

After the War: Berlin as Palimpsest

I

When the German Reichstag, renovated and crowned with a stunning glass cupola by Sir Norman Foster, was inaugurated with a plenary session of parliament on April 19, 1999, the Berlin Republic was at war in Kosovo. A fact that could only have caused revulsion ten years ago now met with broad public approval. Two months later, and decades after the German Wehrmacht last moved through these rugged Balkan mountains, beating a retreat from southeastern Europe, German ground troops have moved into a southwestern swath of Kosovo as part of NATO's peace-keeping mission, and they are celebrated as liberators by the Kosovo Albanians. It is the cunning of history that all this should be happening under the stewardship of a social-democratic chancellor and a Green minister of foreign affairs, representatives of the very political forces that vociferously opposed NATO and the Gulf War in the early 1990s. But it indicates how much the Federal Republic of Germany has expanded its geographic and political horizons since unification in 1990.

Ten years after the fall of the Wall the Berlin Republic is part of a new constellation in Europe. No major antiwar demonstrations have rocked Berlin as they did during the Gulf War, when white bedsheets fluttered from Berlin balconies, pigs' blood was spilled by demonstrators in the streets in angry protest, and the country was caught up in convulsions

of pacifism. At that time of mounting inner-German tensions, the East German and West German Left could revel in the common anti-American slogan "no blood for oil." The scene in all Germany then was in stark contrast to the public support the Gulf War enjoyed in London or Paris. Today, Germany is politically in sync with other NATO capitals, even though opposition to the Kosovo War is strong in East Berlin among the supporters of the revamped Communist Party, the PDS. But especially in the first month of the bombing campaign, the republic remained eerily quiet, and commentators marveled at the surprising change of heart that seemed to have overcome German public opinion, which used to be quite adamant in its principled antiwar stance.

But is that really what it is—a change of heart? Sure, the decision to join the war effort was now made by a social democratic-Green coalition government bedeviled by a rocky start in domestic politics and badly in need of political success. And though some called Schröder the "war chancellor," many on the Left and among the Greens grudgingly kept up their support for the new government. But underlying the acceptance of Germany's role in the Kosovo conflict was something else. The two meanings of Germany's categorical imperative "never again" have come into irreconcilable conflict with each other over Slobodan Milosevic's persistent policies of ethnic cleansing. The "never again" of deploying German troops in an "out-of-area" mission not geared toward purely defensive goals stands against the "never again" that recognizes German responsibility for the Holocaust, emphatically requiring action at the advent of any crisis even remotely reminiscent of the Holocaust. The antimilitary imperative not to deploy German troops out-of-area thus clashed with the moral imperative to intervene in the Balkan genocide. If the politics of memory have dominated the German consensus of "never again," then it was precisely memories of World War II that whittled away at the understandable reluctance to use German troops out-of-area: television images of endless streams of refugees fleeing ethnic cleansing; women and children packed into trains for deportation, stories of mass executions, rape, looting, and wanton destruction.

Of course, it is not entirely clear what Germans remembered. Was it the refugees from Nazism and the victims of German occupation? Or did viewers have Germans in mind, Germans as refugees from the Red Army, expelled from Silesia and from Czechoslovakia? Or was it both rolled into one, the problematic universalism of victimhood? Whatever the case may

be, the strength of memory legitimized the intervention for the vast majority of Germans, even at the price of having to betray one of their two most dearly held convictions. For many, it was a painful choice to make and a blow to the self-righteousness that had accrued to the joint litany of "no more war" and "no more Auschwitz" over the years.

