



## Echoes of the East: Unearthing (Post)Socialist Heritage in Chemnitz' Garages

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*Figure 1: Everything starts somewhere. Maybe the origin of this research is to be found there, among the smell of greasy tools and frozen ice-cream.*

*There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in.*

*Michel de Certeau, The practice of Everyday Life, 1988, p.135*

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## Introduction

Brussels, the 26th of October 2021. Saxony's liaison office to the European Union is celebrating its 30th anniversary. In the hushed meeting room of a Belgian luxury hotel, all sorts of people have gathered: the president-minister of the German state of Saxony, European political representatives, the mayor of the city of Chemnitz, and officials from the European Capital of Culture (ECoC). In this official and somewhat pompous atmosphere, one object stands out. On the soft carpet of the meeting room stands a concrete box measuring 3 metres by 6 metres, with a wooden door, a tin roof and a brass gutter. A garage, coming straight from Chemnitz.

The reason for this object's presence in Brussels can be explained as follows: In 2025, the European Capital of Culture will be held in Chemnitz, a deindustrialised city in southern Saxony. The ECoC's program, sponsored by the EU, is a celebration of European culture aiming to put a different city and its cultural scene in the limelight every year. Although Chemnitz has lost some of its lustre today, it was a major industrial centre in the days of the German Democratic Republic, the GDR. With the opportunity that the ECoC represents, Chemnitz wants to show the world its rich past, shaped by 40 years of socialism, and prove that the skills it has acquired during this time can still be useful today: a sense of everyday's innovation in the face of the uncertainty of an economic system made of scarcity, solidarity between neighbours at all times, and a general sense of community. As for the garage, it represents this "everyday culture" of the former socialist State and will thus be at the centre of Chemnitz2025's program (SVB n.d.).

If I open my master's thesis with this vignette, it is to give a sense of this particular moment where the European Union, the Art world, the East German socialist past and a small instance of vernacular architecture meet. I want to understand why this garage ended up in a fancy meeting room in Brussels, when thousands of others are being unnoticed in former East German cities and villages. This particular situation also sheds light on some of the issues I will develop in my research. Questions of relations between municipal power, Art world and citizens. Questions of heritage and legacy. Questions of nostalgia and loss. Of survivance. With this research, I try to peek through the garages' doors, to listen to stories and observe the ways relationships between Chemnitz2025 and garage users unfold in the field.

The first chapter of my research serves as a reminder of different elements of context important to understand the issues at stake. I will give a brief overview of the geographical and historical situation of the city of Chemnitz, and then of the ECoC's program. I will then dwell on Chemnitz' garage culture and on the socialist garage complexes in particular. With this context in mind, I will then explore the theoretical framework in which I inscribe my research in Chapter 2. To mirror the strong emphasis that Chemnitz2025 puts on the Eastern heritage of the city, I will draw on the scholarship of the Global East in order to analyse my data in the two next chapters. Chapter 3 will be dedicated to the garages themselves and on the continuities and anti-continuities with the socialist time that I could observe in the field. In Chapter 4, I focus my attention on the work of the team responsible for the garage project within Chemnitz2025, with whom I had the opportunity to engage in participatory observation during several months.



*Figure 1: The garage in Brussels. Photograph by Daniel Meissner.*

# Chapter 1: Chemnitz Capital of Culture: Elements of Context

## 1. Chemnitz

Situated in the southern part of what used to be the German Democratic Republic, Chemnitz is, after Leipzig and Dresden, the third biggest city of the German State of Saxony. This triad of cities is often mentioned together to highlight the role that each of them hold in the Saxon economy: Leipzig and its trade fair is the heart of business and commerce, Dresden is the cultural jewel and political centre, and Chemnitz is the industrial working-class core of the State (Glorius 2022). The reputation of Chemnitz as an industrial hub is not new and can be traced back to the first mentions of the city in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, in which Chemnitz was already described in relation to its blooming textile production (Glorius 2022). This remained the case throughout the centuries with dynasties of Chemnitzer industrialists such as the Esche family. After inventing the first sock knitting loom, they made a fortune from the production of stockings and participated in the industrial culture that has earned the city the nickname of “the German Manchester” (Villa Esche n.d.). We can still grasp the prosperity of this period while walking through the city and passing by its countless Art Nouveau buildings and abandoned brick factories.



*Figure 3: An example of abandoned industrial heritage in Chemnitz. Photograph by author.*

During the socialist era, Chemnitz kept its status as “industrial core” of Saxony, as the city was producing 50% of the textile machines used in the Democratic Republic (Glorius 2022). As a recognition of the strong working-class culture of Chemnitz, the GDR authorities decreed the name change of the city in 1953, from Chemnitz to Karl-Marx-Stadt. The city kept this name until the collapse of the regime, when a popular vote was held that gave Chemnitz its historical name back.



After the *Wende* - the social and political change that led to the German reunification - Chemnitz, like other East German cities, suffered from a dramatic demographic decline. According to some sources, Chemnitz lost up to 20% of its population between 1990 and 2011, both from emigration and a drop in birth rates (Glorius 2022). From an urban perspective, this means that in the beginning of the 2000s, the vacancy rate was close to 25% of the city's housing stock (Glorius 2022). This rate dropped mostly because of the demolition carried out within the *Stadtumbau Ost* program, aiming to fight against the shrinkage of former GDR cities. For Intelmann (2019), *Stadtumbau Ost* is to be read within the concept of "Luxus der Leere", the luxe of emptiness, a concept coined by architects and policymakers in the beginning of the 2000s (Kil 2004). For them, East German cities offered the space needed for the State to try out different urban models and could become fields of urban experimentation. For some critical voices, this has not always been done considering the inhabitants (Intelmann 2019). In the case of Chemnitz, Intelmann and Glorius alike argue that already shrinking neighbourhoods lost even more attractiveness and inhabitants after the intervention of *Stadtumbau Ost*. Today, a lot of buildings are still empty and left to decay, especially in the old working-class neighbourhoods, where we can come across countless broken windows and condemned doors.

However, what remains of Karl-Marx-Stadt and its splendour is the 13 metres high sculpture of Karl Marx's head that has been casting its shadow on the city centre since its construction in 1971. More than just a memento of the socialist time, the *Nische*, (the name given to the massive Marx head by the locals) became a flagship and marketing token for the city. From local Coca-Cola brands to barbershop logos, Marx can be found everywhere. Thanks to skillful graphic work, the philosopher even lends his features to the map of the city's bus system (see fig. 4). Being such a predominant and instantly recognisable monument, it is not surprising that the *Nische* also became a meeting point for all sorts of political rallies. The one that particularly struck people's mind was the 2018 far-right manifestations that took place after the killing of a German man by an asylum seeker. Following the murder, people started gathering around the *Nische*. At first, a few hundreds Hooligans and far-right factions took part in the rallies, chanting hateful slogans such as "*Ausländer raus*" and "*Das ist unsere Stadt*" (Intelmann 2019, 190)<sup>1</sup>. In the following weeks, thousands of ordinary citizens joined the rallies, causing a stir in left-wing and moderate circles in Germany and beyond. Some scholars analysed the events through an East German lens (Friese and al. 2019, Brichzin and al. 2022). Intelmann argues for instance that these events were the result

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<sup>1</sup> These slogans can be translated as "Foreigners out" and "this is our city".

of the "ostdeutsche Malaise" and the failures of the *Wiedervereinigung*, the German reunification (Intelmann 2019).



Figure 4: Advertisement for the Chemnitzer Verkehrs AG. Figure 5: the Nischel, photograph by author.

Several books and articles have been written on the 2018 racist outbursts, and scholars have analysed at length the roots and consequences of those events<sup>2</sup>. I will therefore not dwell on it any longer. However, it is worth keeping this context in mind while going to the next section, where I present the ECoC and Chemnitz2025 in further detail. The 2018 events marked a real turning point for Chemnitz where the societal fractures became so evident that it was now impossible to look away. It became imperative to acknowledge the ruptures and try to move forward. By choosing Chemnitz as a year-long representative of Europe, the ECoC also makes a stance about Europe and its own infightings. In their own words :

*With this bid we aim to bring Europeans together through a culture of making, with Chemnitz as its hub. Through people's passions, imagination and gratitude, we cultivate European values and grow self-efficacy critical to our societies. Our goal is to have Europeans reconnect with one another and thus create a loving European community, where sharing is caring. From ruptures to relations. From unseen to European (Kulturhauptstadt 2018, 3).*

However, before analysing the program of Chemnitz2025 in further details, I will briefly retrace the genesis and goals of the ECoC initiative.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the topic, see : Friese, Heidrun; Nolden, Marcus; Schreiter, Miriam (Hg.): Alltagsrassismus. Theoretische und empirische Perspektiven nach Chemnitz. Bielefeld: transcript

## 2. The ECoC program

The purposes of the ECoC stated on the European Commission website are the following: to “highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures, celebrate the cultural ties that link Europeans together, [and] foster a feeling of European citizenship” (Garcia and Cox 2013 : 38). The project emerged in 1983, following a meeting of all the European ministers of culture in Athens. The Greek minister of culture of the time, Melina Mercouri, argued the importance of culture, at the time often relegated to the background, in the development of a European project that every citizen could identify with (Garcia and Cox 2013). A few years after Mercouri’s proposition, Athens became the first ECoC in 1985, followed by other prominent cultural centres like Florence, Amsterdam, Berlin and Paris.

Several authors (Herrero 2006, Garcia and Cox 2013) consider the 1990 capital of culture, Glasgow, as a major turning point in the understanding of the goals of the initiative. With Glasgow, cities began to see the ECoC as a “catalyst for urban regeneration”, with a focus on the long term benefits rather than as the display of an already existing and thriving cultural scene (Garcia and Cox 2013 : 30). The regenerative and long-term effect that the ECoC can have on cities was added to the operational framework of the ECoC for the years 2020 to 2033 (Garcia and Cox 2013). As quoted by Garcia and Cox, the European Commission explains that: “it appears [...] that cities holding the ECOC title have over the years adopted a third broad objective that evaluators have defined as ‘supporting social and economic development through culture’” (European Commission, 2010, quoted in Garcia and Cox 2013 : 46). It is important to keep this paradigmatic change in mind to look at Chemnitz2025. As I showed in the description of the city above, Chemnitz belongs without a doubt to the post-Glasgow Capitals of Culture for which the program can represent a catalyst and a springboard for the local cultural scene.

### a. Chemnitz as European Capital of Culture

“Chemnitz is the ideal workshop for me - free space to create without the noise of the big city”<sup>3</sup> (Meyer 2023, 8). This is how a collaborator of Chemnitz2025 describes the city in the magazine *Chemnitz Capital*. I heard iterations of this take countless times during my research. Chemnitz would be the “new Leipzig”, where artists could express themselves without the burden of expensive rents and over-saturated cultural spaces. As demonstrated in the last section, this advantageous situation is the result of a deindustrialization pattern

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from German by the author.

coupled with drastic political changes. The conjunction of this situation and the active local cultural scene makes Chemnitz an ideal candidate for the “post-Glasgow” ECoC program.

However, despite its long and rich industrial history, Chemnitz did not explicitly put this heritage forward in its application to the ECoC. The different projects presented in the bid book do not dwell on the textile industry, nor is the role of Chemnitz in the manufacturing of machine-tools during the GDR era particularly taken into consideration. However, Chemnitz2025 acknowledges that “like the people in many other traditionally industrial regions of Europe, the people of Chemnitz have historically been knowledgeable, resourceful, and hands-on pragmatics” (Kulturhauptstadt 2018, 10). It is then the agency and inventive practices of “the people of Chemnitz” - or to use the words of the ECoC, the “makers” - that is at the centre of the program. As it will be developed later in this thesis, the “maker” is a broad concept that includes anybody “making things for themselves and for others”, be it artistic practices such as singing or painting, but also cooking, fixing a car or building a house (Idem, 11). Using Chemnitz as a vantage point, Chemnitz2025 seeks to broaden the maker community and to connect the city to other creative actors in Western as well as Eastern Europe. Without offering more details, the bid book’s authors state: “We live in Central European [sic] with Western European minds and Eastern European soul” (Idem, 13). In other words, there could not have been a better ECoC candidate than Chemnitz, as the city is a living metaphor for Europe and the cohabitation of “the East” with “the West.”

As this quote suggests, the Eastern European Soul of the city is, along with the maker narrative, the other prominent theme explored by Chemnitz2025. The first of the program’s four pillars is called “Eastern State of Mind”, and plans to activate some of the socialist spaces still visible in the city. If some of the projects presented in the bid book are linked to traditional socialist architecture, such as the modernist aesthetic or the East German *Plattenbau*, the Eastern State of Mind pillar focuses in particular on one kind of space, the GDR garage complexes. They are at the centre of the flagship project 3000Garagen, which will be central to this thesis. I will describe and analyse this project at length in Chapters 3 and 4, but it is nonetheless worth shortly presenting it here.

The team in charge of the project, composed of three curators and one intern at the time of my research, aims to put the thousands of garages of Chemnitz in the limelight, and more particularly “the personal and collective stories that exist around the garages and the people who use them” (Chemnitz2025 2022). During my fieldwork, which took place two years before the beginning of the ECoC festivities, the team’s work consisted mainly of contacting garage users who would be willing to work with Chemnitz2025 in one way or

another. The team had adopted a very bottom-up approach, and was willing to help any grassroots project stemming from the garage users. For example, an idea that was often discussed was to paint murals on the walls of the garages. In this case, the role of the team could be either to provide the users with material, or to commission a local artist to do the work. In parallel, they also worked with two artists, who will be in charge of the proper “artistic” component of the project. Though nothing was set in stone when I left Chemnitz, the initial idea was to work with a photographer to immortalise some garage users and their practices, and with a multimedia artist to collect testimonies in the frame of a biographical work.

The strong focus put on as mundane a piece of architecture as these small garages can be surprising. In fact, the garages inscribe themselves in a longer history of automobile culture in Chemnitz, the importance of which will be detailed in the next section, predating the GDR.

### 3. The Automobile Culture of Chemnitz

My assumption, based on descriptions from the bid book, was that most of what we could call the “garage culture” of the city was concentrated in the GDR garage complexes. Shortly after engaging in my fieldwork, I noticed that the situation was more complicated. In an article published in March 2023, the satirical blog *re:marx* described Chemnitz as an *Autokratie*, where every planning decision is made in the interest of car drivers (*re:marx* 2023). It is undebatable that Chemnitz is a city made for cars<sup>4</sup> and that the sentiment of emptiness that so often characterises writing about Chemnitz is greatly due to the oversized arteries that cross the city (Brichzin and al 2022 : 39). However, what might be analysed at first sight as a remnant of the GDR planned economy, in fact, predates the socialist regime. An enlightening example of this early motorization of the city is the *Sternhochgarage*, one of the first multi storey garages in Germany. Built in 1928, this 6-storey building offered parking spaces for at least 300 vehicles, a gas station and even a workshop where cars could be serviced. Situated right in-between the wealthy neighbourhoods of Kassberg and Kappelenberg, the *Hochgarage* shows the need, at least for the upper-class, to have a space to park their vehicles (Museum für sächsische Fahrzeuge Chemnitz eV. n.d). Today, the first floor of the building houses the *Museum für Sächsische Fahrzeuge*, the Saxon Vehicle Museum.

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<sup>4</sup> I found several newspaper articles reporting on the inadequacy of the infrastructure during my visit to the archives of the Museum of Industry. See for example Leissner 2008 and Brandenburg 2008.

### a. The GDR Garages

If Chemnitz was planned around cars, one could also argue that Chemnitz was also made *by* cars, or more specifically by the car industry. Chemnitz' nickname, the "Saxon Manchester" is a testimony to this strong industrial past that shaped the city. Besides the manufacturing of textile, Chemnitz and its surroundings were well-known for their automobile industry. Saxony was the birthplace of several automobile manufacturers, the most famous one being August Horch who founded Audi in 1904 in Zwickau, a few kilometres West of Chemnitz.

As Rubin (2011) relates, the Audi factory was seized by the Soviets at the end of WWII, and later nationalised by the GDR. It is in this very factory that what unarguably became the strongest symbol of the GDR, the Trabant, started being produced in 1957. For Rubin, it is the specific Saxon *savoir-faire* in the car industry, particularly the two-stroke engine developed in the 1910's in Zschopau, that, coupled with the chemical industry manufacturing plastic in the neighbouring state of Saxony-Anhalt, allowed the development of the Trabant as we know it. Without the relatively uncomplicated, light and versatile two-stroke motor and the possibility to build an all-plastic car body in a time when steel was hard to find, Rubin argues that the GDR could not have produced cars on such a scale. However, as several authors point out, the large-scale production of Trabants was far from sufficient to meet the demand and East German families usually had to wait several years before receiving a car (Casper and Rellensmann 2021).

With such a waiting time to be able to own a vehicle, people took great care of their cars. In order to protect the Trabant from bad weather and theft, the regime allowed the construction of garage complexes. In the pure socialist tradition, the garage users would organize themselves in *Garagengemeinschaften*, in other words associations of garage users with an elected committee and active members, and use the Saturdays dedicated to community work to build their garage complex together. Each person was required to spend a fixed number of hours building the complex to be able to use a garage (Casper and Rellensmann 2021). Even though the initial purpose of the garage was solely to store a car, other uses and practices developed, and some people started using their garages as workshops to repair and care for their car, as a basement to store goods, or as a social space to spend time with friends and family (Bescherer and Feustel 2021). The garage complexes thus represent more than a mere parking space, and plays an important role in the geographical and social understanding of the GDR.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to give an overview of some of the elements of context that need to be kept in mind throughout this thesis. As I showed, it is particularly important to understand Chemnitz as a city struck both by strong deindustrialisation and urban shrinkage after the *Wende*. If the city has been particularly known for its far-right and neo-Nazi scene in the past years, the ECoC programme is seen by some as a long-awaited catalyst for tourism and culture. Interestingly, Chemnitz2025 will focus mainly on the Eastern heritage of the city, which they argue shaped the creativity of the “makers” of the city. In the program, the symbols of Chemnitz’ “Eastern State of Mind” are the GDR garage complexes that are found everywhere in the city, and that abound with stories. Soon, we will open the door of some of these garages to observe the activities taking place in these spaces. However, I will first establish the theoretical framework in which I inscribe my research.



Figure 6: Various garages complexes in Chemnitz. By author.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Although the garages played an important role in the life of GDR citizens, they are not particularly taken into consideration in the literature on automobiles and traffic in the GDR. For instance, in his chapter on socialist automobility named *Understanding a Car in the Context of a System*, Rubin (2011) does not even mention the garage complexes, as if they did not contribute to the “system”. As Tuvikene (2014) notes, the literature on automobility tends to focus on the “mobility” of vehicles. Garages are therefore considered as non-spaces and not deemed of interest. The fact that the garages, though relics of a bygone era, are still in use makes them even more invisible. They escape the gaze of ruins specialists such as historian Offenstadt (2019), who does not mention the garages one single time in his rather extensive exploration of the traces of the GDR built landscape. The first scholarly case study on garages has been written by Tuvikene, who focuses on the significance of this particular form of “vernacular landscape structures” in Estonia (Tuvikene 2010, 516). Several years later, in 2021, Casper and Rellensmann offered the first serious and extensive architectural study of the East German garages.

