

PRAXIS OF URBAN
MORFOLOGY



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EDITORS:

Vladan Djokić
Aleksandra Djordjević
Mladen Pešić
Milica Milojević
Aleksandra Milovanović

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INTRO

ISUF2023 PRAXIS OF URBAN MORPHOLOGY

Coming from 20 architects, geographers, planners and historians, to more than 600 individual and institutional members across the globe, ISUF presents the important international organization of urban form both for researchers and practitioners. Due to its orientation to both of these fields, ISUF 2023 presents a great opportunity to rethink the praxis, perceived as process by which theory/idea is enacted, embodied and realized.

The theme for ISUF 2023 is drawn from the previous experience and ideas, directed toward systematization and synthesis of intellectual knowledge.

Following this line of reasoning, the Conference tracks are envisioned to confront the topics that are represented as being opposed in order to open up a debate how to transfer ideas to operational knowledge.

A. Good in Planning, Landscapes and Townscapes

A1. Urban planning vs. Urban design

A2. *Fringe growth vs. Urban belt*

A3. Prescription vs. Description

B. Culture Space, Common Space and Personalities

B.1. East vs. West

B.2. South vs. North

B.3. Networks vs. Individuals

C. History of Ideas and Challenges

C.1. History vs. Future

C.2. Preservation vs. Transformation

C.3. Pre vs. Post

D. Programming and Rethinking Concepts

D.1. Strategies vs. Measures

D.2. Education vs. Practice

D.3. Quantitative vs. Qualitative research

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bereczki.zoltan@eng.unideb.hu

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Developing the narrative: Urban renewal based on morphological research of the urban form

Martin Ebert¹

¹Assoc. Prof., NMBU Ås, Norway, martin.ebert@nmbu.no

ABSTRACT

The small towns of North-Eastern Germany suffered great losses in historic buildings and economic dynamics during WWII and the following decades of communist rule. Since 1990, these communities have suffered a major decrease in the number of inhabitants, resulting in a large number of buildings being empty. To adjust the urban structure to 21st century standards and regain economic dynamic, the local government is supporting urban renewal projects. Sites inside medieval town centers are under pressure to amalgamate and be recreated as large-scale developer architecture or to fall into ultimate decay.

As part of the RUHMM-study on the urban morphology of medieval urban structures, a study of the Holy Spirit Hospice (Heiligengeist-Quarter) of Woldegk is conducted. The research showed how contextualisation and a re-definition of the site based on historic narratives inspired authorities and stakeholders to initiate a narrative-based development of the site.

Urban renewal based on historic narratives creates wider public support for contemporary redevelopment in small urban communities. Concepts based on small-scale architecture and functional continuity have shown good results in the chosen case.

INTRODUCTION

A large number of small urban communities all over Europe suffer from dwindling residency, stagnating economics, accompanied by the decay of buildings and urban structures. Especially small urban areas outside the metropolitan fringe-zone are experiencing major structural changes, such as an aging demographic and a loss of total population. This article focuses on the small urban communities in Mecklenburg, a mainly rural area in northern Germany. Here, the population in small urban areas has declined by 14 to 21% since 1990, while the population in central and metropolitan areas has grown by 15 to 19% (European Committee of the Regions, 2022).

The decline of these communities started already 80 years ago, at the end of WWII. Since 1945, the medieval structure of their urban centers has been undergoing a 3-phase cycle of deterioration, making their medieval descent almost unrecognisable.

In phase 1, the buildings and structures underwent large-scale *physical destruction* by acts of war. Soviet troops entered a great number of towns and laid arsenals, incinerating the wooden structures house by house (Prenzlau, Woldegk, Neu Brandenburg, Demmin, Malchin, Anklam). After the war, the

rural areas of eastern Mecklenburg were hit especially hard. Stettin as the regional center was cut off from its western hinterland by the redrawn borders between Germany and Poland, leaving the small urban communities isolated and depending on small manufacturing and agriculture. In this period small towns were rebuilt using industrial construction methods, neglecting existing plot-, block-, building-, and street-geometry.



