Chapter:

**As Good as Apple Pie? Post-Unification Germany and the Reception of Public
Art from the Former German Democratic Republic.**

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In March 2011, a local councillor in the town of Plauen, situated in the former
East Germany, was invited to inspect a freshly renovated primary school.
Dismayed to discover a socialist-era mosaic on display, he asked:

Does the town administration believe, that it serves the basic free and
democratic educational mission of the school to put on show symbols of a
totalitarian organisation and state without commentary?[1]

The mosaic in question depicts a narrative typical of mid-1960s socialist realism
in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In a sequential narrative from the
reconstruction, through agriculture and industry, young pioneers, peace and the
Soviet Union, it enters the 1960s with new tropes of space travel and modern
communications. The depiction of a young couple wearing track suits and
headphones, bending over a radio as well as the astronaut were to demonstrate
alignment with achievements in the West. The 'symbols' to which the city
councillor alluded were not those of the space race or pop music, but the
hammer and sickle, visible on a Soviet flag, and the young pioneer flag.

The local press jumped on the story, pursuing artists and politicians for their
opinions; suddenly the artwork required a 'solution'. However, it seemed that no
one else saw the mosaic quite in same terms as the councillor. The head teacher
of the school said nobody had ever objected to the mural before, and she had
been there since 1967. When one of the two artists who created the mural,

Lothar Rentsch, was persuaded to give his opinion, he downplayed the significance of the work, saying, 'That was our era. That was the way it was.'[2]

This chapter looks at examples of works of art – statues, sculptures and murals – in public spaces of the GDR and traces the way in which their reception has adapted as the fields of meaning around them have changed. I argue that both the removal and the retention (or in some cases resurrection) of works of art and design in public spaces have served the need to project a national consensus on the GDR's past. My premise is that the federally sponsored project of 'working through' or Aufarbeitung of the GDR's past is better understood as 'constructing' the past, and that material culture, including the built environment, has been central to this highly contested project.

The British liberalist historian Timothy Garton Ash claimed that Germany has developed 'the gold standard for dealing with a difficult past'.[3] In stark contrast, one of those engaged with this 'working through', Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, claimed in 2016 that Aufarbeitung was not only paralyzed but that its failure also helped to explain the resurgence of the extreme right in East Germany.[4] As the project of 'working though' the past sought a wholesale repudiation of the GDR and embrace of a new national identity, this was undoubtedly thrown into crisis by the emergence of 'nostalgia' (Ostalgie) for the East in the early 2000s. However, with the increasing temporal distance to the GDR, a greater acceptance of divergent narratives on the GDR is accommodated within establishment public history.

This chapter identifies three phases in the national project of 'working through' the past: first, what I call the 'trashing phase' until the mid to end of the 1990s; second, the 'crisis' of 'nostalgia', predominantly in the 2000s; and third, the approximately post-2010 'adjustment' phase. Through an examination of some cases of works of art in public spaces, we can see how the original remit to wholly repudiate the GDR heritage has been adjusted to accommodate changing economic and social needs. The overarching requirements within the geopolitical and economic context to support capital investment, to develop a public 'heritage' acceptable both internally and externally, and to temper the social, psychological and economic impact of unification in depleted

communities has allowed for the rehabilitation of some artists and some works of art in public spaces which were initially discredited.

The term Aufarbeitung was given to the six-year-long (1992–1998) government-led official investigation into the 'history and consequences of the Socialist dictatorship in East Germany'.[5] The principal government agency, the Federal Foundation for the Working through of the SED Dictatorship, was set up with legally binding aims to promote public awareness of the 'communist tyranny'.[6] The foundation has an explicit anti-communist positioning as its legal premise. Before any 'reworking' of the past in order to reach 'internal unity' could begin, any favourable attitudes to the GDR or communism more generally were systematically excluded.

The asymmetry of the need to conduct detailed examination of the past of (only) the GDR in order to construct an all-German identity for the present was predicated on the naturalness of Germany unity, and the naturalness of the West German democratic model for the two merged states. This asymmetry did not go unremarked in the early phase, but dissent had no traction in the seismic changes taking place in the geopolitical order.[7] Political scientist Frank Unger, speaking in 1990, claimed that the myth of reunification was as ingrained in the West German mindset, as indisputably good, as 'motherhood or apple pie'.[8] When East Germany unexpectedly collapsed into the lap of the West, consensus that this could be projected as the natural and correct course of history was pre-programmed.

