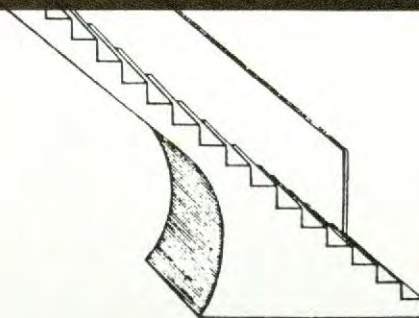
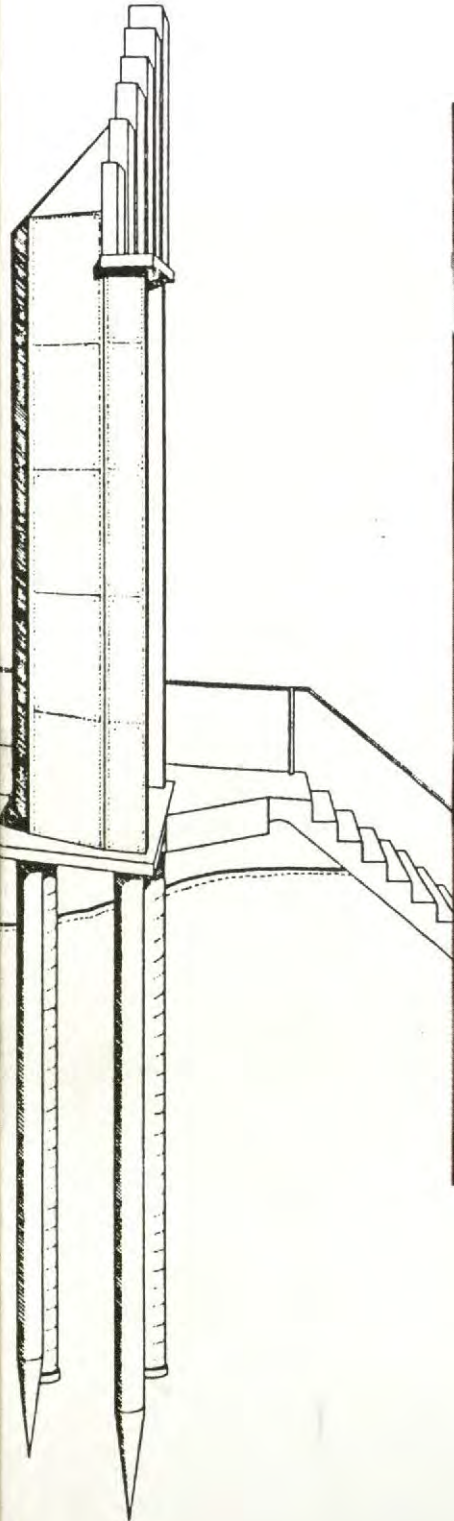
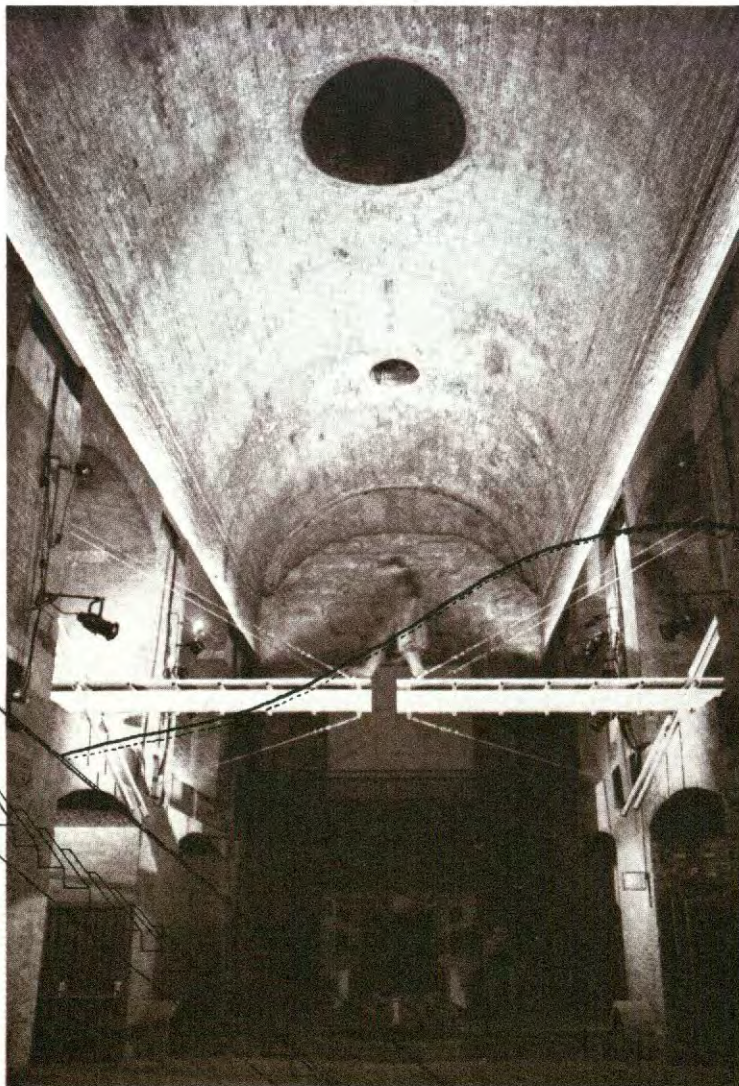


