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PRACTICES

The Open Architecture To Come: an Interview with Esra Akcan

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Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship, and the Urban Renewal of Berlin-Kreuzberg by IBA-1984/87 is a unique book in its genre, dealing with a unique case in the history of European cities.1 Written by Esra Akcan, associate professor of architectural history at Cornell University, it sheds light on some of the neglected aspects around the celebrated Internationale Bauaustellung Berlin (IBA), the last and largest urban regeneration process in Europe through public housing, which gathered in the same neighbourhood the works of some of the most famous architects of the time. While the general strategy of the "critical reconstruction" of Berlin's 19th-century fabric and the single architect's buildings are well known, the political context in which the architects were called is often overlooked. IBA operated on the area of Kreuzberg, a district of West Berlin, where great part of its inhabitants were foreigners, in particular Turkish guest workers who started arriving after 1961 and refugees from the 1980 coup, living segregated in torn-down buildings in poor hygienic and structural conditions.

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1 Esra Akcan, *Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship, and the Urban Renewal of Berlin-Kreuzberg by IBA-1984/87* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2018).
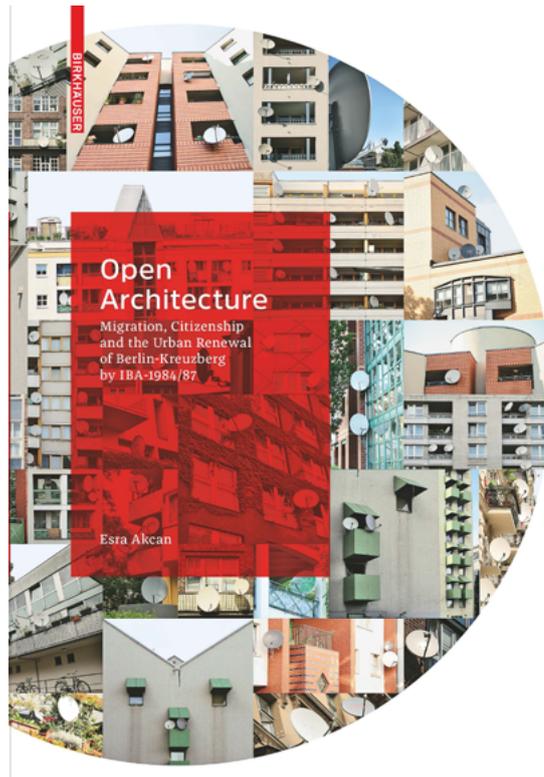
The book reconstructs the discriminatory policies that were adopted by
the Federal government and the Berlin Senate as well. As part of these,
the limit that set, with the excuse of avoiding the creation of "ghettos," the
amount of foreign inhabitants for newly constructed buildings in Kreuz-
berg to 10 percent. Akcan reconstructs the ways in which architects and
planners faced these policies, which ranged to pure indifference to strat-
egies of open resistance, shedding a completely new light on well-known
buildings and their architects.

Akcan does this by mixing the traditional methods of the historian's archi-
val research with an onsite exploration that lasted many years, in which
the historian met activists and the inhabitants which took possession of
the apartments after their construction. In this way, Akcan elaborates the
methods for writing a history of Open Architecture as a tendency—some-
thing that has never been and that cannot be defined once for all, but
which nevertheless has always been latently present in the work of many
architects.

We had the opportunity to have an exchange with Esra Akcan on the
issues of citizenship and hospitality in European cities, and the role of
architects, researchers and educators vis-à-vis the phenomenon of global
migrations.

Authorial architectural dismisses the voice of inhabitants, politics and con-
flicts, giving all the agency in the transformation of urban spaces to archi-
tects as the depositaries of architectural knowledge. On the other hand the
so-called "activist architecture" refuses a strict control over architectural

objecthood, focusing more on the subjects and processes that traverse and produce the built environment. Despite the good intentions of both authorial and participative approaches, exemplified in your book by IBA Neubau and IBA Altbau, you showed that neither have had the power to radically criticize the discriminatory policies of the West German Government and the Berlin Senate.

At best, architecture seems to work as a palliative, to improve the dwelling conditions of inhabitants, or as a critical testimony without the capacity to affect reality. Wasn't perhaps O. M. Ungers—the protagonist of the most emotional of your chapters—right in saying that after all architecture does not have the power to change things, that architecture should not be messing with politics but only with its own internal problems? Or, in the words of Rem Koolhaas praising the paradoxical architectural qualities of the Berlin Wall, that "were not division, enclosure (i.e., imprisonment) and exclusion— which defined the wall's performance and explained its efficiency— the essential strategies of *any* architecture?" In other words, isn't it "open architecture" a contradiction in terms?

