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Spaces-Places 2

Session 1: Paper Presentation

Home in the Highrise: History, Life, and Identity in East Germany's *Plattenbauten*

One of the most visible reminders of Eastern Europe's past are its large concrete highrise buildings, often found on the outskirts of cities. Monotonous rows of blocks of highrise apartment buildings, called *Plattenbauten*, are often found in weathered and run-down conditions, conjuring up notions of a perished Orwellian 'Big Brother' dystopia, and are frequently regarded as the unwanted inheritance of a collapsed political system. However, to understand the buildings' significance in their day it is helpful to take a brief look at their history. These buildings are true representatives of what can be called East German modernism and are remarkable because of their unique construction methods, their aesthetics, and the social considerations that were part of a thoughtful and comprehensive planning process.

Nowadays, they are often labelled as eye sores and examples of 'brutalist architecture' and the buildings and their neighbourhoods quickly fell out of favour with their residents after the collapse of Socialism and the East German State. After 1989 East Germany in particular saw enormous demographic changes with the collapse of its economy and the disappearance of much of its industrial base. Many of its former residents moved away to West Germany in search of new jobs or to what seemed more desirable new, suburban developments or to the newly restored inner-urban areas. The result of this particular type of economic and social flight was that the former high-rise developments in the *banlieue* were left behind and many apartments remained unoccupied. What had once been highly desirable, modern and convenient apartments, and thoughtfully planned neighbourhoods had fallen out of favour and were literally abandoned in a remarkably short amount of time. One of the ideological reasons for the sudden devaluation of the highrise buildings was without doubt their close association with the policies of the East

German government and the fact that they were literally a concrete reminder of the other German state. “The construction of the East German large-scale residential areas with its uniform building and apartment types has been identified as the most visible realization of the social concept of the GDR” (Richter 7).

After 1990 in a complete reversal of policies, the government funding of the unified German Federal Republic was now directed towards urban renewal, which had been badly neglected during the German Democratic Republic’s period as well as new suburban developments. Berlin’s *Prenzlauer Berg* is a prime example of the urban renewal of a 19th century working class district to hip, high end heritage area in the 1990s and 2000s. In contrast, the highrises from the 1960s to the late 1980s were often overlooked and underfunded as their future viability in the new Germany was debated. The demographic movement out of the highrise neighbourhoods meant that the population of these areas changed dramatically both in terms of actual numbers and also in terms of socio-economic status. Those who could afford it often left for better opportunities and a supposed superior quality of life, which quickly turned the former models of urban modernity into social flashpoints and problem neighbourhoods. As sociologist Steffen Mau describes in his recent study, these areas were practically overnight relegated to second class status and the East German highrise building became stigmatized as *Platte*, short for *Plattenbau*, which describes the buildings’ method of manufacture that used preformed concrete elements, so-called ‘plates,’ a special process, which will be explained below. It should be noted here that the derogatory term *Platte* was coined after the German reunification and coincided with the stigmatization of the buildings and its occupants of the former East Germany. A resident who remained in their apartment describes this loss of status and identity in an interview:

After 1990 the recognition was gone There was a lot of badmouthing of the [highrise] neighbourhoods. Then it was said that they all had to be demolished; nobody wanted to live there ... yuk. Then everybody wanted to leave these neighbourhoods. The young and the ambitious said: nobody wants to live in the highrise. (Mau 167)

This lack of desirability led to a rapid decline of residents and apartments were unoccupied. An estimate is that around 2.2 million industrially built apartments were constructed since 1958 (Mau 30), and approximately 360,000 have been demolished so far. This is a loss of around 15% of all industrially constructed apartments in what is the former East Germany.

How did it come to this? To put the large-scale demolition of East German concrete buildings in perspective one has to be aware that it represents the largest annihilation of residential space since World War II. Were these buildings and their residential neighbourhoods indeed the dystopian and depressing baggage of a collapsed system? A brief visit to explore their origins and the planning behind them can hopefully present a more differentiated picture and also explain the very recent rediscovery of this notable representative of modernist architecture. The hope is to provide a more balanced picture and examine the thought behind these neighbourhoods as prime examples of urban modernism, which many people in the days of the GDR were proud to call home.

