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The Appeal of the Berlin Metropolis (July 6, 2006)

A cultural commentator evokes the many voices of the new Berlin and describes the appeal of the new/old German capital, whose strength seems to lay in its very deficiencies, and which has a sort of edginess that is particularly attractive to daring, young creative types.

City of Gamblers

Berlin has lost everything: its industry, its subsidies, and the illusions of the nineties. And now? How are 3.4 million Berliners supposed to make a living? "Berlin must become Las Vegas," says the architect Hans Kollhoff. Encounters and observations in a sobered city.

"We're going to Berlin!" – the battle cry of soccer fans throughout the land provides an answer to a practical question: where do you go when something as big as the World Cup final is coming up? Every great joy wants its place. Every yearning. "To Berlin," that's the myth, the hype, the pull of every metropolis worthy of the name: Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden! Everything here is bigger, prettier, taller.

To be sure, in the case of Berlin this pull is paradoxical. After all, the city itself is exhausted and heavy laden. Hopelessly indebted. And nothing on the horizon that could provide a livelihood for 3.4 million Berliners. No *big daddy* will come and, let's say, fund 20,000 new jobs. When Berlin lost the Wall over night and then lost its subsidies immediately thereafter, there was a rude awakening. Here, the postwar era only ended in 1989. Only then did Berlin understand, in a painful series of realizations, that Berlin no longer existed – the dramatic, fantastic Berlin that the peoples of the world had once gazed upon.

In those first, wild years after 1989 it was talked up as New Berlin. People moved there. Took jobs. Conceived of projects. Built. Until they noticed that it wasn't enough. The sandy soil of the March [of Brandenburg] was irrigated with millions, and it simply sucked them up. You can barely turn around before the sand is dry again. So parched is this city, so thirsty for meaning and money; it swallows and swallows, but the great Berlin-thing is not taking off.

The mood took a turn for the worse. From that point on Berlin was talked down. Its cab drivers. Its loafing youth with their latte macchiatos. Its partying mayor with the tired-looking eyes. It was

the season of the tractates of hatred against Berlin. Only one question remains: why are we (nearly all of us) still here anyway?

Because the pull remains. In fact, it's even increasing. One million, six-hundred thousand Berliners have left the city since 1991; 1.66 million people have moved to Berlin – a veritable population exchange! It seems that with every billion Berlin adds to its debt more people around the world embrace it. Is it delight in the dilapidated chic of a former world city? A sixth sense for cheap rents? Or just the sense of being in the right place? Were the Berlin-adventurers of the nineties too impatient – is Berlin's hour still yet to come?

There are those who believe as much. They even move here, a checkered caravan of painters, pensioners, investors. Artists from London, New York, and Paris, who are tired of working there only to pay for the exorbitant rents. West German pensioners, who are exchanging row houses far removed from any sort of culture for city apartments in Berlin, so that, at the very least, they can be where the operas, theaters, and great museums are. Old enemies, too, are buying in. More than a few Bonn residents who supported the initiative against the government move now own apartments in the once hotly contested Berlin. American actors who've shot films here stay because they like the city – the gentle roughness of its old houses and young faces, the cracked charm of Berlin.

Of course, the prices. Nowhere in the Western world can you live in a large city in such a hip and opulent fashion, and at the same time so cheaply. Nowhere else is space so affordable. If there's anything that Berlin has too much of, it's time and space.

A short stroll down Schönhauser Allee evokes images of Asian cities, with their small-scale commerce (an art of survival), their backpacking tourists in search of pretty girls and cheap beer. Bangkok images. A tiny internet- and telephone-café. A "China Pearl." Tattoo studios. Massages. Clothes for the hippie, the hooligan. A gun shop, a remnants shop, a hostel for backpackers. More mini-cafés with computers, with this and that. Business activity is carried out in the sunlight on a chair in front of the door, with a cigarette and the inevitable latte macchiato.

This, more is less, is what Ettina and Sonja also had in mind when they finished their training as fashion designers. A label called Klonk, a store on Helmholtzplatz in Prenzlauer Berg for 300 Euro per month, a small, off-beat collection. Things you'd wear yourself. Customers you'd chat with for hours. A pleasant, relaxed Berlin life among their own kind.

And that's also how it was until this Japanese guy – who's actually French – walked into the store one day. This Yann came in because he liked the décor. Foliage on the ceiling, paper radios hanging down, paper TVs. He liked the clothes, too. He told the two young women that he worked for a Japanese firm that had 70 clothing shops in Japan and others in New York and elsewhere, and he invited them to travel to Tokyo to design a new shop there. A shop like this one here. Like in Berlin.

