PLANNING THE CAPITAL CITY OF A «COMMUNITY OF FORTUNE» IN THE SOVIET FAR-EAST: HANNES MEYER’S SCHEME FOR THE JEWISH AUTONOMOUS OBLAST OF BIROBIDZHAN (1933-1934)

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ABSTRACT

The creation of the first modern-era Jewish state, Birobidzhan, in early 1930s’ Soviet Union, can be considered as a curtain-raiser attempt to propose a socialist solution to the “Jewish Question” which, as a second thought, also had a part in the regime’s propagandistic maneuvers enacted to downsize the rising influence of Zionism in the country. Nevertheless, this experiment aroused a widespread enthusiasm and called for the participation of both Jews and non-Jews to this “small step in the realization of the Leninist policy on nationalities”. Among these stood Hannes Meyer (1889-1954), the Swiss-born Marxist architect and former director of Dessau’s Bauhaus (1928-1930), which – assisted by his “planning brigade” – offered its expertise to the Soviet Institute for Urban Planning (GIPROGOR) from 1930 to 1936 as chief-planner for Siberia and the Far East.

Within this context, Meyer’s brigade was entrusted with the preparation of a scheme for the transformation of the small town of Tikhonkaya situated along the Trans-Siberian Railway into the new Capital of Birobidzhan. This scheme, one of Meyer’s last projects in Soviet Union, represents a step in the planner’s line of research focused on the forms and principles of the “socialist city” – the “elastic city” theory – but, unlike his previous schemes, this work also had to face an additional challenge: expressing the new Jewish national identity of the city and its role as the Soviet Jewish people’s Capital city.
How did the planner achieve these goals and what place did modern planning models, the “rhetoric of rationality”, Jewish culture, vernacular architectural and urban forms, the local geographical features and landscape hold in the design and figuration process?

According to a widespread commonplace, the first modern-era Jewish State was created in 1948. Instead, 20 years earlier, a fascinating and almost grotesque episode in modern history took place in former Soviet Union: the Jewish Autonomous State of Birobidzhan (JAO) was established.

The subject has been treated by recent scholarship (Barnavi, 1992; Srebrnik, 2008, 2010; Weinberg, 1998), but Birobidzhan is now entering the public domain, since even best seller novels are being entitled to this remote region (Halter, 2012). As for Hannes Meyer’s scheme for the region’s capital city, it has received a decent coverage in architectural scholarship. Mentioned in the first Meyer monographs (Schneidt, 1965; Dal Co, 1969), it also appears in general works over Soviet era architecture and urban planning (Cohen, De Michelis, Tafuri, 1979). These first essays did not include an in-depth analysis of the scheme, but have contributed to open a line of research on Meyer’s Soviet period (Jung, 1989; Richardson, 1989; Maglio, 2002). The later authors generally indicate the Birobidzhan scheme as an advanced stage in Meyer’s experiments with the forms of the socialist city and his “elastic city” theory (elastische Stadt), but also as a sign of the influence of the rising urban aesthetics of Soviet social realism on the planner’s own figurative vocabulary. However, this scheme must represent some important peculiarity for critiques and practitioners too, since Kopp’s milestone book – Quand le moderne n’était pas un style mais une cause (1988) – cites only two works out of Meyer’s Soviet period: his entry for the Moscow competition and the Birobidzhan scheme. This can be regarded as a curious combination which Kopp does not fully explains; the former scheme being granted general recognition in the history of modern urban among other famous planners’ entries for the same competition, and the latter scheme remaining a scarcely known one. Finally, the most recent source on the topic (Kotlerman, Yavin, 2008) - although focused on establishing parallels between the Meyer’s Red Bauhaus in the Soviet Jewish region and his own former Bauhaus Jewish students in British Mandate Palestine and later in Israel, introduces an aspect of the Birobidzhan scheme left untouched by previous authors: the relationship between Meyer’s design approach and the issue of national identity.

The present paper stems from a more general research project focused on the role of architecture, urban and landscape planning in several Jewish rural colonization schemes, among which that of Birobidzhan. It does not, therefore, rely on inedited archival sources or on-the-spot surveys, but is limited to the discussion of available historical evidence. Its originality and interest should therefore be measured against the methods of architectural theory and criticism. To be sure, the author is a practicing architect and planner whose interest for chosen historical experiences stands in the attempt to break their secret and establish rational design principles applicable to present-day issues.

