

# The Interplay of Philosophy and Architectural Aesthetics in the Work of Karola and Ernst Bloch

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After World War II East Germany realized numerous places in kindergartens and nurseries. For this purpose, special schemes and guidelines were developed by the architect Karola Bloch. The weekly care home for children *Future of the Nation* in Leipzig (Fig. 1) designed after her concept and in cooperation with her, appears at the first glance probably a bit odd. But as we will see, it is all the more important to confront them without any aesthetic preconceptions.

This building is clearly not a “masterpiece,” nor part of the modernist canon. But at second glance, however, it has the potential to open up architectural discussions on several levels, like for example on gender and architecture, but also an aesthetic one. While some of her design choices can be linked to modernism, such as the principles of light and air in the building, others appear to be unusual.

At almost the same time as the construction of the aforementioned building, Karola Bloch’s husband Ernst Bloch published his main work *The Principle of Hope*. In the third part of the text *Outlines of a Better World*, the philosopher dedicates not only a big part to architecture itself, but also exercises criticism on modernist architecture.

Fig. 1: Karola Bloch, Weekly childcare facility *Future of the Nation*, exterior view, 1950s



In connection with his philosophical examinations of architecture, the oddities of Karola Bloch's architecture become not only intelligible, they even open up new aesthetic principles. This connection between the philosophical work of Ernst Bloch and the architectural work of his wife Karola Bloch is therefore ideally suited to demonstrate how philosophy and architecture can influence each other directly and indirectly in numerous ways. Especially since the couple shared and exchanged ideas and thoughts intensively throughout their entire relationship and marriage. And as this paper aims to demonstrate, this is particularly true in the case of aesthetics, more precisely the interplay between the philosophy of aesthetics and an architectural understanding of it. A new aesthetic of architecture for a new society,<sup>1</sup> such as Ernst Bloch claimed for it in his philosophy.

### Traces

While Ernst Bloch's life and work as one of the great German thinkers is quite well known, his wife's Karola, on the other side, not as much. It has come under focus only lately.

Ernst Bloch, born in 1885, studied philosophy, German studies and music. His philosophical work is going beyond the idealistic system-philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Mostly referred to as Marxist, sometimes even as a German representative of existentialism, his entire work is looking for the *Noch-Nicht* [Not-Yet] as it can be found in utopian visions. He was already struggling with metaphysics, a concept almost outdated in today's philosophy, furthermore, his thinking can be understood as a holistic practice that claims to be adaptable in every small aspect of everyday life.<sup>3</sup>

This approach in his philosophy gets even more intriguing, when putting his wife in context, as he famously told her "Du machst zu meiner Philosophie die Praxis"<sup>4</sup> ["You turn my philosophy into practice."]

Born in 1905 as Karola Piotrowska in Łódź, Poland, she lived a life that does not do justice to being overlooked in the shadow of her famous husband. Growing up as a wealthy child of a Jewish manufacturer family, and her first stay in exile in Russia during World War I as a kid, where she observed the October Revolution in Moscow, influenced both her political thinking, as well as her attitude towards architecture. Two stances that have been connected throughout her entire life. After a short period of studying at an arts and crafts school in Berlin and inspired by a visit at the Bauhaus, Karola decided to go to Vienna to study architecture at the *Technische Hochschule*. Not unimportant for this decision was, on the one hand, her and Ernst Bloch's belief in socialism, as well as the opportunity opened up by this profession to play an active role in shaping this new society.<sup>5</sup> Two years later, 1932, Karola moved back to Berlin to continue her studies at the *Technische Hochschule Charlottenburg*. Here she started to actively engage in politics and moved together with Ernst Bloch into the *Rote Block* [Red Block] also known as *Künstlerkolonie* [Artist Colony], for her a pleasant society of communists, social democrats and people without any party.<sup>6</sup> Beside her architectural courses, she attended lectures at the *Marxistische Arbeiterschule* [Marxist Workers' School] in Berlin where she met Hannes Meyer, the successor of Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus. Karola Bloch admired his work and even befriended him.<sup>7</sup>

1 Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* [*The Principle of Hope*] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019), 862.

2 Beat Dietschy, Doris Zeilinger, and Rainer E. Zimmermann, eds., *Bloch-Wörterbuch: Leitbegriffe der Philosophie Ernst Blochs* [*Bloch Dictionary: Key Terms of Ernst Bloch's Philosophy*] (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), V.

3 Ibid.

4 Karola Bloch, *Aus meinem Leben* [*Out of my Life*] (Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1981), 103.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 69.

