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Reconstructing Urban Life

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In 1977, the U.S. National Science Foundation published a study called "Reconstruction Following Disaster," which suggested that almost all postdisaster recovery models follow a predictable, temporal path. Interestingly, three of the four stages in the recovery process imply a functional role for architecture. As outlined in the report, the four stages were "an emergency response, restoration of the restorable, the reconstruction of the destroyed," and a final phase of "commemoration, betterment, and development."[1]

The last stage is generally thought to be the most logical point of entry for architecture. But in the aftermath of catastrophe, architects may also respond in ways that transcend an exclusively restorative and commemorative function. In doing so, they may expand their role beyond utilitarianism, to integrate a program of communication and participatory action.

The temporary structure known as the INFO BOX, built near Potsdamer Platz during its reconstruction following the demolition of the Berlin Wall, aspired to this condition. Although tethered to corporate development, it signified urban rebirth. It was a progressive work of architecture that guided redevelopment and engaged the public in an important healing process.

A Form of Healing

Immediately following the attacks of September 11, 2001, debate emerged across America as to how to rebuild the World Trade Center site in Lower Manhattan. One initiative involved the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development, which assembled a group of architects and planners to examine the redevelopment of Berlin's Potsdamer Platz.[2] The rebuilding challenges there seemed to resonate with New York's dilemma. Most identifiable were the emotional scars both cities carried as they reckoned with the reconstitution of emblematic spaces. But it was also hoped that an investigation of Potsdamer Platz would preempt the possibility that rebuilding at Ground Zero would become a spectacle of large-scale development, as in Berlin.

Above top: Before World War II, Potsdamer Platz was Berlin's transportation hub and a vital core for its economy. It was heralded as the principal crossroads of Europe.

Above bottom: Following the destruction of war and the clearing of a zone of death near the Berlin Wall, the site regained prominence in the reconstruction of the unified city. Initially, however, only the INFO BOX stood amid the chaos of redevelopment.

Opposite: Meeting of Berlin's past and future. Photo by Christian Pohlert.
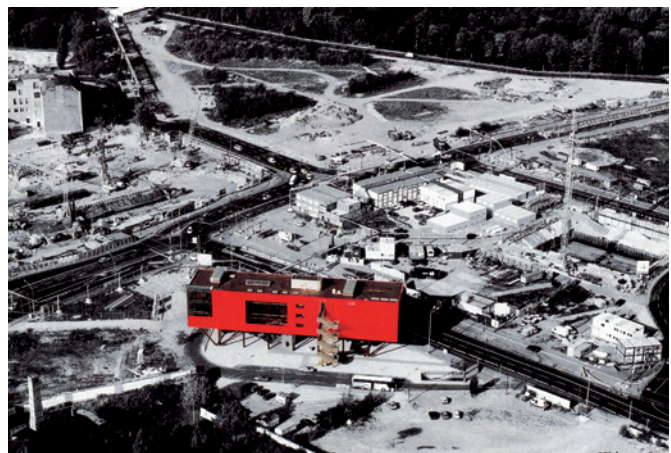
The architect Lebbeus Woods has written that postdisaster recovery starts with the forming of a "scab." For Woods, the scab is a first layer of reconstruction, which shields an exposed interior space or void and protects a space during its transformation.[3] In Berlin, the discourse of rebuilding began with such an understanding, and unlike Ground Zero, where a sense of emptiness remained as reconstruction efforts lagged, the renewal of Potsdamer Platz was primed by a physical form: the INFO BOX. Critics have rarely recognized the importance of this work, which provided a physical scab and created a responsive, participatory environment that communicated a message of progress and hope.

From Hitler's rise to power in 1933 until the fall of the Wall in 1989, Potsdamer Platz endured multiple cycles of collapse and regeneration. Before World War II it was recognized as the point where "principal east-west and north-south routes in Europe" crossed; but it was

completely destroyed during the war, and on August 13, 1961, the Wall was constructed across it, ending its significance as a transportation hub and economic center.[4]

In one day, the Wall was built "literally and figuratively, atop the ruins of war, terror and division," and for twenty-eight years it rooted division into the land.[5] Years after it was dismantled, an emotional resonance of broken livelihoods and severed connections remained. Then, in early June 1995, the INFO BOX appeared, offering a beacon of hope that long-severed, links would be reconnected and the healing of urban wounds could begin.

