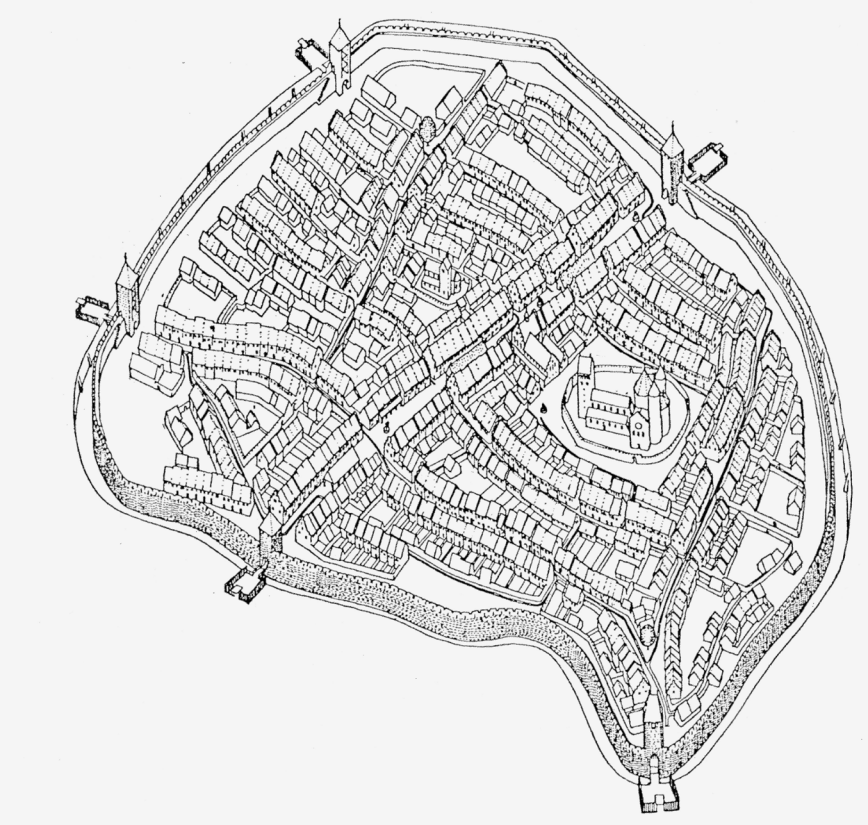
Housing in German Cities

Giorgio Grassi



Axonometric view of the town of Freiburg.
From Enzo Minchilli, *Puglia forme e modelli urbanistici di città antiche* (Bari: Quaderni dell'Istituto di Architettura ed Urbanistica Facoltà di Ingegneria - Università di Bari, 1987), 54.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

A protagonist of Neo-rationalist architecture, Giorgio Grassi is known for his uncompromising and rigorous design approach. Grassi belongs to a generation for whom the architectural project was the overlapping of teaching, writing, and the practice of architectural design. The text translated here in English is a testimony of Grassi's scholarship on domestic space and his commitment to teach students via the use of historical examples. "Housing in German Cities" is a transcription of a lecture Grassi gave at the Politecnico di Milano in 1966, within the course *Caratteri Distributivi degli Edifici* (Distributive Characters of Buildings). In this lecture, Grassi offers a synthetic typological classification of the main developments in housing types throughout the history of German cities. In doing so, Grassi provides numerous projects and cites a diverse group of German architects, including Johann Arnold Nering, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Fritz Schumacher, and Ernst May. The common thread in the work of these architects was their interest in the reform of both housing and urban form. It was not by chance that the topics raised in his 1966 lecture would be further developed in Grassi's long introduction to the anthology he edited of the German journal *Das neue Frankfurt 1926–1931,* first published in 1975, and in other writings.

In the following text, Grassi's main thesis is that many products of the modern movement, such as the *Siedlungen* model or the courtyard block, were part of the longer urban history of the development of German cities.

Indeed, many of the *Siedlung* buildings were closely linked to certain archetypal forms derived from both historical German rural row housing and the Gothic-merchant city, as well as the garden city. On the other hand, many modern courtyard-block typologies, like those built in Hamburg in the 1920s, were the outcome of both the historical urban block made of row houses as well as of the urban monastic traditions, in which the courtyard space within the city was, from its origins, also considered a form of public space. Moreover, the very compositional principles and the architectural language of the German city nourished many of Grassi's design themes as an architect, from the relentlessly even fenestration in his facades to the shadows cast by stark volumes. In this sense, there is a certain echo of Grassi's interest in German rationalism within his own architecture, such as the studies for a housing complex in Borgo Ticino in Pavia, or his buildings near Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. For Grassi the work of the architects discussed in "Housing in German Cities" can be read as attempts to give form to the city through the project of housing. Needless to say, even today, such an attempt remains a good cause for architecture.