7 Ibid., 75.

As her most important teachers of that period, Karola Bloch mentions in her memoirs Hans Poelzig and Bruno Taut. The latter she describes as a progressive man, with whom she shared the affection for the Soviet Union and the disappointment in its architectural development under Stalin: an unfunctional and epigonal architecture, detached from modernist principles that last until 1953, when Nikita Sergejevich Khrushchev triggered a severe change in architecture.<sup>8</sup>

It was not only their similar political views that made Taut and Meyer<sup>9</sup> in particular important figures for Karola. In the case of Bruno Taut it was also his architectural work: the importance and use of color in his architectural work,<sup>10</sup> will impact Bloch's work for the GDR later on, as we shall see below.

Due to the rise of Hitler, Karola could not finish her studies in Berlin after 1933. With the help of Ernst, she moved to Zürich, to finish her diploma there at the ETH in 1934. Despite the political circumstances, the Blochs moved for a short time back to Vienna, where she gained first experiences as a practicing architect at the office of Jacques Groak. It was during this time when Karola Bloch started to work for the communist resistance movement against the Nazis. As the daughter of a well-situated Polish family, she could still easily cross the borders, which made her an important informant and smuggler of messages and documents for the communist party. A task she fulfilled until the pregnancy with her son Jan. In the years from 1935-1936, Ernst and Karola Bloch lived in Paris, where she worked for Auguste Perret. For the first time she had the rare occasion to work on a building regardless of any costs. It was unusual and new for her to have so much freedom given for her design.<sup>11</sup>

Their last station before they went into exile in the USA, was Prague, where Karola worked as a freelance architect in collaboration with the former Bauhaus woman artist Friedl Dicker-Brandeis.<sup>12</sup>

In the year of 1938, Karola and Ernst Bloch emigrated together with their little son to the United States of America. During this time Karola became the sole breadwinner of the young family working as an architect and industrial drafter. Most noteworthy from this period is her design for a summer house for the German Professor of the New York University, Prof. Slochower in Andover, New Jersey. A small, modern house, atypical in comparison to other buildings in this area and time. The publication of pictures of this modernist summer house in *Architectural Forum* was for sure one of the biggest successes in the USA for her.<sup>13</sup>

Going back to Europe after the war had not been an easy decision. But the increasingly difficult situation for communist sympathizers in the United States, the offer of a chair at the University of Leipzig for Ernst Bloch, and the strong belief in the principles of socialism, paired with the personal urge to actively participate in the construction of it, had them move again.

In East Germany, Karola found a job at the *Deutsche Bauakademie* [German Academy of Architecture], led by Kurt Liebkecht, whose architectural understanding was influenced by his

8 Ibid., 78-89.

9 Already in 1930, Hannes Meyer moved to Moscow where he joined the organisation *All-Union Alliances of Association of Proletarian Architects*. He was a member of the Communist party of Switzerland, but his integration into the GDR failed (cf. Thomas Flierl, "Migrant with a Conflicted Sense of Home: Hannes Meyer after the Bauhaus," in *Dust & Data: Traces of the Bauhaus across 100 Years*, ed. Ines Weizman (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2019), 402-419.); Bruno Taut, on the other hand, advocated the interests of the workforce in the *Arbeiterbaugenossenschaft* [Workers' Building Cooperative] *Reform* already before the First World War (cf. Kurt Junghanns, *Bruno Taut: 1880-1938* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1970), 49.).

10 Especially during his time as "Stadtbaurat" [municipal building councilor] in Magdeburg in the years 1921-1923, the so-called "Farbenstreit" [color controversy] was publicly held, in which Taut strongly advocated the use of colors in and on buildings. (cf. Ákos Moravánszky, *Die Erneuerung der Baukunst: Wege zur Moderne in Mitteleuropa 1900-1940* [*The Renewal of Architecture: Paths to Modernity in Central Europe 1900-1940*] (Salzburg/Vienna: Residence Verlag, 1988), 199.

11 Bloch, *Aus meinem Leben* [*Out of my Life*], 109.

12 Ibid., 118.

13 Ibid., 143.

years in exile in the Soviet Union. When Bloch started working at the *Bauakademie*, its main tasks were the development of type plans for several building projects, like residential buildings, schools, or hospitals. Karola was assigned to one of the most urgent, namely, childcare facilities. Since the newly found state of East Germany had a big interest in putting women into the workforce, they had to provide 40,000 nursery places and 160,000 places in kindergartens.<sup>14</sup> Even though Karola Bloch liked the idea of contributing with her architectural work to such an important task – it was after all an important contribution to equality of man and woman under socialism – she couldn't disagree more with the developments of architecture and style in her new home country. The sometimes almost pompous socialist classicism, influenced by the architectural discourse in Moscow at that time, had been contrary to her own architectural understanding,<sup>15</sup> as these historized elements contradicted for both Blochs, Ernst and Karola, with the new, progressive emerging society of socialism.

