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THE NEW TOWNS AROUND ROSTOCK: Housing as Political Policy in the German Democratic Republic

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Over the past twenty years the government of the GDR have patiently and persistently pursued a policy of creating "new communities" that address the need for improved housing, while at the same time responding to a specific political/economic strategy. The new communities around Rostock, on the Baltic coast, are prototypical of this socio/architectural experiment. The article is a critical review of these particular communities, from both an architectural and social point of view. It examines the political motivation behind their creation, describes their architectonic precedent and form and concludes with a criticism of both the technical and social character of the communities. An examination of these communities, which continue to be built, is instructive, both in terms of technical quality and social implications.

The specter of poor and deficient housing stock is often thought of as one that afflicts only developing nations of the third world. This assumption is too simplistic in its generalized description of world housing problems. While such fundamental issues are more readily apparent in the Third World they are not solely restricted to such societies. In his recent address to mark the inauguration of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, the Secretary-General of the United Nations reiterated this point:

The problem of shelter, if unsolved, poses a threat, both immediate and long term, to the welfare of peoples and the development prospects of the international community as a whole. Homelessness and poor housing conditions, though most appalling in the bursting urban centers of the developing countries, constitute a global problem affecting rich and poor countries alike.
(Habitat News 1987).

The industrialized nations of Europe have continued to face this enormously critical social problem since the vast destruction of the second world war diminished the available housing stock by as much as fifty per cent in some instances. Even some forty years later the problem still persists and continues to pose grave social problems. It is therefore, very instructive to examine more closely a planning and architectural rebuilding program that has been actively in progress in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) since the 1960s.

In 1949, East Germany was confronted with the grim reality of the destruction caused by the ravages of the Second World War. Over 45 per cent of the industrial installations had been destroyed, 70 per cent of the power generating capacity either was destroyed or damaged severely and 35 per cent of the urban housing stock had been demolished in the intensive air raids that marked the last years of the war. However, because of the GDR's own economic goals as well as the reparations demanded by the Soviet Union, the GDR concentrated its financial resources on construction primarily in the industrial sector. Although some reconstruction of the damaged houses began immediately, there were few funds allocated for new housing or for modernizing the existing housing stock. As late as 1981, only 35 per cent of the houses were built after 1945; 46 per cent of all housing was built before 1919 while 19 per cent was constructed between 1919 and 1945. In those houses constructed before 1918, only 5 per cent had central heating and only 25 per cent of the units had an inner toilet or bath. In 1981, only 25 per cent of the housing in the GDR had central heating. (Melzer 1985)

Even with the remaining shortages of apartments for single adults and young couples, the availability of housing has increased enormously in the last fifteen years. There had been many complaints about the condition of the housing and even the low birth rate was in part attributed to the poor housing conditions. Furthermore, the regime was unable to sufficiently increase the mobility of its workforce and attract workers to an industrially developing area if housing arrangements were unsatisfactory. It was widely recognized that unless the quantity and quality of the housing improved quickly, the efficiency of the system and even the support for the political system would be severely affected.

The long-term housing program adopted in 1971 by the Eighth Party Congress (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) included construction of new housing and modernizing of old apartments; the goal was to provide decent housing for all citizens by 1990 and to eliminate housing as a social problem in the GDR. This would significantly improve the living conditions for some 10 million people, or 60% of the GDR's total population within two decades. This was, and still is, a major challenge to the designers and construction industry of the GDR. At the time of writing, the overall plan is well under way and current estimates put the completion

date for these target figures at 1995. While the program of housing improvement has been designed to address problems in the GDR as a whole, certain specific areas have been designated as principle development areas. Notable among these are the new communities that have been, and continue to be, built in the Rostock area in the northern part of the country. It is these new communities that house over 100,000 people that are the subject of this article.

