On the morning of April 11, 1977, construction workers from the Brigade Adolf Dombrowski, VEB Tiefbaukombinat Berlin, tore into the grass and brush near the small village of Marzahn, outside the eastern edges of socialist East Berlin. The construction project begun that morning, Marzahn (Fig.1), was and remains the largest mass housing project in European history. Between 1977 and 1990, the sparsely populated townships of Marzahn, Hohenschönhausen, Biesdorf, Hellersdorf, Kaulsdorf, and Ahrensfeld were transformed from open croplands, meadows, forests, and swamps into a vast semi-urban landscape with hundreds of perfectly symmetrical, monolithic, and almost identical concrete slab buildings known as Plattenbau, wide, straight roads, street cars, parks and playgrounds, housing around 400,000 people in 150,000 apartments. Every square centimeter of the area, known as a “new construction settlement” (Neubausiedlung), was planned out in advance by the German Architectural Academy (Deutche Bauakademie, DBA), the main organ of architecture and city planning in East Germany, as well as the city planning office of the Magistrate of Berlin (the municipal government of East Berlin). The Marzahn plan, approved and set in motion by the Politbüro on March 27, 1973, was the central pillar in the SED’s pledge to completely solve the housing shortage in the GDR by 1990 by building at least 250,000 new apartments—itself a key component of Erich Honecker’s promise to deliver “Real Existing Socialism.”

But there was a much more profound narrative interwoven with the Marzahn project, a narrative of newness, historical amnesia, radical modernity, and rationalism, a narrative of family lives and generations shattered by war, loss, flight, squalor, and urban destruction, and a narrative of eastward colonization, utopian settlements, and, ultimately, control and power. For those 400,000 people who moved to Marzahn and its surrounding Neubausiedlungen, the experience was one of profound change, change bound up very closely in ways seen and unseen with the power of SED state. This change was more than just a new address, or a new view, or new neighbors: it was a total transformation of their material environment. Whether they came from the crumbling Altbau buildings of East Berlin districts
such as Prenzlauerberg or Friedrichshain, or from small country houses, the move to a *Plattenbau* apartment in Marzahn meant new dimensions of rooms, new materials in the walls and floors and windows which required new methods of maintenance, repair, cleaning, and decorating, and it meant new ways of getting to work, to school, to recreation. Often, it meant new kinds of schools, new kinds of playgrounds, new kinds of transportation. It meant new kinds of shopping, and new foods. The symmetric, block buildings created new ways of encountering neighbors and strangers, and meant new sights leaving and coming home from work; they meant new ways of caring for children, and new ways of children’s play, and thus, new childhoods. It meant new trees, new grasses, new smells in the air, new sounds, new weather patterns, new kinds of soil.

The transformation was rapid and complete: multiple construction teams, called *Taktstrassen*, working parallel to each other and on three shifts, were able to finish a new *Plattenbau* living block with as many as 120 apartments, or “living units” (*Wohneinheiten*), in 90-120 days. By 1984, most of it was finished, and additional developments in Hellersdorf, Ahrensfeld, and Hohenschönhausen began, further expanding the scope of the *Neubausiedlung*. Over 650 hectares worth of land was dug up, displacing almost seven million cubic meters of soil to make room for nearly 1300 building foundations. Forty-five combination *Kindergärten/Kinderkrippen* and 51 polytechnical high schools were built, each with a construction time frame of about 150 days. Sixteen shopping centers, fifteen local restaurants and pubs, nine senior homes, five hospitals, eight general service centers (*Dienstleistungsgebäude*), fifty indoor sports arenas (*Turnhallen*),

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*Figure 1. Marzahn in 1984. Courtesy of the Bezirksmuseum Marzahn-Hellersdorf.*

*Peters, Platten, Hütten, Wohnquartiere, 190-92.*
two indoor community swimming pools (with saunas), and nine youth clubs were built in direct coordination with each *Plattenbau*.\(^5\) The local river, the Wuhle, which cuts a gentle swale between the old villages of Marzahn and Hellersdorf, eventually flowing into the Spree to the south, was redirected to form an artificial lake that was never completed. The lake was to be at the foot of what would become an artificial “mountain,” the “Kienberg,” a 100-meter, 31-hectare round high hill made of seven million m\(^3\) of construction debris, torn-down old homes, leftover war rubble, and displaced earth. Together, the Kienberg and the Wuhle were the center of a new and completely artificially landscaped recreation park (*Naherholungsgebiet*), which included a bunny ski hill, an all-weather bobsled run (*Rodelbahn*), boat rental facilities and open spaces for picnicking, hiking, soccer, an open air stage, and more.\(^6\) Within five years, an entire metropolis in concrete had sprouted out of the nothingness.

