

# Schinkel-ish: Fragmented Vernacular versus Void Mimicry

*“From whatever side one approaches things, the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of distinction: distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge, etc.—all of them, in short, distinctions in which valid considerations must demonstrate a keen awareness and the demand for resolution.”<sup>1</sup>*

Roger Caillois speculates in his essay *“Mimétisme et la psychasthénie légendaire”* (Mimicry and legendary psychasthenia) on the occurrence of a psychosis induced by the loss of boundary between an insectoid organism and its milieu. The key to this observation, according to Caillois, are matters of distinction. Through an extensive tendency to assimilate to its environment an organism starts to define itself through coordinates outside of its own and therefore fails to define the boundaries between what it is and what it is surrounded by. Caillois goes even further with his speculation and compares this state with the one someone diagnosed with schizophrenia might find himself in, a state where self-awareness becomes blurred towards an existence of renunciation.

In *“A User’s Guide to Entropy”* Rosalind Krauss refers to this particular essay but stirs the conversation to the erosion of a clear figure-ground condition and its sociopolitical implication in the discussion of avant-garde practice, that *would cancel all separations of figures from their surrounding spaces or backgrounds to produce a continuum unimaginable for our earthly bodies to traverse, but into which we as viewers might easily slide or glide-in an effortless, soaring, purely optical movement.*<sup>2</sup> While the erosion of the clear figure-ground condition, which could also be thought of as a blurry boundary could be seen as a purely formal approach it is useful to think of it in more integrated terms where the implied impermeability extends to social, cultural and performative conditions.

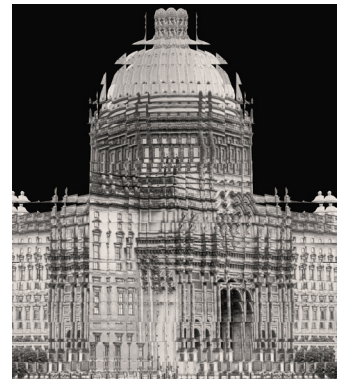
This paper proposes to revisit the concept of blurry boundary generated by mimicry in order to not only criticize the hysteric practice of architectural imitation particularly found in metropolitan cities today but to also propose possible alternatives in contemporary architecture set inside of existing conditions—Bauen im Bestand.<sup>3</sup>

## ON ISH-NESS, VERNACULAR & FRAGMENTS

In order to successfully trace back and concurrently forward das Bestehende (the existent) an -ish appropriation is a convenient concept. It does not describe a thing’s being but much rather its essence in a vaguely definite way. It is through its inherent nature appended to a certain origin but can never solely only be this one. Close, but not quite to the point. Descriptive, without being fixed on singularity. It becomes in itself a flickering figure-ground.

