

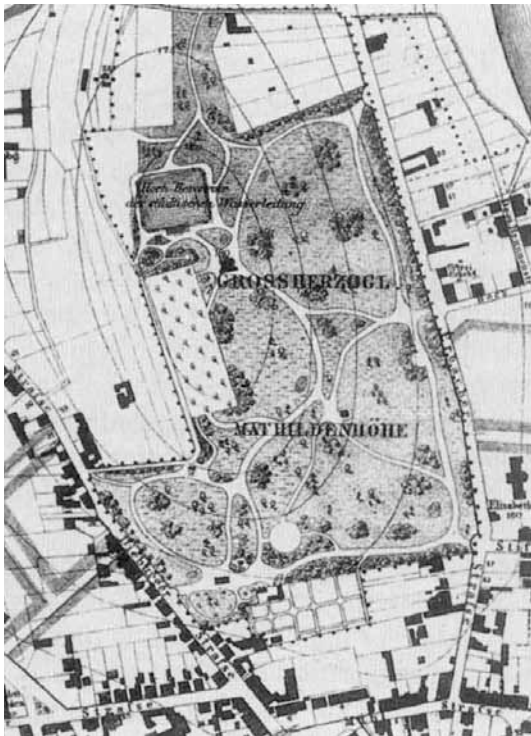
# The “Mathildenhöhe”



# chronicles of the Mathildenhöhe

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The chronology of the Mathildenhöhe from 1833 to date documents the main stages in the history of this “Muse’s hill” in Darmstadt, covering a selection of important exhibitions.



The Mathildenhöhe with the plane-tree grove laid out c.1800.

**1833** The park laid out by Prince Christian of Hesse-Darmstadt passed into the possession of Hereditary Grand Duke Ludwig III of Hesse and by Rhine after his death. Henceforth, the hill was known as “Mathilde’s Hill” after his wife Princess Mathilde of Bavaria. Used as a vineyard in former times, Prince Christian had a garden laid out on the little hill east of the city as early as 1800, making it accessible to the public. The plane-tree grove still exists today. The new owners laid out the English landscape park, building a pavilion and a summer-house.

**1880** At the highest point of the city, on the hilltop of the “Mathildenhöhe” park, a water reservoir was built from 1877 to 1880, supplying the entire city with drinking water until 1994. The water tower became “invisible” when Joseph Maria Olbrich positioned the artist colony’s exhibition building directly on the water reservoir from 1906 to 1908. Until this point, the planted structure had served as a viewing plateau. Steep stairs in the water reservoir lead down into two barrel vaults made of hard-burnt clinker, in which ice-cold, clear water still stands ankle-deep even today.

