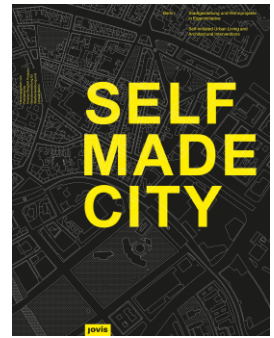


SELF MADE CITY: BERLIN AS PIONEER

INTERVIEW with Kristien Ring, curator and editor of *Self Made City, Self Initiated Urban Living and Architectural Interventions*, Jovis Verlag, 2013. Arie Lengkeek, AIR, the architecture centre of Rotterdam



PLUG Rotterdam is a programme of AIR. With PLUG we bring movement around small and mid-scale building projects which have a significant contribution to the city. In preparing the programme PLUG Antwerpen, Berlijn, Rotterdam, AIR's Arie Lengkeek interviewed Kristien Ring about the lessons which crystallize out of the praxis that has emerged in Berlin in the last 10 years. We don't invent the wheel- we apply it to our own circumstances. Where to start?

1 —————
Arie Lengkeek: Rotterdam is a city which is valued for its civic initiatives and the ground it provides for a broad range of bottom-up initiatives and startups. Yet, our focus is on the initiating of small-scale building projects and the construction-stream that is formed by the sum of these projects. We focus on their contribution to the city and the emerging entrepreneurship they assume for architects as initiators. Now looking at Berlin: Is **architect-initiated development** a fair description, or is it too narrow?

Kristien Ring: Although projects are initiated in a great number of ways, it remains that architects have initiated the most innovative projects. Particularly projects that try to find fundamentally new solutions; be it with experimental building materials, in terms of spatial conditions, mixed functional programming, or financing models.

2 —————
AL: There is no **Berlin model**. Yet: what do you see as the common denominator in the broad variety of architectural practices and offices which evolved over the last 10 years?

KR: The offices that have experience with the co-housing model have entirely diverse working processes and architectural goals. Some offices have developed a tight process of decision making in order to keep the projects manageable and the architectural design in their own hands, other offices find that the discussion and decision making process is central to the design of the building, in which everyone must participate. –That is just one aspect. On the other hand, they all contribute to redefining the architectural profession today. Each office has worked through difficult participation processes and so has gathered experience that can be passed on and improved upon. I think that the common denominator is a real

dedication to creating a customized solution, together with the future users.

3 —————
AL: **Entrepreneurship** is an important factor and parallel; in Rotterdam this movement also starts at a time when, like in Berlin, the housing market is collapsing and production comes to a halt. Which organization and principles in the architecture firms do you regard as essential in this emergent phase?

KR: It all comes down to being able; to secure a building site and, to that all the members of the group can get a loan from the bank. The group needs to be quicker than an investor in buying a site. This is less difficult in "collapsing" times and gives groups the needed time advantage. What should be avoided is the idealistic development of projects into perfect detail, before the site is secured.

4 —————
AL: How would you describe the shift in role and attitude of the **local government** and politics towards these initiatives? Are they merely tolerated or also actively supported as a means of achieving public policy goals?

KR: The senate department for urban development has long looked upon co-housing projects positively. They also finance a privately run agency that is dedicated to helping these projects by way of consulting and a platform for exchange (Netzwerkagentur Generationenwohnen). Unfortunately, the department for finance is in charge of the state-owned land. After years of protest from many sides, there are now some properties that will be awarded based also on the quality of the development concept and not just the price alone. However, politically, ownership-based development cannot be financially supported in any way. Therefore, it is more like the privately initiated and financed projects are actively "used" in achieving public policy goals.

5 —————
AL: In your book you introduce 10 self-made qualities. Which prove to be or are taken over as lasting and **convincing arguments** of the public benefits?

KR: Well, I would say all of them of course, but there are some key points that stand out:

GREEN, OPEN AND COMMUNITY-SHARED SPACES, CREATED IN SELF-INITIATIVE HAVE PROVEN TO BECOME VITAL PARTS OF GOOD NEIGHBORHOODS:

What can we do together, that we can't do on our own? Many groups share common spaces, and have created ideal living situations. Selfmade projects have created a substantial amount of shared space and gardens in the inner city, sometimes even open to the public. The connections created between the green and surrounding urban space is a resource for the city. We see how the entire neighborhood profits from Self-initiative: it helps people to have a sense of identity and invites them to take on responsibility for the place they live.

LONG-TERM AFFORDABILITY HELPED TO CREATE STABLE NEIGHBORHOODS:

In Selfmade projects, the future users decide what to invest in and where money can be best saved. This redefines the quality to price relationship. Alternative models for financing and ownership have offered a new level of long-term affordability within a non-profit and "self-user" ideology. Self-organized and self-managed projects secure affordable working and living spaces in the inner city. Since the market in Berlin is taking up rapidly, we can witness how these projects have secured a long-term basis. They contribute to stable and mixed neighborhood on the one hand, and are pioneering in new neighborhoods on the other.

