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Photo, front cover: Photo: Magnus Rönn. From "Lights in Alingsås", the 2022 outdoor light festval

TROPES IN MEYER AND WITTWER'S PROJECT FOR THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

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Abstract

In 1927, Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer handed in a project for the architectural competition about the League of Nations' new headquarters in Geneva.. This was an important project in the history of modern architecture. According to the architects, it symbolized nothing. It merely asked to be evaluated as a structural invention. Yet since then, several forms of reference have been discovered in the project. The present article argues that this goes beyond mere symbolization. The ways the project refers to and includes meanings is better described as tropes. To develop this recognition, the article examines Meyer and Wittwer's project from the point of view of the American literary theorist Kenneth Burke's article *Four Master Tropes,* which was published as an appendix to his influential work *A Grammar of Motives* in 1945. This shows that Meier and Wittwer's project not merely refers to forms of meaning symbolically, it employs tropes as figures of building which play an active, fundamental role in the discovery of the form of the project. Through the use of tropes, the project enables – as Reyner Banham described it – a view of humans in relation to their environment.
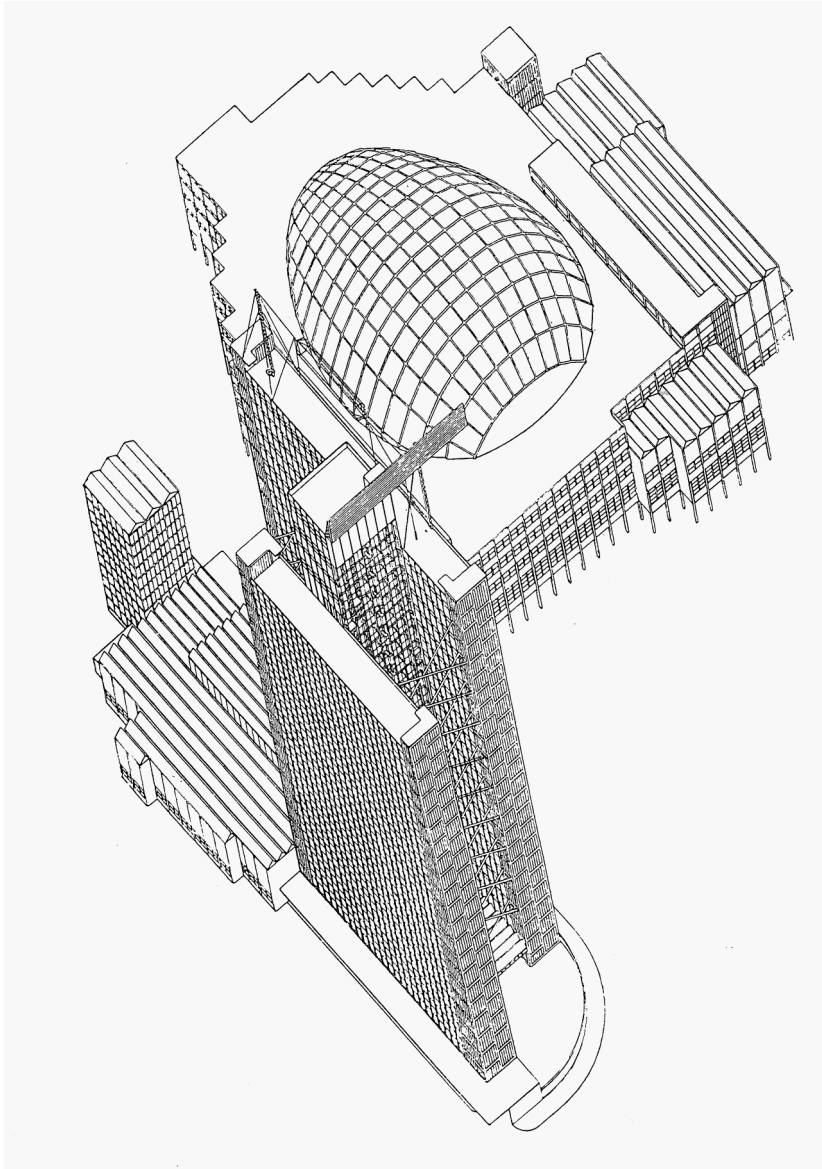
1. A project that symbolizes nothing

This article is about tropes in Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer's project for the League of Nations' new headquarters in Geneva, created for the architectural competition that took place in 1926-7. One might ask why.

In their description of the project Meyer and Wittwer write:

Our League of Nations building symbolizes nothing. – Its size is auto-matically determined by the dimensions and the conditions of the programme. As an organic building it expresses unfeignedly that it is intended to be a building for work and co-operation...This building is neither beautiful nor ugly. It asks to be evaluated as a structural inven-tion (Schnaidt, 1965, p. 25).

Meyer and Wittwer claim that as a necessary consequence of certain practical aims the material building expresses, or articulates, and thereby brings its aims to knowledge through its mere material presence. The *material* presence and its meanings is all you get. It does not acquire a surplus, *immaterial* meaning released from the physical vehicle, like symbols do. As Claude Schnaidt writes in his book, *Hannes Meyer, Bauten, Projekte und Schriften/Buildings, projects and writings,* (Schnaidt, 1965, p. [23]): "To throw off the stultifying influence of academism it was imperative at all costs to rediscover the primordial aims of architecture, to set solid realities – functions of use – polemically against subjective speculations – functions of representation."

And yet, later in his life Hannes Meyer changed his ideas fundamentally on whether and how buildings symbolize. Schnaidt writes (Schnaidt, 1965, p. [23]) that it was soon realized, and Meyer was one of the first to see this, that functionalism was not the spontaneous product of the principles of technology but the *ideological* expression, or we might say articulation, of those principles. This would apply to the project as a plan as well as a "structural invention":

> ...the forms the architect invents are not a passive expression of man's requirements and the demands of material but rather direct human activities along new and more appropriate lines and suggest the possibilities opened by industrial civilization. Like all functionalists, he wanted to express and demonstrate the clarity, truth and beauty of the modern world (Schnaidt, 1965, p. [23]).

This admission had far-reaching consequences, as Schnaidt writes in a slightly different context. This: "... is tantamount to an implicit admission on the part of the functionalists that form has an ideological power, or in other words, that form has a partly autonomous existence, and this paves the way to a new formalism (Schnaidt, 1965, p. [57]).

Consequently, as Schnaidt writes earlier in his book (1965, p. [23]) that without wishing to, Meyer worked out not only a rhetoric of building but a functionalist aesthetic.

So, it seems that Meyer and Wittwer's project for headquarters for the League of Nations in Geneva, contrary to the claim of the authors, actually might "symbolize" meaning after all. When they asked us to evaluate the building as a structural invention, it actually turned out that the building not merely had acquired connotations as an extra semantical or rhetorical dimension added to its pragmatically necessary organisation of the living spaces and construction, connotations that enriched the meaning inherent in the material project. I will claim that what went on when meaning was created in the project is something more profound than happens with symbols. The plan as well as construction were not

only passive vehicles for meaning. They were actively shaped physically not only to respond to the programme but to convey meaning, and the strategy applied by the architects in conveying meaning has more in common with the linguistic devices called tropes of which the metaphor is the most well-known.

Consequently, I will examine the prevalence of tropes in this project. Yet there is no space here to try to account exhaustively for all of them. Neither is the architects' use of tropes systematic or exhaustive in a logical sense. Rather I will try, through highlighting some of the tropes, to show the presence and prevalence of tropes in the project and how they contribute fundamentally to how its form is created. Hopefully, this will also demonstrate the fruitfulness of a tropical approach to the understanding of how the project acquires meaning.

Such an approach to the analysis of a project that claims to signify nothing beyond its functional indexicality – a project that even played a pivotal role in the development of modern architecture – will therefore offer an excellent opportunity to study how signification through tropes leads to the establishment of form, and the function of architectural form in general.

2. The project

The project was created for the architectural competition for new headquarters for the League of Nations in 1926. This competition came at a critical time for modern architecture. It struggled to present its case against traditional architecture. Le Corbusier delivered an entry as well. However, neither Meyer and Wittwer nor Le Corbusier won. The realized project was an example of traditional academism. This was seen as a (preliminary) setback for modern architecture and contributed to the creation of the CIAM movement.[1]

As the project was not realized, the analysis of the project must rely on Meyer and Wittwer's drawings and verbal description. The drawings are characteristically "sachlich" or objective.

The assembly hall was rudimentarily described when it comes to materials. It was intended to be made from a frame of reinforced concrete, while the secretariat was to be constructed from a steel frame on a reinforced concrete raft. The walls of the secretariat had Eternit facing on the outside and polished Eternit on the inside. The floors were to be of xylolite (offices) and rubber (corridors). The windows were Hopper-type with 8mm plate glass. The ceilings were covered with matt-finished aluminium sheeting, the doors had iron frames and insulation of cork with aluminium facing.

