

HIDDEN CHAMPIONS

Perceptions, Values, and Preconception of large-scale post-WWII Housing Estates in Frankfurt Rhine-Main Region

Maren Harnack, Natalie Heger

ABSTRACT: Large-scale housing estates were the most significant and largest single investments implemented in many municipalities in the post-WWII period. They were emblematic of modern urban development until criticism of modern housing became widespread and reached Western Germany in the wake of the fundamental socio-critical movements shaking Europe around 1968. This criticism primarily reflected the voice of middle-class academics, who fed it into the media as well as into the architecture and planning discourse, which continues to dominate to these days. We will argue that this criticism stands in the way of recognizing large-scale housing estates as important testimonies of post-WWII history worthy of preservation. In times of tight housing markets, this criticism also enables significant alterations to the estates' urban fabric as well as densification to generate additional homes without incurring land costs. As a result, we currently risk even the outstanding examples being altered beyond their ability to function as cultural monuments. This paper combines literature, archive material and extensive surveys of large-scale post-WWII housing estates in the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region to trace the changing perception of this housing type over time and its implications for the formal listing process. Whilst the current German legislation allows for the best specimens of large-scale post-WWII housing estates to be listed but factors outside the professional field prevents the authorities in charge from doing so. At the same time the benefits of listing would extend beyond the realm of building preservation to include better acceptance within the general public and improved identification for the residents. Two examples from the Rhine-Main Region will exemplify the challenges related to the preservation of large-scale housing estates.

KEYWORDS: Housing estates, Frankfurt Rhine-Main Region, Germany, post-WWII modernism, heritage listing

INTRODUCTION: Frankfurt am Main was no exception to the general course of housing development in German cities. Due to explosive and badly accommodated urban growth during industrialization, overcrowding and poor-quality was a common experience for many of Frankfurt's residents. Although with the 1920s housing program under Ernst May 12,000 residential units were created, it was not nearly enough to significantly alleviate the dire situation. The war-time ravages merely exacerbated an already atrocious situation and Frankfurt soon needed to absorb and house not only its own population but large numbers of displaced persons arriving from eastern, formerly German regions. Frankfurt regained its pre-WWII size with 563,000 inhabitants by 1951 and surpassed 600,000 inhabitants in 1953 to reach 691,000 in 1963 (Müller-Raemisch 1998, 407ff.).

In this situation, modern, large-scale housing estates provided comfortable, healthy and affordable housing for many people for the first time. In addition, the urban planning principles with its airy open spaces reacted to the experience of the war-time bombings and firestorms, in which dense old cities had become traps for many inhabitants. At the same time, the prosperity grew and fueled the consumption of housing in quantitative terms, whilst also increasing expectations in its quality. In this situation, the extensive development of new housing estates on the outskirts of the city was a logical step. Unlike in more central areas, the rapid availability here allowed optimized, serial housing types to be efficiently planned and built in large numbers, supplemented by amenities such as schools, kindergartens, shopping centers, sports facilities and churches. In many ways, the resulting neighborhoods reflected post-WWII German society and its ideals.

GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND CHANGING VALUES

Around 1968¹ various social changes emerged which contributed to a lasting discrediting of large-scale post-WWII housing. Two converging lines of criticism will be analyzed briefly below.

Numerous theorists have dealt with the connection between consumption and self-expression (for example: Veblen 1902, Maslow, 1943, Schulze, 1992). For housing, this change in values meant that instead of comfort, safety and health, the younger generation looked for interest and stimulation in their living environment. The new-build housing estates on the city fringes were unable to offer these qualities, as they were built images of the social ideals of *Fordism* and embodied a societal model increasingly perceived as unjust—women were expected to look after home and children, trapped far away from the city and the workplace. The progressive criticism of modernity essentially opposed this model (Siedler et al. 1964; Mitscherlich 1965; Lembrock 1971; Blake 1977; Conrads, 1974 or Wolfe 1981). Old *Gründerzeit* neighborhoods, which had continued to deteriorate since WWII, became interesting for young people in terms of self-realization, a good life and stimulating experiences beyond Fordist lifestyles. They provided space for creative appropriation and reinterpretation that affected the development of neighborhoods and urban spaces (Reckwitz 2012, 287ff), and housed a comparatively mixed population. In addition, the *Gründerzeit* floor plans suited new, experimental forms of living, such as flat-shares—unimaginable in post-war family flats. In Frankfurt the *Westend* area was a site of intensive and sometimes violent battles to protect this old housing stock. Before the war it housed the better-off strata of society and remained largely untouched by the war, containing many architectonic gems. After WWII, it soon came under intensive redevelopment, often with high-rise office blocks. Students (and also migrant workers) rented the previously grand homes at often low prices, while the building were awaiting demolition. Whilst residents and conservationists soon realized that the redevelopment would destroy the little amount of historical urban fabric left in Frankfurt, the city's officials were rather slow to understand that the public opinion had shifted.

