The Disintegration of a Socialist Exemplar: Discourses on Urban Disorder in Alexanderplatz, Berlin

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A large public square in Berlin’s eastern part, Alexanderplatz was rebuilt in the 1960s as an exemplar of socialist planning. In the 1990s, it became a problem for urban planners and ordinary Berliners. Drawing on ethnographic material, the author offers a multifaceted account of how disorder is experienced, governed, and materialized in Alexanderplatz. Talk about disorder has provided a way of discussing the dislocations accompanying unification and the vanishing of a socialist ideal. But it may also be understood as a commentary on the perceived failures of government and the social. These discourses involve two distinct conceptions of “society” and “the social.” One is a familiar notion of the social as a problem space; the other is a utopian notion of society as an unattained ideal, characteristic of state socialism. The author suggests how attempts to create order, such as the new design proposed for Alexanderplatz, can appear to produce the disorder they proclaimed to contain.

Keywords: disorder; the social; urban planning; public space; postsocialism; Berlin

In the summer of 2002, the 21st world congress of architecture was held in Berlin. In this context, a public discussion took place in a small art gallery in Berlin’s central district Mitte. It concerned Alexanderplatz, a large public square in the city’s eastern half and the object of a controversial flagship development project. Rebuilt in the late 1960s German Democratic Republic (GDR) as the putative center of a future socialist society (Kuhle, 1995), in the 1990s Alexanderplatz was identified as a problem of urban planning. Its design does not match planners’ visions for a central
A new design, which envisages a complete rebuilding of the square, including the erection of several high-rise buildings, was developed (see Figures 1 and 2). The 2002 discussion brought together a number of speakers from the impassioned planning debates, so ubiquitous in Berlin in the 1990s and early 2000s. One of the participants, the East German urban design historian Simone Hain, suggested that in the debate about the future Alexanderplatz, social, aesthetic, and ethical aspects had often been difficult to disentangle. Some might have hoped that by altering Alexanderplatz’s built surface, its “user surface” could be altered too.

Hain’s reflections alluded to the ways in which urban planning has been concerned not merely with buildings, streets, and squares but also with the constitution of urban life and the city dweller. Critical to this idea of urban planning are notions of order and disorder—linking the social and the material—which this article explores. Notions of urban order and disorder are historically and culturally contingent. Timothy Mitchell (1998) has argued that the conceptual relation between order and disorder is asymmetrical: “[Disorder] is the void that places order as the centre, existing only to allow ‘order’ its conceptual possibility” (p. 82). An examination of ideas of disorder can tell us a great deal about the kinds of order that people imagine or take for granted in particular contexts. However, such an examination is not merely supplementary. Rather, the complex and shifting discourses on disorder deserve attention in their own right.

Analysts of the discourse on urban planning, which emerged in 18th and 19th century Europe and its colonies, have pointed to the significance of particular kinds of order that urban planning has sought to create (e.g., Mitchell, 1988; Rabinow, 1989). Since the 19th century, as the historian Brian Ladd (1990) suggests, urban planning in Germany has become the “pursuit of a combination of spatial order and social reform” (p. 76). Indeed, the 20th century history of Alexanderplatz may be read as a case study of such attempted interventions in “the social” through planning. From Martin Wagner’s 1920s plans for a rationalized city center to the GDR design, each appeared to project an ideal of the organization of the city and urban life (Frisby, 2001; Kil & Kündiger, 1998). The design proposed for Alexanderplatz in the 1990s has
similarly been seen to embody a planned order that is proclaimed to bring economic prosperity and to contribute to the project of German unification. Critics point to the emergence of an urban policy rhetoric employed by city officials, planners, and developers that is devised to constitute inner-city areas as safe and comfortable spaces of consumption (Robe, 1999). The new design for Alexanderplatz is understood not only as an assault on Berlin’s former socialist center, potentially threatening to the East Berlin residents (Hain, 2001; Kil, 2000). More generally, it is deemed yet another example of a surreptitious urban politics through which those people not matching the image of the desired “user”—including homeless people, punks, and migrants—will be excluded from public space (Rada, 1997; Robe, 1999). These developments have been projected onto a larger scale and are seen to parallel global trends in urban restructuring and regeneration (Rada, 1997; Ronneberger, Lanz, & Jahn, 1999). Urban scholars have provided detailed assessments of the continual transformation of public and private spaces and the forces at work in urban development processes (e.g., Caldeira, 2000; Davis, 1990/1994; Gibson, 2003; Low, 2003; Sorkin, 1992; Zukin, 1991). They point to the ways notions of urban disorder and order are produced through the rhetoric and practice of state planners and private developers. Although there are significant parallels, it remains important to attend to the specificities in discourses of planning articulated in diverse social and cultural contexts. Regarding Berlin, there is now a large body of work that demonstrates how urban planning and development has become a crucial arena in which the tensions of unification have been played out (e.g., Binder, 2001; Bodenschatz, 1995; Ladd, 1997; Lenhart, 2001; Strom, 2001; Welch Guerra, 1999; Wise, 1998). Although scholarly and public attention, within and outside Germany, has been focused on central sites and the transformation of Berlin into a European capital city, my analysis examines a place that—despite its geographically central location and historical significance—has come to appear increasingly marginal. Instead of detailing official discourse, my analysis is concerned with how people’s experiences and theories of the cityscape coalesce in an, albeit partial, “sense of place” (Feld & Basso, 1996).
This article draws on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2001 and 2002. The fieldwork included various sites, ranging from the offices of Berlin’s planning administration to the realities of Alexanderplatz for those who live, work, and spend their time there. It also included GDR planners, citizen activists who objected to the proposed design for Alexanderplatz, and several other people who engaged with Alexanderplatz through their work, such as youth workers, developers, and artists. This approach was stimulated by George Marcus’s (1998) suggestions for a multisited ethnography. Through participant observation and in-depth ethnographic interviews, I aimed to get a sense of what I term the multiple Alexanderplatzes that people assembled in postunification Berlin. I attended countless meetings in the planning office and public debates, worked in a pub near Alexanderplatz, and talked to shop assistants, customers, and many other people who come to the square. Serendipity and lucky, often fleeting encounters—perhaps inevitable in the city—were essential to my research. Newspapers, documents, books, and other publications played an important role. Many of the concerns raised by people in Berlin—some of whom understood themselves as scholars and experts—are echoed in the academic literature, which provides a commentary that is part of the ethnography and indicative of the wider evocations of its research subject.

