

# Re-searching (for) the public

Other means of design in former East German cities

Ines Weizman

Lecturer  
London Metropolitan University  
Syracuse University London Program

28 Princelet Street, Flat 4  
London E1 6QH

0044 (0)20 72475040

ines@eruv.net



## Abstract

The collapse of socialism in former East Germany rendered its urbanism politically mute, although not defunct. Despite the common stereotype about its 'normative' nature, the history preceding 1989 shows that a new socialist urbanism was about to emerge. Yet individual initiatives which had imagined to contrast the repetitive housing blocs with service buildings, public institutions and urban landscapes, or in fact aimed to realize the original plans for those socialist housing estates were disregarded after the fall of the Wall. The new 'western gaze' created an imaginary geography in which socialist architecture was understood as culturally 'alien' to the traditional German city. The transformation of perception paved the way for the premature destruction of half-completed housing blocks. I will thus assess the future of socialist architecture at times of political transition, in a way that would reflect on methods of representation and public (mis)-information which to some degree have to be considered as intentional parameters of design.

## *Planning a public sphere*

After World War II, most major European cities experimented with the idea of new towns for reasons that varied from massive housing shortage, to the strategic requirements of a population dispersal that has become part of the security doctrine of the emerging nuclear age. For the former GDR (German Democratic Republic, or East Germany) as much as for the rest of the Eastern Block, the new cities, or rather city extensions of the mid 1970s were no longer directly the products of necessity reacting to the threats of an atomic attack, but offered a chance to fulfill an ideological promise. Far from the banal, grey and depressing stigma attached to them at present, the socialist architecture of the new towns represented one of the most enthusiastic experiments to realize societal utopias.

These urban projects have been planned down to their minute detail including public participation in the planning and construction process of these housing estates. The very mode of construction with prefabricated building elements was not merely a product of an industry rushing and maximizing the production process, but also attempted to promote the social vision which required equality, simplicity and a utilitarian approach as well as the subordination of individuality to collectivity. These huge housing projects at the periphery of larger cities had high aspirations to define themselves as sites of active urban life. Therefore, they tried to integrate as large a variety of public and social functions as possible so that they could function to a certain degree as a self-sufficient alternative to the historical city centre.

Specific norms prescribed in formulas and table the density, distances, and size of particular urban necessities, ranging from the number of restaurant seats, the size of a shop or supermarket to the number of personnel in the health service. Complexity also meant the creative collaboration of urban planners, architects, traffic planners, landscape architects, engineers and economists as well as artists commissioned for public art projects. Similar to the planning of the new socialist city centres in the

1950s and 60s, also these new socialist housing complexes, built in the late 1970s were planned according to prescribed political and ideological concepts. Under the term 'architecture related art' (architekturbezogene Kunst) particular artworks were assigned to particular themes given to the individual housing complexes. According to these themes, the names of streets and squares, open spaces and important public buildings were given. Signboards for the display of propaganda, lighting systems, advertisements and colour schemes were designed according to this theme. Although only a few of these ideas were actually implemented, the role of art as a part of the urban ensemble and as the instigator of public behaviour and engagement with the environment and hence the political sphere were very different from the role of art in the west. Clearly, the concept of the 'normative' here could be understood both as a prescriptive planning of urban life, restricting individual freedom and decision-making, but also as a proposal for a public sphere in which people would actively participate in the building of a new society.

## Tragic Ironies

The political shift immediately transformed the sphere of the domestic and daily life. Formerly greatly appreciated, carefully collected rare objects and artefacts were now considered value-less and swiftly discarded. During the gradual transformation that usually characterises the dissolution of power and cultural structure, the interior of the home became the first domain to be aggressively resented by its inhabitants who seemingly aimed to be 'liberated' from an externally imposed taste. As the relation to the concept of the 'new' has changed, it was the smell of plastic wrappings that invaded interiors. The idea of the intimate 'old' – stored and piled by a nation obsessed with collecting, was cleansed of its embedded memory, or of its so long prescribed location and function in the service of former communist state mechanisms. Almost immediately preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall a new social urban fabric was emerging, yet plans for urban landscapes inhabited with social institutions were interrupted by the shift into neo-liberal ideology. The new 'western gaze' created an imaginary geography in which socialist architecture was regarded as culturally alien to the traditional 'historicist' image of the German city. This transformation of perception paved the way for the premature destruction of half-completed housing blocks shattering a spatio-temporal framework that would have offered its citizens a range of public spaces and gathering places. During this switch in perception local voices went unheard as urban ambitions remained undefined within a newly differentiated urbanism. This paper aims to draw lessons from most recent transformation and partial demolition of a housing estate in Leipzig and aims to explore the potential of alternative urban planning strategies in situations of rapid political and economic change.

