

Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space and Memory in East Germany

Review Number: 2058

Publish date: Thursday, 2 February, 2017

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ISBN: 9780198732266

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £45.00

Pages: 208pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/amnesiopolis-9780198732266?q=978-0198732266&lang=en&cc=gb>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Jörg Arnold

Eli Rubin has written a wonderful book that does not just tell a fascinating story about an important but much neglected subject, but also manages to link this story to much broader historiographical, and indeed ontological, questions about the intersections between space, on one hand, and power, time and lived experience on the other. What is more, Rubin has achieved this feat without filling hundreds upon hundreds of pages, but in a slender volume comprising no more than 160 pages of text. The book is also written in a style that is both arresting and elegant, making the monograph a pleasure to read and a model for others to emulate.

Rubin teaches modern European and German history at Western Michigan University, where he holds the position of Associate Professor. *Amnesiopolis* is his second book. Rubin's ostensible subject matter is the ambitious house-building programme on which the German Democratic Republic (GDR) embarked in the early 1970s under its new leader Erich Honecker. The programme was designed to give tangible expression to the shift of emphasis by the Communist East German state from heavy industry and production to consumption and the quality of everyday life. It constituted a central pillar of a redirection of policy that, in essence, sought to shore up the regime's precarious legitimacy among the population by demonstrating the material benefits of living in the 'real existing socialism' of the present rather than by continuing to exhort the population to defer the gratification of their needs for the benefit of a glorious Socialist utopia in an undetermined future – a policy which, incidentally, because it was financially unsustainable, was to bankrupt the state and would play no small role in ushering in the eventual demise of the GDR in the late 1980s.

Rubin focuses on one project in particular, the construction of a new city district from scratch to the east of Berlin, a hugely ambitious undertaking that came to be named 'Marzahn' after one of the villages that existed in the vicinity. While Rubin provides a detailed case study of this particular construction project, the scope of the book is much more ambitious, as the book's title and subtitle, *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space and Memory*, indicate. Rubin argues that by resettling hundreds of thousands of residents from the confined living quarters of Berlin's inner city to a rationally planned housing estate with modern amenities, the regime not only sought to make good on the age-old Socialist promise of solving the housing crisis of the urban proletariat, but also to wipe out memories of the 'bad old days' of capitalist exploitation, and of life

before the arrival of Socialism more generally. 'In [post-war] Germany [...] there was a continual attempt [...] to induce a kind of historical amnesia. This amnesia took many forms, from policy to education and culture. It also took the form of material rupture, where the past was physically erased from space and therefore from time', as Rubin puts it (p. 7). This is a bold and original thesis which this reviewer finds as intriguing as thought-provoking. That said, there must remain some question marks as to whether the evidence adduced in this volume can really sustain a thesis as encompassing as the one that is advanced here. Does the focus on the physical environment of the everyday life of a substantial, but ultimately limited number of East Germans really allow us to draw broader conclusions about the politics of memory and the relationship of Germans to their troubled past more generally?

The monograph is divided into five chapters, following a roughly chronological narrative arc from planning (chapter one) to construction (chapter two); from the lived experiences of the people moving into these new urban spaces and the communities that they formed (chapter four) to the extensive state surveillance practised in these spaces (chapter five). At the same time as telling a story, each chapter carefully situates the case study in much broader spatial and temporal points of reference, advancing a nuanced argument that regards the new city district of Marzahn as the triumph of a socialist modernity of 'self-contained' systems of functional rationality, and more broadly, as a radical rupture in the life worlds of the new residents (p. 7).

Rubin's original approach offers a wealth of new perspectives and important insights. Three of them stand out to the present reviewer. First of all, the study does well to shift our attention from representational buildings and sites of memory to the built environments of everyday life, to the spaces which people actually inhabit and through which they move on a daily basis. For far too long have urban historians and historians of memory focused on prestige building projects and monuments specifically designed to commemorate (or forget) the past, and Rubin is to be commended for providing an important corrective here. After all, 'people do not sleep in monuments', as Rubin puts it memorably (p. 8). 'If we want to really understand space as a category of diffusion and power, then we have to look beyond central downtown East Berlin [...] and to the spaces in which everyday life unfolded for a vast number of East Germans' (ibid.).

Second, the study can be read an act of historical excavation that successfully historicises its subject matter. Carefully peeling back the layers of stigma and disapproval with which the modernist housing estates of the 1960s and 1970s are customarily treated today, Rubin manages to recapture the utopian quality that underwrote projects such as the Marzahn estate. The study forcefully reminds the reader of the genuine humanistic impulse that lay behind functionalist housing programmes in East Germany and elsewhere, and of the long antecedents, stretching back to the mid-19th century and beyond, of projects which aimed to provide affordable housing that would offer all the amenities of urban modernity while at the same time creating an environment in which residents would be able to enjoy sunlight, fresh air and green spaces. Rubin pays due attention to the immense organisational and technical problems associated with building entire city districts from prefabricated materials – some of them specific to the managed economy of the GDR, others, such as the lack of durability of the materials, generic (p. 64). He also pays due regard to the practical obstacles that the first residents of Marzahn faced when they moved into what was in many respects still a construction site – there is a fascinating subchapter on the ubiquity of mud in the first years of life on the new estate and of how 'the fight against mud' defined their daily lives (p. 96).

