



A History of the Buildings of the Namibia Scientific Society

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Abstract

Of the many remaining civil servants' houses built in Windhoek during the German Colonial Period, houses h and m remain in an excellent state of preservation due to the care given to them by the Namibia Scientific Society, which has been their custodian since the mid-1980s. Little is known about the history of the two houses or their innate technical, aesthetic, and spatial values, which determine their historical significance. This paper addresses this gap while evaluating previous restoration and re-use approaches against the preservation of these values.

Introduction

The need for housing their state employees has always been a concern for the state in Namibia. This is just as true of the German colonial period as it is in Independent Namibia. The end of the Namibian War of Resistance in 1908 led to a rapid expansion of the German colonial administrative apparatus and a correlative growth in the population of civil servants needing suitable accommodation in the capital city of Windhoek.¹ This prompted the German administration to undertake a house building programme for civil servants under which many of the historic houses still standing along Robert Mugabe Avenue were built. Between 1898 and 1914 an estimated 50 houses were erected, each designated with a letter of the alphabet in two sequences, first A–Z (1898–1908), and after 1908 a–z.² The two adjoining houses, m and h, are located at the northern end of the state housing sequence along Robert Mugabe Avenue and the corner of Sinclair Street (Fig. 1). Construction of the houses commenced in 1908 and 1910 by private contractors after plans

prepared by *Regierungsbaumeister* (State Architect) Gottlieb Redecker.³

They have served as the headquarters of the Namibia Scientific Society since the 1980s. While many representative buildings constructed during the German Colonial Period, including those designed by Redecker, have been placed under heritage protection, houses m and h remain unlisted as official Namibian heritage sites despite their relatively high grading as Class B in a heritage inventory.⁴

The aims of this article are twofold. On one hand, the building history of the two houses is developed through the examination of historical plans and archival documents to understand various changes to the built fabric over time. On the other hand, the historical values of the two houses are examined from three perspectives. Insights into the construction materials used to build the houses provide evidence of the development of building technology in Namibia and the correlative stylistic development in Namibian Architecture. The two buildings are then contextualized within the oeuvre of Gottlieb Redecker's residential works in Windhoek to identify similarities and particularities of the two

¹ Peters (1981) *Baukunst*, pp. 167.

² NAN: PWD 5/1 & 5/2 is an incomplete asset register of state housing prepared after the end of German control in 1914.

³ Gottlieb Redecker (*1871 in Otjimbingue, †1945 in Gütersloh) was Namibia's first academically trained architect. Between 1901 and 1914 he was State Architect in German South-west Africa and planned many buildings for the colonial government. See Mossolow (1978) 'Two architects', pp. 33–34, & Mossolow (1978) 'Architekt', p. 24.

⁴ See Schoedder (1981) 'Inventory', KWI 5-1 & KWI 5-2 for the historical building inventory, and Vogt (2004) *National*, pp. 221–228 for the catalogue of Namibia's National Monuments.





Figure 1: House m and h seen from the corner of Sinclair Str. & Robert Mugabe Avenue ca. 1911. DKG Archiv, Frankfurt. No.: PKA/A3/15.

buildings. Finally, the previous renovation and adaptive re-use approaches are investigated to evaluate how the historical values have been maintained or debased.

Materials and Methods

The primary sources used in this study are archival planning documents held in the Ministry of Works and Transport archives, as well as those held in the National Archives of Namibia, to establish the form, materiality and extent of the original houses as well as the changes and alterations they underwent over the years up to the present day. Supplementary information relating to the dates of construction and the various actors involved is sourced from the archival documents of the German Colonial *Baupolizei* (Building approval authority). Secondary sources relating to the architect's biography and the architectural context of the time is sourced from Prof. Walter Peters' groundbreaking study of German colonial architecture in Namibia.

Both Objects of study, houses h and m, are mapped through historic plans and all alterations to their fabric plotted to show how the buildings have changed to date. The original plans are further compared to other contemporaneous civil servants' housing schemes prepared by Redecker to establish similarities in approach and form the basis for a discussion about the architect's working method, and to show how these houses fit into the development of civil servants' housing, leading up to the beginning of WW1.