1 For an overview and discussion of most of the entries in the competition, see John Ritter (1964), World Parliament. The League of Nations Competition, 1926. For an historical account of the struggle related to the League of Nations project – in particular about Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's entry – see Alfred Roth, Begegnungen mit Pionieren (1973, p. 52-57). For an overview of the prize-winning projects, see Société des Nations/League of Nations. Concours D'Architecture/Architectural Competition (Société des Nations/ League of Nations, 1927).

In a Nordic context, it may be of interest that the Stockholm architect Nils-Einar Eriksson was awarded a 1st prize of 12.000 Francs together with Le Corbusier and Nénot, Flegenheimer, Lefèvre, Broggi and Vago.
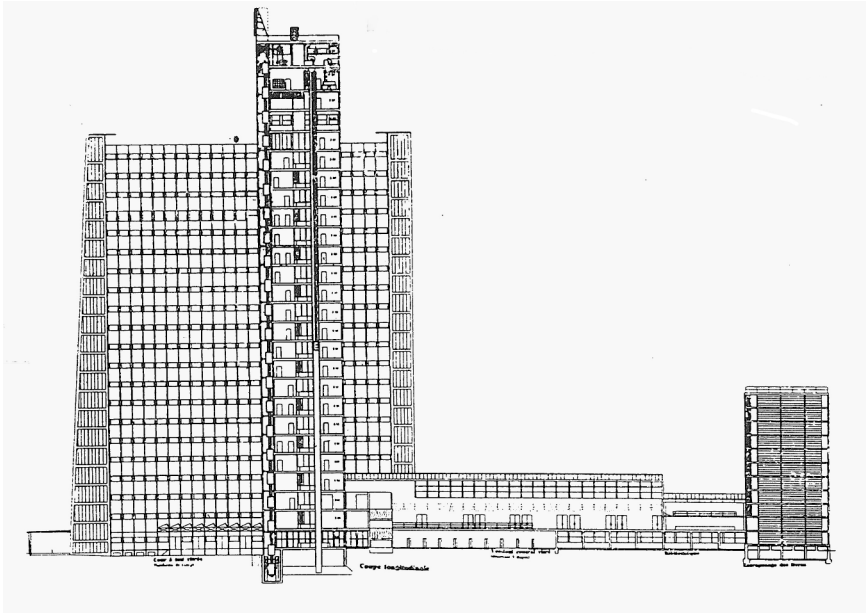
Figure 2
Façade south.
Bauhaus Zeitschrift 4, 1927

Figure 3
Façade east with section.
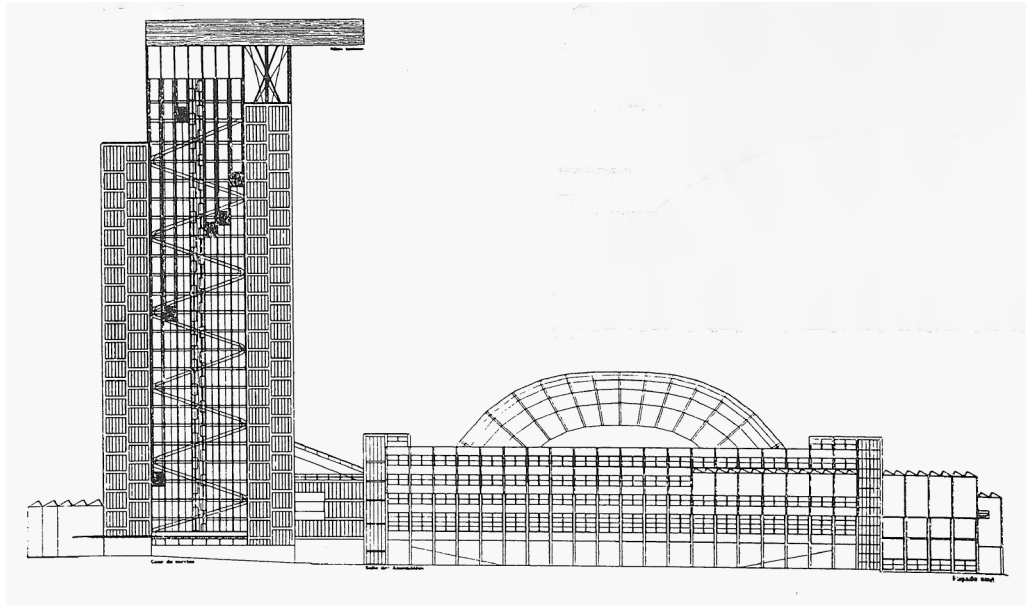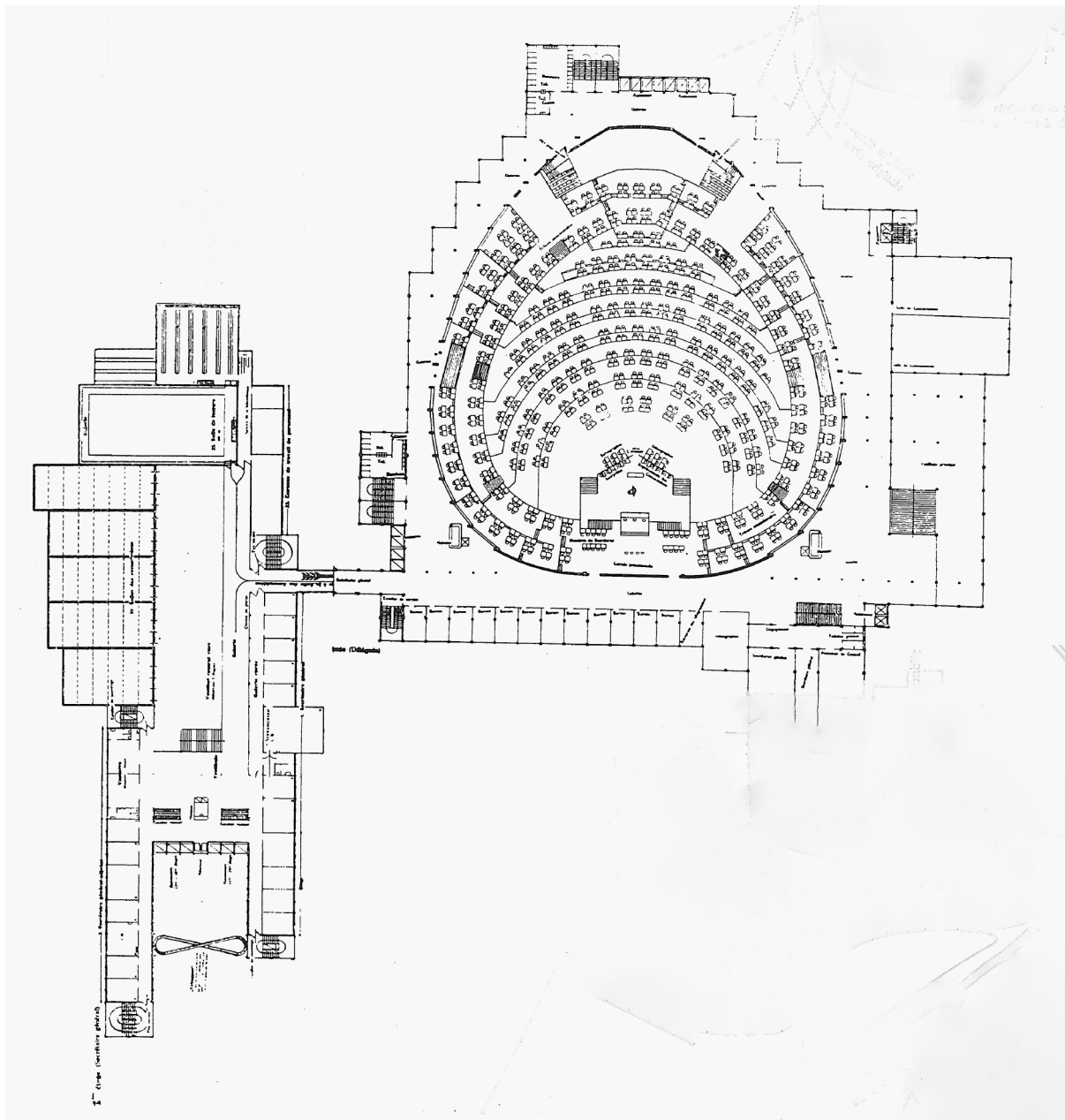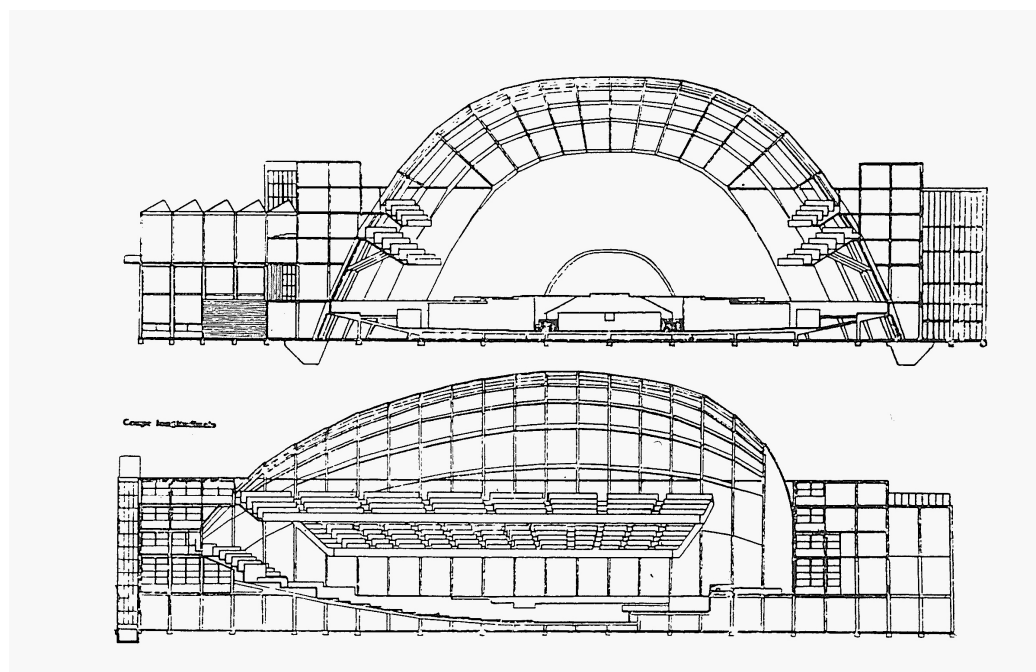Bauhaus Zeitschrift 4, 1927