Now it exists; the two set it up in Tokyo. It's called "Wut Berlin." And Ettina and Sonja have become Ms. Schultze and Ms. Lotz. Business women, 26 and 31 years old, with a new store in the neighborhood Mitte. It's only the beginning. They'll see how it goes. But they've made the leap from *low budget* in Prenzlauer Berg to the *high speed* course of a small, global Berlin fashion company.

"We've become more professional," they say, "harder." It's remarkable how naturally the two operate all over the world. The fierce competition with New York cultivated by the Berlin of the eighties still seems nothing but strange to them. Many of their friends live in New York, or come from there and live here now. Or even from Tokyo or somewhere else. "When you say in New York that you're from Berlin you get an excited, enthusiastic "Wow!" That's the reality today.

Something else is remarkable – their lack of illusions and the clarity which the two see themselves. "We're selling the Berlin hype to the world."

Ettina Schultze has noticed a peculiar phenomenon. "Berlin's reputation precedes it. Its reputation actually creates its own reality, instead of the other way around. Berlin's reputation makes people all over the world see something in the city that only comes true because they believe it."

A thoughtful investment banker with offices in Vienna and Berlin is sitting in a café on the shady Ludwigkirchplatz in the western part of the city at nine in the morning, when Berlin's air is still fresh. He has just come from London. "The first ones to buy real estate in Berlin on a large scale were the Americans and British," says Peter Forstner. "By now, nearly all of Europe is buying, the Danes, Irish, and Austrians are especially active, but so are the Russians and Israelis. Mostly investment funds."

The demand, says Forster, is so great that Berlin is a veritable seller's market at the moment. "The seller can be selective: would he rather sell to someone from Britain or Vienna?"

Forster has also noted mental peculiarities among the investors. "Anglo-Saxons don't like to buy in Kreuzberg because of the high percentage of foreigners. They prefer Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte. Austrians don't care about that."

But what should one make of this global run on Berlin? Is it the dawn of an imminent Berlin upswing or merely an error of stupid capital – you know, it always runs to the place where prices are lowest and then wonders when the profits don't materialize.

"Actually," says Forstner, "you should stay away from Berlin. Actually, you should think: investor beware! Who's supposed to pay the rents you need to make a profit? Berlin's purchasing power is weak, its demographic curve is declining, and, additionally, all the graffiti scares people away. In Hamburg everything is immaculate, city cleaners walk around and pick up every scrap."

Actually. But? “But Berlin tourism is booming. The Berlin hotel industry is booming; it has the highest growth rates in Europe.” In fact, even more luxury hotels are under construction, for example, the Hotel de Rome on Gendarmenmarkt. The pull, then, the myth, the hype: we’re going to Berlin! Is that it? Is that how investors operate, too?

What should an honest broker say to that; he is not a prophet. “Berlin,” says Forstner, “continues to have something ambivalent about it. I think it’ll take another ten years before the face of the new Berlin becomes recognizable. But it’s clear: the investors who are going there now are looking at something other than the naked analysis of the situation.”

Something other. Ettina and Sonja had described it in similar terms. In this sense, investors and the subculture are kindred spirits of the Berlin utopia. You can buy cheaply in the Berlin ambivalence if you have millions – and you can float in it just as nicely if you’re young and have no money but lots of ideas. There are a lot of stores like Klonk. Those who want it super cheap and aren’t afraid of the risk of having a lease terminated on short notice choose an intermediate-use contract in an unrenovated pre-fab construction or an old building in Friedrichshain, Prenzlauer Berg, and slowly also in Wedding. The leaders of the creative crowd move from neighborhood to neighborhood, from street to street, and the baggage train of brokers and investors follows close behind and rents the renovated places to people with more business savvy: law offices, galleries, Indian or Thai restaurants. That’s also how it was in New York City in the eighties.

Poverty as a location advantage, then. Cheap plus myth. Berlin mayor Klaus Wowereit gave it a more party-like ring: “Poor but sexy” was the suggestion he made in the glamour-magazine *Gala* for the identity of the new Berlin. Is this the declaration of surrender of a city that was once a metropolis? Perhaps it’s simply the Berlin way of arriving at reality. In any case, it gives you an idea of just how much Berlin is changing right now.

First, poverty is not longer a disgrace. Berlin is not longer embarrassed about it. It’s wearing its financial indigence like a fake fur.

Second, the era of hollow phrases is over. The slogans of the Berlin propaganda of the nineties – bridge between East and West, soon four, five, six million residents – have faded away. Berlin is what it is. Except, what is it?

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It is summer, and to sit on such an evening on the square of a large city, a square one has personally created, under one’s own high colonnades, is a rare pleasure. Its architect, Hans Kollhoff, has strolled over from his office near Kurfürstendamm to order his favorite pasta – the one with asparagus – at the Italian restaurant, and to watch from the colonnades the hustle and bustle of the residents and their children, who hang out here until into the night. Just checking to

see how his piazza is doing. He pushed it through in years of struggle against the Greens, who wanted everything here to be green, what else.

