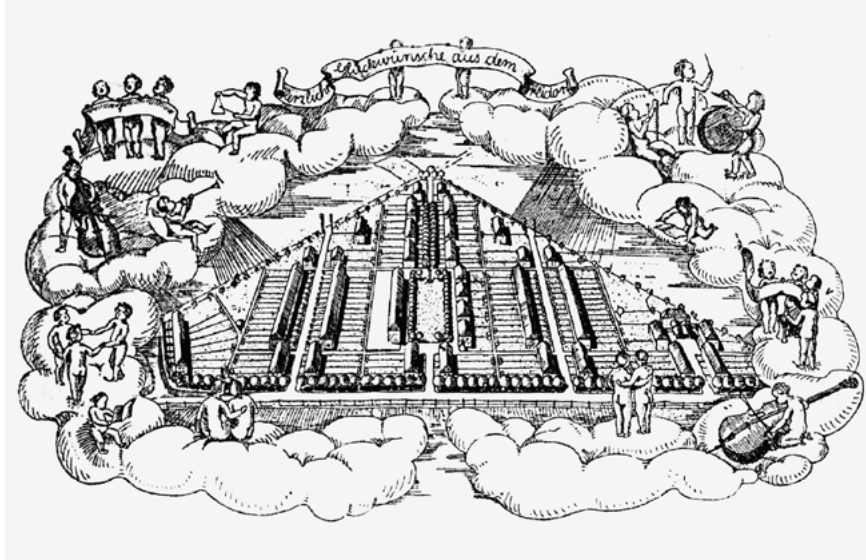


The City of Janus

A Close Reading of Hannes Meyer's Freidorf

Stéphanie Savio



Christmas Postcard.
Hannes Meyer, Basel: USC, 1920. © Staatsarchiv Basel-Landschaft.

In 1938, at a conference in Mexico on architectural education and urban planning, Hannes Meyer (1889-1954) expressed his political hopes for the discipline. Attracted by Mexico City, where socialists fleeing Spain were finding refuge, Meyer first reflected on his teaching in Dessau and Moscow, before addressing the specificity of Mexico.

Don't forget: architecture is a weapon that has been employed throughout the ages to serve the ruling class of human society! In Mexico you live in a state that is among the most progressive democracies in the world. You should fight for the truly progressive architecture in this state!⁰¹

In a second lecture on urban planning, Meyer presented his early project, *Freidorf*, a cooperative settlement near Basel (1919-24), before evoking a genealogy of ideal cities—including designs by Scamozzi, Piranesi, Weinbrenner, Le Corbusier as well as European underground infrastructure—applying his political analysis in retrospect to the cooperative settlement he designed:

Today, the Freidorf settlement with its cooperative seminar has become the intellectual center of the Swiss cooperative movement, in other words of a land in which even the state, in the form of the Swiss Confederation, is a cooperative.

In this respect it is both instructive and amusing to trace how idealized designs for urban development have changed through the centuries. The ruling social class of the time invariably lurks behind these fanciful entities of the ideal city.⁰²

01 Hannes Meyer, "Erziehung zum Architekten," Lena Meyer-Bergner, Klaus-Jürgen Winkler (eds.), *Bauen und Gesellschaft. Schriften, Briefe, Projekte*, Dresden, 1980: 213, translation by Nicola Morris.

02 Ibid., "Erfahrungen im Städtebau," 217-218.

Rudolf Kündig—lawyer, reformer, president of the Union of Swiss Consumer Associations (USC), the project commissioner—chose the title, Freidorf [free village], in 1919 for both the settlement project and for its future society of co-owners. Following the cooperative notion of “social capital,” the USC realized a primary goal put forward by both the first consumer association—a Brighton group founded in 1828 following the principles of Robert Owen—as well as the Equitable Pioneers of Rochdale: to build a settlement of their own.⁰³

The USC was the first successful attempt at establishing a countrywide coordination of cooperatives in Switzerland. Founded in 1890, its headquarters were located in Basel, where the largest consumer association of the region benefitted from the proximity to the local port on the Rhine river.⁰⁴ The function of USC was to, “help one another⁰⁵ to defend their common interests against outsiders, to establish statistics and provide members with commercial, judicial and administrative information.”⁰⁶ In fact, the rising market share of cooperative organizations alerted actors in the private sector, who called for boycotts and requested higher taxes of the new legal form.⁰⁷ Johann Friedrich Schär, the first USC president, tried to counter the initiative with agreements between both producer and consumer associations.



Portrait collaged over a co-op photograph of an electric mast. Hannes Meyer, 1928.
From Klaus-Jürgen Winkler, *Der Architekt Hannes Meyer. Anschauungen und Werk*, Weimar, 1989: 2.

⁰³ Karl Munding, *Siedlungsgenossenschaft Freidorf*, Basel, 1922: 33-36; Franz Oppenheimer, *Die Siedlungsgenossenschaft. Versuch einer positiven Überwindung des Kommunismus durch Lösung des Genossenschaftsproblems und der Agrarfrage*, Jena, 1922 [1896]: 452-453; “social capital” hints at the mobilized shares of a collective profit for a common investment.

⁰⁴ Hans Handschin, “La fondation de l’Union suisse des sociétés de consommation en 1890,” *Le Coopérateur Suisse* (Jan 9, 1965), n°2: 19-27.

⁰⁵ “One another” refers to the collective entities of the affiliated cooperatives

⁰⁶ USC, *Guide Through Co-operative Switzerland*, Basel, 1921: 115.

⁰⁷ See note 4.

Neighboring countries such as England, Germany, Italy, France and Spain already had similar umbrella organizations. In 1895, a worldwide entity was established in London, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), with the scope to improve the visibility of the alternative economic model, its theoretical and practical self-awareness, and its accessibility to (foreign) goods for the sake of low prices offered to members.⁰⁸

Hannes Meyer's involvement with USC began after leaving a bourgeois orphanage in Basel when he was 16 years old. As an apprentice he drew buildings for the organization's new headquarters and joined meetings of the free land movement initiated by Johann Friedrich Schär. Meyer, at the age of 19, wrote an article on Switzerland's successful public electricity project, in the periodical, *Bodenreform*, published in Berlin, where Schär had been teaching social economics since 1903.⁰⁹

HOUSING THAT CONTAINS ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE

In the immediate post-war period, USC members, with their 360,000 families, represented about a quarter of the Swiss population. Freidorf provided a home for 150 staff of the umbrella organization and their families. Freidorf was organized as a distinct cooperative where the employees and inhabitants would, according to the statutes, both pay rent and co-own the property—as long as the purpose of the settlement cooperative was respected; residents were to engage in voluntary work, take part in the general assembly and buy most of the necessary goods from the cooperative shop—refunds of six to seven percent were distributed yearly, proportional to the volume of each household's purchases. The entry share amounted to 100 Swiss francs (CHF) with an overall project cost of CHF 8,100,000.



