

Between ideology and design: Fred Forbat and the political space of modernism

The role of politics in the development of a modernist architectural style

Name: Fleur ten Broecke
Studentnumber: 5207487
Date: 17 / 4 / 2025
TU Delft

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
1.1 Objects of study	3
1.2 Interpretive ideas	3
1.3 Academic Context	3
1.4 Methodology	3
1.5 Thesis structure	3
2. Fred Forbat life course	4
2.1 Study	4
2.2 Moving to Germany	4
2.3 Return to Hungary	4
2.4 Sweden	4
2.5 Bauhaus	5
3. How did the political situation in Germany affect Forbat's earlier work?	6
3.1 Political situation in Germany	6
3.2 Analysis of Großsiedlung Siemensstadt	6
4. The situation and impact of Swedish modernism on Forbat's later works and architecture	9
4.1 Political situation in Sweden	9
4.2 Analysis of Gröndal	9
5. Comparison of the two case studies	12
6. Summary, conclusion, discussion	13
6.1 Summary	13
6.2 Conclusion	13
6.3 Discussion	13
7. Bibliography	14
7.1 Literature	14
7.2 Figures	15

1. Introduction

1.1 Objects of study

Fred Forbat is a Hungarian-Swedish architect, urban planner and theorist. He played an important role in the dissemination and development of modern architecture in Europe (Fred Forbat, 2011). Forbat grew up in a Jewish family in Pécs, Hungary, where there was a heyday of modernism in the 1920s and 1930s. When the ultra-right seized power and Jews and modernism were excluded, Forbat decided to move to Germany, where he joined the Bauhaus. The rise of Nazism made it impossible for Forbat to stay in Germany, so he settled in Sweden. This thesis focuses on how Forbat's style developed in Stockholm compared to his earlier works in Central Europe.

1.2 Interpretive ideas

The main question that can be asked is as follows:

'How did Fred Forbat's architectural style develop during his work in Stockholm compared to his earlier projects in Central Europe?'

To answer this main question, several themes are explored:

- Fred Forbat's life course
- The influence of the political situation in Hungary and Germany on Forbat's early work
- The situation and impact of Swedish modernism on Forbat's view of architecture
- The extent to which post-war reconstruction ideas played a role in Sweden, and whether Forbat had any influence on this

1.3 Academic Context

Much has been written about Forbat's time at the Bauhaus and his work in Germany, but relatively little attention has been paid to his contribution in Sweden. There is primary information available in Stockholm, such as drawings and project notes, which can be of value in comparing his works from both periods. In addition, a site visit is possible, which may be of value in this research.

1.4 Methodology

This research is based on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources such as drawings, letters, project notes from the ArkDes archive in Stockholm can be studied. In addition, a lot of information is available to analyse the political situations of Forbat's time in Hungary/Germany and in Sweden.

1.5 Thesis structure

1. Introduction: context, research question, methodology
2. Fred Forbat life course
3. Case study Großsiedlung Siemensstadt, Germany. How did the political situation in Germany affect Forbat's earlier work?
4. Case study Gröndal, Sweden: The situation and impact of Swedish modernism on Forbat's later works and architecture
5. Comparison of the two case studies
6. Summary, conclusion, discussion

2. Fred Forbat life course

2.1 Study

Fred Forbat was born on March 31, 1897 in Pécs, Hungary. He grew up in a Jewish community and was very connected to Hungarian culture (Fred Forbat, 2011). His interest in art, architecture, music and literature developed at a young age (Winka, 2021). For Forbat it was a logical step to start his architecture studies in Budapest in 1913. However, he had to temporarily interrupt his studies due to the outbreak of the First World War. After the war he did not resume his studies in Budapest, but at the Technical University of Munich, where he obtained his diploma in 1920 (Fred Forbat, 2011).

2.2 Moving to Germany

After graduating, Forbat got a job at the architectural firm of Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, in Weimar (Folkesdotter, 1990). The period from 1920 to 1922 proved to be crucial for Forbat's development around his architectural vision. Forbat assisted Gropius with various projects and gained insight into the ideas of the New Building (Jönsson, 2003). The projects he worked on focused on the efficiency of a space, one of the characteristics of functionalism.

