

Lebbeus Woods

Underground Berlin

Project

1988

An American Architect in Berlin

“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” President Ronald Reagan famously demanded when he visited West-Berlin in 1987. Behind the President the infamous wall blocked the view towards the Brandenburg Gate (1788-91), an old city gate. After the Communists had cemented the division of Berlin by building in 1961 what they euphemistically called the “anti-Fascist bulwark”, the wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate became one of many symbolic sites that punctured West-Berlin. Other such sites were Checkpoint Charlie, where U.S. citizens could enter East-Berlin, the Friedrichstraße railway station, one of the entry points for West-Berliners—which was quickly christened the *Tränenpalast* (palace of tears) as any West-East couple or family had to part there for West-Berliners were not allowed to stay overnight in East-Berlin, and the bridge in Glienicke in the south-west of West-Berlin where during the cold war spies were exchanged.

Above ground, the wall cut through streets and buildings, blocked windows and views from homes, destroyed neighborhoods and families, and forced the two Berlins to exist side by side like siblings that, however, had long fallen out with each other. Below ground, the two cities were more like Siamese twins as they were linked physically by the underground structures of the *U-Bahn*, Berlin’s mostly subterranean public transport system, and the *S-Bahn*, suburban light railways that enter the inner city through tunnels. During the Cold War and the time of the divided city, a few West-Berlin *U-Bahn* and *S-Bahn* lines, for example U6, U8, and S2, traveled through some of these tunnels underneath East-Berlin on their way from one part of the free Berlin into another. Of all the symbolic sites, these tunnels were possibly the most symbolic. Traveling through them made the political divide intrude tangibly into the lives of West-Berliners and tourists alike. The speed slowed down to almost walking pace, the intercom crackled “Last station in Berlin-West”, and the trains traversed dimly lit ghost-stations like, for example, *Potsdamer Platz* and *Unter den Linden*; names that where from a past as distant as the Gothic script was old-fashioned that announced them on pale wall tiles. Along the platforms often stood *Volkspolizisten* (peoples’ police) to deter anybody from either leaving the trains (very occasionally West-Berliners and West-Germans sought exile in East-Germany) or, more likely, jumping on them in an attempt to reach freedom.

“West and East Berlin are cities of prisoners”, Lebbeus Woods wrote in the catalogue that accompanied the first showing of the *Underground Berlin* project as part of a large architecture exhibition in West-Berlin in 1988.¹ By that time the regime of the German Democratic Republic, like most other Communists dictatorships in Europe, was reeling heavily under the call of its citizens for liberty. Nobody knew that a year later, on November 9, 1989, the wall would open and then fall, but in retrospect the signs of the times are visible everywhere. *Berlin, Denkmal oder Denkmodell* (Berlin, monument or model of thought) was the title Kristin Feireiss, the curator of the exhibition had selected. Her brief asked the invited participants for “future-oriented landmarks that were grounded in the particular cultural, urban, geographical, and political situation of Berlin”. More specifically, it called for designs of both symbolic and practical value that would address both parts of the city.²

Woods’ *Underground Berlin* project responded to the gash that the wall had cut into the urban fabric of Berlin: “The Wall and its watchtowers, the no man’s land, and the accidental cemeteries for the martyrs of liberty hold separately as prisoners the inhabitants of both cities even though they should actually be the people of a single city. They should be united through a shared history and language, the same origin, and now also through their mutual internment.”³ This was far from true as the re-unification of Germany was to prove a few years later. Not only

existed there two countries and two cities, but two histories, two languages, and also two people in habits and socialization. Yet, that realization lay still far away in the future when Woods proposed in 1988 “to undermine the wall” by beginning “to repair and to extend the existing subterranean public transport infrastructure in order to let the Berliners in East and West begin to erect meeting halls and public institutions. These would serve a secret underground government, a community of resistance. Soon would arise intellectual, artistic and cultural exchanges in the form of theaters, galleries, schools, followed by trade relations and mutual enterprises in sciences, technology and industry.”⁴

The site of this subterranean Berlin was two tunnels that crossed each other at the underground station of *Stadtmitte* (city center), then in East-Berlin. Only one of the tunnels was in use at that time; it traverses former East Berlin from south to north following the course of Friedrichstraße at whose southern end Checkpoint Charlie was located. The other tunnel was disused during the period of division though it is nowadays again part of the U2. It enters old East-Berlin at Potsdamer Platz, takes a west-east direction until it veers sharply north at Alexanderplatz. Below these tunnels secret civic spaces are carved out, formed by chamber walls made from curved metal sheets that press against the earth cradling the cavities. Within the latter, towers grow downwards connected by bridges at various levels. *Underground Berlin* is an inverted city in which architecture no longer strives upwards in order to create spaces by defying gravity. Instead, it follows the latter force, yet not in an act of surrender but to harvest cathartic earth forces that Woods argued would allow to “re-create the world” by shaping “a new nature, a type of second nature, which is a *human* nature.”⁵

