



A Dream in Ruins: The Architects

By Ralph Stern

Die Architekten (*The Architects*, 1990, dir. Peter Kahane) concerns a collective of young East Germans that wins a competition to design a cultural and shopping center for one of the vast new housing blocks in East Berlin's periphery. Typical of many such projects built throughout the German Democratic Republic (GDR), it suffers from uniformity, isolation, and lack of identity. *The Architects* conveys the idealistic attempt of the collective to develop variety and human scale in housing. It is starkly contrasted with the technocracy that has settled into a deadening routine of prefabricated building and compartmentalized thinking.

The collective consists of former architecture students who, having abandoned their profession by choice or circumstance, are brought together by the film's central figure, Daniel Brenner. Unlike the others, Daniel has remained in the profession but at the age of thirty-eight has not realized a project of any size or substance. Given the opportunity of the competition, Daniel assembles the group that becomes, in effect, his second "family;" one that is juxtaposed with his wife and daughter. Daniel's fate is to negotiate not only between idealism and technocracy, between "the possible and the utopian" as his office superior tells him, but between these two families and their symbolic function.

The collective wins the competition and problems begin. Occupying a central position in the project is the sculpture "Family in Stress" depicting a father and mother straining in opposite directions with an isolated child between. It stands for Daniel's daughter and for the "child" of the second family, the architectural project, as well as for Daniel as he struggles between two families and uncompromised failure and compromised success. These aspects give the film its universal appeal. They are complemented with a convincing portrayal of the complexity and tensions of the architectural design process as we learn, for example, that even within the otherwise united collective one member's fantasy is another's chaos. Thus, *The Architects* stands above other films depicting architects as singular heroes (such as *The Fountainhead*, 1949, dir. King Vidor) or in which "architect" is simply coded as "professional."

In an overarching sense, the child stands for the visionary socialist project that was, like Daniel, fatally caught between the possible and the utopian. Even as the film's architectural project finds belated but unexpected support from the representatives of the Stasi (State Security) and the FDJ (Free German Youth organization), the various strands of the story end without socialist redemption. That the script was accepted without incurring the wrath of the state censors owes much to the fact that *The Architects* was filmed during the tumultuous fall of 1989 as the GDR collapsed and, with it, its most nefarious building project, the divisive Berlin Wall.

Building is Political

Thus, Peter Kahane's *The Architects* belonged to history before it was even fully completed, and perhaps more than anywhere, the history of Berlin exemplifies the notion that building is political, a representation of power. In the film, this sentiment is expressed by Daniel's former professor as he looks out of his window onto East Berlin's Stalinallee (renamed Karl-Marx-Allee) that was built during the early 1950s when socialist zeal was at its zenith and the GDR could afford to build impressive "workers' palaces." This view is followed by a short montage, a visual critique of the industrialized construction dominating the latter decades of the GDR's short life, reminding us of the many competing architectural and social visions born in Berlin.

These include the Cold War competition between East and West Berlin as well as the antipathy of the early twentieth-century utopians towards Berlin's vast tracts of tenements, the Taylorist-inspired reform movements of Weimar and early modernism, the radical restructuring of the city proposed by the National Socialists, as well as early postwar initiatives to erase Berlin's center, devastated by Allied bombing, with the aim of creating a city landscape. In an environment such as Berlin's the terms "city," "country," "housing block" and Heimat ("home") indicate not only place, but ideological inclination.

Sprinkled throughout the film are references to architectural history and political ideologies. They can be found in the opening sequence as Daniel busily draws images of crystals and shells (reminiscent of the utopian projects of Bruno Taut and Hermann Finsterlin), when Daniel equates the city with bad air and disease, and in brief depictions of Max's Berlin apartment (replete with an elevated train and a site for extra-marital sex). They also occur as Daniel visits Max, who is restoring a noble villa, Schloss Lindstedt, located near the palace grounds of Sanssouci in Potsdam. In the film, this villa is depicted as belonging to another world, one far removed and very privileged. Underscored by the exchange between Max and the workers about his ability to acquire alabaster plaster, the depiction of the privileging of patrimony and representative structures over social housing hovers between critique and envy. It is emphasized again at Max's apartment as he tells Daniel that together they will build structures to make the GDR's modern Palace of the Republic look "like a miserable shack."

The Architects presents a running commentary on the interrelationship of the GDR's social and architectural politics. When Franziska insists that the collective wishes to create a "new GDR architecture," she is speaking less about stylistic innovation than social regeneration. That her hopeful assertion is answered only with the skepticism of a group of youths joking about the "collapse of new buildings" (einstürzende Neubauten, also the name of a [West German] rock group) clearly indicates that the time of youthful dreams is over. As Martin, the photographer, remarks elsewhere: "after thirty-nine years, it is finally time to grow up."

For the GDR, film was as equally political as building. One of DEFA's (Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft) most fascinating legacies is the intertwining of these two representational systems. Here too, *The Architects* develops topics addressed earlier in Heiner Carow's *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, 1972) and Hermann Zschoche's *Insel der Schwäne* (*Swan Island*, 1982). But *The Architects* also serves as a bookend to the overall history of DEFA and the GDR. Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*, 1946) and Gerhard Lamprecht's *Irgendwo in Berlin* (*Somewhere in Berlin*, 1946), depicted Berlin as a city of ruins, symbolic for both the destruction of the Third Reich and the fertile ground upon which the dreams of a better, socialist future would take root.

If the beginnings of DEFA were marked by depictions of a ruined city full of dreams, then *The Architects* marks its end: depicting a new city, but one in which the dreams now stand in ruin. As such, *The Architects* is a poignant and essential chapter in understanding the GDR, its architecture and its cinema.

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