Whatever the historical inevitability of this outcome, the new Germany was unprepared for the many questions that opened up in the course of the accession of East to West. The early 1990s' period of the 'trashing' of the GDR was fuelled and legitimized by the media, and soon fed into debates around East German literature, art and architecture. The Bilderstreit ('dispute about art') stemmed from the establishment view that East German art had no place within the new national culture. This fed only indirectly into assessments of works of art in public spaces because such works were not even perceived to fall within the category of art. On unification, East German art was removed from museums, with prominent GDR artists widely condemned as 'state artists' who,

as such, were not artists at all. This denigration reached its lowest point in 1999 at the notorious Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne exhibition in Weimar, where a mass of paintings from East Germany were hung frame against frame, without differentiation against black plastic. One commentator summed it up as a 'Trash-Event'.[9]

Across the towns and residential complexes of the GDR, the process of trashing and reconstruction began immediately after reunification – it was an 'inevitable consequence' of the capital flows, but it was also ideologically motivated. The aforementioned commission for Aufarbeitung used ideological and moralizing rhetoric to condemn the architecture and urban design of the GDR as symptoms of a discredited system.[10] The perception of the East German built environment as a disaster best swept away as soon as possible was manifest in the planning discussions. In Dresden, for example, architects agreed in 1990 'to demolish as many buildings as possible from the last forty years, and so to extinguish the past, and to reconstruct the past from the previous era'.[11] Residential areas suffered steep population losses, but the demolition of living complexes was not purely due to economic rationale; as Weizman argues, '"shrinking" [seemed to be] part of a plan to re-appropriate the city by erasing the "unfamiliar" fabric of a competing ideology.'[12]

I have chosen two examples of the way in which this trashing period of the 1990s saw the urgent need to remove and recontextualize works of art in public spaces that were seen by political decision makers as explicit signifiers of the GDR regime. The Lenin statue on the crossroads that was Leninplatz in East Berlin was removed in October 1991 despite vociferous efforts to save it. The monument lost its protected status on the grounds that the statue stood for 'personality cult and subjection to dictatorship'.[13]

Among the initiatives to save GDR monuments was the forum of (West German) Art History Students, who argued in May 1990 that to remove the monuments would be a 'blanket discrediting the historical value of the persons depicted, making their ideological value equal to that of those who commissioned them'.[14] In other words, they wanted to distinguish between the 'ideological value' of Lenin et al. and that of the GDR authorities. This would have implied a shift in

the indexicality of the monuments, a shift which had not been implied by calls for their demolition. To remove the monuments was not only to make part of history no longer visible, but it also suggested that icons of Marxism–Leninism had agency in a reunified Germany. The premise was that the monuments were a reminder of a discredited regime rather than that they might act as heroic icons for Berlin citizens. The working group Socialist Monumental Art argued that there was a danger that 'once again, repression will determine historical self-understanding', a reference to a perceived failure to acknowledge the Nazi past.[15] In the same vein, the prominent historian of art and public monuments, Hans Mittig, argued for retaining visible testimony even to the difficult past in order to leave open the possibility of debate.[16] Such arguments failed to convince decision makers of the need to clear the landscape in order to forge a new democratic German identity.

At the time of German unification, the interiors and exterior public spaces of the former East Germany were replete with murals, mosaics, modular structures, ornamental works, tapestries, stained glass, sculptures, fountains and play apparatus.[17] Hundreds of less prominent works of art on and within buildings simply disappeared under the bulldozer, fell into disrepair or were situated in spaces that were abandoned. It was more often the case that works were regarded as culturally and economically 'worthless', and thus not worth saving from the re-modelling required by planners and investors, than politically 'dangerous'. Highly visible and explicitly political works were identified by local authorities in the 1990s as requiring a re-signification in line with the new era, and generally artists were enlisted in this process – evidence of the considerable investment in Germany in the 'soft power' of the arts.