In 1925, Forbat moved to Berlin, where he became the chief architect for the Sommerfeld Group. During this period from 1925 to 1928, he was responsible for projects including furniture and industrial buildings (GreyScape, 2020). In 1928, Forbat founded his own architectural firm in Berlin. Here, he made his most famous contribution to modern architecture: the three blocks in Großsiedlung Siemensstadt (Jönsson, 2003). This was a collaborative project with Walter Gropius, among others.

2.3 Return to Hungary

Fred Forbat returned to Hungary in 1932, after the political situation in Germany changed drastically at this time (Folkesdotter, 1990). National Socialism was growing rapidly in Germany under Adolf Hitler. Left-wing intellectuals, socialists and modernist architects were considered suspicious. As a result, many modernist housing projects, in which Forbat was involved, came under fire (Fred Forbat, 2011). Due to the disappearance of work opportunities, and the pressure because of his Jewish origins and modernist vision, Forbat decided to leave Germany before the takeover (Jönsson, 2003). Since he originally came from Hungary, returning was a logical choice.

2.4 Sweden

In Hungary, Forbat designed a number of small-scale projects in the period 1933 to 1938 (Jönsson, 2003). However, here too, there was an increase in the persecution of Jews, which forced him to leave. In 1938, he accepted an invitation from the Swedish architect Uno Åhrén to settle in Sweden (Forbat et al., 2017). During his stay in Sweden, Forbat worked mainly as a city planner. He became known here as "the father of modern comprehensive planning" in Sweden (Jönsson, 2003). He was responsible for making general plans and city plans for several Swedish cities.

2.5 Bauhaus

The Bauhaus was an influential school of art, architecture, and design, founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany by Walter Gropius (Visser, 2024). The school was founded after World War I with the aim of bringing together art, craft, and technology to create functional designs that could contribute to a better society (ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF BAUHAUS, n.d.).

The Bauhaus was not just an art school, but a movement in thinking about art, design, and the role of creativity in society. The Bauhaus had a number of core principles and characteristics. First, it was known for functionalism and simplicity. Designs had to be functional first and foremost. Clean lines and simple geometric shapes and minimalist designs without unnecessary ornamentation were characteristic (Visser, 2024). In addition, modern materials and industrial production were used. For example, the Bauhaus embraced innovative materials such as steel, glass, and concrete. Mass production was seen as a way to make good design accessible to a wide audience. Finally, the Bauhaus believed that design should not only be for the elite, but for everyone. For example, affordable and functional housing was an important focus of this movement (Visser, 2024).

3. How did the political situation in Germany affect Forbat's earlier work?

This chapter will delve deeper into the political situation in Germany and what influence this had on the work of Fred Forbat. A case study will be used, Großsiedlung Siemensstadt. This was a collaborative project in the 1930s with Fred Forbat and Walter Gropius, among others (Jönsson, 2003).

3.1 Political situation in Germany

In the previous chapter, it became clear that Fred Forbat moved to Germany in 1920. Around this period 1920 to 1930, Germany had a complex political situation that strongly influenced the view of architecture. After World War I (1914 - 1918), the Weimar Republic was established in Germany (*De Gouden Jaren '20: Relatieve Stabiliteit*, z.d.). The Weimar Republic encouraged modernisation and innovation, where there was a lot of room for modern art and architecture, such as the Bauhaus.

From the time of the creation of the Bauhaus, there was very strong political criticism of this movement. This became more intense, after the rise of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party). After Adolf Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor in 1933, the political situation changed dramatically (*Duitsland 1933: Van Democratie Naar Dictatuur*, n.d.). This shift in political power had a direct impact on the architecture in Germany. There was a shift from modern and functional designs, to traditional architectural styles, which supported Germany's strength and power at that time (Visser, 2024).