Platforms and bridges lead to “living-laboratories”, experimental work spaces equipped with desks, chairs, and “examination apparatus[es]” arranged underneath copious folds of shimmering fabric. “The play of light on the cloth, its rustle in the soft movement of air, the labyrinth of magnifications and visual perceptions induced by the apparatus”, “quantum-mechanical music ... at once heard and thought and felt”,⁶ and the groans and moans of the metal panels that respond audibly to the pressure of the earth like the hull of a ship echoes the pounding of waves; Woods envisioned a sensuous subterranean architecture that transformed “the complexity and diversity of human life and thought ... into something physical, tangible, something we experience on all levels, from our intellects down to our guts.”⁷

Its cavernous structures planted deeply in the soil beneath Berlin, that most problematic of all German grounds, the project evokes architectural designs ranging from Piranesi’s *Carceri* to German post-World War One architectural Expressionism. With the former *Underground Berlin* shares the vast and over-scaled interior spaces that begin somewhere and end nowhere, with the latter the emphasis on artists and intellectuals as forces of change, the play with music and light, and the preference of an anarchic romanticism. Yet *Underground Berlin* remains free both from any hierarchical order that determined so many German visionary schemes in architecture and politics, and the often earth-bound irrationality of Germanic Romanticism. Rather, Woods’ romantic streak is more of a libertarian kind that favors the individual over the collective and evolution over revolution.

Woods was not content with conceiving a city that remains invisible. Comparable to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra who left the meditative isolation of the mountain top in order to preach to the town in the plain below, *Underground Berlin* breaks out from its subterranean hiding-place. In front of the rational grid of the modernist facades of the *Berolina* building (1929-32) and the *Alexander* building (1930-32), two speculative developments designed by Peter Behrens and financed by American capital, the ground splits open in the middle of Alexanderplatz where

one of the underground towers rises upwards through the crust of the earth. Small metallic shards and projectiles shoot off from the structure, propelled forward by the suddenly liberated, tremendous force with which the metal sheets had pressed below ground against the weight of the earth. Thus the secret community succeeded in erecting in the center of former East-Berlin a tower of liberty that, however, seemingly disintegrated instantaneously in order to instigate new communities of resistance in other locations. Initially, these pieces were flying broadly towards the East, but a year later Kristin Feireiss commissioned a second project from Woods and, accordingly, “The fragments, the tectonic elements of the Berlin project, born of a culture of the earth, were brought together and joined to form a project over Paris.”⁸ When *Aerial Paris* was exhibited as part of *Paris-Architecture et utopie. Projects d’urbanisme pour l’entrée dans le 21eme siècle*,⁹ the wall in Berlin had opened.

Trained as an engineer and as an architect, Woods moved in the later 1970s into more experimental and theoretical explorations of architecture, an approach for which architectural drawings and models have been a basic tool for centuries. What later may be constructed on site becomes already real when the architect draws: “For me ... these works exist and are real. They are built, constructed. They are material and no longer purely in the realm of the mind. They have physical form and are tangible.”¹⁰ This process of drawing as building can be studied on the sheets of the series that were produced in Woods’ apartment at the corner of 67th Street and 5th Avenue in Manhattan’s Eastside during spring of 1988.¹¹ In some sections, for example, major graphite lines are re-drawn in ink, the interstices carefully filled with hues of colored pencil, while details in the background are outlined with graphite lines thinly drawn along a ruler. Others sheets show more of the delicate wavering of Woods free-hand graphite lines outlining the forms that apparently await a second act of drawing in ink. Traces of erasure can be detected, for example, where Woods reconsidered the shape of the lower ending of a cavern below a tunnel; apparently a decision that required two or more attempts.

