

Life beneath the Facades of Bombed-out Streets:

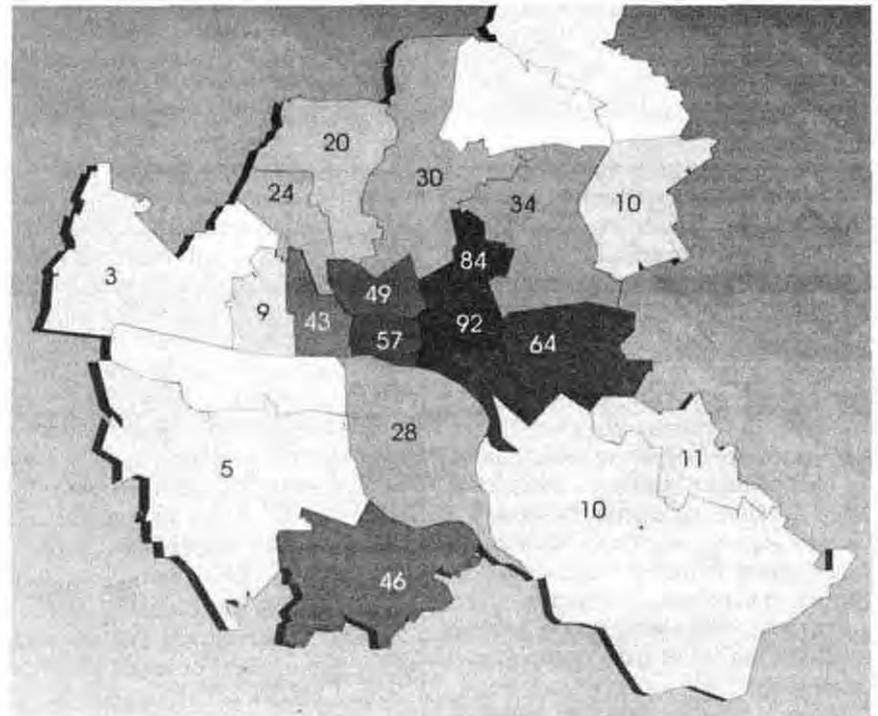
Housing Situation in post-war Hamburg

Professor Dr Joachim Döbler

“**I**ntention: To destroy Hamburg’ - thus it is recorded in paragraph 4 of the ‘Bomber Command Operation Order No 173,’ which was carried out by the Allied bomber squadrons that performed six attacks between July 24th and August 3rd 1943 in order to destroy the biggest, but one, German city. The cover name of the enterprise ‘Operation Gomorrha’ is at the same time a terrible cipher for a punishment that was to repay the attacks of Nazi Germany on the cities of Warsaw, Rotterdam, London and Coventry.

More than 35,000 people are estimated to have perished in the hail of high explosive incendiary and phosphorous bombs dropped by the British and American air forces, which destroyed over half of the city’s residential resources. How did the populace exist in a city which had been so devastated by war? And above all: How was the housing-situation in post-war Hamburg mastered? These are the main questions examined by a research team at Hamburg University.

Historical articles addressing the breakdown of society in post-war Germany are few and far between - as if a Reality, scarred by destruction, distress and torn roots wishes to turn its back on any chance it might have to gain experience from its sufferings or to learn from them. That this is the wrong approach, can be demonstrated by the example of



Percentage destruction of dwellings of Hamburg city districts (1939-46).

the housing situation in post-war Hamburg. This period was one of contrasts, characterised equally by the hopelessness and breakdown of society on the one hand, and by notable achievements in the sphere of political and social integration attained in the gutted quarters of the city, the overnight bunkers and the refugee camps, on the other. Above all, however, it was the local Housing Offices with their special powers

for controlling the allocation of accommodation - which struck deep at the roots of the civil and commercial legal codes - that were asked to bear a burden of responsibility which had become as complex as it was thankless.

The initial situation, in May 1945, was depressing. The Allied air offensive had created a hitherto unparalleled scene of destruction, and the night raids had inflicted a death-toll

of more than 35,000 people. Over half of Hamburg's residential accommodation lay in ruins. Whole districts of the city had succumbed to the horrific firestorms of Operation Gomorrha in the summer of 1943, and the raids which had followed in the autumn of 1944. The picture presented by the residential districts, gutted from outside to inside, their narrow streets lined solely by gaunt facades, is unforgettable. This massive obliteration of the densely populated residential areas in the heart of the city was characteristic of Hamburg's pattern of damage. The



The destruction in the city centre of Hamburg.

