

Learning from Berlin: How to create a dense urban area - Haberland's Bavarian District

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In the specialist literature, the Berlin tenement (*Berliner Mietskaserne*) is considered as the epitome of speculative overuse of the residential block on the eve of the Modern period. This view misses the fact that at the turn of the 19^{th} century, several urban districts in Berlin were built for an emerging middle class that are of outstanding urban quality. The entrepreneur Georg Haberland (*Berlinische Boden-Gesellschaft*) developed entire neighborhoods that contributed greatly to the history of urban development at the beginning of the 20th century – a contribution seriously underestimated. In addition to the Anglo-Saxon way of suburbanization of the middle class and the French way of urban interventions of Haberland are a little-documented third way in the history of city expansions. In this paper, first, I address the question of the urban qualities of the Bavarian District (*Bayerisches Viertel*), drawing on previously unpublished historical sources. And second, I propose a thesis how to place Haberland's undervalued contribution in the wider context of Berlins planning history and beyond. Planning urban settlements from scratch is a current and crucial topic particularly in the US and in East Asia. Corresponding current projects – often designed by European planners – can be found especially in China.

Keywords: urbanization, urban density, urban form, planning legacy

Introduction

This paper revisits urban development in Berlin in the first decade of the 20th century in theory and practice, seeking to exemplify 'urban qualities' by investigating the Bavarian District in Schöneberg. Much historical research has been published on the history of European cities at the end of the 19th century. The literature focuses on Paris, London, Vienna or Barcelona, while Berlin is often considered to be a poor example of urban development.¹ With regard to Modern urban development, however, it is important to state that successful examples of urbanism in Berlin at the turn of the last century do exist. They are just neglected in current urban research about the beginning of the Modern period. I claim that one of the most important and most successful example of this is the urbanism of Georg Haberland and his company, the Berlinische Boden-Gesellschaft. This was one of the dominant land companies (Terrain-Gesellschaft) in Berlin that managed the rapid growth of the population at the turn of the century. To this day the company does not receive the due scientific attention.²

To understand the value of Haberland's contribution it is important to explain the urban issue of Berlin at the end of the 19th century. At that time, Berlin was well-known for its *Mietskaserne*³, literally 'military barracks for renting'. These tenement buildings consisted of dark apartments situated around very narrow courts. To get to your apartment you often had to pass other dark courts, and the apartments had no direct access to the street. This confusing urban situation caused a number of social and hygienic problems. That is why Berlin was – at the time as well as later – generally considered an urban settlement with a very low living standard.⁴ Contemporaries criticized the situation sharply and from different angles. On the one hand, the overuse of the city for financial speculation was pointed out. In a book published in 1907, Rudolph Eberstadt - an economist and urban planner at the local university – described the urban fabric of Berlin as a highly inconvenient structure for urban living, evoking speculative economic development.⁵ Generally, Berlin was analyzed as the epitome of speculative overuse⁶ at the beginning of the Modern period. On the other hand, a formal critique of this kind of capitalist urbanism was formulated. Werner Hegemann – an urban planner from Berlin and professor in New York – described the residential block in 1930 as 'a hopeless fortress in a ridiculous baroque or renaissance façade'7. For Hegemann and his Modernist colleagues, Modern urbanism was the true formal answer to urban problems. As an example, Hegemann cites the Hufeisensiedlung⁸ designed by the architect Bruno Taut. This housing is of course a very valuable contribution to solving of urban problems, which is nowadays even found on the list of World Heritage sites. But Hegemann's indiscriminate enthusiasm for Modern urbanism ignored the fact that there were other alternatives to the so-called Mietskaserne - the tenement building - in Berlin. A nuanced view of pre-Modern urbanism shows there were urban solutions that have advantages over Modern concepts and that could



moreover serve as a paradigm to this day. I claim that the so-called *Bayerisches Viertel* in Berlin, the Bavarian District (cf. figure 1) is a powerful pre-Modern urban strategy. In the following I will seek to lay out why Eberstadt and Hegemann's critique is not adequately applicable to this district. I claim that the Bavarian District is an undervalued contribution to the history of urbanism.



