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# The Past & Future Intersection: Reclaiming Berlin's Potsdamer Platz

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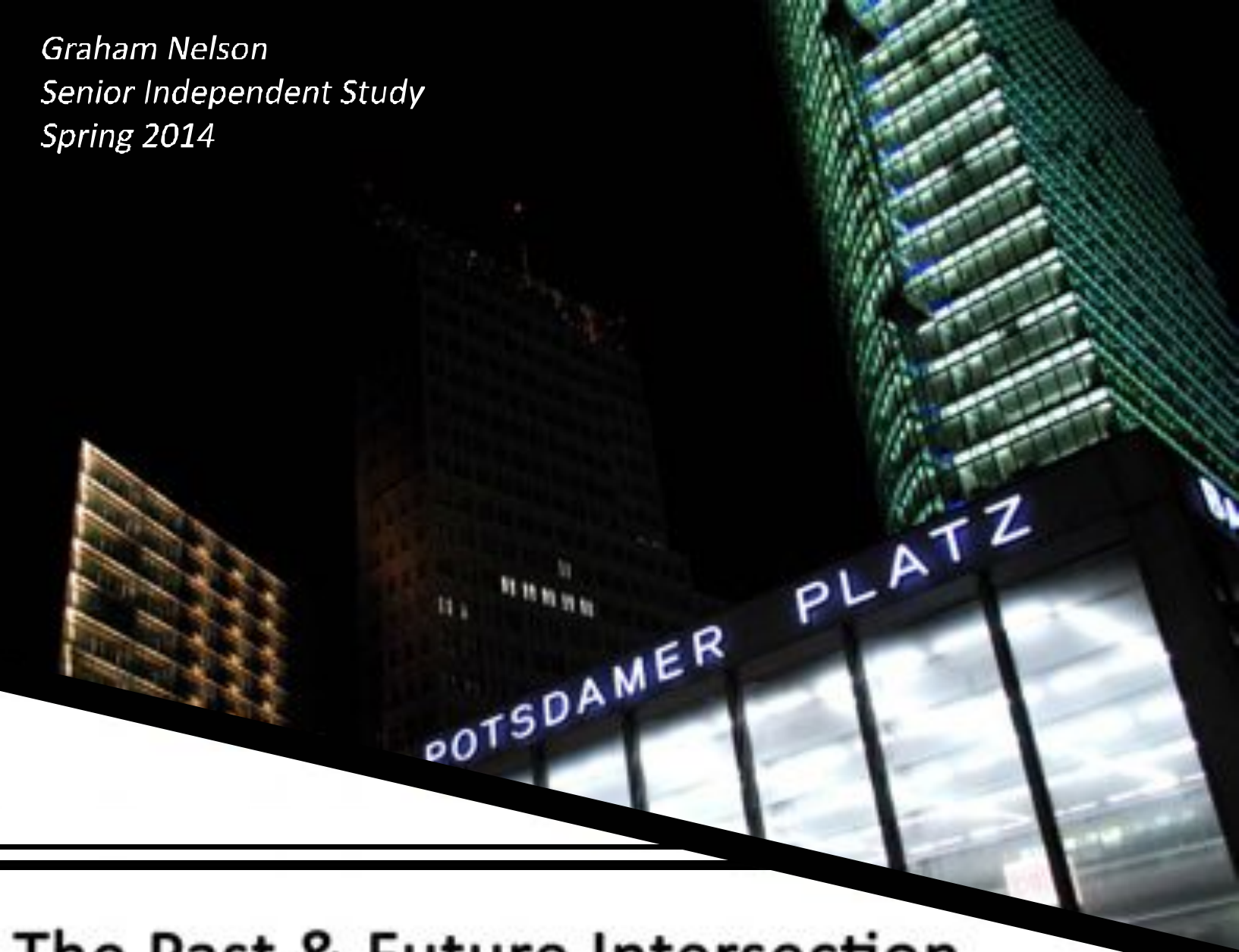
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Graham Nelson  
Senior Independent Study  
Spring 2014



# The Past & Future Intersection

*Reclaiming Berlin's Potsdamer Platz*





*Spring 2014*

Senior Independent Study  
*in the*  
Architectural Studies Major  
*and*  
Toor Cummings Center for  
International Studies  
and the Liberal Arts

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who advised this project*



## *The Past and Future Intersection, Reclaiming Berlin's Potsdamer Platz*

Reconstructing Berlin as the capital of a reunified Germany has been an ongoing process since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and one of the most fascinating examples of this unprecedented process is the redevelopment of Potsdamer Platz. This prominent intersection served as Berlin's economic and cultural focal point prior to the devastation wrought by the Third Reich, WWII, and its subsequent location at the Cold War frontier between East and West.


Following reunification in 1990, through the intervention of Berlin's government and the interests of several prominent international corporations, Potsdamer Platz has been reconceived once more as a center of urban life in the heart of Germany's capital. This project has included numerous prominent architects, from Europe and abroad, and has become strongly associated with contemporary Germany as it is a primary point of destination for visitors to Berlin. The architecture of Potsdamer Platz is distinctive, but deliberately avoids the trend of commemoration, memorialization, and acknowledgment of violent twentieth-century events, present in so many of Berlin's contemporary building projects. Furthermore, the new construction and architecture of Potsdamer Platz lacks any features which directly associate it with the country within which it was built, instead appearing international in objective and character; an understandable goal in a nation which has continually attempted to portray itself as post-national.



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## *Metropolis at the Crossroads of Europe*

Potsdamer Platz began its existence as an economic and cultural center in Berlin not as city's central district but rather as a portal to it. In contrast to planned city squares such as the adjacent Leipziger Platz, Potsdamer Platz emerged as a point where regional roads converged before entering the city.(1) The intersection is located on an important border, the site where the road connecting the Prussian capital with the town of Potsdam in rural Brandenburg passed through Berlin's customs barrier, which was put in place in 1737 and was dismantled by the Prussian monarchy as the city outgrew its borders in 1861.(2) A gate here, similar to the immediately recognizable Brandenburg Gate one kilometer to the north, allowed trade duties to be levied on goods being brought into the city's central district known as Mitte.(3) The Platz vor dem Potsdamer Tor, as it was then known, therefore became an important place of commerce and business as it was one of the primary routes for goods entering the city, and customs duties could be avoided by conducting business on the outer side of the barrier. Potsdamer Platz, along with the adjacent Potsdamer Gate, received grand status during the reign of Prussian monarch Friedrich Wilhelm I who initiated the construction of Friedrichstadt in 1688, a new urban development of the city located outside of the historic walls, and which has prevailed as the name of the district in which Potsdamer Platz is located.(4)





Subsequently, Friedrich Wilhelm I's successor, Friedrich the Great, afforded the area even greater significance when in 1747 his palatial Rococo retreat, Sanssouci, was inaugurated at Potsdam, making the Potsdamer Gate the primary route into the capital for the ruling elite. Despite this, the location of Potsdamer Platz immediately outside the city wall meant that its form was not dictated by the rigorous gridded arrangement of streets in the Prussian capital, but rather by the most direct routes to nearby cities, primarily Potsdam, creating a far less regimented spatial arrangement than the neatly octagonal Leipziger Platz which began the regimented and axial Leipziger Strasse in Mitte on the opposite side of the barrier.<sup>(5)</sup> (Figures 1 & 2) When Berlin annexed its immediate suburbs, and the customs wall was subsequently removed in 1861, Potsdamer Platz continued its role as a primary junction for traffic and commerce at the heart of the new urban amalgamation.

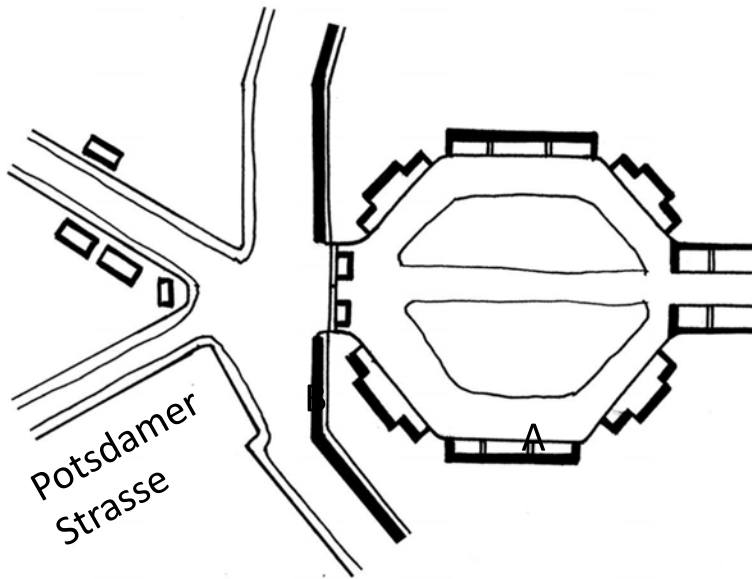


Figure 1, (left) Potsdamer Platz around 1800

A- Leipziger Platz

B- Potsdamer Tor

Figure 2- Potsdmer Tor, mid 1800s


Following German unification in 1871, Berlin attained a status as the capital of the entire German nation, albeit while retaining a degree of its Prussian identity.(6) By this point Berlin was the fastest growing city in Europe, having far outgrown the now irrelevant customs walls, and Potsdamer Platz, having evolved as a commercial juncture point on the fringe of the city, was now centrally located in the urban sprawl.(7) The adjacent train terminus, Potsdamer Bahnhof, was reconstructed in elaborate fashion in 1872, and became the primary entrance point to Berlin for passengers enroute from cities in western Germany and France.(8) This further increased Potsdamer Platz's prestige due to its role of providing the first impression visitors from a multitude of locations had of Berlin. Additionally, in 1894, the Reichstag, the seat of the country's Imperial Diet, was completed on the outer side of former customs barrier and in close proximity to Potsdamer Platz. The site's role as a primary entry point to the city, coupled with its closeness to governmental institutions, helped to further establish the Potsdamer Platz as Berlin's dominant economic hub.(9)



