Boelens restricts his outline of autonomy and synthesis to the development of urbanism by the avant-garde in the twentieth century. Via the Deutsche Werkbund (1907-1914) and the Bauhaus (1919-1927) we end up at the Weissenhofskiedlung (1927) and via the CIAM we arrive at the Hans Viertel (1953). After that, the development lost its consistency: the jump to postmodernism and the current debate on urbanism, of which the IBA Berlin (1987) is an example, simply proved too big. At the same time, the article demonstrates the degree to which the debate on urbanism and architecture was, at that time, unable to free itself from the shackles of the legacy of the Modern Movement of the twentieth century.

Henk Döll
Member of the editorial board from OASE 1 to 9/10
Translated by Laura Vroemen

The double issue 9/10 of the journal OASE includes Luuk Boelens' article "Naar een onverkorte stedenbouw" (Towards an Uncompromised Urbanism) and marks the end of the pioneer phase. OASE 9/10, published in spring 1985, was the final issue I was involved with as a member of the editorial team. The magazine then changed its name and from issue 11 onwards continued as OASE.

The editorial in O 9/10 notes: 'Recent years have seen a widespread interest in the work of the "generation of young architects"... Dissatisfaction with the architectural output from the past few decades is boosting the demand for "young designers with fresh ideas".' With hindsight, this is an understatement: the architecture from that period was indeed the most dismal since the introduction of the housing act in 1901. The reaction against modernism led to an uninspiring architecture and an impoverished vocabulary of forms. A new generation of young architects began practising, exploring new ways and receiving (international) recognition. The architectural output in the Netherlands has since become much more varied and attractive. The double issue O 9/10 presented, whether or not coincidentally, this rich diversity, thus reflecting the work of the pioneer phase: different contours and categories, seemingly unconnected yet also complementing each other.

Luuk Boelens' article contributed to the discussion about urbanism and thus formed part of the debate on the relationship between urbanism and architectural design - two completely distinct disciplines at that time. Back in 1979 Carel Weeber, in his article 'Formele objectiviteit in stedenbouw en architectuur als onderdeel van rationele planning' (Formal Objectivity In urbanism and architecture as an element of rational planning), had tried to remove the discussion about urbanism and architecture from its ideological context and to regard it more objectively. In Italy and France especially, earlier attempts had been made to objectify the professional dimension.

The "grid" city, based on a final academic project by Gerard Fischette and Han de Kluyter focusing on the Weeberian delineation of the interfaces between architecture and urban design
AUTONOMY-SYNTHESIS

The recently initiated, broadly defined debate on urbanism seems definitively to ignore the social relevance of the labour of the urban planner. With the ad hoc objective of filling an observed gap in thinking about form in urban design, this debate has re-emphasised the autonomy of the discipline and the individual artist. The fact that urbanism is drawing on an option which emphasises that the social origins of the formal are unknowable – and thus deliberately and voluntarily retreats as far as possible from reality – has its roots not least in the formalist approach developed by the postmoderns in the 1970s. In 1979 Carel Weeber, one of the Dutch representatives of this school, pointed out that the discipline of urbanism should be encouraged to shed the mask of other disciplines, in order for it to focus exclusively on designing formal structures on an urban scale. Alongside the autonomy of urbanism as a discipline, he advocated re-introducing urban design as an independent, formal level of planning, and thereby restoring the artistically motivated organisation of individual architectural projects to its rightful place. Urban design would then relate not only to the problem of the borders and limits of disciplinary design practices, but also to that of opting for an indissoluble link between urbanism and architecture. Because even though urban planners were no longer supposed to make decisions about the visual qualities of the built environment, and even though architects, for their part, were no longer supposed to dream of cities that were actually buildings, it was still thought to be only through urbanism that architecture could flourish, and only through architecture that urbanism could be elevated to the status of a three-dimensional reality.¹