Midgård

Journal of Architectural Theory and Criticism



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CRITICAL CONVENTIONALISM: THE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE

Stanford Anderson

Introduction

How do current debates about the writing of the history of architecture relate to current issues concerning the practice of architecture? That question was put to me in an invitation to address the Southeast Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians, as it held its annual meeting within the halls of a school of architecture.¹ A challenging discussion was thus invited in what I take to be the intersection of architectural practice and the history of architecture.

I confess I am distressed at the now common practice of rampant, often facile, emulation of earlier buildings and styles. The role of the architectural historian is not to provide an ever more complete catalogue of available precedents, but rather to enable us to think carefully and critically about architecture and its relation to society. I take this to be a particularly emphatic demand upon those of us who teach in schools of architecture. Consequently I shall attempt to advance critical history that is directed to an understanding of architecture which I would term critical conventionalism.

Though the thrust of this essay is historiographic, it is convenient to have a concrete example before us: an example of a historian thinking about specific environments. I shall use two writings by German scholar and activist Roland Günter. The first of these is an essay readily recognizable within the tradition of the history of art, though concerned with the unusual topic of workers' housing. The second of Günter's works, actually a collaborative work, is also concerned with workers' housing, but is not properly a historical study. Nonetheless, I will argue that this later work forces a reconsideration of Günter's earlier

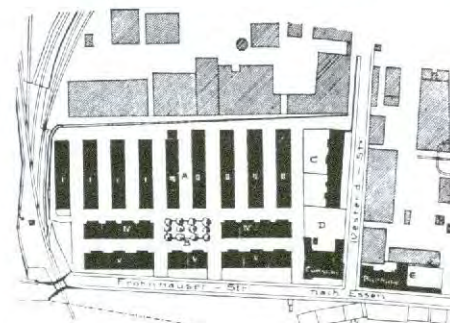
study—and, by implication, of our understanding of the history of architecture. While it may come to appear that I am critical of Günter, I have, in fact, much sympathy with the point at which he arrives. I take Günter as an example because I find his work so illuminating for the issues I wish to discuss and endorse.

Günter's Study of the Krupp Housing Estates

At an art historical congress in Cologne in 1970, Günter presented a paper on the workers' housing built by and for the Krupp Corporation in Essen.² Early Krupp housing was of a type even then allied with barracks, as at Alt-Westend, built in 1863, where there were nine parallel rows of hous-



A. Alt-Westend
B. Neu-Westend
C. Beamtens-Wohnhäuser
D. Consum-Anstalt
E. Bierhalle



Essen, Krupp housing. Kolonie Alt-Westend, 1863

1. The meeting was held in November 1985 at the Georgia Institute of Technology. I am grateful for the invitation of the Society and its agents, Professors John Templer and Robert Craig.

