
Research paper

Making Space for the Single Woman: Housing, Gender and Social Reform in early 20th Century Europe

Jana von Wyl * 

ETH & ZHAW Zürich, SWITZERLAND

*Corresponding Author: jana.vonwyl@zhaw.ch

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the material need for independent space for single working women in the early 20th century was addressed through a distinct form of architecture: purpose-built women's residences. At the time, a personal room and independent income were scarce privileges for women, with housing options often limited to shared lodgings, tenement barracks or religious institutions. The shift in female labour patterns due to industrialisation led to an increase in women working in cities. This gave rise to the concept of the 'surplus woman'—a single, working woman viewed as both a modern paradox and an undesired societal phenomenon. The housing issue, exacerbated by economic inequality and limited opportunities for ownership, prompted the development of alternative residential typologies. The paper explores the architectural characteristics and social implications of women's housing colonies in Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom from the late 19th century to the 1930s through a comparative analysis of case studies. It argues that these residences played a pivotal role in advancing women's emancipation by offering spaces for visibility and autonomy, while also reflecting broader tensions between reform, respectability, and control. Revisiting these housing models further contributes to current debates on single households, gender and urban planning.

Keywords: housing, single women, housing typologies, gendered spaces, common spaces

In 1910 social reformer Mary Higgs published 'Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Woman Worker', a study that highlighted the absence of adequate housing options for single working women. By foregrounding the material challenges of everyday life, Higgs engaged with the broader contemporary discourse surrounding women's housing conditions. To fully grasp the link between housing debates and the emergence of working women in the cities, it is crucial to examine the transformation in women's lives across Europe during the late 19th century.

This period witnessed a significant shift in female labour patterns as industrialisation created new employment opportunities in cities, particularly in domestic service, textile industries (Anderson & Zinsser, 1993, p. 299) and clerking positions (Schaser, 2020, p. 86). As urban middle-class households expanded, demand grew significantly for maids, which led to increased migration from the countryside to the city. For instance, around 1890, approximately one-third of Danish women worked outside the home, half of whom were employed in domestic service (Anderson & Zinsser, 1993, p. 299). But in contrast to the fact, that women were part of the workforce, societal norms discouraged married women from employment, as working was deemed incompatible

with motherhood and domestic duties. Consequently, many employed women were unmarried or childless (Terlinden & Von Oertzen, 2006, p. 187). In Germany, for instance, regulations such as the *Beamtinnenzölibat* enforced celibacy for female civil servants, reinforcing the association between working women and singleness (Frevert, 1989). In the United Kingdom under the legal principle of coverture, a woman's independent legal identity was effectively erased upon marriage (Morrell, 1999). This policy also framed female employment as a temporary condition, as women were expected to marry, start a family, and consequently leave the workforce.

But where could a single woman live in the city? The housing options of the time were either for families or tenement barracks for workers. As more and more women from the middle class entered the urban workforce, the lack of suitable housing became an increasingly urgent issue. In the German Newspaper *Die Gleichheit*, we read an article from 1911: "In many large cities, the housing shortage is particularly noticeable for single women. A girl who is dependent on her own labour and cannot live with her parents often finds it extremely difficult to find a suitable flat. The girl searches and searches, usually in vain, and wastes a lot of time. How often is the door slammed in her face with the words 'We don't rent to ladies.'"¹ (1911, p. 14).

In addition to the limited access to housing came the economic disadvantage for unmarried women: Anderson and Zinsser show in their work 'A history of their own – Women in Europe' with numbers from the UK and France that women earned around one-third up to half what men earned doing the same job (1993, pp. 300-312). Therefore, the housing options available to men were often neither affordable nor socially acceptable for women, leaving single women with very few choices. While the feminist movement was a catalyst in raising awareness of the issue, solutions emerged from a range of actors—including charitable organisations, social reformers and middle-class groups concerned with morality and respectability. A distinct residential typology designed specifically for single women began to appear across urban centres in Europe and the United States (Sassin, 2012). Known by different names—*Ledigenheime* in Germany, *Frauenwohnkolonien* or *Madonnenhaus* in Switzerland, and women's hostels in the UK—these residences began to proliferate from the late 19th century through the 1930s, with some continuations into the post-war period. While they emerged in different contexts and were driven by varying motives, they all aimed to address the growing need for suitable housing for the 'New Woman'².

This article explores the architectural characteristics and social impact of women's residences in urban centres in Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom between 1900 and the 1930s. It investigates how these spaces reflected social changes affecting single, working women in early 20th-century Europe, and considers the role architecture played as an expression of social reform.

Women's housing colonies are examined not only as responses to the housing crisis, but as critical spaces for visibility, autonomy, and emancipation. In the late nineteenth century, the term "colony" became increasingly common in housing debates, and newspapers of the period likewise described women's housing projects as colonies, mirroring its broader use for reform-oriented, purpose-built residential communities. These residences played a pivotal role in advancing women's rights by offering single women—often marginalised and stigmatised—physical spaces for independence, thereby challenging traditional gender norms and contributing to the broader feminist movement.

The discussion centres on several key questions: What were the architectural characteristics of this new housing typology? What social and economic factors drove its development across various European cities? In what ways did these colonies contribute to women's emancipation? How did they incorporate architectural and social innovation? And how can these spaces be interpreted as architectural expressions of feminist theories on space and identity?

The study investigates three critical dimensions of women's housing colonies: their role in fostering female independence, their architectural distinctiveness, and their significance as responses to the challenges of modernity. Drawing on three case studies, it demonstrates how architectural design was closely tied to social reform and explores how these spaces functioned as platforms for emancipation and identity formation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative analysis focusing on three women's housing colonies in urban centres across Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom. It examines the Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House in London by Joseph and Smithem (1913), the *Lettenhof* in Zurich by Lux Guyer (1927), and the *Ledigenheim* designed by Hans Scharoun for the *Werkbundaustellung* in Stuttgart (1929). Each case study is examined in terms of its architectural features—such as room size, shared kitchens, common areas and communal facilities.

¹ Translated from German into English by the author, this applies to all translations unless otherwise noted.

² 'New Woman' describing the growing number of educated and working women (mostly white middle-class women). Term first used in an article by Sarah Grand (1854-1943) in 1894.

The case studies are deliberately selected for their urban context and for their relevance to the early twentieth-century debate on women's housing, allowing for a comparative analysis of purpose-built colonies for single women during a period of profound urbanisation and social change. However, women's housing initiatives were more diverse in scope. One of the early examples, the Blumhardt-Haus in Stuttgart (1874), established by the *Verein zur Fürsorge für Fabrikarbeiterinnen*, offered accommodation for more than one hundred factory workers (Evangelische Wohnheime Stuttgart e.V. (n.d.)). Around 1900, *Mädchenheime* in textile regions provided supervised housing in smaller industrial towns (Sassin, 2012). At the other end of the social spectrum, the Haus zur Sonne in Berlin (1913), designed by architect Emilie Winkelmann, catered to educated middle-class women who had withdrawn from working life (Terlinden & Von Oertzen, 2006). Also considering the timeframe we find later examples into the post-war decades, as shown for example by the *Frauenwohnheim Viktoriastrasse* (1954) or the *Wohnheim Monbijou* (1957) in Bern (Müller, 2024). Taken together, such examples illustrate the broader range of emerging housing models for women across different times, places and social classes. Against this background, the following analysis concentrates on three representative urban projects, examining not only their architectural features but also their socio-political significance. Beyond physical design, the analysis situates these buildings within their social and historical contexts, emphasising their roles in enhancing women's visibility, autonomy and access to urban life. Alongside architectural plans, the research draws on historical sources including newspaper articles, archival documents, and publications from the women's movement to reveal the lived experiences and challenges faced by single women during this period.

