

Searching for Identity through Nostalgia and Modernity—Tendencies in German Architecture after the Re-unification in 1990

ANNE-CATRIN SCHULTZ

Wentworth Institute of Technology

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Architecture has been used to demonstrate political change in many instances throughout history. This research paper explores tendencies in German architecture after West and East Germany unified in 1990 after more than 40 years under separate political systems, economic conditions and architectural development. The main narrative of the research traces the process of defining new identities after the collapse of a strong physical border and a shift in political and economic structure. Practically overnight an area of more than 40,000 square miles was added to West Germany, and the land and inhabitants of the former GDR joined a lifestyle that seemed to have been driven by consumption and opportunity. Over the next few decades, a building boom unfolded in the area that was formerly East Germany and in the city of Berlin. Architecture after 1990, the year of the German re-unification, also modeled a set of values aiming at progress, unity and technical ability. It retained a preference for glass curtain walls and stone veneers, balancing optimism for a great future with nostalgia for 19th century's past. In the former West Germany, the architectural evolution was little impacted, but the former East Germany underwent a comprehensive renewal, especially in the realm of infrastructure, civic, commercial and transportation buildings. This paper compares three specific urban interventions, the Berlin Potsdamer Platz development, Leipzig Hauptbahnhof (Leipzig main train station), and Coutbus Technical University Library, that aimed at identifying and articulating shared formal principles that signify a united country. After 1990, Western architects seized the opportunity and secured numerous commissions along a new type of frontier, and their urban and architectural interventions had the effect of creating and supporting a new German identity.

INTRODUCTION

German architecture had already gone through a re-definition after World War II, a phase of reconstruction and political articulation that in the West resulted in a strong push for transparent, modern, and well-engineered buildings, demonstrating an open and ultimately good society. In the East, modernity was one vehicle to show progress and showcase the SED (Communist Party) regime (1949-1990). Architecture after 1990, the year of the German re-unification, also modeled a set of values aiming at progress, unity and technical ability. It retained a preference

for glass curtain walls and stone veneers, balancing optimism for a great future with nostalgia for the past. In the former West Germany, the architectural evolution was little impacted, while the former East Germany underwent a comprehensive renewal, especially in the realm of infrastructure, civic, commercial and transportation buildings.

This paper compares a series of urban interventions such as the Berlin Potsdamer Platz development, Leipzig Hauptbahnhof (Leipzig main train station) and Coutbus Technical University Library, aiming to identify and articulate shared formal principles that signify a united country. Many of the sites signal public places but are part of private (corporate) development; they expand on modernism but nod to the urbanism and the architecture of previous centuries; they display modern functional forms and indulge the 21st Century's taste for the image. Especially new public and civic projects in former East Germany had to reconcile the duality of different political ideologies, neoliberal capitalism on the one hand and the former ideals of a socialist republic on the other hand. This examination represents an analysis of a series of completed sites and considers the intention formulated in the briefs that initiated them. The study reveals what Emily Pugh calls the "colonialization of the Eastern part of Germany by Western architects."¹ After 1990, Western architects seized the opportunity and secured numerous commissions along a type of new frontier, and their urban and architectural interventions played the role of creating and supporting a new German identity. This paper documents the tendencies and narratives articulated between nostalgia and avant garde that characterize German architecture of re-unification.

DEVELOPMENTS AFTER THE RE-UNIFICATION

After the German re-unification, construction sites seemed to spring up everywhere; multiple cranes became a common view, as if the healing of the rift between the two parts of the country could be achieved with large amounts of concrete, brick, steel and glass. Many institutions and sites underwent necessary upgrades, others seemed to be in a fever, rushing to bring the architecture of the West to the former border and beyond. While there might be exceptions, large-scale projects with high public visibility fell into the same design conventions large-scale projects all over the Western capitalist world seem to obey. Star architects delivered buildings that re-configured familiar elements of the 20th century city: glass curtain walls,



Figure 1. Aerial view of Potsdamer Platz, Berlin 2018. (Photo: Avda, Wikimedia Commons).

modular fenestration and cladding patterns and slick overall geometries. The 1990s brought the intense commercialization of lucrative parts of cities in the former East Germany, as well as East Berlin, shifting from a planned economy (Planwirtschaft) to dynamic and partly self-regulating capitalist processes. A series of legislative instruments and tax incentives backed the immense amount of construction — mostly following the development scheme established in West Germany. As people struggled to sort out atmospheric sensibilities and possible prejudices between Westerners and Easterners,² initial enthusiasm made space for a now shared reality of unemployment and uncertainty, the building sector did not seem to hesitate to adopt the capitalist model and appearance of urban development common in the West.

