

# Unbridled illusion

A brief history of Berlin's city centre

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Being one of the late capitals in Europe Berlin still struggles with its stain. Driven by self-doubts it refuses its own identity. Each generation seems to take revenge on its predecessors. Again and again with frantic exorcism uncomfortable but meaningful repositories of memory had been and will be destroyed.

Berlin's hour of birth is unknown. No legend ennobles its founding. Instead an insignificant document, which mentioned Berlin in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century for the first time, proved, it was a small unimportant city among others. In 1415 when the house of Hohenzollern took over Brandenburg the long and painful ascent of Berlin began.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Peters, Günter: Kleine Berliner Baugeschichte. Von der Stadtgründung bis zur Bundeshauptstadt. Berlin 1995, p. 26.

With very heated ambitions the young noble family concentrated on its social advancement. After a failed revolt of the people of Berlin triggered by the strict government style, the Hohenzollern made Berlin to their residential town. Now being under direct control Berlin's dream of becoming an autonomous civil town was for the time being over.<sup>124</sup>

In the mid sixteen century the House of Hohenzollern could implement the Reformation in Berlin without notable resistance. It was rather more a strategic decision than a question of faith. The house of Hohenzollern wanted to sneak out of the sphere of control of the Vatican.<sup>125</sup>

This decision - amongst other reasons - finally caused thirty years of war. This brutal civil war of dog-eat-dog devastated most of Brandenburg. Half of Berlin was destroyed and one third of its population got killed.<sup>126</sup>

However, despite this devastating political decision the Hohenzollern stayed in power. To repopulate the city a huge

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 48-49.

<sup>125</sup> See Müller, Helmut: Schlaglichter der deutschen Geschichte. Bonn 1988, p. 91

<sup>126</sup> Peters, Günter: Kleine Berliner Baugeschichte. Von der Stadtgründung bis zur Bundeshauptstadt. Berlin 1995, p. 52-53.

immigration program was launched. Dutch, French, Austrians and many others transformed Berlin to a cosmopolitan town. Thus, one fifth of its population was French.<sup>127</sup>

Arriving in silk stockings the displaced French were chocked by the backwardness of Berlin. Its streets were unpaved, littered and muddy. Slowly with the influence of the refugees Berlin's cultural life began to flower. Soon the political and cultural elite of Berlin spoke French. And Berlin got an idea of *citoyenneté*.

At the turn of the century in January 1701 the Elector Friedrich crowned himself in Königsberg in the far east of Prussia.<sup>128</sup> A humiliating secret pact with the Emperor of the Holy German Empire made this coronation possible. Despite of the bad conditions and the embarrassing mockery when the secret pact became public, the House of Hohenzollern finally got its royal dignity.

Becoming a capital by a self-coronation outside of Berlin was stigmatic for the city. However the upgrading to a royal seat was forced forward. Monuments, buildings and squares copied the

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<sup>127</sup> Müller, Helmut: *Schlaglichter der deutschen Geschichte*. Bonn 1988, p. 115

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

artifacts of Paris. The castle and the city had been extended towards the west. It was the beginning of turning away from its old city center, the built memory of Berlin's unglamorous past.<sup>129</sup>



Design for a memorial for Frederic II by Friedrich Gilly, 1797. Even if the memorial was designed for a certain place in Berlin; the rendering did not show one existing building of its time. The existing city was not worthy to show.

Source: Blauert, Elke/Wippermann, Katharina: Neue Baukunst. Berlin um 1800, Berlin 2007, p. 122

A hundred years later when Napoleon Bonaparte victorious marched in Berlin the people enthusiastic welcomed the self-

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<sup>129</sup> Bodenschatz, Harald/Engstfeld, Hans-Joachim/Seifert, Carsten: Berlin auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Zentrum. Hamburg 1995, p. 73-74.

crowned Emperor hoping to become part of his new empire. In an excited atmosphere the myth spread that some of the most refined artifacts of Berlin will soon be displayed in Paris.<sup>130</sup> But Napoleon didn't show any of the looted art from Berlin in Paris. The message was clear Prussia was not important and its art not good enough.

In 1849 Austrian and Prussian troops quelled the March Revolution and its dream of a united parliamentary Germany.<sup>131</sup> Instead twenty years later in 1871 under the leadership of Prussia, Germany got partly united. After the defeat of the French army Germany proclaimed its Empire in Versailles. Wilhelm the 1<sup>st</sup> became "by the grace of God" German Emperor and King of Prussia. Berlin, the previously small town, was all of a sudden the capital of the German empire.<sup>132</sup>

But still, it was the *kleindeutsche Lösung*, which made Berlin to the capital of Germany. Another self-coronation was the starting-point of a vast redevelopment to an imperial city. Following the

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<sup>130</sup> Conrad, Andreas: Schicksalsjahre einer Siegesgöttin. In: Der Tagesspiegel, May 11<sup>th</sup> 2014, p. 13.

