

Policy of Geometry

An Interview with **Inken Baller** by **Dagmar Jäger**
 Translation from German by **Sven-Olov Wallenstein**

After more than 30 years of intense engagement in the creation of an ambitious and humane architecture, Inken Baller is still, with her playfully creative attitude, seeking for new situations in her practice and her teaching. Already her first realized building, House Bachmann in Zürich from 1966, testified to her connections to the artistically and socially committed Berlin avant-garde from the turn of the century. Having just completed her education, she began making a name for herself in competitions for the Cologne area. In the 1970s she built her first real success in the field of apartment complexes and social housing, together with her husband Hinrich, in Berlin. The intelligent treatment of Bruno Taut's heritage at the Cottbusser Tor in 1976, together with the expressive apartment and commercial complex in Lietzenburgerstrasse in Berlin (1975), gave the Baller couple a unique position in the stony landscape of Berlin. The social housing project at Fränkelufer (Berlin) symbolizes, today just as much as in the past, a humane, expressive and socially committed celebration of the city in Kreuzberg. Divorced from her husband since 1990, Inken Baller has given her work new emphasis by engaging in the collaborative work in "Weiberwirtschaft" (a women business centre in Berlin). The competition "My Dreamhouse" allowed her to build a series of one-family houses in Berlin, which contributed to her fame outside of architectural circles. Her more than ten-year-long teaching activity, first at the Gesamthochschule in Kassel, and since 1997 in the university at Cottbus, together with her engagement as dean and her many advisory tasks, provides her with a platform for participating in the transformation of current building and thinking.

Formative Influences

Dagmar Jäger: Together with your husband and partner, you related your architectural creation to the work of Bruno Taut, Hugo Häring, and Hans Scharoun. What links your personal way of working to these architects?

Inken Baller: House Bachmann, designed by Hinrich Baller, also corresponded to my idea of building. As a school kid I always designed houses that were similar to this one, but unfortunately I threw all of these plans away. That's a shame, since they were dynamic houses, nowhere to be seen in this small city (Brunsbüttel), they were my dream houses. At the time I didn't know about Scharoun and Häring, I discovered them first during my studies, and in this sense it was no coincidence that I undertook my first project in the advanced studies program by Hinrich Baller, as scientific assistant at the Technical University in Berlin. The influence from Häring, Scharoun, and Taut has remained alive to this day: the concept of space – inner and outer space – as a structured space,

on the one hand an individual, "functional" space, on the other hand always open to new aspects of experience, an open space that does not delimit but rather inspires and heightens your sensibility, invites dreaming and reflections. All of these three architects have furthermore acknowledged the social aspect, and always built with an eye for the cost aspect. You could say that I discovered these architects through Hinrich Baller, and that he through them could familiarize himself with philosophers like Ernst Bloch and Susanne K Langer. Another dimension that we developed was the working through of construction.

A Woman for Certain Tasks

DJ: After the separation from your husband, do you think you have become a woman for certain tasks, for instance a kind of "niche" architecture as in the case of renovation of difficult old buildings, like the "Weiberwirtschaft"?

IB: We always said that we only get commissions where the sun shines from below, so this is nothing special for me, rather a continuation of the niche that was our common work; this has been enhanced through the introduction of new themes, like old houses, something I like doing, and one-family houses, that give me great pleasure. Yesterday we had another top-ping-out party.

Social Demands - Artistic Ambition - Contacts with the Client

DJ: How do you see the relation between social demands and artistic ambition in the conceptual development of a building? You have built a huge amount of one-family houses – and to get your artistic intentions across in this most direct connection with the client is highly difficult. How do you see your work and your task in this type of context?

IB: To design always means to develop something for the future, it is always a piece of hope for a "better world," a concrete utopia in Bloch's sense. As architects we are, as it were, specialists on answering the question how we should live in the future, in what type of environment – to me this is the architect's essential social responsibility. Unlike the normal "client," the clients for the one-family houses had the advantage of being real people with whom you could discuss their wishes and dreams. You are in fact a specialist when it comes to realize something spatially; realization is a process which is not just deduced functionally, but also demands a specific and personal interpretation of needs. I consider it important in a house to provide the client with surprising insights and discoveries.

On the Concept of Decoration

DJ: Floral turquoise balustrades and arched ceiling frameworks have become your trademarks – is this still valid after 1990? How do you relate to the concept of decoration?

IB: Turquoise balustrades, which are highly decorative, are really the trademark of Hinrich Baller. But I have in fact developed, for instance in the factory in Kassel, a special type of arched ceiling framework, but for reasons of lighting, on the basis of spatial and structural considerations. Concerning the concept of decoration: there is in fact no such thing as an architecture without decoration. Even in the most reduced form, a detail or the material itself become decorative. Man has a desire to develop something beyond the merely unconditionally necessary, and this is the beginning of decoration.

A Unique Position

DJ: Expressions such as "the formal world of Jugend style", "expressionism," and "anthroposophical architecture" were often used to describe your work until 1990, referring to something in between attitude and decoration. How do you see these attempts to categorize you on a stylistic level? In a+u (1986), Helga Fassbinder writes that in your work, there is no question of "singular strokes of genius produced on the drawing board." Precisely this is however claimed by G. Ullman, talking about an "eccentric building style." How do you relate today to this idea of a formal genius? And how do you explain that your work in the Berlin discussion is often reduced to superficial formalism, and that other features, such as those pertaining to the level of construction and social relations, are neglected?