Figure 1: Berlin, Bavarian District - Victoria-Luise-Square, 1903.

Historical classification

The Bavarian District was founded and developed by Georg Haberland. For Modern critics he was the embodiment of the evil financial speculator⁹, getting rich at the expense of the tenants. On the one hand, there is no doubt about it: With his company – the Berlinische Boden-Gesellschaft – he gained wealth at the turn of the last century, because he was one of the most active entrepreneurs in Berlin.¹⁰ But on the other hand, he managed to develop a large agricultural area into an urban structure of high quality within a few years. To this day Haberland's district is very popular and in demand. The heart of the Bavarian District – the Victoria-Luise-Square – is at present one of the squares with the highest living quality in Berlin. This can be proved by the following: The quality of life in Berlin, broken down to each street, is measured by the government of Berlin on a scientific basis, applying different criteria.¹¹ The following map (cf. figure 2) shows a detailed view of the qualities of life; evidently, the areas in the southwest are of better quality than the rest of Berlin. The map thus shows that the urban developments of Georg Haberland constitute areas of high living quality in Berlin. Haberland must have done something differently and – in the long run – he must have done it better in comparison with the other so-called Berlin tenements. I will explain this claim by beginning with a broader view.

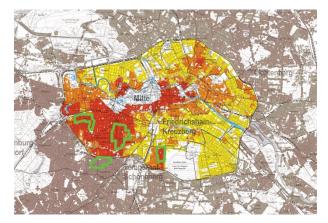


Figure 2: Wohnlagenkarte Berlin, 2018 (red areas: high living qualities, green lines: areas built by Georg Haberland, flagged by the author)

In the mid-19th century important plans were designed for many European cities. Most of these plans are wellknown in the history of urbanism, and all of them determine the urban fabric to the present day. Haussmann – for example – transformed Paris fundamentally with many urban interventions in the historic city. The most important aspect of this plan was the improvement of the existing urban fabric by introducing new streets into



the old urban structure.¹² A completely different strategy was suggested by Cerda for Barcelona. He planned the city expansions without reacting to the historic part of Barcelona. Although he was an engineer, he designed a plan with a very formal approach. The main axes – of which only one was finally realized – establish an independent urban structure.¹³ So, in contrast to Haussmann, he planned alongside the existing city. Another important example is the plan for the Ringstrasse in Vienna that reacts again in a different manner and was the result of a competition.¹⁴ It treats the free areas that had been created by the removal of the medieval fortification. The plan suggests a circle around the old town that establishes a sequence of public buildings and squares. This interspace connects the inner city with the city expansions in an artistic and convincing way. And finally Berlin has its contemporaneous transformation plan too, but it is far less known in the history of city planning. It is the so-called Hobrecht Plan of 1862.

As in Paris, Barcelona and Vienna, the plan dating in the mid 18th century is one of the main reasons why the city of Berlin looks the way it does today, because it determined the urban structure in a fundamental way for the last 150 years. James Hobrecht – also an engineer – designed an urban structure that operates like a combination of the plans for Vienna and Barcelona. He suggested a large ring of residential buildings connecting the historic city with the new extra-mural areas by evolving the city expansions out of the existing urban structure (cf. figure 3). The plan was in fact just an alignment plan structured by large blocks and an important sequence of squares. The plan did not impose regulations on the blocks itself. It only described a grid that could be filled according to the existing building code.¹⁵ The regulations however were not adapted to the new plan. This fact allowed a density that was far too high and led to the speculative overuse mentioned above. Despite this fact, the red structure given by Hobrecht's plan was built very fast and completed by the First World War. At first glance, surprisingly, Haberland did not want to be part of this boom.

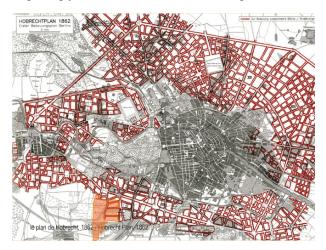


Figure 3: James Hobrecht, Plan for Berlin, 1862, Haberland's property in1898 (orange lines, future Bavarian District, flagged by the author).

