
Forest Settlement by Bruno Taut in Past and Present

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Abstract

This study explores the path of one of the communities in Berlin from the Weimar period to the present by focusing on the forest settlement on the outskirts of Berlin, which was designed by a German architect named Bruno Taut in the late 1920s. When many architects started a new trend in construction during the 1920s, which they named “Modernist Architecture,” the construction of houses for masses developed rapidly in Europe. In 1928, the forest settlement inhabitants established the Zehlendorf Fischtalgrund Residents’ Association. Starting from 1929, this association organized the annual Fischtal Festival aiming to build facilities for youth. Along with the forest settlement residents, people from all over Berlin enjoyed the festival as well. When the Nazis came into power in 1933, the Residents’ Association was commanded to separate, and the Fischtal Festival was also discontinued. Today, thanks to continuous efforts since the 1970s to restore the original state of the forest settlement, people can enjoy the architecture that was created by Bruno Taut, but in a different context from the time when it was constructed.

1

The purpose of this study¹ is to explore the history of a community in Berlin² from the Weimar period to the present, by focusing on a settlement in the outskirts of the city that was designed by German architect Bruno Taut in the late 1920s.

With the modernist architecture movement of the 1920s, housing construction for the masses developed rapidly in Europe until the end of the 20th century³ and Berlin was no exception⁴. In 2008, six Berlin settlements were registered as “Berlin Modernism Housing Estates” and added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites on the grounds that they had considerably influenced housing development thereafter. These settlements were: the garden city Falkenberg, Estate Schillerpark, Horse Shoe Estate (Hufeisensiedlung), Carl Legien, Weißstadt, and Siemensstadt. Of these, only Falkenberg predates the First World War, while the others were constructed during the time of the Weimar Republic. The first four were designed by Bruno Taut. These estates differ considerably from the former housing provided to the working class, such as Mietskaserne, or “rental barracks” in Berlin, by-law housing in England, law-cost housing in France, etc. The architects devised a new construction method and new types of

1. This paper was originally presented at the Osaka City University/Bielefeld University International Joint Seminar “Europe in Times of Globalisation/Europa in Zeiten der Globalisierung,” at Bielefeld University on October 28, 2014, an extended version of which has already been published in Japanese (Kitamura (2015b)).

2. From the 1980s on, academic interest in the history of Berlin communities is apparent. For example, Schmidt (1981), Engel et al. (ed.) (1985-1994), Scarpa (1995), Kiem (1997), Wolfes (1997), Wagner (1998), and Bröcker (2010).

3. Blundell-Jones (2002).

4. On modernist architecture in the context of the history of Berlin, see Ladd (1997), p.104. On representative settlements in the era of the Weimar Republic, see Vier Berliner Siedlungen der Weimarer Republik (1987).

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design that emphasized the provision of good facilities, such as a bath and toilet in each house⁵.

In this study, we will focus on one of the 40 settlements that Taut designed in Berlin, called Forest Settlement (Waldsiedlung or Onkel Toms Hütte Siedlung), which is considered one of his masterpieces⁶.

2

Taut was born in Königsberg in 1880⁷. In 1909, he founded the architectural firm Taut & Hoffmann in Berlin. His important works before the First World War included Falkenberg in Berlin's southeast suburb and the garden city "Reform" in Magdeburg⁸. His exhibition buildings were named "Monument to Iron" and "Glass Pavilion⁹." In 1924, after working as the chief architect of Magdeburg¹⁰, Taut began constructing many settlements in Berlin. Although the idea that the housing problem could be resolved by building suburbs prevailed during the Second Empire¹¹, it was not until the Weimar Republic that suburban settlements flourished. We will explore the reasons for this here.

First, a rent tax was levied from 1924, which aimed at capping the rise in housing rent. Furthermore, since rent was on the rise at the time, the revenue from rent tax largely flowed into non-profit housing construction companies¹². The number of dwellings in Berlin increased from 1.15 to 1.35 million between 1920 and 1933, and non-profit construction firms built as many as 130,000 dwellings. This meant that these firms were responsible for the construction of two-thirds of the new housing¹³. According to Taut's own report, he designed 12,000 dwellings before leaving Germany in 1933¹⁴.