Let me rephrase some of the arguments in the book, because this is not the conclusion I draw from the historical evidences pertaining to the urban renewal of the immigrant neighborhood Kreuzberg. For example, I posit the IBA-Altbau (the section that practiced participatory urban renewal without displacement) as one of the most successful examples in history. It had many limits, as I discuss in the book, especially pertaining to the noncitizen population. Nonetheless, after the process, the resulting "percentage [of immigrant population] was well above the Senate's 10 percent threshold".[2] Namely, the Senate's discriminatory regulations about the immigrants were indeed subverted through the work of the IBA-Altbau team, who were employed by the Senate itself. Here we see an example where architects achieve to overcome their own employer/client's discriminatory rules. This entire chapter is about "IBA-Altbau's success in empowering inhabitants vis-à-vis the state."[3]

We can speak of a similar structure throughout the book. All of the chapters both define forms of latent open architecture in history and expose their limits, in order to make a call for the future open architecture. "The book asks what would have happened if the architectural discipline and profession were shaped by a new ethics of hospitality toward the immigrant, and calls this open architecture."[4] For this reason, the book exposes the contradictions in the way latent open architecture has been practiced *in the past*, but open architecture is not at all a contradiction in terms itself.

2 Ibid., 240.

3 Ibid., 242.

4 Ibid., 6.

It is an incomplete process with unresolved aspects.

I think your question reflects a common habit in architectural criticism today, but one that I try to distance myself from. Namely, the role of scholarship needs to be creating nuanced understandings of past practices, not identifying heroes or villains in an operative way. The book does not turn a blind eye to the contradictions of some of the best practices, but after analyzing the incomplete and unresolved aspects of past practices, I do not reach the conclusion—like you have done in the question—that "architecture cannot change anything." Or after seeing the impotency of this position, I do not shift to the opposite end of the spectrum and naively say "architecture alone can change everything." We need a much more nuanced and realistic understanding of what architecture *can* do, and how. And there is a lot architecture can do, especially if architects collaborate with others, and cultivate themselves about matters in addition to form and client requirements.

FIG. 2   5 June 2012, Memorial in Oswald Mathias Ungers's Block 1 for IBA-1984/87, photographed by Esra Akcan, Berlin, 2012,

A particular place in your book is occupied by the figure of John Hejduk. John Hejduk's architecture is neither "participative" in the classic sense of the word, neither politically critical in content. In his designs the presence of the architect as a creator of form is still very clear. However, as you show in the book, these forms are neither tied with specific uses, nor relate with any historically or culturally defined typology, leaving these forms open for appropriation by anyone. Can we see Hejduk's architectural adventure games, as you call them, as a third way or a line of flight to the deadlock of the debate between autonomy and participation?

Yes, I argue in the book that Hejduk's practice constituted one of the best positions to set an alternative to the opposition between conventional autonomy and participation; but his is not the only one. Actually, there are many other practices analyzed in the book that illustrate viable positions, albeit with unresolved aspects, contradictions, or negligence, including those of Alvaro Siza, Hardt-Waltherr Hämer, Heide Moldenhauer, Cihan Arın, Bohigas/Mackay/Martorell, even Aldo Rossi and Rem Koolhaas and many others with varying degrees of openness to the immigrant. Let me quote from the Preface: Even though this is a story of discrimination and negligence, "this book is also a chronicle of hope. It reports inspiring stories against all odds of immigrants who rightfully take credit of making Berlin's Kreuzberg one of the most exciting places to live in the world. In cases of the lack of hospitality reflected in architecture, it records examples where individual residents triumphed over these non-open spaces. It also brings out solidarities between ex-migrants and citizens, despite the overwhelming discriminations. Additionally, it records one of the most successful chapters of public housing in world history, a program that has since then almost disappeared from the purview of architectural publications and discussions."[5] We need to learn from these practices how architecture could be open, but also observe their contradictions and unresolved aspects to make a call for the future of open architecture. Moreover, I do not think Hejduk's Berlin projects are short of being "politically critical in content" as you say. On the contrary, the "Victims" project proposed for the site of the former Nazi headquarters, which then turned into his Berlin Tower Housing, is very political.

In which ways is architecture open today? Can we find new instances of such a condition for architecture after the 1980s and the IBA debate?

In the book, I define the architectural (formal, programmatic, design process oriented) tactics of open architecture as flexibility and adaptability of form, unfinished and unfinalizabile design, collectivity and collaboration

5 Ibid., 8.

in the design thinking process, participation and democracy in decision making, multiplicity of form's meaning, and open-sourceable design. Any practice that moves toward the expansion of human rights and social citizenship, and toward transnational solidarity can be defined as one type of open architecture. It is true that the sociopolitical and economic conditions of the world we live in today discourage such practices, but they do exist and even get facilitated with the new communication technologies. It is true that the more dominant voices coming out of the architectural discourse today trivialize, dismiss or even oppose such practices, but as far as I can tell by observing my students, there is a growing consciousness about these issues among the new generation. I see that my students are very disappointed with the uncritical, opportunistic, even sometimes anti-intellectual stances that they observe in the recent state of the profession.