Results

House h

House h on Robert Mugabe Avenue (previously called Berg Street) was the first to be planned, with the initial drawings ready for tendering in May 1908. The building was to be positioned 6m from the adjoining Robert Mugabe Avenue, and in line with the house on the opposite side of the street. (Fig. 2)

The first plans show a semi-detached house with two spacious apartments for two married civil servants (Fig. 3). The apartments have a mirrored plan arranged around a split front porch allowing main access, and a back veranda that acts as an open passage to the living room, bedroom, kitchen, and pantry. Interestingly, the bathrooms, entered from the bedrooms, initially faced the entrance verandas and were each ventilated through a bullseye window (Fig. 4). The apartments are set upon a plinth of dressed stone that mediates the strongly sloping site down to the adjoining road. This plinth is ascended by a double staircase leading to two entrance verandas. The façade is kept simple, both projecting living room volumes are accentuated with bracketed gable ends, the main roof is built as a jerkin-head roof with a third centrally placed gable end over the projecting bedrooms at the back of the house (Fig. 5). Gables are ornamented with timber-panelled vents near the apex and gable brackets. Only the back façade gable is ornamented with a filial. Windows are standardised into three types: large vertical windows facing east and west to the main spaces, smaller



Figure 2: House h Site Plan. NAN: BAU 36/B /38.

vertical openings to the pantry, and the round bullseye windows to the bathroom. Two horizontal roof ventilators are built into each gable on the north, west, and south facades. The veranda is built as a timber-framed structure, continuing the main roof. Veranda supports consist of timber posts, beams, and ornamental knee-braces. A small outbuilding was also provided. This comprised two rectangular 'Washküchen' (sculleries) set adjacent to each other with smaller ablution facilities on either side. The outbuilding was positioned along the house's central axis, along the back of the yard.

Construction commenced after tenders had been assessed, for which E.M de Mann was given the contract for masonry, Otto Krägenow for the joinery, and a Mr Rudolph for painting and finishing.⁵ The plinth

⁵ NAN: BAU 36/B /38.

⁶ Ibid.

was constructed of rough sandstone blocks, presumably from the nearby quarry at the bottom of what is now Schanzen Street. These stone blocks were joined with lime mortar and supported a brickwork superstructure of unfired clay bricks set in clay mortar. Only the first three masonry courses were built of stronger fired brickwork to prevent rising damp. Internal spaces were plastered with a clay and external surfaces with a lime plaster, following the contemporary construction methods of the time. Only the bedroom and living rooms received timber floors; the rest were constructed of concrete. Completion was achieved on 11 March 1909 at a final cost of 26 445 German Marks.⁶

House m

Compared to its neighbour, house m was more ornamented while simultaneously being simpler to provide three smaller apartments for three married officials. First plans were prepared by Redecker on 6 July 1909 with two design variations.⁷ In one, the north-facing veranda is projected beyond the building by 1.5m, allowing the staircase to run towards the west and turn to face the adjoining Schanzen Street (today Sinclair Street) on the site boundary, producing an arguably better-defined entry to the second apartment (Fig. 6). This plan did not materialise, and Redecker prepared a second design where the northern staircase descended parallel to the northern facade to prevent encroachments on the building setback line (Fig. 7). It may also be that this would have been a requirement from town officials to allow ample space for the widening of Schanzen Street to a double-laned avenue leading down to the square along Kaiser Wilhelm Street (today Independence Avenue) (Fig. 8).

The final plans show two apartments arranged in an L-shaped plan on the upper ground floor and one apartment on the lower ground floor, aligning with the steeply falling topography. On the upper floor the apartments are accessed via two staircases leading

respectively from Schanzen and Berg Streets to two open hall spaces (named *Vorplatz* in the plans). The spatial arrangement of both apartments is similar in that most spaces are arranged and accessed off the *Vorplatz*. In the northern apartment the bedroom is entered enfilade through the living space. A similar situation is found in the third apartment on the lower ground floor. Here, both bedrooms and the kitchen are entered via the living room in a rather awkward arrangement produced by the upper floor layout and the desire to avoid expensive excavations and basement structures. Each kitchen is provided with its pantry; however, without the commonly implemented back door to the back yard, which was only added through alterations in later years.

As with house h the building plinth is constructed of sandstone blocks set in lime mortar, but the superstructure differs in both material and expression. All walls are built of concrete brickwork expressed externally as face brickwork; the bricks were presumably manufactured on the construction site, as a contemporary photo indicates (Fig. 9).