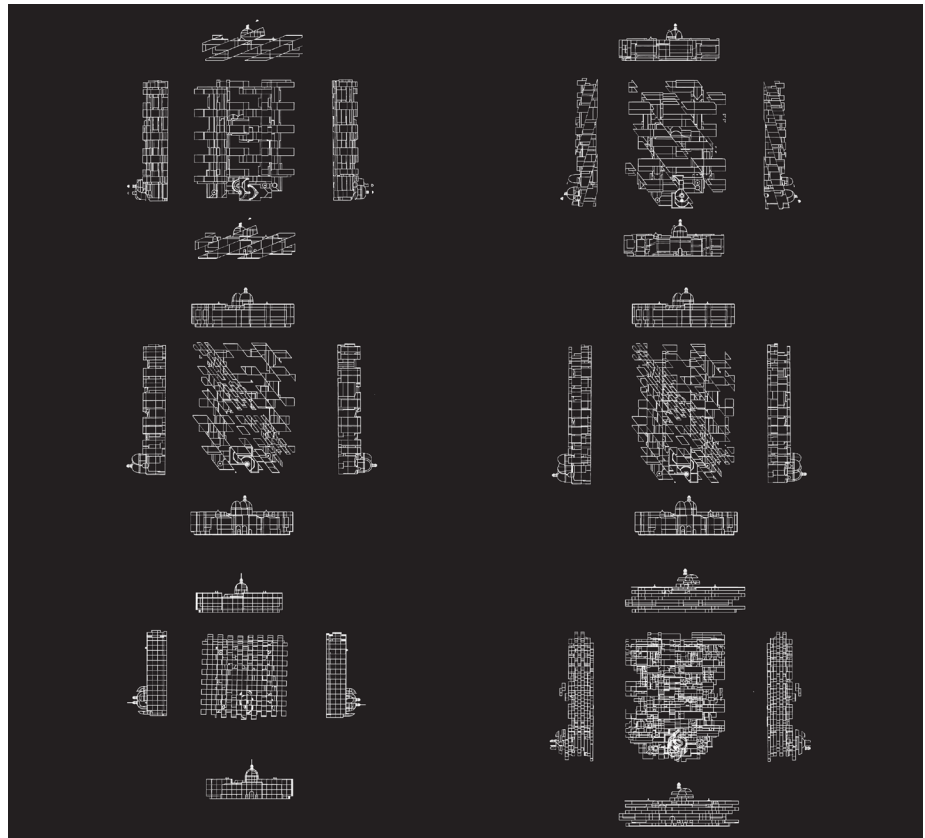
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Figure 1: Blurry Boundary Study I.



In our globalized world this place in between indistinct and explicit starts to define a new kind of vernacular condition. While in the past, urban realities were shaped by politics, corporations and (sometimes) architects, it was still the accessibility to tools, materials and knowledge that determined its final configuration. The democratization of information spread out to a democratization of fabrication and manufacturing which calls for another definition of vernacular. One that does not distinguish between low-brow and high-brow anymore. The architectural image has to recreate itself through the realization of an ever-changing relationship between object, subject and context.

The concept of fragmentation stitches these allegedly separate entities into one without ever fully understanding them as a comprehensible whole. Unlike the idea of collages of the 80's this does not fixate on disjunction and severance but rather, figures of composition through the acknowledgment of incoherence. Hence, we need new complex systems with multivalent readings.

However, current developments around and in urban conditions have proved to fall back to some form of neo-neoclassicism.

#### BERLIN CASE STUDY

According to the art- and architecture critic Karl Scheffler, Berlin is sentenced to "*forever becoming and never being*."<sup>4</sup> Its history makes Germany's capital a setting crippled by fractured memory and distorted identity. However, it is by far not the only place where the crisis of identity due to constant flux calls for alternative architectural solutions. New York will always be a "*mosaic of episodes*"<sup>5</sup> as Rem Koolhaas specified it in *Delirious New York*. Shanghai built itself back to its 1920s cosmopolitan glamour in less than thirty years. The never-being and always-becoming is the new being of our fast and globalized world.

Berlin continues to be a "*disjointed, juxtaposed and above all heterogenous city*"<sup>6</sup>. Today the project of reconstruction and lost landmarks is serving the need for assimilation through the

Figure 2: Blurry Boundary Studies II.

re-creation of resemblance. Supporters of these projects *argue against authenticity in architecture and for a reconstruction of a selective, common memory*<sup>7</sup>. The original's aura is so far removed from the final outcome that it defines it as void mimicry, where distinction and boundary are rendered nonexistent.

One of the main figures in the project of faux-integrity was Hans Stimmann who became known for his consistent approach in the role as the city's Building Director and rather infamous for reducing all linguistic interpretation to conformity. *"Richard Meier complained that Stimmann 'single handedly destroyed Berlin'. Daniel Libeskind opined that the framework 'stinks to me a very oppressive ideology' and, in 1991 Koolhaas stormed out of a planning meeting saying Stimmann 'organized a massacre of architectural intelligence'."*<sup>8</sup>

