

What the Files Reveal: Making Everyday Architecture Talk

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Editorial Summary: Typically, design projects leave traces in building archives. Benedikt Boucsein sees great potential in this practice, as it can be used for a research methodology that explores archival material from the designer's perspective, especially for work that is otherwise not archived. In his text Benedikt Boucsein illustrates this through the example from everyday architecture of the reconstruction period after World War II, which he denominated as »Grey Architecture«. One major insight of this research was that the building files were more important for the research than the actual buildings, and that working in the archive helped make this particular architecture »speak« for the first time, unveiling how the built environment is produced. He concludes that archival material may, especially for everyday architecture, be more important than the actual building, and that the designer's view is decisive in understanding this material. [Ferdinand Ludwig]

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Building Files and the Specific View of the Designer

According to the architectural theorist Albena Yaneva, buildings are not limited to their static appearance in Cartesian space. Rather, she describes them as dynamic, hybrid entities reaching far beyond the built form.¹

¹ Yaneva: »A building or any other architectural work – master plan, design proposal, development strategy – is not a coherent and self-contained entity placed in a space, designed in an architectural practice, built on a site; it is rather a dynamic network of real entities. Defined on the basis of numerous situations of coexistence of these entities, it is made of many spatial pluralities as they enfold in time. It is hybrid and ›could be understood as the intersection of a range of forces, from political to the natural, from the real to the metaphorical. A balance, indeed, of colossal forces« (Till 2009: 56)« (Yaneva 2012: 107). See also: Latour/Yaneva 2008.

Buildings exist equally in representations such as plans, renderings, and photographs, and a building's physical form cannot be understood separately from these media.

With regard to the archive, Yaneva's hypothesis is highly interesting: It assigns the archival material a role that can be equal to or even more important than that of the actual building. Accordingly, it seems worthwhile to put Yaneva's hypothesis at the beginning of a reflection that analyzes the archive for architectural research.

In doing so, this text will focus particularly on the role and potential of building file archives.² Building files on a parcel's development are stored with the local building authorities and are an independent source of information that represent the building itself in a different way. Depending on the complexity of a project's history, these archives can contain numerous plans, as each building application is contained within them. They can also contain correspondence between the architect and the authorities, between the authorities themselves, or copies of relevant official decrees.

In particular, the text will focus on how the building file archive can be made fruitful for research on everyday architecture. Here, building files are especially valuable, as the design of the actual built structures is not explained through its formal appearance: They are predominantly shaped by external influences and not by formal criteria. Further, the protagonists of such buildings usually leave few written traces, and private archives or interviews are rare. Accordingly, the design decisions of these builders and architects have to be tracked, for example, by tracing modifications in the archival material, or by comparing building files from several houses in the same street. The material can help answer questions such as if all overarching rules were respected, if parts of preceding projects were kept and adapted, if there were choices that seem to have been arbitrary as they were changed in the next instance, et cetera. Read this way, the building files can help reveal valuable information about a specific building. As an example for everyday architecture strongly reflected in building archives, the text will

2 This text is based on a notion of »building« in cultures where building file archives play an important role, as opposed to vernacular architecture, for instance. Here, oral tradition takes over the role of the archive: Certain properties of vernacular architecture are only understandable when taking this tradition into account, they are in Yaneva's sense inherently connected to it.

focus on the everyday architecture of the West German reconstruction era after World War II.

Finally, in the context of this volume, a further goal of the text concerns a better understanding the potential of the architect's perspective in such an analysis. When working in the archive, the archival material speaks to the architect as traces of another architect's design efforts – the result of processes that are inherent to the core of the discipline and have been intensively trained during studies and in practice. It can be assumed that this particular viewpoint of the designer enables them to better understand how these components of the built environment were formed, but it has to be better understood how exactly this can take place.

The Case: West Germany's Grey Architecture

Considering its visual omnipresence in West German cities, the everyday architecture of the reconstruction period after World War II (ca. 1945–1965), denoted »Grey Architecture« by the author,³ had been ignored by research for a surprisingly long period. While the general circumstances of post-war reconstruction, which probably represents the greatest collective building effort of the 20th century (Tönnemann, in: Boucsein 2010: 7), are well known, the character of the everyday architecture of that period has only been more closely regarded during the last decade. Before, it seems to have been generally regarded as a non-architectural side product unworthy of attention. And indeed, it was produced under significantly distinct conceptions compared to those valued and practiced in the »high« architecture of the time that was discussed in magazines and other publications. To the university-educated designer, this architecture is opaque, or mute.

