

**“Mass Housing in East and West Germany – Controversial Success and Ambivalent Heritage ”**  
by Florian Urban (Glasgow School of Art)

Mass housing in East and West Germany was more similar than is usually acknowledged, despite the different political systems. In both countries it was a big success – it has improved the dwelling conditions to a level that was unprecedented in history. On the other hand, its architecture is regarded poorly, and the buildings are inhabited by the poorer strata of society. I will show how both success and failure are intrinsically connected, and to what extent the estimation of one or the other depends on the respective context.

This paper consists of three parts:

- A definition of mass housing
- The vision to end the housing shortage and its manifestations in East and West Germany (1900s-1960s)
- Mass Housing as a battleground for political ideas (1960s-1980s)

### **Definitions of Mass Housing**

Mass housing resulted from a love-match between architecture and social policy. It combined standardisation (“standardised housing”) with state involvement (“social housing”).

Its standardisation was not a categorical fact, just a gradual definition: many site-built houses also use standardised materials.

Its status as social housing differed between East and West. In East Germany, any multi-storey dwelling could be considered social housing since it was constructed, distributed and maintained by

state institutions. This system was part of the centrally planned economy established under Soviet influence. In West Germany, public utility housing was built through indirect state subsidy of large developers. Some were private, but the largest were cooperatives owned by the respective towns and cities. This system arose from an unlikely coalition of bourgeois-liberal and social democratic forces.

Both East and West Germany were planned at the same time, but those plans were carried out with a time lag. In East Germany, Erich Honecker’s Wohnungsbauprogramm in 1973 was most effective. The big wave of housing construction in the GDR was in the 1970s and 1980s, when about two million flats were built in a country of 17 million inhabitants. In West Germany, most flats went up in the early postwar decades - about 2.6 million flats until 1970 in a country of 60 million. The status of social housing, connected with rent control and the right of tenant allocation, was always conceded there for only a limited time – usually several decades until the construction cost was amortized.

### **The vision of ending the housing shortage**

Mass housing had its origins in the theories of social reform and standardised construction. In Germany these were connected, on the one hand, with housing reformers such as Otto Schilling or Rudolf Eberstadt and on the other with architects such as Ludwig Hilberseimer, Walter Gropius, or Ernst May. These ideas spawned the much-cel-

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celebrated Siedlungen of the 1920s. They were too few to relieve the housing shortage at a national level, but they were visionary in their architectural form and methods of production. Serial design was developed in the service of a comprehensive and epochal vision: to end the housing shortage and provide modern amenities for all.

Only after the Second World War was the modernist vision implemented at a broader scale. Architects began to design centrally planned neighbourhoods programmed according to modernist principles such as functional separation and primacy of car traffic.

In West Germany, a coalition was forged under particular circumstances. The housing situation at the time was precarious for large portions of the population. Most large cities were destroyed, and about 8 million ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe had flocked to West Germany. They were soon joined by another wave of refugees from East Germany. Millions lived in camps and emergency shelters for years. The housing shortage, thus, was conceived of as a most pressing problem by all political factions, reflecting the fact that refugee status was not class-specific, and equally afflicted, for example, the East Prussian landed gentry or the Silesian coal miners. The West German state measures were thus approved by both leftists and conservatives. Also the definition of the group eligible for social housing initially was rather broad and in the early 1950s included almost 70% of the population. (1) This meant that from the very beginning social housing was predominantly aimed at the middle classes, and not

at the most disadvantaged. (2)

In East Germany, mass housing went along with a comprehensive restructuring of the construction industry toward prefabrication, to the extent that the buildings they generated are referred to as “the slab” (die Platte). This process was started in the 1950s, the time when also the first large estates were planned. For instance, the new town of Hoyerswerda was begun in 1957 to house the workers of a newly founded chemical plant. Halle-Neustadt, the largest slab building development in East Germany, was planned in the 1950s and begun in 1964. East Berlin’s most famous tower block estates went up in the 1970s and together housed approximately 350,000 of the 1.1 million inhabitants of the eastern half of the city.

Overall, mass housing in both East and West Germany was in some respects rather shoddy, but offered a comfort unheard of before by virtually all citizens, including central heating, running water, and self-contained flats at a time when many families had to share an apartment with strangers.

