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Konstantinplatz in Trier: Between Memory and Place

Gerardo Brown-Manrique

The city of Trier, West Germany, celebrated its second millennium during 1984. The celebrations were augmented by a number of restoration and new building efforts that have helped to clarify the city's historical evolution. One of these efforts was the re-development by O. Mathias Ungers of the site of Konstantinplatz (Constantine Square), adjacent to the so-called Basilica but properly named the *Aula Palatina*, or palace audience hall, one of the most important historical monuments in the city. The square serves as the connection between the historic center of the city and other historical sites to its southeast and thus holds a central place in the sequence of spaces that are part of the historic core of Trier. How this project evolved and how it fits into the structure and evolution of Trier, its sense of place, is best understood in terms of the historical development of the city itself.[1]
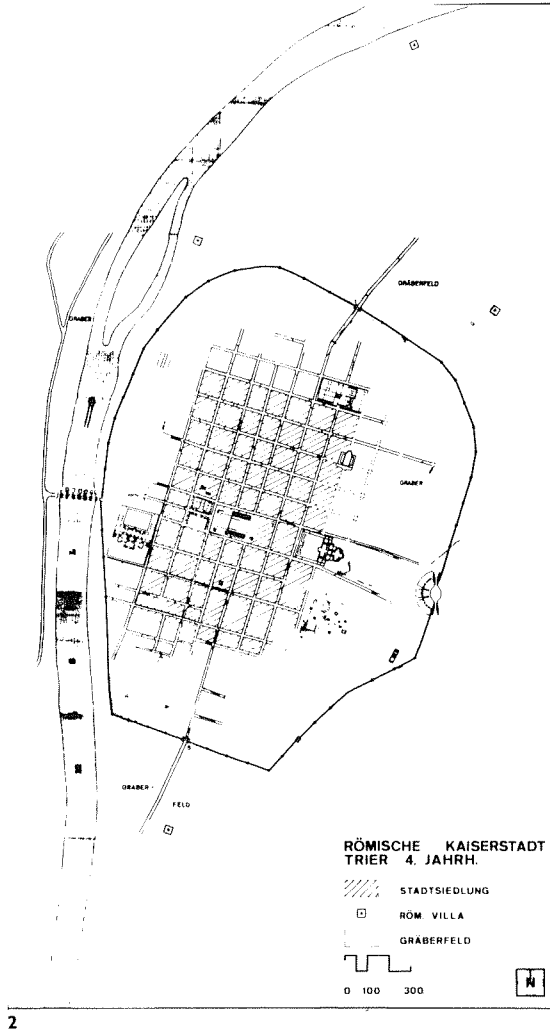
The Roman city of *Augusta Treverorum* was founded in 16 B.C. as an *oppidum*, or settlement, for the Gallic Treveri tribe that inhabited the Moselle River valley and rose to the rank of *colonia* in A.D. 50 during the rule of Claudius.[2] Its importance within the Roman Empire was twofold: Trier's agricultural and manufacturing richness supplied the Roman armies of the Rhine as well as the

expeditionary armies that conquered England and it served as the *civitas* of the Treveri, the seat of the Procurator of Belgica and later of the two German provinces, and capital city of Gallia Belgica. The importance of Trier increased following the political reorganization of the empire by Diocletian in A.D. 286, when it became one of the four most important cities of the Roman Empire as an imperial residence and the seat of the Caesar of the western half of the empire. Thus, until the withdrawal of the Romans in A.D. 410 following the Frankish invasions, Trier maintained a place of prominence in the cultural, economic, and political development of Europe.

Though Trier's size changed dramatically during the Frankish, Merovingian, and succeeding rules—to approximately half the area it occupied at its height in the fourth century—it retained a position of influence in the development of medieval society and culture as the seat of one of the archbishops-electors of the Holy Roman Emperors and as the location of many and powerful monastic institutions. Nonetheless, it was the remaining Roman structures that continued to give form and image to Trier. Ravaged over time by the succeeding waves of invaders, the Roman monuments of Trier remained as testimonies to its past. In the nineteenth

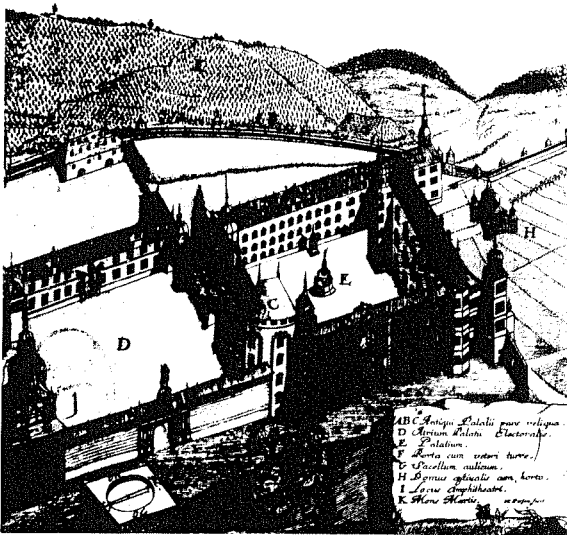1 *Aula Palatina*, from the northwest, 1979.

ROMISCHE KAISERSTADT
TRIER 4. JAHRH.

