Halle–Neustadt – A Case for New Town Renewal in Eastern Germany

Holger Schmidt

The Research Project Halle–Neustadt

Since 1992 Halle–Neustadt, along with ten other newly–built areas in the new federal states and East–Berlin, has been a model undertaking for research within the framework of the programme Experimental Housing– and Townbuilding (ExWoSt). This three year programme, supported by the Federal Ministry for Building, the land of Saxony–Anhalt and the City of Halle is intended to provide generalised statements but which are based on this part of the city. Namely:

- possible solutions and forms for the further development of urban building in East–German newly–built areas;
- the effectiveness of existing instruments for urban building processes and housing policies and suggestions for increasing their efficiency and
- the inclusion of the inhabitants in the process of the further development of urban building, which is orientated towards keeping the existing houses and the establishing of accompanying social programmes.

It has to be emphasized that as the initiators, the Federal Ministry for Building and the Federal Research Institute for Landeskunde and Spatial Order have invited entries for research in which quasi provision making and accompanying strategies and the initial stages for action towards a further development of East–German newbuilt areas shall be formulated. Against the background of West–German experiences in the process of revitalising large housing estates one obviously did not want to wait until *"the child fell into the fountain"*. Since the situation is different to that in West Germany, the identification of a large, newly–built area with that of an area of the city with social problems cannot as yet be said to be accurate. At the same time, the qualitative dimensions of the numbers and size of the newly–built areas that are to be encountered in the new federal states and East–Berlin underline the acute demand for action.

	West Germany	East Germany
Number of flats in large housing estates	600 000	1 016 000
Number of inhabitants in large housing estates	2 Mio.	3 Mio.
Percentage of inhabitants in large housing estates	3 %	20 %
Number of large housing estates with 2000 - 5000 flats	51	55
Number of flats in large housing estates with 2000 - 5000 flats	166 000	193 000
Number of large housing estates with more than 5000 flats	14	70
Number of flats in large housing estates with more than 5000 flats	127 000	823 000
The largest housing estate	N.-Perlach 20 000	Marzahn 59 000
Number of large housing estate with more than 100 000 inhabitants	none	7

The Newtown Halle–Neustadt

Measured in terms of the number of inhabitants, Halle with a population of 311,000 is the biggest city in Saxony–Anhalt. The economic structure of the city is characterised by branches of basic industry, machinery– and vehicle building and foodstuff industries. The enterprises of the chemical industry have to date provided the determining factor economically. Besides a large and qualified labour potential, the city of Halle includes numerous scientific institutions and a considerable research capacity.

At present one out of two of Halle's inhabitants lives on a new housing estate, in a flat built with prefabricated panels. Halle–Neustadt, the largest such area with 87.000 inhabitants, was built between 1964 and 1986 to the west of the Saale meadows, well–situated considering the structure of the city. Initially thought out and planned as part of Halle, the *"Chemical Programme of the G.D.R."* from 1963 brought forth a new direction of development. Under the slogan *"Chemistry brings bread, scientific technical progress, high productivity of labour and welfare for the whole nation"* the rapid chemicalisation of society was to realize in practice the words of Walter Ulbricht: *"Overtaking without catching up"*.

The forced establishing of the chemical industry in the Middle German industrial region of Halle–Leipzig made it necessary to recruit more labour and create new living space for it. A newly–built flat of one's own, with bathroom and WC, with district heating and light rooms were reasons enough for many people to follow the call of the

chemical industry. Using the experience gained through the setting up of new towns like Eisenhüttenstadt, Schwedt or Hoyerswerda it was decided to erect a new town in an industrial way, entirely with prefabricated panels.

As the place for building, a site near Halle to the west of the Saale meadows was chosen, not least because of the good air, hygienic situation and the nearness to Halle. Halle–West in this way became Halle–Neustadt: the independent town of the chemical workers. A large scale project began, we would say today. Competence for planning and decision making was transferred from Halle to Berlin, a building staff was founded and entries for an urban building competition were invited. Parallel with the competition, erection work was already started on the first section of the living complex, this having been designed by Halle planners.

The basic concept of Halle–Neustadt followed the model of the sectionalized design and dispersed city with an axial structure. Alongside the "Magistrale" (the main highway) were the dominating urban aspects, the city centre and the living areas being affiliated to them. Each living complex has apart from the dwelling houses, its own centre, schools and institutions for looking after pre–school children.

