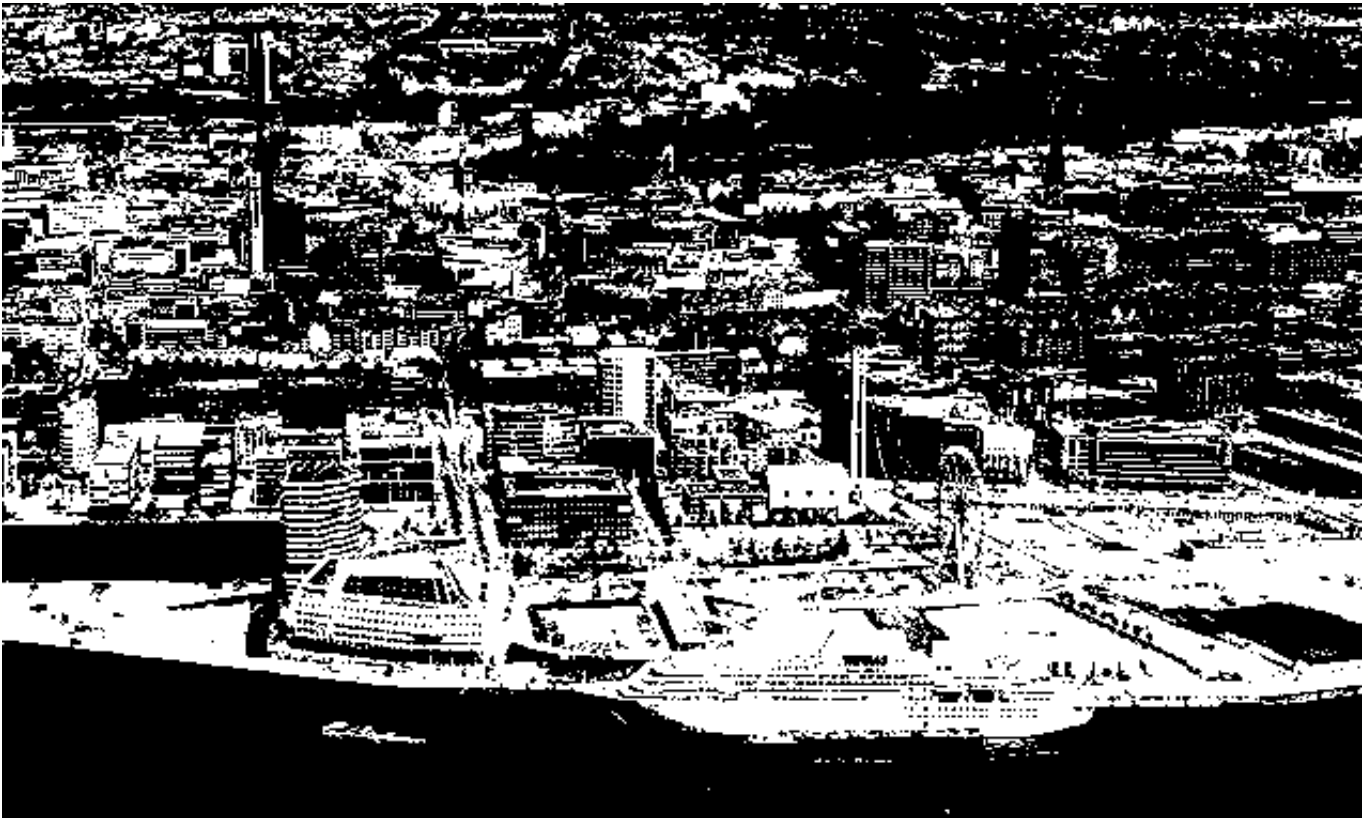


Urban Triage: Berlin's
International Building
Exhibition sheds light on
the city's uncertain urban
future

The Architectural Review
April 2014



Despite Berlin's undisputed status as a European cultural hub, its inner city is being anesthetised - and is in desperate need of a healthcare plan

“What’s wrong with Germany”? So reads the cover of the December-January issue of *Mark Magazine*. The glossy center section includes in-depth investigations of three of the country’s architectural mega-problems “steeped in scandal”: Berlin’s Brandenburg Airport, Hamburg’s Elbphilharmonie, and Stuttgart’s new central train station, S21. As the articles make clear, you’d be hard-pressed to find a singular answer to “what’s wrong” in each city, much less the country as a whole, but there are certainly some running themes – overambitious time frames, underambitious budgets, lack of governmental transparency, and many years wasted finger-pointing, for instance.

