

# BUILDING BERLIN

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# BERLIN: AN UNFINISHED AND OPEN-ENDED DICTIONARY

BY MARKUS MIESSEN & MAGNUS NILSSON



In his novel *Manhattan Transfer* John Dos Passos described New York as a “city of scrambled alphabets” in response to the ethnic multitude of that city. Berlin can also be described as such, not in terms of its biological make-up, but in terms of its dry inert matter: through its historical being, emergence, destruction, separation and finally redefinition, Berlin’s fabric is a veritable encyclopedia of urban knowledge – an unfinished and open-ended dictionary.



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### **Affordable:**

Berlin is still a relatively inexpensive place to live, which is one of the foremost attractions for anyone with an uncertain income. Unlike, for example, London where one needs a substantial regular income to get by, Berlin allows for creative and economical chances. Risk, in all its manifestations, becomes the *modus operandi*.

### **Amnesia:**

The unsettling feeling of walking through a square that once was important and bustling with life, now being forgotten and desolate. The physical structure of the city does not always correspond with the living collective urban memory.

### **Archive:**

Berlin can be thought of as an archive of various urban design methodologies and ideologies. Unlike an archive, its various contents are, however, not organised in a particular coherent and legible manner. The various contents are more or less randomly and often without intention juxtaposed, layered and disjunctive. If there is a meaning in this archival mess, then it can only be found locally through the adjacencies. As such, Berlin does not possess a 'grand narrative' – it is a post-modern condition personified. (See *Retrieval*)

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### **Berghain:**

The best club in the world.

### **Breeding:**

The large number of children in Berlin's borough of Prenzlauer Berg is a reality, but its exception a myth. The German area with the highest concentration of newborns is Cloppenburg, Lower Saxony. The Prenzlauer Berg district is, however, a curious phenomenon. After the

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reunification a majority of the existing population moved to other areas and young people mainly from the West-German provinces took over the oftentimes grand apartments. This process was quick and it was as if the entire district was gentrified overnight. Consequently, the area came to be populated by an incredibly homogenous population: white academic middle-class with a slightly leftist political bearing. 10 years later the same population still resides in the area. The university degrees are completed and middle-class life has truly settled in its all-encompassing coziness. As everyone has a similar background, values and is of comparable age, the residents all of a sudden in a collective effort started to breed. Almost over night, the neighborhood was transformed again – this time with children, buggies and wellness centers for mothers. From instant life to sudden death: what will happen when the population unanimously begins to fade away? Who will then populate the instant ghost town of Prenzlauer Berg?

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## **Corbusier:**

Rumour has it that Swiss-French architect and one of the pioneers of what is now called Modern architecture Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris (who chose to be known as Le Corbusier) accepted nominally 1 US Dollar as payment for the Chandigarh project in India. Chandigarh, known internationally for its architecture and urban planning, is the first planned city of India and home to numerous architectural projects by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, Matthew Nowicki, and Albert Mayer. In order to make this project happen, Corbusier sacrificed against his will his Berlin project (Unité d'habitation, Flatowallee 16, Berlin-Westend), which was severely challenged by local authorities. Although unhappy with it, he went ahead to facilitate alternative income for Chandigarh.

## **Crisis:**

Berlin is in a constant state of crisis, lending the city and its various operations an ability to manage difficulties. Although the current financial crisis has affected the city and its operands, ways are found to negotiate the difficult situation. This resilience is brought about by the necessity for ad hoc solutions and mutual support. Unlike, for example, London, where cut-throat competition propels a certain development, the perpetually difficult situation in Berlin forces people to collaborate, which in turn then paradoxically generates a more stable platform for production.

### **Debt:**

In 2010/2011, the city of Berlin will add 5.5 billion Euro of debt to its already disastrous liabilities. In 2009, the city's overall debt has amounted to 62 billion Euro.

### **Difference:**

Whereas difference in New York is generated by radically juxtaposed objects within a neutral underlying grid, urban homogeneity in Berlin is diametrically opposed in that difference is generated by overlapping, layering and inter-weaving of vastly different urban fabrics, such as 19th Century perimeter blocks, pre- and post-war housing estates and various post-unification reconstruction strategies.

