

Chapter 6 Symbols of transformation: Leipzig's Spinning Mill and its cultural branding

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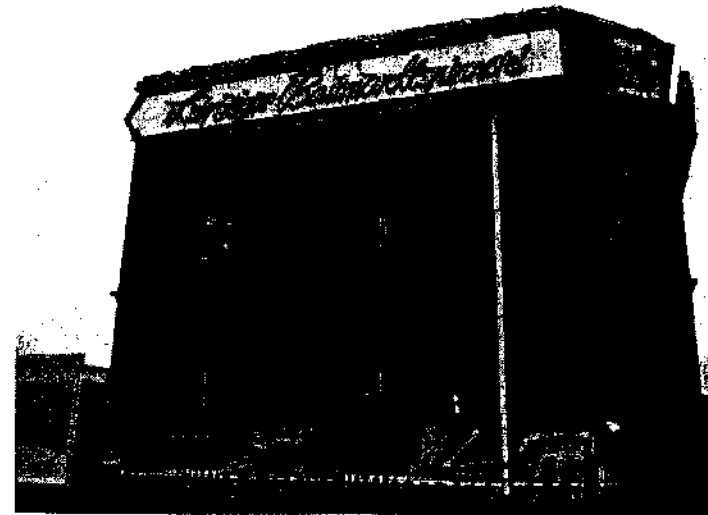
Compared to other German cities Leipzig's housing stock was spared destruction during much of the allied bombing during WW II. Hence Leipzig still has a cityscape that preserves the architecture characteristic of Middle Europe in the early 20th century. While other German cities have been able to preserve and rebuild a few buildings or only small ensembles from this period, 75% of the pre-war houses in Leipzig are authentic Jugendstil buildings. Despite this apparent success, Leipzig is in fact challenged by problems arising from its architectural heritage. During the post-War period, Jugendstil houses became a synonym for a pre-modern culture in which untamed industrialisation left no space for healthy, human living conditions. In both East and West Germany, Jugendstil houses were regarded as not fitted to modern dwelling ideals and were abandoned by inhabitants seeking more comfortable conditions in 1950s and 1960s housing. In the GDR, where Leipzig was in competition with East Berlin, Jugendstil housing estates were systematically disregarded and labelled in official rhetoric as reminiscent of a capitalist society. The socialist *new man* should pursue a *class-less culture* in the new high rise buildings known as Plattenbau at the city's edge. As a result, large parts of predominantly Jugendstil areas were intentionally neglected and left uninhabited for long periods. Those considered as not belonging to this *new society of equal citizens*

- such as political dissidents or alcohol addicts - were forced to live in the historic parts of the city characterized by Jugendstil buildings. These areas were stigmatised, and their social problems have become a self-fulfilling reality.

When built, Jugendstil architecture was a result and part of the cultural embedding of the industrial revolution, in which Leipzig was one of the four main centres of production and innovation in Germany. The symbiotic relationship between the development of an industrial way of life and its architectural expression was lost or made invisible, however, by socialist attempts at modernization. During the GDR period, the former urban fabric was not radically challenged by the socialist regime, as Leipzig was still meant to function as an industrial city. Nevertheless, it is today evident that the intention of the socialist planners to re-organize the city according to their own ideals, but without distinction, did not succeed in creating a sustainable quality of life.

After 1989

After German reunification, Leipzig faced complex, structural socio-economic and urban challenges linked to the new political situation. These included de-industrialisation on a massive scale, a dramatic drop of commercial activities, and a shrinking population.



Indeed, Leipzig did not only collapse after German reunification - because it then lacked viable industrial production - but also shrank in population as residents left the city in search for new lifestyles and new jobs elsewhere. People fled particularly from socialist high-rise estates, especially from the area called Leipzig-Grünau. The consequent emptiness of the abandoned buildings is still an unsolved issue in many former GDR cities, only partially tackled by regeneration plans such as the national programme *Stadtumbau*. In the case of Leipzig, during the 1990s, it was hoped that the former Grünau inhabitants would make a new start in the old Jugendstil housing estates. But this failed to happen following the persistence of a negative perception of this area, its buildings seen as both unattractive and entailing high refurbishments costs.

While in West Germany Jugendstil houses are often reclaimed or bought by people engaged in the cultural industries, Leipzig (like East Germany as a whole) still lacks inhabitants engaged in the booming branches of a post-industrial society. The transformation of Leipzig has not been based on the potential of post-industrial innovation, and its relative success has relied on attracting global companies such as BMW or DHL. The rapid loss of industrial production sites has not been compensated for by the diverse puzzle of small and medium size enterprises in new service sector industries. Although politically and financially supported, East German cities have not succeeded in replacing their Fordist lifestyle by a post-Fordist culture enacted by entrepreneurial young professionals with the competences to live in a flexible and highly uncertain situation. Elsewhere, these groups of urban professionals often use old housing estates such as Jugendstil-buildings as a place for experimenting with new forms of economic, social and cultural activities. Simultaneously, they mark a starting point for gentrification. In Leipzig, however, those urban pioneers are hardly present.

