

INES  
WEIZMANThe destruction of participation  
... and of housing in Leipzig-Grünau

being extended and no new tenancy agreements were allowed. Residents were looking for hints about the vague future of the building in every new measure, every new service personnel, gardeners, unrecognized visitors, especially men in suits. Following the fate of other buildings in the neighbourhood, it dawned on them with disbelief that their homes might be the next to be removed. For the residents this eventuality was described as implausible as these buildings were in fully functioning condition and apartments in Leipzig-Grünau were still in demand especially the 2-bedroom types, and especially in the area around *Seffnerstreet* which is so close to the lake. Neighbouring housing associations even have waiting lists for new tenants. Not only the residents but also the many shop-owners of the block and the staff of the medical centre caught the fear spreading like a contagious disease. Will they have enough customers to function? The future seems insecure and the question of whether it would be 'worth' investing in oneself, one's family and one's business has its impact on people's everyday decision making. Flats were emptying out simply out of the fear of demolition.

## Announcements

In October 2006, speculations and fears became facts. The housing association *Baugenossenschaft Leipzig* announced the impending demolition of the housing slab *Seffnerstreet 1* to 19. The owner argued that since 45 percent of the flats were standing empty the housing block was economically nonviable. What follows is a tragic and seemingly inescapable routine. Grünau, once one of the biggest and most successful (in terms of demand and quality of life) housing projects of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and a privileged site of living for almost 90,000 inhabitants has since the mid 1990s entered a continuous process of demographic decline: today only 47,000 inhabitants have remained.<sup>01</sup>

But all hope was not lost with the publishing of the demolition announcement. Residents, retailers, service providers and the staff of the medical centre organised the collection of signatures against the demolition plans. The action, called: '*Stadtumbau. So Nicht!*' (City regeneration. Not like This!) demanded the revision of the state policy that awarded subsidies for housing demolition. They also called for revisions to the 2000 'City Development Plan for large-scale housing estates (*Großsiedlungen*)'<sup>02</sup> based on the 'Pakt der Vernunft' (the pact of reason), which allowed the six largest housing companies to "consolidate" the housing market in Leipzig, by removing 8,000 flats from the market, most of them in Grünau.<sup>03</sup> In principle, the signatories demanded at least the right to know which homes would be destroyed and when.

It was not the first time that residents collected signatures to stop the demolitions. In 2003, 2500 people protested against the demolition of the 11-floor slab *Brackestreet 36 - 46* (Fig. 1), located parallel to the block on *Seffnerstreet*. Because of the convenient service and shopping facilities on the ground floor residents had considered the building as a central place for their neighbourhood. This was also the reason why the city development plan in 2000 had specifically advised on upgrading this urban centre. But despite the plan, the numerous protests and a last-minute offer to buy from another housing association, the state subsidy that supports the demolition of empty buildings with 70 Euros per square metre of apartment destroyed could not be beaten. In 2005 the building was evacuated and cranes and bulldozers removed its parts, creating a large empty plot of earth on which

today some ugly weeds have begun to grow.

This time, 3500 signatures were collected and submitted to the planning department of the mayor of the city of Leipzig. In addition, post-cards of protest were sent to the Ministry of Interior of Saxony and the *Sächsische Aufbaubank*, a bank which provided the mortgage deal to the housing association. In response, in February 2007, the municipal officials of the city of Leipzig, including the mayor responsible for city regeneration and development, invited the public to a discussion about an updated planning strategy, the so-called *Entwicklungsstrategie 2020*.

## Engaging the public

The meeting room in the leisure centre *Völkerfreundschaft* in Leipzig-Grünau was over-crowded. Residents were curious to hear more details about the *Entwicklungsstrategie 2020*, which held information about the future of their homes. The well-dressed hosts began the meeting with a question that is a standard animation technique in children theatres: "Who here is from Grünau?" Angry "boo" from the audience. The presenters tried to gain ground. They began to lament the general process of demographic decline in Leipzig-Grünau, where according to their statistics - contrary to the whole of Leipzig - the demand was continuously decreasing. Prompt questions about how the diagrams of a further declining population are calculated or about the difference between the term *Stadtumbau* (urban regeneration) that the municipality is continuously using, and the probably more truthful term 'demolition' unsettled the presenters. According to the new plan in housing complex 7 and 8, they continued,