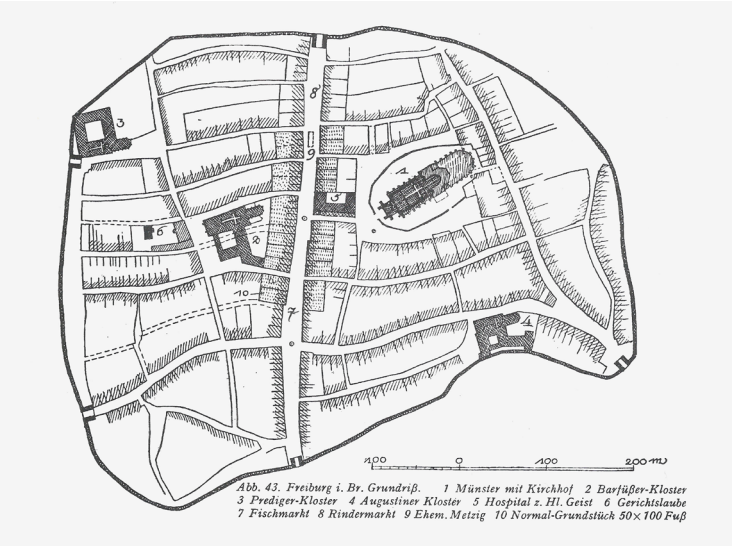
Marson Korbi

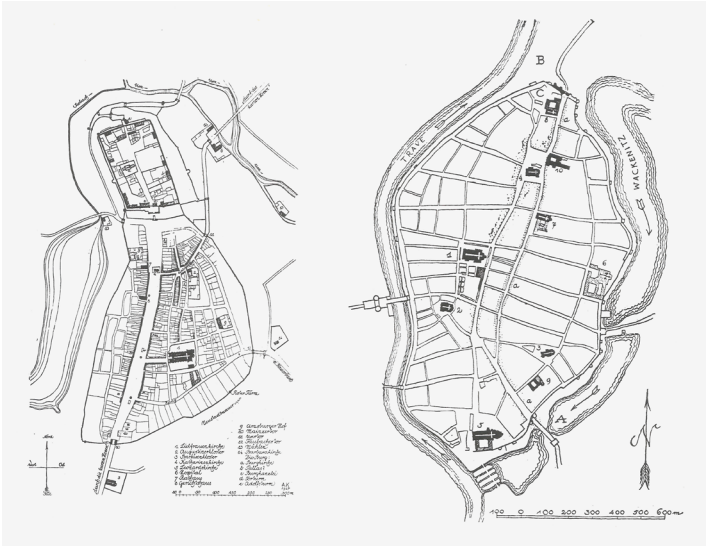
My intention is to discuss the urban residence in Central Europe, focusing mainly on the canonical housing types in German cities.[1] It will be immediately clear that, despite the systematic intentions, the current topic of examination will go beyond any kind of pre-established scheme. The reading will not provide general observations through large approximations. In any case, this short text will be oriented toward a classification system based on the *plan of the dwellings*. In this way, it will allow a series of general observations on the construction of the Central European city. At the same time, I don't think it is necessary to argue here about the legitimacy of a classification of housing based on the form of buildings. There is no need for a unifying classification beyond the history of the facts related to the city's morphology. This classification—which is here taken for granted—should be based on the historical continuity of a certain experience within a homogeneous cultural area.

By starting with a defined geographical area, we assume that a similar classification indicates that we attribute a fundamental role to the form of the dwelling in shaping the city's formal structure. Housing represents a relevant part of these cities, indeed, due to its relationship with the other elements that contribute to the definition of the form of the city. For example, residential buildings in southern cities (like in Freiburg, Strasbourg, or Ulm) are much more related to the *Münster* [Cathedral] when compared to the Hanseatic cities (like Lübeck or Bremen), which have a stronger relationship with the Rathaus instead. The chosen classification can identify certain residential building types. Here, the term *building type* [*tipo edilizio*] indicates not so much the character of residential buildings, related to their particular destination or internal distribution, as the more general formal features of buildings.[2] In other words, the term refers to the building's character in relation to the city's form and design. This means that the parameters for classification will first be based on the *form of the plans* and the *type of land occupation*.

1 Editorial note: Lecture delivered on April 21, 1966. First published as "La casa d'abitazione nelle città tedesche," in Corso di *Caratteri Distributivi degli Edifici*, Facoltà di Architettura del Politecnico di Milano n. 123 (1965/66): 1–23,. The article was later published in Giorgio Grassi, *Scritti scelti 1965–2015* (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2023), 44–65. This text was originally published without footnotes. Footnotes were added by the translator.

2 The term *caratteri* (characters) related to architecture has a very specific meaning in the context of the Italian architecture discipline. The term refers to the formal, functional and typological (distributional and compositional) principles that characterize a building. These elements are often analyzed by the study of the plan and the elevation, being strongly related to the notion of *type*. Not by chance, the course *Caratteri Distributivi degli Edifici* (Distributive Characters of Buildings) is still taught in many Italian architecture schools, reflecting a long and strong tradition of Italy in typological studies.





Left: Plan of the medieval town of Freiburg.
Right: Plan of the medieval towns of Friedberg and Lübeck.
From Minchilli, *Puglia forme e modelli urbanistici di città antiche,* 53, 54.

An important datum that has also been revealed by other fields of research on the city (such as geography) is the independence of morphological facts from the general city structure. From our point of view, this information is very important because this independence is manifested, as Jean Tricart put it, in the "tendency for elements of urban morphology to remain unchanged."[3] The very term 'building type,' on the historical level, expressed the fixedness of the constitutive elements of the urban form. This could confirm the decision to treat the topic of housing in German cities as part of a concrete, time-based experiment that produced a finite series of building types.

Among the forces that determine the permanence of the city's morphological elements, two interest us more directly: the *urban structure* and *building typology*. The urban structure represents a synthetic and analytical notion that applies to the city. It is the element par excellence that individuates both a historical continuity, complexity, and richness, and facilitates the definition of its characteristics. The residential typology is interesting to us because it reflects a series of technical choices and changes in life and customs over time. It can happen that certain forms persist over time, even when the mutation of social and economic conditions, or rather, technical or formal conditions, seems to suggest radical changes. This happens despite the fact that the urban dwelling does not have the same degree of *adaptability* as, for instance, the rural dwelling (what Georges Chabot calls 'the career' of the house) or as some urban collective buildings (such as ancient monuments or historical city walls).[4]

In reality, this permanence is mainly determined by the generality of the constitutive elements of the canonical types of urban housing in relation to everyday life. A typical example is the *Kleinhaus*, or the double-floor single-family dwelling, which had an almost fixed distribution of the parts. This was a widely diffused residential type that was well-defined and completed in the Middle Ages and which has remained unchanged in German cities to this day.

3 Excerpt translated by Marson Korbi. Jean Tricart, *Cours de géographie humaine* (Paris: Tournier et Constans, 1952), 10–15.
4 Grassi is probably referring to Georges Chabot, *Les villes: aperçu de géographie humaine* (Paris: A. Colin, 1948).

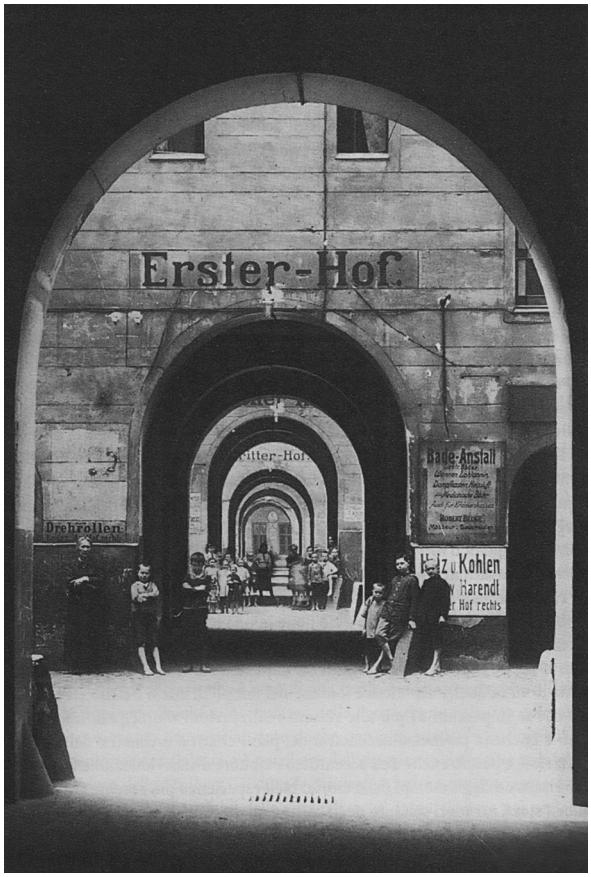
Ernst May, Siedlung Bruchfeldstraße, Frankfurt, 1926–1927.
From Giorgio Grassi, *Scritti scelti 1965–2015* (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2023), 55.