Postwar Eastern Germany had seen a variety of architectural tendencies: reconstructions initiated by the Soviet military administration after the war, the historicizing *Zuckerbäckerstil* for representative buildings in the 1950s, representing conservative palaces of Socialism negating Modernism³ as the first phase of the Stalinallee in Berlin and a move towards industrial modular prefabrication resulting in the well-known “Plattenbauten.”⁴ Comparing a series of large-scale developments in the former East Germany reveals how proven historic formulas were combined with buildings that communicated technical sophistication and continued modernism’s curtain walls instead of encouraging an experimental architectural agenda. In many examples, remnants of the past were preserved to maintain a link to former authenticity and to legitimize new buildings as a mere extension of the old. West Germany had undergone the post-war reconstruction, and had turned to a tech-driven and somewhat comprehensive modernism combined with the

reconstruction of areas deemed important for a city’s identity. The ‘50s and ‘60s had seen unprecedented economic growth (Wirtschaftswunder) and expansion of housing and commercial downtowns. Modernism gave way to Postmodernism and the continuation of modern principles at any scale. The term “Wende” suggests a turn, a new direction, which in architecture happened in a streamlined way leaning towards the Western model colonizing the former East.

BERLIN POTSDAMER PLATZ DEVELOPMENT-CAPITALISM TAKES OVER BERLIN MITTE

Potsdamer Platz is more of an intersection than an actual urban space; construction, demolition and destruction have been part of the continuous evolution Potsdamer Platz has undergone over the course of history. In 1991 the Senate of Berlin initiated a design competition to redevelop the 60 hectares of the Potsdamer Platz and its surroundings. Looking back at a long history with several pasts, unrealized proposals and an always promising future, the square was formerly the “Platz vor dem Potsdamer Tor,” located outside of the city walls, before the Potsdam gate. The adjacent Leipziger Platz was designed by architect Philipp von Gerlach and built between 1732 and 1738 under Friedrich Wilhelm I, creating an actual urban space next to the circulation system of the Potsdamer Platz. In 1838 a railway station opened, turning the Potsdamer Platz into a center for cargo transactions and commerce, booming after 1871 — the year of the founding of the German Empire.⁵ During the early 20th century, Potsdamer Platz already had turned into a commercial center and symbol for the “Weimar Republic’s technocratic modernity.”⁶ In the 1920s it was “the busiest traffic knot in Europe with rapid transit train, underground, 26 tram and five bus lines. Each day more than 20,000 cars crossed the square,



Figure 2. Postcard, View of Berlin at the Beginning of the 20th Century. (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

and around 83,000 travelers were counted at Potsdam Railway Station.”⁷ It also developed into a center of entertainment, with a pleasure palace called “Haus Vaterland” (house homeland) and the Ufa-Filmpalast or the “Europa-Tans Pavillon” including theme park-type restaurants such as the Rheinterrassen (with fake waterfalls and electric lightning flashes).⁸ During the Nazi regime, Albert Speer included Potsdamer Platz in his planning of a long North-South axis for his planned capital called “Germania.”⁹ Architectural change was basically the area’s main characteristic over time. Except for a small wine bar (Weinhaus Huth) and scarce ruins of the Hotel Esplanade, the Potsdamer Platz was completely destroyed during World War II and once again during the people’s uprising on June 17, 1953. After the war, the square ended up as a spot where three zones met, the American, British and Soviet sectors. The area turned back to a wasteland along the Berlin wall erected in 1961, separating Germany into east and west. A few decades of neglect followed, until renewed interest in the area in the 1980s. In the 1990s, after the German re-unification, Potsdamer Platz once more take on a message of embraced modernity while preserving the remaining historic fragments. The ballrooms of the former Grandhotel Esplanade had survived the effects of time and were moved in 1996 with enormous effort. The Imperial Ballroom (Kaisersaal), for example, was shifted horizontally via air cushion to a new location 75 meters away from the original one. The urban palaces surrounding the octagonal Leipziger Platz will act as precedents for the urban development in many areas of Berlin in the 1990s. Once more Leipziger and Potsdamer Platz were at the core of the united city, taking on the historic and contemporary identity of Berlin adopting principles of urban city building from the 18th century.

