

## Living in variable floor plans

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The Bartningallee 9 (at the beginning still: Brückenallee 23) is the middle one of the five tower-like solitary high-rises (Punkthochhäuser) parallel to the S-Bahn. Interbau 1957 wanted to show modern building in all phases as a building exhibition, and Objekt 18 is one of those buildings that could be viewed in shell construction at that time; it was not ready for occupancy until the end of 1958.

(...) The main part of the storey loads and the wind forces are absorbed by two pairs of concrete walls crossing at right angles (bulkheads) and the staircase walls. A characteristic feature of the 15 upper floors is the use of prefabricated elements from the factory for the outer walls, which were only assembled on site: Reinforced concrete columns as pendulum columns and double-shell wall panels. Assembly was carried out from inside the building so that no scaffolding was required. This should also keep any subsequent repairs to the facade cost-effective.

The 7 m wide foyer on the ground floor with its equally wide staircases to the south and north of the building is one of the most spacious entrances to the houses in the Hansaviertel and is considered to be their most beautiful. This is particularly evident at night and when, in addition to the standard lighting, additional light strips are switched on that lead – like a capital – around the two load-bearing, free-standing walls at the top. These in turn are completely covered with anthracite-coloured artificial stone slabs to match the terrazzo floor.

In 1957, the garbage disposal system (“garbage chute”) was expressly mentioned as a comfortable feature of the house. Today, it is mainly used on the ground floor to immediately dispose of the daily advertising garbage. The modern garbage separation – with only one chute – has long since led to the establishment of a garbage dump behind the house: there, where originally the carpet beaters, which were again rarely used, stood. The letter flaps on the apartment doors of all floors remind us that the mail was once delivered conveniently on the floors. The post office found this too time-consuming; at any rate, the 75 letterboxes in the foyer area were just as little part of the architect's design intention as the three pipe cladding boxes that had become necessary subsequently or today's horizontal division of the glass pane in the main entrance door by a wooden beam (it was too often damaged). For the ground floor there was a caretaker's apartment, a large storage room for prams (later the caretaker's workshop, now combined with the apartment) and two offices (one now a doctor's surgery; the other initially used for communal washing facilities and as a room for hanging and drying laundry, then converted into a storage room for prams, bicycles, scooters and toboggans, now the caretaker's workshop and office). As the house grew older with its inhabitants, stair railings were added on the outside and a wooden driveway for wheelchairs was added on the north side. Despite some wear and tear, the changing tastes of the times and increased safety requirements (e.g. when installing inner doors in the lifts), much of the house has been preserved in the style of the construction period. There are owners, who can refer with a certain pride to still own all light switches and sockets, door handles, window bars, ribbed radiators, etc. in the original design and possibly even a cork linoleum floor (depending on the living area held in different colors) that has been preserved under carpet for decades and thus well preserved.

The unique special feature of the house, however, lies precisely in the change. One of the main concerns of the architect was to keep the floor plans so variable that all or almost all walls within the apartment are only partitions and not load-bearing walls and can therefore be removed or changed according to the wishes of the tenants. “Only kitchens, bathrooms and WC's

retain their fixed place due to the continuous installations”, says the official catalogue of Interbau in 1957. This restriction has also been lifted in the meantime, and anyone who accepts a small step in their apartment can of course also lay installations and especially sewers with a slight gradient inside the apartment in the raised floor – leaks, however, become particularly expensive. The architect had already suggested different floor plans at the time: “In order to illustrate the possibilities of variability, the normal type (71 m<sup>2</sup> floor space), of which 56 apartments are built, was shown in six different versions [...]. The room layout can also be changed later at little cost, if it should become necessary due to the changed needs of the residents, because there is no need to install installations or to install beams for the partition walls. In this way, this high-rise residential building meets needs that previously could only be met with high costs or relatively expensive folding and sliding walls” (ibid.).

Of the six residential floor plan variants outlined in the catalogue, the “two-bed type for independent practice: living room, one bedroom, kitchen, waiting room and consultation room” was offered on the first floors or the “four-bed type for parents with two children: Living room, two bedrooms, enlarged loggia (‘green room’) and dining kitchen”. However, these suggestions met with just as little demand as the “six-bed type for parents with four children” (Wiederaufbau Hansaviertel, issue 4, Darmstadt 1957, p. 217). The idea of a “green room”, a loggia intervening in the living space on which the family can stay, work and exercise together, has been pursued by the architect since his studies. In 1957 he wrote about it (“Wie soll die Wohnung unserer Zeit aussehen?” (What should the apartment of our time look like?), in: *Der Tagesspiegel*, Berlin, 6. 7. 1957), and in one of his own apartments, around 1940, the couch in the loggia could be pulled out to the sleeping place and the loggia closed to the outside with large window sashes (which is not permitted in Bartningallee 9 for reasons of preservation, i.e. not to change the architect's concept).

