

Karl-Marx-Allee and “Interbau 1957”. Berlin Postwar Heritage between Confrontation and Co-evolution

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The submission related to post-war heritage recently filed by the Berlin Senate for the German tentative list combines two Berlin heritage complexes of the post-war period: the East Berlin ensemble of Karl-Marx-Allee as well as the West Berlin Interbau exhibition ensemble to be nominated for the World Heritage List.

In my view the submission has three dimensions:

First: The “double” Berlin. After the Second World War, the divided city of Berlin was the main stage for the Cold War. Nowhere else in the world the political confrontation between East and West has left such clear traces in architecture and urban design like in this city. In Berlin, the confrontation and competition between the two opposed political and social systems led to a unique rivalry in urban design and architecture even before the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

Second: In a wider international perspective we can recognize a longer or shorter oscillation between Modernism and Traditionalism in architecture and urban planning, in the East as well as in the West.

Abb. 5: Vorschlag Hermann Henselmanns zur Fortsetzung der Karl-Marx-Allee (1958)

Fig. 5: Proposal by Hermann Henselmann for the continuation of Karl-Marx-Allee (1958)



And third: Due to their similar historical starting situation and due to the dominance or strong influence of the Soviet Union, the Central and Eastern European states share specific common patterns of development in architecture and urban design.

A. The “double” Berlin: confrontation, competition, co-evolution

Confrontation

In a synchronous view the Berlin post-war architectural heritage of the 1950s and early 1960s is unique in its antithetical cultural and political constellation:

Located on both sides of the Brandenburg Gate related to the great East-West axis, they represent, in unparalleled conciseness, concentration and quality, two internationally relevant post-war tendencies in architecture and urban design, each promoted by corresponding occupying powers: the

Abb. 6: Der zweite Abschnitt der Karl-Marx-Allee war nicht nur eine Fortsetzung des Boulevards, sondern umfasste auch Wohngebiete im Norden und Süden für ca. 5 000 Personen (Blick vom Fernsehturm in den frühen 1970er Jahren)

Fig. 6: The second construction section of Karl-Marx-Allee was not only a continuation of the boulevard; it also contained residential areas in the north and south for 5,000 people (view from the television tower, early 1970s)





Abb. 7: Haus des Lehrers und Kongresshalle, 1962–64 nach Entwurf von Hermann Henselmann
Fig. 7: The House of the Teacher and Congress Hall, built 1962–64 after design by Hermann Henselmann

Abb. 10: Café und Restaurant Moskau, 1961–64 nach Entwurf von Josef Kaiser und Horst Bauer
Fig. 10: Café and Restaurant Moskau, built 1961–64 after design by Josef Kaiser und Horst Bauer





Abb. 9: Kino Kosmos, 1960–62 nach Entwurf von Josef Kaiser und Herbert Aust
Fig. 9: The Cosmos Cinema, built 1960–62 after design by Josef Kaiser and Herbert Aust

Eastern model of the so-called SocRealism referring to and revitalising regional-historicist building traditions (“socialist in content, national in form”), and the Western model of the International Style and the open urban landscape (“Stadtlandschaft”).

After 1945, the socio-political confrontation between East and West in Berlin led to the construction of two opposed city types. The former Stalinallee is a representative boulevard with “Residential Palaces” and distinctive squares marked by tower and gateway buildings. In the West, the Interbau1957 demonstratively took up the International Style according to the principles of the CIAM-Charter of Athens.

In this process, politicians in both East and West understood and used architecture and urban design as a medium for cultivating their image and demonstrating their own social “superiority”.

Competition: construction and counter-construction

In a more diachronic view we see that confrontation has its own historical structure:

It’s a dialogic structure, a structure of construction and counter-construction, of thesis and anti-thesis.

While the GDR (following the model set by the Soviet Union) abandoned the architectural and urbanistic Interna-

tional Style at the beginning of the 1950s and only gradually returned to Modernism less than ten years later with the industrialisation of civil engineering (again following the Soviet example), the West unreservedly defended the concept of the “structured, low-density city interspersed with open green space” (“gegliederte und aufgelockerte Stadt”) over many years.

The Berlin submission contains two periods of planning and building of Karl-Marx-Allee, the 1st and 2nd stage of construction.

As a matter of fact, there were two stages more: after 1945 the common modern beginning of East and West and also simultaneously the criticism of Modernism in the 1980s.

Co-evolution: common heritage

Historically, criticism of Modern Movement and International Style architecture and urban design coincided with the political collapse of the GDR and the Eastern Bloc. So after 1990 postmodern zeitgeist criticism concentrated on GDR Modernism, while the architecture of the early GDR found rapid acceptance. In an exact reversal of the political and aesthetic confrontations of the 1950s, the “old” Karl-Marx-Allee in East Berlin gained wide recognition in the field of building culture as a “European boulevard”, and was restored according to the guidelines for historical monuments shortly thereafter. The Hansaviertel (Interbau 1957) and the

“new” Karl-Marx-Allee, on the other hand, had to withstand the anti-modern zeitgeist for several years from 1990 onward. In the meantime, however, many of these historic monuments have been restored as well according to listed property requirements, and their value as building culture is recognised.