In 1990 the Berlin City Council divided the public land into parcels and sold them off to four private corporations, Sony (Japan), DaimlerChrysler (Germany/United States), Hertie (Germany), and Asea Brown Boveri (Switzerland). Since the properties were sold as continuous pieces of land, even the roads and squares are private, though they give the impression of being public. The 1991 competition required the participants to continue to work with the centur-old plan of the area. While the urban plan was stuck in the 1900s, the buildings that would emerged would be testimony of a global economy and of 20th century nondescript cityscapes worldwide.

The architect Daniel Libeskind states: “During the competition for Potsdamer Platz, I was surprised time and again: All the documents that the Senate presented to the participants used the situation of the Thirties, with lines and structures that were valid half a century ago. But when one looked at specific parts of the territory, then there was absolutely nothing present anymore. This old image of Potsdamer Platz kept everybody captive in a way that there were all these octagons and odd triangles reappearing.”¹⁰

The masterplan by the German architects Hilmer Sattler was selected as the winning scheme — received with some controversy after it was announced. Agreeing with the suggested strategy the Berlin Senate had set up, they stated: “The design is based on the idea of the compact, spatially complex European City, not on the American urban model used all over the world.”¹¹ In an effort to re-define Berlin’s center and send a message to the world of Berlin being back on the international stage, the redevelopment of the Potsdamer Platz was put in motion. The strong tendency to hold on to a historic urban plan in elevation

and massing of the new buildings resulted in a dense testimony of modernism — short skyscrapers of the nondescript international city — when the buildings began to appear.

Historian and writer Brian Ladd states: “The promise of reconciliation was embodied in the newly rebuilt center that would knit together East and West, socially and economically as well as physically. That new center would make Berlin the city its promoters wished it to be, one that would revive the flair of the 1920s and also match the attractions of London, New York, or whichever world city one might point to. Instead of uniting two parts of Germany, Berlin united with the globalized world. The new center was also the old center: it was roughly defined by the district of Mitte (Middle), the eighteenth-century city, which had ended up in the Soviet sector when the city was divided.”¹²

Buildings framing the refurbished five-way intersection appear to fulfill Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s metaphorical promise of the flowering meadows (blühende Landschaften);¹³ they are mixed use, apartments and entertainment in the case of the DaimlerChrysler and Sony Centers, as well as large shopping centers, fueling an expanding consumer culture. Lacking the former subsidies, most Western industries in Berlin collapsed after the Wende. The hope was that good urban design would attract prosperous city dwellers. While differing from each other, the buildings around the massive intersection all use the language of modern urban functionalism. The Potsdamer Platz’s identity was defined by the duality of global commerce situated on a historic city map.

Walter Momper, mayor of Berlin at the time, described the re-invention of the area after 1989 as “the architectural decision of the century”¹⁴ and stated on April 12, 1990, that “the heart of Berlin would beat again.”¹⁵ The re-connection of East and West through Leipziger and Potsdamer Strasse was a first practical step towards the fusing of the two parts of the city. During the phase of planning, a temporary building, the red Info-Box, was set up to inform passersby of the planned interventions. It became an extremely popular destination among Berliners and tourists. The principle of *Critical Reconstruction* which was coined by Berlin architect Josef Paul Kleihues in the 1980s aimed at restoring some of the character lost by capitalist and socialist modernism. Senate Building Director Hans Stimmann would encourage the strategy, promoting pre-World War II styles and typologies, featuring the pedestrian city and suggesting the demolition of mid-century buildings.¹⁶ The odd combination of urban conservatism, some preservation but ultimately international modernist developer architecture was seen by many as a lost opportunity. Attributing national and international significance to the square, it represented the mending of a city and an entire country, a reconciliation between the capitalist nations of the West and the former socialist states of the East.¹⁷ The outcome of the competition was discussed widely in the professional and general press. Writer Sebastian Redecke writes in the *Bauwelt* 41.1991 “The task was enormous, the topic absolutely

