

H-Net Reviews

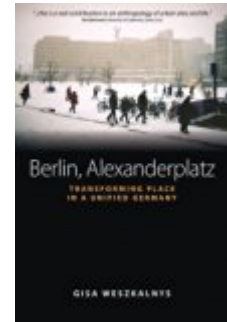
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gisa Weszkalnys. *Berlin, Alexanderplatz: Transforming Place in a Unified Germany*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010. xi + 214 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-723-5.

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Alexanderplatz Lives!

If in 1927 Alfred Döblin's Alexanderplatz was "a place where incessant movement, demolition and rebuilding are the only constants," Gisa Weszkalnys's Alexanderplatz around 2002 is testimony to "the remarkable obduracy" of the site "in the face of transformation" (pp. 10, 171). Of course the trams cross the square, commuters arrive and depart, shoppers go to the mall, and tourists line up to ride up the TV tower, which has become the most compelling icon of the new Berlin, but the days when streetcars stopped every twenty seconds are long gone. Completely redesigned in the late 1960s, the Alexanderplatz that Berliners encounter today was "intended as an exemplar of an emphatically modern socialist city," a center for social life as well as socialist display (p. 11). But since reunification, Alexanderplatz's "socialist-modernist design" no longer matches the vision of planners of the new capital. It not only represents "a break with Berlin's historical structures," which synchronizes Berlin with the proportions and texture of a late-nineteenth-century European city, but the gigantic open space is simply "a waste of valuable inner city land" (p. 12). The East German architecture critic Wolfgang Kil captures western perceptions of the eastern place just right when he sarcastically notes: "The high-rise colossuses are standing around like erratic boulders. Everything suddenly seems to have turned out a few sizes too big and too coarse. All of a sudden, one has the impression, an unpleasant wind was wheezing across the square" (p. 73). As Weszkalnys notes, since 1990, "Alexanderplatz was (and is) a contemporary past" (p. 166), out of place in time and space in such a way as to

invite new ordering schemes. Weszkalnys undertakes an ethnographic study of the "Planwerk Innenstadt," developed in 1999 to re-urbanize and revitalize the center of Berlin and, in particular, to reintegrate Alexanderplatz into the spatial and chronological measure of the new capital.

Although the ethnography is a bit dated since it was undertaken in the years 2002 and 2003, since which many micro generations of urban transformation have occurred, and although the ambitious plans for Alexanderplatz were eventually shelved, Weszkalnys undertakes a fascinating exploration of the planning process, the intellectual debate and political contest over reconstruction, and the multiple roles of citizenship in the reunified city. The Planwerk debate took place in a context of a series of animated debates: the "Schloss debate," which is now resolved in favor of the *Schloss*, the "Holocaust memorial debate," the debate regarding the future of the Palast der Republik (no future since 2008), and many others which were mostly resolved in favor of planning something new rather than preserving something old, as the forest of cranes puncturing Berlin's horizon in the late 1990s and early 2000s indicates. It seemed that Karl Scheffler's century-old quip about the city fated "forever to become and never to be" was never more true than in the present day (p. 31). But Weszkalnys carefully lays the diverse plans over each other to find rather uniform ideas about how Berlin should display its global and European connectedness, which required late-nineteenth-century proportion, relatively high urban density, and a

restoration of much of the old street layout so that the kinks of discontinuity would be ironed out by the new-old plans of continuity. Unfortunately, Weszkalnys never quite tells us what they had in mind for poor old Alexanderplatz, which ultimately survived the onslaught and stayed pretty much as it was. The trams are back, the train station hums, Peter Behrens's historic ensembles have been renovated, and "an unpleasant wind" is still "wheezing across the square" (p. 73).

Weszkalnys most important contribution, however, is not to put forward an argument about how West Berlin colonized East Berlin, although there is much to support that view, or even to suggest how quickly modern places become outdated in new temporal frameworks, which certainly is the case for Alexanderplatz, but to explore the planning process, the conceptions of the planners, and the multiple roles of citizens. Emptiness, once understood as such, becomes a major challenge to the planners' imagination, which had about eighty thousand square meters to work with, whereby the old Alexanderplatz in the Weimar Republic, which Behrens tried mightily to redesign, had only eighteen thousand. "Empty spaces," Weszkalnys writes, are "lands to be colonized" and their inhabitants "are conceived as 'people without history.' These are spaces to be tamed, developed and exploited" (pp. 63-64). Up-to-date Berlin planners worked closely with commercial interests in proper neoliberal fashion and seemed impatient, even surprised, that "artistic, cultural and scholarly attempts to *preserve* emptiness" seemed to require Berlin to do what no other European city would, that is, leave valuable land largely empty (p. 62). Of course, the result was a new emptiness since projects fell through, vacancies soared, so that Leerstand was simply updated rather than erased. If people

in the West believed that "Alexanderplatz is just terrible," people in the East were more apt to note that, "Alexanderplatz *has become* terrible!" (p. 165).

But planners are people too. "Since the populism of the 1960s and 1970s, which affected governmental rationalities [and] planning practice," planners try "to embody a view" which incorporates the "awareness of their own humanity and the relevance of experientially grounded knowledge" (pp. 162-163). Citizens were pulled into the process and pushed themselves into the planning stages. This was partly simply to legitimate the planning process in which the planners ultimately had the final say. But even so, as Weszkalnys argues, Planwerk enabled new sorts of activism around conceptions of place, which subverted and augmented the final plans. Even rationalized, "there were multiple translations at work" (p. 98). Weszkalnys carefully sorts out different registers of power; there is no clear-cut distinction between the systematicity of the planner newly arrived from the metropolitan West and the resistance of the "native" tenant from the colonial East. Weszkalnys is not against planning as such. This more differentiated analysis of the different roles and rhetorics of the protagonists helps explain the collapse of the subject of her marvelous book, Planwerk itself. "What some might consider the superimposition of the socialist intervention and current capitalist reversals in Berlin's cityscape," Weszkalnys is "tempted to label elasticity. What others describe as patchwork," she would "rather call cohabitation. What many see as a market bust," might simply be obduracy. "In the end, it is Alexanderplatz that makes people live things simultaneously" so that Alexanderplatz is the recognizable hero of Weszkalnys's book as it was for Döblin's (p. 172).

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