3.2 Analysis of Großsiedlung Siemensstadt

Fred Forbat's contribution to the design of the Großsiedlung Siemensstadt, clearly shows the clash between modern and functional architecture and the emerging nationalist and traditional preferences in Germany at the time.



Figure 1: Siteplan Großsiedlung Siemensstadt (Fessel, 2019)

Figure 1 shows that Forbat contributed to the residential blocks on the eastern part of the design. The characteristics of the Bauhaus and thus functional architecture are reflected in the design in the following way:

Zeilenbau.

Figure 1 shows that the residential blocks are arranged in parallel rows. The idea of this was to maximize light and ventilation for residents (*Bauhaus Rehouses The Masses*, z.d.).

Flat roofs.

A feature of modern architecture emerges with flat roofs. Indeed, these roofs were seen as practical and thus rejected embellishments associated with a traditional style (Stefanie, 2024).

Balcony-like loggias.

Some designed residential blocks have loggias. This provides plenty of outdoor space and views over the central green zone. This element emphasizes that there is great attention to the well-being of the residents (*Bauteil Fred Forbat [Lila] – Siedlungen Der Berliner Moderne*, z.d.).



Figure 2: loggias of the designed residential blocks
(Großsiedlung Siemensstadt, z.d.)

As discussed earlier, the increasing political influence of the National Socialists had a direct threat to Forbat's architectural approach to this project. The architectural preference shifted towards a traditional German architectural style; modernism was considered alien (Jönsson, 2003). This ideology had a direct influence on Großsiedlung Siemensstadt only later, after Forbat fled back to Hungary in 1932 (Folkesdotter, 1990). The political shift resulted in the following things:

Rejection of flat roofs.

Flat roofs were an important feature of modernist architecture. Thus, much criticism arose from proponents of traditional German architecture (Bauteil Fred Forbat [Lila]). However, the criticism did not cause the design of this project to be changed. The explanation is that Forbat's work in Siemensstadt had already been completed before the political shifts in Germany.

Addition of traditional elements.

In contrast to the rejection of flat roofs, there have been a few modifications and additions to Großsiedlung Siemensstadt. During Paul Rudolf Henning's plans in 1933 - 1934, rows of flat-roofed buildings were added, but without balconies and with wider buildings (Bauteil Fred Forbat

[Lila]). In 1936 came an extension of the estate to the east, led by Hans Hertlein. He planned rows of houses with animal reliefs, high facades and without balconies (Bauteil Fred Forbat [Lila]).

Dash through expansion.

Fred Forbat planned to further expand Siemensstadt to the east. Because of the Nazi takeover, this was ultimately never realised, as his plans were diametrically opposed to the ideals during the Nazi regime (Bauteil Fred Forbat [Lila] - Siedlungen Der Berliner Moderne, z.d.). This made it impossible for Forbat to continue building in Germany as a Jewish architect. The example shows that the political situation put a direct brake on the expansion of the settlement according to Forbat's modernist principles (Fred Forbat, 2011).

In summary, the Großsiedlung Siemensstadt can be seen as a site where the architectural ideals of the modernist movement collided directly with the political shift in Germany. Forbat's forced departure and the subsequent architectural changes to the settlement illustrate how political power can directly influence and change the course of architectural development and urban planning.

4. The situation and impact of Swedish modernism on Forbat's later works and architecture

This chapter will delve deeper into the political situation in Sweden, where Fred Forbat settled in 1938. Furthermore, Forbat's urban design Gröndal will serve as a case study to establish a connection between the political situation and its influence on his work and vision.

4.1 Political situation in Sweden

It has previously been described that Fred Forbat moved to Sweden because his life and work were not safe in Hungary due to his Jewish origin (Forbat et al., 2017). From 1938, after accepting architect Uno Åhrén's invitation, he settled in Sweden (Forbat et al., 2017).

