Refashioning No-Man’s-Land

Urban Image Politics and the Visual Dimensions of Democracy

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The occupation and redefinition by outsiders of a profoundly emblematic no-man’s-land surrounding a most famous conduit from one world to another would be problematic under the best circumstances. Against the backdrop of dramatic political upheaval, social displacement, and economic uncertainty that has characterized post-Wall Berlin, the American Business Center at Checkpoint Charlie encapsulates the complex interaction of private and public decisions that have shaped the process of re-forming – some would say deforming – Berlin, during the past decade. Checkpoint Charlie Bauprojekt which today, ten years after inception, is only partially complete, provides a platform for a discussion about the city’s long and fractious tradition of urbanism, and the boom and bust atmosphere of the last decade, which trapped architects between the forces of central planning and those of the free market. The author, who was Project Manager for Das Business Center at Checkpoint Charlie from 1993 to 1994, describes the excess of means over ends, and questions sacrifices made to the intention to create a grand capital city in the shortest possible time.

Keywords: Berlin, Checkpoint Charlie, Central planning and market forces

Introduction

Berlin is an enormous city – eight times the size of Paris – and famous for its decenteredness and vast extension. It is different from other Western European capitals in terms of its history as a capital and as an industrial center as well as in terms of its buildings. It is a city of rules, whose physical reality, irrespective of politics, has been consistently authorized through the construction of buildings subservient to the overall form of the city. It is a city where memories of the last century’s troubled eras – the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich and the divided city – have meant that here, the crisis of modern architecture and urban planning coincide with the crisis of national identity, a city which since reunification has no consensual idea about how to approach the architectural task of tying together its two parts which developed separately for 40 years. It is what Michael Monninger of the Berliner Zeitung called “a regional capital, now imposed on the whole country for the fourth time, and all the previous ones were unlucky” (Davey, 1999).

The American Business Center at Checkpoint Charlie was one of the first of the more than 40 major projects to be launched in the city after the wall came down. It “pioneered” large-scale commercial development in the eastern part of the city center and was, as such, a testing ground for planning decisions in the city, for its redevelopment would need to balance the search for private profit with the need to create a piece of the city that explicitly articulated issues of this historically sensitive site in ways pertinent to post-unification Germany. A great deal was at stake here: not just ideas, but enormous investments, lucrative commissions, and the sizeable egos of architects and architectural critics, and a public made up of passionate urbanists and amateur semioticians.

In significant ways, Checkpoint Charlie is uniquely local to the complexities of urban redevelopment in late twentieth century Berlin. Still, it is possible to identify patterns and roles that might be generalizable across cities, and perhaps even across other countries. To the extent that all of the factors that interact to
define the political economy of the Checkpoint Charlie project can be analyzed, the interest here is in the qualitative shifts as opposed to measurable levels of activity, which is why I pursue a limited comparative scope and rely on empirically-grounded analysis to defend my view, namely that the forces of central planning and those of the free market prevented creative alternatives and blocked new responses to the complex urban needs represented by the site.

I

A perfect, if unintentional, illustration of the miscalculations that have marked this project occurred in the middle of the night of December 7th 2000, when the last vestige of one of the most famous symbols of the Cold War – an old East German watchtower at the Checkpoint Charlie – was bulldozed by the developers. In the early days of the project, the watchtower was to be treated with extraordinary deference: it would remain where it stood while a mega structural design organized itself around the tower. The developers clearly hoped to capitalize on the universal recognition of the site and, in the years since the Wall was removed, the watchtower attracted tens of thousands of visitors each year. But on that night in 2000, nearly ten years after the project began, only three of the five blocks were complete, the intervening years having brought a slump in the real estate market and near-bankruptcy for the developers. As if rehearsing familiar roles, city officials said they could not have saved the tower as it was not classified an historic landmark and a cry of protest came from the public (a director of the Checkpoint Charlie museum said the decision to bulldoze the watchtower was a “barbaric act”). The developers had of course already spoken.