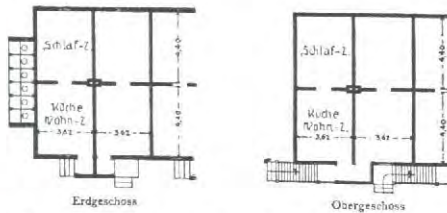
2. Roland Günter, "Krupp und Essen," in Martin Warnke, ed. *Das Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1970), pp. 128-174.

ing, providing 136 two-room dwellings, each of approximately 350 square feet. Later, additional units were built and a company store and beer hall were provided. The 1872-73 Schederhof settlement was also of the barracks type. Independent two-room units appear at each floor with grouped privies at the end of the building.

At the Kolonie Baumhof of the same years, the stark barracks type and its cognate planning give way to a more careful and individualized use of the site and to slight elaborations of the architectural elements. At the Kolonie Alfredshof of 1896-98, small single-family villas are intermingled with semi-detached dwellings in a site plan that shows the influence of Camillo Sitte.



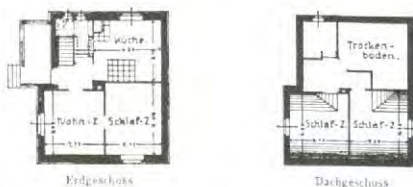
Geschosshöhen im Lichten:
Erdgeschoss 3,50 m
Dachgeschoss 2,93 m



Essen, Krupp housing, Kolonie Schederhof, 1872-73



Wohnhaus für 1 Familie
System AII
Geschosshöhen im Lichten 3,14 m



Essen, Krupp housing, Kolonie Alfredshof, single-family house, 1896-98



Essen, Krupp housing, Kolonie Alfredshof, site plan



Essen, Krupp housing. Kolonie Baumhof, 1871-72

With even so slight an introduction to Krupp housing, Günter's interpretive position can be advanced. Writing as a historian in the late 1960s, Günter's theoretical position can nonetheless be readily compared with that of Friedrich Engels in his work *The Housing Question*, published a hundred years earlier.³ Both authors observe the degradation of the daily life of the workers within the debilitating environmental conditions of the 19th-century industrial city, be this the overcrowding of a received housing stock or the new but inadequate housing put up by speculators or industrialists. Both authors, however, are more deeply antagonized by evidence of paternalist reform, as with the Baumhof or Alfredshof housing. Even the modest brick stringcourses of the Kolonie Baumhof, its window arches, and the slight wooden brackets in its gables are viewed by Günter as the

industrialists' first steps in imposing bourgeois taste on the workers. We are assured that such details do not appear in any housing that workers built themselves.

The impetus behind Alfred Krupp's provisions for his workers was clearly established. Krupp was a pioneer in workers' health services, and in 1892 the retirement community of Altenhof was constructed. By 1909, at the Margaretenhöhe, the houses for active workers were still more elaborate; the large company store was designed by an architect of some note, and the whole site was designed on the garden city principles of Ebenezer Howard. Günter emphasizes not only the increasingly paternalist and bourgeois aspects of the Margaretenhöhe, but also the limited points of access to this garden suburb, allegedly conceived as a means to control the workers.

Günter documents this pattern of

3. Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question*, written in 1872 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954).

paternalist coercion over the workers with statements by Alfred Krupp and his lieutenants. The provision of housing, they said, would take the revolutionary wind out of the workers' sails. Company policy was the common one that tenancy was terminated if the worker left his job. The workers should be politically domesticated.



Essen, Krupp housing. Margaretenhöhe, site plan, 1909

Adequacy of Attention to Originals, Intentions

The ideology of the Krupps, and the contrasting one of Günter, are evident. The point I wish to emphasize is, however, different. As so often is the case in writing the history of art and of architecture, Günter describes these works at the moment of their making and gives particular emphasis to certain ascertainable intentions. However, even if these intentions have been fully and correctly stated, were these intentions fulfilled in the original works or in their extended use? Do we understand these places solely

through the study of origins and intentions?

There can be no question but that the daily life of many workers was bettered by the successively improved housing provision of the Krupps. Nonetheless, in his Krupp studies, under his Engels-like view, Günter does not examine the use of this housing. Rather, he recognizes, ideologically, only the intended co-optation and the assumed disservice of any reform. From Engels, we know the impossibility of meaningful change until the underlying productive conditions are fundamentally changed. Furthermore, since those future conditions cannot be fully anticipated, any attempt to anticipate future solutions is utopian and thus seriously in error. The inquiry about this housing, and about architecture in general, is then as closed by one ideology as was the study of the origin of the housing under another ideology.

