



THE SONNENRING BY MALTE SÄNGER. MALTE SÄNGER AND BEN KUHLMAN HAVE PHOTOGRAPHED THE ESTATES AS AESTHETICALLY ATTRACTIVE ENVIRONMENTS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT FOR OUR GUIDE "LIVING IN POST-WAR MODERNISM".

SONNENRING, FOTOGRAFIA MALTEHO SÄNGERA. MALTE SÄNGER A BEN KUHLMAN FOTILI SÍDLISKÁ AKO ESTETICKY ATRAKTÍVNE PROSTREDIE PRE NAŠU SPRIEVODNÚ PUBLIKÁCIU „LIVING IN POST-WAR MODERNISM“ (BÝVANIE V POVOJNOVOM MODERNIZME).

Photo Foto: Malte Säger

Campaigning for Postwar Modernist Housing Estates in the Frankfurt Rhine–Main Area

Kampaň za povojnové modernistické sídliská v oblasti Frankfurt Rýn–Mohan

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Väčšina nemeckých povojnových veľkosídlisk trpí negatívnym imidžom. Aj keď mnohé jednotlivé budovy z tohto obdobia sú dnes súčasťou kultúrneho dedičstva, sídliská zvyčajne nie sú formálne zaradené ani do zoznamu pamiatkovo chránených území, hoci ich historický význam je zrejvý. Zaradenie do zoznamu síce teoreticky nezávisí od verejnej mienky, ale v praxi to tak je. Ak chceme tieto sídliská zachovať, je preto potrebné presvedčiť nielen príslušné orgány, aby udelili zákonnú ochranu, ale aj širokú verejnosť o tom, že povojnové sídliská stoja za to uchovať. Výskumné laboratórium povojnovej moderny (Forschungslabor Nachkriegsmoderne) so sídlom na Univerzite aplikovaných vied vo Frankfurte nad Mohanom preto vypracovalo súbor podporných aktivít. Cieľom niektorých z nich bolo informovať a vzdelávať širokú verejnosť o historickom a spoločenskom význame týchto rozsiahlych sídlisk, iné boli určené kľúčovým zainteresovaným stranám, ako sú bytové družstvá, stavebné úrady a architekti. Po takmer troch rokoch skúseností možno vyvodíť prvé závery o dopade týchto aktivít.

V tomto príspevku najprv vysvetľujeme špecifickú situáciu veľkých sídlisk v Nemecku. Následne skúmame, ako na seba vzájomne pôsobia zaradenie pod pamiatkovú ochranu a verejná mienka v kontexte nemeckých spolkových krajín, ktoré majú vlastné zákony o kultúrnom dedičstve, pričom sa zameriavame na spolkovú krajinu Hesensko, kde sídli Výskumné laboratórium povojnovej moderny. Následne predstavujeme toto laboratórium a jeho prístup k výskumu, ako aj aktivity v oblasti šírenia informácií a vzdelávania, ktoré laboratórium organizuje. Na záver tieto aktivity hodnotíme a rozvádzame dôsledky, ktoré z nich vyplývajú pre budúce aktivity výskumných inštitúcií a univerzít.

Large-Scale Housing Estates in Western Germany, Heritage Listing, and Public Opinion

Like the rest of Europe, after World War II, Germany was faced with a massive housing crisis. The first relatively small estates were usually built on bombsites, but soon it became obvious that dwellings needed to be produced on a much larger scale. Therefore, most subsequent estates were built on greenfield sites. They reflect the new ideals and conceptions that postwar German society developed about itself, struggling to reinvent itself as a democracy after the *Third Reich*. Most estates were conceived as neighbourhoods that cater for all everyday needs of their inhabitants, meaning that large-scale housing estates are important witnesses of a formative phase in postwar German history.

