
Berlin: Rebuilding Memories in the Contemporary City

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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.

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Introducción

This research takes as a starting point the intervention of the architect Hardt Waltherr Hämer at the International Building Exhibition (Alt-IBA, Internationale Bauausstellung), which was convened to West Berlin in the 80s and was part of the process of participatory urban regeneration in Berlin Kreuzberg.

Since Berlin was elected new capital in 1991 for the reunited Germany, the discourse of the city as image or spectacle is what the municipal authorities, developers and politicians in Berlin were 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 was how best to decorate it to attract better international attention: not the city as an opportunity to be filled with life by its inhabitants and visitors but the city as image in the service of power and profit.

The attitude toward the city was remarkably different in that reconstruction of the IBA Berlin. In the late seventies international architecture competitions were held in the framework of the IBA Exhibition in order to obtain proposals to rebuild portions of the city. This purpose was made as a critical discussion of modernism both in the field of urban planning and in the housing typology.

However, not everything was an anti-modern discussion, some sought a dialogue on the streets, involving citizens in decision-making for the revitalization of Berlin's downtown, degraded during the twentieth century. I refer to the working group of the Alt IBA which, unlike the Neues IBA (the official one), had made its goal to rehabilitate what they possibly could with the help and involvement of the local neighbors. Hämer, the famous "participatory architect", was the chef of this part.



[Fig 1.] View of Berlin from the Reichstag. 2008 The Authors

Berlin. Capital of the XXIst Century

Berlin, as new capital in 1991, 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.

"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).

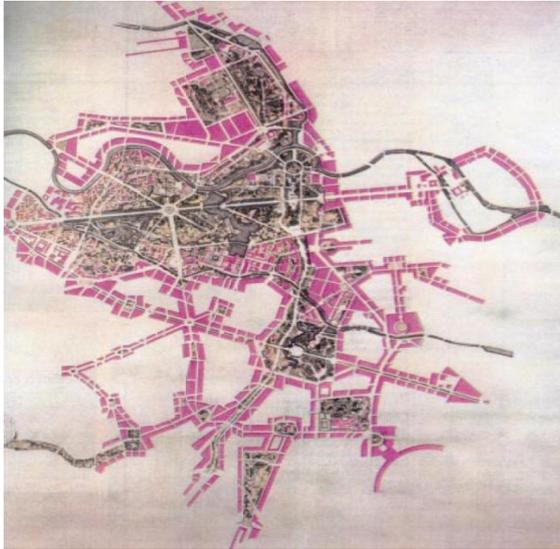
This tension has produced a debate in which the defenders of a "European tradition" and the advocates of a contemporary high-tech international architecture are firmly established.

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.

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.

IBA Berlin: Agreements and Contradictions



[Fig 2] Colin Rowe's Collage City

The IBA was born with the leitmotiv *Die Innenstadt als Wohnort* -The center of the city as a place to live-: a vigorous initiative of the municipal authorities of West Berlin in 1978 to promote and fund official architectural competitions. The objective was to organize urbanistically the future of public space abandoned as no-man's-land places, which had become central urban territories along the Berlin Wall, leading to neighborhoods gradually degraded by the accumulation of successive waves of foreign migrant workers, *Gastarbeiter*.

The exhibition went on to achieve world-wide recognition by the international press, and had a considerable impact on the city because of the large investment made: 3 billion DM (1,500 million euros) in residential blocks -3,000 new and 5,500 renovated- and equipment -nurseries, schools, youth centers, libraries...- at the city center.

In the experience of the IBA crystallized the debate on architecture and cities explained in the 70s in 1978. These competitions can be considered the first materialization of the ideas of Colin Rowe's Collage City as an opposition to the idea of the city that had degenerated from the modern movement and "the Charter of Athens" to the International Style. Among the theoretical premises on which this critical reconstruction was based, it is worth pointing out the next ones:

1. To propose a constructive "disillusionment", opposed to previous exhibitions. It was not the first time that Berlin was facing a large project like this. The proposal of the IBA was accompanied by the idea that the urban planning of the city of Berlin had been marked during the industrialization through International Exhibitions: The Great Urban Exhibition of 1910, the one in 1931, "Housing of today", and the *Interbau* in 1957, "Berlin, the city of the future". Among these, the last was the one with greater resemblance to the IBA, being an International Exhibition of buildings in the city by world-renowned architects of the time, such as Gropius, Aalto or Niemeyer. The *Interbau* was proposed in parallel and simultaneously with the proposal to remodel the center of East Berlin; the

Stalinallee monumentalization was a project subordinated to the purpose of showing the power of the city. They ignored the existing urban grid, implanting models discussed for decades in the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM). Berlin offered a rare *tabula rasa*: a city divided into four territorial authorities and destroyed after the Second World War.