As we can see, the topic is still significantly unexplored. To compensate for the lack of literature on GDR garages, I base my arguments around the broader scholarship of post-socialist and Global East studies, and on the results of a four months field trip in Chemnitz. Before expanding on the specifics of the fieldwork, I will show the relevance of the topic for Urban studies, and examine in more detail the way the East has been and is understood by urban scholars.

### 1. Relevance of the Chemnitz’ garage complexes as an urban topic

In the first lines of Chapter 1, I described Chemnitz as only a shadow of its former self. If it is undeniable that the city lacks inhabitants and dense social spaces, I nonetheless want to partly challenge this canonical narrative on Chemnitz, which also shaped my vision of the city at first. It could indeed be argued that the narrative built around the emptiness and the un-activation of the city has become a trope and a *lieu commun* influencing most readings of the city. For example, in their ethnography of the far-right movements of the city, Brichzin and al. narrate their first encounters with Chemnitz’ urban fabric at length, vividly describing how they visited half-empty cafés, or how they had the local swimming pool to themselves (Brichzin and al. 2022). During the four months I spent in Chemnitz however, I had a different experience. On Sundays, I usually needed to walk to three or four different cafés to find a free seat, and I could see people queuing at the ice cream stand as soon as a single



sunbeam appeared. And, unlike in Birchzin's experience, the swimming pool was usually so busy that I was always sharing a line with several swimmers. A fair number of houses are unoccupied, that is undeniable. But the city's life is present. Shifting our gaze from a dominant and "Western" comprehension of the Urban also means to reflect upon what a city is, and thus what can be deemed "Urban". For one coming from colourful cities such as New York, Mumbai, Rio or even Berlin or Frankfurt, Chemnitz probably does look empty and almost "non-urban". But for one such as myself, who comes from a small Swiss city with a long history of (des)industrialisation, Chemnitz does not look very different from their daily experience of the Urban.

In this paper, I therefore adopt a definition of the Urban that excludes factors of density or political organisation. Drawing on Lefebvrian thinkers, I focus instead on the Urban as an interface where everyday life practices and global logics meet (Lefebvre 2003, Goonewardena 2015, Brenner 2019). In the introduction to *The Urban Question*, Brenner focuses particularly on "state spatial strategies" as one of these major global logics. He argues that "urban space and state space [are] intricately entangled, mutually co-constituting and conflictually coevolving formations of scale-differentiated sociospatial relations under modern capitalism" (Brenner 2019, 10). In the case of Chemnitz, it is not only the "state space" that constructs the Urban, but also the European Union, the international Art industry and cultural economy, as well as the national, regional and municipal governments. The ECoC, two years before the start of Chemnitz2025, is already producing space.

One example of this production of space is the new direct train connection that links Chemnitz to Berlin (NTV 2022, Zeit Online 2022). Since 2006, there have been no long-distance trains going to and from Chemnitz. The city is even the biggest German city without any ICE (InterCity Express) connections. Through conversations with local citizens, I quickly understood that the topic of public transportation is a delicate one and is a cause of anger and bitterness for most of the residents. For instance, countless jokes were made at the expense of the age-old train connecting Chemnitz to Leipzig, which pre-dates the *Wende*. However, since 2022, a direct connection links Chemnitz to Berlin twice a day, in a bit less than 3 hours. If most agree that it is far from sufficient, journalists and locals believe that this connection would probably not have been made possible without Chemnitz2025. The program then helped to expose and accentuate the need for a more fluid transportation system between the State capital and the future Capital of Culture. With this framework in

mind, it becomes clear that Chemnitz, precisely at this moment, could not be more urban, and thus relevant for a thesis in Urban Studies.

## 2. The Global East

As it has been shown, Chemnitz2025 along with its 3000Garagen project are celebrating what the program calls “the Eastern State of Mind” of Chemnitz and of the former GDR. If the authors of the bid book give examples of how this Eastern State of Mind can look like (through a do-it-yourself mentality, solidarity towards neighbours...) they do not give any scientific weight to their claims. For this reason, I will now mention and analyse some of the conceptions of the East that can be found in the Urban Sciences scholarship, particularly among the post-socialist and Global East urban scholars. First, I will show three conceptions of the East as often presented in the literature. I will then draw on scholars defining post-socialism as a lived space made of continuities and anti-continuities with the past to specify my approach to the field. This will allow me to inscribe my research in a theoretical framework, and to articulate the themes and questions I will answer in the analysis.

### a. The East as the Semi-Other of Europe

In order to dive into the different conceptions of the East, it is important to remember that it is not necessarily a geographical concept. As noted by Kuus, the East has traditionally been described as “a figure in a metadiscourse” rather than as a place (Kuus 2007, 151). Trained in geopolitics, she focuses on Europe and its shifting borders and shows how the East is nothing less than the Semi-Other of Europe. Similarly to the Orient à la Said, the East, and Eastern Europe more particularly, needs to exist for the West to be. The East thus plays the role of the constitutive Other, through which the West can think itself (Said 2003).

However, unlike the Orient, Eastern Europe finds itself on the edge, neither inside nor outside of the West. The East is not completely otherized, as it can strive to become Europe, and does – sometimes- achieve it. As Kuus puts it, “the door of Europe [is] ajar, not closed” (Kuus 2007, 158). By drawing a line between Europe and the East, the EU creates a fantasised “Europeanness” that is distinguishable only by its fringes: Nobody knows what the core of Europe is, but everybody knows what – and who – Europe *is not*. As Kuus argues, Europeanness is foremost a matter of discipline. In other words, “if a place successfully ‘learns’ European norms, its Eastness declines; if it ‘misbehaves’, its Eastness increases” (Kuus 2007, 161). Along with Kuus, Müller (2020) also argues that it is this ambiguous relation to Europe that defines the East, more than a common economic or

political system, or a shared experience of socialism. For him, the only characteristic shared by the East is this “feeling of simultaneous difference and resemblance to an amorphous Europe” (Müller 2020, 738).

### b. The East as a Testing Ground

However, this relative proximity to Europe makes the East a privileged playground for western States and policy makers. As Kuus writes, the East is “not simply backward, but [is also] a learner, an experiment and a testing ground” (Kuus 2007, 152). To illustrate her point, the author quotes several historical examples where Eastern Europe has been used as a testing ground by the West. By way of example, we can mention the Western consultants rushing to the East in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, eager to test neoliberal policies on the newly formed countries.

Kuus’ argument resonates extremely well with the case of East Germany. Wolfgang Kil, who coined the term *Luxus der Leere* that I briefly mentioned in the section on Chemnitz, writes about the East Germany at the beginning of the 2000s as “the – involuntary – testing ground (*Testgelände*) for a future beyond conventional (industrial)work” (Kil 2001, 4)<sup>5</sup>. What Kil means here is that the sudden implosion of the east German economy represented an opportunity for investors and policy makers to try out new models and new strategies.

As Kuus reports, in the 1990s Eastern Europe “had a kind of ‘frontier’ ambiance” (Kuus 2007, 153). The same lexicon is used by Müller, who writes about the “Wild East” (Müller 2020, 738). Kil’s article undoubtedly contributes to this feeling of no-man’s-land where the land is to be taken, as he writes about “scouts and pioneers” ready to settle down and as he urges the State to make their installation easier through tax cuts and cheap rents (Kil 2001, 7). As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the ghost of the East as a testing ground is still looming in Chemnitz.

### c. “In the waiting rooms of neglected bus stations”

The title of this section, “in the waiting rooms of neglected bus stations”, is a quote taken from a piece written by journalist Jacob Mikanowski, in which he explains his almost Proustian search for the lost East. Wandering in his native USA, he sees “pocket[s] of Eastern Europe” revealing themselves to him (Mikanowski 2017). Like Proust’s *madeleine*, Mikanowski is instantly brought back to his grandmother’s house in Poland as soon as he steps into abandoned urban spaces, such as the aforementioned neglected bus station. Via

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<sup>5</sup> Translation from German by the author

the scent of “stale urine” and of “old mop water”, East and West are linked in an instant in his mind (Mikanowski 2017, quoted in Müller 2020, 741).

This text is used by Müller to carry out his own “search for the Global East” (2020). Like Mikanowski, Müller pairs Eastness with “a feeling of forsakenness and of disconnection from the world” (Müller 2020, 741). For him, the East is not a place, but rather a feeling, a failed relation to modernity. Müller argues that, if the East is to be found in the interstices of modernity and triumphant capitalism, it is also falling out of the categories of “Global North” and “Global South”. In other words, the East does not belong anywhere: neither to the North’s privileged role in global power structures, nor to the South’s post-colonial struggles.

Mikanowski’s quote not only evokes the neglected and abandoned urban spaces, but also the places in which nothing happens: the waiting rooms. Borrowing the term “waiting room of history” from Chakrabarty, Müller likens the eastern condition to that of post-colonial regions, “striving for a modernity in which it may participate, but only at the discretion and grace of Europe” (Müller 2020, 738). We can already sense a tension between this conception of the East as passive and forsaken and the figure of the “maker” as developed by Chemnitz2025.

#### d. Living (in) Post-Socialism

In the last sections, I have shown how the East is defined in the literature: as forsaken and apathetic, and as the semi-other and the testing ground of Europe. Drawing on Kuus and Müller allowed me to understand how the East is produced and reproduced by Europe. However, focusing solely on this scholarship can erase a paramount fact: the East is not only a concept nor a figment of the imagination. It is first and foremost a lived space. Having researched the former GDR through fieldwork and focussing on a rather mundane fragment of the territory, it is the conception in which I am the most interested. While bearing in mind the other conceptions of the East we just discussed, I will also build my theoretical framework around scholarly work taking the lived space in consideration. To do so, I introduce a body of literature that focuses more specifically on the post-socialist space.

As authors working on post-socialism (Tuvikene 2016, Offenstadt 2019, Houssay-Holzschuch 2021) show, studying the “East” means studying ruptures. It means understanding how economic, political, and cultural systems have died, survived, and sometimes morphed into other kinds of structures. However, the nature of the “post” in post-socialism can be challenging to grasp. As Houssay-Holzschuch asks: “How do we spot the end of something

that is also an ending" (Houssay-Holzschuch 2021, 2)? In other words, is post-socialism simply a transitional condition between communism and capitalism, a kind of "end of history", or is it rather a lasting situation? Stenning and Hörschelmann distinguish between the "triple transition" faced by socialist states in 1989 (the "reform of economic structures", the "construction of democratic institutions", and the "remaking of international relationships"), and the lived, everyday life experiences of people living in and making sense of the post-socialist environment (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, 314). The term post-socialist thus conveys two meanings: on the one hand, it represents the new political and economic model developed after the fall of the USSR or, in our case, after the *Wende*. On the other hand, "the [post] prefix points to the difficulty of making a clean break with the past, to the coexistence of (not so) past and 'post' logics, and to the messiness and entanglements of social dynamics" (Houssay-Holzschuch 2021, 4).

In my research, I am focussing on the second meaning. I want to see how the fact of living in a "post" space translates into the mundane and the every-day life. Most of my informants are now in their 60's or 70's, and thus lived the transition in their adult life. They still live with the ghost of the *Wende*, which came with welcomed political and social changes, but also with a complete restructuring of society. In their large survey on the lives of East Germans today, Arp and Goudin-Steinmann speak of the "ruptures and biographical readjustments" that followed the fall of the wall (Arp and Goudin-Steinmann 2020, 70). The authors mention a plethora of cases that illustrate the profound upheaval represented by the *Wende*. Personal trajectories disturbed by unemployment, deindustrialization, and, as one of their informants recalls, the feeling of being a migrant in their own country. During my fieldwork, I could hear similar stories. For instance, a 75-year-old woman explained how after the *Wende* she lost her job at the factory where she worked her whole life. As a result, she had to sell clothes on markets, and is still working part-time in a nursing home to compensate for her small pension. Those personal experiences illustrate perfectly the messiness of post and past logics' entanglements as developed by Houssay-Holzschuch.

However, these entanglements are not only visible in personal trajectories and stories. They are also embedded in space and materiality. In his exploration of abandoned GDR buildings, Offenstadt shows how the past is also to be found in the form of "traces" that he reads as proofs of both "abandonment" and "resistance". They show what has been abandoned by people in the past and deemed too insignificant to be kept. Simultaneously, they are also the remains of this past which resisted these societal upheavals (Offenstadt 2019, 29). In this research, I try to be attuned to what both people and objects have to say. I

will look for reminiscence of the past in the discourses, but also in the garages themselves and in the objects that are found inside.

In Urban Studies, the entanglement of past and present logics has also been studied (Hirt 2012, Hirt and al. 2016, Tuvikene 2016). Drawing on Robinson's (2016) comparative urbanism, Tuvikene argues that post-socialism is a "de-territorialized concept" (Tuvikene 2016). In other words, the concept of post-socialism can be applied to any city in the world, whether it used to be part of the Soviet sphere of influence or not. To be exact, post-socialism applies to some aspects of cities, as all of them are "ordinary" (Tuvikene 2016, Robinson 2016). What defines post-socialism for Tuvikene, similarly to Houssay-Holzschuch and Offenstadt, is the entanglement of continuities and anti-continuities with socialism. Continuities entail some of the built environment, "social practices", "governing technologies", or views on the world such as "some understandings of social justice" (Tuvikene 2016, 141). Anti-continuities are often visible through ruptures. For instance, as particularly developed by Hirt (2012) in her book *Iron Curtains*, post-socialist cities have in common a strong and galloping privatisation of space, be it through the proliferation of gated communities, or the shrinkage of urban public spaces.

### e. Research Questions

The analysis of the data I gathered in the field will be channelled through the lens of the post-socialist city as conceptualised by Tuvikene. With this research, I aim to identify the continuities and anti-continuities producing the garage culture of Chemnitz today to answer the following question, which will be the subject of Chapter 3:

1. *How do the garages inscribe themselves in the post-socialist city?*

Then, keeping in mind that the East is also an element of discourse, I will question the narratives produced by Chemnitz2025. As it has been said, the East plays a central role in the program, without having been clearly defined. Having spent several weeks with the 3000Garagen team and having witnessed some of their interactions with garage users, I will analyse what kind of understanding of the "Eastern State of Mind" is being produced in the field. In Chapter 4, I will then answer the question:

2. *What conception of the East is being created through Chemnitz2025, and the 3000Garagen project in particular?*

The next section will be dedicated to the methods that allowed me to research these two questions.

### 3. Methodology

#### a. Access to the Field

To carry out my research, I chose to use primarily anthropological methods. As this approach usually requires, I immersed myself in the field and lived in Chemnitz from February to June 2023. Once I was settled in, I contacted local institutions, including Chemnitz2025 GmbH. The team in charge of the 3000Garagen project quickly got back to me and we arranged a preparatory interview and they were very keen to offer me support with my project. However, they were reluctant to simply share garage owners' contact details with me. In the last months, dozens of students of the Architecture department of the University of Munich had come to map the garages and several journalists had also made the trip to Chemnitz to interview garage users. The team thus wanted to avoid them feeling like "zoo animals" that researchers would study without giving anything in exchange. I shared this concern, as I tried to handle my fieldwork as ethically as possible and did not want to add to the power imbalance.

The next week, the team invited me again to their office to talk about our options. During this meeting, they suggested a sort of collaboration. In short, I could accompany them to every meeting and site visit. In turn, I would let them know of my encounters with garage owners and would share my results. This arrangement shaped my data gathering and allowed me to engage in a rather deep participatory observation. Throughout the weeks I accompanied the team when they would visit garage owners or *Garagengemeinschaft* members to understand their needs. I also attended their meetings with artists whose involvement in the project was being discussed.

To refer to the classical "observation stances" in anthropology (Gold quoted in Kawulich 2005), my position was the one of an "observer as participant". Researchers who embrace this method find themselves in an intermediate position: they have been able to develop a solid relationship with the group they observe and, to a certain extent, became "insiders," but without properly belonging to the group nor "participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership" (Adler and Adler 1994 : 180). In my case, I was participating in most of the 3000Garagen team meetings with garage owners, and to their weekly team meeting. I was however not invited to the encounters with the other actors of the ECoC or with the municipality of Chemnitz, nor did I participate in the less official after-work get-togethers.

## b. Positionality

At times, the status of the observer as participant caused me to experience some doubts about my position. I was feeling that what was at first thought as a win-win deal with the 3000Garagen team largely turned out in my favour. The people I reached out to were mainly located out of Chemnitz, had no interest to work with the ECoC, or were public figures that the team could have reached anyway. Whereas I was glad to be able to engage in a *speaking-with* approach of the field and to collaborate with my informants (the 3000Garagen team) rather than simply observe them, I often questioned the real added value of my presence (Nagar and Geiger 2007).

Moreover, the data I gathered was strongly mediated by the fact that I was engaging in participatory observation alongside the 3000Garagen team. On the one hand, I visited most of the sites with the team, which did not allow an eventual critical discourse towards the ECoC to emerge. This situation also shaped my research questions, in which I focus mainly on the practices taking place in the garages and on the work of the team itself. On the other hand, the fact that I met garage owners mostly through the 3000Garagen team is also a bias. Informants I talked to, in particular the ones who form the core of my data, were already involved with the ECoC, and were eager to show their garages to strangers. However, due to the scope of my research, and to my approximative command of the Saxon German dialect, I believe it would have been complicated for me to meet and build a relationship of trust with less accessible garage users. Moreover, I did try to contact a *Garagengemeinschaft*. The email exchange was particularly fastidious and after 2 months of unfruitful conversation, the person I was exchanging with suggested that I write a few questions that they would share with the members. If someone wanted to answer them and talk to me, they would forward the information to me. Since then, I have not heard anything back.

This situation also sometimes questioned the ethics of my research. I was always introduced to people I met with the team as a student writing her master thesis on garages, and it was clear that I was taking notes frantically as they spoke. However, as I did not want to interfere with the team's work, I did not always explain my project in detail. At times, I almost engaged in what Berger called "unplanned participant observation", gathering data on the spot and taking notes on micro-interactions happening before my eyes. As Berger shows, unplanned participant observations do not always "meet the requirement of informed consent and voluntary participation prior to conducting the observation" (Berger 2017, 11).



However, Berger calls for the recognition of such non-traditional methods, in particular in the study of little researched “subcultures” (Berger 2017).

To alleviate these ethical concerns, I made sure to stay vague enough when I recall spontaneous conversations with garage users and every informant whose name is used in this thesis has been asked for their consent. Similarly, I refer to the 3000Garagen team as a whole and do not insist on the personality of the three members. This is also a way to keep a certain level of anonymity, without confusing the reader with more names and functions.

