

Gliding On the Surface of Domestic Life

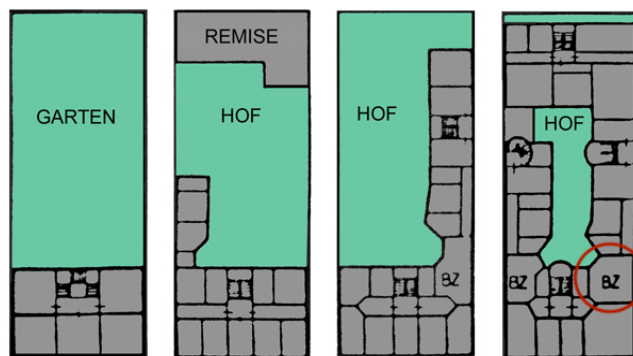
Fragments of its Morphological Existence

By Amir Saifullin

I am surprised by its appearance.

A sun puddle — a spot of light that appears on a surface as a result of reflection of sunlight, which forms the concentration of converging beams of light in a small limited area — is 'sunny bunny' (солнечный зайчик) in Russian. Growing up there, alongside the shores of Volga River, it was one of our great games — my cat and mine — to chase these around. There were plenty of sunny bunnies in our always well-lit flat in a *Khrushchyovka* tenement — a typical cost-efficient pre-fabricated panel building from the Khrushchev era.¹ Gliding the surfaces of the late Soviet furniture ensembles, bouncing off the GDR china imported from Dresden and inherited from my grandmother, which she proudly exhibited behind a glassed shelf, and which my father left there rather indifferently (*'where else would we put it?' I hear him thinking*) or maybe out of some sort of generational respect (*'she valued this'*) after she died. I wonder if this 24-piece orchestra of china has ever been used by either of them — when I once asked my grandmother, she said, it was too precious to use. *A similarly looking set is now listed at 49 Euros on Ebay. However, expensive equals not precious, and 49 euros would be more than what her pension was at the time.* As much as this arrangement made for a tiresome, suffocating view for a young boy, the sunny bunnies were there to excite our imagination.

I am surprised by the appearance of the sunny bunny that landed in front of me, on the white popcorn wall opposite the bed where I am now lying, many years separated from these memories, emerged from their captivating grip, to find myself in our, this time my partner's and mine, flat in Berlin. *The room where the sun spot has appeared also has its typological name — 'Berliner Zimmer' (Berlin room), as does the building, it is a part of — 'Mietkaserne' (the rental barracks). It is precisely the defining feature of Berliner Zimmer that makes me being surprised by the appearance of the sun spot — typically, it is a large long room with a single window at the corner looking out at a tiny stain of court, hence the defining feature — dimly lit.*



On the left: Google Street View of the front house, ours is behind it.

On the right: Transformation of the Berlin *Mietkaserne* and the emergence of *Berliner Zimmer*, indicating its

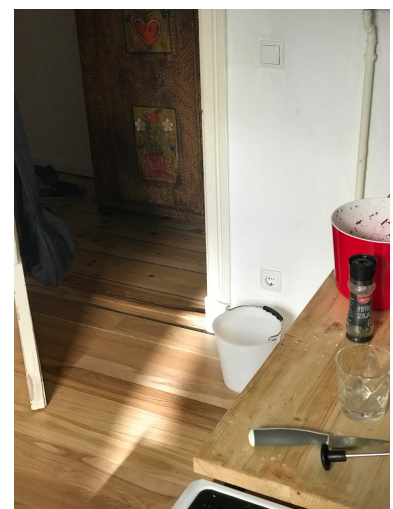


This kaleidoscope of memories and associations, set in motion by a tiny glimpse of light, is making me return not only to what I think is my past, I am noticing now, but also to the history of the space I live now. The structure of the room made out of high ceiling with a little circle of stucco around the lamp at centre, wooden floor with disruption at the corner, where a coal-heated oven used to be until taken out, windows with brass-cast handlers and geometrically carved door — the only remaining elements that let me relate to, imagine a relation to its previous renters.

If the building's tectonics are holding the room in tact, they also keep the past from collapsing, as if it were a Giordano Bruno-like mnemonic system, in which memories are stored in imaginary architectural unites, that one needs to enter to retract them.² A man of twenty-something or thirty-something lived here before us, maybe a year or two, but behind him the chain of history remains obscured to me. We would not know of his existence as well, had he not left some holes on the walls and a pack of tobacco on the floor which he came to pick up at some point, *but the walls, he never patched them, I realise now, noticing the holes.* In Berlin, before new tenants move in, those who move out are also expected to move out any trace of their existence (*it is different in Russia, where you normally would rent a furnished flat, often with carpets on the walls to much regret of young people who want it to be kak v Berline – like in Berlin*). There are obvious practical reasons behind such an eviction of self and past, but maybe this is also a moment where an ontological setting shines through.³ In relation to magical thinking of certain indigenous tribes Mircea Eliade writes that there is a certain ontological hierarchy of past inherent to it — the empirical, everyday life consisting of such reproduction activities as work and sex is irrelevant and so can be forgotten, whereas the mythical — such as events of the creation, predating the history — have ontological and real significance as the only events worth remembering — and reliving through rituals.⁴ Eliade is sure that a modern person while living now *in history*, still relies on myths that stabilise one's existence. Thus, a striking fit between Eliade's conception of *hierophany*, manifestation of the sacred, and Berliners's living habits can be observed: by constantly refurbishing, i.e. resetting the life anew, a Berlin tenant obliterates the past, exposing

