Exporting America: Housing and Home in Post-World-War-II Germany

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War's End and a New Beginning

In the chaos of war-torn, post-1945 Germany, it was above all the Americans who, through many official and private initiatives, attempted to change German culture and society. Through new legislation, new industrial structures, new school curricula, exchange programs, exhibitions on the advantages of the "American Way of Life," and community libraries and cultural centers such as the "America Houses", the US strove to turn Germany into a democracy along western lines, first in an attempt to "re-educate" the German people away from dictatorship, and then as part of a cold-war effort, to embed the Federal Republic firmly into a western front.[1]

What role did the culture of housing play in this westernization process? What aspects of "American home living" were exported in the US attempt to reorient the German people? With home life playing such a large role in the development and expression of culture,[2] any serious attempt to reorient the German population could be expected to incorporate an Americanization of the German home.

In the following paper, I will trace a large-scale, US-initiated project with the aim of "developing new ideas in housing"[3] which was carried out in 15 West German cities in the early 1950s. The Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) competitions attracted over 700 entries and were judged by a panel of American and German urban planning and housing experts. These mostly suburban projects, built under the pressure of a destroyed urban fabric, postwar poverty, and millions of homeless who needed accommodation in more than just provisional barracks, still exist today.

In order to trace the success or failure of an Americanization of the German home, it is first necessary to give a short synopsis of the traditional American and German house.

Traditional House Forms

The American House

The predominant American house form, the detached, single-family residency, is also common in Germany. Despite superficial similarities, the differences in traditional house forms are striking.

The United States experienced a fast and drastic change in house fashions around the turn of the century. The prevailing form in the mid-to-late nineteenth century – for those who could afford it – had been the large Victorian house. Typical were a representative entrance hall, front and back parlors, formal dining room, and a kitchen which was the domain of the servants. Bedrooms or "chambers" were located on the private upper floors.

The turn of the century brought the advent of the bungalow, a new, smaller, informal and efficient type of house which quickly became the middle-class ideal.[4] Bungalows had a front porch and a stoop, where children could play while their elders greeted neighbors passing by. Inside, a living room which faced the street replaced the formal hallway and parlors of Victorian times, taking over the functions of receiving and entertaining guests as well as providing a place for the family to gather. The front door either led directly into the living room or into a small, open hallway. In either case it was usually possible to immediately see into the main living space when the front door was opened.

The kitchen was at the back of the house and had a door leading to the back yard. By the late 1920s, a garage was often found behind the house, making the back door the logical entrance for family members arriving in the family car. The kitchen was still closed off to the living area and became an area reserved for family and close friends. The presence of both a breakfast nook in the kitchen and a dining room by the living room underlined the difference between the two areas. Whereas the family and close friends used the whole house, more formal visitors remained in the living and dining rooms.

Bedrooms were located on the upper floor if there was one. Otherwise they were usually reached via a hallway which shielded them from the more public areas of the house. Bathrooms were located by the bedrooms, which meant a de-facto opening of this most private area of the house to any visitor who stayed more than a short while.

After World War II house plans opened up even more. The front porch disappeared and was replaced by a rear patio or terrace, but picture windows allowed an unhindered view into the living room. The kitchen often had no door separating it from the living area and large pass-throughs between kitchen and dining area became popular.

The German House

By the 1950s, the German single-family residency had gone through a very different history. Around the time of the industrial revolution, the separation of workplace and living quarters became the norm, and the spatial organization of the house changed accordingly. The working class and the petite bourgeoisie lived in small, single-family houses or in speculative flats, whereas the upper class ideal was the townhouse or a villa. In all classes, households consisting of a nuclear family became the norm.

Although there are many regional house forms in Germany,

widespread and typical characteristics of the German house were load-bearing, brick or stone walls, a pitched roof, and durable construction. Wall openings, such as doors and windows, were kept small. Windows were of the casement type, necessitating an air lock at the entrance to prevent their banging closed when the front door was opened. Oven heating, common even after World War II, encouraged people to keep doors within the house closed, in order to conserve heat in the rooms occupied during the day.