Before its demontage, the Lenin statue was subject to an artist's intervention, even before reunification. In September 1990, artist Krzyszstof Wodiczko projected onto it a photomontage image of a Polish shopper gathering consumer goods. The projection, one of seventeen in East Berlin, costing a reported 1.5 million Deutschmarks, was also not without controversy, and is an early example of the way in which sanctioned artistic interventions created a liminal phase for works during the period of rapid change.[18]

While it is unsurprising that a centrally located statue of Lenin was promptly removed after the fall of the Wall, I would like to turn now to the fate of a mural that was essentially treated as politically equivalent to a statue. Max Lingner's 1953 mural Aufbau der Republik (Building the Republic) depicts a joyful socialist realist story of the optimism of youth in the new East Germany. It is positioned at a site in Berlin that was a focal point of the 1953 violent suppression of protests by East German workers, which was to become an important event in the East–West propaganda war. As part of the process of staking out new commemorative moments in the process of reconstructing the past, the site was chosen by the Berlin Senate in 1993 for a new work to commemorate the victims of the uprising (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

The new work by Wolfgang Rüppel presents a reportage image from the 1953 protests set into the ground and sealed under highly reflective glass. Lingner's mythic 1953 representation, an assertion of the then present and future, was countered in 1993 by a montage of highly rasterized press photographs which seem to show 'what it really looked like' in 1953.

Figure 4.1 Aufbau der Republik (Building the Republic), painted ceramic mural by Max Lingner (1953) (background) and part of memorial to the events of 17 June 1953 by Wolfgang Rüppel (2000) (foreground), Detlev-Rohwedder-Haus, Berlin. Photo © Jessica Jenkins 2010.

Figure 4.2 Aufbau der Republik (Building the Republic), painted ceramic mural by Max Lingner (1953). Detail. Photo © Jessica Jenkins 2016.

The counter-narrative equates the original work with the kind of 'truth of image' proposed by the mimetic idea of socialist realism and, in doing so, assigns to Lingner's 1953 celebratory piece the agency assumed by socialist realism. Rüppel's 1993 photographic work reasserts the Western lens on the events. If this potentially opens a reflection on the Cold War propaganda war, this reading is deflected by the additional explanatory material at the site, which affirms Rüppel's work as a reply to the propaganda image of 1953. What was intended in the early 1990s in the tradition of commemoration – in the sense of binding memories into a common moment of the present – loses its purpose in its need to reply to Lingner's work. As a result, Rüppel's work marks 1990s' Germany more than it does the Germany of 1953. Rüppel's work may have seemed appropriate at the time but today looks as pedagogical as the Lingner piece.

By the late 1990s, the institutionalized trashing of the GDR and the exclusion of its culture from German history created a crisis for the general process of Aufarbeitung in the form of a popular cultural backlash in the form of so-called Ostalgie, a neologism of 'East' and 'nostalgia'. It is not possible to recount the many forms and development of Ostalgie here, which has in itself spawned a whole field of cultural historical and ethnographic scholarship.[19] However, what had begun as a pop cultural phenomenon of re-enacting East German culture in

the late 1990s was identified as having huge commercial potential, and mutated. In the view of leading historians, Aufarbeitung was 'thrown back years'.[20] It became clear that Ostalgie was more than its commercial exploitation, that it was indicative of a sense of estrangement in the new Germany. In turn, Ostalgie became embedded into public discourse as a derogatory term employed to dismiss any favourable memories of the East German past.

'Nostalgia' has a pejorative connotation of a foolishness, which does not well characterize the sense of dislocation which fed a public revival of interest in the East German past. 'Nostalgia' in its etymological origin as a longing for 'home' rather than a longing for 'the past' is a better characterization of the counter-narratives that came as such a shock to the standard bearers of the official Aufarbeitung.[21] That material culture and the built environment should emerge as contested territory in remembering the GDR must come as a surprise; it was understood to be the disaffection of most East Germans with the material offerings and decrepit urban spaces of the GDR in the late 1980s which hastened the demise of the socialist state. It was an extraordinary détournement that the designed artefacts of the GDR should take on a compensatory role in the face of a sense of loss. The so hopelessly earnest and inadequate culture, once so laughable – the plasticky goods, the outmoded music, the poor imitations of Western brands, the badly printed graphics, the cheaply built housing, the state commissioned works of art became the object of affectionate memorialization. The effects of the passage of time on all of this design could not be more pointed. It is obvious to point out that objects change their signification from one generation to the next, the mundane becoming something affectionately remembered, but in the case of the GDR these attachments seemed counter-rational and contradicted the hegemony of the post-1990 history-writing project.

