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Artist Statement

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2005-2006 Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image, Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellows.

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Artist Statement

Abstract

I am a senior majoring in German and minoring in art history, and am especially interested in German visual culture in the twentieth century. My thesis topic is the role that publicity and fame play in the preservation of architecture, specifically in German mass-housing developments built in the 1920s and early 1930s by progressive architects working in the Modernist style. In my opinion, what was written about them over the years influenced their reputation and has led historians to hold the physical structures in high regard. The significance of the architecture stems in part from the fact that: a) the architects themselves were eager to publicize and promote their theories; b) there were many exhibitions and therefore catalogs, press releases, and critiques drafted of avant-garde designs and applied arts; and c) these buildings fulfilled a much-discussed and often-politicized need for urban housing in post-World War I Germany.

Comments

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Artist Statement **By Rebekah Flake**

I am a senior majoring in German and minoring in art history, and am especially interested in German visual culture in the twentieth century. My thesis topic is the role that publicity and fame play in the preservation of architecture, specifically in German mass-housing developments built in the 1920s and early 1930s by progressive architects working in the Modernist style. In my opinion, what was written about them over the years influenced their reputation and has led historians to hold the physical structures in high regard. The significance of the architecture stems in part from the fact that: a) the architects themselves were eager to publicize and promote their theories; b) there were many exhibitions and therefore catalogs, press releases, and critiques drafted of avant-garde designs and applied arts; and c) these buildings fulfilled a much-discussed and often-politicized need for urban housing in post-World War I Germany.

The argument that a building's prolonged existence depends on what is written about it is of course contradictory, since only especially good, especially bad, especially interesting, especially useful, or especially useless architecture gets talked about. Therefore, the text draws its significance from the object as well. Theoretical, interpretive, and critical writings might rely on the building's reputation for their relevance, but there are many other banal genres of text that go hand-in-hand with architecture, regardless of whether or not the building is well-known to architectural historians.

For example, the economy of architecture in both the planning and retail phases of architecture is done on paper. Just as real-estate agents and homeowners use words and abbreviations of words to describe homes in newspaper advertisements, a contract (not just a handshake) is usually required to seal a property deal. Maps are helpful to understanding a city's layout, but how much more so when the streets are labeled so that an address can be precisely and efficiently located? Tourists depend on signs that direct them to whatever famous museum, castle, capitol, cathedral, or other building they read about in their guidebook. When they get there, tour guides often give oral explanations to accompany what the visitors see.

For the 2006 Penn Undergraduate Humanities Forum, I compiled selected images of the Modernist housing developments, or *Siedlungen*, that are the focus of my thesis work. In order to illustrate the interdependency of writing and architecture, I arranged the individual photos in a book format, yet deliberately avoided any supplemental text that usually accompanies art: title, name of the artist, location, date, medium, etc. The formal choices I made with regard to the appearance and construction of the book draw on elements from 1920s Modernism (regular shapes, basic color schemes, the combination of hand- and mass-production, etc.).

The question of when to include an image/illustration, or when it is better to describe a visual or art object with words, constantly confronts any writer working on a visual topic. I will not attempt to address *architecture as image* vs. *architecture as object* in this particular project. I am assuming that readers of a paper on architecture generally want to know what the buildings look like, whether in terms of the façade, floor plan, or cross-section. Sometimes they are also interested in what the surrounding area looks like or even what the architect himself looked like. Applicable images are almost always welcome within an architecture-interest text. Likewise, a compelling building (or an image of one) usually raises questions that are best answered with words. Does it have a name? when was it built? by whom? where? for what purpose?—and so on. We are used to associating visual objects that are best described using words with verbal information that accompanies the image. Finding the right balance of words and images is for me one of the most enjoyable challenges in the practice of art history.

I am not present at the conference to answer questions about my project, but have provided a PowerPoint document to supplement the book. My project is not designed to present Modernist mass-housing in a comprehensive visual or verbal way, nor to function as an illustration of my thesis, nor as a venue for me to present photography. It is about flouting the common expectation that where there is an image, there are words to describe it.