The paper is organized in two parts; the first one dealing with the wider historical context, the second one focusing on the scheme itself. Beginning with
a short review of the reasons that brought to the creation of the JAO, and offering a few clues regarding the ideological and cultural roots of Birobidzhan’s Jewish community in the early 1930s, the first part ends with basic information about Hannes Meyer and how he reached to the JAO. The next part draws on Meyer’s own report, sketches and plans, following him step by step from his arrival in the Soviet Far East. Through his diagnosis of the planning task and his surveys across the region, to the first planning options, the final scheme is discussed.

This paper argues that the interest of the Birobidzhan scheme stands precisely in Meyer’s meditation, in the making, over the issue of expressing national identity through urban planning. To be sure, it argues that Meyer shortcuts the ambiguities of common attempts (Vale, 2008) to establish new collective identities in urban planning by alluding to some vague or irreproducible vernacular and traditional forms. Instead, the viewpoint proposed here states that Meyer’s rationale is one of direct confrontation between the future city’s design and the elements of the local landscape and of the wider geographical setting. Indeed, Meyer’s discourse shows an obsession with the rhetoric of objectivity and ideological issues which obscure other far-reaching results and teachings.

Figure 1- H. Klering. Cover, 1939, [The Jewish Autonomous Region, 1939].

A. HOW THE FIRST MODERN JEWISH STATE CAME ABOUT

In the aftermath of Red October (1917), the Soviets found themselves heading a multinational empire encompassing more than a hundred ethno-confessional or national minorities. According to early bolshevist ideology, atheism and the downright dissolution of religions should have contributed to flatten the ethnic
differences among the masses so that «all the people of the world could unite» in world revolution. But Lenin had foreseen a potential issue and in 1913 assigned the young Stalin to work out a “Soviet policy towards nationalities” (Stalin, 1913) which eventually led to the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia (1917). Large spaces of autonomy were thus granted to many groups within the Union, provided that the new republics be “national in form but socialist in content”.

Since its outset, early bolshevism’s claims for equal rights and tolerance, paired with the open condemnation of Tsarist-era pogroms and racial violence, were positively perceived by Russian Jewry. But after 1905’s Russian Revolution, First World War and Civil War, this community experienced high rates of unemployment and suffered regular tides of famine. The establishment of the lishenets (disenfranchised) status only added to this critical situation. Even if massive emigration after 1882 had radically decreased the Jewish population, in the Soviet era, the “Jewish Question” remained a Russian question.

Nevertheless, according to Stalin, the Jewish people could not lay claims to national autonomy within Soviet socialism because, apart from a peculiar language, culture and economic structure, it fell short of a “territory of its own”; the last feature held as necessary to establish a “national identity”. Consequently, the Soviet policy towards the Jews was limited to their normalization: the transition of the luftmensch from traditional commercial and financial activities to a “truly” productive role in industry, craftsmanship or farming. However, from 1921 onwards, a shift occurred in the official attitude. The leadership of the Russian communist party’s Jewish section¹ was searching a land in USSR susceptible to host a future autonomous State for the Jewish people and represent the basis for the full acknowledgement of its «national identity». At the same time, the Central Committee was dealing with other issues: the success of Jewish agricultural colonization in Crimea, southern Ukraine and Belorussia was causing discontent among local populations²; Zionist ideology - considered “bourgeois” and anti-revolutionary - was making its way among Jewish masses; on top of all, the open battlefront with Japan in the Far East threatened to break at any moment.

Within this frame, in Moscow’s views the Yevsektsiya’s pressures could turn into an opportunity to kill many birds with only one stone. A frontier settlement sympathetic to the regime could be established in the Far-East, the Agro-Joint project in the European provinces could be pushed towards failure, and Zionist mottoes could be clamped down. In 1928, the Central Committee issued a decree declaring the availability of some areas situated in the Far East, along the border with Chinese Manchuria and the bank of the Amur River for Jewish colonization, followed in 1930 by the promise to establish there an autonomous region. In 1934, the JAO was born.

