

Weissenhofsiedlung, Stuttgart, 1925: The Initial Scheme

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ABSTRACT

Mies van der Rohe viewed his first proposal for the Stuttgart Weissenhofsiedlung as “artistically right.” Despite this conviction, he guided the project through a series of design iterations that had the effect of radically transforming the project.

The origin of the initial scheme has been a matter of some speculation among historians. Most believe that the initial project was a result of collaboration between Mies and Hugo Häring. There has also been some speculation on the intentions behind the initial project. Both discussions have been thwarted by the presumed lack of documentation.

This paper will present a partial reconstruction of the first scheme, based on historical documents. Rather than trying to assign authorship, it will speculate on the origins of the scheme, some reasons for the abrupt change in design direction, and reaching implications for the understanding of the later work and thinking of the later work of Mies van der Rohe.

Collaboration or Dialog

Several scholars agree that the first scheme for the Stuttgart Weissenhofsiedlung was probably not designed by Mies van der Rohe alone, but was the product of a collaboration between Mies and Hugo Häring. Circumstances suggest this could likely have been the case. Mies had divorced shortly before 1925 and when Häring arrived in Berlin, Mies offered him a work-space. “We talked more than we worked,” Mies later said of these times. Both the talk and the work proved productive. The discussion evidently focused on the nature of the new building; their projects show a degree of cross-fertilization in terms of conception and form.¹⁰ Time has shown their dialog to be one of the most characteristic breaks in modernism, a split that divides proponents of the organ-like building (Häring) from those of universal space (Mies) or, changing the terms, expressionism from rigorous formal and material resolve. This dialog has persisted in various forms throughout modernist and contemporary discourse. Although Häring built little himself, he was a mentor to Hans Scharoun. The debate has therefore been read into the development of the Berlin Cultural Forum, a sort of face-off between Scharoun's Philharmonic and Library and Mies's New National Gallery. It is also possible to read the legacy of the debate into our contemporary context. It suggests a means of understanding the rift in concurrent ideologies of practice—between (say) Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid on the one hand and Herzog and de Meuron and Rem Koolhaas on the other.

If the Weissenhofsiedlung project of 1925 was the product of collaboration, it stands as a marker in a common road, just before a significant fork. As it appeared in the preliminary site plan and clay model, the proposal was based on the extensive terracing of the site and had the effect of suggesting a continuous built fabric. The project was clearly something new: the Stuttgart building authorities, unable to relate the project to any reassuring precedent, were frankly aghast. So

¹⁰ See for example the discussion of the Friedrichstraase skyscraper competition in Peter Blundell-Jones, *Hugo Häring: the organic versus the geometric*. (Stuttgart: Ed. Axel Menges, Jones, 1999), 40-42.

strong was the impression of continuity that the authorities suggested that the proposal neglected the needs of light, ventilation, and vehicular access (they also objected to excessive wall-work and the apparent lack of basements). After surviving a good deal of controversy, including attacks on his competence, Mies submitted a revised plan in July of 1926. Although similar to the 1925 proposal, elevations and plans from 1926 already show less the character of the terrace scheme than the discrete masses of the final project (Figure 1, 2).

