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## Socialist Modernism at Alexanderplatz

MARKUS KIP, DOUGLAS YOUNG and LISA DRUMMOND

### Abstract

*This paper makes the case for a “socialist modernism” to understand the development of Alexanderplatz by the regime of the German Democratic Republic in the 1960s. We propose that the socialist era development on Alexanderplatz was staged as the realization of the modernist vision. At the same time, the 1960s design of Alexanderplatz also includes distinctive ‘socialist’ features, notably the emphasis on centrality and visually dominant tall structures that are in striking contrast to the (Western) high modernist canon. The paper consists of two parts: First we consider the GDR conception of urbanism and the development of the city centre. Alexanderplatz was in many ways the pinnacle of such conception that built on the modernist legacy and imported Soviet ideas of city building. Second, we look at Alexanderplatz through a historical lens. We argue that the GDR development built on the experience of previous modernist development plans for Alexanderplatz in the late 1920s. While Alexanderplatz was to demonstrate the unique socialist capacity to realize the promises of modernity, “Alex,” as the square is colloquially termed, also contrasts with stylizations of the “socialist city” as proposed by Sonia Hirt or Iván Szelényi.*

Berlin, Alexanderplatz, German Democratic Republic, city building

### Zusammenfassung

**Sozialistischer Modernismus am Alexanderplatz**  
*Diese Arbeit spricht sich für das Konzept des „sozialistischen Modernismus“ aus, um die vom Regime der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik realisierte Entwicklung des Alexanderplatzes in den 1960er-Jahren zu verstehen. Unser Ansatz ist, dass die Entwicklung des Alexanderplatzes während der sozialistischen Ära als Verwirklichung einer modernistischen Vision inszeniert wurde. Gleichzeitig beinhaltet die Gestaltung des Alexanderplatzes in den 1960er-Jahren markante „sozialistische“ Merkmale, insbesondere die Hervorhebung von Zentralität und von Höhendominanten, die im auffälligen Kontrast zum hochmodernistischen Kanon (des Westens) stehen. Die Arbeit besteht aus zwei Teilen: Zunächst betrachten wir das städtebauliche Konzept der DDR und die Entwicklung des Stadtzentrums. Der Alexanderplatz war in vielerlei Hinsicht der Höhepunkt eines solchen Konzepts, das auf dem modernistischen Erbe und auf von der Sowjetunion übernommenen Ideen beim Städtebau basierte. In einem zweiten Teil behandeln wir den Alexanderplatz in historischer Hinsicht. Wir argumentieren, dass die Gestaltung durch die DDR auf der Erfahrung vorheriger modernistischer Entwicklungspläne für den Alexanderplatz aus den späten 1920er-Jahren aufbaute. Während der Alexanderplatz die einzigartige sozialistische Fähigkeit, die Versprechungen der Modernität zu verwirklichen, darstellen sollte, hebt sich der „Alex“, wie der Platz im allgemeinen Sprachgebrauch genannt wird, gleichzeitig auch von der Stilisierung der „sozialistischen Stadt“, wie sie von Sonia Hirt und Iván Szelényi vorgeschlagen wurde, ab.*

Berlin, Alexanderplatz, Deutsche Demokratische Republik, Städtebau

## Introduction

This paper on Alexanderplatz, the area in East Berlin reshaped in the 1960s as a central point in the 'Hauptstadt der DDR,' intends to contribute to the conceptualization of architecture and planning in socialist regimes. We make the case for a "socialist modernism" to understand the development of Alexanderplatz undertaken by the regime of the German Democratic Republic<sup>1</sup> (GDR). We argue that high modernist ideas shaped the approach and design, but Alexanderplatz also entails features specific to the socialist regime. Our analysis suggests that Alexanderplatz offers peculiar insights into the GDR's complicated relationship with modernist ideas. Particular strands of modernist and socialist thinking fused to produce this urban assemblage. Generalizations of "socialist urbanism" (HIRT 2008; SZELÉNYI 1996) or "modernism" with the Athens Charter as its paradigm (LE CORBUSIER 1946) fall short of accounting satisfactorily for how Alexanderplatz was fashioned. Our reading of the GDR-version of Alexanderplatz suggests that the socialist era development was staged as the realization of the modernist vision. At the same time, we also highlight distinctive features of the 'socialist' Alexanderplatz, notably the emphasis on centrality and visually dominant tall structures that are in striking contrast to the (Western) high modernist canon.

A reconstruction of the "socialist modernism" at Alexanderplatz appears to be timely as calls to reassess and preserve the "Modernism of the East" ("*Ostmoderne*", refer to BUTTER and HARTUNG 2004; ESCHERICH 2012; T. FLIERL 2008) or "GDR-modernism" ("*DDR-Moderne*", refer to DANESCH 2011; THÖNER and MÜLLER 2006; ASCHENBECK and NIEDENTHAL 2005) have become louder in recent years. In 2013, the head of the building department in Berlin (*Senatsbaudirektorin*), Regula Lüscher, advocated for landmarking GDR buildings at Alexanderplatz

that were poised for demolition based on a (still-existing and only partially implemented) masterplan from 1993.<sup>2</sup> Such announcements were received with controversial discussions about the value of preserving buildings as part of the *DDR-Moderne*.<sup>3</sup> One key to this debate then is the question of what exactly *DDR-Moderne* or *Ostmoderne* is and how to assess its representation in particular buildings or assemblages. Remarkably, in the GDR there was no official talk of such buildings being modernist. In this paper then, we offer some theoretical background for the consideration of the Alexanderplatz development of the GDR as an expression of modernist planning and architecture. Rather than talking about *DDR-* or *Ostmoderne* to qualify its distinctiveness in the register of styles, we suggest the notion of "socialist modernism" to account for the political aspiration of these development efforts and the transnational similarities with other projects in "socialist" countries.

To make our case for "socialist modernism" at Alexanderplatz, we present two analyses: First, we consider the GDR conception of urbanism and the development of the city centre of Berlin in the context of planning and architectural theory at the time. Alexanderplatz was in many ways the pinnacle of GDR urbanism. We argue that the "socialist" planning approach in fact was heavily indebted to the modernist legacy. While the opposition between "socialist" and "modernist" planning that was construed officially in the GDR is oversimplified, so too is the conflation of "socialist" with "modernist" urbanism that authors such as Sonia HIRT, associate professor for Urban Affairs and Planning at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and James C. SCOTT, professor of Political

Science and Anthropology at Yale University (refer to HIRT 2008; SCOTT 2000) propose. Second, we look at Alexanderplatz through a historical lens. We argue that the GDR development built on the experience of previous modernist development plans for Alexanderplatz in the late 1920s. While building on the same promises as the early modernist plans, the GDR plans staged the Alexanderplatz development as a demonstration of the unique socialist capacity to realize these promises.

