

Helping Urban Historians Find Their Way

How the Scientific Collections of IRS Erkner curate knowledge

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Introduction

Whoever does advanced research on the history of GDR urban planning and architecture will very likely consult the Scientific Collections of IRS Erkner sooner or later. These archives, specialized in the building and planning history of the GDR, offer material and information especially concerning urban historical issues and are still growing. Being part of a research institute near Berlin their services are likewise accessible for the public and consequently enhanced. What is quite important for the archives of course is an appropriate online strategy which is characterized in the following.

This paper begins with introducing the peculiarities of the IRS archives regarding their holdings, tasks, and institutional frame. Subsequently observations on user behaviour will be discussed which have made the archives modify its services. In conclusion their digital activities are presented. Two or three things are important to be considered in general: The IRS Scientific Collections are an integral part of a research unit (which is rather seldom), and what seems necessary is a multi-track online strategy which admits a certain stage of flexibility at the same time.

Uniqueness #1: The IRS holdings, a paradise for urban historians

The Scientific Collections of IRS Erkner¹ are singular in more than one respect.² Holding unique sources referring to the GDR planning history, they are a non-governmental archive and belong to a non-university facility, the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS)³ which is part of the Leibniz Association,⁴ one of Germany's major research organizations. Therefore within the IRS collecting and research activities are closely connected, and the archivists first of all give support to projects of the IRS history department (on the department see below). At the same time the archives' holdings are accessible for all kinds of external users, be they scholars or not, and are much frequented. Among the users are e.g. historians, art historians, conservationists, journalists, building authorities, and architects. In summary, the IRS Scientific Collections are peculiar, both in respect to their holdings, their tasks, and their way of working. First of all some remarks on the holdings and their history.

The GDR is past but still present in several respects, and a quarter of a century after its end there is still and again much interest in its history. The exceptional way the two German states were united in 1990 led to specific terms of how to collect and when to release GDR records. For certain reasons many important materials concerning the East German urban planning history now belong to the IRS Scientific Collections. These archives basically derive from materials of what was the IRS's predecessor institute. The former *Institut für Städtebau und Architektur* (ISA) of the GDR Building Academy was East Germany's most important research facility for urban planning and architecture, the academy being based on the Soviet model. Located in East Berlin the ISA, a relatively huge institution, had assignments on the central state level concerning both research and administrative examination. As its name indicates the ISA primarily dealt with construction activities in the GDR cities and towns as well as with processes of urban planning and also urban sociology. Given that the governmental housing programme and construction activities in general were but essential for the SED state it is clear that the ISA was quite an important institute. It had departments e.g.

1 See <http://www.leibniz-irs.de/profil/wissenschaftliche-sammlungen/> (English version: <http://www.leibniz-irs.de/profil/wissenschaftliche-sammlungen/index.php?sprache=en>).

2 Harald Engler offers an English overview about the Scientific Collections in his The IRS Leibniz-Institut für Regionalentwicklung und Strukturplanung, Erkner, in: *ICAM 16 Conference Proceedings*, edited by Deutsches Architekturmuseum and Museum für Architektur und Ingenieurkunst, Frankfurt am Main 2012 (URL: http://www.icam-web.org/data/media/cms_binary/original/1405109432.pdf), pp. 27–29. A bibliography on articles etc. about the IRS archives can be found here: <http://www.irs-net.de/profil/wissenschaftliche-sammlungen/Wissenschaftliche-Sammlungen-des-IRS-en.pdf>.

3 See <http://www.leibniz-irs.de> (English version: <http://www.leibniz-irs.de/index.php?sprache=en>).

4 See <http://www.leibniz-gemeinschaft.de/> (English version: <http://www.leibniz-gemeinschaft.de/en/home/>).

for the general building plans of the major towns, for the analysis of urban structures and for the documentation of urban planning competitions (which indeed took place, mostly in the early GDR times, though within a socialist frame). Today the documents and studies of these departments are highly interesting for researchers. Likewise various architects who worked at the ISA were prominent representatives of their profession in East Germany and did also take part in many architectural competitions and concrete building projects for which they made drafts. Thus, having been established in 2012 as an own unit the IRS Department for Historical Research, among other things, collects and researches the work of its own predecessor institute, of course with a professional distance and already one or two generations ahead.

