

Discreet Aesthetics: Notes on Heinrich Tessenow's Architecture and Collective Housing

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Introducing Heinrich Tessenow

Heinrich Tessenow was born in the city of Rostock in northern Germany, in 1876. He studied at the Technical College in Munich for three years. In 1902, he began teaching at the building trades school in Sternberg, Mecklenburg.

At the turn of the twentieth century, works of traditional German architecture,¹ as well as architectural developments in England,² had a strong impact on the young Tessenow. Ebenezer Howard³ had just published the idea of the “Garden City” (*Gartenstadt*). At the same time, Hermann Muthesius’ study of contemporary English building crafts had been released,⁴ in which he outlined his conception of domesticity and simplicity in building and in the arts. These were formative to Tessenow’s life-long search for a renewed artistic, ethical, and social vision.

In his book *Der Wohnhausbau*,⁵ published in 1909, Tessenow focuses on the elementary construction of the house. His aim is to outline and solve constructive and domestic issues in a “simple – humble – practical” way, without preconceived ideas of a style. Tessenow took a special interest in the design of houses for the working class, craftsmen, and workers, adding the social component as a new element to be considered.

Thanks to this publication, Tessenow was asked to collaborate in the *Gartenstadt* of Hellerau, near Dresden, where he worked next to Hermann Muthesius, Richard Riemerschmid, and Theodor Fischer. He was commissioned to design its well-known large, central building, the school: the Educational Institute for Rhythmic Gymnastics was based on new pedagogic ideas by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, while also being oriented towards a new conception of human community.

In 1913, Tessenow was invited to teach at the Viennese Arts and Crafts School. However, the outbreak of the First World War and the uncertain circumstances that ensued led Tessenow to write what would become his most famous book, *Hausbau und dergleichen*.⁶ Published in 1916, it consists of a collection of essays on housing design and on the development of culture.

1 Tessenow was influenced by popular books such as *Kulturarbeiten* (1901-1917) by Paul Schultze-Naumburg and *Um 1800* (1908) by Paul Mebes. For the relationship between Tessenow and German traditional architecture, see Marco De Michelis, *Heinrich Tessenow* (Milano: Electa, 1991) and Didem Ekici, “In Praise of Poverty: The Middle-class Dwelling in Ascetism in Early Twentieth-century Germany,” *Journal of Architecture* 18:3 (2013): 364-380.

2 Books of the nineteenth century English social critics John Ruskin and William Morris were available in German. In his book *Der Wohnhausbau* (1909), Tessenow quotes the book *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) by John Ruskin, published in German in 1900.

3 The German edition of the book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902) by Ebenezer Howard was released in 1907.

4 The three volumes of the book *Das englische Haus. Entwicklung, Bedingungen, Anlage, Aufbau, Einrichtung und Innenraum* were published by Hermann Muthesius in 1904-1905.

5 Heinrich Tessenow, *Der Wohnhausbau* (München: Callwey, 1909).

6 Heinrich Tessenow, *Hausbau und dergleichen. Mit 107 Zeichnungen und Photographien eigener Arbeiten von Heinrich Tessenow* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1916). See the English edition Heinrich Tessenow, “House-

In 1920, Tessenow was appointed professor at the Dresden Academy of Art. Later, in 1926, he moved to the Institute of Technology in Berlin-Charlottenburg. In the following years, he designed a number of large building projects. Unfortunately, the economic impact caused by the Great Depression did not allow their execution. His teaching activity also came to be interrupted by the historical and political developments of the time.⁷

After his death in 1950, little attention was paid to Tessenow's name. Architects of the time focused their attention on the dominant *Neues Bauen* and radical forms of the architectural avant-garde based on the industrialization of construction. This is the main reason why the name Heinrich Tessenow does not prominently appear in the history of modern architecture manuals, occupying, at most, a marginal place.⁸

Heinrich Tessenow is nevertheless one of the most important pioneers of a new building and dwelling culture in Germany⁹ and Europe.¹⁰ In 1913 Karl Scheffler, one of Germany's leading cultural critics, wrote Tessenow's most meaningful biography. Scheffler considered Tessenow "[...] a master builder for whom everything associated with the hard-won logical ethos of the past goes without saying and whose talent gravitates toward the rediscovery of 'correct' proportions in a higher sense."¹¹ His buildings, drawings, and writings embodied architectural simplicity and appropriateness. At the same time, his work represented humane, communicating a sense of comfort through modest design and aesthetic.

"In addition to the honesty that has been introduced into architecture by its new logical ethos, Tessenow's buildings evince a new kind of artistic honesty. It is the honesty of the pure note, of the noble proportion, of the musically correct. It is not as if this architect has already established a comprehensive new doctrine of measure and proportion in his buildings; he has only just begun, still falters here and there and does not always avoid blank spots. And yet he is on the path to a new canon that will someday be available to all. He is a talent who has rediscovered the long-lost sense for that unwritten numerical law, that indefinable and yet no less real architectural mathematics called beauty.

He builds long, uniform terraces of inexpensive workers' houses without a trace of ornament, without a trace of folk-art romanticism. With anyone else the result would seem proletarian, but Tessenow knows how to set a ceiling height, how to proportion and dispose windows and door openings, how to let a ground-plan grow from interior to exterior, how to work with

building and such Things," in *9H. On Rigor*, ed. Richard Burdett and Wilfried Wang (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 9-33.

7 Tessenow taught at the Institute of Technology in Berlin-Charlottenburg from 1926 until 1934. He was fired by the Nazi administration and lived retired in his country house. After the war, he was named Emeritus Professor by the Soviet administration and taught at the Institute of Technology in Berlin until his death in 1950.

8 Manuel García Roig, *Heinrich Tessenow. Pensiero utopico. Germanità architettura* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1997), 6-8.

