



Image 1: City of Jüterbog around 1930. Estrich House is on the left, below the gable side of the church. (source: Jüterbog Municipal Archives)

## HINTERLAND MODERNISM

### The Revival of Estrich House in Jüterbog

Lars Scharnholz

The Estrich House preserved in Jüterbog is among the pioneering works of German-Jewish architect and engineer Konrad Wachsmann that until now have received little attention. The grandson of the builder has initiated construction research in pursuit of a gradual restoration and change of use in accordance with historic conservation principles.

The architecture of Weimar Modernism is a central component of architectural heritage in Brandenburg. During the 1920s the surroundings of Berlin were a laboratory for new architectural experiments. Many architects tried out their skills in Lusatia, the wetlands of the River Oder, or in the hills of Fläming. The traces of their work remain to this day. This architectural legacy represents trust in progress, confidence in technology, and belief in universality, but also openness to the world, free thinking, and a will to democracy. The legacy fell into oblivion through National Socialism and the ensuing division of Germany. Only in recent years have people begun to rediscover the modern buildings and to take care of and investigate them with an understanding that distinguishes between regional and individual conceptions of architecture.<sup>1</sup> In this context, numerous recent restoration projects stand out that were implemented with support from the Brandenburg state government.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quod vide: Scharnholz, Lars: Unbekannte Moderne. Bauten der Weimarer Zeit. In: Brandenburg Zeitschrift für Kultur, Geschichte und Natur. Kulturland Brandenburg: Potsdam 2006. Nr.3. 2006, pp. 23 – 25.

<sup>2</sup> The most prominent and recent example is probably the Bernauer Bundesschule of the Allgemeine Deutsche Gewerkschafts Bund (ADGB) designed by Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer between 1928 and 1930. Since 2003, on the basis of extensive construction research, the school complex is being renovated and largely restored to its original appearance by the Berlin Architectural Firm Brenne (Winfried Brenne and Franz Jaschke). For its outstanding conservation, the firm received the

## Changes in Direction

Today's efforts to preserve the buildings of Modernism in Brandenburg should not be regarded as separate from the development in Berlin, where even before the political changes in the early 1990s, the protection and conservation of the Modernist legacy from the time between the two World Wars had already begun. For example, in July of 2008, the Bauhaus Archive applied for the inscription of six historic Berlin housing estates into UNESCO's World Heritage list and thereby confirmed a decisive change in direction for dealing with architectural Modernism.<sup>3</sup>

With the inscription of the Berlin housing estates into UNESCO's list, it became apparent that the protection of architectural Modernism is not tied to the conservation of an unmistakable, uniform building style. The residential buildings of the architects display commonalities with regard to several factors – urban layout, structure, facades or colour – that distinguish them, in particular, from the housing estates of the turn of the century. They are also united by their function as model endeavours of social housing estates that promoted reform and pointed to the future.

However, just as apparent are the characteristics distinguishing them from one another. The housing estates reflect the differing conceptions of architecture and orientation towards different influences in early Berlin Modernism, which was renowned for its diversity. On closer inspection something becomes clear that applies to all of Modernism in the Weimar era: the quest for pure form, for a clear delineation between this influential architecture formed by diverse currents and that of earlier and contemporary periods – turns out to be full of hindrances.

In 1996, through the inscription of the Dessau Bauhaus buildings, UNESCO and the closely cooperating organisation DOCOMOMO attempted to separate these icons from the Modernist chaos of Weimar architecture.<sup>4</sup> However, a simultaneous discussion was taking place among professionals who embraced an image of architectural Modernism as differentiated, complex and shaped by numerous influences.<sup>5</sup> They saw a value in the diversity of approaches of this Modernism, which sought to overcome dogmatic design criteria and definitions of style. It isn't that they were attempting uniformity to no avail, rather they celebrated the wealth of polymorphy and contradiction.

For Modernism in Brandenburg, this debate was of fundamental significance. After all, it is there, in particular, that the cities are shaped by Modernism's creative and its regional and individual diversity. Very different modern attitudes and various trends emphasise the identity-imbuings uniqueness of architecture in Brandenburg. In light of this, it must be appreciated that with the project, "Baukultur und Demokratie – Bauen in Brandenburg 1918-1933," the Brandenburg Chamber of Architects defies an oversimplified attribution of styles by making Modernism's heterogeneity a subject of discussion.<sup>6</sup>

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Brandenburg Architecture Award in 2007 and in 2008, was awarded the new "World Monuments Fund/Knoll Modernism Prize." Quod vide: Brinkmann, Ulrich: Zurück auf Meyer und Wittwer. In: Bauwelt, Jg.: 99. Nr.8. 2008, pp. 16-25.

