

Dietmar Steiner

Steiner's Diary. About Architecture Since 1959

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Dietmar Steiner held many positions of considerable influence within the architectural profession. Either in his capacity as Chief Architecture Editor at *domus* in the 1980s, or as director of the Architekturzentrum Wien between 1993 and 2016 (essentially contributing to its creation and development) (essentially contributing to its creation and development), he has not only kept a constant watch over practically everything that went on in architecture, everywhere, but has also had his say regarding who in fact gets the attention of the media, the public cheers and a provisional claim to stardom. In between, he has founded his own office for architectural consulting, advised for the Mies van der Rohe Award for Contemporary Architecture, served in countless juries for architectural competitions and published extensively in Austria, as well as in international journals. He has almost always occupied significant positions that involved deciding where to direct the attention of the architectural world, either towards certain architects and architectural practices, or — maybe more important — towards significant aspects of the profession. His role has been hardly marginal, yet his persona often remained out of the spotlight.

In October 2016, Dietmar Steiner's retreat from the position of director of the Architekturzentrum Wien was celebrated (on his invitation) as an occasion to establish an important benchmark for contemporary architecture, and possibly an even more important one for recent architectural history and theory. In the course of only two weeks three parallel events occurred: the opening of the exhibition "In the End: Architecture. Journeys through Time 1959 – 2019", the homonymous 20th Vienna Architecture Congress¹ and the release of *Steiner's diary. About Architecture Since 1959*. Not only was their timing coincidental, but the three events address the same chosen topic — the architecture of the last six decades — through three different media, arguably dedicated to overlapping, yet different audiences. It is obvious that the organizers, among which Steiner understandably occupied a key position, intended to multiply all possible reverberations between the exhibition (curated by Karoline Mayer, Sonja Pisarik, Katharina Ritter), the opinions of the participants to the congress (in itself a remarkable list of established professionals and scholars) and Steiner's book.

The overlaying of the subject matter can only be fully appreciated if one has indeed visited, attended and read each of the respective items. However, after only reading the book and visiting the exhibition, one is still tempted to speculate regarding two features that both point to the passing of time and that seem to stand out as meaningful: the first is the structuring of exhibition, congress and book in conventionally separated decades (the Sixties, Seventies, etc.) and the second is the repeated reference to an "end".

The original idea for the exhibition was indeed Steiner's and was supposed to be a more direct mirror image of the book, both stemming from the series of lectures on the recent development of architecture that Steiner gave at the Kunstuniversität Linz. As such, it gathered the (same)...

¹ The programme of the 20th Vienna Architecture Congress, "In the End: Architecture. Journeys through Time 1959 – 2019", 18– 20 November 2016, http://neu.azw.at/azw.at/event.php?event_id=1792&text_id=2040&lang_id=en, accessed 20.09.2017 and the press release of the accompanying exhibition hosted by the Architekturzentrum Wien between 06.10.2016 – 20.03.2017, http://neu.azw.at/azw.at/page.php?node_id=3&page_id=922, accessed 20.09.2017.

*stories that fascinated and interested him, ... involving his activities as a critic, writer and director.*² As curator Katharina Ritter goes on to argue it is this very ‘remembrance of things past’ — the reading of the last sixty years of architectural discourses and practices as a progression that would inevitably lead to an end — that has triggered a generational response from the team of curators who have added a second layer to the exhibition, involving ... *contemporary positions that engage with ecological, social, legislative, contextual, and theoretical aspects of architecture, the diversity and innovative power of which show that architecture is far from at an end.*³ The final exhibition was thus conceived as a dialogue between these two layers to the point that the title itself may be read as summarizing two different positions: a testimony of a certain *fabbrica* and the bereavement of its disappearance — “In the End: Architecture”, and the other, emphasizing possible, viable, or coherent alternatives for the future of the architectural profession that stem (directly or indirectly) from the same historical events — “Journeys through Time”. This latter position is also what generates a second conceptual grid for the reading of the exhibition, one that defines architecture as being simultaneously *Material/Theory/History/Law/Society*.⁴ Illustrated through contemporary projects or initiatives it is this conceptual grid that short-circuits the conventional chronological narrative, either by offering different direct references to certain historical endeavors, or, as a whole, by providing a better understanding of architecture’s current predicament not only in contrast with the past decades, but also in the persistence of its more resilient, perennial topics.

