



LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS
MODOS DE HABITAR

ABADA EDITORES

LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD
GRANADA, 23-25 ENERO 2019



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La Casa. Espacios domésticos, modos de habitar
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Hacia el bloque moderno: evolución de un tipo en la arquitectura pre-bélica de Kay Fisker

Towards the Modern Block: Evolution of an Urban Type in Kay Fisker's Prewar Architecture

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Resumen

Según el pensamiento actual, la imagen tradicional de la ciudad europea está generalmente asociada a el bloque urbano. A la manzana le corresponde una arquitectura que aparece firmemente anclada a la trama de la ciudad sin ninguna posibilidad de evolución, sobre todo si se compara con las experimentaciones realizadas entre las dos guerras mundiales, dominadas por teorías visionarias de las ciudades jardín y de las casas altas aisladas. Kay Fisker (1893-1965), que entre los años Veinte y Treinta construyó numerosas manzanas en Copenhague, a través de una personal búsqueda paciente, puso este elemento como protagonista, representando una de las felices excepciones con respecto a este tópico.

Palabras clave: Kay Fisker, Copenhague, bloque urbano, planificación urbana, proyecto arquitectónico

Bloque temático: El proyecto doméstico como núcleo de la modernidad: casa singular y vivienda colectiva, del Movimiento Moderno al siglo XXI

Abstract

According to current thinking, the traditional image of European cities is usually associated to that of the housing block. This name refers to an architectural element that seems to be closely connected to the cities' patterns and doesn't therefore seem to be inclined to evolving – especially if one compares it to the experimentations that took place in the period of time between the two World Wars, dominated by visionary theories such as that of the garden cities and of isolated high-rise apartments. Kay Fisker (1893-1965) designed several blocks in Copenhagen between the Twenties and the Thirties. He used the block as the main element of his personal patient research, this way becoming one of the few exceptions to this cliché.

Keywords: Kay Fisker, Copenhagen, housing block, urban planning, architectural project

Topic: *The domestic project as the heart of modernity: the single, one-off house and collective housing, from the Modern Movement to the 21st century*

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Copenhagen could be seen as a city that had just started to learn all about urban planning, and in which housing was becoming a public issue after the birth of the working class. Although from the end of the 19th century had been laid out a few fundamental rules regarding constructions – establishing for example that there should be an increase of free areas compared to built areas – the character of the first neighborhoods built at that time was still similar to that of the London slums.

The blocks were built inside long and narrow rectilinear lots, and encased private parcels of land, usually filled with bicycle sheds, racks and garbage cans... the general lighting and hygienic conditions of the apartments were usually poor as well, and contributed to the creation of a linear building typology of very small dimensions, in which all the living areas faced the street and the bathrooms and sleeping areas overlooked the internal court.¹

