

Marie-Elisabeth Lüders, “A Construction, not a Dwelling” (1927)

Abstract

Marie-Elisabeth Lüders (1878-1966) was one of the first women to be allowed to enroll at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. She began her studies in 1909 and earned a Ph.D. in political science in 1912. During the First World War, Lüders held leading positions in various social welfare organizations, and in 1916 she took charge of the Central Labor Office for Women at the Imperial War Ministry in Berlin. Lüders fought for women’s rights and disarmament as both a Reichstag representative for the German Democratic Party (1919-32) and as a delegate at many international conferences. In this article, which appeared in October 1927 in the magazine *Die Form*, published by the German Werkbund, Lüders criticizes the fact that the – male – architects of modern apartment buildings apparently gave little thought to their functionality for families or to comfortable living when designing them.

Source

A Construction, Not a Dwelling

[...]

Whoever has carefully examined the houses in the Weissenhof development is forced to pose the astonishing question of whether the majority of them have not been designed and executed in complete ignorance of all the things a family needs to make a dwelling a home. One asks if the builders know nothing about the daily requirements of running a household. Just a couple of examples: There are houses there (built by Mies van der Rohe) with gigantic casement windows on the staircases, going all the way down to ground level, which when opened completely block the landings and represent an unheard-of danger to children in the house. In front of one of these windows there is even a deck extending over the front door—without a railing. The windows themselves have three horizontal bars at the level of the landing, which, however, are set so far apart that children six years old and older can very easily climb through them. Inhabitants of two- and three-room apartments generally do not have nannies to conduct each child carefully down the stairs or to get scooters, sleds, etc. past the ground-level windows.

Following the motto “Bring the landscape into the house,” various apartments also have windows extending all the way down to the ground. Some of the walls are made completely of glass—to the north and the south in the same room. In such rooms there is a constant draft over the floor, a cause for no little concern when small children are present. These rooms, whose windows cannot be outfitted with shutters because they are too big and set too high, are burning hot in the summer, and the light is so blinding that small children in the daytime and somewhat older children in early evening hours cannot sleep in them. In some of the apartments the landscape has been brought into the larder as well. The window, except for a very narrow socle at the bottom, takes up the entire wall, and the larders are facing south!! If the builders are perhaps assuming that man lives by curdled milk alone in the summertime, they are mistaken.

In another place the same sense for natural beauty has bestowed its beneficence on the kitchen, likewise facing south, and in a third on the bathroom. There can be no dispute as to the temperature of the former in summer. This kitchen, however, suffers from a further serious error: the gas stove—quite small for the number of people intended for the apartment—is located opposite the window against a narrow

wall between two doors arranged at right angles to each other. First of all, one turns one's back to the light while cooking; second, every time one of the doors is opened the gas flame is disrupted; and, third, it is a miracle if everyone who goes through the door does not knock a pot off the stove or come too close to the flame. Since the kitchen has the advantage of a southern exposure on the ground floor, the two bedrooms, the larger of which serves two people, are half buried underground and facing north!!

In the bathroom of one of the houses there is, in addition to others, a large window located behind the tub that cannot be opened. Since the rim of the tub is right under the window, the question remains how one is supposed to clean the window, which is on the second floor. From inside one would have to put a ladder in the tub, which could not be done, and from outside one would have to call for professional window cleaners.

[...]

In various houses one notes the complete absence of a place for storing wet coats, galoshes, or umbrellas—and these are supposed to be family houses; instead, there is a terrace of approximately sixty square feet. The same apartments had beautiful furniture as well as well-designed and executed artworks, but, unfortunately, not a single washstand among the furnishings and in a very small bathroom in one of the apartments only a very small sink; even this was lacking in the second apartment. When apartments are shown fully furnished, as is universally the case in the Weissenhof development, it seems to us that the goal should not be to display beautiful furniture (which, incidentally, would certainly be too expensive for the inhabitants of these houses); rather the visitors should be taught something about the practical possibilities for furnishing their homes; they should be trained in the tasteful satisfaction of daily needs, as things are and not as they are imagined in a vacuum by the aesthetic sense of Mr. So-and-So. The kitchen in the same apartment has been executed with remarkably little care and left quite insufficient. In other kitchens, which are otherwise well dimensioned, practically arranged, etc., one nevertheless finds windows which are set so high above such a broad kitchen table that any normal-sized woman would have to stand on a stool to open them.

[...]

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