

Political Implications of Preservation and Planning in East Germany

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Figure 1. Stalinist Architecture in East Berlin

Photo Credit: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/gray-concrete-tower-near-building-during-golden-hour-1057840/>



Abstract

This study documents the ideological instability brought forth in the search for stability through architecture and historic preservation. Following World War II, Germany became divided physically, ideologically, and emotionally into two separate countries. Despite the mounting instability in the region as a result of Cold War tensions, the architectural ghosts of a pre-war Germany proved to be most haunting following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent German reunification. Here, we can explore the hauntological aspects of architecture and its preservation, or demolition. This hauntology provides the fulcrum on which present ideological tendencies balance. I argue that, in East Germany, the post-reunification rise of far-right politics is ideologically scripted into the architecture. Cultural values, such as *Heimat*, viewed through the prism of the Lacanian Theory of Desire pour light on the management of German architecture that continues to haunt the present.

Berlin is haunted by the specter of the Wall. That specter is the future of reunification, the economic prosperity promised but rarely delivered, packaged inside a past that never existed. In the nearly thirty years since the removal of the Berlin Wall, the city of Berlin and the country of Germany are divided economically and ideologically. Although the Wall itself created an island of West Berlin that existed as part of the West Germany, ideologically it separated East (German Democratic Republic) and West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany). Without symbols to demarcate the previous boundaries, the meaning remains concealed, hidden from view and consciousness. It becomes difficult to orientate oneself to the direction of change. We are left with the sediment of ideologies past.

Mark Fisher described hauntology as “the failure of the future” (2012, p.16). This concept, originally developed by Jacques Derrida to refer to the failure of communism that haunts society to this day in many forms, can be found in Germany as both the failure of East German communism and yet again as the failure of reunification (Derrida, 1994). Whereas the collapse of communism caused Francis Fukyama to declare liberal democracy and capitalist society as “the end of history,” it is precisely this end that haunts Germany today

Figure 2. East Berlin Architecture

Photo taken by Esteban Arrango: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/drone-shot-of-the-city-of-berlin-9847451/>



(Fukuyama, 1992 p.133). The spectral aspect here does not require believing in ghosts or paranormal activity, but instead speaks to living in a manner that allows the past to maintain its presence (Derrida, 1994). Michael Bell (1997, p.813) takes this a step further, applying this concept to space saying, "Ghosts also help constitute the specificity of historical sites, of the places where we feel we belong and do not belong, of the boundaries of possession by which we assign ownership and nativene."

Congruently, Bernhardt suggests that socialist planning in East Berlin lead to the development of values that still haunt Berlin today:

Political institutions such as the public regulation of land, the socialist building industry, the supremacy of public investments in the building sector, and a control of the housing stock were some of the main instruments for the realization of the visions of socialist urbanism. In a distinctive but complementary way to the "bourgeois utopias" that materialized in the Western European suburbs, the socialist regimes tried to realize "socialist utopias" by forming socialist men, socialist families, and socialist neighborhoods with the help of urbanism. These utopias produced specific patterns of urban design and urban growth, and helped to establish a whole culture of values and lifestyles that are still very much alive today. (Berhardt, 2005 p.116).

In that sense, the city is "undead". Its hauntology is buried in the landscape. That is to say, we derive our sense of place and space from ideological references buried in the landscape. In Berlin, and Germany as a whole, reunification eliminated meaning from many official GDR buildings through demolition, preservation as an anti-monument to its repressive police state, and abandonment, leaving them to rot in place. Whereas Klaus Von Beyme described post-World War II Berlin as "a conglomerate of unconnected solitary architectural masterpieces," critical reconstruction aimed to plan post-Cold War Berlin so as to read like a text (2014, p.117). This text tells the story and history of the city through the selected preservations, new developments, open spaces, memorials, etc. This story, cohesive and compelling as it might be, is open to subjectivity and interpretation by the city's inhabitants, tourists, immigrants, and various others. And, considering Berlin's violent history, the task of writing a new script architecturally for Berlin was no easy feat.

