Capturing Gathering Swarming - Re-coding Post-Communist Space in East Germany

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CAPTURING GATHERING SWARMING
RE-CODING POST-COMMUNIST SPACE IN EAST GERMANY

A Thesis Presented

by

TOBIAS BERNECKER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts
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CAPTURING GATHERING SWARMING
RE-CODING POST-COMMUNIST SPACE IN EAST GERMANY

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I want to express my deepest gratitude to my professor and mentor Skender Luarasi. You opened my eyes and mind to things that were previously beyond my imagination.

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My project is an acknowledgement of the fact that the physical layout of our environments is not directly describing and shaping the way we live or our societies are shaped. Non-spatial structures are playing a bigger role in societal processes than spatial ones. My project is trying to give these invisible processes spatial expression. Non-functional structures that highlight the non-functionality of post-socialist space.

The monotony and monumentality of socialist spaces is contrasted with a design that expresses the multiplicity (of possibilities, paths, choices, desires) that exists nowadays. Orthogonal space is sliced up, perforated and at points overlaid without replacing it in its totality.

‘Non-functional’ elements are formal expressions of the realm of virtual space which permeates our lives and cities as well. These elements function in a more ‘internet’ fashion (multi layered, multi directional, yet clustered, streamlined etc) and yet they perform in the real world. Yet in the same time they are expressing our high-tech society without being high-tech.

Simultaneously, the presence of these structures addresses the condition of impermanence and change that play a strong role in the psyche of East Germans today. The multiplicity which is expressed by the project contrasts the rigidity of socialist architecture and society - and creates a link to remembering the past.
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CHAPTER 1
INTENT

A big role in the genesis of the Master’s Project was played by my research of the role of space in East German cinema. I paired my initial idea of researching the role of the image in/of architecture with my interest in understanding the East German part of my identity. Eventually the choice of film was an easy one. In my eyes it is the strongest popular media and art form of the twentieth century.

(DE)CONSTRUCTING THE SOCIALIST PROJECT
– (moving) images of the GDR

“Building is political, the projection of power. Each building reflects status [...] Prosperity or austerity. Dreams or despair. Economics and technology. They also display the client’s good or bad taste. Architects have to deal with this. Architects must defend their rights. But they also have to compromise.”
(from ‘The Architects’, Peter Kahane, 1990, (1:07))
Introduction

Within the history of the GDR there was one central theme that took a central role during each of the four decades of its existence. Resolving the question of housing was deemed to be a major step forward towards the real existing socialism - Building Socialism was taken very literally and represented a cornerstone of the Socialist Project.

When East Germany's cinematic works, changed from being carefully set in the past to tackling themes of everyday life the trouble started. East German films began to incorporate more or less hidden criticism and dissent with the Socialist State.

In a highly politicized world, like that of any totalitarian regime, no public work (of art) can be free of political connotations. Every picture or depiction includes some political commentary. This paper will explore how East German film uses architecture and built space to create these moments of dissent. As much as built structures are lasting documents of that period, so are its films and they offer a more intimate view of the past.

My research is about the meaning of architecture in this context. I won't be telling the history of architecture and city planning in the GDR. My concern will be with the non-physical behind the physical appearance of that country's build environment. Because it is the meaning is that these films engage. Films are indexical in their nature, they use an image to describe or relate to something much larger that's behind this image. Ideological architecture functions in a similar manner. Its appearance is never just related to first hand functions or necessities. It is an
image that is referential to the struggle, the project or simply the ideology it stems from. This is why I will analyze film and architecture in one piece of work.

My research has also a very personal side. I spent the first nine years of my life living in the GDR and at the time of the fall of the Berlin wall I was nine years old. I have memories, but they are childhood memories and very particular. I cannot really grasp what it is, but my East German origin has played a considerable part in making me who I am. And being a designer, I want to explore what this legacy means or could mean towards my understanding of space and design for the community.

(Re-)Construction

In post-war East Germany construction of a socialist society was something very literal. The wide spread damage of all major urban centers made it a simple necessity to (re-)construct on a large scale. Architecture and Urban Planning were directly under the control of the Socialist Party and its Ministry of Reconstruction. “Reconstruction by it’s own power became one of the founding myths of the GDR”1 and made building always more than just the mere construction of structure.

As early as 1950 a plan to build or create as many 2.6 million housing units until 1990, either in existing towns and cities, new satellite towns or new cities altogether was ratified. In the beginning of its existence building policies in the GDR focused mostly on reconstruction and architecture and style were under the strong influence of Stalin’s monolithic and monumental projects. In the wake of Stalin’s demise historicism and traditional handcraft were abandoned and replaced by industrial and streamlined construction methods. The switch from reconstruction to construction also meant that the society as a whole was given a new focus. The deteriorating performance of East German industry – I will omit the reasons why
- called for cheaper and faster ways of construction. The monolithic and pompous buildings of Berlin’s new central Avenue the Stalin-Allee (now Karl-Marx-Allee) turned out to overly strain the state’s finances. In fact, the 1956 unrest of East Berlin construction workers was caused by an attempt to cut wages, because of large budget overruns. Stalin’s demise and a change in Soviet leadership, was another factor which made changes and the implementation of new ways possible.

While the original approach still regarded the re-construction as a holistic undertaking, with regard for historic structures, culture and recreation, the new approach was a stripped down, bare boned techno-economic one. Building faster and cheaper was on the top of the agenda.

*Character of Hans Balla in front of the ministers at a building conference:*

“In other words, we in Schkona built faster and cheaper with the aid of modern technology.”

from Trace of Stones (1:23)

Modern technology – typical for this time in history – carried the promise of a better an easier life. While the old canon had spoken out against standardized typologies and modernist development of identical slabs just five years earlier, these elements now became the universal recipe for architects and urban planners in East Germany.

Early attempts with standardized pre-fabricated elements had been started in 1956, and despite increasing the building speed, quality stayed low. Following “floor plans that had existed for decades ... the floor high elements were erected, without heeding their laws and possibilities”. In 1961 a team of young architects presented a pre-fabricated structure which tried to answer to correct the earlier mistakes and answer to the needs of a modern family, the experimental building
P2. By reducing the need for heavy furniture, the reduction of the kitchen to a minimum and the grouping of all the necessities to the core of the apt, a relatively generous living space along the facade was created. Six meters (18ft) of window front allowed for abundant daylight.

