

How to engage with material within an editorial process? Protocols of the research process of the special issue ‘Frauen in der Architektur—: Frauenarchitektur?’

Elias Erkan^a and Bettina Nagler^b

^a Werkplaats Typografie, elias@werkplaatstypografie.org and

^b University of Art and Design Halle, bettina_laura.nagler@burg-halle.de

How to cite: Erkan, Elias and Nagler, Bettina (2024). How to engage with material within an editorial process? Protocols of the research process of the special issue ‘Frauen in der Architektur—: Frauenarchitektur?’ In proceedings book: *ICAG 2023 - VI International Conference on Architecture and Gender*. Valencia, 3-6 October 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4995/ICAG2023.2023.16821>

Abstract

In 1979 the publication of the special issue 31/32 “Frauen in der Architektur—: Frauenarchitektur?” (Women in Architecture—: women’s architecture?) in the renowned architecture magazine *Bauwelt* marked a pivotal moment in the history of feminist architecture in West Germany. This issue was the first German publication to recognize women architects as integral to the profession. While the perspectives presented in the issue remain relevant today—such as calls for new working conditions for female architects—the articles’ themes do not fully align with current feminist discourses that now encompass intersectionality. By studying this historical milestone, we aim to understand the context in which it was published, its impact, and the responses of the conventional *Bauwelt* readership. To unlock its situated knowledge, we apply a methodology that acknowledges our own subjectivity and collaborative efforts, aiming to facilitate a dialogue with the material and our backgrounds. As we embark on the project of creating a book about the *Bauwelt* issue, we adopt an intuitive and dialogical approach, focusing on the unfolding process rather than a predetermined outcome. By promoting collective production, dissemination, and exchange of knowledge, we seek to develop resistant strategies and contribute to the ongoing discourse on feminist achievements in architecture.

Keywords: *editorial process, dialogue, semantics of history, collective authorship, critique, archive, bias, historical objectivity, subjectivity, materialism*

1. Editorial challenges: historical signature and contemporary critique

Publishing the issue 31/32 *Frauen in der Architektur—: Frauenarchitektur?* (Women in Architecture—: women's architecture?) of the famous architecture magazine *Bauwelt* in 1979 was a seminal moment in the history of feminist architecture in West Germany. Curated by architect Margrit Kennedy, this *Bauwelt* issue was the first German publication acknowledging women architects as a crucial part in the profession. This special-issue was intended to draw attention to the underrepresentation of female professionals in the field of architecture and to unionize the concerns, which women architects faced in terms of professional opportunities and recognition.

Although the perspectives presented in the issue still bear relevance nowadays—e.g. Christiane Erlemanns and Odile Laufners demand *Wir wollen andere Werke schaffen und anders zu Werke gehen*¹ (We want to create other works and approach work differently) for new working conditions for female architects—, the issues addressed in the articles do not necessarily match current feminist discourses. We can note this situation when Paola Coppola Pignatelli illustrates in her contribution *Der Weg zu einer anderen räumlichen Logik* (A different way to a different spatial logic) a very dualistic narrative of female characteristics of spatial thinking.² Since then, feminist discourses have shifted to encompass a broader range of power structures, including intersectionality, so we must learn to look more closely to divert our examination into a 'learning from 1979'. Our historical distance allows us to trace the issues agency: Why was this title published? What happened after its publication? What did the conventional *Bauwelt* readership comment on this issue?

We consider the issue not only as an archive but as a mirror as well. Therefore, we work in two time directions: we want to tell a different history of architecture that is not exclusively written by and for men. Additionally we want to analyze and learn from the past to infuse today's debates around *girl-bossing*, unpaid care work, mental load, the need for inclusive design, and the latent sexism in everyday professional practices—as translated into today's terms.

2. An approach to unlock the situated knowledge of the magazine

Drawing from Stuart Hall's concept, the magazine as an interpretation of an archive "represents the end of a certain kind of creative innocence, and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity in an artistic movement. Here the whole apparatus of 'a

¹ Christiane Erlemann and Odile Laufner, "Wir wollen andere Werke schaffen und anders zu Werke gehen," *Bauwelt*, August 1979, 1318.

