UTOPIA COMPUTER

The »New« in Architecture?

Nathalie Bredella, Chris Dähne,
Frederike Lausch (Eds.)

NETZWERK
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The scientific series *Forum Architekturwissenschaft* is edited by the Netzwerk Architekturwissenschaft, represented by Sabine Ammon, Eva Maria Froschauer, Julia Gill and Christiane Salge.

The critical concern of the book "Utopia Computer" is the euphoria, expectation and hope inspired by the introduction of computers within architecture in the early digital age. With the advent of the personal computer and the launch of the Internet in the 1990s, utopian ideals found in architectural discourse from the 1960s were revisited and adjusted to the specific characteristics of digital media. Taking the 1990s discourse on computation as a starting point, the contributions of this book grapple with the utopian promises associated with topics such as participation, self-organization, and non-standard architecture. By placing these topics in a historical framework, the book offers perspectives for the future role computation might play within architecture and society.

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KURD ALSLEBEN, ANTJE ESKE
AND CORINNA STUDIER

Extracts from an Interview with Kurd Alsleben and Antje Eske

Hamburg, August 2019

Corinna Studier: Kurd, as an artist, how did you get involved in the rather architectural process of office landscapes?

Kurd Alsleben: For a while, I lived with the father of a friend of mine and he asked me, "What do you want to become?" I immediately replied, "An artist!" I didn't know… I didn't know, because I didn't know more, right? I didn't know what an artist really is. I didn't think: aha! A sculptor! A painter! I knew the names, but not what they actually meant. Office landscapes posed problems that not everyone could solve. But I could solve them, because I was an artist. My thought processes were different.

CS: How did you get the opportunity to help shape office landscapes?

KA: I knew Eberhard Schnelle, with whom I later collaborated. Eberhard and his brothers inherited a furniture factory from his father and money, apparently a lot of money, and they also worked on building projects on the side. They founded an office organisation company. That was fashionable after the war. The term "organisation" appeared everywhere. That was 63 years ago.

CS: And did you become a member of that organisational team?

KA: Mmm (nods). At the time, people asked themselves: "How should one do new office buildings?" People didn't know! After the war, the buildings were destroyed, new bricks were produced, the old ones were not used and money was produced, but how should we build? So I thought to myself, perhaps not entirely professionally: how can one build?

CS: Before receiving your fist commission, did you have any theoretical considerations or discussions?

KA: Yes, the task didn't yet exist, but you could sense it. We knew the open-plan offices in America, which were depicted everywhere, with everyone sitting in neat rows. But at the time, those of us who discussed them laughed about them, which probably wouldn't be the case today… In that context, I thought perhaps the architects had failed to find a solution for the US-style open-plan offices, or had none available. That's probably why we got our opportunity. Because we were, or at least I was actually an artist! So the good fortune that I was an artist helped us to develop office landscapes. After all, one could say that art in itself has a broader perspective.

CS: Were you the only artist?

KA: Yes, the only artist.

CS: And how many of you were there in this organisational company?

KA: It depended. There were more of us when we were contracted for a project.

CS: How many open-plan offices did you help design?

KA: I don't know. Perhaps a hundred.

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CS: Did you fit out existing spaces, such as factory halls?

KA: No, they were usually new buildings. I'm not sure it would have been possible in existing buildings. And there weren't any factory halls left. They had all been destroyed.

CS: Which part of the process to plan office buildings were you involved in? Even before the building existed?

KA: Yes, that was usually the case. The architect was then instructed to build it. But our work continued, sometimes for years. Sometimes, the office organisation was changed and the furniture had to be relocated.

CS: So you were asked to carry that out?

KA: Yes, the customers didn't do that themselves. They were happy that they had someone who did it for them. Right at the beginning, we also contributed to some of the architecture: spatial design, colours and the like. But that was just at the start, when the rooms were still quite small.

CS: What was your first real contract?

KA: That was a savings bank that already had an open-plan space. The new problem was not the open-plan space or the hall, but the large group of people, let's say around a hundred, who had to work together. And the only model that architecture could offer for large groups of people was the open-plan space. I didn't really see any alternative solutions from the architects.

Antje Eske: In case many people wanted to work together?

KA: Yes, that was completely new! In a factory or in a military context, many people are together and they receive their orders. In a factory, the "orders" may have a different form compared to the military, but in an open-plan space, they came together to

work together, not be ordered about. And the office organiser was there to organise a way of doing that.