Furthermore, literature on feminist spatial theory, housing history and social movements is used to critically assess the significance of these housing colonies as a form of societal and architectural innovation.

The relationship between gender and space has been extensively theorised by feminist scholars. Dolores Hayden (1981) explores how urban planning historically marginalised women, while Doreen Massey (1994) highlights how space is not neutral but socially constructed, reinforcing power dynamics. Applying these perspectives, the analysis demonstrates how women's residences challenged existing spatial norms by creating environments that supported economic independence and communal living.

THE “SURPLUS WOMAN” AND THE RISE OF WOMEN’S HOUSING SOLUTION

By the end of the 19th century, both the number of working women and the number of single women were widely perceived to be increasing. Although this perception cannot be supported by clear demographic evidence (Dollard, 2009), it reflected a significant shift in societal views regarding women's roles in the public sphere. While the overall number of working women did not increase substantially, the nature of their employment changed considerably. Industrialisation and economic transformations facilitated the entry of more women into white-collar professions. For instance, in England in 1851 merely 1 percent of clerks were women. By 1914, 25 per cent of all commercial clerks were women. In forty years, the number of female clerks increased 400 times (Tilly & Scott, 1987, p. 156). This shift in profession meant a displacement from the traditional domestic realm into a priorly male-dominated world. Moreover, the entry of middle-class women into the workforce often contributed to the mistaken perception of an increase in the number of working women, as their experience was equated with all women (Tilly & Scott, 1987, p. 150). The rise of middle-class women in employment brought up moral and respectability concerns. Unmarried aunts and daughters were no longer financially sustainable, yet it was still seen as disgraceful in urban middle-class society for them to work outside the home. The idea of women earning money was viewed as harmful to the family's reputation (Dollard, 2009, p. 9). The growing presence of single women living independently gave rise to the concept of ‘surplus women’³, a societal notion labelling unmarried women as ‘extra’ or unnecessary (Dollard, 2009). As Sassin (2012, p. 201) notes: “The single person was by default a man, and yet the unmarried woman (*alleinstehende Frau*) was a popular signifier of modernity – at once a victim and a heroine of the modern age – one literally ‘standing alone’ (*alleinstehend*) in society through no fault of her own.” This highlights the contradictory position of unmarried women at the time: on the one hand, their status as working women was regarded as unnatural and temporary; on the other, the ‘New Woman’ was celebrated as a symbol of modernity and as a feminist ideal. Or how Massey puts it: “The old patriarchal form of domestic production was torn apart, the established pattern of relations between the sexes was thrown into question.” (Massey, 1994, p. 191).

The way in which one lives - both how and where - is often a reflection of one's economic and social status (Müller, 2024, p. 22). Until the 20th century, women predominantly lived within family structures, whether in nuclear or extended households. If women lived outside the family, they typically did so as domestic servants,

³ The term originated in the United Kingdom following the 1851 census, which reported a significant demographic imbalance with close to one million more women than men. It continued to circulate in public discourse after the First World War, when wartime casualties further intensified concerns about unmarried women. In German-speaking contexts, related discussions referred to a *Frauenüberschuss* (surplus of women).

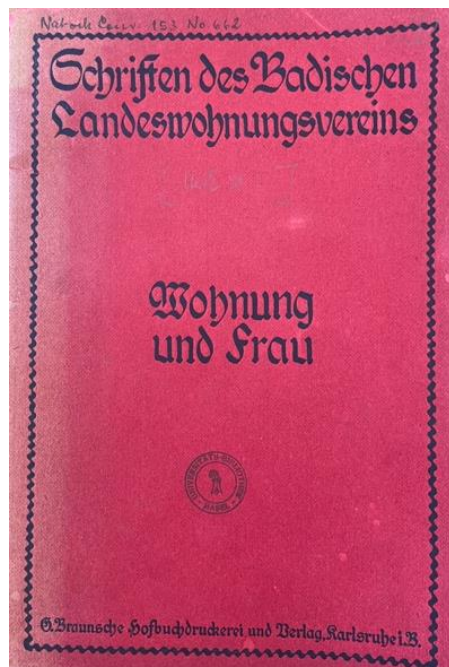
residing with the families they worked for, or as what was called *Schlafgängerinnen* ('sleepwalkers') in Germany, renting a bed on a day-to-day basis in small flats of low-income people (Müller, 2024, p. 22). Others lived in rental barracks and lower middle-class workers might have been able to locate a room in an overcrowded boarding house. For middle-class or upper-class women there were furnished rooms or very rarely independent accommodations (Henderson, 2009, p. 359).

Before, for unmarried women one of the few 'respectable' housing options available was often found in cloisters or other charitable, religious foundations. However, while these institutions provided shelter, they were governed by strict rules and increasingly regarded—across a broad political spectrum, from moderates to leftist radicals—as outdated and regressive. Moreover, having traditionally catered to elderly women, these institutions were seen as ill-suited for young, modern women seeking to actively engage in society (Sassin, 2012, p. 206).

This lack of suitable housing options was addressed by the feminist movement early on. Louise Otto-Peters (1818–1895), a founding member of the General German Women's Association (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein*), addressed this issue as early as in 1881. In her article *Klein, rein und allein* ('small, clean, and alone'), published in the journal *Neue Bahnen*, she asserted that women no longer wished to live in subordination with relatives but instead sought space of their own: "(...) they will all be happy to affirm the above⁴ and find comfort in the fact that they are free to do as they please within their own four walls!" (Otto-Peters, 1881, p. 18). Further, the 1911 conference organised by the German *Badische Landeswohnungsverein*, titled 'Apartment and woman' (Figure 1), articulated the housing crisis as a gendered issue: "The solution to the housing question, this important and urgent social issue of the present day, has an even deeper significance for women than it does for men." (Baum, Kröhne, et al., 1911, p. 40). The conference also underscored the broader issue of the housing shortage for single individuals: "The housing shortage that the building cooperatives set out to remedy is first and foremost the lack of good, healthy and affordable small flats." (Staudinger, 1911, pp. 44-45). Similar concerns arose across Europe. In 1910, Mary Higgs, in collaboration with Edward Hayward, published 'Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Woman Worker', highlighting the housing challenges faced by women workers in London, as mentioned in the beginning.

Figure 1

Conference Booklet "Apartment and woman" 1911



The housing conditions of single working-class women differed significantly from both their married counterparts and single women of higher social standing. Overcrowding, large families, and financial hardship meant that many working-class girls had to leave home at a young age to support themselves. A large number entered live-in occupations such as domestic service, dressmaking, or retail work, which inherently denied them independent housing. Those employed in other fields often secured lodging on their own, but their low wages

⁴ Here 'above' refers to 'small, clean, and alone', which the author describes as fitting keywords for single women, "i.e. those who have no families in which they can make themselves useful, whether their own or one in which they fulfill some kind of professional role."

typically restricted them to the most impoverished housing options. The extreme poverty faced by unmarried, widowed, or abandoned working-class women left them highly susceptible to homelessness, with many forced into workhouses. Historical records indicate that thousands of women also lived in common lodging houses, shelters, brothels, or were left without shelter altogether (Morrell, 1999). This shows that women were by no means a uniform or homogeneous group; the housing conditions of working-class women differed significantly from those of middle- and upper-class women, just as the experiences of single women contrasted with those of married women. However, certain societal factors transcended class and marital status, shaping women's housing circumstances in distinctly gendered ways—primarily due to their economic and social dependence on men.

