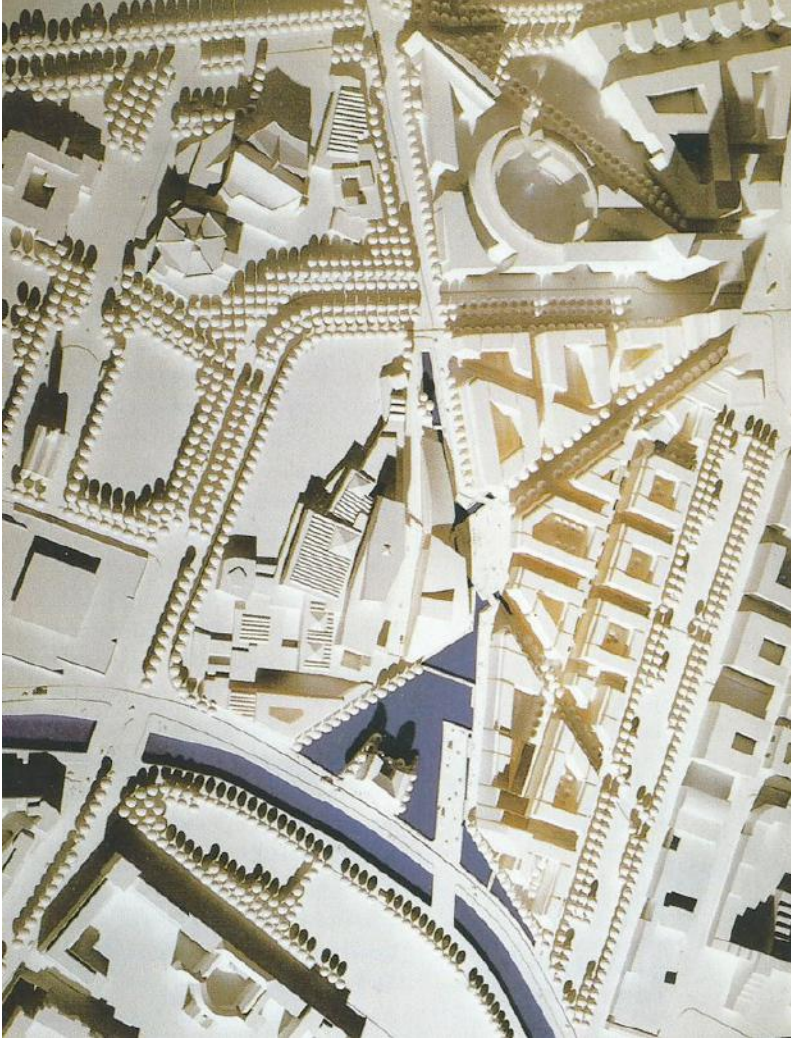


Potsdamer Platz: The Blurring of the Historic City

The recent construction of Berlin's Potsdamer Platz represents more than the completion of Europe's largest single construction project in the last thirty years. Its realization in fact exemplifies a new form of urban development that marks a decisive shift in the form and process of urbanization. It defines the triumph of the synthetic city—a totally controlled environment, conceived and executed at a giant scale, realized in less than a decade, in which every activity, function, building, and image is preconceived to create an idealized fragment of urbanity. The development of the project was based on a complex interaction of public and corporate interests, and exemplifies the dominant role of privatization, the selective framing of historical events and artifacts, current tendencies of re-representation, and the forces of popular culture and entertainment to define the new terms of urban culture.



Potsdammerplatz Site Plan, revised version of masterplan
By Renzo Piano and Christoph Kohlbecker

The transformation of Berlin's historic center might also be useful in framing a number of central questions facing the identity and meaning of the city at the end of the 20th century. Among those, could be asked: Does the city still have an ability to perform as a cultural text, or a true narrative of an evolving culture, given a shifting scales and sources of control, power, and implementation? What is the role of public space in today's city, and is it in fact truly public? Can a viable city form be achieved through a defined, publicly controlled large-scale urban design plan, built in totality vs. the traditional evolution of small-scale, incremental private initiatives? And perhaps more critically: what is the new relationship, if any, between architecture and the city—what has happened to the traditional roles and forms of private and public space?

Potsdamerplatz is one of the few examples of an implemented, large-scale, comprehensive urban design of a central city district of the last twenty-five years, joining a small group of unique opportunities of varying aspirations and success, including: Battery Park City (1979), Les Halles Redevelopment, Paris (1980), Olympic Village/Nova Icaria, Barcelona (1985), and Docklands, London (1988). During its period of construction, from 1992-2000, it was the largest construction site in Europe, and received unprecedented coverage in the local and international press. But more than simply a super-scaled, municipal reconstruction, the project, through its historically charged site, and political as well as design aspirations, takes on larger stakes, which enlarges, and challenges the terms for its accomplishment and evaluation.

