Reflections on Berlin: The Meaning of Construction and the Construction of Meaning

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‘The biggest construction site in Europe’ is a self-description of what is happening in Berlin today, but what is being constructed is an image as well as a set of buildings. The big visible pieces include:

- A whole new set of state buildings, in a prominently located government center (the German word is more expressive — ‘Regierungsviertel’, a ‘quarter for ruling’) at a cost of billions, for a Germany that sees itself as the dominant country in a united Europe;
- At Potsdamer Platz, the European headquarters of Sony, a major structure for ABB technologies and the central building for Daimler-Benz-Messerschmidt’s information products and services, oriented to take advantage of the newly opened eastern market, the whole making virtually a second or third city center;
- Friedrichstraße, before the war a main commercial axis for Berlin, after the war just another street within the anti-market German Democratic Republic, now striving for a role as the luxury shopping street of Germany, the Fifth Avenue of Berlin;
- Huge infrastructure works, a new central railroad station connecting the government center with all Europe, a new auto tunnel under that center, cultural facilities galore, including a new Jewish Museum, and a host of private speculative office buildings;
- A proposed ‘Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe’, often referred to as a Holocaust memorial (the German word is ‘Mahnmal’, a ‘warning monument’, rather than simply ‘memorial’, which is ‘Denkmal’).

And the fact of so much construction per se, the construction cranes and scaffolding everywhere, are now touted as defining the new character of the city (Figure 1).

The construction of what? Of symbols, of meaning, very consciously. Ostentatiously, the best architects of the advanced world are invited to enter competitions, first

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1 These thoughts are inspired by the meeting of the Research Committee on Urban and Regional Development of the International Sociological Association in Berlin last June. No one who was there could have been unimpressed by what was happening in the city nor have failed to try to assign meaning to it, but discussions of that meaning were limited, and these reflections are my own reaction to what was happening there. I was born in Berlin, but my family emigrated when I was four as Hitler came to power, and certainly my reactions need to be read in the light of my own background. In particular, the linkage between the power structure in Germany, fascism and the Holocaust remains for me a central issue, and the present construction in Berlin reawakens for me concern with that issue.
conceptually, then for real, for the key sites. Discussions are undertaken in public, with
speakers, local and international, invited to comment at public lectures, juries impaneled,
special editions of magazines, popular and professional, devoted to the results, and a
whole new institution, the City Forum, established by the Senator for City Development,

Figure 1  Berlin — Mahnmal and construction sites

(1) Selected location for Mahnmal; (2) and (3) Alternate locations in Tiergarten; (5) and (6)
Alternate locations within Government area; (10) Topography of terror; (A) New auto tunnel; (T)
New train tunnel; Dashed lines circumscribe the Government Center and the Potsdamer Platz new
construction.
all devoted to elucidating the meaning and implications of the alternatives proposed. The meaning of each building, each style, each facade, the construction materials, the location and its significance in various historical periods — the empire, the first world war, the Weimar Republic, fascism, post-second world war, the divided and the reunited city — are elaborated, with the prevailing philosophy of ‘critical reconstruction’ giving major emphasis to pre-1914 history.2

Most troublesome perhaps are those constructions dealing with the Holocaust and the Jewish thread in German history; there debate as often leads to apparent paralysis as to decision. Finally, of course, the political leadership asserts itself, the decision is made and is final. The interrelationship of construction decisions with the market (it had collapsed by 1993) and with the national and local budgets is close, and the details of those relationships (to the extent known) are likewise subject to public discussion. Architectural and symbolic analysis, in our best tradition, accompanies all this and extracts its deeper meaning.

But something gets lost in the process. What is being constructed in Berlin can certainly be called meaning; but it can also be called by its short name: power (leave aside the Holocaust Mahnmal for the moment). While form, location and symbolism tend to support purpose, the building on a lavish scale of the new Government Center in Berlin, with a paranoiac concern for security,3 and pomp, and a subservience to every wish for comfort and efficiency and representational fashion by the leaders of the state, is per se an expression of the power of that state. In the debates, after the Wall came down, as to whether the government should move from the backwater town of Bonn to the ‘traditional’ capital of Berlin, the image of the arrogance, the imperialism, the mission of world domination that has historically been connected with the German state was a strong undercurrent — feared by the left, implicitly claimed, in the form of an unabashed chauvinism, by the right.

