

# The chosen history

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### Abstract

*The current discourse of the city as image or spectacle is what the municipal authorities, developers and politicians in Berlin are trying to encourage in order to increase the incomes from tourism, office or commercial rents. This kind of urban politics are spaces for cultural consumption, megastores, festivals and spectacles of all kinds, all intended to attract new tourism, urban travelers or metropolitan explorers.*

*The issue in this city is how best to decorate the city to attract better international attention: not the city as an opportunity to be filled with life by its inhabitants and visitants but the city as image in the service of power and profit.*

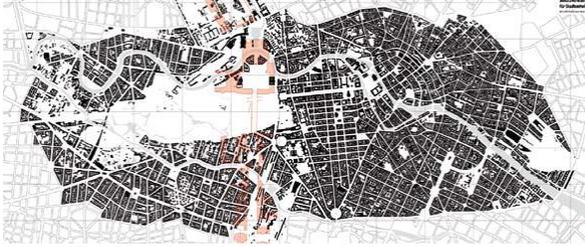
Keywords: Berlin, tourism, history, architecture, reconstruction.

Since Berlin was elected new capital in 1991 for the reunited Germany, it has been exploring the future through an investigation of its history while asserting its metropolitan newness. Its future has been designed through the lost history, which meant the city as a place to live and enjoy, assuming changing programs with which the planning and architecture in the twentieth century in Berlin had to deal.

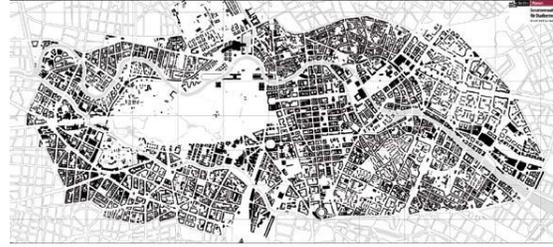
In that century, many events took place in this city as a tale that allows us to understand its reconstruction. Berlin is the best example of a city that in its last eighty years has been marked by political, intellectual and artistic discontinuity. In a dizzying sequence, programs and problems, power and influence, dreams and reality, events and images have been changing. Nowhere is this process more visible.

The city has been built, erased and rebuilt throughout this violent century. As Berlin has left behind its heroic and propagandistic role as flashpoint of the cold war and makes forceful efforts to imagine itself as the new capital of a reunited nation, the city has become something like a place where we can focus issues of contemporary urbanism and architecture, historical memory and forgetting.

There is possibly no other big-city that supports the events of the twentieth-century history as hardly and consciously as Berlin. It is visible in the built space and also on hidden memories broken by tragic events. The projections for Berlin are now in line with the obsessions for the historical memorial, in the middle of intense debates about how to arrange its pasts when the cold war has disappeared. The city is obsessed with architectural and urban issues, leading with the development for the prospect-century-city. The aim consists to create the capital of the twenty-first century, but this vision finds itself haunted with the past.



|fig. 1| Berlin 1940. Landesarchiv Berlin



|fig. 2| Berlin 2011. Landesarchiv Berlin.

“Although the architecture of the new Berlin defies easy categorization and uniform theoretical frameworks, one might associate the city’s citational projects with the historicist eclecticism that Frederic Jameson diagnosed as a central component of the postmodernist “cultural logic of late capitalism”. (Rolf J. Goebel, 2003).

This tension has produced a debate in which the defenders of a “European tradition” and the advocates of a contemporary high-tech international architecture are firmly established.

Looking at the interests and tensions that configure the new city, one could say that the solutions proposed are being the worst beginning for the century that one could imagine for Berlin. Many of the construction plans have been projected against the city rather than for it.

Urban projects that are subject to be visited by the great mass of public in the city of Berlin seem to respond in a clear manner to the call of profits in the capitalist system, sometimes with some melancholy towards a past that seems to be reconstructed in a forced way.

