

## **Doug Hall**

### ***The GDR Project: Notes on the Photographs***

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The photographs were taken in August, 1992. They show the interiors of some of the most important buildings occupied by the government of East Germany before its collapse in October, 1989. The spaces appear very much as they were during the final years of the communist period, with the significant difference that the rooms are now vacant – empty remnants of the former regime.

The major themes of this project were provided by four buildings: Three located in the area of Marx Engels Platz, the bureaucratic and political focal point of the former government in East Berlin and one on the highway leading through East Germany to Hamburg, slightly north of Berlin.

### **The Buildings**

The Palace of the Republic (Palast der Republik), built in the 1970s, was to be, according to Erich Honecker, the showplace of the German Democratic Republic. The building is



curious for many reasons, one being the dual purpose that it fulfilled. On one side it was an immense social center that provided the “popular entertainments” (from flower shows to concerts, dances, and celebratory spectacles) that took place in the Grand Foyer and the Great Hall. On the other side of the building, and separated from the public sector by locked glass doors, was the seat of its second function: the Volkskammer (the State Congress) with its congressional hall, various meeting rooms, and the offices that supported this largely ceremonial display of power. The Palace of the Republic was closed to the public shortly after the fall of the Communist

government, the official explanation being that it was dangerously contaminated by asbestos. There has been endless speculation concerning its future, including rumors that it was to become the new state library and prophecies of its imminent destruction.

The Council of State Building (Staatsratsgebäude) sits on the south side of Marx-Engels Platz. It was the official headquarters for the Chief of State (Erich Honecker during the last 15 years of the GDR). Like The Palace of the Republic, this building fulfilled important ceremonial functions: a place where the power of the state expressed itself, not to the general population, but to ambassadors, leaders of foreign governments, and other official state visitors and bureaucrats. All of the rooms are large, including the office of Honecker, and the foyers, particularly at the entrance level and on the first floor, outside Honecker’s office, and suggest – or at least attempt to suggest – grandeur. Although the

rooms are scaled to dwarf the visitor, there are qualities in the choices of fabric, carpeting, furnishings and fixtures that suggest a sort of 1950s-based hominess. To the American eye it is a décor most reminiscent of the low-bourgeois style of a Ramada Inn. The building is slated for renovation and is supposed to become the Ministry for Domestic Affairs when the federal government relocates to Berlin.

The real power of the German Democratic Republic resided in the highest levels of the Communist Party, which was headquartered in the Central Committee Building that stands across the street and to the east of the Council of State Building. This immense structure was built in 1934 by the fascist architect, Heinrich Wolff (it has also been attributed to Albert Speer), and its entrance foyer is very much as it was during the time of The Third Reich. The building was originally constructed to house the Reichsbank. Shortly after the war, it became the East German finance ministry and in 1959 the headquarters for the Central Committee of the Communist Party (SED).



After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, the ground floor, which housed many of the important meeting rooms, including the Congressional Hall of the Politburo, was closed and sealed, as it remains today. The floors above have been taken over as offices by the Bundesbank. During August 1992, the exterior of the building was being renovated and all emblematic traces of its Communist past removed. The speculation is that the building will be taken over by the



German government, perhaps as a ministry, when it moves from Bonn to Berlin. It is unclear what will be done with the ground floor spaces. Of all the administrative buildings that I photographed, this one was the most austere, perhaps because it is where the real power of the state resided and, being off limits to all but the most important members of the Communist Party, there was no need to soften its authority. Or perhaps it is just that its fascist past, cold and immobilizing, continues to make itself felt there. (Although the authoritarian aura was somewhat diminished by such things as the use of simulated wood grain linoleum to cover the floors of the inner corridors and foyers). Regardless, one is left with the impression that this was a center of power, a fortress from which

unabashed authority emanated, and there is very little in its design or décor to moderate

this impression. (It is not without irony that one reflects on the lineage of this building: bank for the fascists, finance ministry for the GDR, Central Committee Building for the Communist Party of the GDR, and bank for the government of unified Germany).

The fourth building in this project was the main building on the grounds of Stolpe/Berlin Border Control Station. This facility was one of two border crossings – this one situated on the north and the other on the south side of West Berlin – that controlled traffic through East Germany. Unlike the other buildings in this project, this one had no ceremonial function, its purpose being very matter-of-fact: to monitor the passage of West Germans and other foreigners traveling into West Berlin. For purposes of control and enforcement the border stations maintained a strong STASI (East German secret police) presence. When I saw the deserted grounds in the summer of 1992, the main building and the surrounding border control booths had been vandalized. Inside, despite the vandalization and the hurried dismantling of the facility (or perhaps because of them) there was an eerie, foreboding feeling to the spaces enhanced by the crunching sounds of my footsteps across broken glass, the fragments of fluorescent tubes littering the floors, the shredded black-out curtains in the armory, the tangles of wires ripped out of the console in the communication center, an over-turned chair, a stained sink incongruously stuck in the middle of a wall, more black-out curtains in the interrogation room, and the open steel doors leading to the barred weapons storage and security areas.



Thinking about these buildings as a group, I am struck by their anonymity: how alike they are to one another and to other similar places in the East and West and how placeless they feel. The areas within the Palace of the Republic (and in the other buildings as well) that could easily be mistaken for an airport lobby in Buenos Aires, a convention center in Omaha, Nebraska, or a state building in Lithuania or Geneva. Clones of the Stolpe/Berlin Control Station can be found in the United States at any of the major immigration control stations along its border with Mexico. Perhaps one should not be surprised by this sameness. We have all experienced, in all parts of the world, the manner in which bureaucratic and public interiors blend into one another, becoming indistinguishable. These are the non-places where

our identities threaten to dissipate into the ordinariness of our surroundings.

And yet one expects – maybe even hopes – to find in governmental architecture, particularly that which houses the highest levels of government, a physical equivalence as grandiose as the rhetoric that nourishes and mythologizes its ideology. In the case of East Berlin, one enters interior spaces of resolute blandness, which are both psychologically and spiritually numbing. These are spaces that abhor surprise; and if surprise is the metaphor for hope and change, they speak to the values of continuity over innovation; of

drudgery and conformity over epiphany. Unlike the Stalinist architecture of the Soviet Union, which monumentalized commonality, there is nothing celebratory about the East German buildings of the Communist period. They are as void of joy as they are of humor, parody or critique. It is an architectural language in which neither past nor present are imaginable beyond the horizon of an endless and mundane present.