Figure 1. Tribsees: building status in 2021. Illustration by the author based on Städtebaulicher

In phase 2, after Germany's reunification in 1990, the towns went through a phase of *structural abandonment*. Small industry and craft declined further and the employment in agriculture was radically reduced due to introduction of modern technologies. In 2001, 622.000 people lived in communities smaller than 3000 inhabitants, representing 35.3% of the overall population. That number was reduced to 496.000 in 2021, representing 29.6% of the overall population in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Statistisches Amt MV, 2022). In addition to population being older and declining in number, many small communities zoned large areas outside the historic town centers for new suburban housing. Therefore, the historic town centers went into an even faster process of abandonment and disrepair. An analysis of the small town of Tribsees by NMBU in 2023 shows that 45% of the 279 plots inside the medieval town limits were abandoned, whereas 24% of buildings were ruined and removed for reasons of public safety since 1992, 5% are still in ruins, and 15% of the buildings are currently uninhabited (Figure 1).

The third and last phase is currently underway, causing the *morphological eradication* of the historic structure of these towns. Since the financial crisis of 2008, authorities have introduced government programs to upgrade the communal infrastructure, clear abandoned sites, and lend economic support to new businesses and developers. The strategy of many local authorities is to acquire abandoned sites, merge them into larger plots, and sell them to investors. This strategy had some success during the property boom in the 2010s, but has led in many cases to large-scale building

complexes such as the «Hanse Quartier» in Rostock or malls such as the «Marien Carree» in Neu Brandenburg (Figure 2).

This article focuses on the small town of Woldegk, planted in the second half of the 13th century by the Margraves of Brandenburg. The town shows typical features, such as the rectangular street grid, and a rectangular marked with the perished town hall in free position. Woldegk has a residency of 4200 (2021).



Figure 2. The Marien Carree in Neu Brandenburg replaced a 7th floor concrete-building stretched over 7 plots. The Baroque buildings at the site perished in the fire of 1945. Photo by the author.

Faced with population decline and aging, the town of Woldegk has initiated a transformation of its medieval town center since the 1990s. With the help of project mediator BIG BAU, a transformation of the urban center is underway to re-establish Woldegk as an attractive and sustainable town in the area. As a part of the urban transformation two large-scale buildings from the 1970s were removed in the northern part of Woldegk at the site of the perished Holy Spirit Hospice. The transformation process of this site is the subject of this contribution.

METHOD

Woldegk is part of a sample of about 40 towns planted during the «Ostkolonisation» of the 13th century in today's Mecklenburg. Based on an initiative to coordinate all research efforts towards these small urban communities, the RUHMM project was created in 2021, standing for Research on the Urban Heritage of Medieval Mecklenburg. The goal of this effort is to make the research efforts of historians, archaeologists, and urban morphologists visible to each other and establish a public outreach program to promote knowledge about the urban heritage of these towns to the public. By doing so, the project can provide narratives to relate the urban development of the area to its medieval history, helping to regain identity and historic continuity and breaking the cycle of a deteriorating historic town into a generic structure.

The effort in Woldegk has been a pathfinder in this effort. In search of local narratives, an initial reconnaissance trip was undertaken in the autumn of 2020 to gather visual impressions of the site and map a number of known historical sources to define the status quo. The results were published in Norwegian in a series edited at NMBU (Ebert, 2021).

In spring 2021, the town of Woldegk removed one of the two large-scale buildings from the site of the former Holy Spirit Hospice inside the historic town walls. In the fall of 2021, a group of students from NMBU facilitated a student project with the goal of searching for new ideas for the planning of the site. This project defined the paradigm of *narrative-based urban development* as a key to the sustainable repair of the urban fabric. The results were published at NMBU in 2022 (Ebert, 2022a).

After an initial design study in summer 2019, the town of Woldegk invited architects to an open and international design competition in late 2021. The announcement of the competition was directed at the urban transformation effort on the site without taking into account the historical dimension of building on the former site of the town's Holy Spirit Hospice and its chapel. The winners of the competition were announced in spring 2022. The town of Woldegk is currently developing the site based on the winning proposal by Neue Heimat AS (Norway) and Milatz-Schmidt Architekten (Germany).

