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Evolution of Single Family Housing in Berlin

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Edis Kekic

Mellon Grant - Research Report

- Within one month of your return from your proposed research site please submit a five page report outlining the research you accomplished and the results and conclusions that you were able to draw from the experience. Tell us a bit about your daily life, where you lived, who you met, how you traveled, how this experience changed your view of things and other anecdotal information that you think would be interesting.

As a student of the Toor Cummings Center for International Studies and Liberal Arts (CISLA) here at Connecticut College, I was too eager about my project to wait until the end of my junior year to embark on my research project. I heard about the Mellon Grant and decided to apply in order go to my country of interest and start my research right away. My CISLA research is based in Berlin, Germany, focused on the evolution of the single family housing in Berlin from 1920s to the present. Therefore, I took advantage of the Mellon Grant to stay in Berlin in July 2011 and start researching. I stayed in an apartment along the Landsberger Allee, which is in the north-east part of Berlin. I did a month long intensive language program at Technische Universität before I began my individual research. I made a lot of professional connections during the one month in Berlin. I met several students and professors through the program to whom I told of my research; they gave me useful advice about places to go and information to look for.

I came to Berlin five days before my language program started and stayed with a friend who lives in a single family home in Botanische Garten, which is in western part of Berlin. I took advantage of my situation and asked my hosts to examine their house for my project. I did close observations of both exterior and interior of the house and interviewed the owners in order to

find out more about the house. The house was designed in late 1920s to seem, from the outside, like it had two floors, but actually has three. (See appendix 1 for images) The design seems to be influenced by American domestic architecture because it appears to be built out of wood. It has a sharp roof and a huge backyard behind it. The interior also exhibits traits of an American home, where, upon entering through the main entrance, there is a small hallway that leads directly to the kitchen and living room. This reflects the fact that the first floor, is only for public; the proper place for guests to be. The second and third floor consists of bedrooms and bathrooms, making them more private. Along the same street where this house is situated, there were several other houses that seemed quite similar. I assume they were also influenced by American and western single-family designs. (See appendix 2 for examples)

On the other side of the city, close to where I stayed, there were a lot of international style houses. One very famous example, where I was able to explore both the exterior and interior, was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Landhaus Lemke house. (See appendix 3 for images) The house was built in 1932 for Karl Lemke and is the last house the architect built in Germany before he moved to the United States. The architect himself later lived in this house, which is today known as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's house. It is open to the public, as museum of modern art exhibitions. The architect was working at the Bauhaus at the time and through this design he portrayed his philosophy of the courtyard house. It is a simple, functional, one-floor, L-shaped house with a brick façade incorporating a harmonious balance of exterior and interior spaces. The façade that faces the street is more enclosed, ensuring privacy, while the façade that faces the backyard has huge stripped windows that make the house very open. Here, one notices Mies's idea of bringing nature into architecture, where one would feel connected with nature when sitting inside the house. Upon first entering the house, one comes to the communal area,

the living room, which contains huge windows and enables the view of the backyard and the Obersee Lake. From there, one can either go to the studio/bedroom or to the kitchen. Unlike the single family home where I stayed in West Berlin, visitors here have easier access to private spaces because everything is on the same floor while the house described above divides public and private spaces by floors. The neighborhoods close to Mies' house seemed to exhibit similar qualities. (See appendix 4 for examples)

These two are one of the houses I gathered the most information on. Before the end of the language program in Berlin, I talked to my German professor about the research I was doing and she suggested to me some places to visit. I visited Handelalle, a green and peaceful area, filled with single-family homes situated in a circle. (See appendix 5 for images) Handelalle is located in western corner of North west Berlin. The houses have very modern designs. Another house designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe is in this area as well. With one floor, a flat roof, brick façade, it is very similar to Landhaus Lemke. It is slightly bigger, however. I was able to observe the houses in Handelalle only from outside; they were surrounded by privacy gates. They all seemed to be contemporary houses built after 1930s, because the designs were based on simple shape. Most of them had flat roofs and several windows, some stripped and some regular. When comparing the houses described thus far, one notices that the houses at Handelalle have more similarity to Landhaus Lemke than the first house where I stayed in Botanische Garten.

In addition to these visits, I also visited several museums to gather more information about architecture of single family homes in Berlin. From the Bauhaus archives, for example, I learned about the Red Cube, Farkas Molnar's contribution to the Bauhaus competition for the exhibition house in 1922. (See appendix 6) It is a small cube house, representing a typical detached house from that time period. On this design, Molnar applied geometric principles of De

Stijl, resulting in visually striking facades, while giving the house a sense of newness that made it stand out from the works by Gropius and Meyer, two great Bauhaus architects at the time. I also visited Berlinische Galerie (Berlin's gallery), which portrayed some examples of the single family homes from the 1950s. Here, I learned that architects of the post-war period were influenced by the architecture of the 1920s. Their different styles ranged from irregular forms following the model of Hans Scharoun to styles following the ideals of Bauhaus: rectangularity, functionality and clarity. The floor plans and their varied connections to the exterior space were adjusted to the needs of the inhabitants. Each of the houses built in the 1950s had unique character.

I also sought out written sources on these topics. After I was done touring Berlin's gallery, I went to their bookshop and found a book about the exhibits in the gallery, which had much more information on the single family houses in 1950s than the exhibition itself. I bought the book and will be using it for my Senior Integrative Project. Despite my searching, books on single family housing proved difficult to find. I looked through museums, libraries, and archives but could not find much information until one day when I decided to walk down the streets of Berlin and check out the books that were being sold on streets. There was a huge sale in front of Humbolt University, and I could not resist checking all the books on architecture. I found a book called *Berlin und seine bauten*, translated *Berlin and its buildings*, which was written and edited by many writers and architects. I bought it immediately because it seemed from the title that I would make some use of it. Unfortunately, I later discovered that there are multiple parts of this books and the one I bought from the street trader concentrated only on townhouses, not single-family housing. I realized later in my search online that one of the book in this series is actually concentrated on single-family homes in Berlin. I could not find any copies to buy online in

bookstores. I did a search through Connecticut College's Interlibrary Loan and was able to find it in one of the libraries that my school partnered with. I ordered the book and, when I got it, made myself a personal copy to use for my Senior Integrative Project. It has hundreds of single family homes in Berlin described in details, with floor plans and elevations. Once I examine all of these houses in details, I will be much more enabled to draw conclusions on how the design of single family homes evolved from the 1920s to the present.

Based on the information that I gathered during my stay in Berlin, I concluded that many single family homes from 1920s were influenced by the ideas of the Bauhaus as well as international styles. There was one area of the city where houses seemed like they were influenced by American style houses in particular. The reason for this could be that western Berliners gravitated more towards western ideas while eastern Berliners toward eastern. It is also possible that an architect of one of these buildings liked the American style house and, by building one, influenced others to do the same. *Berlin and its buildings* will give me concrete answers about the different styles of houses, which were built in the period from 1920s to the present and I will be able to conclude how the architecture of these houses evolved during this period of time. It will further introduce me to many houses that I was not able to visit during my stay in Berlin so when I go back, I will know where to find them. Fortunately, this was just the beginning of my research and I will be going back to Berlin to conduct my CISLA internship and to continue my research. I feel that I created a strong background by starting my research this summer because now I know which places I will have to visit or revisit and what I have to do when I get there. I am extremely excited to go back and continue researching this topic.

Appendices

Appendix 1



Appendix 2



Appendix 3



Appendix 4



Appendix 5



Appendix 6

