

Claire Colomb. *Staging the New Berlin: Place Marketing and the Politics of Urban Reinvention Post-1989.* New York: Routledge, 2011. 320 pp. \$53.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-59403-5.



Reviewed by Annemarie Sammartino (Oberlin College)

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Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

Marketing a “City Condemned Forever to Becoming”

Asked to explain why he wanted to live in Berlin after graduation despite not speaking German nor having ever visited the city, an excited student exclaimed to me, “Berlin is the new Prague!” Although such a statement might be bewildering to a Berliner—what does the hyper-(post)modern capital city of Germany have in common with the quaintly beautiful city on the Elbe?—many Americans know just what he means. Berlin has become a popular destination for students, artists, and ex-pats. Berlin’s popularity among this group is a function of its history and its (still) cheap rents, but it is also a function of a consciously produced vision by Berlin’s image professionals.

In *Staging the New Berlin*, Claire Colomb takes on the story of the marketing of Berlin. The story she tells is a fascinating tour through Berlin’s attempt to market itself to foreign and domestic tourists, businesses, and even Berliners themselves in the two decades since reunification. As she sees it, the self-conscious marketing of the city provides a unique window into the attempts of public and private actors to cope with the challenges of a

rapidly evolving urban landscape at a time of national and international change. Berlin’s staging reflects international trends in urban marketing, but is also *sui generis* in several levels. First, Berlin faced challenges and opportunities that are unique—suturing a divided city while simultaneously becoming the capital for a reunified country. Second, Germans in general and Berliners in particular have a long history of being especially self-conscious about their image and their heritage, a tendency that was exacerbated in the aftermath of the Third Reich but was apparent even before that.

After a short historical introduction to the major themes of Berlin marketing since the Wilhelmine period, the majority of Colomb’s text focuses on the period after 1989, in a study that moves seamlessly between a focus on advertisers to debates about the shape of the urban landscape itself. She begins with a discussion of the debates in the immediate aftermath of reunification, in which a diverse array of proponents of “critical reconstruction” who sought to preserve and resurrect the historical heritage of the city, clashed with those who

sought to remake Berlin as a forward-thinking, commercial *Weltstadt*. These debates came to a head in Berlin's failed bid for the 2000 Olympics. Out of the wreckage of the "Olympia 2000" campaign emerged a new organization—Partner für Berlin (PfB or Partner for Berlin)—a public/private venture dedicated to promoting the city's image. PfB was and is joined by a host of public, private, and public/private organizations which market Berlin to a diverse set of audiences. Colomb ably explicates these organizations, although the dizzying array of actors can make it hard to understand their relative importance or particular bailiwick. Colomb then looks at the two place-specific campaigns and controversies that dominated the mid-1990s: Potsdamer Platz and the new government quarter. From there, Colomb moves on to discuss the "Schaustelle Berlin" campaign, which explicitly staged the city through site-specific exhibitions and projects for tourists and residents. In this remarkable campaign, construction sites were reimagined as spaces of play and spectacle. Colomb then examines the image of the creative city that marketers sought to promote in the 2000s, the image that, among other things, formed the basis for my student's Prague comparison. Her final chapters explore the debates that Berlin's place marketing engendered in Berlin and elsewhere.

Colomb's discussion of the debates surrounding the reconstruction of Potsdamer Platz provides a sense of the strength and weakness of her approach. At times, her analysis is quite penetrating, such as her able deconstruction of the language that stressed Potsdamer Platz's status as the "heart of the city." Colomb notes that even before the Cold War division of the city, it had long had two centers: one, the historic center located around Unter den Linden, and the second in the Kurfürstendamm shopping district in the west. She also challenges the rhetoric which claimed that turning Potsdamer Platz into a commercial mecca was a kind of reconstruction of the past, noting that developers ignored much of Potsdamer Platz's history to focus on one particular moment: its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "heyday." However, her discussion does not cohere in a way that makes the most of these scattered insights. Colomb concludes this section with a discussion of the unpopularity of Potsdamer Platz, with urban critics put off by its commercialized sterility and its simultaneous popularity with tourists and residents themselves. This is true and it is interesting, but it is also well known enough that Colomb needs to do more to demonstrate what her research has to offer. Here and elsewhere, Colomb has a tendency to substitute questions or pat summaries for analysis in her

conclusions, which is a shame, given the keen analytic eye she otherwise demonstrates in this book.

As Colomb admits, it is unclear and almost impossible to measure how much marketing really affects how a city fares in attracting investment and tourists. Therefore, the value of a study like this is how it helps us to understand the self-perception and presentation of municipal, state, and federal actors, as well as their interactions with one another. One important contribution of this book is to show how the initial opposition between proponents of "critical reconstruction" and those who wished to market the city as a modern metropolis became blurred over time. In particular, both groups found common ground in the dismissal of the Cold War period as an abnormal break in the city's history and in denigrating or destroying the physical traces of the German Democratic Republic through the 1990s. In this regard, Colomb briefly discusses the reemergence of the Berlin Wall as a part of Berlin's marketing strategy in the 2000s, but fails to link this with its earlier absence. A more sustained engagement with the wall and its simultaneous presence and absence in the new Berlin might have helped sharpen Colomb's analysis of the historical stakes involved in constructing a new post-Cold War identity for the city.

This book is explicitly about the marketing of Berlin by professionals, be they in the public or private sector. As such, it tends to neglect grassroots developments except or insofar as they become part of the city's official image. Thus, the Love Parade, a key part of Berlin's 1990s public image, is only discussed when it becomes consciously marketed years later. Colomb ignores the troubled relationship between the city and the Love Parade for much of its history, and indeed the period when it was canceled. Colomb also largely ignores the growth of Berlin's art scene until it, too, becomes part of Berlin's public image. While she does a nice job discussing the dynamics of co-option that develop as a result of this encounter, the earlier role that such developments played in the popular image of Berlin at home and abroad is not discussed, except in a small section in a catch-all chapter at the end of the book. I suspect that informal channels remain more important than official ones for delineating the outlines of the city's image to foreigners and, especially, residents. To be fair, Colomb is more interested in the image the city sought to present than the image that it actually had; however, the permeability between official and unofficial images means that a greater discussion of the grassroots would have been welcome. With these limitations in mind, this is a worthwhile book and con-

tributes a fresh perspective to the increasingly crowded Â
field of studies on post-reunification Berlin.

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