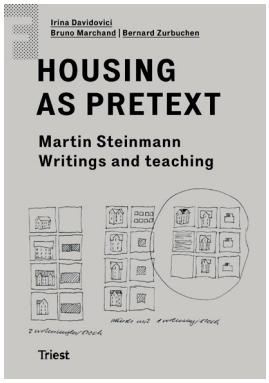
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New release October 2026

Writings on Housing by Martin Steinmann

→ First publication of Martin Steinmann's collected and annotated writings on housing

→ Typological analyses and critical comparisons offer an in-depth discussion of residential buildings

→ Regarded as a building block of neighbourhoods, the urban residential building offers valuable impetus beyond the residential building typology

Architect, critic, architectural historian and professor Martin Steinmann (1942–2022) was one of the pre-eminent intellectual representatives of the Swiss architectural scene from the late twentieth century until his death in 2022.

Known above all for his phenomenological and semiotic thoughts on contemporary Swiss architecture, his writings on housing are relatively unknown. Despite this fact, for Steinmann housing was the entry point or, as he put it, a "pretext" for understanding the influence of architecture on society. In view of current demands in terms of densification and sustainable design of urban environments, this approach is more important than ever.

The possibilities of different social groups living together are fundamentally influenced by housing and its physical manifestation in urban design. By means of his critical reflections on historical and contemporary forms of housing in Switzerland, Steinmann identifies points of reference for current housing and design practices.

The method that Steinmann applied in his research and teaching is as compelling as it is relevant. By harking back to history to identify and analyse typological developments, he draws parallels between traditional forms of housing and contemporary design.

Irina Davidovici, Bruno Marchand, Bernard Zurbuchen (eds.)
Housing as Pretext.
Martin Steinmann – Writings and teaching

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→ This book is the first volume in the **"Collection Filogie" series**, which was launched by the Foundation Filogie. The series focuses on housing – in particular on the aspects of sustainability, affordability and urbanity. The Foundation's aim is to conduct research into a constantly evolving field at the intersection of a spirit of experimentation, innovation and multidisciplinarity. The series is edited by Bruno Marchand.

Steinmann analyses historical forms of housing such as workhouses and mezzanine apartments along with current housing projects by leading architectural firms in order to forge links between traditional forms, social and economic conditions, and cultural norms that are equally relevant for contemporary housing projects.

For the first time, this publication explains Steinmann's teaching methods, bringing together his essays on the subject of housing, some hitherto unpublished and others long out of print.







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Martin Steinmann in front of a building by Kay Fisker during a study trip to Copenhagen, 2006.

"Dwelling and housing are a recurrent theme in your extensive and varied work." It was with these words that Daniel Kurz opened his interview with Martin Steinmann in 2016, shortly after the latter had been awarded the prestigious Prix Meret Oppenheim.[1] Looking back on a distinguished career, Steinmann acknowledged that his intellectual temperament was particularly attuned to the study of housing, understood as the architectural embodiment of everyday life: "I don't enjoy loud or over-agitated architecture; it's hard to stomach." Significantly, he immediately added: "The city can't digest it either."[2] This clarification reveals that housing interested Steinmann first and foremost because of its role within the architecture of the city. It points to the original connection between his interest in housing and his understanding of architecture as a civic and urban discipline.[3] Housing thus emerges as a point of convergence for a wide range of concerns, and its study becomes a pretext for engaging broader questions concerning architecture, the city, and society at large. The typified and standardised nature of housing provides an entry point into wider investigations. As a building type, it reflects the characteristic condition of the urban inhabitant in the industrial age. Steinmann's sustained engagement with this field was driven by the same intellectual enthusiasm that animated both his writing and his teaching: "That is the exciting thing about housing, and that's why I so enjoyed teaching it: here the phenomenon of type and its interpretation reveal themselves in complete clarity; and thereby also reveal how design works, namely in the adaptation of established patterns to particular situations."[4]

Kurz's characterisation of housing as the "common thread" running through Steinmann's work may come as a surprise.[5] In the mid-1970s, Steinmann first emerged on the international architectural scene as the curator of the exhibition *Tendenzen: Neuere Architektur im Tessin*, organised in 1975 at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH Zurich).[6] His influential analysis of architecture in Ticino focused on the theme of architectural autonomy as the common ground from which the work of his Ticinese contemporaries had emerged.[7] Later, in the early 1990s, Steinmann turned his attention to the emerging generation of German-speaking Swiss architects in some of his best-known essays, such as "La présence des choses" (The Presence of Things) and "Forme forte" (Strong Form).[8] Offering formal and material readings of built architecture, informed by phenomenology and image theory, these texts belong primarily to the realm of architectural criticism and theoretical discourse, and appear to have little connection with housing as a social programme. Associated with a body of architecture that attracted considerable critical attention, these writings achieved a far wider international resonance than Steinmann's long-standing engagement with housing, a subject central to his teaching at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL)[9] from 1987 to 2007.

In Steinmann's work, architectural theory intersected with the question of housing through its historical conditioning. The explicit ambition of his criticism was to influence architectural practice. To this end, throughout his career he invited, encouraged, and at times gently coaxed practising architects to articulate their ideas in writing, thereby contributing to the production of architectural discourse. As an integral part of his intellectual agenda, Steinmann sought to illuminate the components of a methodology characteristic of contemporaneous Swiss architecture, one that incorporated history as a central frame of reference in the generation of form. He identified, for example, a shared referential framework in relation to the Swiss avant-garde of the 1920s, whose concerns were centred largely on housing as a programme for social transformation. References to this common formal repertoire implicitly signalled an alignment of architectural values and ideological positions. Thus, in Steinmann's interpretation, various housing projects by Diener & Diener – notably Hammerstrasse and St. Alban-Tal in Basel – consciously engage with

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Kosthaus of the Brändlin spinning mill, Jona SG, 1828, demolished in 1977.

end of which was the *Stube*. From this corridor, stairs led to one large and one small bedroom on the upper floor. The *Kosthaus* in Rikon is an example of this type.

