

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

Ernst L. Freud: Architect to the Bourgeoisie of Weimar Germany

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6j31c080>

Journal

Berfrois

Author

Welter, Volker M.

Publication Date

2012-03-06

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6j31c080#supplemental>

Ernst L. Freud: Architect to the Bourgeoisie of Weimar Germany

March 6, 2012

<http://www.berfrois.com/2012/03/ernst-freuds-modern-architecture/>



by Volker M. Welter

In 1992, when I was working as an architectural historian for an architectural firm located in Berlin, I stumbled across the name of architect Ernst L. Freud. At that time, my task was to conduct research for an architectural historic report on a large country house, located high above Lake Schielow, to the south-west of Berlin, two-thirds on the way to Potsdam.

The first glimpse of the house, after turning the last corner of the steep access road leading up from the lake, is simply impressive. Facing south, a sequence of receding terraces opens up dramatic views across the endlessly flat landscape beyond the lake. The opposite facade is composed of asymmetrically stacked brick volumes rising to a height of three storeys. A large, cantilevered and indirectly-lit canopy marks the entrance at one end of this northern elevation. On both side of the doorway, Persian blue terracotta tiles depict musicians and peacefully grazing wild animals, indicating in a subtle way that here was a place for culture and relaxation. The understated elegance continued inside. Wall panelling crafted from Mahogany, geometric stair railings from exotic woods, translucent light boxes with sandblasted glass held in bronze frames, panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows in several rooms (the one in the dining room could be lowered into the basement in order to open unobstructed access onto the terrace), suggested residents of tremendous wealth and architectural ambitions.

source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250423041347/http://www.berfrois.com/2012/03/ernst-freuds-modern-architecture/>

That the house survived the Third Reich, the end of World War II and then Communist East Germany was most likely a consequence of its relative seclusion along the road from Potsdam to Berlin. Both German dictatorships had used the house (as well as surrounding villas) as a home for parentless and other children in need, and over the course of time the country house had temporarily been part of the headquarters of the Soviet Military Administration of Germany (SMAD) and a one-time residence for an East German minister of heavy industry. Eventually, it had become the *Lotte-Pulewka-Heim* for children: the name honoured a German communist who had returned to Germany in 1946 after nearly twenty years of life in the USSR. The many changes in usage brought with them refurbishments and modernizations of the exterior and interior, though in its substance the building had weathered well.

But who was the architect and who the client? During the Cold War, Henri van de Velde, a Belgian art nouveau architect and founder of the Weimar art school (which eventually became the Bauhaus under the directorship of Walter Gropius), was mentioned as possible architect of the house. As was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, perhaps the most famous German modernist architect who went into exile in the late 1930s. Information about the former owner was not readily available pre-unification. Only in 1991 were questions of architect and original owner resolved when journalist Lilli Thurn und Taxis pointed out that the house was commissioned by Dr. Theodor Frank, a banker in nearby Berlin, and was designed by Ernst L. Freud; a fact that had been recorded in the architectural literature from the 1920s but overlooked ever since.

The discovery of the name Freud in combination with modern architecture raised many issues, not least for the many intersections between Modernity, early twentieth-century modernist architecture, and the life of the architect.

Ernst L. Freud (1892-1970) was the youngest son of Sigmund Freud, the inventor of psychoanalysis, and arguably one of the most influential theories of modernity. Throughout his life, Ernst L. Freud called home the cities of Vienna, Munich, Berlin, and after 1933, London. At one point or another, these cities had all been European centres of modern art and architecture; and even more, the sequence in which Freud moved from one city to the other evokes the image of an architect following the *Zeitgeist* of fledgling architectural modernism. Add to this to the fact that Freud attended the pre-World War I Vienna lectures by Adolf Loos, one of the Ur-Modernists and a crusader against unnecessary ornament. Since his school days Freud had also been close friends with fellow Austrian Richard Neutra who, by the mid-twentieth century, was one of California's most famous modernist architects. By the 1920s, Ernst L. Freud had designed the consulting rooms of many members of the first generation of psychoanalysts who had trained with his father but practiced in Berlin. In short, the conclusion that Ernst L. Freud was an architectural modernist appeared almost unavoidable.

And yet, Freud's architecture doesn't support such a conclusion. The design for the Frank country house, for example, did not experiment with new construction methods or floor plans as Mies van der Rohe's Villa Tugendhat did in Brno, though both houses were designed and built from 1928 to 1930. Mies van der Rohe visibly announced the modernism of his creation with a single horizontal window along the long side of the living area, while Freud mixed English sash windows with traditional formats and panorama windows in the country house. In the Villa Tugendhat, the structural system was explicitly separated from the space enclosing facades. The Frank country house relied on load bearing walls laid beautifully from dark brownish brick. The open floor plan of the villa in Brno allegedly challenged social conventions by revolutionizing the arrangements of interior spaces (though Madame Tugendhat would have possibly objected to such an interpretation). Freud inserted three steps halfway in the entrance passage almost forcing guests to watch their feet and to make, consequently, a composed entrance into the house. Moreover, a silver bowl was

placed on a table in the entrance hall so that calling cards could be left in case the lady of the house was unavailable to visitors. The same paraphernalia of correct social etiquette can, by the way, also be seen in historic photographs of the entrance hall into the Villa Tugendhat, but it is not often discussed presumably as it runs counter to the idea of the villa challenging social norms.

