



# ESPACIOS INDUSTRIALES ABANDONADOS

GESTIÓN DEL PATRIMONIO  
Y MEDIO AMBIENTE

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Editor: Miguel Ángel Álvarez Areces

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INCUNA

Colección: Los ojos de la memoria

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# Berlin's experience with the transformation of industrial sites

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Changing geopolitical contexts had a deep impact on Berlin's urban development throughout the 20th century – and also, of course, on the transformation of former industrial sites.

After a short glimpse on Berlin's rise as an industrial metropolis around 1900, the first part of this article summarizes the industrial trends on both sides of the Wall during the Cold War and highlights two exemplary cases for transformation of industrial sites in West-Berlin. In the second part, I will present two more cases from East-Berlin, focusing on different bottom-up movements right after the fall of the Wall within the framework of an official urban policy, which aimed at reinstalling Berlin as the German Capital and a Global City. Given that Berlin today has established itself as an international creative metropolis, my concluding part discusses whether the new boom we are experiencing since the 2000s can be understood as an opportunity or rather an obstacle for a more in-depth engagement of the city with its DNA.

When presenting my examples, I will not talk about the architecture or design of conversion but focus on its actors and processes within a cultural and political context that has changed repeatedly over time and is interwoven with the great Berlin-myths: the founding myth of Electropolis, the myth

of the Divided City and the myth of the Post-Reunification Berlin.

## **ELECTROPOLIS BERLIN**

Berlin as an industrial metropolis only emerged with the unification of the German Reich in 1871 and in the light of the Electric Revolution starting around 1880. Its impressive dynamics of urban growth are said to be more comparable to North American than to European cities. The young metropolis absorbed material and human resources from the outside world; bankers, entrepreneurs, and engineers with excellent international contacts were the pioneers of Berlin's new industrial culture<sup>1</sup>. The city itself was a testing ground for new technologies and consumer goods; new technical infrastructures deeply inscribed themselves as hard-ware into the evolving physical urban structure. With the new power supply system, a new technical dispositive originated, and

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<sup>1</sup> See STEINER 2011 regarding the emancipation movement of German engineers around 1900, striving for social recognition of technology as a cultural achievement.

it soon expanded to form a global techno-cultural system.

By 1900, Berlin was a synonym for the modern networked city, closely interconnecting technology and culture. The fact that power supply and electro-technical industries clustered within the same city is a specific characteristic of “Electropolis Berlin.” Engineers from around the world visited the then largest industrial center of the European continent inspired by the model of “Electropolis.” Germany rose as an exporting nation and, together with the United States, challenged the British Empire as the leading hegemonic world power. All German electrical companies, such as AEG and Siemens, and all major German banks participated in the race to electrify the world, and Berlin replaced Frankfurt am Main as being the most important financial center of the German Reich.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after the First World War, Germany pursued its ambition to become a world power. Urban growth of its capital took up speed again, too: after establishing Greater Berlin in 1920 by incorporating the surrounding communities, the remaining space in-between was further covered with buildings. For instance, the Berlin Modernism Housing Estates, listed World Heritage in 2008, originate from this time, providing affordable rents for workers by using the first industrial methods in housing construction. In the 1920s, Berlin was a thriving metropolis again.

## THE DIVIDED CITY

After WWII, large parts of the city were destroyed, and the Soviet Army dismantled industrial facilities on a large scale, especially in the wes-

tern part<sup>3</sup>. With the division of Germany and the incipient Cold War, Berlin became the frontier city of two ideologically hostile social systems. Both Berlins received government subsidies in huge volume and tried to outdo each other for decades, also in terms of urban construction. The industrial development, however, was different in both parts of the city. The capital of the GDR remained the largest industrial city in the GDR until 1990 and had – especially as a business location – “a very different function for the country than West Berlin had for the Federal Republic.”<sup>4</sup> West Berlin, with its island location within the territory of the GDR, fought against further migration of industry to southern and western Germany<sup>5</sup>. But after the Wall was built in 1961, even the extensive government subsidies could not stop this trend any longer.<sup>6</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that not only the isolation of the city during the Cold War but also legislations imposed by the Western Allies and the partially counterproductive side effects of the support measures from the FRG government made it difficult to attempt a re-industrialization of West Berlin.<sup>7</sup>