George Murray concluded critical reconstruction left interpretation rather open ended, saying:

We have seen that the debate has come to be dominated by a rhetoric that privileges weighty urban virtues of permanence, duration, solidity, etc., and that strives for dauntingly lofty ideals of univalence as well as metaphysical solace. Given that the popular and critical response to the New Berlin has been mixed at best, perhaps it is safe to say that these

ideals have been realized for a very few, if any. (2008, pp.15, 16)

Viewed through the lens of reunification, of liberal democracy's triumph over communism, this can be read as a specific type of "sub-nationalism" (Vale, 2014). Vale posits that nationalism is the resultant form of a sub group, or one of many groups, attempting to gain dominance over other sub groups in a specific territory (Vale 2014). We can then read German reunification as West Germany's attempted dominance over the East German sub-group. This implicit nationalism played out in the form of critical reconstruction and architectural debates of the 1990s (Murray, 2008).

Reunification found East Germans with a stigmatized experience, searching for belonging in the newly democratic state, managing private property, and discovering their new sense of place in the backdrop of fights for property, preservation, and locality by elites (James, 2014). Furthermore, this was compounded by economic suffering by East Germans following reunification. In the first month of reunification in 1990, the rate of production in East Germany dropped to 46% of the pre-collapse levels of 1989 (Akerlof, et al. 1991). Consequently, the GDR had only 43% of the economic output of West Germany (Annual Report on Germany Unity, 2019). This trend continued despite modest gains. In 2010, Bernd and Schefeled pointed out that "Nominal wages in the manufacturing sector in East Germany have displayed no tendency to catch up to the western level since the mid-1990s" (Bernd, Schefeled, p.20). The Annual Report On German Unity in 2021 (based on 2020 data) reported that Eastern Germany still lagged behind its western counterpart by 18%. East German residents still had only 48% of the private wealth of West German residents, up from only 29% at the time of reunification. East Germany has not seen the promised economic glory of reunification and it could take another thirty years before equity is reached (German unity: Eastern states still lag economically, but catching up, report says, 2021).

With the economic heart carved out of East Germany, the battle over place became central to East German identities. Importantly, the GDR's lack of investment in strategic preservation was a profound misstep by its government. Andrew Demshuk noted:

The Cumulative effect of so many landmarks tottering on the edge of collapse and parking lots in place of restorable ruins gave daily intensity to public grievances...that undermined belief in and ultimately helped to overturn the existing ideology. (2020, p.430)

The repercussions of this were far reaching beyond the GDR's demise, leaving prospective preservation sites ripe for investment by the capital of the West. Heike Alberts provides the example of Quedlinburg as a historic city with six centuries of half-timbered houses that survived the GDR through minor repairs done by

Figure 3. Alexanderplatz, a central public space in East Berlin

Photo taken by Ingo Joseph: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/white-and-gray-concrete-needle-tower-11742/>



residents. At the time of collapse, Quedlinburg represented an authentic preservation of its history. But following reunification, the West German government submitted the site to UNESCO for preservation. The new influx of capital targeted revitalization, which did occur, displacing residents and businesses, converting historic homes into shops and banks (Alberts, 2014).

The combined effects of economic privatization and West German dominated planning and preservation created a ruinous situation for East Germans. Murray points out from a discussion with an East Berlin planner the level to which East Germans were excluded in subsequent planning process:

As I have already mentioned, the architecture and place-making efforts of the GDR period (1945–1989) are ignored, or when they are mentioned at all, it is only in order to insist again how little GDR planners and architects understood of architecture or of place-making...

