
Gendered Spaces in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Germany

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Abstract

This paper addresses how access to urban spaces and the position of a specific building type within the city produced gendered spaces that were far more flexible than has traditionally been thought. The *Ledigenheim*, or home for single workers, was a building type developed by German industrialists and reformers in the middle of the nineteenth century to house single workers while combating the “lodger problem” endemic to working class life. However, the result of the development and position of this building type within the city also radically altered long-held conceptions of gender within the city.

While *Ledigenheime* for men were intended to create a gendered space apart from the largely male-oriented street, one not associated with alcohol consumption, women, or political activity, the lives of the women who resided in *Ledigenheime* were far more open than those of most women of their class, not only made possible by their employment outside of the home, but by the socially progressive public-private nature of the *Ledigenheim* building type. Essentially, middle-class *Ledigenheime* residents resided, with little oversight as to their behavior, in proto-apartment houses with communal facilities open to the public (basically public spaces, an extension of street life), a fact that the contemporary literature does not indicate was problematic socially or morally. This flies in the face of the commonly held belief that all women in Germany before the First World War lived in a domestic realm apart from urban life.

This paper addresses how access to urban spaces and the position of a specific building type within the city produced gendered spaces that were far more flexible than has traditionally been thought. The *Ledigenheim*, or home for single workers, was a building type developed by German industrialists, architects and reformers in the middle of the nineteenth century to house single workers while also combating the “lodger problem” (*Schlafgängertum/Schlafgängerwesen*) endemic to working class life. However, the result of the development and position of this building type within the city was to have great consequences for both single men and women in regards to their public lives. Interestingly, *Ledigenheime* for men were intended primarily to re-domesticate their residents, while the all-female *Ledigenheim* provided women with housing that had “no hint of the convent or cloister;” essentially a space both public and private (Mohr, 1911, p. 742).

With the faith of good German Liberals, turn-of-the-century reformers saw the *Ledigenheim* as a logical and rational solution to a set of complex social concerns and a benefit to the growing and changing German economy. These individuals considered the current laws and regulations in place governing the housing of single people to be less than effective and claimed that the involvement of the police in the matter of housing, such as enforcing building laws and lodging regulations, did not provide the unmarried men or unmarried middle-class German women with good and affordable, or even unobjectionable, housing. In a sense, they saw such regulatory measures as outdated and ineffective, reflective of the mid-nineteenth-century mindset, not a modern solution to a complex problem. The result of such views was a campaign waged towards the construction of the *Ledigenheim*.

These buildings were to be specific to the particular class and profession of the residents and were to remain homes away from home. However, although the word *Heim* translates to home in German, *Ledigenheime* were not homes in the conventional sense. They functioned as a space apart from both the public world and that of the family. Therefore, while a resident might possibly have a single or double bedroom, the rest of the space was communal, generally including a dining room, library, and reception hall. In addition, there was always a male *Hausmeister* for all male *Ledigenheime*, with women’s *Ledigenheime* employing a *Leiterin* (Directress). *Ledigenheime* for men and women also illustrated the growing importance of the *Ledigenheim* as a center of public life for the larger community, as they increasingly housed public libraries and kitchens (*Volksbibliotheken* and *Volksküchen*), partially to offset the costs of their construction, but also to underscore the central position of the building in the neighborhood.

As mentioned previously in regards to men residing in *Ledigenheime*, these buildings were intended to keep men from an entirely public life, for although they were integrated into the community through communal facilities and open courtyard spaces, the main intention was to create a gendered space apart from the street, one not associated with alcohol consumption, women, or political activity.