The first years were, by all means, good ones for both Ernst Bloch, as professor of philosophy, and for Karola Bloch, as a successful woman architect, promoted by the State. However, like many other artists and intellectuals, they could not avoid noticing deficiencies in the GDR and, above all Ernst Bloch started to openly criticize it. Nonetheless, the couple stayed in Leipzig despite the alienation they experienced until 1961. When the Berlin Wall was built, they were in Tübingen, West Germany at a conference and decided to stay, whereby a lot of their work and goods went lost.<sup>16</sup>

### Ernst Bloch's Philosophy, Perception of Aesthetics and the Role of Architecture

A central point in the philosophy of Ernst Bloch is *the utopian*, a term that he wanted to free from its negative connotations. A tool to express outlooks, and thus a concept for which he used for example music as utopia, or architecture as a utopia.

In almost all of his literary pieces, Ernst Bloch dealt with the arts. In literature, music, art, and architecture he saw traces of the development of society. Thought and figures, that do not have the chance to come to an end in everyday life, are given this chance in art. Art enables the aforementioned *Not-Yet*, the not yet graspable, not yet visible. Something that is either not yet conscious, which he refers to as the *subjective Not-Yet*, or something that is just not ready yet, the *objective* form of this principle. Two forms of the new, the yet to come.<sup>17</sup>

“In Bloch's work this is expressed in a complete *ontology*, which in its philosophical intention goes far beyond the human being and includes the whole of being, the matter itself, but which should only concern us with regard to human beings and history: the ontology of *not-yet-being*. Its concise formula is: 'S is not yet P' (the subject is not yet its predicate), whereby being P is what S *cannot only achieve*, but what S 'should' achieve in order to be *really* S. As long as it is not P, it is not yet itself at all (...).”<sup>18</sup>

14 Mary Pepchinski, “Gender & Return Migration: Karola Bloch and the development of standard childcare typologies in the German Democratic Republic, 1949-1961,” in *Ideological Equals: Women Architects in Socialist Europe 1945-1989*, ed. Mary Pepchinski and Mariann Simon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 109.

15 Cf. Bloch, *Aus meinem Leben*.

16 Ibid.

17 Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 4.

18 Translated after Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* [*The Principle of Responsibility: An Attempt at Ethics for Technological Civilization*] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), 376-377.: „Bei Bloch drückt sich dies in einer kompletten *Ontologie* aus, die in ihrer philosophischen Absicht weit über den Menschen hinausgeht und das ganze Sein, die Materie selber einbezieht, uns aber nur im Hinblick auf den Menschen und die Geschichte beschäftigen soll: die Ontologie des *Noch-Nicht-Seins*. Ihre prägnante Formel lautet: 'S ist noch nicht P' (das Subjekt ist noch nicht sein Prädikat), wobei sich das P-sein das ist, was S nicht nur erreichen *kann*, sondern erreichen 'soll', um erst *wirklich* S zu sein. Solange es nicht P ist, ist es noch gar nicht es selbst (...).”

Within his key works, he analyzes social and cultural *Not-Yet-Conditions*, using, amongst other forms of art, architectural styles from ancient Egypt until his present. Different epochs and their visual appearance are used by him to picture his complex thoughts and observations. Without a profound understanding of societies, it is, asserts Bloch, not possible to understand architectural styles. Herewith he was not alone. The art historian Dagobert Frey described style in his essay *Das Stilproblem unserer Zeit* [The Style Problem of Our Time] as a social manifestation, as Moravánszky had quoted it.<sup>19</sup>

Ernst Bloch uses for example the Gothic style in *The Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principles of Hope* as a metaphor for the human condition. Gothic for him transfers the inner sphere of humans onto the outside and brings back the focus onto the human being and its scale. Hence the light-flooded structures and ornaments turned in this period into built symbols of joy.<sup>20</sup> In general, the philosopher shows in his work big affection for ornaments. According to him, they are full of meanings and symbols, full of mysteries that he intends to make visible.

Furthermore, he quotes Vitruvius at the beginning of the architecture chapter in *The Principles of Hope* “Buildings Which Depict a Better World, Architectural Utopias,” saying, that a building must fulfill utility, duration, and beauty.<sup>21</sup> For him, a building satisfies not only the need for shelter but a certain desire of *Kunstwollen*. In this sense, something that is not designed does not exist. Similar to the fine art, architecture is orienting itself, as well as absorbing the tangible world around it. And not for the rest, he defines architecture according to Hegel as an artistic outside world near the human subject.<sup>22</sup>

Ernst Bloch’s significant role in the discourse of art and architecture becomes also apparent, looking at the *Expressionism Debate* he had with Georg Lukács. This dispute among the two friends Bloch and Lukács emerged already in the thirties of the last century. Bloch’s enthusiasm has always been directed towards the avant-garde, both in literature and in the visual arts, whereas Lukács favored realism. Furthermore, the latter even accused the avant-garde of being decadent. The Moscow based Lukács accepted art only within the classical canon and rejected modern art and architecture, while Bloch committed to modified and changeable forms of art, that accompanied social change,<sup>23</sup> an important characteristic of art and architecture regarding his philosophy as outlined before.