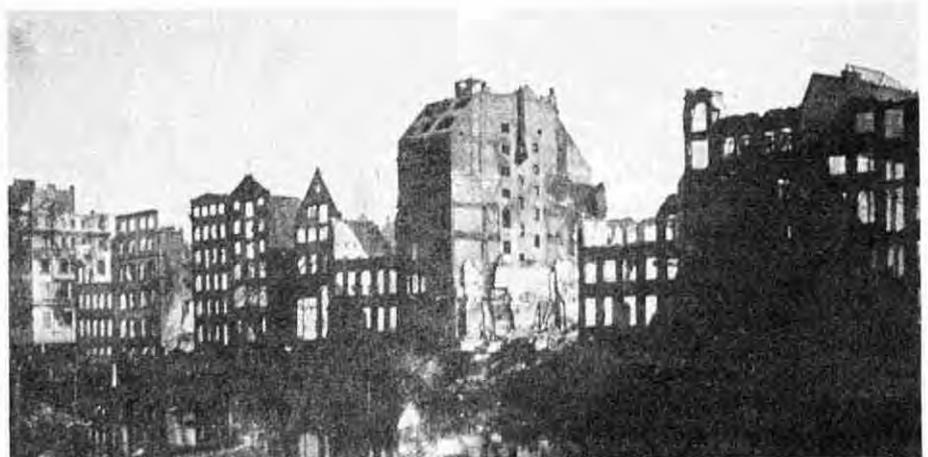


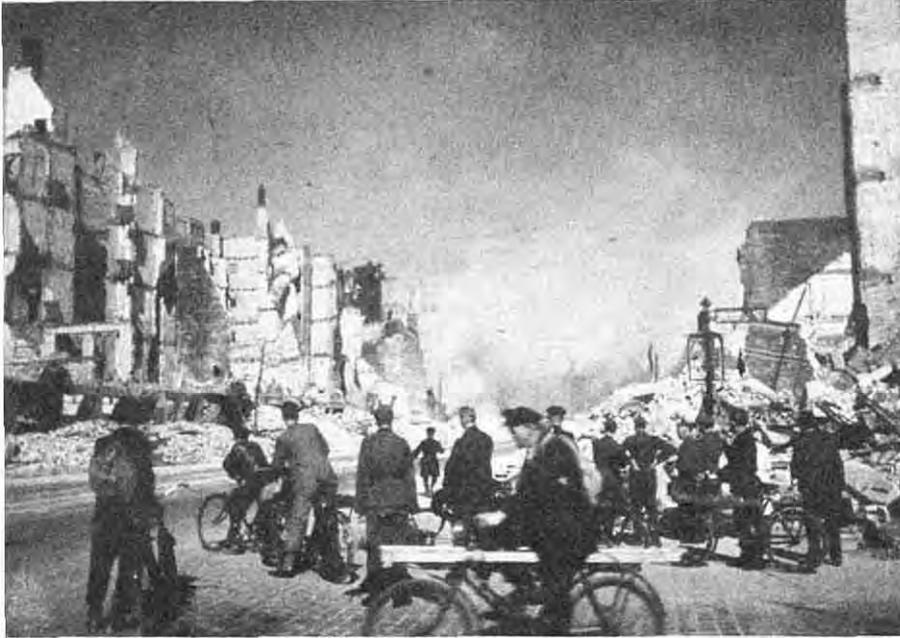
Above: After 'Operation Gomorrha'
Below: Destruction in the workers' quarters of Hamburg.

of war, the accommodation was urgently required, too. Two fifths of the 800,000 or so inhabitants of the city who had been bombed out had found alternative accommodation in the inner city. Only a relatively small proportion had moved out to the suburbs. Everyone else had either fled the city or been evacuated by the authorities. These so-called 'Butenhamburger' formed a migratory potential whose profile and dynamics were difficult to estimate. Their existence was dramatically demonstrated in the immediate aftermath of the collapse, as over 10,000 people

special features of this catastrophe emerged from the overall picture. The central, formerly densely populated working-class districts in the (south-east) of the city had de facto ceased to exist. In some of the western districts of Hamburg, there were losses of some 40 per cent. It nevertheless became clear, after the war had ended, that by carrying out repairs and increasing the population density, precisely here considerable reserves of accommodation could be mobilised.

Under the pressure of the mass migration induced by the ravages





Reviewing the ravaged city.

streamed (back) into the city every week. Hamburg became the destination upon which the hopes, not only of its own returning inhabitants, but also of thousands of discharged servicemen and eastern refugees were pinned. As Alfred Schulz Bischof, the Social Democrat president of the Housing Authority warned his party in September 1945: if this flood is not dammed, using every means at our disposal, 'then disaster is inevitable.'

