

presented in the book, where, despite his interpretation, it is still possible to recognise to which authors they belong: for example, the towers in Viale Etiopia that unmistakably express the language of Ridolfi and Frankl. Consequently, anonymity is not the absence of any authorship, but the existence of a common architectural language within which the architects could each express themselves with their own personality and positions. In this way, the residential districts created — for example, in the INA-Casa programme — were not a jumble of different languages displaying the personalities of the various architects, but the result of a collective effort that did not cancel, neutralise or homogenise the contributions of individuals.

This book provides a good general introduction to the theme of neorealism in architecture starting from cinema, but deliberately omits the fields of art and literature. It is especially useful to a reader who is not familiar with the topic, and provides to an international audience, for the first time, an extensive visual archive. It is also a good starting point for further insights. For example, to advance our understanding of the subject, the individual positions of the architects involved should be studied both through archival documents and through ethnographic field research. To verify if the cases selected by Escudero are able to portray the extent and peculiarities of the phenomenon or not, many more cases would need to be taken into consideration. As Colin Ward, an enthusiast for postwar Italian culture, noted, taking up an acute observation about neorealist cinema made by his friend Riccardo Aragno, ‘the poor stood in line in front of the East End cinemas to see bad films about the rich, while the rich stood in line in front of West End cinemas to see good films about the poor’ (David Goodway, *Conversazioni con Colin Ward*, 2003). This is to say that, above all, it is necessary to verify how much of the architectural artifices adopted worked and acted according to the intended purposes, and how much remained only in the category of good intentions, failing to establish a fruitful dialogue with the social reality to which these efforts were aimed. In other words, the intentions of architects with respect to inhabitants need to be tested and verified if we are to escape the continuous game of mirrors in which critics and historians all too easily remain trapped.

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Lynette Widder, *Year Zero to Economic Miracle: Hans Schwippert and Sep Ruf in Postwar West German Building Culture* (Zurich: gta Verlag, ETH Zurich, 2022), 318 pp. incl. 197 colour and b&w ills, ISBN 9783856764272, £60
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Reviewed by NICHOLAS BULLOCK

Ostensibly about five buildings designed by two German architects, Hans Schwippert (1899–1973) and Sep Ruf (1908–82), and their part in two important debates about contemporary architectural values, Lynette Widder’s book is remarkably wide

ranging. It reaches from the spiritual to the intensely practical, from construction details to democracy.

Focusing on the two decades that followed the second world war, the book shows how architecture and the building industry reflected the changing priorities and increasing prosperity of the new Germany and how architecture might mirror aspirations for an open and democratic society. Refreshingly, the book presents this account with a combination of two very different registers. On the one hand, there is exemplary scholarship and the use of original sources. On the other, Widder writes of her personal engagement with searching for evidence, of the people who have helped her along the way and of her own encounters with the complexities of designing and making a building.

Organised in broadly chronological terms, the book opens with two buildings, Schwippert's Bundeshaus in Bonn (1948–49) and Sep Ruf's Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Nuremberg (1950–56), which exemplify the challenges of building during the years of real austerity. Both illustrate, albeit in very different ways, the limitations of the industry at the time. For Schwippert, the challenge was to construct a space large enough to house full sessions of the Bundesrat while also creating a setting intimate enough to promote 'chance conversations, and easy meeting', and to do this with whatever materials were then available. For Ruf, designing the Akademie der Bildenden Künste, the challenge was to achieve a transparency of construction that would blur the line between inside and the surrounding trees and planting outside. To meet these challenges, both architects worked with the limitations of the moment: while Schwippert put trust in the skills of his workforce and his small, specialised contractors, Ruf's drawings were explicit on exactly how this or that detail was to be handled and the tolerances for the different materials necessary to achieve it. In their different ways, both buildings exemplify what a new German architecture might be: modest, non-monumental and a product of a new, less formal negotiation between technique, space and form than the certainties of the Neues Bauen of the 1920s and 1930s.

This need to distance the new German architecture from the pre-war International Style is equally evident in Widder's discussion of two key debates of the early 1950s. These were the second of the Darmstädter Gespräche, held in 1951, and the 'Bauhaus Debate' prompted by Rudolf Schwarz's article, published in the spring of 1953, attacking the narrow functional and structural preoccupations of an earlier modernism exemplified by the Bauhaus. Widder presents both debates as part of the search for an architectural identity for a new Germany which would be different from the pre-war Neues Bauen, free of a Nazi past and wary of US cultural imperialism, the latter concern given extra weight by the post-war influence of Gropius both in Germany and in the United States.

So, if not indebted to a German past or an American present, what would a new German architecture be like? One answer, internationally visible, was the German Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, designed by Ruf and Egon Eiermann. Its modest, informal architecture of separate pavilions set in carefully judged landscaping suggested a new departure, a rewriting of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion for a modern age. Here was an architecture based on the sensible use of structure and materials, a setting for the well-designed, Werkbund-approved objects that the industries and the designers of the new Federal Republic of Germany were able to put at the disposal of 'everyman', the citizen

of the new republic. Erected in weeks not months, a triumph of construction, understated rather than trumpeted, the overall impact of the German Pavilion and the exhibition of its contents, curated by Schwippert, conveyed what a new German architecture, liberated from its past and independent of the US, might be. But as Widder shows, as the economy revived and the building industry became more ambitious, wanting to demonstrate its mastery of contemporary building technology, the influence of North America grew. The US consulates — in Bremen, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt and Munich — by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), with whose construction Ruf's practice was actively engaged, showed how American ideas came to shape German practice, notably in the design of curtain walling for the public and office buildings transforming the centres of many German cities in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

What this might mean for architecture is illustrated in the final section of the book with two very different examples. Ruf's Hochschule für Verwaltungswissenschaft in Speyer (1957–60) offered the opportunity to explore the way in which the ideas of SOM might be interpreted in a German context. A building intended for the training of the state's future administrators, it provided an important demonstration of an appropriate architectural identity for the new state. As in the years of austerity, there is the same meticulous attention to the way things are built, a German re-phrasing of SOM's work, but tighter and more modest in conception. This, Ruf's exemplar of the new German modernity, is contrasted with the contemporary revaluating of an older tradition of building, exemplified by Schwippert's rebuilding of St Hedwig's Catholic Cathedral in East Berlin in 1956–63. His task was greatly complicated by working across the recently built Berlin Wall for a diocese responsible for the whole city. Heavily reliant on (and deeply grateful to) the skills of the craftsmen and local assistants who interpreted what were often little more than annotated sketches, Schwippert successfully overcame the multiple difficulties of repairing wartime bomb damage, of changes in the liturgy and of the limitations of East Berlin's building industry, to create a building that exemplified the reconciliation and shared cultural values of the two Berlins.

Widder's history of these five projects offers a reminder of the many different ways of writing architectural history. Her account of the two debates places them more firmly in context than do most others. Her summary of the growing influence of US practice on the German building industry is welcome. However, her principal achievement is to provide an account that is written, as it were, from within the offices of Schwippert and Ruf. Returning to their working drawings and job books, she unravels how this or that design decision was taken, how it was detailed and then constructed on site. She lays no claim to write a history of German architecture of the period. The reader may be occasionally frustrated that A1 drawings are reproduced as A5 images and that plans, sections and elevations of the finished projects must be gleaned from other sources. But what Widder does present with clarity and skill is an account of that underexplored process by which designs develop through a negotiation with materials and construction and are then translated into building. May her book spur others to take up the challenge of bringing a comparable understanding of architectural practice and the way that buildings are built to the writing of architectural history.

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