

Session: Cats and Cities

Adelheid von Saldern  
University of Hanover, Germany  
[asalder@gwdg.de](mailto:asalder@gwdg.de)

## **New Living—No Cats. The Example Frankfurt Housing Estates in the 1920s**

As is widely known, the Frankfurt housing estates, which were built at the initiative of the Frankfurt *Stadtbaurat* Ernst May, were a Mecca for modern architects and social reformers from all over the world. The model apartment buildings breathed the spirit of modern living in healthy, sunny, airy and well-equipped buildings—according to the principles of the famous Bauhaus.

Römerstadt, Praunheim, Westhausen and Bruchfeldstrasse—combined under the contemporary term of "The New Frankfurt"—were amongst the large housing estates that reflected the new attitude towards building. It was the architectural style of New Objectivity, based on the rationalization and standardization of structural engineering. Cubist architectural forms and flat roofs symbolized the new building and living aesthetics.

The only problem for the reformers were the new tenants. "Man is the error," Bertolt Brecht once wrote, and the New Building architects thought along similar lines. Although the applicants underwent a selection process privileging decent families of the middle-classes, i.e. officials and white collar-workers, as well as of the upper working-class, and although the tenants chosen were supposed to have a predisposition to accepting the principles of New Living, this concept demanded the social disciplining and rationalization of their behavior.

### *Cleanliness and Hygiene*

One of the most important topics of social learning was hygiene and cleanliness. In order to carry through the modern knowledge of cleanliness, the apartments were sometimes inspected by the property managers, and

apartment building reformers occasionally knocked at the doors to advise the tenants on how to keep the apartments clean and perform household chores properly. A circular directive issued by the Prussian Minister for Public Welfare on January 24, 1929 emphasized the importance of the supervision and care of apartments. It stated that not only the old, but also the new apartments had to be kept watch on so that irregularities could be prevented in time. The directive called for a scheduled, regular inspection of the apartments by Housing Office staff, apartment supervisors or honorary helpers. This was in reaction to the fact that at the time, vermin were frequently found in apartments. It was estimated that in big cities, about one third of all apartments were bug infested. However, the battle was not only being led against bugs, but also against cockroaches and clothes moths. In 1932 a special campaign was announced bearing the motto "Cleanliness in the Estates." In connection with functionalist dwellings, Ernst Bloch once spoke of the "charm of a sanitary facility," and the tiled bathrooms actually became icons for cleaning rituals, not only of the body but also of the soul and the mind. Cats may have also been considered clean animals, nevertheless they obviously did not fit into New Living's concept of cleanliness as they soiled the estate grounds. They left droppings and half-dead or dead mice, which might bother other tenants. So it was more than 'reasonable' and 'zweckrational' to remove cats if one wanted to set cleanliness as the primary goal for the new housing estates.

### *Regulations—Strict Apartment Building Rules*

In the 1920s we were dealing with a new phenomenon: mass tenancy. This was made possible by the highly subsidized mass housing developments at the time. Property management was professionalized and rationalized. Even the starting of a journal was now worthwhile: *Die Siedlung* (The Estate). In 1929 around 12,000 apartments that had been erected and were being managed by non-profit building associations (i.e. building societies and non-profit construction companies), were supplied with the journal. And this number continued to grow—to about 16,000 in the five years that the estates were being built. If one assumes that an average of three to four persons lived

in one household, then the journal addressed 45,000 to 65,000 people, including children. The journal significantly simplified the uniform regulation of mass tenancy.