Second, during the time of the Weimar Republic, Taut was working as the architect of GEHAG (Gemeinnützige Heimstätten-, Spar- und Bau-Aktiengesellschaft), a non-profit housing firm. This construction company had been established in 1924 under the influence of the Confederation of German Trade Unions (Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund), which had itself been founded in 1919. Politically, the company had close relations with the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands)¹⁵. In the Berlin city council that comprised 225 seats, leftist political parties, such as the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands), and Communist Party of Germany (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands), acquired approximately half the seats during the Weimar Republic¹⁶. This political situation of the city council pushed forward the construction of settlements built by GEHAG.

Third, in 1920, Berlin and its surrounding municipalities merged into Greater Berlin (Groß-Berlin), as a result of which, Berlin's area grew by 13 times, and the population increased to nearly double, from 2.00 million to 3.83 million. The population continued to increase gradually thereafter to 4.07 million in 1925 and 4.33 million in 1930¹⁷. Supplying dwellings to the increasing population became an urgent problem. On the other hand, the fact that the larger area could be controlled under one administration was one of the factors that led to the idea of constructing a suburb to solve the housing problem¹⁸.

5. Jager (2008).

6. Deutscher Werkbund Berlin e.V. (ed.) (2005).

7. On the biography of Bruno Taut, see Junghanns (1998). On the researches about Bruno Taut in Germany and Japan, see Kitamura (2017).

8. On "Reform," see Gartenstadt-Kolonie Reform (1995).

9. On Glass Pavilion, see Nielsen (2015).

10. On Taut's activities in Magdeburg from 1919 to 1924, see Symposium Bruno Taut (1995) and Nippa (ed.) (1995).

11. Kitamura (2007).

12. On the rent tax of 1924, see Baade (2004), pp.65-73, Gotō (1999), pp.311-466, and Nagayama (2013), pp.105-107.

13. Schwenk (2002), p.253.

14. Taut (1994).

15. GEHAG ([1957]), 50 Jahre GEHAG (1974), Schäche (ed.)(1999).

16. Ribbe (ed.)(1986), p.847.

17. Schwenk (2002), p.260.

18. Ribbe (ed.)(1986), pp.814-829.

Fourth, criticism of “rental barracks,” which was the main building style for the masses in the Second Empire¹⁹, reached its peak in the 1920s. A rental barrack was a large five or six-story tenement, with its courtyard full of buildings intended for dwelling. Its design and living conditions were criticized by those who were interested in the housing and urban problems that had occurred from the mid-19th century²⁰. The zenith of the criticism was “Stony Berlin. History of the largest rental barrack city in the world” by Werner Hegemann, which was published in 1933²¹. On the other hand, the Building Regulation of 1925 prohibited the construction of non-street facing buildings for housing, which meant that thereafter no more rental barracks were permitted in Berlin. The criticism of rental barracks probably gave birth to the modernist design of settlements in the Weimar period²². For example, Taut’s design for a settlement differed considerably from that of the rental barracks. Even in those areas located in the heart of the city, where there was a high demand for dwellings, four- or five-story tenements were constructed along the street. However, the courtyards were reserved for trees and grass, because of which they resembled parks²³.

Finally, a network of high and underground railways, city railways, trams, and omnibuses was developed in Berlin from the turn of the century, thus significantly improving mobility within the city. Therefore, the development of the Berlin suburbs can be partly attributed to the change in traffic conditions²⁴.

3

We will now discuss Taut’s Berlin works by first classifying the settlements he designed. Taut’s architectural plans, like those of other architects, changed before and after the First World War²⁵. Excluding exhibition buildings, Taut’s housing plans in the years leading up to the war can be classified into two types: the exteriors of buildings that other architects had designed²⁶, and settlements that he, influenced by the garden city movement, designed himself. Both shared in common Taut’s commitment to color, which continued to be a definite feature of his architecture. Proponents of the modernist architecture movement did not favor the coloring of a structure, however, and so Taut’s commitment to color was a peculiarity amongst his peers²⁷.