Rostock is an ancient town whose history began in the 13th century when colonists from the west of the Elbe founded a new settlement on the banks of the Warnow. Next to the even older Slavic community of Roztoc (Broadening of the River) they also established a trading and merchant community on a nearby hill of the same name. This was granted municipal rights by Lubeck in 1218. During the following three centuries Rostock flourished under the protection of the Hanseatic League and its economic strength and political influence grew with the founding of the University in 1419. As a consequence of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) the power of the league and therefore Rostock declined. The city was now under the control of the autocratic Meklenberg rulers. In the 19th century the build-up of the largest shipping fleet in the Baltic, which was based in Rostock, created a high level of prosperity; but unable to face the fierce competition that existed, the size and significance of this fleet declined during the 1890's. Under Nazi rule, Rostock became a center of armaments production, with large factories for the manufacture of both military aircraft and ships.

About a third of Rostock was destroyed during World War II and by 1945 the pre-war population of 120,000 had diminished to fewer than 90,000 inhabitants. (Elsner 1980) The entire industrial base had been almost eliminated. After 1945 the shipping industry was revitalized and in the four decades since the end of World War II it has grown to become the largest seaport in the GDR, with a vital deep sea fishing fleet and extensive shipbuilding facilities.

The new towns around Rostock, (Figure 1) a two and a half hour ride from Berlin towards the Baltic sea, are considered to be one of the most successful attempts at creating an acceptable living environment in the GDR. Sixty percent of the population of 250,000 now lives in new residential areas of 20,000-30,000 each, begun in 1962 between the old city of Rostock and Warnemunde, a sea port and resort. All apartments are equipped with central heating and inner bathrooms. Erected on the primarily agricultural villages of Lutten Klein, Evershagen,

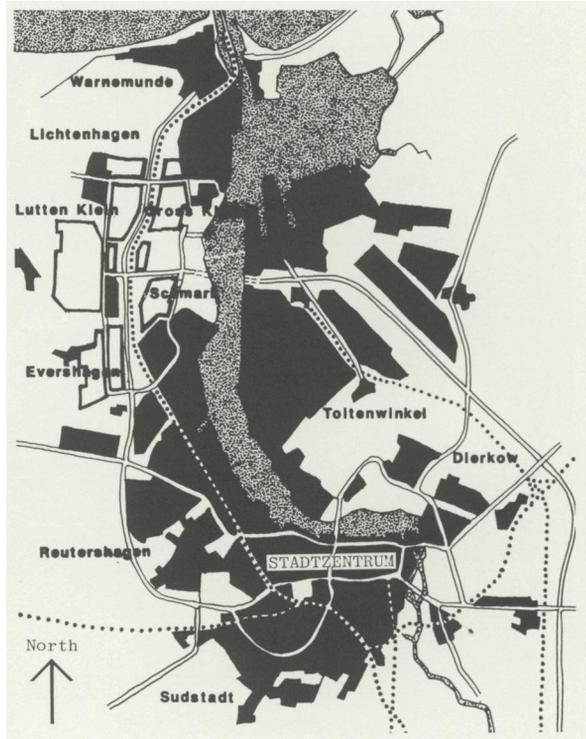


Figure 1. Locations of new communities.



Figure 2. Apartment house entrance in Evershagen.



Figure 3. Central spine in Evershagen.

Lichtenhagen, Schmarl and Gross Klein, the land used for the housing was considered generally poor, flat, unwooded and wet, as well as windy. A sixth new community, Dierkow, is being currently built on the east bank of the river.

From the point of view of state sociologists and planners in the GDR, construction can never become an end in itself but always has to be oriented to the living of the people and the development of a "socialist way of life". (Voigt 1973) Guided by the advice of central research institutions, for example, the Bauakademie in Berlin and the architecture school in Weimar, planners and architects at the district and city levels seek to establish the pre-conditions for a successful family life, for the equal participation of women in society, for the education and socialization of the young, and for the care of the elderly and disabled. Each community ideally includes homes for the aged, clinics, markets, restaurants and buildings for culture and recreation, libraries, nurseries and kindergartens, youth clubs, sports facilities, and other necessary services.

The apartments in the settlements are either owned by the State (60 percent) or by cooperatives (40 percent). The small number of new single family houses do not affect the picture substantially in the new towns. They are, however, more important in the countryside and some older suburbs. Partly due to the shortage of housing and partly due to the policy of integrating the new towns with respect to social class, many people were only too



Figure 4. Town "supermarket", Evershagen.