The ISA holdings, now within the IRS archives, are complemented by other sources of institutional provenance: documents from the former Association of Architects (*Bund der Architekten der DDR* or in short BdA). In particular worth mentioning is a file with more than 7.000 application forms of East German architects who entered this association, including valuable biographical information. What is now the separate, much used photo archive of the IRS Scientific Collections mainly derives from the ISA times as well. By now it contains the considerable sum of ca. 100.000 photographs and slides, mostly showing East German buildings and sites from the 1950s to the 1980s. Again, this photo collection most of all offers insights into the history of GDR towns and cities.

Whereas the ISA and BdA holdings are more or less completed, another group of papers which is quite important too is still and even strongly growing: The IRS already holds ca. 90 personal collections of East German architects and planners of all branches (urban planning, landscape planning, regional planning, traffic planning etc.). Many personal archives e.g. include architectural drafts and plans, files, correspondences, or photos. This material, permanently preserved and publicly accessible in the IRS, is highly relevant both for many research questions and practical issues regarding urban building projects in the former GDR. Therefore the Scientific Collections do constantly and intensively acquisition personal papers which are still in private property. One has to have in mind that in East Germany unfortunately around 1990 very many documents from offices, state-run enterprises, and research institutions were destroyed (perhaps more so than in other Middle and East European countries). The combination of outstanding institutional and personal holdings already makes the IRS a unique centre of knowledge.

Uniqueness #2: How to entangle research and archival processes

What is important is that the IRS Scientific Collections are not only a highly specialized, actively collecting, strongly used archive which gains much reputation by former GDR architects and planners or their heirs: Most notably the archives are an integral part of the IRS Department for Historical Research⁵ which mainly deals with urban and planning history of the 20th century (often referring but not at all limited to the GDR period). An important actor in the academic field, the department does have various national and international partners, e.g. the Centre for Urban History in Leicester. IRS scholars and archivists work but closely together in more than one respect. Acquiring personal papers e.g. often means that the persons in question give information which is relevant for research questions. Also archivists and researchers do interviews with architects etc. which can later-on become archival holdings after having been project materials. Archivists and researchers permanently give mutual hints to each other in respect of interesting persons etc., and often they contact them together. To give one example: When groups of GDR architects or planners meet both IRS archivists and researchers may take part and present their activities. Also, external users of the archives are sometimes advised not only by archivists but by researchers too which is very useful for them with regularity. However such consultations must not be too time-consuming.

A kind of stock market for various purposes are the well-known IRS workshops (*Werkstattgespräche*) on GDR planning history which take place in Erkner every second year (lastly in January 2016). These traditional conferences with ca. 100 participants are not only attended both by established and younger researchers from Germany and abroad but also frequented by contemporary witnesses. By doing so, the IRS Department of Historical Research and the Scientific Collections offer a platform for many stakeholders of the archives: There is always quite an intensive exchange between scholars themselves and between scholars and GDR planners, and, interestingly enough, there is always fresh information about persons worth being contacted and their papers which may be acquired. A good opportunity in particular for everybody in the community to socialize are previews of exhibitions about architects which the Scientific Collections show in their pavilion.⁶

⁵ See <http://www.leibniz-irs.de/forschung/forschungsabteilung-5/> (English version: <http://www.leibniz-irs.de/forschung/forschungsabteilung-5/index.php?sprache=en>). On the department see *Historical Research in the Context of Spatial Social Sciences (IRS Aktuell. Newsletter for Social Science-Based Spatial Research*, no. 7, Erkner: IRS, 2014, URL: http://www.leibniz-irs.de/publikationen/irs-aktuell/pdf/irs_aktuell_en_7.pdf).

⁶ In January 2016 e.g. an exhibition about architect Dieter Bankert (b. 1938) was opened, the vernissage being part of the 14th IRS *Werkstattgespräch*. Cf. my blog post at <https://leibnizarc.hypotheses.org/335>.

