Chapter 5
Large Housing Estates of Berlin, Germany

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Abstract Large estates of towers and slabs can be found all over the German capital, and the differences between those which, before 1990, were situated on different sides of the Berlin Wall are often hard to tell for the layperson. They stand witness to the dream of modern living and acceptable housing conditions for the whole population, which in the decades after World War II inspired the socialist regime in the East in the same way as the welfare state in the West. In terms of political background and social significance, however, the *Plattenbauten* (slab buildings) in the East were rather distinct from the *Wohnblöcke* (dwelling blocks) in the West. Not only were those in the East far more frequent—in 1990 about one-third of East Berliners called a large housing estate their home, compared to about only 5% of West Berliners—they also constituted an environment that was closely aligned to the East German regime's sociopolitical goals. This chapter summarises the history of large housing estates in both East and West Berlin, pointing out commonalities and differences that determine significance and perception of these buildings to date.

Berlin's large housing estates, like those all over Europe, were the outcome of a great hope. Along with rapid modernisation in the mid-twentieth century, there was a widespread conviction that the dreadful housing conditions of the early industrial era could be overcome, and the divide between the life standards of the rich and the poor narrowed. A strong state was believed to be capable of carrying out this epochal task: providing modern amenities for everybody and ending substandard living and overcrowding.

In this respect, estates built under socialism in East Berlin and under capitalism in West Berlin share many commonalities, despite the political differences of their

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respective regimes during the division (1949–1990) and particularly during the times of the Berlin Wall (1961–1989). Both were the outcome of planning efforts since the late 1950s. The largest estates in West Berlin were the Märkisches Viertel (1963–1975, planned by Hans Müller, Georg Heinrichs and others, c. 40,000 inhabitants in 2016) on the northern periphery, Gropiusstadt (1962–1975, designed by Walter Gropius, Wils Ebert and others, c. 35,000 inhabitants in 2016) on the southern and Falkenhagener Feld (begun 1962, planned by Hans Stefan, c. 37,000 inhabitants in 2016) on the western fringe were mostly built in the 1960s. Also, in the East the first large estates were built in the 1960s; for example, the Hans-Loch-Viertel in the Treptow district (begun 1961, designed by Werner Dutschke). The largest estates, however, went up in the 1970s and 1980s: Marzahn (started in 1977), Hellersdorf (started in 1981) and Hohenschönhausen (started in 1984). The three districts together had approximately 350,000 inhabitants in 2001 when the district borders were redrawn.

The time lapse can be explained by shifting political priorities. Walter Ulbricht, East Germany's top leader from 1949 to 1971, mostly focused on representative construction in the city centre. In contrast, his successor Erich Honecker, who ruled from 1971 to 1989, poured significant resources into housing. In both East and West Berlin, large housing estates came under criticism starting in the late 1960s. But while the socialist leaders in the East were less responsive and carried out only small corrections in their construction policy, the West Berlin government, following increasingly negative media coverage, largely discontinued construction of large estates in the mid-1970s. Dwelling in large estates thus became far more frequent in the East. While in 1989 only about 5% of the 2.2 million West Berliners were residents of a large estate, the aforementioned three large schemes in the East housed close to one-third of East Berlin's 1.2 million inhabitants (Gudermann 1999, p. 162).

The difference between East and West Berliners' experiences is also reflected in the terminology. While the West German *Großsiedlung* (large estate) is a more or less neutral description, the East German *die Platte* ('the slab') is a loaded term that merges several meanings. It can denote a constructive element from which the blocks were built (the prefabricated concrete slab), the building (the slab block), as well as by extension the entire estate. To date, *die Platte* evokes memories of the socialist lifestyle connected with bleakness, shoddy workmanship and forced collectivism, but also with modernisation and social equity. On both sides of the Berlin Wall the large housing estates were pragmatically accepted rather than loved, but in the East, there was a strong narrative that connected them to what many East Berliners would sorely miss after the German reunification: low rents, the absence of unemployment and a narrow gap between rich and poor.

Both East and West Berlin's large estates started out as legitimate heirs of the much-celebrated *Siedlungen* (housing estates) of the 1920s with their innovative design and technology. These include the Horseshoe Development (1925–1931, designed by Martin Wagner and Bruno Taut), Siedlung Schillerpark (1924–1930, designed by Bruno Taut) and the White City (1929–1931, designed by Martin Wagner and Otto Salvisberg), which are composed of high-quality 3–4 storey

walk-ups, and which in 2009 were declared UNESCO world heritage sites. Being comparatively few, the interwar housing estates only improved the quality of life for a small minority, but set the stage for a new architecture of standardised design. Berliners were also lured towards modernist dwelling through the showcase buildings of the early post-war period. Most famously was the 'building exhibit' Interbau in the West Berlin Hansaviertel (1954–1957). Generously subsidised by the West Berlin government, internationally renowned architects such as Alvar Aalto, Arne Jacobsen and Walter Gropius were invited to design their visions for multistorey buildings in a park-like landscape. Few later estates lived up to their precedents in terms of design and technological quality. However, most of them initially were widely celebrated.

The following sections provide an overview of this new architecture. They lay out the historical and sociopolitical background of Berlin's large housing estates and introduce the main debates connected with these buildings, as evidenced in the case of the Märkisches Viertel and Marzahn. Evidence of changes in the population composition will be given. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the significance of large housing estates in the post-reunification era in Berlin, characterised by relatively high population stability, on the one hand, but signs of social polarisation on the other hand.

