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introduction: ungers,
self-help and the commune:
the self-help housing
system as a component for
collective living
cornelia escher & lars fischer

in 1969, oswald mathias ungers left his job at the technical university of berlin and relocated to cornell university. STUDENT PROTESTS had impacted heavily on his teaching in berlin and his project for the märkisches viertel, a large-scale housing development on the outskirts of berlin, had been hit by HARSH CRITICISM of mass housing in the media. in the u.s., ungers continued his research on building systems for housing and began a process of reflection and reassessment¹ which was to have a strong influence on the architectural discourse on social issues in europe and the u.s.² it is

1 see andré bideau, "housing as discursive void: oswald mathias ungers in the 1960s and 1970s", in: *candide*, *journal for architectural knowledge* no. 7 (oct. 2013), 61–88. jasper cepl, *oswald mathias ungers*:

eine intellektuelle biographie (cologne: walther könig, 2007), 243–280.

in this context that the design for the SELF-HELP HOUSING SYSTEM (S-HHS) took shape. as a studio project, it was also decisively influenced by a climate of social change informed by the civil rights movement and student protests, which called for a restructuring of architectural education and production.

a PREVIOUS STUDIO PROJECT at cornell had conducted an initial exploration of modular housing types made from timber elements. in the context of this exploration, ungers developed his own design and in 1969 participated in a competition that was held as part of the "OPERATION

2 see lara schrijver, *oswald mathias ungers and rem koolhaas: recalibrating architecture in the 1970s* (bielefeld: transcript verlag, 2021).

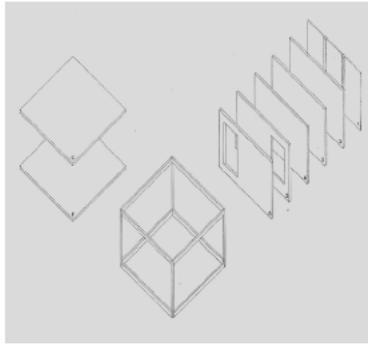
BREAKTHROUGH” program, a government initiative to improve and stimulate prefabricated building construction on a large scale. however, ungers’ proposal was not successful and was not developed any further in this context.

the S-HHS was built on the general layout of this previous project but placed a stronger focus on BOTTOM-UP PROCESSES and ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS. its aim was to provide modest housing notably for people on a low income or living in economically disadvantaged rural areas. the s-hhs took its meaning from the processes it was designed to initiate; AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES were to be involved in manufacturing

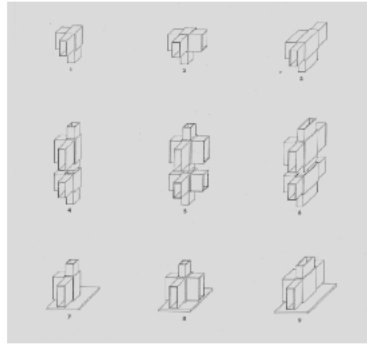
processes at the building component production level. the workshops initiated to this end were part of a larger educational program in which cornell university members were involved. the aim of the workshops was to help break the supremacy of white workers in the trade unions.³ moreover, ungers and his students planned to place the CONSTRUCTION PROCESS of the s-hhs under the control of the later inhabitants. they designed the houses (or housing units) so that the prospective users could build them from prefabricated wooden elements made with standard lumber. the construction

3 we owe this insight to gerardo brown-manrique, who participated in the project as a student at cornell

university and figured as the project designer. see his essay in this book.

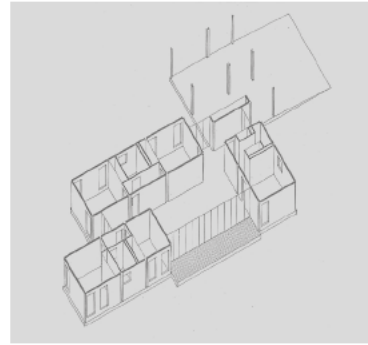


building elements.

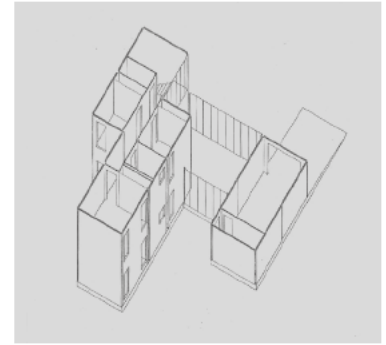


frame connections.

all images p. 18–31:
oswald mathias ungers,
modular box housing
system, study for alcoa,
1969. image credit:
ungers archiv für architek-
turwissenschaft, cologne.



1 story detached house,
4 bedrooms, carport.