Luckily, over the last century German cities have developed an institutional apparatus to address precisely these problems. Behold the *Internationale Bauausstellung* (International Building Exhibition, or IBA): a citywide initiative exploring contemporary development issues in architecture and urban planning. Though generally instated by city governments, the IBA has become an umbrella for any number of public and private initiatives, serving the multiple purposes of showing off existing projects, initiating new ones, and inviting feedback from citizens and outsiders. Since the first edition in Darmstadt in 1901, there have been 13 IBAs of varying size and ambition across Germany – eight of which have taken off since just 2000. Over recent

decades the boundaries of what defines the format have become rather nebulous – even their German-ness: in 2010 the tri-city region of Basel jumped on board and started one too.

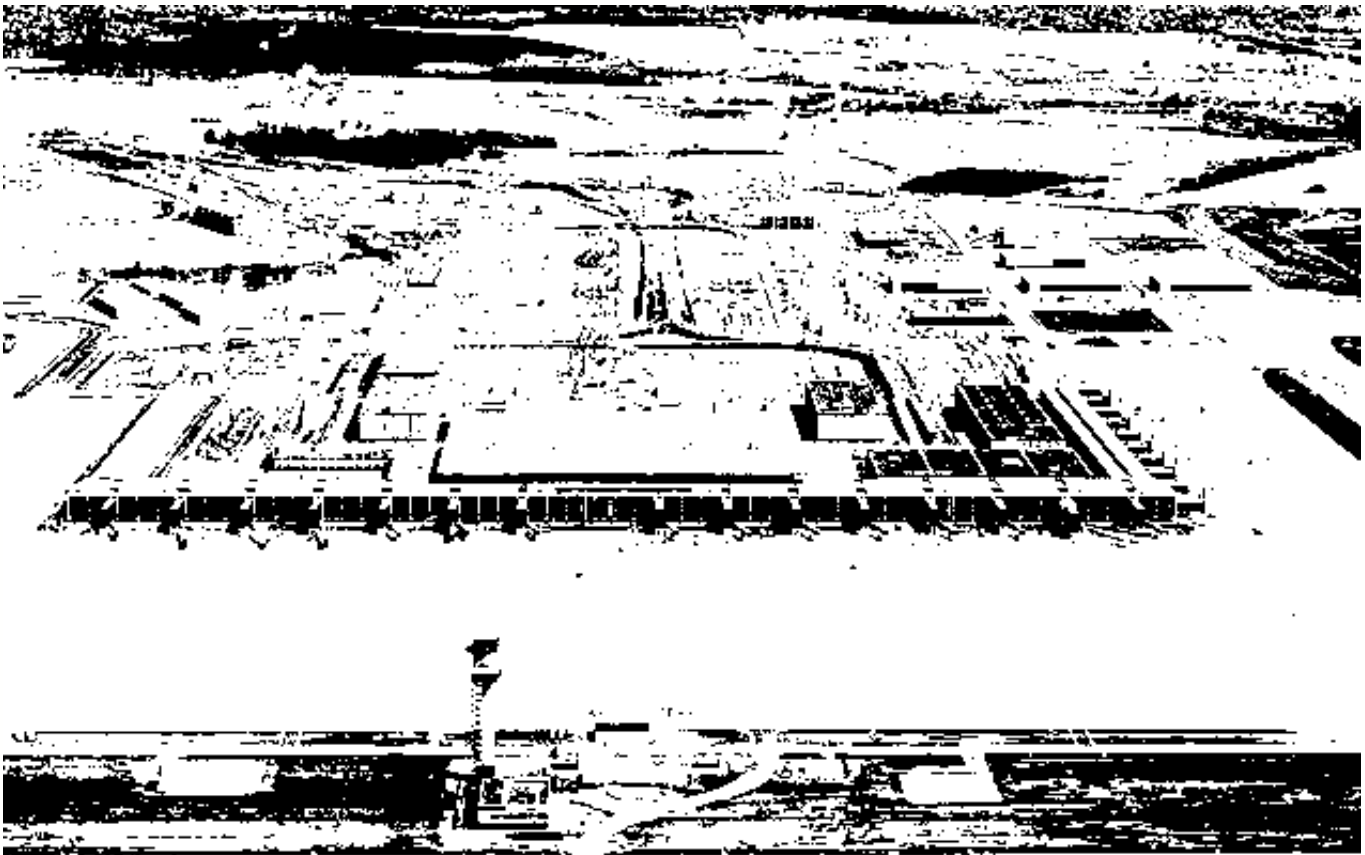


Interbau, was Berlin's major post-war reconstruction and face-saving plan, which took place from 1957-61 as part of the International Building Exhibition (IBA'57)

The most prominent IBA in history has certainly been Interbau, Berlin's major post-war reconstruction and face-saving plan, which took place from 1957-61. Interbau brought 53 international architects to redesign the destroyed Hansaviertel area, ushering in an era of postwar modernism along with 1.4 million visitors and their pocketbooks. Three decades later a second Berlin IBA was held (1984-87), turning its focus to "careful reconstruction" and renewal. Despite downplaying flashy new buildings, the second edition had some political similarities with the last – aiming to reestablish West Berlin as a progressive entity on the world stage in contrast to its eastern counterpart, and to perpetuate its image as the epicenter of German culture by updating its architectural profile.

