When the Stadthalle of Chemnitz, then named Karl-Marx-Stadt, opened in October 1974, officials touted the modern building as exemplary of the German Democratic Republic’s cultural policy. The policy maker Hans Koch claimed, “there is no vast mass of anonymous ‘consumers’ consuming the fare placed before it by an elite of ‘creators.’ Cultural progress is increasingly being seen as a creative process in which everyone participates.”

To facilitate such culture—which could range from J. S. Bach and Bertolt Brecht to folk dancing and clay sculpting—the multifunctional complex featured an array of meeting spaces and a large flexible hall that could host anything from theater performances to exhibitions, dance parties, and conferences (Figures 1 and 2). In light of the GDR’s regime of censorship, surveillance, and repression, the calls for participation underlying this project can easily be dismissed as the ideological mirage of a puppet state. Yet a similar rhetoric accompanied the multifunctional culture halls that were being built on both sides of the Iron Curtain at this time. Some, like the Maison pour Tous of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines on the outskirts of Paris, resembled the Stadthalle in formal and functional terms. This government-funded building, literally a “house for all,” was to be a participatory machine for making community. Like the Stadthalle at Karl-Marx-Stadt, it comprised a flexible performance hall, workshops, meeting spaces, and a restaurant, while also adding a music school. And it was laid out on a similar hexagonal grid, allowing its various spaces to blur into one another (Figures 3 and 4).

The similarity between these building projects is striking, especially when we consider their radically different political and ideological contexts. It is not a coincidence that can be explained simply as a result of transnational exchange among architects across the Cold War divide. In order to understand the reasons for this correspondence, we must expand our analytical purview to include the governmental regimes underlying the production of these architectural forms. The idea of culture as policy—that culture can be rationally and comprehensively administered, including through architecture—was a product of state bureaucratization during the postwar period. Government involvement in culture and the arts can be traced back much further, to the formation of the modern state in Europe and the establishment of public institutions such as theaters and museums. Only in the postwar period, however, did the term cultural policy emerge in national politics and international debates, denoting an assemblage of ideological principles, legislative texts, and administrative practices. This development is what underlay the large-scale building programs for new cultural institutions in the postwar decades, not just in the GDR and France but also in West Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, and other European countries. With their combination of artistic and recreational facilities, the modern culture halls often dwarfed—if not in size then at least in quantity—the classical theaters of previous centuries.

Despite the massive shift these buildings represented for how “culture” was managed in postwar Europe, little has been written about the role of architecture in this process. The few existing architectural histories of culture halls are largely divorced from the cultural and political history of
postwar Europe. Following the emergent discipline of transnational history, architectural historians have recently begun to examine the politics of global circulation shaping modern architecture in the postwar period. This article extends such scholarship by demonstrating how an important but overlooked type of institution, which proliferated across the Cold War divide, helped reshape the very definition of “culture” throughout much of Europe.

Analyzing the roles of bureaucrats, policy makers, and designers, the article reveals how culture became an explicit domain of state policy and why the architecture of modern cultural centers or culture halls became central to this
Figure 2 Rudolf Weißer, 
Stadthalle, Chemnitz, GDR, 
opened in 1974 (photo by 
Reinhard Höll, 2006).

Figure 3 Pierre Venencie, 
Maison pour Tous, Saint-
Quentin-en-Yvelines, 
France, opened in 1975 
(Recherche & Architecture 
35 [1978], 40).
project. The discussion focuses on the GDR and France to illustrate the significance of this Cold War European project beyond the radically different political uses of such institutions in their national contexts. Stated intentions and architectural design reveal little about the role culture halls actually played in people’s everyday lives. Examining these spaces across the Cold War divide in Europe, however, reveals how modern architecture articulated cultural politics in which participation was harnessed to bolster the intervention of the state in everyday life—whether through seemingly unqualified support, as in France, or oppressive regulation, as in the GDR.

**Cultivation and Recreation**

The culture hall is an institutional type with diverse historical precedents. Postwar policy makers and architects saw the culture hall as the modern answer to Europe’s grand tradition of building public institutions for the cultivation of good taste and civic responsibility. Since the popularization of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Bildungstheater* at the end of the eighteenth century, intellectual elites had upheld the theater—and other institutions of high culture—as a means for the intellectual and spiritual development of the citizenry. Nevertheless, cultural institutions in the nineteenth century were more often geared toward amusement. For example, in Germany the *Stadtballe* was developed as a specific type of urban institution for staging bourgeois sociability. The *Stadtballe* was a large, multipurpose hall used for concerts, banquets, and exhibitions. Other important historical precedents to the culture hall were the “house of the people” and the settlement house, which were late nineteenth-century working-class and reform institutions. The house of the people, variously called *casa del popolo*, *Volkshaus*, *maison du peuple*, or *volkshuis*, was an independent space for political discussion, associational life, and popular culture. Such locations were established by socialist and workers’ movements across continental Europe. In the 1920s, the Soviets set up similar institutions, which they called workers’ clubs; these were meant to promote a new, communist proletarian culture.

