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Pictures of Berlin: Construction and Conservation of a 1920s Metropolis

BIRGIT SCHILLAK-HAMMERS

When it comes to Berlin in the "Roaring Twenties", pictures of a vibrant, modern city almost instantly come to mind, although it is widely known that the city and its inhabitants were still suffering due to the aftermath of World War I. It was the government itself that made a great effort to give a completely different impression of the city and measure up to metropolises such as Paris, London, and especially to New York. Photography played an important role in the creation of the so-called Berlin myth.

Berlin und die „Goldenen Zwanziger" – Sofort wird an eine lebendige, moderne Großstadt gedacht. Gleichzeitig ist bekannt, dass damals Berlin und seine Bewohner noch immer an den Folgen des Ersten Weltkriegs litten. Die Regierung unternahm große Anstrengungen, um einen völlig anderen Eindruck der Stadt zu vermitteln und sich mit Metropolen wie Paris, London und insbesondere New York zu messen. Die Fotografie spielte eine wichtige Rolle bei der Entstehung des sogenannten Berlin-Mythos.

Biography

Birgit Schillak-Hammers (b. 1978) has been a research assistant at the Department for Art History, RWTH Aachen University, since 2009. From 2007 to 2009 she held a scholarship from the Gerda Henkel Foundation in Düsseldorf for her dissertation on the avant-garde photographer Sasha Stone, published in 2014. While studying the history of art and architecture, and German literature at the RWTH Aachen University and the Universitá degli Studi in Florence (2000–2006), she also worked as a free-lancer at the Ludwig Forum for International Art in Aachen. She is currently working on her habilitation treatise about the self-staging of architects in photography.

The term "Berlin" still today evokes images of a huge and vivid city—in other words, a metropolis.[1] While Berlin is indeed a city with an extraordinary, checkered history, most periods, such as the German Empire, the Third Reich, or the division of the city after World War II, are mainly associated with negative connotations. Of course, there was the fall of the Berlin Wall, but despite the importance of this monumental event, the period which is still most present today in a positive sense is the so-called "Goldene Zwanziger" (Golden Twenties), encompassing the years of the Weimar Republic. Perhaps this era is recently more present than ever, with the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus being celebrated in 2019, and with countless books, movies, TV shows, and theme parties currently coming onto the scene. When it comes to Berlin in the 1920s, pictures of a modern, vibrant, dynamic place almost instantly come to mind, with people partying night and day in a world full of glitz and glamour. Although it is widely known that this was not what real life looked like for most of the people living in Berlin at that time—in fact, the city and its inhabitants were still suffering due to the aftermath of World War I, and there was a massive lack of work, food, and affordable housing—these pictures are indelible.[2] So the question is, what prompts these images in the first place? How was that image of the city created, and who was responsible for it? How come this image, despite us knowing better, has survived for almost a century?

Ever since the early nineteenth-century, Berlin has been longing to become an important European capital. Around 1900, the German emperors wanted to create a city as beautiful and impressive as London or Paris—until the outbreak of World War I destroyed all their hopes. Yet the government of the young German Republic of the 1920s made a great effort to measure up to metropolises such as Paris, London, and especially New York. It was an explicit interest of officials to present Berlin as a metropolis not only to Germany but also to the entire world. In 1928, Gustav Böß, the mayor of Berlin, said in one of his speeches: "I know Paris, London, and New York are still ahead of us. Soon we must and we will catch up with them."[3] To promote this *Weltstadtsehnsucht* (longing to be a metropolis),[4] pictures of modern comforts, technical achievements, and of course contemporary architecture were spread via photobooks, magazines, postcards, and poster campaigns. Photography obviously played an important role in the creation of the Berlin myth.[5] But whereas the sources differed, the motifs stayed mostly the same, concentrating on the so-called *Hauptstadtsymbole*,[6] meaning symbols of a modern, cosmopolitan capital. According to Detlef Briesen, a kind of "mental map" of the city of Berlin was created in this way.[7]

1. The English term "metropolis" unifies different German terms such as *Großstadt*, *Weltstadt*, *Hauptstadt,* and *Metropole*, which all have a slightly different meaning. In this article the word "metropolis" is mostly used to describe a city that is not only large in terms of the number of habitants, but that also holds all the attributes of a cultural capital.
2. On the state of Berlin in the 1920s, cf. Brennert and Stein 1926. In regard to the dismantling of the Berlin myth, cf. Briesen 1992a+b.
3. Gustav Böß in *Berliner Tageblatt* 1928, as cited in Bienert 1992: 96f [Eng. trans.: author].
4. Cf. Bienert 1992: 96.
5. Cf. e.g. Hake 2008, or Nitsche / Werner 2012.
6. Briesen 1992a: 43.
7. Cf. Briesen 1992b: 155f.

