

Zeitschrift: Werk, Bauen + Wohnen
Herausgeber: Bund Schweizer Architekten
Band: 88 (2001)
Heft: 6: Wohnen, wohnen = Habitats = Housing

Rubrik: English

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 12.05.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

English

Ernst Hubeli (pages 8–13)
English translation: Michael Robinson

The indefinite and the particular

Recent research has not just confirmed the increasingly heterogeneous quality of the way we live and the dwellings we live in, but also a growing gulf between everyday reality, what is offered on the market and the ideologies of advertising. Anyone who investigates the everyday functions of domestic life will find very little that is average and ordinary any more. Deviancy and inappropriateness are the norm. Thus anything aspiring towards a standard – whether in terms of surface arithmetic or a specific home culture – seems out of touch with reality, out of date, and sometimes even obsessive. Numbers of rooms, size of rooms, functions, standards of furniture and equipment and so-called qualities of domestic life that are fixed and described in programmes for residential buildings and competitions are almost all lacking in any plausible justification, and certainly do not have any scientific basis. Dwelling has become a category of use that is open to misunderstanding, and design cannot be expected to define the indefinite. It is in fact all about spatial structures that are entirely neutral in terms of use, and that become fixed only in terms of their unknown future appropriation.

A flat with 4.5 rooms, to mention an example, is still the popular average dwelling in the eyes of the experts. In reality – and this is the result of some wide-ranging research in Germany – no one wants a room with 3 double and 1 single bedrooms. It addresses an average that no one is involved in. As well as this, the number of rooms is seen to be misleading or meaningless. And allotting a function to a particular room has long been considered unrealistic. Rooms are always used differently and in a variety of ways, and if possible remodelled as well. So anyone who still judges a flat in terms of furnishing (and this still happens in competitions), would do just as well to play roulette.¹

Use for another purpose, re-appraisal

It is hard to avoid the impression that in expert circles in particular housing construction is seen from false perspectives, and is at the same time viewed from far too close. It is no coincidence that the most attractive homes tend to be looked for and found in buildings that were not designed to be lived in. Where there are no planning hands, there is more scope. But that is not the only point. If a design strategy had to be brought into play, then it would be about finding scope for use for another purpose and re-appraisals.

Housing values of this kind go beyond housing quality and also beyond architecture that fixes forms, images and functions.

Beatriz Colomina thinks that living today is a question of identity politics. “Politics” is meant literally, to the extent that identity can be aware of both an emancipatory and a (cultural-) industrial dimension. Thus the business with identities and their illusions is one of the calculations involved in current housing production, and this is manifested in commercial aesthetics and advertising. Conversely, the identity industry is compelled to deviate from standards all the time, because otherwise products cannot deliver what they are supposed to promise.

The “identity industry” is linked with “Postmodern consumer behaviour” (David Harvey). Goods are expected to offer identity potentials. This expectation has – after Fordist mass production – created a new, additional market segment. The desire (or the urge) to step out of the mass and mark identities is by no means restricted to figures of the day like yuppies or BOBOs (bourgeois bohemians). Pierre Bourdieu has shown (in the context of housing construction as well) that this wish is common to all social strata and income groups. Thus so-called individualization tendencies cannot be marginalized as a luxury problem for minorities. Admittedly the associated needs and illusions have various more or less obvious manifestations. But “small differences”, says Bourdieu, do not leave anyone cold – above all not the people who deny them (critically).²

Micro-planes of power

What is normal, as stated at the beginning of this article, is no longer about being ordinary and simple, but more about deviancy and inappropriateness. Normality has also lost its innocence for other reasons. In his research on housing construction, Michel Foucault proved that architectural structure developed within specific disciplinary programmes that were only modified in the course of time.³ The usual architectural and organizational orders for housing constitute a micro-plane of power that prescribes certain behaviours, surveillance patterns and codings and excludes others. To this extent normality has also to be seen from the point of view of repression. Whether this has been toned down by the so-called individualization and liberalization of society or whether it is simply shifting over into other forms is an open question. But this question alone compels us to think about living anew.

