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Kirchsteigfeld— A European Perspective on the Construction of Community

American admirers of New Urbanism would almost certainly be delighted by a visit to Kirchsteigfeld. This new district of Potsdam, a suburb of Berlin, features various hallmarks of New Urbanist planning. Public spaces recreate earlier urban patterns; a well defined network of streets intertwines with ample greenswards; the housing is relatively dense. It was designed between 1991 and 1993 by the architectural firm of Rob Krier and Christoph Kohl, and individual buildings were executed by several architectural firms from Central Europe and the United States.

Kirchsteigfeld's planners and architects revived many traditional features of central European towns and cities, updating them to accommodate contemporary demands for greenery and parking. At Kirchsteigfeld's core stands a church; one of the first built in eastern Germany since World War II, it was designed by Italian architect Augusto Romano Burelli. This instant landmark is ringed on three sides by public spaces lined with storefronts. Beyond those are residential districts and community facilities, such as schools.

Most streets are lined with three- to five-story apartment buildings with colorful facades. Neighborhood-scale features include a horseshoe-shaped plaza that opens onto a rondelle. A canal bisects the community, its beautifully landscaped

banks bordered with serpentine benches. Communal gardens are inside each block, providing further green spaces and access to parking tucked discreetly to the side. An excellent streetcar link to the center of Potsdam provides a convenient alternative, however, to the use of private cars.

At Kirchsteigfeld, planning models developed to suture the gashes World War II opened in Berlin's urban fabric were applied to an undeveloped site on the metropolitan periphery. This shift created both opportunities and challenges. The results illustrate the close relationship between even the most carefully considered design on the one hand and cultural and market forces on the other. They also tie the community to a series of often unacknowledged sources whose success Kirchsteigfeld is not always able to match.

Roots in IBA

Since the 1970s, Krier has called for reviving Europe's nineteenth-century pattern of high-density, low-rise apartment buildings built to the street edge, though he proposes to make it more habitable by creating through-block communal courtyards. His influence has been enormous in Europe, where the urban forms he seeks to revive are associated with the good life of an earlier time, just as small towns are in the United States. Most

notably, his precepts were adopted by the planners of the International Building Exhibition (IBA) organized in West Berlin in the early 1980s. Instead of the high-rise apartment towers built during the sixties and seventies to replace buildings damaged during the war, IBA planners erected buildings that mimicked the scale of pre-war apartment blocks and villas.

This emphasis on typology (fostered as well by the popularity in Germany of Aldo Rossi's *Architecture of the City*), however, was seldom accompanied by overtly historicist designs for building facades or interior plans. Although punched window openings predominated, the character of individual buildings recreated the proportions of their predecessors in terms that were indisputably of their own time.

The IBA exhibition also established a precedent for the way in which high-profile architects could be lured into designing everyday housing. Organizers invited firms to compete for the design of the master plan, promising them the opportunity to build some of its constituent pieces. Lavish government subsidies for middle-class housing, combined with strict German construction standards, all but guaranteed the quality of the results, which quickly attracted international attention as a showpiece of postmodern architecture and urbanism.

Groth + Graalfs, a firm that acts both as developer and building contractor, executed one of IBA's best-known projects, the Rauchstrasse quarter, which Krier had laid out. In 1991, when the firm acquired sixty hectares of open land on the south edge of formerly Communist Potsdam, it returned voluntarily to the IBA formula, adding a workshop among the competing designers to encourage collaborative thinking about the plan. The workshop resulted in Krier and Kohl being chosen to create Kirchsteigfeld's plan and ensured that talented architects from Europe and the U.S. would contribute to its execution.

The IBA exhibition was a collection of fragments. On any given block, new construction might stand alongside old. The results were punctuated by the towers in the park erected in the district in the interim.

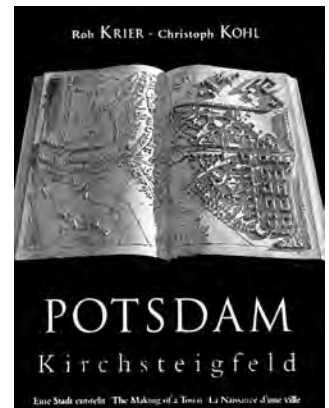
At Kirchsteigfeld IBA precepts were applied to a blank slate. Here the tensions were ironed out of the IBA collage. Kirchsteigfeld's planners took advantage of local landscape and infrastructure features, including an alley of oak trees and a highway, to establish boundaries between it and its neighbors, which include the remnants of a rural village as well as monotonous Plattenbau, prefabricated apartment slabs that were the post-war housing type most favored by Eastern Europe's Communist governments.

