COUNTER-ARCHITECTURE AND BUILDING RACE: COLD WAR POLITICS AND THE TWO BERLINS

Peter Müller

After the Second World War, the transatlantic architectural dialogue between the United States and Europe fractured into a many-voiced discourse. In divided Germany, it was henceforth a propagandistic dispute rooted in an ideological stand-off. While the young Federal Republic leaned towards the United States in all areas of life, East Germany remained in thrall to Moscow. Even after the aesthetic fetters were loosened at the end of the 1950s, East German architecture continued a policy of separatism. East Berlin, in particular, remained preoccupied with the political adversary and thus also participated in the transatlantic dialogue, albeit from an unusual point of departure. While the West looked to the “New World” as the Promised Land, the East rediscovered “Old Europe.” It pursued an ideal defined by a negation of its enemy’s ideals.

Socialist architectural policy accorded a special importance to city centers which derived from their propagandistic function. In the 1930s, Soviet architectural ideologues equated the city center with the center of power. It was the destination for ritualized processions, apex of the mass political cult. 

The now “empowered working class” could assemble here and symbolically take possession of what was once the city’s most valuable land. The conventional urban planning principle of exploiting the city’s most expensive land to realize high profits was turned on its head. There were wide open spaces instead of skyscrapers, aesthetic hegemony rather than stylistic plurality, a grim and determined show of power instead of free competition. While the competition to put up the highest, the most beautiful and, not least of all, the most profitable high-rise building was in full swing in New York in the 1930s, Stalin was planning the tallest building in the world next to the world’s largest parade square in Moscow. Only the war prevented the construction of this building, which was also intended as the biggest work of art (in the world) and a most imposing propaganda instrument. And whereas efforts in postwar West Germany focused on casting all forms of state representation in a modest vein, informing every axis, every symmetry, every skyward tendency with an essential understatement, East Germany’s Communist Party (SED) earmarked Berlin’s historical center for the largest building in Germany. The second-highest building in Europe was eventually erected here, though in an unexpected guise. But the process of reconstruction began with a destructive spree. It was the Spreeinsel district which
formed the nucleus of East Berlin’s reconstruction. The war-damaged stately home of the Hohenzollern family was demolished in 1950, sacrificed to a wide open space reserved for mass parades, whereby the scale of this void was a demonstration in its own right. Imposing axes led to this square in the form of thoroughfares, all aligned towards the same destination, the “central building.” It was a vision of a building which could symbolize power and august superiority in monumental form, although its actual function remained subordinate to this symbolism for many years. And although the dream of a “new monumentalism” was also revived in the Western modernist approach, its “lyrical content” (as Siegfried Giedion had called it in the 1940s) had nothing in common with the historicizing, politicized socialist style. Even CIAM’s reappraisal of the value of city centers differed fundamentally from the Stalinist veneration of the city. When the 8th CIAM Congress debated the “core of the city” in 1951, what the delegates had in mind was neither axes, squares, nor a central building, but traffic-free, multifunctional communal centers which were to be realized on a human scale by architects, painters, and sculptors. Their vision of the “heart of the city” was not a space for demonstrations and prestigious edifices, but a civic landscape in which a community of individuals would prevail. The blueprint appeared to be provided by Le Corbusier’s plans for Chandigarh or St. Dié, rather than Moscow, Warsaw, or East Berlin.

In 1950, GDR leaders drew up a legally binding “Sixteen Principles of Urban Development” to promote the specifically Stalinist aestheticization, politicization and, not least, exploitation of urban planning. One of the driving forces here was Kurt Liebknecht, who had formerly worked under Hans Poelzig and Mies van der Rohe. Following Soviet exile and arbitrary arrest, Liebknecht rose to the position of president of the East German Building Academy and became an arch enemy of functionalism.