Figure 3, 1919


With the establishment of the Weimar Republic following the collapse of the German Empire, Potsdamer Platz was unquestionably the bustling heart of Berlin. By this point, Potsdamer Platz was strongly associated with the idea of the modern metropolis, and was symbolic of how transport technology and capitalism were redefining the city.(10) The area therefore developed permanent associations with the avant-garde cultural scene in Berlin during the Weimar years, and developed business and attractions to cater to visitors.(11) These included the palatial Haus Vaterland, a sprawling pleasure palace which boasted the world's largest café, Café Piccadilly, and several cinemas and restaurants, as well as the flagship of Wertheim's Department Store, a sprawling consumer center and a magnet for visitors.(12) The renowned Café Josty was located here, and frequently hosted numerous prominent Expressionist artists during this period.(13) The square was a major intersection where Leipziger Straße converged with Potsdamer Straße as it passed out of Berlin Mitte, and intersected with the north-south axis which ran between the federal parliament, the Reichstag, and Tempelhof Airport. This location, coupled with its role as the site of a major train terminus, resulted in the area becoming one of the busiest and most congested intersections in Europe.(14) Potsdamer Platz also became the site of Europe's first traffic light, installed to regulate inflow from the five streets. This pentagonal structure came to symbolize Berlin's status as a metropolis.(15) In 1932 Harold Nicholson, a British diplomat, remarked, "There is no city in the world so restless as Berlin."(16) This observation was equally appropriate in a political context since, while Potsdamer Platz was acting as the metropolis' turbulent cultural and commercial focal point, Adolf Hitler's National Socialist Party was gaining influence in the Reichstag.





One of the most unique buildings gracing the intersection was the Columbushaus, a modernist nine-story building including a department store and offices. The structure had its inception in 1929 as a design for the Galeries Lafayette and was later constructed in Berlin in 1933. Columbushaus was a product of the Expressionist and modernist movements, which flourished during the ill-fated Weimar Republic, and demonstrated the progressive ideas regarding architecture and the urban environment which were encouraged during that time.(17) The striking structure was designed by Erich Mendelsohn, an architect who rose to prominence during the Weimar years and whose name is most often associated with the design for the Einsteinurm Observatory in nearby Potsdam. The façade of Columbushaus curved gently along the street emphasizing how the direction in which traffic flowed affected the architecture flanking the streets.(18) The building was modernist in its appearance and function, and seemed to be indicative of the future of architecture. Furthermore, the construction of Columbushaus showed the architect's intent to create a new kind of urban environment which was free of associations with a specific state or culture, signifying the desire to transform Berlin into a world city, not through political endeavor, but through commerce and the early use of the International Style.(19)

During the rise of the Third Reich, Potsdamer Platz continued in its role as Berlin's commercial and cultural heart; however businesses and cultural institutions which did not conform with National Socialist Party ideology were compelled to close. The Jewish owners of the renowned Wertheim Department Store at Potsdamer Platz were compelled to surrender the ownership of their business, and Columbushaus was forcibly repurposed as a state-run tourism agency.(20)



In addition, the area's location so close to the epicenter of the German state meant that Potsdamer Platz was within sight of the Third Reich's most important structures. Albert Speer's Chancellery, the epicenter of Hitler's power and the neoclassical architectural embodiment of Nazism, was erected on Voßstraße one block to the east. Immediately to the south on Niederkirchnerstraße were the headquarters of the Gestapo and SS. Additionally, Potsdamer Platz fell directly in the course of Adolf Hitler and Albert Speer's monumental plan to remake Berlin as "Welthauptstadt Germania," and even before the war some preliminary demolition was begun behind the buildings directly facing the intersection at Potsdamer Platz.(21) Should Speer's vision have been realized Potsdamer Platz would have simply ceased to exist as a relevant point in the city, succumbing to anonymity behind Hitler's megalomaniacal edifices. Although the site's location on the imagined north-south access was largely coincidental, the consumerism and avant-garde culture which dominated the area was reviled by the Nazis.(22) As WWII concluded, Potsdamer Platz's central location, proximity to the Nazi headquarters, coupled with its recognizable profile from the air, resulted in devastatingly heavy bombardment by Allied bombs. By Stunde Null, the entire area was in ruins.(23)



Figure 4, Columbus Haus

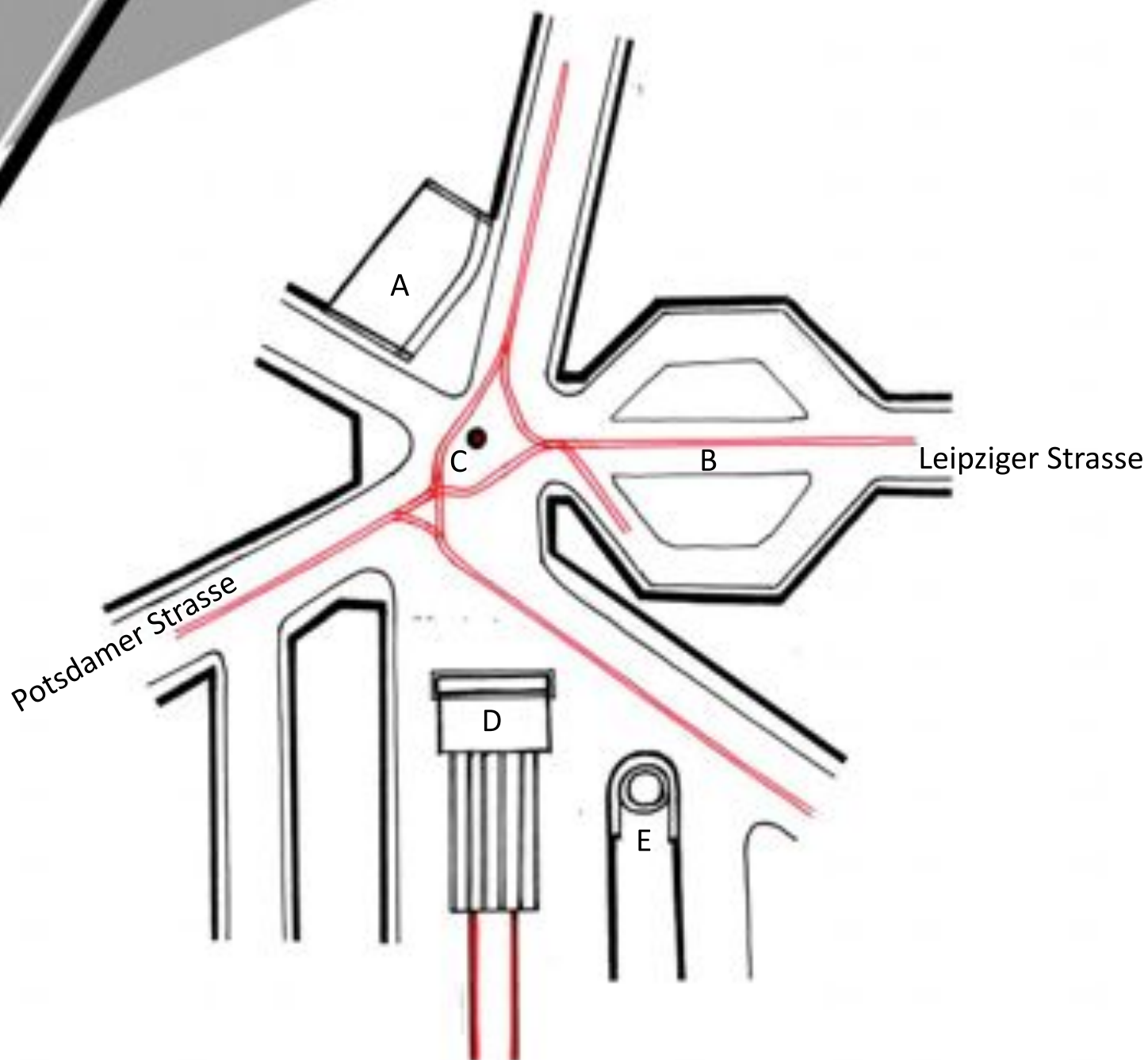


Figure 5, Potsdamer Platz in 1933,  
A- Columbushaus  
B-Leipziger Platz  
C-Traffic Light  
D-Potsdamer Bahnhof  
E- Haus Vaterland  
Red Lines- Streetcars





Figure 6, Model of  
Albert Speer's  
design for  
"Welthauptstadt  
Germania"  
The location of  
Potsdamer Platz is  
indicated.