Figure 5. Selling flowers from private gardens.

happy to finally move into a private and comfortable place to live. However, the inhabitants did not live there "happily ever after". Almost immediately, planners, architects and engineers had to face a number of social and architectural problems which they tried to address in the settlements already built as well as in the designs for the next settlements in the construction sequence.

The problems indicate not that the new towns are a failure but that there is a large number of factors producing dissatisfaction, only some of which can be resolved or even influenced by the architectural arrangements¹. The difficulty of children finding the entrance to an apartment, (Figure 2) the complaints about living "in cement" far from fields, (Figure 3) the annoyance at having to hear the feuding of other families are directly related to the construction and arrangements of the new housing units and will be discussed in greater detail. But one of the decisive factors influencing the lack of community feeling in the new towns does not stem from architectural design or economy of construction but derives from the fact that many residents are newcomers to Rostock and some even to city living. Half of the present population of Rostock comes from outside the area, from southern cities as well as from more rural villages. These

problems are somewhat alleviated by time according to urban researchers in the GDR but that time has not yet elapsed in the recent Neubaugebiete. In the new towns of Schmarl and Lichtenhagen twenty percent of the population has been in Rostock for only six years or less! Aside from learning to feel at home in the new community, the new residents find it difficult to maintain a network of relatives and friends at such a distance. There are other problems as well. Since travel to work is longer than anticipated, a number of women find jobs below their actual level of qualification in order to live close to their apartments. Although highly educated

women rarely make such a decision, many others with considerable skill remain unintegrated into the occupation for which they are trained. Furthermore, social facilities lag behind the immediate construction of housing units, kindergartens and schools, which are necessary for absorbing both men and women into the labor force. Single parents therefore have little to do in the new town itself and depend on a small group of friends or their own parents for child-care in the evening. Adolescents complain even more that there is little to do in the settlements which are virtually deserted on the weekends.

In the past few years, a number of improvements have been made which seem to reduce irritation with, at least, some aspects of the new towns. Aside from several architectural changes in the height and shape of the housing units, planners tried to address the issue of boredom in the new towns. There was an effort, for example, to provide space for the activities of adolescents. School cafeterias, which would not interfere too much with the quiet that adults desire after the working day, were used for discos and youth centers where they were not otherwise available. More frequent transportation was provided to the inner city and some of the neglected paths to the trains were transformed into pleasant walking spaces. A few additional shops were added to the market, including a small department store, (Figure 4) and more fresh vegetables and flowers could be seen in front of the shops, sold on the open market. (Figure 5) Finally, a number of small plots outside the settlement were provided for private cultivation.

THE DESIGN OF THE NEW SETTLEMENTS

The planning and architecture of the new communities is, at first glance, one of expedience. It exhibits an initial appearance of overwhelming conformity, being composed of long rows of apartments, constructed in linear blocks of between 4 and nine stories high, with occasional point blocks of some 19 stories high located near community centers. These buildings are evenly distributed in an open, flat landscape so typical of the area.

This design strategy is consistent throughout the entire development and is clearly a planning device that, from its inception some twenty years ago, has not altered in any significant way.

This strategy is historically a product of the "modern architectural concern for "healthy" living that is clearly a legacy of the late 19th century reformers whose theories and work so influenced European city planning during the first decades of the 20th century. These "reformers" proposed specific design responses to create a new utopian vision of planning and architecture, committed to social equality and to the use of radical technology in the creation of ideal workers communities.

For example, clear architectural connections can be made to the theoretical work of Tony Garnier (1917) in France with its radical concern for the creation of a socialist-utopian community based upon the emancipation of human beings from the monotony of labor to take on more fruitful occupations and the view that all human beings are inherently co-operative and equal. Similar concerns affected the work of English planning reformers such as Ebenezer Howard in his garden city proposals (1898) and Barry Parker and Sir Raymond Unwin in their industrial housing projects such as New Earswick, near York (1902- 03), although the English practitioners were more paternalistic in their planning and were very much concerned with regionalism and individualism in the detailed architectural expression of their communities.



