

BOREDOM, LANDSCAPE, ARCHITECTURE, POLITICS, CRITICISM, SPACE, ECONOMY SIMILAR...

Review,

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URBAN NIGHTMARES IN POOR, SEXY BERLIN

Niklas Goldbach tackles Berlin's city planning

In Berlin, where run-down, neglected and abandoned buildings butt up against slick new developments, where old battle scars are revived as ad-hoc bars, galleries and illegal cafes, where the mayor defines his city with the oft repeated refrain 'poor, but sexy', image has become everything in the race to redevelop.

WITH: NIKLAS GOLDBACH, SUSANNE JASCHKO

Though always a city in tumult and flux, the seismic transformation Berlin has undergone since the 90s is displacing locals and erasing history according to Berlin artist Niklas Goldbach.

The recent developments and architecture in Berlin have been formed by globalisation, he says, and has parallels with the top-down planning of the Third Reich, and the large scale building projects of the socialist GDR, ...*small dictators are changing the silhouette of the city, constructing more and more representative flagship stores, townhouses and company headquarters.*

For a city 70 billion Euros in debt, wouldn't it seem that Flagship stores were a good thing? High unemployment; lagging behind the rest of Germany's economic recovery; it seems Berlin needs all the investment and growth it can get. But Goldbach is right: there are parallels. The building frenzy didn't develop organically; it was, often insensitively, engineered from the top-down. With subsidies and other enticements the government created a boom that has added up only to dirt-cheap rents on never used buildings.

Goldbach spoke passionately about the empty spectacle of Potsdamer Platz, each corner and even the intersection apparently owned by Sony and Daimler-Chrysler. It was a development conceived by city planners as a reunification project, but which has instead become a soulless shopping centre and tourist trap. The overeagerness of city officials and marketing professionals to 'sell' Berlin as a new international centre has highlighted problems with public and private space not unique to Berlin, but also the issues particular to a landscape so spectacularly shaped by history.

Goldbach's recent projects address the first issue, *Contradictions between public and private spheres have*

become key themes in my latest works, but also sensitively engage with the second.

Refugiå, was part of a recent exhibition, *urban interface | berlin* (www.urban-interface.net) curated by Susanne Jaschko. An ‘installative intervention’, *Refugiå* was what would traditionally be considered a site-specific installation. On a vacant and seemingly abandoned block of land, Goldbach erected two fake banners announcing the imminent construction of a new ‘City Quartier’ – luxury condos, a shopping complex, and office spaces.

The images on the banners were caricatures of existing buildings, the words were appropriated from actual banners at real construction sites around Berlin. There were promises of a ‘safe’ environment with a private park and a Starbucks on the first floor – the perfect marketing pastiche.



Refugiå was billed as *an ironic comment on the changing relationship between public and private space*, according to the exhibition blurb. The precept that Berlin is becoming gentrified was also spelled out in the text: developers and middle-classes are moving into working class areas; big, private companies are co-opting public space and making it private; and on a more nuanced level, gentrification and developments are displacing both residents and, ultimately, the area’s history. But how does it play out?

The authentic looking banner was located in a low-income area of the city with a large migrant population, traditionally a working class area, and decidedly un-gentrified in contrast to neighbouring Mitte, which is full of both hip cafes and flagship stores. *...During the installation of the banners some people were shouting from their windows that we should tear them down and that there’s no need for buildings like this in their neighbourhood.* said Goldbach.



But not all the residents were unhappy with the prospect of development, ...*some liked the 'slick' design of the fictional buildings, preferring them to the real, dilapidated buildings in the neighbourhood.*

Some people said they hoped that the new 'City Quartier' will bring more jobs to the area, which made me feel pretty uncomfortable, he admitted.

There is some sense that *Refugiå* is preaching to the converted: those in-the-know about the artist's intentions would come away feeling vindicated; but many passers-by who saw the banners reacted to them as though they were real.

Nevertheless, *Refugiå* has an astringent ability to puncture the inflated promises of developers with its pastiche, not as an ironic comment, but as rhetorical irony that exploits insincerity to express deeply held belief. *Most of my works have to do with my personal fears – feelings of alienation*, says Golbach, a sentiment that is expressed even more clearly in another recent project, *Haunt*.

Without any irony, *Haunt* makes a powerful statement about ownership and loss in history scarred Berlin. The works revolve around the relationship between public and private too – not only public and private space, but property, feelings, and lives.



In the short video loops of *Haunt 1* and *Haunt II*, a trembling/convulsing figure in a sitting position hovers above the ground in a vacant lot. The figure looks vulnerable, lost. It's a disturbing image (even for the sceptical) because of the undeniably ghostly, yet emotional and political connotations. The building is gone, but the figure - someone who lived there, or who died there – remains, hovering.

In just a few seconds, the uncomplicated clips of 'Haunt' pose questions about development, hinting at personal sacrifices and public losses. The project succinctly connects the past – the destroyed buildings, the present – the empty vacuum, and the future - what will be built - in a flickering time lapse. What unknown history will be exhumed and discarded? What has already been discarded, covered, over-ruled in the rush to rebuild?

The imagery is chilling. *Sooner or later these empty spaces and their function as a reminder will also disappear*, says Goldbach.

The campaign to re-invent Berlin rolls on; construction and even preservation are volatile issues, the selective interpretation of history underlies not only large-scale projects like Potsdamer Platz, but also the smaller scale gentrification of neighbourhoods. Goldbach's work engages with not only marketing failures and false promises, but the real and personal losses that are associated with a rapidly changing urban environment, with imagery that is universally recognisable and resonant at a personal level.

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