

# Potsdamer Platz

Renzo Piano Workshop  
Berlin, Germany

prepared by Rachel Miller & Amanda Reed



Above: View of entry to train station at Potsdamer Platz.  
([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com))



Left: Aerial satellite image of Potsdamer Platz (north is up). The octagonal park to the east is called "Leipziger Square".  
([maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com))

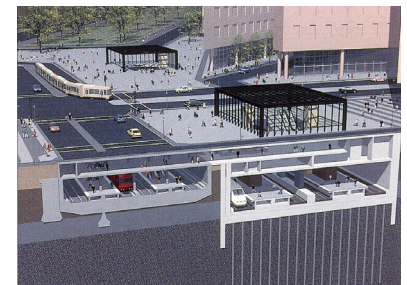
Below-top: Renzo Piano sketch of master plan concept. Idea was to recreate Potsdamer Platz as the heart of the city.  
([rpbw.r.ui-pro.com/](http://rpbw.r.ui-pro.com/))

Below-bottom: 3D model section through underground railways and plaza of Potsdamer Platz.  
(Maier, 231)

Potsdamer Platz is a central point in Berlin with a tumultuous history and grand urban aspirations. The main square and surrounding district were extensively re-developed from 1994 - 1998. The development was one of Europe's biggest "private-sector urban construction projects and was planned by a team of international architects under the leadership of Renzo Piano. The district at Potsdamer Platz comprises 19 buildings, 10 streets and two plazas, and has a total floor space of 500,000 square meters" (Architecture). The main square at Potsdamer Platz also serves as a primary transportation hub for Berlin with lots of road traffic at street level, as well as subway and train lines underground. There are two large entrances to the underground train station within the central plazas at Potsdamer Platz.

Renzo Piano's urban design (which was for the Daimler-Benz property immediately surrounding the central plazas) centered around the idea of a new piazza that would be the focus of public and cultural activities, and surrounded by tall buildings. This plan became the framework for the individual buildings later designed by Kollhoff, Moneo, Isozaki, Rogers, Lauber/Wohr and others. The uses for each building were programmed for 56% offices, 19% residential, 11% retail, 9% hotel, and 5% cultural.

When part of the new development opened in 1998, a ceremony "celebrated the rapid execution of an unparalleled task: the recreation, from the ground up, of a central quarter in a European metropolis" (Enke 29).



*"After the reunification of Germany in 1989 there was room for visions"*  
(Maier, 233)



Potsdamer Platz in 1930.  
The area was a bustling transit center for the city.  
(Wilderotter, 9-28)

## History

Potsdamer Platz is a microcosm of Berlin, its history reflecting the social forces affecting the city over the past four centuries. The revolving cycles of optimism and devastation have been clearly demonstrated in this public space.

The area was first defined in the 17th century when a new city wall was built to line the western edge of a freshly built public square, the Octogon (later known as Leipziger Platz). The road from Potsdam entered the city at this square, and the customs waiting area west of the wall was known as the "Square in front of Potsdam Gate" (Wilderotter 9-10).

By 1831, the Potsdamer Gate area was a tourist center with a railroad station, hotels, and restaurants. The district gained popularity, and the previously modest summer houses became a place for the wealthy, growing into the Millionaires Quarter from the 1830s to 1870s. Starting in the 1860s, four-storey apartment buildings with shops at the ground level were built along Potsdamer Strasse, rendering the street a shopping district.



Potsdamer Platz in 1945.  
The area was a bombed extensively during WWII.  
([berlin.barwick.de/sights/famous-places/potsdamer-platz.html](http://berlin.barwick.de/sights/famous-places/potsdamer-platz.html))

The waiting area at Potsdam Gate evolved into a major traffic junction. Bicycles, horse-drawn buses and trams, horses, carts, cabs, hand carts, and pedestrians all fought their way over the square. The threat of traffic gave way to a fascination with it in the early 1900s (*Architectural Review* 32). Articles written at the time showed pride and optimism in having an intersection that could compare with the traffic in other major metropolises. In 1924, the first traffic tower in Europe was installed on Potsdamer Platz, with police reinforcing its signals (Wilderotter 17-21).