Figure 6. Layout of Rostock-Lutten Klein.

The "structural spine" for the new communities around Rostock and crucial for their functioning is the transportation corridor that runs north from the center of Rostock to the seaside resort of Warnemünde. (Figure 6) This corridor, within which is located the main highway and the rapid transit line, enables the residents of the new communities to commute to work and to have fairly frequent and cheap access to both Rostock and Warnemünde. The public transportation system, both bus and rapid transit train, operates on a frequent schedule and is heavily subsidized. It serves to link the new communities together as well as providing a fast and efficient means of reaching the center of the old city of Rostock as well as the pleasures of the seaside vacation town of Warnemünde.

In detail each community, beginning with Evershagen (Figure 7) the first to be built and the closest to the old city of Rostock, is composed of parallel blocks of apartments, arranged in evenly spaced lines, generally on an orthogonal geometry. The density is very evenly distributed throughout the design with between 230 and 280 persons per Ha. The blocks of apartments are set apart to create extensive public open space, in relationship

to the road systems that both serve as the linkage between the various communities and are internal to the various groupings within each community. The design concept is clearly one that attempts to create an uniformity of development with housing in the tradition of the "garden city" movement of the early twentieth century as modified by the rational architectural theories of the modern movement, such as *Vers une architecture* written by Le Corbusier in 1923. The use of individual houses, so typical of the English garden city movement, had been replaced by the continuous blocks of apartments, but the overall concept is one in which the buildings are seen as being set in the open countryside. It is, in essence, an anti-urban concept of planning,

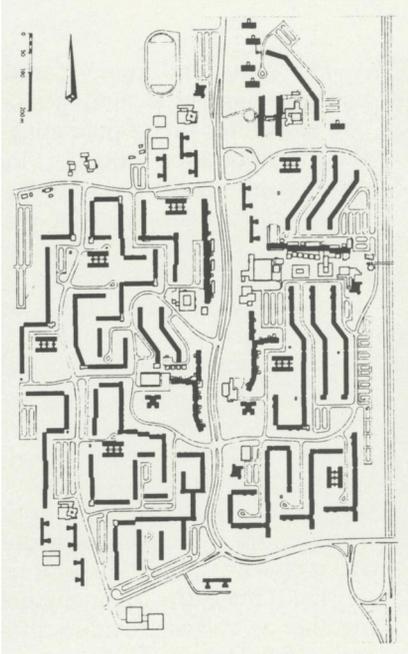


Figure 7. Plan of Evershagen.



Figure 8. Typical apartment block and setting.

Houses built brick by brick are now a thing of the past and the GDR has a modern efficient construction industry.
(Krause, n.d.)

lacking specific hierarchy of place or order in the conventional urban sense. Variations in architectural massing and expression are reduced to a minimum and even when they do occur, such as the inclusion of point blocks rather than medium height linear blocks, they are justified on the basis of acting as pragmatic place markers to identify centers, rather than as a means of enriching the architectural language of the community. This uniformity of architectural expression leads to a confusion of understanding; the fabric of the communities is difficult to visualize in that the sense of spatial complexity is reduced to a rather mundane level, with little typological or architectural variation, (Figure 8) perhaps as a direct response to the stated objective of eliminating social and regional differences. This lack of differentiation becomes quite apparent when one attempts to move around the new communities with any sense of orientation.

Entrances into individual blocks of apartments are poorly defined (Figure 9) as is the overall pedestrian movement system. Location of parking areas is not clearly related to the system of movement around the housing or to the means by which one moves into the various block arrangements. The plan for the communities is predicated upon 100% private car ownership and, although this is presently only somewhat over 50%, adequate space has been allowed in the plan to meet this ultimate goal.

Beyond the planning strategy it is the method of building construction that is of greatest interest. Consistent with other countries of the East European block, heavy precast concrete unitized construction is the method that has been chosen for the building of all the structures. The virtues of this method of building are clear. In the philosophical sense it conforms with the ideal of using an advanced system of building construction, freed from the social implications of traditional systems and representative of a "new" order of society.



