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ART MUSEUM IN THE URBAN LANDSCAPE: THE ROLE OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART INSTITUTIONS IN THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF FRANKFURT AM MAIN

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Abstract

The 1980s was a significantly prolific period for the museum architecture in Germany, when a number of modern and contemporary art museums and exhibition halls were built. Apart from being a result of the new cultural policy, most of them were also destined to fulfil an important role in urban planning of the German state capitals.

Thus, the Frankfurt am Main city centre's identity was completely redefined by creation of the Schirn (*Schirn Kunsthalle*, 1983 – 1986, Architekturbüro BJSS) and the Museum of Modern Art (*MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst*, 1983 – 1991, H. Hollein). Various aspects of these architectural projects will be analysed, in order to reveal the importance of the Frankfurt am Main art district for the urban development and architectural design over the subsequent decades.

This study considers creation of the Frankfurt am Main contemporary art district as a key step in the genesis of the conceptual model of cultural institution, capable to redesign the urban landscape in a radical way and to create new guidelines for its future development. The evolution and implementation of this model still remains a mainstream strategy in the international architectural and urban practice.

Introduction

Frankfurt am Main is the fifth biggest city in Germany, the largest locality as a part of the state of Hesse, the centre of the metropolitan region of Frankfurt Rhine-Main. The status of the European Union's financial capital, the centre of the German stock exchange and one of the main transport hubs of the continent is converted here into concrete, tangible symbols: Commerzbank Tower (the highest of eleven skyscrapers of the city), Stock Exchange (the tenth largest in the world by market capitalisation), Frankfurt Airport (serving more than 60 million passengers per year), Messe Frankfurt Fairgrounds (the second largest exhibition site in the world). Moreover, both commercial heyday of the past decades and booming internationalisation of the city contributed to the attainment of a new status for Frankfurt as the metropolis of contemporary art in Germany.

The *Altstadt*¹ city centre (Fig. 1), its historical, sociocultural and commercial core, was severely damaged by the World War II bombings, changing drastically the urban tissue of Frankfurt (Fig. 2). For the next decades, despite the large-scale reconstruction work, the area between the St. Bartholomew's Cathedral (spared during the bombings, as well as the Römer town hall) and the Römerberg square, likewise some closely situated urban parcels will remain void.

In the 1970s and 1980s, in several German cities, among which are Mönchengladbach, Stuttgart, Cologne, Bonn, Düsseldorf, a number of museums and centres of modern and contemporary art have been built, determining the image of Western European museum architecture of that time. Apart from being a result of the new cultural policy, most of them were also destined to fulfil an important regenerative mission in the post-war urban planning of the German state capitals.

In this mission, Frankfurt had a key role: a number of important architectural and urbanistic tendencies of that time has been realised in the projects of two largest contemporary art institutions of the city – the Museum of Modern Art by Hans Hollein and the Schirn Kunsthalle exhibition hall by the Architekturbüro BJSS (Dietrich Bangert, Bernd Jansen, Stefan Jan Scholz and Axel Schultes). Together they will redesign the urban fabric of the *Altstadt* area by dint of architectonic revaluation and valorisation of all of its historical and semantic layers:

“From an architectural point of view, the projects represent a sign of the times, a revision – not a rejection – of the tenets of Modernism in light of the disastrous post-war planning improvements which scarred Frankfurt’s city centre. [...] the Frankfurt museums have been predicated upon the unstated ‘respect’ for history, the preservation of old buildings and their integration with the new” (Burdett, 1991, p.24).

The goals of this paper are to analyse various aspects of two major museum projects in the *Altstadt* area and to argue with researchers that consider them unrelated to the urban context and devoid of programmatic content (Roberts, 1998, p.91). The paper is guided by the hypothesis that the creation of important contemporary art institutions on the north bank of the river Main was a thoroughly thought-out, multipronged urbanistic program, not just a number of random architectural interventions.



Figure 1. *Altstadt* of Frankfurt am Main before 1944 (Sauerwein, 1911).

Figure 2. *Altstadt* of Frankfurt am Main after the World War II (1960).

Museum of Modern Art

The tender for the construction of the Museum of Modern Art (*MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst*), the youngest museum of modern and contemporary art in Frankfurt, was announced in 1983. In May of the same year the victory was awarded to Hans Hollein's project², but the construction began only in June 1987. Four years later, on June 6, 1991 the museum was inaugurated. At present its collection includes over 5 000 works of modern and contemporary art, representing the chronological range from 1960 till today.

