Historic buildings, it seems, are forever. The centuries-old houses in the centers of Prague, Amsterdam, or Toledo, but equally those in Williamsburg or Québec City, give an impression of permanence and everlasting stability. Current legislation in most European and North American countries reflects this perception. Since the Venice Charter of 1964 extended the definition of a historic monument to include the unexceptional buildings that make up most of the urban fabric, preservation laws increasingly mandate the conservation of what the Charter called “the modest works of the past.” Strictly speaking, any building of a certain age constitutes such a piece of historical evidence and therefore is to remain, theoretically, for eternity. The situation is thus paradoxical: against our common sense we act as if our architectural heritage were eternal.

The paradox of the eternal building, which is constantly modified but never destroyed, relies on a particular conception of architectural heritage that evolved in Europe and North America over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Especially in Europe, where large portions of the population still live in old buildings and where the housing market is traditionally state-regulated, the definition of architectural heritage had a decisive influence on both the shape of the city and the living conditions of the city dwellers. In the following article I will historicize the concept of the eternal building in East Berlin.

Eternal preservation evolved from an idea of obsolescence which was equally peculiar but contrary in its short-term goals. Widely popular until the 1960s, obsolescence had mandated the periodical demolition of the entire urban fabric rather than the eternal preservation of individual buildings. I will demonstrate how both concepts were closely connected and informed a conception of a historic city that is now widespread in many developed countries. Although this article is primarily about the German Democratic Republic, it has to be stressed that East German ideas of obsolescence and preservation were unrelated to the specificities of the socialist regime. As such, they were equally influential in West Germany and many neighboring countries.

Despite wartime destruction, century-old residential buildings make up almost half of Berlin’s urban fabric; until the 1950s, it was almost two-thirds. This is due to the fact that Berlin grew only marginally since the early 1900s, when it was...
the fifth largest city in the world. The bulk of these buildings are the famous Mietskaserne (rental barracks)—late-nineteenth century five-story tenements with ornamental stucco street façades and backyards with barns and workshops at the back. In the late 1950s and 1960s, both East and West Berlin had sponsored the state-sanctioned demolition of these tenements. This policy, dubbed by its critics as the “second destruction of Berlin,” had been fuelled both by the promise of a “new Berlin” and by the notoriously bad reputation of the late nineteenth-century architecture. The rage against Berlin’s “tenement city” was rooted in a persistent cultural construct that connected the architectural characteristics of these buildings to the social misery and political oppression of the early industrial era. In both East and West Berlin, this negative view gradually changed in the 1970s. Nowadays, the formerly despised buildings are increasingly popular among well-to-do Berliners and tourists.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Berlin’s local authorities calculated precisely how long a residential building—tenement or other—was supposed to last. Politicians agreed with urban planners that after a few decades any building would not only physically deteriorate but also cease to adequately cater to the needs of its inhabitants. Periodical repair of roofs, façades, or interiors would therefore only marginally prolong the building’s “life span” but not prevent its final destiny. Eventually it would become obsolete. Consequently, approximately every eighty years the entire city had to be demolished and rebuilt from scratch. The peculiar logic of this destructive circle derived from the experience of modernization during the twentieth century. In the 1870s, technologically-advanced apartments had gaslight and running water. One generation later, they featured electricity, flushing lavatories, and sewer connections. Two generations later, they included bathrooms, preferably with a built-in coal stove to heat the washing water. Another couple of decades later, a central heating system was considered indispensable. In the mid-twentieth century, both scholars and bureaucrats extrapolated these successive waves of technological innovation into the future. Following their rationale, if a 1960s building was so much more advanced than a 1900s building, the same building had to appear as obsolete in 2020 as woodstoves and outhouses did in the 1960s. They neglected that the dramatic rise in domestic standards was specific to their own period and that during the preceding thousand years the development had been anything but linear. In Europe, the most significant technological innovations during the Middle Ages, for example, had been glass windows (1100s) and tiled stoves (1300s), while water pipes, a usual facility in many upper-class dwellings of the Roman antiquity, subsequently fell into oblivion and were only reintroduced in the 1500s.