7,000 flats have to be demolished. Because according to the prognosis, in the favourable case-scenario, in 2020 only 40,000 inhabitants will have remained, while in the unfavourable case only 32,000 will be living here. A bitterly amused and angry murmur in the audience signaled the public mistrust in these demographic prophecies. Rather, people suspected that housing associations in collaboration with the city planning offices followed a particular planning strategy that aimed to encourage people to move out so that they would be forced to move into the newly refurbished 19<sup>th</sup> century houses near the city centre (which also stand empty, but despite the renovated condition cannot offer the same conveniences as Grünau). Individual voices of anger were rising, especially when a power-point presentation threw the new strategic map on the wall. Now, projected at this scale, the low resolution of the lines, the rushed red shadings marking the demolition of buildings and mistakes in the annotation of the plan were revealed to a public which knew every stone and every flowerbed in this area. Some houses were even wrongly marked 'already demolished', or 'to be demolished'. The apologies of the hosts were swallowed in the tumult in the auditorium.

The evening ended with the presentation of a series of red lines encircling the area around the houses *Seffnerstreet 1* to 19, *Brackestrasse 24-34*, 41-55 and *Kändlerstrasse 2-14*, marking the demolition of almost 1,000 apartments.<sup>04</sup> Within this sea of impending devastation the history of the large estate in Leipzig-Grünau would be recreated.

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In the post World War II period, most major European and North American cities experimented with the idea of new towns - modernist satellite cities mostly built of rows of housing blocks. The reasons varied from massive housing shortage, to the strategic requirements of a population dispersal that has become

## Rumours

Leipzig-Grünau, Spring 2006. In the housing slab *Seffnerstreet 1* to 19, rumours were spreading that their homes were earmarked for demolition. For a while already, services of cleaning and general maintenance of the building had become irregular, tenancies for the 544 apartments in this building were not

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2

part of the security doctrine of the emerging nuclear age. For the GDR as much as for the rest of the Eastern Block, the new cities, and large-scale city extensions of the mid 1970s were no longer directly the products of necessity but also offered a chance to fulfil an ideological promise. Far from the banal, grey and depressing stigma attached to them at present, some of these housing projects, particularly the one for Leipzig-Grünau represented one of the most enthusiastic experiments to realize societal utopias. And they were largely received this way in the eyes of the public that sought and sometimes even competed to inhabit them.

### The history of Leipzig-Grünau

At the VIII Party Congress in July 1971, the government of the GDR decreed that the housing shortage was the core concern of the state's social policies and that every household should be provided with a well-equipped modern apartment before 1990. This decree also gave the impetus for the gigantic housing estate of Grünau, located on the western edge of the city of Leipzig. In June 1976, three years after the competition for it was launched, and a long phase of detailed planning, the foundation stone for over 35,000 apartments was laid. To help organise the logistics of the construction process, and to help impose a coherence and identity on this massive housing scheme, the project was initially subdivided into eight so-called 'housing complexes' that were connected by three pedestrian boulevards stretching from north to south. In these 'inner' structures, architects and planners sought to create intimate, quiet and rather small-scale spaces (Fig. 2). This enabled education and recreation centres to be built amidst lawns and green spaces. Space was demarcated in such a way that fences, walls and other physical boundaries were rendered unnecessary. Instead, boundaries were defined by the position and form of each architectural object in relation to its neighbour. This style of urban development made the area particularly attractive to young families whose children had most to gain from the traffic-free network of schools, kindergartens and playgrounds that

made up this green environment.

When the project began, the WBS-70 prefabricated panel series which formed its structural basis had been in use for only four years. This posed a considerable challenge for the architects who were attempting to construct an entire 'city' almost exclusively from prefabricated elements. Nearby, a whole factory was built with the sole purpose of supplying construction materials to the huge estate. As stipulated by the urban building 'kit' developed for the WBS-70 series, all prefabricated building elements were manufactured for particular functions, such as supermarkets, services, shops, schools, youth clubs, kindergartens and gyms. The apartment blocks themselves consisted of a limited variety of 5, 8 and 11 storey, mid-size tenements, as well as 16-storey tower blocks of the 'Erfurt' type (PH 16). The logistics and the pace of construction were determined by the building technology. There were about seven assembly lines (*Taktstrassen*) for housing construction and a further two for public and education buildings, manned by almost 5,000 workers. About 12,400 housing units were completed between 1976 and 1980, but between 1981 and 1985, with improved technologies and increased pressures from the Party to keep to the targets of the five-year plan, the number of new flats ready for occupancy almost doubled to about 21,400.<sup>55</sup>

