When the *Future Grows Old*[1] and Turns Young Again. The legacy of the Henry and Emma Budge-Heim

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Abstract

This paper explores the Henry and Emma Budge-Heim (1928–1930) as part of the New Frankfurt project and among the first modern care homes for the elderly. Designed by Erika Habermann, Ferdinand Kramer, Werner Moser, and Mart Stam, it embodied a model of collective living for the elderly. Its architecture promoted social interaction through shared spaces and routines, while balancing privacy and publicity. Drawing on sources like Ilse Bing's photos, Bergmann-Michel's film, and *Das neue Frankfurt* magazine, the study highlights how Budge-Heim extended private life into communal realms. Its restoration in 2000–2001 and reopening as a senior residence confirms its relevance today. As ageing emerges as a critical concern in contemporary architecture, this case offers insights into how spatial strategies can respond to evolving notions of care and later life.

Keywords
Mart Stam, Ella Bergmann-Michel, Wo wohnen alte Leute, Das neue Frankfurt, Ageing.

Introduction

The Henry and Emma Budge-Heim is one of the earliest examples of modern collective housing for the elderly, conceived with the explicit aim of «putting an end to the prevalent practice of "quartering" old people in something like barracks and creating a "collectively managed hotel for pensioners"»[2]. The project received joint funding from the City of Frankfurt and two philanthropists, the Henry and Emma Budge-Stiftung, after whom the foundation is named. Its significance in the contemporary architectural discourse is twofold: firstly, its pioneering social and spatial model; and secondly, its preservation journey. Severely damaged during the Second World War, the process of safeguarding this building began in 1995[4] culminating in an exhibition by the Instituts für Stadtgeschichte and the Deutschen Architektur-Museums in 1997 on the future of the ex-Henry and Emma Budge-Heim[5]. Following its rescue from demolition in the late 1990s[6], the edifice underwent a programme of restoration and functional upgrading between 2000 and 2001, executed by the firm Dirk Hoppe Architekten of Darmstadt, in collaboration with the State Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments and with the scientific contribution in the field of restoration by the architect Ruggero Tropeano[7]. The project returned the building to its original function as a collective house for pensioners, albeit with some differences reflecting the adaptation of the structure to address the needs of the *fourth age* — a phase of life marked by greater fragility compared to the more active and healthy second half of life, nowadays commonly referred to as the *third age*[8], for which the building was originally designed. This trajectory offers a compelling case of functional continuity, providing critical insights into the challenges and opportunities of preserving the value of modern architecture.

A Long Journey: From Competition to the Restoration

In 1928, an article written by Mart Stam appeared in the magazine *Das neue Frankfurt*, presenting the project for «das neue Altersheim in Frankfurt Am Main»[9] (a new home for the elderly in Frankfurt am Main). The design was submitted by a collective composed of Erika Habermann, Ferdinand Kramer, Werner Moser, and Mart Stam, as part of a competition

organised under the direction of Ernst May of the urban building council. Between 1925 and 1930, the city of Frankfurt underwent significant transformation, characterised by massive urban expansion and housing initiatives.

The preliminary guidelines for the spatial organisation of the *Altersheim* were intentionally broad, as a clear definition of what such a facility should entail did not yet exist. This lack of precedent created a valuable opportunity for architectural experimentation and for the development of a model that could serve as a reference for future generations. Notably, the collaborative nature of the design team itself represented a novel approach in the architectural practice of the period — marked by the figure of the «*champions de l'architecture*»[10], who typically operated in isolation and within the boundaries of individual authorship. In contrast, the Budge-Heim project emerged from a collective design process, which Sigfried Giedion identified as its defining characteristic.