Technological obsolescence was first theorized in the nineteenth century. Karl Marx reflected on the topic in the first volume of Capital, presenting obsolescence as being determined by both physical and non-physical factors. On the one hand, there was material depreciation—wear and tear deriving from both use and inactivity—and on the other hand, a non-material aspect for which he coined the peculiar term moralischer Verschleiß (“moral attrition,” “moral depreciation”). For Marx, “moral depreciation” meant that a machine was outmoded by the progressive change in standards and requirements—examples would be an outhouse compared to a flush toilet or a wood stove compared to a central heating system. Friedrich Engels, in the 1840s, already applied this concept to buildings, implying that the efficiency of a residence, like that of a machine, can be expressed in absolute numbers. Engels pointed out that after approximately one hundred years a building completes its “life” and inevitably has to be torn down and replaced by a new one. His concept is evocative of an analogy that became extremely influential in the twentieth century: buildings were construed as organisms which age and are eventually superseded by a younger generation. In the 1920s and 1930s, architects assumed life spans of thirty years or less for newly constructed buildings. The inherent necessity for demolition found its expression in the building codes and tax laws at the time, which clearly favored demolition over renovation. Starting as a reformatory idea, obsolescence became an obsession with constant reform.

In the post-World War II period, the concept of obsolescence fit well into both the capitalist need for economic expansion and the socialist idea of historic progress and comprehensive renewal. In both the Eastern and Western Blocs, the life span of a building was regarded as a scientifically proven fact. Planning at the time was strictly top-down; the authorities did not see the need for involving the tenants in the decision over whether or not to demolish their residence. In East Berlin, where the state held the power of disposal even over those tenements that were privately owned, there were no obstacles against the official policy. With the Marxist dogma of “objective historical progress” in mind, socialist officials predicted that even the apartments blocks they built in the 1960s (equipped with toilets, central heating and warm running water) would eventually suffer “moral depreciation” in a not-too-distant future, in the same way in which the late nineteenth-century tenements had already become obsolete. East German economist Peter Doehler, an influential figure in East German academia, asserted in his 1961 dissertation that
2. Conserved vestiges of the past on renovated late nineteenth century tenements in Berlin’s Mitte district: Restored shop sign of a coal and wood dealer from the prewar period (70 Bergstrasse). (Photo by author)

“age is the decisive characteristic for estimating quality and value of an old residential building.” In the early 1960s, he directed the Institut für Architektur und Städtebau (Institute for Architecture and Urban Design) at the Building Academy—the most important institute for architectural research in the German Democratic Republic. He later taught at the School of Architecture and Construction in Weimar and eventually directed the Institut für Weiterbildung (Institute for Continuous Education) in Naumburg where all East German planners were sent for continuing education seminars. Doehler’s publications reveal him as a bureaucrat who did not assign any significance to historic residential buildings beyond their quantifiable use value. In his obsession with obsolescence and periodic demolition, however, he not only justified large-scale demolitions but, ironically, also laid the groundwork for the preservation of Berlin’s historic tenements as it was practiced a generation after him. Doehler compared the cost of remodeling with that of new construction and concluded that, depending on the level of damage, cautious investment into old tenements could prolong their life span and thus save the socialist national economy money that otherwise would have to be spent on demolition and reconstruction of buildings.

In the early 1970s, Doehler’s principles informed the first comprehensive remodeling project in East Berlin. On May 9, 1972, the local government decided to renovate the Arnimplatz neighborhood in the Prenzlauer Berg district, a densely built area composed of late nineteenth-century tenements housing approximately 20,000 tenants. For the first time in East German history, an entire historic neighborhood was not demolished in favor of new buildings but renovated and adapted to the demands of modern life. The remodeling was unmatched in its scope. Approximately 2,300 apartments were remodeled, a record in both East and West Germany at the time. Contrary to earlier renovations, the Arnimplatz remodeling conserved the feel of the historic neighborhood. The East Berlin government called to save “façades containing cultural
value,” and many stucco ornaments were carefully renewed. The project also inspired several other renovations of entire East Berlin neighborhoods.  

Common belief often credits the organizers of the Arnimplatz project with the merit of intentionally turning the tides and popularizing tenement preservation. The documents, however, contradict this interpretation. The long term goal of the project was by no means preservation but rather demolition. Construction was aimed at prolonging the “life span” of the tenements a mere forty to fifty years. The aim of demolition in the near future was pointed out in Günter Peters’s 1972 doctoral thesis. At the time, Peters was East Berlin’s leading construction official and in charge of the remodeling. His thesis, classified “confidential” until the end of the German Democratic Republic, was the basis for the local government’s directive. Peters built his ideas on the theory of “life span” and pointed out the inevitability of “moral depreciation,” demolition, and rebuilding. He claimed that the strategy of “reconstruction” consisted of two different phases. During the first, the goal was to stop demolitions, preserve dwelling space, and build new apartments until the overall need for housing was satisfied. In that period, tenement renovations were justified. In the second phase, demolition was to be accelerated together with new construction, so that gradually the entire housing stock was replaced. The Arnimplatz remodeling was considered part of the first phase.