unique. It meant to generate a concept for the center of Berlin on a desolate sandy no man’s land with profound symbolic meaning. [...] It remains unconceivable why a large part of the works neglected the urban connection nodes in east-west direction which needed to be articulated, for a triumphant piece of city.”¹⁸

The press criticized the winning scheme as “Neuteutonia.”¹⁹ Richard Rogers was commissioned with a counter proposal of the winning entry. The realization of the scheme was based on input by Renzo Piano, Helmut Jahn, and Giorgio Grassi, who continued the development of the masterplan. The large investors such as Sony, DaimlerChrysler (today SEB) and ABB committed to running competitions for the projects on their sites based on Hilmer and Sattler’s plan organization.²⁰ The stars of the international scene became the players at Potsdamer Platz, winning the individual competitions: Arata Isozaki, Rafael Moneo, Richard Rogers and others. Helmut Jahn’s Sony Center picked up the role of the Potsdamer Platz as middle-class entertainment center with a circus like covered plaza surrounded by glass skinned buildings framing outdoor seating and fountains. It includes movie theaters, the film museum, housing, offices, and Sony’s European headquarters. The fully glazed tower for the headquarters of the German Railroad (Deutsche Bahn) seems to refer to a short piece of Manhattan — deviating from the typical height of low-rise Berlin that building senator Hans Stimmann was determined to continue.

LEIPZIG MAIN TRAIN STATION

One of the biggest train stations in Europe, Leipzig Hauptbahnhof represents a much smaller scope but exhibits a similar duality of historic fragments or schemes combined with a function-based modernist message, communicating neutrality while advertising the winning system of capitalism. Already in 1862, the station was an important transportation hub as the city of Leipzig grew from 107,000 to 450,000 inhabitants between 1871 and 1899. Expanding train traffic led to the decision in 1898 to build a new and generously sized head station for the transportation of people and cargo. Designed and built during the Weimar Republic, the train station by architects William Lossow and Max Hans Kühne displayed large quantities of glass in combination with large spaces embodying their concept of “light and air.”²¹ It was a roughly 300-meter-long building with large domed pavilions as east and western entry halls and a curved central volume that protruded into the urban space containing the waiting halls. Six large steel arches spanned the 26 train platforms. The bombings of Leipzig during WWII caused substantial damage, leaving only the eastern entry hall standing. After the war, it took several years to remove the rubble surrounding the site and to reconstruct the building with a new concrete ceiling and other structural updates. The final repairs and adjustments were completed in 1965. The *Leipziger Volkszeitung* wrote on September 9, 1965: “Everything added up, all thought through the Main Train Station Leipzig became



Figure 3. Leipzig Main Train Station. (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

a meaningful symbol for the reconstruction since 1945, for the energy that inspires Leipzig's diligent citizens."²²

After the German re-unification, the station was renovated and expanded once more, removing the concourse floor and adding two basement levels to create an expansive shopping mall. In the manner of Walter Benjamin, it was named *Promenadenbahnhof*, a 298-meter-long façade, and a giant hall combining old and new. Initially named the “Cathedral of Progress” when the building opened in 1915, the “new” version of it was going to reconnect with that sentiment, offering 30,000 square meters and more than 140 stores based on the competition-winning design by Hentrich-Petschnigg&Partner in Düsseldorf. The new scheme kept the stone shell of the building, expanding into several basements and dissecting what was necessary to turn it into a large contemporary station, a contemporary service center and a high-end shopping mall. The new station was inaugurated on Nov.12 in 1997 and embodied a similar set of forms, a crisp display of tech-based architecture suggesting functionality and political neutrality with a very flexible interpretation of architectural preservation. The station today resembles an airport, exuding the efficiency of a high-end urban shopping center – with a train station — attracting travelers and non-travelers. The revitalization of the train station stood as a symbol for the revitalization of the entire city, a *pars pro toto* similar to the role the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin had taken on. Some members of the public and preservation authorities were skeptical of the radical intervention, concerned about many new volumes and axis systems coming into the station building, compromising its historic integrity and configuration. The functional glass facades that define some of Potsdamer Platz above ground appear underground in Leipzig.