Figure 7,  
Potsdamer Platz  
at "Stunde Null"  
after WWII



## *The Death Strip*


Following the division of Berlin into occupation zones by the victorious Allies in 1945, the central district of Berlin Mitte, which included the majority of the city's historical landmarks, fell under the hegemony of the Soviet Union. Due to a border between city districts which followed the course of the former customs wall, Potsdamer Platz was located at the convergence of the Soviet, British, and American sectors, creating the so-called "border triangle." In 1949, under the supervision of the occupying powers, two new states were declared in Germany, initially the western Federal Republic of Germany (BRD), which prevails to this day as the sole German state, followed by the communist and Soviet-backed German Democratic Republic (DDR).(24) Although much of Berlin was rebuilt quickly following the war's end, the tenuous political situation at Potsdamer Platz meant that it was barely touched during the reconstruction efforts. Mendelsohn's striking Columbushaus partially survived the bombings, and, following the war, was subsequently reopened as a market; however it burned once again during a failed popular uprising against the repressive DDR state in 1953.(25) A tense aura of normalcy returned to the city, although as soon as the lines denoting the Allied occupation zones in Berlin were drawn, the city became the sole point where East and West directly confronted one another face to face, with West Berlin a continual point of consternation for the Soviet Union and DDR.(26)




As the two postwar German states proceeded on separate courses, Walter Ulbricht, the Soviet-backed leader of the DDR's only legitimate political party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) realized his fledgling communist nation was imploding.(27) While under the chancellorship of Konrad Adenauer the West experienced the "Wirtschaftswunder," or economic miracle, following the introduction of the Deutsche Mark and by the end of the 1950s even the most basic of observations showed that the DDR's idealistic state-run economy was floundering. Simultaneously many of the DDR's educated citizens and skilled professionals resented the lack of political freedoms and economic opportunities granted by the socialist state. Despite the DDR's best propagandistic efforts an inexorable exodus of the young and educated workforce had begun and Berlin, with its seemingly unsealable occupation zone borders, became the primary point of departure.(28) Between 1949 and 1961 over 2.7 million East Germans illegally emigrated to West Germany.(29) Ulbricht, upon being questioned regarding the untenable situation of emigration from his state, famously responded, "No one has the intention of erecting a wall,"(30) while privately begging the Soviet government to grant him permission to seal the borders with West Berlin.(31)

In the early hours of the morning of August 13, 1961, at Ulbricht's orders and with Khrushchev's consent, the border between capitalist West Berlin and the DDR was sealed.(32) The closing of the border occurred without announcement or fanfare and within days the first crude barbed-wire and cinderblock components of what would be labeled the, "Anti-fascist protection rampart" were complete.(33) The construction of the Berlin Wall effectively halted the flow of emigrants from the DDR while also stabilizing the tense political situation in the city, an effect much appreciated by the Western Allies despite their outward condemnation of the Wall's erection.(34)





Due to the presence of the border, commerce and culture in East and West Berlin shifted to new urban centers. In the DDR, the city focused on Alexanderplatz, located at the terminus of the Soviet Stalinallee boulevard, while in West Berlin the city centered on the Kurfurstendamm in the Charlottenburg district. Over the next several years the Wall evolved into a complex system of barriers, alarms, guard towers, and barbed wire, and a great swath of the city was razed in order to create a buffer zone which would become known as the Death Strip. The creation of the Death Strip, and what it symbolized, was most apparent at Potsdamer Platz. The structures which had not been completely destroyed by Allied bombing were bulldozed and what was once called the crossroads of Europe became integrated into the 155 kilometer long gash in the urban fabric of the city. On the western side of the Wall, surviving buildings were demolished due to the rapid property depreciation caused by the building of the Wall, and a desire to avoid any possible confrontations at the border.<sup>(35)</sup> In the months immediately following the border closure a raised scaffold was erected on the western side to allow visitors to the city to peer across into the eastern Communist Bloc. These visitors included John F. Kennedy, who paused at Potsdamer Platz for a photo prior to his “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech in 1963. Throughout the Cold War, when visitors to West Berlin sought to view the Berlin Wall, Potsdamer Platz was the prime location to do so.<sup>(36)</sup> By this point, only the impressions of the defunct streets were left in the Death Strip, paying eerie tribute to the bygone activity of Potsdamer Platz.



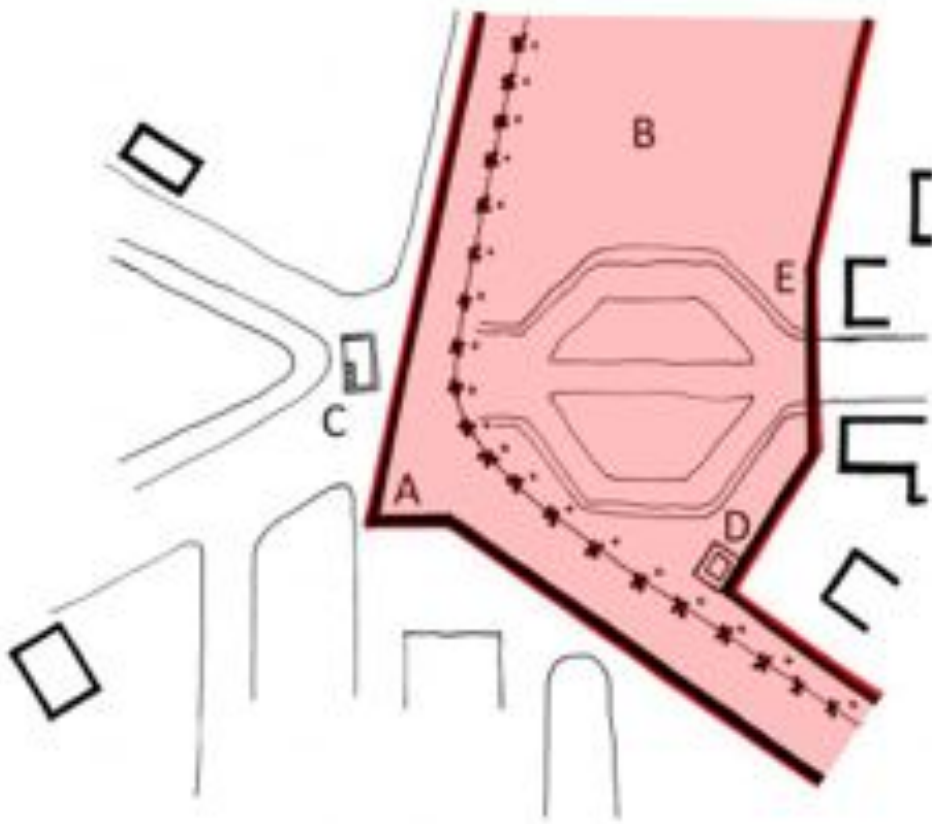



Figure 9,  
Potsdamer Platz during the  
Cold War.

- A- The Berlin Wall
- B- Death Strip
- C- Western observation  
platform
- D- DDR Guard tower
- E- Eastern wall

Figure 10,  
The Berlin Wall  
and Death Strip  
seen at  
Potsdamer Platz  
in 1974 from the  
western  
overlook.






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## *Reclaiming the Capital*

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall, the most tangible symbol of the Cold War, was breached, and a series of events which would become known in Germany as Die Wende, The Change, were set in motion. As Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev assured Eastern Europe that the Soviet Union was no longer willing to use military force to dominate the communist satellite states, the regimes of the Warsaw Pact nations in Eastern Europe(37), including the DDR, deteriorated.(38) Throughout 1989 a series of tumultuous events, including the opening of the Iron Curtain on the border between Austria and Hungary, as well as the storming of the West German embassy in Prague, lead to the ousting of Erich Honeker, the SED party's premier and the DDR's long-serving dictator.(39) The evening the Wall fell, a DDR bureaucrat's confusion at a press conference regarding the easing of travel restrictions on East German citizens resulted in the spontaneous opening of Berlin's section of the Iron Curtain that evening.(40) Within weeks it became clear that open borders and a lack of Soviet force would quickly doom the stunted DDR regime. Realizing that the DDR would not be able to continue as a sovereign state, West German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, presented the Bundestag(41) in Bonn with a plan to carry out reunification in five to ten years.(42) What followed was a remarkably rapid process of economic, political, and cultural reunification. This process ignited the redevelopment and modernization of the former DDR while Berlin was to regain its status as the capital city of a united Germany.