It was inevitable that Berlin would be big. It was, after all, the once and future Hauptstadt of a great economic engine. The German government’s pledge to spend more than $500 billion in ten years to rebuild its new eastern states quickened the pace of investment in Europe’s largest economy, and fostered optimism among investors. Government privatization of businesses was carried out on a scale never before seen (5000 businesses had been privatized within the first three years) and unprecedented capital expenditures were earmarked for improving the transportation and communications infrastructure in the east. Still, reconstructing Berlin would be realized with private capital and by companies seeking to make profits out of redevelopment. Consequently, and very controversially, large tracts of land were sold off by the city to private companies soon after reunification. Five acres of the site around Checkpoint Charlie were sold to the Central European Development Corporation (CEDC) consortium of American and European businesses with primary funding by the American Ronald Lauder, despite the absence of a detailed or articulated master plan (Anon, 1991). The American Business Center (later called Das Business Center at Checkpoint Charlie) was the largest block of development in the area after Potsdamer Platz and the Reichstag. The feeling among many Berliners, was that here as with many other mega projects taking shape in the early nineties, sites of such importance on Friedrichstrasse, a central axis in the historic nexus of the city, should become more than just a high class office enclave with luxury apartments, especially in a city with critical housing shortages and rising unemployment. Moreover, many Berliners felt that the asking price was too low and, critically, that the sale to large international companies compromised debate on the future of the site. (While the question of use was settled preemptively by the developers, the debate about the sale price is far from over. In a final ruling in May 2001, a German court agreed with the German Federal government that the State of Berlin had sold the Checkpoint Charlie tract below (1992) market price and must now reimburse the Federal government, who will then in turn pay restitution to individuals shown to have owned the land before confiscation in the sixties by the GDR.)

II

Amid the contentious debate over the future architectural character of the city, a debate which has tended to focus on the design of solitary projects at the expense of the central urban task of fostering the emergence of new forms of city life in a heterogeneous society, Berlin’s huge planning bureaucracy concentrated on controlling the growth of the new urban topography with neo-traditional design covenants. The view that the Business Center at Checkpoint Charlie, like every other new building in the historic center of the reunited city, should be rebuilt to bear a strong resemblance to its pre-war form was fiercely promoted, and, to a degree, imposed by Hans Stimmann, director of Berlin’s huge planning bureaucracy, and a Social Democrat planner who served from 1991 to 1996, reinstalled July 2001 and by Wolfgang Nagel, the Berlin senator (Ladd, 1997). Stimmann, with the help of a local philosopher of planning Dieter Hoffmann-Axhelm, refined a blueprint for the so-called “critical reconstruction” of the city, locating Berlin’s essence in the eighteenth-century block structure of Friedrichstadt and the dense pattern of five-story courtyard buildings that covered those and newer blocks at the end of the nineteenth century. Official guidelines for a restoration along the lines of traditional European urbanism, which Stimmann took to mean relatively modest-scale buildings clad in stone and brick rather than glass and steel, were issued with strict parameters for heights – 72 feet for the eaves, set-backs for peaks of roofs; and ratios of glass-to-stone. (Stimmann called this the “stone Berlin” although much of eighteenth-century Berlin was, in fact, brick, plastered over and painted in the Prussian ochre of the city’s sandstone palaces.)
As a practical matter, these guidelines struck many critics as a hopelessly romantic attempt to turn back the clock: a vision at odds with the contemporary scale of commerce, capital investment, real-estate development, and private as well as public bureaucracies. More importantly Stimmann’s substantial powers did not extend to the most basic decisions about real estate investment; the special government agency charged with liquidating East Germany’s state-owned economy (the Treuhand) insisted on selling its land quickly, in large parcels and to large developers (Stegers, 1995). Stimmann’s guidelines explicitly sought a Berlin unified by Prussian classical order, a tradition of Prussian neoclassicism invoking the authority of the great Karl Friedrich Schinkel although, as architectural historian Tilmann Budden-sieg points out, “in his time, Schinkel strove to shatter the uniformity of eighteenth-century Berlin”. In other words, the style now held up as the conservative norm was in its time radically innovative. Schinkel’s genius thus can be seen as part of a Berlin tradition diametri-cally opposed to the spirit of critical reconstruction (Ladd, 1997).

The architects of Checkpoint Charlie (including Philip Johnson and David Childs) conformed to the restrictions but were unhappy with Stimmann’s insistence that any too-vivid architectural design must be de-dramatized “for the good of the city”. The architects of Checkpoint Charlie were committed to the new structures on the site being informed by the existing architectural traditions of Berlin but had hoped to temper their interpretive references with something modern and forward-looking. They, like all good architects, thought the proper Berlin tradition was the one that began now. And, as urban critic Wolf Siedler once put it, every epoch in Berlin seems to consume its predecessor as the city draws up a new blueprint for itself. 18th century Prussian bucolia was followed by Rococo Berlin, which was, by the mid-19th century, largely replaced by Schinkel’s neo-classical city, which vanished in the building boom which followed the industrialization of the city in the late 1800s. This process of continuous redevelopment has ensured that little remains of old Berlin. Historians have discovered at least seven layers of different styles in the center and the process has always been characterized by discontinuity rather than continuity, rupture and collision rather than harmony and elegance (Stegers, 1995).