The working class usually had two living spaces: the multi-functional *Wohnküche*, a type of eat-in kitchen, where the family spent most of the time they were at home, and the more formal *gute Stube*, a living room reserved only for special occasions.

The upper classes left the kitchen to the servants and made everyday use of the *Salon*, later called living room, where the family gathered and received guests. Wealthier families had additional, specialized rooms, such as a smoking room, where the gentlemen of a party could retire to enjoy their after-dinner cigars.

The early twentieth century brought with it many reform movements to promote "healthier living".[5] These reformers promoted country living and "*Heimatschutz*", or the protection of national and regional traditions. Rejection of an industrialized society, a closed, patriarchally-run family, and an emphasis on German values and customs were central to their beliefs. Among these reformers, Social Darwinism and anti-Semitism were widespread. In contrast to American reformers of the time, who touted new household inventions, German reformers saw mechanization and rapid industrialization as a threat, and rejected anything they saw as not "rooted in the soil", including new materials such as concrete, or "non-German" building forms such as the flat roof.

An example of this pronounced "*heimatschutz*" housing trend is the Fischtalgrund project in Berlin (1927-8). Although the single-family houses are, for the most part, attached, each entry was carefully separated from those of its neighbors. There was no front stoop or porch. Balconies and patios were on the private garden side, as were the living and dining rooms. The location of the kitchen permitted the housewife to observe the area in front of the house. The houses were well-shielded from the public life of the street. Some had not only an air lock, but a front hallway as well. Rooms which were located at the front of the house generally had windows facing the side; windows facing the street had shutters or iron grilles. Although not in any plan, a proper German house would additionally have had *Gardinen*, or thin, gauzy curtains, to cover the windows and prevent anyone from looking in.

While the exterior of the houses suggested that the inhabitants wanted to be left alone, the interior was no less closed off. The more public rooms were on the ground floor, but the lack of transparency between front door and living area meant that a visitor had to be "shown in" by a member of the family. The kitchen was roomy, but had no place for the family to gather: rather, it was meant to be the housewife's workplace. A second,

