



# Rooms Bathed in Light for the New Human

**Architecture in the GDR was a balancing act between political symbolism, planning requirements, luxurious interiors and the decay of old urban quarters – a dazzlingly paradoxical chapter in European modernism.**

Lasting interest in the architectural heritage of the GDR is manifested in the constant appearance of new books, exhibitions and conferences – and it is reasonable to conclude that the buildings and urban ensembles constructed in the forty years<sup>1</sup> of the GDR amount to more than a mere footnote in architectural history.

Even thirty years after German unification, however, on many sides there is still no consensus about the architectural value of buildings in the style of GDR modernism. Citizens and political decision-makers are still polarised when the value of such buildings is called into question and therefore their destruction is often under discussion. In January 2019, for example, plans to demolish the Terrassenrestaurant Minsk, a work by the architect Karl-Heinz Birkholz on the Brauhausberg in Potsdam, were foiled only at the last minute when a procedure to involve citizens led to a new majority on the building committee. By then, however, the neighbouring indoor swimming pool with its vigorously curving concave roof, also designed by Birkholz, had already fallen victim to the wrecking ball.

Although East German architectural historians and architects accuse people from the former West Germany, sometimes sweepingly, of “treating GDR modernism as something to be discarded”,<sup>2</sup> and claim that by razing the buildings of the GDR the West wants to erase the material and cultural evidence of its identity and its past, in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Peter Richter, with reference to the debate in Potsdam, emphasises: “in truth, the battlefronts have been drawn in a more complicated way... and long-standing Potsdamers too have reasons to be enthusiastic about reconstructed baroque – and those who move in from West Germany to support the retention of GDR modernism.”<sup>3</sup> It is also noticeable that young architects and planners, regardless of their origin, approach these buildings with less prejudice than those who grew up with them: in the former East Germany, too, it was not until about the year 2000 that protest arose against disrespectful treatment of the GDR’s architectural legacy.<sup>4</sup>

## **What could be beautiful about the buildings of a dictatorship?**

On the other hand, for a long time many politicians and decision-makers from the West regarded the GDR almost exclusively as a repressive, unjust state, a dictatorship. They found it hard to imagine that the architectural remains of this state could suddenly be of cultural value. “Did not the Party’s claim to total power restrict any development whatever of open thought and design in such a way that all that could result was, at best, a stage set for the latest formal standards?”<sup>5</sup> This question is legitimate, and plays a key role in approaching this architectural heritage: In the legacy of a dictatorship, what is worth preserving or even to be considered attractive?

The answer is simple: it is necessary to live with the paradox that an anti-democratic system can produce architecturally outstanding achievements. Architecture does not necessarily follow political ethics. Just as the reality of life in the GDR was multifaceted, the buildings it produced were multifaceted too – with regard to their range, the timeline of their development and not least to the motives of its architects and the latitude available to them.

## **Stylistic phases of GDR architecture**

The following description distinguishes the five principal phases that marked the development of architecture in the GDR:<sup>6</sup>

In the immediate post-war period (from 1946 to about 1950), the emphasis lay on the most urgent task, reconstruction. The architectural and urban ideals of the international architectural avant-garde, for example the Athens Charter, were the guiding principles of reconstruction in both West and East. The essential decisions were taken by the Soviet military administration. The second phase was the Stalin era (from 1951 to 1957), when the debate about formalism in art, initiated by Soviet cultural





Residential palaces on the Karl-Marx-Allee, formerly Stalinallee

officers, produced far-reaching consequences for architecture. This led, on the one hand, to “designs of historical pomp”<sup>7</sup> situated between Soviet-influenced neo-baroque, so-called wedding-cake architecture, and neoclassicism. For more everyday construction projects, the no less anti-modern *Heimatstil* (homeland style) predominated. A modernist manner of any kind whatever was frowned upon.

