

THE PALACE OF THE REPUBLIC IN BERLIN – THE DEMOLITION OF A POLITICALLY AND AESTHETICALLY BURDENED BUILDING

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“The pleasant rehabilitation of the historical – or more precisely: the “pre-modern”– city for current urban planning principles in the last generation and also the reactivation of the traditional layout of a city in terms of the “European City” must not turn into blind revanchism against the modern heritage.”

Jörg Haspel, 2000 (Chief Conservator, Berlin Monument Authority)

The Palace of the Republic in Berlin was one of the most significant buildings of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). From 1973 to 1990, not only did the Palace house the East German Parliament – the “Volkskammer”, it was also a house of culture and until it was closed in September 1990 this building was a favourite venue for the citizens and visitors of Berlin. After being closed, this former representation building was totally destroyed in an eighteen-year long painful process and the dismantling was just finished last year. The Palace was an important representative of the so-called “GDR-Modern”, an architectural period of the 1960s and 1970s in East Germany that will be explained in more detail later on. Sadly, the East Berlin Palace shares its fate with several other exponents of the “Late-Modern” architecture. They were not only adapted to new requirements, in many cases they were totally remodelled or sometimes completely demolished.

But what were the reasons for the demolition of the Palace of the Republic? What did its modern design vocabulary contribute to this decision?

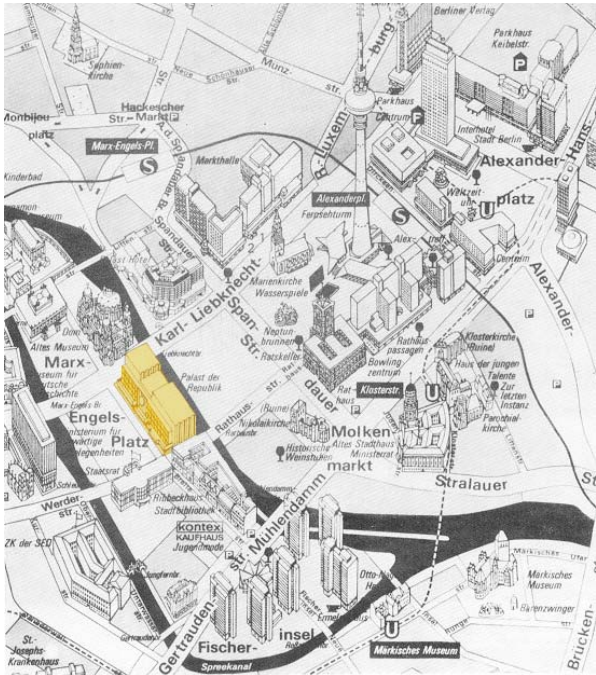


1. Main façade of the Palace of the Republic, 1980s (© Berlin Monument Authority)

BUILDING HISTORY AND BODY STRUCTURE

The Palace of the Republic was erected between 1973 and 1976 in the historical centre of the city. The building was located on the site of the former Royal Palace that was badly damaged in World War II and eventually destroyed in 1950 by order of Walter Ulbricht – chief of the Communist Party and Head of State of the GDR at that time – claiming that it was a symbol of Prussian imperialism. Twenty-three years after the demolition of the Royal Palace, the Palace of the Republic occupied a part of its plot with a new content. The ambition of the GDR government was to create a public building in the city centre, with numerous restaurants and bars, an art gallery, a theatre and other venues offering a variety of high and popular culture.

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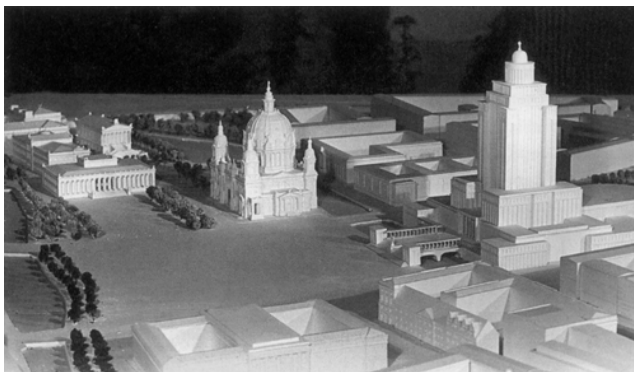


3: "National forum" of the GDR, the former Marx-Engels-Platz, with the Palace of the Republic (in front), the Foreign Ministry (behind, demolished in 1995) and the Staatsratsgebäude (left) © IRS, Erkner

