# History Of Berlin: Culture And Politics

## Introduction

Berlin has had what one would call ‘a momentous’ history. I believe that no other metropolis has been witness to such frequent and drastic changes that has altered the face of the city, of which its architecture constantly changed throughout its history. Even though Berlin has seen itself grow in its importance over the years, with remarkable eras alternated with darker eras. However, the once-divided city has since seen much success in becoming one of the most cultural, political, media and science led city’s. And since the 2000s Berlin has seen the emergence of a cosmopolitan entrepreneurial scene. (Braw, 2014)

Berlin was a town that was believed to have been founded in 1237, on the banks of the river Spree, it was soon merged together with a second town, called C?lln what is now known as Museum Island, which as it suggests is home to some of the most world-renowned museums. Before the middle ages rapidly evolved into the capital and trade centre of the Prussian Empire to later become the capital of a unified Germany in 1871. Following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Germany was consumed by the First World War. Germany emerged as a growing democracy creating what was known as the Weimar Republic. Which reflected the dramatic social and political changes taking place within the country, becoming an international avant-garde culture. The twenties came to an end due to the devastating impact of the Great Depression and the downfall of the Weimar Republic and the uprising of Adolf Hitler. This led to Germany invading Poland, thus sparking the Second World War. Germany's defeat was shortly followed by the division of Germany as a whole, especially Berlin itself, dividing it into zones. A communist East and a capitalist West. After suffering for 40 years of division, the Berlin Wall fell. This was the start for Berlin as a city to reclaim its place as a symbol of liberty and progress: the capital of Europe. Furthermore, be able to see the architectural projects that took place during this time to attempt to create a single unified city once more.

## Imperial Germany and New urbanism

After the unification of Germany and following what is known to be ‘the three Kaisers’; refers to the memorable significance of the death of two German Kaisers leading to a rapid succession of three monarchs within one year. Kaiser Wilhelm II decided to make Berlin a statement of personal rule. A new style was to be found during this period to reflect the confidence of Germany's new position. It was either a proud Neo-Baroque or a heavy imitation of German Romanesque or gothic models (How has politics influenced Berlin’s architecture over the 20th century? 2019). A prime example of this neo-Renaissance style is the Reichstag by Paul Wallot and The Berlin Dome Cathedral by Julius Rashdorff. The pretentiousness of the Kaiser led to Berlin to be upgraded to a level that would overpass the supremacy of that of London and Paris. Making Berlin have no boundaries when it comes to innovation as it was to become symbolised by the museum island; which is in today’s society a hub of museums that in 1999 was named a world heritage site by UNESCO. Museum Island is now a distinctive and iconic part of Berlins attractive cultural ecosystem. The Pergamum Museum of Ludwig Hoffmann was the last big project of the Empire but could not be finished till the end of the First World War.

The early 20th century continued the strong industrialisation push of the country but during this period of time, it wasn't the time to experiment. However, they were a few that did manage to make their mark. One is Peter Behrens (1868-1940) who was a German architect, and a key figure in the modernist movement, who was called the 'father of modern architecture'. "Elements characterising modernism include a simplification of forms, the almost complete lack of ornamentation and the extensive use of glass, concrete and steel" (Shulte-Peevers 2011). The most accomplished structure by Behrens was the building of AEG power station (AEG Turbinenhalle) which was an icon of early industrial architecture in 1909 (AEG, 2019). Great companies like AEG decided to settle and grow in Berlin as the city became the epicentre of science and technology. Founded in 1833 by Emil Rathenau, the electrical equipment producer soon became AEG in 1887, a great energy producer; which is key for Berlin's growth (industrial growth). The company quickly expanded needing important facilities to provide electricity to the whole city (AEG, 2019). The functional building reflected the city's industrial advancements that were achieved at the time, the level of engineers and the wealth of the city. This was the start of developed experimental approaches to building and urban planning in response to the effects of industrialisation (Pugh, 2014).

In 1912 Berlin had two million inhabitants. A new Urbanism was being created within the city; whilst old quarters were being demolished, new residential areas were being created. Alfred Messel (1853-1909) was also a German architect who was ranked as one of the most important visionaries of modern urban architecture for his time. He was responsible for creating a bridge between historicism and modernism. At the start of the 20th century, Messel built museums, lavish villas, and apartment blocks. The luxurious branch at Leipziger Platz was the largest department store in Europe, thus creating a new age feel unlike another building before with its size and elegance. Messel also added final touches to the 'city of museums', as Wilhelm von Bode described the Museum Island at the time (Berlin, 2019).

