

12 Frankfurt / Germany¹

Clone City. An Insatiable Thirst for Authenticity

It is a cultural irony – but an economic fact – that this thirst for ‘authenticity’ can now be slaked only by forgeries.

(Jean Baudrillard)²

The historic centre of Frankfurt unfolds as a tale of destruction and neglect, grand designs and shifting interpretations. For conservationists, it is a tragedy in several acts – specifically in the post-war period. By contrast, Frankfurt’s earlier history is quite typical. Overcrowding, impoverishment and neglect in the 19th century were followed by modernization initiatives featuring large-scale edifices and cross-cutting boulevards. Around 1900, Braubachstrasse and Domstrasse were forced through in the immediate vicinity of the Römerberg. Frankfurt’s Altstadt, it is often forgotten, was already an island before the devastation of the war. It is now over 70 years since the centre of Frankfurt was bombed to rubble. In the meantime, on the insular plot between the *Römer* and the *Dom* (cathedral) with which we will mostly be concerned, a wide variety of urban development schemes have been dreamt up. They have rarely attempted to do justice to the meaning of this place at the heart of the city.³ A quite scandalous torpor led to this central location being used as a carpark well beyond the immediate post-war years. Then, in the early 1970s, the Römer area was subject to the construction of a huge, three-storey underground garage. There followed, along Braubachstrasse, the erection of the *Technisches Rathaus* (Technical Town Hall), a piece of brutalist high-rise architecture by Bartsch, Thürwächter und Weber.⁴ However, this attempt to install a landmark in a city that had dedicated itself to architectural modernism during its reconstruction and was seeking to position itself as a city of skyscrapers failed (fig. 1).

1 The title is a quote from Jean Baudrillard; cf. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 1996 (1968), 84.

2 Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 1996 (1968), 84.

3 Müller-Raemisch, *Frankfurt am Main*, 1996; Pötschke, *Dreißig Häuser sind keine Altstadt*, 2007.

4 Brutalism, it is important to remind the non-specialist, in the field of architecture, has nothing to do with “brutality” – it owes its name to “béton brut”, literally “raw concrete”, a reference to the honest materiality of modern exposed concrete architecture.



Figure 1: View from the cathedral (Dom) over the historic center of Frankfurt with the three ornate gables of the old Town Hall ("Römer"), the modern City Administration Building ("Technisches Rathaus", foreground right) and the "Kunsthalle Schirn" museum of art, all seen against the skyline of the modern central business district (Undated photograph, prior to 2010)

While the Frankfurt skyline is widely accepted to be the city's most important marketing icon and is the foremost symbol of the city's identity for many residents, there was – unsurprisingly – little opposition when the decision was made to tear down the unpopular modern Town Hall. The City of Frankfurt has approved the demolition of incomparably more significant examples of modern high-rise architecture in recent decades.

The dimensional caesura that the *Technisches Rathaus* established in the heart of Frankfurt (see also fig. 2 in chapter 8) was made irreversible by future projects such as the postmodern *Schirn Kunsthalle* (1983–1986, architects: Architekturbüro BJSS). The construction towards the Römerberg that was planned to be carried out together in parallel with the construction of the Schirn was conceived of as 'city repair' (*Stadtreparatur*) in the sense in which this concept became popular in Germany following the Berlin International Building Exhibition in 1987, and spatially is not without sophistication. The remodelling of Frankfurt's most important city square, the Römerberg, led to a reconstruction debate that was lively enough to even affect the local elections. As the pet project of then Mayor Walter Wallmann (CDU), the eastern side of the square that

Frankfurters refer to proudly as their '*gute Stubb*' (colloquially: front parlour) was reconstructed in half-timbering (fig. 2) and now exudes more postcard charm than ever before, a precedent that we will come back to.



Figure 2: The eastern side of the Römerberg, reconstructed in half-timbering 1981–84. (Photo: G. Vinken 2019)

We will complete this prehistory by considering the *Haus am Dom*. Built from 2004 to 2006 between the Cathedral and the *Technisches Rathaus*, whose demolition had already been agreed, on plans drawn up Jochem Jourdan, it functions as a counter-argument to the fever for reconstruction. It transcends questions of taste to demonstrate the potential of modern architecture when the task is to create accents in a heterogeneous area by reflectively referencing the typology of the town house and the historic city centre. Today, the *Haus am Dom* is a rather bewildered onlooker at the current building site and has the appearance of an unintentional blow-up image.

DomRömer Quarter

The most recent act in the variety show being performed in the heart of Frankfurt oscillates between parody and soap opera. It concerns the construction of what is known as the *DomRömer* Quarter on the plot cleared for this purpose by the demolition of the *Technisches Rathaus* (fig. 3, 4).