On account of the fundamental malaise in which urban design work had become bogged down in the early 1980s, Weeber’s half-formed, one-sided formal approach swiftly gained currency (in the Netherlands) in thinking about urbanism, and so, to a large degree, has come to dominate the current debate on urbanism. Increasingly, the contributions to that debate neglect the inherent social and political message of urban design activities, even though studies by Manfredo Tafuri and others have shown that architecture and urban planners simply cannot afford the luxury of being apolitical.² Debate and research on the visual structures still possible at the urban level are thus degenerating into a highly neurotic formalism, which as such is no longer able or willing to advance and articulate its own practice within other, non-aesthetic practices. This becomes even more painfully apparent as we see separate but dual urban architectural projects succeeding one another faster and faster, driven by the winds of fashion, and as this fixation on form, without reference to actual content, is accompanied by growing independence and fragmentation in spatial design practice(s). When urban planners retreat into an ultimate autonomy and give their own specific field of knowledge a central role, the link – so crucial for contemporary projects – between architectural and urban-planning practice and its dialectical relationship to the social configuration of time and place can no longer take concrete form. From now on, the practice of spatial design will thus unapologetically disintegrate into its separate components – planning, urbanism and architecture – which, on the basis of a kind of closed learning and feedback loop, can each develop in a unique, idiosyncratic way. This parting of ways at the level of spatial action systems has, however, made it obvious that no part of current design practice is self-evident any longer; even its right to exist is no longer self-evident, according to Jürgen Habermas.³ Because of the crisis of the multidisciplinary approach that is the inevitable result of this, and because of the more complex field of urban integration in which the discipline of urbanism has traditionally operated, this situation is, for the time being, most clearly visible in the domain of urban design.

Against this background, it seems to me that the above-mentioned restriction of personal responsibility to purely formal questions of urban design becomes somewhat problematic at the moment that the discipline of urbanism, as such, aspires to bring about spatial cohesion between the components of the (urban) plan, which have become isolated and autonomous, and no longer supposed to make decisions about the visual qualities of the built environment, and even though architects, for their part, were no longer supposed to dream of cities that were actually buildings, it was still thought to be only through urbanism that architecture could flourish, and only through architecture that urbanism could be elevated to the status of a three-dimensional reality.¹

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⁵ See also Jürgen Habermas, ‘Moderne und Postmoderne Architektur’, Arch+ no. 61, February 1982; 54-59.

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⁴ See also Jürgen Habermas, ‘Moderne und Postmoderne Architektur’, Arch+ no. 61, February 1982; 54-59.
formal order within urban chaos – its central theme. This design code was adopted from the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts Movement by the Deutscher Werkbund and, via the Bauhaus, eventually led to the Modern Movement. The subsequent developments within Team 10, Forum and postmodernism showed an increasing tendency towards autonomising artistic design practices, thus exacerbating the identity crisis within the field of urbanism, despite what were probably good intentions. This aesthetic falsification, which pushed ahead forcefully along the same lines in the 1970s, has arrived at its logical continuation in the current debate on urbanism: disregard for the practical content of form, so that the discipline of urban design now produces its own indecisions.

THE DEUTSCHER WERKBUND (1907-1914)
In the early years of the twentieth century – the period of the ‘second industrial revolution’ – the need to return to formal questions of urban design and rethink architecture’s identity became the central theme of debate for the Deutscher Werkbund, an association of artists and architects. In a survey of the first five years of the Deutscher Werkbund (Jahrbuch 1912), Hermann Muthesius observed that while the Werkbund had helped to improve the quality of German industrial production – especially in the technical and material senses – this did not mean that it had achieved its goal. From the Werkbund’s perspective, industrially manufactured goods had a conceptual value above and beyond their immediate practical value. Not only was it thought to be possible and essential for the new style of art to express this value, but it was in fact seen as the prior condition for all modern forms of design work.5 The Werkbund code cannot, therefore, be characterised as a one-sided formal approach. It is much more accurate to call it a direct aesthetic confrontation between the ideal of individual freedom of artistic Gestaltung and the general economic laws of industrial utilitarianism. All forms of design work, as defined within the Werkbund’s ideologies, were predicated on the creed that they could not be practiced as separate, individual projects, but only succeed if the design process was inseparably linked to the social and economic circumstances from which it emerged. ‘For art was not, after all, just an aesthetic force, but also a social one, which together were meant to lead not least to the most important force of all, the economic one’.6 This contrasted with the ‘negative thinking’ of individuals such as Adolf Loos, who developed his ‘compositions’ from the inherent contradictions within the capitalist social formation. The Deutsche Werkbund thus tried to build bridges between art and industry, while Loos’s theories envisaged vast gulfs. This made the Werkbund an organisation that was preoccupied with a relationship between individual artistic endeavours and scientific economic practice – between artistic creation and the generation of norms – a political one, in the sense that it involved a new alliance between productive and spiritual forces, an alternative cultural and social use of mechanical means of production, which was ultimately expected to lead to social and artistic ‘liberation’. But given that the political awareness of the pre-war Werkbund was inadequate to achieve this goal and still at a formative stage, the association could not maintain any kind of conceptual unity. It splintered into separate projects, which were either characterised by unreflective artistic utopianism (Wiederherstellung des reinen Lebens durch die Schönheit) or entirely dominated by the productive promise of the capitalist social formation (Wirtschaft als Selbstzweck). The debate between Van de Velde, Muthesius and Naumann at the ‘Werkbund-Ausstellung’ in Cologne (1914) is especially revealing of this clear inner contradiction within the Werkbund’s ideologies.8

