

Remember and Reuse. Spatial Memory and Emotional Value of Post-socialist Public Spaces

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Abstract

The legacy of socialist architecture and urban planning in Europe is worthy of attention not only from the point of view of its historical significance but also in the context of modern “culture wars” or “memory wars,” which are a recognizable feature of modern socio-political life. Using the example of a specific location, the Ernst-Thälmann-Park in Berlin, the article examines the problem of perception of this heritage of European urbanism of the 20th century. This location in eastern Berlin remains the subject of residents' emotional experiences and discussions about the memory of the place revolves around both the demolished gas storage buildings, on the site of which a park was created during the socialist era and the central square with its monument. Nowadays, the residential area with the central square is popular among the locals, combining symbolic and practical aspects. It is emphasised that within the framework of socialist urbanism, the creation of public spaces received considerable attention. This was rooted in the ideological foundations of the socialist system: the dominance of the public over the individual and the values of centrally organized social practices. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc resulted in numerous transformations in political institutions, in the economy, in social relations. These transformations also impacted strategies and practices in urban planning, construction and architecture: the planned economy was replaced by free market, and ideological foundations blurred. At the same time, “places and spaces of memory” emotionally linked to the socialist era are being revised, and the discussion on the value of this architecture is going on. The spatial aspects of this debate are particularly evident in urban environments, given the high diversity of urban communities and the specific nature of urban life: politically competitive and agonistic.

Keywords: spatial memory, spatial narrative, emotional value, post-socialist cities, symbolic conflict, agonistic practices, heritage and everyday life

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Introduction

“Attachments are often hidden and sometimes only revealed during times of change and as such can be less visible than responses”.
(Madgin, 2025, p. 15).

The dynamics of social and political relations in post-socialist societies are complex and varied. In the context of the architectural and urban history of Europe, the legacy of the socialist period (1945–1989/90) remains one of the most controversial pages. The aesthetic, ideological, social and emotional aspects of the legacy of (post)socialist urbanism have both defenders and implacable critics. However, this is a detail of a more general picture: despite the fact that three decades have passed since the end of communism in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the discussion about “post-transit” societies remains relevant in both scientific and socio-political contexts. There are a number of reasons for the attention of researchers, politicians and citizens themselves to the post-socialist urban environment. The following can be mentioned: “culture wars” as a characteristic feature of modernity, the crisis of liberal democracy and the growing popularity (in particular in Central and Eastern Europe) of so-called illiberal democratic projects; concerns about neo-imperial, “quasi-Soviet” claims of the Russian Federation in the former sphere of geopolitical interests of the USSR; discussion about such a phenomenon as Ostalgia, etc. Relevant research requires precise focus in terms of chronology, geography and the conceptual foundations of the research subject. This article, using the example of a specific urban location, examines some aspects of the dynamics of spatial memory and emotional perception of public space as a subject of symbolic conflict in the urban environment of a post-socialist city. Within the framework of socialist urbanism, the creation of public spaces was given considerable attention. This was rooted in the very ideological foundations of the socialist system: the dominance of the public over the individual and the values of centrally organized social practices. Mass construction after World War II was carried out in accordance with these ideological principles both in the Soviet Union and in the Eastern Bloc states. The collapse of the bloc resulted in numerous and sometimes closely interconnected transformations: in political institutions, in power and hierarchy, in the economy, in social relations etc. These transformations also significantly impacted strategies and practices in urban planning, construction and architecture: the planned economy was replaced by free market principles, and ideology had lost its meaning even earlier.

At the same time, “places of memory” and spaces linked to the socialist era - not just physically but also emotionally - continue to be subject to permanent revision. As a result, discursive conflicts arise in post-socialist societies regarding the historical memory of a shared past that influences the present and future. The spatial aspects of this debate are particularly evident in the urban environment, given the high degree of diversity of urban communities and the very specific nature of urban life: politically oriented, competitive, i.e. *agonistic* (Mouffe, 2005; Mouffe, 2013; Bell, 2008; Sharova, and Letnyakov, 2023). These issues of contemporary social theory and political philosophy are revealed, in particular, through the example of the debate around public spaces in post-socialist cities.