When someone from the East criticizes a West German architect or a decision made by West Germans,” the East Berlin planner Bruno Flierl complained to me, “or criticizes the manner in which the Reunification is being realized in the [Planwerk Innenstadt Berlin], then he’s an opponent of Reunification and an opponent of the Federal Republic, then he’s a nostalgist for the GDR, and so on and so on. That is to say, such an attitude gets one excluded from the process. We should just be happy ... they know what’s good for us, and if we happen to be of another opinion, then that’s a problem. (2008, p.12)

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James argues that architecture was one of the few things East Germans had to hold on to in the struggle for a unified Germanness. He describes the patriarchal effect of reunification, saying the result of these actions:

locates the GDR outside a national imaginary demarcated by cultural patrimony and proper devotion to it. The socialist regime appears as a thief, a vandal, or, at best, an illegitimate custodian from which the nation and its heritage must be reclaimed. If the renovation and reconstruction of older landmarks, along with the removal of GDR monuments and the changing of street names in Eastern cities have functioned as an allegory of renewal, they have done so by casting the legacy of socialism as another instance of damage to be repaired or re-verses by the expanded FRG .

Not surprisingly, many Easterners have also adopted the view that their cities are less corrupted by modernity and, therefore, represent a precious historical legacy on the verge of vanishing. Given the stigmatization in unified Germany of the GDR and most East Germans’ pre-1990 biographies, architectural heritage offers an important and rare occasion for Easterners to claim a positive contribution to the unified nation. To an extent, it even redeems their relative deprivation under socialism, since the survival of so much “historic substance” now appears as a fortunate (if unintended) effect of the GDR’s economic failings. (James, 2014; p. 214)

The German language uses a specific word for the feeling of belonging and home: *Heimat*. *Heimat* is both a local and national

performance of Germanness (James, 2014). To contextualize *Heimat* in terms of nationalism, it operates on the premise that home is vulnerable and under threat (James, p.217). Beyond *Heimat* lies the prevalent sense of “Ostalgia,” or the nostalgia for East Germany and its culture. Kaya refers to this expression of East German heritage by saying that :

Heritage is political, Heritage is neither fixed, nor inherent, but rather emerges in dialogue among individuals, communities, practices, places, and things. Hence, one could even say that the ‘new heritage’ has nothing to do with the past, but is instead a form of ‘futurology’. (2021, p.1).

Expanding on this idea, Sterling describes this phenomenon as such, “heritage and nostalgia are more than simply backwards-looking, emerging instead as key components in the rise of a conservative populism that effectively shuts down possible futures” (2022, p.11). While Kaya may not have known it at the time, this “futurology” was previously described by Fisher as *hauntology*. Revisiting Fisher’s description of *hauntology* as the “failure of the future,” we can see the concrete basis of this expression in East Germany, effectively playing out Sterling’s “conservative populism,” in the recent rise of the right wing Alternative for Deutschland party.

Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) relies on *Heimat* and heritage in its rhetoric to attract support. This type of heritage populism is growing as it attracts those who experience “spatial deprivation” or “nostalgic deprivation” and the sense that they live in a forgotten place (Kaya, 2021). The political orientation of the AfD, however, is paradoxical. Its right-wing populism points to a nostalgia, or Ostalgia, for communist GDR symbols, the opposite of right-wing politics. Here, we can extract the actual politics from the equation by examining the desire for a return to a “place,” a sense of *Heimat*, in the GDR. In this sense, *hauntology* is used as a political means, to take the failure of the future and a reinvented past to create a new possible future (Kaya, 2021).

The AfD’s rise corresponds with the 2015 Immigration crisis in Germany which saw over one million immigrants enter Germany in the span of eighteen months (Kirschbaum, 2016). This event coincided with development of “xenophobic and populist positions” in mainstream party politics (Kaya, 2021). A 2021 study by Pethsy, Mader, Schoen concluded that older East Germans had the highest propensity to align themselves with politics of populism and nativism and this held true for the East in general. The 2017 federal election saw the AfD grab 22% of the electoral vote in East Germany versus 11% in the West (Pethsy, Mader, Schoen, 2021). Kaya concludes of this mainstreaming of right-wing politics:

In east German provinces, a systematic form of Ostalgia has been instrumentalized by the AfD leadership to offer to politicize and mobilize its supporters, Ostalgia explains why the AfD is more popular in East Germany

than in West Germany. Ostalgia represents a depoliticized and reflective form of nostalgia for a guilt-free past sought in everyday symbols, individual and social memory. On the other hand, far-right nostalgia in West Germany represented a political memory that is full of guilt. Today we observe that the AfD is using a combination of both Ostalgia and far-right nostalgia. The guilt-free memory of Ostalgia provides the AfD with an effective cultural opportunity structure to become a strong political party in East Germany, while politically loaded far-right nostalgia in West Germany is far from offering such a guilt-free memory (Kaya, 2021; p.11).

