Germany: Neighbourhood Centres – A Complex Issue

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Germany's complex history reflects also on the development of neighbourhood centres. This starts with the ambivalent and controversial significance of the word 'neighbour' which itself had been misused during times of dictatorship. Confronted with different political systems and ideologies, urban planning has been challenged to offer attractive living conditions for people while achieving architectural objectives at the same time. The complex situation of neighbourhood centres is analysed in this article on the basis of one example from West and one from East Germany. Looking at Halle-Neustadt in the east and Frankfurt-Nordweststadt in the west, the obvious failure of both concepts is explained from the social and political changes over the last decades. Today, both centres are commercialized and have to face the German present where demographic changes, international migration and high mobility are dominating urban life.

Since the mid-1990s, neighbourhoods have gained a new significance in Germany. With the focus on the 'Socially Integrative City', the empowerment of neighbourhoods is regarded as a key element for society to re-establish social cohesion. Although nowadays the revival of the neighbourhood has to be seen against the background of an overall restructuring of the welfare state, in historical terms, this comeback of the neighbourhood and its centres can be seen as some kind of a built-up form of socio-psychological 'normalization'. The place status of the centre has been used throughout the twentieth century for the realization of a highly political notion of neighbourhood and community. Already in the 1920s, the communist *Volkshäuser* guaranteed the neighbourhood not only a place to meet, but also functioned as a means to influence the political opinion of the population. With the Nazi dictatorship, these houses were taken over to organize a strong social control over the neighbourhood. As a result, the German understanding of 'neighbour' lost the naïve positive connotation that accompanies the Anglo-Saxon view. It is therefore understandable that after the Second World War, when most cities were confronted with the challenge to rebuild large parts of the urban environment, almost no new neighbourhood centres were erected. It was not until the 1960s, that neighbourhood centres were opened up again where there had been some kind of precursor in the 1920s. As observers like Alexander Mitscherlich and Heinrich Böll have pointed out convincingly, the rebuilding of German cities fulfilled a widespread desire to forget their past abuse. The emergence of functionalist and completely new built-up neighbourhoods throughout the 1950s and 1960s seemed to express this longing for the 'new city.'

In this article, the question that will be posed is how these new towns in East and West Germany have conceived the place of the neighbourhood centre. The ideas and the planning philosophy of the particular

situation when these centres were constructed will be closely looked at. Two examples, which can be considered the most prominent for a perspective on the 'new urbanity' in the East and the West, will evaluate the relationship which the neighbourhood centres are supposed to have with the 'socialist' or the 'free' city. The examples chosen are the Frankfurt-Nordwestzentrum and the Versorgungszentrum of Halle-Neustadt. Their history will be explored in three phases: first, the primary intentions and circumstances of the building process will be outlined to identify differences and commonalities in the 'new city' philosophy and their view on the neighbourhood centre. Then, the comparison will be furthered by attempting to estimate the 'real' function that the centres had within the socialist and capitalist city. Thirdly, the decline of the neighbourhood centre in its primarily defined use after German reunification and as a consequence of major trends in society like demographic change, globalization and diversity of lifestyles will be analysed. Finally, an insight will be given into the recent planning for the centres within the framework of the East German regeneration programme and the plans to reshape the Nordweststadt as 'senior friendly'. The article will end with an outlook on the contemporary revival of neighbourhood centres in Germany.

Neighbourhoods: Tainted by Nazi Ideology but Rediscovered in the 1990s as Protection against Social Exclusion

The term *Nachbarschaft* has a double connotation in the German language. It can either express a certain feeling of being near to something or – comparable to English – be used for a territorial description of a quarter. It is noteworthy that the etymology of the *Nachbar* shows some familiarity with the word for peasant in Old German which signifies the rural tradition of the concept of neighbourhood in German culture. In this sense, discourses on neighbourhoods

in Germany reflect this duality of social and spatial nearness. Whereas in the public discussion of neighbourhoods, the social aspect is often at the forefront, in juridical and planning regulations and discourses, often the territorial 'nearness' of neighbours is addressed.

The perception of neighbourhoods in Germany has to be viewed against the background of a long standing criticism of the big cities (Hamm, 1973). It is apparent that the most influential and fundamental criticism of the emergence of the 'big city' in Germany was formulated before the important processes of industrialization and urbanization had taken root. In his work on 'People and Country,' W.H. Riehl (1823–1897) formulated a criticism of the city which did not express his shock about the bad living conditions of the urban poor, but the loss of harmony of the city of the Middle Ages with its transparent social hierarchy (Riehl, 1861, see also Bahrdt 1966, p. 54). Riehl delivered an image of the city which is reproduced in powerful views circulating in the public discourse on German cities even today. In essence, the city is criticized as being 'artificial' while the village is still the natural place. According to Riehl, the village had to be protected against the predominance of the city and he suggested limiting the right to vote in order to avoid proletarian movements becoming more influential. In the beginning of the industrialization of German cities at the turn of the eighteenth century, local politics dealing with the upcoming poverty of immigrating workers was, therefore, primarily guided by the idea that the mobility of the poor can be withheld by juridical measures. Having recognized the ineffectiveness of these measures, local administration turned to the so-called *Elbersfelder Modell*, which tried to enable workers to escape from poverty with the help of semi-professional supervisors and educative programmes, often offered in the first generation of neighbourhood centres.

In the later part of the nineteenth century,

the romantic notion of the 'lost harmony' regained major influence in the perspective of the neighbourhood. In his work on 'The Future of the City', T. Fritsch (1896) took up the idea of preventing the uncontrolled interference between different zones of the city and proposed a strict separation of seven different areas, reproducing the order of social classes and avoiding any kind of mixture. While the idea of the garden city had been launched to upgrade the living conditions of the urban inhabitants, Fritsch's concept expressed a cultural programme for 'planting and growing' Germans. This is deepest Nazi-jargon. With his extreme anti-Semitism and nationalism, Fritsch's book was an important source of inspiration for the neighbourhood ideology of the Nazi regime.

Their ideas were most clearly expressed in the work of G. Feder (1939) who dreamt of 'The New City' as an organic and harmonic entity where all layers of society were guided by the *Gemeinschaftswillen* (Community Spirit) of Hitler's Germany. The *Siedlungszelle* was given a central place in this creation of the 'Big German Community' as a settlement area or neighbourhood wherein the local organization of the National Socialists played the dominant role. Intimate relationships and transparency were used as an argument for the installation of a high degree of social control. Neighbourhoods were organized to support the legitimacy of the Nazi ideology, as they were the places where individual perspectives could be influenced the most. Neighbourhood centres were assumed to be the place where the ideological brain washing and the reinforcement of social control could be achieved. Political intentions were already a major motive of the communist party in the 1920s for their so-called *Volkshäuser* (People's homes) as an outreach for the neighbourhood. Partially, this movement succeeded the former housing of the unions which was discontinued in the Weimar Republic due to the rivalry between the social democrats and the communists. When the Nazis came into power, these neighbourhood centres were taken over and occupied by the National Socialist organizations.

