

A City Planner Describes the New Government Quarter in Berlin (2001)

Abstract

City planner Günter Schlusche describes the impact of various federal building projects on Berlin's urban and architectural landscape. He is interested in the symbolism of high-profile government buildings but also wants to know how – or whether – they fit into their larger urban environment. His wide-ranging essay examines a variety of topics: history and memory, for example, but also use and functionality. Schlusche also discusses the decision to house various ministries in existing buildings in the city's historic center and describes the beneficial effects of mingling government and non-government institutions in an urban setting.

Source

The Parliamentary and Government Buildings of the Federal Government in the Context of the Urban Development of Berlin

I. Berlin is Many Capitals

“Berlin is many cities” – so goes a saying by the late Berlin architect Werner Düttmann. “Berlin is many capitals” – this is how the statement could be altered and applied to the various capital-city installations built in Berlin under various state forms over the past two hundred years: the official buildings of the recently collapsed GDR, the structures of National Socialism, of the Weimar Republic, of the Empire, and, finally, of Prussia. As early as 1990, that is, almost a year before the Capital City Resolution of the German Bundestag, Berlin presented a compendium of its existing real estate. It revealed two things:^[1] first, that Berlin could offer the federal government a stock of available buildings and building lots that would meet even its most elaborate needs; second, that the vast majority of the sites in question were in the Old Center [*Alte Mitte*], that is, in the historical center between the Brandenburg Gate and Alexanderplatz. Because of the compelling nature of these facts, there was never a serious discussion of basic alternatives – for example, housing all federal offices in the enormous Tempelhof Airport or in Berlin's numerous military barracks. It took some time, however, before the representatives of the decisive institutions came to appreciate the richness offered by these settings, both in architectural and functional terms.

[...]

II. Focal Point Spreebogen [Spree Bend]

The fewest questions were raised by the choice of the Spreebogen as the government district – in this matter, the existence of the Reichstag building was a clear and decisive factor; moreover, the federal government also owned a large tract of adjoining land. Still – when the *Ältestenrat* [Council of Elders] of the German Bundestag decided in October 1991 to make the Reichstag building the seat of parliament, the choice was not as obvious as it might seem in retrospect.^[2] In the public eye and for some politicians, the building was discredited by its National Socialist burden, and its Wilhelmine architecture met with disfavor. Indeed, the defiant building (which, in the days of the Wall, had stood in its shadow like an errant block on the outer edge of the Tiergarten), had nothing winning about it – very much unlike the new Bundestag building by Günter Behnisch on the banks of the Rhine in Bonn. It took a series of

colloquia and public debates to arrive at a more objective assessment of the historical role of this structure, whose purpose had been mocked by Kaiser Wilhelm and whose architecture had been scaled back by him.[3] The great public affection for this building emerged with the artistic project by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the summer of 1995, and it has turned into true enthusiasm since the completion of the dome. With three million visitors in a little over two years, the building has become an international tourist attraction on par with the Eiffel Tower or the Tower of London – a remarkable achievement for a parliament building in an age of grave dissatisfaction with politics.

From the Central District to Spreebogen

The vote for the Reichstag had far-reaching consequences for the location decisions that had to be made starting in 1992, since it made the Spreebogen and Dorotheenstadt the preferred sites for the Bundestag and the Federal Chancellery. In March 1992, the International Urban Planning Competition for the Spreebogen was announced and all the corresponding parameters were laid out – this was done in close connection with the architectural competition to convert the Reichstag into the House of the German Bundestag.[4] Thus, in terms of urban planning, this space on the northern edge of the Tiergarten was designated as a meaningful entry point into Berlin’s historical center. [...]

The Ribbon of the Federation

In February 1993, Berlin architects Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank won the Spreebogen competition; the two had already been involved in the planning process for “Berlin Mitte.” Their design persuaded the jury with its extremely bold plan to organize the buildings along a single line that crossed the Spree at two points and juxtaposed the executive and legislative branches, that is, two very heterogeneous elements, in a single configuration.[5] The great positive response to this design – also from abroad – can be explained in large part by its sensitivity to the city’s history. With the “Ribbon of the Federation,” Schultes and Frank countered the great-power ambitions of the National Socialists, who had planned a massive north-south axis through the center of Berlin that would have culminated in a “Hall of the People” at this same very spot. A second reason for the acceptance of this design was surely the claim that this formation reconnected the Eastern and Western parts of the recently reunited city – an idealistic yet catchy metaphor.