The building was therefore conceived as both a collective project and a collective dwelling, intended to accommodate elderly residents alongside care-workers. The young Dutch architect — Mart Stam was not yet thirty years old — outlined the two guiding principles of the competition, accompanied by commentary and design strategies. The first principle concerned the residents' privacy, with an emphasis on avoiding isolation of individuals within confined spaces. It was specified that residents should feel comfortable and retain a degree of autonomy by being able to move freely, as long as their strength allowed, onto terraces or into private gardens. This requirement necessitated minimizing the building's height. The second principle addressed the building's technical and organisational management, which was to be achieved with maximum efficiency and minimal complexity and expediency. To that end, work areas were centralised, and consequently, the building was developed symmetrically around a central axis: a spatial configuration driven by functional necessity.

A comparison between the competition drawings, published alongside Stam's article, and those published a few years later in 1930[11], reveals several discrepancies. The latter drawings appear to align more consistent with the building as ultimately constructed, suggesting that numerous adaptations were made during the development phase. For instance, the competition proposal included a detached structure for staff accommodation. According to Lore Kramer, this was intended to allow staff members to enjoy their leisure time without interference[12]. The freestanding building was set apart from the main complex by a broad lawn and further screened by a belt of trees, establishing a clear physical and visual boundary between the institutional setting and the surrounding residential fabric. Although the *Altersheim* was envisioned primarily for elderly residents, the institution's daily life and the well-being of its inhabitants were fundamentally supported by the labour of care-workers. However, when the project was updated and republished in 1930, accompanied by photographs taken by Ilse Bing, a significant change became evident: the separate staff building was eliminated. In the realised version, the workers' building was integrated into the main complex, adjacent to the north side of the east wing, near the entrance gate bearing the inscription *Henry und Emma Budge-Heim*. The building consists of three floors elevated on *pilotis*. In contrast to the original scheme, the external spaces, such as terraces and gardens — which were essential features of the pensioners' units — have been omitted in favour of window-based solutions alone. Regarding the internal layout, residents' units were organised into two main typologies: single rooms and apartments. The single rooms included a combined living and sleeping area, with the bed recessed into a niche to optimise usable space, alongside an anteroom with a sink and a storage room. The apartment typology introduced a clearer separation between the living and sleeping areas via a dedicated room, and both spaces opened onto a generously sized balcony

through glazed doors. Transparency emerges as a key architectural theme: externally, each unit features a full-height glazed door and a wall-to-wall window, while internally, continuous ribbon windows positioned just below the ceiling allowed natural light to filter into the corridors. Even the balconies are subdivided by glazed partitions, reinforcing the interplay between openness and privacy.

In retrospect, however, Ferdinand Kramer identified a critical shortcoming of the design: the insufficient number of sanitary facilities and their detachment from the residential units. This arrangement, he noted, was symptomatic of the prevailing notions of hygiene and comfort at the time, which the project adhered to in a rather rigid and uncompromising manner[13].

In contrast, contemporary standards of hygiene and comfort require the integration of private bathrooms within each living unit. This shift was addressed during the renovation of the *Seniorenzentrum Grünhof im Park*, where the original storage room in each unit was converted into an en-suite bathroom.

Since the building had been officially listed as a cultural monument in the register of historical monuments of the State of Hesse, the restoration process had to comply with strict conservation requirements. According to reports prepared by the architectural firm Pfister Schiess Tropeano & Partner Architekten AG[14], following an inspection conducted in the early 2000s, it was established that all architectural elements documented in the architectural plans — including load-bearing structures, interior partitions, and integrated design features — were protected. Nevertheless, adapting the building to meet contemporary functional needs necessitated the implementation of a differentiated conservation strategy. This involved establishing a hierarchy of protected areas, enabling restoration, rehabilitation, and, where strictly necessary, targeted alterations.