Freidorf seen with a house by Melchior Berri in the foreground, from the farm estate established by Basel philanthrope Christoph Merian in 1824. Hannes Meyer, 1921-22. © gta Archiv / ETH Zurich.

⁰⁸ Internationaler Genossenschaftsbund, *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des zehnten Kongresses des Internationalen Genossenschaftsbundes in Basel vom 22. bis 25. August 1921*, London, 1921; see also the monthly and trilingual *International co-operative bulletin* since 1908.

⁰⁹ Meyer, "Ein Sieg der Bodenreform in der Schweiz," *Bodenreform* 19 (1908), n° 23: 722-723; Schär, "1. Untersuchungen und Vorschläge. Die Verstaatlichung der Wasserkräfte," Adolf Damaschke (ed), *Jahrbuch der Bodenreform* 1 (1905): 81-101; Schär, 'Frei-land': die wahren Ursachen der sozialen Not vom Standpunkt der Bodenbesitzreform, Basel, 1892.



A young family working for the umbrella organization USC on the promenade of Freidorf. 1921-22. © Staatsarchiv Basel-Landschaft.

The settlement project had to materialize a substantial advancement of the cooperative economic model. USC director, Bernard Jäggi-Büttiker, formerly a socialist delegate of Basel-City in Bern, had been appointed during the First World War to coordinate a committee for national food security.¹⁰ In the summer of 1921, the 10th congress of the *International Co-operative Alliance* was hosted in Basel. To conclude the congress, international delegates were invited to discover the 150 completed houses of Freidorf—the central cooperative house would be realized in a second building phase—and to inaugurate a memorial stone, shaped as a low pyramid, and engraved to thank the USC for its funding and to wish the inhabitants a life filled by, “altruism, peace and freedom.”¹¹

Announced as the appointed architect by the USC, Meyer presented his early interpretation of the architectural form tested at Freidorf, which was published in the first book on the cooperative experiment in December 1922.¹²

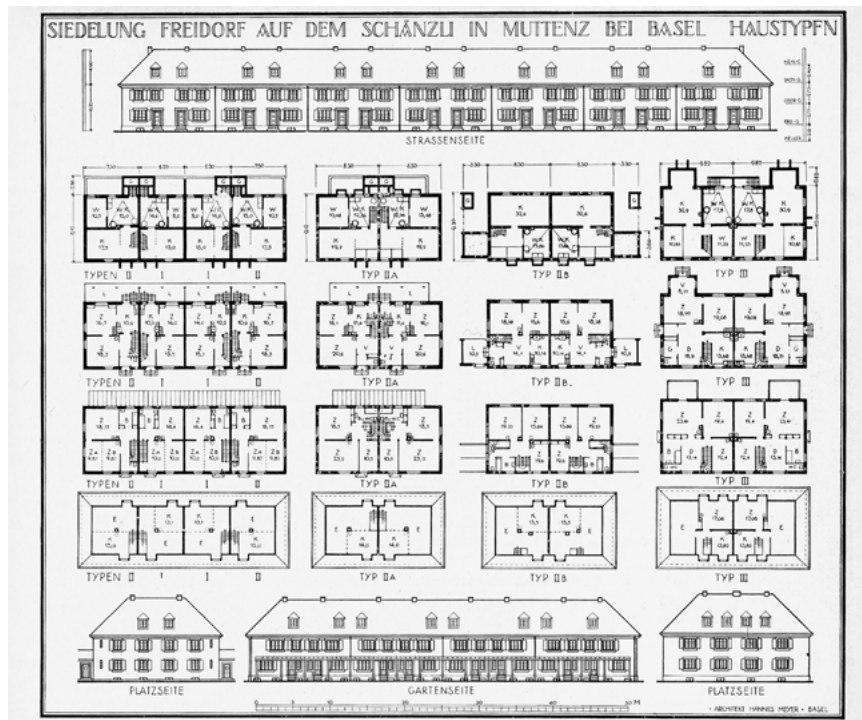
Just as the restless diversity of the modern cityscape is merely a reflection of the jumbled individual intentions of the residents—to those in the know they represent all the ulcers on the social body—so too is the Freidorf construction site merely a manifestation of its [Freidorf’s] inner spirit and an embodiment of its cooperative action: the fully cooperative community of 150 families in the honeycomb-like cellular structure of a settlement. Thus, the rigorous bylaws that are inherent to the structure of the organization are consistent with the rigid layout of the exterior; the unified spirit of the settlers corresponds to the repeated form of the housing blocks, the homogenous type and color of the houses, and the consonance of the building elements; and the coherence throughout the site reflects the united will for a full cooperative. And is it consequently an attempt at symbolism? More

10 Henri Pronier, “Mesures de guerre en 1918,” *La Coopération* 16 (Jun 13, 1919), n°12: 1 (Archives of Baselland).

11 Meyer, “Der Baugedanke” [On Construction], *Siedlungsgenossenschaft Freidorf*, 1922: 77, translated by Nicola Morris.

12 Early publications mentioning Meyer were: Eberhard Vischer, Robert Rittmeyer, Kunstgewerbemuseums der Stadt Zürich (ed.), *Wegleitungen. Sonder-Ausstellung: Bebauungspläne Siedlung Freidorf Muttentz und Gartenstadt Piccard, Pictet & co, Genf, 13. September bis 28. September 1919*; 6; Schär, Damaschke, “Die Siedlungsgenossenschaft Freidorf,” *Bodenreform* (1922): 168; both Jacques Gubler and Martin Kieren pointed at Meyer’s repeated readings of Freidorf: Gubler, “Das Freidorf und die Nostalgie der Zukunft,” *Hannes Meyer. Beiträge zum 100. Geburtstag 1989*, Weimar, 1990: 21; Kieren, *Hannes Meyer. Dokumente zur Frühzeit: Architektur- und Gestaltungsversuche 1919-1927*, Heiden, 1990: 32-33.

than that: it is a struggle for the truth. For the community is propped up by the pillars of the architecture: simplicity, uniformity, truthfulness.¹³



House types. Hannes Meyer, 1922. From Henry Faucherre, Hannes Meyer, Karl Munding, Johann Friedrich Schär, *Siedlungsgenossenschaft Freidorf*, 1922.