The village was the ideological predecessor of the neighbourhood. An uncritical view of the abuse of the neighbourhood and its centres remained in large parts of the German discourse after the Second World War. Influential planning literature could be quoted to point to the fact that the notion of the neighbourhood as a 'natural', 'organic', and 'more social' place has remained powerful (Berndt, 1968). The reorganization of neighbourhood life after the massive destruction during the war avoided neighbourhood centres being placed high on the urban planning agenda in the early years. Until the 1960s and except for the case of 'new cities' discussed below, there have been only two centres which were completely built anew. Most often private, church-related and charity organizations tried to rebuild the old neighbourhood centres under poor conditions. After 10 years or more, these provisory reconstructed centres were replaced by new buildings. The use of the centres often addressed very basic needs like child care, cooking or basic education.

A political concept of the neighbourhood was avoided and there were only limited attempts by the allied forces to use the centres as a place for re-education policies. Private North American churches tried to foster German neighbourhood centres to some extent, but their concept of 'community' was not adopted or of major influence. Instead, the traditional romantic view of the neighbourhood was kept alive further in the work of the German Association of Neighbourhood Centres. In 1965, the then president, G. Oestreich, highlighted his concern for the future of neighbourhood centres: 'We are missing a fruitful social control, which takes care of everybody according to the traditional way of behaviour and which allows to criticize him, if he is not following the rules' (Oestreich, 1965, p. 16). Further on in this article, Oestreich proposed that it should be the main objective of

social work to make people a part of their neighbourhood 'as the neighbourhood is as close as possible to human beings'. Statements like this and others published in the news of the association totally lack reflection on the problematic misuse of social control. It remains unthinkable that the given social order as such might be something from which an individual might disassociate him or herself. Freedom, in this thinking, is only possible if it is in line with the 'natural' neighbourhood.

In the 1960s, the perspective on neighbourhoods slightly changed, in the sense that they were partly viewed as being a kind of *Lebenswelt* in Habermas's terms, which opposed the economically dominated world of rationalism. Neighbourhood centres were seen as a protective place against the 'cold' world outside. By 1968, as all over Europe, social groups began protesting against politics of urban restructuring and demolition. These urban movements underpinned a notion of the social importance of neighbourhood relations as an argument against the physical destruction of a quarter. 'Social work' was introduced as a university discipline and profession which was understood as *Gemeinwesenarbeit*. With this German concept, the focus on 'care for the community' was introduced without a particular spatial notion but inspired by the American understanding of 'community organizing' (Ross, 1968). Radical forms of using neighbourhood centres have, however, had little influence (Bahr, 1974). In practice, though, most social work is part of a community or neighbourhood approach. In this way, the neighbourhood might no longer bear the ideological and romantic notion of being socially and politically a better place to live, while at the same time an awareness for its special care has found its professionalized form of existence. In the 1970s, neighbourhood centres became a meeting point for the emerging new social movements based on issues like ecology, and women's, gay, and human rights concerns (Höbel, 1973). After the professionalization of

these citizens' initiatives, the neighbourhood centre disappeared from general attention until the mid-1990s, when it was rediscovered in the wake of politics against social exclusion.

Post-War Challenges

Destruction of most inner cities is the result of the Second World War. According to estimates, one in every four housing estates was targeted in one way or another. To cope with the basic needs of the population, both East and West German urban planners developed a muddling-through approach which nevertheless set the basic lines for further development in the 1950s. Because of the 40 year long division between the two parts of Germany, important differences can be observed regarding the general attitude towards urban planning and architecture (Beyme, 1992).

The West: Neighbourhood Planning – An Expression of the Socialist Enemy

In the West, as 'centralism' was refused due to negative experiences with the Nazi regime, urban planning policies varied enormously between the *Länder* (regions). Only in 1960, did a federal building law find consensus with all *Länder*. The lack of competences frustrated federal ministers who, as a consequence, developed housing policies as part of the general social policies and avoided the resistance of the *Länder* with regard to wider central 'commands' of the federal state. With the First Law on Housing in 1950 and the Second in 1956, substantial support flowed into the building sector resulting in 3.1 million new dwellings within the period 1950–1965. The high output of this policy has been an important aspect of the anchorage of post-war democracy. Conservative restoration of politics in the Adenauer era, however, viewed housing as a means to make a difference to the policies in the East which aimed towards a common

socialization of all people and therefore private ownership of housing was seen as a 'natural' prerogative for the development of a free society (Bundesminister für Wohnungswesen, Städtebau und Raumordnung, 1965, p. 10). This is to say that community or neighbourhood oriented approaches have been more or less regarded as an expression of the philosophies of the 'socialist enemy'. As a consequence, except for charity organizations restoring some older buildings mostly in poor conditions, almost no neighbourhood centres were built in the existing urban environments until the 1960s.

Only within the framework of the so-called 'new cities' were neighbourhood centres integrated and understood as the main part of a wider social programme. Generally speaking, the idea of new cities was not in line with the overall perspective on housing in the Germany of the 1950s and is therefore to be seen as one of the few exceptional alternative ways of planning. In this way, the history of the 'new cities' in Germany wanted to address certain failures that were generated by the earlier dominance of architecture in the light of CIAM, Le Corbusier and form oriented architecture in general. As summarized by Ilse Irion and Thomas Sieverts regarding the first generation of new towns: 'New cities have been intended to follow a principle where the functional entity, sociological coherence and architectural form are brought into a balance' (Irion and Sieverts, 1991, p. 14). Neighbourhoods were given the highest importance in this concept as a *Grundzelle* (Basic cell) where 5,000 to 10,000 people settled around one primary school.

After the first phase, a second generation of 'new towns' was developed where the neighbourhood was strongly the main area/ focus of social frontiers. This might have been the consequence of the experiences with the first generation of 'new towns' with a very limited understanding of the social geography of a neighbourhood, which is necessarily strongly linked to the greater urban entity. In

architectural language, the new cities were left to follow a functional perspective along with their sociological failings. Social and commercial neighbourhood centres reflected the idea of a place-fixed neighbourhood and the first generation of 'new cities' foresaw their location as to be easily reached on foot. A narrow integration of all functions (leisure, work, and housing) was intended but not realized. The 'new cities' were, however, not aimed at recreating the compact city of the past but intended to harmonize the conflict between city and nature by shaping larger green areas between housing estates. These green belts were used to separate different social facets of neighbourhood life like primary schools, neighbourhood centres, and kindergartens. The maximum walking distance was planned not to exceed 1,000 m from every point in the new city. The planners of the new cities had in mind an integrative perspective on the social stratification of the areas. Contrary to the existing cliché, the new towns were constructed not only with high-rise estates but also as a mixture of housing forms, including even the single-family dwelling. In reality, the planning of the new cities paid little attention to the desires of the inhabitants and already in the 1970s, the main view of these places was that they symbolized the disastrous failure of urban architecture. In a survey that included seventy-five planners of sixteen new cities, the architects and urban planners responsible did not acknowledge the ruinous outcomes of their intentions. Nevertheless, even those with 'unchanged minds' recognized that the community space created was far from sufficient, for which they blamed the public administration (Dittrich, 1973, p. 111).

