

Public Space in Downtown Areas: Parallels between North American City Centers and Friedrichstraße in Berlin

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In large metropolitan areas, the value of urban open space has always been recognized by the urban population. The state of open spaces in a city reflects the complexities of the social life and of the economical situation. If one role of the open spaces in downtown areas needs reconsideration. The relationship between open space and public life, that generates an image of a dense, diverse, classless, and democratic society, has undergone a fundamental transformation.

Looking at North American and European city centers and their open spaces today, the following tendencies can be observed:

1. monostructure of functions
2. homogeneity of the open spaces and inversion of indoor and outdoor space
3. privatization and control of public space, segregation of urban population
4. transformation of downtown areas into museums
5. parallels between the mall and mains street concepts in America and Germany

PUBLIC SPACE IN NORTH AMERICAN DOWNTOWN AREAS

Modern city planning replaced networks of multi-use neighbourhoods with a model that separates living, working, production, and leisure within the city. The city is fragmented through this reduction of specialized areas to technical functions. Apartments were built in the suburbs. Places of work partly persisted in the downtown areas, but offices were also built outside of downtown, following the idea of the decentralized concentration. Shopping centers were constructed extensively in the countryside. Leisure activities were directed towards theme parks.

These fragments were connected through highways. After this development downtown areas could only be used as tourists' attractions, if they had an attractive, historic core, which concentrated monostructurally and seasonally on visitors' activities. If they did

not have an interesting heritage, they were ruined by neglect and often became ghettoized areas.

There exists a tendency for the density of the city center to decrease while the density of the suburbs increases. In many cities in the USA, the suburbs have de-colonized the city. The suburbanites do not even come downtown to work, to go to the cinema or theatre, or to shop. They find all these amenities in their own or in a neighbouring suburb. This flight from downtown has led to a deurbanization of downtown areas. Important attributes of city cores such as density, mixture of functions, public transport were lost.

Following the decline and destruction of many buildings, the downtown was no longer a place with central functions and central importance, no longer a place of identification with the city. The downtown areas themselves have become suburbs of their own suburbs. The centers have been deurbanized.

Because of this development city officials and developers thought of two attempts of revitalization:

- Malls and mixed-use developments with own circulation systems
- Revitalization of the historic Main Street

In the sixties and seventies megastructures were developed to try to save the dying American downtown areas. These huge autonomous compounds contain shops, hotels, conference rooms, and restaurants. They were frequently linked through skywalks. In cities with hot climate tunnels were constructed.

1. Monostructure of Functions

Mainly office towers, some shops, and few apartment buildings were built in city centers. Fassades, that serve as advertisement screens, are an indicator of the commercialization.

Urban life was concentrated in certain locations, certain hours, and certain categories of 'acceptable' activities. After working hours and on week-ends, the center is devitalized through the functional monostructure.

2. Homogeneity of the Open Spaces and Inversion of Indoor and Outdoor Space

The mixture of types of buildings and of functions was given up. Variety was only achieved by esthetic means through use of different materials, form or color of the buildings, rather than through different functions or variety in structure.

Their main entrances are directly from the underground parking. Blank walls homogenize the streets.

The compounds do not animate the surrounding streets and sidewalks. They are self-centered, and lack direct street relation. Their inner circulation systems inverse indoor and outdoor space.

3. Privatization and Control of Public Space, Segregation of Urban Population

The mixture of the urban population to be observed on public streets is hardly possible in malls and indoor plazas, and it is not wanted. The indoor worlds are realms with special regulations. Users have to be willing to follow the rules, e.g. to consume, or they are excluded. Groups of people are thereby segregated. "The public" is divided into several "publics" of populations of the same descent, education, income, and way of thinking.

Public streets were emptied through parallel circulation systems as passages or skywalks. Moreover, streets became more and more dangerous, because they were not observed and controlled by passers-by anymore. Originally passages were thoroughfares or short-cuts between streets. However, they were developed as systems that attract their own population and divide it from the ordinary person on the street.

The indoor worlds such as shopping malls, arcades, atriums, underground cities, and skywalk systems want to substitute for the lost public space in streets or on plazas. These spaces are nearly always privately-controlled, offering privatized versions of the once public street life. The potential for these plazas to be truly public is highly dependent on the owner's attitude. Therefore, the result is privatization and control of open space and public life.