The country house catered to the social and private needs of one of the top managers of Deutsche Bank. Freud's clients were Dr. h.c. Theodor Frank (1871-1953) and his wife, Margot Frank (1889-1942). Theodor Frank came from a southern German, Jewish family of businessmen and entrepreneurs. His banking career began in the late 1880s and by 1922 he was one of the owners of Deutsche Disconto-Gesellschaft which merged in 1929 with Deutsche Bank. Together with the country house, the Franks maintained a town home at Lützowplatz in the heart of Berlin. This enabled Freud to design all required furniture and soft furnishings for the country house.



The floor plan of the country house offered both representative and private spaces. On the lower level, the living areas allow for an easy flow of guests who could move from the entrance hall either to the library cum smoking room, the male realm, or to the parlour or sitting room, the female world. Then both sexes could reunite in the elegant dining room from where the terrace was accessible through an adjacent winter garden. On the upper level, one half is reserved for the owner of the house. The remaining spaces accommodated smallish bedrooms for children and guests alike; the overall impression is that of a luxurious boarding house.

In 1930, the architect Albert Sigrist wrote in *Das Buch vom Bauen*, that 'the new architecture [*neues Bauen*] has two faces. Indeed, it is bourgeois and proletarian, highly capitalistic and socialist.' Researching the architectural oeuvre of Ernst L. Freud means to engage with the bourgeois face of modern architecture in Weimar Germany which should not be confused or even equated with modernist architecture. The latter experimented with radical political utopias, housing for the masses, and with space, form and technology. For example, Berlin during the 1920s and early 1930s evokes images of radiant white cubes and regularly paced *Zeilenbau*, both of *neues Bauen*

source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250423041347/http://www.berfrois.com/2012/03/ernst-freuds-modern-architecture/>

perfection, proclaiming the will to build a new society within a most likely socialist order for the masses of *Neue Menschen*. Such a picture at least emerges from many period accounts and those architectural histories that, accordingly, tell of *The Victory of the New Building Style* as Weimar Republic architect and critic W. C. Behrendt entitled a book from 1927.

Freud, however, stayed away from most of the issues that nowadays are considered, somewhat narrowly, to represent the architectural, social and cultural goals of the 1920s and 1930s. Following instead closely his clients' wishes—rather than pursuing a set of *a priori* artistic ideas—Freud created a heterogeneous oeuvre that sought neither the expression of a *Zeitgeist*, like, for example, the pursuit of the radically new in the form of a fundamental break with the past, nor aligned itself with the opponents of modernism who favoured traditional architecture over any renewal, radical or not, of architectural practice. Looked at today, Freud's architectural works oscillate between the familiar and unfamiliar, the modern and traditional, and the homely and unhomely. Yet this does not point to architecture without qualities but rather at difficulties architectural history may experience when trying to place such oeuvre.

The Franks enjoyed life in their country house up until the early years of National Socialism. Somewhat shielded by Deutsche Bank, though removed from any visible official position, Dr. Frank and his family continued to live in central Berlin until around 1938. By that time Dr. Frank was forced to give up the last position he still held in one of the advising councils of the bank. Subsequently, the Franks fled, first, to Belgium and later, to the south of France. There, Margot Frank was arrested by the Gestapo. Accounts about the circumstances differ. What is confirmed is only that she was transported from her initial imprisonment at Camp Drancy to Auschwitz on 2nd September 1942. Arriving at Auschwitz two days later, 113 prisoners of the one thousand who made up convoy number 27 were selected for forced labour, and the rest, including Mrs. Frank, were murdered in the gas chambers.

Today, the Frank country house has been refurbished and modernized. The building remains the most prominent witness to the architecture of its designer. Other buildings by Freud, like the tobacco warehouse 'Problem' in central Berlin await restoration; though many houses and most of his interiors did not survive the passage of time. The archives at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London preserve Freud's papers, and some pieces of furniture are part of the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum. Some of Freud's former Jewish clients could take furniture with them if and when they managed to flee early National Socialist Germany and Europe. Thus Freudian dining room sets, single bedsteads, liquor trolleys, or just a side table can today be found, for example, in London, Oxford, Reading, Walberswick, Geneva, Tel Aviv, Hawaii, and in Californian cities like Santa Cruz, San Francisco and Santa Barbara. Occasionally, only a few photographs and family lore tell of former Freud-designed houses and furniture. In the case of the descendants of the Frank family, such memories proved to be strong. Until recently, the Frank family lived in Santa Barbara, in a house whose design and location right on the Pacific Ocean was in parts inspired by the former family home high above Lake Schwielow. The designer of the Californian home was a great-grandson of Theodor Frank, an architect who after completion of this house for his parents temporarily changed career and became a psychoanalyst.

Images of the Frank country house courtesy of the author.

About the Author:



Volker M. Welter PhD (Univ Edin) is an architectural historian who has lived, studied and worked in Germany, Scotland and England. Currently he is Associate Professor at the Department of the History of Art and Architecture, University of California at Santa Barbara, where he teaches Californian and Western, mainly European, modern architectural history and theory.

He has received fellowships from the Getty Grant Program, Los Angeles, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London/Yale University, and the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. He was elected member to the European Academy of Sciences and Arts in Salzburg, Austria, in 2011.

His publications include *Biopolis-Patrick Geddes and the City of Life* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 2002) and articles in academic journals such as *Israel Studies* and *Oxford Art Journal*. He is currently completing a book entitled *Tremaine Houses: A Study in mid-20th-century Patronage of Modern American Architecture*, and is preparing an exhibition on the Palm Desert architect Walter S. White to be shown at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UCSB in 2014. He is the author of [Ernst L. Freud, Architect: The Case of the Modern Bourgeois Home](https://web.archive.org/web/20250423041347/http://www.berfrois.com/2012/03/ernst-freuds-modern-architecture/).