In November 1977, just a year after construction began, the first families moved into their new homes. About 60% of the flats were offered to workers' families, while the majority of the remainder were shared between families with several children and young couples. The need for housing was so urgent that moving vans arrived literally as construction vehicles departed. When people moved in, neither the interior decoration of their homes nor their surroundings had been properly completed. Wherever the industrial assembly tracks and cranes could not reach, or construction budgets were suddenly cut, people were asked to step in to provide what the planned economy could not pro-

vide. In the evenings, at weekends and on collective work assignment days – so-called *subotniks* (Russian for Saturday) – residents laboured to 'complete' their new homes (Fig. 3). This process was of course extremely labour-intensive and slow. For years, inhabitants lived in the middle of a construction site. Walking around the newly-built housing estates was only possible with rubber boots. However, despite the hardships, people acquiring flats in Leipzig-Grünau felt privileged to have been given such comfortable flats with heating, hot water and modern conveniences, and the expectation that their neighbourhood would one day be situated in the midst of greenery and gardens reinforced people's sense of identification with the new environment. Residents 'customising' their neighbourhoods by arranging the vegetation, playgrounds, street furniture, or loggias as they wished, described a form of participation that fostered public and private sentiments. Inhabitants both improved their private spaces and since the work necessitated collaborative effort it bonded those residents participating in the program, fostering feelings of local pride and encouraged residents to care for their communities.<sup>56</sup>

However, before mistakenly drawing an ideal, or nostalgic image of the practice of 'public involvement', it is important here to differentiate the concept of participation meant here from the rather 'conventional' meaning of participation as a form of hands-on practice that is combined with people's emotional attachment to a project, or home. In the context of 'real-existing' state-socialism, the term 'participation' relates also to rather ambiguous realities. On the one hand, residents participated in the completion of the construction work because they were driven by what could now be understood as conservative perhaps even (petit) bourgeois ideals of privacy, in a way where each cared for their own 'back-yard' – obviously, a concept which communist ideology officially detested. On the other hand, individual participation in the finishing up of state projects, much like the forced participation in party ceremonies and parades, which many liked to avoid but felt guilty

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about, meant often no more than an improvised method of completing the work., or beautification of a plan, whose general principles were dictated by party officials from the top-down. (Some of the protagonists of novels by Brigitte Reimann, or Irmtraud Morgner come to mind.) Indeed, 'persons in charge' of a 'house community', mostly allied to the *Volkssolidarität* (official welfare society) had frequently to 'encourage' residents who for reasons of laziness, ideological refusal, or simple snobbery of anything that smacked of 'collective action' refrained from participating in the *subotniks*. In socialist societies as in other political systems, this raises the problem of free choice in the call for 'participation', which probably always relates to some form of hardship, peoples' spare time and personal investment. This situation becomes even more precarious in the recent discussion by sociologist and urban critic, Christine Hanneemann who recently warned about the neo-liberal calculation in the use of the concept of 'social capital' (of which the concept of public participation and volunteer engagement is a part), as a remedy for urban development. "The concept of 'social capital', she writes: "is thus misused as a way of anchoring a new notion of society and managing the social costs effected by it. Many critical studies have shown that state assistance programs tend to destroy rather than build up local civic networks because of their principally top-down structure."<sup>57</sup> As it will be shown in the following, in Leipzig-Grünau, the dilemma of this situation is even more complicated: because residents who are still living in this estate, and who have already a stake in the success and development of their estates would be willing, to some degree, to participate and invest themselves (possibly in similar social networks to those instigated at the time of the GDR) in the main-

tenance and upgrading of their immediate neighbourhood, have lost both the cultural-political and the physical 'territory' in which their contribution would make sense. They have become the unwilling victims of the housing demolitions.