Before looking at the different residential types, it will be useful to discuss a particular fact that is important within the geographical area presented in this text. As we are dealing with urban dwellings in the Germanic area, we are also addressing a particular dimension of residential interventions peculiar to German cities. My intention is to discuss the Siedlung. Indeed, the Siedlungen have characterized the expansion of German cities, particularly during the period from the beginning of the twentieth century to the Second World War, to the point that they became an essential part of the structure of many important cities.

There is no need to discuss the political and economic motives that drove the large-scale construction projects undertaken in German cities during the Weimar Republic. It nevertheless remains the fact that, aimed at resolving the question of affordable housing, this intervention involved the major protagonists of the modern movement. And it was precisely in the cities where these protagonists worked (Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt, etc.) that we find the more advanced formal models of this grand economic and political operation. We find that, in those places, the considerable scale of the intervention was paralleled by a concrete commitment to questioning the main themes of the general layout of expanding cities: in the free areas of the built city, in the relationship between suburbs and minor centers, and in the relationship with the surrounding rural countryside.

To what extent could this large phenomenon be compared with the history of the German cities? I think that, through the experience of the Siedlungen, it is possible to read events that are distant in time alongside recent facts of urbanization in Germany within a unitary perspective (as part of one building experience). For example the large medieval colonization—namely, those extraordinary guided migrations that, beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, determined the foundation of hundreds of cities to the east of the Elbe River, to Poland, the Gulf of Finland, and to the Alps in the south—could be linked with the new villages

and the numerous foundation cities during the Age of Princes (from the two Friedrichstadts of Berlin and Dresden, the new cities of Brandenburg, Potsdam, etc., to Ludwigslust, Ludwigshafen, Carlshafen, etc.). One could also mention the manufacturing settlements that were established in the early nineteenth century (for example, in Upper Silesia), alongside many *Arbeitersiedlungen* and *Gartenstädte* at the turn of the century.[5] Many similar settlements were also built during the centralization and industrialization of Germany, when privileges and autonomy were granted to the rising industrial aristocracy.



Adolf Erich Wittig, Meyers Hof, Berlin, 1873.
From Giorgio Grassi, *Scritti scelti 1965–2015*, 48.

I mentioned the architectural tradition of the Siedlung because this aspect is often overlooked, casting a distorted light on the modern movement's most significant experiences. There is no doubt that, as Hans Bernoulli insisted, undivided land property was the decisive and unifying fact of all those past experiences previously mentioned. This is what connected them to the most recent municipal constructions. But this fact also served as the necessary premise for a clear and ordered plan and a unitary design—and thus also for the formal character of these single experiences, which stand out from the historical examples. In recent times, we find those same characters only in the best projects of the modern movement. More precisely, this was clear in those cases where the logic of the nineteenth-century city was rejected. Certain experiments put forward a radical critique, not only of the model of the dense city, but also of the garden city and the workers' districts built at the beginning of the twentieth century.

5 Workers' settlements and garden cities.

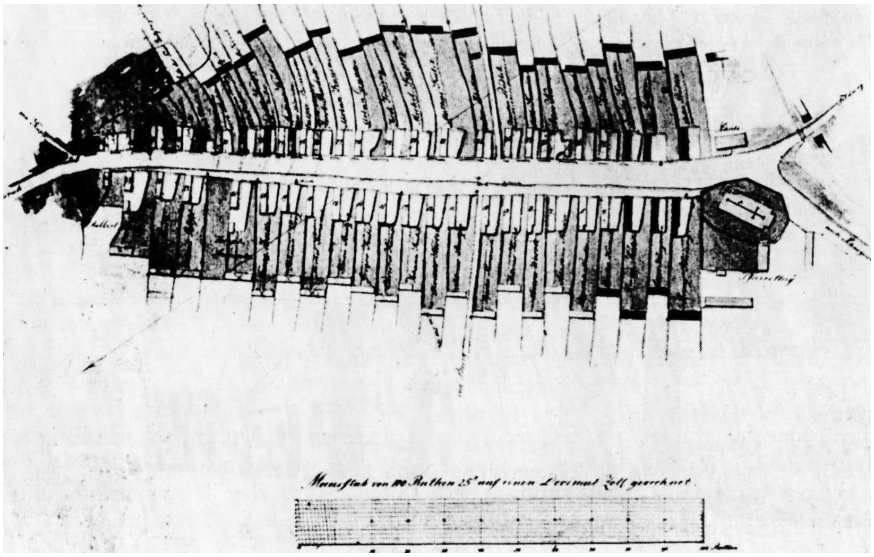
Now, moving on to the canonical building types, I will try to highlight, as previously said, not the characteristic elements related to use, internal distribution, and so forth, but rather their incidence within the urban structure. In other words, I will discuss their role in prefiguring and determining the form and architecture of the city. Following Tricart, a formal classification of urban housing can be based on the floor plan, which can be divided into four main types: the central block; the aggregated block [*blocco accostato*]; the deep block; and the courtyard block. We will examine them separately, except for the first, because, despite being the oldest urban building type (the isolated single dwelling), it did not have a decisive or recognizable role in the process of construction of the city over time.

HOUSING AS A DEEP BLOCK

Isolating this building type from the historical experience means focusing on the relationship between the building and the buildable lot. The type of housing, as a deep block, indicated a particular use of the lot, meaning the entire lot was occupied by the building. In this sense, this typology is a particular case of both the central block (isolated block) and the aggregated one (the row house). This condition was achieved in different ways: by alternating buildings of different heights, or by leaving portions of the lot unbuilt. In the latter case, the free areas had a specific function in relation to the building's use (serving as a longitudinal connection, storage space, etc.). The lot was generally a long, rectangular shape, with the shorter side facing the public space. In this case, the most common distributive scheme followed a comb pattern [*a pettine*] where, given a longitudinal horizontal distribution for each floor, buildings alternated with the internal free spaces that were disposed transversally. This type of building was widely used in Gothic merchant cities, where often the ratio between the short and long sides was 1:4 or 1:5. It is possible to note that, by looking at the historical cadastral urban maps, the parcel subdivision of agricultural land is not that far from this characteristic subdivision of the urban land.

