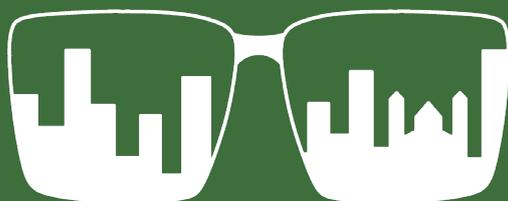


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0542_Paper #2.20: Employing the industrial landscape. Insights on the use of collective spaces of industrialization in Ethiopia
Arnout De Schryvera

0554_Paper #2.21: The "second life" of a building. Hidden flexibility possibilities on appropriation of architectural space
Caio R. Castro, Amílcar Gil Pires, João Mascarenhas Mateus

0566_Paper #2.22: Shopping center and contemporary city: Discussion of appropriation forms
Pedro Bento

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Luigi Savio Margagliottai

0590_Paper #2.24: The domestic city: Expansion of the domesticity in the contemporary city
Flavio Martella, Marco Enia

0598_Paper #2.25: The sustainable house: psychology vs technology
Olivia Longo

0606_Poster #2.26: Comfortable parks
Anastasiya Volkova, Madlen Simon

0611_BLOCK 3: THE NEW FACES THE OLD

0612_Paper #3.01: From Dismissal to Development: the Challenge of Architecture
Roberta Ingaramo

0622_Paper #3.02: The hidden designer: rethinking urban rules in city making
Caterina Barioglio, Daniele Campobenedetto, Marianna Nigra, Lucia Baima

0632_Paper #3.03: Designed to change: The future of architecture is Agile
Salah Imam, Brian R. Sinclair

0644_Paper #3.04: Performance: The Fantastical Dichotomies of City-Making.
Shai Yeshayahu, Maria del C. Vera

0654_Paper #3.05: Infrastructure for collectivity: built heritage and service planning in the city
Francesca Daprà

0664_Paper #3.06: Circular economy and recycle of architectural heritage in fragile territories
Marco Bovati, Alisia Tognon

0676_Paper #3.07: Binckhorst: A palimpsest of architectural lives
Angeliki Sioli, Willemijn Wilm Floet, Pierre Jennen

- 0688_Paper #3.08: Pursuing potential arising from collision: The Islamic city considering Western hegemony
Sabeen bin Zayyad, Brian Robert Sinclair
- 0702_Paper #3.09: New VS Old: Understanding Architectural Tensions in the Design of Public Spaces
Giulia Setti
- 0712_Paper #3.10: (sub)URBAN; Merging Suburban Home Qualities with Urban Housing
Craig S. Griffen
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David Karle
- 0736_Paper #3.12: Scarpa in light of croce: the post-lyrical city
Frank Harrison Weiner
- 0746_Paper #3.13: What Does A Single Building Tell About A City?
Burcin Basyazici, Birsen Sterler, Safak Cudi Ince
- 0760_Paper #3.14: The Urban Church: Repurposing a Community Detail
William O'Neil Bourke
- 0772_Paper #3.15: New old cities. The rebirth of German historical centers
Michele Giovanni Caja
- 0784_Paper #3.16: Adaptive reuse & regeneration as potential for industrial sites in the metropolitan cities of Pakistan
Naveed Iqbal, Koenraad Van Cleempoel
- 0796_Paper #3.17: Metamorphoses in Paris: the fate of Samaritaine among preservation and innovation
Antonella Versaci, Alessio Cardaci
- 0808_Paper #3.18: Building a Modern Asuncion: Contributions of the Hotel Guarani in the Configuration of a New Urban Space
Julio Diarte, Elena Vazquez
- 0818_Paper #3.19: The architectural Spanish imprint in China. Why an "Alhambra-style" mansion in Shanghai?
Álvaro Leonardo Pérez
- 0830_Paper #3.20: Transformation of a historical area in Elche through an apparently invisible architecture
Antonio Maciá Mateu, Ana Mora Vitoria

**NEW OLD CITIES.
THE REBIRTH OF GERMAN HISTORICAL CENTERS**

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ABSTRACT

The rebirth of historical centers in some important German cities represents a unique phenomenon, due to the programmatic nature of the designers' intentions and the variety of proposed solutions. Accompanied by a controversial debate, the cases here considered share the same principle of *critical reconstruction*. A principle which aims to correct the errors often carried out in a state of emergency in the post-war period and mostly based on alternative ideas of city. If this reaction – introduced by the revision of the principles of the Modern Movement since the 50s – arises from a slow awareness of the value of the historical heritage, it is with the first critical reconstruction of historical centres of the 80s that the will to recall concretely their identity is manifested.

