

'What are living conditions like for workers in the European Coal and Steel Community?' from Die Welt (23 May 1955)

Caption: On 23 May 1955, the German daily newspaper Die Welt reports on the housing situation of workers in the coal and steel areas of Lorraine and the Ruhr.

Source: Die Welt. Unabhängige Tageszeitung. Hrsg. SCHULTE, Heinrich ; Herausgeber ZEHRER, Hans. 23.05.1955, n° 118; 10. Jg. Hamburg: Die Welt. "Wie wohnt der Arbeiter der Montanunion?", auteur:Schaufuß, J. , p. 4.

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What are living conditions like for workers in the European Coal and Steel Community?

Impressions from a journey through the 'industrial triangle' — New housing estates for miners

At its most recent session in Strasbourg, the ECSC Assembly held an in-depth debate on how best to resolve the problem of providing housing for workers in the European Coal and Steel Community. At the invitation of the High Authority, a member of our editorial staff toured the *industrial triangle*.

From our own correspondent

Essen, 22 May

Because of the increase in extraction capacity in the mining industry and the construction of new steelworks, the need for housing for miners and steelworkers is constantly growing. In many areas, the need to replace war-damaged houses adds to this pressure. Nevertheless, a tour of the coalfields of Lorraine and the Ruhr shows clearly that the mining and steel companies have tackled the housing problem in very different ways.

With the prefabricated houses which it has constructed in recent years, the Lorraine mining industry must have built the largest number of new dwellings for its workers. The provision of new housing was particularly urgent in this region, because of the need to find homes for the influx of miners from other countries in the European Coal and Steel Community, especially from Italy. One particularly striking example of how the housing problem is being tackled is the Belle-Roche housing estate: in terms of size, it exceeds that of any housing estate in the conventional sense — and this is only the beginning. The experimental stage is over, and the authorities have decided to build a type of house designed to accommodate some six families. Smaller, two-family houses are also being built.

The two important factors governing the construction of these prefabricated houses have been speed and low cost. With the exception of the foundations, all the required building components for the construction of the house are manufactured in a specially equipped factory. The fabrication of these components is itself extremely simple and requires no specially trained skilled workers. There are about 24 different shapes, which already contain all the openings for windows, doors and the future conduit system.

In Giningen, which is also in Lorraine, the steel industry has built a series of steel houses on a trial basis with the support of the High Authority. Apparently, this type of house is based on the High Authority's plan to use as much steel as possible in the construction of workers' housing.

The first question that arises regarding a steel house is naturally the cost of the materials. In Giningen, circumstances there have proved particularly favourable, since one of the largest and most modern steelworks in Europe, the Sollac works near Thionville, supplies all the building materials at cost price — of course!

The Sollac company itself has deliberately scorned such new methods in the construction of its own steelworkers' housing estate. It has, instead, constructed a housing estate in the middle of a forest using a conventional building method, the like of which is not easy to find: Saint-Nicolas-en-Forêt. These apparently exclusive one-family and larger houses lie some distance from the steelworks on a range of hills which afford a view over a landscape completely unspoilt by industrialisation.

Opportunities on the Ruhr

Such opportunities do not exist in the Ruhr. Here, the initial requirements for a solution to the housing problem were quite different. It simply was not possible to build on greenfield sites, because the fact is that, here, five million people live cheek by jowl on 4 600 km², an area accounting for just 2 % of the territory of the Federal Republic.

All the same, it is evident from the estate that houses the miners who work at the *Graf Bismarck* mine at Gelsenkirchen-Buer that building in a progressive manner is understood just as well here. The houses, nestling one behind the other in terraces, are each basically designed for one single family. The focal point of each dwelling is a large sitting-cum-living-room, with beautiful wide windows giving access to the exterior. It was considered important that the existing stock of trees should be preserved during the construction of the estate, thus setting nature in a direct relationship with the dwellings. The exceptional feature of these houses as opposed to the workers' houses in Lorraine is that, after a certain period of time, the occupants acquire the right to own the property. Accordingly, most of the rent goes towards the purchase price. The importance of this system in giving the miners a feeling of stability should not be underestimated.

Revitalising the workforce

The construction of workers' houses is not just a matter of welfare policy, it also has economic significance. A general increase in productivity cannot be achieved through technical investment alone, it assumes that, in his leisure time, the working man finds an environment where his energies may be revitalised. SPD delegate Mr Willi Birkelbach spoke along those lines at the most recent session of the European Coal and Steel Community Assembly in Strasbourg. Indeed, in seeking a solution to the housing problem, it is not just the factors of low cost and speed that should be heeded when the type of dwelling and method of building are being considered. If, first of all, there was an urgent need for a large number of dwellings for the reflation of the economy and, for that reason, less importance was attached to comfortable living conditions, including the location of the housing, there really ought to be a gradual return once again to a solid method of building that satisfies the demands of modern man.

J. Schaufuß