Certain manifestations of today's architectural practice can be ascribed to the logic of humanitarianism. Cooperation and development projects often imply migrants or poor populations as "victims" (not in Hejduk's sense) in need for help, without seeing them as active agents of their own choices, and eventually reinforcing the stereotypes and power relations that govern their life. Despite acknowledging the role of humanitarian support, especially in the present political conjuncture dominated by openly racist policies which are threatening the life of many people moving from one country to the other, can we think of open architecture as a critique of humanitarian architecture?

I think you are right about the paternalistic undertones of some of the humanitarian practices, which rely on ages old Orientalist stereotypes. Open architecture anticipates and encourages resident agency, and in that way, it differs from practices that constitute the habitant as a passive and helpless subject. Thank you for noticing this distinction. Yet, this also depends on who in particular we are talking about, because I cannot imagine those dedicated to humanitarianism have not heard of recent ideas in postcolonial theory and critical race studies to overcome this aspect, and move their practice to one that admits and allows more agency to all.

What seems perhaps a crucial aspect of architectural knowledge is its openness to potentiality, with what is already but not yet there. Architecture, as the art of the project, feels somehow more at home with virtuality rather than actuality. You seem to develop a methodology for writing the history of something that has never been, but which has somehow always latently existed; open architecture has sometimes resurfaced into official history, in incomplete and frag-

mented form, but never becoming hegemonic. Is this a history of
a concept in its becoming? Contrary to Hegelian history, in which
the "not yet" is "already there", open history situates itself in the
time frame between "the no longer and the not yet". You define it
"a history written in the past perfect tense": "the book asks what
would have happened if the architectural discipline and profession
were shaped by a new ethics of hospitality toward the immigrant,
and calls this open architecture." At the same time, open history is
neither a history of Utopia, nor a Utopian history. What we find very
interesting about this approach is that open architecture and open
history respond to very urgent and very practical needs concerning
the reality of the work of architects and researchers alike, looking
for an ethics of intervention in the politics of city, without necessar-
ily incurring in what Manfredo Tafuri had censored as "operative his-
tory". Do you see open history as the possibility of a militant history?**

I agree with everything you said until the word "militant history". Yes, the
chapter "Stop VI: Open History in the Past Subjunctive Tense," where you
quote these sentences, more explicitly discusses what I call the history
of possibility, (against Hegelian notions of actuality and possibility), but
there is a general intention in the entire book to posit open history as an
alternative to both operative history and unengaged history. But I would
not call this "militant". As a matter of fact, my previous books and articles
are about perpetual peace, which I see as the opposite of militancy. So, I
would not associate open history with this word, but I would use words
such as engaged, geopolitical, committed to design practice.

**Both *Architecture in Translation* and *Open Architecture* call for the
definition of a new ethics of architectural work and research, which
mutually complete each other. For example, your performance *Add-
ing a layer Under the Mercator Grid*, which was presented at the
Istanbul Design Biennial in 2012, extends and problematises the
research that you were conducting in Berlin for *Open Architecture* at
the same time. How do you see the relation between research and
your own practice, as an architect, artist and educator, both within
and outside the academic environment?**

Thank you for asking this question that points to something I wish I could
have more time for. I also wish museums and galleries trusted me more
so that I could continue this practice. As you say, during the course of
my research for *Open Architecture*, I tried to find ways to exhibit several
aspects of the process. *Adding a Layer Under the Mercator Grid* was exhib-
ited in the 2012 Istanbul Design Biennial. It was the result of the need to
create some "fictional" work, where documents of true facts were inacces-
sible, such as the direct voice of the women who were subject to domes-
tic violence. *Adding a Layer Under the Mercator Grid* staged six scenes to

FIG. 2   Günser Çetiner, interviewed by Esra Akcan, Berlin 2012.

comment on the murder that took place during my research in Ungers' building (that is mentioned in the related chapter) and some other real cases of domestic violence. It was an additional conversation with Peter Eisenman's project—which is the topic of another chapter. It was meant to remind that the concept of the victim is not a synonym of the concept of the good. Being a target of discrimination or violence is not a guarantee of not imposing violence against others. As the staged cases of this work illustrate, immigrant men who were victims of racism in the workplace could well victimize their wives in the domestic sphere [Fig. 2].