The National Socialist's rise to power in 1933 severely changed the flavor of the district. The Nazi state and party offices occupied the former Millionaires Quarter. Here they set up their People's Court (a special court with quick trials that followed Nazi ideology rather than the usual law) and Euthanasia Headquarters. Many houses were demolished to make way for a huge boulevard through the area to house monumental buildings for the Nazi party, state, and businesses, but work on it was halted in the spring of 1941 (Wilderotter 23-25).



Potsdamer Platz in 1953  
during the uprising.  
(Wilderotter, 9-28)

Allied air raids also destroyed many houses on Potsdamer Platz and in the area. However, once the war ended, life quickly came back, with stores and restaurants opening and the flower sellers returning. In addition, the Soviet, British, and American sectors abutted each other at the square. The ease in stepping over a border and thus evading a police jurisdiction helped Potsdamer Platz to emerge as the center of the black market. This lively center saw devastation again however, with a workers uprising resulting in violence and the deployment of Soviet tanks in 1953, destroying two more historic buildings (Wilderotter 25-26).

## Potsdamer Platz



*Left:* 1972 View from the west looking east over the Berlin Wall.  
(Wilderotter, 9-28)

*Below-top:* 1978 Photograph of the viewing platforms on the west side of the Berlin Wall in Potsdamer Platz.  
([jhuzar.com/berlin%2078%20potsdamer%20platzCopy.jpg](http://jhuzar.com/berlin%2078%20potsdamer%20platzCopy.jpg))

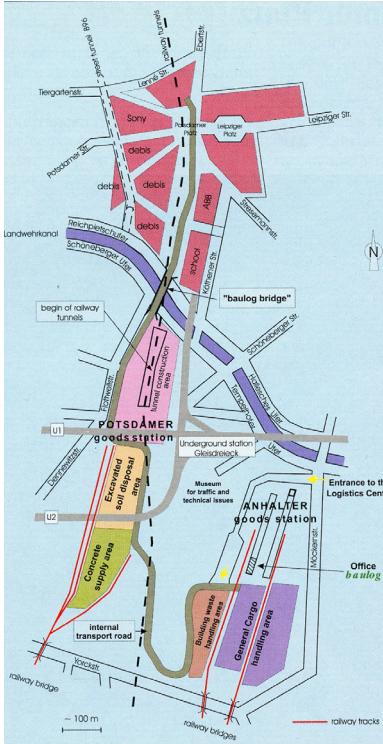
*Below-bottom:* 1985 view from the west looking east over the Berlin Wall.  
([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com))

The Berlin Wall was constructed in August of 1961, slicing north-south through Potsdamer Platz. All the buildings east of the wall were cleared to give border guards open fields. West of the Wall, tourist kiosks were set up allowing people to look at and over the Wall. Potsdamer Platz as a city center was effectively killed with the new physical barrier right through the center of the main square/intersection.

The fall of the Wall in 1990 brought about great hope for urban progress and the opportunity to stitch east and west Berlin back together. The State held an international urban design competition in 1991. Hilmer & Sattler won the competition with their plan for compact, 35 meter high blocks and dense street plan. They argued against large single buildings put up by individual property owners and purposefully omitted an indoor shopping mall. *Architectural Review* notes that the plan was very much in the spirit of "critical reconstruction," celebrating the traditional European city (33). In contrast, Rem Koolhaas, on the jury, described the plan as "a reactionary, provincial, and amateurish urban conception" (Enke 36), and the press agreed. The main investors, Daimler-Benz, Sony Berlin, Hertie, and ABB wanted spectacular architecture, and hired Richard Rogers to do a counter-proposal. Although the Senate considered the plan, they ultimately returned to the Hilmer & Sattler master plan (Enke 34-39). However, since Daimler-Benz owned most of the property directly around the main square of Potsdamer Platz, their urban design by Renzo Piano ultimately, and primarily, shaped the new development.