While the typification of the exterior was strictly maintained for economic reasons and with the intention of symbolically representing an innermost unity, the dwellers' individual differences were expressed in the interior, due to the specific selection by the future tenants regarding both finishes and house type. Three primary types of house plans proposed a gradient that went from the industrial worker home to the bourgeois household. Apartment houses contain four to six rooms of similar dimensions: a living room and a dining room on the ground floor, two to three sleeping rooms on the first floor (with an optional partition of the children's room in the smaller house type), and a screed (equipped to be inhabited in the larger house type). On most ground floors, a kitchen-laboratory is located on the way to the kitchen garden, benefitting from a direct access to the cellar. The fully excavated basement level also provides space for a laundry and heating system.

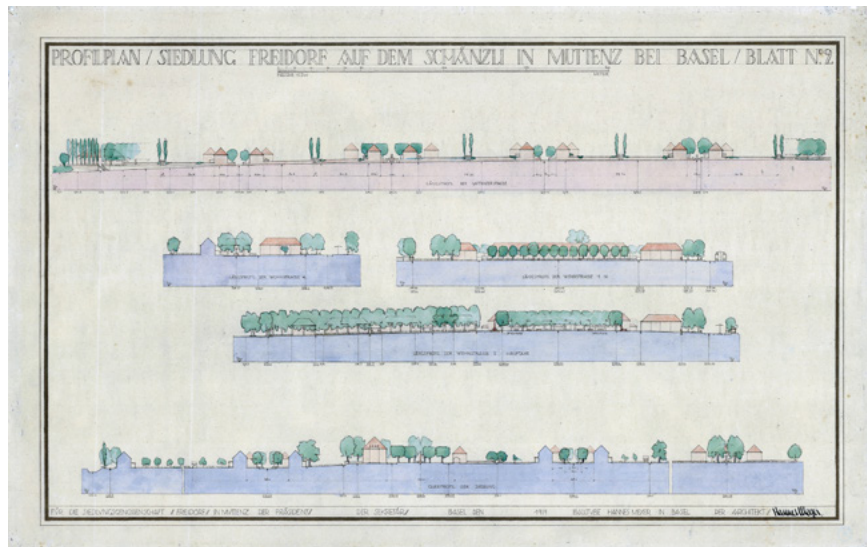
The main variations between the five types lie in both room dimensions and circulation. In houses of the first type, for example, most spaces dedicated to domestic tasks such as kitchen, kitchen garden, cellar and laundry align with doors and stairs on all three stories. The plan rationalizes the walking distance for domestic work, while rooms dedicated to sleep and gatherings occupy square spaces on the side. Houses of the first type have mostly two facades, and occur 110 times in rows of four or 14, as well as in an exceptional row of eight. In the plan, they resemble a “small house for an industrial worker” [*Kleinwohnungshaus des Industriearbeiters*],¹⁴ with a combined central heating and cooking unit and standardized building elements, such as windows, stairs and furniture, typified and exhibited in

13 Meyer, 1922, 58.

14 Rainer Metzendorf, "Von Hüttenau bis Freidorf—Entwicklung der Kleinhaustypen," *Hannes Meyer—Beiträge zum 100. Geburtstag*, Dortmund, 1991: 39.

Darmstadt in 1908 by Georg Metzendorf (whose office Meyer worked for).

Houses of the *second type* have three facades and occur 30 times in three variations (2, 2a, 2b) with progressively larger dimensions. The stairs twist in several directions and accommodate an additional visitor's toilet and a vestibule. In two of the three variants, the disposition of rooms changes with regard to the urban setting. In the third variant (2b), houses face the main square, the playground and the cooperative house; kitchen and living room are swapped, and the entrance moved to the side, behind a garden wall. These twin houses look like the individual homes surrounding the church of a *beguinage*—a symbolic vis-à-vis between individuals and something bigger.

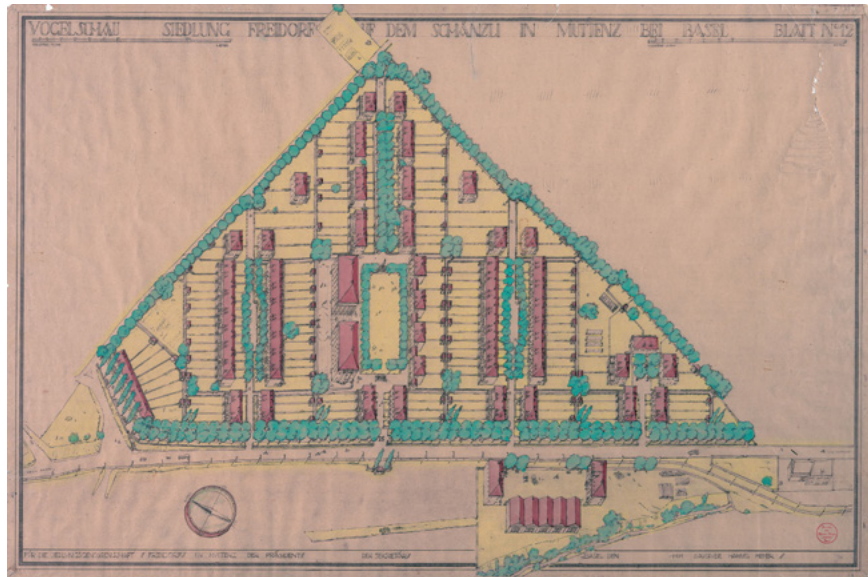


House types. Hannes Meyer, 1922. From Henry Faucherre, Hannes Meyer, Karl Munding, Johann Friedrich Schär, *Siedlungsgenossenschaft Freidorf*, 1922.

Houses of the *third type* are comprised of five twin houses and ten dwellings. Each unit is provided with a larger kitchen, facing either the street or the square. Their large garden is accessed from both the home's side entrance as well as the winter garden—which otherwise forms an extension of the living room. The cellar also is accessible in two ways, from the interior or the exterior. And the vestibule is repeated on each floor. The very necessity of the third type, the most generous habitation within the settlement, had been questioned by Rudolf Kündig during an early collective consultation. Yet in the juxtaposition of different living conditions, a principle of cooperation is materialized: the idea that *solidarity* among people provides a larger and more stable access to property than charity. Gathered at the same address, citizens of different beliefs, confessional and political (in-between liberalism and socialism), agree to regard their opinions as a private matter (neutrality) for a higher good (common property and cheaper investment), while taking part in committees and general assemblies. This is a depiction by Meyer from 1925:

A cellular building. Containing all kinds of animals, the smells and noises of the lapdogs and guard dogs, bee colonies, ducks, tom cats and queens, cocks and hens, tortoises, rabbits, goldfish, motorbikes, harmoniums, looms, pianos, sewing machines, hand organs, phonographs, carpet beaters, drums, and canaries. Containing all kinds of beliefs about the world from the dissidents, ascetics, anthroposophists, athletes, altruists, footballers, egoists, communists, Methodists, conservatives, Grütlians, vegetarians, nonsmokers, and the renegades of all these schools of thought. Containing

all kinds of people who are newspaper writers, workers in a shoe factory, warehouse workers, typesetters, every level of bureaucrat, typists, theoreticians, educators, the educated, pupils, merchants, [female] retail clerks, and the majority of those who had been sold: children, females, women, ladies.¹⁵



Bird's eye view. Hannes Meyer, 1919. © gta Archiv / ETH Zurich.