The building was thus subdivided into three categories of intervention: first-order protected areas, second-order protected areas, and areas designated for reprofiling. First-order protected areas, such as the main entrance hall and selected portions of the corridors, were recognised as architecturally and spatially coherent units of high heritage value, and only restoration and rehabilitation were permitted. The remaining sections of the corridors were classified as second-order protected areas, allowing for limited interventions to specific construction elements. Finally, areas such as the entrance vestibule, the dining hall, and the rear atrium of the transverse wing were designated as reprofiling zones, spaces to be reconstructed or restored in accordance with the original spatial and architectural configuration, as determined through analysis of historical plans, written descriptions, photographs, and material surveys.

Collective Living Between Privacy and Publicity

The urban transformation of New Frankfurt was a coordinate effort that brough together architects, artists, cultural institutions and the media, all working toward a redefinition of modern urban life. Ella Bergmann-Michel's film *Wo wohnen alte Leute* (Where Old People Live) aligned with this broader agenda, foregrounding the need for a radical rethinking of housing at large[15]. Commissioned by Mart Stam and filmed in 1931, shortly after the completion of the Budge-Heim, the film served a promotional function, aiming to communicate the social value of the project to a broader audience.
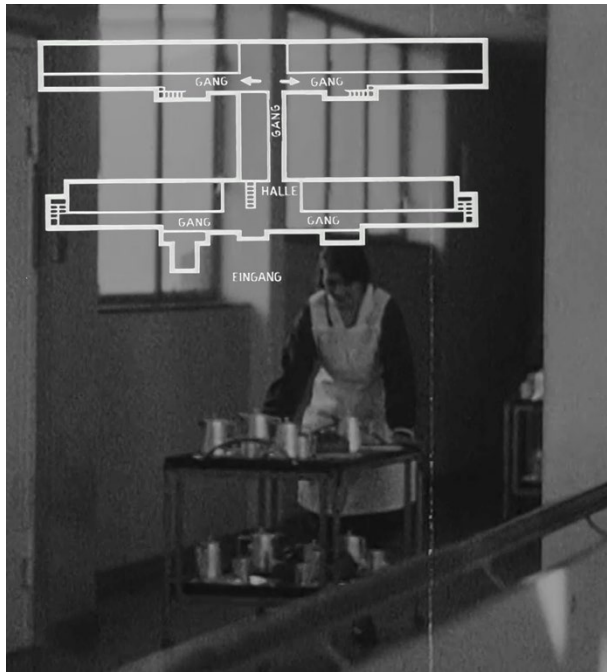
Fig. 1 Thresholds, (photo Ella Bergmann-Michel, 1931) © Sünke Michel, Reference: DFF - Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, Frankfurt am Main (elab. S. Narducci 2025).
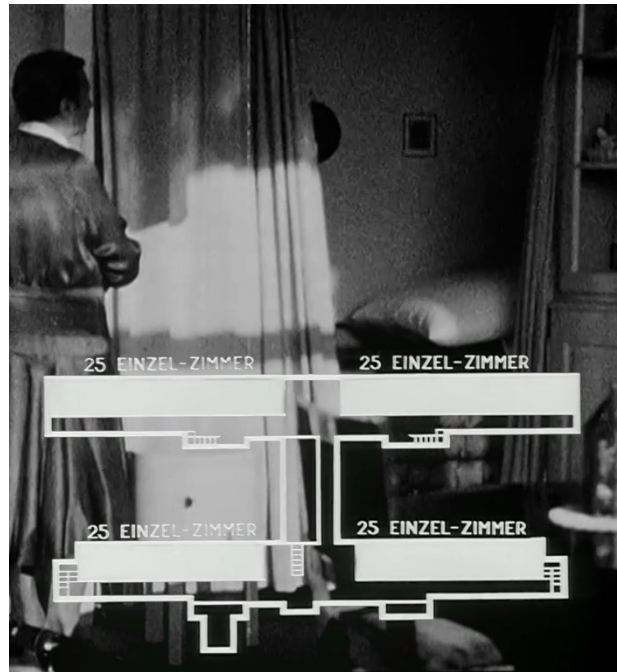
Fig. 2 Rooms, (photo Ella Bergmann-Michel, 1931) © Sünke Michel, Reference: DFF - Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, Frankfurt am Main (elab. S. Narducci 2025).

