The Art of Being a 'Grenzgänger' in the Borderscapes of Berlin

AUTHORS Chiara Brambilla & Henk van Houtum
PHOTOGRAPHY Chiara Brambilla

Two border scholars spent time in Berlin, keeping the perspective of the 'Grenzgänger'in the back of their heads. The analytical result consists of three new perspectives on the urban borderscapes of Berlin.

For many the city of Berlin is an urban focal point par-excellence of much what has happened in the 20th century. Many of the ideological proclamations and struggles in the last century in Western Europe, be it nationalism, World War I, Fascism, World War II, Communism, capitalism, multiculturalism and neo-liberalism, has had a significant urban stage in the city of Berlin. As a result, Berlin can be seen as a prime example of multi-staged urban (id)entity that has been constructed, divided and re-constructed over political macro-history and urban micro-history, which all leave their marks, their borders in the city. In a way therefore the city could be called an urban archipelago of borderscapes. The term borderscapes as we define it here aims to make manifest what Rajaram and Grundy-Warr call "zones of varied and differentiated encounters". For them borderscapes are spaces that are represented, perceived and lived-in as a "fluid terrain of a multitude of political negotiations, claims, and counterclaims". As a human narrator and interpreter of this complex and multi-layered urban borderscapes, we propose to use the figure of the Grenzgänger (see also Greverus, 2005). More than for instance the figure of the urban flâneur, who has notably been reduced to being a flamboyant and capitalistic voyeur, we would argue it is the figure of the Grenzgänger that allows us to focus our attention more on the role of the geopolitical practices and past in the city, so essential when studying borderscapes. The Grenzgänger typically then could be understood as an itinerant of the in-between spaces, a goer who trains his eye on the hidden or latent geographies and does not allow him/herself to be constrained by (urban) borders and monolithic interpretations of spaces.

With this Grenzgänger perspective in mind we have strolled and biked the city of Berlin carrying with us a camera, a Berlin public transportation map, and a city map. What has emerged from our moving observations can be presented in form of three urban itineraries: 1) EmptiCity; 2) TransCity; 3) MultipliCity. This summing is by no means meant as an essential ordering or final take of Berlin, this would be against be grain of the contingency of the Grenzgänger gaze, but rather as a fairly lose tool via which we in hindsight can structure our own wanderings and perceptions. Each of the itineraries focuses on urban 'themes' that have produced various peculiar borderscapes in Berlin.

EmptiCity
The first series of borderscapes that struck us on our wanderings refers to the emptiness in the city of Berlin. Berlin's contemporary identity seems structured on a multiplicity of 'present absences', huge empty areas that allow us to visualize the legacies of Berlin's

An example of an EmptiCity: the 'Mauerpark' in Berlin. A former borderscape, now a potential location for luxury apartment buildings.

Example of a TransCity: thee 'Badeschriff'. Previously a river boat, which became a trendy city swimming pool.

complex past in the physical shape of the city as well as in its topography. The city's emptiness can perhaps best seen in relation to the Nazi regime and its dramatic consequences, the destruction brought by war and post-war planning as well as the building of the Berlin Wall and its fall in 1989 that have contributed to create such a urban aesthetics of emptiness.

Empty spaces present a paradoxical distinctive feature: the city's emptiness is regarded on the one hand as a space of sociological loss and desolation; on the other hand, terrains vagues can be considered positively as spaces full of opportunity and freedom. Empty spaces are continuously subject indeed to the formation of new identity; they are dynamic urban vacant lands that offer the possibility of escaping from the controlled spaces of institutional city planning and play an active role in the continual re-invention of the city by the heterogeneity of everyday practice. In this regard, one can think of empty lands and buildings that starting from the '70s and early '80s have been tending to become temporary homes for squatting communities and punks (squatters' settlement such as the Schwarzer Kanal in Köpenickerstr., ACUD in Veteranenstr., informal caravan allotments [Wagenburgen], …) which started experimenting new collective forms of living and counter-aesthetics that now characterize many borderscapes in Berlin.

However, this image of empty Berlin is in danger of disappearing: on the one hand there are the threats of being displaced, and on the other hand by becoming established or gentrified. A case in point is the area surrounding Bernauerstrasse now partly occupied by the memorial site ensemble (Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer) and partly stage of a number of construction sites aimed at building new luxury housing schemes in the vacant land left by the fall of the Wall. Another interesting borderscape is what is called Mauerpark (Wall Park) that is a wide public park located at the border of Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg and Gesundbrunnen district that was former part of the Berlin Wall and its Death Strip. There is now a big debate in

Berlin because the National Railway Company (Deutsche Bahn) who owns the area is planning to build this spot creating new elegant private housing estates and groups of citizens are protesting against these plans (www.mauerpark-fertigstellen.de; accessed September 2012).

Berlin's identity seems structured on a multiplicity of 'present absences'

Interestingly, at least some citizens seem to wish to retain the peculiar instable identity of Berlin. There is and will be Zweifel (doubt) on destroying old and empty spaces, a term that literally was written for some time in large capitals on the former Palast der Republik. At the end of 2008, it has been destroyed after all to be replaced by a re-make of the Berliner Schloß that once stood at its place. Another example of initiatives against an on-going, pervasive trend towards economic exploitation of the urban space is provided by MediaSpree Versenken (Sink MediaSpree) (www.ms-versenken. org; accessed September 2012), a spontaneous association of citizens who are against the enormous building project called MediaSpree.

