

Where is Potsdamer Platz?

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"I can not find Potsdamer Platz! No, I mean, here... It is not this! Because at the Potsdamer Platz, there was the café Josti... This was a lively square... trolley cars, horse-drawn buses and two cars, mine and the one of chocolate – Herman... The Wertheim department store was here, too. And, then, suddenly the banners appeared here... The Whole Square was lined up with them... and the People were not friendly anymore and the police were not either. But I will not give up until I have found the Potsdamer Platz!"¹



Fig. 1. Film still of Potsdamer Platz in "Wings of Desire", directed by Wim Wenders

In one of the scenes of Wim Wenders film "Wings of Desire," an old man walks with his angel, first next to the Berlin Wall and then towards the area where the Potsdamer Platz once existed. This huge piece of no-man's-land was a symbol of the lost past of a thriving metropolis in the twenties and of the destructive legacy of Germany's history. Wim Wender's film was probably one of the last pieces of documentation that recorded a Berlin, which has been erased by the construction boom after the fall of the wall.

In 1989 three international investors, Daimler Benz, Sony, and A+T, bought the Potsdamer Platz as a prime opportunity for real estate speculation. Suddenly this land became the stage for an international flow of capital and open to the forces of supply and demand. With this development

Potsdamer Platz became not only the "largest construction site" in Europe but also a constant attraction for the media and arguably the best-advertised piece of property in Berlin. Through a special information center, the Info Box, WebPages, newspapers, and architecture magazines one could follow the constant process of construction on a real time basis from any location in the world.

After eight years of rapid and intense urban planning and building construction, the process of making a new urban center has become a reality. Is this intervention an integrated piece of urban landscape within Berlin? Does it capture the urban and architectural identity of the city? The result is highly ambiguous and demonstrates the tension between the city and the corporate investors. This essay explores the hybrid identity of the urban and architectural visions created at Potsdamer Platz. This identity is denied by its mythical past, by the city's agenda of the "European city" and the investor's corporate image.

To develop the future of Potsdamer Platz, a look back to the past was required, a look at what Potsdamer Platz used to be. The mythical image of Potsdamer Platz reached its peak in the golden 20's, when it became Europe's busiest square and the epitome of the cultural and modern city life. The first modern traffic light was built on the square to control a never-ending, almost unstoppable stream of people and traffic. With its bright neon advertising the area was framed by department stores, cafes and theaters. The historic Potsdamer Platz was never laid out as a square, as the word "Platz" suggests. The "Platz" was just a vague geographical description of an area, which was merely a disordered convergence of several roads and a path. It is located on the West Side of Leipziger Platz at the end of Leipziger Strasse. These two linked plazas – Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz – evolved over two hundred years to become one of Europe's busiest squares.

Due to its proximity to Hitler's chancellery, the Potsdamer Platz was nearly completely destroyed in February 1944. In the post war period, the reconstruction proposals for the area were sacrificed under the tensions of the Cold War, since at this location the Russian, British and American sectors met.



Fig. 2. Potsdamer Platz in the 1920s.

After the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the few left over ruins on the East and West side were demolished which created a wasteland with virtually no buildings on it at all. Once again, Potsdamer Platz became a tourist attraction as from this point one could see the Berlin Wall, the no-man's land and the watchtowers. One experienced the powerful void in the city that represented the tensions of the Cold War and the interface between East and West. Potsdamer Platz was gone, a huge empty field where only the memories remained, just as the old man in Wim Wenders movie says: "I cannot find Potsdamer Platz! In the afternoon, there, I chatted and drank coffee, I observed the people, before I smoked my cigar by Löhse and Wolff, a tobacco shop with a good reputation, just there on the other side. So, this, here, can not be Potsdamer Platz, No."²

A new reality started for this wasteland when in 1990 the Daimler Benz Group bought fifteen acres from the Democratic City administration. Negotiations started between the city and Daimler Benz months before the fall of the wall. The Daimler Benz group described it in the promotional video: "The night of November 9, 1989, marked the beginning of German reunification. After this dramatic outcome for the people a new development became a real possibility, even an absolute necessity. This endeavor became the joint vision of the city and the Daimler Benz Group."³ In the public view this was the first big scandal of the area and its development. Not only had negotiations begun before the fall of the Berlin Wall but also the fact that it was sold for a very low price (between a third to a half of the estimated market value) made it even worse.⁴

Potsdamer Platz is an important symbol for the city of Berlin. The city officials feared that an isolated center could be created in this area as only a small number of investors had been involved in the purchase of a huge piece of land within the center of Berlin. The potential result could be an "island" of shopping malls with interior semi-public places or a high-density service area within the downtown area of Berlin. Concomitant with these questions regarding the develop-

ment of the Potsdamer Platz, there was also a need for an architecture that provided Berlin with an identity as a capital.

