

Neu-Karow a new space between Berlin's past and its border

By Katherine Bourke

and Gregor Harbusch A surprisingly short ride on the S-Bahn from lively and much-cited Prenzlauer Berg exists Neu-Karow. This is the name of a suburban development from the second half of the 90's in the northern outskirts of Berlin, not far from the border of the city. Having been promoted as "a Californian dream" by former building secretary Nagel, the new neighbourhood shows a certain proximity to the principles of New Urbanism, as pointed out by Harald Bodenschatz for example. But it is not the aim of this text to deliver an examination of the neighbourhood in accordance to the programmatic aims of the New Urbanism or to the tradition of suburban neighbourhoods from Berlin's Gründerzeit (a phase of industrial growth and prosperity in the late 19th and early 20th century). Rather, the observers' standpoint shall not be neglected – as it is our first-hand wandering through the area, which is the basis of this writing. The walking-wanderings' root is photography and art history and an interest in the urban and in architecture, fed by a critical, heightened by poetics; this approach dangles somewhere in between. Wandering throughout the area now, a few years after it has been completed, aims on slowing down our pace and looking for the breaks and obscurities of the area, as we found them. Walking the area in a conscious way is seen as an approach to reduce the distance towards the neighbourhood to a certain degree – always being aware that this approach can only yield a fractional success.



It cannot be denied that there is a principal and probably insurmountable gap between a perception of the urban from an objective standpoint or from a poet's somehow always irrational approach that treats the urban as a trigger for streams of feelings and complex interdependencies beyond the planners' rational terms. We do not venture to provide a solution to this in between space but rather to embrace the many in between spaces (in the city as well as in thinking) and use them as a playground for breathing, reflecting from.

In between space is a term that we use to refer to both the fluid thinking space present whilst walking and the diversity in the urban composition, in this case Neu-Karow. This phrase lacks a clear definition and as a result allows for many interpretations by the reader. It is possible to think of being in a between space, or be in between a space depending on one's viewpoint. Either way this space has a rippling effect reaching the walker, their surroundings and the reflection that exists when the two collide. As if each step is a new thought – an attempt is made to explore and be grounded in Neu-Karow.



What is between? Is it the structures of the city: flats, schools, restaurants, sports facility and the seeming inconsistencies that exist in the development of such a planned community? Or it is the space between these structures: the green spaces, the peace and quiet of the lake, the playgrounds in the courtyards, the city square, and the pathways between building clusters?

In between space on the edge. It is difficult for us not to consider

Neu-Karow's proximity to the edge of the city. On an edge not present but implied... There seems to be a preoccupation with the sea in the playgrounds of Neu-Karow. A boardwalk with streetlamps lights up a pathway between two ships that set sail in the imagination whilst docked in sand. Another playground hosts a rocking boat and look-out point.

Unlike the theme that seems to exist throughout the playgrounds – the housing and commercial structures do not have a strong continuous link. A striking characteristic of Neu-Karow is, that it comprises a mixture of different, past forms and traditions, brought together in between the city and the edge – a feature that made us think about the specific characteristics of a current manifestation of the middle class in this very case: Less a retrogressive urbanism that clearly pursues one specific theme (even though there are design guidelines, defined by the master-planners Charles Moore, John Ruble and Buzz Yudell), rather, we perceived kind of a retro-conservative attitude that creates spaces by bringing together differences while avoiding any grand gesture, spaces that are characterised by a distinctive indecisiveness– an indecisiveness that may be interpreted as aesthetically and unconsciously mirroring the whole complex of urbanistic, social and economic aspects that made a project like Neu-Karow come into being.

