



Miriam Paeslack. *Constructing Imperial Berlin: Photography and the Metropolis.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 216 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5179-0295-7.

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Published on H-Urban (November, 2019)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari (Marywood University)

In 2008 the Palast der Republik, an architectural showpiece of the former East Berlin, was demolished to make way for the reincarnation of an eighteenth-century palace that once stood in the same place. The new old building aims to serve as the cultural center of a city already rich with fraught monuments to contested histories. According to the project's official website, the palace will revive the "authentic orientation" of surrounding monuments and the nearby Unter den Linden, an elegant nineteenth-century boulevard now overrun with tourist shops and a wax museum. The website does not mention how this historicist assertion might disorient other buildings from Berlin's history, such as the nearby television tower and the Tränenpalast (Palace of Tears), which was a border crossing between East and West Berlin and the site of too many separations of friends and family during the Cold War. Certain parts of history are worth remembering (and commercializing), while others, it seems, are erased.

Miriam Paeslack only briefly refers to the second life of Berlin's palace in her study, *Constructing Imperial Berlin: Photography and the Metropolis*. Yet these events—still playing out more than ten years after the Palast der Republik's removal—are an important perspective from which to examine the architectural ambitions of imperial

Berlin. Anxieties about the curation of Berlin's history are apparently nothing new. From the late nineteenth century on, Berlin embraced change while consistently negotiating ways of commemorating its complicated past. Her study reveals that the era's photographic record makes it difficult to separate invented histories from authentic ones and reminds us that a city's historical narratives are always in flux.

Constructing Imperial Berlin addresses an era too often overlooked in the history of German photography. As Paeslack points out, photographers in Berlin rarely participated in avant-garde debates or claimed artistic ambitions. *Constructing Berlin* thereby has little to say about well-known photographers; Heinrich Zille is the most recognizable name included. Instead, it highlights the work of those in service to institutional and civic needs. Radical interventions in the appearance of architecture developed later in the Weimar period, but the photography of imperial Berlin could hardly be described as straightforward documents. Imperial Berlin and accompanying attempts to picture it might also be compared to Charles Marville's Paris in the 1860s or Berenice Abbott's New York of the 1930s. While opening the era up to such comparative conversations, Paeslack preserves a uniqueness about imperial Berlin's transition to modernity and its re-

relationship to photography. She writes, “Berlin’s development into a world city coincided with the instrumentalization of photography’s technological and aesthetic capacities” (p. xviii). In other words, Berlin and photography are dependent and intertwined. She convincingly argues that one could not have emerged without the other.

Around the turn of the century, Berlin competed with Paris and London as the cultural center of Europe while simultaneously rising as the most American of European cities. As Paeslack writes, Berlin was trying to find a “fragile balance between an open display of urban growth and wealth and attempts at anchoring the city in its historical roots” (p. xi). As much as the city of Berlin was in flux, there was also little consensus on the best way to photographically picture it. As Paeslack relates throughout her book, different strategies attempted to reach diverse audiences and to circulate varied messages about the city’s identity. She examines a wide range of photographic projects and formats—from panoramas to photographic portfolios and photogrammetry, an understudied technique of architectural measurement. While some offered a nostalgic image of a city with a picturesque history, other projects communicated a capital of industrial precision and fast-paced growth. The formats in which to photograph imperial Berlin were as inconsistent as the city itself.

In the first chapter, Paeslack examines how the city employed photography to create narratives for tourists and capture the experiences of this growing metropolis. Through her close analysis of a series of eighteen wide-angle panoramas published in 1901 and 1902, Paeslack addresses how they facilitate comparisons between old and new. No longer did the modern city seem to be organized as an organism, complete with a centralized heart and supplementary limbs. Rather, the city came to be understood as a system of interconnecting networks, emphasizing connections and energy transfers more than a hierarchy of

anatomical parts. Paeslack argues that photography was an apt way of visualizing the city as such a system. The panoramic view aligned with Berlin’s new elevated train station and its horizontal orientation to the world. This new perspective marked a shift from centralization to an emphasis on infrastructure and connectivity.

The city’s photographic image was often valued more than the buildings themselves. This becomes clear in chapter 2, which explores the close partnership between city architect Ludwig Hoffman and photographer Ernst von Brauchitsch. Through their collaboration, they pursued an image of Berlin that emphasized bourgeois comfort and progress. Paeslack argues that Brauchitsch was “central to crafting an image, and eventually to creating a legacy, for Hoffman” (p. 41). Brauchitsch’s photographs for Hoffmann’s architectural portfolio *Neubauten der Stadt Berlin* (1902) strayed from several rules of architectural photography by engaging space through human figures and their interaction. Paeslack offers several comparisons to other photographers to establish convincingly Brauchitsch’s distinct style. As mentioned at the end of the chapter, this partnership seems to anticipate the image consciousness of later modernist architects in astonishing ways.

Photography offered an opportunity to construct national unity and identity despite the reality of architectural projects. While photographers aimed to preserve their subjects technically and without emotion, Paeslack puts this goal in tension with the medium’s “magical qualities,” which allowed it to instill sentiments of nostalgia and national pride. Such a tension was a stake in the photogrammetric images of Albrecht Meydenbauer and the Royal Prussian Photogrammetric Institute, as Paeslack explores in the third chapter. Under Meydenbauer’s leadership, the institute undertook a project documenting the construction of an equestrian monument to Wilhelm I. The series of eight images begins with the demolition of a city castle to make way for the new

monument. Ironically, as Paeslack points out, the castle, “had been replaced by a monument that claims, through historicist design, a historicity that the original buildings had naturally possessed” (p. 85). On the one hand, the photogrammetric image epitomized photography as a tool of accurate commensurability. On the other, its serial imagery gestures to the new cinematic technologies and rising forms of spectacle and entertainment.

More than most cities, Berlin has embraced a constant cycle of construction and demolition as part of its image. This is perhaps best demonstrated by Paeslack’s use of the term “rubble photography” in the fourth chapter to describe the popular practice of depicting different stages of demolition. Paeslack accounts for the association of rubble photography with the more well-known *Trümmerfilme* or “rubble films” set in bombed-out German cities after World War II. The two forms are related but distinct, according to Paeslack. “Rubble photography emerged,” she writes, “amid urban restructuring rather than urban warfare” (p. 92). Yet there is something dramatic about the rubble imagery from both eras. Paeslack calls it “ruin porn,” a form of imagery that traffics between dramatic spectacle and nostalgia. Despite important differences between imperial photography and post-1945 film, the association nonetheless marks a consistent theme of destruction in Berlin representation.

Paeslack brings imperial Berlin into a meaningful dialogue with the present by showing how photography opened up architectural preservation to modern forms of spectacle and historicism. Architecture’s photographic representation plays an important role in history now, as it did around 1900. The completion of Berlin’s city palace, once expected in 2019, has been pushed back indefinitely. But despite its stalled construction, it has already been completed in photographic form. Detailed plans for the building are described next to digital renderings on the project’s website.

Three webcams are updated every fifteen minutes to track the painfully slow construction progress. As Paeslack’s *Constructing Imperial Berlin* suggests, perhaps the building’s photographic imagining is just as important as its eventual completion.

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Citation: Pepper Stetler. Review of Paeslack, Miriam. *Constructing Imperial Berlin: Photography and the Metropolis*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. November, 2019.

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