### **Economy:**

The city has no significant economy to speak of. There are no important industries and the financial sector is located elsewhere. Although there is the 'creative industries', they do not generate the required tax returns required to run a city the size of Berlin. The relatively insignificant economic situation of the city is of course also its attraction. As such, it offers a good location for production, but the drawback is that the market lies elsewhere.

### **Empty (1):**

Although the situation has changed a bit over the past ten years, there still are empty and thus affordable spaces available in interesting and central locations for start-ups to utilize.

### **Empty (2):**

Berlin can be said to paradoxically possess a certain emptiness. The streets are too wide and the buildings too grand. It is as if the clothes are too large for its body. After all, the city was built for a much larger population than the current. Unlike Detroit, for instance, where the emptiness has become the stigma and starvation of an eating disorder, Berlin is a city of loose fit where the coat is comfortably large.

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### **Financial incompetence:**

The Berlin Public Transit Corporation (BVG, Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe) recorded a financial loss of €247 million for 2008. The previous year, the corporation's deficit amounted to €62 million. The current deficit of nearly a quarter of a billion Euros is the result of the state-owned company having to make provisions to meet potential claims from US banks. These risks are due to so-called cross-border leasing (CBL) deals that now threaten to collapse as a result of the worldwide financial crisis.

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### **Gentrification:**

In Berlin it is mainly a question of image rather than economic circumstances that determines the gentrification, which in Berlin's case is better described as an urban migration process. In other words one does not want to be associated with certain types of people. While property prices are increasing, this process is not stimulated by internal demand. Instead, foreign investors – at least until the financial crisis started – mainly from Ireland, the United Kingdom and Scandinavia have bought up and continue to get hold of properties, thus resulting in increasing rents. In Berlin, gentrification is generated by remote control.

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### **Historical Repetition:**

As Ludwig Hilbersheimer wrote in 1967, the financial crisis and inflation of the 1920s produced an advantageous condition for Berlin: many European artists and writers moved to Germany, especially Berlin, turning the city into an international hub and cultural melting pot for critical exchange. This international exchange and cosmopolitan spirit generated an alternative development that hindered provincialism, even in a small-scale city such as Berlin. Today, we are witnessing the same phenomenon.

## **Humboldt-Forum:**

Yet another superb example of how the politics of consensus end up producing mediocre results. The Humboldt-Forum is envisaged as an international forum of art, culture and science to be built on the grounds of the former Berlin City Palace (Palast der Republik). This scientific Disneyland of world cultures is meant to be designed to inspire a fruitful dialogue amongst cultures through the implementation of an agora. We wonder: is the agora not elsewhere, does this really need a designed space and, if so, what does this look like?

## **Hypothesis:**

The German urban theorist Philipp Oswalt (since 2008 director of Stiftung Bauhaus, Dessau) described Berlin as an urban experiment without hypothesis. (*Berlin – Stadt ohne Form*, 2000)

## **Incomplete 1:**

Despite all current and past attempts to create a unified and coherent city, Berlin remains incomplete. It is as if incompleteness is inscribed in the genetic make-up of the urban fabric – a psychotic inability to reach completion. Both beautiful and pathetic, the incomplete can be found everywhere, even in prestigious and representational areas such as the government district around Spreebogen. More than a decade after its completion, streets end abruptly, sidewalks lead to nowhere and parks resemble desolate parking lots.

## **Incomplete 2:**

Up for development. Make your choices.

## **Jaywalking:**

In 2007, someone got fined 5 Euros by the local police for crossing the street when the traffic light was red.

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### **Klaus Wowereit:**

Klaus Wowereit was born in West Berlin (1953). He has been Berlin's mayor since 2001 and is a member of SPD (Social Democratic Party). When he came to power he felt like a fresh wind of change, but reality of post-unification has been more troublesome and difficult than imagined. Regrettably, Wowereit is more famous for punchy sloganeering than building a sustainable political legacy for the city and its inhabitants. He has, for example, coined the phrase "Berlin: Arm aber Sexy" (Berlin: poor, but sexy). What's next? (see *Tempelhof*)

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### **Landowsky:**

In 2007, former senior Berlin politician and one-time banker Klaus Landowsky received a sentence for his involvement in a multi-million Euro corruption scandal that brought down the city's government in 2001.

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### **Low-rise:**

Berlin is a horizontal city.

