

BETWEEN SIMULATION AND INHABITATION:

Money, Technology and People

Berlin 2000:

The Making of Potsdamer Platz

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For most of its history, Berlin has been surrounded by walls. Like no other structure, these walls have determined the city's shape, fabric and function. The Medieval wall protected the city-state and ensured the independence of its burghers. The Renaissance wall became a giant military infrastructure that guaranteed the absolute rule of the elector. In the eighteenth century, the wall provided the king with a steady income from sales taxes. Berlin's most recent wall divided the city and separated two opposing political, financial and military systems.

Overnight, with the fall of Berlin's wall on November 9, 1989, Berlin became a media darling of unprecedented proportions. Not only did the images of thousands pushing through the barrier beg for coverage by national and international networks, newspapers and magazines, but the city itself, largely ignored during the second half of the century, became attractive again. The huge challenges it would face through unification - transformation as the new seat of government and redevelopment into a commercial gateway to the East - made for an unending script.

THE MEDIA

Shortly after the wall's demise, three major media outlets commissioned urban design proposals for the future development of the city.¹ The well-publicized proposals contained striking images, but were completely divorced from both the real planning processes and from what was truly feasible in Berlin. They did, however, provide new metropolitan imagery for politicians, investors and the general public that would go on to influence the decision-making process underlying Berlin's metamorphosis.

The media's attempts to influence Berlin's future development continued in 1995, when Stern magazine commissioned Yadegar Asisi to construct four huge panoramas transporting visitors into the year 2005. Each panorama was devoted to one of the major visual hotspots in Berlin: Alexander Platz, the Brandenburg Gate, the Stadtschloss, and Potsdamer Platz. The designs reflected the desires of a number

of corporate entities interested in constructing a signature building in one of the areas.²

In addition to actively influencing the planning decisions for the future capital, the media also dutifully reported the spectacle surrounding the reconstruction of the city and contributed to the myth of a phoenix emerging from the rubble. The excavation of the Daimler Benz site, which created the largest man-made lake in Europe, was made for newspaper headlines. It took over 80 scuba divers from Holland to pour the foundations, and required construction workers on floating barges to hold a river captain's patent in order to operate the cranes. Across the street, the translocation of the Kaisersaal became an event for TV and streaming web media. When the rebuilding itself did not make good footage or headlines, the Senate and various investors kept media interest at peak levels by sponsoring events such as a parade of construction equipment through the Brandenburg Gate or a light show and ballet of cranes on Potsdamer Platz.

The media attention helped Berlin in create a special aura for a city devoid of positive imagery for most of the past century, and assisted the city in attracting big business in the form of investors, headquarters, and production facilities. It contributed to the discussion on preservation, the re-construction of historic artifacts, and the city's general image. By increasing the city's visibility the constant media attention helped politicians convince their constituency of the need for their relocation to Berlin. It also attracted a previously unheard number of tourists to the city, thus filling local coffers. Lastly it has, to some degree, informed residents of the building effort and the subsequent changes in the city's appearance.

The media's role in the initial urban decision-making process for Potsdamer Platz nevertheless remains highly suspicious. Would investors and developers have insisted on expressing their corporate identity in form of high-rises without the media's promotion of this building type? And would the dominance of the city's skyline by a handful of corporations have been acceptable to the population had not magazines, newspapers, and exhibitions bombarded them with glossy imagery of the vertical form as necessary progress?