Figure 3: Cleared to build a “historic” town center. Demolition of the “Technisches Rathaus” (Photo: Sarah Bonnert, 2011)

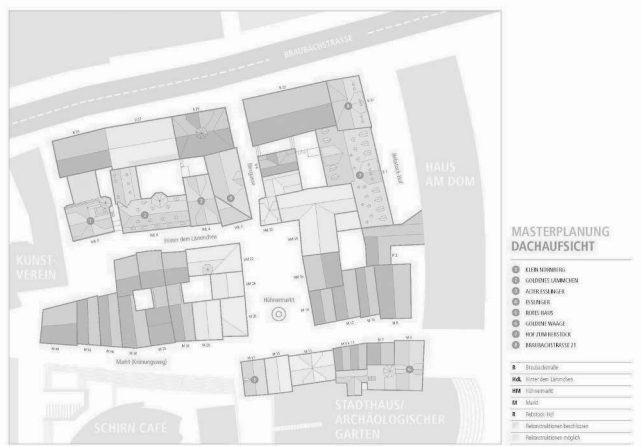


Figure 4: New roofscape. Blueprint for the DomRömer Quarter on the same area, DomRömerGmbH 2012

In objective terms, this project concerns the rebuilding of a mid-sized city centre area with small units and at medium density, with occasional replicas of houses destroyed in the war (fig. 5, 6).⁵

5 Marek, *Rekonstruktion und Kultugesellschaft*, 2009, 53–98; cf. also Hansen, *Die Frankfurter Altstadtdebatte*, 2008 and Bideau, *Fallstudie Frankfurt*, 2011. I am grateful for pointers received from Sarah Bonnert, who wrote her dissertation at Offenbach University of Art and Design on this topic and has created several artworks focusing on the redesign of the area. Her website collates numerous documents, photographs and other information, cf. Website *Alte Stadt aus neuen Häusern*.



Figures 5, 6: The brand-new “Altstadt” – finally inaugurated: Visitors in the “DomRömerAreal” 2019 (Photos: G. Vinken)

The public interest that this project received over many years and which made architecture an election issue in Frankfurt once again doubtlessly has something to do with the dazzling effect of the term *Altstadt*. The now commonplace habit of referring to the *DomRömer* Quarter using this expression draws together various fantasies and hopes and focuses them on this city centre district: the return of the old Frankfurt that was lost, the possibility of healing by means of architectural reconstruction. The idea that the *DomRömer* Quarter could bring back Frankfurt’s old town has been the emotional mainspring of the debate for years. Yet the idea of rebuilding a central part of the city, one that happened to be in public ownership, did not initially generate any unusual ideas. The most important piece of land in the city would become the home of the usual sort of thing: a modern, densely built city-centre district, with shops, offices and a few apartments – business as usual (fig. 7). Only the cookie-cutter ordinariness, the faceless ‘niceness’ of the proposals that won the 2005 design competition generated a real buzz around proposals – already existing – to reconstruct along historical lines. One key means to ensuring that the old town became firmly established in the public image supply was the online publication of digital models (fig. 8).⁶ The calls to “rebuild the historic old town” grew ever louder, until ultimately one of the major parties – the centre-right CDU – aligned itself firmly with the proposal.

The reconstruction debate was led by the *Altstadforum* (Old Town Forum), which was founded in 2004.⁷ It brought together various pressure groups: the Society of Friends of the City of Frankfurt (created in 1966 as the successor to the Friends of the Old Town, *Bund tätiger Altstadtfreunde*, which dated back to 1922), the Frankfurt Retail Association (*Einzelhandelsverband Frankfurt*), the city-marketing group City Forum ProFrankfurt e.V.,

6 Website Wikimedia Commons, Virtuelles Altstadtmodell Frankfurt am Main. Sadly, the original, interactive website with the digital city model (<http://www.virtuelle-altstadt.de/das-altstadtmodell.html>) is not currently operational.

7 Website AltstadtForum Frankfurt.



Figure 7: Inhospitable modernism: winning design in the 2005 competition for a concept to replace Frankfurt's "Technisches Rathaus" (KPS Architekten Engel / Zimmermann)



Figure 8: Digital Old Town. The reconstructed Hühnermarkt (HHVISON, DomRömerGmbH 2013)

and the agency EQUIPE Marketing GmbH. While the 'Friends of Frankfurt' originally called for the pre-war city to be reconstructed as closely as possible, a compromise has since been reached: the new development will respect the lines of the pre-war streets and the volumes of historic buildings "for the most part". As things stand,⁸ the plan is to build nearly 40 new houses, guided by the old volumes, including at least eight 'true' reconstructions of historic buildings. The project's principal contractor is the City of Frankfurt am Main itself, represented by DomRömer GmbH, which is owned in full by the city. The chair of the Design Committee (*Gestaltungsbeirat*) is the architect Christoph Mäckler, a co-founder of the Dortmund-based German Institute for the Art of Urban Design, who has plenty of other business in Frankfurt, including the new airport terminal and highrises such as the Opernturm and Tower 185. "DomRömer GmbH [...] is responsible for developing, planning and completing the DomRömer district. DomRömer GmbH is also responsible for marketing and selling the new houses and apartments – via the establishment of leaseholds."⁹ In other words, the houses will be built by a developer and the individual plots preferably granted to private investors on long-term leaseholds. According to the guidelines for the development of the site of the former *Technisches Rathaus* produced by the City Planning Department: "In the spirit of city repair, a quarter is to be developed with the high density and small scale typical of a traditional old town. The historical network of lanes and squares is to be largely rebuilt [...]. The characteristics of the former old town should be recognisable on the façades and roofs of the other buildings." The design guidelines specify that façades should reflect "historical features", locally typical structural elements and "natural stone from the local region".¹⁰ A public competition for designs was announced in November 2010, and a high-calibre jury of experts selected a further 38 agencies to submit designs alongside

8 This text was originally written in 2013, before the completion of the DomRömer Quarter (2012–18), which closely followed the plans discussed here.