9 In his book *Bauen. Der neue Wohnbau* (1927), Bruno Taut wrote about Tessenow as the main exponent of clarity construction and simple architecture coming from the traditional pre-war houses. In 1927, Ernst May asked Tessenow to contribute to the special issue of the journal *Das neue Frankfurt* on the subject of the modern flat roof. His article *Das Dach* is considered one of the most meaningful texts on the relationship between traditional and modern architectural elements.

10 Charles-Edouard Jeanneret visited several times Hellerau and in 1913 he wrote two articles published in the periodical *La Feuille d'Avis*, positively commenting on the buildings realized by Tessenow. See Marco De Michelis, *Heinrich Tessenow* (Milano: Electa, 1991). Danish architect Kay Fisker wrote two meaningful texts on Tessenow. The first *Tre Pionerer fra Aarhundrederskiftet*, published in the journal *Byggmästaren* in 1947, considers Tessenow, alongside English architects Charles Francis Annesley Voysey and Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott, one of the three pioneers who led to modern architecture from handcraft. The second one, *Heinrich Tessenow in memoriam*, was published in the journal *Arkitekten* in 1951 on the occasion of Tessenow's death. In this text Fisker stated that Tessenow had a strong influence on Nordic architecture.

11 Karl Scheffler, Jonathan Blower and Ben Olschner, "Heinrich Tessenow," *Art in Translation* 10:4 (2018): 382. First published in German as Karl Scheffler, "Heinrich Tessenow," in *Die Architektur der Großstadt* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1913), 164-173.

steps of brick and minor level changes so that the very simplest of things produce strong but subtle notes, so that the ostensibly lowly appears almost elegant and refined. He can place a plain little detached house with bright plastered walls, a red tiled roof and a white wooden balcony within the landscape in such a way that it acquires a certain countenance. Not only do his houses possess the negative virtue of not being clichéd, they also possess the very positive virtue of being the primordial cells of a universally valid architectural style.”¹²

From this perspective, it is legitimate to consider Tessenow not only a fundamental representative of interwar culture — a period characterized by profound social and economic transformations — but also to see in his work, which distinguished itself both from avant-garde experimentalism and conservative traditionalism,¹³ an unprecedented path towards universal values.

The word “discreet” is perfectly suited to a figure that may be often forgotten despite his relevance, as well as to the very idea of architecture defined by Tessenow. According to its etymology, the word derives from the past participle of the Latin term “*discernere*,” which means “to separate, set apart, divide, distribute; distinguish, perceive,” formed by the prefix “*dis-*” — “off, away” — and the root “*cernere*” — “distinguish, separate, sift.” The action of distinguishing and separating is one of the most important aspects of intelligence and wisdom: reducing complex issues into minute parts, grasping particularities, nuances, differences. The adjective “discreet” applies firstly to the person who has the gift of discernment, and, secondly, to what is distinct, clear, well separated. Therefore, the most immediate meanings of the word “discreet” are: “morally discerning, prudent, wise or judicious in avoiding mistakes.”

In Tessenow’s work, every solution, even the simplest and most discreet of them, will be the closest to certainty, and, in this sense, will express honest values.

The Color Grey

Tessenow is mentioned and remembered for his best known project, the Dalcroze Rhythmic Dance Institute in Hellerau. Despite the importance of this building, the project should not be dissociated from the houses designed for the same *Gartenstadt*.¹⁴ More than the Dalcroze Institute, the aesthetics of the small single-family houses and terraced workers’ houses embodies an approach to architectural design that directly considers people’s overall needs. The humblest and “lowly practical” of the domestic needs led the architect to find “a valid general system of forms and styles.” For Tessenow, artisan work is the starting point that makes possible objective, clear, and comprehensible works. The goal is to find and recognize the primary expression — in German *Ur-Ausdruck* — of the house through construction.

The elevations of the series of houses in the workers’ housing district are totally devoid of decorative elements or picturesque modulations. Only the trellises for the creepers and the shady pergolas overlooking the gardens adorn the bare plastered walls. The buildings are characterized by an extreme simplification of traditional German house models.

The two large terraced buildings (Fig. 1) and the small single-family houses (Fig. 2), which Tessenow built between 1910 and 1911, on both sides of Am Schänkenberg crystallize their *Ur-Ausdruck* in defined architectural figures, which result from a radical work of erasing all superfluous elements. The essentiality associated with the repetition of windows and doors indicates the aim of setting a general system of basic forms for modernity.

¹² Ibid., 383-384.

¹³ See Barbara Miller Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1919-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

¹⁴ In order to observe the important contribution by Tessenow within the housing initiative in Hellerau, see the accurate study and the re-drawn plans in Nils M. Schinker, *Die Gartenstadt Hellerau 1909-1945* (Dresden: Sandstein, 2013).



Fig. 1: Top: Row-house "T 2" built by Heinrich Tessenow in 1910, Am Schänkenberg 4-26, Gartenstadt Hellerau, Dresden. Bottom: Heinrich Tessenow, drawing showing the elevation of the street side

Fig. 2: Left: Row-house "T 1" built by Heinrich Tessenow in 1910, Am Schänkenberg 1-15, Gartenstadt Hellerau, Dresden. Right: Original photo of the row-house "T 1" in Hellerau





*Kleinwohnhaus für die Baugenossenschaft Hellerau
Hohlwände Patent Tessenow*

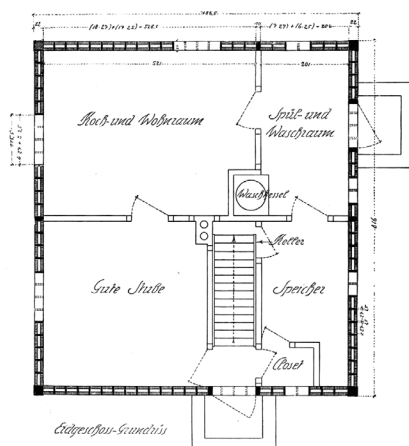


Fig. 3: Top: Detached house "T 4" (*Patenthaus*) built by Heinrich Tessenow in 1911, Am Schänkenberg 17-19, 21, 23, Gartenstadt Hellerau, Dresden. Bottom: Plan of the detached house "T 4" with Tessenow's *Patentwand* wall details

Even detached houses clearly showcase their simplicity (Fig. 3). From a geometrical point of view, the regular volume of the square plan is finished off by the triangular roof prism. No protrusions, dormer windows on the roof, or added elements deform the uniformity and purity of the external surfaces, which are also underlined by the frames mounted on the outer edge of the walls. The windows are sparingly distributed on all four sides, together with the two small access doors, which are barely visible on the side and back of the house.

