Urban analysis of *Onkel Toms Hütte*

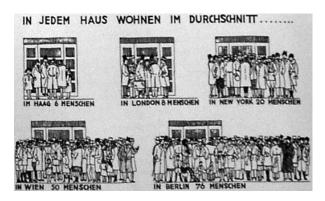
Tai Manu Schomaker



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Drawing showing statistical density in Berlin



Hinterhof, typical Berlin courtyard

1_ Historical background of the construction of Onkel Toms Hütte

1_1_ The real estate situation under the Empire (1871-1914)

1_1_1_ The Block typology (*Mietskaserne*)

The small town of Berlin in the 18th century becomes the capital of the Prussian Kingdom in 1871. With the industrial revolution the city is experiencing tremendous population explosion. In 1925 its inhabitants numbers 4.5 million. It is also among the most populous and densest cities in the world.

While the average residential building in the 1920's in New York City is occupied by 20 persons, Berlin holds the world record with 76 persons per building. In *Wedding* or *Prenzlauerberg*, "rental barracks" with 3 courtyards are housing between 300 to 600 residents. More than 1,000 people reside at *Ackerstrasse* 132. In 1925, about 70,000 Berliners are registered living in basements. 600,000 people live in apartments crammed with more than four people per room.

The living conditions are apparent as to the over crowdedness. Twothirds of the apartments have only one room with heating. The lack of light ventilation, running water and toilets creates appalling sanitary conditions. The apartments in basements and attics are wet and icy in winters, scorching in summers.

The average factory worker does not earn enough to feed his family. It is common for women and children to participate in the family's survival. Apartments are converted into makeshift studios. The noise and smells from neighbors are included in the rental services. The proximity allows voyeurism, control and denouncing. The lower working class has neither privacy nor silence.

The most common urban typology in Berlin is a square block, 150 meters in plan and 22 meters high. The planning regulations do not allow buildings to exceed this height, the laws of real estate speculation make it rarely less. A classic building on a parcel consists of a frontal portion aligned to street (*Vorderhaus*), a side wing (*Seitenflügel*) and one but more often several backyards (*Hinterhof*) with transversal buildings (*Quergebäude*) separating them. The regulation determines their minimum dimension according to the radius of gyration of the spear of fire fighters, or 5.30 meters by 5.30. Even though the heights are limited to five or six floors, the classic typology of Berlin allows extreme density and inhumane living conditions.







Stills from Ruttmann's movie *Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Symphony of the big city*) 1927. In this masterpiece of German prewar cinema, he makes an analogy between the city and a machine.

1_1_2_ The dire need for better housing

The western metropolis is soon seen as hell. Zola describes the dire living conditions of the French working class, Dickens get inspiration from the misery in major English cities. Walter Ruttmann shows Berlin like a machine. Bruno Taut compares the capitalist city with a headless body, selfish and utilitarian.

In 1903, Georg Simmel, a sociologist living in Berlin, warns against the monstrosity of the big city. The urban heritage of the industrial revolution is an unequal city where the lower class lives in abject poverty. Epidemics due to disastrous sanitary conditions in crowded slums where crams a large proportion of the population are devastating. The anonymity, indifference and inequality governs the daily life of the megalopolis. In this alarming situation an urgent need for new housing accessible to everybody arises.

In 1889 the Prussian minister notes that it might be necessary to create accommodable housing accessible to the lower middle class. 1,500 independent self-help organizations will create 125,000 housing units under the Empire, or 5,000 per year. While 250,000 units per year are built, it is a rather marginal initiative.

Housing production has stagnated since 1912. Yet the renovation of substandard housing and expansion of the real estate stock becomes urgent.

1_1_3_ The worsening due to war

While under the Empire, the shortage of housing units is estimated at 1 million. At the end of the World War I will add 900,000. Moreover, the construction cost is higher even though the land prices have fallen. 120,000 homes are produced annually. At half the rate as before the war, while the need has doubled due to the returning solders and the refugees from lost territories.

