

The Art-in-Architecture of the German Democratic Republic and the Paradigm Shift. A Few Cases from the Federal State of Brandenburg (Germany)

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The so-called *Kunst am Bau*, the *art-in-architecture*, also known as *public space art* or *art in construction*, is a genuine phenomenon of Modernity, a tendency aiming for a free collaboration between an architect and an artist in order to provide an individually balanced design and to strengthen the functional idea of a particular building. The integration of the aesthetic education has become one of the obligations of the modern state. The initial reformatory idea, however, was increasingly bestowed with a political dimension in the 1920s, and its misuse for propaganda purposes intensified after 1933. The characteristic realism-style was used during the Nazi regime and, later on, in East Germany during the Stalinist period. Thereafter, art and architecture in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) reoriented towards the modern international style. The following report highlights how Germany handled this modern legacy of the socialist art-in-architecture after the reunification. While we witness an increase of historic research about the art-in-architecture itself,¹ less exists about its current *heritagization*.² According to David Lowenthal, the relicts of the past undergo two types of transformation. The first type refers to the direct impacts on the relicts, i.e. protection vs. iconoclasm. The second type refers to indirect effects in terms of how they are perceived, explained or appreciated.³ Of course, we can speculate in which way both forms of transformation interact with each other, and in which order they come into play in respect to heritagization. According to Yaniv Poria, “heritagization is a process in which heritage is used as a resource to achieve certain social goals”, and this process is linked to phenomena “behind the pictures”.⁴ Who wants to achieve what in our case? The development to be explained in this paper displays some relatively recent bottom-up movements starting in different places but taking similar trajectories. Of course, their nature depends on the specific historic and social features of the particular place and setting. This helps to better differentiate the processes in question, as well as the cultural phenomena of East Germany.

Immediately after 1989, the general public did not show any interest in maintaining the art and architecture of the postwar modernism in the GDR.⁵ In view of the bright new epoch of individualism and neoliberalism, the whole legacy of the *collectivist society* appeared rather embarrassing. Even if some specialized bodies were commissioned to collect documents and conduct research studies⁶ as early as in the 1990s, the topic has attracted wider attention only about ten years ago, when some universities in East Germany started to engage in the debate by organizing well-broadcasted events and conferences.⁷ The energies to do so were fueled not so much by the disappearance of whole socialist sub-

urbs in the wake of serious town-shrinking but rather by the demolition of iconic buildings in many East German cities (Berlin, Erfurt, Dresden, Potsdam, Weimar, etc.). Moreover, besides the remastering of the city structures also the new regulations related to energy saving measures endangered the modernistic building stocks and especially the works of art attached to their façades.

This article deals with two cases located in the federal state (*Bundesland*) of Brandenburg, the region surrounding both former royal residences in Berlin and Potsdam. Although there are a number of other towns with a rich legacy from the socialist period, such as – above all – Eisenhüttenstadt or Brandenburg/Havel, Cottbus, Eberswalde, Schwedt, etc., our chosen cases clearly illustrate two quite different ways of the appropriation of the post-socialist art and architecture.

The first case is related to Frankfurt (Oder), a town on the German-Polish border that faced severe war damages in the whole city and underwent an almost entire exchange of population after 1945. Over time, the reconstruction of the city in the 1960s and -70s proved to be insufficient and did not provide satisfying living qualities in the public space. One of the means to overcome this lack were the efforts to decorate the city with small pieces of art. Thanks to Frankfurt’s status of a district town (*Bezirksstadt*) it obtained many works of art in public space. The biggest improvements of the city centre were achieved in the 1980s, when the erection of additional houses became affordable. This allowed increasing the density of urban structures and reshaping the concept of the retail sector. The main result of the new planning was Frankfurt’s central pedestrian zone covering a section of an old street called Große Scharnstraße. This zone was designed to be an attractive, innovative and event-oriented asset of the city. Interestingly, almost 20 artists were commissioned to deliver their designs without any political expectations or pressure. However, the opening of the pedestrian zone became part of a huge festival, carried out according to the official propaganda requirements. Unfortunately, Frankfurt, like many other cities in Eastern Germany, lost almost a third of its population after the reunification. The pedestrian zone, a much celebrated and fully accepted project among the inhabitants until 1990, thence turned into an abandoned street with empty shops.