CRITICAL RECONSTRUCTION

The re-introduction of the high-rise, although pursued by many no-

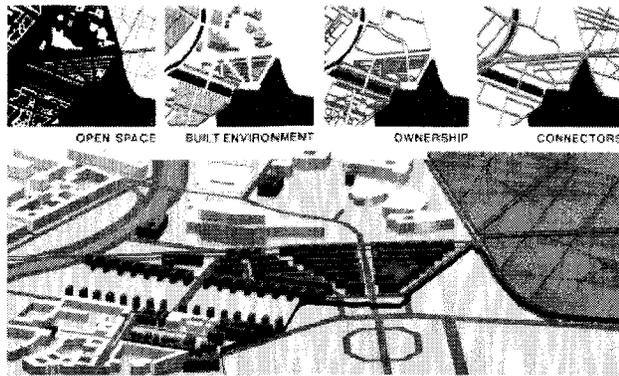


Fig. 1. IBA proposal, 1984-87

table architects throughout Berlin's history, marked a direct departure from the rather careful urban repair practiced during the International Building Exhibition under the direction of Josef Paul Kleihues (1984-87). This urban renewal initiative could not foresee the wall's demise a few years later, and concerned itself primarily with dilapidated areas adjacent to the wall in West Berlin. Intending to recreate the "European City," IBA focused on the traditional neighborhood with street corners and plazas, and promoted privately owned buildings of limited height and size that combined commercial and residential functions. According to its program, perimeter blocks, following or reestablishing the 18th century street grid, were to replace the architectural object. In addition apartments, entertainment, shopping and work were to be built in close proximity to each other in order to guarantee an urban mixture more at home in the 19th than in the 20th century.

In accordance with these guidelines, the masterplan for the area surrounding Potsdamer Platz, featured a series of elongated blocks lined with five to six-story perimeter buildings. The primary orientation of streets, blocks and buildings paralleled the wall, and provided an eastern edge to the Kulturforum, finally integrating it into West Berlin's urban fabric.³ From this plan, however, only a few infill buildings were constructed. Most of the area remained undeveloped for the time being.

In 1983 Oswald Matthias Ungers challenged IBA's strict adherence to traditional block patterns, building heights and setbacks with a design for a 200-meter tower placed next to a grid of over 30 five-story urban villas. By placing a skyscraper next to low-rise residential structures, he failed to create a visually unified area. In addition, at the edge of the development, three large, L-shaped apartment slabs created a wall towards the nearby cultural facilities. This isolated the proposed development rather than integrating it with the Kulturforum.

In November 1990, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung called on selected architects to submit their visions for a Berlin no longer

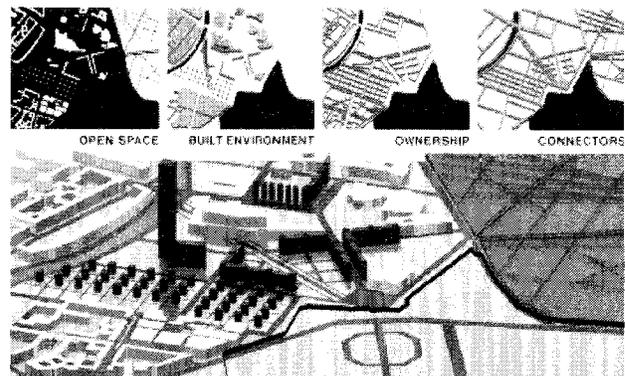


Fig. 2. Oswald Matthias Ungers, 1983

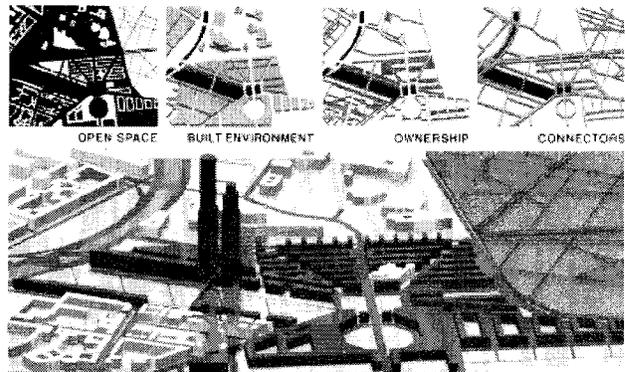


Fig. 3. Joseph Paul Kleihues, 1990

divided by the wall. Ironically, it was Kleihues who, less than five years after his directorship of IBA, ignored its guidelines by implanting a skyscraper solitaire for Daimler Benz⁴ in the midst of low-rise perimeter blocks. Half corporate identity, half low-income housing, his design failed to solve the juxtaposition of a high-rise next to low-rise residential development. Indeed it seems as if he merely combined Ungers' tower proposal with IBA's previous design.