For Hoffmann-Axhelm, a reduction in urban scale to the eighteenth or nineteenth century parcel was the necessary first step to restoring diversity in urban neighborhoods and flexibility in their development. After Speer’s architectural vision for the Third Reich, and then Allied bombs, the critical reconstructionists blamed the massive scale of projects in both the capitalist West and the communist East (post-war reconstruction) as wiping out not only salvageable buildings but entire streets, blocks and neighborhoods, creating desolate stretches of highways, park-

As of 2001, Checkpoint Charlie remains something of a no-man’s-land. The site is unfinished, an artificial enclave only partially filled with tenants by day and empty in the evenings and on weekends. The architecture functions – much like the rudimentary crossing gate and the Wall before them – as a set of activities (exclusivity, surveillance, identity checks etc) and as a physical presence that is oppressively monumental, massive, and forbidding. There is no civic rights in these privatized synthetic spaces created as barricades against the harsh realities of the streets. The buildings have the traditional courtyards, but they are closed. If you don’t work there you don’t get in. As critical

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**Figure 1** Development plan of North-Friedrichstadt, 1748.
Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Berlin
reconstruction took form, Hoffmann-Axhelm himself feared that it was degenerating into mere street decoration, facadism that disguised the continued impoverishment of urban life. The dreariness here is, as one commentator put it, “intense”. Stimmann’s formula for a corrective urbanism turned out to function, in practice, merely as an icon for every architect and investor who wanted quick planning permission. Instead of fostering cultural and economic diversity in a heterogeneous society, it in effect allowed narrow investment surveys with prearranged results to proceed unchallenged.

In the battle for spatial domination, critical reconstruction excluded every facet of East German architecture and planning, the authentic traces of one history erased in order to re-create a different one. And as the Treuhand’s actions directly or indirectly eliminated hundreds of thousands of jobs, it was seen in the eyes of many East Germans as an occupying power of West German capitalists who had supplanted the Soviet Communists. On a daily level the eastern way of life disappeared with street signs, shops and even the two-stroke Trabant automobile replaced by western brands and designs.

During the 1980s, Ehrhardt Gisske, as Generaldirektor der Baudirektion Hauptstadt Berlin (East), developed his own ideas for the restoration of the Friedrichstrasse. But, with reunification almost all East German bureaucrats were eliminated or disabled, part of Abwicklung (“wrapping up”) about which Peter Marcuse has written passionately (Marcuse, 1990, 1991). The old city center had belonged to East Berlin and much of it had long been neglected, but during the 1980s the GDR had devoted considerable resources to its redevelopment. Workers and building materials from the entire country were diverted to Berlin so that the capital might stand up to comparison with West Berlin on the city’s 750th anniversary. Most of the historic buildings still in ruins were finally restored. Renovation was accompanied by new construction to revive major inner-city streets, most notably Friedrichstrasse. Of the new commercial buildings there, still unfinished (Ladd, 1997). A vignette of the relationships of mutuality and domination that lie within, or below, all social life in the reunited city was the Checkpoint Charlie staff: investors and architects were represented by a single East German, while the support staff, janitors and clerks were predominantly eastern.

How to agree on a historical style appropriate to the modern world or a national style in a divided and changing nation? The concept of critical reconstruction provided an alibi to dispense with basic debate, to fall back on an imaginary urban quality before the destruction of the last century. Few would disagree...
with the necessity of firm guidelines for the restoration of a city. Berlin is rightly arming itself against the worldwide leveling that threatens to take what remains of its architectural-spatial identity, perhaps more fearfully than cities with more tradition and more historical substance. But the genius loci of Berlin is not to be recovered through any attitude, device, or style.

To rescue the city and architecture from the dead-end of feverish restoration and an antiquarian approach to architecture, the routine production of built objects is needed less than the development of a new, suggestive spatial quality and order. It is clear that what people have been fighting over in Berlin is not the substance of the city, but its surface; that the focus of their struggle has not been the aims of urban planning, but the means (Schultes, 1995). All in all, what has counted is what is visible: the capacity to attract attention takes first prize and is not dependent on the content of the work itself. But the real issue of planning and architecture is not aesthetics, but future ways of living and working in the city centre.

