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Berlin, Alexanderplatz: Transforming Place in a Unified Germany

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Berlin, Alexanderplatz: Transforming Place in a Unified Germany

Cover Page Footnote
John Fahey is a PhD student studying urban history and the late Habsburg Monarchy at Purdue University.
Studies of German bureaucrats have been popular among academics since the days of Max Weber and have been the source of many of the most important insights into governmental power, institutional psychology, and governance. Gisa Weszkalnys’ *Berlin, Alexanderplatz: Transforming Place in a Unified Germany* delves deeply into urban planning in Berlin, focusing on the Kollhoff-planned project to renovate and develop Alexanderplatz during the 1990s. The plaza has been a potent symbol of Berlin at least since Alfred Döblin’s 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and subsequent films, and it was also a key element of East German city planning in Berlin, serving as an idealized representation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). After reunification, the Berlin senate (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, or SenStadt) identified Alexanderplatz as an area needing renovation under the direction of the Alexanderplatz Frame Coordination (Rahmenkoordinierung Alexanderplatz, or RKA). Alexanderplatz was to represent a new identity for Berlin – that of a unified German capital and global metropolis. Weszkalnys focuses on the long debate between bureaucrats, citizens, politicians, architects and others as to what Alexanderplatz is and what it means to its denizens. She shows that Alexanderplatz is an imagined space which means different things to different sets of bureaucrats, residents, and activists. Since Alexanderplatz was planned over the course of several decades, Weszkalnys argues that it provides a good example of how imagination and expectations transformed during Berlin’s post-socialist phase.

Berlin itself is a contested urban space, filled with controversial memorials and painful memories from the Nazi and Socialist eras, of which Alexanderplatz is just one. Berliners are unusually aware of this contested past, and as the city, government and urban planners work to reform the city into a new global center, Berlin’s past is constantly being reevaluated in the public sphere. Berlin’s citizens are also extremely involved with urban development. In the flurry of urban renewal following reunification, there were over 150 public competitions for building design and urban layout plans. Berlin also worked to involve the public with the city government function of street design and zoning through a variety of outreach programs, public meetings, and public awareness campaigns. Weszkalnys looks at Berlin generally and focuses on Alexanderplatz more specifically as a particularly good example of a troubled planning project. As a lingering symbol of the GDR, public discourse about Alexanderplatz has often focused on its dirty and disorderly nature. Graffiti, garbage, and aging socialist monuments seemed to prove governmental failure, specifically the post socialist government’s failure to maintain the cities. For many, public discourse and complaints about Alexanderplatz in the 1990s and early 2000s was yet another manifestation of *Ostalgie*, and showed Berliner’s sense of loss of the old GDR Aufbau culture.

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1The 1990s were a time of particularly vigorous public debate over the architecture and layout of Berlin, with debates over the *Schloss*, the Holocaust Memorial, Potsdamer Platz, and the Reichstag building among others. For more detailed examples, see Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
Alexanderplatz is informed by this sense of loss and transition. Weszkalnys uses the example of Alexanderplatz to illustrate perceived East German decay and the problem of Berlin’s future development. After an introduction to anthropological theory, the next three chapters of the book trace the development of urban development plans roughly chronologically, as Berlin bureaucrats debated the post-communist architectural identity of the city, identified problem areas, and planned for Alexanderplatz’s renewal. The final two chapters and conclusion look at Berliners’ reactions to the proposed new Alexanderplatz, protests over the plans, and the changing identity of the plaza. Weszkalnys conducted anthropological fieldwork in Berlin in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She worked as an intern at RKA and was granted extensive access to meetings, files, and company records. This was an interesting time for Berlin, when the initial burst of optimism after reunification had worn off, leaving behind grandiose plans for city renewal, but a declining workforce and decreasing demand for commercial and residential development. In describing the bureaucrats, social scientists, civil engineers, and planners she worked with, Weszkalnys draws heavily on Weberian descriptions of objective and rational civil servants. While her analysis at times overwhelms the chronological narrative of Alexanderplatz’s planning and does occasionally become very specialized, it provides a valuable case study of bureaucracies in a mixed public and private enterprise. As an intern at RKA, Weszkalnys was able to see the confusing process of decision making within bureaucracies, where various power players feel shut out and uncoordinated but ultimately work to minimize inconvenience for city residents.

Weszkalnys’ volume builds well on other studies of modernist planning. Like James Holsten’s *The Modernist City* (1989), which examined city planning in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, Alexanderplatz looks at the empty spaces of cities which locals fill with social activity. Where Weszkalnys departs from classic authors like Holsten and James C. Scott is in her excellent analysis of the public reaction to, and discourse with, the Alexanderplatz project. The Berlin government gave ample opportunity for public interaction with the planning process, unlike many modernizing cities studied by urban historians. Berlin’s City Forum allowed open discussions on urban development within Berlin, which allowed citizens to voice concerns about city plans. Official panels were paralleled by citizens’ organizations. Weszkalnys shows how Berlin residents tried to cast themselves as experts and citizens in order to interact authoritatively with city planners. In accordance with the finest traditions of German bureaucracy, letters and petitions to the Alexanderplatz planning committee have all been filed and saved, making excellent source material for a study of complaints about the construction project. These complaints include a wide variety of concerns, ranging from a lost GDR heritage to an excessive Americanization of Berlin to simple property disputes. Weszkalnys looks especially at youth protests by Platz für junge Menschen and other organizations towards the planned development of Alexanderplatz, which would remove popular meeting and hanging out spaces from the public sphere. By looking at these complaints by Berlin residents, Weszkalnys shows the robustness of the social question in urban planning.

As of writing, the planned construction of Alexanderplatz has not begun, largely due to the lack of demand for more real estate in a saturated Berlin market, making the entire project an exercise in imaginative planning. Weszkalnys addresses this halt, simply arguing that development never stops in a city and that the Alexanderplatz plans are...
likely to eventually influence actual development. Despite this pause in activity, Weszkalnys’ book remains important. The case of Alexanderplatz demonstrates that even stalled or failed projects can illustrate the objectives of a government and perceptions of citizens. Weszkalnys has made a valuable contribution to urban history, particularly with her description of bureaucrats at work. She also addresses a useful intellectual problem—the concept of contested plans and imaginary future cities—but could have better connected this issue to broader national trends within Germany. Likewise, she gives insufficient national political or economic context for urban developments in Berlin. Still, *Alexanderplatz* will be very useful to urban historians, students of city government, anthropologists, and future urban planners.

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