The street-facing facades are characterised by large segmental arches spanning the recessed hall spaces to each apartment, the typical semi-segmented vertical windows also found in house h, and a striking pattern

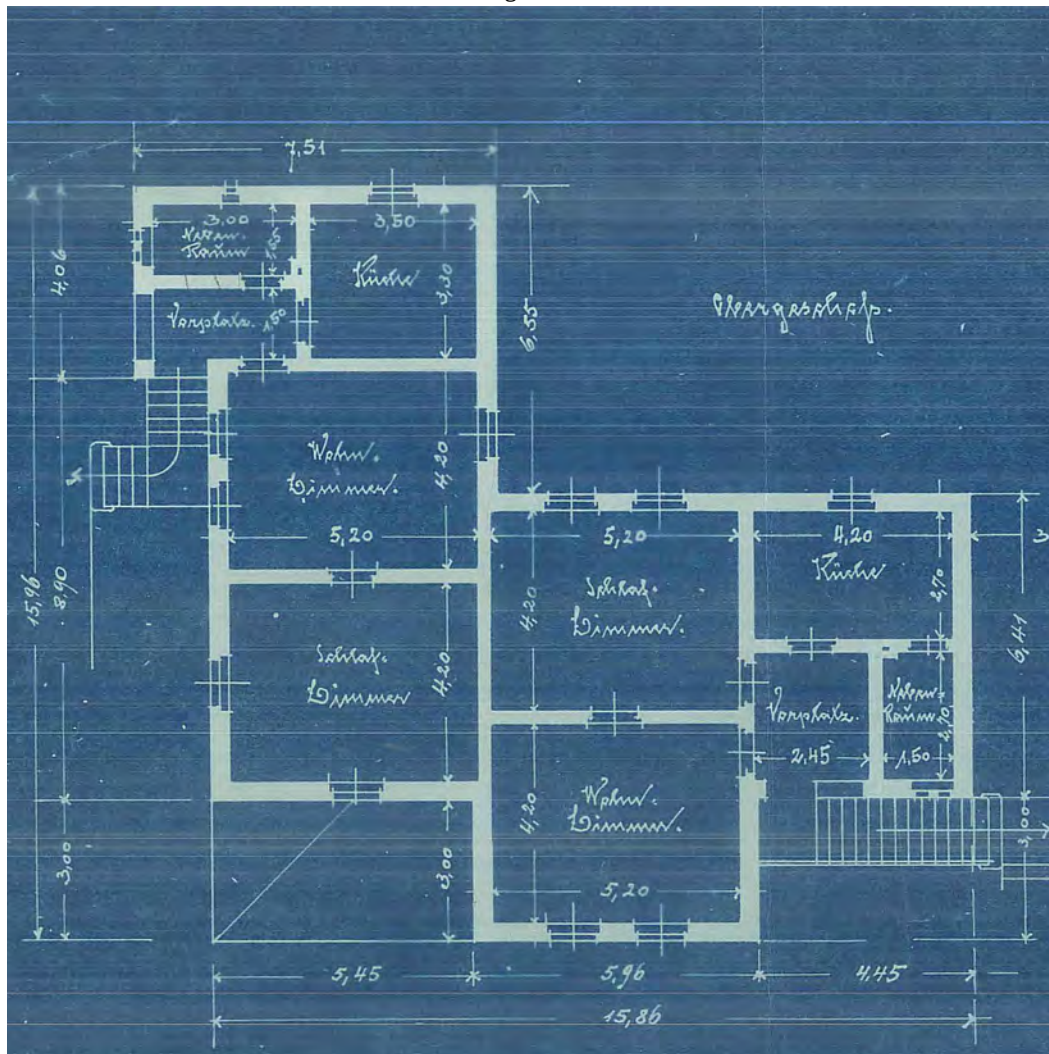


Figure 6: House m Floor Plan Option A, July 1909. NAN: Plan No. 4850.

⁷ Plans.