The struggles single women faced in securing housing reflect broader gendered division of space theorised by feminist scholars. Hayden (1981) describes how the spatial organisation of cities has often reinforced women's economic and social subordination. Similarly, Chant and McIlwaine (1998) argue, women's access to urban space has historically been shaped by their perceived dependency on male providers. The exclusion of single women from the urban rental market thus underscores their precarious position within a built environment designed around patriarchal family structures.

In summary, the increasing number of independent working women in cities—particularly the rise of middle-class women entering the workforce—combined with economic disadvantages and a lack of suitable housing options, made the housing issue a critical concern for women. Therefore, solutions were sought from various sides. On one hand, the bourgeoisie aimed to provide morally safe spaces for working women in the cities, spaces that aligned with traditional values of the 'home', hence avoiding an institutional character. On the other hand, the feminist movement advocated for greater independence for women, seeking to free them from the constraints of family structures and assigned gender roles. This combination of influences led to the development of housing models that strived to balance respectability and independence, offering women spaces that allowed them to live autonomously while still conforming to certain social expectations.

FROM HOUSING CRISIS TO ARCHITECTURAL INNOVATION

Pioneering models

One of the earliest examples of this new typology can be found in Stuttgart: a *Ledigenheim* built in 1874 for skilled female factory workers by the Association of Care for Female Factory Workers. The project's supporters aimed to create a hygienic and morally safe environment while fostering a sense of community. Notable features of this early project include bathroom facilities on each floor, brightly lit bedrooms and well-designed communal spaces, such as a heated gathering hall and two public kitchens (Sassin, 2012, p. 215). Another early example is Sloane Gardens House (Figure 2), built in 1888 for the Ladies' Associated Dwellings Company in London. It primarily consisted of compact single bedrooms and cubicles. The ground floor housed shops, some of which sold products made by the residents. Additionally, the serviced building featured a library, a music room, and a communal dining hall (Gee, 2010, p. 92).

Figure 2

Sloane gardens house 1888. © Geoff Brandwood, Victorian Society



Later housing models still featured many components of earlier housing experiments but presented a classier appearance. The *Ledigenheim* in Alt Moabit Berlin from 1909 for example was in the style of the Biedermeier revival, a style that could be read as both “elevated and homey” (Sassin, 2012, p. 218) (Figure 3). The house

included a dining hall, as well as a coffee house, that was open to the public. A 'homey' atmosphere should on one hand serve the purportedly innate domestic nature of women and on the other hand ensure, that the residents would rather stay at home than indulge in the city life (Sassin, 2012, p. 225).

Figure 3

Alt Moabit 38 (1909), primary facade. 2008. ©Erin Eckbold Sassin



An examination of early housing models designed specifically for single women reveals several defining features of this purpose-built typology. These residences consistently incorporated public and semi-public facilities. Ground floors often housed amenities such as restaurants or libraries, making them accessible to both residents and the wider community. In the private sections, bedrooms were frequently complemented by parlours—semi-public spaces where residents could receive guests without having to invite them into their personal rooms (Sassin, 2012, p. 224). One objective was to ensure that residents stayed within the confines of the building, thus limiting their exposure to potentially morally dubious establishments in the city. Additionally, these housing complexes aimed to free the working women from the domestic chores by providing in-house dining options and communal services.

The construction of *Ledigenheime* was part of a broader international trend of social experiments, which were underpinned by new educational opportunities (Terlinden, 1999). Emerging in the late 19th century, single-kitchen houses (*Einküchenhäuser*), rooted in socialist ideas proposed by Charles Fourier (1772–1837), served as important precursor models influencing the later design of *Ledigenheime*. These early experiments advocated the centralisation of domestic labour to ease household responsibilities.

Within the context of the *Ledigenheime* single women played a leading role. With their perceived innate maternal qualities, women were seen as capable of making a unique cultural contribution to a public sphere that had traditionally been dominated by men and male values. This idea of an expanded form of motherhood—spiritual rather than biological—found expression in what scholars refer to as 'municipal housekeeping'. This concept encompassed various initiatives, such as the establishment of settlement houses, free kindergartens, public kitchens, and public libraries, often driven by philanthropic voluntary organisations. Public kitchens and libraries, in particular, were frequently central to the design of *Ledigenheime* (Sassin, 2012, p. 209). These buildings thus reflected an architectural embodiment of traditional gender ideologies, allowing women to enter the public sphere while fulfilling roles that aligned with their supposed natural duties as caretakers of the home.

Having outlined the origins and underlying principles of this building typology, the following section turns to three in-depth case studies to examine its architectural features and social significance in the early 20th century. Each case will explore with particular attention to its inception the key actors involved in its realisation. Through comparative analysis, the section highlights both the formal characteristics of the designs and their broader impact within the social and cultural contexts in which they emerged.

TRACING THE ORIGINS AND DRIVING FORCES OF WOMEN'S RESIDENTIAL REFORM

One of the driving forces behind early 20th-century efforts to reform the housing market for single women in the United Kingdom was the National Association of Women's Lodging Houses. Established in 1909 by Mary Higgs, it focused primarily on those in the lower-income sectors (Morrell, 1999, p. 293). It played a pivotal role in advancing the housing agenda for single women. However, while the organisation excelled in gathering and disseminating information and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, it struggled to convince municipalities to create lodging houses for women. It still managed to play an important role in opening several

women's hostels. The association's most notable achievement was its dedicated focus on the housing needs of single women, going beyond the scope of other organisations and successfully elevating the issue to national importance.

Furthermore, the organisation directed its efforts towards all women in need, without distinguishing between those deemed 'respectable' and 'unrespectable'. This marked a significant shift in the perception of women's housing needs, reflecting a broader transition from moralistic interpretations of poverty to an understanding rooted in economic factors. At the time, vagrancy and homelessness had become pressing public concerns, prompting discussions about new solutions. The emergence of a 'social services state' under the Liberal government signalled a move towards recognising the provision of basic social needs as a governmental responsibility rather than solely the domain of private charity (Morrell, 1999, p. 324). A notable example of their efforts is the Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House, constructed in 1913. After unsuccessful attempts to secure funding from the municipality, a private fund from the wealthy Ada Lewis-Hill was used to build what became the largest women's lodging house in London at the time, accommodating up to 220 women (Gee, 2010, p. 104). The architectural partnership of Joseph and Smithem, about whom limited information is available except that they had previously designed several workmen's housing projects in Dublin, were commissioned with the Ada Lewis House. Today the house is known as the Discroll House, since it was purchased by Terence Discroll in 1965.