The projects here presented are to be considered a mature phase of this reflection on urban history and the possibility to reactivate it nowadays. In the search of a new identity of their old characters, emerges a dialectic relationship between historical continuity, critical reconstruction and urban design, with recurring themes like: the memory of the layouts of streets and squares, the small-scaled parcels of the blocks, the reuse of historical typologies, the individuality of each house, the representativeness of the façade, the use of traditional forms and materials. According to a growing attention to the veracity of the original urban image, these projects are intended not as a mere *mise en scène*, but as a real implementation of the historical city with respect to current needs.

KEYWORDS

Germany; historical centers; critical reconstruction; urban image; identity.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing rebirth of historical centers in some of the most significant German cities – Berlin, Dresden Frankfurt, Lübeck and Potsdam – represents a unique phenomenon, not only in Europe, due to the programmatic nature of its designers' intentions, the richness of the actors involved, the variety of proposed solutions. Accompanied by a lively and controversial debate, the cases here considered share the same principle of *critical reconstruction* (Caja 2018). Such a critical approach dates back to the revision of the urban principles advocated by the Modern Movement in the 20s of last century, which have built the theoretical basis for almost all the projects for the reconstruction of European cities, especially German cities, destroyed by the Second World War. This critical reflection on the fundamentals of the historical city arose from the rediscovery of its temporal dimension, understood as a complex and stratified phenomenon built up over time. A phenomenon based on the overlapping of distinct historical layers, of different ideas of cities, surviving only in fragments and parts, for the analysis of which techniques similar to those of archaeological stratigraphy have been developed.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The origin of this awareness dates back to the 1950s when, for the first time, the loss of the center and the need to restore a heart to the city became a main topic in the architectural debate (Rogers et al. 1952). The merit of this questioning was to highlight how the functionalist city, so attentive to the question of zoning and the optimization of living spaces, had completely forgotten not only the question of historical centers, but also that of newly founded *nuclei*. The question of the heart of the city was raised as a social, political and economic center as the issue of the new center for many of the devastated cities after the Second World War emerged. This concern for the regeneration of life in the city raised a great range of strategies on how to deal with it. However, many of these actions incorporated decontextualized parts attributable to the model of the open city, which caused the loss of historical identity of the urban space.

The urban analysis developed in Italy during the 1960s (Muratori 1960; Aymonino et al. 1970) became an operational tool to investigate the morphological structure and typological features of historical cities. If the merit of this intense analytical decade was that of classifying historical types and forms in a taxonomic way, its limit was that it didn't have a direct influence on the design phase, which was still understood as an autonomous moment in a tight continuity with the idea of open city based on abstract principles. The reflection of these studies on an international scale in the following decade rediscovered the value, the individuality and uniqueness of historical centers in their spatial and urban dimension. A rediscovery capable of activating a renewed attention towards them, no longer intended only as an object of study and analysis, but as real design references.

This gave rise later to an awareness of the need not only to revitalize these centers but, where necessary, to rebuild them according to the specific settlement principles of the

European city (Delevoy 1978). From Léon Krier's first ideal projects for the reconstruction of German cities such as Bremen (Krier 1984) to the Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin (IBA 1984/87), the reconstructive principle took on a formal definition and critical emphasis, poised between revisionism and experimentation. The interventions carried out in Berlin in the two decades following the reunification of the city (1990), under the guidance of Hans Stimmann and a group of "architects of the city", constitute an updated example of this re-constructivist line, pursued today even in smaller historical centers, such as those analyzed here.

The projects here presented are to be considered as a mature phase of a reflection on urban history and the possibility to reactivate it nowadays. Aimed at reconstructing the identity of the historical features of the here considered German cities, they establish a dialectic relationship between historical continuity, reconstruction and urban design.

