

The making of the “city as a whole”. Postmodern discourse on urbanity in the GDR

Aims and methods

While postmodern architecture in the GDR was heatedly discussed, especially during the 1980s, the notion of a postmodern urbanism seems to have gone unnoticed in those debates. The term “urbanity”, which played a major role in postmodern discourse in western countries, was hardly ever used. However, there was a notable shift in urban planning paradigms from the early 1970s onwards. This can be illustrated by the first urban renewal projects in the old towns of Greifswald (research project 1970–1972, execution 1978–1981) and Bernau (from 1979 onwards), or with the reconstruction and renewal projects in the Wilhelmine quarters in East Berlin, such as around Arnimplatz (1970–appr. 1980) and Husemannstraße (1984–1987). In almost all GDR cities and towns, building capacities were directed towards the city centers in the late 1970s and the 1980s. New housing projects were implemented in the existing building fabric or, more often, rebuilt after the demolition of historic districts. However, the new structures were designed in accordance to the historical city layout and traditional schemes, which meant perimeter blocks and zoning of the buildings into ground floor, upper floors and roof. Even the mass housing complexes on the outskirts of the cities changed their urban layout, from row structures to perimeter-block-like structures. Taking these developments as a starting point, this paper will examine the debate on urbanity in the GDR, in the light of postmodernism. It will focus on the evolution of the “Guiding principles for the socialist development of urban design and architecture in the GDR”. This document was issued in May 1982, one of only a few guidelines to achieve legally binding status. The two-year process of drafting and discussing the principles can be traced on the basis of archival resources: the collections of the *Union of Architects of the GDR* (German: *Bund der Architekten der DDR*, short: BdA) at the *Federal Archives in Berlin* and the collections of the *Building Academy* (German: *Bauakademie*) at *Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space*

(IRS) in Erkner. This evolution of the principles is well-suited to a case study, because drafts and meeting minutes (sometimes stenographically recorded word-for-word) have been passed on, giving an insight into the protagonist's intentions and offering evidence for the two underlying theses of this paper:

1. Given the content, the discourse on urbanity in the GDR since the early 1970s has been strikingly similar to the western one, but expressed in different words and ways which intentionally avoid similarities in language.
2. The discussion of a change in urban design started earlier than that of architectural design and postmodern architecture, possibly even catalyzing it.

As a starting point and reference, a short insight into urban renewal projects from the 1970s and 1980s will be provided. Subsequently, the drafting process of the guiding principles between 1980 and 1982 will be traced, to show the dynamics of its several protagonists and institutions, who struggle to find a compromise between a political and a technical document. After addressing the concepts which preceded this new urban paradigm, its drafts and the discussions surrounding it will be examined for implied concepts of urbanity, seen through the lens of postmodern urbanism.

Urban renewal and “complex reconstruction” since the 1970s
Although there had never really been a phase without urban renewal in the GDR, the topic was brought to the public's attention at the beginning of the 1970s. It followed a phase of urban and architectural competitions for the so-called “socialist remodeling” or “socialist reconstruction” of the city centers, which neglected the existing city layout and would have brought about a great deal of demolition.¹ Luckily for those cities the plans were not implemented, and rising interest in city centers created a shift to a more integrated perspective. This change came from different directions: economic conditions led to decreasing demolition rates as housing was still a scarce resource, and the housing program of 1973 therefore explicitly called for repair and maintenance of existing housing stock.² Furthermore, a renewed interest in history (combined with the need for a new historical narrative after the new constitution of 1974 departed from the idea of a possible reunification of the two German states) sought “progressive traditions” from before World War II.³ A research project initiated urban renewal for the Hanseatic city of Greifswald, a town in the Rostock district flanking the Baltic Sea, between 1970 and 1972. It was conducted by the Bauakademie, the scientific institution for architecture and urbanism in the GDR, in cooperation with local building authorities. As a follow-up project, a neighborhood in the old town was set to be “remodeled” as a case study for further projects. Analyses of the existing structures in the style of Kevin Lynch's landmark maps were undertaken, and preceded the urban and architectural planning of six perimeter blocks. Old buildings were either restored, modernized or demolished. Housing complexes made

¹ See the case studies in Thuringia for this so-called “socialist remodeling”: Scheithauer et al. 2018.