CENTER FOR INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION AND

MEDIA, COUTBUS TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

The Information, Communication and Media Center (Informations-, Kommunikations- und Medienzentrum) (ICMC/IKMZ) of the Brandenburg Technical University represents a new generation of university library that offers all formats of information, media and research needs to researchers, professors and students. It was built for the newly founded university in Cottbus (1991) and built on the location of its predecessor, the University of Civil Engineering. A competition called for modernization and continued campus development of the campus.²³ Designed by the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron based on a vastly altered competition scheme and completed only in 2004, it is located on the eastern part of the campus towards the city. An irregularly curved plan is extruded vertically — analogies with the Aalto vase or Castel del Monte have been made in different places. It is a shiny smooth container with no visible penetrations. Architect Jacques Herzog describes the building as a “solitary landmark” and as “self-referential” and “amoeba-like” in its ground plan. While seemingly random, the form follows “a purposeful configuration of many different flows of movement”²⁴ derived from the dynamic urban circulation and relationships to the rest of the campus. A colorful and large spiral staircase acts as an interior sculpture that alludes to the undulating exterior. Flexible floor plate geometries led to different height spaces and a fluid flexibility. De Meuron describes further: “The colors of the spectrum have been painted in stripes on the floors, supports and walls, following a rational, orthogonal system. They also assist orientation but without a defining color code for fields of study in the building. The colors are reflected in the metal ceilings and shelves to almost psychedelic effect. [...] A white veil is printed on both sides of the building's glazed shell. Texts in different languages and alphabets have been superimposed in so many layers that they are no longer legible, but a pattern



Figure 4. Center for Information, Communication and Media, Coutbus Technical University. (Source: Teodor Bordeianu, Wikimedia Commons).

results whose origin in the world of written signs is unmistakable. The printed pattern breaks the reflection, eliminates the hardness of the glass and makes the body of the building homogeneous.”²⁵ The images embedded in the façade are the illustration of the function — speaking a very direct language deriving from modernism.

CONCLUSION

All three sites appear to combine a strong desire for connecting with the modernism of the early 20th century, instinctively avoiding references to the decades of German separation. As symbols of the new German unity, the buildings suggest a bright and prosperous future. Embodying functional solutions, political neutrality is communicated through glass, metal facades and rhythmic skins, at times reflective, creating an image of anywhere. One can definitely detect analogies with architecture tendencies in Western Germany after WWII, where for example Egon Eiermann embodied the message of democracy in transparent buildings exquisitely detailed and executed. The selected examples are typically the outcome of international competitions, which led to a series of star architects winning the commissions while German architects from the former East were largely absent. Experimentation or a critical discourse with recent architectural production in Eastern Germany did not happen. The projects tell stories of commercial success and cultural production — with private ownership and public realm blending. The outcome of many competitions is a result of the capitalist economy largely ruling the design and construction process — the formal vocabulary being neutral and clean while accepting urban textures of the 19th century. Buildings or spaces left on site were carefully preserved as fragments — giving in to nostalgia, not refraining from radical collaging and alteration. In Berlin, a historic plan gets filled with modernist types of skyscraper construction, tightly packed as if they are 18th century city blocks. In Leipzig, an enormous façade masks a 21st century train station and shopping mall after complete refurbishment. Especially in the Coutbus University library,

there are no physical or literal edges; analogies to the modern skyscraper are common — shortened or buried — above ground on Potsdamer Platz and Coutbus, below ground in Leipzig. A timid type of monumentality unites the projects, with simple and direct narratives (the historic urban plan, the existing facades and the letters printed on the library’s façade) as if a complex discourse would lead to too many misunderstandings.

ENDNOTES

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