In particular in the western part of Neu-Karow, some parts resemble a village. On the one hand, by citing rural architectural forms, on the other hand by situating the individual buildings in a village-like way, thus creating somehow picturesque, non-rectangular, small spaces between the buildings – spaces whose design reveal a clear idea about a small-scale perception and movement of the individual, an individual that prefers open spaces that embrace like a home. Open space as an easily appropriated one, without fear – thus pointing to an ideal of middle-class living condition whose characteristics are all too easily criticized from certain standpoints as retrogressive. We were wondering if such a critique would become silent when encountering the pond in the middle of this part of the neighbourhood. Beautifully composed in a valley, surrounded by a variety of different kinds of residential buildings, most of them not taller than two to four storeys, the pond and the plants around it successfully simulate flown time by making use of the strategy of the picturesque (for good reasons not written with a capital 'p' here, as we are not talking about Uvedale Price and his people).

But Neu-Karow cannot be reduced to an attempt to simulate a village-like fabric. There is no such clear agenda like that. Rather, different spaces and areas, sometimes only different points of view (in a spatial sense) reveal different ideas how to organise edifices. Call it a (probably unconscious) sampling of different programs, a strategy that looks into the rich past of bourgeois urban tradition, merging parts of this tradition, making them usable for the middle-class. (For pragmatic reasons the necessary definition of this term cannot be delivered in this text.)

Thus, the pond that has been mentioned above, is connected by an axis to an oval square, the Ballonplatz ("balloon square"). The Ballonplatz is an architecture parlante, an oval square that points into the past, not only by citing the tradition of Baroque urbanism but also by connecting the new town with the great past of engineering during the European Enlightenment, as one of the earliest successful balloon-rides in Berlin (undertaken by Jean-Pierre Blanchard in 1788) ended on the fields near the small village Karow. The square's form and its name remind to this event – which may



be one of the rare moments in the village's history that created a glance of connection to the context of bourgeois culture of real European dimension.

The Ballonplatz has grown from its original planned state. We think of this grown state as a way to describe the state of a city when the layers of time and use build and reveal themselves. This state is not planned by any one urban planner, it is a composite, it is a palimpsest of time on space. This phrase grown complements in between space in that the grown state is as flexible as in between space and it is up to the explorer and appreciator of the city to perceive and imagine and breathe life into this state. It is in the process of discovering the planned steps to the Ballonplatz water fountain platform that its grown state, hidden through neglect by overgrown grass, is revealed. The grown state, though not possessing an intended character is not one without beauty. It is our desire, by using this term, to draw attention to the beauty present in the urban landscape when the layers of time alter the planned into the grown.

There are many details lost through the neglected landscaping around the Ballonplatz. Bricks form a pattern on the platform that leads us to the circle within the square with the water fountain and vista towards the lake. At this square we become confused... Initially we knew we were in Neu-Karow but then this rural lake presents itself across the square. A confusing and welcoming thought-provoking experience in the suburban development leaves us in between. This in-betweenness made us think and reflect and become bemused – “the defined” may be seen as a distinct quality of the urban, i.e. the urban ideal: The definition as an urban planner's ideology. In Neu-Karow, there are some glances that point to an uncertainty, indecisiveness, in-betweenness, irrationality... Some things simply do not go together or fit – somehow they lead us between the urban and the rural.

Neu-Karow's locale on the edge makes its middle-class urban structure transparent and upright in the midst of a sea of fields, train tracks and motorways surrounding. The closest thing to vertical competition in the surrounding landscape is a windmill and power-tower. Wallace Stegner's thoughts about the North American Prairie landscape resonate for the rural walkers in us as we peer on the edge between the vertical Neu-Karow and the echelon that reaches Berlin's city limits: “You become acutely aware of yourself. The world is very large, the sky even larger, and you are very small. But also the world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging upright thing, as sudden as an exclamation mark, as enigmatic as a question mark.” (Wolf Willow: A History, A Story and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier, NY 1995, p.8)

Empty space is not a novel idea in Berlin, the collapse of the wall has left many empty spaces, some as vast as those surrounding Neu-Karow. This is an attraction for citywalkers and one that begs for a comparison between the space at the edge, or Neu-Karow's boardwalk at the edge, and the empty areas within the in between space of Berlin.

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