The managers of the mass housing developments demanded and enabled the extensive regulation of the social coexistence of the tenants, in our case by issuing a comprehensive set of apartment building rules that prescribed room use down to the last detail. The view towards cats was also accompanied by knowledge of the new possibilities provided by the regulation. It concerned the Fordian regulation of relationships, behavioral doctrines that served to educate architects, urban planners, hygiene reformers and property managers. There had always been instructions in 'correct conduct,' however they each had time-specific character: After World War I the population was robbed of all of its old authorities; they also had to cope with the shock effect of violence and mass death in the war; in addition, Germany's defeat had to be overcome; and finally, people were worried about the spreading weakening of conventional norms and values, including gender relations, not lastly due to the new mass culture. Thus it seemed appropriate to put through new, contemporary rules of conduct in the area of living—analogue to the Taylorist regulation of the flow of operations and the supervised regulation of public urban space by the police.

Thus, people's attitudes both inside and outside their apartments, in the stairwells and in the green belts around the apartment buildings were regulated by strict rules, whereby order, quietness and cleanliness had priority. In 1930, a binding set of apartment building rules was published in the journal *Die Siedlung*. Amongst other things, they prohibited the keeping of pets, including cats. The rules stated: "If the keeping of pets is permitted as an exception, the association–society is entitled to revoke the permission once granted at any time and without being required to give reasons. The conditions associated with the authorization shall be strictly adhered to." Somewhat further down it says that paths and garden areas are not allowed to be soiled. However, cats could not be disciplined; they defied the principles of predictability and for this reason they were to disappear.

### *The Cat Plague*

Obviously some, or perhaps even many, of the tenants did not adhere to the ban. One day the property managers announced that there was a “cat plague.” They therefore decided that all cats be prohibited in the housing estate Westhausen, publishing a pressing appeal in *Die Siedlung* that they be removed immediately. There was no advice, however, on how to go about removing the cats, or on how this could be done immediately. Did the administrators expect the cats to be taken away—where?—or that they be killed? We do not know the answer. The property managers were formally permitted to prohibit the keeping of cats, and it was the tenants who broke the contracts. But they took it one step further by revoking all exceptions they had presumably granted to some tenants in previous contracts. These tenants must have felt it was their right to keep their cats permanently, and they must have been shocked by the cruelly sounding ultimatum. However, the general apartment building rules did state that permission could be revoked without giving reasons. And this was what was happening now.

The ordered removal of all cats can be interpreted as a symbol of the complete pervasion by regulations of the lives and social coexistence of the estate tenants. Light, air and openness were the basic components of the new conception of space. What was meant by this was the transparency of the open building and its interpretation as “liberated living.” There was not to be any more isolation. As the architectural theorist Siegfried Giedion expressed at the time: “Things pervade themselves.” Supervision and discipline were part of this pervasion. This not only meant pervasion ‘from above,’ i.e. by the property managers, but the pervasion of the tenants amongst themselves, and ultimately the pervasion of one's own ego—all of this in the spirit of New Functionalism and New Objectivity. The architectural historian Prigge sums up the reshaping of relationships as follows: “The avant-garde architecture of the 1920s seizes the elements, analyzes their relationships, and reassembles them.”

The concept of pervasion also applied to the relation between interior and exterior. An outer world secluded from the inner world no longer existed, and thus there was no longer anything like a non-functional, subordinate natural environment in which cats could have remained undisturbed.

### *The Protection of the Grounds*

The tenants were to treat the grounds surrounding the estates with care: This included not walking on the grass, above all that children did not play on it.

As far as dogs were allowed, unlike cats they had, and were allowed, to walk on the grass on a leash. They strolled around the grounds of the housing estate, which was regarded as a “garden city.”

Leberecht Migge was responsible for Frankfurt's green areas, including those in the housing estates. He was an advocate of tenant gardens. During the five years in which the estates were being built, 2,560 tenant gardens were created. Under Migge, the grounds were stylized in the same way as the apartments. It was important to him that the soil be used productively, enabling the tenants to develop a relationship to nature. This is also why Migge was opposed to the dominant opinion of the time that parks were only conceived to serve decorative purposes. In the course of the Great Depression he increasingly fought for a new urban–rural network, and advocated the idea of an urbanrural culture. At first glance, Migge's pragmatic, utilitarian attitude makes us suspect that the prohibition of pets, including all cats, was not particularly important to him, even though he did not mention anything about animals. The structuring of nature apparently only applied to the plant world, and not the animal kingdom. It was also fitting that the journal *Die Siedlung* contained numerous articles about caring for plants and the professional care of fruit and vegetable gardens, but nothing about keeping animals. As we will see, for Migge, too, there was a conceptional gateway directed against the keeping of cats.