2 story detached house,
4 bedrooms, garage.

process required a minimum of tools and followed the principle of a “GROWING HOUSE.” the building components were modular and could be arranged into different layouts. at the university, planning for the s-hhs was embedded in a NETWORK OF INITIATIVES aimed at furthering social change.

as a consequence of its very specific production and construction contexts, the design was not represented as a conventional set of plans. instead, it was printed as a building instruction manual⁴ in the form of a booklet. thus, the media conveying the project clearly differed from the usual architectural blueprints and

⁴ see the reproductions in book 2.

took an approach that focused on the assembly of a KIT OF PARTS made from readily available STANDARD LUMBER rather than a specified construction from diverse building materials. instead of specifying the design of a singular finished building, the set of drawings describes a system of building components, general assembly details and possible configurations. the drawings serve as a guide to A BUILDING PROCESS in which the final design remains to be determined. however, as an actual manual for construction, the booklet remains INCOMPLETE and insufficient and should be understood rather as an illustration of the intentions and POSSIBILITIES of the project.⁵

the s-hhs addresses the topics of SELF-BUILD and community. various INTEREST GROUPS are engaged and envisioned as early as the conception of the project: a student community searching for alternative modes of architectural discourse and practice, a community of workers in need of vocational training, and ultimately a community lacking affordable housing. just prior to the project at cornell, oswald mathias and his wife LISELOTTE UNGERS travelled across the united states studying UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES. their research, taken from contemporary publications and underpinned by their

5 we noted this during a workshop at the école nationale supérieure d'architecture de saint-étienne (ensase) in

2023, where we constructed a model of the prototype.

own experiences, was published in 1972 in Germany under the title “COMMUNES IN THE NEW WORLD 1740–1972.”⁶ ungers’ interest in this project seems to have been to study spatial layouts and establish a TYPOLOGY of communal settlements. the communes were social units which had grown out of group initiatives based on SHARED INTERESTS or MORAL SYSTEMS instead of being planned by architects, planners, and public authorities as an abstract system for anonymous users. this contrasted sharply with the programs for social housing ungers had previously been involved in. the question

6 liselotte and oswald mathias ungers, *kommunen in der neuen welt 1740–1972* (cologne: kiepenheuer & witsch, 1972).

was how the BUILT FORMS OF THE COMMUNES mirrored the shared aspect of community and thus differed from a top-down planning approach.⁷ if the schemes worked, they could offer lessons for housing projects in general and influence the form of building, such as for the s-hhs. learning from existing communal projects, the typological approach promised a REVISION of the systems of MASS HOUSING, which departed from logistics and abstract patterns in favor of the forms of living together.

how architecture relates to society and its dynamic evolution was an

⁷ franziska bollerey, "architekturkonzeptionen der utopischen sozialisten" (ph.d. dissertation, berlin: freie universität, 1974).

integral part of the architectural debates of the 1960s.⁸ while architectural utopias of the 1960s were articulated mostly as overall social forms (allowing for transformations within the mega-form), the models of the MEGA-FORMS were BROKEN UP into smaller units in the 1970s, for example in parts of the countercultural communities in the united states. but what would it mean to develop the ARCHITECTURE OF COMMUNITIES as a model for architectural practice? these postmodern communities can be understood as a progressive alternative to the village. their connectedness is not based

⁸ cornelia escher, *zukunft entwerfen: architektonische konzepte des geam (groupe d'études*

d'architecture mobile) 1958–1963 (zurich: gta verlag, 2017).

on traditional bonds or origins but rather on SHARED VALUES AND TASTES, and DIVERSITY is both possible and necessary. yet the moral nexus of many communities and their reliance on a sense of belonging incites them to strive for homogeneity.⁹ specifically built forms NARROW DOWN the field of interaction to a community of the like-minded and tend to homogenize aesthetical preferences and spatial practices of living. as soon as the community transforms practices and aesthetic preferences into architecture, these aspects might become, to a certain extent, FOSSILIZED and fixed.

9 "detotalized forms of encounter: interview with joseph vogl," *an architektur*, special issue (2007), <https://>

anarchitektur.org/commonroom/aa_commonroom.pdf.

in this light, FORMAL OPENNESS and the POSSIBILITY TO RE-ADAPT are what makes the practices of self-build interesting. among the examples chosen by the ungers couple, the idiosyncratic styles of the countercultural architectures of DROP CITY, the MORNINGSTAR COMMUNE, and the LAMA FOUNDATION are particularly instructive. influenced by richard buckminster fuller's dome constructions, these experimental constructions focus on the individual's agency in shaping their daily environment rather than on overarching designs. the dominant aesthetic follows a practice of REASSEMBLAGE, where invention emerges from an engagement with existing material, waste, and detritus.

