

## **The Vindication of the Tenement in East Berlin**

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In contemporary Berlin – like in many other European and North American cities – the once scorned historic industrial districts with warehouses and tenements have become increasingly popular among well-to-do residents and tourists. The image change of these historic neighborhoods has mostly been analyzed as an effect of the German reunification and the introduction of market economy in whole Berlin. I will show that in East Berlin the reinterpretation of the historic urban fabric preceded the introduction of capitalism and already began under the socialist regime. I will demonstrate how the state-sponsored upgrading of an East Berlin inner-city neighborhood in the 1980s relied on a changing understanding of history and historical continuity. At the same time I will show that the urban design policy before and after the German reunification was more similar than is usually conceded.

My example is the Husemannstraße in the historic working class district of Prenzlauer Berg in East Berlin. The buildings on Husemannstraße are typical examples of so-called *Mietskasernen* (rental barracks). The *Mietskaserne* is a type of tenement from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with five-stories, an ornamented stucco façade towards the street, and backyards with barns and workshops in the inner parts of the block. **(pictures)** Such tenements were built all over Germany in the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but in Berlin they ended up forming a particular type. At the time, merchants or civil servants would live in the spacious front buildings, while factory workers would live in the small and often overcrowded backyard apartments. For most of its existence, these tenements were poorly regarded among progressive politicians and social reformers. In the 1960s, both East and West Berlin had sponsored the state-sanctioned demolition of tenements. This policy, dubbed by its critics the “second destruction of Berlin,” was fueled both by the promise of a “new Berlin” and by the notoriously bad reputation of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture. It destroyed significant portions of the tenement areas, which despite wartime destructions in the 1950s still comprised more than two thirds of Berlin’s urban fabric. The rage against the “tenement city” was rooted in a persistent cultural construct that connected the architectural characteristics of

these buildings to the social misery and political oppression of the early industrial era. This negative perception changed gradually in the 1970s. In the decades that followed, the remaining tenements were preserved and increasingly refurbished – a policy that in the West became known as *behutsame Stadterneuerung* (“careful urban renewal”). The word was coined by the International Building Exhibition IBA in the early 1980s. In the East it was known as *komplexe Rekonstruktion* (“complex reconstruction”). In addition, tenements also served as models for a new, historically-conscious architecture. In East Germany, the renaissance of the historic neighborhoods was limited to a few examples. It nevertheless challenges the standard Western view that East German construction policy – as the Baedeker tour guide put it – was exclusively aimed at “completing the job that the bombers of the Second World War had left unfinished” and destroying the historic neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

In East Berlin, the “postmodern turn” towards the historic city had its peak in 1987 with the celebration of Berlin’s 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Only two years before the unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall, the socialist leaders planned to reconstruct a city center that was simultaneously socialist and historic. As a result, the Sophienstraße was remodeled as a “historic craftsmen’s district” with guild signs and period shop windows. **(picture)** At the site of Berlin’s medieval nucleus, the Nikolaiviertel (Nikolai Quarter) was reconstructed as a prefabricated concrete slab version of a historic old town **(picture)** The boulevard Friedrichstraße, which at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been the hub of Berlin’s nightlife, was rebuilt with façades that reproduced the once scorned slanted roofs, bay windows, and backyards, to house shopping centers and restaurants. **(picture)** And in the working class district Prenzlauer Berg, the Husemannstraße was remodeled as an open-air museum for the living conditions of the period around 1900. **(picture)**.

