

The last avenue of the ‘Other’ Europe. The Stalinist universe of the Karl-Marx-Allee in Berlin

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There are cities that lie on a border, and others that accommodate borders and are formed by these. Political events have robbed these cities of a part of their reality, such as their hinterland, their tight bond with the rest of the national territory. History has torn deep gashes in their fabric and made a world stage of their everyday life, turning them into a theatre of the absurd. In these cities, one experiences, in an extraordinary manner, the duality of the border and its positive and negative effects in accordance with whether the borders are open or closed, rigid or flexible, anachronistic, protective or destructive.¹

When Claudio Magris wrote these lines, he was thinking of his hometown of Trieste, which, in the heyday of the Cold War, was occasionally referred to as ‘Little Berlin’. At that time, Berlin was a place that not only existed on a border but was itself a border, just like Trieste and numerous other cities in Central and Eastern Europe. Since then, the erratic course of political geography has determined the mental horizon of countless generations of Berlin citizens, and even today this existential experience is tangible in the cityscape itself, with its abrupt transitions, terrible craters, and dramatic walls.

Berlin’s history exhibits many traces of a true frontier town, with all the corresponding associations of adventure and exploration, of unexpected and ephemeral happiness, of despair and decline. Just after 1900, politicians such as Walther Rathenau and writers such as Kurt Tucholsky described Berlin as ‘America on a small scale’ or as ‘Chicago on the Spree’, because, similar to pioneer towns in the Wild West, there was a long-standing tradition of *laissez-faire* with respect to economic and political expansion. Karl Scheffler in his classical essay *Berlin, ein Stadtschicksal* (1910), saw Berlin as a pioneers’ town, pointing to the peripheral location that Berlin had occupied for centuries in relation to

German culture. Even today, Berlin lies as an isolated archipelago in the thinly populated Mark Brandenburg. This geographical location reinforces the image of a town in the prairie or desert, recalling nomadic oases such as Calgary or Las Vegas rather than historical metropolises such as Paris, London or Madrid. In Berlin, this leads to the paradoxical feeling of living in the centre and on the periphery of life at the same time, a quality Berlin shares with Trieste. Its eccentric situation and demographic earthquakes – the unrelenting transit of refugees, migrants and adventurers – ensure that the residents do not readily become attached to their abode, thus leaving the city, in morphological terms, without a reproducible shape. However, according to Philip Oswalt, it is exactly this combination of transience and urban formlessness that offers a unique playing field of unlimited opportunities. ‘Berlin is an experiment without a hypothesis’, in as much as its many identities allow it to absorb everything that comes along, from political ideologies to economic shockwaves, and to stage these in the cityscape.²

Amidst the tumult of the crashes and catastrophes, happenings, concepts and ideologies that agitated Berlin in the 20th century, whether short-lived or not, there evolved the dominant urban theme of *competition* or *rivalry*. It became a sharp confrontation between various urban quarters, not primarily based on the city’s situation on either side of the Spree, but rather on border shifts enforced by the two world powers that made Berlin a showcase of diametrically opposing social systems after the fall of the Nazi regime. In Berlin, the Iron Curtain was urbanized in an extreme manner, integrated in both the cityscape and urban culture, thus becoming a setting *par excellence* for literary, cinematic, and even architectural representation. The division was initially an administrative boundary that consisted of many smaller frontiers on the military map of a ruined city. It subsequently became a political-ideological schism in the characters and lifestyles of families and individuals, finally reaching architectural status in the brute form of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

The construction of the Wall marked the moment at which the bond between aesthetics and politics in the architecture of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was definitively broken. Architecture was stripped of its symbolic, mythic and representative functions and converted into a political barrier of violence, anxiety, and control. This was also the last and decisive stage in the construction politics of the GDR in its development from 1949 onwards. It was a process full of rapid and unexpected twists and turns, rightly typified by Thomas Hoscislawski as ‘Building between power and powerlessness’ with rivalry as its most important mainspring as it was geared to impress, equal, and eventually surpass the other Germany across the border.³

