Risen from Ruins: The Cultural Politics of Rebuilding East Berlin

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‘Risen from the ruins and facing the future’ affirmed Johannes Becher’s emphatic opening strophe to the national anthem of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), composed in that state’s birthyear of 1949. It was a stirring message, and one that amply reflected the political imperative that had come to suffuse the material task of reconstruction after six years of devastating war.

In Berlin, the material task itself was immense. On February 3 1945 alone, an air attack had left some 120,000 people homeless. The internet abounds with harrowing videos of the city during these post-war months: besuited bürgerers and jaunty soldiers scurry among sunlit streets of twisted, charred and skeletal architecture. 40 per cent of the city’s buildings, most of its bridges, and much of its essential infrastructure had been destroyed entirely.

The Soviet sector, encompassing Berlin’s eastern suburbs as well as its historic core, suffered especially. In his new book *Risen from Ruins: The Cultural Politics of Rebuilding East Berlin*, part of the ‘Stanford Studies on Central and Eastern Europe’, Paul Stangl of Western Washington University assesses the reconstruction effort undertaken in the city’s East between 1945 and 1961. Stangl’s focus is not the rebuilding of the city itself, but rather the cultural politics that determined how the reconstruction played out. For this reason, he concentrates principally upon the most central and symbol-laden sites of the East German capital: Unter den Linden, Berlin’s historic central boulevard; the site of the Royal Palace, destroyed by communist planners in 1950 to make way for a Red Square-style parade ground; Wilhelmstrasse, the government quarter of the previous four regimes; and Stalinallee, the monumental showpiece boulevard of socialist East Berlin.

Over the course of the sixteen years Stangl documents, the planning paradigms of East Berlin changed dramatically, and often. And yet, as a thread throughout the book affirms, under communist auspices the political shaping of the reconstructed city was never considered a mere aspect of the 'cultural superstructure'. To the contrary, the content and symbolism of the new Berlin was always intended to spur the production of a particular type of citizen, be it German or socialist. The city would imbue the East German citizen with a specific identity, often defined in direct opposition to the West. In rebuilding East Berlin, ideology was almost always the driving factor.

The problem was that 'ideology' – and the ways it manifested – was in perpetual flux during this era. To make this point, Stangl identifies nine 'pathways of memory': discourses appropriated by the leaders and responsible authorities of East Berlin in their attempts to construct a socialist utopia on the ashes of the Nazi catastrophe that met the needs and expectations of those who would inhabit it. These are: preservationism, *Heimatschutz* (translated by the author as 'homeland protection'), science, German exceptionalism, humanism, Marxism, Marxist-Leninism, modernism and socialist realism. Some of these, of course, derived emphatically from German traditions. Others were foreign or internationalist, with only the shallowest of roots in German soil. (Modernism, arguably, was both). But none was alien to the thinking of East Berlin's post-war governors, and all proved significant in shaping the cultural politics of the young East German state, as its leaders sought to synthesise their German inheritance with their socialist ambitions and Europe's precarious political situation.

All of these 'pathways of memory' offered possibilities for the rebuilding of Berlin. However, as Stangl points out, their incompatibility with one another inevitably meant that not all could exercise equal influence over the politics of reconstruction. Proponents of one could be in the ascendancy one day and scorned the next. What's more, each was subject to interpretation and reinterpretation according to the political and personal wishes of each individual: 'They provided essential frameworks for interpreting the world, but none was absolute' (p. 20). So whereas the 'socialist-realist' doctrine, for instance, privileged a nation's progressive architectural traditions, filling them with new 'socialist content', radical modernism rejected them entirely. But most important, the 'place memory' of Berlin – a site riven with the scars of militarism and Nazism – conferred a unique twist upon each of these general approaches. Every decision made by Berlin's planners – every design, every construction, every demolition – was saturated by place associations. Barely anything could be approved without meeting some degree of controversy.