“I now sit beside the Biro river,
Fish are swimming to and fro,
All around there’s forest and taiga,
For me it’s the happiest place.

Forests with nuts and rivers with fish,
You find in Biro-Bidjan,
Coal and coke and wild ox,
And even a wild boar.

Biro-Bidjan collective farms have sowed a good deal,
And everything has taken well -
Soya and wheat are waving in the fields,
Our silos are full of grain.

Look at our tailor factory,
Where everything is sewed and sewed,
New machines, life is good.
We live well and free.

Cast your eyes on the chair factory,
We now have something to sit on,
Making wooden chests and beds,
To be used in good health." (Soviet Yiddish folk song, late 1930s: Rubin, 2000; 412-413).

B. TO PUT DOWN ROOTS IN THE FAR EAST

From 1928 onwards, many Jews moved to Birobidzhan from Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine and Belorussia, animated by a genuine mixture of atavistic Jewish culture and avant-garde socialist convictions. They were soon joined by Jews from all over the world (the United States, Argentine, Palestine, ...). Institutional agencies - such as KOMZET and OZET, assisted by the foreign ICOR, offered their tutelage (and control) to what was expected to be a massive emigration wave. Jewish pioneers would arrive at Tikhonkaya, a small railroad-town developed in 1912 along the Trans-Siberian Railway. They would then spread along the main roads leading south towards the Amur River and the countryside, founding collective farms.

Tikhonkaya was the unavoidable crossroads for these immigrants and naturally grew into the local Jewish community’s cultural and logistic hub. It soon earned the status of the Oblast’s capital city and a new name: Birobidzhan, after the two main rivers irrigating the surrounding plains (the Biro and Bizhan rivers). Soon enough, a Yiddish theatre and many Yiddish newspapers were founded.


4. KOMZET, or “Committee for the Settlement of Toiling Jews on the Land”, and OZET, or “Society for Settling Toiling Jews on the Land”, were two public agencies created in Soviet Union to deal with Jewish affairs.

5. ICOR (or IKOR), or “Organization for Jewish Colonization in Russia” (Yiddish: Idishe Kolonizatsie Organizatsie in Rusland), was a New-York based organization formed by communist Jews in 1924. It financially supported Jewish colonists in Birobidzhan with agricultural machinery and seeds, but served primarily pro-Soviet propaganda purposes in North America.

6. Such as the Birobidzhaner Shtern (“Birobidzhan’s Star”) and Der Emes (“The Truth”).
But the enthusiasm of a fistful of Stakhanovite pioneers could not represent a convincing solution to the “Jewish Question”: at the peak of its demographic growth (1948), Jews never represented more than 30% of the JAO’s total population (30,000 inhab.). Besides, after having experienced the hardships of a farmer’s life, many settlers moved back to the city or even to their hometowns; agriculture never represented the major occupation in the area.

A peculiar aspect of this experiment in the modern resettlement of needy Jews was the selection process of the would-be settlers. The OZET organized yearly lotteries to finance colonization in the JAO: winners were granted a transit permit and coverage of travel expenses. A practical solution to a concrete problem and a golden opportunity to propagandize the regimes’ actions, these lotteries also represented a somehow uncanny form of social engineering: what kind of collective identity could this new community claim for if it was actually bound by extraction? Comparing the collective identities of traditional European Jewry and Zionists, especially in their attitude towards anti-Semitism, one could argue that the former was a community of fate, while the latter formed a community of destiny; two different interpretations of the German concept of Schicksalsgemeinschaft. How would the JAO Jews fit in such a picture?

There is no need of uttering a definitive historical or political assessment over the legitimacy of the JAO experiment, but one may question the grotesque and circuslike nature of the OZET-lottery and its role in defining the JAO’s collective identity (“who’s in, who’s out”). Perhaps, the original Jewish community of Birobidzhan could be qualified as a Glücksgemeinschaft; a “community of fortune”? Although it is unclear which part of Birobidzhan’s Jewish community was eventually selected through the lottery process, it certainly contributed to blur the cultural roots of the country’s national identity, turning its translation into a physical organization and a symbolic expression through the tools of urban planning and architecture a strenuous task.