The designers of the culture halls in the second half of the twentieth century drew on the histories and forms of these older institutions. In doing so, they merged the competing interests of the bourgeoisie and the working class. This convergence was a result of the transformation of public welfare from a collection of class-based civil-society initiatives to a bureaucratic state-led regime of mass provision.

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Underlying the development of culture halls was a new approach to culture. Even though historically class-based distinctions between high and low culture persisted, the postwar state now approached culture as a neutral collection of goods and services for which it would assume responsibility of distribution by means of cultural “facilities.” The belief was that culture could now be rationally administered, just like access to water or health care. Despite important national differences—the United Kingdom, for example, in contrast to Germany, had relatively limited public intervention in the arts before the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946—this desire for rationality was at the basis of cultural policy across Europe.12

Not surprisingly, the legacy of European fascism in cultural policy remained unmentioned in discussions at the time. Yet the shift away from class-based interests in cultural affairs and toward a “comprehensive” approach to governing culture would likely have been unthinkable without the far-reaching cultural and recreational programs established by fascist governments during the 1930s. The German organization Kraft durch Freude (Strength through Joy) and the Italian-fascist Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (National Recreational Club) had drawn countless people into the culture would likely have been unthinkable without the national...
of cultural elites under the welfare state and their growing anxiety about the impact of mass culture on French society. Some libertarian voices in France opposed what they understood to be a technocratic and elitist approach to culture. Nevertheless, for the majority of politicians, state involvement in culture meant progress, democracy, and national grandeur. Access to high culture would promote self-cultivation, and “personal development” (épanouissement) was a corollary to national development. Like the economy, policy makers claimed, “culture” could be comprehensively planned. And in a nation as centralized as France, access to high culture meant territorial distribution, ensuring that those living in the provinces had as much exposure to culture as those living in Paris. Central to Malraux’s policies, therefore, was the construction of maisons de la culture—funded partly by the state and partly by local authorities—in provincial towns across France.

In addition to the goal of cultivating citizens, cultural policy across Cold War Europe was shaped by the shared challenge to accommodate new forms of mass recreation and popular culture. In the early 1960s, the sociologist Joffre Dumazedier proclaimed the advent of a new “leisure civilization” of paid holidays, popular music and movies, and an explosion of new hobby cultures. In the GDR, many of these consumer pleasures remained more aspirational than real. Yet the Bitterfelder Weg, a top-down cultural reform project coinciding with the Khrushchev Thaw, can be interpreted as a shy nod to such a leisure society. The reform was presented as a shift “from the art-loving to the artistically active worker.” Familiarizing workers with the “treasures of art and literature” was not enough—building socialism required engaging workers’ “cultural and creative forces.”

Underneath this rhetoric of a new, active role for the socialist citizen lurked the regime’s anxiety about controlling consumer culture. While the East German state initially relied on strict rationing, officials during the “socialist sixties” showed more acceptance of the fact that popular leisure and consumption had become constitutive aspects of everyday life—even if many citizens’ material needs and desires remained painfully unfulfilled. Consequently, cultural policy should aim not just to cultivate socialist citizens but also to recreate them. This shift provided new impetus for the design of cultural institutions such as the Stadthalle of Karl-Marx-Stadt and signaled a softer, more insidious approach to instilling socialism. Citizens would be given more opportunities to “participate” in culture even as state control over their everyday lives increased.

Similar questions about the kinds of culture that should guide state policy arose on the other side of the Iron Curtain. In Western Europe, cultural policy needed to accommodate not just mass recreation and consumerism in an age of affluence but also the growing influence of youth, civil rights, and leftist social movements that criticized traditional distinctions between high and low culture. The more fundamental critiques of universalism might have been far removed from the concerns of policy makers, at least before 1968, but the “culture” of cultural policy across Western Europe gradually shifted from a focus on the highbrow arts to an emphasis on how culture is socially embedded. In France, Malraux’s assumptions about democratizing access to high culture were under increasing attack during the 1960s. In their landmark study of 1966, L’amour de l’art: Les musées et leur public, Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel showed that the experience of art museums was systematically socially determined—comfortable to the elite, unsettling to those least educated. Their conclusion was that museums, rather than democratizing high culture, actually upheld and even reinforced the barriers of social class. Such studies prompted a reorientation of cultural policy toward what experts called the “sociocultural,” and it had direct repercussions for the conception of cultural centers.

In France, the conception of maison de la culture was directly informed by Malraux’s ambition to democratize access to artistic masterpieces. Because democratization implied

**Polyvalence and Integration**

In France, the conception of maision de la culture was directly informed by Malraux’s ambition to democratize access to artistic masterpieces. Because democratization implied
geographic decentralization, the resulting building projects were largely situated in the provinces. Even though some of them, such as the successful cultural center in Bourges, were housed in existing buildings, Malraux emphasized architectural modernism for symbolic and programmatic reasons. Unlike the bourgeois theaters and opera houses of the nineteenth century, the *maison de la culture* should not be an isolated monument, he believed, but “at once a popular, familiar place and a cultural shrine, a kind of ‘café du commerce’ and secular cathedral.” The new cultural institutions needed to attract people of all ages and backgrounds and make them feel at home and engaged with the artistic activities and displays the institutions facilitated. Officials also promoted architectural transparency to stimulate the engagement of passersby and visitors, and advocated seating arrangements in auditoriums that would not imply social class distinctions but instead suggest egalitarianism in spectatorship. Some administrators even proposed auxiliary services, such as snack bars or nurseries, for the convenience of families and those coming directly from work. Even though its primary aim was to offer elevating aesthetic experiences, the *maison de la culture* needed to attract everyone.