*"So many projects being built so near to each other, above and below ground, creates more than merely technical problems. The logistical side...also requires considerable attention." (Maier, 233)*



Above: Diagrammatic map of the underground service system on the construction site.  
(Maier, 234)

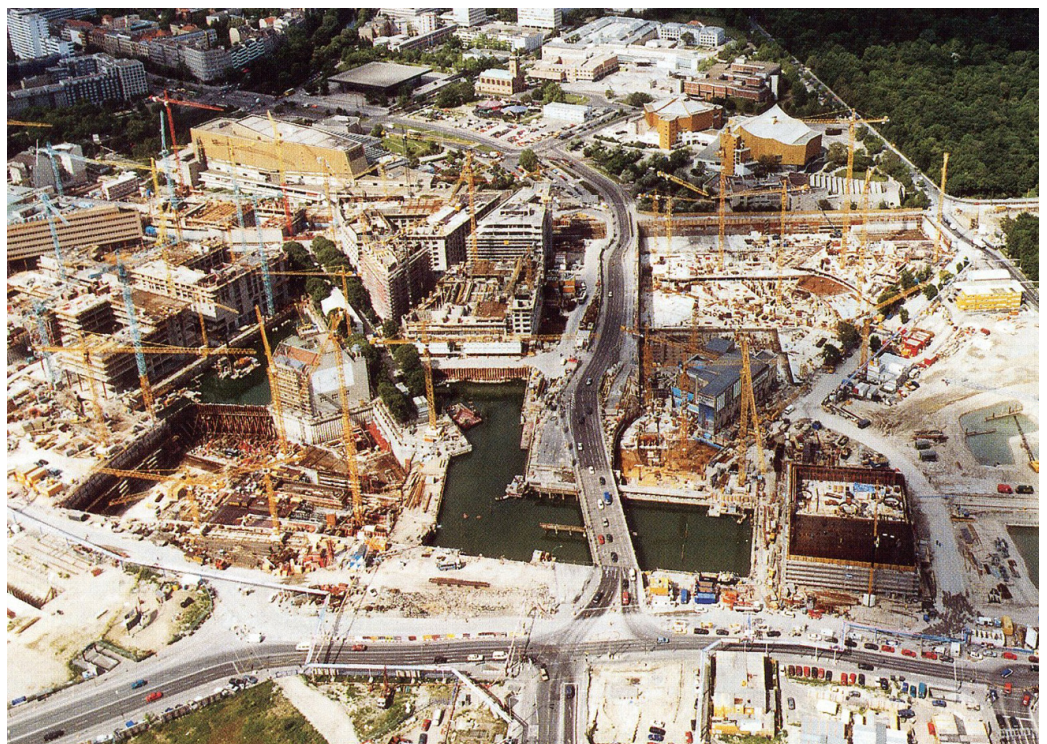
Right: Birds-eye view of the construction site. The watery areas were temporarily created during excavation and foundation building due to the high water table.  
(Maier, 230)

## Construction

The construction of the Potsdamer Platz development was rapid (most of it was done in only 4 years!) as well as vast. A huge amount of coordination was needed in order to make it all possible. The area was developed by both private and public agencies, which added yet another layer of coordination to the mix. The government oversaw the building of some major transit infrastructure, including new tunnels for both train tracks and car roads, as well as a new train station underneath the plazas at Potsdamer Platz. Private developers oversaw the construction of all the surrounding buildings.

Because all of this work was happening all at once, the huge amount of materials that needed to move both on and off the sites created a big logistical problem. "Conventional transport by trucks would inevitably cause a total traffic breakdown in central Berlin" (Maier, 233). So, the state and the private developers banded together to create one "logistics office" for the whole site, which oversaw the receipt, delivery and removal of all materials, primarily via "rail and water routes" (ibid). Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the logistics office was their "logistics centre" located adjacent to the construction site and connected to it by a "2.5km long internal transport road" (ibid) - or underground transport network. This underground system allowed the main roads above ground to operate relatively normally. Additionally, some of these service roads are still in use as the delivery and waste removal areas for the buildings.