Now the Berlin administration says such issues are ‘cold coffee’, irrelevant, not worthy of further discussion — the decision has been made: the government is building in Berlin. Only the form of the construction is open to discussion (and at that only briefly), not its fact. Likewise with what the private market wants to do at Potsdamer Platz or at Friedrichstraße: certainly the private market will be decisive in what will be built, only the form the buildings will take is open to discussion. But the evil lies more in the construction itself than in its form. Does not history teach the dangers of a strong centralized state intertwined with a strong centralized private economy, certainly, if not only, in Germany? What kind of a priority is it, to build another Government Center (all the facilities of government already exist in Bonn, some even now still being built), a street of luxury shops, a costly and glamorous new office center for prosperous businesses, in a city whose unemployment rate is over 15%,4 where anti-immigrant agitation is grounded in economic insecurity, with a welfare state being dismantled on all fronts? The meaning of the construction that is going on is not in any doubt. Its meaning lies in the fact of its undertaking. This is indeed the ultimate landscape of power — not because of its form, but because of the very fact of its construction.

2 The phrase is that of a major figure in Berlin city government, Hans Stimmam; for an excellent discussion, see Huyssens (1997).

3 The ruling Christian Democratic Party supported a ‘politics-free zone’, a ‘Bannmeile’, in which political gatherings and demonstrations can be prohibited, around the area, and 100 million DM are being spent to build underground passages connecting the Bundestag members’ offices and parliament building, in part to insulate the members from unwanted contact with the public. See Der Spiegel (1996 8: 72–5).

4 The rate is 17.4% in West Berlin as of this writing. The argument that construction provides jobs is of course true, but specious; they are temporary jobs, and would be provided by construction of quite other buildings for quite other uses as well, and target in fact already skilled and well-paid workers or, as seems increasingly the case, foreign workers imported for the purpose to work at lower than the standard wages, thus depressing wage rates generally in the field. Job losses in the manufacturing sector have been 11% between 1991 and 1995, and that loss is expected to continue — 65,000 more by 2010.
Nor are these developments unconscious, the actors hidden, the purposes concealed. Senator Streider, a leader in the city’s government, wants to attract affluent people to the center of the city; professional consultants like Dietrich Hoffman-Axthelm justify such policies as following people’s tastes and preferences. Which people? Pompous office buildings with 20% luxury housing may be some speculator’s (or ‘market analyst’s’) view of what is desired, but these are not merely some private real-estate developers putting their private profit ahead of the public good; these are the political leadership’s very definition of the public good. They are delighted at the modernization of the older housing stock in the East, but it has led to rent increases of 70% and a classic gentrification-cum-displacement of the existing tenancy.5

The Potsdamer Platz development is particularly poignant. That Daimler-Benz-Messerschmidt, a key player in German economic and political power through two world wars, is sold the most visible and most promoted piece of publicly-owned real estate in all Berlin — that fact itself, whatever form the resultant building might take, speaks volumes. These new buildings at Potsdamer Platz are the seat of economic power, just as the government center is the seat of political power. Their function is to further that power. Their architectural form is one means to that end, but hardly the most important; that they can sit in full comfort at the heart of Berlin, the presumptive new heart of an economically expanded and expansionary Germany, facilitates that function even more. The architectural form might even, arguably, be interpreted as precisely concealing, rather than revealing, function: making a display of glass and its implication of transparency to enclose a building in whose interior manipulations and decisions are made that are anything but transparent to the outside world is more misrepresenting than representing. Further, the lavish use of marble and expensive and exotic materials, the large atriums and huge lobbies, the ostentatious entrances and ornamentation, all suggest that money is no object here, art and impressiveness, not efficiency, are the guiding principle, all coming from concerns whose dedication to the bottom line is at the foundation of their existence. But fact rather than a particular style is the essential point at the Friedrichstraße also — the level of conspicuous display of luxury is what is obscene, its wrapping in high-style architecture only accentuates the underlying evil.