If the preservation, or lack of preservation, of former GDR spaces led to the rise of right-wing politics in Germany today, then how does this play out in actual space? For one, the influx of one million immigrants “changed the cultural makeup of the German capital in a way not seen since the proliferation of Turkish workers in the 1960s” (Abu-Nasir, Thomas, 2021). A 2016 Los Angeles Times article by Erik Kirschbaum describes Sonnenallee, formerly of the GDR, following the wave of immigrants to Berlin in 2015:

Sonnenallee was once a working-class German street. Around the time that the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it became a popular, low-rent destination for Turks squeezed out of nearby districts by post-Cold War gentrification and rising rents. It was also becoming a new home for thousands from Lebanon who fled civil war. The smoke-filled corner pubs selling beer and the curry-wurst stands that once filled with Germans have long since been replaced by shisha lounges, fruit and vegetable stands and barbershops, among other businesses that cater to the immigrants. (<https://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-berlin-arab-street-2016-story.html>; 2016)

Kirschbaum also quoted a man named Marko describing the feeling of this cultural development by Germans:

A few vestiges of the once-dominant German culture remain. A German restaurant called Pape’s Gasthaus has been closed for months, and a young man selling Christmas trees on a street corner said that business was slow. A German goldsmith named Marko warily unlocked the door to his shop to allow one guest at a time in and said that business has been slowing down.

Fewer and fewer Germans come down to shop on Sonnenallee anymore,” said Marko, who declined to provide his last name for fear his comments would be seen as biased against immigrants. “They feel lost on a street like this where almost everything is in Arabic and hardly anyone speaks German. They struggle to recognize their old neighborhood and wonder: How did they end up in Damascus or Baghdad? (<https://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-berlin-arab-street-2016-story.html>; 2016)

This scenario is not unique to East Berlin or East Germany. Ehrkamp describes a similar situation along a street in Marxloh located in West Germany in 2008 involving Turkish immigrants. The presence of Turkish males dominating the streetscape along with Turkish businesses made Germans wary of visiting the area. The immigrants, already named as “the other,” codify space as “the other,” which Germans then try to avoid both person and place. (Ehrkamp 2008).

While the space may be racialized or codified as an immigrant

Figure 5. East Berlin, looking west

Photo Credit: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/berliner-fernsehturm-in-berlin-germany-9201325/>



space, spaces such as Sonnennallee present economic opportunities to immigrant communities as evidenced by the Los Angeles Times reporting that 90% of businesses on the street are Syrian owned (Kirschbaum, 2016). Kirschbaum describes an “irrepressible entrepreneurial spirit among the Syrian refugees” (2016). Although a singular street, this example can be juxtaposed against the perceived economic victimhood of East Germans and flagging numbers in relation to West Germany. Germans avoiding Sonnennallee, otherwise known by its nickname “Arab Street,” give space to immigrants rather than take space away from them. This is no small development when considering the power structures at play. Matejskova & Letiner suggest that, when discussing contact theory among native and immigrant populations, “encounters are not simply reducible to face-to face contacts - but they are bound up with distinct histories and geographies, and thus are embedded in broader relations of power” (2011, p. 722).