The Reinvented Site



Model by Renzo Piano

The site's critical location is impacted by a series of radical transformations and intentions that continually reinvents its previous identity. In its early 19th century manifestation, the Potsdamer Platz defines the intense commercial center of Berlin, the location of major hotels, entertainment, shopping business that epitomizes the ultimate image, if not operations, of the modern metropolis. It was Berlin's, and

perhaps Europe's transportation center, crossed by some 34 tram lines, a juncture of such intensity as to necessitate the world's first traffic light, which becomes quickly obsolete. During the Nazi regime, the site marks a critical juncture of the great 7-kilometer long north-south civic axis designed by Albert Speer, and by the end of World War II, there is little left except for street easements and several built remains. After the war, it marks the precise point where the demarcation lines between the three occupation sectors meet. The erasure of the former Potsdamer Platz becomes complete during the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, which slices through the site (what was center now becomes edge!) and turns it into a completely unoccupied, scarred void in the heart of the city. The site now becomes as powerful a symbol of an emptied urbanism, the city denied, as much as it was a symbol of the most vibrant possibility of urbanism before the war.

In the 1960's, the site is voided almost to the point of invisibility, yet paradoxically, the areas adjacent to the emptied heart of the city take on a greater role. West Berlin establishes its new Cultural Forum west of the Wall which includes the National Museum by Mies Van der Rohe, and the Philharmonic Hall and Library buildings by Hans Scharoun, a series of autonomous objects, radical, idealized denial of the destroyed city and its historical urban form. Close by, on the other side of the wall lies Friedrichstrasse, the commercial heart of East Berlin, including the remnants of Leipziger Platz, the historic entry to the city. The result is two districts in absolute opposition: The Friedrichstrasse is a virtual figure-ground reversal of the Cultural Center, in which much of the traditional block fabric still remains, buildings are rebuilt on a parcel by parcel basis, and the power of "Main Street" still prevails. While unknown at the time, the polarization of the Cultural Center and Friedrichstrasse forms the basis of opposing paradigms for the later reconstruction of Potsdamer Platz.

While the city is still divided, the IBA Exhibition during the early 1980's, marking the 750th anniversary of Berlin, is initiated as part of the continuing rebuilding of a city devastated by war and political subdivision. The city sponsors the rebuilding of over 150 construction sites throughout West Berlin, which are executed by many prominent

architects from Germany, Europe, and the United States, and are mainly programmed as housing to confront the city's rising population. The IBA attempts to define the notion of a "critical reconstruction" of the city, and sets in place a model for "urban repair," or recreating the historic block form and continuous street wall of the 19th century city.¹ The term "critical" here is also meant to refute the contradictions of the modern city, marked by political, social and cultural division (the Wall being only the most blatant example), functionally differentiated object buildings that fracture the continuity of the city, and the worse culprit of all, the invasion of the high-rise building into the pedestrian scaled low rise city. While a part of western side of Kobenerstrasse is rebuilt, the Potsdamer Platz itself is left out of the IBA initiative, yet the vestiges of its historical focus sets the stage for its final reconstruction.

The Wall comes down in 1989, and an unparalleled opportunity presents itself. The city can be remade, and redefined once again. The void, a vacuum in the city's historic heart demands to be filled. The removal of the former barrier of the Wall promises not only redeveloped and reunification with its adjacent context, but the reunification between East and West Berlin, and the end of the Cold War. The emptied site itself asserts the project's aspiration of reestablishing a new center for the city, with the additional burden of needing to define what could constitute the nature of an "urban center" in today's city, and whether a rebuilt center can relate to and integrate itself into the complex form and program of the existing city. The project is also charged, if by default, to serve as a symbol of the "new," reunified Berlin, which will shortly once again become the capital of Germany and the leading economic power of Europe.²

The Process

The story of the project's development, a series of design competitions and public controversies is long and complex—the following presents just a few highlights of the planning and building process over the last decade:

After the fall of the Wall, city officials, desperate to infuse investment into a financially strapped city, attracted Daimler-Benz (now called Chrysler-Daimler) and the Sony Corporation, which in 1990 and 1991 respectively, to sign agreements to purchase the two largest properties in the development area, 68,000 sq. meters and 26,000 sq. meters, respectively, and at apparently bargain rates. This sets the direction for new form of urban development to come into the scene, suggesting a large-scale rather than a more incremental development of the site, which will largely be controlled by corporate private interests rather than the guidelines prescribed by a public authority. Such a project, assumed to be based on high-rise, “big city” (read American) building typologies, would clearly threaten the principles of “critical reconstruction” developed during the 1980s, and generated heated controversy even more any designs were conceived. What was at stake was not simply the imagined appropriateness of a particular project, or even the future of Berlin’s architectural reconstruction, but the very principles of a democratically conceived, “open” city, legislated and controlled by a municipal authority representing public interests, vs. a city controlled by a singular corporate entity representing private interest. While not known at the time, the battle lines drawn in Berlin could as easily be applied to the state of an emerging global urbanism beginning to affect cities everywhere.

