25 years after reunification Berlin is clearly a different city than it used to be in the 1990s. Gentrification is the term used to neutrally describe the pressure felt by this metropolis exposed to economic and migration pressure for the first time in its post war history.

**Shortage of affordable and flexible apartments**

The demographics demonstrate clearly that after a loss of population to the outskirts or to the region the city is now growing steadily, more than 200 000 inhabitants in the past 3 years alone. Berlin became attractive to a young workforce for its affordable rents, life style and job opportunities. The modern self-employed creative start up entrepreneur feels drawn to Berlin, its many networking opportunities, and its relaxed atmosphere. In this aspect it compares to the context of Austin.

Globalization and its chances and risks are driving the current local debates. A nomadic life style is for many a necessity: opportunity and burden at the same time. The city is becoming a hub of international tourism, educational and work migration and in consequence a target of massive real estate speculation. Berlin is growing fast and with a lot of pain.
Yet, growth takes place as an act of selling out the attractive inner city districts to affluent buyers, gentrification in its purest form. There is no plan but opportunity. Berlin is at risk to lose its concept of affordability. It is at risk to lose its concept of being a city for all = an evenly spread social mix throughout wide parts of the city.

The Senate departments reacted late and half heartedly, always keen on attracting potential tax payers, and high income citizens. The residential market is under a lot of pressure now and a public program to erect new buildings on public land and by public housing companies was only launched recently and without a clear urban strategy. The sites were rather picked by chance and availability than based on a city wide urban strategy. The time gap of 2-3 years between the completion of large numbers of new apartments and the speculative profit on existing apartments is devastating for the development of affordable rents.

**Updating and integrating central parts of the city**

The urban debate right after the reunification focused on strategies for the central parts of Berlin, on defending the iconic landmark buildings and spaces in each half of the city. The formal continuum of both downtowns was a focal point of political debates and decisions for demolition were fiercely attacked. The historical center of Berlin which was transformed into the symbolic and iconic center of East Berlin with a TV tower as the central landmark is as simple as powerful as an urban gesture. The street grid was transformed into a system of major axes laid out to integrate the TV tower into a viewing corridor. Even kilometers from the center the TV tower is visible and gives a sense of orientation.

The most famous axis leading to the TV tower and the related Alexanderplatz is Karl-Marx-Allee, the grand boulevard of East Berlin invented for state parades, serving as the representative boulevard to greet foreign state visitors.

**Trauma of Reunification**

Naturally the political debate in Berlin calmed down after quite some verbal combats for the pros and cons of maintaining symbolic buildings of East Berlin such as the former Foreign Ministry, the Palace of the Republic, some singular buildings around Alexanderplatz and Fischerinsel were all lost for the saviors.

The central area of former East Berlin is now the elephant in the room. There is no explicit and agreeable urban master plan for the near future.

Time is creeping though. The iconic public spaces nevertheless eventually and inexorably disappear due to construction works for a new subway line, due to the reconstruction of the former royal palace, and due to the lack of investment at former Alexanderplatz. The competition plans from the early 1990s which resulted in a zoning plan for high rise office towers have not materialized so far.

In the past decades, Berlin being a polycentric city with distinct council policy could afford to leave the central parts “untouched” as a sort of political healing process.
In the light of uncoordinated growth everywhere in the city it is about time to revisit this central area and to test and update strategies

**Studio Task: Residential towers:**

The scale of Alexanderplatz and adjacent spaces is monumental. Karl-Marx Allee is not connected spatially to that central hinge. The spaces related to Alexanderplatz are still vast and actually downgraded to mere traffic intersections.

The studio will examine urban strategies to connect Karl-Marx Allee better to the central hinge of Alexanderplatz and the other arteries leading outbound.

By introducing residential high rise towers to the site the studio will test space making qualities of towers, their potential positive impact on public space and programmatic issues related to the site and context. In this monumental context which is currently listed as landmark, towers are to be tested for increasing the density in this suburban context right in the center.

The urban studies will conclude with diagrammatic proposals for residential urban towers in sections and plans.
The studio will travel to Berlin in March 12-18, 2017 during Spring Break.

**Estimated travel expenses:**
The School of Architecture is supporting the trip with US$ 800 Mebane funds per student

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