View into the residential courtyard. 1921-22.
From Faucherre, Meyer, Munding, Schär, 1922.

15 Meyer, "Die Siedlung Freidorf" [The Freidorf Settlement], *Das Werk* 12 (1925), n°2: 50, translated by Nicola Morris.

Studying the urban form and the distribution of types reveals Meyer's attempt to form a whole, representing the cooperative ideal in the post-war period.¹⁶ Looking closer, Freidorf's site plan is characterized by larger entities than just the housing units. An important characteristic of the site was the regional *road*, a horizontal axis which became the basis for the plan, as a potential opportunity to apply the garden city model by Ebenezer Howard. Four parallel *streets* run perpendicular to the road. At both ends of the main square, parallel to the road, two crossing *paths* give quick access to the cooperative house. The circulation therefore runs both linearly—following the four parallel streets defined by the rows of houses—and on a grid—following the plan's overall orthogonal structure.

Two opposing formal logics coexist in the project's built environment, which is organized both centrally and in clusters. One recognizes an emphasis on the public center, thanks to the main square facing the cooperative house, as well as the symmetry on either side of the central axis. Yet the repeated presence of clusters, formed by the mirrored position of the rows around each cluster's shared space, is equally prevalent, with two variations on each end of the parcel: a north-eastern single row of eight houses facing poplar trees and a group of three twin houses in the south framing a piazza.

The residential courtyard, as Meyer called it, was a 25 m by 100 m collective space at the center of the most common cluster and shared between 40 households. Its density and narrow proportion remind one of early social housing projects in France and Spain, such as the cité Napoléon and the *corrala* housing type. In Freidorf, the length of each home's rear kitchen garden stretched roughly 25 meters long and was intended for private productive and reproductive uses.

The terraced houses present an idea of duality on a smaller scale: the rows count an even number of units, mirrored two-by-two; and the absent free-standing house is replaced by a twin house.

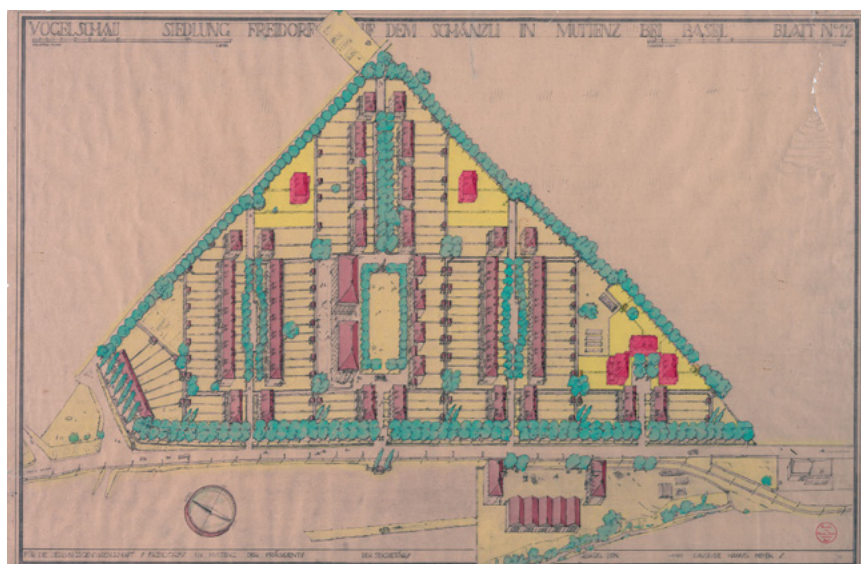
Looking closer at the distribution of the house plans: of the *third type*, two twin houses are mirrored across the central axis on the east, without facing each other directly; and three twin houses in the south create a square. Houses of the third type are off-centered and do not relate to a grid, yet highlight or produce some sense of centrality. The twin houses predominantly hosted the families of reformers and employees of liberal professions, such as USC director, Bernhard Jäggi-Büttiker (in a twin house close to the central axis), but also Johann Friedrich Schär and Hannes Meyer-Herkert, who lived side by side on the almost quadratic square planted with lilies.

Regarding the *second type*, there are three kinds of urban settings in which they occur and that they shape: one setting creates a back to the main square connected by garden walls; another one narrows the perspective of the elongated residential courtyards towards the east, in pairs; and a third setting closes some of the house rows, on the central street and at the north-west edge. Compared to houses of the third type, scattered like confetti in the eastern periphery, the distribution of houses from the second type stresses the two crossing axes and constitutes the beginning of a grid. The semi-detached houses mostly hosted employees, such as the president and vice-president of the settlement cooperative, but also a librarian, an electrical engineer and the head of the savings and auxiliary fund, who lived on the central rectangular square, surrounded by plane trees.

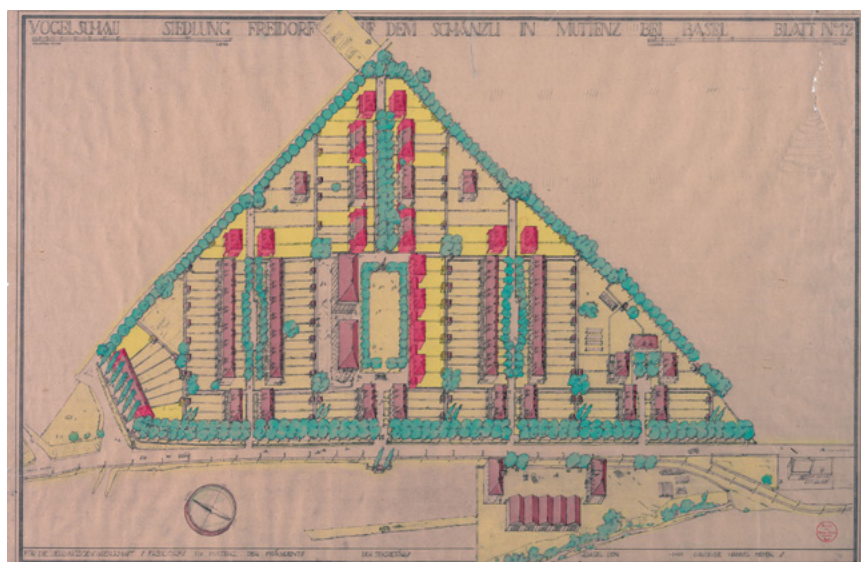
Row houses from the *first type* appear along the main road, in both secondary axes, as well as in the central axis in the east. Houses of the first type form the main structure of the settlement as gates, punctuating the wall of entrances, or as a constitutive element of the largest clusters, with mirrored rows of 12 to 14 houses.¹⁷ These are the most decisively

16 He stated his intention to form a "closed whole" at a conference of experts on July 8, 1919, in the presence of Hans Bernoulli, while describing a compromise between terraced and twin houses (Staatsarchiv Basel-Landschaft).

