

"Hundertwasser Wohnen in den Wiesen"

Art, Architecture and Heritage in Bad Soden, Germany.

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This paper was originally written as an interactive web document and is available in its entirety at the link posted above. Following are excerpts.

The building complex "*Hundertwasser in den Wiesen*" was designed for property developer Wolfgang Wachendorff (Bad Soden) as a condominium of 22 units and built with a final configuration of 17 units.

The building comprises both a new structure, the Hundertwasser-Haus *per se* and a historic structure, the first bath house of the spa town of Bad Soden, which has been incorporated into the design. The Hundertwasser building is rather spectacular in its own way and certainly unique in the area. Some of the heritage management issues surrounding the structure are very much applicable to the heritage debate world-wide.

As will be shown, the majority of the Hundertwasser buildings are remodelling existing buildings. The Bad Soden example, however, was designed from the bottom up and thus is not constrained by preexisting structures.



Figure 1.1. The Hundertwasser building seen from the south-west. (Photo: Dirk H.R.Spennemann 1996)

The setting of the structure is very prominent, at the bottom of a valley and a focal point of two axes of public garden space, the 'Quellenpark' and the 'Wilhelmspark', spaces in which many of Bad Soden's mineral springs occur. These springs made Bad Soden one of the popular spa and bath spots in the 19th century, although well eclipsed by neighbouring Bad Homburg, favoured by the Royal families of Europe.

New age mythological concepts about the sanctity of the mineral springs and the healing powers of the 'holy waters' (according to architect/designer Hundertwasser) have been incorporated into the structure.

Bad Soden is what some local residents would call a 'sleepy hollow' located at the foothills of the Taunus Range, a town of some 10,000 people, some 40 commuter train minutes from the banking centre of Frankfurt am Main, in Central Germany.

Bad Soden is a spa town, owing to its mineral springs, but its significance in the health industry, like most spa towns, has declined, especially in comparison to neighbouring, more famous competitors, such as Bad Homburg. The proximity to Frankfurt and the recent rise of Frankfurt to one of Europe's pre-eminent banking centres has meant that property prices in all surrounding areas, but especially at the foothills of the Taunus, have skyrocketed. This has brought about a change in population demographics and a change in the attitude of the population.

The Architecture of 'Wohnhügel'

The architecture of the building complex "Hundertwasser in den Wiesen" (Hundertwasser in the meadows) is described as a 'Wohnburg' or 'Wohnhügel', literally a living mound, and shows strong conceptual affinities to the pueblo architecture of the American Indians in the South-West of the USA. Not only the overall shape of the various elements of the structure, but also the rough finish of the external wall surfaces with irregularly rounded-off edges underlines this concept. The internal partition is also very much a multi-level affair, signalling a clear departure from the standard, regular and symmetrical, horizontal design of most condominiums. Thus it would appear warranted to use the term 'pueblo' to characterise the overall structure.

The overriding design element was the development of a balanced distribution of the masses without the need to resort to any symmetrical arrangement. In fact, the design appears to go out of its way to prevent any replication in design. While horizontal lines have been avoided, the vertical structural elements remain, governed by reasons of statics, but are cleverly camouflaged with the application of rounded edges, rounded and irregular interiors, as well as wavy lines as decorative external elements.

The initial intent to develop a viewing terrace for the expected tourists and visitors had been abandoned while the establishment of one or more paths through the pueblo as open public spaces (Kalinowski 1898, 1990) is still unsettled as the city council and the builder cannot agree on aspects of this agreement and the matter is before the courts. These open spaces lead to the entrances of the few elevator shafts and units.



*Left:
Figure 2.1. The proposed public space in the pueblo.
The historic structure is at the right of the narrow
path. Note the placement of the Victorian replica
streetlamps.*

The paths as built (figure 2.1) are lit by replica Victorian street lanterns in a green coat of paint, a type which forms the standard street architecture of the centre of Bad Soden. While debatable at best, these lanterns out of place in this pueblo setting and create a visual disturbance.

The design of the building makes frequent references to architectural concepts and design elements which are alien to traditional German architecture. This makes the building visually very 'different' from the norm and inevitably and purposefully challenges and polarises the audience. The overall character of the building as a pueblo, the elaborate ornamentation with glazed beaded columns resemblant of the onion-shaped gilded domes of Islamic mosques, the baldachin-like use of roofs, resemblant of temple architecture, the plantings echoing hanging gardens.