///// STADTSIEDLUNG
⊡ RÖM VILLA
GRÄBERFELD

0 100   300

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MITTELALTERL.   TRIER
UM 1400

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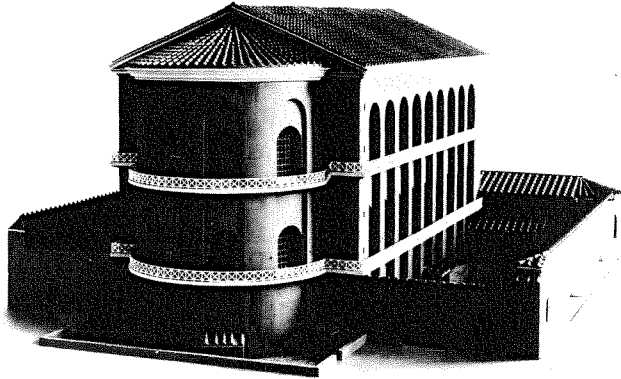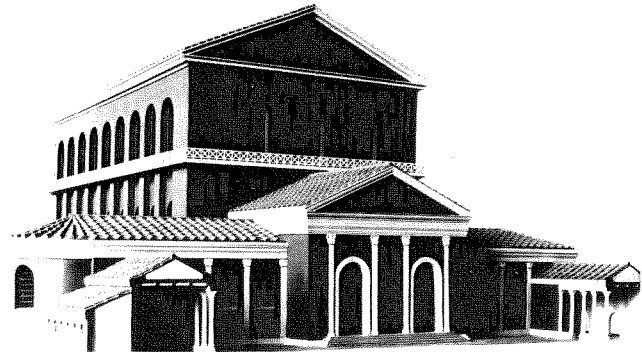⬚ HOHEITSGRENZEN

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century, some of Trier's
architectural monuments
were restored, first through
Napoleon's initiative early in
the century, then by the
Prussian authorities when
the Rhineland became a
Prussian province. The *Porta
Nigra*, following its earlier
conversion into a church,
was restored as a gate, and
the *Aula Palatina*, from
Constantine's time partially
dismantled and incorporated
into the rococo palace of
the archbishops-electors,
was reconstructed and
consecrated in 1856 as the
protestant Church of the
Redeemer.

Mathias Ungers's project for
Konstantinplatz resulted
from an investigation of the
architectural and historical
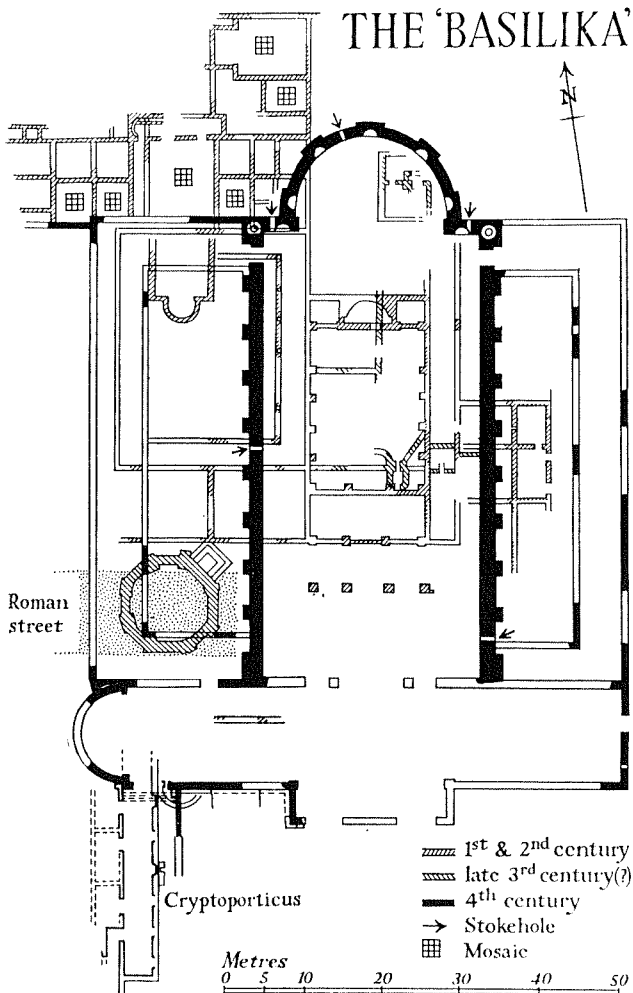development of the city and
the specific site of the square,
just west of the *Aula
Palatina*. The only part of
the imperial palace of
Constantine to have survived
since the fourth century, the
Aula dominates the skyline
of Trier. Its original site
arrangement was determined
through archaeological
investigations, both during
the last century and as part
of the rebuilding following
the Second World War.
Originally built around 310
by Constantine I as the
center of the palace precinct,
its architectural form was
much as it is today: an
apsidal hall, without side
aisles, measuring 27.5 by
67 meters in plan, solid
masonry walls 2.7 meters
thick and about 30 meters
high, and two tiers of
rounded windows. The *Aula*

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THE 'BASILIKA'

Roman street

Cryptoporticus

Metres
0 5 10   20   30   40   50

▨▨▨ 1st & 2nd century
▨▨▨ late 3rd century(?)
▬▬▬ 4th century
→ Stokehole
⊞ Mosaic

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2 Colonia Augusta Treverorum in the fourth century. The Aula Palatina is located in the upper right quadrant of the city.