Tafari's Silence vs. Günter's Eisenheim

With these points (the disservice of reform, the error of utopian projects, the impossibility of action until radical political change has been achieved), we come close to the negativity and the reduction to "silence" demanded in the recent and influential theory of history and architecture argued by Manfredo Tafuri and his circle.⁴ However, this rather noisy pursuit of silence⁵ was not the path followed by Günter in his work immediately following the Krupp study.

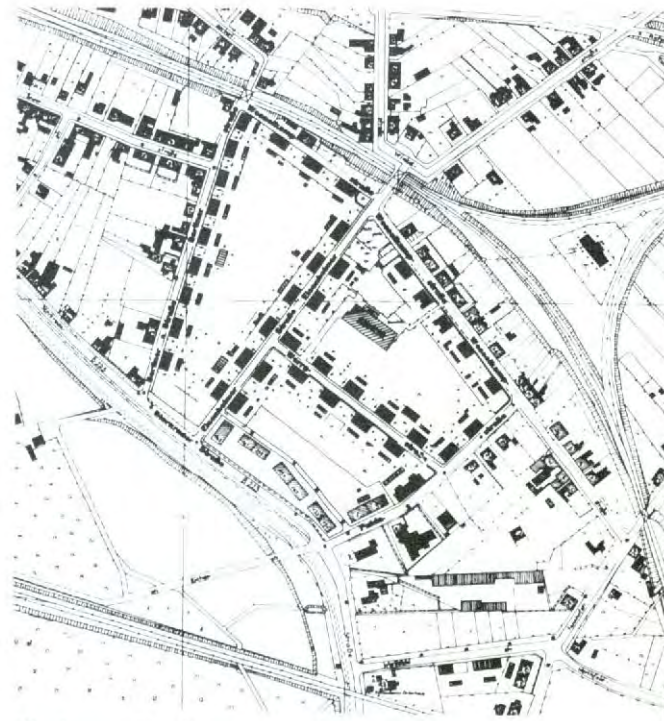
If it has not been evident that historical writing such as that of Günter on Krupp is limited by its own ideology, that fact does become evident when we turn to Günter's activist, polemical book, *Rettet Eisenheim* (*Save Eisen-*

4. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia. Design and Capitalist Development* (first published 1973; Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1976).
5. It was only after I wrote this accusation, "noisy pursuit of silence," that I read Tafuri's "The Subject and the Mask," *Lotus International* 20 (1978), in which he speaks of the "noisy silence" of Adolf Loos.

6. Bielefeld, Fachhochschule Bielefeld, Projektgruppe Eisenheim (Jörg Boström, Roland Günter, and others), *Rettet Eisenheim 1844-1972. Gegen die Zerstörung der ältesten Arbeitersiedlung des Ruhrgebietes*, (2nd ed., Berlin: Verlag für das Studium der Arbeiterbewegung, 1973).

heim).⁶ Eisenheim is a small group of workers' dwellings built by another of those large, vertically organized German corporations, in this case the Gutehoffnungshütte. Eisenheim received brief mention in Günter's Krupp study, for Eisenheim was the first company-developed workers' housing group in the Ruhr district, built in 1844 in the city of Oberhausen. In turning to Eisenheim, Günter could have written a history very similar to that of the Krupp housing. Yet he does something quite different—in part because his task was quite different—I will argue, however, that this later work reflects back—importantly—on the historiographic and architectural issues we are confronting.

Günter did not just turn his attention to Eisenheim. He moved there. The reason, as may be gathered from the title of his book *Save Eisenheim*, was that Eisenheim was threatened with destruction. Günter moved to Eisenheim to work in solidarity with



Oberhausen-Eisenheim. Gutehoffnungshütte housing, site plan, 1844ff.



