



November 9, 2007

Berlin Building, New York Rising Architecture

BY PAULA DEITZ
November 9, 2007

The crown jewel of Carnegie Hall's first international arts festival, Berlin in Lights, is the Berliner Philharmoniker orchestra. While it was a wise programming decision, the choice also reflects the strength of Berlin's built environment: Hearing the orchestra within its 1960s-era concert hall, the Philharmonie, is a musical experience, as well as an architectural one. Architect Hans Scharoun set a gold standard for design with his orchestra in the round, with balconies lined up like rows on a hillside vineyard.

Berlin's architectural identity has played a significant and engaging role in Carnegie Hall's festival - starting with panel discussions last week and continuing with a symposium tomorrow at the Center for Architecture, as well as an exhibit, "Building in Context," that runs until January.

On Sunday, in a packed Zankel Hall, the chief curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, Barry Bergdoll, opened a panel discussion called "Berlin Architecture" with a photograph of the Philharmonie followed shortly by one of Mies van der Rohe's New National Gallery. Comparing Berlin's growth since 1945, and since reunification in 1989, with the rapid development of 19th-century Paris, he said: "The clean slate left by wartime destruction was thwarted, however, by the politics of memory and traces of the past above and below ground."

At one point during the last decade, nearly a third of all the construction cranes in the world were silhouetted against the Berlin sky, and the city itself was a vast wasteland with only ghostly presences of former neighborhoods and city squares, especially in areas divided by the wall.

For the presentations, Mr. Bergdoll selected four architects who established offices in Berlin from 1990 on, ending with the most recent arrival, and his recognition of their work bodes well for MoMA's future role in contemporary architecture. During this period, until his retirement two years ago, Hans Stimmann, Berlin's city building director, held sway over details of Berlin's rapid reconstruction, not without controversy for his traditional views that would rein in even those international architects designing the new towers in Potsdamer Platz. Even so, among the four, Louisa Hutton, a British architect in the firm Sauerbruch Hutton, showed a fanciful combination of a police and fire station called GSW Headquarters, a low-rise extension that wraps around a masonry building with a neoclassical facade. With a continuous glass skin, in greens for the police end and reds for the fire trucks, the individual panes open in a pleasing intermittent design for ventilation and shading.

Also British, David Chipperfield received the plum commission to restore the bomb-damaged, rain-soaked Neues Museum designed in 1859 by Friedrich August Stüler, a student of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, at the heart of Museum Island in the Spree River, which is considered the Athens of the north. In a series of photographs, from historic views to the present, Mr. Chipperfield showed how, without removing any original materials, he has introduced repairs that remain visible as a blend with the old. New sweeping staircases in neutral materials allow the former elegance to survive. His design for a new entrance pavilion on the island of ramps leading to the surrounding museums features a contemporary colonnade, suggesting Schinkel, in a style he called "classicism without time."

Much of the panel's audience regrouped the next evening at the German Consulate General for a program in the Center for Architecture's Berlin/New York Dialogues called "Urban Design and Memorials." It featured presentations by architects Daniel Libeskind and HG Merz, followed by their discussions with architect Lance J. Brown and editor of Metropolis Magazine, Susan Szenasy. The remarks dealt more philosophically with the connection between collective memory and memorials and how they communicate their message to future generations. Some felt the form should only embody the power of the place, while others believed that an accompanying written message was required to engage memory with cultural sustainability. In the end, Mr. Libeskind asked, "How much can we live with memory and still proceed into the future?"

This weekend, continuing under its rubric, Berlin/New York Dialogues, the Center for Architecture opens its exhibition entitled "Building in Context," comparing three neighborhoods in New York - Red Hook in Brooklyn, the South Bronx, and Chelsea - with three in Berlin. Photographer Noah Sheldon's "walk-right-in" murals from both cities give a palpable immediacy to the locations that make the comparisons feel genuine and understandable. An underlying theme of the show is how culture has become the catalyst for the rapid upgrade of neighborhoods leading to gentrification. Open space, such as the development of the South Bronx Greenway, is part of the visionary plan to connect neighborhoods. The installation of a hanging sculpture by the architect Joshua Yates, of linked reflective metal prisms, is symbolic of the exhibition's goal of merging the geographic areas into one spectrum.

Tomorrow, the Center for Architecture will host an all-day symposium, Cultural Kapital/Capital Kultur, in which participants will discuss how the physical aspects of urban development are affected by the evolution of the arts in these two cultural capitals. Moderated by MoMA's curator of contemporary architecture, Andres Lepik, the panel will feature Regula Luescher, who has succeeded Mr. Stimmann in Berlin's department of urban development. One might say the future of Berlin is in her hands.

"Building in Context," until January 26 (536 La Guardia Place, between West 3rd and Bleecker streets, 212-683-5022); for symposium reservations: www.aiany.org.