As the bombing campaign failed to produce instant success, voices of protest arose and became increasingly vociferous. They were fed by the old anti-Americanism of the Left and by a new, equally anti-American Euro-nationalism on the Right, but contrary to the Gulf War, they lacked broad public resonance. Nevertheless, NATO's blunders breathed new life into the "no more war" position. Not surprisingly, one fault line divided the resolutely antiwar stance of the PDS from the pro-NATO position of the other parties, a replay of the continuing East-West divide within Germany. But a rift also appeared not just *among* intellectuals, who after all had been divided about the Gulf War as well (Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Biermann against the antiwar Left in 1991), but between antiwar intellectuals such as Peter Handke and Klaus Theweleit on the one hand and publicly supported government policy on the other. The difference is that in 1991 the pro-intervention literati broke with the national antiwar consensus while this time the opposition to intervention remained the minority voice. Even as there are good reasons to be skeptical in principle about a military human rights intervention and critical of long-term Western policy in the Balkans, insisting on the principle of national sovereignty in the face of Milosevic's serial wars of ethnic cleansing had to appear outright cynical. A new politics of memory and historical trauma has emerged at the core of transatlantic culture in the past ten years, and in the case of Kosovo, it won the strong yet uneasy support of the public despite serious doubts about the universal applicability of human rights intervention in the affairs of sovereign states. But this was Europe, the continent where the Holocaust had taken place. Europe would have lost all political legitimacy in its drive toward unification had it allowed the Serbian genocide to continue. Here, the German politics of memory and the politics of the new Europe merged.

The political change is stunning.

The Kosovo War has shaken up German politics, and it will have an impact on the new Europe. At a minimum, the Balkans and its Muslims have now been recognized as a constitutive part of a unified Europe. Ten years after the fall of the Wall, which was greeted at the time with a mix-

genuine triumph and subliminal fears of a resurgent German nationalism, the emerging Berlin Republic is a European republic and Berlin a European capital among others. And the new Berlin, the new reunited Germany is new in ways hardly imagined ten years ago when the triumphalists of national sovereignty dreamed about a self-confident nation (*selbstbewußte Nation*) that would finally overcome its past, while the detractors of national unification painted the horror vision of a Fourth Reich. Today, Germany is neither. Two weeks after German troops moved into Kosovo, the German parliament affirmed the Berlin Republic's commitment to commemorate the Holocaust. The much-debated though still controversial Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe will be built in the very heart of Berlin. Only time will tell whether this memorial will nurture commemoration or foster oblivion, but the decision to go ahead with the project is politically significant, even though the decision itself was reached with a sense of exhaustion after a twelve-year-long debate.

II

If memories of the past and an evolving present have mixed in unforeseeable ways in the politics of the Berlin Republic, then the same can be said about the architectural reconstruction of Berlin as Germany's capital. At a time when many building projects are coming to fruition, the assessment of the new Berlin has become more fluid and ambiguous than it was five years ago. The stifling architectural debate then pitted the traditionalists of "critical reconstruction" against the triumphalists of postmodern high tech, and both faced the radical skeptics who diagnosed a total lack of any persuasive urban or architectural vision on either side of that debate. Today the boundaries that separated the various factions seem blurred. Critical reconstruction with its restrictive regulations and its ideology of building in stone has never become as dominant a Procrustean bed for the new Berlin architecture as some had feared. Some high-tech projects have been absorbed rather well into the city fabric. And even though there may still not be anything resembling a cohesive urban vision, a decentralized network of new building sites and changing neighborhoods is emerging that is increasingly being accepted by the public and that has begun to shape the image of Berlin as a partly creative, partly timid mix of old and new. The rebuilt Reichstag may serve as an emblem for this mix of the cre-