The relation between the building and the public space it faces also depended on its functional destination. Especially in the historical city, the union between the dwelling and the shop, or the dwelling and workshop or storage, often produced very characteristic types which had a deep rectangular spatial layout. This was also conditioned by the use of public spaces, which the shorter sides of the dwelling faced. In cities like Hamburg, for example, on the Stadtmarsch, it was possible to find merchant dwellings on lots measuring up to 60–70 meters, developed as deep blocks with double orientation, with one side (the house and laboratory) facing on the public street and the other side (storage and garage) on the canal. In the case of two parallel streets, there was always a hierarchy between the two. One served as the main street, and the other as a service street, while the housing spaces were adapted to these different functions.

In the historical city, this intensive occupation of the lot corresponded with a very particular idea of the building and urban block. In the medieval city, when there were no specific policies imposing restrictions, we notice that edifices were built as compact blocks. The term *block* has never had such a literal meaning as in these cases. In reality, the Gothic merchant city has often shown this tendency to group and thus isolate its constitutive elements: the block made of houses and workshops, the block made of hospices, hospitals, and convents, the block of the castle, of the cathedral, etc. The resulting space represented a public place (very often destined to house provisional types of buildings, such as loggias or marketplaces).

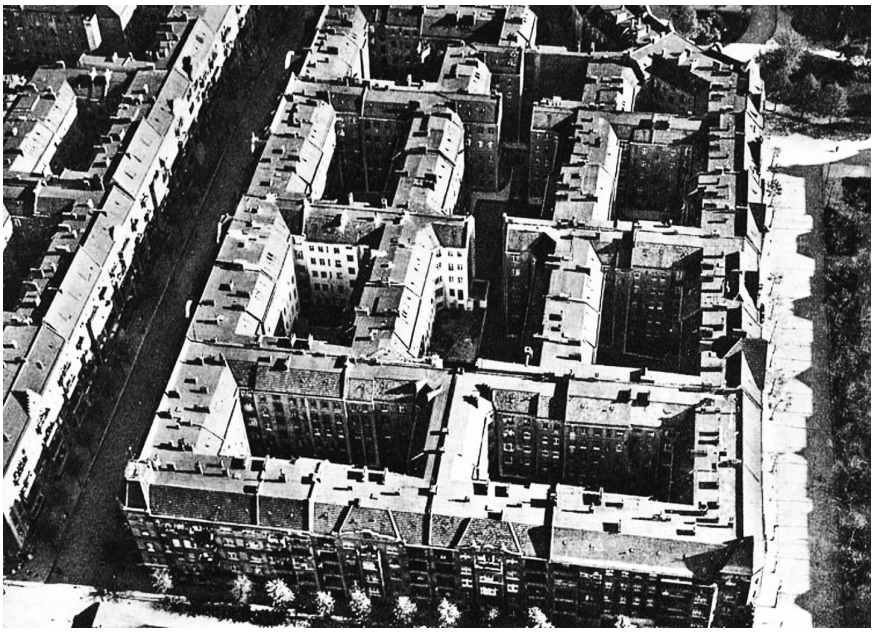


Plan of the village of Alt-Schallendorf, situated in the Opole Voivodeship (district of Oppeln), Poland.
From Giorgio Grassi, *Das neue Frankfurt 1926-1931* (Bari: Dedalo, 2007), 39.

The fact that residences were built as blocks, in the sense of creating *residential units* isolated and distinguished from the surroundings, does not have a clear explanation. It could rather be justified as an objective necessity related to the building techniques, materials, and systems of local construction. A particular type of building that exemplified the relationship between the idea of the block and the construction system was the *Teilhaus*. This dwelling type was built as an irregular structure (timber-framed system) that could stand only if paired with another house, a common building type in the old German cities. It has also to be remembered that the block constituted by this building type was characterized by a dense internal tissue of connective pathways, crossing through the different building units, which formed an internal network of roads, in addition to the external one of the public streets (like, for example, the urban block close to Römerberg in the historical center of Frankfurt).

This *idea of the block* has never ceased being a characteristic element of the formal structure of the European city. But later, it was developed and rationalized at the level of urban design, assuming a different importance, especially in the mutated relationship with the public space. If we think about the modern city, and all those recent projects proposing cities made of large juxtaposed buildings independent from the streets, like Walter Gropius and Ludwig Hilberseimer's slabs or Le Corbusier's *immeubles villas*, we could realize that in the history of cities everything has been included and already experimented with. At the same time, much remained to be investigated and elaborated further.

At the beginning of the century the dwelling, as a deep block, was represented by the massive *Mietskaserne*. These rental barracks (or tenement housing), despite being a common type in the biggest European cities, achieved their most accomplished expression in German cities, especially because of their extraordinary dimensions, a result of the phenomenon of urbanization that emerged during the Bismarck era. Between 1860 and 1890, Hamburg increased from 155,000 to 700,000 inhabitants and Berlin from 400,000 to 1,500,000.