Theoretical Background

In recent years, the phenomenon of post-socialist urbanism has been the subject of growing interest among researchers, including outside the field of the history of architecture and urban planning. The post-socialist city, therefore, is not only a historically significant phenomenon (for example, from the point of view of preserving architectural monuments of the second half of the twentieth century), but also something complexly important in the context of current social, political and cultural issues. That the (post)socialist city is currently being studied in an interdisciplinary context is confirmed by even a cursory review of the relevant scientific literature and periodicals: it is examined in works on the history of architecture and urban planning (Hirt, 2005; Hirt, and Stanilov, 2007; Belci, and Tirell, 2011; Brünenberg, and Engler, 2023; Frost, 2018; Poljak Istenič, and Kozina, 2020; Gerten et al, 2022), memory studies (Hackmann, and Lehti, 2013; Grama, 2019; Ilchenko, 2019; Dellenbaugh-Losse, 2020), postcolonial and decolonial studies (Pucherová, and Gáfrik, 2015; Kołodziejczyk, and Şandru, 2016; Sharova, and Letnyakov, 2023), cultural theories (Forrester et al., 2004; Bartetzky et al, 2009; Diener, and Hagen, 2015; Dogan, 2019; Čamprag, 2019; Sharova, 2022b; Massino, and Wien, 2024), political science and political sociology (Stanilov, 2007; Diener, and Hagen, 2013; Burch-Brown, 2017; Therborn, 2017; Polese et al, 2018; Sharova, 2022a) etc.

However, it is safe to say that the socialist city as a special phenomenon of history, culture, technology and ideology has not yet exhausted its potential for modern researchers. This phenomenon itself has such a complex and multifaceted character that each specific case requires clarification of what exactly becomes the subject of research: monuments and places of memory (for example, monuments to the numerous heroes of the “communist pantheon”), industrial architecture of cities, blocks of standard mass residential housing, public spaces intended for recreation and/or ideological indoctrination? In some cases, the locations of a post-socialist city combine a number of these characteristics. It seems to be accurate considering the case of the current research, which will be discussed further in more detail.

Some of the concepts underlying this study require brief clarification. Specifically, symbolic conflict is related to the concept of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989), based on the idea that various agents constantly compete for control of symbolic resources that enable them to define and interpret social reality in a particular way, including the narrative of the past. The agonistic type of a conflict is described in political philosophy: specifically, Mouffe argues that political struggle in a democracy does not necessarily entail consensus; indeed, on a number of fundamental issues, consensus is unattainable. However, it is likewise impossible for just one side to win, as the configuration of political agents is fluid and subject to the dynamics of democratic competition (Mouffe, 2005; Mouffe, 2013). Consequently, a crucial task for society is to transform the uncompromising, antagonistic conflict into an agonistic one. In this regard, the analysis of agonistic conflict is particularly significant for societies that have undergone a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, a matter of particular relevance to post-socialist European countries, including the former GDR.

To identify the interrelationship between emotional perception and the spatial characteristics of the environment, I address the concept of spatial memory. Until recently, the concept of spatial memory was primarily used in the natural sciences, such

as neurophysiology and cognitive science¹. However, the very idea of spatiality as it applies to memory and emotions has significant foundation in the social sciences and humanities, as well as in literature. The theoretical foundations of this approach were laid in the 20th century in philosophy, social theory and cultural studies. Benjamin (Benjamin, 1986, 2019) and Bachelard (Bachelard, 1994) outlined the connection between environment, space and place, including those in the city, with memory, perception and emotional experience. Pierre Nora's notion of "lieux de mémoire" (places of memory) has made a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion following the spatial turn in the social sciences (Lefebvre, 1981; de Certeau, 1984; Nora, 1989). Hubner and Dirksmeier, in turn, suggest a new term *placemories* to describe the interrelation between feeling, society, memory and place applying the critical approach for deciphering spatialised memories in cultural geography (Hubner, and Dirksmeier, 2023).