Rather than portraying the Budge-Heim as static architectural object, the film depicts it as a «living organism»[16], animated by the presence of its elderly residents engaged in daily routines. This body-centred perspective stands in stark contrast to the earlier photographic documentation by Ilse Bing, which captured the building in its pristine, uninhabited state, emphasising formal clarity over lived experience. By contrast, Bergmann-Michel's lens is attuned to the rhythms of daily life, highlighting both the social and intimate dimensions of inhabiting that architecture. The film's title, *Wo wohnen alte Leute* frames the narrative as a question, one that the film promptly sets out to answer. It begins with evocative scenes of the old city of Frankfurt: dark, overcrowded neighbourhoods, dilapidated building and narrow streets saturated with noise and congestion. The camera transitions from this universal context to the particular, gradually focusing on the elderly as its main subjects. Among the first subjects introduced is an elderly man reading a newspaper in a densely furnished apartment filled with potted plants; this is followed by the image of an elderly woman walking home alone. These early portrayals position the elderly as solitary figures within an urban theatre of disconnection, each seemingly locked into an individual trajectory that never intersects with others. Through this juxtaposition, the film constructs a visual antithesis between outdated, inadequate living conditions and the new model of dignified collective ageing embodied by the Budge-Heim. The *Altersheim* is thus presented as a form of communal living explicitly conceived to counteract the isolation frequently associated with old age, particularly in cases where individuals are still physically autonomous. The idea that elderly individuals might pursue independence outside the traditional framework of family-based care represents a distinctly modern ideal, one resonant with emerging interwar lifestyles. In this regard, the Budge-Heim does not rely on overtly technological interventions to accommodate the ageing body. Rather, it resembles an hotel[17] inhabited by pensioners. The film devotes
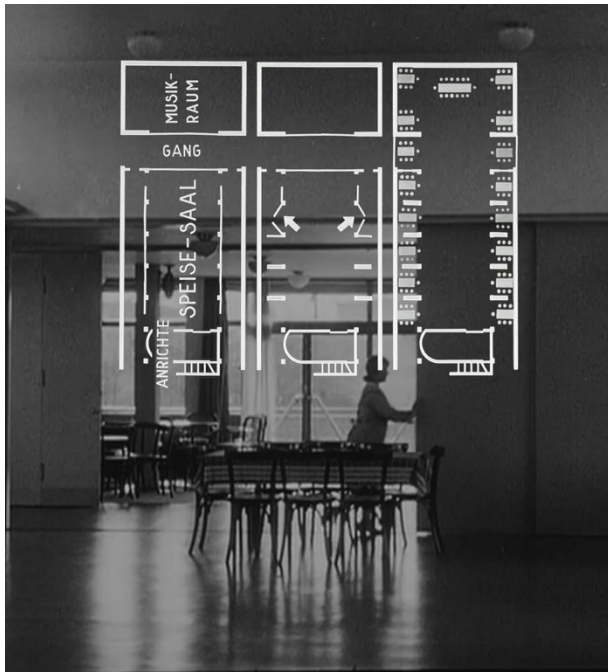
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Fig. 3 Flexible Shared Space, (photo Ella Bergmann-Michel, 1931) © Sünke Michel, Reference: DFF - Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, Frankfurt am Main (elab. S. Narducci 2025).
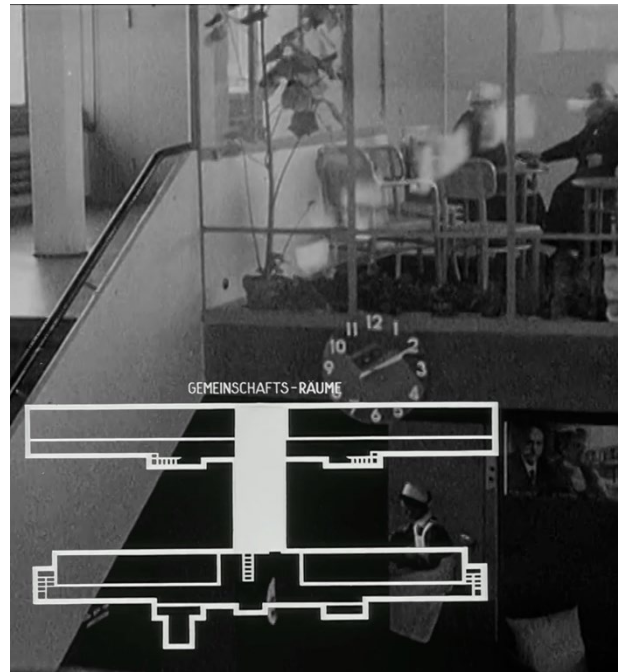
Fig. 4 Lobby, (photo Ella Bergmann-Michel, 1931) © Sünke Michel, Reference: DFF - Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, Frankfurt am Main (elab. S. Narducci 2025).

