

The heritage value of Berlin's gaslamps

Dietrich Worbs

Summary

The “Light Concept” drawn up by the Berlin senate in 2007 started to be put into practice in 2012, the first in-line gas streetlights having now been demolished and replaced by electric streetlights. Many citizens’ initiatives, associations and foundations cannot understand why the surviving 42,500 historic gaslamps are to disappear in favour of electric streetlighting. According to the ideas of the Senate, only a few small “islands of tradition” are to be preserved. The subject of a more comprehensive heritage protection for the gaslamps, which are an outstanding part of the historical and artistic heritage of Berlin, has now been included in the debate on the initiative of citizens’ associations.

Can gaslamps – individually or in groups – be heritage objects? The answers to this question are controversial: citizens’ initiatives and associations organizations answer it in the affirmative whereas the Berlin Heritage Office (Landesdenkmalamt LDA) says “no”. The latter can only imagine gas streetlamps being included in existing heritage areas as “street furniture” or so-called “further components”. This view of the LDA contradicts its own practices of registering heritage objects: Berlin has a multitude of small objects such as fountains, pumps, memorial stones, border stones and milestones, monuments, sculptures and kiosks have – quite correctly – been registered as heritage. A look at the list of the objects under heritage protection will confirm this.

These small objects are built structures and were registered according to the criteria of the laws on heritage protection after their heritage value was examined. Berlin’s building regulations defines built structures as follows: “built structures are structures connected with the earth and produced using building materials.” This is the case with gas streetlamps too: they are connected with the earth and made of building materials (cast iron, steel or concrete, glass etc.). In other words, gas streetlamps as

built structures can be examined for their heritage value using the criteria of heritage protection according to the Berlin heritage protection laws and registered as heritage if they meet one or several criteria.

Which criteria of heritage value are met by gas streetlamps? As an expert in this field, I have come to the conclusion that they are principally of historical and artistic value but also have great significance in terms of science and urban planning.

Historical value

Gas lighting was developed around 1800 by the British engineer William Murdoch, who created the entire system of gas provision, from gas production to gaslamps for the purposes of lighting factories, houses and streets. As early as 1807, Pall Mall in London, the connection between the City and Buckingham Palace, was experimentally illuminated with gas. In 1810, the first company was formed to operate a gas company in London. In 1824, the Imperial Continental Gas Association (ICGA) was founded, which immediately began exporting gas streetlighting to the continent. In 1825, the ICGA signed an agreement with the Prussian Home Office and the City of Berlin to establish a gas company and operate gas streetlighting. On 19 September 1826, the first 26 gas streetlamps of the ICGA were taken into operation in the street Unter den Linden. On 1.1.1847, the Municipal Gas Company, the predecessor of the later GASAG, came onto the scene as competition. The two companies shared the Berlin market for gas streetlighting up to 1918. The gas streetlighting was what made it possible for Berlin to develop into a modern metropolis: shops, cafés, restaurants, theatres and places of public entertainment were able to greatly extend their opening times because the efficient streetlighting allowed the inhabitants as well as visitors to the city to promenade through the streets in the evening and at night. The historical significance of the gas streetlighting is to be found in the fact that it was vital for the development of modern city life from the 19th century until well into the 20th century. It is absolutely necessary to preserve the gas streetlighting lamps as historical testaments to the history of modern urban planning, technology and social history.

Artistic value

The first gas streetlamps were imported from England via the ICGA: the so-called Camberwell streetlamps, which were installed in the street Unter den Linden in 1826. In 1830, Karl Friedrich Schinkel designed a classicist nine-arm candelabrum for Schlossplatz which illuminated the square at night. It was moved to Dönhoffplatz in 1900 and to Schinkelplatz in 1910. It has been considered lost since 1945. Schinkel's candelabrum and in particular the form of its lamps was varied by many designers in the 60 years that followed, leading to the so-called "Schinkel lamp" or traditional lamp of 1893, more than 1,200 examples of which still light the streets today. The Liberty Style designers of around 1900 brought forth many new suspended lamps and candelabras, for example the "bishop's crook" suspended lamp and the Charlottenburg candelabrum designed by Nolkenborn in 1903. In the late 1920s, the top-piece lamp was designed, over 30,700 examples of which illuminate the streets of Berlin today. In the early 1950s, the in-line lamp was developed, of which there are still 7,500 examples today. These are at present being demolished and replaced by electric lamps. In the course of 150 years, many designers ranging from classicism, historicism, Liberty Style and functionalism created ever new forms of gaslamp with a wide variety of excellent artistic designs which it is absolutely necessary to preserve as artistic testaments to their time.

Scientific value

In spite of the existence of specialist literature on the gas provision and the designing of the public gas streetlighting in Berlin, scientific research is anything but complete. For example, there is as yet no overview of the age of today's gas streetlighting and its location in the city. This means that the gas streetlighting must continue to be available for research purposes too.

Value for urban planning

There is no doubt at all that the gas streetlamps help to characterize the urban space, but in a different way by day and by night. By day, they define urban spaces as lines of lamps on the streets or as central candelabra in squares, and at night they produce illuminate spaces. They are of outstanding value for the spatial arrangement

of historical streets and squares. For this reason, the gas streetlighting must be preserved due to its significance for urban planning too.

If one or several built structures meet several criteria of heritage value, they can be confirmed as having possible heritage value. To make them worthy of being considered as heritage, they require the criterion of the public interest in the preservation of the gas streetlighting. They can then be registered as heritage in the official heritage list according to the German heritage protection regulations.

The public interest in the preservation of the gas streetlighting

Since the early 70s and since the European Heritage Year 1975, more attention has been given to historical urban arrangements, urban spaces and buildings among the population, but also in parliament and administration. People remembered which historical lamps shone in many streets and squares before their destruction in the Second World War and ensured that the historical gas streetlighting was restored, for example in Schloßstraße in Charlottenburg. The open-air gaslight museum in the Tiergarten was built up at the same time and inaugurated by Construction Senator Harry Ristock on 6 February 1978. In 1979, the German Post Office published a series of four special stamps to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Berlin's gas streetlighting. In addition, the specialist literature and the press shows that this subject interests not only experts but a large portion of the Berlin population too.

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that Berlin's gas streetlamps are heritage objects and cannot only be protected as street furniture and as further components of existing heritage ensembles. It is of course impossible to put all 42,500 gas streetlamps on Berlin under heritage protection. It is necessary to make a selection. It is the job of the LDA to determine the gaslamps (individual objects and ensembles) to be protected as a result of their outstanding historical and artistic quality and according to their significance for science and urban planning and include them in the Heritage List.