The units of the terraced houses follow the repetitive arrangement without variation, in sequences concluded only by the specular overturning of the end element, marked by the downspouts and pergolas on the garden side. Their order is expressed in such absolute terms that the essential architectural elements are arranged on the plastered façades according to a kind of simplicity that is "full of music and rhythm."¹⁵ The concealment of symmetry, a theme to which Tessenow devoted several illuminating pages of his 1916 work *Hausbau und dergleichen*, is consistently applied in these projects. The regularity of architectural forms is

¹⁵ Scheffler, Blower and Olschner, "Heinrich Tessenow," 384.

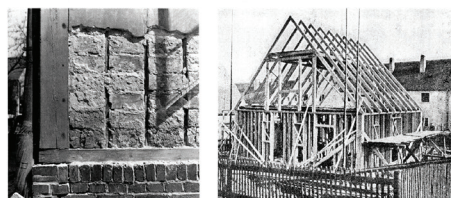
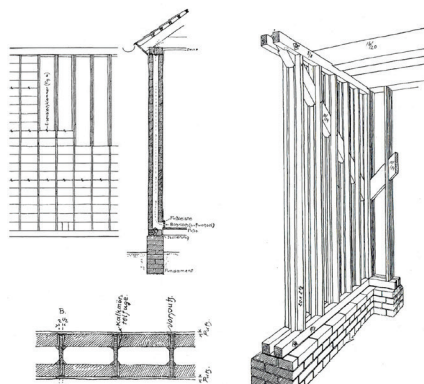


Fig. 4: Left: Detail of "T 4" house built with Patentwand wall system conceived by Heinrich Tessenow, Gartenstadt Hellerau, Dresden. Right: Heinrich Tessenow, drawings of the *Patentwand* wall system and original pictures of the *Patenthaus* construction

Fig. 5: Left: Row-house built by Heinrich Tessenow in 1928, Am Fischthal 62-66b, Siedlung GAGFAH Am Fischthalgrund, Berlin. Right: Row-houses built by Bruno Taut between 1927-1930, Am Wieselbau, Siedlung GEHAG Onkel Toms Hütte, Berlin



never imposed by an axis of symmetry, or by a rigid composition of openings. It is through such application of his theories that Heinrich Tessenow makes a return to the fundamentals of architecture, in order to reach the “pure necessary” architectural form.

Throughout these projects, another element also plays a key role in Tessenow’s architectural language and thought. In 1925, the architect wrote a short text entitled *Die Farbe im Stadtbild*.¹⁶ The color of the façade is considered as a means of expression of architecture, characterized by the same expressive force, meaning, and importance as the form. The difficult task is to find the right balance between these two components of architectural language.

“The practice of a culture in the color of urban houses induces almost without exception a moderate tonality, and does not particularly combat the neutral and faded grey that dominates the daily life of the city dweller. Grey may not be the best color in all cases, but it is certainly the most obvious, or else it is always related to the best color.”¹⁷

For Tessenow, color is a constructive and design element. He explains that, in craftsmanship, what is negatively defined as “surface” is something that remains stable and solid on a surface — in opposition to a work of art, for example, in which the surface is not thought of as such but as a neutral layer made translucent. The color of the façade of a house, through the walls, manifests itself on the street, whereas the cladding evoked by the painter and artistic painting is conceptually secondary because it is not considered a project. For this reason, the color of a house should never be reduced to a simple pictorial layer, but should come directly from the natural color of the material used for its construction. Color should only cover the walls when poor construction systems are used for their construction — a mediocre outer layer of plaster, for example.

In his search for an architecture based on the reduction of elements, economy of expressive means, and constructive sincerity, Tessenow patented a masonry construction system composed of “standardized” elements, the *Patentwand*, which he applied to Hellerau, and which was to contribute to the definition of a simple formal language. In the *Patentwand* masonry septum, the concept of surface color, especially the color grey, is defined within construction practice (Fig. 4).

Another example of Tessenow’s work, in which color plays a significant role, are the houses built in 1928 for the traditional *Siedlung Am Fischtalgrund*,¹⁸ in Berlin. Without going further into the critical debate that characterized the entire operation of the GAGFAH cooperative at the time,¹⁹ the most prominent aspect in the comparison between the houses of Tessenow and those of the adjacent modern *Siedlung Onkel Toms Hütte*²⁰ is precisely that of color. If, in the latter, Bruno Taut shows that plaster, window frames, and entrance doors can be arranged in an infinite variety of colors, variations, and color combinations, Tessenow’s terraced and apartment houses reveal the opposite approach (Fig. 5).

In the apartment building, Tessenow works on the volumetric ratio of the pitched roof and accentuates the irregularity of the arrangement and dimensions of the windows. The neutral color, against which the few architectural elements employed are repeated, softens the alterations, the large pergolas at the entrance or overlooking the gardens, and the variations in

16 Heinrich Tessenow published the article “Die Farbe im Stadtbild” in the journal *Mitteilungen des Vereins Sächsischer Heimatschutz* in 1925. Tessenow included this text as a chapter entitled *Die äußere Farbe unserer Häuser* in the third edition of his book *Der Wohnhausbau*. The most recent reedition is Heinrich Tessenow, “Die Farbe im Stadtbild”, in *Das Land in der Mitte*, ed. Heinrich Tessenow and Theodor Böll (Weimar-Rostock: Grünberg, 2017), 180–196.

