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CONSUMING THE "PLATTE" IN EAST BERLIN: THE NEW POPULARITY OF FORMER GDR ARCHITECTURE

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This article is an analysis of the social and cultural relevance of alternative attitudes towards contested architecture. A concrete example is given by the so-called "Plattenbauten" in East Berlin, prefabricated apartment blocks erected during GDR times, many of which are currently reported to be unoccupied. In the media, they are often extremely negatively portrayed and associated with anonymity, criminality, and right-wing radicalism. Despite this, in the late 1990s, living in the "Platte" gained a new kind of popularity when many young designers, architects, and artists decided to live and/or work there.

These newcomers have no formal responsibility or influence in city planning matters: they are not policy makers, city planners, or investors. Nevertheless, by consuming the Plattenbauten and stimulating others to do the same, they are able to shed new light on these buildings and to create new images. Their attitude towards the Plattenbauten is analyzed from various perspectives: the appreciation and presentation of architecture from within as an efficient strategy to counter negative images; detachment as a necessary condition for the commodification of generally undesired architecture; differences between images "at a distance," "at eye level" and "from within" as different attitudes towards the history from which specific buildings emerged; and cultural gentrification as a means of appropriating (images of) other people's architecture. The analysis is clearly focused on the attitude of the newcomers but other viewpoints, such as those of the original tenants, are also described, as far as they contrast or cause friction with the newcomers' approaches.

In East Berlin and, more generally, in East Germany, hundreds of thousands of former German Democratic Republic (GDR) high-rise buildings—so-called "Plattenbauten," prefabricated apartment blocks—are reported to be unoccupied. Erected within a few decades to make, literally and figuratively, socialist dreams and ideals concrete, these apartments embodied comfort, high standards and modernity during GDR times—people were on a waiting list for several years to get one. After German reunification, their reputation changed drastically, as reported, notably, in the media. People with enough income preferred to move to a single-family dwelling in the countryside, and smaller towns lost their *raison d'être* when the industrial complexes with which they were connected were closed. Simone Hain, an architectural historian specializing in East German socialist architecture, summarizes the situation as follows:

> The great utopia which [. . .] inspired the architects of the GDR [. . .] was the collective search for a perfect system of prefabrication as an efficient means of managing resources and making work easier for all trades involved in construction: intelligent complex planning, easy assembly to save time and energy and "more than comfortable" spatial organization of family and community life. However, this fully industrialized means of ecological production in the GDR, which is generally classed as "Plattenbau," is now often regarded as an expression of a spiteful left-wing Fordist instrumentalism. As a spatial system determined by shortage and deficit management (Hain 2003: 80).

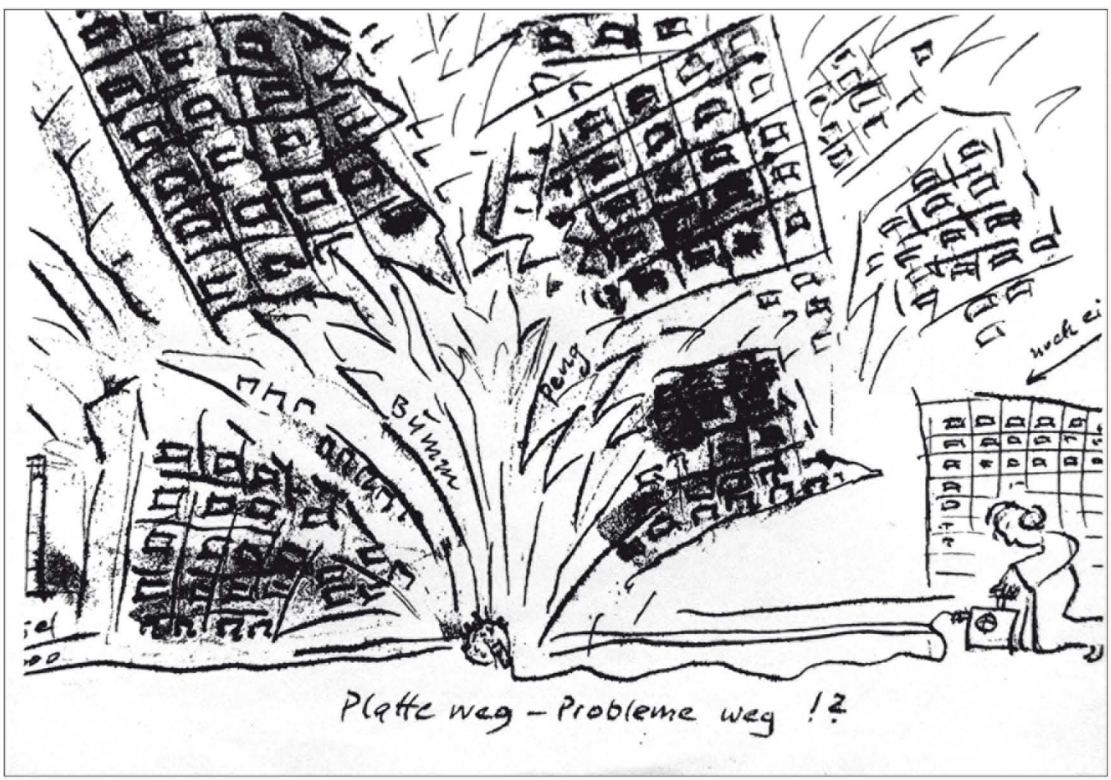
In Berlin, vacancy rates in non-renovated GDR apartments vary between one-seventh and one-third (Geisel 2002: 30). In total, in East

Germany, about one million apartments are empty. In several towns, vacancy rates have become so problematic that certain buildings have had to be torn down. In the media, these areas are extremely negatively portrayed and currently associated with anonymity, criminality, and right-wing radicalism.[1] In a sociological study for Humboldt University about the revaluation of Plattenbauten, Awuku *et al*. (2001) describe their reputation with the following words:

> Plattenbauten: grey, ugly concrete monstrosities, the cold and silent witnesses of another age. Monotone stone deserts, into which even the extensive renovations of the past few years could not breathe new life. The flight away from the Platte cannot be stopped. "Only dynamite could help that now", tearing down and "renaturation" are all that's left (Awuku *et al*. 2001: 3) (Figure 1).[2]

Nicknames such as "rabbit hutch," "shoebox" or "locker for workers" are very common (Rietdorf 1997: 7). While it is not often necessary (yet) in Berlin for buildings to be eliminated, nevertheless the existence of Plattenbauten is severely questioned and, as Geisel (2002) puts it

Figure 1
Cartoon by Gerd Wessel: "Platte away—problems away!?"



in a recent article about Hellersdorf, a peripheral district of East Berlin: "No other building type is so defamed in public as the so-called Plattenbau" (Geisel 2002: 29).

Despite all this, a series of articles appeared at the end of the 1990s, first in design and architecture magazines, and later in the regular press, with titles such as: "Honi's Platte is Hip Again" (Honi is short for Erich Honecker), "Living in the Platte is Absolutely Trendy" or "New Life in the (C)old Platte."[3] Indeed, in the late 1990s many young designers, architects, and artists decided to live and/or work in Plattenbauten or other former GDR architecture. Some of them also furnished their apartments with designs from the 1960s and 1970s. These were portrayed in glossy magazines. A famous German pop group, *Echt*, used one of these apartments as a location for a music video. Perhaps the most ironic thing is that capitalist firms like Coca-Cola, Mövenpick, Vodafone, and Volkswagen filmed commercials in these backdrops of socialist realism (Figure 2).

What does the new popularity of former GDR architecture—Plattenbauten in particular—tell us about the social and cultural relevance of alternative attitudes towards contested architecture? This article is part of a larger investigation into the significance of undesired architecture,

Figure 2
An empty Plattenbau in Halle-Neustadt transformed into a hip hotel for several weeks.

i.e. buildings (or projects) whose existence is publicly questioned and sometimes physically altered by people who have, or took, the power to do so. In my research, entitled "Indispensable Eyesores," I draw upon various case studies in Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bosnia-Herzegovina to examine how, and why, various groups of people alter what they consider to be undesired architecture. To paraphrase Daniel Miller in his "Introduction" to *Material Cultures. Why Some Things Matter* (1998), I address the question of why undesired architecture "matters." This term "puts the burden of mattering clearly on evidence of concern to those being discussed" (Miller 1998: 11).

In the "Introduction" to his *An Archaeology of Socialism* (2000), Victor Buchli writes that: "Of all the material cultures produced by societies, architecture is probably the most durable, long-lasting and easily retrievable. Architecture is also the material cultural matrix which most other artefacts of material culture are associated with or related to" (Buchli 2000: 1). This partly explains why questioning a building's existence—unexpectedly emphasizing the ephemerality of something supposedly durable—has such relevance and contributes to what David Crowley calls "peaks of dramatic transformation or troughs of controversy," as opposed to "level history" (Crowley 2002: 202). Architecture, understood as material culture, can undergo various destinies: a building, or group of buildings, can be eliminated, transformed or only challenged. Depending on the question of whether the other individuals involved approve the rejection of a so-called "eyesore" or not, the situation gains various meanings. When people agree with each other that a building has to be eliminated, for example, demolition can be given the character of a collective, secular sacrifice.[4] When various groups of people disagree about the building's fate, and all have power and influence in such debates—because of their profession or political position, or simply because of their number—then this can give rise to long-lasting discussions in which they confront their images together. Finally, it may be that some individuals who feel concerned about the fate of the building do not have enough official power to be able to influence such matters. In this situation, the only possible means to counteract the dominant perception and decision-making is by arguing on another level. The revival of GDR architecture in Berlin is an example of the latter situation.