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7. Schicksal can in fact be translated with both a negative and a positive meaning, as faith or destiny.
C. CALLING UP THE EXPERT: HANNES MEYER IN BIOBIDZHAN.

Hannes Meyer (1889-1954) was a major figure in the history of the Modern Movement in architecture. An impetuous communist and Marxist, he took part in the early 1920s to the Swiss avant-garde magazine ABC-Beiträge zum Bauern/Contribution on Building (Gubler, 1994) and succeeded to Walter Gropius as Dessau’s Bauhaus school second director (1929-1930). After being pushed away from the school, he moved to the USSR, where he practiced and taught until 1936. Trapped between Stalinism’s authoritarian downturn and the imminent war menace in Europe, Meyer fled back to Switzerland and from there to Mexico, and after WWII moved back to his home country were he concluded his career.

In the USSR, Meyer was an appointed urban and regional planner at the National Institute for Urban Planning (GIPROGOR), a position which offered him the opportunity to experiment with two specific issues: the definition of the “socialist city” and the issue of the “large scale” in planning. Research over the forms and features of the “socialist city” - a city which would have solved its productive, social and political contradictions with the countryside; a city where each and everyone would have had the right to a decent home, work and leisure space - was, since the early 1920s, one of the major issues involving European and Soviet masters of architecture. Meyer’s interest for the “large scale” was, instead, a less diffused concern; it represented the natural...
development of the transition from his first projects inspired by the German Garden-City Movement (Siedlung Margarethenhöhe, Essen, 1916; Siedlung Freidorf, Basle, 1919-21) to socialist urban planning. Meyer was seeking to take a gradual departure from what he shall later define as the “bourgeois conception of mechanistic functionalism”.

In 1933-1934, the Swiss-born architect and planner was invited, together with his planning brigade\(^8\), to prepare a town planning scheme for the development of Tikhonkaya into the Capital-city of the \(\text{JAO} \) Birobidzhan. How did he “formulate” the design problem?

1. DIAGNOSING, SURVEYING, ENVISIONING

“We thought we had mistaken! To say the truth, the Sopka mounts\(^9\) in Tikhonkaya corresponded precisely to our expectations. They were the dignified topographic image of the Small Khingan’s chain’s last sublime foothills along the borders of the Bira River’s valley, but we imagined the future Capital-city of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast somehow different. We were expecting a well-ordered settlement and instead we found an unordered and heterogeneous place. At dawn we visited the large agglomerate that, with its heaps of one storey high buildings distended across a 4km large radius, looked like a immobile flock of sheep grazing on the marshy plain’s arid highlands situated between the Bira and Ikura Rivers. The residential quarters were encircled on every side by marshes, which - with their seducing mantle of Siberian Iris - moved further inland along the folds towards the living zones.” (Hannes Meyer, 1934\(^{10}\)).

Alighting at the station of Tikhonkaya, Meyer’s first impression betrays the difficulty of the assignment: how can a small, miserably developed, railway-town develop into a new Capital-City? It is expected to welcome, in the near future, an important flux of immigrants, the seat of public agencies directing the agricultural and industrial development of both the \(\text{JAO} \) and the neighboring Soviet republics. The brigade forecasts a demographic growth from 5,000 to 37,000-44,000 inhabitants in the city itself. In addition to this poser, the experts sincerely believe in this unique opportunity to contribute to the achievement of the “Leninist policy on nationalities”, taking upon themselves the highly symbolic significance of their task.

“The group [composed by the planning brigade, involved experts and local delegates] pinpointed the particular significance of this city’s future architecture as the creative and artistic expression of the Jewish people. We, as architects, were asked to collaborate with the large masses of Jewish workers in the planning process. They were hoping that the scheme would reflect the values and cultural peculiarities of Jewish culture and the role of Birobidzhan as the Capital-city of a Socialist country.”

In other words, the originality of the planning problem stands in the definition of the city’s “new ethnic and national identity”. Which compositional devices

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\(^8\) Meyer, the economist Lebdinsky and the engineer Gandurin (respectively I. P. Lebedinskiij, based in San Petersburg, and Dimitri A. Gandurin, according to Maglio, 2002; 103).

\(^9\) The Sopka mounts (Small and Great Sopka) are two extinct volcanoes situated along the southern banks of the Bira River.