Kollhoff is one of the architects who have shaped the new Berlin. In the quarrel over what it should look like, he holds a firm position: the city of houses; the stone house in the stone city – as an address among addresses. Not a bunch of colorful, unrelated works of art by egomaniacal architects. It is a plea for a dress code. Essentially a moral position, for the aesthetic rule makes society possible in the first place.

If you wanted to imagine his ideal city figuratively, it would be a society in suits and evening gowns, and anyone who wanted to set himself apart would do so by wearing especially well-fitting clothes. Not, for example, by piercing and tattooing himself. His symbol of Berlin is the exceedingly elegant, dark red building on Potsdamer Platz – the brick-Gothic antithesis to the glassy Sony high-rise that faces it.

And then Hans Kollhoff responds to the question of whether he sees a chance for Berlin:

“Yes. Las Vegas.”

Berlin, he feels, is most likely to have a chance if it becomes like the gambling city in Nevada. “It lies in the pampa like Las Vegas in the desert. This artificial thing has to be supported.”

But is the complete artificiality of Las Vegas not the exact opposite of a conservative idea like that of a city of stone?

“What people have lamented for a hundred years,” says Kollhoff, “that Berlin lacks the substance of London, is its very advantage. Educational laboratory and entertainment spot, there’s something tremendously contemporary about this combination. Creativity plus cheap rents. I spend a lot of time in Italy. The Italians are totally crazy about Berlin.”

For him, the priorities are obvious: “Expand festivals. An opera festival, why not? Don’t close any opera house; that’s the trump card we hold. And strengthen the casino – put a really big one in Berlin. I know, there’s a federalism problem when I say this; Baden-Baden will be up in arms.” But the capital was eviscerated after the war. “The federalist success of the Federal Republic came at the expense of Berlin.” Government, banks, industry – everything fled westwards. Bonn, Frankfurt, Munich, and Stuttgart divided up the skin of the Berlin bear and thus laid the foundation for new wealth.

“Nobody can and wants to undo this, but there must be an equalization.” The incumbent mayor thought much the same and brought suit before the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe, arguing that the federal government should pay off Berlin’s debt, which has exploded since reunification and grown to the fantastic sum of 60 billion Euro – the city alone could not do it, in

spite of the harsh savings program of its finance senator, Thilo Sarrazin. The decision is expected as early as this summer.

Incidentally, what does Kollhoff think about the mayor and his partying-style?

“Wowereit – basically everyone is happy that he’s here. He’s doing more for the city than it might appear. He brought Berlin out of the stale East-West atmosphere; that’s his historical achievement. He lives and operates beyond East-West categories.”

A slightly audacious smile appears. “Wowereit is a Las Vegas type.” Hans Kollhoff means this in an approving way.

How porous the city still is! After an unprecedented wave of construction. If you walk south from Brandenburg Gate, in the direction of the new Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz, you’ll be offered a view of an open horizon. As if the city ended behind the swath of grass that spreads out between the high-rises on both squares. Berlin seems to stop back there. There’s a similar effect when you step out of the new train station (which, incidentally, should not be called Main Station, like in Bielefeld, but Berlin Central). You stand in front of a broad, paved expanse that’s reminiscent of empty fairgrounds. In the distance come the domes: Reichstag, Sony Center, all kinds of portable festival tents. “Africa” is written on one of them.

Such phantasmagorical emptiness opens up in many places. No, Berlin is not too tight in the waist. It is too big for itself, still. The city was so big at one point – the political, social, industrial center of an important empire – that the years since 1990, despite enormous investments, have not been enough to fill it up again. With life, businesses, buildings.

Even where it was possible to fill the emptiness, at least architecturally – as in the densely packed Friedrichstraße, which, in the summertime, shimmers with heat, the buzzing of cell phones, and the clickety-clack of heels, just like any other large urban avenue in the world – floors stand empty. Here the emptiness has merely been packed into stone boxes. That’s unpleasant for those investors who put their money into the many new office buildings during the construction-mad nineties – and pleasant for those who are arriving only now, when everything is nice and cheap.

But there are at least two Berlins – the one inside the “Ringbahn”[1], and the one outside. The “Ringbahn” separates the inner city, where myths and investments are flourishing and images of Berlin are broadcast to the entire world, from the outer portions of city, where hotels are called “Berliner Bär” and people are engaged in uncool activities like building motorcycles and row houses and selling geraniums at the garden store.

[1] The Ringbahn, or “Circle Line,” is the commuter railway line that runs in a circle around Berlin’s city center – eds.

