

# Stadtbaukunst: The Role of the "Other Modernity" in Designing European City The Wohnhof and Borstei Siedlung

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## ABSTRACT

With this study we want to focus on an historical period, the '20s, fundamental for contemporary urban design. The '20s represent a moment of synthesis of several elements: the potentialities and the risks of the industrial revolution; the ideas of the utopians, Howard's idea of garden city; the tragedy of the First World War, the need for a large number of houses to be built in a short time. So the '20s are full of reified ideas about the theme of dwelling. In particular, we want to focus on the research carried out in Germany by a group of architects linked to the figure of Theodor Fischer and to the schools of Stuttgart and Munich. They considered urban design as "the art of building the city" (Stadtbaukunst), and they carried out the idea of modern city based on traditional elements (street, square, landmark, type and its variations) considered in a renewed relationship with nature and landscape.

Studying the urban plans of these architects of the "other modernity" means studying parts of the city, trying to give order to the big and shapeless city. These parts assume the features of small town in the big city, or close to it, attempting to re-establish the idea of city as the place of human dwelling. This study allows us to reflect on the problem of the expansion of the city and the definition of its boundaries, providing information on how to establish a new town (in nature), or how to re-establish an idea of city in the shapeless parts (suburbs).

**KEYWORDS:** Stadtbaukunst, other modernity, Germany, Wohnhof, Munich, Borstei

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Stadtbaukunst* is an idea widely used in the German architectural literature of the first half of twentieth century (Sonne, 2010). It is the latest attempt to hold together urban planning and architectural design before the explosive incoming of avant-garde. *Stadtbaukunst* is based on the experience and the history of the European city and on its shape. It considers the urban space as "architectural space", defined at first by the façades and their configuration. One of the principles of *Stadtbaukunst* is designing the city using the elements that have always characterized it: street (*Straße*) and urban block (*Baublock*).

## 2 THE WOHNHOF

The object of this study is a particular type of Baublock: the perimeter block. This type is the synthesis of two positions: on the one hand the anti-urban models and the Garden City, on the other hand the relationship with the history of the city. The perimeter block builds up its edges by a curtain building

that shapes the space of the street with the façade. The space of the courtyard (*Wohnhof*) is set inside the block: it is a piece of nature within the city, a human scale space connected to the house. In this way it attempts to bring into the *Großstadt* the overturning of the relation between open spaces and built-up areas required by the reformists, without giving up the forms of urban dwelling.



Figure 1: Petersplatz, Basel (Merian, 1642)

*Wohnhof* is a symbol of social life. *Wohnhof* is a semi-public space connected to the houses built up around its edges. The origin of this special element of urban design can be found in the experience of urban communities as the Fuggerei in Augsburg (1516-1523) and the Flemish *Begijnhof* (Figure 2), or more generally in the cloister and hospital structures. Serial rooms are arranged around an open-air common room. This is the primordial act of enclosing a space in order to qualify it as place of dwelling.

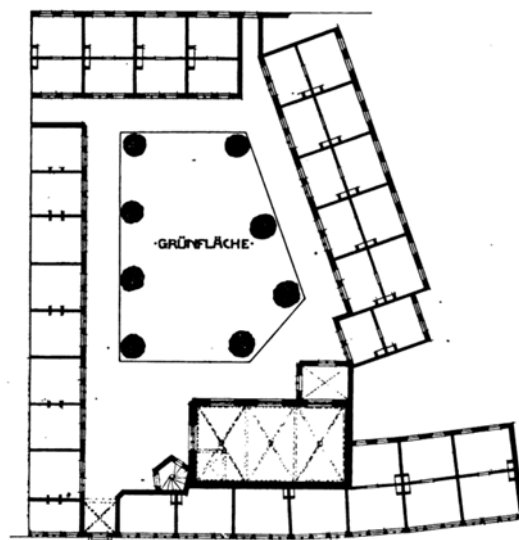


Figure 2: Alter Wohnhof (1513) in Gent, Belgium (Eberstadt, 1920)

### 3 BORSTEI SIEDLUNG

Borstei is a settlement built between 1924 and 1929 by the architect and building contractor Bernhard Borst<sup>1</sup> in Dachauer Straße, 5 km far from the Munich center, with the collaboration of architect Oswald Eduard Bieber<sup>2</sup>.