(Image 1) A prime example of a *Ledigenheim* for men, one that was often cited as “the ideal” by reformers, was the Charlottenburg (*Danckelmannstrasse*) *Ledigenheim*, located in greater Berlin (Walter, 1909, p. 32). **(Image 2)** This building included a *Volksbibliothek* (people’s library) and *Volksküche* (people’s kitchen) and also provided access to the schoolyard of a *Gemeinde Schule* (elementary school) via a passageway from the *Dankelmannstrasse* (on the far right of the façade). **(Image 3)** To enter the people’s kitchen on the ground floor, one entered a short passage of about 3.35 meters square on the right side of the main façade. **(Image 4)** Access to the public library was not quite so direct, though similarly accessible from the left side of the ground floor façade through a passage 9.5 meters long (nestled between several stores). This led to a large central courtyard with a fountain, where the large library, both reading room and circulation area, was positioned on the left side and separated from the main/private entrance to the **Ledigenheim** by a brick and wrought iron fence (which actually bisected the fountain). This combination of public and private spaces, albeit fairly regulated, thus illustrated the acceptance of the *Ledigenheim* into the surrounding neighborhood (Generalakten, Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 042,

Nr. 26245, item no. 3).

(Image 5) However, the inclusion of such elements was not a disinterested undertaking but reflected the mindset of bourgeois reformers that the provision of educational and recreational facilities, as well as good food and drink, would serve to keep the residents from unsavory activities—essentially by enticing them to remain “at home” (*Der Arbeiterfreund*, 1913, p. 395). These “in-house” advantages supposedly served a reforming role—a positive alternative to less wholesome pursuits, such as drinking, dancing, and gambling (In particular, drinking in pubs was linked in the minds of the reformers and the police to Social Democratic ferment, as well as dissolute activities with women) (*Der Arbeiterfreund*, 1906, p. 8). It was widely accepted that pleasant surroundings, from an abundance of books in a library, to the design of a reading room and the inclusion of bowling alleys and drafting rooms would foster “...einen fröhlichen Ton, gemeinsame Erholung, edle Geselligkeit” (a joyful tone, communal recuperation, noble camaraderie) (Schweitzer, 1911, p. 11), which would serve to bind the residents together in happy and healthy pursuits.

Unsurprisingly, women, games of chance, and (of course) drunkenness were banned in every *Ledigenheim*. In contrast, the pastimes offered in these buildings both filled the free time of the residents and served to keep them away from more problematic places, as well as provided a means to gentrification. This is borne out in a statement by a reformer by the name of Dix, who claimed that positive elements, such as libraries, actually had a moderating influence on often rough customs and manners, while simultaneously “tying or binding them to the house” (Dix, 1903, p. 494, 510). Again, re-domesticating single men was seen as instrumental in keeping men away from the perils of Social Democracy.

In contrast, the lives of the women who resided in *Ledigenheime* were far more open than those of most women of their class, not only made possible by their employment outside of the home, but the socially progressive public-private nature of the *Ledigenheim* building type. Essentially, women *Ledigenheim* residents of the middle-classes resided, with little oversight as to their behavior, in proto-apartment houses with communal facilities. This means that *Ledigenheime* serving middle-class women were hybrids of the public and private realms, usually including dining halls and libraries open to, and primarily serving the general public, as well as private bedrooms the First World War lived in an entirely separate sphere from their male counterparts.

Firstly, the exteriors of *Ledigenheime* for middle-class women did not differ in any significant way from the design of those constructed for skilled men, indicating that reformers considered them to be variants of the same building typology, and one that served similar needs. **(Image 6)** For example, the *Lehrerinnenheim* (*Ledigenheim* for teachers) in Berlin-Pankow and the *Ledigenheim/Arbeiterinnenheim* (home for women workers) located at Alt Moabit 38 in Berlin, both constructed circa 1910, employed the highly formal and delicately decorative style of “um 1800” common to numerous *Ledigenheime* for men from the *Dankelmannstrasse Ledigenheim* in Berlin-Charlottenburg, to the Catholic *Ledigenheime* of Münster and Neuss and the *Breitestrasse* building in central Cologne (Mohr, 1911, p. 742).

