



Round table discussions
36 x 50 cm, pencil, paper

New towns become normal towns too

Wolfgang Kil

Large neighbourhoods, new towns from the conceptual and formal repertoire of modern artists are by now no longer popular in most West-European countries. After the Berlin wall fell, there was some urgency in the former socialist countries to join the Western cultural trend as soon as possible, at least in this field. But it is not that simple: so many houses were built in this so-called 'monotonous, anonymous and uninspired' style that it is not easy to get rid of them. Even if one does not appreciate this type of dwelling, it is impossible to get rid of them. It is the sheer mass, the quantity, that turns this 'remarkable' type of dwelling into something permanent. Out of pure necessity, the most frequently asked question is: What might large residential areas mean for the city, now or later? To whom do they matter? Today? Tomorrow? How can they be made suitable for a future, whatever future it may be?

In my opinion the question itself is wrongly formulated in that it assumes that large housing estates are a special, particularly problematical type of city or one designed especially for specific groups of inhabitants. Those who approach the 'housing estate phenomenon' in this manner are sure to run into problems. They talk themselves into it, so to speak.

I would like to stick to an opposing point of view: housing estates, districts planned as a whole, are – certainly when viewed in the long term – *very normal towns*. All that matters is that this normalization should not be frustrated.

Unfortunately it is not easy to illustrate my thesis with East German examples, for the transformation of the district on the drawing board into an organic urban structure takes time. But the new East German towns do not have time. Due to a dramatic loss of residents most of them are being forced to reduce their housing stock and this is mainly being accomplished by demolishing industrially built housing blocks. So, new East German towns do not get as old as the 'normalization' process would require. In addition, the myriad German rules and regulations governing expansion and stabilization of informal urban activities have aggravated the situation.¹

For this reason I would like to elucidate my views on the problem with an example from a slightly more distant part of Eastern Europe where the problematic processes are can be observed in a pure culture, something that we in the West are not often confronted with in such a clear and concrete form. Even if it is impossible to provide proof for the German housing estates, I remain convinced that the process of growing into a city would develop in exactly the same way if only it were to be given time and opportunity. I regard this process as a constant of urban development.

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¹ It is striking that the brief period of revolutionary anarchy, which is to say the 'lawless spaces' before and after reunion, saw the greatest progress in the spontaneous improvement of East German new towns.

Urbanization catch-up: the example of Kiev

Construction of Kiev's new town commenced after the Second World War on the east bank of the Dnieper River. This residential city for a million people is a clear example of functionalist town planning, particularly evident in the robust and hierarchically arranged framework of thoroughfares. On a central and a southern axis, two dead straight metro lines extend eastwards, deep into the new town. At right angles to the metro lines, trams and buses running along broad boulevards carry people for short distances in the residential areas. Every two to three kilometres a station marks the intersection, always on different levels, of train and road traffic. Around the stations the planners left nothing except empty and windy bare spaces between the bridges, stairways and banks.

Over the years, however, it was at these transfer points, used by tens of thousands every day, that the gradual urbanization of the drawing board landscape took place. The process is always the same: first market women selling simple wares like fruit, home-knitted pullovers, flowers, lottery tickets, post themselves around the stairways leading to the platforms and ticket counters. Later, outside in the street, stalls and kiosks form small lanes which soon develop into a respectable market between station and bus stop. At a given moment the time arrives for clever businessmen who know how to acquire permits for good, sound buildings and, step by step, out of the improvised bazaar there develops a gaudy decor for a small town where everything the customer might desire is for sale – including dimly lit pubs and casinos for frivolous nightlife. But in the new town of Kiev there are also car salesmen, builders' merchants and home furnishings, a special department store for children, a cinema and two theatres, all without any doubt the result of the 'urbanization catch-up'.

But we should not be so condescending about the 'catching up'. Urbanity has never been known to grow on drawing boards or green meadows. I maintain that the unplanned activities of private entrepreneurs trying to make a living in areas that were intended to be open (and mostly bare) spaces in the original plans and townscapes, should be regarded as the first stage of the normalization of the planned town. To Lewis Mumford we owe the phrase, 'Houses shape a district, the residents shape the town'. Thus, we should recognize in that bazaar economy the driving force of urban development.

This driving force always operates in the same way: the artificially conceived and constructed town undergoes its first structural crisis. The ideals of the plan have been exhausted and from now on the 'real' relations determine what happens next. In negotiations and agreements that often are far from transparent (and frequently dubious), spaces and areas are given a new function, planned networks of streets are changed, places acquire a new significance. In residential areas where one single structure dominates, small businesses are set up: agencies, private practices and offices. Where laundry was once hung out to dry, bananas, tea or insurance can now be bought, fitness equipment fills the space occupied by a big restaurant, a decorative artist's studio becomes first a passport photograph booth and later a photocopy shop.²

The answer to the question of how large districts can be made suitable for the future – whatever it may look like – is quite simple: Create diversity! 'Let many flowers bloom!' Better than any ambitious plan is interested observation. Watch the seed carried to the meadows by wind and birds until it becomes a colourful biotope. The fact that all this has little to do with sophisticated 'architecture' should not adversely affect the urban

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² During the years after the Wende a similar bazaar economy was also to be observed for quite some time in the outer Berlin suburbs of Marzahn and Hellersdorf.



