

# BERLIN MITTE: ALEXANDERPLATZ AND FRIEDRICHSTASSE.

## URBAN AND HISTORICAL IMAGES

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*Berlin Mitte is one of the most interesting parts of the city, located in the core of Berlin where every corner and stone can tell a story. Mitte, the cultural center of Berlin is also known as the political and economic hub of Berlin. This paper explores the urban and historical image of two important parts of Berlin Mitte district: Alexanderplatz and Friedrichstraße. Friedrichstraße, as the main shopping and business street in this area, was planned with great attention by Prussian authorities, while the area around Alexanderplatz grew up randomly and its streets did not follow any special urban patterns. All potential international investors wanted to come to Friedrichstraße after the fall of the Wall, while Alexanderplatz was not so attractive to them. Many famous architects took part in numerous competitions regarding urban planning reconstructions of the famous Alex throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These two areas of the Mitte district, Alexanderplatz and Friedrichstraße, are very important for contemporary Berlin and both areas have different problems.*

**Key words:** architectural history, urban history, Alexanderplatz, Friedrichstraße, Berlin Mitte, Berlin, post-Wall Berlin.

### INTRODUCTION

Both a western and eastern European city, Berlin is situated in the heart of Europe, 70 km from the Polish border. The city, with around 3.4 million inhabitants, is the largest in Germany and has been the new capital since 1991. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the city endured many changes: the 1918 revolution and the successful Weimar period in the 1920s, then the Nazi takeover in 1933 which was followed by the darkest period in Berlin's whole history, the destruction of the city during World War II, followed by the division of the city in 1945 (after World War II Berlin was divided into two cities after the agreement between the Allies in 1949; the Berlin wall divided the city into West Berlin and East Berlin from 1961) and its reunification in 1990 after the Wall fell down.

After reunification, Berlin experienced a new period of urban redevelopment in which many new buildings were constructed, with the former center of East Berlin, Berlin Mitte, being the district with the highest number of buildings sites. The commercial sector developed very fast, especially at Potsdamer Platz, where new offices, luxury apartments, cinemas and restaurants emerged. Once empty land, Potsdamer Platz

turned into the biggest building site in Europe, and became home to a new \$5 billion business and entertainment center, the 16 building Daimler-Benz/Debis complex and Sony's European headquarters (Till, 2005).

Among the many new projects from that time, some of the most important are the new parliament buildings and federal government complex, the reconstructed historical Reichstag, a number of new embassy buildings and extensive financial and corporate headquarters. All this is a consequence of the relocation of power from Bonn to Berlin (Whyte, 2007). Mies van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, Arata Isozaki, Rafael Moneo, Renzo Piano, Rem Koolhaas and Richard Rogers are some of the famous architectural names who left their signature on Berlin.

Berlin has the status of European center of arts and design. Since Berlin's traditional cultural center was in the area around Unter den Linden Boulevard, and this part of the city fell on the East Berlin side of the wall, the West Berlin authorities created new cultural institutions in their part of the town. In order to compensate for this absence, the Deutsche Opera was created as the equivalent of the State Opera, whereas Mies van der Rohe's New National Gallery served as their alternative to the old national museums which were left in the

east side of the city. After the unification, all these institutions were kept (Arandjelovic and Bogunovich, 2014).

### New Berlin simplicity of Hans Stimmann

According to Till, 'in 1991 the Berlin Senate created a new position called city architect and appointed Hans Stimmann to handpick expert commissions that judged the numerous architectural and development competitions in the city' (Till, 2005: 45). Stimmann had immense power during the period of reconstruction in the emerging new Berlin and was known for supporting a planning approach of critical reconstruction, called the 'new simplicity'. This position was something new in Berlin and announced changes in the urban development of the city. Both a trained architect and powerful bureaucrat, Stimmann wanted to regulate building materials, the sizes of parcels and to control all forms of new urban development, whilst also promoting a contemporary vision of Berlin as a traditional European city. Stimmann aimed to promote an architectural style that resembled old Berlin, high restrained stone buildings without curved surfaces. He was also responsible for the Pariser Platz redevelopment, as well as the reconstruction of Friedrichstraße (Goldberger, 1995). Many of the new projects in Berlin

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really reflect these ideas. The offices in the Friedrichstraße area are a good example of that, all having the suggested roofline.

