The Berlin Block and the New Bourgeois Dwelling

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Abstract

The publication of Gustav Assmann's *Plans for Urban Dwellings* (Grundrisse *für städtische Wohngebäude)* in 1862, in conjunction with the Berlin extension plan by James Hobrecht published the same year, signaled the emergence of the Berlin block as the ubiquitous urban typology that came to constitute the entire city. Assmann provided a catalogue of blocks in plan for various plot sizes, each showing small, medium and large apartments that could be flexibly adapted according to need. Representative of his time, Assmann conceived the block as an undifferentiated system that could house different categories of families, from the bourgeoisie to the working class, and, most importantly, a system that could flexibly adapt to accommodate the dynamically changing pattern of inhabitation corresponding to a mobile and fluctuating population. While Assmann's plans show lines of continuity from the bourgeois apartment blocks of the Biedermeier, I argue that his book signals a new instrumentality of the plans of the block. From the 1860s onwards, they become key components in the discourse of the disciplines of reform: an emerging field of knowledge increasingly concerned with the spatial organisation and government of the entire city. This paper traces a dual trajectory of typological evolution and social reasoning between 1860 and 1900, evidenced by discussions in the *Verein für Öffentliches Gesundheitswesen* (Association for Public Health) and other bodies of reform. Questions arose surrounding the size and grouping of families, the inclusion and exclusion of servants, the size, adjacencies and hierarchies of rooms to retract and strengthen the as too loosely perceived bonds of the bourgeois family. In these discussions, the evolving plans of the block helped to articulate new norms and spatial values that contribute to a new understanding of the bourgeoisie as protecting not only the value of the family, but also the security of the city itself.

Introduction

The publication of Gustav Assmann's *Plans for Urban Dwellings* in 1862, in conjunction with the publication of the Berlin extension plan by James Hobrecht in the same year, signaled the emergence of the Berlin block as a ubiquitous urban typology that came to constitute the entire city. Parallel to the Block's proliferation across the city, the spatial field it constituted became also a field of knowledge - knowledge about and operating on - the city's subjects. The block provided the spatiality upon which the life of the urban population could be studied and diagnosed, and in turn, the transformation of its spaces was seen to offer solutions to the very definition, management and control of the urban population.

This paper describes the block's typological evolution between the 1860s and the 1900s as a gradual process of spatial, social and functional differentiation. The generic and flexible spaces Assmann promoted became increasingly codified into more regularized domestic spaces. In parallel to the rise of the self-contained small dwelling for the urban poor, distinct dwellings and apartments for the newly defined 'Mittelstand' or urban middle classes emerged, helping their very differentiation. Primarily through the example of Moabit, this paper argues that the block's transformation into spatially and formally distinct housing according to class is not only in the service of the improvement of living conditions, but helps to establish the very possibility of government.

2. The Rise of 'The Urban'

The Berlin extension plan of 1862 by James Hobrecht that one can see traced in the 'Plan of Berlin and its surroundings' conceived the city as a unified system of interrelated spaces [Figure 1]. [i] Hobrecht, an engineer, was appointed in 1859, only one year after his professional qualification, to lead a commission 'for the preparation of a construction plan for the environs of Berlin'; a commission which had already been examining urban development issues since the mid-1850s. The plan was a 'compendium of local police regulations determining which lots were to be developed with buildings on the outskirts of the city, and which lots were to be classified as public streets and squares and thus left undeveloped'.[ii] Accordingly, the drawing reads as a negative instruction designating the areas to be kept free of building – that is, the streets and squares that were provided to achieve an overall connectivity and distribution across the surface of the proposed city.[iii] The plan depicts the space of the city as 'full': the new building fabric appears as a solid, a ground of stone out of which the spaces of movement – for air and people, and later drainage – are carved. Hobrecht declared the regularity and convenience of 'mediating connections' as the primary logic of his plan. The resulting urban blocks were designed, as generously as possible, to flexibly allow later subdivision and different modes of occupation including the expected land needs of industry.[iv] In contrast to other urban extension plans at the time, Hobrecht's plan did not propose interventions in the existing fabric. Instead, it projected a ring surrounding the existing city, a ring that, corresponding to Berlin's late but exponential process of industrialization and growth, came to be filled with its system of blocks by the turn of the century.