(Image 7) Secondly, and more importantly, the Pankow house contained fifty single- to triple-occupancy residences, each with its own kitchen, as well as a *Spiesewirtschaft* (restaurant) that was open to both residents and the community at large (Schmidt, 1912, p. 47). Similarly, the *Ledigenheim* in Berlin-Moabit not only housed sixty-six residents, primarily in thirty-seven single bedrooms, but also provided the community and residents with the use of *Kaffeestube* (akin to a modern coffee shop) and educational room, provisions that were clearly indicated on the exterior of the building (Kirschner, 1909, p. 392). **(Image 8)** In fact, the inclusion of such elements and the attention paid to their advertisement on the exterior of the building are most important in highlighting the public-private nature of the building, as was the case for all *Ledigenheime*. **(Image 9)** In the case of the *Ledigenheim* in Berlin-Moabit, the public rooms were located on the ground floor off a central L-shaped hallway and were thus accessible to both residents and visitors. In fact, not only were the *Kaffeestube* and the dining hall open to the general public, with room for 100-150 diners in the latter case, the common rooms of the residences were also open to women from the surrounding community in the evening, in emulation of the English model of the settlement house (Kirschner, 1909, p. 392). It was truly a home for the larger community, not a cloister-like building intended to guard its residents, as reformers found this older model of housing single women profoundly unsuitable to women engaged in the larger world.

The rudimentary luxuries provided within these homes for women were also in keeping with contemporary model *Ledigenheime* for men, again highlighting the fact that there was some parity in the treatment of female residents and their male counterparts. For example, the Alt Moabit building provided “allen modernen Anforderungen an Licht, an Luft und an Reinlichkeit,” including central heat, and showers and toilets in both the basement and on each upper floor

(*Die Architektur des XX Jahrhunderts*, 1909, p. 43). The majority of the forty-seven bedrooms were single rooms, as was advocated as ideal for *Ledigenheime* serving men or women, with the thirty-seven single rooms measuring approximately eight square meters, complete with sunny window-seat, roomy wardrobe, and large, good bed (Kirschner, 1909, p. 391). Additionally, on each of the upper floors, a living room where the women could socialize was provided (Kirschner, 1909, p. 391).

This focus upon aesthetic matters by the supporters of *Ledigenheime* for women may appear strange until one considers that the provision of such pleasant surroundings was in fact a replacement for the restrictive rules of the cloister, as the refined and elegant decorations were both in keeping with the social class of the residents and were considered by reformers to be central to retaining residents. In short, the well-appointed “home like” appearance of the *Ledigenheim* was intended to keep its residents from a “nomadic” life (Kirschner, 1909, p. 391), and the distractions of the city were to be counteracted by “gesündere Räume, bessere Verpflegung und gemüthlichen Aufenthalt” (Trost, 1911, p. 10). Pleasant surroundings would also help the young women to refine their taste and perhaps even curb impulses towards the purchase of frivolous items, seeing that there would be no need to beautify their surroundings in an already elegant and prettily appointed space (Kirschner, 1909, p. 392).

However, the most important point here is that such surroundings were thought to encourage residents to remain “at home,” to stay away from coffeehouses and taverns in the evening, even though reformers falsely considered that such amusements held no appeal for women (Trost, 1911, p. 6). Of course, identical spaces were created in *Ledigenheime* for men that were similarly intended to entice residents to enter a semi-public realm while “at home,” indicating that this was not a gender-specific tactic. Even more importantly, considering that most *Ledigenheime* for women of all classes contained spaces loosely approximating a *Kneipe* or *Wirtshaus*, it appears that this was a space they frequented with some regularity, though the inclusion of such a space in a *Ledigenheim* made it more reputable. In fact, the *Ledigenheim* enabled women, while remaining respectably “at home,” to participate in the larger world by merely walking downstairs to spaces open to the general public, and a traditionally masculine space like a pub or tavern in particular. This fact indicates that middle-class women’s public lives were more nuanced than has been considered.

Certainly, in all the literature concerning this variant of *Ledigenheim*, the virtue of the residents is hardly mentioned, a fact that is astounding when one considers the near obsession of writers with the improvement of the moral fiber of working-class *Ledigenheim* residents, particularly young working-class men, who were seen as a threat to the established order due to supposed political and social radicalism and ties to Social Democracy.