9 Website DomRömer Frankfurt.

10 Website Stadtplanungsamt Frankfurt am Main, Leitlinien für die Gestaltung.

the 18 participants who were invited to submit. In March 2011, the winning entries were put on display in the German Architecture Museum.

A high-quality video produced by the city was released in spring 2012 – appropriately enough at Cannes¹¹ – aiming to give an impression of the form and flair of the new city district. It shows young people strolling through the streets, window-shopping, and visiting a café. We wander down narrow lanes, stand on the rebuilt *Hühnermarkt* in front of the 1895 monument to local poet and proud Frankfurter Friedrich Stoltze (“[...] *un es will merr net in mein Kopp enei: wie kann nor e Mensch net von Frankfort sei!*”),¹² which is to be transferred from its current location behind St. Catherine’s church. The film shows the familiar spaces of a mid-sized European city. Long ‘tracking shots’ along the digital façades show a pleasant mixture of replicas and contemporary architecture, most of the latter featuring more or less subtly historicizing forms. There is a deliberate avoidance of the spectacular, we are rather shown the familiar pattern of historical layers: The atmosphere of a lively city centre, where tradition and timeless style, homely streetscapes and international brands, the local and the global are skilfully synthesized. Designed on the drawing board and created by a single developer, the project is presented here as a model of the city of the future: equally the perfect backdrop for leisure and consumption and a source of identity – even if (and maybe this is only an effect of the digital rendering?), despite the meticulously animated bubbling fountain, it comes across as almost uncannily sterile. The *DomRömer* Quarter is promoted as a successful synthesis of two quite different tendencies. Redeeming a postmodern promise, it is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. On the one hand, it satisfies the popular demand for restoration and historical reconstruction and thus reinforces the related populist condemnation of ‘modernity’ as cold and impersonal. On the other hand, the project draws on the concept of “city repair” and thus focuses on a more exclusive architectural conception, namely the debates of postmodern theory and “critical reconstruction”.

Reconstruction

The first reading, which seeks to consider the *DomRömer* Quarter as a (partial) rebuilding of the historic center of Frankfurt that was destroyed in the war, relies on the rhetoric of recovery, or even continuity. For the ‘Friends of Frankfurt’, this is about nothing less than “regaining” the central reference point of Frankfurt’s identity. “The area between the Main and the former Braubach, on the one side, and between Fahrgasse and Römerbergsenke, on the other, is the primordial cell of the city. That is where the Carolingian Palace stood, whose remains can be seen in the Archaeological Garden and whose chapel was the precursor of the Cathedral. Around the palace, a settlement formed. The market street ran through it, from east to west, forming the route later taken by kings and emperors following their election and coronation.”¹³ The *AltstadtForum* website describes

11 Website DomRömer Frankfurt, marketing trailer.

12 “And I can’t wrap my head around it / How can someone not be from Frankfurt?” (written in the Frankfurt dialect).

13 Website Freunde Frankfurts.

the loss of this “primordial cell” as follows: “[...] Before its destruction in the war in May 1944, Frankfurt’s old town was one of the most beautiful gothic old towns in Germany. More than 1,200 buildings, most of great historical interest, fell victim to a terrible hail of bombs [...] Now, following the demolition of the ‘Technisches Rathaus’ in 2010, more than 65 years after the destruction, Frankfurt has, for the first time, a chance to reconstruct some 30 historic houses, thereby regaining a valuable part of its old town.”¹⁴

Typically, this ‘regaining’ is presented here without further context together with a tale of ruin that befell the city like a terrible storm (a “hail of bombs”). Also typical is the historical carelessness of describing the old town as ‘Gothic’ (just as Dresden is always Baroque), which overlooks 500 years of continual renewal and destruction – as well as the heritage conservation measures and the aesthetically-driven urban interventions of the immediate pre-war period. Also typical of this world view is the suggestive positioning of modernism as the continuation of the destruction: according to this logic, the *Technisches Rathaus* is one more disturbance, and its demolition offers a chance at redemption, healing, recovery. From this perspective, it is simply not apparent that the desire to “recover” the old town is a radical devaluation of the historical. For if (nearly) every part of this “valuable old town” was created in 2012 or later, then the simple fact of being old (or “age-value”, to borrow a turn of phrase from the great conservation theorist Alois Riegl)¹⁵ cannot be considered the defining feature of the historical. The arguments in favour of the value of the new old town use the magic words authenticity, integrity, and continuity, which UNESCO established as the criteria for World Cultural Heritage.

