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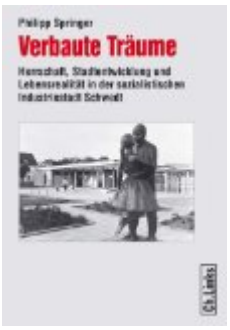
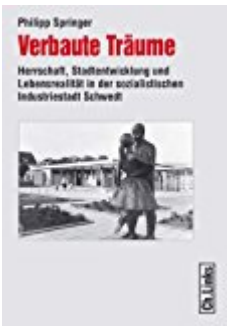



**Frank Betker.** *"Einsicht in die Notwendigkeit": Kommunale Stadtplanung in der DDR und nach der Wende (1945-1994).* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005. 412 S. EUR 48.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-515-08734-6.




**Philipp Springer.** *Verbaute Träume: Herrschaft, Stadtentwicklung und Alltag in der sozialistischen Industriestadt Schwedt.* Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2006. 824 S. EUR 39.90, paper, ISBN 978-3-86153-396-2.

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Schwedt, located near the Oder River in Brandenburg, was dramatically changed in 1957-58, when officials in Berlin decided to make the small town (which in 1950 had a population of 6,500 and was still filled with ruins from the war) into the GDR's main center for paper manufacturing and oil refining. After a brief survey of the town's prewar history, Philipp Springer examines that decision and the construction and expansion of the new industrial facilities. He then explores the consequences, both planned and unplanned, for the town, concentrating first on new housing construction and the impact on the old town center. He then analyzes local decision-making and interactions between individuals and organizations at the local level. Finally, he turns to life in Schwedt and reactions to the opportunities in housing, consumer products, and culture and recreation brought by the transformation of the town.

In locating two major industries in Schwedt, regime planners had decided to create what was, in effect, a new industrial city. Like Eisenhüttenstadt, Schwedt was showcased as a model of a modern socialist city, one dominated by the VEB Erdölverarbeitungswerk and the VEB Papierfabrik (both of which were privatized after 1990). Building these two plants proved a difficult task. First, large numbers of construction workers had to be found, and production line workers recruited. Some came from small villages, where collectivization of agriculture had driven people off the land. Some workers were recruited from other

towns and cities. A few construction workers came from Poland. In addition to attractive wages, workers had to be offered housing, which Schwedt lacked. Hence huge housing projects (along with related shops, schools, and so on) had to be constructed alongside and at the same time as the new industrial plants. The long pipeline bringing crude oil from the Soviet Union was completed in 1963, and full operation of the refinery began in mid-1964. By the end of the decade, the facility had moved beyond producing heating oil and gasoline to start producing acrylics for textiles, plastics for furniture, and fertilizers for agriculture, and the town had mushroomed to over 30,000 inhabitants.

Springer argues that, despite considerable in- and out-migration of workers, the construction boom of the 1960s engendered a sense of genuine optimism among many of the town's new residents. On the one hand, they enjoyed new modern housing, good wages, and access to consumer goods like refrigerators. On the other, they internalized the utopian vision of a new city for the future that was proffered by officials at all levels, and they identified with Schwedt. Springer contends that this optimistic vision, combined with real benefits, contributed to the longevity of the regime, which did not depend solely on the Wall, the Stasi, and Soviet military might. For a time, many residents of Schwedt experienced the GDR more as a success than as a failure.

As Springer shows, the optimistic vision began to fade in the 1970s for several reasons. The town continued to grow, and the authorities could not keep up with the demand for housing, consumer goods, and recreational and cultural facilities. Except for a very few single-family houses for plant managers, doctors, and other professionals, all of the new housing consisted of standardized three-to ten-story apartment blocks, erected using prefabricated concrete panels and located outside the town center. The center itself was neglected, and many surviving prewar buildings were demolished. The result was that residents increasingly found Schwedt boring, a sentiment most strongly expressed by young people, including the children of the early wave of workers who had built the new town.

Economic developments and decisions also contributed to the malaise. Most important, after 1973 the Soviet Union charged the GDR world market prices for its oil, which reduced the amount of crude oil the regime could afford to purchase. GDR planners in the 1960s had hoped to import 40-45 million tons of oil yearly, and their plans for Schwedt were predicated on steady expansion. In fact, oil imports peaked at 19 million tons in 1980. The population in 1981 had reached 52,000, but now more people were leaving the town than were arriving. Planners in Berlin, along with industrial managers, town planners in the district and in Schwedt, and other local officials all proved unable to adapt existing plans to respond to these new challenges. Only in the mid-1980s did local planners begin to focus on restoring and revitalizing the old town center, but by then the failures of the GDR more generally and in its new socialist cities specifically had become increasingly evident.

While Springer presents the history of a single GDR town, Frank Betker's objective is not just to present a history of East German town planning. Nor is it to depict planning in Rostock and Halle, the two cities he uses as case studies. Instead, Betker hopes also to use town planning to test various theories about the nature of the East German regime. As a result, the book tends to circle back to and repeat themes and arguments. For example, Betker addresses the argument, made by some scholars, that modern industrial societies are characterized by ever greater functional and professional differentiation and specialization. He asks whether the GDR was a modern society, given the determination of the SED to reject differentiation and instead impose uniformity and central control over everything. Betker studies urban

planning as a way of deciding whether the GDR was a differentiated or undifferentiated society.