In contrast to the Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House, the women's colony *Lettenhof* in Zurich was not funded by a single benefactor, but by a collective union of individuals sharing common interests and goals. In March 1925, the Women's Centre (*Frauenzentrale*) commissioned studies to explore building projects for single women, as well as the identification of suitable building sites. This sparked the interest of other women's organisations, leading to the merger of three associations and the formation of a cooperative to undertake the implementation of a related project. The Women's Center (*Frauenzentrale*), the protectoral for single women (*Protektorat alleinstehender Frauen*) and the building cooperative for working women (*Baugenossenschaft berufstätiger Frauen* (see [Figure 4](#), Statues of the cooperative⁵)) were able to purchase a larger site in Wipkingen, a quarter in Zurich that was primarily characterised by agriculture until the 1920s (Bürliemann, 2019). The land was collectively purchased, but to accommodate the diverse needs of the future residents and the various interest groups they represented, each group independently financed their own portion of the housing complex. The municipality of Zurich also provided financial assistance to the *Genossenschaften* (cooperatives), while future residents were required to purchase share certificates ranging from 600 to 1800 francs, depending on the size of the room or flat they applied for. This process, which is a distinctive feature of Swiss cooperatives, was commonly used to facilitate affordable housing. One of the earliest examples of such engagement was the women's housing cooperative founded in Zurich in 1919 by Dora Staudinger and others. As a pioneer of the cooperative movement in Switzerland, Staudinger viewed collective housing not only as a response to economic need but also as a tool for self-help and social renewal—values that would go on to shape later projects like the *Lettenhof* (Müller, 2023).

With the *Zürcher Frauenverein für alkoholfreie Wirtschaften* (Zurich women's association for alcohol-free pubs) a fourth player was involved in the project, which led to four buildings grouped around a courtyard ([Figure 5](#)). Although each building was financed individually and has partially a different interior layout, the exterior design was conceived as an overall complex, including a shared garden area (Rudolf, 1928, p. 145). Lux Guyer was an obvious choice to be commissioned with the design of the colony, as she was the first female architect in Switzerland to establish her own architectural practice.

The *Ledigenheim* designed by Hans Sharoun and completed in 1929 as part of the *Werkbundsiedlung* for the *Wohnung und Werkraum* exhibition in Breslau has yet another background and differs programmatically from the previous two examples. It not only provided housing options for single women but also for single men as well as childless couples. The *Werkbundsiedlung* in Breslau was a significant architectural and urban planning project that was part of the broader *Deutscher Werkbund* movement, which aimed to merge industrial efficiency with high-quality design. In contrast to the renowned *Werkbund* exhibition in Stuttgart in 1927, which had a broader international focus, the Breslau exhibition emphasised community-oriented buildings and featured more local architects rather than globally recognised figures. The funding for the exhibition came from the municipality and small and micro flats were the focus of the exhibition (Bock, 2022, p. 114).

⁵ Art. 2 states: «The purpose of the co-operative is to provide healthy and affordable housing and to rent it out to members, primarily to single working women. The cooperative is a non-profit organisation and is politically and confessionally neutral.»

Figure 4

Statutes cooperative working women Zurich, (SozArch KS 334/15-Z1), Sozialarchiv⁵

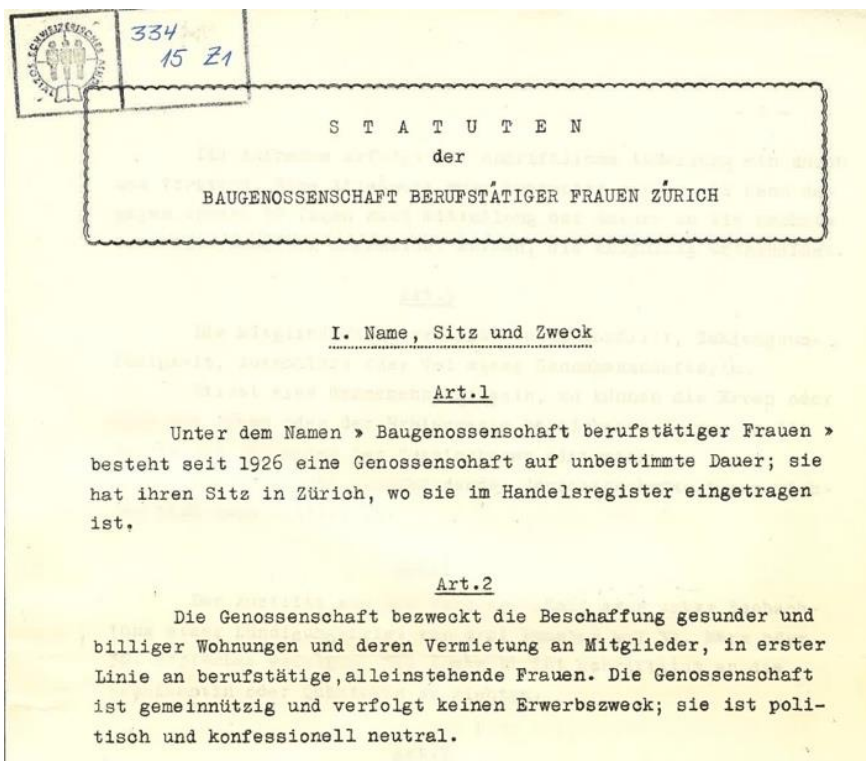


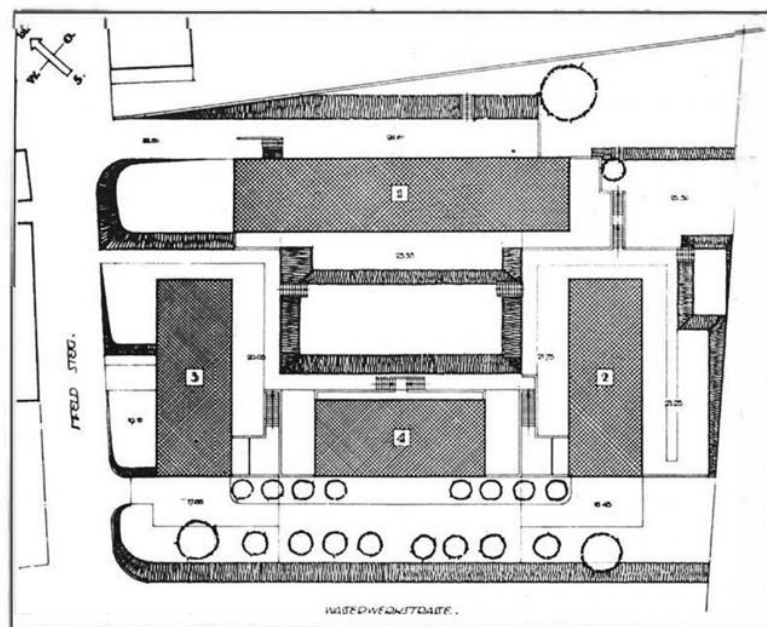
Figure 5

Situation Lettenhof with the different stakeholders, 1927. Published in "Wohnkolonie für alleinstehende Frauen im Lettenhof Zürich." *Das Werk: Kunst und Architektur* 15(5), 1928

LETTENHOF

Lageplan Maßstab 1:600

1. Baugenossenschaft Lettenhof
2. Baugenossenschaft berufstätiger Frauen
3. Protektorat für alleinstehende Frauen
4. Alkoholfreies Restaurant



It highlighted the shift towards rationalist and functional architecture, moving away from traditional ornamentation and promoting a more efficient, standardised approach to residential design (Figure 6). While not exclusively designed for single women, it resonates with the housing models developed by the early feminist movement in Germany, which brought the issue of housing for single individuals—particularly women—into the forefront of the housing discourse and developed community-based housing blocks.

