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Building a national capital in an age of globalisation: the case of Berlin

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Summary

Berlin is being remade as capital of a unified German nation state, just at the time when the role of nation states is being called into question by the claims of globalisation, and the associated rise of global cities. The experience of Berlin suggests that it may be unhelpful to accept the world city agenda as a universal template. Instead it is necessary to explore the ways in which different agencies, companies and authorities negotiate the world around them, seeking to insert the city into pre-existing ideas and realities, as well as to influence and shape them, in what is best understood as a wider process of 'worlding'.

Global cities and globalisation

It is increasingly taken for granted that we are living in an era of global cities, world cities and megacities, in which cities are defined by their positions within global economic hierarchies or within transnational networks (see, e.g., Beaverstock et al 2000, Castells 2000, Friedmann 1986, Knox and Taylor 1995, Sassen 1991, 2000). At the same time, the role of nation states – at least as traditionally understood – is apparently being questioned by processes of globalisation or internationalisation (Held et al 1999, Low 1997). Some have even suggested that cities (or, more accurately, some cities) are increasingly in a position to operate outside the constraints of nation states, with their own political, as well as economic, autonomy and power (Ohmae 1991, Taylor 1996, 1997).

Although positioned within a similar understanding of globalisation and its consequences, there are at least three distinctive interpretations of the new urban spaces, which may be summarised as the ‘world city’, ‘global city, and ‘informational city’ theses (Storper 1997, pp. 221-223). The first defines world cities as the homes of the headquarter functions through which transnational companies run their businesses and exert their power (Friedmann 1986, 1995). The second suggests that what matters is the role of global cities as central locations for the leading industries of globalisation, and specifically finance and specialist business services, with their own forms of production, as ‘control centres’ of the world economy (Knox 1995, Sassen 2000). The third maintains that the rise of a network society based around information processing leads to the emergence of megacities within which are concentrated ‘the directional, productive, and managerial upper functions all over the planet’ (Castells 2000, p. 434).

But the role and meaning of world cities are not just explored in the pages of academic texts. Not only is the existence of globalisation and of world cities widely accepted as the common-sense of the age, but the implicit – and often explicit - agenda for urban development is how best to take advantage of this perceived new world. The texts of managerial gurus point to ways of doing so, providing advice to the urban managers in transforming their cities, learning the lessons of business and seeking to be entrepreneurs competing for growth and development (see, e.g., Kanter 1995 and Porter 1995, quoted in Thrift 1999, pp. 309-319). Maybe only a few cities

can make it to the top of the global hierarchy, but all seem to want to play the game (see, e.g., Kennedy 1991, Short 1999).

The new Berlin, however, fits uneasily into the paradigms. The social and economic conventions that defined the divided city of the Cold War have not yet been superseded by new ones (see Plates 1 and 2 for Maps of Berlin). Berlin is currently in the process of being remade as the capital of a reunified German nation-state (often referred to as the Berlin Republic), just at the moment when the foundations of such an enterprise seem to be facing fundamental challenge from the various rhetorics of globalisation. Berlin faces the task of somehow combining one dream – that of national capital-building - with another - the promise of becoming a global city (see Cochrane and Jonas 1999). At the same time as it has to position itself within a newly united Germany, it also has to position itself within a global region (Europe), which is itself in the process of redefinition. Krätke (2001) convincingly shows the gap between the rhetoric of those who claim Berlin is on the path to becoming a global city and the economic realities, but it remains to be clarified precisely possibilities are open to the city.

In what follows, therefore, we explore some of the ways in which Berlin is redefining itself and being redefined within the constraints of twenty-first century urban development discourse and global political economy. In particular we consider the relationship between Berlin's changing geopolitical position and local experiences of urban life, charting an uncertain and contested path towards a new normality.

[INSERT Maps]

Some local meanings of a bi-polar world

The local experience of Berlin in the second half of the twentieth century was largely defined by the harsh geopolitical realities of the Cold War. The global politics of a bi-polar world also created a divided city, within a divided Germany and a divided Europe (See Plate 3). As a result, the customary distinction often made between the local and the global fits particularly uneasily into the Berlin context – or, at least, the two have historically been inextricably intertwined even more fundamentally than elsewhere.

