

PICTURING SOCIALISM

J. R. JENKINS

PUBLIC ART AND DESIGN IN EAST GERMANY



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Preface

When I moved to eastern Berlin following the fall of the Wall I wanted to understand what the GDR had been. Although the newspapers were full of stories of tragedy and triumph, victims and culprits, this was not what I was looking for. I had many encounters with people from different sections of East German society – those who saw opportunity, others who were melancholic, and some who told me I would never be able to understand. East Berliners sometimes saw me as rather exotic and would ask about the smog in London. Inspired by Barbara Kruger, but long pre-dating Banksy, I spent my time printing and fly-posting prints about the new freedoms around the Mitte district of Eastern Berlin. The poster was hardly the medium of the moment: professors of poster design at Hochschule der Künste in West Berlin where I made my screenprints were retiring and were replaced by specialists in time-based media and computer-aided design. Twenty years later, the GDR seemed to be slipping into history and I decided to move to academic study. By this time, buildings, murals, works of art, interiors, typography, which it had once seemed there was plenty of time to photograph, had disappeared. Even the people seemed to have disappeared. It was the locals who had become exotic.

I chose to research the East German mural because it seemed to me to offer in a single image a way to draw together my interests. I appreciated its poster-like qualities and its claim for a pedagogical impact. This loss and deterioration of visual evidence of East Germany's visual arts in public space was offset by the gain of a historical perspective. The writing that I had been looking for in the early 1990s was developing. David Crowley was at the forefront of that literature and his interest and expertise, alongside that of authority on German design history, Jeremy Aynsley, took me to London. I had once imagined Design History to be a preoccupation with Clarice Cliff teacups and Dieter Rams stereo sets, but at the Royal College of Art I discovered a field which allowed for an understanding of the cultural conditions surrounding design with a broad understanding of what might constitute an act or object of design. The relationship between aesthetics, form and function, between user and maker, between ideas and materiality, experience and intention, questions of economics, production and outcomes – all central to design – were a part of my enquiry, from the object

right up to the planned society itself. The researches for this book taught me much more than my observations could ever have done. But I also learnt much from my years of first-hand experience of post-Wall eastern Germany which I would never have found in the archives.

Acknowledgements

I shall avoid the standard academic ritual of gratitude, with the debts to professors, archivists, award givers and finally the dedication to the inevitably long-suffering family. Spike Milligan, on receiving a lifetime achievement award for comedy in 1996, announced with wicked candour: 'I'm not going to thank anybody, because I did it all on my own!' Indeed, I too did this work all on my own. But I also empathize with Robert Blatchford, author of the 1893 *Merrie England*, who felt obliged to thank everyone who had made him who he was: 'Who taught me to read, and to write? Who suckled me, nursed me, clothed me, fed me, cured me of my fevers and other ailings. Where did I get my ideas from, my thoughts, my power, such as it is, of literary arrangement, form and style . . . What do I owe to personal friends; to schoolmasters, to the people I have rubbed shoulders and touched hands with all these years . . . I can only tell you that these people have made me what I am and have taught me all I know.'

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Glossary and Abbreviations

Terms

Architektur Nationaler

Tradition Architecture of national tradition. Socialist realist style or method of building which sought to appropriate national traditions in the respective country in which it was practised.

Bezirk An administrative district. Fourteen districts were created in the GDR in 1952 in place of the traditional *Länder* or regions.

Bitterfelder Weg Bitterfield Way. A programme set up based on two conferences held at Bitterfeld on 24 April 1959 and 24–25 April 1964. The intention was to bring artists and writers to work in close collaboration with manual workers. The cultural political dictionary of the GDR states that the aim was both to 'deepen the cultural movement of the working class' and to 'orientate socialist artists to the artistic creations of the present mainly through changing their way of life, and their direct participation in the work and life of working people in factories and collectives'.¹ Artist and writers were also responsible for encouraging the creative work of lay people through amateur art circles.

BRD FRG Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) formed in May 1949.