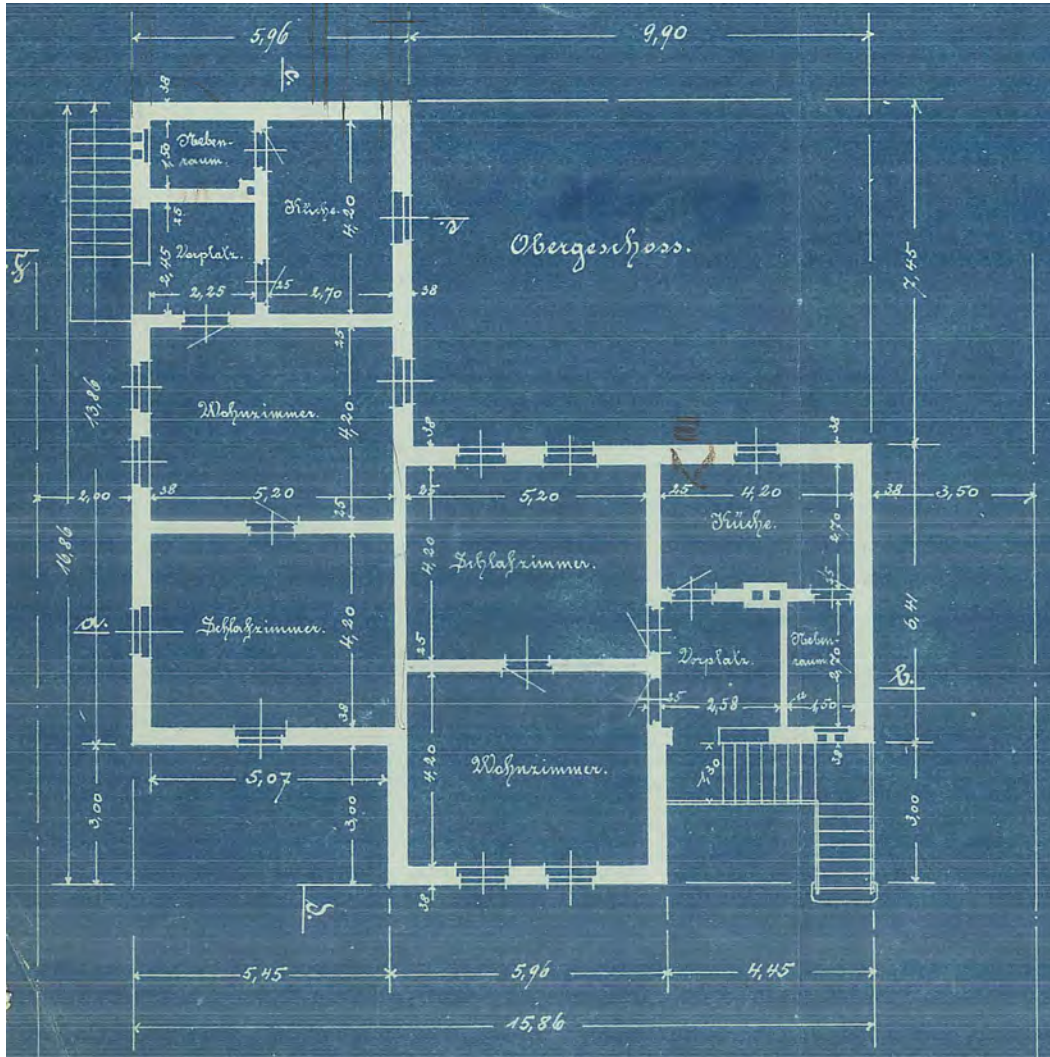


Figure 7: House m Floor Plan Option B, July 1909. NAN: Plan No. 1700.

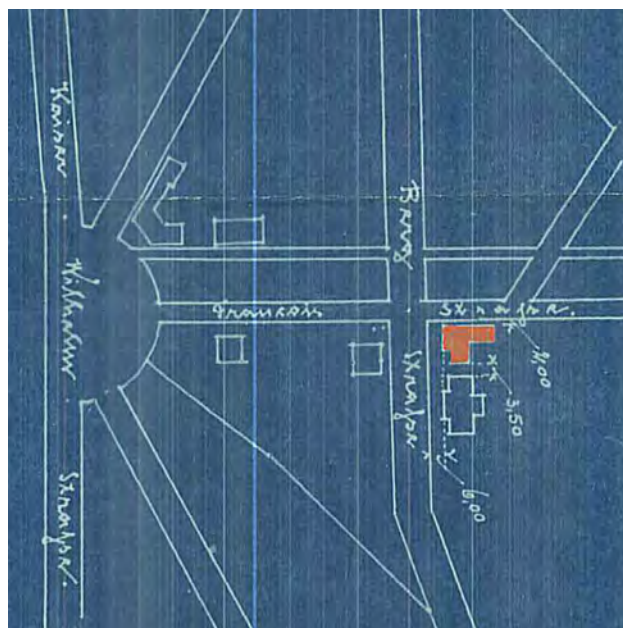


Figure 8: House m Site Plan, July 1909. BAU 37/B/43: Haus M.

