# The Politics of Dwelling

(Dissertation Proposal)

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## Introduction

"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out." Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" brings to mind the social nature of the built environment we inhabit. At the example of public housing my dissertation explores how space manifests social structures and relations as well as how it serves as an instrument of political power. Often, idealizations of certain types of housing are intimately bound up with political ideologies. Through an analysis of three distinct typologies of public housing – communal housing in Vienna in the 1920s, social housing in Cold-War Berlin, and mixed-income housing in post-Katrina New Orleans - I will reveal the traces of three conceptions of modern citizenship: socialism (Red Vienna), social democracy (West-Berlin) and neoliberalism (New Orleans). Following Lefebvre's triadic conception of space, my research will shed light on how ideal spaces (representations of space) envisaged by political theorists, architects and planners have been transformed by already existing historical fabrics and patterns of social interaction (spatial practices); I will also shed light on the actual appropriation of spaces (spaces of representation) by their inhabitants, as it is through these appropriations that we come to a more complete understanding of how and why abstract political visions have been altered or resisted in practice. The fundamental premise on which my dissertation builds is that space is not "dead" or void but inherently political.

Research questions:
"To dwell means to leave traces", writes Walter Benjamin. To understand the political meaning of these traces is the goal of my thesis. Accordingly, my research questions are as follows:

1. What spatial relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements have been adopted to achieve certain political ends?

2. What political conclusions are to be drawn from the counterspaces and sites of resistance carved out by those who have rejected the political goals pursued by various "politics of dwelling"? In other words, what is the relationship between everyday life and political hegemonies, between micro-politics and the macro-politics?

Motivation of my research:
To know how and what social spaces internalize is to learn how political ideologies influence social practices and how social practices shape political ideologies. This critical knowledge is important for two reasons:

1. To inform the planning and building of future spaces that respect people's sense of dignity and that accommodate diversity as well as change.

2. To challenge political visions and their materializations that intentionally or unintentionally foster indifference, alienation, and violence by prioritizing theory over practice, the conceived over the lived.

Methodology: Lefebvre's triadic production of space

Methodologically, I will build on Lefebvre's account of how space is produced, which entails three dimensions that condition each other. Lefebvre's "Production of Space" is based on the conjecture that social reality is contradictory, a conjecture that undergirds dialectical thinking. Even though the dialectical thinking of both, Hegel and Marx has strongly influenced Lefebvre, he does not share their belief that truth or "the end of history" can be approximated trough dialectics. In contrast, influenced by Nietzsche's celebration of life as unpredictable and fluid, Lefebvre argues that contradictions undergo transformations, yet cannot be ultimately resolved. What makes Lefebvre's theory of the production of space attractive is that it adds equal weight to abstract knowledge, material reality, *and* everyday life. Similar to Benjamin, he locates critical not merely in the realm of theory, but also in the realm of praxis. Both, Benjamin and Lefebvre pursue a 'philosophy of praxis' to emphasise the ways that self-conscious practical activity mutually transforms both the world and people active in it. To uncover the possible in the everyday life is itself a critical activity, an activity that takes issue with what is implicitly accepted as "natural" and "given". Lefebvre's (and Benjamin's) critique open up horizons of the possible through carefully looking at the present, a critique that locates the seeds of utopias and radical social transformation not in a remote future, but in the immediacy of our everyday life. The three dimensions of Lefebvre's triadic dialectic are:



The Production of Space
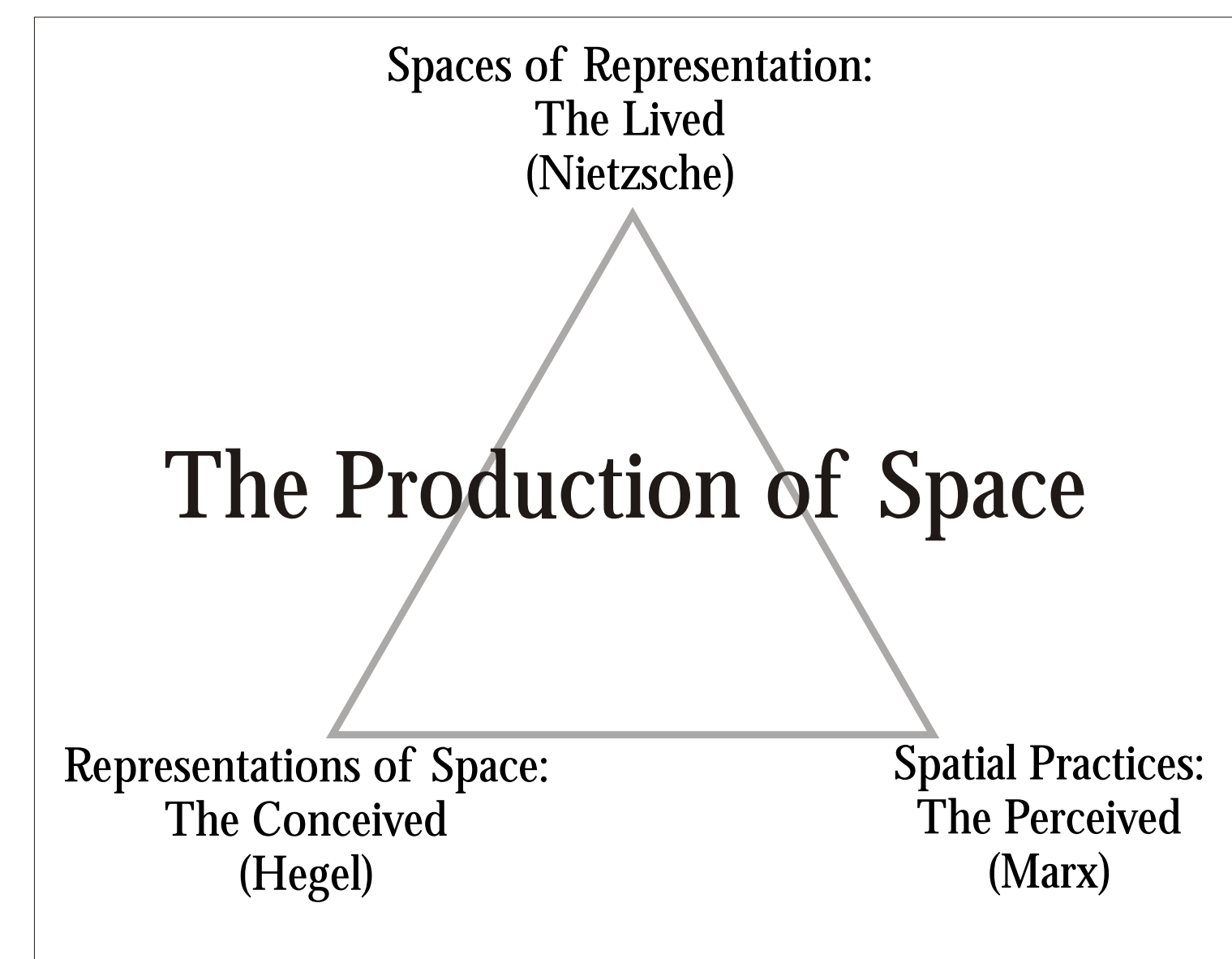
1. Representations of Space: refer to the abstract knowledge of space, the *conceived*, that does not allow for qualitative differences. Representations of space emerge at the level of discourse by experts, professionals and technocrats in the form of definitions, descriptions, scientific theories, maps or plans and are closely linked to ideology and power.

2. Spatial Practices: spatial practices are tied to the material dimension of social activity and interaction. They denote and structure how we go about our everyday life in concrete spaces without thinking about their meaning and implications. Spatial practices have a close relation to how we *perceive* the world; how we enact, reproduce, yet maybe also alter the implicit norms and codes present in space.

3. Spaces of Representation: refer to the creative appropriation of spaces, appropriations that produce meanings or functions that conflict or even defy abstract ascriptions or formalizations. Appropriated spaces are *lived* spaces, shaped by their users and inhabitants. They are spaces that "speak", that have an affective kernel. In contrast to abstract space, spaces of representation are qualitative, fluid, and dynamic.