The congress similarly elaborated in several ways on both features — the historical convention that divides architectural development in decades and its successive “end/beginning” cycles. On the one hand, the inaugural presentations of Jean Louis Cohen and Angelika Fitz framed architecture’s end and respectively pointed to its transfiguration respectively. In his lecture entitled *Crisis as Strategy – Architectural Anxiety since 1950*, Cohen mapped the successive ways in which architecture’s critical junctures became an art of life, while Fitz examined how should the profession (and the professional curator) respond to the question *What can architecture do?*, a question that condenses the more urgent claims of a society less interested in architecture’s self-absorbed uncertainties. On the other hand, the presentation of each decade was placed under polemical headings⁵ and was conceived as resulting from the intersection of a lecture focusing on one aspect of the period and a debate, both involving acknowledged professionals and scholars. While the resulting record of the decade emerged from the ensuing discussions, the lectures themselves unavoidably crossed the conventional time-frames, thus establishing links to the preceding and to the subsequent panels. Consequently, in a similar manner to the exhibition, the congress performed as layers of tracing paper placed one on top of the other in search for the “final” contour of recent architecture, be it sharp or more elusive.

Steiner’s Diary. About Architecture since 1959 adds yet another outlook to the interpretation of the period in question. And as both the exhibition and the congress have proven already, this outlook unfolds in several parallel narratives of different scope and focus. The entire book is announced through an opening conversation between the author and his long-life friend, Jacques Herzog, reminiscing about the professional circumstances that they shared throughout their formative years, those that have yielded their initial encounter and generated their lasting convergence, but also about their perspective on the recent and current architectural development. At the end of the volume, the symmetrical conversation of the author with Anna Heringer is (among others also) an opportunity to outline Steiner’s figure and role in shaping the formation and subsequent

2 Katharina Ritter in an interview presentation of the exhibition, <https://vimeo.com/187659847>, accessed 25.09.2017.

3 http://neu.azw.at/azw.at/data/media/cms_binary/original/1464786760.pdf, accessed 25.09.2017.

4 Headlines of the five sections in the exhibition grouping various contemporary contributions.

5 The headlines of the panels (lectures and discussions) were: *The Sixties: From critiquing Functionalism to Utopias – The Last Avant-garde?*, *The Seventies: Rediscovering the European City. Aldo Rossi and the Tendenza in Ticino*, *The Eighties: The Impact of Postmodernism on the Urban Debate – From Soft Urban Renewal to New Urbanism*, *The Nineties: The Medialization of Architecture – The Impact of Signature Architecture on the Architecture Discourse*, *The Noughties: “Reset” – Sustainability Debates and New Simplicity*, *The Twenty-Tens: An Architecture Crisis? The End – Outlooks*. See also: http://neu.azw.at/azw.at/data/media/cms_binary/original/1475687947.pdf, accessed 27.09.2017.

