A Robust Square:
Planning, Youth Work, and the Making of
Public Space in Post-Unification Berlin

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in post-unification Berlin, this article examines the re-articulation of the problematic of “the social” in city planning. It juxtaposes the contrasting visions of city planners and youth workers for Alexanderplatz, a controversial square in Berlin’s eastern centre. I argue that the notion of “robustness” is helpful in understanding an important contemporary shift in thinking about planning and the social. In a sense, both planners and youth workers accused each other of taking insufficient notice of “the social.” While planners spoke of robustness as a technical, economic and aesthetic quality to which public space needs to aspire, the youth workers’ vision for Alexanderplatz was a proposal for a kind of “social” robustness where the social is, quite literally, built into the urban design. These ethnographic observations need to be understood in a context where city planning has been one of the most critical domains in which the tensions provoked by German unification are played out. Taking such socio-cultural specificities into account will lead to a more nuanced understanding of forms of neoliberal city planning. [Keywords: Urban planning, youth work, participation, the social, governmentality, public space, Berlin]

It has become somewhat commonplace to understand urban planning as symptomatic of the specific “governmentality” that Foucault (1991) associated with the emergence of the modern nation state. This rationality of government works less through coercion and repression than through the ordering of spaces (both physical and conceptual) and the arrangement of objects and people within them (Mitchell 1988; Rabinow 1989; Rose 1999). In this view, the idea of urban planning, from the mid-19th century, has always been bound up with attempts to contain, control, and regulate the city (Albers 1997; Hall 1996). An
important aspect was what came to be known as “the social question,” accompanied by an effort to scrutinize the life of urban slum dwellers, and to re-posit it as a problem within a designated realm of “the social”—as a specific realm distinct from the economy, or the political (Bodenschatz 1987; Rabinow 1989; Rose 1999). Urban planning became the “pursuit of a combination of spatial order and social reform” (Ladd 1990:76); an orchestration of the disparate technologies of managing the city and the social.

This article offers a fresh look at the articulation of “the social” in city planning, drawing on ethnographic material from post-unification Berlin. I examine the contrasting perspectives of city planners and a group of youth workers regarding Alexanderplatz, a public square in the heart of East Berlin, which has become the focus of a major planning scheme in the unified German capital (see Figure 1). I suggest that planners’ and youth workers’ respective visions for Alexanderplatz entail different notions of “the social” and how it could and should be made to reflect in the materiality of the city. Planners envisioned a “robust,” plain public square that would serve as a neutral background to a variety of uses. In contrast, the youth workers’ vision for Alexanderplatz was a proposal for a kind of “social” robustness where the specific needs and desires of the different user groups would be built, quite literally, into the urban design.

In the material discussed in this paper, “the social” figures in a number of ways: for example, as relations between people and their activities which together create the inherently social space of Alexanderplatz. The social is also seen as the heterogeneous diversity of society, which is imagined to be constituted by different groups of people that encounter each other in a public square. Finally, “the social” is a quality of planning, which is summoned, for example, through forms of popular participation. This paper thus does not define the social as much as it seeks to set out the range of different ways in which the social figures, in the activities of planners and youth workers in Berlin. I examine how these various considerations of the social both provoke and over-determine people’s actions (Rose 1999). My argument critically engages recent scholarly claims that the idea of the social is in demise and that its hold on the political imagination is weakening (Rose 1999:136; Ingold 1996).
Similarly, Holston (1999) argues that planners have lost faith in their ability to shape the social through the organization of urban space. In this light, the activities of the Berlin youth workers discussed here might be seen as a scramble for recognition in a world where their specific expertise appears increasingly redundant. However, I want to challenge this assumption. I suggest that a concern with the social—be that in the form of specific groups of people, with society at large, or with how to include people in its political and technical process—has never disappeared from the discourse of city planning. Rather, what we see arising is a new social question (Barry and Weszkalnys 2006)—a specific reworking of the problematic of the social in planning.

The fieldwork on which this paper draws was carried out from 2001 to 2002 and examined the process of spatial reordering in Berlin, which followed the fall of the Wall. Urban planning has been one of the key domains in which the tensions of German unification have been played out (Bodenschatz, 1995; Ladd 1997; Neill and Schwedler 2001; Wise 1998). The controversy around Alexanderplatz exemplifies these tensions. Alexanderplatz constitutes a space of controversial symbolic significance. It is characterized by a socialist-modernist design that does not match current visions for a central square in the unified German capital. Rebuilt in the 1960s German Democratic Republic (GDR) as the centre of “Berlin—capital of the GDR,” in the 1990s, Alexanderplatz came to be seen as a waste of valuable prime real estate and as a break with Berlin’s historical structures. Surrounded by buildings that once carried such names as “House of Travel” and “House of the Teacher,” and sporting former GDR landmarks, including the “World Time Clock” and “Fountain of the Peoples Friendship,” Alexanderplatz may today seem devoid of meaning. A department store, a few shops, a hotel and one of the largest underground train and public transport hubs create a continuous hustle and bustle. For many people, Alexanderplatz has become a place to pass through rather than to stay in.