Authenticity

In the terminology of its proponents, the *DomRömer* Quarter is not being built on the concrete roof of an underground car park, as is in fact the case, but in a fictitious historical topography. “In line with a master plan adopted by the city council in September 2007, 30 houses will be erected there by 2013 on the streets Alter Markt, Hühnermarkt and Hinter dem Lämmchen. The best documented houses – Goldene Waage, Rotes Haus, Klein Nürnberg, Goldenes Lämmchen, Alter Esslinger, Junger Esslinger and perhaps also Haus Rebstock – will be reconstructed. The other houses, whose specifications still need to be elaborated, should, through their individual character, detailed façades, the use of local natural stone and the remains of the houses that were destroyed, resemble the old buildings in form. Additional reconstructions are also possible, in accordance with the goal of forming an appropriate and desirable ensemble. [...] Ground elevations will be restored to historical levels.”¹⁶ Only the final sentence touches upon the complex problem of creating a reconstruction on this particular site. The new area has to come to terms with the fact that the topography has completely changed since the war: with the *Schirn Kunsthalle* and its entrance (the monumental ‘table’ that functioned as an

14 Website AltstadtForum Frankfurt.

15 Riegl, The modern Cult of Monuments, 1982 (1903).

16 Website AltstadtForum Frankfurt.

abstract marker of the entrance has already had to make way), with the excavations in the archaeological zone (and the plan to build the Stadthaus on top of this has already come under fire because it would block the view of the Cathedral), and above all with the brute fact of Frankfurt's metro system, whose ramps and entrances can hardly be relocated. Already the "original level" of this reconstruction is barely more than a lazy compromise. In the diction of the Friends of Frankfurt, what is being built here is not a few rows of houses following pre-war street alignments, but rather buildings that are actually "on *am Alten Markt*, on the *Hühnermarkt*, on *Hinter dem Lämmchen*". Confirmed by the ubiquity of digital renderings, historical plans and photos, the old topography of the city has long been the reality overlaid on the wasteland that the demolitions left behind. And the coronation route, which never really existed in name, is already included in every tourist brochure and will probably soon grace street signs.

The same is true of the quant-yet-exotic old Frankfurt names of the houses that are to be replicated – *Goldenes Lämmchen*, *Alter Esslinger*, *Junger Esslinger*, *Klein Nürnberg*: thanks to the constant repetition, everyone is now familiar with them. In these names, at least, there is an authentic transmission of the historical. To build is now to repeat that which is known by name; the evocatively recapitulated name becomes the band linking the townhouses that were destroyed and their mocked-up revenants. *Altstadt* boosters even like to suggest a certain continuity of use: "There has been much interest in taking an apartment, opening a shop or a restaurant in one of the reconstructed houses. One of those making such inquiries is Frank Albrecht, whose chain of perfume stores can be traced back to a business founded in 1732 in the house known as *Würzgarten* (Markt). Ernesto Melber and his daughter want to open a café in the house 'Zum Esslinger'; they are descendants of Georg Adolf Melber, who was married to the sister of Goethe's mother and ran a dry-goods retail business out of the same building. The young Goethe often spent time there [...]. Clearly, not only this house but the entire area will doubtless become a major attraction for both locals and tourists."¹⁷ Since it is impossible to provide a direct descendant of Goethe's mother's sister to live in every house, the *AltstadtForum* has taken on the task of "supporting the efforts of the publicly owned *DomRömer GmbH* in its efforts to find suitable investors for this area of such importance". It is also "looking for 30 Frankfurters who would like to invest in a piece of the old town".¹⁸ Thirty Frankfurters! Does that mean, no 'outsiders' need apply? Are investors from neighbouring Offenbach excluded? Do immigrants need to prove their 'assimilation'? Once more, in the name of the old town, an exclusive and alienating in-group designation with xenophobic undertones is used, as is always the case with local patriotism.¹⁹

The city's official marketing video for the project, which we have already mentioned, tries to evoke the old town in another way. As a strolling female visitor flicks through the pages of a historical guide to the city, the black and white photos are overlaid with

17 Website AltstadtForum Frankfurt.

18 Website AltstadtForum Frankfurt, details in the section "Aktion 30 Frankfurter".

19 The website has recently been amended to include the following definition of a Frankfurter: "We consider a Franfurter to be anyone who lives here or who loves Frankfurt", cf. Website AltstadtForum Frankfurt, in the section "Aktion 30 Frankfurter".

colour views of the replica buildings. The *DomRömer* Quarter is explicitly presented as the resurrection of the ruined old town. In another scene, there is a further invocation of material authenticity. A couple stop again and again to look at historical details, gazing in wonder at things like the richly decorated door surrounds and lion's head keystones of the reconstructed *Haus zur goldenen Waage*, where architectural fragments that have survived in museums are to be incorporated in the reconstruction (fig. 9).