SECOND ATTEMPT OF REVITALIZATION: THE REVITALIZATION OF THE HISTORIC MAIN STREET

The construction of huge, autonomous megastructures did not lead to a livable city center. These compounds did not animate their surrounding open spaces. The cities' physical appearance became similar throughout the continent. The downtown areas therefore lack individual character.

In the eighties and nineties, the disadvantages of this development were taken into account by planners and politicians. They looked for a new strategy to revitalize the deserted and unsafe downtown areas, and they wanted to give their cities a new identity. Like in Europe, preservation of the historical heritage of small scale build-

ings directed towards the streets, emphasis on walking instead of driving, and a vital street life, became the new guidelines for the restoration and creation of the American downtown areas.

Where historical complexes were already destroyed, new buildings with historical appearance were erected. Naturally grown cities were simulated.

4. Transformation of Downtown Areas into Museums

These "historical downtowns" can be interpreted as theme parks of history. The functions in these new, pseudo-revitalized city centers and in the renovated areas were directed towards tourism and shopping, not towards living and working in an urban environment. Downtown areas were transformed into museums.

5. Parallels between the revitalization concepts of Malls/MXDs and Main Streets

The simulation of city life did not lead to a revitalization of the downtown areas based on real and diverse urban life, but it intensified the negative tendencies, that were already introduced in the sixties: monostructure of functions, commercialization, segregation of the urban population, privatization and control of open space. Malls and revitalized Main Streets are similar concepts.

PUBLIC SPACE IN A EUROPEAN CITY CENTER: FRIEDRICHSTRAÙE IN BERLIN

The situation in the city center of Berlin after the fall of the wall in 1989 can be compared to the situation in American city centers in the sixties. The situation of Friedrichstraße in Berlin in the year 1989 resembles many American downtown areas (e.g. disperse building structure with many voids, no vital street life, deserted open spaces).

After the fall of the wall, the revitalization of the city center, that is located in the former eastern part of the city, became one of the most important directions of the urban planning in Berlin. The historical situation is different, evidently, but the dynamics and intentions for the revitalization are similar.

The leading model of the new planning was called "Critical Reconstruction" of the "European City." That meant reconstruction and maintenance of the street pattern of the 19th century, of the block structure, of the height of the buildings, of stone facades, and of the open spaces.

The building type, that was introduced to fill and to revitalize the city center, was called "mixed-use commercial building." It consists of nine storeys above ground and four below ground. The first and second floors as well as the first basement floor are to be filled with shops and restaurants. From the third to the seventh floor offices are planned. The eighth and the ninth storey are reserved

for apartments, and the remaining three underground floors contain parking.

Housing had to be 20 per cent. This was achieved with small luxury apartments on top of the buildings as well as apartment hotels. In comparison to other city centers in Germany this figure is very low. Housing occupancy in the center normally is 50 to 80 per cent.

The most prestigious project are the Friedrichstadt Gallerias ("Friedrichstadt Passagen.") They form three blocks in the center of the Friedrichstraße, near the legendary boulevard "Unter den Linden." (Block 207: architect Jean Nouvel, investor: Roland Ernst; block 206: architect Henry N. Cobb, investor: Tishman Speyer Properties; block 205: architect Oswald Mathias Ungers, investor: Arc Union/Bouyues). These three blocks measure 60 meters by 90 meters each. 1400 million DM was invested for a brut floor area 99600 squaremeters, containing 35 per cent shops and restaurants, 59 per cent offices, 5 per cent apartments and 1 per cent cultural functions. The floor area ratio is 6.5. The three complexes are connected by an underground passage.

Comparing this German strategy of downtown revitalization with the revitalization in North American city centers, several similarities are notable. What both have in common is the reevaluation of the city center, that had been neglected for decades, especially in the USA. But this return to the center is mainly a geographical one. The structure and function of a vivid downtown, that implies mixed-use neighborhoods, was not rebuilt.

Historically, the city of Berlin consisted of many similar mixed-use neighborhoods. The center is now directed towards service and business, whereas huge housing areas are built as suburbs outside of the city. Berlin is fragmented by this specialization.

The displacement of housing towards the suburbs leads to a deurbanization of the center by means of depopulation. The center is only frequented during rush hours and lunch breaks. At night and on week-ends, it is becoming a deserted area. In Germany, there is a high demand for housing in the city center. Therefore this planning means mismanagement.