Right from its foundation, the GDR government as well as the party (SED) nurtured Utopian expectations of a purified German architecture that would follow

'national tradition', as opposed to the architecture of modernism (Bauhaus) that was denounced as 'bourgeois-reactionary'. On 27 July 1950, the Building Act came into force with the '16 Principles of Urban Design' as its nucleus, following the Soviet Union, in which *urbanity* was described as a pure cultural good and the compact and monumental cityscape of the German City Beautiful was championed as the binding architectonic guideline for the socialist city. Exactly how this kind of centrally structured architecture with its vertical accents and striking silhouettes would appear in the practice of urban development was discussed intensively by architects, art critics, journalists and various party functionaries in specialist magazines and daily and weekly publications. The most important and provisionally the only architectonic reference, was to the architectural ensemble of the Stalinallee in Berlin (1949–58), which was a prototype of a new urban architecture, national in form, and socialist in content. It was an ensemble in which architecture had once more assumed its proper educational task, with the stakes being the 'struggle for a united Germany in the future'. It was a demonstrative architectural programme surrounded by bombastic rhetoric that recalled the populist clichés of national-socialist propaganda. These associations had already been forged in the Bundesrepublik (1952) and also in the GDR shortly afterwards, when German unity turned out to be illusory and the socialist-realist architecture of the Stalinallee (renamed the Karl-Marx-Allee in 1961) was banned by the SED as bourgeois dissipation. This was the situation from which, in the early 1960s, the journalist and novelist Stefan Heym began his novel *Die Architekten*, which provides a penetrating view of the ideological skirmishes, (party) political intrigues, and administrative anomalies that surrounded the design and the progress of the largest Stalinist construction project in the GDR in the 1950s.⁴

Socialist Cityscape

The Berlin of the Stalinallee had been preceded by a city that had known a completely different blueprint. Immediately after the war, the Berlin municipal government – with the approval of the occupying Allies – published the *Kollektivplan*, an urban development scheme for a radically new and unified Berlin in which the pre-war *Mietskasernenstadt* was literally dismantled and spread out as elongated strips of residential and working areas interconnected by a flexible network of motorways. The landscape became a dominant factor, functioning not only as a physical determinant but also characterizing the new city metaphorically as a 'urban landscape'. A striking feature of this 'white' city was the emphasis on urban hygiene – opening toward sun, air and sky – and a certain reticence about allocating it a specific architectural form, an expressive countenance. This could perhaps be regarded as reserve on the part of the German

architects that can be traced back to the perversion of architecture in the national-socialist period.

As a symbol of the vigour of the young socialist state, the construction of the first 'living units', began in 1949. In the district of Friedrichsthain – in the vicinity of the future Stalinallee – a *Stadtdorf* of pre-war social democratic allure would arise amidst the ruins and the few building blocks still standing. It would be a synthesis of a garden city, an industrial settlement, and the landscape, with cheerful towers and domes of people's palaces and festive halls as symbols of unity and peace. It would be a 'white' urban fabric for a 'new' citizen who would live 'in an unprejudiced, socialist, democratic way on free German land. But the first two Heimstätte had hardly been completed when this village idyll fell victim to a policy revamp in which the Anglo-Saxon model of the garden city with its reminiscences of outdated Utopian-socialist reform movements was replaced by the modern classicism of the compact metropolis in accordance with the Soviet model. This unexpected twist was the direct result of a study trip to Moscow, Kiev, Stalingrad and Leningrad (spring 1950), organized by the Ministry for Construction, in which architects, urban planners and SED functionaries – most of whom were former Moscow emigrants – were informed about the new cultural and constructional policy based on Stalin's doctrine of socialist realism. The purport of this was a strong adherence to tradition, with the goal of generating, by means of synthesis, a new socialist art and architecture. Solidarity, beauty, and the exploration of the cultural legacy were the key points of an aesthetic doctrine that found its most adequate articulation in formal, classical language.