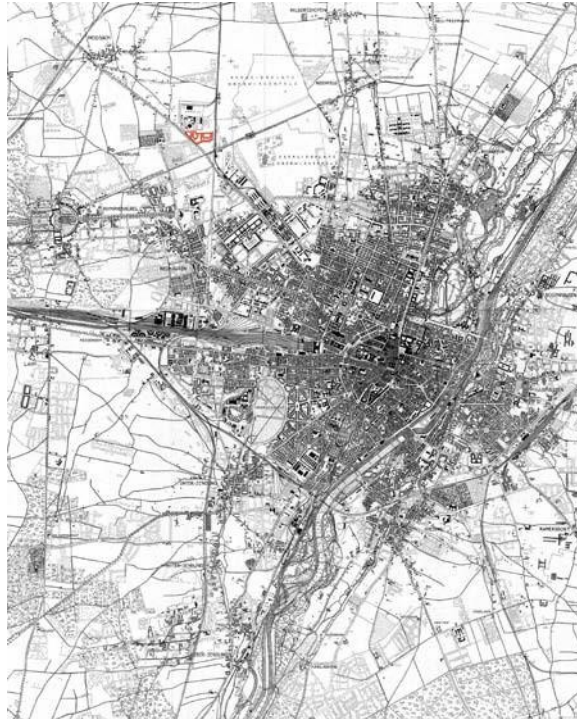


Figure 3: Munich plan of '20s showing Borstei Siedlung

Historical photos (Figure 4) clearly show the basic idea of Borstei: an urban island in the nature; a settlement in the nature that does not give up the elements that have always defined the city. It is not surprising that even today, Borstei, after being incorporated into the city context, succeeds to talk together with the urban landscape. In fact, together with houses of Dante-Bad<sup>3</sup> in the nearby, it forms a part of the city with a strong urban character that seems to retrieve the construction rules of Munich (see Maxvorstadt area) in opposition to the shapeless urban agglomeration that has swallowed it.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Borst (Offenburg, 1883 - Munich, 1963): attends the Kgl. Baugewerkschule in Munich and began his professional career in 1907 as an associate in architectural firms and construction companies. Work on the construction of villas and townhouses. The architects August Exter (1858-1933) and Theodor Fischer (1862-1938) exert a strong influence on him. After 1912 Borst is mainly active as a building contractor. In 1923 he purchased a large building land in Dachauer Straße. The housing shortage in Munich after World War I and the "*Ordentliche Bauprogramm*" sponsored by the city, which provided low-interest loans, were exploited by Borst to make his settlement. From 1925 to 1931 he published the magazine "Baukunst".

<sup>2</sup> Oswald Eduard Bieber (Pockau, 1876 - Munich, 1955): from 1897 to 1900 worked in the studio Schilling & Graebner of Dresden. In 1900 he worked in Stadtbauamt of Munich under the direction of Hans Grässel (1860-1939). From 1906 to 1911 worked in the studio of Georg Meister in Munich. Among his most significant buildings include the Verwaltungsgebäude der Münchener Rückversicherungs-Gesellschaft (1911-13, Munich), the Landeskirchenamt (1928-29, Munich) and the Haus des Deutschen Rechts (1936-39, Munich).

<sup>3</sup> Dante-Bad and stadium: The predecessor of today's pool and sports facility was the Military Swimming School built in 1913 on the Würm Canal. In 1928, the canal was diverted into a pool and the park was opened as a family recreation center. The stadium, designed by Karl Meitinger (1882-1970), has a massive symmetrical portal and steep seating for 1000 spectators. Housing, draw up by Heinrich Berghold, was built along Dachauer Straße. The pool was renovated for the 1972 Olympics (Nerdinger, 2007).



Figure 4: Aerial view gasworks Moosach/Borstei after 1931, schlot-Archive

Borstei is a middle class housing estate conceived as a composite court block. It is built up on all sides and internally forms a set of composite interlocked spaces, *Wohnhof* and *Wohnstraße* (a street strictly connected to the dwelling spaces: it can be seen as an outside expansion of the internal space of the houses).