Marzahn was only the largest of numerous settlement projects like it throughout the GDR, some of which had already been built by the time ground was broken in Marzahn. Using prefabricated, steel-reinforced concrete slabs to cheaply mass-produce apartments was not unique to the GDR, either. Throughout the Soviet bloc, beginning in the Soviet Union with Khruschev’s call in 1954 for socialist countries to build “better, cheaper, faster,” massive housing projects of almost identical concrete slab housing sprang up outside cities, such as the Nowa Huta settlement outside Krakow. In Western Europe, too, prefabricated housing projects were built as part of postwar and postcolonial social welfare states and reconstruction programs. From Manchester to Nanterre, from Athens to West Berlin, the ugly concrete blocks began appearing in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, prefabricated, mass-produced housing blocks were invented in the United States, perfected in France, Britain, and Scandinavia, and the design used in Marzahn itself came from a company in Finland. However, concrete *Plattenbau* was used far more in the socialist bloc than in the West; East Germany built 2.1 million *Plattenbau* apartments, comprising 83 percent of all the housing construction in East Germany—as opposed to West Germany, where, despite the much larger population, only 500,000 were built.\(^7\) East Germany led the socialist bloc—and the entire world, in fact—in the building of mass-produced *Plattenbau* housing. By 1990, more than half of the GDR’s population lived in mass-produced block housing. In some East German cities, the percentage was much higher: 85 percent in Schwedt, 72 percent

\(^5\) Ibid.


\(^7\) Christine Hannemann, Die Platte. Industrialisierter Wohnungsbau in der DDR (Berlin, 2005), 23.
in Frankfurt-Oder, and 65 percent in Rostock. Of the population living in Plattenbau, 20 percent lived in 125 different settlements such as Marzahn.\(^8\)

Moreover, the prefabricated concrete housing block carried a far different meaning under socialism than in the West. In the East, they were built for socialism’s model citizens—workers, planners, party members, young families with children—and were often considered the most prized housing. The Plattenbau of the West, on the other hand, mostly became ghettos for immigrants and low-income residents. But the real difference between Marzahn—and similar new housing developments or new residential areas—and other such building projects in the West was not fundamentally the amount built, nor was it the extent to which the buildings and settlements became ghettoized or remained desirable. In fact, the major point made by many associated with planning or building Marzahn—namely, that it was an example of how well socialism worked and the extent to which socialism could outstrip capitalism in terms of ending the postwar housing shortage—is not really what makes Marzahn so important in the broader scope of history.

What makes Marzahn so important is the extent to which it was a total planning project, the creation of an entire metropolis, comprising every conceivable aspect of government, industry, culture, science, technology, etc., that is inevitably involved in the building and maintaining of a modern, postindustrial city. Everything moved—in theory at least—in harmony with a single, all-encompassing master plan. The GDR was not just building places for its citizens to live; it was building an entirely new world—a world completely free of the material traces of the pre-GDR past, projected directly from blueprints and scaled models onto the tabula rasa of the Märkisch Lebensraum. And it was meant not as an upgrade on the world of the past, but as a radically new world with no memory of the past, built entirely on the principle of rational planning, in which nothing would be left to chance and all needs would always be met.

**The Aufbau of Berlin-Marzahn**

World War II devastated not only Germany’s population and economy, but also its urban infrastructure. The combination of Allied bombing of German cities and the close-range, urban combat that characterized the last six months of the war at least partially destroyed almost a quarter of all homes and apartments in Germany.
In Berlin itself, more than half of the living space was ruined, and by the end of the war, there was a shortage of 1.4 million apartments in the SBZ/GDR. Relatively few apartments were built between 1945 and the 1960s in the SBZ/GDR, and those that remained were not renovated. Consequently, a majority of GDR citizens lived in the same squalid, working-class hovels that had defined proletarian life since the beginning of large-scale industrialization in Berlin. A few others lived in old, rural houses that also dated back fifty, a hundred or more years and were in desperate need of renovation. In 1961, for example, the authorities officially condemned 10.3 percent of all apartments as not fit to live in; one-third of all apartments had no running water, and in smaller cities and towns like Neubrandenburg, this proportion reached two-thirds. Only a third of East German apartments had an indoor toilet; only one in forty had central heating.

