

Proposals for a Re-design of the Törten Settlement by Bauhaus Dessau (1926-1929)

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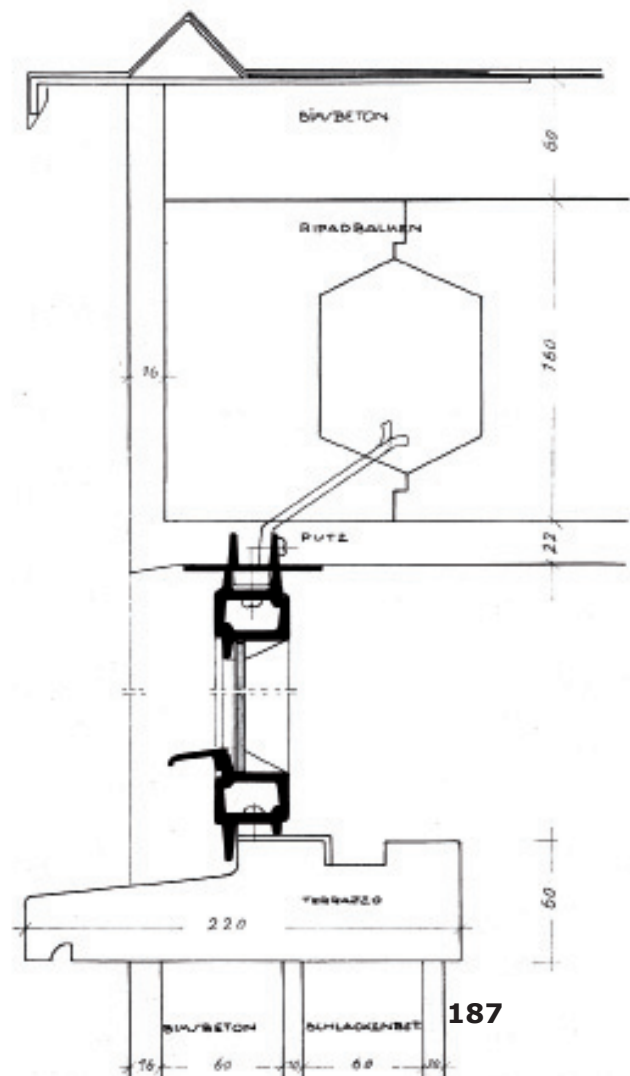
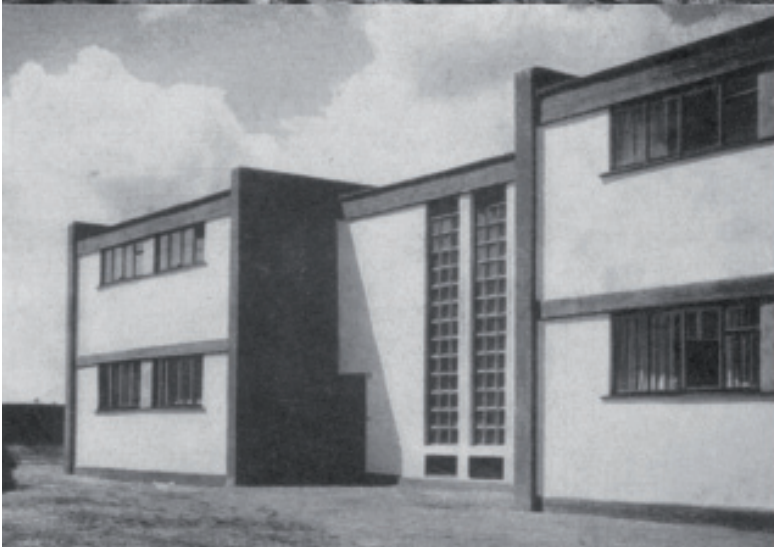
Introduction

In many respects the years 1926-1928 – when the Törten settlement was conceived and built – were decisive for Modern Movement development in Germany. Architects from the Modern Movement got powerful positions in city

planning (Berlin, Frankfurt), the *Werkbund* settlements enjoyed public interest and the *Bauhaus* design “factory” was established firmly in a new building in Dessau¹ under direction of

