

The Lange Strasse in Rostock (1953–58) ”Heimatschutzstil“ as a Source of Early GDR Architecture

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Rostock, situated at the Baltic Sea, former member of the Hanseatic League, became the economic centre of the north after the foundation of the GDR. Its main focus was on ship-building, deep-sea fishing, fish processing and the harbour.

The Lange Strasse in Rostock was built between 1953 and 1958 as a boulevard in a widely destroyed central area of Rostock’s old town. According to the assigned value of the city it was planned as a prestigious and wide street based on the Soviet model. Together with Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig the Lange Strasse in Rostock was one of the most ambitious state-run building schemes of the GDR. All these building schemes were summarized under the name “Nationales Aufbauwerk”. The buildings in Rostock are listed since 1979 and publicly accepted. They are very well preserved.

Before rebuilding started the historic city plan in the area of the new boulevard was characterized by a more or less

regular, elongated grid, as was typical of medieval town foundations in this region. Two streets, parallel to the banks of the river Warnow, including the Lange Strasse, marked the elongated extension from west to east. A variety of narrower streets cut them at right angles and led down to the harbour with a slight slope. Even after the partly heavy destructions of the Second World War, this structure was still visible.

The new boulevard did not take the existing basic structure of the Middle Ages into consideration. The traditional structure was broken by the two following key features of the newly built Lange Strasse. The original street width was extended to more than double (up to 60 metres) and the two- and three-storey buildings, which had influenced the city until that time, were replaced by solid five-storey buildings, highlighted with solitary towers. These scale-busting

Abb. 7: Rostock, Lange Straße, Gemälde von Architekt Fritz Hering, 1955

Fig. 7: Rostock, Lange Strasse, painting by architect Fritz Hering, 1955





Abb. 8: Rostock, Lange Straße, Entwurf des Architektenkollektivs Joachim Näther mit Hartmut Colden, Kurt Tauscher, Carl-Heinz Pastor, Heinz Lösler und Ernst Eick in den Jahren 1953 bis 1959, Nordseite mit Hochhaus, 2012

Fig. 8: Rostock, Lange Strasse, design by collective of architects: Joachim Näther with Hartmut Colden, Kurt Tauscher, Carl-Heinz Pastor, Heinz Lösler and Ernst Eick, 1953–59, north side with high-rise building, 2012

interventions strongly altered the traditional ground plan and elevation of the city.

The former lanes from the upper town centre to the lower harbour are closed to traffic now. The new buildings along Lange Strasse separate the harbour from the rest of the city like a wall. The openings down to the harbour or from the harbour to the city centre are designed as vistas and for pedestrians only. The orientation of the city towards the harbour, which had existed for centuries, was given up.

In January 1953, the Secretary General of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), Walter Ulbricht, laid the foundation stone of the project. The chief architect of the Lange Strasse project was the 27 year-old Joachim Näther. He was advised by the leading architecture institute of the GDR, the Deutsche Bauakademie, represented by Hermann Henselmann.

The aim of the design of the Lange Strasse was to erect a national architectural tradition. While in Berlin Neo-Classicism and in Dresden the Baroque was used to establish a continuity of the new architecture to former building traditions, in the north of the GDR redbrick Gothic was used to create that continuity.

After the division of the German Reich into a West German and East German state, it was the task for the GDR to present itself as the right German state. One of the means

to legitimize that position was the regional reference to the past. To evoke this regional reference an idyll was designed. And because of that the Lange Strasse was planned as an area with very little traffic. The formerly green central reservation was only converted into a tram route several years later.

To present itself as the true German state was not easy. Only one quarter of the total German population lived in the GDR. In addition, the population was not homogeneous. In 1950, 25 percent of the population of the GDR were exiles from former German territories, while there were only 16 percent exiles in West Germany. Moreover, the establishment of new industrial sites as in Rostock caused greater internal migration. In the early years after its founding the GDR faced the fact that a large proportion of its citizens lived in a region in which they had neither been born nor had grown up.