Here, we can examine this “giving of space” as it relates to the AfD and heritage populism. To revisit an early point by James, describing *Heimat* as being both vulnerable and under threat, he underscores this by saying:

Heritage and Heimat operate as mutually reinforcing allegories of a redemptive Germanness that can remain an object of longing and appear untainted to the same degree that it remains just out of reach, always subject to potential loss or disruption. (James, 2014; pp. 219)

The obvious argument here being that the AfD in particular, and East Germans grasping at *Heimat*, very literally need immigrants to “take space” so as to perpetuate their own culture, beliefs, values, and sense of *Heimat*. This Lacanian reading of space is framed by the populist ideal, a reinvented past, that cannot be attained due to the other (ontological lack) stealing it away (Wojczewski, 2021). In this sense, the economic and cultural disparity experienced in the East and its attempt to return to the glory days of the GDR (and its repressive police state), is stolen away by the influx of immigrants, and the government that sanctioned them, into East German spaces and the subsequent perceived economic successes in them. The ontological lack is reified in the form of giving space to immigrants, to hardcoding the hauntological aspects of architectural preservation and urban planning into the landscape. Wojczewski goes on to say of the AfD’s approach to politics as a whole:

However, unlike Germany’s mainstream discourse, the AfD relates these policy preferences less to Germany’s troubled past but rather regards them as expression of a more inward-looking, sovereignty-oriented foreign policy guided by a narrower definition of Germany’s national interest and a desire to jettison the burden of the past and position Germany as a

Figure 4. Typical “plattenbau” style apartment building

Photo taken by Marcus Lenk: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/an-apartment-building-with-balconies-5841899/>



'normal' power. From a Lacanian perspective, this desire for 'normalcy' and reclaiming sovereignty is, however, illusive insofar as it pictures an Other which supposedly enjoys such a 'normal' identity and an object which can never deliver what it promises. For, sovereignty only remains a desirable object as long as it is presented as stolen or blocked and can then serve as a projection screen for popular feelings of lack. (Wojczewski, 2021; p.25).

This giving of space by Germans serves purposes of ideological necessity. The perception of immigrants taking space and subsequently refusing integration culturally is used as a scapegoat to explain the failure of unification and economic strength. This takes spatial form in the concept of the "ghetto" (Caglar, 2001). Again, we see this scripting of space as a threat to Germanness, as Caglar points out, "the so-called cultural enclaves are considered to be the ultimate expression of this refusal and/or the German state's failure to manage cultural diversity so that it would not pose a threat to the solidarity of the imagined community" (2001, p. 605).

Caglar reasons that:

In the post-war period, the ghetto image was (and still is) reserved for those areas densely populated by immigrants and, in particular, by Turks (the largest immigrant group in Germany and in Berlin). Inner-city districts like Kreuzberg, Tiergarten, Wedding and Schoneneberg are areas believed to face the danger of ghettoisation. Structural changes which, in part, resulted from the social, economic and spatial reconfiguration of Berlin fuelled the recent revival of ghetto imagery in the narration of ethnic and immigrant presences in Berlin. Although ghettos are seen as the outcome of immigrants' refusal to integrate, the economic and social transformations that Berlin has undergone since reunification are responsible for the increased concentration of *Auslander* in certain areas of the city. (Caglar, 2001; p.604)