Clearly, accuracy was on the mind of the architect; to this end Kristin Feireiss furnished him with official maps of Berlin.¹² Letters, for example “Apl”, “Frs”, and “Was”, appear on some sheets, these can be decoded as abbreviations of the names of Alexanderplatz, Friedrichstraße, and, presumably, Wallstraße. The copious numbers and digits stenciled in the drawings invite likewise attempts to decipher them, but Woods explains that their only meaning is to signify notations of co-ordinates, of things written, and of verbal and mathematical expressions:¹³ “All is number, all is frequency and vibration—all is unified in the experience of number, and its record is left in the precise but unpredictable mathematics of form.”¹⁴

Finally, there are all those perspectival drawings of the interior spaces of *Underground Berlin* that open up the subterranean spaces to the imagination of the viewer through their precise richness in detail, color, and forms. There are no symbols and signifiers, numbers and letters, but spaces that show traces of use and, therefore, history. “I am a student of history”¹⁵ Woods replied when asked about his motivation to draw *Underground Berlin*, a project whose message was within a matter of a year overtaken by those citizens of East-Berlin who took history into their own hands. Ever since, above ground Berlin is the site of dreams and efforts to unite again the two halves into one city.

Volker M. Welter

LEBBEUS WOODS *UNDERGROUND BERLIN* (1988)

The project was commissioned in 1988 by Kristin Feireiss, Galerie Aedes, Berlin (West), for an architecture exhibition that was part of the Berlin Cultural Capital of Europe 1988 activities.

Lebbeus Wood worked on the drawings in Spring 1988, two models were built in July and August that year by Christopher Otterbine,¹⁶ with James Hicks¹⁷.

The series of drawings comprises 18 numbered sheets, of which sheet #8 is not part of the series¹⁸, one model (model 1) of a tower in Alexanderplatz, and one model (model 2) of a cavern below the underground in Berlin including an inverted tower.¹⁹ One additional elevation view of the set is not numbered. According to Lebbeus Woods, the two models were damaged while the original Berlin exhibition toured throughout Europe from 1988 to 1990. He recalls that the original models were either repaired or recreated on the occasion of the exhibition of selected drawings at the University Art Museum, Long Beach, California.²⁰ The whereabouts of these two models are not known.

In addition, the literature about the project illustrates various drawing, colored and line drawings that are not part of the above mentioned set. Lebbeus Woods explains that he continued making drawings after the initial project had been commissioned and was exhibited.²¹ Some of the line drawings may have already been produced earlier either to aid the building of the two models or for Woods's book OneFiveFour, in which many of the line drawings are published for the first time.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Solo exhibitions of *Underground Berlin* project

June 1988	San Francisco, The Art & Architecture Exhibition Space (2AES), Center for Critical Art/Architecture ²²
Sept.—Dec. 1988	“Berlin—Denkmal oder Denkmodell? Architecture Designs for the 21 st Century”, traveling exhibition curated by Kristin Feireiss, catalog Berlin, Staatliche Kunsthalle, as part of Berlin-Cultural Capital of Europe 1988
April 1989	Bern, Museum of Art
September 1989	Paris, Pavillon de L’Arsenal
April 1990	Cracow, Museum of Fine Arts
October 1990	Kiev, Fine Arts Museum
October 1990	Moscow, Society of Architects

Exhibitions that included selections from the *Underground Berlin* project

August—Nov. 1991	“Centric 44: Lebbeus Woods”, exhibition curated by Diana C du Pont, curator of exhibitions at the University Art Museum, Long Beach, California, 10 drawings and two models, catalog
May—June 1992	“Terra Nova: drawings and models by Lebbeus Woods”, exhibition curated by Diana C du Pont, curator of exhibitions at the University Art Museum, Long Beach, California, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT List Visual Arts Center, 10 drawings and two models, catalog

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE *UNDERGROUND BERLIN* PROJECT

Exhibition catalogs

1988

Feireiss, Kristin, *Berlin—Denkmal oder Denkmodell? Architektonische Entwürfe für den Aufbruch in das 21. Jahrhundert—Berlin-Monument ou modèle de pensée? Projets architecturaux pour l'entrée dans de 21ème siècle* (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1988), including an illustrated essay by Lebbeus Woods: “Berlin unter der Erde”—“Berlin sous terre”, pp. 282-87. [Feireiss, 1988]

1991

Pont, Diana C. du, *Centric 44: Lebbeus Woods* (Long Beach: University Art Museum, 1991), illustrated, with check list. [Centric 44]

Pont, Diana C. du, *Terra Nova: drawings and models by Lebbeus Woods* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT List Visual Art Center, 1992), illustrated, with check list.

Writings by Lebbeus Woods on the *Underground Berlin* project

Woods, Lebbeus, *OneFiveFour* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), pp. 4-11, [88]-[108]. [Woods, 1989]

—, —, “Brave New City: Lebbeus Woods’ Underground Berlin”, *Interview* 19 (January 1989), 58-61. [Interview, 1989]

—, —, “Experimental Architecture: A Commentary”, *Avant Garde: Journal of Theory and Criticism in Architecture and the Arts*, Denver, 1 (1989), # 2 summer, pp. 6-19 (p. 6, 17). [Avant Garde, 1989]

—, —, “Berlin Subterraneo”, *ARDI*, Barcelona, 14 (March/April 1990), pp. 88-99.