Drawing on this diverse material, I discuss notions of disorder in contemporary Berlin. What I offer is not a coherent picture of a “disorderly” public square but a multifaceted description of the ways disorder is thought about, experienced, governed, and materialized in Alexanderplatz. Key to these interrelated discourses on disorder are two distinct notions of society and the social. One is a familiar idea of the social as a problem space and a domain of government (Rabinow, 1989; Rose, 1999). The other refers to a utopian notion of society as an ideal not yet attained. The latter was particularly characteristic of state socialism (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2003, 2006) and as such is embodied in Alexanderplatz. First, I describe Alexanderplatz’s huge significance as an exemplary “socialist square” and how the square’s physical disintegration today seemingly mirrors the disintegration of the GDR state. Talk about Alexanderplatz’s postunification disorder has provided a way of discussing the dislocations that accompanied unification and the vanishing of a socialist ideal. Second, talk about disorder may be considered a commentary on what are regarded as the failures of government. Such failures were perceived in Alexanderplatz’s disorderly materiality—for example, in graffiti, in rubbish, and in particular kinds of people. Disorder was blamed on people who are regarded to have “failed” or have been failed by society and on those who are feared to pose a threat to public order. Finally, I shall suggest how attempts to create order, such as the new plans for Alexanderplatz, can at times appear to produce the very disorder they are proclaimed to contain.

Diagnosing the “Weak Heart of the City”

Socialist planning constructed Alexanderplatz as a spatial exemplar. The square was to be a model for GDR cities and perhaps the entire Eastern Bloc and, simultaneously, a show window to the West. It was part of the newly fashioned center of “Berlin—capital of the GDR,” conceived to consolidate the international recognition of the fledgling socialist republic. The cityscape “was understood as both symbol and expression of the form of society” (Hain, 1992, p. 57) that the socialist state was expected to produce. The historian Stefan Wolle (1999, p. 163) has described the GDR as a “Potemkin Village,” and
Alexanderplatz was arguably its prime building block: a façade of social and technological progress, the apogee of socialist life (Kuhle, 1995). With its hotel, department store, the Weltzeituhr ("World Time Clock"), and the Brunnen der Völkerfreundschaft ("Fountain of the Peoples Friendship"), and surrounded by the Haus der Statistik ("House of Statistics"), Haus des Reisens ("House of Travel"), and Haus des Lehrers ("House of the Teacher")—buildings representing the components of the socialist state—Alexanderplatz was an embodiment of the socialist future. The GDR planners I consulted, who had been involved in designing Berlin’s center, told me that if Alexanderplatz appeared at variance with the envisaged ideal, they would seek to bring the two into line. In response to citizens’ suggestions and complaints, additional shops and restaurants were added to increase Alexanderplatz’s attractiveness. Through these additions, GDR planners effectively adjusted the future to the present. It was a performance of “teleological time [that] melted the momentous into its eternal end” (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2006, p. 370).

People from all over the country flocked to Alexanderplatz on their trips to Berlin. The parades on May 1 and on October 7, the national holiday, and festivals such as the Solidarity Bazaar of the Berlin journalists made the square a happening place. It was on these occasions that Alexanderplatz emerged as the “communicative” and “societal space” its planners had envisaged. The Weltzeituhr provided an unmissable meeting point that remains popular today (see Figure 3). Crowned by a fragile system of heavenly bodies and displaying the times of (“befriended”) places all over the world, the clock seemed to symbolize the ideology of technological progress and socialist internationalism but also the myth of the temporal and spatial infinity of the socialist world (Lücke, 1998). Rumors of prostitution, gay cruising, and other illicit activities added to Alexanderplatz’s inherent ambiguity. As Bernd, an administrator in the local district council and now in his mid-30s, recalled,

[In Alexanderplatz] there was always this illusion or this hope that something would happen; that you would meet people; that you would experience the unheard-of; that you would meet foreigners from western Europe and possibly talk to them.

Alexanderplatz’s special allure may have been disputable during GDR times, but after the fall of the wall, any possibility of a better life and the future that the square had once promised seemed to be fading away. Alexanderplatz had been a place where, as Bernd put it, confined East Berliners could “sniff at the great, wide world.” After 1989, this changed:

You could go to Zoo [station in West Berlin] to sniff at the world; or you didn’t have to sniff at the world because you could travel there. You could get to the world and didn’t have to care that the world would come to you.

As the world of socialist certainties fell into disarray, this was apparently reflected in the square’s physical disintegration. Alexanderplatz became an apt vehicle for talking about the demise of the GDR state and the future it once embodied. Newspaper articles from the period report on Alexanderplatz as an unruly open-air market, dominated by unauthorized vendors selling cheap clothes, Soviet paraphernalia, and electronic equipment for hugely inflated prices, goods that were desirable yet rejectable (Humphrey, 1999, p. 34; “Schwarzer Tag Für,” 1990; Veenis, 1999). The ambiguity that had surrounded Alexanderplatz during GDR times was supplanted by ambiguity of a different kind. “Dangerous gypsies,” “Eastern European conmen,” “violent Yugoslavian
youth gangs,” and “illegal moneychangers” allegedly turned the purportedly immaculate socialist showcase into a center of mischief and crime (“Sittenspiegel Um Die Welt-Zeit,” 1990; “Spekulanten Ade,” 2005). Such descriptions of Alexanderplatz resemble, in some respects, those of places in other postsocialist cities (e.g., Bodnár, 1998). In Berlin, as in other parts of the postsocialist world, images of outsiders became “important symbols for discussing particular kinds of dislocation attendant on the exit from socialism” (Verdery, 1996, p. 97) and implying changing conceptions of trade, work, and the market (see also Bridger & Pine, 1998; Humphrey, 1999; Lemon, 2000; Spülbeck, 1996). These were not the foreigners who had made Alexanderplatz exciting during GDR times but foreigners who signified an other, repulsive, and embarrassing side of Alexanderplatz. East Germans were portrayed as victims of an intruding crowd taking advantage of a situation already deeply uncertain for many. Other newspaper articles offered glimpses of East Berliners caught in limbo. Being in Alexanderplatz was no longer special. Now, the square was for the poor and destitute, religious fanatics, criminals, and those who had not yet made it elsewhere. Alexanderplatz had become “the weak heart of the city” (“Berlin-Alexanderplatz,” 1991).