The P2’s designers regarded the home as a respite of leisure. Domestic labor was marginalized or out-sourced. Domestic life in East Germany saw the introduction of the world of industrial technology and rationalization. Although the light and module based furniture was never widely available, this typology was a success. The `P2 fundamentally remade East German domestic live and became the standard model for all housing built until 1990."5 It created though, what it had set out to destroy: monotony and uniformity in the architecture of housing. Prefabricated architecture was the only architecture build in the GDR ever since.

The 1960ies brought a number of profound changes to the East German society. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 made it clear that this regime was here to stay. The general introduction of modernism meant a lot of changes for peoples personal lives too. The gap in between East and West Germany was getting bigger and bigger and the party seemed to offer more promises then results.

“They promise us the future like a priest the afterlife. We’ll all be dead before we get there.” (from “The Trace of Stones” (0:04))

While the 1950ies had been a decade of reconstruction and establishment of the new state, now the government expected its citizens to play a more active role in shaping that country in the new decade. At a conference in the industrial town of Bitterfeld in 1959, an appeal was made to all artists to participate in the creation of true Socialist Art. Also called Worker’s Art, it did not only mean a call for all workers
to create works of art and artists to join the workforce, the Bitterfeld Way meant also the introduction and establishment of the concept of Socialist Realism. The concept of Socialist Realism was developed by Zhadov, Stalin’s ‘cultural commissar’ in 1934. There are two main interpretation of this concept. One by Gorki who saw Socialist Realism encapsulated in works of art that glorified labor and promoted a revolutionary attitude and the Communist cause. Hungarian literary theorist Georg Lukacs on the other hand interpreted Socialist Realism as art that expressed faith in a new and better society. Socialist Realism was supposed to make high art accessible to the masses, and so it condemned experimentation as ‘formalist’, bourgeois and decadent. It viewed reality in its revolutionary development and wants not necessarily reflect reality but change reality. Artists in the GDR leaned more towards Lukacs and managed to establish a particularly East German concept of documentary realism. The Bitterfeld Way was the beginning of a struggle between artist and the censorship authorities. Instead of furthering the cause of Socialism and strengthening of the State, it highlighted the gap in between the leadership’s promises and propaganda and the everyday experience of the ordinary citizen.
Trace of Stones

“Die Spur der Steine” (Trace of Stones) from 1966 was the first major film production after the declaration of the Bitterfeld Way. An adaptation of a best seller by Erik Neutzsch, the film circles around an industrial construction site. The main “characters free spirited attitude towards life, party and state” and the unethical behavior of a party secretary led to a ban of the film, despite the large publicity it received before it’s opening. The film seemed to reflect the general spirit of it’s time – maybe too well.

As the novel “aspired to occupy a place in East German civic imaginary similar to that of westerns in American self-understanding,” the conquering and making of a country by rough men is one of its central themes. Although workers, the carpenters are the glorified heroes of the film, they weren’t the kind of heroes that the party was looking for. Their lack of a “secure place, inseparable from [their lives], in a genuine collective,” was part of the official explanation of the ban. Wide hats, beer bottles instead of pistols, the hijacking of trucks with building material, and the film being shot in wide-screen Cinema Scope transfers the mythical self-made image of American Westerns into the plains of central Germany.

This is a film of a society in transition. There is no violent clash of old and new, there is no revolution. Throughout the film one can see the actors trying to negotiate this new, undetermined environment. Just as in the opening scene the party delegates arrive at the construction site, these spaces are waiting for an arrival of signification. Balla and Horath waiting in the lobby for the party commission’s verdict, plan libre, concrete facade, lounging on tables and chairs that seem not to be made for them, is an early image of the people’s unease about the indetermination that these new places radiate.
While all private life is set in traditional (non modernist) surroundings – the worker’s barracks, Katie’s room, Horrath’s family apt in Rostock, the train compartments, the street cars, the pubs – public life takes place in and around modernist structures: the administration building, the party’s head quarters, the hotels in Berlin, the bar where Katie and Balla dance, the terrace where Katie and Horrath reconcile. Modernism’s a-historic formal language stands for the new beginning that the socialist state represented. The formal language that was condemned as cosmopolitan and western just a decade earlier, now becomes the expression of the ‘Real Existing Socialism.’ Functionalist spaces exemplify Socialism’s rational nature. The exact framing of the scenes only enhances the character of these spaces and makes the character’s discomfort even more visible. Conflicts arise, where old and new, public and private overlap and become entangled with one another. Horrath’s affair with Katie - the public and political life entering her homely sphere (signifying the old society) - and the backlash that it has on the construction site (which signifies the new society) is the film’s major conflict. Katie’s and Balla’s platonic love resonates throughout the film’s 136 minutes but is clearly brought to a point towards the end. The party’s interference with Horrath’s private life, the provision of a brand new apartment is another conflict that is carried out in front of a modernistic backdrop. Horrath’s self-confession to Balla in Horrath’s new apartment is creating another moment of disharmony in between the personal/human shortcomings and the new/societal (over)expectations. It shows a human being in transition. Already living in the new world - socialism, morality, perfect aesthetics - but still entangled in the old world with it’s imperfections and failures. One of the reasons for the ban of this film, apart from issues with the plot, must have been the character’s unsettledness with their environment.
Conflicts remains unresolved and fail to lead to a positive, constructive conclusion. They all end abruptly. Katie departs suddenly and leaves behind an empty apartment. The party commission cannot reach a conclusion and the protocol is ripped to pieces in the end.

Realism vs reality

In order to justify their work in an ideological manner, filmmakers in East Germany developed the concept of ‘documentary realism’. Other than the older ‘socialist realism’ it aimed to show the human struggle on the path towards socialism.10
The Legend of Paul and Paula

Another film which combines both concepts was released nine years later. The Legend of Paul and Paula[11] also uses the same comparison of the old and the new. The point of departure of this film is significantly different then that of Trace of Stones. The earlier film dealt with the process of construction, Paul and Paula came as a comment to what had been constructed and destroyed in the process. The film is a lot more specific about the message that it wants to convey.

