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Housing Research Council

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A group of nearly 80 architects and other building specialists has banded together in what is known as the Housing Research Council. Their purpose is to make a thorough investigation of the problems of housing in general and home building. They have a threefold aim: In the first place, this group would like to take up the problem of the new housing development, that is to say, the foundation of a sizeable suburb-like colony. Especially at a time when settlement in already established districts represents the majority of all cases, a concern with the model new housing development would be bound to yield insights that can be of benefit also to the occasional special cases that arise in the already developed residential area. In the second place, the group is interested in the rationalization of planning methods and of industrialized architecture; they will yield construction methods, area and house types that we shall have to compare and assess, with a view to determining what can be called their livability. For this reason, the Housing Research Council is concerning itself, in great detail, with the measurement of livability. In the third place, the members of the Council are interested in having a forum where knowledge and experiences can be renewed and exchanged in an age when the knowledge acquired during studies and later on the job is no longer sufficient by itself.

The initiative came from the Swiss Werkbund. We published the leaflet «Who will build Werkbund houses with us?» (WERK 1/1966, page 4). The old Werkbund idea of a model development as an effective prototype and incentive for other housing projects was there adapted to the needs of the times: Given the conditions of rapid growth, of pre-fabrication and of regional and infra-structural problems obtaining in our country, we have to cope with the question of larger projects than all previous Werkbund developments. The Werkbund as a research and planning body can get involved in the construction of such a development only by furnishing the best point of departure, both from the design and the purely technical standpoints. In order to carry out this task, the Werkbund was compelled to broaden its basis. It accepted the assistance of a number of other specialists, in particular engineers and legal men not represented in the Werkbund, and combined them in the Housing Research Council.

In the work of the Housing Research Council it becomes evident to what a great extent the environment of the given housing unit is regarded as a factor in determining its livability. At the basis of any judgment of the house there is now a greater perimeter understood than heretofore. This way of looking at the problem can also be of use in the elaboration of future planning measures and building regulations: seeing that at the present time we have advanced from lot building to regional building, almost the entire construction in housing developments represents exceptional procedures above and beyond the uncoded aims of the building permits. There would be conceivable, in this connection, legislation which, instead of metrical norms, formulated qualitative criteria, this legislation having as its prerequisite the mensurability of livability. In this way we could avoid the danger of having our country desecrated by types of architecture that are viable and acceptable *per se* but are in the mass unbearable. This peril is all the greater in that the prior investments of the future building industry could be based on such commonly accepted and readily licensed building types, and in this way the whole development could become stagnant. The endeavours of the Housing Research Council, accordingly, aim at the creation of a richly varied offer of sensibly priced types of housing of comparable livability. A further desire of the Housing Research Council is the rationalization not only of housing construction but also of the infrastructure. Savings here have to be sought in meaningful utilization planning and a consistent integration of same in the previously established infrastructure. Furthermore, problems arise in connection with the erection of a large-scale housing unit in an already existing community. The range of the questions that arise extends from the public finances to the sociological and political integration of the new residents in the original population of the given community.

Finally, it has to be made clear to the authorities, the business community and the public at large that the increase in livability is a factor of economic significance and, in the last analysis, represents a highly rational measure. We shall be in a position to raise the funds needed for housing construction in an amount that is sufficient only if the resident himself is willing to spend a larger portion of the family budget on housing. However, he will do this only if he is happy in the house where he is living and if there is an incentive to make sacrifices for a high standard of housing. This idea can be put forward only on the basis of social honesty, as represented by an association like the Swiss Werkbund, which is clearly guided by ethical considerations. It is by no means a question of giving scientific sanction to the present situation and of making present-day housing more acceptable by means of tricks with a view to drawing off all the more purchasing power from the population.

The results of the work of the Housing Research Council presented in this Issue can provide but a hint of what has actually been achieved, which again for its part represents merely a sketch of the coming task.

It remains an open question how far the program can be advanced on the previous scale, especially on a non-professional basis; as in every type of research activity, there are more attractive and less attractive assignments, popular and relatively unpopular branches of activity. We should like at this juncture to express the hope that, on the one hand, we can find generous sources of funds to finance necessary but more extensive research projects and, on the other hand, the enthusiasm inspiring volunteer workers up to now does not dry up.

New works of art in the University of Business and the Social Sciences, St. Gall

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by Rudolf Hanhart

Since the last presentation of the new works of art in the University of Business and the Social Sciences in St. Gall (WERK, December 1964), four new groups of works and individual objects have been added. The inter-denominational chapel has been redesigned by the Zurich sculptor Otto Müller. Its sculptural decorations consist of bronze and lead reliefs as well as a massive angular bronze block set up on the Communion Table. – Jean Baier, Geneva, has affixed metal reliefs to the walls and ceiling of the restaurant in the student hostel. They have been painted in simple vivid colours. – For a corridor in the Technology Building a mosaic has been created by Hedy Melano-Högger following a design by Georges Braque; the motif is a bird in flight. – A red mobile by Alexander Calder has been freely suspended in the stairwell.

Purism and the painting of Le Corbusier

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by Stanislaus von Moos

It has become the custom to derive Modern Architecture stylistically from the spatial principles of cubism, but the author points out that Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) became aware of the innovations that had revolutionized painting only after making the acquaintance of Ozenfant (May 1917). In the beginning he adopted a critical position on cubism, purist painting striving for a new kind of classical beauty emerging from the logical thought processes of the engineer. Only later, in contact with the collector Raoul La Roche, did he develop a positive approach to cubism. The author traces the growth of Le Corbusier's painting out of purism. Around 1925 the exemplary purity of the early pictures is abandoned. The «objets-types» are succeeded by the «objets à réaction poétique». Conceptual contents pointing to real objects in the world are to be indicated as solidly as possible. The late work is dominated by signs and symbols and their semantic contents. The words come from sketchbooks: plants, animals, the human figure. Above all, the symbolism of the hand can be traced from 1928 right into the final works.