

New Problems and Challenges for Housing Policy in East Germany: Lessons to Be Learned from the German Case

Timo Tanninen, Regina Bittner, Holger Schmidt

The Housing Policy of the Former G.D.R.

The housing situation in the East of Germany reflects the precipitate hope of a solution to today's problems by the rapid development of the free housing market on the scale of the state housing policy of the former G.D.R.

After the Second World War accommodation resources in the whole of Germany were sharply reduced, about one third of the overall number of flats had been destroyed (Schumann & Marcuse 1991, 157). Between 1949 and 1971, a period of reconstruction work can be identified which was initiated by a two year plan in 1949/1950 by the G.D.R. Regime for the rebuilding of its towns and cities. Under the motto "*National Reconstruction Work*" new housing estates and towns originated in the fifties and sixties. In the seventies, when investment was made primarily in industrial building, the decay of the old building resources was already obvious and existing flats were in part lacking appropriate sanitary facilities. A housing programme with the determination "*to solve the accommodation problem as a social question by 1990*" was introduced at the VIII Party Congress of the Socialist Unity Party in 1971 (Documents of the 9th Party Congress, 1986). The rapid erection of new flats on the periphery of the large towns stood in contrast to the decay of the old building resources. Added to the situation was the concentration of the flat building in the district towns and big cities, the consequence of which was that the housing stock in the small and medium sized towns was neglected.

The appearance of the newly-built housing estates on the outskirts of the cities had social consequences: the strongly egalitarian housing conditions, in the sense of socially-normative basic requirements, led to the demographic structure of the inhabitants being stamped in only one way: long distance to work, lack of infrastructure, shortage of cultural opportunities and spare time activities, and a high housing density. Whilst the newly built flats were given above all to families with children – this being connected to the political and socio-political dominance of this group – the old flats in bad condition in the inner cities were left for old people and poorly qualified workers.

The Housing Programme aimed at the quick and mass construction of prefabricated flats on the edges of the cities. Even though the statistics for 1989 registered 197,929 ready-built flats (Statistisches Jahrbuch 1989 der DDR, 168), nothing was said about the size-structure of those appropriate to the sizes of the households or about the condition of the buildings, which often lacked some amenity or other. In addition, the planning of large housing estates on green meadowland led to the decay of the inner areas of the cities consisting of the old stocks of flats, for we must not forget that 42 per cent of all East German flats originated from before 1919. Although under the G.D.R. regime a modest quantity in housing, (in comparison with the average European level), was achieved: in 1989 there were 422 dwellings per thousand people and 27 sq.m. housing space per person. (Schumann & Marcuse 1991, 164; Statistische Jahrbuch 1989 der DDR, 171-172.)

Table 1: The Forms of House Ownership in the Former G.D.R. (%)

Form of ownership	1971	1981	1985 - 1988 (in new production)
Private	62	48	15
Owned by state	28	37	61
Cooperatively	10	15	24
Total	100	100	100

Source: Statistisches Jahrbuch 1989 der DDR.

In accordance with the property conditions in the former G.D.R., the majority of the houses and flats in new production were in the hands of the State: co-operative ownership in workers' co-operatives also existed. For private owners in the old housing stock it was practically impossible to maintain and repair existing buildings because of the low rents. Moreover, the State's practice of sharing out flats functioned according to given regulations, which served more to hinder the satisfaction of individual or group-specific requirements and at the same time made an economically and socially efficient usage of housing space impossible! Despite thousands of urgent applications for flats a large number stood empty. The extremely low rents (0,50 DM per square metre to 0,90 DM per square metre) as well as security of tenure – made possible by strong protection against possibility of being sacked – were looked upon as indicators of social successes.

Some Preliminary Conclusions about the Character and the Development of the Housing Situation in Eastern Europe

We will make some historical remarks about, and draw conclusions from, the development of housing in Eastern Europe. In this way we will attempt to understand the specific situation there in comparison with housing standards in the countries of Western and Northern Europe. This is possible to do by making short comments on three topics: (1) General historical development, (2) economical and technological development and (3) other ideological views on housing.