A number of events had taken place in the years which divide the two films. The years following the construction of the Berlin Wall, saw a worsening of the general mood in the GDR. The gap between East and West became more and more evident. Despite the wall people continued to flee the country. Hoping to quell political discontent by satisfaction of material needs, the State implemented the policy of Socialist Consumerism. A whole new line of products was filling the stores, advertising and market research became new tools of steering the public mood.[12]

The industry was urged to produce ‘goods of daily demand’ – which for example lead to tractor makers churning out coffee mills that were just as rough and though as their agricultural siblings. Nevertheless, this state-devised program bore its
anticipated fruits. The standard of living actually rose - yet, personal freedom and the possibilities of self-fulfillment did not.13

“To rediscover myself, in a job for instance, people to relate to, people who try to understand me. I’m can't be myself anywhere...”
(from The Architects, Peter Kahane, 1990, (1:07))

Happiness seemed only to be found in the private sphere. The Legend of Paul and Paula ties in at this point. By smartly being called a legend and negating any documentary character, the filmmakers avoided to fall into a number traps that otherwise could have easily stopped this production.14 Harry Blunk15 attributes the outstanding success of the film to the successful translation of a yearning to flee, to break free from all the constraints of society into a private life of true happiness cushioned from reality.

The love story of the main characters is used as a vehicle to level criticism at conformism, petite-bourgeois attitudes, the lack of happiness despite the fulfillment of all material needs. Paul, in his professional life is that type of leader and planer person that other DEFA films used to celebrate, while Paula is hardly a model socialist citizen, single mother with the primary aspiration to escape from her workday routine.

Figure 4: Katie’s apartment (top), Katie and Balla at a hotel (bottom) - screenshots from Trace of Stones, DEFA 1966
The film opens with the implosion of an apartment building in East Berlin. The place where in the course of the film all moments of truly happy life take place. Inside this building there is a feeling of neighborliness. Grown micro systems and networks, which are characterized by mutual sympathy. This is Paula’s world. Here life can grow and one can be whatever one wishes to be, think independently – even live on a flight of stairs for days, as Paul is doing. Neighbors are real neighbors, that are maybe a bit too nosy at times, but help each other out, also in achieving happiness.

In contrast to this romantic picture of neighborliness and private unpolitical space stands the other side, literately the other side of the street. Sterile new housing, mainly show only from the outside, P2s, anonymous standardized units. Paul’s world. His life and marriage with Ines which is solely based on the materialistic cannot hide the unhappiness of his situation, and it is only things and the talk of things that keeps this construct together. After having found his wife sleeping with another man and having reconciled, Paul and Ines lie in bed, discussing remaking
the apartment, new furniture. In the course of the film, their marriage deteriorates, despite constant improvement of their material situation. Comfort and money cannot replace fulfillment and happiness.

The old houses that are being sanitized – imploded to make room for the new symbolize the old and new conditions of society. “Where old substance is removed (urban as well as societal), the new is not necessarily equal or even better.”16 The very straightforward comparison of happiness in the midst of material shortcomings, the apartment, Paul’s dedication to an old-timer car and unhappiness despite material abundance is a lot more than the Trace of Stones character’s unease in negotiating the new. In Trace of Stones there was a moment of claiming that world, the transition was the issue, in the case of Paul and Paula this transition has been made, people are familiar with their new environment, which turns out to be as shallow as Paul’s ‘pretty’ wife. By leaving the new building in the middle of unfinished sidewalks and streets, the filmmakers did not only document a common situation but also exaggerate the facade like character of the new. Paula’s death symbolizes the irreconcilability of her strife towards personal freedom with the limitations of her environment. The final shot, showing Paul lying on Paula’s old bed with his son and Paula’s children in a modern apartment speaks about the violence in which people were thrust into this new environment. The remnants of the old, the bed sawed in half, the picture frame and the people all crammed

Figure 6: Paul.....and Paula with kids - screenshots from The Legend of Paul and Paula, DEFA 1973

Screenshot from The Legend of Paul and Paula, DEFA 1973

Screenshot from The Legend of Paul and Paula, DEFA 1973
awkwardly into their new environment. Die Legende von Paul und Paula did not only strike a tone with its audience and became one of the most popular films in East Germany, with its hopeless undertone it also represents a new conception of reality within 'socialist realist' art.  

The years that followed at first bore a lot of promise for improvement in the GDR. A change in leadership - Ulbricht’s death had brought Erich Honecker to power in 1971 - raised a general hope for a relaxation of the party’s line towards more individual freedom. In fact the party acknowledged the society’s need to dedicate itself more to personal self-realization. Originally this policy had opened the door for more films dealing with individual, personal topics like Paul and Paula. But it was a short spring followed by a harsh winter. The expatriation of singer/songwriter Wolf Biermann in 1976 crushed the last idealist’s hope of GDR being the better, new Germany. Paula’s aspiration to escape from her workday routine and seek happiness away from the main stream culture became the norm for live in the GDR.

“Nice Apartment. Enough money. Child healthy. What should be wrong?”
(from Until Death Do Us Part, Heiner Carow, 1979)
Until death Do Us Part

Another film by the same director, Heiner Carow, deals with the same issues in an even more direct manner. Until death do us part (1978)\(^{18}\) conveys a similar message to that of Paul and Paula. This time through the lens of a marriage crumbling because of the very different expectations of husband and wife – despite an over abundance of love.

In comparison to The Legend of Paul and Paula this film is a lot less metaphoric. The lines in between the old and the new are not as clearly drawn, happiness and unhappiness are taking place in both surroundings. Significantly though, Jens who is a construction worker in his professional life is building up, while his personal life is slowly deteriorating. His lack of self esteem and his brigade’s pressure are slowly breaking him. This makes him a true anti-hero, as construction workers were the heroes of East Germany.