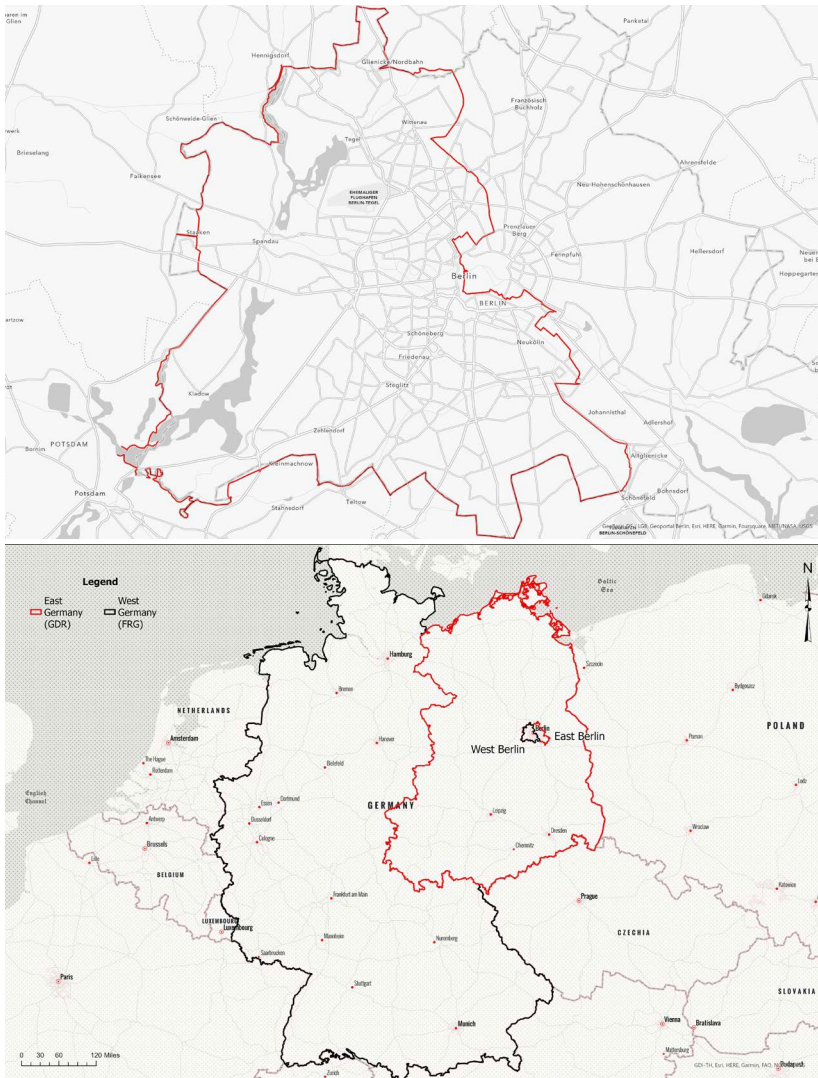
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Regionally, as Matejskova points out, communities such as Marzahn on the outskirts of East Berlin, became immigrant strongholds due to the low rents and family housing. In areas like this one, *plattenbau*, or prefabricated concrete modernist apartments (an economic solution by the GDR to the unavailability of housing) is the standard housing type. While preservation typically favors "the highlights," the uninspiring *plattenbau* nonetheless maintains a placemaking sensibility and serves the interests of immigrant communities. Not typical of discussion for official preservation, *plattenbau* apartments represent a specific hauntological aspect of preservation as put forth by Sterling: they remain as affordable housing units for families of a particular economic strata, in this case, working-class immigrants. That is to say, they are an ideal form of preservation as they maintain their original purpose (Sterling, 2022). If these buildings faced official preservation, would they fare a similar fate as Quedlinberg? Would they still be accessible to immigrants? Or would they undergo gentrification? Or would they establish *Heimat* for East Germans or fuel populist politics?

As established, the architectural preservation and urban planning methods of both post-unification Berlin and Germany created the promise of a future that ultimately failed, leading to the rise of right-wing politics. The continued presence of immigrant populations in urban East Berlin spaces is not likely to change. Planning through the lens of critical reconstruction attempts to tell one specific story from a certain vantage point, but that story is read by the city's inhabitants in multiple ways and can often deviate from the original intention. To highlight this point, an article in Places Journal describes planning initiatives in Alexanderplatz, an former GDR "hub" at the end of the socialist showpiece Karl-Marx-Allee:

In 1993, a design competition to remake Alexanderplatz in the image of

Figure 7. Berlin Wall Dividing East and West Berlin
Figure 8. Map of East and West Germany



reunified Germany was won by architects Hans Kollhoff and Helga Timmermann, who envisioned thirteen towers in and around the square. None have been built to date. Reconciling the cultural identity of modern Germany was a generation-long process, and development around Alexanderplatz has been slowed by historic designations for East German architectural landmarks and a lack of viable investment. There have been only a handful of new low-rise buildings, including a shopping mall and movie theater. Plans for a luxury apartment-hotel by Frank Gehry are stalled, too. (Berg, 2019; DOI:10.22269/190611)