The logic of the urban plan is mirrored in the logic of its component blocks. Gustav Assmann's Plans for Urban Dwellings, also from 1862, was published as a guide to improve and consolidate the existing knowledge about the construction and spatial organization of the block.[v] Assmann, an architect employed by the state, saw his book in the tradition of building handbooks, giving practical advice to the block's builders and their clients. There is no indication that the publication of his catalogue was coordinated with the publication of the Hobrecht plan. However, Assmann was certainly aware that the implementation of the plan would imply the acceleration of urban development and along with it, the proliferation of the block.

Assmann provided a relatively complete catalogue rationalising existing variations of the block's organisation in plan depending on the size and the shape of the plot [Figures 2, 3 &4]. While Assmann saw his book as addressing the need of the middle and poorer classes, his plans cover all possible forms of accommodation, from the single room dwelling to large apartments of up to 14 rooms - to workshops and spaces for industrial uses. The latter are designated at times as distinct rooms, at times suggested as an interchangeable function. While the captions to his plates refer to small, medium and large apartments, in his text he declares flexibility and adaptability in the block's internal organisation as the primary principle of his plans. He explains that the block is subject to 'continuously changing occupation by smaller and larger families and their varying demands'[vi]. Assmann argues that this 'particular mode of occupation restricts any particular and individual disposition.' Accordingly, he proposed generous and undifferentiated rooms, without no 'particular forms or unusual size' and 'without any particular architectural features'; construction methods that allow the joining of small apartments to larger ones, subdividing of larger

apartments according to need as well as the introduction of door openings in all walls to facilitate the addition or subtraction of rooms to units. Assmann summarises that these constraints result in ‘a certain schemata, which changes according to location, size and form of the urban plot, but essentially allows only minor deviation.’[vii]

This schema, with minor variations, unfurled over the urban extension area. The block in areas developed in the 1860s and 1870s such as Luisenstadt and parts of Moabit, performed as Assmann suggested – as an assemblage of undifferentiated rooms.
As the Sineck plan of 1856 demonstrates, Luisenstadt, adjoining the existing city, began to grew long the arteries from the mid nineteenth century onwards. (Figure 5) . The Hobrecht plan incorporated the earlier urban development plan ‘Kopenicker Feld’ at a time when much of its land was still fields and gardens. The aerial photograph of Luisenstadt of 1928 (Figure 6) shows the dense built up of front buildings, sidewings and back buildings, typically with trade and manufacture in the depth of the block, and its internal spaces occupied by residential uses, home working or light industries.

The section VIII of the Hobrecht plan shows the superimposition of the new street system onto the fields of Moabit, with its few buildings, the large military exercise area and the prison (Figure 7) The aerial photograph of Moabit shows the variegated outlines of early deep urban blocks on the right hand side and the centre of the picture, and the shallower urban figure with coordinated development pattern indicative of later and internally more differentiated blocks on the right hand side. (Figure 8).

The aerial views capture aspects of Luisenstadt's and Moabit's socio-spatial pattern of evolution. Both areas evolve from a fundamentally undifferentiated urban system into increasingly formally, functionally and socially differentiated urban segments. In Moabit, the influx of the large factories in the 1870s and 1880s propelled the need to house a distinct segment of the population. In Luisenstadt, the block both adapted to and enabled a synergy of agglomeration of small and medium sized trade and manufacture. A variant of the block evolved that joined whole factories with residential functions.