The Cold War also changed the city’s technical infrastructure. For instance in 1952, the GDR cut off the power lines to West Berlin turning the city, virtually overnight, into an electrical island. In order to ensure a stable power supply, West Berlin’s electricity company BEWAG rapidly built a network of many small power plants<sup>8</sup> and little

<sup>2</sup> This is evidenced by the historic financial district in the center of Berlin. See also: BZI & SenStadtUm 2013, sheet “Bankenviertel” (online on: [http://www.industrie-kultur-berlin.de/faltmappe\\_industriekultur/216.html](http://www.industrie-kultur-berlin.de/faltmappe_industriekultur/216.html))

<sup>3</sup> Some statistical figures are given by Hoppe/ Kupfer 2011: 244.

<sup>4</sup> see FLIERL 2011: 255

<sup>5</sup> Quite a lot of industries and production parts had already been moved outside Berlin during WWII in order to avoid being bombarded, and later never came back again (HOPPE/ KUPFER 2011: 244). Thuringia’s increasing industrialization, for example, dates from this time.

<sup>6</sup> see HOPPE/ KUPFER 2011: 245

<sup>7</sup> There was, for example, a research ban on West Berlin (HOPPE/ KUPFER 2011: 245/246).

<sup>8</sup> Many of these were shut down again after the elec-

later, far away from the sea, emerged as a world-wide technological leader for the power supply of islands.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, many former industrial sites in West Berlin turned into wastelands, providing space for urban pioneers of various kinds. I will present two examples here in more detail:

### German Museum of Technology

In the area around Gleisdreieck (track triangle) – a former node for intermodal transportation system, located right on the canal in the city center – the railway facilities of three passenger and two freight stations had extended to an area of about 100 acres by 1939, surrounded by railway-associated industries.<sup>10</sup> [Fig. 1] Severely damaged during the Second World War and cut off from remote connections, only a small part of one freight station remained in operation. With the construction of the Wall right beside it, this former inner city location turned into a peripheral brownfield and a self-re-vegetating habitat. Since 2012, the *Berlin Center for Industrial Heritage* (BZI) is exploring this area employing methods of industrial archaeology.<sup>11</sup>

Revitalization began in 1983 with the opening of the *German Museum of Technology* [Fig. 2] whose foundation had been preceded by around two dozen years of volunteer work. In 1960, the “Society for the Re-establishment of a Transport Museum Berlin” (today: “Friends and Supporters of the German Museum of Technology Berlin e.V.”) was founded with the aim to build on the tradi-

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trical reunification of 1994, and that raises a number of re-use questions here as well.

<sup>9</sup> see KRÄMER 2014. The author was a senior engineer at BEWAG, Berlin's public power supply company, and in that role traveled to islands worldwide during the 1980s, acting as consultant in Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and so on. In 2001, after retirement, he was co-founder of the *Energy Museum Berlin*, see [www.energie-museum.de](http://www.energie-museum.de).

<sup>10</sup> see HOPPE/ KUPFER 2011: 248

<sup>11</sup> see KUPFER 2013 and 2014



Fig. 1. Aerial view of the area around Gleisdreieck, 1920s © Bernd Neddermeyer

tion of the technical museums that had existed in Berlin until 1945. The idea was to gather all the remainders which at the time were scattered about the city, hardly noticed by the public, and mostly inaccessible, and to use them as the basis of a new museum. The eleven founding members were prominent Berlin citizens and representatives from transport and technical institutions; some also held a seat in the municipal House of Representatives.