—, —, “Terra Nova”, in *Architecture in Transition*, ed. by P. Noerver (Munich: Prestel, 1991), pp. 131-151. [Noerver, 1991]

—, —, “Terra Nova”, *A+U Architecture and Urbanism*, August 1991, pp. 32-61. [A+U 8/91]

—, —, “Lebbeus Woods Anarchitecture: Architecture is a Political Act”, *Architectural Monographs* No. 22, (London: Academy Editions, 1992), pp. 50-63. [AM22]

Selected publications that refer to the *Underground Berlin* project and/or are illustrated with drawings of the project:

Thomsen, Christian W., “Vision für Berlin: Lebbeus Woods’ *Underground Berlin*”, *Ambiente* 11, 1988, pp. 58-82.

Betsky, Aaron, *Violated Perfection: Architecture and the Fragmentation of the Modern* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), pp. 176-181. [Betsky, 1990]

Thomsen, Christian W., “Lebbeus Woods, RIEA and its Berlin Exhibition of Experimental Architecture”, *A+U Architecture and Urbanism*, October 1990, pp. 30-40 (p. 35).

Thomsen, Christian W., *Literarchitektur* (Cologne: Dumont, 1990), p. 144.

Cook, Peter, and Rosie Llewellyn-Jones (eds.), *New Spirit in Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), pp. 40-43. [Cook, 1991]

Thomsen, Christian W., *Experimentelle Architektur der Gegenwart* (Cologne: Dumont, 1991), pp. 195-215. [Thomsen, 1991]

CHECK LIST OF *UNDERGROUND BERLIN* PROJECT AS ILLUSTRATED IN SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Numbers of drawings refer to the set of drawings in possession of Edward Cella Art & Architecture, Santa Barbara, CA.

Centric 44 identifications by Lebbeus Woods.²³

No reconciliation has been attempted between different images that have been published with the same title.

UB1

UB2

Feireiss, 1988, p. 283; A+U 8/91, p. 32; AM22, p. 59.

UB3

Feireiss, 1988, p. 283; Centric 44, #12: "Berlin Center: Partial Composite Plan"; Noerver, 1991, p. 136: "composite plan near the city center"; A+U 8/91, p. 32, p. 34.

UB4

Feireiss, 1988, p. 284; Centric 44, #14: "Horizontal Section Through Civic Space"; A+U 8/91, p. 34, p. 36; AM22, p. 60.

UB5

Feireiss, 1988, p. 284; A+U 8/91, p. 40; AM22, p. 54.

UB6

Feireiss, 1988, p. 284; Betsky, 1990, p. 178: "Cross Section, Sector 5045, Quadrant 1"; Noerver, 1991, p. 137: "Section: civic space with inverted towers"; A+U 8/91, p. 40; AM22, p. 54.

UB7

Centric 44, #13: "Chamberwall Interior"; A+U 8/91, p. 38; AM22, p. 54.

UB8

Not part of the set.

UB9

Centric 44, #16: "Inverted Tower and Bridge Living Laboratories"; A+U 8/91, p. 35, p. 36; AM22, p. 62.

UB10

Interview, 1989, p. 60: "Within an inverted tower is a room containing instruments of understanding: chair, table, cloth, and self-examining machine"; Centric 44, #17: "Living-Laboratory: Interior I-III"; A+U 8/91, p. 38, 44, 45; AM22, p. 59.

UB11

Feireiss, 1988, p. 286; A+U 8/91, p. 45, 47; AM22, p. 61.

UB12

A+U 8/91, p. 42; AM22, p. 59.

UB13

A+U 8/91, p. 43, p. 44, p. 48; AM22, p. 59.

UB14

Avant Garde, 1989, p. 6: "Inverted mechanical tower"; A+U 8/91, p. 42, p. 43; AM22, p. 58 (printed with reverse left and right sides).

UB15

Feireiss, 1988, p. 285 (printed upside down); Woods, 1989, not paginated; Interview, 1989, p. 60: "The civic space resonated with consonant and dissonant geomechanical music of the towers and bridges, acting as an ensemble, an urban unit."; Betsky, 1990, p. 168: "Inverted Tower and Bridge Living-Laboratories, Sector 8571 [sic!], Quadrant 1"; Centric 44, #15: "Inverted Tower

and Bridge”; Cook, 1991, p. 40 (printed upside down): “Underground Berlin. Sector 8751 [sic!], Quadrant 1 (near Alexanderplatz. Inverted tower and bridge living labs.”; A+U 8/91, p. 48, p. 49; AM22, p. 52.

