

Review

Department of Architecture



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German Colonial Architecture from a Global Perspective

PD Dr.-Ing. Mag. Michael Falser was appointed DFG-Heisenberg Fellow to the Chair of Theory and History of Architecture, Art and Design at the TUM. His project, “German colonial architecture as a global project around 1900 and transcultural heritage today”, started in March 2020; it has been awarded a grant for a three to five-year period.

The DFG-Heisenberg Programme provides funding for outstanding researchers who meet all the requirements for appointment to a permanent professorship, to prepare for a future senior academic role, carry on with high-quality research and continue building their academic reputation. (www.dfg.de)

Despite its extremely short existence—a mere three decades—German colonialism (ca. 1884–1914) was geopolitically-speaking a global project spanning several continents (Fig. 1): from Africa (colonies of German East Africa, German South West Africa, Cameroun, and Togo) to Asia (back then Tsingtau and Kiautschou, today the Chinese city of Qingdao and the Jiaozhou Bay area) and Oceania (parts of today’s New Guinea and Samoa). Its urbanist and architectural production was surprisingly rich and much of it, from whole new towns to infrastructural networks and individual buildings, still exists today.

In this sense, it is rather surprising that in the field of architectural history, no comprehensive studies, first, conceptualize German colonial building processes from a historical perspective as a *globally connected project* and, second, thematize structures that are still standing from a contemporary viewpoint as a kind of *shared built heritage*.

This twofold scientific desideratum is now being tackled through a new research project funded by the Heisenberg program of the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft—DFG). The project was conceived by, and awarded to Michael Falser, an Austrian art and architectural historian specialized in global architectural history and cultural heritage studies. Since March 2020, this new project has been embedded into the Chair of Theory and History of Architecture, Art and Design of the TUM (Prof. Dietrich Erben). It is planned to carry out extensive field work in Africa, Asia and Oceania, organize scientific workshops and conferences, contribute to publications (from themed issues in specialized journals to multi-authored volumes), and publish articles and a monograph. An exhibition presenting original archival material is another option to be developed.

From a general viewpoint, this project intends to introduce a methodologically innovative approach into the discipline of architectural history. This will be achieved by incorporating the global and transcultural turn, which has been discussed over the past years in the field of global history and global art history. Today, this approach is also hotly debated as regards the issue of how to deal with the German colonial era. However, while current provenance research comes with pressing claims to reconstitute colonially appropriated artefacts to former colonies in Africa and Asia, the remaining traces of German colonial architecture, urbanism, cultural