Figure 9. Apartment block entrance.

This fascination with the "new order of architecture" as expressed in the means of construction, is also historically consistent with the theories of the "modern" style of architecture that were propounded in the many manifestoes of the Modern Movement of the early twentieth century [e.g.: Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture* (1923) and *Ville Radieuse* (1933)]. In their attempt to completely redefine the nature and values of architecture it was necessary to embrace a radically new form of construction, free from the inevitable tectonic expressions of traditional means of building and expressing the aesthetics of industrial mass production technology. Reinforced concrete was the chosen medium for the brave new architectural world of these visionaries.

The materials used are concrete for the foundations and walls, and reinforced concrete for the floors and ceilings. All the important buildings are constructed of reinforced concrete. These two materials are prepared in molds made for this purpose. The simpler the molds, the easier will be the construction, and consequently the less the cost. This simplicity of means leads logically to a great simplicity of expression in the structure.

(Webenson 1969).

The adoption of this technology would free the architect to express the ideals of the new socialist utopia in a way that was devoid of historical, and thereby, social references. It linked the production of architecture with the newly evolving order of twentieth century socialist industrial society. To a certain extent, this ethic still informs the production of the new communities in the GDR.

However, in a more pragmatic way, the adoption of prefabricated concrete technology has permitted the rapid and economic production of buildings that the ambitious housing program in the GDR clearly demanded. The traditional means of architectural construction, especially in the chaos that existed after the Second World War, were incapable of responding to the social urgency implicit in the political promises of the 8th Congress of the SED.

However, while this technology permitted the rapid and comparatively inexpensive production of buildings, it also created a very limited architectural vocabulary that contributes to the lack of hierarchy within the new communities. This problem has been recognised by the designers and in subsequent developments minor changes have been included that attempt to resolve this deficiency. For example, in Schmarl, one of the more recently completed com-

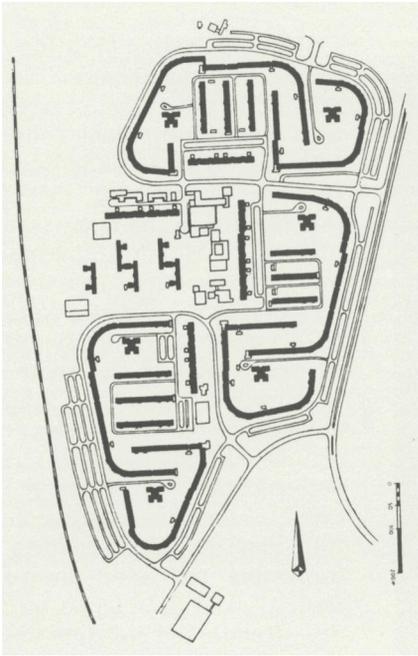


Figure 10. Plan of Schmarl.

munities, the enclosure of the internal spaces with rounded corner blocks has helped to deal with the severe problems of persistent winds that are characteristic of this area as well as to create a greater feeling of neighborhood. This fairly simple solution required the addition of a radial geometry to the basic architectural vocabulary but, in so doing, it has enriched the appearance of the blocks. The later blocks also show a greater complexity of articulation, in which the various functional elements of the blocks, such as stair towers and balconies, are pulled away from the rectilinear geometry and allowed to generate a greater surface plasticity. (Figure 12)

In a few isolated locations a more traditional form of single family house is evident, particularly in association with the horticultural co-operative adjacent to Evershagen (Figure 13). This change of architectural grain adds immeasurably to the variety of the built environment and, although it is certainly more ex-