In the mid 1990s, the inner state migration between the cities of the east where work was precarious and the more economically solid cities of the west, became visible in increasingly abandoned buildings. In 2004, according to the latest study, every fifth flat in Leipzig-Grünau stood empty.<sup>58</sup> Hence, the city-allied housing association that owned most of the housing stock in Leipzig-Grünau opted for a major demolition scheme, focusing primarily on tower blocks. Out of Leipzig-Grünau's twenty blocks, only five remained by the end of 2004.<sup>59</sup> The housing association argued that they suffered from maintenance and management problems. It is true that the basic architectural form of a tower has an inherent weakness and depends for its success on high-density, balanced occupancy in a relatively small area. We understand here how sensitive an urban balance is and how apparently small transformations can produce dramatic effects. It only takes a few families to move out of a tower block or apartment block and the whole system of unpaid housekeepers, voluntary social workers, routines of neighbourly exchange, collective work assignments and human communication comes crashing down. Once the sense of belonging is undermined, the estate can be fatally damaged. The demolition of these towers are more than regrettable as they would have been ideal for residences for senior or disabled persons, because of their interior plan, the fact that there were lifts and because of their location. Currently (in 2007) the majority of buildings in Leipzig-Grünau are being costly renovated to

“Stadtumbau.  
So nicht!



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

adapt to the new groups of interest for such flats.

This development appears indeed very odd in view of the investments made for upgrading and renovating buildings and green spaces in Leipzig-Grünau, particularly in the late 1990s. Between 1997 and 1999, with the *Planspiel Leipzig-Grünau*, the government had funded a larger initiative that aimed at bringing residents and urban planners together in a variety of projects and activities. In hundreds of public meetings, workshops, photo competitions and children's projects, managed by the *Forum Leipzig-Grünau*, residents showed their interest in participating in the future of the estate. In 1999, a small publication documented the activities of the forum. Yet before the brochure was ready to be collected, the public had already realised that real decisions were being made elsewhere and people lost confidence in the existence of a reliable urban plan for the future of Grünau. Still today a few hundred copies of this documentation are available to the public for free. For no apparent reason, problem housing blocks were left standing, while others, in a good location and state of repair, were suddenly demolished (Fig. 4). The truth was that although a great deal of money had been invested (often in the wrong place, in retrospect), the municipal authorities (responsible for an urban planning strategy), the housing companies that owned buildings in Grünau and their respective credit institutions could not agree on a common plan for the future. The reason for this financial calculation has its origin in the GDR, or more precisely in the contract for the reunification of Germany.

#### Old debts

The housing companies in Leipzig Grünau, as in most of the gargantuan housing projects of the GDR built since the 1970s, are burdened with 'old debts'. According to the contract of the reunification in 1990, the individual housing associations, which were formerly subordinated to the GDR planning economy and its budgeting, inherited their former 'debts' from the Staatsbank of the GDR which had once offered 'long-term loans' for the construction of housing estates.

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What in the old state was considered a simple matter of accounting, the urban sociologist Matthias Bernt explains, became a huge problem when the Staatsbank was privatised.<sup>10</sup> The housing associations had not only to start their 'business' with gigantic debts, but also private business banks, most of them directed by western financiers, now owned lending-agreements which allowed them to have a role in the management of the housing companies and hence in their commitment to 'urban planning'. According to Bernt's analysis, it is often international credit institutions that assess the viability of mortgage agreements for banks. Having housing stocks in East Germany in the portfolio (especially in view of the news about the vacancies and demolitions) does not give a good image of the banks' financial credibility and liability for their mortgages.<sup>11</sup> Therefore credit institutions aim to withdraw from their credit arrangements with the highly indebted housing companies. In view of this situation, residents and engaged planners perceive projects that call for image campaigns and creative ideas for living in 'those' estates, such as the generously funded 'Shrinking Cities' project (2004) as problematic, if not misplaced.

There exist of course a few rare and notable examples of architects' creativity in dealing with these buildings. The architecture office of Lacaton Vasalle in France proposed a radical scheme, based on the wrapping of a whole tower bloc with generous cantilevered decks of outside space. The office *Zimmermann+Partner Architekten* transformed in Cottbus 11-story blocks built in the WBS 70 system into so-called 'Town Villas' of only 2 or 3 floors. Muck Petzet's office also achieved an exemplary city planning in Leinefelde combining demolition with conversions for new uses. These achievements are of course well intended, and architecturally interesting, but do not, and most likely could not address the real cause of

the problem which originate in the state subsidy programs noted above.