As in the previous project of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Mönchengladbach, Hollein proceeded from the landscape, topographic situation and specificity of the urban environment: the building site of 2 140 m² had the shape of an elongated triangle, surrounded by few pre-war high-rise houses and several post-war buildings of the same scale. Formerly the site was occupied by a block of same high-rise buildings, completely destroyed during the war. Apart from its sociocultural functions, the program quality of the museum was a unique plastic imagery of the architectural embodiment. Entrance to the museum is located on the corner of Domstraße and Braubachstraße, near the St. Bartholomew's Cathedral, which is a symbolic and semantic dominant of the Frankfurt's historical landscape. However, the immediate proximity to Berliner Straße, the main traffic artery of the area, impacts greatly on the urban nature of the site. Thus, Hollein could not help considering the necessity of involving the museum building in an intense rhythm and multifaceted structure of the urban environment.

The building volume is a triangular prism (Figs. 3,4) which consists of numerous separate geometric bodies, resembling a child's construction set. The postmodern collage is formed by structural and ornamental elements, wedged into the tectonic body: stone cornices, portico columns, gabled roofs, windows of various shapes and sizes, as well as a number of steel elements – both building components and free-standing decorative forms. The interior and exterior are in a close structural relationship: the arrangement of elements, declared in the external composition, finds its reflection and further contextual development in the museum's interior spaces. There are 40 of them, differing in configuration, surface, functional and aesthetic features. Exhibition rooms (4 150 m²), art workshops (519 m²), library and administration rooms (714 m²) are arranged on three floors of the building. The centre of the interior composition is the main exhibition hall of asymmetrical layout, topped off with a curved roof lantern (Fig. 5). The reference frame, developed by the architect, allows to randomly choose the direction of the movement and, therefore, to perceive museum spaces from different visual perspectives. Involvement in a compositional intrigue is

carried out by the constant change of architectural modules and contraposition of structural elements: a square room alternates with a triangular or an oval one (Fig. 6), round columns are combined with sharp angles, narrow staircases (Fig. 7) open into ample halls, roof lanterns are combined with windows of various shapes.

In his article *To exhibit, to place, to deposit: thoughts on the Museum of Modern Art, Frankfurt* Hans Hollein determines the connection between architectural space and a work of art as an essential component of the museum concept:

"[...] the question of tectonic and architectonic nature of wall, floor and ceiling is the basis of accommodating works of art and conveying their message. Neutral space doesn't exist: there are only characteristic spaces of a different magnitude (and access to them), with which the work of art enters into a dialogue – in reciprocal intensification. Whether individual room or hall, the direct confrontation of the work with the building is the essential characteristic of the display – compartments and partitions are only adequate in specifically temporary situations and run the risk of becoming a backdrop" (Hollein, 1991, p.41).

Hollein also emphasises the role of architectural design in a general representation of the museum as a sociocultural institution: *"The quality of a good museum building is also its suitability as a utensil, dwelling, catalyst of art"* (Hollein, 1991, p.41). In case of Frankfurt, the contemporary art museum assumes semantic functions of the forum – an open public space – and metaphorically recreates within its walls some formal characteristics of the historic *Altstadt*. James M. Bradburne, former director general of the Museum of Applied Art of Frankfurt, claims: *"Almost by default, the museum has become one of the Western society's last truly public spaces. [...] Real physical space is indispensable. It is part of being an active participant in the world around you"* (Bradburne, 2015, p.17). Citing Louis Kahn, Bradburne also draws a parallel between the museum building and the urban composition: *"If the street is a 'room by agreement', as Louis Kahn once said, surely the museum is a house by agreement"* (Bradburne, 2015, p.17). In other words, the art museum becomes not only a part of the urban landscape, but also an active catalyst of sociocultural processes within it.



Figure 3. Museum of Modern Art, main entrance (Kröcher, 2009).



Figure 4. Museum of Modern Art, aerial view (Schneider, n.d.)

