

Bryn Mawr College
Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr
College

Growth and Structure of Cities Faculty Research
and Scholarship

Growth and Structure of Cities

2012

Spaces of Identity in East European Cities

Carola Hein

Bryn Mawr College, chein@brynmawr.edu

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs

 Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#),
and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Custom Citation

Hein, Carola. "Spaces of Identity in East European Cities." *Journal of Urban History* 38, no. 2 (2012): 372-378.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/cities_pubs/21

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Spaces of Identity in East European Cities

Czaplicka, John; Gelazis, Nida; Ruble, Blair A., eds. (2009). *Cities After the Fall of Communism: Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity*. Washington, DC, Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Johns Hopkins University Press, 368 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, index, \$65 hardcover.

Makaš, Emily Gunzburger; Conley, Tanja Damljanović, eds. (2009). *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires: Planning in Central and Southeastern Europe*. London, New York: Routledge, 286 pp., illustrations, bibliography, notes, index, \$120 hardcover.

Stanilov, Kiril, ed. (2007). *The Post-Socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism*. Dordrecht: Springer, 490 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, notes, \$239 hardcover.

Urban, Florian (2009). *Neo-historical East Berlin: Architecture and Urban Design in the German Democratic Republic 1970-1990*. Farnham: Ashgate, 283 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, notes, index, \$124.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by: Carola Hein, Bryn Mawr College, USA

Cities are the locus and tool of political, economic, social, religious and cultural activities. Their built environment supports numerous functional needs; it also expresses historic preferences, contemporary choices and future visions of responsible decision-makers and the greater population. A city's often multiple identities and the identities of its population are reflected in the form and location of major government buildings and foreign representations, of grand museums or symbolic educational structures, in public spaces and major streets, in select monuments or housing districts. The presence or absence of these buildings, their construction or demolition, their location close to the center or on the periphery, in open space or in a dense neighborhood, their cost and their ownership, their name and their marketing, as well as their

accessibility-- all of these factors influence the lives of citizens, reflect local (and national) preferences, generate local identities, and often determine future building decisions.

These structures, and their locations and relationships, provide us with information on the civic or national, diasporic or political, group or individual identities at play in each city. These dynamics are particularly interesting in capitals, and where national governments shape the built environment at scales beyond the means and possibilities of a municipality. As political, economic, and social contexts change, the built environment keeps track of a location's history; political collapses, wars, or forced migrations may provide national or local stakeholders an opportunity for the reinterpretation and rewriting of urban space. Local or external, public or private forces can also attempt to change identities, to reposition a city functionally and conceptually, and to create new mindscapes, through urban renewal programs, a multitude of individual actions, festivals, or the renaming of streets. Decision makers may use a place's multiple connotations to play up their own values and highlight their power. A city's identity is thus something that various actors including citizens can construct, shape, and reimagine.

The rewriting of urban spaces in conjunction with a reimagining of identities is a core theme of all four books reviewed here. They focus on cities in Eastern Europe, many of which have a millenary history and hence numerous layers of urban form. It is a region where, as Gelazis, Czaplicka and Ruble phrase it, people throughout history have used "the symbolism of the built environment to put a community on the map of 'Europe'." (p. 10). This area has seen the creation of new nation states after the demise of the Ottoman Empire (between 1815 and 1914) and the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (dissolved in 1918), the rise and fall of communism in the 20th century, the re-creation of nation states in areas that had been part of the Soviet Union after the fall of the iron curtain in 1989, and the enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004. Whether or not the cities discussed in these four volumes are now part of the new Europe, the accession of twelve new members from Eastern and Central Europe to the EU has required them to position themselves in relation to (Western) Europe and the EU. It is also an area that has been traditionally under the influence of Western Europe as well as Russia, a place of exchange between East and West.