I assume that this framework is relevant to issues concerning the architectural and urban planning heritage: the historical past which is embodied in the material objects of the urban environment and acts as a constant backdrop to the everyday life of city dwellers. The perception of this heritage is, undoubtedly, not static but rather undergoes transformation in response to the dynamics of public consciousness, political processes and cultural innovations. In the context of this research, the concept of counter-monuments is particularly useful as it offers a specific way of interpreting memorial objects during periods of social and political change (Young, 1992; DeTurk, 2017; Stevens et al., 2012, 2018). The reunification of Germany, alongside with the collapse of socialist regimes of the Eastern Bloc, necessitated a profound re-evaluation of the historical memory embodied in the urban environment, particularly in the form of buildings, public spaces and monuments erected under the former regime. In my view, the phenomenon of the counter-monument itself is a physical representation of an agonistic engagement with collective historical memory. It demonstrates the claims of mnemonic subjects to the possession of discursive resources and highlights the multiplicity of narratives concerning the past as they manifest in the present social reality. I will return to this concept later when considering the case study.

Methodology

As noted above, the topic of rethinking socialist architectural and urban heritage is highly complex and, therefore, requires a refined methodological framework in each specific case. The objective of this article is to move beyond the framework of architectural and cultural heritage history by applying concepts from political philosophy and social theory to the subject of the research. In my view, this approach is particularly relevant for analysing the legacy of post-socialist architecture and urban environments, which remain contradictory within the contemporary social and cultural context and bear debatable political and ethical meanings. In my research, I examine the spatial and material aspects of commemorative practices. In my view, this approach represents a promising direction within the context of contemporary memory studies. I examine the

¹ See, for example: Bicanski, A., & Burgess, N. 2018 A neural-level model of spatial memory and imagery. *eLife* 7: e33752; Lopez, A., & Bosco, A. 2025. Long-term spatial memory in aging: does research overlook retrograde memory relative to anterograde memory? *Spatial Cognition & Computation*, 1–18.

experience of perceiving a location in East Berlin that serves as a site of memory of the socialist period, but also as a site of everyday life, personal and family memory and interaction at the level of horizontal connections within the urban community. With this in mind, a combination of methods from social anthropology and critical social theory (Low, 2000; Low, 2017; Madgin, and Kenny, 2022; Madgin, 2025) seems to be relevant, as well as concepts rooted in the theory of political participation (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008; Sanoff, 2010). A corresponding combined approach has been tested within the framework of critical urban studies, which focus on the social and political aspects of urban life (see, for example: (Mitchell, 2003; Brenner, 2009; Brenner et al., 2011; Rossi, 2019). I would argue that this approach is particularly relevant for investigating urban spaces that have undergone a transformation from a planned organisational structure to one based on democratic and market principles: spaces that have lost their ideological content while retaining the external form and recognisable visual features of socialist-era architecture and urban planning.

Discourse analysis is the primary research tool employed, given that the case involves elements of discursive struggle, symbolic conflict and the reassertion of narratives of the past within the context of public space in the post-socialist city. Thus, I have attempted to present a comprehensive picture encompassing the reception of the project in professional architectural periodicals at the time of the construction (both German and Soviet); fragments of contemporary political discourse at the level of Berlin's municipal administration; the reactions of local residents and experts to proposals regarding the future of the residential complex and its public space; as well as a description of an artistic reinterpretation—an installation serving as a commentary on the monument. However, this is not an exhaustive picture. I believe that the inherently complex nature of the subject requires further investigation through an interdisciplinary research lens. The given study methods and tools in the field of urban studies and memory studies being applied to the issue of urban planning in the cities after transition, with their highly diverse urban communities. The research of this kind should lead to a set of conclusions on the spatial aspects of social and cultural phenomena. They, in turn, can be used for the development of principles of solidarity and participation that are adequate to the resolving symbolic conflicts in plural societies.

Socialist Public Space: Ideology and Practice

In Soviet architecture, the organization of public spaces was given a very specific meaning: they, like other forms of official art, were intended to promote the “socialist way of life” and be part of the visual ideological narrative of the Soviet state. The same was to be true in the sphere of the USSR's interests, that is, in the “people's democracies,” including those in Europe. According to this logic, an entire city could be a monumental propaganda piece—for example, this quality was ascribed by Soviet architects to Leningrad: in this city, the birthplace of the Bolshevik political project, “the entire architectural character, the entire planning structure, all its interflowing architectural ensembles constantly exert an enormous ideological influence on people” (Petrov, 1970).

A similar assumption could be made about East Berlin after the Second World War - that part of it that was administratively and politically under the control of the USSR.

