

Last Exit to Alexanderplatz¹

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A single ticket for Berlin's public transport has since January 1, 1995, cost 3.70 DM. If a visitor from the new Baltic states wants to take a single trip by bus or subway, he or she needs to work for about one full day (for the average income) to earn the respective value. For a visitor from closer-by Poland the ratio is slightly better; for Belarussians or Ukrainians it is decidedly worse.

This observation made in passing may appear somewhat random. Yet it denotes something fundamental – a misunderstanding still indulged in by Berlin towards its geographical realities. It desires so much to be a metropolis at the river Spree; the hub for people, commodities and ideas in the center of Europe. Yet the kind of Europe whose functioning center is Berlin does not exist. For too long, the city “has danced on the edge, the abyss of history” (Goldberger 1995). And it will remain an outpost for an unforeseeable length of time: the shopping window of the West is full of glittering promises which cannot be fulfilled to those gazing with longing eyes.

Hence, a particular uncertainty rules the city, a lack of orientation, and for some, a childish defiance. The air is filled with a most noticeable fear; the fear of losing one's “attachment to the West” and to fall behind other metropolises, which, seemingly without any threat, indulge in luxury. West Berliners seem particularly unhappy in their outpost, thus practicing denial particularly strongly. The vested rights of forty years of post-war boom stand more effectively in the way of impartial thinking than what a desire for new worlds could envision. Reasons for this are mainly of a mental kind: the opposing political system has vanished, now the “Third World” begins less than an hour's drive beyond Berlin. And the fear of the unfamiliar takes effect below the surface. One nags as if their own misery never existed: poor road surfaces, grey buildings, and strange people. Long rehearsed, for generations, these defensive reflexes are reliable against all that means East. And in Germany the view that

1 | Source: Kil, W. (1995) Last Exit Alexanderplatz. *der architekt* 4/1995.

made those infamous car stickers a top seller increasingly takes hold: “Your poverty makes me want to puke.”

If there exists a town planning metaphor for the mental prejudices of the West against the East, then it is the Kollhoff Plan for Alexanderplatz. This “help desk of the *Zeitgeist* for the nineties” will remain, even if the construction plans may perhaps at some point yellow in the archives. After all, their chances for realization are not particularly great; in any case they are even smaller than for those many other projects of ambition to which the Berlin Senate has let itself be seduced over recent years. Fundamental misconceptions – of the economy, planning policy and architecture and concept – are to blame.

BLACKMAILED FIRST, THEN STOOD UP

Let's refresh our memory: after two rounds of competition (April and September 1993), the well-known conception of Hans Kollhoff was crowned against the clearly-articulated resistance of East Berlin residents and pushed through by a lobby of investors and the Senate. The investors were the last to blame for the cascade of those eager to impress, first thirteen, then eleven, finally nine 150 meter tall high-rise buildings. The investors only wanted to preserve their interest. A matter of *corporate identity*, each company thus fought for one tower.

Berlin's polity has failed gravely in this whole process. Kollhoff's aesthetically exalted total work of art with a construction phase of twenty years uncovered the absence of any far-sighted development concept for the city as a whole. Far removed from any historical realities as well as without any necessity, the Senator for Urban Development, Volker Hassemer, suddenly proposed the relocation of the core city center areas from the Kurfürstendamm to the eastern edge of the old Berlin city center; supposedly, he fell in love, rather foolishly, with a new “picture postcard image” (*sic!*) of his city. The whole process was, in reality, only conducted in such unbecoming haste because real estate owners were already impatiently straining at the leash. The competition, according to a panicky hope, should have provided the Senate with the means to restrain the particular interests of individual owners and, as far as possible, utilize six billion DM as envisaged construction cost to provide a forward thrust for the “metropolis.”

