

Forum

Practice

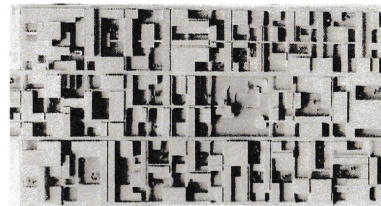
Schiedhelm's legacy

Manfred Schiedhelm's office epitomised the free-thinking of post-war and post-unification Berlin. Ian McDonald laments its closure.

A little piece of history is made in Berlin this month with the closure of Schiedhelm & Partner, successor to the renowned practice Candilis Josic Woods Schiedhelm, architect of Berlin's Free University. Manfred Schiedhelm and his American-born wife Karen Axelrad continued the work begun in the mid-1960s by this pioneering group, with an aluminium-clad extension to the original CorTen campus, together with a library. Along the way, Schiedhelm was a runner-up in the Pompidou Centre competition, with a ground-hugging proposal radically different from Piano & Rogers' 'object building', and proposed innovative, pneumatic structures for competitions in Germany and Japan.

The structuralism of the early work was put to use in realising humane housing in Berlin, Pankow, Staaken and Wiesbaden. Commissions bound up with the 1980s IBA exposition saw the office tackle mews and courtyard houses and canalside apartment villas – the latter pioneering low-energy social housing. A suburban mixed-mode scheme in Lichtenrade, combining curved and blocky forms with low-lying 'garden houses', employed sophisticated modelling to take full advantage of stringent requirements for an external space for each home.

Somewhat against the grain, Schiedhelm eschewed flat roofs for pitched, hipped and curved alternatives that incorporated interesting and intimate spaces. The shallow curved roofs of the Wiesbaden flats perfectly set off the sloping south-facing walls of the upper storeys. In Pankow, the clever counterpoint of opposing high and low blocks along a narrow street prevent the development from becoming oppressive and allow delightful views from roof windows and glazed kitchen 'pods'.



Above Berlin Free University model; Wiesbaden social housing (1992-96).

For the many young British architects who found work at the office during Berlin's 1990s boom, there was also a lesson from Germany's century-long social housing legacy – itself modelled on Edwardian Britain's. All Schiedhelm's residential developments have decent gardens, with larger projects based on maisonettes, with front and back yards, forming 'houses' and several storeys of flats above, shifted or cantoned to produce external terraces. In this way, the fringes are always

inhabited and belong to the residents in a way unimaginable among most recent British social housing.

Taught that continental architects don't do construction, British staff were surprised at Schiedhelm's involvement in all aspects of detailing, often insisting on full-size drawings. An enduring structuralist vestige was the universal 1250mm grid, seen as more human-centric than 1000mm.

Rising rents and lack of work in the new Berlin have led to the closure of the office near Potsdamer Strasse, a hip address in the Bowie/Lou Reed heyday. The huge rolls of decades-old Free University drawings that loomed over visitors in the foyer of the nineteenth-century Mietshaus have gone to the Berlinische Galerie archive. The kitchen where Peter Smithson once burnt the toast went several years ago, along with the flatlet in which visitors were generously accommodated. But for the many young architects who passed through the office, it will remain an inspiration.

Ian McDonald, now based in Pembrokeshire, worked in Schiedhelm's office from 1993-96.