Alexanderplatz has long been an object of planning. In the 1920s, Berlin’s planning director Martin Wagner sought to bring social enhancement to the underprivileged East through a rationalized scheme for a world city square. The poor East, with its centre in Alexanderplatz, had been eternalized by Alfred Döblin in his celebrated 1929 novel Berlin Alexanderplatz—The Story of Franz Biberkopf, which secured the square a special place in the German literary imagination. Following World War II, socialist planning constructed the square as a model for GDR cities and as an expression of a specific form of future socialist society (Hain 1992:57; Kuhle 1995). Alexanderplatz was to consolidate the international recognition of the fledgling socialist republic and to be a show window to the West. It served as a space for festivals and demonstrations, including—importantly—one of the largest demonstrations of political dissatisfaction and opposition in 1989, leading to
the breakdown of the socialist regime. After the German unification, the former showcase of socialist architecture began to deteriorate and became a vehicle for talking about the disintegration of the GDR state and the future it once embodied (Weszkalnys 2007).

In 1993, an urban design competition was held for Alexanderplatz. Accompanied by ample expert deliberation and public participation, an ambitious scheme of high-rise buildings arranged in a circle around the square was devised. In the course, Alexanderplatz was declared a square of “citywide” significance. Responsibility for its planning, formerly held by the Mitte district in which Alexanderplatz is located, was assumed by the Berlin Senate’s Administration for Urban Development which manages urban development for the entire city of Berlin. The new scheme for Alexanderplatz reflects post-unification expectations of rapid economic growth. Like the 1920s plans and the GDR re-construction, the contemporary plans for Alexanderplatz have been criticized for imposing a socio-spatial order on Berlin’s eastern centre (Kil and Kündiger 1998). The new design for the square developed in the 1990s may have appeared like a solution to the problems of unification that Alexanderplatz appeared to reflect. New offices, shops, and apartments are to be built in a public-private partnership with several developers. Alexanderplatz is to be a “People’s Place” and symbol of Berlin’s unification (Senatsverwaltung 2001).

How to involve citizens or the public in the shaping of the future city has been a major preoccupation in post-unification Berlin. For example, an entire novel institution was invented for the purpose of initiating public discussion of urban development issues: the City Forum, an advisory body to the planning administration, launched in 1991 and holding regular open meetings. There have been exhibitions; bus tours around the city; and open days, for instance, in governmental buildings (Binder 2001b). In the 1990s, a carefully crafted campaign recast building sites (Baustellen) as show sites (Schaustellen), offering cultural events and guided tours of unfinished constructions, which became popular among tourists and Berliners. Planning competitions, like the one for Alexanderplatz, have offered ample room for citizens’ participation. Similarly, the youth workers’ project for Alexanderplatz as “a place for young people” aimed to confirm young people’s legitimate presence in Alexanderplatz, and in public spaces more generally, through organizing events and providing facilities, and through demanding young people’s participation in planning. It partly instantiates a global phenomenon of efforts to involve young people in the planning not only of playgrounds and youth clubs but also of spaces that are not exclusively for them but which they nevertheless use (e.g. Driskell 2002; Simpson 1997). Such efforts may be interpreted as attempts to govern young people’s use of public space (Stratford 2002). More generally, they reflect the heightened significance of notions of participation in urban politics and planning, which may be considered

Commenting on recent developments in Brazil, Holston and Caldeira suggest that there has been an observable move from technocratic modernist planning to neoliberal urban government. In the latter, they suggest, “the social is [no longer] imagined as something for the plan to produce, but is, rather something that already exists in an organized fashion. This organization will be the basis for the creation of urban space...” (2005:406). Importantly, I argue that at stake is not simply a broadening of neoliberal governmentality under a participatory guise; but a shift in the nature of ideas about the social in relation to political and technical processes (Barry 2001; Nowotny et al. 2001). This shift has filtered into urban policy and planning practice. The youth workers proposed what I call, borrowing a term used in the recent literature on scientific knowledge production (Barry et al. 2008; Nowotny et al. 2001; Strathern 2005), a “social robustness” for Alexanderplatz. There, planning seeks authority beyond its own domain, in reference to society. The social is not to be shaped by, but to be integrated in, the urban design.

Both planning theory and, more specifically, the planning of post-unification Berlin have produced a vast literature, which cannot be discussed here. See, for example, Cochrane and Jonas (1999), Kil (2000), Latham (2006a, 2006b) and Strom (2001) on notions of neoliberal urban development in contemporary Berlin. My focus is on the work of youth workers and their interaction with the domain of planning. I will show how in the youth workers’ project “young people” emerged as a token for the kind of social diversity which public space is seen to embody. The youth workers conceived their project in contradiction to current neoliberal city development. However, they simultaneously, sought to respond to the preoccupations of Berlin’s planners. I discuss how, in their interactions, planners and youth workers’ perceived themselves to hold different perspectives on society and space, which I differentiate as the universal, the particular and the robust. This paper thus has particular analytic and methodological aims. It seeks to bring together two areas: science studies and the anthropology of planning. I do so by elaborating on a fortunate parallel between the metaphor of “robustness” used in science studies and the ethnographic terms of Berlin’s planners. This is intended not as a theoretical imposition but as a productive cross-fertilization.