The living complexes consist of from five up to eleven storey panelconstruction buildings and some tower–like high–rise buildings. The overall structure of Halle–Neustadt is essentially characterized by streets for traffic. From the North to the South a suburban railway runs through the area, with the help of which a fast connection was
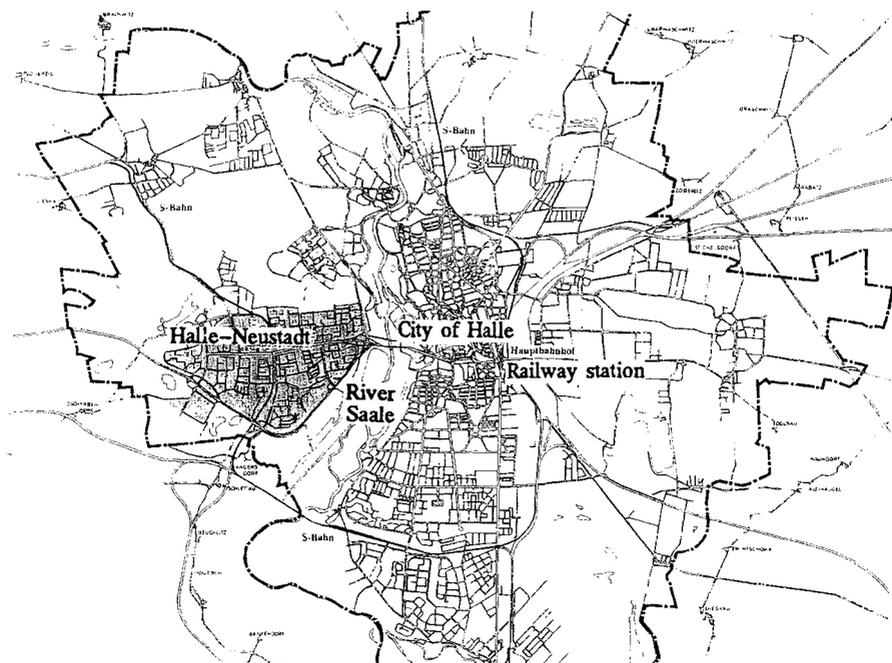
Figure 2: *Geographical location of the New–Town in the urban agglomeration of Halle*

provided to the former chemical combines at Buna and Leuna and the main railwaystation of Halle. In the city centre the railway goes underground and is crossed by the six-lane Magistrale running in an East-West-direction. Via the Magistrale, Halle-Neustadt is connected with the eastern parts of Halle and its historical old centre. In addition to the suburban railway, several buses travel between Halle and Halle-Neustadt. Until 1990 Halle-Neustadt was a separate municipality and had the status of a district-free city (that is to say it had its own administration). After questioning the citizens in 1990, the two former entities were united as one city.

Urban Renewal in Halle-Neustadt

The starting point in Halle-Neustadt is similar to that of other newly-built areas in the former G.D.R. The following deficiencies can be listed:
- technical construction damage to buildings, supply- and disposal systems,
- because of the structural standardization there are functional deficiencies in the flats concerning style, building quality and equipment,
- design and utilisation deficiencies around the dwelling houses,
- deficiencies in the offer of a widely spread programme of cultural and spare time institutions for the different age groups and social strata,
- lack of a variety of job offers in the area,
- "flooding" of the housing complexes by the metoric development of traffic and others.

In spite of the existing structural and infrastructural deficits of the new area it is at present not a social problem area. Yet the danger exists that if considerable improvements in the housing stock of the estate do not take place, this area, just like others in East Germany can, in a process that is difficult to describe in advance, develop into a social problem area leading to a politically explosive situation.

But from our point of view there is no necessity that this scenario occurs. Rather there is a series of potentials that could be activated within the framework of a consciously organised and executed further development of Halle-Neustadt:

(i) The opinion of a majority of the inhabitants about the newbuilt area is clearly better than its reputation as presented by the media. Many residents have a strong identification with where they live and see a real perspective for life on the estate.

(ii) The apartments all have a clear legal status being either municipal property or in the hands of associations. Thereby they represent an important basis for communal housing policies. Consequently, the possibility exists that through active policies on the

part of the municipality consequent social problems in the large estates can be countered in good time.

