

BERLIN- NEW YORK DIALOGUES

INTRODUCTION

Two of the world's most dynamic urban centers, Berlin and New York, are making radical transformations in their streets and skylines. *Berlin - New York Dialogues* investigates the changes in these two cities by looking at the contemporary built environment and mechanisms of urban regeneration – the social, political, economic, and cultural processes that affect building.

As the exhibition delineates, the sustainability of these cities' neighborhoods is increasingly dependent on a critical mixture of identity, diversification, and infrastructure.

Against a background of data *Berlin – New York Dialogues* brackets three areas of each city. High-end projects and informal initiatives are featured and made comparable by a set of overarching topics: Culture as Catalyst, Community Activism, Gentrification, Open Space, and Governmental Intervention. Focus is given to the stories and forces behind the projects – the urban context.

The Berlin areas are in the immediate city center, where different stages of development have been occurring since German reunification in 1990: **Spandauer Vorstadt**, where radical transformation of the historic center encompasses more than just restoration work; the **Spree** area, along the former border between East and West Berlin, where industrial development is now claiming spaces that cultural initiatives and temporary installations have occupied along the river; and **Chaussee + Invalidenstrasse**, where development is imminent, with the opening of the central station and construction of the massive BND (Federal Intelligence Service) complex.

The three areas of New York City stretch from Manhattan into the outer boroughs: **Chelsea**, where the affluent Manhattan lifestyle is developing at an alarming rate alongside new visions for the transformations of industrial sites into public space; **Red Hook** in Brooklyn, where the introduction of Big Box retail has brought speculation about the neighborhood's future, although efforts to maintain the artisan community remain strong; and **Hunts Point + Mott Haven** in the South Bronx, where industrial zones are being reinvented into areas suitable for parks and schools.

Though fundamental differences exist in the way Berlin and New York operate, the intent of the exhibition is not to position one city against the other, but rather to foster learning among each city's citizens and support a consciousness of the driving forces behind the architectural realities of these two cities.

POINTS FOR DIALOGUE

The similarities evident in the urban development of Berlin and New York over the past decade could, perhaps, describe any of the major cities around the world. Among these are the cycles of growth and oversupply, of speculation and disinvestment; the significance of cultural life to the identity of the cities for quality-of-life and tourism; the immense role played by immigration and migration; the debates around education, social welfare, ecology, mass transit, environmental initiatives, industrial reclamation; the intervention of charismatic politicians and public officials in the architectural expression of the city. But despite these similarities, the differences lead us to several key points for dialogue.

1. Qualitative / Quantitative Growth

New York sees itself under enormous pressure to grow, despite its geographically limited footprint. The 'outer' borough of Brooklyn has been comprehensively transformed over the past ten years to the 'in' place to live; Queens, especially on the East River, benefits (and suffers) from immediate proximity to Midtown Manhattan; and the South Bronx offers obvious areas for the next wave of development. The market response in Manhattan, to construct as much luxury housing as possible as less economically powerful constituents leave that borough, has led to extensive 'up-zoning', most obvious in Chelsea. The infrastructural implications of even greater density, illustrated by the August, 2006, week-long power outages in Queens, demonstrate that growth is both a positive economic engine, highly valued in a city with such a high concentration of wealth, and a challenge to municipal service providers.

Berlin, after the initial repercussions of the reunification of East and West Berlin, is subject to a more complex analysis, which has to simultaneously account for growth, demographic transformation, economic stagnation and, in some areas, 'shrinkage'. Thus the question of whether the loss of density can create opportunities for qualitative growth is extremely relevant. This seems to be occurring despite the real estate market which has been rising in value continuously over the past year, largely because of foreign investment. While certain areas of Berlin are subject to densification and gentrification at a rate that competes with that of New York City, the presence of two simultaneous urban forces leads to more variegated patterns of development throughout the city.

Considering this:

What quality of life will be able to be sustained in the city? And for what groups of people?

Can new typologies in housing adequately address needs?

2. Synchronic / Diachronic Development

Development in New York tends towards a synchronic model, meaning that one generation of development succeeds another. In Chelsea, for example, the light industrial development and immigrant housing of the 1980s, interspersed with underground nightclubs, was replaced by a largely gay and politically conscious constituency, and by galleries and cultural institutions, which have, especially with the advent of the Highline project, given way to the next wave of development: luxury shopping and high-end, high-rise housing. Although some prior neighborhood residents remain, each generation has given way to the next, more economically powerful cohort.

Seen from New York, Berlin seems more amenable to a diachronic model, in which diverse generations are less easily defined as successive and more likely to exist simultaneously. In Mitte, for example, low- and high-rent tenants, including small galleries, mixed housing complexes, luxury restaurants and underground bars, seem able to occupy the same urban fabric. The diversity of projects and development models along the Spree, from guerilla initiatives to large-scale commercial endeavors, speaks to a higher proportion of economic and social integration than is typical of New York.

Considering this:

Can the momentum of many small initiatives become big enough to matter?

How dependant is social integration and diversity on the economical cycles of a city?

3. The Urbane and the Urban

New York's real estate explosion of the past ten years is as much the product of global tendencies as it is indicative of a huge concentration of new wealth, largely from the financial services sector. The income divide in New York is the most drastic of any U.S. city and is still growing. Bars, restaurants, clothing stores, as well as universities and housing, compete to prove their indispensability as part of a hip, worldly, urbane, city existence. The idea that the best is a presumed standard appears everywhere from day care centers which quote alumni admission statistics to Ivy League colleges to lingerie stores offering \$200 underwear. Both sell. In housing, this implies that space, light and air are not inalienable rights, but can be seen as luxuries that are traded and sold. Though New York is pledging to increase its supply of affordable sustainable housing in the coming years while focusing on good design, the implementation of luxurious living is happening at a far more obvious rate.

In Berlin, the role of social equity reinforces housing as a basic urban right, rather than a privilege. Neighborhood names still represent a particular identity, which both new and older inhabitants tend to accept. Although 'red' parts of the city may no longer be hotbeds of radical socialism, there is neither a need, by virtue of speculation, nor a desire, to reinvent a working class area as particularly luxurious, even in Prenzlauer Berg, the formerly middle-class area to the north-east of the historical center which has enjoyed the greatest degree of gentrification. Although not entirely free from the cycle of fast amortization of investment which determines the New York market, the much greater degree of nonchalance with which Berliners treat the question of identity relative to their housing seems extremely productive for the city's diversity and for its integration of cultural producers.

Considering this:

What qualities make a city livable and desirable, even for multiple generations?

What do we understand as a bare necessity versus a luxury?