Housing Worldwide

For Information on Risks and Side Effects, Ask Your Residents

“Architecture of good intentions” was the sarcastic upshot with which architecture theorist Colin Rowe dressed down the avant-garde of the twentieth century—for “good intentions” alone are by far no guarantee that truly good architecture will be created. Rowe’s verdict was exaggerated and phrased with intention to provoke. Of course scores of outstanding buildings have emerged from the period of architecture most disdained by Rowe: postwar construction after 1945. But it wasn’t completely pulled out of thin air, this harsh criticism of “good intentions.” Colin Rowe’s skepticism regarding the architectural experiments imposed upon residents of buildings and cities stems from the nineteen-sixties. Wartime destruction and economic growth inspired architects, planners, and politicians around the globe to sweep away historically established forms of urban and housing developments in favor of a new lifeworld designed at the drawing board. This, in most cases, failed to be a model of success.

In the meantime, one is—with the possible exception of Asia’s booming regions—far more precautious. But does this mean that experimentation in architecture should be forsaken?

Good intentions alone—and this is where the issues addressed by this project and thus the exhibition Housing Models come into play—are not decisive here. Whether experiments in the realm of architecture actually lead to success is decided by everyday life, which doesn’t begin until the first residents have moved in. A banal determination. Yet it is difficult to secure an impression of how the structures are really being accepted.

In gaining an assessment of suitability for everyday use and determining what has come of the grand intentions, various difficulties are bound to be encountered. For nearly everything that we are in a position to know about newly erected architecture—assuming that no opportunity exists for viewing the site personally to gain an impression—has been custom-tailored in such a way that even a denotation as “propaganda” would be understated. Those drawing on books, magazines, the Internet, or exhibitions to stay informed about current building practices will encounter a world meticulously devoid of people. The buildings in 99 percent of architectural photos circulating through all channels have been photographed shortly after completion, directly before the residents take possession. The accompanying explanatory notes, if present, are teeming with technicalities that are likely only of interest to other architects—they never seem to address the simple question of whether people feel comfortable in the new house, in the new office, or of how they end up redesigning their environment, perhaps throwing over well-laid plans.

It’s no wonder that this idolization of the building structure in its purity, its having been cleansed of all traces of human life, can almost solely be found either in self-contained architecture circles or in zeitgeist magazines being pretentiously treated through staged photo spreads. The aspiration arising at the beginning of the twentieth century of elevating the world as the “fountainhead of design,” of even soaring to the heights of “global master builder,” has yielded to an epicurean clicking of the tongue when presented with views of silky-smooth concrete façades or

computer- generated proliferations of form. Most architects, it does seem, have maneuvered themselves into “splendid isolation.”

Yes, it is still fitting to inquire about experiments in architecture—but rather without directing questions toward the architects. This premise formed a point of departure for the exhibition Housing Models. Our decision to, in the process of our research, in fact select projects that demonstrate less of the sculptural value of the flawless building or its expressivity and more of the social “program” is a promising sign.

One could have put on an exhibition reviewing the everyday suitability of architectural experiments, including examples of office buildings or factories or bus stops. Housing, however, is the area undergoing the highest level of enduring force. At the same time, the topic housing ensures that each and every exhibition visitor is an expert. In this respect, hardly a good intention can be used as a pretense, and the exhibition can best live up to its aim of reaching beyond an architecture—specific audience—of approximating an audience that will pick up on housing models as a topic for discussion based on their own housing experiences.

The decisiveness of the resolution to study housing as an experimental field was reflected in the ultimately open and highly fragmentary manner in which the final projects to be more closely examined were selected. This selection was undertaken in the scope of a symposium held at the Künstlerhaus Vienna in September 2007. Architecture critics from various countries and continents presented international examples from the field of housing that ventured experimentation in either an architectural or a social sense.

From the sixty projects under discussion, eleven examples were selected that in practice blend experimentation and exemplariness. A further condition: each of the selected structures must have been inhabited for at least two years, so that marks of usage and appropriation are already evident.

The final selection may at first glance appear almost too random. What does a Chilean development in impoverished Iquique have in common with Dutch low-cost terraced housing in Roosendaal, and how do these relate to a Japanese housing project in Tokyo where residents have opted to live in steel cuboids that they must exit in order to enter the bathroom? Our response to this question is to point out the delight inherent in the question mark: each of these housing models expresses intentions through its architecture, being more or less contrary to that which one is accustomed when it comes to the topic of housing. Each of the projects awakens curiosity to look a bit closer, and all harbor a particular agenda that we aim to reveal. The topics revolve around familiar arguments such as private space versus publicness, and naturally also budgetary aspects or revitalization contra new build. In many cases, formal aspects—like, for instance, the positioning of the service zones in the classic multi-story Shinonome Canal Court in Tokyo—seem to dominate at first glance. But ultimately these flexible buffer zones prove to be extremely intensively utilized.