The East: From the Socialist Ideal City to Faceless Housing Estates

Under the political conditions of a socialist republic, the challenges of coping with the disasters of destroyed cities followed a different path of development in the East of

Germany. The most important difference from the preconditions of urban planning in the West was the socialization of private land and house ownership in the 1950s. The arbitrary policies with regard to the confiscation of land were legitimized by an overall objective of the socialist state acting in favour of the general interest. Contrary to the West, this philosophy allowed a central planning perspective and a homogenized approach to urban policies laid down in the so-called 'sixteen principles of urban planning'. In general, these principles underlined the value of the 'compact city' for the class conscious proletariat and were meant to formulate a position in contrast to circulating 'Western' ideas of the Athens Charter, CIAM or the garden city movement.

The term neighbourhood was not used and centrality was understood (in principle 6) as the 'dominating nucleus of the city' where the most important political, administrative and cultural places for the life of the urban population could be found. As principle 10 largely developed the concept of housing areas, the compact city of the GDR was sketched as being dual (centre vs. outside housing). These housing areas were meant to offer 'institutions fulfilling all cultural, social and commodity needs'. These so-called housing complexes were viewed as car-free places prevented from isolation from the rest of the city. Accessibility to areas, like a garden, kindergartens, schools, and the 'daily necessities', was given priority in the shaping of these housing complexes. Defined in this way, the housing areas were obviously not named as such, but were conceived as the centre of daily life in very much the same manner as one thinks of (and were comparable to) neighbourhoods in general.

The self-defined principles of the socialist town planners were followed and realized only in a limited way. In many aspects, the intentions of this approach failed in the later years of the Socialist Republic. Authoritarian and overruling control from central planning authorities left little room for local adaptations of the socialist planning principles. In fact, only a few areas such as the Stalin Allee in East Berlin, the Lange Straße in Rostock or the Altmarkt in Dresden were designed as being inspired by these principles. Following every fashion from the Soviet Union, other concepts, such as the 'Socialist City' realized in Eisenhüttenstadt or Hoyerswerda, became relevant approaches to urban design. As the lack of housing developed into a serious threat to the legitimacy of the socialist state, the orientation towards pre-fabricated high-rise estates pushed more prestigious attempts aside. Already in the 1950s, without any debate between experts let alone the public, the political system demanded the building of housing estates that took no note of existing urban structures, thereby destroying them to a major extent.

The unbalanced growth of cities initiated by these housing policies, however, was far from being in line with the basic principle of a 'harmonious good of the human need for work, housing, culture and leisure' (principle 2). This change in policies was launched and later further fostered from the highest echelons of the state, notably the Prime Ministers Ulbricht in 1959 and Honecker in 1971. With the obvious discrepancy between the socialist ideal and the grey reality dedicated to a quick and economical production of faceless urban spaces, the basis for the later fall of the regime was already laid down quite early since the neglect of urban qualities was one of the most important and early stimuli for the East German population to withdraw their general support for the political system and to organize local protests (Zwahr, 1993).

Building Halle-Neustadt

Given the current state of affairs, historical research on Halle-Neustadt in the East is still to develop. However Halle-Neustadt is an example where, already in the 1980s, empirical research showed the importance of cultural and social dynamics for an

understanding of the realities of the socialist cities.

During the GDR period, the old city of Halle became a regional centre for the nearby chemical industries, mining, electronics, metallurgy, and machine construction. To house the workers and their families, the socialists planned the 'new city', Halle-Neustadt, as the biggest ever built by the GDR. This Neustadt in Halle was, moreover, meant to realize the socialist ambition of letting the housing area of the working class become more than just a place to sleep. In 1963, the Council of Ministers took the formal decision to build the 'Chemiearbeiterstadt Halle-Neustadt', mainly dedicated to the workers of the chemical industries, with the intention that: 'the new city should provide the best conditions for a socialist community life with regard to cultural activities, commodity, housing, sports and leisure' (Ministerrrat, 1963). The decision was taken to create everything that a 'new socialist city' would need (Könnemann, 1982). The city was planned to be constructed within 9 years under the chief architect Richard Paulick, who was assumed to be following the 'latest international experience' and to house up to 20,000 inhabitants. Neustadt was linked by a long ring road with the old city of Halle. In 1967, Halle-Neustadt gained the rights of an autonomous city and mainly families with children moved to this 'modern style' housing. In 1974, the number of inhabitants rose to 70,000 in 21,000 apartments. The Central Committee of the Socialist Party decided that Halle-Neustadt should be further enlarged to house another 30,000 inhabitants by 1980. The up-scaling after 1971 was part of the larger housing policy of the Honecker regime to solve the housing problem of GDR which led to the pre-fabricated high-rise buildings of the 1970s.

In a book 'dedicated to the socialist revolution and the working class,' the history of Halle-Neustadt has been written by a collective group of authors (Halle-Neustadt, 1972, p. 133). In their chapter on community relations, the new city was framed by socialist architectural and urban philosophy. Neighbourhood was seen as a bourgeois concept which referred back to small cities and which had 'failed': 'The idea to create an ideal of the small city based on citizen engagement is *a priori* an anachronism. Representatives of the bourgeois sociology have regarded the idea of neighbourhoods as dead and that we would need the total commercialization of all urban relationships'. Here, the authors were arguing that with increasing intelligence it would become unlikely that people would bind together on the basis of shared cultural interests. According to Marxist theories, a higher concentration of people in a time where the law of economics dictates, is unavoidable. Socialist urban planning therefore ought to see it as an ethical task to raise awareness for the socialist need to take care commonly of the lived-in and built environment. Educational training to shape responsibility, aesthetic feelings and thematic knowledge was meant to be an objective of this urban planning. The importance of centres was underlined in this semi-official interpretation of socialist planning for Halle-Neustadt which is seen as a 'socialist model city' (*Ibid.*, p. 179). The centres were seen as 'decisive' for the urban structure and 'a concentration point of the public' (*Ibid.*, p. 135). It is further interesting that the authors deny discussing any alternatives to this idea. This becomes obvious when they take up the idea of having meeting rooms in the housing estates. First, the argument was developed that under the recent critical economic circumstances, such places were not achievable. Then, the value of such places was regarded as not proven and experiences from Moscow were quoted where such places were left unused by the inhabitants.

The City Centre of Neustadt

In the planning of Neustadt, different parts of this new city were meant to fulfil the

'periodical needs' of the inhabitants while the attached city centre of Neustadt remained important for 'periodical and non-periodical needs' (Halle-Neustadt, 1972, p. 42). For cultural activities, a functional division had been planned from the beginning. The cultural buildings were centred in the south and south-east of Neustadt which resulted in a walking distance of up to 1.5 km for the inhabitants of the northern parts. A central meeting point was the so-called Youth clubs. While twenty-eight of them were established in rooms of the Polytechnic High School, seventeen others had their own space in six separate buildings. The most prominent was the *Jugendklub am Gimritzer Damm* which used a former barracks of the construction workers. The building was surrounded by high-rise housing estates and somewhat 'hidden'. In 1981, this building was renewed and the cinema hall 'Prisma' with 530 seats was constructed.