The disciplinary backgrounds of the authors and editors ranges from art history, architectural history, and urban history to architecture and planning. This diversity helps to provide a broad view on the complex transformations of the cities concerned. Makaš and

Conley's edited volume on *Capital Cities in Central and South Eastern Europe* focuses on the creation of capital city landscapes in existing cities as a result of nationalist movements and the creation of nation states in the area of the former Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires. The arrival of new rulers (a surprising number of them German princes, for example in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, but also Finland and Belgium) and their governments, and the resulting growth of population, brought with it major challenges. Because most of these new nations did not have local professionals, the new rulers invited foreign architects and planners to develop urban plans and design buildings that responded to the multiple challenges of urbanization, modernization, and beautification and to the goal of establishing a spatial vessel for newly forming identities.

What it means for national elites to redesign their capital is further highlighted in Florian Urban's monograph-length study on *Neo-historical East Berlin*. His highly detailed research presents another regime that used urban spaces and buildings, including in this case housing and shopping/entertainment districts, to make a statement about its own importance (p. 226). Urban focuses on East Berlin between the 1970s and 1990, when then head of state Erich Honecker veered away from the vision of future reunification and attempted to establish the country as an independent state. During this time period, neo-historical Berlin evolved, Urban states, as a conglomerate of different design approaches (p. 9). And, as Urban seems to imply, one may consider this architecture as the spatial reflection of a change in national definition and identity.

The transformation of former socialist cities after the fall of the Iron Curtain is at the core of the edited volumes by Kiril Stanilov and by John Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis and Blair A. Ruble. The sudden reduction of state intervention in the economy, the emergence of new actors, the creation of new planning processes, rapid privatization, the question of restitution or compensation of former owners, as well as housing reform, led to extensive urban transformation of the entire city, its function and symbolism. While the term "Wild East" may have been widely used to describe the seeming chaos of these changes, it is often public policies regarding the redistribution of land, buildings and services that underlie post-socialist transformation, as Stanilov appropriately underlines (p. 347).

As Conley and Makaš explain in their introduction, despite different patterns of decline, different center/periphery relationships in the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and different historic urban forms, there were numerous similarities in terms of the rise of nationalist

movements, new social and economic realities, the redistribution of power through the rise of the middle class, extensive growth of cities, industrialization and technical innovation, as well as the common theme of the “formation of modern nation-states, and the construction or adaptation of capital cities to give visual support to national ideologies” (p. 2). The creation of street axes, public spaces, civic institutions, or a major cathedral, the establishment of regulation plans and building regulations were thus just as much (if not more) a statement of modernization and Europeanization, as Nathaniel D. Wood points out in the conclusion.¹

For the newly created countries discussed in the first section of the book (Greece, Serbia, Romania, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Albania, Turkey) de-Ottomanization meant becoming European and modern. Hence they removed “the mosques, baths, bazaars and other structures perceived as un-European and as symbols of the former occupying empire” (p. 6), and created new civic silhouettes “as if the pre-existing city were a blank slate” (p. 21). Such interventions reflected the influence of Paris and Vienna, of Berlin and Budapest, as positive models, whereas Constantinople/Istanbul appeared as the example to overcome. The cases discussed in this first part of the book (Athens, Belgrade, Bucharest, Cetinje, Sofia, Tirana, Ankara) mostly follow similar patterns (p. 22), and the chapters provide an overview of diverse public actors, large scale urban interventions, and major new buildings that served representative as much as practical needs.

Monumental design and styles were an important issue for Athens, capital of the first state to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire, as Eleni Bastéa points out. “Since Europe claimed its roots in ancient Greece and modern Greece oriented its policy towards Europe” (p. 36), the city’s choice of neo-classicism reflected the “desire to become part of European nations, integrate cultural political unity, and connection to classical past” (p. 29). Other cities, such as Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia, experienced political changes after their establishment as new capitals. In each location we see a defilade of foreign architects, including Russians fleeing the October Revolution who were entrusted to build in Belgrade in the monumental manner of tsarist Russia (p. 53)