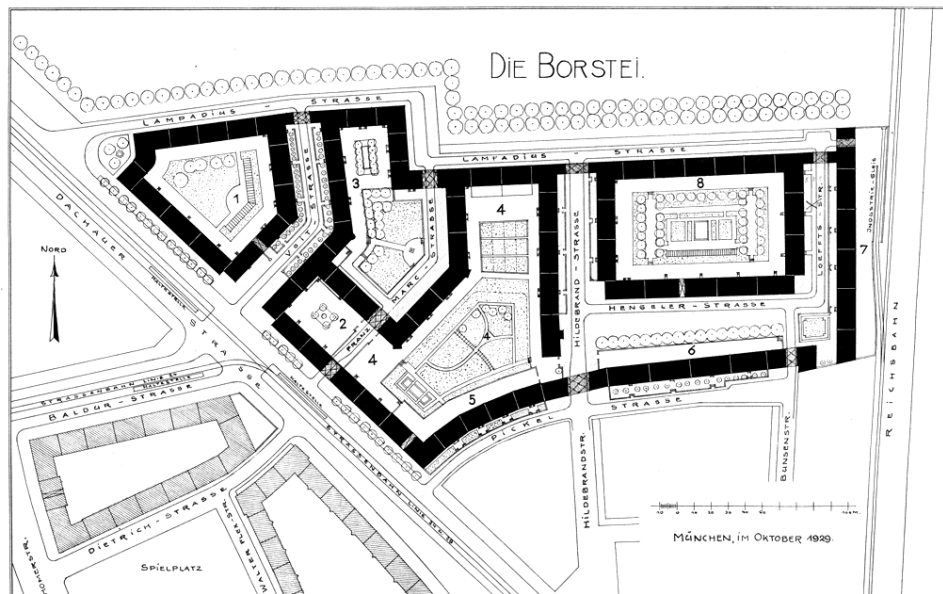


Figure 5: Borstei plan (Web-1)

The whole complex consists of 77 multifamily buildings Traufenhaus (a German house type with the ridge line of the roof parallel to the street), where 774 flats and a number of shops and public facilities

(school, service center and central heating system) are placed. Bernhard Borst's idea was to combine the utility of low cost flat with the benefits of single-family house by the high quality of the shared areas.

The public façade of the buildings (3, 4 and 5 floors high) define with its repetitiveness the urban character of the road. The brick building is entirely covered with a yellow coarse plaster. The rectangular openings (130x150 cm), with white painted wooden windows and shutters, mark the façade with a regular rhythm. The only ornament consist in the stone cornices of the openings. Other elements that give rhythm to the façade are gutters and wooden entry doors, with stone jambs, introduced by small stone stairs with iron railings. The buildings are completed by the roof with timber structure and brick tiles cladding (*Bieberschwanz*). The roof is also punctuated by dormers. The arched entrance gates are the only exception that breaks the repetitiveness of the façade. As medieval city gates, they indicate the free access to the *Wohnhöfe*.



Figure 6: Borstei, Pickelstraße (Web-1)

The semi-public façade looking on *Wohnhöfe* repeats the same elements as the public façade, but becomes more essential. The stone cornices of the openings give way to simple frames made by the same plaster, but finer. With time, the façades have been covered by climbing plants. All this elements realize the *unscheinbar* (inconspicuous) form of the house, the idea shared by Heinrich Tessenow, Paul Schmitthenner and other German architects inspired by Goethe's *Gartenhaus* (Ardito, 2012).



Figure 7: Borstei, inner *Wohnstraße* (by the author)

The inner space of the block is defined by a system of courtyards of different shapes and proportions. They generate different spaces with different characters: a stretched street-court with gardens design as *embellissement*; irregular court as a place of nature (*Rosengarten*); regular court as recreational and silence place with gardens; court as a town square with shop windows shaped by arched openings and stone benches that diversify this façades, painted green, from the others. These are interlocked spaces that enrich the spatial experience. The gardens, designed by landscape architect Alwin Seifert (1880-1972), are enriched with statues and fountains.



Figure 8: Borstei, inner courtyard (by the author)

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Perimeter block could be considered a key component of *Stadtbaukunst* for the construction of the city. It is the basic element of building according to the true nature of the European city. It is a reform, rather than a replacement, of the historical elements of the city. In particular, it is a reinterpretation of the tenement block (*Mietkasernen*). Therefore it does not give up to build up the edges and define the double side façades, one in relation with the street and the other with the inner space. In addition, the inner space is designed as a *Wohnhof* that becomes a place of nature within "the city of stone".

The *Wohnhof* can be seen as an intermediate step between house and city. It provides a transition between public and private spheres; gives a pause off the street. It is a silent island in the city. The act of enclosing a space means to border a "sacred" area that becomes the place of human dwelling. In this way it can answer to the need of places for the metropolis claimed by Massimo Cacciari: the place of dwelling is not a flat. Only city can be dwelled, but you cannot live in the city if it is not suitable for dwelling, if it does not 'give' places. The place is where we stop: it's a pause - is analogous to the silence in a musical score. There is no music without silence (Cacciari, 2004).

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