Again and again this intensive, rather unusual entanglement between a research and an archival branch within one institution is quite advantageous for both sides. The Scientific Collections e.g. not least consider current or future research projects of their direct colleagues while acquisitioning archival material. One example is the widening of the collection concept due to the lead project of the department from 2015 to 2018 on *The “Car-Oriented City” as an Area of Conflict. Open Space Planning in Inner-City Areas as an Urbanisation Strategy in East and West Germany since 1945*.⁷ Now the personal papers of GDR traffic planners are collected as well.

Apart from the significant intersection between archival and research work within the IRS it is also true of course that for the researchers and doctoral students of its history department other archives are very important as well—and that the Scientific Collections are even primarily frequented by external users. IRS’s historical research is not only concerned with GDR history either. Anyway and with or without digital tools, the IRS Department for Historical Research as a whole has become a vital knowledge hub for all kinds of dealing with planning and urban history and the preservation of evidence in this field. Increasingly the IRS is successfully connected and being noticed, both nationally and internationally. These and other circumstances make it quite necessary consequently to enhance the online activities of the Scientific Collections.

Learning from the (un)known user

The IRS Scientific Collections share an experience common for so many archives: It has become normal during the last years that there are still users doing research with physical objects on the spot while there is the highly growing number of those who can or want to access archival information only online and who expect advanced digital services. There are many more and more different users the Scientific Collections have to do with than in recent years, and partly these users are not visible for us at all. Another typical experience which is true for the archives in Erkner: The more information in the internet, the more known the holdings and the more extensive the usage (as well as the offers of delivering material). But even making digitized sources such as maps, drawings, and plans accessible online does not mean that nobody attends the archives personally. On the contrary, all kinds of usage grow

⁷ See <http://www.leibniz-irs.de/forschung/forschungsabteilung-5/leitprojekt.php> (English version: <http://www.leibniz-irs.de/forschung/forschungsabteilung-5/leitprojekt.php?sprache=en>).

but taken as a whole much more so from afar than locally. For the Scientific Collections it is quite important to recognize these developments concerning the user behaviour and changing demands. One big challenge for the digital activities of the archives is to consider both what top researchers (from the IRS and elsewhere) and what others want.

Again the Scientific Collections much profit from being embedded in a research department: From their daily exchange with their colleagues the archivists know typical interests of researchers, how they work, and what services they demand. Also they know well where to find relevant sources in other places, both physically and virtually. The manifold contacts the IRS archivists maintain to users, contemporary witnesses, and other stakeholders and their actively communicating the archives' work (through exhibitions, presentations, and guided tours as well as media reports) are of advantage as well: Although a thorough usage analysis is still missing, the staff of the Scientific Collections should know relatively well who uses the archives for what reasons, and there is no fear of contact. Knowing the users (more or less) and being willing to communicate with them helps the archives improving their activities, not least in the internet.

Elements essential to the IRS online strategy

The daily work in the Scientific Collections does of course already have several digital components, physical and virtual activities constantly meet and complement each other (as is the case with the researchers in the department who mostly come from the humanities). Yet, what is still increasing are archival activities directly linked to the internet. It has emerged that without doubt there will never be such thing as a one stop shop. Instead it is inevitable for the IRS archives to be present on several places in the world wide web, always having in mind its human and financial resources, personal abilities, and technical and social changes. Given that there is a number of rapid developments in many areas the situation is challenging but offers many capabilities likewise.

By now several finding aids are already accessible on the IRS website (cf. fig. 1), a service much appreciated by users as access statistics show. However it becomes more and more important for archives to be present in comprehensive databases and web portals, be it by delivering metadata or even digital objects. In the case of Germany one especially thinks of *Archivportal-D*, the archival section of *Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek* (DDB), a national virtual

library, and also of Europeana and the Archives Portal Europe. But still in all these cases the export of data is quite sophisticated—there being much need of improved delivery tools—, which is why the IRS Scientific Collections export data to external portals only on a pilot basis at the moment.