As in other countries, in Germany, preservation efforts have continuously broadened in scope and time. Today, it is widely accepted that it is necessary to include even more mundane specimens like workers' housing from the interwar period or industrial facilities. Currently, heritage listing focuses on the stock of the 1970s and the 1980s. Nevertheless, most large-scale postwar housing estates have so far remained unlisted. Because of the devolution of German heritage management, it is almost impossible to present exact figures for the whole country, but we were able to establish that in the Rhine-Main Region only six postwar social housing estates have been recognised as cultural monuments,¹ all of them located in the city of Frankfurt, and all of them built in the 1950s. Why? Lack of significance cannot be the reason. The best postwar housing estates certainly are major design achievements and important witnesses for historic dwelling concepts, urbanist ideas, architectural positions, and construction technologies.²

The most important reason most likely is that the housing estates are still not sufficiently recognized by the general public.³ Postwar monuments are often condemned as 'ugly' and 'eyesores' and public opinion frequently criticizes the listing of postwar buildings, accusing the heritage authorities as being elitist and unworldly. In theory, such public comments do not play any role in listing. In practice, heritage authorities need to listen to the public to a certain degree, because otherwise, in the long run, heritage laws will be adapted to the public opinion. In contrast to a large portion of the general public, the inhabitants of the large housing estates often like their homes and living environments.⁴

In Hesse, each building that corresponds to the legal definition of a cultural monument is *eo ipso* a cultural monument and enjoys protection; the function of the inventory is simply to provide information about this fact. Accordingly, the status of a monument is an inherent characteristic of a building, not the result of being listed.⁵ This definition reduces the urgency of the formal listing process to a certain degree, as a cultural monument does not need to be listed in order to enjoy protection. Furthermore, it allows the heritage authorities to influence plans for unlisted monuments simply by threatening with formal listing. In many cases, this strategy leads to acceptable results and avoids public controversies about the correctness of designating an object a cultural monument. However, this strategy has also

resulted in hardly any housing estate being officially recognised as a cultural monument. This lack of official recognition most likely influences the public opinion in remaining critical of postwar estates.

Most owners of large housing estates oppose listing because they fear constraints on future alterations, higher operation costs, and a loss of property value. Some of them worry about their profit, others about the low rents they are still able to offer to their residents – the housing estates constitute most of the few remaining pockets of affordable housing available to groups less favoured by private landlords.

Simultaneously, the current housing shortage of the Rhine-Main region has rendered the generous green spaces of postwar estates attractive construction sites for new housing projects. Accordingly, they are often presented as an opportunity to reduce urban sprawl, to avoid the extremely high cost of land, and to 'improve' the social mix by inserting owner-occupied flats into a neighbourhood almost exclusively comprised of affordable rented homes. Unfortunately, this narrative reiterates the view that the housing estates are suffering from social problems and deficient social networks and feeds into the generally critical view of the estates. Furthermore, it threatens the integrity and authenticity of the estates and thus their significance as cultural monuments.

Research, Education and Campaigning

Since its founding in 2018, the Post-War Modernist Housing Research Lab has been exploring strategies for the ongoing development and conservation of postwar modernist housing estates with a specific focus on the Frankfurt Rhine-Main area. A team of researchers from the fields of urban planning, architectural theory, historic preservation, technical building equipment and design cooperate in this lab on research, conferences, publications, and teaching. Upon reaching the conclusion that public opinion is a key factor for the preservation of some of the best estates, it decided to concentrate as much on education and communication as on research.

The lack of a reliable inventory of large-scale housing estates led the Post-War Modernist Housing Research Lab to start its work on the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region with a complete survey of large-scale housing structures built between 1945 and 1975.⁶ It included both large buildings with more than 70 dwellings and housing tracts that were coherently developed, i.e., with coordinated architecture, landscaping and traffic planning. To locate them, it first used maps, aerial views, and online sources such as Google Earth, followed by extensive field trips. Today, its inventory contains more than 400 entries of highly variable size and quality. This inventory became the basis of the Lab's research.

