

ECHOES OF THE EAST: REIMAGINING GARAGE COMPLEXES' FUTURES IN THE FORMER GDR

1. A landscape of garages

If asked to name some of the most striking features of Saxony's urban landscape, one would probably mention the brickworks of Chemnitz, Plauen or Riesa, the Art Nouveau facades of Leipzig or the Baroque city centre of Dresden. One would maybe also point out some of the distinctive features of the modern socialist architecture developed under the GDR: the austere *Plattenbau*, the large and underused avenues, or the massive sculpture of Karl Marx' head in the city centre of Chemnitz. However, one element would probably go unnoticed in spite of its overwhelming presence in Saxony and the rest of the former East Germany, and despite its relevance to understanding the cultural and social implications of the *Wende* today: the GDR garage complexes.

Usually organised in rows of a few to several hundred boxes, the garage complexes can be found mainly on the outskirts of East German cities, usually near socialist housing. Although they follow a rather strict architectural plan (3 metres high and 6 metres long) and are made from a limited range of materials (cement, bricks and prefabricated panels for the walls, corrugated metal sheets and bituminous coatings for the roof)¹, the GDR garages are also subject to some aesthetic variations. Walking through the garage complexes of Saxony, we may come across metal or wooden doors painted in all sorts of colours, and flat or sloping roofs. These differences reflect the way the garage complexes were built due to the guidelines of the German Democratic Republic regime. Officially, the garage's sole authorised purpose was to protect the easily damageable Trabants and other cars available in the GDR at the time. In order to have access, neighbours would have to organise themselves into *Garagengemeinschaften* and build the complex with their own hands. Each worker either had to spend a defined number of hours working on the construction or needed to pay a fine of a few Marks per missed hour. Today, many of these *Garagengemeinschaften* survived the reunification and are still in charge of the proper functioning of the complexes.

¹ Jens Casper/Luise Rellensmann/Martin Maleschka, *Das Garagenmanifest*, Zürich 2021.

Although garages were only officially allowed to be used for storing cars, their users quickly developed other functions for these spaces. In the context of the scarcity economy (*Mangelwirtschaft*) typical of the social organisation of the GDR, garages were also used as workshops for repairing vehicles or as a substitute for the attic. They were also social spaces where people would gather, and it was not rare to see a *Rostfest* being organised in the courtyard of complexes. Aside from their designed function, the garages thus simultaneously filled the role of a rather „private“ realm out of the gaze of the regime, and as a social space, whose commitments punctuated the lives of *Gemeinschaft* members.²



Abb. 1
Garage complex in
Chemnitz-Sonnenberg
(Foto: L. Bonvin).

As for today, these complexes are in a rather precarious situation. The social component of garage culture seems to have progressively disappeared since the *Wende*, as most of the users I met in the field explained. Even though most of the garages are still in use – mainly as parking spots or storage units – they seem eerily out of place and time, and mostly deserted. Moreover, the complexes are at the heart of debates on urban development, as most of them are built on public ground and thus belong to municipalities. Indeed, the Reunification, and with it the disappearance of East German laws, led to a rather chaotic situation for garage owners. According to the East German legal system, one could own an object (in this case, a garage) on state-owned land without being able to claim ownership of the land itself. This distinction between land and object ownership was specific to the GDR context and did not exist in the Federal Republic or in the new legislation of reunified Germany. After the *Wende*, the legislator had to find a solution to this conundrum. In some cases, the *Garagengemeinschaft* would buy the plot, and thus become the legal owner of both the land and the garage complex. In other cases, the State or municipality remained the owner of the land. In this case, after a transitional period lasting until 2022, public authorities can decide to reuse the land and the garage

² Ebd.

owners are obliged to return the plot to its original state. In other words, users will have to demolish their garages at their own expense. Some complexes have already been targeted by urban development projects or have been completely destroyed. In Leipzig for instance, more than 2.000 garages will be demolished by 2030 as part of a project to renovate the city's schools.³ Therefore, the future of garages raises the following questions: In their capacity as living reminders of the GDR time, should they be considered as cultural and historical heritage and thus protected against all odds? Or should they be seen mainly as spaces where neighbours gather, socialise, and engage in practices such as tinkering? In this case, how can the „GDR garage culture“ continue to flourish and develop despite the precariousness of the complexes themselves?

It is this tension between space and practices that I want to interrogate in this article, and thus I will try to decorrelate the „GDR garage culture“ (especially the garage as a tinkering space and as a place where neighbours' social life can blossom) from the materiality of the garage itself. To this end, I will describe the case of a site in Chemnitz that, although not a garage complex per se, is witness to the development of social and creative practices typical of GDR garage culture. I will then reflect on questions of patrimonialisation and the challenges of considering garages as cultural heritage.