Figure 4.3 Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-F0809-0201-001 / CC-BY-SA 3.0 GDR Foreign Ministry Building, Architectural collective of Joseph Kaiser, 1967. Demolished. Photo © Peter Straube, Berlin.

The school mural story offers an illustration of how counter-narratives disrupted official history-writing. The newspaper framed the discussion around acceptable responses. Opinions on the artistic quality of the mosaic were not given in the articles: the debate circled around whether the symbolism was harmful and must be either removed or balanced by means of an explanatory plaque or other educational measure, or redundant and thus harmless; a local artist interviewed vented his anger at his experience of political state patronage of artists. Online, however, the discussion was more wide-ranging – one local citizen framed the media speculation on the mosaic as provocative sensationalism, proposing:

> Everyone will have their own image of this country, [the GDR] and will know of its weaknesses, mistakes and injustice, and will when they look back without prejudice, also remember its good sides.[22]

The 'good as well as bad' feeling about the GDR represents a majority view among former GDR citizens, with opinion polls consistently showing only a small minority saying it was very good or very bad.[23] This is in stark contrast to the

1990s premise of Aufarbeitung which was that a wholesale repudiation of everything the GDR stood for was a necessary prerequisite to national unity. By the time of the Plauen school mural commotion in 2011, it was evident that there had not been unequivocal embrace by East Germans of all that the West had to offer, but equally that the GDR as a political entity belonged to the past. With the ideas of communism safely consigned to history, the political establishment could afford to be a little more generous; a limited space was opened up for curated, recontextualized and re-signified works of art in public spaces. Arguably, it was not the mural, but the councillor who was out of step with the times.

In the next examples, we will see how this space that was opened up nonetheless worked to maintain the larger project of national consensus. Works of art have not been revalidated in their original sense or purpose. Instead, value has been extracted from some significant pieces where they can be integrated within acceptable cultural myths, or where they offer commercial heritage value within a clearly delineated space. Further, some works have been repurposed to enhance a sense of local ownership of place, which simultaneously helps to renew economically depleted areas where there is no 'historic' architecture of yore to reinstate.

An acceptable cultural myth, although not immediately recognized as part of the heritage of Eastern Germany, is twentieth-century post-war modernism. The renewal of interest in modernist architecture and design as 'heritage' is not confined to Germany, of course, but recognition of the so-called Ostmoderne by the 2000s came, in many cases, too late. The fate of works of the prominent East German artist Walter Womacka provides an interesting case. Womacka's mosaic Unser Leben is well known in Berlin due to its scale and prominent position facing Alexanderplatz. The 125-metre frieze wraps around the Haus des Lehrers, a building designed together with the domed congress hall by Hermann Henselmann in 1964. This architecture was significant at the time for its explicit reference to international modernism. After years of neglect and increasing disrepair in the 1990s, the Haus des Lehrers was, by the 2000s, revalued as an icon of modernism, and the frieze, distinctly socialist realist, came under protection.

Before the renovation took place, the building was given over to an artistic intervention in September 2001, a digital-light project called 'blinkenlights', which was a hacking, delocalized discourse of cool. Blinkenlights was a progression from the 1990s light projections in East Berlin, but both of these light events offered up the surfaces of former icons of the GDR cityscape for a liminal moment before their reabsorption into the new mainstream.

Haus des Lehrers and its mural were fully restored in the mid-2000s; the promotional material draws on the building's modernist heritage, but also acknowledges the socialist promise of the 1960s – 'A dazzling vision of the future and a prominent symbol of a new age' in order to promote the prestige of the building as an 'iconic' site for current-day businesses. An extended description of Womacka's frieze describes the ideological intentions, such as: 'These ideals included supporting developing countries to fight for political and economic independence. A key motivation behind this was the mission of bringing socialism into the world.'[24] Such a public effort to present the historical context of the art work helped not only to increase the value of the real estate but also to serve the interest of curious visitors to Berlin. In this case, the mural is privileged due to its coupling with the 'heritage' modernist architecture, and its location in the centre of eastern Berlin.

