

THE GASLIGHT AS WORLD HERITAGE?

More than half of all the gaslights in the world line Berlin's streets. The silent contemporary witnesses have shaped the image of what is today the German capital since the early 19th century. Now the city's unofficial landmark, as an important industrial monument, could be designated as World Cultural Heritage.

By Bertold Kujath

Anyone who looks into the topic of gas lighting will at some point be confronted with the question: "Gas lighting, does that even still exist?" The gaslight on Berlin's streets is a silent companion, one that you often only notice when it has already gone. Even today, hundreds of thousands of people live in gaslit streets. Districts like Charlottenburg and Zehlendorf in the German capital are still illuminated up to 80 percent by intact gas streetlamps. It seems as though in a city like Berlin, which until just recently still had over 44,000 gas lamps, the gaslight has become such a natural sight that it is hardly consciously perceived anymore. And yet, for some time now interest in the gaslight has been on the rise, which hardly seems coincidental given the Senate's nascent efforts to abolish this type of light for good. The guided gaslight tours offered in Berlin are becoming ever more popular with German and international visitors as well as locals themselves. They all want to see the Berlin gaslight. The objection often brought against it, lumens per watt, barely plays a role. Rather it is the fascination of a lighting culture that has been in existence for almost 200 years now, which

continues to this day to significantly shape the German capital by night. It is this typical lighting culture, a complementary combination of gaslight and electric light (which incidentally is not much younger than the gaslight and as such no less historically important). At present however, the topic of the gaslight exceedingly highlights the fact that many things that are considered everyday and run of the mill have not only an economic, but also a cultural and an aesthetic aspect.

Berlin was only the third city in the world to have the then new lighting installed. The technology for mass-produced gas streetlamps came from Great Britain. In 1807 William Murdoch installed the first gas lamps in London. Hanover followed, but it wasn't until 1826 that the first so-called Camberwell lamps were installed along the avenue Unter den Linden in Berlin. They still contained an open flame, which initially flickered and was weak. That did not change until 1885 onwards, when Carl Auer von Welsbach invented the gas mantle, a piece of gauze dipped in various substances that generated bright light when heated by the gas flame and now guaranteed even and much



Gaslights in Berlin: Candelabra from 1903 with Schinkel lamps, in Schlosstrasse (previous page), alignment, pole-top and pendant lamps (from left to right).

Residents protest the removal of gas streetlamps (right page, below).



greater light output. The Imperial Continental Gas Association (ICGA) in London supplied gas to cities throughout Europe. For almost a hundred years, until 1918, Berlin purchased both gas and the lampposts from Britain. There are still around 2,500 gas lampposts on the streets of Berlin today bearing the inscription ICGA. Some of them are 150 years old, impressive proof of the durability of gas lighting technology. Berlin had long since progressed to become a European centre of the gas supply industry. Gas lighting today is a shining testimony to this epoch. In the 19th century gas illumination was accompanied by major social changes, indeed it enabled longer opening hours in the shops and street cafés. Major cities could now extend their outdoor activities late into the night. The spread of the gaslight saw the parallel evolution of the modern city with its nightlife, theatres and restaurants, as well as its businesses, where people could now work late into the evening or by night. The gaslight was one of the drivers of the Industrial Revolution.

The various gas streetlamp models also have a long history; each redevelopment had its own specific purpose in terms of traffic management. In 1892 the first of the four models appeared that can still be found in Berlin today, namely the Schinkel lamp. The design of the lamp, with its characteristic glass cover, is indeed based on earlier designs by Carl Friedrich Schinkel. Around 1,200 of these lamps still exist atop compound pier posts, as a wall arm or as a five-armed gas candelabra,

such as the original from 1903 located near Charlottenburg Palace. Around 1906 a second model emerged, the pendant lamp, which was also able to illuminate busier streets owing to its higher light point above the road. The pendant lamp quickly proved to be a major export success and was even sold in Buenos Aires. It was followed in the 1920s by the U7 pole-top lamp, popularly known as the "Bishop's Mitre" owing to its characteristic silver cover. It was primarily conceived for residential streets and 32,000 of them can be found today across all of Berlin. The final major redevelopment of the gas streetlamp was the gas alignment lamp from the 1950s. At the time this development ensured the survival of gas lighting, as it was in strong competition with electric lighting. Additionally conceived for main roads, it was fitted with up to nine illuminants in a row. Untypically for a gaslight, here the lamp is attached to an arching lamp post, which is why it looks more like an electric light. In addition to these basic models there are numerous one-offs and special versions. Irrespective of the model, today all gaslights in Berlin are fitted with twilight switches, many of which even run on solar power. The days when someone went round lighting the gas lamps, still popularly associated with the devices today, are long since over.

Over the last two years thousands of gaslights have been replaced with electric ones; they are disappearing very rapidly. In 2012 the umbrella association for all non-governmental cul-



tural organisations, Europa Nostra, wrote an appeal to the then governing mayor Klaus Wowereit to preserve Berlin's gaslights. Along the fact, it argued, that gas streetlamps were still in use in Berlin after the Second World War has outstanding historical significance. In autumn 2013 a photo of a Berlin gaslight went around the world when the World Monuments Fund (WMF) in New York put Berlin's gas street lighting on the Red List of the world's most endangered cultural assets, the only German entry. It listed a further 66 cultural sites, including Venice Old Town. In addition to the historical value of Berlin's gaslights, it was also the great public interest that moved the WMF to make its decision. Ever more residents' protests are being held in areas where gas lamps are being removed. Moreover, in his report British world heritage expert Dr Peter Burman describes the extraordinary value and fundamental potential of Berlin's gas street lighting for world cultural heritage. With its lasting influence on social development in the mid-19th century and its exemplary role as an outstanding historical technological ensemble that still constitutes a functional system today, Berlin's gas street lighting fulfils not one, but two of the UNESCO world heritage criteria. As such, it has good chances of being Berlin's next world cultural heritage site. What will be decisive however is whether Berlin's Senate continues its plans to remove the gaslights or develops an awareness of the considerable potential of this cultural heritage.



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