Research into housing construction?

Almost all disciplines that address housing construction today complain about a theory vacuum that draws in questions about programme and architecture alike. It has also come about for functional reasons, as there can be no mean values (or because all such values have turned out to be false). And the indefinite does not have a programme. And then there is no such thing

as research about housing, either of an empirical or a theoretical nature – especially in Switzerland –, that could provide at least some clues about use-values and their dynamic. Current methods for establishing demand confirm the assumption that dwellings are being produced without any concept and will soon be unusable. They follow a hypothesis that was presumably wrong even 20 years ago, does not get beyond the analytical level of newspaper advertisements. At best they record (and extrapolate from) a status quo that restricts itself to the size, price and number of homes sought. No account is taken of need, or forms of use, or of the dynamics of demand.

Technical production of the home represents a farewell to living

Of course it is never possible to separate housing needs and the way in which they are differentiated from developments, trends and fashions. And yet living in a home is not and has never been a mere mirror of social change. Housing also seems to embody something permanent – elementary needs and eternal use-values that survive beyond epochs and beyond generations. And again and again it has been assumed – inside and outside debates about architecture – that there might be a historic core of living – a structural basis that is always the same “Ge-stell” (Martin Heidegger) or a fundamental typology whose permanence and validity actually confirm the cyclical deviations.

As is well known, Aldo Rossi’s treatises have moved people towards seeing housing construction from the point of view of continuous change and conservative reality, which helped to cushion us against the coercion of architectural innovation. This at least took the edge off a kind of modernization that was tending to hurtle forward without any motive. Before this it seemed to be taken for granted and necessary that homes had to be constantly reinvented if we were to understand the constant progress of cultural life.

Now it would be misleading to perceive the typological as the antithesis of Modernism. It is more like a variant of it. In fact a belief in the inertia and vividness of history can lead to different compulsive forms if the concept of the typological remains bound to a pictorial and transfiguring perception of history. Ultimately the typological model – even if it were to last – is always seen differently, used differently and charged with different meanings, so that it is quite right to wonder what type is really suitable for.

Christian Norberg-Schulz, when discussing the meaning of living, has talked about the making of places and opted for architecture that is appropriately motivated in terms of local history. He gave these theses a philosophical foundation, above all on the basis of Martin Heidegger’s “Bauen Wohnen Denken” (building, living, thinking). But current building – precisely in Heidegger’s view – does not simply refute Norberg-Schulz’s architectural interpretation,

it actually stands it on its head. It has long been possible to simulate history, urban quality, centres, places – precisely because they are ripped out of the life-context that underlay the original forms.

In other words: places and history are technically available – with the result that places and history are not seen as such (as real history with a sequence of events), but as mere images. Heidegger himself pointed out that it is precisely because things are made available in this way that “desolation of being” is increased: “Technical production is the organization of a farewell ... to the essence of living”.⁴

Homelessness as home

Kenneth Frampton introduced another topos for living with his concept of “structural poetics”. Essentially what he means here is the reactivation of sensuality in architecture. Tectonics that arouse the sense of touch and the unmistakable authenticity of things should promote subjective closeness and a sense of place – as opposed to covering things up and shrouding them in ambiguity. In this context Heidegger is a reference point again in the sense of being a “saviour of things”. Peter Zumthor also sees himself as being on the same wavelength as Heidegger when he talks of the “reality of construction and materials like stone, fabric, steel, leather...”