*The New Human and the Belief in the Power of Design: Ernst May*

From the beginning, Ernst May, the urban developer responsible for the estates, was capable of rejecting pets. As chairman of the supervisory board of the housing association(s) he was capable of exercising influence on the structuring of the social coexistence of the people in "his" housing estates. But did he actually do this? We don't know. However, analogies can be made from his views on New Living. He considered the "city to be an operation"—quite in the spirit of the Fordian thought of the time—and a functional and rationally organized operation at that. One of his articles was typically headed with the term "Human Economy." This way of thinking was perfectly compatible with a commitment to social reform. May was concerned with the improvement of social slum conditions and the deactivation of class differences. His greatest concern was certainly the formation of a social society in which its members are integrated into a collective. He wanted to create a new human who fit into the housing estates he had created. As late as the early 1960s he took tenants to task for perpetrating a change in style to his apartments. He was inspired by technocratic optimism combined with a reformist illusion, as Siegfried Kracauer had already recognized at the time: "The illusion consisted in the fact that one attributed the power to bring about changes to technical progress, which can only be achieved through organized political work. Technical progress can serve anyone." At the time, May was non-partisan and did not, as he said himself, busy himself with politics. He believed that as an enlightened leadership personality he could work alone in the spirit of the public interest.

Ernst May, who was born in 1886, came from a Frankfurt family of industrialists. Before and after his participation in World War I, he followed a straight career path. He first worked in England in the office of the urban planner Sir Raymond Unwin, the pioneer of suburban satellite cities. After completing his studies in Munich he began working as a freelance architect before (volunteering?) to fight in World War I. In 1919 he was the technical director of the *Schlesische Landgesellschaft* (Silesian Land Society) in Breslau, and beginning in 1921 he directed the *Schlesische Heimstätte* (Silesian Home). From 1925 to 1930 he acted as a non-partisan city councilor

for the whole of Frankfurt's civil engineering. May's work was supported by the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany). Accompanied by his staff, in 1930 he left for Russia to build new industrial cities in and beyond the Ural Mountains, where he remained until 1934. The planning opportunities under the communist dictatorship seemed attractive to the non-Communist. May was not the only one attracted by this. The great tasks in the Soviet Union also made quite an impression on the non-Communist Rudolf Wolters, and after 1933 he worked for the great tasks of the National Socialists—quite in contrast to May, who did not return to Nazi Germany, but went to Africa instead. Between 1934 and 1937 he worked as a farmer in East Africa (Tanganyika). During the war he was interned in South Africa for two years. After the war he worked as an architect and urban developer in East Africa. In 1954 he became the director of the planning department of *Neue Heimat* (New Home) in the new Federal Republic of Germany. In 1957 he became a member of the SPD, the same year he recommenced working as a freelance architect and became an advisor to *Neue Heimat*. He died in 1970.

Ernst May belonged to that character of urban planners who believed to be able to practice their jobs beyond political systems and to the benefit of the people in the country concerned. Because of his prominent position in the Soviet Union, May may have been spared receiving attractive job offers from the National Socialists. However, the fact that he went to the Soviet Union in 1930 means that he deliberately ignored the crimes committed by the Communists, who at the time had just reached the peak of their terror campaign against the kulaks. May belonged to that generation who believed in the creative possibilities of societies and people. The yearning for clearness and for the elimination of all ambivalence and ambiguity belonged to this way of thinking. Animals, in particular cats, in the new communities did not fit into the concept of the New Human and New Living due to their unpredictability and dysfunctionality. Only fragments are known about what May thought about animals. In the spirit of Taylorism, he had a tendency to compare the "bulk of the population" with worker bees. Accordingly, he compared the small apartments in the new housing development with honeycombs. On the other