A Place for Young People

In the early 2000s, when the building works for the new Alexanderplatz had not yet begun, an additional design competition was held for the open space that would comprise the square in the future. I was conducting fieldwork in the planning office managing the incipient
building works in Alexanderplatz, the so-called Alexanderplatz Frame Coordination (RKA) (Weszkalyns 2004; forthcoming). Its staff, which included both East and West Germans, were drawn from the Berlin Senate administration’s civil engineering department and an independent engineering company. They would often insist that they were not really planning at all, but merely provided an interface between the various interested parties to the Alexanderplatz project. The RKA office was located on the fourteenth floor of Haus des Reisens, a building in Alexanderplatz. The view from the office’s window provided a captivating panorama of the square and large parts of Berlin. It reminded me of de Certeau’s (1984) description of seeing Manhattan from the World Trade Center, which he took as an allegory of the planner’s “God’s eye view.” This totalizing perspective, de Certeau contends, transforms the city into a transparent and readable text, and derives its power precisely from being aloof to the messiness of city life and the “walks” and “operations” of its “practitioners,” the city’s inhabitants. From the RKA’s window, the movement of an individual person across the vast expanse of Alexanderplatz could easily go unnoticed. However, RKA staff challenged my initial impression of their doings as merely a reflection of the planner’s detached God’s eye view. They loudly objected: “But here we are at Alexanderplatz!” Whether East or West Germans, they all had their experiences of the square and were simultaneously inhabitants or, in de Certeau’s term, “practitioners” of the city that was the object of their planning.

In the RKA office, countless meetings brought together city planners, private investors, infrastructure providers, and representatives of various public administration departments, and others with interests in the square. There I first encountered the former youth worker, Heiko, who held the position of the Square Manager (Platzmanager) and who introduced me to the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Alexanderplatz (AG Alex), a group of outreach youth workers working in the Alexanderplatz area. I subsequently began to attend the monthly meetings of the AG Alex, participated in some of their activities, and spent time with the youth workers and young people in Alexanderplatz.

For the AG Alex, Alexanderplatz was a platform for joint events including demonstrations, graffiti spraying, publicity markets, and public discussions (see Figure 2). Youth workers recalled with excitement the summer camps held in Alexanderplatz during the late 1990s, which came with tents, a small swimming pool, a barbecue, and a fireplace around which people sat singing songs. The camps called attention to the dire consequences of insufficient funding for youth work. Simultaneously, they illustrated that it was possible to use Alexanderplatz in previously unimaginable ways. In fact, challenging ideas about which environments are inimical to young people’s development was, as we shall see, one of their key objectives. For the AG Alex, the competition for Alexanderplatz’s open space provided one more
opportunity to press forth their initiative “Alexanderplatz—a place for young people.”

The initiative “Alexanderplatz: a place for young people” was conceived in the late 1990s in the context of increasingly stringent urban policies. As I learned from youth workers, Alexanderplatz had been declared a “dangerous place”—a label applied by the Berlin police force to areas that appear to display a statistically disproportionate number of crimes. Rendered statistically, occasional events become a permanent quality of place and everyone, including young people, becomes potentially suspect. In “dangerous places,” police powers to carry out random identity checks are significantly enhanced. Youth workers considered such controls unjustified and disconcerting acts of criminalization. They frustrate what is now a defining tenet of youth work. In this view, illicit behaviours are not indicators of a criminal character but part of adolescence. Historically speaking, the notion of adolescent delinquents, which are susceptible to the reforming powers of specialized welfare services, naturalized a social imaginary of “youth as problem” (Benninghaus 1999; Gillis 1981; Ruddick 1996). Repeatedly mobilized in 20th century thinking about young people (Gillis 1981; Valentine et al. 1998; Wulff 1995), in the wake of the German unification, the notion of youth as a problem seemed confirmed by right-wing extremism and racist attacks by some youth (Stock 1994; Thiele and Taylor 1998). The youth workers I met struggled with the notion of youth as a problem. While it provided one raison d’être for their work, querying this notion was another. Most of the AG Alex’s members practised outreach social work or street work (Straßensozialarbeit). The rationale of street work, I was told, was to reach those who appear in need of support where they are, in the street, and to enter into partnership with them, rather than forcing them into an institutionalized setting. In the view of street workers, the street (parks, shopping malls, Alexanderplatz) has remained significant in young people’s lives (Hecht 1998; Matthews
et al. 2000). Street-based social work has yielded to the fact that those nominally marginalized—not only young people, but also the homeless and drug addicts—have continued to occupy urban space in a fashion that may contradict dominant spatial meanings and, by implication, definitions of social categories themselves (Ruddick 1996). Street work has been an attempt to govern those who evade being governed. However, when street workers approached young people in the street, they perceived themselves as guests, entering a space that was considered, if only temporarily, to be young people’s own. Young people created it around themselves; it emerged by virtue of their being there (Corsín Jiménez 2003; Munn 1996).