Politically, Sweden found itself in a difficult and complex situation, which eventually characterised itself in armed neutrality (*Zweden Was 200 Jaar Lang Neutraal – Maar Nu Niet Meer*, 2024). This was due to rising tensions in Europe ahead of World War II. Ever since 1814, they had kept aloof from armed conflicts, but built their own arms industry (Seneca Burgerschap, 2023).

With the deteriorating political situation in Europe, partly due to the rise of Nazi Germany, Sweden became a safe haven for about 5.000 German-speaking emigrants between 1933 and 1945, who fled due to the political shift (Jaeggi et al. 2021).

Later on, functionalism took off in Sweden and gained strength. Swedish architects increasingly looked to the modern movement such as Bauhaus to find solutions in housing and urban planning (Jaeggi et al. 2021). This expanded further in the 1930s and 1940s, when social democratic government led by Per Albin Hansson was formed (Roelse, n.d.). The policy called 'Folkhemmet' aimed at providing affordable, well-designed housing for the working class (Seneca Burgerschap, 2023).

In summary, around 1938 Sweden was a neutral country that provided shelter to people fleeing persecution in Europe, which therefore included architects associated with modern movements such as the Bauhaus. The desire to remain neutral amid great international tensions were combined with a domestic movement towards social reform and the embrace of functionalism in architecture and urban planning. This gave Fred Forbat security and opportunities to further develop his modern movement.

4.2 Analysis of Gröndal

Fred Forbat contributed mainly to urban designs in Sweden. In 1942, he joined HSB (Hyresgästernas Sparkasse- och Byggnadsförening) in Stockholm. He was employed here until 1945. While working at HSB, he played a crucial role in the design of Gröndal. Indeed, in it many features of Forbat's functionalist vision emerged.

Gröndal is a neighbourhood in southern Stockholm and is part of the Hägersten-Liljeholmen district (Forbat et al., 2017). The early 20th century saw the start of the design of this industrial area, but in the 1940s - 1950s, it was transformed into a residential area, with modern and

functional flat blocks (Stockholmsen, 1998). This of course had to do with the desire to make Sweden a welfare state and the country's neutrality. Fred Forbat's contribution to Gröndal's design corresponds to Sweden's political situation and wishes. There are a number of characteristics that emerge with this project that belong to the Bauhaus movement.

Simple, rectangular volumes.

Figure 3 shows a residential block on Ekensbergvagen designed by Forbat around 1945. It stands out the residential block consists of simple volumes without unnecessary ornamentation. This principle fits well with the vision of Forbat and the Bauhaus movement. This idea also fits in with the social democratic vision, in which architecture should not be elitist, but accessible and efficient.



Figure 3: *Residential block in Gröndal*
(own work, 2025)

Open urban design.

Figure 4 shows the top view of Fregattvägen street, a street in the south-western part of Gröndal. It is striking that the various housing blocks are orderly situated, with plenty of greenery between the housing blocks. This spatial arrangement fits well with the idea of the Bauhaus, where there was a lot of attention to light, air and views (Bauhaus Rehouses The Masses, n.d).



Figure 4: *Top view Fregattvägen, Gröndal*
(Google Earth, 2025)

Social housing.

As described earlier, Gröndal has been transformed from an industrial area near a neighbourhood for affordable and efficient housing. This is in line with both the political situation in Sweden and the vision of the Bauhaus (Visser, 2024).

Maximum daylight.

Located on Gröndalsvägen are a number of Fred Forbat residential blocks from the construction year 1944 - 1946. Figure 5 shows that the facades contain large windows, which belongs to the Bauhaus movement. Large windows and open floor plans enhance the feeling of spaciousness and connection with the outside world (Visser, 2024). In addition, plenty of daylight in living spaces has a positive impact on the physical and mental health of residents.



Figure 5: Residential block
Gröndalsvägen (own work, 2025)

In summary, both the political ideals of the Swedish Folkhemmet and the modernist principles of the Bauhaus movement are well reflected in the Gröndal neighbourhood. Forbat's design principles such as openness, light and efficiency fit perfectly with the political aspiration of affordable and healthy housing. The district shows how architecture and politics came together, in which functionality and equality were central.

