series of photographs the *Co-op. Interieur* is the only staged picture, apparently generated for the occasion. How did Meyer compose it?

RF

As I said, there are two different versions of the image. In one, the room is shown in landscape format. The other one is cropped into a square format, cutting off the left-hand area of the room that contains one of the chairs and the shelves. I think this has to do with a

specific emphasis Meyer wanted in each of the pictures. In one image you have an equilibrium of elements: the folded-out chair with the shelves on the left-hand side and the flat bed with the folded chair on the wall on the right-hand side provide some kind of balance between the elements. In the cropped image you have an asymmetrical composition that evokes a sense of motion.

WF

On the walls, provisionally covered with paper or tissue, some elements have been fixed. But since one usually cannot fix a chair or a cabinet to a paper wall, this gives the picture a strange atmosphere. He created a three-dimensional axis with a white floor and two white walls in order to turn the ensemble into something that bore no relation to existing spaces, to the stones and bricks that were already there: something out of place.

RF

Yes. And you don't see any windows. Windows are really important in the modernist concept of the relation between interior and exterior. But Meyer avoids windows. Why? One aspect is the openness of the "unseen" side of the picture. But the window would have created a connection to something outside the focus of that specific space. It had to appear as closed as it is, as neutral and white as it is, if one really wanted to concentrate on the main elements.

WF

In the article this image is part of a group of pictures titled *Standard*. That seems to be a crucial point: Hannes Meyer was looking for a proper standard and not just for the aesthetics of a standard, as some of his peers certainly did. And this table is indeed a standardized, mass-produced object that one

can buy in this form cheaply even today.

RF

Meyer indeed understood the “new world” as composed of standardized elements. On the one hand he envisaged it as a collective enterprise and on the other he understood standardization as the social representation of collectivity. That is the core of his vision.

WF

There is no linen on the bed; there is no record on the gramophone. All in all, there’s a sterile emptiness to this room.

RF

This has to do with the reduction of elements to the very minimum. Meyer was very clear in his idea of a *tabula rasa* where history, tradition, all the heavy burden people carry with them is forgotten and one enters the new life, the new world, as empty as the Co-op. room. It is not a spiritual emptiness, though; he doesn’t disregard the human being in this space. The room is a representation of space rather than the space itself.

WF

In “Die Neue Welt” Meyer argues that “*Gemütlichkeit* und Repräsentation” are not what housing should be concerned with.

RF

It is not important for people to live in the most wonderful house or to show off in the best car on the market. That doesn’t make an individual. In “The New World” Meyer advocates for the complete segregation of such aspects from the architectural piece. However, after his Soviet experience—he went to Moscow in 1930, after he had lost his position at Bauhaus—his entire vision changed. In 1943, already in Mexico, he wrote an article, where he argued that hanging up propa-

ganda posters in the work space would create a different atmosphere that could enhance the quality of working life. So he did refer to these aspects of interacting with the emptiness, but not in “The New World.” Any kind of interference would have disturbed the strong message he wanted to convey. Co-op. *Interieur* was not supposed to be a space to live in, but was designed as a space to illustrate certain principles.

WF

On the other hand, the gramophone suggests that the room is also a place to relax and listen to music.

RF

Of course, but it is also indicative of the way Meyer perceived mechanized society as connected to mass culture.

WF

Yet perhaps the gramophone goes beyond this aspect, because surely, if one just wants a symbol of mechanization or mass media, there are other options?

RF

I agree that a typewriter could have done just as well. But I believe that the gramophone is part of the idea of making use of one’s senses: there is the notion of seeing, because the viewer is looking at the picture; the products in the jars on the shelves will each have their own smell; then there’s the texture of the room; and finally the sound element. It’s always about one’s senses.

WF

In “Die Neue Welt” he does indeed refer a lot to sound, acoustics, music, and a new dimension of perception. But he is also referring explicitly to the gramophone as a reference to internationalist communist propaganda,

where the gramophone and the radio have been important media to spread the message acoustically. Meyer writes: "Radio, Marconigramm und Telephoto erlösen uns aus völkischer Abgeschiedenheit zur Weltgemeinschaft."<sup>2</sup> He is talking about a release from a nationalist perspective via telecommunications technology, which of course is one of the basic tenets of communism, being that it is an international movement.

RF

There is another core aspect of Meyer's thinking at the time. He said that we are all learning Esperanto, and geometry is the Esperanto of architecture in that sense. No traditional ties to national expressions, no ties to history. As you can see in the elements that compose the image, there is no trace of local references or anything like that. He was very clear about this universality of language. That is the other really important break with the past.

WF

Why was the picture called *Co-op. Interieur*? Why wasn't it titled "proletarian" or "communist interior"?

RF

Everything was still related to his previous experience of the Swiss co-operatives: his design of the Freidorf estate in Basel and then of the Swiss pavilion for the International Exhibition of Co-operatives in 1924. Initially he identified with the co-operative idea, and named all his projects "Co-op": the Co-op cabinet, the Co-op theater, and the Co-op room—well, the room was later. However, *Co-op. Interieur* was his last participation in the co-operative movement of that time. By 1927, he had already left Freidorf and was heading to the Bauhaus. He wrote to the artist Willi Baumeister that he was tending more and more toward the left. His

political views had changed dramatically by that time. Co-op was fine within a capitalist society, a fair attempt at achieving a more balanced social order, but it was no longer enough for him.