The other three case studies in this volume hold some surprises. The capital of Montenegro, Cetinje, a city the size of a village, tried to establish itself as the capital of an independent country, as Maja Dragícević and Rachel Rossner show. The construction of five embassies - in the center and at both ends of the city (pp.78 and 83) - framed the cityscape and

indicated the desire of the country to become modern and to connect to Europe. Cetinje only remained a capital until World War I, but its grand palaces and embassies today house cultural functions (p. 89). Meanwhile, Gentiana Kera presents Tirana, a city that became the capital of Albania only in the 1920s, as a city that had no pre-Ottoman past that could serve as inspiration. And Ankara, perhaps the best known of all the case studies featured here, built after the defeat in World War I, appeared as a liberation from the long-standing dominance of Istanbul and served as a symbol of the reinvention of Turkey.

The second section (unfortunately not visually separated from the first part of the book) discusses capitals formed in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire (Budapest, Prague, Bratislava, Cracow and Warsaw, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Sarajevo). These chapters complement the perspectives provided by Eve Blau and Monika Platzer in *Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe, 1890-1937*.² Among the case studies, the examination of Sarajevo by Makaš stands out. Even though the city became a capital of an independent state only in the 1990s, its development as the center of Bosnian identity saw the development of Pseudo-Moorish styles “to represent the ‘oriental’ character of Bosnia” (p. 250).

Makaš and Conley have compiled a volume that focuses on presenting little known case studies from Central and Southeastern Europe to the English-speaking world. While the connections to Western Europe have been studied occasionally, this volume brings Russia into the larger discussion of European form and therewith opens up a range of important questions that merit further, comparative research (including comparison with the modernization of Japanese cities). The book does not attempt to offer insights on the theory of capital cities or extensive comparative analysis and instead focuses on issues of urban planning and the professionals involved. Many potential themes for discussion, including questions of housing, for example, are addressed only in selected chapters and in passing. In its focus this volume complements other books in the same series.³ Makaš and Conley’s book comes at a time when many of the cities discussed here have become part of the EU, and reminds the reader that these cities have already been part of the larger European space and identity for centuries and have reshaped their cityscapes since the 19th century with an eye to European acceptance.

A number of the cities discussed in these four books came under Soviet control after World War II, and many of them experienced another round of transformation at that time. The early years of Soviet-inspired political architecture left a common mark on many of them. For

example, Stalinist skyscrapers modeled after Moscow's projected "Seven Sisters" dominate the cityscapes of Warsaw and Riga.

In contrast, it is the period of the neo-historical restoration projects, re-erected buildings and new constructions in historical styles, and the larger context of engaging with history that is at the heart of Florian Urban's book on East Berlin, providing the reader with an example of the complexity of creating spatial references under the socialist regimes. The book starts with what was at the time a surprising choice: the renovation of nineteenth century tenement housing in the Arconaplatz and Arnimplatz areas. These neighborhoods had earlier been criticized as examples of urban decay and the plight of the working class, and had been scheduled for demolition. The lack of sanitary facilities was a major point of criticism. The government started renewal in 1972 but only as a temporary measure, due to the lack of resources for complete rebuilding. Citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) citizens as well as foreign commentators came to praise these buildings, setting the stage for revisiting the demolition policy.

Over time, politicians as well as citizens came to view nineteenth century housing as a pleasant aesthetic environment, healthy, socially integrative, and enfranchising (p. 23). The result was a building policy that featured a contextual urbanism and the reconstruction of an old-town atmosphere. As Urban points out, parallel developments and surprising interactions occurred between East and West, expressed notably in the competing celebrations of Berlin's 750th anniversary. Even West Berlin's *Behutsame Stadterneuerung (Gentle Urban Renewal)* had its counterpart in the renovation of the Prenzlauer Berg area, East Berlin's old, lively and non-conformist district, and the "discovery of everyday life by East German architects, planners, and sociologists" (p. 150).

