

*Landscapes of Care: Photography, Film, Modern Architecture
and Landscape Heritage*



SOPHIA
SCOPIO EDITIONS

volume 8, issue 1 | publication year: 2023
issn: 2183-8976 [print] 2183-9468 [online]
isbn: 978-989-53640-5-3
doi 10.24840/2183-8976_2023-0008_0001_5
homepage: <https://www.up.pt/index.php/sophia>

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Changing the Image: Photographic Investigations on the Anonymous Modern in Aachen, Germany 1970–1989

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Abstract:

In the 1970s and 1980s a certain kind of anonymous architecture emerged in West German cities of the former Bonn Republic which is currently confronted with the risk of demolition, stemming mainly from the lack of recognition and care. These buildings have played a significant role in shaping the character of today's typical West German cities, thus holding a crucial place in the identity of these urban and suburban areas. Therefore, this paper focuses on the concept of photography as a visual preservation method, using the city of Aachen as a representative example of an average-sized West German city. The objective is to enhance the appreciation of this neglected cultural heritage, both in terms of sustainable urban planning and potential inclusion in the canon of architectural history.

Keywords: mediatisation, architecture, photography, film, socialist modernism

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This paper explores the concept of photography as a visual preservation method by taking the example of Aachen, an average middle-sized West-German City. Similar to numerous other major cities¹ situated in the territory of the former Bonn Republic, Aachen is characterized by a certain kind of anonymous architecture which emerged in West German cities in the 1970s and 1980s. Buildings from this era currently confront the risk of demolition, stemming from their lack of recognition, appreciation and lack of maintenance and care.² This is not only problematic regarding their underrated heritage value and a potential inclusion in the canon of architecture history but also in terms of sustainability. These buildings have played a significant role in shaping the character of today's typical West German cityscapes, thus holding a crucial place in the identity of these urban and suburban areas. Therefore, it is necessary to impart their architectural qualities and importance as part of the urban culture to the authorities, academics and a wider public.

This paper will focus on the possible contribution of photography in creating a heritage value and preserving underestimated urban architecture of the 1970s and 1980s in West German cities using the city of Aachen as a case study. To what extent is it possible to evaluate, promote and preserve these buildings through visual representation? And how can that affect a more sustainable way of future urban planning in West-Germany?

The research is based on a seminar which was initiated by the authors at the Faculty of Architecture at RWTH Aachen University and funded by the Federal Institute for Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development in the context of the *Zukunft Bau – Pop-up Campus* entitled "Save Material – Save the Planet" in Aachen. According to the title all projects were meant to contribute to sustainable building methods. The project, led by the authors and realized by master students in architecture, aimed to explore various buildings from the 1970s and 1980s in Aachen, particularly those at risk of demolition, and to develop critical approaches to preservation through photographic exploration.

The seminar consisted of a theoretical component conducted over the span of one semester and a one-week photography workshop. The theoretical part covered various topics, including media theory, art historical classification, the essentials of architectural photography, aesthetic

1 In Germany cities with a population exceeding 100,000 inhabitants are classified as "Großstadt" (major city). cf. 'Statistiken zu den größten Städten in Deutschland', *Statista*, 30 August 2023, <https://de.statista.com/themen/8116/grossstaedte-in-deutschland/#topicOverview> (20.06.23).

2 Andreas Cichowski, 'Die alten Zweckbauten haben ausgedient', *Aachener Zeitung*, 20 December 2021, https://www.aachener-zeitung.de/lokales/aachen/zweckbauten-auf-dem-campus-melaten-in-aachen-haben-ausgesorgt_aid-64712795 (20.06.23); Eckhard Heck, 'Ein Riese in der Krise– Schmuckstück Bushof', *Movie Aachen*, 2017, <https://movieaachen.de/ein-riese-in-der-krise-schmuckstueck-bushof/> (20.06.23); 'Bushof Aachen. Da Capo! Al Fine?', *Deutsche BauZeitschrift*, 2019, https://www.dbz.de/artikel/dbz_Bushof_Aachen_Da_capo_AI_fine_-3431662.html (20.06.23).

theory, the identification of objects for photography and various references. The workshop allowed students to refine their projects, enhance their photographic techniques, and explore the architectural character through extensive studies. Finally, the photographic series were shown in an exhibition. A catalog including both the architectural photographs and accompanying texts about the objects and their architectonic peculiarities complemented the exhibit.