5.1 The Formation of Large Housing Estates in Berlin

During the post-war decades, both German states built on pre-war experiences to tackle the housing crisis. In the West, most multifamily buildings—both small and large estates—were built by state-sponsored institutions. Builders and operators of these estates were so-called *gemeinnützige Wohnungsbaugesellschaften* (roughly translating to 'non-profit housing associations'). They were owned by municipalities or sometimes other public bodies such as trade unions, and they were favoured by subsidies and tax breaks and had a legal remit to provide affordable housing. Best known were GEHAG, which built the Horseshoe Development in the 1920s and portions of Falkenhagener Feld in the 1960s, GESOBAU, which built the Märkisches Viertel, and DEGEWO, which contributed to the construction of Gropiusstadt and which is still the largest single owner of rental housing in Berlin.

Non-profit housing associations were set up in the early twentieth century and engaged in the construction of different forms of housing—not only large estates. In the decades after World War II, they were tightly connected to West Berlin's governing Social Democratic Party. Nonetheless, they were not departments of the local authority (as, for example, Vienna's communal house builders), and they also did not merely act as trustees for the local authority (as they did in other West German cities or in the Netherlands). Their close ties with the politicians who were also their clients were much criticised from the late 1960s onwards, as was the fact that they profited from large commissions and mostly carried out schemes based on nineteenth-century tenement demolition and forced relocation (Bodenschatz 1987, pp. 174–177).

West Germany's and West Berlin's interventionist housing policy, which funnelled large amounts of public funding into housing, was set up in the early 1950s, and at the time approved by both conservatives and Social Democrats. When World War II ended, most large cities were heavily damaged or destroyed. At the time Germany was a country of refugees: approximately 12 million ethnic Germans had fled from the eastern provinces of Silesia, Pomerania and East Prussia, which Germany had to cede to Poland and the Soviet Union, as well as from Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia. More than 8 million ended up in West Germany, a country of 50 million at the time. Here, they were soon joined by another wave of refugees from East Germany. Camps or emergency shelters became home to millions throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Against this background, all political parties perceived the housing shortage as the most pressing problem of the time and supported state investment into housing and strong regulation of the market. After all, suffering from the scarcity of housing was not class-specific. Members of all social groups had lost their homes in the bombings, and also the fate of becoming a refugee was shared by the East Prussian aristocracy as much as by the Silesian peasants and coal miners.

Accordingly, social housing did not necessarily mean working class accommodation. In the early post-war years, the group eligible for social housing was approximately 70% of the population. This reflected the desolate state of the war-ravaged country, but at the same time meant that the receipt of state benefits was no embarrassment for anyone. Although the economic situation improved over the course of the 1950s, the institutional culture of social housing had been firmly established and was to remain for decades to come (Wagner 1995, pp. 2, 8–12). To date, living in social housing is not a stigma in Germany to the extent that it is in Britain or the United States.

In fact, in the whole of Germany, a free housing market had been non-existent since World War I. During the unstable Weimar Republic the authorities imposed numerous restrictions in favour of tenants. The Nazi regime after 1933 upheld and partially reinforced these regulations, effectively replacing the free rental market with a system of apartment distribution through municipal institutions (Führer 1995, pp. 77–108). Hence, in the early post-war years not only in the socialist East but also in the capitalist West there was no free housing market. Only by 1951, when West Germany passed its *Wohnraumbewirtschaftungsgesetz* (Law on the Management of Dwelling Space), did houses and apartments cease to be distributed exclusively by state authorities. Numerous regulations nonetheless remained in place, and only in 1988, when West Berlin was the last city in West Germany to abolish comprehensive rent regulation, one could more or less speak of a free housing market. In East Berlin, a similar introduction of market principles would happen after the German reunification in 1990.

Somewhat in contrast to this apparent interventionism, the status of social housing in West Germany and West Berlin was less stable than for example in Austria, since it was always temporary rather than permanent. 'Social housing', which meant rent control and restricted tenant allocation, was a status assigned to particular units, and it expired after a certain time, usually 20–40 years until the

subsidies were amortised. After that, the units could be sold or rented out at market rate. This arrangement has led to a substantial decrease in social housing units since the 1980s, as most support programmes have been discontinued. However, given Germany's comparatively tenant-friendly legislation, some units for which the official status has expired have retained some of the characteristics of social housing: they are affordable and tenants are protected against eviction.

West Berlin's large estates reflected the new urban planning paradigm *Urbanität durch Dichte* (urbanity-through-density), which around 1960 was promoted by the planner Edgar Salin and the sociologist Hans Paul Bahrdt (Salin 1960; Bahrdt 1961). It replaced the 1950s model of small and low-rise schemes that were referred to as the 'structured and dispersed city' (Göderitz et al. 1957).

Märkisches Viertel, Gropiusstadt and Falkenhagener Feld all aimed at urbanity in this sense, containing densely built 6–20 storey blocks for several tens of thousands of inhabitants. They were modelled after the principles of the Athens Charter such as functional separation, separation of traffic flows and predominance of light and air. They were situated on the periphery, fitted with ample car infrastructure, but reasonably well connected to the city centre through public transit. They were generally planned in conjunction with communal facilities such as schools, kindergartens, shops and sports centres.

These estates were built using prefab technologies and serial construction. However, given the greater variety of clients and builders, the degree of standardisation was never as comprehensive as in the East. Planning and construction also did not become centralised. In the West traditional methods of construction were never completely abandoned, and industrialised construction remained one among many ways of building.