This set the stage for two mediating actions: first, the appointment of an independent, and notoriously conservative Senate building commissioner named Hans Stimmann in 1991 (a figure said to be comparable in power to a Robert Moses of his time) to oversee the development of the site. Second, the announcement of an international competition for the redevelopment of Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz, also in 1991. The guidelines called for a diversity of uses; pedestrian-scaled streets within a plan that would maintain the regular streetfront form of regularly defined city blocks; the reconstruction of the historic geometry of the Leipziger Platz; small development parcels; maximum building heights; the expansion of underground public transport; the limitation of the automobile; and the integration of the few historic

landmarks still existing into the design. Given that the Potsdamer Strasse was replanted shortly after the war, which are now mature trees, the competition guidelines said they must be preserved, thus also calling for the street to remain as a part of the site's infrastructure. The winner, announced in 1991, was the architectural team of Hilmer and Sattler, in a scheme of compact, 35-meter high blocks that developed a dense urban fabric, completely conforming to the historicist approach of the IBA ethic of the 1980's.

The competition received immense publicity, partly due to its acquired symbolic baggage of projecting the "new" Berlin, partly due to an extended competition process involving some of the most important of today's architects, partly due to the immense scale of the undertaken, and partly due to the notoriety of its sponsors. Publicity also came in the form of protest, first by an open letter by Rem Koolhaas, one of the jury members, who attacked Stimmann for the overly defined limitations of the competition, which overly limited formal invention and variety.³ The chief developers of the site, Daimler Benz and Sony were unhappy, having little influence on the competition guidelines, which tended to limit possibilities of "monumentality," or more to the point, a "spectacular architecture" which could highlight their corporate identity. The Daimler and Sony corporations went so far as to commission a counter proposal by Richard Rogers, who had already built such a monument for Lloyd's of London, which was exactly what the sponsors were looking for, and so far, denied.

With pressure from Daimler-Benz and Sony, the Hilmer & Sattler scheme underwent revisions that would challenge Stimmann's historicist agenda. Building heights are raised to 80 meters at Potsdamer Platz and the Landwehrkanal (later raised again to over 100 meters) to allow for more hierarchical massing, and the possibility of high-rise development. In exchange, it was agreed to reduce the cornice height to 22 meters, and an additional two stories set back to an overall limit to 20 meter. The high rises, a clear violation of Stimmann's intentions of developing a replication of pre-20th century Berlin, develop an ambiguity in the project that stays on throughout its final

development—it will never be able to evoke the city that we knew, or be free to become an invention of 21st century urbanism.



Mercedes Benz Building, Renzo Piano

With these concessions, Daimler-Benz finally accepted the Hilmer & Sattler scheme as the basis for a design competition for their property. Renzo Piano and Christoph Kohlbecker win first prize in a mixed-use scheme which virtually duplicates the earlier urban design concept, except for the location of a new civic space at the end of the old Potsdammer Strasse, which along with the massing of several sculpted,

free-standing buildings, uniquely programmed to be a musical theater and exhibit hall (later becoming a casino), breaks the grid and attempt to relate to the object buildings of the Cultural Forum. High-rise structures bracket the north and south ends, one developing a gate to Potsdamerstrasse, the other becoming the sought-after landmark-beacon to mark the presence of the Daimler-Benz headquarters. The master plan, in terms of massing and block form was accepted to be the framework for development, and the 19 buildings totally 340,000 square meters were divided among Piano, and other competition participants, including Hans Kollhoff, Rafael Moneo, Arata Isozaki, Richard Rogers, and Lauber/Wohr (see site plan diagram).



The Sony Building, Helmut Jahn

Sony held its own competition for its 26,000 sq. meter site concurrent with Daimler-Benz. In this case, the Hilmer & Sattler urban concept was subverted in favor of a singular complex which would “both contribute to Berlin’s urban and Sony’s corporate identity,” an impossible aspiration.⁴ The competition winner, Helmut Jahn, opts for resolving Sony’s identity, and develops an inward oriented complex of uniform glass and steel materials focused on an internal elliptical plaza covered by a spectacular glazed, tent-like form. The project includes a high-rise structure which contributes to the cluster of towers at Potsdamer Platz, which along with towers by Piano and Kollhof, are intended to perform as a gateway between former East and West

Berlin. The Sony headquarters occupies a second built layer around the courtyard, filling out the rest of the site. The built complex and central space, containing a series of theaters, restaurants and “Sony World” is highly populated, but aside from being easily penetrated, stands alone, has virtually nothing to do with the massing or materials of Piano’s adjacent development. Stimmann hates the scheme, formally opposes it, but when Sony threatens to pull out of the project entirely, he backs off, and the scheme is built without compromise.