DDR GDR German Democratic Republic (East Germany) founded in October 1949.

Komplexe Umweltgestaltung Complex Environmental Design. Theory and practice for the design of the built environment developed in the 1960s and partially implemented in the 1970s and 1980s.

Neues Bauen New Building. The late 1920s European movement for Modernist architectural developments based on rational principles of economy and functionality, aligned to *Neue Sachlichkeit* in the arts. In Germany the centre for the movement thrived in social democratic administrations, for example Ernst May as city architect in Frankfurt am Main. Other examples are Walter Gropius's 1926 Dessau-Törten estate and Bruno Taut's 1929 Carl-Legien estate in Berlin.

Wohnkomplex (WK) Living Complex (LK). A planned residential area comprising multiple housing blocks, with an infrastructure for daily needs. It was not intended as an overspill but as an independent urban entity with connections to a main city or centre.²

¹*Kulturpolitisches Wörterbuch* (Berlin: Dietz, 1978), 111–12.

²The idea of the Living Complex was introduced by Kurt Junghanns (*Der Wohnkomplex als Planungselement im Staedtebau*, Henschel Verlag, 1954) and developed by Hans Schmidt, 'Der sozialistische Wohnkomplex als Architektur' (*Deutsche Architektur*, 8, 1958).

Institutions and organizations

Names were changed after 1973 in recognition of the separate states of the two Germanys.

AdK Akademie der Künste Academy of the Arts. Institution for support and development of the arts.

BdA Bund deutscher Architekten The Association or Union of German architects, renamed BdA/DDR after 1973.

DBA Deutsche Bauakademie German Building Academy. Central research institute for construction, renamed *Bauakademie der DDR* after 1973. In this text: *Bauakademie*.

Institut für Angewandte Kunst Institute for Applied Arts, Berlin, 1952–63. Research institute for applied arts. The organization went through a number of changes, in name, administration and emphasis, representing a politically significant and gradual shift from craft to design and from arts to industry.

ISA Institut für Städtebau und Architektur Institute for Town Planning and Architecture. Research institute at the *Bauakademie*.

VBKD Verband Bildende Künstler Deutschlands The Association or Union of GDR artists, designers and craftspeople which absorbed independent artists' associations in 1950, when the GDR was founded. Renamed VBK-DDR after 1970.

ZAG Zentrale Arbeitsgruppe der BdA/DDR und VbK/DDR The central working group of the architects' and Artists' Unions, formed in 1968 to improve the theory and quality of architectural art.

Zentralinstitut für Formgestaltung Institute for Design, which replaced the above in 1963 with greater focus on design. From 1972 to 1990 *Amt für*

Industrielle Formgestaltung (AiF), Office for Industrial Design.

Political bodies

BL-SED Bezirksleitung SED The district SED leadership.

KPD Kommunistisches Partei Deutschlands The German communist party before it was merged with the Social Democratic Party to create the SED in 1946.

Politbüro The highest decision-making committee, part of the ZK.

SED Sozialistisches Einheitspartei Socialist Unity Party. The ruling socialist party in the GDR.

ZK Zentralkomitee der SED Central Committee of the SED.

Publications

bk bildende kunst (bk) East German art periodical for painting, graphics, sculpture and architecture, published in the Soviet Occupied Zone (1947–9), relaunched as **Bildende Kunst (BK)** for painting, sculpture, graphics, book art, applied art and craft (VBKD/VBK-DDR 1953–91).