A more important consideration for the GDR regime than the poor condition of these old dwellings were the links they had to the past and to private property. The state wished to suppress both of these as they did not fit in its vision of a new, modern, socialist utopia: almost exactly two-thirds were built before 1918, and almost 80 percent of apartments and single family homes were privately owned—only 12 percent constituted Volkseigentum, or people’s (public) property.9

After Stalin’s death and the workers’ uprising in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev’s rise to power in the Soviet Union opened the way for a large, loosely associated group of architects, designers, and city planners to implement their philosophy of a rational, ahistorical, and mass-produced city-space, home-space, and material culture. Having either been in the Bauhaus, the International Congress of Modern Architects, the pre-“Aryanized” German Werkbund, or having studied under disciples of these groups, the group included, most importantly, Gerhard Kosel, who replaced the Stalinist Kurt Liebknecht as the head of the DBA. (Liebknecht, along with East German First Secretary Walter Ulbricht, had previously ridiculed modern, mass-produced housing projects in West Berlin such as the Hansaviertel as un-German, cosmopolitan, and American.) Kosel, the “system builder,” as Christine Hannemann has called him, had spent almost twenty years experimenting with Plattenbau technology in the Soviet Union; indeed, he had helped develop Soviet Plattenbau methods.10 So when Khrushchev called for “cheaper, better,
quicker” housing construction, and personally chose *Plattenbau* as the best, most efficient, and feasible method, Kosel was well positioned to begin widely implementing his vision of a *Plattenbau* future in socialist East Germany, including the Marzahn development. He was able to promote a number of his friends and close colleagues, all of whom were experienced in *Plattenbau* construction and the all-encompassing *Neubausiedlungen* Kosel had experimented with in the vast steppes of Russia. These included Heinz Graffunder, the architect responsible for overseeing the Marzahn plan (as well as the architect of the Palace of the Republic and one of the most influential architects of the GDR), Roland Korn, Berlin’s chief architect who created the original Marzahn plan, and Günter Peters, the head of Berlin urban planning.

Even though they oversaw the project, the idea for building a satellite city in the flat, Märkisch countryside was not Peters’s or Korn’s, nor was it conceived of in the GDR, but had long been envisioned by German city planners of different eras. Hitler’s chief architect before becoming the Minister of Armaments and War Production, Albert Speer, had drawn up extensive plans to settle 445,000 people in modern housing projects outside the northeast edge of the city, including Marzahn (which was to be renamed Ostachse, or East Axis, as the easternmost part of Germania). Plans for an expansion into Marzahn and Biesdorf to take some of the pressure off the crowded working-class slums had also existed in the Weimar Republic. And these plans, in turn, were based on resettlement plans for the population of Berlin dating back to the turn of the twentieth century.

In fact, the idea of settling people to the east, either as a buffer or as a release valve, or both, had been in the cultural “DNA” of Berlin and Brandenburg for a thousand years if not more. But it had not yet been undertaken for lack of money and political willpower—as well as willing settlers. By 1970, however, the most advanced mass-production system for concrete slabs—the “WBS 70” (Wohnungsbauserie 1970)—had been developed, resulting in a more cost-effective system. With the ascension of Honecker (Fig. 2) and “Real Existing Socialism”—including the declaration that the housing problem would be solved by 1990—Peters presented the Marzahn idea to the Berlin Magistrate, the State Planning Commission, and the Politbüro. All of these entities then approved the original plan, which foresaw a settlement of 35,000 people, but was later vastly expanded.
Nonetheless, before any apartments could go up, a vast infrastructure had to be built, beginning with utilities. Korn and Graffunder’s diagrams called for a large underground tunnel of poured concrete in which all utility lines would be laid, including electric, gas, telephone, and water, to connect Marzahn to the infrastructure grid on Berlin’s east side. Entry points to the tunnel throughout Marzahn were to enable easy repairs or inspections. When the canal for the tunnel had been dug, it was wide enough for brigades from the VEB Berlin Tiefbau to race Trabant cars through it for fun.