3 Trier, ca. 1400. The Aula, now part of the palace of the archbishops-electors, is located just inside the east wall that encircles the city and above the slight bend of this enclosure.

4 Palace of the archbishops-electors, view in 1670 by Nikolaus Person. Visible are the remaining portions of the Aula, sections A, B, and C, as well as the Renaissance gate and baroque tower to the left of the apse of the Aula.

5 Aula Palatina, reconstruction model, 4th century, view from the north. This conjectural reconstruction includes the galleries used by the praetorian guards—the location is clearly established by the holes for the support beams, which are visible below some of the windows—and the enclosure of the service atrium or courtyard, where the ovens that served the hypocaust were located.

6 Aula Palatina, reconstruction model, view from the south. This conjectural reconstruction indicates what the entry of the audience hall of Constantine might have looked like in the fourth century.

7 Aula Palatina, archaeological plan showing the various structures that preceded the construction of Constantine's Audience Hall. Edith Mary Wightman indicates that the octagonal structure to the west of the Aula might be from the late third century. The Führer zu vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Denkmälen states that it is of unknown origin and purpose (Band 32/I, p. 153). From Wightman, Roman Trier and the Treveri (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 106.
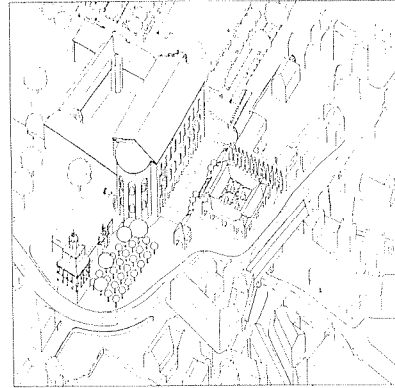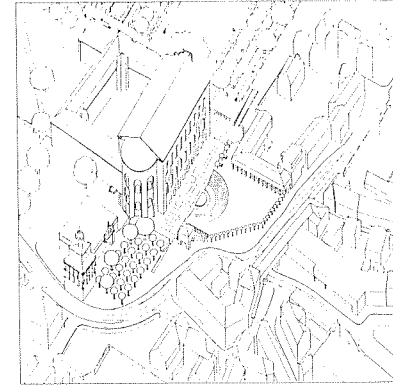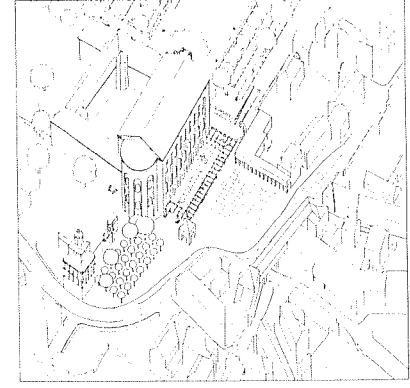
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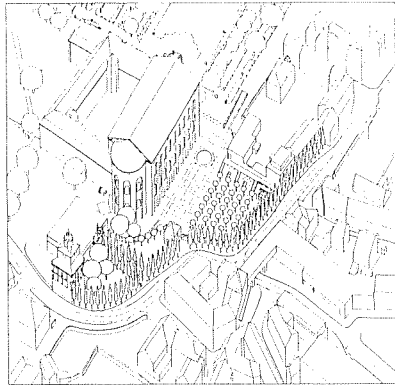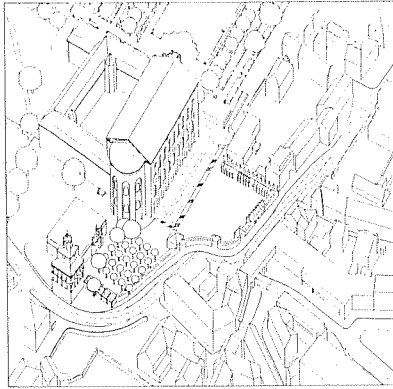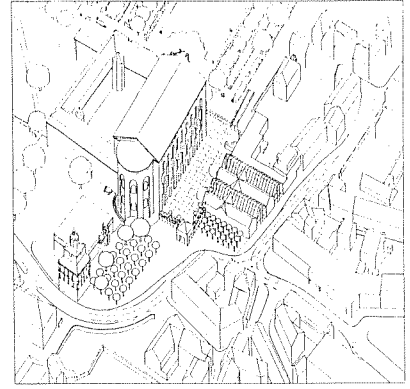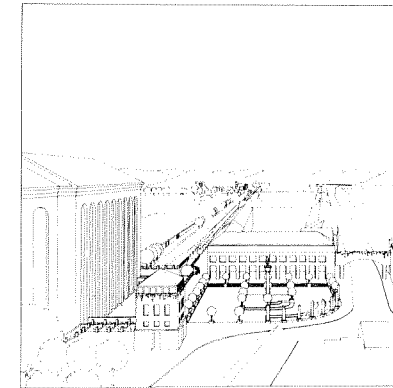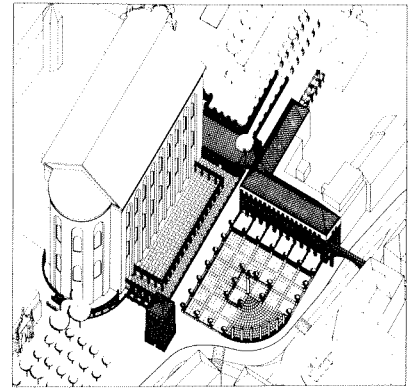
8 **Konstantinplatz, pre-liminary proposal 1.**
9 **Konstantinplatz, pre-liminary proposal 2.**
10 **Konstantinplatz, pre-liminary proposal 3.**
11 **Konstantinplatz, pre-liminary proposal 4.**
12 **Konstantinplatz, pre-liminary proposal 5.**
13 **Konstantinplatz, pre-liminary proposal 6.**
14 **Konstantinplatz, final proposal.**
15 **Konstantinplatz, final proposal, aerial perspec-tive.** The Kaiserthermen are visible at the end of the pedestrian path that leads south from the new plaza. In between are the formal gardens of the archbishops-electors palace.
16 **Konstantinplatz, last revision.**
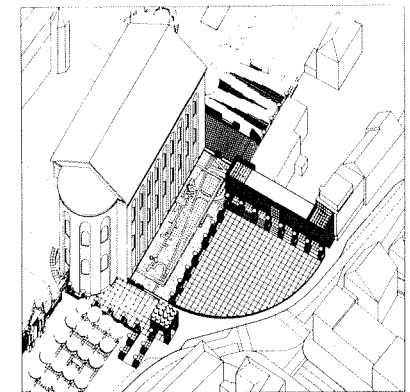
Drawings by O. M. Ungers