## BERLIN MITTE

Berlin is one of the most vibrant modern cities and Mitte is an important part of it. Since reunification, Berlin has become the epicenter of the contemporary art scene. During World War II Mitte was the most heavily destroyed city district with 54% of the housing destroyed (Cobbers, 2011); it is also the location where the city division was most apparent. Mitte hosts Berlin's government offices and is home to the monumental Reichstag building. The spectacular strip of federal government buildings on the River Spree bank spreads north from the Reichstag building. This complex includes the Federal Chancellery, a monumental 36 meter high Federal building that contains the Chancellor and state Ministers' offices, as well as conference and cabinet rooms. The building stands in the middle of the governmental buildings complex. Then, there is the Paul Löbe building hosting the offices for members of parliament, and also the Marie Elisabeth Lüders building right across the river. The master plan for the complex of governmental buildings was made by architects Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank from 1997 to 2000. Their task was to reconstruct the whole area around the meander of the Spree, an area previously destroyed during WWII. The only building left after the WWII destruction was the Swiss Embassy. With this new concept, this part of the Tiergarten regained importance. There is empty space between the Chancellery and the Löbe building. This space was planned for the Forum building, the building planned for the public, and the only building not realized after the master plan by Schultes and Frank.

Most of the recently built corporate buildings are located on sites of the former East-West Block confrontation, Potsdamer Platz and Friedrichstraße, part of the Mitte district.

There are many historical attractions located in Mitte. First and foremost is the famous Berlin landmark, the Brandenburg Gate, built between 1788 and 1791 at Pariser Platz in the neighborhood of the Reichstag and the federal parliament complex, reconstructed and reopened again in 1989 after the fall of the Wall. Heavily damaged in World War II, the Brandenburg Gate was the only object left at the historic Pariser Platz, at the end of Berlin's impressive boulevard Unter den Linden.

Mitte, a 50 km<sup>2</sup> district located in the core of the city, is the most densely populated Berlin district with a population of approximately 320,000 citizens (the translation of the German word Mitte

is center or middle). Mitte is rich in green space, which covers around 17% of the district's surface. The huge Tiergarten, an important element of the city, is also part of the Mitte district (OECD, 2003).

Mitte is famed for its culture scene rich with numerous trendy cafes, movie theaters, art galleries and institutions, and has been compared to the New York art district SoHo. The art scene emerged from renovated historical residential blocks in Mitte. Some of the most well-known are Hackesche, Sophien and Gips Höfe (Till, 35). Mitte is also home to the prestigious and traditional cultural institutions in Berlin, such as the Schauspielhaus, the Deutsches Theater, the Staatsoper and all five great museum buildings located in the Museum Island. The oldest museum is the Schinkel's Altes Museum built in the mid-1820s, while the newest one is the Pergamon Museum completed in 1930 (Whyte, 2007). Humbolt University, situated in Mitte on

Unter den Linden boulevard, is the oldest University in Berlin (1810).

Mitte, the first area to be gentrified after reunification, is characterized by its fusion of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century apartments, new modern buildings and GRD Plattenbauten objects. One of the examples of the old-new fusion is the five-story building of the Koch Oberhuber Wolff Gallery in Brunnenstraße, built in 2009 (this area of Brunnenstraße was the first area to be reconstructed after the Wall came down). The unusually colorful façade is a mix of aluminum and glass surfaces and is situated between two older houses. What was once a post war gap, today is an effective modern fusion.

One of the symbols of the post-wall artistic transformation that occurred in Mitte is the Tacheles Art House, situated on the corner of Oranienburger Strasse and Friedrichstrasse. This city area was a Jewish quarter in the past (this building was a former department store). This



Figure 1. The building of Koch Oberhuber Wolff Gallery in Brunnenstraße in Berlin Mitte.  
Source: Biljana Arandelović



Figure 2. The Tacheles Art House in Berlin Mitte.  
Source: Biljana Arandelović

Mitte neighborhood is known as the art district and includes Auguststrasse, Linienstrasse and Sophienstrasse. During the 1990s the Tacheles building was squatted in by artists and turned into a cult art place. After negotiations with the city council, a deliberate decision was made to conserve the partially crumbling façades and the dilapidated original staircase in their condition of decay. Around 60% of the building is currently used by tourists (Richter, 2010). There are future plans for the Tacheles building reconstruction which are all connected with commercial business usage.

