



[ART REVIEW] BERLIN-NEW YORK DIALOGUES: BUILDING IN CONTEXT

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[Berlin - New York Dialogues: Building in Context](#)

The Center for Architecture

536 LaGuardia Place New York, NY 10012

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Upon entrance to the Center for Architecture's current exhibit, *The Berlin-New York Dialogues*, visitors are immediately greeted with pair of silver parenthesis hanging from the ceiling. It's a clear invitation to think of what follows as fitting snugly between the silvery white curves. This makes for a strange antecedent then, to the bevy of statistics that accompany the visitor on their descent down the stairs. Population of Berlin: 3.4 million; population of New York, 8.2 million. Percentage foreign-born in Berlin: 13.8%, New York: 36%. We've just been primed to think of the two capitals of culture as twins separated at birth, but have already met the fact that they're starkly different. Because of its attempt then, to create similitude where there is little, the exhibit succeeds neither as an inquiry of the built environment, or in facilitating the type of dialogue that could be useful to either city.

The exhibit is divided into themes of gentrification, community activism, and culture as catalyst, whose real-life applications are explored in three neighborhoods in Berlin and New York. This offers a look at the various actors that shape the landscape of both cities, the mechanisms for renewal and processes of growth. The text is rich and the exhibit is visually arresting, although at times it seems like a [Frommer's Travel Guide](#) has come to life on the walls.

There are certainly common threads, most evident in the follies of top-down government planning in places like Times Square and Potsdamer Platz, places where no local would want to live. Community groups and artists have been essential in both cities to the regeneration and beautification process. But in order to claim more transcendent similitude, the curators were forced to make tremendous leaps. Are Red Hook, Brooklyn and Chausseestrasse, Berlin similar merely because both are slated to receive an IKEA? Certainly gentrification is an issue paramount to Chelsea and the South Bronx, but does Hugo Boss replacing independent boutiques in Mitte resonate with quite the same intensity?

Most insightful is the curatorial assertion that that Berliner's sense of identity is not tied to home ownership, which has lent an ephemeral bent to the city; beach bars that spring up on banks of the Spree, so-called temporary cultural activities, housing collectives. This is not the case in New York, where neighborhoods have long been defined by their residents. Given that New York is a place where light, space and air are not guarantees but commodities sold to the highest bidder, it makes for a difficult comparison with a city like Berlin, that has an over-abundance of cheap and vacant space. While New York's historical challenge has been to incorporate the throngs of people desiring to live there, Berlin struggles to merely maintain their existing population.

As the maxims go, Berlin is poor but sexy, New York is (becoming) glittering but sterile. That Berlin may beat New York at the culture game while losing in the economic arena is a startling realization. As such, an exploration of how the two can learn from each other would make for a more compelling — and ultimately more useful — exhibit.

[Berlin](#), [Center for Architecture](#), [New York](#), [Potsdamer Platz](#), [Times Square](#)

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