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Otto Steinicke, “A Visit to a New Apartment” (1929)

A Visit to a New Apartment

The building in which Mrs. Müller lives is a gigantic new housing block divided into 160 separate rental units. The foundation walls are made of polished yellow sandstone. On top rise four storeys of red brick. The apartment block has a flat roof. Airplanes could land on it. The brick façades are covered with a coat of cement roughly textured with pebbles.

To visit Mrs. Müller one has to go through one of the imposing arched gates. Passing by the stairs to the apartments facing the street, one enters the expansive central courtyard. Air and light flood in through the rectangular opening at the top, brightening up every corner of the courtyard. In eight different places there are disposal facilities for kitchen refuse, built in the shape of tall hexagons and lined up straight as an arrow with small spaces between them, like Prussian soldiers on the parade ground. Plots of grass and playgrounds for the children have been marked off neatly and cleanly. The back wings here have nothing of the sad and shabby significance of the old rental blocks. No more stuffy air, no more semidark hallways and stink. Every bit of waste water flows away immediately in an underground drainage system; even the rain disappears into the ground through a gutter, leaving no puddles anywhere on the ground, no mud.

For hygienic reasons, the inhabitants of this new residential block are prohibited from hanging their wash out the windows to dry; nor are they allowed to shake dust out the windows. Those who want to clean make their way, after having settled an appointment with the porter, to a specific area of the courtyard. There, for three hours before noon, one can get rid of dust and beat rugs as much as one likes. There are large communal laundry rooms. They are available to all the renters on days specified for each unit. The entrances and stairways in the rear wings are in no way different from those in the front. Each of the staircases have been outfitted with carpet runners all the way up to the fifth floor.

Mrs. Müller’s apartment is located through entrance five on the fourth floor in the back. I rang. A ten-year-old child opened the door: his mother is not yet home, but, being an acquaintance, I am let in. I immediately take a look around the new apartment.

For Mrs. Müller and her husband, a railroad worker, it was the luck of winning a lottery that landed them here. Five years the family waited, all the while listed at the housing office for an apartment in a new building. They were repeatedly put off. Finally their name was taken from the usual list and added to the other Müllers on the one marked “urgent”; then, two years later, to the “especially urgent” list. After another two years, this one Müller out of thousands had the pleasure of receiving a two-and-a-half-room apartment. And it is truly marvelous. Not at all comparable to the miserable holes for rent in the center, north, and east of the city. The main room, flooded with daylight, is seventy-five square feet. The walls are dry, if not thick enough to keep out noise. Only the old, poor-quality furniture does not go with the room. It was brought from the old apartment: a chaise lounge, an extension table, six chairs, and a buffet. The petit-bourgeois unculture, the so-called knick-knacks, are no longer visible. On the table is a large crystal vase with flowers. The wallpaper is brightly colored and covered over with elaborate decorative flourishes.

The bedroom measures sixty square feet, with a double bed and two children’s beds, and a brand-new linen cabinet bought on credit from a warehouse. This room gets sunlight in the mornings. Then there is a bathroom with a built-in tub, hot and cold running water—very narrow so that only one person can move around in it at a time. The toilet is in the bathroom.

The kitchen looks nearly luxurious, with built-in furnishings attached to the walls. The stove is half electrified, with the other half working with gas. An electric iron is there for Mrs. Müller to use on the wash. The entire apartment is centrally heated with radiators. Otherwise, the apartment has a narrow hallway, about forty square feet, and a tiny so-called children’s room.

I take a look at the husband’s library, displayed on three boards against the wall in the main room. He is a unionized, politically neutral proletarian, an Independent Social Democrat until 1921. After the party split, he joined neither the Communists nor the old Social Democratic Party. Since then he has been more active in the union and sports clubs. Railroad worker Müller is 43 years old; he has lived with his wife since he was 22. The family has four children, of whom the oldest is now 18.

The library of this union man contains about 150 books collected over years of saving. One can find there all of the protocols of the Social Democratic party congresses, from 1905 to 1921: the prewar writings of [August] Bebel and [Karl] Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg’s *Accumulation of Capital;* Eduard Bernstein’s pamphlets next to Lenin’s *State and Revolution;* from [Maxim] Gorky there are the plays and the novel *The Informer;* from Tolstoy *War and Peace;* [Stijn] Streuvels’ peasant novel from the Universal Library. There is one volume of Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*. Much room is taken up by the writings of bourgeois philosophers. Ernst Häckel is represented alongside Kant and Nietzsche. A bunch of recent, typically German, entertaining literary kitsch is there as well. Collected among the brochures is everything the reformist union leadership published in recent years in opposition to the communists. But next to these pamphlets one comes upon the protocols of the R.G.I. Congress, a small text by [Mikhail] Tomsky, a speech delivered to the international workers’ delegates. Just now I have Larissa

Reissner's book, *In Hindenburg's Country,* in my hand, and the woman of the house arrives home to make her excuses and welcome me.

At five in the afternoon her work in the factory ends. Mrs. Müller stamps tin products, more precisely, reaches for them with her hand on the conveyor belt. It takes her a full hour to get to her apartment after work. When I explain now that I have had a look at the new apartment on my own, we sit down in the table with a cup of coffee. Her husband sends his apologies: he had to rush off to meet his union associates for a few words in a bar. "You see," says Mrs. Müller, "here's our new apartment. You can imagine how happy we are to be out of the old hole." I ask about the rent. "Ninety marks a month, still quite cheap," asserts Mrs. Müller, "and only because this whole block was built with public funds and we were on the list for a long time did we even get in. My whole wage, four times a month, goes just for the rent. I make 30 cents an hour—9 hours times 30 cents! That doesn't quite make it in the end and our oldest boy has to add a little from his earnings so we can get it paid on time. My husband earns 44 marks and 73 cents a week by contract. We just get by with the family on that and we're all finally very happy to have a healthy place to live."

Mrs. Müller is nevertheless dissatisfied. She has a lot of worries with the two youngest children, now old enough for school, who need new clothing and school supplies every quarter year. "We can't afford anything extravagant. Now and then we go to the cinema, sometimes to a bar, sometimes to a concert. Our favorite thing, though, is seeing Russian films."

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