<sup>3</sup> Haspel, Jörg und Annemarie Jaeggi, *Siedlungen der Berliner Moderne*. Deutscher Kunstverlag, München 2007

<sup>4</sup> Quod vide: Kuipers, Marieke. Heritage of the Modern World, Evaluating the 'universal value' of the Bauhaus buildings. In: DOCOMOMO Journal. 18, Feb. 1998, pp. 54-62.

<sup>5</sup> With German reunification, the combined research in architectural history of Weimar Modernism made it even clearer that regional and individual currents had brought about a considerable diversity of design tendencies. (Quod vide: Zukowsky, John (ed.): *Architektur in Deutschland 1919-1939. Die Vielfalt der Moderne*. Prestel, München 1994.)

<sup>6</sup> Organisation: Brandenburgische Architektenkammer, 2010, „Baukultur und Demokratie. Bauen in Brandenburg 1918-1933“, Kuratorin: Ulrike Laible.

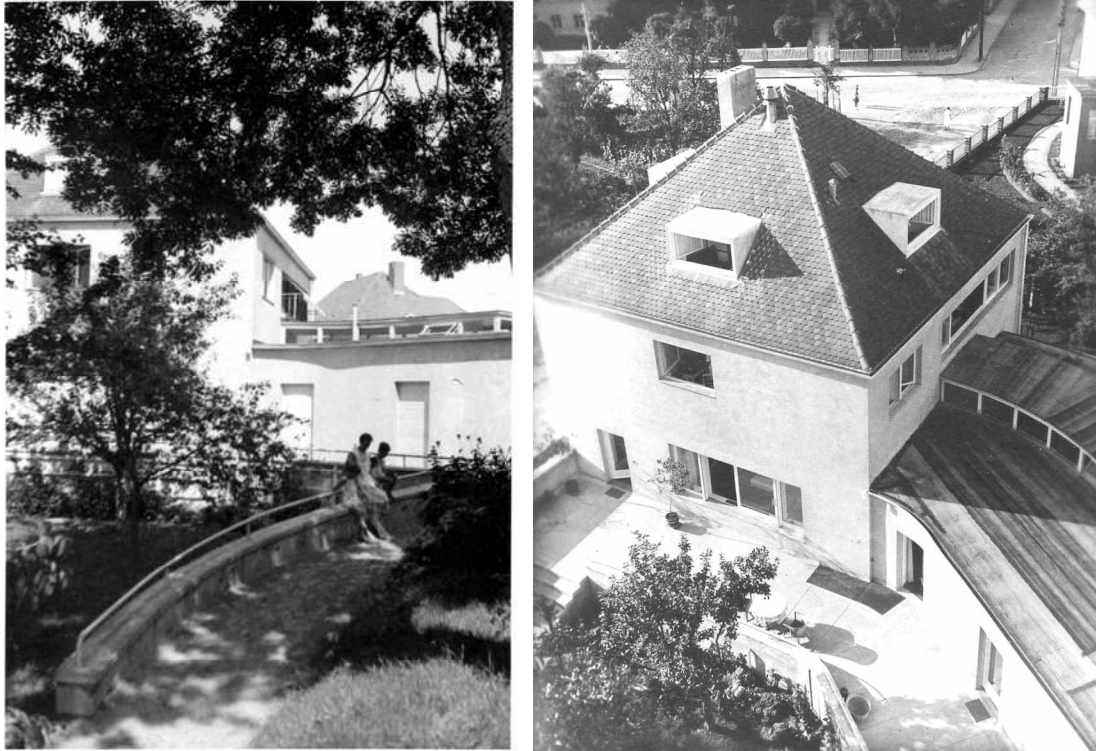


Image 2: Estrich House around 1930. (source: N. Estrich)

### **Estrich House in Jüterbog**

The necessity for a differentiated examination of modernist architecture of the 1920s becomes apparent also at Estrich House in Jüterbog. The historic residential building is one of the early works of the German-American architect and engineer Konrad Wachsmann. Although only beginning his career, he was not unknown when he received at the age of 27 the commission of Georg Estrich, a local friend and doctor in Jüterbog. At the same time, helped by Hans Poelzig, he worked as a chief architect for Christoph & Unmack, a wood construction company in the Lower Silesian town of Niesky, and he maintained an office in Berlin. In the same year that he built the house for Estrich in Jüterbog, he also built Albert Einstein's residence in Caputh near Potsdam.

At first glance it is clear that an unambiguous stylistic classification of Estrich House cannot be made. Although a clear delineation in the architectural history of the 20th century is hardly possible for Estrich House, it seems nevertheless necessary to investigate its unusual design concept, which mediates between Modernism and traditional building. It becomes clear that Estrich House in Jüterbog is different – in terms of construction, material, architectural shape, and urban planning – from the majority of Konrad Wachsmann's later work. It does not provide a basis for categorisation into the work of a pragmatic visionary of space rather it raises new questions regarding Konrad Wachsmann's later work. It is exactly that aspect which makes an examination of this building so exciting.