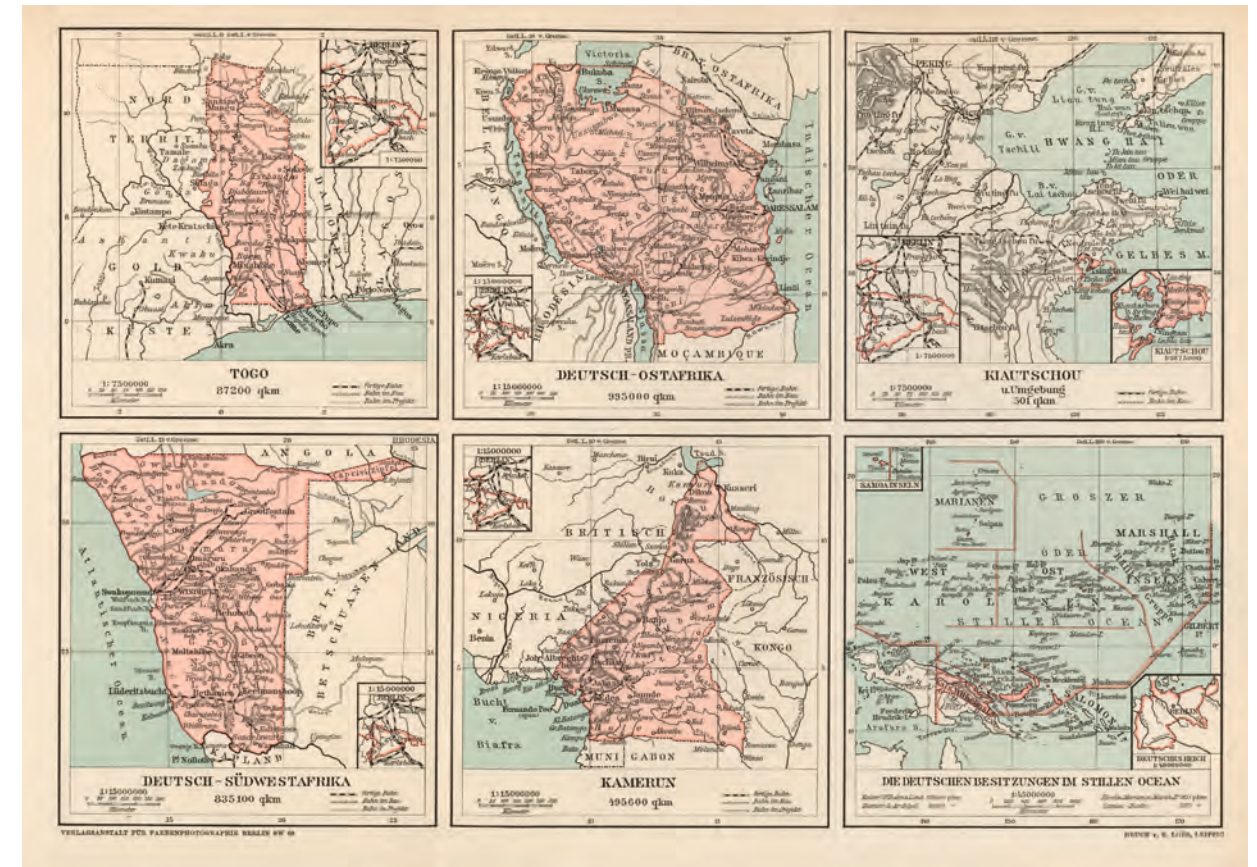


Fig. 1 An overview of all German colonies in Africa, China and Oceania, as depicted in Willy Scheel’s *Deutschlands Kolonien in achtzig farbphotographischen Abbildungen* (Berlin: 1912).

landscapes, and infrastructural planning are still strangely under-researched topics in architectural history and cultural heritage studies. This project is structured into two modules that aim a) to present the immense architectural production historically within a global overall structure, and b) to read its (today) contested legacy—across three continents and with its ongoing entanglement with Germany—as the formation of transcultural heritage.

Module 1: German colonial architecture 1884–1914 — a global project

With a view to the innovative methodology employed by the new discipline of Global Art History, this project on German colonial architecture goes beyond the old-fashioned narrative of a mere one-dimensional transfer of architecture from an imperial motherland into its colonies. It aims to free architectural history, as a discipline, from its classical area-based approach (Europe or Africa or Asia) and make it compatible with a truly global approach. To this end, German colonial architectural production processes will be broken down into three different dimensions (analyzed separately and

then re-connected), namely: *social culture*, in order to discuss the colonial production and the local adaptation and implementation of building knowledge; *material culture*—that is, the different scales, techniques, and typologies of colonial building procedures; and *mental culture*, charting concrete building practices and frameworks as regards terms and taxonomies, and conceptions of style and representation.

Module 2: German colonial architecture as transcultural heritage

More than one hundred years after the Peace Treaty of Versailles of 1919 (whose implementation officially ended World War I, whereby the German Empire lost all its overseas colonies), the “dispute over Germany’s colonial heritage [has] advanced to a central identity debate today” (Jürgen Zimmerer 2017). With the present outbreaks of racism and the related taking down of colonial-era memorials all over the world, this debate has finally reached the disciplines of architectural history and historic preservation in Germany. While experts discuss an appropriate strategy to deal with colonial-era artefact collections at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin

Figs. 2a & 2b, top: A depiction of the original structure in *Führer durch Tsingtau und Umgebung* by Behme and Krieger (Wolfenbüttel: 1904); Bottom: Reconstructed Qingdao railway station in 2018 (Falser 2018).



Fig. 3 The former *Gouverneurs-Wohnhaus* (1905–07) in its present condition (Falser 2018).



and many former ethnographic museums all over the country, this project questions Germany's colonial-era architectures, infrastructural remains, and urbanist fragments in Africa, China, and Oceania. How can we read them within their hundred-year transformation process (1920–2020) as a shared built heritage? Here, the overall aim is to develop a sort of morphology of transcultural heritage (inheriting/inheritance) in a postcolonial and global space. In this sense, the second module investigates the present-day remains of the German colonial period as a highly dynamic physical legacy of ongoing in-situ cultural-political negotiation (*social culture*), the specific practices and techniques of constant manipulation (*material culture*), and the value structure underlying these actions (*mental culture*), which is constantly being redefined.

