Dream House Factories.
What happened to the dream of the factory-made house?

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For Le Corbusier, the development of ideal types for certain kinds of buildings, and their subsequent dissemination as standard types, was one of the most important tasks of architecture:

'It is necessary to press on towards the establishment of standards in order to face the problem of perfection.

[...] A standard is necessary for order in human effort. [...] The establishment of a standard involves exhausting every practical and reasonable possibility, and extracting from them a recognized type conformable to its functions, with a maximum output and a minimum use of means, workmanship and material, words, forms, colours, sounds. Here we have the birth of style [...] Architecture is governed by standards. Standards are a matter of logic, analysis and precise study. Standards are based on a problem which has been well stated. [...] Standardization is imposed by the law of selection and is an economic and social necessity.' (Le Corbusier 1927: 123—127)

Out of the alliance between such cultural achievements and social responsibility grew, as if by itself, as the emergence of the Parthenon demonstrated, all the superior beauty – for Le Corbusier 'the overplus necessary only to men of the highest type.' (Le Corbusier 1927: 135–38) Le Corbusier argued here as a representative of a whole generation of architects who, at the beginning of the twentieth century – borne along by a still basically positive attitude towards progress, and against the background of a building industry still strongly stamped by craftsmanship –, looked upon the potential of industrialisation with downright euphoria. Convinced by the effectiveness of artistically planned interventions in the service of a freely developing society, he called for standards not only on technical and structural design considerations, but also on economic,









Figure 1–4: Single-family home area "Am Sonnenhügel", Berlin-Staaken.

social and – especially – design grounds. Through mass production, the house would finally be freed from ideological and sentimental ballast, and

'A house will no longer be this solidly-built thing which sets out to defy time and decay, and which is an expensive luxury by which wealth can be shown; it will be a tool as the motor-car is becoming a tool.' (Le Corbusier 1927: 244—245)

Yet thanks to prefabricated structures, our suburbs sprout ever more single-family houses which the visionary probably would have despised as sentimental and nostalgic, what he called 'le poème de l'été de la Saint-Martin' (Le Corbusier 1995: 197). The dream of the factory-made house became the dream house out of a catalogue. The goal of developing higher and at the same time cheaper housing standards (technical, construction, and design) has given









Figure 5–8: Single-family home area "Am Sonnenhügel", Berlin-Staaken.

way in the pre-fab² – as in all single-family houses – to eccentric individualisation. In this the possibilities are directed less towards the sculptural-spatial than towards formal aspects, and their architecture attempts, contrary to Corbusier's assumptions, not a rational language of forms but a predominantly tradition-rich repertoire of styles. Thus, we find Le Corbusier's assumption that pre-fabs would free the house from its ponderousness and piety in order to yield to new, pragmatic, and sober buildings of surpassing beauty, turned on its head.

While it appears that high and partially normalised quality standards have long been desired and demanded (no vendor fails to refer to the quality seal on his products), house buyers didn't and don't want to identify themselves with a standardised house architecture which expresses seriality and prefabrication. As a result, consistently high-quality standards can establish themselves only on a technical basis, while on the design level there is no investment in creatively sophisticated ready-made houses, but rather above all in an (apparently) larger creative freedom for the client. The pre-fab customer today could, as stated by the vendor advertisements, design his own home freely according to his own wishes.

Out of this ambition arises – in connection with urban planning that gives precedence to isolated plots over, for example, densely built-up areas with their correspondingly higher need for coordination – a discrepancy between the creative drive of the individual and the public interest, since our built environment as a habitat and a component of our culture must possess defined spatial and design qualities. Exactly this public interest is what Le Corbusier consciously implied in his demand for an environment designed according to his ideas, and which he considered to be on a par with economic and social considerations.

The conflict of interest between individual and society was vividly elucidated by Sigmund Freud in his essay *Civilization and its Discontents* in 1930 (German original: 'Das Unbehagen in der Kultur', Freud 1994). Freud used the term *Unbehagen* (which can also be translated as uneasiness, discomfort, or anxiety) in his text for what we feel in the face of a cultural achievement whose gains are inextricably bound with a lack of happiness. According to Freud, this discontent, so defined, lives in all of us. It comes from an 'indelible core of cultural hostility', based on 'the recognition that every civilization rests on a compulsion to work and a renunciation of instinct and therefore inevitably provokes opposition from those affected by these demands' (Freud 1968: 8). Out of this insight arose the question for Freud of how much individuality a culture could allow – and vice versa: how many concessions a culture can exact from the individual.

