

## THE NEW TENEMENT: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Friday, 10 May 2013, Mackintosh Building, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Glasgow

### 'Modern Memory and the Revival of the Mietskaserne'

by Kathleen James-Chakraborty (University College Dublin)

#### Abstract:

The revival of the tenement (Mietskaserne) as a model for Berlin dwelling units coincided with an interest in the city as the locus of collective memory. Not only was the formerly maligned housing type now appreciated for its ties to a vanished past, but the multiple strategies adopted by architects engaged in this effort proved transposable to the creation of Berlin's new memoryscapes. The nostalgia that surrounded the old Berlin tenement in the 1970s and eighties is now beginning to be applied to its successor. In particular the recent demolition of O. M. Ungers's housing on Lützowplatz has prompted a reconsideration of this no longer fashionable but nonetheless admired moment when Berlin was building some of the world's most aesthetically ambitious social housing.

Writing in 1929 in *The New Berlin*, Walter Petry described a typical Berlin tenement:

The façade, seen at the necessary distance, is classical: the four stories are arranged with a clear sense of architectural mass and pure symmetry; in the ground story the Acker Street façade is shot through with cellar shops and small stalls selling food; in the third floor, stuck on in flat relief, are Doric columns that carry the cornice of the flat roof. This generally unified organization can only be recognized for a moment, as it is immediately obscured again by the decaying colors, one of which is blackish dark gray, and dissolves into the rows of residual crate-like apartments, of which it offers a veteran and awful example. Exactly in the middle, under the only grand balconies, sits the substantial hole for the residences of the back courtyards, a tunnel giving a view into the interior of the fortress.



Fig. 1. Ackerstraße 163, Berlin, Germany, 1877. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

Condemnations of Berlin's many nineteenth-century tenements, dubbed rental barracks or Mietskaserne, studied the pages of German architecture magazines during the 1920s (fig. 1). There was little nostalgia at this point for buildings whose overcrowded conditions were seen as a major public health menace. Creating robust alternatives to this standard typology was understood by the architects of the period, regardless of the degree to which they embraced avant-garde forms, as one of their key achievements. Yet within half a century attitudes to this long-maligned building type had changed considerably, as it became the basis for a new approach to the city that remains influential today. What happened in the 1970s to alter the profession and the public's appraisal? How did these changes in perception in turn influence not only the resurrection of the tenement, but also the evolution of Berlin architecture more generally and indeed the role memory is seen to play within it? Finally, how have the threats now posed to the survival of the new tenements of the 1980s affected how all Berlin tenements are in turn being viewed today?

Petry's words, in which from a distance the tenement might almost be a palace, gives a clue to this process. The rental barracks shared a basic typology, at least when viewed from the street, with its upscale counterparts, the middle class apartment block and even the aristocratic palace. By contrast, there was less confusion about the alternative. Although during the 1920s blocks with similar exteriors could house either workers or the bourgeoisie, postwar high rise housing was almost completely inhabited by those with below average incomes. The slipperiness of the class association of residential facades, and the difficulty at times of discerning even residential from civic and commercial uses, when heights remain low helps account for the shifts in attitude toward the tenement.

What seemed in the 1970s to be the end of modernism was marked in West Berlin by nostalgia for the characteristic fabric of the prewar city. The new focus on the definition of the street, rather than the plan of what lay behind it, helped further blur the once important division between apartment blocks and tenements. West Berlin was far less prosperous than

## THE NEW TENEMENT: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Friday, 10 May 2013, Mackintosh Building, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Glasgow

### 'Modern Memory and the Revival of the Mietskaserne'

by Kathleen James-Chakraborty (University College Dublin)

most cities in the Federal Republic, and yet poorer West Berliners were substantially better off than their prewar predecessors. This meant that an unusually large swathe of the middle class could afford units originally inhabited by far wealthier tenants. Many of the old aristocratic districts were destroyed or in East Berlin, yet the absence of the city's former elite made bourgeois flats more accessible to the middle class; only the villas of Steglitz and especially Zehlendorf retained really upper-crust associations. Nowhere was this transfer from the bourgeoisie to the intelligentsia more thorough than in Charlottenburg, where many of the original inhabitants had been Jewish. At the same time, the wall cut off the possibility of further suburban expansion, leaving even the well off in apartments. Moreover, the West German economic wonder resulted in generous subsidies to West Berlin. This further flattened class, and with them housing, divisions. The rise in standards of living, especially for the working class, across the fifties and sixties resulted in improvements being made to many units in even lower middle and working class districts. Only in Kreuzberg and Wedding, both rendered peripheral by the Wall, did what were obviously still tenements continue to predominate.