Although tourism is an activity of considerable antiquity, it has experienced enormous changes in its final stage. Globalization and low cost products, travels or accommodation have allowed the emergence in recent years of large-scale tourism able to generate huge amounts of money.

Berlin seems to have chosen the path of the tourist attraction by sparks and grandeur, where a network of shops and advertisements makes consumerism reach the foreground stripping citizens of any sense of ownership of a public space that is already corrupted.

Too far away are the days where the urban plans of reference, which became important in the world of architecture and urban planning, were those the purpose of which (achieved to a greater or lesser extent) was the construction of the city and the welfare of its inhabitants. However, the appearance and propaganda that we see today as the purpose of some buildings, were also the most important reasons for architecture during some other periods in the past.

It is amazing to see how small and large events in a city with a history as turbulent as that of Berlin have relentlessly determined the idea and image of architecture and urbanism.

It becomes mandatory to make a revision of the crucial events in the twentieth century that have shaped the look and feel of the city of Berlin as we know it today.

## 1. Review of events during the twentieth century in Berlin

### 1. *Growth euphoria and the great city spaces*

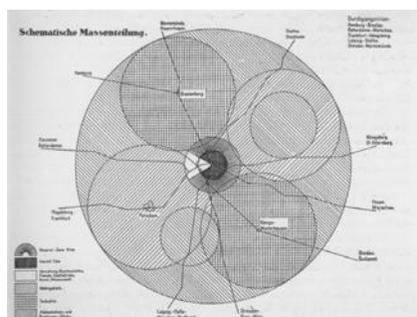


[fig. 3] Bruno Schmitz proposal for the area and Königsplatz Lehrter station presented in the Grand Berlin Competition 1910. Landesarchiv Berlin

The Städtebauausstellung Allgemeine (General Exhibition of Urbanism) in 1910, was aimed at drawing up proposals for a new master plan for construction of Greater Berlin. The program included, above all, matters of economy and circulation, but also popular health and beauty. The urban model of all the proposals was the European city of the late nineteenth century, a historicist image of architecture trying to be rooted in the imperial era. Berlin led the urbanism trend of the time and was a major tourist destination. One goal of this exhibition was to show its greatness and prosperity and to be a focus of attraction throughout Europe.

The First World War (1914-1918) destroyed those illusions of wealth and growth and the "utopia of a happy world". It was difficult to start again, and the first artistic and intellectual effort after the panic of the war was determined by a desire for hope, resulting in illusionist models.

### 2. *From the illusion of the big city to the illusionist city.*



[fig. 4] Martin Mächler Grand Berlin, 1919

After the war, as a first reaction to the political ignorance and mechanics of destruction, two relatively esoteric and extremely political exhibition projects were held at the Neumann's "Graphische Kabinett" (graphic office). The exhibitions were "... für Architekten unbekannt" in 1919 (... for unknown architects) and "Neues Bauen" in 1920 (new construction). They were not international exhibitions and for many artists this was the only open route to communicate after the hardships of war.

### 3. From the futuristic to the functional city.



[fig.5] Aerial view of the factory and the Siedlung Siemensstadt, 1930. Landesarchiv Berlin

The path from the futuristic city to the functional one was brief. Homelessness and the dynamics of trade unions in the Weimar Republic were leading the action. Under the leadership of Martin Wagner and his strong political commitment came the famous large industrial estates in Berlin (Siedlungen). Although these settlements are not subject to tourism, and were not designed for this purpose, they are of particular relevance since they represented one of the most enriching social housing projects and marked a trend for the twentieth century.

### 4. The second architecture exhibition in Berlin in 1931



[fig. 6] Image of the avenue Unter den Linden during the Nazi period. Landesarchiv Berlin

The Deutsche Bauausstellung (German Exhibition of Architecture), 1931, can only be described as a posthumous celebration. "Today's Housing" -staged by Mies van der Rohe, with contributions from Gropius, Otto Haesler and Hugo Häring- is the most memorable of the seven exhibitions. A year before the takeover of the Nazis, a committed group of members of the Neues Bauen invented the slogan "evolutionary house" in reaction to the Great Depression. Under the idea of "Sun, water and electricity for everyone", this was the latest architecture exhibition before other disposition was imposed for "Building the Third Reich".