The district council of Mitte, where Alexanderplatz is located, responded favorably to the youth workers’ criticism of the alarming controls of young people in the square. In 1998, an official resolution was passed affirming that Alexanderplatz should remain a place meaningful for young people. Surveys confirmed this perception, suggesting that there were—in addition to the 230 children and youths living in the square’s vicinity—about 500 young people from all over Berlin who used Alexanderplatz as a meeting-point. The AG Alex was asked to devise measures that would sustain Alexanderplatz’s attractiveness for young people. In 2001, the Square Management (Platzmanagement) was set up to provide an interface between young people, youth workers, potential sponsors, the administration, and private developers.

For our first meeting, Heiko, the Square Manager, took me on a tour around Alexanderplatz. Heiko was a West Berliner in his thirties and had most recently worked as a youth worker on projects in East Berlin, which familiarized him with the specific problems faced by youth after unification. Heiko was a generous repository of knowledge about youth work and Alexanderplatz. Some of his methods resembled those of the ethnographer. He spent his working hours not just in his office, a cramped space that also served to store posters, spray cans and other materials used for publicity campaigns. His points of reference were not just the young people, planners, or developers. To get a sense of Alexanderplatz and people’s diverse uses of it, he sometimes hung out on the square and spent time talking to people there. It was an attempt to conjoin those diverse interests vested in the square, public and private, local business people, consumers, developers, and young people. On our tour, Heiko highlighted features unnoticed by others I talked to during my fieldwork. When drawing attention to the different surfaces of the square, Heiko spoke not of the unseemly patchwork that so upset the planners, but of skateboarders’ and BMX cyclists’ preference for the smooth paving along the tram tracks and in front of the hotel. Heiko distinguished between spaces where youths were permitted and those where they were not—the public, the private, and the semi-public spaces safeguarded by discriminatory practices. He showed me the beach-volleyball field and the brightly sprayed Container, a youth
service area constructed under private sponsorship and, significantly, with considerable input from young people (see Figure 3).

Heiko recounted how they had developed the ideas, helped build the facilities during a week of hard work and bad weather, and later assumed responsibility for them. When I commented on the diversity of people on the square, Heiko was delighted. For him, the presence of West and East Germans going about their daily shopping, of so-called punks and homeless people, of people with different cultures and worldviews, made for a positively “urbane” place. Instead of cordonning off areas for young people, he envisaged Alexanderplatz as a place appealing to all: young and old, rich and poor, punks, skaters, and ordinary youths.

When explaining the popularity of Alexanderplatz, both young people and youth workers evoked notions of centrality and accessibility. Crisscrossed by numerous bus, tram, and train lines, Alexanderplatz could be reached from almost anywhere in Berlin. “Everyone is here,” a young man offered, “it’s in the centre and, therefore, gravity is stronger.” Their comments were evocative of a common portrayal of Alexanderplatz as an entry point into Berlin and a distinctly urban experience. On many days, youths sat outside the Container chatting, playing football, or watching the bustle around the square’s “Fountain of the People’s Friendship.” Inside, young people played billiards and listened to music blasting from a battery-powered radio. When nothing was happening, you could always “go for a walk,” as the young men I encountered often did. In the shops, you could check out CDs, mobile phones, or clothes, or watch—as it happened during my fieldwork—the World Cup on large TV screens. In the winter, one could skate in an ice rink in front of the department store, where many of the young people now frequenting the Container had met for the first time. To get warm and to grab a cheap bite, some went to Burger King.

Youth workers emphasized that young people’s uses of Alexanderplatz differed in ways related to their life situation and the expectations they brought to bear on this place. For punks, Alexanderplatz was a social space and a workplace; for others, it was a space of leisure. Deserted on weekends, it offered space for skaters to try out their tricks. The teenage girls, Heiko suggested, found on the square an escape from their parents’ world and the East Berlin suburbs where
many of them lived. By contrast, for the young Kurdish men, Alexanderplatz was an entry into an unfamiliar world. Being in Alexanderplatz promised many things: chatter with friends; encounters with the opposite sex, playing volleyball, spotting famous TV stars, bickering, dispelling loneliness, sometimes excitement, and sometimes boredom.