Since 1988, the West German state institutions gradually began to retreat from the housing market. (3) A few years later, after the German reunification, the state-owned housing companies in the former East were also privatised. Ever since, the amount of state-subsidised and rent-controlled units has been shrinking – in the West from 3.9 million in 1987 to only 1.8 million in 2001. Thus social housing soon will be a thing of the past.

### **The Märkisches Viertel in West Berlin: housing blocks as a battleground for political ideas**

Maybe it was precisely because of its ideological baggage that the mass-produced apartment block came to be a volatile signifier. First it stood for progress and modernisation, then for disenfranchisement and the neglect of traditions. In West Germany, the change between acceptance and rejection came about in less than a year. The Märkisches Viertel in West Berlin was a particularly telling example. Built for 50,000 inhabitants, it comprised more than 17,000 apartments in tower blocks. The chief designers belonged to the architectural elite of the time. (4)

In 1966, journalists celebrated it as an “expressive composition” (5) and “a symbol of hope for designers in many European countries.” (6) In 1968, by contrast, newspapers called it a “bleak group of barracks,” (7) “realization of a dismal science-fiction movie,” (8) or an example of “rigid uniformity and sterile monotony...where housewives, apparently for no reason, become alcoholics.” (9)

The criticism targeted different aspects. The works were often shabby, the apartments relatively small, the buildings from some perspectives seemed monotonous. (10) The vast green spaces rarely served as the meeting places that the architects had envisioned, and much more as dangerous to cross at night. The dissolution of old neighbourhood structures led to mistrust and neglect of public spaces. And the construction of mass housing led to large-scale tenement demolitions in the inner city. However, compared to countries

such as the US, the German slabs of the 1970s were still relatively wealthy and well-integrated.

In the context of the Märkisches Viertel, radical college students sided with bourgeois traditionalists against an establishment of Social Democratic politicians who had started the housing programme. This was a battle between radicals in favour of state intervention, and more moderate reformists who were also in favour of state intervention. In those years, neo-liberal positions were barely voiced. The leftist critics did not question state planning; rather, they attacked moderate state officials for insufficient pursuit of the tenants’ real needs. The tenants remained ambiguous. They did lament the infrastructural deficiencies of their new residences, but many liked them compared to the crumbling tenements where they had lived before. (11)

East Germany also experienced debates over the tower blocks, but, due to the political repression, this occurred to a much smaller extent. Since the 1960s, they were increasingly censured as being “monotonous,” “uniform,” and “carelessly designed.” Taking into account the extent of censorship in East Germany, the criticism was sometimes surprisingly blunt. (12) A 1975 report to a high-ranking party leader pointed out that the low aesthetic quality of East German housing blocks seriously endangered the citizens’ identification with the socialist state. (13) Criticism was less effective than in the West, but policy was still modified.

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In the West, after the early 1970s, no new mass-housing developments were planned. In the East, this policy shift happened ten years later. The Politburo mandated in 1982 that no new developments on the periphery were to be planned, and that construction was to be executed in the inner city. (14) At the same time there was path-dependency: there were barely enough construction firms left that could execute traditional construction. Plattenbauten were therefore continuously built until the end of the GDR in 1989-90.

The standard story concerning this shift is that the protests and the negative media coverage led to a waning support for public housing. In my view, however, the reality is subtly different: public housing was stopped only once the most dire need was removed and housing shortage, once again, became a problem of the poor, rather than a matter affecting all classes.

In reunified Germany, the storm of criticism against the mass housing developments slowly waned in the 1990s. There was also an increasing awareness that Germany's great settlements were far from being homogeneous.

In the former West Germany, some developments have a very high rate of poverty. In the Märkisches Viertel 14 percent of the inhabitants were on social welfare in 2004 (Berlin average: 8 percent). (14) Yet at the same time, the inhabitants were rather content with their environment. 69 percent were “pleased” or “very pleased” with their dwelling situation, and 85 percent would like to stay. (15) Today, the Märkisches Viertel faces serious

social challenges, but is not a ghetto of crime and misery in the way the 1970s polemicists had depicted it. (16)

In East Germany, social stratification had been very low under the socialist regime. The medical doctor had lived cheek-by-jowl with the construction worker. Now, however, those who stayed tended to be those who could not afford to leave.

Ironically, the media coverage on social issues is far less controversial now than it was in the 1970s. But the gap between rich and poor is much wider – and keeps widening. In this context, slab developments are increasingly residences of society's lower strata.