## 5. *Renewed hope and new beginnings.*



[fig.7] *Aerial view of the Friedrichstadt after the war, 1945.*

In 1945 Berlin was rubble and ashes. But in this moment of grief and pain, the destiny of the city between two worlds was shaping.

They did not wait for the first elections (1946) to test programs and objectives. The plans already started the summer of 1945. There were two major plans: the *Collective Plan* and the *Zehlendorf Plan*, exposed to the public in 1946 and subject of fierce controversy.

Both plans, though very different, had been planned for a future away from reality, without considering the pre-existence, the context or the immediate need for a population that sought its house under the ruins. These plans were desperate to return to the prosperity of the past, in which Berlin was a major focus of attraction of foreign currency and tourism.

In December 1948 the city goes through its institutional division, and shortly after that the *Collective Plan* is approved: endorsed by the Eastern judiciary, modified as an *Organic Plan* and approved in the summer of 1949.

A year later, Ulbrich -magistrate of East Berlin-, criticizing the proposed planning so far, proposed instead an autonomous policy of the GDR. Not a long time after that, in February 1952, the first stone of the *Stalinallee* (now *Karl-Marx-Allee*) was laid. During the following years, the ideological confrontation in matters of architecture and urbanism grew until the lifting of the Berlin Wall.

## 6. *The progressive tradition of socialist realism*

As a basis for the new policy of reconstruction in the eastern state, the cabinet approved in July 1959 the 16 Principles of Town Planning, opposing the Athens Charter defended in West Berlin. The idea that "the content had to be socialist" and "the formula had to be national" or the requirement that the centers of the cities had to provide "the most important buildings and monuments" were not reconcilable with avant-garde ideas linked to the heritage of the Bauhaus and CIAM (International Congress for Modern Architecture).

## 7. *Interbau versus Stalinallee*



[fig 8 & 9] *Aerial views of Hansaviertel and Stalinallee. Landesarchiv Berlin.*

In the mid-fifties, the two completely opposed emblematic examples of urban ideologies appeared on both the east and west of the divided city:

- Stalin Avenue (Stalinallee). It was a fundamental part of the political action of propaganda, which was held with the National Aufbauprogramm (National Reconstruction Program) and the new theory of socialist realism in architecture and socialism.
- The Hansa district in West Berlin: undoubtedly the main part of the inner urban reconstruction within modern principles, symbol of a democratic and free construction and opposite to the sumptuous Stalinallee.

The planning of Stalin Avenue expressed a clear idea of the settings and the image of the city. By means of differential geometry -alternating buildings on the edge of the streets, plazas and tower-shaped coronation of street corners -, they aimed to express both the national and "berliner" tradition and the "population stability of the new state" and the merits of the working class. In the western part of the city the objective was to recover what was denied in the east. The Bauhaus functionalism and the rediscovered Charter of Athens became the manifestos of modern urbanism and architecture. The rationalism of the twenties was to become the benchmark for new construction after the war. It was not a theoretical imperative, but a moral requirement. The Hansa quarter was open to the public in 1957 as Interbau (international exhibition). It represented a heterogeneous sample of buildings, housing facilities, construction and materials. The two projects, the Avenue of Stalin and the Hansa district are examples of the controversial state of discussions in the early and mid-fifties in Berlin.

## 8. *From the ideological to the technocratic model*

Once the Stalin Avenue and the General Plan of 1955 were finished, the debate on the fundamentals and principles of urbanism began again in East Berlin. Thus the new building policy of the GDR began. In 1969, Frank Werner characterized it "by the preference for the typified, industrial, complex, and based-on-economy planning and design." The floor plans were typified and the rationalization of the construction methods led -through the "construction of large semi-industrialized blocks" (Plattenbau)- to the "construction of large panels" made of high-degree-industrialized reinforced concrete: a method that dominated housing construction until the last days of the GDR.