As a result of these policy goals, the first generation of *maisons de la culture* shared an architectural vision. Each would be multifunctional, meaning that in addition to a large performance hall, the building would contain exhibition spaces, meeting spaces, and a variety of spaces for more specialized uses, such as a library, a discotheque, a television room, a restaurant, a bar, or a day nursery. A second important feature was polyvalence, defined as the possibility of using given spaces in different ways. Movable partitions and other mobile architectural elements allowed foyers to be converted into exhibition halls, and auditoriums facilitated a variety of performance and event types. Polyvalence, first articulated by interwar modernist architects in projects such as the *maison du peuple* of Clichy in the Parisian suburbs (designed by Marcel Lods, Eugène Beaudouin, Jean Prouvé, and Vladimir Bodiansky), thus came to define the mainstream architectural production of the postwar French welfare state. The Ministry of Culture held up the *maison de la culture* of Amiens, designed by Pierre Sonrel and opened in 1965, as a new standard in this regard (Figure 5). The building contained several flexible performance spaces, a library, a television room, and a cafeteria. Its main theater had mobile seating to allow performances with the audience facing in different directions. Despite its austere exterior appearance—a concrete post-and-lintel structure with grand windows centered in each of its four bays—policy makers and observers celebrated its transparency and its open character, seeing it as “a vital element of the city, in sync with the city from the morning until the night.”

Critical voices quickly emerged during the 1960s, however. The critics denounced Malraux’s built projects for failing to create inclusive spaces, despite their break with traditional bourgeois institutions. A 1965 government report warned that many “factors of cultural inhibition” precluded participation beyond the cultural elite—a conclusion similar to the one reached by Bourdieu and Darbel in their museum study. In addition to material barriers, such as entry prices and geographic distance, the report pointed to social barriers, including the architectural form, which created distanced, “sacred” spaces removed from the everyday. By 1968, only eight *maisons de la culture* had been opened, with an additional dozen or so under construction or in the planning stage. Perhaps because they had remained symbols of the elite, many of them were occupied by protesters during the civil
whose “sumptuous architecture” dissuaded anyone but the tone. The Ministry of Culture now explicitly criticized its
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town of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines. (President Charles de

After 1968, discussions about the architecture and poli-
tics of the maisons de la culture changed fundamentally in tone. The Ministry of Culture now explicitly criticized its own projects as “soulless places of cultural consumption” whose “sumptuous architecture” dissuaded anyone but the cultural elite from participating.44 In a speech delivered at Grenoble in summer 1968, Malraux proclaimed that the maisons de la culture should not just serve artistic display and diffusion but should “in the first place provoke interroga-
tion, contestation even, and engender dialogue.” To do so, they needed to become “the unfinished image of a living culture, for those who participate in it and create it.”45 The challenge after May 1968 was to make cultural institutions spaces of creative participation rather than just places of consumption or diffusion—not unlike the stated goal of the Bitterfelder Weg.46 At stake was the very definition of cul-
ture; even Malraux, the ardent protector of France’s cultural heritage, now proclaimed, “There is no culture without lei-
sure.”47 By the late 1960s, Dumazedier’s leisure civilization was a reality and had become a central subject of public policy. Moreover, the view that leisure was culture corre-
sponded to attitudes among community workers, who had long advocated for the integration of social, cultural, and community facilities in France’s newly built suburban developments.

Despite this revolution, the architectural conception of the maisons de la culture was not entirely discarded. The earlier concepts of flexibility, polyvalence, and spatial openness instead gained a more radical political charge. Following widespread calls in the years after 1968 to deinstitutionalize society, architects such as Ionel Schein hailed polyvalence as a tool to dismantle the institutional walls of culture itself.48 No longer sacralized or privileged spaces of display, maisons de la culture should become “crossing points” rather than pal-
ces. Monumentality was considered anathema, and policy makers instead envisioned “light, malleable facilities that allow all forms of communication and artistic activities.”49

The Maison pour Tous in Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, designed by Pierre Venencie in 1971–72, registers these new social and architectural ambitions (see Figures 3 and 4).50 The cultural center was a key element in the master plan for the new urban center of Les Sept Mares, part of the new town of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines. (President Charles de Gaulle launched the French new towns in 1965 as a way to
decentralize the Paris region and spur regional economic development.)51 Funded by the Ministries of Culture, National Education, Youth and Sports, and Public Health, among other institutions, the Maison pour Tous was a product of the centralized state and integrated art and performance spaces with a variety of community facilities.52 The building comprised a large multipurpose hall, an auditorium, a school of music, and a restaurant (which served the nearby second-
ary school), as well as smaller spaces for meetings, games, and workshops, a nursery, administrative spaces, and an apartment for the concierge.53 This mix was engineered to engage people from a variety of backgrounds and age groups. A restau-
rant, for instance, was integrated into the complex in order to maximize its daytime usage.54 A similar rationale guided the creation of a meeting space for the elderly, which was situated in a quiet zone of the building with a view onto the park.