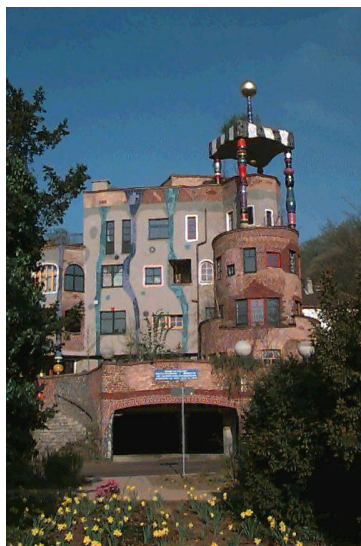


*Figure 2.2.
Left: Enclosed Baldachin structure on top of the central tower.
Right: Open Baldachin structure on top of the northeastern tower*

The structure is dominated by the central tower, which has a flat roof and a large finial in the shape of a gold ball on the top of a post (figure 2.2). This is a much more mundane concept than the initial design which saw a large goldleaf covered onion-shaped roof, similar to that of a mosque (cf. drawing in Kalinoswski 1989; 1990; Mies 1993).

The door and window openings vary in dimensions and proportions, thus providing an additional challenge both to the structural engineer and the builder on site. The need to depart from straight lines as pure vertical lines (the latter are structurally pretermind and thus the irregularity had to be created by visual illusions) caused serious conceptual problems for some of the construction workers who took pride in their accurate work (Kalinowski 1992). The external ornamentation extends only as a design plan and model, with only the major elements marked out. The realisation of the plan and the microdetailing of the elements was left to the interpretation of the construction workers. Thus the final outcome was dependent on the imaginative skills of the crafts people, a drastic departure from the "traditional" architecture of the 20th century.

The necessities of modern car travel were accommodated by the development of a private car park, affording each of the units two parking spaces. In addition, as part of the permitting procedure, the town council required the provision of 29 public parking lots. The entrance to the Parkdeck opens like a cavernous mouth (figure 2.3).



*Left:
Figure 2.3.
Entrance to the park deck and
building seen from the east*



*Right:
Figure 2.4.
Blue glazed tiles are meant to
symbolise falling rain*

The total design of the building continues even in the public parking garage, where the driveway is set apart from the road by a bulbous hump and where the floor shows a pavement of small stones laid out in patterns and where the walls of the partitions continue the design with large numbers. The car park, which forms the base of the pueblo, shows an untreated concrete ceiling. The external surface of the building is ornamented with wavy lines running from the roofline. These lines, executed in blue glazed tiles, are meant to symbolise falling rain running down the walls (Iwan 1996), and thus an integration of nature with the building (figure 2.4, right).

From a structural point of view the building was erected on more than 250 piles driven into the sediments in order to avoid changing the flows of groundwater--in view of the proximity of several mineral springs forming part of the spa precinct a very serious issue. In the event, the

construction of the foundations caused some controversy (see below), as did the partial rerouting of a creek.

The building materials used range from concrete for the foundations, external and internal structural elements, bricks and concrete blocks for the walls and the ornamentals, such as the variety of bricks used in the cladding of the facade.

In addition to the permanent wall decorations and reliefs, the courtyards, balconies and multilevel roof tops of the pueblo are liberally planted with a variety of trees, shrubs and creepers which, as they grow, will continually change the appearance of the structure, thereby giving rise to the overall concept of a living installation. It is planned to have the trees grow to a height which would ultimately obscure much of the elaborate ornamentation during summer and expose it during winter except where covered by creepers).



*Left:
Figure 2.5. A view of the roof area..*

The surfaces of the terraces and open spaces are covered with granulate (hydroponic-type) plant base and have been seeded with grass, with the intent to let nature take its course - accepting that given the location of the pueblo at the bottom of the valley below scrubs and meadows weeds would flourish if left unchecked (as they do).

Such a concept certainly introduced elements of energy-efficiency, where wall and window spaces are shaded by deciduous trees in the summer, while exposed to the sun in winter. However, unlike Australia, the temperature regime in Bad Soden is rarely such that much cooling in summer is required.

