

# From the last hut of Monowitz to the last hut of Belsen

Robert Jan van Pelt<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada

Corresponding author: Robert Jan van Pelt ([rjvanpel@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:rjvanpel@uwaterloo.ca))

Published 10 May 2023

## Abstract

The article offers an in-depth investigation into the history of, and post-war practices around, the most fundamental and indispensable architectural structure of the Nazi camps: the wooden prefabricated barrack hut.

## Key Words

architecture, Auschwitz-Birkenau (Monowitz), barrack hut, Bergen-Belsen, Nazi camps

In December 2012, I found myself in the company of Rob van der Laarse, Carlos Reijnen, some other academics, a few cineastes, the visual artist Hans Citroen, and my wife Miriam Greenbaum, daughter of Auschwitz survivor Jakub Grünbaum, on the threshold of a ruined barrack near the Polish city of Oświęcim, known for being the site of the former Auschwitz I (Main Camp) and Auschwitz II (Birkenau) concentration camps. For almost a quarter century I had visited Oświęcim annually, and I was convinced the place did not hold any more surprises. Yet as we set out to visit the site of the former Buna synthetic rubber factory, Hans, who knew the area well, suggested we make a detour and visit a small farmhouse not far from the factory site.

We arrived at a site in the area that had been occupied by Auschwitz III (Monowitz), the Auschwitz satellite built to house the inmates working on the construction of the Buna plant. The camp site itself had not been included in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. We found half of a barrack hut, partly ruined, that was attached to a small farmhouse. In the aftermath of World War II, many Poles expelled from Oświęcim had returned home to find their lands covered by camps and their houses destroyed. They also discovered, however, that it was easy to dismantle the wooden barrack huts used in concentration camps and re-assemble them elsewhere. Thus many huts became provisional dwellings or workshops. Most of these recycled buildings had rotted away in the 1960s. But somehow one had survived in Monowice.

We entered and found ourselves in the partly ruined building. I recognized the structure: “Good, an authentic *RAD-Mannschaftsbaracke Type RL IV* [Reich Labor Service Crew Barrack Type RL IV],” I thought, clutching to the safety offered by identifying our discovery with its proper label. I noticed inscriptions on the beams and walls summoning inmates to adhere to certain standards of hygiene, which suggested the barrack had been an infirmary. “This is Primo Levi’s barrack,” Hans told us with the self-confidence that is uniquely his. “Which one?” “The barrack of the ten days...” “You mean Ka-Be?” We looked at one another, realizing in astonishment that this ruined and rotting structure might have been Ka-Be, short for *Krankenbau* [infirmary] – the most important site in Primo Levi’s memoir *If This Is a Man* (1947), a key text in the bibliography of the Holocaust and the education of the members of our group. The suggestion that this barrack hut might have been Ka-Be had a profound impact: we all knew, with greater or lesser clarity, that we stood at a site where a universe of the imagination composed of words met a universe of observation composed of space and matter.

As I re-evaluated this barrack hut, I also became acutely aware of how little I knew about the history of the *RAD-Mannschaftsbaracke*. When I returned to Canada, I began to investigate the literature on prefabricated barrack huts built in Germany and German-ruled Europe between 1933 and 1945. A few young scholars in Germany, most notably Axel Dossmann, Jan Wenzel, Kai Wenzel



**Figure 1.** The barrack in Monowice, December 2012. Photographer Carlos Reijnen.

(2007) and Ralph Gabriel, had mapped some of the terrain in several publications, but it appeared that their very valuable contributions to the topic had not yet led to a monograph on the history of the wooden prefabricated barrack hut, such as the one I had entered in Monowice.

Reflecting on the prospects and problems of a research project on the barrack hut, I realized it might be energized by the contradiction between the very marginality of the building type as an object of consideration by architects, clients, historians and theorists, and its historical impact in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Until about 1970, major building types such as temples, churches, palaces, town halls, theatres and libraries were the focus of sustained theoretical consideration and historical study. This reflected the fact that these building types provided the architectural profession with work and income, while architectural historians were thus given clear examples of the evolution of styles and with built, archival and literary evidence. Minor, vernacular building types – barns, stables, cottages, market stalls and so on – attracted little attention: these had seldom been built by notable architects, while their construction had left little evidence with which scholars could work.