Formally, the program was organized on a hexagonal grid that followed the shape of the main performance hall. Designers in France and abroad had been experimenting with such hexagonal formal systems during the mid-1960s, and the design had gained traction among more mainstream architects in the 1970s. Venencie himself had already built a youth center designed as the aggregation of hexagonal prisms.55 For the architect, such formal systems promised to “give a maximum of suppleness to the organization of performances.”56 This quality was most important for the main performance hall. With its mobile seating structure, it allowed for varying types of scenarios, including theater, cinema, halls, conferences, and exhibitions (Figure 6).57 The peripheral circulation around this hexagonal hall provided access on different levels and to the auxiliary workshop and meeting spaces. Circular and hexagonal theater spaces such as this had emerged in the 1960s in response to an interna-
tional movement advocating experimental theater forms, first tested on a modest scale and subsequently employed in the design of mass performance spaces.58

Venencie responded to the widespread calls for deinstitu-
tionalization by inserting three types of public space into his design. Running through the middle of the building was a covered public walkway, which negotiated the differences in levels between the natural terrain and the dalle, or raised platform, onto which the entire urban development was elevated to separate pedestrians from vehicular traffic below (Figure 7). In addition, a central foyer functioned as the pub-
lic “plaza” of the complex, connecting directly to the restaurant, cafeteria, and main performance spaces. Finally, the roof level was designed as a publicly accessible “sculpture garden.” The music school, also located on this level, was organized into separate, well-insulated pavilions for music practice. These pavilions transformed the roof into a mineral landscape for strolling and playing (Figure 8). The interior
street, the plaza, and the sculpture garden were design features that, at least metaphorically, brought urban public space into the institution. Despite the building’s massive appearance, the choices of materials were motivated by the idea of avoiding the impression of an imposing institution and creating “an intriguing and welcoming, immediately familiar” experience.\(^{59}\) The soft, brownish brick used for the exterior walls and the oxidized copper used for the roofs produced an informal aesthetic image, as opposed to the prestigious modernist look of Malraux’s institutions, such as Sonrel’s *maison de la culture* in Amiens (see Figure 5). The structure’s material heaviness was meant to evoke not monumentality but a porous environment that would attract users and surprise them as they appropriated it.\(^{60}\)

Three years before the official opening, planners had already begun organizing cultural and social activities to welcome the arriving population in the new town of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines.\(^{61}\) They subsequently established the Association pour la Promotion des Activités Socio-culturelles de Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (APASC) for the center’s cultural programming.\(^{62}\) The goal of this association was to “develop the creative capacities of everyone” and to “reduce that enormous gap between the minority of creators, inventors, and producers of new models, and the large majority of those undergoing these ‘messages.’ ”\(^{63}\) Cultural programming would thus not only produce creative, participatory citizens but also overcome the gap between elite and disadvantaged social groups. The architecture of the complex worked both for and against these social ambitions. Because many of its interior spaces were publicly accessible, the building was notoriously difficult to manage. Some spaces were impossible to secure, so gates and alarm systems were added, and the exhibition area was moved to one of the performance spaces a few years after the opening.\(^{64}\) At the same time, the building’s porosity facilitated efforts to engage a diversity of users. Its spaces proved ideal for hosting experimental public events, drawing in youth collectives and immigrant workers often living on the margins of French society.

Similar cultural centers were built across France during the 1970s. While they effectively broadened the types of cultural events and activities that received government support, policy makers’ goals of participatory citizenship and “cultural democratization” were rarely if ever fully realized. A 1976 government report explicitly warned of the naïveté of assuming that contact with art and culture would automatically lead to democratization.\(^{65}\) This realization was the death knell for Malraux’s optimistic cultural policies and the modernist architectural experiments that had helped shape it. While cultural centers offered new ways for people to come together and enjoy themselves, their polyvalent and integrated forms of architecture did not, in and of themselves, remold participants into participatory citizens.


**Monumentality and Communication**

Because the GDR was directly shaped by its relationship with the Soviet Union, so too was the design of its cultural institutions, at least initially. With the rise of Stalinism, Soviet architects abandoned the modernist idea of workers’ clubs and instead built “palaces of culture” in historicist styles. In the early 1950s, the GDR adapted this Stalinist type of architecture and its underlying ideology of socialist realism by looking to “national traditions.”\(^{66}\) For Germany, the architecture of Karl Friedrich Schinkel was key.\(^{67}\) Following his neoclassical designs
for public institutions, GDR architects developed a monumental prototype for the *Kulturpalast* (Figure 9). Published in the regime’s official organ *Deutsche Architektur*, the design featured a symmetrical building layout with a large theater space, vestibule, foyer, and side wings housing auxiliary spaces such as club rooms. Its form reflected a dual cultural policy: small meeting spaces for hobbies and popular culture were separated from, and sidelined by, the central shrine to high culture that was the theater space. The theater took on special importance in the making of citizens in the Eastern bloc, and in the GDR in particular. Its strong tradition of politically engaged theater, following the work of Brecht, among others, soon informed changes to the design of new theater spaces and *Kulturpaläste*.