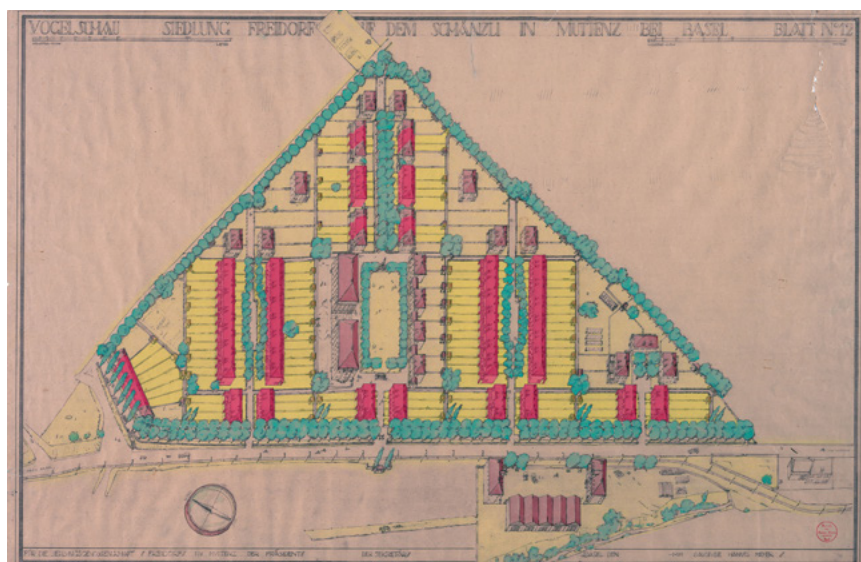
17 The large cluster on the central axis (east) is formed by three mirrored rows of four houses, therefore counting four houses less than the clusters on both secondary axes.



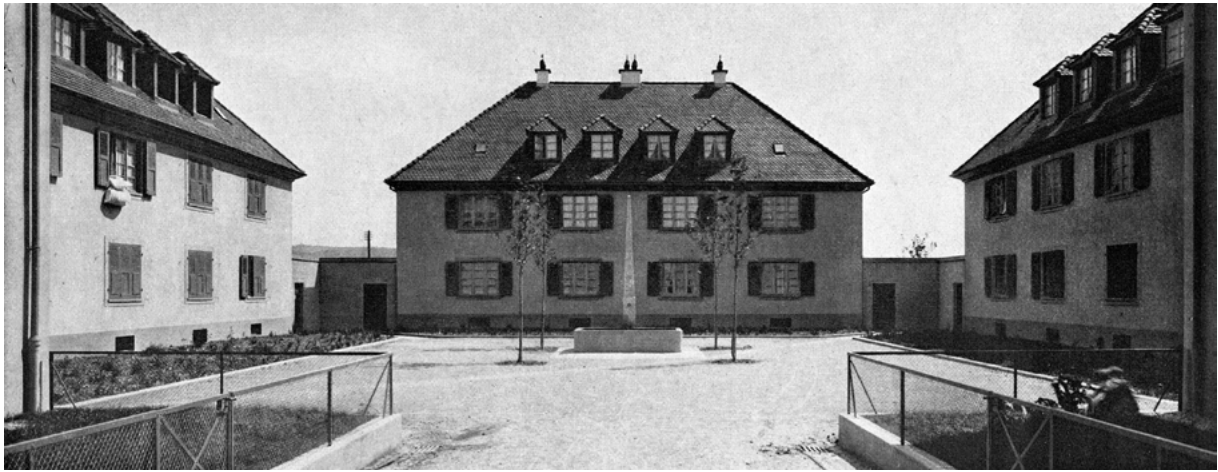
Bird's eye view highlighting houses of the third type.
Hannes Meyer, 1919. Drawing edited by the author. © gta Archiv / ETH Zurich.



Bird's eye view highlighting houses of the second type.
Hannes Meyer, 1919. Drawing edited by the author. © gta Archiv / ETH Zurich.



Bird's eye view highlighting houses of the first type. Hannes Meyer, 1919. Drawing edited by the author. © gta Archiv / ETH Zurich.



The residential square (third house type). 1921-22. From Faucherre, Meyer, Munding, Schär, 1922.



Left: House rows (second house type). Photo Hoffmann, 1924-25. © Staatsarchiv Basel-Landschaft.
Right: The promenade. Photo Hoffmann, 1937. © Staatsarchiv Basel-Landschaft.



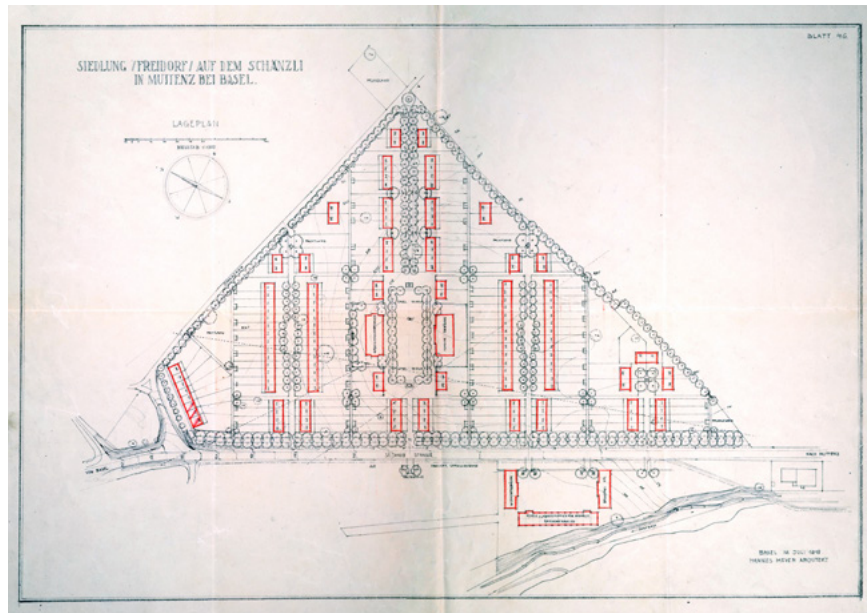
Single row of eight houses (first house type). n.d. © gta Archiv / ETH Zurich.

linear structures: the residential courtyard planted with fruit trees as the most collective space; and the promenade along the wall, with walnut trees and a collection of nearly 2,000 perennials from international origins, as the most cosmopolitan space. At the other end of the spectrum, the single row of eight houses facing poplar trees provide the ultimate vis-à-vis with nature.

