

Berlin

Population: 3.4 million
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What ever happened to the capital of low-cost hedonism and €200-a-month coal-heated apartments? Is Berlin selling its soul? On the persistent rumour that the Jolie-Pitts were moving in, Mitte suddenly became “SoTo” (South of Torstraße) and now Friedrichstraße calls itself the Upper East Side. You have to ring a bell these days to get into many galleries.

Never mind, Berliners still study at 35, every fair has its fringe counterpart and the city keeps the best bar and club scene on the continent. For Mayor Klaus Wowereit, “Berlin ist arm aber sexy [poor but sexy]” but in less polite circles “Berlin ist eine Hure”. Berliners need love and the constant reassurance that we love their city, hence the architectural schizophrenia, the subversive art stance and the redemptory endorsement of every lifestyle fad. The pace is extremely addictive.

Potsdamerplatz and the Ku'Damm are as overrated as Heidi Klum (eds. Oops!): Berlin's centre of gravity has shifted eastwards and even the infamous KitKat Club has left Schöneberg for Mitte. Hanging out in East Berlin won't give you instant street credibility: super-leafy Prenzlauer Berg is as discovered as Notting Hill, with yummy mummies, bespectacled designer dads and busloads of tourists roaming its manicured streets, a major hazard being the twin buggy. But in Mitte, we could never leave Kastanien Allee (or Casting Allee for the posing attitude of its pretty unemployed artists). In the heartlands of the Soviet utopia, Friedrichshain remains a hotbed of subculture. Kreuzberg is our promised land: a loud and proud mixed bag of artists, Lesbian mums, crack addicts, punks, hippies and students, all hanging around Oranienstraße. Each year demonstrations take place on May Day – très Kaviar Gauche.

Over The Edge

Over the last ten years Berlin has joined London, New York and Paris as a major pillar of the art world. Artists and writers, perhaps drawn by the Baudelairian adage that beauty is bizarre, interesting and dirty, flocked to the city. Currently the Young German Artists seem set to take over where the YBAs left off. March holds the 5th Biennale on Augustraße, the city's artistic hub, but the dirt of Berlin's Mitte is increasingly dusted away and Kreuzberg (in the former West), which houses its own set of galleries, is reclaiming its edge over what has become a commercialised East Berlin scene.

Street art has been elevated to new levels: hooded hipsters and art buyers rub shoulders with bona fide radicals in high profile shows housing an enormous variety of mediums; Arkitip and Wood Wood have just held High-math, a “live” issue, at the swanky Pool gallery. The scene echoes that of 1970s New York, but with a disturbing sense of self-consciousness: now that anything by the London Police

is regularly stolen in Amsterdam and that Banksy reaches record highs at Sotheby's, everyone in town wants to have their cake and eat it. Even established galleries court the street seal of approval, in the form of banana spray ratings. With all this hype, grassroots artists are in an interesting state of confusion: collectives exploit their wholesome virtues for street credibility, only to accept Nike as brand sponsors! It looks like Berlin has definitely moved into a new territory, beyond artist run spaces and open houses. With new commercial galleries opening every day, lately along Kochstraße, Zimmerstraße and Brunnenstraße, Berlin is gradually losing its raw quality and becoming less of a “dirty” beauty. But it is not all celebrities and white cubes yet: studios still open in the most idiosyncratic venues, from bunkers to dental practices, and the art world remains approachable. This year the Biennale will relinquish any particular theme, attempting to make sense of the past, present and future of the city's fast changing art scene.

Kate Bloomfield, Nick Buteau

Art, Design & Fashion

In your diary: Berlin Biennale 5 April - 15 June... Berlin Fashion Week 19 - 23 July... Art Forum & Kunstsalon 31 October - 3 November... Megastructure Reloaded (architecture), Autumn dates t.b.c. ...

The Berlin art world is reaching its zenith and many studios and galleries have slowly abandoned their collective ethos. The new Heiner Bastian art temple on Museumsinsel, a private collection featuring the likes of Damien Hirst, is typical of the current power shift. In Mitte, the Scheunenviertel is the epicentre of the creative scene and now flash with upscale galleries. Brunnenstraße has become a hub of its own. Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain still cling to their Produzentengalerie (artist run) ideals and house collectives and quirkier galleries.