The physically deteriorating Alexanderplatz came to serve as a backdrop and metaphor for the disintegration of the GDR state and many of its former citizens. It was, as one journalist contends, a place embodying a specific “German condition” and a “point of crystallization of the unresolved problems of unification” (“Das Malträtierte,” 1993). The new state, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), he opines, had not yet succeeded in reintegrating either Alexanderplatz or these people who
“don’t want the old times back but don’t accept the new ones either.” Alexanderplatz was summoned as a place that had previously embodied an East German identity but was now riddled with troublesome differences. Simultaneously, as I discuss below, the Alexanderplatz of GDR times gained a new life as a metaphor for stability and order. Writing in 1992, the East German architecture critic Wolfgang Kil (2000) similarly related the apparent disintegration of Alexanderplatz to East Berliners’ altered self-perceptions or perceptions and experiences afforded and imposed by unification. With perceptible sarcasm, he wrote,

With unification, the former centre of East Berlin has acquired an overpowering competitor. The glitzy West City around Bahnhof Zoo and Tauentzien—with its overflowing shops, stylish cafés, and effervescent traffic till late at night—effortlessly eclipses Alexanderplatz—this huge, concrete plane between department store, station, and hotel. And promptly, a waft of shabbiness has settled on the former showpiece. The high-rise colossuses are standing around like erratic boulders. Everything suddenly seems to have turned out a few sizes too big and too coarse. All of a sudden, one has the impression, an unpleasant wind was wheezing across the square. (p. 42)

The design competition for Alexanderplatz in 1993 might have appeared like a (partial) solution to the perceived “unresolved problems” attendant on unification. This solution reflected the pronounced concern with what a shared identity of East and West in the unified Germany might mean (Berdahl, 1999; Borneman, 1992, 1992/1997; Glaeser, 2000; Mandel, 1994): Alexanderplatz was to be reconstituted as a symbol of Berlin’s “inner unification” (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, 2001, p. 3). It was imagined that a built environment could be created that would appeal to East and West Berliners alike and express something of their reconstituted sense of self. However, newspaper articles, transcripts of public discussions, and comments of citizen group members to whom I spoke suggest that, for many Berliners, the proposed solution for Alexanderplatz seemed doubtful. It was expected to bring offices, expensive apartments, and exclusive shops that few could afford. The putative symbol of unity would thus draw in “rich Westerners” but exclude “poor Easterners.” Some East Berliners felt the proposed reconstruction to be a devaluation, rather than revaluation, of “their” Alexanderplatz and, perhaps, of themselves.

Strangeness and Indifference: Inversions of Sociality

By the early 2000s, Alexanderplatz’s open-air market had disappeared. The few vendors who were there, selling their goods from portable stalls, had licenses legalizing their trade. Conmen, gambling with passersby, were but a sporadic, though again increasing, presence. The station at Alexanderplatz had been restored, and patches of grass and flowerbeds brought color to the square. These were welcome changes. Yet as I learned from conversations with residents and other people using the square, it still seemed indisputable that “something needed to be done” about Alexanderplatz.

One day in December 2001, I went to visit Herr Müller, a local resident and a former member of a citizen group that had vehemently contested the new plans for Alexanderplatz in the 1990s. As I was waiting outside his home—a 1970s tenement near Alexanderplatz—a man, perhaps in his early 60s, arrived (who turned out to be Müller). Unlocking the door, he enquired whether I was waiting for someone. As I learned later, approaching strangers around the house was habitual for Müller—not
only to help them find their way if they looked lost but also to determine their business. This habit felt even more urgent today because of the constant “coming and going” observable in the area, which was a worry for Müller and for other long-term residents. The newcomers were considered people unwanted or unable to afford a place in West Berlin—people whose devaluation by society might contribute to a devaluation of the area and perhaps the position of its residents. Their arrival was claimed to be noticeable simply by looking out the window: The front gardens were littered, and nobody seemed to care. As Müller explained,

A lot of strangeness [Fremdheit] has come [to the neighborhood] and with this strangeness to the surroundings, too, I’d say. Whether inside the houses or in front of the houses—nobody feels responsible for anything anymore.

In GDR times, as Müller explained to me, the tending of the front garden had been a communal affair in which residents participated with varying enthusiasm. Such activities were conceived of as a significant aspect of citizens’ contribution to the shaping of a specific socialist collectivity and society. When housing was privatized, this was no longer encouraged. In fact, Müller claimed, it was actively prevented, and professional gardening companies were paid to do the job. This was regrettable, in his view, because many of the older residents, familiar with the former practices, would still find pleasure in such activities. Instead, they now felt estranged from their previously familiar environment. A similar sense of indifference and neglect appeared to manifest itself in Alexanderplatz. People who remembered Alexanderplatz from GDR times would tell me that it bore no resemblance to the clean and orderly square they once knew. Instead, as one resident asserted, it had become a gathering place for dealers and punks, and the Kaufhof Department Store’s attempts to improve things by holding

Figure 4. Graffiti in a Pedestrian Tunnel Under Alexanderplatz
Easter or Christmas markets appeared spurious. Dirt, rubbish, and *Schmierereien* (literally, “smearred stuff,” derogatory term for graffiti) tarnished the walls of the tunnels under Alexanderplatz (see Figure 4). Such disrespect for common property and other people’s efforts was deemed to have been inconceivable during GDR times.

