Total Recall

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In 2009, Facebook surpassed one hundred and seventy-five million users globally. The online forum now continues to grow by six hundred thousand users every day. As more and more domestic and professional users are subscribing to online databases (uploading mostly private profile information), their virtual profiles have begun traveling the web in an uncontrolled manner. Meanwhile, withdrawing from those databases has become a problem. Not all websites and social networks are created equal when it comes to breaking up. As an offshoot phenomenon, there are now expert companies such as MyReputation that do nothing else but delete information, removing photographs and images: privately chartered mercenaries that search the web for information that users no longer want to see circulating the virtual cosmos. Increasingly, it slowly dawns on them that once they have uploaded and circulated information, it can no longer simply be taken out of the circuit – it keeps on producing echoes in the virtual world, sometimes productive, sometimes outlandish, frightening, or even damaging. One's reputation has ventured into a persistent thin air, despite all attempts to efface it.

The Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic) was situated on Berlin's Schlossplatz, serving as the seat of the East German Parliament. In February 1945, allied bombs left the Berlin Stadtschloss a burnt-out ruin. The East German authorities eventually demolished it, as they saw it as a symbol of Prussian imperialism. Afterwards, the bronze-mirrored Palast was constructed between 1973 and 1976 on the site of the former Stadtschloss and, between 2006 and 2008, was fully deconstructed in order to make way for a planned reconstruction of the Stadtschloss. To close the circle, construction is due to begin on a new palace modelled on the original. Although the Palast was essentially a building that demarcated national power both in style and physical scale, it was also regarded as a national landmark imbued with nostalgia – a cross between West German rock star Udo Lindenberg, East German leader Erich Honecker, and the Berlin band Einstürzende Neubauten.

Berlin has always been a place in which the longing for a correction of historic evidence has been particularly present. Every new wave of power, any new political regime presented an interest in the destruction of spatial-historic fact while attempting to physicalize a false nostalgia. After the fall of the Wall, it became clear that most of the superstructure of the Palast was heavily infested with asbestos, which led to an instant debate about whether the building had to be renovated or simply knocked down. This counterfeit argument over materials was used to push for a political adjustment of the physical situation and reality at hand.

Berlin is a city of immediate history. From the point of view of the city's historical torments and the residual spaces at its borders, it reveals an aspect of the relationship to the city's historical layers and their distinct ideologies. Contemporary Berlin is currently projected as a porous landscape breathing silence – a city with inner peripheries, sudden changes, breaks, voids, and inconsistencies. All of Berlin's fragments reinforce the image of a city torn by historic forces. This impression, shared by locals and tourists alike, is one of a city with a horizon of icons, but in which so much has happened in such a short time, "that the ruins have barely kept pace with the rate of ideological displacement."[1] The city, like any other European