Similar to the external structure the internal lay-out, as well as the ornaments, are fixed in the design. The wet areas of bathroom, toilet and shower were decorated with a mosaic of wavy-line and irregular curvilinear designs. The mirrors are 'framed' by irregular shaped stucco borders which provide a three-dimensional element to the ensemble. All tile pieces have been fired and glazed in the shapes used and none of the tiles were broken to complete a design.

During implementation of the design, the craftpeople had free hand, constrained by the designers' overall intentions but not by rigid plans, whereas the future owners of the unit had little influence on the events. As such, the interior decoration was a piece of art which was to be accepted without a choice and without the option to modify the design at a later stage. The plumbing and sinks are regulation sets where artistic freedom had been regulated and which only imperfectly integrate into the design.



Left:
Figure 2.6. The bathtub arrangement in one of the bathrooms. Shower and sink are part of the original design, the ceiling lamp is added by the tenant.

The use of some of the materials is rather extravagant. The cupolas as well as a dozen ornamental balls set on the parapets of the Hundertwasser-designed kindergarten at Frankfurt-Heddernheim (Deckenbach 1990) were covered with DM 120,000 (approx. Aus \$ 130,000) worth of real gold leaf (*Frankfurter Rundschau* 27 October 1992).

Even though the structure may have underlying ecological concepts and design principles it is not an ecological building as such. The building materials used are off-the-shelf materials such as concrete, concrete blocks, bricks of various types as well as ceramics and tiles (even though the shapes of the latter are designed). Truly ecological, *ie.* non-manufactured raw materials such as quarried stone used for purposes other than cladding, treated or untreated wood and mud/earth, such as adobe or rammed earth (*pisé*) have not been used (Huber 1993).

Compared to other condominium developments in the area, the \$ >20 million Hundertwasser building is with DM 8,000/m² approximately 30% more expensive per square metre. At the time of writing (May 1996) several of the units were still unsold.

The pueblo complex incorporates a historic building, the first spa building of the town erected in 1722 ([heritage debate](#)). This building follows the symmetrical design criteria of the time and is dominated by horizontal lines created by rows of windows. As such, then, the building provides a stark contrast to the pueblo, a contrast which is enhanced by the architect with the use of dark brown paint borders to delineate the individual stories. This horizontal is then counterpointed by two wooden balcony towers which have been added to the original structure. While brown in appearance, the profiling of the wooden posts reiterates some of the beaded themes of the pueblo. The roof facing the public space on the Quellenpark is dominated by three oversized dormer windows set at even spacing on the roof, yet contrasting and conflicting with the symmetry of the windows below. The ground floor of the building has been extensively modified to allow its usage as shops and professional or commercial premises.

The following Hundertwasser writings sum up many of his views:

The Paradise Destroyed by the Straight Line

An ecologist without a conscience is doomed to failure, and the same is true of an artist who does not bow to the laws of nature.

The world has not improved. The dangers felt have turned into reality.

Nevertheless, today, although nothing has been done, my longstanding warnings are at last being taken seriously.

Yet there are still no lawns on the roofs, no tree-tenants, no plant-driven water purification plants, no humus toilets, no rights to windows, no duties to the trees. The essential reafforestation of the town has not come about.

What we lack is a peace treaty with nature.

We must restore to nature the territories we have unlawfully taken from it. Everything horizontal under the sky belongs to nature. Everything touched by the rays of the sun, everywhere where the rain falls is nature's sacred and inviolable property. We men are merely nature's guests.

In 1952 I spoke of the civilization of make-believe, the one we must shake off, myself, the first of all! I spoke of columns of gray men on the march toward sterility and self-destruction.

The same year I used the term "transautomation" to show the way beyond the rationalism of technocrats toward a new creation in harmony with the laws of nature.



In 1953 I realized that the straight line leads to the downfall of mankind.

But the straight line has become an absolute tyranny.

The straight line is something cowardly drawn with a rule, without thought or feeling; it is a line which does not exist in nature.

And that the line is the rotten foundation of our doomed civilization.

Even if there are certain places where it is recognized that this line is rapidly leading to perdition, its course continues to be plotted.