However, the bad condition of this space has become an interesting topic for the university. The first reflection of the problematic situation was a film produced by the students of anthropology in 2010. Four years later, the first text describing the history and values of the space was delivered by the author of this article.⁸ In 2017, the Viadrina University organized an exhibition on the socialist art in public space

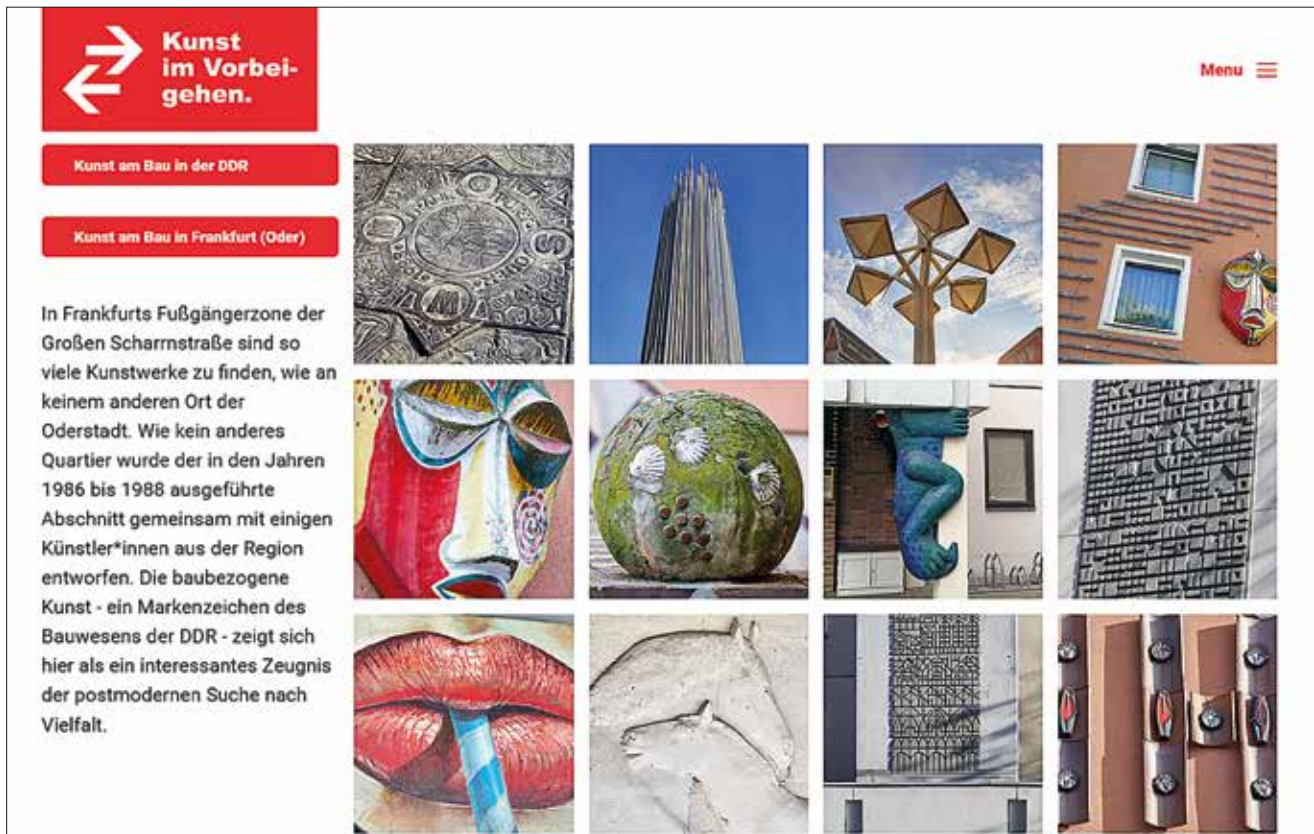


Fig. 1 The website <https://kunst-im-vorbeigehen.de/>, an important means of knowledge dissemination developed by the students. Screenshot by Paul Zalewski with kind permission of "WohnBau Frankfurt"

in Frankfurt (Oder).⁹ It attracted many inhabitants from different social backgrounds in the town. The final discussion involved the mayor of the town as well as the CEOs responsible for the building resources in the city. It confirmed the belief that the art works in public space had the potential to enhance the city's uniqueness and should thus be seen as an important cultural benefit for the community.