Both, young people and youth workers’ interpretations of youth activities in Alexanderplatz took shape against the backdrop of a discourse on youth as a problem, which they were keen to reject. The youth worker Silvia asserted that many for the youth, especially the Kurdish youths, Alexanderplatz constituted a piece of Heimat, connoting a sense of home and belonging (Borneman 1997). Silvia, who regularly checked on the Container, accompanied and counselled those who made use of it, told me that many of them had arrived in Germany as unaccompanied minors; for them, home was currently a bare apartment. These young men were not members of the foreign gangs that caused alarm in the early 1990s by allegedly making Alexanderplatz their territory. Indeed, Heimat implied quite the opposite of such threatening appropriations. The most compelling images used by youth workers to assert the square’s significance for youth invoked ideas of community and public life. The young people here were not causing trouble, but perfectly capable of tolerance and respect. The translation of their activities in Alexanderplatz as an expression of their wish to partake in public life and give purpose and direction to their actions. These young people did not do what is often considered typical of young people, hanging out or simply doing nothing (James 1986; Wood 1985). They were also not wasting time—offending temporal sensibilities that arrived with capitalist notions of productivity (Thompson 1967). Instead, they performed an activity deemed as having potentially positive effects on their self-development.

In short, not unlike the ethnographer, youth workers claimed their depictions and ideas for Alexanderplatz to be derived partly from empirical observations. However, this was not a disinterested project. The images they invoked as Alexanderplatz’s “background potentiality” (Hirsch 1995), including social diversity, tolerance, and public life, had a positive persuasiveness. The youth workers’ ambition was to render this potentiality explicit and to sustain it in the face of the new plans that appeared to threaten their efforts.

Potentialities

For one afternoon in September 2002, Alexanderplatz became the venue for a publicity market for youth work projects, with permission of the district council. Such events reflected the ongoing support that the AG Alex received from the local district council.
Aside from numerous stalls providing information on youth work in Berlin, there were a miniature soccer field, hip-hop music and breakdancing. Punks, together with street workers manufactured large, wooden benches. Skateboarders showed off their skills on a huge halfpipe, and a fence around a building site was given over to graffiti sprayers. This event condensed a broader effort to subvert negative images of young people. Punks were not idle but productive, and graffiti sprayers not destructive but creative. Removed from their usual time and space—the youth club, the skate park, the back streets, and the darkness of the night—the activities of youth seemed transformed. These were not simply leisurely pastimes but skilful activities, which could also appear spectacular and acceptable to adults. Alexanderplatz became both literally and metaphorically a platform for youth workers to demonstrate their challenge to dominant conceptualizations of what social geographers have termed public space as adult space (Holloway and Valentine 2000b; Valentine et al. 1998). Instead of confining youth to schools, kindergartens, playgrounds, and youth clubs, the youth workers’ ambition was to reposition them as an unthreatening feature of public space.

For the youth workers, “Alexanderplatz—a place for young people” was not (simply) a project of urban design. It was a project of forming a truly public space. In their appeals for young people’s participation in the planning of the square, youth workers invoked two notions in particular: the expert and the citizen. While the expert called to mind ideas of difference and specificity, the citizen evoked sameness and equality. Both conferred legitimacy: the former buttressed the authority of young people’s knowledge; the latter confirmed their right to be involved in planning processes.

“Children are their own experts,” some of the youth workers said. Instead of consulting self-styled experts on youth matters, one should let young people speak for themselves as individuals who know themselves and have a right to be consulted, conferred to them qua citizens. Importantly, both expert and citizen impute agency of a kind. To say that children and youth are agents has recently become a familiar assertion in the social sciences (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Bucholtz 2002; James et al. 1998; Holloway and Valentine 2000; Skelton and Valentine 1998). This may be understood as the result of a particular discourse on young people—co-constituted by legal texts, social theory, and the practices of youth workers, situated ambivalently, between a desire to let young people speak for themselves and a continued requirement for representation. Accordingly, what participation is assumed to foster is the ability to articulate one’s needs, desires, and interests, to balance them with those of others, and to exercise choice—in short, a capacity for self-government and active citizenship (Cruikshank 1999; Rose 1999). These are the terms in which the participation of young people has been thematized more widely in Germany in recent years.
Not only is participation assumed to be a generally ethical and indispensable aspect of democracy. Regarding young people, participation has come to be seen as a desirable way of equipping them with what are considered democratic skills—such as negotiating interests, finding compromises, and taking responsibility. As an exercise in self-administration (Selbstverwaltung), the Container in Alexanderplatz epitomized this idea.

In an important sense, for youth workers, “Alexanderplatz—a place for young people” was a confirmation of how young people disrupt common understandings of public space. Street workers’ practices were claimed to grant legitimacy to young people’s presence in public spaces, which they thought was often denied and increasingly jeopardized. Spaces where young people can play, socialize, or simply be, I was told, were gradually disappearing in Berlin, as in other cities. Vacant lots had been built on and train stations and shopping malls were highly surveyed and staffed with guards, who removed all non-consumers and undesirables from the premises. Street workers proffered a dystopian vision of Berlin’s future development echoing, scholarly commentary regarding the privatization of public space in the neoliberal city (Caldeira 2000; Davis 1992; Low 2000; 2006; Sorkin 1992). The assumed (past) congruence between material and metaphoric public space is now said to be under threat (cf. Habermas 1989; Holston 1999; Sennett 1994). With the apparent extinction of the public street and square, public life too is expected to disappear. The youth workers imagined the new Alexanderplatz—the one envisioned by Berlin’s planners—to be just another instantiation of an omnipresent progression towards privatization, exclusion, and segregation.