Some of these boarding houses have an additional chamber in the attic, but research has shown that these were only partitioned off at a later date.

The outer walls of the boarding houses were made of masonry – sometimes with half-timbering on the upper floor – and were finished in white plaster. The inner walls were made of a load-bearing timber frame, left exposed. The roof was "broken" [partitioned] and supported by a horizontal roof truss. Later, more economical roof constructions emerged that were easier to build – a sign of the thrift that affected the entire building and spatial structure. This economy is also evident in the [construction of] outer walls: although these had to be 70 cm thick in the later three-storey boarding houses, they were built of stone until the late nineteenth century. In 1858, Bernhard Becker explained that brick was the best material for such boarding houses in the canton of Glarus, "but due to its high price, it was not frequently used; stone was preferable."[8] For stones could be found in large quantities: "they are lying around on one's doorstep." Becker is referring to the [rounded] stones from the Linth river, the so-called *Linthbollen* that were used in [local vernacular] wall construction.

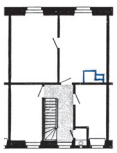
In 1828, the aforementioned Bebie brothers (who enhanced their name to Bebié) built a *Kosthaus* in Turgi with no fewer than twenty Type 1.1 dwellings, but each with three floors – the same type of boarding house that Heinrich Kunz used for all his factories. One reason for the additional storey was the more efficient use of the fixed costs for the basement and roof. Secondly, the larger footprint was of little account given the remote location of these buildings. Furthermore, they provided accommodation for single male and female workers. For example, the surviving census form from 1850 for Heinrich Kunz's boarding house in Windisch lists one four-room dwelling as occupied by a married couple with nine children, six of whom were between the ages of 14 and 24 and worked in the spinning mill, plus two more workers who were single.[9]

Boarding houses built in Wald in 1859 comprised dwellings with four rooms on two upper floors, like the *Kosthaus* of the Jakob Oberholzer weaving mill in Sagenrain, which explains its floor plan. They were converted in the 1880s, when criticism of this type of accommodation for boarders had become widespread. Nevertheless, for a long time afterwards, "many (manufacturers) reserved the right to require the tenant to take in other people if he did not need all the rooms, or even to assign certain people to the [...] flat," as Fridolin Schuler, the first Swiss factory inspector, wrote in 1896.[10]

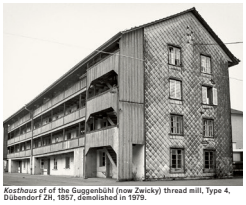
TYPE 1.3. — The aforementioned *Kosthaus* [in Sagenrain] represents a special form of Type 1. It is a row of ten dwellings organised in pairs, with each



Oberholzer weaving mill and *Kosthaus*, Wald-Sagenrain ZH.



Kosthaus of the Wild and Solivo spinning mill, Type 2.1, Baden AG, 1840.



Kosthaus of of the Guggenbühl (now Zwicky) thread mill, Type 4, Dübendorf ZH, 1857, demolished in 1979.

and connected to each other through a network of family and business relationships, it is easy to grasp the worker's position in relation to the factory owner.[20]

Studying the worker's home and the living habits that evolve within it is a task requiring contributions from various academic fields, each with their own methods, questions, and answers. One of these disciplines is architectural history. Discussions with economic and social historians have shown that studies of the living conditions of workers, based on written sources, often fail to reference the structural framework: the dwelling. For example, information on a census form stating that a flat was occupied by 13 people only becomes clear when that flat's structure, floor plan, facilities, and so forth are known. Conversely, architectural historians can only understand the living conditions when it becomes clear how many people lived there, what they did for a living and how much they earned. This is a deliberately simplified example of how the findings of various fields are necessary to interpret the *Kosthäuser* as documents from the nineteenth century and, beyond that, to understand the industrial landscape. As far as the rural areas of the canton of Zurich are concerned, the most important approach to this is Rudolf Braun's [hereby cited] book on social and cultural change in these regions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book imbues this [industrial] landscape with meaning. Research must pick up from there – and architectural history has a role in that task.

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Nineteenth-century gallery-access workers' housing, Milan.

In his editorial for *archithese* 8, Kurt W. Forster remarks in passing that gallery access became the stereotype of the late nineteenth-century tenement house.[1] His remark deserves further unpacking. Judging by the number of apartment buildings with external access galleries, this is hardly the case outside the industrialised cities of northern Italy. It is, however, relevant when considered in the context of the experience associated with these buildings: they starkly illustrate the exploitation suffered by the working class as a result of property speculation. The significance of the gallery-access tenement building is not fixed by its [typological or formal] characteristics. Rather, it is social, arising from how it appeared in the nineteenth-century city. The significance of architecture lies in our experience of its use throughout history.

As Aldo Rossi points out, the expression *uno della ringhiera* (one from the railings), which alludes to Milan's gallery-access houses, still refers to a man from a working-class neighbourhood, a labourer. Rossi himself used the gallery type in a recently completed residential complex in the Gallaratese district of Milan.[2] In his design description, he mentions these working-class neighbourhoods as historical points of reference, but also the German housing estates from the Neues Bauen period.[3] These seemingly contradictory references actually indicate the range of different interpretations that have been given to the gallery building throughout its history. Under conditions of speculation, it was a useful means of increasing the value of a plot of land without resorting to the usual symbols of the bourgeois apartment building. Yet under less laissez-faire conditions, it served the purpose of developing new habits in line with the growing consciousness of the working class and expressing them in architecture. The gallery became a manifesto.