One of the first duties of the Weimar Republic is to reduce the housing crisis. Independent initiative like before the war would have been unable to meet this need. Only state intervention can help in building an effective reconstruction.



Social Democrat propaganda poster.

The SPD (Sozialistiche Partei Deutschland) builds its argumentation on the satisfaction of the inhabitants of the new German Siedlung (housing development). After the war the Social Democrats will use the workers' revolt to seize power. Exceptional living conditions in Britz facing the housing crisis is an argument of political campaign.

1_2_ Towards a rationalization of construction (1918 - 1933)

1_2_1_ The beginnings of social housing

1918 marks the dawn of social housing. The State decides at the end of the war to intervene directly in the real estate industry. Resorption of the urgent need for housing becomes a national priority. The liberal policy of the Empire is offset by a policy to support public construction.

But poor distribution of assistance and the temporary nature of funding due to inflation does not solve the problem. The private sector benefits from these subsidies, rents do not fall and the building costs rise exponentially.

With the currency reform of 1923 the economy stabilizes. Property tax becomes a sustainable source for financing social housing. It represents 75 to 90% of annual housing stock renewal. The State puts in place a more effective control of rents. Two million units will be built between 1924 and 1932.

1_2_2_ The concentration of capital according to Wagner

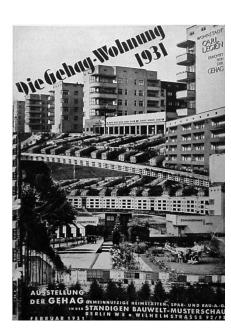
Martin Wagner is an key figure of the housing reform in Berlin. He is a leading promoter of the *Großsiedlung* (large scale Multiple Units).

He criticizes the state funding real-estate policies. He believes them inefficient, resulting at best in a different allocation of costs. As he finds it absurd to finance the stagnant building sector with a very dynamic industry, he streamlines costs through cooperation between industry and construction. All sectors should be equally productive and thus bear similar taxes.

The revolutionary events of 1918 to 1919 gives some power to the working class. Socialization in the property sector does not stagnate long on reflections on the *how*. Wagner is involved in rationalizing the sector while inducing a limited profit.

The *Bauhütte* (the building hut) first refers to the English model. Its structure is intentionally capitalist, based on the consideration that the happiness of the worker in his job will increase his performance. His faith in the socialist construction will compete with the private sector. Municipal structures remain skeptical and the success of the *Bauhütte* does not meet the expected goals. Wagner seeks for an alternative to find a more sustainable source of financing.

Thus in 1924 the *DEWOG* is created (*Deutsche Wohnungsfürsorgung Aktiengesellschaft für Beamte, Angestellete und Arbeiter* - shareholder German company for the improvement of housing for civil servants, employees and workers). It is in practice an organization that centralizes the capital of the newly created workers' bank and the public subsidies in order to redistribute it more effectively to allow the creation of popular housing. New housing initiative organizations are created and are associated to it. The *GEHAG* is created in Berlin (*Gemeinnützige Heimstatten Spar- und Bau-Gesellschaft Aktiengesellschaft* - company which joins real estate shares and savings), primarily from collective housing initiatives like *Britz* in 1926 and *Onkel Toms Hütte* in 1929. This mode of self-financing plays the liberal market rules in order to better counter it. It also provides an effective alternative to poorly distributed State subsidies. The reaction of private unions is tinged with the greatest concern, seeing it as a major threat to free market.



Exhibition of the *GEHAG* in 1931

The realization of the visions of Wagner are made possible through the *GEHAG* and Bruno Taut. The poster shows off the possibilities of streamlined housing.

1 2 3 Standardization

In the contemporary manufacturing processes, Wager sees a model for innovating the building industry.