The initial two chapters of *Risen from Ruins* are thematic rather than spatially-situated. 'Landscapes of commemoration' traces the memory-politics of the immediate post-war years, documenting the difficulties faced by the City Government and occupation forces in dealing with their inherited memory sites. A flashpoint here was the proposal for a memorial in East Berlin commemorating the victims of the 1848 and 1918 revolutions. Stangl expertly weaves the historical debates about this project into the widening cleft between communists and Social Democrats as Berlin divided throughout the late 1940s, showing how political animosities in the present day manifested themselves in the form of memory politics. A third dimension – Soviet triumphalism – complicated things even further. The chapter therefore also examines the way in which the Soviet occupation forces and the local communists sought to inscribe a new historical narrative into the physical city through exorcizing its militaristic symbols and toponymy and replacing them with emblems of Soviet victory and the progressive, 'peaceful' German past. But this was not simply a top-down process. Rather, monuments and toponyms were crafted with sufficient ambiguity to satisfy the gaze of the German citizen. The monumental Soviet War Memorial in Treptow Park, for instance, could seem at once 'humanistic' for non-communists and 'socialist' for communists.

Similar tensions thematise the book's second chapter, 'City plans', which documents how the changing political, ideological and theoretical climate determined the general reconstruction plans of the city during the late 1940s. As always, questions about the respective roles to be played by the old and the new dominated these discussions. The blueprint during these years was Hans Scharoun's plan for a modernist, decentred and wholly non-representational city. Yet this was derailed by ongoing political tensions within

the City Government and then by the division of the city itself. With the establishment of the German Democratic Republic in October 1949, full responsibility for the city plan fell to the new state Ministry for Construction, which immediately began developing proposals for an East Berlin that reflected that its capital city status. A research trip to Moscow in April-May 1950 sounded the death knell for the modernist plans of the previous years. In their wake emerged a series of plans anchored fully in the theories of socialist realism, summoning the Soviet capital as their archetype. Modernist plans were now derided as 'cosmopolitan' and 'formalist', their visions of life-work spatial relationships 'medieval'. Instead, socialist realism lauded national traditions, deemed an 'urban centre' an imperative, and demanded major axes – rejected by modernists like Scharoun as 'militaristic' – for the purposes of parades and state-led demonstrations. Despite the private grumblings of some leading architects about 'Soviet kitsch' (p. 83), the new parameters were swiftly adopted, affirming the symbolic purpose of constructing the city not as 'new Berlin', but as 'Berlin, capital of Germany'. During the early 1950s at least, reconstruction plans proceeded with the prospect of an imminent national unification.

Stangl then shows how socialist realism's appropriation of neoclassical and baroque traditions had a number of momentous consequences for the city's centre. First, it ensured the preservation of Unter den Linden as the historic, symbolic central avenue of Berlin. Nevertheless, as the author illustrates in his chapter on Unter den Linden, the boulevard – and the monumental buildings that lined it – had been central to the reconstruction effort as far back as war's end. The chapter accordingly documents in some detail the preservation activities surrounding several of the street's most significant historic buildings, many of which the Soviet Military Administration (SMAD) had begun restoring prior to the GDR's foundation. In a telling example of clashing discourses, the SMAD tended to emphasise the spatial capacity of these structures while the native communists attacked their militarist or royalist symbolism. The case studies offered by Stangl include the State Opera, restored at considerable cost; the New Guardhouse (*Neue Wache*), reappropriated as a monument to 'the victims of fascism and militarism'; and the Arsenal (*Zeughaus*), a particularly militarist symbol which was nevertheless restored by the SMAD 'due to an exceptional confluence of Soviet interest in its spatial capacity and representative value as well as the mobilization of key German cultural and political elites in Berlin' (p. 119).

But the most controversial case was that of the Berlin City Palace (*Stadtschloss*). Indeed, no example from the planning history of the era demonstrates the cross-entanglements of Stangl's 'pathways of memory' quite so clearly as the *Stadtschloss*. In the immediate post-war months, it survived both the modernist rampage and the iconoclasm of zealous communists seduced by historical narratives of Prusso-German exceptionalism, only to be annihilated by socialist realism – a paradigm that actually *extolled* the virtues of national architectural masterpieces. As Stangl argues, the reason for this was socialist realism's privileging of the representational centre. By its logic, the centre of the capital city must reflect the 'life' of the state it embodied. For Socialist Unity Party (SED) Secretary Walter Ulbricht, this meant demonstrations, parades and ceremonies like those he had witnessed on Red Square; the imposition of which in Berlin, it seems, became something of a private obsession for him. Combined with Ulbricht's 'elemental compulsion to iconoclasm' (p. 142), this was sufficient to signal the loss of one of Berlin's greatest artistic treasures.