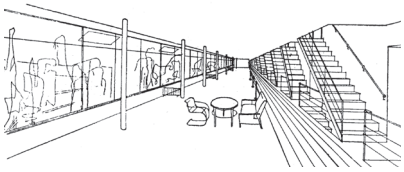
THE STREATHAM STREET BUILDING

In 1848, following a period of severe epidemics [in London], the Society for Improving the Conditions of the Labouring Classes [S.I.C.L.C] decided to prove that [multi-storey] tenements, which were inevitable in urban areas, could offer healthy living conditions if properly designed. For this purpose, Henry Roberts (1802–1876) constructed a building on Streatham Street in the Bloomsbury district in 1849–1850, which still stands today; an inscription on the façade identifies it as a "model house for families".[4] Its street-side façade hardly differs from other buildings of its time, but on the courtyard side, galleries lead from a common staircase to a total of 40 flats of varying sizes distributed across four floors. Brick pillars with flat arches connect two floors at a time. The galleries running between them are alternately secured with balustrades and iron railings.

Gallery walkways were not common in England at that time. It can be presumed that Roberts had encountered them in Italy (a trip to Italy in 1829 is documented)[5] and applied them to the design for this building, arranging the flats in such a way as to limit the spread of infectious diseases. In his widely read book *The Dwellings of the Labouring Classes*, Roberts described how the design could "effectually [...] prevent the communication of contagious diseases":

element suggested by Ginzburg in *SA* and implemented here was the glazed corridor, along which the apartment doors were located. Stairs led from these entrances down and up to the cells, with 3.60 m-high living rooms and the bedroom and bathrooms only 2.30 m high. The description of this corridor ultimately applies to all designs in which the gallery serves to illustrate a new way of life: "What is essential for us in type F is that such housing opens up new possibilities for its occupants in the area of social exchange [...]. The well-lit service corridor can become a kind of forum for collective social exchanges."[30]

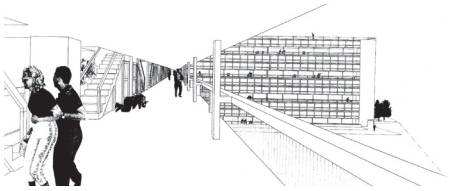
The gallery-access house is defined by the experience of the street as a social experience. From Charles Fourier's "Rue Galerie" onwards, the gallery-access house is understood as a street, a type that transfers the city into the interior of a building. "It is the idea of street, not the reality of the street, that is important", Alison and Peter Smithson wrote about their 1952 Golden Lane design, in which they also described the gallery as a "street-in-the-air".[31] They were also among the first to associate architecture with the term "social engineering".[32] However, architecture can only change people's behaviour if it is part of a changed environment, to use the early socialists' term for the overall social conditions. Godin summarised his thoughts as follows: "Despite what I have established about the influence that material provisions can have on improving the lot of the working classes, it must be clearly understood that this improvement must develop on its own. It has to be produced by the environment itself; it cannot be imposed."[33] The damage to the communal areas of the two gallery-access slabs built by the Smithsons on Robin Hood Lane in London, shortly after their completion in 1970, only confirms the validity of these statements.



Moisei Ginzburg, Residential building with E1 units, project 1928.



Moisei Ginzburg and Ignati Milinis, Narkomfin residential building, Moscow, 1928–29.



Alison and Peter Smithson, Golden Lane competition, London, 1952. Perspective of a 'street in the air'.

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...ARCHITECTURE

In response to two interrelated global threats – overcrowding and urbanisation – architecture around 1950 focused on two relationships: the one between the individual and society, and the one between people and nature. It is only understandable why, under these circumstances, Frank Lloyd Wright's work attracted a great deal of attention in Switzerland; it was precisely these values that Werner Moser emphasised on the occasion of Wright's Zurich retrospective in 1952.[14] And yet, the effects of this exhibition were minimal; if anything, they were ideological in nature, revolving around the idea of "organic" architecture (which Wright himself defined as "natural" and "self-evident", among other things).[15] Since the 1930s, various trends had converged in Switzerland towards a different kind of natural architecture, combining the concerns of both modern and traditional architecture. It was not only external reasons – the conditions of the economic crisis – that had forced Neues Bauen to change its values, but also internal reasons related to its growing prevalence.[16]

HUMANISATION

The example of Sweden can be used to understand this development. The social changes that had occurred during the 1920s without any major disruptions had allowed it to seek a balance between the different values. The new culture, supported by the workers, did not have to define itself in opposition to bourgeois culture and could incorporate the latter's values without a guilty



Haefeli Moser Steiger, Kongresshaus and Tonhalle, Zurich, 1939. Concert hall entrance after refurbishment, 2021.



Aeschlimann and Baumgartner, St. Stephen's Church, Zurich-Schwamendingen, 1955. Covered entrance.

conscience. The architecture could thus display a tendency towards elegance – in contrast to the sobriety embraced in Germany, the Netherlands, or indeed Switzerland – a preference for "warm" colours, "natural" materials, in short, for the emotional side of architecture.[17]

This humanisation seemed to promise the wider acceptance of values that Neues Bauen had sought in vain to impose through the laws of the machine age; indeed, none of its representatives could resist it. This is the trajectory in all the countries where Neues Bauen had gradually become mainstream. Under the banner of a self-satisfied "return to common sense",[18] it embodied criticism of Neues Bauen. A 1949 issue of *Werk* magazine focusing on Sweden gave Alfred Roth the opportunity to reflect on the state of architecture after World War II. He also refers to this criticism: "The attitude from which the buildings were created at that time is accused of being inartistic, inhuman, [...] too dominated by reason and too little imbued with feeling." The recurring demand was therefore, "just as it is with us: 'humanisation'."[19] He countered this by arguing that the basis of architecture continued to be reason, but that this basis had gradually come to be expanded, as had been "clear from the outset". In fact, the blows directed against Neues Bauen largely missed their mark. When, for example, an English magazine asked in 1948 why old, pleasantly coloured materials should not be used if they well served their purpose,[20] one could counter that the *New Architecture* exhibition in London in 1938 had stated: "Masonry, once the fundamental means of architecture, is now one means among many, admired more for its beauty [...] than for its strength."[21]