Eisenheim, street view

the workers to save their community. The owning company, the Gutehoffnungshütte, claiming to offer more adequate modern housing, sought to provide the residents of Eisenheim with high-rise apartments. Günter and the workers saw this offer as an effort by the company to use the land of Eisenheim for a higher economic return while disrupting the communal solidarity of the workers. This interpretation of the ideology directing the company's current actions was inconsistent with what Günter had understood of the much earlier Krupp housing. However, the modern interpretation of, and the claims made for, the old settlement of Eisenheim must open issues which challenge our general understanding of the physical environment and our studies of it.

From the Ideology of Origins to the Life of the Place

For Günter to encourage the solidarity of the residents of Eisenheim and to enlist support in other quarters, emphasis had to shift from the intentions behind the origins of workers' housing generally to the quality of life in this community—Eisenheim in 1972.

In a "communications-analysis," Günter's team recorded the diversity of activities throughout the open spaces of the community at a single moment. Numerous photographs informally record these activities: children at play, young people conversing, elders resting, people engaged in gardening and the raising of small animals, community events, and many more. A look inside the houses of Eisenheim also reveals diverse people, activities, and environments.

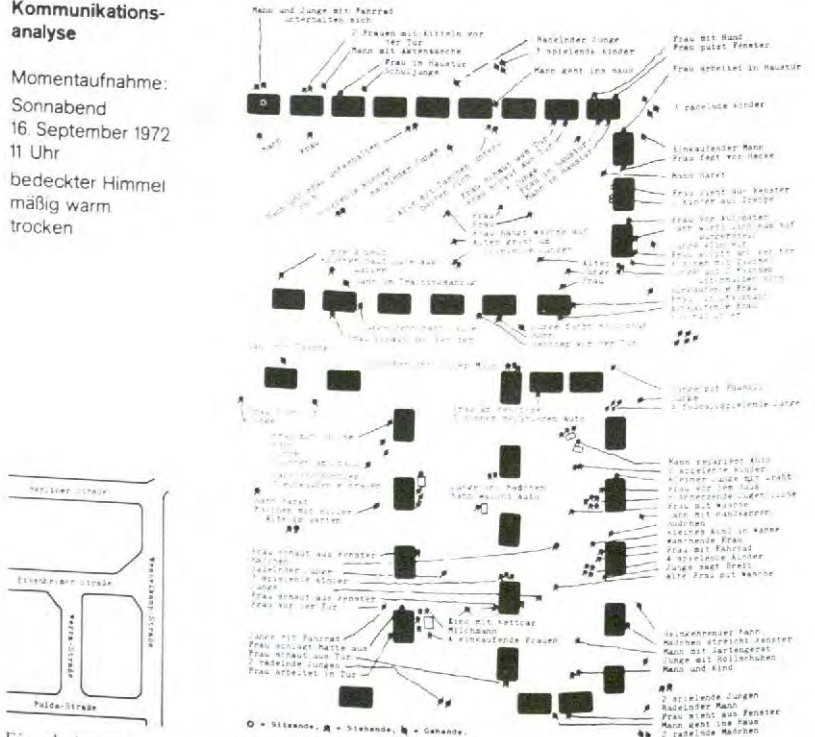
Above all, the emphasis is on Eisenheim as a community and as a physical environment that supports



Eisenheim, view from the allotment gardens

Kommunikations-analyse

Momentaufnahme:
Sonnabend
16. September 1972
11 Uhr
bedeckter Himmel
mäßig warm
trocken



Eisenheim, "Communications-Analysis," a study of the use of the open space of the settlement at a single time, 1972



Eisenheim, photomontage evoking the life and the environment of the 128 children of the community

community from childhood, through the working years, and into the mutual support of the aged. Summary pages of photomontage and text emphasize the community of workers, the provision for children, the well-being won through gardening and neighborliness.

A final section compares these qualities of Eisenheim with their loss in typical modern high-rise housing: aggressive economic exploitation of the land; danger to children through intensified traffic; isolation and boredom of the elderly; absence of places for, and encouragement of, avocations of workers; loss of diverse, supportive environments for children's activities; and the exclusion of gardening, animal husbandry—even walking on the grass.