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however, was not free-standing but had a forehall and entrance vestibule to its south and a service courtyard to the west and east sides, where the ovens that heated the hypocaust floor and wall cavities were located and which was surrounded by a covered walk. In addition, galleries for the praetorian guards were attached to the structure at two levels. As one might expect in a city that has undergone change over time, the *Aula* was built above the ruins of a palace complex from the second and third centuries and was placed over the intersection of two existing streets within the palace compound of the imperial city. During the centuries following its original construction, parts of the *Aula* were demolished and new structures were added. Among these are the late Gothic Church of St. Laurentius, which was demolished by Napoleon in 1803, the extant Renaissance gate and baroque tower to the north of the hall, and the rococo palace of the archbishops-electors to which the *Aula* is attached.

The archaeological plan of the *Aula* shows the location of prior structures: the west courtyard, the forehall and vestibule—from which there is an entry into a *crypto-porticus* that dates prior to the construction of the *Aula*—foundations of other structures, including two small buildings—one octagonal in plan, the other

apsidal—and a street. This plan served as the basis for the design by Mathias Ungers for Konstantinplatz, a design based on the ". . . reconstruction of an archaeological memory."[3] that is, where design decisions were based on the historical evolution of the site and the relationships that emerged between structures that date from the different time periods.

After initially conducting a series of abstract sketch explorations that addressed the issue of how the public space could be defined,[4] Ungers proceeded by making use of the archaeological evidence known prior to the beginning of the construction of the square. The proposal went through six preliminary explorations, each a specific trans-formation of the concrete reality of the site in juxtaposition to architectural interventions.[5] That is, these explorations, in general terms, addressed four issues that would reflect the evolution of the site from pre-Constantine times through the late Gothic period to its situation today: first how to bring to light the vestiges of those structures that preceded or surrounded the hall; second, how to return the site to the historical ground level of the *Aula* so that the floor of the square would match what was to the south of the entry level into the *Aula*; third, how to respond to the location of the demolished

Laurentian church; and finally, how the block of existing postwar buildings immediately to the west should be terminated so as to front toward the new square. The six explorations used a range of archetypical elements to define the boundaries of the site and to provide enclosed space for specific functions. All six included a tower over the foundations of the Laurentian church and reconstructed the entry court to the *Aula* to the outline of its original forehall, with a ramp placed at the location of the *cryptoporticus* to connect this space to the palace gardens beyond:

1. The complete square is lowered to its Roman level and paved in a pattern that extends as a tartan grid the pilaster and bay articulation of the hall. A berm delineates the street and south edges, and trees planted within the fields of the tartan grid are used to define the area outside the original Roman complex.

2. Only the area that comprised the original Roman complex is lowered. The perimeter of the square is defined by a trans-formation of wall as a pergola, an arcade, an embankment, terraces, and greenhouses.

3. Again only the area of the original complex is lowered to the Roman level, with its border defined by a pergola and steps. The rest of the

square is occupied by a galleria that forms an extension to the existing block and the connection between Weberbachstrasse to the west and the *Aula* to the east.

4. Following a similar approach to exploration 3, in this case there is a free-standing city loggia with a central, glass-covered atrium.

5. The area outside the original complex forms an amphitheater, with the *Aula* as its backdrop. Trees form the street edge, and a new colonnade completes the existing block.

6. The lower level adjacent to the *Aula* is defined by a pergola that is a transformation of the original condition in Roman times. The south edge is defined by a building that has a ground level colonnade.

