

## Berlin: A Renovation of Postcards

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### INTRODUCTION

Postcards capture a snapshot in time, merging images of architecture, people and the cityscape. The image on a postcard records a distinct place and time, while the back of the postcard offers a personal story—one that is only understood between the sender and receiver. Upon closer investigation, details in the image along with the sender's narrative offer a personal reading of the city. This project entitled: *Berlin: A Renovation of Postcards* begins with vintage postcards of the former East Berlin and are re-inserted into current panoramic views. By focusing on details found in the postcards, clues about the larger political and economic realm surface that offer a view into details found in the urban fabric such as monuments, political markers, building typologies and personal details such as the clothing on occupants. The encounter of two times in one place reveals differences in the larger political structure of a city as seen in the renovation of urban nodes and architecture. Most recently, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the diffusion of western ideology and capitalism have changed the cityscape of the former East Berlin, while also retaining buildings from both pre and post World War II. As a result, the cityscape offers views into buildings that have been built, renovated, demolished and re-built. Visual cues such as advertising, architecture, and the appearance or disappearance of monuments are the focus for this series of images of East Berlin. The postcards are re-inserted into their existing conditions, thereby revealing an encounter between two times in one location, between the past and the ongoing present.

These double exposure images were exhibited in the Berlin Friedrichstrasse U-Bahnhof station in

December 2004. The location for this exhibit symbolically recognizes the meeting of East and West in two ways, first—through the pairing of two images of the same place but under different political regimes; and second—the location of this station being the physical threshold between East and West where trains stopped. The exhibition of images allows occupants and tourists to see the city in a context that they previously knew, or one in which they currently know.

### *Lustgarten*



**Figure 1:** *Lustgarten: 1912 & 2003*

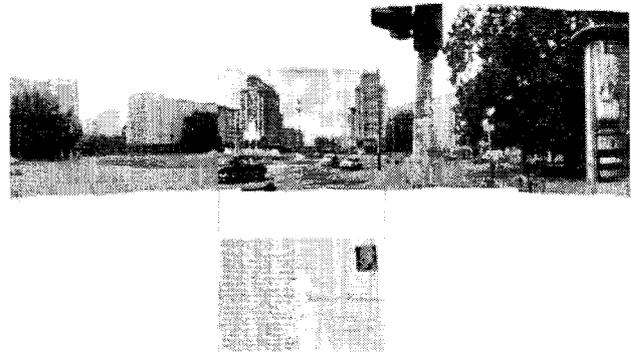
The postcard as a snapshot documents a moment and continues to transcend time until it becomes a vintage postcard. The postcards collected for this investigation offer views into places from other times, such as a postcard dated 1912, with a view of the Berliner Schloss, the original Palace in Berlin (Figure 1). Old postcards are physically dated not only by their sepia colored image, but also through

the people and clothing they wear. In the postcard image of the original palace, I imagine it being a hot summer day in 1912, where men are seen wearing three-piece suits and women wear long heavy dresses as was only proper at the time. The ghosts of these people walk through the site as I hold the postcard and look out to the same site in December 2003 – 91 years later. I show my friend who is visiting me this postcard and she immediately knows where it is because of the big granite bowl in front of the Altes Museum by Friedrich Schinkel. Everything across the street has changed as a result of changing political regimes. The original palace was destroyed in World War II, and the remains demolished in 1951 only to be replaced by the East German palace built in the 1970s. The Berlin Wall came down in 1989—indirectly leaving the current palace in its present state—vacant, which is now under debate as to whether or not to demolish it and replace it with a replica of the original palace. The debate about whether or not to re-build the original palace reveals the yearning of nostalgia in architecture and interiors. Interiors, in particular, are often succumbed to historic styles as clients yearn for a fashion of a previous era of which they have never experienced. This encounter between interior and exterior, and their formal relationship to one another can be found in Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Venturi uses examples of facades and their corresponding interior plan and section to show a distinct or non-distinct relationship between the inside and outside. When one encounters the relationship of interior and exterior, the two spaces can be read in unison, or when unsuccessful, as a rupture in the overall architecture.