After the First World War, Taut’s design began to move towards a more simplified style, which was suitable for mass production. We can classify his architecture of this period into four types. The first type was the tenement, which was built on a vacant lot in an already developed area, such as the tenement in Leinestraße in Neukölln. The second type was the large-scale settlement, which only consisted of tenements, for example, Schillerpark and Carl Legien. The third type was the settlement with semi-detached houses and terraced houses, such as Eichkamp. The fourth type was a mixture of the second and third types, of which Horse Shoe Estate is a good example. These settlements were scattered mainly in the northwest, northeast, southeast, and south parts of Berlin²⁸.

Forest Settlement²⁹ was classified as the fourth type, and was located in the southwest suburbs, unlike many of Taut’s settlements. The formation of Greater Berlin made possible the construction of Forest Settlement, located in Zehlendorf, which became a district of Berlin in 1920³⁰. Because there was resistance to the cutting down of forests

19. On the “rental barracks,” see Geist and Kürvers (1980, 1984).

20. Ernst Bruch, Berlin’s bauliche Zukunft und der Bebauungsplan, in: *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, Jahrg.IV, No.9-24, 1870.

21. Hegemann (1933).

22. On the Building Regulation of 1925, see Ehrlich (1933), pp.39-46.

23. Deutscher Werkbund Berlin e.V. (ed.)(2005).

24. Ribbe (ed.)(1986), pp.733-739.

25. Blundell-Jones (2002).

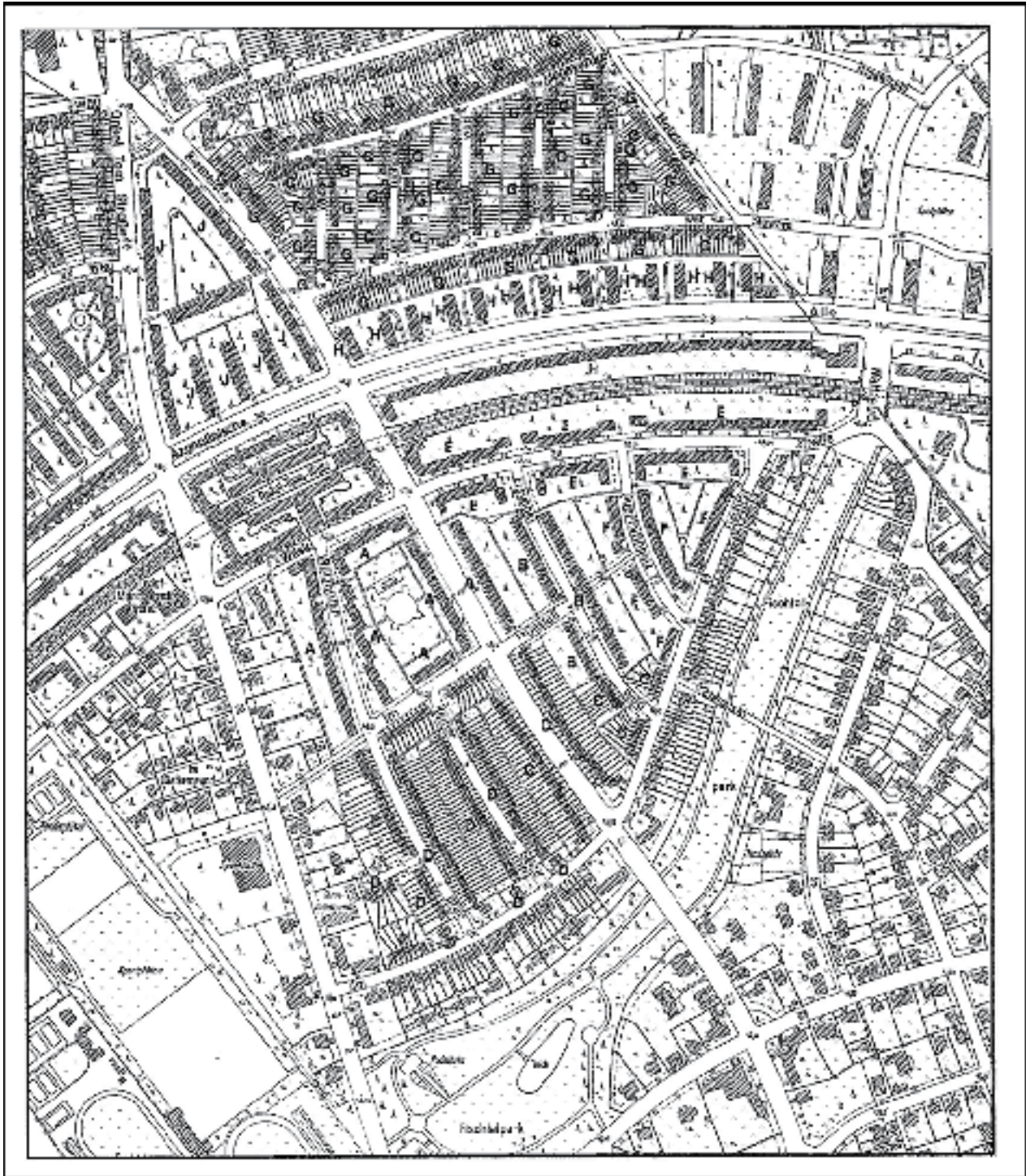
26. Lamberts (1994).