Newcomers, who perceive the Plattenbauten from a different viewpoint than the predominantly negative public image, have no formal responsibility or influence in city planning matters: they are not policy makers, city planners, or investors. They can only witness urban developments and decision-making processes without being able to influence them directly. Nevertheless, by consuming the Plattenbauten and stimulating others to do the same, they are able to shed new light on these buildings and to create new images. The relation between consumption and cultural identification—self-construction and self-presentation, in particular—has been discussed by various authors.[5] More specifically

with regard to architecture, Caroline Humphrey has insisted that: "Consumption is central to the creation of culture, since it involves a process of objectification which enables material things and their discourses to become forms through which people have consciousness of themselves" (Humphrey 2002: 176). We will see that these remarks apply particularly well to the newcomers in the Plattenbauten. Humphrey's chapter "The Villas of the 'New Russians': A Sketch of Consumption and Cultural Identity in Post-Soviet Landscapes" presents other interesting parallels with observations that can be made in East Berlin. In her conclusion, she agrees with Daniel Miller that "the authentic culture of modern urban people may be created out of faked or recycled images," but she adds that there must be certain conditions for this to happen. On the one hand: "There must be a resilience and energy given to image making itself." And on the other hand: "there must be the possibility of rather direct appropriation of material objects to the process of identification" (Humphrey 2002: 200). In East Berlin, with regard to the Plattenbauten, both of these conditions were met. Generally, buildings are among the most difficult pieces of material culture to appropriate, but when they tend to be rejected as undesirable elements, it makes them at the same time much more accessible.

The newcomers' attitude towards the Plattenbauten as well as their tendency for image making, form the central focus in this article, as an example of an alternative point of view on rejected architecture. Their innovative and detached approach is influenced by a complex intermingling of historic backgrounds, personal identifications, and cultural affinities: most newcomers are West Berliners, West Germans, or Western Europeans in their twenties or thirties, working in the arts, architecture or design. In order to uncover how they alter the (image of the) Plattenbauten as well as why these buildings matter, several questions were posed: Are the newcomers' images related to the inside, the outside, and/or the surroundings of the buildings? In what way do they consume the Plattenbauten? Are they totally indifferent to the history from which this architecture emerged? Is the appreciation of former GDR architecture just a (temporary) trend, or is it indicative of a changed perception of this architecture? Did the newcomers really appropriate the (images of the) "Platte?"

Newcomers are not the only ones with a positive perception of the Plattenbauten: some of the original tenants are still very attached to their domestic environment, which they would not like to be demolished. In the last few years, their individual experiences have tended to be described more often in daily newspapers.[6] Nevertheless, they have not formed an organized group, actively fighting to "restore the good name of the Plattenbauten," nor do the media present their perception as something new, that would contribute to a changed attitude towards these buildings. Rather, they embody some kind of continuity in a context of unprecedented social and political change. They are sociologically, politically, and economically relevant by their number, but they do not

explicitly partake in the forum about the future of the Plattenbauten. Their attitude will mainly be described as far as it contrasts or causes friction with the newcomers' approaches.

In her chapter about the villas of the New Russians, Caroline Humphrey has emphasized the "difficulty and contingency of identification as a process," especially when it occurs "through the medium of large material objects like houses, which are subject to economic, political, and other constraints and always sit in a landscape created by other interests and histories" (Humphrey 2002: 182). When buildings are demolished or transformed, this ambiguity of identification through architecture is sometimes obscured by the univocality of the act. But when a building remains untouched despite its negative reputation, this ambiguity—which makes it all the more interesting—becomes much more apparent.

EYESORES FROM WITHIN

In *Thought Styles: Critical Essays on Good Taste* (1996), Mary Douglas writes: "The discourse about dislike and ugliness is more revealing than the discourse about aesthetic beauty" (Douglas 1996: 50). Our first focus will be on the descriptions made by the voluntary new users of GDR architecture: What do they tell us about these buildings, which are considered repulsive by the majority of people? Do they have a different taste, or do they, perhaps, consider aesthetic aspects unimportant or secondary? Douglas further writes: "To know why people do consume, we need to understand why they sometimes do not" (Douglas 1996: 107). Here we need to analyze a double refusal: the apparently dominant rejection of GDR architecture (at least in the media) on the one hand, and the positive valuation of these buildings by a minority of people on the other—implying a refusal of the architecture appreciated by the majority.

For most newcomers in the Plattenbauten (and in GDR architecture, in general), it was a coincidence that they moved into these buildings to live or work—they heard about the accommodation from friends or read an advertisement in the newspaper. There were, probably, a few criteria that their new home had to meet in any case, but they had no previous knowledge, no clear expectations nor prejudices concerning the specific buildings into which they would soon move. For example, Erik Schmidt, an artist who lives on the eleventh floor of a Plattenbau on the Platz der Vereinten Nationen, recalls that he had never heard of that address before:[7] "It just gave 'United Nations Square' as the address, and I didn't know that location, what it was or what the neighbourhood was like. But the address and the description appealed to me. It stated 'maisonette' or 'five rooms' and it was cheap, I found it all fascinating" (Figure 3).

Most people explained their decision to move in as an unbiased, positive valuation of the architectural object itself, without really considering the direct environment, the historic or symbolic meaning

Figure 3
Erik Schmidt's apartment: bare walls, minimalist furniture, neutral colors, with a few colored accents.

of the place or the potential neighbors. For these young people—many of them from West Berlin or West Germany—the rent seemed affordable, and the place was a very welcome alternative to the non-renovated Altbau: apartments from the first half of the twentieth century, dark, with a shared toilet in the corridor and a coal stove instead of central heating. The contrast between these two types of accommodation, which already existed during GDR times, was emphasized by almost all the people I spoke with.

If Plattenbauten are as luxurious as these people assert, then why do they have such a negative reputation? Firstly, their aesthetic aspects certainly do not work in their favor. Even in the book *Peripherie als Ort. Das Hellersdorfer Projekt* (1999), which was meant to shed a more sensitive light on Hellersdorf, a residential district built in the periphery of East Berlin in the 1980s, Rolf Schneider starts his article with the following description:

> It starts with a glacis of empty space, unkempt plains with few trees, just behind this the new buildings come into view. They appear cold, massive, rejecting witnesses of an entirely different world, trumpeting their presence and stifling all memories of the sub-divisions of an old Berlin suburb (Schneider 1999: 93).

In the first chapter of a book entitled *Weiter wohnen in der Platte. Probleme der Weiterentwicklung großer Neubauwohngebiete in den neuen Bundesländern* (1997), the editor Werner Rietdorf gives a clear and structured overview of the problems and potentials of various Plattenbauten districts in East Germany. He admits that many of them are relatively small and standardized in comparison with their Western counterparts, that many of them have construction faults such as leaking roofs or dysfunctioning sanitary installations, and that there is a general lack of commercial and service infrastructure in these districts (Rietdorf 1997: 31). He also warns, however, against generalization and pleads for a differentiated approach to various types of buildings, erected in different places and different periods. Finally, it must be added that the situation with prefabricated apartment blocks changed radically in certain areas in the 1990s. More specifically, some of these areas lost their purpose when industrial complexes were closed. In addition, some people preferred to move to the countryside. With the disappearance of the strong social structures that existed before German reunification, many of these areas have become so-called dormitory suburbs: people go to town to work, shop, and enjoy culture, and they go to the countryside for recreation.

Nevertheless, the negative reputation of these areas is also largely influenced by Western perception and reporting. In Western Europe, prefabricated apartment blocks are constructed for people with a relatively low socioeconomic status. These areas are often characterized by high unemployment rates, social problems, and criminality. Several respondents emphasized that prefabricated apartment blocks in the GDR were constructed with a totally different intention, to solve the housing shortage after the Second World War as quickly as possible, in an egalitarian way. The population in these flats was relatively mixed—certain blocks even represented an elite, because loyal citizens (productive workers, zealous civil servants, professors) had better chances of obtaining an apartment from the State. According to Werner Rietdorf, this "healthy social mix" (Rietdorf 1997: 33) still persists nowadays and is complemented by an increasing variation in terms of age structure. Sieglinde Geisel mentions in her article about Hellersdorf that the term "Plattenbau" is a Western invention that obscures the positive reputation of these buildings in former East Berlin:[8] "No-one living there called it Platte" (Geisel 2002: 30). And she quotes the mayor of Hellersdorf: "We called them total-comfort accommodation, because we were fascinated that warm water came out of the tap." Even nowadays, more than 50% of the inhabitants in East Berlin are living in prefabricated apartment blocks, and more than 80% of them are reported to be satisfied.[9] Many blocks still need to be renovated, but Werner Rietdorf writes that in-depth analyses of the state of these buildings has proved their durability, as well as the technical and financial feasibility to renovate them, or even structurally modernize them (Rietdorf 1997: 38). Peripheral districts such as Hellersdorf or Marzahn, with many

prefabricated apartment blocks, are already mainly characterized by order and tidiness, as noted by Axel Watzke, a student in design communication who organized a large-scale artistic project in a Plattenbau in the Summer of 2002: "Hellersdorf is a very middle-class area, extremely well looked after, with front gardens like allotments. The cliché of ghetto really doesn't apply there." Sieglinde Geisel emphasizes the *petit-bourgeois* character of Hellersdorf: "The 'Club of Garden Inspectors' are honorary caretakers of tidy courtyards; graffiti is removed by the caretaker every two weeks. Curtains hang in the windows, artfully gathered, lace trimming and decoratively divided" (Geisel 2002: 30).