The Arnimplatz remodeling started in 1973. With a demolition rate of only 18% of the buildings, the Arnimplatz was the first remodeling project in East Germany that aimed at preserving the neighborhood as an architectural ensemble. Even the once vilified backyards were to remain, as were most of the rear wings in the dense inner portions of the blocks. Such careful design allowed for a maximum of additional light and air with minimal demolition. On four blocks, individual buildings were torn down to broaden existing gaps and create space for two kindergartens, a cultural center as well as a number of playgrounds and sports fields.

The remodeling hit the nerve of the time. Journalists and urban planners from both Eastern and Western countries applauded the Prenzlauer Berg district. In 1978, deputy city district mayor Heinz Schmaida proudly reported to his superiors that in the past eighteen months, fifty-six delegations had visited the Arnimplatz, including a group of Norwegian journalists, a “friendship committee” from Paris, a leading party official from Ulan Bator, the United Nations Commission for Construction, and a delegation of journalists from the West Berlin newspaper Der Tagesspiegel. Although there are no exact figures about the tenants’ opinion—surveys of that kind were rarely permitted in East Germany—contemporary observers suggest that the great majority saw it as a fortune to have the cake and eat it, too. They were thrilled about having modern-day amenities while remaining in their neighborhoods. The success of the project also reverberated on the other side of the Berlin Wall. In retrospect, West Berlin urban planner Gustav Hämmer acknowledged the significance of his visit for his professional practice. Hämmer was a driving force in West Berlin’s remodeling policy known as Behutsame Stadterneuerung (“Careful Urban Renewal”), which since the late 1970s aimed at the renovation and preservation of historic tenements. His 1973 visit to Arnimplatz had a lasting impact on his ideas. The unforeseen popularity of the project’s “first phase,” the remodeling, prompted the perpetual postponement of the second one: the demolition of the entire neighborhood and its rebuilding in a modern style was never carried out. The life span of the buildings was prolonged indefinitely.

While tenements like the Arnimplatz were renovated, obsolescence became obsolete. The concept of a building having a pre-determined life span gradually disappeared and the notion of “the old” was reconfigured. Publications in the 1950s and 1960s continued to make a distinction between the despised late nineteenth-century architecture and older buildings like the late-medieval nucleus of Quedlinburg or the eighteenth century buildings in Old Town Weimar. In the 1980s, however, this difference waned. New buildings from the nineteenth century were put in the same category with those of earlier eras—both were equally deemed worthy of preservation. In East German practice, like in the West, the renovation of an old neighborhood became increasingly a question of replacing parts rather than entire buildings.

Did the state authorities believe that routine maintenance and repairs could sustain a building indefinitely, or did they no longer consider it their task to engage in comprehensive redevelopment planning? The answer is a combination of both. The first assumption is backed by the fact that in the 1980s, projected life spans increased. In his 1983 dissertation, East German engineer Horst Rolle extended the anticipated use of a tenement almost indefinitely. He did not provide any demolition date, but only asserted that load-bearing parts should be renewed after 130 to 160 years—that is, not before 2000. In February 1990, three months after the reunification of Berlin, Dresden professor Kurt Wilde bluntly dismissed the East German calculations of the past as unscientific and ideologically motivated. He wrote: “The proof for ‘necessary new building’ is a ‘proof’ through appearance...the life span of one hundred years that is sometimes mentioned is normative, not absolutely cogent!” The second assumption
that state-sponsored long-term planning gradually became outdated is substantiated by the decreasing popularity of all-inclusive redesign plans since 1970. The reasons were practical. East German authorities were less and less able to cope with everyday problems of maintenance and supply. In light of a government that was increasingly administrating shortages, extensive projects were inappropriate. Although the state’s authority over housing and construction was never called into question, the economic crisis of the 1980s forced the GDR to cut costs everywhere. Long-term plans thus silently fell victim to pragmatism, as did most other relics of utopian thinking.

Inseparably linked to the modernist promise of comprehensive renewal, obsolescence and moral depreciation defy simple explanations. Even a capitalist state with a thriving economy would be hard-pressed to subsidize the replacement of the entire building stock every fifty years. In a flagging socialist system such a waste of resources was simply disastrous. The parallels under both capitalism and socialism forestall the hypothesis that the “economy of obsolescence” was kept alive by a powerful real estate industry that profited from rapid demolition and rebuilding. 19 In fact, in socialist countries, no identifiable social group benefited from the renewal in a material sense. Even more, this waste of national resources soon became a considerable liability for the state that commissioned the demolitions and eventually had to pay for them. The persistence of obsolescence against all economic reason can only be seen as ideological. It was rooted in a cultural construct, supported by large portions of the population that proved to be stronger than the official socialist doctrine and which eventually contributed to the failure of Eastern European socialism.