“The whole thing is obviously a political problem. The city's interests, those of the public and the inhabitants vis-à-vis the investors, have to be brought into the debate and to be made to count. The inhabitants have to demand this from their political representatives. The investors need to be obliged also to work for this purpose,” appealed Richard Weinstein (1993), one time chief planner of Manhattan and thus an expert in these matters, in the city forum to Berliners and their conscience. Only when the city takes sufficiently strong a position

vis-à-vis private investors will the public interest not suffer. But this was exactly what the city saw and still sees itself incapable of at this moment in time. Like a rejected child, the German capital has to go from door to door, courting attention. It is clearly not the case that it can hardly save itself from interest to move to and settle in the city. On the contrary, emigration losses are taking on dramatic proportions particularly in labor-intensive sectors. The Spree metropolis is a long time away from being an attractive address (for any business card). And, in its desperation, still tries to please even the most fickle developers.

These, one after another, are bailing out from Alexanderplatz: “We are going to start once we have tenants or buyers and not before,” announced TRIGON, project developer for Interhotel, in autumn 1994 (Guttmann 1994). The Treuhand real estate company and Terreno/Roland Ernst have also, for the time being, invested a large amount of money in existing property – which does not look like new buildings are to happen any time soon. [The publishing company] Gruner + Jahr announced that “due to the circumstances” it was considering an alternative location along the Spree riverbanks; the prime site at Alexanderplatz could well wait for any later realization.

Will time let gentle-minded grass grow over the hasty Alex affair? Not at all: German building law creates facts even if no building takes place. Fearing that the fractious administration of the Eastern district of Mitte could unduly delay or even thwart the matter, the Building Senate has taken over the process of approving the land use plan. Thus, the controversial “high-rise tempest” enters building law as a “virtual measure” even without investors and raises real estate values to the extreme.

Even if current (or new) owners had other goals in mind, they could no longer prevent the density legislated for in the Kollhoff plan. An expected floor-space ratio of between nine and eleven enforces the most luxurious expectations of commercialization. Less profitable uses, such as family units or a mix including small businesses, are thus excluded. This speculation, promoted by the Senate in its blinded euphoria for skylines, has led to a “completely rudderless land value structure that precisely prevents those projects that Berlin needs today,” specifically also for Alexanderplatz (Eichstädt 1994: 47).

AN INSULT TO THOSE ON LOWER INCOMES

All involved have until now staunchly avoided any discussion over the consequences of such massive valorization of the center city for adjacent residential districts such as Scheunenviertel, Prenzlauer Berg, and Friedrichshain. The always praised Martin Wagner has already cast his interested eyes over these areas: “The living quarters of the poor and the poorest and their decimated purchasing power obstruct city center development and need to be removed by

radically demolishing desolate living quarters" (Wagner 1994: 88). Today, the imaginary skyscrapers at Alex are casting their shadows onto the socially most intact and thus, for this reason alone, most livable mixed neighborhoods of East Berlin. Their gentrification is, at the very least, accepted by the Senate; skeptics even assume it is part of the approach. "The architectural plan is a surprise attack on the residents who live here" (*Der Spiegel* 13/94). As long as they are being denied a discussion over their prospects, the long-time residents, now well aware of the state of danger they find themselves in, have to consider Kollhoff's visions as a call to arms by the Senate against the citizens of the Eastern districts with less purchasing power. There simply exist no strategies to limit any of the foreseeable upheaval in the hinterland of Alexanderplatz.

Western experiences that consider certain forms of "social differentiation" as normal are only one side of the coin. The other is simply called ignorance. Even the gestures of Kollhoff's development idea talks the traitor's talk of cooptation: the group of towers shaped as a sky-high double bowl encircles the public space, screens it against the East and opens out towards the West. An ostentatious barrier is erected towards the hinterland, which has always been one of the special characteristics of the place. All illustrations and models prove that the Western gaze, fully commanding the city since 1990, has broadened its horizon, beyond the historic Friedrichstadt and the City Palace up to the boundary of the *S-Bahn*. There it shall find a resting point in an imposing skyline: last exit for dynamic service providers and the clientele in search for luxury items. Once again prime location for front offices and designer boutiques. Beyond lies "Ulan Bator" (Michael Mönninger²) and "Asian emptiness" (Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm).