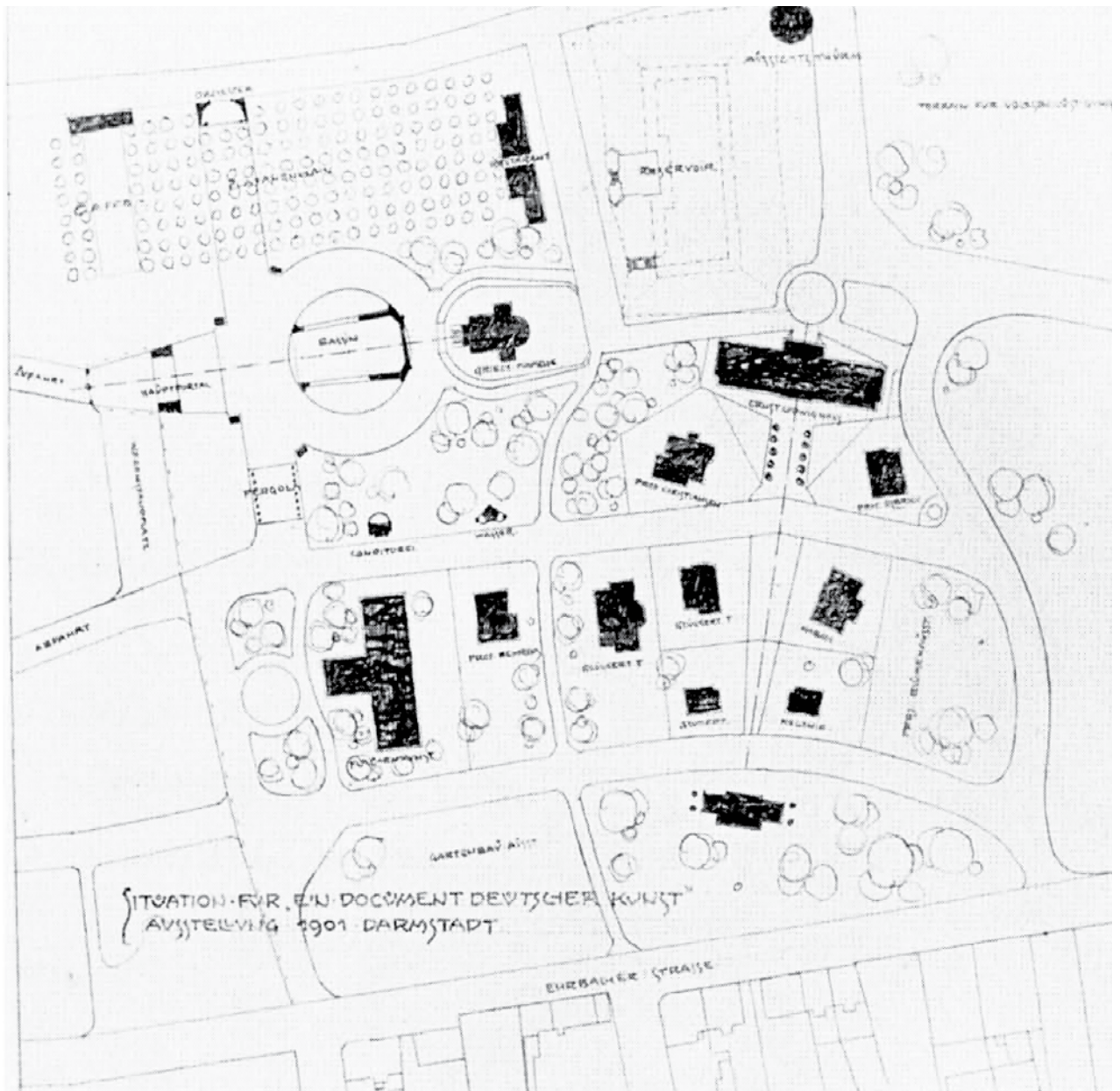
**1897** The Russian Chapel of St Mary Magdalene was built by the last Czar of Russia, Nicholas II, who married Princess Alexandra of Darmstadt, sister of the last Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig, in 1894. Not wanting to do without a church of their faith when visiting Darmstadt, the Czar and his wife had this lavish little private chapel erected. It stands on consecrated Russian soil, gold leaf adorning the three domes, and the three artists contracted to decorate the chapel were also from Russia, as was the Petersburg court architect Leontij Nikolavich Benois, Sir Peter Ustinov’s grandfather. Benois built a religious building rich in contrasts, with sandstone pilasters, colourful mosaics, and a majolica frieze by Villeroy & Boch. Following the murder of the Czar and his family in October 1918, the chapel passed into the ownership of the Russian Orthodox diocese. Services are still held there today.



Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig (1868–1937), the patron of the artist colony, c.1900

**1899** Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig founded the Darmstadt Artist Colony, which would become the scene of the European Stilkunst movement in the following years. It was during his visits to his grandmother Queen Victoria in England that Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig came into contact with the arts and crafts movement, a source of inspiration for Art Nouveau. The artistically minded prince called the first seven artists to Darmstadt in 1899: the Viennese Art Nouveau architect Joseph Maria Olbrich, the

sculptor Ludwig Habich, the painter, architect and later AEG industrial designer Peter Behrens, the medallist and sculptor Rudolf Bosselt, the graphic designer and painter Paul Bürck, the interior designer Patriz Huber, and the painter Hans Christiansen. Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig allowed them to use the Mathildenhöhe – an area totalling some 10,000 square metres – offering space for artistic development and the realisation of new Lebensreform ideas. Supported by the Grand Ducal patron, who granted the artists a basic income and a studio workplace, the artists were allowed to live and work here for three years. A total of twenty-three members were involved in the total work of art that was the Mathildenhöhe until the formal dissolution of the artist colony in 1929.



Joseph Maria Olbrich, plan of the exhibition  
A Document of German Art with the symmetrical layout  
of the artist's houses, 1901



The architect Joseph Maria Olbrich (1867–1908)

**1901** “We must build a city, a whole city! Anything less would be pointless! The government should give us [...] a field, and there we shall create a world. To build a single house means nothing. How can it be beautiful if an ugly one stands next door? What good are three, five, even ten beautiful houses [...] if the armchairs inside are not beautiful or the plates are not beautiful? No – a field; nothing less will suffice. A broad, empty field; and then we shall show what we can do. From the overall design down to the last detail, all governed by the same spirit, the streets and the gardens and the palaces and the cottages and the tables and the armchairs and the lamps and the spoons all expressions of the same sensibility, but in the middle, like a temple in a sacred groove, a house of labour, both artists’ studio and craftsmen’s workshop [...]” (Joseph Maria Olbrich, quoted in: Hermann Bahr, “Ein Dokument deutscher Kunst”, in: *Bildung. Essays*, Leipzig 1900, p. 45 f.)