1. *Experiment Bauhaus. Das Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin (West) zu Gast im Bauhaus Dessau. Ausstellungskatalog*, Berlin: Bauhaus-

1. Images of Törten Settlement as presented in a report and by the Bauhaus (Source: Bericht über die Versuchssiedlung in Dessau. 1929)



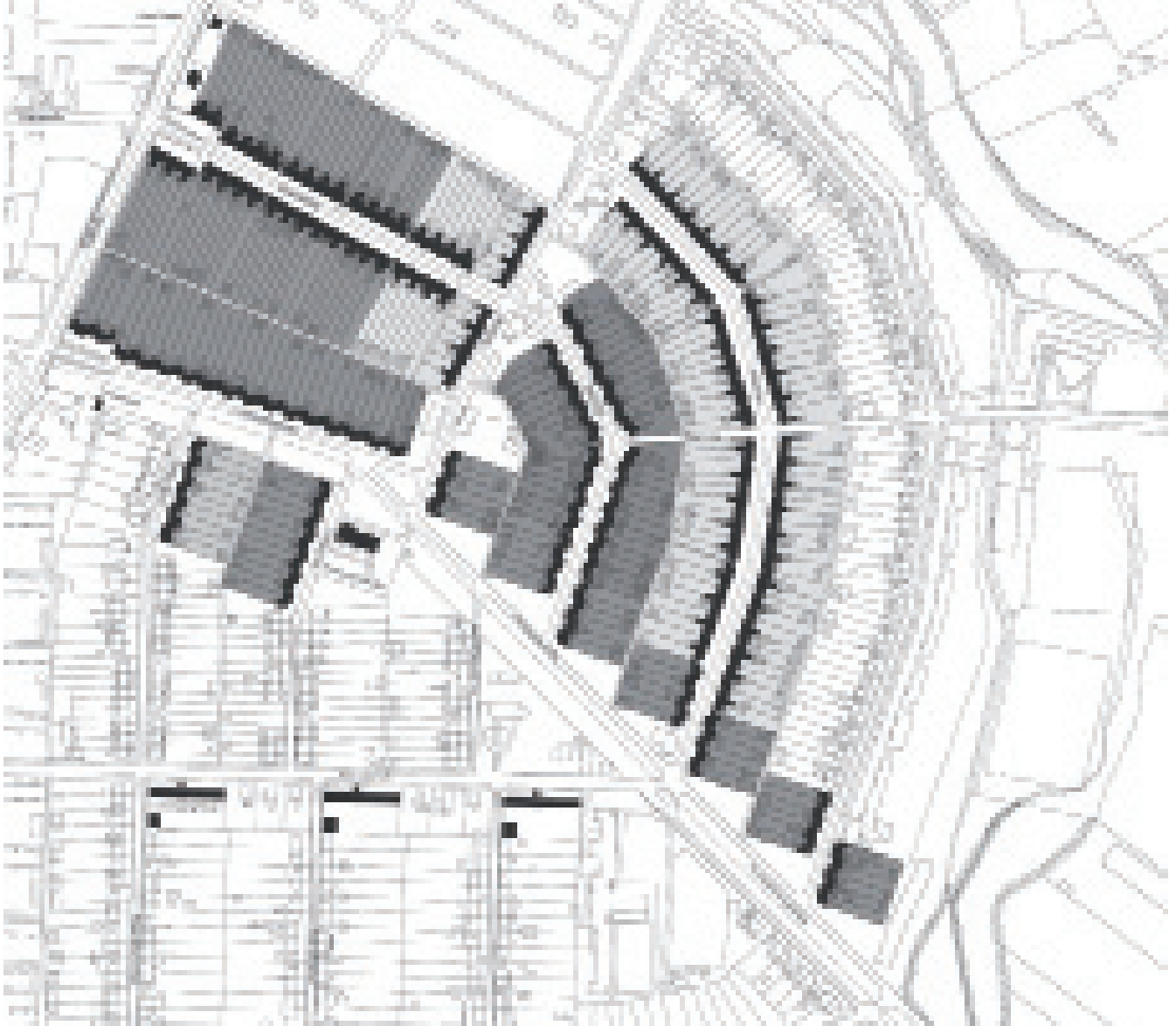
Walter Gropius (1883-1969). For the Modern Movement this gain of social power encouraged an experimental attitude towards projects to be realized.