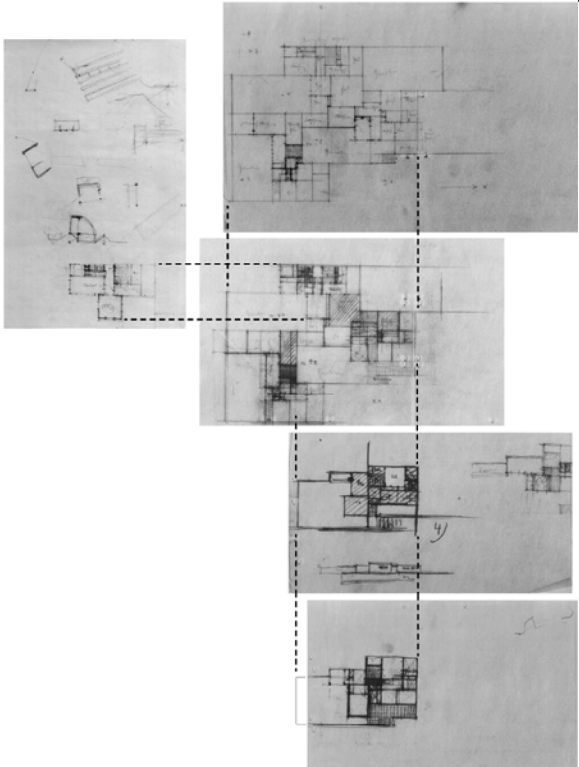
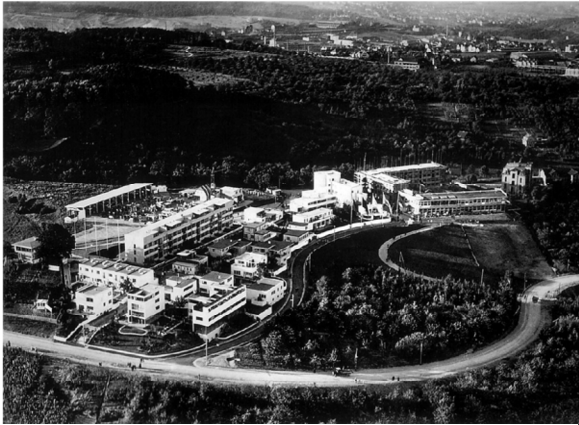
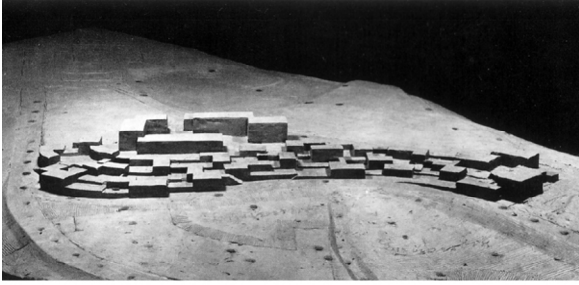


Fig. 1 Weissenhofsiedlung, 1925. (clay model, above) Rohe. and an aerial view of the exhibition, 1927 (below).

Fig. 2 Sketch plans attributed to Mies van der

Drawings published as part of the Museum of Modern Art's *Mies van der Rohe Archive* indicate that more has survived from the original scheme than was previously thought.¹¹ In addition to the site plan study and model photographs there is a series of plan sketches that can be mapped to specific locations on the initial plan (Figure 2). This paper focuses on the development of 3 buildings at the center of the project. The Weissenhof site was located in the countryside surrounding of Stuttgart; the complex was to straddle a local high in a rising slope. Plans were drawn with north to the right. The 3 dwellings that are the focus of this study were to be located near the inflection point in the eastern bounding street, on the low side of the site. Although sketches for other buildings exist, the drawings for these buildings are the most developed, including two drawings of the grouping (drawing numbers 4.168 and 4.170) as well as supplemental sketches. Many of these drawings include annotations, including room names and relative grade elevations. Examination of the original drawings at the Museum's archive greatly facilitated the understanding of marks and notations. In the following descriptions, the equivalent lot locations from the final project have been used to distinguish between the buildings. The plans and sections resulting from the reconstruction by the author are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

¹¹ Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig. *The Mies van der Rohe Archive, Vols. 2*. Arthur Drexler, ed., with introductory notes by Franz Schulze. (New York: Garland Pub, 1986), 178-210. Handwriting analysis should help with establishing the providence of these drawings, however this is beyond my expertise.