Within the history of reconstruction (Nerdinger 2010), these interventions prove to be paradigmatic for the questions they raise, but also for the concrete architectural solutions they offer, in their dialogic connection between copy and reinterpretation, which makes them true witnesses of the contemporary condition in which we live (Eco 2016). On the other hand, despite their obvious character of "constructed historical images" (Pehnt 2011), they are to be explained in opposition to the often exasperated desire to be current and new in much contemporary architecture.

In this sense, they constitute a new chapter in the reconstruction of historical centers, different from previous efforts, based on stylistic, typological or technical aspects, as it is shown in the well-known cases of post-war period such as Warsaw, Münster or Colmar; the Bolognese blocks (Cervellati et al. 1977); the Nikolai Viertel in Berlin with its use of prefabrication.

On the other hand, they are also different from the exported urban cities inside extra-European contexts, especially China (Bosker,

2013), for their different intentions and for the expectations they arise: no images to be evoked or suggested, but real pieces of the historical city to be reconstructed where they were before. There is no displacement, as in the idea of Satellite cities often proposed by the Modern Movement – see *Das Neue Frankfurt* by Ernst May – to be built outside the city center, but also in some Italian cases of urban reconstruction after natural disasters as in Gibellina, Teora or Monteruscello. But there is also no analogy, the typical compositional instrument introduced by Aldo Rossi in the 60s and then echoed in the European and American debate by authors like Colin Rowe, Miroslav Šik, Hans Kollhoff and others to recreate imaginary cities as collages of well-known architectures of the past. What these cases present is a new way of critical reconstruction *on site*, where the margins of interpretation emerge from the architectural solutions, more than from the historical morphological structure, which follows directly the original one, with its compact structure, the recognizability of its typologies, the representative character of its urban image.

2. DIFFERENT WAYS OF URBAN CORRECTIONS

These cases do not arise from an emergency condition or from the need to provide an immediate response, as in the above-

mentioned experiences or more recent ones linked to natural disasters. The here presented projects are in fact cases of transformation and replacement of previous reconstructions and, as such, are rather to be considered as interventions of urban *correction* on earlier parts, realized after World War II, considered today, for various reasons, inadequate – for scale, morphological characters and architectural language – to the pre-existing structure of historical city. They are projects, therefore, that arise from the conception of the urban form as a palimpsest of different layers and historical traces, modifiable in themselves, and from the desire to restore, as far as possible, the image erased and lost over time.

2.1. Destruction vs. Reconstruction: Hildesheim as paradigm

A first paradigmatic case in this sense is represented by Hildesheim in Lower Saxony, where for the first time a post-war building was demolished to allow the reconstruction of the ancient historical ensemble of the medieval Marktplatz (Häger 2011). For the reconstruction of the most representative historical building on the square – the butchers' guild house (Knocherhaueramtshaus), built according to the typical wooden frame structure common to many other buildings of the historical *ensemble* –, a Hotel from the 1960s, in the typical forms of the post-war International Style, was demolished. (Fig. 1)



Figure 1. Hildesheim: Hotel Rose; Knocherhaueramtshaus, rebuilt (from: «Arch+», n. 204)

Likewise, in the other cases treated here, there have been similar cases of punctual replacement. At the Neumarkt in Dresden, it was necessary to remove an oversized *moloch* dating back to the 1980s, the extension of the Police Garrison, to allow the reintegration of the original perimeter of one of the eight historic blocks. At the Friedrichswerder in Berlin, the Foreign Ministry (Ausßenministerium, 1964-67), built on Schinkelplatz site during the GDR regime, partly occupying the Bauakademie area and overlooking the Friedrichswerdersche Kirche both designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, was demolished. In Frankfurt, the Technisches Rathaus (1974), a brutalist building, was destroyed in 2010 to free the Dom-Römer Areal area, while in Potsdam the large complex of the Teachers' Training Institute on Friedrich-Ebert Strasse was recently removed to make room for the new blocks in the process of being built around the Castle. These out-of-scale functionalist buildings, dating back to the socialist or technocratic era, produced, for their volume and architecture, an alienating effect within the original historical fabric, without being able to regenerate a real urban life. (Fig. 2)

2.2. The mixed Model: Leitbauten and Neubauten

Compared to Hildesheim, a true reconstruction *in style* (at least for the façades) of the original historical substance, the model adopted in the cases analyzed here is different and more articulated, as it includes both reconstructions *as they were where they were* and contemporary reinterpretations of the destroyed houses. The *mixed model* is based on the coexistence of *Leitbauten* and *Neubauten* – buildings reconstructed in the same way as the original ones and new buildings inspired by the existing ones.