BIRGIT
         SCHILLAK-HAMMERS   PICTURES OF BERLIN

Fig. 1.

Prefacing pages of Mario von Bucovich's Berlin (1928), László Willinger's
100 x Berlin (1929), and Sasha Stone's Berlin in Bildern (1929).
Source: Bucovich 1928, Willinger 1929, and Stone 1929.

Berlin Photobooks

The photobook was and perhaps still is the most sustainable media to spread pictures of Berlin. Most of these books include an introduction by a well-known author and concise information about the featured subjects written in German, English, and French, surely emphasizing the international significance of the books. While in the 1920s the photobook was not part of what one might call "mass media," they definitely gained in importance after World War II, when the cities were down, and perhaps even more in the last two or three decades.[8] Among the countless photobooks about Berlin that are still around today are three outstanding examples: Mario von Bucovich's *Berlin*, published in 1928 as part of the series *Das Gesicht der Städte* (The face of the cities);[9] *Berlin in Bildern* (Berlin in pictures), published in 1929 by architecture critic Adolf Behne and photographer Sasha Stone;[10] and László Willinger's *100 x Berlin* from 1929.[11] In these books, many features of the "new" Berlin, such as modern architecture, traffic, or other technical achievements, are displayed equally in relation to the historical monuments and picturesque views of the "old" Berlin. Besides that, the use of the inventions of the Neues Sehen (New Vision) definitely underlines the modern impact of the books. Actually, only Bucovich[12] opens his book with a popular historical monument, the Brandenburg Gate, while Stone and Willinger stick to features of the modern Berlin (Fig. 1). Although *Berlin in Bildern* features the Brandenburg Gate on the dust jacket, the chronology of illustrations starts with two views of the Klingenberg power

8.   For example, many reprints of the most important 1920s photobooks of Berlin were published in the 1990s. On photobooks from this era in general, cf. e.g. Heiting / Jaeger 2012.
9.   Bucovich 1992 [1928].
10.   Stone 1998 [1929].
11.   Willinger 1997 [1929].
12.   The photographers probably did not choose the pictures and the chronology all by themselves—maybe they were not involved at all—but for the sake of convenience in the following text the books are labeled with the photographer's names.

station in Berlin-Rummelsburg.[13] The power station was a very popular subject
at that time to promote modern industry, and thus it was published in many photo
reportages.[14] Besides the huge interest in the topic of electricity in the 1920s in general,
German industry needed to be supported after World War I. Maybe that is one reason
so many pictures showing Berlin illuminated at night were published in countless
photobooks and magazines.[15] All three books mentioned contain pictures of
Klingenberg, but only Willinger confronts the source of electricity directly with its
impact: the lights of the Berlin nightlife at Potsdamer Platz.

Willinger's *100 x Berlin*, which is always mentioned in this context but has surprisingly
not yet been analyzed in detail,[16] might be the most modern example among the
three. It starts with a picture of the tallest modern building in Berlin at that time, the

13.   For further information on this book, cf. e.g. Paenhuysen 2010.
14.   Cf. e.g. Lotz 1929: 219–24.
15.   Regarding this topic, cf. e.g. Frecot / Sembach 2002.
16.   For basic information, cf. Jaeger 2012: 220f.