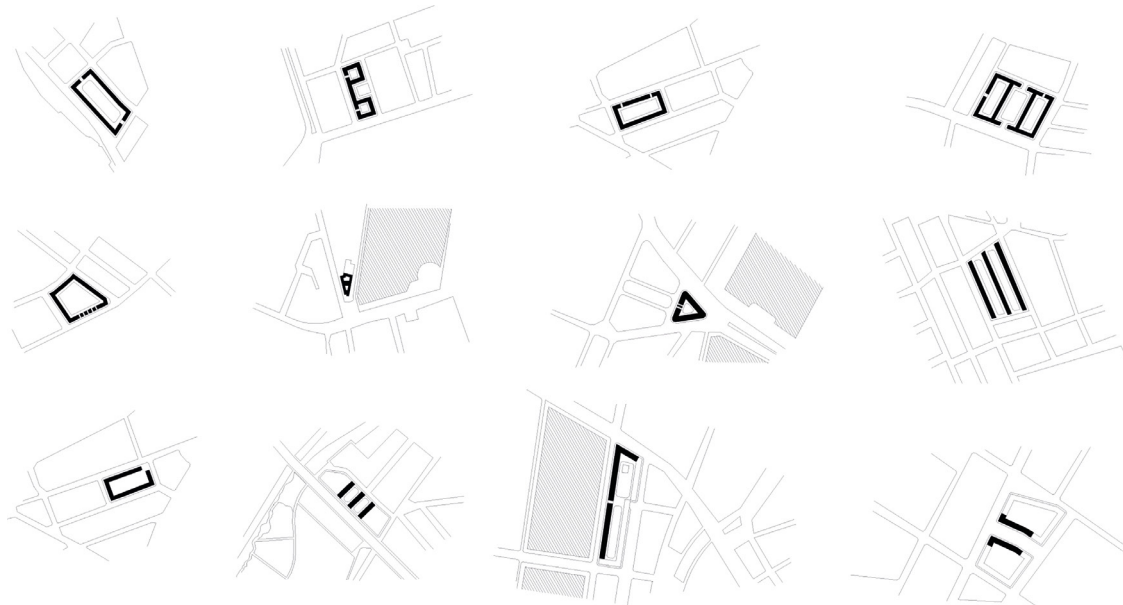


Figure 1: Kay Fisker, Copenhagen blocks (1929 -1939), Copenhagen
Source: G.Baratelli (2018)

This condition, which was so typical of the modern city – in which residents were seen only as wage earners subject to the speculations of the industrial production – partially changed after the First World War, when rented houses received considerable state fundings just as it was happening with the socialist policies in the Red Vienna and as would happen a few decades later with the New Frankfurt. The considerable value of these fundings had immediate consequences in the dimensions of the buildings, and so the 20th century city's blocks started being filled with new *karrerne*: big wall enclosures containing internal gardens for the use of the residents.²

A group of architects understood that their role was not solely that of managing housing density, safety regulations and orderly planning. Povl Baumann, Thorvald Henningsen, Steen Eiler

¹ Kay Fisker et al., *Københavnske Boligtper* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Arkitektforening, 1936), 6-44.

² Fisker et al., *Københavnske...*, 29-44.

Rasmussen and especially Kay Otto Fisker (1893-1965),³ who would occupy the Housing design chair (*Bolig Klasse*) at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts between 1924 and 1955, worked assiduously to lay down the basis of an architectural approach to the problem of collective housing, opposed to an only building-related one. At a first distracted look, the constructions during those years may seem as lacking specific qualities. But observing three of Fisker's most significant works, built between 1922 and 1939, it becomes clear that in his essentially homogeneous production, very far from the great urban utopias, he had been introducing and perfecting a few small breaking elements into a functional tradition that represented the essence of the Danish architecture – and especially of that of Fisker.

1. *Der Klump*, the beginning

To what type of urban image should the new blocks architecture relate to? While tracing a description of the characteristics of Northern architecture, Steen Eiler Rasmussen indicated what were the principles of the new attitude towards form and construction that was being outlined at the turn of the 20th century.

Around 1910, artists and architects started questioning themselves about the meaning of monumentality: it suddenly became clear that even the houses were not just a plain element inside the city, and that, therefore, something in the urban landscape had changed. In the past the house had been «ein neutraler Hintergrund für die monumentalen Bauten mit ihren Risaliten, Säulen und Türmen. Hier ist es selbst monumental geworden».⁴

This was a small revolution that implied a considerable change in the figure-ground relationship: an element that until a moment before could guarantee a visual continuity in the city's texture, leading the eyes of passers-by towards a far-off destination – a public building, a church, the city hall – now had become the main character of the scene, which meant, in a word, a monument. The big blocks occupied specific areas of ground, they had a perimeter, a depth, and were made of several lined up lodgings. They also implied, though, the adherence to new both formal and typological principles. Which were, then, the principles that ruled these volumes?

The blocks' perimeter represented the encounter of two different worlds: that of an architectural type that traditionally occupied a measurable area of ground surface, that could be more or less open or deep, and inside which were contained the juxtaposed housing units, and that of its external shell that, from outside, was perceived as compact and isolated.

³ Luca Ortelli, "La Copenhagen di Kay Fisker", in *Tipo Architettura e Città. Undici lezioni*, ed. Maria Vittoria Cardinale and Stefano Perego (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli Editore, 2017), 119.

⁴ [Translated by the author: A neutral background for monumental buildings and their avant-corps, columns, portals. Now the house itself had become a monument]. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Nordische Baukunst* (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1940), 72.