In the RKA, the Square Management’s ideas found general support. Heiko initiated several meetings and discussions with the planners, in which they commented approvingly on his “reasonable” outlook, explained to him the administrative details, and discussed alternative locations for the youth facilities. For his part, Heiko had incorporated planners’ and developers’ language into his repertoire—a strategy that he thought proved quite successful. His attempt to merge different sets of interests was also reflected in the way he dressed. Instead of his accustomed social worker outfit, Heiko had developed a hybrid combination of chinos, shirt and jacket. Dressing differently was part of embodying a position in between what Heiko felt were two distinct worlds. Despite such partial inroads and acceptance among planners, the potential that youth workers saw in Alexanderplatz differed sharply from the twin discourse of aesthetics and real estate so prominent in post-unification Berlin.

In his conversations with planners, Heiko had appropriated their concern with the value of urbanity. For planners, the existing Alexanderplatz lacked a sense of a clearly defined public space. To be made
urbane, its emptiness needed to be filled (cf. Holston 1989; Stimmann 2001). However, in Heiko’s view, Alexanderplatz fostered a public life of its own, which would be displaced by the cafés, cinemas, and similar attractions of the new Alexanderplatz. The AG Alex’s ideas self-consciously contradicted these commercial interests that they believed would determine the square’s future shape. They suggested free toilets, multiple seating, sport, and play facilities, and sites for street work services. In contrast, for planners such provisions were clearly inimical to public interests. Young people were not part of the development potential that Alexanderplatz promised. As an East German administrator argued in a conversation with me, “In our system, land is too valuable. It has to be marketed.” As a major traffic node and thoroughfare for hundreds of thousands of people every day, the planners emphasized, Alexanderplatz needed to be “robust.” Robustness, in this view, was not only a technical category but an aesthetic and economic one. It referred to a plain, sturdy and largely undefined space and echoed the image of a well-proportioned European square that had become an urban design ideal in Berlin (Stimmann 2001). What the AG Alex envisaged for the square was clutter, unpleasing to the eye and hampering other people’s use of the square.

Perspectival disparities

First of all, there is a different language, and second, there is a different perspective. Do I have a house in the foreground or a human being? [...] The Square Management was created to act as a catalyst, and [...] to translate. Because this [difference] sometimes means that you can talk past each other without understanding what the other side means. (Heiko)

When examined through the lens of a Foucauldian notion of governmentality, social work and urban planning emerge as closely related projects. Their birth is generally traced back to the same historical period and conceived of as entwined with the invention of the social as a knowable, calculable, and governable domain (Rabinow 1989; Rose 1999). Both appear to have sprung from a desire to shape and reform this domain, albeit through different techniques. Significantly, Foucault’s studies of governmental rationalities aim not at demonstrating unity—or that all phenomena are reducible to government or power—but contingency and complexity (Rose 1999: 276). When I speak of planning and youth work in reference to concerns with government, this is not to suggest that planners and youth workers make up a team in a tug-of-war pulling on the same end of the rope. More often, they feel themselves to be pulling in quite
different directions. The disparities in perspective that members of these professions perceived to exist between each other seemed to make translation necessary.

One more example will suffice. After many discussions, letters, and phone calls, Heiko had negotiated a meeting with the highest echelon of Berlin’s planning administration, the now retired Building Director Hans Stimmann who is known for his stern and controversial views regarding the direction that city planning in post-unification Berlin should take, specifically his proposals for a particular set of architectural principles and for retracing the city’s historical structure (Stimmann 2001; Weszkalnys 2004; forthcoming). Urban development in post-unification Berlin has been largely guided by a master plan based on the principle of critical reconstruction which is considered Stimmann’s brainchild. It embodies a professed anti-technocratic stance and the idea of the European city. It echoes much of the critique of post-war planning and architecture, which emerged in Germany, as elsewhere, during the 1960s and 70s. Critical reconstruction seeks to reinstate a functional mixture; the historic street layout; building heights; and the “house-on-one-lot” as the basis for all development. In short, it proposes a return to features considered typical of Berlin and the European city more generally (Schwedler 2001; Stimmann 2001). By invoking a pre-1914 architectural style and street layout—and a supposedly shared past, ranging from medieval times to the early German Empire—it is claimed that Berlin’s distinct identity could be preserved or recreated. The new design proposed for Alexanderplatz is partly an embodiment of such efforts to create an adequate urban centre. The negotiations between youth workers and planners around Alexanderplatz took place against this backdrop of deliberation and struggle over how an ideal of space and society could be conjoined in the city (see Berdahl 1999; Binder 2001a; 2001b; Borneman 1992; 1997; Glaeser 2000; Weszkalnys 2004; forthcoming).

