

Tides of Concrete: Sensing Infrastructural Times in a Former Socialist Model City

Felix Ringel

This is an episodic sensorial biography (Desjarlais 2003) of a city made of concrete. It recounts how urban modernist infrastructures, shaped by their main construction material, created a new historical-sensorial experience. It tracks an infrastructural intimacy, whose cracks, tremors and concussions mark epochal changes in what – for want of a more precise term – others have coined “infrastructural times:” the similarly intricate relations between specific infrastructures and the times in which they exist (Barry 2015; Anand et al. 2018; Appel 2018; Joniak-Lüthi 2019). The maritime metaphors deployed below are not intended to naturalize these dramatic changes. Rather, they introduce a different temporal context to this infrastructure’s precarious materiality in order to disturb our own sense of time.

A sea of concrete

The history of the city of Hoyerswerda’s socialist Neustadt, or ‘new town’, begins with the sand on – and with – which it was built. This sand belongs to Europe’s biggest

inland dune system (*Binnendünengebiet*, in German). A sea of sand turned into a ‘sea of concrete’, a Meer aus Beton, as the Germans have it. To the carefully selected sand (grain size matters!) add water (no salt!) and lime, and turn slurping/slopping/sloshing slurry into artificial stone. Concrete: the material to build modernity (Zarecor 2011). But still somehow reminiscent of a day at the beach. For sensory effect, add the sounds of seagulls and the smell of saltwater on a light coastal breeze.

‘Cliffs’ in Neustadt’s city centre, with a view to the old town.

Photo: Felix Ringel, 2008.



Flow

Neustadt’s construction started in 1955 with Living Complex 1 (*Wohnkomplex* or WK 1), the first of what would eventually amount to ten living complexes. Initially, houses were built in ‘large block mode’ (*Grossblockbauweise*); the rest of Neustadt was constructed from panels cast by the city’s own domestic construction company (*Wohnungsbaukombinat*).

One architect reported how a French delegation visited the Hoyerswerda Neustadt in the wake of WK 1’s construction (Ringel 2018). They had laughed, he remembered, at the idea of building an entire city out of industrially prefabricated concrete panels. Now the architect smirked when recounting the story: the constructors ended up successfully completing their city in 1990, the last year of the German Democratic Republic’s (GDR) existence, using over three hundred different kinds of tailor-made panels.

As the flow of concrete sloshed onto the construction sites, there were concerns about building a city, literally, on sand. But throughout socialist-modernist times, Neustadt remained under construction. Never ready. Always in motion. As if one could hear waves breaking, echoing along its linear streets.



The Neustädter, inhabitants of this new city, came to Hoyerswerda for the comparative luxury of its apartments, featuring 'warm water from the wall' (*warm Wasser aus der Wand*), during a severe postwar housing crisis. Over time, the residents' first impressions merged with the planners' visions of a 'city without fences' (*Stadt ohne Zäune*), and a 'city without chimneys' (*Stadt ohne Schornsteine*). The absence of fences relates to the spatial organization of this new city, and its abolition of private housing property. Meanwhile, the technical demands of the construction cranes piecing the individual panels together determined its layout. To avoid delays and costly transposition of the cranes, apartment blocks were aligned in parallel rectangular grids. Main traffic flows were directed around the complexes, facilitating easy movement and minimizing noise.

'Waves' of deconstruction,
WK 10.

Photo: Mirko Kolodziej,
2010.

The many children in what was then Germany's demographically youngest city could be heard playing loudly on the lawns and playgrounds adjacent to their blocks. Parents called their kids in for dinner through open windows. Neighbours home from nightshift asked for quiet. One can still smell the Sunday aromas of dishes being prepared amidst the busy rattling of cooking implements and crockery. Neustadt's design fostered sensuous proximity inside its houses, too. The acoustic qualities of concrete made audible neighbours' arguments or parties, complicating as much as catalysing new social relationships. As kids, we conversed with the children downstairs through the heating pipes. Visiting friends' apartments always felt uncannily familiar, as they had exactly the same layout and featured similar furnishings.

The phrase 'city without chimneys' alludes to the absence of fumes in Hoyerswerda. Communal heating came, via a network of enormous insulated pipes, from a powerplant twenty kilometers to the north. I do not believe that every time the new citizens turned on their radiators or the hot water 'from the wall', the warmth reminded them of socialist modernity's vanguardism. But these new sensorial experiences (Fehérváry 2013; Rubin 2016; Schwenkel 2020) nurtured a feeling that one was ahead of the times. Neustadt's infrastructures materialized progress toward a modern-socialist future.

The turning tide

Arguably, Neustadt's progress stalled in 1989, with East Germany's Wende or 'turning point'. Others detected decline earlier. Premonitions appeared in the form of changes in the city's infrastructure. Take the youngest district, WK 10, built throughout the



'Surf', WK 10.
Photo: Mirko Kolodziej,
2009.