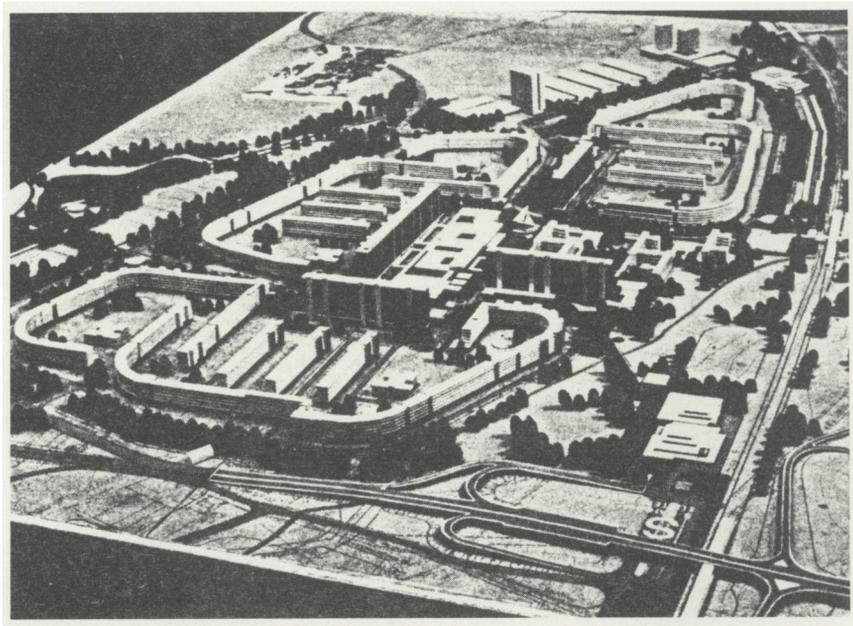


Figure 11. Model of Schmarl.



Figure 12. Murals for decoration and place identification in Evershagen.

principle advantage is that it provides a more sympathetic form of surface treatment that helps to offset the tedium implicit in the basic form of construction. From an ideological point of view, however, it does represent a departure from the rigor of the "international style" and a tacit acceptance of the vernacular tradition in architecture. Decorative treatment on a larger scale is also evident in the mosaic murals that adorn the exposed ends of some of the twelve story blocks. These abstract designs offer not only relief from the otherwise unrelenting bulk of the buildings, they also serve as "place markers" in what would otherwise be a placeless continuum of similarity. More recent evidence of this increasing decorative complexity is appearing in the balcony fronts that are currently being used on point blocks. Although they are still manufactured from pre-cast concrete they have been given a deeply serrated surface, representative of stylized natural objects.

In that these complexities of form and surface are clearly more expensive to produce it would seem that the planners and architects are responding to the need to produce a more varied architectural language that begins to address the social desire for variety and complexity in the living environment.

Another concern that becomes obvious when the present buildings are examined closely is the question of building longevity. The unitized system of construction being used tends to exhibit clear deficiencies in the quality control of construction, particularly in the very important joints between the various parts of the system. Earlier attempts to form these joints with a bitumen based sealer have clearly proven to be unsatisfactory. Later buildings are using a

expensive and perhaps politically less acceptable, such variety is to be welcomed and even encouraged in future development plans.

More obvious changes in the architectural language involve the surface treatment of walls. The early buildings are overwhelmingly "concrete" in external treatment, with the use of exposed aggregate surfaces as variants but in more recent buildings there is a much greater use of applied surface treatments, particularly "clinker", an indigenous term for fired clay tiles. Ostensibly this type of treatment is justified as an attempt to relate the new buildings to the vernacular tradition of brick that is typical of this area of Germany. While it does indeed draw its inspiration from this source its



Figure 13. Point block under construction, Evershagen, July, 1986.

more efficient neoprene gasket. Also certain surfaces are showing tendencies to age and discolor rapidly, especially those on the painted metal balcony fronts. There is a long term maintenance plan in operation but, in spite of this, the projected 100 year effective life of the buildings must be open to serious question. It would appear that the cost of maintenance will inevitably become a very serious problem, demanding increasing investment over time, if the entire development is not to become substandard.