Today we have the opportunity to understand and appreciate this Berlin heritage, born from the *political* confrontation between East and West and the *aesthetical* confrontation between SocRealism and International Style, as a shared built heritage of Eastern and Western Europe and as part of a universal cultural heritage. This reciprocal and characteristically delayed intertwining of East and West and historicism and Modernism can be associated with the image of the “Double Helix”. In a manner of speaking, Karl-Marx-Allee (old and new) and Interbau store, in the logic of their creation, the architectural and urban design code of Berlin’s post-war development.

What was built once as confrontational urban design and expressed implacable competition can be discovered and made accessible in reunified Berlin today, *after* the era of confrontation between the systems has ended and with a critical look at both, the International Style and its counter-movement of regional historicism as a joint cultural heritage of (formerly divided) post-war Europe.

B. International perspective: oscillation between modernism and traditionalism

In a more international and theoretical perspective, we can consider an oscillation between Modernism and traditionalism nearly everywhere. But the East European shifting is specific; we can observe three stages during the one long amplitude of post-war western Modernism.

And if we consider that the break with post-war Modernism in East European countries set by the Stalinist Soviet Union followed the example of breaking with constructivism and modern architecture in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, we see that East European architecture and urban design is existentially connected with the fate of modern architecture in the 20th century.

C. Special common pattern of East European post-war development

The early post-war period after 1945 was internationally characterised by a new approach to Modernism. Especially in countries that had the chance to continue the modern architecture of the inter-war period, like Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, the Netherlands or Yugoslavia, and where modern architects were repressed, fought in the resistance against German occupation or went into exile, post-war Modernism was strong. The attitude aimed at a radical renewal of the concepts and experiences of the 1920s and 1930s following the CIAM declaration of the Athens Charter.

Early plans for Berlin also started in this way. The “Collective Plan” of 1946 followed the idea of a linear city. The first

plannings for the Stalinallee were also inspired by Hilbersheimer and Le Corbusier. Hermann Henselmann designed modern types of dwelling, row houses and detached houses or solitaires. But the “Wohnzelle Friedrichshain” designed by Hans Scharoun remained a fragment. Only the characteristic houses with balcony access (and some multi-storey residential buildings in the background of the boulevard) bear witness to early post-war Modernism in Karl-Marx-Allee.

Then came the big break. After the damnation of modern architecture, of Bauhaus and the CIAM concept as “imperialistic”, “cosmopolitan” and “anti-socialist”, and after a journey of East German architects to Moscow in summer 1950, Hermann Henselmann designed the new image of the requested socialist architecture with his “Haus an der Weberwiese”. He was not the general architect of the Stalinallee, but he designed the main squares and most important buildings, like the oval Strausberger Platz.

To illustrate more existing parallels to Warsaw, I wish to refer to the Smyk Department Store that was constructed in 1948–52 and designed by Zbigniew Ihnatowicz and George Romanski. It was a unique building at its time. The settlement in Warsaw-Kolo, residential houses in continuity of the 1930s, designed by Szymon and Helena Syrkus, is also a monument of post-war Modernism in Warsaw. The parallel project in Warsaw to Berlin’s Karl-Marx-Allee is of course MDM, to which was later added the residential high-rise buildings of “new” Marszalkowska. That means we have a similar structure as in Berlin. Hermann Henselmann designed his answer to his own residential palace-architecture also as modern highly solitaire residential houses in front of continuous rows of houses. Of course, the “new” Marszalkowska was also a counter-construction against the Stalinist Palace of Culture.

This structure – a post-war modern start, then a politically implemented orientation on a regionally defined traditionalism in the early 1950s, finally a return to Modernism in the early 1960s – all these stages seem to illustrate special patterns of architectural development in Central-East-European countries after 1945. In the Soviet Union the first anti-modern break was executed 20 years earlier.

For this reason, the Berlin submission is both an initiative to nominate an underrepresented category of post-war heritage and a singular heritage of Cold War confrontation for inscription in the UNESCO list and an offer to experts and representatives of post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe to discuss and assess a serial nomination of Eastern European monuments and sites which illustrate these historical breaks as well. Conversely, in the case of an intention to nominate monuments of urban design of “Socialist Realism” or “Socialist Modernism”, the case of Berlin would provide the indispensable foil for comparison and contrast due to its unique position of having contained East and West in a single city.

That’s why we regard our submission also as a contribution to promoting post-war architectural and urban heritage as a European cultural asset connecting East and West for a better comprehension of European post-war history and post-war heritage.