Unlike Kleihues, who focused on Daimler Benz as the sole corporate presence on Potsdamer Platz, Hans Kollhoff intended to make the area available to as many multinational corporations as possible. In his design proposal, a cluster of eight high-rises, arranged in a semicircle in front of Leipziger Platz, created a gate into the old part of the city. Rather than providing a convincing strategy for the integration of corporate towers into a low-rise urban context, Kollhoff evaded the problem by transforming the rest of the area into a public park. As a result, Kollhoff's self-referential cluster of towers floated in the landscape.⁵

Although these proposals were elicited by an invitation from the news media, the journalistic response to these and other designs was predominantly negative. Labeled "purely aesthetic gestures"

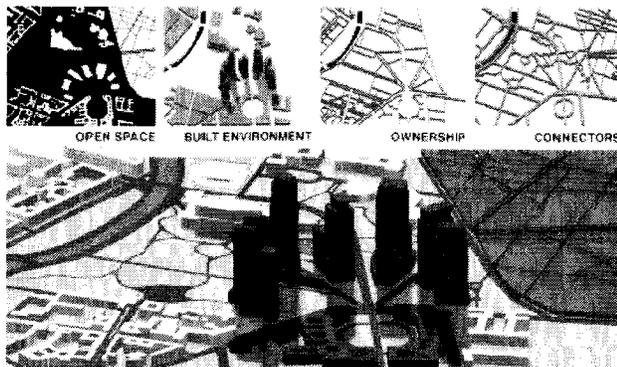


Fig. 4. Hans Kollhoff, 1990

and "urban design's entry into the post-modern media age,"⁶ they were criticized for ignoring the practical problems of confronting the city and were accused of failing to understand Berlin's historical structure. Nevertheless, the proposals did wet the appetite of investors and developers for towers that would emphasize the importance and define the corporate identity of their owners.

At the same time that the media published these visions for Berlin, the competition organizers for Potsdamer Platz developed guidelines for the area that were based on the "European City" concept previously established by IBA. Their competition brief expressly stressed the importance of reconnecting the Kulturforum with the adjacent area,⁷ called for a diverse program to counter the homogenous one found in the Kulturforum, and demanded a sequence of streets and squares that would reestablish the traditional street-front development. Most importantly, however, they demanded that designers take the parcel as their point of departure in order to achieve the desired variety and mixture of functions.⁸

Subsequently, in October of 1991, the jury rejected all high-rise proposals for the area and awarded first prize to Hilmer & Sattler for their horizontally structured proposal. Urban life was to arise on streets and squares flanked by 35-meter tall building blocks placed on a 50-meter square grid. These large square houses were deemed sufficient for "accommodating the variety of intended uses - apartments, offices, department stores, company headquarters, theaters, hotels, etc. Short, narrow streets between the individual blocks were to lead into wider city spaces: to the Neue and Alte Potsdamer Strasse; to the area with open water on the site of the former Potsdamer Station; and towards the green wedge leading to the Tiergarten."⁹

Because Hilmer & Sattler's proposal was visually far less exciting than the high-rise designs, it did not fare well in the general press. Their plan was perceived as a small-town, least common denominator solution, void of any vision for the most important urban design commission of the decade.¹⁰ Daimler-Benz, too, was set on the eye-