The bright red box, designed by the architects Schneider + Schumacher, was intended as a temporary pavilion, with the humble purpose of informing the public as to the city's redevelopment plans.[6] But not everyone shared such a positive view; some regarded it as a marketing tool intended to benefit big new investors in the area such as Daimler-Benz and the Sony Corporation.[7]

However, in this case, the INFO BOX served a greater purpose than simply relaying information or standing in as corporate advertising.[8] It embodied the essence of McLuhan's dictum that the medium is the message. Its physical presence, infused with a message of hope, guided public perceptions of the site with dignity and fearlessness as redevelopment progressed.[9]

The sense of optimism was reinforced by the INFO BOX's physical characteristics. With its scaffold-like structure, brilliant red cladding, and around-the-corner glazing, it sat atop seven-meter-high steel columns at Leipziger Platz. From its roof terrace, twenty-three meters above the ground, visitors had an uninterrupted view of rebuilding efforts at the adjacent Potsdamer Platz.[10] It spanned more than sixty meters and straddled the "no-man's land" where the Berlin Wall once stood. The INFO BOX not only filled the void that existed after the Wall had been removed, but also acknowledged the

scar left behind and lifted visitors up from the danger zone in a way that assured them the violence that once attended this "death strip" was securely in the past.[11]

As a work of architecture in its own right, the INFO BOX also aided the recovery process by "celebrating architecture before the event."[12] The box was one of the first structures in the redevelopment area, and the architects chose to use prefabricated elements to expedite its construction and accommodate the possibility of disassembling it for future use elsewhere.[13]

The INFO BOX was dismantled in 2000, but during its five-year stint, it educated the public and created an interactive forum for visitors interested in the changing urban landscape. This interplay was achieved, for example, by means of virtual-reality tours through Renzo Piano's future shopping developments and mixed-use office blocks.[14] However, not even these sophisticated simulations could match the epic narrative provided by the actual view of Potsdamer Platz.

Navigating the INFO BOX created various vistas, enabling visitors to see the progress of development framed within the box and through the box, providing a one-to-one relationship between the user and the construction site. In essence, it provided the sense of a changing real-time model, instructing the viewer as to the ongoing transformation of the site. This personalized connection allowed visitors to translate the overwhelming experience of the development site into memorable, visual stills.

Meanwhile, at ground level, the INFO BOX served as a Lynchian image, helping visitors orient themselves as they approached from a distance. And once that image was contextualized amid the chaotic reconstruction scene, it provided a path into both the past and future.[15]

The Power of Resilence

Potsdamer Platz harbored historic memories that included both glorious and tragic moments. The view from the roof of the INFO BOX revealed the faint remnants of a sophisticated street grid that once pulsated with movement and the rich urban life of Berlin in the early twentieth century. These traces of city fabric lay buried under the rubble until the INFO BOX reactivated a sense of this layered past.

The INFO BOX was a model form that responded to disaster by offering the promise of eventual healing. It stood as a symbol of the ability of architecture to create resilient physical space. A redeeming work, it communicated the narrative of a tragic past, acted as an agent for public reflection, and provided evidence of impending rebirth.

Notes

1. J. Eugene Haas et al., eds., *Reconstruction Following Disaster* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), p. 336.

2. Family members of victim's and community activists were also part of this delegation. Ron Shiffman and Katie Taylor, "New York to Europe Delegation Preliminary Findings and Recommendation," Pratt Institute Center for Community and Economic Development, http://prattcenter.net/pubs/europedelegation.pdf

3. This notion of the scab is only one aspect of Woods's multitiered discussion of recovery from disaster, which includes concepts such as bottom-up planning, creating change "from below, [and] from the people without the sanction of any institutionalized authority," and essentially questioning conformity and private enterprise. For the purposes of this essay, I use the metaphor of the scab to describe a regenerative process that occurs after a disaster. Lebbeus Woods, *Radical Reconstruction* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), p. 16.

4. Stephen Kinzer, "Watching Berlin Take Shape," *New York Times*, May 12 1996.

5. Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 17.

6. Collaborators in the INFO BOX project included Daimler-Benz, Deutsche Bahn AG, the Senate Building, Housing and Transport Department, Sony/Tishman Speyer/Kajima, and A + T. Land Berlin and private investors financed the project. *INFO BOX: The Catalogue* (Berlin: Verlag Dirk Nishen Bmbh & Co KG, 1996), p. 15.

7. Thank you to the peer reviewer who brought to my attention an article in *Architectural Review* that argued that the INFO BOX was used to enhance the image of the projects—an economical alternative, "compared to the cost of an international billboard campaign." Layla Dawson, "Box of Tricks," *Architectural Review*, 198 (1995), p. 16.

8. Bernard Tschumi has written that the commodification of architecture can produce a relationship between building and program that can be "either highly sympathetic or contrived and artificial," but which overall can produce a net benefit. See Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 147.

9. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 7.

10. *INFO BOX: The Catalogue*, p. 10.

11. Lebbeus Woods has argued that people have an inherent need to fill empty space before they can begin to break away from the debilitating fear of the unknown. Woods, *Radical Reconstruction*, p. 24.

12. Quote from the former mayor of Berlin, Eberhard Diepgen. Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 33.

13. 7 *Projekte Schneider + Schumacher, Architekten* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 1997), p. 64.

14. Five teams of architects were commissioned by Daimler-Benz AG and led by Renzo Piano. The roster included Christoph Kohlbecker, Richard Rogers, Jose Rafael Moneo, Arata Isozaki, Hans Kolhoff, Ulrike Lauber and Wolfram Wohr. See *INFO BOX: The Catalogue*, p. 15.

15. The planner Kevin Lynch described imageability as "the quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, color or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment." Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: Joint Center for Urban Studies, MIT Press, 1960), p. 9.