

Albrecht Schäfer "Berlin Alexanderplatz"

Opening March 2001 at Galerie Kamm

Alexanderplatz reflects to an extraordinary degree the architectural and political history of twentieth century Germany. Each successive regime would consistently negate the architecture of the regimes preceding them. But the history of Alexanderplatz isn't only what was actually constructed, but also of the many proposals by architects and political organisations that were never realized. These proposals suggest virtual histories just as logical or random as what actually took place.

Following on from this premise, the project "Berlin Alexanderplatz" develops a number of scenarios that integrate historical facts with historical possibilities. Using the historical plans of certain architects, these are adapted, where necessary, to conform to the real conditions which effect a design: economic development, war, or changing fashions. The scenarios should respond realistically to this type of urban development. The scenarios are presented in the form of computer-generated photo-montage, giving an impression of how Alexanderplatz might look today if history had taken a different course. Scenario 1 uses designs by the Luckhardt brothers (1928) and the Henselman work collective (1953) while scenario 2 uses designs by Mies van der Rohe (1928) and Daniel Libeskind (1993).

Factual History of Alexanderplatz:

Until the 1920s Alexanderplatz had no clear shape and resembled not so much a planned square, as an unstructured area descending from a medieval jumble of streets by the east gate. However, by the end of the 19th Alexanderplatz was a main junction, and next to Potsdamerplatz, the most important commercial district in Berlin.

In 1926, when Martin Wagner, a supporter of the New Architecture (Neues Bauen), became the director of town planning, he proposed an ambitious new infrastructure for Berlin which in 1928 would include a redevelopment of Alexanderplatz. Below ground, there was a proposal for a multi-level network of three separate railway lines, while above ground a new architecture should respond to the circulation of traffic. The winners of this competition were the Luckhardt Brothers with Alfons Anker (cf. scenario 1). However the project that was eventually built was the second prize winner by Peter Behrens, there being no investors for the Luckhardt design, and the emergence of American backers who preferred the Behrens project. The work on the underground railway was completed, but due to the world economic crisis, the ground level developments remained unfinished - only two buildings of the Behrens project were completed. Mies van der Rohe was also invited to submit an entry. His proposal was a radical design of loosely organized building blocks (cf. scenario 2), but having ignored Wagner's guidelines came in last place.

During the 2nd world war, the square was severely damaged by air raids. After 1945, the ruins were mostly removed, only the Behrens buildings were reconstructed.

Though in the 1920's the development of a modern infrastructure had just started, with the division of Berlin after the war it came to a halt. The construction program of the GDR concentrated on Stalin-Allee where the intention was to develop a national style in the tradition of Shinkel's Classicism and the Russian „Stalin Baroque“ style. Hermann Henselmann, who quickly established himself in a number of work collectives as head architect of Berlin (1953-1959), built a substantial part of the first section of Stalin-Allee (starting 1951). In 1953 Henselmann developed a similar design for the continuation of this project as far as Alexanderplatz to become a monumental, representative square for the GDR (cf. scenario 1). Due to political upheavals in the USSR (Stalin's death 1953) and financial necessity, the later sections of Stalin-Allee (after 1961 renamed Karl-Marx-Allee) were not built in the costly "National Traditions" style, but adopted a cheaper type of modernism. Until the mid 60s, since the construction of a new centre focussed on the Marx-Engels-Forum (now Schlossplatz), Alexanderplatz remained a semi wasteland. Only after the surprising decision of the SED to replace the planned, central representative building with a television tower, were the disagreements over the location of the capital's centre finally ended. From a 1964 competition for the development of Alexanderplatz, the SED put together a proposal that was presented to the East German People in 1969 (the 20th anniversary of the GDR)

as a new architectural high light for the capital. The proposal simultaneously followed a similar planning model that was being worked out in the western parts of the city (e.g. Ernst-Reuter-platz) anticipated by Mies van der Rohe in his 1928 proposal. Since then, apart from a few name changes on the international time clock, symbolising the former socialist people's union, the square has remained largely unchanged. While for some it resembles a Siberian desert (Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm), for others it's one of the most generous urban public spaces in Europe (Wolfgang Kil).

In 1993, during an intense period of economical optimism, the reunited Berlin senate organized a competition that demanded a complete reconstruction of Alexanderplatz. Only the two Behrens buildings should be preserved. Consequently, most of the proposals left very little of the GDR architecture intact. The exception was Daniel Libeskind's design (cf. scenario 2). Libeskind suggested preserving the original structure while adding a dense structure of new buildings in an attempt to achieve historical continuity and social integration. He won second prize. First prize went to a uniform, monumental design by Kollhoff and Timmermann which reconciles the dream (or ghost) of a historical European centre in the form of a piazza, with the populist vision of the city as a Manhattan skyline. The work is planned to start this year.

Two Variations on the History of Alexanderplatz:

Scenario 1:

Having won the 1928 competition, the Luckhardt Brothers with Alfons Anker were commissioned to realize their design. Through generous investment by American backers, the building is finished in 1932. Because of its unified, modern and dynamic form, Alexanderplatz achieves worldwide fame. During the war, heavy bombing destroys the east and north sides of the square. After 1945, a reconstruction of the square is considered, though the infrastructure had revealed itself as being too small already in the 30s. Consequently, only the two southern buildings are restored. In 1953 Ulbricht demands the adoption of the "National Traditions" style. Henselmann, though only a few weeks earlier an ardent Modernist, responds as head of a working collective with a proposal for Stalin-Allee and Alexanderplatz. There is an urgent need for representational government buildings, so work on Alexanderplatz is started immediately and finished within two years. The central committee of the SED move into the middle building at the north end of the square which is now set aside for parades and rallies. Upheavals in the USSR and the consequent setbacks prevent Stalin-Allee being built in a similar style; therefore the planners resort to a cheaper Plattenbau (prefabricated units) method. After the reunification, Alexanderplatz is accused of being Stalinist and eclectic, however with the emerging interest in historicising town planning, the square is listed.

Scenario 2:

In 1928 American investors support a proposal by Mies van der Rohe. By 1932, five of the planned eleven buildings are finished. During the war, large parts of the square are destroyed by air raids. After 1945, the East German Senate decides to restore two relatively undamaged Mies van der Rohe buildings. In the 60s these are integrated into the restructuring of the square. After the reunification, Daniel Libeskind wins first prize just ahead of Kollhoff. Between 1995 and 1999, the first building is realized - the Euroforum - which resembles Mies van der Rohe's famous 1921 proposal for Friedrich Strasse. The buildings function to provide offices for European organisations next to the town hall meets with some resistance from the public. Up to the present, only the Berliner Touristik GmbH have moved in. Further realization of the plan is uncertain, as the need for office space has slackened and there is increasing demand for pre WW1 style (Gründerzeit) architecture.

Albrecht Schäfer März 2001