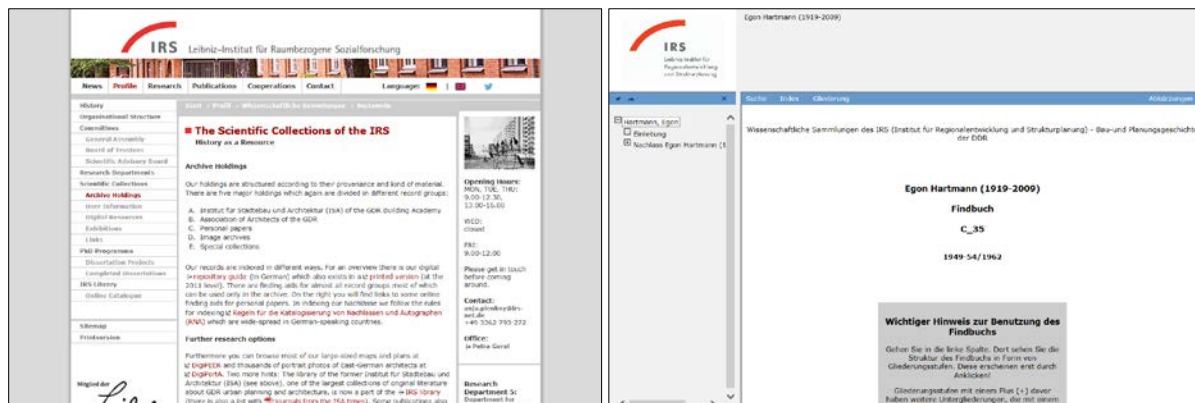


Fig. 1 Part of the pages of IRS Scientific Collections (English version) with information on their holdings

URLs: <http://www.irs-net.de/profil/wissenschaftliche-sammlungen/bestaende.php?sprache=en>
<http://www.irs-net.de/profil/wissenschaftliche-sammlungen/Onlinefindbuecher/Hartmann/>

So far social media such as Facebook and Twitter are no part of the game for the IRS Scientific Collections, the reason being it would mean an unjustified expenditure considering our highly heterogeneous user groups. What is more, the IRS public relations unit with whom the Scientific Collections closely work together are already on Twitter (among other channels). More important so far as the archives are concerned are their taking part in the shared blog where the archives of the Leibniz Association have established in 2015⁸ (the IRS Scientific Collections are represented in its editorial staff). In this blog archival news and highlights can be communicated to a broader public (cf. fig. 2), so ca. 20 research archives most of whom are rather small much benefit by this joint project. But ever more important not only for the IRS archives but also activities aiming at an advanced indexing, digitization, and presentation of holdings in the world wide web.

⁸ See <http://leibnizarc.hypotheses.org/>. The blog is part of Hypotheses.org (<http://hypotheses.org/>), a platform for academic blogs based in France which has become quite popular in Germany.