Finally, in 1995, the two architects also managed to win the architectural competition for the Chancellery in the western segment of the ribbon – a decision that was by no means a foregone conclusion, and one that then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl made only after reflecting on it for six months. The competition to rebuild the Reichstag was won by the British architect Sir Norman Foster – admittedly, after a lengthy revision phase, during whose course Foster radically altered his original design in response to wishes vigorously expressed by the client and eventually realized the idea of the dome. The competition for the eastern segment of the ribbon, the area in which the parliamentary building was to be constructed, was won by the Munich architect Stephan Braunfels, who, through the decision of the client, also became the architect for the portion of the ribbon that continues between the Spree and Luisenstraße.

Federal Ribbon without a Forum?

While the “hard” elements of the ribbon, that is, the Chancellery and the parliamentary buildings, are practically finished, the core piece of the Schultes-Frank design, the Forum of the Federal Government has remained an idea to this day. Neither the old nor the new federal government, nor the Bundestag, could warm to Schultes and Frank’s idea (which has not been provided for in any program but is nonetheless obvious) of conceiving a forum for exchange there between society’s public and parliamentary-political life. [...] Now, after the excavation work around the Spreebogen has been concluded, there is every reason to eagerly await the completion of the large landscaped spaces. Platz der Republik, which stretches from the Reichstag building to the House of World Cultures, offers an

interplay between open areas of grass or hedges and generous arbor landscapes. The expanse of the forum between the Chancellery and the Paul Löbe House is accentuated by waterworks and fields of natural stone, while the border areas, formed by trees, preserve the footprint of the Ribbon of the Federation.

[...]

With its completion in May 2001, the Chancellery became the subject of a controversial architectural debate, which unfolded in a series of arguments and is actually targeted at the urban planning dilemma that has now become apparent.^[6] The Chancellery and the recently occupied Paul Löbe Haus, both large-scale structures, are separated by a distance that is not easily bridgeable, and they fragment the idea of the ribbon. Moreover, they ended up a little out of balance. With its square, thirty-six-meter-high executive building, the Chancellery (which Schultes and Frank had already set apart in terms of height in the first revision to their design), now rises five stories above the administrative wings that flank it on both sides and mark the ribbon. Its counterpart on the eastern side, the Bundestag building by Stephan Braunfels, remains consistent in its height effect and carries out the leap to the eastern bank of the Spree in the same architectural dimensions. The continuation of the ribbon toward the west, on the other hand, is carried out by Chancellery Park, which is edged by pedestal walls, and which one reaches via a two-story bridge. Toward the east, however, the shape of the ribbon is blurred by the newly-built day-care center that Gustav Peichl erected north of the Braunfels building for the children of federal government employees.

The Urban Planning of the Spreebogen

One grievous shortcoming is the lack of integration, in terms of urban planning, of parts of the ribbon on the northern side. In their designs, Schultes and Frank had always assumed that a compact urban neighborhood centered around a new, large-scale train station [*Lehrter Fernbahnhof*] would spring up on the north bank of the Spree in the Moabit neighborhood. This was the declared intention of the German National Railway [*Deutsche Bahn*] as early as 1992, a plan that was supported by the city despite some concerns. This plan will not be realized in the near future. Since 1994, the National Railway has been working on the subterranean tunnel structure of the north-south rail line, which will not only cross under the Spree, but also the Zoo, Potsdamer Platz, and the Landwehr Canal. The completion of the major train station at the point of intersection with the city railway's above-ground east-west line will be delayed until at least 2006, assuming it is to be realized in keeping with the planned concept for two "office arches" spanning the tracks. [...]

Reference to a similar large-scale project on the southern edge of the Tiergarten, a project that has gone through a true planning odyssey, appears reassuring: the Culture Forum [*Kulturforum*] conceived by architect Hans Scharoun. Here, too, the promise of urbanity that was made when construction began could only be redeemed forty years later, in roundabout ways, to be sure, and then only because another large-scale project was unexpectedly added in the form of [the redevelopment of] Potsdamer Platz. Incidentally, these tribulations have not in any way detracted from the radiance that emanates to this day from Scharoun's masterpiece, the Philharmonic.

East of the Reichstag building one can now start to see the mass of construction that has accumulated north and south of Dorotheenstraße as well as Luisenstraße.^[7] The names that have been given to these ensembles, the Jakob Kaiser House and the Marie Elisabeth Lüders House, may well find their justification in the history of democracy, but from the perspective of urban planning they are confusing. In this aggregation of large, highly compact blocks there is a concentration of more than 300,000 square meters of floor space – nearly a quarter of the entire space used by the federal government in Berlin. Moreover, these are single-use office spaces with little chance of establishing an urban, mixed-use environment with, for example, stores, restaurants, or even residential space.

[...]