Heidegger himself saw only the empty form of “Zeug” (matter) in such materials. For him the thing should acquire a quite different meaning: it is as though he had sensed in advance what is happening to things today: where the digital, the artificial and the ambiguous are thrown out and authentic materials shipped in, architects and things that are genuine automatically perceive themselves as cultural criticism. Admittedly the public enjoy this attitude as a passport to leisure. In this way every possible aesthetic and historical antithesis runs through the paradises provided for living, until they begin to seem hackneyed. Iconographic technology consists in the art of making available: tectonics and the place are turned into a hyperrealistic image of atmosphere and place that can be manufactured on the Pacific shores of California, the Brianza in Milan or the Zurich countryside.

Scenographies of this kind do not convey either experience or memory. But they do confirm that place, space and time have long been moving apart, and that this process is irreversible. The links between actuality and underlying substance, between image and body, between the material and the immaterial, between surface, form and style have become blurred. Things are not. At best they can look back from their object status.

The naturally material bonds of place and culture as of place and time have dissolved as a result of persistent modernization – in favour of the simultaneity of real, virtual and fictitious realities. Under these conditions, architecture is no longer able to manufacture “membership” that fits in with a cultural or “cosmic” order

(Norberg-Schulz); it cannot manufacture home, authenticity or stability, nor can it preserve the essence of place.

The dissolution of traditional bonds with place can never be equated with “destruction”. On the contrary, it should be seen as a way of overcoming original dependencies. It is in this context that Karsten Harries speaks of liberation from the “terror of place ... in order to feel at home we accept our homelessness.”⁵

Individualization and specialization

Empirical research confirms a differentiation of lifestyles that are not to be classified as mere manifestations of fashion: the liberalization of legal regulations at the same time as independence is secured by the social state; the spread of “post-adolescence” (semi-independence for young people); the dominance of single households and “sequential polygamy”; the acceptance of “singleness” (without loneliness), which lead to new neighbourhoods, publics and services; individualization and socialization bring ambivalent conditions that cannot be recorded either typologically or statistically; nomadization (most people would rather move than remodel today); and in almost all towns poverty is moving back in, the overall cost of living being lower there.

Against this background it is possible to talk about specialization in forms of living that are appropriate to individual existences and promise individual identities. Goods that stimulate identity have little to do with normative signs that confirm a higher standard of living, education or achieved prosperity. They are – on the contrary – about a desire to become detached from the mass, to mark differences and embody an exterior that is as distinctive as possible, or a life-style. The latter is expressed by objects or activities, and especially by the home.

Admittedly “symbolic capital” is also a form of domestic discipline that employs models and standards. Bourdieu examined successful advertising strategies for the housing market in this light. He established that they fit in seamlessly with the rest of the identity industry, which produces food, clothing and luxury goods. The advertisement starts with transfigured memories, original and subjective experiences, encompassing history and stirring private mythologies that relate to the biographies of particular people or to places that suggest magic. There are no objective clues within this symbolic field. Unfathomable preferences for “art”, “history”, “cool” or “Palais du Facteur Cheval” make a difference here.

Proximity to postfordist product development also encourages renderings whose virtuality mutates into the real object. This also applies to architects, who have been engaged and reified by Allkauf, a German prefabricated building producer, for instance, to replace the anonymity of a mass product with the cultivated standards of selected specialists: “Although rooted north of the Alps, the house is as charming and light as the south” (Hilmer and Sattler).

Is the screen a window or the window a screen?

The housing industry is also increasingly putting soul-boxes on the market – empty, undecorated shells for living in which the relationship between a person and his or her own things can at best be ritualized. Here the media armament of private space has a part to play as well.

This phenomenon can be illustrated by the question of whether the difference between the correct window and the computer or television screen is disappearing with the passage of time. Walter Benjamin described the simultaneity of the external and the internal world with the “étui” metaphor. The 19th century domestic interior was characterized by being hermetically sealed, with the outside world present only as a (private) projection. Now the interior has not simply been destroyed by the new media. The neighbourhood cinema is not a substitute for the “étui”. Inside and outside are structured in such a way that the outside world is now available, fictitiously and omnipresently. The universe of objects, paintings and photographs was – at least partially – a representation of the outside world that was equally fictitious in the 19th century. But memory and the past now also form moving pictures while projections of the outside world have been duplicated, transforming the interior into a fictitious world centre.