27. Deutscher Werkbund Berlin e.V. (ed.) (2005).

28. See the map of Kitamura (2009), p.90.

29. Jaeggi (1987), Silbereisen (1992), and Dannenberg (1989) have already described the early history of Forest Settlement in brief. However, these studies concentrate on the concrete aspects of the settlement, and do not locate it within the broader context of the urban history of Berlin or the architectural history of the Weimar Republic.

30. Schwenk (2002), p.260.



Map: Forest Settlement

A-D: first period/ second period, E-F: third period/ fourth period,
G: fifth period, H: sixth period, J: seventh period

in southwest Berlin, trees were incorporated into the design³¹. (map)

The process of construction of Forest Settlement by GEHAG can be divided into seven periods. In the first four periods, between 1926 and 1928, two-story tenements and terraced houses with three floors and basements were constructed. During the fifth period, in 1929, terraced houses were constructed on the other side, across the underground railway, and were also opened in the same year. In the sixth and seventh periods, tenements were constructed around the terraced houses that had been built during the fifth period. All were constructed with flat roofs. There were a total of 1,915 dwellings in the settlement. Except for the terraced houses of the first two periods, which were designed by two modernist architects, Hugo Häring and Otto Salvisberg³², 1,592 dwellings were planned by Taut. Of these, 1,106 were in tenements, and 486 were in terraced houses. The occupants of these houses supposedly included people from the middle class, such as office workers and officials³³.

The inhabitants of Forest Settlement tried to organize a residents committee soon after they moved in. As a result, in 1928, they organized the Zehlendorf Fischtalgrund Residents Association (Siedlerverein Zehlendorf-Fischtalgrund e. V.)³⁴. "Fischtal" is the long valley located south of Forest Settlement, which functioned as the border with Zehlendorf, an area comprising mansions for the wealthy class dating back to the Second Empire. This valley was developed as a park around the same time as the construction of Forest Settlement³⁵. The residents association held the Festival of Fischtal from 1929 to 1932 with the aim of constructing facilities for children and youth³⁶.

Soon after the first residents moved here, it became clear that there were some difficulties regarding shopping and transportation. This became a topic of discussion in the residents committee, which was held several times in the year 1927, possibly to resolve the problems communally³⁷. The Festival of Fischtal can be considered an attempt made in the same direction. It was enjoyed not only by the residents of Forest Settlement but also by many other people from Berlin³⁸. Two factors were responsible for the attention that this festival garnered from Berlin society, which we would like to point out here.