5. Comparison of the two case studies

The two case studies, Großsiedlung Siemensstadt and Gröndal, are examples of how Fred Forbat's architecture was shaped by the political situation in the two countries, Germany and Sweden, in which he worked.

The two case studies have in common that they both contain clear characteristics of the Bauhaus movement. Modern and functional elements can be seen in both projects. In contrast, the political circumstances and influences played a completely different role in the two projects. Starting with Großsiedlung Siemensstadt: This project initially reflects the optimism of the Bauhaus era in Germany. Innovation and functionality were initially encouraged, but due to the rise of the Nazi regime, there was a lot of resistance to modernism. Ultimately, this led to the project being adapted and expanded in retrospect towards a traditional vision, which suited the political situation and wishes of Germany.

Gröndal, on the other hand, show that Forbat's design was clearly in line with the political context and situation in Sweden. The neutrality of the country, combined with the rise of Folkhemmet politics, provided a stable basis for functionalism. Forbat's vision and work were thus fully respected here and the project was embraced, rather than adapted.

Großsiedlung Siemensstadt shows the tension between a modern and traditional vision, while Gröndal shows the similarity between modern ideals and the vision of the welfare state.

6. Summary, conclusion, discussion

6.1 Summary

Fred Forbat is a German-Hungarian architect who was active in Sweden from the end of the 1930s, after he had to flee Germany and later Hungary, because of his Jewish origins. He is known as an architect for his modern vision around his projects, which can be related to the Bauhaus movement. By doing literature research on the Bauhaus movement, the political positions and developments in Germany and Sweden and Forbat's own works and designs, it became clear how his vision came about within modernism and resulted in innovative designs.

The analyses of Forbat's projects show that his vision around modern architecture is clearly visible in the elements of his designs. In Germany, his projects were eventually criticized and therefore adjusted. In Sweden, the opposite happened, where his projects were embraced.

6.2 Conclusion

The main question of this thesis was as follows:

‘How did Fred Forbat's architectural style develop during his work in Stockholm compared to his earlier projects in Central Europe?’

In conclusion, based on the above text and information, an answer can be given to the main question. As was clearly shown in the case studies, Forbat's works in both countries, which differ greatly in political terms, have many characteristics of the Bauhaus movement. It is therefore not so much that Forbat adapted his style very much to the political standards and wishes of those countries. It is mainly the climate in which he designed that makes the difference between the two countries. In Germany there was a lot of criticism of his works and it was therefore ultimately adapted. In Sweden his designs were very much appreciated and Forbat was able to do his work well, because the political situation also allowed this much more than in Germany.

To return to the main question, Fred Forbat did not so much adapt his style, but the political situation in Germany adapted some of his works.

6.3 Discussion

This thesis has focused on a comparison of Fred Forbat's work in Sweden and Central Europe. Here, Großsiedlung Siemensstadt and Gröndal have been clear projects of Forbat's, painting a clear picture of how political situations influenced Forbat's work. However, there is still much room for follow-up research.

For possible follow-up research, more of Forbat's projects, in both Germany, Hungary and Sweden, could be looked at. His work in smaller cities or later contributions could possibly show other aspects of his vision. In addition, a broader study could be drawn up on various architects from the Bauhaus movement, who settled in other countries. In this way, a more general picture can be drawn of the Bauhaus movement and how a political context can influence its vision.

7. Bibliography

7.1 Literature

Bauhaus rehouses the masses. (n.d.). Ribapix. <https://www.ribapix.com/bauhaus-rehouses-the-masses>

Bauteil Fred Forbat [lila] – Siedlungen der Berliner Moderne. (z.d.). Siedlungen Der Berliner Moderne. <https://welterbe-siedlungen-berlin.de/ort/abschluss-von-fred-forbat/>

De gouden jaren '20: relatieve stabiliteit. (n.d.). Duitsland Instituut. <https://duitslandinstituut.nl/naslagwerk/52/de-gouden-jaren-20-relatieve-stabiliteit?>