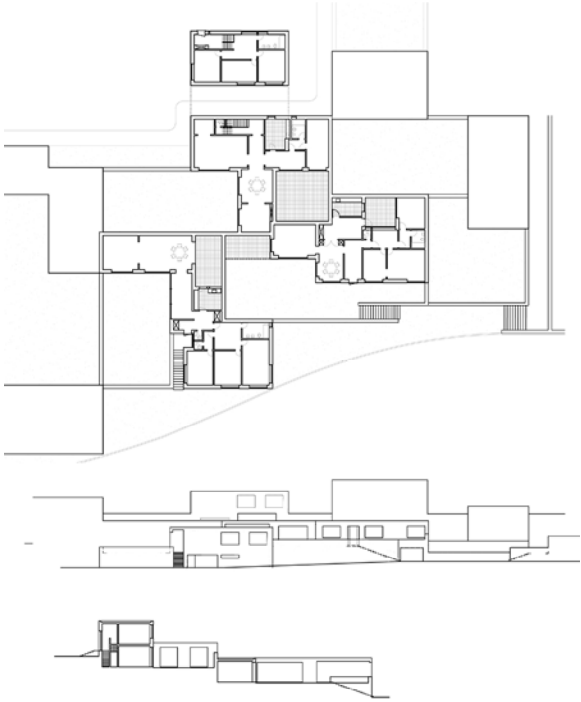


Fig. 3 Plans and sections of dwellings on lots 18, 19, & 20 (clockwise from lower left)

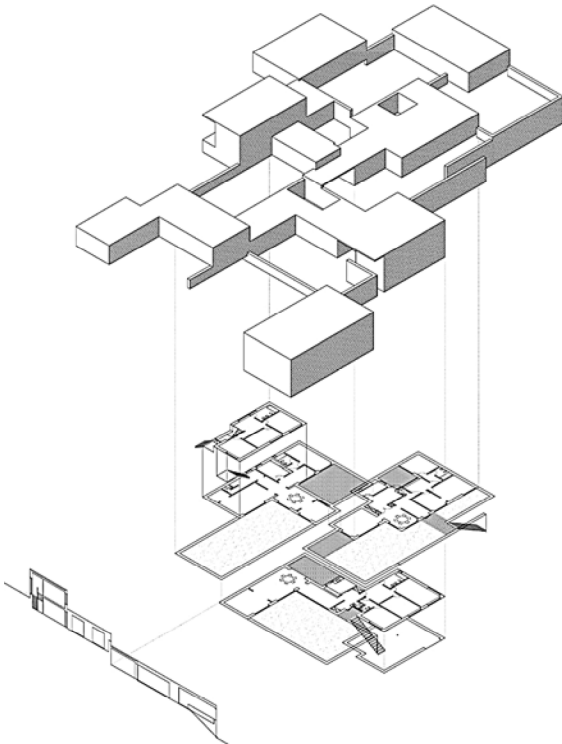


Fig. 4 Axonometric of units 18, 19, 20 & neighbors

Lot 18 (dwelling at southeast/lower left, drawings 4.168, 4.170)

The initial site plan indicates that this building was a L-shaped volume, with the vertical leg of the L backing up to large courtyard to the south. As developed in plan, the building became a Z-shape (again with the vertical backing up to a large court). According to the site plan and model, the lower leg of the Z was to be two stories tall to accommodate the change in grade between the street and the level of the courtyard. There is a stair indicated between the street and the main living level. The drawings indicate that area of the street was assumed to be at level +0 and the court at level +2[m].

Plans 4.168 and 4.170 indicate a similar arrangement of rooms at the living level. In the east wing, 3 spaces nominally labeled “z[immer]” (room) face the street. In the west wing, the rooms are apparently living spaces, opening on the large court. The center part of the building seems to be the focus of the sketches, with the draftsman testing the location of circulation, kitchen, and toilet areas. Sketch 4.170 seems to be the layout drawing, and shows a relatively small kitchen area centrally located and opening onto a rectangular “wirtschaft hof” (housework court) to its north. Toilet rooms are located near the entry as is characteristic of the plans of the time, including those of Mies’s. The bedroom closest to the entry seems well suited to domestic help.

