

BUILDING STALIN'S GERMANY

ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION

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Introduction

Once in a great while the artifacts of a vanished culture are unearthed in their entirety and brought to light before an inquisitive audience. Socialist Realism, the emblem of "High" Stalinism, is undergoing just such a rediscovery.

Stalinist environmental design reached its high tide in the early 1950s, when its influence reached across a hemisphere bounded by Beijing at one extreme, and East Berlin at the other. Unlike Constructivism, the Soviet modernist style that became an architectural icon of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932), the neoclassical language of Socialist Realism has long been something of a scholarly *terra incognita*. Previous dismissals of this aesthetic tradition as "totalitarian kitsch" sustained an art historical narrative that interpreted Soviet modernism and classicism as aesthetic *and* political antipodes - and which unwittingly asserted the primacy of Western European historical experience by force-fitting Constructivism into the narratives that described modernist developments farther west.¹ Yet Soviet modernism and its neoclassical successor share resemblances that belie their stylistic opposition. Each, in its own time, rose to prestige as a representational idiom of state. And each was installed as such through the mechanisms of cultural revolution.²

Can Stalinist neoclassicism, a style often condemned as "reactionary" and "retrograde," really be the product of cultural revolution? The seeming contradiction lies in the biases of architectural history's master narratives. Like Constructivism, Socialist Realism was a vehicle of total social reform, and as such had a far broader assignment than the mere replication of neoclassical facades that it is credited with. As a working method that claimed to be valid in all representational endeavors from literature to architecture, Socialist Realism supplied design norms for socialist urbanism and a plot line for construction site heroism that was to build this new city in a blitz of worker-instigated "socialist competition." In its East German application, Socialist Realism envisioned an anti-Fascist future, assembling its national culture from symbols reclaimed from the wreckage of a Nazi past.

Tracing the web of technological, political, and social prescriptions incorporated in Socialist Realist monuments like East Berlin's Stalinallee is a task well beyond the limitations of a conference presentation. This paper will

thus focus on only two ingredients in East Germany's Socialist Realist revolution that today seem least compatible: the creation of an international language of socialist architecture from colonialist precedents; and the mechanism by which worker-activists, the new men and women of socialism, were mobilized to demand adherence to these Soviet-dictated design paradigms.

Socialist Realism and the "Appropriation of National Tradition"

On a quiet confluence of minor streets in Friedrichshain, just east of Berlin's city center, is a stubby 9-story housing block with the unlikely name "Hochhaus Weberwiese" - Weberwiese Highrise. Its current state of decay belies its rank as "one of the most important post-war buildings in Germany, from a historical point of view."³

It was with this 1951 design that East German architects were said to have finally learned the lessons offered by *das grosse Vorbild* — "the Great Model" — of Soviet architecture. The building's architect, Hermann Henselmann, was said to have produced Germany's first structure "national in form and democratic in content" — a cautious first step toward the standard description of Socialist Realism's working method, "national in form and socialist in content." The Weberwiese tower was celebrated as the poster child of East Germany's National Building Program. Stalin-era design histories portray the Stalinallee, the site of Henselmann's next big commissions, as the direct descendent of Schinkel's neoclassicism, a genealogy made possible by the Weberwiese's pivotal contribution to German Socialist Realism.

"Creative appropriation" of German neoclassicism was East Germany's answer to what critics there denounced as architectural imperialism. The postwar adoption of modernism in the other Germany was labelled "the tragedy of West German architecture" by authorities in the East. Rather than an appropriation of another national tradition, namely that of the Bauhaus, this was seen as symptomatic of colonization of West Germany by American monopoly capital.

This architectural dispute was the western front of a cultural revolution that raged in the USSR in the late 1940s, and which was echoed in the Soviet satellite nations in the early 1950s. It was known as the *Zdanovsbchina*, so-named after the Soviet Minister of

Culture, Andrei Zdanov. Its goal was to reaffirm the canons of Stalinism in the USSR in the wake of a global war that had momentarily shattered the social isolation established in the 1930s. In Eastern Europe the *Zhdanovshchina* displaced any presuppositions that the form and substance of a new socialist order would differ from the Soviet model. The condemnatory catch-phrases of this revolutionary battle against external cultural influence were “cosmopolitanism,” “formalism,” and (oddly enough), “constructivism.” These phenomena were seen as Western threats to the development of progressive — that is, Marxist/Leninist/Stalinist — national cultures.