At a larger scale, the debate in Berlin about whether or not to demolish the existing palace and replace it with a replica of the original has raised questions about the meaning of architecture and the longing for nostalgic styles. What makes one long for a style in which they were never part of? Is there safety in residing in a familiar style although not part of one's past?

#### *Strausberger Platz*

A view to the Fernsehturm—the East German television tower as seen from Strausberger Platz, acts as a focal point along Karl-Marx-Allee (Figure 2). This grand boulevard, which began construction in 1951, was known as Germany's first socialist street that



**Figure 2:** *Strausberger Platz: 1971 & 2003*

would provide apartments for its citizens.<sup>1</sup> These apartment buildings represent East Germany's first attempt to provide mass housing after World War II. As construction continued, the cost would exceed the allowed budget, thereby having to discontinue this building type and inherit the Plattenbau – a housing type made of pre-fabricated concrete slabs developed in the Soviet Union. A few blocks north of Strausberger Platz, is the Platz der Vereinten Nationen (United Nations Square) formerly called Leninplatz. Postcards can now be found at flea markets of the original Lenin statue that stood in front of a series of Plattenbau housing structures. Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the monument to Lenin would be removed and occupied by a void in 1991.<sup>2</sup> In its place now stand boulders from different countries referencing a new international relationship. This act of erasing the former socialist regime through the removal of monuments can be seen in the recent German film, *Goodbye Lenin*.

#### *Plattenbau*

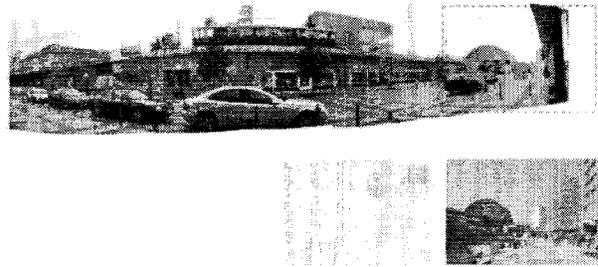
As Gaston Bachelard writes about *The Poetics of Space*, one can also ask about the politics of space, the economics of space, and the monuments of space. After World War II, the new city fabric of satellite cities in East Berlin would be built simultaneous to the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. The integration of housing back into the city fabric was designed by the Soviet Union, as they developed new methods of prefabricated housing that East Germany adopted called Plattenbau. This housing was developed to solve a housing shortage after

World War II but also manifests a political identity of socialism keeping with the goals of the political system to develop one economic class. Since unification, the facades and interiors, however, have changed at a much slower rate than the housing found in the original city fabric of East Berlin such as Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg, where the once gray and dismal streetscapes are giving way to scaffolding and brightly painted facades. As the residents of the former East acclimate to a new political and economic system, the architecture also mediates between the old and new, between the previous places made by the occupants in their memories and the imposition of a new space transformed by the change in political systems.

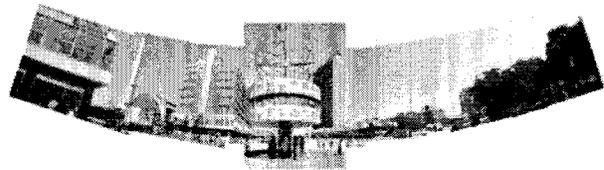
### *Alexanderplatz*

By 1980, the GDR was in existence for over 30 years and had established a goal of creating an identity for itself through its political and economic systems. These systems were materialized through buildings types that could be recognized instantaneously on the facades. Postcards from East Berlin would place emphasis on newly designed urban nodes where the prefabricated facades would be seen such as in Alexanderplatz, a location rebuilt after World War II. This socialist designed plaza was meant to stand in contrast to the classical node of the Museum Island with its cathedral, museums and Humboldt University. The desire of the GDR to establish a new modern city center was partly due to the continued tension between East and West Berlin, which acted as a microcosm to the larger realm of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The re-design of Alexanderplatz kept buildings and structures from before World War II, such as two buildings designed by Peter Behrens and the location of the main train station (Figure 3). These original structures would be situated opposite new GDR structures such as commercial stores, a hotel, cultural centers, nearby Plattenbau, along with a central fountain in the plaza and the Weltzeituhr – the World Time Clock that became a well-known place to rendezvous, and remains so (Figure 4).