CS: How did you experience working for "Böhringer und Söhne," which is explicitly mentioned as an example in the book *Bürolandschaften*?

KA: It was a major company that had constructed the first building for open-plan offices. It was the first place where a large group sat together. That had never existed before because offices had always been set up as rooms with three to five people. Larger rooms were too big and could no longer be controlled. That was the way it was perceived before the open-plan period. So you can see what an enormous step it was. At first, people were concerned that the employees would work differently and confuse the organisational structures that had only just been established. Organising inherently involved ordering individual elements. Today, it is a completely natural concept that company departments must be mutually coordinated. It was natural and new that the sub-departments etc. had to be close to each other, since their tasks involved cooperating with each other.

CS: And did that work better in an open-plan setup?

KA: Yes, one has to say it was the only way! You can't create an organisation in a building with rooms containing three to five people. That's virtually unthinkable today. I'm not saying it will always be that way. We now have computer systems so we're not required to observe, consider and provide for such groups of people.

CS: What was the new and unconventional aspect for employees in open-plan offices?

KA: In the open-plan offices, every workplace was connected to a separate telephone line. So using the telephone was common

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practice, but personal aspects, face-to-face interaction was very unusual. Before that, none of the employees knew each other, since they would only get together at company gatherings. In an open-plan office, it was normal for a hundred people to be together. And they sat in open spaces, just like you are. They didn't look at me, they sat and could look past you.

AE: But they could look at you sometimes.

KA: Of course.

CS: And what about the managers? Did they also have their seats in the open-plan office?

KA: There were bosses in different departments; it went up very high, up to the Heads of Departments. They were gradually integrated into the open plan. At first, they asked for a little more space, but then they wanted to be part of the open plan, because it must have been an advantage, a social benefit, although there was resistance from the employees.

AE: To sit so close to your boss?

KA: To sit so closely to each other. They were used to groups of three to five people. And now they had to sit in a hall. They felt constantly observed. And the Head of Department is sitting there and watching you all the time! But that feeling disappeared completely because they could also be seen. In fact it wasn't a problem for long, but the newspapers were a problem. For a while, their reports criticised open-plan offices. I would say they didn't regard them as common sense. Each period, each timeframe has its own idea of common sense.

AE: Of what is currently "in."

KA: Yes, one is convinced of what is there.

AE : And it constantly changes and sooner or later it's something else.

KA : It changes slowly, so you hardly even notice it. I do believe that there were positive experiences in working in an open-plan office, aside from all the strong social contacts. But common sense was against it, so people were generally also against it. After all, it did have its drawbacks. You could always hear what your neighbour was saying, but if you heard nothing, that was also terrible… It was simply very different from what you were accustomed to. So it was a big change, a transformation. It really was a transformation, don't you think?

CS : Were there famous examples of this type of office landscape?

KA : The owners of Jacobs and Bertelsmann commissioned the design of their office landscapes. Even their own workplaces were in an open plan. Perhaps they wanted that because they expected special difficulties from their employees or because it was their own idea. That was not the case in other companies, I mean company owners sitting with their employees. I was in close contact with Jacobs because I also installed the furniture there. He moved it around again (laughs). It was an impressive moment when the company boss sat down in an open-plan office. In the middle of everything! It made a good impression on the employees. And you have to say: the initial resistance, which mainly came from the press, quietened down.

AE : So there was resistance to begin with?

KA : There was considerable resistance!

CS : But did it become more accepted after Jacobs and Bertelsmann had their office landscapes designed that way?

KA : Yes, it was very well received and there were no more problems. Naturally, we didn't know how the environment could be

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assessed; the companies didn't only have open-plan offices. They were individuals who were paid individually by the company and also had to be controlled, which is all very normal. So at first, they had to learn how the structure works.

CS: Was it your task to organise the employees' furniture and workplaces? What criteria did you apply in fitting out the spaces?

KA: What we had were lists. They showed which people should occupy the space—that doesn't need to be as crude as it sounds: the hundred people who used the space were described individually, at least in terms of their organisational elements. I then positioned the people. The lists of workplaces were very detailed, with names, functions and the means they used. These had to be presented visually. I could use the lists to organise, since every workplace had to exist in an environment of neighbouring workplaces that were also described on the list.

CS: Did you develop the interconnections between the employees yourself?