First, the people and administration of Zehlendorf abhorred Forest Settlement, as it was standardized housing for the masses³⁹. By organizing the festival, which was open to people in Zehlendorf and Berlin, the inhabitants of Forest Settlement tried to integrate their community into the surroundings and larger society. Through the procession, which was one of the main events of the festival, Forest Settlement would be situated within the history of Zehlendorf. For example, in the processions of 1931 and 1932, there was the float of the windmill, which at that time was the symbol of the community of Zehlendorf⁴⁰. This should be understood as an effort to integrate into Berlin society. The news about the festival was reported in the newspapers, and even broadcast on radio in 1931⁴¹.

Second, on the long, narrow lot between Forest Settlement and Fischtal, a settlement was constructed in a style contrary to modernist architecture. This was one result of the conflict between architects from two schools of thought in the Weimar Republic⁴².

The controversy in the magazines and books began in 1923, when the Bauhaus constructed Haus am Horn, the

31. Baudenkmale in Berlin (1995), p.205.

32. Jäger (2008).

33. Silbereisen (1992), p.129.

34. *Wohngemeinschaft. Das Blatt der Grobsiedlungen*, 1-31, 34, 35, 37, 39, 43, 44, 1927; 2-2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 14, 17, 19, 28, 37, 1928.

35. Baudenkmale in Berlin (1995), p.211f.

36. For a more detailed history of this festival, see Kitamura (2018). We can find resources regarding the Festival of Fischtal in the archive of Heimatmuseum Zehlendorf (Ortsarchiv-Zehlendorf Mitte: Rep. 35). In this paper particularly, festival pamphlets, titled *Fest im Fischtal*, which were published annually from 1930 to 1932, are analyzed. The program of 1929 was also published in: *Wohngemeinschaft*. 3-35, 1929. On the festival in Horse Shoe Estate, see Holsten (2016).

37. See note 34.

38. Dannenberg (1989).

39. Jaeggi (1987), p.138.

40. *Fest im Fischtal*, 1931, p.14 and 1932, pp.23-24. On the windmill in Zehlendorf, see Trumpp (1982), p.36.

41. *Wohngemeinschaft*. 3-35, 1929 and *Fest im Fischtal*, 1931, p.14.

42. For a more detailed history of this war, see Kitamura (2015a).

experimental house with a flat roof, in Weimar⁴³. The controversy appeared in the housing construction of 1927, when Weißenhof Settlement was constructed for an exhibition titled “Architecture and Dwelling (Bauen und Wohnen).” Seventeen architects who represented the new trend of the time, such as Bruno Taut, Max Taut, his brother, and Gropius from Germany, as well as Le Corbusier from France and Oud from Holland gathered under the leadership of Mies van der Rohe. The 21 buildings with flat roofs, which each architect designed with ingenuity at this exhibition, helped bolster their reputation internationally⁴⁴.



Pic: Fischthal Settlement(left) and Forest Settlement(right)

To counter the success of Weißenhof Settlement, in 1928, architects of the traditional school organized another exhibition of the same name, with a location beside Forest Settlement. Seventeen architects under the leadership of Heinrich Tessenow designed 30 buildings with gabled roofs. Only one of these architects had also participated in Weißenhof. The buildings varied in form, consisting of detached, semi-detached, and terraced houses as well as tenements. What they had in common was only a gable with a 45-degree angle⁴⁵. This settlement, which was called Fischthal Settlement, was criticized for two reasons, soon after it was built: first, the gables were said to have broken the unity created by the flat roofs of Forest Settlement; second, because the settlement was constructed without economic considerations, the price of housing at Fischthal Settlement was too expensive for office workers and officials to buy or rent⁴⁶. (pic.)

