ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Housing vs. Art in West Berlin

WEST BERLIN

The wall, of course, is the immutable reality; its acceptance is a demonstration of how the surreal becomes ordinary if you live with it long enough, and after 20 years Berliners treat it as a fact of the local geography, like the forests and waterways that make the city such a special place. The line on the map that cuts the city apart at its heart, the Brandenburg Gate, and dismembers the axis of Unter den Linden, is a shocking act of urban amputation. As one stands looking east and west, at the two Berlins, the bland brutality of the division is as disturbing as the actual concrete barricade with its sinister baggage of alarms, mines and guards. No work of art can ever aspire to memorialize this presence and its meanings. The wall is its own best monument.

But the city of West Berlin is divided in its own way — as recent headlines have demonstrated. The issue is housing, with battle lines drawn between squatters and police and politicians caught in the middle. Riots and demonstrations have called international attention to a continuing shortage of housing, and particularly, of affordable housing, in a city that glitters with good living.

The situation is aggravated by geography — West Berlin is an island in East Germany with no place for normal outward expansion — and by a population of which 30 percent are aging Berliners and another 30 percent are young people, many of whom are sitting out the draft years because of an exemption given to West Berliners in an attempt to stem the city's declining numbers. An immigrant Turkish community that accounts for 10 percent of Berlin's residents has crowded into the older quarters. This concentration of the young poor, the old poor and the minority poor has created the classic constituency for housing problems.

Housing in West Berlin is, therefore, both a very real crisis and a radicalized cause. The issue is highly political, and a new government is treading around it with extreme caution. The situation has been brought about, in part, by the city's earlier housing policies. In general, construction in the 1960's was concentrated in peripheral areas, in the new, decentralized developments that were in international favor at the time. The inner city, in common with inner cities almost everywhere, deteriorated badly, compounding the war damage. Urban renewal meant demolition and rebuilding, and large segments of older sections were earmarked for this treatment. Buildings stood empty for years.

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What really lit the fuse was the fact that, as recently as this spring, 10,000 "condemned" apartments were unoccupied, while 80,000 Berliners were looking for a place to live. Rents and "key money" reached outrageous levels. People simply moved into the empty buildings. Frustration became violent protest. But the confrontations have done more than dramatize the need; they seem to be changing the city's policies from bulldozer clearance to rehabilitation of old neighborhoods and existing housing stock — a trend that is already well established in American and other European cities.

Unfortunately, another building issue of considerable importance has been drawn into the controversy. The Internationale Bauausstellung, or International Building Exposition, planned as a showcase of new architecture and ways of dealing with the city, will be a major event in Berlin in 1984. The housing crisis has split Berlin into two camps — those who back the Building Exposition as a potential breakthrough for creative new solutions for the inner city, and those who want its government funding diverted completely to rehabilitated and conventional new housing. IBA, as it is called in its German acronym, has been under serious attack in the press. It has provoked heated accusations of favoring "abstract interventions" over "reality." Its opponents accuse it of ignoring urgent social needs for esoteric art.

Garth Huxtable

Rehabilitated housing in the Kreuzberg quarter—"sophisticated"

Right now, a great deal of misunderstanding and manipulation of the issues is clouding both IBA's, and Berlin's future. IBA's program, in fact, includes both conservation and new construction. Its director is Josef Paul Kleihues, a leading German architect of international reputation and sophisticated urban skills, who speaks with considerable feeling about the art of architecture. Its co-director is Hardt-Waltherr Hämer, a champion of rehabilitation who has rebuilt two pilot blocks in Charlottenburg and Kreuzberg — the latter was the site of some of the demonstrations — and who talks with equal feeling about people and neighborhoods. Professor Hämer sounds like the populist "advocacy" architects of the politicized 60's, but he, too, designs with sophisticated urban skills, and a visit to his Kreuzberg housing reveals esthetic, as well as social preoccupations. The lines are falsely drawn.