Last to be developed are two parcels, the ABB-Gelandes property on the eastern edge, and the former Leipzigerplatz. Both are unaffected by the agenda of corporate sponsorship, and are firmly controlled by the original competition guidelines and the historicist intentions of Stimmann, resulting in equally uninspired results. The ABB scheme is the result of a limited competition won by Giorgio Grassi in 1993, and is a simple linear massing of H and U housing blocks, reminiscent of 19th century Berlin, but without ornament or scale. These define a linear park adjacent to the Daimler-Benz sites, generally following the former easement of the former Potsdamer railway station.⁵ The Leipziger Platz is to be ringed by a series of ten-story high-rises along a setback configuration which precisely follows the historic form of the octagonal platz. The stringent controls have resulted in only one mediocre structure, and promises to be the least successful component of the overall project.

Opposing Ideologies

Potsdamer Platz has been shaped by the divergent wills of, on the one hand, a municipal bureaucrat attempting to mandate a city form that no longer exists, and two competing corporate entities who are not dependent on a city context to exist. With the conflict played out between the Stimmann and the Mercedes-Benz/Sony sponsors, two divergent philosophies of the relationship of architecture and the city have been pitted against one another, and serve to define two clearly opposing models of the city.



On the one hand is Stimmann's historicist, post-modern position, a continuation of the IBA experiment of the 1980's, based in the reconstruction of the traditional city. The intent is to revive the city constructed as a dialectic between public and private space, with continuous building fabric that defines built blocks, streets, and public open space. The extended street grid along with property subdivision develops an overall, neutral framework for architectural development. The idea is that an infrastructural, overall ordering concept of city allows architecture to be independently placed into the system, a variable infill of mixed functions and forms that can be developed over time. The fundamental notion of the independence of architecture and the city could describe much of the development of 19th and early 20th century Berlin, a result of the evolving free enterprise system, and the emerging power of the private developer. (Footnote: This was also the

prevailing model of urban design in the academy during the 1970's and 80's, codified through the influential theoretical explorations by Colin Rowe, Robert Krier and others,⁶ and later built to perfection by Cooper/Eckstut's Battery Park City plan along lower Manhattan begun in 1979, and much of the reconstruction of West Berlin during the 1980's..)



Musical Theater and Casino byRenzo Piano

The other paradigm accepts divergent, large-scale architectural interventions, and certainly the high-rise building, in which public and private space, relationships and programs are determined through the organization of individual architectural events. In other words, rather than a dialectic between public space (street) and private space (block), the street becomes relegated to a purely servicing role, or has disappeared altogether to the periphery--only private space, controlled by private interests, remains. Architecture takes over and defines the identity of the urban block—or, the block has become enlarged to the extent that the car is relegated to the periphery, leaving a totally internalized, pedestrian environment. The building is no longer a component fitting within a dominant, overall urban order—its form and image alone constitutes the new order and scale of the city. The role of architecture in the city has now become more like the architecture of the suburbs, with the internalization of space and the exclusion of any meaningful external urban relationships. This model manifests a fundamental shift of political power, from the mandate of the municipal control of incremental private development to the

financial resources and power of corporate interests to build at an unprecedented urban scale.

The Sony proposal clearly takes the side of the new urban model—self-contained, independent, and internalized, the project is a synthesis of a single concept controlled by a single corporate entity over the complete site. The notion of fitting within a larger, comprehensive urban order, relating to other neighbors, or even to the Hilmer & Sattler competition proposal is of little concern.⁷ The scheme is essentially a covered elliptical courtyard surrounded by lease space that fills out the triangular wedge of the site punctured by pedestrian openings to a peripheral street; a second layer, defining a pedestrian passage articulates the Sony corporate headquarters. While the whole complex has been broken into several building parts (one of which is the preserved remains of the original Hotel Esplanade remaining after World War II)—all the parts are internally related as determined by Sony's prerogative, not through any external public mandate. The public space of the street has been replaced by the privately controlled, (though publicly accessed) space of the atrium. The notion of city is expressed by a singular architectural statement that defines the site as an independent, singular construct within the city, undisturbed by any conflicting vision, or sense of its place in a larger historical context.

At first glance, one could assume that the Mercedes Benz project relates more to the Stimmann model and the original Hilmer & Sattler scheme, given its acceptance of the vehicular grid, and pedestrian spine that subdivides the project into a series of separate building blocks and buildings. The site has been given over to be designed by different architects working within strict massing guidelines, much as in the nature of new development in the surrounding city.⁸ But appearances are deceiving. The grid is smaller than the typical Berlin block, and is reduced to being more a device to articulate massing, rather than a system of property subdivision and development. Further, most of the parcels are designed by a single architect, Renzo Piano, producing a singular compositional massing even further unified by the

same ceramic facing material used throughout. The result is the reading of a single, unified mass, a kind of “mega-building” not unlike the Sony scheme, which in this case is articulated into smaller units by the miniaturized street grid, rather than Sony’s internal, radial subdivisions within a super block. In both cases, the building parts are inextricably tied together into a single perceptual gestalt—while there are internal divisions into articulated masses, they seem to be all cut from a pre-existing, unified whole.⁹