One of the buildings located on this plaza, the Haus der Statistik, a former state-owned GDR office building, sat dormant for nearly a decade after its initial use as a reading room for Stasi archives after reunification. Planning effectively stalled to the point where even demolition could not be agreed upon. 2018 witnessed a complete subversion of spatial relationships in Berlin when an artist collective dropped a banner along the outside of the building that read “Room for Art, Culture, and Social Space,” a facetious prodding of politicians and planners in the face of housing shortages and rising rents. To much surprise, people took notice and soon after a public meeting took place outlining uses for the space. Public partnerships were formed and the project was funded with public money. The Haus der Statistik became a 140 million euro redevelopment project guided not by planners or developers, but by activists and community members. The plan called for some of the building to be reserved for housing refugees, seniors, families and students. The remainder of the building was to be divided up between artists space and community cultural and educational space. While construction is still in the future, the plan ultimately represents a truly alternative response to critical reconstruction and planning, rewriting the script on the modernist structure (Berg, 2019).

On this note, Demshuk suggests, speaking of the GDR specifically, that “few historic buildings ever become vested with great ideological meaning”(2020, p.422). He goes on to reason the subjectivity of historic preservation by stating that “a landmark vested with extreme sociopolitical significance could lose all meaning in the next era. Yesterday’s monstrosity could later be lauded as beautiful” (p443). In the example of the Haus der Statistik, the original meaning is subverted. But Demshuk’s point fails to recognize the hauntology implicit to the landscape and its structures. In this case, the AfD’s rise is not the result of any singular building’s explicit sociopolitical meaning just as it is not the result of any singular political issue. Rather, it is the culmination of a process of planning and preservation that unearths the ideology or gives birth to new ones. As mentioned earlier, Demshuk argues that the lack of preservation in the GDR ultimately fueled the overturning of socialist ideology. Is this not the case in regards to reunification?

Consider this passage by Karen Till in *The New Berlin* regarding critical reconstruction:

The recovery myth is the narrative structure of the Judeo-Christian story about the fall from the Garden of Eden and the promise of redemption through a return to “natural” states. For example, royal Berlin, as the classical European city, fell from its civilized status during the “bad modern” Nazi and Cold War periods. After unification, the heroic planner promises to return the city (and the nation) to its dignified historic status and protect further destruction from happening in the future. Implicit to planners’ claims to return the city to its “true” status are nostalgia for a lost city and fears about continued damage in a rapidly changing present. (Till, 2005; p.48)

The return to a former glory. We can compare this with the rhetoric of the AfD found in its preamble:

We could no longer and did not want to stand by and watch the breach of law and order, the destruction of the rule of law and irresponsible political action against the principles of economic reason. Likewise, we no longer wanted to accept that prejudices and hostilities between the European peoples that had long since been overcome by the regime of EURO rescue would break out again. We have therefore decided to offer Germany and its citizens a real political alternative in all areas.

As free citizens, we stand up for direct democracy, separation of powers and the rule of law, social market economy, subsidiarity, federalism, family and the lived tradition of German culture. (Basic Program for Germany, 2016; <https://www.afd.de/grundsatzprogramm/>)

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Critical reconstruction in Berlin and the motivation of the AfD follow the same pattern. The fall, the savior, the return to glory. Following this line through to the concept of giving space, we can see the deep-seated ideological and political implications buried in the landscape of Germany.

The scripting of the landscape by West Germany over the East in the wake of reunification served a sub-nationalist, West German agenda. East Germans became “the other” in their newly unified country. The sense of loss and economic hardship following reunification existed not only in statistics but in the carving out of East German spaces. Spaces and structures that remained and officially recognized as landmarks for preservation no longer carried their intended use or their implied meaning for many. East Germany’s *hauntology*, this loss of possible futures, and the failure of the promised future of reunification, resulted in rousing populism among East Germans. The influx of immigration into Germany in 2015 and the subsequent giving of space to immigrant groups ignited the rise of right wing politics in the form of the AfD.

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