When eventually the remaining parts of *Westend* were protected from demolition and from conversion to offices, the newly built housing estates had suffered a significant blow in reputation. From the left spectrum, post-war housing estates were increasingly criticized as an extension of *Fordist* principles into private life. In this interpretation, the estates were oriented only towards the reproduction of the workforce, purposefully isolating residents—especially women—from the political and cultural urban processes unfolding more or less spontaneously in

the old neighborhoods. In addition, it was assumed that the housing estates were deliberately designed with little stimulation in order to maximize the profits of the construction industry, thus showing contempt for the residents. The fact that the housing estates hugely improved the quality of everyday life for many residents was often forgotten (Krüger 2014).

The criticism voiced by the more progressive, left-wing social groups and the associated reinterpretation of *Gründerzeit* neighborhoods would not have been so powerful had it not been supported by the other end of the political spectrum—with opposing arguments, but with very much the same result. For conservative critics, the housing estates were lawless places where drug addiction, crime and violence were rife and uncontrollable. The bestseller *Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo* (Felscherinow et al. 1978) and the subsequent film located in Berlin's *Gropiusstadt* created a significant media coverage. Without taking a closer look at the causes of the statistical anomalies, large-scale post-WWII housing estates were identified as places of deviance and public disarray.

BLIND SPOTS

As different as the lines of criticism were, in the end they led to a firmly negative image of large-scale post-WWII housing which continues to have an effect today. They are in contrast with a sometimes clichéd, positive view of the old *Gründerzeit* building stock. These lines of criticism were followed by concrete political changes and led to the end of large-scale housing developments and to the shift back towards the European city, favoring small-scale parceling and mixed-use. The changes also included funding programs that had, and still have, the goal of preserving, improving and upgrading historic building stock. Much-criticized post-WWII housing estates were not included in stock renewal or improvement programs. In some cases, construction was even stopped in mid-flow, thereby adding to existing problems. Either the shortfall of residents compromised the viability of any infrastructure that had already been built (such as in the New Town of Wulfen) or part (or all) of the planned infrastructure was delivered far later than planned, not to the extent initially expected, or even not at all (such as the S-Bahn to Hamburg Steilshoop). The post-war housing estates' structural deficits have only been addressed and partly remedied since the launch of the *Bund-Länder-Programm "Soziale Stadt"* funding program in 1999.

The persistently negative image of modernist housing estates has led to a lack of comprehensive knowledge about this type of neighborhood. And although especially the late, large-scale housing estates—conceived as entire neighborhoods—have been among the largest and most

expensive investments German cities undertook in the post-WWII years, none of them has yet been listed. The last systematic research was undertaken by the German Federal Government (Deutscher Bundestag, 1994) but only considered estates of more than 2500 units, leaving out the vast majority of smaller ones, starting at 500, 800 or 1000 units.

In a later study, the Baden-Wuerttemberg state conservation authority had commissioned a survey for late modernist housing in the Tübingen-Stuttgart Area, resulting in a few listings of individual buildings and small, predominantly middle-class neighborhoods. In North Rhine-Westphalia a survey of 20th century housing estates has been started out and was partly published (Pufke 2021): listing in this federal state is divulged to the level on municipalities, which often choose not to follow the recommendations of the state authority. Apart from this, a number of *Siedlungen* has been documented in individual publications, such as *Märkisches Viertel* in Berlin (Jacob and Schäche 2004) or *Neuperlach* in Munich (Hild and Müsseler 2014).

LARGE-SCALE HOUSING IN THE RHINE-MAIN REGION

A comprehensive survey of the Frankfurt Rhine-Maine region undertaken since 2015 has yielded more than 400 cases of developments, that can be understood as “large-scale”. A main tool of research was the systematic use of google earth as a means to find even the most obscure specimens, that have neither been published nor gained attention in any other way. For this survey, the actual number of residential units for a development to be considered large was not fixed, but depended to some extent to the surroundings. Hence in smaller municipalities a lower number of units would be considered large-scale than in the major cities of the region, such as Frankfurt, Darmstadt, or Wiesbaden. Subsequently all estates were visited and documented using a combination of public transport and bicycle. The on-site inspection allowed us quickly to establish whether an estate has been conceived as a coherent, integrated neighborhood or whether it is a mere accumulation of houses that lacks an overarching concept as well as consistent greenery. In addition to the estates, we found a small number of large buildings we would consider megastructures, most of them developed as private, upmarket co-operative apartments [FIGURE 01].