² Cf. Junker 1973. The housing program was part of Erich Honecker's social policy and envisaged the construction of 3 million apartment units between 1976 and 1990.

³ This so-called “Erbedebatte” (English: discussion on heritage) tried to differentiate between the overall historical legacy as heritage and traditions in a Marxist-positive, progressive legacy. Cf. Bartel and Schmidt 1988: 196–217.

from prefabricated panel systems were erected on the newly-empty plots and vacant sites left over from World War II.⁴

The urban layout of the construction differed from previous projects, as the buildings were not arranged in rows, but perimeter blocks, following the historical layout of the blocks and streets. Even the former cross-sections of the streets were mostly kept to the established height and width, and the image of a historic town was imitated by setting back the top story and chamfering the cross walls as an implied sloped roof, along with creating gabled sections of the façades. (fig. 1) However, the architecture of the buildings remained rather modern, as many façades were still laid out horizontally, although ornaments, alternating surfaces, frames and pilaster were arranged as a means of variation. Only in the later construction stages of the 1980s was the style of the façades changed to a more vertical appearance. Contributing to the feel of a city center, shops and social facilities were integrated into the ground floors, predominantly in the corner buildings.⁵ (fig. 2)

A similar project was realized in the city of Bernau, a small town close to Berlin, in the former district of Frankfurt (Oder). It was also declared a model project for the renewal of historic city centers. Unlike Greifswald, the historic district of Bernau was demolished almost completely and rebuilt. The measures taken to adapt the new buildings for a small-scale historic quarter were not as elaborate as in Greifswald. All the buildings featured flat roofs and were only flats—leaving almost no space for anything other than housing.⁶

Subsequently, similar projects were undertaken in almost all of the central areas of GDR cities and towns. Those projects were attributed with the term “complex reconstruction” as opposite to “socialist remodeling” or “socialist reconstruction”. “Reconstruction” in this use derived from economic theory and had a broader meaning than the rebuilding of lost structures. It could therefore also imply the complete exchange of building fabric, as it aimed at restoring the economic value of the city’s structure which could be achieved by building completely new. The term “complex” was on the one hand used to highlight the complexity of measures taken, meaning the combination of new construction with the methods of restoration, modernization and (sci-

4 Cf. Bauakademie and Büro für Stadtplanung Greifswald 1973.

5 For the Greifswald project, see the papers of Kiel, Mohr and Hartung in Lichtnau 2007.

6 See Seebold 2017 for the projects in Greifswald and Bernau.

Fig. 1 Greifswald, first remodeling area (1978–1981) (left side).

Fig. 2 Greifswald, third remodeling area (1987–1990) (right side).





Fig. 3 Gendarmenmarkt, Berlin. View of two buildings in Charlottenstraße with façades from precast concrete elements (1980–1985).

⁷ See Urban 2006 for the neo-historicist projects in East Berlin.

⁸ An overview of most of the projects in the GDR is found in Rietdorf 1989.

⁹ Cf. Angermann and Hilse 2013: 101–110.

¹⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DY 15/796: 2.

entific) reconstruction of the building stock. On the other hand it also links to “complex housing construction” which incorporated the construction of buildings for childcare, education, leisure, healthcare etc. next to housing.

The most elaborate of these projects are located in the capital, Berlin. Particularly in the former center of pre-war Berlin, wartime-destroyed areas (in the form of ruined buildings and vacant plots) were reconstructed through urban repair, in accordance with the pre-existing urban layout and scale. For instance, around Gendarmenmarkt (then “Platz der Akademie”), multi-story buildings forming the lost enclosure of the central, rectangular square were erected, all with shops or restaurants at ground level, sometimes behind arcaded sidewalks showing ornamented façades fabricated as precast concrete elements. (fig. 3) Around Nicolai Church a whole quarter was re-established, including the few remaining buildings, re-inventing a historic quarter aligned to the former street courses, with façades resembling pre-existing ones and combining them with residential building blocks with historicized décor.⁷ While its shops and restaurants were aimed at tourists from East and West, it also generated over 800 new flats in the heart of the city. Similar infills of smaller complexes were implemented in other districts of the capital, such as Spandauer Vorstadt, Frankfurter Allee and Bersarinplatz.