INTEGRATION INSTEAD OF BLOCKADING

"Nonetheless, the prospect isn't bad," writes Harald Bodenschatz (1994: 92), "that a pure valorization strategy with high-cost offices, shopping worlds filled with world-class goods, luxury apartments and expensive cafes will fail. History, the present and the foreseeable future will bring this place down to the ground, as a space of the East." One can only hope that such predictions will be taken seriously before the first facts have been constructed. A failure of the "enterprise Alexanderplatz" at half term would exceed many times over the disaster of Kottbuser Tor (which in the early 1970s became the writing on the

2 | "Alexanderplatz appears like a frontier post of Mongolia. Its emptiness and expanse reflect an Eastern economy of scarcity whose only item of luxury was the excessive wasting of space" (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 17, 1993).

wall for failed urban development in Berlin Kreuzberg in both social and architectural terms).

To return once again to the earlier mentioned mental barriers: [Alexanderplatz as] the public space of the East! If such a peculiar existence is already assigned with such stubborn insistence, why cannot Alexanderplatz develop its very own quality from such a characteristic? This would be possible if its redevelopment was based on the legitimate expectations of the East city's users; if its significance as a lower order center, as a traditional meeting and distribution point for uncounted everyday movements from Pankow, Weißensee or Lichtenberg, was finally recognized and taken seriously. What if it was developed not as an office location in competition to the West-City but as a hub of fluctuating movements of small-business activities (start-ups) and an urban site of integration (e.g. for immigrants)? That would, however, define the site as a fundamentally different urban concept to Kollhoff's offering. It would need to be explicitly opened out towards the approaching radial roads of Prenzlauer Allee, Greifswalder Straße, Landsberger and Karl-Marx-Allee (as proposed by Kny & Weber whose proposal came third). It would also suggest a far more varied mixing of functions and building typologies; a foundation for a step-by-step growth and permanent change (which was essentially the message of Libeskind's runner-up proposal).

Above all, it would mean refraining from an obsessive (and fairly hopeless) Westernization of the East city, a process increasingly experienced over there as social exclusion ("For whom are these fancy shops?")³ or as a cultural insult. In Frankfurt am Main, the wealth and profit orientation in the Western impression of the central city redevelopment, which has so far come only at the expense of marginal minorities, can already only be enforced against large resistance to the "re-ordering" of Kaiserstraße and the areas surrounding the train station. In Berlin, with its specific East-West divide, relevant parts of the population (read: potential voters) are being put under pressure.

The need for an expansion to accommodate the upper class is not as gigantic as expected only four years ago. Berlin is big enough not to close off its city center to those with more modest incomes – and real poverty, increasingly to be expected from the neighboring countries in the East, doesn't allow its access to be refused anyway. The developers at Alexanderplatz understood this earlier than Berlin's politicians and some architects. The hesitant pause of the investors provides the Senate with some time for reconsideration. There is still time to correct its view of the city. Real metropolises allow for an equal footing not only of lifestyles but also grossly different income groups. Berlin's special role in Germany as in Europe can only consist in a balancing of lives and their prac-

3 | Letter to the editor. *Berliner Zeitung*, May 29, 1993.

tices that are fairly alien to each other. For this, small-scale and flexible urban structures are more productive than triumphant and excluding ones.

At Alexanderplatz, both the historical one and today's, Berlin has a single opportunity (that cannot be repeated) to present itself as an open city, finally also towards the East. This opening, however, has to be desired. Can it be imagined and thought? Hans Kollhoff wasn't able to. Now his proposal sticks to the city's image like the infamous bumper sticker.

Translated by Gesa Helms

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