The replacement of manual labor by machines brings greater productivity. What Ford does with his cars, we want to do with the apartments. [Free translation]

He considers construction techniques obsolete, coming from the Middle Ages. Standardization, rationalization of work by techniques such as assembly line work, prefabrication and the use of the machine power would firstly allow the construction worker to work less, but above all use less expensive labor and thus significantly decrease building costs. He takes as example the construction in the U.S., where the number of people employed on a building site is significantly lower than in Germany, this mainly by the use of steel structure, necessarily prefabricated and which requires less assembly working than the traditional brick construction. He believes that mass production could reduce costs by half by striking out intermediate markets and through the possibilities of partnership with industrial producers of raw materials, who could then adapt their production to the needs of the building sites. All patents related to this mode of production should remain the property of *DEWOG* to avoid possible liberal abuses. This rationalization of work would activity allow socialization without violating the laws of free market.

The first large scale project issued from this principle is the collective housing of *Britz* in *Berlin Neukölln* in 1926, where Bruno Taut architecturally materializes the ideas of Wagner. This operation will become the manifesto of the "New Construction" and the characteristic "horseshoe" the emblem of the *GEHAG*.

Rationalization occurs through a reduction in the number of typologies to four only for 1,000 total built units, meaning 11% of annual housing production in Berlin. The bulk purchase of materials will help them obtain the best price.

Being the first project of this type, the expected savings is not up to the hopes of Wagner. But it is primarily a model for future achievements showing the possibilities of rational building methods. For Wagner it is mostly a model of economic organization that gives capitalism a social dimension and makes socialization unnecessary: *the commune economy*.

He notes that in 1924 10,000 apartments were built in Berlin on 575 different operations, or an average of 17 units per site. This dispersion of efforts on small interventions could be better focused and optimized with 10 building sites of 1,000 units each.







Accomplishments of the *Bauhaus*. A chair by Marcel Breuer. Photos of the school building in Dessau taken by Lucia Moholy. The *Bauhaus* remains a unique experience of synthesis of Arts.



Buildings in the *Weißenhof Siedlung* Stuttgart. Scharoun, Oud, Stam, Taut, Behrens, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, show the world, through the 1927 CIAM, the opportunities of functionalist housing, prefabricated, standardized, manufactured by machines, avant-garde for the workers.

1_3_ Other German initiatives

Parallel to the initiatives in Berlin, effort to streamline production is felt in every country and in all areas.

1_3_1_ The *Bauhaus* (1919-1933)

The *Bauhaus* is a school of interdisciplinary applied Arts who will mark a turning point in history. Essential personalities will take part in its realization and its existence. Gropius and Mies van der Rohe will lead it, and the most renowned German cultural figures of the time will teach there. Laszlo Moholy Nagy for photography, Paul Klee or Kandinski for painting, Marcel Breuer for design, Josef Itten for sculpture, Oskar Schlemmer for the costume design, and others will make its moment of glory. It is actually a bit awkward to categorize them according to their predominant activity, while the motto of the school is a complete training through the interdisciplinary fields studied, making complete artists.

The *Bauhaus* advocates the use of industrial production methods for creation. Standardization, mass production, the world of the machine becomes a source of inspiration and enables the creation of "beauty", beautiful objects, beautiful work and beautiful architecture accessible to a much wider audience. Rationalization of production makes "the Art object" accessible to everyone.

1_3_2_ The Weissenhof Siedlung in Stuttgart

The greatest European architects of the time are involved in building the *Weissenhof Siedlung* in Stuttgart in 1927. The management of the operation is entrusted to Mies van der Rohe, who brings together architects like Le Corbusier, Oud, Behrens, Gropius, Scharoun, Max and Bruno Taut for this manifesto that will host an International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) . The aim is to show the enormous potential of prefabrication, standardization and rationalization in the building sector for the creation of popular quality housing at decent prices. It is the emblem of an innovative modern architecture, refusing ornamentation to leave priority to the fluidity of space, to the importance of light contribution and to equipment, now available and indispensable, as the kitchen, the heating and the bathroom for everybody.