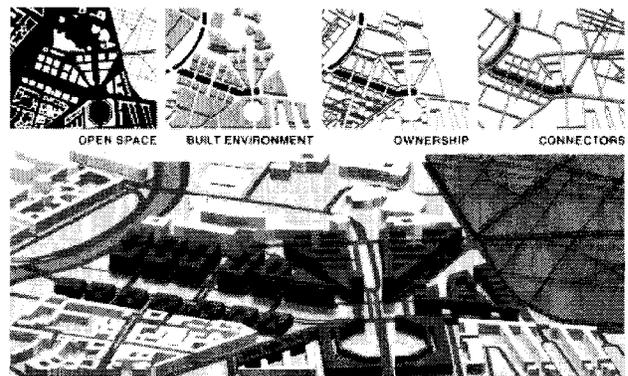


Fig. 5. Hilmer & Sattler, 1991, 1st prize

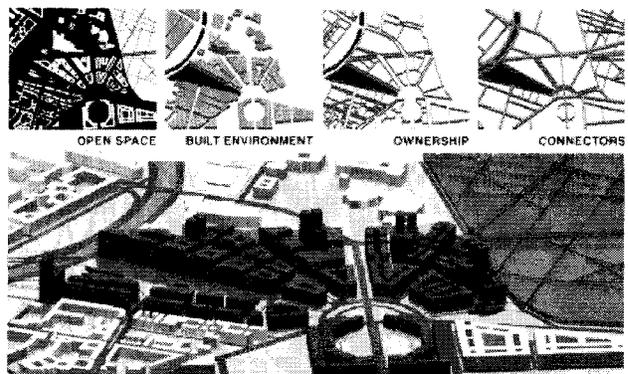


Fig. 6. Richard Rogers, 1991, Investors' Masterplan

candy presented by the media, challenged the lack of signature presence for its headquarters and called the proposal timid (*kleinmütig*).¹¹ Two months prior to the official announcement of the competition, Daimler-Benz and Sony¹² had already commissioned the office of Richard Rogers to propose a masterplan for the area. Although not part of the competition, Rogers' proposal was slipped in through the back door and hung opposite of the winning entry, causing quite a stir. Rogers, more than any other architect, ignored the surrounding city. His street layout guaranteed each investor a prestigious Potsdamer Platz address, but failed to connect with the surrounding infrastructure. Instead, the wedge-shaped superblocs increased in height towards the periphery and created a new wall around the ensemble of Potsdamer/Leipziger Platz.

Although Rogers' design was embraced by the architectural press, the Senate stuck to its original decision to make Hilmer & Sattler's plan the basis for the overall development.¹³ Daimler-Benz finally accepted their concept after being told that a future competition for the area would allow for one or two high-rises to be built.¹⁴ As a result of their negotiations the building height was increased by two additional set-back stories; at Potsdamer Platz and Landwehrkanal

building heights of 80 meters were allowed; and a street tunnel to facilitate traffic connections and provide utility access had to be provided.¹⁵ Subsequently, three competitions were held, one for each investor.

On September 4, 1992, the team of Renzo Piano and Christoph Kohlbecker was awarded first prize for the Daimler-Benz site. Their plan strictly adhered to Hilmer & Sattler's block structure, but moved the public focus away from Potsdamer Platz towards a new piazza, defined by a casino and a music theater. Unfortunately, rather than facilitating a connection with the Kulturforum as mandated in the competition brief, these two structures acted as a barrier, separating the forum definitely from Potsdamer Platz. In addition to the new piazza, their proposal contained an interior shopping mall, an atrium, arcades, streets and alleys. The wealth of competing expressions of public spaces focused the attention on the development itself rather than facilitating connections to the surrounding city.

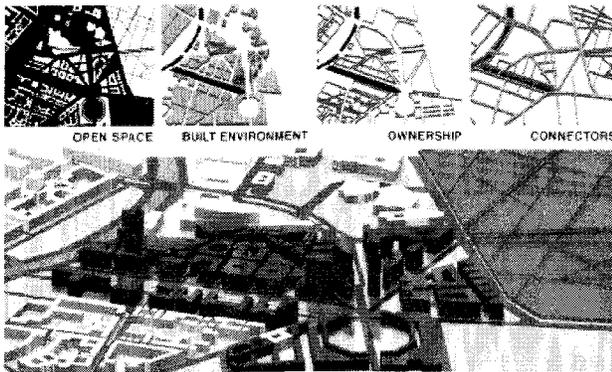


Fig. 7. Renzo Piano, 1992, Masterplan

Almost simultaneously, Helmut Jahn won the competition for the Sony triangle. His proposal negated the intentions of the Hilmer & Sattler plan completely. Although urban elements such as street, square, tower and cornice line were all present, the curved streets did not create blocks and the central piazza failed to become an exterior space of the city. Instead it took the form of an atrium, which, although physically open to the environment (a concession to the dogma of the "European City"), remained essentially private property, and did not structure the network of streets or distribute traffic.¹⁶ Ultimately, one large building, designed by one architect, occupied the site.