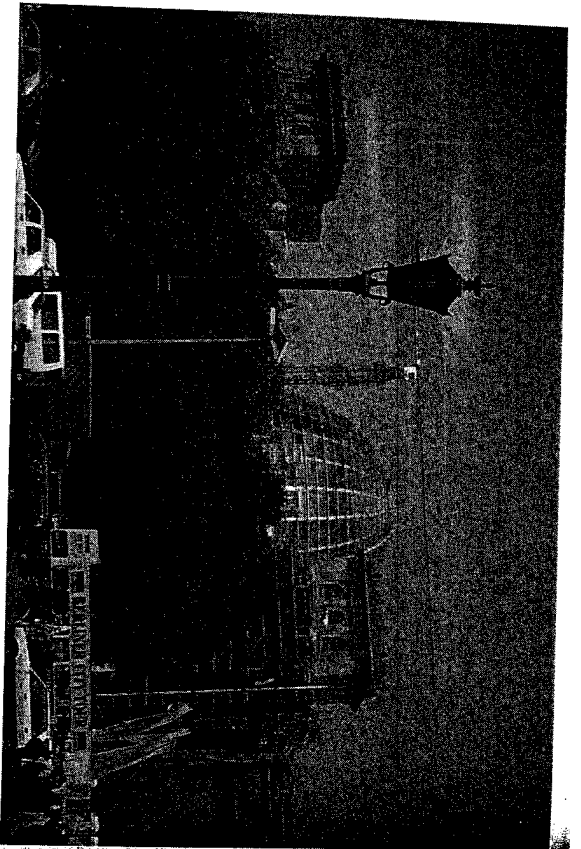


FIGURE 4.1 Reichstag under renovation. Architect: Norman Foster (1998).
Photo: author.

ative and the timid at this time. Its facade and shell are the only residues left from Wilhelmian times: up to three-meter-deep stone walls, pompous columns, a lot of monumental stone permeated by historical reminiscences. The inside of the building has been totally ripped out and pragmatically, though coldly, refurbished in muted materials and colors, but the graffiti left by Soviet soldiers in 1945 are still visible and highlighted on several walls. The only real architectural attraction is the Reichstag's cupola, destroyed by arson in the first year of Nazi rule and redesigned by Norman Foster as a gigantic glass dome, oddly reminiscent of a beehive or an oversize space egg.

The double winding ramps on the inside are publicly accessible, providing panoramic views of the surrounding city and setting the open interior spaces of the building into slow motion for the walking spectator, a veritable "flaneur dans l'air." But it is especially the illuminated dome at night that has been embraced by the media and the public as a symbol of the new Berlin. Foster's overall renovation may not satisfy on purely aesthetic grounds, but it successfully embodies the tensions between the

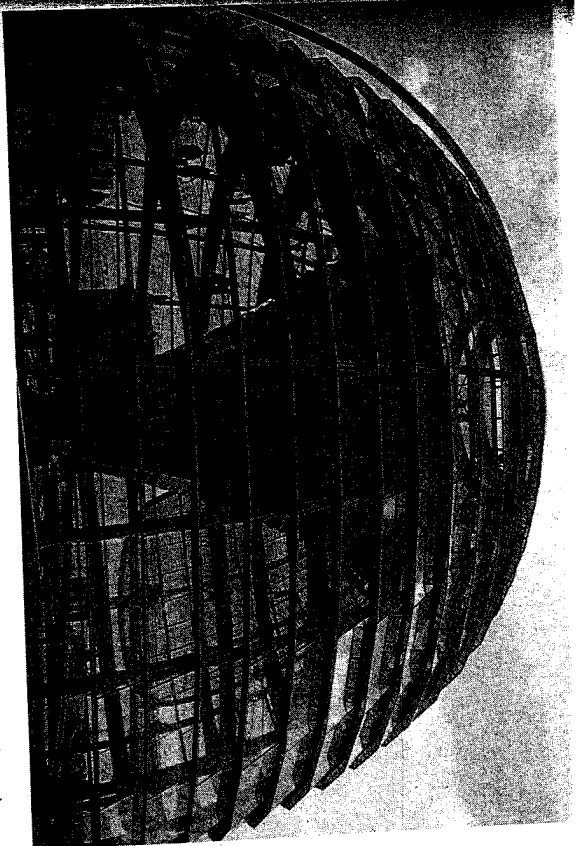


FIGURE 4.2 Reichstag cupola, outside view. Architect: Norman Foster (1999).
Photo: author.

unloved imperial past (the building's outside shell), a bureaucratic functional present of the German republic (the plenary hall for the Bundestag), and the desire to have a flashy image of democratic transparency marking Berlin's reclaimed status as capital.