Ernst May was commissioned in 1926 for the master plan *Römerstadt Siedlung* in Frankfurt. The kitchen of the apartments is now known as the "Frankfurt Kitchen". It is a room whose dimensions are proportioned on the movement of the cook. The kitchen is regarded as a laboratory.

1 3 3 The Frankfurt kitchen

Ernst May was responsible during this time for the creation of suburbs in Frankfurt. He planned these neighborhoods on the model of the *Siedlung* vanguard, and again the prefabrication, standardization and streamlining of the building site plays a key role. The Frankfurt kitchen will remain famous for being the first to reflect the dimensions in relation to the human body, to the movements of the cook and to new equipment (gas, water, electricity). The kitchen is considered a workplace, a laboratory.

1_3_4_ Other *Großsiedlung* in Berlin

Back in Berlin other outstanding examples of *Großsiedlung* are *Siemensstadt* and the *Weißestadt*, built on the model of *Britz*. Spurred by Wagner, Hans Scharoun, Hugo Häring, Walter Gropius will achieve projects using streamlined construction methods. Mies Van der Rohe designs a popular housing lot on *Afrikanische Strasse* in *Berlin Wedding* in 1926, while Bruno Taut will bring nearly 12,000 homes in the 1920's.

The postwar Germany, the Weimar Republic, experiences an exceptional cultural vitality. Taking into account the discomfort but also the power of the working class occupies an important place in this "Cultural Revolution". This revival is built around a modernization of production methods through an association with the industrial world. Standardization, mass production, the use of mass-produced components, the relief of the labor work through the power of the machine allows access of the product to all.

Wagner is one of its most fervent supporters in Berlin. Why not use the principles of free market in other sectors which might get rid of the little competition making use of mass production? Why be ashamed of the consistency of the whole and the repetition of house designs? Why use ornaments still bulky, expensive and unnecessary? Wagner wants to quickly radicalize housing and revolutionize the subject.

Taut yet does not yield to an extreme radicalization as suggested by his partner. Although his work deals with the rationalization of construction processes advocated by Wagner, he also focuses on the conservation of some architectural and urban elements to avoid a drift towards a gray monotony.



Cartoon of a protest in the Weiße Stadt



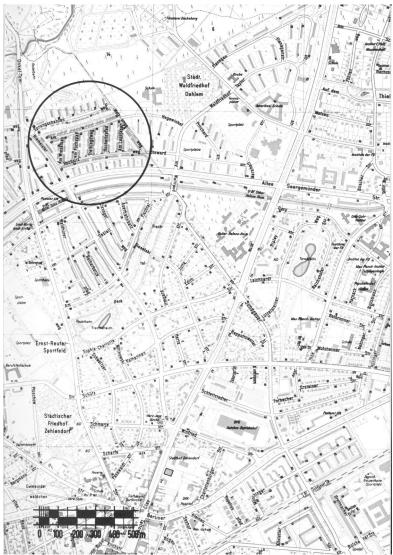
Banners against NSDAP on a building of the Weiße Stadt

1_4_ The dispersion of efforts when the Nazis come to power (1933)

The German cultural effervescence is disrupted when the Nazi party comes to power. The Bauhaus is closed the same year. Artists and intellectuals are fleeing en masse, mostly to the United States. The architects that will then be close to the Nazi power have always been the biggest detractors of this "New Architecture". They do not give up the ornament and do not include the basic principles of *modern* architecture. It's the turn back to the most conformist academicism, to monumental effects, to traditional inorganic architecture, to an archaic approach of the human and the family. These architects always made fun of Wagner, Gropius and Taut and of the German avant-garde.

Indeed, despite a streamlining of the architectural and urban design, infrastructure and techniques used are too young and inexperienced to lead to significant savings in construction costs. The popular support for the mass public housing is dispersed as quickly as minds get more extreme.

