

## Where is Berlin? Too many (virtual) walls shape the town and its communities

### Questions: getting started

Whenever approaching a city for the first time there are different ways, patterns, walls, and stories to unearth its hidden string. I moved to Berlin in Ma, 2014 and suddenly, even before my arrival, I was already playing the most popular sport of the city: speaking about Berlin. This sport has been played with abandon by both recent newcomers to the city and long time Berliners. Such a crowded curiosity makes almost impossible to craft a suitable answer to the main question: where is Berlin? If we want to interpret and understand the city as the backbone for fertile arts field we need to start from the development and diversification of its cultural spaces.

The question is wide, as any possible answers could be for a multifaceted and fragmented land framework. Sometimes you will get the perception there is “no Berlin”, other times the opposite: “too many cities in one”. Already in 1910 Karl Scheffler get the core “Berlin is a city condemned forever to becoming and never to being”. How to solve the problem? Urban planning is a game (or a war, it depends on the perspective) among different players, a strange and unexpected balance between different urban forms, best and worst practices, public and private interests and issues to be achieved and safeguarded (e.g. mobility, housing) ... the only way to overcome apparent contradiction is to start to play.

The main pawn are the Maps: sincere, smooth, clear tools to understand the city.

I am using the plural on purpose, because while approaching a city you will easily find out how every map / identity could be different, contradictory and different. The urban texture is the frank result of different stories, developments, strategies and policies of that city. Let us think of maps as balls, which can roll together, crash against each other, or even never touch. Every of this maps could be disclosed. Remember that every player have different needs and expectation. Which Berlin will we open?

### We need to bear in mind some rules of the game

First of all we should remember a few things:

? the city was heavily bombed during the WWII and strictly divided by a wall until twenty-five years ago: over two decades of division, in four speechless sectors with different identities, different politicians, different urban planning, almost powdered the personality of the city.

? Berlin is the sum of different processes, not certainly their result: the transition to a united city after a history of conflict and division; the transition to a capital city in a nation redefining its national identity; the transition from a socialist to a capitalist city; and the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial or post-Fordist metropolis.

? The city has a long lasting reputation in legitimising dogmas. One of the most successful was to redefine what “being poor” can mean for a city, thanks to the memorable and successful slogan of his mayor, Klaus Wowereit, “Berlin ist arm, aber sexy” (poor but sexy).

? It is commonly believed that investment on tourism brings faster money to public budget, but from the urban development perspective Berlin’s “careful urban renewal” theory was protecting the local low-income

population to the detriment of gentrification, and tourism; reality sometimes goes different from what has been planned.

? It is also commonly agreed how the arts and culture had a key role in the city's development. Although the results of the connections between culture and economic growth still are not exactly perceived, the vivid cultural atmosphere has proved crucial for building the city's identity, attracting visitors and long term investment. What does not clearly appear is which "cultural atmosphere" was (and is) the attractive one. The museum cultural district of Museumsinsel, the Biennial or the independent scene? What are tourist hubs and what are the places for residents?

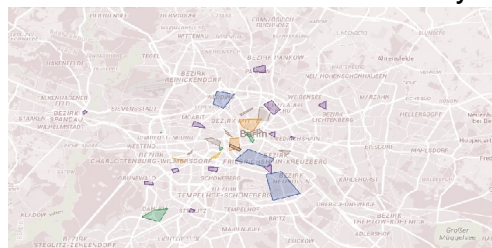
? Berlin is the city with the highest unemployment in Germany and in a European Scale the only capital whose GDP lies below the national average . The big city deficit leads to an extensive wave of privatization and selling out real estate.

## The aim of the game

We can help our interpretation challenge unfolding the maps and comparing them critically; in such a way we can understand the various stakeholders, go off the beaten track, go back to it, look for further maps. Even many crystal balls containing the various maps are never enough, we cannot stop looking for new images the city wants to personify. Melting the maps (finally) makes Berlin naked.

Since the fall of the Berlin wall, we have been witnessing an urban and artistic development, which was the outcome of a peculiar and vibrant situation in which completely different experiments found a prolific soil to start with. At the beginning, the artist-attractive policies of the west and the law free zone around what remains of the borders, later. It is probably one of the most recordable case to see how urban changes and, sometimes, development were playing a key role in the cultural development towards specific directions rather than others.