Abb. 2
Garage complex in
Chemnitz-Kassberg
(Foto: L. Bonvin).

The data I use to form my argument has been collected during four months of fieldwork in Saxony, mainly in Chemnitz and in Nünchritz, a village in the surroundings of Riesa. During this immersive research conducted in the frame of my Masters thesis⁴, I had the opportunity to conduct several interviews with garage owners and cultural actors

3 Ralf Julke, Leipziger Schulhausbau: 18 Garagengemeinschaften sind von Schulbau bzw. Grundstückstausch betroffen, in: Leipziger Zeitung v. 10.5.2022, <https://www.l-iz.de/politik/leipzig/2022/05/leipziger-schulhausbau-18-garagengemeinschaften-sind-von-schulbau-bzw-grundstueckstausch-betroffen-448408> [Aufruf am 6.3.2024].

4 Leah Bonvin, Echoes of the East. Unearthing (Post)Socialist Heritage in Chemnitz' Garages. Unveröff, Masterarbeit, Universität Basel 2023.

involved in the topic, as well as to engage in participatory observation and archival work. This data is analysed in the light of the concept of post-socialism as developed in the current scholarship in Urban Studies. For this reason, before delving into the results gathered in the field, I will give a brief overview of the concept of post-socialism in order to give the reader a better grasp of the issues at stake.

2. Post-socialism in Urban Studies

First, it is important to bear in mind that GDR garages, in spite of playing an important role in East German automobile culture throughout the decades of the socialist regime's ruling, have been overlooked by the scholarship until very recently. Even in the work of scholars who dedicated a significant part of their work to the automobile culture in the GDR⁵, garage complexes have not been studied as objects of knowledge in themselves. In this sense, the systematic work of Caspers and Rellensman at the heart of their „Garage Manifest“⁶ was a seminal work in the acceptance of garages as architectural subjects, whereas Tuvikene, working on their Estonian counterparts, contributed to the understanding of garages through a socio-historical lens.⁷

I would argue, however, that GDR garage complexes fit perfectly into the broader scholarship on post-socialism. As some authors⁸ have shown, the „post“ suffix first and foremost indicates a rupture. Studying „post“ societies means understanding how economic, political, and cultural systems have died, survived, and sometimes morphed into other kinds of structures. However, the nature of the „post“ in post-socialism can be challenging to grasp. As Houssay-Holzschuch asks: „How do we spot the end of something that is also an ending“⁹? In other words, is post-socialism simply a transitional condition between communism and capitalism, a kind of „end of history“, or is it rather a lasting situation? Stenning and Hörschelmann distinguish between the „triple transition“ faced by socialist states in 1989 (the „reform of economic structures“, the „construction of democratic institutions“, and the „remaking of international relationships“), and the everyday experiences of people living in and making sense of the

5 See Kurt Möser, Autobasteln: Modifying, Maintaining, and Repairing Private Cars in the GDR, 1970–1990, in: Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Hg.), *The Socialist Car. Automobility in the Eastern Bloc*, Ithaca 2011, S. 157–169; Eli Rubin, Understanding a Car in the Context of a System: Trabants, Marzahn, and East German Socialism, in: ebd., S. 124–140.

6 Casper/Rellensmann/Maleschka, *Garagenmanifest* (wie Anm.1).

7 Tauri Tuvikene, From Soviet to Post-Soviet with Transformation of the Fragmented Urban Landscape: The Case of Garage Areas in Estonia, in: *Landscape Research* 35 (2010) H.5, S. 509–528.

8 Tauri Tuvikene, Strategies for Comparative Urbanism: Post-Socialism as a De-Territorialized Concept, in: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40 (2016) H.1, S. 132–146; Nicolas Offenstadt, *Le pays disparu: sur les traces de la RDA*, Paris 2019; Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch, Keeping You Post-Ed: Space-Time Regimes, Metaphors, and Post-Apartheid, in: *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11 (2021) H.3, S. 1–21.

9 Houssay-Holzschuch, Keeping You Post-Ed (wie Anm. 8), S. 2.

post-socialist environment.¹⁰ The term post-socialist thus conveys two meanings: on the one hand, it represents the new political and economic model developed after the fall of the USSR, or, in our case, after the *Wende*. On the other hand, „the [post] prefix points to the difficulty of making a clean break with the past, to the coexistence of (not so) past and ‘post’ logics, and to the messiness and entanglements of social dynamics“¹¹. This article focuses on the second definition and aims to illustrate the „messiness“ of post-socialism through the example of the GDR garage complexes. In order to do so, I borrow an analytical tool developed by Houssay-Holzschuch in order to read the entanglements of past and present logics in „post“ landscapes: the metaphor of the Hermit Crab.