Speaking very generally we can say that from the beginning of this century until the Second World War, the whole of Eastern Europe was late in its modern industrial and urban development. Perhaps only the central part of the former G.D.R. (so-called "Mittel-Deutschland", a region south of the capital Berlin) and the western part of former Czechoslovakia were industrialised to a level equal to that of Western Europe. In Eastern Europe, the economic and social structure was mostly agrarian in nature until the 1950s.

Another important historical fact to be remembered is the huge scale of the demolition of housing stocks during the Second World War in this part of Europe. This was especially so in Eastern Germany, Poland and the western part of the Soviet Union (in big cities in Eastern Germany 50 per cent and, for example, in the City of Dessau 85 per cent of dwellings were destroyed).

After the war, the initial situation for the so-called socialist countries was bad enough and then came "*the era of the Cold War*". The U.S.A. and the western block declared a political and business embargo, which meant the complete isolation of the eastern European countries from the economic and – what is most important in our context – technological development in the western industrialised world. The eastern European countries were left under the command of the Soviet Union, which was a backward society, especially in those fields which have been important for improving housing standards and neighbourhood quality¹. All this meant that a spread of technical innovations, new ideas about financial and administrative models, experiences of planning and architectural solutions and so on through the "*iron curtain*" was almost impossible until the late 1970s. This free flow of information and knowledge was one

¹ See for example a relevant discussion in Hegedüs, Jozef & Tosics, Ivan "Is there a Hungarian model of housing system?" in Siksiö (Ed./1990); by Peter Michalovic "Housing dynamics in Czechoslovakia: What brings the mass housing construction?" and by Dumitru Sandu "Why and how is the urban housing stock changing in Romania?" in Galland (Ed./1991) *Housing Evaluation*.

of the most important motivating factors in the process of modernisation in Western Europe.

The third main factor to be noted is that the state housing provision was an important part (in fact in combination with a new education policy, a key element) of the collective ideology of the communist parties to build "*a new communist human being and a better society*"². The idea was that housing, like other things needed by people for everyday life (such as basic foodstuffs, clothing, transport charges, education and culture), had to be organised in a manner other than was done in the capitalist countries. These commodities were very cheap in the former socialist countries because of the massive state subsidies. This was based on a strong ideological standpoint but we think it was important to the former Communist regimes for legitimising their position of power within the population. At this point, relevant conclusion needs to be found to the housing situation: during the Communist era in Eastern Europe **no realistic view of or experience with housing economics was developed**. That is, what the real costs of building new flats – and living in those flats – was for the state. Now that the Communist state has been abolished, national economies are bankrupt and the population cannot reconcile itself psychologically to the financial problems of housing under free market economy conditions because the people have no collective experience of it. (See for example Telgarisky & Struyle 1990.)

This is a concise explanation – perhaps oversimplified – of the housing situation in Eastern Europe (including the eastern part of Germany), as well as a description of the background which should be kept in mind, while discussing actual housing problems in these countries, and making comparisons on an international level.

The Unification of Germany and Its Consequences on Housing

The unification of the two German states does mean new social conditions for housing. With the reunification process a set of new basic laws for planning and building³ went into effect in a country where things had been previously determined by entirely different economic and legal structures. The introduction of the market economy, and resulting immediate confrontation between Eastern and Western levels of productivity,

² A relevant comment on this can also be found in Valdimar Music (1992) *Multi-family Housing in Slovenia. Between Dogma and Reality*.

³ e.g. Building Statute Book, City Building Planning, Housing Planning, Rent Laws, Building and Loan Financing.

caused its economic breakdown in East Germany. The orientation of entire areas towards one branch of industry was now followed by entire regions of unemployment. The loss of social contact, the devaluation of qualifications, the insecurity of social existence after decades of state-proclaimed security of job and flat, today determine the living conditions of a large part of the population in the new federal states⁴. A breakdown in value orientation and ideas about life are the consequence.