This model was firstly adopted at the beginning of the new millennium in the reconstruction of the urban blocks around Dresden's Neumarkt, in conjunction with the completion of the reconstructed Frauenkirche.

Similarly, the Dom Römer Areal in Frankfurt consists of an *ensemble* of houses: about a third are copies of the originals and the rest are entrusted to a wide range of local and non-local architects. In contrast to the general plan for the reconstruction of the Altstadt, only a few blocks will be built in Berlin by



Figure 2. Demolished Buildings: Extension of the Police Garrison, Dresden; Foreign Ministry, Berlin; Technisches Rathaus, Frankfurt; Teachers' Training Institute, Potsdam.

a team of not only national studios, with a compact construction similar to the original, but without the stylistic restoration of the old houses.

The validity of the mixed model seems to be reconfirmed in the other two cases. The blocks around the Alter Markt in Potsdam are based on a general plan (Leitbautenkonzept), according to which different types of intervention are identified: from the faithful reconstruction of the original façades of 18th century buildings to new houses which follow the original volumetric and compositional guidelines.

Also in the case of the narrow and elongated blocks of the Gründungsviertel in Lübeck, a similar approach was followed under the guide of UNESCO: reconstructed pilot project buildings and current reinterpretations of the Gothic-merchant houses typical of Hanseatic cities.

In some cases, like Frankfurt, the dialectics between old and new is defined by the permanence of historical traces and *spolias*, considered as building stones to be reintegrated into the new houses. Their presence has the intent to make the reproduction of the original state – still alive in the collective memory of the actively involved community – more plausible.

2.3. Figurative reconstruction of Baroque city: Neumarkt, Dresden

As one of the most important squares in Dresden's historical center, the Neumarkt was built in the 16th century on the space of the pre-existing city walls in continuity with the market square (Jüdenhof). After the War destructions in 1945, its boundaries disappeared, leaving a large open space around the ruins of the Frauenkirche. During the clearing of their rubble, the complexes of the Johanneum and other historical buildings – still partially standing and available to reconstruction – were also removed.

The actual reconstruction of the urban blocks around the Frauenkirche – planned since the German reunification –, has profoundly transformed the place, according to the original baroque layout (SAK 2008) and its famous views painted by the Italian painter, Bernardo Bellotto. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. Bernardo Bellotto, *Neumarkt in Dresden, 1747* (Hermitage Collection)

The plan was based on the rebuilding of eight parceled blocks, including a series of historic pilot project buildings, under the coordination of the Gesellschaft Historischer Neumarkt Dresden (GHND). The reference points for the reconstruction were: the relationship with the perspective views of the paintings, the compactness of the building, the preservation of the original features, such as the road sections, the continuity of the façades, the eaves heights, the shape of the roofs, the layout of the plots, the type of court house. (Fig. 4)

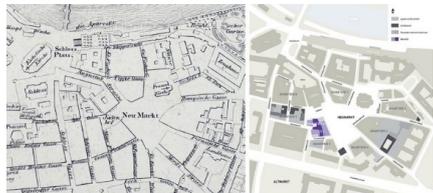


Figure 4. Von Heinrich Lesch, *Stadtplan Dresden, 1828* (extract); *Neumarkt, 8 Quartiere, Plan*



Figure 5. Neumarkt in Dresden, Quartier 1 and Frauenkirche, historical view and actual situation

The City Council, together with investors, has debated and supported these guidelines with the collective participation of the population, through referendums and public demonstrations. The guidelines set out in the Charter of Guidelines defined to rebuild more than 60 plots according to the principle of pilot project buildings and façades, while for the other plots, new houses with simplified façades were planned to fit harmoniously into the complex. The reconstruction of the historical blocks at the Neumarkt won the National Prize for Integrated Urban Development and Architectural Culture awarded by the Federal Ministry of Transport in 2009. (Fig. 5)