The straight line is the only sterile line, the only line which does not suit man as the image of God.

The straight line is the forbidden fruit.

The straight line is the curse of our civilization.

Any design undertaken with the straight line will be stillborn. Today we are witnessing the triumph of rationalist knowhow and yet, at the same time, we find ourselves confronted with emptiness. An aesthetic void, desert of uniformity, criminal sterility, loss of creative power.

Even creativity is prefabricated.

We have become impotent. We are no longer able to create. That is our real illiteracy.

On occasion of the laying of the foundation stone for the Bad Soden house in November 1990, but also in previous writings. Hundertwasser outlined some of the philosophy which led to the design as espoused:

"Why should one heartlessly use a ruler since everyone knows that a straight line is a dangerous and convenient mirage that will lead to disaster".

Since only nature can teach creativity the complex should be regarded as a "voyage into lands of creative architecture ... a melody for feet and eyes." (Kalinowski 1992) Hundertwasser further argues that there is a need to set a counterpoint to the current architecture, to show that is possible to differ, to recover human dignity (Müller 1990b), and that people have become the 'human guinea pigs' of architects (Kalinowski 1990b). Hundertwassers base concept is that:

"nature, art and creation are one and the same, and people have set them apart." (Börchers 1993) Hundertwasser takes strong issue with the straight and symmetrical, unnatural design of modern architecture and argues that architects, well knowing the sins they commit, continue to develop structures that defy organic design. Further, he argues that the average citizens, planning their own homes cannot be entrusted with the responsibility of designing houses (Interview quoted in Santifaller 1992). His design concepts are 'translated' into the reality of structural design and building code compliance by the architect Peter Pelikan. However, unlike the Bad Soden example discussed here, the house in Vienna follows the standard internal layout of flats as regulated by public housing commission (Kalinowski 1992).

Hundertwasser argues that everyone should be permitted and encouraged make their own architecture, constructed from whatever he or she likes, whether it be wood, paper, or leaves - even if the building collapses. He believes people should be able to lean out their window, and paint whatever they'd like, to exercise their creativity and individuality.

In a 1992 interview Hundertwasser argued that buildings are organic and that unlike 'normal' buildings that the owners of buildings designed by him were permitted to change the design of the room of buildings (despite his earlier comments of the conceptual inability of average citizens to design their own homes) (Santifaller 1992).

Yet, both the prospectus (Wachendorff 1990) as well as subsequent events showed that these alterations required Hundertwasser's express approval and were it was not always granted. Further, the purchasers of units are bound by contract to abide by the rules that post-construction alterations to the complex are prohibited. This contradicts one of Hundertwasser's own design

criteria, the 'Fensterrecht', the rule that owners should be permitted to alter their windows in any fashion desired to reflect their individual outlook onto the world (Huber 1993).

The Controversy

The Bad Soden project was first proposed in November 1989 and then modified over time. Starting with 22 units, the final design as built comprises 17 units, none of which is the similar to another. The building is such a radical departure from the architectural norm(al) that it was bound to draw criticism.

Even though the then Mayor argued that the town was able to 'stomach' an artistic building (Kalinowski 1989) and much of the criticism on the aesthetics was to be expected. The building had been approved by all authorities and by *all* parties represented on the town council. Only the height of the central tower was of temporary concern. In the end the project was approved *in toto*, provided that some of the area be public space and some public parking be provided.

In the end it was more the secrecy of the initial city involvement and the nitty gritty of bungled building approvals that dominated the media reporting on the structure between 1991 and 1993. When completed, the pueblo had minimised the pedestrian pavements to such an extent that they endangered foot traffic. It was impossible for two people to pass each other, let alone a pram. This was eventually resolved by abolishing the footpath altogether and by the creation of a traffic area, where cars are allowed, but where pedestrians have right of way.

Further, the project had also breached the provision of a 5m buffer zone to public waterways; the required approval of the nature conservation council (Naturschutzbeirat) had not been obtained (Kiekheben-Schmidt 1992). Even though this was breach of the regulations no action was taken, presumably because the publicity could have caused a backlash with the nature conservation council being labelled cultural luddites. Strong criticism surrounded the lack of public consultation (cf. Förster 1990; Müller 1990).



Left:

Figure 4.1.

