

Rubin, Eli. 2016. *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany*

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Amnesiopolis, the multidisciplinary book by historian Eli Rubin, describes the genesis of the large, prefabricated socialist housing estate in East Berlin called Marzahn. This neighbourhood was built in 1977–1990 as the largest housing project of the German Democratic Republic. It was a showpiece of the “great” socialist regime. Rubin takes Marzahn as a case to prove his provocative point that physical environment and materiality shape the experiential everyday lives of people. Such influence on everyday life creates a socialist personality. Or, let us say, a concrete environment creates concrete people.

Rubin considers everyday life as the bottommost layer of socialism, invisible but influential. Therefore, he focuses on childhood, family life, community and consumption in East Germany and specifically in Marzahn to describe what was altered and shaped by the ruling socialist ideology and how. The main argument of *Amnesiopolis* – the city without memory – is that moving to the newly built Marzahn estate meant a radical sensory, material, and spatial rupture in the everyday life of its new dwellers. New inhabitants moved to Marzahn often from Berlin’s centre, which was steeped in traumatic history – economic crisis, fascism, war. For the first inhabitants, moving to modern Marzahn detached them from old ties and memories and contributed to creating new ones. Rubin stresses material sites of rupture in which the past is physically erased from space and therefore from time. The book

reveals a link between memory and space using the concept of the socio-spatial dialectic, introduced originally by Edward Soja. The socio-spatial dialectic rendered by Rubin implies that everyday life produces space and conversely, space shapes everyday life. Space is understood as a radically material category which transmits ideology and reproduces power, diffusing the power of the state into everyday life (p. 114). In the case of the construction of Marzahn, Rubin shows the state’s attempt to erase history, accommodate workers, manifest the power of the Party, and create socialist propaganda. Above all, Rubin uses rich empirical evidence to describe how the state controlled and disciplined inhabitants – through the secret police, as well as through ‘normal’ institutions such as the *Hausmeister* (literally, house master), community meetings and festivals, activities for children, or local newspapers. Furthermore, Rubin demonstrates through his data that the physical layout of the neighbourhood provided virtually no space for hiding, thus creating a panopticon effect with little room for non-conformity.

Amnesiopolis is an ambitious and extremely well-written book with a clear argument supported by exhaustive evidence. Rubin floods readers with accurate historical and technical details from the development and construction of Marzahn, and leaves no space for doubt that he is a real expert on the neighbourhood. The book also provides a rich theoretical framework that connects knowledge and concepts from different disciplines, which makes the book interesting for historians, geographers, sociologists, and architects. Rubin works with the classic theories of Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, and Le Corbusier, but also calls upon very recent

publications by Kimberly Zarecor and Florian Urban. Therefore, Rubin places the Marzahn story within the relevant theoretical contexts and contributes to the body of knowledge on the socialist city, large housing estates, and interdisciplinary urban studies in general. The exceptional quality of the book lies also in Rubin's ability to track down evidence, so when he talks about the 'Party', the 'state', and the 'Stasi', he always supports his claims with exact dates, places, names or numbers, reflecting the author's thorough work in archives. The first half of the book provides a dense historical and theoretical background, and Rubin carefully describes his thinking process, so readers can easily follow his thought process and understand his logic. An enormous number of references to literature and statistical data, reminiscent of socialist propaganda itself, luckily does not shatter the text, as the author uses footnotes for citations. In addition, Rubin shows an extraordinary talent for creating metaphors. For example, he refers to the nostalgia of the new dwellers of Marzahn for a former old neighbourhood in the inner city: '[T]he new environment was so sterile, so empty, and such a blank slate, it did not entirely break the connections held in the memories of the new arrivals... but those memories continued to live on like an echo in a racquetball chamber, dying away only slowly, or like the ghost pains of amputated limbs' (p. 101). The remainder of the book elaborates the everyday lives of Marzahn's inhabitants. Rubin illustrates through many personal stories the act of moving to a prefabricated panel house, childhood in the housing estate, and surveillance by the secret police. The text flows smoothly also thanks to the personal memories and nostalgic narratives of the dwellers. The life story of one

particular family, which flows through the chapters, helps readers to vividly imagine life in Marzahn and not lose the thread of the narrative. This part of the book is compelling not just for academic audiences, but for the public as well, especially for people who have some experience with panel housing.

Apart from its many positive aspects, the book has also some minor weaknesses. The author uses many sources of data, among them local censored periodicals, published memoirs, and interviews with Marzahn's inhabitants. Unfortunately, it is not quite clear how the interviewees were contacted, how the interviews were conducted, or if they were anonymised. Moreover, it is not always easy to differentiate the testimonies of the inhabitants from the words of the author. A more precise delineation of the testimonies would allow the readers to engage with the text more critically and to question the credibility of these memories. The book contains many detailed facts and figures about Marzahn; however, in some cases, it would have been better to include illustrations instead of mere enumeration. For instance, it is difficult to imagine 38,000 planted trees without a photograph.

Amnesiopolis represents an enjoyable and inspirational read, especially for academics dealing with (post)socialist cities. This housing development in the former Eastern Bloc is a topic of contemporary relevance, and Eli Rubin contributes to the debate with the often-overlooked aspects of everyday life. The book is a comprehensive study of one specific neighbourhood, but the findings are applicable to the entire socialist world in which concrete, conformed, and disciplined people lived their everyday lives in their prefabricated homes.

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