For his encounter with Stimmann, Heiko arrived dressed in a suit and accompanied by his intern, who—rather than his usual T-shirt—sported a shirt. Two members of the citizens’ foundation which promoted and sponsored some of the Platzmanagement’s work, including a countess from a well-known German aristocratic family, provided further support. However, Heiko’s attire and aristocratic armour appeared to leave Stimmann unimpressed. Heiko’s attempt to shift the balance of power in his favour was unsuccessful. Instead, Stimmann focused on demonstrating that Heiko lacked the expertise that would allow him to make authoritative claims. He judged the AG Alex’s ideas unsuitable for a central city-square and in conflict with official regulations. He questioned Heiko’s idea of multi-functional facilities and accused him of disregarding the area’s history. Rather condescendingly, he proposed to teach Heiko a lesson in the history of Berlin, which might clarify why facilities specifically for young people were inappropriate. “This is our gothic old
town,” Stimmann exclaimed. Such facilities would conflict with the church and the town hall nearby. The idea of a beach-volleyball field in the city centre, he claimed, was unthinkable in any other German city, but here in Berlin people seemed to think that anything goes.

In planners’ commentaries, one thing seemed undisputed: youth workers knew about youth and social problems but not about urban design. Conversely, it was not the task of planners to worry about social or societal matters. Arguably, the planners who deliberated on a new design for Alexanderplatz in the 1990s could claim to have considered the social in the form of a study they had commissioned on the social make up of Alexanderplatz. In addition, planners I spoke to emphasized that popular participation in the case of Alexanderplatz had gone far beyond what was legally required. An impressive campaign was conducted with multiple opportunities for citizens to give their opinions. Society and the social have long been drawn into planning—through statistics, reports, and various forms of popular participation—in Germany as elsewhere (Ladd 1997). Planners frequently referred me to the laws that, since the 1970s, had made public participation a firm part of German planning procedures. Since then, cities were no longer deemed a mere mass of material wealth but as imbued with cultural values and social relationships. These laws had been the result of critiques of previous technocratic planning approaches. They imposed interventions in the social through planning (Düwel and Gutschow 2001), of which the 20th century history of Alexanderplatz may be read as a case study.

Importantly, however, the youths frequenting Alexanderplatz on a daily basis had not figured in the social study or in the participation procedures. For planners, the young people appeared seemingly out of nowhere. The meaningful relation that youth workers sensed between young people and Alexanderplatz—and asserted through notions such as Heimat, community, or public life—eluded planners. For them, young people were interested less in partaking of public life than in staking claims in Alexanderplatz.

From the youth workers’ perspective, the robust, plain and undefined square envisaged by the planners played down the presence of groups of people that did not fit certain images of an ideal user. In other words, it appeared to deny the social diversity they saw in Alexanderplatz. In their exchanges with Heiko, administrators repeatedly noted that instead of promoting sectoral planning or particularistic interests, one needed to plan for the common good. Youth, however, were but one user group among many. As Heiko recalled with some bitterness, “If I talk about the punks, [the administrators] tell me to remember the youths interested in sport. If I talk about youths interested in sport, they tell me that I mustn’t forget the punks.” Such advice undermined the youth workers’ claim to a comprehensive outlook. Time and again, youth workers pointed out that Alexanderplatz was not for young people alone. Residents, business people, the police, social workers, the
municipality, tourists, punks, urban planners, and architects were but a few of the diverse groups with vested interests in the square. Youth workers might have considered rather ironic an administrator’s assertion that “we don’t live in neutral space” (where people can do as they please). To them, this was very much how planners saw space. What for planners was a beautiful, unmarked public square, could amount, for youth workers, to a negation of the presence of (young) people.

What I term the perspectival disparities between planners and youth workers were indeed complex. They may be considered to relate quite simply to professional self-interest, but also to ethics, aesthetics, and the knowledge practices constitutive of the professional domains. Sometimes this was described as different ways of seeing, or perspectives. Planners considered theirs to be a trained perspective. One had to learn, as it were, to assume the God’s eye view. By contrast, youth workers would seem to have stayed firmly on the ground. They claimed their perspective was that of real people—a perspective that allegedly eluded planners. Perspectival disparities acquired peculiar significance when members of the two professions encountered each other. Each contested the ability of the other to see and know in the right way.

The Universal, the Particular, and the Robust

In Holston and Caldeira’s discussion the re-conceptualization of the social in planning seems to have failed to produce the purported outcomes. In this article, I examined an apparently more successful attempt to build the social into the urban fabric. As this paper has demonstrated, public space continues to be an object of lively debate and social practice in contemporary Berlin. The project “Alexanderplatz—a place for young people” offers a complex counter example to prevailing narratives of the death of urban public space in the contemporary neoliberal city.