### *Assembly/ disassembly – the case of Leipzig-Grünau*

In November 1977, just a year after construction began, the first families moved into their new homes in Leipzig-Grünau. Planned for almost 100.000 people it was one of the three biggest housing estates. About 60% of the flats were offered to workers' families, while the majority of the remainder were shared between families with several children and young couples. The allocation of the precious apartments was centrally organised and the need for housing was so urgent that moving vans arrived literally as construction vehicles departed. When people moved in, neither the interior decoration of their homes nor their surroundings had been properly completed, and residents were asked to complete the work themselves in their spare time. For years, inhabitants lived in the middle of a construction site. However, despite the hardships, people living in Leipzig-Grünau felt privileged to have been given such comfortable flats with heating, hot water and modern conveniences, and an unshakeable belief that their neighbourhood would one day be beautiful reinforced people's sense of identification with the new environment. In the evenings, at weekends and on collective work assignment days – so-called *subotniks* (Russian for Saturday) – the residents laboured to 'complete' their new homes. And wherever the industrial assembly tracks could not reach, people were able to 'customise' their neighbourhoods by arranging the vegetation, playgrounds, street furniture, or loggias as they wished. This fostered feelings of local pride and encouraged residents to care for their communities.

Following the construction of Leipzig-Grünau, a study was conducted to supervise and review the social well-being of the residents. This study was the first of its kind in the GDR and was led by the sociologist Alice Kahl. It established communication channels which were designed to promote collaboration between the inhabitants and the planners. Kahl's analysis looked at 'demographic waves' and the process by which the Leipzig-Grünau housing scheme was inhabited. The phenomena of 'demographic

waves' were identified as reliable objects for research because the development had been populated in rhythmic surges. This was because groups of apartments were completed according to the chronology of the production lines and handed over to residents on specific dates to celebrate the progress of the scheme. The fact that new residents were mostly in their early



Figure 1: Plan of Leipzig-Grünau, 1988

twenties and had very young children was perfect for sociologists: for years afterwards, they could examine a variety of social characteristics and behaviours to compare the long-term development of different estates' populations.

After 1989, the findings of this research became obvious to everyone. In the mid 1990s, the huge shifts in population brought about by economic upheavals redefined society and the new social status of the residents was visible in their decaying and abandoned buildings. Families who were in their thirties when they moved into the first (1970s) apartments, were faced with the collapse of the economy and the likelihood that they would never work again, written off as 'too old'. At the same time, many of these over-50s were unwilling to abandon their familiar environments. In those areas completed and occupied in the late 1980s, demographic changes were much more dramatic. These estates were home to a younger generation which was theoretically capable of adapting to the job market but which often preferred to migrate to the West in search of better job opportunities.

Population migration is a complex social process: hiding behind the 'invisible hand of the market' are the all too visible influences of cultural politics and issues related to identity and meaning, which all have an impact on urban form. However, as I will try to show, the 'abandonment' of Leipzig-Grünau cannot be blamed solely on the economic collapse of the former East Germany, nor on the accentuation of social structures and divisions which encouraged migration to the western half of Germany or to suburbia. To a large degree, it was the fault of the new authorities, who were unwilling or unable to understand the concepts and values which characterised the organisation of the urban and the architectural fabric. Their narrow-mindedness undermined the housing estates' cohesiveness, which in turn helped to dilute the residents' sense of pride and privilege. The criticism of 'socialist housing projects' has gone beyond – except in the minds of the ignorant – a mere aesthetic critique: it has now taken on institutional and architectural forms. It seems almost as though population 'shrinking' was part of a plan to re-appropriate the city by erasing the 'unfamiliar' fabric of a competing ideology. The demolitions are a symptom of particular ideology and it is worth studying how this process is played out, what form it takes and how the configuration and coherence of the urban fabric is affected by 'strategic' demolition schemes and by a form of 'participatory' discourse which – rather than encouraging people to emotionally and financially invest in their home environment – misinform and confound people's plans for the near future. In a way one could consider this apparently 'agent-less' attitude as a means of design.

After the Wall came down, planners and architects initially believed that the collapse of the planning economy would finally facilitate a realisation – a completion – of their projects. It wasn't to be: despite early promises to the contrary, all housing projects in the former GDR were stopped.