The structure directly abuts the creek line, which in part had to be channeled

By the time the building was approved it was well known that the Hundertwasser building in Vienna had become a tourism attraction with many tour busses including the building in their route ([see on-line tour prospectus](#)). In

Vienna the popularity of the Hundertwasserhaus has meant that a former tyre factory opposite the building was transformed into a Hundertwasser museum and commercial centre, replete with Hundertwasser public conveniences, which have become an attraction in their own right. As the tour bus industry pushes the building, Hundertwasser's mass appeal rises.

Thus initial proponents, as well as opponents of the Bad Soden pueblo had commented on the impact of tourism on the economy as well as the traffic flow in the town. In the event however, little if any additional tourism eventuated and the stream of tour busses is conspicuously absent.

As K. Bender, current mayor of Bad Soden commented:

"Frankfurt is not a cultural town like Vienna, and visitors to the area come for other reasons.

Thus there is no real pool to draw from" (Bender pers. comm.)

In the meantime Hundertwasser redevelopments have sprung up all over Germany and Austria and criticism as to the value of such work has been raised. The American historian Carl E. Schorske in an Interview on occasion of him being awarded the "Große Silberne Ehrenzeichen der Republik Oesterreich" (The Austrian equivalent of the Order of Australia) for his outstanding scholarship on Austrian Modernism called Hundertwasser's work childish and too playful, with little meaning beyond superficialities" (Hanta 1996). Likewise, Walter Zschokke (1996) in a review of the current trends and threats to architecture and architects by construction engineers and economists, argues that much of the modern architecture is merely playful and addresses superficialities, rather than substance, and labels Hundertwasser's work a production line, aimed at tourism traffic.

"Apart from the threat of amorphism and lacking awareness of quality there is the creeping process of 'infantilisation' in expression, which can ruin Vienna's reputation as a centre for art. Do we want to be taken seriously in an international area, or shall cover-up and masquerade gain pride of place?" (Zschokke 1996).

Critical Issues for the Future

One of the key problems with much of the modern architecture is the liberal mixing of construction materials, which once they begin to decay with age, will exhibit different decay characteristics and will require different treatments. In 1993 the builder of the structure, W. Wachendorff, claimed that the design of the building meant it would be staying for centuries as a hallmark for architecture with little need for traditional maintenance. This is hardly the case.

- Already in 1995 the coping of the wall tops was found to be deficient, allowing the ingress of moisture and causing falling damp in a number of places. As a result the external paint work had to be patched up even though the effect merges well with the blotchy paintwork applied in the first instance. Now the tops of the walls have been clad with copper sheeting.
- The ornamental elements of the structure are a cladding placed on top of a concrete blocksurface. The use of multiple materials poses a special challenge, as the thermal expansion coefficients of the various types of bricks, stone and glazed tile elements differ. In view of the thermal range experienced in that part of Germany, with summer

temperatures in the upper thirties and with winter temperatures usually to -15 degrees C, occasionally to -30 degrees, the building has inbuilt conservation management problems that may not have been foreseen by the architect.

- The shallow root base of the trees and shrubs is posed to provide a serious problem when the trees mature as they become increasingly prone to wind pressure. In addition, the small amount of soil poses water retention problems when the plants have grown, forcing owners to continually water the trees to prevent their die off in dry summers. This is hardly a sound ecological principle.
- This mixing is elaborate, with the patchwise mixing of a variety of brick types as well as natural stone. The differences in chemical composition of the stones, the mortar and the bricks may well prove to become a severe conservation problem.
- In the meantime the house has become famous in its own right and has been even used in advertisements. It remains to be seen how history and the heritage movement will regard the Hundertwasser building itself. In view of the radical design elements of the site and in view of the overall scarcity of such structures it can be expected that it will be heritage-listed in its own right. Presumably this protection would then include the Haus Bockenheimer as well, thus protecting the modification made to the historic structure. A question to be answered is whether the incorporation of the historic structure into the Hundertwasser structure has enhanced its interpretation, or whether it has been a deleterious effect.
- The question remains whether the actions taken were ethical. The Australian heritage legislation is obviously very different from that used in the Federal Republic of Germany and in the State of Hesse in particular. Could this have happened here? Should it have happened at all?