history as irrelevant. What remains of *real* significance, however, is the framework of one's existence, the structures of *Altbau*, as one starts anew in a pre-given architectural setting. This formal structure of *Altbau*, then — as highly in demand on the market as it is — becomes the manifestation of the sacred to which one returns and of the real which gives form to living. However, this form is historically conditioned, and in ignoring its history, one might not realise the conditions of one own's living.

'Sun light is a rare appearance in this flat' was the first what we established when we moved here last October. In fact, it is so rare that most days we will not notice its presence. At least four plants — rosemary and I believe mint — have died in the first week, a few more — later. Those who survived, have adapted and etiolated, meaning they have changed their patterns of growths, as well as their form, having bended and curved towards the window, desperate for light. Because of its scarcity, I came up with a game, jokingly at first, less so in the process — documenting the sun spots with my phone camera whenever they appear. This rather ridiculous collection of rare sun light appearances has become an archive of our everyday life. I have not told her yet, she will have found out when she will have proofread this text, but I think of these photographs in terms of a manifestation of what my partner calls Emotional-Infrastructural Labour in her dissertation — as an Althusserian reproductive infrastructure as, I quote my partner, 'the emotional or invisible work that is being spent in the void between (infra)structural expectations and individual conditions in order to prepare the individual (us) to fulfil those expectations and to participate in capitalist structures and society.' Or, as I interpret it, noticing in any form the ephemere and the ostensibly invisible, lying on the surface, amongst the daily routine, that maintains functionality of the everyday, thus making sure it does not fall apart. *Now that I am at distance from these photographs, I like to think they at least brought joy to the person who made them.*



Much has changed since the time the *Altbau* we live in was erected in 1907 but some templates of domestic life must have remained the same. So, I can recognise ourselves in the letter



of Friedrich Engels he wrote after visiting 1893 Wilhelm Liebknecht, a prominent socialist leader in his similarly cut Berlin flat, in which he refers to a room like ours as 'a dive bar, with hardly any trace of window, wherein Berliners spent most of their time.'⁵ While there is misery in the working-class tenements everywhere, he went on, but 'nowhere in the rest of the world one would find this refuge of the obscureness, of the stinky air and of a comfortably enjoying oneself there Berlin philistine.' *The same article where I have found this anecdote and referenced in the last sentence describes popularity of the Berlin Altbauten among young people today in terms of 'renaissance,' in the period of which the dive bar flat of the type we live in has apparently become 'a loft-like character' that makes it 'a centrepiece of the desirable Altbau-flat in the booming Berlin.'*

The origins of the building form *Mietkaserne* are similar to any other tenement in the world. Like any other, it was an architectural response to the needs brought upon rapid urbanisation and industrialisation at the half of the 19th century.⁶ Likewise, the *Berliner Zimmer* is a consequence of the development of the *Mietkaserne* from one front house with a garden behind it in its beginnings to a densely built complex across the edges of the remaining ground, thus necessitating a transition room from the front and side houses, leaving it only a small opening for a window facing the court with no sun light access due to the opposite building. What made form of Berlin mass housing special is that it was inhabited by the working and the bourgeois classes alike, albeit in different boroughs.⁷ The same form of *Mietkaserne* was built on noble Kurfürstendamm in Charlottenburg for the high society, only extravagantly decorated with ornaments and plastic, and for the workers of the countless fabrics in Kreuzberg, held simple in exterior. Surely, the forms of lives were incomparable despite the identical forms of building — they vastly differed in density of inhabitants, infrastructural equipment which meant made for contrasting hygienic situation. That everyday living experience could not be more disparate could be made clear with reference to the

Berliner Zimmer, a byproduct of *Mietkaserne*. What for the working people was a dark, overcrowded kitchen, and a stinking bedroom in the same space, for the upper-class families was an area of societal gathering, a salon, or a library.