These preliminary explorations for Konstantinplatz are reflected in the plan that was finally presented to the city: the site of the original complex adjacent to the *Aula* is lowered to its Roman level, with the former service courtyard recreated ". . . by means of negative forms," where ". . . (the) construction of an arcade structure or urban loggia . . ." completes the existing block, and a four-story tower building over the site of the Laurentian church, the ". . . spatial

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reconstruction of the entrance court" to the *Aula*, and other elements complete the design. The elements of the plaza are clearly delineated: the area adjacent to the *Aula* is at a lower level, while the area outside the original structure, with the new loggia building and the new square proper defined by a series of columns, steps, and planters, is at the level of the present city.[6] Prior to the execution of the plan, a square was added that replicates in its paving pattern the archaeological plan of the area around the *Aula*, with a large grid paving pattern over the remainder of the square. This revision separates, with a series of steps and planters, the area that represents the structures at the historic ground level from the rest of the square; maintains the urban loggia as a terminus for the existing block; and substitutes the ramp over the *cryptoporticus* with a combination ramp-stair that leads to the gardens beyond. The revised plan also reduces the construction over the site of the Laurentian church to a four-cornered platform

planted with trees. The bay used in the structure is based on that of the *Aula*, as is the bay system of the urban loggia itself.

As built, the project incorporates most of these ideas yet responds to specific realities that presented themselves during execution, primarily budgetary constraints. The structure on the site of the Laurentian church was reduced to light fixtures in the form of a partitioned cube at each of its four corners, with a globe in each cube. The urban loggia that houses new facilities geared to the tourist trade was also reduced in size and is much more modest than what was originally planned to form the terminus of the existing block. From the north, this building is seen as an arcade with seven openings, the whole topped by a transparent archetypal roof. The openings are accentuated by the use of medium-gray stone that contrasts with the lighter tone of the masonry used for the rest of the structure. From Weberbachstrasse
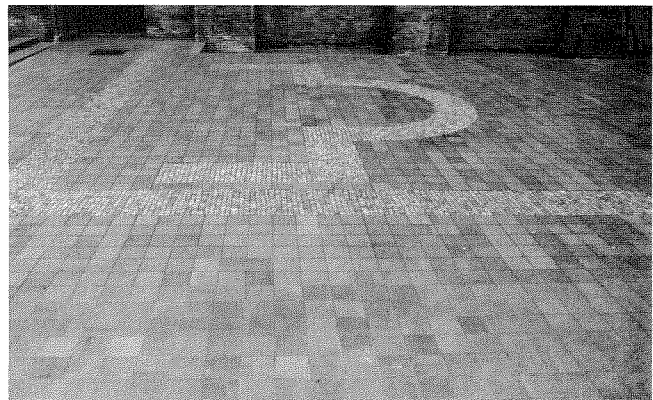
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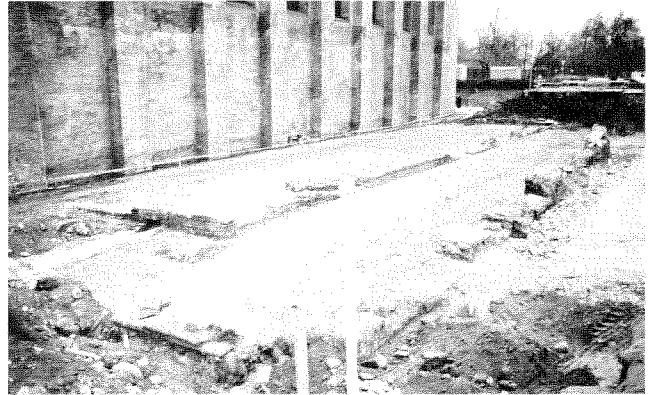
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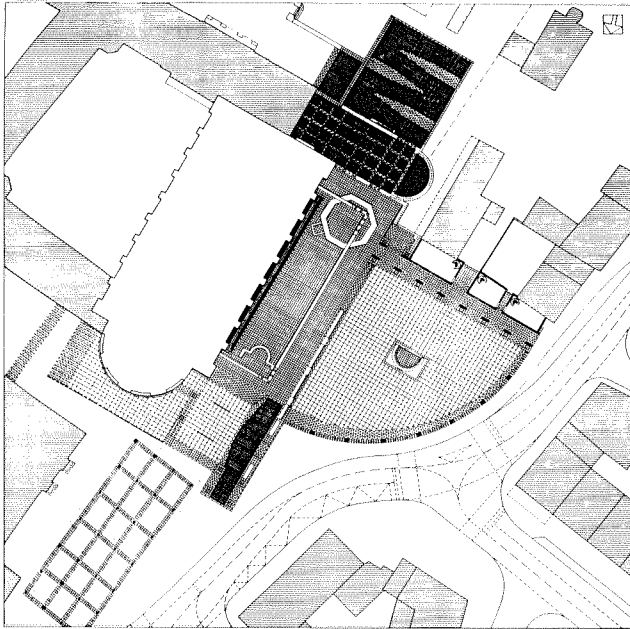
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17 **Konstantinplatz, view from the north.**
18 **Konstantinplatz, view north from the loggia.**
19 **Konstantinplatz, interior view of the loggia.**
20 **Konstantinplatz, view of the site under excavation.**
21 **Konstantinplatz, view of the site under excavation.** The base of the enclosure around the atrium to the west of the *Aula* is fully visible in this view.

22 **Konstantinplatz, final site plan.** Drawing by O. M. Ungers, 1984.
23 **Konstantinplatz, northeast end.** This detail view of the paving shows the location of the former service courtyard and the octagonal building.

