Program for Urban Processes
Constructing the Urban Imaginary: Berlin—Los Angeles

NICOLE HUBER
RALPH STERN
Universität der Künste Berlin

I: BERLIN—LOS ANGELES

A comparitive study of Berlin and Los Angeles may at first appear to many to be somewhat arbitrary. Even if one were to disregard the obvious factors of climate and cultural constitution, there are substantial differences in their respective development and growth. Located on the flat, sandy plain of the Brandenburg-Mark, Berlin experienced a phenomenal expansion from the mid-nineteenth century to the Weimar years very similar to that of Los Angeles' a few years later. As the burgeoning capital of Prussia and then of Germany under the successive regimes of Bismarck, the Weimar Republic and the National Socialists, the destruction of the Second World War and subsequent Cold War division sharply curtailed Berlin's development. Now again as the capital of a re-united Germany, this city of four million thus offers clear contrasts with a burgeoning Los Angeles.

Nonetheless there are also striking similarities. Despite its recent claims to being a "European City" and positioning itself in opposition to the "American City", Berlin's polycentric structure is remarkably similar to that of Los Angeles. In terms of social structure the influx of recent immigrants to Los Angeles, accelerated by America's recent implementation of the NAFTA treaty, promises to find parallels in Berlin's near future as the European Union expands towards the east. What the future may bring for Berlin – as "gateway to the east" and "global city" – remains to be seen, but the addition of eastern European and Russian influences to Berlin will complement the city's existing Turkish population. This population is of such significance that, in Turkey, Berlin is popularly known as "Little Istanbul". Such social changes and their often profound impact on the spatial structure of Los Angeles and Berlin provide ample opportunities for comparative research by urban sociologists, particularly those associated with the so-called "Los Angeles" school sensitive to new trends in urban development that depart from classical models.

There is, however, yet another linkage between the two cities that may at first seem of lesser consequence, but which upon closer analysis is of central importance in the construction of the "image" of the city itself. This is in the area of the visual representation of the city, particularly through film. The importance of the film industry in pre-war Berlin is well-documented. Largely identified with the dominant UFA (*Universum – Film Aktiengesselschaft*) label, many scholars maintain that Berlin's film industry was the only one capable of rivaling Hollywood. The German film industry produced many films in a myriad of genres, but the fascination with the metropolis was strong enough to warrant the direct attention of directors such as Fritz Lang, whose *Metropolis* (1927) is just one film among many that have continued to engage critics and theorists, as well as new generations of directors intrested in representing both the urban and what can be termed the "urban imaginary". When the National Socialist came to power in 1933, many of Berlin's most prominent directors left Germany for Hollywood, and that many of the ways in which Los Angeles (or other American cities) are portrayed in film, owes a considerable debt to the directors original experiences in Berlin. With re-unification, the importance of Berlin's film industry is again on the rise: the city's own interests in developing a post-reunification economic base neatly intersecting with the interests of globalized media companies such as Sony, which has been responsible for a substantial proportion of the Potsdamer Platz re-development as a "corporate image center".

II: BERLIN AS URBAN LABORATORY

If Berlin can both be compared and contrasted with Los Angeles, the educational and pedagogical opportunities afforded urban design instruction in Berlin are often unavailable to American universities. Returning for a moment to a discussion

of Berlin's physical configuration, post-reunification Berlin has added another chapter to a rich and often contested legacy of urban experimentation. The social innovations of the *Großsiedlungen* initiated during the years of the Weimar Republic and both the *Kleinsiedlungen* and monumental constructions of the National Socialist period had already given Berlin strikingly divergent visions of a modern metropolis. After the destruction of the Second World War, the Cold War divisions of East and West engendered further, competitive, visions of urban organization (among them, three *Internationale Bauausstellungen (IBAs)*, the formidable Stalinallee – now Karl-Marx-Allee, the great housing estates in both the former East and West, and the Wall). Seeking to unite former divisions, post-reunification construction has expanded an already impressive urban repertoire. The extravagant ensemble of Potsdamer Platz (including two IMAX theaters and the new Film Museum), the vast new government facilities of the *Spreebogen* encompassing the former Reichstag, the memorials to the victims of the Holocaust, and the "critical reconstruction" of the inner city have all received extensive coverage not only in the architectural press but in the general media and the popular imagination.

Entering the second decade of reunification, Berlin remains an important case study of a major city coming to terms with a complicated and fragmented past while engaging a globalized future. This future includes Berlin's consolidation as the capital of a reunified Germany as well as serving as the gate to the East, for which the Brandenburg Gate serves as the city's icon and logo. New immigration policies recognizing Berlin's need to import highly skilled workers in the field of information technology have attracted workers not only from Poland and Russia, but from the Asian subcontinent. Many of these are arriving with "green cards", adding a new layer to Berlin's cultural mix and "urban imaginary". They are also actively reconfiguring the old "inner city" as a center of "new" technological expertise. This expertise is often in the area of image production, much of which is concerned with city marketing, adding a dynamic charge to this rapidly evolving urban landscape.