Permeability

Function and use programmes are now too dynamic for it to be possible to derive architectural form from them. This applies to housing construction in particular. So the design task cannot consist of effectively determining something that remains indefinite by an act of creative violence. It is precisely about giving uncertainties a form that can include the whole range of information and necessities. A structure that is thought out and spatially articulated in this way admits known and unknown appropriations and becomes firmly established only by use. This means that architectural form cannot lead a life of its own, or at least only a limited one. Form replaces a form beyond forms. A permeable building structure, that is complete enough for use, imperfect and open enough for change, that is able to anticipate and difficult enough for the obstinacy of affective appropriation.

Given the current level of heterogeneity and use-dynamics, the equivalent is not just the “raw flat” (Le Corbusier). It can be imagined as open room for manoeuvre or as a highly specialized spatial structure. Beyond this, living has in any case become a category of use that is open to misunderstanding with the differences from the communicative instruments in workplaces becoming smaller. This will not necessarily have to remove the boundaries between home and work, but will inevitably blur them. So living raises fewer and fewer functional questions. They tend to become questions about use-neutral space configurations, possible zoning and specific relationships with the landscape context, and at the most the context of the house interior.

Professional image and research

It is obvious that at the moment other disciplines are exploring architecture better than it is itself, which can be seen particularly clearly in housing construction. Certainly information is collected about areas, costs and so-called living criteria. This process – even if well meant – shows very clearly that the cart is being put before the horse. Research into housing construction can function only if various disciplines work together, because it is only in this way that there can be any approximation to everyday reality.

The theory vacuum does not prove that there is a crisis in architecture – possibly the contrary, as the most successful genre regulates itself successfully within the fashion business. But everyday architecture has hit an academic low, because, socially and in terms of educational policy, the discipline fails to legitimize its significance as a public and mass-cultural issue. This is expressed not just by the desolate state of research in universities, but also by the fact that research orientated design has been abandoned, a state of affairs that can be observed in almost all European architecture departments. But without research dealing with the present, architecture lacks a sense of proportion and a proof of its public relevance. If there were to be a move to re-establish architecture, then its significance should be sought within new everyday functions, and housing is an example of these. **E.H.**

1 H. Häussermann, W. Siebel, *Soziologie des Wohnens*, 1996, Juventa, Weinheim

2 Pierre Bourdieu et al.: *Der Einzige und sein Eigenheim*, VSA-Verlag, Hamburg 1998

3 Michel Foucault: *Strafen und Überwachen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1978

4 Martin Heidegger: *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, Tübingen, 3. Ed. 1987, et: *Die Kunst und der Raum*, St. Gallen, 3. Ed. 1996

5 Karsten Harries: *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, Cambridge/London 1997

Urs Primas (pages 18–23)

English translation: Michael Robinson

Everyday loss of individuality

Serial production methods in Dutch social housing construction

Social housing – in Holland it is called “Volks-huisvesting”, popular housing – is a phenomenon relating to industrial disciplinary societies (Gilles Deleuze): social housing establishes policies that watch over people with a considerate eye, its ground plans rationalize the nuclear family's domestic milieu, and it is no stranger to the serial production methods of a command economy. Urban development that keeps the various

milieus of the disciplinary society – factories, families, old people's homes, recreation, prisons – strictly separate from each other, is appropriate to the nature of such housing. The crisis of disciplinary societies at the point of transition to the control societies of the IT age is expressed in Holland in constant reform of the housing apparatus, which has so far changed its appearance rather than its way of working.