COOPERATION AS AN EXTENDED FORM OF HOUSEKEEPING

“Set on the peak of a high terrace,” and signaling the playground in the center, the cooperative house was described by Meyer as the heart and brain of Freidorf: “the heart referring to the store and the restaurant, while the brain is the school and the assembly hall.”¹⁸

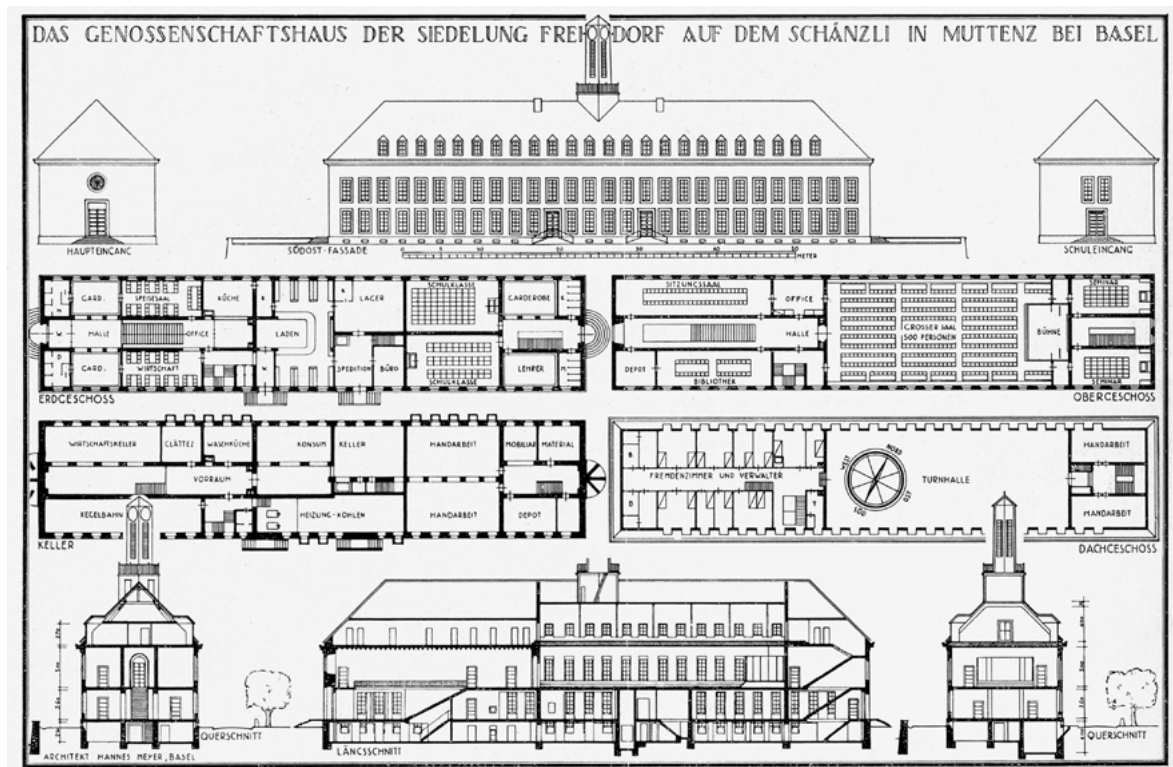
The building has three entrances. The school’s entrance in the east is surmounted by two windows, and gives access to two classrooms, two rooms for further training and the gymnastics hall. Facing the square, two entrances lead to either side of the cooperative shop, one for the shopper and one for the worker. The symmetry echoes the theoretically equal status of both parties as co-owners of the goods, either collecting or distributing them.¹⁹ The entrance on the west is decorated with a bas-relief of a flying male body, looking frontally at the visitor. Through a transverse vestibule with four columns (with the restaurant and bar on either side), a long staircase in the center, illuminated by a circular window, leads to the assembly hall, a library and a meeting room on the first floor.



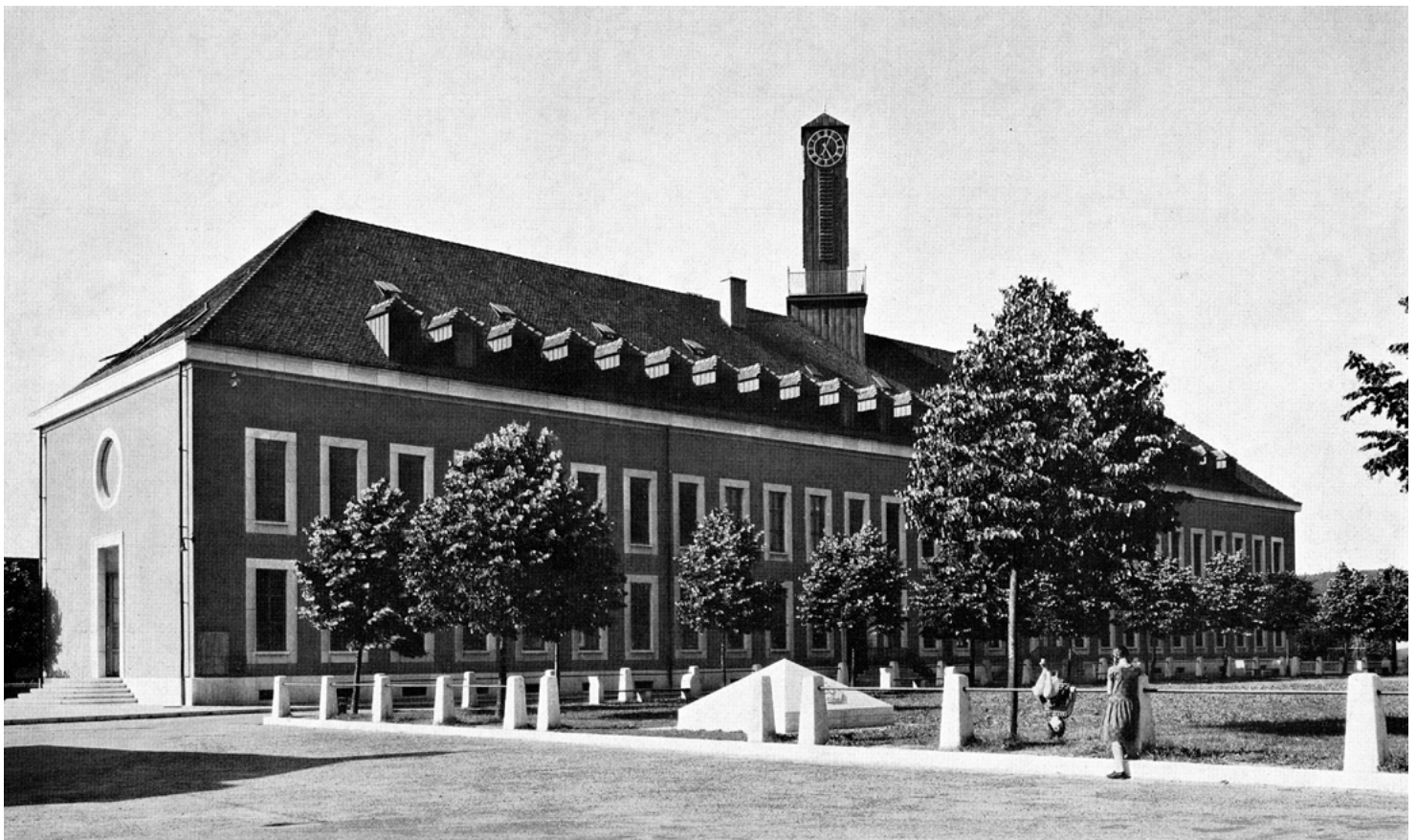
Early site plan with two public buildings.
Hannes Meyer, 1919. © Staatsarchiv Basel-Landschaft.

