

What Tenants Want: Modern Apartments and Well-Designed Furniture (1956)

Abstract

During the Second World War, 23% of Dresden's industrial buildings, and 50% of its residential buildings were destroyed in the bombing raids. After the war, Dresden became a major industrial center in the GDR; city leaders rebuilt some of the city's main historical buildings but opted to rebuild much of the city in a "socialist modern" style, in part for financial reasons and in part because they wanted to distance the city from its past as the royal capital of Saxony and a stronghold of the German bourgeoisie.

The struggle over the implementation of socialist ideology played out in all parts of East German society, including in the building and design of people's homes and living spaces. The GDR aspired to become a self-sufficient manufacturing and cultural powerhouse, but was held back by economic limitations, a lack of supply and, as this article in *Neues Deutschland*, the official daily newspaper of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), showed, self-imposed limitations of "amateurish bungling" and an inability to keep up with changing and modernizing tastes. Function was at the heart of all design in the GDR, but design also had the difficult task of reflecting not only the desires of consumers, but also their ideals. Weighed down by ideology, designs stayed largely the same, and consumers became dissatisfied, wishing for more well-designed, elegant, or creative choices.

Source

Modern Apartments and Well-Designed Furniture

"Façade Architecture" and Old Mass-Produced Furniture Are Obstacles to Modern Home Decor

When rebuilding the destroyed city centers of our Republic, architects strive to combine the most important elements of locally dominant architectural traditions with the purposes of new buildings, which, whether they are residential or commercial, must meet modern expectations.

This task was and is especially complicated when it comes to redesigning the city center of Dresden, its main thoroughfares and central square. It is not easy for city planners and architects to preserve the character of a city in which Baroque elements dominated before its destruction while at the same time lending visual form to the new in the life of our society, not just in the aims of new buildings but also in their design.

Many workers who have moved into a new apartment in the revived center of Dresden rightly complain about a certain "façade architecture" that places limits not just on modern home decor but also supports the persistence of amateurish bungling in our building sector.

What Tenants Want

The structures on the Altmarkt (Old Market) in Dresden clearly reveal the progress in our buildings when compared to the new blocks on Grunaer Strasse, also in central Dresden, which were built up to 1952. The two seven-story façades on the eastern and western sides of the Altmarkt are more massive than their predecessors destroyed in 1945, without however "crushing" the surviving or reconstructed historical structures in the city center. It would be wrong, however, not to note the small avoidable errors about which many tenants rightly complain. In the building at Altmarkt 4, the living rooms of some

apartments are directly adjacent to the bathrooms of the neighboring apartments. The architects have probably never sat in such a living room while someone was running a bath next door.

The tenants are very pleased with the ceiling-mounted curtain tracks, which have made the less-than-attractive wooden curtain rails obsolete. But was it absolutely necessary to ruin the overall impression of the room by installing a multiply welded standpipe for the district heating just a few centimeters away? In some apartments, these pipes not only run along the room's front wall but also "adorn" part of the ceiling. The rooms without parquet were equipped with flooring in different colors, but all of the rooms have windowsills of artificial stone in the same color. And in some apartments the windows have been installed so close to the corners that it is hard to imagine how future tenants are supposed to hang drapes. In order to restore "symmetry," the radiator is installed in the opposite corner. The apartments equipped with a tastefully designed hallway, garbage chutes etc. would also have been improved by separating the bath and toilet.

We Want to Buy Modern Furniture

Speaking with families who have moved into newly built apartments reveals that their interest in developments in our furniture industry is as great as it is among young people. In the furniture department of the HO department store in Dresden, the precision engineer Gerd Lusdorf and his fiancée are inspecting the offerings with particular thoroughness. They plan to marry this year and hope to get an apartment soon. "Naturally we want modern furnishings," says Gerd, but the department stores still have little on display of the nice models shown a year and a half ago that we liked so much at the time. The furniture industry is probably in a similar situation to fashion—there is no lack of ideas and practical and attractive models, but there aren't enough buyers and store managers without a conservative mindset. His fiancée, a young kindergarten teacher, believes that much of the furniture being mass produced at the moment looks as if old drawings had been slightly modernized in the design offices without accounting for the fact that the size and height of rooms in new buildings do not allow for the previous effect. The two had also visited the shop of the furniture manufacturers VEB Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau. In their opinion, aside from a few "extravagant" items, everything there was lovely. They realize that the prices for these products cannot be compared to mass produced furniture. But what keeps our furniture industry from mass producing such well-designed and functional furniture and thus also exerting a positive effect on the prices?

The development of new smaller items of furniture is especially urgent. It is astonishing the types (and quantities) of outdated and kitschy radio stands, newspaper racks, bookshelves, combined lamp tables and house bar lamps that are still on offer. These were not made in 1950 or 1952, either, but are usually newly produced items. It is not enough for a saleswoman to say: "We simply won't sell items anymore that no longer correspond to our sense of design, and that are not calculated to make the homes of our workers more attractive." This is an important commercial insight, but we need to get to the root of the problem. And that is not the sale but the manufacture of such goods, since once they have been produced the economic damage has already been done. In addition, we cannot simply describe kitsch as a lapse of good taste without recognizing its political character.

What Do the Retailers Have to Say?

Several of the points of sales we visited left us with the same impression. Overall, they strive to satisfy customer wishes, without however offering professional advice to adequately influence the development of taste. We repeatedly heard opinions such as that of the head of the furniture department of the HO department store in Dresden, Rüdiger, an old specialist, who is devoted in exemplary fashion to his customers' wishes. "The new developments at the Deutsche Werkstätten and the Bauakademie [academy of architecture and industrial design] are good. But we can't buy many of their products. We need first to study people's needs. Many items of furniture that approach the forms aspired to by the

Bauakademie have sat in our warehouse for a long time. There is simply no demand for them.“ The reason: Hall furniture in the style of the Deutsche Werkstätten costs 500 marks, for example. Why? The price is not lower because orders from retailers are so hesitant. Large series with standard elements could be offered for far less, and demand would surely rise. This closes the “vicious circle.”

On the threshold to the second Five-Year Plan, we urgently need to overcome all the errors and weaknesses in the architectural offices responsible for residential construction and the design departments of the furniture industry as well as the retail trade to better meet our workers’ constantly growing needs for home furnishings.

Source of original German text: H. R., “Moderne Wohnungen und formschöne Möbel,” *Neues Deutschland*, no. 89, April 12, 1956, p. 4.

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