Aachen and the 'Anonymous modern'

Aachen is a medium-sized city with a population of approximately 250,000, bordering Belgium and the Netherlands. Historically, Aachen was a significant centre during the Carolingian Empire, serving as a site of pilgrimage, a religious hub, and a coronation location. It stands out as a noteworthy example in European urban planning history. Despite substantial war-related destruction and subsequent impacts from city and traffic planning, the Roman city layout remains preserved in its core.³

To define and identify the architecture of the 'anonymous modern' it is necessary to take a closer look at Aachen's urban development after the Second World War.⁴ During the war, the city centre and 62% of the residences were destroyed. By 1955, post-war development efforts were underway, making up for building investments that were deferred due to economic challenges during the Depression and World War II. The city's settlements maintain a relatively compact layout, with a focus on linear orientation toward public transportation. Between 1960 and 1980, significant renewal and densification took place across all parts of the city. As recently as the 1970s, the city proposed a development plan for the main streets of the city centre. This plan included making the area more car-friendly by reconfiguring the rings and radials. In 1982, further expansion of settlement areas progressed.⁵

Starting point for the student project was the ongoing discussion around the Aachen bus station completed in 1973. (Fig. 01)

3 Gerhard Curdes, *Die Entwicklung des Aachener Stadtraumes: Der Einfluss von Leitbildern und Innovationen auf die Form der Stadt* (Dortmund: Dortmunder Vertrieb für Bau- und Planungsliteratur, 1999).

4 Helmut Kirsch, ed., *Straßen- Und Verkehrsgeschichte deutscher Städte nach 1945: Stuttgart – Aachen – Bayreuth* (Bonn: Kirschbaum, 1996); Anton Kurze, ed., *Aachen 1945–1970: 25 Jahre Baugeschehen* (Stuttgart: Bek Verlag, 1970).

5 Gerhard Curdes, *Teilräumliche Planung: Der Stand der Stadtteilplanung in der Bundesrepublik* (Köln: Deutscher Gemeindeverlag, 1980).



Once a signature project of urban planning and modern traffic policy it is now regarded as an eyesore in the heart of the city centre. The public debate whether to rebuilt or tear down the whole complex is massively heated-up by the reporting in the local press, where the building is described as 'ugly' and 'concrete block'.⁶

The buildings chosen by the students can be classified by three categories: The ones that were unwanted stated by the local press, like the bus station, the ones in discussion to be teared down because of their in-utility, like the former Police headquarter (Fig. 02) and the ones simply unseen, for example average housing estates, municipal administration, or sacred buildings. To identify those objects in the city, the participants strolled through the cityscape looking for a certain kind of buildings from the 1970s and 1980s defined by materials, like concrete and aluminium, and a specific use of forms and colours. The chosen buildings were described by the students as disregarded but somehow intriguing in their appearance. Most of them were in a neglected condition and in need of renovation. They all had in common that it was not much known about their building history and they were generally considered as disruptive elements

⁶ 'Betonklotz Bushof droht die Abrissbirne.', *Aachener Zeitung*, 11 March 2011, <http://www.aachener-zeitung.de/lokales/aachen/beton-klotz-bushof-droht-die-abrissbirne-1.37> (20.06.23).

[Fig. 01]

Marie Becker, Dennis Sommer, "Peterstr. 21–25 – 52062 Aachen", 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.

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in the city landscape, disregarded by the authorities, scholars and not least the mass media.⁷ Until now, neither a specific heritage value nor certain photographs of these buildings exist.⁸ Nevertheless, these buildings arouse a kind of familiar atmosphere of typical West-German post-war cityscapes in their entirety. Their run-down facades reminding of bygone promise of modern urban living.



⁷ Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 1994).

⁸ Mark Cousins, 'The Ugly [Part 1]', *AA Files* 28 (1994): 61–64.

[Fig. 02]

Fiona Cordes, Georges Reiser, "Hubert Wienen Str. 37. - 52070 Aachen", 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.