5.2 The Formation of Large Housing Estates in East Berlin

In East Germany, the paradigm change towards large estates was far more comprehensive. Following the model promoted by Nikita Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, the 'industrialisation of the construction industry' was decided at the first Building Conference in East Berlin in 1955 and carried out between 1963 and 1968 (Flierl 1998 pp. 56, 62). During that time, small firms were gradually replaced by *Kombinate*—integrated state-owned companies. They stood under tight control of the central government. Being the designers and builders of nearly all East German housing, they focused on standardisation through the use of prefabricated concrete slabs, and increasingly engaged in the construction of large estates.

The first developments started by these firms were built in cities other than East Berlin, such as Hoyerswerda (begun 1957 for 50,000 inhabitants) or Halle-Neustadt, the largest slab estate in East Germany (begun 1964 for 100,000 inhabitants). Particularly the latter corresponded to the 'urbanity-through-density' principle, which also in the German Democratic Republic would soon replace the

loosely scattered low-rise estates of the 1950s, and which would provide the matrix for urbanisation of East Berlin's eastern periphery.

East Berlin's housing estates went up in the 1970s under Erich Honecker, who had become Head of State in 1971. In 1973, he launched his famous Housing Program, which promised the construction of approximately three million new dwelling units in a country of just 17 million inhabitants (Junker 1973). Approximately, two million were actually built (Schröder 1998, p. 283; Palutzki 2000, pp. 113–120). The programme had a massive impact. It made 'the slab' the standard dwelling experience for the majority of the urban population, and prefab construction the next-to-exclusive way of building. During that time, the large estate became the most conspicuous urban form in East Germany, and particularly in East Berlin with the construction of Marzahn, Hellersdorf and Hohenschönhausen.

5.3   A Nation of Tenants

Both East and West Berlin's large estates were based on an ideology of state-driven modernisation, which at the time was shared by many countries in both the Eastern and Western blocs. West Berlin, in this context, was probably the most socialist city in the western hemisphere with regard to strong regulation and the virtual absence of powerful private players.

The general acceptance of state intervention over matters of housing was also related to the fact that Germany had developed a strong tenant culture (Urban 2015a). Homeownership was restricted by the fact that between 1900 and 1951 (in East Germany until 1990) German legislation outlawed ownership of individual apartments—a measure that was originally meant to diminish lawsuits between neighbours (Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch 1903, pp. 93–94; Bundesgesetzblatt 1951, p. 175). During a period when individually owned urban abodes became rapidly popular in the Anglo-Saxon world, German city dwellers could rarely own their flats. With the exception of the very wealthy, who possessed entire buildings, urbanites tended to be tenants. This included large portions of the middle and upper middle classes. In West Germany and West Berlin, over the course of the post-war decades, the number of flat owners increased, but never reached the level of countries such as Britain. In East Germany and East Berlin, all units in multifamily buildings were rentals by default, administered by municipal institutions. A move towards owner-occupation, which was, for example, promoted in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, never happened in East Germany.

In the early twenty-first century, 85% of Berlin households still rent their apartments—in London, the rate is less than 50% (Infas Geodaten 2011; National Housing Foundation Homeownership data for Britain 2014). For the whole country, the homeownership rate is only 45% of households. This is one of the lowest rates in Europe, compared, for example, to approximately 70% in the UK (2007 data in Norris and Winston 2011). Since powerful middle-class groups have been tenants

for generations, they not only advanced the acceptance of tenancy as a way of life but also contribute to the promotion of tenant-friendly legislation. Despite some erosion from the 1980s onwards, these laws are still largely in place. Tenants frequently stay for decades in the same flat. Unless the owner needs the flat for him or herself, it is next to impossible for them to evict their tenant against their will. This has far-reaching consequences on the housing market, which is generally more stable than, for example, in Britain or the US. Compared to these countries, both tenants and owners in Germany move far less frequently. Processes of gentrification or residualisation of entire neighbourhoods are therefore significantly slower (Urban 2015a, pp. 91–94).

5.4   The Märkisches Viertel Estate in West Berlin

West Berlin's largest housing estate, the *Märkisches Viertel*, was typical for modernist compounds erected in the 1960s. It was planned as a self-sufficient neighbourhood unit, based on the principles promoted by pre-war theorists such as Clarence Perry, Moisei Ginzburg, or Le Corbusier. It was planned by 'experts' imbued with a belief in progress and modernisation, and aimed to meet the 'scientifically' calculated needs of a defined population. These included facilities for all basic features of life, including shops, kindergartens, schools, playgrounds, youth clubs, football pitches, ice rinks, post offices and nursing homes. The Märkisches Viertel was thus designed to be part and parcel of a paternalistic welfare state that provided for its citizens and offered housing in the context of public services. This approach made it rather similar to the estates east of the Berlin Wall.

The Märkisches Viertel was built 1963–1974 on West Berlin's northern periphery. It comprised more than 17,000 apartments in tower blocks with ten to fourteen stories. Originally, it was planned for 50,000 inhabitants. In the early twenty-first century, it housed about 38,000. The architects, Georg Heinrichs, Werner Düttmann, Oswald Mathias Ungers, René Gagès and others, belonged to the architectural elite of the time, and there is no evidence that they were not satisfied with their design. One of them, the Chinese architect Chen-Kuen Lee (1915–2003), even spent his old age in one of the tower block flats he designed (Strauss 2003). Born in Shanghai, he moved to Germany as a teenager in 1931, later worked for Hans Scharoun, and in the 1950s designed his famous 'organic' single-family houses (Kählert 2012). The Frenchman Gagès (1921–2008) established his fame with the tower blocks in Lyon-Bron-Parilly, which he built in the late 1950s (Allix 2008). Ungers (1926–2007), one of Germany's most famous twentieth-century architects, at the time was the dean of the Faculty of Architecture at Berlin Technical University, and well known beyond the German borders.