In the centre of Neustadt, three functional areas were planned: a cultural and sports centre in the west, a political-cultural centre at the core, and a shopping and commodity centre (*Versorgungszentrum*) in the east (*Ibid.*, p. 111). The centre at the core was intended to be the heart of community life and was planned as a large-scale public space. This plan was never realized. The *Versorgungszentrum* consisted of a shopping hall (*Kaufhalle*), two cafés, a kiosk, a shop for leather cloths, a shop for women's and men's clothes, youth and children's wear, a shop for glass and porcelain, a drugstore, a bookseller, a florist, a bank and a post office, a hair dresser, an optician, a residential school (*Internat*), and a polyclinic. The *Ver-sorgunsgzentrum* was 250 m long, two-storeyed and had a 25 m broad inner court. The first floor was divided by shopping windows and offered benches and stone tables to rest. The Centre was beautified by regular flower decorations. The upper-floor could be reached by a staircase.

The *Versorgungszentrum* had been long awaited. Only after 20 years of planning

and construction, it was handed over to the public in 1984. Planning procedures started at the beginning of the 1960s with a first study undertaken by architects of the German Building Academy (East Berlin). The first competition was launched in 1967 which had, as its major objective, to evolve a design for the central plaza with a high-rise building for the offices of the chemical industries. As it turned out later, these two objectives were not seen to be necessary afterwards (Topfstedt, 1988, p. 46). Another design competition was held for the roads leading to the city centre. Finally in 1975, the planning concept was decided upon and then realized in the following years. In contrast to the rest of the Neustadt, the centre did not host any youth club and the kindergarten was underused and partly closed. It should be noted, however, that the open spaces around the high-rise housing estates were created so that many opportunities for recreation were possible and that playgrounds, especially for smaller children, were widespread in the centre.

The Function of the Centre in a Society of Control

In 1985, a sociological study of the urban development and housing milieu was undertaken by researchers based at the Weimar 'University of Architecture and Building Sciences' (HAB). Using a mix of different methods such as observation and a number of differently-styled interviews with 1,150 persons, this research looked into the social reality of Halle and Halle-Neustadt (Staufenbiel, 1985). The study was labelled as 'only to be used in office'. Some of its outcomes were certainly not easy to bring into a coherent perspective with the socialist ambitions while, in general, the results were presented in a constructive manner.

The shopping qualities were regarded by the vast majority of inhabitants as better than in other GDR cities, as the *Kaufhalle* in each part of the Neustadt was reachable by everyone within a walking distance of 250 m.
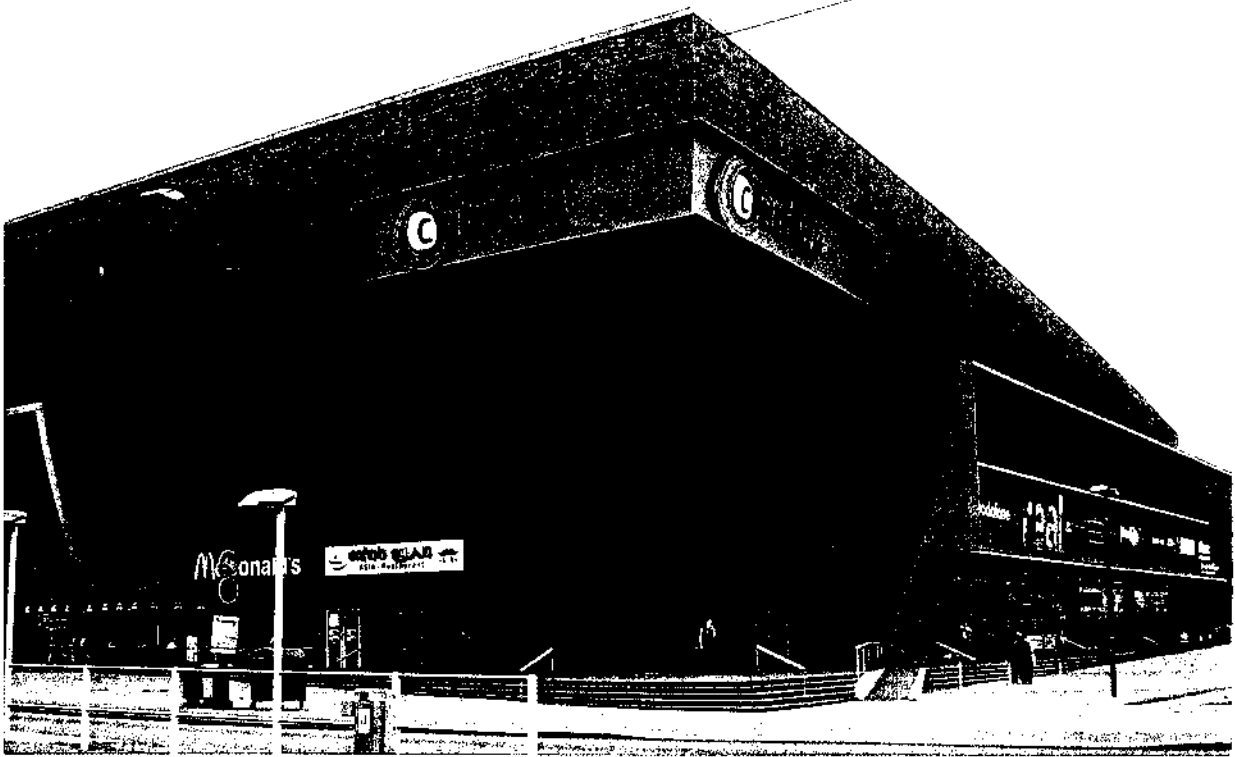
The Neustadt Zentrum opened in 2004.

Although the quality of this consumer choice was also mostly appreciated, the variety of other retailing was criticized as lacking (*Ibid.*, p. 94). The customers criticized the fact that there was hardly any stimulating atmosphere in which to shop and to spend their time as well. There were complaints about the lack of consumer culture. The results of the survey were even more critical with regard to cultural opportunities in Neustadt at that time. Only 38 per cent of those interviewed felt that they would serve their needs. Asked what exactly was lacking in Halle-Neustadt, the inhabitants responded that they would like to have better quality gastronomy in first place. They missed a theatre, a central cultural house, more clubs and other cultural activities.

In an earlier study of the 'effect of urban forms,' two architects, Olaf Weber and the later president of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Gerd Zimmermann, asked forty-two passers-by about their perception of the city centre of Neustadt. Although the low number of interviewees might limit their findings, the insight provided was nevertheless thought by the authors to be plausible:

Neustadt does not create any coherent urban form. The centre is viewed by the inhabitants as representing no more than a functional place. You cannot speak of intimacy or public life; it is in no way a 'fluent' space. This centre just does not function as an organizer of socio-psychological relationships. (Weber and Zimmermann, 1980, p. 185)

In fact, it was not by chance that the city centre was the only place to gather and to meet, and an uninviting one at that. Beyond the ideology of social community, the GDR regime had built up a society of high social control. This created an atmosphere of mutual mistrust and a feeling that acting publicly was not safe (Wolle, 1998). Already in socialist principles of urban planning, public places were designed to offer only/mainly space for political demonstrations of the working class supporting the socialist regime.