Figure 4
Plan mezzanine.
Bauhaus Zeitschrift 4, 1927
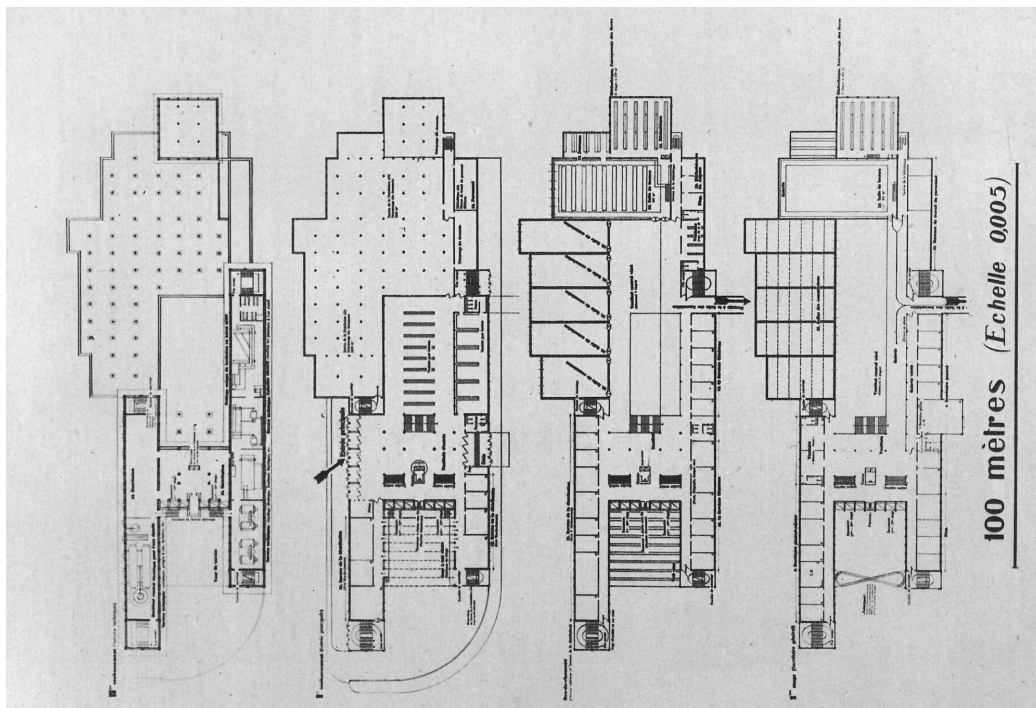
Figure 5 (topp)
Plan secretariat. From left: basement, first floor, mezzanine, above.
Société des Nations/League of Nations, Concours D'Architecture/Architectural Competition./Architectural Competition. 1927

Figure 6 (below)
Cross sections of the assembly hall.
Bauhaus Zeitschrift 4, 1927

3. Architecture and language

Language as a point of view from which to examine architecture is an old and widespread approach in architectural history, as Adrian Forty describes in the chapter "Language Metaphors" of his book, *Words and Buildings. A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (2000).

The most dominant perspective during the 20th century has perhaps been that of linguistic structuralism and, later, post-structuralism. Structuralism originates from Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist theory of language. After the Second World War, it developed into a general theory of signs, "semiotics" or "semiology". This gave rise, in particular towards the end of the 20th century, to a large number of semiotic studies in architecture.

Critique of structuralist thought founded a post-structuralist school where the principal names are Barthes, Derrida, Lyotard and Deleuze. It influenced architectural theory heavily, in particular from the 1970s, and to some extent still does, as part of what is called "French Theory".

Yet, there are also other language-based approaches to architectural theory. An important one is the kind of philosophical Phenomenology created by Heidegger, which amongst others informed Christian Norberg-Schulz. Narratology, which originated from Russian Formalism, has also been used in architectural theory.

Interestingly, Forty (2000, p. 74) claims that much of the later twentieth-century dispute over the "linguistic analogy" has to be understood as a reaction against, or in defence of, orthodox modernism's view that works of architecture were not to be "read" as narratives of external events – they were to be themselves.

The relation between language and architecture is, however, so comprehensive that it is impossible to give an exhaustive overview of it here. We will focus on a particular topic, the use of tropes, which is under-researched.

4. Symbols and tropes

Meyer and Wittwer claim that their project *symbolizes* nothing. They explain it thus: "As an organic building it expresses unfeignedly that it is intended to be a building for work and co-operation" (Schnaidt, 1965, p. 22). The function is its meaning. The meaning of the building is *expressed*, or we might say that the building concretely articulates function, and in this sense brings meaning to knowledge here and now. This expressive quality seems to emerge causally, as Meyer, in accordance with his antihumanism, saw the architect merely as a "switching mechanism". Consequently, the building functions as an index rather than a symbol.

Bearing in mind that we may introduce a conceptual rigour to this discussion that is foreign to Meyer and Wittwer, this raises at least three questions. Firstly: what does it mean that a project symbolizes – or not? Secondly: does this project not symbolize any meaning? And thirdly: is symbolization actually an apt concept in this connection?

At the very beginning of his article on "Symbol" in the *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe* (Barck et al., 2003, vol. 5, p. 805), Heinz Hamm differentiates between two meanings of the concept, one quotidian as well as belonging to the "Kulturwissenschaften" and another belonging to semiotics, formal logics and the natural sciences. The first relates to (so-called "motivated") iconic signs with a certain connotation (an added or surplus meaning – in this context any meaning beyond its denotation: practical use), the second to general or "non-motivated" conventional signs, i.e., signs that are arbitrary in relation to their signification. According to Hamm, the first one is the most common. In this connection, it is of interest that Saussure treated the symbol in this way. He saw it as a kind of sign that at least retained a vestige of natural connection between the signal and its signification (Saussure, 2016, p. 79).

Architecture has functioned as symbol in both meanings throughout its history. However, being an overwhelmingly physical fact, there are fundamental affinities between architecture's character as a sign and the *first* kind of symbolization. The work of architecture is usually symbolic, not only by forming an accidental physical vehicle referring to a meaning beyond its material presence but as a material fact, it reifies meaning in our embodied world. This gives meaning a stronger sense of presence in, relevance to and influence over life.

Figure 7
Henri Paul Nénot, and Julien Flegenheimer's competition entry.
Société des Nations/League of Nations. Concours D'Architecture/Architectural Competition. 1927

Note: This entry was the foundation for the development of the realized project, although modified through imposed cooperation with Camille Lefèvre, Carlo Broggi and Jozsef Vago.