While the term obsolescence has disappeared from Berlin’s urban planning discourse, the idea of a building’s “life span” lingered, albeit in a concealed form. Since the 1970s, it has been implicit in the desire to maintain the building—theoretically for eternity—by regularly replacing its parts. At present, a demolition permit for a Berlin tenement, no matter how dilapidated, is almost impossible to obtain. Until the late 1990s, renovations were generously subsidized by the state. 20 They usually include the upgrading of the heating system (central gas heating instead of individual coal stoves), the installation of private bathrooms, and the insertion of insulating double-pane windows. Their brick walls are to be preserved as historic artifacts while interior walls are often modified, backyards landscaped, and façades restored. Constructive elements, such as the century-old wooden beams, crafted doors, and floor planks are replaced whenever necessary. The permanence of a contemporary tenement is almost like that of an ax in which one exchanges first the blade and later the handle.

Since the 1980s, architectural practice in Berlin’s tenement quarters has been predominantly preservation-minded, reinforcing the insignia of the past. Stucco ornaments, a distinctive element of Berlin’s late nineteenth-century architecture, frequently have been reapplied to replace those removed during the 1960s. The new versions are simplified to save on labor. Vestiges of century-old history have been preserved. On numerous buildings, one finds minutely restored signs reading “saddlery” or “coals for sale.” On the margins of otherwise carefully painted façades, antiquated fonts recall the names of prewar shop owners, bullet holes from World War II are left visible, and weathered ornaments above entrances are protected with transparent finish.

In the last fifty years, the perception of historic edifices in Berlin has greatly changed. The new oldness is self-conscious; durability is staged. There is a certain ambiguity, however. Today’s tenements are clearly recognizable as historic, but at the same time their freshly painted façades are impeccable. Their re-applied pediments, stained wooden doors, and neo-historical window frames communicate not only perdurability, but also constant renovation. In contrast to their traditional form, their remodeled appearance implies revitalization and regeneration. In this respect, Berlin’s renovated tenements can be considered distant relatives of the modernist apartment blocks that were built during the 1960s—both derived from a strategy of periodical renewal. Performing their historicity in an ever-renewable way, the eternal historic buildings of the present echo the conception of an urban life cycle that only three decades earlier had aimed at their comprehensive demolition.

Endnotes

In the following, I will use "tenement" as a translation of the German Mietskasernen (rental barracks, pejorative) or Mietshaus (rental building, neutral). Both terms denote the five-story apartment buildings constructed before World War I, specifically during the Gründerzeit ("founding period"), which followed the foundation of the German Empire in 1871. Following the standards in most German publications, I will not distinguish between luxurious upper-class apartments and working-class dwellings, which were often erected in different wings of the same building. In German publications, the Mietskasernen are also referred to as Altbauten (old buildings). This term is for example used in Berlin's tenant legislation, where it denotes any building completed before the end of the World War II. In this legal sense, Altbauten also includes the modernist Siedlungen of the Interwar Period, which were never despised. The great majority of Berlin's Altbauten are nevertheless the Mietskasernen. In popular use Altbauten and Mietskasernen are synonyms.

For a thorough treatment of the "second destruction of Berlin" and the cultural framework upon which it relied, see Harald Bodenschütz, Platz frei für das Neue Berlin! Geschichte der Stadterneuerung in der "größten Mietskasernenstadt der Welt" seit 1871 (West Berlin: Transit, 1987).


11. Peters, 23-24. Peters was East Berlin's Bezirksbaudirektor (District Director of Construction) and as such the highest-ranking local construction official; his power was nevertheless checked by Party officials.

12. Ibid., 161.


17. Manfred Zache, interview with the author on August 13, 2003, Hohen Neuendorf near Berlin. An architect by training, Zache at the time was employed with the East Berlin Office of Construction (Bezirksbaudirektion) and in charge of the Anzahlmaster remodeling.


22. Abramson, for example, sees the discourse on obsolescence in early twentieth century America in relation to the specific anxieties of real estate capital. Daniel Abramson, "Obsolescence" 110.

23. The subsidies were necessary due to Berlin's tenant-friendly legislation, which made rents low in comparison to other major capitals and under which owners have few rights to terminate a rental contract. As a result, the market value of a remodeled apartment building is sometimes a fraction of the cost for the remodeling.

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