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Incarnate Politics: The Rhetorics of German Reunification in the Architecture of Berlin

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To describe Berlin as a construction site has become a cliché. A report from March 2000 in *The Architectural Review* reads: “Cranes have dominated Berlin’s skyline [for] the past ten years.” [1](#) Five years prior, an article in *Art in America* declared: “Six years after the fall of the Wall, Berlin is coming more and more to resemble a vast construction site.” [2](#) Cranes and scaffolding can be seen all over the city. But the image of Berlin as a conurbation under construction owes much to Potsdamer Platz. There, evidence of renovation is at its most evident, and because of this Potsdamer Platz has become the incarnation of a city-turned-building-site. Even though other urban locations are undergoing similar transformation, this area is by far the most visible – not only because of its central location where traffic and people converge on the way to Berlin’s most popular sights [3](#) , but also because of its often dramatic history, which I will outline below.

Yet perhaps more decisively, Potsdamer Platz has become a visual signifier for post-reunification Berlin because representations of its reconstruction have circulated in profusion throughout the media since its architectural makeover began in 1990. From newspaper and magazine articles about the “New Berlin” to travel guides and postcards, as well as exhibitions and scholarly studies, the successive stages of the area’s reconstruction have been widely publicized in Germany and abroad. The constant circulation of these images has ensured the area’s currency as the central icon of Berlin’s reconstruction. But what does it mean for Berlin’s transformation to be represented by the transformation of Potsdamer Platz? I will demonstrate that the urban paradigm highlighted by Potsdamer Platz’s reconstruction both exalts *and* depends upon contemporary global capitalism, and in turn, that this glorification also underlies the reconstruction of post-reunification German identity as a whole. Finally, I suggest that this affirmation of global capital in Potsdamer Platz not only fails to address the area’s

historical complexity, *but that it actively represses this history.*

Making Potsdamer Platz

Contemporary Potsdamer Platz corresponds to the site of the original Potsdamer Platz intersection and the neighboring Leipziger Platz. [\[fig.1\]](#) Allied bombing at the end of World War II razed most of the area's buildings, transforming it into a giant empty lot, which then became public property. In 1990, the area was sectioned-off and sold by the Senate of Berlin (the city council) to four private corporations: Sony (multinational, headquartered in Japan); DaimlerChrysler (the fusion of Germany's Daimler-Benz and US's Chrysler); Hertie (Germany); and Asea Brown Boveri (Switzerland). When the area was sold, it was treated as a continuous plot of land with no distinction of the property status of streets and open spaces. As a result, even though today's street pattern reproduces, for the most part, the original map of Potsdamer Platz, most of its motorways, streets and squares are private property.

The sale of this land was followed by a public competition in 1991 to choose a masterplan for the area, which defined guidelines for urban occupation, such as street tracing, building sizes and functions, and overall volumetric principles. The winning entry, by the Munich firm Hilmer & Sattler, maintained the octagonal shape of Leipziger Platz and retraced the old Potsdamer Strasse, as well as creating tree-lined avenues and smaller roads. [4](#) The masterplan also established mixed uses: commerce, residences, services, and entertainment. This stemmed from the architects' intention to regenerate urban life in Potsdamer Platz, since the intermingling of different urban functions was associated with older, more established districts in the city. [5](#) But this insistence on mixed uses as a guarantee of urban life ignores the fact that, in "traditional" cities (and the old Potsdamer Platz), variety of use is generated gradually, by social practices and transactions rooted in the everyday, developed and altered over time. The Potsdamer Platz of today, however, was created in a relatively short amount of time and is owned not by many different businesses and individuals, but by four international mega-corporations. In turn, the whole "variety" of buildings, functions, and enterprises is controlled by these four companies.

After choosing Hilmer & Sattler's masterplan, Potsdamer Platz's new owners held private architectural competitions to design their respective sites. Potsdamer Platz was then transformed into the "world's largest construction site." The biggest portion of Potsdamer Platz belongs to DaimlerChrysler, and comprises sixteen buildings: the debis [6](#) headquarters; office buildings, including one for Mercedes-

Benz, now a branch of DaimlerChrysler; four residential buildings; a covered shopping arcade; a hotel; and an entertainment complex with a multiplex film center, a theater, an Imax, and a casino. The Haus Canaris, one of the few historical buildings to remain after World War II, was made into a small conference center.

The overall layout of the DaimlerChrysler sector was designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano. Piano's architecture is assertive yet unobtrusive. The ochre surfaces of his buildings are lightened by large panels of transparent glass set on a slender metal framework (architectural critic Peter Davey calls this framing "filigree," indicating the subtle ornamental effect of this structural element, whose function is to support the glass [7](#)). The constellation of "superstar" architects participating in the Potsdamer Platz project as a whole – including Arata Isozaki, Rafael Moneo, and Richard Rogers – reflects, in general, the sheer scale of the project. This number of different architects, like the mixture of uses, is mainly aimed at reproducing the heterogeneity of buildings in traditional urban areas. Yet traditional, older urban areas of Berlin, even those pre-dating the Second World war, do not usually display sixteen neighboring buildings designed by international architectural celebrities. [8](#)

Architectural critics have focused on the varied quality of buildings now composing Potsdamer Platz. Some have called it an architectural disaster. [9](#) Most of this criticism is reasonable. Isozaki's building is a massive, disproportionate pink block. One of its façades is a vast surface of stone tiles and windows, anonymous and bland, whereas the other façade displays a symmetrical arrangement disturbingly reminiscent of the monumental volumes of fascist architecture [[fig. 2](#)]. Moneo's offices for Mercedes-Benz have been rightly criticized for their lack of formal distinctiveness and identity – except for the company's logotype, conveniently facing the wide Neue Potsdamer Strasse, expected to be one of Berlin's busiest motorways [[fig. 3](#)]. Yet in Moneo's defense, it must be noted that his building echoes the color and geometric shape of the Berliner Philarmonie and the Staatsbibliothek, which sit just behind it. Moneo's protruding, triangular yellow volume is the only building that attempts to integrate itself with its illustrious neighbors. Then again, it is hard to praise Moneo's respect for urban context when what is seen rising out of the Philarmonie is the logotype of Mercedes-Benz.