In the literature on socialist and post-socialist urbanism, some authors comment on the relationship between socialism and modernism. As the introduction to this special issue of *Europa Regional* indicates, debates around this relationship usually consider historically specific forms of socialism, i.e. socialist regimes of the sphere of Soviet influence, and specific forms of modernism, in particular "high modernist" ideas that emerged in the late 1920s and came to fruition in the 1950s to 1970s. (High) modernist ideas are widely considered to be a common ground shared by both sides of the Iron Curtain, a form flexible enough to accommodate various political contents (BODENSCHATZ 1995; KOSSEL 2013; SCOTT 2000). KIP and SGIBNEV (this issue) engage authors who take socialist regimes as the most consistent adherents to high modernist approaches (refer to HIRT 2008). In this vein, BAUMAN (1991, p. 38) views socialism as "modernity's most devout, vigorous and gallant champion". Such arguments, however, are based on a narrow conception of modernism<sup>4</sup> that misses out on the rich and contradictory history of modernist thought and practice. In this paper, we engage some of this historical complexity as relevant to an analysis of the relationship between modernism and socialism. In the following, Alexanderplatz refers to the square itself not the administrative district which is much larger, although at times we consider also

1 The German Democratic Republic came into being in 1949 and came to a symbolic end with the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The country was formally absorbed by the German Federal Republic (West Germany) in 1990.

2 *Berliner Zeitung* 11.4.2013 "Basically, the plan cannot be implemented" ["Im Grunde ist der Plan nicht umsetzbar"], Interview with Regula Lüscher.

3 Such discussions happened in online forums of various daily Berlin newspapers (*Tagesspiegel*, *Berliner Zeitung*, *Berliner Morgenpost*), but also in national papers (*FAZ*, *focus* etc.) as well as in expert forums, such as the "Deutsche Architektur Forum" <http://www.deutsches-architektur-forum.de/forum/showthread.php?t=11165> (accessed online March 18, 2015)

4 The conception of socialism is also narrow in these accounts and worthy of critique, but is not the focus of this study.

spaces in the immediate surroundings of the square.

### Alexanderplatz: A socialist exemplar

In view of its official representation, Alexanderplatz figured as a “socialist exemplar” (WESZKALNYS 2008). At the Third Congress of the Socialist Unity Party [“Sozialistische Einheitspartei – SED”] in 1950, the decision was made to rebuild the city centre including Alexanderplatz.<sup>5</sup>

in connecting the government centre with the rest of the city, including the prestigious and newly-built Stalinallee. Finished in 1969, in time for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, Alexanderplatz was constructed “as a model for other GDR cities and as an expression of a specific form of future socialist society” (WESZKALNYS 2008, p. 253). Claire COLOMB (2007, p. 289) makes a similar assessment when she states that Alexanderplatz was “planned to sym-

fect qualities of daily life. The regime effectively set up high standards against which “the people” were to measure the achievements of the GDR. In the subsequent measuring, one could say, the GDR was found wanting and resultant dissatisfaction brought down the political elite with the Berlin Wall in 1989. Nevertheless, in trying to understand the GDR version of modernism, we argue, the social ideals of modernity must be considered an important aspect beside issues of style and function.



Photograph 1: Alexanderplatz  
Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-H1002-0001-016  
Photographer: Horst Sturm, October 2nd, 1969

The actual development of Alexanderplatz was the result of a long and contorted debate lasting for over a decade about the creation of a central building in the centre (FLIERL 1998a). Whereas initially this building was to function as the height dominant for the city centre, the eventual decision realized this central building as the (flat) Palace of the Republic complemented by the positioning of a new tall building, the television tower, right next to Alexanderplatz. This decision certainly increased the significance of the square within the overall development of the city centre, playing an important part

in connecting the government centre with the rest of the city, including the prestigious and newly-built Stalinallee. Finished in 1969, in time for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, Alexanderplatz was constructed “as a model for other GDR cities and as an expression of a specific form of future socialist society” (WESZKALNYS 2008, p. 253). Claire COLOMB (2007, p. 289) makes a similar assessment when she states that Alexanderplatz was “planned to symbolically display [sic] the spirit of socialism”. And Paul SIGEL (2009, p. 92) speaks of Alexanderplatz as the “stage of the socialist city”. While much of this identification of the redevelopment with socialism happened at a rhetorical level, at the level of architecture, planning and symbolism, as we show below, the GDR employed the register of modernism in their fashioning of “Alex”, as the square is colloquially termed.

By taking up the promise of modernity in the development of Alexanderplatz, the political regime sought to present the socialist approach to city building as superior to capitalist approaches that were seen to have failed to fulfill that promise. A crucial aspect in this endeavour was the social emphasis of modernity, its per-

### GDR conception of urbanism

Urban redevelopments in socialist countries such as the GDR show many similarities with high modernist visions, but also some distinctive features. Officially, the GDR regime disavowed modernism as a bourgeois cultural phenomenon (refer to TSCHESCHNER 2000). Modernism often offered a foil against which the regime’s efforts to build a socialist city were contrasted, as if they were an entirely different endeavour. At the same time, GDR projects shared many ambitions with high modernism as understood in the capitalist West. On both sides, the pretension was to resolve economic misery and alienation, and to embrace the modern promise of growth, development, and improved quality of life.

The contrast between “socialist” and “modernist” conceptions of planning changed significantly between 1945 and the finalization of Alexanderplatz in 1969, oscillating between antagonism and dialectical suspension. The development of Alexanderplatz reflects in significant ways the means by which at a particular moment, the socialist regime sought to distinguish itself against modernist conceptions that were associated with the capitalist West.

Describing the context of the first postwar years in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SOZ) and the GDR, one of the GDR-architects of Alexanderplatz, Dorothea Tscheschner, claims that the modernist Charter of Athens “must be considered a common ideal of German postwar architects”

<sup>5</sup> The heavy war destruction of inner-city areas had facilitated the large-scale planning for a new centre of the socialist state that was to extend roughly from Brandenburg Gate along Unter den Linden across the River Spree into Alexanderplatz.

(TSCHESCHNER 2000, p. 259). In a climate of relative space for cultural experimentation, the first reconstruction and planning efforts in the SOZ and GDR overtly engaged modernist ideas and debates, such as Hans Scharoun's "Collective Plan" ["*Kollektivplan*"], prepared by a group of planners under his direction in 1946. It formed the basis of the 1949 "General Reconstruction Plan" for Berlin ["*Generalaufbauplan*"] that envisioned a decentralized and low-rise city, a linear town along the River Spree. An entirely new traffic grid of highways was to replace the previous concentric organization of streets in the city. The focused attention of this plan was on dwellings organized in cooperatives taking the form of green "urban villages" ["*Stadtdorf*"] of 4-5,000 people. Only a few modernist housing developments following this plan were implemented at that time. One of the best-known, the "Residential-cell Friedrichshain" ["*Wohnzelle Friedrichshain*"], was only partially realized. Its original conception rejected Cartesian ordering principles and any architectural supremacy, and was based on loosely-scattered single housing (HAIN 1993, p. 51).<sup>6</sup>

The Collective Plan of 1946 can be read as a counterpoint to the grandiosity of Speer's plans for Germania (as Berlin refashioned by the Nazi regime was to be renamed). To Scharoun and other post-war architects and planners "modesty became the order of the day" (KIEREN 2000, p. 224). While modest in some respects, the Collective Plan would have so radically altered the urban structure of Berlin that "[t]o actually build this revolutionary vision would have required a centralized political structure as well as new laws that would have granted the state a say in the design of buildings on privately owned land" (CONFURIUS 2000, p. 220). Critics of the plan labelled it socialist (VON BEYME 2000, p. 239). In both the Collective Plan and the General Reconstruction Plan, work and dwelling

were to be functionally related and located as close to one another as possible. In a similar manner to the Athens Charter precepts, the inner city was to be thinned out (also as a strategy to reduce poverty), yet Scharoun's conception of the "city landscape" ["*Stadtlandschaft*"] rejected strict geometric orders of axiality and parallelism and propagated a freer scattering of structures in an open landscape. Nevertheless, the first Prime Minister of the GDR, Otto Grotewohl, took it upon himself to explain the *Generalaufbauplan* using excerpts from the Athens Charter (HAIN 1993, p. 51).