### 9. *"Hauptstadt Berlin" International Contest.*

After the public success of the Interbau, the western sector resumed the attempt to recall the entire city. As part of an international competition in 1959, the goal was to design a plan of the capital's unity beyond the borders of the divided city.

Despite the disparity of the 150 participating teams, almost all of them had a provocative ignorance of historic structures and proposed a dispersed city, which would mean destruction of the historical trace.

With the construction of the Wall on August 13, 1961 the doors were closed to both the illusion of the capital and the urban landscape. Thus, the last attempt to design a global and unitarian urban planning for the city was 25 years before the IBA (International Exhibition of Architecture) in 1984.

## **2. Berlin 2000: The "critical reconstruction" of Berlin. Capital Recovery.**

Rem Koolhaas declared in *Delirious New York*, Manhattan as a retroactive manifesto for the metropolis of the twentieth century, giving clues to contemporary phenomena. Koolhaas marked the first half of the twentieth century as the period in which the system chose Manhattan as a laboratory to study the limits of the city. The keys of the contemporary metropolis for the architect were, though, divided into two: one in New York, USA, another in Berlin, Europe. Berlin as a palimpsest was a superposition of several times that revealed realities and situations.

"Berlin as palimpsest, a disparate city-text that is being rewritten while earlier text are preserved, traces restored, erasures documented- all of this producing a complex web of historical markers that point to the continuing heterogeneous life of a vital city ambivalent about both its built past and its urban future."

The reconstruction of Berlin in this century shows us the practical consequences of architectural theories and economic constraints to which a large city is subjected. In Berlin we can find the architecture of Peter Behrens, the expressionism of Mendelsohn and Hans Scharoun, the Internationale Bauausstellung, the plans of *Welt Berlin Stadt*, the modernity of Hansaviertel, or the postmodernity of Tegel... It looks like a museum of world architecture: works by James Stirling, Aldo Rossi, Daniel Liebeskind, Zaha Hadid, Giorgio Grassi, Rob Krier, Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, John Hejduk, Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, Alvaro Siza, Rafael Moneo, Renzo Piano ... But more than an architecture exhibition, Berlin is like an urban laboratory, steeped in experimentation and constant review.

Since Berlin was chosen as the capital of reunified Germany in 1991, the goal is focused on turning what had been before the destruction of the twentieth century, with the intention of recovering the city as a big tourist attraction. Eclectic postmodern historical projects appear, major restoration of nineteenth-century monuments and museums are carried out and finally two major financial centers of attraction are built: Potsdamer Platz and the future Alexanderplatz.

## **3. Berlin: the Chosen History to the contemporary tourism.**

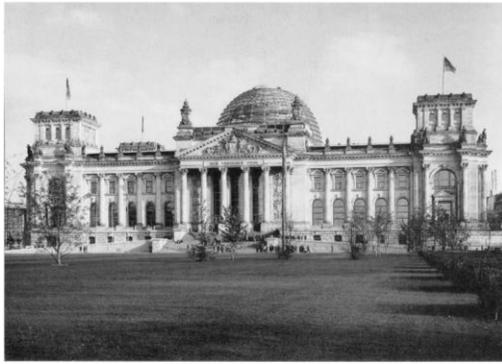
After the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the two parts of the city, old guilt and memory retrieval were the keys to restore the sense of national identity and the large capital that Berlin once had been. Although the most publicized urban projects have been Potsdamerplatz and Alexanderplatz, they are also representing the total surrender to the consumer society. Other examples, however, with public investment, are also centers of cultural and tourist attraction but face memory in other ways.

## *1. Memories of the Holocaust.*

Jewish History Museum designed by Daniel Libeskind and the controversial plans for the Jewish Holocaust Memorial by Peter Eisenman next to the Brandenburg Gate are the most important symbols that connect the desire to make the city a magnet for visitors and the memory of the tragedy of the past of National Socialism. However, the new invented Berlin architecture, forget about other passages of the history mentioned above.