However, other architects, with a decent knowledge of practical design, but lacking an architectural vision of similar impact, were opposed to the quick success of their radical colleagues². (Compare: Bauhütte, Hempel and a discussion by Zalivako.) They opted to gain mainstream architecture for conservative ideas,

Archiv Berlin 1988; Gropius Walter, *Internationale Architektur*, „Bauhausbücher 1“, München 1925 (Reprint Mainz/Berlin 1981); Gropius Walter, *Bauhausbauten Dessau*, „Bauhausbücher 12“, Fulda 1930 (Reprint Mainz 1974); Probst H., Schädlich C., *Walter Gropius*, Berlin 1986-1988.

2. Hempel H., *Vermeidet Mängel im Wohnungsbau!: ein Buch warnender Beispiele*, Berlin 1935; N. a., *Zur Propaganda neuer Versuchsbauten*, „Deutsche Bauhütte“, Jhg 33, 1929, Heft 12 (29.5.1929), p. 193-196; Zalivako A., *The Modern Movement and the Flat Roof Discussion*, „Climate and Building Physics in the Modern Movement“, Nr. 2168, 2005, (Proceedings of the 9th International DOCOMOMO Technology Seminar, June 24/25 2005, Löbau, preservation technology dossier 9, September 2006, Tomlow Jos (publisher), Wedebrunn O. (co-publisher), *Wissenschaftliche Berichte der Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz (FH)*, Heft 88, 2006 (Sonderheft) Nr. 2168-2179, hrsg. v. R. Hampel, Zittau 2006, p. 61-67.

2. Site plan of Törten settlement in Dessau with Type distribution. (Source: *Die Bauhausbauten in Dessau*. Red. A. Schwarzing, Dessau 2001)



and felt strengthened by the rising activities of national socialists.

Description

Törten settlement, with 314 dwellings, was the biggest Bauhaus project and Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus staff in Dessau conceived it with far-reaching decisions in respect to the design and production methods. As an early example of industrialized construction, reinforced concrete floor beams as well as concrete blocks for walls were produced on site. Uniform steel windows and doors were positioned in the facades in an irregular composition, an impression which was strengthened by the prevailing colors: grey, black and white.

The row houses were developed according to types (called *sietö*, recalling *Siedlung Törten*). The two-floor types show functional zoning of the household. Both a cooking kitchen and a washing kitchen were offered, with built-in equipment. Another concept of the architects provided for households to be economically semi-autarchic:

each dwelling had a big stretched garden lot and an out-door toilet, a compost room situated in an animal shed. Similar functions were divided throughout the split-level type with the washing kitchen in the basement. One could argue that the intended functional zoning for such a rather small house was disadvantageous by “over-defining”.

