

Summary

FILIP BURNO (Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw) / The glow of the metropolis. Electricity, architecture, and the senses. Berlin 1924–1933

The subject of the article is the relationship of the electrification of Berlin to the modernisation of the lighting system, the expansion of the public transport network, the social programme based on the construction of new housing estates, the development of luminous advertising and shop window decoration in the city, and finally the growing popularity of “light architecture”, examples of which were above all the impressive grand cinemas and department stores. The capital of the Weimar Republic, a metropolis of more than 4 million inhabitants, was regarded as the most Americanised city in Europe at the end of the 1920s. After the suppression of inflation in 1924, a period known as the “Golden Twenties” began in Berlin. The city became one of the most important cultural centres. American advertising companies had their headquarters there, and modern office buildings were erected in the city for German industrial concerns. Numerous nightclubs and cabarets were active in Berlin. The city was an arena for political battles, criminal scandals and exciting sporting events.

Berlin – the centre of accelerated modernisation in post-war Europe – was powered by electricity, energy generated by power stations built before the World War I, but also by a modern power system consisting of new “electricity factories” such as the Klingenberg and Kraftwerk West and a network of substations, as many as 12 of which were designed by Heinrich Müller and Felix Thümen.

The article discusses both the municipal government’s policy of supporting electrification (through American loans and cooperation with electrical engineering concerns) and the architecture of the power stations and substations mentioned. The increased capacity of Berlin’s power plants contributed to the growth of the entertainment and advertising industry. In 1929, 3,000 luminous advertisements of various kinds illuminated the city. Berlin’s advertising sign makers outdid themselves with ingenious solutions to make a strong impact on passers-by. The most common urban visual attraction was the huge, carefully invited display windows.

In the 1920s, the role of electricity in shaping architectural composition increased. Illuminated advertisements began to appear on the façades of modernised town-houses, emphasising the modern, functionalist character of the buildings. Neon signs were often integrated into the form of the façade, forming a coherent whole. In Berlin’s avant-garde architectural milieu at the time, a call was often made for the creation of an “architecture of light”, the inclusion in the entire architectural composition of lighting effects that could create a completely new, original and at the same time simple composition after dark. Strip windows, neon signs, tall shop windows – all of these could shape the night-time image of a building. Electric light became a complement to architecture and even, as in the works of Hans Poelzig and Erich Mendelsohn, a “material” as important as reinforced concrete and iron. The last part of the article is devoted to the changes that took place in the electrical spectacle of Berlin after the Nazis came to power.