Duitsland 1933: van democratie naar dictatuur. (n.d.). Anne Frank Website. <https://www.annefrank.org/nl/anne-frank/verdieping/duitsland-1933-van-democratie-naar-dictatuur/?>

Folkesdotter, G. (n.d.). Fred Forbat and the functionalist urban design doctrine. In. *Bebyggelsehistorisk Tidskrift* (Number 20, pp. 157-172) [Journal-article]. <https://www.bebyggelsehistoria.org>

Forbat, A., Fred, Rosander, Tom, & Paulsson, G. (2017). Alfred Forbat: On urban development. In KTH, KTH Lecture Series (pp. 1-2).

Fred Forbat. (2011, 6 October). architectuul. Retrieved 8 March 2025, from <https://architectuul.com/architect/fred-forbat>

GreyScape (2020, 11 July). Fred Forbát - Greyscape. Greyscape. <https://www.greyscape.com/architects/fred-forbat/>

History. <https://historiek.net/bauhaus-kunst-opleiding-walter-gropius/99308/>

HUNDRED YEARS OF BAUHAUS. (n.d.). <https://www.laprairie.com/nl-benl/editorials-article/100-years-of-bauhaus.html>

Jaeggi, A., Nerdinger, W., Scholz, O., Nelson Mandela School, Paula Fürst School, Baumann, F., Zenns, K., Kitzenmaier, C., Long, R. F., Franklin, R., Ardizzola, P., Hartung, U., Kögel, E., Seelow, A. M., Reyes, D. M. de L., Neubauer, S., Mari, M., Pérez-Oyarzun, F., Chang, C.-W., . . . Fabre, T. (2021). *Taking a Stand? Debating the Bauhaus and Modernism* (A. Bärnreuther, Red.). arthistoricum.net. <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.843.c11891>

Jönsson, R. (2003). Fred Forbat and the History of Functionalism. in *Nordic Architectural Research: Vol. 2003: 4* (pp. 79-81).

Roelse, A. C. R. (z.d.). DE ZWEEDSE NEUTRALITEIT en toetreding tot de Europese Unie. In M. L. L. Segers, *Begeleider* (Vol. 2, p. 3).
<https://studenttheses.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/20.500.12932/8642/De%20Zweedse%20neutraliteit%20en%20toetreding%20tot%20de%20Europese%20Unie.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Seneca Burgerschap. (2023, 17 augustus). § 4.1 Gewapende neutraliteit - Maatschappijwetenschappen.nl. Maatschappijwetenschappen.nl. <https://maatschappijwetenschappen.nl/krijgswetenschappen/gewapende-neutraliteit/>

Stefanie. (2024, 11 mei). *Wat is de Bauhaus-stijl? Functionaliteit ontmoet esthetiek*. Living Roots.https://www.livingroots.nl/bauhaus_livingroots/#:~:text=Strakke%20lijnen%2C%20platte%20daken%20en,is%20overal%20ter%20wereld%20zichtbaar.

Stockholmsen. (1998). *Gröndal*.

Visser, Y. (2024, 26 September). Bauhaus - Revolutionary art education of Walter Gropius.

Winka, L. (2021). Fred Forbat.

Zweden was 200 jaar lang neutraal – maar nu niet meer. (2024, 3 april). IsGeschiedenis.
<https://isgeschiedenis.nl/nieuws/zweden-was-200-jaar-lang-neutraal-maar-nu-niet-meer>

7.2 Figures

Fessel, C. (2019, 21 juni). *Map of the UNESCO World Heritage Site “Großsiedlung Siemensstadt”*. Wikipedia. https://nl.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestand:Lageplan_des_UNESCO-Welterbe_%22Gro%C3%9Fsiedlung_Siemensstadt%22.png

Großsiedlung Siemensstadt. (z.d.). Berlin.de.
<https://www.berlin.de/landesdenkmalamt/welterbe/welterbestaetten/siedlungen-der-berliner-moderne/grosssiedlung-siemensstadt-654621.php>