The effort of the RUHMM project in Woldegk is two-fold. Besides opening the door for interdisciplinary research and the scientific publication of its results, a main focus is to make historical and cultural knowledge available to the general public. The publication of a scientific town atlas for Woldegk is in preparation. Other publications aimed at the general public and local stakeholders are in the planning stages. As a first step towards public outreach by presenting historical narratives, the status of knowledge was presented in a public lecture in May 2023.

In autumn 2023, the project will commence the mapping of archaeological excavations, displaying them in a GIS-based matrix. The latest knowledge, such as the upcoming excavations on the Holy Spirit site, will be added to the models. The results of this mapping will be published as part of the planned town atlas no later than 2025.

The RUHMM project is aiming its efforts at local stakeholders, searching to realize narrative-based projects in cooperation with the town of Woldegk. An ongoing study is analysing, in what way the contextualisation of morphological analysis and narrative development will change the course of urban development in Woldegk and other towns in Mecklenburg.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The town of Woldegk was planted by the Margraves of Brandenburg between 1236 and 1250. No documents relating to the first decades of the town have survived. Dendrochronological evidence of corduroy roads under the present streets supports the suspected planting of the town in the middle

of the 13th century (Torsten, 2002). The earliest document directly involving Woldegk dates to June 12th, 1298, when Albrecht, Margrave of Brandenburg, donated the village of Nyendorp to be included in the town (MUB 2509). Following this donation, the urban footprint of Woldegk is extended by 18 plots with 40 housesteads (MUB 7249). This extension is still clearly recognisable in the urban plan of Woldegk today (Figure 3). A metrological analysis (Slater, 1990) shows that the plots in the 1298 extension were most probably measured to be 32–33 meters wide and later subdivided into 2 or 3 plots (Figure 4).

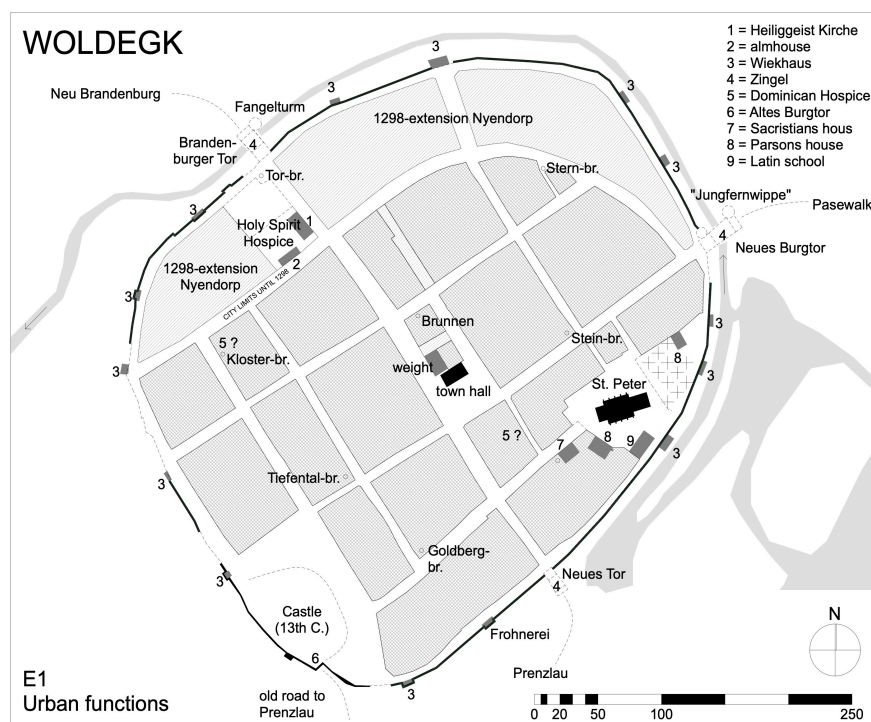


Figure 3. Woldegk. Reconstructed medieval town plan based on current cadastral maps, historic documents and the «1580-plan» of the town. Illustration by the author