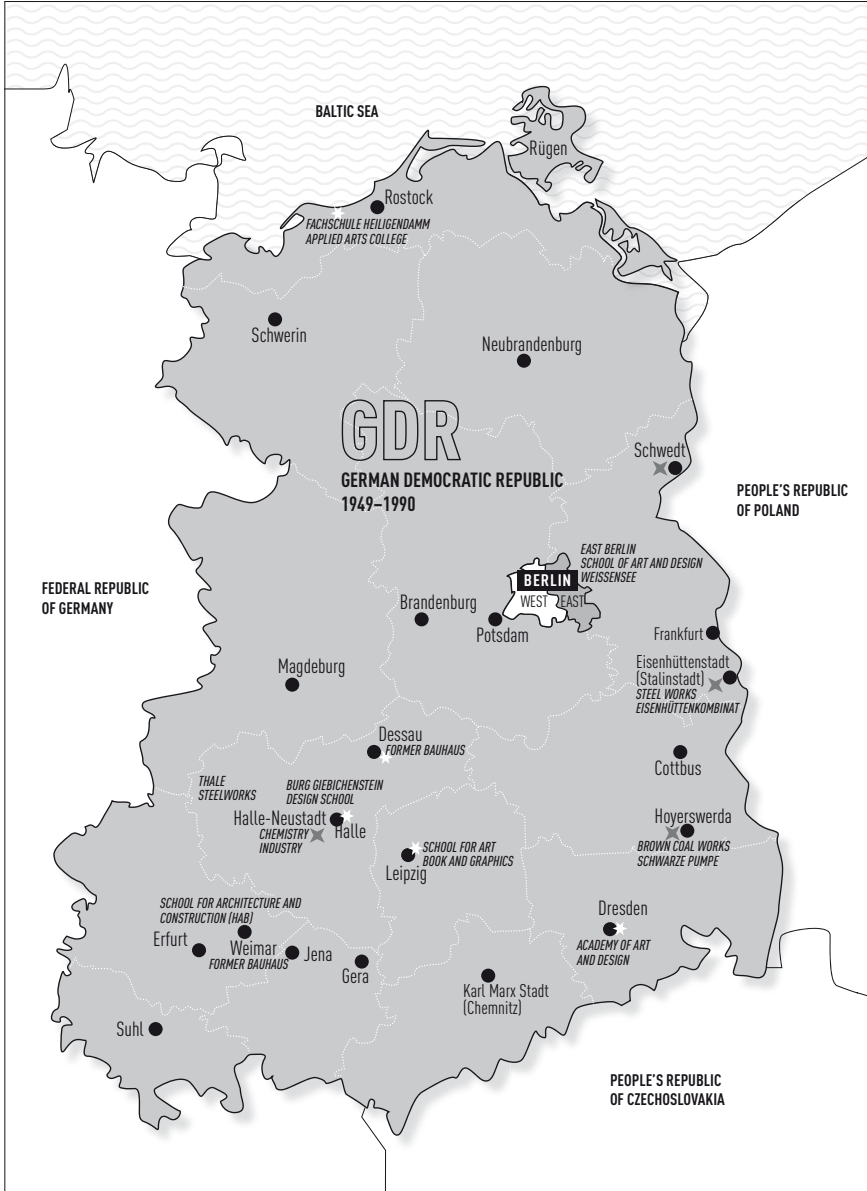
DA Deutsche Architektur East German architecture periodical, renamed **Architektur der DDR (ArchDDR)** in 1973.

Farbe und Raum East German decorators' and colourists' trade magazine.

Form und Zweck / form+zweck (after 1965/2) East German industrial design periodical.

Neue Werbung New Advertising. East German advertising periodical, published by the national advertising agency, DEWAG.

ND Neues Deutschland The official newspaper of the ruling SED.



Map of GDR. © J. R. Jenkins.