Other cities in the GDR pursued respective approaches to urban renewal and repair.⁸ In Rostock, the new constructions in parts of the historic center featured a uniform, vertically accented design, with ceramic inlays evoking the traditional brick façades of the Hanseatic Gothic Style. In Halle, central housing development was planned for smaller urban districts, the so-called “complex areas”. The new structures were fitted into the urban layout of the existing city, only limited by the adaptability of the prefabricated panel system. As elsewhere, shops and other facilities were integrated in the complexes and the suggestion of sloped roofs, individual houses and a certain degree of ornamentation shaped the design, creating a distinct appearance for each of the areas. Roughly half of the planned “complex areas” were completed by 1990, although often not of the desired complexity, as more new construction and less rehabilitation took place.⁹

Towards a new urban policy: the drafting process of new guidelines for urban design and architecture

In 1980 the Ministry of Construction felt compelled to adapt existing urban policy to the ongoing developments. Minister Wolfgang Junker approached the *Union of Architects and the Institute for Urbanism and Architecture* (German: *Institut für Städtebau und Architektur*, short: ISA) at *Bauakademie* in the end of April 1980 with the request to hand in a draft for “Guidelines for urban planning and architecture in the 1980s” within only a month.¹⁰ Legally, there had not been an update since the 1950’s “Sixteen Principles of Urban Design” which had the same binding character. The process of creating those new guidelines ultimately took two years.

A first draft of the requested guidelines was discussed during a meeting of the federal board of the Union of Architects at the end of March 1980. A working group, consisting of representatives from the BdA and ISA, architects from local authorities, and a deputy of the Ministry of Construction, had put together a 20-page document.¹¹ Wolfgang Urbanski, president of the Union of Architects, presented the nine-point program in excerpts at the board's meeting. Focus of the document was placed on the so-called solution of the housing question—a reference to Friedrich Engels—aiming at reducing housing scarcity. This was to be achieved meeting higher qualitative requirements, but also a reduction of costs (point 1). The second point dealt with the professional ethos of the architects. Urban specifications followed: the city should be developed “as a whole”, culturally and economically (point 3), the construction site should be chosen with regard to development and infrastructure, favoring sites within cities over urban expansion (point 4), which is why the harmonization of existing and new structures was emphasized (point 5), while more and smaller housing complexes were to be integrated into the existing city (point 6). The seventh point stressed the importance of increasing the overall architectural quality, while point 8 was about using existing means of industrial prefabrication. The function and tasks of the union of architects were then laid out (point 9).¹²

Several drafts were made before the final version was issued in May 1982.¹³ The text of the drafts was subdivided into seven or nine points, which were each annotated with a programmatic sentence. Those points were then rearranged, rephrased, deleted and reinserted over the course of the two years. At least two phases can be distinguished in this process: a first collaborative drafting from 1980 until early 1981, and a second phase of revision in 1981 that took place more or less behind closed doors.

During the first phase, the members of the *Union of Architects*, local planning commissions, state construction companies, universities and other stakeholders were invited to comment on a seven-point draft that was issued to the delegates of the 7th *Baukonferenz*, a conference held by the *Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany* and by the *Council of Ministers* in June 1980.¹⁴ There was a deadline of mid-October to hand in statements, as well as time for discussion during a meeting of the executive committee of the Union of Architects in September 1980.¹⁵

Many of the statements that were handed in or presented at the conference were pragmatic in nature, circling around processes and conditions in the building sector, aiming at general reforms to loosen the restraints of industrialized, typified building under strong economic coercion, and purely quantitative norms. Discussion of a new urban and architectural paradigm was scarce.¹⁶ In October 1980, Wolfgang Urbanski collected the statements and put them into a report which was sent to the department for building at the *Central Committee*. He summarized the suggestions for additional inclusion: other fields in the building sector besides housing, ways to guarantee continuity of long-time planning, the development of the building industry

¹¹ The working group consisted of the president of the Union of Architects, Wolfgang Urbanski, vice president Gerhard Krenz, director of ISA Ule Lammert and his deputy Horst Adami, the head of the department for theory and history at ISA Alfred Hoffmann, the chief architects Ewald Henn (Erfurt), Peter Baumbach (Rostock) and Hanspeter Kirsch (Magdeburg), professor Karl-Heinz Lander (TU Dresden) and Hans-Jürgen Kluge, the head of the department for urban planning in the Ministry for Construction.