Another preliminary issue that had to be dealt with was a sewage field (Rieselfeld) just north of Marzahn, near Ahrensfeld and the source of the Wuhle. Since the late 1800s, sewage and storm runoff from Berlin’s sewers and storm drains had been allowed to simply flood onto the field at the end of a long sewer pipe. The smell, especially in summer, could be awful, it polluted the Wuhle, which also stank of raw sewage, and altered the pH balance of the surrounding ecosystem, making the planting of many of the green spaces, gardens, and trees a major problem. To address this, Korn and Graffunder’s plan proposed a sewer treatment facility in nearby Falkenberg, which is still there today.

Finally, the transportation infrastructure also needed to be put into place. The S-bahn had to be extended to Ahrensfeld from Lichtenberg-Ost. Luckily, there was already an abandoned railroad bed from an old Reichsbahn line that had been used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for farmers to send produce into the city markets and for the wealthy to visit their summer cottages in the Märkisch countryside. It could be converted into modern S-bahn tracks and stations fairly easily. In addition, roads had to be built, and tramlines laid as well.14

14 Some of this information comes from a series of interviews conducted with Günter Peters in Berlin, March 22, 29, and April 5, 2008.
Moving into the settlement

As soon as the first units at the southernmost tip of the Marzahn settlement known as the “Südspitze” were finished, East Germans could begin moving in—and hordes of people desperate to escape their miserable living conditions lined up to get into Marzahn. Those who worked for a prominent state-owned factory (VEB), especially one working on Marzahn, such as the VEB WBK, the VEB Tiefbau or the VEB Hochbau, could apply for an apartment through their factory’s workers’ housing cooperative (AWG, Arbeiterwohngenossenschaft), which had an allotment for this. Others could apply for a new apartment through the city’s apartment bureau. There was no guarantee that one would end up in Marzahn by applying for it; one might wind up in a different Altbau building, or an older Neubau apartment somewhere in the old city. Almost always, having a child, being married, and being young were advantageous. Living in an apartment that was considered condemned or had been slated for demolition also helped. Yet it seems from most accounts that the experience of actually getting an apartment in Marzahn was one of frustration, confusion, life-changing decisions made in a split second, and massive change.

For Gabriele Franik, for example, the search for a larger apartment for herself, her husband Stefan, and their two-year-old son Thomas began in 1982 when she discovered she was pregnant with twins—an impending disaster, considering they lived in a tiny, two-room apartment in Lichtenberg with no bathroom. “I’m expecting twins,” Gabriele said to the women in the darkly lit, linoleum-flored room. “What do you expect, everyone to just fall over when you want a bigger apartment? Prove to me first that you are having twins,” replied the woman at the housing office (Wohnungsbaugesellschaft).15 But eventually the twins, Christine and Janine, were born, and a key to a three-room apartment in Marzahn arrived while she was still in the maternity ward, presented by a joyous Stefan who declared: “We did it! A full-comfort apartment in Marzahn! Is this not insane???”16

Gabriele knew little about Marzahn except for what she had read in the newspapers about some work being done. When she and the twins got out of the hospital, the family “drove and drove. We drove into a gigantic construction site: cranes crowded our way. All around us stood just-begun Plattenbauten. For vast stretches

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16 Ibid., 80.
there were no paved streets. Mountains of sand towered over us, a gigantic desert of mud, nowhere a tree, or even a plant.” Then finally, after being lost in the badlands of sand hills, mud and cranes, they found a Plattenbau that corresponded to their address: Ludwig-Renn-Strasse Entrance 43. “My heart pounded in my throat, my knees shook as we climbed up in the building still smelling of concrete and paint. My husband unlocked the door, opened it and...a giant empire appeared, with enough room for five family members. Central heating, warm water straight out of the wall, and a balcony six meters long! This is what happiness looks like. We fell into each others’ arms euphorically.” Of course, like all the apartments, this one had just been finished days earlier, and was nothing but naked, gray cement, upon which one of the workers had scrawled: “two cases of beer will be just fine! Greetings, Kalle.” “Prost!” Gabriele said out loud.\(^\text{17}\)

For Jürgen Hinze, too, the idea of Marzahn hung like salvation in his mind since he first heard about the plan in 1975. He, his wife, and two children lived in a building built in 1862 on Zionskirchestrasse which was “almost in ruins; dark and drafty, water ran between the walls, and we shared a bathroom a half-flight of stairs up with the neighbors.”\(^\text{18}\) The thought that he and his family could escape the ramshackle Altbau in East Berlin to move to a freshly laid Marzahn apartment was liberating for him, as it was for so many others.