\(^10\) Unless otherwise stated, excerpts from Meyer’s report refer to Meyer, 1934, as reported in the most reliable published version (Dal Co, 1969; 133-140). Lacking or obscure sections have been integrated or modified on the basis of the English and Hebrew translations by Kotlerman and Yavin (2008).
does Meyer put in play in his design process to architecturally express this program?

During his stay, the architect extensively surveys the area, walked by experts in various fields. He consults the reports of previous scientific expeditions, meets with the city's inhabitants, visits some of the neighboring collective farms; everywhere he seeks a criterion, a latent order, to support the definition of the future city's character. But,

"during our daily walks across Tikhonkaya we looked in vain, among the 350 or so houses made of wood or clay, the expression of a collective identity. The inhabitants showed a preference for the self-standing single-household dwelling and for small gardens whose forms were meticulously taken care of - a scene deign of a petit bourgeois pièce to be played at the Yiddish theater! With its motley selection of building techniques, this locality reminds more the reconstruction of a disordered settlement at an exhibition of the most varied people in the world's building techniques."

Meyer has thus no recognizable building or urban tradition to rely on in the outlining of the future city's national identity. Undaunted, he organizes a walk up to the Great Sopka's top - the only spur from which one can grasp in a single glance the city's geographic theatre\(^{11}\) - and, from 120 meters above the sea level,

"the structure of the plain beneath us unfolded as on a map: marshes and taiga in different light and dark green tonalities. The flooding areas of the Bira and Ikura Rivers were clearly evident, announced as they were by changes in flora. As islands in the marshy immensity, the dark green rellis emerged, hills developed from the second geologic layer on which men had settled and developed agriculture."

In these last few words, Meyer captures the geography of the place in which the future city will rise. He interprets the natural forces that gave the area its present shape in the very long period, but most and foremost he pinpoints a number of elements and figures waiting to be involved in his own scheme: plains, marshes, rivers and flooding areas, dry hills, geological terraces, mountains and forests, natural routes... From the outset, the layers of the elemental landscape are called upon to play a crucial role, as appears in the four considered planning options:

1) the foundation of a new settlement on the marshy area, north-east of the railway line, would require the total reclamation of the land and the digging of a derivation for the Ikura river, but would keep the urban development away from the Bira River.

However, this area lacks natural vegetation and presents obstacles to the supply of building materials;

2) the foundation of a linear city along the Bira River and parallel to both the railway and the road to Waldheim. This option would require the draining of the land occasionally menaced by the river’s flooding;

3) the shifting of the city to the right (southern) bank of the river, close to the commune entitled to Karl Liebknecht, which would require the draining of the marshy lands and the reinforcement of the river’s banks;

\(^{11}\) I owe this interpretative key to Dr. Pallini’s generous advice (Pallini, 2005), and could find it explored in the field of cultural geography too (See Turri, 1998; Cosgrove, 1984).
4) the expansion of the existing city of Tikhonkaya paired by the foundation of a larger settlement on the third geological terrace, at an altitude of some 15 to 20 meters above the rivers’ water level, west to the Sopka Mount and along the road to Birofeld (between km. 3 and km. 6). The city would then be sited some 2 km away from the industrial district, but the area would be protected from flooding and free from marshes. Furthermore, a majestic natural forest borders this potential site to the north-east.

B. DESIGN AND CONTEXT

The latter option is eventually developed. For the existing city a zoning scheme is prepared “as a measure to force the city’s present built chaos into an ordered urban development”. Tikhonkaya is developed into a small linear settlement, parallel to both the river course and the railroad, and penned in the edges of the second geological terrace. A series of small transversal squares linking the railroad to the river are equipped with public gardens and public facilities, conferring a steady rhythm to the continuity of large residential blocks. The areas for the development of both existing and future light industrial districts (timber industry upstream and food industry downstream) are placed at both the far ends of the settlement, acting as frame to the city’s maximal span. A span equal to twice the distance comprised between the two bridges across the Bira River, with the railway station in a barycentric position. A building code is joined to the scheme, stating that new dwellings in this area should be limited to one or two storey, to be built in wood or however with light building techniques, using peat for insulation and keeping the population density under 120 inhab./ha.