The new Potsdamer Platz also includes a carefully composed open space, the Marlene Dietrich Plaza, which "has been described as every German's idealized vision of Italy, urbane but without the washing lines." [10](#) As pointed out by this facetious description, the space is a sanitized simulacrum of a medieval European square, mimicking its physical characteristics out of context and leaving out undesired aspects. The plaza is in turn flanked by a casino, theater, Imax, hotel

and residential buildings [\[fig. 4\]](#). No business executives on the way to work here – the plaza is intended as a congregation space for those in search of culture and leisure. These functions conjure up the ideal of public space as social arena, so often associated with traditional European cities [11](#)– never mind that the Marlene Dietrich Plaza is privately owned.

Culture and art are not only elements of historical idealization. They are increasingly used by multinational mega-corporations as a form of self-advertisement. These companies sponsor cultural events, purchase art pieces and collections, and participate in cultural programs as a way of obscuring the “dark” side of their main objective: to promote the accumulation of capital. On its web site, for example, DaimlerChrysler makes explicit the connections between corporate image and cultural sponsorship in Potsdamer Platz:

With a view to reestablishing the site’s significance as an international meeting place and cultural center in the German capital, DaimlerChrysler is this year once again presenting its “Festival of Nations.” The weekend of cultural events was first staged in 1999 as a continuation of the annual summer show held on the construction site at Potsdamer Platz from the time when work first began. [12](#)

This association with art and cultural activity masks the fact that this corporation’s reason for existence is to produce and increase its own capital. Moreover, this capital does not revert back as a form of collective benefit for the whole of society, and indeed often increases social inequality. [13](#) This is to say, the promotion of cultural events is construed as a form of social benefit for Berliners, directed at a vague notion of the “public.” But the “public” of these events is not the collective social body – it is a paying audience. It comprises those who can afford to know about and visit the essentially commerce-oriented Potsdamer Platz. [14](#)

A Tour of the Space

Potsdamer Platz does not owe its commercial feel only to its functional purpose – as a place of business and commercial transaction. The buildings themselves consolidate ideas through various forms of architectural language. This language is not merely visual (i.e. the building as an image) but also works through the dynamic experience of space, which I will attempt to reconstitute here through a phenomenological description of the site. [15](#)

Potsdamer Platz stands out in the cityscape of Berlin as an agglomerate of skyscrapers nestled in the middle of the city. Instead of forming part of a

continuous weave of similar building arrangements, like the urban fabric of Manhattan, Potsdamer Platz is an extraneous, almost anomalous sprouting. Its buildings rise much higher than their surroundings. [16](#) Their shapes, colors and materials are also distinct: vast surfaces of transparent or reflective glass, façades in blue, brown, yellow and pink, and forms that include sweeping curves, sharp wedges and indented rooflines [\[fig. 5\]](#). Its dense occupation contrasts with the green space of the Tiergarten, Berlin's central park, which opens up in the northwest direction [\[fig. 6\]](#). It also differs from its eastern neighbor, the historical Mitte district, where most of the buildings are masonry low-rises from the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

The southern side of Potsdamer Platz is bordered by the Kulturforum, a sprawling area lined by a series of Modernist buildings housing artistic and cultural institutions, such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie and, as I mentioned above, Hans Scharoun's Staatsbibliothek and the Berliner Philharmonie. There, too, the urban matrix is different. [17](#) While in Potsdamer Platz the towers are set in a dense pattern, close to one another and to the streets, in the Kulturforum the buildings are more loosely organized, surrounded by open spaces and set-off from the street [\[fig. 7\]](#). Even though the Kulturforum buildings are large, their spatial separation downplays their size, while in Potsdamer Platz the sheer density of the buildings magnifies their bulk. Only the Staatsbibliothek compares in size with the buildings of Potsdamer Platz, but its huge dimensions are skillfully minimized because the former is broken down into interconnected volumes. [18](#) In the latter, on the contrary, buildings are basic, single volumes. Their physical presence takes up most of their respective lots and extrudes vertically in continuous surfaces, which appear as massive walls bordering a fortress. [19](#)

Supporting the idea of Potsdamer Platz as a fortress, one does not so much walk through the area as one enters into it. This is not merely an accidental sensorial impression. The streets and open spaces of Potsdamer Platz are private property. And yet the perception of the area as an enclosed space is not only consonant with its ownership status, but also with its intended uses, which are mediated by financial transactions: commerce, services, entertainment, and business. This fact, I argue, endorses Potsdamer Platz's role as a billboard for private capital.

However, once within the limits of Potsdamer Platz boundaries are blurred. The continuity between inner spaces and streets is played out in various ways. Buildings are permeable through multiple entrances and transitional areas such as marquees and cantilevers. Such areas are transparent, keeping a visual continuum between streets and inner corridors. Glass doors make the act of crossing into buildings less perceptible. A few entrances are direct openings with no physical barriers, such as the one leading into the covered forum of the Sony Center.