2.4. The reinvention of Renaissance city: Dom Römer Areal, Frankfurt

Accompanied by a broad and controversial critical debate, the recent inauguration of the

new *old* town center, the Dom-Römer Areal, poses substantial questions about the future of European cities in the era of globalized standardization (Sturm et al. 2018). The project, which received the international MIPIM Award 2019 for the best urban regeneration plan, aims to give back an identity and a heart to the centre of Frankfurt, erased by the war and rebuilt in successive phases, without a precise idea of city. This intervention has filled the gap left by the demolition of the Technical Town Hall, a brutalist building from the 1970s. The old medieval parcellarium, the housing typologies with small courtyards and rich façades, dating back from Mediaeval to Renaissance time, were reused to restore the existing historical structure of urban spaces made of small squares and narrow streets. (Fig. 6)

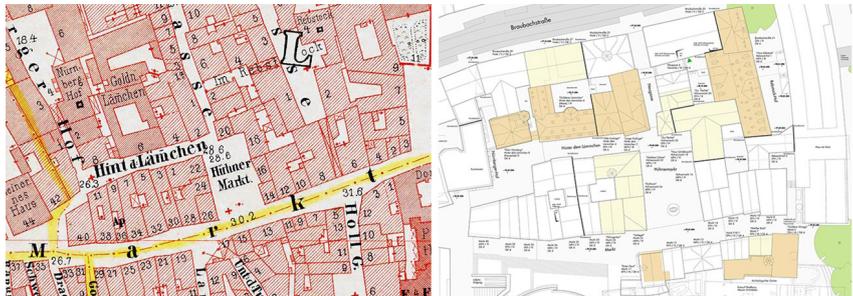


Figure 6. Frankfurt am Main, Ravenstein Plan, 1861 (extract); Dom Römer Areal, Plan.

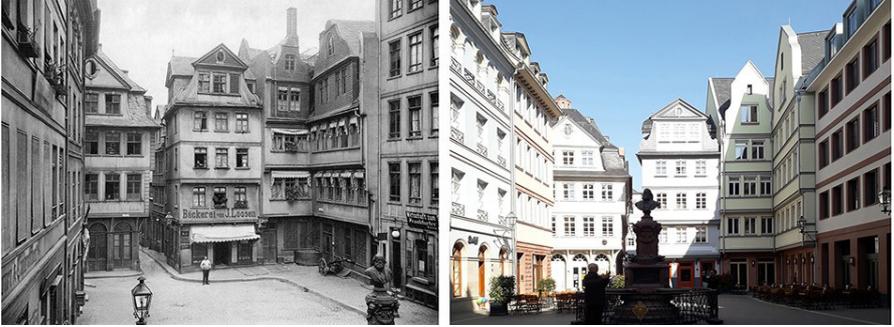


Figure 7. Dom Römer Areal, Hühnermarkt, historical (1904) and actual view.

The competition, promoted by the city, was carried out under the coordination of an architectural quality control committee chaired by local architect Christoph Mäckler. The plan, coordinated by DomRömer GmbH, which was set up specifically for the executive coordination and financing of the project, was based on the urban layout of the original medieval town center, restored while preserving the underground car park of the demolished building. Realized with the close participation of the citizens, the project saw the involvement of several local and some international architectural firms (56 in total), which, following a complex selective phase (5

to 8 different proposals were made for each plot), resulted in a very rich and multifaceted intervention, consisting of 35 houses. The fundamental principle was based also here on two different degrees of reconstruction: on the one hand, the reconstruction *as it was and where it was* of the most significant historical buildings (Leitbauten) – initially eight, but which then became more – thanks also to the extensive documentation available, assumed as pilot project buildings. On the other hand, the construction of new houses, inspired by the old ones but not identical to them (Neubauten). (Fig. 7)

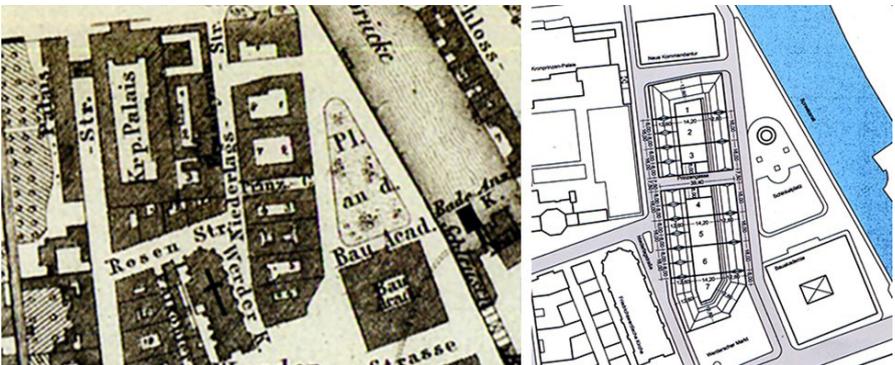


Figure 8. Friedrichswerder: W. Liebenow, Plan 1867 (extract); K.Th. Brenner, Plan 2005 (from: Stimmann 2014).