### c. Writing Process

After the data gathering came the writing. Due to the nature of the participatory observation in which I partook, my data was rather scattered. The large number of places I visited and of people I met did not make the analysis particularly easy. Due to the scope and time frame of the thesis, I could also not engage in proper multi-sited anthropology, where I could have systematically compared and contrasted findings in different settings. To take advantage of the multiplicity and diversity of my observations, I therefore decided to draw inspiration from Assemblage thinking: Following McFarlane (2021), I decided to work with “fragments”. For the author, following fragments of the Urban “enable[s] a particular understanding of the making and remaking of urban worlds” (McFarlane 2021, 4). In his book *Fragments of the City*, McFarlane explores the idea of fragment in different ways: quite literally, by thinking of housing and infrastructure as assemblages of materials, but also as a narrative device. For McFarlane, writing in fragments consists of juxtaposing *vignettes* of different lengths and tones, focusing on different stories and places. Writing in fragments is a way of combining storylines and seeing how (and if) the points where the stories intersect can bloom. For Baudrillard, it is also a form of “democratic writing”, where every fragment can have “its hour of glory” (Baudrillard quoted in McFarlane 2021, 109).

McFarlane uses fragmental writing “to generate insight amidst the radical differences that characterize the urban world” (McFarlane 2021, 109). My approach is less ambitious, as the fragments I am working with all stem from a similar context: the GDR garage culture in Chemnitz. I am nonetheless trying to draw inspiration from fragmental writing, and to present some of my data in the form of vignettes. Some will be written in a more imaged and creative form than what is usually expected of scientific texts. Others will be more traditionally theoretical while some will rely heavily on thick description in order to give the reader a sense of what I experienced in the field.

I do not consider those vignettes as vain stylistic exercises. If I use long descriptions of events or impressionist recalls of encounters, it is to “distil ways of seeing” (McFarlane 2021, 94). By looking at my data through different angles and different registers, I am trying to take Bruno Latour literally when he writes that “the text, in our discipline, is not a story, not a nice story. Rather, it’s the functional equivalent of a laboratory. It’s a place for trials, experiments, and simulations” (Latour 2005, 149). To add “other ways of seeing” to textual methods, I will also use visual inputs. Keeping the idea of the fragment as a conductive thread, I will also assemble photographs I took in the field, but also official documents, and archives.

#### d. Themes

Even though I inscribe my research in fragmental thinking, I still organise my data around four themes which emerged from my fieldnotes, namely:

1. The maker’s identity
1. The sociality in garages
2. The Post-Public City
3. The new and future uses of garages


These themes were present both in the way the 3000Garagen team was framing their project and in the interviews I conducted myself. For this reason, they will be found across my two research questions. Each theme will be enriched by specific literature, but they will all be seen through the light of the theoretical framework I developed above: the Global East and the post-socialist city. In the first chapter of the analysis, I will look at these themes in terms of (anti)continuities with socialism. We will see what survived, and what changed in the garage culture since the *Wende*. In the second chapter, we will observe the 3000Garagen team in action, and see what definition of the East is activated through the four themes.

#### e. Informants

My research revolves around a small number of informants, with whom I had the chance to conduct interviews, or to witness at length during their interactions with the 3000Garagen team. To make the analysis chapters more readable, I will here present the garage users and the spaces that are the most relevant to my research, and that the reader will meet throughout the different sections. All the interviews and discussions have been conducted in

German and later translated into English. Alongside my informants, I present the three spaces that are at the heart of my research, marked in red on the respective satellite images. By showing the three spaces in a broader geographical context, I hope to give a sense of the diversity of the situations encountered in the field.

<p>Heinz Borsdorf garage user.</p>	<p>Heinz Borsdorf is my only informant who does not live in Chemnitz, but in another Saxon village one hour away. I met him through common friends, and decided to include his interview in my research even though he does not come from Chemnitz. Indeed, his experience as a garage user for more than 30 years was precious to understand how garages are inscribed in the post-socialist space as a whole.</p>
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<p>Gutsweg</p>	
 <p>The image is a satellite view from Google Earth showing a residential area with several long, red-roofed apartment blocks. A specific building complex is highlighted with a red outline. A legend in the top-left corner identifies the area as 'Gutsweg Garage complex'. The 'Google Earth' logo is visible in the bottom-left corner of the image.</p>	
<p>I accompanied the team to the yearly assembly of the Gutsweg <i>Gemeinschaft</i> on 21.4.2023. The assembly was followed by a barbecue during which I engaged in participatory observation.</p>	

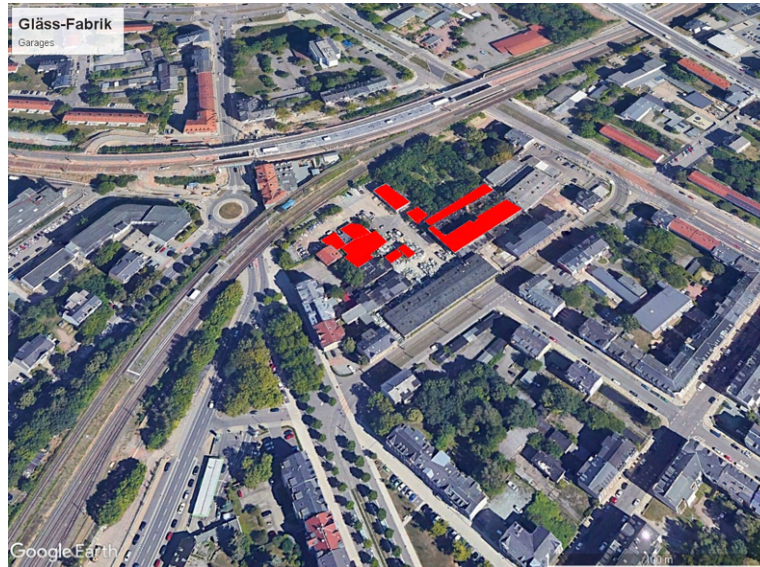
## Schützenplatz



Located in the periphery of Chemnitz, the garage complex of Schützenplatz is the biggest of the city with more than a thousand garages managed by several different *Garagengemeinschaften*. In my research, I will focus on one of them in particular. The people I met in Schützenplatz are:

<p>Ute Wetzel President of the Schützenplatz <i>Garagengemeinschaft's</i> committee.</p>	<p>I met Ute Wetzel twice, once on 3.4.2023 when she discussed possible collaborations with the team. She then invited us to the 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee of the garage complex on 20.4.2023.</p>
<p>Raik and Pascal Drechsler garage users and tinkers.</p>	<p>I met Raik Drechsler and his son Pascal with the 3000Garagen team on 15.5.2023. Raik is a bit of a local celebrity, and several articles have been written on his tinkering talent (in his free time, he works on old GDR vehicles), and on his relationship with his son, Pascal, who is also involved in garage culture.</p>
<p>René di Carlo garage user and Klappfix owner.</p>	<p>I met René di Carlo with the 3000Garagen team on 1.6.2023. He recently acquired a Klappfix, a trailer-tent typical of the GDR time, with which he travels. He stores and maintains it in his garage.</p>

## Gläss-Fabrik



Although the Gläss-Fabrik is not a garage complex in the GDR tradition, it is an extremely interesting space to look at in order to understand the garage culture in Chemnitz. Built in the beginning of the 20th century, the Gläss-Fabrik has been abandoned after the *Wende*, like the majority of East German factories. Since the reunification, the space has been used by people who needed of a space to work on their car or to store material. The space now belongs to the cultural centre Transit, which collects rents from the users. As we will see, the future of the space is uncertain, but the factory is temporarily used by several people. I met some of them, namely:

<p>Mareike Hornof garage user and artist.</p>	<p>I met Mareike Hornof for an interview on 29.3.2023. She transformed a part of the Gläss-Fabrik into a garage where she stores and repairs material for her catering activities. She is strongly involved in the cultural life of Chemnitz.</p>
<p>Markus Wabner garage user, old-timer and artist.</p>	<p>I met Markus Wabner for an interview on 16.3.2023. He has been using the Gläss-Fabrik for 20 years as a garage but also as a social space. After the interview, he introduced me to two other users active in the car-tuning scene.</p>

## Chapter 3: The Post-socialist Garages

In this chapter, I aim to understand the garages of Chemnitz through the framework of the post-socialist city. With the help of a set of qualitative methods, I will test the concept of continuities and anti-continuities as developed by Tuvikene on four different aspects of the garage culture in East Germany. As we will see, some elements survived the collapse of the socialist regime better than others. In some cases, the continuities will be extremely apparent, whereas in others we will only discern traces and ghosts. The first section of this chapter will be dedicated to what the ECoC calls the maker's identity, in other words the different tinkering practices that happen in garages. I will then put my focus on instances of sociality observed in the field, before exploring the increasing securitisation of the garage complexes in terms of ruptures with the socialist regime. Finally, I will show how the (anti)continuity framework can be disrupted by looking at how users exchange and outgrow their garages.

### 1. Opening the Black Box

The figure of the maker, who occupies such a paramount position in the narrative of Chemnitz2025, is the perfect starting point for our analysis. This theme requires a bit of historical background and I will thus start by showing how tinkering activities became an important part of East German society, and how they survived or changed after the *Wende*. The first paragraphs will be dedicated to a particularity of GDR garages, namely the fact that they were built by their users themselves. I will then look into the activities, in particular automobile maintenance and repair, that were (and sometimes still are) taking place there. With this section, I aim to show how the continuities with the socialist era last and survive in today's practices.

#### a. The Construction of the Garages

If garage complexes are not unique to East Germany, the way they were built and set up is undoubtedly typical of post-socialist contexts. Indeed, garages could not be constructed without previously forming a *Garagengemeinschaft*, an association of neighbours sharing a need for parking spaces. Once the association would be instituted, members would be authorised to organise themselves in "brigades" and to build their own garages in the evenings or weekends (Tuvikene 2014, Casper and Rellensmann, 2021).

During the 50th jubilee of the *Garagengemeinschaft* of the Schützenplatz, the president of the committee, Ute Wetzels, presented some photographs of the construction of the

complex in 1972 on which we could see men in vests erecting walls and stacking bricks. The hundreds of people present in the room, mainly elderly men, were watching the pictures with murmurs and emotional nods. With a smile, the committee president stated: “everyone was proud [of being part of this collective project]”. The old black and white pictures also resonated with the last part of the presentation, where the committee profusely thanked two men who participated in the garage building and who still regularly engaged in reparation work around the complex. As they were walking to the stage to receive a gift from the committee, the slideshow was displaying recent photographs of the two elderly men on ladders, fixing the gutters with a smile on their faces.

This example accurately depicts the feeling of pride directed towards the “first generation” of garage users. This element was brought up by most of my informants, who were often making a clear distinction between the users who were involved in the complex’s building and the new owners who just inherited or bought it after the *Wende* and, as Ute Wetzel puts it, “do not even say hello”.

However, the pride of building a garage with one’s own hands did not die off with the end of the socialist regime. As we were visiting his garage in the Gläss-Fabrik, a user told me for instance:

*At first, after the Wende, it was empty. We built it piece by piece. The shelves etc. Everything was already there, we picked everything from the ground. So [we really built] everything piece by piece.*

Interestingly, most of my informants had participated in the building of the garages one way or the other. Raik Drechsler, who was still a child when the garage he now owns was being built, recalled helping his father to carry buckets of sand. Heinz Borsdorf, whose garage had been constructed at the end of the 1970s, worked every Saturday for months on the site. As the quote above shows, the user I met in the Gläss-Fabrik and some of his friends had to set up the space themselves to make it suitable for their activities. It is probably not a coincidence if the people I interacted with were for the most part involved with their garage since the beginning. It is indeed probable that someone who has invested time and efforts to build their own garage develops a sentimental relationship toward it, and thus becomes more active in the community.

## b. Autobasteln

As it has been said, the literature on GDR garages is particularly scarce and it is not particularly surprising that it does not dwell on the sentimental connection between garage and user. However, there is an interesting scholarship on the concept of “Autobasteln”, namely the fact of caring for and maintaining a car in the GDR. This activity usually takes place in garages, and thus belongs to the broad GDR “garage culture”. For this reason, I will dedicate the next section to Autobasteln, and the sometimes strong relationship that can develop between owners and artefacts in the garages.

### *Between Economy of Scarcity and Social Distinction*

Even though the status of the *Garagengemeinschaften* forbids (in principle) the use of garages as anything else than a parking place, they are often turned into workshops where people tinker or repair objects and vehicles. The historian of technics Kurt Möser is one of the few scholars who explored the relationship between the East German society and the act of repairing and caring for vehicles. In his work on *Autobasteln* in GDR times, Möser shows how the GDR automobile culture developed itself for three reasons: the “planned lack of support infrastructures”, the “specifics of vehicles themselves”, and the “role of a do-it-yourself mentality in socialist societies” (Möser 2012, 207). The two first points have been studied by several scholars (Möser 2011, Möser 2012, Bescherer and Feustel 2021, Rubin 2011) and were also part of the discourse of the people I talked to. It is well known that during the GDR times, people would wait up to 15 years to receive a car, and that it was then paramount to keep it running as long as possible (Rubin 2011). It was especially the case as the cars were not particularly well manufactured and would easily rust. Möser (2012) even talks about *Prä-Nutzung-Reparatur* (pre-use-reparation), as some models of Lada imported to the GDR required its owner to take some pieces off of the vehicle’s body to treat it against rust even before they could drive it.

What Möser calls the “role of a do-it-yourself mentality in socialist societies” can also be observed in the intense and long-lasting work needed to maintain GDR cars. The author (2011) shows how, unlike in the West, car users in the GDR were actively encouraged to dive into the black box of technique and had to learn not only how to repair, but also how to transform their vehicles. What probably started as a way for producers to compensate for the penury of vehicles soon acquired a political function and became an important part of the everyday building of socialism. Möser quotes the introduction of a famous GDR booklet:



1000 Dinge selbst gebaut. Das Buch des Bastelers. (1000 self-made things. The Tinker's book), where we can read :

"May this book contribute in its modest way toward imparting practical experience as well as expanding craftsmanly and polytechnical knowledge, thus serving the ends of technical progress, increasing labor productivity, and building socialism (Hirte 1967, quoted in Möser 2011, 164).

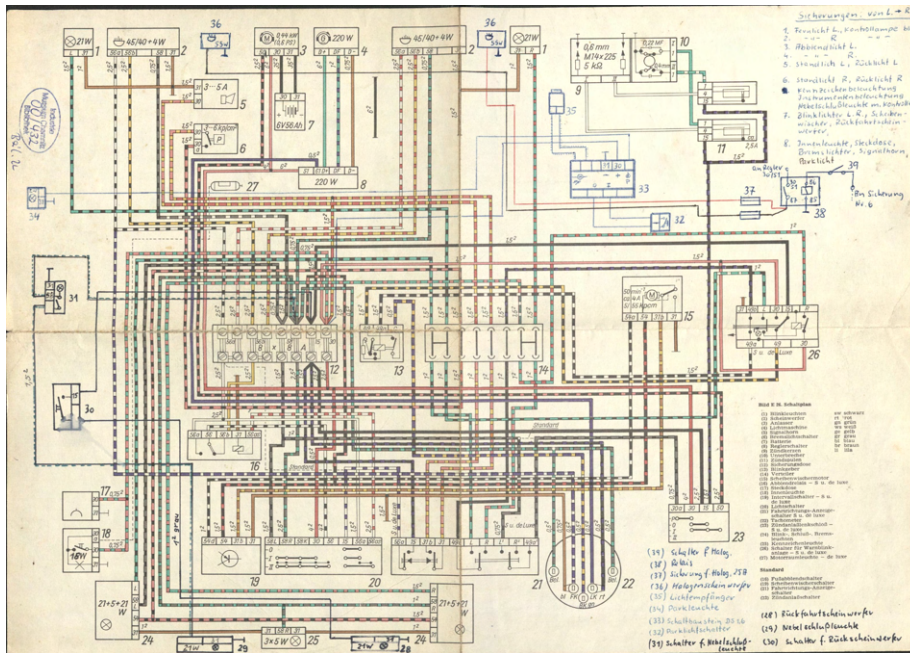


Figure 7: Trabant's electric diagram found in the book "wie helfe ich mir selbst". The owner of the book has completed the diagram with annotations written by hand, testifying of the personal work required by GDR vehicles. Archives of the Sächsische Industriemuseum.

Here, we see how technical knowledge and socialism are intertwined, and how "making" skills were praised in the GDR times.

During my fieldwork, I principally met people who consider themselves as "old-timers" and dedicate their time to repairing or rebuilding old vehicles as they were. In that context, I did not observe a lot of modification practices. Moreover, the end of the economy of scarcity implies that nowadays, most of this repair is done as a hobby and not out of necessity. One example of a self-transformed vehicle that I could however observe was Mareike Hornof's trailer (see figure 8). She bought this small vehicle manufactured during the GDR time from an old neighbour and turned it into a transportable pizza oven for her catering activities. She used her garage to make this hybrid object and to repair it after every summer season. In this example, we can see the legacy of the GDR do-it-yourself mentality, where creative and technical skills are used to palliate the lack of suiting objects.



Figure 8: Mareike's trailer. By author.

### *The Vehicle as a Friend*

A clearer continuity between the automobile culture in the GDR and what I could observe in Chemnitz is the strong bond between the vehicle and its owner. Möser writes that *"When drivers maintain and repair their vehicles themselves, they open the black box of technology. They actively deal with their artefact, they acquire skills in assessing its condition and problems. And they build up a subjective relationship to the technology they use. Auto-repair can also be described as bonding work between users and artefacts"* (Möser 2012, 210)<sup>6</sup>.

Even though most of the garage users engaging in auto repair own more than one vehicle, I could observe that most of them developed a special bond with one object specifically. Raik Drechsler became a bit of a local celebrity when his 1964 *Schwalbe*, a moped of the GDR manufacture Simson, was stolen from his garage and later found in the river (Graf 2021). Since then, Drechsler has been relentless in his attempts to get the machine back in operation. When I went to see his garage, the *Schwalbe* was without a doubt the highlight of the visit. After having presented all of his other machines, he theatrically took off the white sheet that was protecting the moped from dust. When I met him later during an ECoC event, he gave me news of his machine, as he would have done of a family member, or a pet. The moped was doing well and he had just started working on the patina of the lacquered parts.

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<sup>6</sup> Translation from German by the author.

Similarly, when I visited René di Carlo and his Klappfix with the 3000Garagen team, someone pointed out that he was talking about the tent as he would of a friend. Di Carlo answered that his relationship with it was indeed almost “animistic”. The use of the word here is interesting. By giving it a soul, di Carlo transforms his Klappfix from an object to a thing (Latour 2005a). Unlike an object, a thing is not only material, but also entails “conditions of possibility” and “forms of intentionality” (Graham and Thrift 2007, 3). More than a tent that allows di Carlo and his family to go camping, the Klappfix becomes something bigger than its original function. It becomes an “assembly” (Latour 2005a) of materials, memories, and hopes. By using the word “animism”, di Carlo also acknowledges the agency of his Klappfix, and, to put it bluntly, the two-sided nature of their relationship. We can see how the line between the living and the non-living becomes blurry here. Möser also develops this tension between human and non-human by arguing that in the context of *Autobasteln*, the role of automobiles is very similar to the one of pets: in order to take care of them, owners need to invest both emotional and practical work (Möser 2011). Both the examples of Drechsler’s moped and di Carlo’s Klappfix clearly show this bond between human and machine that can deploy itself in the intimate space represented by the garage.