(iii) In many parts of the estate, particularly in its marginal areas, there are considerable opportunities for concentration or potential building. These can, above all, be utilised to complement the lack of functional facilities within the housing area, for trade and commerce, leisure and cultural activities etc.

Pre-supposing a necessary precursor to planning and the solving of the problems of old debts, one could begin immediately on an improvement of the direct housing situation through a socially acceptable renovation and modernisation of the prefabricated panel buildings and the re-designing of the surrounding area. Moreover, through the reduction of existing functional and design failures in the city surroundings, one could achieve an improvement in the living situation that would be perceptible to the residents.

The very controversial and emotional public debate over the demolition or the further development of the newly-built areas in East Germany that took place in 1990-1992 has in the meantime become realistic and has led to the following basic consensus:

1. The newly-built areas in the new federal states with their more than 1 million apartments represent an important part of the housing supply and from the housing policy angle they cannot be relinquished for the foreseeable future.

2. The development of East German new construction estates is an important, and in consideration of its complexity, a new task for urban development and the social policies of the communities involved.

3. In response to the *"post-Wende"* period demand for the demolition of the prefabricated panel building areas, today there are positive indications towards development, with the aim of arousing the residents' trust in and commitment to their residential area and its immediate surroundings.

4. The existing shortcomings in the newly-built areas in Eastern Germany do not go hand in hand with a concentration of instances of social problems as is frequently the case in the West. Therefore, strategies for renovation are required whereby social and cultural traditions that have stood the test of time are activated on behalf of the further development of the estate.

Topics to the Project: Urban Renewal as a Democratic and Cultural Process

The research project described in this chapter is based on three pillars:

1. Seven research components were prepared, as a result of which fundamental questions in the field of research were dealt with in concrete instances. As an example, existing approaches to development were explored, new planning requirements probed and investigations were made to explore the tying in of the city quarter in the overall strategy for the whole city as well as the efficiency of organisational and housing policy measures.

2. Creation of institutions supportive of an independent further development of the newbuilt estate on a broader democratic basis. Here we are concerned with holding project workshops on a regular basis, functioning as a platform for discussion for community politicians, administrative staff members and citizens alike. Further, an on-site office is to be established which shall offer support to small unit renovation activities and which can function as a mediator between different participants in the urban renewal process.

3. Dissemination of methods of operation and the results of the research project and of concrete examples of the means accompanying further development projects, which at the same time encourage discussion about the aims and methods of the further development of large estates being aspired to and can make a contribution to the stabilisation of the identity of Halle-Neustadt.

Image and Identity as Decisive Criteria

The central "crunch point" for the success or failure of the further development of newly-built areas like Halle-Neustadt is overcoming the widely-held "negative image" and "social unease" felt by many residents. "Unease" is markedly diffuse and at present not clearly definable with regard to its real causes.

In the sense of urban renewal that is both democratic and expansive, identification and a feeling of belonging on the part of the residents of Halle-Neustadt is amongst the most important potentials for development, in that like technical, natural space or structural characteristics they directly (or indirectly) and persistently characterise everyday life in a city quarter.

195

Precisely because of the contradictions, the insecurity of approaching the idea of "home" being in "panel estates" and the importance of the topics identification and home for the future of Halle–Neustadt a differentiated approach will be attempted in the following.

Table 1: Typical Nicknames Used to Characterise Halle–Neustadt

Nicknames			
– Sleeping city	64	– Workers safe deposit box	11
– Residential ghetto	22	– City of the same houses	10
– none	19	– Concrete silo	10
– Ha–neu	17	– Concrete city	9
– Concrete desert	11	– Grey–green city	5
		– Others	25
Total of designations			203

Following the outliving of the euphoria over the "modern city", it would appear that from the residents' viewpoint there is an exclusively negative, almost scathing verdict concerning descriptions of Halle–Neustadt.

Although, on the one hand, the residents for the most part reserve very negative names – indeed they are almost abusive – for their section of the city, the overwhelming majority of those questioned have, contrariwise, found their home in Halle–Neustadt.