At Potsdamer Platz, the long-sealed intersection of Potsdamer Straße and Leipziger Straße became one of the first official checkpoints for free travel between East and West Berlin, and the site briefly resumed its original role as a gateway as citizens of the DDR were finally permitted to travel at their will. Although few on either side of the Wall expected the reunification of Germany to come anytime soon, the abysmal financial state of the DDR, coupled with woefully outdated and inadequate infrastructure and industry, hastened the transfer of sovereignty. On the March 18, 1990, the DDR held its first free elections, and the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), the center-right party of then federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl and former chancellor Konrad Adenauer, won in a landslide. From that point on, the two Germanies hurtled towards reunification despite substantial financial challenges and the suspicions of other European leaders. (43)

The political climate in Europe during the opening of the Iron Curtain was complex, and the government in Bonn was obliged to be particularly sensitive to the concerns of other European leaders that German reunification could precipitate a renewed nationalistic fervor. Despite elation at the West's triumph over communism, the immediate prospect of a reunified sovereign Germany, which would abruptly become the most populous European nation, unsettled several other countries. Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister who was among the most vehement decriers of communism and the Soviet Union, publically advised caution and restraint regarding the reunification process to Helmut Kohl, while privately sending messages to Mikhail Gorbachev demanding he delay the opening of the Berlin Wall and stall German reunification.(44) Thatcher's response to the reunification plan which Helmut Kohl proposed was, "We beat the Germans twice, and now they're back." (45)




Consequentially, seeking to allay the fears of other European leaders proved to be a major impetus behind the implementation of the Euro as a single European currency, as a monetary union would render political, military, and economic, aggression impossible. This was a condition of German reunification about which French president François Mitterrand, who viewed the Deutsche Mark as Germany's "nuclear weapon," was adamant.(46) Helmut Kohl's government therefore understood that a visibly strong commitment to greater European integration was necessary for reunification to proceed with the consent of Germany's neighbors. Although throughout the reunification process, which officially culminated on October 3, 1990, a patriotic elation was present throughout the country, the government and constituency were careful to avoid any overt triumphalist displays of nationalism.(47) The night of reunification, Beethoven's Ode to Joy, the anthem of the European Union, was played alongside Germany's. This sensitivity towards the impression given to other nations in Europe and elsewhere would permeate throughout the process of reconstituting Berlin as the federal capital.

By July 1990, the Berlin Wall and inner-German border had been almost entirely dismantled and the great wound through Berlin began to close. On October 3, 1990, the Federal Republic officially absorbed the territory and citizenry of the defunct DDR and simultaneously the victorious allies of WWII began their final withdrawal.(48) For the first time in over forty years Germany was a unified and fully sovereign state.




The complete absorption of a failed communist state by a democratic and capitalist country is a virtually unprecedented event, and in addition to the significant amount of challenges Helmut Kohl's government faced regarding the incorporation of the former DDR, a fierce debate began within the Bundestag immediately following reunification regarding the future location of the federal German government. Bonn had been the state's capital since 1949 and was never intended to serve as the permanent seat of the Bundestag, as the town's provincial character and lack of associations with political movements was one of the main reasons it was chosen over Frankfurt am Main following WWII.(49) However, the prospect of the capital returning to Berlin was not universally embraced in the Bundestag.(50) Berlin had served as the capital of a militaristic Prussian state, an empire whose monarchy had charged into WWI, the ill-fated Weimar Republic, the disastrous and genocidal Third Reich, and a Soviet-dominated communist dictatorship. Berlin carried onerous associations not only for Germans but for citizens of other nations who had been affected WWII and the Cold War. Carefully avoiding any actions which could be construed as symbolic of a restored nationalism was of the highest priorities for the architects and city planners who reconfigured Berlin as the federal capital.(51) Norman Foster's glass dome atop the Reichstag emphasizes transparency in government while prioritizing the ability of the constituency to access the structure.(52) Nearby, the new federal strip of buildings, which includes the federal Chancellery, symbolically links East and West Berlin across the Spree River while cutting off the axis envisioned by Hitler and Speer.(53) Additionally, fierce debate raged over the characteristics of new architectural commissions to be built in areas which were unusable during the Cold War. This controversy pitted proponents of deliberately restrained and simplistic styles against advocates of deregulation, capitalism, and therefore normalization of the city's architectural landscape.(54)



In this sense, reconstructing Berlin with commercial edifices that dominate many global cities could be seen as a denial of history, and the reluctance to acknowledge the city's violent and destructive past. Contrastingly, forgoing the subdued architecture of Bonn in favor of bold contemporary structures could demonstrate a desire for normalcy.


Due to the legacy of the Third Reich, and the monumental and imposing images of Speer's plan for Welthauptstadt Germania, there exists in Germany a deep distrust of monumentality in architecture.(55) This issue was very much at the forefront of discussions in the Bundestag regarding the redevelopment of Berlin as the federal capital. The architecture of the postwar capital, Bonn, was comparatively restrained and deliberately anonymous.(56) "Willfully nondescript," governmental buildings were nestled in a modernist low-rise complex along the Rhine, and the Bundestag convened in a simple round chamber devoid of nationalistic imagery or classical references.(57) According to Günter Behnisch, the architect responsible for designing the Bundestag plenary chamber in Bonn, "Monumental facades, stony symmetry, and long axes evoke jack-booted soldiers; and behind long rows of columns lurk blood-spattered tyrants."(58) Furthermore, nationalism in Germany remains something of a taboo, and bold displays of national pride, which would appear normal in the United States and other European states, are seen by Germans as inappropriate and unsuitable for a national capital.(59) This mentality has effectively necessitated a degree of internationalism in virtually all large public architectural works, and a great deal of importance being placed on the international competitions which award commissions for prominent projects.





A result of this is that Germany possesses the largest number of buildings designed by foreign architects in the world, as an exclusively German competition could be construed as indicative of renewed nationalism.(60) The new landmarks of Berlin would therefore not possess a distinct national style, rather they would be designed with internationality in mind. As the European Union took shape following the Cold War and the inception of the Eurozone began, politicians in the federal German government as well as the Berlin Senate sought to remake Berlin as a new heart of a united and peaceful Europe.(61) In a sense, the goal would be to redevelop Berlin not simply as the capital of Germany but rather as a multinational European metropolis, a city which attained its status with the creation the Schengen Zone(62) and European Union, and the antithesis of the nationalistic hubris of Adolf Hitler. Jürgen Klemann, a member of the Berlin Senate stated, "This is the clear attempt to identify this new Berlin as at the geographical center of a newly uniting Europe."(63) This goal of internationalizing Berlin following reunification would contribute greatly to the character of many subsequent redevelopment projects in the city including Potsdamer Platz.

Following Reunification, thousands of acres of centrally-located urban space which had formerly comprised the Death Strip became available for reconstruction.(64) The symbolic importance of redeveloping these acres of Berlin, which had formerly comprised the Death Strip, for the German government cannot be overstated. The site was bare, having been a dangerous frontier for a generation while memories associated with the area weighed heavy. It must also be noted that, despite governmental oversight and a deliberate choice of the international and domestic developers Sony and Daimler, this project was intended to largely be fueled by private corporations, contrasting with the prominent civic projects, including the reconstructed Reichstag, Federal Chancellery, and central station, taking place one kilometer to the north.



This was a deliberate choice aimed at not only increasing the speed of development but also at recreating the former commercial and cultural heart of the city.<sup>(65)</sup> Unlike other architectural projects associated with the relocated capital, the architecture at Potsdamer Platz would demonstrate how reunified Germany wished to be perceived internationally, albeit in a context of culture and commerce, not government. Adorning such a prominent area in the capital with architecture devoid of nationalistic associations shows the importance of internationalism and cross-border economic discourse in the twenty-first century. The nearby government taking a relatively hands-off approach further emphasized continuity with Weimar Berlin when Potsdamer Platz was the preeminent portal to the city and its commercial heart, possessing cinemas and department stores which were among the grandest in Europe.

By the time Germany officially reunified in 1990, Daimler, the maker of what is arguably Germany's most famous export, Mercedes-Benz vehicles, had acquired a large portion of the site slated for redevelopment. The firm was immediately attracted to the site due to the obvious factor that Potsdamer Platz presented the rare opportunity to develop a virtually barren tract of land in one of the most prestigious and conspicuous locations in Germany.<sup>(66)</sup> By 1991 the entirety of the developable space was privatized, with Daimler and Japanese corporation Sony controlling the majority of the land in two sections. In addition to the obvious desire to increase investment and commerce in the reinvigorated Berlin, the rapid privatization of the area also symbolized the rapid encroachment of capitalism into a space where the presence of communism had been dominant for decades.<sup>(67)</sup>

Redeveloped

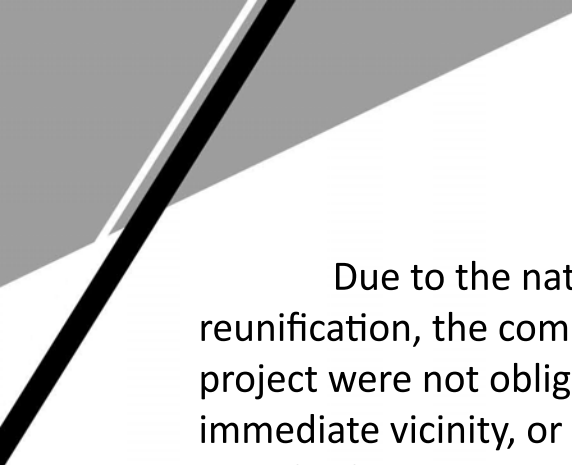


Potsdamer Platz would make no attempt to acknowledge or memorialize the legacy of the bygone Communist state which had partially existed on its site, reveling instead in the products of international economic discourse which the Soviet Bloc had stymied, and visibly reclaiming land which the Cold War had rendered lifeless.


