

Architecture as Collector's Item

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The author explains what led him to start assembling an architectural collection of apartments designed by prominent architects in Berlin.

My collection of city apartments in Berlin grew as if by itself. Until recently, I have neither questioned the origins of the idea nor traced the path of its gradual development.

In Israel I designed a large housing complex near Jerusalem and two apartment houses in Ramat Gan: Dubiner House built in the early sixties and Spiral House in the eighties. Both buildings represent a different approach to residential design, also providing comfortable accommodation for myself and my family.

My situation changed in 1991 when I won a competition to design the Jewish school in Berlin. It became clear that the scheme stood a better chance of being built if I was based in the city, as it had to conform to German building codes and overcome considerable resentment toward the design. It was then that I established an office in Berlin and had to look for proper accommodation.

Living and working in Berlin I became directly acquainted with the works of great twentieth-century architects for the first time. These included buildings that I had previously only been familiar with from plans and photographs, such as the Philharmonie and the Staatsbibliothek, both by Hans Scharoun. These masterpieces must be seen first-hand in order to experience the architect's unique mastery of space.

Unlike the public buildings open daily in Berlin, it is impossible to visit an apartment by Hans Scharoun or any other architect. The only way to experience it would be to live in one. Recognizing this must have triggered my interest in what has developed into a collection of architects' apartments.

Berlin is well-known for its cultural institutions, but less for the amount and quality of modern residential architecture built in between the two world wars by the most prominent architects of the twentieth century. Residential complexes and low-cost housing were built to the designs of Hans

Poelzig, Bruno Taut, Hugo Häring, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Erich Mendelsohn, Hans Scharoun, and many others. For the *Interbau* exhibition of modern architecture in Berlin in 1957, many known architects were invited; among them, Alvar Aalto, Le Corbusier, and Oscar Niemeyer. During my student years, I admired the works of these architects, particularly of Erich Mendelsohn, who left Nazi Germany to work and build in Palestine. Fifty years later, I traveled in the opposite direction, from Israel to Berlin, to build the first Jewish school after the Holocaust, the Heinz-Galinski-Schule.

To acknowledge my debt to the generations of architects who have inspired me, I followed the example of painters who collected, in their ateliers, paintings by artists they admired. Pablo Picasso, for example, had paintings by Henri Matisse, Henri Rousseau, Joan Miró, and others. By collecting great architects' apartments, I thought it to be a means of respect also toward the work of city architects, civil engineers, and many bureaucrats who have made it possible for so many good architects to contribute to the architecture of Berlin. Though we can't hang an apartment in another apartment like a painting, the idea of the collection didn't seem impossible to me.

The first opportunity presented itself when the city of Berlin decided to transfer the ownership and the administration of some of its housing condominiums to private investors. At the beginning of 2006, apartments could be bought in buildings designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Alvar Aalto; both built in Tiergarten, the "Central Park" of Berlin, as part of the 1957 *Interbau* exhibition.

In 2007, I found an apartment in a less well-known housing project in Wedding, north Berlin, designed by Mies van der Rohe in 1927, and recently an apartment in a 1928 house designed by Erich Mendelsohn became available, located on Cicerostrasse. It is one of the most elegant apartment buildings in Berlin, located not far from Mendelsohn's famous Universum Cinema on Kurfürstendamm. While trying to expand my collection, always limited by available funds, I was aware of the enormous difference between the high value of the works of painters and sculptors in contrast with the moderate price of the works of great architects. I thought that collecting an architect's work is one way of correcting this inequality, as well as a way to draw public attention to the work of architecture.

Great architecture is not a short-term investment; it belongs rather to the mega economy. Its contribution to society can't be measured by monthly interests, but by the benefits it can bring to subsequent generations. This is true as well in the case of my modest collection of Berlin apartments. It is a conceptual idea rather than a commercial investment.

Perhaps the best example of the importance and real value of art and architecture for society is the city of Florence. One can't fail to notice that today its citizens, as generations before them, continue to enjoy healthy returns on the Medici family's very wise investments.

The Medicis successfully infused the volatility of politics with the permanence of art. Their legacy should continue to be inspiring.