As a result of the survey, we could determine that only a small minority of the examples could be considered *Siedlungen* with coherent planning, design, and management in place. Of these, seven examples from the 1950s are listed as cultural monuments, six of them are located in Frankfurt: Albert-Schweitzer-Siedlung (1950–56), Fritz-Kissel-Siedlung (1951–54), Postsiedlung (1951–58), Dornbuschsiedlung (1954–59), Heinrich-Stahl-Straße

(1957), and parts of the Ferdinand-Hoffmann-Siedlung (1959). One example is located in Kronberg: Siedlung Roter Hang is mainly consisting of single-family homes and, different from the Frankfurt ones, does not contain any social housing. No example of the later period, i.e. the 1960s and early 1970s has been listed, and none of the megastructures. But although the survey has created extensive knowledge about the regional stock and has established a methodology that could be applied to other regions of Hesse, the conservation authority has neither listed any further examples nor has it embarked on or commissioned systematic research into the cultural heritage of post-WWII mass housing in Hesse.

This negligence is especially grave as the existing estates are under intense pressure. Housing is becoming increasingly scarce in European metropolitan areas including the Frankfurt region, and municipal as well as national governments announce ever increasing goals for new housing construction. Whilst the *Gründerzeit* neighborhoods are now barely affordable, the lush green spaces of the post-WWII large-scale housing estates are increasingly viewed as potential building plots. They are often owned by municipal, other publicly or semi-publicly owned housing companies which specialize in providing subsidized or low-cost housing, and which are held accountable to achieve housing construction targets by their public owners. Using green spaces in large-scale housing estates for infill development is often considered a sustainable option, as no additional streets are needed and expensive land acquisition is avoided, thus reducing housing costs in an over-heated market.

This creates little opposition outside the large-scale housing estates, as they are largely seen as outdated, along with the *Fordist* model of society they embody. But contrary to public belief, the importance of post-WWII modernist housing development lies at least partly in its recognizable *Fordist* character. *Fordism* embodies the social ideals of its time and in this sense, housing estates are important historical testimonies to our recent history. The best examples showcase historic dwelling concepts, urbanist ideas, architectural positions and construction technologies. Accordingly, it seems self-evident that some of them must be preserved and protected for future generations. However, this does not happen, although their significance in terms of urban planning, art and history—three out of five possible criteria for listing²—would undoubtedly allow this, for example in the case of Ernst May’s Schelmengraben in Wiesbaden or Walter Schwagenscheid and Tassilo Sittmann’s Nordweststadt in Frankfurt. These two settlements we consider two of the best examples of late large-scale housing estates in the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region (Harnack et al. 2020).



01 Results of the survey on large-scale housing Frankfurt Rhine-Maine region with more than 400 cases of developments. © Maren Harnack, Frankfurt UAS, 2019.

TWO EXAMPLES: NORDWESTSTADT AND SCHELMENGRABEN

The Nordweststadt, built from 1962-68, is located directly north of the famous Römerstadt (1927-28), and contains approximately 7,500 homes. Its main planner, Walter Schwagenscheidt, was part of Ernst May's team in Frankfurt in the 1920s and had been developing the *Raumstadt* concept since then (Schwagenscheidt 2013 (1949)). Contrary to the dominant views of that time, Schwagenscheidt suggested to arrange buildings perpendicular to each other so that they would enclose communal green spaces that would encourage social life between different buildings. Nordweststadt was meant to connect the three existing sub-centers Praunheim, Heddernheim and Niederursel and its main shopping precincts was intended to serve all three. Planning commenced in the late 1950s and in 1961, the competition with a high-profile jury including Ernst May elected no winner. The second prize was awarded to Gerhard Rittmann and Helmut Krisch, the third to Walter Schwagenscheidt and Tassilo Sittmann. Ernst May favored the Rittman-Krisch-project because it used strict *Zeilenbau* (row building), whilst the chief city planner preferred the Schwagenscheidt-Sittmann-design because of the more community-oriented positioning of the buildings which was finally commissioned to become the urban development framework plan [FIGURE 02].