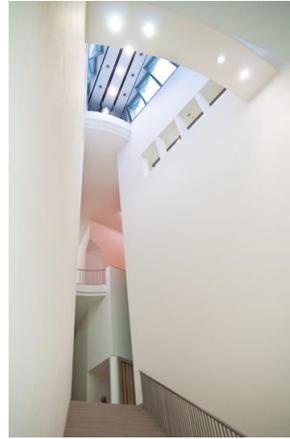
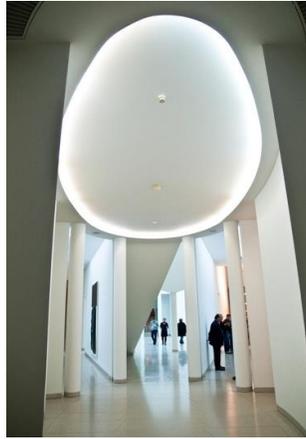


Figure 5. Museum of Modern Art, central hall (Schneider, n.d.).

Figure 6. Museum of Modern Art, oval hall (Helmond, 2009).

Figure 7. Museum of Modern Art, stairway (Helmond, 2009).

Schirn Kunsthalle

Another important art institution in Frankfurt is the Schirn Kunsthalle exhibition hall (also known as *Kulturshirn*) which, since its opening in 1986, has arranged more than 200 exhibitions of modern and contemporary art. The cultural centre (Fig. 8) includes exhibition spaces with a total area of 2 000 m², offices, recreational and technical areas, rooms of the children's music school, a bookstore and a restaurant.

The name of the Schirn Kunsthalle appeals to its location in the area between the St. Bartholomew's Cathedral on its east and the Römerberg square on its west, on the site of the now-defunct Schirnstraße, along which the shops of the Frankfurt's guild of butchers were housed for centuries. At that time the neighbourhood was considered as an important urban public space: *"The official term for the area is 'Freizeit- und Kulturschirn' – 'schirn' being an old Frankfurt word for the open-fronted shops which were a common feature of the old town and provided popular meeting-places"* (Risse, Rodel and Rodel, 1987, p.102). In 1944 almost all of the buildings in that area have been destroyed; the site remains empty until the construction of the exhibition hall.

The Architekturbüro BJSS, headed by Dietrich Bangert, Bernd Jansen, Stefan Scholz and Axel Schultes, was working on the project of the Schirn Kunsthalle between 1983 and 1986. The design concept was based on the strategy of integration of the two *Altstadt's* extant segments into a single urban ensemble. The elongated building³ of the cultural centre, with its continuous portico and a glass-domed atrium inside a concrete rotunda (Fig. 9), becomes a focal point of the ensemble and, at the same time, an intermediary between its elements: the pedestrian axis proposes a scenario of passage from the Römerberg square to the St. Bartholomew's Cathedral and vice versa through the Schirn's rotunda. The atrium inside of it, which is also an entrance to the exhibition hall, is raised above the ground level by several flights of stairs and becomes a culmination of the scenario. The ensemble also includes the inner area just behind the Römerberg square, formed by the Schirn Kunsthalle and the surrounding buildings. In spite of its small size, this area combines functions of a public transport hub (underneath there is the Dom/Römer subway station) and sociorecreational functions (a space for street cafes, a meeting point for citizens, etc.).

The symbolic role of a connecting link between the square and cathedral is also seen in the Schirn Kunsthalle's architectural plan: a cruciform volume, which resembles the Latin cross plan of the Romanesque or Gothic cathedral, is oriented along an east-west axis. In the interior this axis corresponds to the main exhibition "nave" (Fig. 10). Thus, the architectures played up the concept of the Schirn Kunsthalle as a "temple of art"⁴, focused exclusively on commercial exhibition projects (the cultural centre does not have its own art collection). The genesis of this concept goes back to the 1960s – 1980s. In the 1990s the model of the "temple/shopping center" museum⁵ finds its realisation in the majority of newly built contemporary art museums and exhibition halls of the time. This model follows the postmodern principles of multivalence, polymorphism and pluralism, described in detail by Charles Jencks⁶.

Turning to the architectural design of the Schirn Kunsthalle, its layout consists of simple stereometric shapes, such as cube, parallelepiped, cylinder, prism. The deliberately strict stereometry is contrasted with the urban context, but does not come into intense conflict with it due to the refined plastic style of the building. The centre of the composition is the rotunda, displaced from the main axis. Its external volume, completely lined with sandstone slabs, contrasts

with the glass-domed ceiling and the glass curtain of its internal space. The architectonic character of the “nave” is also based on the contrast: square columns, covered with sandstone, bear on a massive volume of glass and steel under a gabled roof.