Significantly, this use of space stands in sharp contrast to the way in which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century middle-class women’s interactions with the city have traditionally been considered by scholars, as well as by their contemporaries. In general, the middle-class woman’s proper sphere was thought to be the home and that only the fallen woman or working-class woman was comfortable with public life. Men were traditionally actors on the stage of the city, participants in civic life, while middle-class women were excluded from such interactions. The middle-class woman was also supposedly focused on her own individual concerns, not civic issues. Of course, the fact that women were supportive of, and integral to, the creation of *Ledigenheime* that would serve themselves as well as the community belies such an assumption. In addition, the semi-public spaces of *Ledigenheime*, socially acceptable for women residents to visit, as well as easily accessible to both residents and the general public, indicates the growing parity between men and women in Wilhelmine Germany, despite other discrepancies.

However, one must be careful not to assume that reformers supported the creation of *Ledigenheime* for women in order to assist the nascent feminist movement. Instead, it was positioned as a way to provide appropriate housing to those who could not otherwise afford lodgings commensurate with one’s social station. Such action was necessary, particularly for professional women, as these women were generally paid one-half of what a man in a similar position would have earned, and this negatively affected her ability to find unobjectionable housing (*Schlafstellenwesen und Ledigenheime*, 1904, p. 188). After all, the only other housing option for unmarried German women at this juncture, regardless of her education or social status, was the charitable *Stiftung*. However, not only did this form of housing run the risk of “...turn(ing) people who are capable of helping themselves into charity cases,” they were also governed by rigorous rules (Lewald, 1863, p. 79). Most importantly, they were primarily conceived of as serving older women, and reformers noted that this emphasis was hardly conducive to the life of a woman who was a participant in the greater world, and certainly not middle-class professional women

as a class (Mohr, 1911, p. 740). These reformers considered the current laws and regulations in place governing the housing of single women to be less than effective. They stated that the involvement of the police in the matter of housing, such as enforcing building laws and lodging regulations, did not provide the unmarried middle-class German woman with good, affordable, and unobjectionable housing (Schivmachev, 1911, p. 230 and *Schlafstellenwesen und Ledigenheime*, 1904, p. 188).

In fact, rather than positioning the plight of these women as delicate creatures in a bid to support the construction of these *Ledigenheime*, reformers generally appealed to a sense of class consciousness or solidarity, highlighting the fact that the educated, single German woman was drawn from the same social class as the very reformers coming to their aid and the reformers and potential residents could work together to solve this problem. For example, Hauptmann a. D. W. von Kalckstein of Bremen, a participant in the *Schlafstellen und Ledigenheime* Conference of 1904 in Leipzig, in noting the difficulties in finding suitable housing for skilled and lady-like single women, stressed the commonalities between these women and the middle-class (male) conference participants, noting that they were all “workers” in a loose application of the word (*Schlafstellenwesen und Ledigenheime*, 1904, p. 178). Implicit in these statements is that these reformers did not accept the idea of separate spheres for men and women and that certain women did have a place in the larger economic development of Germany. Essentially, they took the situation of middle-class women working outside of the home as a given.

Interestingly, despite the measured and logical explanations in regards to both the need for *Ledigenheime* for women and the ways in which these institutions ought to be organized, an underlying radical edge to these projects can be discerned. The creation of new forms of housing, particularly those for women, was a revolutionary undertaking according to leading left-radicals August Bebel, Peter Kropotkin, and Lily Braun, who all saw reformed housekeeping as “one of the foundations of their (women’s) liberation.” In her writings, informed by Bebel’s *Woman under Socialism*, Braun quotes the anarchist Kropotkin, who wrote that to “liberate women means not only to open the doors to the university, the court of law, and parliament for them; rather it means to free them from the cooking stove and washtub, it means creating institutions that will permit them to raise their children and participate in public life” (Braun, 1901, p. 93). This statement indicates that housing, in combination with professional work, was one of the most impor-

tant elements in the relation of middle-class women to the public sphere.

Thus, one can view the *Ledigenheime* for middle-class female residents as a transitional building leading from the familial home to the independent and individual apartment we know today. In fact, in some ways *Ledigenheime* were more socially revolutionary than the single apartment would prove to be, not only in the creation of a community of educated and like-minded middle-class professional women, but also in a departure forever from the cloister. In short, *Ledigenheime* for women enabled their residents to take part in the larger world and the economic life of their country as never before—changes that would shortly come to be exhibited in the person of the New Woman of Weimar Germany.