Even some of the most mundane realities of urban development were rooted in the politics of world power and the divisions generated by it. So, for example, in neither case was there significant suburbanisation - in the West because its borders were tightly drawn and in the East because there was no significant market in owner occupied housing and a policy in favour of high rise housing. Massive urban renewal schemes in West Berlin, including those in the districts of Kreuzberg, Wedding and Neukölln, renovated the inner-city housing stock and worked to limit suburbanisation, while new developments like Gropiusstadt in the West and Marzahn in the East remained within Berlin's boundaries. As a result, Berlin could be viewed as a rather extreme experiment in the restriction of urban sprawl (see, e.g., the mapping of land use and development in Ellger 1992, Figure 1).

[INSERT Photograph 1, with the following caption: Marx and Engels look out over the Alexanderplatz – the local symbols of a divided world]

The shock of German reunification and of the end of the Cold War, the end of the bi-polar world, was also a fundamental shock for the city. Exemplifying its role as a city able to speak the troubled history of the twentieth century, the jubilant media coverage of the Berlin Wall's opening also subsequently become a metaphor for that whole period of historical shift. Nationally, too, it became the dominant metaphor for German reunification – the reunification of Berlin and the reunification of Germany were almost synonymous (see, e.g., Diepgen 1995, Petschull 1990, Schäuble 1995). Yet it also meant the disruption of the old arrangements, the – admittedly rather peculiar - yet taken for granted conventions of economic and social life, which had defined Berlin for its residents, economic and political actors. Not only did unemployment rise to unprecedented levels through the 1990s (to 16% at the end of the decade), as subsidies were withdrawn and manufacturing industry collapsed, but the tight borders that defined the city disappeared, its cultural industries were threatened by rationalisation, and the role of its retail centres was transformed.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the move away from a bipolar world (defined through the conflict between major world blocs), towards an apparently more homogeneous globalisation, also freed Berlin from its position as a prisoner of geopolitics, and – indeed – from its existing global role. Hassemer (Chief Executive of *Partner für Berlin* and previously Senator responsible for development) set out some of the

implications of this in interview (1999), claiming that, a 'new city without [a] wall has to be constructed...For the first time, [the city has] a chance to look ahead'. Berlin, he notes, 'has had no future for the past seventy years'.

It is this coming-to-be - becoming a city once more - that haunts Berlin today. On the one hand it is becoming capital to one of the most powerful capitalist economies in the world, which one might expect to be a relatively painless transition, precisely because of Germany's power and resources. Yet, there is also evidence of uncertainty and insecurity even among those most committed to growth. Attempts to pursue normalisation (to work towards a self-sustaining regional socio-economy) through a merger between the Berlin and the surrounding Land of Brandenburg have been unsuccessful. A referendum on the issue in 1996 saw a vote in favour of integration in Berlin (although in the East of the city the majority voted against), while the corporate vision of a global - or Euro - city-region offered by the politicians and their private sector partners was perceived as a threat rather than an opportunity by most of the voters of Brandenburg. The Bankgesellschaft Berlin (1999) remains pessimistic about the growth prospects for the city and the developer TishmanSpeyer predicts that it will take many years to fill up vacant office space (interview, 1999).

Building a national capital

At each step of the way, the processes of rebuilding come up against the thickness of history, the obduracy of memory, and even questioning from those Germans who are concerned about the re-nationalisation of German culture through sovereignty and unification. The Federal government has already moved back to Berlin, despite the misgivings of some of its civil servants, which have meant that seven (out of sixteen) ministries are to stay in Bonn with branches in Berlin. Although the scale of building in the government quarter (Regierungsviertel) has been reduced with the recognition that Berlin already contains many buildings suitable for government use, it remains dramatic, stretching across what was once the border between two political and economic systems. For some local residents and politicians this seems a threat as much as an opportunity, because it seems to bring with it a move away from the relative openness and social tolerance of the past (at least in the West) and its replacement with increased discipline and policing to protect the new state institutions (see, e.g. Rada 1997, Winden 1999).