The urban development project of East Berlin during the division of post-war Germany was decided in the corresponding vein of ideological confrontation. Overall, the eastern part of the city was rebuilt and redeveloped in a way that symbolically contrasted itself with the “old” Berlin, that is, Nazi Berlin, which, during the Cold War, had acquired, if not a symbolic successor, then at least a less implacable adversary of its recent past-West Berlin. All the more remarkable is the fact that, spatially, the new planning decisions and objects in the east of the city seemed to reflect historically significant sites of the former, unified Berlin: the iconic Stalin Allee (predictably renamed Karl-Marx-Allee during the Soviet “Thaw”) was linked in the urban development plan of that period to Unter den Linden and the Brandenburg Gate (Dellenbaugh-Losse, 2020, p. 35). Thus, in a competitive environment, a new symbolic landscape was formed, associated with “socialist values” - equality, social justice value of labour etc. It's worth noting, however, that post-war construction in Berlin, executed in the spirit of Sozialistischer Klassizismus - that is, the eclectic style still often referred to in the post-Soviet region as “Stalinist Empire style” - visually correlated rather weakly with these values. But the international style of Modernism and Brutalism in architecture that replaced it, in addition to appearing significantly less pompous, was also intended to serve as proof that the GDR was no less technologically advanced, with a dynamically developing economy, than its Western neighbour and rival.

The fall of the Wall is cited in most relevant studies as the starting point for the de facto “reinvention” of cities in the former Eastern Bloc. This event became the most visible, striking visual symbol of the change of eras and generations, giving rise to new contradictions, debates and doubts. The de facto reunification of Berlin's “West” and “East” signified the need for a redefinition of identity - both local/urban and federal/national (which, incidentally, remains unfinished to this day, considering at least the question of the status of Ossi and Wessi in the public consciousness in modern Germany).

Soviet architectural criticism devoted considerable attention to the GDR's urban planning experience: compared to other Eastern Bloc states, socialist Germany played a special, symbolic role as an outpost of socialism in close proximity to the capitalist world. This applied to all spheres, including, of course, such ideologically significant ones as urban planning and construction. This area of development, formally following the famous 16 principles of construction (*Die 16 Grundsätze*, 2005) was characterized, in particular, as “a combination of bold dreams with a sober, very businesslike consideration of real possibilities” (Kopelyansky, 1970). GDR planners, according to this evaluation, in their projects were proceeding “from a clear social perspective, view cities as dynamic systems, the expected changes to which are taken into account in modern master plans... The focus of all these urban planning measures is concern for the individual and for the member of the socialist collective” (ibid.). GDR urban planning practices were seen as primarily involving the reconstruction of cities from within, i.e., from the centre to the periphery, increasing the density of development, bringing harmless industries and other places of employment closer to residential areas and developing advanced transportation systems. And, of course, Soviet architectural critics noted a “decisive break with the apologists of capitalist urban planning” among urban planners in the GDR.

Ernst-Thälmann-Park: A Social and Socialist Housing Project

The Ernst-Thälmann-Park is a highlight of socialist urban planning in the late GDR. Inaugurated in 1986, just three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, it also became a quintessence of the communist symbolism even the mythology, in its material form: the myth, projected onto the urban territory.

A notable detail of the construction of a residential area between Prenzlauer Allee, Danziger Straße and Greifswalder Straße, with a vast public space and a monument is the attention the project initially received from the political leadership of the state. The implementation of the project took relatively little time: in 1979, the Politburo of the SED decided to transform the site of a disused gasworks on Greifswalder Straße into a park and name it after Ernst Thälmann—with no exaggeration, the most prominent person on the list of the official communist historiography in the GDR. Thälmann (1886–1944), a dockworker and transport worker from Hamburg, became chairman of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and its paramilitary organization, the Red Front Fighters' League (RFB), in 1925. After the KPD was banned by the Nazis in 1933, he was imprisoned for eleven years and murdered in Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944.