Another difference — in aesthetic appearance — was evaporating upon subsequent changes in forms. If at their origin, working class *Mietkaserne* was unpretentiously plain, then by the time our building was erected, the stucco has become a common place inside, and outside various ornaments, little towers and plastic. This transformation in appearance was significant enough to caught the attention of Lu Märten (1879-1970), an unjustly forgotten socialist feminist theorist, so she wrote an article on *Mietkaserne* in 1911, referring to these tenements as 'a mass grave of lost aesthetic values.'⁸ Märten's account is here of particular interest. She, living in precarity herself, was engaged in the struggles of working class, not only in the fabric but also at home, being adamant to develop proletarian aesthetic defined through relation and application of art to the everyday of the working and poor. In the emergence of ornaments, she saw an unconscious attempt to reproduce 'disinterested,' bourgeois aesthetic norms and forms, foreign to the world of the workers. In rejecting the bourgeois forms of life, she nevertheless accepted the *Mietkaserne* as a building form that was not a 'spontaneous product of new forms of life' [...] but emerged out of complicated, conflicting interests of those who had to live and those who could let them live.' Yet the workers should not replicate the living habits they are unable to reproduce within giving structures. Instead, Märten called for rearrangement and adopting the structures to their own needs. In an earlier 1904 article 'Centralisation of the Householdkeeping', Märten offered a rearrangement of living habits beyond aesthetics that would liberate working class women from the burden of housekeeping:

Because it is absurd to think that in the long run the majority of women would be able to pursue their profession, their bill-paying employment and, in addition, to fulfil all the duties that the individual economy requires, supervision of children etc., without to take mental and physical damage and without discriminating one activity at the expense of the other.⁹

To alter this exhaustion, she proposed, for example, to establish in the *Mietkaserne* one centralised kitchen, instead of 'having 30 women working on 30 ovens in narrow, wet and stinking spaces', and where the cooking would be done in shifts and justly paid, and subsequently consumed either commonly in designated common rooms or privately at home. Likewise, for the daily children care, she proposed to have a common *Mietkaserne* kindergarten on the first floor. While this might have been perceived as utopian fantasy at the time, these ideas were became signature features of the realised later avant-garde housing projects, as most famously in Moisei Ginzburg's *Narkomfin* building in Moscow (1928-32) or Le Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation* in Marseille (1947-52). Despite horrible hygienic conditions in Berlin mass housings, Märten, however, did not call for their demolition and building new forms, as was desired by the avant-gardists, but to re-organise the everyday living of the working people within the existing ones — much as the Berlin wealthy adopted dark *Berliner Zimmer* to their needs.

Already at this point, being still only indicated in fragments, themselves crumbled and cracked, there appear nevertheless shapes of a striking contrast regarding (domestic) forms of life: one calls for constant renewal, reset and return, in anticipation of re-entering prehistorical certainties of existence. The illusion of arranging your own life, from scratch, is bought, however, by the ignorance of historical struggles, by which the inhabited form of life is conditioned. The other, it seems, accepts the violence and misery of historical struggle and calls to find the sacred not in its pre-determined forms but in the glimpses of emancipation within the everyday life playing out inside them. The mythological ritual, the one that is *sacred* and *real* is still there, preserved, but allocated to the ostensibly invisible, gliding on the surface.

Writing this made me realise in a painting of my partner, hanging in our Berliner Zimmer behind my chair, and in fact depicting both our room and a chair, a sun spot that I previously did not noticed, but now that I am looking at, it is there, in the left corner bellow.

I am surprised by its appearance. And I am not.



¹ Recently, there has been an emergence of interest in the late Soviet mass housing motivated by an effort to rehabilitate these from the diminishing reputation they have. See, for example, Nikolay Erofeev's work, who is writing his dissertation on 'the concept of 'experiment' in Soviet housing architecture in 1950-1980.' <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/people/nikolay-erofeev>

² Yates, Frances Amelia. *The Art of Memory*. London: Pimlico, 1992.

³ Various thinkers have explored the relationship between the poetics of space and the everyday life, as Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre and John Roberts, but for the present purposes it is sufficient to take these as a mere indication, that there is an indeed a relationship between everyday life and a domestic space.

⁴ Eliade, Mircea, and Philip Mairet. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975. Eliade, Mircea, and Willard R. Trask. *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971.

⁵ Markus Ackeret, 'Schmuddelecke und Herz der Berliner Altbauwohnung.' *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 13. Aug. 2016, S. 8. <https://www.nzz.ch/international/wohnserie/blick-in-die-wohnzimmer-dieser-welt-berliner-zimmer-schmuddelecke-und-herz-der-altbauwohnung-ld.110659>

⁶ Elkins, T. H., and Burkhard Hofmeister. *Berlin: The Spatial Structure of a Divided City*. London ; New York: Methuen, 1988.

⁷ Douglas Mark Klahr, 'Luxury Apartments with a Tenement Heart The Kurfürstendamm and the BerlinerZimmer,' *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 70, 3, September 2011, pp. 290-307.

⁸ Lu Märten, 'Von der Mietkaserne' (1911). *Lu Märten Formen für den Alltag, Schriften, Aufsätze, Vorträge*, ed. Rainhard May, Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1982.

⁹ Lu Märten, 'Die Zentralisation der Hauswirtschaft' (1903). *Lu Märten Formen für den Alltag, Schriften, Aufsätze, Vorträge*, ed. Rainhard May, Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1982.