Within these intended lines one finds, for the most part, an extremely cogent collection of lively facades that frame relatively narrow streets on one side and generous courtyards on the other. Few of the individual buildings are as original as the best contributions to IBA (by Peter Eisenmann and Jaquelin Robertson, Office of Metropolitan Architecture, Aldo Rossi and Moore, Ruble, Yudell, which participated in both developments), but they share much the same spirit. Stucco facades, into which balconies are cut or from which they project, recreate in the proportions of their details an earlier urban pattern without imitating its ornamental decoration. In both cases, architects have respected precedent while avoiding sentimentality.

Transferability

Americans tempted to reconstruct Kirchsteigfeld at home will be frustrated to find that it is as much the product of specifically German political and economic conditions as of the New Urbanist approach to community design.

Many of Kirchsteigfeld's most appealing features were mandated by local regulations, and public funding played a large role in the realization of its ambitious design. The regulatory envi-



A relief of Kirchsteigfeld's plan, depicted as the pages of a book, greets visitors to the town.

Kirchsteigfeld



Aerial photo, showing central axis and Hirtengraben Park
Photo: Werner Huthmacher

Early plan sketch by
Rob Krier and Christoph Kohl
Graphic: Krier and Kohl





Hirtengraben Park, detail
 Photo: Werner Huthmacher



Mid-block apartment building
 Photo: Werner Huthmacher



Corner tower type
 Photo: Werner Huthmacher



The Rondelle, lined with buildings designed by Krier and Kohl, opens onto Horseshoe Square.
 Photo: Kathleen James-Chakraborty



Plattenbau, housing built under the former German Democratic Republic near Kirchsteigfeld
Photo: Kathleen James-Chakraborty

ronment that demanded high-quality construction, pedestrian and bicycle paths, and a sensitive approach to the local ecology does not exist in the United States. Moreover, the combination of public and private funding that built Kirchsteigfeld (though considered in Germany to be a significant example of privatization) would be unthinkable in the U.S., where no public agency would lavish so much money on middle-class housing. Nor would a local American government be likely to contribute a streetcar, as happened here.

Kirchsteigfeld's location in a formerly Communist suburb on Berlin's edge places it in a housing market very different from that of American suburbs. Potsdam's Communist-era housing crisis was exacerbated, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, by its proximity to the city. But Potsdam's pre-war buildings were in poor repair; conditions in the newer Plattenbau were often little better. Thus there were many people eager to occupy Kirchsteigfeld's apartments, despite a density that ensured that the standards of privacy and spaciousness demanded by most middle-class Americans would be absent. Finally, the degree of involvement that Groth + Graalfs continue to have in Kirchsteigfeld as property managers is unusual even in Germany, as was their responsibility for erecting most of the community's infrastructure.

Compromises

Krier and Kohl, along with the developers for whom they worked and the other architects who assisted them, created an extraordinarily attractive suburban environment. They were able to take advantage of a Communist-era housing crisis, general German agreement about planning principles similar to those of New Urbanism (albeit often within the aesthetics of International Modernism), generous government subsidies and the organizational legacy of Berlin's recent IBA to achieve this impressive result. Yet even these conditions, so essential to the construction of a well-

defined, well-designed, well-maintained, amenity-rich community of this density and configuration, have not proved sufficient to ensure an ideal mix of uses or to protect the integrity of the design from market imposed revisions.

Half of the community was built according to the original plans. But in the southern sections the apartment blocks Krier called for have given way to single-family row houses. These have little relationship to the street or to the central public space they abut, which consequently now lacks the strong spatial definition that makes its counterpart to the north so attractive.

This is not the only compromise with Krier and Kohl's vision that one finds upon visiting the community. For example, Krier and Kohl were determined that the development not become merely a bedroom community. But with the continued absence of the workplaces their plan proposed, this nonetheless has happened.

Kirchsteigfeld's relatively low population and the small size of the individual shops have conspired against the evolution of a lively commercial center. Perhaps a third of the few shopfronts remain empty, and one can buy little more than basic groceries without traveling outside the community's well-defined boundaries. Although most Germans continue to shop in downtowns, village centers or the neighborhood shopping districts that line streetcar routes, Kirchsteigfeld's inhabitants overwhelmingly favor the new American-style shopping centers just to the north.