In 1981, State Council Chairman Erich Honecker personally commissioned the Soviet artist Lev Kerbel to design a Thälmann monument at the corner of the most important traffic routes of the area, Greifswalder Straße and Danziger Straße. The monument, 14 meters high and 15 meters wide, stands on a base made of Ukrainian granite (*Ernst-Thälmann-Park*, 2026). The monument and the park, with a newly built residential area of several prefabricated houses (architect Manfred Zumpe et al.), were inaugurated in 1986 - on the centenary of Thälmann's birth (Historical Critical Commentary, 2023). A 16-hectare park was created around the residential houses. At the time, the project received positive comments from architectural critics in the GDR, such as the following:

“An urban planning concept became reality entirely in the spirit of Ernst Thälmann, who declared as early as 1919, ‘The housing question can only be solved by constructing all dwellings in such a way that all modern advancements benefit not a small minority, but the general public.’” (Adalbert Behr. 1987. *Building in Berlin 1973 to 1987*. Ehrhardt Gißke (ed.). Berlin: Koehler and Amelang, 1987);

“The paths through the extensive grounds, adorned with seasonal flowers, roses and rhododendrons, lead to numerous playgrounds, the cultural centre with its rooftop theatre, a café, an indoor swimming pool and the Zeiss Planetarium. Groups of trees alternate with terraced lawns. Various designed seating areas invite visitors to relax.” (Fritz Steinwasser. 1987. *Parks and Green Spaces in Berlin*. Berlin: Berlin-Information);

“Since its opening, Ernst Thälmann Park has been one of the social centres not only of the district. Its residents themselves take care of the maintenance and design of the grounds, as do the pioneering partnerships of the surrounding schools, which, for example, have taken on the task of caring for the flowers.” (Fritz Steinwasser. 1987. *Parks and Green Spaces in Berlin*. Berlin: Berlin-Information). (*Revisited*, 2026).



Figure 1. Residential area next to Thälmann monument. Source: Veronika Sharova, 2026

The residential complex of prefabricated apartment blocks—with over 1,300 apartments for 4,000 residents, ponds, playgrounds and a swimming pool—was not built from scratch. The site had been location to the Fourth Berlin Gasworks since 1874, six gas storage tanks (gasometers) were constructed between 1882 and 1908 and functioned till 1981. The gasometers were partially demolished in 1981 (not without resistance from the residents of the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg), and the remains integrated into a new residential area: the original building is the former gasworks administration now houses a gallery and the *Theater unterm Dach* (Theater Under the Roof). An octagonal extension—the *Wabe* (Honeycomb)—still serves as an event hall and a cultural centre, a popular meeting place for the local community. Considering this “social-discursive negotiation” (Meissner, 2025) against the background of the previously existing type of urbanscape, the Ernst- Thälmann-Park project, as a residential district with public space, is a striking example of an urban *palimpsest*—a type of development in which new structures emerge on the site of previous ones that have been destroyed by external factors (demolition, damage from military action, natural disasters, etc.) or naturally ruined with time and then rebuilt (see for more details: (Sharova, 2022b)).

Palimpsest development, unlike “assemblage” development - in which new structures are introduced into the existing urban environment without destroying it—presupposes a “layering” of memories of the location's previous state, which, in turn, can generate a unique symbolic tension within the environment: in emotional terms, this tension can be expressed as a sense of landscape loss, a sense of alienation from familiar visual experience, a fear of loss of identity and connection to the environment etc. This phenomenon is examined using the example of public spaces in the cities after transition including the given one.

The apartments have been very popular since their construction, and, according to GEWOBA housing association (which manages approximately 1,100 apartments), 31% of the tenants are first-time tenants (as of November 2013) (*Etwas zur Geschichte*, 2026). However, after 1989, the condition of the residential complex gradually deteriorated, both housing complexes and the surrounding park fell into increasing disrepair. Funds for park maintenance became increasingly scarce, the fountain and irrigation system was shut down around 2006 for cost reasons, and the neighbourhood pond was slated for removal (*ibid.*). In fact, the care of most of the territory fell on the shoulders of caring local residents and dedicated volunteers.

But it can be assumed that the most controversial aspect in the recent history of Ernst-Thälmann-Park has remained the monument itself and the public space surrounding it, a large square—as was customary in socialist urban planning practice. Memorials, as Dellenbaugh-Losse rightly points out, are generally “...the most visible and explicit form of spatial symbolism... and one of the most contested” (Dellenbaugh-Losse, 2020, p. 13–14).