Plan 4.168 is a less tentative drawing, and perhaps represents an advance over 4.170. Along the large court, sketch lines indicate that the stair is to be open and that the south facing room (labeled, but unintelligible) may have an overhanging eave, or area of terrace paving. Marks on the plan indicate that this room, as well as the living room, may have been intended to open on both courts. The drawing also explores a different arrangement of service spaces in the east wing. Although no lower level plan seems to exist, the circle with a “X” at its center may indicate the thought of a spiral stair connecting to the lower level.

Lot 19 (dwelling at west/top center, drawings 4.168, 4.170, 4.176)

This building was to be T-shaped in plan, with relatively large courts to each side of the east-west (vertical) stem of the T. As in Lot 19, the large court was located to the south. Its level is indicated to be +4[m]. The smaller court is almost square and labeled simply “hof” (court). The top of the T lies along the street to the west is divided by an entry hall, which lies on axis with the center of the T-stem. The south wing seems to be dedicated to living spaces. The north wing contains the kitchen and service spaces. These remain constant in the three plans. A space labeled “wirtschaft” (housework) lies along and opens onto the court. To the extreme north is a large rectangular room that also opens on the court. Notations indicate that an internal area that shares a common wall with the kitchen may have been intended to include a bath.

In the area of the south wing, both drawings 4.170 and 4.176 contain a single large space labeled “Wo[hnzimmer]” (livingroom). Drawing 4.170 indicates that the first spaces in the east wing (the stem of the T) was to be a the es[zimmer] (dinning area) and the east-most room the “lib[rary ?].” Drawings 4.168 and 4.176 show similar forms for these spaces but drawing 4.168 seems to be a more exploratory version of the plan. It indicates both the overall subdivision of this living space, including the presence of a dining table, a corridor, and perhaps a circular stair—none of which seems to work.

Although the site plan indicates that this unit was to be one story, all 3 plans indicate the presence of a stair in the south wing, along the street wall to the west. All plans also seem to indicate a toilet room beneath the stair. Grade elevations in the final project suggest that the street level would have been about 1.5-1.7 m above the living level. A second level above this wing would have not only facilitated entry, but provided the space to for bedrooms not shown on the main floor plan.

Lot 20 (dwelling at north/right, drawings 4.168, 4.170, 4.174, 4.180)

This building is the most unusual in terms of typology: a U-shaped volume around a central court, with a wing attached to the middle of the south side of the U. In drawings 4.168 and 4.170 this wing is occupied by a square-ish living room near to the center of the U and further to the south, a small rectilinear volume marked "loggia". Drawings 4.168 and 4.170 also show similar arrangements for the main part of the dwelling, including the kitchen to the south side of the inner court, joined by a buffer-like space marked "wirtschaft." This space extends from the entry hall to the north toward the internal courtyard. To the south of the entry hall is a prominently-scaled room marked "es[zimmer]" in drawing 4.168. To the north of the entry hall are the private spaces of the house. These rooms face east, but are planned en suite around a room to the east side of the court. The development of the plan in drawing 4.168 indicates the consideration of corridor planning, to both the north and south of the entry, considered perhaps to allow immediate connections from the entry to living room and to the room on the north side of the interior court. It faces south and is marked "sol[arium]."

Dwelling 20 is located in adjacent to a prominent stair in the site plan. Annotations on the plan indicate the elevation of the courtyard as "ca (circa) +2m". Annotations on drawing 4.170 also indicate a "garage," apparently at the lower level. Based on the final grading of the street and the need for a garage, the court level would in fact have been closer to 3 meters above level 0, placing each dwelling in the cluster at distinctly different grade elevations.

Drawings 4.173 and 4.180 are similar and show developments on this plan. Both exchange the housekeeping and kitchen areas and the living and dining areas, an apparent improvement in circulation and adjacencies. Marginalia on 4.173 indicates an intermediate state in the development of the plan, showing only revisions to the kitchen area, and clarifying circulation from the entryway to both the north and south wings of the plan. This circulation scheme seems to have been adopted in the later sketches. A more heavily drawn configuration on the same sheet shows a corridor along the east side of the inner court providing equal access to all rooms in this wing, including the solarium.