*Stimmann's legacy is the redevelopment of Berlin's historic center, Mitte. He claims in "From Utopian Socialism to the Urban House" that in order to re-create an urban identity for Germany and international tourism one has to cut all ties to the old East-Berlin relics and rebuild based on the historic city plans.*<sup>9</sup>

*This general attitude to reconstruction emphasizes a misuse of the collective monument and an abuse of architecture and its political power.*

*Resurrection projects like Berlin's City castle (Stadtschloss Berlin) and Friedrich Schinkel's Bauakademie are particularly suitable to establish a definition of void mimicry in contemporary practice, due to the fact that their sole goal is to remind of an intact past that did not exist. They quite literally become scaffolding that hold up flat images of their former appearance.*

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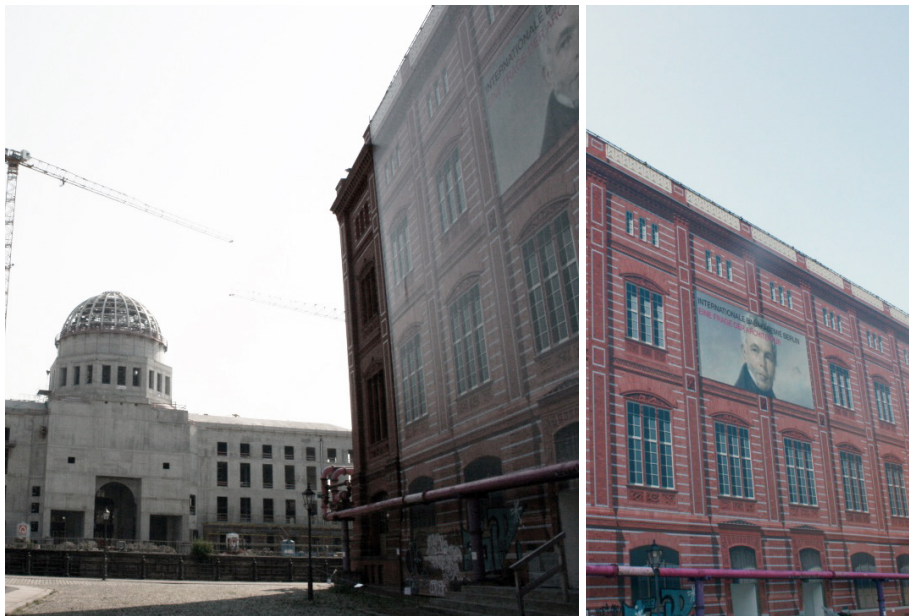


Figure 3: Stadtschloss & Bauakademie, June, 2015.