Leipzig-Grünau, according to the new planners, was ‘malfunctioning’, partly due to the ‘lack’ of attractive shopping. Opportunities for big profits looked promising, so in 1995 a massive shopping centre – that ubiquitous prerequisite of Western planning – was parachuted into the heart of the housing scheme. Built by ECE Projektmanagement GmbH – a major Western investment company that specialises in shopping centres – the development offers more than 24,000m<sup>2</sup> of retail space, comprising around 120 shops, a cinema, cafés, restaurants and a multi-storey car park. As with most projects of this kind, the commercial success of the new



Figure 2: Allee-Center Leipzig, Aerial photography, 2000

shopping centre destroyed the prospects of the smaller shops and markets that opened after the collapse of the Wall, and channelled public events into its highly regulated space. Yet the functional unbalancing of the housing schemes is not the only problem. Because the centre is sited in an area that the original planners had earmarked for a variety of social and commercial functions, and effectively blocks the main boulevard axis of the estate, it disrupts the flow between two of the major housing estates. In this way, the centre has dealt both a symbolic and a practical deathblow to the ideas of socialist planning. The route between the two housing complexes is now covered by this massive structure, and when it is closed the only link is a narrow (and scary) iron tunnel that runs beneath the huge complex. The privatisation of public space which has characterised the post-reunification years is clearly presented here in its urbanistically most extreme and excruciating form.

The areas immediately surrounding the shopping centre were, of course, ‘beautified’. Curves, arcades and white plastered façades were sprinkled around to promote the ‘new’ aesthetics of consumption. The ‘deformation’ of the axis was essentially designed to undermine the symbolic importance of the whole housing scheme; offering a counter-urbanism that would resuscitate the city with a competing ideology. Apparently, a direct ‘editing’ of the past was required to counteract the ‘poisonous’ ideology which had inscribed itself into the very look of the place. Even more disturbingly, this ‘off the peg’ shopping centre – whose design was doubtless influenced more by theories on maximising consumption than by any consideration of its surroundings – did not quite fit into its urban environment, whose fabric was forced to retreat to make room for the new giant. Two neighbouring tower blocks were denied light and space and initially emptied beneath the sixth floor. However, once the shopping centre had cut the avenue in half, the tower blocks’ role in outlining the anticipated public and cultural centre was redundant and they were subsequently demolished.

Under the GDR, a combination of ideological pressure and considerations over the historic context of the city meant that relatively few tower blocks were constructed in the centre of Leipzig. However, in Leipzig-Grünau, *PH 16* tower blocks fitted in well with the designs of complex urban planning, both functionally and spatially. Leipzig-Grünau was never intended to be a ‘suburban’ housing estate: its planners combined elements of the garden city with mass housing to create an urban environment which rivalled, in some ways, the importance of the old city centre. The tower blocks which punctuated its skyline merely served to underline the significance of the area and its cultural axis. These multi-storey buildings were designed as landmarks which would mark out a ‘centre’ that was spread along

boulevards. Their construction was seen as the main achievement of the mid-1980s because they needed special planning permission and more generous budget allocations. The blocks were expensive to build due to the comparatively high cost of steel and the need to install lifts. Consequently, they were objects of considerable civic pride for planners as well as residents. The tower blocks were also popular because their smart apartments offered attractive views over surrounding developments and green spaces and particularly because the maisonette apartments on the top two floors offered a welcome change from the other panel-built homes.

In 2002/3, when the decline in population became apparent and the removal of tower blocks became a priority in the reorganisation and reshaping of the project, the two blocks next to the shopping centre were amongst the first to be earmarked for demolition. The allied housing association that owned most of the housing stock in Leipzig-Grünau opted for a major demolition scheme, focusing primarily on tower blocks. Out of Leipzig-Grünau's twenty blocks, only five remained by the end of 2004. However, the removal of these orientation points helped to destroy the project's order and balance. The tower block represented a key feature of modernist city planning, and for the GDR it was an important element in the choreography of the city. But it has since become the most fragile of urbanism's formal components. The housing association responsible for the destruction of Leipzig-Grünau's towers argued that they suffered from maintenance and management problems. It is true that the basic architectural form of a tower has an inherent weakness and depends for its success on high-density, balanced occupancy in a relatively small area. We understand here how sensitive urban balance is and how apparently small transformations can produce dramatic effects. It only takes a few families to move out of a tower block or apartment block and the whole system of unpaid housekeepers, voluntary social workers, routines of neighbourly exchange, collective work assignments and human communication comes crashing down. The sense of belonging is undermined and the estate can be fatally damaged.