Attempts to characterize this kind of architecture in West-Germany and analyse their possible heritage value often focus on the period of the 1960s and 1970s.⁹ For example, the term 'grey architecture', used by Benedikt Boucsein, categorizes the anonymous everyday architecture of the 1950s and 1960s in West-Germany, but at the same time unites various architectural languages and cannot be easily attributed to a specific style.¹⁰

Regarding the history of urban planning in both parts of Germany before 1989 it seems reasonable to focus on the 1970s and 1980s, especially when it comes to differences in the appearance of cityscapes in East and West Germany. Before the construction of the Berlin wall in 1961 there was still hope for a reunited Germany and thus urban planning still connected, especially in Berlin where amongst others Hans Scharoun and Wils Ebert developed a plan for Greater Berlin (Groß-Berlin).¹¹ Around 1970 urban planners furthermore dismissed the idea of a car-friendly city and the suburban mass housing (Großsiedlung) as the ideal solution for housing shortage. The rethinking was amongst others caused by the sociocultural changes in the late 1960s.¹²

The architectural style emerging especially in the 1970s and 1980s is therefore still to be defined. The architectural historian Charles Jencks offers a possible definition of an architectural style practiced around the end of 'modernism' which to a certain extent can be referenced as a first attempt to define the West-German buildings of the 1970s and 1980s. Following Jenck's thesis 'modernity' ends with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoue, built in 1954–1955 and demolished in 1972.¹³ Followed by a period, which lies between the end of modernism and the entry into postmodernism. This is particularly interesting to the extent that the so-called 'Late Modern' spans over a period of about twenty years, 1960–1980, during which the western German cities underwent a period of intense urbanization. As Jencks describes, modern housing typologies developed a character that deviated from the purism of the modern masters or exaggerated certain aspects. This contradiction between exaggeration and anonymity makes the stylistic designation 'late modernism' particularly difficult. Architectural styles develop at different times around the world and Jencks' definition applies to some extent to the architecture built

9 Alexandra Apfelbaum, Gudrun Escher, and Yasemin Utku, *Mit den Riesen auf Augenhöhe. Ein neuer Blick auf Großstrukturen der 1960er und 1970er*, 2016. <https://baukultur.nrw/projekte/mit-den-riesen-auf-augenhoehe/> (30.08.23).

10 Benedikt Boucsein, *Graue Architektur. Bauen im Westdeutschland der Nachkriegszeit* (Köln: Verlag Walter König, 2010).

11 For different perspectives on rebuilding German cities after WW2 cf. Ulrich Conrads, *Die Städte Himmelloffen. Reden und Reflexionen über den Wiederaufbau des Untergegangenen und die Wiederkehr des Neuen Bauens 1948/49*, *Bauwelt Fundamente* 125 (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2003).

12 Andreas Jüttemann, *Berlin (West) – Eine unwirtliche Stadt? Stadtautobahnen und Großsiedlungen in der Kritik (1954–1982)* (Berlin: vbb, Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2021).

13 Sabine Horlitz, 'The Case of Pruitt-Igoue: On the Demolition of the US Public Housing Complex in St. Louis, 1972', ed. Axel Sowa, *Candide. Journal for Architectural Knowledge*, no.10, 2010.

in the 1970s and 1980s in West Germany as well. In his work *Late Modern*, published in 1980, he defines certain rhetorical features but also ideologies and design concepts to classify late modern architecture.¹⁴ According to Jencks, ideologies of the time were an unconscious style, pragmatic, expansive and late capitalist architecture, the suppressed artist and the architect who offers service, rather than representing a saviour or master. All of them a possible explanation for the fact that so little information is known about the architects and the style of that time. Selected appearance characteristics, which are more abstract than the symbolism of postmodernism, as specified by Jencks, are: technical perfection, extreme repetitions and articulation, structure and construction as ornament, and second machine age aesthetics as well as an emphasis on extreme logic, transport, mechanics, technology and construction. To a certain degree these characteristics are applicable to the anonymous modern, but at the same time, 1970s and 1980s West-German buildings are most likely too vague in representing these characteristics to make it into Jencks' illustrative selection.