BALANCE

In this context, I would like to return to the architecture of "my" school in Rapperswil, described at the time as being closely connected to nature and "suitable for a holistic education".[22] Architecture, it was argued, should satisfy both rational and emotional needs. [In contrast], Neues Bauen was accused of being limited to the intellect – "we have thus reduced life to a simplistic common denominator."[23] This limitation corresponded in material terms to the preference for iron and concrete, which in turn were contrasted with other materials perceived to have more emotional connotations. Thus, the school's hall achieved balance through the combination of technical and natural materials. Its flat ceiling is supported by columns cast in concrete, with the exception of two stone columns marking a niche. The hall thus expresses an attitude that does not allow ideologies to restrict the free use of different materials, as Hans Hofmann emphasised in the catalogue to the aforementioned exhibition on Swiss architecture. After years in which materials had been assigned specific – ideological – meanings, he advocated that their use should be determined on a case-by-case basis by the task, or by the "nature" of the task.[24] The concepts developed around 1930, based on the specific historical situation of the time, were being reviewed and replaced by more general, even "elevated" notions. Whereas at the second CIAM congress in Frankfurt in 1929, on the topic of housing, the focus lay on the needs of "the masses", there is now talk of "people". These people are less associated with specific social conditions than with the physical and psychological conditions they experience privately.









Sauter and Dirler Architects, Glattal estate, Zurich-Schwamendingen, 1947–48. Bottom right: Albert Heinrich Steiner, Heiligfeld III estate, Zurich-Sihlfeld, 1953–55. Entrance canopies, details.

at the time [...] that they were pleasing, but "a certain uniformity cannot be overlooked, even though it is denied. An expert will certainly notice a particularly delicate railing [...]; the architect, one senses, is fighting like Don Quixote against uniformity."[33] This primarily concerns the building structure; no detail can help here. "And the Don Quixote-ness of this lies in the fact that one trots out a decorative phrase, namely the phrase about the free individual."[34]

The railing appears here in a compensatory form: under the conditions of mass construction, it offered the architect an opportunity to express himself artistically, whereas in other respects he was increasingly becoming an administrator of building processes. It fulfils the demand – which Sigfried Giedion certainly did not mean in this way – that it is time for architects to bring out the artist in them.[35]

However, one can see it differently: by concentrating expression on specific areas, the design changes in the manner already mentioned. It becomes the design of specific elements as "objects" that are attached to simple blocks. On the one hand, this process allows these areas to be individualised, while on the other it ensures a remarkable uniformity in the housing estates built around 1950. They are similar in broad terms: blocks with grey plastered walls, with windows that are separated from each other and whose shape provides information on the type of rooms, with gently sloping roofs... What distinguishes the housing estates are the elements mentioned above, primarily the canopies that protect the entrances. Their design is the hallmark of the individual housing estate or the cooperative that built it. The heaviness of the houses and the lightness of these roofs, the flatness of the walls and the fine structure of the grilles and balustrades made of corrugated sheet metal, or Eternit, or ribbed concrete cast in rubber formwork, the supports with grooved wooden or screwed-on aluminium strips and, finally, the rafters thereby complement each other. All these details have the effect of dematerialising the corresponding areas. The decisive factor, however, is that this concentration finds its place in mass construction, in that the designed areas do not affect the blocks in terms of the floor plan or the structural and constructional conditions that form the basis of their uniformity.[36]

If these observations apply to the housing estates that mark the expansion of the city at its edges, the question arises differently in the centre. Here, it is not a matter of concealing the mass – and the norm on which its production is based; on the contrary, they become the appropriate expression of the business city. In a paper on German architecture of the 1950s, Christoph Hackelsberger writes of the straight path that leads "from the DIN A4 page [...] to the standard window axis",[37] and of the grid that became the symbol of those years. It is the symbol in which the business district was also expanded in Zurich around 1950. However, I cannot agree with his negative assessment of the grid.

Otto Salvisberg had provided a model of architecture for the new commercial building in 1940–41: the Bleicherhof, which met with broad consensus due

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Gigon Guyer Architects, ensemble of three apartment buildings, Zürichberg, 1998–2000. External view and typical floor plan of the West building.

types in terms of their ground plans, addressing the qualities of the park house in different ways. In one, the staircase forms an inner core, with the spaces in the flat – corridors and rooms – arranged like the skins of an onion. Here the rooms very definitely face outwards, towards the park. Several architects chose to design buildings with two apartments per floor, like the *palazzina*. Here I find the ground plan created by Meinrad Morger and Heinrich Degelo particularly attractive: the rooms form a kind of glacial drift, with exciting spatial relationships. However, the possibility of linking the two flats fails to convince in either of these buildings, as the rooms are mirrored.

In the other type, the staircase and the "installed" spaces form peripheral, lit cores that articulate the dwelling. This produces a continuous space that spreads out like water between stones. This space can be subdivided into the usual rooms by means of sliding doors. And when walking around the flat, one finally gets a sense of the park as a whole, in rapid, cinematic clips. This type was developed in Wallisellen by Marianne Burkhalter and Christian Sumi, and also Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer. It is closest to being an up-to-date version of the townhouse at the turn of the century, where the rooms were linked together, appropriately to the order imposed by middle-class life. Today the sliding doors make it possible to do the opposite and create a new order from case to case. It is not surprising that homes in old townhouses like these are particularly sought after.