The second part of the scheme concerns the new settlement to be founded across the river. As one alights at the station, its skyline will appear immediately above the older part of Tikhonkaya: there, dwellings can rise up to four storey high and the density of population to 400 inhab./ha. Such difference in regulations has a precise expressive goal: to establish a formal interplay between the old city’s developments and the new settlement which covers the whole third geological terrace down to the border traced by the river’s draining canal. But it is the plan that best expresses the overall scheme’s composition principles.

Two large axes form a quadrivium: the general layout’s backbone. A first axis, the “axis of collective functions”, forms a broken arched line linking in a meaningful sequence: the railway station and the old city’s main square; a new 900-meter long timber bridge over the River; a large monumental alley with facing public facilities; a large central square hosting the local Palace of the Soviets, the Party’s headquarters and the Palace of Culture. Further, the sequence bends to the north-east towards the Small Sopka’s foot, ending in “a wonderful stretch of country between two sopkas (extinct volcanoes) (...) a perfect site for the central park of culture and recreation” (Meyer quoted in Schnaidt, 1965; 72) with the natural sites of the Great Sopka on one side and the eastern forests on the other.

The second axis, the “axis of vital functions”, assumes instead a tree-like pattern collecting the major routes approaching from the region’s most populated areas. Its central section corresponds to the road reaching from
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Siberia to the North, flanking the railway line. At the entrance of Tikhonkaya, the road bends toward the bridge over the river, skirts along the Great Sopka’s foot and runs across the new settlement in a north-south direction until it reaches the road to the Amur River and the collective farms. Two minor road segments branch off this central section. The first one coincides with Tikhonkaya’s existing main street along the railway siding. The second one starts at the Great Sopka’s foot and points southwards across the new settlement’s centre.

As a result, these two large axes follow the heliocentric directions and, paired with the section of the “axis of vital functions” which parallels the ridge road running along the hilly spur, rule the overall arrangement of the new settlement’s functional zoning. A network of secondary roads obeys to these three directions and defines the form and shape of the fundamental urban units: the *qvartals*. In these large building blocks, from which crossover motorized traffic is kept away, the dwellings and all the related basic public facilities are arranged within walking distance: first necessity shops, postal office, green areas and sporting facilities, laundry house, nursery, worker’s club. Each *qvartal* also includes at least one relevant urban facility of a supra-neighborhood level (hospital, high school or college, university, seat of local administration), in order to guarantee the maximal interdependence between each single neighborhood. They are grouped in *strips* by functional affinity (by types of residents, of productive activity, of equipment or collective facilities...) to foster the tightest possible relation between dwellings and workplaces, while each *strip* is endowed with an area for further expansion. The *strips* hosting productive activities, for instance, are carefully located and arranged. The heavy industry plants form the core of an urban hub within the city, while the food processing and light industry plants are placed on the urban fringes in direct relationship with areas of intensive mechanized farming in the neighboring countryside. In this way, each *strip* - enclosed by green areas, parks or large alleys - can assume an autonomous layout, adapt to topography or to pre-existing settlements, and yet take part to the “harmonious” composition in the whole.

The final scheme’s overall layout, encompasses both the existing and the future city in a development based on a system of axes, squares, green belts and infrastructure framing large “qvartal strips” into a well defined geometry. It recalls the previous design experiences of Meyer in the USSR, especially his competition entry for the “General Plan for the socialist Reconstruction of Moscow”: the prototypical application of Meyer’s “elastic city” theory. In line with the urban planning debate of his time, Meyer’s scheme does not explore into the details the future urban landscape and its final image, but instead limits itself to very precise and specific indications regarding the structuring elements able to guide the city’s future growth: infrastructural networks, public open spaces, institutional and ceremonial facilities, dwellings, industrial and leisure zones. In other words, the focus is placed on the places for moving, living, working and recreation.

Yet, Meyer’s Birobidzhan scheme shows a few significant differences with the Moscow plan and even with his later Soviet experiences.