Eisenheim, open-space scenes





Two images contrasting the auto-oriented open space of high-rise housing with the congenial environment for children at Eisenheim

Eisenheim, interior views



Quasi-autonomy

Such an account of Eisenheim is polemical. It is open to criticism as naive, as populist. Nonetheless, even acknowledging some of the questionable traits of this activist tract, I believe Günter's view of Eisenheim contains important insights. Rarely does any built work achieve, or achieve only, that which was intended. We can only know a place by attending to the duration of its use. An environment such as Eisenheim, particularly as its relations with the society around it change, may come to serve quite differently than either its original builders or critics anticipated. Surely this is what Günter comes to claim for Eisenheim. Simple as Eisenheim is—or perhaps because of its simplicity—there has apparently been an improvement in the workers' lot without the worst fears attending such reform. Eisenheim comes to be seen as an agency of worker solidarity rather than as an instrument against it. Under another set of company and state regulations, Eisenheim may once have served—or may yet again serve—coercively. We see, however, that we are forced to prise apart intentions, societal rules and the physical environment. The physical environment possesses a quasi-autonomy, a degree of autonomy from its origins, or from any moment—a point to which I wish to return.

If Günter's life at Eisenheim reveals important matters about *that* place, then, in his earlier writing on the Krupp housing, his ideology certainly distorted the reality of those communities by neglecting to observe how they had come to serve over time. An account of the operative politics in the founding of an environment is of unquestioned value; but as architecture,

the fundamental issues are those peculiar to the physical environment—issues that are increasingly revealed over time.

Historical Programs

Is there, then, some ideal, nondistorted model of reality by which we can enter into historical inquiries about place or environment? Surely not. A Marxist historian such as Günter must deny the possibility of such an ideal model for-it would not be socially determined. But equally, non-Marxist epistemologies of our day deny any such ideal model.

As there is no ideal model, historical inquiry can only begin with something more fallible: a thesis, a historical program, an ideology. My distress with Günter's study of the Krupp housing is not that it is ideological, but rather that his premises are inadequate and sufficiently hoary, that they did not need another demonstration of their inadequacy. My *interest* in Günter's Eisenheim is neither with its ideology nor its methods, but with its observations that could breathe life into his historical inquiries.⁷

Understanding a place is not a matter of an ideological account of intentions that were shaped by yet another ideology. Understanding a place is rather a concrete historical inquiry. Living at Eisenheim, Günter discovered, concretely, the incompleteness of his Krupp studies. Eisenheim was a locus of community and of worker solidarity rather than a site of coercion. Eisenheim provides a model of a physical system supporting community in the face of proffered alternative physical systems.

But I have now evoked "concrete historical inquiry" as if it were something naively simple. "Understanding

7. I do not disavow the intrinsic merit of Günter's cause at Eisenheim, but my present concern is with what we learn of the study of architecture.

a place is a concrete historical inquiry." It is that, but such a historical inquiry still involves positing *some* model of reality. Correctly, and fruitfully, we have the intersection of *what* Günter saw at Eisenheim and *how* he saw it. Günter's Eisenheim proposes a thesis; it is still an ideological study, but an ideology explored in a specific setting. The 19th-century housing of Eisenheim, now serving differently under 20th-century conditions, assumes a value in its own right and deserves historical study. It also provides a model with which to criticize new forms of company housing. Günter still forms this resistance under much the same ideological intersection as that represented by Engels and the 19th-century industrialists, but a more articulate concern with the physical environment is at least made available. For Eisenheim to serve in this way, Günter must take, explicitly or implicitly, certain positions, such as: the communal support provided by Eisenheim outweighs the urban isolation and the elemental level of servicing offered by such housing; or, the absence of private ownership is desirable; or, the artlessness of this housing and its maintenance of aspects of pre-industrial conditions is either not an issue or is actually apposite.

None of these claims is obvious or incontestable; but when such propositions are advanced in the immediate context of a concrete environment, they are tested. Does the proffered analysis represent one acceptable analysis of this particular physical environment, or are there inconsistencies? Does the community that Günter extols exist in the form described or not? What are the conditions of support and constraint in this physical environment that relate it with this community? Can these relations be

generalized, and if so, how?

Eisenheim in 1972 becomes valuable just because it is fixed in time and place—and because Günter gives that time and place a location in a general political and social field. I would prefer to say, inclusively, in a 'cultural field'.

Cultural Field; Multilineal Histories; Critical Conventionalism

The necessity of locating one's self in a cultural field is what Karl Kraus advocated when he sought to explain what he and architect Adolf Loos had achieved.