At times in the early 1990s, it seemed that the old would overwhelm any new departure. The consensus was that Berlin was primarily a memory space, haunted by the ghosts of its past: Berlin as the center of a disjunctuous, ruptured history, site of the collapse of four successive German states, command center of the Holocaust, capital of German communism in the Cold War, and flash point of the East-West confrontation of the nuclear age. Obsessed with its memories as they were stirred up after the fall of the Wall, the city simultaneously plunged into a frenzy of urban planning and architectural megaprojects that were to codify the new beginning and to guarantee Berlin's metropolitan image for decades to come. Ghosts of the past and the spirit of future glory struggled on the same terrain without prospects for reconciliation. With the emergence of major new building plans in the historical center of Berlin for the

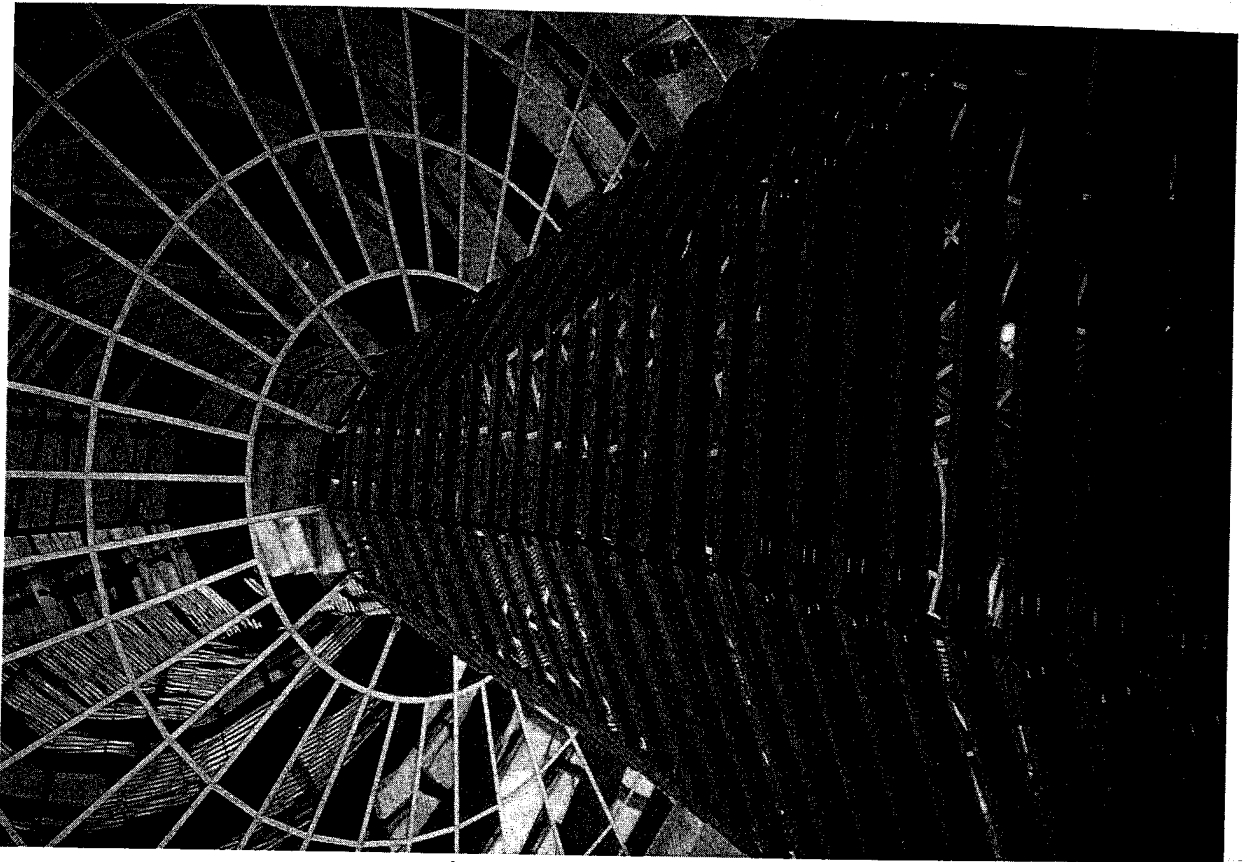


FIGURE 4.3 Reichstag cupola, inside view. Photo: author.