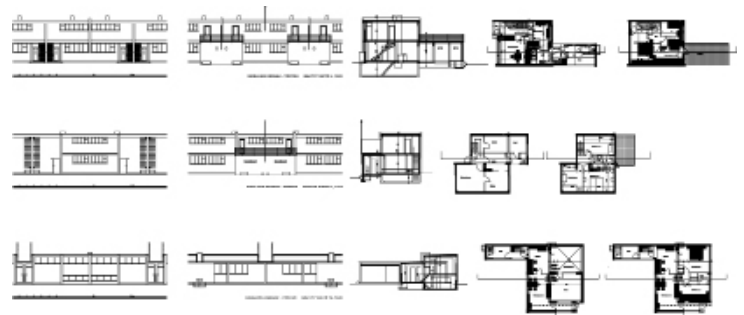
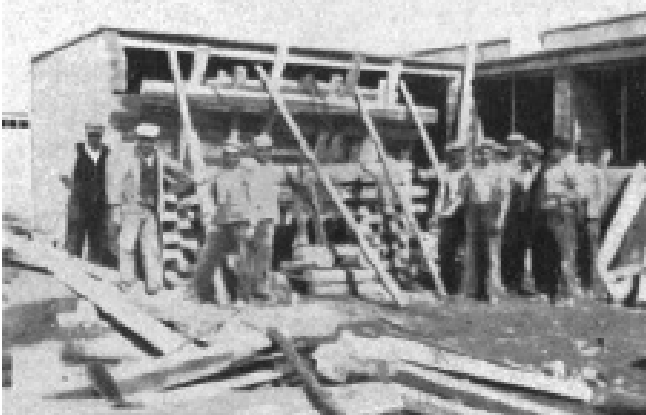
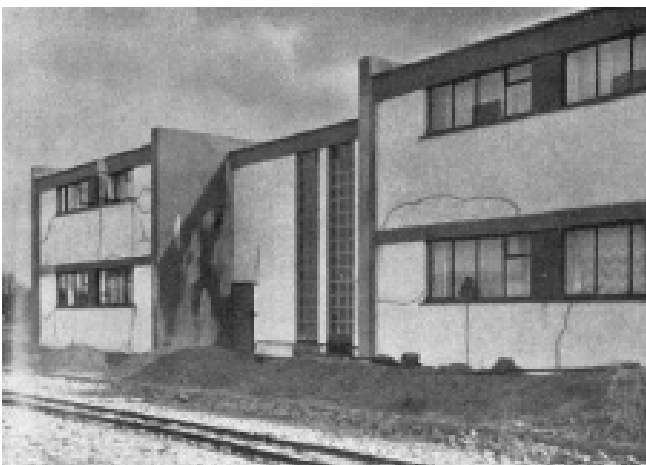
Structurally the houses were conceived as floors spanning between load bearing walls and the external walls were filled with light concrete blockwork. The roofs and also the blocks were of various materials and made by different techniques, in order to be tested experimentally under comparable conditions³.

Workmanship was much below what the designers had intended and official reports⁴ detected building faults, many of them concerning building physics (bad heat insulation as a result of too much glass area in steel frames, cracks in walls due to too freshly processed blocks, interior rain pipes without chance for repair).

3. Schwarting A., *Die Siedlung Dessau-Törten. Bauhistorische Aspekte und Folgerungen für den Umgang mit einem Baudenkmal der klassischen Moderne*, „Architectura“, 2001-01, nr 31, s. 27-48; Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau (Hg.), *Die Bauhausbauten in Dessau*, A. Schwarting (red.), Dessau 2001.

4. Kammler H. (ed.), Meyer-Ottens O., *Bericht über die Versuchssiedlung in Dessau*. „Reichsforschungsgesellschaft für Wirtschaftlichkeit im Bau- und Wohnungswesen“, e.V., Jhg 2, April 1929, Sonderheft Nr 7, Gruppe IV, Nr 4.

3. Images of Törten Settlement, showing massive cracks in the facades and the increased work for experimental solutions (Source: *Deutsche Bauhütte*, 29.5.1929 Heft 12).



4. Three house types of Törten settlement, from top, sietö I -1926, sietö II - 1927, sietö IV - 1928. Drawings retouched by Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH (Source: *Die Bauhausbauten in Dessau*. Red. A. Schwarting, Dessau 2001)

Subsequently the conservative press presented, with ample photographic documentation, the Törten settlement and Gropius in the worst possible light. They called him “propaganda architect”, pointing on the vast publicity activity of Bauhaus. Interesting in this respect is the important role played by advertisement (German: *Reklame*) in the correspondence around Gropius’ realizations for the Fagus Werke⁵.

Also the dwellers themselves were not content and they started in a do-it-yourself manner to change the plans and windows and tried to add insulation. The dwellers, among them workers of the modern Junkers steel works in Dessau, had expected a reasonable comfort level surpassing the rural life conditions actually offered.

Present situation

The Bauhaus buildings in Dessau were listed as UNESCO World Heritage but the attitude of the conservation authorities towards Törten settlement was rather uncertain compared to the careful treatment of the Bauhaus school and the *Meisterhäuser*: They approved new windows to be grouped and the facade color to be near to white and anthracite for frames. The overall impression of the settlement in 2007 is rather disappointing and full of technical and esthetical confusion.