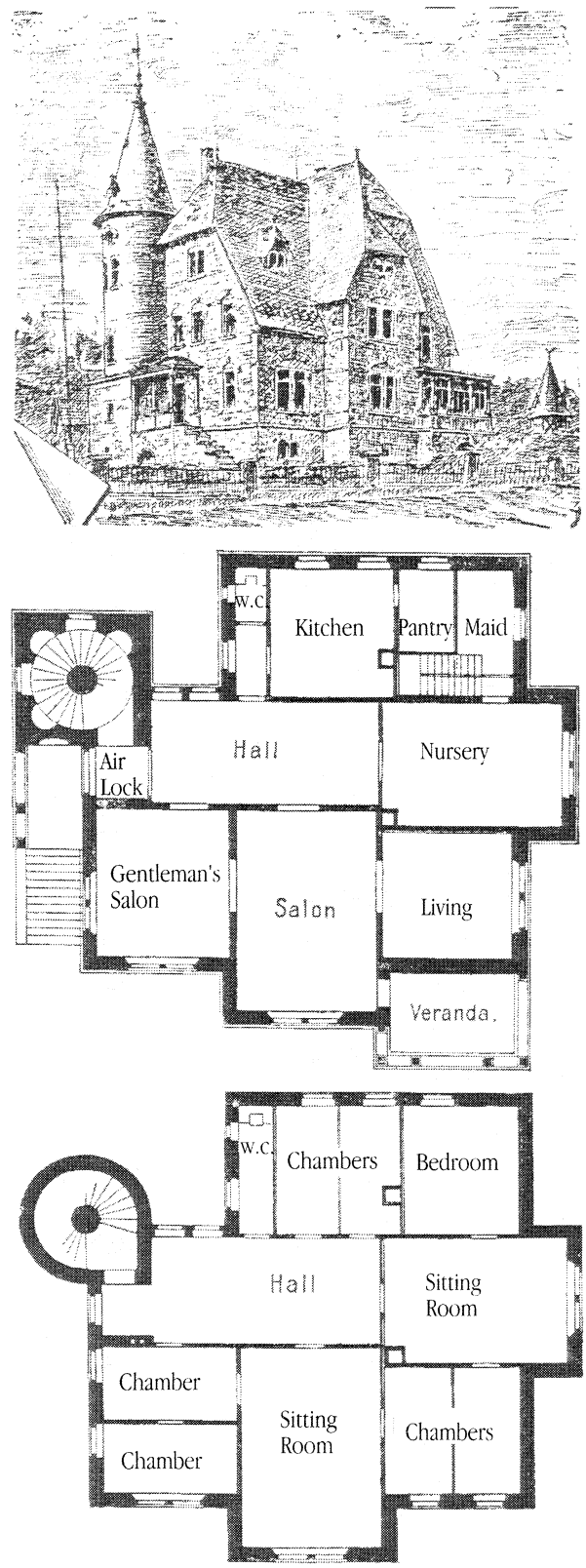

Fig. 1. A late nineteenth century villa in Holzminden, Germany (Arch. Liebold). Rooms were specialized, allowing a high degree of social ritualization.

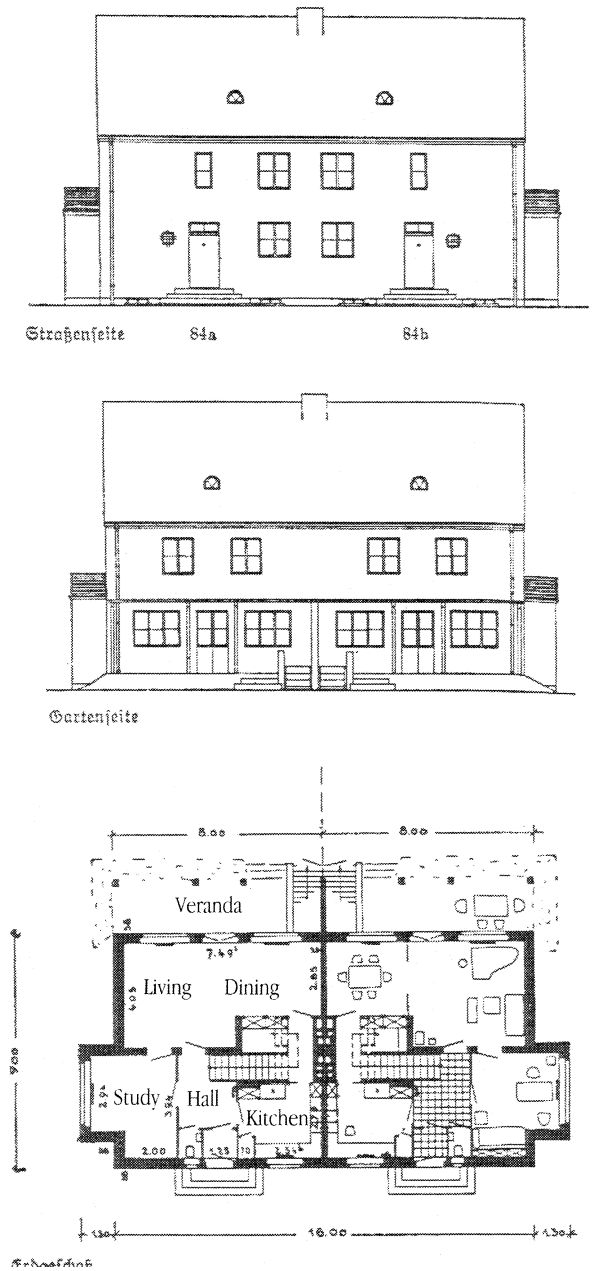

Fig. 2. Single-family house in the Fischtalgrund project, Berlin 1927-8 (Arch. Hans Gerlach). A visitor must cross three thresholds to reach the living area.

analogous room on the ground floor, usually reached via the front hallway, could ideally be used as the husband's study. Bedrooms were located on the upper floor; a lavatory by the front door meant that no visitor needed to go upstairs.

At a time when the American house was becoming spatially more open, both in terms of interaction with its surroundings and in its interior arrangement, the German house remained hierarchically compartmentalized within and closed to the world without. It was not possible to observe what was happening in the house, although windows allowed a policing view of what was happening on the street. Despite technical innovations in heating and construction, the German house of the late 1920s looked remarkably like its centuries-old predecessors. This traditionalism was surely intensified by what German conservatives saw as a serious threat to national stability: the 1920s avant-garde attempt at a forced opening of society.

