

Weszkalnys, Gisa. 2010. *Berlin, Alexanderplatz. Transforming Place in a Unified Germany*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books. xii+224 pp. Hb.: \$60 / £35. ISBN: 9781845457235.

Published in the Bergahn Books' edition *Space and Place*, Gisa Weszkalnys' monograph is an ethnography of urban planning related to a particular space, Berlin's Alexanderplatz square that, not for the first time in its history, became an arena of city's self-reinvention in the 1990s. Envisioned as a centre of the DDR's Berlin during the socialist era and 'as an exemplar of an emphatically modern socialist city: a centre of societal life, a place for trade and communication and an embodiment of socialist internationalism and technological progress', Alexanderplatz is today perceived as 'a waste of valuable inner city land and break with Berlin's historical structures' (pp. 11–12). Examining the discourses and practices of Berlin spatial reordering after the unification, Weszkalnys depicts today's socialist-capitalist Alexanderplatz as a chronotope, a 'plural time-space,' and examines ways in which this specific locale 'comes into being in different domains and with different effects'. What she offers to readers is a rich ethnography not of diverse 'constituents' of Alexanderplatz, but rather an insight into ways in which it is multiply constituted (p. 2).

The book consists of seven chapters. In the introductory chapter, the author situates the object of her research in the broader framework that goes beyond negotiation and imagination of the city's identity and includes questions such as citizenship and belonging, expertise and planning, time and space, the nature of ethnography and the object of anthropology (p. 2), 'the nature of ethnographic field, the distribution and distributedness of our anthropological objects, and the engagement with some of those most emphatically "modern" domains of contemporary life' (p. 29). As an enquiry that drives the book, she emphasises the question 'whether we are willing to see anthropology as both descriptive and, as such, as a problematising knowledge practice,' and sees as a goal of the anthropological account of Alexanderplatz 'to convey its multiple constitution, whilst recognising that people live different Alexanderplatzes simultaneously' (p. 29). The second chapter serves as a prelude to the story about Alexanderplatz, as it introduces a set of discourses through which Berlin's future was imagined. These future imaginaries include Berlin as the capital, the metropolis, the global city and the European city. Most of the talks about what Berlin should become in the future, the author points out, are talks about how to fill Berlin's emptiness, since 'it seems impossible to talk about Berlin after unification without attending to its empty spaces' (p. 61). And in most of imaginations of Berlin's future, Alexanderplatz as an oasis of socialist planning had come to appear inadequate.

In the following, third chapter, the author moves more closely toward her ethnographic object – Alexanderplatz – and points out to its disorderly materiality. She offers an insight into ways in which discourses about Alexanderplatz's post-unification disorder provides a 'channel' for set of socially relevant discourses: these discourses enabled discussions on the present day dislocations and the vanishing of a socialist ideal; they also enable linking the square's physical disintegration with the disintegration of the GDR state. Talk about disorder may also function as a commentary of failures of government.

The fourth chapter deals with the process in which Alexanderplatz was identified as a problem of urban planning, which led to development of new design for the square.

The next chapter turns toward critiques of the urbanistic re-design of Alexanderplatz, closely looking at attempts of citizen initiatives and experts to challenge the planners' visions and procedures that made these visions legitimate.

The sixth chapter highlights dynamics of changing ways the square and the city are governed urbanistically, as well as the ways in which 'the social' is articulated in city planning through the prism of the project initiated by a group of social workers who worked with young people in Alexanderplatz.

The concluding chapter, entitled *Whose Alexanderplatz?*, highlights the relation between planners and citizens and suggests that 'the mix of numerical, participative and more "narrative" knowledge practices that planners now deploy have yet to translate into newly conceived kinds of composite and possibly inconclusive results' (p. 164). The author asserts that the counterpoint to the planners' Alexanderplatz are not various citizens' visions of the square, 'but rather the square where disorder and disintegration become manifest' (p. 165). She pays particular attention to the vision of Alexanderplatz 'that sometimes appeared to be "more real" than the others:' the one that is related to economic and money. For administrative planners, Alexanderplatz 'was not just a public square but simultaneously an investment project where ownership is distributed between private developers and the public hand' (p. 168). This concluding chapter also provides readers with a reflective look-back to main issues brought in the study. One of them is the notion of assemblage as an ontological concept applied to a place; the discussion of Alexanderplatz highlights the historicity of assemblage and its conflictual nature.

Throughout the book, Weszkalnys insists on multiplicity as inherent characteristic of Alexanderplatz. In her own words, "ambiguity", "fluidity" and "elusiveness" might be the last words that come to mind when one looks at Alexanderplatz, this concrete plane, and the sturdy buildings around it. Yet, they seem to be the words that encapsulate it best' (p. 167).

A detailed and multi-layered ethnography of the place, Weszkalnys' study essentially belongs to studies of post-socialism, too, since most discussions around Alexanderplatz cannot be detached from its embodiment of a particular historical moment – now defeated, outdated, 'a peace of the East' that city builders cannot accept. Throughout the book, the author highlights post-unification tensions and the temporal experiences of East Berliners 'as the inhabitants of this city that is to be rewritten, and the continuing salience of the gradually obliterated socialist period in their life trajectories' (p. 166). This kind of obliteration, a common post-socialist condition, becomes particularly exposed in multiple visions and temporalities of the re-united city.

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