of recessed plastered panels interspersed with brick-work piers that incorporate the positioning of facade openings into an overall composition (Figs. 10 & 11). Smaller windows to the pantries on the upper ground and the kitchen on the lower ground floors are expressed as two small, slender openings joined under an oversized straight lintel. Ground-floor windows to the living and bedrooms are expressed as a tripartite cluster of narrow windows covered by a deep lintel topped by a plastered eyebrow pediment. Especially impressive is the decorative front gable end expressed as a pediment and decorated with outward curving painted bands. The gable roof overhangs are supported by gable brackets, the fascia is articulated with a gently curving teardrop shape, and the entire structure is topped with a decorative filial. The less visible east and south-facing facades are treated more simply and without any further decoration. The roof is a mix of full gable, jerkin head, and Dutch gables along the principal Berg street facade, and a simple hipped roof set at a lower height along the secondary north facade. A cluster of three adjoining ablution facilities was added as an outbuilding in the back yard.

Construction of the house was undertaken by a team of builders. Hermann Ahrens built the masonry, H. Berensheim did the carpentry, and P. Hoch painted. It was completed by 10 March 1910 at a cost of 34 781 German Marks.⁸

Changes and Alterations since 1910

The inevitable drive for alterations to the houses had already begun in 1913. House m was expanded to the east to provide an additional children's room accessed from the now elongated veranda, and a new long pantry entered from the kitchen. The south-facing window to the living room was blanked off to prevent a line

of sight to a new kitchen door built into the back wall of the neighbouring apartment. The only changes to house h during its early existence were the demolition of the party wall between the two apartments, creating a larger shared veranda space.

A new road construction project along the old Berg Street meant that the road would be significantly lowered from its previous height. To prevent the foundations of the two houses from being undermined by the new road cutting, a solid retaining wall of up to 2.5m height had been built as a boundary wall along Berg Street, some time after 1913.

The 1920s brought with them a new administration under the League of Nations Mandate and new spatial demands. House m was especially affected by the round of alterations. Both apartments were consolidated into one larger house (Fig. 12). This necessitated a new entrance, for which both old bathrooms were joined to form an entrance hall. The two old entryways were simply bricked up. Many rooms were repurposed: the old kitchen of one apartment changed to a bedroom, a pantry to a bathroom, and the differentiation between a sitting and dining room was probably befitting the status of the new occupant. House h was merely given a new back door to the kitchen in its eastern apartment.

In 1934, the houses were finally connected to the municipal sewerage system and provided with running water, as a certificate from the Municipal Sewerage Engineers attests. Along with that, the first indoor toilets were installed, while the old privies in the backyard were upgraded to flushing water closets.

Besides the construction of a group of three servants' quarters against the outside ablutions of house h in 1954, no apparent changes seem to have been made to the buildings up to the late 1980s, when the Namibia Scientific Society purchased the houses from the Government.

This time, both houses would undergo a more radical transformation to turn the old residential spaces

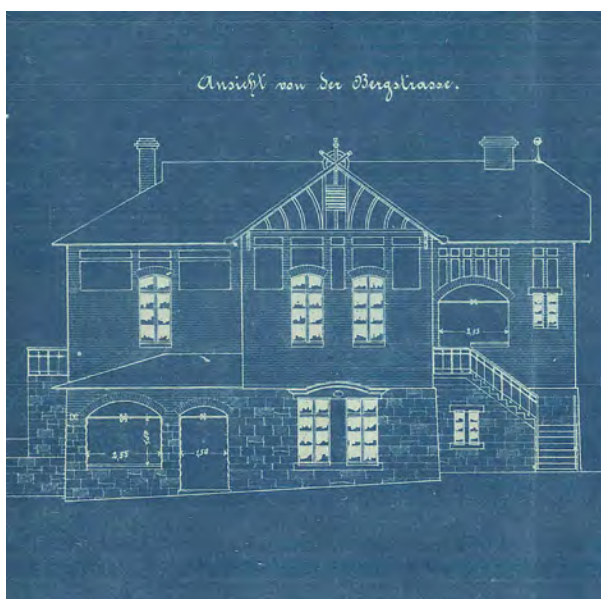


Figure 9: House m West Elevation, July 1909. NAN: Plan No. 1700.



Figure 10: House m North Elevation, July 1909. NAN: Plan No. 1700.

⁸ NAN: BAU 37/B /343.



Figure 11: House m during construction in late 1909. DKG Archiv, Frankfurt. No.: PKA/A4/84.