Figures 9 to 12 exemplify early variations of Assmann's 'schemata' in Luisenstadt and Moabit, They share Assmann's logic of the block as an urban system: the façade as defining primarily the space of the street; a generic system of front, side and back wings allowing a systematic modularity in filling the urban block; 'quintessential openings' linking the space of the street into the depth of the block to provide access to back buildings, stables and the collective toilets, and an internal organisation that wraps relatively generous and undifferentiated sequence of rooms around the void space of the street and the courtyards. Internally, the plans are organised as a generic assembly of relatively generous, flexibly useable rooms, distributed across a corridor or arrayed as though rooms offering flexibility in the addition and subtraction of spaces, if not through shared corridors, then through the various openings between rooms.

Ernst Bruch, one of the harshest critics of the Hobrecht plan and its constituent type, provides a most succinct summary of the urban principle underlying their joint spatiality: 'The uniform subdivision of streets renders each street into a connection

between all possible uses, and each house into a microcosm of the whole of human society'. viii Hobrecht's undifferentiated urban fabric and Assmann's flexibly adaptable plans share precisely this understanding of the city as an infrastructural system that collects and distributes an as yet undifferentiated population and a multiplicity of uses throughout its territory. The criticism against the early Berlin block as an inadequate form of housing is the anachronistic projection of a modern conception of housing that did not exist in that form at the time. Moreover, as urban historian Gerhard Fehl noted, the flexibility of the block's spatial organization allowed it to act as a 'large sponge', able to absorb an undifferentiated social body in extreme flux. [ix]

Interestingly, Hobrecht's plan precedes any theoretical debates on urban planning in Germany, and the author himself barely commented on his plan but for short statements of defense. However, in Teoriá general de la urbanización of 1867, Ildefonso Cerda describes his blocks as a system of 'fluctuating boundaries and an endlessly mobile population', in a city structure based on connectivity and circulation, a description that also applies to the spatiality of Hobrecht and Assmann.[x]

The Knowledge of the Urban

As the block proliferated across the urban territory in the 1860s, the city's growth and increasing density were closely observed and registered. In the 1870s, groups and associations whose knowledge and expertise were based on the observation of patterns immanent to the city began to form, groups that made it their task to map moral topographies, or patterns of public health and industrial synergies onto the urban fabric. Among these groups were the influential Verein für Sozialpolitik [VfSP (Social Policy Association)], founded in 1873 to study methods for readjusting the liberal market economy, and the Deutsche Verein für Öffentliches Gesundheitswesen [VFOG (German Association for Public Health)], also founded in 1873, which became the central forum for the discussion of public health and sanitary matters.[xvi] These associations brought together economists, doctors, sanitary experts, engineers, architects and municipal leaders. Using the new instrument of statistics and one of its products—the census of the statistical office—to ensure the scientific probity of their work, they accumulated their own data, or banks of knowledge, largely built up through the observations of the block.[xvii]

And thus began the 'avalanche of numbers': every part of the buildings came to be described, recorded and tabled processes paralleled by a minute observation of life in its spaces. Questions of the quantity and constitution of its inhabitants, of contagion and disease, of income, of tax and of expenditure of alms support were scrupulously described, quantitatively listed and tabulated to show possible interrelationships. These urban descriptions and the databases of urban life brimmed with the, to us, peculiar mixture of empirical and material data, moral observation and social study. Echoing Robin Evans' description of the immoral spaces of London mansions and

hovels, the descriptions of the Berlin block paint a picture of excess, of floors, bodies, noise, children, dirt and voices. [xi] The multiple occupancies of dwellings, rooms and even beds, the fluid organization of the extended and open structured families including the various forms of subletting and lodgers were seen to deliver sexual promiscuities, proliferate vice and corrupt moralities. The blocks indecipherable network of fluid spaces appeared to provide the breeding ground as much for contagion and disease as for the formation of dubious alliances and the potential for revolution. While these observations focused on the overcrowded accommodation of the poor, their proximity to and mingling with the 'Mittelstand', and the latter's potential, partly through this proximity, of sliding into the proletariat, vilified the flexibility in the block's spaces.