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toward the *Aula*, the building is simply a tall galleria—a roofed walk that reverses the pre-Constantine condition of an open street with covered walks to either side. The stepped walk leads from the street to the lower level of the *Aula* entry itself. The main part of the square is separated from the sidewalk by wide, curving steps and a row of free-standing columns that support globe lights. The floor of the square slopes down from this level until it matches the top of the excavated foundations of the enclosure to the service courtyard and then drops to the original Roman ground.

During the actual excavations in preparation for the construction of the square, a significant, semicircular, early Christian mosaic was uncovered. Although it would have reflected the archaeological memory of the site, there was much debate about whether to include it in the design of the square. Ungers proposed that its location on the site be indicated by contrasting paving stones, as was done to
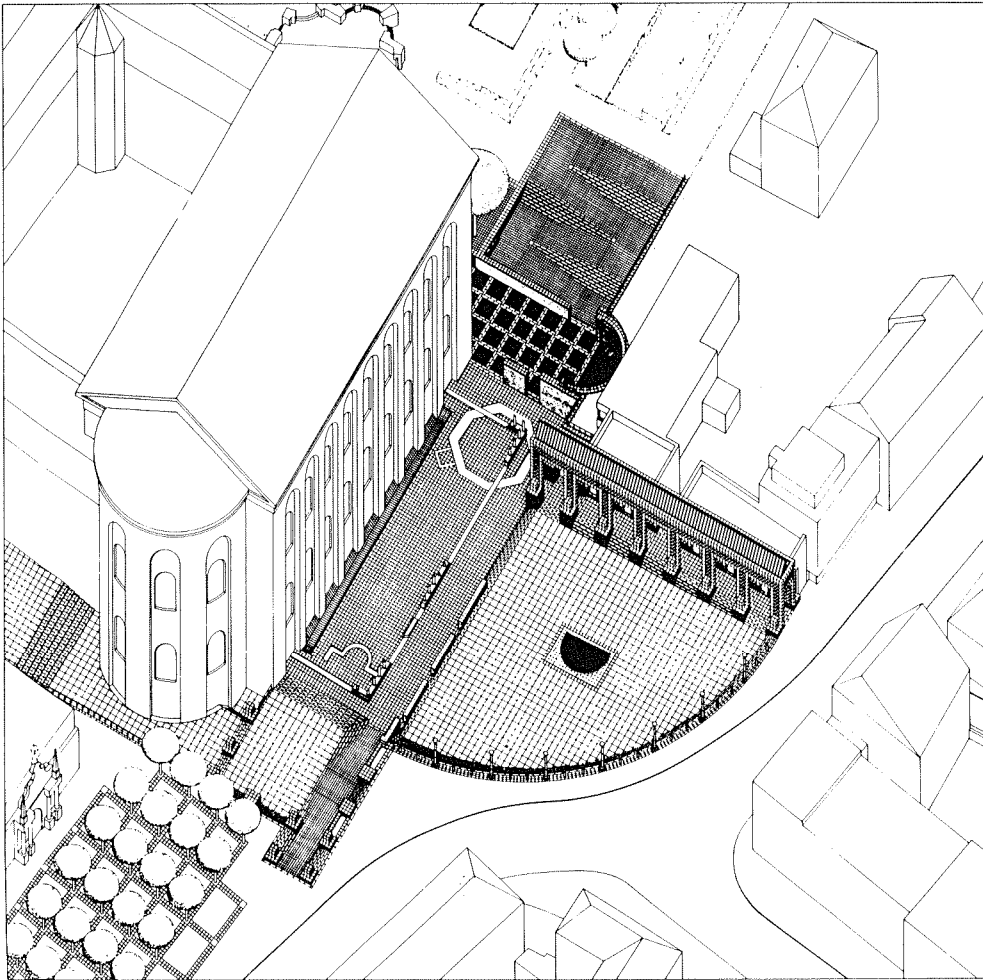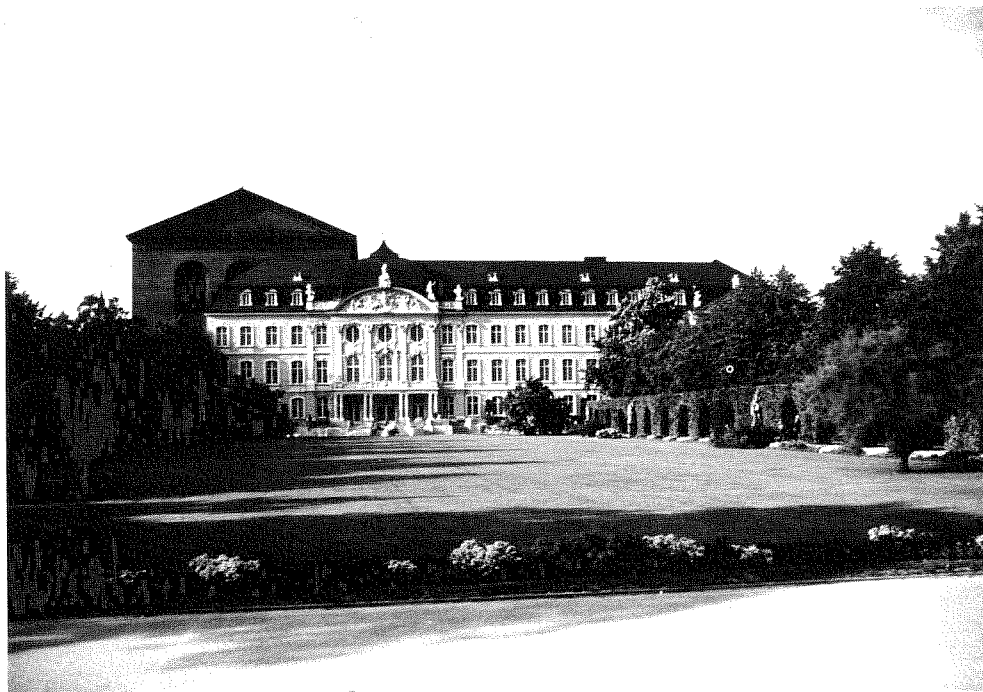
indicate the location of the octagonal and apsidal buildings and the outline of the former service courtyard. In the end, the mosaic was not reflected in the executed project.[7]