Haberland decided not to work within the alignments of Hobrecht's plan. He began to focus on the southwest of Berlin – at the time worthless farmland around a little village called Schöneberg.¹⁶ There he followed his own strategy of development. He began to persuade the farmers to sell him their farmland at a time when nobody was interested in these parcels of land, so he could buy it at a low price.¹⁷ Although he was self-taught urbanist and architect - he did an apprenticeship as a merchant - he already seemed to anticipate the problems that arose due to the high density within Hobrecht's urban concept.¹⁸ Within a few years Haberland owned a large part of the cheap agricultural area in Schöneberg.¹⁹ There he planned the future Bavarian District, the largest and most important area he would ever develop. In 1898 the streets of Hobrecht's plan still led to nowhere (cf. figure 3), and Haberland understood that he had to adapt to the Hobrecht plan while doing it better. In collaboration with the community of Schöneberg, he designed the alignment plan and defined the parcels of land.²⁰ Haberland's company started to build the streets and the squares, financing the implementation on its own.²¹ Only afterwards did he sell the parcels of land to private owners and, by lending money, Haberland encouraged them to build their own apartment buildings. He even provided the architect to control at least partially the formal expression of the new buildings. If there was no purchaser, he constructed the buildings on his own account and sold them for great profit after completion.²² So the company acted as a partner of the municipal authority as well as urban planner, land surveyor, architect, real estate seller, bank and builder at the same time what lead to a very efficient construction process.



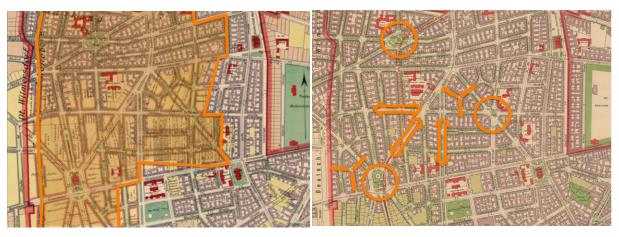


Figure 4.1: Plan of Schöneberg, detail, 1904 (orange area, Bavarian District, flagged by the author). Figure 4.2: Plan of Schöneberg, detail, 1909 (flagged by the author)

A closer look at the plan of Schöneberg in 1904 explains Haberland's impressive way of producing an urban structure (cf. figure 4.1). The process of urban production started in the northern part where the first buildings were already completed and where they connected the new city expansion with the existing urban structure of Hobrecht's plan. In the southern part, only the streets and squares were built. The plots of the farmers are still visible; they are overlaid by the new urban structure in a steady process that developed the quarter from north to south. The plan is a fascinating historical document because it demonstrates the entire process of developing a city from farmland to dense urban structure. As such, the technical process of developing a city seems quite simple: You buy farmland, establish a master plan, build streets and squares, sell the parcels of land and let them be built. Of course, this description does not take into account the complex political and social processes Haberland had to deal with. But on a formal level Haberland's urban strategy allowed the city to grow in a predictable way and can thus be analyzed and described precisely. In this respect the crucial question is how urban quality was achieved during this process.

Analytical classification

As shown above, contemporary urban planners as well as later experts considered Berlin in general to be of poor urban quality. Yet, Haberland imposed an urban structure that was different from the contemporaneous city expansions in many respects and led to new qualities for different reasons. An analysis of the Bavarian District points out its specific urban elements (cf. figure 4.2) that are unique in this combination for Berlin and beyond. Haberland's area is structured by three squares arranged in a triangle. These squares are connected by a system of perpendicular and diagonal streets. With this arrangement he follows the contemporary literature²³ that he probably knew. But the decisive difference to the conventional urban planning in Berlin was that Haberland treated the resulting blocks in a different manner. He invented a new kind of Y- or T-shaped intersection by connecting 3 residential streets. In order to achieve a more differentiated urban structure he segmented the common building block by this innovative intersection. The combination of these elements – squares, system of streets and intersections – lead to the specific urban structure that is fundamental for the following urban qualities:





Figure 5: Berlin, aerial view of the Bavarian District, 1935.