Figure 11, Potsdamer Platz vis a vis Berlin landmarks,



- A- Federal Chancellery
- B- Reichstag (Bundestag)
- C- Brandenburg Gate
- D- Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe
- E- Site of Third Reich Chancellery
- F- Kulturforum, Philharmonic & New National Gallery
- G- Potsdamer Platz
- (Red line- former path of the Berlin Wall)



Due to the nature of the Potsdamer Platz site following reunification, the commissioners and designers of the reconstruction project were not obliged to conform to preexisting landmarks in the immediate vicinity, or become overly absorbed in the nuances of the land's complex history. According to the wishes of the Berlin Senate, which had assumed control of the land which had comprised the Death Strip, the former path of the Berlin Wall was to be respected, albeit not memorialized.(68) After the Bundestag consented, in October 1991, a competition was held by the Berlin Senate to develop a master plan for the redevelopment of the entire site which included Leipziger Platz immediately to the east. The competition selected the plan of Munich-based firm Hilmer and Sattler which divided the area into sections based on the arrangements of the previously existing streets with the prevailing idea of "consistency without uniformity."(69) Their design was not as regimented as several other submissions which favored either a gridded or radial division of the area, deliberately retaining the asymmetrical arrangement of streets while appearing organic and allowing for individuality within the development zones.(70) Additionally, the master plan preserved the contrasting spatial configurations between Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz, the latter to be redeveloped with the same octagonal footprint as before WWII, albeit with contemporary buildings. In explaining the rationale of their design, Hilmer and Sattler stated, "The design is not based on the American urban model of skyscraper agglomerations, as we find it worldwide, but on the compact, spatially complex European city."(71) This approach to design spawned a debate regarding the arrangement which was most adept to handle a twenty-first century urban environment in a centuries-old city. The master plan also subtly acknowledged the proximity of the Kulturforum, which had been a cultural center of West Berlin and included structures such as





Hans Scharoun's Philharmonic and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's New National Gallery, creating continuity between the spaces in lieu of simply disregarding the adjacent area.(72) Besides Hilmer and Sattler, the architects who submitted proposals for consideration included Richard Rogers, Renzo Piano, and Hans Kollhoff, all of whom would go on to design individual structures within Hilmer and Sattler's arrangement, with varying amounts of conformation to the master plan.(73)

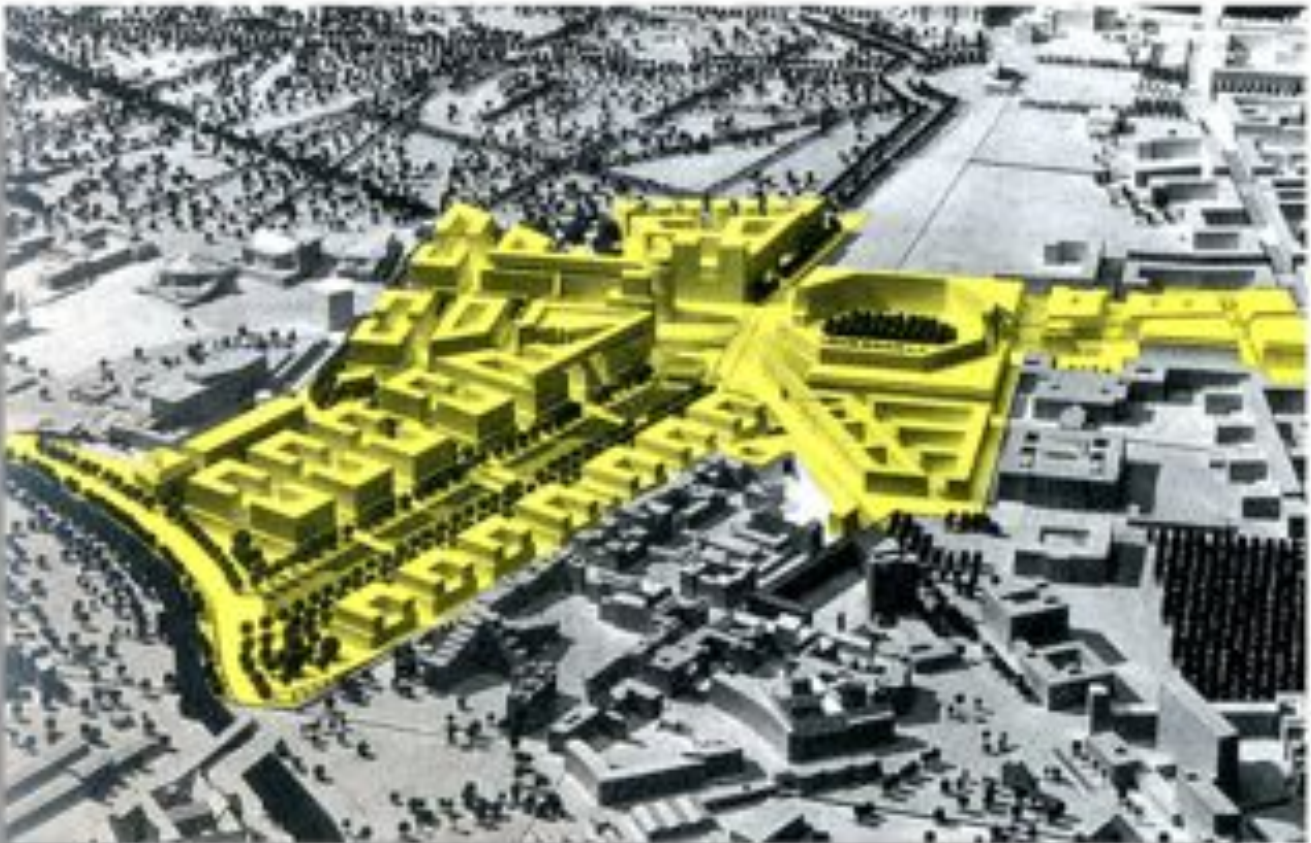



Figure 12, Hilmer & Sattler's winning master plan.



When they purchased their plots of land from the Berlin Senate, the companies involved agreed to not only locate branches at Potsdamer Platz but, in lieu of merely constructing offices, to contribute to the establishment of a new urban area which would be accessible to pedestrians and provide a variety of services and destination points.(74) This, as dictated by Hilmer and Sattler's master plan, would ideally serve to recreate the bygone hub of commerce and culture which had existed prior to WWII. The Berlin Senate was perhaps overly eager to sell the land due to the financial capabilities of Daimler and Sony to invest vast amounts of private money into the project at a time when both the federal German government as well as the government of the state of Berlin, were facing a largely unanticipated amount of financial challenges associated with reunification. Before construction was initiated, the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, felt compelled to investigate the sale of publically-owned land to Daimler for prices which were substantially lower than market value.(75) This controversy spurred debate regarding the process of deciding which institutions the Berlin Senate permitted to redevelop Potsdamer Platz and how organically the redevelopment of the Wall area, particularly in Mitte, was progressing. Additionally, the Berlin Senate continually expressed their desire for Daimler and Sony to create structures which more directly acknowledged the area's complex past while implying continuity with pre-war Berlin, although Daimler and Sony were reluctant to do so as their primary objective was the creation of prestigious corporate architectural symbols. (76)






Figure 13, Potsdamer Platz in 1994.



Figure 14, Sony (Blue) & Daimler (Red) development.