<sup>131</sup> Müller, Helmut: Schlaglichter der deutschen Geschichte. Bonn 1988, p. 156.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 182-183.

idea of monumentalization large sections of the city center had been replaced by parvenu architecture. After the death of the Emperor Wilhelm 1<sup>st</sup> in 1888 under the reign of Wilhelm 2<sup>nd</sup> the rebuild of Berlin even accelerated. It was a period of no limits: in growth, in opportunities, in stile etc. With out any point of historical or cultural reference, without a real noble class or old bourgeois families nothing seems to be impossible.<sup>133</sup>

With enthusiasm everybody designed its own history. First of all Wilhelm the 2<sup>nd</sup>, he turned the surrounding of the royal castle into a scenery of historicized eclecticism by building a huge monument for his Grandfather Wilhelm the 1<sup>st</sup>, by rebuilding the cathedral and other buildings in the neighborhood in a pompous neo renaissance style.<sup>134</sup> And while the destruction of the built memory of Berlin's modest past went on a brand new Romanic forum in the new western district had been built.

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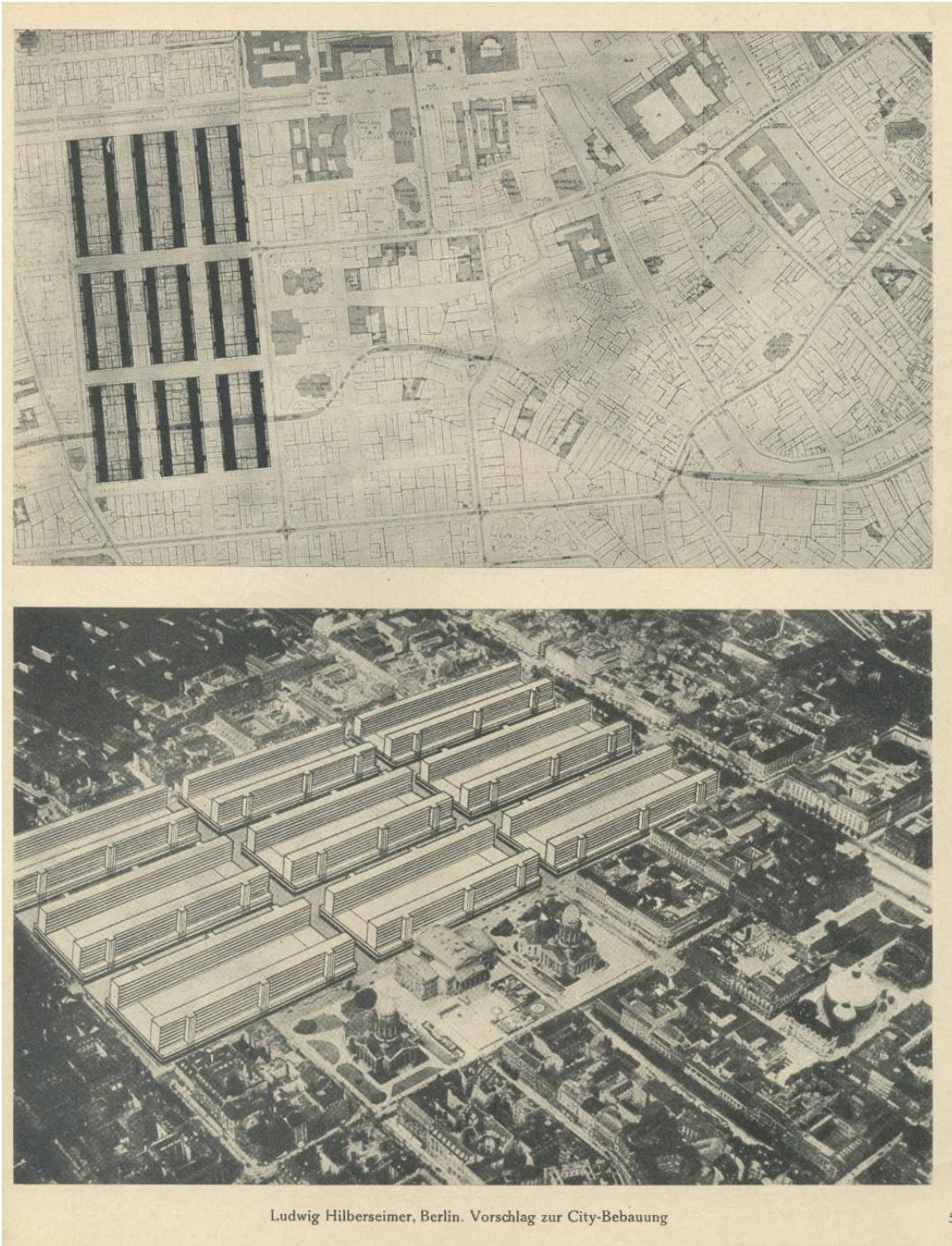
<sup>133</sup> Bodenschatz, Harald/Goebel, Benedikt: Berlin – Stadt ohne Altstadt. In: Nentwig, Franziska/Bartmann, Dominik: Berlins vergessene Mitte. Stadtkern 1840-2010. Bönen 2010, p. 21-25.