There are a multitude of ways of dealing with this development, the social differentiation is foreseeable. Any orientation in this situation of change is difficult; behaviour patterns and models get, so to speak, transmitted from outside into living conditions for which they are rather strange. The outbreak of radicalism and terror are signs of the social tensions that exist.

Rent Development and Housing Policy in the New Federal States

The social and cultural developments described above are the causes of the problems in today's housing market in Eastern Germany. After the change – the *"Wende"* – at the beginning of 1990 the Modrow government demanded the return of the flats from being the *"property of the people"* to ownership by the municipalities. City planning and the building of houses were to be shifted from state control and placed in the hands of regional decision makers. The purchase of state-owned single-family and two-family houses by their occupants was allowed. Under the First and Second agreements between the two German states, East German real estate was freed for sale and the return of land, property or the respective compensation payments to former owners was decided upon. For those flats owned privately the compulsory assignment of tenants by local councils was brought to an end.

Existing agreements which protected tenants against eviction by the owner requiring the flat for his own use remained valid until December 31st 1992. Under the principle *"Restitution rather than Compensation"*, the transfer of property from the former state-administration estates to the original private owners and the urgently needed reconstruction of the old building stock is little helped because the uncertain situation regarding ownership does not encourage investment.

The various rent-related legal aspects of the *"Unification Agreement"*, according to which the Federal Government has the right to control the amount of rent for the existing building stocks but whereby newly built flat prices are regulated by the market, has led to a division in the housing market. Rent increases are correlated by law to the

⁴ The former G.D.R. has been divided into five autonomous states of the F.R.G. *"Fünf neuen Länder"*.

development of incomes. The first rent increase in October 1991 resulted in an additional 1 DM per square metre and the transfer of the operating costs to the rent. A further increase from January 1993 has been carried through. The relatively low rents are not attractive to investors because as long as the state regulations function tenants will prefer the cheaper flats (see *Wohnungspolitik in Deutschland*, 1991). In spite of the second rent increase in January 1993 it was not the only raise some tenants had to face: the annual apportionment of 11 per cent of the cost of modernization and repair is also added to the rent. The social consequences of these developments will supposedly be mitigated with the help of a special law providing financial support for housing.

Official Policy and Alternative Conceptual Approaches

The task of privatising the stock of flats fell into the hands of the cities and the municipalities. The newly built panel building housing estates, which already show considerable constructional defects, are deeply in debt, a fact that makes it impossible for the newly founded housing societies to secure loans for their reconstruction (Ulrich et al. 1992).

For a large number of the old buildings there are claims for restitution, this hindering the clearing and reconstruction of the inner cities because the clarification process regarding ownership is slow. Apart from factors such as the desolate stock of housing, the decayed inner cities, the lack of home comforts (18 per cent of the flats were in 1989 without bath or shower, 24 per cent have no WC in the flat, 42 per cent are not connected with a sewage drainage plant, 60 per cent have no modern heating system) and high energy waste due to bad insulation (Schumann & Marcuse 1991, 163; *German Industrie... 1991*), the inhabitants are confronted with fear and insecurity caused by the massive number of claims for the restitution of properties.

As regards the approximation of living standards in East and West there has been an increase in the demands of the occupiers: when Federal Republic citizens in the West have 25 per cent more living area at their disposal than the tenants in the East (Guerra 1991) there is demand for more and more living space for the individual in the new Federal States. The satisfaction of such demands will be accomplished by a rapid rise in rents and will push forward social division in the living areas. The Federal Government is attempting to push the process of privatisation forward with special supportive programmes: for example low interest loans for families for the purchase of building or privately owned houses or flats. The release of land for building is already well under way.