Applying Freud's structural model of the personality to the cultural community, the creative impulse and the wish to design one's own home as an individual one on the drives side oppose the demands of society and the built environment on the cultural side.

Standard dreams

The success of the commercial ready-made family house cannot be explained strictly by quantifiable factors like cost and secure completion dates or high construction and material standards. On the contrary, the industry had and has to battle here against various reservations (cf. Allensbach 2005). There

are probably additional needs being addressed that architects are no longer trusted to meet. And indeed, the concern that architects are primarily interested in their own dreams is not entirely plucked out of thin air.

Data on the state of these needs give cause to reflect on the design and marketing of pre-fabs. Informed by the insights that culture theories offer, the ready-made house since the 1990s indeed has developed from an appropriately priced house for everybody into a high-end product that counters status anxieties. With the offer of an all-in-one place comes a comprehensive consumer-oriented marketing concept: from the idea of buying a house in a supermarket, through offers like colour, style or feng-shui counselling, to promotional offers like a weekly dream house lottery – with friendly help from celebrities. For example, the Swabian firm Exnorm put two Sissi designs on the market in 1998 to honour Empress Elisabeth of Austria's death centenary. In 2001, Hanse-Haus advertised the football club FC-Bayern-München-Haus, in club colours. And the firm Viebrockhaus has worked with the fashion and jewellery designer Jette Joop for years (cf. Gill 2010: 79–83). The development of such strategies is based on the insight that in buying one's own house an entire life plan and style of living is implied (cf. Bourdieu 2002: 41). Consequently, the marketing of ready-mades is less and less about value for money and increasingly about intangible and hardly quantifiable promises of happiness: quality of life, joie de vivre, and lifestyle. Thus, the objectives underlying the ownership of a single-family pre-fab – for example self-determination, living close to nature, economic security, and self-expression – lose some of their rationality and increasingly take on the character of compensatory projections. And so, the appeal to Freud is in this respect not random. Between the poles of need and projection, drive and culture, individual and society, what interests us is which images will convince the customers.

Actually, the fulfilment of the dream house, which in the vendors' advertisements is so urgently communicated, already wipes away the memory of the pre-fab's mass-produced origins. Likewise, the latitude in production, which is enabled by newest applications of CAD and CNC technologies and developed with precisely this in mind, allows for differentiated offers while maintaining serial production. They individualise standard solutions — and standardise individuality. Nonetheless, pre-fab house offers generally appear to be strangely uniform. Why is that?

Standard images

Imposed by standards and zoning requirements to realise the maximum floor space on a minimum plot of land, and due to a combination of always similar use specifications in pre-fab houses, a limited number of typological possibilities arise. Their formal differentiation must operate within a broadly intelligible and therefore hardly individual vocabulary, if they are to satisfy the various fantasies and, at the same time, generally addressable requirements of representation that have always been bound up in having one's own home.

Living in one's own home combines concrete advantages like adaptability to individual needs, protection against the tyranny of landlords, and economic security - especially in old age - with features such as independence, freedom, and autonomy. With connotations of such conservative values as reduced consumption, frugality, discipline, labour, and long-term planning, owning a home is valued as an appropriate expression of a successful biography, as studies show (cf. BBR 2001: 19 f.). At the same time, owning a single-family house demonstrates individual success in life and upward social mobility, and thus fulfils the function of a status symbol. Nonetheless, through the increasing prevalence of home ownership, for which the pre-fab as both product and driver is largely held responsible, the representative function is no longer exclusive. This sets the representation of social distinction as a secondary mechanism in motion. The initially low-cost house nowadays has to appear bigger and more expensive to assert the owner's financial potency and to pretend a higher level of social status (cf. Bourdieu 1987: 120–125 and 500-513).