<sup>134</sup> Peschken, Goerd: Schloss und Stadt. In: Förderverein für die Ausstellung „Die Bedeutung des Berliner Stadtschlusses für die Mitte Berlins“ (Ed.): Das Schloß? Eine Ausstellung über die Mitte Berlins. Exhibition catalogue. Berlin 1993, p. 34.

This rush for sheer size culminated in WWI, which blasted the whole imperial dream. Being *kleindeutsch* and defeated the restless search for itself seemed to pause for moment. The emperor and his whole political system did resign. The new freedom was mirrored in radical new designs: social models, urban design but even life plans couldn't be radical enough. While the society was excessively searching for new moral and social values, art and architecture rid themselves of all pomp of the imperial time. Bared and honest was its philosophy. However its negative attitude to the urban heritage was the same as before. The radical renewal of the city center was the postulate like at any other time.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Bodenschatz, Harald/Engstfeld, Hans-Joachim/Seifert, Carsten: Berlin auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Zentrum. Hamburg 1995, p. 84-85.



Proposal for a new city-development designed by Ludwig Hilberseimer, 1930. This plan and photo montage of the urban



renewal of Berlin's city center with high rises was the consequent continued development of his scheme for a high rise city published in 1924.

Source: *Moderne Bauformen* 3/1931, p. 57

In spite of the harsh poverty, Berlin's cultural scene seemed to blossom. – But just to tumble. Proclaiming the Third Reich, Germany was a late dictatorship. An atavistic program of constructing a capital worthy to compete with the other great dictatorships the old shameful past had to disappear. The buildings of the imperial time didn't comply with the aspired leading position in Europe; even less did the few testimonies of the Weimar Republic. A never seen before urban clearance started to make space for a brand new city center. Again an old town was needed but not the one, which existed. So the clear-cut demolitions in Berlin's historic center went on.<sup>136</sup> War was a welcomed companion in the dream of a resurrection of the capital.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Bodenschatz, Harald: *Berlin Urban Design. A Brief History of a European City.* Berlin 2013 (2010), p. 62-69.

<sup>137</sup> Paulsen, Friedrich: *Die große Aufgabe.* In: *Bauwelt* 3-4/1944, p. 19.