III. The Federal Government in the Old Center

Only a few hundred meters further south of the Linden, the blocks of Friedrichstadt between Wilhelmstraße and Markgrafenstraße show the positive effects of weaving various federal ministries into the existing architectural structure. The buildings of the Federal Ministry of Justice, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth, the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, or the former Prussian House of Lords [*Herrenhaus*], used today by the *Bundesrat*, connect to a tradition of utilization that is more than a hundred years old in some cases, and they offer evidence of a living culture of re-utilization that is appropriate for historical monuments.[8] No aura of unapproachability – from exaggerated security demands, for example – emanates from these buildings; they hardly generate any displacement effects, rather they offer a certain measure of urban contact surface, which can give rise to high-quality utilization networks linked to other high-quality locations but also to secondary uses such as restaurants or service providers. Numerous federal states have their representation in Friedrichstadt, and a number of foreign embassies are located there as well, for example, those of France, Great Britain, Poland, or Belgium. This shows that these institutions have followed the example of the federal government. Their existence is convincing proof that the demands of a capital and urbanity are reconcilable. One exception might be the United States embassy on Pariser Platz, whose heightened security requirements are evidently leading to some urban planning concessions that are actually unacceptable for the city's layout and for the restoration of public spaces at this very prominent location.

[...]

V. Focal point Spreeinsel [Spree Island]

The area between Schlossplatz [Palace Square] and Molkenmarkt underwent the most profound alterations in the course of the six-year planning phase. Until 1994, the federal government was still assuming that it would house at least three ministries there. The 1993 urban planning competition for the area of the Spreeinsel, that is, the area around Schlossplatz, envisaged that the Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry of the Interior, and the Federal Conference Center would be located there.[9] To house this volume of construction, the contest mandated the destruction of the Palast der Republik [Palace of the Republic], which occupies the eastern part of the palace site, the State Council building, and the GDR Foreign Office. In other words: all GDR government structures in this area were to come down in one fell swoop. But that wasn't all: according to the visions of the Federal Ministry for Building, then led by FDP politician Irmgard Schwaetzer, the former state bank building in the neighboring Friedrichswerder district and the former Reich Aviation Ministry were to be torn down as well.

These plans revealed deep differences of opinion between the federal government and Berlin and also met with considerable opposition from members of the architectural profession.[10] In the Spree Island Competition of May 1994, a decision was made in favor of Bernd Niebuhr's design for a "Stadthaus" ["Town House"] in the dimensions of the former City Palace, but the decision offered no solution on account of a biased conflict over the building's use; rather, it only led to new difficulties.[11] While the question of an appropriate usage program for this area was pushed aside unsolved, those in favor of rebuilding the palace scored a publicity success in the summer of 1993 by projecting a simulation of its façade, and the GDR Foreign Office disappeared.

VI. The *Altbau* [pre-1948 buildings] Concept of Klaus Töpfer

The change came at the end of 1994, when Klaus Töpfer became federal minister of building and firmly rejected all of the government's plans to tear down buildings and build new ones. Presented in 1995, his plan for the area completed the swing toward an approach based on the utilization of existing buildings;

this approach included buildings from all time periods, including the GDR era. This concept not only had the decisive argument of lower costs on its side; it also offered a way out of ever more burdensome demands that the move to Berlin had to be perfect – demands that offered a hiding place for unrelenting opponents of the move in the administration. Additionally, this freed up unimaginable resources for urban development projects involving existing *Altbauten* in the center of the city and allowed a differentiated approach to engaging with existing buildings from the point of view of historic preservation.

This had two consequences for the area between Schlossplatz and Molkenmarkt. The demolition plans for the State Council building and the former Reichsbank were given up for good; in the long-term, however, this area quickly lost significance as a site for federal government offices. Temporarily housing the Chancellery in the State Council building until April of this year does nothing to alter this fact. In the future, the federal government will be represented in this area only by the Foreign Office located west of the Spreeinsel – in a most impressive way, though. The severe old Reichsbank building, which slightly follows the bend of the Spree and was used during GDR times as the seat of the SED Central Committee, has been given a new, modern interpretation that is also well suited to its inner-city setting though a new addition by architects Müller and Reimann. The well-proportioned interplay of glass façades, natural stone surfaces, and interior courtyards offers a pleasant contrast to the older building's seemingly endless rows of window axes. From the northern patio of the new section, which is accessible to the public for exhibitions and events and houses a small café, a view opens onto the semi-restored urban space around Werderscher Markt.

VII. The Future of the Schlossplatz

At the same time, the eye falls on the empty space of the Schlossplatz and the Palace of the Republic, which will be a complete skeleton once the asbestos removal is finished. The fact that no federal government offices will fan out here should not be seen as bad news but as good. The historical significance of this place does not call for a rather flat use by a ministerial administration that provides nothing for the public. The utilization program for this place should have an international dimension, perhaps something in the form of an institution that integrates Eastern and Western values. [...]

