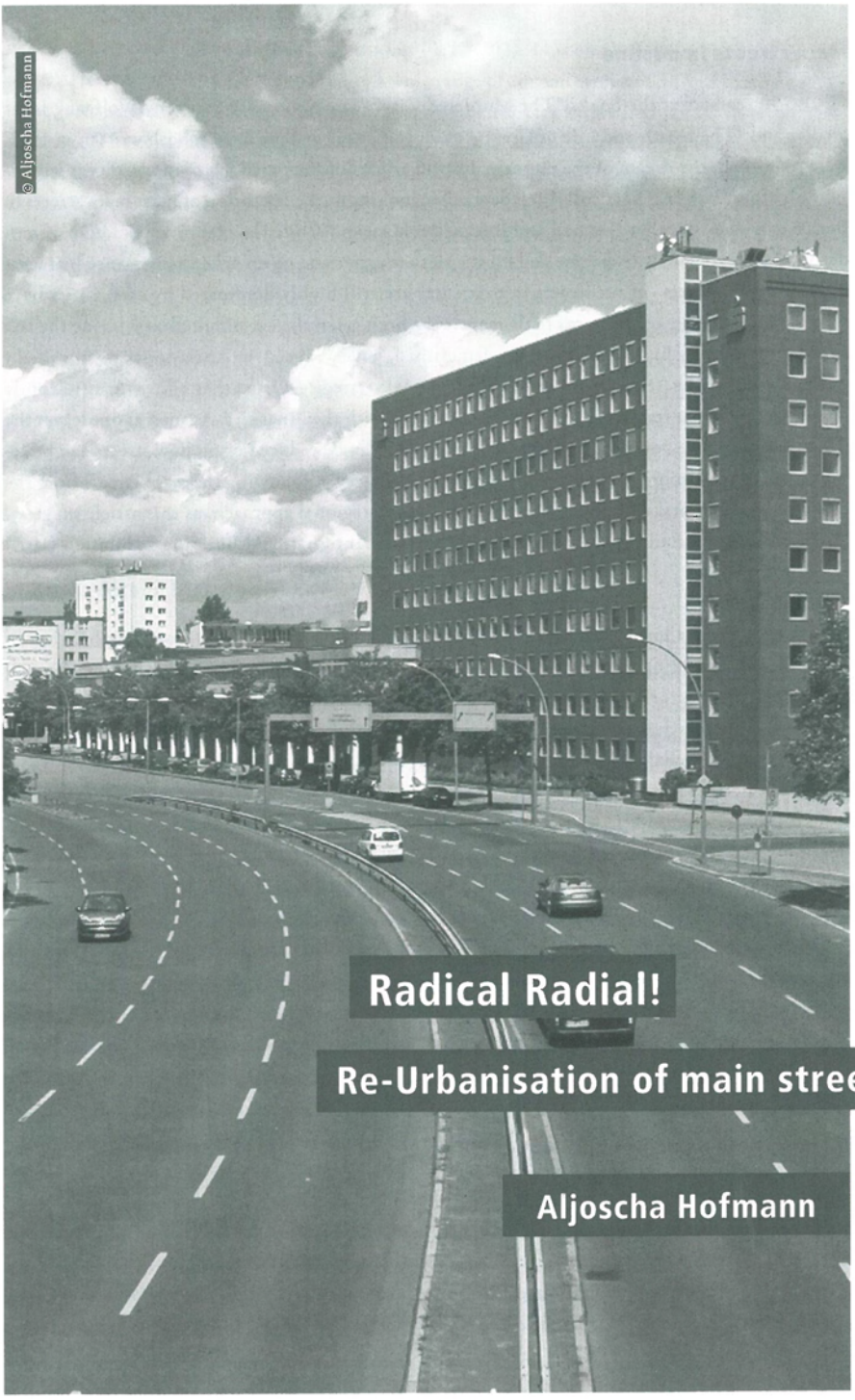


# Radical Radial!

## Re-Urbanisation of main streets

Aljoscha Hofmann

## Main streets in decline

50 years after the books "The Murdered City" (Die gemordete Stadt) by Wolfgang Jobst Siedler and "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" by Jane Jacobs, both written in 1961, were published, the dream of the motorised world as part of the paradigm of modernity is still visible all around us. It is particularly evident when looking at the condition of most main streets in Berlin as well as in other German and international cities. While the planning paradigm of modernity has been widely overcome and most cities are experiencing an urban renaissance – at least in their central parts –main streets in particular are still highly dominated by cars. Cities have made smaller and bigger attempts to dismantle the heritage of the car-oriented city during the last decades - inner city highways have been demolished, lanes reduced, and new tramcars installed - however, many of these projects don't follow regional strategies. Often they either focus solemnly on getting bicycle-infrastructure in place or deal only with the inner city. As soon as one leaves the dense inner city the concepts on how car-dependency can be reduced or on how streets can be re-urbanised become more and more sparse and vague. However, following the main streets from the inner city to the outskirts offers a large potential for a regional approach, as this article suggests. Such an approach could provide the topic for the next International Building Exhibition (IBA) in Berlin.

