

The banality of ugly.

An enquiry into the unsettling practice of valuating buildings

What is the right way to value a building? In this study I investigate the intricacies of activities of valuating architecture in two cities where such valuation has no taken-for-granted character. The cities I propose to explore are the Polish city of Wrocław (former Breslau) and the Lithuanian city of Klaipėda (former Memel) united by the similar constellation of architecture inherited from drastic political ruptures: annexation from Germany after the WWII and the transition from state socialism to capitalism after 1989. The intricacy of valuating buildings in these prototypical cases turns out to be the lack of certainty among urban experts about what constitutes “good” and “valuable” building, and how the “good” and “valuable” building should be maintained to be an example of such. By analyzing how 60 architects, urban planners, city officials and activists in two cities articulate their ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’ buildings, and by following the activities comprising valuation and devaluation of architecture – such as cleaning, painting over, concealing, drilling through building layers, measuring energy efficiency of the facades and doing stratigraphic studies of the facades’ paint, among others – I explore how urban experts in two cities make and stabilize normativities and definitions of the ‘good’ and ‘beautiful’ that later inform their professional practices. I do so to state the following: that in valuation of buildings the ‘good’ is not given: it is discovered, learnt about, stabilized or made unbalanced by the efforts of actors with different levels of commitment and certainty about what constitutes value.