Kirchsteigfeld and Karow Nord

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Kirchsteigfeld and Karow Nord could be thought of as sisters, fraternal twins, sent to grow up in different parts of the world, who have returned as adults to live in the same county, if not next door. One can see the resemblance in the bones perhaps, but the difference in manners is much more striking.

Visiting Kirchsteigfeld we proceed as in a large house, through a series of rooms, the doors and windows closed, with a bit of heat going, and Rob Krier's warm presence there to greet you, like the portrait or the statue in the entry hall. Karow has left all the doors and shutters wide open, with a cool breeze sweeping through, and everyone outside in the garden.

Analogies aside, both places share a common ideal, which is to be called a town, a place of dwelling and community richer and more memorable than what we usually have in mind when we say "suburb" or "gartenstadt." Programmatically, however, both developments are much closer to the latter, which in turn is far richer than what we have in mind when we say "housing project."

Given common ideals, the relative coolness or warmth carries through each project quite consistently in terms of process—intensive review of the many architects' designs in Kirchsteigfeld, almost none in Karow (not our preference!)—as well as in terms of the built result, which in Karow is somewhat looser, a bit larger-grained, with a more equal status given to buildings and open space.

Another implication of being a town, and one very much valued by both urban design teams, is the sense of authenticity. The quality sought is vitality, which in visual terms means the tension between the clarity of a planned form or pattern, and the accidental details of its execution over time. Since both projects are being built all at once, there really is no execution over time, and therefore little opportunity for accidents, spontaneous details and changes. But imperfection is, happily, readily available to the town planner, even on a fast track. Involving as many architects as possible in executing the plan virtually assures that no one gets it exactly right.

In order to understand the potential for each project to hold the visual richness that we associate with historically developed communities (and we are here talking principally about built form, rather than social or cultural responses), it is useful to compare briefly the process by which both plans were built out.

Housing, by far the major component of each project, was divided into design–construction phases of some three hundred to six hundred units each, with multiple architects in each phase. In Kirchsteigfeld there were generally more architects in each phase. In a typical district, perimeter blocks were divided into a series of "houses"—three- to four-story apartment houses of ten or twelve units each, with a different architect for each house. This produced a very fine grain in terms of scale and variety, and required a close coordination of the different architects by Krier and Kohl. At Karow, the developers Groth + Graalfs moved away from this more detailed approach (which Krier favored for its closer simulation of historic development patterns) towards giving each architect larger pieces of the plan. On most streets in Karow one sees facades by one architect stretch for an entire block on one side, clearly giving a larger scale. This different quality is reinforced by other features—wider streets with more on-street parking in Karow, for example.

The prevailing perimeter block pattern in both projects is relieved by a variety of other housing formats, such as urban villas, and, more importantly, by other functions—commercial

centers, day-care centers, public schools and open space. Karow has a greater variety of housing patterns and types—perimeter block, urban villas in different scales, two-story mews and a special pattern called Karow Courts. (The Karow Court was based on farm house patterns in the historic village: a two-story, multi-unit house is combined with small L-shaped blocks of flats around an intimate courtyard, giving a feel of the original farmer's court or *bauernhof*.) Individual architects were assigned various combinations of these types, but rarely splitting them or sharing a party wall.

Written guidelines for both projects were relatively spare, although in the case of Karow they were deliberated by an independent panel of architects and landscape architects over many months. Controls included roof slopes and conditions at the ground, particularly built edges in relation to streets and open spaces, as well as building entrances and projections. Quite different color palettes were developed for each project by consultants, with quite different outcomes.

A major difference in approach was the extent of design review. In Kirchsteigfeld, Krier and Kohl conducted workshops, with scale models and compiled colored elevations, to see how the individual building designs added up. In Karow this process was not supported by the developers or the city, and each of the several building firms conducted independent efforts with their own architects. Moore Ruble Yudell had scant opportunity even to find out about the designs of the architects and no chance to influence the work beyond the written guidelines. Thus a project that began with intense exchange among peers in a master planning competition was executed by strangers with no collegial interaction; in other words, the same way buildings are done in most towns around the world.

Public buildings in Karow were watched over much more closely, at least by the City of Berlin. Architects for schools and day-care centers were chosen through design competitions with almost curatorial care. The variety, consistently thoughtful contemporary design, and quality of material and construction of these buldings make an extraordinary contribution to Karow's public realm.

There is no question that Kirchsteigfeld has a kind of quirky charm. It is in some ways a more unusual, more colorful and more unified place than Karow. In that sense it is consistent with its inspiration and context, the city of Potsdam. Karow is, by virtue of its greater range of scale and its variety of patterns set into a strong and somewhat axial framework of streets and landscape, more like Berlin. This is very much the kind of result that we and Krier and Kohl would have hoped for.

Kirchsteigfeld

Sponsor: Groth + Graalfs Industrie und Wohnbau
Design: Rob Krier • Christoph Kohl (master planner, coordinating architect), Muller Knippschild Wehberg (landscape architect)
Worskshop participants: Augusto Romano Burelli; Eyl Weitz Würmle; Rob Krier • Christoph Kohl; Krüger Schuberth Vandreike; Moore Ruble Yudell; Nielebock & Partner.
Architects: Benzmüller + Wörner; Brandt/Böttcher; Augusto Romano Burelli and Paola Gennaro; Dewey & Muller; Eyl Weitz Würmle; Faskel & Becker; Feddeson, V. Herder & Partner; Ferdinand + Gerth; Foellbach Architekten; Hermann & Valentiny; Wilhelm Holzbauer; Jürgens + Mohren; Kamman und Hummel; Kohn Pederson Fox; Rob Krier • Christoph Kohl; Krüger Schuberth Vandreike; Lunetto + Fischer; Moore Ruble Yudell; Johanne Nalbach + Gernot Nalbach; Nielebock & Partner; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; Steinbach & Weber.

Karow Nord

Sponsor: Groth + Graalfs Industrie und Wohnbau
Design: Lunetto + Fischer (executive architect), Moore Ruble Yudell (associated architect), Muller Knippschild Wehberg (landscape architect)
Engineering: Hildebrand and Seiber (structural), Wegmann & Partner (mechanical), Unruh & Partner (electrical)
Contractor: Ingenieurbüro Ruths