What would be revived in the late 1970s was not really the tenement, but the apartment building, which was now located where the tenement had been. The distinction was largely a matter of elevators, kitchens and bathrooms, but also of narrow courtyards, which denied light to tenement interiors, but were eliminated in their successors. Moreover even the original tenements were no longer associated with the grimmest poverty. Instead they were now being viewed as part of a cityscape whose wholeness had not yet been fragmented by war and division. And now that modernism was ubiquitous, there was new appreciation for the rather humdrum classicism that decorated the street facades, if not the courtyards or interiors, of all but the simplest of these blocks.

The nostalgia of the 1970s was not, of course, unique to Berlin. The reaction against modernist planning, and particular modernist high-rise housing epitomized by Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961, was similar across much of

Western Europe as the low rise housing estates of the 1920s, whose planning was informed by the garden city movement even as much of the architecture eschewed its sentimental recall of the vernacular, was replaced by towers. Equally crucial was the publication in 1966 of Aldo Rossi's *Architecture of the City*, translated into German in 1973 after Rossi was appointed to a guest professorship at the ETH in Zurich.

The origins of memory studies, now one of the principal pursuits of scholars from across the humanities, lie largely in architecture, and very specifically in the architectural theory that inspired the revival of Berlin's apartment blocks. Rossi was key to both. He argued against modernism's emphasis on functionalism, claiming that good buildings long outlived their original purposes. Such structures he claimed, quoting the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whose work had hitherto had little impact outside France, were the locus of collective memory. The term consequently gained immediate currency in advanced architectural circles in Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Britain, and the United States. At the same time, the solution he proposed – a reliance on typology – was relatively generic and did not insist on attention to the cultural or spatial particulars of individual structures.

Rossi's book, which was based in part upon his positive view of East Berlin's Karl Marx Allee, was a seminal text for those who would spearhead the repair of Kreuzberg through the re-invention of the rental barracks as contemporary social housing. These included O. M. Ungers, Rob Krier and Josef Paul Kleihues. From 1979 to 1987 Kleihues led the International Building Exhibition that converted West Berlin's poorest corner into a showcase of new thinking about architecture and urbanism; Rossi contributed housing on Wilhelmstrasse. Here he matched the cornice height of his neighbors, and broke the block down, both through variations in massing and color, in ways that resonated with the pattern of older housing while not repeating its classical detail; parts of the building extended more deeply than others into the garden behind; there were none of the courtyards characteristic of the district's original tenements.

## THE NEW TENEMENT: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Friday, 10 May 2013, Mackintosh Building, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Glasgow

### 'Modern Memory and the Revival of the Mietskaserne'

by Kathleen James-Chakraborty (University College Dublin)

IBA designs fused respect for historic scale and relation to the street with the opportunity to pair stylistic experimentation with what were, in most cases, relatively conventional dwelling units. The results differed in two key ways from architecture associated in the United States and the United Kingdom with the neo-liberal economic policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. First, there was much less gentrification. In place of Canary Wharf's commercial offices, IBA featured subsidized housing that, while intended to attract white-collar workers, also housed Turkish immigrants in impressive numbers. Nor was there in Kreuzberg any of the sentimentality on view at Seaside. In Berlin the respect for typology was typically implemented independently of classical detailing; what was posited as a return to urban order remained largely the realm of abstract architecture.

How that abstraction was to be derived from historical precedent was a key question in a neighborhood whose tenements had always existed in close physical and typological proximity to the palaces from which first Prussia and then Germany were governed. Wilhelmstrasse, for instance, was long synonymous with the national government; along with the work of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, the ministries that lined it provided a key source for the rationalism espoused by many IBA architects. Would the memory of these forms or the policies implemented in these spaces prevail? This was an open question in the 1980s, when Kliehues dreamed of recreating the demolished Prince Albrecht palace. Built in the 1730s and renovated by Schinkel, it had served during the Third Reich as the headquarters of the SS. Instead, in what became the first step towards the creation of the Topography of Terror, a grassroots initiative excavated the foundations. Rossi's housing stands just across the street.

The debate opened up here between whether the organization of the façade or the facts of the ground plan was the locus of collective memory proved also be between a history of form, largely detached from social context, and one which grappled more openly and effectively with the most troubled chapters in the city's history. Strategies for housing developed during the IBA morphed after the fall of the wall to serve as

templates for the commercial and civic redevelopment of much of Mitte, the historic heart of the city, which had been located entirely in East Berlin, as well as for new memory-scapes. Peter Eisenman's IBA housing block at Checkpoint Charlie of 1981-85, Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum of 1989-99, and Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, of 1997-2005 represent distinct, but related, examples of the way in which the revival of the Berlin apartment block came to serve very different purposes.