Likewise, when he apparently took the side of the Modern Movement, his position towards modern architecture was, at least, let’s say, ambivalent. In one of his first big works *The Spirit of Utopia* he dedicated a chapter with the less flattering title *Technological Cold*, in which he describes the contemporary living space as a cold one and blames machines and their introduction in architecture to have murdered phantasy. Hence the lack of astonishment on his part that the bathroom took over the most important role of architecture. He even claimed it to be for modernism, what the domes used to be for the Gothic period.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, he calls for a more humanistic technology, since the use of technology in modern times does not free the human being, but only cheap mass production. And yet, he ascribes consciously used, functional technology the ability to free art and to enable a non-luxurious expressionism, which subsequently can lead to a more liberated society.

Only a couple of years later he again used architecture as a tool for his philosophy in *Heritage of our Times*. His attitude towards modern architecture did not change much but became indeed more specific. He is writing about the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which he explained as something that cares about emptiness and reduction, the deadening of life, and the turning of humans

19 Moravánszky, *Die Erneuerung der Baukunst*, 54-55.

20 Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 848.

21 *Ibid.*, 821.

22 *Ibid.*, 871.

23 Cf. Bloch, *Aus meinem Leben*.

24 Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie: Zweite Fassung* [*Spirit of Utopia: Second Edition*] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 21.

into commodities as main characteristics, all covered in apparently honest forms.<sup>25</sup> Nearly everything turns into a machine-based series production that, on the other hand, produces a new form of space: steel rooms that not only appear to be very practical, but also trick one into misunderstanding such as being classless. Considering their price, it is very clear for him that they are not. He detects a similar misleading in the “social democratic ‘modernity’ à la Giedion”,<sup>26</sup> where the alleged neutrality of technology, its cleanliness, and commodiousness is overestimated since it underestimates that this kind of hygienic living alone does not guarantee a classless society. Instead, it is according to Bloch, simply not honest about serving the well-doing middle-class. Also, the already mentioned emptiness of this architecture is evidence of social problems for him. It seems as if nobody settles in anymore, and the further ahead the architecture tries to be, the balder it becomes. Furniture disappears, almost dissolves into its mere purpose. Nothing attaches itself anymore, the space remains open for something that is already missing.

It does not seem that this outlined ambiguity is changing much in the last but not least, here mentioned major work of his, *The Principle of Hope*, where he depicts modern architecture in “Building on Hollow Space.”

A letter from the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1936 from Ernst Bloch to his wife Karola Bloch, indicates that for the architecture chapter of it he had been assisted by her, and that they have at least partly worked together on it.<sup>27</sup> This is most likely also the reason why more of his architectural analogies correspond now with a wider discourse in architecture, and even mention some of Karola Bloch’s icons and teachers. Nonetheless, Bloch still maintains a critical tone towards modernist architects. He accuses, for example, Le Corbusier’s and Walter Gropius’ work of pretending to be progressive, while it really just stagnates. He writes:

“For more than a generation, this steel furniture, concrete cubes, and shed roof creature has stood there without any history, ultra-modern and boring, seemingly bold and genuinely trivial, full of hatred for the cliché of every alleged ornament and yet more stuck in the prescribed formula than any stylistic copy in the terrible nineteenth century.”<sup>28</sup>

The philosopher even goes so far as to say that Le Corbusier’s *La Ville Radieuse* and the way its constructive elements refer to the human, turns actual human beings into standardized termites.<sup>29</sup> In conclusion, he states that for him truly new architecture that liberates itself from the past completely can only emerge within the context of a truly new society since new societies are ready to embody themselves within architectural floorplans and ornaments. Full of heritage, but without any historicism and the copying of old styles.

### Spousal Consent and Oppositions

Especially early in their relationship, Ernst and Karola Bloch extensively wrote each other letters, in which they did not only talk about personal matters and events, but also a lot about ideas and attitudes. Frequently he sent her architecture and art related articles or passages of his work as an attachment to his letters, asking for her opinion and thoughts and being disappointed when she disapproved. Furthermore, he did also send her postcards with photographs of buildings, explaining on the backside why it is according to him “good” or

25 Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit [Heritage of Our Time]* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016), 216.

26 Translated after Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, 219: “(...) sozialdemokratischer «Modernität» à la Giedion, (...)”

27 Anna Czajka, ed., *Das Abenteuer der Treue: Briefe an Karola 1928 - 1949 [The Adventure of Faithfulness: Letters to Karola 1928-1949]* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016), 214.

28 Translated after Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 860.: “Seit über einer Generation steht darum dieses Stahlmöbel-, Betonkuben-, Fachdach-Wesen geschichtslos da, hochmodern und langweilig, scheinbar kühn und echt trivial, voll Haß gegen die Floskel angeblich jedes Ornaments und doch mehr im Schema festgerannt als je eine Stilkopie im schlimmen neunzehnten Jahrhundert.”