The resources of the building economy were bound by rubble clearance and restoration work. So it was indeed his authority which bore the main political brunt of this precarious development, in which the ratio between the supply of surviving accommodation and the demand for housing kept growing steadily worse. Very illustrative of this problem are calculations which show that average living space per head of the population in Hamburg declined from 13.6m² in 1939 to 5.6m² in 1947. In the same period, the residential density figures - including half rooms and (non-winterised)

emergency accommodation - rose from 3 to 5 persons per accommodation unit. However, these indicators are only valid for comparisons within the city where, despite



View of the bombed out city.

the fact that housing was managed according to social needs, great disparities still occurred with respect to the quality of supply (ie living space and fitments). Finding accommodation for the larger families was always a problem. The high proportion of these, amongst the 50,000 to 60,000 officially registered persons on the housing list, reflected not only the shortage of suitable multi-room units, but also resistance, which could often only be overcome by the arbitrary allocation of families to housing. The actual living conditions also had to be taken into account. Frequently, damage to buildings or the partitioning of dwellings for creating 'substitute rooms,' thwarted any free use of available living space in accordance with the current guidelines.

Any description of this housing shortage would be incomplete without some mention of the housing requisitioned by the British occupation authorities; or the fuel shortage, whose effects the authorities tried to counteract by erecting heated communal halls during the severe winter of

1946/47. Particularly graphic are the post-war reports from the bunkers and cellars in which people were living under the lurking threat of epidemics, and which, once empty, had to be filled in to prevent 'squatting.'

However, it was the Nissen hut - that corrugated-iron, ex-army hut, 1,500 of which were initially erected from October 1945 - that was to become the true symbol of the post-war era. The files of the Control Commission for Germany, the Central Office for Labour for the British Zone and Hamburg's Housing Authority reveal that the furnishing and use of these Nissen huts was a source of great controversy. In actual fact, the aptitude of their occupants for self-sacrifice and self-organisation was to ensure that these tin huts, grouped into 'streets,' would become just as much a part of the scene as the communal accommodation run by the Office of Social Services for the refugees, returning soldiers or foreign workers.

The housing emergency scenario provides a simultaneous background



Workers' quarters- with no workers.

for the tasks and conflicting aims of the management programme, which had already been introduced into the Housing Policy, in outline, as early as 1943 with the decrees on the

housing management ('Wohnraumlänkungsverordnung') and on the provision for the bombed-out ('Wohnraumversorgungsordnung'), but which in Hamburg had been despatched via a special channel through the 'Reichsleistungsgesetz' and the subsequent 'Control Council Law No. 18.' This law was designed to ensure the complete registration, and appropriately targeted allocation of housing resources based on strict regulations for occupation. The task was as complex as it was contradictory in its enforcement. A distribution of the remaining living space according to criteria that took into account social justice, hygienical requirements, political acceptance, economic necessity and legal justification.

The preconditions for this were the imposition of a curb on freedom of movement in Hamburg. The inflow of potential residents had been stopped by decree - along with the introduction of restrictions on private rights of disposal. From today's point of view, governmental intervention in dislocating large groups of the population appear particularly



Emergency accomodation.



Life in
a Nissen
Hut street.

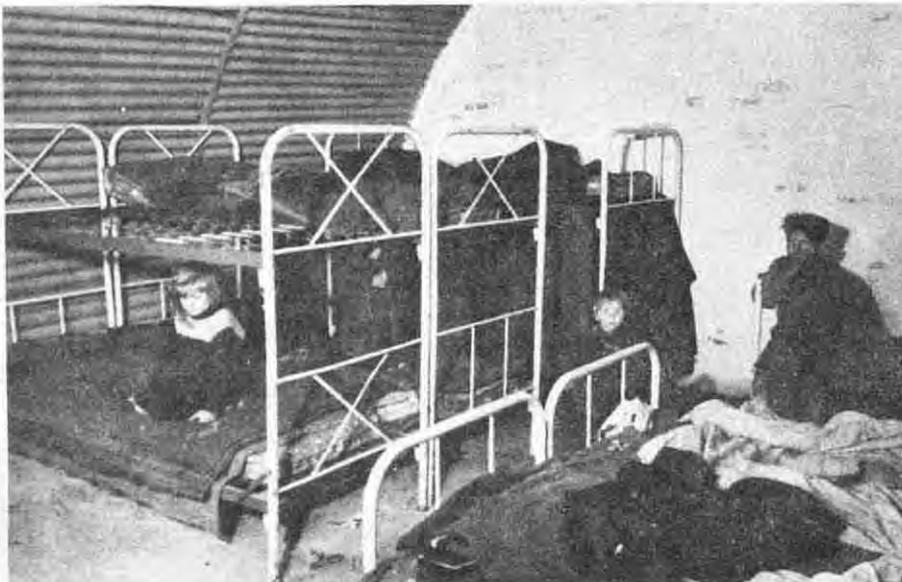
incisive. Ordinance No 16 and Housing Directive No 7, prohibiting a change of residence, were to provide the possibility of a co-ordinated influx of refugees and a longterm planning of a housing and economic policy within the British Zone. Just as aggravating, in its effect, was the declaration of several regions to be closed areas which were thus locked up against uncontrolled immigration. So Hamburg, too, was affected by a total control of infiltration and settlement. Taking into consideration

