

Major references

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CASE STUDY

Potsdamer Platz, Berlin, Germany: a ‘cutting-edge vision’ for a consumer society (1991+)

Before World War II Potsdamer Platz was the major node of Berlin and the termination of the railway line to Prussia. Like any node its quality was a function of its surroundings. They were diverse making an activity-rich area of hotels, cafés, art galleries and artists’ workspaces. The war changed all that. The area was demolished by allied bombs and divided by the partitioning of Berlin that the end of the war brought. Only the Esplanade Hotel and the Weinhaus Huth survived the bombardment. They stood in a wasteland between the occupied zones of Berlin.

The precinct now consists of or, rather, will consist of three portions: the Leipziger Platz and its enclosing buildings, and the two areas that are the subject of this study. The one north of the Neue Potsdamer Strasse is now known as the Sony site and the other that lies across the road from it is known as the Debis site. In 1990, the land-owners hired Richard Rogers to make a proposal for the area (see Figure 8.45). In 1991, the Senate (i.e. government) of Berlin held a widely publicized design competition for the whole South Tiergarten area. It attracted 16 entries from internationally renowned architects. It was won by Heinz

Hilmer and Christoph Sattler (see Figure 8.46). Helmut Jahn won a similar competition for the Sony site but that was sponsored by the corporation. Giorgio Grassi was appointed architect for the strip of land on the east side of the site. He kept to the principles of the Hilmer–Sattler design.

The Hilmer–Sattler design was restrained and essentially a New Urbanist one. It sought to recreate the complex, tight patterns of the traditional European city. The height of buildings was restricted to 22 metres with setback roof structures rising to no more than 30 metres. It had to follow the rule that at least 20% of each new development had to be allocated to housing. The design followed an approach called ‘critical reconstruction’ in which the stand taken is that the identity of a city is established by its history and does not need to be re-invented simply because that identity is something from the past. It repudiates the ideology of Le Corbusier as represented in the post-war developments in West Berlin (e.g. the Interbau at the Hansaviertel) and in the East Berlin of the GDR where massive buildings were located as objects in space. Opposing critics see critical reconstruction as a romantic attempt at turning back the