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LETTERS

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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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Jill Winder is a Donors' Fellow of the Institute studying post-reunification Germany through the work and attitudes of its artists.

The Shrinking of Eastern Germany

By Jill Winder

NOVEMBER 25, 2005

BERLIN—Cities, in the parlance of modern architectural and urban theory, are almost by definition places that expand and grow infinitely. Since the process of industrialization began two centuries ago, people have flocked to urban centers from the countryside in search of work, better living conditions and access to education. So great is this entrenched concept of cities and growth that recent architectural and urban-planning theory has almost exclusively focused on the development of “mega cities” and the demands of housing exploding populations. Yet in spite of the rapid pace of urbanization in some areas (notably China), once-thriving cities all over the world suffer from a surprising phenomenon that modern urban planning seems ill suited to deal with: Shrinkage.

Research conducted recently by the United Nations has shown that for every two cities that are growing, three are shrinking.¹ According to Philipp Oswalt, a Berlin-based architect and director of *Schrumpfende Städte* (Shrinking Cities), a three-year research project (2002–2005) funded by the *Kulturstiftung des Bundes* (Federal Cultural Foundation), more than 450 cities worldwide have lost 10 percent of their population since 1950; no fewer than 59 of those are in the US.² While the problems that this urban shrinkage creates are by no means exclusive to Germany, the impact of shrinking cities in eastern Germany, a crippling side-effect of German reunification, is particularly devastating. In the last 15 years, eastern Germany has lost between 14 and 30 percent of its pre-1989 population.

Leipzig and Halle: A Case Study

In my essay “48 Hours in Leipzig” (JW-7) I wrote about the city’s struggle with high unemployment, right-wing extremism, the development of cultural infrastructure and its promising art scene. Leipzig, just 90 minutes by train from Berlin, is by many accounts an eastern German city that is faring well. The fact that the city enjoys this distinction even with the unemployment rate hovering around 20 percent is an indication of just how dire economic conditions are in the region as a whole.

I recently returned to Leipzig and was struck again by the contradictory forces of decay and renovation that litter the city. I emerged from the ultra-modern, immaculate Central Station onto the street, which is completely torn apart. New tram tracks and modern tram stops are being hastily constructed in anticipation of Germany hosting the FIFA (Football Association International Federation) World Cup football (soccer) championship in summer 2006. Just a few blocks away, the flashy glass-and-steel structure of the newly renovated Museum of Visual Arts sits across from a row of dilapidated GDR (German Democratic Republic)-era high rises known as the Brühl Houses, their roofs topped with depressing faded signs announcing in English, French and German, “Welcome to Leipzig.”

Leipzig and Halle (officially known as *Halle an der Saale*) are 40 kilometers (approx. 25 miles) apart. Leipzig has been a trading center for hundreds of years;

¹ Kate Stohr, “The Shrinking-City Phenomenon,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 2004.

² More information (in German and English) can be found at: www.shrinkingcities.com.



A view of one of the crumbling East German high rises across the street from the brand new Museum of Visual Arts in Leipzig.

Halle became an important industrial city in the 19th century. After reunification, the privatization of nationalized industries dealt a horrible economic blow to all eastern cities. Because the vast majority of goods produced in the GDR were not internationally competitive, many factories were closed without delay. Halle, the center of East Germany's chemicals industry, was hit especially hard.

In 1989, Leipzig had 493,000 residents. Halle's population, 247,000, had been nearly doubled by the construc-

tion of Halle-Neustadt in the mid-1960s. This "new city" was built on the outskirts of Halle and housed nearly 100,000 people (mostly workers in the nearby chemical combines and their families) in pre-fab socialist high rises (called *plattenbau* in German). By 2005, Leipzig had lost 100,000 residents and Halle nearly 70,000. From 1990 to 1995, migration to the western states of Germany was the main cause of population loss, but by the late-1990s, suburbanization was the culprit.

As Philipp Oswalt explains, "Factors such as tax exemptions for investors, private-housing subsidies, the spread of shopping centers and the relocation of large businesses led to a building boom that used up green-field sites on a large scale. It may seem paradoxical, but the reality is that shrinkage and growth went hand in hand: the cities' loss was the countryside's gain." Today, 55,000 of Leipzig's 320,000 apartments are vacant. In Halle, vacancy rates are about 20 percent. And much more serious problems than vacant apartments threaten the region: reflecting the uncertainty and poor prospects many have in the region (as well as demographic shifts), the birth rate in Leipzig and Halle is 50 percent lower than before the end of the GDR. This decrease in birth rate will have a dramatic impact on the social fabric of the cities (already many young and educated people have moved west, leaving behind accidental retirement communities of old pensioners) as well as on the region's ability to rejuvenate itself economically.