Alongside the structural reorientation of the city, style became a second instrument of agitation in this architectural power posturing. By inventing a new national style, the SED contributed something to the transatlantic dialogue which directly opposed the “cosmopolitan dogma” of International Style. By upholding a national building tradition in the spirit of Knobelsdorff and Schinkel, the GDR picked up on “sound popular taste” and the facile criticism of modern trends which had many supporters before, during, and after the Nazi era. Apart from its role as an instrument of political self-affirmation, a historicizing canon of style also served as an anti-American argument; the destruction of German cities was generally blamed solely on Anglo-American bombers, and the postwar reimportation of classic modernism in West Germany was seen as a continuation of the West’s depredatory work. The East German reaction to this transatlantic patronage found expression in propaganda
and new planning measures, the most impressive of which was Berlin’s Stalinallee.\textsuperscript{10} As a striking symbol of cultural superiority, a towering high-rise building was to be erected in every major East German city, but above all in East Berlin, in the form of a majestic hallmark whose functions revealed undeniably baroque traits.\textsuperscript{11}

East Berlin, of course, played the leading role in this stage-managed debate on the role of the high-rise building; numerous plans for the reshaping of the political center were drawn up between 1951 and 1963. Initially, these plans remained restricted to the building and the central square at its feet (Figure 1). The planning reached an initial milestone in 1953–54, however, with the idea of transforming the entire city—both East and West Berlin—into an all-embracing work of art. Not only streets and squares, but also factory entrances and the courses of rivers were to be artistically restyled as part of an urban scenario in an undeniably Romantic vein. A central building streamlined into a tower would form the centerpiece of a wreath of high-rise buildings, giving the low-lying city a striking silhouette.

There were never any real prospects for realizing such a mammoth project, however, which was to include the surrounding area within a 100-kilometer radius. The GDR was far too weak economically, and after

Figure 1. East Berlin’s “central building” by Richard Paulick, autumn 1951. Image courtesy of Bundesarchiv Berlin.
the workers’ uprising of June 17, 1953, the domestic situation was far too unstable for such a prestige-oriented undertaking. Following the Soviet Union’s recognition of the GDR as a sovereign state in 1955, the architectural mission soon lost its relevance as an instrument of foreign policy. Although the GDR continued to agitate for the unification of Germany until well into the 1960s (that is, even after the building of the Berlin Wall) and reserved a central building in East Berlin as the seat of a future all-German parliament (at least on paper), by the end of the 1950s the SED was forced to recognize the de facto division of Germany into two states. And this also affected urban planning for East Berlin. Planning measures for East Berlin’s center were suspended between 1955 and 1958. Housing construction activities geared towards modernization and industrialization gave rise to design blueprints which were continually rehashed until the demise of the GDR. The result was the monotonous and arbitrary character of the prefabricated slab constructions, which remain a blight upon East German towns and cities to this day.

It belongs to the irony of the two Germanies’ architectural history that West Berlin was repeatedly a source of fresh inspiration to (re)intensify planning efforts in East Berlin. After the above-mentioned pause in planning activities, it was above all the well-publicized success of Intbau (1957), the Hansaviertel (1957–59) and the international competition Hauptstadt Berlin (1958) which spurred the GDR leadership into action. The Hauptstadt competition had particularly far-reaching consequences because the most innovative city planners in the Western world were invited to reshape the historical center of both East and West Berlin. There were no limits on their proposals because the political situation ruled out the possibility of any plan ever being realized. Thus, Le Corbusier, Alison and Peter Smithson, and Hans Scharoun all submitted impressive plans which, compared with East Berlin’s rigid planning models, reveal just how great a divide between East and West had emerged in only ten years. The onus was now on the East to address modern architecture once again. This began somewhat haltingly until the early 1960s.

In order to attain international recognition, the GDR’s first move was to counter the provocation of West Berlin’s Hauptstadt competition with its own competition. Its scope was restricted to East Berlin and only architects from the Eastern Bloc states were allowed to participate. In an attempt to ensure the competition’s success, the undersecretary charged with its planning, Gerhard Kosel, secretly tried to push through one plan, which has been misconstrued to this day as a project imposed by the party and the government. In fact, Kosel, who had lived in the Soviet Union for more than twenty years without falling victim to Stalin’s purges, was seeking a way to marginalize Herman Henselmann, who had been tasked by the municipal authorities with planning East Berlin’s
center. This gave rise to a semi-private planning competition which had an extremely invigorating effect.