UB16

Centric 44, #17: “Living-Laboratory: Interior I-III”; A+U 8/91, p. 46; AM22, p. 55.

UB17

Centric 44, #17: “Living-Laboratory: Interior I-III”; A+U 8/91, p. 39; AM22, p. 63.

UB18

Feireiss, 1988, p. 287; Centric 44, #11: “Alexanderplatz Projection Tower, Section”; Thomsen, 1991, p. 211: “Underground Berlin: Turm des Kulturzentrums, 1987 [sic!]; A+U 8/91, p. 54; AM22, p. 59.

UB Alexander Platz perspective

Feireiss, 1988, p. 287; Woods, 1989, not paginated; Interview, 1989, pp. 58-59; Betsky, 1990, p. 177: “Alexanderplatz Projection Tower” Centric 44, #10: “Alexanderplatz Projection Tower”; Noerver, 1991, p. 138: “Alexanderplatz, projection tower”; A+U 8/91, p. 55, pp. 60-61, p. 61; AM22, pp. 56-7.

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- ¹ Lebbeus Woods, 'Berlin unter der Erde', in *Berlin-Denkmal oder Denkmodell? Architektonische Entwürfe für den Aufbruch in das 21. Jahrhundert*, edited by Kristin Feireiss (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1988), pp. 282-287 (p. 282). (All translations from this catalogue are mine. vw)
- ² Kristin Feireiss, 'Einführung', in *Berlin-Denkmal oder Denkmodell?*, pp. 8-9 (p. 8).
- ³ Woods, "Berlin unter der Erde", p. 282.
- ⁴ Woods, "Berlin unter der Erde", p. 282.
- ⁵ Lebbeus Woods, "Terra Nova", in *Architecture in Transition. Between Deconstruction and New Modernism*, edited by Peter Noerver (Munich: Prestel, 1991), pp. 132-151 (p. 134).
- ⁶ Lebbeus Woods, *OneFiveFour* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), p. 6.
- ⁷ Woods, "Terra Nova", in *Architecture in Transition*, p. 134.
- ⁸ Woods, "Terra Nova", in *Architecture in Transition*, p. 140.
- ⁹ Kristin Feireiss (ed.), *Paris—Architecture et utopie: projets d'urbanisme pour l'entrée dans le 21ème siècle* (Berlin: Ernst und Sohn, 1989). The exhibition was shown in Pavillon de l'Arsenal in Paris from December 1989 to March 1990, after which it traveled to Berlin.
- ¹⁰ Woods, "Terra Nova", in *Architecture in Transition*, p. 136.
- ¹¹ Lebbeus Woods to Volker M. Welter, e-mail, December 1, 2008.
- ¹² Telephone interview with Kristin Feireiss, December 2, 2008.
- ¹³ Interview with Lebbeus Woods, New York, October, 8, 2008.
- ¹⁴ Woods, *OneFiveFour*, p. 6.
- ¹⁵ Interview with Lebbeus Woods, New York, October, 8, 2008.
- ¹⁶ Lebbeus Woods to Volker M. Welter, e-mail, December 1, 2008.
- ¹⁷ Lebbeus Woods, *OneFiveFour* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), no pagination (third page from the back)
- ¹⁸ Kristin Feireiss, Berlin, has one drawing in her collection; it is not known which drawing this is and/or if this is drawing #8.
- ¹⁹ Identification of the model numbers by Lebbeus Woods (Lebbeus Woods e-mail to Volker Welter, December 1, 2008.).
- ²⁰ Interview with Lebbeus Woods, New York, October 8, 2008.
- ²¹ For example: Lebbeus Woods, "Lebbeus Woods Anarchitecture: Architecture is a Political Act", *Architectural Monographs* No. 22, (London: Academy Editions, 1992), p. 60 (two lower section in left margin), Lebbeus Woods, "Terra Nova", *A+U Architecture and Urbanism*, August 1991, p. 36 (line drawing in lower margin), p. 38 (line drawing in upper margin), p. 41 (also on back cover), p. 49 (left drawing), p. 50 (left line drawing), p. 52 (right line drawing), p. 57 (left line drawing), p. 58 (right line drawing).
- ²² According to Lebbeus Woods recollections, the drawings of the project were shown in the gallery in San Francisco with K. Feireiss's approval. (Lebbeus Woods e-mail to Volker M. Welter, December 1, 2008.)
- ²³ Lebbeus Woods e-mail to Volker M. Welter, December 1, 2008.