Adolf Loos and I . . . have done nothing more than to show that there is a difference between a [monumental] urn and a chamber pot. It is in this difference that culture is given a space to play itself out. The others, those with [claims to] positive knowledge, however, divide themselves between those who would use the urn as a chamber pot and those who would use the chamber pot as an urn.⁸

Thus, contrary to the claims of the ambitious artists of the Viennese Secession or of the Deutsche Werkbund, but quite possibly sympathetic to our examples of workers' housing, Loos believed that art should *not* dictate to the crafts or to the entire spectrum of building. Similarly, there are distinctions in the continuum from public to private; there is a decorum appropriate to the situation. So, too, there are appropriate distinctions from the monumental to the vernacular. For any task, it is necessary to locate ourselves and our actions within a cultural field. These distinctions could be significantly analyzed in synchronic studies. However, in thus locating ourselves in a cultural field, we place ourselves not only in a synchronic problem situation, but also in one or more of an indefinite number of historical lines: a multilineal history.

8. Karl Kraus, in *Adolf Loos. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag* (Vienna, 1930), p. 27.

About these matters (the continuum from art to craft; from the monumental to the vernacular; from public to private) there are no absolutes—no absolutes from either natural law or from a canon; and thus the necessity to recognize their conventionality. These conventions can only be understood diachronically. Each discipline (art, science, craft, or vernacular production) has its own extension in time. To quote Loos again: “Tradition is no more the enemy of development than the mother is an enemy of the child.”⁹

This multilineal history—this complex history of not fully coordinated and sometimes with competing disciplines and conventions—rules out holistic interpretations as well as demands for action based on the presumption of such wholes. Consider the utopian ambitions of the Darmstadt Artists’ Colony or the motto of the Viennese Secession: “For the time its art. For art its freedom.” Adolf Loos resisted even the less exaggerated

versions of such programs; the Deutsche Werkbund, for example.

In contrast, a multilineal history, with its nonholistic character, recognizes conflict/inconsistencies/contradictions within a cultural setting; thus the need to act critically, the need to criticize the operative conventions—a critical conventionalism. There is change in the relations among the multilineal histories—conceptually, technically, and in the way in which life is lived. Points of intervention must be identified and superior production sought. Yet only superior production should supersede earlier production. With Loos, as seen in the Steiner House living room, the Egyptian stool deserves continued production since we know none better; the piano does *not* need artistic intervention for it is properly a product of the development of music and of craft. With Günter, in 1972, the postwar high-rise apartment does not offer a dwelling superior to the factory housing of the 19th century.

9. Adolf Loos, cited in Heinrich Kulka, “Adolf Loos,” *Architects’ Yearbook*, no. 9 (1960), p. 11.

Vienna, Steiner House, 1910, by Adolf Loos, exterior view from the garden





Steiner House, dining room



Steiner House, living room

Quasi-autonomy

This observation returns us to an issue touched on earlier. What Günter found at Eisenheim in 1972 is surely quite different from what one would have found there under the Wilhelmine empire and, I dare say, is quite different again today. Potentials for inhabitation and interpretations are not fully anticipated in the making of an environment. Such potentials come to be recognized and employed as that environment comes to sit differently in a changing cultural field. As an environment is not fully bound to the intentions that brought it into being, and as it serves differently over time, it displays a degree of autonomy. We need diachronic studies not only to understand the complex webs of our cultural fields. We especially need a history of the duration of artifacts or environment, then active, and then again dormant. We will often be surprised at the resilience of environments—at their ability to serve within radically changed cultural fields. But this does not mean that architecture becomes a matter of indifference; there are limits to this resilience. Eisenheim cannot serve well in every conceivable cultural field. Consequently, any architectural inquiry is not only an account of remarkable diversity, or resilience, historically revealed, but also an account of the potential support and constraints that any physical environment presents.