2.5. The difficult comparison with K.F. Schinkel: Friedrichswerder, Berlin

The area around the former Bauakademie, the Friedrichswerder church and the reborn Schinkelplatz (Fig. 8) – obtained after the destruction of the new Foreign Ministry of the GDR period – is part of the Plan for the city center (Planwerk Innenstadt) elaborated under the direction of former Senate Building Director Hans Stimmann (Stimmann 2014). The actual design of this new prestigious residential area follows the layout of the original blocks, on which the former house typology was to be reinterpreted according to its compact character and its high building density.

The difficulty of this intervention is revealed in the delicate relationship with the two adjacent brick masterpieces by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, the author of Berlin's classical rebirth at the beginning of XIX century, the church of Friedrichswerder and the Bauakademie, the first school of architecture which has been waiting to be rebuilt for more than ten years.

The block known as Kronprinzengärten on the west side of Friedrichswerdersche Kirche (plan: nps tchoban voss, 2014) appears as a simplified version of a first proposal, in which the individuality of each house was called into question by the presence of a common underground car park below the entire block.

The unity of the intervention, guaranteed by the constant eaves height and the continuity of the street line, is however compromised by the heterogeneity of the façades, often characterized by strong historicist accents.

The block between the church and the Bauakademie is the result of the re-elaboration of a first plan designed by Klaus Theo Brenner in 2005, divided into two parts, with a total of seven independent plots, two of which are places at corners and five are extended from one side to the other of the block. During the realization this original parceled structure was replaced by a more compact one, with a smaller number of houses. (Fig. 9)

2.6. Reconstructing copies of copies: Alter Markt, Potsdam

The ongoing reconstruction of the urban blocks in the centre of Potsdam, around the Alter Markt, bordered by the Castle, the Nikolaikirche (both rebuilt in different periods) and the buildings along the river Havel, aims to restore the original settlement layout erased by historical events. And this, through the re-proposal of buildings that oscillate between stylistic reproduction and creative reinterpretation of formal principles taken from the past.



Figure 9. Werderscher Markt: Historical view (1904) and actual situation (House on the right by R. Moneo).

Although the first proposals date back to the last century, it was in 2004 that a competition was launched to redefine the area around the Alter Markt. The winning project introduced the idea of rebuilding the urban blocks around the Nikolaikirche and the Castle which was recently rebuilt almost as *it was and where it was* by architect Peter Kulka. This also gave rise to the idea of reconstructing the sequence of the old buildings on the waterfront, once called *Alte Fahrt* (STP 2012).

The plan of the pilot project buildings elaborated in 2012 (Integrierter Leitbautenkonzept Potsdam) proposed to rebuild the old blocks and, inside them, to reconstruct the houses according to the façades of the ancient models. On an urban scale, the *Leitbautenkonzept* also modified the wide street lane of the late 60s, diverting it and reducing its section, in order to make it possible to rebuild the Castle (even if shortened in length). The blocks under construction, following the demolition of the large building that contained the Fachhochschule Potsdam (FHP), were defined on the basis of a functional *mixité* principle, capable of conferring new urban complexity and vitality on this central area of the city. (Fig. 10)

In the general plan of the blocks facing the Castle, the Nikolaikirche and the Alter Markt, a precise layout of the plots was outlined, such as to ensure the small scale of the individual houses adjacent to each other. The

corner houses, often with façades referring to historical examples, were intended to hold together those arranged along the newly designed streets. Here, too, the levels of reconstruction range from reproducing *how it was and where it was*, in the case of buildings referred to pre-existing models, to a rebuilding subject to common urban and architectural constraints.