A way to conserve Törten settlement

The goal of this paper is the search for a proper way to deal with a less successful example of the Modern Movement as far as its conservation is concerned. Realization of the proposed redesigns is not intended, but probably partly possible and as a fitting approach for the situation in Törten recommended by the author. Methodologically, the author opted for a design

5. Jaeggi, A.: *Fagus. Industrial Culture from Werkbund to Bauhaus*, Princeton Architectural Press, August 2000.

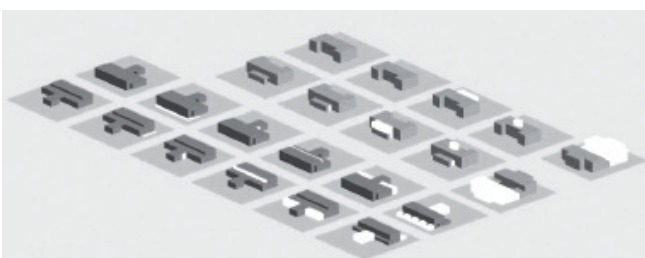


5. A street in Törten settlement, 2006. (Source: Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH, photo Ruth Hundeshagen)

workshop in which eight students (7th semester) had to present two or three proposals, dealing both with the row house types as well as with its urban setting. As a theoretical training the Bauhaus buildings in Dessau were visited. They learned about specific problems of restoration of buildings of the Modern Movement, read key texts, including conservative criticism, photographed the present settlement, talked to some dwellers and analyzed functionally the type plans. All this was only possible with help and instructions of the Bauhaus Dessau foundation (Monika Markgraf c.s.) and by the generous providing of recent plan reconstructions by Andreas Schwarting c.s. Subsequently a proper conservation strategy was developed departing from the presented data.

It would be quite interesting to discuss in depth the possibilities for conservation (reconstruction, critical reconstruction, technical improvements in recent stylistic design, stylistic anarchy, destruction and new planning) but the group eventually judged **re-design** to be the best concept. Re-design may be defined as the renewing of an existing design proposal, similar to a presentation of variant proposals, or the reworking of a plan at a specific moment of the design process by a successor. A certain sentimental feeling towards Modern Movement prevailed among the students and stylistic rules or shapes common for the Modern Movement were accepted. On the other hand, any

6. Re-design strategy, by adding volume in zones of cubic shape (Source: Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH, cad Nguyen Vu)



exaggerated admiration of the iconic figure of Walter Gropius was avoided, in order to keep options open for refreshing ideas. All this fits in the concept of sustainable conservation, in which the building substance is respected both as a material resource as well as with regard to its cultural impact. Modern Movement was seen as a building tradition of which such elements which cope with recent live conditions were simply accepted.

When the designs were ready, two students, Ruth Hundeshagen and Nguyen Vu, as well as myself, made an exhibition of most re-designs in an exhibition of 24 posters, preceded by an introduction. In this phase the graphic presentation was unified for a better comparison of the originals with the corresponding re-designs. The design proposals were corrected to some extent by the exhibition team, to make them more consistent with general requirements and norms. The first stage of the traveling exhibition, 20.10.2007 - 20.-1.2008, is the Schminke House in Löbau, a work by Hans Scharoun of 1933 and a major example of the organic modern architecture. From a didactic point of view the exhibition is rather aiming at students and general public, than at scholars.

Some design proposals

The main features of the re-designs deal with restructuring of the spatial organization, in which former food stores, animal sheds or washing kitchens are occupied by new functions. An important mean for the re-designs was to extend the houses by zone-like cubic volumes. Often the living room was enlarged towards the garden with much glazing, of an insulated double-glass quality. Another concept was to include new elements with an autarchic structure. As a general impression one can observe that most street facades were left similar to the original Gropius' design.



Street-level parking

An important difference when compared with the pre-war time is a great demand for private parking in our times. Many architects or conservation specialist tend to neglect this aspect and the result is wild parking, which is definitely worse aesthetically in dense urban sprawl than an ordered solution.

In the Gropius' plan the first executed part contains a street with an entrance situation defined by a widened street profile. In a proposal by student Thomas Vopel this area is intended for trees and a large parking space. The row of trees implies a screen of urban dimension, which marks the entrance situation but at the same time conceals the car park. On the other hand, parking space in the street itself is reduced to

re-design shows how such a concentration can be reasonably solved, and at the same time such a building complex may offer space for leisure activities on the second floor. The garden space is reserved for barbecues or play. Of course the initial dwelling type is hardly recognisable, but the street image of continuous low blocks is maintained. Please note that the demographic situation in the former East Germany allows for the so-called *Rückbau*, which means pulling down buildings in order to reduce the dwelling density in a city part. Of course in other social or economic situations conservation efforts should be aimed at renovation without a loss of functionality.

Houses

The student proposals accept that an exaggerated pragmatic strategy of changing individual houses may cause an unpleasant chaotic overall result. Instead of a theoretical re-design of all types, within a uniform stylistic garment, they offer solutions for small row house ensembles, specific for an urban situation. Thus, individual changes in volume extension or façade rhythms appear in connection with recognisable urban conditions and may hardly be interpreted as accidental. An example is the proposal by Matthias Warz for a row of six houses, bordering a small piazza with a store on one side. Pairs of



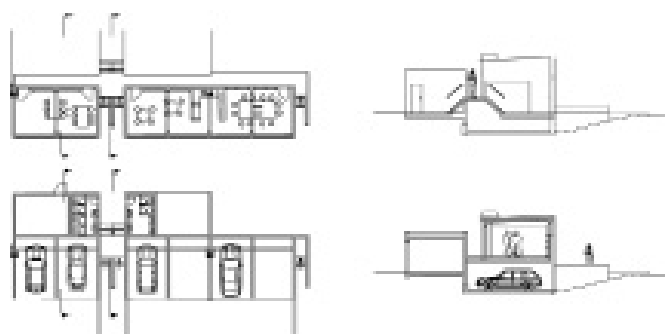
7. Urban space and parking solutions (Source: Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH, Thomas Vopel and Nguyen Vu)

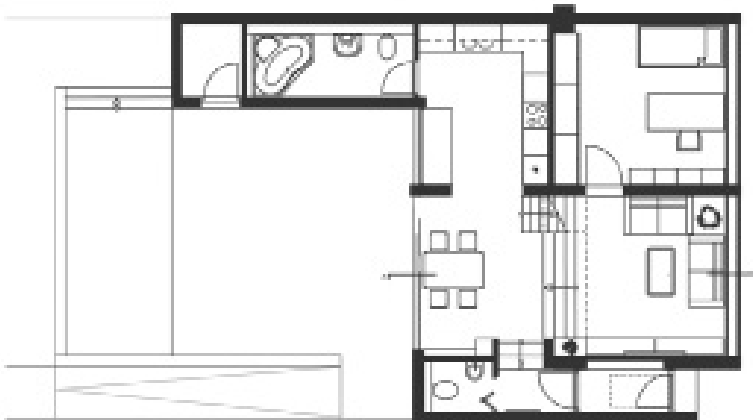
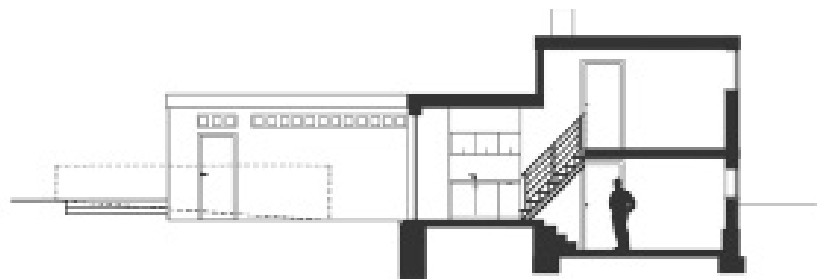
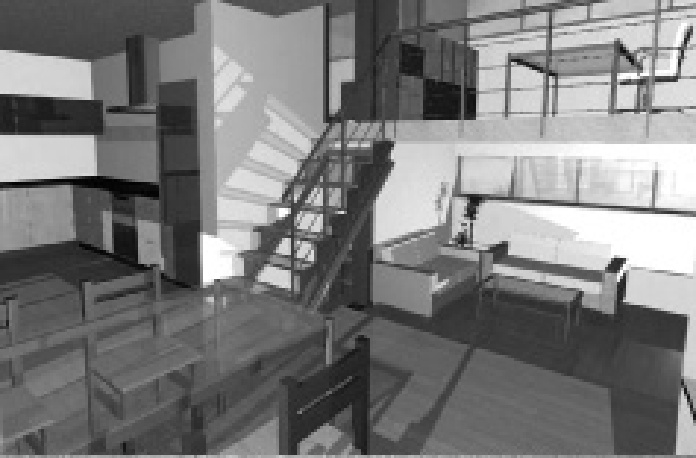
a minimum, giving space to originally intended small trees and lawns. A parking solution by Vu is to use a corner site, in which situation part of private gardens may be sacrificed for this goal.

