Onkel Toms Hütte
Natalie Holmes unearths the intriguing story behind Zehlendorf’s most singular housing estate... Imagine this: in 1925, 70,000 Berliners lived in basements and about 600,000 people inhabited rooms shared with three others.

Many apartments had little or no heating and the lack of running water made for appalling sanitary conditions. In winter the apartments were damp and icy. In summer they were unbearably hot.

Times were tough, so in order to survive, women and children frequently had to work at home, turning some of their valuable living space into working areas, only adding to the horrendous noise and smells of a sickeningly claustrophobic effervescence.

With the industrial revolution, Berlin’s population had exploded to 4.5 million by 1920. Exacerbated by the style of housing, the city quickly became one of the most populous and densest in the world, where life for the majority of its inhabitants was one of misery and abject poverty.

The most common type of building at this time was a square block - 22 meters high and 150 wide, according to the limits of planning regulations of the time. This block consisted of a Vorderhaus facing the street, two perpendicular Quergebäuden, a side area (Seitenflügel) and the backyard (Hinterhof).

With demand for housing so high, it was not unusual for up to 600 people to cram into one of these tightly knit constructions; over 1000 people lived at the building on Ackerstraße 132 in Wedding, probably breaking some grim record at the time.
The (recently formed) Weimar Republic had to take drastic action to alleviate the growing housing crisis, and architect Martin Wagner was a key figure in the housing reform that followed.

A dedicated socialist, Wagner recognised the failings of purely capitalist projects and set about pursuing a more sustainable form of financing. He was instrumental in the creation of the GEHAG (Gemeinnützige Heimstätten-, Spar- und Bau-Aktiengesellschaft - Housing Cooperative for Savings and Construction) in 1924.

Working with his contemporary and fellow architect Bruno Taut, Wagner was also a rationalist, advocating the replacement of manual labour by machines, which he believed would liberate the workers. Inspired by the towering steel structures being constructed Stateside, the pair saw mass production and prefabrication as the solution to driving down construction costs by cutting out the middle man.

The first product of this new wave of building technique was Britz in Neukölln, the site of the famous Hufeisensiedlung (Horseshoe Estate) that went on to become an emblem of the movement and part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, along with five other subsidised projects (built between 1910 and 1933) that together make up the Berlin Modernism Housing Estates.

In 1926, Taut worked with architect Hugo Häring to design and build Onkel Toms Hütte. Financed by the GEHAG and heavily influenced by Taut’s previous partnership with Wagner, Onkel Toms Hütte is relatively underrated as a building project that was arguably revolutionary in both its theory and execution. Taut visualised a Utopian society - classless and at one with nature, and criticised the capitalist system, describing it as a headless body, selfish and utilitarian.

Onkel Toms Hütte, the penultimate stop on Berlin’s U3, is testament to Taut’s success. Named after Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1853 novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the district apparently acquired its label in around 1885, after a local pub-restaurant (Gaststätte) landlord called Thomas installed cabins in his beer garden, which came to be known as ‘Tom’s Cabins’. Situated on the edge of the Grunewald forest, bounded from the west on Riemelstellerstrasse and from the east on Holzungsweg, the estate’s trunk access road is Argentinische Allee. Perpendicular to this is Onkel Toms Strasse, and the aforementioned Gaststätte, which is sadly no more, was located near the junction with Riemelstellerstrasse.

The housing estate that Taut created on the 12-hectare site is a triumph of colour and light. Rationalist in influence but human in style, the accommodations are somehow conformist but not monotonous. Back in the
twenties, Taut anticipated his buildings’ degradation over time and allowed for this in his design so that, unlike most other ageing housing estates, they look as modern, warm and comfortable now as they must have when first erected. More so, perhaps.

The buildings are modernist and practical, but Taut avoids monotony by including diversity within their homogeneity. Various sections of the sprawling estate look different to each other in terms of colour, shape and size.

Space is as important as what fills it, with housing blocks broken up at intervals with unpredictably pleasing paths, roads, woods and parks. The mechanical lines of the buildings are also softened by homely details such as asymmetric windows and invitingly individual doors.

Use of colour can often look gaudy and catalyse the ageing process, at least aesthetically. One of Taut’s many achievements with Onkel Toms Hütte is the enduring polychromatic success, apparently inspired by the likes of Mondrian, Kandinski and De Stijl.

Somewhere between pastel and primary, and clearly well-maintained, the buildings manage to be both vividly and subtly allochrous (changing colour); the blues, greens and oranges a comfortable compromise between urbanity and nature.

Nature features heavily in this space too. Towering trees are ubiquitous, and wildlife is all around. Bird-life is pleasantly apparent, actively encouraged by the numerous feeders and nesting boxes. In keeping with the architects’ intention to bring inhabitants closer to nature, the vegetation itself is important in the estate’s overall effect. The low-rise constructions are dwarfed by arboreal monoliths that cast dramatic shadows, providing an external wallpaper of dynamic, interrupted light.

Wandering around Onkel Toms Hütte, one gets the strong impression that this is a wonderful place to live. Almost a century since its construction, the area evokes an excitingly futuristic feel and would not seem out of place in a Utopian sci-fi story. That this estate has survived and flourished is all the more moving given the horrors of the decades that were to follow.