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the monument to the communist leader who fought Nazism but was also, according to the German historian Ilko-Sascha Kovalchuk, a staunch supporter of Stalinism and the gravedigger (*Totengräber*) of Weimar democracy (*Ernst Thälmann. Der Mythos*, 2026), lost the meaning intended by its creators. It can be said that this part of the visual narrative became “illegible” within the context of the public space it belonged to. Following the historian's question, it is worth asking: what does the monument, which thousands of people can still see every day, now symbolize? The reaction of city authorities was initially simple and predictable: after German reunification in 1990, a commission of the Berlin Senate recommended the demolition of the monument. But its recommendation led to no real action; only the stone plaques bearing texts by Ernst Thälmann and Erich Honecker were removed, but the monument was left on its site. In May 1993, the debate came to the next stage; the Prenzlauer Berg district assembly (*Bezirksverordnetenversammlung*) decided to dismantle the monument. But this time the demolition was not implemented too, due to a lack of financial resources (*Historical Critical Commentary*, 2023). In 1997, most of the residents of Prenzlauer Berg voted to keep the name “Ernst-Thälmann-Park” (*ibid.*). Since 2014, it is a listed monument, together with the park and the ensemble of the housing estate of WBS 70 residential prefabricated houses and high-rises (*Erläuterungen zum Vorliegen*, 2014). The city of Berlin has been maintaining the statue since 2006 but later abandoned attempts to remove the graffiti from the granite, citing the high cost and complexity of the work. The result is the monument's current appearance. As of the spring of 2026, the monument is fenced off, making access difficult, but the previously applied graffiti remains on surface of the pedestal and the statue itself.

But it was not the end of the discussion on the monument's future. In 2022, it is once again attracted increasing attention. In March 2022, a group of members of the CDU party in the Berlin Pankow district council introduced an initiative to demolish the monument, citing Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine. The motion justifies this by stating that the Russian president Vladimir Putin is 'still driven with resentment because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and wants to resurrect the former superpower'. Following the logic of local centre-right politicians, the monument to the former chairman of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) does not correspond to the values of a democratic society that opposes this war and Russia's imperial ambitions, as it symbolizes the ideology of communism.



Figure 2. Thälmann monument. Source: Veronika Sharova, 2026

The press immediately joined the dispute: for example, the independent Berlin newspaper *taz* (*Die Tageszeitung*) pointed out that “more than 30 years after the end of the Soviet Union... Russia is a capitalist state that has absolutely nothing to do with communist ideas”. “The mention of the “depiction of the hammer and sickle on the

monument,” meanwhile, points to the real motivation: Thälmann is to be erased from memory because he was a communist... That party voted for the demolition as early as the beginning of the 1990s”, argued *taz* author Erik Peter in his article, which also attracted several dozens of highly emotional readers’ comments (Peter, 2022).

The article also mentions an important detail: shortly before the issue of demolition was raised in the city council, the monument received an artistic commentary in the form of additional elements designed to conceptually redefine its meaning. That “redesigning” project contributed much to the rethinking, “recontextualisation” of Ernst-Thälmann-Park public space.

Agonistic Conflict and Emotional Value of a Place in the Case of Ernst-Thälmann-Park

An attempt to rethink the spatial narrative of Ernst-Thälmann-Park in an artistic way was undertaken in 2019–2021. In 2019, the district office of Pankow organised the competition “Artistic Commentary on the Ernst Thälmann Monument”; more than 100 artists from all over Germany took part in it. A year later, in 2020, the results were summed up: the jury recommended Betina Kuntzsch’s “Thinking from the Pedestal” project for realization (Kuntzsch, 2021). The project combined motifs of memory of a place, political identity during the GDR era and the period of transition after German reunification and reflections on the quality of public spaces in the context of the daily life of city residents. One of the competition’s requirements was a proposal for an improvement in the quality of the open space in front of the monument. By placing five dark coral-red concrete elements in front of the monument, echoing the shape of the pedestal, the artist intended to emphasize the greater proportionality of these figures to humans, within the scale of the large open space. I’ll add that the theme of the proportionality of human and built environments is not completely foreign to socialist urban development, at least within experimental projects (see, for example: (Sharova, 2021)). In this regard, there is an interesting overlap between certain ideas and initiatives belonging to the socialist era and contemporary artistic commentary.

The nature of a “counter-monument” is clearly discernible in the additional elements installed near the Thälmann monument, owing to their provocative character. Seamlessly integrated into the space of the square, they invite the viewer—that is, any passer-by—to re-evaluate the spatial narrative of the ensemble formed by the square and the monument, as if to join a dialogue not only with the artist, but also with the past embodied in this public urban space. Moreover, these blocks, installed as an artistic commentary, do not clash visually with the original ensemble conceived by the public space’s architects in the 1980s; moreover, their “socialist-style” dark red hue harmonizes with the colour of the monument’s granite base, which is currently covered in graffiti.