Above: Demolition in Stadtumbau Ost. Below: Socialist art in public space.

Losing Significance, Regaining Meaning

After German reunification, the centre lost its function as the neighbourhood was increasingly abandoned by its inhabitants. As in all East German cities, severe decline resulted from the integration of East German industries into the world market. While the chemical industries survived the transformation process, the number of workers needed was reduced dramatically. The initial expectation that the economic gap between the two parts of Germany would be overcome soon has not become reality more than 15 years later and is still regarded as a long-term objective. Today, 100 people still leave the East every day to find a job in the West. Together with declining birth-rates and the wish to realize the much-criticized suburban dream of a house in the countryside, migration has resulted in a population only about half that in 1990. Halle-Neustadt has been integrated with the adjacent old city of Halle in a common planning strategy to cope with this shrinkage. The official urban regeneration plan for Halle foresees a total decline of inhabitants from 313,000 (1990) to 200,000 (2010) whereby the newer areas are much more affected than the old inner city. The philosophy of this plan is to find creative solutions and not to see this as a purely architectural problem. The motto is, 'we take the people with us'. In a series of events, inhabitants are invited to participate in the process and to express their ideas on how this shrinkage should be organized. Nevertheless, the main decisions have already been taken and laid down in the 'City Development Strategy'. Some

14,000 apartments in Halle-Neustadt have to be pulled down. As part of the Federal programme for the urban regeneration of East German cities (Stadtumbau Ost), sub-stantial support from the national govern-ment is guaranteed for the realization of this clearance of unwanted housing With regard to the city centre, the plan proposes that the principal structure with the centre in the middle of the new city will be retained. However, the centre will be completely renovated in order to build a 'totally new atmosphere' which should invite *flâneurs* and people to just stay around. As expressed in the city's strategy: 'Next to lively shopping windows and friendly offices, the *Neustädter Passagen* will bring in enthusiasm with the green spaces and silent areas'.

While the *Passagen* are not yet realized,

other parts of the centre are already reopened. With the reuse of a former primary school as socio-cultural centre, the *Pusteblume*, a privately organized 'Association for Culture,' has provided citizens with a place for their cultural activities: from playing music to making exhibitions. This new cultural centre is especially attracting schools.

Other projects have been more temporary, like the idea of *Hotel Neustadt*, where children and theatre actors have occupied one of the empty housing estates to invite people to live in this enormous vacant space (Ludley, 1993). Other initiatives like the *Kunstblock* (art in public) want to revitalize the centre of Neustadt with arts projects (Herrmann *et al.*, 2002). The former railway station in Neustadt is intended to be a permanent exhibition space for contemporary art

The socio-cultural centre Pusteblume.

which will be organized and sustained by a civic arts association. Culture and art are thus becoming important initiatives to keep a new city of just 40 years old from dying when most of the inhabitants want to leave. Temporary use of space has become another important approach to cope with a shrinking city. The *Quartiersmanagement* (neighbourhood management) has therefore opened up a 'Space Market' where temporary use of vacant space is 'traded'. Everyone who needs some place to organize a commercial, social or cultural activity for a certain period of time can find a free offer there.

It is important to take into consideration that those inhabitants who leave are the ones with the best educational and social skills. A melting pot for all social groups during the GDR period, Neustadt now increasingly concentrates old, poor, less educated and socially un-motivated populations. When the Mayor of Halle, Ingrid Häußler, inaugurated the 'Second Conference on the Future of Halle-Neustadt', only half of the room was full. She was shocked that nobody seemed to have prepared himself or herself by reading the strategies laid down for Neustadt. Not even the cultural and social initiative groups seemed to have thought about how to develop the area further. Although the ongoing and planned initiatives to revitalize Halle-Neustadt are well intended, it is doubtful whether the citizens are capable of 'rescuing themselves'.

The Nordwestzentrum in Frankfurt

The Nordwestzentrum as part of the Nordweststadt in Frankfurt has often been regarded as the paradigm for the West German modernist approach in coping with post-war challenges (Irion and Sieverts, 1991). This 'new city' was planned as a residential project for 25,000 people. With an open competition for architectural proposals in 1959, the realization process started after 4 years of intensive discussion. After the Second World War, Frankfurt embodied for many visitors the despair of German cities in an extreme form. The Swiss writer, Max Frisch, wrote at that time in his diary:

If you look at Frankfurt and compare it with Munich: Munich you could think of, but Frankfurt no longer. The ruins are not standing here, but they are sinking down in their own past. One is only surprised that there is no awakening at all. (Frisch, 1950)

The city was not only destroyed by allied bombing but also discouraged by the defeat it felt when Bonn was preferred as the capital city of the new German republic instead of Frankfurt. The metropolis had a prominent place in German history as a trade, banking and industrial centre throughout the centuries, which also led to sophisticated approaches to architecture and urban planning. The rebuilding of the inner-city was therefore discussed in the first place as a re-start of the ambitious planning of the 1920s, promoted by prominent figures like Ernst May, Bruno Asch and Ludwig Landmann (Kuhn, 1998).

While there have been controversial debates on how to re-animate this heritage and how to understand its 'key', the main idea of further planning of the city was to locate major functions of administration and tertiary economy in the centre of Frankfurt and to locate housing areas on the outskirts. Ernst May himself, as the Planning Director of the Social Housing Association *Neue Heimat* and member of the jury for the Nordweststadt, had a major influence on the interpretation of what was, in the 1920s, mainly his idea of the 'New Frankfurt'. Nevertheless, it was questionable whether it would be adequate to guide the planning activities in the 1950s by the principles of concepts from before the war. Instead, it seemed evident that the everyday pressure on politicians and planners to meet the very basic needs of the population, in the first place to house the large number of homeless people, pushed aside any more theoretical considerations.

In practice, May's concepts for large-scale housing projects (*Großsiedlungen*) may have

been accepted simply because they were there at that time and their promise to build a roof for so many people in the shortest time. As the Director of the Building Department of the City of Frankfurt at that time, Hans Kampffmeyer expressed his view on the Nordweststadt as:

The Garden City, the City of Le Corbusier, the old concept of settlement and other concepts are not for now and they cannot claim to be the guiding principle for urban planning. They are all abstract and ideological. We must instead look for structures and forms, which people of an industrialized society have in common to their self-concept: that is the open society. (Kampffmeyer, 1968, p. 7).

Principles of the Initial Phase

The centre was planned as part of the wider theoretical approach of the architect Walter Schwagenscheidt who published a book on his vision of the *Raumstadt* (Space City) shortly after the Second World War with the intention to 'take the pen and draw for all those being homeless and having lost their houses by the bombings' (Schwagenscheidt, 1949). Besides pragmatic approaches and practical tips, this book also contained a kind of 'urban commitment' (Preusler 1985). As 'real' homelessness became increasingly a general problem, the *Raumstadt* approach seemed to address a more existentialist concept of feeling not at home. Schwagenscheidt's book therefore was received as an gift that gave urban planning a more ambitious point of departure.