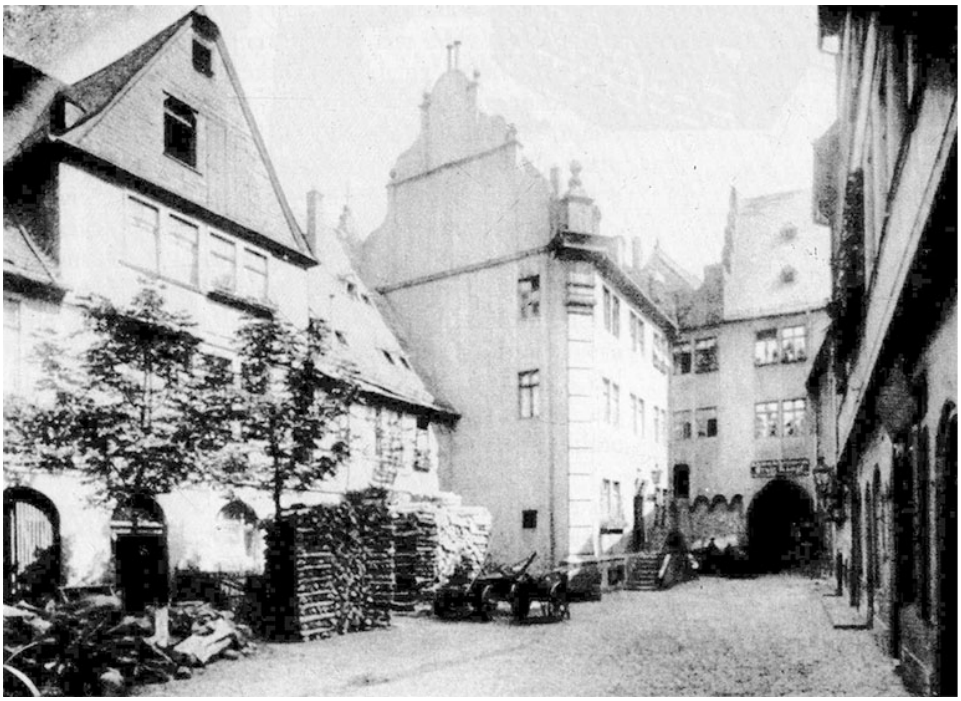


Berliner Mietskasernen or tenement housing, Berlin, 1920s.
Photo by Sasha Stone. From *Berlin in Bildern,* 1929.

The Berliner typology of the *Mietskaserne*, after being legalized by Prussian regulation, represented the highest achievement in Europe with regards to the principle of the maximum use of urban land. On a typological level, this research yielded paradoxical results, such as the famous *Berlinerzimmer*, a corner room receiving light and ventilation from the inner edge of the building. All this obviously has nothing to do with the history of the Gothic merchant city or the previously mentioned idea of the block. As this process was clearly exemplified in the historical centers, it was also applied to the preexisting urban blocks. The clearest case was Friedrichstadt in Berlin, the first expansion beyond the city walls traced by Johann Arnold Nering under Frederick I, at the end of the seventeenth century. The project included large rectangular urban blocks (up to 200 m long and 70 m wide) built along the perimeter, forming large, enclosed courtyards, gardens, and areas for vegetables. As a result of urban police regulations at the end of the century, this part of the city has remained, to this day, one of the areas with the highest building density.

On housing as a deep block typology, we could put forward two considerations. The first concerns our cities, particularly the German cities of today. Clearly, the use of this building type for maximum land utilization influenced a large portion of our cities, particularly the central and intermediate areas with their characteristic network of roads, including the systems of orthogonal and diagonal streets, which produced various forms of urban blocks. All this has represented, until the present, a certain type of city and a way of living in it and using it. When we design, we cannot disregard this type of city, because it still represents, despite everything, the idea of the city we have today: I mean, finally, we relate to the nineteenth-century city in the same way as when it was originally built.

A second consideration is related to the form of the dwelling, based on the disposition and use of the rooms. If we look at both the oldest type and the late-nineteenth-century one, we notice an obvious indifference to the use of the elements of space. Of course, the reason for that is different in both cases, if not the opposite. In the nineteenth century, for speculative reasons, dwelling space and the canonized system of bourgeois life, based on a very defined hierarchy of elements, were reduced to the absurd point of unrecognizability and contradiction.



Left: Engraving of Nürnberger Hof, drawing by Matthäus Merian the Elder, 17th century, Frankfurt.
Right: View of the Nürnberger Hof, from the northern side.
From Giorgio Grassi, *Das neue Frankfurt 1926-1931* (Bari: Dedalo, 2007), 18.

In contrast, the historical city responded the opposite way. Its general character presupposed that customs never entered into contradiction with the structure of the building and its *raison d'être*. The main elements and domestic furniture, which were seen as *utensils*, like the alcove, the chimney, etc., established the function of the spaces. The space and the parts inside the old housing buildings remained undifferentiated until the end of the nineteenth century. These houses were composed of large rooms of undefined use and contained very essential domestic objects. This type of housing was far from the models of the modern city. However, the undifferentiated plan of housing did not completely disappear (for example, in manor villas and in nineteenth-century city housing). These dwelling plans were later questioned in the debate about *functionalism*, through the discourse on *adaptability* and *multifunctionality*, for example, in projects like the house without windows by Hugo Häring and in the competition for an *expandable house* introduced in Berlin by Martin Wagner in the 1920s.

HOUSING AS AN AGGREGATE BLOCK

As said, the type of housing on a deep block is a particular case of the aggregated block type. The reason we isolate the type of the isolated block is to show a clear *idea of the street*: to highlight the relation between the front of the building and the public space in front of it. In this sense, for example, the nineteenth-century rental housing we described above was also an aggregated-block housing type, as it always defined a clear *street front* (namely, the original idea of the street generated by the nineteenth-century city form).

Apart from the borderline example of rental housing, the type of housing as an aggregated block generally shares the same typological connotations and relations with a very diffuse building type known as *Reihenhaus*, or row house. The common definition of a row house is that it is a type of building in which units are repeated in series on a single lot, occupying

it only partially. The free area was always on the inside part of the urban block and was used as a garden. Since the Middle Ages, the row house generally implied the single-family house (*Kleinhäuser*). This building type had such a simple distributive scheme that it became unchangeable. Consequently, this typology was repeated and reproduced in German cities with extraordinary continuity, especially through the collective typologies of housing (such as welfare, religious structures, or corporative communities) that were built in the historical city.

The main street of the village of Baborów (Bauerwitz)
in the district of Leobschutz, Poland.
From Giorgio Grassi, *Das neue Frankfurt 1926-1931* (Bari: Dedalo, 2007), 40.

The row house was always the index of a preordered plan of a land subdivision of parcels. The very definition of this typology implied compositional principles of formal unity and alignment, which derived from the project of a street or public space, seen as an architectural space within the city. One should also look at the parallels in the rural examples, such as foundation villages. This characteristic of the preordered design, typical of the foundation cities, could be seen in the history of urban blocks in German cities until the end of the eighteenth century, when land ownership associated with these interventions was preserved intact. The form of the blocks was always related to the design of the public space, and their dimensions depended on those of the streets and squares they were connected to. Even the subdivision of the elevation along the street and the plot dimensions depended on the characteristics of the public spaces and their hierarchies within the urban composition. The canonical classification of row housing buildings in the historical German city confirmed that variations were not casual. It is indeed very common that urban housing until the end of the eighteenth century was classified as *Zweifensterhäuser*, *Dreifensterhäuser*, and so forth, based on the buildings' dimensions and the importance of the number of windows on the main façade.[6]

In the case of the aggregated block, the distinction between single-family and multiple-family types was very clear in relation to the distribution of the functional elements. The latter appeared around the end of the eighteenth century, alongside rental housing, as a variant of the medi-

6 *Zweifensterhäuser* means two-family house and *Dreifensterhäuser* is a row house type with three windows.

um-high-bourgeois single-family house typology. At the beginning of the century, with the first working districts and the first rental housing, the distinction became even clearer. At that point, this distinction became, alongside residential zoning, a specific instrument of discrimination and social segregation in the city.