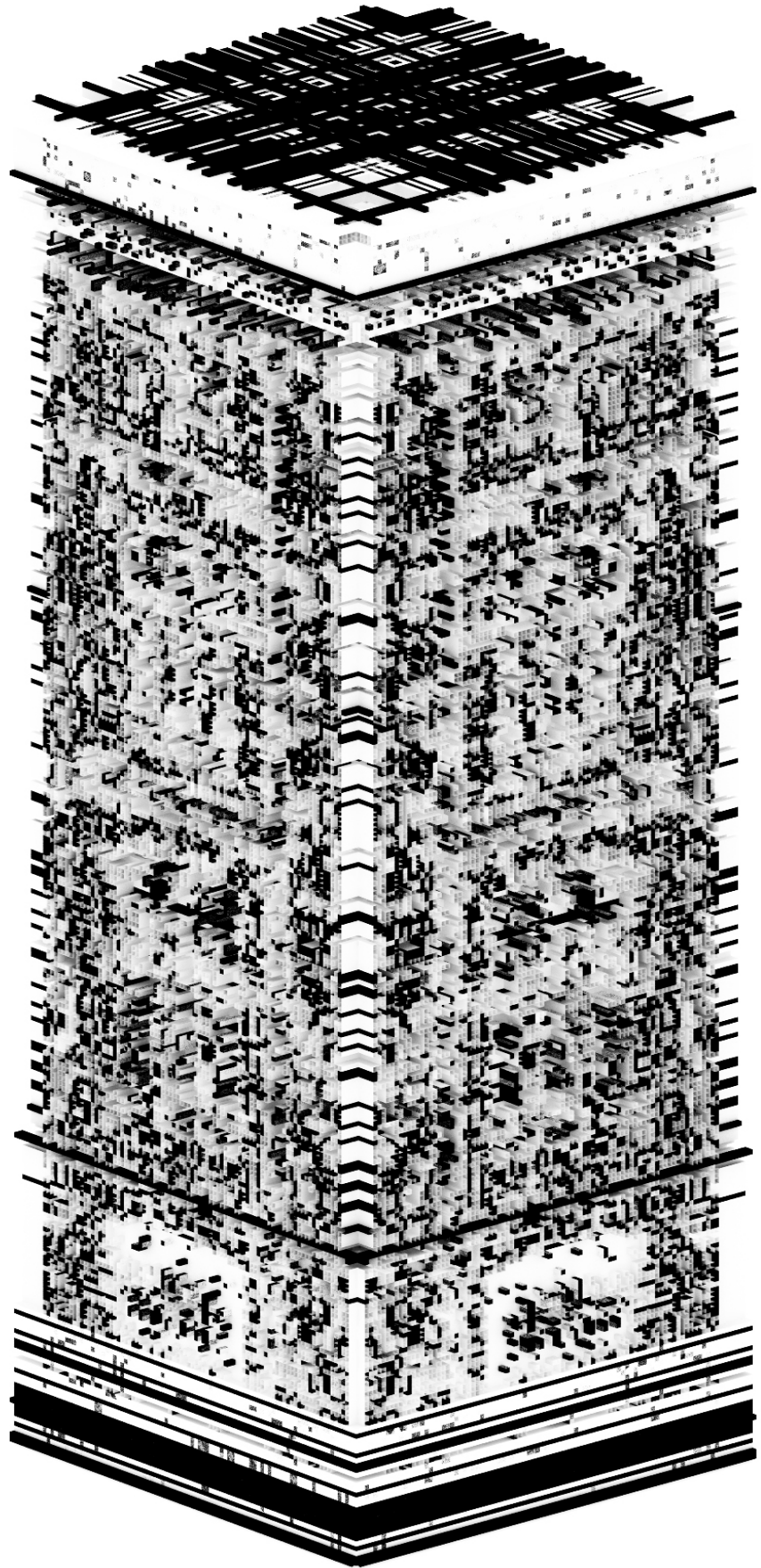


Figure 4: Bauakademie Corner Study.

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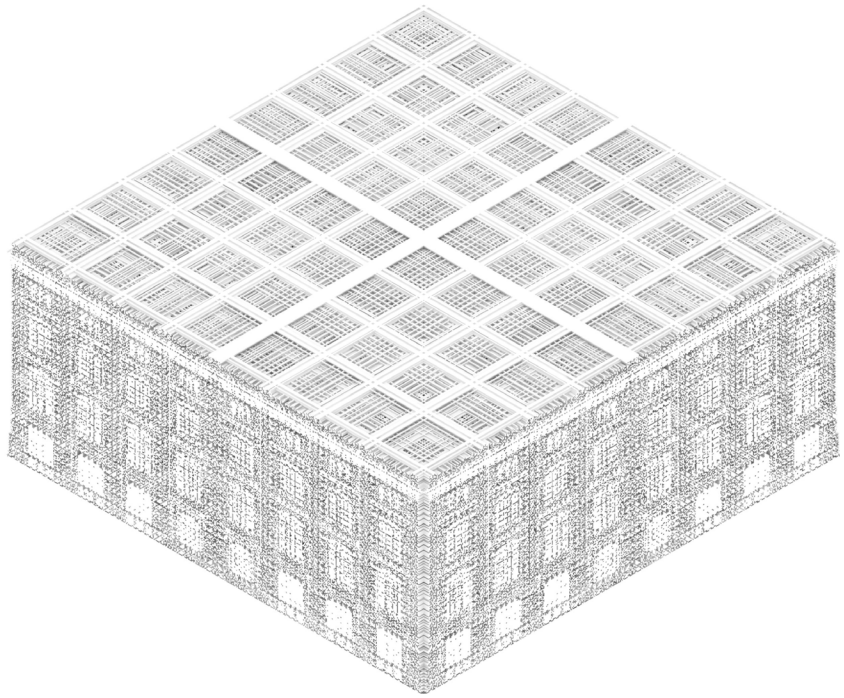
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#### **SCHINKEL-ISHNESS**