29 Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 861.

“bad” architecture. An example of such a postcard from 1932 features the *Goetheanum* by Rudolf Steiner on the front. On the back he wrote that the hill is almost crashing under the weight of this “architectural-cosmic-hierarchical,”<sup>30</sup> colossal Art Nouveau concrete house, and even called it “*Kotzpfropfen*”<sup>31</sup> which literally translates to “vomit plug.”

How much the two have influenced each other’s work remains vague. Still, regarding the preserved correspondence or memoirs, it is not too far-fetched to assume that the mutual influence is not insignificant.

At this point there is only one question left: on which points in art and architecture did they agree, and on which did they disagree? And after all, could his writing on architecture eventually have had a serious impact on her architectural work in East Germany?

For one thing, the *Expressionism Debate* between Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács had had its impact on Karola Bloch.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, because of its political connotation, after all she was a big supporter and also a member of the communist party, whose branch Lukács faithfully propagated. However, on the other hand, it was precisely this understanding of art by the party she struggled with, already from the beginning. In her memoirs, she describes the incomprehension of her and fellow supporters of the Soviet Union about the competition outcome for the Soviet Palace in 1932/33. The fact that the Russian architect Fomin with the design of an oversized, epigonal building, was able to assert himself against representatives of the classical modernism, such as Mart Stam, Hannes Meyer or Walter Gropius, was something she could not understand and was proof for her that the Soviet architecture was moving in a wrong direction.<sup>33</sup> It seems like this result of such an important architecture competition was for Karola Bloch, what the competition for the *Palais des Nations* in Geneva had been for Le Corbusier. Thus, it is clear that in this debate, Karola Bloch agreed with the positive attitude towards the avant-garde her husband advocated.

Something that divided the opinions of the couple had been ornamentation. While Karola Bloch followed more the attitude of Adolf Loos<sup>34</sup> concerning ornaments, Ernst Bloch was almost captivated by decorative elements. In *Spirit of Utopia*, he wrote that “(...) a birthing clamp should be smooth, but a sugar clamp on no account.”<sup>35</sup> Exactly this affection he shared for all sorts of design elements, as long as they did not mimic past styles, as he observed it in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He dealt with this issue intensively in *Heritage of our Time* and even dedicated it its own chapter: *Hieroglyphs of the XIX century*.

At a time coined by significant social changes and a new emerging bourgeoisie, Ernst Bloch sees ornaments as nothing else but a cover for something one was not sure how to handle. The exuberant decoration of that period even resembled barbarity for him. And hope for architecture in this period was only to be found where it felt unobserved.<sup>36</sup>

Karola and Ernst Bloch kept on maintaining this dismissive attitude towards the copy of styles, rampant ornamentation, as well as architectural indulgence in the past when they observed it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where it was the favored architecture style of the Soviet State. An attitude

30 Translated after: Czajka, ed., *Das Abenteuer der Treue*, 143.: “(...) architektonisch-kosmisch-hierarchischen (...)”

31 *Ibid.*, 143.

32 The Expressionism Debate is mentioned several times by Karola Bloch in her memoirs *Aus meinem Leben*.

33 Bloch, *Aus meinem Leben*, 78.

34 *Ibid.*, 62.

35 Translated after Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 23.: “(...) eine Geburtszange muß glatt sein, eine Zuckerzange mitnichten.”

36 Ernst Bloch quoted here Sigfried Giedion’s “Bauen in Frankreich” [“Building in France”] (Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, 382), a book that also Karola Bloch writes about in her memoirs, as being one of the most influential ones for her architectural education at the Technische Hochschule in Charlottenburg, Berlin, where she studied at about the same time that Bloch was working on that very text.

which especially for Karola as an architect in a higher state position in the GDR, did not necessarily make things easier. Since 1950, the architecture there oriented itself on the model of socialist realism in the Soviet Union, the national traditions, as well as classicism.<sup>37</sup> However, this did not stop her from taking a public stance against such copies of style, the more so as it obviously contradicted the basic principles of the new society.<sup>38</sup> But, unlike the Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky,<sup>39</sup> Karola Bloch never took a stance on the architectural development in the GDR with her architectural designs, she used rather articles and statements for this purpose.

### Future of the Nation

Yet, with her architectural position, it was not always easy for Karola Bloch to work for the *Deutsche Bauakademie* and its guidelines. Looking back, she wrote:

“Thank goodness my kindergartens had to be cheap, so that such ornamentation was not possible anyway but still, designing freely and modern, with large windows, and irregular floor plans was neither possible<sup>40</sup> nor allowed.”<sup>41</sup>

The director of the *Bauakademie* Kurt Liebknecht favored the stance the Soviet state took in the aforementioned architectural discourse. As head of the *Institut für Städtebau und Hochbau* [Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning], he was responsible for the development and production of guidelines for the entire building industry in the GDR, and additionally, he led the institute for design that controlled the executions of these guidelines. This made Liebknecht the most influential person in architecture in East Germany at the time.<sup>42</sup>

Despite this conflicting attitude between Karola Bloch and her employer, she still appreciated very much the work that she was assigned to. It finally allowed her to build for this new society she and her husband were hoping for. It even gave her the chance to actively participate in it.

