

Everything from Plastic: Promise and Utility in the German Democratic Republic¹

Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Eisenhüttenstadt

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In considering the architectural and cultural legacy of the Eastern Bloc, the everyday interaction between people and their surroundings was not restricted to the physical environment of the street, but included that most intimate of settings: the home. Many take for granted the items used in the home, and yet it is precisely this aspect of utility that makes considering such objects worthwhile. By examining how people felt about their home environment, we can make broader conclusions about how far people accepted the experiment with redefining the home that took place under state socialism.

The Documentation Centre of Everyday Culture of the GDR in Eisenhüttenstadt, Germany, otherwise known as the DOK, is currently exhibiting a collection entitled "Everything from Plastic: Promise and Utility in the GDR". Here, the way in which plastics revolutionised the domestic environment in the German Democratic Republic is under consideration. Plastic was part of the GDR's technical prowess, and the new material came with futuristic promise of abundance and utility. At a basic level, GDR plastics had a great impact upon daily life: they made things once scarce more available, and what a wide variety of colours and forms! This may at first seem an unusual topic for study, but as is often the case, the better something functions, the less it is noticed. Items for the home - and especially those designed for homes in the Eastern Bloc - come with their own political and economic contexts.

Plastics are easily cleaned, reusable, hard to break, and are ultimately rather cheap to produce on a mass scale. Thus, the exhibition deals with what it calls the "plastification" of the home in East Germany. Furthermore, the habituation of these new products, and the ultimate disappointment at the uniformity of products that were on offer, is examined. Therefore, plastic items for the home can be said to be typical of many goods produced in the GDR. Whether it was a Trabant automobile or a set of plastic egg cups, the planned economy was unable to meet demands of its consumers.

Of course, there was a worldwide boom in plastics after the Second World War (consider the so-called "Tupperware Parties" in the USA of the 1950s, whereby women could earn an income, independently, in their own homes). This was a time when women in the West were expected to play a predominantly domestic, homemaking role, rather than comprising an important part of the labour force. What was meaningful in the case of the GDR, however, was how plastics found their way into every part of the home, and also into every conceivable hobby. The building of a new society thus came with a new material, one that could transform the lives of people just as meaningfully as the political doctrine of the government put new satellites in space. Plastic camping gear, plastic crockery, plastic bath mats, plastic children's toys and even a plastic cuckoo clock are some of the items that have been brought together by the staff at the Documentation Centre. There is of wide range, from the practical to the kitsch.

¹ Alles aus Plaste: Versprechen und Gebrauch in der DDR, exhibition at the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Eisenhüttenstadt, running until 31.12.2013.

The exhibition also considers the historical framework of this plastic revolution in the GDR. Starting in 1945, the “chemical triangle” of Halle-Merseburg-Bitterfeld had been the area where the chemical industry in this part of Germany was most highly concentrated, producing mainly synthetic rubber and PVC. In 1958, the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the State Planning Commission of the GDR held a Chemistry Conference, under the slogan “Chemistry is bread, wealth and beauty” [*Chemie gibt Brot, Wohlstand und Schönheit*]. This was concerned with the expansion of the chemicals industry in the GDR - after all, support for industry was essential in the ideology of the Eastern Bloc. Oil began to be used as well as lignite, and the production of consumer goods from plastic, as part of the economic policies of the GDR, got well under way.

The exhibition space at the Documentation Centre is held in a former kindergarten in “the first socialist city in Germany”. The building itself is an excellent example of Socialist Realism in architecture, with a stained glass window depicting life under socialism and the typical socialist classicist style of architecture. Aside from the exhibition on plastics, there is a range of artefacts from the GDR on display in the permanent exhibition rooms, ranging from collections of medals and schoolbooks to propaganda posters. Much like the town itself, the Documentation Centre is never bustling. In the four times this author visited, as part of a research project on Eisenhüttenstadt, there were never more than three or four other guests. This means that one can take in the exhibition at a leisurely pace, and also ask staff questions about the objects on display.

Overall, the exhibition has been assembled with care, and clearly the staff at the Documentation Centre are knowledgeable about everyday life in GDR. However, in contrast to the permanent exhibition rooms, there are no videos or audio recordings. To fully connect the exhibition with the everyday context in which most of the objects were used, a short walk around Eisenhüttenstadt can be very rewarding. Eisenhüttenstadt, known as Stalinstadt until 1961, chronicles the evolution of city planning in East Germany and the Eastern Bloc as a whole. The streets are laid out on a grid pattern of the streets as designed by architect Kurt W. Leucht, and almost all of the living quarters are in vast apartment blocks, with communal gardens. The oldest housing estates are of a simple, modern style lacking in ornamentation and were completed in the early 1950s, which are clearly influenced by the ideas of the Bauhaus. After stern official critique, and some critical comments from the workers who lived there, the architects were forced to adopt a more ornamental style of building. Socialist Realism took root for only a brief period, but had a profound effect upon the town. Decorative loggias and balconies make an appearance, and plenty of didactic public art is to be found in the town. In the 1960s as beyond, in the context of de-Stalinisation - and with an eye on budgetary constraints - the hulking grey apartment blocks of prefabricated concrete, so central to popular imagining of life in the Eastern bloc, made an appearance. The “new town” of socialism in East Germany therefore documents the variation in the state’s conception of city planning, its expression of power and ideology, and attempts to create a genuinely socialist society through engineering the built environment to this end.

In conclusion, a visit to the exhibition at the Documentation Centre offers an exhibition on a relatively unknown theme, the “plastification” of the home in East Germany, and in doing so offers a contrast with how this process took place in the non-socialist world. Plastics are still seen as a very modern material, and it was this promise of modernity that made them so exciting upon their widespread introduction. Paucity of supply and uniformity of design quenched this excitement in the GDR. As with the building style in Eisenhüttenstadt itself, design became reduced to the most economically efficient mode of production, with little concern for the demands of those who were consuming the goods not through choice but through a *lack* of choice. There are, then, interesting parallels between the products designed for the home and the design of homes and public buildings not only in the GDR but across the Eastern Bloc.