Framing the issues in architectural, or in representational terms, concedes the ball game before it is begun.6 The issues are power and its uses, wealth and its uses; framing the debate as one about form trivializes the issues, trivializes the history, serves to distract attention (perhaps deliberately?) from the underlying decisions. Postmodernism may, in fact, serve the purposes of power here, but so may other styles; the focus on styles could lead to, but is more likely to distract from, attention to what is really happening. This is, of course, not to say that style is unimportant, or that design decisions do not connect directly with political and social decisions, nor is it to say that decisions such as height limits or contextualism or historic honesty are unimportant. It is only to say that there is a danger that in the prominence given to such discussions underlying issues are buried. Some cynics even believe that the apparent willingness of some members of the Berlin administration to listen to discussions of architectural form and urban design is the result of a deliberate desire to focus discussion on issues they themselves consider unimportant, to ensure that the really important decisions go unchallenged. Architectural competitions may be held for the government center, but the fact that a ‘politics-free zone’ is to be


6 The discussion recalls the comments of Ada Louise Huxtable about the Times Square redevelopment debates: ‘the abuses of zoning and urban design, the default of planning and policy issues, have been subsumed into a ludicrous debate about a ‘suitable style’, … leaving all larger planning problems untouched’ (Huxtable, 1989).
designated around the key buildings in which demonstrations can be effectively banned, and that the construction program called for underground passageways connecting the offices of members of parliament with the parliament building, 'sparing elected officials from direct contact with passersby' (Strom and Mayer, 1997: 21), is not a matter left to the architectural jury to influence.

The handling of the built legacy of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) represents an analogous issue of the relationship between form and fact: here the built form is put forward as the fact that requires attention, but the meaning given the form in the official presentation is simply factually wrong, and it is the fact of the existence of the surviving structures, not their form, that leads to state action. The Palace of the Republic was built where the old imperial castle had stood, a castle damaged in the war and torn down with symbolic fervor by the Socialist Unity Party after its consolidation of power in the GDR. Plans for the demolition of the new Palace now are officially grounded in the presence of asbestos in its walls, but expert opinions differ sharply as to how that danger might best be abated, and almost everyone concedes it is hostility to the memory of the GDR that accounts for the likelihood of demolition: its form, so the prevailing belief goes, too vividly and too conspicuously symbolizes the evil that was the East and its Stalinist orientation. In fact the Palace of the Republic is a modernist building, and its construction represented a victory of the more anti-Stalinist factions within the GDR, in the period made more liberal by Kruschev’s revelations in the Soviet Union, over the hard-core Stalinists who had wanted to build on that site a high-rise, perhaps in the form of the dominant Moscow-style wedding-cake towers. It contained nine theaters, multiple restaurants and the legislative, but not the executive or party, organs of the state, and was in fact a quite popular and accessible building to the people of East Berlin. Power lay not there, but in the building of the Central Committee of the SED, behind the Palace and located in the prewar headquarters of the National Bank of Germany.

So what the Palace of the Republic in fact symbolized to a large part of Berlin’s population was the priority of public space and public life over the private. The idea of combining the seat of the legislature with public theaters and publicly accessible restaurants and entertainment is the exact opposite of what is being developed in the new West Berlin government center, with its fortress-like concept and its careful attention to controlling access and use — not that there were not similar concerns in the GDR, but even so the form of the Palace of the Republic was designed to demonstrate openness rather than control. In this case also, then, to focus attention on the built form, rather than on the facts of the GDR/West German conflict, misses the point. It is the fact of the political leadership’s desire to reject and suppress the potentially troublesome legacy of the GDR, not the form of the Palace of the Republic nor the best form for its replacement, that gives meaning to the discussion.