In an article, published in 1953 she wrote:<sup>43</sup>

37 Carla Aßmann, “Konsequent modern? Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky als Beraterin der Deutschen Bauakademie der DDR” [“Consistently Modern? Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky as Consultant of the German Bauakademie of the GDR”], in *Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. Architektur. Politik. Gesellschaft: Neue Perspektiven auf Leben und Werk* [Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. Architecture. Politics. Society: New Perspectives on Life and Work], ed. Marcel Bois and Bernadette Reinhold (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2019), 173.

38 On the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 1950, Karola Bloch published in the daily newspaper of Leipzig the critical article “Warum nicht Barock in Sitzungssaal?” [“Why Not Baroque in the Assembly Hall?”], in which she pointed out the contradiction of using the Baroque style for a room in the city hall, in which the problems of citizens and workers are discussed. (cf. Bloch, *Aus meinem Leben*, 200).

39 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky knew Kurt Liebknecht from the time she was working for Ernst May in the Soviet Union and was initially intended for the job Karola Bloch was assigned to later.

40 The GDR was facing a shortage for various constructing elements, such as iron. Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky wrote about the work Karola Bloch was assigned to, that in the GDR it was not the task to design a nice individual project or to build a nice kindergarten. It was rather to create the basis for the construction of typical solutions, to be able to create as many and good kindergartens as possible, as quickly as possible, with a few doors or other deficient materials and with as few qualified workers as possible. This statement by Schütte-Lihotzky can be found in: Christopher Freyer, “Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky: Bauten für Kinder” [“Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky: Buildings for Children”], in *Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. Architektur. Politik. Gesellschaft: Neue Perspektiven auf Leben und Werk* [Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. Architecture. Politics. Society: New Perspectives on Life and Work], ed. Marcel Bois and Bernadette Reinhold (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2019), 307-308.

41 Translated after Bloch, *Aus meinem Leben*, 203.: “Gottlob mussten meine Kindergärten billig sein, so daß solche Ornamentik ohnehin nicht möglich war, aber frei modern entwerfen, mit großen Fenstern, unregelmäßigen Grundrissen, durfte man nicht.”

42 Aßmann, “Konsequent modern?”, 160-170.

43 The *Deutsche Bauakademie* put a lot of effort in promoting the schemes for childcare facilities they were working on. Furthermore, the institute published and displayed the developed schematic floor plans to discuss them in the public. Karola Bloch herself published articles in the trade press, but also in general



“The architectural design of these standardized plans will undergo a qualified artistic elaboration. The children’s facilities will blend in with their surroundings and be landscape-bound. Thus, various façades will be developed to meet these requirements. The standardized children’s facilities should be beautiful, functional, and adapted to the psychology of the child. (...) Sunny, light-flooded rooms in which bright, cheerful colors will dominate, solid and at the same time aesthetic children’s furniture and toys, flower windows and natural corners, aquariums, birdcages, and terrariums will create a happy environment for the intellectual development of our children. These kindergartens and crèches for the youngest citizens of our young republic will reflect the care for mankind.”<sup>44</sup>

In the same year, the first kindergarten and nursery were finally built. The *Baumwollspinnerei Leipzig* [Cotton Mill in Leipzig] had an urge for childcare facilities since a high percentage of workers there were women working in a three-shift system. Under the supervision of the Fugmann Brigade, a local design office for industrial buildings in cooperation with Karola Bloch as a consultant, a nursery for 30 children and a kindergarten for 60 children was constructed. Later on, the latter was named *Future of the Nation* (Fig. 2) by the workers of the cotton mill and follows the scheme B1/60 developed by Bloch. As this was a flagship project, it was realized with 30% more budget than normal. Karola Bloch herself proposed the exterior as well as interior design.<sup>45</sup> Since 2004 the children’s weekly home *Future of the Nation* is a listed building<sup>46</sup> and it is still used as a kindergarten today. However, unfortunately, adaptations had been made before it got listed, which is why the description of especially the interior, solely relies on descriptions by Karola Bloch herself.