In the meantime, Leipzig is promoted as a city which could potentially attract these types of entrepreneurs. Hence, in urban marketing strategies, TV spots, and local media, the city is pictured as a thriving place defined by young West Germans as being as hip as Munich. To attract visitors and gain cultural credibility, the city is promoting its local potentials while focusing on traditions such as the Thomaner Chorus or Bach's music. Such campaign seems to have little impact so far on Leipzig's cultural transformation. Tourism and even large scale foreign or West German investments are isolated dynamics which are not seeping through to the remaining socialist

and industrial urban culture. What one can identify are milieux with almost no chance to find a place in the new industries, run down public spaces, broken social networks and a general feeling of detachment which rules in parts of West Leipzig which planners have marked for demolition. Social problems accumulate here in an obsolete physical environment no longer connected with the path of industrial production. Viewed from a nostalgic point of view, Jugendstil houses are now leftover relics in a city moving towards a post-Fordist culture.

Walking through Plagwitz/Lindenau

The process of transformation becomes visible from a short walk through Plagwitz, an area in the west of Leipzig. This neighbourhood grew and expanded when in 1884, 9,000 square meters were used to build the largest cotton spinning mill in Europe, the Leipzig Baumwollspinnerei¹. The whole industrial site is an entirely new part of the city whose architecture was built in elegant red brick. In a typical mode of urban development in the late 19th century, the complete landscape of this area alongside the old salt road of Germany was redesigned. Most significantly, natural conditions were superseded by the prerogatives of the production. This becomes especially clear in regards to the waterways in the city. Historically, Leipzig gained from its close position to key canals such as the Weiße Elster and Pleisse which enable connection to the river Elbe and thereby to the North Sea. The city's very existence can be traced to its uses of these waterways since the 11th century. Industrial production not only changed the water uses and was responsible for the widening of canals for shipping and harbouring, but the rivers were also deeply integrated in production processes.

In 1856, a lawyer named Karl Heine developed plans to develop Plagwitz and the West of Leipzig to become an industrial centre and proposed the building of a channel that links the city to the booming Ruhr area. While this plan has never been realised, the debates on how to link with the rest of the world have been a constant trait of local politics. In fact, large parts of a new harbour in Plagwitz have been realised and only a few kilometres remain unbuilt. A last attempt to complete the channel was undertaken by the Nazi regime when tonnes of earth were moved in a *work creation programme*. At that time the uselessness of such water connections became already evident.



Industrialisation had influenced Plagwitz's geography already decades earlier. In 1910, the attraction of nearly 20,000 workers to the city had been the reason for massive housing construction - street after street was built. The industrial entrepreneurs sought to express their economic as well as cultural hegemony in the city: housing estates fulfilled a symbolic representation of the power of industry in all its glory and misery. One street expressed the self confidence of an upcoming class, while another street was organized in a quasi military order to offer short term accommodation to workers. Today, this partition is still visible in the architectural styles of the Western areas of Leipzig which are divided into bourgeois Lindenau and working class Plagwitz.

Standing on the Lindenau market place, the façades of the surrounding houses state the pride of the locale. Walking South and leaving the market place to get to Lütznauer Straße, the circular street order transforms into a grid style of street pattern with the Karl Heine, Weißenseiler and Gießener Straße becoming the key avenue for smaller alleyways. Here, there are *Mietskasernen* (military style tenement houses for workers) as the counterpart of the Jugendstil blocks in Lindenau. On the Plagwitz side, it is possible to cross the re-naturalised water of the former industrial canal. Nowadays,

Leipzig is trying to promote its waterways as both providing a distinctive identity to the city as well as encouraging recreation and tourism. Further up towards the city centre, Venetian-style gondolas have been introduced to offer costly trips for tourists. Out of context and of dubious aesthetics, this is one of many attempts by the leisure sector to reinvent Leipzig as a city of waterways. Especially the former head of city planning of Leipzig, Niels Gormsen, and the association New Shores which he directs, have been supporting this kind of recreational initiatives regenerating the city.