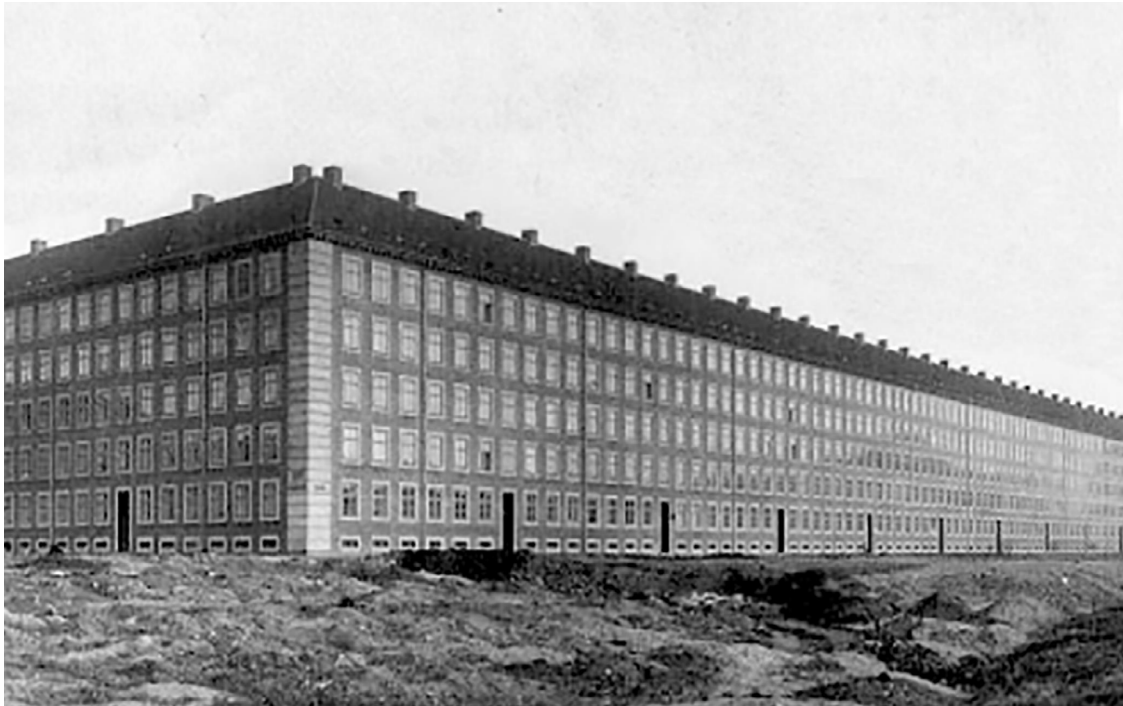


Figure 2: Kay Fisker, Hornbækhus (1920-1923), Copenhagen
Source: *Architekten*, n°39 (1923)

It all started by taking away the decorative elements and rediscovering the strength of bare volume: buildings shouldn't be monolithic, they should be homogeneous. And homogeneousness could be reached by, for example, using brickwork for both the bearing walls and the roof tiles, so that the roofing didn't seem as detached from the main body of the building. The internal walls that faced the courtyard and the intrados of the apartments' entrances had to look the same, too. The roof, smooth and without any openings, neither windows nor dormers, set off the wholeness of the block and at the same time highlighted the essential character of this kind of architecture, putting it on the same level of simplicity as the English houses and rural constructions. According to this kind of logic, the details didn't disappear but were strategically merged into the block without breaking its uniformity, complying with a mathematical order that combined all the elements together (may they be bow-windows or turrets), since, as the architect Borchs observed back in the 19th century: «ein gutes Ganzes, wenn es gelang, ein solches zu schaffen, sich mit weniger oder gar keinen Einzelheiten begnügen kann».⁵ Obviously, among all these elements, the windows remained an inevitable presence. Their number grew according to the number of residents: one window coincided then with a small room or a kitchen, two windows matched a double room, three or four corresponded to a bigger living room. But the way in which the spaces inside the buildings were distributed didn't show on the façades: the different rooms couldn't be seen from outside. The windows created a pattern on the brickwork that, together with a peculiar use of the bricks, generated a sort of 'upholstery'.

⁵ [Translated by the author: When a well directed great whole manages to state something, it might need very few details, or even none]. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Nordische Baukunst. Beispiele und Gedanken zur Baukunst unserer Zeit.* (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1940), 56.