Furthermore, the two-story building with a pitched roof and recessed entrance area in the middle of the southern façade (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) can probably be understood as the result of a design principle that Hannes Meyer entitled as both communist and yet also regional in its formal language.<sup>47</sup>

Entering the T-shaped building through a spacious and bright entrance hall, one found two separate group rooms on the ground floor, one on the east, and the other on the west wing. These day units had each direct access to the garden, where the children could – in the manner of modernist principles – eat, sleep, study, and play in the fresh air. If needed, folding partitions

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magazines and newspapers. The article referred to here was originally published in the GDR 1953 and again in Irene Scherer and Welf Schröter, ed., *Karola Bloch – Architektin Sozialistin Freundin: Eine Neuentdeckung der Bauhaus Schülerin* [Karola Bloch – Architect Socialist Friend: a New Discovery of the Bauhaus Student] (Mössingen-Talheim: Talheimer Verlag, 2010), 175-188.

44 Translated after Karola Bloch, “Grundrisschemas von Einrichtungen für das Kleinkind (DDR 1953),” [“Layout Diagrams of Facilities for the Infant (GDR 1953)”] in: *Karola Bloch – Architektin Sozialistin Freundin: Eine Neuentdeckung der Bauhaus Schülerin*, ed. Irene Scherer and Welf Schröter (Mössingen-Talheim: Talheimer Verlag, 2010), 188: “Die architektonische Gestaltung dieser Typen wird eine qualifizierte künstlerische Durcharbeitung erfahren. Die Kindereinrichtungen werden sich der Umgebung einfügen und landschaftsgebunden sein. Es werden somit verschiedene Fassaden entwickelt, die diese Bedingungen erfüllen. Die typisierten Kindereinrichtungen sollen schön, zweckmäßig und auf die Psychologie des Kindes abgestimmt sein. (...) Sonnige, lichtdurchflutete Räume, in denen helle heitere Farben dominieren werden, feste und zugleich geschmackvolle Kindermöbel und Spielsachen, Blumenfenster und Naturecken, Aquarien, Vogelbauer und Terrarien, werden eine frohe Umgebung für die geistige Entwicklung unserer Kinder schaffen. Diese Kindergärten und Krippen für die jüngsten Bürger unserer Jungen Republik werden die Sorge um den Menschen zum Ausdruck bringen.”

45 Claudia Lenz, “Karola Bloch und das Kinderwochenheim Zukunft der Nation” [“Karola Bloch and the Future of the Nation Weekend Home for Children”], in *Frau Architekt: Seit mehr als 100 Jahren: Frauen im Architekturberuf* [Frau Architekt: Over 100 Years of Women as Professional Architects], ed. Mary Pepchinski, Christina Budde, Wolfgang Voigt, and Peter Cachola Schmal (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 2017), 152-157.

46 Anne König, “Der Kindergarten der Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei: Auf den Spuren von Karola Bloch” [“The Kindergarten of the Leipzig Cotton Spinning Mill: On the Tracks of Karola Bloch”], in *Karola Bloch – Architektin Sozialistin Freundin: Eine Neuentdeckung der Bauhaus Schülerin*, ed. Irene Scherer and Welf Schröter, (Mössingen-Talheim: Talheimer Verlag, 2010), 215.

47 Cf. Flierl, “Migrant with a Conflicted Sense of Home,” 409.

divided the group rooms into smaller units. Upstairs were the night units and an isolation room for sick children. The night units were first divided each into five six-bed dormitories, later for the sake of practicality into ten to twelve-bed dorms, with an added observation window. A valuable addition to the group rooms was the porch, which also offered the possibility of being outside in all weathers. The entrance hall with the staircase was designed in such a way that it could also be used as an additional “living hall.”<sup>48</sup> The high railings and wooden posts of the staircase reached the ceiling and formed this way a second, “upper hall.”<sup>49</sup>

The entire design of the building oriented itself around the needs of its users, namely the children. Hence the position and design of the windows with the sill 60 cm above the ground, which is the right height for the kids to reach, to take care of the plants, aquariums, etc. placed there, or to just look out of the windows (Fig. 3). The same principle of child-friendliness applied also to the color arrangement throughout the entire building. It helped children to orient themselves through it. The west was kept in green tones, with green walls in the day units, and green tiles in the lavatories. The east followed the same scheme in yellow. Additionally, next to each door were small signs and drawings on the eye level of the children.

Another special feature was the hallway ceiling painting by German artist Emil Block. According to the architect herself, the starry sky in soft blue and yellow colors captured in a very sensitive way the childlike being.<sup>50</sup>

Although a similar use of color was used in Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky’s design for the *Kindergarten at Kapaunplatz* in Vienna,<sup>51</sup> I would like to argue that the influence of Karola’s former teacher Bruno Taut is palpable here in the color scheme of the children’s home *Future of the Nation*. It was eventually during his time in Magdeburg and his use of color that the sentimental value of color became cherished. Taut saw color as an expression of joy of life, which especially as a cheap means of design distinguishes itself in economically difficult times.<sup>52</sup>

### Where Architecture Meets Philosophy

This conscious handling of the interior space that takes care of the needs of its actual users, the children, reacts to what Ernst Bloch criticized about modern architecture: that it is cold, inanimate, empty, and depersonalized. Just as if Karola Bloch was attempting to create something opposite to this critique, in both design and function. But still, despite the functionality adapted to the needs of children, the overall appearance of *Future of the Nation* comes across as somehow crude. It seems as if she did indeed try to build an architecture according to modernist principles, but not following those through. At the same time, it also looks as if she tried to break with those principles intentionally – almost as if she had adapted the same ambiguous attitude towards modernism as her husband Ernst Bloch.