Ullstein Building, which was finished in 1927 by Eugen Schmohl, followed by two examples of Neues Bauen and—surely not by coincidence—two other publishing houses: Scherl-Haus by Otto Kohtz[17] and Mossehaus by Erich Mendelsohn.[18] This opening definitely underlines the importance of the press and the media in general in the times of the Weimar Republic. While Stone and Bucovich simulate a walk through the city in a more (Stone) or less (Bucovich) rigorous way, Willinger repeatedly anticipates old and new subjects despite their geographic position; for example, when he contrasts a view of old Berlin houses with a picture of the Siemensstadt, or when he opposes modernist Berlin housing estates, such as Fischtalgrund or Britz, with symbols of historic architecture, such as Charlottenburg Palace or the backyards of the Friedrichstadt (Fig. 2). This strategy evokes the impression that the city consisted equally of new and old architecture, yet this was certainly not the case.

"Jeder einmal in Berlin"

As stated above, photobooks are an essential source for today's historic view of Berlin in the 1920s, but one has to consider that they were not that significant in everyday life back then. Besides reports in magazines and newspapers, city marketing played an important part in creating a new image for the city of Berlin—for example, adverts like the one featuring the new Karstadt department store at Hermannplatz, a signature project of urban planning built by Philip Schaefer between 1927 and 1929 (Fig. 3). In Berlin's aspiration to make an appearance as a 1920s metropolis, tourism also played a significant role in promoting the city's amenities. The campaign "Jeder einmal in Berlin" (Everybody once in Berlin) was launched in 1927 to expand urban marketing. The Berlin exhibition office, which was renamed to Ausstellungs, Messe- und Fremdenverkehrsamt der Stadt Berlin (Exhibition, Fair, and Tourism Office of the city of Berlin) in the same year, was responsible for this major campaign.[19] It is a good example of how the city sought to increase the number of visitors, although as early as 1924 already a million people were visiting the city.[20] Karl Charal developed a logo for Berlin showing the Brandenburg Gate, with the letters of the word "Berlin" replacing the columns of the gate. In the architrave it says "Jeder einmal in Berlin" (Fig. 4).[21] This logo was a great success and in a way still is, as even today the Brandenburg Gate is in the official logo for Berlin. Besides the logo and its corresponding posters, the campaign "Jeder einmal in Berlin" was also spread via brochures and city guides published by the Exhibition, Fair, and Tourism Office. Hugo Hirsch was even commissioned to compose a march, which subsequently became very famous. In the foreword of *Jeder einmal in Berlin: Offizieller* Führer *für Berlin und Umgebung und Potsdam und seine Schlösser* (Official guide to Berlin and its surroundings) from 1928, Adolf Schick, head of the Exhibition, Fair, and Tourism Office, wrote about why everybody should visit Berlin. He stated that this campaign should convince people to become friends of Berlin, the "German metropolis." Schick wanted people to "see and experience" the capital of the Reich as the "world capital of order and beauty, the city of work, the

17. Kohtz's project was only partly executed in 1925.
18. Mendelsohn rebuilt the destroyed building from 1921 to 1923.
19. Since 1924 the slogan "Jeder Deutsche einmal in Berlin" (Every German once in Berlin) was used by the former Municipal Tourism Office, e.g. in the magazine *Wochenspiegel*. Cf. Köhn 2015: 44, 46f.
20. Cf. Köhn 2015: 44.
21. Cf. Institut für Kommunikationsgeschichte und angewandte Kulturwissenschaften der Freien Universität Berlin 1995: 13–15.

Fig. 3.

Advertisement for Karstadt
at Hermannplatz, Berlin, 1930.
Source: Bienert 1992: 171.

Fig. 4.

Karl Charal, design for "Jeder einmal
in Berlin," color lithography, 1928.
Source: © Deutsches Historisches Museum.

most active metropolis of the continent, the European center for economy and traffic, the city of music and theatre, the biggest city for sports, the metropolis with the most beautiful surroundings."[22] With this statement he claims nothing less than the number one position among the European capitals in almost every field of modern urban planning: economy, mobility, culture, and landscape.

This image was also promoted in foreign countries, as the campaign was not limited to Germany.[23] The slogan "Jeder einmal in Berlin" was translated to different languages. On an Italian poster it says, for example, "Almeno una volta a Berlin—La metropoli dell'ordine e della bellezza della musica e del teatro" (Everybody once in Berlin— the world city of order and the beauty of music and theatre).[24] To underline the

22.   Schick 1928: 15 [Eng. trans.: author].
23.   Cf. Bienert 1992: 96–103
24.   Italian advert from the "Arbeitsbericht des Presse- und Informationsamtes" in 1929, cf. Bienert 1992: 103
        [Eng. trans.: author].

