

Two Cities Linked by Design



“Berlin-New York Dialogues” includes a photo-map of Berlin.

Librado Romero/The New York Times

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**

Published: November 15, 2007

The area surrounding Chausseestrasse, a former no man’s land where a wall once stood in Berlin, may not seem to invite immediate comparisons with the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. But architects and urban planners see parallels in the rapid growth of both of these formerly gritty neighborhoods, particularly in how the arts have spurred gentrification.

As New York and Berlin undergo architectural booms, such provocative juxtapositions can shed light on how the arts, immigration and community activism affect urban development. That’s the thinking behind the “Berlin-New York Dialogues: Building in Context,” an exhibition at the Center for Architecture on La Guardia Place in Greenwich Village that will travel to Berlin in March.

“These are two cities that are both on the verge of paradigm shifts in how growth happens,” said Lynnette Widder, a curator of the show and head of the architecture department at the Rhode Island School of Design.

The question in New York is whether the city can sustain its building boom, Ms. Widder added, while in Berlin the question is whether the city can continue to reverse years of shrinkage. “Germany is looking to America as a model of a much more free market,” she said.

The remaking of a united Berlin, meanwhile, offers New Yorkers a new way to reflect on psychological barriers in their own town.

“The way the Berlin Wall divided that city for so long.” I think we’ve got that in New York, but we don’t see it,” said Frederic M. Bell, the executive director of the New York chapter of the [American Institute of Architects](#), which runs the center.” There are people who never go north of 14th Street or never go to Red Hook. That’s the lesson we’re learning from Berlin. What Berlin is learning from us? I think it’s a question of scale - how to live more grandly.”

Running through Jan. 26, the exhibition is part of the broader Berlin in Lights festival, which includes performances and lectures at organizations including [Carnegie Hall](#), the Museum of Modern Art, the [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum](#) and the Goethe Institute.

Rather than focus narrowly on noteworthy buildings, the exhibition and related panel discussions explore issues like how Berlin is reasserting its role in European cultural and intellectual life and how New York is trying to maintain its reputation as a creative center, even as artists are priced out of neighborhoods they helped to rejuvenate.

“We didn’t really try to have one-on-one comparisons,” said Kristien Ring, the director of the German Center for Architecture in Berlin. “We tried to pick themes where one can delve into a dialogue.”

For example both cities seem to have rediscovered the potential of their waterfronts in recent years, with an array of commercial buildings and residential lofts rising near the Spree River in Berlin and architects drafting plans to enhance the East River esplanade in Manhattan.

Each of the exhibition’s curators has some personal connection with Berlin. Ms. Widder lived there for eight years. Ms. Ring has lived there since 1991. And Sophie Stigliano, the Center for Architecture’s director of exhibitions, is German and formerly lived in Berlin.

Their show touches on themes like immigration, economic growth and political activism in three neighborhoods in each city: in New York, Red Hook, the South Bronx and Chelsea; in Berlin, the Chausseestrasse, Mitte/ Prenzlauer Berg and the Spree River area.

Several projects are examined in each neighborhood. In New York that includes the Bronx Charter School for the Arts, a public elementary school designed by Weisz & Yoes Architects in a converted factory with a colorful tiled facade. The show cites the school as an example of “culture as catalyst”: the institution’s arts-based curriculum has had a broad impact on the neighborhood.

In Berlin featured projects include Alexanderplatz, home to the Television Tower and the Berolinahaus by Peter Behrens, as well as the old socialist developments along Karl-Marx Allee, examples of so-called East Modernism.

The curators tried to represent areas in varying stages of development: fully formed neighborhoods like Chelsea or Spandauer Vorstadt; nascent areas like Red Hook or Spree; and nontraditional areas like Mott Haven and Hunts Point in the Bronx or Chausseestrasse.

While private developers tend to have the final say in New York, architecture is commissioned through open competitions in Berlin. Architecture is thus a more crucial part of public life in Berlin than here.

In the exhibition displays about each city - including photographs, renderings, maps, statistical information and interviews - are positioned opposite each other.

“Chausseestrasse and Red Hook needed to talk to each other,” Ms. Wilder said, because both share a history of grass-roots growth and are now sites of large-scale development, like the Ikea furnishings store in Brooklyn and a new home for the BND, the German intelligence agency, which is moving 4,000 employees from Frankfurt to Berlin.

At the same time the curators tried to avoid stretching the comparisons. “We realized the differences are probably more significant than the similarities,” Ms. Widder said.