¹⁸ Meyer, “Der bauliche Organismus” [The Structural Organism], *Samenkörner* (Apr 1920), n°4: 55, translated by Nicola Morris.

¹⁹ Arie Sharon’s notes from Meyer’s course on the cooperative at the Bauhaus: <https://www.ariesharon.org/Archive/Bauhaus-and-Berlin/Bauhaus-Materials-1927-29/i-J2cgQMT/A>



The cooperative house.
Hannes Meyer, 1922. From Faucherre, Meyer, Munding, Schär, 1922.



The cooperative house. 1924-25.
From Claude Schnaidt, *Hannes Meyer. Bauten, Projekte und Schriften / Buildings, projects and writings*, 1965: 14.



The western entrance.
Photo Hoffmann, 1924-25. © gta Archiv / ETH Zurich.

The cooperative board gathered in this meeting room as well as the seven thematic commissions dedicated to education, healthcare, operations, facilities, finance, entertainment and security. Members devoted their free time to gaining administrative and political skills under the guidance of both commission heads who were chosen by the board. Meyer led the building commission between 1922 and 1926. Dr. Karl Munding, a German theoretician of cooperatives who was invited by Jäggi to settle in Basel, helped shape the program for Freidorf, and later led its education commission together with economist and USC editor Dr. Henry Faucherre.²⁰ In, *Duties and rights of the cooperative employees in the light of the cooperative idea*, published by the USC in 1909, Munding had already expressed his vision:

All real cooperative economies are an expanded form of housekeeping, where the interests are completely in harmony, and love, thoughtfulness, and forbearance prevail, but neither envy nor the spirit of superiority. [...] In the association, economic values are multiplied and increased to a certain degree, even if there is no other motivation than egoism in play; mental and spiritual values, in contrast, can only be triggered and enhanced by “the virtue of giving,” by a public-spirited transfer from one person to another. If it were not possible to carry out this exchange generally, or at least not to a large extent, the material association would remain no more than a fragment that would be ground down to its individual atoms sooner or later. [...] the avant-garde of the full cooperative, cooperative consumers, and

20 Vachan Fomič Totomianc, «Deux coopérateurs disparus: Karl Munding (1859-1934) and Antonio Vergnanini (1861-1934)», *Revue des Etudes Coopératives. Problèmes d'Economie Nationale & Internationale, Questions Sociales* 13 (Apr/Jun 1934), n°51: 229-233.

producers, all striding on ahead together [...] has to be an elite corps, and since it has not yet reached that stage it has to be trained for the role. This is the sole way of producing pioneers who can exert direct influence on the large masses of consumer democracy.²¹

While construction advanced—it started in June 1922 and lasted until May 1924—Meyer described the “temple of community” as a replacement of the usual small town’s store, restaurant, school and church—a religious building that was referenced by the most decidedly vertical building element of the settlement.²²

Above it all, a ridge turret sends its regards, balanced at an angle of 45 degrees; it calls the approaching hour with its bell and clock face, replacing the absent church tower as a landmark and repository of time.

Soon the chimes of the copper belly will mark the inauguration by sounding from the roof, and community life will beat in the heart of the cellular structure. In the communal building the residents will assemble to receive instruction, to attend a lecture, to take a meal, and to go bowling, and the Penates deities will move into the sanctity of the cooperative: love, work, pleasure.²³



Outdoor gymnastics. © Staatsarchiv Basel-Landschaft.

The combination of a “cellular structure” and the reception of “instruction,” together with bowling games, seems to call into being a new state socialist lifestyle. Yet the emphasis on love and pleasure echoes the consideration by cooperative movements for the “affective force,” one of the main tenets of Heinrich Pestalozzi’s and Charles Fourier’s social experimentations, which contrast with a Marxist perspective on this point.²⁴

21 Munding, *Pflichten und Rechte der Genossenschaftsangestellten im Lichte der Genossenschaftsidee*, Basel, 1909, partly reprinted in Totomianc, Charles Gide, Werner Sombart, *Anthologie des Genossenschaftswesens*, Berlin, 1922: 231-235, translation by Nicola Morris.

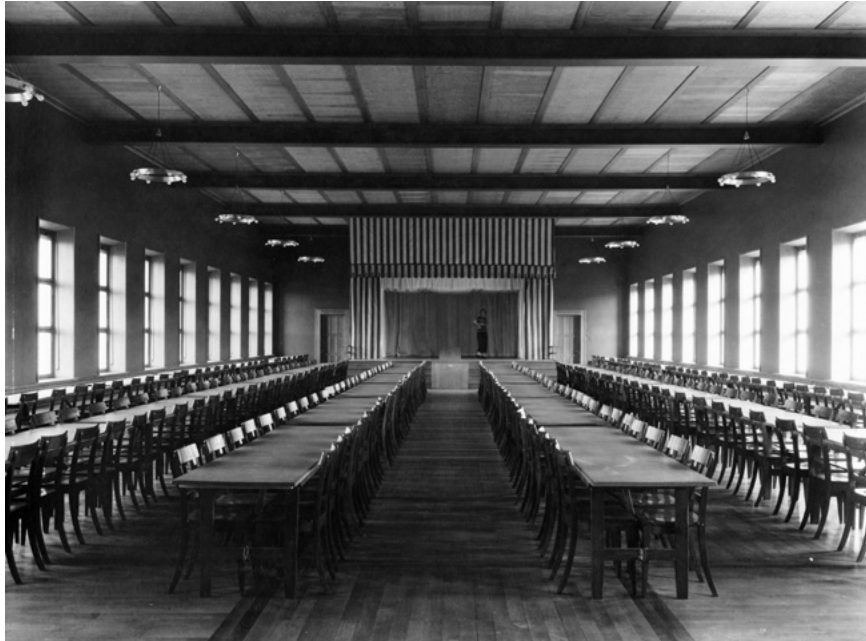
22 Meyer, 1922, 76.