The original Bauakademie, designed by Friedrich Schinkel in 1831 and destroyed after WWII, has been defined by some as the onsets of European modernism. The progressive break from rigid concepts of classicism towards an idea of abstraction in Schinkel's work was rooted in an interest for structural rationalism that evolved from an (...) inclusive, liberal perception of history<sup>10</sup> and a reactionary attitude to zeitgeist. Klaus Heinrich, a Religion Philosophy professor at the Free University in Berlin frames this attitude as a technique of resistance: *"When Schinkel built, he always built against something that already existed. He shifted present opinions; changed the environmental light, modified dispositions of buildings, that were hopelessly tailored for only one singular role; created unanticipated awareness of substructures in the history of genres (...)"*<sup>11</sup>

While the historic figure Friedrich Schinkel and his buildings have an almost sacrosanct position in the debate around reconstruction, it appears to be useful to imagine a Schinkel appropriation. In a world where digital images and new technology surround us as an ubiquitous fact, their translation to building is not a singular process anymore. So it seems to be a missed opportunity to not at least speculate on an approach to adaptive reuse that allows reinterpretation according to our current zeitgeist. A resistance to what we think we know and reconsideration based on what one, freed from preconceptions might be able to reassemble.

Therefore the concept of a fragmented vernacular builds upon the discussion of estranged entity and collage and proposes a third possibility between mere opposition and imitation. The subconscious idea of the unified whole allows a convergence of Schinkel as a permeable figure, an "-ish" appropriation of itself, a blurry boundary between what was and what will be.



## ENDNOTES

1. Cailliois, Roger, "Mimétisme et la psychasthénie légendaire", trans. by Shepley (October: the First Ten Years, Cambridge, 1936, trans. 1984), p. 17.
2. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, "Formless: A User's Guide to Entropy", October Vol. 78 (MIT Press, New York, 1997), p. 403.
3. "Bauen im Bestand" is an explicit terminology defined by the German fee structure for architects to define a project set in existing conditions.
4. Scheffler, Karl, "Berlin, ein Stadtschicksal" / "Berlin, a City's Destiny"—translated by author (University of California Libraries, 1910).
5. Koolhaas, Rem, "Delirious New York" (New York, The Monacelli Press, 1997), p. 21.
6. Torisson, Fredrik, "Berlin—matter of memory" (Ratatosk Publishing Ltd, London, 2010), p. 25.
7. Didem Ekici, "The Surfaces of Memory in Berlin"; Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review, Vol. 18, No.1, (Hypertraditions: Tenth International Conference, Bangkok, Thailand, Fall 2006), p. 26.
8. Jencks, Charles, "The Story of Post-Modernism: Five Decades of the Ironic, Iconic and Critical in Architecture" (Wiley, 2nd Edition 2011), p. 88.
9. Stimmann, Hans, "Von der Sozialutopie zum staedtischen Haus" (Berlin, DOM Publishers, 2011), p. 192 (translated by author).
10. Neil Levine, "Modern Architecture: Representation and Reality" (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 101.
11. Klaus Heinrich, "Der Architektur ein Bewusstsein ihrer selbst zu geben" / "Making Architecture aware of itself" (Aachen, Arch+ 219, ARCH+ Verlag GmbH, 2015) p. 07 (translated by author).

Figure 5: Baukademie Corner Study.