As French Existentialism became more influential in West European debates, Heidegger was also reread by German urban theorists where they found a notion of the house as an existentialist remedy against the prevailing homelessness of German society after the lost war (Bollnow, 1955, p. 170). In a later reflection on his work on the Nordweststadt, Schwagenscheidt described his view on the use of space as follows:

I designed the spaces as indicated by the examples

that nature gives us. Space is primarily and in the first place emptiness. (Schwagenscheidt, 1964, p. 18)

As a consequence of this ontological simplification, political and social aspects of urban planning were kept aside and a purist and modest language of architectural forms was chosen.

You think the centre is without a soul? But I say: only human beings have a soul and now they have it even more as all the ballast of architecture is taken away from them. (Schwagenscheidt, 1949, p. 85)

Although in his basic premise of the *Raumstadt* the social aspects of urban design were principally reduced to the existentialist philosophy, in the design practice of the Nordweststadt, social mixture was claimed to be a major objective. 'We want to build for gypsies and ministers', as Tssilo Sittmann, the closest assistant to Schwagenscheidt, explained. A high quality of infrastructural investments, central heating being foremost, was the main theme to achieve a status of attraction for high- and low-income groups. Another important issue for the objective of 'social mixture' was the creation of an autonomous new cultural and commodity centre within the Nordweststadt. As A. Gleiniger pointed out, the centre of the Nordweststadt followed internationally circulating concepts of poly-centric city planning as expressed in the English New Towns (Gleiniger, 1995, p. 128). The centre was described in the city's call for architectural proposals as 'an oasis ... core of the city, urban region of the pedestrian, where all functions and experiences grow together as an urban extract, an island-like crown' (Ausschreibungstext, 1959, p. 196).

It took 7 years for the neighbourhood centre of the Nordweststadt to be accomplished. Criticism was widespread as the concept of building a totally independent centre 8 km from the city centre of Frankfurt was regarded as a factor of isolation. In 1968, the inauguration of the centre was accompanied

by the maiden trip of the first metro in Frankfurt with the Nordweststadt as the final destination. In architectural discourse, the new neighbourhood centre was highly praised: 'A place where events are possible and thereby the feeling of being at home can grow' (Bock, 1969). The Nordwestzentrum was developed as ambitiously as the whole new city but it seemed even more that the new centre had no other already existing examples that the architects could have looked to for inspiration. Scandinavian, Dutch and American concepts were rejected as they went beyond the concept of German neighbourhood centres at that time which were merely designed as retail centres.

The Nordwestzentrum was meant to operate at a neighbourhood level but also as a place that would be attractive for the whole of Frankfurt. Underground parking for 2,200 cars with all shops and facilities above was the basic idea so as to give the centre the status of a second core of Frankfurt. The centre was designed for more than the 25,000 inhabitants of the Nordweststadt, as it was expected that in future the new city would double in size. Furthermore, it was expected that the centre would function for another 80,000 inhabitants of Frankfurt as their shopping area.

The centre had also been planned to serve the cultural and social needs of the resident population. The planning foresaw the establishment of the Polytechnic University for Social Pedagogy with attached student accommodation, a public swimming pool, a *Bürgerhaus* (Cititzens' House), a local library, a kindergarten and offices for public administration and social services. The link to the Nordweststadt was constructed through pedestrian bridges crossing the circulation roads. The clearness of the design (by Apel, Becker and Beckert) was based on a functional and flexible system of axes and spaces that led to open spaces, all constructed in grey concrete.
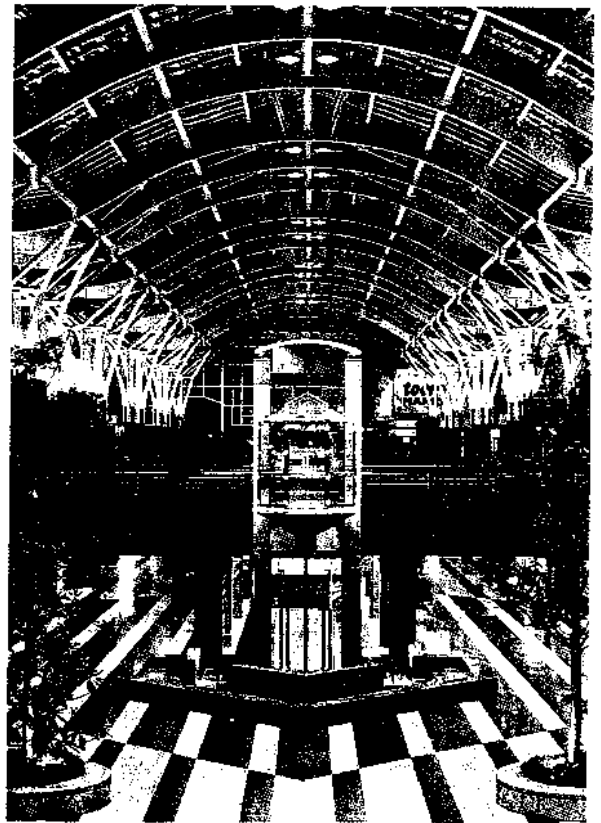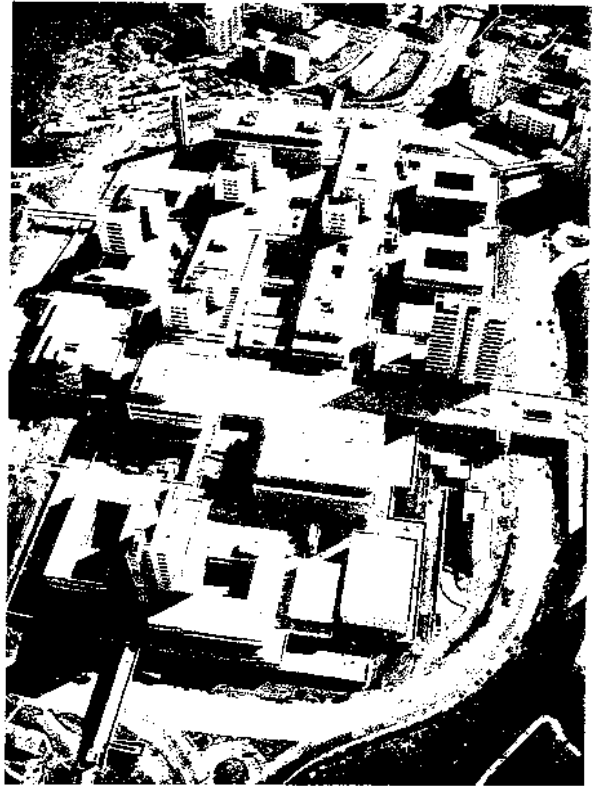
Above: The Nordweststadt from above. Below: The new shopping centre in the Nordweststadt
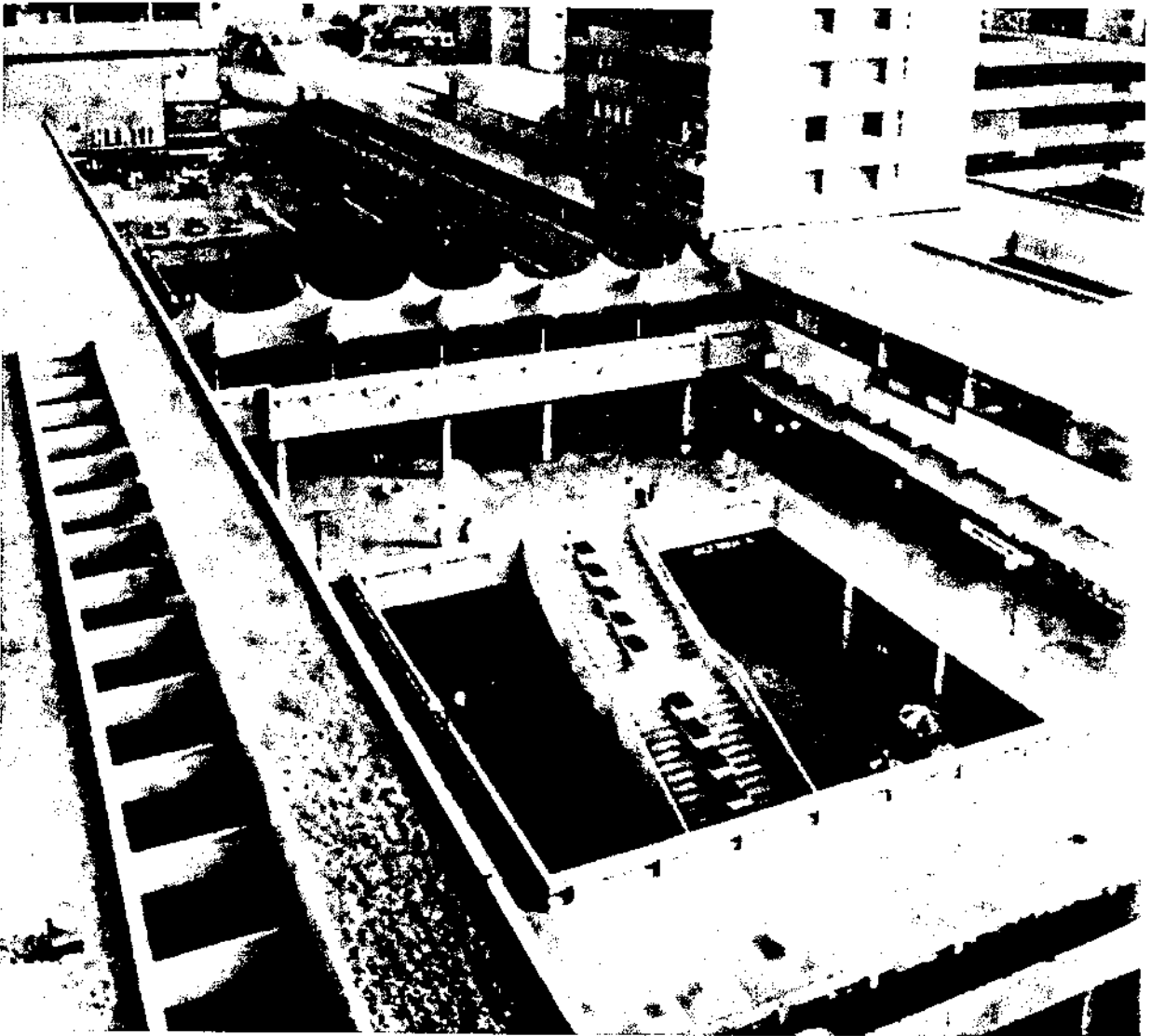
The Nordwestzentrum before renovation.

