

Dwelling and Domesticity (1899)

Abstract

The growth of the urban population led to acute housing shortages and the transformation of urban space. The demarcation of space along class lines continued, but the concentration of commercial activity in the city center pushed the well-to-do middle classes into the suburban periphery and drew the proletariat into densely populated inner-city neighborhoods. The author of this piece, which originally appeared in the magazine *Neue Deutsche Rundschau*, criticizes the abject living conditions of most urban wage laborers.

Source

The concentration of the growing population owing to the invisible iron band that separates the urban periphery from the countryside leads not only to an overcrowding of real living spaces, but also to the use of every room that is the least bit suitable as housing. No statistic can grasp the grotesque things that occur in the process, no imagination can paint the strange cases that can be found in the growing cities. Fortunately, there is no need to solicit inquiries on this point; members of well-to-do families need only look at how their own maids and those of the families of friends are housed to grasp the entire casuistry of a use of space guided by wise thriftiness – the difference being that in the houses of the poor, the landlord rents such dingy rooms, shacks, and nooks as rooms. These then appear in the statistics as dwellings with only one heatable room, and not infrequently are they occupied by six or more residents.^[1]

Of course, it is not only the oft mentioned iron boundary [between the city outskirts and the countryside] that leads to concentration and the renting of stables, drying lofts, and coal cellars as living spaces for people. In economically advancing cities there is another process involved, which is evident in two primary symptoms: the transformation of the former city center into a large bazaar and the conversion of peripheral parts into something like the former center.

Unfortunately, current housing and living statistics have not yet closely tracked the increase in shops, storehouses, and storage depots in the busy sections of flourishing cities and probed their influence on the concentration of the population and housing prices. All one has to do, however, is inspect house façades, scan a few years of the address book, and pay an occasional visit to the houses most subject to this process to get a clear picture of the interesting transformation of central sections of the city into one single market, whose sites are distributed fairly evenly between wholesale business, including banks, and elegant retail trade.

One might think that this metamorphosis would push the entire population out of the center. That may well be true for London City, for New York between Castle Garden and Post Office Square, and for some parts of Hamburg, but not in the least for medium-sized large cities like Breslau, Magdeburg, Leipzig, and Dresden, and not even for Berlin and Munich (more likely for Vienna).

The well-to-do residents are displaced not only by the termination of leases that precedes the conversion of apartments into stores and offices, but also by the increasing noise and clamor in these quarters, and especially by the trendiness that makes other quarters fashionable. Thus, those who have reached a certain financial level, and are no longer forced to live in a few gloomy rooms behind a store, will leave for a more outlying part of the city. The situation is worse for the small shopkeepers who must have their apartments and stores on one floor or at least in one house; the rising rent for stores also raises

apartment rents, and one has to get by with fewer rooms, or take in pensioners, lodgers [*Zimmerherrn*], or night-lodgers [*Schlafgänger*]. This is the first step toward the destruction of the home or the beginning of seriously deplorable living conditions.

It is the common people, however, who are most solidly entrenched in the center: sometimes it is habit that holds them there, sometimes the inability to find a place to live at the periphery, but mostly it is the nature of their work that prevents them from moving away from the center. The woman out-worker wants to remain close to the clothing store; wage earners, hackney coachmen, cleaning women, ironing women, washing women, landladies, servants, family tailors, midwives, copyists, and dance and piano teachers must not leave “their” area if they want to keep their clients, if they want to continue finding their occasional work. They stay and help each other in two ways: the enterprising ones, or those who can still risk a few pennies, rent the empty “grand” residences and begin the life – rich in diversions and losses – of the “furnished landlord” or the guesthouse owner or renter of rooms. Therewith family life decays within this stratum as well. Even though cases in which a single man houses several female night-lodgers [*Schlafmädchen*] in a single transit room [*Durchgangszimmer*] or a younger widow rents to more than ten young factory workers are not the rule,^[2] a repugnant promiscuity is the rule nonetheless. And which statistics tell us of the many, many Amandas and Wandas with large feathered hats and “separate entrances,” whom all the children in the house admire and envy so much, who always have so much candy, whose regular and occasional visitors the entire house tracks so carefully?

Those who lack the means for such a venture – and many a good mother is deterred by the great child mortality in the night-lodger accommodations, which is well known among the people – and yet cannot decide to leave the center will seek to make a home for themselves in a drafty garret, an empty cellar, in some closet improvised somehow, somewhere in the corners and hallways of once spacious patrician homes; or friendly landlords who would rather not have their tenants move to the suburbs quickly fit a few side or rear buildings into their courtyards, where every floor is given a few dwellings made up of a kitchen and a room. If such a dwelling houses no more than five children in addition to the father and the mother, it will not be listed as “overpopulated” in the *Yearbook of German Cities* – even if it includes not a single side room, if the rooms are boiling hot in the summer nights, if no ray of sunshine ever falls into the courtyard shaft in the winter. As far as statistics is concerned, a “kitchen with window” is always a “heatable room,” and a dwelling of two rooms with fewer than eight residents is not “overpopulated;” after all, there are a good many dwellings with kitchens that have no window.