In the other instances, through the subtle manipulation of materials, Ungers addressed the issue of how to reflect the vestiges of the past of this important place by relying on "memory"—in general, an awareness of the history of the place and its culture, and in particular, the history of the immediate site that results from a very methodical and methodological analysis—to "reconstruct" what was known because of the various historical clues found within the site. This reliance is a primary characteristic in Ungers's design process, as one can see in previous projects[8] where he investigated the evolution of a particular situation, identified the existing antecedents, and then transformed these in arriving at a solution. At Konstantinplatz, Ungers began with the archaeological plan of

the site, with the elements that constitute the project themselves being the result of a clear understanding of form, space, and construction.[9] The geometry of the new construction at Konstantinplatz is not dissimilar to the rigid purity of the *Aula*, in which the circle and the square are the basic forms and where the architectural expression results from the construction material itself.[10] All forms and patterns in the new project are generated from a square module and the two-square rectangular masonry unit. In designing this new space for Trier, Mathias Ungers made use of archetypal forms in a very deliberate manner. For example, one finds two interpretations of the same vertical element: free-standing columns establish the boundary of the plaza without implying directionality of entry into the space; and square pillars of the new building can be seen as an eroded wall, which establishes an edge congruous to the wall of the *Aula* itself. There is additional ambiguity in how the new

24 *Aula Palatina*, view from the west.
25 *Aula Palatina*, view from the west. Photograph © Josef Tietzen. Reproduced with permission.

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26 **Konstantinplatz, final axonometric view.**
27 **Trier, view north from the palace gardens.** The gabled front of the *Aula Palatina* is visible to the left. The palace of the archbishops-electors can be seen immediately in front and to the right of the *Aula*.

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**28 Konstantinplatz, view
north from the entry area**
to the *Aula Palatina.*

**29 Konstantinplatz, view of
the urban loggia from the
Aula.** The plaque that
illustrates the evolution of the
space can be seen to the left of
the loggia.

structure is perceived, for it
is a loggia facing the plaza, a
galleria connecting the street
to the entry of the audience
hall, and two parallel walls
that are transformations of
the same perforated plane.
Because their beginning
point relied on the historical
reality of the site, the forms
that create the new Konstan-
tinplatz are complementary
to the historic elements
around the square.

As indicated earlier, Kon-
stantinplatz serves as the
connection between the
historic center of the city, an
area that is primarily for
pedestrians, and the areas to
its southeast. The pedestrian
area in the heart of Trier
has been extended to just
opposite the new urban
space, which allows for an
unencumbered, leisurely
movement from the *Porta
Nigra* and the adjacent
Simeonstift (the former
Cloister of St. Simeon, where
the city tourist office is now
located) at the north end of
the historic center, past some
of the most important
monuments in the city:
the cathedral, begun by
Constantine's mother,

Helena, on the site of her
demolished palace,[11] and the
adjacent Church of Our
Lady (Liebfrauenkirche);[12]
across Breitenstein and
Weberbachstrasse, through
Konstantinplatz to the entry
to the Church of the
Redeemer (the former *Aula*);
and beyond to the palace of
the archbishops-electors and
its gardens, the Rheinisches
Landesmuseum, and the
ruins of the royal baths,
or the Kaiserthermen.
Konstantinplatz also pro-
vides a forum where both
formal and informal outdoor
activities can take place,
whether they be scheduled
performances, casual
strolling, or sitting in the
outdoor area of the cafe
that is housed in the loggia.
Prior to this intervention,
Konstantinplatz was a
nondescript space, a parking
lot for cars and tourist buses,
which provided the visitor
and resident alike with a
truncated view of the *Aula
Palatina.* Today, not only
can the audience hall of
Constantine be viewed
without these distractions,
but more important, the
project by Mathias Ungers
creates a space that responds

to the sense of place of Trier.

Sense of place is dependent on various conditions. At Konstantinplatz it results from a complete understanding of the history of the structures that form part of the "archaeological memory" of Trier: the cathedral, the Kaiserthermen, the palace of the archbishops-electors with its baroque gardens, and the many other monuments from Roman antiquity to the nineteenth century. In this project, the new intervention uses basic architectonic forms as the backdrop for the historic monuments; the monuments, not the new urban loggia and square, hold a central place in the history and sense of place of Trier. The new structure, however, is now part of the evolution of the specific site. The overall project results from an understanding of this evolution, and so it reflects the actual transformation of the area without replicating the elements that once existed there; the archetypal forms of the new loggia become part of the architectural evolution of the site and of the city.