Overtly engaging and experimenting with modernist ideas was a rather short-lived urban experiment that lasted until about 1951, when Soviet decrees instructed architects and planners to implement a particular kind of "socialist realist" urbanism throughout socialist Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, Simone HAIN (1993) suspects that the ongoing competition for dominance between Social Democrats and Communists within the Socialist Unity Party ["*Sozialistische Einheitspartei – SED*"] partially explains this shift. The involvement of many Social Democrats in the General Reconstruction Plan was a thorn in the side of many Communist leaders who thus sought Soviet help to strengthen their position. As a way of distinguishing themselves in this contestation, the Communists emphasized "supra-communal forms of association"<sup>7</sup> (HAIN 1993, p. 53) against "urban villages" espoused by the Social Democrats.<sup>8</sup> Alexanderplatz was to become a key embodiment of this new urbanism.

With the Reconstruction Law ["*Aufbaugesetz*"] of 1950, architecture and planning were conceived of as complementary tasks that had to be brought into unity. Bruno FLIERL (1998b, p. 63) notes that such unity corresponded to widely held high modernist wishes. The *Aufbaugesetz* thus fostered among many planners and

architects hopes of realizing their visions in the context of the GDR, as he explains:

"If nothing else, [planners' and architects'] engagement was based on the hope that under conditions of socialist ownership of land and of the means of production in construction, it would be possible to bring about this unity of planning ["*Städtebau*"] and architecture, of architecture and planning in the context of a complex task, that many architects had always dreamt of since Le Corbusier" (FLIERL 1998b, p. 63).<sup>9</sup>

B. FLIERL points out that this unity was made possible by subjecting both planning and architecture to construction engineering ["*Bauwesen*"] as a branch of economic planning in the GDR. Over time, this subordination created increasing frustration among architects and planners who had to follow bureaucratic stipulations and saw their creative and artistic engagements – another modernist pretense – radically curtailed (FLIERL 1998b, pp. 54-59).

### Planning: The 16 Principles as an alternative to the Athens Charter?

In connection with the Reconstruction Law, the national government also passed the "Principles of Urban Development" ["*Grundsätze des Städtebaus*"] in 1950 which came to be known as the "16 Principles". The GDR planning for Alexanderplatz can be considered a paradigmatic embodiment of some of these principles and their intention to institute a distinctive kind of urbanism. The "16 Principles" were widely believed to be an adaptation of Soviet planning principles and to signal the break from the Athens Charter, which Bruno FLIERL (1998b, p. 59) describes as a "socialist sublation ["*Aufhebung*"]".

Parting ways with the Athens Charter, it should be noted, is not specific to what we term "socialist modernism". The Modernist discussion among planners and

6 In this period, however, the buildings that were actually built were balcony access apartment rows ["*Laubenganghäuser*"] placed in regular arrangements.

7 Quotes from German sources were translated by the authors of the article.

8 Interestingly, one of these communist leaders, Kurt Liebnecht, who supervised the reconstruction of Berlin, criticized the General Reconstruction Plan for not being "modern" ["*unmodern*"] (HAIN 1993, p. 54).

9 Henceforth, when quoting a German source, the translation is ours.

architects in the West also moved on, as evidenced in Eric MUMFORD's documentation of debates within CIAM (the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*), through the 1950s, debates that continued among its former members following that organization's dissolution in 1959 (MUMFORD 2009, 2000). In West Germany, too, the paradigm of the Athens Charter was contested. Edgar SALIN (1970) and Hans Paul BAHRDT (1961) argued against a functionalist understanding of urbanity and for a political and sociologically-informed one. BAHRDT, in particular, advocated for a compact city with built spaces that allow for both withdrawal into the private sphere and engagement with others in the public sphere.

The conceptual engagement with the Athens Charter, however, moved in a different direction in the GDR with the 16 Principles. A closer look at these two documents reveals how the 16 Principles sought to establish a contrasting programme. In terms of formal differences, B. FLIERL (1998b, p. 59) notes that the 16 Principles "were not directed as an appeal by city planners and architects towards the government as [the Athens Charter], but vice versa as an assignment of the government for city planners and architects. And thus they functioned in such fashion: as a charter from top to bottom".

In terms of content, TSCHESCHNER (2000, p. 260) summarizes the differences between the 16 Principles and the Athens Charter as follows: "In contrast to the 'Athens Charter', the [16 Principles] took on traditional ideas of a compact city with closed streets and squares as well as a centre with dominant buildings as the starting point for urban planning." In opposition to modernist conceptions of radical renewal (à la LE CORBUSIER), principle 1<sup>10</sup> emphasized the historical development of cities as the basis of development. Principle 5 affirms the "principle of the organic and the consider-

ation for the historically created structure of the city while abolishing its shortcomings".<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, the GDR-conception for Alexanderplatz saw a historical continuity from the pre-war square.

Calling to mind the Athens Charter's categorization of urban functions, principle 2 stipulated as a goal of development "the harmonious satisfaction of human claims for work, dwelling, culture and recreation". However, in significant contrast to the Athens Charter's functional differentiation of the city into spaces of habitation, leisure, work, and traffic, the 16 Principles' emphasis on "culture" takes the place of "traffic". Edmund Collein, a leading planner for the reconstruction of the city centre in Berlin, in 1955, offers an interesting rationale as to why:

"The street is not just a traffic band, the square not just a traffic hub, the apartment building not a dwelling machine, but street, square and building are in their external appearance expression of a societal-artistic idea" (quoted in HAIN 1993, p. 62).

Thus, at least with respect to theory, the greatest aspiration for Alexanderplatz was its development for culture, more so than its resolution of the traffic chaos that had persisted for decades.

Against the Athens Charter's call for the de-emphasis and thinning of the city centre, principle 6 defines the centre as the "defining core of the city", and "the political centre for the life of its inhabitants. The most important political, administrative and cultural sites are located in the centre". And, of particular concern for the socialist regime: "On central squares, political demonstrations, parades and festivals take place on public holidays" (principle 6). B. FLIERL (1991) notes that such emphasis on centrality is distinctive of the socialist planning approach (in contrast to the capitalist). Centrality was to be expressed symbolically through the architectural design of "dominance" (FLIERL 1991), i.e. in "the

most important and monumental buildings [...that] define the architectural silhouette of the city" (principle 6) as well as through "squares, main avenues and voluptuous buildings in the centre of the city (skyscrapers in the big cities). Squares are the structural basis for urban development" (principle 9). Against the attempt insinuated in the General Reconstruction Plan to dissolve the city into a "tissue" of villages, principle 12 affirms that "[t]o transform the city into a garden is impossible. [...] In the city, life is more urban, in the city periphery or outside of the city, life is more rural". As we show below, "abolishing shortcomings" (principle 5), primarily meant improving the quality of living, habitation, and culture as well as improving traffic circulation without reducing the centre to a traffic hub. The decision to build dwellings in the city centre embraced the idea of "urban living" and "urbanity" with Alexanderplatz as the apex of such ideal.