In particular the case of the Nikolaiviertel highlights the East German leaders' "claim for independent nationhood," as the project architect Günter Stahn pointed out (p. 107). An urban district destroyed in the war and rebuilt with historic references, including cobblestone alleys, wrought iron signs, and historic monuments, and featuring restaurants, bars, apartments, and museums, the project was inaugurated with much fanfare in 1987. Other examples of historic reconstruction include the Platz der Akademie and particularly the unfinished Friedrichstrasse project for a glitzy entertainment district, discussed in chapters 6 and 7. The latter in particular would have added a new facet to socialist urban life, but it was still under construction when the Wall fell.

As Urban highlights in his conclusion, the neo-historical design projects only became possible because decision makers referred to a generic idea of the city rather than to Berlin's specific history. Today these areas have become part of the Berlin streetscape; due to reunification, it becomes more and more difficult to comprehend the particularities of the creation of these structures. The book thus provides the reader with a unique glimpse into the workings of a socialist regime and a background for better understanding of the ongoing reshaping of post-socialist cities. The book ends by pointing to the larger set of issues that emerged as the former socialist city restructured, creating space for office buildings, shopping malls and new housing types, and therewith sets the stage for the other two books under review here.

The transformation of the former socialist city is at the core of these two books. As Stanilov points out, there is already a large body of literature on the political and economic as well as social transformations in post-socialist cities but urban form and structure have been less studied. In part this lacuna is due to the time that such transformations take (pp. 1-2). However, as the collapse and restructuring after socialism has affected everyone and every facet of urban life, it is a theme worth examining in depth. It is also intimately related to the theme of space and identity that brings the present selection of books together. Stanilov identifies six major themes in urban form and transformation through which he examines the various facets of urban transformation in post-socialist cities. For each of these themes (regional development trends, non-residential development, residential development, evolution of public space, public policy and urban development, and planning the post-socialist city), Stanilov provides a comprehensive introduction, giving his book the quality of a monograph with a coherent and comparative perspective that is completed by detailed investigation of specific aspects of individual cities. It provides the reader with a kaleidoscopic view of transformation in Eastern and Central European cities. The book thus combines the best aspects of monograph and edited volume.

The new post-socialist logic (re)-creates urban hierarchies, reviving pre-socialist networks and dismantling the socialist system of concentrating growth in the largest regional centers at the expense of other settlements--"reverse urbanization," as the editors call it (p. 29), referencing György Enyedi.⁴ Rapid development and metropolitan expansion characterize many of the national capitals, regional centers, and some areas close to the borders with Western Europe; its counterpart is the relative abandonment of specifically socialist mono-functional

academic or industrial towns, for example (pp. 31, 62). The various phases in which global players have reshaped urban form since the 1990s are highlighted in numerous chapters. Luděk Sýkora's discussion of office development and post-communist city formation in Prague (summarized in a well-presented table) illustrates particularly well the different periods of development of the office market, from an early period determined by scarcity and transformation of existing buildings, to the construction of new offices first in the center and, later, in office parks on the periphery and large-scale redevelopment projects in inner city areas (pp. 130-31). Similar patterns of socio-economic change and its reflection in the built environment are apparent in industrial development, as the example of Budapest (discussed by Eva Kiss) shows, and can also be observed through the example of the retail market, as Alla Makhrova and Irina Molodikova discuss for Moscow.

Socialist housing, as part 3 highlights, embodied socialist politics and decision-making (p. 182), but as the funding from the former government disappeared, land ownership changed and publicly owned residential estates were privatized, single family houses appeared in suburban areas, and residential patterns changed extensively. As a result of shifting population densities, central urban areas started to decay, and cities grew with little control. The ratio between public and private transportation shifted: as the number of privately owned cars increased, public transportation ridership declined, as did its financing. While some of these changes can be observed throughout post-socialist cities, their specifics vary, as each country had a different history and governance structure and adopted its own approaches towards privatization (opting for restitution or compensation of former land owners).