¹² SAPMO-BArch, DY 15/38: 27–29.

¹³ Alongside the first draft of May 1980, at least eight other drafts existed. Four are preserved as typescripts in the archives, dating from June 1980, February 1981, January 1982 and February 1982.

¹⁴ IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_14): Bund der Architekten der DDR/Bauakademie der DDR: Leitlinien für die Entwicklung von Städtebau und Architektur in der DDR in den 80er Jahren, Berlin, Juni 1980.

¹⁵ SAPMO-BArch, DY 15/82: 129.

¹⁶ SAPMO-BArch, DY 15/82.

17 SAPMO-BArch, DY 15/796: 4–15.

18 The working group apparently included not only Urbanski, Lammert, Krenz and Kluge, but also Werner Rietdorf of the ISA and Hubert Scholz, the first secretary of the Union of Architects, whilst the architects Lander, Baumbach, Kirsch and Henn were no longer present. Cf. IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_10).

19 BArch, DH1/28856: Bund der Architekten der DDR / Bauakademie der DDR: Leitlinien für die Entwicklung von Städtebau und Architektur insbesondere für die Durchführung des Wohnungsbauprogramms, Berlin, Februar 1981.

20 As reported in a letter from Lammert to Trölitzsch. IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_9).

21 As reported in a letter from Lammert to Trölitzsch. IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_9).

22 IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_7 and A1_89_8).

23 IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_3).

24 Ibid.

25 SAPMO-BArch, DY 15/796: 16–37.

and planning methods, and the improvement of decision-making processes with the inclusion of the public. He appreciated the efforts made to elaborate on new guidelines, and advocated a legally binding form of their release.¹⁷

Following this, a draft was made by a BdA and *Bauakademie* working group.¹⁸ It was presented to the Ministry of Construction in February 1981 as “Guidelines for the development of urban planning and architecture in particular for the implementation of the housing program”¹⁹ with the intention of making it to a *Politburo* decision and therefore legally binding.²⁰ As this version of the guidelines was produced with significant input from architects, planners, *Bauakademie* and BdA, it can be seen as the preferred document, from a professional viewpoint.

The guidelines were not confirmed after the meeting with the Ministry. On the contrary, an intense period of revisions of the guidelines began, in which the Ministry of Construction and the *Central Committee*, with Gerhard Trölitzsch as the head of the department for building, were closely involved. A lively discussion followed, with the officials aiming for ideological comprehension and the representatives of the BdA and *Bauakademie* campaigning for a professional document.

Ule Lammert sent revised versions of the guidelines to the Minister of Construction (Wolfgang Junker) and Trölitzsch in February and May of 1981.²¹ The document was now called “Guidelines for the development of urban planning and architecture in the GDR”, removing the time perspective (the 1980s) and a concentration on the housing construction program from the title. Interestingly for the process, Lammert sought the advice of Edmund Collein and Hans Gericke in May 1981, obviously trying to gain support from and counting on the scientific and political experience of two professionals of the GDR building system.²² Collein had been one of the authors of the ‘Sixteen Principles of Urban Design’ in 1950, and as former president of the BdA and member of *Bauakademie*, had been involved in the development of related working papers. Gericke had been one of the supervisors of the research project in Greifswald between 1970 and 1972, and was the acting vice president of the *Union of Architects* at the time.