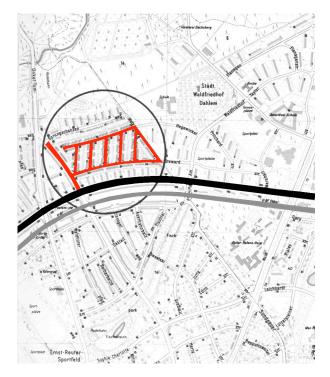
Bruno Taut fleas too. But he is not convinced by the American dream, and a trip to Russia disgusted him from the turn taken by communism. He goes to Japan where he works with a local architect to build a traditional house in which he'll live. He marvels at the architectural wealth of the country. But with the war getting closer Japan is no longer a safe haven. He immigrates to Turkey where he makes few public buildings, before dying in 1939 in indifference.

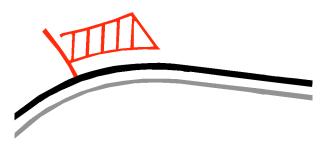


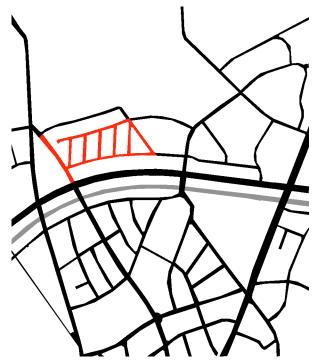
The *Wahldsiedlung Zehlendorf V* is built between 1929 and 1931 from plans by Bruno Taut. In the 1920's, Berlin was facing a housing crisis. An extensive program is run by the city to deal with overcrowding and alarming hygiene conditions. Entire neighborhoods, called *Siedlung*, are built on the outskirts of the city.

Bruno Taut is highly demanded during this period. He designs almost 12,000 homes. The *Siedlung* are typically collective apartment blocks, as Britz. Here, it is a set of row-houses, a housing estate, located in a peripheral district nowadays upper-class.

This policy of social housing will be aborted by the Nazi regime in 1933.









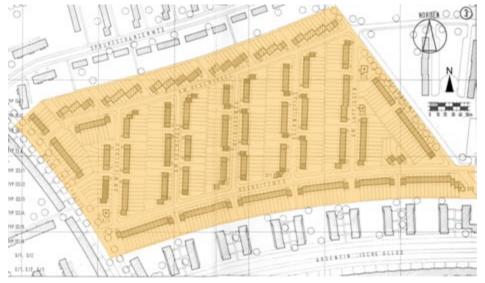




U-Bahnhof (subway station) Onkel Toms Hütte

The lot is located in the *Berlin Zehlendorf* district. It is an extension of the city toward the southwest, to Potsdam, in contact with the north *Grünewald*, vast forest of West Berlin. The urban landscape consists mainly of low-density residential buildings and individual houses, with omnipresent vegetation.

For Waldsiedlung Zehlendorf, also called Onkel Toms Hütte (Uncle Tom's cabin), the Metro Line 1 was extended. Indeed, the Siedlung does not consist solely of townhouses, but especially of small collective houses not exceeding five storeys. The *Argentinisches Allee*, running along the subway, provides quick access to this extension of the city. It is the main source of noise. Other routes are mainly feeder roads with little traffic. Their curves give a picturesque character to this part of the city inspired by the *Garden City*.