Meyer and Wittwer may be subjectively correct in the sense that they did not work to add connotations to the material work of architecture. However, Kenneth Frampton – perhaps the most important interpreter of this project – claims in his book, *Modern architecture. A critical history* (Frampton, 1980, p. 134), that there is what he calls a latent symbolism in the architects' insistence that a novel organization like the League of Nations cannot possibly be crammed into the straitjackets of traditional architecture. To paraphrase the well-known text by Meyer (1926), "the new world" requires new architecture. According to Frampton, this latent symbolism is also expressed in the proposal to classify the users of the assembly building by their car-parking position, and to conduct them inconspicuously from this point to their assigned places in the auditorium. The project thereby refers to meaning through its form.

From this, it becomes clear, however, that there is an important way in which the verb "to symbolize" neither in its first nor its second meaning entirely covers what the architects are doing and the sign-character of their work of architecture. It may even miss a vital point. The added meaning of the project does not merely emerge as a by-product of an otherwise self-evident architectural form that is already defined by necessity – or even convention. Meaning is created precisely through an active intervention to shape the physical form – the physical vehicle for meaning – in a certain way. For example, it is shaped in relation to a new envisaged group of users: "<u>hygienic work rooms</u> for the busy representatives of their people. ... <u>open glazed rooms</u> for the public negotiations of honest men" (Schnaidt, 1965, p. 25. My underlining). These are the men of the new world. I will describe this as "perspectivation". The physical form thereby ceases to be just a passive vehicle – albeit to some extent motivated – for meaning.

The authors describe the organisation of the League of Nations as a *novelty*. The focus is thereby shifted from the way the building represents and reflects to how it *reshapes* the building task from a certain new perspective. It is defined as a building *in opposition to* what this building may have been expected to have been, from a traditional point of view. This is what the project according to the authors is emphatically *not*: "No pillared reception rooms for weary monarchs .... No back corridors for backstairs diplomacy" (Schnaidt, 1965, p. 25). This delimitation at the same time indicates what it might have been, and what the authors might claim the winning project by Broggi, Flegenheimer, <u>Lefèvre</u>, <u>Nénot</u> and Vago actually became.

The new definition of the institution and the building task originates from a comprehensive reinterpretation of society and, beyond that, what the general task of architecture might be: According to what Meyer writes in his manifest, *Die Neue Welt* [The New World] in 1926, "Trade union, co-operative, Ltd., Inc., cartel trust and the League of Nations (sic!)

are the forms in which today's social conglomerations find expression, and the radio and the rotary press are their media of communication. Co-operation rules the world. The community rules the individual" (Meyer (1926) cited in Schnaidt, 1965, p. 93). Thus, not even the organisation of the plan and technical construction – the physical vehicles of meaning – are merely articulations of practical necessities. They rely on a certain perspective on life in general and the particular form of life in the institution it is going to serve.

This turns the building task into a much more open quest for form and meaning. In this context, the project turns out as a vision, even an apotheosis of life *as-if-it-were* like this. Thus, form does not only have a partly independent role in the project. It becomes clearer how it is an active agent for putting the building task into perspective, and thereby understanding it more profoundly.

The new conception of life is transferred from the new world, as Meyer and Wittwer saw it, to the building task not only as intellectual meaning, but as concrete form in a fairly radical way, which I will argue is more similar to the function of *tropes* – or *figures* of speech – than symbols.

From this point of view, the employment of metaphor in the project suggests a likeness between the modern society of *Die Neue Welt* and the building. Thus, metaphor is about *knowledge*. What is more, this comparison helps us to discover, not only meaning, but form even in great detail in the building task with which we are concerned. In this way, the perspectivation afforded by metaphors becomes important to the creation of works of architecture.

From this point of view, architecture quickly reveals an intriguing parallel ambiguity to ordinary, discursive speech. This is usually seen as expressing straight forward, "literal" meaning. However, on closer scrutiny it abounds with what are loosely called metaphors. The character of those expressions has only become disguised by habit, or when employed in science, by an emptying of the metaphorical content.

However, metaphor is merely one of a set of similar literary devices. The theory of literature subsumes them under the concept of "tropes". According to *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Ritter & Gründer, 1980, p. 1520), the original meaning of the classical Greek *trope* is "turn", "direction" and in transferred meaning "way" (Art und Weise). In rhetoric, the notion serves as a super-concept for a series of semantical deviations from the seemingly literal use of language. This turns the use of concepts into *figures* of speech. The fundamentally "literal" dimension of meaning in architecture, in particular the modern one, is that of practical use or "function" - interpreted as instrumental but often as conventional. As the seemingly literalness of discursive language is undermined

by the metaphorical origin of a lot of its concepts, so is the literalness of function in architecture.

Before we proceed with our inquiry, I wish to be clear about one issue. There are many intriguing similarities between the ways in which tropical figures of language establish meaning and how architectural forms give rise to meaning to support an examination of the parallel. Consequently, in this essay I will use the analogy as a heuristic tool – much as Burke describes the use of metaphors in science. However, I understand many of the dangers and fallacies related to applying the linguistic analogy to architecture. Consequently, what I write does not necessarily imply that I support any wholesale notion of architecture as a language. It is necessary to be explicit on this, due to the influence of linguistics-based theories in architectural research in the last half-century.

5. Research on tropes in architecture

Despite the crucial role tropes play in architecture, surprisingly little has been written on it. Most has focused on metaphors from the point of view of language as a model to understand architecture. In *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, Charles Jencks (1984, p. 39) claims that *metaphor* is the mode most commonly disregarded in modern architecture. At the end of the chapter on metaphors (Jencks, 1984, p. 50), he claims that the result of architects' denial of even the most potent levels of metaphor, concentrating instead on the supposedly rational aspects of design like cost and function, is that their inadvertent metaphors take metaphorical revenge and kick them from behind, in the sense that their buildings end up looking like metaphors of function and economics and are condemned as such.

Along similar lines, Andri Gerber writes in the introduction to the book, *Metaphors in Architecture and Urbanism, An Introduction*, co-authored by Brent Patterson, that when he started work on his PhD, he noticed an almost total absence of research on the theory of metaphors in architecture (Gerber & Patterson, 2013, p. 14).

As Gerber's book demonstrates, this is no longer entirely fair towards architectural research. For instance, Adrian Forty has, as we have seen, examined the use of metaphors in architecture. Yet most of it is focused on the employment of metaphor and, differently from Jencks' approach, not in built form but in verbally founded thought and speech about architecture, in this context even as a spur to discover design. Rosario Caballero's work through a series of articles and the book *Re-Viewing Space. Figurative Language in Architects' Assessment of Built Space* (2006) is perhaps the most extensive effort in this regard. Less has been written on the employment of material, non-linguistic forms to organize architectural form. In this regard, in spite of research done in later years, Gerber's

verdict still to a large extent seems just. If this is true for metaphors, it certainly seems to be even more so for the remaining tropes.

6. Kenneth Burke's approach to tropes

In our study of tropes in Meyer and Wittwer's project, we will use the approach of the American author and critic Kenneth Burke. Burke represents the American theory and criticism tradition. He was (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2008) a partly autodidact writer of poems, a novel and some short stories. He worked as a music and literature critic and lectured for some time at the University of Chicago and at Bennington College. According to Britannica Academic, he is known for his view on humans as symbol-using, symbol-making and symbol-misusing animals; he saw literature as "symbolic action". Consequently, he was not merely interested in the formal aspects of literature but also its relation to its full context, which included its audience, the author's biography, the text's social, historical and political background. As the critic should criticize not only literature but also criticism itself, he became a spokesman for literary theory. *The Four Master Tropes* was published as an appendix to his influential theoretical work, *A Grammar of Motives* in 1945.

In this text, Burke describes the four master tropes – or figures of speech and writing – as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Burke begins his text by declaring that his primary concern with the four tropes will not be with their purely figurative usage, but with their role in the discovery and description of "the truth" (this harmonizes very well with the basic tenet of *neue Sachlichkeit* and Meyer). He emphasizes that the dividing lines between the literal and figurative usages shift, and that the four tropes shade into each other. Burke continues by saying that the "literal" or "realistic" applications of the four tropes usually go by a different set of names, which we might say describe their characteristic ways of working as figures of speech. We will use Burke's main concepts metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony to discuss the tropes and their other names, not as concepts but as descriptions of their unique functions/strategies or ways of working as figures of speech.

For metaphor we could substitute perspective;
For metonymy we could substitute reduction;
For synecdoche we could substitute representation;
For irony we could substitute dialectic (Burke, 1969, p. 503).

In a footnote, he further qualifies the notion of dialectic used here by saying that it is to be understood in the restricted sense because in a broader sense all the transformations considered are dialectical.

Burke addresses the distinction between literal and aesthetic tropes as well, but there is no room here to pursue the question about the aesthetic way of using them.