Crisis and Reshaping

Fifteen years after opening, the centre was regarded as a total failure. Very soon it became apparent that the ideal of the new centre had not been realized. The greyness of the concrete façade allowed only a sharp black-and-white contrast and no nuances in the design of architectural details. The right angle became the dominating shape for everything, be it the planters or the lamps. As a consequence of this unfriendly built environment, the centre developed as a place of desolation and emptiness. The inhabitants of the Nordweststadt did not stay there longer than needed and the desired clients from the rest of Frankfurt preferred to do their shopping in the real city centre where urbanity could be experienced to a certain degree. (The rebuilding process in Frankfurt was only finished in the 1990s). Furthermore, the long and uninterrupted lines of buildings in the Nordwestzentrum allowed the winds from the forests of the Taunus Mountains to the north of Frankfurt to blow unabated through the centre's open spaces. Only in summer was the climate of these spaces such that they were a pleasant place to be.

When the centre reopened in 1985, no architectural or social ambitions were claimed as the guiding principles. The centre had developed from a highly acclaimed architectural and planning ambition to a disillusioned place. It took no less than 14 years to rebuild and reshape the Nordwestzentrum and in its renovated state many observers did not recognize it. The long delay was partially due to the difficulty of finding a committed new private investor, but it was also an expression of the challenge in psychological terms that had to be overcome by the main planning and political actors (Gleiniger, 1995, p. 216).

The renewed centre became like one of the many gallery-style shopping malls that appeared everywhere in the 1980s. With a roof and much glass work, chrome and decoration, the centre today is a comfortable place to spend time even without doing much shopping. The urban 'soul' is no longer left over for the people to develop on their own; the private investors, shop owners and restaurants are now ambitious to create a lively atmosphere. In public planning administration, it is stressed that retail, housing, leisure and culture be com-bined in a satisfactory way. Left out of the regeneration are all social and cultural institutions earlier seen as an integral part of the centre. This is visible especially with regard to the Polytechnic University and its student accommodation which have remained there as cement monsters of a time long gone by.

Paradoxically, the centre now seems to be accepted by a broad population. The *flâneur* ambling amongst the people and the hasty consumer are both to be found on any ordinary day. The centre has become a pleasant place to stay and enjoy time with the family. What the best intentions of urban planners and architects failed to achieve through philosophical concepts, private investors in their attempt to attract and bind clients to this place of consumption