The Dutch housing act (Woningwet) of 1901 brought about the administrative, financial and technological – and thus almost automatically spatial – separation of housing from other building activities. Subsequently, a distinct law has emerged for dwellings that in many respects (daylight, emergency exits, air-conditioning) argues differently from the corresponding regulations for office building. For example, the housing act laid the foundation stone that enabled building firms, suppliers and architects' offices to specialize, thus creating a special field of knowledge, a culture of housing construction. Different industrial building methods, different grid scales, different building products and different images became generally accepted in housing construction from those that applied to office or industrial building.

Regulations and effects

The housing act established housing construction as the tool of state urban development. Important steps towards the institution of modern urban development were the banning of housing on main roads and, complementary to this, the enactment of rules about the planting of greenery, expressed in square metres of public park space per dwelling. These regulations were reflected in a characteristic thinning of density in housing estates, with branching access roads carrying little traffic and broad, planted central reservations.

Social housing construction also provided the authorities with information about and a certain degree of control over the everyday lives of the poorest strata of the population. A key point was reached with the disciplinary measures taken in the thirties, the “home schools” and estates for “non-viable families”. But today as well social work is carried out and crime is fought through social housing construction. Thus, for example, the police design regulations for “Safe Living” require a view of the street from the dwelling so that public spaces can be kept under surveillance.

Finally the housing act instituted “Welstand”, a community aesthetics commission that examines every building project in terms of its aesthetic qualities. These commissions, which consist mainly of architects, act as a guarantee of survival for architectural standards. “Welstand” has certainly contributed to the “high average” standard of building production that foreign observers admire so much in Holland. The humiliating ritual of the commission meetings – to which world stars and nobodies have to bow regardless – probably has a certain levelling

effect. But in recent years project-related supervision teams and other decentralized aesthetic micro-commissions have been created that are no longer aiming for unity, but for maximum differentiation of architectural image-production.

Bringing things to a state of perfection, and crisis It was not until after the Second World War that the systematics of “popular housing”, the interplay of the various protagonists, regulations and bureaucracies, started to play itself in properly. The industrialization of the building trade did not mature to full efficiency until the mid sixties, in other words at a moment when the first signs of a crisis in the system were starting to show on other fronts. In the years after the war the authorities had promoted the use of standardized ground plans for homes and standardized room dimensions with financial stimuli, but they had also funded site assembly schemes like the British Airey system. But these systems turned out to be cost-intensive and inflexible, and were successful only temporarily. It was not until 1963 that decree by Minister Bogaers brought about efforts on several levels that restructured the building industry's working methods on a lasting basis. Unlike France or the GDR, Holland did not rely so much on a single building system that was complete in itself – heavy prefabrication –, but chose to develop open subsystems that can be combined in different ways with each other or with traditional building methods, according to the particular project. This pragmatic and flexible “soft” system is probably to be thanked for the fact that the use of rational building systems has now become generally accepted.

The most important subsystems for shell building are the cast-in-situ concrete tunnelling method using U-shaped prefabricated shuttering, the use of thin, prefabricated concrete slabs as disposable ceiling shuttering, and heavy prefabrication. Support systems in material other than concrete are scarcely viable in present-day housing construction. When establishing measurements in the design, the choice of the shell building system is a key factor, and standardized finishing elements like standard timber units for façade infilling and windows, standard steps and standard doors are also important. In the ground plan, it is actually only the tunnel building method that requires a binding system of measurements (unit spacings as a multiple of 0.3 metres). A unit spacing of 5.4 metres has turned out to be the most efficient solution as a result of superimposition on to minimum building requirement dimensions for rooms and corridors, parking space dimensions and other factors, and is thus used very frequently. The current available range of standard stairs and doors in combination with the prescribed minimum height between floors favours a vertical unit spacing of 2.7 metres. The soundproofing regulations are consistent with this building method: no measures are necessary other than concrete walls and floors 25 cm thick. This means that the concrete structure is sometimes

slightly too large for the span, which leaves a certain degree of design scope when manipulating the tunnel structures.

