

# SANDRA KRIŽIĆ ROBAN

## Perspectives of the Visible

Many things that define a place are determined by a meaning that can have huge impact on the environment, regardless of whether a particular image shows precisely what the artist wanted to indicate with his or her work. Photographs of urban places, as well as those that “merely” remind of them, often rely on complex and well-known insights on social spaces, including the way they intertwine, multiply, and thus generate new meanings.

The series *Index of Livability* (2011) by Karina Nimmerfall speaks of a project of modernist urban renewal. Unlike the urban planning based on industrialisation as one of the main drives of progress after World War II, which determined the evolution of cities in economic, social, communicational, and aesthetical terms, the artist has focused here on a less renowned project of Richard Neutra in Los Angeles. The Austrian architect emigrated to the United States in 1923 and is mostly remembered as the author of brilliant modernist villas in which he achieved a perfect combination of spatiality and conciseness. He explored the features of Californian architecture and used these insights in order to design houses that would show a perfect fusion of interior and exterior space. Socially engaged, he also endorsed *healthy* housing, introducing to the US certain ideas that were characteristic of European architecture and urban planning between the two World Wars. This was the basis on which the Californian housing estates were designed. They were intended for poorer populations, as Neutra did not want them to be deprived of good and healthy housing because of their material standing. These are mostly housing estates consisting of one-storey and two-storey houses surrounded by gardens, orthogonally arranged between pedestrian lanes, even though in some cases he also designed apartment towers. Communal spaces and facilities, including a school, a nursery, a supermarket, and a cultural centre, did not meet with enthusiasm at the times of

corporate urbanism, especially during McCarthyism, and the present state of the housing estate testifies of the public attitude towards this socially engaged concept, which has been gradually devastated. The utopian attempts to change the world by means of architecture have resulted in a derelict housing estate, as the socially deprived tenants did not invest in it or generate new housing options, at their disposal at least in theory.

As in some of her earlier series, Nimmerfall has treated the photographs as a visually unified set of data, complemented with information on the construction and the present-day condition of the estate, as well as a list of references that may serve as a basis for further research. The colour chart on the left margin is a sort of link between the archivistically treated, almost documentary black-and-white photographs and that which we expect to see. It functions as the stabile part of the archive/album, almost hinting at the procedure of cataloguing that helps structure the viewing experience. It may be interpreted as a remnant of the montage procedure, which the artist often uses in her work, “complicating” the process of seeing and understanding by constructing architectural models and spatial installations that help achieve the perspective of the visible.

Squeezed between the archival data and the colour chart, the actual scene brings a touch of mistrust in what we see. Perhaps it is because of knowing her photographs from one of the previous series, *Substitute Locations*, which she treated as an “‘objective’ documentation”<sup>20</sup> of something non-existent, a mere stage set offering an appearance of life, place, and space. Both cases are potential (spatial) aporias, whose status may at first seem autonomous, yet actually depends on other people’s interests. Nimmerfall’s photographs document parallel spaces that, like heterotopias, function simultaneously, both questioning and confirming each other.

<sup>20</sup> Raimar Stange, “Preface,” in *Karina Nimmerfall: Cinematic Maps* (Graz: Camera Austria, 2007), unpaginated.