During the warmer months, sidewalk tables at restaurants and cafés are an additional way to integrate inside and outside. [20](#) Shops and restaurants are minimally separated from sidewalks by glass showcases, which disclose their interiors only to invite looking – and subsequent visiting – from passers-by. These glass membranes bring inside and outside closer, not only visually but also experientially. Because shop windows line both the inside and outside of buildings, the promenade along the length of these displays is uninterrupted from sidewalk to shopping mall. Streets and corridors are covered by the same continuous surface, a kind of Moebius strip that attracts the gaze and distracts from context. These shop windows symbolically compress their interior “contents” (merchandise, food, services) into flat visual planes that function as readable advertisements, which then double as a stage upon which Potsdamer Platz is presented as a thriving global city. From within and without, this area is reduced to a series of façades – like stage props, with no depth.

The office towers also perform this symbolic function. The succession of windows evokes the idea of a beehive, not only through its repetition of identical “cells,” but also in the idea of busy, incessant hard work. [21](#) At night, the whole area shines as an electric display. Bright office windows are set off against their dark framework. The glass façade of DaimlerChrysler’s movie complex glows as a film screen. The buildings’ contents are projected through this façade, reduced to the same visual plane as the neon signs outside [\[fig. 8\]](#). Even more than during the day, Potsdamer Platz at night resembles a giant luminous billboard.

Incarnate Politics

The above considerations rely on one assumption: that architecture symbolizes and carries out political, social and economic functions. Yet I will now complicate this assumption by discussing the ideological role of architecture in the context of contemporary democracies – specifically, private architecture sponsored by clients seemingly, or nominally, disconnected from the political sphere.

In the past, totalitarian régimes such as Nazism, Fascism, and Stalinism have used architecture to convey specific ideological messages, to captivate their audiences through monumentality, rigorous symmetry, repetition and didactic devices such as reliefs and inscriptions. [22](#) Subtler ideological uses of the built environment are found in so-called democratic régimes. In these societies, civic architecture is cast in terms of national identity rather than political leaning, and privately commissioned architecture (such as that of Potsdamer Platz) is seen as altogether divested of politics. Critiques of this architecture focus on the aesthetic – in terms of taste and trend, as if forms had an autonomous existence, independent from social context or meaning. These buildings are also examined for functional

efficiency and structural quality, resulting in purely technical assessments.

Even though such forms appear merely functional (i.e. windows are made of glass so that interior spaces may be illuminated), they nevertheless convey ideological, cultural or political messages. Nor are these ideas arbitrary or essential (that is, there is no intrinsic property of glass that connotes “commercialism”). These meanings are formed as the result of specific historical contexts and are modified by social interaction. In the case of Potsdamer Platz, taking into consideration the influence of contemporary capitalism and German reunification, as well as the forms, materials, and functions of the area, it becomes clear that this site delivers a specific, often crystal clear, ideological message, even though part of this ideology is concerned precisely with demonstrating that these forms are purely functional and politically neutral.

This approach to architecture is a legacy of Modernism. Modernist architects vehemently attacked ornamentation. [23](#) Instead of the pictorial formalism of nineteenth-century architects, whom they saw as mere façade designers, the Modernists developed an abstract aesthetics, concerned with “spatial” properties. They also insisted on the *universality* of this aesthetic. Modernist architecture was further legitimated by its functionalism, defined by objective, scientifically determined aspects. In turn, these perceived qualities endowed Modernist architecture with the appearance of semantic neutrality.

Even though this purported absence of meaning has been criticized by Post-Modern theorists and architects [24](#), the tenets of Modernism have nonetheless survived. Since the advent of the Modern Movement, even socially minded architects such as Walter Gropius avoided political commitment. In the Europe of the 1920s, dodging association with often radical political movements was a matter of survival. And after the defeat of Fascism and Nazism, the explicit association of architecture and politics became anathema in most of the Western world. Modern architecture thus dominated post-1945 reconstruction in the West not only because of its economic and practical effectiveness, but also because its style was associated with freedom and democracy. [25](#) Today, the latter ideas are still salient, but are complemented by the fact that Modernist architecture allows a high degree of commercial convenience: no ideological commitment means flexibility, which means a wider range of clients and commissions.

So far I have suggested that the view of architecture as ideologically neutral is related to the theoretical and practical influence of Modernism. I will now complicate this argument by suggesting that the significance of Modernist architecture to the conveyance of capitalist values is more than merely the appearance of ideological neutrality.

The supposed impartiality of architecture reinforces the idea, in capitalist democracies, that there is a complete separation between the spheres of politics, economics, and culture (this separation is *discursive*, not observed in practice). This perceived neutrality is in turn related to the pervasive idea that political regimes are themselves neutral. In an essay devoted to the oppressive dimension of democratic capitalism, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard remarks that the impositive nature of this political-economic model is effaced from discourse by the view of capitalism as a *natural* mode of human organization:

Under the perfectly neutral name of “system,” it prevails, in truth, after thousands of years spent trying all sorts of forms of community organization. Human history was but natural selection of the most successful – by means of competition, of course – among forms springing up at random: that is, the aforementioned system. It is from this henceforth incontestable fact that the world in its present form draws its prestige, or its authority. [26](#)

Lyotard indicates that neutrality is related to two factors: one, that the idea of democratic capitalism is purely functional (in other words, that societies compose themselves in this way merely because it is the most fit mode of organization – the most efficient for objective or practical needs [27](#)); and two, that democratic capitalism is a spontaneous or natural choice, a chance event comparable to genetic mutations. Lyotard uses the expression “natural selection” to indicate the biological metaphor that contributes to this understanding of capitalism as organic. The fact that almost the entire world has adopted, or tried to adopt, the capitalist system provides further evidence for those who believe in its neutrality and adaptive advantage. Oppressive aspects such as social inequality are either repressed or seen as inevitable. Neutral, natural, and fit, capitalism is called a *system*, not a *régime*.