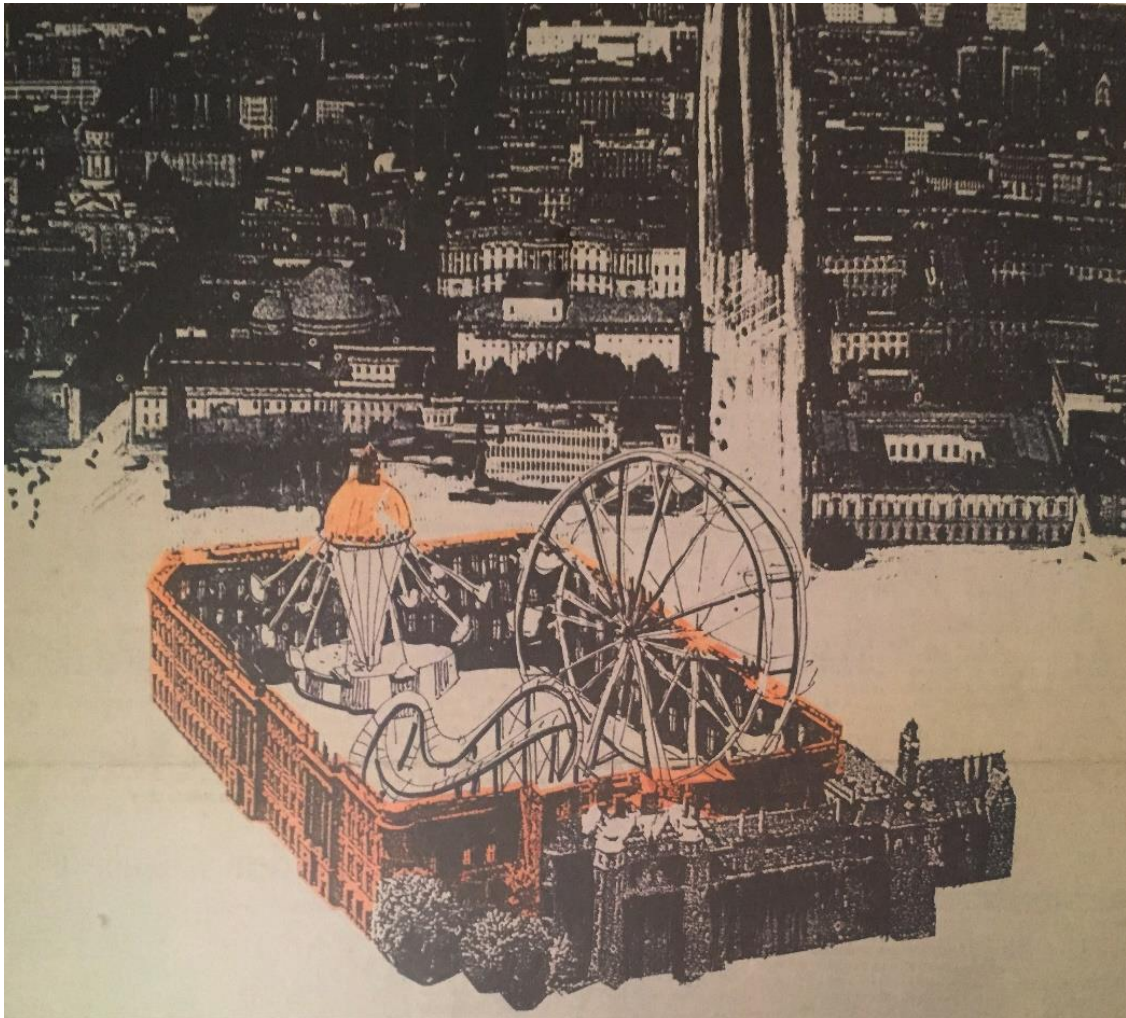
Bombs stopped this nightmare of preponderance. Pounded, raped and divided Berlin was reinventing itself again. Blowing up its past, bursting the buildings which survived the wary bloodlust, a new socialistic heartbeat tried to revitalize the city center. Berlin metamorphosed in a car-oriented city without cars.<sup>138</sup> The old city castle had been blown up without an idea of a compensation.<sup>139</sup> At the end a compromise of overburden leftovers from the imperial time and awkward urban components defined Berlin's center when *Friedensstaat* collapsed. Again, the new society ripped of Berlin's artificial heart to reinvent history. First the wall, than statutes were pulled down. The deconstruction of the socialistic urban heritage went on. Carefully house-by-house the incommode cenotaphs of Germany's second dictatorship disappeared. Instead new

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<sup>138</sup> Bodenschatz, Harald/Goebel, Benedikt: Berlin – Stadt ohne Altstadt. In: Nentwig, Franziska/Bartmann, Dominik: Berlins vergessene Mitte. Stadtkern 1840-2010. Bönen 2010, p. 21-25.

<sup>139</sup> Bernau, Nikolaus: Der Ort des Souveräns. In: Förderverein für die Ausstellung „Die Bedeutung des Berliner Stadtschlusses für die Mitte Berlins“ (Ed.): Das Schloß? Eine Ausstellung über die Mitte Berlins. Exhibition catalogue. Berlin 1993, p. 75-77.

memorials were built. Trying to mask this cascade of violence the rebuilding of the royal castle began.<sup>140</sup>



Sketch of a temporary reconstruction of Berlin's city castle by Hilde Léon and Konrad Wohlhage, 1996. This ironic statement reflects the debate on the future of Berlin's city few years after

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<sup>140</sup> Flierl, Thomas/Parzinger, Hermann: Humboldt Forum. The Project. The Point of Departure. In: Flier, Thomas/Parzinger, Hermann (Ed.): Humboldt Forum Berlin. Berlin 2009, p. 10-11.

the fall of the Berlin Wall. The architectural heritage of the German Democratic Republic had to make room for a new city center, whose image was still unclear.

Source: Der Tagesspiegel, September 28<sup>th</sup> 1996, p. 14

The idea of catharsis by brutal violence lives on. It seems Berlin can't escape its fate, of fighting against its demon of the past. The apparent vacuum caused by frictions in history and space seem to be the magnet which attracts many young people from all over the world.