Report on the Berlin Program Alumni Panel
at the Thirty-Fifth Annual GSA Conference
September 24, 2011 in Louisville, Kentucky

Architectures of Berlin

Introduction
Claire Zimmerman

Beyond Reconstruction: Architectural Metaphors in Postwar Berlin [Architecture as metaphor]
Clara Oberle, University of San Diego, Berlin Program Fellow 2002-2003

The Architecture of Urban Intervention, Berlin 1910/2010 [The architecture of historiography]
Erik Gheniou, Pratt Institute, Berlin Program Fellow 2001-2002

Architectures of Architecture in Postwar Berlin [The architecture of mass media]
Claire Zimmerman, University of Michigan, Berlin Program Fellow 2002-2003

The Berlin Program Session at the GSA meeting this year was entitled "Architectures of Berlin." The session focused on different aspects of Berlin architecture and planning, drawing out relationships between buildings and other kinds of infrastructure that dictated the physical construction of the city. In the session call distributed to speakers, these sorts of infrastructures were identified as both physical (roads, power supply, transportation facilities and networks) and administrative (building codes, planning initiatives, housing society covenants). The talks are summarized in the attached abstracts.

Two speakers focused on the period immediately following World War II, when Berlin had to recreate itself in the wake of widespread destruction. One paper provided a comparative frame for examining the city at two different moments in its history, both in the 20th century. Clara Oberle (University of San Diego), a historian, dealt with architectural metaphors in the years following 1945; Claire Zimmerman (University of Michigan) dealt with the same period from the perspective of art history and modern architecture; Erik Gheniou (Pratt Institute) discussed the planning initiatives from two phases of Berlin history from the point of view of an urban historian and architect.

The session was well attended and discussion afterwards continued into the cafe next door, taking up the majority of the following session as well. A number of Berlin Program alumni attended, but there were others in the audience as well, who expressed interest in and curiosity about the interdisciplinary nature of the projects supported by the program.

In the event, one of the planned speakers was unable to attend thanks to illness in her family. Zimmerman, also the session organizer, replace her with a version of a talk given in Berlin in June, revised for the topic. The moderator, Wallis Miller (University of Kentucky), was compelled to cancel her attendance the day before the session, thanks to another family illness; the three speakers conducted discussion between one another and with the audience, both in the session room and afterwards.

"Architectures of Berlin" – Abstracts
Moderator and Commentator: Wallis Miller, University of Kentucky

"Architecture" is often used metaphorically, to comprehend notions of structure and order within complex organizations. "The Architecture of Society" subtends both literal and metaphorical meanings—but it is mostly the latter that prevail in the use of such a phrase. Computer scientists currently use "architecture" as shorthand to describe the complex design problems of computation in hard and soft versions. A metaphor that does a great deal of organizational work, "architecture" has been used in a variety of other fields as well, from history to literature, to economics, to cognitive science, to market economics.

This panel seeks to explore the uses of architectural metaphors as they apply (or do not apply) to the recent history and historiography of Berlin, a city in which architectural battles played out with particular vividness in the last century. If the term "architecture" has been broadly applied to the study of society, of economics, of cybernetics, of politics, what specific role did it play in Berlin in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Berlin was a showcase for imperial, modern, and fascist architecture, and then again for a showdown between East and West Germany after the war. But how was the city particularly susceptible to architectural thinking in other arenas, arenas that were both physical and administrative? What effect did the physical destruction of the city have on the ways in which architecture could be thought, and deployed as thought? What might we learn through a broader examination of the role of architecture in the history of the city, particularly in relation to the limits of the metaphor? What is omitted, when such a conceptual framework is imposed? What pushes back against this usage—to what might an "anti-architecture [of Berlin]" amount?

Paper 1: The Architecture of Urban Intervention, Berlin 1910/2010
Erik Gheniou, Pratt Institute

Berlin was a hotbed of urban design theory in the decades before WWI, when concepts of picturesque, vernacular-based, and "traditional" urban form were employed in radical ways to tame the social and economic problems that arose from the explosive growth of the modern metropolis. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the city again became a proving ground for new models of urban life, though this time in the face of stagnant economic and demographic growth. In both periods, Berlin's urban architecture was grounded in an identifiable apparatus of assumptions about design's responsibilities to intervene in the spatial construction of ordinary life. This paper will identify aspects of this apparatus and compare the two periods using specific examples from around the time of the City Planning Exhibition of 1910 and among emerging firms practicing now that have rejected the nostalgic urbanism of the 1990s. This nineties urbanism, typified by "critical reconstruction" and the new Potsdamer Platz, explicitly claimed a lineage to the forms of 1910, but this paper will argue that the typological, interventionist, improvised, and socially-committed work of around 2010 makes a better parallel to the motives that originally generated those forms.

Paper 2: Beyond Reconstruction: Architectural Metaphors in Postwar Berlin
Clara Oberle, University of San Diego

This paper traces the use of architectural metaphors and thought in the social and political re-organization discourses of postwar Berlin. Sources from the mid to late 1940s suggest a prevalence of architectural vocabulary and thought. It is reflected in the language of politicians, Allied occupation personnel, journalists, writers, and everyday Berliners. While other metaphors co-existed, it next asks why the architectural took the most prominent position. Several factors, among these older and modern state traditions of employing architectural, planning, and building metaphors and interacting with the architectural and planning professions shall be considered. The impact of World War II, however, was arguably key. The architectural metaphor allowed for the perceived absence of order (e.g. in matters of housing, political structure, social hierarchies) to be juxtaposed with reconstruction and the establishment of a stable, legible order for which many actors yearned. As metaphor, it may also have presented a fundamental way in which actors attempted to grasp the effect of war and war's end. In a conclusion, the paper reflects on the implications of this study for our understanding of postwar historiography. Unlike metaphors from the realm of the physical body and pathology, the architectural metaphors have mostly been used uncritically. Resulting biases, including "postwar reconstruction," shall be considered here.

Paper 3: "Photographic Returns, 1945-53"
Claire Zimmerman, University of Michigan

This paper investigates the impact of work by German émigré architects in the United States on postwar German culture. As the American juggernaut of wartime and postwar construction gave architects the opportunity to build at an unprecedented scale, photographs of their work traveled back to Germany in exhibitions, journals, books, and snapshots. The rhetorical power of these images of remote steel and glass architecture acted on a nation confronting destroyed cityscapes - physical emblems of greater destruction - through the minds of its architects. The documents also prepared the way for later building projects on German soil, such as the New National Gallery or the huge Gropius-Stadt, both in Berlin. While abstraction and the reductions of architectural publication were well established even before the war, nevertheless postwar architectural debate was newly ethically charged by the reality of ruined German cities set against the image of American might.

Report by Claire Zimmerman
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