This tendency also applies to the common hut – the usually crude and bare single-storey, single room building, constructed from readily available building materials (wooden boards, logs, branches, loam or stones for walls, and boards, shingles, straw, turf, skins, canvas, matting

or cardboard for the roof), and without permanent foundations. Both laymen and scholars consider the wooden hut the oldest and most universal form of architecture. Their logic is based on the general availability of wood in most parts of the world and the relative simplicity of using wood for construction. Yet their assumption is not supported by much material evidence: wooden buildings, unlike stone ones, have relatively short lifespans and tend to disappear without a trace. The sorry state of the wooden hut in Monowice is a case in point.

In the year that followed our visit to Ka-Be, I began to sketch out a biography of the barrack hut – a version of the common hut that did make world history. It is the story of a lightweight hybrid between a shack, a tent and a conventional building that was easy to erect, take down and transplant part by part. It is a story of a standardized, serially made product that offered instant shelter to those forced by design or circumstance to survive away from home: soldiers; ill people forced into quarantine; laborers working on infrastructural projects or in resource-extractive industries in sparsely populated areas; foreign laborers; people who had become homeless as the result of earthquakes, great fires or bombing raids; and prisoners. It is the story of a building type that always remained a product of necessity without ever becoming an object of aspiration or, for that matter, affection.

The barrack hut entered the world stage with a bang in 1854. British and French expeditionary forces in the Crimea proved unable to conquer Sevastopol and were



forced to lay siege to the city. Thanks to a telegraph connection, the British public learned that soldiers were freezing in their tents, and a few British builders set out to make simple, prefabricated huts for use in the Crimea. The British and French governments bought into the plan. A design was produced within days and the parts became available in weeks. Shipped to the Black Sea with great publicity, the barrack huts saved the expeditionary forces. At the same time, both the British and French governments decided to create large camps consisting of barrack huts at home to provide realistic training conditions for the militia that provided the reserves for the standing armies. The 2,000 barrack huts built at Aldershot near London and Châlons near Paris became the focus of public interest. Finally, after it became clear that sick and wounded soldiers who were lodged in field hospitals consisting of flimsy barrack huts healed much more quickly than those housed in large brick or stone hospitals, the barrack hut became a cure-all in every emergency situation.

The American Civil War demonstrated the full remedial potential of the barrack hut. The American Army adopted the structure, standardized it and made it the backbone of a system of managing mass casualties, including aid stations, field hospitals and general hospitals. Military surgeons were able to obtain extraordinary medical results in these hospitals, with many making a direct link between the design of the buildings and patients' dramatically lower morbidity and mortality rates. In addition, the barrack hut proved a panacea when, for the first time in history, armies were left with tens of thousands of prisoners of war. The Union Army built large prisoner-of-war camps, each consisting of up to a hundred barrack huts surrounded by a wooden stockade.

The experience of the Civil War was closely studied in Europe. The highly professional German military medical system made the barrack hut a basic building block of its infrastructure, and, after the creation of an experimental and somewhat upgraded civilian version at the Charité Hospital in Berlin, it became the model for patient wards in Central and Eastern Europe. During the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) military barrack-hut-hospitals and hutted prisoner-of-war camps were built all over Germany. In contrast to the United States, where all barrack huts followed one standard type, every German municipality or army jurisdiction commissioned its own design, with the proliferation of different versions of the barrack hut providing opportunities for research and comparison.

In the decades that followed the Franco-Prussian War, barrack huts multiplied: they were used as quarantine hospitals for epidemic diseases, colonies for children infected with tuberculosis, temporary settlements for construction workers in faraway places, spas, inner-city schools, instant settlements in the colonies, and emergency shelters after the 1908 Messina earthquake. An important new development was the search, initiated by German Empress Augusta and taken up by the International Committee of the Red Cross, for a barrack hut that could not only be prefabricated, easily transported and quickly

built, but also easily taken apart and reconstructed elsewhere. The patented design by Danish tentmaker Johan Gerhard Clemens Døcker won the first prize in a large international competition organized in 1885, and the purchase of Døcker's patent by the German firm Christoph & Unmack marked the beginning of barrack hut production on an industrial scale.

Until 1914, the barrack hut's reputation was largely benign: it provided instant shelter for those who needed it. But the outbreak of war, the mass arrest of so-called enemy aliens, the flood of civilian refugees from Central and Eastern Europe dislocated by conflict, and the capture of hundreds of thousands of soldiers led to the construction of vast internment camps, each of which consisted of an overcrowded compound with hundreds of badly maintained and ever more cheaply built barrack huts surrounded by barbed-wire fences. The public perception of the barrack hut changed: the dominant association became one of squalid captivity.