² Paola Coppola Pignatelli, "Der Weg zu einer anderen räumlichen Logik : Vorstellung, Nutzung und Planung des Raumes," translated by Monika Peschken, *Bauwelt*, August 1979, 1285-1287.

history’—periods, key figures and works, tendencies, shifts, breaks, ruptures—slips silently into place.”³

In our work on the Bauwelt project, we hold our own positions, subjectivity, and collaborative efforts in high regard. While we approach the material with an eye on history, we also critically examine it within the framework of the present context. A quote of Walter Benjamin expresses our understanding: “To historically articulate the past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was.’ It means taking control of a memory which flashes up in a moment of danger.”⁴

While we are not historians, our distinctiveness lies in our position as laypersons. As a duo, our work methods diverge, with Elias, a graphic designer, employing a textually-driven and graphically-oriented approach, and Bettina, a trained architect, adopting a more holistic but epistemological perspective. Although our backgrounds are interconnected, they draw on distinct implicit knowledge. We also notice as we are socialized as male and female, that also our interpretations of texts vary. In this sense, the Bauwelt issue 31/32 functions as a lens through which we critically examine our own professional and epistemological approach to work, while simultaneously serving as a mirror that enables us to reflect upon ourselves.

As editors, our aim is not to produce a scientific publication. We strive to challenge stereotypes, oversimplifications, and gender binaries, while also acknowledging their relevance in contemporary architectural discourses centered on equality, ecology, and community. Notably, many debates from the past continue to resonate with the discourses of today, providing valuable insights on how feminist achievements can be more effectively integrated into mainstream practices. Therefore, we need to unlock its situated knowledge, especially its echoes and its dead ends back then.

As a result, we aim to develop a specialized methodology where engaging with the material becomes an open process that facilitates a dialogue with our background and ourselves. In this endeavor, we do not adopt the stance of detached researchers seeking to conceal our biases. Instead, we acknowledge the need to mark our own position within the process. Our primary focus lies in the unfolding process itself, rather than a predetermined outcome.

As we proceed with the project of creating a book about the special issue, we contemplate how to navigate the material, our historical distance, our individualities, and our collaborative efforts. In this endeavor, a dialogical exchange of abstract thoughts as well as ideas becomes crucial.

Some questions guide our engagement with the issue, such as:

- Is the magazine more than a record of the past?
- Which topics are continuous until today?

³ Lola Olufemi, *Experiments In Imagining Otherwise* (U.K.: Hajar Press, 2021), 21, iBooks.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *On the concept of history*, trans. Dennis Redmond (2020), 2.

But a central concern of our content is to promote various processes of collective production and exchange of knowledge through the flow of dialogues. Therefore, we allow us to work intuitively, allowing conversations and topics to evolve naturally, without following a predefined set of questions. This approach aims to create a different way of engagement, understanding the process as an integral part of a political practice, and development as the formation of resistant strategies.

3. Development of the contribution

A Currently, we find ourselves in an early stage, yet with an extensive engagement, as *Bauwelt* accompanies us for a while. We often ponder how to commence in the most appropriate manner. We contemplate our method of dealing with and within the material, voices, and historical context. Perhaps a point of reference could be our reflections on what we find challenging in the issue? What aspect is currently blocking your progress, B?

B For me, the selection of perspectives stands out as a potential obstacle. The sole unifying element is that all authors are women, and the texts are related to architecture. However, I sense a lack of a coherent thread that guides me through the content. Although there appear to be thematic areas such as “messy history”, “professional practice” (manifestos), and “being a woman”, the discussions often seem repetitive or present topics in a simplistic manner. Furthermore, I find it intriguing that even in that era; the views seem to diverge without being presented in opposition to one another.

