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The social-individualistic man

Walter Gropius and Franz Müller-Lyer

This paper addresses the question of how architects during the 1920s in Northern Europe (most prominently Germany) tried to affect, educate and “better” residents of their tenements.

This endeavour was closely related to the idea of a New Man, who could be shaped with the help of the rational and objective “New Architecture“. That a New Man was about to emerge was a widely accepted thought and had proponents from the medical as well as sociological and psychological sciences. The New Man was usually associated with the blue-collar worker who lived in the overgrown cities, in small, unhygienic and thus unhealthy tenements.

The New Man represented a new class in society whose needs and lifestyle were believed to have changed and therefore no longer fit into traditional patterns. In the course of the discussion that circled around the question of which architecture would be the healthiest, another topic emerged.

The development of new architecture provided planners with an opportunity to directly influence not only the health but also the lifestyle and morals of these New Men.

To help with the latter subject sociologists, philosophers and doctors were sought to provide prognoses on how society would change in the near future. During the late 1920s architects utilized those theories that described the changes in the mental, sociological or psychological condition of the New Man.

The German architect Walter Gropius, for example, developed in 1929 a 10-storey tenement for this purpose. Gropius followed the description of a New Man and the ways in which he would form a new society that had been proposed by the sociologist Franz Müller-Lyer. Gropius described the concept as an adaptation to the changing social order, and his tenement was just one example of many which were aimed at renewing man and society.

Critics however judged these attempts as arrogant and quixotic. Helmuth Plessner, for example, criticises the objective new architecture as having created a “Pole of coldness”. The efforts to create a hygienic and healthy environment that would enhance moral and lifestyle resulted – in Plessner’s reading - in inhumane spaces that leave no room for individuality.

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