The half-hearted promotion of council house building does little to answer the acute need for flats in the new Federal States. Those government promoted programmes

already under way show hardly any results because the financial margins of the East German population are limited. The great need for modernisation and repair will not be satisfied in this way.

Alternative Conceptional Approaches

Whilst representatives of the business community are set on rapid privatisation, the sale of privately owned flats and houses, the sale of rented properties to tenant co-operatives which either undertake repairs to the buildings themselves or suggest them to investors), town planners and sociologists faced with the economic and social situation in the East of Germany look in another direction. An essential starting point for a change in the current process would be the reversal of the policy of "*Restitution rather than Compensation*", with the former owner being compensated. The extension of the co-operation sector can also prove capable of development, whereby tenant organisation could also possibly represent co-operation (Schumann & Marcuse 1991, 170). Until this point in time only a few outstanding individual projects have shown that such a method of transferring property to tenant organisations uses the self-help potential within the population, something that itself results from a specific G.D.R. form of socialisation.

Instead of a demand for the urgent dismantling of subsidies and the inevitable raising of rents, a socially acceptable rent reform should stand in the foreground, along with a not-for-profit one. An alternative housing policy could, in conjunction with another quality of communal democracy and city publicity, lead toward a broad, democratically determined cultural revival of the city. Overall, because of the influence of a multitude of factors, the housing situation in East Germany appears problematical: a general substitution of a state housing policy by a free market for accommodation under such circumstances cannot be justified, neither from a socio-political nor an economic viewpoint.

A Few Sample Cases from Dessau

Dessau North – Old Town Area

Dessau North provides the sole remaining witness to municipal building during the expansion of Dessau in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The buildings existing from the "*Gründerzeit*" (1870 – 1890), despite consisting of compact continuous blocks, have a relatively low density and are attractive because of their position by the Schiller

Park and the Elbe and Mulde riverscapes, and by their proximity to the city centre. Within the quarter there are different parts which are linked to the building and rebuilding phase. The "*bourgeoisie north*" originated at the turn of the century and boasts larger and technically better equipped flats than the "*proletarian south*", the latter appearing with industrialisation. Like many quarters dating from the Gründerzeit in the cities of the erstwhile G.D.R., the area demonstrates a specific population structure, this being connected to the state's policy of allocating flats. Thus, it is mainly young families with children, young single people and senior citizens who live here. The southern part of this area of the city in particular has a negative social image. The high population turnover within the quarter was in part due to the poor standards of installation in the flats, young families grabbing the first opportunity to move to a better area.

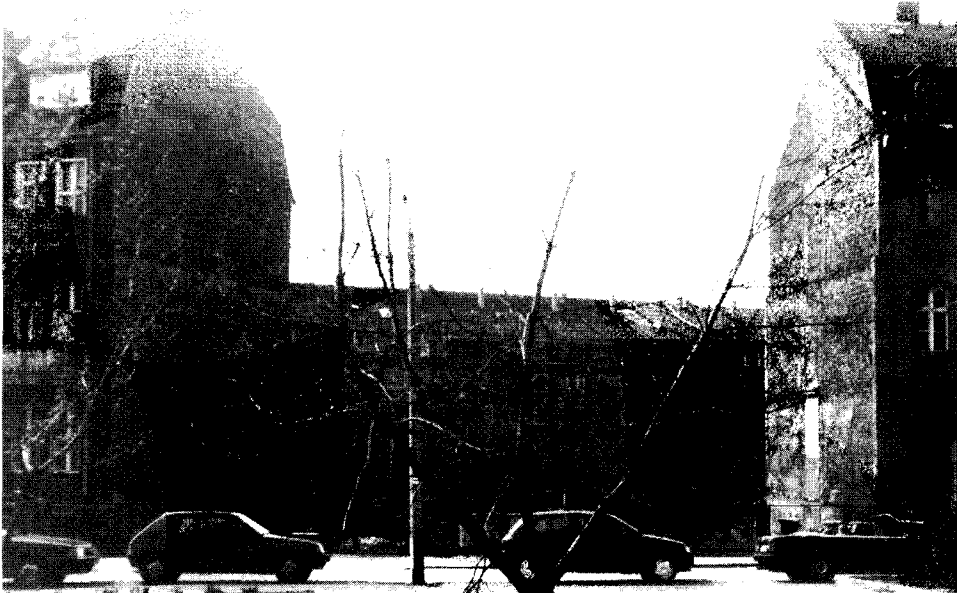


Figure 1: *An unbuilt site after the war damages in Dessau North*
(Photo: T. Tanninen)