Since 1993 with the Old Debts Assistance Acts, the government attempted to avoid the collapse of housing associations by taking over some of the costs which, because of the vacancies, had no chance of being recovered. This subsidy proved to be 'a bottomless pit' around which several practices of abuse and misuse developed. In 2001 the law was amended again to allow debts to be reduced if housing was taken off the market. Additionally about 70 Euros per demolished square meter of apartment was promised. The devastating impact of this law, ignorant of democratic planning and free-market strategies, cannot yet be estimated. This government subsidy saved many housing estates from bankruptcy and even allowed others an 'extra income', but the 'market distortion' caused by the subsidy made the work of urban planners seeking to involve the public in consultations largely superfluous.<sup>12</sup>

#### Conclusion

Population migration is a complex social process: hiding behind the 'invisible hand of the market' are the all too visible influences of cultural politics and issues related to identity and meaning, which all have an impact on urban form. However, as I have tried to show, the 'abandonment' of Leipzig-Grünau cannot be blamed solely on the economic collapse of the former East Germany, nor on the accentuation of social structures and divisions which encouraged migration to the western half of Germany or to suburbia. To a large degree, it was also the fault of the new authorities together with the financial institutions, that were unwilling or unable to understand the concepts and values which characterised the organisation of the urban and the architectural fabric. The often random and short-sighted demolitions undermined the housing estates' cohesiveness,

which in turn helped to dilute the residents' sense of pride, privilege and identity. It seems almost as though population 'shrinking' was part of a plan to re-appropriate the city by erasing the 'unfamiliar' fabric of a competing ideology. Therefore, in order to make a critique operative, it is important here to study how this process is played out, what form it takes and how the configuration and coherence of the urban fabric is affected by a complicated sequence of chain reactions which degrade the attractiveness of the area to such a degree that the demolition appears as the only possible solution. It is all too obvious that the support of seemingly invisible 'all powerful and unavoidable' economic processes makes residents' participation in determining the fate of their urban environment seem futile and redundant. The political and economic storm unleashed by this process frustrates the political agency of the citizen. What has been lost here is thus not only an idea of community participation, but the very idea of political citizenship – a promise raised by the reunification and democratisation, a promise broken.

#### Afterword

In June 2007, the department for city development in Leipzig invited Grünau-residents for a second meeting to present the revision of the *Entwicklungsstrategie 2020*. Again, the meeting started with an affront to public participation. No handouts or maps were made available before the meeting, so that guests could only follow the new plans through the projected power-point presentation. It took two more weeks after the meeting before the plan went online and became available to the public. Again, the second draft reconfirmed the demolition of the housing blocks *Seffnerstr. 1 to 19, Brackstr. 24-34, 41-55 and Kändlerstr. 2-14* by 2008. The plan has still to be finalized in the municipality. However, it is most likely that the residents of the affected buildings, the retailers and staff of the medical centre will not wait for the final version, but will find it wiser to move to another part of town. The housing companies already provide an excellent service to help in moving homes. ■

- 01 In 2005 about 1,3 million apartments were standing empty in East Germany.
- 02 The 'Stadtentwicklungsplan Wohnungsbau und Stadterneuerung – Teilplan Großsiedlungen: Zielplan Grünau' was developed in the year 2000 with a short-term perspective of three years.
- 03 The 'pact of reason' was a complicated agreement made in 2000 between the city development office in the municipality of Leipzig, the housing association as well as their respective banks on the buildings that will be demolished in Leipzig in the near future. The idea was to create the process of demolition and renovation as reflected and just as possible.
- 04 Ironically, as a response to the collection of signatures the city had prepared a (demolition-) plan for the next two years, while the initial promise of the plan, that is a vision for the year 2020, remains still in question.

05 1986: 271

06 FLIERL 1984: 190-196

07 HANNEMANN. 2006: 486

08 2005: 4

09 Commenting on the destruction of the tower blocks at the northern entrance to Leipzig-Grünau, Hans-Dietrich Wellner, once leading architect and planner of Leipzig-Grünau, bemoans the demolition of the towers thus: 'I ask myself who is doing the city planning? Good, functional housing complexes are blown up. This is devastating in my view. This has nothing to do with planning. This area has been intentionally ignored', my transcription and translation, Hans-Dietrich Wellner, in interview, July 2004

10 BERNT, 2006: 592-596

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

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Fig. 4