While the choice of precast unit construction is one that seems right for the new communities its extended use in the architecturally more sensitive areas of the old city of Rostock is very much open to question. In recent years the

social value of carefully restoring the damaged fabric of the old city has been clearly recognized. Great effort and resources have been devoted to this very important preservation issue and the center of Rostock now has a very popular pedestrian street that attracts many of the citizens of the new communities and provides the depth and richness that their new towns lack. There is also extensive building under way in the area along the waterfront where over 600 new town house apartments are being constructed. The architectural decision to use the precast concrete panel system admittedly somewhat cosmetically modified to reflect the traditional gable forms of the existing warehouses, appears to be very problematic in this instance. This is a case where a much more responsive and traditional attitude should have been used, in recognition of the intrinsic value of both the historic forms of architecture and the social value of the urban context being re-created.

CONCLUSION

What is the significance of a report on housing construction in a port city in Eastern Europe? We do not think that the new towns around Rostock have outstanding architectural characteristics in a worldwide perspective, nor do we think that these developments are a model for city planning or public housing in the West. We do, however, consider it important to learn more about the changing conditions and recent developments in city planning and public housing in what surely is one important part of the world-state socialist Eastern Europe.

The housing policy in the GDR relies on public planning as a method of procedure. As a matter of political policy it excludes the market forces that are such a formative part of the architecture and planning of Western Europe and North America. This creates certain problems which are likely to increase when the sheer demand for basic living space is met and discussions begin to center on quality rather than quantity. Nevertheless some of the social and architectural conditions found in the new towns of the GDR are very similar to those found in large public housing projects in the West. It is also interesting to note that the historical philosophies that have fueled the creation of "modern architecture" and planning in the first half of the 20th century are common to both political systems. While such theories have been openly criticized and, indeed, rejected as intellectually and socially suspect in the West, they still seem to be the basis for the production of the new communities in the GDR. It is perhaps appropriate that this should be so in view of the socialist political spirit that infused much of the progressive architecture of the early twentieth century. The state socialist orientation within the GDR clearly shapes the physical and social structure of the new communities of Rostock. Compared to western conditions these new communities exhibit relatively low levels of in-equality in housing standards. The uniformity of both the standards of accommodation and the architectural expression is clearly a physical expression of the desire to promote such equality. This is very evident in the limited architectural vocabulary and in the lack of urban hierarchy in the general plans, although we do not necessarily agree that the egalitarian policy of the state government dictates such a physical response. Other national concerns that play a significant role in the production of these new communities, and influence their state of completeness, are related to the scarcity of economic resources, the national priorities for expending these resources, the state of international co-operation within the eastern block countries and the ideological aesthetics currently in political favor. While it is clear that all of these forces bear upon the production of the new communities and contribute to both its physical progress and its aesthetic quality, such forces are constantly in flux and it is difficult to assign relative weights of influence from our brief exploration of one set of new towns within the GDR. It is, however, quite clear that the simplicity and monotony of the architectural language presently in use must be addressed as an issue affecting social conditions. There needs to be a much wider range of housing types produced, including at least an approximation of the traditional single family house, and there needs to be a much greater architectural vocabulary developed in order to produce a greater degree of visual complexity at both the building and urban levels.

In order to increase the satisfaction of the residents with the non-architectural aspects of the new communities it is crucial to continue the improvements that have been initiated in the provision of social amenities. It is particularly important to build more clubs, especially for the teen-age segment of the population, to continue to provide a greater variety of cultural events and to significantly increase the number and diversity of shops within the town centers. It is also important to improve the public transportation links between the communities and the workplace. Another social concern is one that revolves around the efficient and timely repair and servicing of the apartments. We have already expressed our concerns about the quality of the constructional methods being used in the building of the apartment blocks. In order to sustain the quality of the buildings there needs to be a much more efficient program of regular maintenance and more prompt response to requests for urgent repairs. Without these sustained commitments to both the physical and the social fabric of the new communities it is difficult to imagine how they can become viable and enduring towns.

NOTES

1. Most of the information on the social problems in the new towns comes from Rueschemeyer's interviews with DDR sociologists, state architects and residents of the new communities. For further references and elaboration of these problems see Rueschemeyer (forthcoming). For review of GDR research on the new towns see Kuhr 1985.

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