Most importantly, prefabricated apartment blocks should not all be put in the same category. First of all, in Berlin, a significant number of them were built in or near the city center. Naturally, these apartments allow easy access to the rich and complex infrastructure of the inner districts and a different lifestyle from that in the dormitory suburbs. In addition, although all Plattenbauten look very similar at first sight and were supposed to embody egalitarian housing, there are nevertheless some significant differences in standard: if most centrally located blocks are well equipped, and some of them have even been renovated, certain eighteen-story buildings in Marzahn do not even have an elevator. It must be added that newcomers in the Plattenbauten have all chosen centrally located buildings; they would probably not make the move to a peripheral district.

People who recently moved into GDR architecture to live or work were not influenced by the negative reputation of these buildings. Dominant negative images of architecture are often based on its outside appearance or its symbolic meaning—seldom on an appreciation of its inner space. Zohlen (1999: 138) writes that stereotypical portrayals of the Plattenbauten often result from an abstract and distant viewpoint, as from a helicopter or on a drawing table.[10] An evaluation of the inside of a building requires a more thorough investigation, and it cannot be so easily subjugated to generalizing statements or prejudices. In a chapter entitled "Existence, location and function: The appreciation of architecture" (1994), Allen Carlson describes a so-called "path of appreciation:" "In approaching, we experience a work's existence, in closing and circling, we experience its outer form and its fit with its site, and, lastly, upon entering, we experience the fit between its outer and inner space and experientially realize its function" (Carlson 1994: 160). For an in-depth judgment of architecture, it is thus necessary to enter the building and to get a feeling for how it functions. Newcomers in the Plattenbauten looked beyond stereotypes and ready-made perceptions to judge the architecture on its own merit. If they had responded to the dominant reputation of this architecture on a similar level of superficiality—by setting another distant and superficial image against it—their approach would not have received as much attention. Indeed, Sharon Zukin has elucidated in a chapter about "Space and Symbols in an Age of Decline" (1996) that the rights of disposal over a certain place

include the rights of disposal over its image, its symbolic dimension: "To ask 'Whose city?' suggests more than a politics of occupation; it also asks who has a right to inhabit the dominant image of the city" (Zukin 1996: 43). Clearly, the newcomers in the Plattenbauten have no official influence on city planning matters and no "right to inhabit the dominant image of the city." The only means for them to eventually contribute to a changed perception of the Plattenbauten is by entering them and letting other people enter them as well: opening up these buildings, i.e. the objects themselves, leaving their outside appearance and symbolic connotations aside, and showing their potential. If this was not initially the intention of the new Plattenbau users—they moved in for purely pragmatic and personal reasons—it was, however, the result of their actions.

This is not to say that newcomers are the first ones to appreciate the inner space of the Plattenbauten, but their approach is innovative in that they also consciously open them up and purposely make the private realm public. Traditionally, despite—or perhaps precisely because of—the efforts of socialist states to penetrate and publicize the private sphere, inhabitants were experiencing and dealing with public and private spaces in remarkably different ways. In a book entitled *Wohnkultur und Plattenbau. Beispiele aus Berlin und Budapest* (1994), Kerstin Dörhöfer writes that what inhabitants dislike the most about their domestic environment is the lack of flexibility and the exterior design. Displaying personal creativity, they try to counterbalance the excessive standardization and create a warm and cosy interior by means of a distinctive arrangement of furniture and personal belongings (Dörhöfer 1994: 201). Other authors confirm that the antithesis between private and public space characterized Eastern-bloc countries for many years. The effort that people put into the conception of their homes was much more than purely a question of taste; it was a means of identification through the appropriation of material culture and space.[11] The most concrete description of people's attachment to their domestic space in this context is provided by Adam Drazin with regard to Romanian interiors. In the "Introduction" to *Home Possessions: Material Culture behind Closed Doors* (2001) Miller announces Drazin's analysis as follows:

> The startling aesthetic contrast between the grey and crumbling concrete of Soviet-system blocks of flats with the emphasis on wooden furniture and infrastructure within their warm interiors, objectifies two histories: that of the public and the state on the one hand and a domestic situation that has tried to reconstitute itself in defiance of the constraints that were imposed (Miller 2001: 13).

Certain newcomers were soon confronted with the special meaning that private space had acquired during several decades of GDR. When Ulli Uphaus, a young landscape architect, moved into his apartment on the

fifteenth floor of a Plattenbau in the Leipzigerstraße, he intended to organize an art exhibition on all floors of the twenty-five-story building. A renowned local artist was willing to produce new paintings for this occasion, which would be exhibited in each of the apartments at places chosen by the occupants themselves. Uphaus contacted all of his neighbors, presented them with a detailed concept for the project . . . and received no more than two responses (both negative).

For the original tenants, their apartments constitute a place of escape from or protest against the public realm. For the newcomers, on the contrary, they form a means to be immersed in the latter. They appreciate the interiors of the Plattenbauten for different reasons: they not only consider the infrastructure largely superior to that of the Altbauten, but also praise the quality of the rooms in terms of light and space. (We should be aware, however, that apartments in which entire families were living are now occupied by two new inhabitants at the most.) Erik Schmidt explained to me that he had completely different expectations when he moved to Berlin and that the Plattenbauten turned out to be a surprisingly pleasant discovery:

> I didn't like old Berlin, the city was closed off and nothing ever happened and the people were slow. When you visited friends there, you always sat in a dark basement or ground floor flat, and it was cold. We didn't know the architecture of the Plattenbauten, they were locked up, so after the Wall fell they were the only new bit left to explore, so to speak. [. . .] And now you are high up, the sun shines, there is light there.

One of the main differences in perception between the inside and outside of these apartments is that what makes them unattractive at first sight—their large size and uniformity—enhances the quality of their inner space in terms of light and a spectacular view of the city. For Ulli Uphaus, the main motivation for moving into his apartment was the height. He definitely wanted to live in a high-rise building—"the higher, the better"—and this one turned up by coincidence. Another landscape architect, Frank Peter Thomas, who lives on the twentieth floor of another tower in the same street, explained to me that the proportions of the apartment—relatively long drawn-out rooms with low ceilings—give him the impression of being in a bungalow, floating over the city somewhere around the twentieth floor. If Plattenbauten are perhaps not particularly attractive from the outside, their inhabitants have found the best strategy to avoid this view: by experiencing them from the inside and enjoying what they can offer. In his essay on "The Eiffel Tower" (1997 [1964]), Roland Barthes remarked:

> In order to negate the Eiffel Tower [. . .] you must [. . .] get up on it and, so to speak, identify yourself with it. Like man himself, who is the only one not to know his own glance, the Tower

> is the only blind point of the total optical system of which it is the centre and Paris the circumference. But in this movement which seems to limit it, the Tower acquires a new power: an object when we look at it, it becomes a lookout in its turn when we visit it, and now constitutes as an object, simultaneously extended and collected beneath it, that Paris which just now was looking at it (Barthes 1997 [1964]: 173).

In other words, from inside the towers, people gain access or another relationship to the city. An Altbau apartment may be attractive to some people for its high ceilings and wooden floors, but it is generally a relatively closed space. High-rise buildings, on the other hand, allow a much more "urban" experience, as several respondents described to me; inhabitants have the feeling of being in the midst of town (Figure 4). Frank Peter Thomas described this feeling in a comparison between two of his working places, the former in an Altbau, the latter in the so-called Haus des Lehrers on the Alexanderplatz. This very prominent building was designed by GDR architect Hermann Henselmann and used for teacher training. It remained empty for many years after German reunification, until it was put into use again by a number of artists, architects, and designers in the late 1990s. Frank Peter Thomas recalls the contrast with his previous working place:

> Before when we were in that flat, with coal heating, somewhere in a courtyard, you couldn't see anything, it was simply a room in which you worked. But then at the Alexanderplatz, it was completely different, very urban. We had large windows, we were located far down, on the first floor, we were involved in the traffic. Nevertheless, we had a great view, because the house is on the corner and you can look down on the railway, and watch the high-speed trains come and go from the station. This is really big city life, tons of traffic on the street, accidents always happening, there was always something to see on the street. Next door was the Congress Hall. Once a month they held an erotic fair, we could see the posters, it was a colourful scene, very interesting. [. . .] We let ourselves be inspired by the atmosphere there, the prospect and the view of the street in the middle of the city, the urbanity of Berlin.

The direct experience of the urban environment—feeling part of the city—constitutes a discovery for the new users of this architecture; some of them even refer to it as a real "liberation."[12] All this also illustrates how much the dominant—here, negative—reputation of a building or type of building can be disconnected from a close and real appreciation of its inner space. When people are not influenced by the dominant attitudes, they can approach a building without prejudice and experience the architecture for itself. This is perhaps the most effective way to counter negative images.

Figure 4
The view from Ulli Uphaus's apartment: being in the midst of town.