Metaphor

According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Pearsall, 2001, p. 895) the origin of the notion of metaphor is the Greek verb metapherein which means "to transfer". In a metaphor, a sign (in language a word or phenomenon or in architecture a material form) is put in relation to a second one. Thereby, meaning is transferred from the second to the first domain, which is seen under a new perspective. Accordingly, Burke describes *metaphor* in this way:

> Metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of that, or the thatness of this... And to consider A from the point of view of B is, of course, to use B as a perspective upon A (Burke, 1969, p. 503-4).

In Shakespeare's sonnet no. 18, we find the famous question: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (Shakespeare, 1958, p. 1045). This comparison establishes a perspective relationship between a summer's day (B) and the enigmatic addressee (A) of Shakespeare's sonnet. By comparing them, one is looking for qualities that the two domains share. This brings forward a hitherto unnoticed or new quality in the addressee. This demonstrates clearly the "as-if-it-were" element that is involved in metaphors.

Burke's definition is linked to his interest in the trope's role in the search for *truth*, in poetry as well as in science.

Meyer and Wittwer claimed that: "Any architectural attempt to give architectural expression to such a body must presuppose that it is nerved by the will to attain truth" (Schnaidt, 1965, p.25). The search for the truth of the League of Nations institution, and the use of perspectivating relations concretized through metaphors to reach this, are actually eloquently demonstrated by the competition we are discussing.

Meyer and Wittwer's world view is described in Meyer's manifest, *Die Neue Welt* (Meyer, 1926). Here Meyer describes the new world of industrial mass-society, and we have already seen that he understood trade unions, co-operatives, Ltd., Inc., cartel trusts and the League of Nations as the forms in which the social conglomerations of its day found expression.

Such a fundamental perspective on the project may be concretely articulated, for instance, in how the plan is situated in relation to its envi-

ronment, its exterior volumes, in the inner organisation of its rooms, its construction and iconography.

With respect to how the plan is situated in the surroundings, the perspective becomes noticeable in the main orientation of a project, towards whose surroundings the architects link their projects and what they ignore. Meyer and Wittwer created their project as a manmade artefact *in opposition to* nature – in situ concretized through the surrounding park – even if the special characteristics of the site were outlined at some length in the conditions of the competition. The architects thus write: "This building does not seek an artificial link with its park-like setting through the art of landscape gardening. As a deliberately contrived work of man it stands in legitimate contrast to nature" (Schnaidt, 1965, p. 25).

Instead, they oriented their project towards the approaching automobiles. As the automobile was seen as the epitome of industry, it represented the world of industry and industrial workers and, in a wider perspective, even the entire world and culture of modern industrialized society. To paraphrase Shakespeare, Meyer and Wittwer seemed to be saying, although less poetically: "Shall I compare thee to the modern industrial society?"

How radical this was, is seen by comparing the project to Le Corbusier's as well as to the winning project.

Le Corbusier consciously organized his project *in relation to* the natural site and its genius loci. As the picturesque tradition was crucial to Le Corbusier's later projects, Frampton reminds us that Le Corbusier identified this one as a *conception paysagiste*, a phrase Frampton takes as suggestive of Romantic Classicism (Frampton, 2002).

All in all, the architects of the two projects chose opposing perspectivating comparisons in the quest for the truth of the institution of the League of Nations. This truth was not only the utilitarian truth as it was conceived by functionalism. It was more a kind of social, cultural or even existential truth.

However, this basic perspectivating or metaphoric strategy of the projects was accompanied by other metaphors. Due to the importance the architects place on construction and its consequences for the exterior volumes as well as the interior spaces, it is useful to discuss this next.

Frampton characterizes Meyer and Wittwer's design as an architecture of building method – and thereby construction – and Meyer himself as a doctrinaire constructivist dedicated to building method as the very basis for creation. In this, he resembles a post-Classicist version of

AXONOMETRIQUE DEPUS LE LAC

Figure 8 (top)
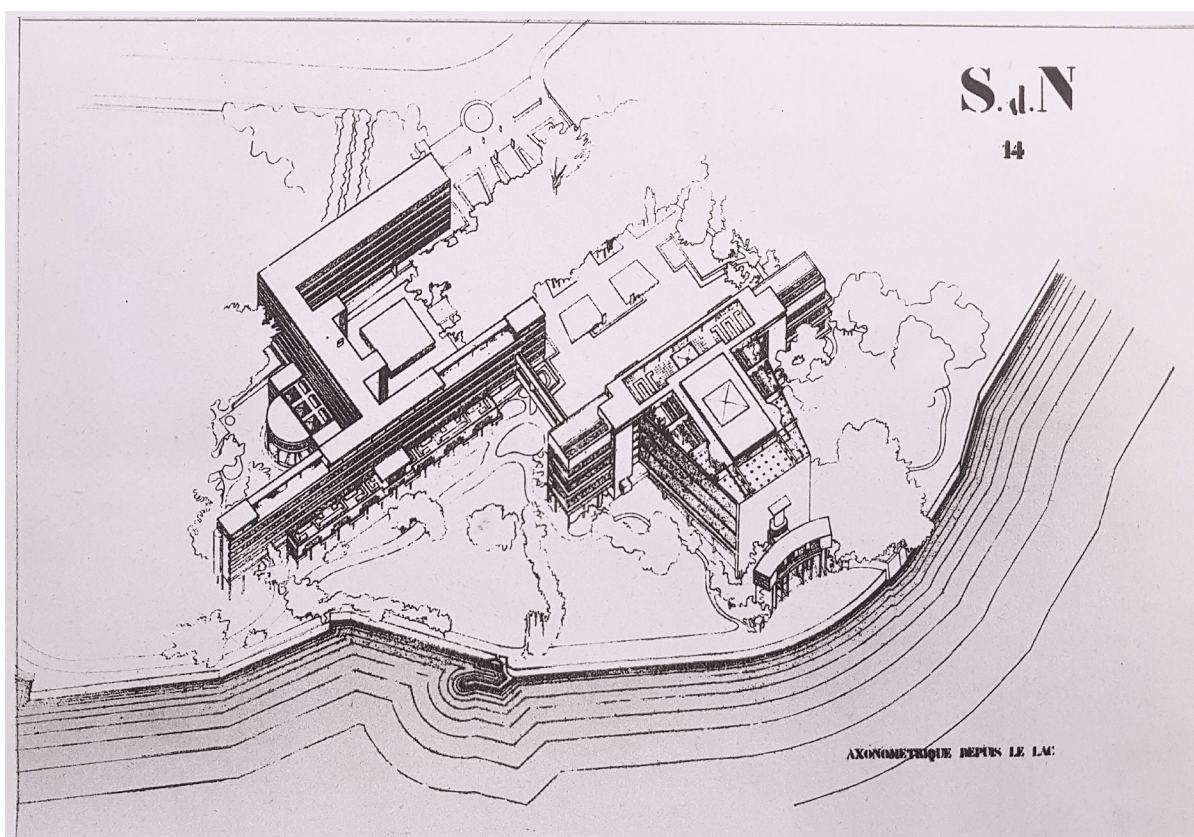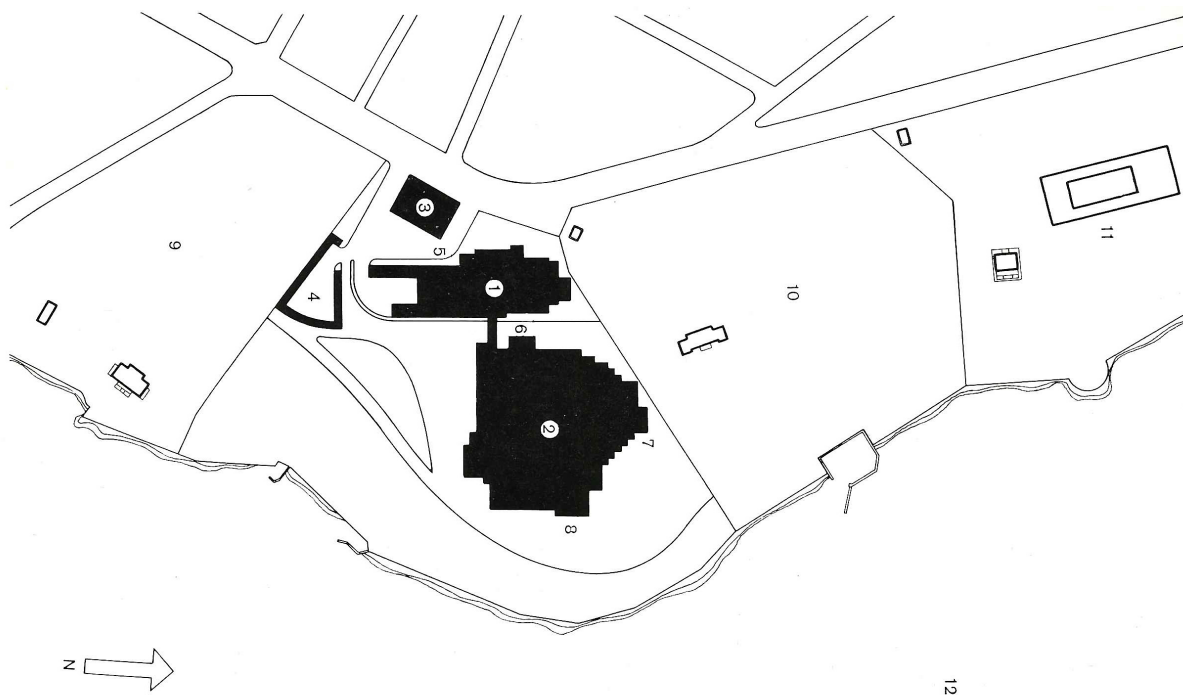**Meyer and Wittwer's Situation Plan.**
1 Secretariat building, 2 Assembly building, 3 Covered parking space, Garage, 5 Main entrance, 6 Journalists' entrance,
7 Public entrance, 8 Delegates' entrance, 9 Mon Repos Par, 10 Park Baton, 11 International Labour Office

Source: Schnaidt (1965)

Figure 9 (below)
Le Corbusier's competition entry.