Many of the researchers who have analysed the Schirn Kunsthalle in their publications, pay attention to its semantic plurality. Thus, in the article *A gallery between the Cathedral and Town Hall: the Kulturschirn at the Römerberg, Frankfurt* Franco Stella writes about the aspects of its symbolic and structural ambivalence:

“Speer-like visions’, ‘a machine-gun aimed at the Cathedral’, ‘postmodern formalistic games’, and on the other hand ‘cathedral of culture’, ‘stoa’ and ‘Italian Renaissance palazzo’. [...] Ancient and modern words, fragments of languages that have long been detached, are crowded into a fairly restricted urban space and do not always reveal the reason behind them with clarity, their punctilious reference to the history of the place and to its surviving testimonies” (Stella, 1987, pp.55,59).

Finally, the concept of plurality correlates with the dual role of “global”⁷ Frankfurt am Mine – the largest financial centre of continental Europe and, at the same time, one of the main cultural cities of Germany:

“Together with other community facilities in those areas of the historic centre richest in memories, with the ‘museum district’ on the left bank of the Main and with new buildings of the Trade Fair, it sustains with authority the ambitious objective of bestowing the role of cultural metropolis on Frankfurt, as a counterweight to its more established image as a financial centre, so prevalent that the city has earned itself the nickname of ‘Manhattan’” (Stella, 1987, p.57).



Figure 8. Schirn Kunsthalle (Miguletz, 2011).



Figure 9. Schirn Kunsthalle, atrium (Miguletz, 2011).

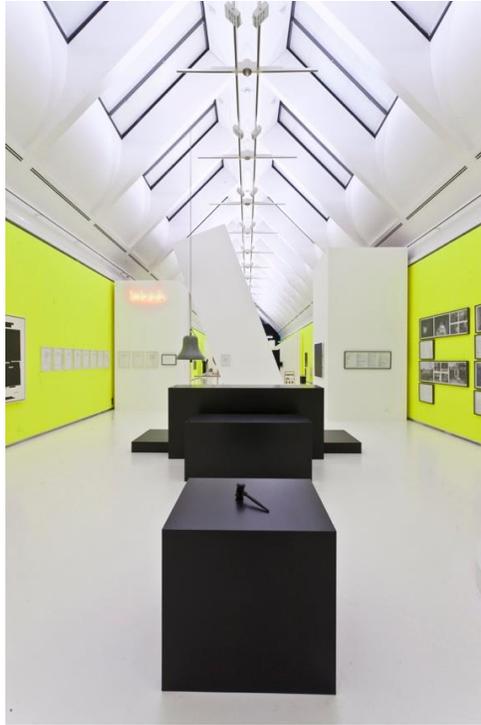


Figure 10. Schirn Kunsthalle, main exhibition "nave" (Miguletz, 2011).

Art institutions in the urban landscape of Frankfurt

The long process of remodeling and requalification of the Frankfurt city centre begins in the early 1970s. In 1972 reopens the History Museum (*Historisches Museum*) on Römerberg square, marking the future museum-centric urban policy of the subsequent mayor:

"In the late 1970s, mayor Walter Wallmann launched the ambitious redevelopment programme for the city's dismal museum landscape contained in one 'magic' word: Museumsufer⁸. The project [...] aimed to consolidate an eclectic and accidental accumulation of museums along the south side of the river in Schaumainkai" (Giebelhausen, 2003, p.84).

In its next phase the project extended to the north bank of the river, including the area of *Altstadt* and predetermining the construction of the Schirn Kunsthalle and the Museum of Modern Art⁹.

The case of the *Altstadt* was one of the first successful examples of the postmodern regeneration of urban context on a large scale. It has been carried out by means of new architectural forms, that continue to retain and transmit memory about the former context. At the same time Aldo Rossi was declaring the importance of historical dimensions of the urban area, evolving the *genius loci* concept: *"The city is the locus of the collective memory. [...] The collective memory participates in the actual transformation of the space in the works of the collective, [...] memory becomes the guiding thread of the entire complex urban structure"* (Rossi, 1982, p.130).