hand, on several occasions he compared the city with its population with a zoo, in which the zoo director carefully studies the natural living conditions of the animals and then copies these as accurately as possible in captivity "in order to ensure them a healthy life." Certainly, one should not weigh every spoken word all too carefully, but what becomes obvious is more of an instrumentalized relation to animals: in the first case May is interested in the bees' diligence despite the confined biosphere of the honeycomb; in the second case he is fascinated by the imitation of natural life in a zoo.

### *Domination as a Social Practice*

As already mentioned, strict rules with regard to social coexistence prevailed in the new housing estates. However it would be wrong to believe that these rules had only been made up at the top. On the contrary: The house rules were put up for discussion in the journal *Die Siedlung*. One was at least able to send letters to the editor. Allegedly, none were received that perceived the regulations to be too far-reaching, but according to the editor, on the whole the number of letters received was small. There were a few negative voices, but these were not taken seriously and the content of the criticism was not passed on. Supposedly, others wanted to tighten the regulations. The greatest need was for quiet. Other occupants complained that "many tenants simply disregard the regulations," above all that children romped about on the lawns and damaged the green areas. Apparently, some of the tenants also demanded the careful treatment of the grounds. This example makes it clear that domination was not solely exercised by the property managers at the top, but that knowing they had the property managers on their side, a portion of the tenants joined in and were able to exercise power over deviants by virtue of the generally binding house rules. This demonstrates the entanglement and decentralization of domination and power in the social realm, more precisely in the realm of neighbors.



### *Functionalization of Space—Allocation of Space Use*

The allocation of urban spaces according to function belongs to the spirit of the times. The principles were not laid down until 1933 in the internationally valid Charter of Athens, but the concept of functional allocation had already begun to take shape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through specific building codes and city formations. In the course of Fordism, in the 1920s the trend towards functionalization intensified. The maxim was: Functional allocation of operations. Functional allocation of the city. Functional allocation of housing space. And functional allocation of human activities according to the various premises. Migge also made an appeal for the different use of spaces. As an advocate of "rationalized garden plots" he supported the corresponding functional allocations. As far as the housing estates were concerned, one space was reserved for the building entrances, another for traffic, a third for going for walks, a fourth for child's play, a fifth for drying laundry, etc. Thinking in terms of order and structure went so far, by the way, that each street was assigned its own variety of tree. According to this function-oriented logic, a separate space for cats would have been necessary. But this made no sense, and thus cats did not fit in with Migge's concept. All of the spaces were carefully separated from each other. In this respect, Westhausen was the most consistent example. Something completely new had originated here: "a closely meshed network of functional belts crossing each other at right angles." Was it mere coincidence that it was precisely here that cats had to be removed??

Children were also assigned spaces, spaces in which they could play: playgrounds or grassy playing areas. This social achievement was founded on an ambivalence in that at the same time, children were prohibited from playing anywhere else. The ambivalence of this modern achievement is frequently ignored in the literature. With reference to the new housing estates in Frankfurt it was written that the children had appropriated the open public spaces and played on the streets. But we know from the sources that this was prohibited. They were not even allowed to play on the through paths. In accordance with post-proletarian thought, one did not want to permit another street urchin culture. Playgrounds were considered to be a social and cultural achievement

of the times. No one seriously challenged the usefulness of children's playgrounds, and the SPD demonstrated large-scale support. Not only was social progressiveness praised, the playgrounds were perceived as places of order because they were supervised by parents. The function-oriented spaces, which were geared towards the conveyance of a uniform, rational, "modern" lifestyle, were clearly linked with the intention of disciplining children. They were to learn at an early age that certain actions are only allowed to be performed in certain spaces.