Other versions of the documents must exist from August and November 1981, as they were discussed by Lammert in a report to Trölitzsch.²³ Not all the versions after February 1981 were included in the archives of the BdA and *Bauakademie*, leading to the assumption that from May on, they were mostly developed within the *Central Committee*, by Trölitzsch, as Lammert indicated that he was the author of parts of the documents from August and November in his report, while advocating for the implementation of the suggestions by Collein and Gericke.²⁴

As a result of this process, a document from January 1982 was elaborated upon, which was again sent to the *Central Committee* and the Ministry of Construction.²⁵ It was considerably ideologically charged in comparison to the ‘professional’ version of February 1981, and can be seen as its political counterpart. Still, another rephrasing of parts of the document took place in

February and again in May, now titled “guiding principles” instead of “guidelines”, referencing the ‘Sixteen Principles’ of 1950.²⁶ In the end, the guiding principles were officially adopted by the *Politburo* on 18 May 1982²⁷ and published in the daily newspaper “Neues Deutschland” two weeks later.²⁸

The overall discussion of the principles is traceable through the archival resources, with drafts and correspondence between the protagonists. The next paragraphs will elaborate on this, with a focus on connections to discussion on postmodernism and statements concerning the notion of urban life and “urbanity” in the GDR, starting with the preceding concepts.

Preceding Concepts

As previously mentioned, the “Sixteen Principles of Urban Design” were technically still current in 1980. Written with a strong influence from the Soviet Union in 1950, the principles advocated a historically informed, compact and dense city, with a representative center.²⁹ The “Sixteen Principles” found implementation in large urban axes flanked by monumental and historicist buildings — one example being Stalinallee in Berlin. This period is called “National Traditions”, and only lasted until 1955. After Stalin's death two years earlier, and with Nikita Khrushchev then leading the Soviet Union, the development in architecture and urban planning almost took a U-turn, towards industrialization and typification.

The new planning paradigm was again a modernist one, proclaiming functional zoning, car-friendly traffic planning and housing construction in rows with vast green spaces. This new urban paradigm never found a legal basis of its own, as the “Sixteen Principles” did, though it was repeatedly codified in working papers from the Bauakademie and in the so-called “complex guidelines” issued by the Ministry of Construction. Only the “Guiding Principles for Planning and Design of Socialist City Centers” were confirmed at a meeting of the *Council of Ministers*, and were therefore mostly legally binding.³⁰ It advocated generous and spacious ensembles in city centers to house institutions for politics and culture, economy and administration, supply and recreation. Existing residential buildings were tolerated, and buildings with a public function be preferred for redesigns of the center. Accordingly, the core of the city center was to be held functionally separate from the adjacent areas.³¹

At first glance, the time span of only four weeks between April and May 1980 seemed to be too short to prepare a draft of new guidelines. However, it is not that short-term, considering that the *Bauakademie* continuously developed working papers and could revert to existing material.

In fact, the draft from May 1980 draws heavily on a document that was already published in 1975 as “Challenges for urban planning in the fulfilment of the Housing Program”.³²

These 20 theses already included the relevance of the housing program for urban development, of a higher architectural quality of housing projects, and the combination of old and new. The theses also contained other aspects of the 1980 draft of the guidelines which were even more explicitly phrased, such as

26 Cf. the February 1982 version of the guidelines IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_1), for the May 1982 version IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand Bund der Architekten / Schriftgut BdA (B1_29).

27 BArch, DY 30/J IV 2/2/1947.

28 Neues Deutschland 1982.

29 Exemplary: Principle 5: “Urban planning must be based on the principles of organicism and on the consideration of a city's historical structure in eliminating that city's shortcomings.” Principle 6: “[...] The center of the city shall be composed of the most important and monumental buildings, dominating the architectural composition of the city plan and determining the architectural silhouette of the city.” Own translation, based on the German version from Durth et al. 2007: 173.

30 BArch, DC 20-I/4/450.

31 Cf. Deutsche Bauakademie 1960: 1–2.

32 Lammert et al. 1975: 201–208.

33 "Die Stadt als einheitliches Ganzes".
Lammert et al. 1975: 208.

ecologic sustainability and participative planning. They even already stressed the importance of conceiving the "city as a consistent whole"³³—a notion prominent in the drafts and the completed document of 1982. The "city as a whole" became synonymous to the overall concept in the GDR and although it was not unique in program, there was no Western equivalent terminologically.

The urbanity of the "city as a whole"

Although never mentioning the word "urbanity" (German: "Urbanität"), the search for a notion of urban life in the GDR comes through in many discussions about the new principles. Beyond this, motifs of the postmodern urbanism of the 1980s and 90s come through in the drafts.