Cultural heritage at risk

When analysing the reasons for the underestimation of these buildings in Aachen and exploring methods to illuminate their significance, next to the definition of a certain architectural style, several other aspects need to be taken into consideration. The aspect of maintenance and care plays an important role in increasing the heritage value of the anonymous modern.¹⁵ The buildings are not appreciated when they are in bad condition: faded colours and materials or the disappearance of the structure of the formwork on visible concrete. (Fig. 03)

When asked why architecture from the 1970s and 1980s is in general not very much appreciated, architecture critic Nikolaus Bernau states that these buildings have been in use for almost 50 years, but since then hardly any financial means have been invested into their maintenance. Therefore, especially municipal buildings are affected by a wave of demolition since the early 1990s. Dilapidated buildings are often cheaper to demolish than to renovate: "A mistake of the German financing methods, how to maintain buildings. The maintenance funds are always part of the operating funds and are therefore always in competition with the financing of exhibitions etc."¹⁶ Far too little has been and is invested in maintenance.

¹⁴ Charles Jencks, *Late-Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).

¹⁵ Jan Capol, 'Denkmalpflege für die Bauten der Boomjahre?', in *Bauten der Boomjahre, Paradoxien der Erhaltung*, ed. Uta Hassler, Catherine Dumont d'Ayot, and Institut für Denkmalpflege und Bauforschung ETH Zürich (Gollion: Édition in Folio, 2009).

¹⁶ Nikolaus Bernau, *Warum werden so viele Gebäude aus den 70ern Abgerissen?*, May 5, 2020, Interview with Deutschlandfunk: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/endlich-mal-erklaert-warum-werden-so-viele-gebaeude-aus-den-100.html> (27.03.2023). Translated by the authors.



Architect and urban designer Charlotte Malterre-Barthes argues in a similar way when she states: "... to excuse their demise, politicians and officials are quick to blame the natural aging process or factors such as rain, squatting, or vandalism. Such aspects may play a role, but so does the lack of public funding for maintenance, a disengagement epitomized by budget cuts, privatization, outsourcing of cleaning and repair services, and a general contempt for upkeep efforts", and "... in Western societies seeking to constantly create themselves anew, to maintain what exists is rather unpopular".¹⁷

¹⁷ Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, 'Maintenance as a Political Act', in *Everyday Matters: Contemporary Approaches to Architecture*, ed. Ciro Miguel and Vanessa Grossman (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2022), 193–203.

[Fig. 03]

Hannah Gobien, Jakob Polster, "Lagerhausstr. 20 – 52064 Aachen", 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.

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Accordingly, 'caring' for architecture – in a literal sense as well as in a broader context – is a crucial factor when it comes to preservation. As stated above the first step is to arouse attention for a subject, but what is decisive when it comes to attracting the authorities, researchers and/ or photographer's attention? Is it just a coincidence which buildings are chosen or are there certain circumstances that lead to a more intense engagement with certain buildings? In the following further open questions and ideas on the decisive circumstances are proposed.

Labelling – When referring to certain eras in architectural history the assignment of an architectural style and the labelling of an era is crucial. This phenomenon resembles indeed the process of creating a brand name. Labels like 'Italian Renaissance', 'Bauhaus' or 'Brutalism' are far more than academic terms. Apart from their scientific use and definition, they stand for a much wider, more popular characterization of architecture or a certain expectation or expertise that comes with that architecture. For example, the excessive use of the term Bauhaus is not only motivated by its original meaning or the true Bauhaus architecture – if that even exists – but because it comes with a certain connotation of an image that was created by Walter Gropius and others. Similar can be said on Brutalism. In 1954, the term was coined in Britain regarding the *beton brut* used for the mass production of large housing developments in urban suburbs as well as for sculptural buildings with extreme cantilevers and carved ornaments. Despite its controversial appearance, brutalism is nevertheless a renowned architectural style. Moreover, it is recently experiencing a renaissance photography was jointly responsible for. It indeed hasn't always been subject to extensive photographic documentation, even though one of the three concepts assigned to Brutalism by Reyner Banham is the "memorability as image" or "quality of being imageable".¹⁸ Especially the increasing interest in photographs of brutalist buildings on social media is remarkable.¹⁹ Buildings of the 1970s and 1980s are not attached to such a memorable label yet.