The difference between single-family and collective housing was restated at the theoretical level within a defined ideological framework as part of the alternatives between the *stone city* and the *garden city*. Certainly, this sort of double vocation of the late-nineteenth-century European city assumed a particular form in German cities. This happened because, from the very beginning, these alternatives have always been discussed and also concretely experimented with. Let's think about, for example, the role played by Hermann Muthesius's text *Das englische Haus* (1904);7 the experiences of the *Arbeitersiedlungen* and *Gartenstädte* at the beginning of the twentieth century; the debate within the modern movement until the public arguments delivered at the Frankfurt conference of 1929; and the built projects in Hamburg, Berlin, Stuttgart, and Frankfurt.

Left: Ernst May, Siedlung Westhausen, Frankfurt, 1929–1930.
Right: Ernst May, Siedlung Bornheimer Hang, Frankfurt, 1926–1930.
From Giorgio Grassi, *Scritti scelti 1965–2015*, 59, 63.

From this perspective, the row housing typologies, due to their diffusion, had largely shaped the history of German cities. This typology was also the most adaptable within the debate on affordable housing and the architecture of the new city. Indeed, the historical *Reihenhaus* was one of the most important references for the most significant examples of German rationalist Siedlungen. There is no need to highlight their very evident

7 See Hermann Muthesius, trans. Janet Seligman, *The English House* (London: Crosby Lockwood Staples, 1979).

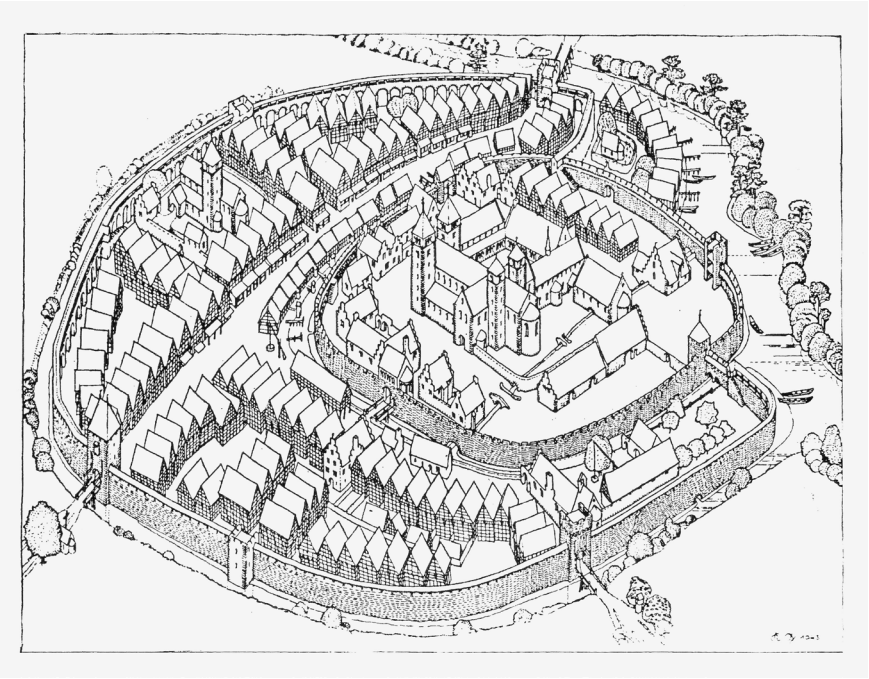
formal coincidences. We could note in the Siedlungen (which we are used to considering innovative and revolutionary projects) the tenacious persistence of this historical model, especially in relation to the use of spaces and the dimensions of its constitutive elements.

However, in similar examples, revisiting classical typologies did not reproduce the same relationships between building types and open spaces as in the historical city. On the contrary, from this perspective, there seems to be a clear break, not only in terms of program. The attempt to liberate the building block from the constraints of the street network, even if perhaps not the best achievement of the modern movement, precisely represented an attempt to get out of that logic. And here we could recall the discourse above on the literary meaning of the term *urban block* within the historical city. We could mention examples of historical cities that implemented this type of planimetric solution, such as the famous *Sieben-Zeilen* (seven parallel and equidistant row houses built by the municipality of Nuremberg on a free area with an irregular form for the guild of weavers in 1499). Resurfacing these examples could help give the proposals of the modern movement a more precise historical sense. It is a matter of fact, for instance, that in the most important examples of rationalist Siedlungen (from Dammerstock in Karlsruhe to Praunheim or Römerstadt in Frankfurt), there was a will to bring back to the residential quarter that formal unity and character of identification typical of the historical examples that we already mentioned.

THE COURTYARD HOUSING

We now discuss the courtyard housing type to introduce, within the discourse of urban dwelling, the formal question of open space integrated into residential buildings. I am mostly referring to those closed urban blocks, or *isolated* ones, that delimit an open area, often of great dimensions (to the point of competing with the city's public spaces). These internal spaces were indeed the main identifying element of this type. Talking about courtyard housing means referring to the relation between the building and its internal free area. This internal space, through its form and use, determines the character of what we could consider a *residential unit* that often has a high level of autonomy in relation to the surrounding city, namely the *Wohnhof*.

In the Wohnhof, we could easily recognize the influence of the most common models of convents and the most complex and relevant versions of rural housing. Like the Reihenhaus, with which it was closely related, the Wohnhof was a typical building type in Central Europe. It was almost always destined to be a collective form of dwelling. In the historical city, the Wohnhof corresponded to a particular model of social life and was addressed to the various social groups or segregated communities present in the city. Through time, this particular building type, which had a clear and closed architectural form and was very distinguishable within the city, was definitely absorbed by the urban landscape and was disrupted from its origins. Yet it was the Wohnhof's characteristics that confirmed its social and communal nature, despite its historical origins. There are many examples of urban land subdivision that created a shared internal space among many plots, as in most old German cities. The form of these areas replicated the canonical forms of the city's public spaces, and sometimes they assimilated the configuration of an internal street or a piazza. It was the collective and communitarian character of these spaces that made the Wohnhof type resemble the various public-use buildings in the city (like colleges, barracks, hospices, hospitals, and so forth).



Axonometric view of an ideal monastic city
(whose form was determined by an existing monastery).
From Minchilli, *Puglia forme e modelli urbanistici di città antiche*, 52.