1980s. By then, building materials were in short supply. Planners were permitted to contravene the government directive that buildings of more than five floors must feature elevators. That out-of-breath feeling on climbing to the upper storeys provides a subtle yet visceral reminder that a certain period in time had come to a standstill.

Several visitors to art projects in WK 10 remarked on the low quality of the materials. Not discernible by eye, only my fingertips felt the increased porosity compared to WK 1's apparently 'supreme' concrete. This sense of touch traces the GDR's economic decline – as does another deviation from the plan. Throughout the 1970s, planners squeezed several thirteen-floor high-rise blocks into the heart of Neustadt, instead of building a proper city centre featuring cinemas, shops and bars. More concrete in less space; more 'dormitory town' (*Schlafstadt*) and 'workers' lockers' (*Arbeiterschließfächer*¹) than model city. It was as if the young socialist republic had lost sight of its future.

Ebb

Its material decomposition would take longer, but in the 1990s, the city started to retreat. Tens of thousands of inhabitants, recently made unemployed, left for work in West Germany, particularly the young and well educated. The blocks grew quieter and fewer children roamed the complexes. Without the three daily shifts going to the mines, Neustadt lost its heartbeat, as the city's concrete infrastructures lost their appeal. Socialist housing turned into 'social housing', standing not for a modern future but an obsolete past. People still reminisce about Neustadt's bustling, youthful period before those days.

Like the citizens, the houses too began to disappear – victims of an 'artificial correction' (*künstliche Bereinigung*) of the local housing market. Deconstruction commenced in 1998. At first, demolitions occurred randomly. Later, calls were made to 'back-build' (*zurückbauen*) the city from the outskirts, to avoid another kind of porosity, this time in Neustadt's overall *gestalt*. Underground infrastructures were adjusted; the sewage pipes in the widely abandoned second-youngest district, WK 9, were downscaled by injecting more concrete. By 2013, the first WK underwent 'area-wide' (*flächendeckend*) demolition: apartment blocks, streets, pavements, streetlamps were all broken into pieces and flushed away after the swell of demolition dust had settled. In a strange reversal, Neustadt's youngest district, WK 10, went first.

Shrinkage at that rate is quick business. Abandoned blocks hardly counted as ruins, of modernity (Hell and Schönle 2010) or otherwise. They were emptied and removed in a few short months, their concrete swiftly turned into rubble (Gordillo 2014; Harms 2016) and fed back into capitalist productivity as aggregates for new infrastructures elsewhere. Thus, the now-brittle panels melted into a stream of concrete directed away from the city. The times had taken a different direction.

Deconstruction, vacancy, shrinkage and decline have their own eerie sounds and silences too. Stillness started with the staggered departure of former tenants. Noise came with the bulldozers and cranes. In contrast to inhabitants of renovated blocks,

those staying behind in unrenovated houses usually endured both. No more hellos on the staircase, no quick chat across balconies, no sound of children's play outside.

The demolition commences with boarded-up entrances and the erecting of fences (at last!) to secure the sites. First, they take out windows and doors, so as not to litter the rubble. It is spookiest when the concrete is all by itself. Wind rushes through the empty houses, blows around bare corners. Then the bulldozer picks apart the buildings panel by panel, in a spectacle observed by passers-by and former residents. As the final goodbye from walls that used to be homes, one hears the sounds of grating and crunching, jarring and squeaking – all drowned in a constant spray of water aiming to keep down airborne concrete particles. Cranes rip off and drop panels from the thirteenth floor; you can feel their impact as they hit the ground.



'Melting' block, with security fence, WK 10.
Photo: Mirko Kolodziej, 2009.

These sensorial experiences are unsettling at first – unforeseen, unforefelt. Then you get used to it, and the absence of the houses and the people that lived in them. An uneasiness remains though: fully functional apartments are taken down because there are no people left to dwell there. This uncanniness again most haunts those who live in unrenovated blocks, awaiting the official letter declaring planned demolition. Those in renovated houses can relax in quietude: the investments in their homes secure them for another twenty years. These renovated buildings hide their concrete under cladding in decidedly un-modern pastel shades. They are modern houses in postmodern times, at odds with the current era in a different way to their unrenovated counterparts.

'Drowning' in concrete,
WK 10.

Photo: Mirko Kolodziej,
2009.



Sensing infrastructural times

There are confusing temporal complexities at the heart of the multi-sensorial relations people have with an infrastructure as intimate as their home. Different times, rhythms and ruptures overlap and interact in and around them. Through touch, sound, smell and hearing, inhabitants experience their infrastructures' precarious existence in time (Schwenkel 2015), and detect changes that, on their own, are impenetrable to sight or incomprehensible by reason (Howes 2003). They co-produce a sense of the times their infrastructures inhabit with them. Attuning to Neustadt's ebbing sea of concrete, they sense that something fundamental is changing – and must learn yet again to navigate their city's tumultuous present.

Notes:

¹ Understood as the place where workers would be literally ‘locked away’ at night.

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