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Leerstand / The Quality of Emptiness

Nella Young

Vacant houses.

Neglected parts of towns.

What I was told to expect.

The quietness of Naumburg.

Abandoned factories.

Converted factories.

Out the train window on the way into Dessau,
piles of building rubble being moved by machines but never appearing to change.

The Halle overpass forming the entrance to Glaucha,
historic home to the destitute, the prostitute, the dregs of society:
the part of town with no balconies.

Walking through Halle's Christmas market,
circus guy jingling a can of coins, accompanied by a flea-bitten mule,
Army chorus in fur-lined coats. Liver smell, fried fish. "Euro-village".

Silent market places in the busy midday – footsteps and liver sizzling.

1980's heroes in the GDR, sitting at their desks all day insisting on doing nothing in order
to save the wooden houses of Quedlinberg from being demolished and replaced by
Soviet-style apartment blocks.

The way apartments often come with no appliances, you install your own – dishwasher, oven, refrigerator (everyone has small ones, waist-high), sometimes also lighting fixtures.

You can expect a toilet, sinks, counters in the kitchen.

Chances are good you'll have a balcony, but you might not have flooring.

The disability sign – three black dots arranged in a triangle - that people wear on a yellow armband.

How the Germans we asked explained it with such an air of logic and seemingly no air of horror.

Did they see it on our faces?

Sneaking into the vacant apartment building in Glaucha: dusty wallpaper slumping to the ground, a kitchen towel still hanging on a hook, pigeon shit coating the attic floors, the fear of being caught.

Returning to an American suburb with no sidewalks and the constant hum of electricity: weed whackers, air conditioners, pool filters, floodlights.



Zentral Poliklinik, Halle-Neustadt. Nella Young (2010)



Neustadt Markt, Halle-Neustadt. Nella Young (2010)



Neustadt Passage, Halle-Neustadt. Nella Young (2010)



Am Gastronom: The Longest Block, Halle-Neustadt. Nella Young (2010)



Am Gastronom, Halle-Neustadt. Nella Young (2010)

About the author:

After earning her Masters degree in Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning from Tufts University, Nella Young received a research fellowship to travel to eastern Germany, where she studied planning strategies for shrinking cities. Nella has a Masters degree in Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning from Tufts University and a Bachelors degree in Studio Art from Wesleyan University. She currently works for the New England Foundation for the Arts.