Figure 4.4 'Der Mensch gestaltet seine Welt' (The Person Creates Their World). Mural by Walter Womacka in the former Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the GDR (murals and building now demolished).

The fate of another set of three Womacka murals situated in the conference room of the former foreign ministry at the administrative heart of East Berlin demonstrates how much had changed since 1995. The Berliner Zeitung reported at the time that Womacka's work was destroyed due to a 'lack of interest'. The building, equally an interesting exponent of modernist architecture, by Joseph Kaiser, was described as a 'blunder' and demolished to make way for a

restoration of the 'historic' Schinkelplatz.[25] The much more fluid, Picasso-like drawings of Womacka's works Der Mensch gestaltet seine Welt were not politically charged, and were less visible, but scant consideration was given to the integrated art works or their potential value (Figures 4.3 and 4.4).

There are several interesting examples where works of art have been repurposed to enhance a sense of local ownership of place, while simultaneously divesting them of their original purpose and political meaning. Among other examples, this is evident in the rhetoric around Lev Kerbel's enormous Karl Marx bust in the centre of Chemnitz, and in the re-signification of Sigbert Fliegel's flame monument in the centre of Halle old town. In the local authority of Berlin Marzahn, selected works of art from the 1980s – none of which are political – have been retained and validated alongside new commissions in residential complexes largely populated by the older generation.

This sense of art as a local identifier of belonging has been most evident where an artist identified with a particular place has been rehabilitated. One of the most important examples is the work of Willi Neubert who, like all prominent GDR artists, was denigrated as a 'state artist' in the 1990s. During this period, his work was removed from public view. Neubert, originally a metalworker from the small steel industry town of Thale, pioneered the use of industrial enamelling for murals; his work, often leaning heavily on modernist form-making, had in the GDR period been installed in prominent locations.

In 2000, the mayor of Thale, Thomas Balcerowski, negotiated the retrieval of a major work which had been put in storage in Suhl for public redisplay in Thale. Balcerowski explained to me that he was determined to honour this 'son of the town'; the works 'created under the political circumstances of the time', were a 'milestone in Thale's earlier [industrial] history'.[26] Here in a town which, like all the former industrial towns of East Germany, suffered huge working-age population losses after unification, the importance of place, historical connection and personal connections to the artist overcame the stigma attached to GDR public art.

Figure 4.5 Willi Neubert, Kampf um den Sieg des Marxismus Leninismus (Struggle for the Victory of Marxism Leninism), 1977. Enamel painted on tiles. The work was retrieved from storage in the town of Suhl and transferred to the artist's home town of Thale. Photo © Jessica Jenkins 2010.

Such reinstatements of artists and artwork in a localized context have taken place across the former GDR – while artists have been dismissed as 'state artists' in the national discourse, at a local level, opportunities are found to celebrate them, to quietly restore works which give some sense of identification in otherwise depleted landscapes. The story of the school mosaic in Plauen was concluded at least for the time being when the majority vote on the council was against the addition of a plaque to explain the mural. The same arguments were rehearsed – from the residual potency of the symbols to their relative unimportance. When the artist Lothar Rentsch died in May 2017, he was feted in the local press as a wonderful artist, without a mention of the GDR. With the GDR safely consigned to history, it has been possible to absolve some of its artefacts and their makers from their alleged 'complicity'. There is evidence that East German art is beginning to return to the museums today; the status of works of in public spaces is dependent on where they can accommodate the functions of heritage-making and local identification.[27]

As Germany enters its third decade of the post-Wall era, the examples I have shown of rehabilitation of some remaining works of architectural art indicate how the increasing temporal distance to the GDR permits a greater tolerance

within mainstream decision-making bodies. While there continues to be controversy at all levels over the interpretation of the GDR, the project of consensus has acknowledged that there were a multitude of experiences of the socialist state. The publicly sponsored history project still set the limits of the acceptable discourse but those limits are broader than in the 1990s phase of Aufarbeitung.

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