The avant garde's social and societal aims were sweeping. Aside from a general cultural renewal, the avant garde tried to reform humanity by improving its housing. The experiments had been radical in countries such as Russia, where new, communal housing forms were developed to hasten societal reorientation, and more tempered in countries such as Germany, where light, air and sunshine became key aims in the building of new working-class dwellings. And yet even in Germany, reformers espoused a new architectural language, one which was based on lightweight, cost-efficient construction, forms which resulted from functional demands, and above all, a new honesty, a moral transparency, in which a thing was not to outwardly try to be something that inwardly, it was not.[6]

The resulting architecture was an affront to many. The asymmetry, flat roofs, and a complete rejection of ornament were aesthetically unfamiliar, while open floor plans and large windows that anyone could look in through, challenged established ideas of privacy.

With the election of the National Socialists in 1933, the owner-occupied single-family house, now called a *Heimstätte*, became the official ideal. Even multiple-unit houses were built with solid masonry walls, small windows, and pitched roofs, making them formally similar to the single-family style.[7] Aside from "rooting him with the soil", homeownership gave the "little man" the feeling that the threat emanating from socialism, that everything was to be shared, would finally be conquered.[8]

The ECA Housing Program

After World War II, the devastated cities and large number of homeless made housing a major concern in Germany. Although many might recall the typical 1950s house as being a multi-family high rise or slab construction, the detached, single-family house which National Socialist propaganda had declared as one of its housing goals remained an ideal in the nation's mind.[9]

In answer to the pressing housing problems, the American Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), working with Marshall Plan funding, sponsored a series of competitions in 1952 in order to gather ideas for "the development of housing". The focus was on new, government-subsidized buildings in planned communities. Fifteen West German cities provided tracts of land. The competitions were open to German architects and engineers; the jury consisted of both American and German experts. The documentation included separate chapters in which the American side presented its view of the competition results.

In all, twenty multifamily and thirteen single-family house types were developed.[10] Despite the goals initially asserted, a

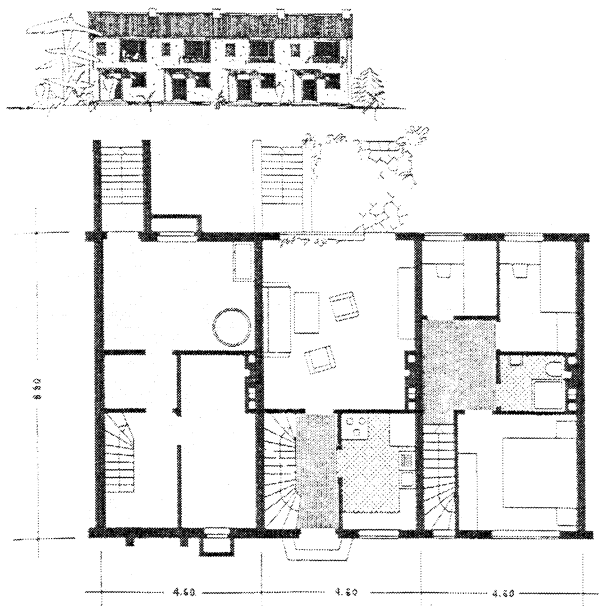

Fig. 3. ECA row house in Aachen (Arch. Horst Loy and Alfred Schwelm). Although this project did have a central laundry, the row houses still included a basement.