But the history of Berlin since reunification reveals that capitalist modes of social organization are not organic, nor are the realms of politics, economics and culture (including the built environment) discrete. They are entirely *contrived* and *interconnected*. The creation of Potsdamer Platz, as I have indicated, demonstrates the degree of dependence between these concepts and their material manifestation. Moreover, Potsdamer Platz and the discourse which defines it, as I stated in my introduction, establishes the narrative for most of post-unification Berlin, perhaps even Germany.

East and West

The central role of Berlin in the narrative of reunification attests to the need for iconic events, which distill and crystallize the complex and multiple processes related to national reunion. These processes have been *incarnated* in acts of architectural transformation: destruction and reconstruction. [28](#) Perhaps the most famous of these incarnations was the demolition of the Berlin Wall. Journalist Michael Bynion recalls “the extraordinary feeling that here was history in the making, and that Berlin, Europe and indeed the world would probably never be the same again.” [29](#) That this act was eminently symbolic is indicated by his consideration of the wall as “a division that was already obsolete and was likely soon to be torn down.” [30](#) The cathartic destruction of the wall, whose ritualistic role was underscored by the festive atmosphere that spread over Berlin [31](#), was immediately accompanied by the start of reconstruction. Bynion’s text goes on to describe how cranes filled Berlin’s skyline on that very day: “East German army bulldozers, cranes and construction teams were to be seen tidying up after working all night to erect pedestrian railings at the reopened crossing point.” [32](#)

Demolition and reconstruction have been complementary efforts in the composition of the image of Berlin. Yet demolition did not mean that the city was built anew. The choice between destruction and preservation was selective. The sites of demolition and redesign tended to be those associated with the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and East Berlin. [33](#) And if the material signs of the East were the main objects of repression, then those representing the West were not only preserved, but were also re-asserted through new construction. The architecture of reunified Berlin, including avant-garde experimentation, explicit commercialism, and the refined practice of the world’s best architects, was the singular expression of postwar architectural history in Western Europe. This cannot simply be regarded as an art-historical development. It was a conscious affirmation of values now taken as hegemonic: those of capitalism in its contemporary form. Among the many buildings in Berlin that exemplify this, those of Potsdamer Platz are the most outstanding.

The crumbling of the Soviet Union provided further proof of the universal validity of Western (capitalist) modes. This event, in turn, fueled representations of German reunification as natural, inevitable. And this optimistic context allowed the re-joining of East and West to be underscored by the promise of economic prosperity, and social and political emancipation. Yet instead of the distribution of new wealth throughout the country, reunification proved to be an uneven economic and social process. Some argue that it has consisted, to a great extent, in the domination and exploitation of the East by the West. [34](#)

This naturalization of reunification indicates that partition of the country was viewed as *unnatural* or *provisional*. Division was seen as an artificial imposition, whereas

national unity was apparently justified by commonalities of language, culture, history, and geography. I am not trying to argue, however, that a united nation is natural: it is *naturalized*. The contrived processes of unification are forgotten, as if societies had lived in harmony forever. [35](#) But Germany only came into being as a nation-state in 1871, due to the efforts of Otto von Bismarck. There were and still are profound regional differences in Germany, regarding culture, language, heritage, and political affiliation. The unification of Germany in the nineteenth century, the country's division in 1945, and its reunification in 1989 are all "artificial" as opposed to "natural" processes, in the sense that every political decision is constructed.

The task of representing a nation – of gathering a multiplicity of social realities under a common narrative – is always-already problematic. In addition to their natural heterogeneity (for example, in population), nations also have to maintain a sense of unity in the face of less glorious aspects of their history. For all the embarrassing difficulties posed, for example, by French and British imperialism, or slavery on the American continent, Germany's burden is in many ways exceptional: the extension of Nazi dominance over Europe, the excessive brutality of Hitler's terror state, the death of dozens of millions of people as a result of a war in which Germany played a pivotal role, and of course, the Holocaust. Few other nations have had to contend with the accusation of having fomented "absolute evil." In addition, Germans still grapple with unresolved feelings of humiliation stemming from their defeat in both World Wars and their postwar occupation by the Allied powers (which officially ended only in 1990 with reunification). Because the country is scattered with war ruins, semi-destroyed buildings, monuments and memorials, the reminders of this traumatic past inserts the question of national self-image into everyday life for most of the German population.

These issues are complicated enough, but reunified Germany is dealing with yet another legacy: the scar of its separation. Almost half a century of division has profoundly altered both East and West in their material, cultural and social realms. Lasting several generations, this split was deep enough to configure distinct identities, but at the same time it was not so wounding that an underlying sentiment of Germanness disappeared. This sense of national self lingered throughout separation not only because both regions shared a common history, language, and culture, but also for more basic reasons: because many Easterners had relatives on the Western side of the border. The pain and difficulty of division itself underscored, in its own way, the nation's basic sense of unity. The Federal Republic of Germany and the Democratic Republic of Germany shared more than a name: they shared the claim to a lost wholeness. But four decades of separation under divergent political and economic systems took their toll. Thus not only did reunification revive a sense of Germany's shared identity, but it also unearthed the country's profound inner differences.