Lefebvre's triadic dialectic is by no means a simple blueprint to be used for empirical analyses. To the contrary, it requires theoretical clarification especially the link between the abstract and the lived, between macropolitics and micropolitics. To get a better understanding of this model, I will examine Lefebvre's reading of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche.

Cases: Vienna in the 1920s, Cold-War Berlin in the 1950s, Post-Katrina New Orleans
The common denominator of these otherwise divergent cities is that all three of them are sites of major *crises*: the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 from which Austria emerged as an economically depressed rump state; the destruction of Berlin in WWII; and the devastation of New Orleans by hurricane Katrina. Yet crises contain the seeds for new beginnings and often new beginnings become engraved in space. Housing has been essential to the reconstruction of all three cities. Unsurprisingly, it has also been a major site of clashing political worldviews and newly emerging hegemonies.

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## 1.

### Red Vienna's Social Municipalism: Growing into Socialism


Karl-Marx-Hof | Wien

From 1919 – 1934 Vienna had a socialist government. Austro-Marxism, whose main theorists were Otto Bauer and Max Adler, distanced themselves from both, violent revolutions as well as from reform socialism. The Austro-Marxist hope was that a society could "grow into" socialism. For them, the key to power was cultural, not political. Education was conceived as the principal means of advancing the social interests of the proletariat and preparing the party intellectually for power. The provision of public housing and communal facilities played a crucial role for this goal. Red Vienna can be read as counterspace, as a socialist heterotopia, in an otherwise conservative state. With it came an overall reconstruction of life according to goals of human dignity and public responsibility. Yet it also triggered considerable resentment among the working class, especially because of the Austro-Marxist leadership's paternalism and its dismissive attitude towards traditional working class culture.