1. Monostructure of Functions

The new buildings in the Friedrichstraße contain shops (mainly clothing), banks, automobile showrooms (Mercedes), offices, and hotels. The center is becoming a central business district and not an individual city center. The name "mixed-use commercial building" is a euphemism. There is no mixed use. Thus, like in America, we find a monostructure of functions in the central area of Berlin. This one-dimensional structure can hardly adapt to changing needs of different uses.

2. Homogeneity of the Open Spaces and Inversion of Indoor and Outdoor Space

The regulation of streetwidth (22 meters) and the height of new buildings (22 meters) was set up to create a homogeneous streetscape. However, homogeneity in a negative way results from monostructures. The shopping compounds and indoor galleries do not attract street life. The banks and car showrooms of the Friedrichstraße do not encourage window shopping and strolling along the sidewalk. This leads to functional homogeneity and social devaluation of the street.

The autonomous compounds of the Friedrichstadt Gallerias are directed towards their interior rather than towards the street. Private indoor plazas like the "Place Voltaire" in block 206 want to substitute for outdoor public streets and plazas. These commercial buildings lack a direct street relation, and they have direct access from the parking garage.

3. Privatization and Control of Public Space, Segregation of Urban Population

The tendency of gentrification is obvious in the Friedrichstraße. Small shops and little trade and craft businesses, families and subcultures are expelled through demolition of old buildings or high rents. The remaining population is ranked hierarchically by its buying power and reduced to the role of passive consumers. The new trade spaces and luxury apartments are directed towards high-class shops, high-profile businesses, and high-income professionals.

4. Transformation of Downtown Areas into Museums

The regulations which have directed the design of Friedrichstraße originate in the late 19th century city (street pattern, block structure, height of the buildings, stone facades). The simulation of a naturally grown neighborhood can be found in blocks that were divided into pieces simulating different architectural styles and ages, and in the construction of new buildings that pretend to be old.

The historical tradition of Friedrichstraße as a night life area, as it was in the twenties, with many bars, clubs, and theaters is an image which the new builders want to promote in their advertising, to give the street back its historical value as an address.

PARALLELS BETWEEN NORTH AMERICAN CITY CENTERS AND FRIEDRICHSTRAÙE IN BERLIN

We have found many similarities between the planning for American downtown areas and Friedrichstraße in Berlin. This is remark-

able, because the official directing ideas of the German planning were the "Critical Reconstruction" and the "European City". The reconstruction was not critical. It was partly historical, partly economical. The public discussion and the economical promotion of Friedrichstraße are hypocritical. The new downtown does not represent a European city, rather it has many components of American central business districts.

OUTLOOK

If we want our cities and their public spaces to be open, human, tolerant, accessible, and adaptable to changing causes and fashions, how can we achieve it?

Developing general guidelines for city planning is not the right direction. Efforts that are made to solve the city through developing general city patterns are questionable. They often become recipe books, that contain overall proposals for urban planning. They are based on the wrong assumption that common design guidelines can fit every city and every town. But every city has its own language, pattern, history, and requirements, and thus it has to be analyzed and designed individually. But some points should always be taken into account concerning planning, revitalizing, or generally dealing with cities:

The downtown area has an important role for the whole city. In economical terms, constructing in the center is desirable, because the technical infrastructure is already existing, whereas in a new suburb it has to be constructed newly. Public transport often serve the center, if it has not already been dismantled. For ecological reasons, a city should be densified in order to stop the urban sprawl.

City planning has to direct towards the urban population. Each city and each business is dependent on their users, consumers, and passers-by. A city center that is not planned according to the residents' needs and desires will not survive, neither in an economical, nor in a social way.

The planning process has to become more democratic. City planning may not be dominated by speculation.

Adaptability and flexibility are key words in city planning. Historical cities have survived because they are based on flexibility. Monostructures and the creation of a final situation of a city, as it was done in the Friedrichstraße in Berlin, contradict the adaptability of the city to changing needs.

One essential quality of the open spaces is accessibility and multifunctional use. Plazas and streets, that are only accessible to a limited part of the population, and that are only serving one function, are not truly public.

Strategies to make our cities more livable have to be developed from the actual social, cultural, and economical situation of the city. For every planner concerned with the urban environment, this presents a tremendous challenge.

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