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## *The Architecture: Infobox*

As the massive project of rebuilding Potsdamer Platz was initiated, the first, albeit temporary, architectural project opened to the public. Due to the historical and political legacy of the site, the scope of the structures under construction, as well as the area's proximity to the most important sites in Berlin, an effective means of handling daily visitors was required. The solution was known simply as Infobox and was designed by Frankfurt-based firm Schneider + Schumacher.<sup>(77)</sup> Infobox consisted of a three-story building clad in red-painted steel, elevated on diagonal stilts, which allowed visitors to both learn about the site's history and redevelopment while affording them an opportunity to gaze over the construction site and learn about its future.<sup>(78)</sup> In this way Infobox fostered transparency in the process of rebuilding of Berlin while serving as a liaison between the public and the urban space in the process of being reclaimed and redefined. It also had the effect of making the redevelopment of the area a significant tourist attraction in and of itself.<sup>(79)</sup> The structure was described as having, "provided a physical scab and created a responsive, participatory environment that communicated a message of progress and hope."<sup>(80)</sup> Infobox functioned as an initial scabbing, forming on the urban environment prior to the closing of the wound itself.<sup>(81)</sup> Additionally, as it was financed by the corporations directly involved in the rebuilding of the site, it presented an opportunity for them to explain the contrasting architectural choices made within the master plan.<sup>(82)</sup> Infobox stood until 2001 and was awarded the Stahlbau Prize for architecture in 1996, recognizing an



unorthodox temporary structure with an equally unusual purpose. In creating such a large and prominent structure, the symbolic importance of this particular redevelopment project becomes apparent, and given the remarkable legacy, interest from both Berliners and international visitors was high. Berlin's then mayor, Eberhard Diepgen remarked of the structure, "The Infobox opens up the world of Potsdamer Platz for them (the visitors) a world of past and future." (83) What is also interesting about the way in which the redevelopment site was displayed at Infobox was the noticeably small amount of information relating to the DDR's history and that of the Berlin Wall. (84) This selective depiction of recent history can be attributed to a number of factors, particularly the desire to emphasize continuity with the site's prominence during the Weimar years as well as the desire to avoid memorializing the space.



Figure 15, Infobox



The entirety of the Potsdamer Platz redevelopment project was largely completed by 1999 when the federal government returned to Berlin. The final arrangement of the reconstructed site deviated somewhat from Hilmer and Sattler's master plan, although their basic spatial arrangement prevailed. On the northern side of Potsdamer Strasse, the area developed by Sony was designed exclusively by Helmut Jahn. Daimler's area, which comprised the majority of the land, was developed with projects from several internationally prominent architects, all of whom had entered previously in the master plan competition. Hans Kollhoff designed the tallest structure at Potsdamer Platz, a distinctive skyscraper clad in red brick which evokes the designs of early American high-rise buildings. Directly facing Kollhoff's project, Renzo Piano was responsible for a series of structures in Daimler's quarter including a cinema, a series of low-rise apartment and office building, a shopping arcade, and a nineteen-story high-rise at 11 Potsdamer Platz clad in beige terra cotta and vast glass curtain walls. Also within Daimler's quarter, Richard Rogers designed two office buildings at Linkstrasse 2-4. Rogers' firm sought to subvert the master plan with a series of striking and contrasting structures.<sup>(85)</sup> Both Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers' buildings make minimal energy consumption a priority, but at Linkstrasse 2-4 the building elements dealing with natural passive ventilation and heating are far more visible. In this way it is somewhat reminiscent of the landmark Pompidou Center in Paris which had made its functional systems the defining aspect of its exterior design.<sup>(86)</sup> At Linkstrasse however, the utilitarian features of the structure on display are directly related to the prioritizing of energy consciousness. Bright yellow brise-soleil automatically adjust their angle to minimize unwanted heat gain, while glass panels are inclined at an angle to selectively take advantage of natural light.



Each building in the Daimler quarter is also integrated with a rainwater retention system designed by Atelier Dreiseitl, which minimizes water consumption while creating water features with which pedestrians can interact with. During the reconstruction process Potsdamer Platz also regained its status as a major transportation juncture point in Berlin. A rail tunnel was constructed which directly linked Potsdamer Platz with Berlin's new central station one kilometer to the north, allowing the area to once again serve as a departure point for long-distance trains. The U-Bahn and S-Bahn metrorail lines running beneath the site were also upgraded and reintegrated into Berlin's transportation network. On the surface, Potsdamer Strasse regained its role as a major thoroughfare in the city, proceeding through the site into the redeveloped Leipziger platz. This hectic convergence of street, pedestrian, U-Bahn, S-Bahn, and long-distance rail traffic, was a dominant part of the experience of being in the area pre-WWII(87) and something which has been successfully recreated, reconceiving it as a transportation artery paying homage to its role prior to WWII.

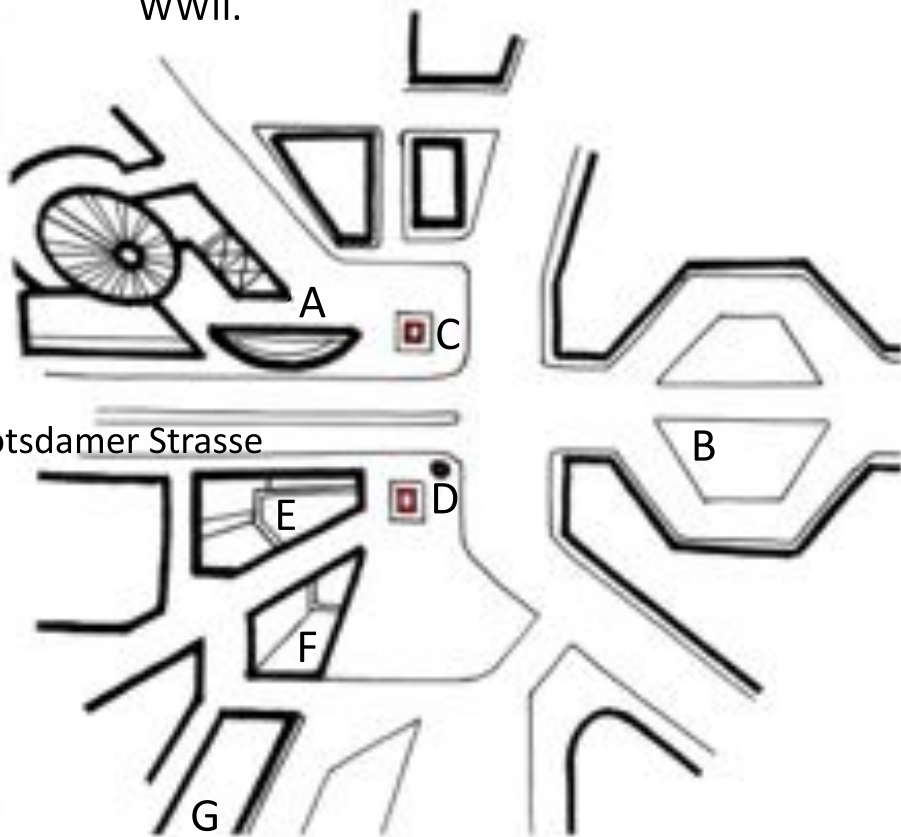



Figure 16, Potsdamer Platz today.

- A- Sony Center, Jahn
- B- Leipziger Platz
- C- Train station access
- D- Reconstructed traffic light
- E- Kollhoff Tower, Kollhoff
- F- 11 Potsdamer Platz, Piano
- G- Linkstrasse 2-4, Rogers




## *Sony Center*

Helmut Jahn's design for the Sony Center, arguably the flagship structure of the entire reconstruction project, dominates the central area of Potsdamer Platz and creates a unique enclave within the urban environment. As Jahn states, "It is not a building, but a part of the city. External is the "real" city; internal is the "virtual city."(88) The Sony Center has been described as constituting, "A new type of covered, urban forum for a changing cultural and social interaction of our time."(89) As the visitor passes through the tapered glass gates to enter the dramatically covered courtyard, they enter a microcosm of cosmopolitan urban life. Museums, an IMAX movie theater, and restaurants serving cuisine from Germany and abroad, are presented in an airy vortex of glass and steel. The name of one of the establishments, Restaurant Josty, recalls the Café Josty which had become famous as a gathering place for Expressionist artists during the Weimar Republic.(90) Following its inauguration, the Sony Center's cinemas have become the setting for the Berlinale, one of the world's most prestigious international film festivals.(91) In this way the Sony Center can be seen as a reincarnation of the Haus Vaterland, the palatial entertainment and accommodation center which existed at Potsdamer Platz until WWII and contained the most famous cinema in Germany at that time.(92) Simultaneously, the shape of the Sony Center serves as a dramatic example of seemingly futuristic design, much in the same way Columbus Haus did on the same site in 1933. The Sony Center is a dynamic example of High-Tech architecture and is among the most recognizable buildings in Berlin.




Its architect, Helmut Jahn, was born in Nuremberg and later emigrated to the United States, but after the Sony Center has completed several projects in his home country, including the headquarters of Deutsche Post (DHL) in Bonn in 2002, the distinctive Messeturm skyscraper in Frankfurt am Main in 1997, and the Munich Airport Center in 1999.(93) The spectacular centerpiece of the Sony Center is a vast canopy roof covering an unenclosed courtyard creating an urban environment both spatially detached from and yet, through the specific placement of ingress and egress points, communicates with features of the surrounding area. The shape of the roof is derived from a tensile catenary structure held by circular trusses crowning the adjacent glass buildings, creating a floating effect which is particularly dazzling at night, and which bestows a permanent festive aura on the space. By day, the courtyard provides refuge for pedestrians from the sun, wind, or rain, and allows a chance for pause and relaxation alongside the animated water features which flow through it. Additionally, the entrances to the courtyard of the Sony Center direct the visitor to specific nearby points of interest, on the north, the Tiergarten Park unfolds bringing a nature into the city, while to the west one is directed to Hans Scharoun's Berlin Philharmonic. In this way, despite the creation of a detached spatial enclave within the structure, the architects were considerate of prominent features in the existing urban landscape.

