Einer unter Vielen [One among Many]

*Translator's note: the central German term of this work, Ledigenheim, has no precise equivalent in English. Literally, it means "hostel or asylum for unmarried people, mostly unmarried men". As the term boarding house with its wide range of meanings is the subject of one of the following texts, it cannot be used as a valid translation. Ledigenheim will instead be translated as "home for single men". — A.S.

Housing shortage and deterioration of the working class – these social ills were to be overcome in English industrial cities of the late 19th century. Families in over-crowded apartments often had to rent out a bed to so-called bed lodgers at night: unmarried men without a permanent home. In order to counter these morally and hygienically unacceptable conditions, the private secretary of the Prime Minister, Baron Rowton, ordered the building of several early and successful homes for single men. Named after their initiator, the Rowton Houses were massive, fortress-like buildings which provided sleeping booths on the upper floors, each consisting of a bed and a little tray, separated from the others by thin wooden walls. Thus, they only allowed for limited privacy; yet, they could be rented per night and at a very cheap price. Included in this price was the usage of the very generously equipped common rooms on the ground floor: dining room, laundry room, showers, lounge, reading room. The houses soon proved very popular, both with their users and their investors: thanks to constant occupancy, they generated fast and considerable rates of return.

The intellectual nomad within a modern metropolis –
this was a prominent figure in the 1920s, describing a newly-emerged social type. It was often mentioned in writings of sociologists and philosophers, but also of architects, whenever their concern was analysis of the present or prognosis for the near future. An example is Oswald Spengler's famous book "The Decline of the West" (1922) in which he compares the rise, prosperity and decline of former advanced civilizations to the present. For him, history was cyclical: he describes men as nomads at first; then, they go on to become farmers and settle on their own land, before they start to feel at home in cities, turning into cultural beings. Finally, there would be but a mere "mass of tenants and lodgers, straying through the wilderness of houses from one shelter to another". The importance of the fireside would be completely lost then; in the end, the city as a whole would be the place of human dwelling. This is where the "last men" would reside: solitarily, not as a group, indifferent to the continuance of their own species.

A room of one's own for every adult – this demand was put forward by several exhibitions of the German Werkbund around 1930 where Walter Gropius, Hans Scharoun and other protagonists of "Neues Bauen" presented their drafts for a contemporary way of dwelling. These were directed against obsolete spatial and social structures like the over-crowded kitchen-diner, the purely representational parlor, or hierarchic bourgeois married life. Instead, they showed models of studies for men or women which were each dedicated to one intellectually and economically independent person, mostly to perform cerebral work. Burdensome housework was to be banished from private space as much as possible; it should instead be taken care of by staff, collectively for the whole house. What remained obscure in many of these modernist drafts was their actual target group: despite programmatic interest in the housing conditions of the masses, the décor tended to be luxurious, while children were hardly considered in most floor plans; the anticipation of further social individualization could not have served as a sufficient explanation for all this. Scharoun once wrote: in the end, only a special type of people would match up to the expanded idea of home implied in this new way of living.

A dignified residence for the soldiers who returned home – with this aspiration, various homes for single men were planned and built during and after World War I, often as parts of newly founded settlements initiated by the German branch of the garden city movement. The latter was very popular at the time, given the catastrophical living conditions in most big cities and the increasing doubts concerning the good nature of civilization which the war had fortified even more. The alternative was to turn back to a small-scale settlement close to nature, surrounded by a kind of green city wall.
On the inside, a new kind of community was supposed to grow, fertilized by the shared experience of war and trenches which people hoped would help level out social differences. Especially in the homes for single men (sometimes straightforwardly referred to as homes for invalids), everybody should find a new place to live who had rendered services to the Fatherland: in comfortable, fully equipped single rooms with supplementary common facilities. Often, the building was placed in the center of the settlement or at the end of a central pathway: as a symbol of reverence and thankfulness.