government quarter and the Reichstag, the corporate center at Leipziger and Potsdamer Platz, the restoration of Pariser Platz, the emerging plans for the Museumsinsel, Alexanderplatz, and for the preservation of the Stalinist urbanism of the Karl-Marx-Allee (formerly Stalinallee, now Frankfurter Allee), presence and absence, memory and forgetting entered into a fascinating mix. Heated conflict erupted even over the marginalia of urban reorganization. Communist monuments in East Berlin were knocked down and street names were changed, triggering a public debate about the legacies of the socialist state and the politics of forgetting. Some wanted to raze the East German Palace of the Republic, plagued by asbestos but quite popular among East Berliners, and in its stead rebuild the Hohenzollern Palace, which was bombed out in World War II and razed by the communists in the 1950s. Talk about the voids of Berlin became commonplace. The vast empty space in Berlin Mitte between the Brandenburg Gate in the north and the Potsdamer Platz in the south, which had been occupied by the mine strip and the Wall, now cleared away, captured the imagination. Visibility and invisibility became categories of architectural discourse about the built legacies of the fascist and communist states. Which buildings should be given over to the wrecking ball and which should be reutilized once the government moved from Bonn to Berlin? Even the unbuilt past, Albert Speer's megalomaniac plans for the triumphal north-south axis and the transformation of Berlin into Germania as capital of the Third Reich, exerted its power over any visions of the future. Thus the plans for the new government strip in the bend of the Spree River just north of the Reichstag studiously avoided a north-south layout, opting instead for an east-west axis that had the additional advantage of suggesting reconciliation between the two parts of the city separated from each other for so long by the Cold War. But then Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag in 1995 provided a stunning reprieve from the burden of dark memories. The dialectic of the visible and the invisible found its exuberant and celebratory expression in this temporary installation that charmed Berliners and the world and that now finds its counterpart in Norman Foster's radiant glass dome.

But visibility and invisibility, memory and forgetting have yet another dimension in the debate about reconstructing the German capital. At stake is the question of the center, of the centered city. Many saw the void left by the dismantled Wall in Berlin's middle as a scar that might

never heal, either architecturally or historically. Historically, of course, this space never was a center. Instead it marked the boundary between the old Berlin, east of the Brandenburg Gate, and its western expansion through the Tiergarten district and beyond. Even the Reichstag, built as the imperial parliament in the 1890s, was banned from the inner sanctum of imperial Berlin, which began only east of the Brandenburg Gate. Architecturally, any radically new vision for this space left by the vanished Wall was quickly blocked by the political logic of developing the new government strip in the Spreebogen and by the hasty approval of the corporate development plans at Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz. The empty space in the center thus has shrunk, but it still suggests a void, something that remains unsaid in the urban text.

In a certain way, this void right on top of Speer's north-south axis conjures up the void that cuts through the famous zigzag structure of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum. Libeskind's void is an architectural index of the destruction of Berlin's Jews and their rich culture during the Third Reich. The void between Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz, on the other hand, between the government mall and the corporate headquarters, may in the end not signify the loss of a potential new urban center that was not to be. It rather suggests that Berlin cannot be centered in the same way that London or Paris are.

The defining power of this symbolic space in the heart of Berlin is only exacerbated by the fact that it is precisely in this void, just south of the Brandenburg Gate and very close to where Hitler's Reichskanzlei once stood, that the Berlin Republic is to build the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. After twelve years of public controversy, multiple competitions, changing juries, political denunciations, and a radical about-face of several of the participants in the debate about the politics, aesthetics, and purpose of such a monument, the memorial, designed by Peter Eisenman as a labyrinthine field of some 2,500 stone slabs of differing height and complemented by a documentation center, will finally be erected. The parliamentary debate was uninspired, but a political decision was needed to legitimize the project democratically and to put an end to public wrangling. Everybody recognizes that there can be no perfect solution to memorializing the Holocaust in the country of its perpetrators. But it must be commemorated, through an act of political will and with a commitment to the democratic future, even though any monument will always

run the risk of becoming just another testimony to forgetting, a cipher or invisibility. Thus in the very center of the new Berlin, there will be a national memorial to German crimes against humanity, that ultimate rupture of Western civilization which has come to be seen by some as emblematic of the twentieth century as a whole, a curse on the house of modernity that we now inhabit with enormous trepidation.