Initially, however, the regime employed neoclassicism as a political message, speaking antagonistically to the modern architecture of the capitalist West.

Since only a few large state-owned companies had the funds to build in the first half of the 1950s, only a small number of *Kulturpaläste* were built. Most of these followed the published prototypes; for instance, the stripped-down...
classicist Kulturhaus of Maxhütte in Unterwellenborn, designed by Hanns Hopp, Josef Kaiser, and Thomas Reimer (Figure 10). Despite the architects’ insistence on historical forms to promote both “community experience” and “critical art appreciation,” the project was built with modern industrial techniques.  

Even if the ideal of Bildung through high culture shaped such designs, builders on the ground were more aware of working-class needs for recreational spaces. For the Kulturhaus of Rüdersdorf, finished in 1956, the builder, Emil Leibold, was mandated to use a standard prototype. He nevertheless questioned its practical functionality and argued for a multifunctional hall instead of a classical theater space. This was something officials were just beginning to consider on their own as the state gradually abandoned Stalinist neoclassicism in the second half of the 1950s.

The mass construction of cultural institutions in the GDR did not take off until the 1960s. By this time, the Soviet Union had reevaluated its position on modernist architecture, and GDR architects cautiously followed suit. In addition to shifting to a modernist idiom, the new designs articulated a different, broader concept of culture. A key player in shaping the new Kulturpalast type, even more than architects or party elites, was the Büro für Technologie kultureller Einrichtungen (Bureau for the Technology of Cultural Facilities), later renamed the Institut für Kulturbauten (Institute for Cultural Buildings), established in 1960 and led by Klaus Wever and Wladimir Rubinow. The institute proposed two fundamental changes to the Kulturpalast. First, the program would center on a new type of space: a flexible, multipurpose performance hall that would allow artists and nonartists to be brought together in the way set out by the Bitterfelder Weg cultural reformers. Even if this ambition remained unacknowledged, it reinscribed in GDR theater design the modernism of the 1910s and 1920s, from the Festspielhaus Hellerau designed by Heinrich Tessenow and Adolf Appia in 1912 and the Bauhaus experiments of Oskar Schlemmer to Walter Gropius’s unexecuted Total Theater project (Figure 11). Such modernist theater designs had already focused on the reorganization of stage and audience, insisting on a more direct and dynamic relationship between spectacle and spectator in order to invest the theater with a renewed social function. Yet during the postwar decades, such experimental and interactive strategies had become widespread across Europe and thus no longer represented a particularly socialist or revolutionary agenda.

Second, the institute argued for a close integration of “active and passive zones” in the building at large. Meeting rooms and workshops needed to be spatially and functionally integrated with the performance spaces, so that in all spaces “the public would actively process what is made and thereby become the maker.” Unlike the Stalinist palaces of culture, the institutions of this new generation were located not close to industry but in the heart of the city. Planning was effectively coordinated with urban renewal projects, which during the 1960s were cast as a way to turn existing cities into socialist ones.  

State officials continued to stress the need for monumentality, so that the Kulturpalast symbolically marked the proud transition to socialism on the skyline. At the same time, these officials increasingly emphasized the communicative role of Kulturpaläste in the city and their function in everyday life.

The Kulturpalast in Dresden registers these changing approaches. The first design ideas from 1951 included a monumental tower, a strong theme in GDR urbanism, reminiscent of Bruno Taut’s early twentieth-century concept of the Stadtkrone (city crown) as a representation of national community. In 1959, the Dresden City Council organized a competition for an enormous House of Socialist Culture, with the explicit requirement of a tower form. Only one of the twenty-eight design entries, Leopold Wiel’s modernist design, dispensed with the tower in favor of an integrated horizontal organization (Figures 12 and 13). Even though the jury insisted on monumentality and modernist “formalism” was still politically sensitive at this time, the city council ultimately selected Wiel’s proposal, albeit in a reduced version. The project, which was
eventually changed in name to *Kulturpalast*, was built from 1967 to 1969. Its design was centered on the new type of performance space developed by the Institut für Kulturbauten, with which Wiel collaborated closely. The main hall had a stage that could be moved up and down, so that a flat floor could be created for different types of events. According to the designers, the goal of this high-tech installation was directly political—an architectural response to the Brechtian theme of theater as life. Because it could put performers and spectators literally on the same footing, the design would overcome the “capitalist separation between producer and consumer.” Some commentators even argued that because “all spaces are public” and “the people work in all of them,” visitors could become cultural producers in their own right, according to their own “cultural needs.” Many spaces throughout the building could work together and thus potentially facilitate new kinds of mass events. Programmatically, the building was designed as a ring of interconnected, communicating spaces so that, the designers claimed, “every space can be used with every other” (Figure 14). The assumption was that such a layout would automatically lead to cultural exchange between professional artists and nonartists. How this would be concretely

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**Figure 10** Hanns Hopp, Josef Kaiser, and Thomas Reimer, *Kulturhaus, Maxhütte, Unterwellenborn, GDR, 1962–55* (photo by Uwe Klimpke).