It is again ironic that the phase which eventually determined the face of East Berlin’s center began with the reactivation of Gerhard Klosel’s draft design, a model example of the Stalinist era (Figure 2). This design showed a monumental high-rise building, organized along central symmetrical lines which combined the two desired functions (a high-rise administrative building and the seat of parliament), embodying the executive power of the legislature. It marked the center of a strongly hierarchized city, which was to sacrifice two of its oldest districts to make way for the baroque pools intended to reflect the central building, creating two mirror images. Whereas the building itself remained isolated from the city, from the perspective of the political demonstrator on the parade square it merged together with the central stand, which was not reserved solely for party and government leaders during large-scale demonstrations. The plan was to install a commemorative hall inside the stand where the treasures of the workers’ movement could be displayed. There were even plans to move Karl Marx’s remains here. Kosel dreamed of surpassing the Lenin mausoleum in Moscow, the model for his vision. Whereas the Lenin mausoleum evoked ancient structures in a very gen-

Figure 2. Stalinist monumentalism after Stalin’s death by Gerhard Klosel, 1955. Image courtesy of Bundesarchiv Berlin.
eral way, Kosel chose the Pergamum Altar as the model for his memorial stand, with the aim of establishing a symbolic connection between GDR socialism and Germany’s most important ancient treasure, linking the mythological world of the past with the classless world of the future. Because communism was seen as the telos of history, it did not matter to Kosel that he used models which had also been employed by Wilhelm Kreis during the Third Reich.

Although Kosel’s plan was published only in a rigorously amended form, it lost nothing of its staid, backward-looking impetus (Figure 3). Because the plan was the unofficial winner before the competition was even launched, it stood on the conservative end of the form spectrum, which had taken on a new, modernist slant in the Soviet Union, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Here, up and coming architects had been inspired above all by Brasilia, and many planners had also taken note of West Berlin’s Hauptstadt competition. Many entries for the East Berlin competition undermined the rigid ideal behind the competition, by proposing central buildings within two high-rise blocks or without any skyscraper at all. The high-rise building was no longer seen as an ideal, and many architects proposed marking East Berlin’s political center with obelisks,

steel-needles (each 150 meters high), or with something like the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. But these non-conformist plans were rejected by GDR leaders and the competition’s top prize went to a static high-rise project by Gerhard Kröber and colleagues.

Only Hermann Henselmann’s one-off design for a Forum of the Nation, which went as far as to satirize the name of Kosel’s Marx-Engels Forum, retained its visionary force in spite of official criticism (Figure 4). Instead of a gigantic high-rise building, Henselmann planned an ensemble of separate functional buildings, the most impressive of which were a suspended assembly hall and the so-called Turm der Signal (Signal Tower). It was this tower—half television tower, half Marx-Engels memorial—which later became the landmark of East Berlin’s new city center, projecting the most important symbol of the time—Sputnik, the world’s first satellite—into the Berlin sky as a bright red sphere.  

During the competition, however, the disregard for the GDR’s conventional forms of representation was an affront. As the jury sifted through the submissions, the GDR was riding high on a short-lived wave of economic success, which was seen as an affirmation of its politics. The GDR thus had little incentive to change its traditional forms of state representation. The change in economic policy in 1959 towards comparative competition with the West merely called for a change in the style of traditional representations. In line with the declared aim of Überholen ohne Einzuholen (surpassing the West on our own terms), architecture was required to abandon its separatist policy. The style-based Gegenbau (counter-architecture) was to give way to quantitative Überbau (outbuilding). Kosel’s central building was simply given a cosmetic make-over by Hanns Hopp, one of the most productive architects in the GDR (Figure 5).

Planning measures for East Berlin’s center continued gradually under these same premises up to the building of the Berlin Wall. The wish for prestige-enhancing symmetries continually gained ground, as did the establishment of regional planning in a graphically oriented guise which legitimized large open spaces. While the design of the central building faltered, however, Hermann Henselmann erected GDR’s first high-rise building with a curtain wall, the Haus der Lehrer on the Alexanderplatz (Figure 6). This building sought to keep pace with contemporary developments in the field of high-rise construction, such as the Seagram Building in New York or the Mannesmann Building in Düsseldorf.

The success of this high-rise earned Henselmann the privilege of submitting the last high-rise designs for East Berlin’s center. Directly after the building of the Berlin Wall, the GDR was intent on finally putting its old plan into action, to counter the horizontal gesture of impotence implied by the closure of the border with a vertical gesture of power. While
Figure 4. Hermann Henselmann’s Forum of the Nation with a Sputnik-Marx-Engels monument, 1959. Image courtesy of Sammlung Baukunst/Akademie der Künste Berlin.
Henselmann’s first draft design in 1962 endeavoured to lend East Berlin’s central building a certain South American flair with the motif of a hovering state emblem and sweeping lines, the project (intended for implementation in 1963) restricted its ambitions to the mediocrity of a typical German administrative building of that time.

