Paul Stangl’s *Risen from Ruins. The Cultural Politics of Rebuilding East Berlin* is a detailed and comprehensive history of the high-level debates, decisions, and policies which shaped the rebuilding of East Berlin in the first decade after the end of World War Two. Stangl presents an impressively researched account of the major players involved in planning East Berlin, including leading figures in the SED Politburo, their adversaries in the West, and the modernist architects and planners who accommodated themselves to the mandate of socialist realism which held sway in the communist world during this era.

Stangl’s aim in writing this book is more ambitious than just presenting a straightforward narrative of the buildings that got demolished, reconstructed or built anew in East Berlin; as he claims in his introduction, he wants to „spatialize“ his analysis of memory in the urban landscape (p. 4). By this he means that his focus is on the ways in which memory is mediated in everyday spaces. Quoting geographer Edward Relph, he writes that „Place experiences are necessarily time-deepened and memory-qualified“ (p. 4), and Stangl then adds that „the connection [between cultural memory and a particular site] may grow stronger or weaker, be forgotten and recovered“ (p. 5). Much of the book is an attempt to understand how connections with the past, as embedded by the brute reality of urban space, were either severed or reestablished by the early SED’s policies surrounding what to demolish and what to rebuild – and how – in postwar East Berlin.

Of course, what past? Berlin was always a very complex city, and its urban spaces reflected that. The memory of the working class movement was embedded in its slums and Elendsviertel, but so was the memory of Prussian imperialism and militarism. So too were examples of modernism, and attached to all of these were works of art that were German national treasures. Stangl points to the complexity of simply discussing „severing“ or „rupture“ versus „continuity“ by limning several themes or discourses that he gleans from past German history, which reemerged and shaped the debates and decisions about how to rebuild East Berlin under the SED. Preservationism, Heimatschutz, Science, Humanism, Marxism, Marxism-Leninism, and Modernism: according to Stangl, they all emerge as core themes that shape this history. He completes his introduction with an impressionistic description of the massive amount of destruction and rubble left over in Berlin, which helps situate the narrative firmly in the material and spatial realm.

Stangl’s book then uses a mix of thematic and chronological narration. The first chapter is about the building of communist and Soviet memorials. It extends back to the history of the SPD / USPD / KPD in Germany, and some of its commemorative spaces in Berlin, such as the Friedrichsfelde cemetery and the Luxemburg-Liebknecht memorial, while also exploring the initial removal of monuments to the Prussian military, and the building of the Treptow memorial.

His second chapter again reaches back in time, giving a good summary account of the various urban designs which planners have proposed in different eras for Berlin, from the Hobrecht Plan to the Greater Berlin Plan of the 1920s, to Albert Speer’s plans for Germania. Stangl then discusses the initial plans for a „New Berlin“ put forward in 1945-46 by modernists who had been influenced by the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) and its central document, the Athens Charter, including Hans Scharoun. These plans did not come to fruition, as socialist realism became ascendant in the Party and in the Soviet Bloc in general by 1949. Here, Stangl does a nice job of detailing the lines of influence within the SED and the GDR’s ministries – in particular, the influence wielded by the Soviet Union, Kurt Liebknecht (Karl’s nephew), Walter Ulbricht and others. Also very helpful is Stangl’s account of just how influential the architect Gerhard Kosel was in promoting the idea of technology and science as one of the key productive forces in social-
ism, which helped reintroduce industrialized building techniques into the GDR by the end of the 1950s.

Stangl’s next chapters focus on a particular area or project within East Berlin. Chapter three is devoted to Unter den Linden, the epicenter of Prussian history and militarism, as well as German national culture, with prominent museums, the Humboldt University (the former Friedrich Wilhelm University, renamed in 1945/49), the opera house, etc. Here too, the intractably difficult question resurfaced of whether communists should make a clean break with the past, which was too tainted by militarism and capitalism, or whether they should lay claim to the national heritage of Germany to prove that socialism represented the „true” Germany. Chapter four focuses on the imperial palace, which the Politburo determined to be structurally unsound and demolished, and the creation of Marx-Engels square in its place. (The Palace of the Republic, erected in the 1970s, is beyond Stangl’s time frame.) The imperial palace has of course been a source of controversy since the fall of the Wall, and Stangl makes clear his own view: the palace could have been saved, and it was Ulbricht who was behind the drive to demolish it. Like in chapters two and three, one detail that emerges from Stangl’s work is the amazingly central emphasis that both Soviet and socialist realist planners placed on having open spaces in the city for mass rallies, assemblies, and parades. This is an aspect often overlooked in discussions of socialist realism, and it would be nice to hear more about it.

Chapter five concentrates on Wilhelmstraße, which had become the epicenter of the Nazi government, and chapter six on the building of Stalinallee, which is normally juxtaposed as the antithesis, of sorts, to the Plattenbau methods that came after the project. Stangl notes that even conservative socialist realists like Kurt Liebknecht who passionately opposed what they called „formalism” (meaning industrialized, modernist building), recognized that Stalinallee squandered a huge amount of valuable resources, and that the GDR would have to move to prefabrication and assembly-line construction to cut down on costs. What he wanted was to find ways of prefabricating ornamentation, and other cultural facades, which would preserve some German national character. What Stangl does not mention is that experiments were in fact done by the German Architectural Academy (Deutsche Bauakademie) on this scale and that the technology just did not exist – it was either modernist Plattenbau or nothing.

Stangl’s account is very useful, because of its detailed research. It is not, however, very well-written, which is a shame. There are multiple typographical errors, such as a claim that Marx began publishing in the „1940s” (p. 10, should be „1840s”) or that East German propaganda referred to „Hitler’s rouges” (p. 45, presumably „rogues”). More importantly, though, is that despite the very well-conceived introduction, the body essentially just gives a straightforward history of the main building projects in East Berlin, and does not really advance any kind of argument. In a way, this book is useful as a reference, more than it is for introducing a new thesis or narrative on urban space and the Cold War. Frequently, too, Stangl’s writing becomes repetitive, a danger of mixing thematic and chronological structures. Finally, this book needed a lot better editing – despite how useful some of the details may be, the book is overladen with them, and often times there are several pages of details that are not important and do not need to be written down. It is surprising that Stanford University Press could not vet one of its works more carefully. Still, if readers can get past the poor writing and editing, there are some very useful nuggets of information here that help us get closer to a complete picture of just how Berlin came to take the shape that it has.


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