

IDEA OF HOUSE

The Individual Residing in the Mass Produced

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Introduction

The Berlin Wall as a reference point marks the monumental political and economic changes that took place in Germany in the 20th century, but more so, the Berlin Wall reveals the divisions between East and West Germany regarding homes and domestic spaces between its construction in 1961 to its demolition in 1989. The Berlin Wall has had its greatest impact upon East German domestic architecture with the construction of housing complexes called Plattenbau, which were built by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) throughout the 1970's and 1980's. As one travels through the former East, these Plattenbau dot the East German landscape and can be seen in cities such as Rostock in the north, and eastern Germany such as Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden and Dessau. This paper looks at the homes built in East Berlin prior to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and then examines the ways in which the new government has sought to incorporate the homes from the East into a "new" Germany following unification. The government's inheritance of the Plattenbau challenges them to address a new set of social and technical issues in regards to integration. In doing so, the role of the interior provides

Fig. 1. View from the Fernsehturm in Berlin looking West.

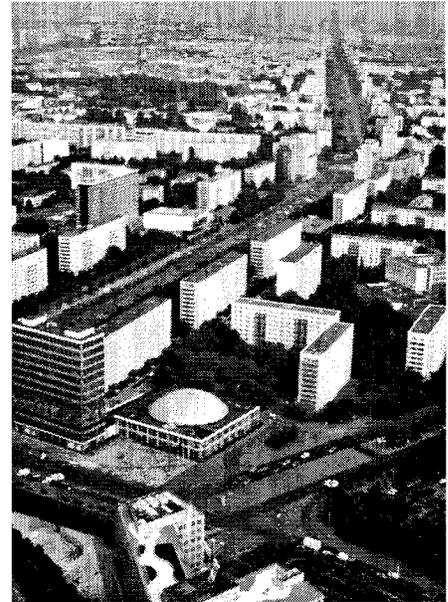


Fig. 2. View from the Fernsehturm looking East.

a link between these issues as the government must find a way to keep the buildings occupied while renovating them and their surrounding landscape.

City planning maps and aerial views of a divided Berlin allow us to examine the different approaches to reconstruction that took place after World War II in both East and West Germany. As the West chose to build within the existing fabric of the city, the East German government chose to demolish crumbling buildings and to construct a new city fabric that took its cues from cities in the Soviet Union. A view from the observation deck of the Fernsehturm (TV tower) in Alexanderplatz in the East reveals these differences made in the city fabric. To the West stand the Mietskasernen buildings, which are the turn of the century brick and stucco buildings. The Mietskasernen were used to house workers during the industrial revolution as Berlin began to rapidly expand. These buildings define the original fabric of the city, thereby shaping the city blocks and the above ground circulation. To the East, one can see the contrast of an orderly pattern of large pre-fabricated buildings that are taller than the Mietskasernen and are more spread out leaving larger open spaces between them. The effect of these buildings from an aerial

view reflects a highly ordered system that loses the typical European cityscape of smaller dense buildings. Although the Wall is no longer visible, the division of the domestic architecture is seen in these aerial views.

The significance of the demolition of the Mietskaserne with the replacement of the Plattenbauten is captured in the East German film from 1972 *The Legend of Paul and Paula*. This film uses the differences between the old Mietskaserne and the new Plattenbau buildings to show the division of lifestyles that took place in the GDR housing. The movie was controversial at the time because it challenged the lifestyle that the Socialist government had envisioned for its citizens. This is revealed in the film as the main character who is a party member chooses to leave his Plattenbau apartment and move into the Mietskaserne, thereby rejecting the new. At various scenes, a view of the Mietskaserne is shown being imploded as a new Plattenbau is revealed from behind the dust and located in the path of the sun. This film depicts the architectural changes that people saw as old buildings were destroyed to make room for the new Plattenbau. Upon the interior, this included the changes made to heating systems where the coal heated ovens that occupied a large area of a room would now be replaced in the Plattenbau with new radiant heating systems. As these homes were changing, their lifestyles were also affected as the political sphere shaped their domestic spaces.

As the East swept away the remains of war damaged buildings, the city blocks changed with the new buildings that also included the introduction of new forms of transportation. Above ground tram-lines were built to accommodate residents throughout East Berlin and the satellite cities where the majority of new housing was built. A transportation map reveals the separate set of lines that stay within the Eastern border line. Even after unification, the tram-lines still only accommodate the East.