city, is an urban landscape bearing witness to all the forces that have shaped it throughout history. However, Berlin is different than any other European city because all of the forces that have tried to structure and arrange it run through the axes of history. The city has had to endure periods of absolute monarchy, Industrial Revolution, National Socialism, World War, free market economy after the war, Socialism, Cold War, the disappearance of the Communist regime, the reunification, the unparalleled building boom of the 1990s, and its current slowdown. Its built environment has had to cope with these political, economic, and military forces throughout history. The natural resilience of its built environment – the traditional sloth of architecture – has been pushed to the limit, both by the intensity of its historical waves and by the devastating energy of its rulers.
Urbanism and architecture, as the responsible stage designers of the contemporary city, have always played a major role in its identity. More than in any other city, Berlin's architectural and urban discourses have always been ideological. This relation with ideology can be seen as a general characteristic of the city: "Urbanism does not really exist, it is only an ideology in Marx's sense of the world. Architecture does exist, like Coca-Cola: Though coated with ideology, it is a real production, falsely satisfying a falsified need. Urbanism is comparable to advertising propagated around Coca-Cola – pure spectacular ideology ...."[2] However, as the subject of an intensified sequence of urban intervention – or ideological energy in Koolhaas's sense of the world – Berlin seems to be an exception as well as an excellent example. What remains hidden in other cities, the impact of a self-assured construction of identity on the everyday appearance of the city, is part of Berlin's everyday experience. Living or being in Berlin therefore means facing politics. Ideology and urbanism are closely entangled in Berlin. The city is visible today as the result of present and past ideologies superimposed on the urban landscape. The city presents a large amount of different physical structures coexisting on top of each other, originating in old and recent ideologies. Its buildings and places encode its past and give form to the city's history and identity. What is most surprising about its built environment, though, is not the specific chronology of historical eras, but the relation ship between the different layers of history at this very moment.
Berlin is clumsily unfinished. Its appearances do not match its different meanings, while architecture, as the discipline of space, is always implicated in the process of creating single controlled identities. The urbanistic intervention, apart from its origin in the desire to control, is situated in between the mental reassurance of an opaque past and an uncertain future. In order to trans form the fact of a city into the concept of a city, the existing environment needs to be mentally transformed into a surface that can be dealt with, into a city that awaits intervention. In this sense, the urban invention is always related to history, or better: to an image of history. The architecture of Berlin shows this constant involvement with history. The city seems to be stuck with an apparent insecurity that produces the desire to rewrite its history. Constantly reflecting their historical background, "Germans do not dream of a different future, but a different past."[3]
In every city, there has been a great need to construct symbols that signify historical periods. As representations of power in urban territories through architectural intervention, these symbols become parts of the city's memory. Berlin is short of these traditional icons for a simple reason: it is a city inflated with history but absent tradition – a territory which had to endure several processes of destruction, each calling for a redefinition of identity. There is no city more symbolic in terms of

rebuilding the city on the city. Berlin is moved by an intensified dialectic of construction and destruction, a mechanism of desire for identity and tabula rasa. As a result of the continual process of construction and destruction, it presents heterogeneity and instability. Moments of tabula rasa and the explicit construction of a unified identity produce a restless urban landscape of ideological scars. Its specific environment is the result of a process of constantly changing ideologies in both political as well as architectural and therefore urban terms.

The exposed layers of history in Berlin's urban environment contribute to the phenomenon at hand: this city of constant fragmentation offers a continuous stage for re-invention. This quality could also be understood as its historic catch-22: a permanent process of longing for ideologically driven action has left Berlin as a kind of loose fabric that allows the coexistence of differing urban models and signatures. Its identity is closely related to the concept of the urban void. History has been imprinted so brutally on the physical presence of the city that, besides the well-known ideological monumentality, there is an underlying stratum of ghostly present absences that recall the city's past. To many, it is Berlin's layering of present absences that hold the city's fascination. Contradictory as it may seem, absence does not only characterize the city, it also structures it. The now absent Wall remains in many ways a structuring principle for the united city in the same way that the divided city's two sides were defined by the absence of their counterpart.[4]

Architects dream to build. The confident lines on the drawing board signify plans directed towards a bright and shiny future. Traditionally, architects have always been standing on the frontline of modern society's warfare against what exists. They have been the ones to direct and design the city of tomorrow. The driving force of such an encounter is carried by a genuine faith in progress. However, the projections of their desire not only indicate sensitivity towards society, but also reveal a distorted hidden pleasure: the desire to build is supported by the desire for power. In their attempt to sell their subjective dreams for tangible vehicles of progress, architects luxuriate in the power handed over to them by society. Legitimizing their social position, though, means hiding this pleasure. Ethics are in the means of doing so: architects understand their power as a positive tool in making the world into a better place. Patronizing, ironic, dogmatic, or cynical, the different modes of communicating an ethical message are all directed in support of the architect's legitimacy. In the architect's head, however, there is a fundamental misconception concerning this desire. As opposed to their expectation – the illusion that their child made from stone will enhance the environment – reality offers no guarantee for a better future. This is partly connected to the specificity of architectural production in general: since architecture is bound to focus its energy on a limited location, it always leaves things behind. The margin, on the contrary, is the ultimate transitory position one can take. It is not a means to intervene in the world. As opposed to architectural structures and programs, it does not do anything for a nearby or faraway future. It is simply there – it offers a datum from which content may emerge.