Although new, the apartments had an unfinished quality about them for the new arrivals. As a rule, they were completely empty and without wallpaper. In many cases, apartments were open for moving in before the building itself was completed; blocks of floors were opened as they were finished, while construction continued on the floors above. In some cases, the cement walls were barely dry, as was the glue binding the PVC flooring in the kitchen and foyer.\(^\text{19}\) Moreover, the new arrivals had very little with which to fill their new space because they were moving to much larger living quarters than they had enjoyed before. More than half of them had come from small, usually one-room Altbau apartments in decrepit tenements in the old working-class sections of Berlin and other cities. Most of the new apartments, in contrast, while they ranged from one to five rooms, were typically three or four rooms because the entire project was intended for young families with children.

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 81.
\(^\text{19}\) This, however, is an old Berlin tradition dating back to the construction of the tenements in the nineteenth century (the same ones that many Marzahners escaped a century later): people desperate for a place to live and with very little means could move in while the plaster was still wet for a reduced rent.
Industrial designers and the techno-crats of the planned economy had long been at work designing and mass-producing modern, Bauhaus-influenced amenities, including furniture, kitchens and appliances, and even flooring, for the Neubauwohnungen. The Schrankwand, a floor-to-ceiling shelf unit designed to hold books, stereos, vases, photos, knick-knacks and other common living room furnishings, became increasingly popular in the GDR and in other socialist countries for precisely this reason. The “Intecta” series, developed by the Hellerau Werkstätte, was the most popular “system” of furniture, combining a few different types of shelf units with beds and sofas to provide complete “rooms” for East German consumers. Modern kitchens were also touted as must-have amenities for the new apartments, such as the “Ratioküche”—a rationalized, streamlined built-in kitchen that could be found in most Plattenbau apartments. Throughout the new apartments, plastics were central: the Intecta shelf unit was laminated in polyester resin, and the Ratioküche kitchens were coated in “Sprelacart”—a kind of plastic surfacing. Even the floors, made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC), were a product of numerous studies by designers and engineers on how to make the modern apartment more efficient and easier to maintain.  

20 See Eli Rubin, Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic (Chapel Hill, 2008), for more on the relationship between plastics, furniture, and Plattenwohnungen.
The young families moving in were primed to purchase these newly developed items through a combination of social and policy influences. Advice magazines such as *Für Dich* ran frequent articles on how to furnish one’s new WBS-70 apartment, such as the one pictured in Figure 3. The emphasis on how to furnish the children’s rooms is especially significant in this context. Previously, most families with children had had to share one room with them, so the concept of an entirely separate child’s room with child’s furniture was completely new. Yet families did not have many choices in how to do this: there were only a few furniture stores offering the complete service necessary to furnish a child’s room—as well as a kitchen and a living room—all at once, including stores on Alexanderplatz and Karl-Marx-Allee. Moreover, these stores only carried the Intecta or similarly styled furniture sets. Furthermore, most young couples were dependent on *Kinderkredit*, or credit to young families as part of Honecker’s “Real Existing Socialism” policy, for such large purchases. This credit could be used to furnish a child’s room but only in certain stores—the same stores that plied the modern and synthetic shelf units and kitchens on Alexanderplatz and Karl-Marx-Allee.\(^{21}\)