Introduction

Nobody much cared about the works of art which remained unhelpfully in the urban environment after German reunification. Paintings could be removed to storage in museum cellars, but public art remained stubbornly in place. Some works, such as a Karl Marx relief on the entrance to Leipzig University, generated local controversy and were eventually removed from public view. Gert Bondzin's monumental *Der Weg der Roten Fahne* (The Path of the Red Flag) (Figures 0.1 and 0.2) on the Dresden *Kulturpalast* was draped with a grey veil. Willi Neubert's enamel frieze *Die Presse* (The Press) at Berlin Alexanderplatz disappeared behind the cladding of a steak house. Most interior works landed in builders' skips or gradually disintegrated. Weeds grew over sculptures. Fountains ran dry. Ceramics were smashed. Tiles fell off mosaics. That was the picture for most of the 1990s. By the year 2000, a few local authorities and other organizations came up with imaginative ways of dealing with such works. Lev Kerbel's colossal Karl Marx bust at the centre of Chemnitz (formerly Karl Marx Stadt) was enclosed in a white box by artists and then reappeared on a credit card. A panel of an enamel mural from Suhl by Willi Sitte was embedded on the facade of a new museum devoted to the artist in Merseberg. The private DDR Museum in Berlin took custody of Ronald Paris's mural from the *Haus der Statistik* on Alexanderplatz, relocating it to their visitor cafe. Artists could only be grateful that their work had found a new existence. But the last ten years, as the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is firmly lodged as *history*, has seen a wider public and scholarly interest in East Germany's architectural art and, in some cases, funds have been found for complete restorations.¹ The declining visibility and disastrous condition of the remaining works in public space² also galvanized their re-evaluation since around 2010, not

¹In 2020-21 'Seventy years of public art in Germany' (both East and West) is marked by the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (BBR) with a symposium, documentation and a new touring exhibition.

²Where works have fallen victim to vandalism or been dispensed with in reconstruction programmes, this amounts to a municipal statement of negative value, given that vandalism of present-day art or monuments would normally be dealt with.

so much as works of art but as markers of place and identity. For example, a renovation project costing around Euro 800,000 completed in 2019³ of Josep Renau's *Die Beziehung des Menschen zu Natur und Technik* (The Relationship of People to Nature and Technology; 1980–4) was medialized largely as an event for the people of Erfurt, as a marker of place and home or 'heimat' and as part of the physical profile of the city, even though the dramatic impact and compelling story of the work attracted international interest, pointing to potential world heritage significance of some GDR architectural art ensembles.⁴ With plenty of caveats about the ideological circumstances of production, some works and architectural ensembles are now accepted as heritage at a local level, as part of the profile of towns and of potential interest to tourists. But in spite of this reappraisal, little has been written on the history or artistic value of public art in East Germany. Although in heritage terms works have been assigned value as 'documents', there is little discourse around what is being documented. Cultural heritage needs to be understood in terms of how social and ideological reproduction occurs through spaces, forms, materials, narratives, iconography and rituals. The integration of works of art within architecture in the GDR was not just intended to cheer up a



Figure 0.1 Detail of Gerhard Bondzin, 'Der Weg der Roten Fahne' on the Kulturpalast (Palace of Culture), Dresden, 1969. Photograph © J.R.Jenkins 2019.

³The mural, now property of the town of Erfurt, was not recognized for preservation until 2008.

⁴'Wandmosaik von Josep Renau kehrt nach Erfurt zurück.' Erfurt.de. 09.12.2019. https://www.erfurt.de/ef/de/service/aktuelles/am/2019/134080.html#slot_100_2



Figure 0.2 *Kulturpalast* (Palace of Culture), architectural collectives Leopold Wiel and Mural: Gerhard Bondzin, 'Der Weg der Roten Fahne', 1969. Photograph Dresden © SLUB / Deutsche Fotothek / Manfred Thonig.

triste landscape, it was at the very heart of the self-understanding of the socialist state. For those involved in shaping the GDR, it seemed from start to finish that the built environment and its art was critical to the success of socialism.

Picturing Socialism, the first history of East German public art in the English language, seeks not to close a gap in research, but to open up this fascinating field. It makes visible, values and evaluates some of the immense variety and qualities of the works of fine art, crafts and design integrated in the built environment from 1945 to 1990. It analyses the critical discourse which assured the place of these works as an integral part of architectural ensembles across the realist, Modernist and potentially postmodernist eras, and it interprets their didactic and decorative functions.