After Stalin’s death in 1953 it was a few years before the political thaw reached architecture, and a reversion to the International Modern style was sought. The return to soberness from 1957 to the early 1970s may be regarded as the golden period of architecture in the GDR. Impulses from both West and East were adopted and led to the formation of an autonomous Ostmoderne (Eastern modernism) that delighted in experiment.

The fourth phase relates to the 1970s. With modular construction methods and the establishment of types, politically willed industrial construction was definitively implemented for all standard tasks in the shape of the *Plattenbau*, a structure made from prefabricated concrete slabs.

After 1980, in the fifth phase, the perfecting of industrial construction continued. Alongside this, in the spirit of reflective modernism, post-modern influences became apparent in the GDR too. At the same time a renewed appreciation of the value of pre-modern building fabric and old town centres set in.

### “Risen from ruins”

The hardships of the phase of reconstruction after 1945 shaped the identity of the newly founded state and its citizens. Young people, many of whom had just returned from the war, built up a new country. One of the very first reconstruction projects, on the orders of the Soviet military administration, was the Volksbühne (People’s Theatre) on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin (p.145). Few people are aware that this theatre, so influential today in the German-speaking drama scene, is essentially a post-war building. From 1948 onwards Hermann Fehling and Gustav



Theatre in Neustrelitz that was rebuilt in 1954 in the style of the time

Müller rebuilt the theatre dating from 1913 designed by the architect Oskar Kaufmann, which was reduced to its outer walls in the Second World War, and added two salons to its sides. These were intended as places where theatregoers could meet after the performance to discuss the work. The decisive intervention consisted in transforming the side windows to long vertical and horizontal bands of windows and in building the semicircular upper part of the façade, which gave the theatre a *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) character.<sup>8</sup>

### Stalinist baroque classicism

For one long decade this was to be the last time that such a plain, modern building was erected in the eastern part of Germany. From 1950, in accordance with influences from Moscow, architecture in the National Tradition style was dominant. This “baroque classicism of the Stalinists”<sup>9</sup> is seen in exemplary manner in the newly built Friedrich-Wolf-Theater in Neustrelitz with its columned portico and in the Kulturhaus at the Maxhütte steelworks in Unterwellenborn in Thuringia, where no fewer than three awe-evoking temple façades were built. Stalinstadt, later called Eisenhüttenstadt, newly founded near the Polish border in Brandenburg, still presents a coherent ensemble from this period, one great museum of early GDR architecture (pp. 52–55).

For housing in villages and small towns, the homeland style with gable roofs, simple volumes and façades with regular door and window openings represents a kind of timeless modesty. For public buildings, however, architects’ efforts to dispense with any kind of architectural esprit are most obvious: no cuboid forms, no continuous bands of windows, no unsupported projecting roofs of reinforced concrete, no dynamically rounded façades. As soon as these buildings had been completed, a feeling of yesterday, of being left behind by the times, clung to them. Only industrial and university buildings manifested a certain freedom. The verdict



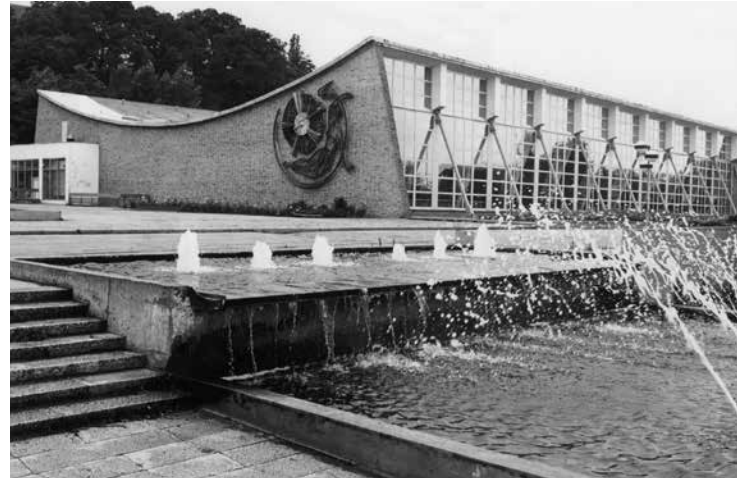
In the lobby of Restaurant Moskau, Berlin