Unfortunately, all this wealth and technological advancements due to the rapid growth of Germany was quickly terminated and tore the country into pieces. In 1914, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Germany found itself in the First World War. Germanys defeat in 1918 created domestic instability leading to the removal of Kaiser Wilhelm II from power, thus ending the monarchs rule. Germany's socialist party, the SPD was given power gaining the most amount of seats in the Reichstag. This then led to the creation of what is known as the Weimar Republic.

## The Weimar Republic and Bauhaus

First World War put all creativity on hold that resulted in more during the years of the Weimar Republic (1920s). Innovation lured a whole host of the finest avant-garde architects to Berlin, including Le Corbusier, Bruno and Max Taut, Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe and Hans Poelzig. Within 1923 founded by Walter Groupious, they formed an architectural association called the Bauhaus, this shaped Berlin with new buildings. "members were united not by a single architectural vision, but by the desire to break with traditional aesthetics and to create a modern, healthier and affordable yet human-scale approach to building" (Shulte-Peevers 2011). This idea was put into place with the demand for housing due to a shortage. "in cahoots with chief city planner, Martin Wagner, ring members devised new firm of social housing called Siedlungen (Housing estates), which opened up the living spaces and incorporated gardens, schools, shops and other communal areas that promoted social interaction" (Shulte-Peevers

2011). A key example is the horseshoe colony in southern Neukolln, of which is a horseshoe-shaped building wrapped around the central garden, created by Wagner and Bruno Taut.

The Weimar Republic was the government of Germany from 1919 to 1933, due to the republics constitution drawn up in Weimar, as a result, Berlin lost the capital status; still recovering from social, political and economic instability due to the recent loss in the war, as a result, was forced to sign the Versailles Peace Treaty (the Weimar Republic, 2019). The reparation payments that resulted from this, amounted to 132 billion Reichsmarks, this became a severe burden on the German Reich and this provided extreme right-wing parts with a welcome pretext to combat the Weimar Republic. The Great Depression hit Berlin in 1929, which led to 1.5 mill people being unemployed in Germany and a 1/3 of this was in Berlin. By 1932, industrial production was reduced by half within the city and unemployment had grown to 30.8%. By early 1933 unemployment in Germany had reached a staggering six million (Visitberlin.de, 2019).

Berlin, however, experienced a cultural and artistic boom in the 20’s. It was as though the social and political changes inspired the works of art to be more experimental and avant-garde. Berlin was embracing the new and modern whether it was in the fine arts or architecture, Berlin remained its cultural significance. The city grew and became the centre of leisure with the help of new technologies like cinema. This made the population of Berlin double by 1929 rising to 4.3 million (Reuter and Joseph Erb, 2019). An example of the architecture of this period is the Berolinahaus constructed in 1932 by Peter Behrens. The building itself is very loyal to Behrens style, is expressionless. This building pictured the perfect depiction of the depression in which the country was falling in. Despite including modern touches including glass, the structure remained solemn.

## Architectural delirium; The Third Reich

The government was failing to respond effectively, passing tax increases and cutbacks rather than spending. This then led to public dissatisfaction with the economic conditions and the government led to the dramatic increase in voter support for Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP, who became the largest party in the Reichstag (the Weimar Republic, 2019). As soon as Hitler came to power in 1933 modernist architecture was put to a halt. He was determined to transform Berlin into a showpiece of National Socialism. The new regime shut down Bauhaus school, “one of the most influential forces in 20th-century architecture” (Shulte-Peevers 20009:58), especially modernism. Hitler enforced architectural monumentalism by putting “Albert Speer in charge of turning Berlin into the Welthauptstadt Germanis, the future capital of the Reich” (Shulte-Peevers 2011). Hitler wanted Speer to draw up grand plans for the rebuilding of the city, in order to represent all the prosperity, power and force of the Third Reich. From this it was as though Hitler wanted Berlin to reflect his greatness as the Kaiser had been before him. The Olympic stadium was constructed to undertake the 1936 Olympic games that were held in Berlin. And of course, Hitler made it his goal to ensure that the sports stadium was going to be the largest in the world (at the time) and that it incorporated very innovative techniques in addition to an imposing design (How has politics influenced Berlin’s architecture over the 20th century? 2019). Hitler saw the opportunity to showcase German racial superiority to the world.

However, it was in Berlin that Hitler’s hold on Germany came to an inglorious end, he committed suicide bringing the Nazi regime finally to an end, with the soviets marching into the city of Berlin declaring the war was over. Today very few Nazi-era buildings survive. A key relic

is a coliseum like Olympiastadion created by Walter and Werner March, of which to the is still feels gargantuan despite a modernisation. The legacy of the third Reich architect, Ernst Sagebield, still survives today with his massive Reich Aviation Ministry, of which is today the federal ministry of finance.