THE BAUHAUS (1919-1927)
After the First World War, the pursuit of not only the relationship between art and industry, but also of ‘unity among the various languages of composition and views on art’ was the central theme of the Bauhauslehren. Founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius and serving (at least initially) as a pedagogical complement to the Werkbund, it strove for the coordination of all creative work – for unification in art and design – in order to arrive at a progressive synthesis between and within architeegn.
tecture and society. Accordingly, the Bauhaus ideology was based on a dual design code, at two complementary levels: the level of the Gesamtkunstwerk (that of the unity of all arts in the vision of an all-encompassing architectural style of the future) and the level of machine art (the connection between the artistic and industrial production processes). Although the separate components of this two-part ideology had been developed earlier, the former within the Arts and Crafts Movement and the latter by the Werkbund, the Bauhaus, in bringing them together, gave them a specific social content and theory necessary for this purpose. He reasoned that the progressive synthesis of modern architecture, collective construction, which involved communication both among artists and between art and society as a whole, could only be brought about if it was also the logical product of the intellectual, social and technical conditions of the ‘modern era’. Particularly with the arrival of Theo van Doesburg and László Moholy-Nagy and, later, its move to Dessau, the Bauhaus thus propagated the unity of all artistic work by virtue of its relationship to life itself, and from 1923 to 1927, it thereby laid the groundwork for a collectively shaped, intersubjectively oriented Maschinenstil.

The problematic contradiction between art and industry, between design and technology, was then resolved by mediating between the artistic potential of art and the processing potential of mechanical means of production at a particular stage in the design process. This stage was the traditional, artisanal development of the prototype, the standard, which – as both the artistic result of laboratory experiments and the foundation for mass production – made the art-industry fusion possible. As Walter Gropius, foreword to The Synthetic Vision of Walter Gropius, ibid., VII.

This postulate of cultural development was a philosophical borrowing from Hegel’s definition of progress in terms of the dialectical sequence of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Not only was the educational programme known as Bauhauslehren divided into the three separate stages of Vorkurs, Fachstudium and Gestaltstudium, but the Bauhaus code itself could also be characterised by an analogous series: art-technology-style. Alongside its above-mentioned views about the unity of all artistic views and compositional idioms, as well as those about the unity of the artistic and industrial production processes, the Bauhaus opted for ‘multiplicity within this unity’, for variation in the size and composition of the parts, in an attempt to avoid a compromising sterility and uniformity in social and cultural development. The key concepts of the Bauhaus ideology (unity, prototype and style) were thus rooted in the paradox of variation (in reference to art) versus standardisation (in reference to industry), a seeming contradiction which was regarded not as a forced choice between two options, but rather as a productive ‘conflict’ that could lead to reconciliation (synthesis) and thus to a new and better architectural style. Under the production of the intersubjectively created artistic codex and of industry, it was thought that it would be possible to safeguard the unity of the formal while also – in the other, sociocultural domain – leaving enough scope for personal, individual taste and the creative/intuitive approach. ‘The final result would thus be a successful combination of consistent standardisation and far-reaching potential for variation,’ Walter Gropius concluded.
senhof, a suburb of Stuttgart. The Weissenhofsiedlung, as this model housing estate came to be known, departed in the following three fundamental respects from the Berlin Wohnsiedlungen, which had been developed in the preceding years:

1. its programmatic aspect;
2. its conception of urban development; and
3. its status as the first clearly international cooperative endeavour by the Central European avant-garde.