Post-socialist shells

In her work, Houssay-Holzschuch analyses some of the architectural remains of the South African apartheid regime as being „recycled“.¹² Places such as buffer zones that once surrounded the townships are now being reclaimed and used by black communities. Like hermit crabs, people „embody [...] the ‘loosening’ and possible transfiguration of once rigid structures“.¹³ I argue that garages can also be understood as such „rigid structures“ from the past in which new uses are being developed. However, I believe that there is more to the Hermit Crab metaphor that can be expanded on in this case. Indeed, the following chapter will show how garage users not only recycle their space, but also move to other kinds of shells.

3. From a shell to the other

As mentioned previously, Houssay-Holzschuch considers „recycling“ as a means of „transfiguration“ of old structures tied to times of hardship. Examples of this phenomenon can definitely be observed in the case of the garage complexes of Saxony. Some of the ones I visited had been turned into artist's *ateliers*, where people paint, sculpt or tinker. W. for instance uses his garage as a space of creation for his dreamlike landscapes populated by creatures made out of scraps of metal and wood. Other garages are used as party locations, where young people meet to socialise or watch football.

However, the majority of the users I met during my research did use their garage as a mere storage unit. This point can be illustrated by the case of H., who recently moved from his native village of Nünchritz to settle in Dresden. He nonetheless kept his old garage to store his winter tires and some of his most cumbersome belongings. Some of the older garage owners were also adamant that nowadays most people, especially

10 Alison Stenning/Kathrin Hörschelmann, History, Geography and Difference in the Post-Socialist World: Or, Do We Still Need Post-Socialism?, in: *Antipode* 40 (2008) H.2, S. 312-335, hier S. 314.

11 Houssay-Holzschuch, Keeping You Post-Ed (wie Ann. 8), S. 4.

12 Ebd., S. 14.

13 Ebd., S. 16.



Abb. 3
Garage complex in
Nünchritz (Foto: L.
Bonvin).

younger ones, only use their garage as a parking spot for their car and that the social dimension had disappeared. A member of a *Garagengemeinschaft* in Chemnitz complained, for instance, that new garage users „*didn't even say hello*“.



Abb. 4
Garage complex in
Chemnitz-Altendorf
(Foto: L. Bonvin).

Whereas this situation could be read as the slow death of the traditional garage „culture“, I would argue that it has more to do with the „rigidity“ of the GDR garage itself. During my research, I found that the function of the garage often did not differ much from the traditional uses developed during the GDR era. While older users sometimes complained about the lack of friendly relations with their new neighbours, I did observe several moments of sociality happening among younger garage owners. An enlightening example is the case of P., a 20 year old Chemnitzer who caught the tinkering bug working with his father as a child. He uses two garages, one for his hobbies and mechanical work, and one as a party venue. As P. explained, he is meeting there almost every

week with his friends to chat, drink, and listen to music. To this end, P. skilfully divided his garage to transform the back into a small living room, with sofas and coloured lights. When I asked for more details about the parties, he answered with a smile: „*What happens in the garage stays in the garage*“. As we talked, a friend of his joined us. The two young men were planning to fix one of the speakers installed in the garage. They set to work under the tender gaze of P.'s father, who later said: „*It is better for young people to be here than hanging out in the street*“.



Abb. 5
Garage complex in
Chemnitz-Mitte (Foto:
L. Bonvin).

As this example shows, it would be an exaggeration to proclaim the death of social practices in garages. Problems rather arise when garages themselves are no longer suitable shells for their users and their tinkering activities. In many cases, garages are indeed too small to accommodate modern cars, which have become much larger than the tiny Trabants. To alleviate this situation, users resort to various strategies: trying to buy a second garage, moving to a slightly bigger one, or, if they feel too cramped, seeking other types of spaces. The encounters I report below illustrate this last strategy.