Alexanderplatz, thus, as a pre-war central square was to keep this role. As a historical central location, its function of centrality was to be further emphasized through architectural and planning designs of "dominance". The development area was large and the adjacent TV tower was, at 368 metres, the tallest structure in Germany. At the time, no other Western German city had seen a building even remotely as high marking the city centre.

### Siblings but not friends: The 16 Principles and the Athens Charter

HAIN (1993) cautions us not to overstate the difference between the Charter of Athens and the "16 Principles", as the political regimes intend us to do. HAIN (1993, p. 60) presents an intriguing genealogy of the Athens Charter and the 16 Principles and claims that the two are distinct outcomes of debates at the 4<sup>th</sup> CIAM (*Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne*) congress in 1933. Originally to be held in Moscow with its impending reconstruction and the Soviet Union as "the most significant field of experimentation" of the modernist movement,

<sup>10</sup> The principles can be found here (in German): <http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/staedte/wiederaufbau-der-staedte/64346/die-16-grundsatz-e-des-staedtebaus> (accessed online September 2, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> The idea of the organic is also clarified by principle 14 emphasizing "the experience of the people embodied in the progressive traditions of the past."

the preparations for the 4<sup>th</sup> CIAM raised political questions among CIAM members about “contentious problems of aesthetics, societal conception and national economics” (HAIN 1993, pp. 49-50). The CIAM secretariat announced a decision, for “reasons of timeliness”, to hold the meeting in Athens. LE CORBUSIER had pushed for CIAM to hold a Congress in Moscow to allow a study of the “more comprehensive Soviet strategies being debated” there (MUMFORD 2000, p. 44), which he contrasted to CIAM’s focus on discrete elements of urbanism. The Soviet debates tended to divide participants into ‘urbanists’ (who favoured concentrated settlements) and ‘disurbanists’ who supported the concept of relatively low density development stretched along transportation routes. (MUMFORD 2000, p. 45) Plans were underway to hold the Congress in Moscow in 1932 (later moved back to 1933), however, as Stalin turned towards neo-classical architecture and a view that considered modernism to be a representation of capitalism, CIAM members in Western Europe turned against the idea of meeting there (MUMFORD 2000, pp. 71-75).

HAIN highlights the fact that the “Athens Charter” was LE CORBUSIER’s personal account (and attempted compromise) of the heated discussions of the 4<sup>th</sup> CIAM congress. The congress itself voted against LE CORBUSIER’s proposal at the end of the meeting in Marseille.<sup>12</sup> At the time, the modernist movement in planning and architecture reveals a much broader approach than LE CORBUSIER’s technocratic account. Several “[CIAM] members who were interested in communism”, as well as CIAM groups from England, Yugoslavia, Spain and Italy rejected LE CORBUSIER’s version for reducing the city to a mere economic enterprise (HAIN 1993, p. 50). In their view, social, political, and cultural questions were left unaddressed in LE CORBUSIER’s technocratic account of four city functions. As HAIN reports, LE CORBUSIER

consciously left out the fifth urban function of civic communication in the city centre, as it was a topic of significant controversy and instead concentrated on “technical” concerns that he believed all CIAM members could agree on irrespective of political commitments.

Left unresolved at the congress, the function of centres soon re-emerged as an issue in the context of the reconstruction of Moscow in the early 1930s. In the Soviet Union this conflict was (authoritatively) settled in the “Principles of the Reconstruction of Moscow” of 1935 that envisioned centres as public spaces for communication and political engagement of citizens, places for collective identification that are marked by very tall structures, visible from far away (HAIN 1993, p. 59). At its following congresses, the CIAM was not able to reconcile the differences. As a result, in 1949 at the 7<sup>th</sup> congress in Bergamo groups from socialist countries left the CIAM. This, undoubtedly, contributed to the political disavowal of modernist terminology within “the East”.

The conflict about centrality broke out again in full force in the case of the reconstruction efforts in Berlin, particularly in the city centre (HAIN 1993, p. 58). As already mentioned, by 1950, the Social Democratic reconstruction plans for East Berlin, clearly derived from the Athens Charter and complemented by Scharoun’s idea of the “city landscape”, saw themselves increasingly cornered by a Communist elite that favoured a solution similar to Moscow’s. In an effort to “resolve” the dispute, a German delegation of architects and planners was sent to Moscow from April 12 to May 25 1950. In collaboration with their Soviet colleagues, and thus under their influence of the official Soviet planning doctrine,<sup>13</sup> this delegation formulated a position paper reflecting the conception of socialist centrality.

Upon returning to the GDR, the group revised their paper into the 16 Principles. Given the peculiar legacy of the 16 Principles, reaching back to the CIAM via Moscow, HAIN (1993, p. 60) nicknames the 16 Principles the “Charter of Moscow”.

In short, while the differences between the Athens Charter and the 16 Principles may be significant, it is something entirely different to claim that the 16 Principles were an overcoming of the modernist ideas. At the same time, the Athens Charter must not be mistaken for a quintessential declaration by the modernist movement, even if we consider CIAM as an, if not the leading, organization of the “modernist movement”. As such, the emphasis of the 16 Principles on the centrality function of cities follows the line of thinking of several former CIAM members and member groups and is consistent with approaches that had considered themselves “modernist”. Certainly by the 1950s, the label “modernist” had become disavowed politically in the GDR and was more or less replaced with “socialist”. Given this legacy going back to a common body of knowledge, we think it is reasonable to use the terminology of modernism to discuss Alexanderplatz, and, in order to do justice to its particular political inflections, to call this particular adaptation “socialist modernism”. In this respect, the distinctive emphasis on centrality and the symbolic language of dominance at Alexanderplatz is not “anti-modernist”, but rather follows a particular modernist legacy that the Athens Charter as well as the socialist regimes themselves had silenced.

It is important to note ongoing and fluid convergences and divergences in the architectural debates of the 1930s – 1950s between positions taken within the Soviet Union (and its sphere of influence) and outside of it among Western members of CIAM. Of particular interest to a consideration of the GDR redevelopment of Alexanderplatz were debates on monumentality, centrality, and the core or heart of the city. In a 1937 essay titled “The Death of the Monument”, Lewis

<sup>12</sup> LE CORBUSIER published “La Charte d’Athènes” in collaboration with the French CIAM group anonymously ten years later in 1943.

<sup>13</sup> On this collaboration, HAIN (1993, p. 55) writes: “During lectures and discussions for days, the Soviet interlocutors of the German delegation, especially the department head of the newly established ministry for urban development, disposed with superiority over the knowledge of highly controversial theoretical developments abroad and in the Soviet Union over the previous two decades.”