Yet, despite some positive effects in beautifying the area, this physically and marketing oriented transformation of Plagwitz did not avoid some criticisms. There are two key areas of debate. First, the city of Leipzig needs to invest much more economically if the waterways are to be accurately restored. Second, the local impact of this type of tourism and recreation project is questionable, especially its benefits to the less well off in the neighbourhood of Plagwitz. So far, the city council has decided to stop the project.

Entering the Leipzig Baumwollspinnerei

Within Plagwitz, the housing area and cotton spinning mill (*Leipzig Baumwollspinnerei*) are separated by an over-ground train line which is used for local services. Right behind the railway station, the imposing architectural complex of the spinning mill is emphasized with a huge board that spells out: Leipzig's Cotton Spinning Mill and clearly designating the area as an industrial site of significance.

The board at the top of a ruined estate is placed at the beginning of a road connecting to the spinning mill. This once marked the entrance to the area dominated by the mill. The pride of ownership, industry, entrepreneurship and modernity can be symbolically interpreted through the design of the board: remarkably the text on the board does not show a traditional German but a European font style which underlines a cosmopolitan rather than patriotic attitude. If the spinning industry once dominated every detail of communication, living and working in this area, today the message delivered from the same place has changed: aspiring to an atmosphere in which the general and the specific, the odd and the advanced, the global and the local fuse together.



An art district

Today, the *Baumwollspinnerei* is known worldwide as a prominent art exhibition centre for local Leipzig and foreign artists. At first glance, the visitor to the area is addressed by the concept of the Cotton Spinning Mill which transforms the existing cultural landscape into a globally understandable code. The obvious contradictions between the particular-local and the general-global are wrapped up in a set of symbols that are decipherable as an exciting local performance of authenticity. In contrast to other forms of place making, the strategy used here leaves the buildings and the name board as they were, thereby enabling the visitor to become a discoverer in an area of decline, to inhale the scents of the heyday of progress and hard work.

The old spinning mill was the working place for about 4.000 employees until 1992 when the fabric was taken over by West German investors. In 2001 it ceased all production and the machinery was sold, while the area became increasingly empty. At the beginning of the 1990s, accompanied by the euphoria of the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, alternative clubs and artist scenes discovered new spaces in Leipzig. It was at this the time when the Spinning Mill hosted a Summer Studio organized by local artists and made possible by the former *Grundstücksverwaltung* that was open to

new tendencies, while on site some of the industrial production was still active. It was a prototype of *Zwischnutzung* (interim use), which allowed the creation of an urban microcosm of informal cultural and artistic activities with small workshops. Some artists actually moved onto the site, occupying a small part of the spinning mill, restoring the spaces for living and working purposes. As the inner city was still in a process of substantial rebuilding, the Spinning Mill offered an attractive and relatively cheap place for studios and exhibitions. Local institutions such as the Leipzig Fine Art School and the Leipzig Municipality have collaborated with the Spinning Mill from the beginning. Its owners, the BHB GmbH München and the MIB AG Berlin/Leipzig, have been carefully exploring opportunities for re-use of the territory and the large machine halls. Tactically, these two agencies moderated and partially managed further development of the area, in accordance with the local artists' community. During the first year, dedicated to the process of renovating lofts and studios, tenants were not asked to pay the rent. Still today, rental costs of these (post-) industrial spaces remain affordable.

Another important stakeholder in the development of the Spinning Mill is the Foundation Federkiel, originally founded in Berlin in 2000, aiming to foster creative initiatives and projects in contemporary art. Foundation Federkiel, is actively working at the Spinning Mill, coordinating exhibitions and public events at Halle 14, including art-oriented educational activities for children and teenagers under a program named *Kreative Spinner* (Creative Spider). In addition, Foundation Federkiel participates in the management and decision-making process together with the artists' community, looking after the future of the entire area.

Intensive communication with the local artists, gallery owners and other stakeholders has resulted in a strategy that focuses on the Spinning Mill as a place of high quality arts production - branded as Leipzig painting. Many international galleries became interested in the Spinning Mill thanks to its low rental costs. Prominent, influential and already established actors in the field of global art promotion like the Galerie EIGEN + ART and the Pirogi gallery from New York, have taken up the new location in cooperation with investors. This has helped spectacularly in turning the Spinning Mill into an international hub for arts: in 2007 the Guardian wrote about Leipzig *Baumwolle Spinnerei* as the 'hottest place on heart' for the arts². Yet, the managers of the Spinning Mill have been aware of the difficulties involved in putting their object on the global art market map. A journey

through examples in other countries, especially in the United States, and other comparable attempts gave them the impression that regeneration by culture could only be successful if a highly focused location policy ensured the communication of a local profile.