Figure 6

View of the courtyard with the two-bedroom flats on the left and the dining hall in the middle, 1929. © bkp, Berlin, 2003, Kunstbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz



In summary we have one project brought to life by a women's organisation and financed by a female philanthropist, another executed through the merger of three women's cooperatives with the support of the municipality for charitable housing, and a third showcased at an exhibition of housing models, which highlighted how small and micro-flats, designed to accommodate the emerging "urban nomad" (Sassin, 2012, p. 248), which were at the forefront of the housing debate at the time.

Architectural innovations in women's collective housing

The Ada Lewis Women's Lodging is a six-story building designed in a Baroque style with a distinctive U-shaped floor plan (Figure 7). Its façade is marked by large, generously proportioned windows, which offer no indication of the compact cubicles behind them. The entrance is accentuated by a triangular pediment in the style of a 'tympantum', while the semi-circular steps create an inviting gesture toward the public.

Emily Gee, in her chapter "Where Shall She Live? Housing the New Working Woman in Late Victorian and Edwardian London", describes the building's architectural approach: "This historicist style conferred a sense of authority that fitted its semi-institutional use, yet the rich detailing produced a proud building to suit the women it housed." (Gee, 2010, p. 105).

The first four floors were dedicated to sleeping accommodations, comprising "214 single cubicles, twenty double bedrooms, and six slightly larger 'special' rooms" (Gee, 2010, p. 105). Architects Joseph and Smith employed an innovative material of the time—Mouchel-Hennebique ferro-concrete—in the columns and in other structurally significant elements. While these features imparted a sense of solidity and functionality, the common rooms contrasted with a more decorative aesthetic. They were adorned with colourful glazed tiles, featuring niches and fireplaces (Figure 8). The house offered a variety of shared spaces, including a sewing room, a clothes-brushing room, laundry and drying rooms. Amenities designed to support domestic labour were primarily located in the basement, while the sewing room, library, and dining rooms were situated on the ground floor (Historic England, n.d.). The special bedrooms were consistently occupied, while the cubicles attracted fewer residents. This discrepancy arose because, although the hostel was intended for the 'poorest' women, they were primarily occupied by teachers, typists, clerks, and nurses, rather than factory workers. As a result, just four months after opening, a small adjustment was made to increase the privacy of the cubicles.

Figure 7

Ada Lewis women's lodging house (Driscoll house) by Stephen Craven, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



Figure 8

Library at Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House. ©Historical England DP0217



Emily Gee also writes about the Ada Lewis House, that it was “clearly modelled on the men’s Rowton Houses (...). Ada Lewis House was more inviting and ‘feminine’ in some of its decorative schemes (...) but the glazed tile dados (...) were eerily similar.” (Gee, 2010, p. 106).

In general, we see a lot of similar features to lodgings that were solely built for men. But some interesting distinctions can be determined, such as the above mentioned ‘feminine’ decorations. Other distinctions were the interior connection between the private spaces and the public. *Ledigenheime* for men emerged within municipal and philanthropic reform efforts aimed at stabilising the everyday lives of single male workers, who were considered particularly vulnerable to moral dangers and unruly behaviour in the modern city (e.g. Rehloffstraße Hamburg, 1913, *Ledigenheim* München, 1926). These concerns shaped the architecture: In the *Ledigenheime* at Dankelmannstrasse (Berlin, 1908), for instance, there was no direct access from private or semi-private spaces to the public areas of the home. This deliberate separation of single men’s interactions with public spaces reflects the concerns of middle-class reformers, who feared that, residents had not yet fully adapted to domestic life and could not be entirely trusted to conform to expected behaviour. Whereas women, seen as naturally inclined to domesticity, were considered less of a concern (Sassin, 2012, p. 221).

In contrast to the small cubicles at the Ada Lewis House, the Lettenhof in Zurich offered more two- (23) to three-room (6) flats, rather than single rooms (22) (Zamariàn, 2013, p. 180). This was a deliberate choice by the cooperative, aimed at accommodating women with varying needs in terms of room sizes and, consequently, rental prices. Nevertheless, we find similar professions represented among the residents: Dressmaker, telephonist, office clerk, commercial clerk, childminder, kindergarten teacher or teacher (Bürlimann, 2019).

The façade, similar to that of the Ada Lewis House, featured large windows, including double-wing balcony doors. However, it embraced a distinct modernist style, marked by the absence of ornamentation and historical references (Figure 9).

Figure 9

The Lettenhof view from the river 1927. Bangeschichtliches Archiv Stadt Zürich



The *Lettenhof* offered a range of apartment types, each with furnishing and layouts tailored to residents’ differing needs and financial means. The largest units—two- and three-room flats located in the main housing blocks—featured generously sized rooms, private bathrooms, full kitchens, and balconies. In contrast, the more affordable two-room flats situated in the flanking wings were equipped with compact kitchenettes and either private or shared bathroom facilities. A third category consisted of ten single rooms located in the fourth building, which also housed the alcohol-free restaurant. These single units included bed alcoves, running water, either a balcony or bay window, shared bathrooms, and small kitchenettes (Rudolf, 1928).

Overall, the housing colony was considered highly innovative for its time. Modern conveniences such as electric boilers, telephones in each building (at a time when only three other telephone connections existed in the entire neighbourhood), and vacuum cleaners available for borrowing from the caretaker couple reflected a forward-looking approach to everyday domestic life.

As one contemporary newspaper observed: “At every turn, the layout and utilisation of the rooms reveal the architect’s understanding of the needs of a woman’s household, which has to be managed as efficiently as possible in terms of time and energy alongside her job” (M.L.Sch., 1927).

By comparison, the Ada Lewis House placed greater emphasis on communal areas rather than individual living spaces. Nevertheless, the restaurant in the *Lettenhof* provided a space for residents to gather or order meals to be delivered to their rooms. This feature was significant in fostering social interaction and communication, not only among residents but also with those from the surrounding neighbourhood. At the time, it was considered immoral for women to dine alone in a public restaurant, making this provision a crucial aspect of the colony (Schmid et al., 2019).

“Zurich can pride itself on being the first Swiss city to fulfil an urgent need of our time: The creation of small flats for single and especially working women.”, celebrated a local newspaper (M.L.Sch, 1927). As international developments and debates in Switzerland are rather slow to be reflected in the built environment, the residential colony was praised by various newspapers and magazines. Hans Scharoun's *Ledigenheim* had a somewhat more difficult task. The housing block for single individuals was built for the *Werkbund* exhibition ‘*Wohnung und Werkraum*’ in Breslau in 1929. Only two years prior to that, the famous *Werkbund* exhibition ‘the apartment’ took place in Stuttgart under the artistic leadership of Mies van der Rohe. Interestingly, the architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, who designed a model flat for working women as part of the Stuttgart exhibition, advocated against clustering women in segregated residential blocks. Instead, she promoted the integration of single women’s housing into larger, mixed-family residential developments. Based on her own experiences and commissioned research in Frankfurt, Lihotzky developed the concept of the *Einliegerwohnung*—independent, affordable studio units embedded within regular housing settlements. She argued that integrating single women into family-oriented housing would not only reduce social isolation but also allow the units to benefit from public subsidies otherwise unavailable to women-specific housing blocks (Henderson, 2009, pp. 360–361).