United Nations Archives at Geneva

Durand. Thus construction, or rather a particular construction, becomes the second perspectivating technique the architects used in search for the truth of the institution.

Frampton describes the structural grid of 9 by 4,5 meters as Meyer's Platonic element. On this grid, the structural arrangement would arise in much the same manner as the "image" came into being on a Mondrian canvas. The grid was not only introduced as a practical means but may be interpreted as a concretization and articulation of the idea that construction, here as part of the modern, industrial form of production, is the fundament of architecture. In this way, a basic and quotidian constructional technique was charged with a double metaphorical meaning. Incidentally, Frampton also sees in the use of this grid an expression of Meyer's egalitarianism – something that increases the metaphoric content of the construction (Frampton, 2002). However, the metaphoric use of construction here also indicates Burke's point that metaphor may blend into other tropes like metonymy.

The metaphoric charging of construction is accentuated by the ways the construction influences the exterior as well as interior volumes. K. Michael Hays (1995, p. 165) describes the building – as well as later the plan – as egregiously decentred and dissymmetrical. The exterior volumes seem to rise as a construction causally from the requirements of the program without any interference by architects and therefore without composition. An example of this is the zigzag glass wall surrounding the assembly hall, which follows the construction.

Even more intriguing may be the meaning created by the interior spaces. The rooms of the plan are superimposed on the construction grid. Supposedly, the rooms would develop "automatically" from the requirements of the program. Frampton describes this (Frampton, 2002) as a random empiricism that results in an agglomeration of rooms. The superimposition of rooms on the constructional grid is seen to lead to a resultant plastic effect that appears random and inconsequent.

This leads to a paradox which demonstrates that functionalism is not necessarily a simple matter. Meyer's emphasis on building method as a utilitarian phenomenon did not lead to exceedingly practical solutions if we are focusing on social use. Meyer's focus on construction turned into an *expression* of utility that did not necessarily assure optimal utility. To Frampton, Le Corbusier's solutions in many cases seemed to be superior in this regard. In Meyer and Wittwer's case however, necessity of expression triumphed over pragmatics.

This demonstrates how the utilitarianism of Hannes Meyer led to the idealization of *the appearance* of utility. Metaphor thereby triumphed over literal meaning – the practical function. In turn, this led to Meyer's
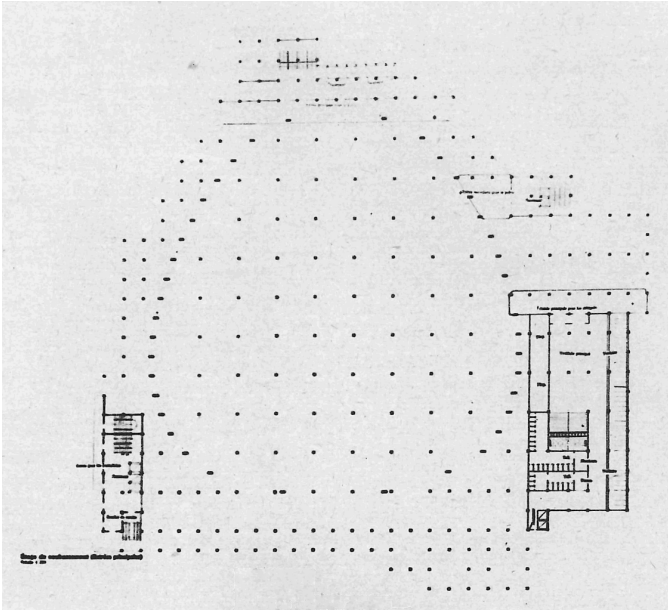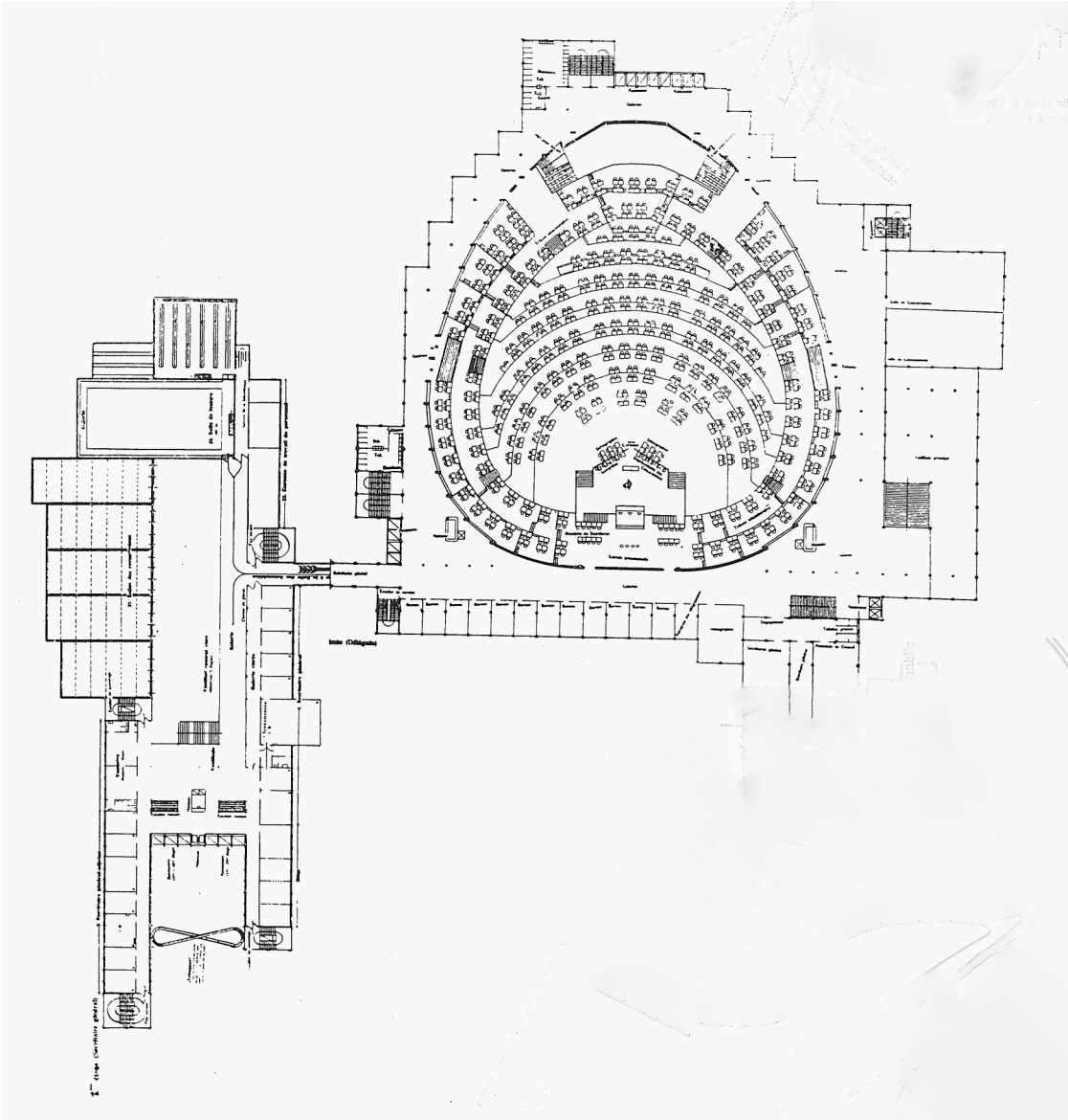
Figure 10 (left)
Ground plan of the assembly hall.
Société des Nations/League of Nations. Concours
D'Architecture/Architectural Competition. 1927
Figure 11 (below)
Plan of the mezzanine showing the
zigzag pattern of walls.
Bauhaus Zeitschrift 4, 1927

inadvertent creation of a functionalist aesthetic. As Frampton indicates (Frampton, 2002), the complex relations that may exist between the relative utility of an artifact and its iconography – or how it appears – tend to be insufficiently acknowledged. As he formulated it: "…a utilitarian iconography does not assure optimum utility. Conversely, an ideal iconography does not preclude an effective operational solution".