The residents’ commentary partly echoed the nostalgia that has been reported in relation to the political and social ruptures following the breakdown of socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (e.g., Bridger & Pine, 1998, p. 6; Ssorin-Chaikov, 2003, p. 117). In scholarly analyses, nostalgia has been taken to imply a slightly skewed view of the past filled with memories of a “good” life that has vanished (e.g., Chase & Shaw, 1989; Lowenthal, 1989; Watson & Wells, 2005, p. 20; Wilson, 1997). In postunification Germany, *nostalgia* has been a notorious word. Far from being a neutral analytic concept, it is a politically loaded term. A neologism has been invented, *Ostalgie*, referring to a supposedly romanticizing or distorted view of what life in “the East,” the GDR, was like—as people tried to cope with the disappointed expectations and unfulfilled promises of unification. However, talk about Ostalgie is often felt to belittle the experiences of East Germans by relegating them to the realm of the emotional and irrational. Most East Berliners I met would oppose an interpretation of their words and actions as simply nostalgic, and, indeed, the term would fail to convey the complex “sense of place” involved.

I suggest that the residents’ commentary sketched out a specific sense of place, one in which indifference and disorder had emerged where people once perceived the possibility of an (never quite achieved) ideal society. People who do not greet you in the lift, neighbors you cannot entrust with the keys to your flat to look after your plants while you are on vacation, and those who just do not bother to pick up litter in the front garden all seemingly embodied the impact of “the West” and, more generally, the adverse conditions affecting society today. Graffiti, rubbish in the front garden, or children’s toys left in the corridor were more than a violation of expected norms of behavior. For Müller and many other long-term residents of the area, they were the traces of irresponsible newcomers and an attack on previous collective efforts. What had fallen into neglect were not simply the houses, front gardens, and public spaces. It was also, I suggest, a particular kind of sociality. This sociality was one produced by people literally extending themselves outward into the built environment. From this perspective, actions that destroy communal property may appear to inverse the established sociality. They entail an inverse intentionality. The agents are opposed: They may be long-term residents, on one hand, or strangers, on the other. Social relationships now appeared to be marked by anonymity, indifference, and reserve. These phenomena and the instrumentalization of relationships by money have long been associated with the modern city and specifically the capitalist one. Social critics, from Simmel (1903/1980) to Sennett (1994, p. 255), have commented on them with perceptible ambivalence. Socialism held out the hope of abolishing the supposed sociopsychological characteristics of the urban dweller, along with capitalism and the inequality and difference between the country and the city (Grundmann, 1984). In contemporary Berlin, however, some people found that confirmation for these interlocking theories of the city and capitalism lay again before them. Theory and experience coalesced in a moral topography of place.
Failures of Government

At times, Alexanderplatz’s disorder could appear to be a matter of rubbish, rats, and too many people of the “wrong” kind. Commentary on this kind of disorder echoed what Stallybrass and White (1986) have termed a “metonymic chain” linking, for example, the poor to disease and to animals deemed repulsive, such as rats. To say this is not to suggest that perceptions of Alexanderplatz’s disorder are crudely or mechanically determined by a dichotomous mental structure or a metonymic chain but only to insist that they articulate historically contingent discourses on order and disorder, in which the association among substances, creatures, and persons constructed as defiled or deviant has long been pivotal. Talk about Alexanderplatz’s disorderliness and ways of dealing with it—through street cleaning, policing, or social work—evoked specific ideas about the social as a problem space to be managed through government. Blanket terms such as dirty could refer to both the materiality of Alexanderplatz and to particular people, sometimes labelled “fringe groups.” In this commentary, Mary Douglas’s (1966) famous observation that dirt is “matter out of place” seemed apposite. The boundaries that were being transgressed were those between salubrity and pollution and between the good and the asocial citizen. Importantly, “anomalous” matter was felt to threaten not only a conceptual order but also people.

Among municipal street cleaners, Alexanderplatz had the reputation of being “the dirtiest place in the whole of Berlin.” The hotel manager lamented that instead of coins, as in the fountains of Rome, in Alexanderplatz’s fountain one could find only rubbish. Blame was variously assigned to the municipal government (for providing inadequate cleaning services), to individual shops such as Burger King (whose customers allegedly produced disproportionate amounts of rubbish), or to every user of the square (see Figure 5). In the summer of 2002, the municipal street-cleaning service installed an oversized, bright orange rubbish bin with the imprint “For Beginners.” It was to remind people that even rubbish—unwanted objects with little specific economic or aesthetic value—had an appropriate place. Rubbish seemed to obstruct the playful, recreational activities, the beauty and salubrity that public fountains and gardens are intended to foster (Ladd, 1990, p. 67; Rotenberg, 1993; Worpole, 2000). Floating beer cans and broken pieces of glass in the fountain could pose a danger to children, eager to splash around on a hot summer’s day but held back by their mother’s warnings of the diseases they might catch in the contaminated water. Of similarly great concern were the rats in Alexanderplatz. They became visible particularly at night, straying undisturbed onto the otherwise deserted square. Rats elicited fear and repulsion, especially when venturing beyond the nighttime Alexanderplatz into broad daylight. They became a nuisance feared for their damaging effects on businesses around the square. The manager of a café was outraged that her complaints to the municipal offices only yielded the dismissive reply, “We can’t do anything about it.” The municipality appeared to neglect the care of public space, which she, like many other people, regarded as one of its main duties.