The dispute about the construction of the Holocaust Mahnmal reflects yet another relationship between fact and form, structure and meaning. A monument is, after all, not intended to be a fact in itself, but rather a symbol — in this sense, pure meaning. Here the proposal, endorsed by Chancellor Kohl and funded by the government, is to construct a monument to all the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Through that act itself, the simple fact of his endorsement of the construction, Kohl expects to be seen as appropriately expressing his rejection of anti-Semitism and the Nazi past, cleansing himself from this part of German history. But the proposals for the monument vitiate such a purpose. It will be a memorial structure, much like many other war memorials. It will pay tribute to the victims, perhaps by listing names or places, but will say nothing of causes or perpetrators: so victims without villains, a natural catastrophe, not the doing of humans, an event, not an action. And its location will reflect a long-standing pattern in German memorials to the victims of fascism: although geographically it appears centrally located, near where the Berlin wall stood, it will not get in anyone’s way; it will simply be one of the many sights
of Berlin that its residents or visitors may go to visit if they wish — or leave ignored if they wish. It provides one place where the genocide of the Jews by the German state can be remembered, leaving all other places free of that responsibility.

How different if the monument were to be erected directly in front of the Reichstag, or the Chancellor’s imposing office in the new government center! Salomon Korn, for instance, a German Jewish architect now living in Frankfurt and entrusted with representing the Jewish community’s views on Jewish memorials, in a brilliant article called attention to early submissions that could really function as a ‘Mahnmal’ in the competition, but were barely touched on by the jury. One of the simplest was for a deep trench directly in front of the main entrance to the Reichstag, whose symbolism might represent the break in German history that the new Reichstag was to represent, but the fact of whose existence would force every German legislator every day of every session to walk around an inescapable reminder of what was once on the other side of that break. Korn rejects the idea of simply demolishing the Brandenburg Gate and strewn its dust over the memorial site as substituting one destruction for another, but suggests instead removing some of its supporting stones and replacing them with temporary wooden ones. Or to put a glass wall in front of the new monument to the ‘victims of war and violence’ — originally to the fallen German soldiers of the first world war — with the names of the concentration camps engraved on it, so everyone wishing to view the first could not by-pass the second and would be made to think about the connection. In any event, to make the monument intrusive to the contemplation and exercise of power. The issue here is not, in the first place, an artistic/aesthetic one, says Korn, but a political/moral one. He’s right; the first question at this point is not whether art after Auschwitz is possible, but what Germans today want to say about Germany and the Holocaust. The artistic construction of form must grapple with that issue first, and that requires a pointed, open, and honest discussion that the powers that be do not wish to see occur.

Or, even worse, which they do want to see, but on their terms: encapsulated, at a ‘high’ intellectual level, dominated by ‘Sachverständige’, experts (literally ‘those who understand the thing’), and focusing on the representational/symbolic issues, not the political or moral ones. The jury of Sachverständige (three museum directors, an architect and an American historian) expressed doubt as to whether it was even possible to

7 Although it, in fact, has no historic association with the Holocaust. The site was apparently selected because the land was owned by the Federal government, and thus a larger Federal financial contribution could be expected, and because it was empty, so construction could begin quickly without issues of displacement, etc., and further controversy be avoided (letter to the author from Bruno Flierl, 6 January 1998). That it is in a geographically prominent location, near the Brandenburg Gate, although set off from it, spoke for it, but also raised objections to it, some good (too much traffic noise), some bad (too prominent a ‘thorn in the flesh’ (Meier, 1998: 23).

8 Korn (1997). In several pieces Korn has stressed the view that such a monument should not only have a real historical link but should also provoke a living dialog with present German life and actions (see, for example, Korn, 1996).

9 Bruno Flierl, East Germany’s leading architectural theorist, similarly suggested two appropriate sites at the Place of the Republic in the open space between the two houses of the German Parliament, without going into the type of memorial to be situated there (Flierl, 1997).

10 A comparison with the impact of the handling of churches damaged in the war comes to mind: the Gedächtniskirche in Berlin, carefully preserved and explained in an adjacent modern new building in the center of Berlin, illustrating how the ‘new Germany’ is able seamlessly to incorporate preservation of the past with a downtown of the future, and the Frauenkirche in Dresden, in the GDR, crumbling, trees growing through its open roof, speaking volumes about destruction still felt and not overcome in the present.