1 In 1926, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe became the general director of the Weissenhof project, for which he designed both the urban plan and the first housing block. He described the problem of the ‘new housing’, and thus the programme of the Weissenhofsiedlung, as follows: "The postulate of "rationalisation and standardisation", as well as the pursuit of profit-ability in housing production, are merely facets of the problem, which are very important, to be sure, but can only become truly significant when placed in the proper perspective. Alongside or, more accurately, above and beyond them is the spatial problem, which can only be solved by means of “creative force” and not by rational or organisational means." This principle thus highlighted the pursuit of rationalisation and standardisation in architecture, but also emphasised that this pursuit was only a means of getting at the modern formal aspects of the ‘housing question’. On its own, the Weissenhof programme provided an open (or half-open) method, which gave individual architects the greatest possible artistic freedom, despite the modern requirement that the building process be unified and unequivocal. Nevertheless, the avant-garde participants, who had previously worked in relative isolation, managed to jointly produce an astounding degree of formal unity. Through the intermediary of the socioeconomic conditions of modernity, the international avant-garde seems ultimately to have succeeded in finding a single artistic code and thereby rallying around a single collective style.

2. The unity shown at the architectural level was not, however, reflected in the overall plan. Although Mies van der Rohe attempted to create a free, organic and thoroughly green housing estate according to 'modern planning principles', and although, with the aid of his own project and the housing blocks designed by Le Corbusier and Peter Behrens, he aimed to make the intended organisation of the estate apparent to the eye, these proposals could not undo the impression that the individual villas followed the contours of the Killesberg only in a haphazard way, and hence that, in urban planning terms, the Weissenhofsiedlung disintegrated into its architectural parts. This was because Mies van der Rohe’s design initiatives were only meaningful at the level of reception, and thus did not conform to the newly introduced scientific methods, which made it increasingly clear that the problem of
urban design involved not only formal, but also organisational and political coherence. Contemplating the initial results of the exhibition, Walter Gropius wrote, ‘The Werkbundsiedlung thus clearly demonstrated the new potential of modern building and the possibilities of its architectural style, but at the same time, it clearly revealed the urban-design failure of Weissenhof and the urban problems that the avant-garde had yet to solve. . . . Instead, the new role of the architect-urbanist should be that of organiser, and thus oriented in multiple directions; it should be linked to research on biological, social, technical and aesthetic problems, which should be merged into an independent and more complex whole.’\footnote{16}

3 Given, however, that both the French and the Dutch avant-gardes had already come to a conclusion similar to that of Gropius, it was felt that the international nature of the Weissenhofsiedlung presented excellent prospects for this approach. Sixteen members of the avant-garde from five Central European countries,\footnote{17} working in collaboration, had not only produced an ‘international style’ – clearly demonstrated for the first time at the Weissenhofsiedlung – but had also taken the first step towards a follow-up at the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (known as CIAM; La Sarraz, 1928), which provided the Modern Movement with an authoritative institution at a political level that was capable of linking its architectural programme to urban planning. As soon as Bauhaus ideology became political and the Modern Movement began to present itself internationally as the vanguard of an alternative, liberated society, it could take a stand against the reactionary criticism of the national socialists and the Deutsche Heimat- schutz and thus prevent the impending schism, 14 years after a similar schism had struck the Werkbund-Ausstellung in Cologne. At the same time, the ideal of unity could thereby extend beyond the borders of architecture and, as a progressive synthesis at the architectural level, culminate in a more complex urban organism, which in turn created the conditions for comprehensive regional and national planning. That led to the emergence – starting from the prototype (developed in the Bauhaus laboratory), and by way of serial architecture and the international style (the Weissenhofsiedlung) – of the functional approach to urban planning and design (the CIAM code), which conversely influenced the design of individual houses and rooms and the relationships between architectural ‘cells’. The first CIAM conferences, in the period from 1929 to 1933, are especially clear illustrations of this artistic postulate of visual continuity in the production chain from ‘sofa cushion to metropolis’.\footnote{18}