of formalism hangs perceptibly like a sword of Damocles over the heads of those who designed these buildings, especially with regard to what this architecture does not display.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the extent of what was reconstructed and newly built in only a few years is impressive, especially in view of the high reparations that were owed by the Soviet Occupation Zone and later GDR to the Soviet Union: entire railways and factories were dismantled and taken to the Soviet Union.

The cities, above all, severely damaged by war, are marked even today by the wedding-cake style, including the centres of Magdeburg, Nordhausen and Rostock. In Lange Strasse in Rostock, the façades were built with exposed brick, interrupted by patches of plasterwork. These nods to the north German style of brick Gothic are a welcome regional variation on tame eclecticism. However, in small towns and villages, too, the intention was to put a new, socialist face on everyday life. Here architecture was given the task of imparting physical expression to the achievements of the new system.

### Palaces for workers

From late 1949 a political campaign initiated by, among others, the Soviet culture officials Alexander Dymshitz<sup>11</sup> and Vladimir Semyonov led to a far-reaching rejection of all positions of Western art and architecture that were regarded as bourgeois and decadent or subjective. Until that time, reconstruction in East Germany had largely followed the guiding examples of International Modernism. The accusation of formalism was aimed especially at the emerging International Modern style and manifestations of Neues Bauen (New Building) such as the Bauhaus style – or what was taken to be this style. The high-rise completed on Weberwiese in 1951 to designs by Hermann Henselmann marks the beginning of this phase. What was now demanded were palaces for workers, part of ceremoniously staged urban spaces that gave spatial expression to the achievements of socialism. In a mere two and a half years, on the two kilometres



The now demolished swimming pool in Potsdam

between Strausberger Platz and Frankfurter Tor in Berlin, the ensemble of Stalinallee (today Karl-Marx-Allee, pp. 108–115) was constructed with its eight- to twelve-storey housing in the National Tradition style, which in effect meant an interpretation of the Soviet wedding-cake style with added local variations. On the inner ring road in Leipzig, the housing on Rossplatz constructed at the same time was a similarly elaborate, monumental residential palace.

The unbelievably short construction period of Stalinallee in Berlin, which was motivated by propaganda purposes, necessitated compromises in craftsmanship that soon took their toll: within a few years the first ceramic tiles and pieces of masonry fell from the façade. By 1990 this had happened to 50 per cent of the cladding.<sup>12</sup>

On the west side of Strausberger Platz, the ensemble of this showpiece boulevard terminates in two higher structures that enclose the oval-shaped space. This is a lasting caesura, as the final section of the street up to Alexanderplatz is flanked by several eight- and ten-storey slab-like residential blocks of large prefabricated elements, placed at right-angles to the street (p. 108). These austere slabs were built a decade later and express an entirely transformed view of architecture and city planning. The change from architecture that shapes the urban space to open stand-alone buildings is evident.

The prefabricated blocks (Plattenbauten) are flanked by a series of public buildings that are among the highlights of GDR architecture of those years: the Kino International cinema, Restaurant Moskau (now known as Café Moskau) opposite it, and an element linking them to the residential slab blocks, two-storey pavilion buildings with large areas of glazing for shops and services such as the former Babette beauty salon, which was used as a bar until 2018 (pp. 120–127). This second section of Karl-Marx-Allee represents the third phase of building in the GDR. The spirit of the National Tradition and Soviet models had been cast off, and with the “reappropriation of avant-garde design concepts by the left, East German









20 Opera house, Leipzig  
right: Wintergartenhochhaus, Leipzig



























Terraced high-rise, Rostock-Evershagen 69  
left: Sonnenblumenhaus, Rostock-Lichtenhagen