2. The Palace of the Republic in the heart of Berlin

Viewed from Unter den Linden, the main historic boulevard of Berlin, the Palace of Republic constituted an important landmark. The Palace was located in the heart of the historical city centre, on the middle of an island in the river Spree, close to four world-famous museums.² During GDR times the square in front of the Palace, between the Old Museum and the Staatsratsgebäude was called Marx-Engels-Platz. The Marx-Engels-Platz was the national forum (Staatsforum) of the GDR with the Palace of the Republic as the House of Parliament located on the east side of the square, the Foreign Ministry, demolished in 1995, on the west and the Staatsratsgebäude, which housed the collective head of state and which was listed as a monument in 2003, on the south. In 1994, the Marx-Engels-Platz was renamed "Schlossplatz" in memory of the destroyed Royal Palace which gave an inkling of the future development.

The Palace of the Republic was in complete contradiction to the building that was destined for this area in the 1950s. After the foundation of the GDR in 1949, the Party leaders wanted to erect a dominant neoclassic skyscraper in place of the demolished Royal Palace as a symbol of the young Socialist state. In GDR terminology, this government building was called the "Central Building" ("Zentrales Gebäude").

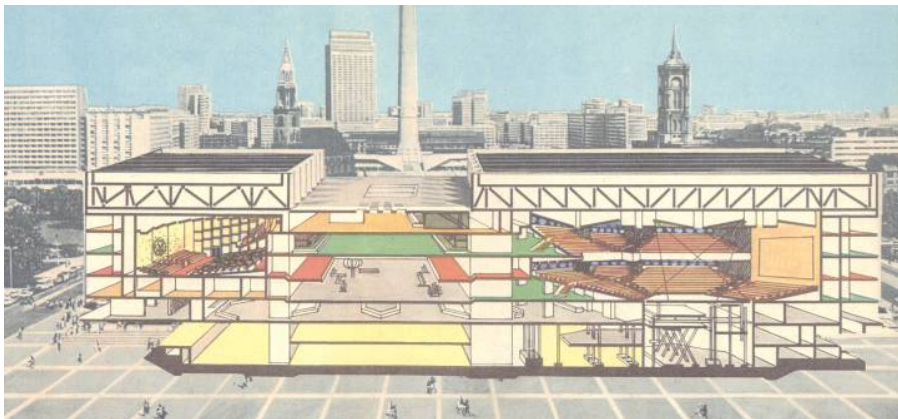


4. One of the many proposals for the "Central Building" in East Berlin: Richard Paulick's high-rise, 1951

² In 1999, the Pergamon Museum, the Old National Gallery, the Old Museum and the New Museum were enlisted on the World Heritage List as "Museum Island".

However, in the seventies, instead of the planned skyscraper, the Palace of the Republic was built. In the early seventies the GDR government attached great importance to presenting themselves as being modern and cosmopolitan. Therefore, the “Central Building” also needed to have a design vocabulary consistent with that of international modern architecture. In this regard, the Palace, as it was built, offered an adequate response: an asymmetric configuration, cubic structure, flat roof, curtain wall and the indented ground floor.

The Palace was 180 metres long, 86 metres wide, the asymmetric lower part – the foyer area – was 25 metres high and the parts in the north and the south were 32 metres high – they housed two large auditoriums, one for the parliament and one adaptable hall for different events.



5. Construction and interior of the Palace of the Republic (© Frösi 9/1975, magazine of the former GDR-youth organisation)

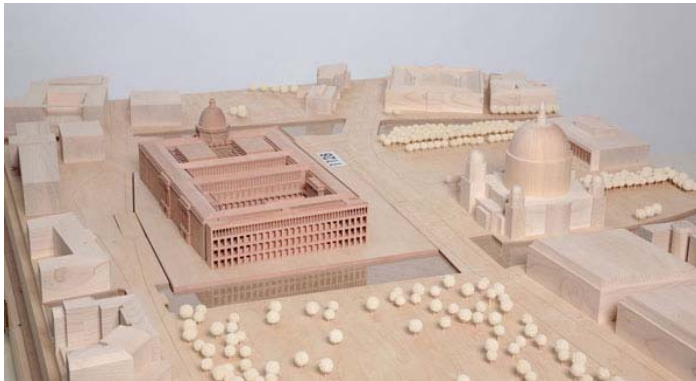
The multipurpose palace was only in use for 14 years. The collapse of the GDR also ushered the end of its most representative building. In September 1990, the year of Germany’s reunification, the House of Culture was closed. The official reason given was the contamination of various parts of the building with asbestos. The biggest problem was the asbestos sprayed onto the steel construction.

