

Brief report on the Berlin Watch Day 2015

"New lights and historic lamps - are gas lamps too expensive to become a World Heritage Site?"

In the context of the Watch Day, sponsored by World Monuments Fund, the first international conference on gaslights was held in Berlin on 18th May 2015, more than 150 visitors attended this event. The organisation team consisted of Dr. Agnete von Specht (Denk mal an Berlin e.V.), Angus Fowler (Denkmalwacht Brandenburg-Berlin) and Bertold Kujath (Gaslicht-Kultur e.V.). While Angus Fowler mainly organized the international contacts, Dr. Agnete von Specht and Bertold Kujath were responsible for the public relation within Berlin and the medial and public presentation like the internet presence or a promotion film, which was shown in the Berlin subway.

The conference took place in the historic interior spaces of the Charlottenburg city hall. We could use diverse technical facilities in the conference room like a beamer, a loudspeaker system or a wireless headphone system for translations into English or German. The presentations and later the panel discussion were interpreted simultaneously by Angus Fowler. The publicist and journalist Gerwien Zohlen moderated the evening. All of the responsible members of the Berlin Senate who were invited by us and even by the Monuments Watch itself refused their participation. Representatives of the local press and two camera teams, one from the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS News), attended the conference.

In autumn this year the Berlin City parliament will have to decide about the nearly complete teardown of the remaining 37.000 gas driven street lamps on the streets of Berlin. Although experts have certified that the gas lamps have a good chance to become Berlins next World Heritage Site. Possibly this Watch Day event was one of the last big chances to preserve Berlin's gas lamps for future generations. The evening began with a course of presentations. After the welcoming of the visitors by Dr. Agnete von Specht, the first presentation was given by Constanze von zur Mühlen, the representative of the World Monuments Fund. She introduced the principles and aims of the World Monuments Watch and explained the reasons, why the Berlin gas lamps and gas lights have been included in the world wide protection program 2014 by the Watch. Bertold Kujath, chairman of Gaslicht-Kultur e.V., reported about the current situation of the gas street lamps in Berlin and about some of the activities which were performed by citizens and several organisations in order to stop the dismantling of the Berlin gas street lamps. The director of the Croatian School Museum, Branka Manin, showed in her presentation a better way to handle cultural values like gas lamps. In Zagreb all still existing gas lamps are under protection and the city fathers even plan to expand the network of gas street lamps. Winfried Wolff, member the Berlin Chamber of Construction, talked about the historic and monumental value of gas street lamps in Berlin and other parts of the world. The last speaker of the evening, Dr. Peter Burman, Edinburgh, was the author of the "Expert Report on the Heritage Significance of Berlin's Gas Lamps & Lanterns as and for World Heritage". He introduced his expert opinion. At the end of his presentation he pointed out that since 1882 both systems, electric and gas lighting, existed side by side, the best of both worlds. "Why not, dear politicians, continue that marvelous idea?" Dr. Burman asked.

During the following panel discussion Jutta Matuschek (Left Party), member of the Berlin City Parliament, explained the political attitude towards the gas lamps. Most parliamentarians, including those of her own party, were not well informed about the subject, she said. Due to its complexity and interconnectedness, a monument consisting of thousands of gas lamps was hard to understand on the political level, Ms Matuschek declared. Also Dr. Dietrich Worbs, former executive employee of the Berlin State Office for the Preservation of Monuments, talked about problems concerning the protection of monuments in Berlin. The number of employees of the State Office had been reduced by two thirds in the past, he said. The last contribution of the panel discussion was made by Hellmut von Laer, lawyer and former bank director. He criticised that there was no public discussion about the economic calculations used by the Senate to justify the demolition of the gas lamps. These calculations contained too many mistakes so that in reality there were no possible savings at all by tearing down the gas lamps, he described. After that a lively public debate came up with many interesting contributions by the visitors. There was a general consensus that only with international help the ongoing demolition of the gas lamps in Berlin could be stopped enduringly.

On a short refreshment in the foyer all participants could exchange views with each other. Afterwards many visitors took part in the guided gas light tour on bus and were impressed by the still existing gas light in Berlin. After 5 hours at 11:00 p.m. the Watch Day event was finished.

Bertold Kujath
Chairman Gaslicht-Kultur e.V.

Online picture gallery about the Watch Day:

<http://gaslicht-kultur.de/First-international-conference-on-gaslight-and-gaslamps-Berlin.html>

Possibly also helpful: A German description of the Berlin Watch Day:

<http://gaslicht-kultur.de/news/newsletter-2015-06.html>