2. The first experiment and its variations

The well known Hornbækhus,⁶ built between 1920 and 1923, represented one of the best expressions of this principle. Located in a relatively central area, the Nørrebro neighborhood, it was made of a single building containing 290 lodgings and 29 double sets of stairs whose internal enclosure was totally empty and could be reached by the short sides through two broad portals. The 5-storey tall and 10-meters deep block contained only one housing typology, which was very common in middle-class houses as well, in which the central hallway lead to the kitchen and the bathroom, both located on the sides of the service stairs. On the same side were also the bedrooms, while the living room and the dining room overlooked the street. The façades were treated consistently with the principle of continuity, according to which bricks dominated the scene and the blocks were characterized by the rhythm created by one big window repeating itself and keeping its same exact dimensions, in order to indicate the democratic distribution of air and light. The building's compact body didn't show anything of its inside. It was uniform, but at times irregular.

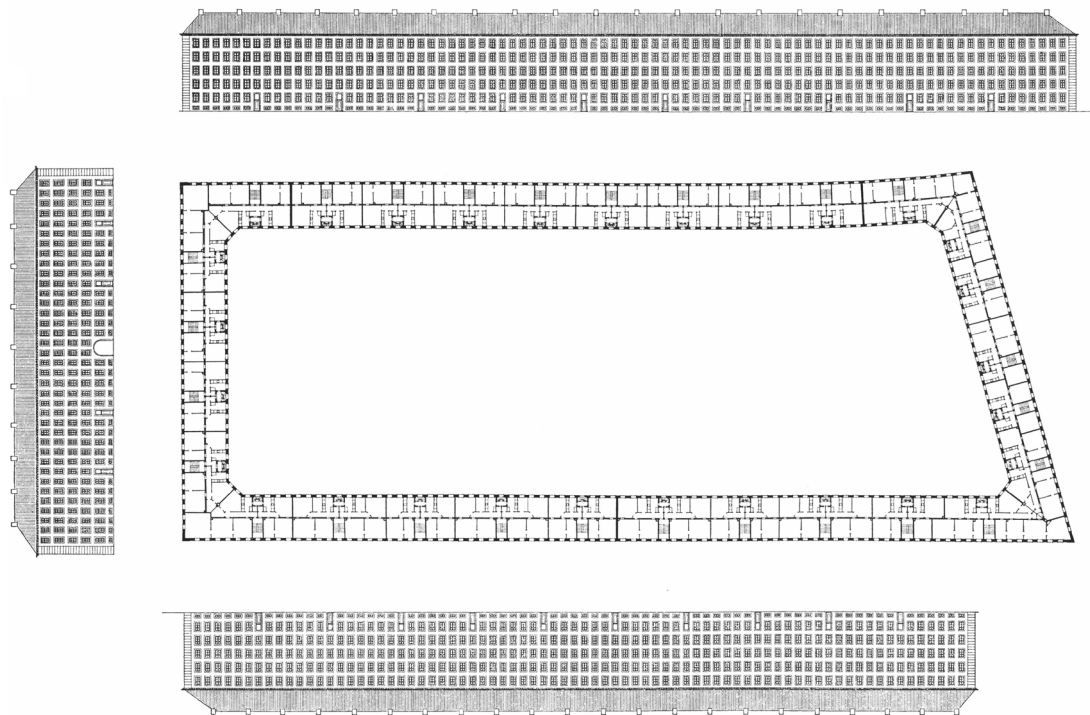


Figure 3: Kay Fisker, Hornbækhus, plan type and building elevations, (1920-1923), Copenhagen
Source: Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Nordische Baukunst. Beispiele und Gedanken zur Baukunst unserer Zeit* (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1940)

Its shape changed according to the edges of the street. In this sense, the space of the lot was optimized, so that its corners, by curving almost imperceptibly, became precise indicators making passers-by aware that there was a functional exception: the presence of commercial activities on the ground floor. The block, or *Klump*, was forced to get out of its parallelepipedal rigor. Although as a whole it represented an important step, the Hornbækhus showed a few

⁶ Ortelli, "La Copenhague...", 119; Luca Ortelli, "Architecture ancrée dans le quotidien. Kay Fisker et ses compagnons de route", *Matières*, n.°12 (2015): 70-72.

limits. Some were faults due to the strict regulations that forced architects to include a second set of safety stairs in the buildings (this way taking away some useful space) and to have all the living rooms overlooking the streets (whereas the court would certainly offer a better background). A few other questionable choices were due to popular practices like, for example, that of using a standardized type of housing⁷ and that of making no difference between house and landing windows in order to keep going the sequence of holes in the walls. A few years later, the very need to include a second set of stairs while working on the Gullfosshus⁸ block, would suggest Fisker the first important variation in the rhythm of the holes. This change would be a vertical shifting of the windows' order, through which functionality and aesthetic came together. At this point, it would be appropriate to ask the question: is the Hornbækhus functional?