The advertising promises used by vendors to help their clients to acquire the customised dream house of their individual wishes and imaginations additionally aim at these representational needs. They flatter the need of potential customers to express a public image of the uniqueness and significance of their person. At the same time, the ever-increasing number of variants on offer supply the customer with numerous possibilities for identification.

Thus, the imagery of the structures activates clichés – whether Alpine or Nord-deutsch, Mediterranean or Scandinavian, Modern or Ecological – which are for their part standardised and constantly reproduced in all areas of advertising. These images illustrate dream worlds, from Mediterranean flair and cool ambience to fantasies of castles and gardens inhabited by rich and beautiful celebrities. Furniture magazines and catalogues, newspapers, guidebooks, promotion films, and media of all kinds similarly spread such images. We see television productions like Inga Lindström and Rosamunde Pilcher films, Der

Landarzt (The Country Doctor) or Das Schloss am Wörthersee (The Mansion on the Wörthersee), or soap operas devoted to the lives of well-off Californian, Texan, or Italian dynasties. Cooking shows, arranged around highly polished kitchen blocks, set the standard for the new feel-good home. Numerous decoration soaps, broadcast over various channels many times a day, serve the awakened yearnings, as installation advisers with a part to play in the family fate, give practical tips and instructions on how to realise these dream worlds within the owner's own four walls (cf. Gill 2010: 87–91).

Standard components

The handcrafted and the industrially manufactured product are distinguished from each other above all by the opposite meaning and valuation of, respectively, the primary, actual function and the secondary, symbolic function. Such a paradigm change is also significant for the commercialisation of the readymade single-family house, which transforms the owned home into a product, and construction into a service — in the eyes of most vendors a step which they look back upon with pride. However, this forces them into an increasingly systematic application of the product form in order to remain competitive within a steadily growing market (cf. also Baudrillard 2001: 16).

The prerequisite of this competitiveness is to match the production and distribution conditions of other industries, for example the automobile, furniture, or garment industries. From the start, these fell under the heading of mass customisation. Here, mass production and customisation are bound together in a way which can be understood as customised mass production, and means that, with an eye on the progress of technical development and under consideration of set parameters, an individualised garment, piece of furniture, or car can be as quickly and cheaply manufactured as if it was mass-produced. The distinction must therefore often focus on *nuances*³. Thus, for example, motorcar manufacturers offer an apparently endless palette of colours – in plain or double lacquer – as well as a wide variety of technical refinements and variations on the extra options. The consumer is soothed with the illusion that he is getting a unique model.

The transfer of these principles to ready-made houses means, thanks to the latest technology, that reasonably priced manufacture, based on industrialised and rational planning and building processes, no longer has to stand in the way of realising the individual builder-owner's wishes. In this way, the house manufacturer ostensibly offers the customer tailored products at moderate

prices, which heightens the attractiveness of the offer. At the same time, they can use the customer's information that steers the configuration process as input for the development of new products, essentially conducting market research and thus eventually profiting twice. Here, the internet offers the ideal interface between customer and vendor: company home pages do not always restrict themselves to information about the latest offer.

Interactive house configurators additionally enable potential house buyers to extend different floor plan suggestions with bay windows or winter gardens, select options like a gabled roof versus a hipped roof, and choose styles from classic to modern. Within a few seconds the customer can get a fixed price estimate with a visual simulation from top edge to base plate in 3D perspective. The result often is an eclectic mix of distinct types, styles, and elements. These refer not only to the architecture of the house itself, but also the catalogue imagery of the firm, in which claims addressed only to architecture refer to the appearance, the flair of the house, the ambience of the home.

Standard language

Any marketing of the pre-fab product by catalogue or on the internet to anonymous customers must necessarily be general. The largest possible range of houses must be included in order to speak to the greatest number of potential buyers. Most vendors therefore refer to a broad selection of reference projects, which they nonetheless by no means want to be understood as readymades. Thus, the language commonly avoids any vocabulary that might evoke mass production or pre-fabrication and focuses on terms that might appeal to fantasies about taste (for example, style directions) and professional status (for example, draft proposal). The systematic listing of these offerings leads nonetheless back to the reality behind. Here, at the latest, doubts arise as to whether the advertised promises to tailor an individual dream house to every customer can be seriously und feasibly realised.