Development of East German Housing

The influence of Soviet housing methods began to be felt with the alliance of the East German leader, Walter Ulbricht and the leader



Fig. 3. View of housing in Marzahn-Springpfuhl.

of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev in 1961 wherein they sought to collaborate on finding a resolution to the housing shortage in the East. The shift in Soviet housing gained ground in 1955 when Khrushchev began to push the Communist Party and Soviet architectural community to convene several conferences on housing with the goal of treating housing as another commodity that could be industrialized and thus improve efficiency.¹ By 1958, the technology of pre-fabricated concrete panel systems was being implemented which technologically resolved the problem of a housing shortage. However, it is important to note that the notion of the apartment as a home for the family or individual was disregarded in the overall design.² Rather than finding a balance in housing between mass production and personalization, the hand of mass production won. Indeed, by the 1970s, the changes in housing became evident in the Soviet Union with the triumph of dense pre-fabricated housing blocks. These housing structures and the technology would be transported eastward into the Soviet sector of Germany.

The large satellite cities of Marzahn, Hohenschönhausen, and Hellersdorf, housed one third of East Berlin's residents by 1989, with Marzahn alone housing fifty-six thousand apartments.³ These satellite cities contain a limited number of building types. In plan, a

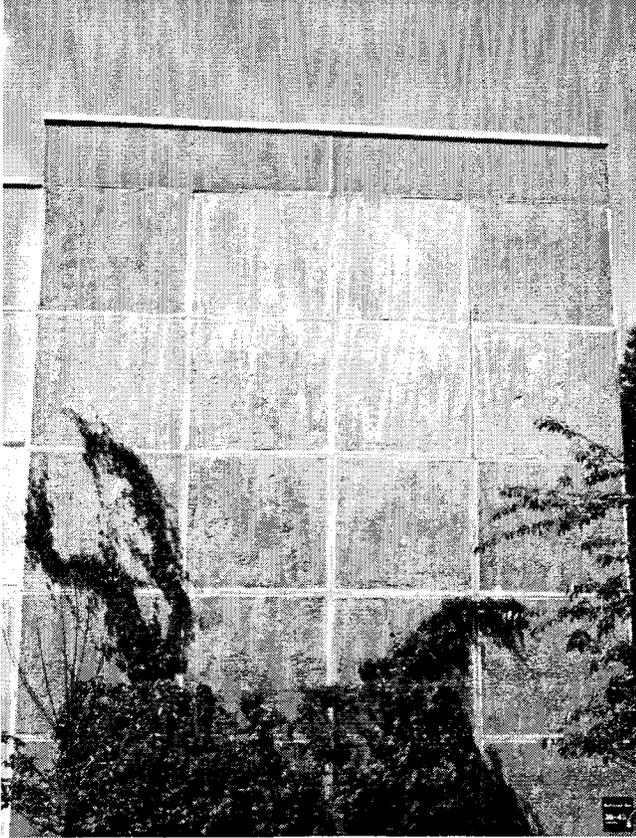


Fig. 4. Exterior grid of concrete panel construction.

majority of the housing appears as long thin bars that continue endlessly into the horizon. A second type of building is a large tower that reads as a dot in plan, yet when seen in reality, they read as anonymous towers in a landscape of repetition. Building layouts reveal open corners where two buildings at a perpendicular could not meet as a result of the limitations of the construction methods where the cranes were unable to complete corners. The original intent for these satellite cities contained all the necessary support buildings for a community to function, such as schools, parks, sports complexes and community centers. Yet, in the process of building the housing, many of the necessary support buildings would never be built aiding in the decline of occupant satisfaction in the satellite cities.⁴ In the development of these building types, the Soviet

Union was aiming to narrow the number of types in order to design more efficient housing that East Germany would inherit. The prefabricated concrete panel system would dominate the housing and re-appear in the support buildings such as schools. These buildings in East Germany were categorized into types with names such as QP, WBS 70, and P2, where variations in floor plans were further developed.⁵ The floor plans would vary allowing for apartments with families and individuals, yet as the floor plans were developed, the plans would be repeated so that the interior and exterior remained anonymous. The long bar housing structures would normally be segmented where apartments would take on the proportions of a shoebox, and then divided efficiently by parallel walls throughout the volume of the bar.⁶ The interior of the buildings illuminates the relationship between the political system and its citizens. In East Germany where the citizens were considered "equal", the housing was also built to be anonymous, uniform and equal. The floor plans of these buildings do not lend themselves towards the personal. The most personal space these buildings offer are windows and balconies that allow one to see out along with balconies providing a place to put prized window boxes that allows for the individual to express themselves on the exterior. The anonymity extends from the planning of the complexes and reaches every scale down to the standard issued front door.