In the southern part of the quarter, the Gründerzeit buildings were demolished on the grounds of their poor state of repair, being replaced by panel buildings. Throughout the area there have been great numbers of claims for restitution, so that by the time this handing-back process is complete only 20 per cent of the old building lots will remain in communal hands. For the old owners who are returning, investment in the renovation of the dwellings is not lucrative. A tendency can already be discerned: if renovation is carried out, it is done on a luxury basis, and buildings are being converted predominantly for commercial use. This process goes hand-in-hand with the displacement of the less wealthy sections of the community (see Konter 1992).

Since 1990 the area has been the subject of planning considerations; however due to limited resources and the unclear situation regarding ownership the renovation efforts of the city administration have, to date, been scarce.

Housing Estates in Dessau

The Wolfen Estate in Dessau was built between 1928 and 1931 for lower-grade white-collar workers in the I.G. Farben-Filmfabrik Wolfen, and was equipped with facilities that, for that time, were extraordinary: swimming pools, tennis courts, laundries, parklike open spaces and separate gardens. These flats, which are today in the hands of the ORWO-Filmfabrik-AG in Wolfen are, according to the management plans, to be privatised. To this point, the social character of the estate has been retained – that is to say first and foremost white collar workers in the chemical industry – the only change being that the greater part of these are now either pensioners or in early retirement. The ORWO plan for privatisation had no interest in the social structure of the housing estate when they offered the flats to the tenants in a non-reconstructed state. The repayment of loans was beyond the financial means of individual householders.



Figure 2: *Privatization, own initiative and management..., but how?*
(Photo: T. Tanninen)

During a meeting of the inhabitants held in the summer of 1991 which was called by a tenants' organisation and the Dessau Bauhaus, the ORWO management stuck to its strategy, which allowed the sale of flats to other interested parties. As a result of this experience, an Association was formed from the existing Citizens' Action Committee, to demand "*socially compatible rented flats*" on the estate as well as "*fair privatisation of flats*", tailored socially to the association's members. After many rounds of discussion, the Association, which by now was functioning as the representative for the interests of the inhabitants, succeeded in securing a reduction in the purchasing price and the continuance of the rent contracts. At the same time, the Association organised contacts with the municipal authorities, in order to obtain influence in the renovation of the estate and in the designing of the open spaces. The "*Regional Housing Estate Renovation*" working group founded in the Bauhaus Dessau in September 1991, acted as a mediator in discussion about and of the estate's cultural content, as the initiator of contact between different institutions, bodies and scientific institutions to thereby assist in the process of revival in the region. (Kegler 1992.)

Conclusion: a Difficult Situation without any Easy Solution

Having clarified the dimensions of the task of reconstructing the built environment and improving the housing conditions in Eastern Europe, we will go on to discuss some of the related economic and political aspects of "*reconstruction and improvement*".

The problems, then, are enormous, not least in the economy⁵. The means of production are outmoded, productivity is low, and the quality of products is such that they have difficulties to compete on the world market. The national economies of Eastern Europe have great problems in selling their products and thus get enough money in order to pay for what they need. Moreover, the new governments have to pay back huge loans made to the former Communist regimes. (e.g. Lang 1990; Andorka 1993.)