III

Talk of the voids of Berlin, however, seems less pertinent now than it was a few years ago. Indeed, the urban tabula rasa fantasies of the early 1990s have faded fast. Enthusiasm about building the new Berlin from the scratch is giving way to a more pragmatic outlook. Not metaphors of the void but emptiness is the issue at a time when so many new office and apartment buildings are still looking for occupants. At the federal level, financial calculations have forced a scaling back of many plans, mandating reutilization rather than destruction of several major fascist buildings in the heart of Berlin (Göring's aviation ministry and the Reichsbank). Overblown images of a new global Berlin as capital of the twenty-first century have made way for a more modest reality. What is now emerging is the more intriguing notion of Berlin as palimpsest, a disparate city-text that is being rewritten while previous text is preserved, traces are restored, erasures documented, all of it resulting in a complex web of historical markers that point to the continuing heterogeneous life of a vital city that is as ambivalent of its built past as it is of its urban future.

Berlin is now past the point when the debate focused primarily on the vast corporate construction site at Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz. Gigantic developments by Daimler Benz and Sony loomed large as threats to the urban fabric as a whole. The malling of Potsdamer Platz, that mythic traffic hub of the Weimar Republic, Germany's Piccadilly Circus and Times Square rolled into one, seemed a foregone conclusion and a symbol of all bad things to come. Potsdamer Platz has indeed been malled, and the architectural results are, as predicted, rather appalling. Its relationship to the neighboring Kulturforum with the Staatsbibliothek, the Philharmonie (both by Hans Scharoun) and the Neue Nationalgalerie (Mies van der Rohe) is ill defined. The new Potsdamer Platz will never match the myth of the square as an emblem of Weimar modernity. The narrative of Pots-

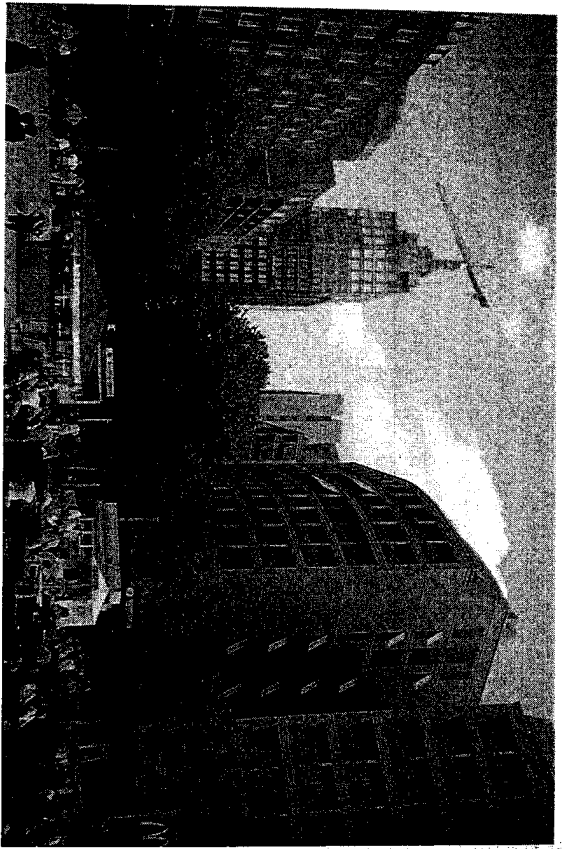


FIGURE 4.4 The new Potsdamer Platz plaza. Photo: author.

damer Platz as the imaginary center of a metropolis expires in its arcades, which, as a two-story drab shopping mall stuffed with mini-boutiques and fast-food units, resembles the inside of a prison more closely than a consumer paradise.

And yet, Potsdamer Platz in its new incarnation has received a surprisingly positive press, and the public seems to accept it with open arms. To some, the city's insistence on maintaining the old street plans for the Potsdamer Platz area has turned out to be a blessing in disguise. For the narrow streets, alleys, and piazzas allow for a certain intensity of street life, as long as one forgets that it is the street life of the late twentieth century: that of the pedestrian shopping mall. Others feel that the corporate and commercial buildings are different enough in size, material, and design at least to suggest a real urban space. If it is a mall, to them it is also still Potsdamer Platz. Much will depend on how these buildings age and how attractive Potsdamer Platz will remain as a public space once its current novelty has worn off. I remain skeptical, but Potsdamer Platz today may well embody the structural irreconcilability between consumer society and public space. At any rate, the Potsdamer Platz development, the white elephant of