It was Konrad Naumann’s idea to restore a portion of Berlin’s tenement fabric to show the everyday life at the turn of the century. Naumann was the First Secretary of the Berlin District

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<sup>1</sup> The Baedeker tour guide for Berlin writes under the entry “Prenzlauer Berg”: “What the bombs were not able to complete was ‘accomplished’ by the East Berlin city administration...” (“Was jedoch die Bomben nicht schafften, ‘gelang’ dem Ost-Berliner Magistrat...”) Baedeker Berlin, 11<sup>th</sup> edition Ostfildern: Mairs, 1997, p 209

Direction of the ruling Socialist Unity Party and thus the leading party official for the capital of the German Democratic Republic. He also was a Politburo member. In practice his influence on Berlin construction outweighed that of East Berlin's mayor and was only surpassed by that of the top leaders Erich Honecker and Günter Mittag.<sup>2</sup> In October 1983 the local party officials at the Prenzlauer Berg district deferred to Naumann's suggestion and proposed a two-block area of Husemannstraße district as the site for the reconstruction project. It comprised a total of 30 buildings, which were all built between 1870 and 1899. The Prenzlauer Berg was not only the best conserved of East Berlin's historic working class districts, it was also famous for the liveliest art scene in East Germany. As a result of Naumann's suggestions, the remodeling was carried out between 1984 and 1987. Façades, doors and windows were remodeled "according to the Old Berlin character."<sup>3</sup> Selected apartments were repaired and modernized, a measure which, following the standards of the time, included the repair of roofs and chimneys, the construction of showers or bathrooms, and the repair of the coal stoves, but not the construction of central heating.<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the guidelines of the Socialist Unity Party the remodeling aimed at reinforcing the "Old Berlin character" of the street: Façades, business signs and shop decorations were painted in a turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century style, and gas lanterns, placard columns, and a water pump were crafted according to historic models. In addition, the streets were adorned with benches and concrete planters. Along the sidewalks several street cafés and restaurants opened, which were an important attraction in the gastronomically undersupplied socialist capital.<sup>5</sup> Party leader Konrad Naumann had also called for period shops where the passer-by could watch craftsmen at work; accordingly a scissors grinder, a barber, a tailor, a potter, a florist, and a drape maker were established.

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<sup>2</sup> that becomes apparent from a letter of the First Secretary of the Prenzlauer Berg Township Direction of the Socialist Unity Party Ernst Heinz, dated October 12, 1983. LAB *C Rep* 902, 5440

<sup>3</sup> "dem Altberliner Charakter entsprechend" *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Krause, Dorothea e.a., *Rekonstruktion im Stil der Jahrhundertwende – Husemannstraße in Berlin*, ArchDDR 10/1987 p 14

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p 14-16.

The official resolution, passed by the local East Berlin on February 29, 1984, confirmed the goal "to preserve the Old Berlin character of this neighborhood."<sup>6</sup> In addition, it related the significance of this historic street to the founding narrative of the socialist state through the reference to the local workers' movement: "[In the Husemannstraße neighborhood] the political activism of the marginal groups of the proletarians and their sympathizers evolved. The inhabitants developed forms of mutual help to ail the misery."<sup>7</sup> The significance was underscored with the reference to two local celebrities whose dwelling unfortunately was destroyed in the war: The sculptor and draughtswoman Käthe Kollwitz who in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century depicted the blight of the local working class on expressive drawings and whose bronze portray adorned the Kollwitzplatz adjacent to the Husemannstraße, and her husband, the "doctor of the poor" and socialist activist Karl Kollwitz. The Husemannstraße project was thus conceived as both a housing improvement program and a theatrical enterprise with recreational and educational purpose. The resolution also aimed at the "biggest possible truth to the historic model" as a fundamental principle of the project, but at the same time, the proposition cut back expenses at the cost of historic accuracy.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the stucco ornaments were only restored on the front façades but not on secluded locations such as throughways and backyards walls.<sup>9</sup> In some cases stucco ornaments on front façades were substituted by simplified, and thus cheaper, "modern versions."<sup>10</sup>

The remodeling was closely connected with a re-interpretation of history. This became most obvious from the Historic Museum. It was established as a branch of the Berlin local history museum Märkisches Museum at the groundfloor of the building Husemannstraße No. 12 and bore the official name *Museum Berliner Arbeiterleben um 1900* (Museum of Berlin Workers'