As Berlin becomes a national capital again, its past attempts at centralisation have been brought to the fore; buildings from all past regimes are being re-used following modernisation. Not just the Reichstag (apparently de-Nazified and even de-Prussified by the addition of a crystal dome designed by Norman Foster, following a brief period as an art object wrapped in Christo's thick plastic sheeting), but also the Nazi Air Ministry and Central Bank are back in use, and GDR buildings have maintained their role as local government offices.

Each return is fraught with debate, historical assessment and reinterpretation. Nowhere in Europe is national and local history so critically debated, often through the prism of architecture. Through his analysis of the physical legacy of the built environment and the 'memories' associated with and embodied in it, Ladd (1997) powerfully examines the ways in which the past helps to shape Berlin's present. His exploration of architectural legacies highlights the extent to which the lived memories of Berlin's and Germany's shocking century make the city and its culture what they are today. Extensive debates over monuments and buildings have been important, precisely because they reflect the day-to-day ways in which the residents of Berlin have to deal with their historical provenance.

Hertling (President of the Chamber of Berlin Architects) confirms that 'Berlin is a museum of architecture' (interview, 1999). As a result, there have been major debates about how that 'museum' should be treated. At the heart of these debates lies the tension between a normality defined by the removal of the past and one defined by its continued use and incorporation. Hertling emphasises the role of local architects and others in campaigning against the tearing down of Nazi buildings (such as the old Air Ministry) and against the demolition of the GDR's Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic). He argues that 'we cannot recycle history in tearing down architecture' (see also Flierl 1998), but, of course, that implies that history is recycled in other ways (See Plates 4 and 5).

[INSERT Photographs 2 and 3, with overall title: 'The reappropriation of urban space'. And then for 2: 'Ernst Thälmann - leader of Communist Party in the 1930s, died in Concentration Camp, symbol of GDR regime in the 1960s, and site for graffiti in the 21st century'. For 3: 'A fragment of the Berlin Wall survives to point towards and art gallery in East Berlin']

Till focuses explicitly in what she calls ‘the cultural politics of normalization’ (Till 1999, p. 269) through an exploration of the debates around the redefinition and redesign of the *Neue Wache* memorial on Unter den Linden in the first half of the 1990s. Originally built in the nineteenth century as guardhouse for the royal palace guard, after 1918 it became a war memorial commemorating Germany’s dead of the First World War. Under the Nazis it became a place where Germany’s military heroes were honoured and celebrated – a core place in Nazi ritual. In the 1950s, the building was reappropriated by the East German state to become a memorial to the victims of fascism, by the late 1960s being ‘transformed into a secular altar to anti-fascism’, helping to sustain the official myth of the GDR as ‘a state dedicated to fighting fascism’ (Till 1999, p. 261). After reunification, there was a new appropriation, as the memorial was redesigned and rededicated to the victims of war and tyranny – ‘the two World Wars and the two dictatorships’ (Till 1999, p. 262). In other words, it celebrated the reunification of Germany on the terms given by the West, but it was also a national memorial, a claim to be a unified war memorial.

Similar issues were raised in the debates over the Palast der Republik (right in the centre of the city), itself first built as a symbol of the new state socialist regime – a palace for the ‘people’ to replace a bomb-damaged palace of the Prussian aristocracy. For East Berliners it was never merely a symbol of the old regime (where the East German Parliament met) because it had also been used for a wide range of leisure activities. At the start of the 21st century it still stands unused, despite a controversial campaign, involving leading local members of the CDU, to demolish it and replace it with a reconstruction of the Prussian palace, which stood on the site until the 1950s (see e.g. Howe 1998, Marcuse 1999a). But the developers are waiting patiently to find a means of ‘normalising’ the space. Roland Ernst Städtebau – a development company from Heidelberg set up to take advantage of opportunities in the former GDR - is still a potential bidder for the Schlossplatz (where the Palast is located) and its redevelopment. They aim to construct a new public building rather than to restore the old, principally because restoration would not be economically viable as modern office space. From the developer’s point of view, however, it is clear that nothing will be built there unless there is some involvement of the German state, whether by taking up part of the building or subsidising the reconstruction (interview, 1999).