Berlin reconstruction, has been joined by other architectural attractions. There now is a web of sites of very different size and function that fleshes out the architectural landscape of the new Berlin: the new Pariser Platz just east of the Brandenburg Gate, an entryway into classical Berlin; the Hackesche Höfe, an imaginative reutilization of one of the most fabled multiple inner courtyards of the old Berlin; the Aldo Rossi complex of apartment buildings and offices at Schützenstraße, with its southern-style courtyards and colorful and varied facades that loosen up the block building prescriptions of critical reconstruction; the fast-paced renovations at Prenzlauer Berg, in the old Jewish quarter known as Scheunenviertel, and in other neighborhoods of East Berlin. In fact, East Berlin is architecturally at an advantage. Since the poverty of the East German state prevented wholesale destruction of old housing stock, the preservation and restoration of neighborhoods is now possible in a way forever barred to most of the western parts of the city. The political conflicts between East and West Berliners, however, linger on. They have even intensified as the new city is slowly taking shape and as parts of East Berlin are being gentrified. But then, in one way or another, the eastern part of Berlin was always separated from its western part, and the current "wall in the head" may just be the latest manifestation of a long tradition. Architecturally neglected in most discussions are of course those socialist mass housing projects (Plattenbau) in East Berlin known from all over Eastern Europe. And yet it would be quite challenging to imagine ways of integrating housing projects such as Marzahn, Hohenschönhausen, and especially Hellersdorf into the new urban fabric, now that they have lost their grounding in socialist notions of collective living. Whether they will stand as ruins of socialism and urban decay or whether they can be modified in some creative form, only time will tell. The larger question here is to what extent the socialist city text will remain part of the fast-changing palimpsest that is Berlin. Daniel Libeskind's plan for Alexanderplatz pointed creatively in that direction, but it has no chance of being realized.

IV

A mix of the old and the new, the creative and the timid—that does not seem all that bad a constellation for a city that has never had the luster of London or the aura of Paris. Building on its historical decentredness as

an architectural urban space and maintaining the city as a palimpsest of many different times and histories may actually be preferable to the notion of a centered Berlin that would inevitably revive the ghosts of the past, not just in the minds of Germans but in the imagination of Germany's neighbors east and west. Berlin as palimpsest implies voids, illegibilities, and erasures, but it also offers a richness of traces and memories, restorations and new constructions that will mark the city as lived space. Bernhard Schlink, author of the best-selling novel *The Reader*, is certainly right in suggesting that Berlin still lacks a physical and psychological center. I see this as an advantage, and in that sense the title for the architectural sight-seeing tours, organized by the city in the summers of the late 1990s, may not be inappropriate after all: *Berlin—offene Stadt*, Berlin—open city.

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5



Fear of Mice: The Times Square Redevelopment

I

Cats, the longest-running show on Broadway, was approaching its twentieth year at the Winter Garden, just a few blocks north of Times Square, in the late 1990s, but the fear of a mouse had become the dominant trope in the debate about the Times Square redevelopment. Listening to some critics wax apocalyptic about the effects of Disney's invasion into the inner sanctum of New York city's popular culture reminds me of how much the Nazis hated Mickey as a symbol of the pollution of authentic German culture. To the Nazis, the mouse was dark, filthy, a carrier of disease, a threat to the body politic and to the body of the nation.¹ Within Germany of the 1930s, of course, the mouse was the Jew. In the 1940 propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*, the Jewish diaspora is represented as swarms of migrating rodents invading, destroying, and controlling every part of the globe. It was a theory of globalization *avant la lettre*: intensely paranoid, conspiratorial, and murderously ideological. Reacting to the success of Disney movies in Germany, the Nazis focused on Mickey's blackness, warned of the "negroidization" (*Verniggerung*) of German culture, and thus conflated Disney with their attack on jazz as that other mode of American, i.e., un-German, culture that needed to be excised: Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman—this black-Jewish combination represented the ultimate overdetermined cultural threat to the Aryan race. Given their