Sonja, the wife, embodies the optimistic citizen of the GDR. Without the intent to rebel, she simply and silently wants to follow her dreams and aspirations - here it is returning to work after giving birth to her child. Her husband – at this time of the film playing the role of the state - feels deceived and completely overreacts to her confession. This doesn’t neither brake her will nor her love to him, and she silently pursues her way. Jens’ brigade is trying to be supportive and helps to provide them with a brand new apartment – a true P2. The brigadier impersonating the voice of ‘common sense’ comments: “with this new and beautiful apartment, everything

![Screenshot from The Legend of Paul and Paula, DEFA 1973](image1)

![Screenshot from The Legend of Paul and Paula, DEFA 1973](image2)
else will get in order again. Marriage, career...” Despite the good intentions this attempt also turns out unsuccessfully. Jens’ promotion is also turning sour. Earlier on, his job was a source of fulfillment and gave his life some sense, now it turns into another source of pressure and over-expectations. Meanwhile Sonja is trying to do everything possible. “Everything by the book. Everything with the best intentions and it goes wrong anyhow.” The book is literally the advising book ‘Our family’ a wedding present by Sonja’s boss – the state’s meddling with their private life. Jens escapes into drinking and slowly becomes an alcoholic. To celebrate Jens’ exam, Sonja is exalting herself in trying to be the perfect (house-)wife. Their living room table is set with cold cuts, sandwiches, beer and brandy. Sonja dresses in a semi transparent dress. It is a quirky picture of petite bourgeoisie and cheap pornography – and both efforts go unnoticed.

The conflict in between husband and wife climaxes when Sonja does not interfere as Jens accidentally drinks acid. He survives, she confesses to him and still they can’t get away from each other. The film ends on a note of stagnation and pointlessness.

The Architects

This was a general mood in the country at the time. Although there was a small opposition movement, especially under the roof of the church, the wind of change blew from the outside in. Gorbachev’s ascend to power, perestroika and eventually the Hungarian’s bold moves towards democracy startled people from their depressed slumber.

It was in those times that filmmaker Peter Kahane decided in 1987 to take a stance and attempt to realize a film that “included everything that moved us in these days.” The Architects meant to address more than just building and designs.” In the
middle of the film – as the Daniel’s project runs into difficulties and seeks help from his former professor – the professors monologue sums up the societal meaning of building:

“Building is political, the projection of power. Each building reflects status [...] Prosperity or austerity. Dreams or despair. Economics and technology. They also display the client’s good or bad taste. Architects have to deal with this. Architects must defend their rights. But they also have to compromise.”

(from ‘The Architects’, Peter Kahane, 1990, (1:07))

The film tells the story of a man whose willingness to compromise is his downfall. As a cinematic work it is maybe not as brilliant as Trace of Stones – the director even says that there weren’t too many artistic considerations. The director’s personal passions and the desire to really put everything into one film are all too evident, yet The Architects is still an important historic document. Just as in the formerly discussed films, there is a clear discrimination in between the limits of public life and the dreams and hopes expressed in the private sphere. Paul and Paula only offered a snapshot of the new world, The Architects shows the full spectrum. Monotony, vast concrete deserts, over-sized traffic infrastructures have become a reality. The face of the Real Existing Socialism is a rather ugly and harsh one. A world without possibilities or room for compromise. The main protagonist, Daniel Brenner tries to see the positive sides of this word and constructively improve it.

“Talking [...] won’t help. Only doing something will change things.”

(from ‘The Architects’, Peter Kahane, 1990, (1:03))
Daniel’s and his wife’s character Wanda mirror two opposed attitudes towards the system. Daniel, the one who believes that by actively engaging one can change things. Wanda, the disillusioned, who sees no place for her in this world “which has been made for others (1:03)” and feels that she’s too old for hope.

Just as in *Paul and Paula*, the modernist apartment is the place where the family falls apart. The new world in general is the one that does not facilitate success and happiness.

The role which old, pre-modern spaces play is another parallel to the other films. This is the intimate, livable environment. Daniel’s team sets up an old apartment for the members to live while working in Berlin. The act of painting exemplifies that these spaces can be shaped after one’s own ideas. These spaces are where thoughts can be spoken freely and a free exchange of ideas is possible – here the team gathers to celebrate or in moments of despair. There is an almost archetypical gesture in the gathering around the fire (0:59). Daniel and Renate are making love in this apartment and also Daniel’s friend Max is using an old space for his affairs.

The character of Max is almost a super-Paula. Despite professional success he builds his private space in a villa out in the country, far, far away from the city, it’s dirt and it’s problems.

Daniel fails with his optimism to make the best out of the circumstances, it is the circumstances that nip every creative initiative in the bud. As a final shot, Daniel is shown drunk looking out from underneath a festive stage on the field that he unsuccessfully tried to turn into a livable city. The system has robbed him of his last spark of idealism and clouds its failure with huge red banners and festive bouquets.

The films title and the urgency of the film makers create a sharp difference in between *The Architects* and the other two films. Were the first two works of film indexical in their use of architecture, this film uses it in a very direct fashion. The
director, Peter Kahane was so concerned with really speaking out what concerned and bothered him, that to get his point across he restrained from using metaphors. The characters voice their discontent straight into the camera. The director’s despair is accumulated in a collage of a ‘folk song’ which talks about the beauty of ‘our country’ \(^{23}\) and the gray tristesse of Berlin, dirt spewing cars, streets framed by the Berlin Wall, gray snow and smoggy skies.

**Conclusion**

All three films show clearly how people never seemed to fully feel at home in this new world. There was a constant estrangement of official party line and people's private lives. Just as Socialism as a form of government never really caught on, people did not warm up to its architectural expression either. The spatial split, new versus old, public versus private, was a split that also ran through the lives of GDR citizens. Despite the cult of the builder and the myth of reconstruction there seemed to be a portion of society that never fully accepted the new cities and neighborhoods as fully valid and self explanatory environments. Seeking refuge in politically undetermined spaces allowed conscious people to survive in a totalitarian system such as the GDR. The project of building, of literally constructing new spaces for this new society failed because of two reasons. Firstly, the single minded, one size fits all approach in which it was handled. Secondly, the simultaneous onset of socialism and modernism in East Germany. The attempt to reshape a society and the physical make up of a country at the same time proved to be too much too handle at once.