specific social and economic demands, the local authorities wanted to keep the balance by introducing a system of permits of residence and immigration and by reserving a quota of the housing resources for the benefit of certain parts of the population.

As a counterweight to these, legal standards were formulated defining the 'registrable living space' and standards of provisioning, regulating the priorities for the allocation of accommodation, and harmonising the appropriate administrative pro-

cedures. Putting these standards into practice proved to be a never-ending task. 'The limit has long been reached,' so it says in the official resume of January 1947: 'The flats are over crowded. It is becoming more and more difficult for the civil servants of the Housing Authority to somewhere discover a vacant room. The act of registration, having been pushed forward again and again, produced - after initial success, a rapid descent of figures for the discovery of vacant accommodation.' Another reason for this was that the responsible offices were operating a system which generated a ceaseless flow of new regulations. On the one hand, this situation arose from changing requirements, and on the other, from changes at the political level which, initially aimed at centralisation, but in later phases turned to regionalisation and the curbing of the arbitrary powers of local authorities through the Administrative Courts. All this was aggravated by bureaucratic intransigence. Above all, however, the mandatory character of these regulations created a situation in which the authority's unattainable and irreconcilable expectations laid it open to accusations of inefficiency. 'The president of the Housing Authority must be the most hated man in Hamburg today' wrote the 'Hamburger Echo' in December 1948.

Nevertheless, to keep the record straight, it must be admitted that this system of housing management did, in fact, work. In contrast to the rationing system for food no black market was able to emerge here. Since the housing situation in Hamburg was subjected to energetic monitoring by external agencies, any attempts to gain preferential treatment in the allocation of quarters remained confined to favouritism and lack of control within the administration itself. The city was prey to the wildest rumours. Thus the 'Monthly Report on Morale' published by the regional Military Government, Public Safety, observed that



The British army 'Nissen Huts'- a symbol of the Post-War era

according to public opinion, the Housing Authority and the Food Administration were vying for the title of the 'most corrupt authority in Hamburg.' In both cases, it was asserted, influence and small bribes were able to work wonders. Apart from the odd case, however, accusations such as these were wide off the mark. The citizens themselves were invited to participate as honorary staff in housing management. They were eligible to occupy posts on the housing committees which, co-opted into the housing departments, decided on the allocation of completed dwellings, and on the boards of arbitration which dealt with complaints about orders affecting registrations, allocations and re-quartering. It must be admitted, however, these boards of arbitration

failed to perform their intended function, of cushioning the effects of compulsory orders imposed in the name of housing management. Heavily involved in internecine conflicts about the ways in which the legal remedy procedures should be implemented, they evolved into shunting stations into which some 1,500 complaints flowed each month. As the housing shortage dragged on, the tendency to resist tooth and nail any interventions by the Housing Authority grew, and was aggravated by the extension of the Administrative Court's jurisdiction under 'Ordinance No 165.' The responsible officials in the housing departments, in particular, were dismayed to discover that, by exhausting every legal expedient, living space could be blocked for months on end, since this new juris-

diction, far from providing any protection against official high-handedness, only exacerbated the already miserable housing situation.

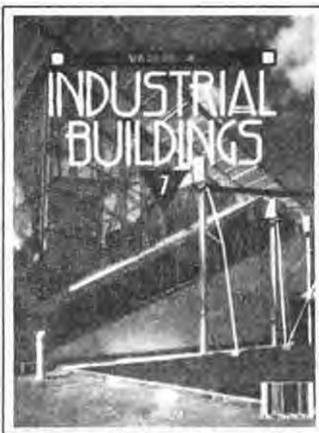
Hence, the homeless must have been devastated when they realised that their hopes of getting accommodation were being put through the hoop. Many renounced their claims in the face of coercion by the Housing Authority. In other cases, it may be assumed that even after moving into accommodation, such resistance would continue in the form of an endless running battle.

Slightly revised version of an essay first published in: German Research 1 (1994). The text is based on studies in record offices of Hamburg and London.

Photographs Courtesy the Author

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(from the book)



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