17 Tessenow, “Die Farbe im Stadtbild,” 186.

18 Architects involved in the *Siedlung Am Fischtalgrund* were, among others, Alexander Klein, Paul Mebes, Hans Poelzig, Paul Schmittner, and Georg Steinmetz. Tessenow was the main coordinator of the project.

19 For this topic, see Christine Mengin, *Guerre du toit et modernité architecturale : loger l’employé sous la République de Weimar* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2007).

20 Built between 1926 and 1932, the *Siedlung Onkel Toms Hütte* urban project was conceived by Bruno Taut. He was responsible for the execution of the buildings in the central part of the settlement as well. The other parts were designed by Hugo Häring and Otto Rudolf Salvisberg.



Fig. 6: Top: Apartment building built by Heinrich Tessenow in 1928, Am Fischthal 58-60, Siedlung GAGFAH Am Fischthalgrund, Berlin. Bottom: Heinrich Tessenow, drawing showing the elevation of the street and rear sides

the pitch that mark the housing units. The dissolution of symmetry, in this case, poses extreme consequences to the design, but the composition regains its rigor and coherence thanks to the mass of color on the façade. On this grey and discreet “score,” the architectural elements are clarified and harmonized as a whole (Fig. 6).

From these examples, it can be deduced that color is not only considered a fundamental component of architectural design, but also has another underlying, albeit fundamental, task. In these collective housing projects, the objectivity, unity, and modesty of the architectural language codify a model of life.

Collective

Although they present certain discrepancies or inconsistencies, the essentiality of the façades of the houses in Hellerau and Berlin reveals a great wealth of relationships between the parts that constitute them. It is a harmonious architecture, governed by a code “recognizable” in its size, in its elements and in its search for legitimacy derived from traditional forms.

The logical forms of Tessenow’s architecture are part of daily life, and, for this reason, possess evocative power. The essential condition that Tessenow gives to his work can be summed up in the word “discreet”. Its aim is the attaining of a collective sense for society. The search for values that go beyond the individual sphere of the architect, and which are passed on to the community, is critically elaborated by Scheffler:

“[...] what really matters in architecture – as in life in general – is not individualism and originality, but that as many individuals as possible are able to reach the point where they can achieve things with universal validity and where personality recedes behind the matter in hand.”²¹

More than in previous texts by Tessenow, in *Die Farbe im Stadtbild*, the social dimension plays a key role in his theory of color in architecture. In doing so, Tessenow translates the most practical and simple aspects of house building into tools for an evocative vision of collective life. He explains that the desire to gather in large communities and to build parts of cities corresponds to the desire to subdue personal nature, individual opinions, and tastes, in favor of shared ones, which establish themselves as universal elements.

From an architectural point of view, in order to push any singularity into the background, the shapes and colors publicly displayed by the house must be “all the more discreet, common and neutral as our propensity for the urban or the good functioning of a community grows.”²² This is in stark contrast to the view that, in a society made up of so many singularities, architecture only becomes interesting when concerned with exalting specific singularities through eccentric shapes and colors.

In Tessenow’s vision, therefore, the color grey represents the discreet and collective dimension of a community, since it represents and blends the most banal aspects of everyday life:

“Grey is not the color of great joy, deep sadness, ardent love, savage war or serene peace, but the color that calmly connects them all, neutralizes them in unity.”²³

Tessenow’s aim is not to establish an architectural style in the strict sense of the word, but to determine the character of an architecture that can set the foundations for the social life of a community. As it was already apparent in his experience in Hellerau, he speaks of uniformity in the street so that each element is discreet, accepted, and recognized in a common way. Grey is the color of sharing a way of living, of collective living, because against its neutrality the sensitive world can manifest itself more clearly.

This “philosophy” of collective living, which permeates Tessenow’s text, finds an echo in another little-known text. It is the paper *On Style in Architecture* by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, based on a lecture at the Darmstadt conference²⁴ held in the summer of 1951. Despite its philosophical nature, this text has strong architectural relevance. Considering the relationship between architectural style and craft, the Spanish philosopher clearly states that architectural style is not personal, and that personal style is not the mark of a good architect.

21 Scheffler, Blower and Olschner, “Heinrich Tessenow,” 382.

22 Tessenow, “Die Farbe im Stadtbild,” 183.

23 Ibid., 187.

24 At the conference, two philosophical lectures took place. One was Martin Heidegger’s lecture “Bauen, Wohnen, Denken” (Building, Dwelling, Thinking). The other, by Ortega y Gasset, was titled “The myth of man beyond technique.” The first had wide repercussions throughout the world of architecture, whereas the second was largely overlooked by architects.

Ortega y Gasset also imagines the negative result of such a personal approach, effectively confirming the discretion of Tessenow's architecture:

"Architecture is not, cannot, and must not be an exclusively personal art. It is a collective art. The genuine architect is a whole people. It is the people who provide the means for the construction of a building, who define its purpose and its unity. Imagine a city built by "brilliant" architects, each working, however, to his or her own personal style. Each of their buildings might be magnificent in and of itself and yet the city as a whole would be bizarre and intolerable [...]"²⁵

The figure and reserved life of Tessenow also fit such perspective of modesty and discretion. Giorgio Grassi pointed out that Tessenow never accepted architectural slogans and mistrusted the role of demiurge, which architects were assuming in the struggle for functionalism and internationalism in architecture. At a time when architects were defining the concept of *Existenzminimum*, Tessenow was speaking of craft and architecture as the work of artisans. By the time modern architecture had already adopted the modern flat roof and strip windows as a standard, Tessenow continued to use pitched roofs and traditional windows.²⁶

According to Ortega y Gasset, within the technical frame of their work, architects enjoy full freedom to employ whatever means they choose to achieve their goals, but, in what concerns architectural language, they must act according to certain principles that cannot and must not be exclusively personal.