The central argument of this book is that the visual arts in architecture and public space were critical for denoting socialist difference, a crucial endeavour in East Germany, which sought to develop a distinct socialist culture at the same time as competing with its western neighbour, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Socialist difference hinged on establishing a culture and landscape which did not look like a poorer version of the West, but which was a demonstrably socialist social and aesthetic system. This system was socialist realism, established in the Soviet Union since the 1930s and imported into all the newly socialist Eastern European states soon after the start of the Cold War in 1947. Socialist realism contested the idea of the autonomy of the artist or of art, insisting that they

must be ideological, close to the people, close to the Party, and representative of 'typical' life. But by 1954 the cultural polarity through which the fronts of the Cold War had been established was disrupted by the Soviet change in course, with most socialist states then reneging on socialist realism and developing their own forms of Modernism. East Germany differed. Whilst standardized building was favoured by Khrushchev as economical, Modernism as a cultural practice remained off-limits for the GDR political leadership whilst holding a magnetism for many practitioners. This book argues that the polydisciplinary field of the visual arts in the built environment allowed for transitions between competing visions of what socialist architecture and public art should be. Over four decades, the centrality of art in the built environment enabled the development from the realist conception of architecture as an art form (*Baukunst*) to a conception of Complex Environmental Design (*Komplexe Umweltgestaltung*). As the emphasis in urban planning shifted to integrated environmental conceptions of public space in the 1970s – a shift to design – the role for art continued to be defended by anti-functionalists and others concerned about monotony, particularly of standardized housing. This critical position of art as a signifying practice within standardized architecture resulted in the production of prodigious numbers of works of great variety, many of which exhibit an interesting hybrid quality of the socialist realist method and modern language of form.

The critical importance of art and architecture as signifiers of socialism resulted in protracted ideological struggles, but these were not just between practitioners and so-called 'Party ideologues' – a term frequently used in GDR scholarship to suggest a kind of irrational attachment to ideology – but often between influential artists, architects and critics who held differing views on how to adapt to societal and technological change whilst developing socialist culture. The power of the authorities was in its ability to censure, conceal or to sanction. But these were braking mechanisms, not idea-generating mechanisms. The episodes of heavy censure, most notoriously in so-called formalism debates (in 1951 and again in 1962–4), which denigrated works with any hint of an abstracting aesthetic, provided no answers, no guidelines, other than looking towards the Soviet Union. In the words of Horst Stempel, whose Friedrichstrasse station mural was at the centre of the 1951 debate, the attitude of Party functionaries was: 'We know nothing about art, but we will criticise.'⁵ At the same time, leadership of the ruling

⁵Discussion at the School of Art Weissensee on the article by N. Orlow in the *Tägliche Rundschau*, 20 and 21 January 1951. Professor Stempel was paraphrasing comments made by a delegation of Party functionaries dispatched to assess a mural he had painted in Ballenstadt. Stempel claimed that the workers had no problems with the mural, except some did not like the form. 'Besprechung am 26.01.52 über die Artikel von Orlow in der "Täglichen Rundschau"', in Hiltrud Ebert, *Drei Kapitel Weissensee: Dokumente zur Geschichte der Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weissensee, 1946 bis 1957* (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 1996), 150–6, 155.

Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), whilst periodically flexing its muscles and redrawing the boundaries of political virtue, was well aware that it depended on its artists and intelligentsia to substantiate its ideals.

Picturing Socialism employs a chronological and geographical framework to reveal how as well as tensions and disagreement there was also innovation and progress. It travels from Eisenhüttenstadt, Dresden, Berlin and Hoyerswerda in the 1950s, to the debates at the German Building Academy in Berlin and the new socialist landscape of Halle-Neustadt in the 1960s, to the design collective for the East Berlin World Festival Games in 1973, and ends in a form of postmodernism in Rostock in the 1980s. The title *Picturing Socialism* invokes both the process of developing and defining visual representations which contributed to a 'socialist imaginary', as well as their production and situation within the public built environment. The positivist idea pursued in socialist realism that visual or literary texts and artefacts could reflect reality (albeit in a solely affirmative fashion), and thereby communicate ideology and generate predictable responses, could not be contained. The 'social imaginary' (Castoriadis)⁶ in which the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world is created is exactly what is meant by 'picturing' socialism. Socialism was 'pictured' in multiple ways, for many through the historical experience of Weimar Modernism, but also through German traditions, revolutionary art, Mexican muralism, and social and intellectual developments outside the Eastern bloc after 1949. 'Picturing' also describes a more prosaic reality of filling public spaces with art with the expectation of transferring ideals to the people who inhabit them. This is certainly the intention of terms used by the architectural critic Bruno Flierl, the verb *bebildern* and noun *Bekunstung*, who argued that covering buildings with pictures or art deflected from the opportunity to create a reformed, social conception of socialist architecture.⁷