The new governments are not attempting a "*third*" or "*middle way*" of development. They are trying to undertake a rapid, free, capitalist market form of development

⁵ For example, since 1989 the GNP has decreased in Poland 23 per cent, in Czecho-Slovakia by 20 per cent and in Hungary by 17 per cent and in Russia by 45 per cent. First in 1992 the economy stabilized in Poland and in 1993 the GNP increased by 2 per cent. Other East-European countries have until now very unstabilized economies, big unemployment (excepting the Czech Republic), great inflation rates and falling real salaries (Hirsch 1994; Harenberger Länderlexikon '94/'95). The amount of poor people has doubled in Eastern Europe between 1989 - 1992 (Unicef 1994).

without any realistic view of what "*the market*" or a market economy is, and how it functions. Exacerbating the problem, they lack many of the basics necessary for such a rapid form of capitalist development⁶. For example, an innovative middle class prepared to take risks is negligible in these societies. There are many factors why economic recovery goes forward at a slow rate.

Following the collapse of a monolithic power structure and a one-party political system, new parties, civic movements, free citizen groups and so on have flourished – all with the aim of participating in the development of democratic political practice. We can identify enormous political enthusiasm in Eastern Europe but we maintain that people have a very idealistic view of democracy, of how and at what speed it functions. People have great difficulty in understanding what the so-called "*rules of play*" in democracy are. As Kaminski (1993, 179) concludes: "*This cultural infrastructure for democracy and the market is weak.*"

New politicians demonstrate a low capacity for cooperation with other parties. Overall, great rivalry between persons and groups is identifiable (Fehr 1993). The capacity to make decisions, necessary for steering development forward, is limited, decision making requires much time. "*Neither the market economy, nor the civil society can be established from one day to another*" (Kaminski 1993, 178). People become disillusioned with their politicians and new elections are called after short intervals. The newly elected politicians are expected to find quick solutions to many big problems – which cannot be done – and which results in the citizens becoming tired with democracy... Many countries are in a vicious circle of "*development*" in terms of the efficiency of political practice.

Generally speaking, the political systems of these new democracies will be unable to deal with the enormous social problems these countries will be faced with in the foreseeable future. Political systems are too unstable to be able to drive forward a consistent, long-term policy for the future (e.g. Fehr 1993, Mattusch 1993). As a result of the poor economy, the unclear question of property ownership, an underdeveloped legal system and other factors, the accommodation situation in particular is very problematic. Economically speaking, the new regimes tend first to invest in the modernisation of industry and other infrastructures (communications) rather than in the reproductive sector (housing, servicing, culture).

⁶ This was one of the most discussed themes at an international research seminar *Urban Planning and Environmental Policy in the Context of Political and Economic Changes in Central Europe* arranged by the Institute of Sociology (Prague) and the International Sociological Association, Prague, 9 – 12 January 1992. A seminar document is published by Institute of Sociology, Academy of Science of Czech Republic, Prague 1993.

To speak about the priorities of housing policy in different countries is, naturally, a broad topic, and it depends on real problems such as the variation in the shortage of flats between countries and between different regions within one country. We see the situation in East Germany as follows: the repair of old housing stock must be given priority over large investment in new housing production. This is why there are relatively many dwellings per thousand citizens (422) in the former G.D.R. although most of these are not modern. The cost of new production is too high and only a small part of the population is able or willing to pay such high costs or rent for a new flat. Some people are able to use the supply of normal bank loans for the modernisation of their private houses. This system of saving has been stimulated by the state too, but it can only help a small part of the population.

To conclude, regarding the actual situation in East Germany: pluralistic democracy at its initial phase is not functioning well there either. After the downfall of old command structures a public administration is unable and, on political principle, unwilling to provide an overall steering capacity (Heise 1992, 147). It is difficult for politicians together with the administration to undertake repairs and make decisions about city renewal, about investment in infrastructure and housing. One explanation is that everything now has to be regulated according to a judicial system and laws which come from the west, which are unable to deal with the complex problems of "*post socialist*" reality. On the streets, people feel this legislation to be mostly of an "*imperialist*" nature and unable to solve the real and acute problems of the population. (See e.g. Offe 1993, 812–815.)

