

Curating Socialist Cold-War Art in East Berlin

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Due to the division of Berlin into East and West, the city has gone down in world history as an important focal point of the Cold War, which was openly fought between the USA and the Soviet Union and their respective allies from 1948 at the latest. This division is still visible today in architecture and urban development. Urban planning and architecture – and especially housing construction – developed in a unique way into central fields of competition between the systems during the Cold War in view of the massive destruction caused by the war, the requirements of reconstruction and socio-political reorientation. The eastern part of Berlin dominated by the Soviets and the western part, designed by the Western Allies, functioned as shop windows to the world to emphasise their own economic and cultural, and thus ideological, superiority.

Over a period of more than 20 years, unique residential quarters and urban ensembles were created in both East and West Berlin according to the plans of renowned architects, representing in unique conciseness, density and quality the internationally relevant trends of architecture and urban development of the post-war period. High-quality ensembles were built, each of which in itself represents an outstanding example of different guiding principles and design characteristics of modernist architecture and urban development, in which important protagonists of mid-20th century architecture such as Walter Gropius, Oscar Niemeyer, Alvar Aalto or Le Corbusier in the West and Hermann Henselmann, Richard Paulick or Josef Kaiser in the East played a decisive artistic role and formed a globally unique combination of competing urban ensembles within one city.



Fig. 1 Berlin-Friedrichshain, Frankfurter Allee (formerly Stalinallee), first construction phase, section C, block C North, photo Wolfgang Bittner, 2015



Fig. 2 Berlin Mitte, Karl-Marx-Allee, 2nd construction phase, photo Wolfgang Bittner, 2013

After initial plans for the entire city, based on Hans Scharoun's "Collective Plan" presented in 1946, which envisaged a fundamentally new, functionally organised city in place of the existing urban structure and was implemented in the following years up to 1950 at the "Wohnzelle Friedrichshain", a fundamental paradigm shift began in the eastern part of the city after the founding of the two German states in 1949. Now, following the example of the Soviet Union, a historicising monumental architecture as an expression of socialist culture was to become characteristic in the sense of a national formal language with socialist content. This was to set itself apart from modernism, which was described as "western formalism" and "cosmopolitanism". A unique example of this is the Stalinallee (today's Karl-Marx-Allee).

The two sections of the Karl-Marx-Allee built between 1951 and 1964 as well as the buildings of the international building exhibition "Interbau" of 1957 in the western part of the city show in a way that is unique worldwide this confrontational and at the same time diversely interrelated competition of systems with the means of urban planning and architecture.

In the newly founded GDR, the reorientation of urban planning and architecture that took place from 1950 onwards under considerable influence of the USSR led to the monumental expression of a regional-historicist architecture of "national tradition" ("socialist in content, national in form"),

which determined the first large construction section of the Stalinallee and showed all the characteristics of a style that became known as "Socialist Realism" (Fig. 1).

The architecture of the Stalinallee is a combination of monumental dimensions, classical architectural details and modern elements in order to meet the requirements of residential buildings as prestigious "workers' palaces", which were to provide quality living in an inner-city location for all social classes. In addition, the political content conveyed by inscriptions and sculptural works were the basis of this proven social achievement. Exhibitions of exemplary residential furnishings illustrated the high-quality standards of the neighbourhood down to the last detail. A park-like green area along the north side as well as the typological combination of apartments on the upper floors and shops and restaurants in the ground floor zones support the intended boulevard character of the street. All buildings were equipped with elevators, and the comparatively large apartments had a high standard with hot water heating and bathrooms. There were numerous communal facilities to support the intended collective spirit. This spirit was also to be expressed through the socially balanced allocation of housing.

Again a few years later, in the eastern part of the city, the hitherto unfinished connection between Strausberger Platz and Alexanderplatz was built, where the street led into the city centre, which was still to be developed (Fig. 2). In the



Fig. 3 Berlin Mitte, Café-Restaurant Moskau, photo Wolfgang Bittner, 2013



Fig. 4 Berlin Mitte, Kino International, photo Wolfgang Bittner, 2007



Fig. 5 Berlin Mitte, Kino International, detail of south facade, photo Wolfgang Bittner, 2007

course of the de-Stalinisation, the street was renamed Karl-Marx-Allee in 1961. Just as in the Hansaviertel, a new urban quarter was created here, which was now to serve as a model example of a “socialist housing complex”, exemplifying the new orientation of the GDR’s urban planning and housing policy in the post-Stalin era and following the guiding principle of “socialist modernism”. As a result, prestigious building projects of cosmopolitan elegance were created.