Other works produced for Open Architecture were exhibited in the Biennial as well. "Freedom of Information" became the cover of the book. After a Turkish immigrant family won its appeal to the German Federal Constitutional Court in 1993, the residents gained legal permission to install satellite dishes as part of their constitutional right to freedom of information. Germany hence started being populated with satellite dishes all around. Visual cacophony according to some people but symbols of demands for freedom of information according to others, the dishes are testimony to the lived forms of IBA buildings. While extending immigrant rights, they simultaneously stamp their houses as territories of the stateless. "Freedom of Information" at the Biennale printed—on an actual satellite dish—a collage of photographs of IBA buildings with copious satellite dishes [Fig. 1].

Still another work was titled "Couplings," which exhibited the oral history aspect of the research process. Unlike conventional architectural histories,

the topic of *Open Architecture* requires giving voice not only to architects and policymakers but also to noncitizen residents. Methodologically, the book extends its theme to its format and explores an open form of writing, through a genre inspired by oral history and storytelling. I propose to configure the individual noncitizen voices as an oral historian who does not have claims to representability, but may rely on one witness, who admits the necessarily partial and contingent nature of oral history; and as a storyteller who acknowledges that the fabric of everyday life unfolding in an individual's experience of a space is also part of a building's history. Architectural history does not end when the building leaves the hand of the architect. I exhibited this aspect in the Biennale in the form a 12-screen video installation that included selections from my oral histories with architects and residents that were done separately but montaged as a conversation on two screens across from each other. When the screen of the resident was active, the screen of the architect froze and vice versa, to expose the dialogue or the lack thereof between them when their ideas about the same space was concerned. This video installation collectively lasted for about 7 hours—which nonetheless constituted only a tiny fraction of the total amount of interviews that were done for the book [Figg. 3-4].

In *Architecture in Translation* you seem to reject the concept of cosmopolitanism in architecture, as an instance of Enlightened universalism. Cosmopolitan ethics, as it was envisioned by Kant, was based on the general acceptation of universal truths that were supposed as inherently rational. Eventually, these universal truths have demonstrated themselves to be actually very culturally, gender-, class- and race-specific: their application did not result in global peace, but in a global bloodshed. In other words, hospitality in cosmopolitanism is a conditional one, based on the acceptation of the host's principles. It seems that you have introduced the concept of open architecture as an antidote for cosmopolitan architecture. However, do you see any possibility to redefine cosmopolitanism *from below*, as Arjun Appadurai has described it, a cosmopolitanism without a universal idea of what humanity is, but which rather develops from the life of the city and the struggles of the urban poor?

Architecture in Translation exposes the contradictions in the dominant, Kantian cosmopolitanism, but, rather than rejecting it as a whole, the book makes a call for a new cosmopolitan ethic for global justice and perpetual peace (to repeat a phrase in the pages, on the book cover and several announcements).[6] "Universalism" is also a concept that we need to be more careful about, before jumping into complete, *a priori* refusal or acceptance. And it is not a value posited in Germany or Europe alone: sev-

6 Esra Akcan, *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey, and the Modern House* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

FIG. 4   from Uzun's balcony in Block 28 for IBA-1984/87, photographed by Esra Akcan, Berlin, 2012

eral teachings across the planet cultivate a universal understanding, and what might be seen as a synonym/translation of the word cosmopolitan ethics. This discussion is picked up in *Open Architecture*. For your readers who might not have read the book, let me quote the paragraph that I think explains this the best in the Preface of *Open Architecture*. "The migrations between Germany and Turkey during the first half of the twentieth century, of not only people but also images, ideas, objects, technologies, and information, was the topic of my book *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey and the Modern House*. There, I also commented on the insufficiencies of the dominant ethics of hospitality, by discussing the unresolved points in Kantian cosmopolitanism. While some might argue that Kant's notion of hospitality falls outside the realm of individual moral judgements, because it is concerned strictly with laws and regulations between states, I instead followed the thinkers who discuss this hospitality within the general framework of the philosopher's ethics. Commenting on, first, the potential Eurocentrism and second, the paradoxes of conditional hospitality in Kantian ethics where unconditional good will is the highest order, I argued that this hospitality does not annihilate the perception of the"guest" as a possible threat. A conditional hospitality that comes with an "if" clause, one that gives migrant individuals cosmopolitan rights only if they comply with the predefined norms of the "host", and therefore one that still construes them as the "other" and constructs a hierarchy, is not true hospitality. I think this is still the dominant mode of hospitality today, and hence constitutes the ethical backdrop of the ongoing human rights

regime, even though the current international laws are, strictly speaking, products of more recent times. This book picks up these two debates in *Architecture in Translation*, namely, both the history of migrations between Europe and West Asia, and the discussion on the unresolved nature of the dominant notion of hospitality, "by making a plea for a new ethics of welcoming that would inform open architecture to come."[7] This may indeed have similarities with "cosmopolitanism from below," which is theorized as "translation from below" in *Architecture in Translation*.

Thank you very much for reading my books carefully and for your questions.

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7 Akcan, *Open Architecture*, 7.