The success of this building was due to the fact that its traditional elements were sublimated. As it has been noticed several times, the court featured considerable dimensions (157 x 57 meters), much greater than those of other close-by *karrerne* and the internal garden – which inaugurated Fisker's collaboration with the landscape architect Gudmund Nyeland Brandt – finally had the characteristics of a well equipped park with side trees and adequate resting spaces. When closely observing the Hornbækhus' plan, it can be noticed that the strict axial order and the obsessive correspondence of the windows between the internal and external courts, which could be seen as form-related choices combined to an unusual planimetric cleanness, actually guaranteed the existence of double natural ventilation in the houses. The doors, according to the Scandinavian tradition, directly connected the main bedroom with the living room, assuring a constant circulation of air. Moreover, when getting close to the corners of the building, as Luca Ortelli in his writing argues, the rhythm of the stairs changed,⁹ and the same type of apartment with central hallway could be found in different sizes, with two or three bedrooms. Depending on the increasing number of bedrooms, the living room became proportionally bigger, it conquered more space.

Hornbækhus also marked a watershed, a non-return point in Kay Fisker's production and in that of the Copenhagen's *karrerne*; the ensuing evolutions of this model in the 1920s would deal mainly with the access to the internal court and with the relationship between the built volume and the street. The attempt was that of gradually moving towards more permeable compositions. The construction of the Gullfosshus trapezoidal block had already seen the introduction of five openings on one side that made the courtyard visible from outside. In other cases the choice was that of breaking the *Klump* and move the buildings back from the street's edges in order to add wide green areas (Englandsvej and Brigaadegarden); in Østergaarden a part of the *karré* was eliminated to create a corner entrance. Gradually the shape of the architectural type started to change to half-closed, then to angular and open compositions with repeated and linear configurations, according to the Berlin model. The traditional block became then a dying species, but it kept being used where urban layouts had already been designed.¹⁰

⁷ Fisker et al., *Københavnse...*, 30-32.

⁸ Poul Erik Skriver, "Boligbiggeren Kay Fisker", *Architectura*, n.°15 (1993): 58.

⁹ Ortelli, "La Copenhagen...", 121.

¹⁰ Fisker et al., *Københavnse...*, 33, A-B.

3. The break: Vodroffsvej

At number 2 of the corner between Vodroffsvej and Gammel Kongevej can be found a peculiar building. It's a 6 storey block containing 18 apartments whose construction was completed in March of 1929 with the help of Christian Frederic Møller, an associate of Fisker's studio.¹¹

It represented an important evolutive step in Fisker's production, as well as an original elaboration of some of the fundamentals of modern architecture reached after a short, yet intense, professional, didactic and editorial career, and through a constant effort in being up to date about the state of the art by going on several journeys to Holland and Germany to study the most important residential complexes realized by contemporary architects.