The IBA began with the purpose of recovering principal population and activity. East Berlin was the *Hauptstadt der DDR* (the self-proclaimed "Capital of the GDR"), but the West had lost its function, and with it, its urban articulation. Berlin was isolated and its strategic geopolitical location in the heart of Central Europe turned it into the symbol par excellence of the Cold War above all.

The IBA sought to recover the social and urban activity in West Berlin exposing performance discussion through the media in order to attract new residents: *Where is the architecture that shapes Berlin? What is the image of the city?* The historical urban traces had to be recovered and a path in which past, present and future could interact and interpenetrate was to be generated.

2. To accept the fragmented condition of the architectural culture of the time and to outsource this condition in the executed projects, as an attempt at reconciliation of opposites. It's the end of the idea of total design and totalizing technocratic discourse. According to Kleihues, "the conception of pluralism that characterized the historical image of European cities can be performed even when the modern and conflicting ideas are respected, not as a classical superficial need of harmony, but open to experimentation and contradiction". As Colin Rowe said, the drift towards an architecture increasingly understood as pure technology disconnected from social and political life, more and more away from the explicit democratic wish of the rationalist vanguards in the 20s, sacrificed the social and humanistic spirit of the cities. The ideas of utopia and progress were treated wrongly, making the architecture and the architect the alleged saviors of all social illnesses, which often went together with a strikingly anachronistic vision where past and historical roots were eclipsed, giving the architecture a birth free of any embarrassing past: an illusory eternal youth which resulted in lack of commitment to what has already been built.

3. To finish with the figure of the architect as a "Messiah" and promote the active participation of citizens through collective decisions. It meant an explicit attack, then, to the ideology and urban city model postulated by the Charter of Athens (1933), in which the architect would play the decisive leadership role and the articulation of all functions would be developed sectorized.

4. To reevaluate the public space. The IBA promotes the rescue of the Berlin's historic urban configuration characterized by the "corridor-streets" and closed or half-closed blocks with inner courtyards. An objective was also to give priority to the mix of functions (leisure / work / dwelling) in one sector of the city. Retrieve the pedestrian scale by creating a clear distinction between the private and the public sphere recovering the façade as delimiting element and the street as a structuring agent.

5. To propose a conciliatory path between tradition and innovation. The IBA established basic guidelines according to traditional patterns of alignment and height, but with freedom of design, volume and style.

Conclusions

The fall of the wall meant a radical change in the attitude of planners dealing with the city of Berlin. After reunification, due to the urging desire to restore the splendor of the great capital that Berlin was once, reconstruction seemed to have been done responding more to those interests than to a desire to improve objective quality of the citizens' life.

However, this rush was not visible when projects within the IBA were discussed. The tragic existence of the wall, with its terrible consequences, in a certain way, set some challenges to architects whose actions were not only more humble but also more socially beneficial.

One of the consequences of current urban development is the known phenomenon of "gentrification", which consists of a displacement of the residents of a neighborhood by the arrival of a higher and more affluent social class.

The result is, then, a forced change of use and population, where the interventions do not respond to the needs of its residents or to the revaluation of something existing, but is merely a process of speculation in which social inequality is generated with the resulting conflicts between new and old residents. When, in the process of gentrification, the phase of the neighborhood's degradation comes to an end and begins the revaluation of land, the neighbors do not usually find the government's support they deserve, finding themselves first forgotten and then repudiated.

It is important to acknowledge that the process we described does not merely include high-cultural places such as Potsdammer Platz or Alexander Platz. These examples show that the new urban models under capitalist enterprise and consumerist materialism can open up physical and cultural spaces that choose remembering some forgotten or destroyed memories of the past and bury the rest.

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