Competitions were held to develop a master plan for development of Potsdamer Platz "in close consultation with future users and investors. In general the guiding principle of the "European City" with its strict division between public streets, squares and parks on one hand and private lots and inner courtyards on the other, was a central requirement."⁵ The selection of the model of the European City was strongly enforced by the Senate building director Hans Stimmann, who based his argument on the past failure of Berlin's urban planning. "Berlin is the place where theoretical and design consequences can be drawn from the practical experience of the urban planning and architectural ideas of early modernism, postwar modernism and postmodernism. Yet Berlin is also the place where the urban planning strategies of the postwar decades, with their separation of functions, their ignorance toward the ownership conditions of individual lots and their automobile-oriented traffic planning were tested and failed—in the socialist east. Berlin was the city whose recent political history as the capital of Nazi Germany imbued it with the understandable desire for consistent destruction of the historical urban plan in the center.⁶ It was also argued that urban planning immediately following the Second World War destroyed as much of the historical fabric of the city as the war itself. Based on this, Stimmann, the Senate Building director, argued for a strategy of "Critical Reconstruction."

The term Critical Reconstruction originated in the 1980's at the International Building Exhibition (IBA), which was then directed by Josef Kleihues. The motto of the IBA: "inner city as a place to live" describes the aim to rediscover the quality of the traditional elements, which make up the structure of a city, and the re-evaluation of the social conditions for housing. The programmatic aim, as expressed in Kleihues' concept of "critical reconstruction of the city" focuses on the dialectic between historical continuity and contemporary theoretic and artistic expectations.

Critical reconstruction was not as rigorously applied in Potsdamer Platz as in other developments after 1989, such as Pariser Platz or Friedrich Strasse. However, the main essence was seen in concept of the "European City." The formula to create this type was expressed in a system of small-scale, lot related arrangements as the competition brief required: "the topos of the lot or lot structure could prove a key concept for further considerations if it is understood as a cipher for functional, structural and formal scales and mixtures rather than merely as an overcome historical value."⁷ This strategy was rather artificial as it attempted to disguise the reality of the existence of only three major property owners of Potsdamer Platz.

When in June 1991, the two-stage competition was launched to redevelop Potsdamer Platz the question of identity had a number of diverse reactions by architects. Libeskind clearly states his position in his competition entry that: "The identity of Berlin cannot be reformed in the ruins

of history or in the illusory reconstruction of an arbitrarily selected past. The new city must be allowed to emerge of a mosaic and a puzzle...In its formation no style or system should be given priority".⁸ The proposals for the competition varied from a group of seven slim towers by Kollhoff, a romanticized version of the American skyscraper, to the colored set piece of stage-managed fantasies by William Alsop and Jan Stormer.

The identity for Berlin definitely favored a conservative trend. The first prize went to the Munich architects, Hilmer & Sattler. Their vision was a compact European City with more intricately structured spaces. "The plan is not on the American urban model of high-rise accumulation used around the world, but rather on the compact spatially a complex European City. ... Urban life should not arise in the interior of large structured building complexes, but on streets and squares." The design aimed at a new interpretation of the "Berlin Block", not in the traditional form of continuous block edge development, but as a succession of "large square houses" with 50 m. sides.⁹ In the media the proposal was



Fig. 3. Model of Hilmer and Sattler's first-prize scheme for the Potsdamer and Leibziger Platz competition, 1991.

soundly criticized as dull and mediocre but it best adhered to the concept of the "European City" and was the most suitable for continuous development by the different interest groups.