Given Berlin's problematic twentieth-century history, much of Berlin's recent efforts at establishing has been concerned with establishing new images of Berlin as a progressive world city; one that, while not forgetful of the past, has made profound efforts to overcome it. In this regard, Berlin's three new memorials to, respectively, Jewish history, the Terror of the National Socialist regime and the Holocaust promise to be both "real" sites of significance as well as powerful signifiers in Berlin's presentation and "representation" of itself through other forms of media. In many respects there is an irony attached to this, for although Jews are returning to Berlin in increasing numbers, many arrive from the former Soviet Union and have little identification with the trauma experienced by German Jews.

Often touted as the "new old" Berlin and reflecting an interest less in the fabled Weimar years than in its initial late-nineteenth-century rise to prominence, the imaging (and imagining) of the "new" Berlin has been coupled with the return of the Federal government and Germany's tentative steps at reasserting itself as an active participant in the international political arena. As a the capital of a newly re-united Germany, Berlin's projection of a youthful imagery is an asset in attracting an influx of tourists. Although many older tourists visit the city, it is particularly attractive for the young. In this regard it is important to note the annual Love Parade which attracts some one million ravers for an event closely associated with Berlin's burgeoning club and music scene. All of this underscores Berlin's marketing of itself as a city for the young, cosmopolitan and dynamic and, in many respects, Berlin is "younger" than it has been since the turn of the last century. Local bookstores display prominent "Berlin" sections marketing everything from postcards and city guides to videos of late pre-war "Großstadt" films (including Lang's afore-mentioned *Metropolis*) and early post-war "ruin" eatures to Wim Wender's "Sky over Berlin" and the trendy, techno "Run Lola Run". Included in this filmic representation of the city are recent productions that can be understood both as films proper and as a means by which the city markets itself. These include Hubertus Siegert's *Berlin Babylon* (2001), which documents the construction of many of the most prominent projects of the mid- to late 1990's as well as the just-released remake (2002) of Walter Ruttmann's 1927 classic, *The Symphony of a Great City*. Ideological divisions between those of the former east and west may still run deep, but the fabrication of the "new" Berlin, both as fact and fiction, is a collective and popular effort.

III: ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION AND URBANISM IN BERLIN

The German architectural education generally places a far greater emphasis on urban issues and contextualization than its American counterparts. Moreover, there is a great deal of exchange between the university and the work environment. In Berlin this gains in immediacy and has obvious advantages. To students, it is self-evident that urban issues are germane to architectural discourse; thereby tempering their fascination with both the idealized architectural object and the image of the singular architect. Most students are highly sensitive to the changing urban configurations of the "everyday" that have accompnied Berlin's rapid post-reunification development.

However, if the combination of an energetic environment understanding – even promoting – itself as an urban laboratory and a sensitized student body sounds ideal for developing a program in urban studies, there are reservations that deserve mention. Despite the drama associated with the reconstruction of Berlin, the leading figures directing this effort exhibit a conservative cast and truly innovative thinking is often lacking.

This conservatism is easily transported into the university via the German tenure system, which greatly favors practitioners and technocrats over those engaged in other forms of research and architectural production. Thus the reciprocity between university and city often serves less to vitalize the urban debate than to diminish the university's ability to develop a critical voice. For students, the emphasis on *praxis* and the relative paucity of courses in history, theory and criticism denies them the tools that they might use in developing alternative points of view. To the extent that alternatives are developed, they are often highly subjective and, as such, finally bow to conservative pragmatism. While this may prepare students for an easy transition to the office, it does little to develop critical abilities-including those necessary for urban studies. This is particularly true in a city concerned with trying to define itself anew and wishing to avoid simplistic replication of existing forms of knowledge.

IV: THE "PROGRAM FOR URBAN PROCESSES" AT THE UDK BERLIN

In the topography of Germany's higher education, the "academies" distinguish themselves from the mainstream Technical Universities and Polytechnics (Fachhochschule) and offer some fundamental advantages. Smaller and more flexible than their brethren, the academies are often more exploratory in their approach to architecture and urbanism. Whereas the larger universities emphasize technical skills and, currently under extreme financial pressure, are developing new programs in areas such as real-estate management, the academies are focussing on conceptual skills directed towards the new information technologies. In part, this is a realistic response on the part of the academies to develop unique and competitive profiles.

Berlin's University of the Arts (*Universität der Künste* or UdK, formerly HdK) is no exception. Originating with the renowned *Akademie der Künste* (Berlin's oldest academic institution), the UdK has produced some of Berlin's most progressive contemporary architectural luminaries. Administrative and financial reform requirements of the mid-1990s prompted the Department of Architecture to reorganize as the Department of Design (*Fachbereich Gestaltung*), allowing it to more easily integrate into other departments, including film, graphics, fashion and music. It has also initiated a number of experimental programs addressing the design demands of the new economy. Interdisciplinarity is encouraged and curriculum requirements grant much latitude to students' exploration of fields beyond their major. Thus, although a critical stance towards archi-tectural and urban production lacks the degree of theorization characteristic of American schools, it can be argued that the constant exchange between departments and disciplines fosters a productive critical distance towards any given discipline. Underlying the desire for this exchange is the strong conviction that the architectural profession is undergoing a profound transformation and that, with the completion of the last phase of post-war reconstruction initiated by reunification, Germany is no longer able to employ great numbers of architectural graduates. Indeed, many young German architectural graduates spend much of their early careers working abroad.