The tensions apparent in Berlin’s contemporary development are also reflected in the exchange between Marcuse (1999a and b), Campbell (1999) and Häußerman

(1999) in the pages of the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Marcuse expresses a concern that the new Berlin is being built as a city of state power which is predicated on a sort of historical forgetfulness, albeit one that sometimes finds its expression in the building of monuments like that to commemorate the Holocaust, which are intended to draw a line under the past. He fears the emergence of a new authoritarianism within the city. Häußerman by contrast seeks to highlight the 'ordinariness' of the city, which he argues deserves to be judged on the same basis as other large capitalist cities. Despite his greater sympathy for Marcuse's critique, Campbell's conclusions point in a similar direction. Berlin will, he predicts, be 'increasingly assimilated into the political-economic network of European cities' through a process of 'Euroconvergence'. This is echoed in the language of Berlin's planners who are seeking to reposition Berlin as part of the 'European Community of metropolises' (interview 1999), rather than world city.

A new Berlin in a new Europe?

The Europe through which convergence might be achieved, however, is less homogeneous and stable than this implies. Europe itself is in transition. The creation of a united Germany and a unified Berlin was only one aspect of a wider set of changes that have transformed the nature of the Europe of which Berlin is a part. It is widely recognised that the future of Berlin will depend on its position within a global – and above all an expanded European - system. In other words the network of European cities can no longer be taken for granted as being the old Western European network, so that the nature of the assimilation is itself likely to be more complex. At the very least it might be a two way process. It is commonplace in Berlin to think of the city as an East-West frontier; but the implications of this remain highly ambiguous. In some versions, the expectation is that Berlin will be part of a wider shift of European development to the East – a move away from the current Western orientation of growth in the EU's notorious 'blue banana'. In others, the frontier imagery suggests a rather different set of relationships, with Berlin gaining its dynamism precisely because it is on the edge, not at the centre of a new Europe. Within Berlin, the East-West division remains significant, although the physical division has gone.

Sassen, perhaps rather prematurely, suggests that Vienna and Berlin are emerging as ‘international business platforms for the whole central European region’. She identifies the possible emergence of a ‘regional transnational urban system for the whole region, in which both competition and a division of functions have the effect of strengthening the overall business capability of the region’ (Sassen 1994, p. 44, first edition of Sassen 2000). But the challenge faced in Berlin is a significant one. There is no ready-made territorial economic elite (nor any evidence of institutional thickness), either in the surrounding *Land* or the wider European region, into which the city can simply be inserted. That elite (and the networks of economic and social linkages) are being (or need to be) built as part of (or alongside) the process of city building.

This is explicitly recognised by Berlin’s urban boosterists, who translate it into a rather different vision of the future – promising to transcend and possibly rescue the old Europe through growth in the East. Hassemer argues that Berlin will become the most important decision-centre in Germany because of the way it will increasingly fit into a new Europe – stretching to the borders of the Ukraine. ‘Europe,’ he argues ‘has a common destiny’ and Berlin can act as the gateway to the east for Europe’s other cities. The growth potential of Western Europe, he suggests, has reached its limit. New growth will be in the East, which will be ‘the most dynamic part of Europe’ offering the whole of Europe its only chance to be a ‘tiger region’ - creating an alternative growth pole to the ‘blue banana’ of Western Europe (interview, 1999). Nor are the boosterists alone in drawing these conclusions.

World city or Prussian city?