Figure 9: New half-timbering and authentic spolia
– Reconstruction of “Zur Goldenen Waage” (HHVI-
SON, DomRömerGmbH 2013)

The design specifications that have already been produced recommend the use of such spolia “wherever historically or aesthetically possible”.²⁰ After the war, many architectural fragments were indeed recovered and squirreled away in the city’s archives.²¹ The fact that these can now be used in ‘meaningful’ ways has persuaded many a once critical observer.²² As attractive as the prospect of fetching the sometimes exquisite late Mediaeval and Renaissance fragments from storage and putting them on public display appears: when incorporated in the ‘correct’ or, as is mostly the case, the ‘wrong’ building, these genuine fragments complete the planned pastiche in a way that blurs the boundary – so vital from the perspective of heritage conservation – between original and copy. The practice of reusing recovered fragments from buildings that have been demolished

20 Website Stadtplanungsamt Frankfurt am Main, Leitlinien für die Gestaltung.

21 A detailed online catalogue of all the spolia that survive has since been developed, cf. Website Spolien der Frankfurter Altstadt.

22 Bartetzko, *Aus Alt mach Neu*, 2007.

or destroyed in new buildings is familiar from many old town restorations.²³ In the name of a homogenizing cityscape grooming, a certain degree of deception is, if not deliberately pursued, at least passively condoned.

Postmodern *Heimatschutz*

From the perspective of the *Heimatschutz* movement, a late 19th and early 20th century conservation tendency rooted in romantic nationalism, architecturally accurate replicas of destroyed buildings are always a guarantee of architectural quality. According to this logic, new buildings – always a second-best solution for the supporters of reconstruction – have to be subject to the strictest possible set of design regulations in order to limit the damage they do. In the *DomRömer* Quarter, new buildings are subject to regulations that normally – and quite rightly – apply only to historic districts. Strict conditions regarding scale and volume, typology and materiality seek explicitly to prohibit any outbursts of modern formal language. However, the German term *Stadtreparatur*²⁴ (literally “city repair”) that is often used in this regard is misleading. It suggests a reference to concepts from urban planning and architecture that belong to a debate first held in the 1960s by the circle around Aldo Rossi. At that time, architecture was looking for a way out of the inhospitable dead-end street that functionalist modernism had become. By turning to the *site* in its historical stratification, to its typologies and materialities, it was hoped that a richer, ‘site-specific’ architecture could be developed. In Germany, these ideas inspired the highly fertile Berlin IBA (1977–87), which was guided by the concepts of “careful urban renewal” and “critical reconstruction”.²⁵ And it is no coincidence that it was in Berlin, at an international building exhibition that is conventionally conceived of as a means to showcase the architecture of the future, that a part of the event was dedicated to the revitalization of old buildings (*IBA-Altbau*). The approach that was first realized here went hand in hand with a fundamental shift of perspective that returned the historic city to the centre of attention and rehabilitated it as a touchstone for contemporary architecture. Hans Stimmann’s *Planwerk Berlin* – a comprehensive urban design plan for the city – which sought to rein in the city’s uncontrolled post-unification growth, yet lacked conceptual depth and exhausted itself mostly in formalist promises of punctuated “stone” façades, etc. The search for the “city beautiful” that was also pursued in the German Institute for the Art of Urban Design in Dortmund (where Hans Stimmann worked alongside Christoph Mäckler) points in the same direction. Anointed once again as a model, the historic city is above all consulted as a versatile repertoire of forms for deployment. Existing structures are rarely subjected to systematic analysis in their heterogeneity, which would be a precondition for a site-specific building practice and individual city repair.²⁶

23 Meier, Spolien, 2021, in particular 65–70.

24 Website Stadtplanungsamt Frankfurt am Main, Dom-Römer-Areal.

25 Bauausstellung Berlin GmbH, Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin, 1987.

26 Löw/Vinken, Anpassung und Wirkung, 2012.

In Frankfurt, too, site-specific thinking is entirely alien to the *DomRömer* project. The textures of central Frankfurt, the scale and organization of the existing urban spaces around the *DomRömer* Quarter are too heterogeneous to enable the evocation of a credible 'old-town' architecture. The *Technisches Rathaus*, on top of whose underground garage the new district is being built, was flanked not only by the Dom and the Römer, but was also, and far more tangibly, the neighbour of the postmodern *Schirn Kunsthalle* and Braubachstraße, which only sliced through the old street plan in 1900 – and was further embedded in an architectural mix typical of Frankfurt's post-war regeneration, a combination of true urbanism and looser, almost suburban construction. Towards the Main river, the characteristic city centre pattern of block-perimeter buildings with inner courtyards gives way to two-storey terraced houses with front gardens and balconies. The reminiscences of local heritage in the *DomRömer* Quarter are not the result of analysis of and reflection on the existing structures, typologies and forms in their historical stratifications, but are rather entirely the expression of a will for restoration and reconstruction on the part of the city's planners. In Frankfurt, Aldo Rossi's call for a return to place and history has been reduced to a sheer formalism, a kind of postmodern *Heimatschutz* aesthetic.