Woldegk was originally planted on the northern end of a ridge, surrounded on three sides by water or wetlands. On the fourth side, the bailiff's castle protected the town from higher ground. The town consists of 3 E-W streets crossing 4 N-S streets in rectangular geometry. A part of one of the central blocks is reserved for the market with a centrally placed town hall, similar to other Brandenburgish towns planted in the same era (Prenzlau 1234, Neu Brandenburg ca 1240, Friedland 1244, Strasburg ca 1250). The market is placed where the main trade route from Brandenburg to Prenzlau crosses the top of the ridge. The parochial church, dedicated to St. Peter, is placed on the highest spot of the urban footprint, following the tradition of its time.

The Holy Spirit Hospice is located at the intersection of the urban extension of *Nyendorp* and the main trade route to Neu Brandenburg. The hospice was erected on two of the 40 housesteads donated in 1298 and owned by the church (Schüßler, 2000). This way the hospice was placed in accordance with the common practice: at the periphery, at the corner of the block, close to a major town gate.

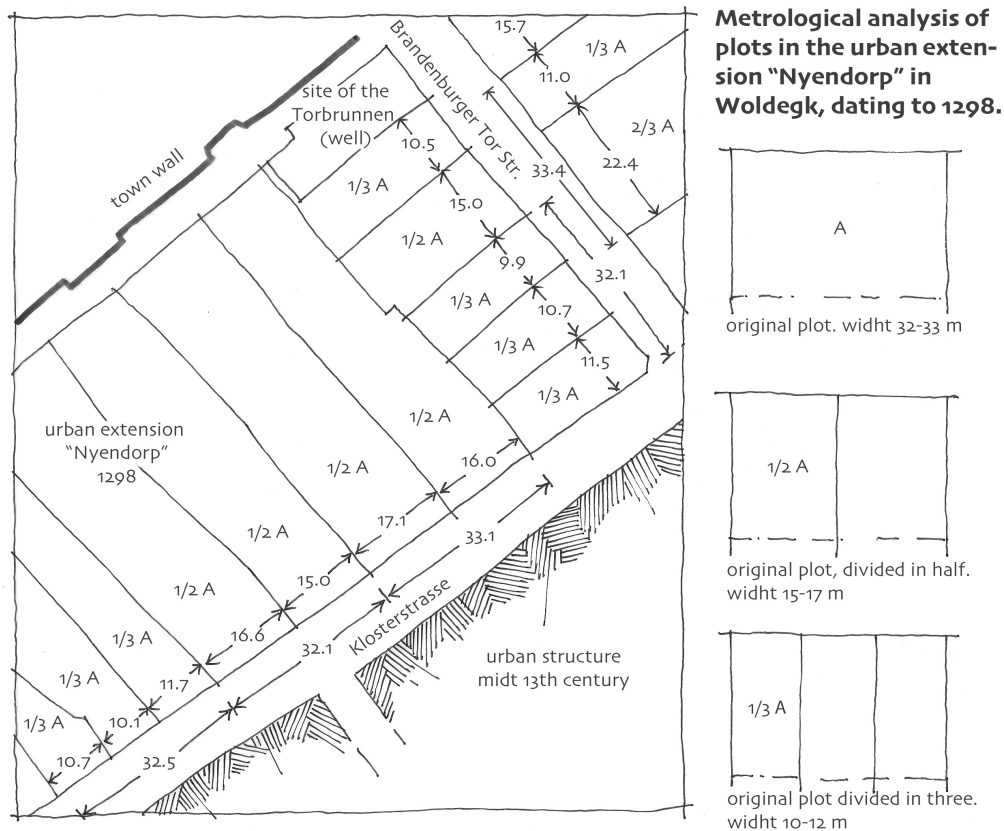


Figure 4. Metrological analysis of plots in the urban extension «Nyendorp» in Woldegk