Not only were Marzahners moving into a utopia in the process of construction, but they were obliged to take part in its building as well—mostly through communal landscaping campaigns called “Mach Mit!” organized by each building’s *Hausgemeinschaft*, or building committee. These campaigns helped to fulfill a motto that resident Torsten Preußing noticed in his building’s lobby: “From ‘I’ to ‘We’” (Vom “Ich” zum “Wir”). Preußing, like many residents, got involved in these campaigns within days of moving in when he saw a sign ordering “All men outside with a shovel in hand!” for the arrival of topsoil the next day.\(^{22}\) As he reported, the men did just as the sign commanded, unloading and spreading tons of topsoil over the muddy, sandy, churned-up earth in the front of the building. In the next stage of these campaigns, not only men but women and children, too, got involved, spreading grass seed, and planting seedlings and—most importantly—trees.\(^{23}\) On nice afternoons when a Mach Mit! activity was taking place, spontaneous grill parties would pop up outside the buildings.\(^{24}\) Almost a fourth of the green space in Marzahn was landscaped like this, with residents, and occasionally soldiers of the East German Nationale Volksarmee (NVA) as well as the Red Army pitching in to do *Subbotnik*, or Saturday volunteer work, as well.\(^{25}\) Annually, prizes called “Golden

\(^{21}\) Some of this information on where furniture came from and how it was financed came from an interview I conducted with Barbara Diehl, April 3, 2008, in Berlin. See below for more information on Diehl’s experiences.


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 18.

\(^{24}\) Interview with Leo Märker, March 19, 2008, Berlin.

“House Numbers” were awarded to the building committees that best landscaped their green space, with 327 blocks receiving these awards in all.26

Tree planting was important both in a material and metaphorical sense. On the one hand, trees redesigned the landscape according to standards of sanitation and pleasantness, and, on the other, they put down figurative roots in brand new soil that were often both communist and personal. Among Marzahners, the best remembered tree-planting event was on September 22, 1978, when Sigmund Jähn, the first (and only) East German cosmonaut, visited Marzahn with Soviet cosmonaut Valery Bikovsky. Having just returned from a space mission in Soyuz whereupon they received the Order of Karl Marx at the Palace of the Republic from Honecker, the two had come to Marzahn, accompanied by an entourage of SED luminaries, to each plant a maple tree. They ended their visit with a guided tour of one of the freshly completed WBS 70/11 living units, block 60.17.27

The cosmonauts’ visit highlights the pride the state felt in its new housing development, just as the residents were proud of their high-profile guests. Residents renamed the main traffic artery, Leninallee, which the trees had been planted along, “Allee des Kosmonauten” in honor of Jähn and Bykovsky, who were said to have had a special fondness for Marzahn and its residents. The cosmonauts left behind an official SED badge that they had taken with them into outer space, and returned at least one more time in subsequent years to check on their trees as well as to greet the residents of WBS 70/11 unit 60.17. But they were not the only socialist celebrities to visit. In fact, a tour of Marzahn became a common practice for most guests of honor to the capital of the GDR, including heads of state such as Indira Gandhi and, most memorably, Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev.

**Growing with Marzahn**

For Elisabeth Albrecht, the growth of the trees she helped plant marked the passage of time, and life, in her *Plattenbau* in WG III. She moved there with very little in 1982 as a single mother with her small son—he brought only his plastic dump truck and a few stuffed animals, which he did not have enough room to play with in their previous half-room apartment in old East Berlin, but which he now could roll back and forth, in ecstatic joy, arranging the stuffed

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26 Ibid.
animals and the dump truck in various sequences. The animals and the dump truck came outside with her son on Mach Mit! days to “help” Elisabeth and her new neighbors (and their forty-two kids) plant birches and poplars. Though they had trouble growing these at first because the soil was still polluted from the decades of contamination from the old sewage fields nearby, they managed to earn a “Golden House Number,” painting elaborate murals of fairy tales along the outside walls and inner entranceways. Reflecting on the passage of time, Elisabeth recently said, “Now, twenty-one years later, the poplar I planted below my window has reached my ninth floor window. My son has moved out—a few years ago, in fact, and for many years it was just the two of us. But now, I enjoy my view of the greenery.”

For some families with children, the move to Marzahn turned out to be a lifesaving break with the past. Barbara Diehl’s childhood in the small village of Magdeborn, outside Leipzig, had been unhappy. In fact, as Barbara herself put it, she “had no childhood.” Her family had been shattered by war: she never met her father, who was killed on the Eastern Front, and her mother had taken up with several different men to fill both the emotional and the financial emptiness that her father’s death had caused. None of these relationships ended well. Barbara had to work from a very young age, but it was never enough to heal the wounds of a dysfunctional and loveless home life.