THE PERIOD OF CRISIS AND RECONSTRUCTION (1929-1957)
The promise of this approach to urbanism, which CIAM believed it could promulgate on the basis of its social and

\textbf{TOWARDS AN UNCOMPROMISED URBANISM} 

\textbf{LUUK BOELENS}
political message, was never realised. The international re-organisation of capital and labour resulting from the Stock Market Crash of 1929 made it impossible to sustain the formal ideology of the 1920s, whether in the Soviet Union with its five-year plans, Hitler’s fascist dictatorship in Germany, or even the social-democratic West of the New Deal. Precisely as it reached its apotheosis, precisely in the first five years of CIAM, the period when the Modern Movement achieved public recognition and appeared to reach its apex at the Athens conference (1933), it became clear that it would have to revise its theories of planning substantially. Confronted with polyfunctionality, multiplicity and the disorganic character of modern society, urban design could no longer be viewed as the transformation of social forms envisaged in the artistic laboratory into new metropolitan spaces, but rather as a form of instrumental and programmatic consistency, of an entirely different nature from that which was taking shape in the University of Total Architecture.20 This same approach, with its individualist tendency, not only surfaced in Team 10’s programme of work, but also informed its neo-humanistic approach to design work, which centred not on theorising, but on actual building.21 Especially after the disintegration of the CIAM (Dubrovnik, 1956), it became possible for this ‘pragmatic account of another way of thinking’, this architectural urbanism that made reference to the core, the habitat and the kasbah, to become the dominant design code of the Modern Movement and thus dominate international architectural thinking during the revival that took place in the post-war reconstruction period.

HANSAVIERTEL (1953)

The fragmentation that inevitably resulted, however, could not express any message, social or otherwise, for an alternative

19 ‘Democracy is shaped by two contrasting manifestations. On the one hand, it is founded on the diversity of the spirit, which results from an intense and individual action; on the other hand, it is based on a common denominator of regional expressions which, drawing on the cumulative experience of successive generations, gradually become able to distinguish the more arbitrary from the characteristic and essential. Although these two manifestations appear irreconcilable, I believe a merger will have to take place; otherwise, we will end up as robots.’ Walter Gropius, Scope of Total Architecture (New York, 1935), XIV, as quoted in Herbert, The Synthetic Vision of Walter Gropius, op. cit. (note 10), 19.


future practice of urban design. All too rapidly, the Team 10 code became capricious and arbitrary, and therefore antithetical to urbanism.

Less than a year after the CIAM became permanently inactive, the Hansaviertel in Berlin – a model estate intended as a euphoric example of the Wirtschaftswunder – once again clearly demonstrated this inability to make good, after 30 years, on the promise of the Weissenhofsiedlung for the field of urbanism. This project – which claimed to offer the ‘architecture of freedom’ and the ‘planning of the city of tomorrow’ and involved 48 architects from 13 countries – was meant to win the world over to the progressive, modern spirit of Western democratism, as opposed to the purportedly conformist social realism of East Berlin in the reconstruction period. On balance, however, it was a adverse development for architecture and urbanism, because the event overlooked the field’s duties to society. Despite the propagandistic and pathetically demagogic pretensions of this excessively personalised architecture, there was little cultural substance behind its haughty exterior, and instead it seemed as though the avant-garde had turned their clock back to the earliest stage of the Modern Movement. Whereas the Weissenhof project had at least presented a single, international architectural style, the Hansaviertel exhibition had nothing to show but an uncoordinated, idiosyncratic collection of individual architectural personalities. True, they proposed intriguing solutions to particular problems, but the district’s green spaces were not enough to tie their work together into a coherent urban whole. ‘What was intended to be a cultural prototype of Western society became, at best, an artistic exception, legitimated in ideological terms.’ The ideal of unity, the dialectic approach to art and society, appeared to have been utterly defeated, and the avant-garde as such could no longer take a stand against the impending unconditional surrender to the contradictions, imbalances and chaos that characterised the modern metropolis. In response to this alarming prospect, architecture and urbanism tried to regain their cultural significance through the semantic and procedural approaches, respectively, by retreating into a lasting autonomy. The fact that, in the process, they not only scrapped the social programme of the Modern Movement, but also exacerbated the growing division of labour and fragmentation of cultural action systems, was seen not merely as a banality, but as one of the greatest feats of modern architecture, accomplished with great difficulty after the rigid straitjacket of CIAM’s functionalism. Now that ‘practical content’ had been dispensed with, once again anything seemed possible in design work, which could make its highest priority the pursuit of constant novelty and an ever-changing variety of forms and symbols.