The redefinition of public space—areas that hold political, economic, and social meaning-- (discussed in part 4), reveals the extensive implications for space and identity of the transformation of former socialist cities. In her contribution on “Public space in the ‘blue cities’ of Russia” Barbara Engel provides us with extensive insights into the socialist concept of public space. As Stanilov explains, in the socialist city “most space was public by default” and “social interactions were diluted throughout the urban fabric in an entropic fashion” (pp. 270, 271). Public space in the post-socialist city differed not only from this but also extensively from capitalist cities, in availability and use but also pattern and location within the city. Here “those functions are channeled to a fairly limited number of reasonably well-defined streets, squares, and parks, and where social interaction is supported and induced by commercial activities” (p.

271) The post-socialist transformation has led to a broad range of treatments of public space, reflecting the ways in which each city and nation deals with massive privatization, commercialization, and the transformation of streets and urban transport.

National policy for planned urban growth in post-socialist cities is still in its infancy. Commercial actors and non-national players have direct and indirect impacts on urban transformation. The EU, for example, has influenced urban transformation through its focus on large-scale infrastructure and economic development. The earlier *laissez-faire* politics, however, have recently been questioned by scholars, politicians, and citizens, and new concepts are emerging, such as Baltic capitals' bicycle networks (p. 357). Overall, the book succeeds in providing a succinct overview of the transformation of the post-socialist city while offering detailed information through case studies that focus on specific themes or disciplines, from the perspective of scholars who lived through the transformation to post-socialism.

The urban planning focus of Stanilov's edited volume is complemented by John Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis and Blair A. Ruble's examination of the "rapid and simultaneous spatial-temporal, geocultural, geopolitical, and socio-economic transformations" (p. 1) since the 1980s, which focuses more broadly on "cultural landscapes and European identity," as the book's subtitle suggests. The book is divided into three thematic sections, presenting case studies around the themes of "Re-creating Medieval Histories," "Architecture and History at Ports of Entry" and "Cities at the New East-West Border." All chapters address various issues of historic background and identity formation as expressed in the built environment. While the authors focus on the post-socialist period, introductions to the cities' longer history provides necessary background. Each author then highlights specific themes relevant to the particular narrative of a city. Through the chapters of the book we thus witness some cities that turn towards Europe or have even become part of the EU, and others that remain consciously Russian.

Capital cities, again, play an important role in this discussion. Eleven case studies provide in-depth information about the transformation of politics and society and the reformulation of identities as expressed through architecture and urban form. As the editors point out, "The choice of a particular urban past has great implications for the city's present and future identity" (p. 5). In Vilnius, the capital of newly independent Lithuania, for example, we witness the reconstruction of the Lithuanian palace, on the one hand, and the construction of modern edifices

reflecting the global economy, on the other. Vilnius is a particular case, as Kaunas was the capital before independence and the new political structures had to use Soviet-era buildings.

Another intriguing case is discussed by Nicolai N. Petro, who demonstrates how Novgorod uses its history as the fourth largest trading port of the Hanseatic League to underscore its multicultural heritage and its long-standing connection to the larger European sphere. The city has joined the New Hanseatic League and is currently seeking to build a pedestrian mall and international trade complex that would demonstrate its Hanseatic ties (p. 70). Such reconstruction of the past can be part of an academic exercise, thus the governor of the Novgorod region turned to academics to found his urban initiatives (p. 63). The discussion of Wrocław (prewar German Breslau) by Gregor Thum adds to the discussion on multiculturalism. Cleansed of Germans after the war, the city's built heritage was reinvented as Polish after 1945. More recently, the city has reshaped itself as home of the Orange Alternative and thus anti-Soviet resistance (p. 93), and adopted a new self-image: as a European city shaped by various cultural influences in the Polish-Czech-German borderland (p. 95).