When Walther Ulbricht gave the order to blast the Stadtschloss the Palast der Republik, as a replacement, was supposed to fill a vacuum. But although the Palast primarily functioned as the spatial manifestation of the Volkskammer, the East German parliament, it was also used as a public venue, which included cafes, a restaurant, sport facilities, and a club. This unusual mix was picked up by the 2004 initiative Volkspalast, which (referencing the work of English architect Cedric Price)

made use of the building as a cultural hub, a physical framework in which multiple and multi-facetted activities and discursive events could take place over the course of many months. At this point, the Palast was still physically present, or at least its facade was – the interior was somewhat of a hollow core, like a whale that had had its innards taken out. The temporary transformation of the building resembled the transition between a rocky past and uncertain future, a multifunctional reanimation of a glazed corpse, which in many ways had also been the ambition of Price's Fun Palace project in England in 1961, which he developed in association with theatre director Joan Littlewood. Price was one of the visionary architects of the late twentieth century who, through his challenging planning notion of the Non-plan, reinterpreted and spearheaded the relationship between spatial practice and temporal programming, often creating environments that would be responsive to visitors' needs and the many activities intended to take place there.

The Volkspalast's programmatic considerations (ranging from concert hall, theatre, exhibition space, labyrinth, club, and many more often spontaneously organized events and programs) echoed Price's practice. This urban laboratory for alternative and new forms of public, as well as for interaction and communication between the groups temporarily inhabiting those spaces, could be transformed and appropriated by its respective users. Apart from the fact that the Volkspalast was of course a direct result of the historic transformations of the Palast itself, it also responded to the situation within the architectural procession and spatial discourse per se: in architecture, over the preceding two decades, there has been an increasing obsession with formalism, especially the kind that is often based on nonsensical arguments and computer-generated excuses for a more ambitious and responsible political discourse. The majority of buildings were being planned and executed as selfreferential objects. Many architects continue to misunderstand the notion of architecture as a sculpturesque artistic endeavour. In contrast, one of Price's most valuable contributions, which could also be described as his essential paradigm, was the idea that a building does not necessarily have to be physical. He smartly interrogated the notion of progress: "If technology is the answer, what was the question?" Architecture is instead something that happens over time. That has been the nature of many of his projects and right now, in midst of the financial crisis, this approach is more topical and relevant than ever. In fact, these days, one could rephrase Price's question this way: "If parametric urbanism and large-scale development is the answer, what was the question?"

Price's built work most often had and still has the quality of a stage, a stage-set of sorts, a space of uncertainty and potentiality in which things can emerge and take place. Whatever happened in the physical space was something stage-worthy. When one investigates the way in which he was dealing with the question of authorship, the most relevant tool and component within the equation of each project was the way in which the protocols for use and strategic framework were "designed." Price understood himself in a subtle and humble way as a service provider of a kind of content that can happen in space.

The margin, as the immediate stage of architecture's side effects, offers a second perspective to this specific nature of architectural production. In opposition to architecture, the space of the margin allows for a more direct idea of process, a continual transparency of progress. The physical leftover is a ground of ephemeral traces, and offers simultaneity of difference - stratified information that the places of architectural development lack in their exclusiveness. In this respect, the margin

functions as the delayed catalyst of urban culture. This extra dimension to architecture's instrumentality enables us to understand the margin as a local recollection of the other, a memorial testimony of tactical space. Occupied by whispering narratives rather than visual representation, this continuity in space and time is the enormous resource that marginal territories present today as the ultimate buffer zone in the contemporary city. The margin evokes an architectural under - standing which lies far beyond its own discipline. The question remains, however, how to deal with the ever-present desire for implementation. Architecture is a practice of colonialism that tends to support and satisfy the desire to fill up the in between, to diminish its possibilities, to replace uncertainty with definition.