Communal Housing | Vienna

## 2.

### Berlin in the 1950s: Housing as Battle Field of the Cold War
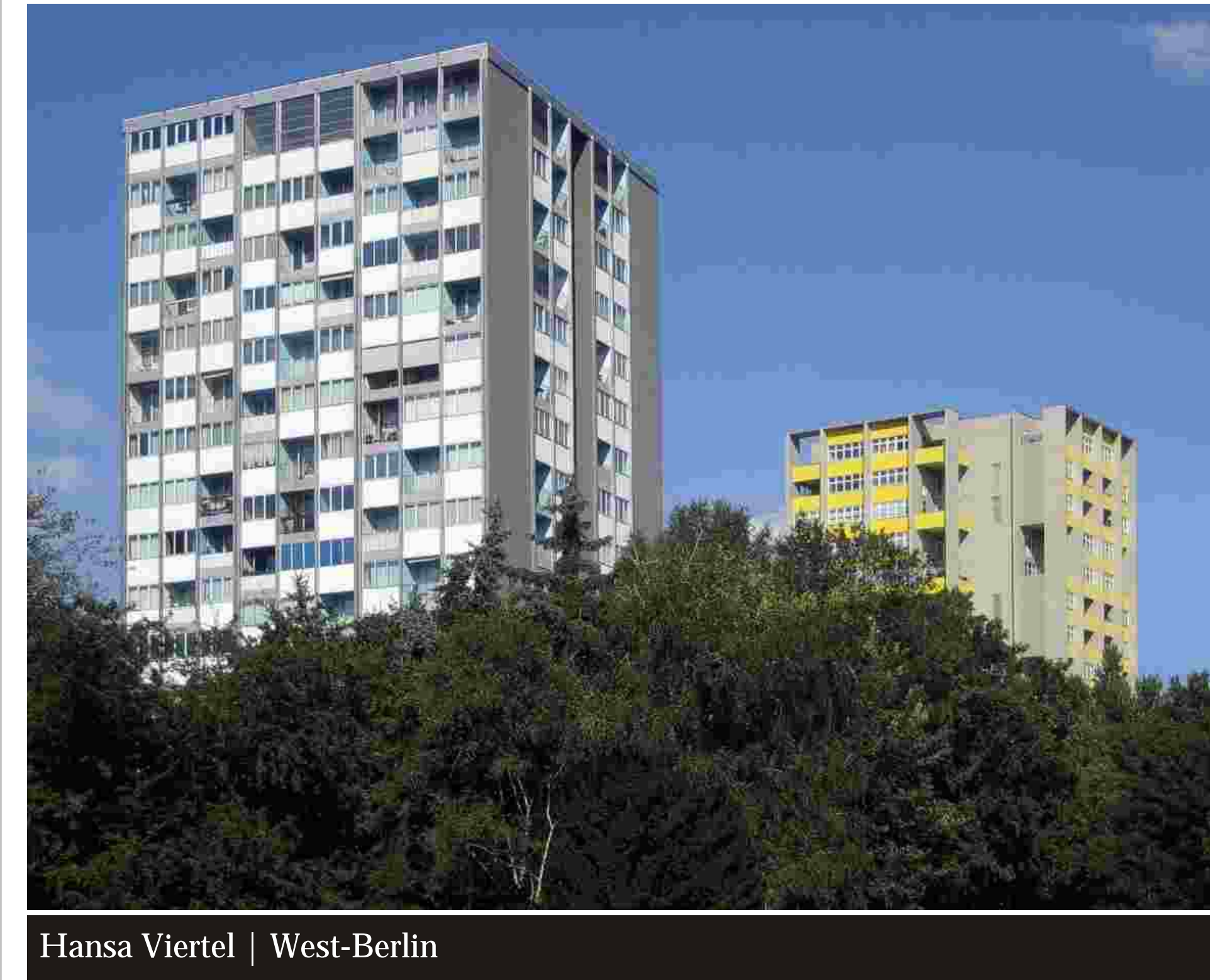

Hansa Viertel | West-Berlin

Berlin's reconstruction was strongly motivated by breaking with Nazism. Two main, yet contradictory, desires shaped the reconstruction efforts: a) to rebuild and to reestablish links to Germany's history before 1933; b) to build something entirely new. Until the 1950s, both regimes made efforts to make their respective political causes seen by building the "right kind" of homes. The construction of these homes was informed by two different conceptions of what is essential to human dignity and freedom: socialism and social-democracy. Both of them were driven by building houses for "the people".
Karl-Marx-Allee (a.k.a. Stalinallee): was the showcase project of the socialists. The first buildings were built according to modernist paradigms, yet later change of style towards socialist classicism. The socialists ended up rejecting modernist formalism as they considered it as a sign of contempt for humanity. Modernist ideals of decentralization, division of functions were viewed as being hostile to collective action and public life.
Hansa Viertel: was the social democratic response to the Karl-Marx-Allee. It was built in line with modernist principles. Hence, decentralization functional divisions mark the Hansa Viertel. Whereas the creation of public space, of boulevards, was important to the design of the Karl-Marx Allee, the Hansa Viertel was deliberately built away from the street. The latter's decentralized, unregimented order was meant to be a symbol for liberal individualism and the free market - a symbol against totalitarianism and East-Berlin's "worker barracks".