The Nazis tried to change this when they came to power. They aimed to alter society radically by creating many networks of camps dedicated to bringing Germans into line, in order to discipline, mobilize, militarize and heroize the German nation. There were also camps for the construction crews working on German highways and the fortified defense works in the west known as the Siegfried Line. The basic building block of all of these camps was the *RAD-Mannschaftsbaracke*, a perfected version of the *Doecker Baracke*, which was now produced under license by sawmills all over Germany. In 1935, the *RAD-Mannschaftsbaracke* Doecker was adopted by the German Army, and two years later the SS placed a first order for *RAD* barrack huts for use in its concentration camps.

The Second World War saw the zenith and nadir of the barrack hut. From the summer of 1940 onward, most civilian construction in Germany came to a halt, and from 1942 onward, this ban was absolute. The only exception applied to four different variations of the original *Doecker Baracke*, which now came to dominate the landscape and cityscape of German-controlled Europe. Hundreds of thousands of these barrack huts were produced, housing soldiers, forced laborers, civilians bombed out of their homes, and concentration-camp inmates. Thus the wooden barrack hut and its immediate context, the camp, became a crucial stage for the key drama of the twentieth century: The Holocaust.

The post-war fate of the hundreds of thousands of barrack huts involved a somewhat embarrassed re-use followed by demolition. The fate of one barrack hut in Bergen Belsen stands out, however. When units of the British Army entered the camp on April 15, 1945, they encountered a catastrophe: everywhere they saw unburied corpses and sick and dying prisoners – mostly Jews – living in overcrowded, filthy barrack huts. The soldiers made a heroic effort to bury the dead and move the living to a nearby army base. On May 19, the last of the survivors left the Belsen compound. Immediately thereafter, a Vickers Armstrong MK II Universal Carrier drove to-



**Figure 2.** The last barrack at Belsen. Photographer Bert Hardy. Collection Robert Jan van Pelt.

ward the now abandoned wooden barrack huts and used a flame-thrower to set all but one ablaze.

The burning of the last barrack hut happened two days later with a bit of staging orchestrated by the commanding officer, Colonel H.W. Bird. He arranged for a 1933 model of the War Ensign, which carried an image of the Prussian Iron Cross, to be nailed to the structure, along with a large portrait of Hitler. And he ordered the erection of a large stake in front of the barrack hut, one which was to also serve as a flag pole. Sergeant Bert Hardy, who had been photographing in Belsen for a month, carefully set the rest of the scene for posterity. The barrack hut itself was soaked in gasoline and, after a few words from Col. Bird and volley shots fired as a salute to the dead, set on fire. The crowd cheered, the Union Jack floated out from the top of the flagpole, and the shutter of Sgt. Hardy's Leica clicked.

That desperate *auto-da-fé* ended a relatively limited act of physical erasure – sixty barrack huts burned – and initiated a larger process of forgetting, at least as far as barrack huts were concerned. Sgt. Hardy's picture suggests that this barrack hut, and by implication all the Belsen barrack huts, *deserved* to disappear from human memory. The Allied discovery of the horrors contained within the barrack huts marked a moment of truth from which the imagination has not yet recovered. In burning the barrack

hut, the British soldiers sought to make a clear statement: we need to move on; everyone needs to move on; let's erase a terrible, inassimilable past. But, as we have learned, things are never that simple: a second generation arose that felt burdened by that very past while also feeling short-changed because they had somehow missed one of the most momentous events of the twentieth century.

This, then, may help to explain why I began to visit Auschwitz in the late 1980s, and why I continue to do so today. It explains why I have read and reread Primo Levi's writings as if they were Holy Scripture, and why, in December 2012, my heart skipped a beat in that ruined and rotting barrack hut when Hans Citroen announced: "This must be Primo Levi's barrack."

## References

- Dossmann A, Wenzel J, Wenzel K (2007) Barackenlager. Zur Nutzung einer Architektur der Moderne. In: Schwarte L (Ed.) Auszug aus dem Lager. Zur Überwindung des modernen Raumparadigmas. Transcript, Bielefeld, 220–245. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839405505-012>
- Levi P (1947) *Se questo è un uomo*. De Silva, Turin.
- Van Pelt RJ (2018) Labor Service Barack Huts in Germany and the United States, 1933–1945. *Zeitgeschichte* 45(4): 507–536. <https://doi.org/10.14220/zsch.2018.45.4.507>