Exactly how a modern, socialist city could be developed from these theoretical principals was clarified to the delegation in physical terms: from 1933 onward, Moscow had been reconstructed, somewhat heavy-handedly, into a metropolis with Haussmann-like allure. The traffic network had been furnished with sumptuous metro stations, broad avenues had been constructed and lined with theatres and monumental workers' palaces whose façades, with their columns and framed oriels and balconies, as well as their marble facing, frescos and mosaics, caught the attention of (marching) passers-by. In Moscow, the German plans for the post-war reconstruction of Berlin were dismissed as not in line with the spirit of the times, and as 'un-modern'. In contrast to the proposed 'brightening-up of the German capital', the Soviets advanced the socialist ideal of metropolitan urbanism with the Magistrale as architectural dominant, viewed as the grandiose succession of squares and streets in an architectural style that was national, beautiful and stately:

Articulating urban architecture as a garden or landscape is erroneous ... It is also much too expensive; even countries like Britain and France cannot afford it ... The essence of a city is its historic centre. After all, where does the idea of a capital city actually become visible? In the centre! In the suggested solution to

the traffic problem in Berlin (a net-like grid of expressways), it is completely unclear as to what is the centre and what is a suburb ... Where is the area for demonstrations? Where is the square for parades? Where are the streets through which we can march? Where are the government offices and cultural institutions? All in the centre, of course. When planning the city centre, one should not take traffic as the starting point, as was done in Berlin, but rather people, demonstrators, who should be able to march right through the centre.⁵

As the city of proletarian classicism, Moscow had to serve as the ultimate example for a new, triumphant urban architecture that would permanently banish the anxiety and horror of the national-socialist past from the Berlin streetscape. It was the Stalinallee in Berlin that – as the 'first socialist street' in the new republic – would give substance to this Stalinist idea of urban architecture.

In the 1950s, the Stalinallee was a completely autonomous, architectural feature rising out of the ruins. In the words of Bruno Flierl: it was a built-up groove in the wounded body of the city.⁶ Over a distance of almost 2 km, a series of building blocks with an average length of 200 m flanked a grand Magistrale (75 to 100 m wide!) of two three-lane trunk roads, lined on either side with cycling tracks and broad pedestrian promenades edged with trees. Because the Stalinallee was set up as a trial project for the *National Reconstruction Programme for Berlin 1952*, the Magistrale in the eastern section of the city had to be realized within an extremely limited period (in the hope of finishing it in time for Stalin's birthday in December 1952), despite a shortage of financial resources, building materials, and construction workers. Modelled on Gorky Street (now Tverskaya) in Moscow, designed by Alexander Vlasov, the Stalinallee, with its spacious walls of monumental 'People's palaces' also had to be firmly anchored in a distinct 'national style'. But the specific stylistic idiom to which this hasty reversion to German baroque and classicism might lead remained a mystery. Two architectural competitions did not bring the required outcome. The central party leadership eventually decided that the newly completed *Haus an der Weberwiese* – a high-rise apartment block designed by Hermann Henselmann, with many references to Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841) – would serve as the official guideline for the architecture of the Stalinallee. To Henselmann, this was also the impulse to surprise the Politbüro and the planning teams that were working on a collective design for the national 'Parade Avenue' with a proposal for the architecture of the Strausberger Platz, the monumental entrance gateway from the old city to the new. Ultimately, Henselmann's office designed the two connecting pieces in the new Magistrale: the Strausberger Platz and the Frankfurter Tor, so that the heterogeneous construction of the Stalinallee was framed in a striking architectural configuration. At the same time, the thoroughfare was made 'readable' by means of architectonic semantics that oriented itself to the city of Berlin and its architectural past by means of loggias, towers, and portals.

Simultaneously, at street level, pedestrians and demonstrators were called to account, showing their solidarity with evolving socialist society.