**Figure 11** Walter Gropius, *Total Theater for Erwin Piscator, Berlin, 1927* (drawing by unidentified artist; Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of Ise Gropius, BRGA.24.145).
achieved, however, remained unclear. Thus, the notion of communication did not just inform architectural programming; it also allowed designers to articulate their ambitions for participation, even if participation was fundamentally constrained by the political regime.

The project for Dresden paralleled attempts elsewhere in Europe to design cultural institutions that would prompt users’ participation and communication. Yet, unlike designers such as Cedric Price, whose Fun Palace project for London in the early 1960s took a cybernetic approach to participation that meant the near dissolution of architectural form, the designers of the Kulturpalast continued to emphasize traditional monumentality and what they deemed to be a more explicitly socialist aesthetic. Opened in 1969, the building was dotted with myriad works of public art depicting socialist scenes—for instance, Gerhard Bondzin’s mural Wege der roten Fahne, which represented the German labor movement.

East German architects, state officials, artists, and theater makers were well aware of European design trends and enjoyed abundant international exchange at this time. The journal Bauten der Kultur provided extensive coverage of Western European and Soviet bloc projects, and members of the Institut für Kulturbauten often traveled internationally. Even though many of their socialist ambitions and architectural aesthetics were unique to the GDR, the East German Kulturpaläste also reflected a pan-European architectural
development. The Miesian solution, of large cubic volumes with glazed foyers, was commonly used for public buildings across European cities in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in West Germany. East German architects studied flexible designs for multiuse cultural centers in the Soviet Union as well as the Frank van Klingeren project De Meerpaal in Dronten, the Netherlands, which also fascinated French architects such as Schein (Figure 15).

A second paradigmatic project in the GDR was the Stadthalle of Karl-Marx-Stadt by architect Rudolf Weißer, who moved more resolutely away from monumentality to design a place that would stimulate cultural and social encounters (see Figures 1 and 2). As at Dresden, the project was a key part of the master plan for the town center, which had suffered heavy wartime damage. Its construction started in 1969 and it opened in February 1974, but the project originated with a 1959 competition, when it was called the Haus der Kultur und Wissenschaften (House of Culture and Sciences). The initial, tower-based design evolved significantly over the 1960s. Local officials eventually decided to use the tower not for the cultural program but for a hotel, since the tower would be the most expensive part of the project and the idea followed "international standards." To define the program for the cultural complex itself, the city council consulted with local associations, including the Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth), about their needs. The idea of a flexible, multipurpose design was thus not only pushed by the centralized state but also embraced at the local level. In what was almost a physical embodiment of this idea, Weißer placed the hotel tower directly on top of the Stadthalle, so that the two shared the ground-floor lobby.

The cultural complex, designed in collaboration with the Institut für Kulturbauten, borrowed the Dresden model in its emphasis on programmatic interconnection. Yet it offered one key innovation: the hexagonal grid. The grid facilitated industrialized construction methods and, more important, allowed for a nonhierarchical spatial organization that intensified possibilities for interconnection and integration (Figure 16). The design of the Palast der Republik in Berlin (1973–76) would further pursue this hexagonal formal strategy while encasing the ensemble in an oblong. The Stadthalle, by contrast, expressed its interior organization in a composition of hexagonal prisms, abandoning axial planning and symmetrical ordering in favor of complex, interlocking forms. According to the designers, its variegated massing expressed the building's role as an active "organizer" and "stimulator" of social life. Such intentions—of functional integration and the animating role of architecture—corresponded closely to trends across Europe at this time, particularly in France.
The Stadthalle was a built diagram of “cultural communication.” Its sprawling lobby was conceived as the central crossroads that connected the various event and performance spaces and would ensure a maximum of interaction between people and activities. At the same time, it remained grand, exuding a socialist splendor (Figure 17). Surprisingly, in an echo of capitalism’s relentless fabrication of new desires, the city council members’ explicit rationale for such architecture was its capacity to elicit unknown needs and unconscious desires among visitors. The building included two large multiuse performance halls designed to facilitate a variety of public events. The designers understood the events as forms of communication and organized the hall to accommodate “linear contact” (e.g., concerts or theater performances), “ring contact” (e.g., for folk dancing or fashion shows), and “directionless contact” (e.g., ball games or exhibitions) (Figure 18). Open day and night, weekdays and weekends, the Stadthalle offered programming focused on what in official jargon was called sozialistische Unterhaltungskunst (socialist entertainment art), which included anything
from theater and cabaret to dance parties and Christmas shows.  

Subsequent GDR culture halls embraced mass recreation wholeheartedly. Some, like the Freizeitforum (leisure forum) in Marzahn, incorporated a panoply of sports facilities, becoming in effect full leisure centers. Official design guidelines published by the Institut für Kulturbauten promoted Funktionsverflechtung—the weaving together of functions—as the key concept for all cultural facilities. The term could denote a range of concrete architectural strategies to combine uses, create free spaces, and maximize social interaction. Yet what made it more specific as a design strategy, according to policy makers, was the understanding of culture as “communication.” The Kommunikationsbereich, a distribution and traffic area that also functioned as meeting and event space, thus became the architectural and programmatic core of the cultural complex. Just as the GDR needed to integrate “Bildung, recreation, and gastronomy,” as Werner Prendel argued, it also needed to build these integrated facilities “so that the smallest economic effort will lead to the largest societal effect.” Even though the same logic of efficiency dominated discussions of integration in France and elsewhere in Europe, Prendel proclaimed that integrated cultural facilities would help build socialism and create communal sociability in the GDR’s neighborhoods and cities.