… AND REALISATION

Gigon Guyer continued their typological investigations in a competition for apartments on the Zürichberg in 1998.[14] They suggested grouping these apartments into three urban villas, which, on account of their location, really did deserve the denomination.[15] The design has since been built and forms an important reference point for examining the building type that is being discussed under various names here. It is based on the order of the quartier, which contains houses and villas, and attempts to use the relatively large parcel better than usual without disturbing this order. This was, in brackets, at the time also the reason for the open development in the Doldertal: the municipal building department refused to give permission for the terrace-style development that the architects had originally proposed because it was "alien to the quartier".







EMI Architects, Apartment building Steinwiesstrasse, Zurich-Hottingen, 2011–15. External view and typical floor plan.

tradition than to a picturesque one, as claimed by EMI. Here, the communal space resembles a path through an English park, where images – and sensations – follow one another in surprising twists and turns. This parallel is also obvious because this space in the larger flats is designed in a way that allows its windows to face different parts of the surrounding area. With such twists and turns to the left and right, the path through the apartment appears longer, as if through such a park.[29]

A RESIDENTIAL BUILDING BY MILLER MARANTA

However, the design that most successfully brings the interior and exterior forms of the apartments into harmony is the development by Miller Maranta in Zurich-Riesbach, 2010–12. The history of the site – the park of a nineteenth-century villa – and the building regulations for zone W2 required careful consideration of the surroundings. In this sense, the design is part of a preoccupation with *place* that occupies a large part of recent architecture in Switzerland. The concept has been understood primarily in terms of urban planning. Miller Maranta's work since the hall in Aarau in 2003 can be read as a gradual expansion of this understanding of *place*, which is most effective where the surroundings are equally characterised by built and natural features, for example on the Gotthard Pass with its old buildings and their forms dictated by necessity, and the rocks.[30]

I will limit myself here to the residential building on Zollikerstrasse: its façades are plastered in grey-brown; the colour and external forms make it appear smaller than it is. Towards the street, which is bordered on the other side by high walls, these are hard, while towards the park they have a soft structure with turned-out balconies. The design seems to be determined on both sides by the intention to connect the residential building with the different elements of the location. However, it is no less determined by the internal form. It is striking that the living spaces in particular are *deformed* where actions are more strongly associated with movement than in the bedrooms. (Compared to Scharoun's living spaces, it should be added: *slightly* deformed.) And these intentional movements are guided in a very precise manner by the shape of the rooms.

THE PERCEPTION OF SPACE

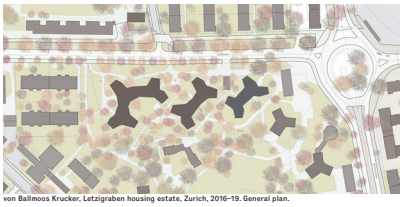
We would now have to walk step by step through one of the apartments, starting at the front door, and observe how slightly sloping walls shape the space, how they make it wider or narrower, and how we experience such changes physiologically and psychologically; we would have to note how walls and windows protrude or recede, how we experience them, in other words, as behaviour that we relate to ourselves. What Arnheim writes about form in general applies no less to the form of space: that we experience it as tension, that tension is a property of the things we see, such as size, shape, and colour, and that it is therefore an essential part of our perception.

"Perception reflects the penetration of external forces into the organism", he writes. "Why should the interplay of physiological forces not find its counterpart in perception? I maintain that it is precisely these forces that we perceive as 'tension' or 'movement'. In other words, we are dealing with the psychological counterpart to the physiological processes that bring about the organisation of perception."[31] We experience the tension that things have as an expression of "patterns of vivid forces". In the case of spaces, I prefer to use the term "*mood*" to describe whether they are cheerful or serious, calm or solemn – to name a few of the sensations that spaces evoke *in us* through their properties: for it is not the space that is cheerful, but *ourselves* when we are in it, calling it cheerful – or whatever else.[32]

But how do you do that: describe the characteristics of spaces? Describe how their deformation creates certain tensions? Describe the sensations that these tensions evoke in us? That remains the great challenge of phenomenology.

THE SINGLE-IMAGE AND MULTI-IMAGE SPACE

With an image, we can describe the pattern of forces in its essential features; we have it before us as a whole. With a room, this is not the case; we cannot see part of this pattern because part of the room is behind us. Once we have seen it, we can only "see" it in our memory. However, we must distinguish between two types of space: in one case, its walls are uniformly designed,



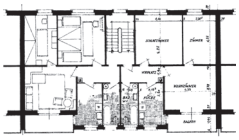
von Ballmoos Krucker, Letzigraben housing estate, Zurich, 2016–19. General plan.

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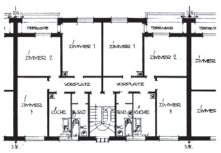




Diener & Oberle, Residential buildings Oltingerstrasse, Basel, 1946.

costs, the municipalities also leased land for the cooperatives to build on; and so the number of dwellings in their hands rose from 2,273 to 6,852 during the same period.[8] Yet the housing shortage lingered on, in part because the post-war marriage boom had led to an increase in births and in part because of the large influx of immigrants from other municipalities following the repeal of the 1941 curtailment of freedom of establishment. The housing cooperatives attracted a disproportionately large number of workers, civil servants, and salaried employees from both the public and the private sector. Yet the rents were relatively high, at least as long as the rent caps introduced during the war remained in force.