'Zeitgeist' – How far back in time does an era have to be in order to be appreciated? How significant is the current 'Zeitgeist'? From Gründerzeit buildings to modern architecture, architectural styles often experience a period of forgetting, neglecting and demolition before their heritage value is acknowledged again. As stated above, the anonymity of the 1970s and 1980s architecture can be attributed partly to the fact that architectural historians have not assigned an architectural style to them. Buildings of this period are listed under their date of origin but are not further placed in the context of a style period. Reference works on architectural styles conclude with Modernism, leaving little information about the history and architects of these structures. Consequently, they may not align with the current 'Zeitgeist'.

¹⁸ Claire Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Hamish Lonergan, Meme, Memory or Critic. Revaluing Brutalism on Social Media, in *Valuing Architecture. Heritage and the Economics of Culture*, ed. Ashley Paine, Susan Holden, John Macarthur (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020) 208–224.

The architect's image – The anonymity of the intended buildings is enhanced by the anonymity of the architects and their missing image. Nowadays nobody would question the existence and preservation of a building that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe may have only briefly laid his hand on. Moreover, destroyed buildings like the Barcelona Pavilion or House Wolf are being rebuilt. Mies, Le Corbusier and many other iconic architects, contributed to their own myth, not least through the deliberate use of photography.²⁰

The photogenic – The technical development of photography favours the photographic representation of certain styles. Throughout history, the interaction between photography and architecture has led to a concentration on certain works and artists such as the modern architecture of 1920s and 1930s.²¹ But is there such a thing as photogenic architecture?²² If there is, this implicates, that also non-photogenic architecture exists. As from the 1920s architects knew their buildings would be photographed and were fully aware about the importance on photography in regard of self-marketing as well. Meanwhile, buildings from the 1970s and 1980s might still be associated with architects for whom self-promotion was not a priority.

Picturing the 'anonymous modern'

The chosen objects in Aachen, as described above, were photographically recorded and examined by the students from both documentary and aesthetic points of view. Photographs of the buildings were to be taken from various perspectives and prints were created, discussed and curated. This process aimed to train the participants' perception of the buildings and uncover their aesthetic qualities. It was preceded by intensive studies of the fundamentals of architecture and urban photography as a visual method to document, evaluate, promote or preserve architecture.²³

Projects like Ed Ruscha's *Some Los Angeles Apartments* or *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* as well as *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown served as a starting point on the possibilities of exploring and explaining architecture by the means of photographic approaches.²⁴ Regarding the countless works and publications that aim to promote a certain architectural style or principles the focus was on the 1920s, a turning point in media history.

20 Nathalie Herschdorfer and Lada Umstätter, *Le Corbusier and the Power of Photography* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

21 Robert Elwall, *Building with Light: An International History of Architectural Photography* (London: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2004).

22 Andreas Haus, 'Fotogene Architektur – Photogenic Architecture', *Daidalos* 66 (1997): 84–91.

23 A detailed analysis of the many different existing approaches would go beyond the scope of this paper. Cf. Rolf Sachsse, *Bild und Bau. Zur Nutzung technischer Medien beim Entwerfen von Architektur*. (Braunschweig/Wiesbaden: Vieweg Verlag, 1997); Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century*.

24 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1972); Martino Stierli, *Las Vegas im Rückspiegel: Die Stadt in Theorie, Fotografie und Film*, *Architektonisches Wissen* (Zürich: gta Verlag, 2007); see also Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, *The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977).

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The function of architectural photography shifted from documentation in terms of monument preservation and historical studies to a tool for explaining and promoting modern architecture. Pioneers like Walter Gropius and Sigfried Giedion set the stage and many other architects, critics, and scholars followed until today.²⁵

In regard to activism towards preserving architecture, an important reference was the work of Richard Nickel, an architectural photographer and historic preservationist who worked in post-war Chicago from the 1950s to the 1970s. Nickel attempted to save the neglected or diminished buildings of architect Louis Sullivan from demolition, pioneering a new form of activist preservation photography.²⁶ The historian Sarah Rogers Morris argues that Nickel's work used the photographic medium to understand, represent, and reevaluate the work of Sullivan, while elevating the act of preservation as one of righteous heroism.²⁷