By the 1980s, hundreds of cultural centers, small and large, were spread across East Germany (Figure 19). How they shaped the everyday experiences of East Germans is hard to assess. Events at the GDR’s prestigious culture halls were, almost certainly, carefully monitored, and they excluded elements that could be interpreted as critical of the
state. The institutions were thus vehicles of state control rather than of citizen participation—at least in the sense of direct empowerment as it was understood in Western Europe after 1968. Yet “participation” should be understood here in its historical context: it was first and foremost a means for the state to apply control in more indirect ways. With fickle interests and a consumer culture of mopeds, cassette players, and music bands, “youth” had become a special concern of state officials during the 1970s. Houses of culture, with their special youth programming, were part of a strategy to avert potential uprisings by situating youths in settings where their activities could be controlled (Figure 20). In such a vexed political context, designers and policy makers not coincidentally legitimated communication and Funktionsverflechtung as architectural strategies to accommodate “spontaneous, unprogrammed use of free time.”

**Conclusion**

When seen through a Cold War lens, the culture halls of the GDR are polar opposites to those in France or elsewhere in Western Europe: the first were instruments of state control intended to prevent social resistance and directly mold culture to political ends; the latter, spaces of free expression in a market-oriented public sphere. While such a characterization is not inaccurate, it hides as much as it reveals. Culture halls on either side of the Iron Curtain shared correspondences not only in design but also in the basic assumptions

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**Figure 19** Locations of GDR cultural facilities (Kulturelle Freizeiteinrichtungen in der DDR [Gotha Haack, 1976], Staatsbibliothek Berlin, map collection, Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte [bpk]).
that undergirded cultural policy. Whether in Western or Eastern Europe, culture halls were state-funded institutions with a specific political goal—namely, to foster a type of citizen who would actively participate in cultural life within specific bounds set by the state. In this way architecture participated in the Cold War invention called “cultural policy” and helped articulate the divergent cultural politics of socialism and liberal capitalism.

During the 1960s and 1970s, policy makers framed the cultural center, perhaps paradoxically, as an institution that was universally applicable to and independent of political economy, or of politics altogether. In December 1967, at one of the first conferences on cultural policy organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), policy makers analyzed cultural facilities from France to Poland and from Ecuador to the Soviet Union as part of a single movement toward “cultural development.” Even if they distinguished the different directions cultural policy might take at the national level—for example, the “popularization of masterpieces” versus “workers’ education”—they emphasized that cultural policy was fundamentally based on “making people participate” by “endeavoring to stimulate their powers of creation.” In 1969, a meeting between the French and Polish delegations to UNESCO came to similar conclusions, finding that cultural policy was a tool for both individual and national development, irrespective of political ideology or cultural difference. Underlying cultural policy was a vaguely defined
humanism: the “right to culture,” to be guaranteed by the state through the construction of cultural facilities. The Council of Europe was another key institution promoting this idea. As early as 1964, its Council for Cultural Co-operation described the goal of cultural policy as “enabling the individual at all times and throughout his life to take advantage of the widest opportunities for cultural development and self-fulfilment” and “to reach out beyond the small minorities who have traditionally appreciated ‘highbrow’ activities like serious music, theatre and the fine arts, to the broad mass of the population.”

Such high-minded goals, however, were founded on a relationship between state and citizen that seemed universal but was in fact political and historically determined. Jacques Coenen, a policy maker at the Council of Europe, succinctly voiced this paradox by pointing out that state intervention in culture, a domain of life that most people consider essential to their sense of privacy, freedom, and individuality, constitutes a “dirigisme which would like to be non-dirigiste.” Yet, despite such wariness, the council still advocated for a vigorously interventionist cultural policy, because “active experience [is] preferable to passivity, and participation in community affairs [is] better than exclusive preoccupation with family life and private pursuits.” Many policy makers in Western Europe emphasized that their policies supported only the institutional framework of culture rather than its content. Yet the state project of turning passive consumers into participatory citizens was hardly neutral, even if it was presented as such.