On the one hand, the Ernst-Thälmann-Park is quite a typical example of a residential complex that was built as a showcase project for the concept of “socialist housing.” At the same time, its “spatial symbolism” (Dellenbaugh-Losse, 2020, p. 17) reflects a number of noteworthy aspects of the discursive, narrative, ideological and agonistic recontextualization of the urban environment after the democratic transition of the turn of the 1980s–1990s. This is an obvious symbolic conflict, which includes not only the attempts to rationalize the political position, such as the ones described above, but

also an emotional component; not only the desire to destroy the subject of the conflict, thus achieving some kind of “zero sum”, but also grassroots civic initiatives and impressive artistic attempts to rewrite this ideological message, incorporating it in a new way into the modern urban environment.



Figure 3. “Thinking from the Pedestal” project. Source: Veronika Sharova, 2026

The debate over the need to preserve (or, conversely, destroy) a public space containing a monument from the GDR era is, in my view, an expressive example of an agonistic conflict. This phenomenon, initially conceptualized within the categories of political philosophy, has also found its way into critical urban studies, which, in turn, is embedded within the broader field of critical social theory. The “right to the city” is an idea explored in the works of a number of social theorists, primarily from the left; this concept emphasizes the need for inclusivity, accessibility and democracy in urban spaces. The idea was first articulated by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book *Le Droit à la Ville* and then developed in numerous later works (Mitchell, 2003; Harvey, 2008). The concept of the “right to the city” extends not merely to access to resources (which is certainly crucial in an era of widening inequality) but also to the ability to influence the changes taking place within the urban environment. It therefore relates to citizens’ liberty and, furthermore, to fundamental, even “precious”, human rights that are all too often neglected (Harvey, 2008).

But, as the case under study demonstrates, residents can unite and demonstrate their agency in realizing their “right to the city” and in their efforts not to initiate changes but rather to avoid them, at least those they consider an infringement on their familiar and comfortable living environment. The activism of the Ernst-Thälmann-Park community is indicative in this regard: interestingly, residents of the area advocating for the expansion of the protected area use the slogan “*Die Stadt gehört uns*” (“The city belongs to us”) in their activities, which clearly refers to the “right to the city” concept and slogan. The local residents’ initiatives have been realised in a grassroots project *AnwohnerInitiative Ernst-Thälmann-Park. Wie wollen wir hier leben?* (“Residents’ Initiative Ernst-Thälmann-Park. How do we want to live here?”) (*AnwohnerInitiative Ernst-Thälmann-Park*, 2026). Perhaps in this situation “the idea that the city might function as a collective body politic, a site within and from which progressive social movements might emanate”, as Harvey points out, doesn’t seem that “implausible” (Harvey, 2008). In the given situation, one can expect the implementation of a social and political scenario of direct democratic participation, civil complicity, or, in other words, participatory design, i.e., “an attitude about a force for change in the creation and management of environments for people” (Sanoff, 2010, p. 1). If in the classic democratic theory participation was explained through the lens of actions lying in the sphere of traditional politics (elections, influencing political decision-making, staffing political elites etc.), the theory of participatory design, in turn, focuses on the sphere of transformation of the living environment and the environmental needs of the residents themselves, and not of politicians, bureaucrats, or experts.

However, I would like to note that in the given case of a transforming public space, the political orientations of local residents do not appear to be the leading, or at least the only, motive. In this regard, I would like to conclude by addressing the topic of *spatial emotional value* and illustrating this concept using the example of Ernst-Thälmann-Park. It is quite common to associate historically significant places with the emotions they evoke. But I assume that everyday mundane spatial memory and perception are also objects of emotional value. From this perspective, standardized objects, such as prefabricated buildings of mass-construction residential areas, as well as standardized public spaces, can be objects of affection, nostalgia, pride, sense of belonging and other emotions. The lexicon of “people–place relations” (Madgin, 2025, p. 11) can also include such notions as “‘association’, ‘attachment’, ‘interaction’, and ‘connection’ sit alongside other terms such as ‘sense/spirit of place’, ‘genius loci’, ‘townscape’, ‘character’, ‘social value’, ‘communal value’, and ‘social historical interest’” (ibid.). The question is: Are local residents willing to protect the authentic character of the Ernst-Thälmann-Park environment because this public space is a listed monument, or is this intention is rooted in the people’s personal emotions towards this place, in a personal spatial memory, which in the context of emerging solidarity is transformed into a collective memory? A convincing answer to this question would require a full-scale socio-anthropological study, similar to those conducted and described by Setha Low (Low, 2000; Low, 2017). I will make only a few suggestions (which I hope will be developed in the further research). When discussing the emotional content of the perception of public space and the living environment, we should not ignore such mental states as fear (including fear of change) and a sense of stability, which, at the micro-level of everyday life, takes on particular significance—especially given the total instability and unpredictability of the current era of polycrisis.