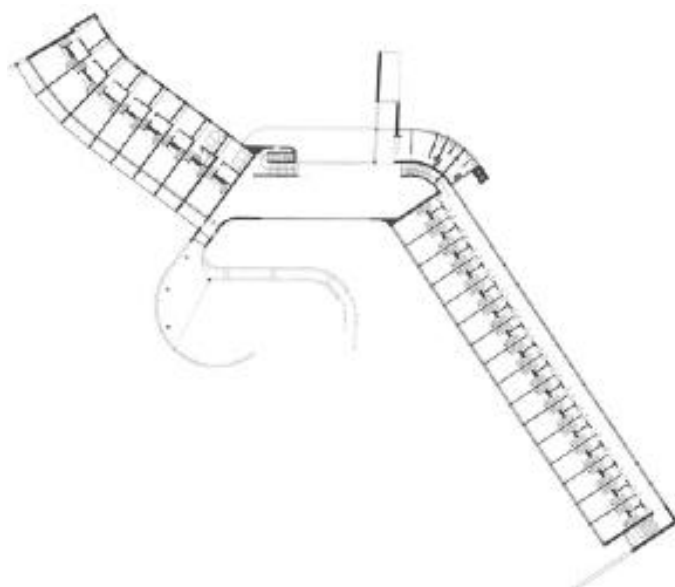
It can be assumed that a lot of pressure was on the architects of the ‘*Wohnung und Werkraum*’ expo not to repeat the Stuttgart contents and go beyond what was displayed there (Eisen, 2012, p. 225). Compared to the other case-studies we have here an experimental settlement, though built to overdue the time of the exhibition, but certainly with a model character. Opposed to Ada Lewis Women’s Lodging House the *Ledigenheim* designed by Hans Scharoun was not intended to accommodate the ‘simple’ working girl but rather targeted the ‘New People’ of the interwar period. For this audience, more complex facilities were presented, much like the comforts a hotel had to offer (Eisen, 2012, p. 227). Scharoun himself talks about a metropolitan dweller, who differs from the small town or middle town dwellers, referring to the above mentioned ‘urban nomad’. In the reception of the exhibition, we can see that Scharoun’s building was the most noted and hence it can be said that he truly accomplished to add to the housing debate of the *Werkbundsiedlung* in Stuttgart. Eisen, for example writes about this: “It was the first *Ledigenheim* of modern genealogy to be built, which differed fundamentally from its predecessors in terms of its promised social function and clientele.” (Eisen, 2012, p. 229). It seems that from now on, working single people were at the forefront of the modernisation of living environments and lifestyles and that their new domicile communicated this change.

The building's form and layout reflect Scharoun's vision of modern housing, combining efficiency with a strong emphasis on social interaction and spatial fluidity.

One of the most striking features of the *Ledigenheim* is its S-shaped layout, which integrates different residential wings with communal spaces (Figure 10). This organic form not only responds to the site’s topography but also creates a dynamic interaction between private and shared areas. Additionally, the building was divided into separate sections to accommodate different demographics: one part was designated for female residents, while another was exclusively for men, and a third for couples. This separation reflected societal norms of the time, preserving the overall communal concept while innovatively combining different groups within a single residence.

Figure 10

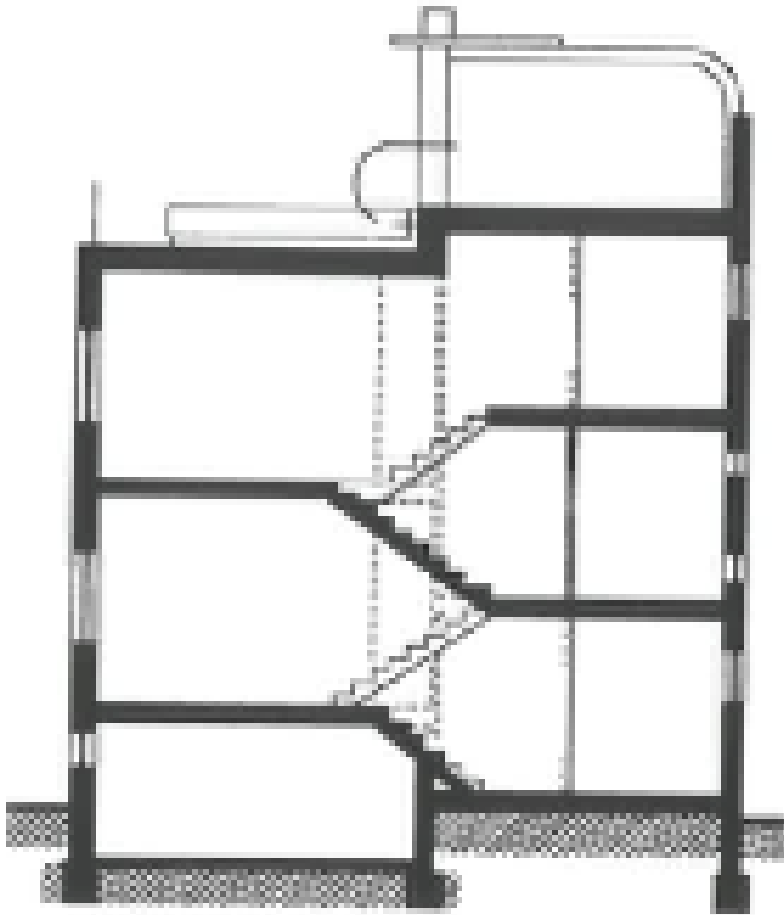
Floorplan first floor, 1929. Akademie der Künste [AdK], Berlin, Hans-Scharoun-Archiv



The flats themselves are compact and efficiently organised. The single and double-occupancy units are designed with a semi-duplex arrangement, where each unit spans two half-levels. It was one of the first split-level building (Figure 11). This living on multiple floors was intended to give a sense of living in a house, and with this house-in-house principle Scharoun created a new social building type (Bock, 2022, p. 14).

Figure 11

Section, 1929. Akademie der Künste [AdK], Berlin, Hans-Scharoun-Archiv



A key architectural element of the *Ledigenheim* is its communal facilities. At the heart of the building is a large central hall, flanked by a restaurant and service areas, fostering a sense of community among residents. The lobby, terrace, and rooftop gardens further support Scharoun's vision of collective living by providing additional shared spaces where inhabitants can interact (Syring & Kirschenmann, 2004, p. 33).

The three case studies demonstrate various architectural innovations, both technical and in terms of spatial design. In the Ada Lewis House, drying rooms were introduced, which were “celebrated for drying a resident’s clothes within minutes of her coming in from the rain.” (Gee, 2010, p. 105). In *Lettenhof*, each kitchen was equipped with an electric boiler that provided hot water for both the kitchen and the bathrooms, alongside other modern amenities like electric washing machines, tumble dryers, telephones, and vacuum cleaners (Rudolf, 1928). Other innovations were found in the layout of the ground floors: Scharoun’s *Ledigenheim* featured an S-shaped layout that fostered communal living and social cohesion by integrating private flats with shared spaces, such as a central hall and restaurant. This design encouraged interaction among residents and reflected a progressive social approach by accommodating both single men and women, promoting equality while still respecting societal norms of the time. The split-level micro-flats in the *Ledigenheim* were one of the first examples of this housing arrangement, offering efficient use of space while creating a sense of independence within a collective environment (Eisen, 2012). In Lux Guyer’s *Lettenhof*, innovative features such as built-in cupboards and designated compartments for storing milk in the entrance area were introduced, optimising space and utility (Figure 12). Ada Lewis House, with its small cubicles, was compact and designed primarily for lower-income women, but the careful detailing of the common areas, such as the stairway with an iron balustrade that continued throughout the building, imbued the space with a sense of elegance. The centralisation of the household chores by providing communal dining room, sewing and clothes-brushing rooms presented a relief to the exhausting lives of the residents while fostering a sense of community (see Table 1 for comparison).