Fig. 2. German Museum of Technology, 1986 © SDTB, Photo: Clemens Kirchner



A first stage victory took place in 1979 when the Berlin Senate commissioned the Society with the preparatory work for the establishment of a state-owned “Museum of Transport and Technology” (the founding name). The Gleisdreieck area was chosen as a location, explicitly stating the use of historical traffic structures; the first director was appointed in April 1980. Then something unexpected happened: early elections took place in Berlin on 10 May 1981, the Social Democrats lost their majority for the first time after WWII, and the political color of the Mayor changed. The new Senate reviewed the financial planning of all construction and purchase projects and discarded most of them. Also the “New Transport Museum” project was almost cancelled. At that time, it proved crucial that a cross-party commitment with the museum project had been formed within the House of Parliament. The man who made the difference was Edmund Wronski (CDU), an engineer working for a global electrical company,<sup>12</sup> who was informed about the project by his political colleague and opponent Achim Rheinländer (SPD) who was the chairman of the Museum Society at that time. When the first section of the new museum finally opened in December 1983, the CDU-Mayor Richard von Weizsäcker gave the opening speech.<sup>13</sup>

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Museum is located in the middle of downtown. The 1990s passed relatively quietly, in 2000 the revitalization of the neighborhood picked up. In 2007, a still missing adjacent lot was acquired for the Museum as a reserve for future extensions. The most obvious change regarding the area’s revitalization concerns the former track area (65ha) which was converted into a park until 2013. At the same time, the former *Postbahnhof* (post station) and other surrounding

former industrial buildings such as the *Kühlhaus II* (cold storage house) were transformed into exhibition and event venues.<sup>14</sup>

Today, the German Museum of Technology is one of the largest museums in Berlin.<sup>15</sup> Concerning content, the museum focuses on the history of technology but is increasingly trying to interconnect past and present. The creation of the *Berlin Center of Industrial Heritage* (BZI) in 2011, together with the *University of Applied Sciences HTW Berlin*, for instance, is evidence of the Museum’s motivation not only to act as a committed player in the field of industrial heritage on a Berlin-wide scale but to also set the stage for new thematic priorities and cross-connections within the museum.

### ufaFabrik

While the German Museum of Technology at Gleisdreieck is the result of a dedicated top-down initiative, my second example highlights a movement “from below” – not less political in its own way. The ufaFabrik sprang from the typical squatter culture of the 1970s in West Berlin. Werner Wiartalla, physicist and resident of ufaFabrik, shared the group’s memories with the participants of BZI’s Third Berlin Forum for Industrial Culture and Society in March 2014:<sup>16</sup> “We initially wanted an industrial building in Kreuzberg but unhappily it was demolished before we could enter. Our second choice was the site of the former copy workshops of the UFA film studios constructed

<sup>14</sup> see HOPPE/ KUPFER 2011: 251

<sup>15</sup> The museum’s Historical Archives, incidentally, became the new owner of AEG Company Archives after the company went bankrupt in the late 1990s. Thus, important records of one of the key players of Electropolis that had moved from Berlin to Frankfurt am Main after 1945 can today be consulted in their historic home town again.

<sup>16</sup> For more information on the Third BZI-Forum see [http://www.industrie-kultur-berlin.de/termine/0/drittes\\_forum\\_fuer\\_industriekultur\\_und\\_gesellschaft/62.html](http://www.industrie-kultur-berlin.de/termine/0/drittes_forum_fuer_industriekultur_und_gesellschaft/62.html)

<sup>12</sup> A few weeks later, in June 1980, Wronski became Senator responsible for the state-owned transport, water and gas operations. In 1994, he was made an honorary member of the Museum Society.

<sup>13</sup> The following year, he became German Federal President (1984-94) and internationally known.