In contrast to the conventional masonry buildings of the first construction phase, the second construction phase with type buildings and prefabricated components was intended to embody the change in concept towards industrialised building. The new urban quarter is dominated by the Allee linking the first and second construction phases and by the set-back, separate rows of residential flats along the street with pavilions in front. By combining residential functions with representative public functions along the avenue (cinema, restaurant, bar, retail pavilions and congress hall), this section, like the first construction phase, also received city-wide relevance and international appeal.

The highlight of this urban development was the “Café Moskau” and the “Kino International” opposite. With these special buildings and the commercially used pavilions, the second construction phase continued the boulevard character of the first construction phase in its own way.

The Café-Restaurant Moskau (Fig. 3) was built in 1964; it is a document of the consistently modern attitude of the architecture of the early 1960s in the GDR. The steel-frame construction of the two-storey flat-roofed building with inner courtyard and enclosed garden allowed the walls to be completely glazed – the idea was that by day, one could see through the transparent building, by night it looked like a glowing glass cube, visible from afar also through the very artful lettering of the illumination advertisement on the roof.

It contained a nationality restaurant with typical Soviet specialities, a wine restaurant, a shop for Soviet folk art, a concert and dance café, mocha and tea rooms as well as rooms for private parties. The night bar in the basement was very popular at the time and rounded off the gastronomic range. The motifs that were supposed to signal the Russian character of Café Moskau are concentrated at the entrance, in a mixture of folksiness and enthusiasm for technology that was characteristic of the time around 1960: the entrance wall is taken up by a large-format mosaic, “From the Life of the Peoples of the Soviet Union” (designed by Bert Heller), which unites groups of figures, animals and landscape elements – including a monumental drilling rig – in a lively scene. A Sputnik satellite (the first satellite in space in 1957) on the mosaic and as a sculptural model on a corner stele proclaims the message of the technical progress of the Soviet people. The pictorial tesserae (= small-format polygonal or round plates made of stone, ceramics, ore, lead, bone, terracotta, glass or similar hard materials with which mosaics are laid) here consist of different materials, such as natural stones, different-coloured glass stones (smalt) and also broken tile fragments. The mosaic was extensively conserved and restored in 2006.

Today, Café Moskau is part of the listed business centre in the area of Schillingstraße/Karl-Marx-Allee, which also includes the Kino International and several retail pavilions.



Fig. 6 Berlin Mitte, House of the Teacher, photo Wolfgang Bittner, 2007

What they all have in common is the high aesthetic standard and the modernity of the design. This part of the former Stalinallee was deliberately and in every way set apart from the Stalinist construction section between Frankfurter Tor and Strausberger Platz which was completed in 1956.

The Kino International (Fig. 4), built in 1961–63 according to designs by Josef Kaiser, is the most striking cube in the second section of the Karl-Marx-Allee. Its prominent position in the centre of the new residential complex at the junction of Schillingstraße was effectively staged against the background of the façade of the ten-storey Hotel Berolina.

Starting from the shape of the auditorium, Kaiser developed a building structured by its functional areas, whose height of 15 metres was dictated by the urban design. The glazed foyer on the upper floor, enclosed by a protruding concrete frame and cantilevering nine metres above the ground floor without supports, allows a clear view of the busy avenue as far as Alexanderplatz and at the same time functions as a stage for the cinema-goer. The architect integrated the large billboard – which is part of the design – proportionally convincingly into the glass foyer front and the name of the large cinema.

Integrated into the three windowless fronts is a sculpture relief developed from only two forms, into which 14 white-painted concrete cast reliefs (each 1200 x 3600) with the title “From the Life of Today’s People” (1964, concept Waldemar Grzimek, Karl-Heinz Schamal, August Schievel-

bein) are integrated, whose formally abstract pictorial motifs clearly take a back seat to the abstract surface ornament in the overall effect (Fig. 5). For the exterior design, it was necessary to visualise the social content of the building in the form of realistic art close to the people. The serially produced cast reliefs, as art in construction, aimed at the fusion of architecture and sculpture. In 2019, the renovation of the outer shell and the restoration of the reliefs were completed.

Pavilions in front of the residential rows relate to the street cross-section of the first section, but remain elegantly restrained with their typified architecture, low height and large glass surfaces. Originally, nine shop pavilions of the Gesellschaftliches Zentrum (Social Centre) were planned along the entire section of Karl-Marx-Allee. However, only five were built between Schillingstraße and Strausberger Platz. Characteristic of the flat-roofed buildings are the spacious sales rooms, which are staged by extensive glazing with fine, partly anodised aluminium framing. The interior is divided only by an open gallery. The pavilions are recognisable as a cohesive group by the yellow ceramics of the exterior walls, the supports and cornices covered with coloured split clinker bricks and glass slips, and the (no longer extant) advertisement lettering.