The co-founder of the Vienna Secession and artistic director of the Darmstadt Artist Colony, Joseph Maria Olbrich, set out to tackle the task in Darmstadt armed with this vision. The Lebensreform around 1900, the unity of art, architecture, interior decoration and life are the central themes of those seven artists, who made the colony which was to be founded the subject of their first exhibition “A Document of German Art”: they presented eight individually designed, completely furnished artist and private dwellings, the studio building, the “Temple of Work”, and a number of temporary structures including a playhouse, a restaurant, the “House of Surface Art”, the entrance portal, and a flower-house.

The Darmstadt Artist Colony opened on 15 May 1901 with the official, highly symbolic inaugural play “Das Zeichen” based on an idea by Peter Behrens, who also wrote the commemorative publication “Festivals of Life and Art”. The exhibition site on the Mathildenhöhe was viewed by numerous visitors from May to October 1901 and featured light shows and theatre performances. The spectacular exhibition gained Darmstadt renown as a centre of Art Nouveau alongside Vienna, Prague, Brussels, Paris, Glasgow and Nancy.



Darmstadt Artist Colony, the Christiansen House, Russian Chapel, and Ernst Ludwig House, colour postcard, c. 1901

**1904** The second presentation of the Darmstadt Artist Colony was far more modest than the first exhibition. With several artists having left the colony, the sculptor Daniel Greiner, interior architect and craftsman Paul Haustein, and painter and graphic designer Johann Vincenz Cissarz were called to Darmstadt. The centrepiece of the exhibition was the meanwhile largely destroyed group of three buildings by Joseph Maria Olbrich, commonly held to be a perfect example of middle-class housing. The show also featured a spacious garden restaurant made up of five pavilions and a bandshell, that were removed after the exhibition.

**1908** The third exhibition on the Mathildenhöhe, the Hessian Regional Exhibition for Free and Applied Arts, featured not only members of the Darmstadt Artist Colony, but also artists and craftspeople from all over Hesse. Albin Müller was in charge of the concept, with Joseph Maria Olbrich, ceramic artist Jakob Julius Scharvogel, sculptor and glass artist Emil Schneckendorf, and goldsmith Ernst Riegel taking part as members of the Darmstadt Artist Colony. The centrepiece of the exhibition was

the presentation of showhouses for workers commissioned by Hessian building contractors. The result was a small workers' settlement at the edge of the artist colony that was dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere (Erbacher Strasse) after the end of the show.

The focus of the Hessian Regional Exhibition was also on the inauguration of the new Upper City of Darmstadt on the Mathildenhöhe: the monumental building complex with its Wedding Tower and adjoining exhibition building is Joseph Maria Olbrich's last work. The Wedding Tower, also known as the "Five-Finger Tower" because of its characteristic spire, was the city's wedding gift to Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig, who had married the Princess of Solms-Hohensolms-Lich in 1905.



The jury of the exhibition of the Deutscher Künstlerbund in Hall 3 of the exhibition building, including Lovis Corinth, Christian Rohlf, Max Klinger, Ludwig von Hofmann, 1910