It is characteristic of the clustering of people in such dwellings that only a small number of residents have a bed of their own. For example, an investigation into overpopulated dwellings in Breslau (overpopulated in the statistical sense) in 1896 revealed that the population in them shared beds as follows:

with 0 1 2 3 4 other persons

3,291 8,418 1,305 104 26 number of residents

This and other conditions result from the transformation of central sections of cities with growing populations into a pure market. Under these influences, the mobile and wealthy population pushes toward the periphery, which is still spaciouly built on from earlier eras, with garden houses and villas. Soon, houses stand side by side here as well; the gardens still survive behind the houses, and there is still light, air, room. But the exodus from the center increases, the belt surrounding the periphery holds firm or yields only in a few places. The peripheral zones still contain only residential houses, but side and rear buildings, “private streets” and “garden houses” begin to fill in the courtyard spaces behind the street frontage and the old gardens; many an old noble palace, many an old patrician summer house gives up its expansive hinterland to the blandishments of the speculators. The insides of the houses now have parquet floors, stuccoed ceilings, majolica stoves, runners on the stairs, splendid things for the better-off

retail merchants who have escaped the old center! But the spacious rooms of old are broken up by dividing walls, every spare space is turned into a “room,” and only *one* quiet chamber retains its old rights, while the maid’s room, the storage room, the wardrobe room [*Schrankzimmer*], the pantry, the spare closet [*Reserveverschlag*], the ironing room, and the bathroom [*Badekabinett*] are transformed into splendid salons and boudoirs with a little stucco and wallpaper. A rudely colorful luxury of repulsive decorations, far below the quality of the wallpaper, grins at the residents of the “grand” apartments of 7 “rooms” for 2,000 or 3,000 marks, light and air is taken away by the sky-high stone wall on the other side, the side-building in the courtyard. Following this lovely pattern of mis-decorated and mutilated old houses, four and five-story boxes, disfigured with ridiculous plaster ornaments, spring up all over the neighborhood, wherever a piece of garden is still open. Everything that makes a dwelling comfortable has been happily driven out; the “fine” modern house proudly faces the astonished century with a high rear house [*Hinterhaus*], high rents, and haughty “vice-landlords” [*Vicewirten*]. No trace of any kind of use of modern, technological aids; after all, the new house is, technologically and in the distribution of space, merely the copy of the old house that has been thoroughly spoiled; the only modern thing about all these rows of streets, which are now also pushing into the countryside here and there like canyons, is merely the ruthless exploitation of the air monopoly accorded to the landlord without objection. For the uninterrupted construction of buildings along a road and the usurious use of space within a house amounts in fact to the exploitation of an unlimited monopoly of the air. Is it still air that the resident of a “grand” dwelling on the third floor sees wafting through the windows from the street, that rises up from all the lower levels through the flooring, that threatens to suffocate him when he looks down from a back window into the narrow courtyard shaft in which his children are working?

Among the very worst characteristics of today’s “grand” tenement houses we must reckon the absence of hallways in the rear houses. There, one bedroom opens onto the next, any possibility for the sick, for those in need of rest, for those who work with their minds, for the nervous, to withdraw, to be by themselves, to find peace, is lacking. [...]

But we in the far northern and central part of Germany allow the little people to go under in garrets and basements, to degenerate in night-lodger quarters [*Schlafgänger-Quartieren*], and we live under the usurious dominion of the urban agrarians [*Stadtagrarien*] in houses without clean air, without sunshine, without comfort, without the thousand aids of modern technology, whose means pertaining to heating, ventilation, lighting, washing, and elevators we install in our insane asylums and infirmaries, but which we do not dare to demand from the greed and selfishness of the land usurer [*Bodenwucherer*]. And I will not even begin to talk about the aesthetic of living – volumes could be written about the senseless ornamentation of the two or three front rooms, about the shabby neglect of the four or five cramped backrooms, which they dare to rent to us as a dwelling for 2,000 or 3,000 marks a year.

Why do we put up with this misery and this slavery? Is not our discomfort and the terrible housing misery of the workers and artisans the product of the same soil? Are the 930 in a thousand (in Berlin) or the 910 in a thousand (in Breslau) who are tenants among the inhabitants of our flourishing cities merely a herd of sheep who have to quake in fear before the 70 or 90 per thousand inhabitants who own a house?

The lack of small dwellings for families with a modest income, the lack of dwellings that would allow for real living, instead of cramped overcrowding, for the social class that is willing to sacrifice 20 or as much as 25% of a good income to pay for it, is a very paradoxical phenomenon.

NOTES

[1] The wise thriftiness that the homeowner learns in the process is then applied to his “grand dwellings” of 1,200-2,000 marks; tolerably spacious rooms 7-8 meters wide are given two dividing walls, and suddenly there are three tube-like rooms as “grand salons;” a bathroom becomes a “bedroom with an adjoining bath closet;” a porch is quickly enclosed and turns into a balcony room;

a small part of the hallway is sectioned off by a wooden wall as a “maid’s room,” and what was once the maid’s room is dressed up into a “boudoir” with a little stucco and a screaming gilded stove. Presto! The lordly residence of 7 rooms is finished!

[2] In Munich in 1890, no fewer than 414 single men were discovered who were renting to one or more female boarders.

Source: Hans Kurella, “Wohnung und Häuslichkeit”, *Neue Deutsche Rundschau* 10 (1899), pp. 816–19; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1982, pp. 56–60.

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