IX. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

The presence of the federal government in Berlin also includes a very subtle landscape of commemoration and remembrance that is supported by it. This refers especially to the remembrance of the crimes of National Socialism, which is part of the core of the political self-conception of the Federal Republic. In Berlin this will be manifest not only in the form of verbal pronouncements, commemorative events, and jointly financed projects, but above all in the shape of the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe. In a certain sense, the Bundestag's 1999 decision in favor of this memorial can be seen as a counterpart to the Berlin resolution of 1991. For it makes clear that the federal government is not making a fresh start in Berlin, but rather is very consciously acknowledging its historical responsibility and the continuity of German history.^[12] The memorial will be built in very close proximity to the Brandenburg Gate, that is, in a location characterized by the highest degree of public visibility. The design by the American architect Peter Eisenman gives reason to assume that, aesthetically speaking, a completely new kind of art for the urban sphere is arising here, one that offers a highly attractive space for the commemorative work that each individual must engage in.

X. Conclusion

Measured against the expectations that were tied to the federal government's move to Berlin in the early years, its presence in Berlin has had less impact than was originally assumed. The hopes – also entertained by the private sector – that the economic and demographic situation of the city would

fundamentally improve in the wake of the federal government were illusory. Equally false were predictions of a new centralism or a revival of old-Prussian conditions. The urban planning physiognomy of the federal government in Berlin makes this particularly clear: Berlin is organizing itself as the capital of a federal state with a European perspective that has never before existed in this form. This restructuring is being accomplished through the appropriation and cultivation of the existing spaces and buildings. The Ribbon of the Federation on the Spreebogen remains the federal government's only large-scale urban planning intervention. Its completion, however, will take more time, and it will not be able to assume urban qualities without incorporating other forces of development. In the old center, the presence of the federal government is helping to create a city, is filling in potentially empty spaces, and is improving the readability of the city's historical development. Finally, the addition of the federal government is also accomplishing something marvelous for the city as a whole: with the strengthening of its outer edges, the Tiergarten is becoming the green center of the city.

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NOTES

- [1] Task Force for "Capital City Planning, Berlin," ed., *Rahmenbedingungen und Potentiale für die Ansiedlung oberster Bundeseinrichtungen in Berlin* (Berlin, 1990).
- [2] German Bundestag, ed., *2. Kolloquium Deutscher Bundestag* (Berlin, 1993), p. 19ff.
- [3] Kaiser Wilhelm called the Reichstag building the "Reich monkey house" and prevented it from having a dome higher than the one on the City Palace. S. Michael Cullen, *Der Reichstag – Die Geschichte eines Monuments* (Berlin, 1983).
- [4] See Bundesministerium für Raumordnung, Bauwesen und Städtebau mit Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Umweltschutz, *Internationaler städtebaulicher Wettbewerb Spreebogen* (Berlin-Bonn, 1993).
- [5] Compare Federal Ministry for Regional Planning (n. 4)
- [6] See Hanno Rauterberg, "Pathos für die Republik", *Die Zeit*, no. 18 (April 26, 2001), p. 41f.; Sebastian Redecke, "Auf der Bühne der Politik", *Bauwelt*, no. 22 (June 8, 2001); Heinrich Wefing, "Das Ende der Bescheidenheit" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (April 26, 2001), p. 52f.
- [7] See Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau- und Wohnungswesen, *Demokratie als Bauherr – Die Bauten des Bundes in Berlin 1991–2000* (Hamburg-Berlin, 2000), p. 70ff.
- [8] See Jürgen Tietz, "Glück auf", in *Architektur in Berlin-Jahrbuch 2000* (Hamburg-Dresden, 2000), p. 32; Landesdenkmalamt Berlin, *Hauptstadt Berlin – Denkmalpflege für Parlament, Regierung und Diplomatie* (Berlin, 2000).
- [9] See Bundesministerium für Raumordnung, Bauwesen und Städtebau mit Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Umweltschutz, *Internationaler städtebaulicher Ideenwettbewerb Spreeinsel Berlin* (Bonn-Berlin, 1994).
- [10] See Bruno Flierl, *Berlin baut um – Wessen Stadt wird die Stadt?* Berlin, 1998, p. 107ff.
- [11] See Federal Ministry for Regional Planning, note 9.
- [12] See Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas, "Das Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas, Informationsblatt". Berlin, 2000.

Source: Günter Schlusche, "Die Parlaments- und Regierungsbauten des Bundes im Kontext der Berliner Stadtentwicklung", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B 34–35, 2001.

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