Second stage competitions conducted by each of the three investor groups defined the final master plan and the architecture. The Sony Corporation went with the architect Helmut Jahn. The master plan was completely rejected by Helmut Jahn. He wanted to combine "a formal and spatial and technical vision and order 10 for the site and intended to show the strength and technical capabilities of his clients, the Sony Corporation. The buildings, which are higher than anywhere else in the area, are endless glass curtain walls, with a composition of images determined by nighttime light installations. Several of the buildings are located around a huge atrium representing a modern urban space. This semi-public space will be the "urban theatre for life or video events." Where is Potsdamer Platz? Maybe we can find some of its

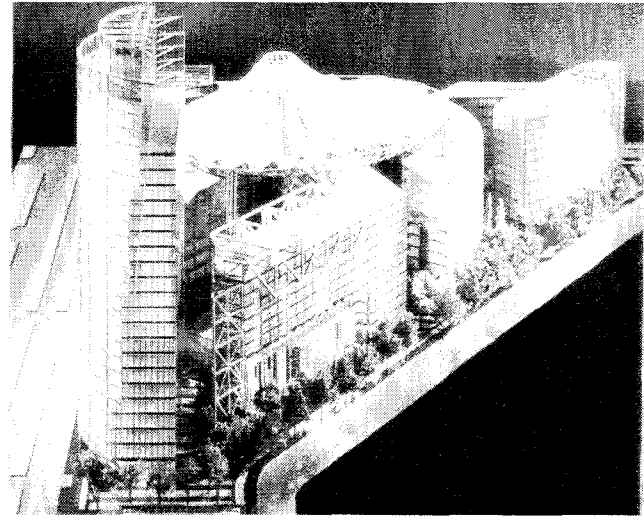


Fig. 4. Helmut Jahn of Murphy/Jahn, model from the Sony site.

urban spectacle in the atrium, but the anonymous architecture suggests building types that can be found anywhere else in the world.

The winning submission for the second stage competition of the southeast sector, owned by Daimler Benz, was won by the Italian architect, Renzo Piano. Piano not only gave a new character to Hilmer & Sattler's block structure in his overall design but also was the only one to propose a strong concept for the public space. He developed the idea of a public plaza, the Piazza. The Piazza transforms the dead end condition of Potsdamer Strasse (which had to be preserved) into a revitalized center of urban activity and social interaction. The other improvement was the development of a new topographical edge towards the Staatsbibliothek (National Library). Renzo Piano designed towards the east, behind the national library, an oblong building housing the casino and theater. Its design moves away from the orthogonal block system and blends in with Scharoun's building to form an urban entity. The unsettled edges north and south became an extensive water garden.

The first building to be erected at Potsdamer Platz was the Info Box in 1995. The red floating box on stilts was a computerized intelligent device to ostensibly put the public at ease and to involve it with this construction boom. The Info Box clients, such as A+T, Daimler Benz, Sony, Bewag, German Telecom, German Railway and the Senate for Building, expressed their visions through the incorporation of high-end technology. Interactive videos, movies and Internet access computers demonstrated the urban, architectural and infrastructural planning related to Potsdamer Platz and Berlin. Potsdamer Platz had become a complete multi media spectacle. From a viewing platform on top of the buildings one can observe the reality: The "largest construction site in Europe."

To bring the project closer to popular acceptance the Sony Corporation used in its video an animated image of an icon

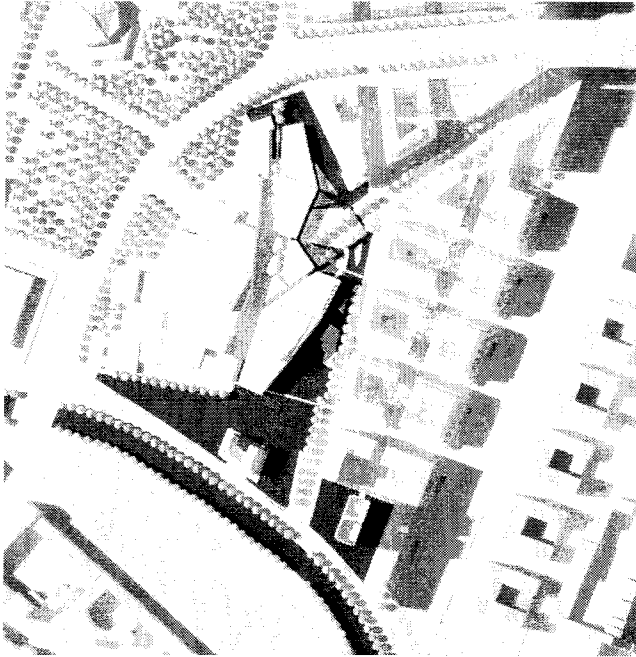


Fig. 5. Renzo Piano for the Daimler Benz sector, the winning submission.