11 I have no ideal solution for the monument; indeed, if the jury had been consistent in its reservations, it should simply have resigned. Perhaps a fitting provisional solution would be to leave the site barren and weed-overgrown, with merely a sign: ‘This is the location at which a monument to the murdered Jews of Europe was to have been erected. Because an understanding of what led those who murdered them to act as they did has not yet been achieved, the site remains barren’. A somewhat similar proposal was in fact seriously submitted in the recent competition by Jörg Esefeld and his colleagues (called ‘Scala’).
represent the Holocaust through artistic means. A good question, if hardly ever discussed before. But that should lead the discussion, not to a new focus on a new competition for an ‘impossible’ monument, but rather to what measures a nation might really take to honor the victims of the Holocaust and prevent a continuance of the developments that led to it: discussion of the treatment of minorities and immigrants, for instance, or of the meaning of democracy, or of the role (and perhaps even its physical incorporation) of the new Reichstag, the parliament.

A final example from a smaller scale illustrates the dangers of the current process. In Frankfurt there was a debate about the construction, at the Börneplatz, the site of the former Jewish quarter and adjacent to the old Jewish cemetery, of an office building for the public works administration of the city (including its gas works!). The final solution was the creation of a small museum with the foundations of a few of the old buildings from the old Jewish street preserved under glass and tucked into the corner of the new administration building, and the dedication of a small memorial park behind the building adjacent to the cemetery as a place of ‘remembrance’. Opponents called it, not a memorial park, but a ‘Geschichtsentorganzungspark’, a ‘park for the cleaning of history’. The Holocaust memorial in Berlin is likely to become a similar monument to the cleaning, or at least compartmentalizing and historicizing, of history.

If meaning is being constructed in Berlin today, if these various construction projects are to be given meaning, putting them together suggests what that meaning might be. The construction of the Regierungsviertel stands for the power and wealth of the German state, while Potsdamer Platz reflects the power and wealth of German business, and Friedrichstraße, at least in design, reflects the enjoyment of the fruits of that power and wealth in consumption. But the Holocaust memorial, if it is to say anything at all to observers today, must be precisely warning against the consequences of that power and wealth in the hands of an arrogant and asocial state and business community, against the building of the enjoyment of the benefits of wealth and power by some at the expense of the exploitation and domination and ultimately extermination of others. One memorial, on one site, cannot bear the burden of such a message — no matter how it is designed. Power and murder were historically intimately linked in Nazi Germany; one cannot now celebrate the former at the same time as one mourns the latter. No matter how one designs a Holocaust memorial, in the shadow of the new Regierungsviertel, Potsdamer Platz, Friedrichstraße, the meaning of the memorial turns into its opposite, into a final laying to rest rather than a living provocation, as long as power and wealth march on undisturbed all around it.

So the controversies over the meaning of the design of these separate constructions, in the aesthetized focus into which many of them tended to lapse, suppress and conceal deeper issues of responsibility and current policy. The political leadership is quite content to call its commitment to the fact of some memorial, any memorial at all, an adequate response to the need to come to terms with the roots of one of the most terrible actions of modern human history, and to get on with the business of ruling and generating wealth.

Real communication is generally healthy, and certainly there is much to discuss about all this. Difficult political issues and moral judgments are linked to the action of construction of the built environment in Berlin as in few other places on earth. But the controversies around them, to residents and visitors alike, may conceal the issues as well

12 In a ‘Manifesto’ published by Werner Hoffman; see Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 18 November 1997: 45.
13 The controversy is clearly and insightfully described in a publication of the museum, Stationen des Vergessens: Der Börneplatz-Konflikt [Places of forgetting: the conflict about the Börneplatz], Museum Judengasse, Frankfurt am Main, November 1992. See particularly ‘Damnatio memoriae — Der Börneplatz als Ort kollektiven Vergessens’ [The damnation of memories — the Börneplatz as place of collective forgetting]: 18–43.
as reveal them. Issues of form can be smoke-screens, or they can be the heart of the matter. Telling which is which is an important part of any real understanding of what is to be seen and heard in Berlin today.

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