For a self-proclaimed counterforce to Western imperialist cultural domination, Socialist Realism’s parentage and mode of dissemination to Germany were discomfiting to say the least. In the spring of 1950, a delegation from the East German Ministry of Construction left Berlin for Moscow. They returned six weeks later with a draft of new, anti-modernist guidelines for reconstruction, the “Sixteen Principles of Town Planning,” which had been more-or-less dictated by the delegation’s Soviet hosts. These guidelines were duly passed into national law on July 27, 1950.⁴

While in the USSR, East German designers were also shown examples of non-Russian architecture that were said to be suitably socialist as well as national in character: precisely the assignment awaiting resolution back in Germany. Illustrations of these exemplars appeared in numerous East German design publications of the early-1950s. Pride of place was given to exotic pavilions built to represent non-Russian republics at Moscow’s All-Union Agricultural Exhibition of 1939, often touted as the first successful expression of the rich assortment of national cultures encompassed within the USSR’s “Great Family” of nations. These essays in geographic and historical identity were seen as proof that a universal socialist culture was being built from the ground up, in a host of native dialects. Stylistically, the pavilions were a sort of cultural kit-of-parts, mounting locally-derived decorative motifs on a standard neoclassical chassis which was identifiably Soviet in origin. It was an expressive system that attempted to appropriate not just national form, but nationalist sentiment as well, obscuring Soviet cultural hegemony with a flourish of local color.

The representational architectures of Russia’s “near abroad,” as developed in the late 1930s, reflected the design legacies of 19th and early 20th century colonial expositions, a genealogy studiously ignored by Socialist Realism’s proponents. Imperial powers had also developed a synthetic heritage for their distant territories which was spun from native monumental and craft traditions. High Stalinism’s prescriptions for a harmonic collection of socialist national styles appropriated the tropes of colonial architecture, but with significant amendments to the genre. Whereas 19th-century imperial exhibitions claimed to reveal native culture in its unadulterated form, Socialist Realism took pride in the overt manipulation of such traditions. And while the exposition displays froze native cultures in an ambiguous and distant past, demonstrating them as incapable of change and advancement, Socialist Realism depicted

differing national cultures converging at full speed toward a predetermined communist destiny. Even considering these amendments, Socialist Realism bears remarkable affinities to the representational practices now associated with Orientalism. The irony of East German architects applying these formulas to their own neoclassical traditions in order to come up with a new socialist architecture lay not so much in the notion of the past as a vehicle of progress — a common enough theme in architectural history — but more precisely in the methods of this recycling. In buildings like Henselmann’s Weberwiese and the later Stalinallee, German neoclassicism is manipulated as local color in accordance with formulas which, as originally developed, defined exoticism as that which was non-Russian. Or, put differently, Socialist Realism’s “creative appropriation” of Schinkel forged a new German heritage that was “Eastern” in ways other than merely geographic.

The Battle for a New German Architecture

East Germany’s new architectural association, the Deutsche Bauakademie, introduced its first publication, a translation of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*’s entry on architecture, with a war cry: “We stand in the midst of a battle for a new German Architecture.” By 1950 the combat metaphor was more than just hollow rhetoric. *Neues Deutschland*, the S.E.D. Party newspaper, broadcast the campaign to the nation. Party secretary Walter Ulbricht called on workers and intelligentsia to defend socialism’s cultural front. His fusillades left no doubt as to the identity of East Germany’s architectural adversary. It was Bauhaus modernism, which, as readers were informed, was being perpetrated by designers in West Germany as part of a scheme to “disassociate the working people from their homeland, language, and culture in order to replace these with the ‘American lifestyle.’” World War Two’s aerial bombardment had been the first phase of this plot; it was being followed up in the West by a disfiguring barrage of glass boxes and crate-like buildings (*baukasten*). Most shocking of all was the presence of well-placed “supporters of formalism” among the ranks of East German architects.

The charges against leaders of the design profession were, in one sense, largely accurate. As of 1950, the architects-in-chief of East Germany’s three most important national design collectives — lead by Hermann Henselmann, Richard Paulick, and Hans Hopp — were all adherents of *das neue Bauen*, the updated Bauhaus legacy that had become a hallmark of West German reconstruction. Paulick, in fact, was a Bauhaus alumnus who had worked on design teams with Gropius in the 1920s; Henselmann and Hopp had held high positions in Hans Scharoun’s Institut für Bauwesen before assuming positions in the new East German Bauakademie. Even after East Germany’s architectural study-tour to Moscow had returned bearing the received wisdom of Socialist Realism, Paulick and Henselmann were still turning out design proposals for housing slabs and unadorned sports stadia that fit right in with mainstream West German design.

Reconstruction was charged with the ideologically

important task of representing the new socialist Germany, and it was clear that designers represented the trailing edge of change. By the late 1940s, contracting had already been restructured as the domain of “publicly owned” concerns; construction workers were reorganized into Soviet-style teams using Soviet building techniques; and private architectural firms had yielded to collectives. What was missing was the architectural aesthetic that would signify this radical reformatting of productive and social forces.

In this sense the Weberweise of 1951 stands as a memorial not only to the campaign for national reconstruction, but also to the year East German architects were finally brought into line. The circumstances of their conversion presents a composite picture of the strategies of cultural revolution in Stalin’s Germany, which combined coercion from above *and* below.

