Book review: Annett Zinsmeister, ed. *Plattenbau, oder: Die Kunst, Utopie im Baukasten zu warten*. [Hagen, Germany]: Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum, 2002. 144 pp. in: Utopian Studies, Vol. 14, 2003

In this volume, Annett Zinsmeister brings together photographs from and about an exhibition on utopian building in the former GDR, two of her own essays, in which she outlines the intellectual context of her project, a number of response essays from various critics on her artistic work, and two excerpts from longer theoretical pieces by Wittgenstein and Barthes. The central word in the book's title, *Plattenbau*, refers simultaneously to the technique of building with prefabricated concrete slabs and panels, and to a building constructed in that way. The practice of *Plattenbau*, as Zinsmeister points out, developed during the housing crisis in post-World War II East Germany; it was furthermore part of the "'socialist perspective'" (59) to build near-identical houses for the classless East-German society. The subtitle translates as "the art of maintaining utopia within a construction set," where "Baukasten" can also refer to a set of building blocks.

The exhibition that prompted this publication was held at the Karl Ernst Osthaus museum in Hagen, Germany (www.keom.de), under the title "Museutopia -- Schritte in andere Welten" [steps into other worlds]. Zinsmeister was a curator for the exhibition, which also included works by numerous other utopian artists not discussed in her book. Throughout the book, there are many black-and-white shots of the art exhibits. On eighteen pages the reader can study excellent color photographs depicting both the artistic work of Zinsmeister and the everyday architecture of socialist *Plattenbau*. These juxtapositions repeat visually the basic tenet of the accompanying texts and combine to create a rather convincing utopian project.

Zinsmeister's art develops in the space between a strict structuralist approach, as practiced by the housing program of the GDR, and the aesthetic potential that lies within the combination of prefabricated building blocks. The artistic work presented in this book sets out, then, to present the utopian potential of a rigorously formalist building technique beyond the strict functionalism of the original, socialist housing projects, thereby freeing the combinatorial potential of the building system from its oppressive use as repetitive building blocks.

In Zinsmeister's work, this tension between architectural norms and aesthetic creativity is repeatedly, and playfully, resolved. The ludic character of her project is further emphasized by the fact that she willfully sidesteps physical limitations by creating some of her models in virtual space. Gravity, statics, and other "real" considerations do not limit her creative energy. Concrete becomes almost weightless and freed from a specific location, creating Zinsmeister's own type of ou-topos. The illustrations of her art present themselves as graphic experimentations that aim to please visually. They are not, it has to be noted, intended to provide spaces for living. Hers is a sculptural project, which does not stray far from contemporary architectural practice, for instance in Frank O. Gehry's extravagant shapes. (However, in the past Zinsmeister has provided practical suggestions for improving life in a *Plattenbau*.) Zinsmeister's utopia thus remains abstract, despite the photographs and actual models. Only too clearly are these projects developed for the museum, and not for actual realization. This is not to say that the Museutopia project presents itself as purely academic or narcissistic. Rather, by pointing out the creative potentialities of normed building, the contributors challenge practicing architects at least to aim at a more creative use of their basic units. Because of this implicit intention, the book is a truly utopian project, much more so than the actual housing projects of the GDR government—despite programmatic declarations to that effect—ever were.

In the critical contributions that accompany Zinsmeister's own work, some address more general issues of utopian architecture, others relate directly to the art presented in this book. In a very informative essay, Wolfgang Pircher and Christa Kamleithner provide the historical framework for the predominance that engineering gained over architecture in France between about 1750 and 1850. Originating from an emphasis on the practicality of housing, engineered building became more functional, normed, and eventually normalized. Pircher and Kamleithner demonstrate that the tendency toward "industrial" architecture predates the heydays of International Style building.

Walter Prigge argues that within modern architecture, the interior and the exterior of buildings are blending into each other and become almost indistinguishable. An additional change he notices in the crucial shift in the internal logic of modern houses, which are compartmentalized and structured according to different functions such as sleeping, cooking, eating, all of which are allocated specific places and rooms within the modern house. Through this process, modern buildings also structure the behavior of their inhabitants, marking the beginning of industrial living.