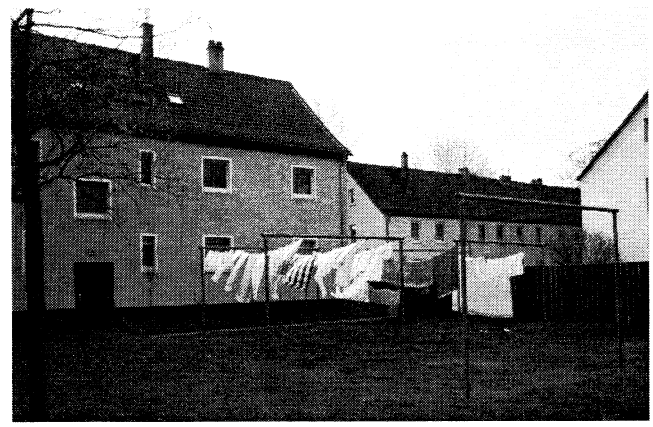

Fig. 4. ECA apartment houses in Mainz (Arch. Franz Throll). Compared to what had been achieved by German architects in the 1920s, the ECA competitions produced pitiful design results.

main aim seems to have been the reorganization of the German construction industry,[11] while the main criteria for judging the projects became cost efficiency, a theme which dominates the competition documentation.[12] Many of the projects were a mixture of both multiple-dwelling and single-family housing, with the latter making up almost a third of the total units. All of the single-family dwellings were of the less costly row house type. That the relatively more expensive one-unit houses were even planned can be considered testimony to the continuing one-family, one-house ideal.

The architectural language of the fifteen winners in this American-sponsored competition remained, even by 1950's standards, mediocre to outdated. In contrast to building exhibitions such as the Weissenhof Siedlung near Stuttgart (1927-8) or the Interbau exhibit in Berlin (1957), no big-name architects were represented. Although one of the commentators claimed that, "the architecture of the Third Reich is dead," he confused the classicist style of that era's civic monuments with the "*heimatschutz*" style of its housing, hastening to add that the former was now the official style of socialist countries in Eastern Europe.[13] In fact, over 60% of the ECA houses had a pitched roof, evoking once again the "*heimatschutz*" style. Even larger, multi-family dwellings were planned with this roof type, continuing a Third Reich policy which gave apartment buildings the appearance of oddly oversized single-family dwellings.

With one exception, all of the single-family ECA houses were planned with the kitchen facing the street and the living room facing the garden. Only one house had an eat-in kitchen, making the majority of kitchens workspaces to be occupied by the housewife. From here, she could supervise what was happening on the street. Seventy percent of the houses had a basement, which could be used as a laundry area of for storing foodstuffs. That this high-cost factor was included is not only an indication of war traumas resulting from food and fuel shortages, but also demonstrates a firm belief in the self-sufficient household.

The front of the house was usually fairly closed compared to the back, where large windows allowed a view of, and a patio door provided access to the back yard. Bedrooms were, again with one exception, on the upper floor. Bathrooms were an area where costs were often cut; many had no sink. Only three houses had the bathroom on the ground floor. At least one architect was so concerned with not having visitors wander upstairs, he put a separate lavatory by the front door at the cost of having the bathtub alternatively in the kitchen or the basement. The same design suggested a bed in the living room, probably less of a "new development" than a sign of post-war poverty.

Few of the ECA designs offered novel solutions to spatial questions. The houses were still closed to the street and open only to the private garden zone. The kitchen and household rooms were still considered a woman's domain, from which she could see what was happening on the street. Communal amenities, such as cost-efficient central heating plants, were not planned. Laundries, which could have cut costs by eliminating the need for a basement while reducing the housewife's workload by allowing her the use of a washing machine, were rejected in favor of individual housekeeping rooms with few, if any appliances. At least five houses were designed with some form of central heating which, however, did not lead to experiments with open floor plans.

Only one American author wrote on the design of the individual units, remarking that typical American projects, such as the single-family row houses in the Lake Meadows project by Chicago, were characterized by open floor plans, "with no division...between the main rooms used during the day (entryway, living room, dining area and kitchen...).[14]

Summing up the results of the search for new spatial ideas

from the German side, Edgar Wedepohl, calling the ECA competitions the search for new "national housing", argued that the pluralism of all possible organizational solutions should be reduced to standardized solutions which would serve *das Volk* (the people) and help save costs: "The focus is on the person who, with all his personal idiosyncrasies, voluntarily accepts the boundaries of his individual freedom in consideration of the community." Calling special requests, "the demands of queer eccentrics", his idea of possible differences in housing units was limited to the unit size, to accommodate different family sizes, the kitchen type, and the types of amenities, including central heating, offered to fit various pocketbooks.[15]