The newcomers' attitude towards their homes does more than diverge from that of the original tenants in that the former have blurred the fundamental border between public and private, whereas the latter would tend to emphasize it. They also clearly have different conceptions and expectations of domestic environments. In her analysis of Plattenbauten interiors in Berlin and Budapest, Kerstin Dörhöfer has systematically inventoried aspects of middle-class, modern, and postmodern home cultures. She writes that a large majority of tenants displays a predominantly middle-class home culture, in which home, understood as a place for relaxation and as a status symbol, is unmistakably associated with the family, as opposed to the larger community. Aspects of modern and postmodern home cultures are also present, but they are certainly not predominant. In the former, home is conceived as an extension of the larger, increasingly industrialized community and characterized by functionalism and rationality. In the latter, home embodies individuality and a personal interpretation of the larger community; objects are no longer granted a meaning by their function, but by what people symbolically associate with them. This description applies to the new inhabitants' conceptions of home: they do appreciate their apartments, and they would not like to move out (at least, not for the moment), but, in general, they present their apartments as temporary, utilitarian objects that can be exchanged for more suitable ones if needed or wanted. In magazines, the images of their apartments are not those of intimacy and individual biographies, i.e. their homes are not primarily presented as places for privacy, refuge, security or self-identity, but mainly as cult objects, as models or stages. "These homes are cool," seems to be the message; "and so are the people living there." This can be illustrated by a photo series in *Esquire*,[13] an architecture and design magazine, in which Erik Schmidt's apartment has been compared to that of his neighbors, who came to live there in GDR times. Bare walls, minimalist furniture, and neutral colors—except for a few colored accents—characterize Schmidt's apartment. Schmidt knew from the very beginning what the place should look like (Figure 5). At the end of the 1990s, design and fashion from the 1960s and 1970s had already become trendy, but not the corresponding architecture. When he visited the apartment for the first time, he knew at first sight that it could become like a place in the architecture and design magazine *Wallpaper*. In his *Homestory: A Glimpse of a Modern Artist's Living* (2002)[14] he presented a series of consciously styled photos with comments on the character of the place. He described the transformation as follows:

> The space in the protected historical monument Plattenbau group presented the ideal possibility for contemporary living. In furniture the artist chooses modern design, which incorporates the accent of the Sixties and corresponds to the character of the building. Minimal investment would emphasise the object-like quality of the interior. At relevant positions the original

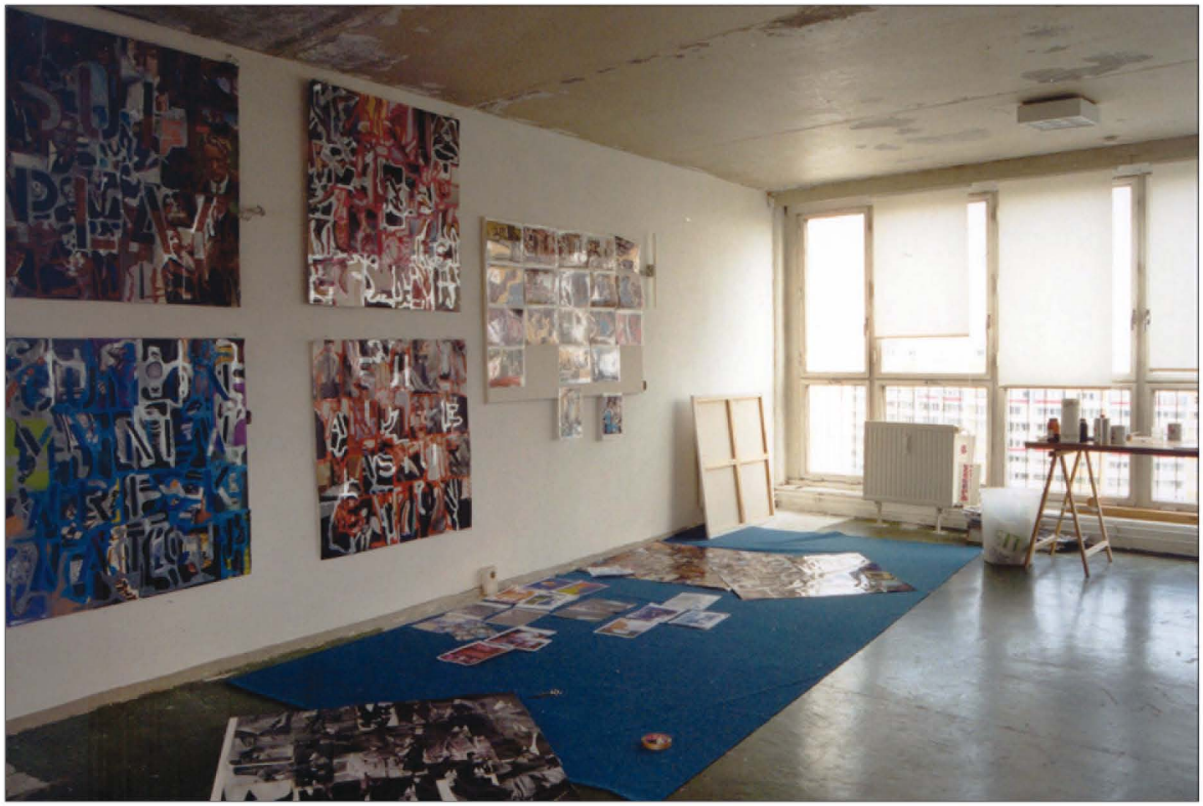


Figure 5
"A glimpse of a modern artist's living:" Erik Schmidt's apartment.

condition would be restored: while in the entrance way the original wallpaper would be exposed, in other rooms the concrete walls would be visible. Their materiality and colour are highly stimulating (Schmidt and Weidner 2002).

The neighbors' apartment is not only totally different in style, but also much more loaded with personal objects and meanings. It contains much more furniture—including some heavy, dark wooden cupboards—and is largely decorated with paintings, plants, figurines, carpets, and paraphernalia: all kinds of objects that embody people's occupation of, and relation to, the place. Pictures of the neighbor's home clearly show personal attachment.

CONSUMING THE EYESORES

After their first contact with the Plattenbauten or other GDR architecture, new users realized that these buildings were not only suitable for personal use but could be further consumed if they were transformed into something new, mediatized and merchandized. As soon as Schmidt's apartment was ready, he produced a video film and a series of postcards and offered it as a location for rent to an advertising agency. The main motivation for doing this is the awareness that images of the

apartment could attract a good price: "Naturally, that had a lot to do with capitalism, to say: I have something here, that is my potential, how can I market it." The ice-cream brand Mövenpick was the first to rent Schmidt's apartment as a location for a commercial; the income was enough for Schmidt to pay a few months' rent (Lüdtke 2002: 62). Other commercials and publications soon followed. With the title "Platte putzen" ("Cleaning Platte"), *Max* presented four newcomers in the Plattenbauten along with images of their interiors. *Home* followed with "Neues Leben in der (k)alten Platte" ("New Life in the (C)old Platte"): interviews with four inhabitants, illustrated by glossy pictures of their trendy homes. Many other magazines and newspapers reported on the same theme in the following months. *Der Spiegel* published an in-depth report entitled "Dufte urban" ("Great Urban"), and the new trend even reached the other side of the Atlantic with one-page coverage in *The New York Times*, stating that: "In chic new Berlin, ugly is way cool."[15] In the following period, Coca-Cola, Volkswagen, and Vodafone used Schmidt's apartment or other Plattenbauten as locations for commercials. *Echt*, a German pop group for teenagers, made a music video in which Schmidt's apartment appears in its true state, very recognizable, with several views of the surroundings. Schmidt recalls that it was very special to see groups of teenagers in front of the door, waiting for an autograph from their idols. Indeed, the target group of this German-speaking band lives in the Plattenbauten; to them this architecture is not strange, but familiar: "It is of course very special that their favourite group suddenly has come to live, so to speak, in the same architecture that they live in, which can have a negative reputation."

The newcomers' apparent detachment from the more intimate and personal aspects of home was a necessary condition to make images of the Plattenbauten suitable for the media. Commercials, video clips, and magazines do not primarily aim at rewriting the history or ideological background of the Plattenbauten, nor do they subtly affect collective stereotypes by means of the personal experiences of old and new inhabitants. Rather, they present images of the architectural objects in themselves, their qualities and potentialities. Representations of people's attachment to their homes as private, intimate spaces would just not sell. In Marzahn and Hellersdorf, great effort was made—supported by big investments—to renovate Plattenbauten and differentiate them from each other by means of individual balconies, artworks on the roof, plants, and colored or decorated facades. Although this corresponds, for many people, to a positive image of the Plattenbauten, it has never received—and will never receive—the same attention as the apartments mentioned before. Gerd Wessel, architect, artist and cartoonist, ironically focuses on these spruced-up buildings in his cartoons. He questions the superficiality of these initiatives, which fail to deal with the architectural objects themselves, and ridicules their *petit-bourgeois* character. In order to open up the Plattenbauten and make people aware of their potential, they need to be freed of connotations

to intimacy and individual experiences of home—people must be able to project their own ideals and wishes on them.

Detachment is not only necessary to the mediatizing, but also to the merchandizing of Plattenbauten and other GDR architecture. Indeed, one could say that these buildings went through a process of commoditization. Before German reunification, commoditization was restricted, meaning that many things were "not exchangeable and not for sale," to paraphrase Igor Kopytoff in his chapter "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" (1986). More specifically, most people had to be on a waiting list for years to obtain an apartment. Things changed drastically in the 1990s as newcomers could easily move into the Plattenbauten. Nevertheless, history can explain why the people who already lived there did not necessarily appreciate their arrival. Ulli Uphaus, for example, had the following impression:

> Several people on this floor are a little eccentric, they've been living here for 30 years, forever. You notice sometimes that they feel: people come here from the west or young people, turn the music up loud and perhaps ignore the neighbours a bit. They feel rather like they have priority here because they've lived here so long and they had to apply to get a flat here. While for us it was so easy to find a place here.