She hated life in Magdeborn, and as soon as she finished secondary education, she went to school in Halle and quickly found work at the Leunawerk chemical factory, where she met her future husband. They married in 1973 and moved to Berlin a year later, where he found work at the State Planning Commission. She then got pregnant with her first son, Dieter, marking a totally new start in her life. But life was hard in Berlin, living with her husband and child in a one-room apartment in the backyard of an Altbau apartment in Friedrichshain. It had no bathroom, a tiny 12 m² kitchen, and just a single tap with nothing but freezing cold water. If she wanted to give the little boy a bath, for instance, she had to warm the water in a kettle and then fill a plastic bathtub. Her husband would get up at 4 a.m. to start the radial heater so that it would be warm when they got up a couple of hours later. On top of these inconveniences, Dieter clearly had developmental issues—he was hyperactive and unable to socialize with other children in his preschool. The stress was unbearable—it was “hell” as she described

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29 Interview with Barbara Diehl, April 3, 2008, Berlin.
it, her life in Friedrichshain deteriorating to the low level she had suffered in Magdeborn.

Finally, when her second son, Stefan, was born in 1980, Barbara was able to secure a new apartment in Marzahn, in a WBS 70/10 building on the Allee der Kosmonauten. Moving to Marzahn did not immediately solve her family’s dysfunction, but it did allow the boys to have their own rooms. More importantly, the open green space and the numerous parks spread out below Barbara’s balcony meant that the boys could go outside to play and remain in her view. Soon, Dieter found a friend, a girl his age whose family had moved in across the hall, and who, like every other child in Marzahn, was brand new and also very much in need of friends. They played together almost every day after school.30

Although the move to Marzahn was lifesaving for Barbara, one needs to be careful not to overemphasize new Marzahn residents’ contentment with their surroundings. For many, the initial euphoria of having a full-comfort apartment for the first time in their lives wore off within a year, and many of the downsides to living in Marzahn became apparent. Most importantly, the spatial design of a Plattenbau, as well as the wide open spaces between buildings, made it much harder for residents to form new social networks than it had been in the old neighborhoods like Prenzlauerberg. Inconvenient as the old dwellings were, they fostered relationships and friendships by forcing residents to share toilets and spend time in communal places, as when people ate and showered at the factory. According to the Institute for Marxist-Leninist Sociology study, a plurality (41 percent) of several hundred subjects responded that they were only “somewhat happy” with the social networks they had formed at Marzahn, while almost the exact same number (40 percent) claimed they were either “somewhat” or “extremely unhappy.”31

Above all, the Berliners, who comprised more than two-thirds of Marzahners, were dissatisfied.32 Their dissatisfaction stemmed partially from the lack of fun or social things to do in comparison with their old neighborhoods—half of all former Berliners surveyed considered the leisure activities in Marzahn to be almost totally or totally insufficient, whereas only 16 percent of Marzahners who had come from small towns felt this way.33 The long commute also spawned dissatisfaction; over 80 percent of Marzahners commuted for more than 45 minutes, and a third worked in Berlin-Mitte, a central East Berlin district rather far from Marzahn. Many cited this

30 This information is taken from a series of interviews I conducted with Barbara Diehl in Berlin on March 17, April 3, and April 14, 2008.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 52
fact as contributing to their negative assessment of life in Marzahn.34

**Plattenbausiedlung and social control**

There were obvious political overtones to moving to Marzahn, which were not lost on most of the residents. A large number of the apartments were reserved for members of the government, the NVA, border patrol, Stasi, Volkspolizei (People’s Police), and other organs of the state. Many were bureaucrats somewhere in the vast planning bureaucracy of the state, like Barbara’s husband, who worked for the State Planning Commission. People outside the GDR mainstream—for example, those living together without getting married, or those who had been in trouble with the authorities for petty criminal offenses or suspicious political activity—did not stand much of a chance of receiving an apartment in Marzahn, or in any other Neubaugebiet. For that matter, neither did those who did not work for a prominent VEB, the state, the SED, or those who were childless or elderly.