of Berlin, the sparrow "Ikke."¹¹ The sparrow describes the planning by Helmut Jahn. The other major media event sponsored by Sony was the move of the Kaisersaal cafe of the Esplanade Hotel seventy meters back to provide additional space for the street. The Kaisersaal was one of the two remaining buildings on the Potsdamer Platz and was reputed to have been a favorite of the last Kaiser, Wilhelm II. It was also the favorite of Wim Wender's and was the site for the final shots of the movie, "Wings of Desire". The video by Sony, presented at the Info Box, shows Wim Wender discussing the unique building of Berlin and in a fascinating time-lapse motion photography the Kaisersaal move from one place to another, a real masterpiece of technology. The cost was reported to have reached thirty three million dollars. Innovative and technical visions are core factors for the image of the Sony Corporation and this act of ambiguous historical preservation is arguably one of the world's most expensive corporate advertisements.

The Potsdamer Platz sector by Daimler Benz is promoted as the International center of the world or the "heart of an European metropolis." Certainly in the German context the Daimler Benz Corporation has a different position than Sony. Not only can the Daimler Benz star be included as a symbol of Germany's prosperity but also Daimler Benz has always played a role in the destiny of Berlin. Obviously, the architecture of the Daimler Benz sector is a reflection of its corporate image within German society and is therefore more in harmony with the model of the "European City" than Sony. The development of the Daimler Benz sector has the most extensive exhibition including plans, models and three-dimensional video showing fly throughs and walk

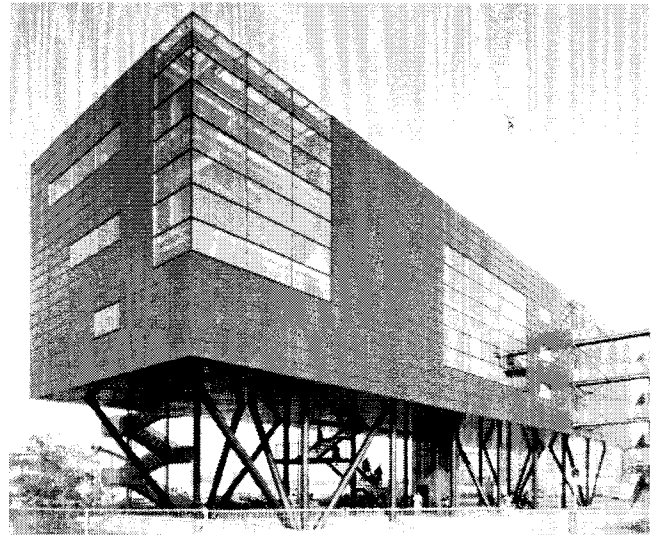


Fig. 6. The first building to be erected at Potsdamer Platz was the "Info Box" in 1995 designed by the architects Schneider and Schumacher.

throughs of the future architecture. Once again, extremely sophisticated and expensive tools are used to promote prime pieces of real estate.

In the video, the Daimler Benz site is represented as a piece of a puzzle, well fitted into the city. Traffic connections and the proximity of the Cultural Forum to the national library, philharmonic and the national gallery are intended to supply cultural and social integrity within the city. However, there are problems with the integration of the different sectors or linkages to existing districts. For example, the new theater by Piano has no physical connection to the national library and large traffic streets divide the Sony and the Daimler Benz area. Potsdamer Platz appears to be contained within itself like a fragment within the city of Berlin. It becomes just as it is seen in the video simulation; a piece of an international, corporate puzzle.

