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## Residential 2004

ALEXANDER TZANNES ASSOCIATES

ALLAN POWELL

ANDREW COOMER + ASSOCIATES

CON BASTIRAS

GREGORY BURGESS

IVAN TURCINOV

KENNEDY NOLAN

LOUISE NOBLE

MODERN ARCHITECTURE PARTNERS

NETTLETON TRIBE

ODDEN RODRIGUES

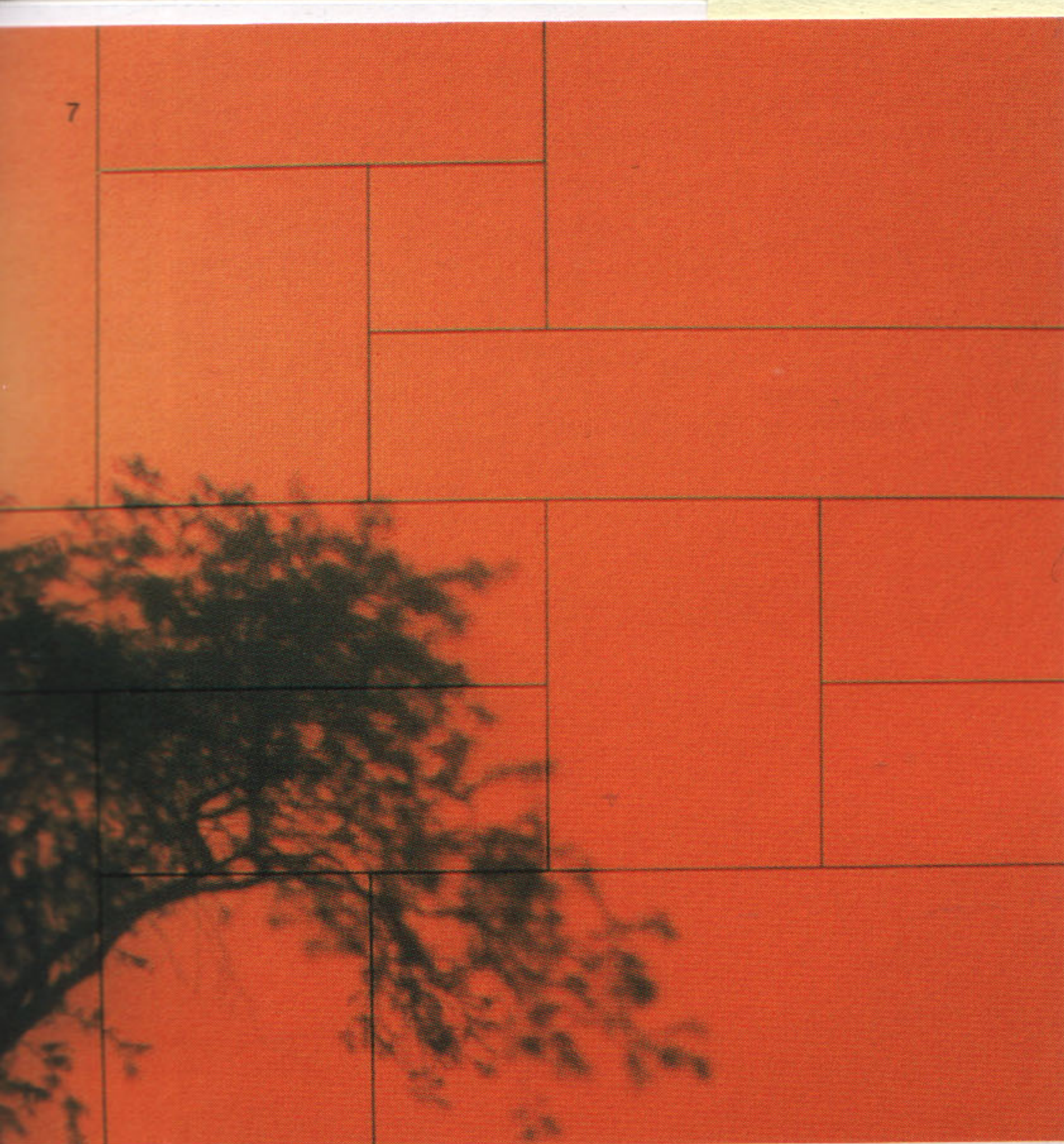
ROWAN OPAT

STREAMES + ASSOCIATES









post-reunification development frenzy, Potsdamer Platz. This is despite being earmarked for redevelopment in the original approved masterplan for the area.

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the rents in plattenbau developments were extremely low. Since 1989 they have increased to almost Western standards. The dream of owning a home is now a possibility for residents of the former GDR, but only for those with means.