Bettina Pousttchi's phantom palace is titled *Echo*. It appears as a hologram on the Temporäre Kunsthalle, which was essentially intended as "a box" for local critical content production and display. But Pousttchi's temporary facade project is neither melancholic nor romantic to the extent that it could be described as borderline nostalgia. On the contrary: it produces a last reminder of how local politics, especially in and around the debate about rebuilding the Schloss, have become a farce and, moreover, simply display the populist and opportunistic fiction of Berlin as a historically adjusted and debugged city for the future international tourist.

One should not add here to the narrow-minded and long-winded debates around whether the Palast should have been destroyed or whether the Schloss should be rebuilt. The Palast is now gone and this is a reality that the city as well as the supposedly heterogeneous political space that is Germany should have dealt with, and now has to deal with. Pousttchi's installation presents neither a celebration nor a reconstruction of the Palast. From the point of view of a contemporary architect practicing within the discourse of contemporary spatial practice, it offers much more than a timely comment on something local: it produces an interim reminder of the other, set against the contemporary climate of formal practice devoid of criticism, devoid of content. The Palast's ambivalence – in its unique double function as a political space of representation and a public venue – is also presented as a visual recall, a temporal depiction that is lost on one's retina. While it embodies the experience that most of us have in Berlin's city center, one of marginality devoid of present or visible historical strata, it produces a feeling of present absence. Rather than a physical manifestation that was once there, it offers us a glimpse of a possibility, a past that was once present and could have been carried on into the future, but has now succumbed to a hologram that reminds us of the commands that Captain Kirk gives his transporter chief Montgomery Scott when he needs to transport back to the mothership. This phenomenon of absence is generic rather than bound to national heritage. It is something that everyone can experience in Berlin's sites of absence.

In urban terms, the installation should be understood much less as a political action and more as an experiment that attempts to understand the role that photography can play in the urban imagination and its personal, that is to say individual, processes of archiving history. The reflections and mirror images on Pousttchi's facade neither depict nor distort the concrete or actual urban fabric of the surroundings – they imagine a possible space beyond its locale. Moreover, *Echo* interrogates the current discourses around the potentiality of the Kunsthalle as a typology that presents a showcase of local critical artistic production. Pousttchi's piece takes this notion and question to the nth degree, both in terms of its content and scale as well as its urban potential and visibility, playing with the tourist gaze.

What mode of local criticality does it produce? How does it set itself apart from other artistic formats of representation such as the museum, Kunstverein, or gallery? Pousttchi's facade inverts this dilemma in order to make visible the conflict between the container, which is the Kunsthalle, and the political space and responsibility it is supposed to assume. Instead of a politicization on the inside, politics has become a mere facade.

As it is often impossible to withdraw one's profile from the Internet, it seems to be difficult to pretend that by simply planning otherwise, a discourse and debate about a political space can simply be negated and ruled out. While Pousttchi's project renders the impossibility of erasing physical matter and discourse from history, it experiments with the physical and conceptual scale of media as a means to critically reposition and call into a question a debate that has gone on for so long that it no longer manages to polarize. Where Leipzig's 1989 Monday demonstrations and the transformative potential of the 2004 Volkspalast were symbols of a slow march, not through the institutions, but towards a quiet and peaceful revolution, the Palast itself was never reinterpreted in terms of its possible use and program; it simply changed hands from stateauthority to urban initiatives. As the building has come to symbolize the impotence of the architectural profession, it becomes clear that its future has always been determined by political considerations beyond the critical. Symbolizing the impossibility of erasing identity's potential of the pastprogressive, Pousttchi's installation, more than anything, illustrates that when Gil Scott-Heron said the revolution will not be televised, he was wrong. It was.

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[1] Brian Hatton, "Letters from Berlin," *AA Files* 21(1991), 102–03.

[2] Rem Koolhaas in *More Is More: OMA/Rem Koolhaas – Theorie und Architektur*, ed. Heike Sinning (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 2000), 99.

[3] Philipp Oswalt, *Berlin Stadt ohne Form* (Munich: Prestel, 2000), 56.

[4] Richard Shusterman, "Ästhetik der Abwesenheit," *Lettre International* 43 (1998), 30–35.

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