Traditionally urban planners have advised that the way to deal with urban blight is to demolish whatever buildings are left and start over.³ Germany took a different path, with planners insisting that if the government invested in improving infrastructure, private investments and industry would follow. This approach has proven a failure, one of reunification's worst investment gambles (at least so far). The German government estimates that the sum of public and private funds given to eastern Germany since 1990 amounts to at least 400 billion euros (\$470



Photo of a GDR-era plattenbau surrounded by green field after neighboring buildings were demolished.
Photo: Frank Ludwig

³ This "solution" is currently being discussed in France following the riots and unrest that erupted in some French housing projects (*banlieu*) in November.

billion USD)—approximately 25,000 euros (about \$30,000) for every resident of the region.

According to Oswalt, the government spent millions of euros in Leipzig and Halle alone on road improvements, new electrical lines and sewage systems, yet these efforts did not bring about the anticipated economic revival, or convince people to stay. In a complete reversal of policy, the German government is now funding what may be the largest de-urbanization project in the world, spending 2.7 billion euros (\$3.9 billion) to demolish thousands of suburban communist-era housing blocks with the intention of “letting the grass grow back.”

Shrinking Cities: The Exhibitions

In autumn 2004, the first Shrinking Cities exhibition was held at KW—Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. Over 18,000 people visited the exhibition—an impressive number. The exhibition showed the results of research conducted by local teams in five very different places: Detroit, Liverpool and Manchester in England, Ivanovo (Russia) and Halle/Leipzig. The choice of such diverse locations was deliberate; one of the myths the exhibition set out to dispel was the common view that urban shrinkage, if it did occur, was the result of political change (as in Eastern Europe or Russia) or war.

The exhibition cataloged varied stories of decline in the six cities, with causes ranging from political upheaval to the loss of traditional manufacturing jobs. Diverse objects were also on display—from ingenious homemade inventions the local residents of Ivanovo came up with to deal with Soviet-era shortages to taped interviews with long-time residents of now-abandoned housing projects



Posters produced for the exhibition with slogans such as: “Halve east Germany,” “Accelerate Deadlock,” “Demolish Emptiness,” and “Destroy the Image.”

in Liverpool. One work that I found especially striking was a video produced by researchers working with the Detroit team. It depicted the exhumation and re-internment of bodies buried in Detroit’s inner-city cemeteries. In a practice that is becoming increasingly common, adult children who grew up in Detroit but have long since moved out of the city re-bury their parents, moving them (at great cost) to the suburbs where their descendants now reside. As one person interviewed for the project explained, “We’re never in Detroit anymore, and visiting Mom’s grave is our only reason for going there. It’s been pretty emotional, and it sounds kind of crazy, but we just want her to be buried near us. We want her to rest in peace in a nice neighborhood.”

The first exhibition, while engaging, was diagnostic in nature. It set out to define the phenomenon of urban shrinkage. The follow-up exhibition, *Shrinking Cities – Interventions* (on view in Leipzig’s GfZK, or Gallery for Contemporary Art, from November 25, 2005 until January 29, 2006), by contrast, looked for strategies and new concepts to deal with the problem, with a special focus on Eastern Germany. In the Halle-Neustadt train station (about 30 minutes from Leipzig), a concurrent exhibition, *Shrinking Cities – Investigations*, examining the phenomenon of shrinking from an international perspective (much like the 2004 exhibition), was also on view.

I went to Leipzig for the opening of *Shrinking Cities – Interventions* not quite sure what to expect. Through my friend Füsün Türketen, who has worked on the project, I had an insider view of how the exhibition came together and was curious to see the result. The museum was absolutely packed, and many of the key figures from the Berlin art scene had made the trip, evidence of the importance of the show and the high level of interest in the subject. In *Shrinking Cities – Interventions* more “traditional” architectural displays and documentation were shown alongside artists’ projects. Thirty projects by artists, architects, and researchers addressed five subjects:



Füsün Türketen, an architect who worked on the *Shrinking Cities* project, at the exhibition opening.