Later, a result of implementing the anonymous kit of parts meant that there was no typology used to define the shape of homes. The housing reveals the role of the engineer in developing building technology as opposed to the role of the architect whose responsibilities include recognizing and solving problems through the knowledge of programmed space, the interaction of people, the aesthetic needs of an occupant, the site and materials. In the case of these large housing complexes, the role of an architect is absent. Instead, the role of efficiency and the desire to build quickly and cheaply led the design of domestic spaces, and as a result, the housing complexes of the East do not take into account the desires of the occupants. This lack of attention to small detail and to individuality characterized much of East German architecture.

East Germans in the aftermath of World War II did not see the

repetitive dense housing negatively, but rather they saw new homes with modern radiant heating systems as a luxury from the outdated, dirty and sometimes dangerous coal heated ovens. The pre-fabricated housing made of concrete panel systems would allow for the East to build efficiently and fast, thereby replacing men with cranes, and brick and stucco with concrete. The assemblage of pre-fabricated parts did not require skilled craftsmen and required far fewer workers owing to the use of cranes to put the parts into place. This was important for the East German government for two reasons: first, many skilled laborers had fled to the West before the borders were sealed and second, the East felt the need to show the West that they could develop new progressive housing systems.⁷ A relationship can be seen between the political system where the citizens are made to be equal, and the housing projects that also present themselves as anonymous, uniform and equal.

Technology Meets the Domestic Interior

The approach to design in the East could also be found upon the interiors of the homes representing the ideals of the political system. As with the exterior of the buildings, the East also turned to the Soviet Union for its methods of design but now at the scale of the interior. Designs for domestic items, such as furniture, dishware and textiles were similar in development to the mass-produced housing. The objects were mass-produced and easily stackable whether it was furniture or dishware. Plastic molded chairs and tables were pervasive as their production became easier by implementing new plastic molding techniques. As a result, there were limited choices for furniture styles available to occupants in the east, thereby placing constraints on the occupants' choices to express themselves upon the interior. The domestic interior is part of the private domain that allows its occupants to express their interests, allegiances and family heirlooms. These objects naturally come from a range of sources whether they are newly purchased or handed down from relatives. Kerstin Dörhöfer reveals in her book *Wohnkultur und Plattenbau*, images of interiors in the Plattenbauten after unification where the occupants' possessions reveal a combination of the mass-produced interior furnishings along with personal possessions that do not fit the ideals of the GDR socialist system.⁸ It is not surprising that the interior becomes the place for

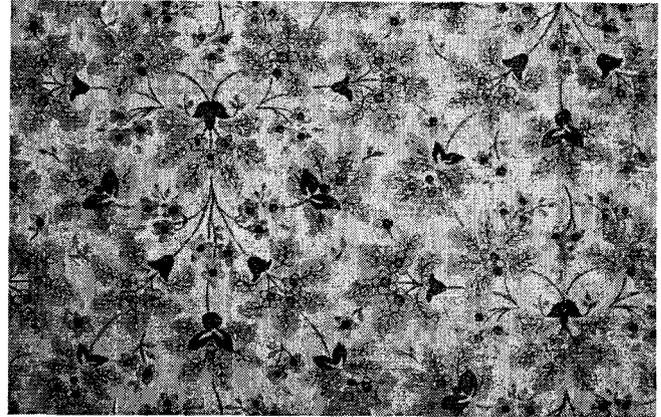


Fig. 5. GDR designed wallpaper for Plattenbau.

personal possessions. Dörhöfer reveals images of the ideal socialist interiors that can also be found in GDR design magazines such as *form+zweck*. These magazines show readers how to furnish their homes with GDR produced furniture along with further suggestions for assemblage of storage units that at a smaller scale, resemble the overall composition of the Plattenbauten. One can notice the sterile, lifeless space that speaks about anyone rather than a specific person in these mock-up rooms. The interior for those in the East became a place where the individual was allowed to be expressed, yet the government through its imposed economic system limited its citizens to the objects they had access to thereby limiting their expression.