The events in East Germany are not unique and have to be seen in the context of the general alienation that people experienced throughout the twentieth century. Its limited scope – time-wise and locally - and my personal connection made it an ideal example for research. What makes the case of East Germany particular
and different from other Eastern European countries is the fact that the other world was right in front of everybody’s eyes. West Germany successfully portrayed itself as the only legitimate German state, and it was on everybody’s TV screens every night. This reinforced the existing notion that socialism was something imposed by an outside power.

The years before the fall of the Berlin Wall were a mystery for me which I tried to explore with this work of research. For my future work I am drawing two major aspects from this research. Firstly, the portrayal of the old conditions as the more natural ones raises the question of authenticity. Even though I believe that this a romantic illusion, the human desire for it is real and wants be referred to in architectural design.
Secondly, I feel that I have come to understand on a more human level the unsettling character of twentieth century urbanism and architecture. I have been well aware for a long time of effects of this legacy, yet my occupation with people’s stories within this greater history helped me to discover the human response to it. The sudden and violent ‘breaks with history’ are nothing strange to me. The fall of the Berlin Wall is the one event that had a major impact on my understanding of the world. I was fortunate to have grown up in a family that was politically very active at the time, which turned these historical events into a much more personal experience. This experience of a political system, a whole country disappearing almost over night made me realize first hand that there is a status quo is none-existent in this world. Everything can be subject to change, replacement or demise. To discover ways and tools how architecture can react to and creatively work with these violent leaps of history will be the subject of my final design project.

Notes

1. Director Peter Kahane in “A regular DEFA film?” Lars Mikolai, Fernsehzentrum Babelsberg, Icestorm Entertainment Gmbh, Berlin, 2004


4. Winfried Stallknecht, Herbet Kuschy, Achim Felz were the main architects who developed the P2. - in ‘Plattenbau Privat’ Susanne Hopf, Natalia Meier, Nicolai, Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandling Gmbh, Berlin, 2007

5. Plattenbau Privat’ Hopf, Meier
If nothing else, Lukacs was a source for language that artists could use to plead their case. However conservative and antimodernist, his aesthetic allowed art a measure of autonomy from politics. Part and parcel of his emulation of bourgeois high culture was the premise that a work’s inherent value depended as much on the integrity of the artist the on the expression of “optimism” in the new society. Nevertheless, applying Lukacs’ ideas to the depiction of the socialist present had clear problems. How could the nineteenth century novel, whose greatness derived from its depiction of the “dynamic contradictions of social life,” serve as an effective model for art in a social order in which there very forces of history had been overcome? Lukacs’ own answer to this question, in an essay written during the confusion of 1956, was to posit socialism as as the first societal type aiming to eliminate antagonistic conflict. Socialist realism’s purpose would then be to depict and further this difficult process. This reasoning, however, flew into the face of official ideology, which held that only “nonantagonistic contradictions” persisted.” The Triumph of the Ordinary, Joshua Feinstein, The University of North Carolina Press, 2002, pg. 57

“Trace of Stones” F. Beyer;
Synopsis: Building construction foreman Hannes Balla is self-proclaimed king of the large construction site “Schkona.” He is held in high esteem by his co-workers because he makes sure they are paid correctly. Things stop running so smoothly when supplies become scarce, and Kati Klee, a young technician, and Werner Horrath, the new Party Secretary, arrive on the site. Hannes’ unassailability and his reputation are at stake now because Horrath has a lot going for him and is quite a match for Hannes. Kati is able to see Hannes’ true nature, and he falls in love with her. But Horrath loves the young technician as well, despite being devoted to his wife and children waiting for him in Rostock. He cannot make up his mind and entangles himself in lies, pretending his motivations are for the sake of his work. But he pays a high price for lying. This love triangle involving Kati, Werner and Hannes, which initially benefited their work because it inspired Balla to take on new tasks and views, is destroyed. This film was banned for 25 years. Arguably the most important DEFA film of the 1960s, Trace of Stones was shelved by East Germany following its 1966 release. Based on Erik Neutsch’s novel of the same title. (Source: DEFA Film Library at UMass, Amherst, website)

The Triumph of the Ordinary, J. Feinstein, pg 185

Die DDR in ihren Spielfilmen, Harry Blunk, Profil Verlag, Munich, 1984, pg185

The Triumph of the Ordinary, J. Feinstein, Chapter 7

Synopsis:
Paul is unhappily married to a beautiful but rather ignorant woman who cheats on him. Paula, who has two children from different fathers, is in a relationship of convenience with Saft, a tire salesman. Being rational and thinking of what is best for the children, Paula is not really opposed to marrying this extremely decent and respectable, though much older, man. Paula and Paul meet each other in a bar by accident. They end up falling in love. Yet, Paul, who can never make up his mind, almost gambles away his luck. Paula feels betrayed by him. And when her child dies in an accident she blames herself for it and splits up with Paul. Only now does he realize how much he loves Paula. He decides to win her back and it is so moving that all who witness this deeply sympathize with Paul. Finally, Paul wins Paula over despite all the obstacles. Their love becomes a legend in the Neighborhood, intensified by a tragic twist. To this day, the most popular DEFA film. (Source: DEFA Film Library at UMass, Amherst, website)


13. Building Socialism at Home, Paul Betts in: Socialist Modern, Pence, Betts

14. With Die Legende von Paul und Paula, film director Heiner Carow and the scriptwriter Ulrich Plenzdorf wanted to buck this trend by making a film that would be a major box office hit. The formula for their success included two ingredients: The creation of a heroine who was a far cry from the ideal socialist personality, a ‘real person’ with whom the audience could identify; and the transgression of the by then customary gritty documentary realism through fantasy, which the narrative form of the legend afforded.

15. Die DDR in ihren Spielfilmen, Blunk

16. Die DDR in ihren Spielfilmen, Blunk

17. ‘Die Legende von Paul und Paula’ “blew a breach (Director Konrad Wolf)” in several respects, as it reflected a reality that did not conform with the official party line. A special meaning for the development of film in the GDR was it’s tragic ending. Blunk explains that in the system of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, the tragic only exists in the form of the ‘optimistic drama’. Tragic conflicts were usually removed from human and social relationships.