A We probably need to examine the title “Women in Architecture—Women’s Architecture?” more closely and read between the lines. Is there a coherent thread or is there even one at all? In addition, why do we assume there should be? The title conveys two aspects to me. It names the subject, “women”, and the field they are in, “architecture”. This is followed by a long dash, as if the sentence is interrupted. It feels like a pause, perhaps indicating a reflection on the daily practice of women in offices, construction sites, and so on. However, it is also the beginning, marked by a colon, inviting us to follow a sense of curiosity. “Women’s architecture?” Whom does the question mark address? Does it doubt the existence of a gender-specific architecture? On the other hand, does it question whether there is architecture created exclusively by women? Alternatively, does it refer to architecture designed for women? This intentional ambiguity runs consistently throughout the entire magazine, leaving ample room for interpretation and discussion. It creates a space for dialogue, asking where we can see women in architecture.

The title speaks volumes about a state of flux, transitioning into a movement of self-positioning and exploration, encompassing both determination and a search for direction—all in one. Can these two aspects have a coherent thread? The approach is to embrace the process itself as the goal. If this is perceived as chaotic, it also reveals the possible influence of our patriarchal

conditioning. The apparent lack of a clear thread in this issue exemplifies how deeply we are shaped by an ideology of narration and order which is also a kind of articulated critique in the issue.

From my point of view, the message of the special issue was meant to be: look, we are evolving, seeking, and therefore, we do not need to adhere to a grand plan. A red thread is unnecessary because “Messy history” does not follow a coherent thread. In the editorial letter, Margrit Kennedy emphasized on the fact that she did not want to deliver answers but to provide impulses.⁵ However, as we are now working without a red thread (at least we have not recognised one), this approach also requires a completely new research method. How do we approach the diverse and varied positions when preparing a publication for this edition? How do we process the content of *Bauwelt*?

B Perhaps the relationship to publishing nowadays is different from that in 1979. For us, it is challenging to grasp fully what it meant to produce a magazine issue back then since we did not live in that time. I can imagine that a bi-weekly magazine like *Bauwelt* was somewhat akin to today’s social media and blogs—a space for discourse and discussion rather than a self-contained publication like a book. This is evident in the letters to the editor, where opinions are exchanged, and architectural matters are commented upon and negotiated. Some of these letters could even be considered as small articles on their own. Margrit Kennedy’s case, who got the opportunity to curate the 31/32 issue of *Bauwelt* through her complaining letter in issue 31 (1978), is the best example of this.

What I am getting at is that we must acknowledge that we are dealing with historical material. This leads me to your final question. We are looking back at a past that it looks back at its own past. In our attempt to supplement architectural history, the authors themselves seek to contribute to the architectural narrative. I want to embrace the notions of positioning and searching, as they aptly describe what the contributors are doing in this issue and reflect our approach to working with the material.

One of the reasons we are so invested in this topic is that we feel a close connection to it. However, we also hold different views on many of the presented theses. Even the title itself might be different if we were to name it today, aiming to appeal to a broader audience. Perhaps, in this very process of engaging with the material, we find the red thread—the common thread that guides our work.

When working on a book, we need to clarify whether the subject matter is solely *Bauwelt* with all its positions and theses from 1979 or if our examination in 2023 defines the subject, and in doing so, we establish our own position in relation to *Bauwelt*—echoing the essence of

⁵ Margrit Kennedy, “Zur Lage,” *Bauwelt*, August 24, 1979, 1279.

positioning and searching. Imagining the issue as architecture: How would this architecture look, and how would you navigate within it?

A We acknowledge a significant aspect—we have not lived during that time. This temporal distance influences our perspective, limiting our understanding to what is visible, audible, or comprehensible. We are aware of our present biases and viewpoints and aim to strive for objectivity. History is not confined to a single temporal dimension but encompasses multiple overlapping periods.⁶ The historian Reinhart Koselleck argues that what makes history is never solely derived from the sources themselves. How history is written depends on the sources used and how we bring them to life. Moreover, we must consider the sources the contributors used in creating their articles.

Our motto phrase, “We are looking back at a past that it looks back at its own past,” is highly relevant in understanding the multi-perspectival nature of this research. Our gaze is not static; it moves alongside contemporary discourses. The diversity of ephemeral media at the time allows us to understand how discourses were dominantly shaped. Bauwelt was undoubtedly one of the hegemonic institutions, as theorized by Chantal Mouffe.⁷ With its bi-weekly publication, announcements, job offers, competitions, critiques, and letters to the editor, we can collect snapshots of that era. Interpretations must navigate the tension between bias and objectivity. As researchers, we inevitably position ourselves and embody our perspectives. It echoes anthropological methods, which involve observing while being aware of one’s bias.

