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THE WERKBUND ESTATES 1927-1932. ACTUAL PERCEPTION OF EARLY MODERNIST HOUSING

Abstract: The reflection on the heritage of the Werkbund model housing estates was raised by the exhibition “Droga ku nowoczesności. Osiedla Werkbundu 1927-1932” (Road to Modernity. Werkbund Estates 1927-1932) in the frame of the European Capital of Culture, Wrocław 2016. The article discusses the role played by the model-driven projects signed by the Werkbund movement in shaping the architectural culture of the last century. This tradition of working on the development of the quality of debate around architecture and the city continues in Germany with the success of the Deutsche Werkbund Association, which is a good example for such initiatives.

Keywords: Modernism, modernist architecture, Werkbund, Werkbund estates and heritage.

Introduction – Werkbund estates exhibition in Wrocław

What are urban planners interested in, when discussing early modern avant-garde? I suppose it might be a possible linking to contemporary times and to the larger contexts. Let me focus the readers' attention to one of the most influential movements of modernist housing estates, to those of the Werkbund movement.

It recently became a fact of broader interest by two important events: two houses of the *Weissenhofsiedlung* in Stuttgart are officially part of the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage. Designed by renowned architect Le Corbusier on behalf of the Deutscher Werkbund, they are part of one of the most influential architectural settlements of the modern era.

The second event was retrospective, in which all seven European modernist settlements of the early Werkbund movement were shown in a comparative exhibition. This exhibition of the modernist housing exhibitions' was shown this summer in the European Capital of Culture, Wrocław 2016 (Photos 1-6). The show took place in the magnificent premises of a former monastery, now lodging the architectural museum under the title of „The Way to Modernity. Werkbund Estates 1927-1932“. It gave insi-

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Photos. 1-6. Objects from the exhibition *Droga ku nowoczesności. Osiedla Werkbundu 1927-1932* in the frame of the European Capital of Culture, Wrocław, 2016
 Source: D. Eisermann – Werkbund bw.

ghts in the one of the most influential early modernist movements. Accompanying to the review the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław edited a very readable catalogue under the same title [Urbanik, Adamczyk-Arns 2016]. The exhibition and catalogue are the examples of the unique collaboration between the representatives of the settlements.

1. The times of the reformist spirit and radically new housing estates

In these times of the reformist spirit of the early modernist movement radically new housing estates have emerged with an unbelievable level of risk and experimen-

tation as far as the design of the lifestyle and the living environment were concerned. Nearly at the same time between 1927 and 1932 six settlements were built in Europe.

The movement started 1927 in Stuttgart, Germany, by the Weißenhof Estate. The main concept was by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who realized together with his colleagues an international claim with the participation of international architects. The Belgian Victor Bourgeois, Swiss-French Le Corbusier, Austrian Josef Frank, Dutchmen J.J.P. Oud and Mart Stam were represented [Gropius 1925] amongst German modernist architects of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity)¹.

One year later in 1928 in Brno, Czech Republic, a settlement of enormous stylistic unity titled *Novy dum* (the new house) was reached. Then in 1929 in Breslau, Germany (now Wrocław, Poland) WuWA Estate (*Wohnung und Werkraum Ausstellung*, Apartment and Workshop Exhibition), has been built. It has been erected in the district of Grüneiche under the direction of Adolf Rading and Heinrich Lauterbach. In contrast to Stuttgart, WuWA in Breslau succeeded the strengthening of a peripheral region at that time, because exclusively members of the Silesian Werkbund were involved in the planning and execution of about 40 buildings. The elaborate advertising concept of Johannes Molzahn with a detailed corporate identity contributed to a broad reception not only in the specialist public [Schwartzing 2009]. The outstanding „Home for Singles“ by Hans Scharoun was the expression of a new way of life.

On the other hand in 1931 in Zürich, Switzerland, the Neubühl Estate turned away from the concept of individually designed model houses. The five architects – already represented in the Weißenhof estate – now worked together with an agreement of a uniform colour concept and with standardized detail solutions towards a more homogeneous language of architecture.

Under the direction of Pavel Janák the Baba Estate in Prague, Czech Republic in 1928 also represented the idea of functionalism of the Czech bourgeoisie middle class. New concepts of spatial economy were used particularly in the case of minimal houses (mostly double wing types) by means of remarkable solutions with regard to multipurpose spaces and their variability.