Artificial Showcase

Over the last ten years, the physical transformation of Potsdamer Platz has inscribed the area as the “third center of Berlin,” [36](#) bringing capital, people and activity into the formerly vacant space. Representations of the area’s rebuilding have consolidated the idea of resuscitation, as if Potsdamer Platz had been dormant, only now brought back to to the realm of the living. However, Potsdamer Platz has not been made central (again) by its reconstruction. On the contrary, it has been chosen as *the* site of reconstruction precisely because of its centrality. This centrality does not stem only from the site's geographical location, but also from its political significance. This significance was maintained throughout the twentieth century, from the 1920s, when it was the “busiest intersection in the world,” through its association with the Nazi government in the 1930s [37](#), its bombing in 1945, and finally its visibility as No-Man’s land, the site of the Wall, the border between the two Germanys. [38](#)

On one level, Potsdamer Platz became the site of concentrated investment because of material concerns. The area, in other words, was an entrepreneurial dream: first, because the site was vacant, meaning that costly demolition work would not be needed; secondly, Potsdamer Platz was public property, meaning that it was not subject to the same imperatives and concerns of private land, which could have hampered its sale; and finally, and most importantly, its location – at the very center of the city – was ideal for attracting business, consumers, and culture-goers. Potsdamer Platz is nestled in a heavily populated area -- in a central passage point. It is a concrete node of urban life.

The attractiveness of Potsdamer Platz goes beyond the geographical limits of Berlin. Since reunification, followed by the decision to locate the capital in Berlin, the city has catalyzed the nation’s political energies: its historical and geographic credentials make it Germany’s political and cultural center. No wonder, then, that Berlin’s center itself is the disputed object of a diverse array of interests. It stands for more than the center of the city: it is the center of the nation, and the symbol of its economic thriving and the material success of reunification. Although Frankfurt, Cologne and Munich also boast shining skyscrapers, they were not born in the aftermath of reunification. Potsdamer Platz, as a product of the New Germany, represents the process of transformation undergone as part of reunification. Its empty space had once been the hallmark of Communist desolation. Thus the filling up of this space is proof of the benefits of capitalism, which has brought its fruits to the formerly sterile land – or so it appears.

Yet the development of Potsdamer Platz has not radically changed the economic condition of the nation. The wealth that it symbolizes has not spread throughout the whole of East Germany. Given these circumstances, the transformation of Potsdamer Platz can be characterized as symbolic, or more concretely, as a contrived act with a clear political message. This sense of Potsdamer Platz's conscious manufacture as a site for the cultivation of national identity can be seen in the rushed sale of the area soon after reunification. The area, which was a public space, was sold by the city council to private, international corporations at a price much lower than the market would then allow. As Brigitte Werneburg reports: "In 1990, only two months after the opening of the Wall, the Berlin Senate, or city council, sold two choice 'filet' plots in Potsdamer Platz to Daimler-Benz and Sony, at a price so suspiciously low that a European Union commission felt obliged to investigate." [39](#) The hasty sale of one of Berlin's major public spaces allowed little or no discussion of its future. No sooner had the Wall fallen than Berlin's government sealed the destiny of the area, where local and international companies would be showcased and the joys of consumerism – including the consumption of the city itself – would be cultivated.

If this real estate transaction contained a political choice which seems, now, inevitably linked to the historical events of 1989 – the fall of the Wall, the end of European communism – it is important to nuance this argument with the consideration that such a choice also responds to global forces that are independent from reunification and which have been shaping cities all over the world. These forces include the expansion of transnational capital, corporate investments in metropolitan centers, and the emergence of what Saskia Sassen has called "global cities." These forces have promoted similar changes in different parts of the world [40](#) and were already at play in Berlin before the fall of the Wall. Prior to 1989, for example, there were already plans for real estate investments in an area close to Potsdamer Platz, on the western side, by some of the companies that own it today. Architectural critic Peter Davey notes that "before unification, Daimler Benz already had an option on a site near Potsdamer Platz." [41](#) The particularities of German politics thus not so much furnished the ground for a battle finally won by capitalism, as it provided the catalyzing forces that made the economic and political disputes visible, even magnified. And Potsdamer Platz, as one of the most symbolic sites of the city, is the central showcase for these disputes and their attending cultural manifestations.

Yet although real estate enterprises and commercial ventures abound in post-unification Berlin, one look at the city's past and present economic situation denies any natural necessity for such ventures and points instead to the artificial creation of needs – at the expense of the state – forging and reinforcing an image of capitalist success. In spite of its cultural and historical significance, critics have

argued that Berlin does not have a predominant economic role in relation to the rest of the country. According to Social Democratic senator Annette Fugmann-Heesing in a 1996 interview, “West Berlin could never carve out a niche compared to Dusseldorf, which is the center of advertising, Munich, which dominates electronics, or Frankfurt, which is the financial center.” [42](#) Other reports suggest that the economy of the city has yet to find consistency and its own identity, despite the influx of public employees and federal finances. [43](#)

Potsdamer Platz is presented as a product of the new Germany, and its success points directly to the success of Germany as a unified country. But the economy of Berlin and of reunified Germany is not as flourishing as it may seem. Berlin, as we have seen, has not found a solid economic role for itself. Reunified Germany is an unevenly developed country: “The West contains some of the richest regions in Europe, while the five eastern Länder [regions] remain the poorest.” [44](#) And even Germany’s strong economy is not above suspicion: “It is experiencing a crisis of competitiveness, with irresistible pressure to reduce taxes, cut social welfare and reduce government spending.” [45](#) These considerations highlight the artificially sustained character of Berlin’s prosperity.