Mumford staked out a position against urban monumentality claiming that classical monuments represented “the ‘dead’ body of the traditional city” (MUMFORD 2000, p. 150) and, as such, had no place in a dynamic and progressive city. At the same time, LE CORBUSIER, Sigfried Giedion and Josep Lluís Sert (all key figures in CIAM) became interested in what they called “the new monumentality”, a kind of ‘modern monumentality’ that was expressive of “popular needs and aspirations” of modern society (MUMFORD 2000, p. 150). In 1943, Giedion and Sert published with Fernand Léger “Nine Points of Monumentality”, a manifesto in support of a new approach to urban centrality. They argued that pedestrian civic and cultural centres should be created at a variety of scales in cities (MUMFORD (2000), p. 151). In a scheme that seems to presage the GDR development of Alexanderplatz, LE CORBUSIER proposed in 1945 the rebuilding of the centre of St-Dié in France as a civic centre. This “public gathering space” was to consist of “an open platform with freestanding buildings: a high-rise administrative center, a civic auditorium, a museum designed as a square spiral, a department store, cafés and shops, and a hotel” (MUMFORD 2000, p. 152). The question of the centre of cities was the focus of the 8<sup>th</sup> CIAM held in Hoddesdon, England in 1951 with the theme “The Heart of the City”. In the discussions of centres, sometimes the word “core” was used to denote the physical centrality of a location, while other times “heart” was used to suggest the psychological and emotional significance of a space.

## Architecture

The Soviet Union under Stalin promoted the idea of revitalizing “national architecture” as a way of increasing the popularity of socialist regimes.<sup>14</sup> In 1951, the foundation of the German “Building Academy” [“*Bauakademie*”] in Berlin was

motivated by a “struggle for a new German architecture” against the “formalism” inherent in the “Bauhaus Style” or the “New Objectivity” [“*Neue Sachlichkeit*”] and called for a “reflection on the classical cultural heritage in architecture” (quoted in TSCHESCHNER 2000, p. 261). This kind of socialist classicism rooted in “national building traditions” sought to rebuild Berlin as an “urban metropolis” (HÄUSSERMANN 1996, p. 217). It favoured monumentalism with columns and ornamentation, called “gingerbread-style” [“*Zuckerbäckerstil*”] in German, and proposed a “closed” city structure, with long building facades that formed walls along boulevards as exemplified in the prestigious *Stalinallee* that ran into Alexanderplatz. This period of socialist classicism, however, was also short-lived as the GDR elite had to face the fact that such architecture could not be afforded on a long-term basis (for a history of the first construction section of the *Stalinallee*, refer to BARTETZKY 2009). This, and the political upheaval in the Soviet Union following Stalin’s death in 1953, brought sweeping changes to Soviet ideas about architecture.

Already in 1950 the Soviet Ministry of Construction coined the motto “quicker, cheaper, nicer” to lower housing construction costs by 25 %, a development that was deepened at the Soviet Construction Congress with an official campaign against luxury in 1954, just after Khrushchev had assumed office (BOHN 2014, p. 120). In 1955, following this direction, the First Building Conference [“*Baukonferenz*”] in the GDR was held under the programmatic title: “Building better, faster, and more cheaply”. This certainly also implied a revised understanding of the 16 Principles (from 1950) with their original emphasis on organic, traditional and closed city structures now encompassing more industrially-produced housing complexes laid out with an “open city structure”. The second construction section of the *Stalinallee* leading from Strausberger Platz onto Alexanderplatz thus displays striking differences to the first section. Finished in

1965, these housing complexes were built using industrial production techniques and TSCHESCHNER (2000, p. 265) sees their design as an example of a de facto “return to modernism” in GDR architecture, even though official proclamations continued to label its approach as “socialist”, never “modernist” (Interview TSCHESCHNER 2011).

With respect to Alexanderplatz, TSCHESCHNER herself considers the square to be “homogeneous” and the “architectural high point” of modernism in the GDR (TSCHESCHNER 2000, p. 268). An official 1971 GDR booklet on Alexanderplatz carefully noted the “modern contours” of the newly designed square (GUMMICH 1971). SIGEL (2009) points out the composition of high-rise and low-rise building in Hermann Henselmann’s House of the Teacher and its Congress Hall, located alongside Alexanderplatz, as a constructive engagement with international examples of modernism, including LE CORBUSIER’s design for the UN headquarters in New York, and Oscar Niemeyer’s Capitol in Brasilia.

The redevelopment of Alexanderplatz thus occurred at a particular moment in which on the one side, “Alex” became a key piece in the planning of East Berlin’s city centre as an example of the socialist planning approach, and on the other side, its building style and techniques reflected a “de facto return to modernism”. In this context, the GDR development of Alexanderplatz suggests a dialectical engagement of the socialist regime with the modernist movement that warrants the designation “socialist modernism”. A closer look at the history of Alexanderplatz, with a focus on the period from the 1920s to its finalization in 1969, further details the ways in which the GDR development of Alexanderplatz built on its (high) modernist legacy.

In particular, the inter-war unbuilt planning project for Alexanderplatz served the GDR regime as a backdrop representing capitalism’s failed urbanism. The development of Alexanderplatz thus not only represented the “size and dimension of socialism’s victory” architecturally

<sup>14</sup> HÄUSSERMANN (1996, p. 217) notes on this effort within the GDR: “In 1950, Walter Ulbricht, the later leader of the governing party, proclaimed a return to ‘national traditions’, without any attempt to avoid resemblances to fascist urban development.”



(through the height dominance of the TV tower and the spaciousness of the square and surrounding boulevards) but also its realization. The GDR saw socialism as capable of actually transforming space and realizing the social promise of improved living conditions that had already been articulated in previous development visions for the square. At the same time, the GDR's architectural and planning approach built on the historical legacy of Alexanderplatz as a "modern space" and as a field for modernist intervention. Many stylistic elements of (high) modernist planning were appropriated. This dialectical fashioning of modernism and socialism, however, renders the generalized notions of socialist urbanism used by Iván SZELÉNYI (1996) or Sonia HIRT (2008) inappropriate for a case study such as ours.

### History of Modernity at Alexanderplatz

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Alexanderplatz had been acknowledged as a prime example of a "modern" space. Its peculiar social and spatial characteristics of marginality, diversity, and change, however, have a long history reaching back to the foundation of Berlin in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Originally an intersection of important trade routes just outside of Berlin's

northern medieval city wall, the square that now marks Alexanderplatz functioned as a dynamic place of traffic, commerce and encounter. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the area north of Alexanderplatz was an impoverished neighbourhood, the subproletarian milieu which Alfred DÖBLIN describes in his famous novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. A landmark in the development of modernist literature in Germany, the novel uses Alexanderplatz as a quintessential space of modern experience, detailing the existential struggles of its protagonists to cope with the unintelligibility of the social. Reflecting on people moving around Alexanderplatz, DÖBLIN (1992, orig. 1929, pp. 220-221) writes:

"Who could find out what is happening inside them, a tremendous chapter: [...] To enumerate them all and to describe their destinies is hardly possible, and only in a few cases would this succeed. [...] They have the same equanimity as passengers in an omnibus or in street-cars. [...] The wind scatters chaff over all of them alike."

Wolfgang KIL's (1992) historical account of Alexanderplatz as receptacle for (poor) immigrants coming from the East (Germany and Eastern Europe) offers another

trope for modernity: the migrant uprooted from her conventional, if not traditional surrounding, moving in the hope of a better life.