And, of course, the Ministry for State Security, or Stasi, kept well informed about every aspect of Marzahn. It possessed every blueprint of the buildings.
and knew all about the topography, as well as where every utility
tunnel and building exit was. There was literally no place to hide
in Marzahn—there could be no “underground,” because even the
“underground” had just recently been built, and the Stasi knew all
the access points to the utility canal. In fact, the Ministry for State
Security developed a guidebook for agents following suspects in
and out of the new WBS 70 buildings (Fig.4), with helpful hints
such as always getting in the elevator with the suspect so as not
to lose them, waiting for suspects to press their floor button and
then pressing the button of the floor just below, so as not to raise
suspicion, and then using the time-lag to run up the extra flight
of stairs to catch up with the suspect. The guidebook was replete
with blueprints and diagrams showing exactly what angles were
needed for surveillance cameras and recorders. Because every WBS
70 building was exactly the same, only one guide was needed for
the entire Ministry for State Security and Ministry of the Interior.
It was intended as a quick reference guide that agents were to keep
with them at all times in Marzahn.

Conclusion
The East German Plattenbauten have undergone a remarkable
lifecycle. Initially rejected as cosmopolitan and “Western” by com-
munism’s old guard, by the 1960s and 1970s they came to embody
the utopian promise of a space-aged communist future. By the end
of the 1970s and during the 1980s, that promise became a reality for
millions of families around the GDR, and the Plattenbausiedlung—
most prominently typified by Marzahn—came to define everyday
life behind the Berlin Wall for approximately half the East German
population. When the Wall fell, places like Marzahn stood at a
crossroads—they had begun to shape the inner, everyday lives of
their residents and, at the same time, it was clear that they were a
vision of the future for remaining East Germans not yet living in a
Plattenbau. Living in Marzahn was both a promise and reality. The
East German residential construction program was intended to
completely solve the East German housing shortage by 1990, and for
the most part it did. Had East Germany weathered the crisis of 1989-
90, eventually, the vast majority of East Germans would have lived
in a place like Marzahn. For this majority, everyday life would have
come to be shaped by the straight lines, the identical patterns, the
open, Corbusian green spaces, the effects of holistic and totalizing
planning. Most of all, the links to the olden days, and especially to

35 There are large quantities
of blueprints, construc-
tion diagrams, technical in-
formation about the steel,
concrete, topsoil, voltage
of electric line, water table,
traffic flow, and so on scat-
tered throughout the files of
the various departments of
the MfS. See, for example,
Bundesbeauftragten für die
Unterlagen des Staatssicher-
heitsdienstes der ehemaligen
Deutschen Demokratischen
Republik (BStU), Ministerium
für Staatssicherheit (MfS),
Hauptabteilung (HA) VIII,
5090, 16-20; BStU MfS BV
Berlin, AKG 1019 “Informa-
tion über Probleme des Standes
der Vorbereitung des
komplexen Wohnungsbaues
im Gebiet Biesdorf/Marzahn,”
MfS Verwaltung Groß-Berlin
4.12.74; BStU MfS Sekr des
Min, file nr. 1787, pages 0151-
0154, and file nr. 2442 Teil 1.

36 BStU MfS HA VIII, 5192,
“Dokumentation über den
Stadtbezirk Berlin-Marzahn”
erarbeitet von den Jugend-
kollektiven des Referates 4
the tenements and the old prewar neighborhoods (*Kiez*) of Berlin, would have weakened as so little would have remained to remind East Germans of them.

But none of that happened. When the Wall fell, it left Marzahn in a truly wrenching existential bind. During the GDR, Marzahn was an amnesiopolis, a place of the future, designed to erase all links to the past so that a new, self-referential future, based only on itself, could become real. After 1989-90, it became a place with no past, as Westerners quickly recognized. It became a place with only a snuffed out future, thus existing in a strange kind of suspended animation. Those residents who had jostled and waited and worked to get into Marzahn, for whom the GDR’s narrative of progress and utopianism was fused with their personal narratives of upward mobility and personal growth, who (in many cases gladly) left their pasts behind, found themselves after 1989-90 stranded in a time eddy. Once the old neighborhoods of East Berlin—Prenzlauerberg, Friedrichshain, Mitte, etc.—were opened up to the mechanisms of a private real estate market and the kinds of investment capital able to renovate old apartments, suddenly having a past was the new future. *Altbau* trumped *Neubau*. And the *Plattenbausiedlung*, originally condemned by the GDR’s founders as too dismissive of history and heritage, ultimately came to be judged harshly by Western critics for that very same reason.

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