Nostalgia versus History

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Potsdamer Platz was a chaotic mixture of cars, trams, and people. It was an irregular and fragmented open space surrounded by hotels, cabarets, residences and offices, placards, luminous signs and billboards [\[fig. 9\]](#). It was as much a physical intersection as it was the juxtaposition of buildings, vehicles, people, lights, and movement. This contrast of elements associated with modernity turned Potsdamer Platz into a symbol of cosmopolitanism at the beginning of the twentieth century (Berlin itself was perceived as modern, liberal and chaotic [46](#)). Allied bombing at the end of World War II turned the area into rubble. The liveliness of Potsdamer Platz made its destruction and emptying starkly visible by contrast.

At the time of reunification, Potsdamer Platz was cut by the Wall, which was in fact composed of two parallel walls enclosing a strip of no-man’s land. The western face of the Wall was accessible to visitors who could not only approach it, but also paint it. The open space around it, covered by weeds and debris, was an occasional site for circuses and popular manifestations. [47](#) The changing graffiti, often elaborate and executed by famous artists, made this the Wall’s most photogenic part, reproduced in films, photographs and postcards [\[fig. 10\]](#). The eastern wall, on the other hand, was heavily patrolled by armed border guards. It

posed a concrete danger to East Germans; many who tried to breach it were shot and killed. [48](#) Buildings bordering the wall in East Berlin had their windows and doors bricked up, blinding their façades. The city turned its back on the “antifascist protective rampart,” as the Wall was officially called in the GDR – East Germans were forbidden to call it “Mauer,” the German word for “wall.” The structure was thus effaced not only physically, but also in language. It was not a site of visitation, but of fear; it was blank and deserted [[figs. 11](#) and [12](#)]. These characteristics made the eastern wall a poignant symbol of German division.

When Potsdamer Platz was vacant, it was filled with political and cultural significance. Even as it displayed emptiness and devastation, it was a prop for political statements and retained a sense of the area’s historical complexity. A number of refurbishment possibilities could have maintained the site’s historical eloquence while allowing for new uses. The Wall did not have to be completely torn down in order to be permeable; the empty space did not have to be filled up with constructions in order to be inhabitable; and built remnants of the border, such as watchtowers, could have been preserved. But, then again, removing all aspects of the Wall was easier: it removed the problematic of *history* and transformed it instead into a commercial bloom of late capitalism.

Strangely, the official discourse on the reconstruction of Potsdamer Platz denies historical effacement and insists on historical restoration. Architects make an effort to “restore” and “reconstruct” the site’s urban pattern. But, as I have argued above, these efforts are fueled by nostalgia. They are not restoring authentic origins, but constructing ideal narratives. At the same time, these efforts repress troubling historical aspects: the division of the country; its attending social, cultural, and material imbalances; and the violence inherent to division – incarnated by the totalitarian state of the German Democratic Republic, but also present in the post-war sectioning of the country among the Allies and in the “Americanization” of West Germany.

The difficulty in dealing with the recent past is translated into denial, erasure, and rewriting. It should come as no surprise that Potsdamer Platz itself embodied all the three in the last century. The first moment of historical effacement, poignantly evoked by the character of Homer in Wim Wenders’ film *Wings of Desire*, happened in the 1930s, when the proximity to the Nazi headquarters and the presence of Nazi buildings on the site (including a bunker) imposed its mark on the space: “And then suddenly the banners appeared, here, the whole Platz was lined with them. And the people weren’t friendly any more. And the police weren’t either.” [49](#) The violent, but cathartic bombing of the area by the Allies in 1945 was another blatant instance of annulment, prolonged by the division of the city. However, if destruction constituted a moment of historical annihilation, the ensuing

treatment of the space somehow managed to preserve both its past history (insistently recalled by its physical absence) and the traumatic events of bombing and division. Physical vacancy magnified the idea of the area as a border between antagonists. This was a reminder of the antagonism itself, of the open war wound exacerbated by the construction of the Wall in 1961. Potsdamer Platz preserved, in disconcerting form, the conflictual and almost absurd history of Germany. With the end of division, though, the void was filled up with new constructions, choking all that remained of the sense of conflict, historical contradiction, and anguish.

The sequence in which Homer wanders Potsdamer Platz in *Wings of Desire* brilliantly evokes this anguish. It is a solemn and moving scene, where the old man, named after the father of History, slowly moves through debris and weeds. Homer revives through his words the preceding history of the place, which he had experienced. He stands, baffled, in the vacant lot, repeating the question: "Where is Potsdamer Platz?" It is hard not to think of Karl Marx's much-repeated motto on the recurrence of history – "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." [50](#) If the first instance of erasure, brought about by Nazism and the war, is undeniably tragic, the second erasure, undertaken by logotypes, window shops, and business offices, can only be thought of as mockery. Sure, one can now get a clear answer to Homer's question – "Where is Potsdamer Platz?" It is there, at the end of the street, by the shiny blue office tower. But I prefer to leave the question unanswered, and to conclude by quoting Homer's final words in his perplexed promenade through the vacant space: "I will not give up... until I have found the Potsdamer Platz." [51](#)