Fig. 3. Creative pioneers in West Berlin: The Squatters of ufaFabrik, March 1979 © ufaFabrik Internationales Kultur Centrum e.V

during the 1920s.<sup>17</sup> We were a motley crew of creative people who wanted to try new ways of living and working together, with great diversity, a living example of an ecological interaction. We then simply squatted the site. And that was easy because, apart from ourselves, nobody else was slightly interested in it.” [Fig. 3] After seven years of illegal occupation, a lease contract was German Museum of Technology, 1986 © SDTB, Photo: Clemens Kirchner signed with the city administration, which will be running until 2037. Since then, ufaFabrik cooperates with the city of Berlin in four policy areas: culture, ecology, economy, and social. Berlin's first environmental policies for instance were developed during the 1980s in ufaFabrik. On the European level, ufaFabrik is mem-

ber of the network “Trans Europe Halles” ([www.teh.net](http://www.teh.net)), created in 1983 by alternative cultural centers which are all located on former industrial sites. And last but not least: ufaFabrik ties their own narrative to the history of the place, as Werner Wiartalla explained: “The story of the former film production: ‘to capture dreams on celluloid’ continues in our project of ufaFabrik being a workshop, laboratory, and factory for the testing of new forms of com Community life and economic activity. We want to get away from a society working on the assembly line. We want space for new sustainable practices!”

### Conclusion

Both examples are very political and typical for the old West Berlin which was not only a city of political clique but also a city of political subculture, of

<sup>17</sup> Author's note: also famous artists like Marlene Dietrich dropped in regularly at the copy workshop's offices in the 1920s to pick up their salaries.



Fig. 4. Aerial view of the AEG City Schöneeweide, around 1928 © SDTB, AEG Archives

artists, and young men from West Germany who wanted to escape compulsory military service. A closer look at the players reveals: while the museum project united Berlin citizens voluntarily engaged around the common cultural goal to establish a museum by revitalizing the Prussian tradition of technical museums in Berlin, the *ufaFabrik* is a classic bottom-up movement pursuing a new social vision and a socio-political claim. Both projects have in common that they could probably only occur on the industrial wastelands of an economically stagnant city. For decades, these wastelands served as havens for a free unfolding of the urban pioneers of West Berlin – beyond real estate pressure and exploitation logic.

Nonetheless, I should also mention that new sub-cultures emerged in East Berlin at the same time, too. The resistance to the demolition of the gasometer in Prenzlauer Berg in the summer of 1984 is one example. Official GDR policy did not regard this building as a technical evidence of industrial work and eventually replaced it by a prefab residential area with a park and a giant monument dedicated to the labor leader Ernst Thälmann. Thomas Flierl, a young scientific assistant from Humboldt University, took part in these debates publicly

– and lost his job in academia.<sup>18</sup> He continued his work as a dissident during GDR times and later became Senator for Culture of reunified Berlin.

## POST-REUNIFICATION BERLIN

Reunification of Germany and the Divided City in 1990 was followed by a large-scale break-down of industrial activities in East Berlin. An example is the former AEG City Schöneeweide [Fig 4]. With around 30,000 employees, it was one of the largest industrial centers of the GDR; today it is one of the largest historic districts of Electropolis. Of the many active industrial enterprises that existed there until 1990, only two are left. In 1995, a neighborhood management (“Quartiersmanagement”) was established in order to cushion the negative effects, accompanied by the renovation of the settlements until 2010. The re-industrialization of the area, however, succeeded only partially, so that in 2011 a new special task force (“Regionalmanagement”) was established to attract new industries and improve relationships with the owners of the disused buildings. A quantum leap took place when the *University of Applied Sciences HTW Berlin* moved into some parts of the former AEG premises from 2006 onwards; in 2009 the new *Campus Wilhelminenhof* [Fig. 5] was officially opened. The proximity of university and industry is considered one of the most important potentials for the district's economic development. What is more, with their move to Schöneeweide, the HTW staff started to be interested in the region's industrial heritage. As early as 2009, four professors set up the research cluster *Kompetenzfeld Regionale Industriekultur (KRIK)*,<sup>19</sup> and in 2011 the *Berliner Zentrum für Industriekultur (BZI)*<sup>20</sup> was created together with the Foundation of the German Museum of Technology.