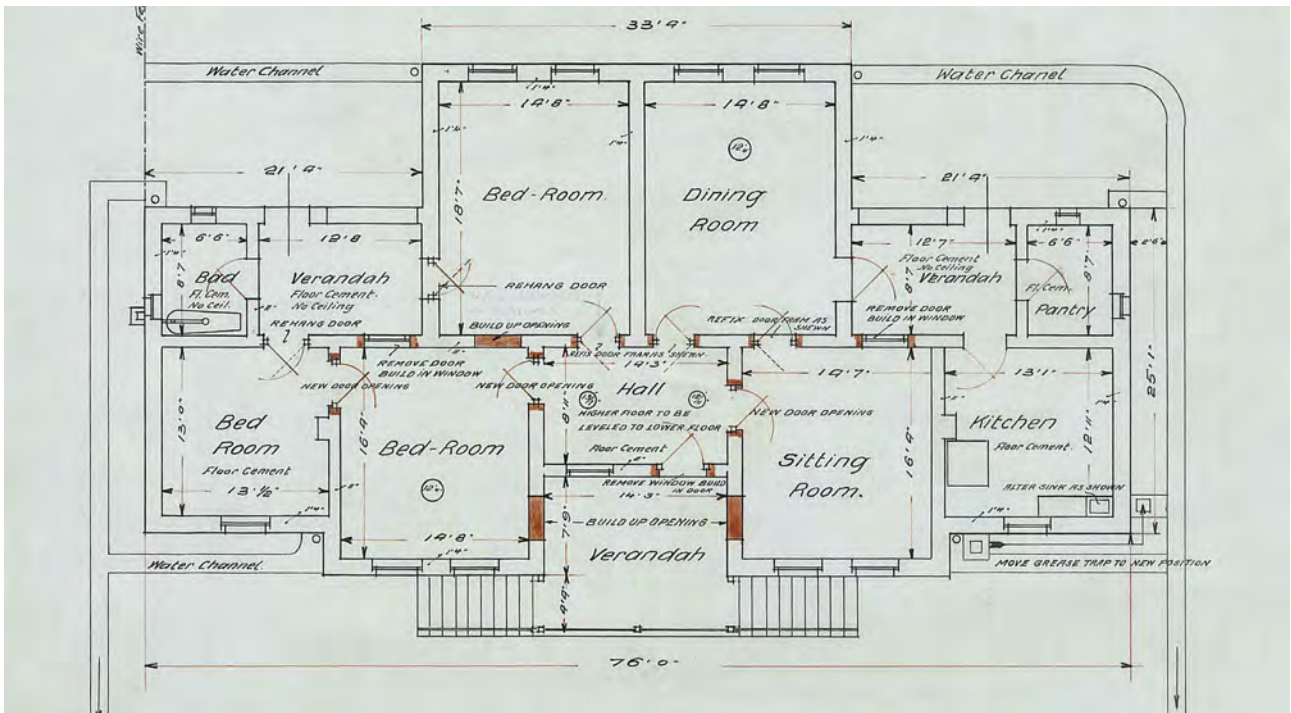


Figure 12: Alterations to House h. 1924. MWT Drawing Archive: PWD 23/6b

into offices, libraries, and seminar spaces needed by the NSS for their activities. These alterations took place under the planning of architect Peter Strack. House m was linked to house h with a recessed covered bridge to consolidate both buildings into one complex. The function of the verandas as primary circulation spaces, as originally conceived by Redecker, was abandoned in favour of a linear spatial sequence connecting both houses. This necessitated splitting the front portion of house m into two sections: a front portion consisting of reception, office, and entrance hall leading to a back

portion consisting of a new hall, passages leading to a storage room, and two offices. To fit the large hall into what were originally small cellular rooms, the two east-facing rooms were combined, and the volume was extended by a new addition in front of the old south veranda and pantry, thus flattening out the east-facing gable end. The northern veranda, previously enclosed, now functioned as the passage to house h and a new back entrance to the parking lot behind the two houses. Strack emphasised this new back entrance with an attached gateway comprising two freestanding piers

covered with a flat concrete roof, carefully distinguishing the old from the new.

Linking the two buildings also meant that some changes were required at house h, specifically managing the numerous entrances. The entrance hall to the old apartment on the north facade was bricked up and the staircase demolished, the hall to the second apartment on the west side was enclosed with a door and window, and only the lower ground floor apartment retained its separate access. Internally, new openings were created to link the separate apartments, and an internal wall was demolished to make space for a library. The out-buildings in the back yard were torn down, except for the old servants' quarters, which were extended by one room and connected internally through new doorways.