23 Ibid., 76-77; see Meyer’s depicted cultural pessimism on the same topic in *Das Werk* (1925): “Above it all, the chimes call out in joy from the clock turret, announcing from its copper belly with a c-es-f-g-a-c that the hour has struck and death is hastening by.”

24 Schär (foreword), *Siedlungsgenossenschaft Freidorf*, 1922, 12; Munding, “Leitsätze und Erziehungsprinzipien für die Genossenschaft Freidorf,” in Jäggi, Munding, *Richtlinien zur weiteren Entwicklung der Genossenschaftsbewegung*, Dec 1921, 15-21; Totomianc, 1934, 230; Charles Fourier, Hermann Thurow (ed), *Der sozietäre Reformplan*, USC: Basel, 1925.

The building was inaugurated in June 1924, and the first performance of *Theater Co-op*, directed by Hannes Meyer, took place on the stage of the assembly hall. In his text from 1925 for *Das Werk*, the monthly journal of the Swiss architects' association, he added a satirical comment on the facade, viewed from the playground:

*To the left is a “factory” with 112 windows, all exactly the same, huh!*²⁵



Freidorf's assembly hall with the stage set for *Theater Co-op*. 1924.
© Staatsarchiv Basel-Landschaft.

A COMPROMISE BETWEEN WILSON AND LENIN

During his 1938 lecture in Mexico City, Meyer also applied the notion of an “ideal city” to his explanation of Freidorf. At several instances, between 1919 and 1925, however, he characterized the project and the period from which it emerged as a compromise, underlining the contradictory forces at play in its material and immaterial construction.

It was 1919. The postwar era, Wilson, agreements for which world history and the *Zeitgeist* compromised themselves equally. And so the village of Freidorf also became a garden city.²⁶

“Main view,” a painting by Basel artist Fritz Zbinden, was commissioned in 1924 by Hannes for the Swiss entry in the International Exhibition for Cooperation and Social Welfare in Ghent. Part of a series of 24 colorful scenes, “Main view” depicts the city as both an ideal and a compromise in a single image. Lenin and Woodrow Wilson are pictured as a duo, representing a fictional dialogue between capitalism and communism—both leaders passed away in January and February of the very same year. The vivid colors indicate a utopian register, also visible in the presence of the angel, while the money bag seems to reveal a critique of the social model of Freidorf.

²⁵ Meyer, 1925, 51.

²⁶ Ibid., 42.



Fritz Zbinden, "Main View" [Hauptaussicht], 1924.
© Staatsarchiv Basel-Landschaft.

The work of Zbinden can also be considered a compromise in terms of the representation of history—hinting at a lost dream. Because of his project for a league of nations, Wilson received the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1919. The United States, however, never joined that League, which made the radical principle of the self-determination of peoples quite difficult. Meyer's conclusion, from 1925, presents a dialectic between abstract immaterial ideals and material culture:

And that is what Freidorf is like, a child of undetermined time and tightly interwoven circumstances, very much a compromise; in social terms between the individual and the community, in formal terms between urban and rural. The purer individual form, naked and true, and hence undeniably beautiful, embodies every city suburb. The purer communal bonds conjure up a purer form of settlement. To take one example, if the barrier between one family and another—the apparatus of division that is currently traditionally and respectfully honored – should disappear, so too would the garden fences and the separating walls. The result would be jointly cultivated garden fields, district heating, a central boiler system, a central kitchen. To take another example, if the mental attachment to the recently experienced clutter of city culture should disappear, as well as the presumed scale of the house and the section of the small house, so too would the concept of the "street," of "symmetry," of "details." A form of settlement would emerge as an asymmetrical, fractured approach that is built solely on a justified respect for hygiene and profit, where the sun is dawning for garden and architectural machinery for living in, at the same time as it is the bearer of inhuman beauty and purity.²⁷

A SOCIETY OF CIVIL SERVANTS

Produced for *Theater Co-op* in 1924, a second series of about 24 drawings by the Bernese artist Ernst Morgenthaler titled “Jean Co-op” was photographed in the meeting room of Freidorf. Each of the 24 drawings portrays a different kind of worker or employee from the cooperatives affiliated with the USC, including someone at the architecture office of Freidorf—all kinds of professionals who were housed in Hannes Meyer’s project by means of architectural types.²⁸ The aesthetics of the drawings seem to recall the sufferings of several messiahs, critically suggesting that the cooperative ideal—pleasure at work creates added value—only occurs in the very long term.

It leads to a set of open questions that a close reading of the typology of Freidorf raises: does this experiment of the rising middle class in living together, by means of collective organization and institutional subsidies, formalize the new condition of worker-citizen and employee-citizen in the Interwar period?²⁹ Do nation states allow autonomous, cooperative enclaves?³⁰ Or are they contradictory prototypes of an idealized inner structure? A few words from the portrait of modernity by Robert Musil echo with this interrogation: (Every man, he liked to say, has a function in the state: the prince, the worker and the artisan are civil servants!)³¹

28 As part of the building office, beside Meyer, there were three building managers among which A. Metzger, who formerly worked with Karl Moser and on the supervision of settlements; and the architect Rudolf Christ (1895-1975), who formerly won the 3rd prize at the Pic-Pic competition with Edmund Fatio in Geneva.

29 See Massimo De Angelis, “The Production of Commons and the ‘Explosion’ of the Middle Class,” *Antipode* 42 (2010), n°4, 954-977.

30 See Irina Davidovici, “Hybrid Commons. Housing cooperatives in Zurich,” in Stravos Stravrides and Penny Travlou, *Housing as Commons. Housing Alternatives as Responses to the Current Urban Crisis*, London, 2022, 111-131.

31 Robert Musil, *l’homme sans qualités*, Paris, 2004 [1930], 150, translation by the author.



The "Jean Co-op" drawing series by Ernst Morgenthaler. 1924.
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