From the very beginning the *Museumsufer* project sparked intense controversy among researchers. Ingeborg Flagge (1988, p.172) was announcing the change of the Frankfurt's image from a banking-dominated city to a trendsetter of new urban lifestyle. Luca Basso Peressut (1986, p.3) reveals the coherence of the project interventions, *"aimed at a general reconstruction of the urban identity of a city"*. Peter Davey, on the contrary, was criticising them: *"The challenge remains to give urbanity and humanity to the potentially liberating, plural revolution of Modernism rather than trying to breathe life into badly stitched together Frankenstein monsters composed of dead elements of the past"* (Davey, 1987, p.74). David Dunster also claims the new museum buildings of Frankfurt to be *"random basket of currencies, pragmatic undertakings from various sources, impossibly under-theorised"* (Dunster, 1989, p.36).

However, in time it became clear that the *Museumsufer* project was not only about filling in urban voids behind the Römerberg square, but about establishing a new paradigm for the social, cultural and economic development of the whole area. This museum-centric paradigm unifies historiography and museification in the urban field. The memory

about the former urban tissue is not literally reconstructed *in loco*, it is conserved and valorised by means of museum architecture.

A formal analysis of the area structure reveals that the heights of both museum buildings correspond to the surrounding built environment. New forms are accurately incorporated in the allotted land parcels, following their historical and contextual logic. They assume the role of connecting links between survived pre-war buildings, in order to recreate an integral urban matrix. A postmodern reinterpretation of architectural elements and patterns historically inherent in the area – recurring theme of a gabled roof, asymmetrical facade compositions, geometric sharpness of architectonic volumes – contributes to its further integrity. The geometry of metaphoric reverberations is also used: the rotunda of the Schirn echoes the St. Bartholomew Cathedral's tower and the tower of the Old St. Nicholas Church (*Alte Nikolaikirche*) at the Römerberg square, its cruciform volume is practically a reflection of the Cathedral's plan. The location of the Schirn Kunsthalle and the Museum of Modern Art allows to set new axes of movement within the *Altstadt* area and to reorganise its urban composition, making it more consolidated and efficient (Fig. 11).

In 2007 the City Council of Frankfurt adopted a new strategy for the development of 7 000 m² in the centre of *Altstadt*, liberated after the demolition in 2010 of the brutalist Technical City Hall building (*Technisches Rathaus*). In 2009 the city-owned Dom-Römer GmbH was established, in order to manage planning and realization of the Dom-Römer project (Fig. 12), based on the authentic pre-war image of the area (Fig. 13). In 2011, after an architectural competition being held, the urban project was presented publicly:

"15 reconstructions and 20 new buildings, incorporating typical style elements of Frankfurt's old town, together create a residential area that is typical of an old city centre with a successful mixture of old and new. Around 200 people will make this their new home. As in the past, the quarter will also house little shops, restaurants, premises for local craftsmen and picturesque squares" (Dom-Römer GmbH, 2011).

Previously, such a literal concept has already been realised in Frankfurt, starting from the 1950s, in the accurate reconstruction of timber-framed buildings at the Römerberg square. It was completed in the late 1980s with the rebuilding of the east part of the square – the *Ostzeile*: *"Under the sign of post-modernity, the historical east line could be incorporated as a legitimate citation of the past"* (Rodenstein, 2010, p.168). The initial phase of the Dom-Römer project started in January 2012, in spite of a continuing high-flown discussion and contradictory opinions:

"Still, the design was attacked from all sides and the debate took a fully unexpected, surprising new direction after an alternative to the modern plan was made public [...] The memory of the old city was provoked by a model of the image of the old city, which was seen at first by the younger generation as 'simply beautiful' and for which they became advocates" (Rodenstein, 2010, pp.170,173).

Comparing the *Dom-Römer* and the *Museumsufer* projects, we will find the inconsistency and incoherence of the first one: the tactics of scrupulous architectural imitation can lead to depriving the *Altstadt* of its urban identity, reducing it to a papier-mâché theatrical set. The *Altstadt's* contemporary art institutions, on the contrary, introduce a different semantic quality in the area, create favourable rapports between built and open space, and seek to provide a new interpretation of its historical landscape.