Obtaining an »Architectural Definition«. The Role of the Archive

According to Christian Norberg-Schulz, the main problem of building history and theory is the question: Why does a building from a specific epoch have a certain appearance? (Norberg-Schulz 1965: 20) To answer this question for the particularly difficult case of West Germany's Grey Architecture,

3 Two main studies were conducted on the theme: A PhD project from 2005–2008 at the ETH Zurich (Boucsein 2010) and as part of the research project »Städtebau der Normalität« at the TU Dortmund from 2012–2014 (Boucsein 2018).

the chosen research method can best be described as a mixture of historical, urbanistic and architectural approaches. The first study, conducted from 2005 to 2007, included working with primary sources, such as interviews and archival plan material, through formal analysis of selected buildings, secondary literature dealing with the urbanistic developments of the time, as well as grey literature from the post-war era. The study centered on a particular case study, the city center of Essen.

Building on the knowledge gained in the first study, the second, smaller study, conducted from 2012 to 2014, focused on the analysis of building files corresponding to a particular street in the center of Essen and the resulting discovery of a small private archive of a particular architect. This study reinforced and further refined the architectural definition formulated in the previous study.

In the context of both studies, the work in the archive (mainly the administrative building file archive, although some files were retrieved from the city's historical archive) did not follow any predefined methodological procedure. In principle, every plan in the building files of the selected streets was examined from front to back. Short summaries of the respective building histories were produced while going through the files. Important facts, dates, and names were noted for later reference. Plans that seemed important to understand the development of the project were scanned or photographed and then filed electronically. If an open question remained about specific themes later on, the according files were reviewed in the archive.

Once filed electronically, the plans could be interpreted in a number of ways typical to the designer's perspective. For example, the facades of the approved projects in a certain street were combined in a number of different ways, demonstrating how the street elevations emerged during the reconstruction period and explaining their peculiar appearance. It was possible to reconstruct how the window formats followed the fashion of the respective decade quite directly. And formerly unexplainable facades and floor plans were better understood by analyzing the emergence of a project from the remains of the preceding building, thereby layering the relevant documents over each other.

By analyzing the different sources and connecting the knowledge gained in the archive to multiple other sources, an »architectural definition« to answer Norberg-Schulz's question was formulated. Central to this was the description of the Grey Architects' design method: It was analyzed as additive, contextual, and referential. The Grey Architects did indeed follow a

design method, though it was fundamentally different from that of »high« architecture.

Hypothesis: Grey Architecture as a Mode

While the importance of Grey Architecture as everyday architecture of the German reconstruction period had been the motivation for the initial study, it had started from a typological viewpoint. In the course of the research, however, it became clear when employing the historical-urbanistic-architectural approach that Grey Architecture is not a type, but rather a mode (from *modus operandi*). Subsequently, mode became the guiding hypothesis to understand Grey Architecture.

Mode as a concept to describe architecture is still a marginal notion that has only gained more attention since the beginning of the century – surprisingly, as it is fundamentally important for a deeper understanding of architecture. As Yaneva explains: »if we consider architecture as a mode of activity, we cannot divide and subdivide its objects in styles, design principles and architectural languages. We can only follow the differentiation of the activity into different modes as it impinges on different materials and employs different media« (Yaneva 2012: 108). In a first attempt of systematization, Kimmo Lapintie, turning to the philosophical field of modal logic for reference, lists possibility, necessity, knowledge, and belief, as well as the obligatory and permitted as modal notions (Lapintie 2007: 38). Independent from these studies, different modal conditions were carved out in the study on Grey Architecture: Technology (e.g. infrastructure or building technologies), economy (e.g. ownership, labor costs), society (e.g. networks, fashions), planning (e.g. power of authorities, parcellation), and legislation (e.g. building laws and masterplans).

Looking at these conditions, it becomes clear that external circumstances play a dominant role in how architecture is produced: The modal perspective shows that architecture is not primarily the product of the architect's will, but rather strongly depends on external circumstances (Boucsein 2012). As Jeremy Till states, »architecture is [...] shaped more by external conditions than by the internal processes of the architect. Architecture is defined by its very contingency, by its very uncertainty in the face of these outside forces« (Till 2009: 1) – a property of architecture that is often forgotten both in education and research.

It must be noted, though, that the notion of mode has a different significance for »high« architecture than for everyday architecture. In »high« architecture, modal conditions are usually perceived as something that must be overcome through the power of design. Accordingly, these architects often strive to at least partially conceal modal conditions and react to them by appropriate design methods, as Reyner Banham reflected in his essay »A Black Box. The Secret Profession of Architecture« (Banham 1996). This is also possible because »high« architecture is usually not as strongly influenced by external conditions as everyday architecture: Due to specific client-architect relationships, less restrictive budgets, or resources of the architects, external modal conditions can be transformed in the design process in a subtle, complex, and more elaborate way.