It is unknown when the Holy Spirit Hospice in Woldegk came into being. The chapel is mentioned for the first time in 1358 (MUB 8503). Another source describing the Hospice, is the town map of 1580, which appeared under mysterious circumstances in 1780. Both the original and the copy made in 1793 are lost, but not before the copy was copied again in 1927. According to this somewhat conspicuous source, the hospice contained a chapel in N-S direction, an almshouse, and a northwards churchyard. The chapel is depicted with three travées and a large tower in its southern corner. If the chapel could either be of very unusual disposition or that the illustration is faulty, is impossible to determine since the chapel was damaged during the war of 1618–48, turned into an infirmary in 1720, and finally demolished in 1796 (Ebert, 2022b).

The town of Woldegk developed along with the major economic development in the area. Like many other towns, the burghers of Woldegk were freed of the burden of housing the bailiff's castle inside the walls. After the last mention of the castle in 1350 (MUB 7047), its destiny is unknown to us. Large amounts of terrain have been removed from the castle's site, possibly already during the Middle

Ages. Archaeology has only been able to document the refilled moat of the castle. The masses used to fill the moat contained traces of medieval pottery.

Woldegk was devastated by fire in 1442, 1547, and 1719, and destroyed by war in 1440 and 1637, when only 14 people survived. Russian troops set fire to the town in April of 1945, destroying 70% of all buildings inside the medieval fortifications. Therefore, only a few medieval structures have survived: the church, rebuilt in 1447, and the remains of the town wall, built mainly of fieldstones. As of 2023, almost 1200 meters of the town wall remain visible in six sections, resulting in 84% of its original length. The wall even contains 11 rectangular niches, where once «Wiek»-houses, buildings attached to the wall housing rooms for the guards, were placed.

The town had four gates, three of them double gates with a more robust inner gate and a representative outer gate. All double gates were removed in the 19th century. Only the oldest gate, the Burgtor, is filled with fieldstones but remains visible in the south-east corner of the town.

As a result of the destruction in 1637 and the fire of 1719, the majority of civic buildings in Woldegk were made of wood, dating to the 18th and 19th centuries. Pre-1945 photographs document 2-story buildings of half-timbered construction, often plastered on the facades towards the street. The buildings followed in large parts the medieval plot structure, as new archaeological excavations have shown (Jänicke, 2019).

Because of the extent of WWII destruction, the East German government declared Woldegk to be one of 53 «Wiederaufbaustädte», towns that would be prioritised with planning and rebuilding efforts after the war. The declaration also meant, that the government could freely take possession of private building plots inside the town. As a result, large areas were rebuilt with industrial building methods from the 1960s up to the 1980s (Figure 5).

After the end of the socialist government in 1990, the state's rights to dispose of private property ended. The transformation of buildings in Woldegk has since been driven by the commercial interests of private investors and the housing cooperative owned by the town. Later housing projects have followed the historic block geometry, but further ignored the historic plot geometry.



Figure 5. Woldegk before and after its destruction in 1945. Source: Unknown/ Stadt Woldegk

Postmodernism and town reconstruction

The loss of historic urban situations has been shown to be traumatic in middle-European cultures. The influence of Marxist thinking on the reconstruction strategies in different East-European countries led to the victory of modern reconstruction over historic rebuilding (Brandt, 2004). While the

reconstruction of historic buildings and situations was seen as eclectic, inauthentic, and impractical during the modernist period following the war, a renaissance of historic rebuilding has occurred since the dawn of postmodern architecture in the 1980s (Fiuk, 2018).

The town-rebuilding efforts of Polish towns are well documented (Frank, 2004). Frank points to three different strategies: historic reconstruction (Warsaw, Danzig), modern rebuilding (Stettin, Köslin), and abandonment (Elbing, Glogau). Elbing was left to ultimate de-urbanisation, when the remains of the medieval town were turned into a park in the 1960s, leaving only the cathedral and a small number of reconstructed buildings standing as solitaires.