Construction of the Schirn Kunsthalle and the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt am Main has marked new tendencies in the international museum practice of subsequent years. At the same time, these institutions are crucial for the contemporary urban design: regeneration of the *Altstadt* by means of museum architecture has formed important preconditions for the museum-centric urban paradigm of the last two decades.



Figure 11. *Altstadt* of Frankfurt am Main and its contemporary art institutions, aerial view (Grebe, 2006).



Figure 12. Dom-Romer project (2011).



Figure 13. Hühnermarkt square in pre-war *Altstadt* (1900).

Notes:

¹ Germ. "old town".

² By that time Hollein have already had a considerable experience in the design of large-scale museum projects which had received international fame. In 1972 – 1982 he was working on the Abteiberg Museum in Mönchengladbach; in 1985 the project was awarded the Pritzker Prize. In 1977 – 1978 Hollein was working on the interiors of the Museum of Glass and Ceramics in Tehran.

³ The building of the Schirn Kunsthalle is 140 m long.

⁴ One of the first historians who have written about an art museum as a temple, was Benjamin Ives Gilman. According to his work *Museum ideals: of purpose and method*, an art museum collection is gathered "in the interest of ideal":

“A museum of science is in essence a school; a museum of art in essence a temple” (Gilman, 1918, p.81). This perception of an art museum became one of the core postulates of the modern museology.

⁵ The term goes back to the Charles Jencks’s publications *The contemporary museum* (1997) and *The spectacular museum – the museum between cathedral and shopping center. Facing contradictions* (2000): “In its totality, contradictory components generated the main contradiction of our times – secular temple. Who can blame the museum for creating the equivalent of a mystical epiphany, especially today, when the church is going through a credibility crisis? [...] A blockbuster exhibition, a shopping centre and a million-dollar painting. It is safe to say, where exactly these commercial functions originated: at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the new underground galleries of the Louvre in Paris. Super-exhibitions [...] make large numbers of visitors, large shopping facilities and extremely high turnover. [...] Museum tends to become a contraposition to opposing forces, that pull it in different directions” (Jencks, 2000, pp.8-14).

⁶ Charles Jencks writes about the pluralism of the postmodern architecture in the publication *Postmodern and late modern: the essential definitions* (1987). Later Jencks will formulate thirteen positions of postmodern architecture. The first position states: “Multivalence is preferred to univalence, imagination to fancy” (Jencks, 1996, p.131).

⁷ According to the report of the Globalization and World Ranking Research Institute (GaWC, 2012), Frankfurt am Main is considered to be an “Alpha city” or a “global city”. The term “world city”, which meaning is the city that has a key importance for the different regions of the world and has a significant political, economical and cultural influence on them, is also used.

⁸ Germ. “museum embankment”.

⁹ The complete list of museums that were part of the *Museumsufer* project included: German Film Museum (*Deutsches Filmmuseum*, 1979 – 1984, Bofinger & Partner), German Architecture Museum (*Deutsches Architekturmuseum*, 1979 – 1984, O.M. Ungers), Museum of Applied Art (*MAK Museum für Angewandte Kunst*, 1979 – 1985, R. Meier); Archaeological Museum (*Archäologische Museum*, former Museum Pre- and Early History [*Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte*], 1982 – 1989, J.P. Kleihues), Schirn Kunsthalle exhibition hall (also known as *Kulturschirn*, 1983 – 1986, Architekturbüro BJSS), Museum of Modern Art (*MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst*, 1983 – 1991, H. Hollein), Museum for Communication (*Museum für Kommunikation*, former German Postal Museum [*Bundespostmuseum*], 1984 – 1990, Behnisch & Partner), Jewish Museum (*Jüdisches Museum*, 1985 – 1988, A.J. von Kostelac), Portikus Exhibition Hall (*Portikus*, 1987, M.-T. Deutsch, K. Dreissigacker), Museum of Ancient Sculpture extension (*Liebieghaus-Museum alter Plastik*, 1987 – 1990, Scheffler & Warschauer), Icon Museum (*Ikonomuseum*, 1988 – 1990, O.M. Ungers), Städel Museum extension (*Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie*, 1988 – 1990, G. Peichl). The new building for the Museum of World Cultures (*Weltkulturen Museum*, former Museum of Ethnology [*Museum für Völkerkunde*]) designed by R. Meier in 1989 – 1996 has never been constructed.

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