The entrance of the Nordwestzentrum today.
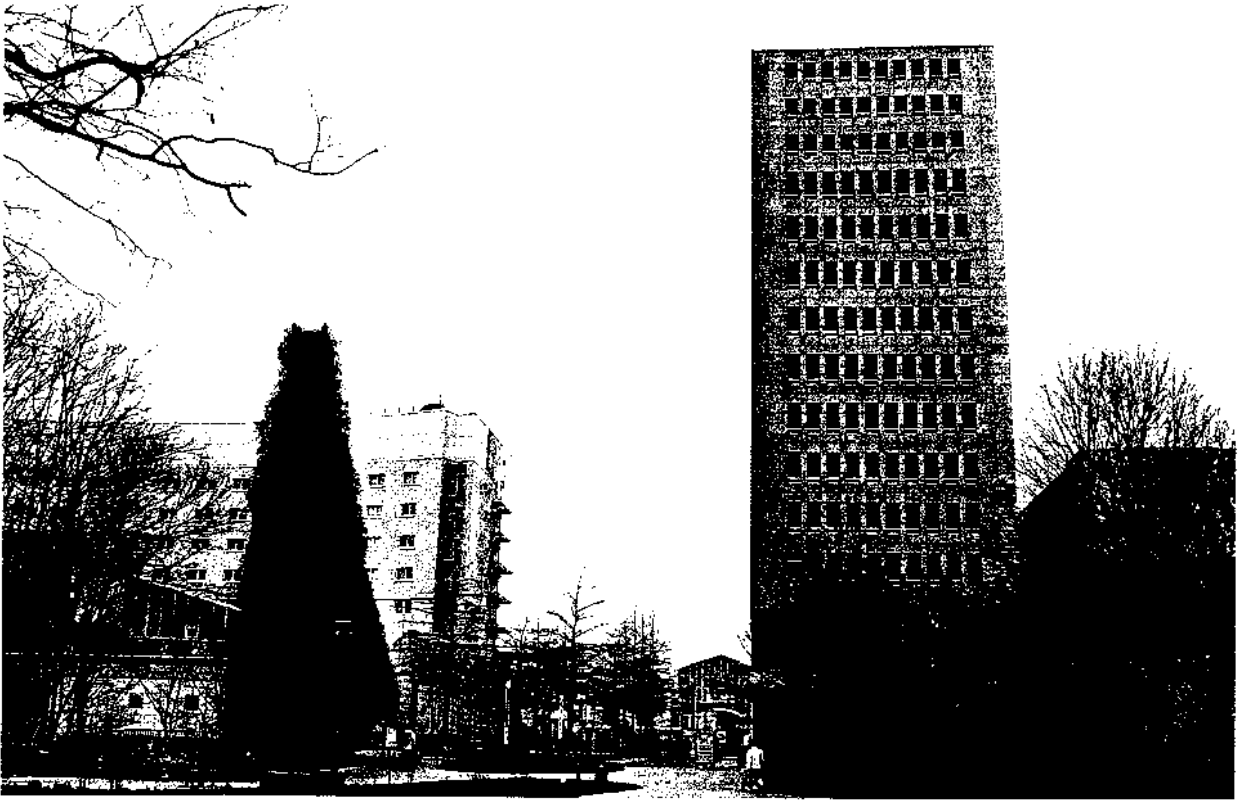
The Nordwestzentrum from the pedestrian area.

have done in the creation of some kind of 'urban place'. But this achievement is also generated by the widespread fear of crime that was shared by many Frankfurters in the 1990s. Surveillance and private security organizations make the centre a safe place. This has created new forms of exclusion and the new urbanity of the Zentrum has developed a kind of artificiality and rigidity. Unwelcome in the new consumer paradise are all kinds of people not fulfilling the superficial visual check by the guards who prevent the homeless, street musicians, beggars, junkies, street retailers and other 'suspected' persons from entering the centre. No political demonstrations, no loitering, no graffiti and no crime take place there.

Future Perspectives

The renewal of the centre reflects the assumptions about the development of society in the 1980s and the 1990s. As crime rates dropped

in the last decade all over Germany as well as in Frankfurt, the fear of crime is no longer the main concern in urban policy. Instead it is the ageing city. As a response to the consequences of demographic change, the Schader Foundation has started a 'Demonstration Project – Demographic Change' (Stadt Frankfurt, 2003). The Nordweststadt was chosen as a place for a practical approach to cope with an ageing city, because the majority of its present inhabitants arrived there in the 1960s. At that time, the main occupants of the apartments were families. Thirty years later one in three inhabitants is more than 65 years old and half of the inhabitants in Nordweststadt are 'empty nesters', older than 55 years and living in apartments originally designed for families. The Nordweststadt thus forecasts a demographic situation which is predicted for the whole of Germany by 2030. In the Frankfurt Metropolitan Area, affordable, housing for families is increasingly difficult to

find. One strategy could thus be to motivate senior citizens to give space to families and thereby reshape the Nordweststadt into its original balanced demographic mix. Surveys have shown that the senior dwellers are willing to look for smaller apartments but are not willing to live in a home for old people. Alternative opportunities, also suggested in the interviews, do not really exist. Thus there are limited opportunities to offer smaller houses with close access to the Nordwestzentrum. In other words, it is doubtful whether this approach to the problem of demographic over-representation of the senior population can be realized.

An alternative strategy would be to accept the high concentration of the older generation and to give the Nordwestzentrum a different character. This would result in closure of the kindergarten and school and instead the introduction of a care centre for disabled persons. Measures to improve the barrier-free access to the centre have to be developed in any event, but this would need to be given higher priority in order not to exclude the elderly and disabled from the pleasant, clean shopping world of the contemporary centre. Furthermore, more beautiful public spaces like rose gardens outside the Nordwestzentrum have been regarded as addressing the interests of the senior inhabitants. The suggestions made by the 'Demonstration Project', however, do not take into consideration that the incumbent senior population would refuse to move into smaller houses and have planned detailed projects for the reduction of the amount of housing and the introduction of more open space in its place.

But Nordweststadt is also exceptional in Frankfurt in respect to its low number of ethnic minorities. Only 25 per cent of the inhabitants are of foreign origin while all other parts of the city show significantly higher numbers. An influx of families would entail a larger proportion of immigrant families which would require a more diverse infrastructure for leisure, culture, and enter-

tainment. But this aspect has not yet been considered important in the reshaping of public places and the composition of the whole Nordwestzentrum.

Outlook

Both the Nordwestzentrum and the centre of Halle-Neustadt are examples of the recent trends in neighbourhood centres in Germany. While the situation in the East German neighbourhoods is characterized by severe problems of loss of inhabitants and their 'social capital', many neighbourhoods in West Germany have to cope with a different social mixture reflecting demographic change and international migration. Since the mid-1990s, there has been serious concern that the West German neighbourhoods are under stress and initially the Länder of Hamburg and Nordrhein-Westfalen reacted with a programme paying special attention to them. When the Schröder government took over the national competences for urban planning, the 'Socially Integrative City' programme offered support for all neighbourhoods with special needs in the whole of Germany. One of the key issues of this programme is the installation or upgrading of neighbourhood centres. As a consequence, there has been a renaissance of neighbourhood centres in Germany. For East Germany, however, the 'Socially Integrative City' programme remains only one of the few larger support programmes of which the 'Stadtumbau Ost' is the most significant. With regard to many different existing programmes, it is hard to predict the effect of this renaissance. Although such strategies for upgrading the neighbourhood seem a positive trend, there are also grounds to criticize this development. Already in the 1960s, the neighbourhood had lost its significance in architectural design practice and increasingly the idea of mixing different spatial uses in one area became the main trajectory of local town planning (Flecken, 1995, p. 287). The high mobility of inhabitants and a wider urban geography,

where the different spheres of daily life are not bound to one single neighbourhood, is characterizing contemporary urbanity and questioning the very notion of the 'neighbourhood centre'. There is a danger that – as might be already visible in the case of Halle-Neustadt – the neighbourhood centre becomes the last refuge for those who cannot leave.

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