Fig. 2. Peter Eisenman, Housing block at Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin, 1981-85. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

Eisenman's original Berlin commission was for a typical IBA block (fig. 2). He described its decorative grids and torqued massing as the result of juxtaposing the geometry of the eighteenth century customs wall, the East German wall, both of which ran right behind it, and the Mercator map. A similar mapping exercise, but one that broke free of the street line, lies at the core of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, whose roots in the IBA have been recently explored by Paul Jaskot. Rather than

## THE NEW TENEMENT: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Friday, 10 May 2013, Mackintosh Building, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Glasgow

### 'Modern Memory and the Revival of the Mietskasernen'

by Kathleen James-Chakraborty (University College Dublin)

being derived from an apartment block or tenement, however, this design was inspired by Erich Mendelsohn's Metal Workers Union headquarters, whose acute angles Libeskind detached from their origin in the footprint of its site (fig. 3). While these buildings detached the construction of memory from the admiration for order that underpinned much of the IBA, Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe recalls the regularity with which the iconic Berlin block, whether palace, apartment building, commercial block, or tenement, Prussian, Second Empire, or postmodern, fronted the street (fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum, Berlin, 1989-99. Source: Wikipedia Commons.



Fig. 4. Peter Eisenman, Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin, 1997-2005. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

The conversion of the IBA strategies into Critical Reconstruction unhooked them from their origins in housing and, over the course of the 1990s and the first generation of the new millennium, moved them from the forefront to the rearguard of international architectural culture. Maintaining Berlin's low-rise

character once market forces moved in proved popular with both cultural conservatives and social activists, although not often with the star architects who had become enamored of the city during the IBA or the hipster public fostered by that earlier effort's effective public relations. There is some evidence, however, that a gap is opening up within the city between the reputation of the IBA and that of the Critical Reconstruction adopted by most, but not quite all, of its protagonists. Earlier this year one of the key IBA blocks was demolished; none of the structures yet enjoy protection as listed monuments. The reaction to the erasure of Ungers's housing on Lützowplatz proves that there is considerable affection for the IBA, which is now appreciated more than its immediate progeny.

Ungers was with Rossi the key figure in launching the approach to the Berlin apartment block enshrined in the IBA. His conversion came after witnessing the limitations of the high-rise Märkisches Viertel, which he had helped design. In 1969 he resigned his professorship at the TU Berlin to become chair of the department of architecture at Cornell University. His students there included Rem Koolhaas and Hans Kolhoff, both of whom participated in the Berlin summer school session he led in 1977, which helped map out the approach the IBA would take. His housing on Lützowplatz was, although not the first example of his new approach to the city, one of the first and most prominently sited of all IBA buildings (fig. 5). Completed in 1983, it lay well to the west of most other contributions. It consisted of a six-story block facing the street with three free-standing blocks set into the rear garden. These were meant to resemble villas, although they in fact housed more apartments. A much larger and entirely commercial building by Modersohn & Freiesleben, a firm whose work is more than a little indebted to Ungers frequent insistence on the cube, is to be built on the site.

## THE NEW TENEMENT: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Friday, 10 May 2013, Mackintosh Building, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Glasgow

### 'Modern Memory and the Revival of the Mietskaserne'

by Kathleen James-Chakraborty (University College Dublin)



Fig. 5. O. M. Ungers, Lützowplatz Housing, Berlin, 1983, demolished 2013. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

Ungers's housing stood for only thirty years. The return of the free market to Berlin has resulted in the erasure of one of the icons of West Berlin's days as a supposed capitalist enclave. It is being mourned, however, not as the seminal work of European postmodernism whose gables anticipated the use Rossi would make of the same device on Wilhelmstrasse, but as an example of modern social housing, about to be crowded out by market-driven speculation (its much denser replacement is to include a hotel and offices as well as apartments). This is possible because in Berlin the social housing estates of the twenties, many of them designed by Bruno Taut, usually maintained the same scale and, crucially, the same strong street walls, as the tenements to which they otherwise provided such a powerful alternative. Key in the work of both Taut and Ungers was the replacement of the back courtyards with green space that on Lützowplatz also contained the villas. Furthermore, the relatively lean IBA budgets precluded the revival of classical ornament, even had their architects wished to apply it. Today it is the social purpose, rather than the whiff of domestic sentiment entirely absent in Ungers' later work in Berlin, that accounts for the appeal of the vanished Lützowplatz ensemble.

For more than a century Berliners and their architects have fought over the appropriate appearance of the city. Housing has always played a key role in that debate. Even participants have, however, often confused,

sometimes purposely so, building types that indeed shaded into each other. Berlin's tenements, old and new, retain such a robust reputation today in part because it is so easy to mistake them for everything from palaces to office blocks. The ubiquity of their facades, which were also relatively similar at most particular moments in time (the IBA being the greatest exception), masks the variety of their interior organization. From four to seven stories, as long as they hold the street line, all are, now that the worst of the city's poverty has long since been eradicated, part of an elastic and often reassuring continuum that has served as the basis for almost everything that has been erected in Berlin for more than a generation.