The situation was even more striking in the apartment block were Erik Schmidt lives: some of his neighbors were opposed to his initiative to rent his apartment as a location. They went to the rent tribunal and obtained a ban on further filming. Schmidt explained their resistance to me as a lack of economic awareness due to several decades under a communist regime, where profit seeking was negatively valued. I would rather say, along the line of Zukin's remarks about "who has a right to inhabit the dominant image of the city," that the original inhabitants had the feeling that (the image of) their home was appropriated by people who did not have that right. Indeed, Werner Rietdorf has emphasized that in GDR times, the State granted people a guarantee on their apartment, which was thus like a social good, completely independent of their financial situation. Therefore, people's attachment to rented apartments was remarkably strong and durable—people identified with them as if they owned them. Inhabitants were even willing to renovate both private and communal spaces at their own expense (Rietdorf 1997: 35–6).[16] This explains why the world of these residents simply clashed with that of the advertising managers from Hamburg, who occupied all the parking places with their Jaguars and thought that money gave them the right to rule the place for the day. Caroline Humphrey describes a similar situation in her analysis of the villas of the New Russians. Focusing on the contradictory and contested character of identifications through the means of architectural objects, she insists that groups of people who are excluded from but nevertheless feel concerned by, these

processes can contribute to undermining the meanings and images embodied by these buildings: "The construction of a public exterior [. . .] that excludes others is also the shining face on which the excluded inscribe their envy, jealousy, admiration, and so forth" (Humphrey 2002: 182).

The conflict between the pragmatic, sometimes profit-seeking attitude of the newcomers on the one hand, and the resistance of former GDR citizens against these developments on the other, can be interpreted as an opposition between commoditization and singularization, as defined by Kopytoff. Indeed, mediatizing and merchandizing make GDR architecture "exchangeable or for sale" (Kopytoff 1986: 69); this is a process of commoditization. Newcomers have a detached attitude to GDR architecture: they approach these buildings as objects in themselves, because of their functional qualities and their relatively cheap price. When benefits can be made, they do not hesitate to merchandise this architecture, which then becomes a product among others on the worldwide market. Erik Schmidt was not the only one who realized that his apartment could become a source of income if rented to advertising agencies. Similarly, the great interest displayed by the print media was also involved with an economic awareness: residents charged magazines for taking photos, and apartments were presented among other architecture or design pieces, not primarily for contemplative or reflexive purposes, but as something that other consumers could potentially acquire as well. In the same period, GDR architecture was introduced into the club scene, as Gerriet Schulz, creative director of the WMF-Club[17] explained to me. There was a sudden revival of the aesthetics of Plattenbau facades: a Plattenbau happy families game was created, and facade elements were used for the design of flyers and in the form of video projections (Figure 6). The WMF-Club got hold of the entire interior of the Palast der Republik and other buildings as well, including some high-quality technical equipment which they could otherwise never have afforded.

Through all these developments, GDR architecture has been commercialized and has gained an economic value. Nevertheless, Gerriet Schulz also explained to me that especially elderly people from the former GDR were not necessarily happy with these developments. He recalled the comments of the caretaker in the building of the Council of State, where Schulz and others presented projects for the Palast der Republik:

> He said to me: he would prefer to tear the thing down before some obscure artist got up to pranks with the GDR architecture. Better to go down with honour than end up a ruin of GDR architecture that someone plays with. There are many former GDR inhabitants who mourn the passing of the old state, who fulfilled positions of importance, they don't like what we are doing. They would prefer it to be torn down, over and done with, than have drugs consumed here, young people, etc.

Figure 6
The WMF-Club in Café Moskau: one of the trendiest clubs in town.

Kopytoff has written that: "The counterdrive to [the] potential onrush of commoditization is culture" (Kopytoff 1986: 73). Indeed, for those who resist commoditization, GDR architecture has not only functional characteristics, but also—mainly—an important historic and symbolic value; it reminds them of a historical period in which their cultural identity is rooted. They have lived for several decades in a state where apartments were "publicly precluded from being commoditized" (p. 73). Not only do people need some time to get used to, and eventually accept, the changed perception of buildings as commodities, even when they recognize the commodity status of architecture, this does not stop the simultaneous processes of singularization: "[. . .] even things that unambiguously carry an exchange value—formally speaking, therefore, commodities—do absorb the other kind of worth, one that is nonmonetary and goes beyond exchange worth" (p. 83).

These remarks apply not only to the so-called DDR-Sonderbauten (special buildings), but to residential districts as well: as the Plattenbauten are very recent in terms of architectural history, many current residents were the very first ones to move into their apartments—they were, so to say, "pioneers," and this creates a special kind of attachment between fellow inhabitants, and to the place. Wolfgang Kil has

emphasized this in his article "Eine Stadt wie jede andere" (1999), where he writes that this is almost incomprehensible for people who have always lived in historic architecture:

> As the difficult beginning in construction rubble and the lack of incomplete infrastructure, thus the local timeless "zero hour," acted to a great extent especially forming identity and thus individual history, the inhabitants of old cities are seldom aware and thus cannot understand what sort of motivation stimulates those people "out there." As the positive creation myths of the inhabitants of the new cities were denigrated and turned around as part of the system change, the crisis of identity in these regions increased massively (Kil 1999).

The attachment to GDR architecture makes it very difficult to look at the buildings as objects in themselves—disconnected from personal or historic meanings—and thus to present them and/or sell them as such. Thus, we could say that in order to create positive images of the Plattenbauten that are not on the same level of superficiality as their negative counterparts and also have the potential to become meaningful to an increasing number of people, it is necessary to approach them from within and to share these images with others without imprinting personal values on them.

EYESORES AND HISTORY

The different relationship of newcomers and former GDR citizens to GDR architecture can also be illustrated by the situation in the Haus des Lehrers. Upon their arrival in the building, one of the first discoveries the incoming tenants made was the porter. Twenty-four hours a day, someone was sitting at the entrance to guard the place and manage the keys. When tenants wanted to go into their office, they had to sign in to get their key; when leaving the building, they had to check out. Most of them liked this system; they saw it as part of the highly functional and convenient infrastructure of this freshly discovered architecture. There was no risk of losing or forgetting one's key, and it gave them a feeling of security. Frank Peter Thomas told me, however, that there were also a few tenants who had grown up in the GDR, who did not appreciate this system at all. It reminded them of the extreme and regular controls in GDR times, which imposed severe restrictions on individual freedom.[18] Similarly, Gerriet Schulz told me that although the regular customers of the WMF-Club were, from the beginning, from both East and West Germany, not all of them appreciated the introduction of GDR aesthetics in the interior design. Some East Germans complained: "I don't want to go to a club and be surrounded by the shit I grew up with." These differences in perception raise the question of whether the attitude of newcomers towards GDR architecture is really entirely disconnected from its history. Furthermore, we may ask to what extent a positive

valuation of generally undesired architecture such as the Plattenbauten can remain completely ahistoric.

Most new users of GDR architecture told me that they were not really aware of the history from which it had emerged when they moved in, but they soon developed a consciousness for the place in which they were living or working. Ulli Uphaus said that he soon got the feeling that the Haus des Lehrers was extremely "pregnant with history." It was mainly the discovery of the architectural object from within which aroused the newcomers' curiosity for the corresponding history. Rob Savelberg, a young historian, described his growing fascination for the "fantastic design," the "typically GDR carpets and enormous built-in cupboards," the goods lift that the porter showed them—which they repaired and put into use again—the spacious windows, the round doorknobs, and the rectangular decorations on the ceiling. Frank Peter Thomas added that all these features made him aware of the historical context in which they had been created:

> For me, the history of the building was not at first important, it was simply the place looks interesting because it still has a mosaic decoration and funny windows and is built of unusual materials, it is architecturally significant, but of course it was created because of history. Because there was a GDR, there is this mosaic, and because there was a GDR, there are these toned-down windows which the Palast der Republik also has. [. . .] And so the history of the GDR slowly came to light. Not much was left in the building itself, but it was still evident: there was a canteen and certain functions that would never have been incorporated under a capitalist regime, communal rooms, conference rooms. Of course, every hotel has conference rooms these days, but not in the dimensions of those built in the GDR period. It didn't have to be that efficient, but it was important that the management be controlled somehow (Figure 7).

The relationship that developed between the incoming tenants and the history of the buildings was an interaction. On the one hand, the architecture influenced people's work and the social relationships inside the building. Several individuals told me that the interior layout of the Haus des Lehrers provided exceptional conditions for an intensive social interaction. All the offices were located around a large corridor, where people came into contact and presented their work to each other. This gave rise to many exchanges and cooperations between people with various professional backgrounds; it was an exceptional, dynamic, and cross-fertilizing atmosphere. The architecture influenced the social relationships between the participants, but did not determine their behavior. On the other hand, people were inspired by the architecture and transformed it into something new. Rob Savelberg even said that the new users of the Haus des Lehrers brought the building back to life:

Figure 7
The Haus des Lehrers with its toned-down windows.