Based on the survey, the Research Lab selected ten estates that are representative for the Rhine-Main region. These included entire neighbourhoods as well as large houses, small (<500 units) and large (>2,500 units) estates in small (<25,000 inhabitants) and large (>250,000 inhabitants) municipalities and were built between the mid 1950s and the late 1970s. These were developed into case studies or 'biographies', applying a mix of



MALTE SÄNGER'S AND BEN KUHLMANN'S PHOTOGRAPHS WERE SHOWN IN AN EXHIBITION AT DEUTSCHER WERKBUND FRANKFURT.

FOTOGRAFIE MALTEHO SÄNGERA A BENA KUHLMANA BOLI PREZENTOVANÉ NA VÝSTAVE V DEUTSCHER WERKBUND FRANKFURT.

Photo Foto: Ben Kuhlmann

methods, including archival research, discourse analysis, mappings and semi-structured interviews with inhabitants, administrators, architects, and other key persons.

Through a variety of activities, the Post-War Modernist Housing Research Lab attempted to bring knowledge about the large housing estates of the Frankfurt Rhine-Main area closer to a broad public, including architects, urban planners, authorities, and interested laypersons. As the Research Lab is part of a public institution, we need to follow certain rules that require us to act differently from planning offices or political activists, but not to remain confined to the academic world. On the contrary, as we are based at a university of applied sciences, our research is expected to be transferred into the realm of practice. Additionally, the Frankfurt UAS is requested to fulfil its *Third Mission* and thus to strengthen its ties with society. In this spirit, we developed a set of dissemination activities.

Firstly, we cooperate with the heritage authorities, sharing information and research, which, in the long term, might feed into formal listing. The present Hessian law on cultural heritage allows listing estates [not only], but this rarely happens out of fear of the ensuing discussion about their lack of 'beauty'. The goal of this side of our campaign is not so much the creation of knowledge, which is abundant among the heritage authorities, but the formation of strategic alliances and support structures.

Secondly, we aim to work together with the owners of the estates and provide guidance on how the estates could be improved and developed without diminishing their value as cultural monuments. For some owners, this is especially interesting when they intend to alter an estate that might be designated a cultural monument and therefore needs the approval of the heritage authorities. Out of the public eye, compromises might be found to avoid formal listing, but our experience from following these negotiations shows that tight budgets and time pressure often leave little scope for thorough design.

Thirdly, we aim to convince architects that many estates are well designed environments on nearly every level of detail, since in contrast to urban planners, German architects are commonly

very critical of the estates' designs. This audience was addressed in two conferences on large-scale postwar housing, one of them focusing on their protection and adaptation to today's needs and standards,⁷ the other reflecting the role of participation for their transformation.⁸ Both conferences attracted more than 100 participants each and were followed by a book publication.

Fourthly, we introduced the topic of large-scale postwar housing estates into various courses taught at Frankfurt UAS. In this way, young students develop an unbiased view of the estates and can act accordingly in their future professional work. In a teaching project on the *Platensiedlung*, a *Zeilenbau* housing area in Frankfurt, students explored its everyday life. The findings were used to create an audio walk.⁹

In cooperation with the *Freilichtmuseum Hessenpark*, an open-air museum, students planned the siting for a group of 1960s and 1970s single-family homes the museum is seeking to acquire. The *Hessenpark* will show them next to much older farmhouses from Hessian villages. In this context, modernist housing will be presented as another, 'normal' layer of history.

In 2021, the Post-War Modernist Housing Research Lab was awarded the *Hans Sauer Award* for the teaching project *Wasteland*. Students and residents of a Frankfurt estate will jointly transform solid waste found in its open spaces into new objects. This will generate knowledge about linear consumption and the value of materials. In addition, it will encourage community activities to improve the immediate living environment.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Post-War Modernist Housing Research Lab addresses the general public, aiming at educating them about the ideas, the history, and the life of large-scale postwar housing estates. To this end, we developed another set of activities.