Two very important parts of the Berlin Mitte district are Alexanderplatz and Friedrichstraße.

## FRIEDRICHSTRAßE: THE HISTORY AND RECONSTRUCTION

The Friedrichstadt area urban renewal, with Friedrichstraße as its central core, aroused much less public attention and discussion than the Potsdamer Platz renewal process. The first capital reconstruction projects started in 1996, before the Daimler complex construction works at Potsdamer Platz began. Contrary to the huge public polemics that followed the Potsdamer Platz reconstruction process, the redevelopment process in Friedrichstadt area went without any great problems and was finished relatively quickly. One of the reasons for this is that the East Berlin Magistrat had already started with negotiations on several projects before reunification. Not all of the initial projects from that period were realized in the end, but this definitely sped up some of them.

Elizabeth Strom in *Building the New Berlin* writes about Friedrichstadt as 'one of the older parts of the city, added during 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century expansions of the urban core where much of the old inner city was long dominated by two-storied apartment houses and then, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, developed much more intensively with five to six-storied buildings, rear houses, and side wings. As Berlin became an increasingly important financial and industrial capital following Germany's 1871 unification, Friedrichstadt, and in particular Friedrichstraße, emerged as the center of tertiary economic activity. Although the southern part of Friedrichstadt, located in the district of Kreuzberg, is still characterized by a mixture of residential and commercial uses, the heart of the area, and the part of the neighborhood most under redevelopment pressure now, had long lost its residential character' (Strom, 2001:200).

The Friedrichstadt area didn't have the fame of Alexanderplatz as there was a lack of open spaces which would attract more visitors to come and enjoy the boulevard. The only

exception was the Gendarmenmarket square. The fusion of apartments with business buildings was featured in this area, as the urban policy of the GDR demanded. Even with this, all international developers and clients who were planning to come to Berlin after the reunification wanted to have their offices in this area. To have an address in Friedrichstraße was very prestigious and the demand for offices was enormous. Demand by international investors to build only in this area resulted in making Friedrichstraße the most expensive real estate in the whole of Germany for a couple of years after unification.

One of the reasons for the great popularity of Friedrichstraße is its centrality, as it lies between Alexanderplatz and Potsdamer Platz, two very important city points. Also, the street is connected with more than one underground line, thus easily reachable from other parts of the city. Not less important is the fact that several national ministries are located in the neighborhood, which made this street very attractive after the capital was moved from Bonn to Berlin, bringing together all the power and administration that this demands. The important French department store company Galleries Lafayette wanted to build a block in this street.

The capacity of the city officials to control and direct development has been limited. One of the reasons for this is that this area has been the subject of some of the most legally complicated property claim issues in the city. The development of Friedrichstadt has been determined by the changes in national laws regarding expropriated property restoration to its former owners.

As with other parts of the inner city, this area was also mostly neglected by the GDR government. This situation was present until

the 1980s when the national building authorities began to pay attention to inner city reconstruction. The national government made an ambitious plan for Friedrichstraße reconstruction as soon as the Wall fell down. One of the most attractive locations for the renovation was the famous Grand Hotel, located on Friedrichstraße and Under den Linden. This location, now called Friedrichstadt Passage, embraced a monumental three-square-block complex with numerous cafes, an office complex, stores and a theater, all connected by elevated sidewalks along the narrow streets. With this, the new Berlin's downtown was born. Hans Stimmann, the city architect in charge of the urban development in the post-wall period, made some recommendations, an urban guide, for Friedrichstadt competitions with the aim of developing a physical profile similar to the Berlin of the past. Accordingly, he suggested building materials and maximum heights that would be in the harmony with the rest of the city structure. One of the city center development requirements concerned the typical Berlin traditional block, a mix of commercial and residential use. The inner city development needed to include 20% housing (Strom, 2001).

