

**"A Window of Garden City Governance" –
New Pieces in the Mosaic Discovered since German Unification
Or: Magdeburg Between "Rotenburg" and "Boastville"**

The opening of the GDR borders in 1989 opened up new chapters for planning history relating to all phases of urban development up to that date. Here, I am focussing on garden cities, or rather garden suburbs (because, as we know, there was no equivalent to Letchworth or Welwyn Garden City in Germany). Quite a range of garden suburbs virtually unknown to planning history have emerged over the years since then, such as the housing estate of Marga, which claims to be the oldest garden suburb, older than the classic "Gartenstadt Hellerau", and which provides a curious example of the widespread misunderstanding that Howard should have postulated that garden cities were supposed to be round.

But beyond the discovery of the physical evidence of these garden cities, it is the insight into the processes of planning and developing these estates which have enriched our understanding of what went on in the early 20th century. One of the windows upon planning history opened in the 1980s was that of governance. But the view from this window has seldom been directed at the period before the 1920s.

And it is from this window that I am looking at a group of 3 neighbouring suburbs in Magdeburg all founded in 1909. They represent 3 types of garden suburbs, and so it seemed, 3 almost archetypal approaches to garden suburb development.

One is the **working class estate 'Reform'** designed by pioneer Bruno Taut, an icon of the cooperative garden city suburb and a proto type for Taut's work in Berlin, which cumulated in suburbs such as Falkenhöhe and the Horseshoe Estate: cheap, plain houses with identical floor plans well suited as a model for the public housing reform movement of the Weimar Republic.

The **second** is a somewhat pompous industrial housing estate which the local branch of the Krupp steel works designed for the upper ranks of its employees, and characteristic of the estates developed by Krupp in the Ruhr district, including the most famous "Margarethenhöhe".

The **third** is the middle-class estate of '**Hopfengarten**' just across the road from 'Reform'.

In all three, the dialectic disposition of public and private in terms of the actors and their strategies was mirrored in the typical contrasts of architecture and urban design, which in turn were interpreted as an expression of the polarity between "community" and "individuality" and simultaneously as an expression of contrasting class interests and associated strategies: The plain, economical and somewhat Spartan terrace houses of the workers' estate Reform with identical floor plans celebrating collective workers' solidarity and community in court shapes, stood in stark contrast to the individualist character of representative-looking villa type buildings which were proliferating the bourgeois dream of residing in a manor house, for which the developers of the big money-making terrain societies and the "Villen-Kolonien" were catering.

The Hopfengarten estate seemed to fit this pattern. While "it was rated as a model colony in the early years of the garden city movement", as Magdeburg's chief planner Göderitz pointed out in widespread agreement with the architectural journals of the time, this positive image faded in the 1920s. For the solution of the immense problems of mass housing after World War I it seemed less suitable than the identical terrace houses of Reform. Moreover, the endeavour of workers' emancipation was frequently associated with a kind of disdain for any-

thing middle-class as “bourgeois” and hence somehow morally deficient – an attitude which probably is nowhere as prevalent as among middle-class left intellectuals.

Without wanting to pursue this syndrome at this point to any length, with respect to Hopfengarten we can see where this uneasiness stems from: At first glance, its appearance, its middle-class character and orientation towards home-ownership is reminiscent of that majority of home owner co-operatives which have managed all over Germany to maximise their private gains through privatisation of publicly subsidised finance, services and land, and then ended their existence as co-operatives – not exactly a model for the ‘heroic phase’ of the public housing programme.

It is only upon closer scrutiny that we realize that the middle-class character of the estate development experience and the multitude of individual designs have made it difficult to appreciate the peculiar differences of the approach. If we want to understand what happened, we have to go back to 1909.