Unification and the Renovation of Facades

The demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989 followed by unification in 1990 officially erased the border between east and west, yet an invisible border remains as citizens of the former east must acclimate to the west. Before and during the construction of the Berlin Wall, residents of the East chose to go West before the Wall was constructed and even during its existence when people would attempt to escape to the West. Now that the Wall is gone, there is a struggle for those in the east to acclimate to the west, and at the same time, there is a struggle for those in the west to perceive those in the east as equal. The reaction of residents in the east to the opening of the Wall resulted in a migration westward within

Germany in addition to other countries west of Germany. Since unification, 20% of east Germans had left for the west.⁹ The migration westward has affected the Plattenbau along with the identity of its residents. After the wall came down, the west German media commented on the appearance of the Plattenbau expressing their disdain for the monolithic structures they would prefer to have demolished. As a result, the occupants of the east became highly self-conscious of and embarrassed by their homes. What had previously appeared to them as a home provided to them after World War II with electric heat rather than coal ovens was now seen negatively as projected by the western media. This reaction inherently affects their identity as an individual and as a member of a community. The ideals of socialism meant that the housing allotted for individuals to reside in the same buildings where economic status did not play a role, for example, a construction worker would be a neighbor with a doctor. This situation existed in the east but most likely would not exist in the west. The opening of the border allowed for occupants of different economic classes to move (largely wealthier residents), thereby creating a problem where the housing had the potential to turn into slums. At the present, the Senate Department for Urban Development is renovating the Plattenbau along with completing adjacent structures that will offer the residents more amenities in these satellite cities. In Hohenschönhausen, one of the satellite cities, a new mall has been constructed where capitalism is now a remedy to the problem of out-migration in order to keep its occupants in their homes. This is now an example of the western culture and economics migrating eastward changing the landscape of former socialism through architecture. With this new mall, goods previously not available to the people are now available, the decision is whether or not these people will choose to bring these objects into their homes. Although unification has been an issue more tangibly related to the East with the housing as reminders of the GDR system, the country as a whole has felt the effects of renovation. Prior to unification both West and East Germany received substantial subsidies from the former Allied countries and the Soviet Union respectively; yet with unification these subsidies dramatically decreased. The German government has had to raise domestic taxes to replace this loss in subsidies in order to close the gap between the former East and West. Many of these taxes have been



*Fig. 6.
Renovated
facade of
Plattenbau.*

designated for renovation in the East that would specifically change the façade of socialism.¹⁰ From the government's point of view, they have initiated renovations of the housing to provide variation on the exteriors while repairing structures that have showed the failure of the concrete panel system. In the process of renovation, they have offered the occupants the opportunity to renovate the interiors of their apartments, allowing for individual variation upon the interior. The exteriors have been given a face-lift where cosmetically the buildings look different, yet it raises the question whether or not the change in appearance will acclimate the occupants, similar to the purchasing of western goods in the mall for a new appearance.

Conclusion

The German magazine, *Der Spiegel*, often publishes controversial articles revolving around Germany's past. A recent issue published an article on the potential for the Plattenbau to go beyond the renovations made by the government. The article focuses on a group of young artists and people who have moved into the Plattenbau and made their own renovation upon the interior. A few

apartments are shown that have been renovated to fit into a current 'hip' culture, showing the plastic molded furniture of the GDR but set within a new culture. Overall, the image of the apartments has taken on the image of artist's lofts. Another image shows a public mailroom space of the Plattenbau that has been painted a brilliant glossy red with new lighting fixtures and all surfaces polished, revealing a completely changed space. Only a few apartments are shown in the article revealing that this is not the norm, but it does offer a solution to problems that the government foresees.¹¹ At the present, many young people have moved out of the Plattenbau towards the west, leaving the housing with older residents. The government hopes to draw younger people to the Plattenbau to resolve a problem where these buildings could lose its occupants and therefore their use. At the present, these buildings provide 50% of housing in the former east.¹² If these buildings were to be torn down, the government would be faced with problems of where to re-locate occupants coupled with the cost of demolition and new constructions. A recent documentary film by Hubertus Siegert titled *Berlin Babylon*, follows a series of architects building in the recent wave of new architecture in Berlin. He focuses on discussions with architects and state officials, and at one point, shows a disagreement between two as how to pursue building in the landscape of East German architecture. Following on the heels of the traditional buildings in Berlin being demolished for the Plattenbau in the film *The Legend of Paul and Paula*, this film continues that process of demolition as the film shows a series of Plattenbau being imploded, leaving one with an uneasy feeling of 'homelessness.' This sense of 'homelessness' comes as a result of experiencing the interior of these buildings, where identities of occupants have been established. As the government continues to renovate these buildings, it could be through the individual and their mode of expression upon the interior that brings a solution to the migration from these buildings.