Fig. 6.

Sasha Stone, Wenn Berlin New York wäre… (If Berlin Was New York), photomontage, ca. 1928.
Source: Museum Folkwang, Fotografische Sammlung, Essen.

Fig. 5.

Albert Vennemann, photomontage for Hugo Hirsch's march "Jeder einmal in Berlin," 1927.
Source: Köhn 2015: 55.

equivalence of Berlin with other metropolises there was another poster showing the Brandenburg Gate among the most popular city emblems, such as the Arc de Triomphe, the Tower Bridge, the Colosseum, and—a bit of a surprise—the skyline of Manhattan, illustrating the international aspirations of this campaign.[25]

It is remarkable that the slogan "Jeder einmal in Berlin" survived and circulated for so long. It was used by the National Socialists for reasons of war propaganda in 1939, and afterward, despite this abuse, used again for Berlin marketing. An advert from 1950 reads: "Everybody once in Berlin—a slogan at one time? No, the catchphrase of today!"[26] Furthermore, the advert recaptures some of the motifs of the old campaign of the 1920s: a globe, the radio tower, and of course the Brandenburg Gate. Beneath it, the words: "Berlin—Meeting point of the world." Obviously such a campaign had to be based on pictures, so the posters and brochures often displayed photographs of famous landmarks, such as the Brandenburg Gate, the city hall, or the Berlin Cathedral, and symbols of the modern metropolis, such as the radio tower, a power station, or the first German traffic light, at Potsdamer Platz. The same motifs were used for several photomontages created by Albert Vennemann in the context of the campaign—for example, a cover for a famous record by Hugo Hirsch (Fig. 5) and the montage displayed in the Berlin pavilion at the Official Advertising Fair in 1929. But while his montages were widely known and are still present, and although in his day

25.   Dustcover: Arbeitsbericht des Ausstellungs-, Messe-, und Fremdenverkehrsamts der Stadt Berlin, cf. Wagner / Behne 1988 [1929]: 89.
26.   Cited in Köhn 2015: 60 [Eng. trans.: author].

he was an important chronographer of Berlin city life, today the photographer and designer Vennemann is almost forgotten.[27]

Photomontages

The campaign "Jeder einmal in Berlin" clearly provides evidence of the importance of photomontages in the depiction of cityscapes or visions of cityscapes. In a way, montages are very precise when it comes to expressing the longings of Berlin, because they are able to visualize utopian states, while photographs are mostly limited to the actual state of affairs. While Vennemann's montages for the campaign are easy to identify as "fake," some photomontages of that time come closer to creating a new reality, such as the works by Moï Ver or Germaine Krull. In respect to Berlin, the series of photomontages by Sasha Stone can be considered an outstanding example of this technique. In the 1920s, Stone was a very well-known photographer and, among other things, specialized in architectural and urban photography.[28] The montages titled *If Berlin was…* show Berlin combined with other cities, such as Biarritz, Innsbruck, Venice, or Istanbul. In the context of the *Weltstadtsehnsucht*, the work *If Berlin Was New York*, in which Stone combines a view of Potsdamer Platz with pictures of New York, seems to be the most relevant (Fig. 6). In general, Potsdamer Platz was one of the outstanding symbols of Berlin traffic. Thus, it became a popular subject for illustrating that topic, as heavy traffic was considered to be one of the major characteristics of a modern metropolis. It makes an appearance in almost every publication or campaign about Berlin, especially after the first traffic light in Germany, imported from New York, was erected there in 1924. At first sight, it is not obvious which part of the montage belongs to which city, as the urban characteristics of the two cities are very much alike; the traffic light actually functions as a linking element between the two of them. The traffic light may have been necessary at Potsdamer Platz at that time, but, as Walter Kiaulehn points out, it was only because the urban planning failed in creating more transport axes through the city. According to Kiaulehn, Berlin had only about fifty thousand cars in 1926, meaning one for almost a hundred inhabitants. Compared to that, Paris had one car for forty inhabitants, and in New York every sixth person owned