### **Conclusion: local and universal factors**

While the German story has much in common with equivalent processes in other industrialized countries, a number of local constraints affected the path of events. These included:

- a relatively stable demography;
- an unprecedented level of wealth; and
- a very particular political situation stemming from wartime destruction and the impoverishment of formerly wealthy classes.

As much as the German case can be deemed a success, particularly in comparison to countries such as France or the US, just as evident was its failure to last. But in a way, it could be argued that the tower blocks fell victim not just to their ‘failure’, but also to their very ‘success’. Three factors, all

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concerning complex matters of public perception and expectation, should here be borne in mind:

First, the overall rise in housing standards converted the projects from a comparably privileged environment to a comparably underprivileged one.

Second, the social and economic hardship that produced the consensus among Germany’s housing politicians broke apart once the most pressing need was overcome. The goal of equal housing for everyone, in this situation, lost its lure for the more affluent.

And third, state intervention and expert knowledge stopped being perceived as benevolent once it had reached a certain level of influence over people’s living conditions.

Germany’s tower-block estates are thus an ambivalent heritage. On the one hand they were the product of a largely successful enterprise of overcoming the housing shortage and providing modern amenities for large parts of the population. On the other hand, however, they exacerbated social segregation and the disenfranchisement connected with top-down-planning. Much more than the architecture, it was the social and political context that determined the significance of Germany’s mass housing. While the positive effect of social housing in Germany has outweighed the negative, the success story, unfortunately, is not likely to be repeated.

## NOTES

1: Georg Wagner, *Sozialstaat gegen Wohnungsnot* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1995), 33.

2: Georg Wagner, *Sozialstaat gegen Wohnungsnot* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1995), 22, 38.

3: Gesetz zur Überführung der Wohnungsgemeinnützigkeit in den allgemeinen Wohnungsmarkt, 25 July 1988

4: In 2006 there were approximately 36,000 inhabitants living in the Märkisches Viertel (statistical data of the Berlin government).

5: Anna Teut, “Huldigung an die städtebauliche Tradition,” *Die Welt*, November 8, 1966: 13.

6: “Hoffnungsschimmer für die Städtebauer in halb Europa,” *BZ* (Berlin) October 19, 1967

7: “Es bröckelt,” *Der Spiegel* n. 6 (1969), 38-42.

8: *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 3, 1969, quoted after Alexander Wilde, *Das Märkische Viertel* (West Berlin: Nicolai, 1989), 127.

9: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, January 20, 1969, *Allgemeines Deutsches Sonntagsblatt*, June 22, 1969, *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, May 16, 1970, all quoted after Alexander Wilde, *Das Märkische Viertel* (West Berlin: Nicolai, 1989), 127.

10: Gerhard Ullmann, “Kritischer Zwischenbericht über das Märkische Viertel,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* June 10, 1970.

11: Johannes Hieber, “Berlin war eine Reise wert,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Regionalanzeiger Nord*, October 9, 1973, Alexander Wilde, *Das Märkische Viertel* (West Berlin: Nicolai, 1989), 112.

12: For example the famous architect Hermann Henselmann in “Der Einfluss der sozialistischen Lebensweise auf den Städtebau und die Architektur in der DDR,” *Deutsche Architektur* n. 5 (1966), 264-265 stressed that such monotony was “against the essence of socialism.” Sociologist Fred Staufenbiel in “Kultursoziologie und Städtebau,” *Deutsche Architektur* n. 6 (1966), 326-327 pointed out that monotony was not a

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mandatory consequence of industrial construction.

13: “Architekturanalyse im Bezirk Leipzig,” presented to the Abteilung Bauwesen (Department of Construction) at the Central Committee, led by Gerhard Trölitzsch, in November 1975. Berlin Federal Archive DY 30/18088.

14: Grundsätze für die sozialistische Entwicklung von Städtebau und Architektur in der DDR, minutes of the Politburo meeting on May 18, 1982, final copy, Berlin Federal Archive DY 30/J IV 2/2 1947: 238.

15: Census data from 2005, Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, available online at [http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/planen/basisdaten\\_stadtentwicklung/monitoring/de/2006/index.shtml](http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/planen/basisdaten_stadtentwicklung/monitoring/de/2006/index.shtml), p. 214, (accessed August 2008).

16: Institut für Markt und Medienforschung, Märkisches Viertel (West Berlin, 1986).