In the 1920s, the Berlin government targeted "Alex" for redevelopment in an effort to impose a social and physical order. As Erich KONTER (2005, p. 182) comments,

"Alexanderplatz was chosen to present the principles of the modern city as purely as possible: The World City cast in one pour eliminating local history, a homage to modern car traffic, promotion of large-scale ownership of real-estate, exaggerated densification of the built environment, monofunctional concentration of offices and retail areas, displacement of poor inhabitants and functions".

At the time of the competition for the redevelopment of Alexanderplatz in the late 1920s, Martin Wagner, a major advocate of modernist planning, was the chief planner of Berlin. Among his concerns was the "irregularities" of the existent Alexanderplatz which were to be remedied by a "unified architectural design of the entire square" (quoted in BODENSCHATZ 1994, p. 87). In the city as a "machine for work and good living", Alexanderplatz was to become a "clearing-point in a net of veins" determined by the principles of "acceleration, uninterrupted movement [*Stockungslosigkeit*]", clarity" (quoted in JÄHNER 2014). Wagner sought to disentangle car, rail, and pedestrian traffic at different levels, and allow for the expansion of car traffic. According to Wagner's colleague and city councillor for traffic, Ernst Reuter, the opening up of new large streets was to "air the inner city" not only for hygienic reasons, but also for economic development mediated by traffic. The proletarian housing blocks stood in the way, metaphorically and literally. As Wagner explained in the *Deutsche Bauzeitung* in 1934: "The neighbourhoods of the poor and poorest with their decimated spending capacity impede the development of the city and must be removed through a radical scrap-



Photograph 2: Alexanderplatz in 1903  
Source: Wikimedia Commons, CC-PD-Mark



Photograph 3: Panoramic view of ruins and the reconstruction of the two Behrens buildings on Alexanderplatz on March 31, 1950  
Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-S95184, Photographer: Heinz Funck

ping of the desolate dwelling quarters” (quoted in BODENSCHATZ 1994, p. 88). Fully in line with high modernism’s embrace of creative destruction and historical amnesia, Wagner proposed to plan Alexanderplatz as a “world city square” [“Weltstadtplatz”] with a horizon of 25 years: “With respect to the limited lifespan of the world city square, it is also indicated that the buildings surrounding the square possess no enduring economic or architectural value” (quoted in BODENSCHATZ 1994, p. 88).

The world financial crisis and the political developments leading to World War II brought these ambitions to a halt. With the founding of the German Democratic Republic, however, the intention was to continue the pre-war endeavour and to demonstrate its superiority by realizing the modernist principles which had failed under capitalist conditions. In the next section, we scrutinize particular “socialist” aspects of the Alexanderplatz development and compare them to HIRT’s claims about socialist urbanism. Assessing each claim, we will also point to an additional social element of centrality that strikes us as important in order to understand the development of Alexanderplatz in the GDR.

### Striking grandeur and rigid order? Layout and scope of Alexanderplatz

Sonia HIRT (2008, p. 786; following SZELÉNYI 1996) argues that socialist cities display “striking grandeur and rigid order of spaces and buildings, as exhibited in colossal but visually disciplined pu-

blic plazas and massive housing estates. Among his concerns was Iván SZELÉNYI (1996, p. 301) himself mentions Alexanderplatz as an example of this aspect, calling it “indeed an impressive development, which expressed some kind of imperial grandeur and responded to certain ceremonial needs of a socialist society”. On this point, we concur.

In terms of planning, the largesse of the 1960s Alexanderplatz redevelopment ostensibly resembles high modernist planning visions of building the city of the future on a large scale – and from scratch with hardly any concern for former street and building patterns. In the case of Alexanderplatz, the redevelopment virtually erased the historic grid of street and square (only the two buildings by Behrens from the early 1930s remained). Such erasure was facilitated by the heavy damage the area sustained during WWII, but the development also suggests a conscious erasure of history by removing remnants of the built environment.<sup>15</sup> As a radical approach, emphasizing rupture and change (BRAUN 2008, p. 103), the building of Alexanderplatz resembles the kind of high modernist approaches proposed in the architectural competition in 1929 as well as several others in the West.

The scope of the GDR development was wide and included large neighbourhood

areas around the square itself. While such a slash-and-burn approach would be inconsistent with the “principle of the organic”, it may have been accepted nonetheless on the basis of the intense war damage. That the emphasis on symbolic renewal may have been a greater priority than an historically more sensitive account is suggested by the following comment by Paul Verner (quoted in FEIREISS 1994, pp. 24-25), first secretary of the SED-district in Berlin, in 1960:

“In constructing the centre of Berlin, the victorious ideas of socialism, the life of the people in peace, happiness and welfare must be presented in a work of urbanist and architectural art at a large scale so convincingly, that it fills workers with confidence and strength, courage and enthusiasm. The building of the centre requires a clear arrangement and thought-out structure. It must be generous and spacious, have a bulked building development, broad streets and sufficiently large green spaces as urban lungs.”

Unquestionably, the enormous scope of the Alexanderplatz plan dwarfed many modernist planning efforts in the West. It is particularly striking when compared with the proposals of city planners such as Martin Wagner and Ernst Reuter who struggled to transfer private properties into city-ownership – and failed – only thirty years earlier. The realization of Alexanderplatz was made possible by the collectivization of land and real estate in the GDR. In a direct historical comparison

<sup>15</sup> Architectural critic, Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm complains that residential areas to the north of Alexanderplatz, in which the war-damage had largely been repaired, were slated for complete destruction to make way for all-encompassing renewal (Interview Hoffmann-Axthelm 2011).



Photograph 4: View of Alexanderplatz weeks before its inauguration, August 13, 1969

Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-H0813-0026-001

Photographer: Eva Brüggmann

as intended by its socialist builders, the planning of Alexanderplatz under capitalism thus appeared to be too weak to rein in land speculation as the Athens' Charter demanded.

SIGEL (2009) accounts for the spaciousness between buildings in the "Alex" area by way of the enormous scale of the entire planning concept. This spatial composition, as he claims, can be more fully grasped from the observation deck of the adjacent TV tower 203m above the square. In this respect, spaciousness and the height dominance of TV tower and the hotel must be considered complementary. Such a planning approach also speaks to the modernist method of conceiving and judging spaces from several perspectives, arguably giving priority to the perspective from above, "the pilot's" perspective.<sup>16</sup> The generous openness of the plan, with loosely grouped buildings on and around Alexanderplatz can be read as an embodiment of modernist aesthetic ideals, i.e. allowing for sun and ventilation and representing a repudiation of the

pre-modern traditional city street generally, and, specifically, an overcoming of the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions of the pre-war neighbourhood characterized as "without sunlight" (GUMMICH 1971, p. 27). The size of the square increased dramatically from 18,000 sqm to 80,000 sqm and was destined for pedestrians only. In the surrounding neighbourhoods, previous densities of 850 to 1,000 inhabitants per hectare were to be reduced to 500 in entirely new buildings that were to be more efficiently designed in their use of space (BRAUN 2008, p. 103).