Ankunft Architecture

Historians hold varying opinions on the modernity of the Stalinallee as an architectonic project. Seeking a link between aesthetics and politics, two interpretations are obvious.⁷ On the one hand, the Berlin Magistrale is presented as a touching example of *Ankunft Architecture*, and competing with the government on the other side of the border – it functioned as a forward-looking image of a future, united, democratic Germany. In advance of the countless and extremely popular *novel* films, novels and radio plays of the 1950s, whose theme was the self-realization of GDR citizens in the reality of socialist society – particularly in the large industrial complexes – the Stalinallee was the avenue awaiting the advent of the noble German worker who, after a long march through a history of exploitation and social inequality, had finally arrived in a house built by his own hands. Judging by the representation in contemporary films, books and radio plays, which primarily and heroically accentuated the selflessness of the people along with the traditional building methods, the architecture of the Stalinallee, with its folkloristic ornaments and festive garlands, can be read as the historic word of welcome from the working class to itself.

What makes the Stalinallee exactly so fascinating, however, is that the idea of a social Utopia is crossed by a different message that is directly related to the precarious position of Berlin as a border town wedged between two world powers. Simone Hain regards the Stalinallee as a kind of memorandum, a diplomatic signal from the Soviet Union to its opponents in the Cold War, clarifying the (erstwhile) Russian pursuit of European and international integration. Following that train of thought, the Stalinallee is an east–west axis, both literally and figuratively. It is the monumental overture to a revamped centre, based on the Warsaw reconstruction, whose architectural apex was the *Forum Fredericianum* where the buildings of the future ‘central’ government could bathe in the historical grandeur of the Deutsche Staatsoper, the Palace of the Prinzessinen and Kronprinzen, the Zeughaus, and the Bauakademie.

In contrast to the separatist politics of the Bundesrepublik and the division of Germany, the Soviets insisted on an imaginative, appealing, historical reconstruction of an old-new Berlin as an eloquent symbol of the proposed solution to the German question. This was also the political-ideological context within which the East-German leaders attempted to legitimize the Stalinallee as a demonstration project in Germany. The Stalinist theory of socialist realism not only presented (state) architecture emphasizing solidarity among the people, but also architecture that served the national consciousness, reinforcing the people’s awareness of

their own cultural past.⁸ For example, the Deutsche Bauakademie advocated a critical processing of Gothic, Renaissance and Classical styles, not with the aim of copying or paraphrasing these, as the national socialists had done, but rather to develop them further within the understanding of a vital, national culture. With the theme of 'the German City Beautiful', the SED also hoped to appeal to the citizens of the Bundesrepublik who were offended by the increasing Americanization of German historic inner cities, which not only threatened the cultural diversity of a great national legacy but also the perspective of a (re)united Germany. As Walter Ulbricht announced to his compatriots on the other side of the border: 'With the Stalinallee in Berlin, we wish to demonstrate how we see our future, united, democratic Germany.' He took as his point of departure the notion that the West Germans masses, on seeing the beauty of the Stalinallee, would be converted to socialism at one fell swoop!

A political shift

The myth of the Stalinallee suffered political adversity due to two events that were the direct result of the death of Stalin in March 1953. First of all, the popular uprising of 1953 – which turned out to have been (partly) induced by the Soviets – in which the construction workers of the 'biggest building site in the country' played an important part.⁹ On 17 June 1953, the myth of the triumphant *Ankunft* (arrival) of the proletarian elite was exchanged for the hard reality of the protest march featuring the bricklayers of the Stalinallee, clad in white overalls. The Stalinallee itself, an example of Stalinist *Siegesarchitektur* was threatened by the de-Stalinization process initiated by Moscow, which announced its presence via radical change in the building industry and particularly in architecture. From the mid-1950s onward, the struggle for political dominance in the Kremlin coincided to a certain extent with the intricate process of structural innovation in the construction industry. It was a process that lasted three years and eventually led to a radical rejection of Stalinist urban aesthetics and – in the fight against the malaise in the housing sector – a streamlining of production techniques. In order to dig out the notions of popular solidarity, cultural legacy and urbanity, which were deeply rooted in Stalinist ideology, the reverse side of socialist realism in architecture, high construction costs, material waste, and poor labour productivity were emphasized at shows and work congresses, and particularly in the press. However, it was only after Stalin's personality cult had been unmasked at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 and de-Stalinization had become a political fact, that a beginning could be made on planning a realistic house-building programme.¹⁰