POSTMODERNISM AND THE CURRENT DEBATE ON URBANISM

In highly simplified terms, this growing independence – and, consequently, the increasing specialisation of individual design practices – has characterised the last 20 years of the architectural and urbanist disciplines. While Team 10 and Forum were still trying to maintain some degree of connection to the social context of their design activities, the introduction of the linguistic method in the design process firmly categorised the spatial object of manipulation as a formal, independent, autonomous knowledge complex, which therefore went beyond the domain of everyday ideological, political and economic reality. In contrast to both the functional and the humanist approach to design, which attributed a message (social or otherwise) to architecture, the postmodernists showed an increasing tendency to distance themselves from the cultural and political ideas associated with traditional approaches to design, ideas which seemed overlooked to them, and instead posited that modern (and postmodern) architecture was a ‘formal language’. The focus was no longer on direct engagement with social and functional conditions, but on a ‘theoretical discourse’ relating exclusively to what the proponents claimed was the only objective subject matter at architecture’s disposal: the architectural form itself. By concentrating solely on the communicative relationship between individual images and signs, between the form and the receptacle, they believed that they could transcend the functional meaning of form, instead ascribing an intrinsic value to architectural concepts.

See, for instance, Peter Eisenman, *House X* (New York, 1982).
This obsessive quest for the ontology of architecture was, by its nature, drawn to the internal organisation and aesthetic proportions of the architectural object, to a closed and purely self-referential formal system which no longer had any serious connection to reality whatsoever. In this process, the means of design and techniques of production also became aesthetic objects in their own right, and thus no longer amenable to any functional or organisational interpretation.

This definitive sequestration of postmodern architectural thinking into autonomous spheres, cut off from the real world, thus became more painful for two reasons: first, the impending impoverishment of the avant-garde significance of traditional modernism and, second, the increasing specialisation and fragmentation of aesthetic thinking at the level of cultural systems. With the return of practice espousing l’art pour l’art and the accompanying undialectical application of, and reference to, the history of avant-garde design practice, the postmoderns adopted ‘the present of the past’ as their principal theme, thereby betraying both their neo-conservatism and their unequivocal antimodernism.27 The architect’s position, the realisation of the past in the solidified present, is no longer the central issue; instead, a new type of formal historicism is emphasised, one which detaches the aesthetic effect of the historical plan from its original context and introduces this fact as new material in current design practice. Cutting across periods in this way may seem to restore the architectural continuity of modern building, but by disregarding the specific character of the knowledge involved, it also accelerates the process by which the practice of spatial planning and design disintegrates into its separate components, each of which can only define a value orientation in relation to one knowledge complex. While architects have gotten away with this exclusivity so far (because it is the built object itself, rather than the theorising, that legitimates social acceptance, the postmodernists tell us), because the discipline of urban design is directly linked to a more complex field with a sui generis unity, the tendency towards specialisation and autonomy has played a fundamental role in the recently generally acknowledged debacle in urban design work. The attempts now being made to preserve a degree of ‘unity’ in modern architecture, to preserve the integration of individual components, are problematic by definition within the framework of formalist thinking. In this context, Jürgen Habermas makes an interesting point in his Adorno lecture. Habermas, too, sees a direct link between the increasing segmentation of cultural spheres of value – the growing differentiation of science, morality and art – and the autonomous specialisation of sectors adapted to specialised tasks, which have branched off from a path that has continued in everyday practice as if its rightness were self-evident. In this process of ever-greater autonomisation of individual practices from their context of the broad public, the aesthetic aspect, instead of being a means to an end, can become an end in itself. As a result, architecture may from now on have its own internal history, which shuts out social and other extrinsic criteria that could conceivably bring about communicative rationality and interaction between specialisms. This is because in the autonomous and specialised handling of specific problems, one only ever draws one’s own intellectual positions and the knowledge belonging to one’s own field, without recourse to other action systems or to social practice. Therefore, for Habermas, artistic deviation from everyday practice is not only the problem at the root of the fragmentation of the range of cultural action systems, but also, as such, forms the basis for the doomed attempts to do away, at this late stage, with the cultures of these groups of experts.28 It is precisely because the current debate on urbanism seems to have associated itself with the formalistic design approach of the postmoderns, thus demanding its own autonomy, that the discipline of urban design – viewed against this epistemological background – is farther removed than ever from its proclaimed objective of bridging the gap between the planning process and architecture. While in the 1920s and ‘30s urban design could take a socially engaged form, drawing on the intersubjectively created codex and mediating between art and industry, and as soon as it became political could, likewise, indicate the programmatic and spatial conditions required for national and regional measures, the return to pure elitist formalism seems to have ruled out any such communicative practice by definition. Because the current debate on...
urbanism dispenses with the practical content, social integration and formal interaction that should characterise the artistically successful and socially responsible practice of urban design, it will, in all probability, also fail to mediate between the architectural fragments within the scope of a single code, let alone safeguard an aesthetic conception of urban design. The discipline as such is now producing its own aporias and can no longer hold any position with authority.

