

Hilar Stadler – URBAN CONDITIONS

from: Georg Aerni. *Slopes & Houses*. Wien: EIKON, 2002

It was an abrupt decision to shoot the next series in Hong Kong. It meant a departure from the European city with its traditional image and theory conventions, meant a turning towards the “urban careless zone,” towards the city as a structurally not very determined field. For this project this was the risk and at the same time the promise. *Slopes & Houses* was completed between 1999 and 2000, and following *Panoramas parisiens* and *Xamfrans* it marks the third city project by the photographer Georg Aerni. This time the series has been conceived as a cycle of images that comprises wall-sized large and middle format c-prints and inkjet prints. Here once again, the structure of the city was instrumental in determining the conception of the series. The city inscribes itself so to speak in the images. Georg Aerni’s photographs investigate their sites.

Hong Kong is an example of fast-paced urban development utterly bursting at the seams and is the very paragon of the post-industrial megalopolis. Aerni’s focus on Hong Kong is his personal attempt to come to terms with these megastructures. Here we must take into consideration that Georg Aerni belongs to the generation whose socialization was forged by an all-embracing ecological consciousness. The book *Bauen als Umweltzerstörung* (Construction as Destruction of the Environment) was at least in Switzerland an incrimination in the face of the reckless over-settlement of the landscape. The imagery found in this publication is now well established and has become part of the repertoire of our generation. With his expansive wall-to-wall images in *Slopes & Houses* Georg Aerni seems to make reference to this pool of images. The works show anonymous apartment buildings that, as it were, break through the edges of the picture, showing neither base nor rooftop. The façades are translated into ornament, into a seemingly endless pattern of similar motifs that stretches evenly over the entire surface of the image.

In the abovementioned publication these types of images are the epitome of the trend toward homogeneity, of inhuman building embarked upon under the portent of economic rationalization and optimization. Construction of this type is often equated with social neglect. However, this does not seem to be the case in Hong Kong, which is by comparison a safe city.

What distinguishes Aerni’s photographs from the given standard are his fine nuances of color, which leave a dense atmospheric impression. Although by all means comparable in their composition, the photographs do not permit a clear classification. Vis-à-vis the depicted object they are strangely noncommittal. To me they seem to seek a reconciliation with the conditions; not in order to help a self-confident symbolic language to assert itself, not to make room for the play of forms, not to establish extravagant shifts of color, but to call into question the quality and the value of the images themselves.

The city Hong Kong is a prime example of the current urban development discourse. In *Mutations* (Barcelona: Actar, 2000) Rem Koolhaas calls it an “Asian city,” characterizing it as a texture that reveals no stability, renews itself continually, and expands within its narrow bounds. He says it generates conditions that are characterized by contrasts and heterogeneity. In particular Rem Koolhaas emphasizes the difference in respect to the “European city,” which in contrast to its “Asian” counterpart derives from a conception of continuity.

Georg Aerni – the architect as photographer – is familiar with this kind of question. His interest in making Hong Kong the subject of his photographs profits from the architectural theoretical discussion. His

photographs, however, are not an attempt to illustrate a theory. They are not based on theoretical premises. Georg Aerni works empirically. The basis for his first approach of the city is a topographic map. His first impression of the city is a flat view. Aerni covers his area systematically, making notes of possible locations and visual alignments. For this task the map is his most important tool and in the course of his exploration it becomes his storyboard, the protocol of his step-by-step acquaintance with the city. On it are inscribed his routes and detours, cleavages and folds, discoveries and disappointments. Recorded here is the process of approach and encounter. Before the actual photography comes the "reading" of the place. The selection of *Slopes & Houses* as the theme emerges from this encounter.

The urban images mainly show places amidst anonymous residential buildings, which in accordance with the considerations of rationalism and economy were erected as huge building complexes. Georg Aerni's photography deals with the reciprocal relationship between houses and a terrain that is adapted under difficult topographic conditions. Houses and slopes reciprocally determine each other. Due to the growing demand for space for buildings and traffic routes, ever more shorelines are being filled and virgin forests cut down. Architecture's reaction to the scarce ground resources is to build high, and it spreads out wherever it can, stretching farther and farther up nearby hillsides. Slopes are a result of these reckless interventions into the landscape. The loss of natural vegetation necessitates the implementation of building measures to protect the slopes from erosion. At the current time approximately 54,000 of these slopes are registered with the Hong Kong municipal administration, which carefully monitors every change.

The slopes are "functional buildings" and as such should fall into the classification of civil engineering. But they are more than this, too, because they also produce terrain, they make land. The title *Slopes & Houses*, however, implies this word pair not only as two interdependent concepts, but also as an ideal notion as it appears in the field of architecture, analogous to the coupled concepts of architecture and landscape. Here, however, architecture doesn't confront the indifference of a naturally arising landscape, but rather a designed and controlled "architecture" that calls itself landscape.

Georg Aerni's photography – which is seen as architectural photography – gazes beyond the buildings. It looks into the interstices and empty spaces that don't seem to be a part of the city, that belong neither to the category of house nor street space, nor of garden nor rock. The specific qualities of a third category don't apply readily to these sites. Aerni's photographs show sites, which have consciously been given various forms and as such do not seem accessible. Through their features the sites are revealed as the subjects of the photographs.

Georg Aerni stages these city sites like an expert director might. The theater-like atmosphere doesn't escape our attention. The *mise en scène* is enhanced and emphasized by the photographer's choice of lighting. Aerni always assigns his photographs the same lighting conditions. He wants a neutral, diffuse light that shines evenly over the image space and immerses it in continuous illumination. The images appear to get by without any reference to time. The scenery transports us to moments of intimacy that seem unusual for Hong Kong as a metropolis. Georg Aerni's position is distinguished by his closeness to the city, a proximity to the object. And here we once again recognize the position of the wanderer, someone who lets himself be drawn into the real circumstances. This is Aerni's way of participating, even if we never see the inhabitants themselves. Aerni translates the position of the person, the position of the inhabitant of this city, into his own point of view, into that of the photographer.

*Slopes & Houses* profits from the fluctuating topography of the city. It allows the photographer to vary the point of view, sometimes choosing the foot of a hill, other times the hillside. Since the direction of the lens is not altered to accommodate different sites, i.e. it is not turned upward from a low standpoint, not turned downward from higher up, we gain insight into the body of the city at different levels. It doesn't escape our attention that the composition of many shots disregards the perspective mode of photography. In several different works the vanishing point – the counterpart of the point of view within the image – is concealed. The photographs profit in this way from a space that remains invisible to the viewer. Thus the images lose their organizing focus, the details are, as it were, released from their subordinating context and shifted into the field of the visible.

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