Berlin has a long history of Building Exhibitions: General Urban Design Exhibition in 1910, German Building Exhibition 1931, Interbau 1957 and the IBA 1987. Throughout these times a great number of challenges have been faced. Each exhibition was realised under different planning principles and diverse economic, social and political circumstances. Each gave answers to the relevant key challenges the cities were facing.
Currently, Berlin faces various city-wide challenges. It is undergoing an economic transformation from less traditional industries to more contemporary approaches to reconcilable inner city production and a growing relevance of the service sector. At the same time Berlin needs to find ways to densify suburban structures, for example by creating new neighbourhood centres. Questions such as - How can the city adapt to climate change? How can sustainable and reconcilable mobility be implemented? How can the growing segregation between the outer and the inner city and between different quarters be countermanded? How can Berlin adapt to the demographic changes? - are more relevant than ever. Therefore, a discussion about a new International Building Exhibition for Berlin that calls for new approaches towards dealing with future challenges was initiated in winter 2010.

## Main streets – current challenges

For a long time the planning of streets has mainly been a technical field for traffic planners, separated from urban design and other design disciplines. It was therefore not the main focus to look at the urban spaces streets create, nor the urban qualities for other users than motorists. Aspects that affected the layout of streets were the optimisation of traffic flow, safety issues (to be achieved by a strict separation of different traffic types). The general rule was: the wider a street

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was, the better the flow of traffic (Schmucki 2001:97–103). This one-sided transformation of the main streets over the last decades has let to a wide range of current stresses and strains. Some of the most pressing challenges for streets to function as urban spaces with a high quality are caused by car usage. The concentration of particulate matter ($PM_{10}$) and noise are crucial issues. Indeed, the maximum allowance, according to EU standard values for particulate matter emission in 2010, is exceeded throughout the whole of Berlin (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung Berlin 2008). Similarly to the particulate matter, existing noise levels in most main streets in Berlin are above standard values (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung Berlin 2005).

Apart from the obvious environmental concerns, noise and air pollution have led to a number of other problems: buildings being abandoned, streets with less attractions and shops being more difficult to let. The stresses have affected residential buildings as well as central public infrastructures and former community services and bigger private structures like department stores. The main streets, once the central service areas of neighbourhoods and the places where post offices, markets and city halls were found, have faced a massive loss in their function as community centres.

## Main streets in history

Until the middle of the 19th century, before Berlin grew into the city we know today and before it became a single municipality with the surrounding villages and cities in 1920, the radial streets formed the connections to the closer city region as well as to more distant places. Most former communities and today's city neighbourhoods had their centres along one or another main street. The radial streets were the key element that gave and still give structure to the city as the arteries along which growth concentrates. Later, the radial streets became the representative main streets, centres of economic and public life, as well as desirable residential addresses. At the beginning of the 20th century streets like Kaiserdamm or Bismarkstraße were broad and representative boulevard. Beautiful beds of flowers flanked the streets and decorated the central verges where the tramcars ran. Trees lined the busy streets, which shops and apartments faced with representative facades. Throughout the whole city one would find city halls and department stores along these busy lifelines e.g. the impressive Ulstein House on Tempelhofer Damm, the old post office building on Karl-Marx-Straße or the Karstadt department store by Phillip Schaefer from 1929 at Hermannplatz, the intersection of the two radial streets Karl-Marx-Straße and Hermannstraße, at the time the most advaced department store of the world. The radial streets were also the busy lines of public transport, along which tramcars and buses ran. And still today, the main streets are the arteries along which most of the public transport runs, above or under ground.

## Main streets of potentials

Berlin's main streets offer the structure to find answers to many of the current challenges streets face in most industrial cities. Through strengthening and re-urbanising, they could become a strong link for the city region and overcome their current status as barriers within the city. The neighbourhood centres along the radial streets, which represent a big part of existing economic wealth, could be strengthened and once again become both social and economic. The main streets

are often the "living rooms" of the adjoining neighbourhoods and should therefore be reinstalled as places of identity. Reorganising the different modes of transport could create environments for living and transit at the same time. Living along a "civilised" main street could once again achieve a representative character. New shops and institutions could improve local supply. Cultural places along the main streets could be re-established, improved or even newly set up.