DIE INTERNATIONALE BAUAUSSTELLUNG BERLIN (1987)

The Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA) in Berlin, the end date of which has already been shifted to 1987, does not seem to present good prospects. Despite the central programme of this building exhibition, which emphatically faces up to the problem that individual architectural works and the city need to be brought into a positive, constructive relationship with one another, and despite the fact that the IBA – unlike the above-mentioned Bauausstellungen – is deliberately and voluntarily confronting existing urban structures, in this Berichtsjahr it seems reasonable to conclude that the IBA will achieve no more than the expansion of a few excellent works of architecture.29 Given its exorbitant solutions and the differences between individual projects – a few fragments, such as Krier’s project in Ritterstrasse and Baller’s residences on the Fraenkel-ufer have already been completed – it appears more likely that the avant-garde aspirations of the IBA – which has also been called the Internationale Bluff Aktion – will result in the fetishisation of the formally incidental than that it will gradually set in motion a process that can turn the city back into an integrated whole. Because it focuses directly on the ‘great masters’ whose stars are currently rising,30 and thus often relies almost exclusively on the one-sided, half-formed formal approach to design, the IBA escapade stands almost no chance of contributing meaningfully to Berlin’s urban reorganisation. In my opinion, this impotence of the practice of urban design says a great deal about not only this particular international exhibition, but the entire Western approach to design.

Instead, this article has suggested the following conclusion about the problem of urbanism: As long as the disciplines of architecture and urbanism do not formulate positions on the social message of their design activities, as long as they refuse to take up the practical content inherent in form, the avant-garde significance of the modern will progressively diminish and – by following fashionable trends and developing specialised working methods – inevitably disintegrate into its incidental fragments. Against this backdrop, the future prospects for urban designers are anything but rosy. In contrast, however, a socially engaged approach – which takes architecture and urbanism to be two distinct but inseparable parts of a single spatial practice – still generates polemic. The right approach does not locate the link between form and content in a linear dimension, in which one follows logically from the other (‘form follows function’ or ‘function follows form’), but rather in a dialectical relationship which shows that the fields of operation of form and content are inseparable – joined by an elastic cord, as it were. Once the content of spatial design relates not only to technical design issues, but also to social content, the form can absorb the historical and social postulates so essential to modern-day projects and make them inherent to itself. The more productive approach thus provides direct mediation between design and criticism, between artistic creation and the formulation of norms, and thereby operates in both the domain of the aesthetic and expressive, and that of moral and practical knowledge complexes. To arrive at a two-part design production process of this kind, however, it seems we must return to square one – that is, if we ever really moved beyond it.

Translated by David McKay


30 Including John Hejduk, Aldo Rossi, Rob Krier, Peter Eisenman, Oriol Bohigas and Oswald Mathias Ungers.