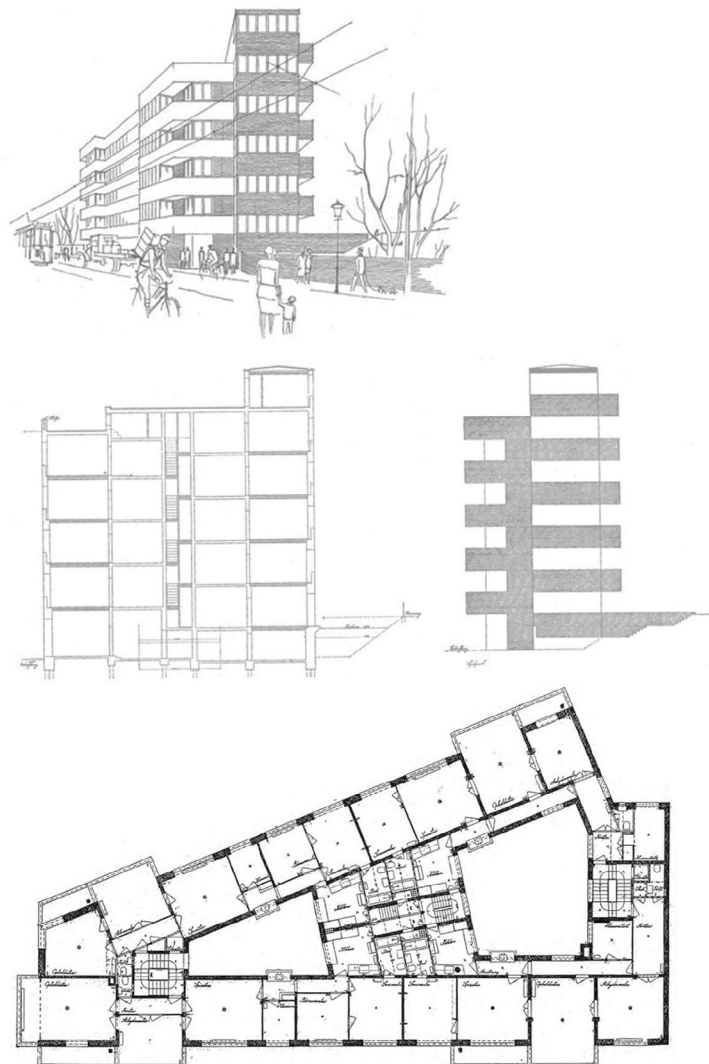


Figure 4: Kay Fisker and Christian Frederic Møller, Vodroffsvej (1929), Denmark:
Figure 4.1: perspective; Figure 4.2: section and south elevation; Figure 4.3: plan type
Source: <http://www.arkitekturbilleder.dk/bygning/vodroffsvej-2a-og-2b/>

¹¹ Skriver, "Boligbiggeren ...", 64.

Nothing about this project can be considered easy, starting from the limitations imposed by the context to the full potential of the block: the area was closed on three sides, two of which were defined by the Lake Sankt Jørgen and by the street, while the third was destined to be soon occupied by another building.¹² In this case, Fisker couldn't use the same solutions that he would have used for a conventional *karré*. The single volume that constituted the basis of the traditional block had to be broken into two wings. These two very narrow bodies, each with autonomous access, intersected with each other in the area occupied by the main set of stairs, that then became a sort of hinge between the two buildings. In the center of the lot, a third volume containing the safety stairs and the services divided the central enclosure into two internal courtyards. This kind of distribution offered obvious benefits to the apartments, since the depth of the wings (only 6 meters deep) guaranteed an excellent natural lighting in the main rooms. The courtyards (which this time were too small to plant whole parks inside them) were big enough to guarantee adequate ventilation to the servant spaces of the apartments – kitchens, bathrooms and hallways – all overlooking these voids. In accordance with the regulations, the housings were served by double sets of stairs, the safety ones, though, had been put all together so that they didn't take any surface away from the wings.



Figure 5: Kay Fisker, Vodroffsvej (1929), Copenhagen
Source: Poul Erik Skriver, "Boligbiggeren Kay Fisker", *Architectura* n.°15 (1993)

¹² Kay Fisker, "Nye Bygninger. Bebyggelse ved. Sct. Jørgens Sø", *Arkitekten U* (1929): 137.

The result of all this was an articulate distribution of spaces, with apartments of 4 or 5 rooms that could be gone through in *enfilade*, without stopping. Volumes were broken vertically, as well. The shifting between the two parts of the block found in this case a topographical reason: the lake's bank was higher than the street level and, consequently, the apartments overlooking the lake (as can be seen in the section) had to shift upwards to a higher position. From the last floor, made solely of bedrooms, it is possible to access the flat roof.

The important news in Vodroffsvej wasn't only related to the lodgings' structure, which was becoming more and more suitable for the modern lifestyle, in accordance to the needs of the emerging middle class – that wanted to have shops right downstairs, elevators, and the study next to the living room –, but to the fact that the main rooms of these apartments benefitted from an exclusive view and that, to reach this goal, the very concept of window had to change and to adjust to the available space and to being able to offer a view on a landscape that favored horizontality. It is exactly the element of the window that served as the breaking element of the classic *Klump's* image, and for sure this building was the result of a few other attempts.