The architectural ambitions were thus high. Ironically, the architects had consciously attempted to avoid some of the key features they were later blamed for, in particular the bleakness and monotony that was characteristic of so many functionalist estates. They rejected continuous rows of houses and repetitive building

types. They separated car and pedestrian traffic, but unlike other planned neigh-bourhoods at the time they put a strong focus on public transit. They planned different forms of greenery to avoid the appearance of an asphalt jungle. And they took great pains in designing youth clubs, playgrounds and public squares to foster community life.

The planners dedicated large spaces to parks and artificial bodies of water, such as the lake Segelluchbecken, which were easy to build in the flat and boggy Berlin region. Spaces enclosed by buildings were designed as gardens—examples include blocks by Shadrach Wood, Oswald Mathias Ungers and Georg Heinrichs. The 'extended backyards', where the inhabitants were unaffected by traffic, were aimed to provide leisure spaces for both children and adults.

Colourful façades designs and unusual plans aimed to be a contrast to the 'monotony' of Berlin's late-nineteenth-century tenements, where most inhabitants had lived before. Conspicuous examples include Karl Fleig's multicoloured *Papageiensiedlung* (Parrot Scheme), or the semicircular or jagged plans of Karl Schudnagies' blocks.

The modernist desire for increased light and air was met not only by scattered blocks and greenery but also by many balconies. Building plans showed a high degree of awareness of the location. René Gagès' large block—later nicknamed *Der lange Jammer* (The Long Lament) for its alleged monotony—took advantage of a strict north-south division to afford the inhabitants cool, north-facing kitchens and sunny, south-facing living rooms with balconies. Ungers' point blocks, unspec-tacular with regard to appearance, were nonetheless built on well-thought-out plans that gave all rooms sufficient daylight while at the same time sheltering balconies from neighbour's views. If any of the criticism at an architectural level was justi-fied, it was about shabby workmanship related to the aim of building cheap and fast.

The fact that the designers attempted to improve functionalist planning was not lost on the contemporaneous reviewers. A journalist celebrated the 'rejection of the modernist dormitory town' while another one commended the use of 'felicitous stylistic devices from pre-war architecture', such as rounded corners and corner windows, which 'mitigate the dictatorship of the right angle, one of the charac-teristic evils of postwar architecture' (Presse und Informationsamt des Landes Berlin 1971, p. 53). Observers also commended a meaningful overall composition in which different architectural volumes are combined to form a harmonic built landscape. Descriptions such as 'plastic strength' (Schulz 1968) echo the numerous studies of city image and city perception that followed the publication of Kevin Lynch's classic 'The Image of the City' (Lynch 1960). The book was translated into German in 1968 and reflected growing concerns with the idea of the city as a meaningful and readable environment.

Widespread acceptance of state intervention and tenant culture, as well as the architects' efforts, did not spare West Berlin's large estates from a rapidly declining reputation in the late 1960s (Urban 2015b). The fact, however, that the Märkisches Viertel became a scapegoat for the shortcomings of the German construction industry, was largely coincidental. The other two large West Berlin estates, Falkenhagener Feld and Gropiusstadt, suffered from an equally bad image, but

received far less media attention. The same applied to many similar developments all over West Germany.

Few people would have anticipated a sudden fall from grace. In the first years after construction began, the Märkisches Viertel appeared to be a straightforward success. A journalist in 1966 praised the towers and slabs as forming an 'expressive composition' that embodies a 'will to art' and a 'sensible and not only mechanistic spatial order'; she even went as far as comparing the 'post-office overpass' that stretched across the main road Wilhelmsruher Damm to the 'great urban design tradition' of the Brandenburg Gate (Teut 1966, p. 13). Another writer called the new neighbourhood 'a hope for designers in many European countries' (BZ 1967). Only a few years later, things looked very different. Now, the same neighbourhood was censured as 'monotonous', 'sterile', a 'depressing mass of monotonous slabs' and a 'realisation of a dismal science-fiction movie' (Wilde 1989, p. 127).

The abrupt swing in public opinion started with a celebration. On the fifth *Bauwochen* (Building Fair) in 1968, the West Berlin government was determined to show the successes of its urban renewal programme, which had started 5 years before. The organisers decided to complement the official programme with an exhibit by architecture students titled 'Diagnosis on the construction in West Berlin', which was subsidised with the considerable amount of 18,000 deutsch-marks (equalling approximately 15 years of rent payments for a two-bedroom tenement flat at the time). In return, the local establishment of architects, planners and politicians received caustic criticism (Aktion 507 1968; Schröder 1998). The rebellious students tainted the Märkisches Viertel as a textbook example of modernist hubris that entailed both ugly architecture and bad planning, and accused the local government, in alliance with housing associations and architects, of exerting totalitarian rule over the built environment.

In an atmosphere stirred by student protests across the globe, the polemic spread like wildfire. West Germany's most eminent news magazine Der Spiegel took up the cue and a few weeks later published a six-page article, in which it condemned the Märkisches Viertel as 'the bleakest product of concrete architecture' and a 'grey hell' (Der Spiegel 1968). Five months later Der Spiegel followed up with a cover story that included quotes of frustrated inhabitants: 'I feel like I'm in a prison camp', 'I will die in this monotony' and 'Every night when I come home I curse the day we moved into these barracks' (Der Spiegel 1969). Other papers and magazines followed suit. Within a few months, the Märkisches Viertel became infamous throughout West Germany as the place where, according to the reports, 'already four-year olds are condemned to spend their future lives as unskilled labourers' and 'housewives, apparently for no reason, become alcoholics' (Wilde 1989, p. 127).