In the case of men, *Ledigenheime* served a different role, essentially linking them to the community at large through semi-public spaces, such as the *Volksküchen* and *Volksbibliotheken*, rather than as unwanted *Schlafgänger*, but also in tying them to a hygienic and semi-bourgeois “home”—with the purpose of re-domesticating young, single men. However, in the case of both men and women, the building of *Ledigenheime* was a step towards radically altering long-held conceptions of gender within the city and the extent to which the public realm entered into the private.

Image 1:



Image 2:

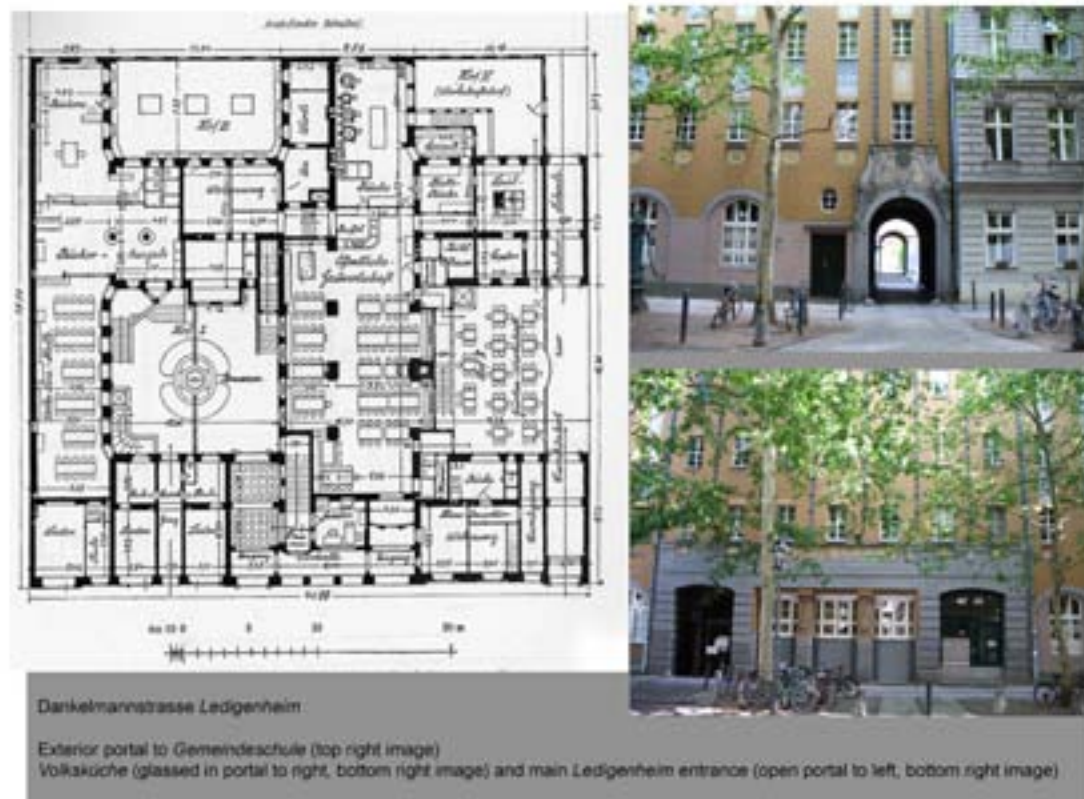


Image 3:

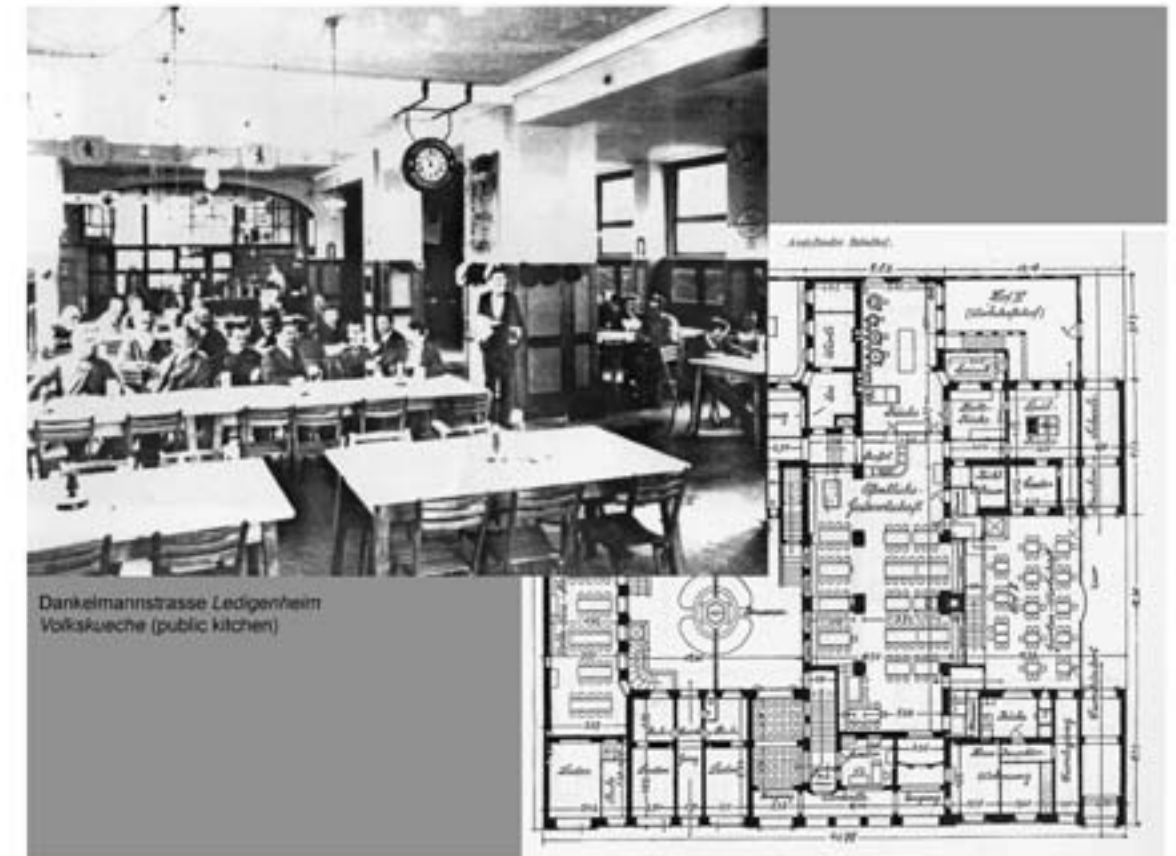


Image 4:

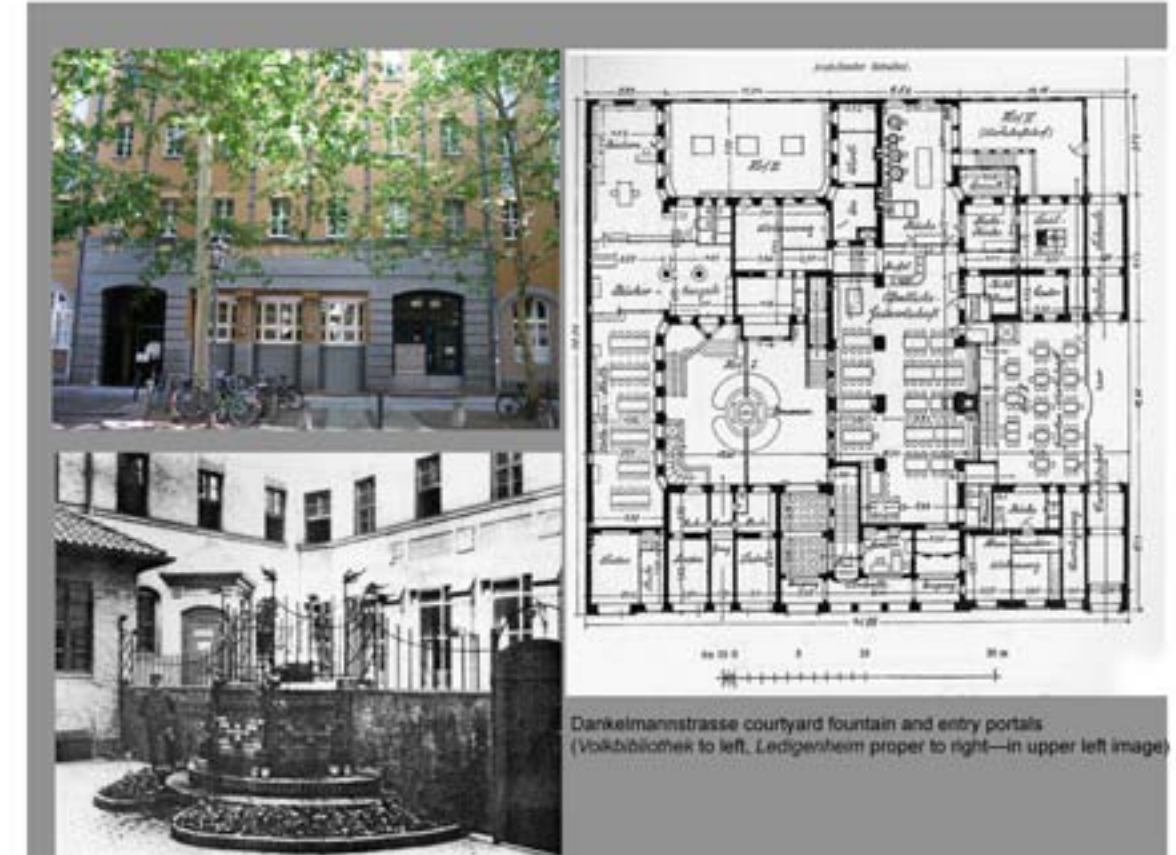


Image 5:

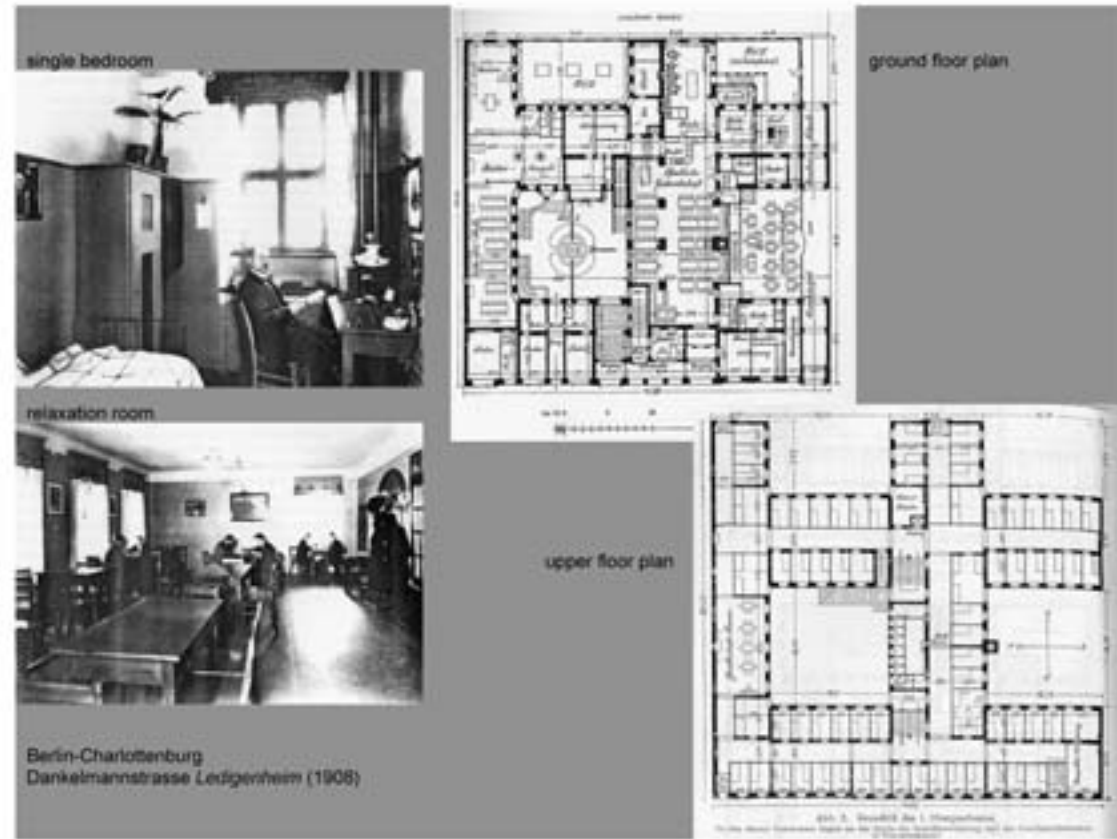


Image 6:



Image 7:



Image 8:

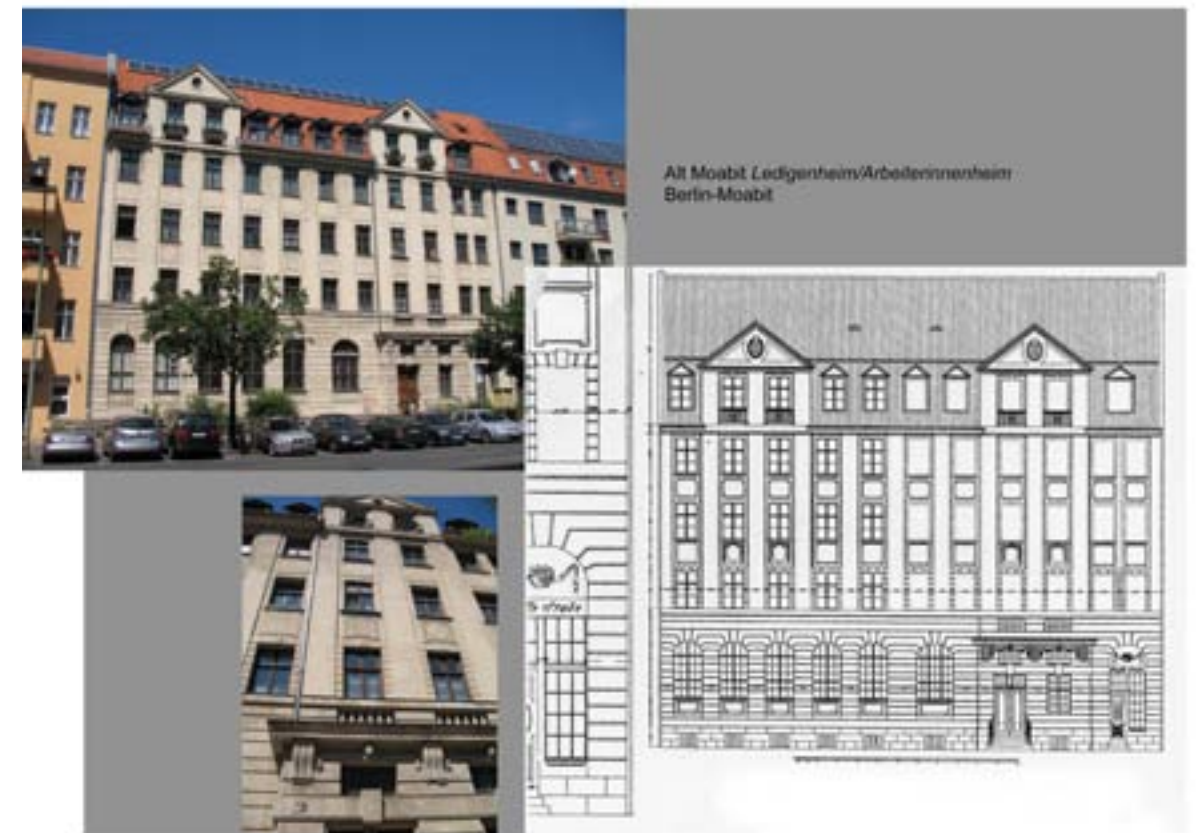


Image 9:



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