Of course, the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher was also discussed in the context of the seminar. The Bechers' intentions regarding the content or purpose of the pictures offer similarities but also slightly differentiate from the project in Aachen. Bernd and Hilla Becher started their work with the aim to document certain architectural types before they would be gone and used photography as a tool that gained advantage over drawings in terms of speed.²⁸ The Bechers were equally interested in the formal correspondences within groups of water towers or furnaces, as well as in the technical aspects, as evidenced by their numerous publications, especially from the early years.²⁹ The actual artwork wasn't photography but the concept of a series of typologies in accordance with the principles of Concept Art in the late 1960s. In contrast to today's preferred presentation of photography in museums their pictures were initially presented on unframed cardboards which strengthened the conceptual, documentary character.³⁰ It was not the Becher's objective to save the industrial architecture from demolition in the first place nor was it a priority for them to evaluate the architectural style or create a better image. Their approach was rather focused on exploring the sculptural qualities of the industrial sites and documenting them from a retrospective point of view than to provide perspectives as a cultural heritage in the future.

25 Walter Gropius, *Bauhausbauten Dessau*, Bauhausbücher 12 (München: Albert Langen Verlag, 1930); Sigfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1928); Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 1941).

26 Richard Cahan, *They All Fall down: Richard Nickel's Struggle to Save America's Architecture* (Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1994).

27 Sarah Rogers Morris, 'Richard Nickel's Photography: Preserving Ornament in Architecture', *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 10, No.2 (Winter 2013): 67–80.

28 Hilla Becher, 'Klar waren wir Freaks', *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, 2008.

29 Bernhard und Hilla Becher, *Vergleiche technischer Konstruktionen*, (Aachen: Gegenverkehr. Zentrum für aktuelle Kunst (Exh.-Cat.), 1971).

30 Rolf Sachsse, *Hilla und Bernhard Becher, Silo für Kokskohle, Zeche Hannibal, Bochum-Hofstede, 1976. Das Anonyme und das Plastische der Industriephotographie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Verlag, 1999).

Nevertheless, the students' works assembled some stylistic features made popular by the Bechers such as monochrome backgrounds, front views, flatness and one-point perspective. In contrast to the Bechers, all students in Aachen chose colour photography, a fact that was amongst others influenced by the bold use of colours in the buildings. (Fig. 04)



[Fig. 04]
Andre Mangad, Carlos Schrewe, "Sommerfeldstr. 18 - 52074 Aachen", 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.



Some of the series also referred to the Becher school at the Academy in Düsseldorf: For example, colourful detailed views that reminded of the work of Jörg Sasse, interiors reflecting the work of Candida Höfer, or the carefully composed facades by Thomas Ruff. (Fig. 05–06)

Thomas Struth's series *Unconscious Places* may also be mentioned as an example with an impact. The series Struth created in the 1970s and 1980s deals with at first sight commonplace urban settings in cities all over the world, documenting urban development sensitively and pictorially while allowing the viewer to discover these underrated places.³¹

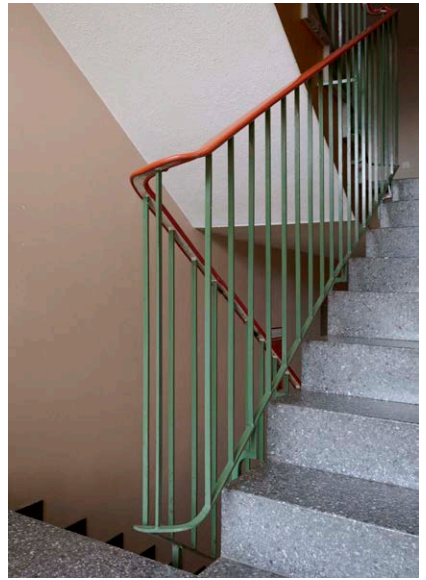
Beside the Becher school, other photographic projects focused on the anonymous architecture of the 1970s and 1980s in Europe. One example is the Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, whose work focuses on the periphery of the Central European (especially Swiss) city, considering it a place where nature and architecture coexist harmoniously. In a collection of photographs titled *Siedlungen, Agglomeration* Fischli and Weiss show some glimpses of a suburb that remains anonymous and without a precise identity regarding its location.³² Fischli and Weiss take a closer look at other, non-human but nevertheless 'living' elements: trees, bushes, and lawns. Their assertion of value thus starts from the details of places.