## Rebuilding in an era of Divide

3rd of May 1945 the war was finally over, but so was Berlin. What was once a proud metropolis in stone, had now been reduced to a city of dust. This was ‘stunned ineuron’ (Zero-hour) for Berliners. After the war the city was dived, with the Russians in charge of the East and the West, controlled by the Americans, and the French. So in effect, there were now two Berlins – East and West.

In the aftermath of the war the need for new homes for the thousands of homeless Berliners became paramount. It was a race; West vs East to create a new model city that represented their way of thinking. One of the standout architects in East Berlin GDR was Hermann Henselmann, of which was the mastermind of Karl-Marx-Allee. “Built between 1952 and 1965, it was East Berlin’s first ‘socialist boulevard’ and the epitome of Stalinist pomposity (Schulte-Peevers 2011). But the two new berlins didn’t define themselves by construction alone. The destruction of old buildings also became a creative and political act. The only restored buildings that were pre-war and were not demolished were Peter Behrens’ functional Berolinahaus and the Alexanderhaus. The Schloss’s demolition in 1950 in East Berlin was an ignominious end for what was after all Berlins most historic building, the Soviets decided that with its imperial past it represented the wrong kind of history.

A decade after the demolition of the Schloss, East and West Berlin became more divided. This led to the erection of what is known as the Berlin wall. It quickly became the most infamous and emotionally charged structure. The wall however turned into a divided city comprising of two separate cities that clash in economic and ideological systems between the East and West, of which is prevalent within the architectural arena of the city space. “East Germans looked to Moscow, Where Stalin favoured a style that was essentially a socialist reinterpretation of good old fashioned neoclassicism” (Shulte-Peevers 2011). This is starkly different to the modernist aspirations of the democratic west. West Germany and Berlin’s societies also experienced a cultural and political change with huge youth protests, a new and radical way of thinking. The emergence of this movement marked the birth of a more leftist way of thinking and upheaval in student activism (Politiques de la culture, 2019).

West Berlin urban planning in contrast to the East sought to eradicate any hint of monumentalism by rebuilding the city in a modern, organic and rhythmic manner that provided many open spaces, of which can be a metaphor for a free open society. A key example: The Hansaviertel, of which is a loosely structured leafy area that blends high-rises and single-family homes together. However, the Berlin Wall put an end to the ambition of creating a central link between the Eastern and Western city halves. A key masterpiece of sculptural Modernism was Scharoun’s Philharmonie. As well as the State Library and the Chamber Music Hall. (Schulte-Peevers 2011).

## Reunification

In 1989 The fall of the Berlin wall is one of history’s most memorable events. However, other than reuniting the two (previously separated) regions once again, and was later declared as Germanys new capital. A consequence of 40 years as a divided city, Berlin has a huge cultural infrastructure with many cultural institutions twice: Berlin state opera and Deutsche Oper Berlin (Politiques de la culture, 2019). Since the 1990s the city has undergone social, economic and political change, and its cultural significance has changed too.

The city rushed to fill the fracture between the two regions from where the wall once stood. The Postdamer Platz is the most reflective realisation, it was needed to resolve the issue of bringing a metropolis life back into the area where it had been dead for years. It was realised with the most prestigious architects: Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers and more. Today its transformed into a new urban centre, with leading companies like Sony, have settled their headquarters in futuristic and aesthetically pleasing buildings.

Hundreds of architects from around the world participated in the project to help in the construction and redevelopment of the new chancellery and the Reichstag, respectively. The Reichstag development was commissioned to Architect Sir Norman Foster who in his own right is a master of architecture, he crowned the building in a majestic glass façade (dome) (How has politics influenced Berlin’s architecture over the 20th century, 2019).

## Conclusion

It’s is clear that architecture in Berlin has no doubt been influenced by a number of political regimes that has left its mark on the city. For example, during the Kaiser’s regime, they used architecture to show the increasing military strength and confidence and didn’t hesitate to demolish historical vintage buildings in the process. Whereas, during the Weimar republic the architecture was perceived differently. It was less of a reflection of political power and more about the expression of society. I think Bauhaus was the best reflection of this era with its free-thinking movements. But Berlin is a city that simply will not give up, a succession of new and old buildings keeps appearing, they acknowledge rather than deny their history.

Nearly thirty years after the reunification of Berlin, and it still continues; it seems to be far more challenging to achieve than previously thought. This comes as no surprise, especially, for the cultural and political policy the past thirty years have seen huge transformations. And to have two separate cultural and political infrastructures that need to combine, can come with some challenges. The people of the East and West were socialised in such different ways that in hindsight the integration would be swift was idealistic. But I don’t think it’s impossible, I think after another generation Berlin will truly be unified once again. The history is too new – too raw. However, with enough time in between historical events bridges could ‘be built’ and new Berlin will become the metropolis that it deserves to be.