Today, there are plans to reconstruct the Baroque Hohenzollern Palace. After a long debate about the function and future role of the historical centre, in 2002 and again in 2006, the German Parliament decided in favour of rebuilding the facades of the destroyed Royal Palace and consequently, removing the GDR Palace. The demolition started in February 2006 and the official terminology disguised the actual facts by calling this as a process of “removal” and “dismantling”.



6. The demolition of the Palace took a long time from 2006 until 2008, photo: January 2008 (© Lars Kinder)

Of course, a detailed reconstruction of the totally destroyed Royal Palace is out of question. It is impossible to reconstitute a monument with a 500-year building history and all its changes and disruptions even if some sculptures of the façade have survived the demolition in 1950. The planned "Humboldt-Forum" will have replicas of the historical facades of the Royal Residence on three sides as reminiscence of history and as an alleged repairing of the cityscape. However, behind these facades, modern construction and contemporary interiors will be erected. The "Humboldt-Forum" will house a museum, a library and other cultural and scientific institutions.



7. Model of Franco Stella's "Humboldt-Forum" (© Franco Stella)

"GDR-MODERN": POST WAR MODERNISM AND INTERNATIONAL "LATE-MODERN" – AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE THE STYLE

In the German Democratic Republic the development of modern architecture followed a path of its own. In the initial years after World War II, architecture and urban planning in the Soviet Occupation Zone and in the Western Occupation Zones developed in a comparable way: in both parts of Germany there were ambitions to rejoin the modern movement of the pre-war time. But in East Germany this development was disrupted by the foundation of the German Democratic Republic in 1949. The new government ideology demanded that an expression was to be found in a design vocabulary that was different from the western architectural language. Therefore, GDR architecture of the fifties was – influenced by the Soviet architecture – based on historical styles, primarily a kind of neoclassicism. This period of GDR architecture lasted from 1949 until about 1960 and due to its design vocabulary it is called "Architecture of the National Building Tradition". It was only after the death of Stalin in 1953 and a shift towards the more competitive, industrialised architecture in the USSR that modern architecture in the GDR also experienced a reassessment. This process started in the late fifties and became relevant for the governmental and other representative buildings in the sixties. Currently, researchers characterise this architectural period of a "caught up modern"³ between 1960 and circa 1980 as "GDR-Modern". Particularly in the early seventies the ideologists abandoned the claim of a design vocabulary of their own. On the contrary, modern architecture was meant to highlight the alleged cosmopolitanism and internationality of the GDR.

The Palace of the Republic was a real child of the "GDR-Modern". Its architectural design – the horizontal shape, the flat roof with the high fascia, the marble-trimmed cubes of the two halls and the mirrored glass-curtain wall – simultaneously reflected the post-war architecture of the fifties and early sixties as well as the architectural tendencies of the time when it was built. This becomes clear in comparison with a similar building type, the western buildings of culture and congress centres. A majority of the buildings of culture and the conference halls of the "Late-Modern" style built in the sixties and seventies show ground plans and building shapes inspired by contemporary structuralism. They were built as big, stacked and bent sculptures; their high fascias hide auditoriums and the structure of the facades changes between open, glassy and enclosed, natural stone-trimmed sections. Typical exponents are the Congress and Concert Hall "Finlandia" in Helsinki by Alvar Aalto (1962-71) or the Congress Centre in Hamburg (1970-73). The large, glazed rectangular cuboid of the Palace of the Republic has many features similar to those of the theatres, houses of culture and congress

³ Thomas Topfstedt: Die nachgeholte Moderne. Architektur und Städtebau in der DDR während der 50er und 60er Jahre. In: Gabi Dolf-Bonekämper/Hilturd Kier (Hg.): Städtebau und Staatsbau im 20. Jahrhundert. Berlin 1996, P. 39-55.

centres of the fifties and early sixties like the German Opera in Berlin (1956-61) by Fritz Bornemann or the Music Theatre in Gelsenkirchen (1959) by Werner Ruhnau. The conspicuous gold-coloured curtain wall, the trademark of the Palace, was a very popular architectural motif in the two decades since its first realisation at the Seagram Corporation headquarters (1958) in New York, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.



8. The Music Theatre in Gelsenkirchen, North Rhine-Westphalia (1959) by Werner Ruhnau, an example of transparent glass-cuboid architecture of the 1950s.



9. The Congress Centre in Hamburg (1970-73) by Jost Schramm and Gerd Pempelfort as a representative of a typical "Late-Modern" building.

DEMOLITION IN SPITE OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

With the demolition of the Palace of the Republic, reunified Germany sacrificed a building of special importance in German history, particularly the four decades of East German architectural history. The reasons for the demolition were manifold, but the ecological one, the argument based on asbestos pollution, exploited to justify the demolition was, in reality, only of secondary significance. Nobody doubts the importance of asbestos abatement, but the total destruction of the building was certainly not necessary.