Access for vehicles and pedestrians is separated, allowing pedestrians to move safely through green routes connecting schools, churches, shops and other amenities. Although the landscaping (designed by Erich Hanke)

creates continuous, park-like greenery [FIGURE 03], public and private areas are nuanced and legible. The undulating landscape design also hides the vehicular access and leads pedestrians imperceptibly upwards to the bridges that span the streets. Playgrounds, schoolyards and recreational spaces are woven into the pedestrian network.

Nordweststadt is a very rare example of urban design, landscaping and traffic planning complementing each other and forming an aesthetically and practically highly satisfying environment of outstanding quality. This is underlined by the high architectural quality of the public buildings: all churches and two out of three school have been listed as cultural monuments. Despite this, the rest of the neighborhood remains unlisted, even the immediate vicinities of the listed buildings [FIGURE 04].

Schelmengraben in Wiesbaden was planned by Ernst May from 1961 onwards. After emigrating to Africa during the Nazi era May returned to Germany in 1954 and became the chief planner for the *Neue Heimat*—a non-profit construction and housing company—before starting his own practice in Hamburg in 1956. In 1959 he won the urban design competition for the Parkfeld Siedlung in Wiesbaden and consequently was commissioned to design a comprehensive development plan for the entire city. His plan included the extensive redevelopment of historic neighborhoods as well as four large scale estates at the fringes of the city (Parkfeld, Klarenthal, Schelmengraben and Sonnenberg, which was not built). The entire plan was published and generously distributed to inform residents (May 1963). Schelmengraben is



02 In Nordweststadt the specific arrangements of buildings create a succession of semi-enclosed green spaces that characterize the housing estate. © Forschungslabor Nachkriegsmoderne / OSM, 2019.

located on a hill west of Dotzheim and contains approximately 2,500 homes. It combines high-rise point blocks and *Zeilenbau* (row building), which is situated perpendicular or parallel to the streets and thus creates semi-enclosed communal green spaces. Schelmengraben borders on the Taunus Forest and a ravine (the *Schelmengraben*) which provided the name for the estate [FIGURE 05].

Pedestrian routes connect the communal spaces to the landscape as well as to the center. The landscape was

again designed by Erich Hanke who relied on local species such as the pine trees from the forest nearby and created the impression that the forest extends into the estate. In Schelmengraben, the buildings are architecturally simple, but small recesses and rich colors prevent any monotony. Although most of the buildings have been post-insulated and lost some of their architectural detail, the overall design idea can still be experienced, especially as the trees have matured and a lot of the detailing of entrances



03 View of the Nordweststadt embedded in its lush greenery. © Ben Kuhlmann, 2019.



04 In Nordweststadt a mix of building blocks of between three and eight floors as well as higher point blocks create a visually interesting cityscape. © Ben Kuhlmann, 2019.



05 The plan of Schelmengraben shows how some buildings are following the main streets, whilst others are arranged perpendicular.
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is intact [FIGURE 06] [FIGURE 07]. The high-rises mark the entries to the neighborhood. Another high-rise, the so-called *Rotes Hochhaus* (red high rise), marks the now largely derelict center, visually connects it to the older *Märchensiedlung*, and is a generally well-known landmark [FIGURE 08].

Although neither Nordweststadt nor Schelmengraben is formally listed, they both are to some extent protected from inappropriate changes. In Hesse each building or area which corresponds to the legal definition of a cultural monument is *eo ipso* a cultural monument and thus enjoys protection. The list, or inventory, serves only to provide information about this fact. Accordingly, being a monument is an inherent characteristic of a building, or an area and not the result of being listed.³ This legal definition somewhat reduces the urgency of the formal listing process, as cultural monuments do not require listing in order to enjoy protection. Furthermore, it allows heritage authorities to influence plans for unlisted monuments simply by threatening formal listing—thus opening up a space for negotiation, which would be significantly smaller once an item is on the list becoming an object of public scrutiny. In many cases, this strategy leads to acceptable results and avoids public controversies about the appropriateness of designating any given object as a cultural monument. This has happened in both of the above examples.

In 2017, the owners of Schelmengraben had planned to add roughly 1,000 residential units to the estate, a plan fiercely opposed by the residents.⁴ The heritage authority of Hesse then contacted the owners for an informal talk about possible heritage restrictions. The involvement lasted throughout the planning process and various conflicts became apparent, especially as the owners were quite inflexible regarding the dimensions of the planned buildings. The densification project was eventually stopped for other reasons than the heritage value of the settlement. In the process, a maintenance plan for the landscaping was developed and the colors of the buildings were readjusted.