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1. Gerald R. Blomeyer, "Letter from... Berlin," *The Architectural Review* 207 (March 2000): 30. ↑
2. Brigitte Werneburg, "Rebuilding Berlin," *Art in America* 83 (November 1995): 83. ↑
3. The Tiergarten, the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, the historical district of Mitte, the monumental Unter den Linden boulevard, and the museums and cultural institutions of the Kulturforum. ↑
4. Peter Davey, "Potsdamer Platz," *The Architectural Review* 205 (January 1999): 34. ↑
5. The mixture of uses also repeats the urban primer set by Post-Modernist critics such as Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities* [New York: Vintage Books, 1963]), and Charles Jencks (*The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* [New York: Rizzoli, 1984]). ↑
6. debis (sic) is the acronym for DaimlerChrysler Services, a subsidiary of DaimlerChrysler. ↑
7. Peter Davey, "Piano at Potsdamer Platz," *Architectural Review* 205 (January 1999): 36. ↑
8. There are, of course, urban areas with numerous buildings by famous designers – for instance, the Olympic Villa in Barcelona, built on the occasion of the 1992 games. But these are exceptional areas, which do not try to pass for a piece of "spontaneous" or "traditional" urban development. ↑
9. In the words of architectural critic Paul Goldberger, "an urban debacle of epic scope." Apud Doris Lockhart, "The Best and the Worst," *Blueprint* (June 1999): 18. ↑
10. Davey, 36. ↑
11. See for instance Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Publishers, 1938, 1966, 1970), and Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980). ↑
12. "The DaimlerChrysler Summer Festival at Potsdamer Platz: International Culture in the Heart of the German Capital," August 21, 2000; DaimlerChrysler web site (www.DaimlerChrysler.com). ↑
13. Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 9-10. ↑
14. The relationship between culture and urbanism in the context of contemporary global capitalism is explored by Brazilian philosopher Otília

Beatriz Fiori Arantes in "Uma Estratégia Fatal: A Cultura nas Novas Gestões Urbanas," *A Cidade do Pensamento Único* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 2000), 11-74. ↑

15. My definition of spatial experience, or phenomenological perception, is based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). The French philosopher maintains that perception is formed by the corporeal and dynamic experience of inhabiting space. Merleau-Ponty criticizes spatial descriptions that privilege only the visual dimension, and that define the visual register from a fixed, external, impartial point of view (a fictional, omniscient "eye"). For instance, geometric space, determined by Cartesian coordinates and objective measurements. While objective space is constant and fixed, lived space changes according to subject position, and is informed by the tridimensional presence of the perceiving body (not restricted to the sum of separate senses such as vision or tact). ↑
16. While Berlin is predominantly a city of low-rise buildings, some Western and Eastern neighborhoods contain high-rises and towers. These are usually placed according to Modernist urban planning, keeping distance between buildings and from streets. ↑
17. The concept of urban matrix refers to principles that generate different patterns of urban fabric: type and size of streets, blocks and buildings, heights and alignments (in relation to the street and to neighboring buildings), materials, shapes, etc. ↑
18. The breaking down of the library into integrated volumes, which are neither autonomous nor disjointed fragments, but distinct parts of an articulated and cohesive whole is characteristic of Organicist Modernism, one of the currents of Modernist architecture. Both the Staatsbibliothek and the Philharmonie display Hans Scharoun's mastery of this architectural language. ↑
19. This fortress-like quality of Potsdamer Platz is pointed out by Christian Olaf Schmidt in his unpublished M. Arch. thesis, "Hard Core Urbanism: Urban Planning at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin After the German Reunification" (Rice University, 1996). ↑
20. These sidewalk tables are ubiquitous in Berlin, a piece of urban culture in themselves. But while Potsdamer Platz makes physical use of a "cultural tradition," its symbolic use is conditioned by context and differs from other areas in the city. ↑
21. For this symbolic purpose, it is irrelevant whether each window actually corresponds to an office or whether some offices contain more than one window. The point here is indeed the disjunction between inside and

outside, and the semantic predominance of the latter. The symbolic function of glass in windows and showcases associated with corporate architecture is explored by Dan Graham in "Corporate Arcadias," *Artforum* (December 1987) and "Art in Relation to Architecture: Architecture in Relation to Art," *Artforum* (February 1979). ↑

22. Leonardo Benevolo, "Political Compromise and the Struggle with the Authoritarian Regimes," *History of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971), 540-585; Dawn Ades et al., comp, *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930-1945* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with Hayward Gallery, 1995). For a comprehensive critical history of Modern Architecture, see Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture*. See also Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985) and Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). ↑
23. The Modernist attack on ornament owes its fame to Austrian architect Adolf Loos, a precursor of the Modernist Movement who wrote the article-manifesto "Ornament and Crime" (reprinted in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* [Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1998]). ↑
24. The most influential critique of Modernism on the account of its intended neutrality is made by Charles Jencks in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, especially in the first chapter, "The Death of Modern Architecture." Jencks suggests that Modernist architects not only saw their architecture as universal, but that they also denied that it constituted a language at all. Jencks demonstrates the inadvertent, and often disastrous, meanings communicated by this architecture. ↑
25. This was especially the case in West Germany, where Modernism was self-consciously used in governmental buildings in the federal capital, Bonn, as a guarantee of political humility, neutrality and contrition. Michael Wise cogently explores this point in *Capital Dilemma: Germany's Search for a New Architecture of Democracy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998). It must be noted that the association of Modernism with anti-Fascism is itself an ideological construct. Suffice it to remember that Benito Mussolini flirted with Modernist art and architecture. Modernism was chosen for many Fascist governmental buildings in Italy. Modernist, or Rationalist, designers such as Giuseppe Terragni openly aligned themselves with Mussolini's Fascism. See Benevolo, "Political Compromise and the Struggle with the Authoritarian Regimes." ↑
26. Jean-François Lyotard, "Terror on the Run," Jean-Joseph Goux and Philip R. Wood, editors. *Terror and Consensus: Vicissitudes of French Thought*