At the present, plans for Alexanderplatz entail demolishing the GDR buildings and replacing them with anonymous western buildings. The fountain and World Time Clock are to remain in the urban plan, revealing an encounter of the old and new as seen through buildings from pre-war to the present.



**Figure 3:** *Alexanderplatz: 1986 & 2003*



**Figure 4:** *Weltzeituhr: 1980 & 2004*

### *Deutsches Historisches Museum*



**Figure 5:** *Deutsches Historisches Museum*

A postcard dated 1963 of the German History Museum located at the edge of the Museum Island shows East German automobiles passing by the museum (Figure 5). This museum has recently undergone change with an addition by I.M. Pei. As one looks closely at the postcard, a subtle piece of information reveals changes in the image from 1961 to the present. In the view from 2004, one can see three of four statues atop pedestals on a bridge. The fourth pedestal, as seen in the vintage postcard is missing its statue. The missing statue from the postcard image uncovers an exchange of art works that took place in the early 1980's between the East and West. The East received the statues that were buried in the West for safety during World War II in

exchange for an archive of a porcelain manufacturer, KPM. When tourists now encounter the statues on the bridge, there is little evidence that at one time they stood empty. For residents of the former East Berlin, their encounter with the statues is more apparent as they saw the return of the artifacts to their original location.<sup>3</sup>

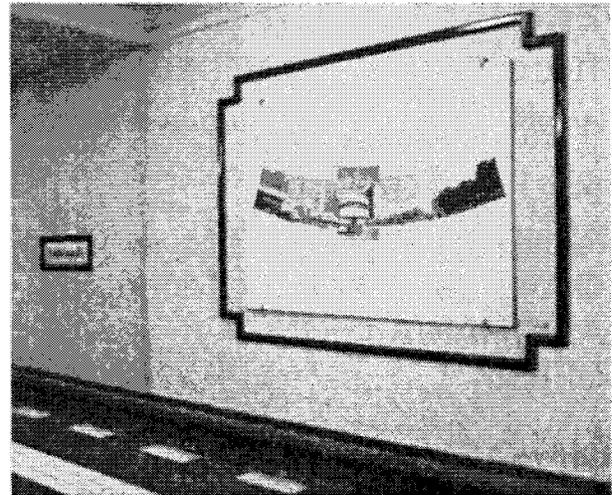
### CONSTRUCTION CONTINUES

Traces of Berlin's political history are evident in the facades, courtyards and interiors of its architecture. The quiet markings on these buildings are often so commonplace for its occupants, yet as a visitor, these markings are overwhelming with a sense of history, revealing war-marked facades, and the names of former businesses throughout East Berlin. As the East continues to be renovated, the process requires mediation between old and new, past and present. Encounters of renovation in Berlin can be found at the scale of architecture, but also in the memory of past and present as the inhabitants know their city.

A selection of images accompanying this paper, along with additional images was exhibited in the Friedrichstrasse U-Bahnhof in December 2004 (Figures 6 & 7). The realization of this exhibition in the station allowed for East and West, past and present to meet. Similarly, occupants of Berlin also experience the images as remembrance of the past or present as there are those who grew up in a divided East and West and those who grew up in a unified Berlin or moved there after unification. People from each of these times will encounter the city in different ways. The exhibition of these images speaks to all of these people allowing them to enter the postcard images depending upon how they have known the city. The temporary occupants – the tourists, will also encounter these sites on their tours of Berlin and through reading the history in their guidebooks. Berlin is constantly changing as one can see cranes across the skyline and scaffolding across facades. Everything is changing as people live among the process. This project will find an end but the city will continue to change.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*Figures 6 & 7: Friedrichstrasse U-Bahnhof Exhibition*

### NOTES

1 Ladd, Brian. *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, (186).

2 *Ibid.*, 197.

3 Interview with Prof. Dr. Rosmarie Beier-de Haan, Sammlungsleiterin, Deutsches Historisches Museum (German History Museum), Berlin, July 21, 2004.

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