Local residents often cite a sense of community as a motivating factor in their attachment to the area and the emotional value of the location. Here's just several examples: a married couple living in one of the buildings in the complex since 1985 «still enjoy living in Ernst-Thälmann-Park, also because of the abundance of greenery and the strong sense of community: "People help each other, visit each other, whether they've always lived here or are newcomers. We have everything we need here: shopping, transportation, our specialists. We're happy here," they say (*Ernst-Thälmann-Park*, 2021). Another, younger tenant, who moved into her new apartment in Ernst-Thälmann-Park in 2020s, notes that she was "absolutely thrilled" (*ibid.*), and describes her apartment in the way that "It has a real urban feel to it", and particularly highlights "a kind of community spirit" (*ibid.*).

In other cases, local residents note not only the abundance of greenery and the familiar, convenient infrastructure of the area, but also social values: long-standing acquaintance with neighbours, solidarity with community members, the opportunity to spend time together, discuss everyday topics and celebrate holidays together (*Vor Ort im Prenzlauer Berg*, 2026). At the same time, other respondents answer that they can easily imagine moving to another place (*ibid.*). Interestingly, some also report a sense of being directly present in ongoing history when they are in the square next to the monument (*Wildwest im Thälmannpark*, 2019).

Conclusion

I believe that the study of post-socialist urbanism is particularly relevant at present, amidst the ongoing polycrisis. Urban environments endowed with rich internal ideological and political substance as well as distinct external artistic expressiveness are embedded within public discourse and play a significant, albeit at times underestimated, role in its dynamics, including conflictual ones. When discussing the dynamics of collective memory practices in the context of post-socialist public spaces, the following hypothesis may be assumed considering the given case. The square with the Ernst Thälmann monument became a place of memory only once it had lost its original ideological significance. Now, it serves as a remembrance of a lost country—the GDR—for those who see it as an object of n(O)stalgia following German reunification. The Thälmann monument is, therefore, a paradoxical object. At the time of its erection, it did not have any memorial significance; rather, it had political and pragmatic meaning as an integral part of the official ideological narrative of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). Thus, it appealed to the present rather than the past, which was largely a formal matter for local residents, while Thälmann himself was merely a ritualistic image. In a sense, it is a monument with a delayed effect.

Considering the residential area as a whole, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of the formation of "place-based emotional communities" (Madgin, 2025, p. 40–42) is observed not only in relation to the protection of architectural monuments of a more classical type, but also in the case of mass construction projects that possess special qualities of belonging, identity and authenticity of the environment, in relation to which mechanisms of solidarity, participation and joint action also arise, and these processes can occur against the background of the evolution of symbolic conflicts regarding collective memory, historical justice and other elements of public discourse in its spatial dimension.

Given the geographical and cultural diversity of post-socialist cities in Europe, the ways in which public spaces from the socialist period are reimagined, remembered, and reused also vary significantly: they are objects of a political debate, they are destroyed, or become objects of mass interest in the form of *commie tourism* (Diener, and Hagen, 2013), and sometimes they simply symbolically disappear into oblivion. The Ernst-Thälmann-Park case seems to be important because, despite its specificity, it is not unique: it can easily be scaled up not only within the former GDR, where many monuments, urban planning elements and public spaces from the socialist period remain, but also much more broadly, within the territory of the former Eastern Bloc, where the architectural and urban legacy of socialism continues to be both the subject of symbolic conflicts and, at the same time, a familiar visual backdrop to everyday life for millions of people in the cities after transition.

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