> It was GDR, it stank of musty carpets, musty cupboards, and musty telephone lines. Everything was musty. The first thing we did was to bring our synthesizers, our computers and all our materials inside, we tore out the carpet, cut off the curtains, opened the windows wide, and brought the building back to life. It had passed away.

New tenants accepted a direct confrontation with the building and its history; they did not deny it, but they started an interaction with the traces

from a recent past: "In fact, we were seduced by the charm of the GDR architecture to occupy a building from the Sixties in the postmodern Nineties and to appreciate it—and we cultivated that for the outside world." The same is true of the WMF-Club, where GDR inner architecture was recovered to be resuscitated, recycled, and transformed into something new. These various examples show that if newcomers were unaware of the historic and symbolic meaning of the buildings into which they moved, they soon developed a consciousness for these aspects, which even contributed to a positive valuation of this architecture. Several people said: "We all thought it was cool to work in a GDR atmosphere."

The appropriation of undesired architecture by new users is related to their perception of the buildings and their historic background. In a book entitled *Die Erinnerung an "das Herz der Stadt." Geschichts- und Gedächtnisbilder vom Potsdamerplatz* (1991), Dieteke van der Ree has taken the Potsdamerplatz in Berlin as her research subject for studying the perception of the built environment in the recollection of certain events. She uses the work of Pierre Nora to define two kinds of remembrance: "images from memory" and "images from history." She then compares these two types of remembrance with two kinds of observation: "images at eye level" and "images at a distance." If certain episodes are lacking in someone's experience (if the person lived somewhere else at that time or was simply not yet born) or if someone's observations are influenced by a professional background (like an architect, planner or journalist), then the person will have—for the most part—"images at a distance" in mind, for example maps, cards or clichés. These images are often expressed in metaphors or in other symbolic terms. Applying van der Ree's remarks to the present case, we could say that the general, negative perception of the Plattenbauten and other GDR architecture is based on "images at a distance" and lacks an awareness of the specificity of the buildings themselves. As "images at a distance" very often represent the perception of professionals, they do not always have to be negatively biased: in another context, politicians could have an interest in preserving certain buildings, or investors could see a gap in the market.

When people have personally experienced an event, they have observed it "at eye level;" they remember it as "images from memory" (sometimes fragmented), and they also describe it as such. These images are rich in personal experiences, but the people are rarely able to objectify or contextualize the buildings. In the present case, the perception of the original tenants is mainly constituted of "images at eye level." My emphasis has mainly been on positive valuations, but high vacancy rates in non-renovated apartments show that negative "images at eye level" can also exist and lead hundreds of thousands of people to move out. Finally, most newcomers refused the predominantly negative "images at a distance," but they could not fall back on "images at eye level," because they had not experienced this

architecture before German reunification. Their images are of a third kind, which I would call "images from within." As I argued before, incoming tenants firstly and primarily experience the buildings from within; the experience of their inner space and functionality gives them access to the history from which the architecture has emerged. The movement from "images at a distance," via "images at eye level," to "images from within" follows Allen Carlson's "path of appreciation:" from a very distant perception of GDR architecture, first almost "flying over it," approaching it, then coming closer and circling around it, and finally entering it. Just as the generalizing, stereotyping "images at a distance" lack an awareness of the specificity of the buildings in themselves, so the "images from within" tend to portray the buildings as disconnected from their context. Most "images from within" are, in this case, very positive, but they could also fade away if other buildings become more hip.

These notions constitute a simplified presentation of a dynamic situation, and people can switch from one kind of perception to another. For example, the newcomers' detached approach to their homes theoretically allows a large public to share in their experience, both people with "images at a distance" and people with "images at eye level." Nevertheless, the historic awareness to which an experience of the buildings from within possibly gives rise can also become opposed to the detachment described before, which is a fundamental condition for the commoditization of GDR architecture. This is what happened to the Haus des Lehrers in the eyes of many newcomers as they became increasingly aware of the architectural, historic, and symbolic value of the building, especially when in 2001, a developer expressed his wish to acquire the building. He proposed to preserve the mosaic on the facade as dictated by the Office of Listed Buildings, but the entire inner architecture that made the building so characteristic of the period in which it was built would be replaced by a standard office interior. Rob Savelberg, who had an office in the Haus des Lehrers at that time, used strip lights to build letters behind the windows of the ninth floor which, when illuminated at night, formed the words "Not for sale" as a clear protest against the plans of the developer. Savelberg enumerated once more all the special characteristics of the building: its fantastic design and furniture, its fascinating history, its exceptional location on the "only real and authentic centre of Berlin, the Alexanderplatz," "the experimental garden of Europe". After two years in the Haus des Lehrers, Savelberg's message in the press was:

> In the name of a supposed profit maximisation and redevelopment a proven incubator will be destroyed. Second, the location Alexanderplatz 4 is worth more than the sale tag of DM 20 million. Third, in Berlin already over 9% of offices are empty, i.e. hundreds of thousands of square meters of expensive space. Throughout the city there are English FOR SALE signs or simply SALE! signs posted everywhere. The sale to this investor is a

> sell out, and we the society of tenants are NOT FOR SALE. These investors do not dare and cannot buy us, buy us up or buy us out. The house and its inhabitants are unsaleable.

Savelberg's project was very expressive but it did not have any influence on city planning matters; users of the Haus des Lehrers were powerless to do anything about the sale.[19] The project did not even receive as much attention in the media as earlier projects did. People had moved in for the functional qualities of the architecture and the relatively low rent, but very quickly they had become fascinated by the uniqueness of the place and started to see it as something very special or even "uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable for anything else" (Kopytoff 1986: 69). Perhaps this could explain why NOT FOR SALE was not as efficient as previous projects. When the developer expressed his intention to buy it, Savelberg and other tenants tried to present it as a "non-commodity," i.e. as something "'priceless' in the full sense of the term, ranging from the uniquely valuable to the uniquely worthless" (p. 75). Tenants had become attached to the building, but it was precisely their unbiased perspective, their detachment, which initially allowed them to approach it as an object in itself and gave their approach an exceptional strength. When they started to emphasize the singularity of the building, they began to argue on the same level as the people with "a right to inhabit the dominant image of the city"—but in these discussions they were clearly lacking economic and political power and support. As Kopytoff has emphasized:

> Behind the extraordinary vehement assertions of aesthetic values may stand conflicts of culture, class, and ethnic identity, and the struggle over the power of what one might label the "public institutions of singularization." [. . .] Power often asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects (Kopytoff 1986: 73, 81).

In this situation, the new tenants clearly did not have and could not acquire "the right to singularize" the Haus des Lehrers.

CULTURALLY GENTRIFIED EYESORES

Now that both positive and negative perceptions of GDR architecture have been analyzed, the question may be posed again, what did the newcomers' perspectives on GDR architecture contribute to the debates? Did the new images that they created permanently alter the predominantly negative perception of these buildings?

In a sociological study for Humboldt University, Awuku *et al*. (2001) asked if the new popularity of Plattenbauten should be interpreted as a trend or if it consists of a series of individual interests that do not

form a collective movement. The scope of their research was too narrow to draw definitive conclusions, but the authors had the feeling that the growing popularity was not as striking as the coverage in the media would suggest. The friends and acquaintances of incoming tenants reacted positively to their new apartments but did not imitate them—a necessary condition for the development of a trend. In addition, a direct experience of the Plattenbauten from within seemed to be a necessary condition for significant changes in perception to occur—attractive images in the media are insufficient to provoke these changes (Awuku *et al*. 2001: 17–18).

My respondents indicated that there is a large interest in GDR architecture—the WMF-Club, for example, is very popular. Similarly, in the Summer of 2002, three students from the Kunsthochschule Weißensee organized an interdisciplinary project entitled *Dostoprimetschatjelnosti* (Russian for "objects or places of interest") in an empty Plattenbau in Hellersdorf. Fifty artists from all over the world lived and worked there for two months. Presentations, exhibitions and parties attracted hundreds of people. Perhaps it is "easier" to display interest in the so-called DDR-Sonderbauten than in the Plattenbauten because the private sphere is not concerned. Nevertheless, several Plattenbauten residents told me that friends had reacted very positively to their new homes and could even imagine making the same choice. Frank Peter Thomas recalled:

> Our acquaintances at first took pity on us: "Oh, you have to live in a high-rise and it's a Plattenbau. Do you really like it?" We reply: "Yes, it's great." They all had very funny reservations and prejudices about the house. People only know the Leipzigerstrasse from driving fast through it. Then we had a party, and the effect was really impressive: everyone was delighted and felt that we had a very beautiful flat. That removed a bit of the shock. Everyone who had come to the party have said since then: "It's beautiful," and many asserted that they would also like to live in such a house.

Whether the new users of GDR architecture can be defined as one specific group or not, and whether it is possible to speak about a trend or not, it is clear that this architecture, despite its generally negative reputation, received much attention in the media and gained a new popularity for a significant number of people.

The arrival of newcomers, taking over some of the Plattenbauten and other former GDR buildings, appreciating them in an unexpected way and subsequently presenting them as trendy, attractive places—which then proves infectious to some of their acquaintances—all these characteristics suggest similarities to a process of gentrification. Typically, this phenomenon "involves both a change in the social composition of an area and its residents, and a change in the nature of the housing

stock (tenure, price, condition, etc.)" (Hamnett 1991: 176). The concept of gentrification is interesting in this case because it emphasizes the differences, the influence and the potentials (notably due to differences in so-called "cultural capital") of the various groups involved. Nevertheless, the social changes that Hamnett mentions are generally presented as a shift from working- to middle-class residents.[20] In addition, changes in the built infrastructure of a gentrifying district are not limited to the purely residential aspects but as Neil Smith and Peter Williams have emphasized in the introduction of their work *Gentrification of the City* (1986):

> [. . .] residential gentrification is integrally linked to the redevelopment of urban waterfronts for recreational and other functions, the decline of remaining inner-city manufacturing facilities, the rise of hotel and convention complexes and central-city office developments, as well as the emergence of modern "trendy" retail and restaurant districts (Smith and Williams 1986: 3).