In the course of the public discussion about affordable rents in the new Hansaviertel, object 18 was taken over into the programme of “social housing construction”; in addition to long waiting lists, the conditions for moving in were a housing entitlement certificate and an interest-free tenant loan. The first owner, Terrassenhaus-Bau GmbH, only had uniform standard floor plans produced, which remained unchanged until the end of the social commitment, the sale of the house and the conversion into condominiums in 2000. Inevitably, because the landlord had too little rental income to invest in structural changes due to the limited social rents, she could not even choose her tenants herself, and the tenants, on the other hand, had no reason to invest in other people's property and would generally not have been able to do so financially either. From around 2000 onwards, the actual idea of the architect of variable floor plans came to the fore on a larger scale. Apartments in the Hansaviertel are still in great demand because of their central location and the quality of life at the Tiergarten, but families are now used to larger living spaces than in the 1950s. This is why childless couples or singles often move into the apartments at present, who would like a more generous interior design and like to remove walls completely or partially or prefer other individual cuts. A larger financial power than thought of by the architect makes possible today even if necessary the acquisition of two adjacent dwellings and their unification to a twice as large dwelling with break-through at a not supporting wall, whereby the desires of the new owners – up to the floor home sauna – much liberty remains. Unaware of the health-promoting intentions of the architect, his idea of a loggia extended to a “green room” has not yet been realized.

The attic storey (15<sup>th</sup> floor) is designed as a “staggered storey”. Like the ground floor below (mezzanine floor), it closes off the building structure at the top with a circumferential terrace corridor which, however, is interrupted by a partition wall between each of the five apartments. Here, the pendulum columns are particularly effective as quasi free-standing column elements. Four of the five apartments on this top floor, which were expressly created in the “studio character” (Interbau catalogue), thus have a significantly smaller heated living space than the lower 14 floors; only in the case of the central south apartment, which in any case is only approx. 49 sqm in size, is the principle of the loggia area running across the entire width of the apartment (here: 7 m) identical with the other floors. The four flats of almost the same size at the corners of the house

originally had a larger living room and two half rooms of 7.5 sqm each (e.g. 1 children's room, 1 parents' bedroom) in addition to the hallway, bedroom, bathroom and open kitchen. The window areas here are indeed more extensive than on the other floors, only in the area of the two half rooms there is half a wall side without windows (e.g. to place a cupboard). The window frames otherwise merge seamlessly or are interrupted only by a narrow column or the room partition wall, so that these four studio apartments are much brighter than all the others. However, the balcony terraces running around the corners are usually very windy and less user-friendly than the small loggias closed on the sides. The unobstructed view from the upper floors to the city of Berlin is intoxicatingly beautiful and a visitor attraction. From the interior staircase on the north side, however, not much of the city can be seen, so that the few strangers who "smuggled" themselves into the house on New Year's Eve, for example, with the hope of a fascinating view, are extremely disappointed.

Gustav Hassenpflug has designed the facade of the house relatively simple and without any obvious conspicuousness. Originally, as model photos show, the upper four corners were receding and without a roof. A general view drawing by the architect dated 30. 6. 1956 (Kunstabibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz Berlin) allows the interpretation that these upper corners of the building were alternatively closed in the outer form as they are today, but were conceived with a grid field opened upwards in the roof surface. The first, sixth and eleventh floors only have a loggia in the small middle apartment. On the one hand, this means an interesting optical structuring function for the façade, which – in contrast to the model – now looks "third divided" on the west and east sides and not too uniform. On the other hand, these apartments (larger in the heated area) represent an alternative for the tenants. Indeed, in the history of the building there have been various changes of residence within the building: Tenants of the balcony-less large apartments have shrunk and are now happy about their sunny loggia; tenants whose families expanded but who wanted to stay in the house now saw the larger living space of the apartment without loggia as an advantage. The architectural historian Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper describes in her book about the Hansaviertel the effect of Hassenpflug's facade design as follows:

"On closer inspection, his skyscraper, which at first glance appears practical but conventional, turns out to be an attempt to accentuate a style not otherwise represented in the Hansaviertel. The floor-to-ceiling columns of light grey tinted lightweight concrete and the false ceilings form a perfectly regular, three-dimensional facade grid, behind which the dark grey parapets and wall panels of prefabricated elements, as well as the windows and loggias, recede. The corner supports are not highlighted, so that the four facades meet almost framelessly. Although the horizontal elements are much wider and more prominent than the vertical ones, the effect is similar to that of a 'curtain' façade" (p. 72).