Also, in 1932 in Vienna, Austria the overall concept of Josef Frank preferred again the presentation of typical houses. The involvement of the two Americans Richard Neutra and Arthur Grünberger (both emigrated in 1923) opened the horizon to the cultural imports from the USA – Hollywood movies and American jazz music – had shattered the bourgeois lifestyle and entered the world of art and daily life.

¹ As a result of the economic and political recovery after the crisis of 1923, the “Golden Twenties” were risen. Amongst the population, peaceful rest gradually began. In both art and politics, the term „New Objectivity” (German: *Neue Sachlichkeit*) was used to clearly distance itself from expressionism and the inflation years.

2. Werkbund –architects of the European avant-garde

The realisation of these settlements goes back to an artists' association, which devoted itself to the exchange of opinions and publications by the architects of the European avant-garde: the Werkbund. The association was founded 1907 in Germany, to promote contacts and exchange and collaboration between artists, craftsmen, and industrials. The aim was to work together in the fabrication of products with an artistic quality claim. Hermann Muthesius, founding member, formulated it as: „more content, less art.“ At that time the English “Arts and Crafts” movement thus appeared to Muthesius as a counter-projection to the so-called “style architecture” in the turn of the 19th and 20th century in Germany, which, according to Muthesius' conception, was guided solely by the striving for a representative and “artistic” appearance. The Werkbund was founded against the backdrop of the emerging industrialization with the aim of providing an excellent position on the world market through good design of products; Functionality and appropriate material were the central quality criteria, which included all design disciplines. In the interplay of art, industry and handicraft, future-oriented impulses were given for building culture and design as well as encompassing social processes. At that time the beginning of a new future was creating considerably new design processes.

The new requirements of the industrialized age of the modern era also required an education reform. Even before the founding of the Bauhaus in Dessau by Walter Gropius in 1919, which united art and industrial production, the Royal (later State) Academy of Art and Art History in Breslau was very progressive under the direction of Werkbund members – Hans Poelzig (1903-16), August Endell (1916-26) and Oskar Moll (1925-32).

Beyond the time of the comparative exhibition the tremendous treasure of the birth of modern thinking in Europe is still alive. But today the modernist estates are in different states of preservation. Whilst the merit and the value of the exhibition in the European Capital of Culture, Wroclaw 2016 are manifold. A sum of models, plans and historical photographs and the display items of well-designed consumer goods impressed the visitors. The nature of the comparison made the charm and sharpened our knowledge, for the exhibition departments were linked to urban models, compared the typologies and put in focus the state of research – as for example the modernist colouring and equipment. On the side gallery of the nave of the former church a series of small screens with photographs visualized impressions of the state before and after the renovation of the houses in a temporal and spatial overlay and an excellent impression of the commitment to the preservation of the construction of the modernist period.

Our view was also directed to the nearby WuWA itself that was for so many years suffering from neglect and underestimation. The exhibition gave us an opportunity to compare the models for a better future to the nearby originals. The present state

of the existing group of small WUWA houses, which are located in the shadow of the monumental Max Berg's Centennial Hall (Hala Stulecia), is partly excellent and partly regrettable. Some of them are living a neglected existence. Others are given the honour of contemporary appreciation. They are testimony to the European-inspired and all-embracing innovation that is going on from generation to generation.

Conclusions

Since then in the more than 100 years of its existence, the Werkbund has given important impetus to the industrial and design culture and works for the quality of the human environment. Today the Deutsche Werkbund is continuing the work towards its goals at an European level. The discursively, interdisciplinary and non-profit oriented association pursues its goals with events, excursions, publications, exhibitions and exemplary projects².

As a federation, it is supported by designers, culturally committed persons, self-employed persons and companies who pursue the goal of a high quality design of our environment, with interdisciplinary topics exemplarily in society, architecture, landscape, living, design, social engagement and energy³.

Thus, not only the buildings of the early modern period are cultivated in order to continue to be the setting for a pleasant life, but also the modernist ideas are developed further. It is not simply to cherish a tradition in the 21st century, rather than to secure the good frame and form for a good life within new global challenges, with new digital solutions and with social commitment for the equality of all.

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² [www.deutscher-werkbund.de].

³ Such as: From Industrial Society to Cultural Society – Work in Change; City culture in dialogue. East-West experiences; About People and Things; Urban development – who is the game?; On to new shores – plan against the current; One must take a position. Julius Posener – Work and effect; Provocation Future; From good form to good life; Laboratory City – On the Future of Living in the City; The invention of the future; live//design; RhineRAIL&GoodsCURRENTS; The creative potential of uncertainty; Industrial Culture – Between Sustainable Value Creation and New Entrepreneurship.