#### *A tragic irony*

In a self-fulfilling prophecy, Leipzig-Grünau became the failure it was initially declared to be by the new planners. Until 1989, its housing stock was considered among the most desirable, and far superior to the draughty, dilapidated, 19<sup>th</sup> century housing available in the city centres. Since then though, it has been partly destroyed; its fabric, disfigured and ravaged, could no longer offer inhabitants the integrated amenities and the quality of life they had come to expect. After 1989, the constant pressure to satisfy the demand for housing – which had preoccupied the GDR's planners for so long – was turned on its head. People started to leave the development and the city in large numbers: for suburbia if they could afford it, or, as the economy collapsed around them, for the western half of the republic in search of work. The demolitions in 2004 gave Leipzig-Grünau a completely new identity and atmosphere. What had been planned as a vital urban environment – a 'second city' – was deliberately deformed and stripped of precisely those elements of density which made it a 'second city'. It now appears to be in the process of becoming a kind of second-rate suburbia. It is always possible of course that the 'disappearing' city may transform into some kind of unimagined utopia: a gigantic ecological project and nature reserve. In 2004, it became clear that the city 'planning' strategies and removals of urban fabric, which were ostensibly designed to ameliorate the major social problem of large-scale population migration and shrinkage, had in fact caused considerable damage. Indeed, in the absence of a genuine planning strategy to manage the new 'freed' and 'de-densified' urban environment, the practice of 'Rückbau' now looks like a dubious form of urban appropriation.

The term 'shrinking' implies a proportional reduction; yet this is not what has happened in Leipzig-Grünau. Here, the urban environment was conceived and built on the basis of complexity and the harmonious distribution of elements: it was a network that owed its stability to the intricacy of the urban ensemble, sharing the same time and space. The thoughtless removal of singular objects from this system affected the environment as a whole.



Figure 3: after the demolition of housing blocs in Leipzig-Grünau, photograph, 2005

What happened to Leipzig-Grünau can therefore best be described as an amputation – an urban deformation inspired by the demands of profit and loss charts rather any consideration of the needs of the urban organism. Once the confidence and support of an estate's long-term residents is undermined, the damage to the area can often be irreversible. Indeed, many of Leipzig-Grünau's inhabitants are now fearful for the future of their neighbourhoods. In the absence of a master plan to regulate or 'design' the destruction, the abstract notion that tearing down buildings would somehow improve the quality of what remained turned out to be a farce. For no apparent reason, problem housing blocks were left standing, while others, in a good location and state of repair, were suddenly demolished. The truth was that although a great deal of money had been invested (often in the wrong place, in retrospect), the authorities and the credit institutions were unwilling to even consider, much less learn from, the ideas which had inspired the original builders.

#### *Searching for the public, constructing an archive*

If we accept that democratic procedures depend on active citizens, we also accept the need for a clear spatio-temporal framework that will allow people to exchange ideas and to debate in a functioning public sphere. East German cities were full of public spaces and these functioned quite efficiently by the standards of the ideologues who used the city to orchestrate political spectacle. However, public space should not be confused with the *public sphere*, which throughout the entire history of the socialist period, barely existed. The former is the spatial infrastructure that may facilitate the existence of the latter – which includes, in one form or another, free speech, free media and democratic politics. The old GDR's newly-emerging public sphere was evidently not robust or developed enough to resist the destruction of its public spaces – those parts of the city or its outskirts that were the backdrop to everyday life. The shopping centre case study is a good example of how places like Leipzig Grünau were unable to resist the assault on their public spaces because they did not understand the rules of the new democracy well enough to make their voices heard in the public sphere of the reunified Germany.

Another very crucial aspect of the reunification process was the deplorable lack of interest on part of western politicians and practitioner in regards to the expertise, knowledge and professional archives of individuals, work collectives, institutions and libraries. A large amount of plans and documents of Leipzig-Grünau was due for destruction shortly after the reunification before the new personnel (mainly from the west) entered the planning offices. Thanks to a single stout-hearted planner who decided to keep this rich source of documents in custody an important collection of plans have survived. But how much more documentary material may have been lost in this process of 'cultural renovation'?

At an age when the most daring visions for a new world order are being formulated by neo-conservative think tanks and when the critical left has lost its conceptual lead, and indeed when it appears that we do not need, or possibly even cannot bring about new utopias, it is about time to reconsider the social and urban utopias of the past. Convinced that ideas do not die, but develop, I aim to defy the current tendencies that rush to erase the relics of a doomed modernist past. The continuation, reinterpretation and 're-inhabitation' of the utopian projects of the past could re-ignite a defunct 'social machine' that has run out of 'useful ideology' - not through ideal forms but within the past formalised spatiality of our environment, building thus on the built.



Figure 4: A strange new suburbia, Leipzig-Grünau, 2006