Other resources

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Self Made City

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In the tension between freedom and need

Review:

"Self Made City" – Self Initiated Urban Living and Architectural Interventions

Kristien Ring & Franziska Eidner 2013

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"Self made projects, at least in the context of Europe and particularly in that of Berlin, are created in the tension between freedom and need."

The publication of the "Floor Plan Atlas; Housing", by Friederike Schneider, published by Birkhauser (1997) launched a plethora of imitators confirming a rich and varied interest in housing and urbanism inspiring both editions of the RIAI's "The New Housing", (2002 & 2009). It was the consistent (e.g. plans 1:200) systematic organisation of the graphic and numeric quantitative data provided the architectural researcher with a valuable template for practice. Now in its 4th edition it confirms the important currency of housing as the foundation of urbanism. While most architectural publications concentrate on the image, the plan, the form, they often gloss over the demographics, the social and political frameworks under which they have been conceived. Issues like tenure, social cohesion, community supports and affordability are displaced in favour of space standards, planning limitations, density guidelines and architectural ambition.

In "Self Made City" it is all about the delivery, social and community engagement. The book documents 124 projects, 47 of them in detail. The 130 case studies examined in the "Floor Plan Atlas" were taken from a global data set whereas those in "Self Made City" are from Berlin. Only high quality architectural solutions were chosen. The goal of the publication was to make a record of Developments (since 1990), Strategies, Professional and Participatory Processes, Economic Performance, Tenure, Neighbourhood Patterns, Future Visions and Recommendations for Action.

The publication focuses attention on the Baugruppe, a particularly German model of self-initiated housing and urban development. Between 1984 and 2005, the Berlin Senate's "Bauliche Selbstiffe" (Self Help Planning) facilitated these self-starter cooperatives. In this period Berlin was undergoing massive changes. In 1991 over 25,000 apartments were unoccupied, mainly in the east. A people moved to the city a new energy emerged that suited the "Selbstiffe" ideology. Self-initiated projects from (illegal bars, clubs, galleries to meeting spaces began to fill the considerable voids in an open city. Berliners were becoming *"the co-creators of their city."*[i] When the Senate shut down its housing supports in 2002 the Baugruppe projects filled the gap. Professionally led small and medium self-initiated communities of future homeowners have forged a new identity through housing. The projects emphasise social cohesion, community participation, flexible housing systems, and generous common spaces and contribute significantly to the urban fabric in which they stand.

Sites from 106 sqm to 1,500 sqm became home to thousands of new apartments and housing units were added to the city. However by *"2011 half of all transactions on the German Real estate Market took place in Berlin"* and *"the quickly expanding real estate market the gentrification spiral has intensified on every level."*[ii] and inevitably *"…with unsurprising momentum international investors are discovering the city and buying up vast amounts of assets. Rents are rising; there is vast decline in the number of vacant lots and buildings"*[iii] The authors claim that *"self-used, ownership based apartments can be seen as a stabiliser,"* against the vagaries of the market. The Berlin Senate agreed and in 2012 sold city owned land to those with the best use concept rather than the largest bid. *"Co-housing projects have become determining players in the development of the city."*[iv]

The authors emphasise that affordability is an important component of any co-housing programme. 13 of 32 projects were completed for under €2,000 @ sqm with a number under €1,500 @ sqm, They concluded that; *"The limit for people who would like to participate in such self-made project appears to currently lie at €2,500 @sqm. In the future, without any kind of support, it is quite possible that the level of quality presented here will no longer be achievable."* The authors' goal for the publication was to *"highlight solutions that can be transferred to other projects and places; solutions that have been developed in self-initiative and promote future oriented sustainable urban living environments and development."* As a template for one possible urban future it deserves to be digested by architects, policy makers, officials and community activists. Following the crash here, in the gap between ambition and reality our towns and cities have become flexible laboratories for ad hoc entrepreneurial spaces. Pressure is mounting for national and local authorities to release the shackles of planning and development to allow self-starters (Baugruppe Selbstiffe) to take the lead. This guide to the Berlin experience provides a good foundation.

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[i] Constance Cremer

[ii] Kristien Ring

[iii] Rolf Novy-Huy

[iv] Michael Muller