Also the traditional solution of Törten settlement has been accepted. The deep gardens between the ring roads have been shortened and lay-bys or garages find place at their ends with still enough area for a access road.

As a radical proposal by Franki Knecht might be seen the idea, to put the cars in the basement space of the former split-level dwellings, connected to the street by ramps. The

8. Re-designed split-level type (sietö IV - 1928) with parking in the basement, combined with leisure space in the second floor. (Source: Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH, Franka Knecht)





9. Re-designed split-level house type (sietö IV - 1928) with lowered living space. (Source: Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH, Nguyen Vu)

houses may be converted into luxury dwellings, with an interior parking and terraces. The street facade keeps much of the original aspect.

Of special interest is the split-level house type, with rather small original mezzanine heights, especially in the basement. Since the water level was 160 cm below ground level, these cellars are kept quite low. The students have solutions in which the cellars are deeper, expecting that this is technically possible, also in terms of economy.

An interesting consideration of a proposal by Nguyen Vu is to deepen the level of both the living and the terraced garden floor and open the cellar space towards the living, as well as a gallery above. In this way the living area becomes quite spacious.

Semi-public buildings

The concept of enlarging the row houses by adding a floor is seen quite sceptically by conservation policy. Recent urban planning in Holland shows good results for such a growing-house concept, but in the Törten settlement proportions could suffer if a third floor were added on a row of two-storey houses. A design by Ruth Hundeshagen offers a solution in which only a small extension is put on the roof, with utmost care to reduce its volume as far as possible. The building is a kindergarten within

three neighboring houses with a new staircase of oval plan. The children may climb to the third floor and find themselves in a sub-marine look-out.

Nowadays, flexible working time, allows dwellers to stay near home through part of the day. A coffee and cake shop are thus desirable services for small settlements as social gathering points. An interesting concept may be to transform a double house for such purposes. In the proposal by Marjeta Kuralt, the roof level has been heightened so that occupational safety and technical standards be met in the second-floor. The exterior is changed somewhat, which coupled with graphic additions of advertisement and a heightened podium terrace along the street, strengthens the image of a semi-public

10. Redesign of a pairwise house type (sietö II - 1927) for a coffee shop. (Source: Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH, Marjeta Kuralt)