As a central traffic hub, too, Alexanderplatz speaks to HIRT's characterization of "striking grandeur" and "rigid order". The development was committed to the modernist emphasis on facilitating traffic flows, including various modes of public transportation, including trains, subways, trams and buses that connected at Alexanderplatz. The square was framed by three major boulevards with up to 6 lanes in each direction, signaling a commitment to car traffic. The scope of this traffic solution clearly proved to be oversized

and exaggerated with respect to its use. In an interview, sociologist and planner, Professor Harald Bodenschatz from the Technical University in Berlin described this situation as "a car-oriented city without cars! [...] You find it everywhere in Eastern Germany. It is very crazy. Totally car-oriented but there are no cars" (Interview BODENSCHATZ 2011). Such an assessment, however, must acknowledge the expectation of economic improvements translating into a proliferation of cars.

### Lack of functional diversity?

Contrary to HIRT's and SZELÉNYI's assertion of a "lack of functional diversity", we contend that this GDR development offers a different picture. B. FLIERL (1998b), for example, contends that while commercial functions at Alexanderplatz were rather de-emphasized compared to city centres in the West, they were not absent. In 1971, the chief architect of the Alexanderplatz redevelopment, Joachim NÄTHER (1971, p. 347), addressed criticisms of Alexanderplatz that claimed "there is too little 'nightlife', luminous advertising and other effects".

"It must be said that we didn't take on the task to reproduce the commerce of entertainment of Kurfürstendamm or the hectic shindig of Place Pigalle. Alex is, in contrast to a capitalist city, no stomping ground for the idle rich but a place for the leisure of working people."

And Herbert Fechner (quoted in GUMMICH 1971, p. 21), Mayor of Berlin, claimed on the occasion of "Alex's" inauguration in 1969:

"In contrast to the centres of many capitals of capitalist countries with 'city-character' and that are all about representation but without real life and function like the well-known parlour ["*gute Stube*"], the reconstruction of central parts of Berlin is about the creation of a lively centre for our population that offers good housing, a diverse spectrum of experiences and opportunities for human

<sup>16</sup> See for example, KUCHENBUCH 2010, p. 243

contacts as well as recreation and relaxation.”

Using similar reasoning, Bruno FLIERL (1991, p. 59) claims that central spaces like Alexanderplatz were primarily designed for “communicative centrality”. This was to be achieved by multifunctional buildings in the city centre for education, culture, leisure, dwelling, commerce, jobs etc.; a mix that was expected to foster urbanity.

Among its diverse functions, Alexanderplatz was the most important traffic hub for people traveling through the city, be it by car or one of the many modes of public transportation. After the modernization of the train station in 1964, 1000 S-Bahn trains and about 40 long-distance trains passed through the train station on a daily basis. But Alexanderplatz also included commerce, culture, gastronomy, and a great number of jobs (particularly office-based) as well as thousands of newly-built dwellings in the immediate surrounding residential areas. To name only the most renowned establishments: The House of the Teacher and its adjacent Congress Hall were sites of conferences and gatherings accommodating some 1,000 visitors. The “Interhotel Stadt Berlin”, a high-rise of 39 floors (123 m), had approximately 2,000 beds and included 11 restaurants, a large ballroom and a casino on the 38<sup>th</sup> floor. The “Centrum Warenhaus” was the largest department store of the GDR with 15,000 sqm of sales floor, able to accommodate up to 60,000 customers daily (BRAUN 2008, p. 115) and offered the most refined assortment of consumer goods in the GDR. A furniture store was located in one of the Behrens buildings. The store “Natasha” offered specialty items from the USSR, right next to a hunting and fishing outfitter (SENATSV ERWALTUNG 2015). The House of the Berlin Publishing Company was the umbrella agency for various publishing houses, including several daily papers. There were also plenty of cafes and restaurants, including the “Alex Grill”, “Alex-treff”, the “Mocca-bar”, and the “Automat”, the first self-serving restaurant in East

Berlin in which guests could get their choice of dish by putting in special coins and then opening the desired glass cabinet (MÜHLBERG 1998). The dance bar “Berliner Kaffeehaus”, one of the few spots in East Berlin open late at night, along with a popular bowling centre completed the range of entertainment in the area (JOCHHEIM 2006, p. 190). The “World Time Clock” as well as the “Fountain of the Peoples’ Friendship” were common meeting points in East Berlin and the landscaping of the area around the TV tower, including the Neptune fountain, was inviting of leisurely activities. The Alexanderplatz itself occasionally hosted large information events, parades, festivals or meetings. In several instances, the subway tunnels were used as galleries to exhibit works of art (BRAUN 2008).

### **An oppressive monotony of styles?**

Characterizing the design of Alexanderplatz as an “oppressive monotony of style” hardly seems appropriate. As we have already seen, Alexanderplatz architect of the GDR era, Dorothea TSCHESCHNER, considers the architectural style at Alexanderplatz “homogeneous”, an outcome of overall planning by a central authority. The designs of individual buildings fit within the overall concept of Alexanderplatz and are ostensibly inspired by a modernist aesthetic of simplicity and sobriety. Nevertheless, each of the new buildings had different architects and allowed for some differentiation in style. In 1960, the Politbüro explicitly asked the chief architects of the Alexanderplatz redevelopment to avoid “monotonous concrete boxes” following complaints from the public (HOLPER and KÄTHER 2003, p. 8). The Alexanderplatz design accommodates various differences and contrasts: the honeycombed facade of the Centrum Warenhaus can be juxtaposed to the linearity of the hotel “Stadt Berlin”; the curtain wall-facade (*Lamellenfassade*) and the flying roof at the base of the House of Travel contrast the flat facade of the House of Electric Industry. On some buildings, parsimonious architectural design

was compensated for with colourful mosaics and friezes. Moreover, the development integrated two original buildings of Behrens from the 1930s that were restored after suffering war damage to become key parts of the assemblage. The housing estates surrounding the Alexanderplatz area also display architectural differences that have often been overlooked after reunification when all housing estates in the GDR were often referred to as “Platte”, assuming that they were all built as prefabricated slab-construction (which in fact is not true for the housing estates at Alexanderplatz).

HIRT’s and SZELÉNYI’s definition of socialist urbanism thus mischaracterizes the planning of “Alex” in terms of its functional and architectural diversity (harmonized but not uniform), but importantly also misses its symbolic emphasis on centrality.

### **From marginality to centrality**

Prior to World War II, Alexanderplatz effectively functioned as a barrier between the bourgeois and imperial city centre (marked by the large palace) in the West, and the impoverished neighbourhoods in the East. The GDR fashioning of “Alex” was to reflect the changing role of “the people”. As a popular space, Alexanderplatz area was marginalized under capitalism, yet in the GDR it was to become the civic centre of the state. There were several scales to this new function as a people’s square. At neighbourhood level, Alexanderplatz became a crucial piece in the upgrading of the Eastern part of the city. This upgrading was also necessary due to the Western parts of the city being cut off through the division of the city. Nevertheless, Tschechner assesses: “For the first time in the urban history of Berlin, the Eastern districts, disdained since time immemorial, created for themselves ‘a bit of equality’ in the context of the inner city” (quoted in BRAUN 2008, p. 113).