In response to a huge housing crisis after WWII, the Government of East Germany made it one of its social and economic priorities to provide a large number of affordable and modern apartments to its citizens in the shortest possible time. The directive of the Central Committee of The GDR's ruling party (SED) at the 8th Party Congress in June 1971 decreed that the highest priority of its social and economic policy for the next decades was to be the improvement of the living condition of the population (Honecker 38). A key aspect in the implementation of this

policy decision was the rationalization of the production process of a new type of large-scale residential building, the type WBS 70 (Residential Construction Series 70), which was to become the norm for most multi-unit apartment complexes in the coming decades. In a multidisciplinary approach, the planners and architects worked together with social scientists to identify the needs of the population when creating entire new neighbourhoods: “Applied sociological research . . . has informed urban planners and architects to design the new neighbourhoods in a more flexible and practical manner in order to address the diverse demands of the residents. . . . In the future much will depend on the recognition of new factors, which the design of the residential space will have to address (Lembke et al. 42). Consequently, a crucial part of the integrated planning process of the buildings was to design the infrastructure of the new neighbourhoods at the same time. This included transportation, clinics, pharmacies, supermarkets, restaurants, pubs, and a special emphasis on educational buildings, such as schools, kindergartens, day care centres, sport and cultural centres, libraries, youth centres as well as opportunities to participate in leisure and cultural activities for the new residents. (Höhne 10, Krenz 23-24).

The most efficient way to address this scarcity of apartments as quickly as possible was to manufacture them by employing industrial production processes, thereby leveraging significant economies of scale. The majority of apartment buildings constructed in the 1960s-1980s in East Germany made use an industrial prefabrication process whereby large elements of the building, made out of poured concrete, were manufactured off-site in an assembly line process. In the factory the completed wall, floor, and ceiling elements consisted of variable pre-shaped concrete panels or ‘plates’ with a size of up to 6m x 6m, with 6m x3m the most common size (Lembcke et al 12). These were then preinstalled with functional and mechanical items, such as plumbing,

electrical conduits, door hinges, tiles, windows etc. The prefabricated elements were then transported to the construction site and final assembly and finishing happened on-site with the help of large rotary cranes that could support loads of up to 6300kg and had a reach of 25 meters (Lembcke et al. 12). This industrial process made the production as efficient as possible, saving costs as well as time to ensure that enough apartments could be supplied to a rapidly growing population (Hahnemann 26). The concept of the industrially produced apartment, however, is not an East German invention. It can be traced back to significant modernist architects, such as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, or Walter Gropius, who found that the industrial materials and processes were ideal to transform their design philosophy into reality. “The phrase ‘form follows function’ is often used when discussing the principles of modernism. It asserts that forms should be simplified – architectural designs should bear no more ornament than is necessary to function. Modernists believe that ornament should follow the structure and purpose of the building” (Rowe). Consequently, the two main design principles of modernist architecture are the use of colour and repeated patterns on the buildings’ façades (Dolff-Bonekaemper). Inspired by Le Corbusier’s modernist design ideas that rejected decoration for its own sake and embraced functionality (as demonstrated in his *unité d’habitation*), large scale developments gained their characteristic façade patterns that reflect the structure of its functional units inside. A particular trademark of these modernist designs was the use of concrete due to its almost infinite adaptability to any shape, its ease of use, and general availability as a construction material, its durability, and its modest cost. The smart use of a limited number of prefabricated functional elements allowed the architects an almost tetris-like number of combinations to design 1-4 room apartments and also to vary the footprint and shape of the entire building to create a multitude of unusual shapes such as a star-shaped building or a butterfly-shaped building

consisting of 2 wings with connecting accesses in the middle (as found in Berlin's Thälmann Park for instance). The idea was to build family-friendly apartments in buildings that provided lots of daylight and fresh air and frequently even had balconies as outside spaces (Zumpe).

So, what could the proud new resident expect once their application was approved and the new apartment was ready to move in? All apartments featured a very comprehensive standard equipment: central heating, hot water supply, garbage chutes, a bathroom with full size tub (and integrated shower connection), hand wash-basin, lightswitches, electrical outlets, doorbells, intercom, TV and phone jacks (with actual phone connections being extremely rare), complete kitchen with sink, stove and counter tops, linoleum flooring, and even a choice of wallpaper (Lembcke 24-25). In light of the prewar standard of most apartments with outside bathrooms, often lacking hot water supply and making do with coal fired stoves, this was a very desirable standard equipment.

To maximise the space and to group the installation walls together, kitchens and bathrooms were inside rooms connected to a passive venting system. The kitchen was small and often had a pass through to the dining area for added convenience. Much like the outside design of the buildings, the inside was also supposed to be informed by the new, modernist design principles. To this purpose handbooks and brochures were published or distributed to help the new residents understand the concept of their homes and to make the most of their prized new place. Brochures, like a car's owner's manual, were given to the new residents providing advice on how to care for the new apartment and what to do in case of problems. For example, "in case of leaking waterpipes, immediately shut off the main valve in the basement and contact the resident caretaker and your neighbours" (Höhne 173).