The Konstantinplatz project has not been without critics who question its architectural expression.[13] Criticism has primarily centered on the nonhistorical form and color of the urban loggia itself rather than the new square. One could say with justification that the imme-

diate questions about the design will not persist, and the new intervention will gain acceptance just as the pink and gilt rococo palace and its elaborate baroque gardens do not create great controversy as seen from the ruins of the magnificent Kaiserthermen, or even because of the precarious interlocked condition of the rococo palace and the *Aula Palatina*.

Adjacent to the plaque commemorating the dedication of the square on June 1, 1984, the loggia includes another plaque, which illustrates the architectural changes that the site has undergone and should help those unfamiliar with the history of the city understand the form of Konstantinplatz. What Mathias Ungers has achieved in this project is a design that defines the open space and allows for the audience hall of Constantine's palace to be experienced in relation to its original ground level. The *Aula* can now be viewed in a "Roman" setting as part of a series of architectural events that form the historical core of the city. And because of the way in which the design contributes to the experience of movement between the historic monuments and spaces of the city, the new Konstantinplatz is a project that responds and contributes to the sense of place in *Augusta Treverorum*.

NOTES

1 The historical information on Trier comes from a number of sources. To facilitate the reading, each has not been individually identified, particularly since the sources were often used only to substantiate or verify general knowledge of the history of the city. I gathered the material for this essay during the academic years 1982–1983 and 1983–1984, during which time I was on temporary reassignment to the Miami University European Center in Luxembourg. Aside from the specific technical sources identified below, the primary sources of information used for the architectural history of Trier are Edith Mary Wightman, *Roman Trier and the Treveri* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971); D. Ahrens et al., *Führer zu vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Denkmälen*, Band 32: Trier (Mainz-am-Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1977); and Joachim von Elbe, *Roman Germany—A Guide to Sites and Museums* (Mainz-am-Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1977), pp. 388–438. Information relative to the design of the Konstantinplatz was obtained directly form O. M. Ungers or from his associate, architect K. L. Dietzsch, during numerous telephone and personal conversations over the length of the construction of the project.

2 Wightman states that *Augusta Treverorum* was thus named in honor of Augustus, since the city was ". . . founded according to [his] policies," and to reflect the fact that the city's native population was the Treveri, though

Augusta Treverorum had no established native name (op. cit., p. 37). Its native population enjoyed the status of *civitas libera*, and Trier itself was raised to the rank of *colonia* under the rule of Claudius, though there is no recognition in its name of the emperor under whom it gained this rank (ibid., pp. 40–41), as is the case with Köln, or Cologne (*Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium*, the *colonia* raised to this rank by Claudius, city with an ara, or altar, and honoring its native daughter and mother-in-law of Claudius, Agrippina the Elder; Gerta Wolff, *Das Römisch-Germanische Köln* [Köln: Verlag J. P. Bachem, 1981], p. 25).

3 Gerardo Brown-Manrique, ("Introduction." *O. M. Ungers—Works in Progress 1976–1980*, IAUS 6 (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1981), pp. 94–103.

4 O. M. Ungers, "Planungsvorschlag für die neugestaltung des Konstantinplatzes in Trier." Unpublished report (June 1981), pp. 28–29.

5 Ibid., pp. 32–55.

6 Ibid., p. 94.

7 The early Christian mosaic was uncovered in December 1982. Though the location of a number of structures, medieval streets, and so forth were known from prior investigations, the quality and completeness of the mosaic was a new discovery. It was removed from the site and will be reassembled in the *Landesmuseum Trier*, the state museum. The initial debate was whether to create a facsimile of the original, to replace the original on the site, or whether to simply

indicate in some manner its location.

8 See, for instance, the general discussion of Ungers's work, entitled "Morphologies, Transformations and Other Stories: Recent Work by O. M. Ungers," in *O. M. Ungers—Works in Progress*, IAUS 6 (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1981), pp. 6–19; and the proposal for the museum at Schloss Morsbroich in Leverkusen (Gerardo Brown-Manrique, "Schloss Morsbroich—Ungers' Museum Project in Leverkusen," *Architectural Design*, 50:1/2 [January/ February 1980], pp. 8–15).

9 Ungers discusses this in his essay "Architecture's Right to an Autonomous Language," in Venice Biennale, ed., *Architecture 1980: The Present of the Past* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1980), pp. 319–324.

10 Though the *Aula* now is seen as an exposed brick structure, there are traces on the outside wall that indicate that the surface was covered with two layers of plaster, with the outermost layer being finished with crushed tile (Wightman, op. cit., p. 104).

11 This has been confirmed by excavations during the reconstruction following the Second World War, when a significant number of wall and ceiling frescoes were recovered; they are now on display in the Episcopal Museum in Trier.

12 This church is one of the first two structures in Germany built purely in the Gothic style. It has a central plan, with the four piers at its crossing resting on the bases of columns from the early Christian basilican church that formed part of the double-church complex with the cathedral.

13 In the process of collecting information on Trier and Konstantinplatz, I obtained comments on the architecture of the new square and urban loggia from both casual visitors and residents of the city. Most with negative comments felt that the new project "didn't fit"—that it wasn't historicist in its architecture—or that its color (sand and dark gray) clashed with the deep red clay of the *Aula*.