

Resource Architecture – XXI World Congress of Architecture
22 to 26 July 2002 in Berlin

Workshop 01 The City as a Stage: Urban Entertainment

Name Prof. Janet Ward

The Americanization of the New Berlin

Janet Ward

Associate Professor, Department of History,
University of Nevada Las Vegas, USA

There is a Las Vegas metaphor of postmodern city-creation – that is to say, the Strip's reputation of architectural *bricolage*, of a structural hyperreal so strong that it has become substance. Because it stands for Americanization in its most blatant sense, the Baudrillardian Vegas metaphor has long inspired a "fear and loathing" among the cultural-intellectual elite, particularly those whose *raison d'être* is provided by cities established in modern industrial times. Increasingly, however, we can identify the pervasive reach of the Vegas metaphor of image-based commodification into the root of all architectural practice.

Given the fact that Berlin was precariously positioned as the former outpost of Western democracy in the middle of Eastern Europe, it is understandable that the early intoxicated rush toward architectural reunification included an impetus to make Berlin look more "western" as quickly as possible, as if to provide three-dimensional evidence that the West had won.¹ This (American) "West" often appears as an alien, or at best uncomfortable, source of influence for Europe's latest capital. Nonetheless, two key transformational aspects can be identified in the Americanization of the post-Wall city: first, commercial architecture, including office space, is exerting a "considerable influence on the new face of Berlin" -- perhaps more than any other building type.² Second, formerly public properties are being sold to privately owned investor groups, that is to say: increasingly, as in US urban practice, the market is saying what goes up where.³

A significant aspect of Berlin's ongoing recreation of itself as post-Wall capital of Germany is the desired recapturing of its glory years during the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras when it grew to become, by 1920, the third largest city in the world. Many conservative city boosters and liberal urban critics alike prefer to think that it is still possible to make the New Berlin into a quintessentially modern "European city." By way of contrast, UCLA architecture professor Dagmar Richter offers an extension of the underlying consumerist ethos of the Weimar years onto today's US-based practices of

postmodern urbanism: "Berlin has learned from Las Vegas without knowing it... Berlin will become the first state-organized media city of surface. It will surpass our expectations of Las Vegas, Disney, and City Walk."⁴

With the current lack of confidence in corporate growth for Berlin, which is languishing in a bankrupt condition in the wake of the real estate boom of the early 1990s, all of Mitte will at this rate succumb to the commodification model, namely of history as theme park. This is epitomized by the trendily refashioned courtyards of Hackesche Höfe -- themselves evidence of "final commercialization," states critic Frank Roost, and based on the hyping of the "myth" of what the area used to be in the days before World War II.⁵ In the impulse to make Berlin into its previous images, we can find a too-neat elision of all the disruptions to the city caused by Nazism, wartime bombing, and Cold War division. The application of Critical Reconstructionist tenets -- namely, rehashing the old street plan, lot sizes, façade materials, and building height limits (22 meters for cornice lines, and 30 meters for rooftops) -- has led to an instant-history approach. In this sense, commercial and non-commercial sites alike have been or are being reconstructed to fit the requisite iconology of heritage tourism ("Berlin must look like Berlin," as per Stimman's pronouncement⁶) that alone today seems to guarantee economic growth for urban centers. The many examples of this include the Pariser Platz, the Adlon Hotel, the interior design of restaurants in Mitte, as well as plans to rebuild the Tacheles into a New Urbanist Johannesviertel, or to remake the Kommandatur, Bauakademie, and Stadtschloss into the images of themselves.

Paul Virilio agrees, observing that Berlin's rebuilt structures serve as "stage-sets" for the fledgling capital's boosterist productions. The most spectacular of these is the newly rebuilt Potsdamer Platz through which the Wall used to run. If we recall the unfulfilled Friedrichstrasse skyscraper competition of 1921, at which Mies van der Rohe first proposed his glass-skinned skyscraper, we can see how this dream has now been belatedly achieved by the substitution of site and era. But in realizing its modernist wish to build a mini-Manhattan, Berlin inadvertently produced more of a mini-Vegas: a citational package with its own range of simulacra.

Chief architectural philosopher of Berlin's voids, Daniel Libeskind, brings attention to what he believes to be the underlying problem raised by Potsdamer Platz, despite its relative success. Libeskind remains highly skeptical of the ability of Potsdamer Platz to transform the city's image for itself and abroad, and he denigrates the use of this site for the promotion of millennial architectural commodity fetishism: "I believe that Berlin, like any city which deserves to be called that, is no commodity. It is not something which can be bought in a store like a refrigerator, washing machine, or

computer. A city is something which you really need, like the air we breathe. That quality is something which you can't always say of commodities."⁷ Perhaps Libeskind is stretching a few historical features out of shape here: for the pre-WW II Potsdamer Platz embraced Americanism as a modernizing and internationalizing business ethic with links to Taylorism, Fordism, and New Objectivity -- the net effect of which was to salvage national reputation in the wake of the Versailles Treaty.