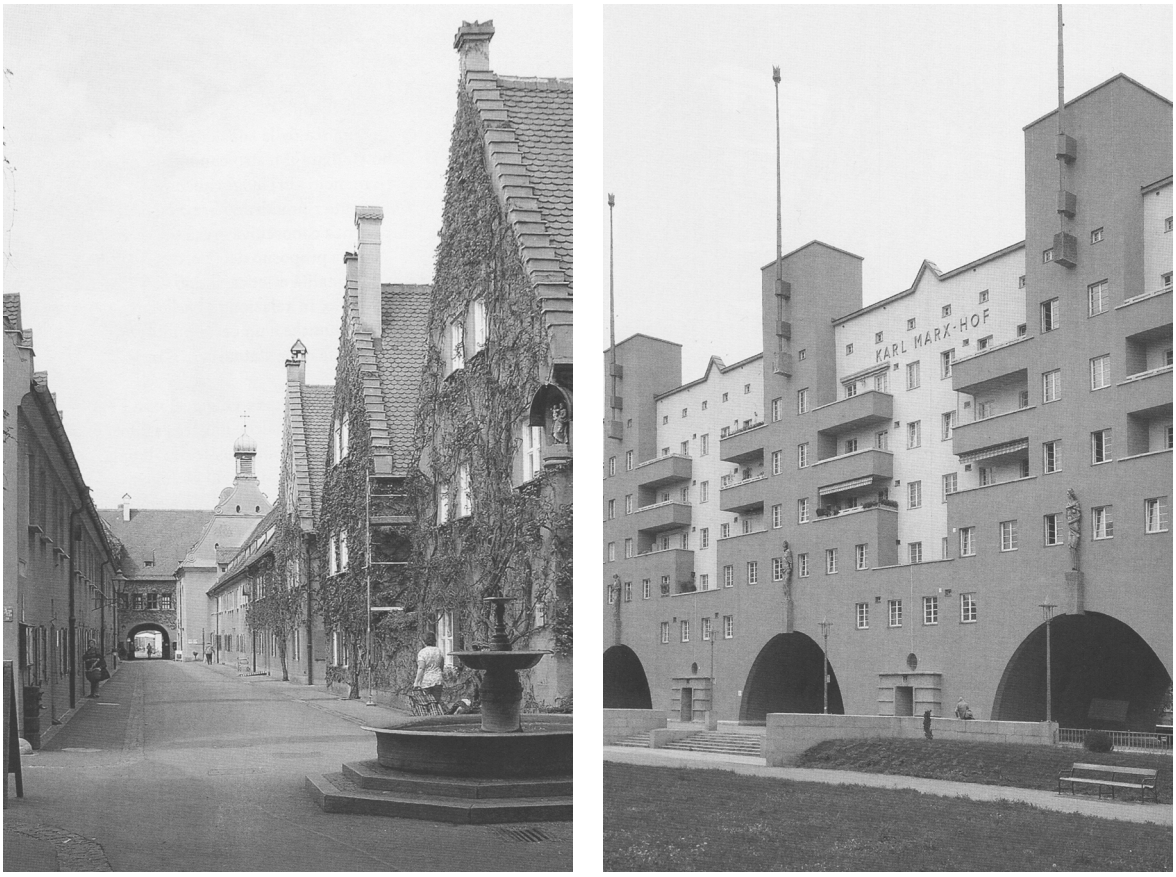
As already said, the *Hof* derived from the idea of collective life, and the history of the *Wohnhöfe* originated in the experiences of urban communities based on corporate bonds (like those of artisan merchants) or on spiritual or confessional communities. In places like Flanders and Germany, these last examples played a significant role in the form of the city, comparable to the role of the system of convents and hospitals in Italian cities. In this sense, the Hof often had the same connotations as the building complexes that provided welfare services in the city and were supported by the merchant bourgeoisie, like the *béguinages* that we still find in Bruges, Ghent, and Amsterdam, or the famous *Fuggerei* in Augsburg. These examples clearly showed the character of segregation of the *Höfe* (like the very large Judenhof in Berlin). In certain conditions, this segregation seems to determine a fixed connotation of the Wohnhof, even in the most recent times, such as the ghettos of modern cities, for example, or the workers' districts built during the two world wars, like the Viennese Höfe (such as the workers' stronghold of the Karl-Marx-Hof).

Concerning the elements of urban composition, we could notice that the Höfe of the Gothic-merchant city added a completely new element of complexity and richness to the relationship between the private space of the house and the public one of the city by adding an intermediate unit, a space that could be considered to be *relatively pubic*. This space was not completely subordinated or secondary to the surrounding public spaces (like, for example, the service street or the emergency street in various forms of *Wich*, *Schupf*, etc.), because the main façades of the buildings faced into this space.

There are many new and important examples of urban interventions, especially in the cities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that demonstrate how this formal idea of the historical city was absorbed as a compositional principle from the City of Princes, assuming an important role. We already mentioned the case of Friedrichstadt in Berlin, and the value of the first courtyard buildings designed by Nehring. The same considerations are also true for the housing blocks of Potsdam, Mannheim, and Karlshafen. There are many similar examples from recent urban history. One should not forget, for instance, the *Berliner Bauordnung* of 1925 (intended to address the extreme density of nineteenth-century residential

blocks in Berlin), which established the construction of large courtyards composed of continuous buildings with heights of three-to-five floors.

This intervention closely recalled the most progressive elements of classical urban composition. Because of that, the formal solution of large perimetral courtyard blocks offered an original contribution to the primary debate of the modern movement, and an extremely realistic and advanced reference, at that moment, for the agenda of *functionalism*. This choice, indeed, represented a clear adherence to the *stone city*, composed of buildings and ample free space. This city was identified by its compositional elements and its boundaries, which were able to cut short on many of the false problems that were being discussed at that time (like the resolution on a formal level of the contraposition between city and countryside).