Betker's answer to this question about whether the GDR managed to reverse the modern trend toward functional and professional differentiation is both yes and no. He explains in detail just how centralized administration worked on the national, regional, and town level. To be sure, some variation was found in city administrative structures. Halle, unlike Rostock, had both an office for city planning and an office for transportation planning. All important decisions, however, were ultimately made in Berlin, and all administrative offices had to follow policies determined by the SED. In regards to urban planning, the most important policies were the state's economic growth plans and its commitment to industrialized, prefabricated housing construction. Fifteen giant housing combines (*Wohnungsbaukombinate*, or WBK) were responsible for planning and building the huge, sterile housing complexes that characterized the GDR, and those combines depended upon the economics ministry and not the construction ministry for resources. All of this meant that local planners and architects had little flexibility to confront local issues, be they the physical deterioration of old inner cities and infrastructure or economic downturns in a city's economy. For example, SED chief Walter Ulbricht himself rejected building a rapid transportation link between Halle's old center and Halle Neustadt, the massive new housing complex built a few kilometers away. In general, then, Betker portrays the GDR as a society lacking both individual autonomy and functional differentiation.

At the same time, Betker contends that within city planning offices, it was still possible for architects and planners to use their professional training, maintain informal contacts with professional colleagues (including contacts with professionals in West Germany), and draw up proposals for such things as rejuvenating inner city areas. Such proposals, which competed with mandates from Berlin and the WBK, were seldom realized, and Betker notes that the planners were "not revolutionaries or resistance fighters" opposed to the regime (p. 49). They were content to hold on to their jobs and accept a system that ruled and overruled them, all the while retaining a degree of self-confidence and intellectual independence, and achieving what little they could. This manifested itself particularly in the mid-1980s, when--as was the case in Schwedt--both Halle and Rostock planners and architects were able to renovate blocks in their historic inner cities. In Halle, the apartment block known as Brunos Warte did not follow the usual WBK standard forms. It made use of prefabricated panels but also included more steel and varied facades. In the northern part of Rostock's historical center, reconstructed gabled buildings stood near buildings where the use of prefab elements had been adapted through the use of bricks to fit in with local styles. In the eastern *Altstadt*, the Fünf-Giebel-Haus became a "Prestige-Objekt" that earned both national and international praise (p. 337).

In contrast to West Germany, almost no independent architects or planners worked in the GDR. The regime never trusted the "free" professions, because it believed that professionals were subservient to the bourgeois society it sought to abolish. GDR architects and planners received nearly identical training at the technical universities in Dresden, Weimar, or Berlin-Weißensee, and their 150 yearly graduates moved into government positions. Given West Germans' highly critical attitude toward the prefab housing blocks and the deteriorating cities that characterized the GDR at re-unification in 1990, one might have expected that GDR planners and architects would have been swept aside and entirely replaced by a cohort of planners and architects from the West. In fact, Betker argues, this was not the case. Most of these GDR professionals successfully asserted that their training was not dissimilar to that in the West and that, in spite of the homogeneity of the

GDR, they had been able to maintain at least intellectual independence. They held on to their positions in local planning offices, learning to work within new bureaucratic constraints and apply new laws about planning, building, and private property rights. In other words, no radical transformation of this particular profession took place.

Both of these books are recent dissertations and characteristic of the genre. Both are highly detailed and demonstrate exhaustive research in archival and secondary sources, and both require time and effort to get through. Springer's book unfortunately contains rather few illustrations of the city of Schwedt, while Betker's includes many illustrations, graphs, and charts. Neither book, however, contains a list of illustrations or a subject index; Springer's book has no index at all. Both Springer and Betker use oral history to augment written records. Springer interviewed thirty-one Schwedt residents of various ages and backgrounds as a way to get at how people actually experienced the transformation of the city. Scattered throughout the book are six sections, nine to nineteen pages long, each containing interesting excerpts from those interviews. Betker likewise uses interviews, but his subjects were individuals directly involved in planning in Halle and Rostock, his two case studies.

Springer's history of Schwedt is quite long, but the prose is straightforward, making it fairly easy to read, in spite of the detail. (On this score my only complaint is the extensive use of abbreviations--nearly 180--some of which are hard to recall, which required frequent consultation of the abbreviations list in the back of the book.) Betker's study, though much shorter, proved harder going. As a historian, I longed for a more straightforward and detailed account of planning in the two case cities as well as answers to questions that perhaps did not fit within Betker's more sociological framework. Just how many planners and architects fled Rostock and Halle for the West prior to 1961, and with what consequences? Did GDR planners make use of wartime reconstruction plans? If some GDR planners and architects were able to have contacts with West German colleagues and read West German professional literature, how did this influence their practice?

Springer and Betker deal with different kinds of cities and their approaches are quite different, though many of the issues are the same--central versus local planning, prefab housing construction versus historical renovation and renewal, and so on. Historians of the GDR generally, and of East German planning and urban history in particular, will find much of value in both of these books. They contribute to our growing understanding of where and how the regime's centralized economic and urban planning succeeded and failed on the local level. The interviews also help us understand how Schwedt, Halle, and Rostock began the transition from a socialist society to being part of the Federal Republic.

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