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27.   Eckhardt Köhn recently rediscovered this portraitist of the city of Berlin, cf. Köhn 2015.
28.   For life and work of Sasha Stone, cf. Hammers 2014.

a car.[29] So the traffic in Berlin was definitely not as heavy as the officials might have wished for, or as it is displayed in yet another famous photomontage by Albert Vennemann (Fig. 7). Because of the huge discrepancy between the wished-for metropolitan traffic and the actual reality at Potsdamer Platz, the montages, like the ones by Vennemann, worked much better in illustrating the desired image than the actual photographs. In 1926 the writer Kurt Tucholsky expressed his thoughts concerning this phenomenon as follows: "The Berlin press is keen on inculcating the Berlin people with a new obsession: traffic! The police are splendidly supporting them. It is indeed ridiculous what is happening in this city to organize, to capture in statistics, to depict, to sort out, to divert, to supply … Is it that massive anyway? No."[30]

Urban Planning

The Berlin subway is another key urban element that promoted technical progress on the one hand, and on the other became a remedy for the challenges of the rising traffic volume. Under the administration of Ernst Reuter, the city councilor for transportation from 1926 to 1931, the line network of the Berlin subway was almost doubled.[31] Compared to automobile traffic, the extension of the public transport system was indeed a true accomplishment of the time. When it was founded in 1928, the BVG (Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe) was the largest local transportation company worldwide. The building site at Alexanderplatz, where a whole new junction was built, functioned as a symbol for this rapid expansion and for the new Berlin, even though one couldn't even see anything of the subway in the pictures. Like the pictures of the building site at Alexanderplatz that stood for the upcoming technical innovation, some of the subway interiors in a way anticipated technical progress too. One of the most modern subway stations was the one built in 1926 at Nollendorfplatz by the architect Alfred Grenander, who was responsible for many subway stations in Berlin before and after World War I.[32]

29. Cf. Kiaulehn 1981: 22–23.
30. Tucholsky 1926: 739 [Eng. trans.: author].
31. Cf. Reichhardt 1979: 63f.

In 1931 Karl Scheffler published an interior shot of the Nollendorf station by Sasha Stone in his book about the changes going on in Berlin (Fig. 8).[33] The picture, which was composed according to the terms of modern photography, focuses on lighting. It shows a light band on the ceiling and thus gives the impression of a continuous fluorescent tube. In fact, it is just a copper gutter with single bulbs. In this way, the picture goes further than actual reality; it is a kind of prediction of a technical innovation that is not yet available.[34]

A similar strategy can be determined when it comes to the photomontages produced in the context of architectural competitions. While photobooks or advertising campaigns are often discussed regarding the question how the powerful image of Berlin in the 1920s developed, the influence of architectural competitions and their publication is rarely taken into account. This is quite strange, as the drafts, often visualized via photomontages, were widely published and frequently used to promote a modern image of the city and/or ensure support for the huge building projects. A very important

32.   Cf. Brachmann 2006: 80–82.
33.   Scheffler 1931: fig. 54.
34.   At that time, fluorescent tubes did already exist but were not produced serially. This only happened in 1938, after General Electric bought the patent.

figure in this context was Martin Wagner, the head of the municipal planning and building control office in Berlin. Together with Adolf Behne, Wagner published several issues of the magazine *Das neue Berlin: Grossstadtprobleme* (The new Berlin: problems of a metropolis) in 1929,[35] in which they tried to illustrate why Berlin needed new urban structures and modern architecture. For that reason, numerous pictures were used to illustrate these thoughts—for example, a double page showing modern buildings by Bruno Taut opposed to old housing estates.[36] The first page of this extremely influential book is illustrated with a photomontage of Alexanderplatz created by Umbo and Sasha Stone—quite programmatic for the whole issue (Fig. 9). According to Wagner, Alexanderplatz should have become a *Weltstadtplatz*. That is why several competitions were launched to give it a new, modern appearance while complying with the needs of urban infrastructure at an important junction. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was one of the architects who made an entry for this competition, and he visualized his plans via photomontage as well (Fig. 10).