A Communist society was a centralised state. This meant concentration of power, finance, and competence in the central hierarchy of state administration. Large structures and organisations were planned and developed. This is why the capacity for solving problems independently at regional and local level is very low. Huge organisations for former state-owned rented housing blocks are now suffering as a result of this. The question now is how to find administrative and financial models for the housing owned by the municipalities. Many of the latter want to relieve themselves of these problems by privatisation, by selling the flats.

In spite of a large flow of capital from the central federal Government, the economies of the so-called five new "*Länder*" are not in good shape. It has been calculated that approximately one third of the national product of the former G.D.R. has been transferred into official subsidies from what was referred to as West Germany. The productivity of labour is approximately half that of the West. People are paid 50 – 65 per cent of what their peers receive in the old *Länder*. All this means that housing economics cannot function in the same way as in West Germany. Families are unable to devote as much money to housing as is necessary in a western model, market-based

system of housing economics. Especially urgent is new investment for the modernisation and improvement of the old buildings with their insufficient conditions.

All of this means that in the near future the economy in the eastern part of Germany will be unable to accumulate the capital required to solve the housing problems there. If this can only be achieved through financial aid from West Germany then we can imagine how great the problems are that face other former socialist countries, where there are fewer opportunities for securing financial support.

Our main conclusion is that there is no simple solution to either the housing problem in East Germany or that in the whole of Eastern Europe. Many small-scale solutions, private initiatives but especially new administrative and financial models must be approached. The renewal of the old housing stock and infrastructure is such a huge task that it will require a long time to realise: at least 10 – 15 years, perhaps 20.

Where we do see some hope, albeit little, is to support people in building small cooperatives in order to purchase and run the former rented properties. There is some tradition of cooperatively owned housing in Eastern Europe, this however being for the most part large and centralised in nature. This form of collective property finds some support amongst ordinary people. All forms of collective solidarity in the former socialist countries cannot be labelled as negative.

Particularly in Germany, there has been much experience with social housing reform movements, beginning as early as the 1920s. These were based on workers' self organisation and management (Harloe 1992). In the new societal situation in Germany it should be reasonably possible to motivate and assist people to mobilise themselves on the basis of the old settlement projects of the workers and on the foundation of the psychological ability of the former G.D.R. population to come together to solve housing problems through solidarity. People would need a degree of management aid to organise themselves into small housing cooperatives at the local level. But what they need urgently is a modern legislative and legal system which provides full support to this kind of housing. Following Marcuse (1992) new forms of "*cooperative private ownership*" and "*non-profit cooperative ownership*" will be needed, thereby motivating people to work together with each other on the basis of their real interests and the acute situation in order to improve the quality of their housing.

Because housing economics in Eastern Europe have reached crisis point, this kind of mobilisation assumes great importance. Through self-management by the residents and "*self-help activities*" it is possible to reduce the costs of the modernisation, maintenance and administration of accommodation. We know of many examples on an international scale and with small cooperatives at the local level this is particularly workable.

However, the official system of financing which subsidises housing must give priority to this type of housing model. But this is neither the case in East Germany nor

any of the other Eastern European countries. The fact is that we do not have financial support of this kind at our disposal, something that a rapid development of cooperative housing models presumes. We cannot foresee the conservative government of the Federal Republic of Germany undertaking such reform⁷. Does the Social Democratic Party have any real alternative housing policy? The real question in Germany is this: is the social democratic movement capable of formulating a new concept for housing policy, one that could better support a cooperative model relevant to East Germany, and can they find a realistic financial model for this? And are they strong enough to win the next election? When yes, then perhaps a new, socially-orientated housing policy will become possible.

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⁷ See for example a discussion about a dominant private market led model for housing in the European Community in Harloe, Michael (1992) "*The Social Construction of Housing*", p. 5.

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