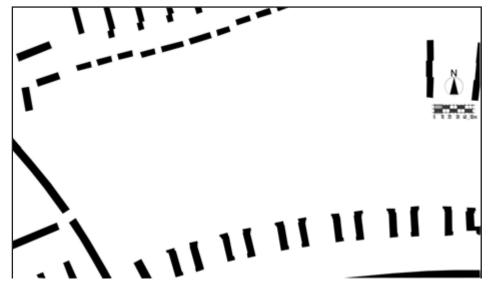
north-south streets

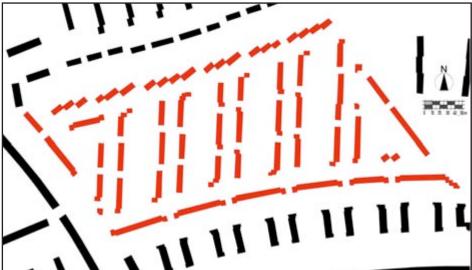
Riemeisterstrasse

visual breakthrough

Hochsitzweg

The study area covers about 120,000 square meters or 12 hectares. It is accessible to the West by a 21 meters wide street, the *Riemeisterstrasse*. Streets within the study area are 10 meters wide. *Holzungsweg* situated East is 15 meters wide because of the larger pedestrian area allocated to the neighboring lot. Both streets have the same direction. It is the same for the streets *Am Hegewinkel* and *Hochsitzweg*. These have the characteristic to be curved, allowing to identify the start of the pathways oriented north-south through the lot. The curve has the other effect of breaking a too monotonous perspective. North-South streets have facades facing West painted red and East green. They end South on a diagonal visual breakthrough. These methods allow once more to bring more spatial variety to the whole.













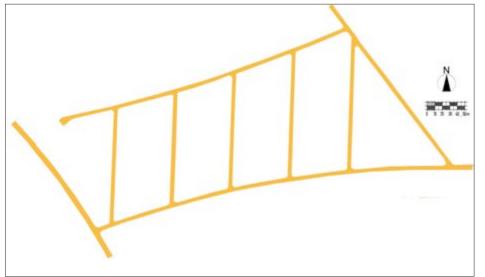
North neighboring lot

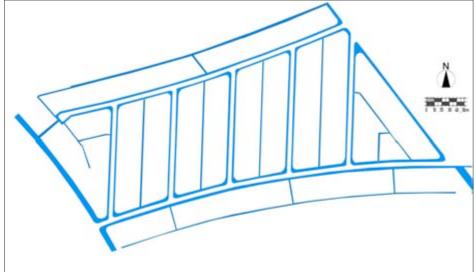
West neighboring lot

East neighboring lot

cusp

The built surroundings are of low density housing adopting a slab typology. The studied lot is of private row-houses. The rows are interrupted by rather random cusps and withdrawals in order again not to concede too much to monotony. The street corners are emphasized with hooks. The area has 416 townhouses and 3 individual houses, giving 35 houses per hectare.















Car lanes are 5 meters wide. Knowing that a street is occupied by parked vehicles, only one lane is passable. The cars are thus forced to drive slowly and are not tempted to cross the area to make a shortcut. Car traffic is permitted, even for foreign vehicles, through absence of gate, but this traffic remains casual.

Shared pedestrian traffic occurs on sidewalks along motorized roads. Their width is 2,5 meters and thus enable easy walking. Thanks to the rare car traffic it is also possible to use the streets as pedestrian connection. The children already use these roads for their games.

Paths cross the lots through the back-gardens. They are not fenced and accessible to all. They allow this way a back-access for every home, thus having two entrances, one being more discreet. These paths are sometimes bordered with sheds built by the inhabitants. They pass through planted areas and look like logging roads.