The construction site was further defined and aided by a philosophy of "just in time" wherein materials were ordered and delivered only just as they were needed. In that way large storage areas were not needed.



## Potsdamer Platz



*Left:* October 2006 view of people interacting with a remnant of the Berlin Wall in Potsdamer Platz. These remnants stand as witness to the square's past. (www.flickr.com)

*Below-top:* October 2004 view of a pumpkin market set-up on the main square at Potsdamer Platz. (www.flickr.com)

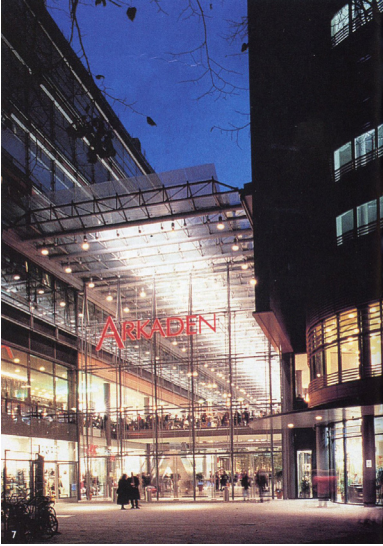
*Below-bottom:* December 2007 view of the annual Christmas market at Potsdamer Platz. This market is very popular and really activates the square as a public space. (www.flickr.com)

### Activities

As a commercial and entertainment sector, the Potsdamer Platz district has quite a wealth of activities. It was planned to intentionally be a "lively inner-city area [and] alive all around the clock" (Potsdamer Platz). The district includes "a shopping street, the Potsdamer Platz Arcades, the Theater at Potsdamer Platz, the BLUEMAX Theater, the Berlin Casino, the ADAGIO night club, the CinemaxX movie center, the Grand Hyatt Hotel Berlin, the Mandala Hotel and many cafés, restaurants and bars. In addition, Potsdamer Platz has been the venue for the International Berlin Film Festival since 2000" (Potsdamer Platz). The official website for the area advertises that between 70,000 and 100,000 people use the various facilities every day.

The most successful (from an 'activities' standpoint) truly public areas of the district are the two public plazas that sit adjacent to one another at the heart of Potsdamer Platz. It is in these squares that the two main entry points to the underground train station are located. Also, the plazas are well used open spaces for markets, from pumpkin stands in the fall to a big annual winter market in December. Additionally, general milling around and sightseeing are popular activities in the square, where there are attractions such as pieces of the Berlin Wall and views of the flamboyant architecture.





Potsdamer Platz in 1945. The area was a bombed extensively during WWII. ([berlin.barwick.de/sights/famous-places/potsdamer-platz.html](http://berlin.barwick.de/sights/famous-places/potsdamer-platz.html))



June 2007 view of the Potsdamer Platz skyscrapers. ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com))



## Critique

The completed project has received mixed reviews. It succeeded in bringing many people to the area, 70,000 people per week day and 100,000 people on the weekends in 1998 (Sewing 50). However, its future is uncertain. Reinhard Hönighaus and Oliver Wihofszki in the *Financial Times Deutschland* announced on October 1, 2007 that both Daimler and Sony were putting their Potsdamer Platz properties on the market.

Potsdamer Platz is once again a hectic street intersection with 40,000 cars passing east-west per day. But, Werner Sewing criticizes it for being overburdened and a “victim of failed traffic planning” (50).

Sewing also argues that the designers tried to build up an image of historical authenticity, but it comes across as false. Kollhoff’s bottom two floors recall Berlin office buildings of the late Weimar Republic, and the site neighbors the only historical building still intact, the Haus Huth. The dense street pattern, referencing a medieval period, actually never existed in that part of Berlin. Rather than a place revealing true history, he understands the space more as a stage set (54). Sewing argues that the designers pulled from all around the world, resulting in a “theme park in which significant big-city motifs are presented within the pedestrian-friendly, nearly automobile-free idyll of a small town” with “only genuine ingredients of Berlin ... missing” (55).