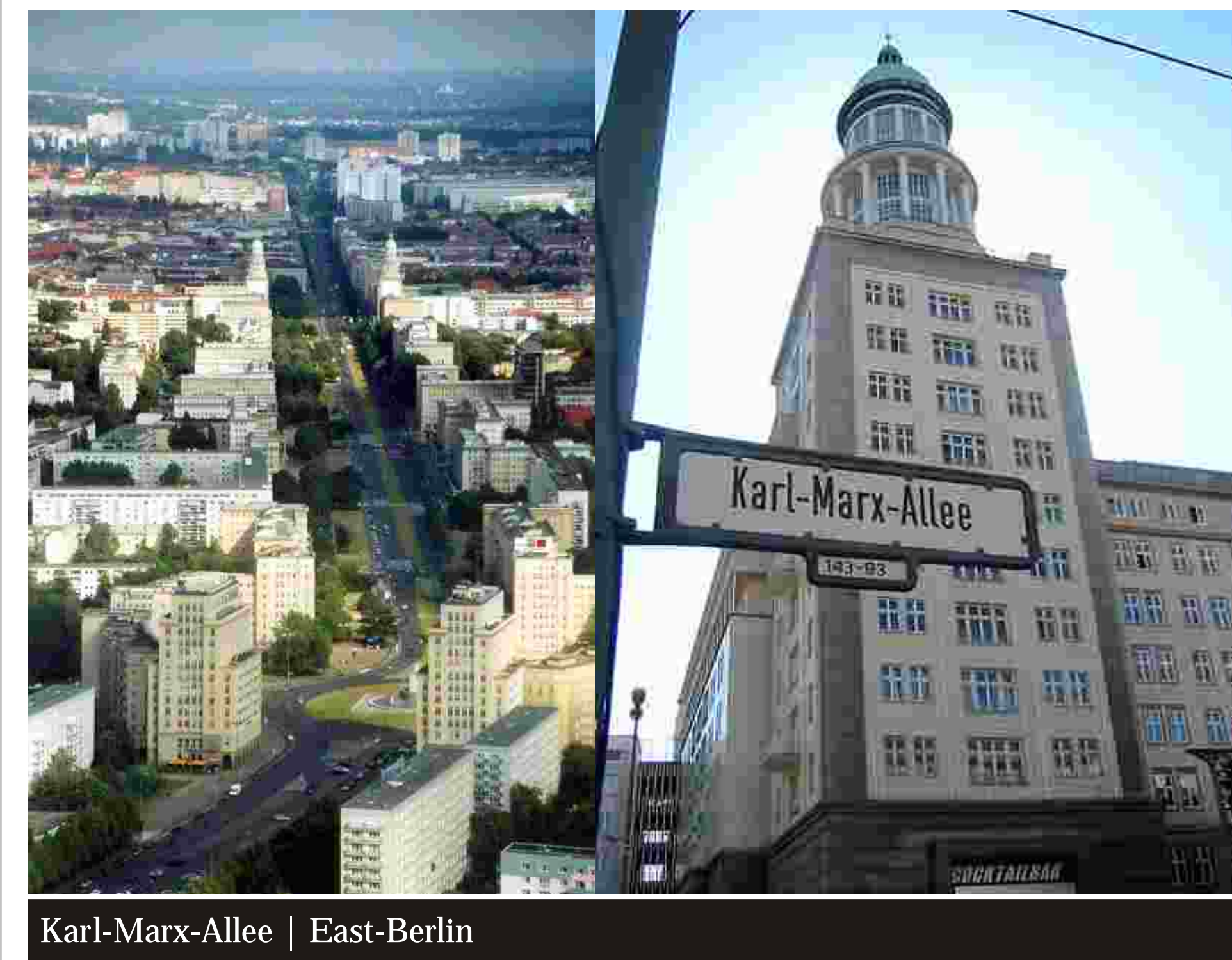

Karl-Marx-Allee | East-Berlin

## 3.

### Post-Katrina New Orleans: A Neoliberal Make-Over


Public Housing | New Orleans

By looking at the recent demolition of New Orleans's public housing I hope to show how the neoliberal idealization of free markets, self-sufficiency and non-interventionist state operate. Despite an already existing acute housing shortage (greater New Orleans counts 12 000 homeless), the demolition of the housing projects C. J. Peete, B.W. Cooper and St. Bernard is ongoing, that of Lafitte imminent. New Orleans provided 4605 viable affordable rental units, mainly inhabited by the Afro-American working class. The plan is to replace these public housing projects with mixed-income neighbourhoods, a plan that is expected to reduce the amount of subsidized housing by about two-thirds that existed before Katrina. One of the most common arguments for mixed income housing is the moral and social enhancement of the poor through exposing them to middle and upper class social milieus; an argument based on environmental determinism. One aspect that is of particular interest to me is the tension between the alleged increase of individual freedom through the roll back of state interventions and the simultaneous emphasis on reeducation geared towards norms of self-sufficiency and autonomy, reeducation that especially affects the poor and that provides them with little choice.


Poster | New Orleans