Wedepohl's attempts to define new standards for optimal housing units are based on a slew of tables comparing various values and ratios of the ECA houses. He comes to the conclusion that single-family houses should not be built for less than four occupants, calling smaller units, "dubious dwarf constructions which, in the long run, are not capable of life."[16] In a comparative analysis of the thirteen different single-family houses, he emphasizes which plans provide, "protection from neighbors' gazes," and which would allow for subletting rooms in the house (while maintaining occupant privacy), while also pointing out possibilities, "for new forms of living: one-roomedness and connection between rooms instead of cell-like separation."[17] He suggests that these new living forms be actively taught: "A more efficient use of the dwelling would be possible if habits which have their origins in earlier forms of living were changed. This would require a long and planned training, which would have to begin in the schools..."[18]

Wedepohl's use of typical Third-Reich terminology, his belief that the state should prescribe how people are to live, his concern with what the neighbors might see, and his simultaneous acclamation of opener floor plans in the house, all within the framework of an American-sponsored program, illustrate the uncertainty of German planners after the war. Faced with the question of what future housing should look like, it seemed easier to retreat into the seemingly objective world of tables and figures rather than seriously question prevailing ideas of social hierarchy, individual privacy, and community.

The apparent American disinterest in directly influencing the design and spatial organization of housing is surprising, when one considers both what a large part "home" plays in shaping and showing people's identity, and how concerned US policymakers were – at least in the early years – with "denazifying" German society. Either the Americans trying to shape a new, democratic Germany were not aware of how spatial and social patterns can be interrelated or, in contrast to their German counterparts of the Weimar Republic, they did not consider housing an adequate means to bring about social change. Surely the Americans, with their own anti-communism taking form at home, could identify with the German fear of "collectivism". And so, either unaware of or ignoring the pre-war housing debate, they allowed decisions which led to a continuation of many aspects of traditional German housing, both formal and otherwise, including those which had been adopted and encouraged by the National Socialists.

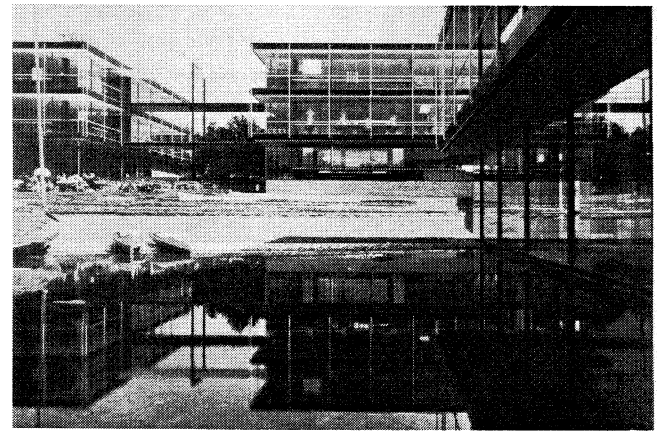

Fig. 5. The German Pavilion for the World Fair in Brussels, 1956-8 (Arch. Sep Ruf and Egon Eiermann). The modern design was to signal Germany's renewal after the Third Reich era.

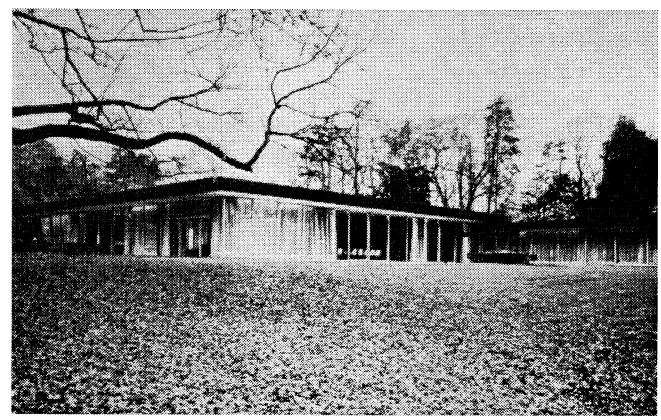

Fig. 6. The Chancellor Bungalow in Bonn, 1963 (Arch. Sep Ruf). Housing for the Federal Republic's leader signaled openness, progressiveness, and a renewal of quality design.