Hundreds of thousands of square meters of office space on both sides of the two-mile axis of Friedrichstrasse have been built, arguably with little concern for the people who will occupy these spaces. Neither the senate Department for Building and Housing nor the “Berlin school” has shown the slightest interest in new materials, new construction techniques, or low-energy buildings. There has been little concern to provide the archaic spatial matrix of this new Berlin with any tolerance for the impact of new technologies of transportation or the changes of social re-formation. Using the city as an explicit instrument of national ambition is inevitable (the growth and change in a city is subject much more to market forces than to the dreams of architects) but it is the form chosen that can be questioned (Balfour, 1995). Some urban theorists see this merely as a struggle between global elites and local communities and reduce it to the simple antagonism between distant powerful forces and local victims “retrenched in their spaces that they try to control as their last stand against the macro-forces that shape their lives out of their reach” (Castells, 1992). At the root of the matter lies humanity, but it is not the economic being, but the psychological and social being whom we understand only imperfectly, and ordinary people should be viewed as creative actors involved in the social construction of transnational urbanism by the social networks they form, rather than being viewed as passive objects propelled to global cities by underlying logics. The space of democracy do have a visual dimension. This democratic vision may prefer the jumbled, polyglot architecture of neighborhoods to the symbolic statements made by big, central buildings. It may reject the all-at-once, massive development of urban centers such as Checkpoint Charlie and instead seek slower, less coherent growth throughout the city (Sennett, 1999). Ultimately, the result of visual, decentralized democracy would be set against that of a unifying political space. In their effort to transform the city from a complex, humanist institution to a perfectly controlled and singular image, the makers of planning policy, both local and federal, have failed to grasp a rare opportunity to create a vital capital that gestures out into the future.

Conclusions

It is easy to point out culprits undermining the best work of planners, architects and politicians, but it is my contention that no single force is responsible for the somewhat compromised architectural production of Berlin’s restructuring. It is, rather, the desperation that two forces – scale and speed – exert in tandem. When many people have to work together and move quickly, anything that expedites the process will win out, and so, design-by-fiat often replaces deliberative design. While it can be argued that there is no difference between small projects and big ones (except scale), it can also be argued that scale is the most consequential aspect of the relationships. Big projects need to be flexible enough to accommodate each design yet challenging enough to contribute to each design, and time is one thing that can work to their advantage. In Berlin, as in Checkpoint Charlie, restructuring requires time and the rush to the future complicates the building present. Whether, and how, the architectural grafts of the last decade take root will be interesting to see.

The failure of planning officials to pursue the dimensional growth of the city as a whole alongside that of individual buildings exposes a central problem: even with the current tools of design it appears impossible for a single architect to control the whole scale of an urban problem, let alone the effective execution of projects to be shared with other architects who undoubtedly have different ideas. The grand urban design no longer seems comprehensible to the citizen, either in its unity as a skyline or its legibility as a series of separate schemes. In the absence of a stable frame of reference, urban politics has steered its course blindly, stressing completely different interests in each realm of public life. Marked by the absence of a unified approach, building activity in Berlin concentrated on numerous individual projects which do not take their rightful place in the hierarchy of other urban problems. In my opinion, two areas of research need to be explored on the Berlin scene. The first is reconstruction of public space. In Berlin, everyone’s attention is focused on buildings, not on streets or squares, or the small, tactile gestures of street-level experience. The only projected public space is the converted commercial mall, not the open spaces of connective tissue where various parts of the city and its memory are linked. What has been missed is ecological planning in which intrinsic opportunities and inherent constraints are recognized. The second...
area of research lies in investigating the innovativeness and complexity of the programs themselves. As we have seen, the Checkpoint Charlie Bauprojekt provides a platform for a discussion about the city’s long and fractious tradition of urbanism, and the boom-town atmosphere of the last decade. This has trapped architects between the forces of central planning and those of the free market. This is perhaps the most evident aspect of Checkpoint Charlie’s legacy. A determination in favor of the free play of economic forces consigns this resolution to the individualism and energy of a market society—along with its instability and moral blindness. A determination in favor of planning will consign the resolution to the exercise of political decision-making—along with its bureaucratic tendencies and inefficiencies. But there is no expression of new forms of civic life.

References


Further reading

Kramer, J (1999) Living with Berlin: Berliners have the chance to turn Europe’s most notorious city into idea city—if they can only decide what that is. The New Yorker 75(17), 50–64.