One of the known preparatory drawings¹³ represented the western façade of Vodroffsvej featuring squared and framed openings that repeated themselves and were interrupted only by the bay-windows. The building was still treated as a unitary element covered by a traditional pitched roof. In another of these attempts, the windows changed slightly: they were wider, had abandoned the squared shape and were combined with an alternation of balconies and bay-windows. In none of these two cases, though, do the elements of the modern architectural language succeed in finding a convincing synthesis.

We don't know how many efforts preceded the final result. This implied that all the parts were merged together and subdued to the rules that regulate heights: the module containing the windows repeated itself from the ground to the flat roofs of the two wings. The building was then divided into alternate strips of surface, so that the two wings fitted into each other with the solid areas of one matching the empty areas of the other, as highlighted by the corner solution. The two different tones of the bricks, yellow and red, in accordance with the Danish context, meant to reassert this principle of complementarity. And yet the Vodroffsvej would be welcomed as a scandal and Fisker would be associated to the image of someone like Le Corbusier, even with his glasses, that threatened traditions.

4. From the city to the balcony: Vestersøhus

The block of Vestersøhus¹⁴ is located not far from Vodroffsvej. It was designed and built in two different phases between 1935 and 1939. Its external aspect, if seen from the opposite bank of the lake, looks like a very long 7-storey-tall brick-barrier assaulted by a series of white balconies lined up in several rows, that reflects itself in the water of the lake Sankt Jorgen. Behind this outward plainness and repetitiveness, though, hides an unexpected richness: 242 apartments, 10 boutiques and a 43 rooms hotel with a restaurant in the corner, all contained in a little more than 300 meters. In the central court there are a few services, a squash hall and a parking lot.

¹³ Lisbet Baslev Jørgensen, "Sur les traces d'une architecture authentique", *Archithese*, n.°4 (1985): 22.

¹⁴ Poul Erik Skriver, "Boligbiggeren Kay Fisker", *Architectura*, n.°15 (1993): 64; Thomas Sørensen, "Bauten und Motive". *Archithese*, n.°4 (1985): 33.

The lodgings are definitely of superior quality than standard ones, and were addressed to a wide range of users with different needs, who could want to live in the one-roomed flats on the ground floor as well as in the big apartments on the higher floors, more suitable for larger families. Having to take into account this wide variety of users, the whole planimetric composition typologically derived from a fortunate series of joints organized over a few basic alignments: the main stairs and the service ones have the kitchens on their side, a double set of walls in the center of the lot contains an internal services area and, on the other side, overlooking the lake, there's the balconies' system.

This modular logic, together with the striped composition of the building's surface, makes it easier to create variations to the planimetry, allowing a certain interchangeability between the lodgings that are usually combined in pairs between a stairs area and the other, just like the white keys of a piano: to the one-roomed flats correspond the three rooms apartments with a bedroom and a balcony, to the two-rooms apartments with a living room and a loggia the three-rooms apartment with a bedroom and a loggia, and so on... Only on the last floor, almost all the apartments have at least four rooms and double balconies – a trick that allowed the architects not to include a second set of stairs, as stated in 1929 law.¹⁵