CHOICE AND FLEXIBILITY FOR MULTI-GENERATION SOLUTIONS:

We need to have choice in planning, in order to be able to find personalized solutions. In this way, people with special needs can find a place in the city and spaces can be adapted to suit changing needs over time. Multi-generation living is enabled by custom-fit, flexible and barrier-free building design. In general, these qualities are found in Selfmade projects significantly more often than in market-driven developments.

THE FACILITATION OF HYBRID-USE CONTRIBUTES TO SUSTAINABLE URBANITY:

A functional mix supports interaction with the surrounding urban community, which is an essential factor for urban vitality and can positively affect the entire district. Investors normally deal in either housing or commercial real estate. Selfmade projects are based on and developed out of existing needs. Particularly in the inner city where the creative class is growing, there is a high demand for small, affordable office and commercial spaces that are located close to living spaces. MIXED URBAN QUARTERS and SOCIAL INTEGRATION are made possible in the inner city by specific user groups that create their own Selfmade niches and oases's.

SELFMADE PROJECTS ARE LEADING THE WAY IN ECOLOGY:

Ecological living ideologies, construction standards and building concepts have been realized frequently in Selfmade projects and serve as reference projects for others. From passivhaus to timberconstruction in highrise, selfmade projects lead the way. The need for these technologies and the willingness to experiment and prototype with them is expressed by the users and owners themselves, who are perfectly well able to balance the merits and vices of these new technologies.

FUTURE ORIENTED ARCHITECTURAL SOLUTIONS and EXPERIMENTAL MODELS:

Alternative planning solutions provide enough open and green space, as well as quality living spaces whilst repairing the urban fabric. The re-use and re-activation of existing buildings capitalizes on existing resources by creating solutions

that utilize culturally and architecturally valuable buildings that would otherwise be unattractive for investors. Through experiments, alternative solutions are tested and models for the future are developed that would not be possible under normal conditions. Selfmade projects experiment more than often with new building materials. We need to create the right parameters for that, to allow the experiments of today to become our solutions of the future.

6

AL: The financing of both the projects and the financial model of the architectural offices is an important cornerstone which took some time to settle. What **convinced banks** of the credibility of these initiatives?

KR: You may want to ask the bank that financed most of the projects: UmweltBank AG. There are only two banks really that finance these projects in Germany. I believe that it was a combination of persistence and convincing schemes. Also, these banks have financed co-housing projects in other cities and therefore already had some experience.

7

AL: With 'auf einander bauen' and 'self made city' you, as a curator, identified what was actually happening and gave it a public face. By doing this, things were set in motion. How would you describe the **contribution of these cultural initiatives** to the evolution of this constructionstream?

KR: Auf.einander.bauen was a project from 2007 so we can look back and evaluate that the publication sold 2500 copies within seven months and that we had the highest number of visitors to the exhibition at the DAZ ever. The exhibition and publication showed very first examples with a "how-to" emphasis. Indeed, this brought different interest groups together, started discussions, set-up new networks and inspired new projects. –I was really criticized for this exhibition in architectural circles, for showing bottom-up projects. In the meantime, hundreds of co-housing

projects have been built, and society continues to change in a way that collaborative and participatory processes become a central part of our profession. Selfmade City, on the other hand, an overview of the last ten years. The publication analyses the particular architectural and urban qualities that have been realized in the diverse projects, in the form of best-practice examples. With the goal of defining the qualities that are essential for sustainable urban development and that can be transferred as principles to new projects.

– Not only in Berlin. Hopefully Selfmade City will contribute to earning support in securing sites for further projects. –And inspire new projects!

8

AL: Berlin has a two-faced urban development. The more formal one celebrates the big scale and international face of the city, and thrives on the waves of the market economy. The construction stream you have identified stitches and mixes the city from neighborhood to neighborhood. How would you describe these two streams and their underlying systems: **complementarity or contradiction?**

KR: Berlin. Berlin is a great city despite its administration, as people like to say. The big projects have a certain relevance. However, the real, lively, urban playground that people flock to the city for is not found there. It is the Selfmade projects that contribute to this vital urban mix. If you zoom into areas of Prenzlauer Berg, Mitte and Freidrichshain where there are many Selfmade projects in a small area, we can really see how they define the city. Weather urban interventions or built, these are small scale, tailored projects that each have their own unique solution to the surrounding urban condition—a situational architecture. The critical mass of Selfmade projects clearly shows how effective they are in creating a more livable city for the future.