Furthermore, the entire project underlies the attempt to meet his image of utopia in terms of how she saw in *Future of the Nation* herself a tool to express an outlook, in which the socialist principles of gender equality, and a new definition of the family finally got realized. These socialist principles that made this building necessary in the first place, wanted to trigger social change, something that for Ernst Bloch always had been an important characteristic of architecture. And it is precisely for these reasons that the children’s home corresponds to what Ernst Bloch would describe as a truly new architecture: an architecture that is completely detached from the past and created from the context of a new society.

48 Bloch, “Das Kinderwochenheim Zukunft,” 192.

49 Ibid., 197.

50 Ibid., 198.

51 Freyer, “Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky,” 307.

52 Junghanns, *Bruno Taut*, 54-55.

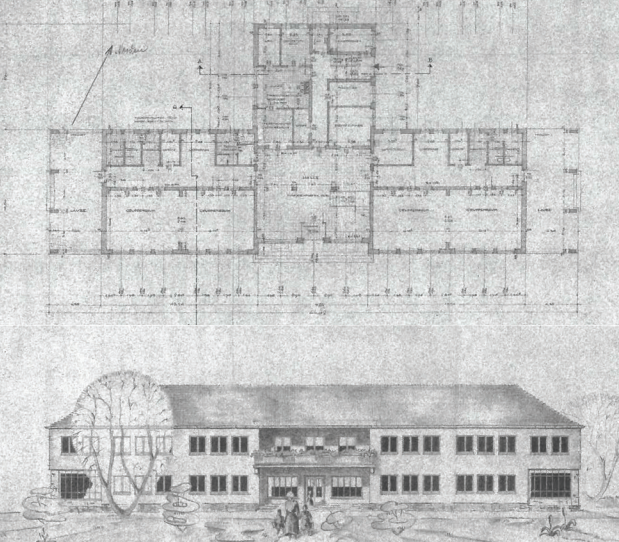


Fig. 2: Karola Bloch, weekly childcare facility *Future of the Nation*, ground plan & south view, 1952 (left)



Fig. 3: Karola Bloch, weekly childcare facility *Future of the Nation*, interior view, 1950s (right)

## Conclusion

For sure the circumstances and guidelines Karola Bloch faced as an architect in the GDR cannot be ignored when talking about the design of the weekly care home for children, *Future of the Nation*. The design process and the implementation of such a building were different than in western Europe or the USA. In East Germany no different individualities – neither from the architect, nor the one from the client – was in the focus, but functionally-defined type plans were.<sup>53</sup> However, Karola Bloch's contribution to architectural production and discourse was not insignificant.<sup>54</sup> Neither was Ernst Bloch's contribution to his field during his time as a professor in Leipzig and beyond.

What connected the couple most can be found in the junction of their professions. Both shared the deep belief in socialism and the wish to actively participate in the construction of this new emerging state and society within their own profession. Both their works circled this. And both of their works undeniably also implied elements, theories, thoughts, and figures of their significant other, which in the end played a significant role in the understanding of architectural aesthetics in the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, as well as in the architecture of Karola Bloch.

Last but not least, it should be emphasized that, despite the interwoven nature of the professions and the direct influence of specific works, be it Karola Bloch's building and architectural theory or Ernst Bloch's philosophy, Ernst Bloch's work has received considerably more attention up to now. Whether publications, collected archive material, or even material rescued from their house in Leipzig by friends of the couple after the Wall was built, *his* was given significantly more attention than *hers*. It remains to question at this point whether this has anything to do with the quality of Karola Bloch's work. Nevertheless, as a woman architect (and not as the wife at the side of the great philosopher as so often before), she has gained new recognition thanks to exhibition projects such as *Frau Architekt: Over 100 Years of Women as Professional Architects*, curated by Mary Pepchinski, Christina Budde and Wolfgang Voigt at the Deutsche Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt 2017/18. Moreover, Karola Bloch's theoretical and architectural work, which did indeed play an important role in the GDR between the years 1949-1961 and the implementation of feminist principles within her work, is in a broader context part of this author's ongoing research project at the University of Innsbruck.

53 Andreas Butter, *Neues Leben, Neues Bauen: Die Moderne in der Architektur der SBZ/DDR 1945-1951* [New Life, New Building: Modernism in the Architecture of the Soviet Socialist Zone/GDR 1945-1951] (Berlin: Hans Schiler Verlag, 2006), 471.

54 Pepchinski, "Gender & Return Migration," 107.

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