The Block's density and permeability (Figures 14&15) posed a problem to the disciplines of reform. The VFOG, sought in vain to identify specific correlations between volumes of air, dampness and the lack of sunlight in the block's spaces and patterns of disease, contagion or death. Its literature is riddled both with the frustration of the inability to prove the block's spaces as directly responsible for illness and contagion as much as with the very difficulty in tracing the spread of illness across the fluid space of the block. The VfSP equally struggled to identify the balance of income and expenditure with social matters. One of its key concerns lay in the proportion of household income spent on food or rent, particularly its ability to afford the costly protein, understood as necessary to sustain a healthy workforce. Their databanks sought to table bodies, spaces, nutrition and cost across all social strata at the scale of rooms, dwellings, blocks and the city overall.

This short summary exemplifies the attempt to craft an 'urban reason', a knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the urban patterns of the city's organization. The city came to be seen as an organism that balanced its flows of income and expenditure, requiring a healthy and productive workforce to sustain its life. However, the 'fluid' sponge of the block did not only pose a threat to health and political equilibrium, but also prevented the very possibility of governing inside its spaces. For the nineteenth century reformer, the block's looming façade hid an unquantifiable, fluctuating mass of potentially dangerous people and activities. As long as the block and its dense and mobile population seemed unknowable and incalculable, both the analysis necessary to propose intervention and the implementation of that intervention remained impossible.

While the security of the city and even the nation was seen to be threatened by the proletariat, reformers were also concerned with the Mittelstand - the undefined mass between the upper bourgeoisie and the proletariat . The Mittelstand was seen both as the driver of urban prosperity and the bulwark against the dangers emanating from the proletariat.[xii] Structural changes during urbanization effected dangerous degrees of social mobility in each direction between these not yet clearly demarcated social groups. In addition, the Mittelstand's family structure was perceived as too loose, their familial integrity threatened by distant relatives, cohabiting journeymen and servants. As long as the territory of the block eluded precise tabulation, strategic strengthening of the Mittelstand, the optimization of its productivity and the dissemination of desirable values and norms remained elusive.

Accordingly, housing reform, was not only concerned with the improvement of living conditions of the urban poor, but also part of a project of discipline and regulation of the overall social body, with the generalization of the self contained domestic space of the family at its center. [xiii] The evolution of the block bears traces of the containment and separation of the working class as much as serves as mechanism of differentiation for the Mittelstand.

Between the 1860s and 1900s, the block undergoes a process of typological evolution, a process partly in response to the multiple, various demands by social reform, but also in response to spatial and economic patterns of agglomeration and synergy.

The sequence of plans in Moabit, one of the earliest areas to be developed, trace the block's increasing spatial, formal and programmatic differentiation. The block outline in plan begins to inflect, following a stronger linkage and hierarchy between rooms, as shown in the plan of Bandelstrase 25 (Figure 16). The plan shows the new module of the self contained small dwelling as s sequence of toilet, kitchen and room in the back buildings, but still has an open structure in the front building. By the mid 1880s, the generic, flexible array of undifferentiated rooms was replaced by the defined groupings of rooms, each with a set of preferred functions in the attempt to group and interiorize a group of individuals defined through the modern domestic family. The plan of Rathenowerstrasse 43 (Figure 17) exemplifies that the outline of the block in plan is subordinated to its internal organization, opposed to the early generic urban figures defining the urban voids of streets and courtyards. Its slightly staggered outline maximized lighting but also accentuated the logic of the plan as a sequence of distinct groupings of rooms, apartments of a defined size rather than the previously

flexibly array of spaces. The generalization of the kitchens and toilets as distinct spaces implied an ossification of the previously definable separating walls between rooms. Whereas Rathenowerstrasse 43 (Figure 18) can be seen as a form that houses the lower middle classes in the lower floors, and the working classes in the smaller apartments in the upper floors, the plan of Turmstrasse 4 (Figures 19 & 20) demonstrates that as soon as the self -contained space of the domestic dwelling is generalized across all social strata, blocks emerge that address distinct bandwidths of the urban population. Its plan is organized with two larger dwellings in the front building, with a sequence of serving and served spaces, large enough rooms to serve as spaces of representation, but crucially, too small to sublet rooms to others. The retraction of the back line of the building, away from the back of the plot, the orientation of apartments away from each other and the size and articulation of the back building reestablished the hierarchy between the front and the back. The organization in plan and the opulent façade suggest the Middlestand as the desired occupant.