Since then, two years of coordinated action has been done. The cooperative administering the houses in the pedestrian zone now also takes care of their renovation, although most façades as well as the overall outlook of the street just need a brush-up without any significant alterations. At the same time, the students of the Viadrina University work on the critical approach and dissemination of the knowledge about the recent history of the city. Besides archival research they use qualitative methods of the social sciences by interviewing witnesses, especially those artists who had delivered works for the pedestrian zone. The outputs of this project include the website (Fig. 1) and the exhibition curated by the students; their aim is to open a space for critical intergenerational dialogue about the history and transformation of this urban space in all its different aspects.

Potsdam, the capital of the *land* of Brandenburg, was also heavily damaged during the war and then rebuilt in a socialist manner. Since 1989, thanks to the highly developed cultural infrastructure, Potsdam has constantly attracted wealthy people and thus become one of the richest communities in East Germany nowadays. The tensions between the pre-modern and modern old and new imaginations of the city

triggered many controversial debates. In 1991, the Council of the Town agreed on the principles of the historically oriented planning policy for the city. Following this agreement, many buildings of the GDR-period were torn down or partly replaced by reconstruction projects such as the Royal Castle or the Palazzo Barberini. Both these buildings were backed up not only by regular citizens but also by the members of the financial elite – mostly new residents – donating lots of money. This harsh turn away from the city's socialist imprint to a baroque one mobilized, of course, the opposite side of activists engaged in the preservation of socialist modernity supported by the locally influential leftist party. Indeed, the debate politicized quickly.

Within this debate, the question on whether or not to demolish a prominent functional building from the socialist time, the so called *Rechenzentrum* (centre for digital operations), in order to rebuild the baroque Garrison Church (*Garnisonkirche*), originally situated on the same location, became the most prominent discussion. The church, consecrated in 1732, damaged in 1945 and finally blown up on behalf of the Communist Party in 1968, was an important but difficult object. The main reason for its historic importance is the fact that it contained the coffin of King Frederic the Great, an object of admiration of the Emperors Napoleon Bonaparte and Alexander I. Yet, an even more critical aspect of the church than the link to the old Prussian militarism as a whole, is the symbolic contamination by the so-called *Day of Potsdam* on 21 March 1933 when Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of the *Reich*¹⁰. The *Rechenzentrum* was