First, Haberland distributes the squares within a walkable distance. Mixed use is concentrated in these three squares. The squares are shaped so as to get as many corner buildings as possible. In these corner buildings – and only there - shops and restaurants are allowed. In this respect the squares function as centers and meeting-points for the district. Second, Haberland's urban plan imposes a clear and detailed concept for private and public traffic. There is a clear distinction between traffic roads and residential streets with regard to sectional profile and connectivity to neighboring quarters. The residential streets are marked by small front gardens that narrow the traffic areas. The Y- and T-intersections are only planned for the residential streets and provide a local subcenter for the neighborhood in addition to the squares. The public transport system was also important for Haberland's urban strategy. He fought hard with the local authorities to get a connection to the city center by tramways.²⁴ After he had realized that the tramways were too slow, he even financed a subway line. The Bavarian district was about to be finished when Haberland - together with the local authorities - decided to reopen the main streets to get a subway for his district that connected the new squares with the existing public transport system.²⁵ This fact demonstrates the power and financial potential of Haberland's development company. And third, the system of perpendicular and diagonal streets creates small urban blocks with many corner buildings. In contrast to the blocks of Hobrecht's plan this arrangement of rather narrow buildings allows many apartments to be well-exposed. Moreover, the acute-angled intersections give views in different directions along the street. The apartments are not just oriented towards the block across the street. Consequently, this urban structure allowed Haberland to sell the parcels of land at a much higher price because of the good orientation of the buildings. And finally, Haberland managed to create residential streets of high quality. The blocks are small, and a hierarchy of streets and small intersections support orientation within the neighborhood. The small Y-shaped intersections are highlighted by a tree, and front gardens were implemented along all the residential streets (cf. figure 6). These elements, introduced by Haberland and unique in Berlin, were not even common in Europe. For these reasons Haberland's combination of urban elements in his plan is of outstanding quality and seems to be his very own invention.



Figure 6: Berlin, Lindauer Street, 2017.

The combination of these urban elements as they are realized in the Bavarian District is not found in German literature on urbanism at the time. Neither Baumeister²⁶ in 1876, nor Sitte²⁷ in 1889 or Stübben²⁸ in 1890 – the founders of the discipline of Modern urban construction (*Städtebau*) – proposed similar solutions. The most influential book on urbanism at the end of the 19th century, Camillo Sitte's *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, champions a picturesque urbanism based on an irregular structure.²⁹ Although he must have known Sitte's ideas, Haberland designs his plan for the Bavarian District in 1898 in the opposite way, by imposing a regular geometrical structure of streets and squares that are point symmetrically organized. He ignores Sitte's claim that planning squares with irregularity 'increases naturalness, stimulates our interest and intensifies the picturesque.³⁰ Besides the work of Sitte, there was another important German publication on urban planning: Stübben's instruction manual on urbanism. Stübben cites examples from Belgium and reproduces plans of Liège, Antwerp and Brussels³¹ that show certain similarities with the urban design for the Bavarian district. Among others, Stübben refers to an example in Verviers that is very similar to the Viktoria-Luise Square³². Haberland may have been influenced by Stübben's work, but there is no evidence. Georg Haberland was Jewish and his remains were completely destroyed during the Nazi-Regime. Even his printed legacy gives no evidence of



influencing predecessors. On the contrary, in his books he ignores the questions of design. He published several small books where he only focuses on the economic preconditions for urban planning³³ and describes his planning practice simply as a result of the imagination of his company, the *Berlinische Boden-Gesellschaft*.³⁴ Although various examples cited by Stübben may have influenced Haberland, in particular for the layout of the squares, the combination of urban elements in the Bavarian District can be qualified as a genuine invention of the commercially trained autodidact.

Conclusions

The combination of the main reasons for the urban qualities of the Bavarian District explains why these blocks are in demand as residential areas to this day. Haberland's Bavarian District is a unique contribution to the history of planning and shows a convincing example of urbanity. 'Urban density' in combination with 'social and cultural heterogeneity'³⁵ are preconditions for urbanity and lead to urban qualities that obviously remain popular. Soon after its completion, the Bavarian District became an immediate attraction for the middle class in Berlin with an ensuing vibrant social life.³⁶ Moreover, until 1933, the district was the heart of Jewish social life in Berlin and was called the 'industrial area of intelligence'³⁷. At the same time, the Victoria-Luise-Square was a 'microcosm for Russian immigrants'³⁸. After Shoah and World War II the district has not yet fully recovered even to this day. But Haberland's urban development turned into a social and cultural melting pot, representing an urbanity of high quality soon after construction and until the outbreak of the war. A comparison between the Bavarian District and the conventional contemporaneous urban structures in Berlin shows how uniquely Haberland handled urban density.