Top-down pressure was the strategy that made a convert of Henselmann. His support for Hans Scharoun’s modernism as a proper signature for a new socialist society and his failure to admire the new neoclassical Soviet embassy going up on Berlin’s Unter den Linden were more than an embarrassment for the regime. A taste for modernism, interpreted in the terms established by the *Zdanovsbchina*, was no longer merely aesthetic intransigence, but was now framed as a form of political deviance that betrayed the working class and its new nation. In June 1951 Henselmann was denounced in an article written by the editor of the Party’s national newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*. Entitled “On the style of building, political style, and Comrade Henselmann,” it demanded the designer’s immediate ideological change of heart. But Stalinist society was not forged by coercion alone. According to Henselmann’s contemporaries the newspaper’s stick was also accompanied by a carrot: The promise that adherence to the new standards of architectural professionalism would yield career advances.⁵ Henselmann’s amends included rediscovering the native patrimony of Schinkel and penning an expose of the reactionary nature of modernism, published in *Neues Deutschland* in December 1951. By the end of 1951 he was well on his way to becoming East Germany’s most celebrated architect, having been awarded commissions for the Weberweise, the Stalinallee at Strausberger Platz, and the directorship of the Institute of Theory and History at the Deutsche Bauakademie.

Pressure to conform to new standards was applied from below as well as from above. This strategy for effecting a revolution in architectural culture is demonstrated in the career of Otto Haesler, a Weimar modernist charged with the reconstruction of the industrial community of Rathenow, northwest of Berlin, in the late 1940s. Haesler’s primary task was to plan new workers’ housing. He brought to this assignment years of prewar experience in designing social housing, as well as early-postwar experience as a member of Hans Scharoun’s Institut für Bauwesen. His efficiency units, built in Rathenow in 1951, were miracles of *existenz minimum* compression, packing a one-room apartment with kitchen, bath and dining nook into a 35 square-meter package that could be built and furnished for under 10,000 marks; the target ceiling for new East German housing (by

comparison, Henselmann’s Socialist Realist Weberweise units officially came in at 78,000 marks, and were rumored to have cost even more).

When it came time for occupancy, the tiny apartments sparked complaints that were choreographed into a housing strike led by a Frau Küster, a model worker-activist at Rathenow’s Friedrich Engels Synthetic Silk Factory. Along with other activists, she refused to move into the new unit that awaited her, citing the “incorrect spatial and architectonic qualities” that she claimed made the building uninhabitable. Bathrooms lit only by a high frosted-glass window opening up onto a corridor, and a kitchen without a ceiling-height partition to separate it from the rest of the apartment were singled out for condemnation. The free passage of cooking smells to other rooms rendered the design “completely unhygienic,” and until the problems were resolved, Frau Küster and her colleagues were not moving in. The complaints were probably more due to the small size of the units than by their modernist form, and the “strike” was likely orchestrated from above — few people in a nation of inhabited ruins would have turned down a new apartment of any description five years after the war. The story of Frau Küster’s strike was published in a national newspaper, the *Tägliche Rundschau*, in December 1951. Haesler soon found himself relieved of his duties at Rathenow, and would never be commissioned by the state to design housing again. His final commission was instead the reconstruction of the late 17th C. Zeughaus on Unter den Linden as the Museum for German History.

The campaign for a new German architecture was fought in East Germany in the manner of a Stalinist revolution-from-above. It conformed to the Leninist formulation of the Party as the leading edge of revolution, coordinating workers and the intelligentsia in a common battle against Western monopoly capitalism. The architectural front of this battle divided its labors by class, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate. Prescriptions for built space were enforced through the construction of new socialist identities, each with its own responsibilities and privileges. These scripted roles, as well as the emerging stage set of socialist neoclassical facades they were played out against, were all elements of Socialist Realism’s blueprint for total social reform. Given its foundation in colonial modes of representation and cultural transmission, and the coercion involved in establishing its new norms, the parallels to the imperialist system it claimed to replace are impossible to ignore. Yet, rather than simply reading this history as another object lesson in totalitarian evils, designers and architectural historians would do better to examine the Stalin era’s unpalatable use of narratives of deviance to frame differences of aesthetic opinion, a strategy for enforcing conformity that pervades the history of 20th century architecture on both sides of its east/west divide.

NOTES

¹ For an alternative history of Constructivism, see: Greg Castillo, “Constructivism and the Stalinist Company Town,” *Urban Design Review* 2, (England: University of Greenwich, 1997), pp. 1-20.

² The best source on this topic, in the context of Soviet modern-

ism, is: Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

³ Christian Borngräber, "Residential Buildings in Stalinallee," *Architectural Design* 52 (11/12, 1982), p. 35.

⁴ On the East German architectural pilgrimage to Moscow, see: Simone Hain, *Reise nach Moskau* (Berlin: Institut für Regionalentwicklung und Strukturplanung, 1995). It is interesting to note that at precisely the same time that East German

architects and planners were being sent by the Soviet Military Administration to Moscow for retraining, groups of West German architecture students and planning supervisors were being sent by the American Military Administration for retraining in the USA. See: Greg Castillo, "Cities of the Stalinist Empire," in Nezar Alsayyad, ed., *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Experience* (Aldershot, England: Avebury, 1992), p. 261-287.

⁵ Jörn Düwel, *Baukunst voran!* (Berlin: Schelzky & Jeep, 1995), p. 148.