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# The old guard modernists in Western Europe and post-war urban visions: Cornelis van Eesteren as jury member of the ‘Hauptstad Berlin’ competition 1957-58

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Urban visions drawn on paper, assessed in competitions, and circulated through journals and books can have a huge impact on city planning. They can be as influential – perhaps even more influential – as realized plans that, after all, have to withstand the realities of funding, land use planning or everyday use. Prizes awarded for competition entries and the publicity that comes with them can influence urban planning practices for decades to come. It was therefore a decision of far-reaching consequences when leading modernists were chosen as members of the jury for the Hauptstadt Berlin competition 1957-58 – a competition set up to plan for a future city center of a reunited Berlin as the capital of Germany. Among the selected jurors were Dutch urbanist Cornelis van Eesteren and the Finn Alvar Aalto, his friend from the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM). The selection of the jury was a conscious choice aimed at continuing and updating pre-war modernist discussions.

## Planning for Berlin after the World War II

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After Germany’s defeat in World War II, the city center of the old imperial capital Berlin was largely destroyed. For many German and foreign planners this destruction signalled an opportunity to rethink the former capital’s urban form without much concern for the historic urban layout or the few remaining buildings. They were eager to provide their ideas in the context of a major event such as a city planning competition for the design of the Berlin center.

But, the competition had to respond to the political context of the time. The former capital was under the political and planning control of the governments of two parallel states, the German Federal Republic (GFR) in the West, which also controlled the Western part of Berlin under the control and influence of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the East, which chose Berlin East as its capital and aligned with the Soviet Union. The government of the GDR, which controlled the historic center of Berlin, had started rebuilding activities, using them to make a political statement. Notably the so-called Stalinallee, the major boulevard with multi-functional housing in neo-classical style leading from the center of Berlin East to the outskirts of the city in the direction of Moscow, made a clear statement about the political affiliation of the GDR.

The GFR lacked control of the key historical areas of the city other than the former parliament building, the Reichstag. To make a point on its claim on the rebuilding of the center of Berlin, and to take a stand against the Stalinallee, the governments of the GFR and West Berlin were limited to paper architecture. As the relation between East and West declined and a realistic chance of reunification disappeared, they opted to make a major political statement through paper urbanism. Starting in 1954, they organized an international building exhibition, the *Interbau*, and opened a competition for the capital of Berlin: 'Hauptstadt Berlin'. This competition had several, sometimes opposing tasks to fulfill. Political reasons – the West German government's continued believe and fight for a united capital – were important. In addition to the competition's advertising function, the competition also sought to address concrete urban planning tasks: city planners had to keep sufficient land free for future government functions and infrastructures.

### **The Hauptstadt Berlin competition: Preparation and selection of the jury**

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The governments of the GFR and West Berlin intended the Hauptstadt Berlin competition as proof that a capital of a unified democratic Germany would be capable of hosting both national and cosmopolitan functions. The inclusion of the territory of the historic center of Berlin, under GDR administration, in the competition area represented a political affront to the East German government and was met with strong criticism. Nonetheless, this situation provided room for the making of an architectural and urban statement to be circulated on paper, and a conscious attempt to innovate based on the ideas of 1920s modernists.

It was in this highly charged context that jury members were selected. A Preparatory Committee established in 1955 brought together ten experts, some drawn from the national and Berlin administrations. Others were leading German architects of

the reconstruction period. This group steered the competition towards moderate modernist planning, typical of German post-war reconstruction. The most notable of the invited members had long-standing expertise in modernist planning and a history of work with relevant networks.

Otto Bartning had been active in the planning of the modernist Siemensstadt since the 1920s. He had been an urban planning advisor to Berlin since 1955 and head of the Bund Deutscher Architekten, the association of architects in the GFR. His hope for the competition was to obtain projects that would still be valid in 2000, clearly an indication of his desire for future-oriented projects.<sup>1</sup> Werner Hebebrand, head of urbanism in Hamburg (Oberbaudirektor) from 1952-64, worked with Ernst May in the 1920s in Frankfurt and was closely connected with several CIAM members. Hebebrand opposed urban planning based on monumentality and axes and called for the sort of land reform that had been carried out in Rotterdam. Rudolf Hillebrecht was a key player in the German reconstruction. He had stayed in Germany during the war and continued to work under the Nazis. As head of urban planning in Hannover he organized the exhibition Constructa 1951 that indicated directions for postwar urban planning in Germany. In the jury he played a connecting role between planners who had left Germany and those who had stayed. Among the latter was Hans Stephan, who participated in the Preparatory Committee as urban planning director in Berlin (Senatsbaudirektor) and who had held important positions during the Nazi period.

This group developed the practical foundation for the competition. They decided to invite some prominent foreign modernists whom they knew and who knew each other from the pre-war period to join the jury in addition to key members of the Preparatory Committee. They invited several long-standing members of the old CIAM avantgarde with strong roots in Western Europe. These were planners who were aware of the city-planning reality of Berlin – partly on the basis of experience from the 1920s. All spoke German, so communication on the jury did not involve language barriers. The resulting selection of jury members set the stage for the competition outcome, aimed at providing solutions to planning problems specific to Berlin and developing new ideas for future cities.

### West European modernists as jury members

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The Hauptstadt Berlin competition was planned as an international event, in a way that was in keeping with pre-war modernism. The names of the famous jury members were expected to be enough to attract as many participants as possible. The most famous invitee was Walter Gropius, who had been an American citizen

since 1944, and who was one of the architects involved in the *Interbau* exhibition. As the most prominent emigrated representative of German architecture in the 1920s, Gropius was known to all those involved. His contacts with Bartning and Hebebrand came from the Bauhaus era and the common CIAM work. The nomination of Gropius as a judge was a great incentive for foreigners to participate.

Ultimately, Gropius did not take part in the jury – officially due to illness. From his correspondence with Le Corbusier it appears that there were ‘difficulties with Berlin’ – probably in the context of the *Interbau* exhibition – which prevented him from participating.<sup>2</sup> As a replacement for Gropius, Herbert Jensen, a representative of an unbroken planning continuity from the Nazi era to the 1950s,<sup>3</sup> was appointed to the jury. Thus, the German planners of the postwar reconstruction were most numerous.

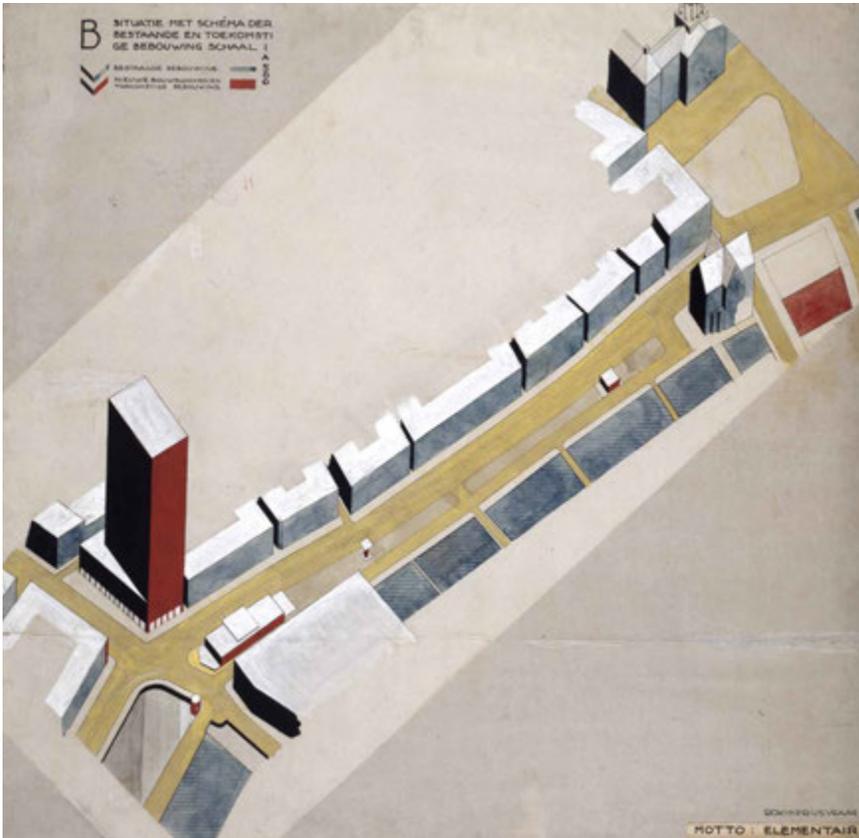


FIG. 1 Cornelis van Eesteren, Competition Entry Unter den Linden, Berlin, 1925 [Het Nieuwe Instituut]

They also invited Cornelis van Eesteren, the past president of CIAM, whose contacts in Berlin went back to the 1920s. In 1925, van Eesteren had won the first prize in the competition for the redesign of Unter den Linden. [1] As head of the Urban Planning Department in Amsterdam, van Eesteren was familiar with concrete urban planning issues as well as with large-scale visionary projects. [2] Furthermore, they invited Alvar Aalto, who had been part of the international architectural avant-garde in the 1920s and had been a member of CIAM since its founding in 1928. Aalto was also involved in the construction of a building at the *Interbau* exhibition.

Pierre Vago was the youngest of the foreign invited judges. His role was important for the intended political and urban-based impact of the competition. He brought in a strong theoretical aspect of architecture through his activities as editor-in-chief of the French architectural magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. As long-time Secretary General of the International Union of Architects (UIA), Vago was informed about the conditions for holding competitions, a knowledge key to the holding of *Hauptstadt Berlin 1957-58* competition. Vago was the only one among the foreign jury members who did not belong to the 'old guard' of the CIAM and was the most critical of the general consensus among the other judges. His opinions also differed from those of his peers, as his conception of the capital was influenced by Paris city planning culture and studies at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* under Auguste Perret.

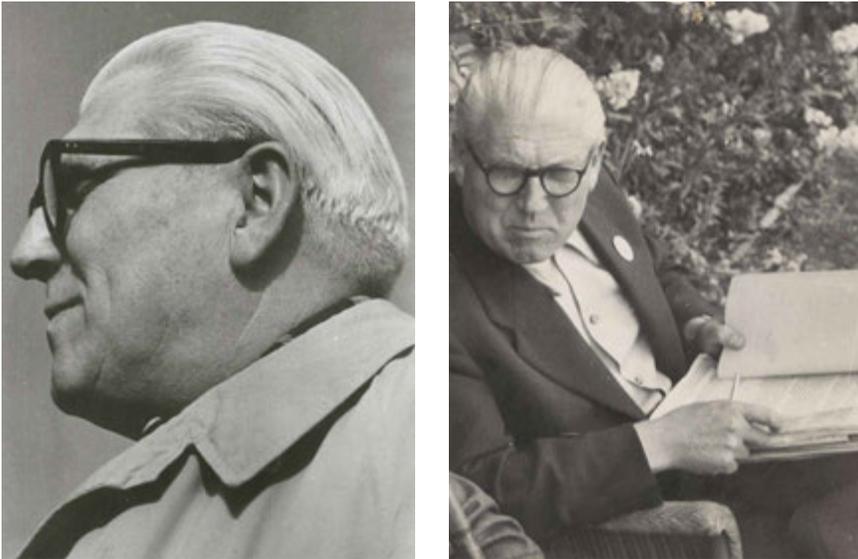


FIG. 2 Photos of Cornelis van Eesteren [Het Nieuwe Instituut]

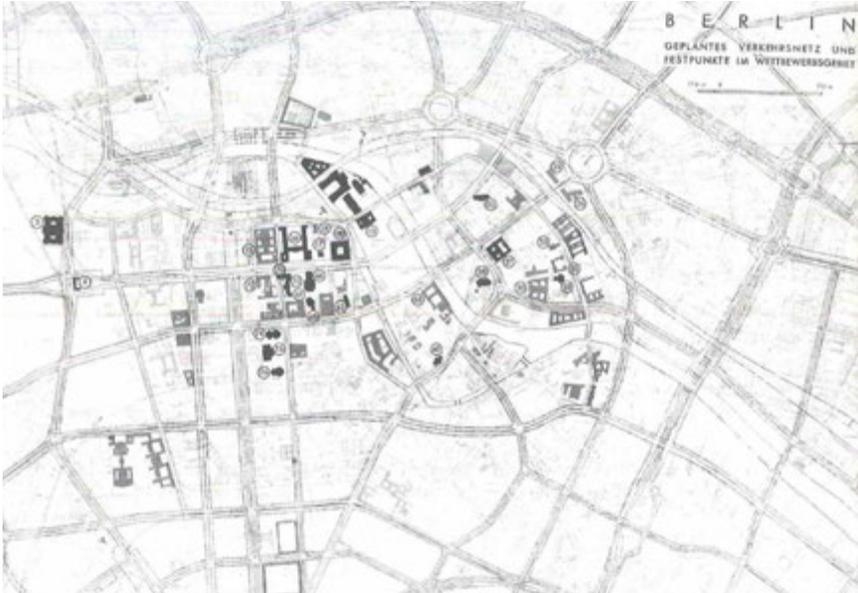


FIG. 3 The Preparatory Committee's traffic plan served was included in the material provided to participants in the Capital Berlin competition 1957-58 [Berlin. Planungsgrundlagen für den städtebaulichen Ideenwettbewerb 'Hauptstadt Berlin', Bonn/Berlin 1957]

### Discussion of East European judges

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The Preparatory Committee proposed the participation and the invitation of Eastern European architects.<sup>4</sup> Many modernists had found a home in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. At the beginning of 1957, Hans Hopp, the president of the Bund Deutscher Architekten der DDR, the association of East German architects, suggested that the competition documents should be coordinated between the East and West administrations before they were issued. He also said that a representative of the GDR would be appointed to the jury.<sup>5</sup>

The Preparatory Committee's lead, Bartning, ultimately rejected this proposal, stating that the competition was open to all European architects and that the preparations formed an appropriate foundation for the planning of a future German capital. He replied to Hopp on May 15, 1957 that the competition had been announced in agreement with the UIA and that the documents had already been printed.<sup>6</sup> A conversation between Hillebrecht and the East Berlin chief architect Hermann Henselmann, who had expressed positive views on the West Berlin *Interbau* exhibition and the invitation of Western architects to the competition for the residential area Fennpfuhl in the GDR's part of Berlin, could no longer prevent

the break with East Berlin. As Henselmann foresaw, the GDR authorities and the Soviet occupying forces protested against the Hauptstadt Berlin competition,<sup>7</sup> stating that it was a call for an intervention in the allied jurisdictions.

The Bund Deutscher Architekten der DDR tried to block the Hauptstadt Berlin competition via the UIA. Here the selection of the jury members paid off. Pierre Vago, as indicated above secretary-general of the UIA and jury member in the Hauptstadt Berlin 1957-58 competition, informed the Bund Deutscher Architekten in the GFR on request that the competition was technically sound and could not be closed for political reasons.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the Bund Deutscher Architekten in the GDR was left only with the choice to prohibit the competition for its members and ask other friendly associations to do the same: A demand that Romania and the USSR stay away followed. Other Eastern Bloc countries similarly hindered the submission of competition documents.<sup>9</sup>

### The competition Hauptstadt Berlin

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After almost ten years of preparation, the competition Hauptstadt Berlin was advertised on 30 March 1957 [3–4]. As was to be expected, the most violent reaction to the official competition came from the GDR. The bidding process of the capital city's competition was rated as a manoeuvre to divert attention from the Federal Republic's accession to the newly established European communities.<sup>10</sup> East Berlin would go on to host its own competition for the center of Berlin. In addition, the result of the all-German competition Fennpfuhl in Berlin-Lichtenberg was revised, in which a West German architect (Ernst May) had recently won the first prize.<sup>11</sup> Despite the primarily critical attitude of politicians, interest among planners was great: 392 architects requested the competition documents, consisting of memorandum, planning documents, and statement. Ultimately, 151 projects, including two full-scale variants, were submitted by the deadline of 1 February 1958.

On the 10th of June, 1958, the jury met for the first time. Governing Mayor Willy Brandt and Hermann Wandersleb, representing the Federal Ministry of Housing, opened the meeting. Otto Bartning, Cornelis van Eesteren and Rudolf Hillebrecht alternated as chair in a daily rotation. After the round of assessments, 52 works were unanimously excluded. On the afternoon of the second day, the jury went on a joint tour of the competition area to clarify local issues. On the third and fourth day of the meeting, a further 73 works were dropped. Among them were projects by well-known architects who participated in CIAM, such as Mart Stam, the Dutch architect and planner; Arthur Korn, who worked in Berlin before emigrating to London in 1937, and Ernst May, head of urban planning in Frankfurt in the 1920s.



FIG. 4 Master plan for Berlin as a unified city in 1957 [Berlin. Planungsgrundlagen für den städtebaulichen Ideenwettbewerb 'Hauptstadt Berlin', Bonn/Berlin 1957]

After the first round of assessment of the entries, the judges were able to subdivide the work into two groups. One group – comprised mostly of the German participants – had tried to develop realistic and detailed proposals within the existing laws and technology, while the other group, including French, English and Italian designers, was putting forth proposals for the design of an ideal city center, one that was not necessarily Berlin.<sup>12</sup> These different conceptions were already encouraged by the competition documents. In view of the political situation, it was clear that an implementation of plans could not be expected in the near future, even though the current problems of Berlin's urban planning demanded long-term guidance. As a result, most participants used the opportunity to make generic statements for the future.

The judges' expectations of the competition were also split. The Berlin members of the jury were particularly interested in local problems and their solution, whereas the foreigners were more interested in the general urban planning discussion. After lengthy discussions, the judges agreed that in addition to proposals for the unique situation of the center of Berlin, suggestions, intellectual thoughts or insights should also be obtained that could stimulate urban development, in a variety of ways, including spiritually.<sup>13</sup> The jury made a conscious decision to give prizes to a broad range of proposals, from very realistic ones, to those engaged in rethinking the future.<sup>14</sup>



FIG. 5 Hauptstadt Berlin 1957-58. A variant of the competition entry by Hans Scharoun. Second 2nd prize [*Bauwelt* 29 (1958), 35]

The first prizes should not be awarded for an ‘idea as such’,<sup>15</sup> the jury thought, but rather for loving attention to the typical situation in Berlin. Nineteen works remained in the narrower election and were once again examined and commented on in writing.<sup>16</sup> The jury acknowledged the particular history of Berlin, the landscape and its historic scale. They considered the traditional functional structure of the city and the few historic buildings worth preserving. Overall, they opted to preserve the typical horizontal silhouette of the city, rather than award projects that included skyscrapers. They appreciated a reorganization of the city through the separation of the different types of traffic, with the goal of giving freedom to the pedestrian. The jury rejected proposals for exaggerated transport projects, such as huge cloverleaf crossings or highways, which brought unacceptable architectural and urban planning solutions or architectural structures that disrespected the traditional scale, such as from Peter Friedrich and Elly Lehning, who proposed a linear development along a highway with giant buildings for economic functions, or by the group Bacchetti, Castiglioni und Sianesi, who envisioned a 750-meter high skyscraper. They wanted to give the car adequate space and make it possible to experience the city from the car.

The majority of the jury rejected axes and symmetries. Pierre Vago commented that the rejection of any ‘monumental effect’ was a reflection of German history, and that a later evaluation of the competition could lead to another verdict. Some of the prize-winning small-scale, ‘new-romantic, somewhat provincial’

designs appeared to him to be inappropriate for a capital and a cosmopolitan city.<sup>17</sup> In general, instead of powerful accents, the jury looked for organic forms of organization. These criteria characterize what was becoming a typical German dispute over the design of city centers in general. It is therefore not surprising that the first five prizes went to Germans, the majority of Berlin architects. The jury opted to give additional praise to projects with forward-looking ideas, especially new traffic solutions and attempts to develop a symbolic city base.

It was probably due to Bartning's skills that the first prize was accepted with only one dissenting vote and the second prizes were unanimously approved by the 17 judges, who awarded a first prize, two 2nd and three 3rd prizes, and gave additional recognition to four more projects. The presence of the foreign planners of the old CIAM guard was certainly not the only decision-making force, but their influence was evident. They facilitated the rise of a new generation, at least that is how it seemed on the occasion of the publication of the prize winners on 18 June 1958, as a large number of young architects were among the prize winners.



FIG. 6 Hauptstadt Berlin 1957-58 Competition entry by Alison and Peter Smithson with Peter Sigmund. Third 3rd prize [Berlin. *Ergebnis des Internationalen städtebaulichen Ideenwettbewerbs: Hauptstadt Berlin*, Stuttgart 1960]

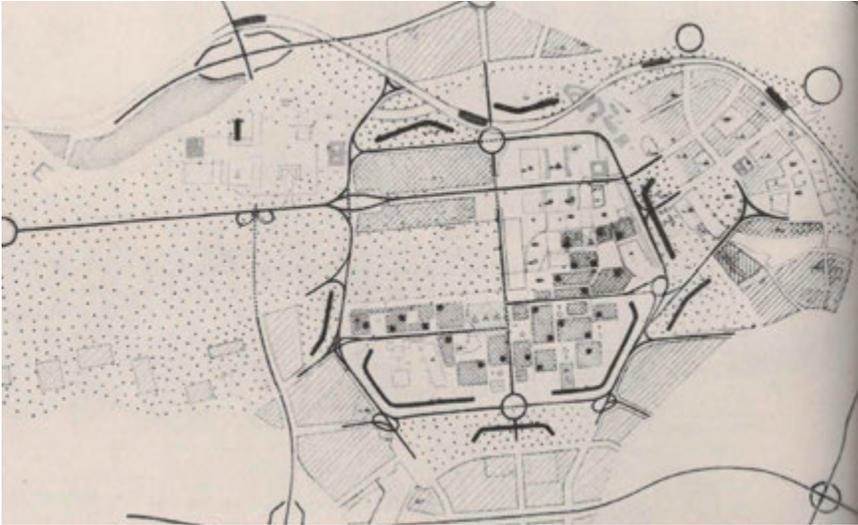


FIG. 7 Hauptstadt Berlin 1957-58 Competition entry by the office of van den Broek en Bakema [Erläuterungsbericht, Archives Broek en Bakema]

The result showed a colorful mixture of developments. The first prize was awarded to the working group Friedrich Spengelin, Fritz Eggeling and Gerd Pempelfort, from Hamburg / Hanover. The first 2nd prize went to Egon Hartmann, who had been active in Berlin for a long time, together with Walter Nickerl. A second 2nd prize went to Hans Scharoun, who had worked with Wils Ebert. [5] Similar to the planning of Van Eesteren in 1925, he proposed row buildings along the 'Linden'. The first and second 3rd prizes went to young Berlin architects (Gerhard F. Kern/Rainer G. Rümmler/Hans J. Schröter and Bodo Fleischer/Hermann Kreidt). Alison and Peter Smithson received the third 3rd prize. [6] Among the purchases and works in the narrowest selection were many foreign projects, including a design by Le Corbusier and a group of young architects around Marion Tournon-Branly.

Even though the competition had no real built effects, the designs of both the realistic and the more abstract entries served as models and a basis of discussion for urban planning in Europe. As a result, the award winners received important assignments in which they were able to implement the ideas they presented, or gain professorships through which they conveyed their views to students. The city-planning concepts presented in the competition were disseminated and were trend-setting in their historical significance. In assessing the entries for the Hauptstadt Berlin competition, Van Eesteren and his colleagues paved the way for post-war urban planning from pre-war colleagues, notably Hans Scharoun and Le Corbusier, and rising stars of the postwar period, such as Jaap Bakema and Peter and Alison Smithson. [7]

## Notes

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- 1 15 September 1956, Zusammenfassung der Besprechung vom 7. und 8 September 1956 [Berlinische  
2 Galerie: Wettbewerbsakten der Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen (SBW) 275-1].  
3 Letter Le Corbusier to Sigfried Giedion, 19 February 1958, 12 (10) [Paris, Fondation Le  
4 Corbusier].  
5 Herbert Jensen, *Umbau der Stadt Kiel. Betrachtungen zur Durchführung eines Wohnungsbauprogramms  
6 der Stadt Kiel und seinen städtebaulichen Folgeerscheinungen nach dem Kriege*, Kiel 1941.  
7 Vermerk über die Besprechungen am 5. und 6. Oktober 1956 im Hause des Senators für Bau- und  
8 Wohnungswesen, Betr.: Wettbewerb Hauptstadt Berlin [SBW 275 gen I, S. 7].  
9 Herrn Senator Schwedler. Betr.: Wettbewerb Hauptstadt Berlin 26 Januar 1957 [SBW 275 gen II].  
10 Letter Otto Bartning to Hans Hopp, 15 February 1957 [SBW 275 gen II] Berlinische Galerie:  
11 Wettbewerbsakten der Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen.  
12 Vermerk Betr.: Wettbewerb Hauptstadt Berlin, 9 März 1957 [SBW 275 gen II].  
13 On the discussion with the Bund Deutscher Architekten in the GDR see: Korrespondenz SBW 275 gen II.  
14 See: Korrespondenz SBW 275-12  
15 'Bonn will Berliner bluffen', ADN-Interview mit dem Stellvertreter des Oberbürgermeisters Waldemar  
16 Schmidt, Auszug aus *Neues Deutschland* 31 March 1957.  
17 'Ost-Berlin baut sozialistisches Zentrum', *Die Welt* 21 October 1957.  
18 Grundsätzliche Bemerkungen zum Wettbewerb Hauptstadt Berlin, Senatsbaudirektor Dipl.-Ing Hans  
19 Stephan, Berlin S. 1-4 [SBW 27,5-10-13].  
20 Grundsätzliche Bemerkungen, S. 4 [SBW 275-10-13].  
21 Pierre Vago, Wettbewerb Berlin, S. 1-7 [SBW 275 gen 111].  
22 Grundsätzliche Bemerkungen, S. 4 [SBW 275-10-13].  
23 See: Stadtplanung, Berlin (West Berlin). Senator für Bau- und Wohnungswesen. Abteilung Landes- und  
24 Berlin. *Ergebnis des Internationalen Städtebaulichen Ideenwettbewerbs: Hauptstadt Berlin, Stuttgart 1960*.  
25 Pierre Vago, Wettbewerb Berlin, S. 1-7 [SBW 275 gen 111].