TransCity

The 2nd series of borderscapes that we discern here could be described as transformations, temporariness and heterogeneity, or what we loosely sum as TransCity, is closely related to Berlin's 'scenography of the void'. Almost no city in Europe has been so radically characterized by temporary use projects as Berlin: places that are closed down or lying waste, as well as railway stations, bunkers, and coal stores are transformed into places of recreation, supermarkets and administrative offices are made into art galleries,

factory buildings into apartments and cultural centers. Wandering through the city with the gaze of the Grenzgänger, what hits the eye for instance is the vivid art and club culture and techno scene developed following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that brought forth a new art and music scene. In this light it is worth mentioning the example of Tresor, the first techno disco in Berlin. The club was founded in March 1991 in the vaults of the former old Wertheim department store in Mitte, the central part of the former East Berlin, next to the famous Potsdamer Platz. But due to financial problems the club closed and reopened on 24th May 2007 in a renovated power plant on Köpenickerstr. in Mitte.

Another significant place is the so-called Badeschriff, an old river barge that has been filled it with water and moored in the Spree River. It is an urban lifestyle pool. However, it is interesting that Badeschiff has been built transforming an old industrial area into a recreation centre à la mode not far away from the Spree' old port and the docks. Apart from the Badeschiff, borderscapes of this kind are shaped by the many bars and restaurants, clubs, and night bars that animate the Spree's banks in zones that were very close to the Wall or in the no man's land that divided Berlin's urban space before the Wall fall.

Another case in point is the area previously occupied by the Tempelhof airport. The airport closed all operations on 30 October 2008 and since closing its empty buildings have been reusing for new either temporary or permanent aims: film sets, exhibitions, trade fairs... On the weekend of 8-9 May 2010, Tempelhof was festively opened as Berlin's largest public park named Tempelhofer Feld (www.tempelhofer-park.de; accessed September 2012).

MultipliCity

By approaching Berlin through the lens of bordescapes, the city also emerges as a social environment that is characterized by the multiplicity of differences in the people, in the way they use, characterise and define the space they live in. Berlin is a montage of paradoxes, multiplicities and dualities, as well as instabilities that transform homogeneous wholes into ever-changing spaces of

No city in Europe has been so radically characterized by temporary use projects

creative borderscapes.

A remarkable example of this is the area in Berlin-Mitte in the surroundings of Oranienburgerstr., Auguststr., and Rosenthaler Str. Paradoxes and dualities are expressed here by a urban aesthetics that juxtaposes houses and squats - that today form a network of alternative culture of numerous living and working collectives as well as cultural organizations - with the elegant trendy, exclusive twenty-odd commercial art galleries that have been established in the area (mainly Auguststr.).

Examples of urban multiplicity can be also found in Berlin-Kreuzberg and Berlin-Neukölln where a variety of street markets, shops, groceries that are owned by migrants coming from a number of different countries in the world (mainly Turkey) create a kind of very fascinating multiethnic landscape.

Furthermore, it is worth considering the case of Friedrichstrasse: the

Example of a TransCity: the Spree shores. The former no man's land has been transformed into a fashionable and recreational area.

Example of a MultipliCity: the Friedrichstrasse. The city as social environment is clearly noticeable.

street, one of Berlin's most famous, has been convulsed by events, and even by bombs, that have befallen the city. From suburban street to business and entertainment district to stage for a Cold War standoff, Berlin's Friedrichstrasse has played many roles in the city's history and it has now become with its surrounding area the street's upmarket, one of the most elitist shopping districts.

Wandering through these kinds of Berlin borderscapes, provisionally synthesised in three sorts of borderscapes, highlights the urgency to find new lenses that allow us to grasp the complexity of the constellation of many intersections, fractures, broken histories and multiple layers in a big modern city like Berlin. The city does not allow for a simple dichtomous narration like east versus west or capitalistic versus old-east or all too unnuanced phrases like Mauer im Kopf. Following the architect Oswalt (1998), "unlike other cities, Berlin does not stand out on account of its classical beauty, it is neither a composition which is the result of an ideal plan nor is it the product of organic growth; discontinuities and contradictions, diversity and emptiness characterise the city". In this sense, viewing Berlin in terms of borderscapes allows us to begin to have an eye for the complex multi-positionality of Berlin's geographical (de)signs. It is precisely a gaze of the Grenzgänger that has the potential to do justice to the manifold of urban thresholds in a city.

Chiara Brambilla (chiara.brambilla@unibg.it) is Research Fellow in Anthropology and Cultural Geography at the Centre for Research on Complexity (Ce.R.Co), University of Bergamo. Henk van Houtum (h.vanhoutum@fm.ru.nl) is Associate Professor Political Geography and Geopolitics at the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research, Radboud University Nijmegen and Research Professor Geopolitics of Borders of the University of Bergamo.

Selection of references

Greverus, I.M. (2005) Ästhetische Orte und Zeichen: Wege zu einer ästhetische Anthropologie. Münster: LIT Verlag.

Kumar Rajaram, P. & C. Grundy-Warr (eds.) (2007) Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Oswalt, P. (2000) Berlin_Stadt ohne Form. Strategien einer anderen Architektur. München - London - New York: Prestel Verlag.

www.mauerpark-fertigstellen.de

www.ms-versenken.org

www.tempelhofer-park.de