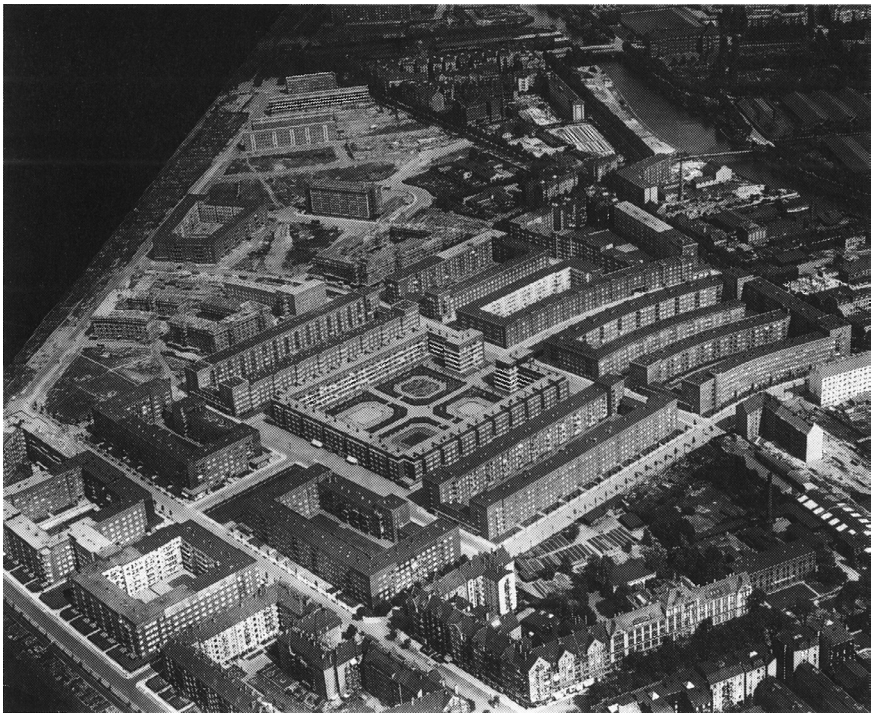


Left: Thomas Krebs, The Fuggerei Housing Complex, founded by Jakob Fugger, Augsburg, 1516–1521.
Right: Karl Ehn, Karl-Marx-Hof, Vienna, 1926-30.
From Giorgio Grassi, *Scritti scelti 1965–2015*, 44, 65.

In the architectural scene between the two World Wars, there were important examples that followed this direction. The most interesting and fully realized was the case of Hamburg as planned by Fritz Schumacher (but also the Plan of Amsterdam by Hendrik Petrus Berlage). During this period, Hamburg assumed a unique physiognomy. Its most relevant aspect was the rigorous architectural unity that the single residential interventions restored to the city and to its own building tradition. This must be seen as the result of a highly advanced critical reading of the existing city. This process extended from the recognition of its constitutive principles to the definition of the elements of the construction of the city, including typological decisions on building density, building techniques, material selection, and so forth. This allows us to speak, in the case of

Hamburg, of a recognizable *style*, probably the only case in the history of modern architecture.

The Wohnhof could appear as a collection of single-family units or as proper collective housing. This distinction was based on the number of floors: the first case had one or two floors and the second had many. However, in the historical examples, given the particular character of the buildings, even the Höfe with many floors had a linear, distributive system composed of adjacent elements. As with the composition scheme of the single-family units, the most common distribution in the courtyard block was through the gallery (*Laubengang*). This meant that inside the historical city, the courtyard type was always a particular case of the row house type.



Freid Karl Schneider, Jarrestadt Housing Complex, Hamburg, 1926–1930.
From Werner Möller, *Mart Stam, 1899–1986. Architekt, Visionär, Gestalter. Sein Weg zum collection Tessin-Hårleman 1168 Sources of Illustrations 1169 Erfolg 1919–1930* (Berlin: Wasmuth Ernst, 1997), 51.

This distributive linear scheme was carried forward by various experimental building types developed by the modern movement. I am referring to the Frankfurt CIAM Conference and the exhibition on the *minimum dwelling*. Here, together with the single-family row housing types, gallery housing types were also presented. In both examples, it was evident that the aim was to recapture the simplicity and distributive clarity of historical examples. This was especially true regarding the form and dimensions of dwellings, which revisited the case of the monastic type of lodging associated with the Höfe of the Gothic city.

Yet it was only with the rise of the rental housing type, in other words, with the affirmation of the speculative nineteenth-century city, that the Wohnhof assumed its definitive structure, with a vertical distribution, that we still find today in the contemporary city. At this point, the courtyard housing finally lost its characteristic connection between the single dwelling and the communal space of the Wohnhof. This process of typological transformation, as a sort of loss of identity, was its *raison d'etre*. Inside the modern bourgeois city, this was not specifically related to the courtyard type, but, as already said, it also affected the recent history of the other mentioned building types.

We could say the same about the dwelling's plan. It is possible to note that the relationship between quotidian life and the form of the house is relatively easy to understand in historical examples. It is even easier in the oldest examples to notice an immediate and general relationship between the use and the adaptability of spaces, for instance, as already mentioned, in the role of furniture in defining the function of spaces. This was not the case when we consider the contemporary bourgeois dwelling. Indeed, the latter was detached from the traditional dwelling not only because of the changes in quotidian life it expressed but also because of the different way it represented this idea through a meticulous and imaginative celebration of everyday life. It was precisely the floor plan of the typical bourgeois dwelling that reflected the broader process of the *privatization* of the city, implicit in the idea of the capitalist city. The dwelling plan reproduced through its distributive scheme an increasingly isolated way of everyday life, autarchic and separated from the city. It's sufficient to look at any manual of housing of the early years of the twentieth century to recognize all the paradoxical functional specifications and hierarchies and, in parallel, even the absurd process of dimensional reduction that governed its space through the law of the maximum profit.

It must be said that, from this perspective, the modern movement assumes a different meaning. This was the case, for example, with most of the studies on the form and dimensions of lodgings, beyond programs and theories, related to the *Existenzminimum*. In reality, what functionalism, as such, did was to bring that process to its extreme consequences. It basically flattened the general and collective values of domestic life. At the same time, it pushed to extremes the functional division of the dwelling's parts, as defined in the canonical bourgeois apartment. It is completely useless to read the history of the modern movement through the debates about functionalism. This becomes extremely misleading if one wants to really understand the best and most successful examples of that period. The value of such examples lies in the city they sought to express, in spite of their irreproducibility and singularity. Precisely starting from this, they proposed different solutions to the housing question. They indeed offered partial and specific answers to larger, more complex questions. The central issue here, at the end, remains that of the architecture of the European city.

AUTHOR

Giorgio Grassi (Milan, 1935) is an Italian architect. He taught at the faculties of architecture in Milan and Pescara and served as a visiting professor at the universities of Valencia, Lausanne (EPFL), and Zurich (ETH). Among his most significant publications is *La costruzione logica dell'architettura* (1967), a foundational text in his theoretical work. Grassi also edited the Italian translation of Heinrich Tessenow's *Hausbau und dergleichen,* published as *Osservazioni elementari sul costruire* (1975), and the volume *Das neue Frankfurt: 1926–1931* (1975). More recently, he published *Nella direzione opposta: Heinrich Tessenow ritrovato* (2025).

COPYRIGHT

ISSN 2813–8058 burning.farm