These drawings show a revised location of the living room, an arrangement that extends a prominent volume towards the east boundary of the lot, bifurcating the mass and effectively forming a third court overlooking the street. This configuration, sketched in elevation on drawing 4.173, is clearly more dramatic in massing than any of the individual volumes indicated on the initial site plan.

The building on Lot 20 is located adjacent to a stair so prominent that in the massing model it seems to indicate the presence of a public passage. Unfortunately there is no passage at this location, and the stair leads only to a single dwelling (lot 20). The prominence of the site may well have been the motivation behind the study of the buildings in this area, but the public passage was, in both the initial and final schemes, located further to the north. The false importance of the stair can be understood as a mere semantic error in a development sketch. Or it may have been representative of the confusion between public and private space, one of the larger contradictions within the project.

1925 vs. 1927

Each revision in the plan after 1925 brought the Weissenhof further from the initial conception, and closer to a conventional arrangement of isolated volumes. Increasingly the land was marked by a conventional rectangular partitioning. The building masses reached for near-prismatic simplicity; they seem destined to be centered on their lots. In fact, this is more of a formal logic than a strictly typological one. The project did mix row-house and apartment types with house types. Apartment and semi-detached aggregates were, however, treated as autonomous and units, consistent within themselves, separate and distinct from all other units. In the absence of commercial and public amenities, and in relative isolation from the city of Stuttgart, the Siedlung was closer to a garden suburb than an extension of the city.

With the reconstruction of a few of the buildings, it can now be seen that the first scheme was different in a number of ways. The model reflected the complicated rhythms of massing and an intriguing ambiguity between building and terraced landscape. In the site plan drawing the distinction between the built and the un-built was more clear. Surprisingly, the development sketches went in the opposite direction. Rather than simplifying the relationships between the dwelling units or between the units and the land, the architect's development of the house types seems to have complicated these relationships. In addition to the courtyards formed by the terraces, courts were added internal to the building masses. Instead of isolated prisms, these masses were composed of apparently primary forms, combined to make L-, T-, U- and Z-shaped assemblages. Instead of isolation, each building merged not only with the site walls but also with its neighbors.

The result was a near-reversal of the conventional figure/ground relationship of the house type, a conception that seems to have been an uneasy fit with the conception of the European landscape. This analysis suggests that the complexity of the project—including property arrangements, the coordination of the building techniques, and the integration of distinct (and therefore discontinuous) formal systems within a technically indistinct (and continuous) building fabric—created significant obstacles, perhaps too many obstacles to be overcome in the short time frame allowed by the exhibition.

What was lost when the scheme was transformed? A comparison between the first and final schemes indicates that the 1925 project truly was more dense. While the number of units is nominally the same, the average unit size, as well as the overall floor area ratio (FAR), would have been about 20% higher than the final scheme (0.59 vs. 0.47) and, for the developed plans (presented here) the FAR is greater than the average (0.66 vs. 0.59).

More suggestive than the quantitative increase in the density was the discovery of a spatial strategy for urban housing. To be sure, the idea of the court-type space appears in Mies's architecture before 1925 and in many projects thereafter. In 1933-34 Häring used the type to design a small group of buildings at the Kochenhof, a small un-built extension to the Weissenhof.¹² But the most powerful implications of the first project for Stuttgart lie in the conception of the living-court as an urban type. In both personal and student projects between 1931 and 1940, Mies pursued the courthouse motif time and again. As Terence Riley has said, Mies used the courthouse type as a demonstration of "...a house that could create a city...".¹³ It was a strategy that, without ignoring a dwelling's formative connection to the environment, offered the potential to be *scaled*.

¹² See Jones, *Hugo Häring and Modern Architecture Through Case Studies*. (New York: Architectural Press, 2002), 14.

¹³ Terence Riley, "From Bauhaus to Court-House," in Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll, eds., *Mies in Berlin*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 337.

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