Figure 3: Feeling at Home in 1984 and 1992

196
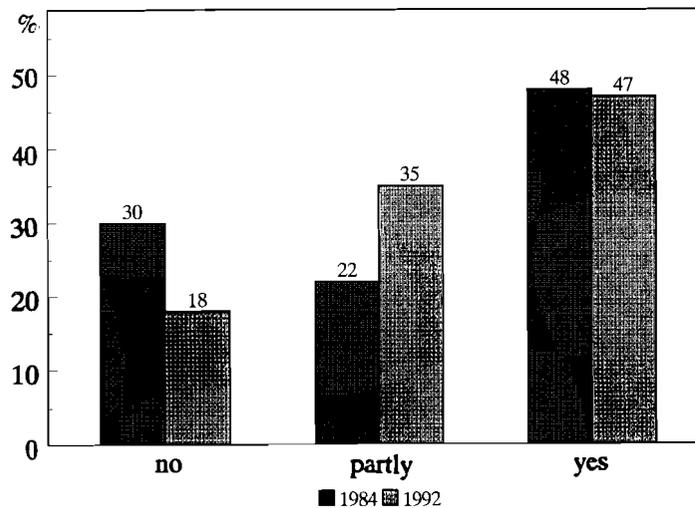
The contradictions of life in Halle–Neustadt are conveyed very graphically in these two pieces of evidence. A form of *"schizophrenia"*, is recognisable – or cognitive dissonance. The overall *"negative image"* of Halle–Neustadt is to a considerable degree characteristic of outsiders – or at least is strongly reinforced by them – and not of those who live there. Amongst the residents themselves, the external discrimination often falls on fertile soil in this regard inasmuch as considerable shortcomings and disadvantages actually exist in this quarter of the city. Thus the *"negative image from within"* appears at least in part to be explainable as an undiminished reflection of the alien view from without. The adoption and increasing repetition of negative cliches on the part of the residents can only be seen in part as being a result of their own, everyday negative experiences.

Already in GDR times, abusive names were in evidence for the characterising of newly–built areas and as such the first signs of a negative image. Nevertheless, this never reached the stage of a comprehensive and public devaluation by politicians, experts or the press as occurred between 1990 and 1992 when the swell of discrimination reached its peak. It can be said that new construction areas function as an incarnation of the GDR, so they could provide an example for a large–scale devaluation of the East German way of life.

Astonishingly enough, however, discrimination results not only from outsiders, the Neustadt residents themselves abuse the place where they feel themselves to be at home, discriminate against their own place of domicile and their own living situation.

The question of the other dimensions of the predominantly negative and burdening nicknames must be left unsettled here: to what extent the Halle–Neustadt residents find "their" sleeping city, "their" concrete desert, "their" workers safe deposit box as something special, unique, of value, how much hapless pride is hidden in these names, how much hidden love and how much normality and how much that is habitual.

Although the extensive devaluation of and discrimination against East German newly–built estates through politicians, experts and the media came to an end about two years ago, a negative evaluation of newly–built areas such as Halle–Neustadt remains widespread. The devaluation culturally of the new estate will become a problem in particular when it has a destabilising effect on the existing social situation: on the one hand it strengthens resignation and withdrawal in the private sphere, on the other it will strengthen the will of potential migrants to depart. In both instances additional barriers will have been erected in the efforts to revitalise and renovate Halle–Neustadt.

The age groups living in Halle–Neustadt, with their different experiences of life and life styles, express themselves very differently. Whilst the *"original inhabitants"* with their experience of the building up of the estate express themselves overwhelmingly in positive terms regarding Halle–Neustadt, the children there and the residents who moved in later are critical. Derived from this, it is clearly necessary to develop

197

Figure 4: *Centre sphere in Halle–Neustadt (Photo: H. Schmidt)*

completely different offers and different forms of strategy regarding the constructional and functional alterations within the newly-built area for these very heterogeneous groups. All the measures planned must consider from the outset their identification-supportive effect on the different groups of residents and their different social effects.

New Values Necessary for Social Aspects

For a comprehensive renewal of Halle–Neustadt it is not enough to adapt the experiences gathered during revitalisation processes on large housing estates in West Germany without utilising our precise knowledge concerning the entirely different social situation in newly-built areas in the East. The future development of Halle–Neustadt is only a constructional or constructional–technical problem in the second instance. The need of an integrated development concept which is in essence guided by social, cultural and ecological premises is decisive for the future. Only if there is also an "uprise" of the area through the provision of an improved cultural and leisure time infrastructure, at the same time as reconstruction and modernisation of the dwelling houses is carried out there will be an improvement in the image of Halle–Neustadt and the identification of its residents with it.