The technical aspects of urban planning – as it was defined by Joseph Stübben – is about establishing a street hierarchy, defining parcels of land, fixing the uses and providing a public transport system.³⁹ That is exactly what Haberland did by planning the Bavarian District. But in addition, his example shows that urban qualities basically depend on the relationship between street and building (cf. figure 7) or – in other words – depend on urban density. As Hartmut Häussermann puts it, it is 'the urban density' that generates urban qualities.⁴⁰ This means that urban planning is also about dealing with the ratio of built and unbuilt surfaces or the ratio of built and void volumes. Haberland's example – in contrast to the criticized urbanism in Berlin – shows how to manage this ratio in order to effect heterogeneity and density that are preconditions for urbanity. It is a matter of a fragile equilibrium that cannot be achieved by simple rules but can be exemplified. 'Urban quality emerges and proves itself in individual cases.'⁴¹



Figure 7: Berlin, Bavarian District, Speyerer Street / Bavarian Square, 1925.

As part of this text I can only briefly indicate in a very general way what was the historical value of Haberland's example in comparison to urban planning processes in other European cities. A comparison with contemporaneous city expansions in Paris and London underlines the uniqueness of Haberland's proposal. In the first decade of the 20th century the urban development of Paris was characterized by a densification within the urban fabric.⁴² After Haussmann's plan was realized in the 19th century, there was no more master plan to follow. At that time – during the so-called Belle Epoque – architects in Paris were supposed to finalize Haussmann's ideas and to merely develop the existing streets, with interventions only in specific places.⁴³ Within the dense



urban pattern, architects sought to introduce an urban quality that led to a completely different result in comparison to Berlin. So, in contrast to Berlin, the urbanization of the bourgeoisie in Paris was an intra-mural process consisting in a consolidation of the historically grown urban structure. During the same decade the urbanization of the middle-class in London led again to a completely different solution. London's suburbs "are located on outskirts of, but remain part of the city, with an urban geography intermediate between town and country, and (...) depend upon urban centers for employment, goods and services."⁴⁴ So far this description fits to the Bavarian District. Contemporary with Haberland and driven by the same forces and needs, the solution to the urbanization however is completely different. In London the urban development around 1900 is characterized by low density and can be summarized as "residential, middle-class, owner-occupied suburbs (...) of small detached and semi-detached houses."⁴⁵. The suburbanization in London points already to the future Garden Cities and is the complete opposite of Haberland's strategy of urbanizing the middle-class in Berlin in a structure of high density.

In conclusion, the literature on the history of urbanism in European cities describes two methods of urban development at the dawn of Modern period⁴⁶: On the one hand, there is the Anglo-Saxon way of suburbanizing the middle-class, exemplified by London, Brooklyn or San Francisco. On the other hand, there is the French way of urbanizing the middle-class within the existing urban fabric, which signifies an intra-mural urban process. In contrast, the development in Berlin is generally considered a misleading path both by contemporaries and later observers: a path that leads to a narrow and badly exposed urban structure driven by the speculative overuse of the building land and followed by heavy social problems. This historiography misses the fact that Haberland built a dense urban area with qualities that are greatly undervalued. His urban plan achieved a social and cultural heterogeneity and a density that balances compactness and free space in a multifunctional and walkable city structure. I suggest that in the history of urbanism, the contribution of Haberland's *Berlinische Boden-Gesellschaft* needs a reassessment. The Bavarian District could serve as a model for a third way of urbanizing the middle class, even in the current context of rapidly growing cities in Europe, Asia and elsewhere.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor(s)

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Endnotes

¹⁴ Ibid., 185.