Nan Ellin, one of the few authors to deal with a specifically urban view of postmodernism, summarizes such motifs and defines a series of themes characteristic of the process of postmodern urban planning:

"contextualism, historicism, the search for urbanity, regionalism, anti-universalism, pluralism, collage, self-referentiality, reflexivity, preoccupation with image/decor/scenography, superficiality, depthlessness, ephemerality, fragmentation, populism, apoliticism, commercialism, loss of faith, and irony". She describes how inspiration for postmodern urban design was drawn "from mass culture, the social context, the site, and the past", giving a further definition for contextualism and reasoning that even the role of the urban designer changed "from businessperson and artist to the facilitator, political activist, and social engineer".³⁴

34 Ellin 1996: 133.

Thus, according to Ellin, urban design would be able to create a change in society—a goal which was quite common in socialist theory of architecture and urban design.

Coming back to the typical motifs of postmodern urbanism, contextualism can be found in the drafts of the guidelines and guiding principles. The overall holistic approach to the "city as a whole" (first point 3, later point 2) can be understood in a functional, structural, cultural and historical manner. An aspect of contextualism is then included in all versions of point 4, defining well-designed housing complexes as exploiting the conditions of existing structures and the surrounding landscape. In the first drafts, contextualism was put as a single point: "The connection of the new with the existing – a basic social, economic, cultural and architectural concern".³⁵ It was eliminated from the guidelines in the 1981 revision, which was dominated by the *Central Committee*. However, key aspects of the point were implemented into point 6, stressing the fact that cities gained their unique and varied appearance only through the harmonious connection of old and new.³⁶ Regarding cultural contextualism, point 7 of the February 1981 version was interesting, stating that it was always necessary to detect and analyze the specific "milieu" and regional traditions of a city, town or settlement, and to implement them into the new urban, architectural and artistic design.³⁷ This was eliminated

35 "Die Verbindung des Neuen mit dem Bestehenden – ein soziales, volkswirtschaftliches, kulturelles und baukünstlerisches Grundanliegen." IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_14).

36 IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_1).

37 BArch, DH1/28856.

in the following version, from which only the architects would be obliged to continue the legacy of “the works of the great German master builders”.³⁸

Pluralism can only be seen, in a very narrow sense, as artistic variety in the January 1982 version. This takes into account that it accepts the critique of the then state-of-the-art prefabricated panel housing complexes as monotonous and dull. This variety should be consistent, however: “unity and variety” of artistic means should lead to higher expression and “eventfulness”³⁹, also tackling leisure experience in cities.

The concept of ecology is not mentioned by Ellin, but ranks among the main concerns of postmodern planning and architecture. Coming from the 1975 Bauakademie theses, it is addressed in various stages of the drafting process, first named explicitly and later only mentioned implicitly. In between, it is even extended to include aspects of sustainability, however not using this exact term. In the existing drafts, it is paraphrased as building for generations, but also as an aesthetic sustainability, i.e. a design that ages well. The new structures were to serve not only today’s needs but future requirements as well. Collein stressed this aspect in his advice to Lammert, warning of “carving present needs in concrete like no other epoch before”.⁴⁰ Buildings and urban areas were to be designed in a way that would not become aesthetically outdated too quickly, but maintain “a permanently appealing appearance”.⁴¹

The overall premise of the new urban policy was to qualify the city centers for housing. “The inner city as a place to live” was also the main theme of the *International Building Exhibition* (IBA) of 1987 in West Berlin. Although one could argue that, in the GDR, this turn towards the centers was more of an economic necessity than a programmatic decision, the approaches to this task were quite similar on both sides of the wall. This is, however, more obvious in the results than in the text of the “Guiding Principles”. The methods of “critical reconstruction” and “careful urban renewal” show similar results, especially in Berlin, where perimeter blocks were rebuilt and Wilhelminian style buildings rehabilitated in both East and West. Planning methods, procedures and protagonists were different, with community involvement one of the key facilitators for the projects in West Berlin. In the state-run and rigid building industry of the GDR, aspects of community involvement or participation were discussed, but deliberately not labelled “Partizipation” as in the West. A phrasing like “considering suggestions and critique from the general public”⁴² tended towards this direction, although in reality it was aimed more at informing the public and gathering feedback than real participation. The search for urbanity, or at least visions for urban life in the newly-designed and rehabilitated city centers, comes through during the process of drafting the “Guiding Principles”, even though they were mostly eliminated in the process. Besides previously mentioned features like variety of design and eventfulness, more technical aspects were also considered. Architects and urban designers advocated a high population density during the first phase of discussing the guidelines, which was rejected due to concerns by the Ministry of Construction as possibly colliding with existing norms.⁴³ In the February