The first reconstructed buildings are those on the riverside (*Alte Fahrt*) in front of the castle: here the three adjacent palaces, Barberini, Chiericati and Pompeii, have already been completed, re-proposing the original façades. (Fig. 11)

2.7. The grammar of medieval blocks: Gründungsviertel, Lübeck

The Gründungsviertel (Founders' Quarter) in Lübeck is one of the oldest areas in the western part of the city. Despite some historical references, it underwent several transformations in the post-war period – the modification of some historical traces, the creation of a parking lot, the construction of two isolated professional schools – which led to a shift from the compact structure of the historical blocks towards a more thinned out one (<https://www.luebeck.de>).

Since the 1990s there had been plans for a restoration of the Gründungsviertel. With the support of the UNESCO World Programme



Figure 10. Potsdam: C.L. Oesfeld, Plan 1778 (extract, in red: the Castle); General Plan, 2012 (from: STP 2012).



Figure 11. Palazzo Barberini, Potsdam: 1907 (Photo: E. Eichgruen), 2019.

Lübecker Altstadt, the schools were demolished in 2009. Archaeological excavations and documentary analyses of the site were carried out on the cleared land.

The expected rebirth of the Gründungsviertel on the structure of the original parcels was thought of in the sense of a *critical reconstruction* of the historical layout of the city. The historical parceling of the land made available plots of different widths, thanks to which the richness and variety of the urban image of the past was recreated. In the project under realization, different typologies of houses can accommodate different destinations within a compact building line, which fits well into the minute scale of the medieval center of Lübeck.

Based on the "Rahmenplan Gründungsviertel", the conditions for urban reorganization and development of the district as a residential area within the city were defined in 2015. This plan forms the basis for a reorganization of the "founding district" according to historical street alignments, differentiation of the building type, variation of roof ridges and eave heights. (Fig. 12)

The reconstruction of the Gründungsviertel as an area of contemporary living is one of the most important and challenging projects in the Hanseatic city of Lübeck. The new district is based on the historical precedents, with its compactness of the blocks, the density of the plots, the building alignments, the pitched roof houses. In total, 170 units, including apartments, shops and offices on the ground floor, are foreseen.



Figure 12. Lübeck, Gründungsviertel: historical situation (1872) and actual plan.

CONCLUSION

For the extent of the here analyzed interventions, recent critics have spoken of *reconstructionism* as a response to *deconstructivism* born in the late 1980s (Fischer 2011). With respect to the desire to dissect the historical city analytically – as if it was a patient on an operating table, attempting to dismember its individual pieces and subject them to conceptual processes of abstraction – the attempt here is rather to reintegrate the surviving fragments and traces still present within a unified image. The aim is to propose an updated version of the historical image that has been lost, following wrong – or today no longer suitable – choices. Choices mostly born from a desire to erase the historical and compact structure of the inherited city, often still legible in its foundations and building layout, and in any case received through the historical iconography, albeit in fragmentary form, in favor of new ideas of the city, which today have mostly proved to be inadequate.

Therefore, these cases are not to be understood as nostalgic attempts to reproduce the city as *it was*, nor as simple urban regeneration projects, but as advanced and mature examples of “critical reconstruction”, according to the meaning introduced in the European debate since the 1970s. Projects that are also attentive to current issues related to sustainability and the return to a human scale of city living. In contrast to the futuristic ideologies advocated by the avant-gardes, mostly based on the myth of technological progress, these interventions start from the human scale as a measure to re-found the city and its architecture, in respect to actual needs of pedestrians, cyclists and new ecological means of transport.

In fact, these examples have already been taken as a reference by other non-European nations in search of their identity – following the too rapid processes of urban transformation in recent decades – through

processes of reinvention of their history and tradition (Engel 2018). Abandoning the taboo of authenticity and historicity of the original, they reinvent traditional forms as if they were authentic. These “invented traditions” attempt “to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” (Hobsbawm 1983, p. 1).

Beyond the many doubts and criticisms that such interventions are raising, what is clear is that these are real projects of contemporary architecture, in which the historical city acts not only as an image, but as a concrete reference. It is still too early to assess whether their actual role within the city stops at the pure image, or becomes structural to the real life of those who live there. That is, if these reconstructed centers do not actually remain a simple tourist attraction, but become real places to live in, capable of truly reactivating the sense of community lost over time.

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