In this year, the establishment of a local group of the German Garden City Association was followed by the foundation of a group of several new co-operatives. The same year saw a new land use zoning plan and building regulation coming into effect, which introduced the new type of “small country house sections” and which thus provided the legal basis for the design of garden city type developments in the first place. However, the prescribed very low building density and high building standards were clearly designed for “so called better residential areas”. After all, there was no intention of spoiling the inner city rental housing market by allowing the development of cheap housing at the city edges. As one of the council members remarked: “Building 500 dwellings at the edge of the city is going to result in a decline of rental values in the old part of town. We are never going to allow this.”

With this in mind, the local council and the lobby of house and property owners did everything to prevent the workers’ association “Reform” from even finding land to purchase. A kind of “hare and hedgehog /tortoise? game” developed, in which un-identified investors repeatedly succeeded in snatching up the lot that the “Reformers” were about to purchase. Eventually, however, the reformers found out how to play the game and had an outside agent buy the area, on which in 1912 the first house could be built.

By that time, the middle-class co-operative Hopfengarten had already completed more than 100 houses. Thanks to their lobbying activities, an important amendment had also been made to the zoning order after long disputes with the Local Council. The restriction to detached villa type houses with very high room ceilings gave way to the possibility of developing terraces with up to 4 houses and continuous house frontages of up to 50 meters.

The Reform type development would not have been possible without this amendment. But it was also useful for the third co-operative in the group, the Krupp industrial housing estate, even though, it was more focussed on building representative detached houses for rental by the more well-to-do employees of the steel works. It was a classic industrial housing estate, in which the rental contract was linked to the work contract.

In public perception, this was “Protzenheim”, Boastville. And the serial terrace houses of the social democratic workers of “Reform” were “Rotenburg”.

The appearance and the image of the neighbouring district of Hopfengarten seemed to be similarly clear. In contrast to the identical terrace houses of Reform, the Hopfengarten co-operative concentrated on detached and semi-detached houses as well as house groups of up to four, often designed by a range of individual architects and trimmed to a maximum of individuality. The way in which they were integrated into a coherent house design, the semi-detached houses appeared like little ‘villas’, while frequently not measuring more than 50 sq. meters.

But were they in fact “cheap houses”, as this brochure of 1911 claimed? I examined the validity of this statement by comparing building prices and standards between HG and R. The surprising result is: The cheapest semi-detached homes in HG (5.000 Marks) were cheaper than the cheapest terrace houses in R (7.500 Marks).

Rental houses and private homes, each ranging from Spartan one-bedroom to 4-bedroom houses were a basis for developing the desired social mix.

Because this was the basic idea: the idea of founding a purely rental co-operative had been given up in view of the city council’s negative attitude towards the garden city idea, and in view of the bad experience of Reform. Instead, it was decided to build an estate with mixed tenure. The basic principle for starting this development could be termed as a strategy of “priming the pump”.

„Since no external funds were available, the only one way to procure the capital required for land, water, sewerage systems and roads was to sell a large part of the land on to the private house builders at a price which would at least cover the expenses.

„It was those members of the co-operative who were going to be home owners and who were able to contribute higher amounts of money, who made it possible in the first place to buy the land. The exceedingly difficult preparatory works could scarcely have been carried out for a pure rental co-operative.“

An overriding planning aim was to build „neither a pure workers‘ estate nor a middle-class employees‘ estate but by all means an estate with a strong social mix.“

Fine grain mix of tenure

The distorted interpretation of HG began in the early 1920s. People such as Magdeburg’s famous head of planning, Johannes Goederitz slammed the estate saying that “in contrast to Reform, the old mistake had been repeated of putting villa type houses along streets that are far too wide.”

Hopfengarten was rated as a dubious exemplar of those conventional middle-class garden suburbs overly concerned with representative, individualistic architecture and with turning the profits of common investment into private gains as quickly as possible. This juxtaposition of the images of the two garden suburbs was perpetrated into the mid-1990s. However, a closer look at ‘Hopfengarten’ led to a range of surprises in terms of the actual planning process, the governance patterns and the physical result.

This indicates that the ‘Hopfengarten’ experiment was an interesting attempt at bridging social divides and that it is time to bridge the black-and-white divides in conventional historiography in this respect.