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<sup>6</sup> "Der Magistratsbeschluss vom 29.2.1984 – Konzeption zur Gestaltung der Husemannstraße – hat als Zielstellung, im denkmalpflegerischen Sinn, unter Wahrung des Altberliner Charakters dieses Wohngebiets die Wohnungen zu modernisieren und instandzuhalten." bill for the Prenzlauer Berg city district council sitting on December 12, 1984, LAB C Rep 134-02-02, 1333

<sup>7</sup> "(Hier)... bildete sich die politisch aktive Teilnahme der Randgruppen des Proletariats und seiner Sympathisanten in solchen Wohngebieten heraus. Es entwickelten sich Formen der gegenseitigen Hilfe zur Linderung des Elends." Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p 2 and p 8

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p 2 and p 10.

<sup>10</sup> "aus produktionstechnischen Gründen" Ibid. p 10

Life around 1900).<sup>11</sup> The museum showed an original working class apartment from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with living room, kitchen, and sleeping room. The walls were adorned with historic pictures and documents of historic working class life in beer halls, garden plots, and labor union houses. The museum opened on Labor Day (May 1) 1987 with the exhibit *Anfänge der Arbeiterfreizeit* (The beginnings of workers' leisure time).<sup>12</sup> The exhibit was conceptualized by the "Research Group on Cultural History," which was directed by historian Dietrich Mühlberg. Mühlberg, who since 1976 was a tenured professor of cultural theory at East Berlin's Humboldt University, had extensively worked on the cultural history of the German working class.<sup>13</sup> Mühlberg's approach can be read from his 1983 publication *Arbeiterleben um 1900* (Workers' life around 1900), which he published in close connection with the Husemannstraße project.<sup>14</sup> Next to misery and oppression, Mühlberg mentioned numerous positive aspects of workers' lives at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as a higher living standard and higher degree of individual freedom compared to that of the working classes in rural areas.<sup>15</sup> In the preface of the book, he straightforwardly asked "why is the working class life around 1900 interesting?" and gave two answers. On the one hand, "a simple comparison [of the workers' life around 1900] with the life in our society stresses the advantages of socialism."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand "this history also contains the sprouts of the new, the preconditions of the socialist way of life."<sup>17</sup> Mühlberg's work documents an important step in the re-evaluation of Berlin's historic tenements. In the 1960s and 1970s, the moment of comprehensive rupture with the pre-socialist period of capitalist oppression was stressed, and its architectural remainders were deemed unworthy of preservation. Now, the pre-socialist and

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<sup>11</sup> Rat des Stadtbezirks Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg, Kreisplankommission, „Vorschlag zur Nutzung der Erdgeschosszone in der Husemannstr“ vom 6.1.1984. LAB C Rep 902, 5440

<sup>12</sup> The Emil-Fischer-Heimatmuseum also edited a catalog. Böhm, Tobias und Udo Gösswald (eds. 1989), *Anfänge der Arbeiterfreizeit*, Berlin

<sup>13</sup> The research on working class history was the explicit purpose of Mühlberg's Lehrstuhl. Cp. Mühlberg, Dietrich (ed.1983, Autorenkollektiv) *Arbeiterleben in Berlin um 1900*. Berlin/DDR: Dietz P 185

<sup>14</sup> Mühlberg, Dietrich (ed.1983, Autorenkollektiv) *Arbeiterleben in Berlin um 1900*. Berlin/DDR: Dietz

<sup>15</sup> Other than bourgeois, workers usually chose their partners because they loved them, since economic reasons did not count for the poor, p. 91, other than rural workers the urban proletarians did have some spare time which they could share with social activities, p 132-160, proletarians developed forms of organization and class consciousness p 103-122.

<sup>16</sup> "[Es] läßt ein einfacher Vergleich mit dem Leben in unserer Gesellschaft die Vorzüge des Sozialismus plastisch hervortreten." Ibid. p 6

<sup>17</sup> "Diese Geschichte enthält auch die Keime des Neuen, Voraussetzung sozialistischer Lebensweise." Ibid p. 6.

the socialist periods were seen as a historical continuity. Thus the pre-socialist architecture was needed to document historic progress.