Despite the narrow and uninspiring specifications in the call for entries, the competition generated some eminently respectable results.²⁷ *Morger+Dettli* (Markt 30), for instance, designed a naked façade of unquestionable modernity. The references to the "gothic" half-timbered house, evident, for instance, in the steep angle of the roof and the successively protruding storeys, attractively contrasts to the abstract simplicity of the stone façade. As an (ironic?) concession to the original specifications, the half-timbered façade of the replica opposite is reflected in the building's large windows. Naturally, this façade, which is entirely lacking in old-world charm, is not featured in the film. The bulk of the designs, however, are compliant: pragmatic variations on more or less non-specific historical motifs; synthetic finger exercises in urban façade design that risk little and have little to gain. The hermaphroditic nature of the designs is everywhere more than evident. Behind historicist façades are revealed beautiful floor plans, refined halls and stairways and light effects that no half-timbered house can provide. And, naturally, many addresses have direct access to an underground garage. Only a few of the selected agencies have genuinely attempted to create high-quality contemporary architecture in dialogue with historical typologies and structures, and not just to fill gaps.

Frankfurt's old town development is not 'city repair', is not the evolution of the city's unique character using the means of contemporary architecture. It is rather the creation of a 'zone of tradition' as a compromise between identity formation and the demands of the market. In this regard, the formation of the *AltstadtForum* out of representatives of retail, city marketing, and heritage conservation has proved a success; the opportunities to exploit the houses have been considerably enhanced as a result of the new building's more flexible floor plans compared to the total replica that was originally called for. If one looks for precedents for this pleasing and slick, clean and safe (and hence very non-urban) 'zone of tradition', there are two directions where surprising

27 The press also reviewed the process positively, as in the extensive report in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper by Göpfert/Michels, *Kein Egotrip eines Architekten*, 2012.

connections can be made: on the one hand, with the ‘making’ of the old town, namely with the homogenizing restoration projects undertaken since the 1930s and with post-war reconstruction, and, on the other, with the ‘historically themed architecture’ that has blossomed internationally since the 1980s.

Islands of Tradition

The rehabilitation and restoration of historic city centres in Europe has always had a double goal: the ‘reintegration’ of slums in the economic cycle, and the creation of aesthetically homogeneous historic districts.²⁸ Indeed, earlier projects, such as the “recovery and demutilation” (*Gesundung und Entschandelung*) of the area of Cologne around Great St Martin’s church that was carried out under Nazi rule, reveal clear parallels to the most recent project in central Frankfurt. Situated near the Cathedral and directly on the River Rhine, the *Martinsviertel*, which continues to enjoy popularity as the historic quarter of the severely bombed city, was created in the 1930s by means of large-scale reconstruction.²⁹ In this context, *Gesundung* (healing, recovery) meant the creation of new squares and targeted demolition to enable the circulation of air and facilitate ‘hygienic’ modernization, while *Entschandelung* (demutilation) encompassed cityscape beautification measures such as the dismantling of intrusive Wilhelmine façades and billboards. Large-scale demolitions and gap-filling by means of pseudo-historical buildings, whose numbers far exceeded those of the houses that remained or were restored, created a homogeneous island of ‘Old Cologne’ tradition.³⁰ Strict building regulations meant the architects involved were required to refer back to the ‘timelessly simple’ traditional form of ‘typical’ Cologne houses, without a more specific historical reference point. Requirements included slate roofs and window and door surrounds of “rhenish cut stone”.³¹ As in Frankfurt today, the area was to retain its “unique local character” via the application of spolia from condemned buildings.³² Portals, embrasures, borrowed anchor plates indicating the year of construction meant it could sometimes be hard to tell new and restored buildings apart, especially since older buildings that “lacked character” were also enriched with spolia.³³ In some cases, entire façades were relocated. Old town character is the conscious result of mimicry and simulation: as the conservationist responsible, Hans Vogts, put it, for instance, the “typical Cologne character” of the extended Kastellgäßchen would “depend more on new building”.³⁴

It is a bitter irony that precisely this synthetic old-town quarter, whose creation was in part the result of nationalist and racist policies, was rebuilt after the war as an ‘island of tradition’ (*Traditionsinsel*) was then a technical term among city planners in

28 Vinken, *Zone Heimat*, 2010; Vinken, *Kampf um die Mitte*, 2011.

29 Cf. the essay on Cologne in this volume (Chapter 9).

30 Schlungbaum-Stehr, *Das Martinsviertel*, 1999; Vinken, *Zone Heimat*, 2010, 137–206.

31 Petz, *Stadtсанierung im Dritten Reich*, 1987, 151.

32 Examples are included in Vogts, *Gesundungsmaßnahmen*, 1997 (1936), 171.

33 Houses on the *Buttermarkt* with reused anchor plates in the form of numbers indicating years were later mistakenly listed as historic monuments, Schlungbaum-Stehr, *Das Martinsviertel*, 1999, 42.