The new Leipzig school

The success of this strategy brought global attention to what is often called the New Leipzig, or even the New German, school. The title of New is intended as a reference to what had been called the Leipzig School a long time ago. Both old and new schools were disputable and contested labels for a community of painters, deriving more from the public than from the artists themselves. In contrast to a conceptualisation of a school as an entity with a strong leading figure and a rough but integrative programme³, the first Leipzig school could be identified less controversially. Since their participation at the Documenta 6 in 1977, Werner Tübke, Wolfgang Metheuer and Bernhard Heisig have been regarded as Leipzig painters. Their students, foremost among them Sighard Gille and Arno Rink, have been described as the second generation Leipzig School. Today's Leipzig School consists of artists such as Neo Rauch, Tilo Baumgärtel, Peter Busch, Tim Eitel, Tom Farbitius and others who have in common simply that they

are somehow rooted in Leipzig and its surroundings. While the artists themselves reject being branded as a New Leipzig School, they did and still do benefit from the power of this brand in the global art market. Their incorporation into the promotion of the Spinning Mill art production was crucial to this, as were the activities of Gerd Harry Lybke who is the director of the gallery Eigen + Art. Moreover, the fast and intensive exchange with the Leipzig Fine Art School has guaranteed that the market demand for fresh students from Leipzig can continue to be satisfied.

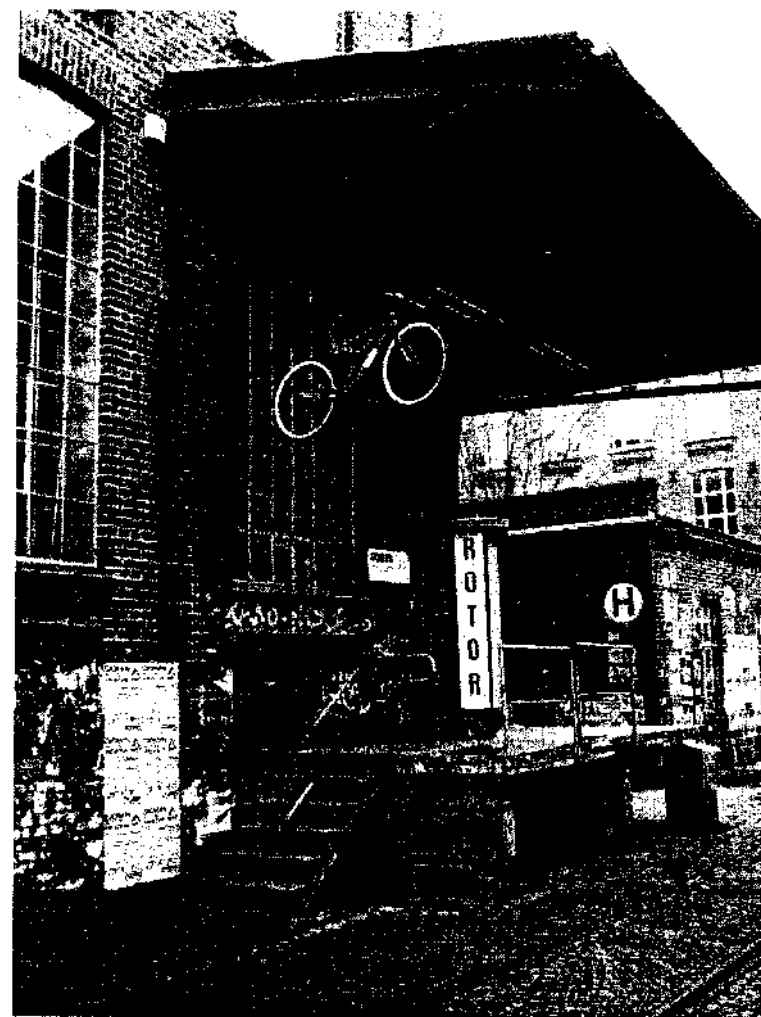


However, it is critical to briefly define the style that binds these artists together. In German discourse, the products of the New Leipzig School are seen as a renaissance of the *Stimmungsbild* - an existentialist and melancholic mode of expression, which despite its clear appearances remains abstractly vague, addressing the inner voice of the spectator⁴. In discussion of the success of this form of art, German commentators identify different aspects of the style: some observers underline that these paintings are converting rather conventional forms of art into an avant-garde style. In this way, the New Leipzig School reanimates a tradition of figurative painting which had become less popular since the long victory of formally abstract, cubistic and

conceptual art⁵. The framing of the galleries in a place like the Spinning Mill, indeed, fits well in this mixture of an old and very concrete place and its built symbolism.