### **Margins:**

"The existence of these spaces of uncertainty is both a relief and a promise. While breathing our eternal desire for a humane homecoming on in-humane territory, it is as undefined as we are. In our attempt to structure the chaos that space initially is, the margins have become the last reminders that can possibly tell us who we are. They are inhabited by the other and inhabit the opposites, which our phony worlds are put together from. The margins are ugly and beautiful. They laugh and they cry. They are full of energy and still remain calm. They are without sound while they speak. They stabilize, and still, exist through instability. They catch our dreams, and still, they are sleeping themselves. They give birth and they kill at the same time. The margins are we." (Kenny Cupers and Markus Miessen, *Spaces of Uncertainty*, 2002)



### **Neue Mitte (The Third Way):**

is the working title of a notorious manifesto co-authored by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The characteristics of the manifesto include a strong belief in the market mechanism, explicit approval of inequality, an appeal to historical change as justification, and a determination to impose its values.

### **Non-precious:**

Generally Berlin is not a beautiful city. It sometimes is downright ugly, which lends it a malleable and flexible life-force enabling the city to take on a multitude of forms. The central problem with the reconstruction plans of the 1990s was that they threatened to curb the liveliness of the city's genealogy by a sea of well-meant homogeneity.

### **Open (1):**

Due to the financial and cultural liberty of the city, most spaces and scenes are fully accessible.

### **Open (2):**

Bars are open late.

### **Planwerk Innenstadt:**

After the unification Planwerk Innenstadt (1997) was the framework for reconstructing the inner city. Very much informed by Aldo Rossi's ideas described in his book *The Architecture of the City*, the reconstruction framework sought to uniformly reinstate the perimeter block. At the time it was heavily criticised by the 'progressives' as utterly reactionary and historically revisionist. Some 10-15 years later, it is now possible to – in a more nuanced manner – evaluate the reconstruction strategy. In some areas such as the Dorotheenstadt, where there was an existing

block structure in place, the plan worked successfully. At other locations, where it aimed to reconstruct entirely eradicated urban fabrics such as Potsdamer Platz and in particular the adjacent Leipziger Platz, it is painfully clear how artificial these places turned out to be. The lesson from this is two-fold. Firstly, one-size-fits-all solutions do not work everywhere. A city is a complex entity that does not suit 'blanket solutions'. Secondly, there is nothing inherently conservative with any urbanistic model. In other words, an urban framework in itself does not possess a meaning. Meaning is generated through the application of various urban models and their subsequent use. (See *Stimmann*)

### **Provincial:**

Although Berlin likes to see itself as a world city, it is nevertheless thoroughly provincial. Unlike Paris, London or New York it almost completely lacks international flair, solid industries, financial markets and healthy service industries, which is surprising as over the past 10-15 years there has been a tremendous influx of the international creative crowd. Berlin is exceptional in its ability to produce parallel universes rather than crossbreed.

### **Polwechsel (Polar Change):**

The duality of Berlin was inscribed in its genes even before the separation and subsequent unification. What is today known as the merging of two cities generated a singular entity: Berlin and Cöln. If today, the East still to a certain extent represents freedom away from the stuffiness of the West, one should not forget that in the past the West was the shiny new thing away from the oppressive Prussian authorities and institutions located in the East. The West was the new East.

### **Potemkin:**

Around Potsdamer Platz, and in particular Leipziger Platz, there are enormous scaffolds with billboards depicting full-scale images of future buildings. In Berlin, there is an incredible impatience to generate metropolitan density and life out of the nothingness where the Wall once stood. It is literally as if it must be generated instantly. In an essay written by Adolf Loos in 1898 called *The Potemkin City* he describes a similar phenomenon: "Who has not heard of the villages erected in the Ukraine by Potemkin, that crafty favorite of Catherine the Great? Villages of cardboard and canvas, the purpose of which was to transform a deserted wasteland into a blooming landscape for the eyes of Her Majesty." ("The Potemkin City" in *On Architecture*, Adolf Loos, 1898)

### **Potsdamer Platz:**

The beginning of the end.