A year later, Giorgio Grassi was declared the winner for the A+T development that encompassed the remainder of the area. Of all Potsdamer Platz proposals only his entry remained true to Hilmer & Sattler's urban design concept. Four U and I shaped buildings were placed on a raised plinth adjacent to the former Potsdamer station. Despite being the most contextual project in its siting, volume and

appearance, the A+T development failed to connect to the surrounding fabric. The layout of blocks neither lined up with Piano's Daimler-Benz development, nor with the IBA blocks. Even if they had, the elevated slab would prevent any pedestrian traffic to or from the neighboring site.

THE CRITIQUES

By 2000, with two thirds of the Potsdamer Platz development completed, the media and the general public were finally able to assess the quality of the quarter. Some called the development a counterproposal to suburbanization, and argued that the layout of Potsdamer Platz was consistent with the European, not the American tradition.¹⁷ Others interpreted the area as "a spatially complex American city, with high-rises and squares, with urban life inside the large-scale structure, and with compacted street spaces."¹⁸ The New York Times, however, claimed that "Potsdamer Platz truly resembles an Edge City; a private, development-driven urbanoid cluster ... that could be anywhere."¹⁹ Called Blade-Runner-City, Office Desert, Container City, or Investor's Paradise, the development was criticized for its commercial monoculture, its failure to provide smaller, livable property units, and its lack of truly public spaces. The architects were accused of transforming "the urban center into a world expo of the building industry."²⁰ Indeed, compared with the original intentions for development of the area as a contextual link between Friedrichstadt and Tiergarten, Potsdamer Platz neither recalled the "European City," nor any of the ideals developed under the heading of "critical reconstruction."

By giving investors control over a huge area in exchange for guaranteed employment and tax revenues,²¹ Berlin made it impossible to achieve its own goal of providing the mixture of styles, appearances, and functions typical for the European City.²² Even the Senate's stipulation that large-scale developments reserve at least 10% of the newly constructed floor area for shopping and entertainment and 20% for housing, did nothing to prevent the corporate takeover of the area.²³ Later on, the office component was reduced to 50%, thus increasing entertainment and retail to 30%. By insisting on this arbitrary ratio, Berlin created a hybrid on Potsdamer Platz: the destination city, where people go to work or to be entertained but not necessarily to live.²⁴

DESTINATION CITY

Potsdamer Platz is ideally situated for this new urban type. Well connected by all forms of public transportation offered in Berlin²⁵ - train, S-Bahn, underground, bus and tram - the new City Berlin Mitte offers easy access to all. Several parking levels under each complex with over 3,500 spots provide easy access for the short trip to the surface,

where one can “eat sushi, watch a movie, and get out of there.”²⁶ In addition to its many bars, restaurants, and cafes, Potsdamer Platz is also a haven for movie enthusiasts. The Daimler-Benz complex offers 3,500 seats in 18 theaters, Sony another 2,800 seats including Germany’s first I-Max theater. A casino, a music theater, and, until recently, Sony’s musicbox²⁷ complete the allure and guarantee visitors well into the night.²⁸ It is no surprise that, in 1999, the area had already attracted more visitors at nighttime than the entire center of Hamburg.²⁹

“YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE PUBLIC SECTOR AND ENTERING THE PRIVATIZED ZONE”³⁰

No other urban neighborhood is cleaned daily; graffiti doesn’t survive longer than 36 hours.³¹ “Every new building is effectively private space, gated by night, surveyed by security cameras, patrolled by armed guards and Alsations.”³² Doormen take care of the residential units during the absence of their owners and provide additional security as well. The very expensive³³ condominiums and rental apartments combine the advantages of a hotel with the benefits of one’s own home, thus catering to those who, according to Helmut Jahn “already have an apartment in New York, one in London, and now want to have one in Berlin as well.”³⁴ Most of the apartments are rented to singles and couples without children,³⁵ many of which are politicians and diplomats. These are residents who appreciate the close vicinity to the Reichstag as well as the international flair of the development, and for “whom it is more important to have their shirts ironed daily than to have a children’s playground nearby.”³⁶ They live in a world devoid of churches, graveyards, schools or other social amenities. Even the originally proposed retirement home was taken out of the program early on. In short, the resident population of Potsdamer Platz has little stake in their neighborhood.

Potsdamer Platz, however, does not stand alone when it comes to the “Grand Projects” of Berlin. Since the wall’s demise in 1989, over 122 thousand new housing units have been constructed, about 14% of which are located in the city’s core. While much of the building effort was justified by the assumption that the new capital city would drastically increase in population, current projections foresee a continuous migration toward the periphery. Only six of Berlin’s outlying districts will increase their population; the remaining 17 districts - Tiergarten and Mitte among them — will lose anywhere from one to fourteen percent of their residents.

Given the migrational tendencies, it is questionable whether the Potsdamer Platz development will be sustainable in the long run. The commercial development of almost 5 million square feet, intended to make Potsdamer Platz into a major hub for all of Berlin, will have to compete with many similar sized projects located all over Berlin.

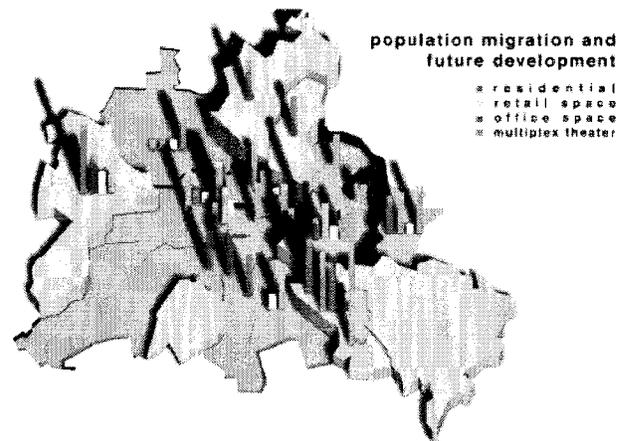


Fig.8. Future Development in Berlin

The twelve shopping centers currently planned will add over 644 thousand square feet of retail space to the city’s offerings, with only 10% being located on Potsdamer Platz. Over 19 million square feet of office space will be constructed in the next few years, 16% of which are located on Potsdamer Platz. Twenty-two multiplex theaters will serve the Berlin population, with Potsdamer Platz accounting for only 10% of the seating capacity. In addition to the 82 million square feet of residential units built by 2000, another 29.7 million square feet are under construction. Less than 4% of the new housing units are located on Potsdamer Platz. Competition to attract customers will abound throughout Berlin. Considering the scope of these new developments, it stands to fear that the Potsdamer Platz development will soon lose its novelty and join the list of somewhat dated commercial enclaves in search for tenants.

It will be interesting to revisit Potsdamer Platz ten years from now. The dynamics of redefining a city that has had a rift through its center are sure to change as the gap is filled. Let’s hope that, unlike Potsdamer Platz, future developments will not be dictated by corporations and will provide true urban spaces that connect to their surrounding fabric so that the rift between East and West Berlin can truly heal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

¹This occurred before the newly elected senate could even constitute itself and begin addressing the planning of the future metropolis.