It has been pointed out (Jung, 1989; Richardson, 1989) that this last scheme shows a transition in Meyer’s designs from a looser geometrical pattern (as in
the Moscow scheme) to very rigid geometric overall layouts, with an increasing role assigned to large monumental alleys, ceremonial squares and celebrative buildings. A subtle shift, from an enthusiastic experimentation with the possibilities of rationalist planning to the rising urban aesthetics of Social realism, can undoubtedly be traced in this evolution which has already been discussed elsewhere. Instead, as Maglio (2002) underlines, Meyer’s Birobidzhan scheme shows another formal particularity: its triangular shape, unusual in early Soviet planning experiences. Maglio emphasizes this difference by comparing Meyer’s final scheme to his preliminary sketch. While the latter illustrates the precise transposition of Meyer’s theoretical model to the specific site conditions of Tikhonkaya, with a grid-shaped pattern arranged according to the cardinal points, the former draws an hybrid figure: its orthogonal «L-shaped» edges follow approximately the cardinal orientation, while its third edge skews along the ridge road running along the foothills of the Small Khingan chain down to the Sopka Mounts.

The question arises whether Meyer only adapted his principle to the site’s specificity or pursued a meaningful expressive purpose? The ideal scheme’s deformation does indeed establish a kind of direct dialogue with the area’s
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topographical events. Not only are the Sopka Mounts framed and staged by the scheme’s oblique section, they also set the dimensional pace of its elements: the large square-shaped “qvartals” are approximately as large as half the Great Sopka’s foot, while the rectangle-shaped “qvartals’” smaller sides are just as large as the Small Sopka.

C. ARCHITECTURE AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

During his entire career, the Swiss-born architect kept a tensed relation with the experience of functionalist architecture and town-planning made of both passionate adherence and radical criticism. At a closer look, Meyer himself has seemingly been wedged into the Movement’s “rhetoric of objectivity”. In his final report for the Birobidzhan scheme, Meyer claims that his design is the direct expression of the future city’s program: the concretization of the “socialist city’s” ideals and the expression of the JAO’s capital city’s symbolic meaning.

This design task being “the unique opportunity for both the socialist architect and urban planner to act towards the neutralization of the opposition between city and countryside through mechanized farming and light urban industry, linking it to Lenin’s policy towards nationalities”.

Instead, the simultaneous analysis of the scheme and its report reveals that the design solution reached far beyond the slavish enforcement of programs, theories or models, no matter how groundbreaking. In Meyer’s own writings, the truly genetic principles of his overall composition, the landscape project, is kept in an undertone: the determining factor in his scheme’s elasticity, the one able to root the project in a specific site’s features and requirements, is in fact entrusted to the elements and figures of the local landscape.

In particular, Meyer plucks out of the landscape the constitutive elements of human establishment in this specific spot’s raison d’être: the last spur of the mountain chain drawing the limit between the Upper Biro’s narrow valley and the large plain at its feet that allows for the development of intensive agriculture; the “dry” geological terraces’ attractiveness; the waterway as a resource for drinking water, irrigation, fish farming and as a convenient natural transportation route; the railway line connecting Moscow to the Sea of Japan; the large forest providing building materials and burning wood, and, last but not least, the Sopka Mounts as a unique vantage point from which one can visually appreciate this geographical theatre.

In Meyer’s Birobidzhan scheme the architectural expression of new collective values and identities is not entrusted to the rehabilitation of some vague vernacular tradition. Instead, the local topographic elements are actively involved in the overall composition, which stages the universal and a-historical values of natural landscape12.

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12. For an early and very suggestive discussion of the role of confrontation between man and nature in the consolidation of collective identities, see Reclus (1866).
Figure 10- Axel Fisher (Belgian, 1978-) . Interpretative sketch of Meyer’s Birobidzhan scheme bird’s eye view (published in Bauhaus in Birobidzhan, 2008), 2010, drawing pen on drawing paper.

1. Bira River and draining canal; 2. Borders of geologic terraces; 3. Forest limits; 4. Railway; 5. Industrial areas (timber industry upstream and food industry downstream); 6. Dwelling “kvartals”; 7. Public green areas; P. Bridge on the Bira; S1. Road to Siberia; S2. Existing road to Waldheim and Vladivostok; S3. Road to collective farms and Amur river; S4. Road to Waldheim; S5. Ridge road through natural forest; SF. Railway station; M1. Great Sopka; M2. Small Sopka; C. Central square.

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