The transition to Alexanderplatz is formed by the ensemble of the House of the Teacher (Fig. 6) and the Congress Hall. The twelve-storey building was erected in 1964 as a steel-frame construction with a façade of glass and alumin-

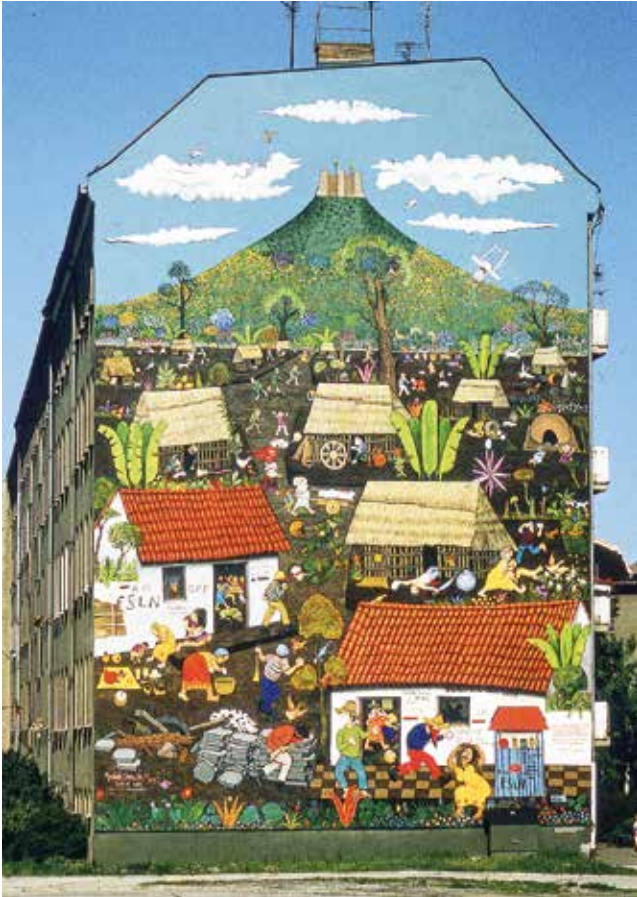


Fig. 7 Berlin-Lichtenberg, Nicaragua mural, photo Gabriele Senft, 1985

ium. The building owes its special effect to the surrounding mosaic frieze “Our Life”, which describes an ideal image of socialist society based on modern technology, peace, friendship between peoples, and classlessness. The design was created by the artist Walter Womacka, following the tradition of architectural monumental paintings of Mexican modernism. It extends over two floors with a total area of seven by 125 metres, making it one of the largest works of art in Europe in terms of surface area. The mosaic, consisting mainly of

glass and ceramic materials, was restored from 2001–2004. Together with the Erfurt University of Applied Sciences a preparatory system was developed to enable the artwork to be removed from the building without being damaged.

The integration of prominently placed works of fine art on the above mentioned buildings supported the politically motivated concept with their content. The monumental mural *Nicaraguan Village – Monimbó* 1978 (Fig. 7) in the Berlin district of Lichtenberg also fits perfectly into this socio-political context. The mural, commissioned by the Berlin magistrate, was painted in the summer of 1985 on the gable wall of a typical old apartment building in Berlin by the Nicaraguan artist Manuel García Moia in the style of naïve painting. The painting shows Moia’s home village, Monimbó, where almost exclusively indigenous people lived and which was destroyed in 1978 by the then ruling Somoza regime after an uprising. With a painted surface of 255 m², the anti-war painting is today one of the largest murals of naïve painting in the world.

In 2005, at the instigation of the private owner, a full-surface composite thermal insulation system was installed. On top of this, the painting was reconstructed in detail by artists using original tracings. Due to processing errors and serious structural defects, the insulation system detached from the wall in the following years and lost its functionality. As a result, the insulation panels were removed in 2013, revealing the original underneath. In 2015/16, the Berlin Monument Authority commissioned restorers to document the damage and carry out a sample restoration to assess the possibility of an overall restoration. The result was assessed by all parties involved and approved for execution. In 2020, the mural was successfully restored with funding from the district of Lichtenberg, a very committed citizens’ initiative and lottery funds. The Monument Authority provided technical support for the project, even though this did not concern a listed building.

Credits

Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6: © Landesdenkmalamt Berlin

Fig. 7: © Gabriele Senft