The end of state-socialist rule in Eastern Europe and the rise of postmodernism opened the gate for the return of urban thinking in reconstruction efforts. Even though the end of the war seemed to have faded into history, the memory of lost urban spaces and buildings is well intact, not limited to the generation that experienced pre-war Europe. The historic reconstruction of the town centers of Dresden and Potsdam or the rebuilding of the residence in Berlin could be cited as the most prominent evidence in Germany. Even the concept of rebuilding entire neighborhoods gained traction. Led by planning authorities, town rebuilding was initiated in Elbing in 1983 (Lubocka-Hoffmann, 1988), in Glogau in 1985, and in the lower old town of Stettin in 1990.

According to Fiuk, the source of the Renaissance of the medieval town is the critique of modern urban planning, which also represented a social movement towards the reintroduction of street, square and multifunctional use as represented by Mitscherlich's *Modernism-critique* (Mitscherlich, 1965). After a long search for spaces better representing urban lifestyles, the protagonists of town-rebuilding decided, to a greater or lesser degree, to imitate medieval structures and buildings (Fiuk, 2018).

In Elbing and Glogau authorities allowed for a postmodern reconstruction of the town but decreed that the historic cellars of the pre-1945 buildings had to be preserved. The medieval plot structure of the town plan was so transformed into the footprint of present-day building blocks. At the same time, the architecture of the town-rebuilding projects in Elbing and Glogau received a great deal of criticism. Lorenz argues that the reality of the rebuilt Elbing in no way managed to live up to the expectations of recreating historic urban qualities (Frank, 2004). As reasons for this failure, he mentions morphological and architectural uniformity and poor quality of materials. This observation seems to have been seen in light of the more successful rebuilding in the town centers of Dresden, Frankfurt, Hildesheim, and Potsdam.

Other researchers have tried to formulate other strategies to re-examine the question of the desired urban quality. Zagroba proposes a phenomenological method to evaluate historic spatial structures and their value in the development of the local cultural landscape in Western Prussia (Zagroba, 2023).

By any means, the issue of identity and quality of urban spaces remains very relevant in the historic town's destroyed in the wars of the 20th century. The inhabitants of Woldegk are giving a clear perspective on their view of the future of their community. A quick search on the Facebook pages of the town reveals a great number of pre-war photographs combined with suggestions and demands for the reconstruction of historic urban spaces. The graffiti on one of the modern buildings showing the perished Baroque town hall and the marked speaks for itself (Figure 6)



Figure 6. Longing for identity: Graffiti on a modern building block showing a historic picture of Woldegk.

NARRATIVE-BASED URBAN DEVELOPMENT AT THE HOLY SPIRIT SITE IN WOLDEGK

Hospices are one of the oldest communal institutions in the medieval towns of Middle Europe. Their role in the urban fabric was dual: they provided shelter and caring for exposed parts of the urban population that were not provided for by their families, and they served their communities by providing religious guidance and comfort (Knefelkamp, 2000). That includes especially care for the elderly, who could enter the hospices by gaining a prebend, a lifetime right of residency, in exchange for transferring a large portion of their personal wealth to the hospice. Since the hospice gained access to the personal belongings of their inhabitants after their deaths, the communally run institution was often a great source of income for the town or a subject for investments for wealthy merchants (Stuntz, 2005).

The hospices usually consisted of the infirmary, chapel, prebend houses, and the courtyard, where some of the deceased were buried (Ebert, Ruchhöft, 2022). The hospices were placed extra muros ante portas in the periphery of the growing towns, which rewarded them with often large plots. When the towns grew and enclosed with walls, the hospices became a part of the town's interior, just inside the walls, close to one of the main gates. The hospices had therefore often access to garden plots along the wall where the residents produced food (Leistikow, 1985).

The Holy Spirit chapels were rectangular stone or brick buildings containing of a unvaulted hall, mostly in the E-W direction. The chapel had no spire, only a small ridge turret for bells. The building was usually placed in the corner of the block, closest to a town gate. Only a few chapels have survived in the towns of Mecklenburg, Wismar (1250) and Güstrow (pre-1308), while the chapel in Friedland is well documented even though it was destroyed in 1945 (Figure 7).