Liberating women from the burden of housework – this was the key objective of the one-kitchen-house, a concept which was advocated by social democrat Lily Braun around 1900: based on the strain and inefficiency of 50 women cooking in 50 kitchens in the same house at the same time, she developed the idea of a cooperatively run house with a central canteen kitchen operated by staff. Childcare facilities were meant to further help women combining professional life and maternal duties: both in working class families where the second income was needed, and in the middle class where women were striving for independence. Braun was hit by criticism from all sides: some called her concept "state-owned motherhood", and even social democrats feared the disintegration of family structures. According to Clara Zetkin, the concept was economically useless: the poorest working class families which were in need of the second income could not afford the high financial commitment, while all the others would not depend on it. An article about the first realized one-kitchen-house in Berlin (1908) confirmed this estimation: it was financed in a capitalistic manner, thus all inhabitants came from wealthy backgrounds, "officers‘ and clerks‘ families ...also a few single people like writers and artists and maybe even a young couple whose female part is an editor."

A material and spiritual economization of urban dwelling – this is the central demand of the book "Metropolisarchitecture" (1927) by architect Ludwig Hilberseimer. Standardization and limitation are means of emancipation to him: both poor and wealthy parts of the population would profit from a reduction of their possessions. Spatial tightness and local ties should make way for open space and mobility, bourgeois chattels for practical built-in furniture. A prominent phrase from the book says: In the future, relocation will not mean loading a van, but packing a suitcase. Consequently, the model for this new way of dwelling would be the American hotel, at the highest level of technical equipment and comfort. Hilberseimer emphatically describes its entrance hall, like the prototype of a new idea of urbanity: the coming and going of a multitude of agents, all from different backgrounds and with different agendas, but all making use of the modern technical facilities and services offered by this building.

A house with furnished single rooms that can be rented for shorter or longer periods of time – such could be a minimum definition of the concept "boarding house" which holds a wide range of meanings. It originated in the USA: in the 19th century, it described a private house whose owner (often women) rented out single rooms, including providing one or more meals per day; in this case, boarding referred to taking meals at a joint table. Both the persons running and using these places gradually gained more and more ambiguous reputations, and so did the concept itself; "boarding house" was even used as a synonym for prison at a certain time. This was surely unknown to the European modernists who started using the term for their visionary hotel-like apartment houses in the 1920s and 1930s: certainly because of its international flair, but also because of its semantic proximity to "going on board", and thus to the big steamships which had become the most prominent symbol of progress, high technology and comfort at the time. Today, the term is resurfacing: in cities characterized by labor migration and increasing rents, commercial boarding houses offer furnished rooms in the middle and upper price range, as an alternative to second homes or hotels.

Designing an affordable holiday resort for the middle class – this is an assignment which the architect Howard Roark obtains in Ayn Rand‘s novel "The Fountainhead" (1942), to be located at the hillside of a valley in the surroundings of New York City. He explains to the client that his idea is based on the fact that the middle class was longing for total privacy on their vacations which was commonly a privilege of the upper class and not of interest for the lower class. This is why his plan is to design each house of the resort as an autonomous unit without any shared facilities; what is more, from every single house, none of the others should even be visible. The client approves. As it shows in the course of the novel, he is convinced that Roark‘s idea is insane and that the project is bound to fail. For this case, he had prepared a legal scheme to back out of the contract with profits. He had chosen Roark based on a number of newspaper articles ridiculing his scandalous, unconventional buildings and ideas: the perfect candidate for the failure of the project. The client is all the more surprised when the resort is received very well; the houses are soon fully booked.

Man and space – this simple and universal title was chosen for the second issue of the Darmstädter Gespräch [the conversation of Darmstadt] in 1951. This programmatic series of events was conceived by the city in the late 1940s to reclaim the city's cultural importance from the era of Jugendstil, faced with the loss of its major function as the administrative capital of the federal state of Hesse under allied occupation. For the second issue, renowned intellectuals and architects were invited to give answers to the urgent questions of the present: in lectures and in plans for buildings of the public sector. The event is deemed legendary today, especially Martin Heidegger's lecture "Building Dwelling Thinking". Considering the definite housing shortage in the city, some had doubted the appropriateness of the rather theoretical and philosophical discussion; yet, the decision was made under the resolution that the misery of individuals should not prevent asking the great questions of the time. But in the end, it was another critical argument which echoed most dominantly: it claimed that the event was not an actual conversation, not in the sense of a dialogue; it rather resembled a recital of solitary opinions that hardly ever referred to each other.