Developments in Moscow had a great impact in the GDR and provoked confusion and uncertainty not only among the party leaders. Thousands of former executives in the communist party who had fled from the Nazis to the Soviets in the 1930s only to become the victims of Stalinist purges returned from the prison camps as witnesses of the terror, betrayal and abuse in the communist fatherland under Stalin. The Soviets' declaration of war on social realism in architecture also meant a weakening of the ideological legitimacy of building in the 'national tradition'. Khrushchev's speeches, especially at the Building Congress in December 1954, appeared almost immediately in the East-German press and were the direct cause of an energetic industrialization programme and of the hesitant start of a new building method. At the same time, however, at least verbally, there was a grim adherence to the postulate of building in a national tradition as an ideological endorsement of the rivalry with the 'other', capitalist, Germany. This policy began to crumble as a result of the new course taken by the Kremlin with regard to the 'German question', in which the prospect of German unity was exchanged for peaceful coexistence of the two German states. All these shifts occurred at the moment when the government and party had to make a decision on the completion of the Stalinallee in Berlin and on the concept of the missing link between the Straussberger Platz and the Alexanderplatz. The issue was how to develop a new, modern socialist urban concept that would clearly distance itself from the politically untenable ideal of 'the beautiful German city' without having to replace it with an 'alien' *Hansaviertel* (new urban quarter in West Berlin)? These acute dilemmas and skirmishes involving a 'different' (urban) architecture and thus also a different (in other words, non-Stalinist) socialist society became the subject of Stefan Heym's fascinating novel *Die Architekten* (1963).¹¹

Die Architekten

The setting of this book is the year 1956. Daniel Tieck, a former member of the German Communist Party, arrives unexpectedly in a town somewhere in the GDR. Due to a combination of luck and resilience, he has survived 16 years of forced labour in the Gulag. Trained as an architect, he managed to retain his mental power while in Siberia by using everything he could lay his hands on to build scale models of houses, streets, and even whole towns. They represent models for a 'different' socialist future, in which he still believes. Having suddenly gained his freedom, he contacts his best friend and former fellow student at the Bauhaus, Arnold Sundstrom, with whom he emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1933. The latter is now a prominent party member and the celebrated architect of the great *Strasse des Weltfriedens*, which Stalin passed through on his way to Potsdam. Sundstrom is married to Julia, who was orphaned during his stay in Moscow. He

looked after and raised her according to Stalinist pedagogic principles. After the war, Sundstrom settles in the former East Zone. Julia also becomes an architect and is a member of the design team responsible for the *Strasse des Weltfriedens*. Julia is the central character in the novel. Unsettled by the panic that Tieck's arrival causes in her husband, she seeks to unravel the true course of events in her youth and discovers a fact that not only eclipses their marriage but also her entire existence. The truth is that Sundstrom not only betrayed his friend Tieck to the NKVD, but also her mother and her father, Julian Goltz, who had briefly been a communist representative in the Reichstag. As a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Goltz was eventually handed over to the Nazis and murdered in the border town of Brest in 1940. In addition, Julia hears from her colleagues that the 'Street of triumph' – in Julia's eyes a brilliant example of genuine socialist architecture – appears to have a close resemblance to the design that Albert Speer produced for the Charlottenburgerallee at that time. Confronted by this double truth, Sundstrom's ethical opportunism and the stylistic falseness of the Avenue of Triumph, Julia takes refuge in a love affair, passionate but fleeting. She eventually returns to her studio where, in conjunction with Tieck, she draws up a plan for the extension, the second phase, of the *Strasse des Weltfriedens*. It becomes a plan that is praised by the jury for its fresh socialist modernity, but victory goes to Sundstrom's own revised plan in which, in accordance with the party political line, the break with Stalinism is only superficial. Sundstrom's design is merely a crude, if not an outright false, compromise between the discredited (Stalinist) building style and the proposed new architecture.