Put differently, rubbish and rats could signify a failure of government. This notion has been largely the result of a discourse on public health, which powerfully emerged in the 19th century. It placed responsibility for the maintenance of public cleanliness and order—through technologies of hygiene such as pavements, street cleaning, and enclosed sewers—into the hands of the municipalities and the state (Corbin, 1986). If early efforts at containment were to especially protect the bourgeois classes (Stallybrass & White, 1986), by 1900, health and hygiene measures were to be applied to the whole...
of society. Public health had come to be considered part of the public interest (Ladd, 1990). Sociobiological theories of urbanization posited the city as a threat for the German Volk, generating sickness and debility (Lees, 1985, p. 142). Entwined with a growing sense of hostility toward the city, public health came to refer to the physical and the psychomoral constitution of the urban dweller, especially the poor. Injecting elements of “nature” into the city—in the form of gardens, parks, and recreational spaces—was rendered a luxurious but necessary way of improving their allegedly coarse and immoral manners. Providing welfare programs, sewers, and street cleaning became the task of any “good” city government (Ladd, 1990, p. 67).

In the early 2000s, Alexanderplatz’s planners could presume the space of public health and busy themselves with technicalities when discussing pavement widths or the course of sewage pipes. Sometimes, however, in the meetings I attended in the planning administration, those assumed threats to public health were problematized. For example, planners remarked they would shun the food stalls in Alexanderplatz because of their smell and the rats roaming about. The stalls posed technical and aesthetic problems. Neither these “sheds” and similarly impermanent, “ugly” structures nor the associated elements were deemed to have a proper place in a central square in the new German capital. They were not simply matter out of place, however. When viewed from the perspective of the future Alexanderplatz—as administrative planners did—they could seem unequivocally out of time. By contrast, for other people to whom I talked, rubbish and rats had come with unification. Employees at the foods stalls, too, worried about the rats and bad smells but blamed them on the sorry green shrubs just behind the stalls. Much abused as a “piss corner,” this place was emblematic of what a street cleaner felt Alexanderplatz to be in
general, namely, “the largest public toilet in Berlin.” During GDR times, I was told, all this had, quite simply, not existed, and street cleaners had had much stronger chemicals to counteract rats and stenches. From this perspective, urine, rats, and rubbish were, quite definitely, matters in time.

A Problem of the Social

Although Alexanderplatz’s disorder could appear to be a failure of government, simultaneously it was all-too-readily attributed to people who were seen “to fail society.” A street cleaner pointed to the large crowds of people gathering in Alexanderplatz and especially to the punks, whom he considered “the greatest dirt producers.” Punks, sometimes called Bunte (“colorful”), have self-consciously distinguished themselves from an assumed normalcy through their clothes and hairstyles and their boisterous behavior (e.g., Hebdige, 1979). When approaching passersby for money or shouting at each other or their dogs, they would attract attention. These people were singled out and stigmatized because of the “out-of-placeness” of their appearance and behavior (Richardson, 1982/2003, p. 85) and were frequently felt to constitute a threat to public order.

Businesspeople in Alexanderplatz frequently appealed to the police and private security services to call punks to order. They feared that these people “loitering” in Alexanderplatz would scare away potential customers. Some people called for the intervention of the social office and social workers, the experts of the social. Others took matters into their own hands. Residents in a tenement at Alexanderplatz, for example, began to bombard the punks outside the building with water-filled balloons, tomatoes, and household refuse. Others again suggested that there was enough space elsewhere in the city for these people to go. The punks who people wanted to see “something done about” were almost invariably portrayed as “drunks,” “scroungers,” and “idlers”—able young people who chose not to work but “to live at our expense” or “off society.” Giving these people money, one resident suggested, was like feeding pigeons; both were a nuisance, not pretty, and virulent. But this, he quickly added, was only a metaphor. For Müller, punks were predominantly a problem of visual repulsion. These were people he considered even more “indecent” than other “folk,” “scoundrels,” and “rogues” gathering at Alexanderplatz. However, he continued,

I don’t want to call all of them asocial [asozial]. Certainly, this would be an exaggeration. One could easily be guessing quite wrong, . . . Not everyone belonging to these circles is inevitably, by nature or by mentality, antisocial. They’ve ended up there for various reasons.

Perceptions of homeless people, punks, or so-called street children were neither uniform nor fixed. For some people, punks and homeless people were a pitiful corollary of unification, mounting unemployment, and a widening gap between rich and poor. Such commentary echoed a familiar tension in appraisals of people’s apparent failure to conform to society. The notion of asocial used by Müller is entwined with a discourse on the social as a distinct realm and the idea of the welfare state. Families and individuals are imagined to be tied into a protective social net—of tax, insurance, social benefits, and solidarity among mutually dependent members (Rose, 1999, p. 123). At a time when comprehensive welfare provisioning and—in the GDR—near full employment seemed to make it possible to secure an acceptable standard of living for all, those who are poor may easily be blamed for their own misfortune or considered “deviant.” People
frequently appeal to “asociality”—understood as an individual or group-specific characteristic—as an explanation for apparent failures (or refusals) to conform to society’s assumed standards (Knecht, 1999, p. 13). There is, thus, on one hand, a structural understanding of poverty, locating its causes in socioeconomic structures, and, on the other, an individualistic understanding where poverty may be seen as a choice, resulting, for example, from an “unwillingness” to work (Howe, 1990). These frameworks coexist in tension. Where some people see individual failure, others identify, in a sense, a failure of the social, imagined as “a particular sector in which quite diverse problems and special cases can be grouped together, a sector comprising specific institutions and an entire body of qualified personnel” (Deleuze, 1979, cited in Rose, 1999, p. 101).

In the context of Alexanderplatz, punks occupied a metaphorical position similar to that of the traders, hawkers, and beggars in post-Soviet Moscow described by Lemon (2000). “Social disorders,” she writes, “are imagined here in terms of human waste—people out of place” (p. 26). In this sense, punks were deemed out of place in a public square—itself often considered the epitome of civic ideals. Those considered marginal to society have been delegated to the edges of the city and spaces where the “the deviant” can be controlled and “the pathological” normalized (Foucault, 1963/2003; Rose, 1999; Schlör, 1998; Sibley, 1995). In important respects, punks emerged as a cipher of social disorder against which the persona of “the citizen” (that public spaces have been thought to help produce) and an imagined ideal of society could take shape.

