Cheap Rents and Housing Shortages (Retrospective Account, 2010)

Abstract

Prefabricated housing complexes dot the landscapes of all former communist countries. They proved to be a quick and affordable solution to the housing shortages that once plagued all of Eastern Europe. East Germany was no exception. Under Honecker's leadership, new construction increased dramatically, but housing remained a problem until the end of the GDR.

Source

Despite an elaborate housing construction program, a housing shortage remained the constant companion of the GDR. The promise of the SED party congresses to provide "everyone with an apartment" by 1990 fell by the wayside, just like the Workers' and Peasants' State itself.

After all, in Berlin in 1984 Honecker handed over the two-millionth apartment that had been newly constructed or renovated since 1971. Yet the flurry of flashes from photographers and cameramen that day could not hide the fact that the ambitious housing construction program had by then eaten billion-dollar holes into the state's fiscal resources. What was meant to demonstrate social superiority merely attested to the ineffectiveness of the socialist planned economy: yet another bad check had bounced.

Standardized Comfort: *Plattenbau*[1] and Furniture

Apartments of the new type—usually called merely *Platte*—were found throughout the GDR. That was practical. Even in an unfamiliar apartment you could hardly get lost: a sofa set (with a pull-out bed) on the right, a wall unit on the left, a dining corner in front of the service hatch to the kitchen. Standardized living, the dimensions of the apartments determined the design of the furniture makers.

As early as 1957, the Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau [a furniture company] presented the Model type 602, a functional furniture program of which twelve versions were still on offer until 1968. It created room in a small space. The later reproductions of the program from other furniture factories replaced wood with particle board, whose surface laminate merely imitated wood. Anyone who did not live the standardized way deliberately put up with less comfort in an old building. There, in contrast to the *Plattenbau*, a district heating system or hot running water tended to be the exception, although an outhouse no longer was the norm everywhere.

In the *Plattenbau*, too, not all dreams came to fruition. When the housing construction program gradually ran out of money, cuts were made. For example, an added wall turned a three-room apartment into a four-room apartment. Elevators were now authorized only for houses with at least six floors, which is why henceforth in Berlin—unlike in the provinces—ten-floor buildings were the rule. While *Plattenbau* buildings kept rising on the grassy fields of the Republic, the valuable old inner-city buildings had been spared by the war fell apart.

Housing Shortages: "Come Back When You're Married!"

Tuesdays and Thursday were public consultation days in the Housing Office. The waiting rooms were bursting at the seams. For hours, young moms with toddlers at their side stood more or less patiently in line. There were good reasons to take the children along. The prospects of being assigned an apartment

were better for families with offspring. The more children, the higher the chance.

By contrast, singles without children had a difficult time of it. They were frequently dismissed with the instruction: “Come back when you’re married!” That is why young couples often had to continue sharing a room in their parents’ apartment years after getting married.

Large enterprises had their own housing contingents, which they distributed to “deserving workers.” Those who had the time to participate in work projects and a little luck might snag an apartment in a Workers’ Housing Construction Cooperative [*Arbeiterwohnungsbaugenossenschaft*, AWG] or one of the coveted apartments in an old building from the housing stock of the twenties. Those belonged to the Housing Cooperatives that had come into being at the time. The management of the apartments, including repairs and renovations, was up to the building owner, though they could not make decisions about occupancy. The largest stock of apartments belonged to the various Communal Housing Companies (KWV). They owned not only the new prefabricated apartment buildings, but also the old houses that had been expropriated or relinquished by their owners.

Repairs You do Yourself—Provided Material is Available

For anyone assigned a new apartment, it was the fulfillment of a long-held dream. Although it was only rented, it was treated like one’s own four walls. Residents invested a lot of money and time in their homes: they papered the walls, laid tile in the bathrooms and kitchens, repaired the floors, and tended the front yard. . . Everyone was his own carpenter, mason, painter, or plumber. Not because it was so much fun, but in response to everyday necessity. Craftsmen were in short supply. And if they were available, they often lacked materials. Lucky was he who had a collection of old nails, screws, and wood scraps.

The feeling of happiness knew no bounds when a tenant, thanks to connections, was able to procure a circuit breaker for his electrician, without which a modernization of the electrical system was unthinkable. Otherwise, you were left with the choice of turning on either the washing machine or the iron. Both at the same time? That would blow the fuses.

Incidentally, hooking up electrical circuits was the only work that the hobby craftsman was legally prohibited from doing. Everything else, the trained citizen of the GDR could (and had to) manage, thanks to polytechnical education. But even industriousness, improvisational talent, and imagination had their limits: new windows were as much a rarity as roof tiles, bathtubs, toilet bowls, cement. . . A list that could be extended at will.

Self-help and neighborly help were typical. And in the housing communities they became the basis of many a common celebration.

Cheap Housing—Expensive Self-Deception

Housing was cheap in the GDR. A square meter of living space cost between 80 Pfennig and 1.25 Marks. Tenants in old buildings often felt disadvantaged. While they had to pay for heat and warm and cold water themselves, in many a *Plattenbau* settlement it was included in the already low rent. What was supposed to be paradise on earth turned out to be comfortable self-deception.

Low rents had to be subsidized at ever greater expense. State subsidies were intended to bridge the gap between construction costs and end consumer prices. What gave pause to every sixth-grade student was always a cause for celebration for the party and state leadership: having frozen prices at the level of the thirties. But at what cost? For example, the eight Pfennig that a tenant had to pay for a kilowatt hour of electricity was long since merely a fraction of what it cost to produce it. What seemed cheap became very expensive.

NOTES

[1] High rise built from prefabricated concrete slabs – eds.

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Translation: Thomas Dunlap