

“Monument Alley,” by Falk Jaeger, trans. Allison Brown, in HEKMAG (Spring/Summer 2006), pp. 112–117.

*Built in the 1950s in the imposing wedding-cake style of the former USSR, Berlin’s Karl-Marx-Allee is a phenomenally unique example of East German architecture. Although the young post-reunification generation is now taking over the glorious street, it seem unlikely that vibrant urban life will ever really fill this urban backdrop.*

It is summer. High atop the roof of a building on Karl-Marx-Allee, snacks from the barbecue are being passed around in the shade of the awning. Young people are leaning against the railing and enjoying the magnificent view down the wide avenue toward the television tower at Alexanderplatz. The atmosphere is relaxed, but the stately backdrop, however, is due to someone who was anything but relaxed: Josef Stalin.

If any street in Berlin is worthy of being called a “grand boulevard,” this is it. Monumental and formidable, Karl-Marx-Allee cuts a swath from Alexanderplatz, the center of East Berlin, to the trendy district of Friedrichshain. More and more clubs, galleries, and cafés are opening up there, yet Karl-Marx-Allee has no ambiance. It’s much too expansive for strolling and window-shopping in the style of a Kurfürstendamm or Friedrichstrasse; there is too much traffic and it’s too intimidating.

When this avenue became a showpiece of a young East Germany in the early 1950s, it was supposed to make an impression—and that it did. Stalinallee, as Karl-Marx-Allee was originally named, made the division of Germany visible in the city’s architecture. Construction of the multi-lane road proceeded at full throttle from 1952 to 1960. It was majestic and a true display of grandeur, intended to demonstrate the socialist system’s superiority over the decadent, capitalist West.

Berlin architect Hermann Henselmann, who was in charge of planning Stalinallee, was a leading figure of late Bauhaus architecture. Bauhaus is associated with a modern, unadorned aesthetic and a definite orientation of a structure toward its functionality. What now lines Karl-Marx-Allee is a lot of different things, but it is not Bauhaus. What prompted a modernist like Henselmann to design such a splendid thoroughfare?

It was the Soviet government in Moscow. Whereas star architects such as Martin Gropius from Germany, Aalvar Aalto from Finland, and Oscar Niemeyer from Brazil presented reconstruction architecture in the spirit of modernism at West Berlin’s 1957 International Building Exhibition (Interbau), Henselmann’s political convictions kept him in the eastern part of the city. Trends there came not from the minds of the world’s most brilliant architects, but from Stalin. He did not at all care for constructivism, as modern architecture in Moscow was called. He loved the pseudoclassical “wedding-cake style” that architects such as Ivan Fomin, Alexey Shchusev, and Boris Iofan developed from Leningrad neoclassicism. Appropriate

directives from Moscow assured that the architects of the socialist sister states would also discover this love within themselves.

One response came from the versatile Henselmann: he adorned his building—which was celebrated as the “first German residential high-rise” at the Weberwiese near Stalinallee—with classicist windows and ornamented gables patterned after ancient Greek styles. He referred to the mixture of styles comprising feudal elements as the “new spirit of the working class” and as a “progressive cultural tradition.” Things ran their course.

The Weberwiese was merely the prelude to the great project that was the Stalinallee. The new boulevard—with initially 2,570 and later 5,500 apartments—was built as a major “national reconstruction program.” Henselmann and his collective widened the avenue to almost 100 yards, designed monumental tower constructions, created a rhythm in the long residential housing blocks by articulating the façades with protrusions and recessions, and incorporated decorations tracing far back into the annals of architectural history. Beauty salons and bakeries thus received magnificent arched windows as if they had been designed by Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio. And the apartment buildings were adorned with recessed balconies complete with columns and balustrades like descriptions in Giacomo da Vignola’s writings from the sixteenth century. Henselmann added to it by citing German building traditions in the form of round domed towers reminiscent of those on the French and German churches (Französischer Dom and Deutscher Dom) designed by Carl von Gontard at Berlin’s Gendarmenmarkt square.

Apartments became available for workers in East Germany to move into starting in 1953. With tiled bathrooms, garbage chutes, central heating, elevators, TV antennas, and intercoms, they offered incredible comfort for the times. Until then, such luxury was only the stuff of dreams. The new residents felt like kings.

But just as the wedding-cake style had come from the Soviet Union, it was this country that issued an edict that marked its end. As early as 1954, Stalin’s successor Nikita Khrushchev banished his predecessor’s form of heroic historicism. It became obvious that Stalinallee’s elaborately decorated brick construction was far too expensive and could hardly be rationalized with modern technological means. But Henselmann, however, pulled off a graceful transition in architectural theory to industrial housing production. Now he was back in his element—modern architecture. Having become the city’s chief architect in the interim, he planned the further construction of the boulevard with unadorned concrete slab buildings. The House of Teachers (Haus des Lehrers) and the Congress Hall at Alexanderplatz—reconstructed into an elegant ensemble in 1964. Henselmann created a symbol of modernity that marked the beginning of the grand boulevard. As an influential university professor and the only GDR star who was also renowned abroad, he was able to assert himself among the nameless GDR collective architects against the party bureaucrats.

His main achievement, Karl-Marx-Allee, earned new accolades after German unification in 1990. Its historical look corresponded to the New Urbanism trend in American model cities such as Disney’s Celebration or Seaside, which became widely known through the film *The Truman Show*. Whereas Berlin’s newer concrete slab buildings have long since been rebuilt or demolished, the magnificent Karl-Marx-Allee is the largest landmarked object in the city. It is being carefully restored and celebrated as a model by architects such as Hans Kollhoff. And endowed with an aesthetic consciousness and lucrative jobs, the creative avant-garde is now taking over Karl-Marx-Allee block for block, apartment for apartment. Why? The apartments are bright, friendly, and have an optimal floor plan. Everything has been taken into consideration. That somehow sounds like Bauhaus.