

# H-Net Reviews

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Matthew Jeffries. *Politics and Culture in Wilhelmine Germany: The Case of Industrial Architecture*. Oxford and Providence, R.I.: Berg Publishers, 1995. xiii + 318 pp. \$45.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85496-945-6.

Reviewed by Mark Peach (Southern College)

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Architecture, as numerous historians have pointed out, is the most expensive of the arts. Without generous patrons, architectural visions remain two-dimensional fantasies. Indeed, with the exception of architecture endowed by wealthy and often eccentric individuals, architecture is usually the product of a variety of collective forces, a complex and often confusing combination of social, economic, cultural, as well as aesthetic needs and desires.

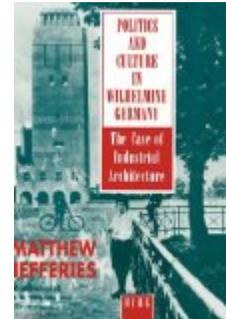
It is for this reason that industrial architecture provides a useful means for investigating the politics and culture of Wilhelmine Germany. In effect, Matthew Jeffries attempts to provide for Wilhelmine industrial architecture what Barbara Miller Lane (*Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1914-1945*) provided for German interwar architecture some time ago – an analysis of architectural development in a social and political context. The author states that this is not an architectural study per se, but rather a contribution to “politically-literate architectural history” (27). The result is a competent investigation of the relationship between cultural reform and the industrially built environment.

As Jeffries rightly complains in his introduction, Wilhelmine architecture has for too long been seen as little more than the training ground for Weimar modern architects. And despite the considerable efforts of historians such as Julius Posener, Tilmann Buddensieg, Jochen Bober, Jost Hermand, Richard Hamann and others, mainstream Wilhelmine architecture continues to be viewed largely as an unfortunate but necessary transition. Jeffries’s contribution to a more nuanced view of German *Fin-de-Siecle* reform movements, architectural and otherwise, is therefore all the more valuable.

One asset of Jeffries’s study is to illustrate that architectural historicism in Imperial Germany was considerably more complicated than generally assumed. Historicism, asserts Jeffries, was less pervasive than is commonly known, and its death was a “slow and messy process” (44). In the early years of the new German Reich, industrial building had no artistic pretensions. Architects had no interest in commissions for buildings they considered culturally unimportant, and corporate directors had little incentive to hire them. What changed this state of affairs was the advent of joint stock companies and the subsequent need to convince shareholders and creditors of the company’s economic health.

To the extent that companies began to hire architects for industrial buildings in the late nineteenth century, they chose architectural styles related to church and state that reflected values of strength, solidity, and authoritarianism. The businesses that favored historicist architecture were the coal and steel industries; it would be businesses that opposed the social, political and economic policies of German heavy industry that first began to develop a “counter-architecture,” i.e. modern architecture. In fact, it was the increasingly common perception that German culture was in need of reform that instigated the movement against architectural historicism.

Much of the initial support for architectural reform came from the *Heimatschutz* movement, a group generally associated with reactionary opposition to reform (which Jeffries sees as a post-World War I phenomenon). Yet in the context of Wilhelmine Germany, the early *Heimatschutz* movement was arguably progressive. Jeffries builds a case for the reasonableness of the group, insisting that the movement was not a lunatic



fringe, was not necessarily anti-modern, and was certainly not culturally pessimistic. Like architectural modernists, *Heimatschuetzer* saw a harmoniously-built environment contributing to social harmony. Modernists and *Heimatschuetzer* parted company, however, when they attempted to decide what the future, both socially and architecturally, would look like.

The German *Werkbund* represented the modernist opposition to design historicism. Ostensibly, the *Werkbund* was founded to improve the quality of Germany's manufactured goods and the lives of those who produced them. In view of the considerable literature on the *Werkbund* (Joan Campbell's *The German Werkbund: The Politics of Reform in the Applied Arts* remains the standard text), Jeffries restricts himself to discussing the *Werkbund's* relation to industrial building – but finds plenty to discuss. Progressive German manufacturers had modernized the design of their products before they began to modernize their factories, but when they did begin to see modern architecture as an asset they often chose *Werkbund* architects.

Using the industrial architecture of *Werkbund* architects Peter Behrens, Walter Gropius, and Karl Siebrecht as case studies, Jeffries argues that manufacturers chose modern styles for industrial buildings because of the statements such buildings made about the respective industries and the ways in which modern buildings might have advantageously positioned their products in relation to competitors. But aesthetics and economics were not the primary motivations for choosing modern architects: “With its ideas on economic priorities (*Qualitaetsarbeit*), the reform of the workplace, and the role of commerce and industry in society, the *Werkbund* took political positions and attracted political people. In effect, the selection of a [German *Werkbund*] architect became a political act” (145).

Prewar *Werkbund* politics revolved around the figure of liberal nationalist Friedrich Naumann, the founding visionary of the *Werkbund* and leader of German progressive renewal. Although Naumann certainly had an interest in art, artisans, and manufacturing, he apparently saw these activities primarily in relation to broad social reform and the future economic role of Germany in *Mitteleuropa*. According to Naumann and many of his sup-

porters, the *Werkbund's* promotion of *Qualitaetsarbeit* would both reduce class conflict and improve Germany's international economic competitiveness. Under the leadership of Naumann and Ernst Jaekch, the wartime *Werkbund* became a propaganda tool of German expansionism while attempting to ameliorate Germany's militaristic image.

The metaphor of the *Werkbund* as an alternative weapon of war can be applied to the domestic sphere as well. The oldest and most conservative elements of Germany's industrialization, namely the coal and steel industries, remained suspicious of the *Werkbund* because of its progressive social views and its architectural modernism. The expanding sector of light industry that depended on skilled labor, however, saw *Werkbund* membership as a useful means to lobby for favorable trade and tariff conditions: “The [German *Werkbund*] companies did, however, have much in common: they were innovative, rapidly expanding and publicity conscious; they were to be found in the principal growth areas of the economy, or else were market leaders in more stable sectors; above all, they were companies which sought to distinguish themselves from the industrial status quo” (220). And their new weapon was architecture.

Jeffries's final conclusions regarding the *Werkbund's* ability to promote social and cultural renewal comes as no surprise. There were inherent contradictions in Germany's social structure that neither quality work nor modern architecture could resolve: “To launch a new aesthetic was one thing, to change the direction and emphasis of economic life was quite another” (243). As Weimar's modern architects discovered later, a political revolution did not significantly alter this situation.

All told, Jeffries's book is a significant contribution to our understanding of the complex intersection of art, industry and German cultural reform. His thorough and interdisciplinary research will make his study useful to scholars interested in architecture, bourgeois reform, industrial relations, and economic structural change. It does not overturn any long-held convictions, but by reintegrating industrial modern architecture in its social and political context, this study does contribute to a more sophisticated perception of the forces of modernity in Wilhelmine Germany.

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