In 2020, we turned our case studies into an architectural guide to ten large-scale postwar estates in the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region, *Wohnen in der Nachkriegsmoderne* (Living in Post-War Modernism).¹⁰ The photographs of the book were specially commissioned, and do not reiterate the narrative of decline and decay. Instead, they pay tribute to the particular aesthetic qualities

A NEIGHBOURHOOD WALK
IN COLLABORATION WITH
KUNSTKONTAKT AT THE
SCHELMENGRABEN ESTATE IN
WIESBADEN, DESIGNED BY ERNST
MAY, 1961 – 1971.

PRECHÁDZKA PO SÍDLISKU
SCHELMENGRABEN VO
WIESBADENE, KTORÉ NAVRHOL
ERNST MAY, 1961 – 1971.
V SPOLUPRÁCI S KUNSTKONTAKT.

Photo Foto: Natalie Heger



of the estates and shape different images. In order to present these photographs in a new context a second time, we organized an exhibition at the *Werkbund Frankfurt*, which attracted a larger audience than most previous exhibits at this space.

The organisation of so-called *Siedlungsspaziergänge* (neighbourhood walks) in five of the case studies (Nordweststadt, 1961 – 1968, Sonnenring, 1969 – 1975, Ben-Gurion-Ring, 1973 – 1977, Schelmengraben, 1961 – 1971 and Wohnstadt Limes, 1959 – 1973) played a key role for the communication and education strategy of the Post-War Modernist Housing Research Lab. They were planned in cooperation with *kunstkontakt*, a small business organizing cultural events. Throughout a total of sixteen neighbourhood walks, 238 participants (interested laypeople, architects, students and occasionally residents – often limited in numbers due to anti-Covid-19 measures) were offered multifaceted glimpses behind the scenes of often unknown and underestimated large housing areas. For each of the estates visited, an accompanying flyer was produced with background information and a general map.

Participant observation and a series of non-representative guided interviews among the participants suggested that after the walk, most of them saw the housing estates in a positive light, while before, many of them considered the estates not very attractive places or even no-go-areas. The interviewees found the history of the estates and the concepts of the planners particularly interesting. They were also interested in getting in touch with the residents and in information about the current everyday life. Some of the participants initially were apprehensive about visiting estates, yet especially these same participants often expressed surprise at the high quality of the estates' design and the amount of thought that had gone into them.

After the walks, many of the participants expressed a positive attitude towards the protection of large housing estates of postwar modernism and called for respect for the architectural heritage whenever interventions such as energy refurbishment or densification take place in the housing areas. Some of the interviewees stated that they were particularly interested in the

question of what can be learned today from past experiences for the construction of new neighbourhoods.

It may be argued that the simple fact that the participants took part in the neighbourhood walks proves that they were positively biased towards the estates. This may be true to some extent, but our observations and interviews revealed that a significant number did not know what to expect and was ready for a new experience.

The multifaceted activities and publications of the Research Lab were regularly taken up by various media (newspaper, radio), counterbalancing the otherwise mostly negative local reports.¹¹ A comprehensive website informs about the wide range of activities initiated and organized by the Research Lab.¹²

Conclusions

The various campaigning activities engaged in by the Post-War Modernist Housing Research Lab over the last three years increased the visibility of large-scale postwar housing estates inside and outside academia. We are convinced that this will considerably facilitate the protection and the responsible development of postwar housing areas in future. However, tangible results such as formally listed estates or a systematic survey of all potential cultural monuments among the large-scale housing estates in the entire state of Hesse have yet to be achieved.

Although the Post-War Housing Research Lab was well funded, additional efforts are needed to reach these goals: First, our activities have to continue. This is only possible if we can secure a replacement for the nearly expended financing. Second, supplementary formats should be developed to address groups not reached so far. The walks, for instance, are not accessible to everybody since they require the participants to concentrate on oral explanations and to be physically able to walk and stand for quite a while. For this purpose, collaborations with institutions not yet addressed are required.

We are aware of our limited engagement with the residents. Although the residents were invited to join the neighbourhood walks, they remained an event *about* the estate and

the residents, not *for* or *with* them. Despite the best of intentions, to some extent, the walks repeated the familiar relation of strangers and residents with strangers entering the estates, walking around in the safety of a group, possibly feeling culturally superior and not considering that this might make the residents feel like zoo animals. Other formats, e.g. artistic interventions¹³ developed in cooperation with the local community, are often more inclusive, but also more time-consuming and less able to convey information. Accordingly, we feel the need to complement the neighbourhood walks with activities that convey active roles to the residents.