Die Architekten is a typical example of the literary genre of the architect's novel, in which formulations borrowed from the realm of building, such as 'foundations', 'collapse' or 'reconstruction', are used for their semantic powers of expression, for their capacity as symbols or metaphors to visualize complex political and social power structures. This was a popular genre in the GDR, of which Brigitte Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand* (1974), and Alfred Wellm's *Morisco* (1987) are the most famous examples.¹² For his novel on the great avenue, for which the Stalinallee in Berlin unmistakably functioned as a model, Heym accumulated a great deal of documentation. His archive, stored in Cambridge, contains accurately maintained card systems with extracts from manuals covering the technology, theory and history of architecture and urban design. There are also long lists of quotes and reports of conversations and interviews with almost all the architects who were directly or indirectly involved in the construction of the Stalinallee. The result is a novel whose plot is probably too transparent and the dialogue rather forced; nevertheless, it presents a unique picture of the reception of the Stalinallee in the GDR in the mid-1960s.

Heym wrote the novel in the years immediately after the construction of the Berlin Wall, which was no less than an emergency brake aimed at concealing

the failure of the socialist system on German soil. The building of the Wall also meant a total repudiation of Western ideology and a further political and cultural orientation toward socialist colleagues in the East Block, the Soviet Union in particular. In the GDR, increasing tensions in the economy and economic policy, and also in society itself (among young people, artists and intellectuals), were masked by distraction manoeuvres and an intensification of ideological discipline. In this way, there arose a cultural climate in which artistic production – drama, film and literature – were increasingly subjected to state control, censorship and regulations. The all-time low occurred at the 11th Plenum of the ZK in December 1965, at which meeting poets, writers and film-makers were accused of bringing the triumphant expansion of socialism into danger with their subversive work.¹³ In *Die Architekten*, Stefan Heym presents the Stalinallee as the background to the restoration of Stalinist power politics in the Soviet Union and in the GDR, the dogmatic communist course of the SED, and particularly the harsh repression of the intellectual and artistic plea for a democratization of the existing socialist model. It is the frightening product of Stalinist intrigues of power, betrayal and corruption. Despite the crumbling façades, poorly-functioning lifts, and the physical collapse of Sundstrom on the roof of his People's palace that is under construction, the *Strasse des Weltfriedens* is not a symbol of degeneration or destruction but rather a portrayal of exposure and revelation. On the roof of an unfinished housing block, Tieck discloses that not only he but also the parents of Julia were victims of fascist practices in a country – the Soviet Union – that shortly afterwards dictated the architectonic model for the 'Avenue of Triumph'. At that moment, architecture and arrests, cultural policy and political systems all become one to Julia. 'Hypocrisy in concrete and brick', according to Tieck, thus referring back to the monumental urban showcase of a fascist political regime, solely oriented to a show of strength, whose rejection had been the ideological cornerstone in the foundation of the GDR in 1949.

Tieck is not a cynic but is, in contrast to Sundstrom, rather the prototype of a committed democratic communist. It was his own initiative to make a draft design for the second phase of the *Strasse des Weltfriedens*, a south elevation from exactly the point where he revealed to Julia the perverse character of Sundstrom's architecture. Tieck's avenue is not an old-fashioned corridor street, and not a 'parade square' with corner blocks and gateways. It is simply a street, the shortest link between two locations, with disciplined, strictly modular modern blocks and pavilions liberated from the military constraint of axial symmetry and routine numeric patterns. It is modern architecture in a technical sense, based on serial production and not on representation. It is also an architecture that appears to assign to passers-by, pedestrians and consumers alike, the feeling of freedom and movement. It is architecture with neither borders nor boundaries, the perfectly transparent reflection of a different socialist society to which Stefan Heym, as a

loyal dissident, also committed himself and, as a consequence of which, his novel *Die Architekten* could only be published in 2000.¹⁴

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