38 “Die Städtebauer und Architekten der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik sind in ihrem Wirken dem progressiven, humanistischen Kulturerbe, den Werken der großen deutschen Baumeister, die Bedeutendes zur Weltkultur beigetragen haben, verpflichtet.” Neues Deutschland 1982:10.

39 German: “Erlebnisreichtum”, SAPMO-BArch, DY15/79: 31. For the notion of “Erlebnis” in 1980s GDR urban planning, cf. Urban 2006: 273–275.

40 Edmund Collein to Ule Lammert: “Es besteht die Gefahr, daß wir unsere derzeitigen Raumbedürfnisse in einem Maße ‚betonieren‘, wie das keine Epoche der Architektur zuvor getan hat.” IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_7).

41 “[...] den Gebäuden und baulichen Ensembles ein dauerhaft ansprechendes Aussehen zu verleihen.” BArch, DH1/28856.

42 “[...] ihre Vorschläge und Kritiken im Sinne höherer Effektivität und Qualität des Bauens zu beachten [...]” This phrasing from the early drafts stayed in all subsequent drafts and the final version.

43 SAPMO-BArch, DY15/795: 10.

1981 version, the centers were to incorporate central car free zones (German: Hauptfußgängerbereiche), which required pedestrianization.

With regard to the final version, it becomes evident that concepts and terms that could draw a connection to Western theory—which was actually well known among the scholars⁴⁴—were deliberately erased from the text. During a discussion on the draft in June 1980, Bruno Flierl, member of the BdA working group “Architecture and Fine Arts”, advocated the re-implementation of a clause for an integrated social, economic, cultural and ecological view of urban design and for the most intensive use of space, time and energy as decisive premises for future urban planning.⁴⁵ These contemporary demands with paradigmatic architectural terms of the time had been included in the very first version of May 1980, and had been deleted in June. Lammert—in reference to “the wretched discussion on postmodern architecture in the West” that led to “negating architecture” up to a “neo-eclecticism”—warned of leaving out the precondition of industrialization, as it was a source of modern architecture and urban design, apparently trying to refrain from becoming postmodern by accident.⁴⁶

44 Cf. Angermann 2017.

45 SAPMO-BArch, DY 15/82: 154.

46 Lammert: “Die betonte Bejahung der Industrialisierung und modernen Technik als eine der Quellen der modernen Architektur (wie in der Augustfassung) und die sich daraus ergebenden Konsequenzen für den Städtebau halte ich für sehr wichtig. Dies auch im Hinblick auf die desolante Diskussion im Westen um die postmoderne Architektur, die vom Verneinen der Architektur bis zu einem sehr veräußerlichten und handwerklichen ‚Neoelektizismus‘ reicht.” IRS (Erkner) / Wiss. Samml., Bestand ISA / Direktor (A1_89_3).

Implementation and impact

The resulting “Guiding principles for the socialist development of urban design and architecture in the GDR”, which were approved in May 1982, can only be called a compromise between the positions of its authors. Precise guidance on matters of urban planning which prevailed the preceding documents and first drafts from the Bauakademie was eliminated in favor of more universal statements. Whereas the original target group was professionals, the resulting paper was addressed to a broader public, getting them ready for inner-city (re)construction. In this way, they were only establishing as policy what was already going on in the building sector. There was no significant impact on formal aspects of building and planning practice, as many developments for adapting the prefabrication series were already under way, along with the building industry and planning processes for an application within the existing city. The principles largely backed up these developments, as they were now in line with official GDR policy.