Moreover, none of the featured housing models venture something radically new, at least not if measured against architectural history. Still, the Chilean Elemental development is a praiseworthy solution since housing has never been built there that exhibits a well-balanced relationship between social commitment and related self-

building concepts. And neither is the Swiss development in Uster “revolutionary,” for it has numerous forerunners. But in Switzerland it is nevertheless a cost-effective and energy-efficient approach that encompasses the same questions as the Elemental project in Chile: Does a “shelving structure” prove valuable where the residents enjoy as much freedom as possible with their “section,” and does it matter whether they HAVE TO actively contribute to the expansion of their area (for economic reasons in Chile) or whether they WANT TO (in Switzerland)? How do “building collectives” work, that is, the voluntary pooling of prospective homeowners for the erection of an apartment building? The pragmatic building group project “ten in one” in Berlin stands out for the extraordinarily short time—two years—dedicated to project development and realization. In Vienna the idealistic project “Sargfabrik”—comprising seventyfive housing units—required twelve whole years to move from initial conceptualization to the quasi selfadministered housing form. The younger sister “Miss Sargfabrik” only exacted around three years of the planners’ time.

Compelling are the individual processes of appropriation taking shape through the residents. It has been repeatedly observed that the potential for identification with one’s own living environment can be substantially heightened by partially planned self-build schemes. Important is to ensure that such schemes are adeptly supported, even when the housing forms depart from the ideal typology prevailing in the minds of the planners. Functioning spatial structures retain their sense of quality even if, as in the case of the POS project in Krapinske Toplice, Croatia, changes are made to the skeletal structure after the fact.

The terrace houses of Tierra Nueva Farm Labor Housing in Alamosa, Colorado have their roots in the grid of single-family housing and reveal an alternative housing form for seasonal migrant workers, replacing the mobile trailer. Dominating here is strict functionality and order in combination with a social program.

This is in line with the U.S. Hope VI housing program, initiated in 1992, which has set out to rectify urban problem zones through demolition and new build. An exception to this approach is illustrated by the Archer Courts project in Chicago, where the postwar buildings have been successfully restored and thus saved from demolition.

These examples show how one-time ambitions and ideas are not enough to preserve the exemplary. Continual maintenance, refinement, and dedusting are basic parameters for living experiments. In an ideal scenario, the dynamism is shifted over to the users themselves. Yet everyday life calls for ongoing moderation in terms of coordinated initiatives that vitally contribute to the preservation of such exemplariness.

And one thing has become significantly apparent, namely that the regionally differentiated housing forms are becoming increasingly aligned—for instance in the project Shinonome Canal Court in Tokyo, where conventional living room seating furniture has found a place next to tatami mats. Local differentiation only becomes apparent through culture-specific housing accessories.

Debate among the symposium participants, which ultimately flowed into the exhibition, was naturally spurred on by precisely those documents that were meant to play only a minimal role in the discourse: spread across the wall were typical architecture photos, building specifications, floor plans, and sections.

On the table, however, was the first housing model—an individually fashioned reproduction of the Miss Sargfabrik in Vienna—facilitating discussion on the question of how models must be created that, instead of serving primarily as fetishes for architects, rather provide information about the usability of house and apartment. In the exhibition, all projects are represented by large-scale models, in some cases even accessible since life-size reconstructed from cardboard.

At the symposium a photo series was shown by Viennese photographer Hertha Hurnaus, which was likewise dedicated to the Sargfabrik. The images were created for an issue of the Spanish journal 2G and accompanied an interview series by Ilka and Andreas Ruby, who had undertaken one of those rare attempts at assessing—years after its completion—the suitability of a building for everyday life. For the realization of the exhibition Housing Models, however, the perspective was even more subjectively selected: the image documentation derives from the residents themselves, who were solicited by local “correspondents” to take photographs of their housing environments. The texts found in this publication also stem from these correspondents and are augmented by two essays respectively dealing with financial issues in the real estate market and the question of the resource-efficient renewal of postwar-era “experiments.” For those authors who had several years ago already written about a newly finished building, the fresh encounter has proved to be an insightful comparison to earlier expectations. In addition, the texts by last year’s symposium participants shed light on the context of housing in the regions whence the selected projects hail.

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Vienna/Frankfurt am Main, 2008

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Exhibition catalogue „Wohnmodelle - Experiment und Alltag“ (German only)
Oliver Elser, Michael Rieper und Künstlerhaus Wien (Hg.eds.)
Folio Verlag Wien- Bozen
http://www.folioverlag.com
EUR [D/A] 29,80
EUR [I] 28,20
ISBN 978-3-85256-490-6