Finally, for all the glamour it has acquired through its association with Krier and its status as a showpiece for New Urbanism, Kirchsteigfeld still feels like a set piece, a stage set in which it is not yet obvious that the quality of community will match the thoughtful design of most of its constituent pieces. Some of the beautifully-landscaped communal areas seem to have been designed more for display than use. On a stunning autumn morning not a single toddler was to be found playing in



The rowhouses the developer has recently substituted for the apartment blocks called for by Krier and Kohl have an awkward relationship to the street, with small front gardens that correspond more to the usual backyard, complete with sliding glass doors and gardening shed. Photo: Kathleen James-Chakraborty

any of the courtyards, where prominent signs forbade dogs, soccer balls and bicycles—three staples of German recreational activities.

Precedents

Through most of the twentieth century, Germany has proven fertile territory for experiments in escaping what the German sociologist Georg Simmel identified as the alienating character of modern metropolitan life. Germans have a proud recent history of providing thoughtful urban planners and architects with the opportunity to re-inject a sense of community into the urban forms that the society as a whole continues to value as a repository of its cultural traditions.

In their published accounts of their intentions at Kirchsteigfeld, Krier and Kohl ignore these important precedents, many of them located in neighboring Berlin, and distort the character of their design's relationship to earlier patterns of European urbanism. Their point of departure is not as timeless as they would like to think. The apartment building, whose organization around a courtyard they explode to the scale of an entire block, became the prototype for housing in northern Europe only during the nineteenth century; before that time the townhouse with a small garden in the rear predominated. In truth, they have made no attempt to replicate the density of either model, both of which supported an active commercial life at street level.

At Kirchsteigfeld, Krier and Kohl instead placed apartment blocks in a landscaped setting that recalls early twentieth century garden city developments, such as the Margaretenhohe in Essen and Staaken on Berlin's western edge. While the architecture of these settlements was overtly nostalgic in its recall of pre-industrial village life, something that is entirely absent at the more urbane Kirchsteigfeld, these communities have had more success than Kirchsteigfeld in creating viable centers that replicate the commercial

and institutional mix of village life because the modest scale of their public spaces are more in keeping with the size of their populations.

Nor is Kirchsteigfeld entirely independent of Modernist models. Both the planning apparatus and the community's scale and density have more in common with the workers' housing erected around Berlin's periphery during the 1920s than with any earlier German architecture. In particular, the combination of the way in which the blocks are split open to reveal the courtyards and the brilliant coloring of individual facades recall the Britz and Onkel Tom's Hutte (Uncle Tom's Cabin), two of the developments laid out by Bruno Taut, although, of course, Krier and Kohl eschew Taut's standardized plans and flat roofs.

Ironically, developments like Bochum's Uni-center, a 1970s megastructure with little aesthetic appeal, recreate the active pedestrian life characteristic of successful cities much better than Kirchsteigfeld does. In Bochum, where an irregularly shaped plaza sits atop two levels of parking and is ringed by shops and apartment towers, a huge student population ensures that the relatively banal space, which doubles as a protected play space for children, is occupied virtually around the clock. Without such a high number of workers and residents, Kirchsteigfeld is not yet and may never become the viable, free standing community its planners envisioned.

Nonetheless, Kirchsteigfeld is a welcome addition to Germany's rich legacy of planned communities. It offers hope that Germans will, through a combination of thoughtful public and private planning, continue to avoid the worst ramifications of the suburbanization brought on by their enormous prosperity. If Kirchsteigfeld proves almost impossible to replicate in the U.S., where government policies and market demands are different, this only demonstrates the degree to which Krier and Kohl's design is rightly embedded in the culture whose aspirations it so effectively mirrors.

Karow Nord



Aerial view of Karow Nord shows various housing types, including courtyard buildings in the foreground, villas along the lake and perimeter blocks behind.

Photos: Werner Huthmacher



Retail street

Vista over the water park



Midblock pedestrian walk



Day care center



Karow Nord's plan includes a street system integrated with its context, axial streets and vistas like in Berlin, a hierarchy of streets and open spaces, long bands of park in an "agri-grid," a mix of housing types and scales, and a tapering down of scale from the center to the edge.

Graphic: Moore Ruble Yudell