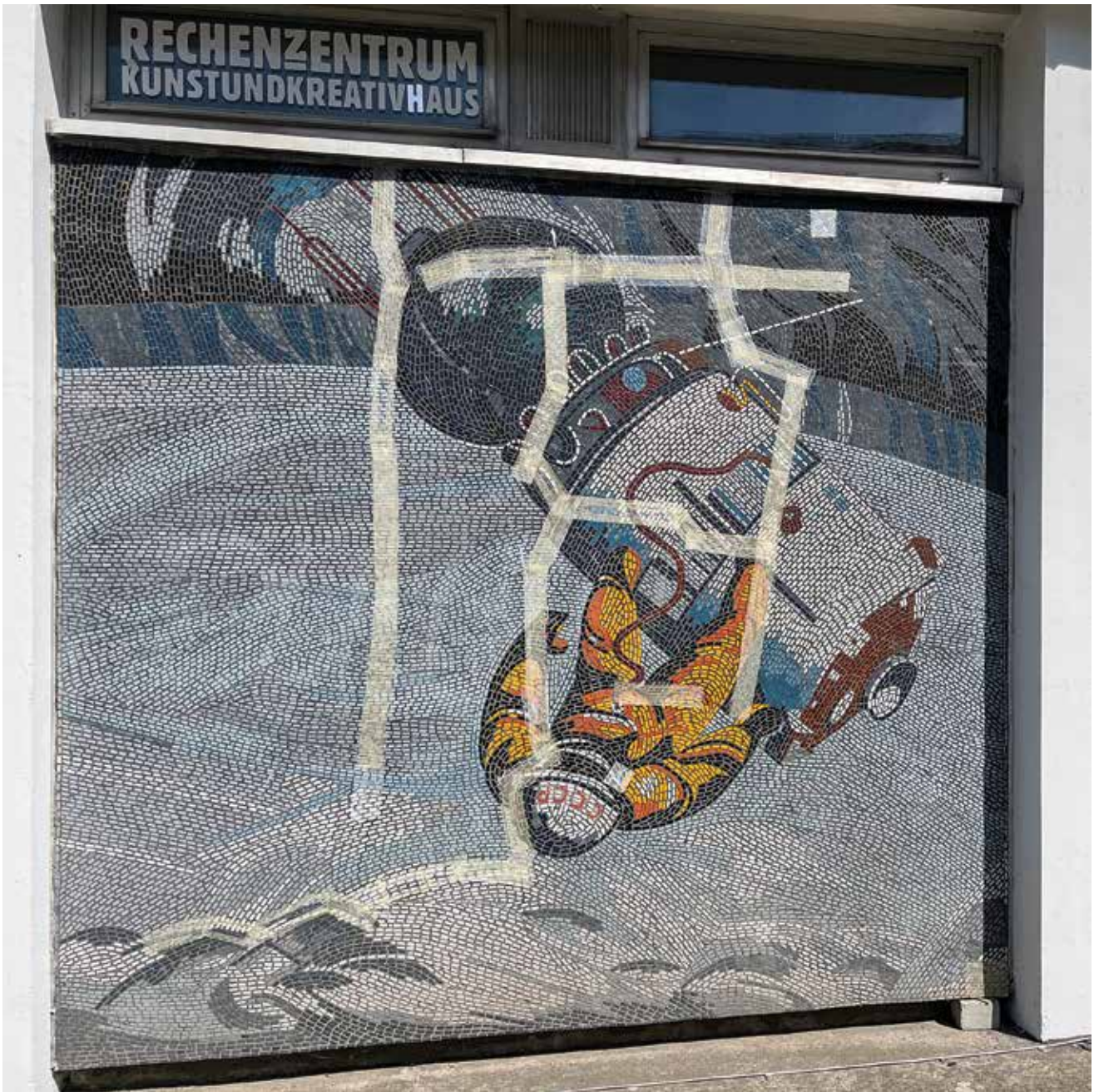


Fig. 2 Human Being Conquering the Cosmos, mosaic made of 18 parts, created in 1972 by local artist Fritz Eisel for the facade of the Rechenzentrum. The themes of the mosaics are dedicated to the secular notion of the cosmos and as such consciously exclude the religious interpretation of space, thus contradicting the sense of the previous sacred building on this ground. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion against Ukraine in 2022, however, the mosaics can be seen not only as witnesses of the Cold War, but also as an expression of the Kremlin's expansionist continuities and long-lasting imperialism. Photograph by Paul Zalewski.

erected almost at the same place between 1969 and 1972 by architect Sepp Weber and others. It was a humble functional building complex decorated with large-scale mosaics made by Fritz Eisel (Fig. 2).

The building complex represents an early development of the electronic and digital industry, a branch of fundamental importance for the centralistic steering of the socialist planned economy. After the dissolution of the GDR the complex was used in a provisional way. Despite this, great sections of it were torn down in 2010 and 2019, so that only

a small part of it – the one with the mosaics – remains up to the present.

For a long time, it seemed that the outcome of the battle between the opponents and the supporters of the church's reconstruction was clearly in favor of the latter. Not only the financial elite such as fashion designer Wolfgang Joop or TV-star Günther Jauch, but also top politicians including Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier were convinced supporters of the reconstruction. Despite the critical opinion of the Director of the Branden-

burg Heritage Authority and his skepticism about the reconstruction project in 2012, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture declared in 2013 that “the not existing church (sic!)” was a “nationally important monument”. The rebuilding of the baroque tower only 1.7 metres away from the socialist *Rechenzentrum* started in 2017, foreshadowing the demolition of the latter. Moreover, the reconstruction project obtained 20 million euros funding from the state and five million euros from the Lutheran Church. Critical observers see this process as a typical example of top-down planning, one that combines a patronizing discourse about aesthetics with the exploitation and privatization of the city.¹¹

However, a public petition against the reconstruction and against the demolition of the *Rechenzentrum* in 2014 marked a turning point in the debate. In 2015, the socialist building turned into a provisional workplace for some 200 artists until 2025. Meanwhile, even the administration of the town having supported the destruction in the past has recently changed its attitude now demonstrating its openness to dialogue. During a critical conference in 2020 devoted especially to this conflict, the large-scale mosaic on the façade of the *Rechenzentrum* was put forth as an argument for the preservation of the building. The debate is still open and the end unknown, yet, observers can witness a significant change in the appreciation of this piece of socialist heritage – despite the considerable alterations of the original building since 1989 and the lack of outstanding architectural quality.