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- ²⁰ Christoph Bernhardt, *Bauplatz Groß-Berlin*, 185.
- ²¹ Georg Haberland, 40 Jahre Berlinische Boden-Gesellschaft (Berlin: Frisch, 1930), 9.
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- ²⁵ Gudrun Blankenburg, Das Bayerische Viertel in Berlin-Schöneberg (Berlin: Bäßler, 2012), 32.
- ²⁶ Reinhard Baumeister, *Stadt-Erweiterungen* (Berlin: Ernst, 1876).

¹ Harald Bodenschatz, *Städtebau in Berlin* (Berlin: Dom publishers, 2013), 28.

² Ibid., 35.

³ Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, Das Berliner Stadthaus (Berlin: Dom publishers, 2011), 197.

⁴ Werner Hegemann, Das steinerne Berlin (Berlin: Ullstein, 1963), 207.

⁵ Rudolph Eberstadt, *Die Spekulation im neuzeitlichen Städtebau* (Jena: Fischer, 1907), 8-10.

⁶ Franz Pfemert (ed.), *Die Aktion* (Berlin: Die Aktion, 1912), 654.

⁷ Werner Hegemann, *Das steinerne Berlin*, 210.

⁸ Ibid., 211.

⁹ Ralph Herrmanns, *Haberlands* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1996), 31.

¹⁰ Christoph Bernhardt, *Bauplatz Groβ-Berlin* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 65.

¹¹ Berlin Senatsverwaltung, Wohnlagenkarte, accessed March 1, 2018,

http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/wohnen/mietspiegel/de/wohnlagenkarte.shtml

¹² André Corboz, *Die Stadt und die industrielle Revolution* (Zürich: ETH, 1989), 24.

¹³ Walter Kieß, Urbanismus im Industriezeitalter (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1991), 150.

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¹⁶ Helmut Winz, 700 Jahre Schöneberg (Berlin: Haupt & Puttkammer, 1964), 106.

¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹ Helmut Winz, 700 Jahre Schöneberg, 110.

²³ Reinhard Baumeister, Handbuch der Baukunde, 3. Heft (Berlin: Toeche, 1890), 16.

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²⁹ Michael Mönninger, Naturdenken und Kunstgeschichte, in Kunst des Städtebaus, ed. Klaus Semsroth (Wien: Böhlau, 2005), 38.

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- 2007), 28. (Translation by the author)
- ³⁶ Gudrun Blankenburg, Das Bayerische Viertel in Berlin-Schöneberg, 28.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 50.
- 38 Ibid., 54.
- ³⁹ Joseph Stübben, Der Städtebau, 3.

⁴⁰ Hartmut Häussermann, *Phänomenologie und Struktur städtischer Dichte*, in *Städtische Dichte*, ed. Vittorio Lampugnani (Zürich: NZZ, 2007), 28.

⁴¹ Thomas Keller, *Das Kriterium der Dichte im Städtebau*, in *Städtische Dichte*, ed. Vittorio Lampugnani (Zürich: NZZ, 2007), 45. (Translation by the author)

⁴² Bernard Rouleau, Paris: Histoire d'un espace (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1997), 364.

⁴³ Ibid., 378.

⁴⁴ Dion Georgiou, Leisure in London's Suburbs, in The London Journal, Vol. 39 No. 3 (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 175.

⁴⁵ Mark Clapson, Suburban Century. Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 4.

⁴⁶ Harald Bodenschatz, Städtebau in Berlin, 35.

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³¹ Joseph Stübben, Der Städtebau (Darmstadt: Bergstrasser, 1890), 244.

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Figure 1: Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 290 (01) Nr. II3346

Figure 2: Berlin Senatsverwaltung, *Wohnlagenkarte*, accessed March 1, 2018, http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/wohnen/mietspiegel/de/wohnlagenkarte.shtml

Figure 3: Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 270 A 2385

Figure 4.1: Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 270 A 666

Figure 4.2: Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 270 A 9081 Bl 1 1909

Figure 5: Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 290 (02) Nr. II10359

Figure 6: Photography by the author

Figure 7: Landesarchiv Berlin, F Rep. 290 (01) Nr. II12726