Going back to German colonial Tsingtau (present-day Qingdao) in China — a preliminary field trip in December 2018

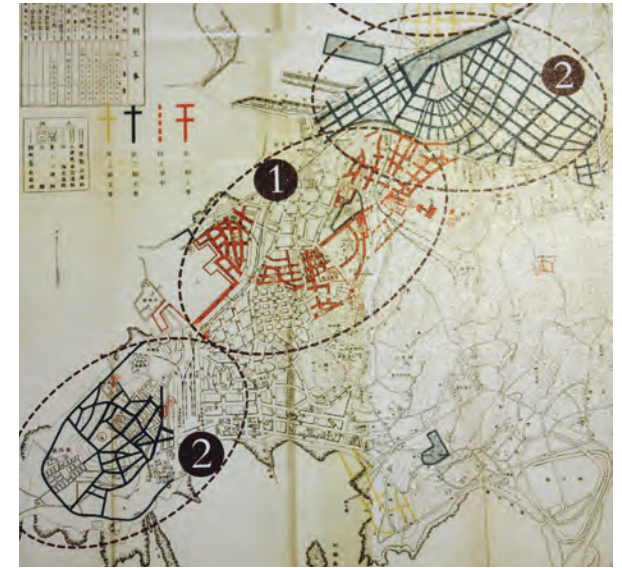
In order to exemplify some challenges within the above-mentioned agenda, a small collection of photographs is presented here. Most of them were taken during a preliminary field trip to a former German colonial marine base: Tsingtau (ca. 1898–1914), today the much appreciated Chinese harbor city of Qingdao on the shore of the Yellow Sea, situated between China's capital Beijing to the north and the former International Concession of Shanghai to the south.

When reaching the city by train, large signboards in Chinese, English, and Russian welcome the visitor with an aerial depiction of a surprisingly green cityscape; only experts would spot singular German colonial structures nested in this view. However, leaving the railway hall toward the central square opens up some more ambivalent architectural vistas, one of which is the train station itself. Only detailed studies back home while investigating historical travel literature would reveal that the current exterior is a recent in-style façade reconstruction of the last decade—the original landmark of the German colonial city having been demolished (Figs. 2a & 2b).

Approaching one of the former key buildings of German colonial rule, the *Gouverneurs-Wohnhaus* (1905–07) on top of the central hills (Fig. 3), reconfirms that a shared built-heritage construction is combined here with taxonomies and value judgments of architectural history, altogether an originally European discipline that travelled to the East more than a hundred years ago. While ascending the privatized road toward the well-maintained building, a series of educative signboards tells the story of how “Chinese Elements and Oriental Consciousness” were merged here into a strange stylistic mix of German regionalism, picturesque *Heimatstil*, and colonial attitude. After an architectural tour through the listed ensemble, the souvenir shop (primarily for Chinese tourists) provides a miniature of the same building next to a *Gartenzwerg Häuschen* and other excolonial fantasies.



Figs. 4a & 4b left: A German *Entwicklungsplan* of the marine base of Tsingtau around 1900; Right: A Japanese urban development plan after 1918 (Exhibition panels in the *Strand Hotel*, Falser 2018).



The path down to the once peripheral beach resort leads the visitor to another historical structure, the so-called *Strand Hotel*. Inside, an excellent exhibition displays a series of interesting photographs and maps. These indicate the important fact that a rational urban grid of streets and squares was not only implemented around 1900 for a totally new German town, which to this day has left a physical imprint of high-tech infrastructure, such as a harbor and a whole railway system: the former *Schantung-Bahn*, once departing into the Kiautschou *hinterland* and its coal mining sites (Fig. 4a); as if that was not enough, the urban fabric continued to develop within a new colonial regime after German troops had left when WWI broke out in 1914. After the war, the Japanese planned and partially implemented their own vision of a modern city with new urban subcenters inside and around the German time layer (Fig. 4b).



Figs. 5a & 5b, left: The present-day view towards the new city center of present-day Qingdao; Right: Internationalist style fantasies for the new governmental quarter (Falser 2018).



Today, Qingdao is a totally modern megacity with a new center around the inner bay, where Chinese couples stroll along a marina with food stalls and restaurants (Fig. 5a). However, the really uncanny chain reaction to this collage of former colonial styles and attitudes to power, with an interchangeable language of international investment architecture, is found around the monstrous new Chinese regional government quarter, on the southwestern seashore (Fig. 5b).

For this reason, a first site visit to the city fostered the working hypothesis that these contemporary building practices are far away from what proper architectural historians would call “traditional Chinese architecture.” *Coming to terms* with these *past-colonial* architectural hybrids is one of the many tasks of this project.

Michael Falser