It is therefore perfectly understandable if vendors want to offer their clients help to orient themselves and identify possibilities in a very broad and highly diversified housing market. There are currently over 1,000 house models alone on the website for vendors listed by the *Bundesverband Deutscher Fertigbau*⁵. First, melodious names replace factual descriptions for the various building categories: a double-house becomes a *Duett*, a *Pasodoble* or a *Twin*, while a one-level retirement bungalow is sold under the label *Fifty5*. To make these attributes stand out in the crowd, further names are sought in order to

offer the client additional information about price categories and design directions. Key words associated with different lifestyles are often used, for example Esprit, Ideal, or Sunshine, or perhaps rather Diamant, Prestige, or Royal. Pointers to aeographical-regional styles are also sought, from Småland and Gomera, to York and Tirol, to Venezia and Florenz. The vendors also pin great hopes on musical associations through house names such as Jazz or Blues, Allegro or Forte, Ideenhaus Belcanto or, finally, Turandot, Othello, and Don Giovanni. Such names should convey substance, purity, and exclusivity as well as Mediterranean ease and La Dolce Vita or a youthful outlook paired with Scandinavian pragmatism. Occasionally, this leads to results like La Grande mit Wintergarten (La Grande with winter garden), Design Schupfholz (which is a miniscule German settlement), or Trendy Bielefeld (a town in northwestern Germany whose name in jokes regularly symbolises not so trendy places in Germany). However, the arbitrariness of such names doesn't end here, but is intentionally connected to the established conceptual world of the consumer goods market. Thus, those names could easily be assigned not only to a variety of house models, but also to other products, like cars, exercise machines, and appliances, as well as deodorants, coffee, flour, and ultimately toilet paper (cf. Gill 2010: 99-103).

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The context-free conception and presentation of the buildings in catalogues and on the internet corresponds ultimately to the lack of hierarchy of the accumulated structures and styles. With the re-entry into the sphere of the built reality, these stamp individual architecture with the character of the whole domain of single-family houses and transform the city and countryside into agonies of entropic urban sprawl. At the same time, the possible combinatorics of components adapted to structural engineering and thermal efficiency advances impassively. It fosters a *bricolage* of dreams – from which there is no awakening.

Thus, the freedom won in manufacturing is neutralised in a collage of boiler-plate images – and nonetheless bought at a high price: indirectly by society and taxpayers through the spoiled landscape and high development costs, and directly by the buyer in whose interest all this supposedly transpires. On the one hand, the vendor pays entirely for the wishes of individualisation. On the other hand, a fashionable (facade) design rarely contributes to maintaining or increasing the value of a building. Investment in the largest possible

standardised customised dream home on the smallest, cheapest possible plot of land is seldom worth it: the more eccentric the architecture and location, the lower the resale value. In the model home parks, out-of-fashion show houses are replaced when they no longer reflect the current trends. House owners don't have that option.

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Illustration credits

Photos: Amos Fricke, 2012.

Endnotes

- For the term and the concept of the 'factory made house' cf. Herbert 1984.
- The terms pre-fab, factory-made house, and ready-made house will be used on the following pages for single-family houses of lightweight or solid construction which command a high degree of pre-fabrication and which are distributed by a house building company.
- 3 For the perception of the term cf. Bourdieu 1987.
- 4 E.g. https://haas-fertighaus.de/hauskonfigurator/; https://www.fingerhuthaus.de/haeuser/hausfinder/?gclid=EAlalQobChMl6o_Fodyw3QlVRLTtCh1-3QkZEAMYASAAEgKa3PD_BwE; https://www.weberhaus.de/haeuser-finden/hauskonfigurator-starten/?google_campaign_id=7ef37d60-59cd-f175-c0cc-526f99083da9&gclid=EAlalQobChMl6o_Fodyw3QlVRLTtCh1-3QkZEAAYAiAAEgK0QfD_BwE (all accessed 10 September 2018)
- 5 See https://www.fertigbau.de/ (accessed 7 February 2019).