Outgrowing the shell

One cold morning of February 2023, I met with W. for an interview. I had been told that W. was a prolific sculptor and *old-timer* collecting vintage vehicles in a garage complex shared with other users. In other words, a rather traditional use of garage in the post-GDR context. I was thus very surprised when I arrived at the meeting point. In lieu of the traditional rows of identical garages, it is a very different landscape that unfolded before my eyes: the garages were in fact the remains of a disaffected factory that had been redesigned to offer several working spaces. During my interview with W., who rents a space there since 2003, I learned that this factory, referred hereafter as the *Fabrik*, had been built in the late 19th century and abandoned just after the *Wende*. Shortly after the reunification, the *Fabrik* was bought by a West German investor who then rented the space to people in need of a space to tinker or store material. The *Fabrik* is currently

owned by a nearby cultural centre, who was aiming to turn it into a party venue. The state of the building being very poor, the project was abandoned and the space is now a textbook case of post-socialist „in-between spaces“, where the precarious state of old structures allows for intermediate use.¹⁴



Abb. 6
„The Fabrik“ in Chemnitz (Foto: L. Bonvin).

Interestingly, the majority of the users I met in the *Fabrik* used to have a „traditional“ GDR garage before moving into the factory. For instance, J., an active member of the tuning scene of Chemnitz told me:

Earlier, we started in the small GDR garages. When we were 15, with the bike or the moped, the size was still ok. But for tuning you need machines, you need technical tools and the [GDR] garages are too small for that.

The *Fabrik* is also a profoundly social space, where people help one another and spend time together. W. told me for instance that „*people meet [in the Fabrik] to exchange ideas, chit-chat, philosophise, drink beers, grill...*“ Other users of the *Fabrik* also explained how important the social aspect of the space was for them. A man I met after my interview with W. told me for instance:

I use [the garage] for my hobby. And besides, it also became a meeting place. People who have nothing to do with cars or repair come to have a beer, and enjoy the end of the workday.

M., who also rents a space in the *Fabrik*, reflected on the sense of solidarity that has developed among the garage's users. She explained how neighbours help each other out,

¹⁴ Martin Müller/Elena Trubina, Improvising Urban Spaces, Inhabiting the in-Between, in: Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 38 (2020) H.4, S. 664-681.

exchange tools and advice. For her, the *Fabrik* is also a space of freedom, where she feels at ease. As she puts it: „*As long as you don't bother anyone, you can do whatever you want here*“. To illustrate her point, M. went on telling me about some of the most memorable parties she had organised in her garage: Live music, home-made pizza and even, one time, a police visit for night-time disturbance. M. assured me that she would have gladly invited me to one of those parties, but they were mainly taking place in the summer, when the *Fabrik* courtyard was blooming. Nevertheless, the mood was already festive in these early days of spring and after our interview, M. promptly joined her neighbours who were celebrating the *Feierabend* in front of their garages, sitting on folding chairs around a pack of beer, all bundled up in their winter jackets.

It is worth noting that users I met in the *Fabrik* did not only move from a smaller shell to a more suitable one; they also took over another remnant of socialism, namely an old factory abandoned since the *Wende*. The former GDR, and former socialist regions more generally, are often pictured as a „disappeared country“ whose history is only visible through ruins and traces.¹⁵ Offenstadt for instance explored countless factories or official buildings that had been significant during the socialist time. In his descriptions, all are vacant and abandoned.

However, we see with the example of the *Fabrik* that such spaces can also have a „second life“. Examples of abandoned factories in post-industrialized cities turned into fancy cocktail bars, expensive lofts or cultural venues are countless. What makes the *Fabrik* particularly interesting is that the factory welcomes users and practices that were already present during the GDR times. The practices did not change, they just moved from one shell to the other.

This example shows how „the coexistence of (not so) past and 'post' logics“¹⁶ enfolds in the context of East German garage culture. In this case, typical garage activities such as car tinkering and social interactions are carried out in another kind of (post-socialist) space.

4. Protecting garage „culture“

With these examples encountered in the field, I aimed to show how the GDR garage, being a typical „post-socialist“ space, cannot be easily summed up and categorised. The entanglement of materiality and practices through different contexts and space-times raises the question: What really is the GDR garage culture? Is it mainly associated with the space in itself, or with the practices traditionally taking place there? This question is all the more pressing as some garages are threatened with demolition due to urban development. Should they be patrimonialised, protected?