³¹ Hugh Campbell, *Unconscious Places – Thomas Struth and the Architecture of the City*, 2014.

³² Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Siedlungen, Agglomeration* (Zürich: Edition Patrick Frey : Kunsthalle Zürich, 1993).

[Fig. 05]

David Herrmann, Maya Keim, Wenzel Weikert, "Augustastr. 1 – 52070 Aachen", 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.



As a counterpart to the typical western urban scenes some East-German examples were discussed as well; amongst others an early project by Leipzig based photographer Matthias Hoch who pictured the underground stations of various East-German cities in 1988 and later documented the deconstruction of the famous Silver Tower in Frankfurt, built between 1975 and 1978.³³ And of course the work of Roman Bezjak who led the photography workshop in Aachen. In his work he takes a closer look at the dismissed and politically charged urban architecture of the former Soviet Union.³⁴

As a result of engaging with these different approaches, photography was employed as a visual tool for various purposes in the Aachen project: documenting the buildings that will be torned down in the nearby future, promoting the architecture of the 1970s and 1980s to prevent the demolition of further buildings emphasizing the importance of caring for these buildings, and evaluating the architectural style of the anonymous modern regarding its importance for the canon of architectural history.

³³ Matthias Hoch, *Silver Tower* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2013).

³⁴ Roman Bezjak, *Roman Bezjak. Socialist Modernism*, ed. Inka Schube (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

[Fig. 06]

Sophia-Franziska Bouveret, Teresa Schreer, "Königsbergerstr. 2-6 – 52078 Aachen", 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.

Promoting the 'anonymous modern'

Subsequently, the visual material produced by the students was intended to offer a new point of view on the buildings and the architectural style. The focus was on conveying visual-aesthetic arguments for the preservation and reutilization of the existing building stock. The buildings and their qualities were to be made visible while situating them within their urban context. The visual language is notably clear and analytical, though it adapts to each subject and specific context. Thus, the distinction between photography as an art form and photography for a practical purpose becomes less distinct. The photographs simultaneously serve as tools for architectural communication and, through their consistently applied visual style, blur the line into the realm of art.

The individual photographic approach of the students was a result of the intensive work on the object, its history and above all the architectural qualities of the specific building. Corresponding to the heterogeneity of the objects, the series turned out very different. While some projects concentrated on the surroundings (Fig. 07) or the socio-political context, others broached the issue of the usage by the habitants or focused on the architectural stylistic form of the object in detail. In the end, each work provided a specific analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the pictured architecture. But in order to make a difference in the perception of these buildings the material had to be made accessible to a wider public.



[Fig. 07]

Hannah Gobien, Jakob Polster, Lagerhausstr. 20 – 52064 Aachen, 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.

This leads to the aspect of the dissemination of photography, which takes place in almost every communication concerning architecture and in various media such as photobooks, architectural magazines, (online) magazines, journals, exhibitions and social media. The interrelation and interdependence of photography and its publication has always played an important role. As a reproducing mass media, photography functions as a substitution for the building itself and as an effective distributor.³⁵ Digital photography enables not only professional architectural photographers but also amateurs to disseminate their photographs. Today, digital photography is accessible to the mass, an effect that is comparable to the invention of the compact camera in the beginning of the 20th Century. Taking pictures is economic, fast, uncomplicated and the result can be shared online immediately.³⁶ It can therefore be argued that photography is a tool which makes architecture and objects visible on a large scale in a literal sense, partially enables an understanding of architecture and can indeed contribute to the appreciation of an architectural style.

Therefore, the results of the Aachen case study were shown in an exhibition that took place in a vacant office building from the early 1970s and was also documented photographically. (Fig. 08–09)



35 Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity*; Birgit Schillak–Hammers, 'Das Bild vom Bauhaus. Zur Architektur als Massenmedium damals und heute', in *Die Sprache der Stadt. Architektur- und urbane Raumbilder zwischen Ästhetischer Subjektivierung und normalisierender Kommerzialisierung*, ed. Markus Baum (Leverkusen: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2022), 77–94.

36 Felix Hoffmann, Kathrin Schöneegg, and C/O Berlin Foundation, eds., *Send Me an Image: From Postcards to Social Media* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2021).