Despite acknowledging the many difficulties of modernist housing projects, Rubin in many respects draws a more upbeat picture of life on these estates than is customary, as he readily acknowledges himself. As chapter three makes clear, many Berliners positively longed to escape from the cramped living conditions of the decaying inner cities or the rural backwardness of their villages. They very much looked forward to moving into bright new flats in functionalist housing estates such as the Marzahn complex. 'This change was often experienced and framed by East Germans as positive, a release from the old, the cramped, the stale, the past, and towards the new and modern, as well as a rise in status – an *Aufstieg*' (p. 77). In a fascinating section, Rubin draws attention to the way in which the new urban environment was experienced and appropriated by children, illustrating the extent to which concrete and children seemed to be two sides of the same productivist ethos that characterised the GDR. More broadly, the section is a fascinating reminder of

the importance of the individual life cycle for the ways in which environments, spaces and social relations are experienced.

Third, the book makes an important intervention in the ongoing historiographical debate on the nature of East German society, and in particular, the relationship between state power and 'ordinary' East Germans. As Rubin states boldly, 'The spaces are the key – they are the convection, the pathway through which the power of the state and the Party travelled and diffused into everyday life, so unseen we might be almost forgiven for mistaking this as a 'normal' or 'bottom-up world' (p. 114). Rubin substantiates this claim on two levels. He demonstrates that the rational layouts and normed interiors of the new housing estate provided ideal environments for state surveillance, and indeed were partially designed with that objective in mind. More broadly, Rubin also demonstrates that the very sense of community that developed on these estates, revolving around such seemingly mundane things as beautification initiatives and festivities, cannot be divorced from the structures of power pervading the society of the GDR.

These are fascinating and highly original points and insights. They make clear how fruitful a dispassionate outsider's view can be when brought to bear on a subject matter that seems all too laden with value judgements and preconceptions by scholars who have personal memories of life in the GDR, or, as in the case of the present reviewer, of childhood visits to relatives living in the GDR. The study also demonstrates the advantages of theoretically informed reasoning that is equally at home in critical geography as in urban studies and the study of everyday life. Finally, there are the great heuristic benefits of an approach that is not afraid to situate the history of the East German dictatorship in the *longue durée* of the goals and aspirations of the European labour movements.

That said, the present reviewer has some doubts as to whether the evidence produced in the book can really sustain an overarching thesis that conceives of these housing estates as 'spaces with no traces of the pre-socialist past, and thus no opportunities for East Germans to retain whatever memories they may have had of an older German historical narrative' (p. 6). Rubin himself readily concedes that erasure was an aspiration of Socialist city planners rather than a reality that they managed to achieve, with traces of recent and earlier pasts emerging as the excavators set to work on the building site (chapter two). But my caveats go beyond the obvious point that there was no truly virgin land to be found on the outskirts of Berlin, or for that matter, anywhere in a densely populated central European country such as (East) Germany. Rather, it seems to me that the exclusive focus on the new spaces into which the residents moved and in which they were to spend their everyday lives, tends to neglect lines of spatial, social and cultural continuity between the 'old' world and the new. While people do not sleep in monuments, they do not spend their entire lives on the new estates either. One may assume that even Marzahnners did, on occasion, venture back into the centre of Berlin, where they would be confronted with reminders of the recent and more distant pasts, not least of all their own. One may further assume that they also maintained filial and friendship relations with people who continued to live elsewhere. Equally important, it does seem strange that the Socialist state should consciously invest so much effort into creating a lived environment that sought to erase the past when in the broader cultural sphere, the state was beginning to reclaim the very past it allegedly sought to erase, embracing (elements) of the broader German 'heritage' in addition to the Socialist 'tradition' – a shift which not only led to national celebrations of 'German' cultural icons such as the theologian Martin Luther, but could be exploited by local amateur historians to rediscover the 'lost' cityscapes of the time before the airborne destruction of the Second World War and the 'second destruction' of the post-war rebuilding effort.

(1)

But these are points for further debate. They are not intended to distract from the achievement of this book: Eli Rubin has written a wonderfully inspiring study which will be of great interest to social and cultural historians of the GDR, to urban historians, critical geographers and anyone interested in the achievements and discontents of modernity more generally.

Notes

1. Compare Helmut Meier and Walter Schmidt, *Erbe und Tradition. Geschichtsdebatte in der DDR* (Cologne, 1988); for a local example see also Jörg Arnold, *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory: The Legacy of Strategic Bombing in Germany* (Cambridge, 2011; pb. 2016), p. 238. [Back to \(1\)](#)
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