



## Photographing the Slums of 1900s Berlin

Danièle Voldman

*Translated from the French by Oliver Waine*

**Reviewed:** Philippe Bonnin and Margaret Manale, *Wie Berlin wohnt/Habiter Berlin, 175 photographies, 1900-1920*, Grane: Créaphis, 2016, 240 pp.

*At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dramatically poor conditions of urban working-class housing was a cause of major concern in many cities, and would lead to the first social-housing experiments. Photography, then a booming new technology, was one of the means used to document this problem and raise awareness of conditions, as this book on working-class housing in Berlin illustrates.*

Taking as their starting point a collection of photographs taken during the first 20 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, architect and anthropologist Philippe Bonnin and historian Margaret Manale have joined forces to present and examine the pitiful state of working-class housing in Berlin at this time. Here, as in every large European city, industrialization had led to a massive influx of manual labor: between 1850 and the First World War, Berlin's population grew from around 500,000 to some 2 million. The German capital, boasting one of the highest population densities in the world, had rapidly become dominated by tenement buildings—known as *Mietskasernen* (literally “rental barracks”)—whose costs continually increased under the combined pressures of property speculation and high demand. As a result, it became ever harder for the working classes to keep a roof over their heads, to such an extent that inhabitants would often sublet a corner of their slum dwellings to homeless individuals on a nightly basis—and obviously without any sort of tenancy agreement—as a means of generating a small amount of income while showing solidarity with those less fortunate than themselves. This is explained in the caption of first photograph of the collection, where two beds, arranged top-to-tail, with carefully straightened covers, occupy practically the entire surface area of a “wretched little room.” To make things worse, the high fares charged on the then brand-new urban express train, the *S-Bahn* (built between 1907 and 1927), meant workers were unable to move further out from the center (where most of the jobs were), particularly in the case of women who took on piecework at home, for which fast deliveries were vital. Working-class families would therefore often occupy dark and dingy tenements built in courtyards close to factories and workshops. In Kreuzberg, for example, one courtyard containing a small carpentry workshop led to a dwelling with no windows or skylights where a family with eight children lived (photo 8).

### Denouncing poor housing conditions

As in France, Belgium and Great Britain, reform movements in Germany of all persuasions were concerned by this issue that offended ethical sensibilities and ran the risk of creating a social

explosion. One of the problems was that, in the prevailing liberal economic context, tenants were not protected by any laws (unlike homeowners). For reformers, therefore, one solution was to make use of tax breaks and low interest rates in order to build high-quality housing to be made available at below-market rents—the beginnings of social housing. But who would actually build this housing, and what types of dwellings would they offer?

In Germany, and especially in Berlin, private and public institutions founded on principles of Christian socialism, together with trade-union and socialist movements, set to work on this task. Private insurance companies, in particular, were among the most active in this regard: 20 years after Bismarck's laws on social protection came into effect, Germany had more than 20,000 local health-insurance funds, with 13 million low-income subscribers. In order to identify needs and propose solutions to improve Berlin's working-class housing, surveys were conducted and the results published in the form of annual reports, providing a snapshot of the state of the city's old and poorly maintained housing stock, most of which was built between 1825 and 1870.

The 175 photographs, taken in 112 dwellings between 1902 and 1920—presented by the authors in a clear and scholarly way—were commissioned by Albert Kohn, a former employee of the Berlin retailers' insurance fund who had worked his way up to be managing director. His approach was explicitly inspired by the kinds of statistical studies conducted under the supervision of political economics professor Karl Bücher for the city of Basel. This involved demonstrating, using photographic evidence, the harmful influence of unsanitary housing on the health of their inhabitants (e.g. tuberculosis, rheumatic disorders, rickets in children). The researchers—trade unionists and medical students—were required to compose succinct captions for each picture, while the task of taking the actual photographs was entrusted to Heinrich Lichte & Co., which did not record the names of its operators.

The publication, in 1903, of the first report, in the form of an annotated photographic booklet, received a positive response from those who decried the city's poor housing conditions. Insurance funds in other cities, such as Strasbourg and Leipzig, used the report as a model for their own work. At the same time, however, these *Wohnungs-Enquêtes* were the subject of virulent attacks from Berlin landlords, via the Prussian Regional Union of Land and Property Ownership. This body, with 14,500 members and a regular publication called *Land Ownership*, took action in 1906 that sought to prohibit these surveys, forbid the publication of their results, and make the steering committee of the insurance fund liable for any fees incurred by what they called a “waste of the community's money.” While this union did not succeed in its endeavor, it would continue to accuse the insurance fund and its surveys of stoking class hatred.

### **Capturing working-class housing with realism, not exaggeration**

It is true that these photographs, focused on the small size of dwellings and the crowded and cluttered nature of rooms, with beds squeezed into what served as kitchens, black encrusted smoke on the ceilings and damp patches on the walls, could well have incited revolt against the “working-class condition.” They show interiors where “great disorder” reigns, a jumble of utensils and clothes, with washing hung up to dry across the single room, tables still laid, and detritus strewn across the floor. From this point of view, they form part of the same movement of social photographers such as Jacob Riis, a Danish émigré to the US, or the American Lewis Hine, who photographed slums in New York to draw attention to poor housing conditions, rather than for their picturesque qualities or heritage value, as in the case of French photographer Eugène Atget. In any case, whether intentionally or not, the operators employed (who, unlike Riis, Hine or Atget, would remain anonymous) revealed another facet of working-class housing. Inhabitants, captured in their everyday environments, pose with what can be considered a certain dignity; in general, they bear serious expressions, only occasionally brightened by a smile. Some sick inhabitants were photographed confined to their beds, while others seem to have insisted on posing with the rest of their family.