The last discernible change made to the NSS building was the addition of a bookshop to the south side of house m. Here, a new volume covered by a segmental arched roof was connected to the building's south side. The junction between the buildings had been clearly expressed through a front and back recess connected by a flat concrete roof. Facing the back of the property, a new entrance to the bookshop and ablutions were provided.

Discussion

Materiality and architectural expression

As both houses are similar, but built of very different materials that ultimately define their aesthetic expression, one can point towards a rapid change in the use of construction materials used for building in early 20th-century Namibia. While house m was primarily built of locally sourced fired and unfired clay brickwork, its neighbour is built of cement bricks using imported cement, which has subsequently become a ubiquitous building material in Namibia. This change is also expressed in the aesthetic expression of each building. House h is kept simple with little decorative ornamentation arising from the poor quality of sun-dried brickwork that cannot be exposed to the elements for fear of disintegration. The building is thus kept simple with decoration reserved for the timber fretwork around the veranda and roof. Simple plaster detailing is used around the windows to emphasise the façade's flatness. House m, however, allows for an altogether different architectural expression, owing on one hand to the building's prominent corner location, and on the other, to the choice of cement brickwork interspersed with smooth plastered panels. This is only possible due to the particular qualities of cement face brickwork that stands up well to the harsh Namibian climate.⁹ Placed next to each other as the buildings stand today, one can observe a historic transformation of materiality from locally produced to globally imported at the beginning

of the 20th century, a development that would alter how Namibians build in the decades to come.¹⁰

A – The position of the buildings within Gottlieb Redecker's residential oeuvre

House h is by no means special, as it continues the well-received double house theme already established by Redecker at the turn of the century. Simply put, one house plan is designed and then mirrored to form the other half of the house in what one would today call a semi-detached housing typology. Similarities to other of Redecker's houses are abundant. Houses E, F, G, S, L, O, e, h, o & p are all executed as double houses.¹¹

In contrast to the well-established double house motif of house h, house m is truly unique. Nowhere else did Redecker attempt to produce a corner house, one that aims to negotiate a corner condition with two representative street frontages. In terms of the design method used, the skill of Redecker as an architect becomes apparent. Where a double house, as mentioned before, is designed by simply mirroring a plan, in the corner house, Redecker mirrors the plan about a 45-degree angle to produce two frontages organized around the circulation veranda. Minor variation to the two apartments allows for further interest through the creation of a representative gable end formed by pulling the living room of the west-facing apartment forward. From the point of view of construction method and ornamental detail, house m can be placed in the same stylistic category as the two double houses o and p, both built in 1910/11.¹² All three are built of cement face-brick and feature the characteristic elements of the *Putzarchitektur* already developed by Redecker in 1905 at house S.¹³

B – Notes on the design method of Gottlieb Redecker

At this stage, one must mention further similarities in the floor plans of both houses. Where house m establishes the planning scheme of a veranda as the principal circulation system to all primary spaces, albeit from the back, house h takes up this scheme but inverts it so the veranda also acts as the entrance from the front elevation to the residential units on the upper floor. This optimisation of work processes, achieved by inducing slight variations to one planning scheme in order to achieve a great variety of floor plan layouts, is a typical design method used by Redecker and the architects of the *Bauverwaltung* (Works Department) to reduce time spent on designing unique solutions to each problem. Universal solutions are sought that act as mnemonic planning devices. These are then adapted and iteratively altered to the contingent aspects of varying situations, resulting in specific solutions, while allowing more time to be given to the task of planning buildings

⁹ This would also have been possible with fired brickwork, e.g. house S in Peters (1981) *Baukunst* p. 161, & Schoedder (1981) 'Inventory', KWI 1-6. However, firewood was a scarce commodity in Namibia and was often reserved for cooking and heating, rather than for use as a building material. See Peters (1981) *Baukunst*, p. 99.

¹⁰ Komeda (2020) *Kontaktarchitektur*, pp. 203–211.

¹¹ Schoedder (1981) 'Inventory', KWI 5-14, KWI 5-5, KWI 7-8, KWI 1-6, KWI 17-7; for the double house motif, Peters (1981) *Baukunst*, p. 161.

¹² Ibid. pp. 195–196.