- (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 27. ↑
27. It is interesting to note how the characterization of capitalism as purely functional echoes the justification of Modernist architecture also in terms of function. ↑
 28. I do not define “incarnation” as mere “reflection,” as if iconic events were simply a consequence of immaterial processes. Rather, I conceive of “incarnation” as the intertwining of different dimensions – concrete, visual, symbolic, political, financial, ideological, etc. ↑
 29. Michael Bynion, “A Week of Emotion, Confusion and Joy,” *The Times* (November 9, 1999), Features. ↑
 30. Bynion. ↑
 31. Celebrating crowds occupied streets and avenues, blocking the traffic of vehicles. “Berlin abandoned all rules ... For a week there were spontaneous parties along the Kurfürstendamm,” reports Bynion in “A Week of Emotion, Confusion and Joy,” recalling that food and drink were offered for free and that West Germans gave money for East Germans to shop. ↑
 32. Bynion. ↑
 33. One example is the demolition of a whole block of coveted GDR-era residential buildings on Karl-Marx Allee (formerly Stalinallee) in 2002. Another even starker instance of erasure is the planned redesign of Alexanderplatz, which proposes to eliminate all the GDR-era buildings in the area (offices, housing, a hotel, a department store) except for the Fernseherturm (television tower). ↑
 34. Nobel laureate Günter Grass suggests this domination of East by West Germany in *Ein Weites Feld* (published in the United States as *Too Far Afield* [New York: Harcourt, 2000]). At the same time, the modernization of East Germany, technologically less developed, may be regarded from the opposite perspective – that is, as a burden to the West German economy. While prosperous, modern West Germany was at the forefront of industrial technology and cosmopolitan culture, East Germany was seen as insular and precarious, seemingly embodied by its grimy buildings, darkened by archaic coal heating systems, and its lack of cultural diversity. When the Berlin Wall fell, one of the most extraordinary (or perhaps not) results, which seems to have received little attention, was the single direction of the flux of people over the border. Descriptions of crowds of East Germans pouring into West Berlin, mesmerized by the range of consumer goods, are not paralleled by any comparable movement of West Germans to the East. It is hard to know if this euphoria was caused by a vision of freedom or by the immediate sight of material prosperity. The attractiveness of Berlin as a

capitalist Eden is not surprising. During the division, federal money was pumped into West Berlin so that it could be maintained as a capitalist stronghold in the East. Judy Dempsey reports that “until German unification in 1990, West Berlin was pampered by the federal government. Over 60% of local public expenditure had been financed by Bonn. The aim was to keep people in the city, encourage companies to settle there and maintain a shining capitalist showcase in the heart of East Germany.” “What Role, Berlin, After the Cabaret?,” *Financial Times*, published in *The Financial Post* (July 20, 1996), 82. ↑

35. These considerations on national unity are based on the theoretical exploration of national identity and representation undertaken by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991). ↑
36. Peter Rumpf, “Progetti per l’area della Potsdamer Platz, Berlino,” *Domus* 744 (December 1992), 44. The other two centers are the Kurfürstendamm (the center of West Berlin) and Unter den Linden (the center of East Berlin). ↑
37. Potsdamer Platz was a couple of blocks away from the Prinz-Albert-Strasse, where many official Nazi offices and related organizations were installed. ↑
38. Of course Potsdamer Platz was only part of the actual border contours. The division between the two countries ran west of Berlin; West Berlin was an island within East Germany. ↑
39. Werneburg, 83. ↑
40. Sassen, 9-10. ↑
41. Davey, 33. ↑
42. Interviewed by Dempsey, 82. ↑
43. In “Letter from... Berlin,” Blomeyer concedes that “Shopping is still best in the west. Times have been difficult, especially for foreign firms like Virgin, Fnac or Warner Brothers Studio Store” (31). In “What Role, Berlin, After the Cabaret?,” Dempsey reports that the low demand has decreased the rental price of office space in refurbished areas of Berlin, frustrating investors (82). ↑
44. “Germans Unite in Heated Agreement.” ↑
45. “Germans Unite in Heated Agreement.” ↑
46. See for instance Otto Friedrich, *Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s* (Harper Perennial, 1995); Thomas Friedrich, *Berlin Between the Wars* (Vendome Press, 1991). ↑

47. Wim Wenders provides an evocative, atmospheric register of this space in the film *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel Über Berlin/Les Ailles du Désir*, 1987).↑
48. Interestingly, museums and monuments dedicated to those killed in escape attempts often refer to them as “victims of the Wall.” The “Wall” is identified as a deadly device in itself. The actual deaths, however, were caused by East German soldiers who shot the escapees. In reunified Germany, it seems hard to acknowledge this painful situation, which is perceived as a paradox. During the division, when there were not only two nations but also two competing régimes, this paradox was more openly addressed. For instance, it was encapsulated in a popular joke about East Germans trying to break through the Wall: “Germans being shot by Germans trying to escape from Germany to Germany.” Reunification depends on the effort to bring forth Germany’s basic unity, and not its inner conflicts. The contradiction is eliminated from official discourses of memorialization. This theme will be further explored in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.↑
49. Dialogue spoken by the character Homer in *Wings of Desire*. The banners, of course, displayed the Swastika and other Nazi insignia.↑
50. Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” David McLellan, ed. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 300.↑
51. *Wings of Desire* (1987).↑

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