Figure 9: the Drechslers and their moped. Private photograph. Figure 10: René di Carlo’s Klappfix. By author.

### *The Vehicle as a Travel Companion*

Vehicles do not, however, stay in the garage forever. As di Carlo puts it, his Klappfix is not only a friend, but also a *Wegbegleiter*, a travel companion. Möser reminds us that tinkering was also a “vacation-oriented activity” during GDR time (Möser 2011, 167). Indeed, there were not a lot of options in terms of accommodation for travellers during GDR times. The car thus became a “mobile leisure structure” (Möser 2011, 167) to compensate for the lack

of hotels in the GDR. Once again, the owner was in charge of transforming the car. As a matter of illustration, one can think for example of the tent that could be fixed on the roof of the Trabant, transforming it into a mini camping van. As we see, the automobile was more than a vehicle. It was also the *thing* that could offer holidays to East German families, by transforming itself into a space of vacation.

Along with Tuvikene (2014), I also argue that in the socialist context, it is the garage itself that made mobility possible. The garage acted as a mooring space, namely “something that acts as an ‘enabler’ that will ‘permit, provoke and enable’ other entities to be mobile” (Adey 2010 quoted in Tuvikene 2014). Without the material security offered by the garage where pieces could be stored and the car repaired, it is hard to picture how vehicles could have been mobile. In this sense, garages participated, and still do in cases such as di Carlo’s, in the wider network of (auto)mobility.

### *From Scarcity to Sustainability*

*[Why do I like old GDR machines so much?] It is both a question of nostalgia and quality. [...] Materials made in the GDR were good and long-lasting. So it is also good for the future [of the planet] if we keep using them.*

This is how René di Carlo answered the question of the origin of his passion for his ageing Klappfix. Indeed, not only the tent, but every accessory from the mattresses, the curtains, to the plates and the coffee cups dates back to the GDR. Even the gas bottle supplying the kitchenette is in its original state. This is causing di Carlo a few problems, since bottles that small are no longer produced. So, he had to come up with another solution, and had to learn to fill it by hand. As Graham and Thrift write, “disconnection produces learning, adaptation and improvisation” (Graham and Thrift 2007, 5).

I already gave several examples of forced adaptation in the context of GDR automobile culture like the “pre-use reparation” required from owners. In those cases, the “disconnection” was due to the economy of scarcity, and the overall lack of resources in the GDR. Today, as René di Carlo states, it is rather a matter of resource sparing. If the context has changed, the practices remain very similar. This is also due to the fact that old eastern automobiles are easier to repair than their Western counterparts. Since the 1970s already, Western cars tend to be less and less mechanised, and thus harder to be taken apart and repaired by amateur mechanics whereas the black box of Eastern vehicles is easier to open (Möser 2011). Graham and Thrift argue that failure is inherent to any object, and that it is

when something breaks that progress and innovation can happen. Through their repair practices, tinkerers in Chemnitz's garages not only allow objects to survive, but also develop innovative ways to maintain them in working condition.

## *Conclusion*

It might seem that this discussion on automobile usage is straying from our main topic: the GDR garage complexes. However, I think that it is crucial to look into the making practices that happen inside the garages. The literature on *Autobasteln*, and Kurt Möser's work in particular gave us a sense of the special relationship that develops between a machine and its owner. But nothing is said about *where* those relationships can blossom and grow. If we could probably argue that a similar emotional relationship can be forged between a user and their garage, especially when they participated in its building, the garage seems to be more of a shell, a space where other relations can develop.

Moreover, the figure of the "maker" is central to Chemnitz2025, and particularly to their "Eastern State of Mind" program. It was thus important to show what kind of makers are to be found in garages. With the example of Drechsler and di Carlo, we could see that the bond between the maker and his *thing* is central to his or her everyday practice. There are also examples of garage users who have a different relationship to their production. We can think about Fliegen Toni<sup>7</sup>, who manufactures wooden bow ties in his garage and probably does not develop such relationships with his objects. However, the strong relationship between the creator and their creation, or the owner and their object, was very noticeable in the cases I witnessed. As I showed by drawing on the literature, the bond with the object was already a dominant feature of automobile culture in the GDR.

I also presented how continuities in post-socialist societies can take new forms and new paths. Repair practices travelled in time. Whereas they were justified by the lack of resources in the GDR, they can now be part of a global discourse of degrowth and sustainability. In this sense, the tinkering and making practices illustrate how past and present are entangled in the garages, and thus show how continuities and anti-continuities unfold.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, see his website: [Holzfliege Chemnitz | Fiedlers Fliegen \(fiedlers-fliegen.de\)](http://Holzfliege Chemnitz | Fiedlers Fliegen (fiedlers-fliegen.de))

## 2. The Garage as a Social Space

Another theme in which continuities with the GDR time are visible is the sociality taking place in garages. Drawing on field observations and encounters with garage users, I will here question the legacy and survival of GDR social practices. I intend to show that, like in the case of the maker's identity, sociality is at the heart of an entanglement of past and present practices. More precisely, I will follow the thread of two elements of sociality in garage culture and show how they relate to the pre-*Wende* situation.

First, I will analyse the garage as a space of freedom where (mostly) men can unwind and socialise among themselves. Then, I will focus on the *Garagengemeinschaft*, the organ that manages the garage complexes. Drawing on my observations of the assembly of one of the biggest *Gemeinschaft* of Chemnitz, I will show how garages' sociality is also intertwined with nostalgia, and how the past and present social interactions sometimes cause frictions.

### a. The Garage as a Realm of Freedom

#### *Party Garage*

We already met Raik Drechsler in the previous section of this chapter. The gifted tinker shares his passion with his son Pascal, who, at the age of 20, carries on the family tradition. Pascal uses two garages: one for his hobbies and tinkering work, and the other as a "party garage" for social activities. When we visited it, he opened it and invited us to take pictures and step in as we pleased. He explained that he meets almost every week with his friends to chat, drink, and sometimes listen to music. When we asked for more details, he answered with a smile: "*What happens in the garage stays in the garage*". Pascal skilfully divided a few square metres of his garage to transform the back into a small living room, with sofas and coloured lights. As we talked, a friend of his joined us. The two young men were planning to fix one of the speakers installed in the garage. They set to work under the tender gaze of Pascal's father, who later told us: "*it is better for young people to be here than hanging out in the street*".

The use of a garage as a social space for partying does not disappear with age. When I interviewed the users of the garages of the *Gläss-Fabrik*, they all stated that the social aspect of the space was extremely important to them. For example a user told me:

*I use [the garage] for my hobby. And besides, it also became a meeting place. People who have nothing to do with cars or repair come to have a beer, and enjoy the end of the workday.*

For Mareike Hornof, the garage is more than a transitional space to unwind after a day of work. She talks about hers as a space of “freedom”, where “everybody does what they want, as long as they don’t bother anyone”. She uses her garage to organise big parties, and she even explains that almost one hundred people attended one of them last summer.

Here, we must remember that the garages of the Gläss-Fabrik are not typical GDR garage complexes, but were built inside an abandoned factory. It is thus easier to use and create space in innovative ways, and it is also easier to respect the neighbours’ space and boundaries in such a setting. However, garages in the GDR have always been considered social spaces, and the “Subbotnik”, the evenings and week-ends dedicated to common work were also moments of sociality and rest (Casper and Rellensmann 2021, Bescherer and Feustel 2021). “Party garages”, although forbidden by most *Garagengemeinschaften’s* rules and regulations, always existed on the fringe of legality.

### *The Garage as Mancave*

As Casper and Rellensmann note, the garage as a social space was very gendered in socialist times. The fact that the automobile culture was predominantly a masculine one, the garages became a space for male friendships to flourish (Casper and Rellensmann 2021, 25). It is worth focusing on this point and showing how the garage is as much a “mancave” now as it was then.

Markus Wabner uses his garage primarily to create sculptures and repair old-time tractors. He has however also organised a “bar area”, with a few sofas and tables, only devoted to “chatting, philosophising, [and] listening to music”. For him, those activities also represent an important part of the garage culture:

*People meet here to exchange ideas, chit-chat, philosophise, drink beers, grill... That can also be considered as culture. A special, typical “men’s culture”, with men’s things. In the garages, there are not a lot of women. There are some, but not many... There is also a typical music, ACDC or ZZ Top, “garage music” as we say, that is part of this men’s culture. So that’s also a part of culture and it’s important.*

Here, more than a simple “party garage”, Wabner makes it explicit that it is a social space dedicated to men. Kimmel, Moasio and Beruchashvili argue that, as a response to the third wave of feminism, some men try to produce spaces that, like garages, are “islands of untainted masculinity and purified pockets of virility” (Kimmel 1987, quoted in Moasio and Beruchashvili 2016, 658). Without going as far, there is undoubtedly a certain valorisation of stereotypical men's activities and the idea that spaces where those activities can take place should be protected.

For Moasio and Beruchashvili, garages and their masculine environment can also be “therapeutic enclaves” or transitional spaces where men can release the stress accumulated during the workday, and prepare themselves to assume their familial duties. I would argue that this view can be a bit caricatural and focus on one very specific kind of masculinity: able-bodied working men in stable heterosexual relationships. However, this conception of the garage as a transitional space is shared by some of my (male) informants. One of the users of the Gläss-Fabrik tells me that, in summer, he comes to his garage straight from work to spend a few hours working on cars or talking with friends. It is particularly easy for him, as the garage is on his way from his workplace to his house, 6 km further. As this detail shows, the potential of garages as enclaves of masculinity is even greater in the context of the garage complexes (and the garages of the Gläss-Fabrik), as they are geographically separated from housings. In the literature, authors focus almost exclusively on North American or Australian Suburbia, where the garage is typically part of the family house (Lloyd and Vasta 2017, Fuller 2015, Moasio and Beruchashvili 2016). In the case of the suburban garage, the proximity between the house and the garage can blur the limits between family space and mancave, making it even more of a masculine space of socialisation.

However, rather than through a conscious choice of excluding women, the overwhelming presence of men in the garage culture can be explained through the concept of the “boys club”. Fisher and Kinsey define it as “the shared discourses and practices amongst men which institutionalise men’s dominance over women [...] but which remain covert or are dissembled as harmless social interactions” (Fisher and Kinsey 2013, 45). In the garages, women are excluded because they were not socialised to understand or find what Wabner calls “men’s things” interesting. In the interview, he took “garage music” as an example, but we can also think of topics such as mechanics and cars, that are extremely present in discussions among garage users.



Similarly, I also observed instances of micro-violence disguised as “harmless social interactions” during my fieldwork. For example, a member of a *Garagengemeinschaft* told me with enthusiasm that, since they commissioned an artist to paint a mural on the wall of the complex, there were no acts of vandalism anymore. I was then rather surprised to see that said mural was the depiction of a sexist joke that objectified women, and particularly women who would be interested in engaging in “garage activities”.



Figure 11: Mural on a garage wall. The text reads: “I’ve always been in favour of equality”. The other man answers “for sure”. By author.

Fisher and Kinsey also argue that in the context of the boys’ club, sexist discourses are often hidden behind a façade of rationality. Similarly, when I ask Markus Wabner if his wife sometimes visits him, he answers that she does not like coming very much. For him, the main problem is that the garage is dirty, not very comfortable, and, more importantly, that there are no bathrooms. Interestingly, Mareike Hornof shares his point of view. When I asked her for her opinion on the very little feminine presence in the garages, she answered exactly like Markus Wabner: it is cold, dirty, and there is no restroom. The lack of infrastructure probably also plays a role in the lack of feminine presence in the garages. But it is important to understand the larger pattern that can lead to this situation, and how exclusion often plays out through ordinary and harmless sexism (Page and al. 2016).

### b. A sociality top-down: the Assembly of the *Garagengemeinschaft*

In the last section, we looked at the garage as a realm of freedom for (mostly) male users, who can use their space as a refuge to socialise and forget about their everyday life. However, we should bear in mind that garages are not only individual bubbles of privacy,

but that they are also strongly part of a network with rules and strict power structures: the *Garagengemeinschaft*.

Like every constituted association, each *Garagengemeinschaft* needs to organise a yearly meeting, where the committee presents the budget, the current issues of the year, and where new members can be elected. It is quite common however for the committees to sometimes struggle to organise assemblies, and the attendance is usually very low. One member of a *Garagengemeinschaft* committee explained that they had not organised an assembly since 2017: "It needs too much organisation. We are a big community with hundreds of members, so we would need to rent a venue. It is just not worth it". Another one explained that they still do it every year, but as several members are in a nearby nursing home, they often hold the assembly there instead of in the garage yard.

Heinz Bornsdorf, as a member of a *Garagengemeinschaft* but not of the committee, told me that he only went to one assembly in the last three decades. He even says that they probably do not organise them anymore. The committee meets, and later shares the decisions made via mail or by displaying it in the box near the entry of the garage complex. As he explains this last point to me, it suddenly dawns on him that he never communicated his new address since he moved out of the village in 2017. He has thus not received any letter from the committee in years. It does not seem to bother him much: "*they have my phone number. They can still reach me if they need to.*"

As we can see, the committee does not seem to play an overly important role in the everyday life of the garage users nowadays. But to understand what the tenuous strings of sociality that are still to be found in the yearly assemblies are, the next section will describe one which I had the opportunity to observe.

### *You will only listen in silence: The Assembly of the Schützenplatz*

At the beginning of April, the 3000Garagen team and I met Ute Wetzel, the president of the *Garagengemeinschaft* of Schützenplatz, to discuss a possible collaboration with Chemnitz2025. When the team enquired whether the members were still meeting regularly, she mentioned that the 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee of the garage complex was coming up only a few weeks later. Although this was not supposed to be a public event, she allowed us to attend on one condition: we could join for the first part of the assembly, but we would have to leave as soon as they would start discussing budgeting, statutes changes and new committee members.

The assembly took place in an old inn in the periphery of Chemnitz, which is now used as a reception hall. When I arrived, the local butcher who was in charge of the catering was rushing to get plates of *belegte brötchen* on the tables before the event began. As I entered, four members of the committee were taking attendance and asked me for my name. When I told them I was with the 3000Garagen team, the president stood up to welcome me, and explained that we would be sitting in reserved seats in the front of the room.

I pushed the door and entered the hall where the meeting was taking place. Dozens of rectangular tables with 30 chairs around each of them were set up in the hall. Altogether there must have been a little bit less than 200 people there, which represented only around half of the members of the *Gemeinschaft*. The audience, composed mostly of elderly men, chatted in a joyful hubbub, sharing the bottles of beer assigned to each table and munching on the bread and charcuterie that the catering service had just laid out on the tables. In a typical fashion for party halls that need to be polyvalent and accommodate bingo, village dance nights and end-of-the-year dancing schools' shows, the room featured a 2 metre high stage where the *Garagengemeinschaft* committee was sitting behind a long table covered with a white tablecloth. The middle seat was occupied by the treasurer. As we learned later on, she had held the position since the creation of the *Gemeinschaft* in 1971. After 50 years of loyal service, she was going to be replaced at the end of the assembly.

At 6 o'clock sharp, Ute Wetzel asked for silence and, after a short introduction, gave the floor to the 3000Garagen team. This situation seemed to be a compromise reached between them. Indeed, during the meeting that happened a few weeks prior, the team had asked if they could project their slides and present their work. The president had been categorical: "*No. [You will] only listen in silence*".

It is thus clear that the team did receive permission to speak for a few minutes, but without taking up more time and space than necessary. As a result, they chose another approach than the one they usually use to present their project. This time, they mainly focused on the importance of garages in the former GDR, and in the East in general. One member of the team talked about her own experience as a Polish woman, and how the garages were also part of her landscape when she was growing up. After their presentation, which did not generate many passionate reactions from the audience, the assembly properly started with a retrospective of the garages' history in the last 50 years, centred almost exclusively around the figure of Heinz Foraschik, the "founding father" of the garage community. The president described fondly how he dedicated his life to the garage complex, to the point of putting

his own professional activity on the back burner, and how he always listened attentively to the problems encountered by the community members. After honouring the memory of the charismatic figure, the committee went on discussing current issues afflicting the garages and the ways they were trying to respond to it. This point being at the centre of the following section, I will not develop it any further here. After this part of the assembly, as it had been promised, we tried to stand up discreetly and navigate between the tables until we made our way out of the venue.

### *GDR and Ostalgie*

From all of the interactions I was able to witness, the assembly of the Schützenplatz was certainly the one where I felt the spectre of the socialist regime was the most present. It is then not surprising that the 3000Garagen team chose to present their project from the perspective of the GDR, and to inscribe the garages in a disappearing Eastern landscape by comparing it to Poland. One of the members of the 3000Garagen team later jokingly referred to the assembly as “the day of the [SED] party”. But how can we see these continuities with the socialist past? As was apparent in the description of the assembly, the vertical power of the *Gemeinschaft* was made very clear by the way the room was laid out, with the committee sitting higher than the members on a stage. The strong focus on the life of the founder of the *Gemeinschaft*, pictured as a flawless benefactor who personally chose Mrs. Wetzel as his successor, also reinforces the feeling of verticality and a reverence to a sole leader typical of the GDR times.

These performative elements can be read through the concept of *Ostalgie*, a “form of selective amnesia” that idealises the GDR and its regime (Cooke 2005, 104). As Cooke writes, people struck by *Ostalgie* tend to commemorate East Germany as a place spared by unemployment and crime, and where the sense of community was central to everyday life. While I did not specifically focus on the economic afterlives of the GDR in my research, I could very clearly observe a longing for the allegedly richer social life of the GDR time. Every time the 3000Garagen team mentions to their respective audience that one of their goals is to try and retrieve and recreate the pre-*Wende* sociality, I could observe older audience members nodding in agreement. Several of the people I talked to shared the same consternation: people now used garages as parking spaces and did not feel like socialising with their neighbours.

But if the sense of community was stronger before the *Wende*, it was also for practical reasons. Heinz Borsdorf told me that if garage communities were previously tightly knit, it is

mainly because all of the garage users were living nearby and had worked together on the building of the garages. Nowadays, the huge demand for garages and the progressive change of ownership means that people present in the same garage complex might have no relation, neither as friends, nor as neighbours.

Moreover, the feeling of longing experienced by some of the older members does not necessarily need to be read through the lens of *Ostalgie*. Indeed, what I observed among these ageing garage users was a rather universal feeling of being out of step with today's world. As Cooke notes, the concept of *Ostalgie* can be problematic as "the impression is created that any expression of nostalgia for aspects of life in the east signals a wish amongst the population to return to the days of division and even to a rebuilding of the Berlin Wall" (Cooke 2005, 104). When we met with Raik Drechsler, one of the first things that he told us was:

*Before the Wende, there was a real social community here. But not anymore. In the last 10 years, most people just use their garages to park their cars. Now the world is just about money and indignation (Empörung).*

Here, Drechsler voices his discontentment with today's world, but it does not mean that he regrets the life before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He inscribes himself more in what Müller describes with his concept of Eastness: the feeling of falling through the interstices of modernity.

### *The Youth Have no Stories to Tell*

The feeling of being disconnected from the younger generation is also very noticeable among the older garage users. During her meeting with the team, Ute Wetzel for instance urged them to hurry if they wanted to collect interesting garage stories, as the "authentic" garage users were slowly dying. She even concluded with a formulation that could not have been clearer: "*The youth have no stories to tell*".

Of course, the younger generation does have stories to tell. We already talked about Pascal and his party garage, where he socialises with his friends. Interestingly, Ute Wetzel herself mentioned some of the "stories" of the young garage users that she deems uninteresting. She talked about a couple of young men who wanted to install a satellite antenna to be able to watch football in one of the garages. Apparently, it caused endless discussions within the *Garagengemeinschaft* as this activity would increase the shared energy costs. Ute Wetzel said that they finally found an arrangement between the committee and the young men.

Watching football in a garage is as much part of the “garage culture” as other activities, be it grilling or working together to embellish the garage complex. It seems like, in this case, *Ostalgie* results in a hierarchical ranking of social practices, that, once again, is typical but not unique to east Germany.

### *Conclusion*

Similarly to the making practices, the instances of sociality I could observe in garages stem from the GDR’s context. The garage is still a space of freedom and an important part of “men’s culture”, where people can develop and nurture friendships. This is certainly not unique to the former GDR, but as the comparison of the literature on garages in North America’s suburbs has shown, Eastern Germans users enjoy a bit more privacy and independence, as their garage is not directly located in their home. Through the example of the assembly of a *Garagengemeinschaft*, I also showed how vertical the management of the garage association can be, and how the committee members sometimes act as the guardians of what is considered good sociality.

On the other side of the coin, it is evident that those continuities, as Tuvikene (2016) notes, are fragile and can disappear. The *Garagengemeinschaft* of Ute Wetzel is one of the biggest in Chemnitz, and one of the exceptions that prove the rule. As some of my informants stated, the social component of garages progressively died off after the *Wende* and is now the shadow of its former self and this progressive disappearance is translated into nostalgic discourses.

### 3. The Post-public City

In the first two sections of this chapter, we saw how practices of tinkering and moments of sociality are inscribed in continuity with the socialist time, even though these practices do not correspond to what took place before the *Wende*. Here, we will witness ruptures and proper anti-continuities. This section stems from an observation that struck me at the beginning of my fieldwork. Whereas I was expecting to see mostly decrepit and rotting garages, I soon noticed that most of them are monitored by surveillance cameras, protected by fences, and sometimes even by electric barriers.

For Hirt, those gates and borders are an important feature of post-socialism. In her book "Iron Curtains", she observes that barriers, gated communities, and privatised spaces have multiplied in Eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall, perfectly illustrating what Tuvikene calls "anti-continuities". As Hirt argues, more than an attempt to catch up with the West, the privatisation of space is a direct response to the failures of socialism. For her, the post-socialist city is first and foremost a "post-public city", where public space is challenged everyday by what she calls "spatial secessions" (Hirt 2012, 47).

I will here apply the concept of the "post-public city" to two features of Chemnitz' garage culture. First, I will go back to the increasing securitization of the garages and see how it can be analysed as a symptom of post-socialism. I will then question the conception of public/private by looking once again at the *Garagengemeinschaften* and their progressive loss of power and show how this situation can also be read through the concept of the post-public city.

#### a. Securitising and Monitoring

The garage complex of Schützenplatz, made of thousands of garages, is the biggest of Chemnitz. The garages stretch for hundreds of metres on a hillside, along a dead-end road. However, for someone unfamiliar with the GDR garage architecture, the complex looks more like a military facility. Indeed, each row is completely closed off by a metal gate that can only be opened with a key. On each side of the gate, a motion-sensing lamp, whose set-up makes it look like a surveillance system, faces the garages. If I could not see any actual cameras, several signs on garage doors remind trespassers that the whole space is monitored. At the end of the road, before entering the garages belonging to the members of the *Gemeinschaft* of Ute Wetzels, an automatic arm barrier has been installed, so that only members can access the complex by car. On the barrier, another sign reminds us of the presence of surveillance cameras.

The feeling of militarisation of the space is even accentuated by the fact that the garages are facing a centre for asylum seekers, right across the street. The juxtaposition of the barbed wires, the fences and the guarded entrance on one side, and the arm barrier, the cameras and the closed gates on the other left me with an uncanny feeling. However, despite their commonalities, there is a fundamental difference between the two spaces: the asylum centre walls are made to keep people in, and the garages fences to keep people out (Hirt 2012). The securitized apparatus also works on a symbolic level. Although nobody told me to leave or asked me what I was doing there, I had the clear feeling of being an intruder, and it took me several trials to build the courage to take some photographs of the complex.



Figure 12: The heavily monitored garages of Schützenplatz. By author.

As I already explained, I was also able to observe the *Schützenplatz* garages from the “inside”, so to speak. As developed in the section “the Garage as a Social Space”, I had the opportunity to attend the first half of the general assembly of the *Schützenplatz’ Garagengemeinschaft*, where the president presented an overview of the 50 last years of the garages. Interestingly, more than half of her talk was dedicated to anti-social behaviours and the security devices that have been installed in reaction. She explained for instance that an arm barrier has been installed in 2016. A few weeks later, the barrier had fallen, apparently as an act of vandalism. As a response, the committee decided to install security cameras in 2017 and 2018. This was a rather important investment as the electric grid had to be extended in order to put cameras in the most remote corners of the complex. But according to the committee’s president, no more thefts or property degradation have happened since the cameras have been installed.



If thefts in garages seem to happen (we can think of Raik Drechsler's moped that has been stolen from his garage and then dumped in the river), none of the people I talked to seemed particularly concerned by the danger of robbery. One garage user I met with the 3000Garagen team vaguely recalled a criminal fire in the 2010s. Heinz Borsdorf could not tell me about a single case of theft, although he remembered that robberies in garages happened a lot during the GDR time. This last observation is interesting. I do not have the statistics and figures that could prove or refute the idea that thefts were more frequent in GDR times. However, some authors mention that during this time of extreme scarcity, valuable tools or car parts would often be stolen (Tuvikene 2010).

Hirt's work on spatial secessions in post-socialist cities also shows that the desire for protection is not particularly correlated to the actual level of criminal activities. Drawing on Caldeira (2000), she shows how gated communities (or, in our case, gated garages) are "symbolic landscapes" (Hirt 2012, 54) whose purpose is to mark the separation from the rest of the urban society. In a post-socialist context, keeping the Other out and focusing on the community is also a response to the failure of the ideal of collectivism that the regime was trying to build. Indeed, this collectivism was supposed to develop in the public space: in the streets, in citizen associations, and at work. As Hirt notes, "socialism did not obliterate the private; it obliterated the public – not as institutions, but as an ideal" (Hirt 2012, 22). It is then understandable that people who experienced the life before the *Wende* mentally connect the public space to the socialist regime and its heavy supervision and control over the population, and hence valorise the intimacy and safety of private spaces over public and shared space.

However, I believe that there is more to it than a need for privacy and wariness toward the "public". We have to remember that garages are almost always managed by *Garagengemeinschaften*, and that decisions are taken by the majority of members during assemblies. More than a way to keep the distance with the "outside", I argue that the securitization of the garages is also a matter of displaying the force of the *Garagengemeinschaft*.



Figure 13: various apparatus of securitisation in Schützenplatz. By author.

### b. A Two-class Society

In April, the 3000Garagen team and I met with the priest of a church in the neighbourhood of Kassberg. The parish owns land in the vicinity of the church, where garages have been constructed on and around a small hill. The church pays the *Pacht* (the plot rental fees) to the city, and the garage users pay rent to the parish. Two different *Garagengemeinschaften* take care of the garage complex, and although the land is rather small and compact, the garages belonging to one or the other could not be more different. The garages up the hill are protected by an arm barrier, and cameras have been installed along a brand new lighting system. Down the hill, the garages are almost abandoned. Some are empty, some are full of garbage. As we visit the complex, the priest jokingly tells us that it is a “Zwei-Klassen-Gesellschaft”, a two-class society. However, when I ask if more incivilities are happening in the unmonitored garages than in the others, he answers that no, not particularly.

More than actually protecting garages against incivilities, it seems like the securitisation technologies are also a way of showing the strength of the *Gemeinschaft*. Garage complexes whose members are numerous and organised enough can afford to install gates and cameras. The priest told me that the members of the *Gemeinschaft* down the hill had asked him to install an arm barrier and that he had to explain that this was a matter to discuss during the yearly assembly, and not with him. Seeing the state of abandonment of some garages, one can wonder if the *Gemeinschaft* has enough resources to complete the project.

This example reminds us of the important role played by *Garagengemeinschaften* in the securitization of garages. The situation is indeed more complex than a simple privatisation

of a former public space. The garages are neither completely private nor completely public, nor have they never been.

### c. The Agony of the Interim Realm

During the GDR time already, garage complexes belonged to what Hirt calls the “interim realm” (Hirt 2012, 21). Those semi-public/semi-private spaces, represented by citizen associations such as local choirs, pro-environmental groups, (or garage associations) exist between the State and the civil society and act as mediators between the government and the citizens. Hirt argues that in the former socialist states, this interim category had been cannibalised by the regime, as most of the associations were either founded by the government, or strongly infiltrated by it. This point can be illustrated by the description of the assembly of the Schützenplatz where I mentioned how the meeting, through its organisation and atmosphere, could be read as a continuity of the GDR time. The *Garagengemeinschaft* is undoubtedly one of these “interim realms” where public and private cohabitate.

As we saw earlier, the “public” realm in socialist spaces was something to be wary of, as it was completely taken over by the State. Since citizen associations were strongly supervised by the State, they also have been equated to the public in the mind of the population. It is then understandable that, after the fall of the USSR, people distanced themselves from associations such as *Garagengemeinschaften*.

I would argue that the difficulty for associations to replace their active members is not unique to post-socialist spaces. However, it was striking to see that, although the demand for garages was extremely high, the *Garagengemeinschaften* were struggling to find the next generation of garages’ representatives and committees. The president of a *Gemeinschaft* of Altendorf I met with the 3000Garagen team, a man in his 50s, told us that the committee itself came to him in 2009 to ask him to join them. Unlike other garage users, he welcomes the presence of young people and their somewhat unorthodox uses of garages (we already talked about “party garages”, and young users listening to music or watching football). He explains:

*There are a few young men using the garages, enjoying their age. It is good because in 10, 20 years, when I won't be able to be in the committee anymore, we will need the young generation to take over. So, I am happy if young people are interested.*

Another committee's president we met, a man in his 60s, told us about the difficulty he had to find the mandatory minimum of four committee's members, whose names and contact details were displayed on the wall of a garage. When the team noticed that one of the members was a woman, and praised the feminization of the garage world, the president laughed. The woman turns out to be his wife, and he jokingly says that she was basically forced to join to allow the committee to exist.

Reading the difficulty of garage committees only through the light of the post-public city is a bit simplistic. But it is undeniable that, if the garages in themselves are in high demand, the associative life of the *Garagengemeinschaft* has lost its appeal.

### *Conclusion*

In this section, I showed how garage complexes progressively became heavily guarded and monitored spaces. Drawing on Hirt's work, I showed how this situation can be read as a symptom of post-socialism. More than an universal trend of securitisation and privatisation, I argue along Hirt that the garages' reinforced doors, arm barriers and cameras are a reaction to the failure of socialism and its promises of collectivism. In other words, it is an anti-continuity of the GDR time.

I also showed how the difficulties faced by the *Garagengemeinschaften* can be analysed through the lens of post-socialism. Being part of the interim realm that was also grabbed by the regime, the *Garagengemeinschaften's* committees and their vertical organisation struggle to recruit new members. However, by investing in surveillance material, the *Garagengemeinschaften* seem also to cling to their power. The cameras and barriers become a means of displaying their importance.

## An Interlude in the Form of a Dialog<sup>8</sup>

*[After having visited his garage, Heinz takes me to the other side of the complex, where a row of new garages, facing the old ones, has been built. We meet a man in one of those new, bigger spaces, who is working on an old car. They chat for a while, and the man explains that he is looking for another garage in the village.]*

- The Man : I'd like to find one, but not too far...
- Heinz : Ah! You could have mine but I'm not selling it yet!
- M : It's here?
- H : Yes, just here across.
- M : Ah-ah... *[silence]*
- H : [pointing to one of the new garage] Is that the garage of Kai?
- M : Yeah that's his.
- H : He still owns it?
- M : Yes. Mine too, he owns the whole row. I'm paying rent.
- H : To Kai?
- M : To Kai.
- H : Ha-Ha! To Kai! You didn't buy it but you rented it... Yeah we can do that too..
- M : For a while yes. But I am looking for something else to buy.
- H : But the [GDR] garages are too small to work on a car!
- M : ...yeaah... they are shorter...
- H : Shorter they are indeed.... *[silence]*
- M : They are actually to store, not to tinker or whatnot. Just to store things.
- H : Yeah I use mine to store my winter tires. I went to get my tires changed today, here in the village workshop. Paid 30 euros. And you know how much I'd have paid in Dresden? ... 90.
- M : HOUUU!
- H : Yeah, so it is still worth it to drive here and keep the garage to store them. I'm also still playing tennis here. But the day I'm not in the club anymore, I'll probably sell it.
- M : Well, please think of me then !
- H : Of course, I'll let Kai know. Have a good weekend.

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<sup>8</sup> This title is taken from Bruno Latour's text "Reassembling the Social" (Latour 2005b, 141), in which he reminds his student that the text in social sciences works like a laboratory. It is a space of discovery, trial, and experimentation. In a chapter dedicated to metaphors and poetic images, I figured this short dialogue would find its place.

## 4. The Hermit Crab

This dialogue reconstituted from my fieldnotes illustrates the theme I aim to develop in this section. It shows that the garages, far from being abandoned ruins of the past, are at the heart of current practices. People bargain, exchange and outgrow their garage. This observation complexifies the framework of the post-socialist space as made of (anti)continuities. Indeed, garages can be simultaneously a relic of the past as well as a very current issue.

To disrupt the continuities/anti-continuities dichotomy, I am building this section around a metaphor developed by Houssay-Holzschuch in her work on “post-”spaces. As I developed in Chapter 2, post-societies are characterised by “a space-time regime of entanglement” (Houssay-Holzschuch 2021, 7). Houssay-Holzschuch argues that, to comprehend the relation between time and space in experiences of “post”, we need a new vocabulary and new images that can convey how space and time are intertwined. She thus proposes several metaphors to understand spaces in relation to their past and present: the post-space as a palimpsest, spring, bubble... Here, I will borrow her metaphors of the Hermit Crab, which she describes as urban objects that “have been recycled, hosting new meanings and social uses in hollow-out [...] shells” (Houssay-Holzschuch 2021, 14).

In her work, Houssay-Holzschuch describes one example of a post-apartheid’s hermit crab: the buffer zones around South African townships. These spaces went from a symbol of colonial violence and white supremacy to an urban zone reappropriated by the local community. Like an abandoned shell, other users have taken possession of the space and use it as they see fit. As the author writes on several occasions, the metaphors she develops apply to every post-society, and I would argue that it is especially true in the case of the former GDR.

However, I believe that the metaphor of the hermit crab has more to offer. Before being a shell, the hermit crab is first and foremost an animal, a living matter. More than focussing on the garages as hollow-out shells, I want to understand what dynamic of exchange is taking place. I will then show how, sometimes, the typical GDR garage is not the most suitable shell for the East German garage culture. This metaphor will allow me to expand on Tuvikene’s framework and propose the concept of *discontinuity* along (anti)continuities.

### a. Moving and Exchanging Shells

During my fieldwork, I could observe several garages that, like hermit crabs, became shells used for various purposes. Beside the garage where he stores his Klappfix, René di Carlo owns another one in town. He uses it as an atelier, or a “project room” where he devotes himself to painting. Similarly, Markus Wabner uses his garage to create metal sculptures forming a dreamlike landscape around the Gläss-Fabrik. However, if Houssay-Holzschuch considers hermit crabs only as “hollow[ed]-out” shells that other users almost stumble upon and recycle for their own purposes, the situation is far more complex when it comes to garages in East Germany. As we saw through the dialogue I reported in my fieldnotes, users often desperately look for bigger or more suitable garages, acting like actual hermit crabs. In the case of the user of the dialogue, he is both waiting to access ownership, and to find a second garage to use as a storage area. More than mere abandoned shells, garages are precious goods at the heart of a market.

Only a few minutes before the encounter with this garage user, Heinz Borsdorf had shown me a leaflet that had been slipped under his garage door a few years ago (fig. 15). The text reads: “Garage to sell? We buy your garage fast and without complication”. When I asked him if there was a strong demand for garages, he told me that when someone sells a garage and puts an ad for it at the complex’s entrance, it usually does not stay long. This is the case in most of the other garage complexes I visited, some of them even having a waiting list.



Figure 14: The old and new garages facing each other. By author.



Figure 15: The leaflet given by Heinz Borsdorf.

## b. From one Post-socialist Shell to the Other

However, GDR garages are often too small for people to repair cars bigger than a Trabant. Therefore, garage users also sometimes look for bigger shells. The experience of a man I met in the garages of the Gläss-Fabrik illustrates how some activities outgrow the garage and require investing other spaces :

*Earlier, we started in the small GDR garages. When we were 15, with the bike or the moped, the size was still ok. But for tuning you need machines, you need technical tools and the GDR garages are too small for that.*

It is worth noting that users in the Gläss-Fabrik did not only move from a smaller shell to a more suitable one; they also took over another remnant of socialism, namely an old factory abandoned since the *Wende*.

The former GDR, and former socialist regions more generally, are often pictured as a “disappeared country” whose history is only visible through ruins and traces (Offenstadt 2019). Offenstadt, who uses *urbex*<sup>9</sup> as a method to investigate the remains of the GDR in present-time Germany, explored countless abandoned factories and former GDR official buildings. In his descriptions, all are vacant, and archives of all kinds litter the ground. However, we see with the example of the Gläss-Fabrik that such spaces can also have a “second life”. Examples of abandoned factories in post-industrialized cities turned into fancy cocktail bars, expensive lofts or cultural venues are countless. What makes the Gläss-Fabrik particularly interesting is that the factory welcomes users and practices that were already present during the GDR times. The practices did not change, they just moved from one shell to the other.

It is sometimes important to decentralise our gaze and look beyond the GDR garage complexes. After the four months I spent on the field, I can argue that the Gläss-Fabrik is the space where the “spirit” of the socialist garage culture is the most visible. The two typical garage activities I described above, car tinkering and social interactions, are particularly alive in the garages of the Gläss-Fabrik where I could observe neighbours helping each other, sharing a drink, and listening to music together.

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<sup>9</sup> Urbex (URBan EXploration) consists of visiting abandoned buildings. Here Offenstadt uses it as a scientific method.





Figure 16 and 17: Two examples of garages in the Gläss-Fabrik. By author.

## Conclusion

Houssay-Holzschuch argues that mobilising metaphors is a way of “work[ing] against constructed binaries” (Houssay-Holzschuch 2021, 11), whereas Noxolo and al. see metaphors as “pregnant”, in other words inhabited by “far-reaching and often unintended revelations and implications” (Noxolo and al. 2008, 148). With the metaphor of the hermit crab, I hope to have shown another way of thinking about the garages, and to have revealed other implications. I have notably shown how continuities and anti-continuities sometimes become *discontinuities*. What I aim to convey with this term is that some of the socialist practices that were taking place in the garage complexes did survive, though in other spaces. The GDR garages are not always the most suitable for car tuning or tinkering activities, and users often search for bigger and more modern shells. In the case of the Gläss-Fabrik, the garage culture is well alive, but in a more hybrid and polyvalent space.

## 5. (Anti)continuities in Garages

In this chapter, I showed how the garages can be considered as a feature of the post-socialist city since they are intertwined in continuities and anti-continuities with the socialist time. I developed some of these (anti)continuities and showed how complex the situation sometimes is.

With the first section dedicated to making practices, I showed how some of the habits I observed in the garages (such as *Autobasteln* or the special relationship between owner and object) can be traced back to the GDR. However, these continuities morph and travel, and we saw how repair practices are now embedded in current issues such as sustainability and resource sparing. In the second section, we observed some social encounters taking place in the garages. I showed how the garage remained a mancave and a space where “good” sociality is monitored by the *Gemeinschaft*, as it was before the *Wende*. The sociality is however only hanging by a thread, and the nostalgic discourses I could hear reflect a sense of loss. In this case, continuities and anti-continuities are cohabiting. Then, I showed how garages are also going through what Hirt considers typical symptoms of post-socialism, namely the important securitisation of garage complexes, as well as the slow agony of the interim realm represented by the *Gemeinschaften*. Working with the metaphor of the hermit crab, I then showed how garages can also be a space of *discontinuity* rather than (anti)continuity. If the garage itself is still at the heart of a market, and thus part of a clear continuity, we also understood that “garage culture” is also taking place in other spaces, such as the Gläss-Fabrik.

With this chapter, I made it clear that garage complexes are a feature of the post-socialist city as conceptualised by Global East scholars and answered the first research question: *How do the garages inscribe themselves in the post-socialist city?* I also tried to complexify the framework by proposing the term *discontinuity* to describe situations in which garage culture happens elsewhere than the traditional GDR garages. However, the garage complexes are not only a palimpsest of socialist and post-socialist histories; through Chemnitz2025, the city is also about to become the symbol and representative of Europe. This particular space-time regime will be at the heart of the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Workshopping the “East”: Chemnitz2025 goes into the garages.

As it has been said, Chemnitz2025 puts a strong focus on the “Eastern State of Mind ” of the city, and the 3000Garagen project is one of the four “flagship” projects of the program. Having spent most of my research time with the 3000Garagen team, in the field or their office, I aim here to give a sense of the way the team uses “the East” as a framework, and what vision of it is being created through their work. To do so, I will go back to the four themes I developed in Chapter 2. First, I will analyse the concepts of “maker” and “makerspace” that are heavily used in the marketing of Chemnitz2025 and show how the 3000Garagen team works and plays with the idea of the “maker”. Then, I will look at the ways the team is (re)creating sociality in garages or, on the contrary, allows it to develop out of their gaze. I will then focus on the future uses of the garage complexes through the lens of (anti)-patrimonialisation. Finally, I will mention some of the frictions that I could observe between garage users, municipality and Chemnitz2025.

### 1. A City of Makers

In this section, I will show how the figure of the maker is used by Chemnitz2025 and the 3000Garagen team more specifically. After a brief overview of the literature on makers and makerspaces in post-socialist spaces and beyond, I will analyse the way the 3000Garagen team uses and politicises the figure of the maker practically in the field.

#### a. The Maker and their Space

In the 90 pages of Chemnitz2025’s second bid book, the word “maker” (and its derivatives like makerspace, maker culture, etc...) is used more than 500 times. The definition deployed by Chemnitz2025 is rather broad: the maker is simply “anyone who creates something, be it small or big, improvised or planned, grown or tasteful, ambitious or delicate” (Kulturhauptstadt 2018, 4). It is hard to think of anything that would not fall under this definition, especially as we read a few pages later that: “everyone creates something, but some people do not yet perceive themselves as makers” (idem, 11). The maker is, in turn, an essential part of a “trans-local European” identity, linking innovative “cit[ies] of makers” everywhere in Europe (idem, 13), and an individual who can share the “joy of

making” by connecting and working with makers everywhere either through the digital platform “maker-space.eu”, or in “makerhubs” disseminated in the city (idem, 18).

The emptiness of the term has already been highlighted in the first monitoring meeting report by the ECOC expert panel, published in September 2021. In this text, the European Commission writes:

*The Panel recommends a continuous refinement and interrogation of the concept of “Makers”. While potentially highly interesting, the concept may also be viewed merely as a ‘trendy’ term in 2021 and can be used to mean almost anything (ECOC 2021, 16).*

If the definitions of the “maker” and the “makerspace” are particularly blurred and imprecise in Chemnitz2025’ programme, the concepts are not very precisely defined in the scholarly literature either. In her review of the current state of the research on makerspace, Mersand for instance defines it as an “area that provides materials and tools to encourage individuals or groups to make things, to create new knowledge, or to solve problems” (Mersand 2021).

However, a common feature shared by every makerspace is its educational dimension (Libow Martinez and Stager 2013, Blikstein and al. 2016). Libow Martinez and Stager explain how the concept of makerspace can be traced to the work of South African mathematician Seymour Papert. Drawing on Jean Piaget’s constructivist idea that children learn better through discovery and self-making, Papert launched a computing program for children at the end of the 1960’s. The goal of the project was to “shift the emphasis from passive consumption to active creation and invention” (Libow Martinez and Stager 2013 : 33). Learning through making is then an important feature of the makerspace and maker culture. This educational component is also to be found in the Chemnitz2025 programme, in which we can read that: “in [their] hybrid maker communities people learn, experiment and experience together” (Kulturhauptstadt 2018, 12).

However, Chemnitz2025 shows a greater interest in the “makers” themselves than in the “makerspace”. The definition of the maker that is the closest to what I could experience in the field is the one given by Marotta in his qualitative research on the maker identity. He defines the maker as someone “produc[ing] niche, handmade goods – anything from food to home goods to electronics – that emphasize local roots, small-scale operations, and collaborative work” (Marotta 2020, 639). As Marotta shows, makers share a common aversion for globalisation, tend to be critical toward corporate work and value entrepreneurship and local, hand-made products. As we could see earlier with examples

such as Raik Drechsler or René di Carlo, the “makers” I met in the garages were also valuing local (in this case vehicles made in the GDR) and hand-made objects.

## b. The Eastern Maker

As I showed in Chapter 3, and more specifically in the section “Opening the Black Box”, the maker can also be considered as an important socialist figure. The fact that car owners were encouraged to understand and repair their vehicles themselves is just one of many examples of what was expected from people in socialist regimes. It is thus not surprising that this angle is strongly developed by Chemnitz2025. The bid book states for instance:

*“[the programme of the project] Eastern State of Mind strengthens people's sense of achievement and pride by rediscovering the places where people silently tinker and DIY: We turn Chemnitz into a huge ‘makerspace’, with 3000 garages serving as individual workstations for personal interaction” (Kulturhauptstadt 2018, 28).*

Some Global East scholars also developed the idea of “making” as a central feature of socialism. For instance, Trubina and Müller write about a “creative making-do” specific to post-socialist spaces (Müller and Trubina 2020, 669). For them, it is the superposition of diverse histories and geographies in post-socialist spaces that enables “a condition of creative chaos” to emerge (ibid). Unlike Mersand, who shows how the articles she reviewed define the objectives of maker culture in terms of engagement, community building, and education (Mersand 2021), Müller and Trubina consider that the need to survive in an economy of scarcity can also be a driving force leading to making practices.

Marotta's study - focusing on the U.S. cities Portland and Detroit - is the one that perhaps resonates most with what I have encountered in Chemnitz with regards to makers and their role in city-making. The author reminds us that the maker movement is first and foremost a way to withstand crises. Thrown in a world of economic uncertainty dominated by capitalist corporations, makers try to make a place for themselves and to mitigate the effects of the crisis on their everyday life without disrupting the whole system. As Marotta writes: “[...] a key function of ‘maker,’ then, is the sense of mooring and purpose it provides for people whose old attachments and value systems have suffered attrition and are in need of new ones” (Marotta 2020, 651).

It is interesting to see how the maker, who was an important figure of the socialist time, is still relevant in a post-socialist context. If the socialist maker had to withstand scarcity, the

post-socialist maker has to cope with the post-*Wende* uncertainty and complete change of value system. The continuity here is particularly visible and well exploited by Chemnitz2025.

### c. 3000Garagen and the Maker Identity

As we saw, the maker is central in the bid book rhetoric. However, we have to remember that the bid book is not a scientific document, but rather a marketing tool and that its goal is to tick all the boxes of a successful application to the ECoC program. It is thus interesting to see how the figure of the “maker” is effectively used in the field by the 3000Garagen team.

In the field, the “maker” rhetoric was seldom used, neither by the team nor the garage users. It is not particularly surprising, as Marotta notes that people he met during his fieldwork all vehemently refused to be called “makers” (Marotta 2020). Rather than trying to force garages users into a discourse made of “city of makers”, or “European makers of democracy” like in the official documents, the 3000Garagen team was rather trying to give the concept depth and historicity by bringing it back to people’s everyday practices before and after the *Wende*. In a sense, the team is trying to show that the “makers” did not wait for the makerspaces and maker hubs to flourish.

The team was however working with “makers” in the proper sense of the term, who produce niche, handmade objects (Marotta 2020). I already mentioned Fliegen Toni, who manufactures wooden bowties in his garage. However, most of the people involved with the garage project are not following the logic of entrepreneurship. As I showed in “Opening the Black Box” garage users own a rather limited number of objects, with whom they often developed a very special bond. The definition of a maker for the 3000Garagen team is then broader than what can be found in the literature.

The focus on makerspaces as a place to learn and exchange knowledge that was at the heart of Mersand’s article is also not very visible in the field. If the bid book does contain a project, “the Garage of Autodidacts” where “masters” and “students” would work together on developing their skills in the tradition of the Bauhaus school, it is unclear if this project will ever come to life. As several people within Chemnitz2025 made clear, the bid book was not to be followed to the letter and most of the projects will be abandoned along the way.

To summarise, the figure of the maker is less explicitly used in the field than in the official discourse, and everyone “making” something with their hands was considered a maker for the team. In the next section, I argue that the figure of the maker is also a discursive device that allows the 3000Garagen team to support the garage users’ habits coherently.

#### d. Supporting the Maker Identity

During my interview with Mareike Hornof, she told me that she felt that Chemnitz2025 was missing the real needs of garages users in Chemnitz:

*Solidarity already exists in garages. What we need is security and the promise we will be able to keep them<sup>10</sup>. That would be the best way of supporting the "maker identity".*

Interestingly the team does share her concerns. When they introduced me to their project for the first time, it was even the first goal they stated. One member explained:

*By law, it is forbidden to do anything other than parking a car in Chemnitz garages. So, the city finds itself in a dilemma. They want to put the garages in the limelight, but it's technically illegal. So in the frame of the "Makers of Democracy" marketing, we want to make it legal.*

An encounter I had in a garage complex illustrates how open this secret is. The 3000Garagen team and I met with the president of a *Gemeinschaft*, who told us that there was definitely no one tinkering in the garages, since it was forbidden. A few hours later, when we visited the complex with him, we met a man in his garage repairing his motorbike. When I asked him if he was tinkering regularly, he said that he did, along with several other users.

All of the people tinkering in their garages told me that they never had any problem with the city, who turns a blind eye. But in the context of Chemnitz2025, things could change. The visibility given to the garages would put the city in an uncomfortable situation, as it would be forced to publicly admit the law is not being enforced. I could not attend the meetings between the team and the city, but they assured me that the dialogue was open, and that the city was inclined to find a solution to this judicial conundrum.

Marotta argues that the maker culture is a sense of community based on values and common understandings of the world, but without the "collective intent of being politically coherent or rationally representable" (Marotta 2020, 639). Here, the 3000Garagen team tries to go beyond the scattered maker identity and to represent the "maker" and their right to create in garages.

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<sup>10</sup> As I will develop in the section "Ruinen schaffen ohne Waffen", the future of the Gläss-Fabrik is uncertain. The owner is trying to sell it and it is probable that the factory will be destroyed to allow real estate developers to build on the land.

## *Conclusion*

In this section, I showed how the notion of the “maker” is framed in the literature, and to what extent it was applicable in the case of Chemnitz. We saw that the maker, in addition to being an “Eastern” figure, is a product of a society made of ruptures and uncertainty, and that makers anchor themselves through hand making practices. I also showed how, in the field, the 3000Garagen team considers anyone tinkering or creating things in garages as a maker and try to politicise the term in order to defend the rights of garage users.

This chapter aims to understand what vision of the East is being created through the work of the 3000Garagen team in the field. In Chapter 2, I showed how the East is defined in the post-socialist and Global East scholarship, for instance as a “testing ground” or “waiting room”. Through this section on the maker's identity, I illustrated how the team disrupts both visions. Indeed, by working with makers on the ground, the team engages in a bottom-up approach tailored for and with the community. By trying to politicise the figure of the maker as an attempt to regularise the making activities happening in garages, the team also turns a rather hollow and abstract concept into an effective tool to protect garage users and their activities.



## 2. Garage Gatherings

In this section, I will keep exploring the bottom-up approach of the 3000Garagen team and focus on the ways they activate sociality in garages. First, I will draw on my fieldnotes to describe an event co-organised by the team and a small *Garagengemeinschaft*. By relating this moment, I am hoping to give the reader a glimpse into the methods of the team and show how they try to recreate a grassroots sociality on the field. Then, I will analyse some other instances of sociality happening outside of the gaze of the ECoC.

### a. The ECoC as a Catalyst of Sociality

On an afternoon in April, the 3000Garagen team was invited to present their project during the yearly assembly of the *Garagengemeinschaft* of Gutsweg, in the peripheral neighbourhood of Altendorf. Faithful to their goal of supporting social life in garages, the team had also planned a barbecue after the official assembly and had asked for my help to fill the car with a dozen packs of beer and sparkling water, and 50 butcher's sausages.

As we drove to Altendorf, they explained that the garage complex was under threat of destruction, as the city is planning to turn the nearby wasteland into a biking lane. I will develop this specific situation at length in the section "Ruinen schaffen ohne Waffen", where the relationship between the city and the *Gemeinschaft* will be discussed. In this section, I will focus on the event in itself more particularly, and show how social relations between garage users and Chemnitz2025 unfolded.

The Gutsweg assembly could not have been more different than the one of the Schützenplatz I described in "the Garage as Social Space". When we arrived at the venue – a house that can be rented for events with a green outdoor area –, we were welcomed by the president of the committee and his wife. They seemed happy to welcome us, and they chatted eagerly with the team while waiting for the other *Gemeinschaft* members to arrive. However, ten minutes before the official start of the assembly, we were still alone with them. Finally, a few minutes before the proceedings began, eight people out of the community's 70 members showed up. With the exception of a very young man who recently received a garage from a friend, all the other members were men approaching their 80s. The president looked very embarrassed by the extremely low attendance, but not particularly surprised. Yet, he had displayed all the necessary information in the small window at the complex's entrance. He concluded that those who were not present would regret it, and that they should not count on him to summarise the team's presentation for them. The assembly then

proceeded in good spirits. During their presentation, the team mentioned that sociality used to be stronger in the GDR time, and that they were aiming to bring it back to life. As they spoke, I could see some of the older members nod with a slightly saddened smile. If, as I argued earlier, the garage social life can be part of the continuities that make post-socialism, it was hanging on by a thread in this case. After the assembly, everybody was invited to go outside for the highlight of the day: the sausage grilling.

All of the members who came to the assembly joined for the barbecue, as well as some actors of Chemnitz2025, including the managing director and the press relations manager. As for the 3000Garagen team, it seemed like they applied the following strategy: one of them was in charge of the grill, and the two others were making sure to always be talking to different members of the *Gemeinschaft*. Even though the crowd was made up of two very distinct groups, the local elderly garage owners and the cultural world, they all managed to mingle well.

In this case, Chemnitz2025 and the 3000Garagen team in particular did co-create a social interaction. Rather than artificially re-creating a sociality *à la* GDR, the team offered something slightly different. A traditional Saxon *Grillfest* with Bratwurst, mustard and potato salad, but also vegetarian alternatives and *Kulturbier*, a beer from a Chemnitz brewery that donates part of the sale price to local cultural associations.

The barbecue can be seen as a success as it brought the garage users and the ECoC together, allowing issues to be spoken about in a more informal setting. It was also a moment of "culture", in the sense of people doing and creating something together. However, it is undoubtable that the event touched a tiny number of people. In the next few years, it will be interesting to see how the idea evolves. Will other barbecues be organised, in bigger garage complexes, with more members attending? Will it be semi-public events, where other populations could join ? Will the ECoC even be a catalyst that will inspire ageing *Garagengemeinschaften* to organise their own *Grillfest*? The future will tell. In the meantime, the Gutsweg's barbecue was a paradigmatic example of the way the 3000Garagen team handles its task: working with the needs of the community, one step after the other.



Figure 18: Some of the members of the 3000Garagen team and local garage users during the barbecue. By author.

#### b. Lass uns mal in Ruhe: Sociality out of the Gaze of Chemnitz2025

If the Gutsweg community does collaborate eagerly with the 3000Garagen team, there were other cases where I could observe the garage users' reluctance to engage fully with the ECoC. In the case of the *Gemeinschaft* of Schützenplatz, it was clear that the ECoC, represented by the 3000Garagen team, were there as guests, and that they were not invited to exchange freely with people. During the meeting with the president, Ute Wetzel, that happened a few weeks prior, the team asked whether they could contact some garage owners who might want to collaborate with them. Ute Wetzel answered: *"It is better if I directly ask the people I know who would have stories to tell. It is easier because I know them, I know who to ask."* As we can see, the ECoC is welcomed, but under the garage community's own terms. Unlike most of the other representants of *Garagengemeinschaften* who met with the 3000Garagen team, Wetzel also had a very clear idea of what kind of project she wanted to collaborate on with the ECoC: a mural on the lateral wall of the garages representing their founder, Heinz Foraschik. When one member of the team told her they could imagine a black and white portrait of the man, Wetzel cut them off: Black and white was out of the question. She wanted a colourful rendition of her mentor. This exchange was interesting to witness because it clearly showed that the ECoC was not

accepted everywhere and at any time. The team was welcomed to provide support, but needed to keep its distance.