The old Jewish quarter, with the former Haeckeschermarkt workshops, the Jewish cemetery and synagogue Sophienstrasse Oranienburger: the remains left were restored, leaving some visible marks of the ravages of war (the synagogue, for example, is empty). It is a restoration that allows one of the famous "tourist route" in which the work was mainly on sanitation.

## *2. Institutions and symbols of the new democratic Germany.*



[fig 10 & 11] The Reichstag in 2002 and the Stadtschloss in 1913. Landesarchiv Berlin/ Waldemar Titzenthaler.

Another example of restoration would be the most eclectic combination of the Reichstag, the square of the Brandenburg Gate with a new Hotel Adlon built and opened in 1997 in imitation of the old hotel from the Gründerzeit, and above all, we cannot forget what will be the most eclectic reconstruction of all: the old palace of the Hohenzollern.

The Reichstag, with a hypermodern dome designed by Sir Norman Foster, is a symbolic complex that binds the reconstruction of historical memory and the spectacle of the great new city. The old nineteenth century dome symbolized the power of democracy against the ancient power of the Hohenzollern (represented by the same dome in the palace). But even if it is a "historical citation" of its past, it also shows a discontinuity in its history. Now, perhaps, it intends to be transparent like the new government of the new Germany.

But the "historical citations" take more controversy in the reconstruction of the Stadtschloss, old palace of the Hohenzollern. A palace was almost fully destroyed by the bombs of World War II, demolished in 1950 by Walter Ulbricht to leave a large open area for military parades. In 1976, the government of the GDR built the Palast der Republik which housed the Volkskammer (parliament), a theater, restaurants, ... The building was abandoned, and numerous structural damage were the pretext in the last ten years to demolish it to rebuild "as close as possible" the old palace. Such decisions were not entirely new to Berlin: the former DDR city hall incorporated on its façade the Stadtschloss portal where Karl Liebknecht proclaimed the Socialist Republic in 1918; the Kronprinzessinpalais on Unter den Linden has in its restaurant the portal of the Schinkel Bauakademie, destroyed by the war; and most famously, the crumbling Kurfürstendamm Gedächtniskirche incorporates a sanctuary from 1963.

### 3. *The new financial centers, centers of attraction for divisas.*



[fig 12] The Potsdamer Platz in 2000: the Sony Center with the Grand Hotel Esplanade's Frühstückssaal and Kaisersaal in the foreground. Landesarchiv Berlin / Stefane Jacob.

If the Reichstag, the Stadtschloss, the Adlon, .. accounted for the reconstruction of the monumental Berlin, other examples show the commercial and populist “boom”, but also laden with memories. The panoramic view from the Reichstag includes the spectacular Potsdamer Platz, which combines new and old in their own (very particular) way.

The site shows the power of the new global capitalism (the Sony Center, Daimler Chrysler Headquarters), large areas of consumerism (the Arcade) and the entertainment industry (Cinemaxx, the theater in Berlin Marlene-Dietrich-Platz ) in the same place, while reconstructing fragments of the buildings that occupied the square in the Greater Berlin (halls of the Hotel Esplanade).

### 4. *Berlin's museums and restoration of monuments*

The negotiation with history, in some cases, has led Berlin to an eclectic reconstruction. However, in the Museum Insel, which was quite deteriorated after World War II, but never demolished, conventional principles of restoration and preservation have been followed, repairing damage to preserve the essential, although details have been lost. This model is in contrast to the previous one, not letting political interests or desires of false appearances interfere.

We have seen then, that Berlin has become a major tourist attraction like a theme park of "history being represented in the twentieth century." Berlin has been built with the postmodernists abuse of “historical citations”, with memories elected by the interests of the political class, urban “booms” financed by big business... and among these, conventional restoration, peaceful and sincere with historical memory.

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