One of the main contemporary Berlin tourist attractions of this area is the Checkpoint Charlie, the former border crossing between the two divided sides during the period from 1961 to 1990. The Checkpoint Charlie had a historical role in the divided city as the main entrance and the departure point to East Berlin for non-Germans, diplomats and journalists who had permission to enter East Berlin on a day visa. Today, at this former Berlin border stands a huge luminous box, an art project entitled *Ohne Titel/Without Title* made by artist Frank Thiel in 1998, commissioned by the Department for City Development. The Department's aim was to make art projects at the seven former borders in



Figure 3. Art project *Ohne Titel/Without Title* at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin Mitte.  
Source: Biljana Arandelović

Berlin. The Checkpoint Charlie was one of them. This project of light boxes with dimensions of 3.20 x 2.5 m is definitely the most successful of its kind and attracts the biggest number of tourist (Dickel, 2003).

## ALEXANDERPLATZ: THE HISTORY AND RECONSTRUCTION

Alexanderplatz has been changed many times during its history. This pedestrian quarter is separated from the rest of the area by wide streets and a network of underground pedestrian tunnels made to connect the square with the train station and the buildings across the surrounding streets. With the exception of the two Peter Behrens buildings from the 1930s, the square is surrounded by typical DDR fifteen-story office buildings. The highest structure in Berlin, built in 1968, is the 368 m high Television Tower standing behind the train station. This structure, designed by Hermann Henselmann and Jörg Streitpar, is not only dominant in Alexanderplatz, but is also visible from almost every part of Berlin. It was the peak project of the New International architecture of the Alexanderplatz area in the 1960s and is the most important landmark of the former East Berlin. The purpose of its high structure, which is impossible not to be seen from almost all central parts of the town, was to remind those in West Berlin that they were surrounded by the East German State (Cobbers, 2011).

The iconic Alexanderplatz is one of the major city squares named to honor Alexander I, Tsar of Russia on the occasion of his Berlin visit. The square, known for short as Alex, is an important part of Berlin's history. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Alexanderplatz was transformed into a significant transit junction and shopping area. The S-Bahn, the surface rail network, was constructed in 1882 while the underground was constructed in 1913.

In the post war period it became a typical socialist urban square and was considered to be the center of East Berlin. In November 1989 it was the place of important demonstrations. Here at the square, people gathered under the famous Weltzeituhr (the World Time Clock constructed in 1969 was a popular meeting point in East Berlin and showed the time in major world cities).

Alexanderplatz was a symbol of life in DDR, a favorite place to hang out, but after the fall of the Wall, it lost its significance. As a result, a lot of restaurants popular in the East Berlin era were closed and the central square fountain was left dry because of the lack of maintenance funds. After the unification, things changed when it became a gathering place for punk



*Figure 4. Television Tower at Alexanderplatz in Berlin Mitte.  
Source: Biljana Arandelović*



*Figure 5. Mural Unser Leben at Alexanderplatz in Berlin Mitte.  
Source: Biljana Arandelović*

rockers. Over half of all crimes reported in Mitte happened in the area around Alexanderplatz (OECD, 2003).

One of the remains of East Berlin is the Unser Leben (Our Lives) mural on the façade of The Haus des Lehrers (House of Teachers, Department of Education) located in Alexanderplatz. This mural is the work of famous DDR Socialist Realist artist Walter Womacka and was made in 1964. Here, as in the other Socialist Realist art works, the communist society is glorified and various demonstrations of ordinary people's lives in the DDR are displayed. This monumental mural

is well preserved today after being restored in recent years (Treeck, 1999).

After the fall of the Wall, Alexanderplatz, considered as one of Berlin's most important centers, was redeveloped, together with other areas of Berlin. This redevelopment included the former department store Centrum Warenhaus, the largest department store in the DDR, which has now been transformed by modernization. The reconstruction of well-known buildings such as the Stadt Berlin hotel (a 123 m tall hotel), the Haus des Lehrers (The House of Teachers), The House of Travel and the publishing house building (today Berliner

Zeitung) had the aim of making this square competitive with West Berlin.