<sup>18</sup> see FLIERL 2011

<sup>19</sup> see HAFFNER 2013

<sup>20</sup> For more details on the *Berlin Center for Industrial Heritage (BZI)* see STEINER 2013 and 2014



Fig. 5. University of Applied Sciences HTW Berlin, Campus Wilhelminenhof © HTW Berlin/ DOM publishers

### Industriesalon Schöneweide

The same year KRIK was created within the HTW, some engaged volunteers and small and middle-sized companies in the neighborhood joined forces and created the association “Industriesalon Schöneweide e.V.” in order to save Schöneweide’s last GDR Company Museum from the scrapyard.<sup>21</sup> The association also has an im see BZI & SenStadtUm 2013, sheet “Industriesalon Schöneweide” for more details portant social, cultural, and psychological function for the neighborhood’s residents, many of whom are former factory workers from GDR companies. After seeing their home state GDR implode and losing their jobs, the association’s hall – today serving as a museum, an exhibition hall, a cultural center, and a café at the same time – is a place where they

reinsure themselves about their own identity by documenting, preserving, and explaining the remnants of their former working life. Building on that ground, the initiative developed amazingly in recent years. With numerous exhibitions and events, and being official member of Berlin’s Museums Association since 2012, the Industriesalon’s vision has enlarged and matured, aiming today at establishing itself as a regional Visitor Center for Industrial Heritage and to set up a Berlin-wide Route of Industrial Heritage linking itself with other potential tourist destinations of Electropolis Berlin – a goal pursued in cooperation with BZI.

The biggest selling point of Industriesalon in comparison with all other industrial heritage projects in Berlin is its impressive human energy in combination with its firm social and cultural roots within the neighborhood and its close ties to a wide range of actors. Its biggest problem is financing: because there is no permanent financing, and project funds are only approved for very short periods of time, there is regularly a vital need for money.

<sup>21</sup> see BZI & SenStadtUm 2013, sheet “Industriesalon Schöneweide” for more details

## Technopolis Berlin

While the world struggled for a new order after the end of the Cold War, and not only Schöneberg had to deal with social earthquakes, the inner city of East Berlin had its wild 1990s. In the shadow of political attention and in the midst of temporary anarchy, new projects and subcultures arose – such as the two techno clubs “E-Werk” in the former substation Buchhändlerhof<sup>22</sup> [Fig. 6] and the “Tresor” in the former cash office of the Wertheim department store which had survived as a war ruin close to the Wall. A little later but still in the tradition of these first pioneers, the “OstGut” opened on the site of today’s O2 World in Friedrichshain. In 2004, forced to leave from there, they moved into a nearby former power plant built in 1954 to supply the prestigious Stalin Allee with

<sup>22</sup> see also BZI & SenStadtUm 2013, sheet “E-Werk”

electricity and changed the name to “Berghain.” Norbert Thormann, one of the two managing directors, was so kind as to take part in the BZI Forum in March 2014, too, and told the audience about their experience with the transformation of the plant: “At that time, the building had stood empty for twelve years, and we were immediately impressed by the layout of the rooms and the particular aesthetics. The building was also relatively easy to come by, but we first had to do our homework in order to rent the grounds from the former BEWAG:<sup>23</sup> financing concept, business plan, loans from the bank, and so on. Afterwards, we had to convert and renovate the entire building as it was in very poor condition.”

<sup>23</sup> BEWAG, Berlin’s former public power supply company (today Vattenfall), was just starting to work out strategies for the sale and conversion of its discontinued real estate around this time. See also Grube 2008



Fig. 6. Creative pioneers of the 1990s: Techno Club “E-Werk” © Chromapark

Nowadays, the Berghain owns the property and employs around 200 people in its environment. And just like the ufaFabrik, the Berghain, too, links its own story to the history of the place in an industrial heritage narrative: "In earlier times, electric current was produced here; today it is electronic music. We tried to integrate as many relics of the former usage as possible in the architecture of the club. A bar was built in old switch cabinets, porcelain insulators are used as decoration, and so on."