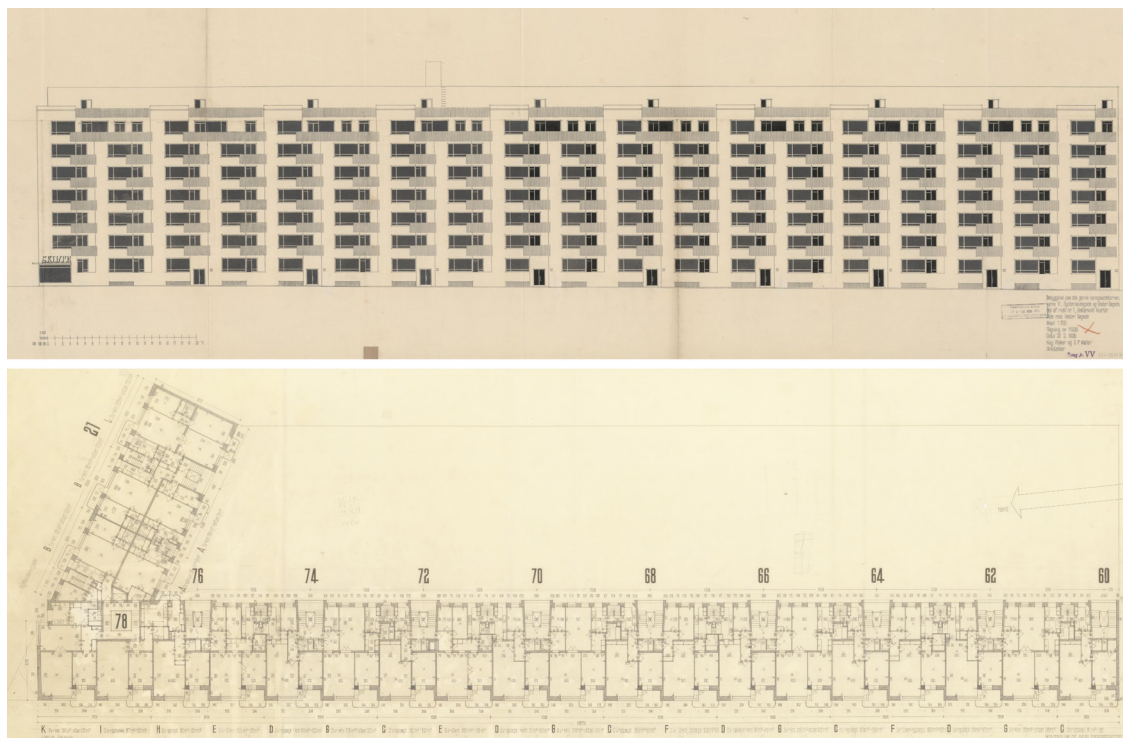


Figure 6: Kay Fisker, Vestersøhus (1935-1937), Copenhagen:
 Figure 6.1: elevation; Figure 6.2: plan type
 Source: Danmarks Kunstbibliothek, Arkitekturtegninger

This kind of flexibility can be found as well internally and, exception made for the servant and a few other main areas, which were divided by wall separators, was resolved with simple wooden partitions that could be removed if necessary. This way, the apartment could adapt itself to the household, growing or decreasing together with the family.

¹⁵ Fisker et al., *Københavnse...*, 36.

With Vestersøhus the image of the block evolved: the block was now part of a solid equilibrium provided to it mainly by the balconies. The façades had to adjust to this simple ornament. The device designed by Fisker and Møller was very sophisticated, everything had to be played on three different levels: the balconies, the bay-windows and the loggias, to which correspond internally the biggest rooms, where the greatest part of the day life takes place. In the living rooms, light was captured by angular windows facing south-west, shifted from the position of the balconies. This way nothing could interfere with their independence, while the loggias moved back as much as the balconies jugged out not to damage the room lying behind it, which could be either a dining room, a bedroom or a study. The dimensions of the balconies changed only when getting close to the roof, where they became an external volume alternate to the living rooms and the stairs, that assaulted the building as if being a sort of embattled volumetric crown.¹⁶

Have the original premises then been betrayed?



Figura 7: Kay Fisker, Vestersøhus (1935-1937), Copenhagen
Source: Rasmussen, *Nordische Baukunst...*

From the point of view of the materials and of the viewers' perception, the balcony is opposed to the *Klump*: the first is figure and it's white, while the brick surface constitutes its ground. The architect's choice of materials reflected this dualism, introducing a new element in the façade that showed off all its material lightness – with its concrete slab and its metal curved parapet – as a repeated delicate shell that contributed to the powerful and almost muscular image of the front. From the city to the balcony, everything was resolved in architectural terms. Even if Vestersøhus closed the series of the most significant experiences of the prewar phase, it

¹⁶Rasmussen, *Nordische...*, 81-82.

would be wrong to consider these three experiences as single episodes. There is a continuity in Fisker's blocks that resides in what Martin Steinmann identified as his intellectual freedom:¹⁷ that means being able to accept what modernity had to offer, but also to refuse it, following a realistic attitude towards design-related issues and in no case showing a nostalgic approach towards any construction tradition.

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¹⁷ Martin Steinmann, "Die Tradition der Sachlichkeit und die Sachlichkeit des Traditionalismus", *Archithese*, n.°4 (1985): 2.