Another example of such a formative urban project is the competition for a high-rise building in Friedrichstraße in 1921/22, for which visionary designs by renowned and young architects were created.[37] The drafts were widely exhibited and published, and therefore are still well known today. Undoubtedly, the most famous examples are the plans by Mies van der Rohe created in this context. Similar to the picture of Grenander's light tubes at the Nollendorf station, the photomontages by Mies van der Rohe predict a technical innovation that was neither financeable nor yet realizable: a high-rise made completely out of glass. It is indeed interesting that the drawing of the high-rise imitates a low angle shot to show the building in a much steeper angle than it would have appeared in reality—definitely an achievement of modern photography. Erich Mendelsohn was one of the first to make this technique popular when he published his work *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (America: an architect's picture book) in 1926. If one takes a closer look at Mies van der Rohe's other montages of Berlin—for example, those of the department store Adam or the office building Roter Kreis—and compares them to urban photography of that time, it appears to be pretty obvious that the architect tried to imitate the characteristics of this technique.

Nevertheless, montages like the ones for the Friedrichstraße competition enhanced the impression of Berlin as a city full of high-rises, which was in fact not the case. In the 1920s and early 1930s, high-rises were only built occasionally and widely scattered over the whole city. The Ullstein Building (Fig. 1), finished in 1927, was by far the highest modern building, with a height of seventy-seven meters and twelve stories in the tower. In 1937, Douglas Chandler, a correspondent for *National Geographic Magazine*, visited Berlin and was surprised by "the village-like appearance of most streets," and also remarked that he could only find "three or four buildings that" were "as much as ten stories high."[38] In contrast to the high-rises, the modern housing estates, such as the one in Britz designed by Bruno Taut and Martin Wagner, were actually realized. Measured by the necessities after the war, it seems to be quite obvious why cheap and fast housing was considered

35.   Wagner / Behne 1988 [1929].
36.   Wagner / Behne 1988 (1928): 58f.
37.   For information about skyscrapers in the 1920s, cf. Neumann 1995.
38.   Douglas Chandler, *Changing Berlin: Life and Luster of Berlin*, 1937, cited in: Briesen 1992b: 151.

to be more important than expensive skyscrapers. But the impressive visualizations via drafts or montages were used for marketing and are still vivid even today. They give an impression of how Berlin could have looked if the times and technological progress had been different. One might say that Mies van der Rohe and the other architects created a city that in fact never existed and doesn't even exist today, yet is still alive in people's minds.

When studying 1920s visions of Berlin, it becomes obvious that photography is not only able to display the past and the present, but also capable of predicting a possible future. It is a fact that in most cases the image of a city is not compatible with actual reality.[39] It is furthermore most likely that if there is no scientific research done to disprove these images, they will stay in people's minds forever. But getting things right requires a will to do so, and in the case of Berlin, maybe that wasn't and still isn't in the interests of the people in authority, or maybe it's not a public benefit at all. During the short period of the Weimar Republic, the picture of a utopian Berlin was created by the authorities, the press, the artists, and the architects mainly by using photographic devices. A modern metropolis was brought into being that stood for the young democratic republic, including all its hopes and dreams for a better future. History tells us that these expectations were dashed, but what survived was the vision that was created. After World War II, photographers, like all other artists, struggled with how to deal with this massive tragedy. In the field of urban photography, the destruction of the cities made this problem even more evident. How do you promote a city when there is no city anymore? Despite all that, Berlin was partitioned into four sectors and later divided by a gigantic wall. Furthermore, being located in the middle of the German Democratic Republic, it lost the status of capital for the Western side. So maybe the answer is easy: when there is no new city to promote, you have to keep up the myth of the old one and stick to the glorious past, because the era of the Golden Twenties is an early symbol for democracy, and at the same time, it is a warning of how easily a democracy can change into a dictatorial regime. A warning that particularly today is required more than ever.

39. Cf. Briesen 1992a: 39f. Briesen is referring to Kevin Lynch. Of course, there are more examples that should be considered in this context: film, literature, and the dust jackets of books that deal with the topic of the city, and most importantly postcards. The latter were especially widespread, being found also in foreign countries, and often preserved the memory of buildings that were destroyed in World War II.

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