Gerd de Bruyn describes the hegemonic power of modern architecture. However, while the functionalist architecture of modernism prescribes a conservative tradition of living and of society, the dual and ambivalent roots of modernist architecture both in social utopianism and in capitalist wealth are often denied. The elitist tendency of architectural modernism is then declared postmodern. Within modernist architecture, de Bruyn detects a tension between rational functionalism on the one hand and idealist aestheticism on the other. Architectural ornamentation used to signify to the urban citizens that they enjoy freedoms of almost carnivalesque dimensions. Then, ornaments were symbols of democracy. Contrasting this, the unornamented

modernist paradigm set out to offer good-quality housing to everybody, but did away with all symbolic ornamentation, which would, after all, only *signify* to everybody. A second context for architectural ornamentation de Bruyn discovers in its historical legacy, which he traces back to nomadic lifestyles. Today, the automobile remains as the last trace of the formerly nomadic culture, but only after architecture has dissociated itself from the nomadic tradition, which for a long time managed to survive in the form of ornamentation reminiscent of textile patterns (and other portable goods). The nomadic lifestyle also emphasized the here and now, whereas sedentary cultures focus on the future, dreaming of an afterlife that has to be earned through hard work, and invoked through lasting edifices. To counter this process, de Bruyn envisions an architectural practice of the 21st century that is based on nomadic ornamentation.

Michael Thompson shows how the social housing projects in post-war Great Britain attempted to provide diverse and stimulating buildings, using the coded components of normed building blocks. As an alternative, Thompson evokes the rural utopia of William Wordsworth, who envisioned a classless arcadia. The absence of (vertical) hierarchies in this model gains significance in the context of high-rise buildings and the strictly structured order of modern urban life.

Anne Hoormann argues that, despite the optimism with which early modernist architects viewed the increased industrialization of architecture, critics now consider modulistic building as a cause for social problems, and not its solution. She traces geometric visions of urban life back to Thomas Morus and the chessboard design of his future city, as well as, in a Foucauldian reading, to the regularity of militaristic planning. Hoormann concludes that building with modular blocks created the exact opposite of the urban utopia that it intended to provide.

Claus Pias compares fundamental questions of mathematical proof with the power of combining elements. He speculates whether mathematics and architecture follow the same basic principles: "In einem Akt gewalttätiger Repräsentation beschneidet Digitalisierung das Kontinuum des Analogen zur handhabbaren Größe—gleichgültig wie fein oder unwahrnehmbar ihre Auflösung auch sein mag" (120). [In an act of violent representation, digitalizing trims down the continuum of the analog realm to a manageable size—regardless of how high or unnoticeable its resolution might be.] Through this process, Pias maintains, the digital is always and actively forgetting aspects of its original sources.

Directly responding to Zinsmeister's art, Wolfgang Ernst develops the idea that memory functions with the help of individual little "cards," which resemble the prefabricated building blocks of *Plattenbau*. Ernst emphasizes that the modulistic building blocks in and of themselves are not predisposed to be utilized in specific political and social contexts; rather, they can be put to all kinds of different uses. The dystopian urban landscape of *Plattenbau* neighborhoods should not be blamed on the basic building blocks, but on the manner of building. An appropriate response is, therefore, not the remodulization of the building blocks, but rather a deconstruction of the building process. Ernst concludes that memory, modular building, and the architecture of archives all share a common structural principle.

Kai-Uwe Hemken carefully analyzes the photographs that Zinsmeister took of actual *Plattenbau* façades. In the aesthetic representations of Zinsmeister's re-arrangements of the modules, no functions are noticeable; she actually reverses the original intention, according to which the modules should enable the architect to provide a maximum of functionality. Her art thus follows in the footsteps of other avant-garde artists who challenged the basic paradigms of modernist art by deconstructing its apparatus. The deconstructivist artists thereby show that the

traditional, rationalist utopia is nothing but "eine unerlaubte Verkürzung der Idee der Moderne, die stets die Vielfalt und Gegensätzlichkeit als Teil ihrer selbst erachtete" (112) [an unallowed foreshortening of the idea of modernity, which has always considered multiplicity and contradictoriness as parts of itself]. Such deconstructive art is always processual, art in process, described by Hemken in the context of art's "'transitorisches Potential'" (113) [transitory potential].

In two more noteworthy responses to Zinsmeister's work, Eckhard Siepmann compares her artwork to the chaotic structures of snow flakes, and Michael Fehr contends that useful utopian concepts have to come in the shape of artistic models, since only those models can achieve the necessary distance from reality that is a crucial component of utopian speculation.

As a whole, Zinsmeister's edited volume makes a coherent argument, despite the differences in both style and tone as found in the various contributions. In her re-assessment of the rich potential of normed building, Zinsmeister successfully dissociates the engineering and physical side of building from the aesthetic and politico-socially committed power of architecture.

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