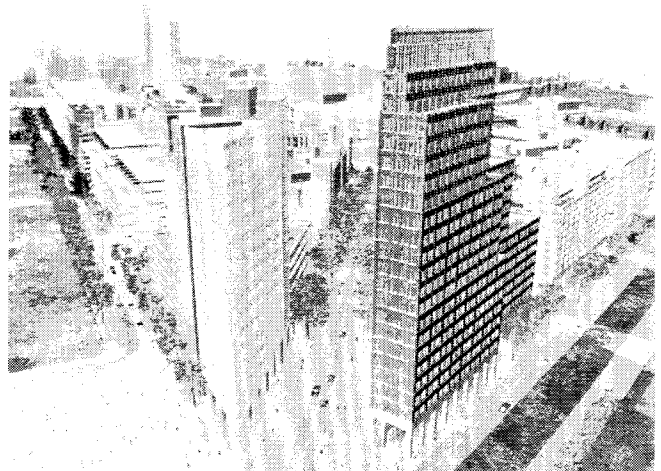


Fig. 7. Aerial view from the promotional video: Potsdamer Platz - The Film, 1995.

In the video a walkthrough takes the observer through the “emerging quarter” starting with the old Potsdamer Strasse, leading into the renamed “Marlene Dietrich Square” and finally into the open water garden. The amazing experience is that one takes exactly the same path in reality. As in the script in the video, one walks along Potsdamer Strasse lined with cafes and shops and its old existing trees. The overall atmosphere is calm and controlled. The Strasse then leads into the gentle and welcoming Piazza and from there into the open water gardens. Everything is pleasant, “an urban and natural delight.” Yet something remains missing. Where is Potsdamer Platz?

CONCLUSION

The Potsdamer Platz was designed with its own set of rules and the sheer size of the project has enabled it to create its own cultural and social life. The visitor, who has seen and “experienced” the Potsdamer Platz via a computerized multimedia presentation, strolls within the pleasant atmosphere of well-scaled public spaces. The street has been rediscovered as the main public event in the city and the buildings are placed “once again along the plotlines of the street as a sign of a regained historical consciousness.”¹² At first one marvels at the perfection and pleasance of Potsdamer Platz, it is just as it was planned and advertised. Then one questions and wonders. The visitors move slowly, contained and controlled within the area. There is no surprise, no spectacle, it is a perfect world: an artificial and nostalgic fragment of a planned European city.

On the surface it is an ambiguous mixture between anonymous, corporate architecture, new technological visions and a traditional vocabulary. Interestingly the three towers on Potsdamer Platz tell the story: the glass tower by Helmut Jahn, the filigree by Piano and the tower in stone with punch-

holed facades. Some architects, in particular Piano, were able to transcend the concept of the “European City” and created pleasant environments with diverse sequences of spaces. However, the net effect of market conditions has been the creation of a place for special events, a consumer and Leisure Park. Every third visitor is a tourist, and the majority of the foreigners are Americans and Italiens.¹³ The Potsdamer Platz is a tourist attraction, ‘a Kodak moment’ within the city of Berlin.

NOTES

- ¹ Wenders, Wim and Handke, Peter, *Der Himmel über Berlin*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990): 57.
- ² *ibid.*, 57
- ³ Daimler Benz Project, *Potsdamer Platz –The Film*, (Debis Immobilienmanagement, 1995)
- ⁴ Francesca Rogier, “Growing Pains: From the Opening of the Wall to the Wrapping of the Reichstag”, *Assemblage, Abstract* (April 1996): 49
- ⁵ Stimmann, Hans, “New Berlin Office and Commercial Buildings”, *Downtown Berlin, Building the Metropolitan Mix* (Berlin: Bertelsmann, 1995): 17
- ⁶ *ibid.*, 7
- ⁷ *ibid.*, 17
- ⁸ Libeskind, Daniel, as quoted by Alan Balfour, “Berlin Desired”, in *World Cities, Berlin* (London: Academy Editions, 1995): 67
- ⁹ Hilmer and Sattler, as quoted by Hans Stimmann, “New Berlin Office and Commercial Buildings”, *Downtown Berlin, Building the Metropolitan Mix* (Berlin: Bertelsmann, 1995): 17
- ¹⁰ Jahn, Helmut, as quoted in *Architectural Review* (January 1999): 44
- ¹¹ Baumeister, Nicolette, “Architektur im Zeitsprung”, *Architektur in Berlin, Jahrbuch 1996* (Berlin: Junius Verlag GmbH, 1996): 59
- ¹² Koolhaas, Rem, “Shipwrecked” *S,M,L,XL* (New York: the Monacelli Press, 1995): 259
- ¹³ Westphal, Dirk, “Populäres Ziel Potsdamer Platz”, *Berliner Morgenpost* (30 January 1999).