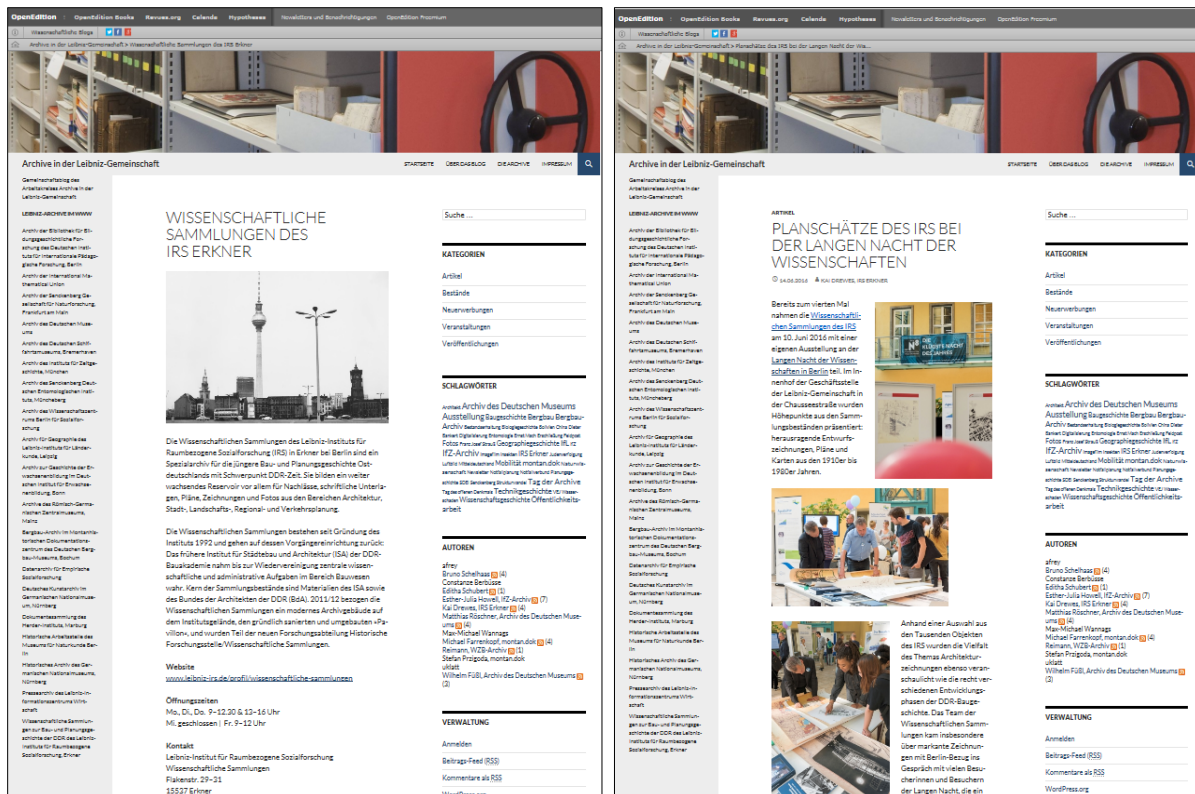


Fig. 2 Two Blog posts of the IRS Scientific Collections on the blog of the Leibniz archives

URLs: <http://leibnizarc.hypotheses.org/wissenschaftliche-sammlungen-des-irs-erkner>
<https://leibnizarc.hypotheses.org/720>

What about the access from outside to digitized sources from our archives, a strong wish by many users? The Scientific Collections digitize sketches, photos, documents etc. both on demand and as part of projects aiming at the presentation of a larger numbers of objects in the internet. Such projects are always dependent on third-party funding due to their resource requirements and financial expense. In the IRS's case the preconditions are relatively good. The first reason being there is much know-how in making research applications on a national and supranational level. Secondly the IRS archives have much profited from their intensive networking and organizational commitment for several years, particularly regarding the Leibniz Association and its archival working group.⁹ Together with other Leibniz archives it was possible to arrange two larger joint digitization projects and thus to gain valuable experiences concerning workflows.

⁹ See <http://www.leibniz-gemeinschaft.de/ueber-uns/organisation/arbeitskreise/arbeitskreis-archiv/> (English version: <http://www.leibniz-gemeinschaft.de/en/about-us/organisation/working-groups/ak-archives/>). The IRS Scientific Collections are also an active member e.g. of the *Föderation deutscher Architektur-sammlungen* (confederation of German architectural collections, see <http://www.architekturarchive.de/>), the national section of the International Confederation of Architectural Museums (ICAM). Many of the outstanding archives gathered in the German confederation have worse preconditions than the IRS archives concerning digitization projects.

Recent digitization projects

The joint projects DigiPEER and DigiPortA enabled the IRS to digitize, describe, and present thousands of their architectural sketches and photo portraits of East German architects respectively.

DigiPEER¹⁰ has much to offer for advanced researches: More than 4.000 IRS objects (especially larger ones) are deeply indexed, and users can view them in high definition—which is quite comfortable and good for conservational purposes too. What is not possible however is directly to download such files. Users may ask for a copy instead for which they have to pay a small fee. During the last years a considerable number of academics and other users from Germany and abroad have ordered scans from DigiPEER in high definition. One of them is urban historian Professor Rosemary Wakeman from Fordham University who recently put it like this: “The best illustrations of East German new town plans are from the extraordinary IRS archive.”¹¹