Even if various authors do not emphasize exactly the same aspects in their approach to gentrification processes, these few explanatory remarks do make clear that the concept of gentrification does not apply to the case of the Plattenbauten as naturally as it may have seemed. On the one hand, the number of newcomers to the Plattenbauten is significant, their presence does contribute to the upgrading transformation of certain GDR apartment blocks, which is connected to an emerging interest in the qualities of these buildings as exemplified, notably, by the intensive renovation undertaken by certain housing corporations,[21] and all this has received extensive coverage in various media. On the other hand, the differences between the original inhabitants and newcomers cannot be described in terms of class: first, because the Plattenbauten population is traditionally—and currently—very mixed; second, because the newcomers are also more differentiated than most approaches to gentrification would suggest;[22] and third, because the most significant contrast between "old" and "new" inhabitants is between East and West. It must be added that the original inhabitants are not displaced by the newcomers; rather, they live side by side. Newspaper articles have reported about tenants who had to leave their apartments in more peripheral districts of other East German towns because high vacancy rates made it impossible to preserve the building, but many of them wanted to move into—and were granted—similar housing (Rosenkranz 2001). Certain renovated apartments near the city center have become owner-occupied property, but not to an extent that it would make the place inaccessible to the original tenants. Finally, it could be stated that some intrinsic qualities of GDR apartment blocks—too standardized, not luxurious enough, and not flexible enough to be transformed into more exclusive housing—make them unsuitable,

in the long term, for further gentrification in terms of an inflation of real-estate values. Not in the least influenced by a Western perception, most potential investors continue to associate Plattenbauten with a low socioeconomic status.

Despite these remarks, I would not like to abandon the concept of gentrification, as I believe it can be very useful when approached from another perspective. The material presented up to now suggests that, although gentrification in terms of social and economic changes does not completely apply here, there is nevertheless a competition between groups of people with divergent images of the Plattenbauten over "the right to inhabit the dominant image of the city." In an article entitled "In the Pursuit of Difference: Representations of Gentrification" (1996), Lees warns about the bias of the various gentrification texts that these people produce (academic, journalist, realtor, and gentrifier) and which are, in his opinion, far from neutral, and imbued with personal interests:

> Gentrification as a site of difference is expressive of urban change, transformation, hybridity, and individuality. [. . .] the positioning of gentrification as a site of difference was intellectually, politically, and economically strategic: by academics who were hoping to open up a new urban literature; by journalists (media) who were attempting to illustrate a story, to emphasize something new in city living; by realtors, who used difference in their niche marketing to attract buyers and renters into inner-city neighbourhoods; and by gentrifiers themselves, in a narcissistic run for individuality (Lees 1996: 455–6).

In an attempt to go beyond the bias implied in these different discourses and to find out the deeper motivations of the various groups of people involved, more attention has to be paid to the cultural aspects of gentrification, as suggested by Jon Caulfield: "Often, culture is acknowledged as somehow or other part of the gentrification process, but its exact role—the role of the influence of philosophic or aesthetic values or of structures of feeling about everyday life—usually remains in a black box" (Caulfield 1989: 620). In this line of thought, what can be observed in Berlin is basically a process of cultural gentrification in the sense that newcomers, although they have not physically displaced the original tenants, tend to gentrify the latter's experience(s) and image(s) of GDR architecture.

If newcomers initially moved in for purely practical or financial reasons, they soon became aware of the potential and meaning of the architecture in which they were living and/or working. Then they started to use these buildings very consciously, either to find out or to present more possibilities, or to convey a specific message. Christian Lagé, one of the organizers of the project in Hellersdorf, told me that they explored the utmost limits of what the Plattenbau allowed them to do; the next step would have been to remove certain walls. Their investigation was

visible both inside and outside the building. To launch the project, they hung an enormous banner between their own and the adjacent Plattenbau, with their website: www.anschlaege.de (German for "attacks"). This action provoked many reactions from the neighbors, who wondered if the attacks were meant literally or figuratively. Users of the Haus des Lehrers (Teachers' House) even saw themselves as a new generation of teachers, as young professionals who could teach other people their discoveries. Finally, Frank Peter Thomas and his housemate, as a provocation, made a website[23] where they severely criticized historic architecture and ironically declared the Fernsehturm (the television mast, built in GDR times on the Alexanderplatz) a guardian angel against flash ornaments and bad taste:

> Robogon opposes built trash and smeared Greek style and calls the television mast his guardian angel in the battle against the misused ornament. The dreadful sight of the highly swanking fuss at the Gendarmenmarkt will no longer lead to furrowing of brows as the television mast strengthens your neuronal resistance.

These examples show that newcomers in GDR architecture are using and, in a sense, appropriating GDR material culture and transforming its meaning. This corresponds to what Caroline Mills describes in her article "Myths and Meanings of Gentrification" (1993): "One might, then, interpret gentrification as the victory over a hegemonic urban imagery by a new symbolism coupled to an emergent cultural manifesto. However, new visions may be co-opted in the reforging of hegemonic discourse by the machinery of dominant culture" (Mills 1993: 151). Plattenbauten inhabitants thus have to face more than the generally negative perception of their place of residence in the media and the stigmatizing association with criminality, anonymity and right-wing radicalism. They also perceive how newcomers—West Berliners, West Germans, Western Europeans—with a positive appreciation of Plattenbauten are appropriating traces of their recent history in which part of their identity is rooted. The meanings that newcomers attribute to GDR architecture are not only related to taste, but also to a new appreciation or even a rewriting of GDR history. The term "Ostalgie" (nostalgia for the East) has become very common to refer to a growing interest in and appeal emanating from GDR material culture, which can be illustrated by the revival of GDR design, the enormous success of the film *Goodbye, Lenin*, exhibitions such as *Kunst in der DDR* (*Art in the GDR*) in the Berliner Nationalgalerie, the creation of a Plattenbauten Museum in Dresden, the organization of numerous cultural projects in empty Plattenbauten,[24] etc. Very symptomatic for the (re-)writing of GDR history that parallels the more entertaining part of this revival is the production of GDR souvenirs, such as "System 80/25" produced by Superclub Berlin for a large project in Halle Neustadt: these souvenirs

consist of two original wall plugs fixed together back to back like a photo frame, displaying a small piece of authentic GDR wallpaper (Figure 8). They are presented in very fashionable boxes with a stamp in GDR fonts, reproducing the numbers of the wall plugs, referring to their precise location in a specific room of a specific apartment in a specific building.

Figure 8
System 80/25, a GDR souvenir produced by Superclub Berlin.

However, this so-called nostalgia for the East is a much more complex phenomenon than the relative superficiality of commercialization and entertainment incentives might suggest. Indeed, as Paul Betts has analyzed in his article "The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture" (2000): "[. . .] ex-GDR consumer objects [. . .] have emerged as new historical markers of socialist experience and identity. [. . .] Where GDR goods once served as a source of perennial dissatisfaction and embarrassment, they later became emblems of pride and nostalgia" (Betts 2000: 734, 741). The meanings that newcomers are projecting on GDR architecture are not necessarily in line with how the original tenants identify with these concrete embodiments of their recent past. Firstly, Betts writes that the memories attached to GDR material culture are of a fundamentally collective character: "While markers of social distinction long existed within this allegedly classless society [. . .] the memories of GDR material culture have tended to reinforce, not undermine, East German solidarity" (p. 754). Here we may notice a significant difference with the circulation of images produced by the newcomers, who emphasize a very individualistic way of living and a concept of home as a means of self-construction and self-presentation. Secondly, "the importance of housing, architecture, and city planning as the preferred sites of socialist cultural identity [has] markedly shifted toward commodities and domestic spaces by the late 1950" (p. 758). This also applies to the post-1989 nostalgia, which has primarily focused on everyday consumer objects. The fact that these objects matter so much for former GDR citizens in terms of cultural identification partly explains why some of them resist the image making of the newcomers who also focus on the inside of the Plattenbauten—decoration styles, arrangement of furniture, unique objects—and are, in that sense, appropriating their cultural roots. And thirdly: "Casting East German culture as fundamentally pre- or antimodern became a favorite West German parlor game after 1989" (p. 739). The perception offered by the newcomers is not entirely disconnected from this tendency: progressive, avant-garde young people come to live in the Plattenbauten, remove some of the old furniture, create minimalistic interiors with modern design, and "bring the building back to life," as Rob Savelberg mentioned with regard to the Haus des Lehrers. Does this not suggest that the Plattenbauten in their original state were old-fashioned and needed a trendy face-lift?