Lastly, the plan of Rostockerstrasse 33 (figure 21) exemplifies a further step in this process of spatial, social and functional differentiation. The block is structured by 5 staircases, each providing access to two dwellings. It combines smaller and larger dwellings, but locates the latter as extending into the side wing, and the smaller ones in the centre of the front and the back building. The strong hierarchy between dwelling in the front and at the back of the building is addressed through mirroring the plan. The drawing shows internal dimensions demarcating appropriate sizes for various rooms. There is nothing flexible or adaptable in its spaces, nor any expectation that the building would grow and evolve or its occupants change to adapt

to the changing character of the urban area. Instead, the repetition of this form of the block comes to configure almost the whole street, correlating a distinct architectural and urban form with a definable and governable content, in this case, the lower middle classes (Figure 22).

Here the block has become an envelope for strategies of government addressing the new social figure of the modern domestic family. Whereas the porous organisation of the 1860s block seemed to leave the family vulnerable to dubious influences, this plan articulates dwellings small enough to suggest containment and protection. The exploration of room sizes and sequences corresponds to, and also ensures, a particular spatial distribution of individuals and activities. Relations between husband and wife, parents and children, and the family and its neighbours are reinforced through a mutual surveillance of moral and sanitary habits. Here the space of privacy, and its correlative freedom, become the reward for conforming to norms.

While this description of typological evolution is indicative of Moabits's transformation from an area mixing all classes and intermingled with some trade and manufacture, towards a focus on the lower Mittelstand and working classes required by its large-scale industries, it also reflects an city wide pattern that not only saw the grouping and interiorisation of individuals into the spaces of the domestic, but also began to differentiate whole segments of the urban population.

Since the 1890s, also other urban areas differentiate according to function or class. Luisenstadt evolves its particular block mix of residential, industry and manufacture (Figure 23). In parallel, building societies unrolled templates of identical blocks for

the working classes over large urban areas in Berlin's North East (Figures 24&25). During the same period, the systematic development of the West of the city begins, with blocks whose large plans formed the template for the zoned hierarchies of the apartments for the upper Mittelstand (Figures 26 &27).

Conclusion

In the space of 30 years, Hobrecht and Assmann's fluidly adaptable spatial infrastructure has begun the long trajectory towards the spatially, socially and functionally segregated city. The block has evolved into a range of different housing typologies, each allowing the accommodation and identification of distinct segments of the urban population opposed to the cohabitation of different classes desired in the 1860s. The concentration of the urban poor posed its own dangers, but now this could be constraint within the bandwidth of this population, spatially localized and intervened in. The middle classes were no longer under the threat of the proletariat's influence, or compromised by its proximity. Instead it forged its own version of housing, neither too small nor too large to compromise the integrity of the middle class family. The distribution of individuals into the defined spaces of the domestic and groups of the urban population into segments of the urban fabric, made the city transparent and governable.

Throughout the time of its proliferation until the last third of the twentieth century, the reception of the block as the 'Mietskaserne', the 'rental barrack', was overshadowing its performative dimension. The term was used in the 1860s to describe the very few Berlin blocks whose internal organization was similar to that of the military barracks – internal long corridors with rooms of each side to house the poorest of the poor.

However, since the first decade of the twentieth century, the term came to polemically denote all the ills of the nineteenth century metropolis, embodied in the figure of the Berlin block: excessive overcrowding, intense poverty and poor health, and the economic imbalance of speculation.