In addition to the High Tech style of architecture used by Jahn for the Sony Center, the complex elegantly integrates technologically innovative environmentally sustainable systems into the design.(94) The structure avails itself of a complex naturally assisted HVAC system which was accounted for when crafting the shape of the complex . During the design



process, Jahn collaborated closely with his engineers, Werner Sobek and Mathias Schuler, to render a systematically and structurally efficient structure, while retaining a striking appearance, a specific approach to High-Tech design has been referred to by Jahn as “Archi-Neering.”(95) This method ensures a building in which the shape of the distinctive and futuristic silhouette does not come at the expense of the practical functioning of systems or the amount of materials required, although the structure’s total form, comprised of numerous elaborate structural systems, retains an expressive appearance. This has helped to render a building where a High-Tech form is indicative of the modern and efficient lighting and HVAC systems which facilitate the comfort of its occupants, appropriate for a building so directly associated with the modernization of Germany’s image.

The Sony Center additionally includes the high-rise Bahn Tower, a 26 story ellipse of green glass which, together with Hans Kollhoff’s tower immediately across Potsdamer Straße, forms the vertical apex of the urban area. The tower serves as the corporate headquarters of Deutsche Bahn, the primary railway corporation in Germany, which was privatized following reunification, however with the Government remaining the largest shareholder.(96) The balance between these structures, which are similarly sized and positioned, but which display drastically different stylistic approaches, contributes to the idea of consistency without uniformity which was so central to the Hilmer and Sattler’s master plan. Taken as a whole, Sony’s portion of Potsdamer Platz is unabashedly High-Tech and shamelessly corporate prestige architecture, forgoing any attempt to commemorate the site’s turbulent past.(97) Instead, Jahn produced a design which provides a dynamic symbol for the brand of the developer that funded it as well as an emblem of Berlin’s reemergence as a united global city.










## *Daimler Quarter*

The tallest and most prominent piece of Daimler's development site is the Kollhoff Tower, a twenty-five story office building sheathed in dark red bricks and tapering to a climactic point. When seen from the center of Potsdamer Platz, flanked by Helmut Jahn's Bahn Tower and Renzo Piano's high-rise at Potsdamer Platz 11, the Kollhoff Tower appears as the centerpiece of the ensemble, and together with the Jahn's Bahn Tower, forms the silhouette of a gate on Potsdamer Strasse.(98) The building is unusual seeing as it is one of the few landmark structures which is named for its architect, Hans Kollhoff, rather than the corporation which financed it. Kollhoff is primarily known for his contemporary reinterpretations of early high-rise buildings, and had previously submitted a radial arrangement of five masonry-clad skyscrapers in the master plan competition.(99) The cladding of the Kollhoff Tower, in distinctive reddish brown masonry, stands in stark and deliberate contrast to Helmut Jahn's Bahn Tower which faces it directly. Here, curved glass and bricks arranged in a sharply vertical pattern converge to display two drastically different interpretations of the modern skyscraper, one High Tech the other an homage to the early days of the skyscraper in the United States before WWII. Kollhoff envisioned this tower to be a European reinterpretation of the American high-rise, and therefore derive its appearance from the former zoning requirements in New York which mandated setbacks for tall buildings as well as the former trend of cladding skyscrapers in masonry to conceal their structural systems. According to Hans Kollhoff, "Our brick highrise on Potsdamer Platz is intended to put an




end to an unfortunate European tradition that focuses exclusively on squat and abstract towers.”(100) The type of masonry used is influenced by the works of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, who had even designed a gate on this very site. As Kollhoff observes, “Without the tectonics of Schinkel’s Bauakademie these breathtaking towers (American skyscrapers) would have been inconceivable. So why not bring this tradition back to Europe.”(101) The Kollhoff Tower is therefore somewhat unique in Germany as in a sense it is a transatlantic skyscraper, one which possesses an American form, clad in unique German masonry by a German architect.(102) Kollhoff had previously entered unsuccessfully in the competition to develop the master plan for the area with the idea of using the power of capitalism to create an array of skyscrapers on the site.(103) This resulted in criticisms that the design tried to impose high-rises on Berlin, creations which could appear appropriate in Frankfurt, often referred to as Mainhattan, but which, to certain observers, might appear out of place in the capital.(104)




Figure 17, the Kollhoff Tower  
Figure 18, (above) Kollhoff's master plan proposal






Immediately southwest of the Kollhoff Tower lies the focal point of Daimler's development site, an open square called Marlene Dietrich Platz, the space of which is defined by Renzo Piano's adjacent buildings containing a shopping arcade, cinemas, and offices. This area is named for renowned German-born actress and singer Marlene Dietrich who, perhaps more than any other figure in Weimar Berlin, embodied the flamboyant and avant-garde atmosphere which dominated the cultural scene at that point in the city's history. Especially for international visitors, Dietrich's name would be associated with the progressive arts scene in Berlin, and clearly emphasizes the continuity between the reconstructed Potsdamer Platz and the area's role during the Weimar years. (105) At Marlene Dietrich Platz, a series of paths converge and intersect on and around an artificial reservoir called Piano Lake created by Atelier Dreiseitl. Throughout the process of redeveloping Potsdamer Platz, the ability of nature to heal an urban landscape was viewed as an important component of the design.(106) Integrating natural elements into Daimler's portion of the site, including rows of trees extending from the Tiergarten as well as animated water features which the public can interact with, was a deliberate tactic used to heal the gash in the urban fabric.(107) In Germany, this is especially relevant seeing as the German government places a particularly great importance on environmentalism and simultaneously in architecture. Unlike many other industrialized nations, in Germany sustainable economic policy and sustainable environmental policy are viewed as mutually beneficial.(108) This system designed by Atelier Dreiseitl in conjunction with Renzo Piano, is integrated into each of the skyscrapers and low-rise buildings in the Daimler quarter, and is one of the most conspicuous sustainable features at Potsdamer Platz. (109)



According to the designers, the central idea behind their scheme was to keep the rainwater where it falls and utilize it accordingly, in green roofs, as grey water in plumbing, and in fire prevention systems, thus minimizing the amount of water the buildings consume while mitigating contaminated runoff.(110) Atelier Dreiseitl created the artificial freshwater lake immediately to the south of Marlene Dietrich Platz to collect rainwater after it passes through underground cisterns. This creates a zone of natural aquatic life in a heavily urbanized area, providing a refuge for visitors and residents while using specifically designed plant filters and wetlands grasses to clean the water. The space around Piano Lake is very much accessible to the public, and is crossed and intersected by a series of paths on stepping stones, a clear symbolic reference to the reunification of the city.(111) Simultaneously, new corridors of trees blur the lines between green space and pavement in the city. According to Niel Overstrom, “Many visitors are also drawn to Dreiseitl's waterscape that integrates in such a magnificent and evocative manner engineering, ecological design and art. Regrettably, this feature is tucked back from the heart of the plaza and relegated to only one area of development. How spectacular it might have been if the master plan of Hilmer & Sattler dictated that water be used to integrate the entire redevelopment of Potsdamer Platz (and not only Daimler’s portion).”(112) Further affirming the success of the project, the entire water conservation system designed by Atelier Dreiseitl received the DGNB Silver Sustainability Award for an urban district in 2011.




Figure 19,  
Water features  
designed by Atelier  
Dreiseitl at Marlene  
Dietrich Platz.



## *Discerning the Result*


It is particularly interesting to juxtapose the rebuilt Potsdamer Platz with the other newly constructed monuments and nearby governmental structures in Berlin. Easily within view of Potsdamer Platz is Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, completed in 2005 and which stands as the preeminent structure in the German capital memorializing the genocide perpetrated by the Third Reich. Immediately to the north of that sits the Reichstag and the Federal Chancellery, the former redesigned with a permeable glass dome symbolizing democracy and transparency in government, and containing a spiraling ramp above the Bundestag's plenary chamber, elevating the electorate above the government. The linear shape of the Chancellery, designed by Charlotte Frank and Axel Schultes symbolically links East and West Berlin across the former frontier where the Wall divided the city, while deliberately cutting off the north-south axis which would have been created by the main boulevard of Albert Speer's Germania.(113) The legacy of Speer's plans was present enough in the minds of the jurors awarding the commission for the Chancellery that they only considered plans with an east-west orientation.(114) Additionally, elsewhere in the city, redevelopment projects languish - stymied by bureaucracy and intense debate spurred by complex historical associations regarding their sites. This includes the proposed reconstruction of Berlin's Stadtschloss, the palace which served as the seat of the Prussian monarchy which was demolished by the DDR following WWII and replaced with the Communist Politburo's Palace of the Republic, which was in turn razed following reunification due to asbestos




contamination.(115) Despite the complex historical associations surrounding Potsdamer Platz, here these issues do not appear to be present. The reconstruction project was largely completed by 2000, and displays a far different character than prominent contemporary structures in the surrounding area, and one which noticeably lacks the intent of memorialization and historical tributes present in so much of the city's recent architecture.