Buildings by Richard Rogers, Mercedes Benz Building Beyond

This comprehensive site unity does tend to break down on selective blocks that have been given over to other architects—but here again, the block unit is a single complete building rather than a series of varied programs within the block, due to the fact that the scale of the grid simply doesn’t allow for multiple buildings to be built on a single block. Each building, becomes the urban block, is an island unto itself.¹⁰ The grid as infrastructure defines only a few architectural variations, and most of these conform to the same courtyard type. The variety is even further reduced by the Richard Rogers scheme that repeats the exactly same buildings on two blocks, while and the massive Isozaki housing is a linearly extended courtyard extrusion that replicates itself over multiple blocks.

The grid, traditionally used as a device to order the variety of private events and generate a vital, public realm has become too reduced to be interesting (i.e. too little infrastructure and too few units) and imposes an unnecessary layer of control over the few parts that remain. The buildings seem to dominate over the experience of public space, with the surrounding streets performing as little more than servicing lanes, providing minimal access to circulation, light and air. There is only one significant and pedestrian-active public street, Potsdamer Strasse, leading to the spatial climax of Marlene Dietrich Platz—the others are largely reduced to providing vehicular circulation and servicing. Public pedestrian activity is generally relegated to internal, privately controlled spaces, such as the shopping mall adjacent to Potsdamer Strasse, and the Mercedes Benz atrium, not unlike the covered court of the Sony project.

The realization of Potsdamer Platz suggests that the new city will be achieved through a scale of architecture that defines its own site, versus an earlier condition of architecture whose own identity was subservient to its primary role of defining the dominant organization of public space. The Stimmann model of the historic city for urban design initiatives simply no longer works in the new city of global/corporate levels of control and large-scale redevelopment projects. This suggests fundamental shifts in the role of public space, and the processes of urban development. The form of this emerging paradigm, if Potsdamer Platz can serve a model¹¹, would be described as something like the following:

1. The New City is generated as a series of very large, independent architectural fragments.
2. These architectural fragments define areas larger than the traditional urban block, which have become too small to allow necessary horizontal associations and programmatic complexity. .
3. Circulatory infrastructure is no longer necessary, except to divide large architectural fragments into smaller-scaled parts that are adequately serviced.

4. Each architectural fragment fulfills the needs of its own spatial program and agenda, and can operate independently from its surrounding context.
5. These urban fragments equally control/shape public (or publicly accessed) space and private space--there is no difference.
6. The New City can be developed as an entity, over a short period of time.
7. One architect (or a small team) generates and/or conforms to a single plan .
8. One corporation (or a conglomerate) initiates, controls, and funds the New City, with little interference and interface by public authority.

These simple principles that produce Potsdamer Platz are now common to redevelopment throughout the world, equally comfortable in the inner city or the suburbs, ultimately negating the differences between the two. Potsdamer Platz, American edge cities, and the expansion of Shanghai generally follow the same formula, with minor difference of scale, program, and client. The historic city will not disappear—but is destined to become a smaller, if not minute fragment of the future city.

Ingredients of the Synthetic City: The City in Miniature

The experience of the new Potsdamer Platz places one in an urban limbo of mixed intentions, ambiguities, and contradictions that reflect its ambitious agenda, contentious process, loaded history, and conflicting participants. It is a fragment of a city that emerges, seemingly in an instant, cleansed of memory, out of a half-century void. The project mixes the forms and devices of an actual historic place (but what place that is isn't really clear, given that almost all manifestations of its history are lost) with the program and aspirations of contemporary culture, independent of Berlin, or German culture. Potsdamer Platz is the ultimate achievement of a disengaged, transplanted urbanism, resulting in a radically reframe condition—the artificial construct of a synthetic city. Nothing is accidental—every condition, form, material, entry, sign, and function has been placed, planned and designed with precision. It is a city of appearances, that consciously replicates images of urbanism and traditional forms and

programs that are reproduced and scaled in ways very different than the original sources. It grows not out of its place and culture, but rather is a product of another agenda based on the expanded role of corporate power and capital to shape the contemporary city. The product has now become a familiar one, generated through the phenomena of mass entertainment, media as spectacle, new communication technologies, and commodity-based culture of the global city, but now realized at a new scale and ability to persuade.