As mentioned previously, garage complexes are just starting to be a topic of interest for architects and cultural actors, who also start to tackle the issue of preservation. In the

15 Offenstadt, Le pays disparu (wie Anm. 8).

16 Houssay-Holzschuch, Keeping You Post-Ed (wie Anm. 8), S. 4.

frame of Chemnitz2025, the European Capital of Culture program that will take place in the Saxon city over the year 2025, a team works on the matter of the GDR garage complexes specifically. Among other curatorial dimensions, they try to tackle this question of cultural heritage. During an interview with a member of the team, they explained that they were understanding heritage as a dynamic and grassroot practice. In other words, it is the community itself that should discuss questions of heritage, and grant the status of „cultural heritage“ to a space they deem of interest. The status could then be withdrawn at any time. For the team, it would be a way of using heritage as an actual protective tool that would allow the „spirit“ of a place to thrive. This idea is also present in the literature. Architect and monument conservation expert Luise Rellensmann argues for instance that „heritage should break its own rules“ and that „to demonstrate and act upon significance does not always require the preservation of fabric“¹⁷. In this sense, protecting the garages would not necessarily mean going down the traditional road of architectural preservation. The team made this clear during several of our meetings: not all garages can be protected against decay or urban development projects. It is rather a matter of protecting both the garages that are still used and loved by the community, and the immaterial garage culture. This complexity is perfectly illustrated by the following two stories I encountered during fieldwork.

A passion for heritage

I have already mentioned P., the young man from Chemnitz, who uses one of his garages as a social space and the other as a mechanical workshop where he develops his passion for tinkering inherited from his father. As he explained, P. spent a significant part of his childhood observing his dad repairing rare GDR mopeds, painting parts, greasing screws. For P., his garage is therefore more than just a box made of wood and corrugated iron. First and foremost, it is inscribed in a father-son relationship.

However, his garage is not only the result of a common passion shared with his father: there are also other continuities at play. When I visited P.'s garage, a GDR licence plate displayed on the wall caught my attention. Old GDR plates are very common in garages and I saw them in most of the ones I visited, but I was surprised to see it in the garage of a young man born well after the *Wende*, among the merry mess of inside jokes scribbled on the walls by his friends and advertisements for German liquors. He explained that the licence plate belonged to the former owner of the garage, and that he did not see why he would take it off.

As we can see, P.'s garage is embedded in a logic of transmission both on a personal and a larger scale. On the one hand, he learns to maintain GDR mopeds with his father; on the other hand, his garage is the perfect example of the typical GDR garage with its old licence plates on the wall, the tinkering and the weekly parties. However, it would be

¹⁷ John Schofield/Luise Rellensmann, Underground Heritage: Berlin Techno and the Changing City, in: *Heritage & Society* 8 (2015) H.2, S. 111-138, hier S. 134.

hasty to consider P.'s situation as the norm as questions of filial transmission sometimes unfold very differently.

Among boxes

H. moved out of his native village two years prior to our interview. Retired, with all of his children out of the nest, he did not feel anything holding him back there. But he kept his garage. When I visited it, it was almost empty except for two objects facing each other in the half-light: on the one side, an old solid wood sideboard belonging to H.'s mother who lives in a retirement home. On the other side, a cardboard box full of his son's childhood belongings. He has been living in West Germany for years and has no desire to ever come back to Saxony. H. was planning to bring the boxes to his son a few weeks after our meeting. We contemplated the sideboard and the boxes in silence for a while, and H. said:

Yeah... you have to take care [entsorgen] of it a bit at some point, because I know how it goes... With my parents back then, when it came to an end, the kids had to do all the work.

Here, filial transmission must be understood in terms other than material inheritance. H.'s gift to his son is the assurance that he will never have to take care of his father's garage.

These two stories show how the same space can have diametrically opposed implications. The garages used by P. and his father are living (and lived) spaces where knowledge is being transmitted, whereas H.'s garage is a space in transition. It is what maintains his relationship to his native village, but it also has the potential to become a burden on his child. In Saxony, there are dozens of garage users like H. and P., and hundreds of other situations. These two examples thus illuminate the need to work on a case-by-case basis and to develop dynamic heritage preservation policies for post-socialist spaces.

5. Conclusion

With this article, I hope to have shown how reading GDR garage complexes through the lens of post-socialism allows for a looser comprehension of post-GDR spaces. Now that garages are starting to be seen as relevant research subjects, it is fundamental to think of them not only as vestiges of the past but as „post-socialist“ spaces, and to reflect on their relevance today. Like the shells of hermit crabs, garages are sometimes abandoned, exchanged or outgrown, while other kinds of space can also shelter traditional GDR practices. The future of garage complexes, akin to other „post“ spaces, is then in the hands of the community. A collective reflection between local actors and garage users is essential to determine the conditions under which both the complexes themselves and the GDR garage culture should be preserved. As previously noted, some actors such as Chemnitz2025 are currently working on this issue, and we can only hope that others will step up to the task and contribute to shaping a meaningful future for these garages and their users, in Saxony and beyond.