2008 will not disappoint: the new, temporary White Cube is a contemporary art space that fills the gap left by the demolition of the Palast der Republik; Art Forum is now a grand slam exhibition and Kunstsalon is

its attention-seeking, rebellious little sibling; the Biennale returns on Auguststraße; at its fringe, Megastructure Reloaded is a retrospective dedicated to 1960s radical architecture. Following the success of What makes Shanghai addictive (and What makes Berlin addictive in Shanghai), Berlin continues to provide a springboard between East and West, this time with Camp, a Berlin-Hiroshima artist exchange programme.

The fashion world, unfairly described by designer Kostas Murkudis as Brachland (“a dumping ground”), is slowly making a name for itself. ESMOD is a hotbed of talents and Berlin has more than 1,000 micro-labels. Only a few designers have made it onto the world stage - Kaviar Gauche, Talkingme-anstrouble, Sisi Wasabi – but Berlin Fashion Week is hosting catwalks and showrooms from everywhere in Europe. With a lack of seriously rich footballers' wives – even Frau Beckenbauer can't buy all the collections - the scene remains low-key with an anti-establishment stance.

Zwischenmieter

With empty premises everywhere, Berlin landlords continue to let out their space to Zwischenmieter (temporary tenants) – desirable creatives who can boost the cachet of an area. Many designers operate from ground floor aquariums, flashing their shiny Macs and ic!berlin eyewear at passerbys. This enables Berlin to remain at the forefront of pop-up concepts: the Beck's Fashion Experience is now an integral part of Berlin Fashion Week. We heard somewhere that Wedding was the new Mitte and we almost chocked on our Currywurst until we attended Wedding Dress, a fringe fashion and urban arts festival that occupied three entire blocks at the very unfashionable end of Brunnenstraße (tellingly it was organised by property developers). Many pop-ups that become permanent are too lazy to change the name of the previous shop: soon all venues in town will be called Möbel something! Space in Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg is increasingly scarce but new hotspots include Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain and Wedding, which have recently hosted temporary flats

for Nintendo, the Kubik summer club and the Turkish-Japanese Pop Up Pub Bento Centre.

Cabaret & Soviet Chic

The tradition of experimental theatre lives on in Berlin. Schöneberg can package the Cabaret experience but Kreuzberg's BKA theatre will provide proper Isherwood decadence. The wall has all but disappeared and its traces remain palpable in the urban landscape, with wastelands and former ghost stations forming a faultline between the 2 parts of the city. [add] Traces of the wall remain in Mauerpark and in Friedrichshain's East Side Gallery.

Nostalgia of the Cold War era helps define a retail concept typical to Berlin: at Weinerei, drink and pay what you want; same when eating at Morgenrot. 2007 saw the closure of Umsonstladen, where everything was free. Pavilions offered to Warsaw Pact countries are an artistic legacy of the Soviet Union. Remember the USSR sipping a drink at the Tajikistan Tearoom, Berlin's original pop-up!



Past, Present & Future

Berlin's contemporary architecture cannot be understood in isolation from its glorious past and buildings no longer in existence still play a vital role in an imaginary landscape. Most look at the innovative spirit of the Weimar Republic with nostalgia. At the periphery of the city, the modernist housing projects of Siemensstadt and Berlin Britz led the way in social housing. South of Kreuzberg, Tempelhof has developed a cult status: the airport, although expanded during the Third Reich, was initiated in the 1920s and has been described by Norman Foster as “the mother of all airports” (it will be discontinued this year).

Berlin's destruction and the Cold War intensified competition, with grand Soviet display like the Plattenbauten (concrete blocks) of Karl-Marx-Allee in the East, and the modernist manifestos of Hansaviertel and Corbusierhaus in the West. Socialist delusions are visible in the once desirable Siedlung (housing project) of Marzahn, now a bastion of unemployment. Capitalist West Berlin maintained

a tradition of experimental social housing throughout the 1980s: Alvaro Siza's “Bonjour Tristesse” building (the nickname and the graffiti are a more recent addition) and Zaha Hadid's Wohnhof (initiated in 1987) both represent the Iba accomplishments in restructuring Berlin's derelict urban areas.

Achievements since reunification are patchy. Potsdamer Platz and the Regierungsviertel (government district) have been bastardised, including a low-rent Flatiron look-alike. Rem Koolhaas' Dutch Embassy is often acknowledged as the most accomplished building in the government district. Elsewhere, Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum exemplifies a cottage industry of collective memory; sadly, the dramatic Holocaust Memorial nearby has to be shared with bored teenagers on their mobile phones. The latest chapter in a city torn between past and future is the former imperial castle being rebuilt over the ruins of the socialist Palast der Republik.