In this way, these photographs reveal to the reader something previously underlined by the works of Alain Faure (1999): the working classes, contrary to what sections of the managerial class—all too ready to condemn their supposed slovenliness and lack of hygiene—suggested, were in fact house-proud. Even without money, they tried with the limited resources available to them to make their home as attractive as possible: a birdcage or cuckoo clock here, pictures on the walls and floral wallpaper there, with curtains at the windows (where they existed), lace tablecloths and, in many cases, a meticulous sense of order despite the accumulation of objects. Order and disorder go hand in hand in these pictures, illustrating the complex reality of life in these dwellings.

Regardless, the surveys helped to raise awareness of the poor state of working-class housing. They helped to legitimize the creation of a housing policy by the Weimar Republic: 2.5 million dwellings were constructed between 1919 and 1932, four fifths of which with state aid. Most were built by construction companies affiliated with trade unions or health-insurance and pension funds, based on survey results collected since the turn of the century. This building effort was interrupted from 1933 onwards with the rise to power of the Nazi regime.

At a time when the question of accommodation for migrants and refugees is more pressing than ever, we can but commend the initiative of the authors of this fine book, which provides readers with keys to understanding the history of photography, the history of life in Berlin at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the perennially thorny question of how to house the poorest city dwellers.

### **Bibliography**

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**Danièle Voldman** is a historian and a CNRS research fellow based at Paris-1 Panthéon–Sorbonne University. Her work focuses on contemporary cities from a social, architectural and urbanistic standpoint. Her recent publications concern the Parisian working classes in the interwar period (notably *La Garçonne et l’Assassin*, Paris, Payot, 2011). As the curator of a number of history exhibitions (including *Amours, guerres et sexualité, 1914-1945*, Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine (BDIC)/Musée des Invalides, 2007; and *1912-2012 : cent ans de logement social*, Saint-Denis, 2012), part of her work also focuses on the methodology of history exhibitions.

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**1904. Liebigstraße 25, Friedrichshain, building at rear of courtyard, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor**

**Main room:** L. 4 m [13'1"], W. 3,60 m [11'10"], H. 3 m [9'10"]. The dwelling is composed of a main room and a kitchen. The air is difficult to breathe; the naked floorboards are black with dirt, with rags and refuse in the corners. Seven people sleep in the main room. A straw mattress has been placed on a sofa, which has been extended using two chairs to accommodate four children, who sleep two by two and top-to-tail, covered by a light quilt, without sheets. The husband and wife sleep in the one and only bed. A four-week-old child, with tuberculosis, is lying in a stroller, covered with an old blanket saturated with sweat and urine. The parents say he cries day and night. To calm his crying, his brothers and sisters rock the stroller. The child receives no medical care whatsoever, as the father suffers from rheumatism and cannot work.



**1904. Liebigstraße 25, Friedrichshain, building at rear of courtyard, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor**

**Kitchen.** The woman sews sacks in the kitchen to earn enough money to feed her children. For 10 to 12 hours of work, she earns between 75 pfennigs and 1 mark. The room is only rarely heated, depending on the amount of money available to buy fuel.



**1905. Höcheröchstestraße 18, Friedrichshain, building at rear of courtyard, cellar**

**Living room.** A man with a lung condition, his wife, and three children live in the cellar: living room, bedroom, kitchen. Two of the children have “the English disease” (rickets); a three-year-old boy has bow legs. The small bedroom behind this room is so dark and damp that it is uninhabitable. The woman, to carry out her piecework, has to use an oil lamp.



Blitzlichtaufnahme.

Feinr. Lichte & Co. Phot. Berlin S.W. 48.

**1907. Kronprinzenstraße 2, Weissensee [today Borodinstraße]**

**Kitchen.** A wretched dwelling comprising a bedroom-cum-kitchen for a family composed of the husband, his wife, and their 10 children ranging in age from 14 to 1½. The oldest of the daughters is absent from this photograph, which does, however, include her grandmother.



**1908. Waldemarstraße 75, Kreuzberg, side wing, basement dwelling**

The apartment comprises a living room, a bedroom, and a kitchen. It is reached by descending a staircase of 14 steps. The rooms are dark and damp. H. 2.50 m [8'2"], with the floor 1.50 m [4'11"] beneath street level. An image of poverty and distress. The man has eye and lung conditions; two children have recently died.



Blitzlicht-Aufnahme

Heinr. Lichte & Co., Phot., Berlin SW. 48

**1911. Fürstenwalder Straße 3, Friedrichshain, side wing, basement dwelling**

**Main room.** This basement dwelling consists of a main room and a bedroom. The patient, who suffers from a lung condition, and his wife live primarily in the first room, which serves as their kitchen, bedroom, and living room. This room is so dark that it is only possible to read in front of the window. L. 4 m [13'1"], W. 3 m [9'10"], H. 2.55 m [8'4"] to 1.60 m [5'3"] beneath the level of the courtyard. The adjoining bedroom is occupied by two relatives.



**1913–1914. Möckenstraße 115, Kreuzberg, right-hand wing, garret**

Dwelling inhabited by a mother and her two sons. Light enters by a skylight. The toilet is located in the courtyard.