Potsdamer Platz attempts to perform as a model of the New City, and present all of the components of a comprehensive, working urban scene, including mass transit, offices, housing, shopping, recreation, in a range of historical and new architectural typologies—all on a site of only approximately 120 acres!¹² So how do you get it all in? The answer is to use many of the traditional components of urbanism, but shift their form and meaning through the devices of miniaturization and re-representation, and displacement. The overall assortment of types must be highly reduced—not 3 hotels, but one; not several shopping districts, but a single mall; not a theater district, but a single theater; not a skyline of high-rises, but 4, carefully placed; and finally, not a residential community, but a couple hundred units in two buildings. Thus, the project presents a kind of “Noah’s Ark” of urbanism—just enough of each species to spawn an actual urban organism, if not an entire city—(except there’s no room for reproduction). The one exception to the principle of minimal representation is the movie house—a Cinemaxx, I-max, and Sony Entertainment Center—some 25 theaters in all—enough for an entire mid-size city. Within the miniaturization of the overall urban program, entertainment is the one component that can not be compromised. The essence of the whole enterprise is to create an entertainment attraction, and such attractions demand choice, based on a market that reaches out to all of Berlin beyond.



Towers by Murphy/Jahn on right, Hans Kollhoff on left

And to get even that limited range of urban program, one must make everything a little smaller than normal. The high-rises aren't very high—the Kollhoff tower is 25 stories, or 101 meters, and the Sony tower is 103 meters—nothing close to its sources in Chicago and New York. Their footprint is so small as to be virtually useless to a modern corporate tenant.¹³ The Marlene Dietrich “Square” is only a forecourt to the Stella Music theater and I-Max, hardly large enough for a single café. The covered plaza of Sony's complex is far more generous—but here too, only large enough for a few events (the one entry to the multiplex, one bar, one restaurant, the remnant of the Hotel Esplanade— and that's about it). The mall seems to have reasonable variety—but is too small to possess the big-box department store, which is the critical traffic generator of the original American model. The Hyatt Hotel, taking up a full block, seems to be of normal size, until one walks into the lobby, and discovers a minimal lounge and front desk smaller than many boutique hotels. The Potsdamer Strasse is the pedestrian center of the project—but with its mature trees planted some 50 years earlier, wide sidewalks, highly reduced traffic (the street dead-ends into Marlene Dietrich Square), not to mention the fact that it's only four blocks long, with only a couple of cafes and shops— it seems to have an almost cozy, traditional street scale of a small German village, and certainly not the great of activity of the pre- World War II boulevard, the heart of Berlin. The result is a kind of “Disneyfied,” urban theme-park of miniaturized events to develop as comprehensive

experience of urbanity as possible, but compressed into a site too small to be able to encompass enough of it at normal size.¹⁴

The problem of the Potsdamer Strasse, and so many other aspects of the project is that it is based on familiar urban precedents that have somehow become removed from their original sources, and are now framed, re-representations of the original artifact, emptied of all authenticity. So while the street maintains its original easement, and the earlier-planted trees, it is now but a distant memory of the original boulevard. What used to be a street continuing western city beyond, now almost immediately dead-ends due to the post-war construction of the Scharoun Library; nothing remains from before the war, except for one building. Even its title, with its qualifying “Alt” Potsdamer Strasse, to differentiate itself from the newly realigned street that had to maneuver around the 1960’s Culture Center, makes it clear that the “original” has been preserved to once again remind us that it is indeed a remnant of its earlier existence. The other passages look like urban streets, but don’t function as streets, except to service buildings and allow necessary open easements—they have little shopping, and virtually no pedestrian activity. The miniature towers that mark the entry to the street “look” like towers, but as mentioned, are not the right scale, and seem to be a kind of replica of more convincing originals found in the U.S.

While the site was virtually leveled at the end of World War II, the project desperately strives to authenticate itself by its maintaining connections to the few examples of historical fabric remaining on the site, following the competition guidelines that required building fragments to be incorporated into the project. But even the authentic fragments that are the actual artifacts existing before World War II don’t feel authentic. The one remaining intact building, Hous Huth, and other fragments of the Hotel Esplanade and Canaris-Haus are so obviously isolated and unique, so preciously restored (Helmut Jahn has placed parts of the Hotel Esplanade literally behind glass) they become artificially recontextualized, and made unreal. It’s almost as if all the new development was already there, and the few historic fragments were brought in from outside, or worse, newly built as historic

recreations to break up the totality of the new vision, and lets some sense of an actual history bleed through. But there's too little of it remaining against the massive upheaval around it to perform as an index of any significant text. Actually, the original sense of the void itself was the most significant and accurate representation of the site's, and now that it's been filled in, that will never come back. And the other critical layer of the site's history, the Berlin Wall, the manifestation of division, loses any sense of possible reference given the project's intent of its denial, the victory of reconnection and reunification through its simple act of filling the edge with a built place.