Cottbus, Plattenbau converted to detached dwellings

quality. This is the world once recommended by Robert Venturi: 'Main Street is almost all right!'

But it is not a matter of town planning alone. Normalization also includes individual houses. Who believes that these houses, standing there as they are, have reached the end of their potential?

'System-built houses are very ordinary dwellings that have just been occupied too early, in the finishing phase so to speak. They just have to be finished with solid workmanship, show that the materials used are of good quality and then these houses will be perfect.' Cottbus architect Frank Zimmermann knows what he is talking about for he has won many awards with his conversion projects. In contrast to many housing corporations he is not concerned with the mere cosmetic embellishment of the facades, which gives a superficial illusion of 'individuality' and 'variety' while in reality neglecting the uniformity of the housing types.

No, in Zimmermann's projects not much was left of the old structures of the buildings for close inspection disproves the stubborn prejudice: concrete should not be seen as a building material for eternity. Despite their apparent rigidity, system-built houses are in fact quite flexible and just as suitable to be used differently as any traditional brick building from the Golden Age of industrialization (1871–1873). And in the end they are treated accordingly: when the first useful phase of the building is over, the creativity of a second generation of designers will get the opportunity to realize new types of housing, taking into account the need for higher standards and finding room for facilities that were lacking. Maisonettes and roof terraces, a lift, a caretaker and a social worker on the floor occupied by the elderly – who will remember the 'raw

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Kiev, street trade near metro station on the Hidropark Island in the Dnieper

3 Standard types of dwellings, developed by the Institute for Typological Research (Ministry of Construction and Development). See elsewhere in this book: Mikel van Gelderen, 'Unabashed Shamelessness'.

forms' once designated by such abstract abbreviations as WBS 70 or P2?³ And so it suddenly becomes clear what is going on with these industrially built blocks: reconstruction is quite normal in any house, *history*, will play its part. Every house becomes an individual social biography.

And so we arrive at the item I would like to call the true cultural challenge of our time. The large number of individual conversion projects, are, just like the previously described urban development projects, driven by economic necessity, engaged in a battle for a big cultural project: for the historic normalization of the world of modern planning.

Experience teaches us that towns that have not developed slowly through the centuries, but which have emerged as if by the waving of a magic wand, that in the end these products of human imagination are hardly fit to be lived in. This is the generally accepted view: the desire to think up a town is on a par with an attempt to invent an artificial living being. Nevertheless, this worldwide criticism is inadequate for it presupposes the rigid lack of changeability of the original design. On the other hand one can say: the test for any urban environment, even if designed on the drawing board, is the day-to-day life of its inhabitants. And it is exciting how, sooner or later, they will begin to change the appearance of any newly built house. To allow lively versatility and stimulating complexity to develop at all, time must pass.

In this modern times do not fare differently from other epochs: the districts of the post Golden Age of industrialization were more or less planned towns, too, artificial buildings cast in one piece and, what is more, for contemporaries at the time of their construction, and even more so for

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4 By way of comparison: the Berlin quarter Wilmersdorf, now cherished as the absolute pinnacle of middle-class urban culture, was built towards the end of the nineteenth century in only ten years for some 100,000 people on a vast building site on the outermost edge of Berlin. These are exactly the same data that applied to Marzahn about a hundred years later.

the following generations, an expression of contempt for people and ordinary profit seeking.⁴

It took about 80 years for the one and only beatific, nostalgically idealized model town of our times to develop out of this spectre of town planning. And even then, one should compare the original condition of those tenements with the way, they are used today: these old dwellings can only be loved because they are no longer what they used to be.

Once again: normalization of the modern planning worlds – of industrialize housing and functionalist town planning – is the next cultural challenge that awaits us, worldwide. We are now facing a new landscape; there is a special need for imagination and professional skills, and the courage to engage in bold experiments. This reminds us of the experiment in Cottbus, which has since reaped fame in many professional magazines, showing the skilful disassembling of a high-rise flat that was no longer needed, and using the parts to assemble six small 'town houses': a building project which deserves to be analysed and not just for its economic effect.

That Cottbus experiment, without any doubt the most radical in a long series of similar bold conversion projects, must highlight the worldwide dimension of the problem. For the worldwide dimension is an ecological one as well: the building materials we use today are also raw materials! Those who believe that they can get rid of this unpopular phenomenon simply by blowing it up, have not yet given proper thought to the real, purely physical dimensions of the reality of the modern movement – not only, but in particular in Eastern Europe. It should not be thrown away. It should be converted and taken along into the future.