Synopsis:
Sonja and Jens truly love each other. Their wedding and subsequent married life is heaven on earth in their eyes - especially because they already own a flat and a baby will soon complete their happiness. But then Sonja realizes that being a housewife and mother does not fulfill her. She misses her job and colleagues and would like to work again. Jens is entirely opposed to this idea. Having been deprived of a harmonious family life in his childhood, he now demands a harmonious married life from Sonja, but based on conventional notions of what that would be. She seems to submit to his demand, but then she takes the examination to gain higher status in her profession without his knowledge. Jens feels betrayed and becomes violent. He regrets his actions and wants to prove himself. He starts a training course, which he is unable to handle. Out of despair, he begins to drink. Sonja works secretly. Panic stricken, she has an abortion. Jens learns about it, he loses his self-control completely. At this point, Sonja only feels hatred for him. When Jens drinks from a bottle in which Sonja knows that there is some caustic detergent, she does not stop him. But Jens survives. Sonja cannot deal with her guilt and soon she openly admits her guilt to Jens. [Despite this tragedy they seem to be stuck and can’t get away from each other.] (Source: DEFA Film Library at UMass, Amherst, website)


20. Unsere Familie, ein Ratgeber fuer Jung und Alt, Verlag fuer die Frau, Leipzig; was a very common book that offered ‘the answer to all problems’ of the socialist family.


Synopsis:
Daniel feels like a stranger in his own land. His architectural plans for a new development have been rejected for not complying with standardized designs. His colleagues decide to leave Daniel to himself. Even Daniel’s wife, Wanda, is despondent and wants to move westwards with her daughter like so many others. Kahane deftly shows the bureaucratic inner workings of the former East German centrally controlled economy. His protagonist assembles a team of irreverent architects who intentionally goad the powers that be. They want to see just how much they can get away with, and that turns out to be preciously little.

22. Kahane, “A regular DEFA film?” Lars Mikolai,
Unsere Heimat – by Hans Naumilkat, BMG Amiga,

“Unsere Heimat, das sind nicht nur die Städte und Dörfer,
Unsere Heimat sind auch all die Bäume im Wald.
Unsere Heimat ist das Gras auf der Wiese, das Korn auf dem Feld,
Und die Vögel in der Luft und die Tiere der Erde
Und die Fische im Fluß sind die Heimat.
Und wir lieben die Heimat, die schöne
Und wir schützen sie, weil sie dem Volke gehört,
Weil sie unserem Volke gehört.”

Our homeland, is not only it’s cities and villages,
Our homeland is also the trees in the forest.
Our homeland is the grass on the meadow, the wheat in the field,
and the birds in the sky and the animals on the ground
and the fish in the water are our homeland.
And we love the homeland, the beautiful,
And we protect her, because she belongs to the people,
because she belongs to our people.
Lebbeus Woods

Undeniably, Woods was the major source of inspiration at the beginning of the project. His occupation with ‘post’ conditions and architecture in a rather atypical way had always fascinated me. I especially like his notion of ‘anarchitecture’.

“[..] against all authoritarian regimes, and against all authoritarians. I am interested only in the authority of individual acts and moments on a continually shifting landscape of acts and authority - the landscapes of the free-zone.”

“The role of architecture in this landscape is instrumental, not expressive. It is a tool extending individual capacities to do, to think, to know, to become, but also to pass away, to become an echo, a vestige, a soil for other acts, moments, individuals.”

“My projects are concerned with with the invention of new conditions of living. They are deeply political in nature, yet anti-ideological, in that they do not follow a programme for social relationships a priori. Instead they develop architecture of continuous transformation for it’s own sake, thereby undermining the very possibility of dogma in any form. Fixed social forms dissolve in the turbulences of change in the spatial and temporal boundaries established by architecture, projecting a society fluid in form, wholly dependent on the poise and ingenuity of individuals continually confronting new conditions. This fulfills the ethical and moral imperatives explicit in the sceptical, even pessimistic, spirit of the present age.

Responsibility for the condition of both self and the world is fixed in each individual being. No system can be trusted. Any ideology is a betrayal. Only through the transformation of self can community be established. Architecture becomes a political act of intensely personal meaning.”

1
Thoughts

Other texts that were rather influential in the making of this project are a number of interviews that I found in a book called “Transurbanism” (Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (editors) V2_Publishing/NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2002)

The following paragraphs are excerpts of these interviews:

Roemer van Toorn ‘Against the High-jacking of Multitude’

Architecture has the ability just as cinema to create new worlds. Movies sceneries are like mobile sections that render the moving of movement visible. Information is nothing abstract but a series of edited images. Architecture can borrow scene making (mis en scene) from the cinematic.

Liberation can come through and with cliches, not disqualification. The introduction of an absurd element, the ‘unconsumable’ activates differences to challenge existing conditions and liberate. This is a two way street.

Architecture free of the obligation of the symbolic: ‘the visual that keeps form seeing (because it’s pretext is that we decode, decipher, that we ‘read’). The image always challenges us to carry out a montage with others, with some other. Because in image, as in democracy, there is ‘free play’, unfinished pieces, gaps, openings. Devices of the image: aesthetic roughness, “trucage” (falsification/trick).

Radicalization of our everyday conditions while maintaining, not eliminating, communication with the normality of the everyday.
Arjun Appadurai  ‘The Right to Participate in the Work of the Imagination’

“The nature of the human concern with intimacy, with friendship, with attachment, with predictability, with routine, and even with what we may call ordinary life, or everyday life, is such, that it simply cannot work with entirely abstract, or virtual, or mediated, or imaged communities, to the use the Anderson phrase. A fascinating aspect of your notion of locality is that cities are no longer one locality, but a complex of localities. This raises a difficult problem for urbanists: how to plan a city that’s no longer homogeneous, but consists of all sorts of groups that want their own locality somehow produced or reproduced?”

“So the question of how to imagine cities as a site for the structure of feeling is a challenge, both conceptually and epistemologically and also practically in terms of urban planning and urban design and urban form.”