¹³ Ibid. pp. 160–161. The term *Putzarchitektur* refers to a stylistic device to bring plasticity to a façade by rhythmically regulating large surfaces with exposed face-brick piers alternating with smooth plastered panels.

for a whole territory. Certainly, as one of the few academically trained architects in the German colony of South West Africa, Redecker would not have had much time to spend on crafting individual solutions for each building.

Further evidence of this approach can be seen in Redecker's other civil servants' houses in Windhoek. Houses x, Q, W, and R, for example, share the same planning scheme centred around a partial wrap-around veranda shielding the living and bedrooms, which are connected internally by a passage terminating in a back service veranda. In all four houses the living room projects out toward the front of the house with a representative gable end. Minor variations to the spaces and spatial sequences of all four houses allow specific site conditions to be responded to while maintaining an economy of design labour.

C – Preservation of historical values and the future of Houses h and m

The alterations to house m in 1924 drastically altered the internal spatial sequence of the house to adapt two apartments into a single dwelling. The function of the veranda as primary circulation space was thus obscured in favour of an entry hall (built in the position of the old bathrooms) and a secondary back circulation path linking kitchen, pantry, and dining room, corresponding to new social norms of privacy and the ubiquitous use of servants in the early mandate period. The architecture adapts to new forms of living, itself an important historical development.

While the purchase of houses h and m by the Namibia Scientific Society undoubtedly contributed to the preservation of the houses up to the current era, alterations undertaken in the 1980s further eroded the significance of Redecker's initial planning ideas embodied in the spatial organisation. It can certainly be argued that the new functions of a scientific society, with its needs for large assembly spaces, offices, and a library, are incongruent with the layout of residential spaces, which would require radical alterations to meet the new spatial requirements. However, in introducing a new linear spatial sequence linking the two houses, the architect removed the last vestiges of Redecker's original planning ideas. This is especially apparent on the north façade of house m, which loses its representative function by having the entry veranda bricked up. The west-facing veranda of the same house loses all function, as do the entrance stairs leading up to it, both becoming obsolete. Not all of Strack's interventions are to be critically evaluated. Indeed, the architect's approach of carefully differentiating the old fabric from new interventions is successful. The new additions and remodelling of the south-eastern portion are done by slightly recessing the new walls from the eastern gable end, signifying a difference in constructive horizons. The careful addition of the new back entry portico barely touches the existing building, and the new bridge linking houses m and h is tastefully done with modern materials while respectfully maintaining the massing of both buildings as seen from the dominant western façade. Little can be disparaged about the additions of 2004. The new bookshop sets itself apart from the historical buildings in both plan and elevation. A

new formal language is developed through the use of a flat slab mediating the old and the new, and the light curvature of the new roof introduces a discernible difference to the visual ensemble, clearly showing that it is a product of its time.

To conclude, architectural approaches to the re-use of historical buildings have immensely developed in scope over the last decades, together with the development of value-based evaluation methods. One cannot simply maintain the aesthetic qualities of a building without considering the technical, material, or spatial values embodied in historical buildings that give evidence of the ways of building and living of the past. To do so is to devalue the myriad historical legacies from which we can and must draw today in order to gain valuable insights into the architectures of the past and the knowledge these buildings embody. It is hoped that, despite the loss of some historical significance through the alterations of the past, the buildings will be carefully extended in the future to exalt and not depreciate the innate values of two scarce examples of Gottlieb Redecker's residential architecture that are preserved for us today.

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Namibian National Archives

Archival Files

- BAU 36/B /38: Haus h.
BAU 37/B/43: Haus m.

Plans

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Ministry of Works and Transport Drawing Archives:

PWD 23/5: Municipal Area Windhoek, Buildings No. 23,24. No Date. Drawn: H. Sch. Site Plan.

PWD 23/6: Windhoek Building No. 23. Director of Works Office, Windhoek. October 1924. Floor Plan & Site Plan.

PWD 23/6b: Proposed Alteration to Dwelling House Windhoek, Building No. 23. Director of Works, Windhoek. May 1924. Floor Plan.

PWD 24/6: Zeichnung zum Beamtenwohnhaus 'm' in Windhuk. Für drei verheiratete Unterbeamte, Windhoek. Februar 1910, Gottlieb Redecker. Roof and Floors Construction Plans, Elevation, Section.

PWD 24/8: Zeichnung zum Beamtenwohnhaus 'm' in Windhuk. Für drei verheiratete Unterbeamte, Windhoek. Februar 1910, Gottlieb Redecker. Foundation and Floor Plans, Elevations, Sections.

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Windhoek Municipality

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