"Here, in this matter, we discover what architecture really is: unlike the other arts, it does not express personal sentiments and preferences, but, rather, collective states of mind and intentions. Buildings are immense social gestures. The entire people speak through them. They represent a general confession of the so-called "collective spirit" [...]"²⁷

Given that Tessenow's sincerity, when dealing with the theme of the small single-family house, is expressly transformed into a constructive manifesto, and because Tessenow offers clear answers to an architecture that sets demands primarily of a practical nature, his rejection of ostentation means that he sees craftwork not as an end in itself, but as a path towards a spiritually higher culture and a spiritually elevated man.

Individuals

Tessenow's vision of a collective future, as outlined in *Die Farbe im Stadtbild*, clashes with some of the main trends in contemporary society.

One of the first thinkers to provide a detailed picture of the progressive individualization in our society was the German sociologist Norbert Elias. By rejecting a dichotomous position, Elias theorized the coexistence of the individual and society.

In the Preface of his 1987 book *The Society of Individuals*²⁸ he wrote:

"The relation of the plurality of people to the single person we call the "individual", and of the single person to the plurality, is by no means clear at present. But we often fail to realize that it is not clear, and still less why. We have the familiar concepts "individual" and "society", the first of which refers to the single human being as if he or she were an entity existing in complete isolation, while the second usually oscillates between two opposed but equally misleading ideas. Society is understood either as a mere accumulation, an additive

25 José Ortega y Gasset. "On style in architecture," *Domus* 983 (2014) 155.

26 Giorgio Grassi, "Architecture as Craft," in *9H. On Rigor*, ed. Richard Burdett and Wilfried Wang (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 37.

27 Ortega y Gasset. "On style in architecture," 155.

28 Elias published the German edition *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen* in 1987. The English edition *The Society of Individuals* was released in 1991.

and unstructured collection of many individual people, or as an object existing beyond individuals and incapable of further explanation. In this latter case the words available to us, the concepts which decisively influence the thought and action of people growing up within their sphere, make it appear as if the single human being, labelled the individual, and the plurality of people conceived as society, were two ontologically different entities.”²⁹

It is significant that, although these words were first published in 1987, the core of *The Society of Individuals* was actually written in conjunction with Elias’ 1939 book *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*³⁰. The ideas expressed in the essays included in the later work consequently observe social changes across a timespan of approximately 50 years. Throughout this period, Elias verified, essentially, the impossibility to refer to and employ with precision the terms “individual” and “society” in isolation. He rejects the twin view of “individualism” and “holism,” in order to conceive an “individual/society” that avoids the polarity between the two.

Therefore, with the introduction of the notion of “individuality,” we move from a society based on communal practices to a “society of individuals,” in which each individual corresponds to a separate “I,” with their own intellectual autonomy, and capacity to act and think freely. If this private sphere outside the social world is the privileged location of the subject’s specific existence, one also keeps the mechanisms of control of the society: there is, therefore, a fundamental duality between the subject and the outside world, two distinct realities that seek a balance “we-I,” from which, according to Elias, the “I” emerges as predominant in modernity’s individuals.³¹

This balance poses as a fundamental issue the lack of a vision that would allow the understanding of how individuals, in large numbers, form something that is more and other than a mere collection of separate individuals. That is, it lacks the understanding of how individuals come to form a “society,” of how society can change in specific ways, of how the history of society takes a specific course, which was not intended or planned by any of the individuals that constitute it.³²

Elias shifted the conceptual arrangement between these two entities from an assumption of two opposite forces in an unending battle for freedom and domination into that of “reciprocal conception”: society shapes the individuality of its members, and individuals form society through their life actions.³³

Elias’ theories indicate substantial changes undergone by the social body since the period when Tessenow wrote *Die Farbe für Stadtbild*. A fundamental aspect that marks an almost irreconcilable rupture between Tessenow’s point of view and that of the contemporary society described by the sociologists of individualism pertains to the question of work. In contrast to the industrialization and serialization that characterizes most of contemporary life, Tessenow’s idea of collective and community architecture is based on artisanal work. If we consider, for example, the process of design and construction of a residential building, we can see that artisan work for Tessenow was not simply an architectural question. It was rather a vehicle to ennoble man’s physical and intellectual work, leading it towards a larger sphere, that of the community. The *Gartenstadt* in Hellerau, in fact, was born and developed from this conviction.

The changes in this conceptual basis and in the designing approach coincide with changes in social dynamics. Tessenow had already warned of a possible social disintegration, which would, consequently, also involve the role of architecture and inevitably that of architectural language:

29 Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), vii.

30 Elias’ book *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* was published in German in 1939, it was virtually ignored until its republication in 1969, when its first volume was also translated into English.

31 Michel Lussault, “Individu,” in *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l’espace des sociétés*, ed. Jacques Lévy and Michel Lussault (Paris: Belin, 2013), 539-542.

32 Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, 7.

33 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 30.

"[...] Even if the noblest art of building did not interest us too much, we would still have another, much more serious reason to fear for the future of our society: it will certainly be warlike, chaotic and destructive, as the art of building faithfully accompanies flourishing cultures. It is indeed possible that the coverings in question here will be the most visible sign of the decomposition of the whole society, a disintegration that can no longer be contained. Perhaps the wisest thing to do would be to speed it up or encourage it, instead of trying in vain to contain it. But no matter how awful it may be to plan in advance for the destruction of an existing society, it is also natural for us human beings to be caught up in the devastating fury of believing in reliable construction or the art of building."³⁴

Starting from Elias' theory of the society of individuals, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman further clarified the workings of contemporary society through his concept of "liquid modernity." Bauman works from the idea that modern society shapes itself through the relentless activity of "individualizing," as well as through the activities of individuals seeking to readjust and renegotiate that network of mutual interactions that we call "society."