[Fig. 08]

David Herrmann, Exhibition "Ugly Ducklings" at the Pop-up Campus, Theaterstraße 92–94, Aachen, 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.

[Fig. 09]

Anna Hensel, "Theaterstr. 92–94 – 52062 Aachen", 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.

The students were responsible for conceptualizing and executing the exhibition. This involved creating prints, selecting support materials, designing the exhibition architecture, and curating the objects. The exhibition was complemented by the catalogue featuring architectural photographs and explanatory texts about the photographic series.³⁷ The texts were written by the students, having a twofold aim: firstly, to research and provide background knowledge about the objects and the individuals responsible for their construction, and secondly, to describe the often-overlooked architectural merits of the buildings. The combination of pictures and text helped to generate compelling reasons for preserving each of the objects. Moreover, this approach allowed the project's results to be shared with a broader audience.

The received response from professionals as well as visitors of the exhibition was very positive. Every discussion in context with the exhibition, for example with researchers or representatives of the city such as the administration for building matters, led to an intensive discourse on the displayed architecture, its history and the urban context. Especially the highly controversial architecture of the bus station, once the first of its kind in West Germany, attracted the professionals' attention. This effect was increased enormously when the local press picked up the issue, so that it was made accessible to the local population.³⁸ The approach to raise awareness for the anonymous modern of the 1970s and 1980s in Aachen by using photography as a tool was thus achieved. The general perception for these buildings in the public space could be sharpened and a deepened debate about their preservation was initiated in the local context. Furthermore, the intense research led to the rediscovery of the once very reputable architect, Erwin Lynen, who was responsible for many building projects, mostly housing estates, in the 1970s and 1980s in Aachen but nowadays is almost forgotten. One of his buildings, pictured for the project, is now in debate to be listed for monument protection. (Fig. 10)

Research perspectives

Successful on a small level, the Aachen case study introduced the broader theoretical question that takes the discussion further than the local context it originated in: Can photography affect the preservation dynamics of controversial and underestimated buildings?

Assuming that the case study previously described can also be applied to other West German cities – especially the ones with a controversial aesthetic reputation like Saarbrücken, Kassel, Bochum or Bielefeld – a continuance of this research project in a larger scope and with the collaboration of different disciplines in consequence appears to be promising and necessary to answer the broader question.

37 Birgit Schillak-Hammers and Leonie Bunte, eds., *Hässliche Entlein: Nachhaltigkeit als Problem der Ästhetik* (Aachen: RWTH Aachen, 2022).

38 Birgit Franchy, 'Ausstellung „Hässliche Entlein“ – Architektur der 70er und 80er Jahre im Fokus', *Movie Aachen*, 3 September 2023, <https://movieaachen.de/ausstellung-haessliche-entlein-architektur-der-70er-und-80er-jahre-im-fokus/> (20.08.23); 'Pop-Up Campus und das Bauen Der Zukunft', *Aachener Zeitung*, 4 September 2022.



[Fig. 10]

David Herrmann, Maya Keim, Wenzel Weikert, "Augustastr. 1 – 52070 Aachen", 2022; RWTH Aachen University, Aachen.

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Making architecture visible through photography and influencing its appreciation and preservation dynamics only works when the photo is published and simultaneously connected to a name and location, ideally accompanied by specific keywords related to the era. It does not function effectively without attribution, merely serving as a representation of anonymous architecture. At best, it can be successful in capturing and promoting an entire architectural style. In such cases, however, an analysis of individual buildings is necessary to establish their association with the style.

Defining the buildings as an important background buzz of the city, the anonymous modern contributed to shaping the often overlooked and highly underestimated urban image of West German cities. Therefore, it is of great importance to strengthen the argument by comparing characteristic cityscapes in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s with those in East German cities. This comparison can help define the distinct urban atmosphere unique to these cities. With the potential loss of buildings from the 1970s and 1980s through demolition West German cities could lose their specific visual character and thus a part of their historical identity.

This paper can only provide first thoughts on the very complex subject which involves the fields of architectural theory, history of architecture, urban planning (history and perspectives), cultural heritage, photography and media studies. Next to further field studies in different cities it is essential to expand the theoretical framework, especially regarding other approaches to architectural photography as method to visualize arguments in the discourse of architectural theory and history.

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