In the “Alex” neighbourhoods, several large (eight to eleven-storey) housing estates were built to represent the regime’s high aspirations for socialist living standards across the population. In the

1960s, the housing estates were produced using industrial methods and counted internationally among the technologically most advanced mass housing complexes at the time (LEINAUER 2004, p. 122). The advancement this housing represented for Berliners is even more dramatic in the context of the pre-war experience of overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions in this area. Officially, the GDR presented this upgrading of the “working class area” that previously had been neglected and discriminated against as a reversal of history (GUMMICH 1971). Compared to the density of the pre-war quarters, the spaciousness of the new developments must have appeared immensely liberating, not as the act of urban destruction it was criticized for several decades later.

At an urban level, the emphasis on centrality at Alexanderplatz can also be viewed in its particular solution to the traffic chaos that had been persistent there. Previously Alexanderplatz had been a dense mix of pedestrian, car, and public transport traffic, the dangerousness of which GUMMICH (1971) illustrates with historical accounts of fatal accidents and injuries. By contrast, the new design strictly adhered to the principle of separating pedestrian and car traffic, following LE CORBUSIER’s “Kill the street!”, except on days of demonstrations and parades when the boulevards were closed off to vehicular traffic. This separation of pedestrian, car, and train traffic, intended to improve traffic flows and avoid accidents, amounted to a significant novelty in the design of Alexanderplatz. A negative feature was that the boulevards surrounding the perimeter were not inviting to pedestrian traffic. It was a rather long and difficult endeavour to cross these broad boulevards at street-level or by underground tunnel.

The overcoming of marginality at Alexanderplatz, however, did not only aim at improving conditions for employees, customers, and residents of the area, but also those beyond the confines of the city. Walter Womacka’s frieze on the “House of Travel” (the headquarter of the GDR’s

travel agency and its state-run airline “*Interflug*”) entitled “Humanity overcomes time and space” may be given a symbolic reading beyond its more literal invitation to frontier-crossing travels: a liberation from closed and marginalized quarters towards an engagement with the world on this world city square. Assessing the plans for the centre of Berlin, the editor-in-chief of the official architects’ journal, Kurt MAGRITZ (1959, p. 2), envisioned “a central place of urban, national and international encounters”. In fact, Alexanderplatz became a popular place for leisure visits and encounters for people throughout Germany and in other socialist countries. Several annual large-scale parades and demonstrations, involving tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people throughout the country ended at Alexanderplatz. STANDLEY (2013) details how Alexanderplatz became an important tourist destination for residents of Eastern Europe, particularly in the early 1970s when residents of socialist countries could travel without a visa to the GDR. A particular high point in this context was the 1973 World Youth Festival with its focal events at Alexanderplatz which attracted 8 million visitors from 140 countries to East Berlin (BRAUN 2008, p. 120).

### Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have argued that Alexanderplatz can be considered as a specific example of “socialist modernism”. We have consciously refrained from construing a “type” of socialist modernism and we do not claim that Alexanderplatz is in any way paradigmatic or representative. Instead we have attempted to make sense of the specific influence and confluence of socialist and modernist ideas in the creation of this space. It might be true that “modernism” is a toolbox flexible enough to accommodate various political contents, as James C. SCOTT (2000) argues in his account of LE CORBUSIER’s attempted ingratiation with both capitalist and socialist countries<sup>17</sup>,

or as Elmar KOSSEL (2013) demonstrates in his biographical narrative of architect Hermann Henselmann, who worked for Nazi Germany and later became a chief architect in the GDR. Nevertheless, flexibility should not be mistaken to mean that the outcome is necessarily the same regardless of political context. In this vein, we have discussed some of the modernist peculiarities in the case of Alexanderplatz.

By highlighting the political character of modernism at Alexanderplatz, we hope to contribute to the debates surrounding the preservation of the *DDR*- or *Ostmoderne* which have largely focused on either aesthetic or economic reasoning. While it is understandable that advocates for preservation refrain from using the descriptor “socialist” due to its negative connotation in hegemonic discourses particularly in the first decade following the demise of the GDR, such a strategy also abandons the possibility that these buildings might actually tell us something today about the social life of cities.

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<sup>17</sup> At various stages in his career LE CORBUSIER sought work in Mussolini’s Italy, Vichy France, Vargas’ Brazil, Soviet Moscow and the post-war U.S.

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## Резюме

МАРКУС КИП, ДУГЛАС ЯНГ, ЛИЗА ДРАММОНД

### Социалистический модернизм на Александерплац

В предлагаемой статье концепция «социалистического модернизма» используется для понимания реализации развития Александерплац в 1960-х гг. во времена Германской Демократической Республики. Авторский подход состоит в том, что развитие Александерплац в эпоху социализма было воплощением модернистского замысла. В то же время оформление Александерплац в 1960-х гг. включает отличительные «социалистические» характеристики, в частности, подчёркивание централитета и роли оптически доминирующих высотных зданий, которые находятся в разительном контрасте с традиционными модернистскими канонами (принятыми на Западе). Статья состоит из двух частей. Вначале рассматривается градостроительная концепция ГДР и развитие городского центра. Район Александерплац во многих отношениях был кульминацией концепции, базировавшейся на модернистском наследии и на привнесённых из Советского Союза идеях в области градостроительства. Во второй части статьи Александерплац рассматривается в историческом плане. Авторы полагают, что дизайн Александерплац во времена ГДР был построен на опыте предшествующих модернистских проектов конца 1920-х гг. В то время как Александерплац должна была представлять уникальную способность социализма по воплощению задач современности, «Алекс», как это место именуется в народе, выделяется на фоне стиля «социалистического города» (Sonia Hirt und Iván Szelényi).

Берлин, Александерплац, Германская Демократическая Республика, градостроительство

## Résumé

MARKUS KIP, DOUGLAS YOUNG, LISA DRUMMOND

### Le modernisme socialiste sur l'Alexanderplatz

Cet article plaide en faveur d'un «modernisme socialiste» permettant de comprendre le développement de l'Alexanderplatz sous le régime de la République démocratique d'Allemagne dans les années soixante. Nous supposons que le développement de l'ère socialiste sur l'Alexanderplatz est une réalisation de la vision moderniste. Dans le même temps, le design des années soixante de l'Alexanderplatz comprend également des particularités «socialistes», notamment l'accent mis sur la centralité et la visibilité des hautes structures dominantes qui sont en contraste saisissant avec le canon haut-moderniste (occidental). L'article comprend deux parties: dans un premier temps, nous étudions la conception de l'urbanisme en RDA et l'aménagement du centre-ville. L'Alexanderplatz était à bien des égards l'apogée de ce genre de conception, construite à partir du patrimoine moderniste associé aux idées importées par les Soviétiques en matière de construction de villes. Dans un second temps, nous examinons l'Alexanderplatz à travers le prisme historique. Nous pensons que le développement de la RDA tire parti de l'expérience des précédents plans d'aménagement modernistes réalisés pour l'Alexanderplatz à la fin des années vingt. Alors que le but de l'Alexanderplatz était de démontrer la capacité socialiste unique à réaliser les promesses de modernité, «Alex», nom familier de la place, contraste également avec la stylisation des «villes socialistes», comme le supposent Sonia Hirt ou Iván Szelényi.

Berlin, Alexanderplatz, République démocratique d'Allemagne, urbanisme