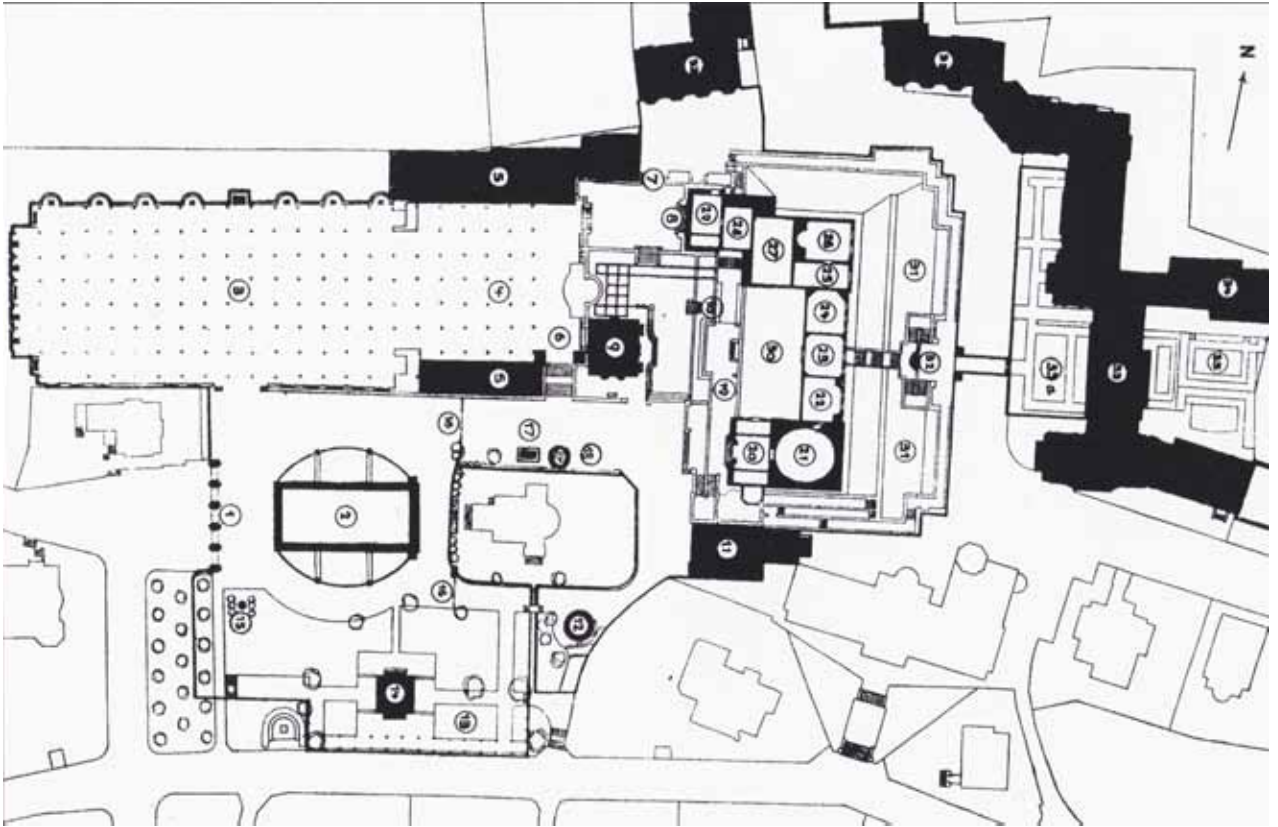
"Yes, we must call him a daredevil, Olbrich was one of the founders of modernism. One of its first daredevils. The conviction of his artisanship burned in him, still trying to find the right way. In the middle of his efforts, he has now been interrupted. Only now would he show that he was equally capable of creating great architecture. Düsseldorf's Tietz department store is under construction, the exhibition hall and the Wedding Tower in Darmstadt, its five peaks towering up like beseeching fingers, are his final works." (Obituary to Joseph Maria Olbrich, in: Die Zeit, 9 August 1908.)

**1910** The only exhibition of the Deutscher Künstlerbund in Darmstadt was under the "patronage of His Royal Highness the Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig of Hesse". Friedrich Wilhelm Kleukens designed the poster and catalogue.



The final Artist Colony exhibition in Darmstadt with the Lion Gate designed by Albin Müller & Bernhard Hoetger, 1914

**1914** More buildings were created as part of the artist colony's last exhibition, the Darmstadt Artist Colony Exhibition in 1914. The Mathildenhöhe gardens were also redesigned. The artistic director was Albin Müller, who, in addition to the "Lily Pond" in front of the Russian Chapel, also designed the "Swan Temple" and the large block of rented flats. Only a fraction of the latter survived the Second World War. Visitors entered the exhibition site through the imposing Lion Gate, a work created jointly by Albin Müller and the sculptor Bernhard Hoetger. The latter also designed the sculptures for the plane-tree grove, in which he impressively visualised the cycle of life, the "coming to be and passing away". Temporary buildings completed the exhibition site, with an exhibition restaurant designed by Emanuel Margold, a fashion pavilion, and a Sekt hall after plans of Edmund Körner. The mosaics "The Kiss" and "Goddess of Love" in the foyer of the Wedding Tower were designed by Friedrich Wilhelm Kleukens. The exhibition of the Darmstadt Artist Colony had to be prematurely cancelled due to the outbreak of the First World War.



site plan of the artist's colony, 1914

**1918** The last exhibition under the patronage of Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig, "German Art, Darmstadt 1918", showcased works by Hans Thoma, Max Liebermann, Max Pechstein, Ernst Barlach and Georg Kolbe.