‘In today’s terms, a mistake?’

by Alexander Davidson

Standards, propriety, and the cultivation of taste in Stefan Forster Architects’ refurbishment of Ferdinand Kramer’s Philosophicum (2014–17)
Long before the Mod­ulor by Le Corbusier, his influential scaling system based on human proportions, Schlemmer noted in a diary entry from 1923: ‘[M]an, the human figure. It has been said that he is the measure of all things. So be it: architecture is the noblest form of measurement, so unite!’ Actively trying to promote the conjured union at the Bauhaus, Schlemmer designed its stage to serve as a spatial laboratory for experimentally exploring the concept of ‘man in relation to surrounding space’ from a wide variety of perspectives. In the process, special costumes transformed actors into deindividualized types, and the choreography was reduced to a set of elementary gestures and movements.

Debates around standardization are polarized. On the one hand, historians and critics associated with the modern movement championed the concept, with Nikolaus Pevsner following Hermann Muthesius in declaring that the ‘future belonged to standardization’. (1) On the other, critics of the modern movement like David Watkin and Léon Krier have condemned standardization for having, along with rationalization and functionalization, been one of the notions ‘formulated in the Athens Charter’ responsible for ‘killing the variety and complexity of traditional cities’. (2) Look beyond this heightened rhetoric, however, and one notices that historians on both sides of this critical divide have seen standardization as a totalizing concept, uncritically accepting modernist rhetoric and marketing claims as really-existing facts. Amid this discourse, what is required is a delicate and gentle survey of uses and meanings of standardization in one particular case study building, that being Ferdinand Kramer’s Philosophy-Cum (Philosophy Faculty Building, 1958–60). The structure is one of many composing the Goethe University Frankfurt’s Campus Bockenheim, built in a conspicuously modern style and then refurbished from 2014 by Stefan Forster, an architect critical of the modern movement, thus allowing me to determine whether the association between standardization and modernism posited by Pevsner, Muthesius, Watkin, and others is justified. To what extent has the refurbishment been made to conform to what kinds of ‘standards’? By what means and how effectively have the architects of the renovation sought to set standards for architectural taste?

Kramer was a fierce advocate of standardization, understanding the complex array of terms related to it. This was largely due
to Kramer having worked at the Abteilung für Typisierung (Department for Standardization) in the Städtisches Bauamt (Architects’ Office) of the City of Frankfurt am Main. In 1929, he gave a talk with Adolf Behne on Südwestrundfunk entitled ‘Wie wohnen?’ (How to Live?), setting out how standardization, or ‘Typisierung und Normierung’, could be a means of achieving radical reduction in architecture. Stefan Forster, belonging to a school of thought termed ‘neo-rationalism’, valuing historic urban forms and seeing type rather than function as the best means of understanding architecture, has not uttered a great deal on the subject, although it is likely that he would follow other neo-rationalists (Krier) in seeing it negatively, as in begetting monotony and slavish idealism. (3) By far the most common position, however, remains for architects to use standards in buildings without ever really talking about them.

**Differing Conceptions of the City**

The conversion of the Philosophicum in Frankfurt into private student accommodations has been subject to its own debates. The refurbishment is seen by Enrico Santifaller as a ‘Pionierbau’ (pioneering structure) for retaining the original building’s modern aesthetics, whilst responding to the forthcoming regeneration of the Frankfurt district of Bockenheim into—to use developers’ parlance—a ‘Kulturcampus’ (cultural campus). (4) Equally, the new extension building, blocking the view of the Philosophicum from the road, has been described as ‘a thorn in the side’ of Lore Kramer, Ferdinand’s widow. (5) The conversion followed a prior, failed attempt by a citizens’ action group or ‘Bürgerinitiative’ to turn the Philosophicum into an apartment building owned by a housing trust, Mietshäuser Syndikat, led by Anette Mönich and a group of Kramer devotees, involving a sensitive restoration and receiving Lore’s blessing. The action group could not secure financing for the necessary 7.8 million euros, so in 2014 the building was sold to Rudolf Muhr, property developer and head of the Wohnungsgesellschaft ABG, who commissioned Forster’s firm to rebuild it. A key aim for Stefan Forster Architects (SFA) was ‘reconciling the building with the city’, as Forster believed that the orientation of the Philosophicum to the street—not parallel but at a slight angle—was, in today’s terms, a ‘mistake’ that needed correcting. Lore naturally rebuffed the assertion, claiming that it was not an error but rather a concerted effort by her husband to ensure that the faculty building, like the campus generally, ‘did not have anything to do with that filthy street’. (6) SFA have tried to achieve this reconciliation by inserting the extension’s wedge-shaped plan at such an angle that the western edge of the whole ensemble is now aligned to two neighbouring buildings to the north and south. These are not historic buildings, but rather rectilinear student dormitories from the 1950s, one built prior to Kramer getting the position of head architect at the university, ‘ein Geschenk der Amerikaner’ (a gift from the Americans), (7) and the other designed by Kramer with Helmut Adler in 1956. This is the first of several ways that project manager, Nina Bölinger, and her team have designed the extension so as to refer to the modern buildings surrounding it, those being, firstly, the facing materials, the bricks here alluding to Kramer’s other university buildings clad using these materials. The figure-ground relationship, especially the negative space formed by enclosing the access towers with the extension on the west side, now imperfectly mirrors what is produced by the outlines of the two adjacent halls of residence. Finally, the module for the new extension, repeated to create a 5 x 20 grid, is, despite

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1) Ferdinand Kramer’s Philosophicum, view from Gräfstraße, Frankfurt am Main, 1961.
the window frames having been enlarged, clearly based on the one formed by the recessed sections in the Philosophicum’s (now substantially rebuilt) steel frame. It is not accurate, in this case, to claim that standardization is a uniquely modernist phenomenon. In calling for the Philosophicum’s alignment to the street to be ‘fixed’, Forster revealed that there is, in neo-rationalist thought, too, a desire to make buildings conform to a definitive level of correctness. A prevailing common sense in contemporary architecture, as to which architectural styles are seen as respectable and worthy of retention, has here been broadened to include post-war architecture in a way that is yet to inflect Forster’s rhetoric, although it is evident in the design approaches of the younger project architects, having shown their appreciation for modern buildings by using them as exemplars for certain details. Speaking of the Baroque period, John Summerson once wrote that the success of Lord Burlington and his peers was due to using ‘every device of persuasion and performance … to fix a standard of architectural taste’, that ‘exclusive, snobbish sense of the recognition of certain fixed values by certain people’. (8)

Those old mantras of persuasion and performance are in evidence at the refurbished Philosophicum in Bockenheim, especially in the theatricality of a number of retained modern details that my guide was keen to draw my attention to, as well as in a make-shift historical display in the ground-floor lobby educating tenants about Kramer’s Philosophicum and how it was renovated. Neither are going to convince modernist aficionados of the necessity of losing much of the original building fabric, or indeed of the inherent superiority of neo-rationalism, but these flourishes may yet win over a few of the undecided.