In conclusion, when comparing both cases, we can see a common pattern resembling what we already know from the history of heritage preservation: the experience of loss is the starting point for every reflection and re-valuation of objects¹² although their speed and circumstances may be different. While we can observe a symbolic fight for the representation of particular epochal layers in Potsdam’s public space, Frankfurt (Oder) seems to be a rather archeological example, fueled by the curiosity related to the recent history of the town.

The discussions in Potsdam, indeed the most significant place for the history of Prussia, have a direct impact on the physical transformation of the city and therefore quickly attracted political powers. The city of Frankfurt does not have this type of explosive potential and the late socialist pedestrian zone with its different objects was not endangered but rather asleep in the last years. In both cases, the younger generation and the exchange of information as well as the dissemination of the problem in the press and via social media played a crucial role.¹³ The media allow creating epistemic communities¹⁴ aiming for a better understanding of modern local history. This relatively recent heritagisation of the post-socialist architecture and art in public spaces is not yet covered by the authorized heritage discourse.¹⁵ Although the communal authorities for heritage preservation in Brandenburg are aware of and interested in this phenomenon, they often remain unable to defend the genre against destruction owing to an overload of work and too many other pressing issues.¹⁶ In this situation the engagement of civil society could be seen as a much desired and welcomed support, and as a way to help increase the objectivation of specific protection purposes.¹⁷ Moreover, we can easily rec-

ognize some social goals in the described actions: the curiosity the remaining pieces of socialism still arouse today seems to be important for the self-definition of the younger generations born in East Germany after the reunification. In a way, it also brings positive recognition for the older generations that grew up in a completely different system and which has been absolutely discredited after 1989. This sort of recognition seems to be a vital gesture and symbolic means to help overcome many of the problematic developments and tensions that have come up in the wake of the German reunification.

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¹ Among the considerable number of recently published books and articles on the topic we only refer pars pro toto to two comprehensive works published by the German Federal Ministry of the Interior, the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (BBR) in 2020: 70 Jahre Kunst am Bau in Deutschland (see also <https://www.bbr.bund.de/BBR/DE/KunstamBau/70-jahre-kunst-am-bau-in-deutschland.html>, consulted last on 7.2.23) and the online presentation of art-in-architecture commissioned by the German Federal Republic since 1950: <https://www.museum-der-1000-orte.de/> (consulted last on 7.2.2023)

² The term “heritagization” means: heritage making – the creation and recreation of cultural and historical meaning and identity – is done by different actors and at different levels, from institutions, museums, their visitors, to common people (see also <http://statusproject.net/heritagization/>, consulted last on 23.2.23).

³ LOWENTHAL, *The Past*, 1985, p. 264.

⁴ PORIA, *The Story Behind*, 2010, p. 218.

⁵ This becomes evident in Frankfurt (Oder), for instance, when tracking local press releases from the 1990s, which was scrutinized in the framework of the university seminars given by the author.

⁶ Such as the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space in Erkner.

⁷ For instance, the conferences devoted to the Ostmoderne provided by the Bauhaus-University Weimar in 2011 and

2014 or the international conference at the German Historical Museum organized by the European University Viadrina in 2012.

⁸ ZALEWSKI, Frankfurt an der Oder, Große Scharnstrasse, 2014, pp. 141–153.

⁹ ZALEWSKI, Entstaubt: baubezogene Kunst der DDR, 2017, pp. 88 f.

¹⁰ GRÜNZIG, *Deutschtum und Vaterland*, 2017 and EPKENHANS, WINKEL (eds.), *Die Garnisonskirche in Potsdam*, 2013.

¹¹ LUTZ, TOMCZAK, ZSCHOGGE, *Make Potsdam Great Again*, 2018, pp. 231–244.

¹² BOGNER, DOLFF-BONEKÄMPER, MEIER (eds.), *Collecting Loss*, 2021.

¹³ For example via: <https://www.facebook.com/ReZePotsdam> (consulted last on 23.2.23)

¹⁴ HOLZNER, *Reality Construction*, 1968.

¹⁵ SMITH, *Uses of Heritage*, 2006.

¹⁶ This is the result of an extensive empiric survey in which more than 30 communal authorities from Brandenburg and (East) Berlin took part and which was conducted under the supervision of the author. See DAMMANN, *Wandgebundene Dekorationen der DDR-Zeit*, 2017.

¹⁷ ZALEWSKI, *Problematik der Objektivierung*, 2017, pp. 271–276.