None the less, many of us might well prefer to imagine what would have been had Libeskind been permitted to build his own design at Potsdamer Platz -- a fantasy land of zigzagged structures celebrating the site's Cold War status of voids and divisions, and leaving untouched the destroyed street plan of old, with a "one kilometer long wilde mess...in which everything," states Libeskind, "can remain as it is."⁸ But perhaps this "as it is" is rather suspect: what about how Potsdamer Platz as it used to be before it was cut in two by the No-Man's-Land stage? It seems that all post-Wall imaginings concerning Potsdamer Platz, whether aiming at its refashioning as a commercial city or as a broken monument, have arisen from an imagined original condition of its urban fullness and completeness. This imaginary is what is most missed in the new Potsdamer Platz, even if it was never there: as Gerwin Zohlen states, the busy traffic junction of Potsdamer Platz was rather the very opposite of presence: "the non-form [Un-Form]...the non-square [Un-Platz] par excellence," careening full of tempo, traffic, and Einsteinian relativity.⁹

The reconstitution-process of Berlin's Mitte as a stage-set is leading toward a condition of over-encoding. By over-encoding I refer to a socio-geographical mapping through which not enough spaces are left unplanned for the sake of a slower, more manageable urban transformation; the result is a rigid network of fixed urban interfaces that remain bounded, or separate, one from the other. Such is the offense that the Vegas Strip gives the critical visitor who insists on a frustrated search for habitat-connections that would have grown through time; and the same offense exists as a possible danger for the New Berlin. When the Wall fell, Berlin went through an initial phase of promoting both boosterism (or space-filling) as well as the "fragile and fragmentary network"¹⁰ of the urban voids of its WW II and Cold War heritage. Now these spaces are being too rapidly developed, sanitized, bought out, discovered, and made over, as Berlin searches in vain for its lost modern city centers.

The resurrection, then, not just of Potsdamer Platz out of a lost No-Man's-Land but also of Berlin-Mitte as a focal point of reunification has led not so much to the wished-for re-centering of the city, but rather to the New Berlin's most "American sector," this time according to postmodern (rather

than Weimar modern) dictates of cultural capital. Nor is this phenomenon limited to the former East Berlin: the electronically enhanced cinematic billboard on the new C&A store on the Ku'Damm is as effective as those in Singapore or Vegas. The city that once received the moniker of Frederick the Great's "Spree-Athen" -- and then again, in industrial modernity, that of the forward-looking "Spree-Chicago" -- is now on the way to becoming "Spree-Vegas." The catchy title for the recent German edition of a collection of Mike Davis' essays makes the case against Casino Zombies. Is the fate for a commercialized New Berlin in general, or Potsdamer Platz in particular, that of casino-cultural zombification? Or can we approach the condition of today's urban planning in a less over-defensive, atrophied way? A balanced view needs to be found that does not demote economic and infrastructural renovation and the concomitant commercial development that has to accompany the city's long path to growth.

Let us turn to Richard Sennett, who, in The Spaces of Democracy, rejects the "all-at-once, massive development of urban centers" like Berlin's (Potsdamer or) Alexanderplatz and wants a pluricentral "collage city" à la Colin Rowe as the space of democracy, in the manner of Aristotelian "synoikismos -- a coming together of differences." This is Sennett's understanding of the Athenian agora as the origin of fragmented, mixed social space for (albeit originally male) democratic interaction. "The result of visual, decentralized democracy should be," states Sennett, "to shatter those images which attempt to represent the city as a whole."¹¹ We can reflect on the degree to which Potsdamer Platz offends against Sennett's concept of democratic urban space. It tries to be both the agora and a recentralization of urban commercial power according to global city standards. The question remains: can it (and can Berlin) be both?

Notes

¹ Uwe Rada (editor of taz) is not so sure. The Polish bazaar that sprang up on the site of Potsdamer Platz during the Wende was just the beginning, as Rada satirically warns Western sensibilities. See Uwe Rada, Berliner Barbaren. Wie der Osten in den Westen kommt (Berlin: BasisDruck, 2001), 14.

² Annegret Burg, "The Commercial Building: An Urban Component," in Annegret Burg, ed., Berlin Mitte. Die Entstehung einer urbanen Architektur (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1995), 25. Burg speaks of the belated, "rapid, stormy development" of office buildings for post-Wall Berlin Mitte (25).

³ As political scientist Elizabeth A. Strom emphasizes: "capitalist urban development doesn't require the mobilization of political support." Strom, Building the New Berlin: The Politics of Urban Development in Germany's Capital City (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 235 (emphasis original); and 117-34. See also urban sociologist Hartmut Häussermann's essay on the encroaching American style of urban growth on European cities, in "U-Bahn und Urban," Süddeutsche Zeitung (June 30, 2000): 11.

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- ⁴ Dagmar Richter, "Spazieren in Berlin," Assemblage 29 (1996): 75.
- ⁵ Frank Roost, "Themenpark am Tacheles. 'New Urbanism' in Berlin," in Architektur in Berlin. Jahrbuch 2001, ed. Architektenkammer Berlin (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2001), 91, 89.
- ⁶ Quote by Hans Stimmann, in Paul Goldberger, "Reimagining Berlin," The New York Times Magazine (February 5, 1995).
- ⁷ Daniel Libeskind, "Potsdamer Platz," radix-matrix. Architecture and Writings (New York: Prestel, 1997), 161.
- ⁸ Libeskind, "Potsdamer Platz," 162.
- ⁹ Gerwin Zohlen, "Erblast des Mythos. Das Verfahren Potsdamer/Leipziger Platz. Rückblick nach vier Jahren," in Ein Stück Grossstadt als Experiment. Planungen am Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, ed. Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani & Romana Schneider (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1994), 17. See also Thomas Friedrich's citation of Einstein's reflections in 1920 on Potsdamer Platz in Der Potsdamer Platz. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner und der Untergang Preussens, ed. Katharina Henkel & Roland März (Berlin: Nationalgalerie Berlin, 2001), 63.
- ¹⁰ Giovanni La Varra, "Post-It City: The Other European Public Spaces," Mutations, ed. Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, & Sanford Kwinter (Bordeaux: ACTAR, 2000), 428.
- ¹¹ Richard Sennett, The Spaces of Democracy (Ann Arbor: College of Architecture + Urban Planning, The University of Michigan, 1998), 41, 19, 41.