No doubt, the Palace was burdened with a political mortgage. As the House of Parliament and one of the most representative government buildings, after the collapse of the GDR it served as a symbol of this state. The political associations of the Palace of the Republic after the end of the GDR and all the subsequent emotional debates complicated the process of reflected dealing with this former representative building and significant monument. In this case, eventually the building was held responsible for the misdeeds of the former political regime and this resulted in its demolition.

Apart from political, ideological and ecological reasons for demolition, the building was also denigrated for aesthetic reasons. As an exponent of the “GDR-Modern” the Palace in Berlin was affected by the currently prevalent “cultural revolution against Post War Modernism”⁴. This kind of “cultural revolution” has also been noticeable in numerous demolitions since the nineties in Berlin – in both the eastern and western parts of the city. This destructive urban planning affected, first and foremost, buildings of the sixties and seventies. The rejection of the “GDR-Modern” for aesthetic reasons was quite obvious in the dispute centring around the Palace of the Republic. It involved rejection of the specific design vocabulary of the “GDR-Modern” as a mixture of the Post-War Modernism and the international “Late-Modern” of the sixties and seventies: the cubic, asymmetric shape plus the facade of marble-trimmed structure and coloured, mirrored curtain wall.

It is interesting to note that, whilst many “GDR-Modern” buildings have been demolished, prominent buildings of the early phase of the GDR, erected in the design vocabulary of the so-called “Architecture of the National Tradition” (1949-1960), as well as of the last decade of the GDR, built in a kind of “GDR-Postmodernism” (1980-89), are currently NOT in the focus of any debate and thus do not seem to be in similar danger. Indeed some splendid buildings of these periods have already been listed as historic monuments, for example East Berlin’s main boulevard, erected in the fifties, the Stalinallee (1952-58) or the Nikolai Quarter, reconstructed in the eighties in a kind of post-modern historicism (1981-87).



10. A significant exponent of the “Architecture of National Tradition”: building of the former Stalinallee (since 1961 Karl-Marx-Allee) in Berlin. (© Lars Kinder). Interestingly the “Architecture of the National Tradition”, which resulted from a need of architectural separation in the former GDR, is generally accepted today.

The buildings and cityscapes of the “GDR-Modern” are victims of a special stigmatization: although their value as a historical monument has been made clear, only in some cases the monument protection is successful in enlisting them. There is a vehement public and political opposition. This rejection is not the least a result of the prejudice, the industrialisation of the building process and the lack of freelance architects in the GDR have only produced utility standard architecture with low demands of architectural design and quality.

But monument protection is also responsible for the unloved, and not only of widely appreciated historical witnesses, if they have an outstanding significance in our history. As a German conservator stated a few years ago: “Protection of historical monuments could not be only for the aesthetic beauty and ideological and political comfortable and popular.”⁵ History – and of course, architectural history – represented by the Palace of the Republic must not be disposed off by demolition and new construction. The protection of a building is not corresponding to the approval of the political system that erected it.

⁴ Peter Krieger: Spiegelnde Curtain Walls als Projektionsflächen für politische Schlaglichter. In: Hermann Hipp/Ernst Seidl (Hg.): Architektur als politische Kultur. Philosophia Practica. Berlin 1996. P. 297-311, here p. 299.

⁵ „Vom Denkmalschutz (...) kann nicht nur das ästhetisch Schöne und ideologisch wie politisch Bequeme und Populäre betroffen sein.“ (Ludger J. Sutthoff: Kulturhäuser – Zentren des politischen und kulturellen Lebens in der DDR. In: Deutsches Nationalkomitee für Denkmalschutz (Hg.): Verfallen und vergessen oder aufgehoben und geschützt? Architektur und Städtebau der DDR – Geschichte, Bedeutung, Umgang, Erhaltung. Bonn 1995. P. 84-89, here p. 87.)

Every society needs a connecting link to its history; yet in Berlin this connection was demolished on the basis of short-sighted aesthetic and political arguments. The destruction of the Palace of the Republic and the planned replica of the facades of the demolished Royal Palace ignores recent chapters of Germany's troubled history –World War II and the forty years of Germany's division into two countries. This process shows a dubious, selective opinion of history, far off from reality and continuity; it lacks the acceptance of one's own history and also tolerance towards the architectural forms that are products of the recent past. The preservation and integration of the significant remnants of GDR architecture would have been an expression of a responsible historical consciousness that has the courage to accept an uncomfortable past and is willing to hand this legacy down to future generations.