People have occupied buildings in Berlin both legally and illegally, the latter through squatting which the city has heavily experienced. These two approaches make different results. As the government continues to renovate the Plattenbau methodically and with supervision, an alternative is to renovate without governance. Recently, an art and architecture school located in the former East

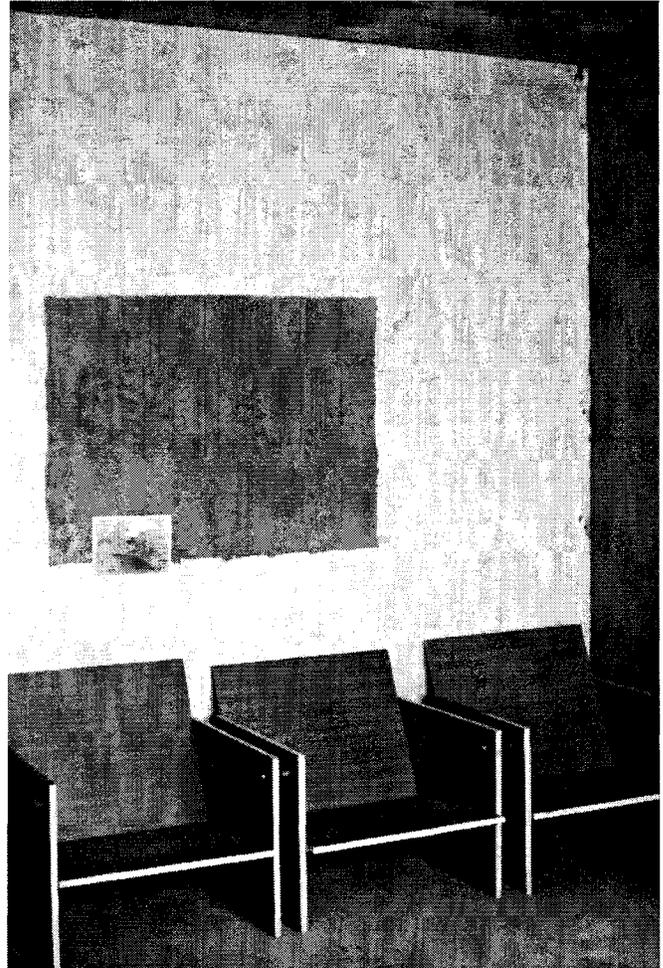


Fig. 7. Artists renovating the interior of an abandoned Plattenbau.

Berlin has invited artists from Europe to live and set up studios in an abandoned Plattenbau. They have been given the freedom to experiment with alternative forms of design within the building knowing that upon completion of their residency, the building is planned for demolition. The presence of these people from various places throughout Europe has not only affected the interior of the building, but also a larger area of the Plattenbau as residents can observe the alternative changes that the artists are bringing to the area.

The unification of Germany has erased the overall political

border between east and west, but the acceptance of western ideals into the former eastern homes remains an invisible border. During an informal interview with a German man from the west, he explained to me that a large percentage of east Germans are choosing not to accept the west into their homes and lives. Their work situation was clearly planned for them under socialism, unlike in capitalism where one's job is not always secured. The result of this is a higher unemployment rate in the east. On the other hand, those who felt restrained by working in a socialist government have been able to enjoy a new work place under capitalism. The role of how one has a sense of usefulness in their community is revealed through their work. If their sense of usefulness is gone, this is reflected back into the community and eventually in the home.

The events around the construction and demolition of the Berlin Wall helped in establishing a clear division between East and West. With unification, the ideals of each regime remain through the architecture and people. It is now up to the people to dissolve the conflicting ideals by acclimating to the new by migrating from one side to another, or acclimating by acceptance, bringing the new into their homes and lives.

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