KA: No, I was provided with all that information. So I simply presented the interconnections, I would say. And in this context, that is my understanding of my artistic activity. The data flowed into those interconnections, which are nowadays transmitted through wires. Today we speak of data flows. You could use the term back then as well.

CS: So in a way, you were the computer (laughs).

KA: Yes (laughs).

AE: What equipment did the individual employees have?

KA: A desk, a cupboard, a counter where files were kept. The furniture was not specially made. It already belonged to the company. It's all so similar. We also introduced flower boxes in

the office landscape; I don't know whether they also existed in American open-plan offices. I think each workplace had around ten square metres of space. That was the average including toilets and everything else; the floor plan needed to accommodate everything. But we couldn't influence these individual aspects. They were the very normal dimensions defined by the architect.

CS: Did you use partition walls as sightscreens?

KA: Yes, because you could see a great deal of what your neighbour was doing, more than usual. And you sat together every day. But no more than five or six people sat together in one area.

CS: So, in the office organisation company, was it your task to arrange the furniture of the office landscape or did you all do that together?

KA: We didn't do that together. I did that by myself. The workplace lists were good preparation and if they didn't fit, the office organisation wouldn't fit either. So they would have to be rewritten, but that hardly ever happened.

CS: Were there models or experiments with which you could test your arrangements?

KA: No, not really. We had no models to try things out. We were unable to carry out any social or social-psychological experiments, since we weren't qualified to do so. Today, you would probably contact a university to examine the situation. We didn't have that possibility.

CS: Nowadays, you would produce statistics on it.

KA: Yes, we didn't have anything like that.

CS: Did you just know it would work based on your discussions?

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KA: Yes, that's right. After all, you're interacting with Antje and me without needing any statistics.

CS: And did you produce any collages or perspective drawings to visualise the office landscapes?

KA: Due to the architecture, the office landscapes were single-level, empty halls. So all we needed was to imagine the third dimension for the halls' arrangement. (Points to the floor-plan drawings.) Whether this goes here or there or there...

CS: So your imagination was enough to arrange to the floor plan and impress your customers?

KA: Yes, that's what they thought. That was the closest we could get to reality (laughs). Yes, my drawings were the realest option possible. Variations were possible over the period of a month. But that wasn't often the case, because by God, that would have caused all sorts of other changes, wouldn't it? We only presented complete complexes, for instance for a relocated department.

CS: Did you develop your office landscape according to a specific concept?

KA: Since I was an artist, I had the idea of contributing rhythm, which was not necessarily an architectural-spatial element, but we'd have to talk a little more about that. The large office group brings organisational flexibility. And that was the top priority for everyone. You could organise working groups or workplaces flexibly. That went very smoothly; it was no problem in the open-plan area to move four pieces of furniture around… and that's what we needed the workplace lists for. What people can't understand is the fact that they had to be drawn! As visual presentations. The task of drawing included adding rhythm to the office landscape, an irregular, free rhythm. That didn't exist in the lists, but the lists did contain occasions where rhythm could be added. Everything must be part of the rhythm. You had to have that inherent rhythm,

the aesthetics and that was simply my job. I thought about it recently, yesterday and the day before, and then I realised: how should the placement be? Well, I've no idea. I just did it.

AE: What did you do?

KA: So, you had large spaces and tackled the task: this department will sit in this corner and another will go there and they grow towards each other. In this case, growing means leaving space for each other. Arranging such an organisation is based on cybernetics. You could say it is connected to the theme of office organisation. But I quickly introduced cybernetics to Eberhard [Schnelle].

AE: And how did that introduction come about? What interested you in cybernetics?

KA: Yes, that could sound rather crude: the artist strives for a broad perspective and at the time, cybernetics had the broadest perspective of all. There was also another important point: the fine overall aesthetics. I could probably switch more easily in my mind from one art form to another, in other words leaping over things, than perhaps the people whose task it actually was to design spaces! (Saying to himself:) You could actually say: "It wasn't your task! You took it." But that isn't really true, because the task was simply out there. I didn't take anything away. I never really pursued anything, but there was nobody who would have added something different to the office landscape, which had to be implemented in a short time—or within the time available. Always blaming it on speed oversimplifies the matter. But you also need to have something in the locker. You could say, "Irregular, free rhythm, well, I could have done that!" in the way people do today, but it doesn't work that way. Well, where does the rhythm come from? And that's what I mean when I say an artist is better at leaping faster between the arts. That's plausible, isn't it?