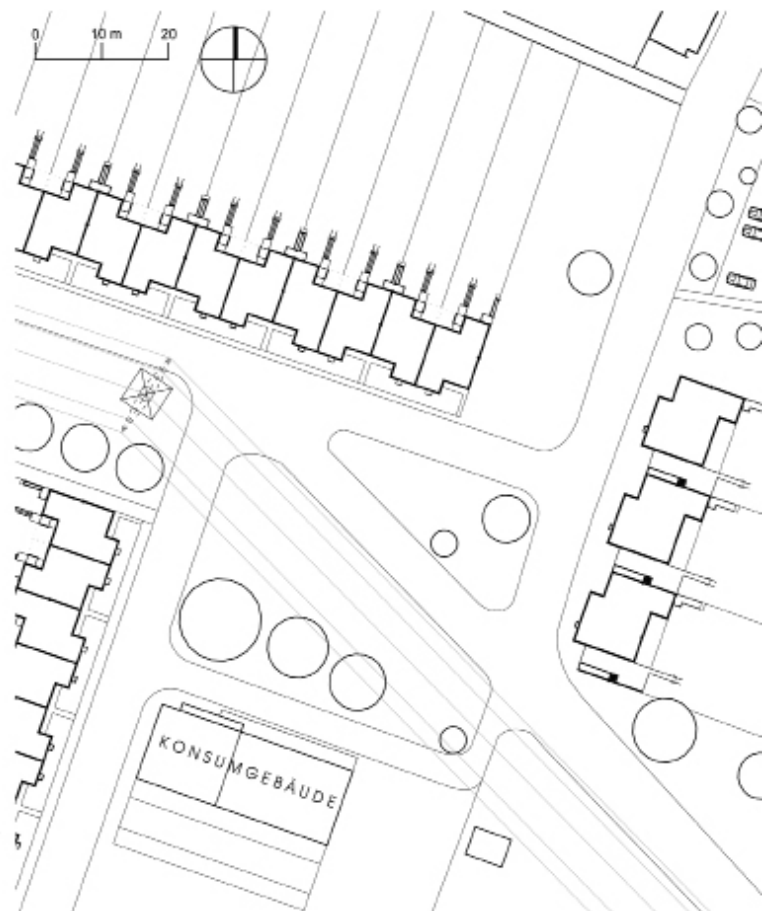
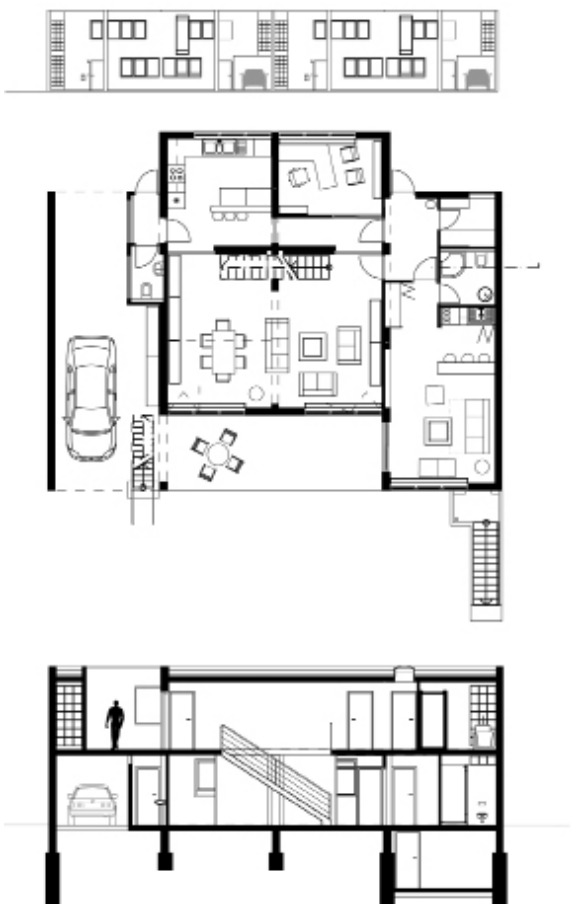
11. Redesign of a three house row (sietö II - 1928) as a kindergarten. (Source: Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH, Ruth Hundeshagen)

function within an otherwise uniform house row. An important clue to the site of the coffee shop is a short footpath leading to the garden side of the house block. In such way practical delivery is possible from the backside, also with an option to go from front to the rear on foot. Guests may find parking opportunities also in the former garden space and reach the coffee shop through the footpath.

The design workshop *Bauhaus Siedlung Törten - neues NEUES Bauen - Re-Design* was realized by architectural students of the Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH 2006-2007: Rico Hoffmann, Ruth Hundeshagen, Franka Knecht, Marjeta Kuralt, Vu Nguyen, Maik Strube, Thomas Vopel, Matthias Warz. The exhibition of the same name was presented by Ruth Hundeshagen and Nguyen Vu. Coordination by Prof. Dr.-Ing. Jos Tomlow.

For kindly providing information and historical documents we thank Monika Markgraf of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation and DOCOMOMO-Deutschland.

12. Re-designed pair of two-storey type houses (sietö II - 1927) with inner parking space and terrace. (Source: Hochschule Zittau/Görlitz FH, Matthias Warz)



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