Consequently, the 1980s saw a series of central building developments, which showed not only a shifting paradigm in urban planning but also an altered notion of urbanity and urban life in the GDR. Phenotypically, the projects featured an orientation of the historic urban layout of the respective cities, building within perimeter blocks and a mixture of functions which clearly marked a shift from the modernist planning paradigm of the functional and therefore zoned, low-density city. Genotypically, these projects promoted the centers of the city as a place to live, meeting quotidian demands as well as leisure requirements.⁴⁷ The city centers were therefore deprived of their sole function: places of representation of the regime, as was the directive in the “Sixteen Principles”.

47 Hirsh suggested that developments in smaller cities were planned to attract the intelligentsia. Cf. Hirsh 2013.

In their overall implementation, the guiding principles fell short of their objectives. There has never been holistic and widespread urban renewal in the GDR. Projects with a holistic approach either remained limited to small areas, like in Greifswald, or made to surrender to economic restraints, as in Halle. As a result, many cities, towns and larger villages saw their historic centers largely demolished and rebuilt with residential complexes rather than rehabilitating existing building stock. However, many city centers benefit from these complexes today, as they offer housing in a central location. As they are mostly harmonically implemented in terms of size and urban layout, they appear much less problematic than many developments of central shopping malls and public buildings after 1990.

In their time, the overall premises of the guiding principles were up to date with the urban planning paradigms of the 1980s. This might be best illustrated in Berlin, where the “careful urban renewal” and “critical reconstruction” of IBA 1987 in the West met the “complex reconstruction” in the East—the similarity in terms being accidental in this case as “complex” and “reconstruction” in the East had a conceptual history of their own. The IBA methods were applied to the Eastern districts of Berlin after the reunification of the city⁴⁸, mostly ignorant or unaware of the GDR's own genesis for a model of urban renewal and reconstruction.

48 Cf. Bodenschatz / Polinna 2010: 126.

Conclusion

Architectural discourse surrounding the GDR's turn away from a modernist paradigm was largely driven by urban planning considerations. The discussion and experiments on a change in urban design started earlier than those on architectural design, catalyzing it. In this way, perimeter blocks both preceded and entailed pedimented façades. The successive construction stages of inner-city development in Greifswald illustrate this evolution well, showing modernist, horizontally-designed housing blocks with a traditional urban layout in the first construction stage, and more vertically oriented and playfully decorated in the second and third stages.

With regard to the new guiding principles of 1982, it becomes clear that ideas about a new overall urban concept for the GDR were drafted long before attempts at new official policy. In its draft stages, the guiding principles promised a reinvention of the notion of a socialist city, with aspects of a post-modern urbanism aiming towards lively urbanity. This model of the “city as a whole” no longer saw the city as something to be built anew, but as something that was passed on and had to be renewed by incorporating existing structures. On an ideational level, the understanding of the city was a holistic, historically informed one. On a pragmatical level, the turn towards existing structures was primarily pursued to exploit technical and social infrastructure and to minimize distances between home and work. The economic primacy over architectural and urban planning issues essentially determined the resulting paradigm in 1982, not only because it was primarily intended to serve the fulfilment of the (quantitative) goals of the housing program.

It becomes clear that the principles could have been a real revision of urban planning and urban life. However, most of the aspects which were oriented towards urban development theory in line with the global zeitgeist were eliminated over the course of the revisions. The resulting version appears toothless and uninspired, which can be placed in the prevailing narrative of a GDR that had become visionless towards its end. Fortunately, actors in the building industry were not that visionless, and even in the last years of the GDR they still created interesting inner-city areas that are still accepted as good places to live today. By looking towards a mixed city with public ground floor use, these areas are more accepted by the public than the large residential areas on the outskirts of cities.

As many were designed in a postmodern or neo-historicist style—bordering on the feared “neo-eclecticism”—they might be seen as aesthetically challenged today, but not in terms of their urban form or as a place to live. Some buildings and ensembles have even gained the status as listed monuments, being examples for this last stage of GDR urban design, for their urban contextual integration in existing urban structures and their harmonizing architectural design.⁴⁹

49 Examples being Große Klausstraße in Halle (Saale), Nikolaiviertel in Berlin and the northern area of the Old Town Rostock.

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Figures

Fig. 1–3 Kirsten Angermann.

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