In 1968, exactly five years after Bogaers' initiative for industrializing the building industry, his successor Schut enacted the subsidy prescription for experimental housing construction, which showed that the authorities had a completely new concern, and this was no longer primarily about perfecting the system and increasing its efficiency, it was about reform. Increasingly violent criticism of the serial and monofunctional housing construction methods used in the rebuilding period was making itself heard. "The imposition of discipline entered a state of crisis in its own right, in favour of new forces that formed slowly and were to develop at a tremendous speed after the Second World War: we were no longer members of disciplinary societies, we were already leaving them", wrote Gilles Deleuze, and by "we" he of course means the so-called generation of 1968. Paradoxically, Dutch housing construction had resorted to camouflaging its large-scale and serial nature at precisely the moment at which its industrial infrastructure had started to work efficiently. It is remarkable that methods of open subsystems did not place any obstacles in the way of this project: for example, in the seventies sector-form tunnel shuttering was developed in order to realize the fractally branching, wind-

ing cauliflower forms of the residential courtyards. And the detachment of the façade from the shell, which was being carried out with increasing consistency, created ideal conditions for a superficial differentiation in terms of appearance for buildings that were structurally the same.

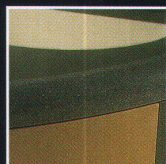
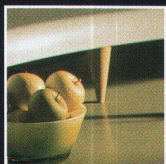
Repetition and difference

In the meantime this tendency has hardened into a state of automatism that sometimes takes on grotesque features. Large housing estates like the Ypenburg estate near The Hague, which is under construction and will provide 15,000 dwellings, are divided up into various sections, which are then allotted clichéd landscape or architectural titles. Thus in Ypenburg there is a water quarter, a forest quarter, a moor quarter and so on. Each of these quarters is being built by a different consortium of investors and building contractors. A different architectural practice devises a sub-plan on the basis of the title theme for each quarter. These sub-plans are then further broken down into half a dozen building blocks, and half a dozen architectural practices are selected to work on them further. At this stage a supervisor watches like a hawk to make sure that the building blocks are as different from each other as possible. Of course this is entirely superficial, as the architects have only marginal scope for manipulating the uniform

space-use programmes, constructional dispositions and budgets.

In the best contemporary Dutch housing construction projects, attempts to exploit the scope in the system as much as possible have been made with subversive subtlety and tireless negotiating skills in order to achieve something more than cosmetic distinctions in the housing offered. One of the last highlights of architecture in a period coming to an end is that there are signs of resistance to obsolete structures due to premonitions about new developments. The IT age will replace central, planned control with self-organized networks and Taylorist series manufacture by using automated custom construction. The boundaries between function categories like housing construction or office building will become blurred and lose their significance for the organization of urban development and building production. But the state aesthetics commission's image policy is also becoming frail: if architecture no longer represents the popular community housing project, architectural images will become advertising messages competing with each other in a free market.

«Tolle Kurven suchen zärtlichen, belastbaren Partner für wilde Träume ...»



Eine flüchtige Berührung und sie war hingekissen. «Wie zärtlich Corian® zu meiner Haut ist», dachte sie. Keine Kanten, keine Fugen, ästhetisch bestechend und so unverwundlich! Es war der Anfang einer grossen Liebe, denn Corian® folgte ihren wildesten Vorstellungen. Selbst schlechte Behandlung macht nichts aus: Corian® ist robust, hygienisch und leicht zu pflegen. **Küchen- und Badarbeitsflächen aus Corian® von DuPont – eine Lovestory von Dauer.**



Vertrieb und Ausstellung:
Studer Handels AG, Im Schossacher 12, 8600 Dübendorf
Telefon 01/823 18 80, Telefax 01/823 18 90, e-mail: studer@corian.ch, www.corian.com

CORIAN®



Corian® ist ein eingetragenes Warenzeichen von DuPont.