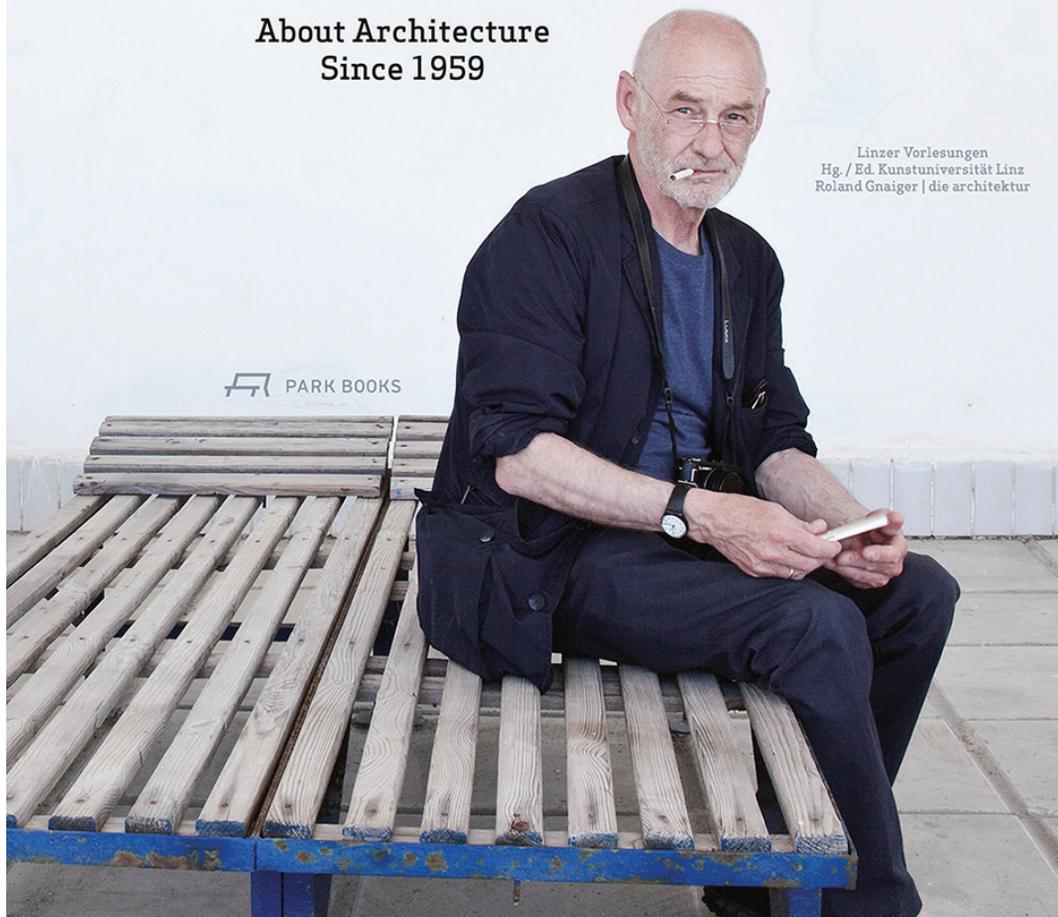
Über Architektur
seit 1959

STEINER'S DIARY

About Architecture
Since 1959

Linzer Vorlesungen
Hg. / Ed. Kunstuniversität Linz
Roland Gnaiger | die architektur

 PARK BOOKS



evolution of another generation. Between the two the book is divided into as many “days” as the decades of architectural development it addresses. Firstly, this partition ironically (and self-ironically) implies not only that Steiner played a God-like part in the recent architectural world, but rather that the end of his endeavor is to be construed as a new beginning somewhat liberated from the “father-figure”. However, this new condition would still unfold under his constant supervision, all the while awaiting Steiner’s first (and possibly even second) coming. Secondly, by pointing to the unity of creation, this division proves misleading as to the sum of the articles assembled under each headline and in the entire book. In this sense, Steiner himself acknowledges that the book collects his *coincidental depositions*, that define each period through the author’s intimate reading of the architectures that stroke his attention.

However, it is this very unity of the whole endeavor that the book does in fact achieve both by complementing the exhibition and the congress, and in itself. To the afore mentioned events the book adds several new tones and nuances. They may derive from the strong positions often assumed by the author regarding the development of architecture in the decades in question — such as his criticism of business architecture, for example. They may also stem from the intimate character of the ‘diary’, that allows the reader to glimpse into Steiner’s laboratory, thus becoming a witness to the important doubts or questions that the author may have, instead of being served simple answers.

The book also follows in the footsteps of the exhibition and congress by providing a double perspective of the explored decades: firstly, through the contemporary interviews that recall past events (either through the author’s voice, or through that of his counterpart), but also through introductory stenographic annotations that assertively summarize the author’s record of the respective time-frames. The articles themselves then come to enlighten these time-frames and reflect Steiner’s a posteriori subjective synthesis achieved by sieving (or rather *rummaging*) through a disordered personal archive, comprising “... *texts, interviews, pictures, relicts of events, projects and data, as well as fragments of occurrences that have shaped my thought and view of international architecture on the past decades. It was odd and appealing at the same time to conduct archaeology in one’s own architectonic image of the world.*”⁶

The topics of the different articles vary in scope and intensity. Some concentrate on Austrian architectural history and, while bringing to the fore personalities like Hermann Czech, Adolf Krischanitz, Otto Kapfinger; others establish transversal links through the 20th century that go back to Adolf Loos and the Viennese Sezession; other contributions focus on liminal practices or projects such as Rural Studio, Amateur Architecture Studio, Mud Works Architektur and Nikola Bašić’s Kornati Memorial, raising questions about the act of building and its attached social and societal implications. Yet another sequence of articles (*Of Whores and Saints, Architecture: Reset*) outline Steiner’s critical panoramic readings of the architectural world that, through their ambit and depth, emerge as invaluable theoretical contributions to the contemporary debate. In the end, all articles, interviews and contributions seem to branch out and connect to one another. In parallel the entire book is beautifully and playfully designed, abundantly illustrated, often with images extracted from the author’s personal collection, all the while benefitting from Steiner’s restrained, balanced and substantial discourse.

Yet, as the pages turn and the articles begin to cross reference one another, this composition achieves a coherent, comprehensive and persuasive unity. Thus, after being introduced to the author and his standpoints, one begins to better understand the value of the recurrent topics — “*it has always been the remote and the resistive, the mundane and the societal aspects that [have] interested me*”.⁷ Despite the author’s avowed intention,⁸ these persistent topics construct both an alternative history to past developments and a valuable underlining ethic that Steiner sets at the foundation of the architecture to come.

6 Dietmar Steiner, *Steiner’s Diary. About Architecture since 1959*, in the introduction entitled “Why this book?”, 9.

7 *Ibid.*, 10.

8 The author talks about his book rather in terms of a personal testimony — *[a] book about my relationship with architecture* — and only assumes credit for contributing to the history of architecture by supplying a marginal Central European perspective.