## Radical Radial

The proposal "Radical Radial" follows this vision. A key idea of the concept is that while referring to the streets, more then just the streets is implied. When facing the challenges along the streets one has to deal with the street, the accompanying buildings, the side streets and the neighbourhoods beyond the main streets. So, by saying "re-urbanising the street" one actually has to widen the view and look at the needs of a much bigger area of the city within which the main street forms its central place of identity and community and its business centre. The challenges along the main streets also vary from the outer to the inner city. At the edges of the city, suburban sprawl, strip-like usages like car dealers, petrol stations or big box retail, and the large suburbs, which date from between the 1950s and 1970s, need qualifying while the challenges change towards the inner city: traditional village centres lost their coherence when main streets cut through former squares and meadows, separating them into two sites. New transportation modes need to be installed and a new balance between the street as a place for living and a place for moving needs to be found. What is needed is a project that does not focus on the street, nor the transport or any other sectoral issue alone, but tries to achieve an integrated approach at changing our city streets and their surroundings.

The ideas of changing street layouts and the way we use cars and other transport modes are not completely new. They have been partly tested in smaller pilot projects and realised in different cities. Some interesting concepts and ideas will briefly be introduced here. HJPplaner developed the concept of "dimensioning by urban scale" (Städtebauliche Bemessung), which tries to invert the normal way of planning a street: instead of first calculating how much space is needed for the carriageways and afterwards using the rest for bike lanes and pavements they, on basis of the surrounding buildings, calculate how much space is needed for the pavements and end up with left over space that can be used as carriageway. (Heinz 2009:78). Another big issue that makes a difference between a street for pedestrians or for motorists is the way it is lit in the evening or at night. Lamps that hang over the streets have only one goal: making driving safer. In these situations the light often hardly spills onto the pavement making it an unattractive space that might be perceived as unsafe. Berlin has developed a light concept in which it is stated that pavements and bike lanes will be lit with 50% of the carriageway light intensity. (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung Berlin) Whether this should not be the other way round is questionable.

Canzler mentions another interesting fact: the number of driving-licence holders in Germany under the age of 26 has decreased from 90.6 percent in 2000 to 75.5 percent in 2009. At the same time the use of car-sharing has increased massively and new models with fluent intercange from one transport mode to the next have been developed. (Canzler 2011:96-97) But not only car-sharing has been on the rise, bike hire systems are appearing all over Europe. Paris, which has one of the biggest bike hire systems has just made another step by expanding there velib project to the integrated use of automobiles (Autolib) (Canzler 2011:97–98). Thus, there is a tendency to move focus away from the car oriented main streets toward a more human scale, keeping a variety of actors with different interests in mind.



## Main streets – steps in the right direction

Kicking-off a paradigm change as proposed with "Radical Radial" does not only imply the necessity to activate funds but also to achieve a change in everyday behaviour – how we move, shop or spend our leisure time. Even more, strong new alliances are needed to make a change in the way we see and use streets today. At the same time the overall street has to stay in focus. A single project along a main street (like changing a part into a shared space) has an impact on the rest of the street as well as on neighbouring streets and can therefore not be thought of in isolation. Only if the overall effects are taken into consideration can it become a project that looks beyond its geographical limits. Sectional interests have therefore to be well negotiated and need to be integrated into the vision.
Apart from negotiating particular interests, re-urbanising a main street is a big strain on economic and labour ressources and can - especially in a bankrupt city like Berlin – only be achieved if all stakeholders are involved. A highly fragmented municipality, small budgets and various 'insular' projects are some of the further challenges that need to be dealt with.

Many sections along the main streets are of similar urban texture and face similar challenges. For an IBA 2020 it would therefore be a feasible undertaking to look at some of Berlin's main streets and find exemplary solutions for different kinds of urban and suburban situations. By showing how a main street can be altered to become a 'street of tomorrow' – with a focus on pedestrian and cyclist friendly spaces, while at the same time offering sustainable traffic solutions to keep the city's economy prosperous and resilient, a relatively small number of projects could make a big difference in contemporary planning. Therefore, "Radical Radial!" is a proposal to re-urbanise the radial main streets, running from the historic city centre into the neighbouring state of Brandenburg – a concept with relevance for Berlin, the city region and other international cities. For the first time, solutions could be sought for an integrated strategy on re-urbanising main streets that considers all aspects, including: existing and new kinds of traffic, economic and social issues, as well as urban design and architecture for the streets of tomorrow. With an International Building Exhibition it would furthermore be possible to invite architects, planners and experts from all over the world to bring in their experience and further develop this vision as a holistic one.

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