The frontlines of the debate were particularly noteworthy. The battle, to a large extent, took place between different factions of the left and not between leftists and conservatives. The students, who in the name of the working classes demanded citizen participation and the end of expert planning, first and foremost opposed the Social Democratic local authority and their allies in architecture and construction. That is, they fought precisely those societal forces that had set off to improve the housing situation of the most disadvantaged. They were supported by leftist

housing activists as well as by bourgeois traditionalists. A prominent representative of the latter was publisher Wolf Jobst Siedler (1926–2013), who vociferously decried West Berlin's urban renewal programme as 'murdering the city'—not only promoting what he deemed bad modernist design but at the same time sponsoring the demolition of beautiful nineteenth-century residences (Siedler and Niggemeyer 1964). Calls for market liberalisation and a retreat of the welfare state, which would dominate the debate a generation later, were conspicuously absent. All factions involved in the polemic took it for granted that state intervention as such was beneficial and should be reorganised rather than abolished.

With several decades of historical distance, it is clear that the 'architectural debate' over the Märkisches Viertel, and by extension over other large estates, was about anything but architecture. It certainly was not about the design of this particular estate, which, as most observers agreed, was significantly better designed than, for example, Gropiusstadt (Funke 1970, p. 233).

Rather, catchwords such as 'monotonous blocks' and 'grey hell' were ciphers for different strands of criticism. They were directed against rationalist planning, in particular functional separation and car-orientation, and against modernist governance—top-down decision-making that entailed large-scale tenement demolitions, forced relocation and the disruption of old neighbourhood structures. They sometimes merely pointed to the fact that many basic aspects of the new neighbourhood—shops, services and green spaces—remained under construction for years after the first tenants had moved in, which was annoying for those affected, but not per se a weakness of the plan.

Accordingly, the inhabitants remained ambiguous vis-à-vis the debate in the media. They were unhappy about the infrastructural shortcomings and lamented the remote location away from their workplaces. But they were similarly shocked about the press reports depicting their neighbourhood as a ghetto and themselves as criminals or, at best, helpless victims of the local housing bureaucracy (Wilde 1989, p. 130). They generally deemed the Märkisches Viertel an improvement to the substandard tenements where most of them had lived before. Their biggest challenge, it seemed, was neither bad architecture nor deficient planning, but rather the rent level, which despite rent control and subsidies was usually more than twice as high as in a substandard inner-city flat (Wilde 1989, pp. 112–115; Bodenschatz 1987, p. 246). From a scholarly point of view, this is particularly disconcerting, since it points to the limitations of almost any measure, which in a market economy tries to improve the housing situation of the poorest.

Over the following years, the storm slowly waned. Once the parks, shops and communal facilities were completed in the 1970s, and once the owner carried out improvements on leaking roofs and deficient insulation in the early 1980s, resident satisfaction was on the rise. Press reports were increasingly positive, commending the parks and playgrounds, the amount of street life and the community spirit—which, ironically, was to a large extent a result of the common fight against architects and bureaucrats (Gethke 1979; Schardt 1986; Wilde 1989, p. 130). Statistics from the 1980s reveal that 69% of residents were 'pleased' or 'very pleased' with their environment, and 85% expressed that they would like to remain

Fig. 5.1 Berlin's large estates. *Source* Florian Urban

(Institut für Markt und Medienforschung 1986). At the time, the Märkisches Viertel was a modest neighbourhood with social challenges, but by no means the 'grey hell' as which it had been depicted 20 years earlier (Figs. 5.1 and 5.2).

5.5 The Marzahn, Hellersdorf and Hohenschönhausen Estates in East Berlin

East Berlin's large estates fared slightly different than those in the West. Nevertheless, they were also first widely accepted and then became subject to increasing criticism. Textbook examples were the aforementioned schemes in Marzahn, Hellersdorf and Hohenschönhausen. They resulted from a master plan worked out in 1969, and went up from the late 1970s onwards. The plan was rather general and specified use and not design, but nonetheless aimed at density and renounced both suburban single-family homes and loosely scattered low-rise buildings. Specification came in the context of the 1973 Housing Programme. The first large estate Marzahn, begun in 1977, was built of regular, identical apartment blocks of the P2 series. They had ten stories, four entrances and contained approximately 180 dwelling units each.