An important figure in the Alexanderplatz urban development was Senator Hassemer, who did not prioritize Alexanderplatz projects immediately after the unification. Actually, until the end of 1992, there was no mention of Alexanderplatz in the city newspapers or official Senat for Urban Development publications. As written in *Urban Renaissance Berlin: Towards an Integrated Strategy for Social Cohesion and Economic Development*. 'Many of the buildings around Alexanderplatz had been headquarters for GDR Kombinate and associations, the property of which was administered by the THA Treuhandanstalt after reunification. As some Alex properties were sold as part of a large business package, the THA had almost total autonomy in determining property ownership patterns at Alexanderplatz. There were seven major private investors controlling the real estate at Alexanderplatz. Most of these investors bought properties from the Treuhand. In three cases, West German businesses bought out entire East German enterprises, and the property at Alexanderplatz was part of the package. The West German retailer Kaufhof entered into a partnership with the GDR Centrum-Warenhaus, with its flagship store at Alexanderplatz, just before currency union in 1990 and later took over the chain' (OECD, 2003:209).

Berlin Senator Hassemer played an important role in Alexanderplatz urban development projects in the period after unification. His idea was organizing a planning competition for the area, similar to the one held at Potsdamer Platz, where architects would be invited to bring their ideas for Alexanderplatz development. The difference with the planning process at Potsdamer Platz was that here, the major area investors were included as part of the competition jury. This idea was to avoid possible negative public discussion and the embarrassment that happened in Potsdamer Platz when the investors were not satisfied with the final results and commissioned other architects to the projects. The Alexanderplatz competition involved 14 invited architects in 1992.

'The winning scheme, by Kollhoff & Timmermann, envisages nine towers, each 150 meters high, which emerge from podium buildings that conform to the so-called Berlin line, namely city blocks of five to six stories with cornices at thirty meters. This is a compromise between the desire to reassert the street pattern and the spatial qualities of the old city, as in Friedrichstrasse, and the desire of the investor for high blocks and large rental incomes' (Whyte, 2007: 225). The chosen project invoked huge public controversy as too many high-rise

building were planned by Kollhoff and most of the investors changed their plan. None of the owners were in a hurry to build the skyscrapers as the real estate market was declining. Part of the project has been realized, but the urban redevelopment process for Alexanderplatz has not yet been completed.

## CONCLUSIONS

The nucleus of East Berlin before the Wall came down, Alexanderplatz, is a large public space surrounded with tall office buildings and the Television Tower, also enclosed by widespread typical East Berlin apartment complexes. It is definitely an area whose future development was not easily defined by the city planners. For some people, the lack of a clear idea for Alexanderplatz development is the main reason why this area never attracted investors in the way that Potsdamer Platz or Friedrichstraße did.

During the period when Berlin was divided, Alexanderplatz was a famous attraction for East German tourists coming to Berlin. After the unification, when West Berlin became reachable, the role of Alexanderplatz changed a lot. At the same time, when Potsdamer Platz and Friedrichstraße greatly changed their look, Alexanderplatz stayed more or less the same, with some adaptations and reconstruction, but was definitely far away from being competitive with Potsdamer Platz and Friedrichstraße, both previously on the same side of the Wall. Alexanderplatz is one of the rare central Berlin spots that look familiar to the visitors who haven't been to Berlin for a long time. We can conclude that keeping the old look is not always a bad decision and that it might bring positive effects. What the future development of Alexanderplatz will bring to Berlin citizens, and who will prevail in the corporate high-rise struggle, only time will tell.

Friedrichstraße, the other Berlin hotspot in Mitte, has a different problem. As many major projects were completed at the end of the 1990s, when the real estate request in Berlin had fallen drastically, many buildings remained half empty. This consequently led to investors facing the problem of much lower rents than originally anticipated. In addition, some residents that had rented the spaces earlier (one of them being the French department store Galeries Lafayette) were asking for lower rent as they knew that investors would not want to gamble with losing them. A good example of this is the Friedrichstradt Passage, where almost half of the space was not rented, much less than investor projections. The problem of real estate in Friedrichstraße is just one of many problems in Berlin.

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