Located in the immediate vicinity of Jüterbog's town wall, the residence, with pitched roof, eaves height, and building line fits into its historic surroundings to this day. The plastered facade at Bleichhag and the modest and asymmetrically arranged windows appear sober and reveal little of the architect's joy in experimentation and intentions to promote functionality in his designs. Only along the garden side, in the one-storey wing attached to the building, can one find indications of Konrad Wachsmann's idiosyncratic positions. The extension with skylight curves south into the garden. Here, one can rediscover the elements that were recognisable in the architect's earlier wood building projects.

### **The Way of Conservation**

When Nils Estrich, a grandson of the builder and an architect in the Principality of Liechtenstein, took over the building in 2008, he faced a great challenge. He wanted to renovate the building in accordance with historic conservation principles and to fill it with new life. At first he looked for partners to potentially support him in this ambitious effort. During his search, he came upon other restoration projects also dedicated to Konrad Wachsmann's architecture: the work on the Einstein residence in Caputh near Potsdam, and at the residence for the directors of the former Christoph & Unmack Company in Niesky.<sup>7</sup>

Following Nils Estrich's conversations in Niesky and Caputh, Estrich House in Jüterbog became a topic in 2008 at the conference "Einstein's Architekt in der Provinz." Among the conference participants were the Brandenburg State Office for Conservation, Bauhaus Universität Weimar, and the Potsdam University for Applied Sciences. The proceedings were published in the form of a brochure by the organiser of the conference (Initiativkreis Albert-Einstein-Haus Caputh).<sup>8</sup>

In 2009, within the framework of construction research projects, the Potsdam University of Applied Sciences and the University Zittau-Görlitz examined the current situation of Estrich House in terms of urban planning and conservation. In the same year, the Brandenburg Chamber of Architects included the building in its list of 50 Most Important Buildings of the Weimar Republic. Nils Estrich established contacts to the German Federal Foundation Baukultur, University of Technology Berlin, the Munich Architecture Museum, Bauhaus Archive, and the Brandenburg University of Technology in Cottbus. In the United States, he spoke with the Getty Museum, New York City's MoMa, and with Judith Wachsmann, the wife of the architect, as well as various contemporaries of Wachsmann. This was followed by various projects at universities. On the local level, the owner of the building is making an effort to involve the citizens of today's structurally weak Jüterbog in an exchange. He also started a school project with a local grammar school and opens his building to visitors once a year on Historic Monuments Day.

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<sup>7</sup> While the summer residence in Caputh was opened again to the public in 2005 after extensive work, the research and restoration in Niesky are continuing. The conservation work is being carried out under the direction of Rolf and Claudia Klinkenbusch, from the Dresden firm of Klinkenbusch and Kunze. (Quod vide: Scharnholtz, Lars (ed.): Die Unbekannte Moderne. Von Luckenwalde nach Löbau. Philo & Philo Fine Arts, Berlin 2004.)

<sup>8</sup> Conference organisation: Wiebke Franck, Initiativkreis Albert-Einstein-Haus Caputh. – The essay, "Erbe der Moderne. Konrad Wachsmann in Jüterbog: eine Wiederentdeckung" by the historian Elke Dörner was also published. (Dörner, Elke: Erbe der Moderne. Konrad Wachsmann in Jüterbog: eine Wiederentdeckung. In: Der Architekt, 04/08, 2008, 16p.)



## Outlook

Nils Estrich has been able to rent out sections of the building in the meantime. In the upper floors he has provided studio space for artists from France, the USA, Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Austria and Germany. He is looking for an open concept and would like to realise the discursive examination of Konrad Wachsmann's legacy on various levels. If it were left to Nils Estrich, the aim would be a long-term continuous and appropriate use of the building that would also function on a public level. Such a use undoubtedly depends restoration of the building and garden soundly based on principles of historic conservation.

Ultimately it will depend on doing justice to the building regarding its individual and obviously unconventional form language. Possibly, this approach will make it clear that young Konrad Wachsmann did not want to relinquish a formal-traditional consideration of the urban context while simultaneously pursuing the puristic trends of Modernism. All previous research seems to support the thesis that Konrad Wachsmann could enter the architectural history of the 20th century as a distinct pioneer of modular, prefabricated building. However, with a closer and more critical examination of his work, this view becomes questionable and begs to be modified. Specifically, Estrich House in Jüterbog raises fundamental questions concerning the architect's work that would make a reinterpretation appear to be necessary. Corresponding conclusions concerning the treatment of Konrad Wachsmann's legacy in terms of historic conservation will thereby become necessary. In the future this must be considered in Jüterbog.

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