Bauman recognizes that the "melting of solids" is a permanent feature of modernity. Two phases have led to this social transformation. In the first, the "solids" were broken, but immediately replaced by others that were as hard as the previous ones. In the second phase, the new "solids" are liquefied, as the patterns of dependence and interaction become malleable, to a point never experienced or even imagined by past generations, without anything, this time around, tangible or lasting coming to replace them.³⁵

In the absence of any clear and reliable framework, identity has been transformed into a "task," for which actors are responsible. In liquid modernity, the social standing sees self-determination as compulsory. A part of the process of identity construction, for the majority, freedom (first pole of individualization) is offered only in exchange for security (second pole of individualization) and experienced as uncertainty and fear of the future. Within this context, liquidity manifests itself as a loss of the meaning of personal commitment, while also provoking alterations in the meaning of interpersonal commitments.³⁶ The consequence is

"[...] the fading and wilting, decomposing and falling apart of human bonds, of communities and of partnerships. Commitments of the 'till death do us part' type become contracts 'until satisfaction lasts', temporal and transient by definition, by intention and by pragmatic impact – and, therefore, with the tendency to be unilaterally broken when one of the parties senses more opportunities and more value in abandoning the partnership than in the attempt to save it at whatever incalculable cost."³⁷

Uncertainty tends to produce increased systemic instability and insecurity. Of the consequences involved in this tendency, Bauman highlights social fragmentation.³⁸

The theories of Bauman and those of Tessenow find an affinity precisely in such opposition between the liquid and solid states of society. Not only did Tessenow, as previously discussed, fear the fragmentation of social collectivity, he also already referred to the state of uncertainty that characterizes the disintegration of the collective towards individualization. Within such framework, a simplified, clear, and honest construction and language can provide the conditions of security and solidity that are required if society is to regain a sense of community.

The color grey stands as emblematic of this security, particularly since "grey is the color of great work, the favorite color of architecture, the art of building and any healthy, strong community."³⁹

34 Tessenow, "Die Farbe im Stadtbild," 189.

35 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 7.

36 Ibid., 48.

37 Ibid., 163.

38 Ibid., 48.

39 Tessenow, "Die Farbe im Stadtbild," 187.

Nevertheless, Tessenow's work does not intend to eliminate the individual sphere. The calm and discreet appearance that is evoked by the color grey in the community, in the street, and in common areas is not present inside the house. Here personal tastes, favorite colors, and individual choices can express themselves freely; it is a personal space, "where the world really belongs to us."⁴⁰

Monotony

Creating many misunderstandings, Tessenow is often remembered for having been the teacher and mentor of Nazi architect Albert Speer. This association inadvertently attributes him with being the inspiration for some Proto-Fascist tendencies⁴¹ and for the radicalization of the *Heimat* in the National Socialist architectural vision. This hypothesis has been repeatedly and correctly proven wrong by historical facts, the architect's writings, and his biography.⁴² Tessenow's role as an educator throughout his professional and personal life was more significant.⁴³

It should not be forgotten that there were, among his students, many architects who were active in different geo-political contexts. Trained in Vienna, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky designed and patented numerous laboratory kitchens, including the famous *Frankfurter Küche*, which was developed for Ernst May's social housing projects in the experience *Das neue Frankfurt*.⁴⁴ Franz Schuster followed a similar path. Having trained with Tessenow in Vienna, he became his collaborator in Dresden (Fig. 7) and eventually built several residential buildings in Vienna. Later, Schuster joined Ernst May in the construction of the *Siedlungen Römerstadt* and *Westhausen* in Frankfurt.⁴⁵ Konrad Wachsmann, one of the most experienced designers of wooden buildings in Europe, came to collaborate with Walter Gropius in the prefabrication of wooden elements in the United States.⁴⁶ Swiss architect Franz Scheibler, one of the sixteen students of Tessenow's class in Dresden, continued to accurately apply in his projects the lessons from his master.⁴⁷ Also trained in Dresden, Friedrich Weinwurm became the most important architect of the Slovak avant-garde.⁴⁸

By comparing these approaches to architecture, one can clearly identify the main teachings of Tessenow — competence in construction, simplification of architectural forms, and sobriety of architectural language. At the same time, they outline a delicate issue both in the field of architecture and in architectural perception within society: the question of monotony.

40 Ibid., 190.

41 Michael Hays, "Tessenow's Architecture as National Allegory: Critique of Capitalism or Protofascism?" in *9H. On Rigor*, ed. Richard Burdett and Wilfried Wang (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 54-71.

42 This hypothesis is criticized in Bruno Reichlin, Giovanni Klaus Koenig, "Heinrich Tessenow negli appunti di uno studente berlinese, 1929-1932," *Casabella* 34:349 (1970): 37-44; Grassi, "Architecture as Craft," 38-39; De Michelis, *Heinrich Tessenow*, 131-133.

43 Hans-Joachim Engstfeld, "Lehre, Lehrer und Wirkungen: die Poelzig- und Tessenow- 'Schule'," in *1799-1999 Von der Bauakademie zur Technischen Universität Berlin*, ed. Karl Schwarz (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 2000), 224-239; see also the academic projects realized by Tessenow students in Peter Meyer, "Heinrich Tessenow und seine Schule," *Das Werk*, 21:8 (1934): 225-234.

44 Susan Henderson, *Building Culture: Ernst May and the New Frankfurt Initiative, 1926-1931* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 153-160.

45 Ibid., 187-191.

46 De Michelis, *Heinrich Tessenow*, 109; Robertson Ward Jr. "Konrad Wachsmann," *AIA Journal* (March 1972): 33-42.

47 Martin Steinmann, "...Un homme qui recherchait le simple et le normal : À propos de Franz Scheibler et de ses bâtiments 1924-45," in *Forme forte: Ecrits/Schriften 1972-2002*, eds. Martin Steinmann, Jacques Lucan and Bruno Marchand (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2003), 29-48.