The city faces major restructuring - the centre is being redeveloped and the ‘green’ image of West Berlin (preserved in the aspic of the post-war boundaries) is being undermined by massively increased traffic flows. The incorporation of the former downtown areas of the eastern half of the city is the lynch pin of the city’s current transformation, with the older industrial space in the East being integrated into the wider new German/European economic system and the older housing stock (particularly in Prenzlauer Berg) being substantially gentrified by the new (Western) middle classes seeking cheaper housing (Brady & Wallace, 1995). In the southeastern quarter of the city around Treptower Park (home of a massive Soviet War memorial,

explicitly protected in the treaty which finally saw Soviet soldiers withdraw from the city) recently protected industrial architecture is juxtaposed against new office construction. International player *Allianz Insurance* has located service jobs into shiny corporate buildings. The juxtaposition of new growth against decline is everywhere apparent.

Some aspects of the symbolism of redevelopment are clear enough, drawing on the imagery of global architecture and high-end retail development to highlight a global role for the city. But here, too, the messages remain ambiguous.

[INSERT Photographs 4 and 5. 4: ‘ Potsdamer Platz rises from the ashes – the biggest building site in Europe’. 5: ‘Potsdamer Platz joins the global marketplace’]

The Potsdamer Platz is now at the centre of Berlin, having been divided by the Wall as an area of dereliction until 1990 (See Plates 6 and 7). And even here the legacy of history is hard to miss. The land was originally cleared in the 1940s as part of Hitler’s plans to build a new city (Germania) as the capital of his thousand-year Reich. As a senior town planner commented the major developments around the Potsdamer Platz would not have been possible, ‘if Hitler and Speer and all these guys would not have left this space open for their dream of a global city – Germania’ (interview, 1999). Of course, the Allied bombers also contributed and the later construction of the Berlin Wall across the wasteland helped to maintain it. The Potsdamer Platz had been one of the city’s historical centres, its busy street-life a feature of inter-War postcards in much the same way as that of Piccadilly Circus or Trafalgar Square was in London. The redevelopment was led by Sony and DaimlerChrysler (who between them hold over 80% of the available land, with DaimlerChrysler holding around 75% of this). International architects (such as Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers and Helmut Jahn) have been drawn in to design a series of prestige office buildings, retail spaces and entertainment facilities - constructing a vision which sets out to define Berlin as a world city, with buildings like those of other world cities.

But the mobilisation of the language of architecture in the repositioning of Berlin is by no means as straightforward as a simple reading of the Potsdamer Platz development might suggest. In some cases there has been a conscious and deliberate reconstruction and reappropriation of the past – Foster’s dome for the Reichstag, for

example, is a much more modest version of the original plan which would have covered the building instead of merely topping the existing one (Pawley 1997); the central synagogue in Oranienburger Strasse, virtually destroyed in the 1930s, has been reconstructed with its own magnificent golden cupola; the nineteenth century Hamburger Bahnhof has been refurbished and reopened as a gallery of contemporary art; the Deutsche Historisches Museum is to be renewed with the incorporation of an extension designed by I.M.Pei. The dominant official rhetoric on planning and development in the city has been one that has sought to maintain a Berlin style, utilising Prussian stone and shunning high rise development (see, e.g., Schweitzer 1996).

This has been reinforced by the arguments of some locally based architects, who often have a powerful position through their involvement in architectural competitions (charted by Schweitzer 1996). Kleihues, for example, who has participated in construction projects in Berlin over many years, including the Gendarmenmarkt redevelopment, and the conversion of Hamburger Bahnhof, argues that modern form should emerge through local materials (interview 1999). In the context of pressure for the intensification of land use and the construction of prestige developments, in practice this may actually mean pulling down what exists and putting up a pastiche (reflected, for example, in the Pariser Platz and Hotel Adlon developments near the Brandenburger Tor). The design of 3 Pariser Platz by Frank O. Gehry for the DG Bank, perhaps takes this to its logical conclusion, to the extent that it appears to subvert the aims of the planners – the building has a ‘conservative street front’ in traditional stone, while the internal atrium and conference centre follow Gehry’s more familiar approach utilising curving lines and biomorphic forms (DG Bank, undated).