Even if the assembly of the facade elements does not correspond to the construction of the "curtain" facades, the author rightly sees the visual effect as a quotation from this then quite modern facade design. In particular, she refers to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's "famous Lake Shore apartment buildings in Chicago, which at the time were almost revered as icons of high-rise construction". Hassenpflug shows this in his 1966 book "Scheibe, Punkt und Hügel. Interessingly enough, "New residential skyscrapers" does not, however, depict Mies van der Rohe's "Lafayette Apartments" in Detroit (pp. 62f.). A small oversight in Dolff-Bonekämper's book about the Hansaviertel, highly recommended for reading, should be corrected here: The six design variants of the standard floor plan of the apartment, which is printed in the Interbau catalogue, among other things, were inadvertently rotated incorrectly and assigned to the northeast corner of the house. They refer, however, to the southwest corner, as shown by the missing windows to the staircase required for the northeast corner and the missing closed wall infills on the narrow side instead of two windows.

Hassenpflug's building "is described as one of the most interesting buildings in Berlin's Hansaviertel quarter in terms of both construction and living function" (Christian Grohn: Gustav Hassenpflug. Architecture, design, teaching. 1907–1977 Düsseldorf 1985, p. 114; after others: Architecture and housing, 1960, H. 4, p. 94f.).

### The architect

Gustav Hassenpflug (1907–1977) founded the “Altenberger Werkstätten” in Altenberg near Cologne, where he designed and built simple wooden furniture and furnishings, after his journeyman’s examination as a carpenter with like-minded people. He participated in the exhibition “Gesolei” in Düsseldorf in 1926 with such room furnishings, where he became acquainted with the works of the Bauhaus intended for industrial serial production. He then studied painting, furniture design and industrial design at the Bauhaus Dessau in 1927 and 1928, where he quickly became an employee of Marcel Breuer. In his estate, he kept records of lessons with Moholy-Nagy, Kandinsky and Klee (now in the Bauhaus Archive, Berlin). As early as 1928 he published an essay entitled “möbel aus holz oder metall oder?” (furniture of wood or metal, or?) in the 4<sup>th</sup> issue of today’s famous Bauhaus magazine. Later he repeatedly published books on the subject: “Möbel aus Stahlrohr und Stahlblech” (1935), “Baukastenmöbel” (1949), “Stahlmöbel” (1960) and “Stahlmöbel für Krankenhaus und ärztliche Praxis” (1963), as well as numerous essays. Also about painting, especially his book “Abstrakte Maler lehren” (1959). In the third and fourth semesters Hassenpflug then studied architecture and urban planning with Hannes Meyer and Mart Stam, whereby he became enthusiastic about Meyer’s social and biological commitment to the new residential building, which was not supposed to be a “living machine, but a biological apparatus for mental and physical needs”.

From 1929 Hassenpflug worked as a freelance architect in Berlin and as an employee of Marcel Breuer (participation in the Deutsche Werkbundausstellung in Paris 1930 and in the Bauausstellung Berlin 1931). In 1931 he joined Ernst May’s urban planning group in Moscow, where he participated in the “General Development Plan for Greater Moscow”. From 1934 to 1945 he worked again in Berlin and in Switzerland, designing residential buildings and business furnishings and as a permanent consultant to large furniture companies. Shortly before the end of the war he worked together with Egon Eiermann on a hospital building in Berlin; in 1945 he took over the management of the reconstruction of destroyed Berlin hospitals on behalf of Prof. Sauerbruch and wrote the monographs “Das Gesundheitswesen in der Bauplanung Berlins” (Healthcare in Berlin’s construction planning) and “Handbuch für den neuen Krankenhausbau” (Handbook for new hospital construction) together with Prof. Dr. med. Paul Vogler. From 1946 Hassenpflug taught as a full professor of urban planning in Weimar. Later he headed the Landeskunstschule in Hamburg, which he transformed into the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste in 1955. From 1956 (until 1972) he taught as a full professor at the Technical University of Munich. In addition to numerous buildings (Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Helgoland...), many pieces of furniture, unrealised designs and the book publications mentioned above, Gustav Hassenpflug’s oeuvre also includes a wealth of essays and manuscripts, especially on urban planning issues.