The division has been over for 25 years now, the attraction policy worked as expected in the years following the fall of the wall, but being poor is not sexy anymore and the question of where Berlin is and where it is going is still crucial. The Projekträume, independent art space, artist or curatorial run; the State Museums (institutional scene) the commercial gallery; how the city would like to showcase its artistic and cultural image to the public, Berlin for tourist and Berlin Art Week maps, State Museums and galleries. Maps reveal how the cities are trying to develop a creative image to attract artists. In some of them we discover how the construction of a creative city can threaten those local social, creative centres which already exist and rose up organically. Correspondingly, artists are important producers of the symbolic urban site. In their artworks they often produce new representations of cities and urban imaginations.



State Museum  
commercial gallery  
Project space  
Touristic area  
Kommunale Galerie

The 90s were the period of the big investments in real estate and Flagship projects, such as Postdamer Platz centre and Reichstag. High investments in culture start to come, as well as possible rooms for

fostering the city's image as a new capital. This big investment was never supported by any policy or long term strategy, but what was heavier without any consideration of the ongoing situation. This could be easily observed in the maps, in the years in which the municipality was investing on the Mitte district (Postdamer Platz, Museuminsel, Reichstag), the independent cultural scene was carrying interest in completely different areas, mostly more recognized and more related by the city's resident. The attempt was to fill the empty grey zone, left by the wall, with high profile architecture without the recognition that the population, the real potential stakeholder, was already displaced away.

The new century brought the awareness of relying on a poor budget, and to be attractive at the same time. Was that an illusion? In the coming years poverty cannot be anymore adopted as an asset, and some questions need to be asked. Answers are quite difficult, if not impossible, as Scheffler observed: Berlin is condemned to becoming and never to being. It is a mixture of disappointed expectations and unrevealed opportunities. The year of the fall of the wall was for too long considered the year zero. The point from which everything could have been started. The wall was a big wand for the city, but this doesn't mean an absence of identity, although the municipal emphasis upon special effects aimed at keeping high attention on Berlin was not necessarily successful, and the city was not benefiting from such an approach. The needed backbone is still missing.

From the material point of view the wall is clearly over; from the symbolic perspective many different walls, much more intangible and hard, grew in the city. Maps allow us to detect the skeleton (if it exists), in any case they make connections and contradictions visible. The materials are all there, Berlin is laying with his bare viscera and no back bone to hold them up. The question shouldn't be: which cultural maps?, but: how to develop a unique map? It's clear enough that there are still different rooms for creating synergies and develop "inter-map" strategies. Berlin needs to craft a map where differences are acknowledged and respected, but similarities unified; it also refers to contemporary art.

The maps now still diverge. Tourism is perceived as a gentrification accelerator, the main scene benefits from external visitors, but the independent scene and residents perceive only its negative effects. What could be observed, on the other hand, is the absence, in the independent scene, of any attempt to attract new types of audience (e.g. Tourist, non-Berliners), such as absence of platform, information tools, clear location map and suitable opening hours of the different venues.

Past experience could tell us a lot. The city didn't learn from the success of *Zwischennutzung*, an interesting method to manage vacancy and to capitalise on the off scene. The magmatic and undefined movement of squat, and project space later, never met any institutional feedback and was never included in the city's planning. The independent scene is no longer understood primarily as a cultural attack against the mainstream or as resistance to a hegemonic culture. Now is the time to start looking at it as niche markets to be fed.

The structure of grant is again an example of the blindness of city planning, the most part of income statement of project space is occupied by grant and institution's donation, such as *Hauptstadtkulturfonds*. No type of verifier or incentives are present in the pursuing of project's aim. This is one of the factors leading to the proliferation of dozens of new project spaces, which didn't manage to establish real form of collaboration or economic sustainability. Meanwhile the culture that was regarded as potential developer in problematic areas (such as the one connected with *Quartiersmanagement*), it is not necessarily addressing and tackling local population.

All the maps of this patchwork, although different and possibly conflicting, are feeding each other. The

protagonists involved in contemporary art are numerous, and there is no person or institution which occupies a central role. A leadership based on cost of city's facilities was defended and pursued during the years, but it's not enough. The city never really pursued the twofold which was rising naturally: differentiation and segmentation. After a necessary period of introspection, the German Capital is now at the point in which looking outside and thinking wider is no more an option, but a need. Berlin is now part of a wider framework which include Europe and many other creative cities. Could Berlin de-localise and reconsider its splinter in a global frame? Weak public action leads to magmatic urban development; will Berlin be able to restart from its splinters and build its back bones from here?

Unbridled capital, Berlin holds the reputation of a city where everything is possible, where its own scars and voids become a playground for creativity and experimentation for everything from the arts to politics and from architecture to philosophy; a carte blanche of unlimited possibilities. Different Berlins are laid on the maps as no grasped opportunities or new market losses. The city is (should be?) ready to be reinvented with new perspectives and real synergies. Who is in for the next round?



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