48 Henrieta Moravčíková, *Friedrich Weinwurm: Architekt/Architect* (Bratislava: Slovart, 2014), 33.



Fig. 7: Single-family houses “D-Zug” built by Heinrich Tessenow in collaboration with Franz Schuster in 1922, Moritzburger Weg 19-39 (former Pillnitzer Weg), Gartenstadt Hellerau, Dresden

In Hellerau, the newfangled, monotonous Tessenow houses were presented to visitors with the specification that the final aesthetic result would only be achieved once the vegetation in the gardens and pergolas would have grown.⁴⁹

One of the most radical modern architects of the avant-garde in the interwar period, the Swiss Hans Schmidt defended architecture from the accusation of monotony. Starting from the observation that the purpose of construction is to accommodate a flexible and multiple life, Schmidt refused any kind of individualization of architecture. This point of view applies to both spatial and aesthetic levels. Indeed, individual characterization means neglecting the process of development and confrontation with the problems of society.⁵⁰ Schmidt clearly states that:

“Monotony is often referred to not only from the point of view of individual buildings, but also particularly from the point of view of city planning [...]. As a solution to the monotony of urban planning, the trend in architecture in general today is to differentiate buildings to the maximum extent possible in terms of volume and layout. In most cases, this results in neighborhoods that lack the unified face of the city and where the trend towards diversity runs the risk of generating a new form of monotony, that of disorder and anarchy. The question of monotony is, in reality, not an aesthetic problem but a social problem.”⁵¹

In line with the mentioned theories of Tessenow and Ortega y Gasset, differentiation can be seen as a symptom of the separation between architecture and its collective character, its objective no longer being linked to society.

Despite the fact that Tessenow and Schmidt had diametrically opposed visions of architectural construction (artisanal construction for Tessenow and completely industrial for Schmidt), both identify themselves with a constructive clarity that is not linked to the materials or the style of a specific period. For Tessenow and Schmidt, the character of architecture is intrinsically linked to its rationalization, that is to say, to the execution of a project by following the clearest, simplest, and most logical solutions. In this way, the accusation of monotony, often motivated by the search for “humane” architecture, is reduced to “the aesthetic projection of the inability to build according to reality...”⁵²

The level of formal simplification used by Tessenow has as its goal the achievement of generality in architecture.⁵³ Once the means of expression are reduced to the essential aspects of a work, the perception of differences between buildings is made possible. Monotony in Tessenow is

49 De Michelis, *Heinrich Tessenow*, 210.

50 Aldo Rossi, “Hans Schmidt et le problème de la monotonie,” *Werk-Archithese* 65:17-18 (1978): 13-14.

51 Rossi, “Hans Schmidt et le problème de la monotonie,” 14.

52 Ibid., 14.

53 Grassi, “Architecture as Craft,” 48-49.

therefore based on a precise axiom: to conceive architecture through a series of elements that can be used repeatedly, in different ways but always coherently, in order to establish a set of interpretable linguistic rules. These rules instill certainty and make buildings familiar.

Furthermore, Tessenow not only searched to establish the rules for his interpretation of monotony, but also concerned himself with how to accentuate their perception. For this reason, the chapter on ornament in *Hausbau und dergleichen* occupies an important position. It should be noted that, in the years when every effort of modern architecture was aimed at demonstrating the futility of ornament, Tessenow emphasized its “human” dimension. Despite not being necessary within the laws governing the interpretation of architectural language, ornament emerges as an element to position individual perception within conventions, which represent, though their approach to monotony, the usefulness of architecture.

“The love for craft works also contains the love of the ornamental. It certainly cannot reject it; it is inherent in healthy work, like our whistling or singing at work, or the pattern of a brick wall, which we do not strive for but which covers our sober work giving it such a noteworthy appearance; or like a poppy in a cornfield, a laughing accessory in a large expanse of utility, not something we wanted, but something we could not avoid. So let it be as quiet as possible, very incidental, and very timid.”⁵⁴

The question of the ornament is particularly topical today since it is directly linked to the development of digital culture⁵⁵. Owing to the development of material sciences and the rise of computer science, materiality allows for new forms of ornamental design and manufacturing to be experimented with. Their character reveals a complexity that produces a form of destabilization at different levels. Firstly, contemporary ornament shows a tendency to manifest itself as textures and patterns rather than forms and structures. This implies an abstract character. Secondly, contemporary ornament has no precise addressee. It seems to establish a labyrinthine set of modules, links, and processes.

Under these conditions, the individual is considered rhizomatic or network-like, producing ambiguities and uncertainties. The ornamentation of digital culture exacerbates the anonymity and individualization already theorized by Elias and Bauman.

Within this context, Heinrich Tessenow's position takes on its full importance – by highlighting the significance of living together and the conception of the architectural project with society as its objective.

Back to the Collective

Taking into account the different issues discussed, clear trends can be outlined.

From a sociological point of view, individual difficulties do not add up to a common cause. They invite everyone to seek individual solutions to problems beyond their own strengths. For an individual, “common interest” means letting each person satisfy themselves.

From an architectural point of view, the implicit question concerns the ways in which collective housing faces changes in social dynamics and their impact on architectural aesthetics. This concerns both pioneering projects and new collective housing developments.

At a first glance, one could sketch two main trends in the form of linear equations:

Grey + monotony = collective + community society = stability and certainty
Color diversity + variety = individualism + liquid society = instability and uncertainty

⁵⁴ Tessenow, “House-building and such Things,” 30. The author of this paper modified the incorrect English translation “industrial work” with “craft work,” in order to respect the original German text by Tessenow.

⁵⁵ Antoine Picon, *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 129-145.

In reality, society and architecture do not work and interact in such a simplistic way. However, these allow us to highlight two relevant aspects of today's collective housing design.

First, the *Gartenstadt* in Hellerau and other past collective housing initiatives, especially those executed in the Interwar period, assert themselves presently as a model of the permanence of the identity of the "community." The *Gartenstadt* model provides a framework for spatial and social stability, through neighborhood, nature conservation, and integrated community spaces.

Second, new forms of collective housing, such as Community Households, Cluster Apartments, and Co-Living, were designed in Europe during the last 20 years.⁵⁶ These forms were encouraged by the rising pressure in housing policy, population growth, low housing vacancy, and increasing rental prices. In such cases, the collective spaces are more prominently developed, as they compensate for the greatly reduced facilities and limited space in the individual apartments. These forms of collective housing are still in the process of being developed and implemented.

Past and contemporary models point the way in which collective housing can deal with ephemeral expedients of individual society, so as to ensure the sharing of values and common goods that individuals are unable to achieve. Indeed, collective housing is *par excellence* an architectural model that is born out of certain crisis conditions.

Bernardo Secchi reminds us that, in urban history, the crises of the Western world have brought to the fore fundamental questions for the city. Each crisis has marked not only spatial structures and lifestyles, but also the urban image. This image is intrinsically linked to the social sphere since each crisis has raised new conflicts of security and spatial justice within the city:

"The crisis of the early years of the twenty-first century [...] coincides, like others in the past, with the emergence of an important urban issue with a multidimensional character; a character that is hard to recognize. At the heart of the different dimensions of this crisis are inequalities. [...] the city, always imagined as the space of social and cultural integration *par excellence*, has become, in the last decades of the twentieth century, a powerful machine for suspending the rights of individuals and their groups. This policy, like all policies, required an ideology and rhetoric: the ideology of the market and the rhetoric of security. They pervaded the last decades of the last century and had to represent themselves also in a coherent space policy, in a set of physical devices that make the separation concretely visible at different scales [...]"⁵⁷

Secchi's point of view connects the social problems of individuals, as introduced by Elias and Bauman, to recent urban phenomena. For this reason, and while also considering the thoughts of Tessenow and Ortega y Gasset, one finds that urban interventions require discretion, so as to guarantee conditions for equality and justice, both spatially and socially. The collective dimension is not realized in the mixture of "singularities" of architecture. Rather, it is carried out through architecture's capacity to offer a framework that can bring together and homogenize all "individual" specificities.

What is special nowadays is that new collective housing projects in Europe are reinterpreting, in an architectural way, social and historical requirements for new ways of living.⁵⁸ Following prominent examples from the past, projects in many European cities tend to maximize housing by incorporating spaces dedicated to collective use, such as common laundry rooms, nurseries, collective gardens, and common rooms. If this aspect favors a certain mix within the building, specific living situations within society require housing typologies to be adapted to the complexity of contemporary housing.

56 Susanne Schmid, Dietmar Eberle, and Margrit Hugentobler, *A History of Collective Living: Forms of Shared Housing* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2019), 232-234.

57 Bernardo Secchi, *La città dei ricchi e la città dei poveri* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2013), 72-74.

58 Schmid, Eberle, and Hugentobler, *A History of Collective Living*, 232-234.

Following the theories of Elias and Bauman, diversity, and economic and social crises have had a significant impact on such housing projects. To today's society of individuals, co-housing offers flexible and adaptable solutions, which are concerned with the coexistence of the individual sphere and collective life within the same dwelling. In a world of movement, social diversity, and uncertainty in daily life, collective housing is adapted to a changing world through social mixing and the weaving together of the individual-collective.

At the typological level, different lifestyles have originated an enormous amount of inventions to complement conventional dwellings.⁵⁹ Therefore, housing is able to respond to specific phases of life and domestic needs through a shift in values. First, the conviction that shared usage is more important than possession is particularly evident. Second, the functional division of living and working is progressively dissolving. Third, the resident groups are more diverse as people in different phases of life are brought together into the same spaces.

Collective housing has become more complex since today's way of living challenges and transforms its requirements progressively. However, in contrast to the *Gartenstadt* in Hellerau, contemporary buildings neither establish themselves as an urban model, nor contribute to the city's image. In spite of their innovative typological inventions, high spatial quality, and accurate construction, they are designed and dispersed throughout the city zone by zone. Aesthetically speaking, contemporary collective housing is integrated within the city by means of different approaches and results. Consequently, projects do not materialize a specific character that can represent and express the collective values of a city and its habitat. The prevailing architecture of today's collective housing does not bring focus to the question of architectural character and, to use Ortega y Gasset's formulation, does not reveal itself in its role of collective discernibility.

On the contrary, what seems to take place in contemporary initiatives is the confirmation of Hans Schmidt's prophecy. In most European neighborhoods, the trend is towards a monotonous aesthetic disorder, not only without creating a unified image of the city, but also taking the diversity of the architectural language that characterizes the city to cacophonous extremes. The extremity of this disorder crystallizes in the distorted monotony of diversity and singularity, equating perception with an effort to understand multiple rules that often escape familiarity with the architectural form. These forms do not give certainties and, paradoxically, despite their extreme specificity to the individual, even call into question their human dimension.

Tessenow's texts and projects are today prophetic in their lucid analysis of the relationship between architecture, society, and aesthetics. The grey color, as defined by Tessenow, symbolizes, first of all, a committed architecture, in which the collective is not only a spatial aspect but also an objective for identity.

This color must be understood metaphorically. Within the distorted monotony of diversity, it plays the role of a call to arms in face of the problems of society and the identity of the city. Rereading a text, written almost a century ago, on the color grey and coming to find a strong relevance to today's issues can make one smile. It is a smile that also evokes a critical posture.

The discretion embodied by Tessenow ultimately confronts us with current questions and, especially, with the necessity to discern the intelligence of aesthetics within architecture and society, the term 'intelligence' meaning the ability and the creation of tools to comprehend. Thus, the discreet aesthetics represents the search for new visions, of which the primary objective is collective.

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