The underlying planning principle was called *Komplexer Wohnungsbau* (complex residential construction) and, like West Berlin's estates at the time, was
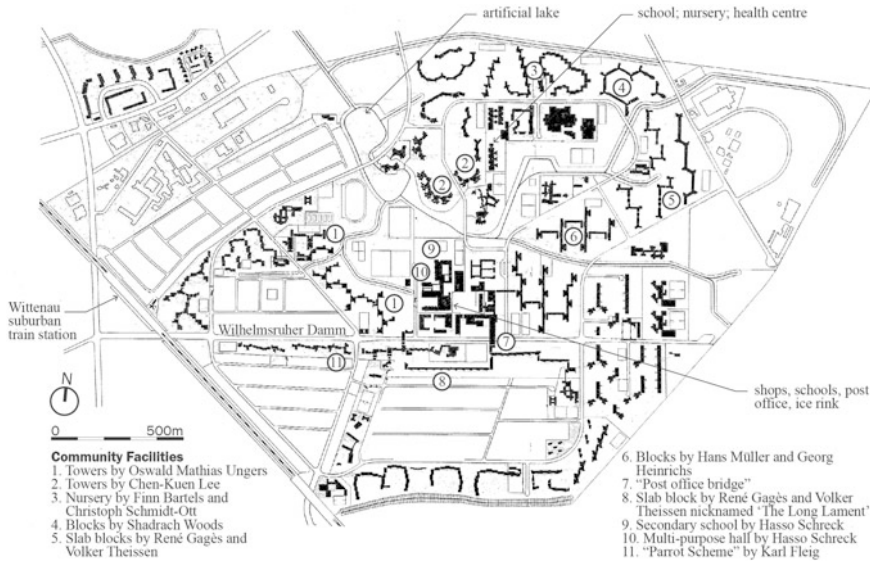
Fig. 5.2 Plan of the Märkisches Viertel, built 1963–1975. *Source* Florian Urban

indebted to early twentieth-century theories such as Clarence Perry's neighbourhood unit, Le Corbusier's Radiant City, and early Soviet functionalism. 'Complex residential construction' yielded the East German equivalent to the Soviet *mikrorayon* (micro-district). Residential buildings were built next to 'communal' buildings such as shops, schools, kindergartens, playgrounds and sports facilities. These neighbourhoods were thus not that different from the projects of West Berlin's welfare state institutions such as the Märkisches Viertel, but promoted as reflecting the principles of a socialist society: equal living conditions and modern amenities for everyone, state authorities that care for basic human needs, and education as the basis of the socialist collective.

Criticism of these standardised schemes was noticeable at an early stage, which is remarkable given the restrictions on free speech in East Germany. In a surprisingly blunt way, already in the 1960s they were criticised as being 'monotonous', 'uniform' and 'carelessly designed' (Henselmann 1966; Staufenbiel 1966). A 1975 report to top leader Gerhard Trölitzsch's office pointed out that the situation was serious and suggested that the low aesthetic quality of the housing blocks seriously endangered the citizens' identification with the socialist state (Abteilung Bauwesen 1975).

The leaders were nonetheless eager to brush away such warnings. Since the housing shortage in East Berlin continued to be harsh, they were convinced that standardised flats in large estates were the only way to provide sufficient modern flats. In addition, there was an important aspect of path dependency. With the 'industrialisation of the construction industry' in the 1950s East Germany had embarked on a course that within the rigid corset of centralised state planning was

impossible to revise. There were simply no firms left that were able to carry out different forms of construction. Hence, the only concessions that the leaders were able to make were slight variations in design and use of concrete slabs, most notably through the promotion of small-scale slab buildings in the city centre from 1982 onwards (Urban 2009, pp. 85–91). The large estates on the periphery, however, had already largely been laid out and were subjected to only small modifications. For example, in contrast to Marzahn, the later estates of Hellersdorf and Hohenschönhausen contained a mix of higher and lower blocks and a greater variation in arrangements, including large courtyards.

It is fair to say that in the last two decades all construction debates in East Germany in one way or another centred around 'the slab'—whether to support, modify, or stop industrialised construction. By the 1980s, even many leading construction officials, and certainly the majority of the population, would have supported a different approach to housing than standardised prefab construction (Urban 2009, pp. 85–91). However, the regime proved to be too inflexible to admit substantial modifications, and slabs were built until the East German regime collapsed in 1989.

5.6 Large Estates and Market Liberalisation

Since the German reunification in 1990, municipal policy towards Berlin's large housing estates was somewhat contradictory. In the early 1990s, both the local authority and the national government poured generous subsidies into the housing stock. Housing associations in both halves of Berlin received ample funds to renovate buildings that frequently had started to deteriorate less than two decades after their completion. At the time, most large estates were renovated. Particularly, the crumbling 'slabs' in the East received additional insulation, updated plumbing and often added balconies. Underused green spaces between the buildings were refurbished and often built up with shops and service buildings. Particularly noteworthy was a retro-1970s style with bright colours and geometrical forms that was applied to many façades. The massive investment certainly helped to reduce residualisation. In terms of architectural features, there were nonetheless limitations in making these buildings attractive. Featuring low ceilings and small rooms, they could not compete with stately nineteenth-century buildings, single-family homes or new build blocks of flats.

At the same time, the tide was turning against social housing, and thus against the very institution from which these estates derived. Along with increasing international popularity of market-centred ideas, Germany gradually reduced its social housing programmes. In 1988, the 80-year-old legal privileges were abolished and West Berlin's non-profit housing associations, as those in the whole of West Germany, had to operate on market principles (Bundesgesetzblatt 1988, p. 1093). When the German Democratic Republic collapsed a year later, the state-owned homes in East Berlin attained a similar legal status. They were

transferred to newly created companies owned by the city of Berlin, but privately managed as limited liability corporations.

The most noticeable changes took place from the late 1990s onwards, when Berlin's local authority began to regard its municipal housing stock as a means to relieve its financial misery—debts that were unrelated to housing in the first place. Between 2000 and 2006, Berlin sold 100,000 dwelling units to international investors, thus sacrificing a system working with long-term success for short-term profit (Focus 2006; Berliner Mieterverein 2006). For tenants, this meant a sharp rise in rent levels, as the new owners tended to exploit all options for profit offered by the law.

