

DOI 10.18413/2312-3044-2017-4-1-84-87

## MODERNITY, SPACE, AND MEMORY IN EAST GERMANY\*

**John Gillespie**

Middle Tennessee State University

**Abstract.** The author reviews *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany* (Oxford, 2016) by Eli Rubin.

**Keywords:** space, architecture, memory, East Germany, the 1970s, the 1980s.

**Copyright:** © 2017 Gillespie. This is an open-access publication distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source, the *Tractus Aevorum* journal, are credited.

**Correspondence to:** John Gillespie, Department of History, Middle Tennessee State University. 1301 East Main Street, Murfreesboro, TN 37132-0001, USA. E-mails: Jpg3u[at]mtmail.mtsu.edu, johng90[at]vt.edu

УДК 94

## МОДЕРНОСТЬ, ПРОСТРАНСТВО И ПАМЯТЬ В ВОСТОЧНОЙ ГЕРМАНИИ

**Джон Гиллеспи**

Университет штата Теннесси

**Аннотация.** В работе анализируется монография Э. Рубин «Амнезиополис: Модерность, пространство и память в Восточной Германии» (Оксфорд, 2016).

**Ключевые слова:** пространство, архитектура, память, Восточная Германия, 1970-е годы, 1980-е годы.

Rubin, Eli. 2016. *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 208 p. ISBN 9780198732266

---

\* The Russian translation of this book review was published: Gillespie, John. 2017. "Modernost', prostranstvo i pamiat' v Vostochnoi Germanii." *Tractus Aevorum* 4 (1): 84–87.

With this new foray into the later years of East German history, Eli Rubin thoroughly investigates the political, material, and sociocultural development of the GDR's massive housing projects during the 1970s and 1980s. Rubin uses a comprehensive approach to explore the planning and development of Marzahn, East Germany's largest *Plattenbausiedlung* (prefabricated housing settlement) in the northeastern outskirts of Berlin shortly after Erich Honecker's rise to power in 1971. He includes conceptual elements from multiple fields in the humanities and social sciences, such as architectural studies, urban planning, and theories of space, memory, and community building. In doing so, he proves that the state's response to its population's critical need for housing remained, like all elements of East German life, fundamentally shaped by the regime's political goals and theoretical ideals. These demanded a clean break with Germany's past in order to create "spaces that were radically new, radically modern, and radically socialist" (6).

Despite all effort, these new settlements never managed a true break with the past, nor did the government's unwavering support overcome common issues in the East German economy. Nevertheless, the state did succeed in creating spaces imprinted with its political ideals that directly shaped the daily life of its citizens, and made the experience of moving to Marzahn one of sensory rupture and reorientation for residents. Rubin presents a balanced perspective, showing the benefits and improvements that life in this community offered, but also the frustrations it entailed, and of course the repressive surveillance system that pervaded it. He also briefly examines the fate of Marzahn since the reunification of Germany, as both the settlement and its former residents struggled to find a suitable place in the capitalist system.

Chapter one lays out the destitute situation of many East Berlin residents after World War Two and describes the planning of the Marzahn project. A significant portion of GDR citizens residing in the capital lived in miserable, dilapidated *Mietskaserne* (rental-barracks). Berlin's issue of overcrowding in low-quality accommodations stretches back to at least the mid-nineteenth century. Solutions similar to the GDR's prefabricated settlements had been proposed and adopted during the Weimar period and under the Third Reich, but neither regime followed through on such plans. Likewise, officials in East Germany made little progress until Honecker announced a concerted effort to improve housing conditions with his "unity of economic and social policy" (28). The *Plattenbausiedlungen* were "large enough to be cities unto themselves" and designed to have everything their residents needed within a close distance (31). In this regard, they functioned less like expansions of existing cities, and more like separate urban spaces where a new model of socialist community could develop away from the physical remnants of the past; hence the title, *Amnesiopolis*.

Chapter two details the excavation and construction in Marzahn. Rubin provides fascinating technical detail into even small matters of construction

and layout, while pointing out the pervasive influence of Le Corbusier's theories on architecture and urban planning, which included a heavy emphasis on bright, open, living areas and large tracts of green spaces between buildings. Ironically, the excavations that eventually produced those pleasant surroundings at first created an environment that Rubin likens to the surface of the moon for its cratered and lifeless state. Struggles against mud formed a leitmotif for the early years of development in Marzahn. The details of construction also show the first physical encounters with Berlin's past, as workers frequently ran into both archeologically valuable artifacts from previous eras and more recent reminders of Germany's military defeat in the form of unexploded ordinance.

In the third chapter, Rubin provides more detailed accounts of individual families' experiences upon their arrival in Marzahn. Young professional couples who already had children or were pregnant were almost exclusively selected to receive new apartments. A working-class pedigree and good connections or employment in the Party bureaucracy also improved the odds. For these individuals, the new life in Marzahn represented a step up in terms of material conditions, but often lacked some of the sensory comforts from their old lives, such as the smell of bread being made at local bakeries. For good or ill, Rubin aims to show that the act of moving to Marzahn constituted a fundamental rupture in the sensory experiences and patterns of life for new residents. Chapter four details the development of new communities in Marzahn, with further emphasis on the critical role that children played in the state's investment. The material realities of living in these new spaces fostered a collectivist mentality of community that reinforced socialist ideology through invisible and minute mechanisms of state influence.

If the construction of a new comradely community is the bright side of Marzahn's story, chapter five shows the negative aspects in the form of Stasi surveillance. Although Marzahn residents represented the most propaganda-friendly citizens of the GDR, the Ministry for State Security applied surveillance and intelligence gathering techniques just as rigorously here as elsewhere. Stasi activity engaged with the spatial arrangement of the settlement at fundamental levels, from exerting influence on the original design of buildings to training its agents with a detailed sense of the environment in order to facilitate surveillance work. The evidence leaves little doubt that the Stasi was "the glue that held everything together," but "that 'glue' was not benign" (133). The book's conclusion carries the story of Marzahn forward past the *Wende*, showing how the most desirable residences of the GDR suddenly became unwanted remnants of an abandoned ideal.

Rubin's work is compelling, highly detailed, and thoroughly researched. He skillfully weaves together technical descriptions and bureaucratic monotony with colorful anecdotes. For example, he notes the nickname residents gave to the rubber boots that saved them from the prodigious mud

during construction (“Marzahn foot condoms”) and the tenth-grade class of high schoolers who faced official state condemnation after they painted a mural of firemen on the wall of a concrete bus stop that was not sufficiently reverential (97). Many of these stories come from personal memoirs and interviews with former residents, a body of sources that Rubin deploys to great effect alongside government records.

Despite a few typos that unfortunately remain in the final text, this is an excellent study and a fantastic expansion to the existing literature on daily life in East Germany. It does a particularly good job of giving concrete examples for abstract concepts, such as the diffusion of political power into spatial arrangements. Anyone with an interest in the application of Lefebvre’s theories of space and Foucault’s understanding of the panopticon to socialist spaces would do well to read this work. There is much further work to be done in this field as well. Rubin and a few other authors such as Paul Betts have looked at residential spaces, but the effects of politics and ideology on spatial arrangements in other areas of life in the GDR awaits similar treatment. Rubin’s text inspires curiosity as to how these same mechanics of power played out in the construction of shops, restaurants, and office buildings. He has given a solid foundation that deserves to be built upon further.

#### **About the author**

John Gillespie is a graduate student at the Middle Tennessee State University.