IB: This reception is really specific for Berlin. This is a city which has been dominated for the last 10-15 years by a discussion rooted in O. M. Ungers. His pupils have exerted a strong influence, and Ungers' work is an extreme case of an architecture derived from discourse. You can just read texts by him, and then look at the corresponding house. His texts have a thoroughly poetic, almost expressionistic quality – the houses stand there beside them, dry as bone.

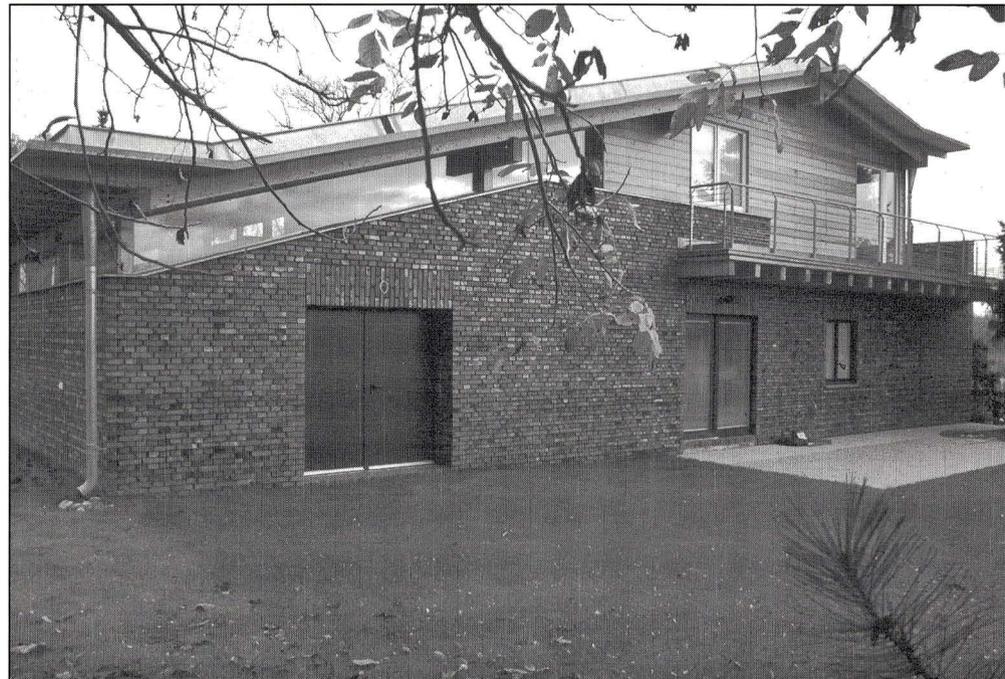
DJ: How do you see this difference between an articulated claim and its translation into a built reality?

IB: It's an incapacity to realize, which breeds an aggressive reaction towards our work, to which has to be added the strong influence exerted by the 68 generation: everything that could be verified or planned came under attack. Everything that escaped discourse was suspect. This kind of thinking still characterizes Berlin.

Manufactury in Kassel.



One-family house, Berlin.



DJ: Groups like Constant and Situationist International began to work in 1968 with social processes – was that picked up in the Berlin discourse?

IB: Obviously, there were social claims for architecture made in Berlin as well, but for Berlin architects designing was “suspicious” – in the end, people who had finished their studies roughly at the same time as Hinrich could not understand that we could build in such a frivolous way. Many people in my generation haven’t built anything because of this, and they still suffer from it. There is no other way to explain this aggressivity. What is strange, is that southern Germany is totally different – south German reception of our work is much more positive than here in Berlin. Architects here have of course not failed to notice that residents in our houses have always been very enthusiastic, and that people stop in the street to look at them. But for this reason our architecture is seen as a kind of holiday architecture, or a plebeian architecture. In the end, we subscribe to a plebeian architecture, which does not mean that it has to be populist, or superficial like the Potsdamer Platz. This can only be attained if architecture is multi-layered enough: functional and irrational, simple and elaborate, planned and surprising, cost-efficient yet full of luxurious attributes, easy and difficult, i. e., if it takes leave of a thinking in yes and no and leads to a thinking of both/and.

Flight?

DJ: Have you ever thought of leaving Berlin?

IB: No, I love Berlin. Berlin can give you a lot of strength, and has so many people.

DJ: You have your opportunities for playing around?

IB: Yes, there is a fair amount of possibilities in Berlin. Unfortunately, these chances have during the last 10-15 years not been sufficiently understood by architects. This is of course not just due to the architects, but also to the contractors and the political situation in our city.

The unabridged German version can be found at: www.jp3.de

Dagmar Jäger is a Berlin-based architect, whose work includes both teaching and practice, experimental projects and building. She is currently teaching a studio at the School of Architecture in Eckenförde and in Holzmin-den, and is preparing her dissertation under Prof. Baller on the signification of changing architectural language in industrial architecture related to machine construction.

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