A Dangerous Place?

One summer evening, I sat chatting with some young people who frequented a facility for youth located in the northeastern corner of Alexanderplatz. They came here almost every day, passing their time—as we did now—talking and bickering while sitting under the trees and watching people pass by. Usually, it was the same crowd, but tonight two young men joined us. Their presence seemed to perturb some of the girls. I had not met these young men before, and, for them, I was a new face, too. On hearing that I was writing about Alexanderplatz, one of the young men, Ahmed, exclaimed he’d been a regular at Alexanderplatz for 7 years and could tell me everything I might want to know. Pointing across to where a group of Cubans were playing their game of domino, he noted, “That’s the Negro corner (Negerecke)!” Here, one of the girls interrupted, sharply criticizing his choice of words: These people were called Afro-Americans, she knew. Ahmed sneered that she should mind her own business.

Ahmed continued to enumerate Alexanderplatz’s various “corners”: the Fidschicorner at the public toilets, the spot where pickpockets from Romania and ex-Yugoslavia gather, the spot around the television tower where conmen who were also from ex-Yugoslavia gather, and other corners where people of predominantly Arab origin and without residence permits deal in marijuana and heroin. Two areas, Ahmed claimed, functioned as meeting points for all: the small casino at the bottom of the hotel and what he called the “unofficial casino” in the park behind the television tower. Ahmed’s friend added that Alexanderplatz used to be dominated by Albanians, engaging in their “private trade.” “Later, the Kurds came,” he explained, “and we left the area to them.” Then, Ahmed giggled that in front of the department store one would find the unemployed and welfare recipients—mostly men who have come here to look for a woman. “In Alexanderplatz,” he went on to say, “society’s filth assembles.” This was strange, he thought, for just over there was the beautiful district of Prenzlauer Berg; in the other
direction, there was Hackescher Markt where, according to Ahmed, people were friendly to each other, too; and another “cool” district, Friedrichshain, adjoined Alexanderplatz in the East. Alexanderplatz, Ahmed concluded, is right in the center and a place where only “the socially weak” gather.

While I was scribbling down these explanations, a new landscape—or rather people-scape—of various illicit and marginalized groups spread out before me. In Ahmed’s Alexanderplatz, a diversity of ethnic and social groups laid claim to their respective corners of Alexanderplatz. This kind of description—assembled from newspaper headlines, public pronouncements, and everyday experiences—could be taken as offensive (perhaps deliberately so), as the girl’s response indicates. It both resonated and jarred with the picture of Alexanderplatz painted by worried residents. It also reminded me of what Sirwan, a Kurdish youth I had met at Alexanderplatz, had told me a few days earlier. He spoke of his growing dislike for Alexanderplatz, which was partly related to the dealers whom he despised and with whom he wanted no dealings. Then Sirwan queried, “You are not going to write about what I just told you?” He was cautious not because he feared getting into trouble with the dealers; rather, he worried that if the presence of such people at Alexanderplatz became widely known, policing might increase, and he and his friends would become subject to even more controls. From prior experience, Sirwan knew well that the police were hardly discriminating in their controlling practices—aside from a discrimination between “dark looking” people and others. Sirwan was therefore unsurprised that I had little awareness of either the policing practices or the illicit activities he described. Likewise, when I now said to Ahmed that I could not quite see what he was seeing, Ahmed laughed: “That’s understandable. You only see it if you know!” In any case, one would not believe it when Alexanderplatz looked as it did that night. The evening sun was shedding its last light onto the square. There were people out on an evening stroll, and others were resting on the grass. Alexanderplatz looked tranquil.

However, Ahmed and his friend also knew that the police had declared Alexanderplatz a “dangerous place” in the mid-1990s. “Since the Wende [‘turn’],” Ahmed offered, “Alexanderplatz has become a dangerous place and more and more criminalized.” The young men, who claimed previous involvement in some “wheeling and dealing,” boasted about how to evade the police’s attempts at controlling crime. Perhaps partly to impress, Ahmed and his friend appeared unconcerned about the power of the police or, for that matter, about the ethnographer’s potential power to inscribe Alexanderplatz as a criminal space that had so worried Sirwan.

The city has long been associated with crime and danger but, as the urban analyst Epstein (1998) suggests, what is perceived as dangerous and what provokes “city fear” is “always contingent on the ways in which we should fear the city” (p. 213). Berlin police have applied the label dangerous place to areas—ranging from select streets to entire underground train lines—that display a statistically disproportionate number of crimes. Rendered statistically, occasional events have become a permanent quality of place. In “dangerous places,” everyone is a potential suspect, and the police’s rights to control people’s identity without immediate cause are significantly enhanced. Such classifications influenced perceptions both of the place and of everyone within it. When Müller recounted his experience of being pickpocket by a Vietnamese man who had pretended to ask him for change, he did not fail to invoke the crime statistics that he thought corroborated his perception of Alexanderplatz as an unsafe place. The classification of Alexanderplatz as a “dangerous place” appeared to affect the ways in which people embodied the square. Crime and danger were frequently, though not exclusively, expressed in a racialized discourse and associated with certain groups of people.
to be avoided and with the nighttime Alexanderplatz. At night, danger emanated from emptiness and obscurity—the absence (or hiddenness) of people. In spite, or because, of streetlights and illuminated advertisements, the nocturnal city has come to be imagined as a space where danger lurks (Schlöer, 1998, p. 57).