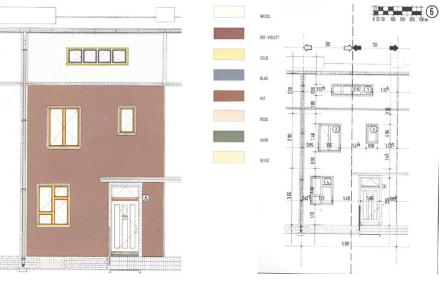




original and modified East entrance



original and modified West entrance





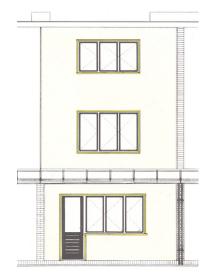
variation on type II on South entrances

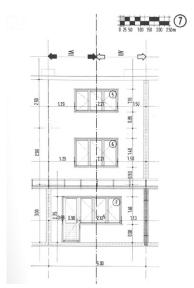
The type II house is the most common along the lot. The repetition of this typology gives coherence to the ensemble. Nonetheless, a variable color scheme according to sunlight exposition introduces diversity in the uniform model. Cool green faces East morning light, dark red western sunset light, bright beige north. A detailed color scheme also applies for windows and doors, every part of the frame having a variable color. Taut breaks the dogma of heliotropic floor plan in order to keep consequent street composition: East and West entrance facades are the same, resulting in different expositions for kitchen and living rooms.

Variations in the typological scheme is a strength of the Onkel Toms Hütte urban design. Type II reverses when entrance face South, the garden facade applies, the white color scheme remains for the brightest facade. The floor plan has to be rearanged for this slight variation of the exterior composition. Taut believes that the plan and the facade are tightly connected, what differs from Corbusean free plan conception.

















type III and II East garden facades

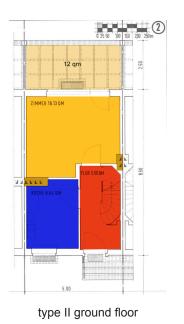
type II West garden facade

The type II garden facades follows the same color logic. Most rows are terminated with an additional type III, which is 6 meter wide instead of 5. The single houses design is derived from this type III. Sometimes a house type don't follow the others alignment, according to an apparent random pattern. These variations have more intuitive reasons and demonstrate the ability to adapt of the design approach.

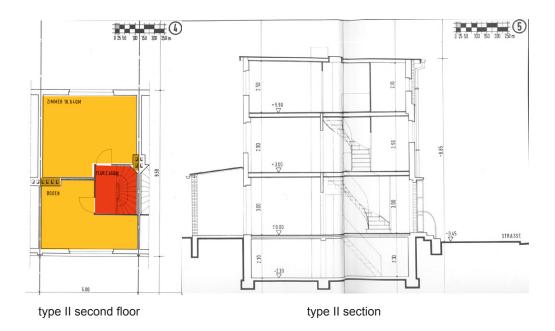
South garden facade with posterior verandas

type IIa North garden facade

Most inhabitants adapted the houses to their needs and taste, most houses being since private owned. The most common modification is a closed veranda in place of the first planned glass roof covered open one. Surface is won to the loss of a bright living room. Often also windows were replaced by contemporary standards. The maintenance of the original colored window design should be encouraged, being one of Taut's signature. More regrettable, the color scheme is sometimes interrupted by a standard grey finish. Sometimes even users implemented ornaments. Historical restorations is now encouraged yet not directive.







The most common house type II is 5 meter wide and 8,50 deep, 3 floors with 3 bedrooms, a basement and an open veranda. The neat floor area is about 100 sqm. The living rooms are on the garden side, with exception of smaller one on the second floor called *Boden*. This arrangement remains even when facing different cardinal directions. It is therefore non heliotropic but more intended for best usability.

3_1_ Taut, the architect of diversity in uniformity

Modern dogmatic and orthodox architecture from the 1920's, the CIAM, the Bauhaus, are criticized by some historians, including Paolo Portoghesi. For him it becomes necessary to rewrite the history of *modern* architecture. An architecture regarded until now as minor as the one of Bruno Taut must be reassessed. Indeed Taut is able to integrate the contradictions rather than to dismiss them by escaping into concepts such as functionalism and aesthetics.