For academic researchers, spending time with activities like neighbourhood walks is a problem as they do not generate the hard currency of academic work: papers and research grants. On the other hand, the success of such activities depends on the expertise and credibility of institutions such as the Post-War Modernist Housing Research Lab and the Frankfurt UAS. While many universities increasingly stress the importance of *Third Mission* activities, practice shows that most of them nevertheless expect these activities to be financed by external funds. Given the lack of academic benefits and the difficulties of securing constant support, activities like the neighbourhood walks become a form of idealist activism, albeit an academic one.

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1 Albert-Schweitzer-Siedlung (1950 – 1956), Fritz-Kissel-Siedlung (1951 – 1954), Postsiedlung (1951 – 1958), Dornbuschsiedlung (1954 – 1959), Heinrich-Stahl-Straße (1957), parts of Ferdinand-Hoffmann-Siedlung (1959).

2 For a more comprehensive discussion of heritage and postwar planning see MEIER, Hans-Rudolf, 2011. Denkmalschutz für die 'zweite Zerstörung'? In: Franz, B. and Meier, H. R. (eds.). *Stadtplanung nach 1945. Zerstörung und Wiederaufbau. Denkmalpflegerische Probleme aus heutiger Sicht*. Mitzkat, Holzminden, pp. 22 – 29.

3 For comparison see Glendinning, Miles, 2012. Cumbernauld New Town: Reception & Heritage Legacy. *Architektura & Urbanismus*. **43**(3 – 4), pp. 271 – 287.

4 See e.g. VENKATESH, Sughir Alladi, 2012. *American Project*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2002; HARNACK, Maren. *Rückkehr der Wohnmaschinen. Gentrifizierung und Sozialer Wohnungsbau in London*. Transcript, Bielefeld.

5 In other federated states (Bundesländer) of Germany such as North Rhine-Westphalia, the status of being a monument depends on being listed. The last official national inventory of large housing estates was published by the German Government in 1994. It was unreliable in some respects and exclusively focused on estates with more than 2500 dwellings, omitting many smaller estates with similar qualities (and problems). See Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 12/8406: *Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung. Großsiedlungsbericht 1994*. Bonn, 30 August 1994. At state level, such inventories are mostly missing as well.

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7 HARNACK, Maren, HEGER, Natalie and BRUNNER, Matthias (eds.), 2020. *Adaptive Re-Use, Strategies for Post-War Modernist Housing*. Berlin: Jovis.

8 BRUNNER, Matthias, HARNACK, Maren, HEGER, Natalie and SCHMITZ, Hans Jürgen (eds.), 2021. *Transformative Partizipation, Strategien für den Siedlungsbau der Nachkriegsmoderne*. Berlin: Jovis.

9 The full audio walk 'Hallo Platensiedlung' can be viewed and heard on the following website: <https://www.architektur-frankfurt-university.de/alle-blogposts/halloplatensiedlung>

10 HARNACK, Maren, BRUNNER, Matthias and HEGER, Natalie (eds.), 2020. *Wohnen in der Nachkriegsmoderne, Siedlungen in der Region Rhein-Main*. Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag.

11 Articles appeared in the general press, among others, in FAZ on 03. 02. 2021, on 11. 03. 2020, on 12. 10. 2019, on 09. 10. 2018 as well as radio interviews in hr, hessenschau and others. For more details see: www.frankfurt-university.de/nachkriegsmoderne > Medien

12 See <https://www.frankfurt-university.de/nachkriegsmoderne>

13 For a more detailed discussion see the papers by Ragna KÖRBY, Daniel THEILER, Volker SCHMIDT, Pia LANZINGER and Peter WEIGAND in *Partizipative Transformation*, loc. cit.