Beyond the Potsdamer Strasse, where it all comes from? Certainly not from Berlin. Potsdamer Platz is the ultimate packaging of a synthetic city made up of diverse parts displaced from other sources and places. Where does one begin? Renzo Piano's sensuous beige ceramic cladding that unifies his buildings, based in a warm, Italian sense of craft, seems completely out of place in Berlin. Further connecting to the German's love of Italian culture is Piano's rich shaping of Marlene Dietrich-Platz, generated by varied alignments and vistas of multiple grids and street alignments, replicating the picturesque qualities of an Italian square. The high-rise by Kollhoff has similar fenestration and massing to the early New York ziggurat skyscraper conforming to the 1916 zoning law, with 1930's Art Deco overtones. Other buildings are the iconoclastic products of unique visions, such as Richard Rogers's high-tech, (and over-wrought) version of office building, with a forced articulation beyond the demands of any corporate or speculative operation. More iconoclastic is Helmut Jahn's tent-like covering of his Sony project, whose sense of introversion and denial of the urban block make it a peculiar choice for an urban project in general, and has no precedent in Berlin in particular. At the other end of the spectrum, Moneo's rather mute exterior for the Hyatt Hotel, with virtually no qualities of interior public space could have chosen to relate to a more opulent tradition of Berlin's old grand hotels, but seemed to choose not to.¹⁵

Potsdamer Platz also abounds with places that come out of suburban, rather than urban traditions: an enclosed shopping mall that looks like

malls everywhere can be entered from the underground transit (or parking garage) without ever stepping out into the city; the multi-plex cinema and Imax concepts as the latest manifestations of the film entertainment industry; or the enclosed atrium of Mercedes-Benz again reminiscent of a suburban office park. The sources all seem to come from somewhere else, and certainly have nothing to do with Berlin, which as it turns out, are a selection of the predetermined set of parts found in today's global city. Which effectively means, they come from nowhere in particular, simply the products of mass consumer culture based in advertising, and the replication of the same models everywhere, no matter what are the local characteristics of the context. And in fact, a criteria for success is to deny any recognition of locale. If it doesn't seem to come from Berlin in particular, so much the better, because one wants to experience something beyond Berlin, and be entertained the way a tourist is entertained. Thus, Potsdamer Platz becomes urban spectacle, an event to be visited and enjoyed by the tourist. And "at Potsdamer Platz, even a Berliner can feel like a tourist."¹⁶

Thus, the identity of Potsdamer Platz, as shaped by the demands of the modern tourist, expresses what has become the primary role of the modern city, now exposed in its purest, unadulterated form: the city performs as a provider of the entertainment and commodities of mass culture. And culture not based in its broadest historical perspective, but culture of its recent vintage, the Imax, movie complexes, theme restaurants, and chain stores that are now found virtually anywhere. This is mixed with the new scale of the corporation's advertising power and insatiable need for publicity and identity that shapes the image and development of the global city. The evidence of mass consumerism is everywhere. The Sony project includes "Sony World," a focal showcase of the latest products of Sony that presents itself as a combination of institutional museum (of itself), an information center for its products, and perhaps least importantly, a sales room. Mercedes Benz includes a prominent automobile show room that advertises its cars prominently to its interior atrium and the external street. The building lantern takes the form of the Mercedes logo, now prominently featured as one of Berlin's most prominent landmarks. Other logos

abound, including those of McDonalds, the Hyatt, and a large number of ubiquitous retail and restaurant operations. The tourist is entertained by familiar “friends,” which despite their banality, are now made more tantalizing, and in a way, powerfully potent by conquering all vestiges of the site’s authentic history, specificity, and trauma. The irony, of course, is that such specificity of place, the experience of the new and unfamiliar was once the basis of the tourist experience—and in a site so rich with meaning and history, there were a multitude of possibilities for exposing its past (far better achieved prior to the site’s transformation), with at least an equal amount of entertainment value.

And if the answer is that both the authentic and synthetic experience can be achieved, and in fact, are combined, exist side by side at Potsdamer Platz, and be a part of the complexity of a real, working city—it is believable that such was the intent. It is all there, most of the functions of the historic city—a mix of housing, work, shops and recreation. And even the fragments of remaining history, as dictated, have been carefully maintained—a few rooms of the Hotel Esplanade, the Weinhaus Huth, the 50 year-old trees along Potsdamer Strasse. But as placed in the overwhelmingly orchestrated preconception of the whole operation, the authentic parts become flattened, re-presented, and merge into being just another part of the total experience. It is this flattening of all experience which becomes the most insidious quality of the synthetic city, and the one which is most difficult to overcome. The result is a form of blurring-- Berlin cleansed of its specific past and memory, or perhaps one could say that history is cleansed into a highly selective condensed memory, a historical amnesia that erases the “bad,” and reframes places and associations to be made palatable to the anesthetized sensibilities of modern culture. Mass culture makes it virtually impossible to mark, and then notice, the qualities of difference, perhaps the most essential precept of a qualitative urbanity. It all becomes drowned out—and even in the rare cases that one is in the presence of the authentic—the actual trees, the actual historic building, the actual place of the wall—one becomes suspect, we’re not really sure of it, because we know that the replication can be every bit as believable, and as accurate as the original.¹⁷ Ultimately, we really don’t care which one we’re getting, because we’re desensitized to any

perception of difference—and just enjoy the immediate fulfillment of the familiar spectacle.