As a glass and steel skyscraper, the Sony development in the Potsdamer Platz represents a clear break with this ‘tradition’. One of the judges in the architectural competition for the Sony development argued for the introduction of greater architectural diversity – suggesting that Sony and developer TishmanSpeyer should employ more than one architect to introduce difference to their development but Sony wanted a clearly branded space and would not take the suggestion on board (and were indeed contemptuous of the provincialism of the vision of Berlin’s economic and political elite. See Wolf 1998, p. 206). He now criticises the Potsdamer Platz development for being dominated by a bland, non-local, global corporate architecture

(interview, 1999). Another locally based architect who works on urban renewal takes a still stronger position. He notes that the city boosterists are ‘trying to present Berlin as a European city’. But, he says, the Potsdamer Platz is quite unlike a European city, which means they have not achieved their own goal. ‘The public spaces are being privatised...so the openness and accessibility are being taken away from the city’. The development, he argues, gives to ‘private capital that which should be open to everybody’, so that it is more like an American city. Whatever the official position of planners and development politicians, he feels that the US principle is being followed in practice. ‘Actually’, he concludes, it ‘isn’t a square (Platz) but a pile in the middle of a desert’ (interview 1999).

Conclusion

Nevertheless, and whatever the visions of the boosterists, in many respects, the arguments of Häußerman and Campbell remain persuasive. The new Berlin clearly is taking on features that are characteristic of other large European cities – it is, for example, hard to escape the impacts of suburbanisation and gentrification, and the new retail malls, galleries and passages are familiar too (see Cochrane and Jonas 1999). But, if there is a process of convergence – of making ‘ordinary’ – taking place, however, it is a tortuous and uneasy one, characterised by a series of uncertain steps, first drawing on one set of symbolism, one form of imagery, then on another. A range of possible futures remains in contention, while the past continues to cast its long shadow over the present. One locally based architect, who remains sceptical of the grander claims of global architecture and Berlin’s urban boosterists, emphasises that ‘Berlin wird, wird, wird, wird. Nie zu Ende’. (‘Berlin is always becoming. Never complete’) (interview 1999).

In this context, Storper’s critique of the broader global cities literature is persuasive. Despite his recognition that it highlights some key aspects of contemporary urbanisation, and despite the differences he identifies between the different approaches, Storper criticises them all for interpreting cities as ‘machines’ through which the logic of global capitalism works itself out. Cities should not be seen, he says, ‘as a mechanical node in a bigger machine’ (Storper 1997, p. 222). Instead he stresses the importance of viewing cities as complex and differentiated ‘ensembles’ made up of the (informal as well as formal) relationships and conventions

that exist between the agencies (people, organisations, interests) which underpin their economic operation. Storper (1997, p. 255) prefers the metaphor of a ‘crucible in which the ingredients, once put in the pot together and cooked, [and] often turn out very differently from what we can deduce from their discrete flavors’. He emphasises the extent to which cities, their residents, social and economic actors, make themselves in a reflexive process of development and redevelopment, albeit ‘constrained by the machine like forces of late modern capitalism’ (Storper 1997, p. 256). As a result Storper suggests that global capitalism gets involved both to gain access to specific regional and urban markets, as well as to the specific (localised) socio-economic arrangements that exist in particular cities.

This paper began by asking whether nationalism or globalisation was the driving force of contemporary city building in Berlin. Instead, however, the question needs to be expressed rather differently - to consider the role of national capital building in an age of globalisation in order to rethink the relationship between world city status and the formation of a German national capital. The more this is explored the more jarring it is for debates about world cities. Building on Storper’s analysis, it is more appropriate to identify a process of *worlding*, which is far more widespread than are cities classed as world leaders. In other words it is necessary to move away from a concern to assess the success of Berlin as a centre for global influence, and towards a more nuanced idea of the ways in which cities are fitted into global hierarchies. Instead of coming up with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to the question of whether Berlin is becoming a world city, the idea of *worlding* permits us to appreciate how different agencies, companies and authorities in Berlin negotiate the world around them to insert the city into pre-existing ideas and realities, and in turn to influence them. Nationalism, nationalist agendas, and national capital building seem to be specific aspects of globalisation; or to use the language from above, nation building is itself a dynamic of *worlding*.

Note

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