But cats could not be confined to a certain space. They strayed about wherever and however it suited them. This feline behavior, which defied boundaries, contradicted functional thought in terms of space and order. For this reason cats had to be considered dysfunctional. They did not fit into the concept of New Living, in which all dysfunctionality was to be eliminated.

#### *View of the Nazi Era and Summary*

One of course now expects that everything had worsened after 1933, that cats were hunted down by the block leaders and that violations with respect to keeping pets were severely punished. But the journal did not confirm this. Nothing was said about pets, just as no stricter house rules were issued; nothing was stated about block leaders, and nothing was reported about denunciation. The only issue that was explained in all openness was the forcing into line of the managing and supervisory boards (*Gleichschaltung*). There were articles published during the Nazi era on apartment care and home furnishing, but the cleanliness discourse was not intensified.

The history of the prohibition of cats is not one that at first glance points towards the Holocaust. Rather it belongs to a history of the rational and functional pervasion of life worlds, in this case to the history of New Living and New Building. The historical site was primarily modernity together with its belief in feasibility and not a *particular* political system. The belief in feasibility and planning was polyvalent, i.e. it could be associated with all political systems and then assume system-specific form and content respectively:

It was the desire for a closed and totally new world in miniature that defined the housing concept in the 1920s. In an interpretation by the literary scholar Helmuth Lethen and the historian Michael Geyer, it was an attempt to cope with the primordial experience of the violence of World War I through the project of modern building and modern living. It was therefore a generation of front-line soldiers, to whom not only May but also Gropius belonged, and these processed what they had experienced through its contoured conversion in terms of civilization—much differently than did the national conservatives and the National Socialists, who posited violence, leader worship and race.

As different as the objectives of the principles of New Building were to those of nationalist and Nazi thought, both had a common root: The belief in new humans and the ability to shape society by means of socio-technological achievements. If in the Weimar era the socio-hygienic impulse of New Living was bound to a socio-reformist impulse and embedded in a pluralist society constituted under the rule of law, in the Nazi era a racist orientation towards terrorist dictatorship dominated. In other words: The objectives were rewritten and established in a new political system of coordinates that could be positively connoted by the "Volk comrades" (Volksgenossen) The housing estates were occasionally interpreted as the epitome of positive eugenics. The cleanliness postulate had in the meantime become an integral part of *general knowledge*, and this made its reinterpretation and its politicization in favor of Nazi principles easier. From now on, the whole city and all of society were to be cleansed. It was no longer a matter of cats and vermin, but of Jews and "inferior Germans," that means asocial persons, homosexuals, the ill, the feeble minded and Communists. This reorientation required other mouthpieces than that provided by the estate journal *Die Siedlung*, which presented the Nazi era more from a friendly-sounding side in which normality apparently determined everyday life. Clearly, the "Volk comrades" (Volksgenossen) were not to be confronted with political tirades of hatred and exclusion in their private spheres. When the journal, for example, published something about the renovation of the old part of town, the article did not thematicize the

associated socio-technological selection mechanism, but solely the positively formulated redesign of this area of the city.

In summary it should be pointed out that in the Weimar Republic the propagated norms of cleanliness and hygiene as well as the rejection of everything dysfunctional had already tended towards excessiveness and to a logic of their own, therefore cats were to be sacrificed as well.

The principles of cleanliness can be compared with a road that led to a crossroads. Various paths of development forked off from this crossroads: one of these paths led into a multi-option lane, which ultimately made possible a policy of "cleansing the people's body" of all "unclean" people. The path to National Socialism and to the Holocaust was 'only' one of the possibilities provided by history; it is the dark side of modernity.

Unfortunately, it was not handed down and therefore uncertain whether the cats in Westhausen survived the regulation directed against them. It is only certain that after 1939, all Jews had to relinquish their cats and other "living inventory." It is unknown what happened to them. But it can easily be made out that the "behavioral doctrine of coldness" (Lethen) lost its profile in terms of civilization and experienced a racist turn, which ended with fatal consequences for very many people.