An architectural metaphor could aid anthropological influence, offering a means to substantiate abstract thoughts and perspectives. It opens a new level of documentation. Movement implies that the process of engagement is not linear, taking up space, time, and corporeal presence, necessitating a multi-perspective approach to historical writing.

Regarding the architectural metaphor, I would like to intertwine movement with it, as they are inherently connected. Metaphors evolve over time as we delve deeper. To reflect the current state, I choose the metaphor of a toolshed—a modest, functional place that requires understanding to navigate. Often aged, it smells of wood or metal, a place where one gets hands dirty while working rather than being a space for displaying beautiful things. It is about creation, needing materials, ideas, and skills—elements integral to our process. The Bauwelt also faces challenges, such as binary-dominant feminism that underpins womanhood purely on biological grounds, lacking intersectionality. The special issue is not a pinnacle of graphic design; it lacks grand pictorial spreads or such features. Hence, the toolshed metaphor fits well—tucked away

⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), 10.

⁷ Cf. Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art,” *emisférica* 10/2 (2013).

in the backyard, inconspicuous, not a glamorous object or a place for lingering. However, I must note that it is a place that demands both knowledge and the mastery of tools.

Now, if I may pass on the metaphor to you, what would you like to do in this toolshed? On the other hand, what would you transform it into (should it become a new building)?

B The image of the toolshed as a metaphor is fascinating, especially because associating our project with a collection of tools to connect feminist principles and architecture (history) is an intriguing approach. Some tools are regularly used, while others have become rusty and almost unusable—just like in a toolshed.

However, I might not agree with the statement that representation is not crucial in the special issue. For me, representation is a fundamental aspect. When we talk about “Women and Architecture,” it is not just a passive relationship; historically, there have been many women who contributed to architecture—numerous female architects. This issue demonstrates that. Efforts were made to emphasize that it is not a phenomenon of the 20th century alone; women have been involved in architecture throughout history. While *Bauwelt* might not have been the most aesthetically pleasing magazine, it was the first German magazine to dedicate an entire issue to this topic. Margrit Kennedy as the editor and the contributing authors aimed to have a platform for their cause and to represent women in architecture.

Perhaps we can attempt to move from the three-dimensional to a two-dimensional space. During a recent visit to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, I stood before Kazimir Malevich’s painting *Supremus No. 50*. It portrays differently colored shapes—rectangles, triangles, lines—in red, black, yellow, and purple. The depicted elements overlap, approach, cross, oppose, and cover other elements, creating a complex composition. Each element can stand on its own theoretically, but the composition generates the whole image—reminiscent of the magazine being more than the sum of its articles. Like the elements in the painting, the texts take on different forms and tones.

We both agree that in our engagement with *Bauwelt*, we give ample space to our own roles. Reading and reflecting teach us much about ourselves: where we have made progress today; where we still find points of connection, and how we might even be subject to dogmatic views. Let us conclude our dialogue by acknowledging how captivating and absorbing this topic is, and that we should consider formats that reveal these thought processes to others. Publishing, as the authors of *Bauwelt* did, is a natural option, but perhaps we can explore other ways to delve further into the complexity and depth of the subject. In addition, together, we can keep the topic open—the story is not yet fully told!

4. Outlook of the process

In our ongoing endeavor, we recognize the continuous and dynamic nature of the processes we are engaged in. It prompts us to contemplate whether the traditional medium of the book is ideally suited to represent the cultural significance of this unfolding journey. Books, by their inherent nature, adopt a fixed form, find residence in institutions such as libraries, are bound to specific languages, and require the act of reading for comprehension. While the book suggests completeness and a definitive product, it is crucial to question whether it can adequately encapsulate the ever-evolving complexity of our subject matter. For us books are still a good way to structure and store information, but especially for this topic, we need to find ways to represent processes also in the media we choose, ensuring a continuous and evolving learning.

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