Beyond recognizing the complex webs of culture—and of architecture as a part of culture—it must be possible to criticize these relations. There must be criticism that could be brought to bear on Eisenheim. Beyond warding off what is worse, there must be an enterprise of proposing what is better. Here is a student of Loos, Hein-

rich Kulka, paraphrasing his teacher:

The primary problem should be to express the three-dimensional character of architecture clearly, in such a way that the inhabitants of a building should be able to live the cultural life of their generation successfully.¹⁰

I particularly appreciate this claim, for it recognizes the relative autonomy of the discipline of architecture (“the three-dimensional character of architecture”) while also emphasizing, not in a mere utilitarian manner, that architecture serves. Kulka’s paraphrase also recognizes, if only implicitly, what is so emphatic in the work of Loos—that it is the job of architecture neither to retrieve nor to continue the past, nor to invent the future, but to serve “the cultural life of [this] generation” in the full complexity of its relations with the past and the already present conditions of change.

In a similar vein, Kulka continued, “He [Loos] aimed to create buildings in which a modern way of living could naturally develop.”¹¹ Loos’s simultaneous attention to “the three-dimensional character of architecture” and to a developing “modern way of living” do not necessarily provide mutually reinforcing criteria. On the contrary, it is the conflicts of these criteria that Loos would not obscure within a unifying aesthetic. Consider Loos’s attention to the referentially complex domesticity of the interiors of the Steiner House while insisting on the innovative decorum of its exterior. With an opposite interior and exterior, Loos brought his building on the Michaelerplatz into considerate relation with its old-city environment while providing an inventive interior for its modern commercial use. Each opportunity to work is assessed for its position within a cultural field, simul-

10. Kulka, *ibid.*, p. 10.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

taneously differentiated along poles of art and craft, public and private, monument and vernacular, tradition and innovation.

Conclusion

To place oneself in a cultural field, and to assess and act upon it critically, is not a matter solely of givens. On the contrary, such actions require both imaginative projection and rational examination. Elsewhere I have proposed considering such projections and rational examinations as research programs — research programs of both architecture and of history.¹² Since there is no assured central theoretical construct for such research programs, we are best served by the competition



Vienna. Building on Michaelerplatz, 1910, by Adolf Loos

12. Stanford Anderson, "Architectural Design as a System of Research Programmes," *Design Studies*, vol. 5 (July 1984), pp. 146-150.

Building on Michaelerplatz, the mezzanine level of the Goldman & Salatsch clothing store



of alternative theories, each tested by application to specific situations. My examples from the work of Günter show two theoretical positions applied to two similar, but differently considered, environments. It has been my claim that Günter's second exercise successfully, if only implicitly, criticizes his first study. Further consideration of Krupp housing would have to incorporate the theoretical position that was advanced in the temporally extended and more closely observed setting at Eisenheim.

As historians, we are involved in at least two research programs: that of the person/group/era under study and that of our own research. These two programs are not strictly separable. The logic of our own program proposes a logic for the subject under inquiry. Thus, as in the writings of the philosopher and historian of science Imre Lakatos,¹³ our historical inquiry may be concerned more with the logic of the situations than with the actual train of events. Indeed, the necessity of the historian's point of view calls into question the accessibility of "the actual train of events." Yet we need not be reduced to a thorough-going relativism. It is true that the research we conduct about the subject under

study is set by our program of inquiry. Furthermore, that program has no absolute basis, but rather a theoretical core that is adopted and held by convention. The rationality of the enterprise consists in improving the relationship between that conventional core and the historical setting. A new theoretical enterprise may yield new insights within a familiar setting. Conversely, it is possible to criticize alternative theoretical positions—both for fidelity to the archive *and* for the fruitfulness of the inquiry proposed (conditions which may be, but are even more likely *not*, coincident). There is a critical conventionalism to the historian's enterprise as much as there is to the architect's.

I conclude by paraphrasing myself:

Any social practice, such as architecture or the history of architecture, takes place in a field of overlapping, often competing conventions. Sound practice recognizes the quasi-autonomy of these conventions and thus of their claims on us for their own beauty and order as well as for their possible perpetuation. But sound practice also requires that we recognize the limits and discover the potentials of these conventions within their domain of practice. Conventions and practice criticize one another. They thus can sustain a reasoned and empirically based practice within societies that maintain discourse.¹⁴

13. Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
14. Stanford Anderson, "Critical Conventionalism: Architecture," a lecture given in the conference "Canons, Conventions and Criticism," held at MIT in April 1982 and now published in *Assemblage 1* (1986), pp. 6-23.