### Quote 1:

"The cities of the 17th century Brandenburg Mark left a lot to be desired and were amongst the most inhospitable in Germany. Let's take Berlin, for example. Although hardly outperforming most cities of the Brandenburg Mark [region], yet not quite falling behind, one could effortlessly argue that the electoral Brandenburg residence – of all electoral residences of this era – was the most wimpy and could neither be compared to the standing of such cities as Munich and Dresden nor to the realities of Cologne or Mainz." ("Das damalige Berlin" in *Wie man in Berlin so lebt*, Theodor Fontane, 1862; translation by the authors)

### Quote 2:

"Berlin has gone through an extraordinary era of transformation, having developed into a picturesque and distinguished city. This rather enjoyable fact is due to many factors, but without question and probably most likely to be owed to the asphalt and horse tracks. Not only has the traffic increased at a rapid pace, but it has changed its reputation. The horse-drawn cabs still exist, yet they go almost unnoticed, as, regularly, 6 or 10 rather elegant horse-drawn trams are passing the spectator. This city is full of life, briskness, and fashionable splendour. I am more than thrilled to be offered the opportunity to spend such genteel time in this place that I neither believed in nor thought it would ever see the light of day." ("Vernobelte Zeit" in *Wie man in Berlin so lebt*, Theodor Fontane, 1881; translation by the authors)

### Record stores:

Our favourite record stores are Dense (Petersburger Strasse 81) and Hard Wax (Paul Lincke Ufer 44a).

### Retrieval:

If the urban condition of Berlin could be likened to an archive, then it is the abrupt edges between different urban models that make them legible – whereby the very disjunctive condition acts as a form of retrieval system of urban knowledge. (See *Archive*)

### Riots:

Berlin's May Day (May 1), which annually erupts in heavy violence and street clashes between thousands of apparently politically motivated protestors and the police in Kreuzberg, is deeply stuck in the leftist movement of the 1980s. Its political message has fully imploded.

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### **Slow:**

Berlin is not fast.

### **Stimmann:**

Hans Stimmann is an architect and urban planner who was born in Lübeck (1941). As Secretary of State (1996-99, Federal State of Berlin) for planning he was responsible for the controversial and heavily debated Planwerk Innenstadt, a contextual urbanism fuelled by critical reconstruction (see *Planwerk Innenstadt*).

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### **Techno:**

"It is very important to understand that Techno ... in Berlin is not about stars and the culture of celebrity. There are some DJs that are better known than others. But that is beyond the point. Clubs in Berlin are about the collective subjectivity of the crowd. People celebrate themselves." ("Safe Haven 2.0," Tobias Rapp [author of "Lost and Sound – Berlin, Techno and the Easyjetset"] in conversation with Markus Miessen, May 2009)

### **Tempelhof:**

Instead of agreeing to the substantial offer for the former central airport of Berlin Tempelhof to be taken over by the Babelsberg Film School – an offer which would have essentially turned the airport site into Europe's centre of film, education and post-production – Berlin's infamous mayor Klaus Wowereit decided instead to limit the entire building to a single week-long use: for the fashion week Bread & Butter to return to Berlin. In an already heated financial climate, this is yet another mindless move – both unsustainable and intellectually questionable (see *Klaus Wowereit*).

### **Test bench:**

Since the fall of the Wall, Berlin has become a test bench for anything that cannot (at first) exist in a space of economic pressure.

## Urban Condition:

"The Berlin Wall as architecture was for me the first spectacular revelation in architecture of how absence can be stronger than presence. For me, it is not necessarily connected to loss in a metaphysical sense, but more connected to an issue of efficiency, where I think that the great thing about Berlin is that it showed for me how (and this is my own campaign against architecture) entirely 'missing' urban presences or entirely erased architectural entities nevertheless generate what can be called an urban condition." (Rem Koolhaas in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Conversation Series: Volume 4*, 2006)

## Utilization:

Significant for Berlin is how an apparent difficult situation is utilized and transformed into something positive and productive. People creatively use scrap-material, occupy under-utilized spaces and tend to be collaborative.

## Void:

"Through the parallel actions of reconstruction and destruction, such a city becomes an archipelago of 'architectural' islands floating in a post-architectural landscape or erasure, where what used to be city is replaced by highly charged nothingness." ("Imagining the Nothingness," Rem Koolhaas, 1985); "Neither those in the West nor those in the East are free, only those trapped in the wall are truly free". ("Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture," Rem Koolhaas, 1972)

## Waves of destruction:

Every era of political change was followed by an immediate wave of destruction. Architecture is memory. Memory is dangerous.