“In my view we should change our fundamental emphasis to the flows, rather than to the spaces and structures. “

“... you have to get away from the distinction between what one might call “sedimented space” and “trafficked (or traversed) space.” Sedimented space is what all our specialties are about; even in social science, research is much easier once a population has precipitated or sedimented itself. But to look at the circulatory system through which forms are moving, through which bodies are moving and identities are moving and material, infrastructural stuff is moving, from electricity to cars to roads and postal services, etc., and then then turn to more secure locational forms, is difficult.”

“...all this is possible because today […] media are cheap. This is also an important
reason why localities in the spatial sense are not important anymore.”

“...it’s quite a demanding and challenging exercise, [...] inhabiting multiple imaginary spaces.”

Scott Lash ‘Informational Totemisms’

“...how does power work in the information age? There is power in the flows too. It’s not just good old flows against dreadful structures. Sociotechnical systems, even nonlinear ones, play an important role in domination. Even without meaning you can have domination. Okay, there’s still some meaning around, but in some ways culture is dominantly operational, rather than a meaning culture.”

“It’s everything Duchamp was talking about: if you go to an art gallery you should be a user of the work of art and complete it, because it’s incomplete, it’s conceptual, and the actual material thing you see is an accident on the way to the concept, and even the concept is a little concept, not a big one. If anybody in an audience is putting forward different interpretations, it’s yet another operational completion. “

“I was in Havana with my two sons and of course I’m so old they try to sell dope to my kids, and then they say to my sons: “Where’re you from?” And they say: “England, London.” And then these street sellers go: “Oh, Ali G, Ali G.” It was incredible that these fuckig Cubans are identifying the English not with Shakespeare, but with Ali G. What was supposed to be value meltdown and multiculturalism is now seen as English.”

“I think power works through an incredible facticity now, and through an indexicality on a very immediate level – although it also works discursively – but it works
incredibly indexically in the sense of nonlegitized power. You know how you read the newspaper: it just hits you with brute facticity, and you don’t think about the arguments. “

**Mark Wigley ‘Resisting the City’**

“In 1963, Webber² published a key essay called “Order in Diversity: Community without Propinquity.” His point was that the city had been radically dispersed because of the evolving communication systems. Inasmuch as cities are physical organizations that enable people to communicate with each another [sic!], new systems of communication allow for different organizations. Physical boundaries become irrelevant and cities become increasingly intricate and widespread networks. Webber argues that this leads to a city organized as a maze of subcultures of your neighbors or those of anyone else in the your city. You are connected to your groups by electronic systems of communication rather than streets. This doesn’t mean that the physical city disappears. In fact it continues to grow as a huge physical apparatus. The trick of Webber’s argument is to say that people get together in dense spatial organizations for nonspatial reasons. In other words, they inhabit space in order to communicate, but communication is not a spatial phenomenon. On the contrary, it is a kind of subversion or destruction of space. So specific spatial systems are set up in order to facilitate transactions that subvert space.
Lars Spuybroek  ‘The Structure of Vagueness’

Organization with chaos. Optimized Path System by Frei Otto. Interaction among elements restructure and “find (a) form”. A strategy of flexible, individually weak elements cooperating to form stronger collective configurations. What emerges is a soft rigidity. [...] it is not a an easlily readable and clear form, but a vague order..... [...] a system that is in fact structured by holes.

Reflections

Antje Heuer, Stefan Rettich  ‘Farewell from the Socialist City’

“They [the buildings] were meant to demonstrate the unity of industrial construction and socialist architecture and to ‘differ fundamentally from the chaos spreading in the centres of capitalist cities...’³ as Walter Ulbricht put it.

What distinguished the socialist city positively from West German or West European cities was not only the aesthetic guises of East German architectural modernism,
but above all designs that – in terms of structure, space and philosophy – were
directly linked to the political system.

[...] it represented a thinking which could be called idealistic: faith in the power of
the collective ad in the need for subordinating individual interests to those of
the community; equality for all and the desire never to lose sight of the welfare of
society as a whole.

Figure 12: Marzahn: a planned town for 100,000 inhabitants to the
east of Berlin - Clelland, Architectural Design, 1982

Figure 13: The initial Berlin Wall:
August 13th, 1961. “faith in the power of
the collective” - Clelland, Architectural
Design, 1982

The typical European city is a city whose inhabitants – as the owners of it’s small
scale properties – self-confidently take an active part in determining its fate, but in
the GDR, after forty years of socialism, the political and economic foundations of
this type of European city had disappeared.

Conflicting spatial images herald the emergence of complex, global networks and
relations, but also of pluralism and freedom in this new age. At the same time, these
images require partially changed habits of perception (just like the ‘intermediary
city’ does) for their beauties to be discovered.

With the return of the capitalist society, the nature of a village, town or city is again
determined by marketablility. We must not let them be reduced to this quality alone.
For ‘the good life’ we urgently need the relics of the socialist city – and not only its spacious public squares and iconic buildings of the 1960s. The least we need is the reflection on and questioning of the role of private ownership and the discussion of social cohesion. The post-socialist city is alike a seismograph that indicates future developments and, just like its predecessor, remains a testing ground.
In the context of this project ‘site’ is more than just a geographical location. It is rather a point in time, a freeze frame in a reel of film, a moment in history. A premise of the studio environment that gave birth to this project was to find an architectonical expression of our contemporary condition. This condition is one of virtual networks playing a central role in creating social (meeting) space. In other words, the processes that facilitate our lives and societies happen unseen. Together with my previous research and my personal experience I decided to play out this attempt - adding the image of our contemporary society - over/at/on top of what I started to call ‘post-socialist spaces’ in East Germany.

Figure 18: Objects in space - black and white digital photography by author
I was struck by the sheer beauty of these places and asked myself why that is so. On the surface these are cities that have lost their sociopolitical context, they are not even performing well and yet I deemed them immensely beautiful. I concluded for myself that the reason must be the fact that the lack of context turned the buildings into three dimensional pieces of art, volumes in space, but not actual architecture.

Figure 20: sheer beauty....decontextualized - digital photography by author

That is how the idea of adding a new layer was born. Whatever that meant at the time. My more tangible site at this point were the remnants of socialist urban planning in East Germany.