Looking at certain paintings which have made their way to international audiences, the analysis might reveal other dimensions of this successful development. As some art critics in Germany underline, it seems that those paintings have a common story. "It is telling us about the hurt of the contemporary human", says Christian Schüle in a review for the leading feuilleton journal *Die Zeit* (21 June 2005). He notes that personality is always sketched in these paintings in a negative way. Seemingly, the pictures express a powerlessness which Schüle sees as a mirror of the actual feeling of the emptied out inhabitants of the modern world. "It is not the picture which is sad, it is the life of the observer", he argues.

The lack of a radical character seems to put supporters of the New Leipzig School into a defensive position. While the diagnosis of the actual state of society as exhausted and critical might be right, the reflection of the artists does not offer an impulse for change and emancipation. A year later, the same journal reacts on its own appraisal of these paintings in a more critical manner in an article titled as "Borrowed life: The New Leipzig School is famous but now the myth stops". This review was a turning point of the general⁶ perception of the New Leipzig School among art critics. In its essence, the paintings were now seen as having little to say, telling no story and reducing their performance to workmanship (or skill). A year later, the art critic Dorsi Kothe, in a review for the *Deutschlandfunk* - the only German-wide radio station - came to the conclusion that the New Leipzig School is a "motor for your career but a hinder for your creativity" (14 April 2007).



Conclusion

Up to 300 people now live in the old Spinning Mill, of whom 80 or so are artists. Meanwhile, the *Baumwollspinnerei* increasingly interacts with the surrounding local population and tries to serve its social needs. Half of the area is occupied by other activities, some commercial and others more socially engaged. It remains unclear how the art community will react to

the de-mystification that has been taking place, while the interdependence of the artists with the global market throws a shadow over this mode of art production in times of international financial crisis. As demand from the United States diminishes, the sustainability of this strategy for branding, producing and promoting the Leipzig art style is less viable. Linking up local art production with a global market cannot be maintained for ever: the very nature of a globalized economy requires constant re-fashioning and permanent rearrangement. While some cities have a historical advantage in global competition as places of art production⁷, others find it more difficult to gain the advantages of a stabilized rank in a global economy of signs and spaces⁸.

Walking through Plagwitz on the way to Lindau market, one passes a shanty house where a horizontal yellow board attracts the view of the flaneur. *Wächterhaus* (guardhouse) it says and identifies the building as occupied by those artists who experiment with their artistic work and their personal way of life. The success of this initiative depends on a group of factors, not the least of which is the engagement of (foreign) urban pioneers representing a new way to approach urban heritage⁹. Owners have become realistic and no longer expect profitable rents, but acknowledge that any symbolic rent and reuse of the building is better than leaving houses to decay. It would be short sighted though to see these still marginal processes as a classical narrative of gentrification by artists as described by Cameron and Coaffee¹⁰. The cultural transformation of Leipzig to a so called postmodern epoch did not frame those activities now developed in the *Wächterhaus* initiative. To summarize: it is symbolic ahead of cultural transformation. Neither markets, the broader public, the non-local media nor the general attitude of people in Leipzig generate incentives for this kind of process. Up to now, it seems that Leipzig has copied a kind of development to post-industrial urban life see elsewhere, and to some extent this creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. The very substance – that is local creativeness embodied into persons and supportive institutions – however shows the fragility of this transformation.

1 Schultze, B. *Spinnerei. From Cotton to Culture*, Leipzig, 2006.

2 *The Guardian*, 01.02.2007

3 Tiryakian, E. 'The Significance of Schools in the Development of Sociology'. In: Snizek, W.E., Fuhrmann, E.R. and Miller, M.K. eds. *Contemporary Issues in Theory and Research*, Westport, 1979, p.219

4 Schmidt, H.-W. *Malerei aus Leipzig*. In: Katalog zur Ausstellung „made in Leipzig“, Torgau, 2007.

5 Lange, C., Matzner, F. (eds) *Malerie der Gegenwart. Zurück zur Figur*, München.

6 Rauterberg in "Die Zeit", 13 July 2006.

7 Musterd, S. 'Divers pictures of the postindustrial city' In: Eckardt, F. and Hassenpflug, D. eds *Consumption and the post-industrial city*, Frankfurt, Lang, 2003.

8 Lash, S. and Urry, J. *Economies of signs and spaces*, London, Routledge, 1999.

9 Meier, H.-R. 'Stadtreperatur und Denkmalpflege' *Die Denkmalpflege*, 2, 2008, pp. 105-117.

10 Cameron, S. and Coaffee, J. 'Art, Gentrification and Regeneration – From Artist as Pioneer to Public Arts'. *European Journal of Housing Policy*, 5/1, 2005, 39-58.