Figure 12

Floorplan second and third floors, 1927. Published in "Wohnkolonie für alleinstehende Frauen im Lettenhof Zürich." *Das Werk: Kunst und Architektur* 15(5), 1928

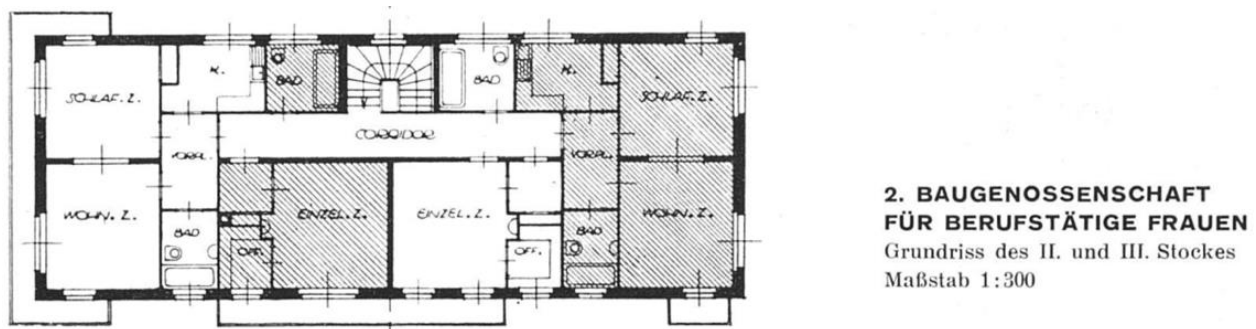


Table 1

Comparative overview of the key features across the three case studies

Feature	Ada Lewis Women's Lodging House, London (1913)	Lettenhof, Zurich (1927)	Ledigenheim, Breslau (1929)
Stakeholders	National Association of Women's Lodging Houses; funded by Ada Lewis-Hill (private philanthropist)	Cooperative of Women's Organisations (Women's Center, Protectoral for Single Women, Building Cooperative for Working Women, Zurich women's association for alcohol-free pubs), Municipality of Zurich	Municipality-funded Werkbund Exhibition, Deutscher Werkbund movement
Architect(s)	Joseph and Smithem	Lux Guyer	Hans Scharoun
Accommodation Type	Single-room cubicles, shared spaces	Mix of single rooms and small flats (two- and three-room units)	Small and micro-flats, split-level units
Size	214 single cubicles, 20 double rooms, 6 special rooms	22 single rooms, 23 two-room flats, 6 three-room flats	48 flats, 32 for single individuals, 16 for childless couples
Communal Facilities	Sewing room, laundry, drying rooms, library, dining room, foot baths, clothes-brushing room	Alcohol-free restaurant, shared gardens, communal facilities (telephones, vacuum cleaners, washing machines)	Central hall, restaurant, rooftop gardens, terrace
Design Style	Baroque, historical	Modernist, functionalist, minimal ornamentation	Rationalist, modernist, innovative organic S-shaped layout
Architectural Innovations	Ferro-concrete structural elements, efficient drying rooms, glazed tile interiors	Built-in furniture, compact kitchenettes, modern appliances, varied flat sizes, private balconies	Split-level flats, innovative S-shaped layout integrating private and public spaces
Economic Class & Occupation	Primarily lower-income professional women (teachers, clerks, nurses, typists)	Lower to middle-income professional women (dressmakers, telephonists, office clerks, teachers)	Mixed demographic: single working individuals, men and women, 'urban nomads'

The social impact of purpose-built housing for women

Housing is a fundamental human need, but it goes beyond the mere provision of shelter. It encompasses socio-spatial structures that shape how everyday life is organised and experienced (Reuschke, 2010, p. 7). For women, especially single women, the ability to inhabit space independently has long been tied to broader questions of respect, autonomy, and social participation. In her 1909 article *Goals of the Women's Movement*, Helene von Mülinen articulated this ambition clearly: "To show the single woman the same respect as the married woman—we are still quite a long way from this, despite some progress—to help her, as men are helped, to find a professional life that fulfils her, and to guide her intellectual life in directions where she learns to be a ruler according to her determination—that is the task and goal of the women's movement."

This ideal found expression in the built environment, particularly in women's housing models such as the so-called 'Madonna-Houses'. An early successful example is the York Street Chambers, built in 1892 by the Ladies' Residential Chambers Company Ltd. Its layout—comprising private bed-sitting rooms or flats paired with communal dining facilities—closely resembled the explored case studies. As Emily Gee notes, the first women

members of the RIBA, sisters Ethel and Bessie Charles, operated their architectural practice from this residence (Gee, 2010, p. 93). Hence, these spaces could foster not only independence but also professional networking and mutual support.

While these housing models were not always intended as overtly feminist interventions, scholars like Sassin have emphasised their emancipatory potential. They aligned with broader reforms in domestic labour, particularly the feminist push to liberate women from the burdens of housekeeping and enable fuller participation in public life. Lily Braun (1865 – 1916), for example, argued that access to education or politics was insufficient unless paired with infrastructural support—such as kitchen-less homes—that allowed women to step beyond the confines of domestic roles (Meyer, 1985). She was a German feminist, writer and social reformer, advocating for women's rights, particularly focusing on the intersections between social, economic, and political structures. Braun believed that the advancement of women's rights in education and politics was insufficient without addressing the infrastructure that supported women's domestic roles.

In this light, *Ledigenheime* can be seen as direct architectural responses to feminist demands for independence and social integration and as a further development, or rather specialisation, of the precursor models of one-kitchen housing models. As Sassin notes: “Simply by enabling women to live ‘on their own’ in a setting that was a combination of the public and private realms, but without the requirements of running a typical household (...) *Ledigenheime* were more progressive socially—even radical—than many of their (general progressive) supporters believed.” (Sassin, 2012, p. 239).

At the same time, these spaces often embodied a tension between emancipation and control. While they offered women privacy and autonomy, they frequently reinforced middle-class moral expectations. In Germany, many *Ledigenheime* appointed a director to oversee the residents' behaviour—someone “who would ensure ladylike behaviour” (Sassin, 2012, p. 210). Similarly, in Zurich's *Lettenhof*, a resident caretaker couple was responsible for maintaining order. Moreover, the architectural features themselves often reflected gendered assumptions. Residences for women typically included ‘teaching kitchens’ (as in Alt Moabit) or small individual kitchenettes in addition to communal dining areas (*Lettenhof*). In contrast, male-only residences never included private kitchens, revealing a persistent assumption that women—even when living independently and having the options of in-house dining—would still want to prepare meals for themselves. This distinction makes Hans Scharoun's *Ledigenheim* in Breslau particularly significant: no architectural differentiation was made between single male and female residents.