WF

With the products, spaces, or set-ups he designed for Co-op and Freidorf, he was inventing aesthetics, methods, constructions, and designs that helped to promote the idea, the products, and the life of Co-op. But here, in *Co-op. Interieur*, it seems, he is reinventing, reformulating the way of living as such. And at this juncture he is leaving the framework of Co-op to stage something that is a lot more radical.

RF

Yes, I think it has to do with his relationship to the Swiss avant-garde architectural magazine *ABC: Beiträge zum Bauen* edited by Dutch architect Mart Stam and Russian avant-garde artist El Lissitzky. Meyer was clearly making a break: either to remain a traditional architect who will provide some benefits to the people but remain in Freidorf, or to embrace revolution. For him, it was both political and aesthetic. By 1926 it was clear to him that there was no other possibility than to embrace the avant-garde, and not just in the artistic sense, but all the way to whatever he could sustain as an ideologue. This picture, *Co-op. Interieur*, and "The New World" are turning points. Meyer became deeply involved in Marxism from then on.

WF

Can you imagine how *Co-op. Interieur* worked at the time, how people perceived it?

RF

I think the image had a dramatic and provocative effect, just as the article itself. However,

it was 1926, so Meyer was a little bit late. Le Corbusier for example had already made his famous statement that a house is a machine for living in—which Meyer repeats in his article.

WF

In the article the picture is subtitled “Die Wohnung,” the apartment. How far does it represent Meyer’s concept of providing housing for the masses, for workers, or for the new human being?

RF

Meyer himself reflected on his experiences in housing. In 1938, when he came to Mexico for the first time, he gave a lecture titled “Experiences in Urbanism.”<sup>3</sup> And he referred to the kind of work he had developed in his early career, the Essen housing estate Margarethenhöhe he was involved with. He referred to that part of his life as building for the elite—Margarethenhöhe was a donation by Margarethe Krupp—and he referred to the exploitation of the proletariat and pointed out the differences between the social housing projects and those designed for the elite of the Krupp company, the latter residing in the fancy traditional houses he built. And then he jumped to his Soviet experience to recall how wonderful it was to live the dream of building the new society and how important that had been to his professional and personal development. In between speaking about this he also spoke about Freidorf and Co-op and reflected on the possibilities the co-operative movement could offer the people in a capitalist society. He saw it as an in-between option. What is interesting is that in 1943, by the end of his architectural career, he designed another estate for workers in Mexico City called Lomas de Berra. He referred to that specific estate as a co-operative and re-emphasized the values that

were important in Freidorf. He realized that in the Mexican reality of 1943 there was no other way than the compromise of the co-operative. He realized toward the end of his career that even if he could not change the world he could at least contribute in some specific way to the improvement of people’s living conditions.

WF

We have talked about how the viewer might interpret the details in this image and what role the elements might play. But maybe Meyer’s intentions were not as painstaking as we believe. Perhaps he just needed a kind of interior to illustrate this space, where the “new human being” would live. He attached some sheets of paper to the walls of his Basel office, took two of his newly designed chairs, a shelf unit from his bathroom, a bed that he was preparing for some client, a record player from his aunt, arranged them a little bit, and took a snap shot. Afterward he decided to crop the left-hand edge because it looked too messy. And under pressure to meet the deadline he sent it to the magazine. Maybe it was not as choreographed and conceptualized as the corpus of writing about it and also our discussion suggests.

RF

I am quite sure he had an intention, simply because he was not the kind of guy who would experience a sudden revelation. Everything for him was the outcome of a thorough process of research, of understanding elements—it was part of his personality. Even when thinking about his political stance, he never took impulsive decisions. If it was truly the product of an impulse, what triggered it? And why in 1926, with all the influences he had already demonstrated? I believe he carefully calculated the effects he wanted to convey.

The interview was conducted by Jesko Fezer and Christian Hiller at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 11/28/2014.

Transcript: Alexandra Nehmer

- 1 Hannes Meyer: "Die Neue Welt," *Das Werk*, 13, 7 (1926): 205 ff. Digital version: <http://cloud-cuckoo.net/openarchive/Autoren/Meyer/Meyer1926.htm>; abbreviated English version without images, "Hannes Mayer's 'The New World' (1926)," tr. from the German by D. Q. Stephenson, from Hannes Meyer, *Buildings, Projects, and Writings* (Teufez, SZ, 1965): <https://modernistarchitecture.wordpress.com/2010/10/20/hannes-meyer-s-the-new-world-1926> (both accessed 10/2/2015).
- 2 "Radio, marconigram, and phototelegraphy liberate us from our national seclusion and make us part of a world community." Tr. "Hannes Mayer's 'The New World.'"
- 3 Hannes Meyer: "Experiencias de Urbanismo," *Arquitectura y Decoración*, 12 (1938): 252–57.