The end of the GDR’s period of economic success signalled the end of high-rise planning ventures. In 1963, all prestige-building projects were shelved and the GDR parliament convened henceforth in the Haus der Lehrer. In 1964, plans for East Berlin’s center made no headway in the run-up to the fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the GDR, until a unique solution emerged by chance. Just as the plans for a central building were being abandoned, plans for an East Berlin television tower sped towards a conclusion. The repeated deferral of this project since 1952 now had dire political consequences, as the West had strongly stepped up the capacity of its transmitters after the building of the Berlin Wall, with the result that there were regions in the GDR where one could receive enemy broadcasts, but not GDR programs.²¹
Now there was a proposal to locate the East Berlin television tower in the center of the city, where it inherited the central building’s symbolic function. Directly linked visually with the assembly hall, which still featured in the city plans (and was eventually realized as the Palast der Lehrer, Alexanderplatz, by Hermann Henselmann, 1956/59. Photograph by Peter Müller.

Figure 6. Haus der Lehrer, Alexanderplatz, by Hermann Henselmann, 1956/59. Photograph by Peter Müller.
Republik), the tower solved the core aesthetic problem facing the city planners at no extra cost, because of its height (which was a technical necessity). At the same time, it was hailed as a brilliant feat of civil engineering and broadcasting technology. Furthermore the tower had a kind of Cold War bonus, because West Berlin had no financial power to

Figure 7. East Berlin TV Tower, 1964/69. Photograph by Peter Müller.
erect its own Stuttgart-like TV tower near the Olympiastadion, as had been planned since 1959. The construction of the East Berlin TV tower began in 1965, and the project was available for propagandistic exploitation in 1969, to tie in with the GDR’s twentieth anniversary.

Because the original tower designed in 1962 was unable to make its mark on the face of the GDR’s capital in its original guise—a mixture of

Moscow’s and Hamburg’s TV Tower—Henselmann’s Signal Tower project was revived as a result of machinations which remain a subject of debate to this day. The spherical dome adopted the well known futuristic forms designed by R. Buckminster Fuller. They were striking and impressive, evocative of a rocket taking off together with the hovering Sputnik satellite (Figure 7). This unique “space architecture” heralded the redevelopment of the Alexanderplatz, fitting into a rigid prestige-oriented space which redefined the “old city” with a new, radical modernism in a renewed attempt to surpass the West. What was doomed to remain only a distant vision in West Berlin’s Hauptstadt competition proved realizable in the East, where there was no need to take any divergent interests into consideration. Just as socialism had won the race into space, the race for the future of mankind now also appeared to have been won. This gave socialism good cause to flaunt its own symbols in its architecture, exemplified here by Sputnik, and to go to provocative lengths to invent a whole new city. In the heart of Berlin’s historic center, the GDR created an image which it continued to promote with vigor, until it was overtaken by events when Apollo 11 landed on the moon. By focusing on the realistic representation of Sputnik, however, the East was able to maintain its fundamental difference from Western space architecture—decrying, for example, the lesser-known Space Needle (1961–62) in Seattle as nothing more than a flying saucer (Figure 8). Regrettably, socialist prestige-architecture had no time for such individualistic flights of fancy. The transatlantic dialogue remained permanently interrupted. Yuri Gagarin and Captain Kirk were never to orbit the earth together.

Notes

1 Werner Durth, Jörn Düwel, and Niels Gutschow, Ostkreuz/Aufbau: Architektur und Städtebau der DDR, vol. 2 (Frankfurt/Main,1998), 17–199.


4 Peter Müller, Symbolsuche: Die Ost-Berliner Zentrumsplanung zwischen Repräsentation und Agitation (Berlin, 2005).


8 Simone Hain, Warum zum Beispiel die Stalinallee? Beiträge zu einer Transformationsgeschichte des modernen Planens und Bauens (Erkner, 1999).


10 Herbert Nicolaus and Alexander Obeth, Die Stalinallee: Geschichte einer deutschen Strasse (Berlin, 1997).


17 Peter Müller, Symbol mit Aussicht: Der Berliner Fernsehturm (Berlin, 1999), 54–63.

18 André Steiner, Die DDR-Wirtschaftsreform der sechziger Jahre: Konflikt zwischen Effizienz- und Machtkalkül (Berlin, 1999).


21 Müller, Symbol, 39–42, 68–74.