Also architect Dorothea Krause, who was the project manager of the Husemannstraße remodeling, took a similar approach. In an journal article on her project, she pointed out that working class life at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not only determined by “murderous work schedules, overcrowding, and social insecurity” but also by solidarity between workers and by the familiarity of the residential neighborhood. According to Krause, the acknowledgment of these positive aspects was only made possible through the historic distance and the victory of socialism, which finally did away with the oppression. Therefore, the tenements could now be disassociated from capitalist oppression and appreciated merely for their beautiful forms. Krause accentuated that the “ornamented façades of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century...do not have the objective to deceive and to hide the social blight.”<sup>18</sup> Like Mühlberg’s book, Krause’s article thus reflects the thematic shift. Since the tenements ceased to represent the social and political system in which they were built they could be reevaluated and filled with a different meaning. Both Krause’s and Mühlberg’s arguments are not limited to a socialist ideology. If one substitutes “capitalist oppression” with “misery of the early industrial age” and “socialism” with “modernization,” their ideas appear surprisingly similar to the beliefs that at the time were upheld in Western countries.

Critics dubbed the Husemannstraße “a socialist version of Main Street at Disneyland.” However, it proved to be an instantaneous success. Despite frequent supply shortages the weaver’s and tailor’s shops became popular gift stores, and in front of the bars “Budike” and “1900” patrons lined up every night waiting to be granted access to the limited seats (**picture**). Also the West Berlin newspapers applauded the project. Journalist Sonja Gladigau of the liberal Volksblatt commended that to her great surprise the “movie backdrop” was able to generate an authentic street life and that the Husemannstraße predominantly attracted a

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<sup>18</sup> “Die ...verzierten Fassaden der Gründerzeit...haben heutzutage nicht mehr die Aufgabe, etwas vorzutäuschen und das Wohnungselend zu verbergen.” Ibid. p. 16

young, artsy, and often local crowd.<sup>19</sup> Even the conservative Berliner Morgenpost, which was usually extremely critical with East Berlin prestige projects, called the street “an attraction for both locals and visitors.”<sup>20</sup> The enthusiasm has to be understood in context. The Husemannstraße offered as much consumerism as the socialist state was willing to permit. To the daily visitors – most of who were Berliners rather than tourists – the references to class struggle and historic determinism was as distant as postwar small town life is to the visitors of Disneyland. Most visitors were not disturbed by the poor quality of the remodeling or by the dubious claim to authenticity. Rather than the artificiality of the historic references the main criticism against the Husemannstraße was that in view of thousands of dilapidating façades in Berlin’s inner city the remodeling of thirty buildings was a drop in the ocean.<sup>21</sup>

Only for a brief period after the end of the GDR the Husemannstraße was reviled. In August 1992 a piece of stucco spectacularly fell on a café terrace and heavily hurt a woman. The sidewalks subsequently had to be protected by graceless wooden awnings. **(picture)** The West Berlin press welcomed that event to rage against the miserable quality of East German construction work and the pretentiousness of Erich Honecker, who had been trained as a roofer but as the dictator of a Workers’ and Farmers’ State apparently was not even able to get a decent construction job done.<sup>22</sup> The unconcealed sarcasm in those articles suggests that for many West German journalists writing immediately after the German reunification the constructive flaws of the Husemannstraße embodied the failure of the socialist system as such. Thus to them the law-suit that the formerly state-owned housing company filed against its contractors in 1994 was a settling of accounts with the late East German state as a whole. Once the façades were renovated again in the late 1990s and the wooden sidewalk protections

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<sup>19</sup> Sonja Gladigau, Restaurierte Husemannstraße für Filmarbeiten immer beliebter, in Volksblatt July 31, 1988

<sup>20</sup> “Attraktion für Einheimische und Touristen” K. G., Attraktion in Ost-Berlin: die Husemannstraße, in Berliner Morgenpost November 4, 1988

<sup>21</sup> The design of the Husemannstrasse is also an example for the inefficiency of East German bureaucracy. Less than 30 buildings were modernized, yet scores and scores of letters, memorandums, studies, and opinions were produced over the course of three years. And all repeat more or less the same statements.