AE: Leaping faster than who?

CS: Perhaps an architect?

KA: Yes, faster than an expert.

CS: Sure, an artist sees different connections.

KA: Yes, it's different.

AE: …or perhaps an artist is not fixed on or limited to something specific. And what (reads out Kurd's notes) does that have to do with Ezra Pound?

KA: That is an entirely different genre. Literature… At the time, I came across Ezra Pound. He was an American, a generation older than me. His work is all as if it were in one rhythm. I can't say I can explain it although I've read a lot of it.

AE: It inspired you, didn't it?

KA: It really inspired me. For years of my life, I really lived with it. And like Brecht, although more so with Pound, the same, irregular rhythm has been attributed to him!

CS: Did you read that while organising your office landscapes?

KA: Yes, and it inspired me. Unfortunately, Ezra Pound was a stubborn person whose politics were adrift. But when you have reached a certain age, for example you or me, then that shifts. Everything is more multifaceted and things take place on different levels. What I mean is that it's important when considering a free, irregular rhythm that one can't connect it to a military rhythm.

AE: Yes, a military rhythm isn't really free.

KA: The military is not free and not irregular. It can happen that the free, irregular rhythm has an irritating effect because it is connected to "disorientation." At least I always feared that. Perhaps

I feared it more than was really necessary. After all, if I'm not mistaken, rhythm is something that has lost some of its conscious effectiveness, or do you disagree? Actually, rhythm is a phenomenon that stems from ancient times and ancient language. So it must have had a high status in the field of aesthetics.

How did the period of office landscapes end—that's another question. (Pause.) That happened at a time when Germany was reunified. Office landscapes ended for me then, but I'm not quite sure whether the commissions stopped coming.

AE: Perhaps your other interests also played a role?

KA: That might also be the case. It's funny. A Swiss man came to me. I don't remember his name. He wanted to have a licence from me for office landscapes, in other words permission to do the same as me. That was a strange concept to me as an artist. I couldn't do it. I thought, if that's the way it goes, others can also do it better or worse. I laughed at him, but that's silly too. I could have said: "Give me this much money!" (laughs). But I didn't do that because I thought the artist does that and anyone can imitate and improve on that. But strangely, I only dimly remember the end of office landscapes.

It could have been that competitors did it without licenses, above all in America, but that was far away. Naturally, they couldn't do anything with their office halls. But then they saw what could work, how it could be used. Instead of being developed by Americans, it was done by Germans in America. I even knew them. I myself perhaps wasn't interested in expanding. That was the first time the label "office landscape" appeared. It hadn't existed from the start. We never used it and there came a time when we didn't like it, but somehow I like it now. It's a friendly catch phrase for the type of space. At the time, we just called it "MobO" for "Mobilar-Ordnung" ("furniture order").

CS: The Schnelle brothers founded a publishing house that mainly focused on cybernetics. Did you publish your books with them?

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KA: Not usually. We caused a revolution at D&S, who published a master copy without any editorial revisions and the single edition was printed within one day. And we needed a publication. We were allowed to clearly define and structure what we wanted. Of course, if you have an editor, he will improve some things, but make others worse.

CS: At the Schnelle publishing house, you initially supervised the field of "Information Theory and Information Aesthetics." Do you remember anything about that?

KA: Yes, but it wasn't a proper role. It was while we were refining our idea of office landscapes. Information aesthetics was originally a concept by [Max] Bense, or to be precise, by Bense and [Abraham] Moles, and I simply joined in.

CS: Have you yourself ever worked in an open-plan office?

KA: Yes. At first I didn't have an opportunity, because the only open-plan offices that existed were the ones I had designed. So it only came about much later, but not as an experiment. I had a workplace there for a while. I even wanted to rent one; not all of them are always occupied and then I sat there… well, it was a rather unusual situation.

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The critical concern of the book "Utopia Computer" is the euphoria, expectation and hope inspired by the introduction of computers within architecture in the early digital age. With the advent of the personal computer and the launch of the Internet in the 1990s, utopian ideals found in architectural discourse from the 1960s were revisited and adjusted to the specific characteristics of digital media. Taking the 1990s discourse on computation as a starting point, the contributions of this book grapple with the utopian promises associated with topics such as participation, self-organization, and non-standard architecture. By placing these topics in a historical framework, the book offers perspectives for the future role computation might play within architecture and society.