Soon thereafter, things changed once more. Already by 1951, Ulbricht's fixation on the physical centre of power had been eclipsed by the need to divert resources – financial and political – into the construction of the showpiece Stalinallee in the Friedrichshain district. In a lengthy chapter, Stangl analyses the many twists and turns that characterised its construction. Though the monumental precedent of Moscow's Gorky (now Tverskaya) Street was clear, planners sought to ensure that the street attained a suitably German 'form'. With one eye on the West, the SED launched an enormous public relations campaign around Stalinallee, parading the enormity and speed of the project, the mass voluntary labour that had gone into its construction, and, of course, its goal of providing comfortable and spacious housing for workers.

There was therefore a great degree of irony to the fact that political commands to accelerate work on Stalinallee helped trigger the 1953 East Berlin workers' uprising, the most serious existential threat the German Democratic Republic faced until 1989. Just two years after the uprising, Ulbricht, following

Khrushchev's lead, mandated a more economical approach to construction, privileging speed and efficiency above ideological display and pricey ornamentation. This mirrored the GDR's political shift away from claiming to represent the German nation and towards the construction of 'socialism'. Moreover, the SED's renewed emphasis on science and technology as vehicles of progress was deployed as a demarcation strategy from the West. But, critically, the new paradigm was never intended to allow modernist precepts to trickle back into East German planning practice. Affirming 'national traditions' may no longer have been the central priority, but this did not mean it lacked importance entirely. Instead, the new designs were to 'organically combine new modern forms' with the 'old traditional ... German spirit' (p. 99). (Needless to say, planners struggled to capture these ideological gymnastics in their urban visions).

As this narrative would suggest, 'placed-based *meaning*' is a central category of Stangl's analysis. In the ideology of communist politicians and planners, this was expressed through an uneasy synthesis of past, present and future. Marxist leaders may have peddled a 'scientific' history with 'objective' lessons for the present, but all of the political and planning elites engaged in East Berlin's reconstruction bore their own histories and ideas of what the city demanded. Moreover, their memories of the Nazi past were still raw. The various 'pathways of memory' provided alternative frameworks for interpreting and reinterpreting these experiences in the urban landscape. As Stangl writes in the conclusion of his 'City plans' chapter, 'Even Berlin's architects, while familiar with the city and its history, evidenced only a brief time-horizon in their knowledge of planning history and politics, often extending no further than their professional careers' (p. 104). His study accordingly places a central emphasis upon agency in the planning history of Berlin; and indeed, one of its key strengths lies in how the author traces the way that the East German authorities navigated and responded to the myriad material, financial, political, personal and ideological limitations they faced.

There exists already a substantial, high-quality body of literature on East Berlin's post-war planning and architectural history, including sections of Brian Ladd's 1997 *The Ghosts of Berlin*, the volumes by Werner Durth, Jörn Düwel and Niels Gutschow, as well as numerous books and articles by Maoz Azaryahu, Emily Pugh and Florian Urban.^[1] [2] With *Risen from Ruins*, Paul Stangl adds to this list with a study that is perhaps more specific in its focus, yet of no less interest as a result. Stangl does an excellent job in highlighting the conflicts and irreconcilabilities that dominated the planning discussions of the immediate post-war era, employing his 'pathways of memory' device with great effect. What emerges is an impeccably well-researched and engaging work, amply illustrated and competently composed. The author more than meets his stated ambition to reveal the deep but complicated relationship between politics and planning during a period of tremendous political tension and instability. As such, students of communist politics and ideology will find every bit as much value in this work as those of architecture and urban planning.

[1] [3] Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin* (Chicago, IL, 1997); Werner Durth, Jörn Düwel and Niels Gutschow, *Architektur und Städtebau der DDR: die frühen Jahre* (Berlin, 2007); Maoz Azaryahu, *Von Wilhelmplatz zu Thälmannplatz: Politische Symbole im öffentlichen Leben der DDR* (Gerlingen, 1991); Emily Pugh, *Architecture, Politics, and Identity in Divided Berlin* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2014); Florian Urban, *Neo-Historical East Berlin. Architecture and Urban Design in the German Democratic Republic 1970-1990* (Burlington, NJ, 2009).

The author would like to thank the reviewer for this extremely thoughtful review of *Risen from Ruins*.

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