“Negotiating Inequality,” “Governing Oneself,” “Making Pictures,” “Organizing Retreat,” and “Occupying Spaces.” Nine of the projects were awarded funding from *Shrinking Cities* on the basis of an international competition.

Staging a successful exhibition about architecture and urban issues is extremely difficult. Museum-goers are accustomed to primarily visual displays, and many of the works on view in the *Shrinking Cities – Interventions* were research-based, heavy on text and weak on aesthetics. Even the most interested viewer can feel easily overwhelmed when confronted with a museum that seems



Installation view, *Shrinking Cities – Interventions*

filled with reams of paper and a few video monitors. After seeing both exhibitions I believe that the two extensive publications produced by *Shrinking Cities* — *Shrinking Cities Volume 1: International Investigation* (2004, with German and English editions, and *Shrinking Cities Volume 2: Concepts for Action* (in German, 2005)), totaling some 1,600 pages — provide a more suitable forum for communicating the exhaustive research and documentation the project has managed to produce.

Perhaps inevitably, the pieces in the exhibition that really stood out were made by the artist’s, not the architect or researcher’s, hand. Two excellent works, Andreas



View of an installation and audio work, *Wir Alten (We, the aged)* by the group L21. According to the project organizers, “Germany is aging and shrinking. In the year 2020, eastern Germany may be called a ‘corridor of the elderly,’ where one in three residents is over the age of sixty. The typical ‘migrant’ who leaves this ‘corridor’ today is a young, well-educated woman. In this way, the region loses its regenerative basis for growth and the ability to sustain a conventional economy.” The problem of Germany’s aging society is discussed through interviews with experts and young people who consider what a “society of the aged” would look like.

Siekmann’s *Theatrum Mundi Oeconomicus* (installation) and Tadej Pogacar’s *Treuhand Puzzle* (installation) dealt with the fascinating story of the *Treuhandanstalt* (Trust Agency, known in Germany simply as the *Treuhand*). The *Treuhand* was a public agency responsible for privatizing, reorganizing and liquidating the state assets of the GDR between 1990 and 1994. It was also charged with making companies competitive, changing the management and making land available for industrial and commercial use. It assumed the assets and liabilities of around 8,000 East-German businesses in order to sell them to German and international investors. By the end of 1994,

Sketch for Andreas Siekmann's *Theatrum mundi oeconomicus*. The scene in the upper-right-hand corner depicts a transaction between a *Treuhand* manager and a businessman, where "unemployment costs are kept under the table," in order to seal a deal.



it had privatized some 14,000 enterprises.

This process was rife with what many see as political corruption and confusion. In his excellent and controversial book *Verwaltete Illusionen* (Administered Illusions), Wolfgang Seibel writes that the *Treuhand* "was far more than a privatization agency, it was for all intents and purposes a political institution."⁴ Seibel is not the first critic to claim that because Germans from the west who were affiliated with western German businesses and banks almost exclusively staffed the *Treuhand*, for a time it functioned as the virtual government of eastern Germany. Not only did the employees of the *Treuhand* determine which companies would survive and which would be foreclosed, it also had the power to determine which investors could buy eastern firms or services. Especially controversial was the awkward redistribution of property appropriated between 1933 and 1989 by the Nazi, Soviet and GDR regimes. Over two million claims were filed on property in former-GDR territory by the December 31, 2002 deadline, but conflicts continued to emerge and as claimants won their cases, potential investors were scared off.

Pogacar's work, an interactive puzzle, makes the intricate and often harrowingly complex story of the *Treuhand*'s activities accessible in a visual way. It is a useful tool for understanding the controversial process of privatization and how the eastern-German economy was created by the *Treuhand*'s policy decisions. Siekmann's installation chooses a more symbolic path, based on the model of small decorative theaters with mechanical figures that were a popular form of folk art in 19th-century Saxony. Taking its cue from the fact that the privatization of eastern Germany has often been described as "automatism," the mechanical theater displays the machinations of the process.

Although neither piece offers a solution to the prob-

lem of shrinking cities, they deftly illustrate how eastern Germany's current economic decline is at least in part a product of the controversial privatization activities of the early 1990s.