Against all this, the socialist Alexanderplatz, and “GDR times” more generally, were summoned as a metaphor, albeit ambiguous, of stability and order. Crime and fear of crime were largely considered phenomena that had emerged only after unification. During GDR times, Alexanderplatz had been the object of thorough surveillance. Rumor has it that cameras were installed at various buildings around the square, sending images to screens in the Stasi offices. Three different police departments, an East German policeman told me, were deployed to keep Alexanderplatz free of “undesirable” persons. A punk walking on the Platte—as the police called the open area of Alexanderplatz—would have had no chance. Echoing official GDR rhetoric, he noted, “In socialist society, something like that wasn’t allowed to exist. There were only orderly dressed people.” Today, he surmised, Alexanderplatz was gradually turning into another Bahnhof Zoo, the train station in West Berlin infamous for drug-related crime and prostitution. Similarly, an East German planning administrator in her 30s claimed never to have felt unsafe walking alone in the city when she was younger. With the ruptures brought by the Wende, however, what she called her “subjective sense of safety” had changed. Neither homelessness and drugs nor the rubbish that people today carelessly strew about, she thought, had existed in the GDR. “Many problems just weren’t there, and others were locked away better,” she noted, “but one can doubt whether this was a good solution.” The boundary between protective surveillance producing safety and intrusive surveillance producing unfreedom seemed elusive.

Producing Disorder

In the early 2000s, the new plans for Alexanderplatz had still not materialized. For many people I talked to during my fieldwork, the square’s persistent decline was bewildering. The busy planning for Alexanderplatz that I observed in the administrative offices and the orderly future that was promised were far removed from people’s everyday experience of the square. In this final section, I want to examine another discourse on Alexanderplatz’s disorder that casts disorder as the product of attempts to create order. Ironically, the plans to revamp Alexanderplatz had apparently transformed one of the “unfinished constructions” (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2003, p. 134) of the GDR state into the “unfinished construction” of another, the FRG.

In interviews and conversations, there emerged a distinct commentary on the square’s continuing decline that implied that the reasons lay less in its outdated design than in wider economic and political processes, or indeed in the new plans themselves. For example, the peculiar emptiness that had emerged in Alexanderplatz since the early 1990s was related partly to the “political vacuum” characteristic of the period around unification; partly, it was related to the closure of restaurants, cafés, and shops and the lure of Berlin’s western part. A typical notion was that disorder and decline resulted from the impact of forces outside people’s control, such as “the West” or “capitalism.” By contrast, Michael, a man in his mid-30s who had lived near Alexanderplatz all his life, located current developments within a stream of time that encompassed both East and West. He told me about a popular bookshop that had been replaced by a bank. For him, this was not symbolic of the frequently lamented takeover of the East
by the West but, as he matter-of-factly said, was simply a sign of “our times.” Instead of the expected betterment, the actions of those in power—the politicians, planners, and developers—often appeared to generate further destruction. The discontinuation of the water music in the fountain behind the television tower near Alexanderplatz and the removal of public seating facilities were particularly lamentable changes. A former GDR planner suggested to me that this was a strategy of making Alexanderplatz so unattractive that a reconstruction began to feel inevitable or even desirable. Perplexing, too, was the apparent devaluation of previously admired buildings, evinced by their destruction. The summer of 2001, for instance, saw the tearing down of the celebrated Palast Hotel near Alexanderplatz. Some of the numerous onlookers attracted by the demolition commented on the unreason behind the activities: The hotel was a product of expert engineering and had been recently refurbished. Now “they” demolished it, only to replace it with another hotel!

The sales assistant in a flower shop at Alexanderplatz expressed disbelief that the new plans for Alexanderplatz would ever become reality; in fact, she doubted that a plan existed at all. When set alongside GDR planners’ comprehensive schemes, current planners could easily appear not to be planning at all. Instead, they relied on the vagaries of the market and on private developers implementing their ideas piecemeal. Others saw the cause for disorder in the very existence of a plan. As Thomas—an urban planner and one of the citizen activists who had opposed the proposed design for Alexanderplatz—explained to me, since the plans had become legally binding, they inhibited even the smallest measure to improve the square’s appearance. They set out the specifications for Alexanderplatz’s new design, including building heights and the amounts of square meters for housing, offices, and commercial space, to which developers would have to adhere. Until the developers would fulfill their promises, Alexanderplatz had become, in the planners’ words, a Platz im Wartestand: a place caught in the moment of waiting for the better future to come.

Finally, it could seem that the new vision for Alexanderplatz gradually created its own validation. There were, for example, the Rathauspassagen—a large socialist structure adjacent to Alexanderplatz, combining housing and workspace with space for consumption and leisure. After unification, its exclusive flair had yielded cheap shops selling “any item for a D-Mark” and a supermarket attracting what were felt to be rather insalubrious kinds of people. In 2001, even these had disappeared because of the incipient renovation that was to bring the Rathauspassagen up to date. Now, the area looked as if “the plague had broken out,” commented a customer in the local Kneipe (pub) where I worked for some months. The owner of the Kneipe observed the area’s deterioration with apprehension. When she acquired the space in the early 1990s, she had not expected her new independent life to become so precarious. Together with what had once been a top location in East Berlin, her business and livelihood crumbled (see Figures 6 and 7). Her business, like many others, had to shut because of the incipient renovation.

Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2003) has provided a compelling analysis of how, at the state’s margins in Soviet and post-Soviet Siberia, the idea of the state is reified and deferred in discourses on failure and in discursive gaps. In this always-incomplete state project, “unfinished constructions” are “order still unachieved . . . as a display of work in progress” (p. 136). Similarly, regarding Alexanderplatz, the destruction and disorder produced were, we might say, evocative of an ideal of the good city or, for that matter, the state. Gutted buildings, streets torn open, and exposed cables and pipes were the signs of a yet-unfinished project of constructing a new unified German state of which
Alexanderplatz was to be symbolic. For city planners, projecting a future and accustomed to delays, the busy renovation works in the Rathauspassagen and the construction of a new multiplex cinema nearby (replacing a GDR leisure complex) were the first signs of a new future materializing (see Figure 8). Their rationale was one of aggregate numbers and of new businesses and jobs created in the long term. By contrast, customers

Figure 6. Summer 2001: The Kneipe in the Rathauspassagen

Figure 7. Spring 2002: The Rathauspassagen is a Building Site; the Kneipe Has Closed Down
in the kneipe joked that, considering the speed at which buildings were being built and torn down in Berlin today, the new cinema would be pulled down before it even opened. People’s speculative comments regarding Alexanderplatz were embedded in a broader discourse, typical of postunification Berlin, where construction and destruction, order and disorder are but flip sides of each other. But that plans promising construction and order simultaneously generated destruction and disorder was for many people a rather bitter irony.