The sales first and foremost affected the most attractive flats—that is, in most cases not the large estates. But it contributed to a polarisation of the housing market. With the total number of housing-association-owned flats rapidly dwindling, there was fewer affordable dwelling space available. Large estates on the periphery thus gradually turned into a refuge for those who could no longer afford to live in attractive inner-city neighbourhoods.

In Marzahn and the Märkisches Viertel, most flats are still owned and operated by housing associations, and rents have stayed comparatively low. They rose significantly from the levels under socialism, but remained moderate compared to other flats. In 2017, a small two-bedroom flat of 65 square metres in a renovated Marzahn slab would cost about 430 euros rent per month; in a similar tower block flat in the Märkisches Viertel the rent would be about 70 euros higher (SenStadt 2017).[1] These numbers relate rather favourably, for example, to the local minimum wage of €8.84 per hour—that is approximately €1,400 per month before tax) (Handwerkskammer Leipzig 2017). But they have to be put in context, as they refer to the average of all rental contracts, many of which have been in place for decades. Someone signing a new contract is likely pay significantly more. The security of low rents for existing contracts, however, is a significant incentive for long-term residents to stay and to a certain extent staves off the equivalent of 'white flight'.

5.7   Residential Change in Berlin's Housing Estates

Compared with cities such as London or Paris, Berlin has had low levels of social segregation for a long time. This was also related to the economic slump of the 1990s and early 2000s and the comparatively relaxed housing market at the time. To a certain extent, this is still reflected in the comparatively high level of social

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[1]The Berlin government's rent index is at €5.07 per square metre for a slab in the street Allee der Kosmonauten 181 in Marzahn. This amounts to €330 monthly, plus an estimated €100 for heating and utilities. For the street Senftenberger Ring in the Märkisches Viertel and a 65 square metre flat completed in the 1970s the rent index is at €6.12 per square metre, which would bring the sample flat up to €398 plus heating and utilities (2017 figures in SenStadt 2017).

integration in the large housing estates, although the times of abundant flats are long gone and since the 2010s Berlin is ravaged by an exacerbating housing shortage.

Berlin's large estates are modest neighbourhoods inhabited by society's poorer strata, but whether or not they are considered problematic depends on the standpoint. In the eyes of city officials, some estates, such as the Märkisches Viertel, Marzahn, Hellersdorf and Hohenschönhausen, contain a 'high concentration of problems' related to unemployment and poverty (SenStadt 2004, p. 10) and required 'particular attention' (SenStadt 2015, p. 13). Similarly, high indicators of deprivation, however, can also be found in some nineteenth-century tenement neighbourhoods in the inner city, and thus do not correlate to flats in modernist blocks. In addition, in contrast to Britain or France, the differences between 'good' and 'bad' neighbourhoods are still comparatively small.

In 2002, 10% of the Märkisches Viertel inhabitants were on social welfare, higher than the Berlin average of 6.2%, but not overwhelmingly different, and the unemployment rate stood at 15.6%, compared to the Berlin average of 14.2% (the rate refers to inhabitants with a German passport, as statistics at the time were different for non-German inhabitants) (SenStadt 2004, data for neighbourhood 'Märkisches Viertel'). A decade later the unemployment rate declined in absolute numbers, but rose in comparison to the general level. In 2014, it stood at 12.1%, compared to the Berlin average of 7.5% (now calculated jointly for both Germans and foreigners).

A striking level of disadvantage could only be found at the level of benefits (which now, in contrast to the earlier statistics, lumped together social welfare payments and housing benefits): it stood at 28.9%, compared to the Berlin average of 12.1% (SenStadt 2015, data for district region 'MV1'). These numbers have to be taken with a grain of salt, as the 2014 statistic was set for a slightly smaller area than that of 2002. Also, like all statistics mentioned in this article, the figures refer to areas that approximately match the large estates, but to a small extent also include adjacent low-rise and single-family houses (Fig. 5.3).

Immigrant presence is still not as strong as in the tenement neighbourhoods in the inner city. In 2002, the Märkisches Viertel had only 9.1% residents with a non-German passport (2.5% Turks), well below the Berlin average of 13.3% (3.7% Turks), and markedly different from the ratio of 41.4% in the portion of the central Kreuzberg district nicknamed 'Little Istanbul' (29.1% Turks) (SenStadt 2004, data for neighbourhoods 'Märkisches Viertel' and 'Mariannenplatz'). In 2014 the number rose to 20.1 compared to the Berlin average of 14.4% and compared to 32.1 in 'Little Istanbul' although the figures, again, refer to slightly different areas (SenStadt 2015data for district regions 'MV1' and 'Nördliche Luisenstadt'). The numbers of course do not include nationalised foreigners, Germans nationals with foreign parents, or Russlanddeutsche, immigrants from the former Soviet Union with ethnic German ancestry (Figs. 5.4 and 5.5).

The share of foreigners in the Märkisches Viertel is similar to that in other large West Berlin estates such as Gropiusstadt (13.7% foreigners/5.4% Turks compared to the Berlin average of 13.3/3.7) in 2002 (SenStadt 2004, data for neighbourhoods 'Lipschitzallee') and 17.5% foreigners in 2014, compared to the Berlin

Fig. 5.3 Märkisches Viertel: residential towers on Senftenberger Ring by Chen-Kuen Lee (left and right in foreground) and by Heinz Schudnagies (middle in the background), built 1964. *Source* Florian Urban 2009

Fig. 5.4 Buildings by Oswald Mathias Ungers, built 1964. *Source* Florian Urban (2009)

Fig. 5.5 The 'Ideal Tower' (1966–1969, Walter Gropius/Alexander Svianovic), commissioned by the Ideal Construction Cooperative in the Gropiusstadt estate in West Berlin.   *Source* Wikimedia Commons/Magnus Manske, 2008

average of 14.4%—again, referring to slightly different areas (SenStadt 2015, data for district region 'Gropiusstadt').