34 Vogts, *Gesundungsmaßnahmen*, 1997 (1936), 171.

Germany). “With respect for the cityscape, taking into consideration the fact that only a limited number of houses are originals, and that, for the most part, this is a city district that was more or less newly created in the course of old-town rehabilitation before the Second World War with the use of old architectural features, the city’s conservation authorities maintained the gabled contours of the rooflines as well as the height and rhythm of the built volumes”, as Hanna Adenauer, the head of Cologne’s conservation department explained at the time.³⁵ In Cologne, which had prescribed itself a moderately modern reconstruction, this kind of identity-confirming measure was also able to generate consensus. “The rebuilding of the area around Great St. Martin’s (restoration of the old town) with the old market will make it possible to preserve what is original and unique about Cologne”,³⁶ as even such a technocratic modernist planner as Wilhelm Riphahn saw fit to comment. Riphahn’s proposal to rebuild the city’s Rhine front in a modernist style would in fact have turned the old town into a truly isolated island of tradition in a quite alien environment (see figure 8 in chapter 9 on Cologne in this volume).

The *DomRömer* Quarter is one of a series of urban construction projects, both pre- and post-war, that aimed to use ‘islands of tradition’ as anchors of identity for cities that were undergoing modernization. For Hamburg, which was completely destroyed by aerial bombardment and, as far as he was concerned, unrebuildable, the planner Fritz Schumacher proposed in 1944 “joining together [surviving buildings] somewhere to create a ‘historic centre’ however modest.”³⁷ The case of Hanover is more familiar. After severe destruction during World War II, it was rebuilt as a modern “car-friendly” city under Rudolf Hillebrecht, with no regard for existing structures. Many of the few surviving historic buildings were even demolished in the process.³⁸ As if to compensate, an ‘island of tradition’ was created out of relocated half-timbered houses around the *Marktkirche*. It is striking that, after 1945, in the most ruthlessly modernized cities – and that certainly includes Frankfurt – similar decisions were reached even many years after the war: as in Hildesheim, where from 1986 the reconstruction of the famous *Knochenhaueramtshaus* (Butchers’ Guild Hall), which garnered a great deal of attention at the time, the ‘dismantling’ of the modern market square and the erection of a ‘historic’ ensemble were carried out consecutively, so in Dresden, where following the reconstruction of the *Frauenkirche*, the fake Baroque Dresden is currently extending its tentacles at the *Neumarkt*.

These entirely artificial ‘islands of tradition’ have, as is easily seen in Frankfurt, a compensatory function. In many regards, the *DomRömer* Quarter was able to refer back directly to a precedent from just 20 years previously: the aforementioned reconstruction of the buildings on the eastern side of the Römerberg.³⁹ After lying in ruin for years, the reconstructed row of half-timbered houses is today one of the city’s most well-loved landmarks (see above, fig. 2). The proponents of the *DomRömer* project referred explicitly

35 Adenauer, *Die Pflege der profanen Denkmäler*, 1955/1956, 168.

36 Riphahn, *Grundgedanken zur Neugestaltung*, 1945, 7–8.

37 Quoted in: Beseler/Gutschow, *Kriegsschicksale Deutscher Architektur*, 1988, XLVIII.

38 Beseler/Gutschow, *Kriegsschicksale Deutscher Architektur*, 1988, 250–251.

39 Burgard, *Frankfurt und der Retrotaumel*, 2007.

to this project: “The reconstruction on historical lines of the eastern side of the Römerberg (Samstagberg) and the restaurant *Zum Schwarzen Stern*, which was concluded in 1983, corresponds to the wishes of the Friends of Frankfurt. It also shows that, when the right level of commitment is present, reconstruction is possible.”⁴⁰ Of course, this project – like all undertakings of its type – also subjected its historical model to embellishment and modernization. Examples of embellishment include freely designing half-timbered façades where none had been visible before, as, apart from the building at the northern corner, all the structures destroyed in the war had been faced with plaster or slate. And modernization includes raising the ground level on which the new houses were built by a metre or so in order to retain the underground garage that had been built in the meantime – a case of palpable interference in the subtle evolution of the historic square. And, of course, modernization also means making sure that “historical façades” conceal floor plans that offer a generous rate of return: by breaking up the traditional unity of the town house into separate floors; by removing entrances to newly constructed annexes in the rear, which was necessary to enable the creation of shops and modern apartments behind the half-timbered frontages.

The *DomRömer* Quarter thus belongs to a tradition, well-established in Germany, of old-town clones and simulations, which have enjoyed a revival since the advent of post-modernism. Where the old town had once possessed a certain historicity, and where this had once given a basis to claims for its authentic and historical character, the most recent debates in Frankfurt show forcefully that the connection between “old town” and “old” has been entirely dissolved. DomRömer GmbH has even used the slogan “We are planning the old town”, and an audience member at a panel discussion expressed her hope that “the mayor might soon be able to formally dedicate the old town”. Road signs advertising the presence of a “historic old town”, which until now have appeared pleonastic (as in the infamous “free gift”) could in the future be augmented by new signs alerting the traveller to the location of a newly built “old town”.