The construction company behind Fischthal Settlement was GAGFAH (Gemeinnützige Aktiengesellschaft für Angestellten-Heimstätten), a non-profit company for office workers’ housing, which rivaled GEHAG in those days in Berlin⁴⁷. GAGFAH was founded in 1918 and aimed at providing housing for office workers. This company had a close connection with the office workers’ organization, called the German National Association of Commercial Employees (Deutschnationaler Handlungsgehilfen-Verband), which was established in 1898. This organization had anti-Semitic tendencies and played a leading role in the General Association of German Office Workers Union (Gesamtverband deutscher Angestelltengewerkschaften), which was founded in 1918. These organizations had close political connections with center to right-wing parties, such as the German Democratic Party (Deutsche Demokratische Partei), German People’s Party (Deutsche Volkspartei), The Centre Party (Deutsche Zentrumspartei), German National People’s Party (Deutschnationale Volkspartei), and nationalist parties, and supported the NSDAP in the final phase of the Weimar Republic⁴⁸.

Therefore, Fischthal Settlement might have gone beyond the conflict between the architects, to include conflicts on views of the world, political stances, and the workers’ movement. For the inhabitants of Forest Settlement, living beside the settlement must have posed a great problem, which might have led to social conflict. I argue that this festival was intended to promote uniformity between Forest Settlement and Fischthal Settlement. In this regard, two pieces of evidence can be presented: the text written by the chief of GAGFAH in the festival pamphlet⁴⁹, and the fact that the main festival square of 1929 was established in Fischthal Park, as if to say that the festival would embrace the

43. Matz (2001).

44. Deutscher Werkbund (ed.)(1992), Ulmer & Kurz (2009).

45. *Ausstellung Bauen und Wohnen. Berlin-Zehlendorf 1928. GAGFAH-Siedlung Fischthalgrund. Grundrisse und Schnitte*, 1928.

46. Völter, Die Gagfah-Siedlung am Fischthalgrund, Berlin-Zehlendorf, in: *Die Baugilde*, 10. Jg., Heft 19, 1928; Die Gagfah-Siedlung “Bauen und Wohnen” in Berlin-Zehlendorf, Fischthalgrund, in: *Wohnungswirtschaft*, 5, 1928.

47. On GAGFAH, see GAGFAH ([1968],[1993]), *Eigenheim und Wohnung für Angestellte*.

48. On the German National Association of Commercial Employees, see Rütters (2009).

49. *Fest im Fischthal*, 1930, p.18, 1931, p.13, 1932, p.17.

new settlement between the park and Forest Settlement⁵⁰.

4

When the Nazi regime was born in 1933, the situation changed. Taut himself was forced to go into exile in Japan, where he could not work as an architect, except for the renovation of the Hyuga-house in Atami⁵¹. Instead, he wrote books and essays on Japanese culture⁵² and gave instructions on craftwork in Sendai and Takasaki⁵³. In 1936, he went into exile in Turkey and died there in 1938. Soon after Taut left Germany, the Residents Association was ordered to disband and the Festival of Fischtal was discontinued⁵⁴.

After the Second World War⁵⁵, Zehlendorf, including Forest Settlement, came under the American occupation zone. Much of the housing in Forest Settlement was used as quarters for American military personnel, and former inhabitants were moved to alternative housing within Berlin. At an unknown point after the American personnel withdrew from Forest Settlement, the Festival of Fischtal resumed.

On the other hand, the exteriors of Forest Settlement were left discolored, and many inhabitants undertook major renovations of their housing. In the 1970s, there was a movement to restore the fifth-period terraced houses to their original condition. During this time, the inhabitants and the Zehlendorf administration, on the basis of a survey conducted by architectural historians, entered into discussions on the way the restoration would be conducted⁵⁶. At the same time, a corresponding movement was witnessed at the Horse Shoe Estate⁵⁷. However, it was only after the reunification of Berlin in 1990 that Taut's work was reevaluated⁵⁸. Today, there remain approximately 10,000 housing units in Berlin that were designed by Taut, many of which have been restored to their original colors and structure⁵⁹.