While notions of privatization, gentrification and social exclusion are key to the AG Alex’s project, participants also succeeded in developing a sustained vision for what urban development in a contemporary capital city may comprise. Since the fieldwork was completed in 2002, the youth workers have registered some success. The Square Management was solicited as an expert in the competition for the design of Alexanderplatz. There were further workshops and opportunities for public discussion, that included young people. The youth workers endorsed the winning design—a vision of Alexanderplatz as a stage for people, with plenty of lighting and seating facilities. Activities for young people have continued to thrive in the square, and a new site nearby has been found for their facilities. The building works in Alexanderplatz are slowly taking off but in a more reduced form than was originally envisaged.
In the light of contemporary pronouncements of the demise of the social (Rose 1999), the AG Alex’s success may come as a surprise. I do not wish to deny the extent to which this success is due to the persistence and ingenuity of Heiko and the AG Alex and certain individuals in Berlin’s administration who supported their aims. The youth workers’ project was embroiled in complex local politics, in official planning doctrines and individual power struggles, in concerns about what the capital of the New Germany may look like and, significantly, about processes of its making. Importantly, these negotiations took place against this backdrop of deliberation and struggle over how an ideal society could be realized in urban space. In this sense, the youth workers’ project spoke to concerns not only about neoliberal city development but more specifically to the contemporary constitution of public space in Germany, and ultimately about notions of Germanness.

What I wish to note, however, is that the youth workers’ relative success is also related to an important shift in the thinking about the social in planning. The material from Alexanderplatz offers important anthropological insights beyond the ethnographic specificities of Berlin. Rather than its redundancy (or resurrection), I suggest that we are seeing a re-articulation of the social in planning, an attempt to create a kind of “social robustness.” To adapt a notion from recent analyses of scientific knowledge production, social robustness is sought where efforts are made “to ‘build into’ particular projects not just future demands of the public or customers, society in a weak sense, but an authority that lies beyond the market, in the name of ‘society’ in a strong sense” (Strathern 2005:466). Similarly, where planning was once considered robust if its practices and procedures conformed to those recognized as valid within the professional domain, now planning may be considered robust only if it looks towards society (cf. Nowotny et al. 2001; Strathern 2004). The seeking of authority beyond its own domain, in reference to society, makes for what I term socially robust planning.

Robustness is a fitting metaphor to illustrate what was at stake regarding Alexanderplatz and in the re-thinking of planning practices more generally (cf. Abram 2006; Holston and Caldeira 2005). Arguably, planners and youth workers entertained very different notions of how society could be materialized in the cityscape, and of how Alexanderplatz could be made robust. Largely framed by their professional understanding of what makes a good public space, planners spoke of robustness as an aesthetic, economic, and technical quality to which public space needed to aspire. This aspiration seemed threatened by the youth workers’ demands for what was, at times, derisorily described as sectoral planning. In an important sense, both youth workers and planners accused each other of taking insufficient notice of the social. Planners claimed youth workers endorsed a technocratic view of society as consisting of different sectors that could be known empirically and for which distinct spaces could be planned. By contrast, from the youth
workers’ perspective, planners were pre-occupied with the technical, aesthetic and economic rather than the social aspects of the square.

It is not the case, however, that youth workers took the social into account while planners did not. Rather, the youth workers’ perspective may be understood as a perspective from the particular, while the planners considered the social as a totality. The youth workers’ concern was with people’s particular needs and desires—including those of young people to which their job required them to be especially attuned. This was different from the particularistic perspective they were occasionally accused of, which loses sight of the larger public good. Their perspective from the particular (rather than particularistic) could seem in conflict with the position reflected in the planners’ reports, namely, a position that revolved around the notion of a larger social totality, as a universal form. In this sense, the social had already been considered in the making of the new Alexanderplatz, embodied in a social report and in citizens’ participation that were conducted in the early stages of the planning. Assembled from questionnaires, surveys and statistics, the social had been integrated into the square’s new design.

Importantly, however, these forms of conjuring the social were quite different from what the youth workers had in mind. Citizens had influence primarily in their role as residents and property owners; whilst the social report conjured society as separate from and even opposed to, other domains such as the economy, the law and the environment. By contrast, in the youth workers’ project, Alexanderplatz was a space considered to be inherently social, by virtue of people being there, a quality that could be imperilled or enhanced. The youth workers’ aim was not simply to add a social group that planners seemed to have overlooked. Rather, what the youth workers demanded for the square may be understood as a form of social robustness. For them, planning was not just about providing a container for people’s activities, but about creating a space that had people’s desires, expectations, and actual behavior already built into its design. The shift towards socially robust planning is by no means linear or absolute. Nor is it a top-down reformulation of governmentality. I suggest that what we see is a messy co-existence of different discourses that people draw on to persuade. “Alexanderplatz—a place for young people” is not simply a form of resistance to a prevalent urban governmentality but a rich example of contemporary efforts to reassert the power of the social in the city.

Notes

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