The institution of the Holy Spirit Chapel survived mostly until the Reformation. As communal institutions, they were not under direct control of the Roman Church, so they became often the first churches in which the Lutheran gospel could be heard inside the town walls. After the Reformation, they continued as hospices or almshouses. In Woldegk, the almshouse was sold in 1702 and replaced by a large building for 18 inhabitants. The new building turned out to be too large and was sold in 1704 and divided into two homesteads. The almshouse moved into the chapel in 1720, then housing six inhabitants. By exchange with another plot, the chapel came into private hands in 1796 and was removed (Schüßler, 2000).



Figure 7. The gothic gable of the chapel of the Holy Spirit Hospice in Friedland to the left of the Brandenburger Tor shows the main traits of these buildings, close proximity to a major gate, a simple architecture and a small ridge turret; source Heimatmuseum Friedland.

The plot on the street corner where the hospice once stood was divided and a two-story building in baroque style was raised. The building was damaged in the 1945 fire and later removed. In the 1970's two 4-story concrete building blocks were erected. To save the effort of removing the cellars of the pre-1945 buildings, the blocks were placed about 10 meters from the outer limits of the block. The two blocks housed 64 apartments until 2020, when one of them was removed.

The narrative of the winning entry in the 2022 design competition is a variation on the theme of community service and common welfare. The Holy Spirit Hospice played a crucial role in the social fabric of the medieval town (Ebert, Ruchhöft, 2022). They represented, in a practical sense, the Christian ideal of charity in the urban community. The old and the sick were taken care of by the community at the same time as inhabitants could gain an early version of social insurance by donating their possessions to the hospice.



Figure 8. Heiligengeist-Quartier: Winning entry of the design competition 2022. Neighborhood hall marking the street corner where the Holy Spirit Chapel once was situated. Authors: Neue Heimat AS (Norway) and Milatz-Schmidt Architekten (Germany).

The theme of civil responsibility for the common good of the community as the main narrative is transformed in the competition project into a 21st century approach. At the street corner, formerly occupied by the hospice chapel, a neighbourhood hall was planned to house general spaces that could be adapted by the community. A room of 100 m² with a ceiling height of 5 to 11 meters can be used for dance classes, pilates, choir practice, or concerts. The room can house a party of 60 to 80 individuals and can be rented by private persons for family gatherings or birthdays. The room is open to the street corner with large glass planes, so the architecture is signalling its social function to the neighbourhood. By allowing the community to use the building, the neighbourhood hall continues the narrative of community service from the 14th-century Holy Spirit Hospice to the 21st century.

In addition to the functional continuation, the new buildings will be separated into volumes of 6-12 meters in width to continue the narrative of subdivided plots. The division will be visible through a variation of facade materials and different volume heights, creating a variable building structure typical for small urban communities. The buildings have a contemporary architecture, combining pitched and flat roofs with roof terraces (Figure 8). The Woldegk project is being followed by the public through the press, information campaigns, publications, and lectures. The developers hereby ensure that the established narratives are popularized and recognised by the public.

CONCLUSIONS

Urban development in small urban communities in Mecklenburg has undergone three consecutive phases of transformation, leading to the destruction of the physical, structural, and morphological structures in the former medieval town centers. This process is ongoing, resulting in the alienation of the population from the urban history of these towns and the desire to restore the local identity by recreating lost urban situations and buildings.

The example of the Heiligengeist Quarter in Woldegk shows how historical narratives can be developed to support the creation of identity and the perception of historical continuity. Narrative-based urban development uses the results of historic, archaeological, and morphological research to create themes or guidelines on which sustainable urban development can be based. An interdisciplinary approach is required in order to succeed in this effort. In addition to the publication of scientific results, popular outreach is necessary to enter the found narratives in the public discourse. Urban renewal based on interdisciplinary research generates hereby sustainable solutions for the future development of small urban communities.

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