By contrast, the block's tectonic solidity; internal flexibility and generosity; its capacity to adapt and promote urban transformation at a larger scale, has led to its successful persistence into the present day. Particularly the early generic blocks; with their assembly of undifferentiated rooms, spilling into the series of voids of the courtyard, are aligned with current trends of urban design: it combines a dynamic mix of functions and a vibrant street life. Its generous and undifferentiated spaces have allowed its for diverse and changing requirements over time, often accommodating light industry, shops, office spaces and dwellings simultaneously (Figures 28 & 29). The block's spatial organization draws interior and exterior spaces closely together supporting a flexible gradation from public to private space. As a theoretical model, the Berlin block cannot be reduced to the residential function of a tenement. Instead, it provides an urban structure with a loose fit to accommodate urban life.

[i] Descriptions and analyses of the Hobrecht plan can be found in Ernst Heinrich, "Der Hobrechtplan", *Jahrbuch fur brandenburgische Landesgeschichte*, (1962), p. 13; Geist and Küvers vols. I&II, and C. Bernet, "The 'Hobrecht Plan' (1862) and Berlin's urban structure" in *Urban History* (2004) [electronic journal], [cited 10. June 2005].
Available:http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract;jsessionid=21EAFA2C241A1594EBE7CC4650E83554.tomcat1?fromPage=online&aid=311433.

[ii] *Obertribunalentscheidung* of 1869, in T. Striethorst, *Archiv fu ̈r Rechtsfa ̈lle,* 3rd ser., 1 (Berlin, 1870), 217–18.

[iii] The plan to regulate Berlin's exponential growth was conceived as a 'compendium of local police regulations determining which lots were to be developed with buildings on the outskirts of the city, and which lots were to be classified as public streets and squares and thus left undeveloped' (*Obertribunalentscheidung* of 1869, in T. Striethorst, *Archiv fu r Rechtsfa ̈lle,* 3rd ser., 1 (Berlin, 1870), 217–18. All translations from German by the author.)

[iv] Letter, In Geist Und Kuvers,

[v] Gustav Assmann, *Grundrisse für städtische Wohngebäude. Mit Rücksicht auf die in Berlin geltende Bauordnung* (Berlin, 1862).

[vi] Ibid. p.5.

[vii] Ibid.

viii Ernst Bruch, quoted in Dieter Hoffmann Axthelm, Die dritte Stadt. Bausteine eines neuen Gründungsvertrags. Frankfurt 1993. P.193

ix Gerhard Fehl , Berlin wid Wlestadt. Wohnungsnot und Villenkolonien. In: Juan Rodríguez-Lores; Gerhard Fehl (eds.), Städtebaureform 1865 - 1900 : von Licht, Luft und Ordnung in der Stadt der Gründerzeit, Hambrug 1984, Bd. 1, p. 110

[x] Ildefonso Cerdá, *Teoriá general de la urbanizacion y application de sus principios y doctrinas a la reforma y ensanche de Barcelona*, 1867, discussed in Françoise Choay, *The Rule and the Model. On the Theory of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge,MA: MIT Press, 1997 [originally *La règle et le Modèle, sur la théorie de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980)], p. 237.

[xi] An anonymous observer writes: 'the screaming of children, the roar of the factory in the courtyard, all the steam and stench of the 40 or 50 kitchens with their smell of tallow and rancidity, where no door can be opened without the penetration of curious, envious or gleeful gazes, here the home must appear as hell, the pub and brothel as heaven'. In Hegemann p85

[xii] See Julius Faucher, Die Bewegung fuer Wohnungsreform, Berlin 1865

[xiii] As Michel Foucault and Jacques Donzelot have described, the modern family appeared as a mechanism of liberal government that was able to intervene in the health and welfare of the overall population without overextending the domain of state law. Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press 1997) [originally *La Police des familles* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977)]