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Building Socialism: Architecture and Urbanism in East German Literature, 1955–1973 by Curtis Swope (review)

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German Studies Review, Volume 42, Number 1, February 2019, pp. 187–188 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2019.0031>



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Building Socialism: Architecture and Urbanism in East German Literature, 1955–1973. By Curtis Swope. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. xii + 257. Cloth \$120.00. ISBN 978-1501328121.

Themes of architecture, design, and building are ubiquitous in East German literature, in part because the German Democratic Republic had the mission of building an antifascist state out of the ruins—“aus Ruinen,” as the country’s national anthem reminds us—of a territory destroyed by fascism, genocide, and war. As such, workers building, citizens interacting with buildings and streets, and thinkers struggling to determine what a socialist design ought to look like are themes that appear regularly in East German literature throughout the forty-year period of the GDR. Some scholarship on the topic of architecture in GDR literature already exists. For example, David Clarke makes the case that the *Plattenbau* apartment in Christoph Hein’s *Der fremde Freund* (1982) is a microcosm of the restrictive GDR. Several scholars, such as Christl Kiewitz and Bärbel Lücke, have written about the space of Bad Guldenberg in the works of Hein. Similarly, Hunter Bivens has explored architecture and affect in Brigitte Reimann’s novel *Franziska Linkerhand* (1974). Nonetheless, given the strong presence of the topic in GDR literature, much work remains to be done.

With his well-researched *Building Socialism: Architecture and Urbanism in East German Literature, 1955–1973*, Curtis Swope has, indeed, tapped into a topic with expansive potential. Juxtaposing the architectural theory of thinkers such as Hermann Henselmann, Richard Neutra, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin with ekphrastic moments in works of GDR literature, Swope illustrates the extent to which GDR writers were influenced by—and perhaps even influenced—architectural thought. That is, the book is at least as much an intellectual history of GDR thought on what Swope calls “built space” as it is a study of GDR literature. Rather than showing “built space” to be metaphorical or narratological (which it surely also is), he finds intellectual contributions to architecture and design embedded in works of literature by way of ekphrasis. The result is a gambit: Swope creates a remarkable intellectual history, but literary savvy readers might find themselves wanting more in the way of close readings.

One theme that appears repeatedly in the volume is that of *Kulturerbe*, even if Swope does not describe it in quite those terms. That is, just as writers, readers, philosophers, and functionaries in the GDR were struggling to define the prospective heritage and path of socialist literature following the destructive caesura of Hitler-Fascism; architects, dwellers, and also writers were struggling to define the appropriately socialist lineage of “built space.” There were debates about, for example, whether to use old bourgeois furnishings, and whether *Plattenbau* buildings actually created a social(ist) space. It is, I think, relatively common knowledge among scholars of GDR literature that there was an ongoing struggle in the GDR to fashion

a literary heritage that posited bourgeois realism as a precursor to socialist realism, in part in the spirit of Georg Lukács. This literary heritage unraveled in the 1970s and 1980s, as scholars such as Theo Honnef, Daniel J. Farrelly, John Pizer, Matthew Philpotts, Sabine Rolle, and Robert Blankenship have shown. However, Swope shows something similar at work in architectural thought, which gets even more complex as architectural thought and works of literature interact with one another.

Swope's chapter organization may seem bewildering at first, despite the fact that there are two descriptions of it in the volume, one a few pages into the introduction and another at the end of the introduction. The reason the chapter breakdown is tricky is because the chapters, particularly chapters 4 and 5, are not quite aligned by specific literary works. Instead, each chapter works through a complex constellation of theoretical ideas about "built space." This is not necessarily a flaw in the volume; it may offer more productive juxtapositions, but it does keep readers on their toes. In the brief conclusion, Swope finally adopts a refreshingly colloquial tone. The conclusion—easily the best part of the book—finally frames the argument in a way that is as readable as it is intelligent.

Swope's periodization seems arbitrary for much of the book. At the outset, he states that he ends in 1973, simply because that is when Reimann died. Although one must end somewhere, readers might wonder what Swope makes of the many references to architecture in later GDR literature, for example in Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), which was published only three years after the death of Reimann, and in which the narrator spends much time staring at and contemplating buildings, stairs, and streets. Then, in the conclusion, Swope explains that he finds GDR literature of the 1980s less interesting. Still, the fascinating theoretical contributions on "built space" that he discovers and describes likely continued developing throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s. Films such as *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1973) and *Die Architekten* (1990) are likely also entangled in those theoretical constellations. Perhaps Swope could be persuaded to write a sequel?

In the introduction, Swope strangely declares that scholarship on East German literature since the 1990s has gone awry, and that scholars ought to return to the scholarly mode of operation of the 1970s. With all due respect to the productive and insightful work on GDR literature done in the 1970s by highly competent scholars such as Marc Silberman, much excellent scholarship has been produced on East German literature in the past thirty years. A return to the 1970s would not be progress.

All in all, *Building Socialism* provides a useful foundation for future scholarship on representations of architecture in GDR literature. For specialists who are already somewhat familiar with the literary intelligentsia of the GDR as well as Weimar-era and Cold War-era theorists of architecture, this book will provide new connections and reframe some key ideas about "built space" in the GDR.

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