**Conclusion**

In summer 2002, Berlin’s first theatre group of homeless persons, called Ratten 07, gave a humorous public performance in Alexanderplatz (see Figure 9). Dressed up as larger-than-life cleaning ladies and equipped with brooms and foaming detergent, they gave Alexanderplatz a vigorous cleaning. Their ostensibly lighthearted performance may be read as a critical parody of the notion of “cleansing” the urban environment, implying the removal of both dirt and certain categories of people. As the Berlin anthropologist Robe (1999) argues, in contemporary Berlin the social problem of poverty has been turned into an aesthetic one, requiring an ostensibly aesthetic solution. Programs such as the Action Plan Clean Berlin, zero-tolerance policies, and the increase in private security forces are cited as alarming indicators of an increasingly repressive urban regime (Rada, 1997; Robe, 1999; Ronneberger et al., 1999). What
makes these programs so controversial is, on one hand, that the kind of metonymic chains (Stallybrass & White, 1986) they evoke, and the biologizing and racialized discourses in which they are enmeshed, were deeply implicated in the most distressing practices of human intervention in the social, including the atrocities committed under the banner of German national socialism (Linke, 1999; Rose, 1999, p. 115). On the other hand, there is concern about a blurring of “public” and “private” realms. The proliferation of public–private partnerships and private security services, for example, unsettles definitions of the state as being uniquely responsible for planning—a notion particularly common in Germany (Strom, 2001, p. 234)—and as possessing a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within its territory (Johnston, 1992, p. 218; Weber, 1919/1992, p. 6). At issue, here, are apparently obscure legal bases and lines of accountability. Orchestrated interventions in the social of the kind attempted by the modernist planners of the 19th and 20th centuries can appear dubious today. Rather than interference having ceased, however, the ways in which urban planning now affects the organization of urban life are often perceived to have become more dispersed, more clandestine, and sometimes altogether unaccountable.

Instead of assessing the degree to which the new Alexanderplatz corresponds to this pattern, this article aimed to provide a close-up, and sometimes uncomfortable, examination of the reality that “disorder” had for people I encountered in and around Alexanderplatz. Disorder was variously experienced as irresponsible “strangers,” as “graffiti” and “rubbish,” as people who self-consciously decide to stand “outside” society, but also as people who had simply missed out on the betterment that unification seemed to promise. Such commentary pointed to perceived failures of government and the social, which were seen reflected in the materiality of the square. It also indicated perhaps less the mourning of a vanished past than the loss of a future. The future that Alexanderplatz once embodied had turned into a future that “could have been.” The proposed plans for Alexanderplatz could seem to have contributed to its demise. The plans were criticized for their intended and unintended consequences, including the demolition of GDR architecture, gentrification, and the continuing decline of the square. Nonetheless, talk about
disorder and that “something needs to be done” about it served to further consolidate specific ideas of government, planning, and the state (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2003). Plan and failure, order and disorder were entwined: Just as the new plans appeared to produce more disorder, the perceived disorder was productive of order. The disorderly Alexanderplatz constituted the counterpoint to the carefully developed Alexanderplatz envisaged by Berlin’s planners. Disorder made order thinkable as it were (cf. Mitchell, 1988).

Notes

1. The article draws on my PhD research (Weszkalnys, 2004), which was made possible by a William Wyse Studentship. I owe thanks to two anonymous reviewers, to the editors of *Space and Culture*, and to Maryon McDonald, Tanya Richardson, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, Andrea Stöckl, Karen Wells, Gwyn Williams, and Hadas Yaron for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

2. This was no doubt an aspiration rather than reality. An investigation of what Buchli (1999) terms the “scrappiness” and indeterminacy of meaning of socialist architecture was unfortunately beyond the scope of this study.

3. Attempts to create built environments that have specific effects on people’s sense of being are not new. Such environments are imagined to entail what Nancy Munn (1996/2003) has termed “transposable qualities.” An example is the 1850s design for New York’s Central Park, especially the creation of “scenes” or “views.” They were assumed to have a “poetic” influence and “qualities [that] had the power to act on people’s inner states of being or mind, and so make life ‘healthier and happier’ in the city” (p. 102).

4. I use the term *asocial* to avoid confusions with the notion of antisocial behavior that is so prominent in contemporary Britain.

5. Punks had indeed become an object of governmentality, with special services and places for them to meet, eat, wash themselves, and engage in other activities and with qualified personnel assisting and monitoring them.

6. Early on in my fieldwork, I was introduced to the group of youth workers running the facility and began to participate in their activities and spend time with youth workers and young people in the square.

7. A group of Cubans met at Alexanderplatz during the summer in the afternoon and evening. Most of them had come to the German Democratic Republic as students and stayed after unification.

8. *Fidschi* is a derogatory term for Vietnamese people.

9. Both Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain have large populations of students and, increasingly, of well-off young professionals and sport many cafes, bars, restaurants, and shops. Hackescher Markt in Mitte district has become a trendy location and, more recently, many feel, “yuppified” and “invaded” by tourists.

10. A West German policeman I met opined that such fears were characteristic of East Germans unfamiliar with risks of ordinary cities. Perceptions of crime and danger may vary in relation to gender, age, ethnicity, individual feelings of vulnerability, and so on. Ewald (2000) relates fear of crime among East Germans to the experience of disappointment attendant on unification, especially among economically marginal workers.

References


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