Everyday architecture, in contrast, does not work against the strong modal conditions it is subjected to. It does not have the means, resources, and mandate to do so. Rather, it works with the conditions in an affirmative manner, translating them directly into architecture.

In this light, everyday architecture in general and West German Grey Architecture in particular can best be understood and analyzed as a mode – as the product of strong external post-war conditions, which are directly reflected in built form, but also the result of a specific education, as well as client expectations. All of these factors are reflected quite clearly in the building files that were examined in the course of the study.

The Archive: A Piece of the Puzzle

Working in the archive was a decisive component of the research on Grey Architecture: It helped make this particular architecture »speak« for the first time. In hindsight, the files served as the most important anchor in the research. Working in the files also delivered certain unforeseeable results, influencing the direction of research in an unplanned manner.

As it was especially decisive for the research to constantly shift the scales of observation, the building files served as an anchor. By linking the information from conventional secondary sources (as well as Grey Literature from the local context of the city of Essen, gathered from other occasionally obscure municipal archives and libraries) to what could be observed on the block and building scale, it was possible to contextualize the way in which post-war architects worked with (and often also against) the authorities. Interviews with persons that had experienced the reconstruction period

were also used to contextualize what was observed in the building files. At the same time, the building files served as the best material to test central hypotheses, as they represented the actual development of these particular buildings at that particular time.

Working in the building files also led to surprising insights that further informed the direction of the research. For instance, in the second research project dealing with the most important shopping street in the city of Essen, reviewing every building file in that street revealed that large parts of it had been built by the same architect, Hans Engels, whose name is today completely forgotten. By locating his daughter, it was possible to retrieve a small, largely photographic documentation of his work. His activity, interrupted by a premature death, proved to be quite extensive, extending throughout Western Germany and incorporating diverse tasks such as social housing, commercial buildings, parking garages, and office parks. Furthermore, internal documents between the authorities regarding their experiences with Hans Engels were found in the building files: They revealed that he worked almost ruthlessly and solely in the interest of his clients, sometimes starting to build before having been granted permission. The example of Hans Engels shows that working with building files can uncover the history of individual architects who influenced the everyday architectural production of that time, helping to understand how such architects worked.

In hindsight, it appears that the building files were more important for research than the actual buildings. This reaffirms Yaneva's hypothesis about buildings as hybrid, dynamic entities: Depending on the research question, other aspects of these entities come into the foreground. The archive additionally helped maintain a certain level of abstraction and distance from the object of study. Surely the research would have taken a different direction if it focused on the material aspects of the respective buildings, such as their details, building materials, and atmospheres.

Making Everyday Architecture Talk

Reviewing the study on West Germany's Grey Architecture from the perspective of the archive reaffirms Yaneva's hypothesis that buildings are dynamic/hybrid entities reaching far beyond their actual built form. In consequence, this also means that there is no clear duality of existence / non-existence for buildings, but that they undergo different stages of existence. This is especially important for everyday architecture, which is often continually modified

throughout the years, making the notion of an »original« secondary. It must be noted here that most of the authors of this architecture would agree to this, as they viewed their work as pragmatic and provisional responses to a state of emergency after the war, and as they usually did not attach importance to notions of authorship.

Moreover, it can be concluded that, as the built object decreases in importance as a type, or as a material form, and as its networked and temporal character increases in significance, mode as a category becomes more central in understanding it. The notion of mode relates to the time frame as well as to the multiple thematic connections that everyday architecture has to the economic, legal, technological, and societal influences around it. To gain this modal information, the archival material holds a central significance, as it helps explain influences and decisions. Nevertheless, this can never happen in an isolated way. More information is always necessary to be able to understand mode and modal conditions. The archive can serve as an anchor for gaining knowledge, but it can never be the only source.

Regarding the role of everyday architecture in the city, reflection from the perspective of archival research evidences that this architecture is not to be read as a concrete architectural object, but as a more complex and multifaceted matter. In terms of preservation, for instance, one conclusion may be that it does not necessarily correspond to the nature of everyday architecture to preserve the original buildings. It may be more important to secure typological aspects of the building, in addition to issues such as ownership and production methods. Furthermore, plans and photographs that are stored in public or private archives are valuable, as they can give substantiated information on modal conditions and modal practice. The built form, which has usually been continuously modified throughout the years, becomes less important than the representations that can explain everyday architecture through its modal conditions.

Finally, although archival work is usually not part of an architect's education, students should proactively work in the archive according to their training as designers – and not try to be something else. The designer's view is decisive in understanding mode and modal conditions. It enables them to make the archival material productive for research, to reconstruct design decisions, interventions from the clients and authorities, and the pressure of external circumstances – and to make the everyday architecture, which is often so hard to decipher, talk to us.

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