Although he never belonged to a party, Diener's political sympathies lay with the left and this naturally brought him into contact with the housing cooperatives. In fact, after 1946, Diener & Oberle's work for them would be their principal source of contracts for several years to come. Both were therefore present at the 1947 founding of the Holeestrasse housing cooperative, for which in 1949–51 they would build three rows of four or five apartment blocks each.[9] Their first project for a cooperative, however, was in 1946, when they built a row of six five-storey blocks for the cooperative Zum Bischofstein, Basel, on the street of that name. The staircase in each block afforded access to two three-room apartments per storey, each of which had a familiar floor plan in which, to avoid wasting space on a corridor, one of the two bedrooms is accessed from



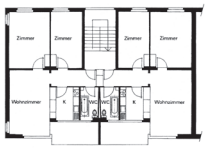


Diener & Oberle, Residential buildings Lörracherstrasse, Riehen, 1946–47.

the living room. This floor plan can be found in various residential developments both before and after World War II, among them the apartment blocks by Kellermüller & Hofmann on Zurlindenstrasse in Zurich, of 1932.[10] It constitutes the most compact, and hence most economical, layout for an apartment of this size. Diener & Oberle built another row of buildings for the same cooperative on Oltingerstrasse in Basel later in 1946.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FLOOR PLAN

With this first contract the office had proved itself to be reliable. The number of apartment blocks it was henceforth asked to build for still more cooperatives in both Basel and Riehen is remarkable. Their floor plans follow a familiar typology for working- and lower-middle-class homes. The rooms of the three and four-room apartments are lined up along a corridor, which on the plans is called a *Vorplatz*, or vestibule. This was a typology that had evolved in the mid-nineteenth century. Often the rooms have connecting doors to broaden the scope of their potential uses. The WCs in these buildings, and later the bathrooms, are situated on the façade next to the kitchen as a rule. We shall return to the architecture of these developments.



Kellermüller & Hofmann, Residential buildings Zurlindenstrasse, Zurich, 1932.



Herzog & de Meuron, House in Oberwil (the Blue House), Basel-Landschaft, 1979–80.
Side view, photo by Martin Steinmann.

This blue-painted house, [Basel, 1980, by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron], was featured in *architheses* on a previous occasion; at the time, it was still under construction.[1] It stands in a new [suburban] neighbourhood that presents, within a limited area, a catalogue of architectural notions of the middle class – and their codification in the building regulations. If one were to judge it by reference to the surrounding buildings, it would appear both alien and contemporary.

It is not my intention to present the house again; I wish to explain, in the light of certain characteristics, what it means for me, countering any possible objections with a sentence from Roland Barthes: "what controls the critic is not the meaning of the work, it is the meaning of what he says about it."[2] The architecture of the house is sensory. I use this word, even though it's a label already applied to many things: the elements do not – or do not primarily – refer to something else, to something one might see, through them, as their meaning. They are, in a sense, opaque and thus refer to themselves. It is there that their meaning must be sought.

To name one example: the rear wall of the house curves a little inwards – under a perfectly straight roof. In consequence, the brickwork on the right-hand edge of the streetside looks more prominent than that on the left. This feature makes the "nature" of the wall sensorially present.

I cannot say that the elements of this architecture are references, even though I am already "somehow" familiar with them.[3] They have their geometric place less in the architectural canon – for example, in the history of the type – than in the viewer's own memories associated with architecture. To give another example, I'll mention the plywood panels on the garden side of the house. They are made of a material that strikes me as somewhat makeshift, a material that one would use, say, to board up the windows of an abandoned building. (In Boston I once walked past such a house for four months.) Thus, for me the plywood is the sign that presents this side – in a counter-movement – as "open". The association is not arbitrary; it is linked to certain properties of this material. The architects draw on a different association, describing the panels used as "outward-facing, vulnerable parts of the house".[4]

If I read them this way, as a sign, there seems to be a certain contradiction with the observation that the elements of this architecture do not refer to anything else. One might perhaps say that this contradiction is resolved insofar as the plywood refers to an experience with plywood. (In a sense, it is a perfect icon: the sign coincides with what it signifies.)

The forms of the house in Oberwil are not about history; they are about the memories associated with them. Jacques Herzog wrote in this regard: "I believe that architecture provides us with memories of our own lives, not of the history of architecture."[5] When he and Pierre de Meuron use forms from the history of – high or low – architecture, they do so because this allows statements to be

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R. D. — Don't you think that people are rather indifferent to whether they live in row constructions or in perimeter blocks?

MEINRAD MORGER — In the 1920s, this was an ideological question; that is no longer the case today. The debate on urban space is shaped by morphological concepts and not only ideological ones. Any urban form is fundamentally possible.

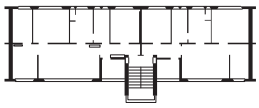
M. S. — What concerns me in this context is how, on the typological level, I respond to one form or the other, to the urban space that it defines.

M. A. — The urban form determines, in various ways, public and non-public spaces. This applies at every level: in housing as well, there are rooms that are used by everyone and others that are occupied individually. What concerns me are the transitions from one to the other – the changes in space, in light, and so on.

R. D. — In the Reicke house, one can interpret the widened corridor in front of the bedrooms, by analogy with a perimeter block, as a communal courtyard.[2] The question that arises is this: do we regard such a corridor as an extension of the individual space, or of the family space, or rather as an independent space placed between other spaces?

M. S. — In the 1920s, Otto Haesler built such dwellings: those often-criticised "corridor-less" apartments, in which the corridor is connected to the living room in order to make it more spacious.

M. A. — I take pleasure in hearing my wife, even if she is not in the same room. Mrs Reicke likes hearing her children. In her house, this corridor actually became important.



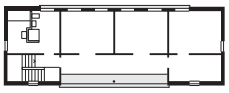
Otto Haesler, Residential building, Dammerstock housing estate, Karlsruhe, 1928.

M. S. — The bedrooms in the Reicke house are small. This house therefore leads me to ask to what extent the functions usually assigned to bedrooms – sleeping, doing homework, reading – can be distributed among different rooms. Otto Haesler, let us repeat, had already addressed this theme. In his dwellings in Kassel-Rothenburg, for example, the 6–8 m² bedrooms serve only for sleeping. They lend themselves to a "functional" mode of living, without accommodating "false" needs, as defined by [the avant-garde journal] *ABC*.[3]

R. D. — The Reicke house, which does not belong to the housing projects we are discussing here, presents a differentiation of spaces. It creates a certain sense of freedom. My question is this: is there another kind of freedom that would result from renouncing such differentiation?