Besides a ton of architecture (ranging from banal to bizarre to fantastic), both Berlin IBAs also built public platforms to assess urban growth and redevelopment in the midst of rapid local change and geopolitical shift. In

other words, precisely what needs to happen in Berlin today. And Berlin was indeed on track for a third IBA in 2020 – but in June 2013 the event was officially cancelled because the senate couldn't squeeze out enough money to move forward with the plan. To clarify: the 30 million euros of life support that are being pumped out of the city budget every month to maintain the comatose Brandenburg Airport have drained the city and left longstanding cultural institutions anemic. And this in a place where the culture industry is, and always has been, its lifeblood. Berlin, home of Interbau: “what’s wrong” with this picture?



Berlin's Brandenburg Airport aims to serve an area combined of 6 million inhabitants and become Germany's third busiest airport

Hamburg has just reached the end of a long, ambitious and well-funded IBA. A total of 63 projects are near completion, nourished by a combination of public and private funds amounting to about a billion euros. Over the last seven years, Hamburgers have gotten brand-new public plazas, schools, social housing, the world's first building with a “bioreactor façade,” and a baking museum in a historic windmill. Berlin is not and does not want to be Hamburg...but maybe Berlin is a tiny bit jealous. Berlin has spent the cost of five Hamburg IBAs and over 15 years on its stupid, useless airport.

No, an IBA, much less a bakery museum, is not the answer to “what’s wrong with Germany”; it could also be considered nationalist propaganda like any biennale, distracting from deep-seated, complex issues with new construction and fanfare. A case in point, over the last years Hamburg has seen growing conflict – even violent riots earlier this year – about the kind of gentrification that is always obliquely related to development. And concurrently (though financially unrelated) with the IBA, there’s the ongoing possibly-crazy HafenCity development, and of course the Elbphilharmonie debacle.



Elbphilharmonie is located in Hamburg’s HafenCity and aims to create, according to the architects Herzog & de Meuron, ‘A New Place for the City’

Berlin is neither industrial nor post-industrial: there’s never been a major industry to build up public funds – and good luck trying to raise private money for an opera house. What it does have, still, is a steadily growing mobile culture class and a good deal of cultural tourism. Given its undisputed status as a European culture hub, one might assume that culture would be the first place to invest some money, but a completely different governmental tactic prevails. We’ve asked again and again: unlike every other major city in the country, why

doesn't Berlin have an official *Kunsthalle*?

The culture class loves Berlin because of its low barriers to entry. You can show up on easyJet, grab a cheap room somewhere, not learn German, and after a minor squabble with immigration nab some kind of visa. The city government seems to welcome us with open arms. But the flip-side of this hands-off attitude is a total lack of institutional support for the arts – the “you do your thing, we'll do ours” nonchalance that some would simply call “neoliberalism.”

The Berlin senate banks on the fact that anglophone expats will remain relatively uninvolved with local politics – and that longtime Berliners have been adequately repressed to the point of cynicism following the heavily-protested destruction of the iconic Palast der Republik in 2008. Citizens ruefully sign petitions protesting the hasty redevelopment of the disused Tempelhof Airport, the only public space of its kind in the world, while Mayor Klaus Wowereit carries on with his bowdlerization of historic landmarks by selling off the square footage to real estate developers.



The Palast der Republik was built between 1973-1976 and was completely demolished to offer space for the reconstruction of the Stadtschloß in 2013

The city is indeed gentrifying in the most romantic sense of the word – yet the

typified image of squatters being evicted and the elderly left on the street only encompasses part of the nasty situation. While Berlin's growing population is quickly edged towards the peripheries, in the already-unlivable center million-euro condominiums are being jammed between the remaining landmark buildings, for someone not-from-Berlin to ostensibly inhabit. In a year, you won't be able to see the Schinkel Pavilion from Schinkel's Friedrichswerder Church because a tower with a rooftop pool will be wedged between the two. Rather than gentrification, "it would be more accurate to call this a progressive anesthetization of the inner city," as Georg Diez aptly called it in a *Der Spiegel* article.

Medical metaphors abound when talking about Berlin's urban situation. Our cultural institutions desperately need a healthcare plan. In the meantime, like city-dwellers around the world, Berliners are attempting triage. A group of citizens have recently organized "DIY IBA," using their own time and resources to reflect on Berlin's pressing issues. If only this sort of ingenuity could be combined with the city's bank account.

About the author:

Elvia Wilk is a Berlin-based writer and editor interested in expanding the interactions between art, architecture and technology. She publishes art criticism and poetry on various platforms and has been an editor for *uncube* since 2012.