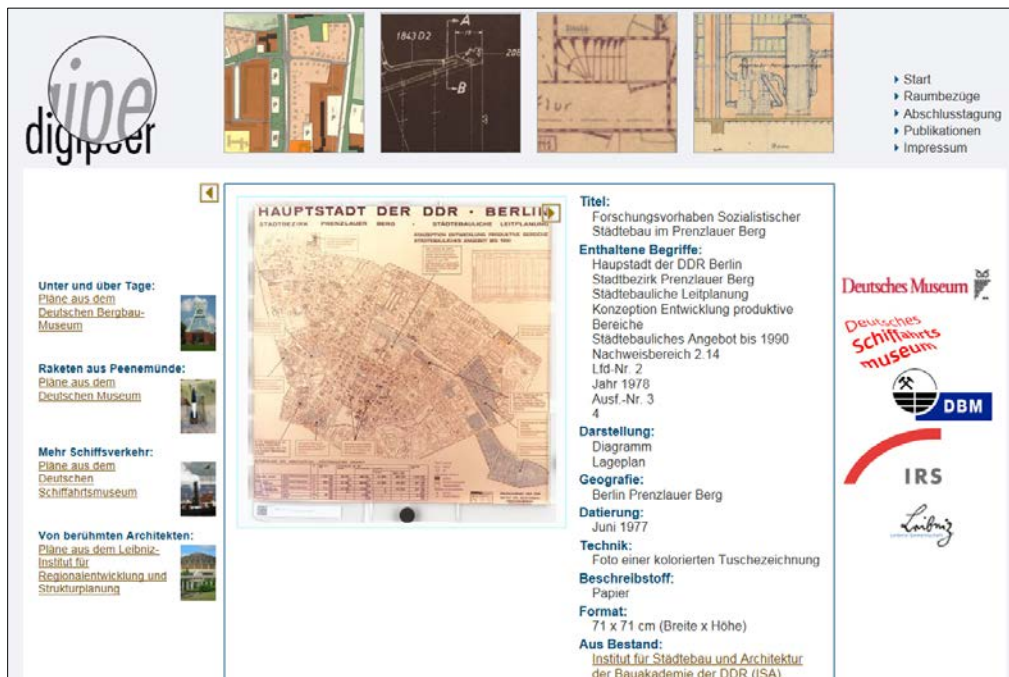


Fig. 3 Site plan from Prenzlauer Berg, East Berlin under socialist planning auspices (1977) in DigiPEER

URL: <http://www.digipeer.de/index.php?id=712402615>

¹⁰ See www.digipeer.de (home page for IRS objects: <http://www.digipeer.de/index.php?static=54>).

¹¹ Rosemary Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia. An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. xi.

DigiPortA¹² is a digital portal of nine archives within the Leibniz Association for presenting digitized portraits. Being one of the partners, the IRS Scientific Collections were able to digitize, index, and present thousands of photos of GDR architects.¹³ Thus, the database is a helpful tool both for searching for portraits (which is e.g. of interest for conference presentations and publications, cf. fig. 4) and for biographical information. As this aspect indicates personality rights are but essential to be recognized—a circumstance important for other possible projects too.



Fig. 4 Photo portrait of prominent architect Richard Paulick in DigiPortA

URL: http://www.digiporta.net/ires/IRS/s2/IRS_B_2-6995.jpg

Due to the advanced knowledge within the IRS team on GDR urban history, East German architects, and their networks it was possible to add valuable information in several cases concerning e.g. concrete urban planning projects the architects and planners were involved in (cf. fig. 5). Admittedly completeness has been out of reach by far so much can still be done in the future. As the IRS history department has distinguished experience in biographical research there is a high potential in the future regarding the digital indexing of biographical information. Probably for such projects authority file numbers will become ever more important, and at least for more prominent architects such numbers were recorded in DigiPortA too (cf. fig. 6). For future projects georeferencing will figure prominently as well.

¹² See www.digiporta.net.

¹³ On the IRS activities within DigiPortA see Harald Engler, GDR Women Architects between Emancipation and Professional Obstinacy, in: Michela Rosso (ed.), *Investigating and Writing Architectural History. Subjects, Methodologies and Frontiers. Papers from the Third EAHN International Meeting*, Turin 2014, pp. 835–845 (URL: <https://susanklaiber.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/eahn2014proceedings.pdf>).