M. S. — We are, once again, reopening the debate between Bruno Taut and Otto Haesler, in which Bruno Taut essentially defended the type of dwelling in which rooms of the same or similar size are arranged on either side of a corridor. We know this type well; it was the norm at the turn of the century. At that time, the rooms were still connected to one another by doors, if only because of heating issues. This resulted in very diverse kinds of connections. Moreover, the corridor was wide enough to accommodate cupboards. I believe that the apartments designed by Rainer Senn belong to this type.

RAINER SENN — The corridor is 1.80 metres wide. That is enough for it to be used as a room, though not in the same way as the corridor in the Reicke house, which is bordered by rooms on only one side.



Michael Alder, Reicke House, Bottmingen, 1987–89.



Morger & Degelo, Müllheimerstrasse 138–140, Basel, 1993. Detail of change in colour at the back.

residential building evokes. (Fritz Neumeyer distinguished it precisely from construction with the term "image of construction".)[16]

To understand what is special about this façade, we can compare it with the façade of the residential building at Allschwilerstrasse 90 by Herzog & de Meuron. Instead of slabs, it is formed by many narrow supports that carry the ceilings. Both parts are made of concrete. Together, they form a precise pattern of perception in which the construction and the "image of construction" coincide. In a sense, one does not get the impression that the balconies are attached to the façade (even though technically, they are). However, this is the case with the residential building at Müllheimerstrasse 138–140, because the colour dissociates the parts in the manner described.

However, perception has only limited relevance to the technical circumstances. The forces that form a pattern of perception cannot be measured in kilograms. They are visual forces. This raises the question: how do we regard the building? Do we see it as a whole, divided into floors by balconies, like cornices made of stucco? Or do we see it as floors stacked to form a whole? What determines our perception? The whole or the parts that form the whole? And do we see the building the same way from all sides? Or does the pattern of perception change as the balcony depths change?

At first glance, the horizontal lines of the balconies dominate, standing out sharply against the dark background. On closer inspection, however, they are balanced by the vertical lines formed by the bright windows reflecting the sky, even if these are weaker. In fact, gravity determines the vertical as the most important spatial direction. That is why a building with floors that appear to be stacked on top of each other contradicts our perception, as Rudolf Arnheim notes; it resists the spontaneous urge of perception to connect the floors. "This effect is often balanced by columns, vertically aligned windows, or other upright forms."[17]

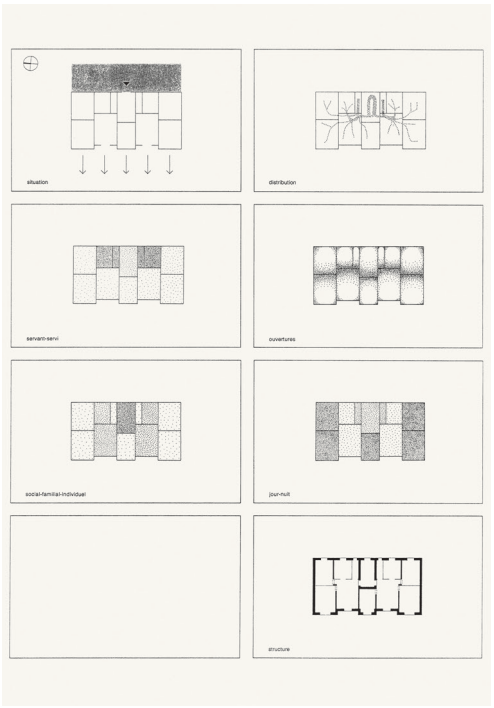
This observation applies above all when the windows extend from floor to ceiling and thus, due to their shape, appear parallel (*not* connected at the sides). It suffices to imagine these windows offset against each other, which would be possible from the inside, from the rooms, to achieve a completely different effect: an effect that privileges the floors or layers they form. The architects were aware of this; there are corresponding drawings. In other words, the vertically aligned windows of their residential building represent a choice: in favour of a balance between horizontal and vertical forces.

From the outside, the arrangement of the windows does not follow any particular pattern. Facing Müllheimer Strasse, they are spaced as follows, calculated in panels: 1/2/3/1/3/2/2/1/3/2/3/4. The spacing is not mandatory from the inside. However, they avoid a more regular structure of the façade so that the panels do not simulate an "image of construction" that has no basis: so they do not appear to be load-bearing (since we would attribute a structural meaning to a

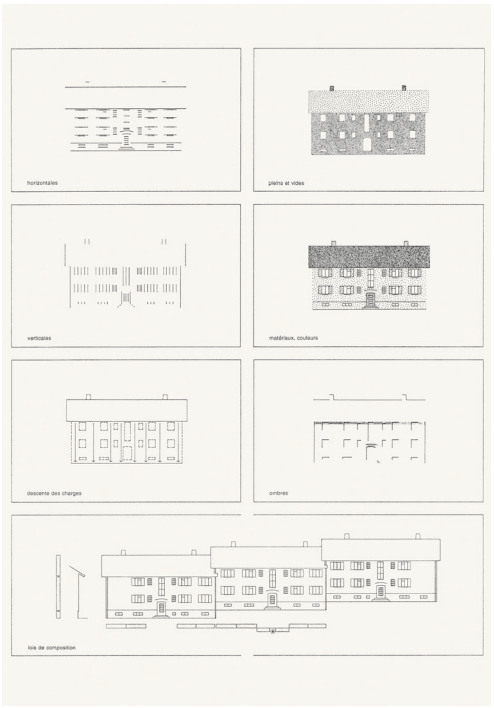
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Typological analyses carried out by Steinmann's students.



housing". Of considerable interest, these documents reveal the evolution of an architectural line of thought, its certainties as much as its hesitations, through erasures, corrections made with correction fluid, and other traces of an ongoing intellectual process.