What Frampton here remarks on regarding plan and construction, also applies to the iconography of appearance of its external volumes. As the competition demonstrates, the architects were facing several options. Not by accident, Meyer and Wittwer took over the iconography, as Frampton also remarks, from early Soviet constructivism – the aesthetics developed to express the new workers' state and the industrial means of production it rested on. This fitted well with Meyer's Marxism, which ultimately led to the end of his period as head of Bauhaus.

What we observe in Meyer/Wittwer's and Le Corbusier's very different projects may seem a general aspect of all architectural projects. Meyer later acknowledged that the development of a project never is, and can never be, merely a rational answer to unambiguous basic human needs. It implies choice between options. The orientation of a project, organization of plans, its particular construction as well as its iconography, in a sophisticated way entails one or more defined ways of perspectivating the needs and thereby human life for which it is created. Thereby, the project acquires the character of an assembly of metaphors. This is so even if the architects themselves don't acknowledge it – in which case the metaphoric content may return to haunt them, to echo Jencks.

However, according to Burke, metaphor overlaps with other figures of speech, and when we are going to discuss further "figures of *building*", it may be more appropriate to treat them under the headings of other kinds of tropes. This is so, partly because architecture is a material phenomenon and the next tropes, the metonymies and synecdoches, are more closely linked to concrete material phenomena.

Metonymy

According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* again, the origin of this concept is the Greek word *metonumia*, which literally means "change of name" (Pearsall, 2001, p. 897). In Burke's discourse, metonymy works through reduction (Burke, 1969, p. 506). It conveys some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible. The metonymy, however, merely works *one way*, from the tangible to the intangible. The heart may be a metonymy for emotions but not vice versa. This is perhaps the trope that comes closest to the symbol's way of functioning.

As architecture is material and thereby indeed tangible, works of architecture should be expected to show examples of a discursive figure like

metonymy. Yet Meyer and Wittwer's work seems to be rather scarce regarding this trope. This is interesting and may highlight the architects' focus on the work's material presence and lack of surplus meaning. There are fewer forms which function as an emblem for more abstract, non-sensual meanings.

The project as a whole may be seen as a metonymy for Marxist modernity.

As we already have indicated, another example of how immaterial meanings are reduced to material figures of building in a unilateral way may be what Frampton coined as the authors' Platonic element, the building grid. Metaphor is blended here into metonymy, when it is seen as a metonymic reduction of the idea that construction is the fundament for modernity in architecture. As an expression of Meyer's egalitarianism, it may also form a metonymy for democracy.

A somewhat related interpretation is found in K. Michael Hays' book *Modernism and the posthumanist subject, the architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer.* Hays (1995, p.168-9) compares what he calls the egregiously decentred and dissymmetric plan of the building and the dada collage. If this is accepted, it may also be seen as a metonymy for the *destruction* of the humanist subject and the nature of the modern subject. The latter consequence may not have been intended by the authors but may be an example of how artefacts release cultural meanings beyond the scope of their originators' intentions, by being part of a wider culture.

It is interesting that Meyer and Wittwer's project seems to exhibit rather few metonymies because they are abundant in other kinds of architecture. A lot of ways of building, from singular motives to forms of plans, turn into conventional forms that emblematically signify some kind of meaning. The Greek column as well as the entire Greek formal idiom has been used as metonymy for a host of different meanings, as demonstrated by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre:

> *A further study of the use of the classical idiom shows classical architecture to have been engaged in many contradictory meanings and uses since the Renaissance. Classical buildings have been mentioned ... in the Renaissance ... as supporters of a militant structure in the same period, legitimizing the new world order of science, the market, industry, and a kind of limited democracy. Up to the end of the eighteenth century, they were used to give support to the ideas of homo fabricus, an exemplum virtutis of the new way of bourgeois life* (Tzonis & Lefaivre, 1988, p. 274).

Architectural projects create meaning through concrete metonymical figures of building. Yet, due to the material character of architecture, the tropical figure of synecdoche may seem particularly fit to establish reference and create meaning in architecture. Consequently, it doesn't surprise that synecdoche seems to be a more prevalent trope in Meyer and Wittwer's project.

Synecdoche

According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the origin of the concept of the synecdoche is the Greek "*sunekdokhe*", which is constructed by the joining of "*sun*" – "together" and "*ekdekhesthai*" – "take up" (Pearsall, 2001, p. 1452).

Burke writes that the trope of synecdoche may be substituted by *representation,* and he considers it in what he describes as the usual range of dictionary sense, which is: part for the whole, whole for the part, container for the contained, sign for the thing signified, material for the thing made (which in his view brings it closer to metonymy), cause for effect, effect for cause, genus for species, species for genus, etc. (Burke, 1969, p. 507-8). Later in the text, he includes such relations as before for after, implicit for explicit, temporal sequence for logical sequence, name for narrative, disease for cure, hero for villain and active for passive (Burke, 1969, p. 509). As one can understand, the possible forms of synecdochical relationships are legion. Burke claims that all such conversions imply an integral relationship, a relationship of *convertibility* between the two terms. This is the basic logic of synecdoche, separating it from metonymy.

Synecdoche is a very important tropical form of architecture. Architecture is material culture and a lot of the relations between the parts of the synecdoche are material, in particular those forming part of some kind of an allegedly causal chain.

As the house may be seen as the container of physical life, it may be understood as a synecdoche for the institution it consists of, in a similar way to how archaic language talks about firms as "houses". In this sense, the planned house as such, as well as its plan, may be understood as synecdoches, not only for the League of Nations, but also for the society at large that sends its representatives to the building as it is presented in *Die Neue Welt* (The New World).

The metaphor of the orientation may blend into a synecdoche. The house is oriented towards the approaching cars – eminent emblems of industrial society – which are offered parking lots exceeding the required number several times over. In this way, the house has a synecdochical relation to industry and modern industrial mass society.
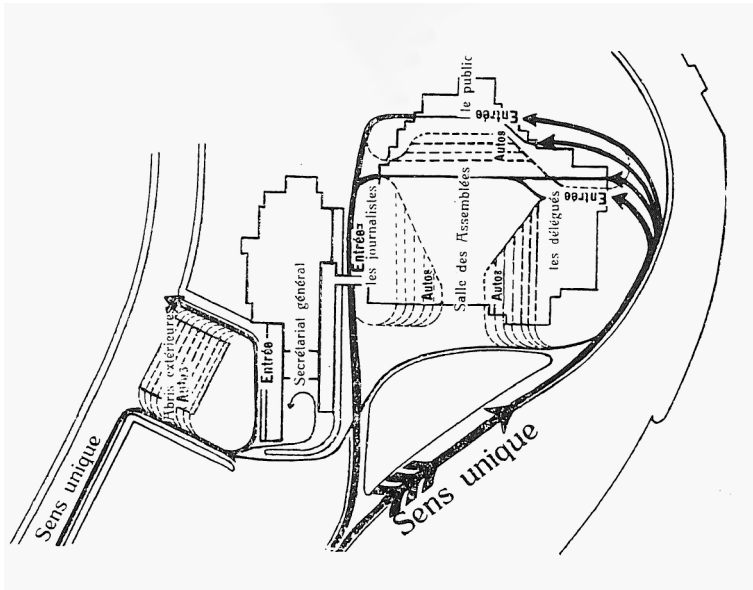
Figure 12
Circulation plan showing the approaching cars and car parks.
Bauhaus Zeitschrift 4, 1927

On a more detailed architectural level, there are an abundance of synecdochical relations established that add meaning to the project. This applies to architectural elements like the radio-tower, glass lifts and posters, which form part of modern technical civilization. The same applies to the construction system as a concrete technical device and even to the emphatically modern building materials – Eternit, xylolite, glass, concrete, aluminium and steel. All of them enjoy a synecdochical relation to industry, to factories, industrial workers and through them to industrial society.

However, here I would like to highlight an aspect of the project's synecdochical figure of building, which I would claim is very important but often overlooked in architecture in general. K. Michael Hays describes the building as well as the plan as egregiously decentred and dissymmetrical. As Meyer and Wittwer resisted the creation of any processional space or centralized composition, and thereby monumental unity, the viewer, then, walking through the building always finds himself in residual spaces, in the gaps between the primary spatial units, compelled to move, constantly differentiating and recombining spatial experiences but only in pieces and only in time (Hays, 1995, p. 165). Hays then compares the organisation of the plan, and we may add the experience it engenders in the users, in a passage to the Dada collage (Hays, 1995, p. 168-171).