Fig. 5 Part of the information on architect Dorothea Tscheschner in DigPortA with additional biographical info
URL: <http://www.digiporta.net/index.php?id=205532307>



Fig. 6 Part of the information on architect Bruno Flierl in DigiPortA, including authority file numbers
URL: <http://www.digiporta.net/index.php?id=534791842>

Other digitization projects are meant to follow in the future, not least concerning IRS's considerable photo materials, which are much looked after. In this case however copyright questions (and possible financial claims) are particularly important to be taken account of.

According to the characteristics of the IRS history department it will be wise always to look for synergies between archival and research purposes. The possibilities to link data and to enable advanced qualitative and quantitative analyses (the latter under the heading of Digital Humanities) appear almost unlimited.

Curating content: A new online portal on GDR planning history

The core of the Scientific Collections' internet activities will become their new online portal which will be launched in September 2016 (cf. fig. 7). This portal will not replace the rather static pages of the archives which are meant to be maintained within the IRS website (with basic information on the archives' holdings, their terms of use, etc.) but is an additional offer of a different kind. The idea is to make the portal become the most important online venue in the field of GDR building and planning history. By doing so it should be possible to attract further attention both to the Scientific Collections and the whole IRS history department.

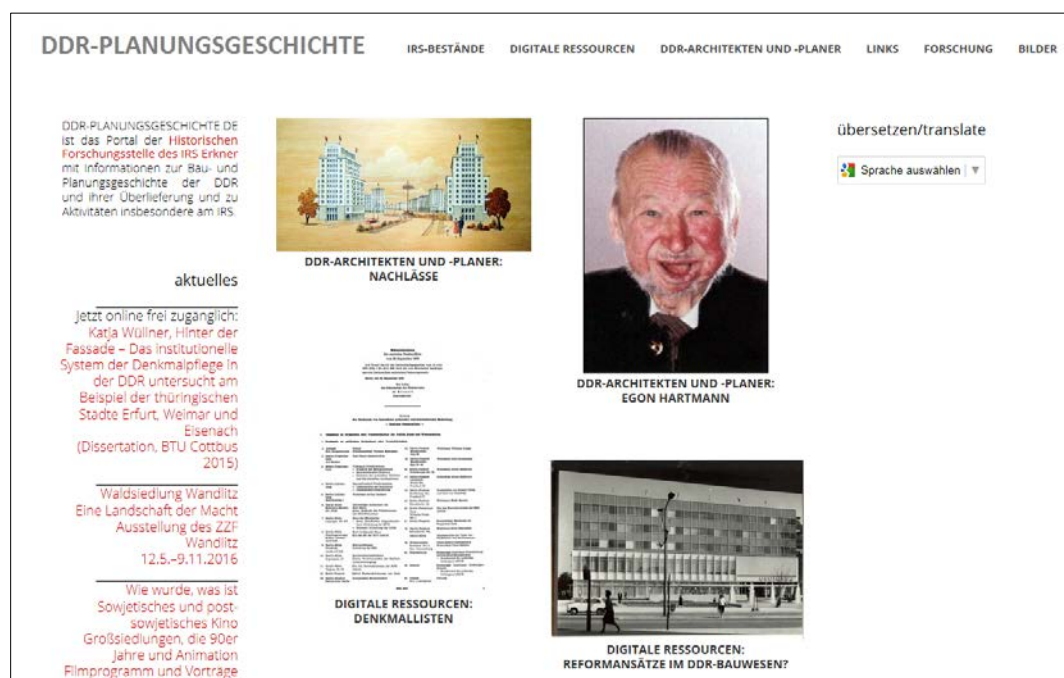


Fig. 7 The IRS history department's online portal on GDR planning history (provisional version)

For the beginning there will be main categories e.g. concerning relevant digital resources, GDR architects and their personal papers (no matter where they are held now), current research projects, pictures, and links to other websites. News will be covered on the front

page. The whole site, based on WordPress, can be easily extended, and it is explicitly desirable also to involve academics from outside the IRS. But basically it will be IRS archivists and researchers to contribute to the portal, so once more the entanglement of both spheres is supposed to be to the advantage of a project. New archival or research projects e.g. should be presented with summaries and posts (and of course illustrations worth seeing). There is really much content (and structured data) in the IRS history department already existing or to be generated in the near future that can be used for the portal, many stories and striking objects can be presented and explained (cf. fig. 8), the same goes for digital audio files with interviews. What will certainly be of great importance in the future are ways to document ‘biographies of places’—another added value for urban historians the IRS means to create, drawing on its distinguished archives.