"WHY HOUSING?"

At the outset, it is worth noting that in the introductory text to one of the earliest "briques" – that of the winter semester 1991–92 (a text that appears to mark an initial shift towards a more precise framing of the subject) – Steinmann poses this very question: "Why housing?"[6] This enquiry is all the more pertinent given that, as previously observed, he does not appear to confine himself to a specific and systematic teaching of this theme. Rather, he mobilises it as a pretext for engaging with architecture in a broader sense, particularly from a theoretical standpoint.

There are undoubtedly multiple reasons for such a choice, of which only a few may be outlined here. In the first instance, and with reference to the lecture notes, one may advance an initial justification grounded in an understanding of the subject that is at once essential and humanist, in line with the thinking of Christian Norberg-Schulz:[7] "Housing represents a fundamental problem that concerns society as a whole […] and which, more than any other, reflects the life of a people."[8]

Steinmann's affinity with this theme is already evident in his earliest research. As a researcher at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich), he undertook an in-depth study of the *Siedlungen* architecture of the 1920s and 1930s.[9] In doing so, he was able to document, at the time in an unprecedented manner, the attention afforded to these developments by the avant-gardes within the debates conducted at the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), notably at the Brussels congress of 1929 and that of Frankfurt in 1930.[10]

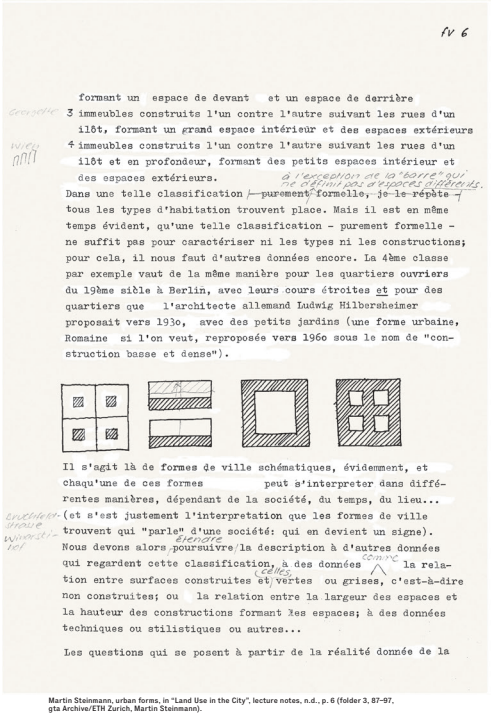
If this sustained interest in rational – particularly minimum – housing never waned over the course of his career, one also observes in Steinmann a consistent engagement with contemporary housing. He appears to have been driven by the conviction that this domain offered a vast field for architectural invention, as well as by the, once again precocious,[11] intuition of the importance it would assume from the 1990s onwards within the Swiss architectural context, particularly in German-speaking Switzerland. This development was largely propelled by the expansion of public procurement and by the requirement imposed on clients, especially housing cooperatives, to organise architectural competitions.

Finally, it is worth noting that, by the late 1980s, the establishment of a structured teaching programme devoted to housing proved especially timely within a Lausanne academic context still strongly marked by the legacy of the Beaux-Arts, which tended to privilege an architecture oriented more towards representative programmes than towards domestic ones. Admittedly, the question of housing had already been addressed, notably in the wake of the post-1968 moment and the emergence of sociological approaches; however, it remained confined to a single studio and was primarily developed within the domains of research and theoretical instruction.[12]

FAMILIARITY

Steinmann's response to the question "Why housing?" is rooted above all in the notion of familiarity, insofar as each of us maintains, in one way or another, a relationship to domestic space. In his view, "this theme is familiar to students in both its primary and secondary functions",[13] the former being of a material and functional nature, the latter relating to the symbolic dimension and to the meaning of objects and places.

Applied to architecture, this distinction draws upon the work of the Italian linguist and writer Umberto Eco, who writes in *La struttura*



fv 6

formant un espace de devant et un espace de derrière
3 immeubles construits l'un contre l'autre suivant les rues d'un
ilôt, formant un grand espace intérieur et des espaces extérieurs
4 immeubles construits l'un contre l'autre suivant les rues d'un
ilôt et en profondeur, formant des petits espaces intérieur et
des espaces extérieurs.
Dans une telle classification ~~— purement formelle, je le répète —~~
tous les types d'habitation trouvent place. Mais il est en même
temps évident, qu'une telle classification - purement formelle -
ne suffit pas pour caractériser ni les types ni les constructions;
pour cela, il nous faut d'autres données encore. La 4ème classe
par exemple vaut de la même manière pour les quartiers ouvriers
du 19ème siècle à Berlin, avec leurs cours étroites et pour des
quartiers que l'architecte allemand Ludwig Hilbersheimer
proposait vers 1930, avec des petits jardins (une forme urbaine,
Romaine si l'on veut, reproposée vers 1960 sous le nom de "con-
struction basse et dense").

Il s'agit là de formes de ville schématiques, évidemment, et
chaqu'une de ces formes peut s'interpreter dans diffé-
rentes manières, dépendant de la société, du temps, du lieu...
(et s'est justement l'interpretation que les formes de ville
trouvent qui "parle" d'une société: qui en devient un signe).
Nous devons alors poursuivre la description à d'autres données
qui regardent cette classification, à des données comme la rela-
tion entre surfaces construites et vertes ou grises, c'est-à-dire
non construites; ou la relation entre la largeur des espaces et
la hauteur des constructions formant les espaces; à des données
techniques ou stilistiques ou autres...

Les questions qui se posent à partir de la réalité donnée de la

Martin Steinmann, urban forms, in "Land Use in the City", lecture notes, n.d., p. 6 (folder 3, 87–97, gta Archive/ETH Zurich, Martin Steinmann).