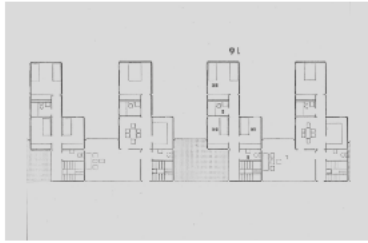
the building practices of these communities can be described with claud  levi strauss' famous figure of the "BRICOLEUR." in contrast to the engineer, who focuses on overall problem-solving with highly developed technologies, the bricoleur intervenes selectively with the help of things that are already at hand. through this intervention, a connection is made with the immediate material surroundings, which is not only based on technology, but eventually creates a more INTERACTIVE LINK with objects and buildings, one that might engender a heightened interest in their MAINTENANCE AND CARE.¹⁰ extending the practices of building and maintenance to a form of SHARED

EXPERIENCE, the process of building can be perceived as one of community formation, including both humans and material artefacts and remaining open to continuous adaptations. a deliberate linking of design, community ties, and values can be observed here, which might again lead to a certain homogeneity and exclusiveness. yet it is up to the participants to maintain relations with the outside world and FORGE NEW ASSOCIATIONS.

the architecture of the S-HHS PROTOTYPE approaches similar questions from a very different point

10 steven j. jackson, "rethinking repair," in *media technologies: essays on communication, materiality, and society*, eds. tarleton

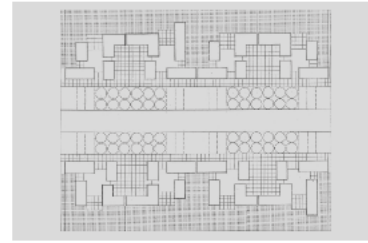
gillespie, pablo j. boczkowski and kirsten a. foot (cambridge, mass.: mit press, 2014), 221–239.



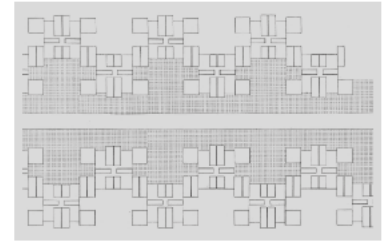
2 story attached houses,
type 16, 4 bedrooms,
dining room.



1 story attached houses,
type 1–4, 2–3 bedrooms.



street organization,
1 story attached houses,
type 11–14, low density.



street organization,
3 story apartment houses
& shops, type 19–21,
medium density.

of departure, with a focus on SYSTEMS rather than individual creativity. instead of searching for expressive and colorful detritus from which to assemble something new, the prototype draws on OTHER FORMS OF “AT HAND” in modern society: the strategy is to embed the project into existing production systems and to connect it with political and SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS. in the process of designing the s-hhs, the systems which were addressed grew smaller. the initial prefabricated housing project was linked to state institutions and the construction industry. three years later, the s-hhs prototype built at cornell functioned at a more intimate scale of action—community associations,

professional stakeholders and local businesses—in order to unfold its potential.

the SELF-HELP HOUSING SYSTEM can be interpreted as a component in the process of reorganizing the social based on the ideal of self-help and community action. in so doing, it started from ONE DELIMITED UNIT—the house—which could be EXTENDED and combined into a system. furthermore, it incorporated organizational questions into architecture and architectural education. rather than withdrawing into a countercultural position and demonstrating its specific aesthetics, it can instead be seen as NETWORKING ACROSS DIFFERENT STRANDS OF SOCIETY to provide access to housing.

treating architecture as a device for education, self-help, and empowerment, the project aimed to GIVE AGENCY to socially or racially disempowered parts of the population.

the project's EDUCATIONAL VALUE can still be assessed and valued from today's perspective, even if it ultimately did not move past the PROTOTYPE PHASE. the designers put too much faith in existing production standards and in the adaptability of the professional systems. plans to reform professional practice in both organizational and technological terms, starting from a design, were not fulfilled. the project of getting black workers into trade unions and plans to use

standard lumber successively failed. yet it was important and instructive, not only for the students working on it at the time, but also now as the final project in our research series, negotiating ungers. the s-hhs demonstrates once again how PERMEABLE the work of the architect ungers is to input from other people he worked with, to potential opportunities for building, and to trends and debates within the profession. this series has looked at projects at the PERIPHERY of ungers' work—and even of architecture itself. we focused on projects that were close to FAILURE, atypical or removed from the principles of universal truths that ungers himself eventually declared in his writing. it is UNGERS'

OMNIVOROUS CAPACITY, his interest in speaking to the construction sector, building politics, protagonists of social trends, and students asking for a critical rethinking of practice, which makes his work so fruitful for TRANSVERSAL QUESTIONS and negotiations.