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Out here there's even still industry. Not everyone has left. In his wood-paneled conference room from the 1930s, Gero Wiese, the managing director of Gillette, explains how this works. Gillette has been a German-American company since the prewar period; today it's part of Proctor & Gamble. Simply put, Boston supplies the beards of the western hemisphere and Berlin-Tempelhof the beards of the eastern hemisphere with razor blades. A good one thousand people work in each of these two parent plants. After the Wall was built, Gillette, like many Berlin companies, also moved some of its technical operations to Western Germany. But only four years later, in 1965, the company returned to West Berlin. "Leaving was an overreaction."

And today – globalization, the lower labor costs in Eastern Europe?

Wiese nods. No question. Then he explains the special situation of his company. "Our machines, the ones that manufacture razor blades, contain twenty computers. For that we need highly qualified workers; we have them here. In Eastern Europe we have to put them though a lengthy training process first."

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The directions for the final meeting say: midnight. Penthouse, open door to the terrace. An expansive view of Berlin. White wine. Ernst Freiberger is sitting at the table and reflecting about life, what matters and what doesn't, and about Berlin – what works and what doesn't.

Life is simple. When Freiberger had achieved much, very much, as a Bavarian-Berliner entrepreneur – sold his grocery empire, developed the enormous area at the *Spreebogen* [Spree bend], 150,000 gross square meters of floor space, at that time the largest construction project in the city, rented to, among others, the Federal Ministry of the Interior – he said to himself, "now I'll go traveling for a year." It turned into two-and-a-half years: 1998 to 2001. He visited every continent, ninety countries, kept a diary, and wrote a book about every trip. "Only for myself." And – what matters?

"What remains of my travels is not the most beautiful beach, the most beautiful women, the best food. What remains is family, religion, hospitality."

What remains is a man of around fifty, whose group of companies brings in revenues of hundreds of millions of Euro per year, who, on the side, seeks to promote dialogue between the world's religions, the representatives of which he invites to his Bavarian hometown of Amerang every year, a fruit of his travels.

And what is, what will become of Berlin, his chosen home for nearly thirty nears now?

“I am investing vigorously in Berlin.” When he asks himself what the city is supposed to live from, industry and financial services, he says, are not part of the answer. Other cities have staked out those claims. And so Ernst Freiberger’s Berlin business ideas offer a picture of what might succeed here.

“The growth markets are the creative sphere, tourism – and the field of medicine. I know something about that; I own a group of hospitals in Bavaria. Right now I’m in the process of planning a clinic in Berlin.”

Something big, of course. In addition, he’s rebuilding his Spreebogen area, the hotel, the restaurant, a doctors’ center. Together, that creates between 500 and 600 jobs. On top of this comes his new large-scale project: the former Main Telegraph Office on Museum Island. “I’ve asked Helmut Jahn to take over the planning.” The well-known architect from Chicago. “I wouldn’t be doing things like this if I didn’t believe in Berlin.”

The Berlin that’s beginning to take shape is one that comes after industry and after subsidies. And after the illusions of the nineties. It will be a city that will have nothing to do with the postwar German ideal of similar living standards everywhere, indeed, with equality. One part Bangkok. One part Las Vegas. One part Tempelhof. One part Berlin, D.C. And if things go well, one part high tech on top of it. With people like Professor Bernd Michel. With heart centers and other highly specialized clinics that attract rich patients from around the world. With festivals, operas, and luxury hotels for the evenings and the nights. And with tattooed lads from the suburbs who wander by the terrace of the Adlon Hotel and stare at the guests and make obscene comments. Yes, that, too. That already exists.

Enduring the contradictions between poor and super rich, allotment garden [*Schrebergarten*] and place-to-be, absolute world and absolute province, new Russians and old Zehlendorfers, Anatolians and members of the Philharmonic is something the city has been practicing for sixteen years. It is really good at training. It has newly trained itself to have a good dose of straight-forwardness and equanimity, old Berlin virtues.

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Things don’t have to resemble a funfair, as they did during the days of World Cup, things can also be solidly middle class. Isn’t the Philharmonic playing tonight at the Waldbühne? The Berliners love these annual summer concerts in their own way. They reach into their picnic baskets and take out pieces of fried chicken, red wine, and good cheer when the sun sets and the blue of the sky grows darker, and then, at the very end, the orchestra plays “Berliner Luft” and everyone whistles the snappy chorus. Berlin is blissful, then, at peace with itself; then it is Avustribüne and Sportpalast waltz and Herbert von Karajan, all at the same time. Viva Las Vegas!

Source: Wolfgang Büscher, “Stadt der Spieler” [“City of Gamblers”], *Die Zeit*, July 6, 2006.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap