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omcshane@wk.planet.gen.nz
www.RMAStudies.org.nz

Centre for Resource Management Studies

158 Rangiora Road, RD2, Kaiwaka
Northland 0582, New Zealand
T 64 9 + 431 2775 F 64 9 + 431 2772

Halle-Neustadt – the “Sustainable City”

A Cautionary Tale

Part B of a presentation to the Land Transport Summit.

Prepared by Owen McShane based on edited extracts from an essay by Randal O’Toole of the Thoreau Institute.

Halle-Neustadt, is a bedroom community built between 1964 and 1990 for about 100,000 people on the outskirts of the manufacturing city of Halle, in East Germany.

Randal O’Toole of the US Thoreau Institute, first became aware of Halle-Neustadt at a 1998 San Francisco conference on “Sustainable Transportation” at which two planners from the University of Stockholm declared it to be one of the most sustainable (i.e., least ‘auto-dependent’) cities in the developed world. (Note their assumption that “autos” are unsustainable.)



A Postcard of Halle Neustadt

Randal O’Toole reports:

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“As shown in the vintage postcard, Halle-Neustadt consists of rows of apartment buildings surrounded by pleasant-looking green spaces, with a central commercial area and road corridors serving large, articulated buses. The new city was also connected to Halle by an extensive streetcar system and a subway, and the city met the "Ideal Communist City" density of about 70,000 people per square mile.

The Stockholm planners' paper noted that almost all the apartments had two bedrooms because government planners decreed “that the ideal family consisted of four family members and that the number of flat rooms should be one less than the number of family members.” They also noted that the government discouraged car ownership by placing most of the parking on the outskirts of the city “at a relatively large distance from the residential houses.”

What the Swedish researchers failed to note in their 1998 presentation, but faithfully recorded in their full paper, was that Halle-Neustadt was only “sustainable” during the period of Soviet Rule. When Germany reunified, many residents moved out, and enough of those who stayed bought cars, so that auto ownership “reached nearly the level of western Germany.” Naturally, this created major congestion and parking problems: “The cars are parked everywhere -- on pavements (i.e., footpaths), bike-ways, yards and lawn.” The Swedes feared that proposed construction of new parking garages would “undermine” the “planning concept of concentrating the parking places on the city's outskirts.”

In April 27, 2006, Randal O'Toole joined [Wendell Cox](#) on a tour of Halle-Neustadt and other formerly East German cities. The first thing they noticed was that the “parking problem” was gone, as were most of the green spaces, which had been turned into parking lots. The city center also enjoys a modern new shopping mall supported by a multi-story parking garage.

The apartment buildings themselves ranged from “reconstructed” to totally abandoned. According to various web sites on the city, Halle-Neustadt's population peaked at 94,000 in 1990 but since has fallen to 60,000. After reunification, the apartments were privatized and are now owned by various housing companies. These companies have successfully lobbied the federal government to fund the demolition of unneeded buildings, and more than two dozen high-rises in Halle-Neustadt are scheduled for destruction. Yet the population of East German cities is declining so fast that demolition cannot keep up: the region is expected to have even more vacant housing in 2010 than it does today.

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“From a distance, the subway station still appears attractive. A closer look reveals many of the windows are broken, the inside is covered with graffiti, and the restaurant and other facilities advertised on the outside are abandoned. Downstairs the loading ramp has room for fifteen-car trains, but today four-car trains are more than sufficient.



The Railway Station

Where did all the people go? Many found jobs in western Germany; since reunification, East Germany has lost more than 1.25 million people. But many of those who stayed got away from the “slabs”¹ by moving to suburbs of new duplexes and single-family homes. Many such suburbs are added onto existing villages. But well away from any village, in the middle of farmlands, O’Toole found several big-box stores, including a home improvement center, a furniture store, and a hypermart.

Today no one in Germany refers to such suburbs as "monotonous." This term is instead reserved for the grey slabs of concrete that most people are abandoning as fast as they can. Throughout Europe, high-rise apartments are increasingly becoming ghettos for Muslim and other foreign "guest workers."

Which brings us full circle to 1998 when University of Stockholm researchers tell an international group of planners that Halle-Neustadt is one of the most sustainable cities on

¹ As they are unaffectionately known by the locals, just as they named Halle-Neustadt “Hanoi”.

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earth -- knowing full well (but not mentioning) that the prerequisite for Halle-Neustadt's sustainability was keeping its residents poor and oppressed.



Typical new housing in Re-unified East Germany.

What Does Sustainable Mean?

Randal O'Toole tells a cautionary tale indeed.

We should pause to consider that this city, declared by the Stockholm researchers to be the world's "most sustainable city", was sustainable only so long as its citizens were subject to the rule of poverty and tyranny.

Is this a useful model for New Zealand?

Owen McShane

Director

NOTE: For Randal O'Toole's full commentary go to the *Frontier for Public Policy* page at:

<http://www.fcpp.org/main/people.php?CategoryID=2>

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