²Only the Potsdamer Platz panorama is based on reality with building permits issued and most buildings under construction. The remainder is largely based on

a combination of design proposals and historic precedent for sites where no design proposals exist at this point. According to Bruno Flierl, the panoramas support those who favor the historicizing of the city. Bruno Flierl, *Berlin baut um. Wessen Stadt wird die Stadt?* (Berlin: Verlag für Bauwesen, 1998).

³In 1959, Hans Scharoun, the building director of West Berlin, had planned a group of buildings called the Kulturforum with the goal of bringing the divided culture together. Shortly after the designs were completed, the Berlin Wall was built. Several memorable structures were built nevertheless, thus creating an "offering" to East Berliners that they could only glance at but never enter.

⁴In the summer of 1989, Lord Mayor Walter Momper promised Daimler Benz a huge area on Potsdamer Platz in order to set a signal for Berlin as a city worth the investment. Not foreseeing the wall's demise, the choice of site was motivated by the wish to stabilize the edge to East Berlin rather than to connect the fabric with that behind the wall.

⁵According to the brief published with the proposal (Vittorio Magnago Lumpugnani, *Berlin Morgen* (Stuttgart, Verlag Gerd Hatje: 1991), his scheme would allow for a traditional mixed-use development of the open space between Tiergarten and Landwehrkanal. His plans, however, fail to show how such a juxtaposition between corporate icons and contextual structures would be articulated.

⁶Bruno Flierl, "Hoch hinaus? Zum Medienspektakel "Berlin Morgen", " *Stadtbauwelt* 109 (1991), and Ortl Aicher, "Berlin wird Hauptstadt," *Arch+ # 108* (1991).

⁷The competition brief ... required an awareness of the original lot sizes ... "as a cipher for functional, structural and formal scales and mixtures rather than merely as an overcome historical value." The mixture was to be achieved expressly not through integration into large form, but rather, wherever conceivable, in a small-scale, lot-related arrangement. Competition brief for Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz, as quoted in Annegret Burg, *Downtown Berlin : building the metropolitan mix* (Berlin: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1995), p. 17.

⁸The competition was limited to architects, thus excluding urban planners from the process. Roland Enke, "Vertane Chancen?" Published in Yamin von Rauch, *Der Potsdamer Platz* (Berlin: jovis Verlag, 2000)

⁹*Downtown Berlin*, p. 169.

¹⁰According to Rem Koolhaas, Stimmann, in a very loud and tactless manner, labeled projects as 'stupid', 'unrealistic', or 'childish'. Stimmann, on the other hand, admits, "I am a little rude. ... Whoever claims that [this department encourages provincial boredom and mediocrity] is narrow-minded. ... Every name architect is building here. ... The danger is that instead of a city the outcome will be an architectural exhibition. [Compared to the Grand Project, in Paris] Paris is intact. Within an intact urban pattern one can afford the out of the ordinary. Berlin's core, however, is beyond repair. We lost the everyday city-life. ... My symbol is the regaining of the uninterrupted history, ... the reconnection with all past periods [such as] baroque, Schinkel, Gründerzeit, premodern movement, the 30's and the 50's. The break as leitmotif for architecture is wrong.

I believe in continuity." Ilka Piepgras, "Berlins Wunden vertragen keine Extravaganzen," *Berliner Zeitung* (April 29, 1995).

¹¹Flierl, p. 77

¹²Daimler-Benz acquired the property in July 1990, for 2,702 DM/sq.meter; Sony in 1991, for 3,270 DM/sq.meter, and A+T (Asea Brown Boveri and Terreno) in 1992, for 4,120 DM/sq.meter.

¹³Senate Decision of December 10, 1991, *Downtown Berlin*, p. 169.

¹⁴Eva Schweitzer, *Großbaustelle Berlin* (Berlin: Nicolai Verlag, 1996), p.103.

¹⁵Enke, p.39

¹⁶Jonas Geist, "Dampftopf," *Bauwelt* 27 (2000): 25.

¹⁷Streets intersect in squares; the buildings front the street, create corridors and frame courtyards. Dankwart Guratzsch, "Berlin oder New York," *Morgenpost* (December 30, 1999).