The future development of these areas can be prophesied only with great difficulty. Conjecture concerning the near future of new areas cite either a picture of the *"nice living area for the middle classes"* or the nightmare of a *"constructionally and socially distressed part of the town"*. It is idle to argue about the strikingness of both scenarios. It is more to the point to observe the contemporary social situation and possible social changes and to take into consideration the sociological information gathered in this way for all the essential decisions to be made.

Considering the multitude of tasks to be solved in the newly-built areas in East Germany and their interdependence, the social aspects or the possible negative social effects of single measures taken have so far played only a subordinate role. The difficulty lies in the integration of existing knowledge concerning the social problems, the planned renewal projects in the newly-built areas concerning their effectiveness and the accuracy of their aims and whether it may be possible to undertake different or additional measures. Since this possibility has so far been given away it must be reckoned with that there will be a tendency towards an increase in the instances of social problems and of an exodus by the residents, especially the younger and the better educated.

An Extended Scope for Social Planners

For social planners and social planning as a discipline involved in the process of urban renewal this means that they need to break out of the tightly conceived framework for their actions as drawn up according to Construction Laws (§ 180). This restricts them to "convalescent" (or post-care) and compensatory activities. If the social mix that exists in the newly-built towns in East Germany is to be used as an essential potential for the further development of such areas then social planning will need to fulfil two quite different tasks at the same time, e.g. acting as lobbyist and as a practical worker.

Lobby work (preventive activity):

- image improvement
- strengthening of identification
- give a specific city quarter a cultural stamp
- secure residents' influence on basic questions
- influence city publicity
- secure a framework for practical work

Practical work (compensating activities):

- involvement of residents in the planning process
- support self-help
- practical social work
- tenants' right of co-determination
- securing of institutions for communal use.

199

Figure 5: *A young generation of the stony city (Photo: H. Schmidt)*

Urban Renewal as a Democratic and Cultural Process

The cultural offerings in Halle–Neustadt – poor anyway – broke down almost entirely after 1989. Standing in opposition to the troublesome task of the establishment (re-establishment) of a stable offering one hears time and again the argument that there is no money. At the same time space allocated for cultural purposes gets less because of the other, more attractive alternatives of letting. This loss of cultural substance is accompanied the death of the city's public life.

Since the residents reflect upon these facts very critically and are very dissatisfied with this situation, it must be feared that following the *"cultural decline"* in the near future there will be a decline socially in the newly-built area. To be precise, this will occur when younger, more active and better earning groups of residents decide to leave a place that is relatively lacking in culture. The starting pistol for such an occurrence was fired with the cultural devaluation of Halle–Neustadt described above. Even so, this ought to have been a false start: indeed it can still be so.

To avert this decline the concerted action of all participants is required, independent of the different interests, and the development of new, democratic policy forms of urban renewal is needed.

200

– Future development is only a constructional or technical problem in the second instance. Decisive for the future will be an integrated development concept which is essentially guided by social, cultural and ecological premises. Only when parallel to renovation and modernisation of the accommodation there is an *"upswing"* in the attractiveness of the area through the means of an improved cultural and leisure time infrastructure will the image of Halle–Neustadt improve and the sense of identity of its residents rise.

– The process to be induced requires appropriate support from those involved, both persons and institutions resident in Halle–Neustadt. The establishing of a *"Neustadt Forum"* where the different interests are represented and where common aims and areas of action could be found would be a desirable starting point. Individual measures could be investigated at an early stage with regard to their effects on the social situation and the functional structure of the quarter of the city. Furthermore, relationships and connexions between the actions of other interested parties could be established.

– The general disposition within the framework of the further development of Halle–Neustadt to strengthen the residents identification with the area and to improve its image could be supported by the establishment of *"Neustadt Office"*. This would, at the same time, serve as a location for contacts to be made, as an intermediary agency, as a lobbyist and as the organizing body for the Neustadt Forum. It could thus serve as the moderator in various problem areas. The establishment of such an office would in itself be indicative of a growing acceptance of the specific problems of the Neustadt residents by the Halle city fathers.

It is important that every participant, no matter whether a building firm or a research team, a housing association or a resident, must be conscious of the fact that with each building process that is initiated or with each decision made a very complex and very sensitive entity is being interfered with. We must learn to understand how intensive our interdependencies are and how fragile are seemingly stable relationships.