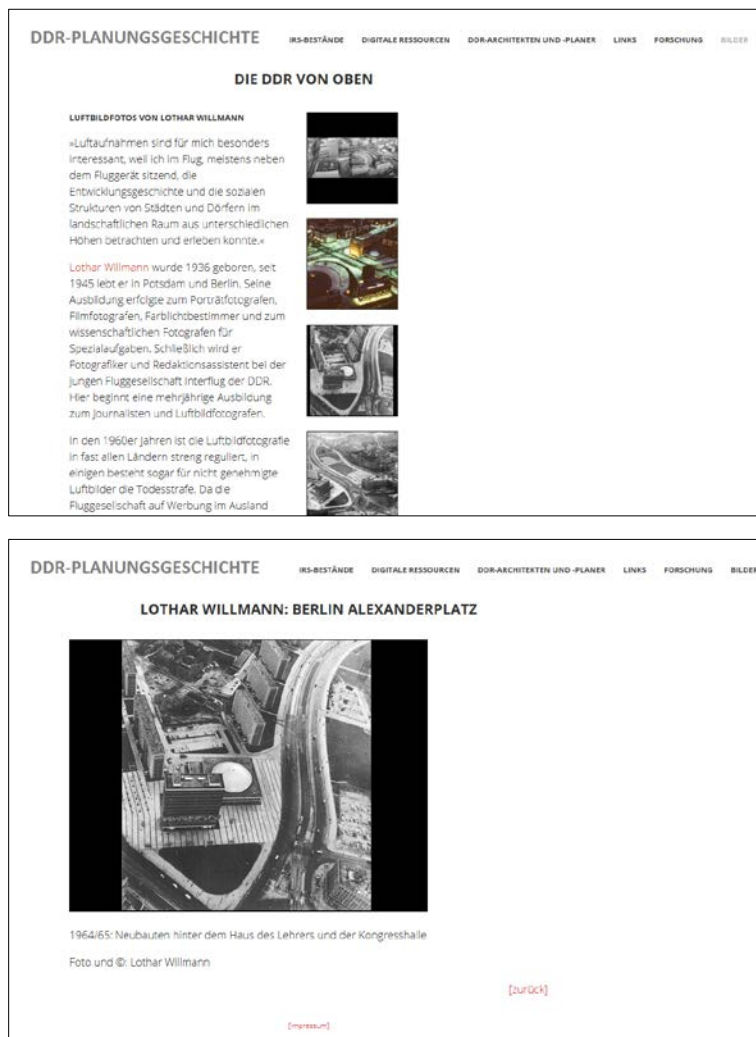


Fig. 8 Virtual exhibition with aerial photos of GDR cities taken by Lothar Willmann (provisional version)

One big challenge is the language question. Compared with the institute's website the content of the new online portal will be eminently in progress. Other than is the case with the IRS pages it will be impossible to translate all posts. Google's translator plugin is no real solution.

Conclusion

In addition to the traditional operations of the IRS archives which are already often digitally supported (acquisition, indexing, and provision of archival materials) it becomes more and more important for the IRS Scientific Collections actively to communicate knowledge, be it offline or online. Especially with regard to their new online portal on GDR planning history this means that researchers and archivists increasingly have to create and curate content themselves. One consequence of the IRS being a visual knowledge hub is that ever more papers in private hands will be offered to be acquired by its archives.

Future challenges come up on the horizon. From time to time e.g. it happens that the archives receive files with digitized objects without also getting the original materials (by now this refers mostly to written documents and photos). This new way of acquisition already leads to rather interesting questions concerning the adequate description of such materials and their terms of use. What would be much more challenging however was if the Scientific Collections once decided systematically to collect materials from the youngest past such as personal papers of architects and urban planners from post-GDR East Germany: Strongly dealing with digital born materials would challenge the archival work fundamentally, taking into account that what has been the main business of the IRS archives until now will remain anyway. That may seem far away but the past 20 years have illustrated that the Scientific Collections of IRS Erkner continuously have to face significant changes—and that they can be confident thinking of the future as well.

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