While the exhibition aimed to present productive and innovative strategies for dealing with urban shrinkage, many of the proposals exhibited seemed to trivialize the issue rather than seriously engage with it. And inevitably, a good number of the "proposals" fell back on diagnosing the problem, focusing on the dreary state of reality instead of the more challenging chore of finding solutions. One rather silly proposal, *Exterritories*, produced by Fielder Tornquist and the architecture firm *komplizen Planungsbüro*, Halle explored the idea of transferring a Chinese-style "special economic zone" to the Halle/Salle region and how it might impact the area, proving once again that the miraculous urban boom in China is not far from any architect's mind these days.

Dealing with Shrinkage

In contrast to the *Shrinking Cities – Interventions* exhibition, the book *Shrinking Cities Volume 2: Concepts for Action* includes some interesting examples of how city planners and the German government can deal with urban shrinkage. One project, done by the firm Latz + Partner, is called the *Landschaftspark Duisberg-Nord* outside the city of Duisberg. The project reclaimed an old smelter and turned it into a nature park with sports facilities, an amphitheater and waterpark.

Reclamation and renovation are other obvious ways to turn unused urban areas into useful and even desirable sites. I told the story of *Die Spinneri*, a former cotton mill in the Plagwitz neighborhood in Leipzig in my JW-7 essay and will not repeat it here, but needless to say the transformation of this industrial complex into one of the most important art locations in eastern Germany proves



An old bunker in a former smelter in Duisberg is turned into a recreational area where people practice rock climbing.

⁴ Wolfgang Seibel, *Verwaltete Illusionen* (Berlin: Campus Verlag, 2005).



The top two photos show a plattenbau that was dismantled and rebuilt as a row of duplexes. The bottom two photos show a five-story, 650-foot-long plattenbau rebuilt into a row of eight “city villas”.

that reclamation and reuse can be successful. Another essay in the book by architect Wolfgang Kill (author of a book entitled *Luxus der Leer*, *The Luxury of Emptiness*), explains the fascinating phenomenon of architects who transform socialist high-rises, turning them into completely different structures while reusing most of the original building materials.

Unused, vacant buildings can also be used for temporary projects, a practice the Germans call *Zwischennutzung*. Perhaps the most well-known of these projects is called *Volkspalast*. Over the course of 2003–2005, a wide variety of cultural programs (theater, art exhibitions, conferences, etc.) were held in the empty shell of the former GDR *Palast der Republik* (Palace of the Republic) in Berlin Mitte. The project was an enormous success, drawing diverse crowds and enjoying positive critical reviews. Elske Rosenfeld, an author who wrote about art and temporary use in the *Shrinking Cities* book, notes: “The use of vacant spaces by artists, musicians, and others is an alternative, non-conformist form of urbanity, at least until owners and investors reintegrate these structures into the economic logic of gentrification.”

According to Rosenfeld, many instances of temporary use by artists and others have been organized in Germany and elsewhere. One important project, the work of a collective called *anschlaege.de* (the German word *Anschlag* means assault or strike), took place in summer

2002 with the awkward title *dostoprimestschatjelnosti* (the Russian word for “sights”). Fifty-three international art, architecture and design students from 17 countries were invited to spend three months living and working in two condemned *plattenbau* located in Berlin-Hellersdorf. The artists created a kind of short-term commune, fixing up temporary studios and living spaces and staging performances and exhibitions. This type of temporary use has the potential not only to be a source of cheap workspace for artists, but also to bring attention and even visitors to out-of-the way areas of the city.

In the end, director Philipp Oswalt considers the *Shrinking Cities* project to be a political gesture. As he said recently at a panel discussion about the project, “We see this not only as an academic or research project but as a political intervention into the discussion of what should be done about the shrinking-city phenomenon in Germany.” □



One of the two plattenbau buildings in Berlin-Hellersdorf where the artistic project *dostoprimestschatjelnosti* took place in summer 2002.

Current Fellows and their Activities

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Logic at Rutgers University, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • **FRANCE/MOROCCO**

An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for *Somerville This Week*, in Somerville, MA.

Cristina Merrill (June 2004-2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • **IRAN**

A journalist and researcher for the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Nick is finishing a Master's program in Comparative and Regional Studies (Middle East/Central Asia) at American University in Washington DC. He is studying intensive Persian — as is his fiancée, Rikki Bohan — in anticipation of his departure for Iran after his marriage in autumn 2005.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • **SYRIA/LEBANON**

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599
E-Mail: icwa@valley.net
Web address: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Peter Bird Martin

Program Assistant:
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Administration and Publications
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