significant attention to scenes of everyday life: residents playing cards, strolling in the garden, conversing in shared spaces, reading the newspaper, or eating together. These vignettes underscore the central argument of the film: that architecture can foster social interaction in later life. Care workers move through the spaces in uniform. Their presence emerges subtly, integrated into a narrative centred on collective life and daily rhythms, reminiscent more of a hotel protocol. The work of care thus remains largely in the background, woven into a depiction of communal living structured around the routine shaped by the layout. One particularly illustrative scene focuses on the flexible design of the dining room. Movable partition walls allow a fluid reconfiguration of space, enabling three originally separate rooms — the dining room, an adjacent corridor, and the music room — to be merged into a single, light-filled glazed space. A staff member demonstrates the sliding system to the camera, embodying the modernist ethos of transparency, and multifunctionality. Once the space has been set up, a worker opens the canteen shutters to signal the start of lunch, prompting the residents to gather. The final scene offers a tender resolution: an elderly couple, presumably formed during their time at the Budge-Heim, a facility originally intended for single residents, stands at the window, waving two handkerchiefs toward the camera. This closing gesture encapsulates the project's broader social ambition: to foster not only dignified ageing but also the potential for new social bonds to emerge later in life.

Inhabiting the Legacy

The Budge-Heim stands as a complex architectural artefact that challenges the very notion of home. While the German suffix -*Heim* traditionally refers to the domestic sphere, the spatial and organisational logic of the building — structured around individual cells, in-room breakfasts, scheduled mealtimes, and uniformed staff — aligns more closely with that

of a hotel than with a traditional dwelling. As a modernist intervention, the Budge-Heim participates in the broader agenda of consigning centuries of cluttered interiors and unsanitary living conditions to oblivion[18], proposing instead a vision of domesticity restructured around hygiene, order, and rational planning. This ambiguity of meaning — oscillating between the homely (dwelling) and the unhomely (hotel) — mirrors the semantic complexity of the term *heimlich*. As Freud observes in its essay *The "Uncanny"*, «*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*»[1]. The Budge-Heim, in this light, encapsulates the very contradictions embedded in the German language itself and stimulates a renewed reflection on what *home* might truly mean. To engage with the legacy of this project is to confront the persistent ambiguity at the heart of modernist domesticity: between the generic and the specific, the institutional and the intimate, the designed and the lived. As the future grows old, ageing remains a critical and expanding field for architectural intervention — one in which contemporary architects are increasingly engaged through a variety of approaches. Revisiting the Budge-Heim not only sheds light on historical design practices related to care — often marginalised within architectural discourse — but also invites renewed reflection on how architects might respond to the needs and bodies of today. Late life continues to be a site for architectural intervention that demands responses attuned not only to the vulnerabilities of ageing bodies, but also to their capacity for sociality, autonomy, and dignity in the present.

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