Taut experiences an expressionist period where he starts with Scheerbart the *Gläserne Kette* (chain of glass) correspondence and designs a pavilion for the *Werkbund* exhibition in Cologne in 1914. Then from 1919 to 1921, he imagines an utopian city where its form echoes the ideals of a classless society dedicated to finding its relationship to nature. A collective of principles, comparable to the construction of the cathedrals, give rise to "people's centers" across the whole country. As mentioned previously, he criticizes the capitalist city that he compares to a headless body, the mirror of an utilitarian and selfish society. He imagines upgrading the Acropolis of the city, its crown where community functions would be held.

From 1921 he builds more than 10,000 low-income housing units, he adopts the formal simplification and the large size but refuses heliotropic orientation and dogmatic avant-garde forms. His realistic experience as builder keeps him from the constructive fragility of functionalist works. Through formal diversity he avoids the monotony of rationalist conformism.

Onkel Toms Hütte is far from his expressionist sketches or the symbolism of the master plans for Magdeburg. The dimensions and proportions reveal a different design approach than Gropius or Mies, where volume is revealed by light. Taut's homes are featuring family life. The doors and windows are of contemporary aesthetic and retain a human proportion. He brings the facade back to its Latin etymology, the face. His houses may look unspectacular but he anticipates their degradation by repeating known prototypes. Particular attention to the user and the preservation of certain characteristics makes the happiness of the people, even if their house is not published in all journals. Common elements of the house refer to some conventional methods, such as door frames, gutters, pilasters and cornices.

Each room is identifiable from the outside. As a contrast to the pace of the streets in Berlin, built on the variation of a monotone classical theme, Taut's musicianship is obtained through harmonization and atonality with rows of monochromes. He actually compares the urban composition to the musical composition.

Following the colorful style of the 1910's (Mondrian, Kandinsky and

the *De Stijl*), but not the purism of the 1920's (the hegemony of white), he will never renounce to the utopia of the colorful city.

The color:

- is an element of individuality
- is a mood factor
- values the different daylights
- creates an atmosphere
- is a material
- characterizes a volume
- differentiates architectural elements (attics, openings)
- is pleasing to the user.

The scale remains human. He reuses the achievements of the industrial city without blind adherence to machinist religion. He diverts and recycles standard elements. In a serial composition he allows the appropriation of the inhabited space by applying a strict overall color schemes.

His free interpretation of functionalism remains childless, lacking a comprehensive theory. But Bruno Taut clearly characterizes as an architect capable of diversity, human concerns and fantasy in a revolutionary and avant-garde, but sometimes monotonous and uniform, architectural context.





type III modified East garden facade

3_2_ Onkel Toms Hütte, making users feel home

The particular position of Taut into the modernist movement can also be credited to the careful attention for the inhabitant. Usability primes upon theory and abstract concepts. The generous dimensions of the common spaces show great potential to make the place feel home. The forest like backyard gardens might cement a community feeling. They remind in scale local traditional settlement centers, where the main street forks around the village core: the church. The alleys are wide enough for walks in the sun but tight enough to discourage frequent car traffic. Shops and facilities are also absent of this portion of the housing development, there are to be found along the subway stop distributing the whole ensemble.

The seemingly random variations in the global principle might be understood as an encouragement to appropriate the space. As a matter of fact, nowadays users have engaged a broad set of unforeseen modifications: the closing of verandas, the replacement of windows, more common facade colors and sometimes ornamentation. Long term evolution might have been a purpose of the unspectacular design, some of these changes might yet be considered too odd, making this subtle design look banal. The color scheme Taut developed for facades and opening should be encouraged to remain, giving a sense of unity to the community beyond having obvious plastic qualities.

In 1980, Posener, Pitz, Brenne and Portoghesi were commissioned by the Berlin Senate to state on the situation of *Onkel Toms Hütte*. They excluded strict historical protection of the ensemble but gave recommendations to encourage user initiative and awareness. Their reflections show great understanding of Taut's design philosophy: a uniform urban fabric, that is alterable. Their suggestions for conservation seem to have had some effects, recently renovated houses adopting the original color scheme again.

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Georg Simmel

Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben

1903

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