In the end, the building of Potsdamer Platz was based on good intentions, and its contextual massing does reinforced Stimmann's mission of Berlin's reconstruction, as much as it may have been undermined, and overwhelmed by the prevalent cultural and economic demands of the global city. But perhaps the central mission was wrong—problem was not to reconstruct, or fill the voided site, but to allow the site to speak of its history, largely expressed through the very fact of its removal, later division, and the remembered power of the void. In other words, the problem becomes: how to fill the site, and let it remain as a void at the same time, seemingly an impossible paradox. Perhaps the answer can be found in earlier modernist models of Le Corbusier and others, long rejected as being destructive of the historic city, anonymous, and a-spatial. But it is in fact the “continuous space” of the modern city, and not the classic reconstruction of the historic block and street that can possibly maintain both the condition of absence, as well as a framework for habitation (which could easily absorb a Sony complex, or other anomalies. One could not think of a more fitting rediscovery of modernist planning theory, or a better context for its vindication, and wishes it could have been built in place of the realized vision of the new city.

Notes:

1. See Heinrich Klotz and Josef P. Kleihues, *International Building Exhibition Berlin 1987*, New York: Rizzoli, pp. 7-11.
2. The shift of the capital from Bonn to Berlin generated several competitions for major civic/governmental projects equal in importance and visibility to the Potsdamer Platz development, including the reconstruction of the Reichstag by Norman Foster (now completed) and the construction of the new capital building complex, won by Axel Schultes, which is currently being realized.

3. Roland Enke, "Missed Opportunities" from *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urban Architecture for a New Berlin*, Berlin: Jovis, pp. 31-33.
4. Ibid, p. 42.
5. These projects are far behind schedule and still under construction due to delays in infrastructural rail and tunnel construction.
6. This highly influential era of urban design theory is generally known as "contextualism," and later, "Collage City," as evolved at through Rowe's teaching and writings carried out at Cornell University during the 1970's and 80's. See:
William Ellis, "Type and Context in Urbanism: Colin Rowe's Contextualism," *Oppositions*, Fall, 1979, Vol 18, New York: MIT Press.
Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City*, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1978.
7. The scheme does generally conform to the height limits of the Hilmer & Sattler model (although not to its plan), except for the proposed tower, which was 17 meters higher than permitted.
Enke, op. cit., p. 43.
8. Stimman's ability to successfully mandate replication of the consistent, historic 30 meter high block scale is most notably achieved in the rebuilding of Frederick Strasse, the primary commercial spine of former East Berlin (just east of the Potsdamer), and the district west of the Brandenburg Gate (north of Potsdamer), which has become a new governmental district.
9. Urban design theory here, relative to the notion of the unifying powers of the perceptual gestalt, has antecedents with earlier aesthetic theories found in the art movement of "Minimalism." See the seminal article:
Robert Morris, "Notes On Sculpture," *Artforum*, February, 1966.

10. This notion of the block as island, or as a condition of floating archipelagoes is directly based on insights of Rem Koolhaas. See:
Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 101-3.
11. Also could be included as a part of the same phenomenon would be the new development of Lille, France, and the recent giant theme hotels built along the Las Vegas strip.
12. Perhaps the ultimate, and most absurd attempt at miniaturization was a theme park built in the Northeast Bronx, New York called "Freedomland," built in 1960, which attempted to compress all of the United States in an area of around 85 acres, (surrounded by a 120 acre parking lot!). The Rocky Mountains was presented as a couple of several earth mounds 50 feet high, the Mississippi River was a drainage ditch, the Great Lakes were seven feet deep, and so on. The park was an utter failure, closed after 4 years; and was replaced by Coop City.
See:
Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, David Fishman, *New York 1960*: New York: Monacelli Press, 1995, pp. 968-69.
13. The towers replicate the image of earlier tower designs, with the Kollhof seemingly influenced by Art Deco, ziggurat high rises of the 1930's, and Jahn's Sony high-rise a refinement of the glass box of the 1950's, but at a reduced scale from the original. Highrises of a similar scale were built in the early 20th century, but are now obsolete for modern commercial leasing, and in many cases, as in lower Manhattan, are being turned into residential apartments.
14. Much of this description is extended from an analysis in:
Werner Sewing, "Heart, Artificial Heart, or Theme Park" from *Der Potsdamer Platz: Urban Architecture for a New Berlin*, Berlin: Jovis, 2000.
15. Ironically, one of the most significant, and unfortunately, not overly influential models of interrelating modernism with the conditions of a local physical and cultural context can be found in

James Stirling's Staatsgalerie, built less than two decades earlier in nearby Stuttgart. See:

Robert Maxwell (Introduction), James Stirling Michael Wilford and Associates, London: Thames and Hudson, 1994.

16. Sewing, op. cit., p57.

17. The original, and extended argument along these lines is based on: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," from Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1968.