More significantly these publications bridged the abstract notion of modernism and the lived experience by placing its design principles in a context of social values. One such book, a 'Primer for Living Spaces' goes to great lengths to define a modern style in functional terms. Somewhat idealistically the handbook postulates that principles of design no longer need to focus on representation and social standing since the socialist society has largely overcome the need to signal one's status to the outside world. "The 'better people' are no longer the better classes, but the people who work better. And the necessity and willingness to be the best we can is reflected in the appearance and the interior design of our dwellings" (Wohnraumfibel 26). The completed apartment will reflect the residents' self and "their interests, and tastes. It is also a reflection of the society in which they live, and which has formed them" (114). By giving the reader practical advice on how to furnish their new apartment in the most efficient way, the primer also provides a commonly understandable definition of modernism: "What is the meaning of modern? Modern is what meets our requirements. And these are to minimise the amount of unnecessary work our apartment creates, to have as much space for ourselves, and to be able to do the things we like without infringing on the those who live with us. Basically, all the things a family does in their daily life (31).

Consequently, the most important criterion for the design of an apartment are its many functions during the course of the day. "Our apartment should first and foremost serve the needs of our daily life. Our daily routine is the central issue and the design and furnishings in the apartment need to support it" (27). The typical activities of the residents are then enumerated, such as cooking, eating, sleeping, doing homework, bathing, doing laundry, playing, socializing, entertaining etc. The point of all this is that "the apartment and its furnishings have to do justice to all these various activities and ... a ranking of them will allow us to prioritize our needs" (27).

The practical advice to modern living is an entirely functional approach. Once the basic needs and traffic patterns are identified, the furnishing will be chosen to address these needs. The following questions are posed in order to identify the residents' needs: "How do I save work and avoid unnecessary trips in the apartment? How do I keep as much possible space of the apartment for myself? And what is the best way to organize all day-to-day the processes in available space in the apartment" (31)? Once these questions are answered and the residents' needs are identified, suitable furniture and materials can be selected. Again, the emphasis is on easy-to-care materials and bright colours to reflect the natural light in the new apartments. The handbook informs us: "The use of new surface materials on furniture is increasing. Furniture is being covered with colourful layers of synthetic materials that complement the shade of wood. Table surfaces consist of tough *Sprelacart* (which is a laminate-like material similar to Formica in North America). These synthetic materials from our chemical industry are not a substitute for wood, but have properties that are superior to those of wood; they meet our desire for a colourful living environment" (31). Responding to the Central Committee's demand for improved living conditions, the students and academics at the department of architecture at the University of Dresden studied the most efficient use of space in the newly planned and constructed apartments since older types of furniture were often designed for representation rather than functionality and thus too bulky and inflexible to fit the new spaces. In 1967 the designers Rolf Horn and Eberhard Wüstner came up with an entirely new line of furniture that was light and most importantly – modular. Pre-empting Ikea's revolutionary concept, the designers of the line MDW 60 (*Möbelprogramm Deutsche Werkstätten 60*) used only modular, standardized flat pieces of composite wood. These allowed for an almost unlimited number of combinations and could be configured individually (Höhne 56). It is no coincidence that the design principle of the furniture

mirrored that of modernist architecture. In particular the shelving units included a large number of functional elements, such as open and closed shelves with doors, spaces for stereos and TVs, or integrated desks. The most significant characteristic was that the choice of modules or elements allowed the owners to design their own wall units. In the words of the designer: “the user as the finalist” (Höhne 56).

So, to conclude, was East Germany’s great modernist experiment in residential construction a success? The answer is a resounding yes and no. The goal to build as many apartments as possible in a short time was certainly accomplished. In addition, the residents were clearly appreciative of their new apartments and their neighbourhoods. As witnesses will confirm, to be allocated a brand-new apartment with all the modern conveniences was indeed considered the next best thing to winning the lottery. But the collapse of the GDR was also the end of the experiment of residential modernism. The neighbourhoods’ rapid descent to problem neighbourhoods and demolitions seemed to have sealed its fate. However, the most recent social and cultural developments in Germany give reason for optimism. A dramatically rising demand for housing suddenly makes the reasonable rents in the highrises very attractive. More significantly, a younger generation has discovered the modernist architecture form the last century and uses creative solutions to make the old apartments work for them. In the spirit of their modernist designers, the prefabricated units are relatively simple to modify and several small units can easily be knocked together into bigger ones, separate floors can be connected by stairs to be turned into maisonettes, and even the stores on the ground-floor have been discovered by design conscious young entrepreneurs. It is almost as if these transformations that ensure the survival and adaptations of the buildings had been planned into their manufacturing process by their original architects, designers, planners, and builders.

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