¹⁸Michael Mönninger, "Vergnügunginsel im Meer der Langeweile," *Berliner Zeitung* (Oct. 12, 1996).

¹⁹Like postwar Berlin, Potsdamer Platz and the adjacent Leipziger Platz are divided into zones of occupation ... each is controlled by a different corporate giant ... Its three parts evoke three phases in the history of Berlin: the imperial city of baroque palaces [Main Street - A&T], the industrial city of mechanical production [factory town - Daimler Benz] and the informational city of advanced electronic communications [Cyber Land - Sony]. Potsdamer Platz truly resembles an Edge City; a private, development-driven urbanoid cluster ... that could be anywhere. Herbert Muschamp, *New York Times* (April 11, 1999).

²⁰Michael Mönninger, "Weltausstellung der Bauwirtschaft," *Berliner Zeitung* (Oct. 26, 1996).

²¹Daimler-Benz promised to create 10,000, Sony 4,000 new jobs on site; about 500 million Mark / year in form of taxes will be generated on site alone. In "Eine Baustelle als Balsam für bange Berliner," *Die Welt* (Oct. 24, 1997).

²²Hans Stimmann, the Senate's building director responsible for the development guidelines, explains to the Washington Post: "I'm against the bloody big blocks, ... I'd go back to the historical pattern of the city with the development of individual lots. But I had no choice. It's a disaster in terms of my theoretical ideas of architecture, but my ideas had nothing to do with the reality of Berlin." *Washington Post* (Jan 8, 1995).

²³This ratio does not reflect the typical distribution of uses in a European City where entertainment, retail, and offices account for no more than 20% of the built substance. Nor does it mirror the American City, whose Central Business District is largely dominated by offices and retail, with some entertainment. Here, less than 5% of the floor area cater to residential functions.

²⁴According to the Berliner Zeitung, this "shift towards inner-city amusement park, [is] a concentrated compensation for the dying city which creates an island of entertainment within the boring context of the city of Berlin. Michael Mönninger, "Weltausstellung der Bauwirtschaft," *Berliner Zeitung* (Oct. 26, 1996).

²⁵Two city train lines and one regional line (N-S) intersect with one subway line, a future tram line, and a major bus route (E-W)

²⁶"Auf neutralem Boden", *Der Spiegel* 40 (2000).

²⁷The musicbox was an urban entertainment center where one can conduct an orchestra, board the yellow submarine, and visit a museum of sorts.

²⁸Especially the Sony Center has become a popular tourist attraction during the day and night, and is perceived on the same level as the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate, or the KaDeWe.

²⁹Dankwart Guratzsch, "Experiment gelungen," *Morgenpost* (December 31, 1999).³⁰ Billboards of demonstrators on Potsdamer Platz. *Daily Telegraph, London* (Nov. 21, 1998)

³¹"Auf neutralem Boden", *Der Spiegel* 40 (2000).

³²*The Guardian, London* (Febr. 1, 1999).

³³Sony charges between DM 8,000 - 12,000/m² for its 134 condominiums, Debis between DM 7,000 and 11,000/m², double the cost of a renovated condominium

in a turn of the century mansion. By comparison, average new construction in Berlin is valued DM 4.230,-/m². "Der Markt für private Immobilien in der Region Berlin -zweigeteilter Markt im Wandel," *Aengevelt Report NO. VI, Berlin* (11. Mai 2000).

Apartments between 40 and 150 m², cost 18-25 DM/m², compared to DM 16 in best location overall. "Der heimliche Regierungssitz am Potsdamer Platz," *Die Welt* (Oct. 28, 1999).

³⁴Helmut Jahn, as quoted in "Stets zu Diensten," *Der Spiegel* 49 (2000).

³⁵In 1999, over 1/6 of the residents of the 311 exclusive Debis apartments were diplomats. "Der heimliche Regierungssitz am Potsdamer Platz," *Die Welt* (Oct. 28, 1999).

³⁶"Auf neutralem Boden", *Der Spiegel* 40 (2000).