Hays' comparing a description of the plan and the experience it creates in the user is highly synecdochic and may be related to one of Burke's comments on artistic representation to touch upon this question – to highlight a phenomenon, which is often inadequately emphasized in contemporary architectural theory. It relates to what we have already written about how tropes are employed not merely passively to signify but as figures of building to actively create form.

Burke claims that artistic representation is supposed to be synecdochical in the sense that certain relations within the medium "stand for" corresponding relations outside it (Burke, 1969, p. 508). In naturalist art, this is easily understood. However, there is a wider sense in which even an "abstract" artwork may be synecdochical towards its external reality. This may happen not only through the depicted phenomena and their qualities (to a certain extent even the most "abstract" contemporary work of art may be seen as imitating concrete forms) but also through the relation between its elements. Thus, a Dada collage, or more so a similar work of architecture, may establish synecdochical links to the experienced order of life, as well as to the internal order of the experiencing subject engendered in a modern industrial society.

Perhaps this is foremostly articulated in the formal order of the work of architecture, its dimensions, proportions, rhythms, figures and so on. The relations here are immediate – not so much to Classical architecture's representation of a Pythagorean cosmos (rather metaphoric or metonymic) – but as to Meyer and Wittwer's work and its relation to the claimed co-op life of the modern industrial society.

The general point here is that the formal organisation of a work of art or architecture, or more pointedly, its "formal language" often functions synecdochical and consequently as a comprehensive trope. This is about the relation between a macro and micro world.

These examples, and perhaps in particular our comments on the plan, demonstrate some of the ways in which a work of architecture may include the tropes of synecdoche to draw on a richer web of meaning than natural necessities to "give expression to a view of men in relation to their environments", to quote Reyner Banham (1960, p. 327).

That our examples not only are to be seen as practical *necessities* but to actually form synecdoches is easily noticed if we compare Meyer and Wittwer's project to the others emerging from the competition, including Le Corbusier's and the realized Neo Classical one. Their organisation of the plans as well as their constructions varied exceedingly. Thus, what Meyer and Wittwer claimed to be the result of a kind of *necessity* like natural causality, leading to compositional randomness at odds with traditional architecture's efforts to order architecture, emerges as the result of *free,* culturally highly informed choices with the mere *appearance* of necessity. This emphasizes their solution's character as specific *figures of buildings*.

Irony
According to Burke, the preceding tropes may blend into irony. According to him, irony is created when one tries by the interaction of terms upon another to produce a *development,* which uses all the terms, and

therefore from the standpoint of this total form (which he sees as equal to perspective or perspectives), none of the participating "sub-perspectives" can be treated as either precisely right or wrong. They are all voices, and all the characters are needed to produce the total development. In ordinary irony, no perspective is superior to the others – as in a drama, no singular character may be seen to be the spokesperson for the author. In "romantic irony", however, one of them is (Burke, 1969, p. 512).

From this point of view, Meyer and Wittwer's project, taken at face value, acquires a strong identity by being utterly unironical. It is political art propagating a singular position of scientization of building with great fervour.

From our position, we may distinguish a trace of romantic irony in the project and its authors' relation, not to the building task at hand, but to the field of architecture. It might show up in their relentless intention – through this project amongst others – to destroy traditional architecture and propagate a new one. In this sense, the negativity of Meyer and Wittwer is romantic and typical of the avant-garde characterized by Matei Calinsecu (Calinescu, 1987, p. 124) as a culture of crisis and a cult of negativity. However, their own intention seems to be too single-minded and their ideal too independent from traditional architecture that it might be correct to characterise it as ironical.

On a more general level, other epochs of architecture cultivate the ironic trope to a much greater degree than modernism. The heydays of the trope of irony, albeit not always in Burke's sense, are those of Post-Modernism. Great parts of historicism may also to some extent be understood from this point of view. Actually, all in all, all aesthetically oriented architecture may to some extent be understood as ironical, ordinarily eschewing the one-dimensionality of political propaganda. This makes the question about the relation between literal, discursive and aesthetic tropes even more relevant.

7. Tropes in architecture

Meyer and Wittwer claimed that their League of Nations building symbolized nothing. It referred to no meaning beyond its material fact. Yet, we have discovered that, contrary to the claim of the authors, the project actually referred to comprehensive meanings. Furthermore, it did so precisely through its material presence. It did this through concrete *figures of building* which form tropes. The tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony manifested themselves in the material reality of the project, at least through the way it was situated in the environment, its exterior volume, the organization of its interior spaces in relation to the construction, the construction technique, materials and even the project's iconography.

The entire project forms a grand trope. It concretely manifests the specific ideas about the institution of the League of Nations put forward in Hannes Meyer's *The New World*. The manifest saw the institution as part of a new, industrial world, and a series of commentators, including Reyner Banham (1960, p. 325), have commented that the architects of the first generation came extraordinarily close to realising the general idea of a Machine Age architecture.

This grand trope, however, is constructed from a web of different sub-tropes: the institution was put in *metaphorical* perspective through its orientation towards the approaching automobiles as representatives of industrial society. Through the building grid, the building and architecture in general were put into the perspective that construction – here as part of the modern, industrial form of production – is the fundament for architecture.

The building and the League of Nations were not so much referring to meaning through *metonymical* reduction. This is perhaps something we might expect from a project insisting on its factual and fact-based indexicality. Yet, we have seen that the building grid also may function as a metonymy for Meyer's egalitarianism.

When it comes to *synecdochical* representation, however, the building abounds with examples. The metaphor may blend into the synecdoche, and we have discovered such representation in the orientation of the project, the exaggerated number of parking lots, architectural elements like the radio-tower, glass lifts and even posters, and in building materials like Eternit, xylolite, glass, concrete, aluminium and steel. All of those link the project to the modern industrial civilization. We have in particular discussed at length how the spatial plan may be seen as a synecdoche for the order of modern, industrial society and the psyche of its inhabitants.

An interesting aspect of the project is its lack of *ironical* dialectics. This might perhaps be expected from such an unambiguous form of political architecture.

The tropes were not the direct, "causal" result of the programme. Neither were they passive vehicles for meaning. As the architectural competition showed, as figures of building, they were actively chosen as certain form possibilities among several others. As forms, they were not merely, perhaps not even foremostly, chosen to solve formal problems. They were chosen in the search of, or rather to proclaim, the meaningful (ideological) truth about the nature of the institution of the League of Nations for which the architects were drawing. The meaning-carrying forms, however, had precisely distinct form-qualities. Consequently, the pursuit of

meaning through concrete figures of building contributed crucially to the project finding its final form.

Works of architecture, however, seldom form merely one grand trope. They include and release a host of different meanings. The cloud of meanings surrounding a project is often experienced as nebulous, hard to pin down or delineate exhaustively in a systematic way. Burke's model, however, indicates how a grand trope may embrace a web of different sub-tropes. The different sub-tropes forming the web of meaning of a project don't need to be homologous as in scientific use. Their function is not to constitute a logical discourse *on* the project. It is to make some meanings present, confront them with each other, and through their material presence make this confrontation possible to experience by the users, through their senses and on their bodies.

As we have seen, the project is particularly shaped by metaphors and synecdoches. Metonymies are scarcer, and the project seems to be poorer in irony. Yet I still think that Burke's approach is fruitful. First, it makes it possible to see in more detail and be more precise about the complexity in how this (and other) building(s) convey meaning. Secondly, it makes it possible to discover the characteristic tropical profile of the project and discuss what it means.

The particular richness of synecdoches in this project may be interpreted as typical for a project created from radical materialism. The relative lack of metonymies may be understood on the same background. Further, confronting the project with the trope of irony, makes us see certain qualities in it by also foregrounding what it is *not*. On the surface, it is utterly unironic. Yet, particularly in historical hindsight, amongst others as seen from Meyer's own reorientation, its fundamental irony, its dialectical way of working, emerges as the project's important historical function in changing the course of architectural history. In this connection, it was starkly ironical.

By addressing the question if and how a project through its *tropes* tries to understand a certain institution and its way of life, we are focusing on what I will claim is a crucial aspect of architecture that may be too often ignored in contemporary architectural discourse. With respect to some of the works of architecture of the first machine age – and we might include our example – Reyner Banham claimed: "Their [the architectural projects'] status as masterpieces rests, as it does with most other masterpieces of architecture, upon the authority and felicity with which they give expression to a view of men in relation to their environments" (Banham, 1960, p. 325). The work of architecture thereby turns from being a "machine for living" into a "machine for knowing" – an epistemological "machine".

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