Figure 19: Recoding the City - mixed media by author

Figure 20: sheer beauty....decontextualized - digital photography by author
The site which I tried to reveal was the ‘digital cloud’ in which we live. It became clear to me that an architecture which incorporated a contemporary image would have to be part of the virtual world as well at the real world. Over the course of the project I tried to carefully bring both the actual and the virtual together. I wanted to explore what their intersection/layering would lead to. From literal attempts like this:
I moved on to more interpretive images that started taking an actual site/existing architecture etc into consideration:

The actual physical site that I finally chose for my project is situated in the city of Halle - which is a city of 234,000 in the state of Saxony-Anhalt. I spent an extensive amount of time there researching for this project. During communism it became famous for its new development called Halle-Neustadt (new city). Nevertheless Communist/Modernist urban planning left it’s mark on the historic city as well. The area around the train station was extensively redesigned in the 1980ies. Big roundabout, flyover, a bus and light rail terminal. The particular intersection that became my site was redesigned at the end of the 1990ies.
I was attracted to this particular site not only because of its aesthetic qualities but also because the processes at the site, the flows, the restlessness of the place reminded me of the overall processes that my project is tying into.

Figure 26: site isonometric
Process

My process was mostly characterized by revealing, layering, (over) saturation and extraction [A]. I extracted and layered (visual) information from the site [B+C]. When the image reached a point of rien-ne-vas-plus [D] I started extracting patterns, shapes and vectors that appeared in that cloud of (visual) data [E].

Finally I employed these extracts to become sections, plans, etc.
Figure 30: ‘rien ne vas plus’

Figure 31: patterns shapes and vectors
ONE  Revealing

“The site that i tried to reveal was the ‘digital cloud’ in which we live.”

TWO  Ungraspableness

“...a layer that is born out of a temporary condition logically has to include or address a notion of fleetingness.”

THREE  Juxtaposition

“New RELATIONSHIPS in between individuals and architecture. Instead of old and overcome --- architecture will be perplexing, questioning, reflecting.”
CHAPTER 5
DESIGN

Figure 35: Capturing Gathering Swarming, title collage - mixed digital media by author
Monotony and monumentality of socialist spaces is contrasted with a design that acknowledges the multiplicity (of possibilities, paths, choices, desires) that exists nowadays. Orthogonal space is sliced up, excavated, perforated and at points overlaid without replacing it in its totality.

Non-functional elements are formal expressions of the realm of virtual space which permeates our lives and cities as well. These elements function in a more ‘internet’ fashion (multi layered, multi directional, yet clustered, streamlined etc) and yet they perform in the real world.

The presence of these structures addresses the condition of impermanence and change that play a strong role in the psyche of East Germans today. The multiplicity which is expressed by the project contrasts the rigidity of socialist architecture and society - and creates a link to remembering the past.
My project though, ties into more than just the contemporary or the immediate. It is actually addressing the short-livedness of systems and ideologies. Socialism was another self proclaimed superior ideology which instead of causing the world revolution disappeared after just five decades - leaving behind vast landscapes of de-contextualized architecture. This is the reason why my project is only referring to - yet not directly tying into our contemporary condition of a networked society. In this way it is acknowledging the present but also anticipating its demise.

The way in which the project's elements encounter/interact with/attach to the old structures (walls, pavement, flyover) speak about scars which the departure of the socialist society left behind. The end of the Socialist state in Germany came about rather silently, no eruptions of revolutionary fervor, no widespread violence. Change took place mostly inside people’s minds, but nevertheless it left wounds and scars behind. Scaring of concrete, removal of layers is the architectural equivalent in my project.
Metaphorically it is like a book about computers which can be read without the actual need of a computer at hand. This is why this project tries to express these processes (invisible, yet essential networks, multiplicity and diversity) without the actual use of these condition’s tools. Metaphor and reference have longer life spans than hyper links and social apps.

My project tries to act in a similar fashion. Gathering, swarming, concentrated diversity, polyvalent constructs which are the more spatial attributes of the internet-age are the reason for the project’s elements to reorganize these post-socialist left over spaces in a similar manner.
Research about socialist space made me discover a recurrent theme: the lack of space for individuality and compromise.

My project introduces a non conformist character into these spaces. It highlights the 'no-room-for-compromise' attitude under which these spaces were derived and as such act as a reminder and connector to east Germany’s history. A juxtaposition of the rigid past with the vagueness of today takes place.

The notion of ungraspableness

Part of the intention and origin of the project is the desire to create an alternative memory. There is also a desire to communicate my interpretation of that post-socialist condition. Personally, the strongest impression that the end of the eastern block has left me with, is the knowledge that nothing can be taken for granted. The lack of a status quo. Things that seem set in stone (or concrete in our case) can be swept away with amazing speed. This means that my project which tries to add a layer that is born out of a temporary condition logically has to include or address a notion of fleetingness.

The general physical actions of the project are rather subtle. In terms of process it has been design by subtraction. My project addresses moments of loss on the theoretical level - it has been designed in the same fashion. Out of layers of
information or data that are present at the site I extracted bits and pieces that were revealed - with the help of a variety of tools - manual and computer based. Simultaneously, the actual structures are illustrating this process as well. Corten steel members act as 'dream-catchers' which reveal that layer of data that has become so central to our way of living. In these structures describe something that is ungraspable and fleeting, yet present.

Figure 42: views and exploded axonometric
Finally, I want to employ these structures of the past to ask questions about today.

I am from that generation that maybe did not consciously witness the enormous changes which the fall of the Berlin wall brought about. Nevertheless, my East German origin makes up a big part of my identity. Despite this central role in my biography and my generation’s as a whole, actual knowledge and awareness and interest in these topics are relatively scarce.

Remembering the past is largely left (pun intended) to those who glorify what has been. There is no lively debate. Only ignorance and glorification. My project wants to help maintain a memory which is of a more emotional nature. Repetitiveness, monotony and rigidity which characterized both life and architecture in the GDR is contrasted by free form, nurbs elements of the present digital age.

The project is not clear cut and it’s ambiguity is part of the condition that I am trying to describe and the emotion which I am trying to express.

Figure 43: Juxtaposition, new elements at Riebeck Square, Halle Saale, East Germany
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