I had the opportunity to live in one of the houses in Forest Settlement from March 2010 to January 2011. The building in which I lived, a two-and-a-half room housing unit, was constructed during the first stage. Its front wall was painted yellow, while its window frames and doors were painted red, white, or black. The garden-facing wall was painted blue and white. Upon entering the building, one encountered a staircase with blue-gray walls and railings painted in red and black. Through the front door of my dwelling, which was painted in white and ash, the world before you changed: Everything inside the house was white.

Taut furnished most of his mass housing units with baths, which was an unusual feature at the time⁶⁰. I would argue that this is indicative of his intention to improve the conditions of workers, something I was convinced of when taking a bath every night. The kitchen not only has a garden-facing window, but also a small window facing the veranda, which allowed meals to be sent directly from the kitchen to the veranda, especially in summer. Taut thought that the rooms and furniture should be arranged rationally to facilitate housework; this window reflects his idea⁶¹.

The outside world was also an important element for living in Taut's housing. The view of the garden over the

50. *Wohngemeinschaft*, 3-35, 1929.

51. On the Hyuga-house in Atami, see Bruno Taut. *Hyūga-bettei* (1998).

52. Most of these books and essays were published only in Japanese at the time of their publication. Recently, German versions of some of these books have been published. Taut (2009), Taut (2011), etc.

53. *Burūno Tauto no kōgei* (2013).

54. Dannenberg (1989).

55. *Silbereisen* (1992), p.137.

56. Pitz & Brenne (1998).

57. *Hufeisensiedlung Britz* (1980).

58. Nerdinger ... [et al.](ed.)(2001), Lamberts (1994), Nippa (ed.)(1995), Symposium Bruno Taut (1995), Pitz & Brenne (1998), Nielsen (2015), etc.

59. *Deutscher Werkbund Berlin e.V.* (ed.)(2005).

60. Normally, the flats in rental barracks were not all equipped with a bath or toilet.

61. Taut (1924).

veranda from the living room is wonderful. The structures were built on the four edges of a square block. The wide space that emerged became the shared garden of the inhabitants. Because many trees remain in the garden, one has the sense of living in the forest. This garden served as the main square for the Festival of Fischtal from 1930 to 1932⁶².

In the middle of the garden is a set of playground equipment where children attending the kindergarten set in one corner of the structure could play every sunny day. This kindergarten space was originally designed for storage use. Forest Settlement also has several spaces for this purpose, many of them now used as kindergartens or offices.

Thus, in Forest Settlement, although there have been some changes, Taut's design remains largely unchanged and people can enjoy the world that Taut imagined and crafted. However, the social context of Forest Settlement differs today than at the time of its construction.

First, the residents of Forest Settlement founded their own organization, the "Association Parrot Settlement (Verein Papageiensiedlung)," in 2010. This organizes several events, and once held a festival of inhabitants. Although the association is open to everyone, it is primarily only for the region and inhabitants of Forest Settlement. In this respect, it is quite different from the way that the inhabitants once tried to connect with Zehlendorf or Berlin⁶³.

Second, the Festival of Fischtal was held annually until 2012 in Fischtal park. This was an event aimed at youth development by the government of Zehlendorf. As it was the only festival to introduce the activities of various youth organizations in Zehlendorf, it lost its element of being a festival for the inhabitants that the former Festival of Fischtal had had⁶⁴.

Finally, there was a movement to add Forest Settlement to the list of "Berlin Modernism Housing Estates." The parliament of the borough passed a resolution for action to include Forest Settlement on the list⁶⁵. Forest Settlement, which was once abhorred, is now recognized as a symbol of the good old Weimar period by the people of Zehlendorf and Berlin.

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62. *Fest im Fischtal*, 1930, p.4, 1931, p.14, 1932, p.19.

63. On this association, see <http://www.papageiensiedlung.de>.

64. On this festival, see, <http://www.fischtalfest.de/>.

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