In other spaces, the ECoC is simply not welcomed at all. As I visited the Gläss-Fabrik for the first time, I met a user, a man in his 40's who was working on his car. When I asked him what his opinion on Chemnitz2025 and the garage project was, he shrugged:

*I don't know what they are doing. They come here and take photos or whatever. For us it's not nice, because we want to be left in peace. We don't want any robbery or theft happening. We just want to be left in peace.*

The main difference between the Gläss-Fabrik and the other garages I visited is that a strong sense of community and sociality already exists there. We already talked about Mareike Hornof and the parties she is organising. She also told me that, had I come in summer rather than at the beginning of spring, I could have come to several barbecues and parties that are organised in the garden located in the inner courtyard of the factory. However, Mareike and her friends were already celebrating the *Feierabend*, the end of the workday, in the cold evenings of March. As I came to the Gläss-Fabrik for the second time to interview her, some of the users I had met the first time were gathered around a pack of beers, sitting in a circle on folding chairs. Once we were done with the interview, Mareike Hornof promptly joined them.

In this context, Mareike Hornof does not feel like the ECoC can add any value to their experience in the garages. Unlike the Gutsweg community, there is no need for a "social catalyst" here. As she puts it:

*The ECoC comes here and tells people: "Do something with us". But people don't care, because there is already an exchange happening! What does the ECoC have to give us? Nothing.*

In the first part of this section, I showed how sociality can be (re)created with the impulse and resources of Chemnitz2025. On the other hand, the ECoC is also excluded from some spaces where solidarity and exchange among garage users already bloom. Before concluding this chapter, I want to mention another case of sociality happening outside of the gaze of the 3000Garagen team. In some cases, there is simply no sociality to bring back to life, because there were never any social events happening inside the garages.

### c. The Garages as a Garden Alternative

Although my research focuses exclusively on GDR garages, we should not forget that the post-socialist spatial ecosystem is far more complex. The GDR was made of different typologies of space that were strongly tied together. As I visited Heinz Borsdorf's garage, he pointed to the apartment he had lived in most of his life, only a few metres away, and then at the factory where he had worked for more than 30 years. He told me that *"it was typical in the GDR back then: everything was central. [the housing] and the job too. It is inconceivable today. But it was nice."* So, when I asked him whether he recalled throwing parties in his garage, Heinz answers without any hesitation:

*No, it was forbidden. [For social activities], we had a garden, just across from the house. A lot of the people who lived here had a garden. Not big, it was 53m<sup>2</sup> more or less, but it was nice.*

A quick look at the online GDR home video archive "open memory box" (Open Memory Box n.d.) confirms the importance of gardens over garages as social spaces. The few images of garages are footage of their construction, or they are in the background of the action. But most of the videos under the "garden" tab display family moments, friends drinking beer, sausages being roasted on a grill...



Figure 19: screenshots of the videos under the tab "garden" of the video archive platform "open memory box".

As a garage user interviewed in a newspaper article about GDR garages states: garages can also be *Kleingartenersatz*" (Locke 2022). Bearing in mind that social activities, especially grilling, are formally forbidden in garage complexes, it makes sense that people owning both a garden and a garage would privilege the former for social events. Moreover, although this tends to change nowadays, the "typical GDR" spatial organisation was centred around the housing, and house neighbours were also probably garage and garden neighbours. With this argument, I aim to show that sociality is not limited to one type of space. By focusing on garages, Chemnitz2025 (as well as I) probably miss out on instances of sociality and friendly barbecues.

## *Conclusion*

With this section, I wanted to show how the 3000Garagen team acts to support sociality in garages. I witnessed one single event, and I do not claim that it alone represents the way the team handles the question. However, the event was a way to revive a “traditional” sociality, allowing older garage users to rekindle memories while also meeting other kinds of actors. I also showed that other kinds of social relationships exist outside of this conventional sociality highly dependent on the *Gemeinschaft* and inherited from the GDR.

The 3000Garagen team told me several times that they are there to help and enable social events to flourish, but only when there is a clear need articulated by the community. In this sense, it is better when sociality happens spontaneously, without any need for the ECoC’s help. Instead of using Chemnitz as a “testing ground”, the 3000Garagen team uses a bottom-up strategy that allows garage users to decide on what terms they want the social space to develop, or not to develop. In the next section dedicated to the future uses of the garage, I will deepen the reflection on the case-by-case strategy adopted by the team.

### 3. Ghosts

In this third section, I explore the theme of the future uses of the garages. In the context of Chemnitz2025, thinking of the future of garage complexes also means looking at heritage and preservation practices. Indeed, the GDR garages are simultaneously strongly embedded in the socialist architectural history, while also belonging to vernacular landscapes (Tuvikene 2010). Unlike other examples of monumental modern architecture (in Chemnitz, one can think of the 13 metres high sculpture of Karl Marx's head), the garages have not been built to show the grandeur of the socialist regime. Built by and for the users, they also slip through the cracks of scientific literature. Despite their number, they have been erased. However, it does not mean that garages are not of great sentimental value for their owners, and they often find themselves at the heart of questions of transmission, heritage and nostalgia. One question thus arises: Should they be institutionally protected, and if so on what terms? The 3000Garagen team reflects intensively on this question and on the idea of a patrimonialisation "from below" taking nostalgia seriously. Before analysing the way the 3000Garagen team activates questions of heritage and patrimony, I will contrast two examples taken from my fieldwork to show the different ways nostalgia can operate and the futures that can await garage complexes.

#### a. Living Nostalgia

Stepping into René di Carlo's Klappfix feels like going back in time. As he proudly explains, every element dates back to the GDR, even the mattresses and the curtains. Sitting on the berth, in the camaieu of mustard yellow, brick red and sand beige, a member of the 3000Garagen team asks di Carlo where his passion for GDR objects comes from. Di Carlo, who was born only a few years before the *Wende*, explains:

*I was very young when the Wende came. So, for me, the GDR is my childhood and I only have good memories of it.*

As we can see, nostalgia (or *Ostalgie* in our case) is not only a shared experience lived by populations that had to suffer extreme changes (Houssay-Holzschuch 2021, Dlamini 2009, Adams and Larkham 2015). Nostalgia is also a profoundly personal experience. When di Carlo invites us to step inside his Klappfix, he informs us with a smile that "it smells like the GDR". In other words, it smelt like his childhood. Authors such as Dlamini (2009) have documented this taboo feeling of longing for undemocratic or objectively "worse" times. This feeling is even more present for people like René di Carlo, for whom the insouciance of childhood and the iconic objects of the GDR merge in his mind.

In the field, some of the practices and the ethos of the GDR garage culture are being transmitted to young people who were born well after the reunification of the two Germanies. The most telling example is probably the one of Pascal Drechsler and his father Raik. As I explained in Chapter 3, both have a passion for tinkering and if they are now both working on their own machines, there was a time when Pascal would observe and learn from his father. When I asked Raik if he was perpetuating a family tradition and if he himself tinkered with his own father, he said that he never did. He recalled memories of the building of the garage complex, and remembered helping his father to carry buckets of sand. But once the garages were built, Raik's father never used the space to tinker or repair his car.

Pascal's garage is thus inscribed in a father-son relation more than in a real "tradition". However, his garage is not only the result of a common passion he shares with his dad. Other continuities are at play. When I visited Pascal's garage, a GDR licence plate displayed on the wall caught my attention. Old GDR plates are very common in garages and I saw them in most of the ones I visited. Even Heinz Borsdorf, whose garage is almost empty and used as a storage unit, still has the plates of his 2 Trabants on the wall. However, I was surprised to see it in the young Pascal's garage, among the merry mess made of inside jokes scribbled on the walls by his friends, advertisements for German liquors, and LGBT-friendly stickers. He explained that the licence plate belonged to the former owner of the garage, and that he did not see why he would take it off.

Pascal's garage is then embedded in a logic of transmission both on a personal and a larger scale. On the one hand, he learns to maintain GDR mopeds with his father; on the other hand, his garage is the perfect example of the typical GDR garage with its old licence plates on the wall, the tinkering and the weekly parties with his friends I mentioned in the section "the Garage as Social Space".

### **b. Among Cardboard Boxes**

However, garages are rarely so intensively used and the relation between Raik and Pascal Drechsler seems to be an exception more than the rule. In the case of Heinz Borsdorf's garage for instance, questions of nostalgia and transmission unfold very differently.

In the previous chapter, I used Houssay-Holzschuch's metaphor of the hermit crab to explain how users would outgrow or seek other garages. We saw how working with metaphors is an effective way to shift our gaze and think beyond binaries. In the same text (Houssay-Holzschuch 2021), she mentions another metaphor that can be applied to post-spaces: the tomason. The name of the concept refers to the following anecdote: In 1982,



the famous baseball player Gary Thomasson moved to Japan after a rich and successful career in the United States. There, he joined a team in Tokyo where he became infamous for setting the league strikeout record. The legend even tells that he gained the nickname of “giant human fan” because he barely hit any ball during the season.<sup>11</sup> Japanese artist Genpei Akassegawa then gave the name “tomason” to all of the urban objects that lost their original purpose with time, but that are still maintained in the public space like our ill-fated baseball player. (Houssay-Holzschuch 2021, Gervais-Lambony 2017). As we can see, the tomason is foremost a nostalgic figure, a living reminder of the loss of a certain space-time.

Like a tomason, Borsdorf’s garage is an object whose real purpose is unclear. Unlike the rest of my informants, Borsdorf does not live close to his garage anymore, and hence does not use it as a parking space. Indeed, he left the village where he worked and raised his children to move to the near-by city in 2017. If he keeps his garage, he tells me that it is solely to store his tires. As he explains several times during our meeting, he saves 60 euros by changing his tires at the local mechanic’s rather than in the city. One could ask if keeping a garage that would sell for more than 2000 euros, while still paying the annual *Pacht* of 120 euros a year is worth saving a few dozen euros at the mechanic. One could even wonder if the garage is the only remaining element bonding Heinz to what he calls his “Heimat”, a term difficult to translate that conveys both an idea of home and native motherland. In this sense, his garage can be seen as a kind of *ghost*, a reminder of a past.

Heinz is also concerned with questions of filial transmission, but in a very different manner than the Drechsler. Heinz’s son has been living in West Germany for years and is not planning to ever come back to Saxony. When I visited his garage, it was almost empty beside a few boxes that were piling up on the floor, and the four tires waiting to be taken out next winter. Like miniature tomasons, two objects were facing each other: on the one side, an old solid wood sideboard belonging to Heinz’ mother who lives in a retirement home. On the other side, a cardboard box full of his son’s childhood belongings. A few weeks after our meeting, Heinz was to bring it to his son. We contemplated the boxes for a while, and he finally said :

*Yeah, you have to take care [entsorgen] of it a bit at some point, because I know how it goes... With my parents back then, when it came to an end, the kids had to do all the work.*

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, see ‘Gary Thomasson - BR Bullpen’. Retrieved 8 August 2023 ([https://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Gary\\_Thomasson](https://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Gary_Thomasson)).

Here, filial transmission must be understood in terms other than material inheritance. Heinz's gift to his son is the assurance that he will never have to take care of his father's garage.

If I explained Raik Drechsler and Heinz Borsdorf's stories in such detail, it is to show how the same space can have diametrically opposed implications. The Drechsler's garages are living (and lived) spaces where knowledge is being transmitted. On the other hand, Borsdorf's garage is a space in transition. It is arguably what maintains the relationship between Heinz and his village, but it also has the potential to become a burden on his child.

In Chemnitz, there are dozens of Heinz Borsdorfs and Raik Drechslers, and hundreds of other situations. This is a challenge for Chemnitz2025, who needs to present a coherent image of garage "culture". In other words, what deserves to be put in the limelight, or protected? The garages in themselves, or the practices in which the "makers" are engaging? Should all the garages be considered culturally relevant? What to do with the ones that became tomasons? To answer those questions, the 3000Garagen team adopts a dynamic approach that they call "making heritage" that I will develop in the following section.



Figure 20 and 21: Raik Drechsler and Heinz Borsdorf in their garages. By author.

### c. Making Heritage

When I met the 3000Garagen team for the first time, they ran me through their project's curational dimensions. Two of them have already been developed earlier in this chapter: the team is trying to work toward a regulation change to officially allow "makers" to work in their garage. They are also aiming to support social events and sociality among garage users. The third dimension they presented during our meeting was the question of cultural heritage. Staying in line with their participative and bottom-up conception of the project, they explained that they were understanding heritage as a dynamic and grassroots practice. In other words, it is the community itself that should discuss questions of heritage, and grant the status of "cultural heritage" to a space they deem of interest. The status could then be withdrawn at any time. For the team, it would be a way of using heritage as an actual protective tool that would allow the "spirit" of a place to thrive.

This idea is also present in the literature. Architect and monument conservation expert Luise Rellensmann, who also collaborated with the 3000Garagen team, argues for instance that "heritage should break its own rules" and that "to demonstrate and act upon significance does not always require the preservation of fabric" (Schofield and Rellensmann 2015, 134). In this sense, protecting the garages would not necessarily mean going down the traditional road of architectural preservation. The team made this clear during several of our meetings. All the garages cannot be protected against decay or urban development projects. It is rather a matter of protecting both the garages that are still used and loved by the community, and the immaterial garage culture.

### d. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in<sup>12</sup>

The 3000Garagen team members are not the only ones to reflect on these innovative takes on heritage. They are at the heart of critical currents of museology and conservation everywhere (Lorente and Moolhuijsen 2015). However, these questions are even more salient in the context of the post-socialist realm. As Offentstadt (2019) explains, the German reunification led to an erasure of GDR history that was seen either as shameful or not deemed interesting enough. Few years after the *Wende*, the *Ossis'* everyday life also became a new object of consumption. People went in mass to the cinemas to see the adventures of Alex, the hero of *Goodbye Lenin!*, and fumble with him through the disappeared GDR products, Mocca Fix and pickled cucumbers (Cooke 2005, Offentstadt 2019). In places such as the *DDR Museum* in Berlin, they could physically engage with

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<sup>12</sup> (Certeau 1988 : 135)

these ghosts of another space-time. The museum is designed to be interactive and visitors are encouraged to take a stroll in a reconstituted GDR living-room, or to sit in the actual Trabant exhibited at the entrance. However, no museum and no mainstream film tries to reconstitute the experience of being in a garage. Some GDR experiences seem to raise crowds more than others.

Drawing on Michel de Certeau (1994), I read this official memory of the GDR, that some could accuse of being sterilised and even “popified” through the lens of patrimonialisation. According to de Certeau, patrimonialising is a way of “exorcising” the ghosts of the past, a “look at the past, not the experience of the past arising” (Gervais-Lambony 2017, 2012)<sup>13</sup>. Working with dynamic definitions of heritage rather than patrimonialisation, the 3000Garagen team is trying to let the past speak for itself. The interest of working with garages that are still in use is undoubtedly to avoid reifying it. To let the ghosts speak. I encountered several of them, be it Pascal’s licence plate, Mareike’s old trailer-turned-pizza-oven, René’s Klappfix, or Heinz’s cardboard boxes. The question now is to know what ghosts should be listened to, and who to leave alone.

## *Conclusion*

This section showed how the 3000Garagen team is handling questions of patrimony and cultural preservation. By dwelling on two different stories I encountered during my fieldwork, I aimed to show the various ways users envision the future of their garage. Once again, the team is working following a case-by-case logic and understands that protecting all the garages of Chemnitz is not possible nor desirable. Chemnitz2025 could have been a golden opportunity to try and patrimonialise the garage complexes as interesting examples of a disappearing socialist architecture. On the contrary, the 3000Garagen team acknowledges that what needs to be protected is what users want to see protected. Going back to the conceptions of the East, it is here clear that the team considers it as a lived space that does not belong in the museum. If the only spaces that can be inhabited are the haunted ones, it is then important to welcome the ghosts without confining them to a patrimonialisation’s logic.

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<sup>13</sup> Translation from French by the author.

## 4. Ruinen schaffen ohne Waffen

The title of this section, “building ruins without weapons”, is a popular saying in East Germany, parodying the anti-war GDR slogan *Frieden schaffen ohne Waffen*, “building peace without weapons”. This witticism, with its typical East German wry humour, reminds us that the ruination of most Eastern cities is due to the lack of maintenance and resource allocated by the authorities (Jungholt 2019). I heard this saying for the first time during an interview I conducted with the director of the *Fahrzeugmuseum*, whom the reader will meet later in this section. In his view, the saying was referring to Chemnitz’ complete lack of interest in its garage culture that, as he explained, was falling apart without any institutional support. This feeling of disconnection not only from the municipality but also from the cultural world will be the subject of this final section of Chapter 4.

I dedicated the last section to questions of heritage and architectural preservation, and showed how the 3000Garagen team was trying to theorise and implement a bottom-up view of heritage. Yet, we need to bear in mind that the ECoC and the 3000Garagen team in particular do not have the power to take actual decisions. These issues are part of regional planning laws and are addressed by the city authorities, or even sometimes by the State of Saxony (RevoSax n.d.). It is something that the 3000Garagen team made clear during our first meeting: in terms of decisional power, the city has the upper hand over the ECoC. For this reason, Garcia and Cox note that the municipalities’ political engagement is paramount for the viability of ECoC projects, and that the most successful capitals of culture are the ones benefiting from a strong political and civil support (Garcia and Cox 2013).

To question the relationships between the city, the civil society and Chemnitz2025, I will end this chapter with a reflection on some of the tensions I observed in the field, be it between garage users and the municipality, or with the ECoC. Drawing on some of the recent scandals and criticisms faced by Chemnitz2025, I will finish this chapter with a discussion on the real power held by the 3000Garagen team, and the actual possibilities of bottom-up methods in such a context.

### a. The Slow Agony of Garage Culture

We already met the *Garagengemeinschaft* of Gutsweg when I described the barbecue that followed their yearly assembly. As I already mentioned, the jolly atmosphere of the sausage grilling was contrasting with the difficulties the garage complex was facing. For the Chemnitzer administration, the complex belongs indeed to the “category A”, namely the

“sites with other urban development goals of the city” (see fig. 22) In other words, the category A garages are the most at risk to be destroyed in the short term. In the case of the Gutsweg, the future is particularly uncertain. The president of the *Gemeinschaft* already had meetings with the city representatives to discuss the case, but they seem to have left him with a bitter aftertaste. One encounter made him particularly upset, and he shared the following anecdote on several occasions:

*The city wants to demolish the garages as part of the new biking path they are designing. But all of us who have garages here live nearby, so we need somewhere to park our cars. So, when I ask them where we should put our cars, they reply that they will build new parking lots. It just makes no sense!*

The feeling of disconnection with the city was also fueled by the context of inflation in which Germany found itself at the beginning of 2023. In the garages, the rise of energy costs was on everybody's lips. The price of the *Pacht* had also risen significantly<sup>14</sup>, which made the president of the Gutsweg *Garagengemeinschaft* conclude that “the city does everything to collect money from [them]”.