Houses for single women began to lose their prominence as a distinct typology in the 1930s. In Germany this was partly due to the rise of fascist ideologies, which reasserted traditional gender roles and cast women primarily as mothers within the nuclear family. At the same time, these residences came under critique from within modernist architectural discourse. Reform-minded architects such as Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky argued that separating single women into dedicated housing blocks was both socially isolating and architecturally outdated. Instead, they promoted the integration of single working women into larger, mixed-use residential developments, a model that aligned more closely with the ideals of the Neues Bauen movement (Henderson, 2009; Terlinden, 1999).

While post-war reconstruction produced various forms of accommodation for single people, such as personnel houses attached to hospitals, or compact apartments in large-scale housing projects like Alvar Aalto's high-rise in Bremen (1958–62) or the Berlin Hansa Quarter developed for the Interbau exhibition (1957), these cannot be seen as direct successors to the *Ledigenheim*. As Erin Eckhold Sassin concludes, “there were and are no duplicates for the *Ledigenheim* building type” (Sassin, 2012, p. 259). What disappeared was precisely the reformist ambition that had once driven women's residences: their collective kitchens, lounges, and gardens designed to foster new forms of sociability and support among women. Post-war solutions instead responded to the urgent need for small, private units, shifting the focus away from communal reform to standardised individual flats.

Berta Rahm's 1950 essay *Wohnmöglichkeiten für Alleinstehende* (living possibilities for singles) further underscores this point. Writing in the Swiss journal *Werk*, she observed the continuing lack of adequate housing for single women and noted that Switzerland lagged behind countries like Sweden, where the issue had gained greater attention. Her call for action shows that, even decades after the first wave of *Ledigenheime*, the housing question for single women remained unresolved and largely marginal in Central Europe. Rahm's perspective aligns with Sassin's assessment: while the typology left traces, particularly in the evolution of the modern single flat, it never secured a lasting foothold nor retained the explicitly social ambitions it once embodied.

From a feminist perspective, this trajectory is telling. What persisted after 1930 were fragmented or pragmatic responses to demographic and economic pressures rather than visionary projects aimed at transforming gendered relations through architecture. The *Ledigenheim* thus stands out as both a historical anomaly and a potential model: a building type that demonstrated, as Sassin puts it, that “(...) that it was once possible to

balance social control with social mobility and to skillfully and successfully move between progressive and conservative positions in the interest of maintaining, or even building, a civil society” (Sassin, 2012, p. 259).

CONCLUSION

This paper examined how the material need for independent space for increasing numbers of single working women in the early 20th century was addressed through a distinct form of architecture: purpose-built housing for single working women, emerging in the context of urbanisation, industrialisation, and shifting gender roles. These residences, developed across various national contexts, represented a confluence of social reform, feminist demands, and middle-class moral anxieties, expressed through a new typology that sought to accommodate and regulate women’s growing presence in the city.

The case studies of the Ada Lewis House in London, the *Lettenhof* in Zurich, and the *Ledigenheim* in Breslau reveal how architectural form was directly tied to broader social change. These buildings were not only practical responses to housing shortages but also symbolic interventions that reconfigured the relationship between gender and urban space. The presence of such residences within the city marked a significant shift in who was seen as a legitimate urban resident. Their visibility helped validate the lives of single working women, challenging dominant narratives that confined women to familial or dependent roles. Conversely, it was the increasing number of women living and working independently in urban centres that made the construction of such residences both necessary and acceptable—signalling a reciprocal relationship between architectural visibility and social presence.

The collective nature of these housing projects further shaped their impact. Shared kitchens, dining rooms, lounges, and gardens were not incidental features but integral to their design. These spaces facilitated collective living and informal networks, offering emotional, practical, and at times professional support among women navigating social and economic precarity. Especially for those outside traditional family structures, collectively functioned as an alternative infrastructure of belonging. While these arrangements enabled mutual support and resilience, they also reflected a degree of social control. Many residences imposed moral codes, rules of behaviour, or managerial oversight, highlighting the ambivalence between freedom and regulation embedded in these designs. As such, collectivity in these projects was a site of both solidarity and surveillance—shaped by class, ideology, and institutional goals.

Significantly, these buildings were not only spaces inhabited by women but often initiated and shaped by them. Agency over the built environment emerged through cooperatives, foundations, and reform organisations led by women, who engaged with design, planning, and financing processes. These actors operated within the constraints of their time, yet managed to influence the architectural and social character of the spaces they created. In a period when women were still excluded from many formal realms of power, these interventions represent a form of spatial authorship—expressing feminist and reformist ideals through the built environment. Decisions regarding room types, building layouts, public versus private space, and service infrastructure reflected complex negotiations of independence, care, modernity, and domesticity.

Returning to the central question of this paper—how women’s residences reflected social change and functioned as architectural expressions of reform—the case studies show that these buildings were deeply embedded in the gendered, moral, and political currents of their time. They responded to the realities of a changing workforce, to debates over respectability and autonomy, and to emerging ideas about domestic life and social belonging. While they did not fully dismantle gender norms, they offered new forms of spatial organisation that acknowledged and supported women’s independence, albeit often in a constrained or conditional form.

Rather than reading these projects as purely emancipatory or entirely regulatory, they are better understood as ambivalent spaces—sites of possibility shaped by negotiation, compromise, and context. They were products of overlapping forces: feminist advocacy, municipal reform, philanthropic intervention, and middle-class moral concern. As such, they offer insight into how space can reflect, mediate, and even produce social change.

These historical examples hold relevance today as contemporary debates continue to engage with questions of housing and gender. The challenges faced by working, single women in the early 20th century—economic marginalisation, social invisibility, lack of access to secure housing—remain pressing concerns in many parts of the world. Revisiting these early models underscores the importance of designing for collectivity and agency and reminds us that housing is never just about shelter—it is also about structure, identity, and the power to participate in shaping one’s environment. However, further research is needed to fully understand the long-term impact of these housing solutions on women’s participation in architectural reform and how they continue to inform contemporary discussions on gender and space.

At the same time, the history of women’s residences points to the need for more nuanced narratives: rather than a linear story of emergence and disappearance, these typologies were continuously reshaped across contexts, persisting in altered forms well into the post-war period. Current debates, such as those raised at the symposium ‘Housing for Single People – Narratives, New Perspectives, and Methodological Challenges’ (2025),

as well as theoretical perspectives from intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006), add new layers to these questions. They remind us that housing is never neutral: it orients bodies in space, shapes belonging and exclusion, and intersects with multiple axes of identity and inequality. Understanding the ambivalent legacy of women's residences can thus contribute to a broader conversation on how domestic and collective spaces continue to negotiate autonomy, dependency and belonging today.

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Ethical statement

This study does not involve human participants, animals, or identifiable personal data. Therefore, ethical approval and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were not required.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Author contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conception, research, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

Data availability

The data used in this study consist of archival materials from publicly accessible historical archives. All sources are cited in the manuscript. No new datasets were generated.

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Biographical sketch

Jana von Wyl (she/her) is a doctoral candidate at the Chair of History and Theory of Urban Design at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) at ETH Zürich. She is part of the SNSF-funded project "*Geschichte der 'Öko-Architektur' in der Schweiz, 196X–199X*" at the Institute for Constructive Design at ZHAW. Her dissertation, "Tracing Women in Swiss Eco-Architecture", examines women's contributions to ecological design in Switzerland from the 1960s to the 1990s. Jana studied architecture at ETH Zürich, where she completed her master's degree. After working in architectural practice, she joined ZHAW as a researcher and teaching assistant and started her position as a doctoral candidate at ETH in 2025.

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