The group of cities discussed in the second part--Tallinn, Odessa, Sevastopol, and Kalinigrad, all port cities-- have taken different paths. Tallinn embraced its independence and launched itself onto the global stage, receiving recognition from Jones Lang Lasalle & Lasalle Investment Management as a rising star as early as 2003. Jörg Hackmann focuses on the city's postcommunist architecture and argues that architecture and urban form in Tallinn needs to be viewed in the political and social context of its time and, since the 1980s, as an attempt to depart from socialist models (p. 107). While Tallinn embraces Europe and globalization, Sevastopol stands on the opposite side of the spectrum, as Karl D. Qualls points out. The city, which hosts the Russian Black Sea Fleet, has not repositioned itself with a European identity. Instead it continues to turn towards Moscow, and the Crimean War remains the main reference for identity and landscape design (p. 170). Kalinigrad/Königsberg, discussed by Olga Sezneva, has an even more complicated place as a European city in Russian exclave territory, annexed in 1945 and resettled with Russian speakers.

The third section studies Kharkiv, Lviv, Lodz, and Szczecin, cities in Ukraine and Poland that are now reconnecting to their multicultural pasts. The case study of Lodz by Joanna Michlic is particularly interesting as it showcases a small city, a textile center where foreign entrepreneurs—notably German and Jewish—built factories in the late 19th century, starting a

modernization process comparable to that of American cities at the time (p. 284). Through various initiatives, including the Festival of Dialogue between Four Cultures and the revitalization of the Manufatura, a large postindustrial complex, the city emphasizes its history as melting pot and working class center, and seeks to forge a new identity (with Europe as referencing frame), which is particularly difficult in cities with multi-ethnic (including German) heritage.

These examples demonstrate, as Geladis, Ruble, and Czaplicka write in their conclusion, that the EU's decision to deepen interconnectedness of its member states and simultaneously widen its current borders to embrace postcommunist Europe (Agenda 2000) (p. 335) was important to support these countries in rediscovering their European roots and redefine their national identity in relation to Europe. Displaying the multiple "shared histories, identities and aspirations of the people living in the continent's postcommunist cities" may help in the understanding of what it means to be European (p. 346).

The four books reviewed here offer a kaleidoscope of historical information on capitals and other cities in Central and Eastern Europe. They reflect different readings of urban spaces and identity formation from the early 19th century until today. While Makaš and Conley concentrate on questions of public architecture and urban planning, Urban weaves together various case studies of neo-historic design in East Berlin. Stanilov focuses on aspects of architecture and urban planning, providing an intriguing view of the layering of socialist and post-socialist urban features within the same territory. Czaplicka, Geladis, and Ruble's book adds a theoretical and comprehensive dimension to the study of space and identity through its case studies. Together, the four books underscore the relationship between political power and urban form, and provide the reader with a new perspective on the spatial expressions of civic identity, particularly in regard to an emerging Europe. Given the multiple changes in the area and the location of most of these cities in Soviet-controlled territory during the Cold War, English-language publications on these cities are still limited; these four books are thus a welcome addition to the literature.

¹See also Nathaniel D. Wood, *Becoming Metropolitan: Urban Selfhood and the Making of Cracow* (Dekalb, IL, 2010).

² Munich, 2000.

³ Arturo Almandoz, ed., *Planning Latin America's Capital Cities, 1850-1950* (New York, 2002); David Gordon, ed., *Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities* (London, 2006); Thomas Hall, *Planning Europe's capital cities: aspects of nineteenth-century urban development* (London, 1997).

⁴Their source is: György Enyedi, "Urbanization under Socialism," in Gregory Andrusz, Michael Harloe and Ivan Szelenyi, eds., *Cities after Socialism: Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies*(Oxford, 1996), 100-18.

bio:

Carola Hein is Professor at Bryn Mawr College in the Growth and Structure of Cities Department. Her current research interests include transmission of architectural and urban ideas along international networks, focusing specifically on port cities and the global architecture of oil.