The "Program for Urban Processes both reflects this period of transformation and avoidance of the term "urban design" in favor of "urban processes" was decided upon after much discussion: we felt the former placed too much emphasis on the architectural tradition of a singular, controlling vision rather than an integrative one. Similarly, within the trajectory of urban history, the connotations associated with *Städtebau* (literally, "city building"), are closely situated to a concern for form alone, thus obscuring the political, economic and social forces shaping urban environments. On the one hand, the Program for Urban Processes steers an academic course in which conceptions of the city and urban design are pursued in their historical and cultural contexts while, on the other hand, it is also follows a creative or artistic direction. "Culture" is understood as having an empirical component (economic, social and political facts) as well as a more subjective and ephemeral one. The latter is most aptly described as the "urban imaginary", partaking of literature, film, advertisements and, increasingly, city marketing. To us these aspects are instrumental in constructing an "image" of the urban. In this context, the "image" of the city not only serve as an instrument of urban analysis (Kevin Lynch, Fredric Jameson), but also serves to literally "construct" another vision of the urban.

To appreciate what is at stake with these terminological differentiations, it is important to mention the tradition of urban design in Germany which, in the 1930's, linked planning concepts to the image of the city in terms of the so-called "Leitbild". The *Leitbild* was intended to organize social "value-scales" in a visual representation in a manner that would serve as the "basis for an all-encompassing view of the desired spatial order". Translated into the typological representations of the city characteristic of the *Schwarzplan* (figure-ground plan), this instrument of design found particular favor in post-war urban planning. In the late 1940's, the experiences of the war in Germany were grafted onto the *Leitbild* resulting in the concept of, literally, the "ordered and loosened-up" (gegliederte und aufgelockerte) city. This vision of the city reintroduced large amounts of green spaces intended to "humanize" the harsh realities of urban life. Since the 1960's, this concept has been slowly replaced by its diametrical opposite: the notion of "urbanity through density". Intermittantly criticized as exclusionary, the *Leitbild* has gained new ground in relation to the recent emphasis on the "sustainable city". If the *Leitbild* was first conceived of as an instrument of state planning, it has recently been appropriated by financially-pressed cities as an aid in city marketing, altering the concept of the *Leitbild*. If it was first intended to represent a scientific and quantitative

planning methodology, it is now applied as a qualitiative characterization of the city. With this qualitative dimension the historical and cultural dimension of the city gain substantially in importance as cities such as Berlin seek, literally, to construct their new identities. It is out of this re-conception of the *Leitbild* that artificial distinctions such as those between the "European" and "American" city have arisen and it is polarities such as these that we have sought to avoid. As we mentioned at the opening of this paper, we are more interested in locating correspondences between two cities often considered as opposite, than we are in reaffirming unproductive intellectual conventions.

V: THE PROJECT "CONSTRUCTING THE URBAN IMAGINARY: BERLIN - LOS ANGELES"

This project addresses the extent to which the "image" of the city serves, or can serve, as the motor for urban development in the context of a globalized economic and information network. The aspects exmained are, first, the manner in representational idioms are utilized as analytical instruments and second, the manner in which they are introduced as literal instruments of urban planning, design and marketing and, third, the manner in which they are deployed in the construction of the "urban imaginary". As mentioned above, the current discussion in Germany concerning the *Leitbilder* of urban development contrasts the "European" with the "American" city. In this discussion Berlin is considered as the paradigmatic "centralized" city whereas Los Angeles is understood as the paradigmatic example of the decentralized city characterized by endless sprawl. In contradistinction to this polarized conception of these sister cities, our interest is in locating not only historical parallels in the development of the two cities, but ways in which they can profit from each other in their furture development. Using Berlin as both an empirical case study and a conceptual starting point we are pursuing exchanges with universities in Los Angeles that make this manner of dialogue and exchange possible.

Thus, in relation to sustainable urban development, it has thus become apparent that Berlin is more appropriately conceived of as a polycentric network located within a regional context than as a centralized entity. In contradistinction, Los Angeles offers opportunities for locating models in which its expansive horizontal growth can be counteracted.In the area of city marketing, Berlin inceasingly utilizes media such as film and the internet in which the development of the city is itself presented as an "exhibition". Berlin had already established a history of this manner of exhibition with its various IBAs, but the most recent example of this exceeded all previous standards with concept of the "Baustelle-Schaustelle" in which the city's vast construction sites were presented as great "events" rather than as disruptions in the everday life of the city. Similar kinds of strategies serving urban development have also been developed in Los Angeles.

Given this introduction, in the closing minutes of this talk we will present examples of how design students of the Program for Urban Processes have coped with this broad-based approach to the comparative study of "Constructing the Urban Imaginary: Berlin-Los Angeles".

Thank you.