History and parameters of public art in the GDR: An overview

Public art was ubiquitous in the GDR. It was important in bringing the communicative power of art out of the realm of galleries and collectors and into the shared spaces of public life. A lateral function was the colour, orientation and variety which it offered within the built environment. Whilst a public art programme existed in West Germany too, this did not match the scope or ideological

⁶Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), cited in *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, J. B. Thompson (Cambridge: Polity, 1984), 23.

⁷Bruno Flierl, 'Architektur im Prozeß komplexer Umweltgestaltung', *Architektur und bildende Kunst, Komplexe Stadtgestaltung*, Publication of ZAG Seminar, Erfurt 1981 (Berlin: BdA DDR), 12.

significance of public art in the GDR. In 1988, even after budgets for public art had been drastically cut, there were over 3,000 submissions to the X. Art Exhibition in Dresden from across the republic.⁸ The vast majority of public art in the GDR was only known in situ by those who lived and worked in its town centres, housing estates, shops and precincts, canteens and factories, nurseries, playgrounds, schools and universities, political and administrative buildings, health, cultural and sports facilities, hotels, ministries, municipal and trade union buildings. Works of architectural art were also given a national platform at the Dresden art exhibitions, which attracted high visitor numbers and interest from the general public.⁹ But the intense debates over architectural art were largely discourses internal to the GDR and did not feature in the Cold War rivalries played out through exponents of modernity such as prestige architecture, sport, technology and consumer goods.

The changing terminology for the genre reflected disputes over the proper socialist course of art and architecture. In the 1940s and early 1950s *Kunst am Bau* (art on buildings), was used, a term retained in West Germany and reinstated in post-unification Germany. In the socialist realist architecture of the GDR from post-1945 to the mid-1950s, the integration of pictorial elements into the substance of buildings was carried forth from earlier traditions. Simple figures of, for example, working people, farmers, and activities such as music making and reading replaced classical allegories; socialist symbols were integrated into decorative elements; purely ornamental work, geometric and plant-inspired was also common. Techniques in which established artists and craftspeople were already expert such as stone relief, ceramic relief, painted ceramic and *sgraffito*, and bronze for sculptures also represented a continuity of tradition. The term *Wandbild* (mural) could refer to methods which were more applied than traditional painting and frescoes, such as ceramic tiling, reliefs in stone, plaster, brick, or other materials, *Bleiintarsie* (lead intaglio) and mosaics.

The major shift in architectural art came in the 1960s. This was due to several influences, most importantly the drive to 'industrialize' building – in other words, to create prototypes for buildings, especially housing but also schools, nurseries and other functions, which could be serially, and thus economically, reproduced. This came alongside what was termed the 'scientific-technical revolution'

⁸Rolf Walter, 'Zur Entwicklung der architekturbezogene Kunst seit der IX Kunstausstellung der DDR 1982/83', in *Architektur und bildende Kunst 10* (Berlin VBK-DDR, 1988), 77.

⁹Visitor numbers and comments in guest books were recorded and officially analysed. The data for 1988 shows that 78 per cent of visitors were reasonably to very interested in the genre, slightly higher than the figures for industrial design and craft. Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung an der Universität zu Köln, cited in Bjorn Raupach, 'Gewebte Lebensfreude', PhD Dissertation (Paderborn: University of Paderborn, 2016), 106.