Official Structures

If a push for new, more open, transparent and democratic housing patterns was deemed too unimportant or too difficult by the German building trade and their American advisors, then it is all the more remarkable that when official structures were built, quite a different position was taken.

Two buildings especially illustrate the young Federal Republic's desire to demonstrate that a change had indeed come over the land: Sep Ruf's and Egon Eiermann's German Pavilion for the World Fair in Brussels (1956-8) and Ruf's Chancellor Bungalow of 1963.

The World Fair buildings, a series of eight exhibition pavilions joined together by bridges and covered passageways, were grouped around a landscaped, open yard. The pavilions had either two or three stories, were square in plan, and were based on a strict grid system. The project followed the predominant ur-

ban idea of the post-war era, structured and loosely-grouped volumes, in this case set within a park.

Modern materials and construction techniques determined the buildings. Their form, taking up ideas developed by Mies van der Rohe in the 1920s, was elegant and low-slung, seeming to consist of nothing but floating platforms and a bit of glass. Transparency was high, both in an urban sense, with space flowing between and around the buildings, and in terms of the buildings themselves. An open floor plan dominated the interior of the pavilions. Stores were only used where protection was needed from the sun.

Sep Ruf's second official building for the Federal Republic was the Chancellor's Bungalow in Bonn, Germany's "White House," and the official residence and reception building of the nation's political leader. Commissioned under Konrad Adenauer, it was inaugurated by his successor Ludwig Erhard on November 12, 1964.

The Chancellor's Bungalow was every bit as transparent as the 1958 World Fair building had been, and as different from "normal" German housing as could be imagined. As in the World Fair building, modern forms and materials determined the building. By moving into this building, Erhard wanted to demonstrate to the world that the "new Germany" was an open republic, a non-aggressive and progressive partner capable of producing quality design.[19]

Although the bungalow was meant to signal German openness and democracy, the reaction to the building within the republic was mixed. On the whole, public German opinion was not always kind to what was perceived as a "cross between an aquarium and an American drugstore."[20]

Conclusion

German housing trends in the period following World War II were not influenced by American patterns of living as much as by traditional German norms. The spatial opening of the German house akin to American customs was, even in post-war Germany, associated with "un-German" and "bolshevist" housing forms which an avant-garde elite had attempted to establish in Germany during the Weimar Republic. This reason alone would have sufficed to reject the spatial transparency of the American home, presented to the German public via the media. Added to this was a widespread resistance to what was perceived as too much "Americanization".[21]

The German house form ideologically propagated during the Third Reich continued to remain the ideal for a large part of the population after the war. Owner-occupied, single-family houses continued to be encouraged by the post-war Christian Democratic government in an attempt to firmly establish conservative living and family structures as a bastion against communism. This is in direct contrast to official buildings, even those used for housing, in which Germany attempted, through a "democratic" and spatially open architecture, to demonstrate its rehabilitation to a watching world community.

American policymakers after the war did not actively support a reorientation of German housing, despite their attempts to structurally and culturally change German society in other ways. It is surprising that such a pronounced area of people's identity was not the focus of increased "denazification" attempts. While German housing did eventually take on certain spatial characteristics of American housing, the ideological aspects of spatially transparent versus spatially closed housing forms continued to be an issue in the Federal Republic for years to come.

ENDNOTES

Note: All translations of German text are my own.

1 The US-initiated "denazification" programs are an obvious example of a political reorientation attempt. American industrial policies in Germany are traced in: Volker Berghahn, *The Americanization of West German Industry 1945-1973* (Leamington Spa/New York: Berg Publishers, 1986). For a discussion of the role of America Houses in post-war Germany see: Axel Schildt, "Die USA als 'Kulturnation'. Zur Bedeutung der Amerikahäuser in den 1950er Jahren," *Amerikanisierung: Traum und Alptraum im Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Alf Lüdtke, Inge Marssolek, Adelheid von Saldern (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1996), 257-69. Cultural Americanization in general is treated in: Bernd Greiner, "'Test the West'. Über die 'Amerikanisierung' der Bundesrepublik Deutschland," *Mittelweg 36*, Oct./Nov. 1997, 4-40.

