



Gaslight and Gas Lamps of Berlin

Germany

First introduced in 1826, the streets of Berlin were once lit by over 80,000 gas lamps; about 43,500 remain today. While gas lighting once characterized metropolitan centers around the globe, most gas fixtures have been replaced, leaving Berlin among the last bastions and home to more than half of the world's surviving gas street lamps. The lamps themselves, which represent four main styles as well as many unique ones, date from the nineteenth century to the post-WWII era and are both an important element of industrial heritage and a character-defining feature of the urban landscape. But it is also the gaslight, the aura it casts across the darkness of the Berlin's avenues and neighborhoods, that uniquely defines the experience of nighttime Berlin and is a treasured aspect of life in the city.

The government has called for replacement of the remaining lamps with electrified fixtures over the next eight years, with plans to only save a small number. Over 1,000 have been lost in the last year alone, and demolition contractors have been given financial incentives to finish ahead of schedule. Berlin residents, as well as the international community, have been protesting the loss of the gas lamps, not only because of their social value and cultural significance, but also because of the questionable rationale for their replacement. Proponents for demolition claim that new lamps will be more cost-effective and ecologically friendly, but opponents counter that proper full-cost accounting, which incorporates a life-cycle-based assessment of all economic, environmental, and social costs, suggests otherwise. The situation represents an important moment for the heritage field to demonstrate the full range of benefits that historic resources provide to society, and the costs associated with their loss. Inclusion on the Watch seeks to raise awareness about the plight of these lamps in Berlin, and to also underscore the need for the heritage field to engage in these types of analyses to better rationalize its cause.