Architects and developers with vision, often in cooperation with public housing authorities in East German cities, have started to recognise that the reclamation of abandoned plattenbau settlements may be a means of drawing people back to struggling communities and breathing new life into barren urban precincts.

Despite this new enthusiasm, the dominant negative attitude towards plattenbaus is not without justification. In almost every case the same issues and constraints dictate the design brief. Plattenbau developments are notoriously impersonal. Large blocks sit amid poorly planned open space and there is little sense of address or of personal ownership. Rooms are small and inadequately lit, insulation and water-

proofing substandard, and ground floor units raised with no direct access to the outdoors.

Architects such as Frankfurt's Stefan Forster are addressing these issues in innovative ways. In Forster's Lessingstrasse conversion in Leinefelde, the predominantly concrete facade of an apartment block has been transformed by steel, glass and vegetation. The renovated building is characterised by the transparency of its facade, which has resulted in greatly increased levels of solar access and a much more vibrant relationship with its surroundings.

Forster's high profile and much lauded conversions are not immediately readable as reinvented plattenbaus. Often only the facade rhythm is retained. Additional openings are inserted and existing ones enlarged. In some developments Forster has demolished several upper levels to reduce the scale. In the case of his apartments on Herschelstrasse in Leinefelde, entire sections of the existing 180-metre long apartment block were removed to form eight freestanding apartment buildings. The defining prefabricated concrete elements were replaced with rendered masonry, resulting in monolithic sculptural forms far removed from the segmented rationality of the plattenbau.

Berlin's Arnold + Gladisch have a different approach to their plattenbau conversions. New cladding, if not prefabricated concrete, is designed to reflect the modular construction of plattenbau facades. Their renovation of the 1975 apartment block on Rudolf-Seiffertstrasse in Berlin-Lichtenberg retains the strong rational facade composition, but replaces tired concrete panels with a contemporary back-ventilated fibre cement facade system. Glass and perforated aluminium replace the heavy concrete balustrades. Although the overwhelming verticality of the facades has been attenuated, there is no reduction in scale and the essence of the plattenbau is still easily readable.

There is no doubt that contemporary architects have been largely successful in their attempts to correct the shortcomings of the plattenbau. The reuse of existing built fabric and infrastructure provides a valuable source of low-cost housing and is encouraging residents to return to suffering communities.

But despite the overwhelming benefits of plattenbau conversions, the tailoring of redevelopments to modern and predominantly West German sensibilities threatens to contribute to the continued erosion of East German culture.





NEWS JESSICA MATSON

# Plattenbau.

*Rescue and reuse in the face of potential obliteration of a culture.*

PLATTENBAUS, THE FUNCTIONAL BUT OFTEN CHARMLESS pre-cast concrete staple of cheap East German construction, have come to represent the face of the former socialist state's architecture. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, East Germans seeking new horizons and escaping high unemployment levels have abandoned thousands of these buildings. Slowly, architects and developers are recognising the opportunities plattenbaus present in terms of low-cost accommodation. Recent office and apartment building conversions reflect a new fondness for the East, a phenomenon known in German as 'Ostalgie'. These developments reinterpret discarded segments of East German history and inject new life into what is largely regarded as the grey wasteland of the GDR.

The momentous events of November 1989 and consequent reunification of East and West Germany led to the unique merging of two cultures. Forty years of separation and political dichotomy resulted in the development of two distinct national identities. When the borders opened it seemed few people were concerned about the repercussions of the absorption of East German economy and culture – perceived as grossly inferior – into the dominant West. The overwhelming emotion and positivism of reunification eclipsed any

fears that something unique might be lost in the process. Over the past few years, however, there has been a gradual realisation that the childhood memories of a whole generation are at risk of being lost forever. This, coupled with increased disillusionment, unemployment and economic decline in the East, has led to an increasing sentimentalisation of life in the GDR.

Nostalgia for the East is manifesting itself in the form of TV game shows, souvenir shops and a general fondness for the days spent behind the iron curtain. The much-maligned East German car, the Trabant, children's television character the Sandman, and even a brand of pickles, Spreewaldgurken, are celebrated on websites and television. Special 'Ostalgie-parties', where people dress up in former GDR Youth Brigade or People's Army uniforms, listen to East German music and consume the almost extinct delicacies of the East, are also popular.

The dominance of the plattenbau as a building form in East Germany means they have developed a strange following of their own, and are featured on desk calendars and board games. They are also acquiring some respect from heritage authorities. An example has managed to survive demolition on Gertrud-Colmar Strasse, two minutes from the focal point of Berlin's