



BERLIN: A PROFILE

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Stepping out from underneath the glass arches of Berlin's brand new main railway station, the Hauptbahnhof, one is greeted by a plethora of grandiose architectural gestures set against the backdrop of a vast expanse of undeveloped ground. One's gaze may come to rest on the Federal Chancellery, designed by Axel Schultes, or on the "Band des Bundes", the "Federal Belt" of newly constructed government buildings; one may take in Norman Foster's Reichstag cupola or the completely redeveloped Potsdamer Platz and recall that, a mere fifteen years ago, none of these structures existed. What is even more striking from this vantage point is that the city, as people's living-space, does not seem to intersect with the Berlin that is the new representative centre of Germany. City-dwellers and citizens evidently inhabit two decidedly distinct spheres. Unlike many other European cities, Berlin has no clearly defined city-centre complete with market-square, city hall and cathedral. Such central space simply does not exist here. More than ever, Berlin is a conglomeration of parallel worlds, a hotchpotch of stages on which long-established residents, newcomers and tourists make their respective entrances.

The Berlin Wall saved the Western part of the city from the fate that, after the War, had typically befallen so many other West German cities with their emptying town-centres and fraying edges, their populations slowly spilling over into the surrounding countryside. Yet there was a price to pay for this in Berlin, namely the destruction of a coherent urban structure. The bombings of World War II and the subsequent partition had carved up Berlin's infrastructure, its canalisation, its network of roads and its railway system. Vast areas of derelict land soon became a hallmark of this fragmented city. When the Berlin Wall fell and Berlin became, albeit by a narrow parliamentary majority, the capital of the newly unified German, expectations ran high and grand visions abounded. Surely, the city would soon be home to six million people, and all manner of fanciful plans were drawn up for this new metropolis: Berlin was to become the powerhouse of the new Republic, the focal point for an entire "Generation Berlin", the "hub" that

would connect East and West, a veritable "laboratory of unification". Such promises were directly rooted in the rhetoric and practises of the Cold War, when, thanks to huge subsidies provided by the two respective German states, West Berlin had been established as a "Window on Freedom", while East Berlin stood proud as the "capital of the first Workers' and Peasants' State on German soil". On either side of the Wall, Berliners themselves tended to view such labels – which bore precious little relation to the realities of their everyday lives – with a healthy amount of irony. While others were certainly welcome to entertain illusions of grandeur, Berliners' first loyalties lay with their neighbourhoods and their lovingly tended urban allotments.

Since the early 1990s, Berlin has, above all, been a huge building site, and architecture often had to grapple with paradoxical expectations: on the one hand, the "Planwerk Innenstadt", a decidedly anti-modern reurbanisation and city-centre revitalisation directive, decreed that the "historical city" should be recovered; on the other hand, politicians and residents alike expected the architectural fraternity to create a metropolis of the future. As a result, a lot of sound yet middling designs, but few masterpieces, were realised. Bold and innovative architectural statements are indeed very few and far between in this city. Today's general sense of disappointment with this state of affairs has less to do with the buildings themselves than with the hopes and expectations of the 1990's. People had once more been prepared to put their faith in the redemptive power of good architecture, only to discover yet again that redemption is the one thing architecture cannot offer. Most importantly, however, the new government buildings or the redeveloped Potsdamer Platz failed to project an image that Berliners could recognise. The city remained as fragmented as ever. In the midst of this unparalleled building activity, and while ever more grand expectations were projected onto Berlin, the city's economy collapsed: the eastern part of the city as well as its Brandenburg hinterland were labouring under the consequences of deindustrialisation, while the Western part of the city grappled with the effects of the

end of subsidisation. Since 1994, population figures have been steadily declining, and today, an entire suburban belt is economically dependent on Berlin. Meanwhile, in the city itself, more than 100,000 apartments stand empty. For years, both commercial and residential properties have been in plentiful supply and remarkably cheap to get hold of. Compared to Paris, Warsaw or London, this seems an anomaly.

Maladministration and wastefulness have left the city¹ crippled with debt and effectively bankrupt since 2002. The state of Berlin has withdrawn from all major building projects, which are now exclusively in Federal hands. The attempts at regenerating the city's urban infrastructure have largely been successful and, for the most part, the effects of war and partition have been overcome, but there is a painful lack of resources when it comes to maintaining the city's libraries, schools, theatres and universities. Berlin is a poor, economically weak city that is terrifically cheap to live in. Contrary to initial expectations, no new urban elite has emerged post unification. A bourgeoisie, in whatever shape or form, that would set the tone, function as a social barometer, speak out on behalf of the wider public and take the lead on issues of common concern, simply does not exist in Berlin. Berlin is a city of ordinary people, students, newcomers fleeing the provincial backwaters of their childhoods, and a fast-living and mercurial bohemian crowd made up of artists, intellectuals, journalists, free-lancers and plain drifters. This latter set shapes the mood and lifestyle that dominates Berlin's inner-city districts. Most of these people lead rather precarious and uncertain lives, but they have certainly made Berlin the only German city in which a carefully chosen witticism, a surprising gesture or an ingenious performance count for more than status and income. Indeed, money plays an astonishingly minor role in the social life of the city. And Berliners like to take things slowly – a fact that surprises even Swiss visitors to the city.

This bohemian scene has found a perfect form of expression in the “intermediate utilisation” of disused buildings. There are many such empty structures all over Berlin, and squatters are swift to move in and put them to creative use – dissolving traditional boundaries between art and entertainment, aesthetic ambition and nightlife fun. The first such project was the “Tacheles” on Oranienburger Straße, and

eventually even the “Palace of the Republic”, the former cultural centre, come seat of the East German parliament, now in the process of being demolished, was turned into a temporary arts venue. Three old armchairs and a hastily cobbled together installation usually suffice to transform the fleeting moment into a memorable one. This culture of the transitory, a legacy of our love-affair with everything crumbling, seems uniquely suited to the character of the city, and Berlin owes much of its attractiveness for tourists to precisely this idiosyncrasy. It has put Berlin firmly on the map in the European imagination and proves that, here at least, everything is possible and anything goes, no matter how limited your resources. A spirit of freedom is indeed key to people's life in this city.

Berlin's economic plight, its poverty, its lack of an effective elite, its fragmentation and abundance of disused spaces, the weakness of its administration and the continuing East-West divide – all these are the very conditions of Berlin's intellectual as well as real-life character. Three factors will determine the city's fate over the coming years: immigration from Eastern Europe, a brain drain among the young, and the continuing lack of a city centre in the good old European sense of the word. For most of its history, Berlin has been a rather dismal one-horse town. It became the capital of Germany because it had been the capital of Prussia. Since the dissolution of Prussia, it has become apparent that the city is barely able to survive by its own efforts, surrounded as it is by an impoverished region that is gradually being abandoned by its inhabitants. The political task of countering this state of affairs with strong and effective institutions is currently tackled only hesitantly and without much energy or conviction.

What Berlin teaches architects and urban planners is, above all, humility. The building and planning frenzy of the 1990's showed that architecture cannot be expected to counteract the provisional and temporary nature of this city, nor relieve its social frailty. What it can do, however, is to continue to create stages and project images. Good metropolitan architecture has much in common with good stage design – a fact more apparent in Berlin than anywhere else in the world.

¹ Like, for example, Bavaria or Hesse, Berlin is a federal state in its own right.

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