The intensive projection of meanings onto GDR material culture, in particular architecture, alarms not only the original tenants, but also those who "have a right to inhabit the dominant image of the city" and fear the consequences of a positive revaluation. Gerriet Schulz told me

that he and others, such as the Urban Catalysts,[25] have developed ideas for a temporary use of the Palast der Republik, which is scheduled for demolition in three years' time to make way for a reconstruction of the Stadtschloß. They proposed using the place in the meantime for performances, presentations, and parties. Most responsible persons are clearly in favor of these plans, but the State, which owns the building, fears that a too-positive revaluation could endanger the plans to eliminate the palace: "Of course they are worried that when we go in there and are successful and open it up that people will see, 'Hey, it's not really that bad' and in three years everyone will say: 'We don't want to tear down the Palace.'" Jon Caulfield commented with regard to modern property entrepreneurs, that: "Like the rest of the culture industry, they cannot invent the desires they commodify but need to extract them from living culture" (Caulfield 1989: 626). In the same way, for the State and other participants in this process who mainly view GDR architecture in terms of "images at a distance," it is very difficult to control or influence what Caulfield calls "living culture," here: the newcomers' creation, circulation, and diffusion of "images from within"—this explains their fears.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of different perceptions of the Plattenbauten illustrates the relevance of alternative attitudes towards rejected architecture. Newcomers approached the buildings from within, they experienced their inner architecture and functional qualities. This was the best way to go beyond stereotypes, which are usually based on a perception from the outside and at a distance. The detached attitude that allowed such an unbiased exploration of the buildings was also a necessary condition for their mediatizing and merchandizing. The strength of alternative images is best illustrated by the fact that people who do have the power over such matters start to fear the arrival of newcomers, as with regard to the temporary use of the Palast der Republik.

Nevertheless, the experience of GDR architecture from within also made new users aware of its history. The fascination and singularization to which this could give rise may then reduce the previously displayed detachment and relativize the strength of the positive images against their negative counterparts. This is intimately connected with what Kopytoff calls "the power of [. . .] the 'public institutions of singularization.'" As was illustrated by the Haus des Lehrers, the new tenants had no chance to succeed on this level of argumentation; they were powerless to do anything about the sale.

This analysis further shows that various positive attitudes towards rejected architecture can exist simultaneously, without ever intermingling. The newcomers' relationship to the Plattenbauten differs from that of the original tenants in more than one way. Their respective conceptions of private and public space are entirely opposite: whereas domestic space had acquired a very special meaning during several

decades of GDR, the newcomers have blurred the fundamental border between private and public by mediatizing the Plattenbauten interiors. Further, they display divergent home cultures and do not share the same ideas with regard to the saleability of homes. This has much to do with their respective relationships to the history from which the Plattenbauten emerged. Finally, I would like to add that, although the newcomers' presence in the Plattenbauten has received much media attention and thus found a place in the collective imagination related to these buildings, the attitude of the new tenants was always very individualistic. Despite their interest in GDR history—which they seem to perceive as something rather "peculiar"—their main motivations were to discover the Plattenbauten by themselves and to comment from their own point of view. They never primarily intended to stimulate a collective valuation of the Plattenbauten with which both the original and the new tenants would identify. Rather, they would use the material traces of this history to present themselves. In that sense, they unmistakably displayed a "narcissistic run for individuality" which, according to Lees (1996), is characteristic for gentrifiers.

In general, it is very difficult to foresee the impact of alternative attitudes towards rejected architecture, as it depends on a complex interaction between images "at a distance," "at eye level" and "from within"—implying different observations, experiences, appreciations, and attitudes towards the buildings. It also depends on whether the competing images are of the same kind or not, and whether those partaking in the debates have "the right to inhabit the dominant image of the city" or not. This shows that, apart from demolition, transformation, and acquisition, there are alternative, complex means of appropriating other people's architecture.

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NOTES

1. See Geisel (2002), Steglich (1998) and Zohlen (1999).
2. All translations by the author.
3. See *Bildzeitung* (2001) Du Bois (2002) and Wewer (2001).
4. See my paper entitled "13th May 2001, 8:01 AM – 1 Building, 20 000 People and 450 Kilos of Explosives. The Explosion of Corrupt Architecture as a Secular Sacrifice."
5. See also Miller (1998: 11).
6. See, for example Finger (2003); Rosenkranz (2001).

7. All quotes by Erik Schmidt, Axel Watzke, Ulli Uphaus, Frank Peter Thomas, Gerd Wessel, Rob Savelberg, Gerriet Schulz, and Christian Lagé from interviews held July 5–8 2001 or May 4–9 2003.
8. I will nevertheless continue to use the term *Plattenbau*, because it was used by the people I spoke with: the newcomers in these prefabricated apartment blocks, who are the subject of this article. Besides that, the term simply refers to a type of building, characterized by a specific construction method using prefabricated plates.
9. See Geisel (2002: 29) and Steglich (1998).
10. "The 'view from Kienberg' is a classic of a sentimental distance, which does not want to belong to reality and discover the fear of continuously changing other places. It takes up the same position as the town planner at the drawing board, when he commits houses to designs on paper, abstract, like a helicopter pilot who can only view reality as an ornament; the inevitable fate of an architect or, in the specialist terminology of the GDR, project manager work" (Zohlen 1999: 138).
11. In a collection of articles about *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (2002), David Crowley writes that Warsaw interiors in the 1950s and 1960s were "private sanctuaries"—not so much that they would set the stage for dissident meetings, but in a much broader sense: In the "Soviet-styled city," where "space was subordinate to images and effects, and, by the same system, interiors were inferior to the exterior forms that produced them" (Crowley 2002: 185), people would understand the private realm as "the limit of intrusions from the public sphere." This means "the home was claimed as a sanctuary, private in the sense of being a hidden or inaccessible realm" (p. 187). In the same book, Katerina Gerasimova describes the increased importance of a "symbolic privatization of domestic space" (Gerasimova 2002: 210) in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, as a reaction on several decades of openness of the private sphere to the State and the collective.
12. Penko Stoitchev, a "sound artist" who created the Ambient Lounge on the fifth floor of the Haus des Lehrers, emphasized the urban experience one step further. The place was conceived as an observatory where people could relax and enjoy the view in two directions, completed by a sound installation made of noises that were gathered in the nearby surroundings. Another project in which the Haus des Lehrers specifically acted as an observatory is *Herr Doeblin's Lounge*, by Rob Savelberg, in November 2000. It was conceived as an "after-work event." People lay on mattresses while listening to an actor reading Alfred Döblin's famous book *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. They could observe the square by night through a telescope.
13. See *Esquire* June 2001: 48–51.

14. *Homestory. A Glimpse of a Modern Artist's Living*, initially written in 1998, was published in 2002 in the catalog to the touring exhibition *Come-in. Interior Design as a Contemporary Art Medium in Germany*, commissioned by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Institute for International Relations). See http://www.ifa.de/a/a1/come-in/dweidner.
15. See Esser (2001), Wewer (2001), Roth (2002) and Koelbl (2001).
16. See also Humphrey (2002: 185–7).
17. The WMF-Club has led a nomadic existence since the early 1990s, moving from one empty building to the next. The search for empty, affordable space soon led the initiators into GDR architecture, such as the *Ahornblatt*, a very striking, shell-shaped, concrete building that was used in GDR times as a canteen, or Café Moskau, one of the catering establishments representing the other Eastern-bloc states, where the WMF-Club recently took up residence.
18. Another example in the same building is the telephone exchange from GDR times, an enormous installation. Rob Savelberg told me that one person was responsible for making the connections. On this occasion, he was also tapping the phone calls, like he had always done before 1989. Most incoming tenants found it funny; Rob Savelberg said it gave him the feeling of living in a kind of museum or fairyland. This was of course not the same perception as people who had actually lived in the GDR.
19. After the Haus des Lehrers had been sold, certain people started privileging their individual interests in the search for a new office, and what had by that time become like a community soon fell apart. Here we see a shift from "images from within" to "images at a distance," and a very pragmatic search for other, affordable offices. Others, who absolutely wanted to stay on the Alexanderplatz, moved into the Haus des Reisens (another GDR building with a contemporary interior), and still others rented a floor in the main building of the communist newspaper *Neues Deutschland*.
20. "Gentrification [. . .] refers to the rehabilitation of working-class and derelict housing and the consequent transformation of an area into a middle-class neighbourhood" (Smith and Williams 1986: 1).
21. For example, several apartments blocks on the Platz der Vereinten Nationen (where the artist Erik Schmidt lives) were extensively renovated in 1995–6 and subsequently became listed buildings. This has been documented in an article by Gerold Perler (1998). As I mentioned before, attempts at upgrading the housing stock in Hellersdorf were also made. In general, since 1990, many property developers have asked themselves how to develop this enormous quantity of GDR housing.
22. A large majority of newcomers consists of creative workers (artists, architects, designers, advertising managers), but in an article entitled "Gentrification and Desire" (1989), Jon Caulfield has argued on the diversity of gentrifiers in terms of visibility and tenure,

occupation and income, political outlook, cultural affiliation, as well as household composition and lifestyle (Caulfield 1989: 618). His remarks also apply to the newcomers in the Plattenbauten who do not, as such, form a group, class or movement.

23. See: http://www.robogon.de.
24. Besides "Dostoprimetschatjelnosti" in Hellersdorf, for example, an empty Plattenbau in Halle-Neustadt was transformed into a hotel for several weeks in September 2003, attracting hundreds of visitors every day (see www.hotel-neustadt.de). In the same period, thirty artists were participating in a project in Hoyerswerda entitled "Superumbau—die verkunstete Platte," documenting, analyzing, and challenging the changing meanings of Plattenbauten in various cities (see www.spirit-of-zuse.de).
25. See http://www.urbancatalysts.de.

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