The purpose of an International Building Exposition is basically simple: it is to demonstrate the latest state of the art in housing and urban design in the highest architectural terms. Today, that covers a wide range of techniques, and the approaches used in Berlin will be as varied as the participants' styles. IBA is utilizing some of the world's most talented and advanced practitioners, who are being commissioned, through competitions, to work on projects for specific parts of the city. Professor Kleihues has brought together an incredible concentration of stellar names that include James Stirling, Charles Moore, Ramund Abraham, Rob and Leon Krier, Oriol Bohigas and Ralph Erskine; projects have come from Peter Eisenman, Arata Isozaki, Aldo Rossi, Oswald Ungers, Mario Botta and Gottfried Böhm. A number of these architects, while widely admired, have been more published than built; others have major construction to their credit. All are on the leading edge of architectural design.

It seems certain that some badly needed "social housing," as government-sponsored and funded housing is called here, will be built in Berlin under public programs with or without IBA's "interventions." What the controversy comes down to is whether the city wants housing with, or without, architecture — or at least, architecture in its more innovative aspects. And what that, surprisingly, turns out to be is something that everyone thought was laid to rest a long time ago — the eternal struggle of the avant-garde. All of the objections, including the urgent social issues, are redolent with its echoes.

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Much of this was explored at a recent conference on "Berlin and Its Architecture," sponsored by the Aspen Institute, Berlin, which brought together a group of German and foreign professionals for an international look at the situation. The depth and intensity of the discussion was surprising. Much of the energy of the talks reflected the turbulent ideas that are currently changing the vision and practice of architecture and planning througout the world. This is a time of transition — of controversial developments and charged interchanges — in a creative climate not unlike that of the equally turbulent 1920's. Then there was a rejection of the past for a future that would solve all human problems in a totally new way. Now we are in the process of painful readjustment to the presence and lessons of the past, and the perception of the possible.

What has been forgotten in the current controversy is that Berlin has a long, impressive, 20th-century history of architectural innovation. A series of International Building Expositions have given Germany a unique place in the building of our time. Held in Berlin and other cities, they have included the classic examples and prototypes of Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, J.J.P. Oud, Bruno Taut, Ernst May and others. The Weissenhofsiedlung of 1927 in Stuttgart is still a housing landmark and people are still living in it; Mies's model housing in the Berlin Building Exposition of 1931 had immense and lasting impact. Berlin's 1957 Interbau that reconstructed Hansaviertel was less successful as planning than as star performances, but its housing is still considered a prime place

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to live. A visit to the Siemenstadt site confirms the enduring excellence of those experiments of 1929-31. These avant-garde exercises have not only produced enormously influential housing; they have also been responsible for a considerable part of the history of modern architecture.

The difference between the earlier expositions and IBA is that they were based on tabula rasa planning — a unified, cleared site was turned over to the architects to design a better world of the future. Today's efforts are sadder, wiser and considerably more complex. Now we try to mend the existing city; to understand it as "a place with a memory" in Professor Kleihues's words; to work sympathetically within its culture and conditions, with "a new idea of time."

That is why IBA has chosen not a single location, for a monolithic demonstration, but a series of scattered sites that need to be rewoven into the urban fabric, through sympathetic reconstruction or new "infill" building. The words used for planning today are "contextual," "fragmentary," "incremental," and "inclusive," as opposed to the Olympian, homogeneous, controlling idea of a master plan. The aim is always the same — better housing and better living — the official theme of IBA is "Living in the Inner City," which covers a broad spectrum of human and environmental concerns. But the problem is being approached today in a radically new context of urban perceptions and beliefs. What is not new is the idea that art can serve social needs.

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Meeting the challenge at this level would be in the best Berlin tradition. The work is proceeding well; competitions have been judged and the chosen designs are being carefully reworked to satisfy programs and costs. Everything will not be ready by 1984, but there should be enough to show an array of techniques of urban rebuilding, and by 1985, there could be 30,000 additional apartments in Berlin. If an aggressive program of neighborhood rehabilitation is carried out independently of IBA's efforts — and this should be a high government priority — there will be far more housing, and the city's architectural character will be saved and strengthened.

There is also the promise of an extraordinary constellation of new buildings in Berlin in 1984. These architects are being given a chance to build in this city, just as those earlier "radical" architects were given the controversial commissions of the 1920's and 30's. The rest, as they say, is history. And art. ■

The complete credit for the East Campus complex of Columbia University in the Oct. 4 article, "An Ingenious Advance in Housing Design," should have read Gwathmey, Siegel and Emery Roth and Sons, P.C.