<sup>22</sup> see Adrienne Kömmler, Husemannstraße: “Pfuscher am Stuck” bedroht Passanten, in Berliner Morgenpost April 25, 1993 Ute Semkat, Der Putz bröckelt gefährlich, in Die Welt July 21, 1993 Uta Keseling, Kühle Blonde unter Bretterdächern: An der Husemannstraße bröckelt der Putz, in Berliner Morgenpost April 28, 1996

disappeared, the criticism waned and the commercial success increased. The rising rent level now forced low-profit shops such as the shoemaker, the barber, and the drugstore to move. The "Museum of Berlin Workers' Life around 1900" and the "Barber's Museum" closed and the remaining stores were brushed up to the aesthetic level of a West German commercial street. Most buildings were remodeled again according to meet the *Weststandard* – the West German standard for modernizations, which included for example central heating instead of individual coal stoves.

The style of the Husemannstraße nevertheless remained the same. Contrary to most other once prestigious architectural projects from the times of the German Democratic Republic, the Husemannstraße design was accepted without reservations. The wood carver and the basket weaver perfectly matched the boutiques and galleries that opened there after capitalism had taken over. Unlike most "modern" East German restaurants, the Old-Berlin-style bars were well-liked by the numerous West German tourists. At the turn of the millennium, the Husemannstraße was the heart of a gentrified historic neighborhood. **(picture)** In the whole area, the ornamented stucco façades were carefully restored. Well-to-do couples fill the streets and café terraces and the backyard buildings are rented out to dentists and law firms. Real estate agents explain the ongoing demand for rentals in the area with the "neighborhood atmosphere," which especially attracts young professionals. The area thrived to the point that now very few of the Western visitors can imagine that they are admiring a showcase project from the times of the late German Democratic Republic.

Like the other architectural projects that were carried out for Berlin's 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1987, the Husemannstraße conveys an image of socialist urban design that is quite different from the cliché of bleak standardized highrise buildings. The Husemannstraße is garish, brash, and jarring. At the same time, it exemplifies a shift in East German design policy that bore more parallels to West German urban design policy than is usually conceded. Projecting a reconfigured interpretation of history on the screen of a historic neighborhood.



The Husemannstraße remodeling – like other 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary projects in East Berlin – also anticipated an increasing polarization of society which is usually associated with postmodern capitalism in Western countries. The East German laws guaranteed that the Husemannstraße tenants could remain in their apartments and after the renovation enjoy extraordinarily low rents. At the same time renovated apartments that happened to be evacuated were preferentially allocated to privileged members of the East German society.<sup>23</sup> Thus the resident population was exchanged, even though the exchange went much slower than comparable gentrification processes in capitalist countries. It nevertheless exemplified a tendency towards an acceptance of the increasingly unequal housing conditions – in spite of the official rhetoric of egalitarianism.

The Husemannstraße project also anticipated the reconfiguration of urban history and its instrumentalization for entertainment purposes. The remodeling converted the tenements into backdrops for a reenactment of nostalgic memories. This combination of history and entertainment touched the nerve of the time. Planned to promote the socialist regime, the images of “Old Berlin” rather promoted the neighborhood. Thus the allegedly socialist redesign of the Husemannstraße significantly contributed to the gentrification of the area in the 1990s. In this sense, urban design before and after the German reunification has to be seen as a continuous development rather than a break.

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<sup>23</sup> Hansjörg Buck, *Wohnungsversorgung, Stadtgestaltung und Stadtverfall*, in Eberhard Kuhr, ed., *Die wirtschaftliche und ökologische Situation der DDR in den 80er Jahren* (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1996) p 76