Historicizing theme-architecture

At the point where the old town has become completely decoupled from any concept of age itself, it becomes clear how close this project is to another branch of real estate – one that has also enjoyed great international success since the onset of postmodernism, namely historicizing theme-architecture. It has its origins in the consumerist realms of the amusement park and the casino; icons of themed architecture include Las Vegas with its Bridge of Sighs, Eiffel Tower and Pyramids, and, of course, Disneyland’s Main Street U.S.A., where America’s small-town utopian dream recurs ad infinitum. And yet these themes have also been present in the real world for some time now. Shopping malls now compete with outlet villages built on organically irregular, vaguely historical patterns. In many of Germany’s “Outlet Villages”, behind façades similar to those of Disney’s Main Street U.S.A., the deep stores of multinational corporations line up in rows (fig. 10).

40 Website Freunde Frankfurts.



Figure 10: Brave old world that has such consumers in it – Outlet Village near Berlin (Photo: G. Vinken 2017)

Of course, here we find ourselves on a completely different architectural and aesthetic level from the *DomRömer* Quarter. The pastiche architecture of the outlets consists of a limited number of simple elements, historical references are reduced to a bare minimum, and details alluding to city life are merely sketched in. Comparable, however, is the attempt to generate a sense of comfort and the consumption-friendly effect of these small-scale urban spaces that imitate organic structures, that are safe – and somehow familiar.

Everywhere, themed architecture is successfully capitalizing on vaguely historical, easily recognizable architectural forms. The spatial and aesthetic revival of the idea of neighbourhoods organized like small towns or along pre-industrial lines emerged in the USA in the 1980s as New Urbanism. It was opposed to the devastation of landscapes and the waste of resources as a result of urban sprawl.⁴¹ This movement proposed to establish a new, denser and more traditional architecture in contrast to the anonymity and formless spread of the suburbs. Themed architecture was particularly successful at the higher end of the property market, for instance in the Florida town of Seaside, which provided the set for the film “The Truman Show”, and the city of Celebration, founded by The Walt Disney Company itself. Perhaps the most spectacular example of historically themed planning in Europe was established near Dorchester in England by Leon Krier from 1993, with the personal support of Prince Charles. Poundbury is a large suburban development with an “organic” street plan and a dense building pattern that follows decorous pre-industrial lines (fig. 11).

41 Talen, *New Urbanism and American Planning*, 2005 or Katz, *The New Urbanism*, 1994.



Figure 11: ‘Olde English’ suburb: Poundbury, Dorchester (Photo: R. Dorrell 2010)

A middle-class suburb in the form of a traditional English town, it is currently undergoing considerable expansion as a result of high demand. It is telling that the proponents of reconstruction in Frankfurt see this artificial clone of old England, one that involves no “reconstruction” whatsoever, as a model. On their website, they refer to Leon Trier’s project as a successful example of traditionalist, “antimodern” architecture.⁴² Nor is it surprising that the centrally steered city planning authorities of China’s boomtowns are aware of this successful approach. Around Shanghai, a city of 18 million people, numerous satellite towns are being constructed as part of the *One City. Nine Towns* project, not only in the old English style, but using a broad palate of European themed architectural styles. However, the attempt to found a “New Amsterdam” built around canals in northern China has since collapsed, along with the investors’ prospects of a return on their outlay, as this pattern of living proved unsuited to meeting key needs of Chinese life.⁴³

Dieter Hassenpflug coined the word “citytainment” to describe these Chinese satellite towns built in traditional European styles.⁴⁴ In Frankfurt’s city centre, a ‘luxury’ feel-good ‘historic’ district is currently being built at a cost of 100 million euros, with a pre-industrial small-town flair, on a human scale and with a familiar set of experiences on offer. Is this still the “thirst for authenticity” that the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard suggested in 1968 could “be slaked only by forgeries”?⁴⁵ Frankfurt’s old town is a homogeneous, familiar and almost certainly highly profitable newly constructed city district. The old town here is nothing more than an architectural pattern that can be invoked anywhere and at any time to reproduce a certain atmosphere. It is not that the

42 Website Freunde Frankfurts.

43 Hassenpflug, *Der urbane Code*, 2008.

44 Hassenpflug, *Citytainment*, 2000.

45 Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 1996 (1968), 84.

authentic cannot be distinguished from a simulation; however, that distinction appears to be largely insignificant for both the public perception and for building and planning policy. Baudrillard called this kind of situation, where the distinction between the real and the simulation was no longer relevant, “hyperreal”.⁴⁶ If the challenges of the present can overwhelm us from time to time, if the new is sometimes confusing, or if our urban heritage seems too burdensome or too expensive then there is now an alternative we can all agree on: let’s build a lovely new old-town clone.

46 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1994 (1981), chapter “The Hyperreal and the Imaginary”, 12–14.