### Conclusion

Until the early 2000s, the creative pioneers of the Post-Reunification Berlin and the "Technopolis", even in the inner city, remained largely undisturbed by an urban policy which at the time was busy re-installing Berlin as the German Capital and making it a Global City.<sup>24</sup> In parallel, highly emotional debates took place concerning the handling of GDR architecture. This was the time when the demolition of the Palace of the Republic and the reconstruction of the Prussian City Palace were fiercely discussed, the Reichstag was wrapped, and the sky-scrapers of Potsdamer Platz were built. Compared to the bottom-up initiatives of the former West Berlin, however, these two examples clearly show that economic factors and the fastest possible professionalization started to play an increasingly important role after 1990.

### THE NEW BERLIN

Some ten years after the special geopolitical situation had ended, a growing economic pressure for development became ever more apparent, and it will change Berlin's image and perception in the longer term. A closer look at the housing market shows: after the fall of the Wall, around 90% of Berlin apartments were state-owned – as an industrial metropolis, Berlin had naturally emerged

as a worker's and tenant's city. In the 1990s, the city administration decided to increase the share of private proprietary significantly (cities such as London and Paris were considered models) and began to sell public residential property on a large scale – above all the attractive late nineteenth century buildings, the former tenements of Electropolis. Urban redevelopment programs and rent regulations could not prevent luxury renovations and real estate speculation. Nowadays, gentrification processes in the inner city districts have become omnipresent, rents have skyrocketed in recent years, and the lower and middle classes as well as the creative pioneers are constantly displaced to the outskirts.

Pressure on commercial property is increasing, too. Here again, the public sector sold numerous properties to private investors over the last decades, including many former industrial sites. However, if the city wants to stay able to influence on its own urban policies and development, it cannot continue to sell the prime premises to the highest bidder. A reorientation of Berlin's property policy is therefore being discussed vividly at these moments – especially in two directions: firstly, when allocating spaces – particularly special properties and unusual objects – the easy money should not always have a higher priority than any benefits to the city and its inhabitants. Secondly, Berlin's public property fund ("Liegenschaftsfonds") itself could develop and manage its real estate, instead of selling it – e.g. as done in Hamburg.

The creative pioneers and underground movements of West Berlin and the Post-Reunification times have contributed significantly to the "cool" image of Berlin. In the early 2000s, city marketing reoriented its strategy by focusing on the Creative City<sup>25</sup>. What is interesting in this context is that it is highlighting people, not places. The municipal tourism institution visitBerlin has an interest to take on the hype and promote the city's industrial heritage because it is looking for new ways to improve

<sup>24</sup> see also MACKRODT/ KALANDIDES 2014

<sup>25</sup> see MACKRODT/ KALANDIDES 2014: 137

the distribution of the ever increasing tourist flows within the city. The example of *Berliner Unterwelten*<sup>26</sup> – an association founded in 1997 with the goal to make urban infrastructure and unobserved objects in the Berlin underground accessible for the public and to put it under legal protection – actually shows that these kinds of “different” offers do work very well.

Eventually, tourism looks like a good opportunity to organize more public awareness for industrial heritage in Berlin. BZI proposed new ways of story-telling and ten themes in 2012, developed in close cooperation with a wide range of partners, highlighting what is special about the story of Electropolis, and including present-day developments in its interpretation.<sup>27</sup> This may serve as a basis for a more in-depth engagement with Berlin’s industrial heritage in the future. However, before implementing the project, evaluations are required for each industrial heritage place involving all local actors in order to decide whether increased tourism marketing would be a benefit or only further increase the pressure on individual objects.

A careful study and promotion of its DNA would suit the once biggest industrial city of the European continent in every way. When striving for an urban development that is not only economically viable but also just and culturally sustainable, industrial heritage is an important resource. And as we have learned from the examples above, informal actors and processes play a significant role beyond official institutions and hierarchies in the conversion and changing perception of industrial buildings and facilities. Therefore, a pluralistic approach seems fundamental when it comes to conceiving future strategies for an integrated urban development and a sustainable transformation of former industrial sites.

<sup>26</sup> see their website <http://berliner-unterwelten.de/> for more information (several languages)

<sup>27</sup> see STEINER 2013 for the English version; the BZI website and Steiner 2014 for more details in German

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