06 In Schelmengraben, buildings follow the slope of the landscape.
© Malte Säger, 2018.



07 The greenery is characterized by landscape steps and native trees.
© Malte Säger, 2018.



08 The center with the 'Red High-rise' is a well-known landmark in the whole of Wiesbaden.
© Malte Sanger 2019.

In Nordweststadt, no comprehensive plans are currently being followed. A design competition in 2011 yielded a first prize, that was extremely respectful to the existing fabric, but none of it was actually built. Since then, housing in Frankfurt has become increasingly scarce, but it is generally understood that Nordweststadt, although not listed is a cultural monument, is not appropriate for significant densification. As in Schelmengraben, any additional building would be subject to consultation with the heritage authority. However, small changes are happening all the time, especially in the green spaces. The old interlocking pavement is replaced by more modern paving, landscaped stairs and single steps are eliminated to make the environment barrier-free and modern benches are being inserted. This changes the overall impression significantly and we suspect that these changes would not happen to the same extent if Nordweststadt was formally listed.

STATUARY MONUMENT PROTECTION AS A STRATEGY

The informal processes described above protect estates to some extent and make listing less urgent. But this strategy in Hesse has also resulted in hardly any estates being officially recognized as cultural monuments. We are convinced that this lack of official recognition very likely influences public opinion to remain critical of post-WWII estates.

Informal conversations on different levels of heritage management suggest various reasons for this omission. Most importantly, housing estates are still not sufficiently recognized by the general public, who often condemn post-WWII monuments as 'ugly' and 'eyesores' and frequently criticize listing post-WWII buildings, accusing heritage authorities as being elitist and unworldly.

In theory, such public comments do not play any role in listing. In practice, heritage authorities need to listen to the public to some degree, else it is likely that heritage legislation will be adapted to public opinion in the long run. In contrast to much of the general public, residents of large-scale housing estates often like their homes and living environments.

Although it is widely accepted that mundane typologies such as interwar worker housing or industrial facilities need to be listed, large-scale post-WWII housing estates are still being avoided, whilst their public buildings such as schools and churches have in many cases been added to the inventory almost in their entirety. In Nordweststadt all five churches including the attached kindergartens, libraries and administrative buildings as well as two out of three schools are listed in the inventory. Currently, listing focuses on the building stock of the 1970s and the 1980s, having skipped the large-scale housing estates in question here. German heritage management is largely devolved to the federal states, making it almost impossible to present exact figures for the whole country. Housing estates are rarely compared across different federal states, making it more difficult to locate the most outstanding specimens.⁵

CONCLUSION

The fact that urban researchers are now academically concerned with 1960s and 1970s housing, clearly indicates that large-scale post-WWII housing is not simply a historical fact, but also subject to re-evaluation. This opens up the possibility of re-interpreting and re-occupying this kind of city, as described by Andreas Reckwitz (2012), regardless of the original intentions and framework conditions. This can also give rise to new competition and conflict similar to that observed in *Grunderzeit* neighborhoods, which—like the re-evaluation from the late 1960s onwards—could predominantly play out in the field of cultural differences. On the one hand, this increases the need to generate and distribute knowledge on the context within which large-scale post-WWII housing was conceived. On the other hand, formal recognition as cultural monuments would highlight the estates inherent qualities and provide their residents with the cultural capital attached to living in cultural monuments—an asset usually exploited by middle-class property-owners rather than social housing tenants.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Criticism of modern settlement construction begins before 1968 and continues after 1968. Nevertheless, the year 1968 is so closely associated with longer-term political and social upheavals that it is used here as a reference.
- 2 The other two being technical and scientific significance (Hessisches Denkmalschutzgesetz §2 (1)). For a more comprehensive discussion of heritage and post-war planning see MEIER, H.-R., "Denkmalschutz für die 'zweite Zerstörung'?" in: FRANZ, B. & MEIER, H.-R. (2011).
- 3 In other federal states (Bundesländer) of Germany such as North Rhine-Westphalia, the status of being a monument depends on being listed in the inventory.
- 4 See e.g. <https://www.fr.de/rhein-main/wiesbaden/neue-wohnungen-wiesbaden-13549112.html> (last accessed March 2023), or many other online articles
- 5 The last official national inventory of large housing estates was published by the German Government in 1994. It was unreliable in some respects and exclusively focused on estates with more than 2,500 dwellings, omitting many smaller estates with similar qualities (and problems). See DEUTSCHER BUNDESTAG, Drucksache 12/8406: *Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung. Großsiedlungsbericht 1994*. Bonn, 30 August 1994. At state level, such inventories are mostly missing as well.

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