East Berlin's housing estates show similar levels of integration, but have changed significantly since the end of the socialist regime. The slabs in Marzahn or Hellersdorf, once desired for providing running warm water and central heating, have now turned from a comparably privileged to a comparably underprivileged environment given the general rise in living standards. The days in which the doctor lived wall to wall with the labourer are gone. Those who have stayed are mostly

Fig. 5.6 Buildings in Marzahn, built late-1970s. *Source* Florian Urban, 2005

elderly, and those who come increasingly belong to the lower classes. The areas are nevertheless not exclusively inhabited by the marginalised. In 2002, the unemployment rate (of Germans) reached 17.1% in Marzahn and 15.4 in Hellersdorf; certainly very high, but not so far above the Berlin average of 14.2% (SenStadt 2004).

Historically, the share of non-Germans in East Berlin has always been small, as the share of foreign nationals in the German Democratic Republic was less than 1%. This has not changed significantly since the German reunification. In contrast to large estates in the West, those in the East are largely ethnically German. The rate of foreigners in the Marzahn-Hellersdorf district in 2001 was about a third of that in the Märkisches Viertel and stood only at 3.4%, compared to the Berlin average of 13% (Statistisches Landesamt Berlin 2002, p. 29).

A decade later, also in the large estates in the East, there was a decrease in unemployment rates and a slight increase in social welfare status and share of foreign nationals. In 2014, the district of Marzahn-Hellersdorf had an unemployment rate of 9.0 (Berlin average: 7.9%) and a share of housing benefit and social welfare receivers of 15.8% (Berlin average: 13.3%) (SenStadt 2015, data for district 'Marzahn-Hellersdorf'). The share of foreigners rose slightly, but was still small at 5% (Berlin average: 14.3%) (Statistisches Landesamt Berlin 2015, p. 57).

If one, somewhat coarsely, equals immigrants with migrant workers and leaves aside the much smaller number of students and immigrants from privileged backgrounds these numbers suggest that the popular estimation that 'historic tenements are attractive and tower blocks are not' (mainstream at least since the 1990s) has not yet fully translated into settlement patterns. Berlin's large estates are certainly no

Fig. 5.7 A large courtyard in Marzahn built in the 1970s; renovated and fitted with insulation and colourful façades in the 1990s. *Source* Florian Urban, 2005

immigrant ghettos, and immigrant presence still concentrates on the inner-city neighbourhoods that were considered unattractive in the 1960s when the first wave of immigrants arrived.

The figures also suggest that in the early twenty-first century large estates in both East and West Berlin have witnessed a slight increase in the share of disadvantaged groups, which aligns with an increasing housing shortage and the increasing desire for privileged groups to live in the city centre. Compared to similar estates in Britain or France, however, Berlin's tower block developments nonetheless still appear to be well integrated (Figs. 5.6 and 5.7).

5.8 Conclusion

In both East and West Berlin, large housing estates cannot be equated with crumbling tower blocks, where the marginalised eke out a miserable living. This does not mean that the German capital does not face problems of poverty and marginalisation, but they are distributed among different housing types, including some late-nineteenth-century neighbourhoods in the inner city. Modernist estates tend to be inhabited by the working and lower middle classes, but they are generally well maintained. While Berlin's privileged groups increasingly return to the inner city, the numbers of ethnic minorities and unemployed on the periphery are on the

rise, but their share in large housing estates is (still) only slightly higher than in other neighbourhoods.

The comparative integration is an outcome of several factors. First, in contrast to Britain or the US, there is no stigma attached to being a tenant or living in a multistorey building. Early twentieth-century legislation made Germany a society of tenants, a condition that for a long time has been supported by the middle classes and guarded by a high degree of rent protection. Particularly in East Berlin's 'slabs' there is still a living memory that these buildings had originally been erected for the whole society, and until 1990 housed families from all social classes. Second, urban changes in Germany are slow because of rent protection and a cultural habit that does not favour frequent moves. This has so far prevented the growth of 'ethnic neighbourhoods' in the American or British sense of an area where an over-whelming majority belongs to the same group. In none of Berlin's large estates is the share of foreign nationals higher than 20%. Even if the percentage of inhabitants 'with a migrant background' (thus the official term) is higher, one can hardly speak of ethnic ghettos.

Large housing estates, as part of both East and West Germany's welfare state policy, were highly successful in achieving their original goals. Overcrowding and deep deprivation have largely disappeared since the post-war period, and the overwhelming majority of Berliners enjoys acceptable living conditions and modern amenities. At the same time, these estates, like the institution of social housing in general, to some extent have fallen victim to their own success. The significant improvement in dwelling conditions for the majority has led to dimin-ishing political support for the minority of marginalised citizens, as those who improved their personal situation no longer regard housing as the most pressing problem. The fact that from the early 2000s onwards large estates were among the few areas that were not affected by the privatisation of municipally owned flats is likely to increase social polarisation and contribute to a rising gap between better and worse housing conditions. In light of an increasingly unequal society, sky-rocketing rents and eroding tenant protection, large estates now are a refuge for the most vulnerable in the housing market, but at the same time also concentrate those who are unable to profit from the economic upswing of the post-industrial era.

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