What makes the situation even more complicated is that the timeline is far from clear. Though everyone knows that the complex is doomed to disappear and that new sell contracts cannot be signed in the meantime (see fig. 22), nobody knows when the demolition will take place. In an email exchange I had with the *Grundstücksverwaltungsamt*, the property management office of the municipality of Chemnitz, my interlocutor told me that:

*“The draft and design decisions are currently being prepared internally by the administration. [...] From today's current view, it is envisaged that the City of Chemnitz retains the existing ownership of the garage plot and then markets the plots itself in the realisation of the building plots to be established by the development plan. Unfortunately, we are unable to predict how the timetable will develop.”*

If this situation adds to the frustration, it also makes something clear: the garages are not a priority for the city.

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<sup>14</sup> For example, it rose more than 30% in the case of Heinz Borsdorf.

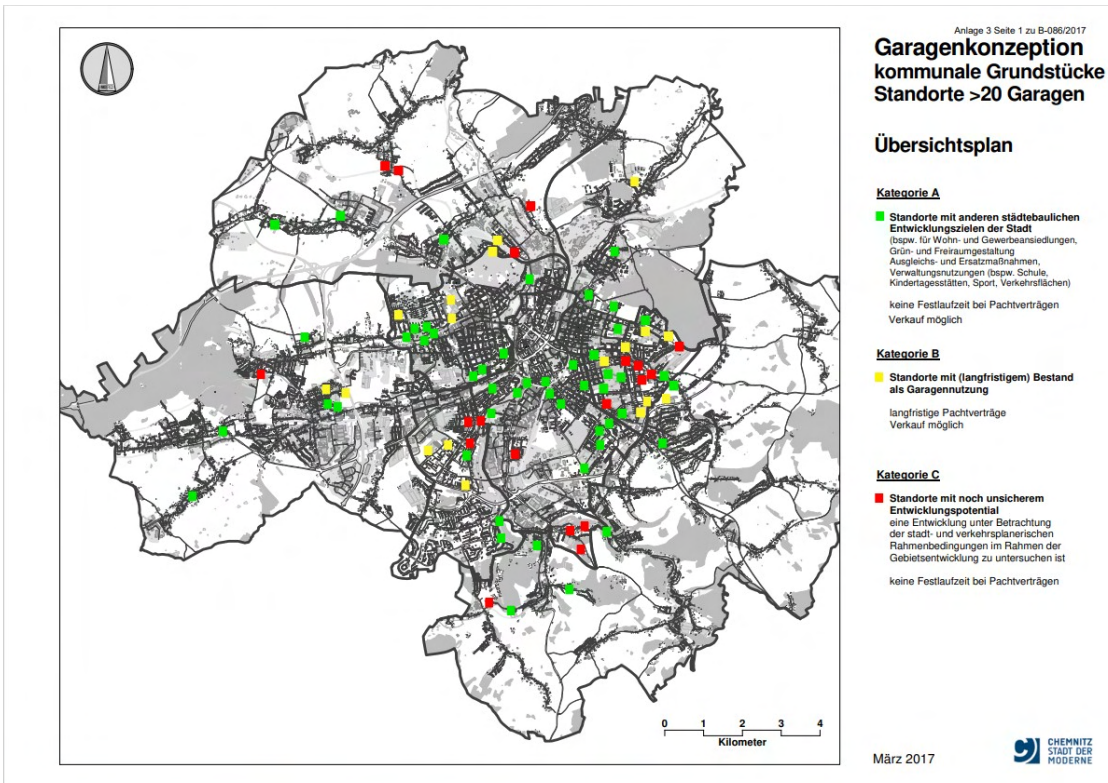


Figure 22: Map of the different categories of garages. In green, the category A, most at risk to be destroyed. Stadt Chemnitz.

Of all of my informants, Mareike Hornof was the most virulent towards the inaction of the city. For her, if the city wants to promote garage culture (which appears to be the case as the city met several times with the 3000Garagen team in what seemed to be fruitful exchanges), Chemnitz should then protect them in a very material way: construct more of them, sanitise the ones already existing, and buy the land where garages are imperilled, like in the case of the Gläss-Fabrik. Indeed, the plot belongs to Transit, a nightclub and cultural centre housed in the adjacent former train station. The club bought the land a few years ago in an attempt to expand their venue. The project did not work out, and, according to Mareike, Transit is now trying to sell the land again. Although some garage users have been there for 20 years, the Gläss-Fabrik is in a state of perpetual interim use, which prevents users from really being able to project themselves in the space. For Mareike the solution is simple. The city could buy the land and, in this way, protect the users from the precarity and risk of expulsion.

Dirk Schmerschneider, the director of the *Fahrzeugmuseum* of Chemnitz also expressed his annoyance at the inaction of the city of Chemnitz. His museum is housed in one of the oldest *Hochgarage* of Germany, a beautiful six storey building built in 1928. Schmerschneider lamented that, although the *Hochgarage* is being visited by eager

architects and culture aficionados since the building had been featured in *The Modern View* (Haus Schminke 2019), a book recording the most interesting examples of modern architecture in Saxony, the city is not seeing the potential of the space. When he guided me through the building, he showed me with sadness the lift that was used to bring the cars to the upper floors. It is in its original condition, and would be an extremely interesting space to bring to light. However, it is now used as a storage area as the museum is sorely lacking in space.

His conclusion is the same as Mareike's. The simpler solution would be for the city to step in and buy the building. This had been discussed in 2007 when the museum moved into the *Hochgarage*. However, the city did not do anything, and the building was finally bought by a private stakeholder. This is a significant cause of grief for Schmerschneider, as the lease is renewed every 2 years. Without the security that a longer contract could offer, it is impossible for the museum to develop projects on a longer term.

Mareike Hornof and Dirk Schmerschneider both blame the precarity they find themselves in on the city's passivity. There are undoubtedly other causes for this lack of support than a mere disinterest in the garage culture as a whole, starting with a lack of resources that many municipalities are experiencing. It is understandable that in a shrinking city stroked by unemployment and poverty, the preservation of garage culture is not the priority (Glorius 2022). Drawing on Hirt's analysis of post-public cities, the situation can also be read as a very banal symptom of post-socialism. For her, the public sector in post-socialist cities tends to "abandon[] its responsibility to protect public space, in both its material and non-material connotations" (Hirt 2012, 194). Similarly, Schmerschneider and Hornof feel the lack of protection in terms of materiality (the garages themselves) and of uses and practices (the garage as a historic witness and as an important space of sociality and exchange).

If the frustration towards the city is particularly audible now, it is because it seems to be conflicting with the way Chemnitz2025 publicly reiterates the significance and importance of the garages as part of Chemnitz' cultural landscape. I argue that some of the irritation toward the inaction of the city is transferred to Chemnitz2025, whose lack of communication also exacerbates the feeling of disconnection of the civil society.



## b. Garages and Apple Trees: what place for the Community ?

More than once, the 3000Garagen team had to make clear to their interlocutors that they did not have the power to change any law, nor the resources to sanitise or secure existing garages. During the Gutsweg's barbecue, members exposed their concerns with the hope that they would be brought to the city authorities. The team had to explain that they did not represent the city of Chemnitz and that they did not have the power to change their precarious situation. This lack of means, coupled with the bottom-up stance adopted by the 3000Garagen team, sometimes made it look like nothing was being done. During an *Info-Café* where the team presented the state of their project to the public, a city representative asked about their vision, and whether the project would survive and develop after 2025. The team's answer was clear: the future was in the hands of the garage users. They were there to support and make grassroot projects possible, but there was no vision to force on the community. If none of them participate or carry the project forward, then so be it. It was not their place to tell them what to do.

The team's firm stance on bottom-up methods also needs to be read in light of an event that shook Chemnitz' cultural world a few days before the end of my fieldwork. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2023, "WE PARAPOM: the Parade of the Apple Trees", one of the four flagship projects of Chemnitz2025 was simply cancelled. This participative project aimed to plant 4000 apple trees in the city with the citizens, and spark reflections on the *vivre-ensemble* in a city wounded by the 2018 far-right rallies (WE PARAPOM Projekt n.d.). Chemnitz2025 did not communicate extensively on the cancellation, but the few publications available online blamed the inhabitants' lack of involvement and wariness toward the whole project (Jung 2023). In a press conference, the artistic director of Chemnitz2025 stated that "a new program for low-threshold community engagement will be designed" (WE PARAPOM News, n.d.) . This new project will be developed by the end of 2023 but it remains to be seen whether popular confidence can be restored.

This detour through another Chemnitz2025 project shows how delicate community participation is to handle. In this case, inhabitants seem to have felt left behind and to have had no say in the process, which led to a global disinterest in the project (mdr.de 2023).

## *Conclusion*

As I hope to have shown, garages are entangled in a broader context where other actors, be it the municipality of Chemnitz or the ECoC, are at play. Even though the 3000Garagen team is trying to distance itself as much as possible from the vision of the East as a “testing ground”, the wider context does not make participative and bottom-up approaches particularly easy to implement. The city, who owns some of the plots where garages are built, does not have the means nor the interest to protect the garage complexes, especially when the land can be sold or used for more profitable urban development. Chemnitz2025 is struggling to gain public support, especially since the failure of WE PARAPOM, a project that was deemed too top-down and not connected enough to the situation on the ground.

It is also probable that, despite (or maybe because of) the team’s dedication to a bottom-up and truly participative approach, the 3000Garagen project will fall short of expectations. How to open thousands of garages, organise concerts, workshops and puppet shows like promised by the bid book in a context of such uncertainty and distrust of the population? Whereas the team is aware of the situation and seems to be content with a much more modest participation of the garage users than announced, the disconnection with the official discourse aggravates the population’s frustration. As the local media Radio Chemnitz states: “The makers want to get a total of 3,000 owners to open their garages to visitors. It is not yet clear how many will actually take part in the project in the end” (Escher 2023)<sup>15</sup>. As I showed in the rest of this chapter, the team did gain the trust of several garage users in the field and is engaging in innovative cooperation and opening dialogues. But in a city of more than 200.000 inhabitants and thousands of garage users, will these relationships be even noticeable?

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<sup>15</sup> Translated from German by the author.

## 5. The 3000Garagen project and the Eastern State of Mind

In this chapter, I aimed to analyse the 3000Garagen team's work in light of the different visions of the East. Since the project belongs to the pillar "the Eastern State of Mind" of Chemnitz2025's program, I wanted to examine the way the East is being used in the field, and answer the question: *What conception of the East is being created through Chemnitz2025, and the 3000Garagen project in particular?*

As the team focuses on personal stories, it is evident that the theme of the GDR was often mentioned during their work with garage users, in particular when it came to the themes of maker's identity and sociality that I developed in the two first sections. However, the team was more interested in the current issues and practices and did not dwell on the past. The figure of the maker is for instance politicised to bring garage users' current interests to the municipality of Chemnitz. The team also tries to promote instances of sociality, but through a grassroots approach that allows the *Garagengemeinschaft* to keep the upper hand. Similarly to their take on the maker identity, the team does not try to recreate an artificial GDR-style sociality. Even though the only co-organised social event I observed was a traditional sausage barbecue, it did not feel like a nostalgic rendition of a disappeared time but rather like a common reflection on what can still be done in garage yards and how to include other kinds of audiences. In the third section, we saw how the team is also thinking about heritage as a bottom-up practice. Unlike traditional stances on the East, the socialist heritage here is not museified nor put at a distance. The East is not a Semi-Other nor an inert space. Rather, the team understands the East as a dynamic lived space where people can make their own decisions on the future of their socialist heritage.

I also tried to contrast the team's bottom-up approach with the traditional vision of the East as a testing ground. As many examples illustrated, the team chose the opposite track and is trying not to impose anything on garage users, which might result in a much more modest project than the one described in the bid book. As I showed in the final section, the bottom-up approach is sometimes difficult to navigate, especially when looking at the bigger picture and the overlapping power structures like the municipality and Chemnitz2025 as a whole. In the continuity of Chapter 3, it can be argued that the team inscribes its work in a reflection on post-socialism and on the entanglement of past and present. More importantly, the team acknowledges through its bottom-up work that the garage culture is still alive and evolving. If the past and the present are entangled here, the team adds another temporal layer: the future of the garage complexes.

## Chapter 5: Final Remarks

### 1. A detour to Estonia

In these final pages, I want to briefly leave Chemnitz, only to return again. Following fragments also means to be alert to the coincidences and to the moments when stories meet and interweave. Here, the story leads us to Estonia, the country of the only urban scholar to have written extensively on socialist garages in English: Tauri Tuvikene. As I have shown repeatedly, his empirical work on garage complexes as well as his theorisation of the post-socialist city have inspired me greatly to conduct my own research. I could then not finish this thesis without mentioning that Tartu, the Estonian city where Tuvikene's fieldwork on garage complexes took place, will be the European Capital of Culture in 2024, one year before Chemnitz.

The angle chosen by Tartu2024 is "Arts of Survival" and the program will be dedicated to the "knowledge, skills, and values that will help us lead a good life in the future" (Tartu2024 2019) The bid book and its striking green design presents projects focussing primarily on the human and non-human relationship. For the authors of the bid book, Estonia can draw inspiration from its own folklore and ancient respect for nature to create innovative ways of protecting the environment. Notably, the socialist heritage, let alone the garages, is not highlighted at all in the program. Estonia's Soviet past is briefly mentioned, but only as a reminder of Soviet exactions and labour camps (Tartu2024 2019). If garages are becoming a "trendy" topic in the former GDR, with a growing number of newspaper articles being dedicated to the subject, the complexes do not seem to be as popular in Estonia. The comparison between the two contexts would deserve a dissertation of its own but by way of example I will mention an encounter I had with a young Estonian man I met during my fieldwork in Germany. When I explained my research topic, he was extremely surprised to hear I was dedicating my Masters thesis to an object as mundane as socialist garage complexes. Were they even still in use? He himself had no connection to socialist garages whatsoever and had never thought about them as a heritage worthy of interest. When I asked him if he himself felt he belonged to the "Eastern State of Mind" so dear to Chemnitz2025, he said no, not at all.

*When I talk to my grandmother about this period, the memory that stands out most is her participation in the Baltic Way in 1989<sup>16</sup>, [the huge human*

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<sup>16</sup> For more information, see Suziedelis 2013

*chain that spanned more than 600 kilometres between the three Baltic capitals to protest Soviet occupation]. She has stars in her eyes when she talks about the solidarity between Baltic countries that happened there. That's what she tries to pass on to us.*

My informant, born almost a decade after the collapse of the USSR, does not feel like he belongs to a global "East". He rather feels connected to the anti-soviet independence struggles of the end of the 1980's. In other words, to a post-socialist world.

Comparing the ways the East is or is not thematized by Chemnitz2025 and Tartu2024 can seem artificial and rather vain. However, it becomes more interesting when we look at the programs of the other Eastern ECoC of these last years. Rijeka2020, Novi Sad2022, Veszprém2023, none of them thematized the East in their programs. Only Kaunas2022 dedicated a project to modernist architecture, but without ever linking it explicitly to the socialist past of Lithuania. With this detour, I thus want to raise the following question: why did Chemnitz2025 choose the angle of the East to develop its program?

Even though the differences in quality of life between West and East Germany remain high and concerning, the former GDR is now part of one of the most powerful and wealthy European countries. Among the former Soviet satellites, there is no denying that East Germany is faring much better than others in terms of economic and political conditions. It is then striking that the Eastern mentality is so much more thematized by Chemnitz than any other Eastern European Capital of Cultures.

Tuvikene shows how post-socialism is a "deterritorialized concept" that can be applied to any city, formerly part of the socialist sphere or not. Similarly, post-socialism is one of the many angles through which post-socialist cities can be studied (Tuvikene 2016). One can wonder if the focus on the Eastern State of Mind of Chemnitz is not also a conscious decision to benefit from the interest of the ECoC for Eastern cities. Indeed, looking at the other cities chosen recently demonstrates a trend: Rijeka Croatia in 2020, Kaunas Lithuania and Novi Sad Serbia in 2022, Veszprém Hungary and Timisoara Romania in 2023... Determining if the focus on the Eastern State of Mind was also a conscious marketing choice in order to maximise the chances of Chemnitz would require more research. It is however an idea that could be worth considering.

## 2. Chemnitz' Eastern State of Mind

As I showed through my research, Chemnitz2025's bid book does not only focus on the East, but on a somehow magnified version of it. What people would have inherited from the GDR would be a strong sense of community and solidarity and a maker mentality that can overcome everyday problems. In the aftermath of the racist outbursts of 2018, creating a positive narrative around the figure of the *Ossi* was also a way to respond to the event and short circuit the mainstream denigration of the East as backward and borderline fascist (Arp and Goudin-Steinmann 2020). However, my research showed that the situation is rather different in the field. I witnessed ruptures, be it the slow agony of *Garagengemeinschaften*, the longing for a lost sociality among neighbours, or the growing privatisation of space. In the garages, what remains from the GDR time is also threatened by urban development and the inaction of the city. As we observed in the Gläss-Fabrik, the garage culture also moved to other kinds of spaces, less visible at first glance. However, these spaces also suffer from precarity and their future is as uncertain as the traditional garage complexes. On the other side of the coin, we saw with the stories of Mareike, Markus, Raik, Pascal and René that garage culture is still alive. What illustrates this at best is the bottom-up approach chosen by the 3000Garagen team. By working closely with users, the team avoids reifying the garages, and allows the culture to flourish and to take new paths. As long as the garage culture is still developing, it is alive.

More than the presence of a real "Eastern State of Mind", my research showed that Chemnitz and its garages were profoundly post-socialist, since they are embedded in continuities and anti-continuities with their past. More than being a mix of "Western European minds and Eastern European soul[s]" as the bid book suggests (Kulturhauptstadt 2018, 13), Chemnitzer garage users are rather the perfect illustration of the "post" space-time regime. At the end of her article, Houssay-Holzschuch asks:

*"how do people engage with a space-time regime? What is the materiality through which it manifests itself? How are places linked to time periods? Where are change and permanence located?" (Houssay-Holzschuch 2021, 17).*

With this research, I hope to have at least started to answer these questions in the context of post-socialist Chemnitz. And if, as Robinson and Tuvikene state, all cities are ordinary, then these questions are universal. Questions of nostalgia, change of value system and remembrance through materiality and heritage are at stake everywhere. Perhaps, framing

Chemnitz as a (post)socialist city and reflecting on the materiality of space-time regimes makes it profoundly European, and thus a perfect Capital of Culture.

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