Many visitors who come to Potsdamer Platz, particularly from abroad, are interested in the legacy of the Berlin Wall and how the city has filled in its scar. At Potsdamer Platz, and throughout the Mitte district, the Wall's former path is marked by a subtle row of bricks in the pavement. It is therefore perhaps noteworthy that at Potsdamer Platz the legacy of the Wall is not central to the master plan or individual buildings.(116) In addition to the bricks in the pavement, five graffiti-covered sections of the wall, spaced apart by glass information panels, have been reinstalled on the sidewalk at Sony's request, however their presence is miniscule compared to the adjacent high-rise structures.(117) In this way, Potsdamer Platz has become one of the only prominent post-reunification projects in Berlin where the legacy of the Third Reich, subsequent Allied bombardment, and forty years of national division is largely ignored.(118) In lieu of the countless monuments and memorials flanking Unter den Linden, Mitte, and the federal strip, Potsdamer Platz, refuses to allow the appearance of its architecture to be defined by the turbulent events which took place at its site. The project is also somewhat triumphalist, revealing not only in the ideological victory of capitalism but also by the very fact that structures at Potsdamer Platz exist.(119) Potsdamer Platz was slated to be razed by the Third Reich and was demolished by the actions of a communist dictatorship. Therefore, rebuilding this site in such a dramatic fashion shows off the West's symbolic victory, however, in a way which Germans would never find permissible in a governmental structure.






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The memories of prewar Potsdamer Platz are strongly associated with the Weimar Republic when Berlin was regarded as the quintessential metropolis in Europe.(120) However, this association often deliberately omits the turbulent political situation in the government at that time. During the 1920s, when Potsdamer Platz was Berlin's cultural and economic heart, the Nazi Party was gaining power in the nearby Reichstag.(121) During the Cold War years, when Potsdamer Platz was bisected by the Berlin Wall, a strong nostalgia developed in the city for the Weimar years when Potsdamer Platz was a beloved cultural crossroads, although this nostalgic sentiment undoubtedly desired to avoid recalling the political developments which subsequently wrought such destruction on the city.(122)

It is clear that Potsdamer Platz was reconstructed with the international visitor as an important intended audience, something which has periodically resulted in consternation from native Berliners.(123) Whether the site's redevelopment as a true continuation of the bustling intersection which existed prior to WWII and the Berlin Wall is debatable, and the implications of global capitalism's role in reshaping the urban environment have repeatedly been labeled as problematic.(124) Additionally, making a direct connection with Weimar Berlin using the architecture of corporate prestige is undoubtedly somewhat futile.(125) In lieu of the centuries of evolution which established the original Potsdamer Platz, the reconstruction was created on a vacant site in less than a decade, fueled almost exclusively by money from international corporations seeking to increase the prestige of their brand. Howard Watson commented in the journal *Architectural Design* in 2006, "As a landscape it is so devoid of character and so detached from urban vitality that it seems to deliberately amalgamate the worst of both eastern bloc and American



planning.”(126) A powerful criticism given the project’s goal of healing the scar in the city caused by the Berlin Wall, albeit somewhat relevant due to the strong goal of avoiding any nationalistic, and therefore cultural or historical, implications. Furthermore, the reconstruction has been criticized as being removed from the urban environment, with buildings which are out of scale with the rest of Berlin, although it can be argued that throughout its history, Potsdamer Platz has always been somewhat detached from the surrounding urban fabric.(127) Throughout the Weimar Republic, the essence of which the reconstruction sought to recreate, the area was dominated by structures such as the Haus Vaterland and the Wertheim Department store, institutions which catered primarily not to Berliners but to the throngs of visitors who came to experience the turbulent metropolis that was Weimar Berlin.(128) Even during the Cold War, Potsdamer Platz was the place where international visitors were brought to observe the divide between East and West and to obtain a glimpse into the Soviet Bloc. In a sense, this legacy justifies the creation of monuments which were designed with the international visitor, not the Berliner, in mind, while simultaneously affording reunified Germany an opportunity to portray itself in an international context.





It is without doubt that Potsdamer Platz has succeeded in becoming immediately associated with reunified Germany, and has reemerged as one of the primary destinations for visitors to Berlin. The status which the area formerly held during the Weimar Republic as the ultramodern center of a sprawling metropolis has been recaptured, albeit at a scale and with architectural styles which have not been met with universal acclaim, as well as with the often controversial introduction of large sums of private capital. It is clear that bustling activity, incessant transit, and architecture which hints at the future, have returned to grace this peerless intersection. Additionally, the project's appearance is indicative of how, following WWII and internal division, Germany has moved away from any forms of overt nationalism, a phenomenon which is reflected in the array of international architects who contributed to the redefining of Berlin as the federal capital. (129) The redevelopment of Potsdamer Platz is successful when considering the goal of portraying reunified Berlin not simply as Germany's capital, but as a contemporary European metropolis and an international crossroads.



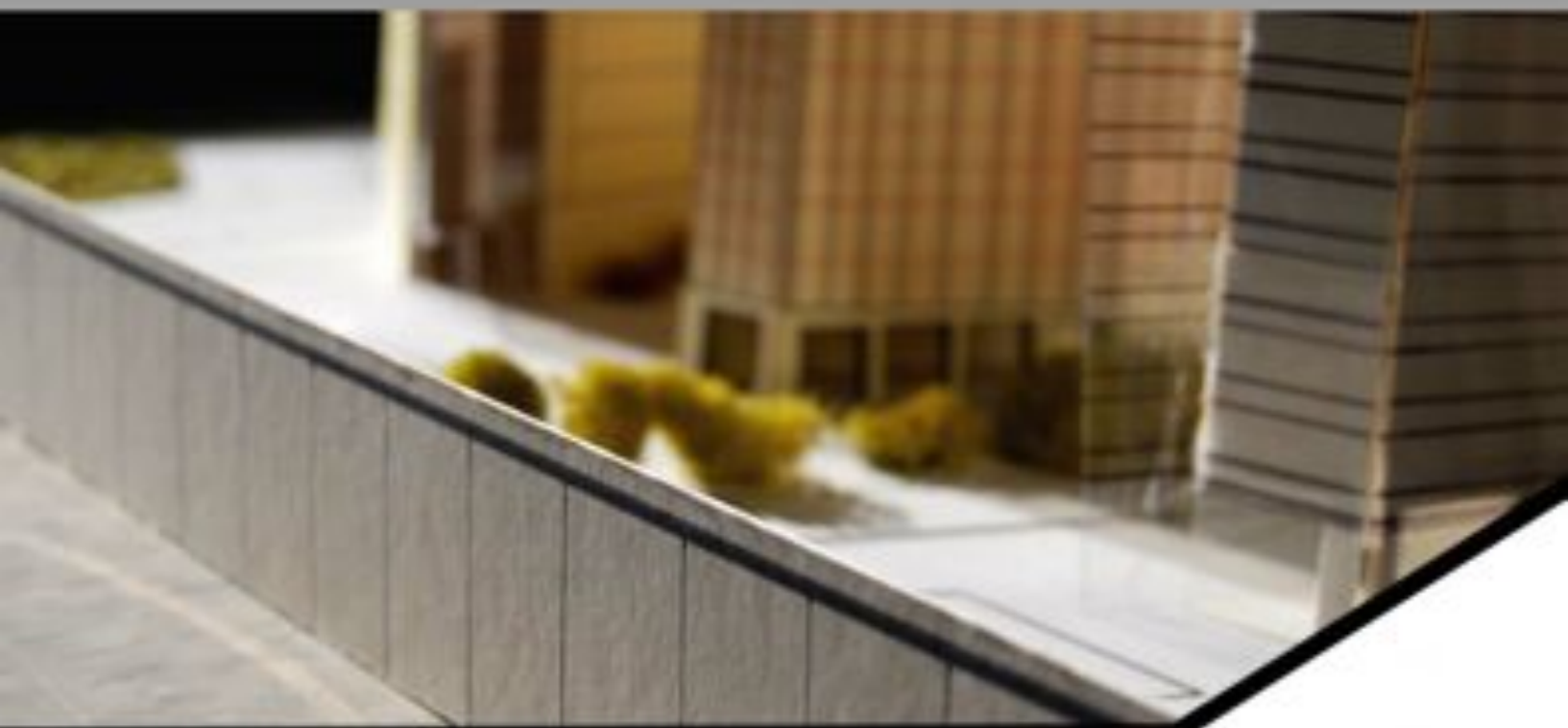


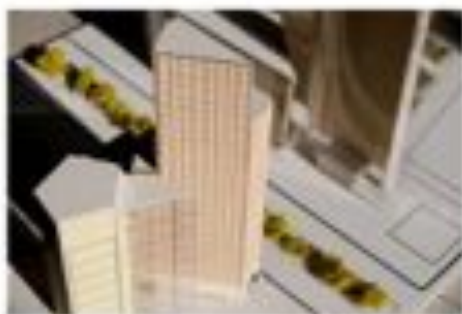
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*Model of the Most Prominent Buildings at Potsdamer Platz*















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