The policy of the emerging socialist state had to take up the ideas of nation and home to legitimize itself. Architecture as a form of artistic representation of the state played an important role. Through the architecture of the Lange Strasse in Rostock an interpretation of history was created that instead of showing the variety and contradiction of historical tradition favoured an identical, reassuring picture of origin and identity.

The design elements used were only partly related to redbrick Gothic. The historically provable elements such as blind gables and friezes contribute significantly to the general impression. Each of them are worked out in detail and show a precise knowledge of the ornamental forms characterizing the large city churches of the Baltic coast or the richly decorated gables of the town halls of Lübeck, Rostock and Stralsund.

The main cornices and the shield-shaped gables prove that they were derived from historical forms and used as the basis for the subsequent design process. Individual ornaments are assembled to geometric patterns made of glazed bricks typical of redbrick Gothic and stand out in part on a brightly plastered background. The terracotta friezes used as the upper end of the ground floor show clearly that they were developed from the High Gothic quatrefoil. As a recurring element the quatrefoil motif, mostly made of black glazed bricks on bright lime plaster, appears significantly on the majority of building blocks as well as the many openwork tracery with accompanying pinnacles.

The other important part of the design of the Lange Strasse however came from the repertoire of Heimatschutz architecture that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. These are architectural and urban elements that are not derived from redbrick Gothic and have no historical connection to the region at all. Nevertheless, these elements also shape the overall character of the buildings and make them appear native.

The light columns with block-shaped capitals that create the impression that they were made of sandstone by a stonemason and accentuate the brick facade, cannot be traced back to redbrick Gothic. This also applies to the arcades and loggias, which – as an urban design – characterize the overall look of the boulevard considerably. Block-shaped capitals belong to Romanesque architecture and are typical of regions which have natural supplies of natural stone. Along the Baltic Sea, around Rostock, evidence of Romanesque architecture can rarely be found because of the late Christianization and colonization. Due to the lack of natural stone, brick became the dominant building material. The same applies to the arcades and loggias. They do not belong to the historical and urban building characteristics of streets and

squares in the region. Instead, they belong to the repertoire of Heimatschutz architecture, an architecture independent of the town and region, as was propagated in Germany by architect Paul Schmitthenner. Through his design for the garden city in Staken, today a suburb of Berlin, built between 1914 and 1917, he became a model. The same applies to the flat bays projecting from the facade. These bays, which were designed so convincingly as historical components, are not part of the regional architecture; neither are the round-shaped rods of the window posts.

All these components do not originate from regional north German architecture. They have in common that they all appear as elements from "the good old days". They are among those elements that made up the recipe for success of traditionalist architecture or Heimatschutz architecture. Venerable material and elaborate craftsmanship become witnesses of an old building tradition, regardless whether they are provable or invented in this context. The resulting conglomerate is a seemingly convincing, imaginary image of homeland and nation. The impression of a superhistorical past is given. Nation and homeland merge with each other.

For the details, it was not the pictorial depiction of the economic build up, the emerging industries of shipbuilding and fishing that were used. Industry and technology do not dominate the figurative depiction on the capitals of the arcades, but rather symbols and allegories of traditionalist urban criticism and agrarian romanticism. This includes block-shaped cubes, worked with a bush hammer and other fan-like arrangements of grain bundles, birds of prey with captured fish and intertwined deep-sea creatures, each arranged in naive relief scenes.

When one looks at these designs, it is not surprising that in 1955 the leading institution for the training of architects in the GDR honoured in particular the main protagonist of the conservative Heimatschutzarchitektur of the 1920s and 1930s. Paul Schmitthenner, head of the so-called Stuttgart School, was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Technical College of Dresden, at the age of 70. This honour was a logical consistency, because a large part of the architecture of Socialist Realism in the GDR was dominated by the conservative Heimatschutzarchitektur.