2 See Amos Rapoport, "Systems of activities and systems of settings," *Domestic architecture and the use of space: An interdisciplinary cross-cultural study*, ed. Susan Kent (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9-20.

3 Helmut Döscher, "Der ECA-Wettbewerb," *Neuer Wohn-Bau: Neue Wege des Wohnungsbaues als Ergebnis der ECA-Ausschreibung*, 3 vols., ed. Hermann Wandersleb (Ravensburg: Otto Maier Verlag, 1952), 1:6.

4 For a discussion on the development and spread of the bungalow in North America see Anthony D. King, *The Bungalow: The production of a global culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 127-55; Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 171-92, and Larry R. Ford, *Cities and Buildings: Skyscrapers, Skid Rows and Suburbs* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 146-52.

5 For a discussion of these movements and housing see: Joachim Petsch, *Eigenheim und gute Stube: Zur Geschichte des bürgerlichen Wohnens* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1989), 98-129.

6 In 1927, Mies van der Rohe described this new transparency in the design process as follows: "We do not judge the result of, but rather the approach to the design process. It is this approach which shows us whether the form was developed from the life of an object, or if it was created for its own sake." Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Über die Form in der Architektur," *Programme und Manifeste zur Architektur des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed., ed. Ulrich Conrads (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1981), 96.

7 Although Albert Speer's planning department developed large, multi-

unit housing blocks, these were never realized.

[8] Petsch, *Eigenheim und gute Stube*, 176.

[9] Construction rates for single-family houses continued to rise, while rates for multi-family houses stagnated after the early 1960s. Statistisches Bundesamt, *Gebäudezählungen* (Wiesbaden, 1950, 1961, 1968, and 1987).

[10] All fifteen winning entries are documented in: Georg Günthert, Brigitte D'Ortschy, "Die 15 Ausführungs-Projekte," *Neuer Wohn-Bau*, ed. Wandersleb, 9-39.

[11] Bernard Wagner, "German Architecture Looks Up: E.C.A. Housing Development Program Helps German Architects and Contractors to Introduce Modern Methods in Housing," *Journal of The A.I.A.* XVII (1952): 10-17.

[12] Erdmann Grübnau, "Baukosten," *Neuer Wohn-Bau*, ed. Wandersleb, 102-4.

[13] Hans Schloszberger, "Gestaltung," *Neuer Wohn-Bau*, ed. Wandersleb, 119.

[14] Walter F. Bogner, "Entwurf," *Neuer Wohn-Bau*, ed. Wandersleb, 131-2.

[15] Edgar Wedepohl, "Grundriss," *Neuer Wohn-Bau*, ed. Wandersleb, 59.

[16] ibid., 61.

[17] ibid., 62.

[18] ibid., 66.

[19] Hans Wichmann, *Sep Ruf: Bauten und Projekte* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, 1986), 122.

[20] Heinrich Welfing, *Parlamentsarchitektur: Zur Selbstdarstellung der Demokratie in ihren Bauwerken. Eine Untersuchung am Beispiel des Bonner Bundeshauses* (Berlin: Duncker & Humbolt, 1995), 96.

[21] Antagonism towards American culture (or perceived lack thereof) and a fear of being overly "Americanized" was common in Germany even before World War II. See: Adelheid von Saldern, "Überfremdungsängste. Gegen die Amerikanisierung der deutschen Kultur in den zwanziger Jahren," *Amerikanisierung: Traum und Alptraum*, ed. Lüdtke et al., 213-44.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Hans Issel, *Die Wohnungsbaukunde* (Leipzig, 1910), 44.
2. *Bauwelt* 19 (1928): 776.
3. Hermann Wandersleb, ed., *Neuer Wohn-Bau. Neue Wege des Wohnungsbaues als Ergebnis der ECA-Ausschreibung*, 3 vols. (Ravensburg: Otto Maier Verlag, 1952), 1:11.
4. Photo by A. Staub, 1999.
5. Hans Wichmann, *Sep Ruf: Bauten und Projekte* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, 1986), 93.
6. ibid., 128.