Notes
1. I would like to thank Prita Meier, Florian Urban, Patricia Morton, and the anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful comments that have helped improve this text.
4. On the history of cultural policy in France, see Vincent Dubois, La politique culturelle: Genèse d'une catégorie d'intervention publique (Paris: Belin, 1999); Philippe Urfalino, L'invention de la politique culturelle (Paris: La Documentation Française/Comité d'Histoiire du Ministère de la Culture 1996).
8. On France, see Klein, “Des maisons du peuple aux maisons de la culture.”
17. I refer here to socialist realism in the arts more generally, even though the historical trajectory of the movement differs across countries and is often discipline-specific. For example, in the GDR realistic painting persisted as part of socialist realism, whereas neoclassical architecture was abandoned in the mid-1950s.
20. See, for example, Walter Ulbricht, Die nationale Mission der DDR und das geistige Schaffen in unserem Staat (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1965).
22. Ibid., 2.
24. See Dubois, La politique culturelle, 191–98.
25. Even though these were presented as new institutions, the establishment of maisons de la culture goes back to the 1930s. See Urfalino, L’invention de la politique culturelle, 23.
30. Hans Bentsen, the minister of culture in the first half of the 1960s, even argued that the Stadtstollen should be modeled on the popular turn-of-the-century Volksbücher, but that idea was quickly dismissed as reformist. Meyer, Kulturpaläste und Stadthallen der DDR, 161.
32. During the early 1960s, the French Ministry of Culture was at pains to distinguish its new maisons de la culture from other state-funded collective facilities being built at the time, in particular the youth centers, or maisons des jeunes et de la culture. Established by the state department for youth and sports, these institutions facilitated painting, photography, and theater workshops and club meetings. Separating such creative and recreational activities from the high culture of the maisons de la culture was problematic to many policy makers. See Jacques Charpentreau, Pour une politique culturelle (Paris: Les Éditions Ouvrières, 1967), 7–15. See also Urfalino, L’invention de la politique culturelle, 75–78.
33. Studies and Research Department, French Ministry of Culture, Some Aspects of French Cultural Policy, 15.
39. Baeque, Les maisons de la culture, 47.
42. “Maisons de la culture,” internal note, May 1968, CAC 19840754/3, National Archives, France.
43. Commission Charte de Villeurbanne, Compte rendu de la réunion du 10 juin à la Maison de la culture d’Amiens, 1968, CAC 19950514/1, National Archives, France.
46. Commission Charte de Villeurbanne, Compte rendu de la réunion du 10 juin à la Maison de la culture d’Amiens.
50. Venance designed the Maison pour ‘tous in collaboration with scenographer G. Demangeat and sculptor M. Rossignieux.
51. For more information on the French new towns, see Kenny Cupers, The Social Project: Housing Postwar France (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), chap. 5.
55. One of the first maisons de la culture proposals on a hexagonal grid was by the Atelier d’Urbanisme et d’Architecture (AUA), for the maison de la culture for La Part-Dieu in Lyon. Venance’s maison des jeunes et de la culture in Fresnes was already finished by this time. See L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui, no. 112 (1966–67), 67–68.
57. Nevertheless, such flexible theater spaces were already being contested in France, a result of the controversy surrounding the “factory-like” Théâtre National de Chaillot, designed by AUA. See “L’espace transformable en question,” Techniques et Architecture 310 (Aug./Sept. 1976), 42–78.
59. Les 7 Mares Elancourt-Maurepas, VNSQ, 2.
60. This intention mirrored late Brutalist ambitions such as those that influenced AUA’s design of L’Arlequin in Grenoble.
62. APASC brought together representatives from the local municipalities, the planning team, several ministries, and local associations.
64. “Étude des types d’animation pratiques,” 25.
67. The late 1940s saw a brief period of experimentation with modernism, including by architects such as Hermann Henselmann, who subsequently designed projects in the neoclassical style.
68. In December 1950, a competition for a Kulturhaus prototype was organized, and the results were published as a series of guidelines in Deutsche Architektur, no. 4 (1953). Schriftenwechsel des Institutes mit verschiedenen Ministerien über die Projektierung und den Bau von Kulturbäuden, 1951–54, BArchB DH2/3065, Bundesarchiv Berlin, Germany.
69. Even though Brecht did not produce his best-known work during his GDR years, the impact he had on East German theater in subsequent decades was considerable, not only because he had trained the next generation of theater makers but also because his wife, Helene Weigel, continued to work at the Berliner Ensemble for decades after Brecht’s death. Wilhelm Hortmann, “Revolutions in Scenography on the German Stage in the Twentieth Century,” in A History of German Theatre, ed. Simon Williams and Mark Hamburger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 298–300.


75. Flierl, “Das Kulturhaus in der DDR.”


77. Sitzung des Preisgerichtes am 12.07.1960, internal note, BArch DH 2 II/07-3/8, Bundesarchiv Berlin, Germany; These of the Rates of the Stadt für die Grundkonzeption “Hk,” 22.7.1960, internal note, 114310 Rdb Dresden, BT: 5449, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, Germany.

78. Deutsche Architektur, no. 4 (1968), 212–18.


83. Institut für Kulturbauten, 1971–80, folder, BArchB DR1/17912, Bundesarchiv Berlin, Germany.


87. Erarbeitung von Gestaltungsvorschlägen für das HKW der Bezirkshauptstadt Karl-Marx-Stadt, 15.03.1962, 33842, Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, Germany.

88. Pfeifferkorn, Grobe, überschlägliche Betrachtung zu Nutzungsmöglichkeiten und Nutzefekt des Hochhausteiles des HKW Karl-Marx-Stadt, 5.10.1964, 28469, Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, Germany.

89. “Volkswirtschaftliche Aufgabenstellung für der Investitionsvorhaben,” report, undated, 28470, Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, Germany.

90. Vorlage für die Sitzung der Plankommission, 02.10.1961, Vorbereitung des Baus “Haus der Kultur und Wissenschaften” in Karl-Marx-Stadt, 1614, Stadtvich Chemnitz, Germany.