Another criticism regards the use of high rises. Sewing wonders why Berlin looked to American models from the 1930s and placed high rises like Chicago’s or New York’s at Potsdamer Platz. They are too small and too few to be a downtown or to make an effective skyline (51). *Architectural Review* also describes the designs of the Daimler Benz and Sony buildings “as competing commercially as well as in architecture,” questioning, “Is this the way to make a city” (44)? Helmut Jahn, the designer of the Sony site, largely disregarded the early Hilmer & Sattler masterplan, opting for a less rigid block structure (*Architectural Review* 44). One might argue that if the Hilmer & Sattler plan had been followed in spirit throughout the district, the public realm would have been in the forefront, more like the Potsdamer Platz of the 1920s. As it is now, the privatised public space dominates.

Early criticism pointed to the denial of true public space in favor of private consumption. Le Monde complained that the new development was a “modern fortress of consumption” (Sewing 49). Most paths lead to the covered mall, the Arkaden, with 120 shops, 35,000 square meters of sales floors, and 3 storeys. The mall also connects to the underground commuter and regional train lines. It, so far, has been very successful, but Sewing observes, “If this is the city’s new heart, it beats to an American rhythm” (56). No retail stores are located in the alleys or on the streets, and even the apartments are often leased by companies for their traveling employees (Sewing 57).

Left: A replica of the original clock tower and traffic light stands in Potsdamer Platz. ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com))

## Potsdamer Platz



*Left:* An elevated view of the Sony Center “forum” - a privatized and commercialized public square. A large roof protects the area from rain and snow. This photo from August 2008 shows that it is quite a popular destination with people sitting at cafes as well as just lounging on the edge of the fountain. (www.flickr.com)

*Below-top:* Street level view of the entrance to the Sony Center “forum” space. (www.flickr.com)

*Below-bottom:* A view down the street just outside the Sony Center. The real public space of the street is empty; a bad side-effect of so much private-public space surrounding it. (www.flickr.com)

*Architectural Review* comments that the master plan merely laid out the urban form, failing to specify functions of buildings (34). Although the site incorporates different uses, “the contrast between Piano’s warm, urbane thoroughfares and the windy, cheerless emptiness of nearby Friedrichstrasse could not have been greater” (34). Although the comment was intended to complement Piano’s plan, it points to the lack of attention put toward the public realm.

Overall, the area seems to work well as a commercial center for Berlin. The shopping mall is extensively used and the Sony Center forum space is quite popular. However, the many indoor streets, from the Arkaden, to “public” alleys through some of the office buildings, serve to remove people from the actual public spaces of the outdoor streets. The two central plazas at Potsdamer Platz fare somewhat better, since they have the constant activity of the two train station entries as well as being used as a special market space and event space throughout the year.





Exterior view of entry to Potsdamer Platz station.



Interior view of entry down to train station under Potsdamer Platz.  
(members.virtualtourist.com/m/p/m/1552a3/)



February 2007 interior view of underground Potsdamer Platz station.  
(www.flickr.com)



Exterior view of entry to Potsdamer Platz station.  
(Photo by Eugene Hernandez, blogs.indiewire.com/eug/archives/2005\_02.html)

## Resources

Allen, John. "Ambient Power: Berlin's Potsdamer Platz and the Seductive Logic of Public Spaces." Urban Studies. 43. 2 (2006): 441-455.

Enke, Roland. "Missed Opportunities?" In Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architecture for a new Berlin, ed. Yamin von Rauch and Jochen Visscher. Berlin: Jovis, (2000): 29-46.

Keating, Paul. "New Urban Domains: Potsdamer Platz." Debatte. 9. 1 (2001): 78-84.

Lehrer, Ute. "The Spectacularization of the Building Process: Berlin, Potsdamer Platz." Genre. 36. 3 (2003): 383.

Maier, W. "Construction Logistics for Potsdamer Platz." Structural Engineering International. 7. 4 (1997): 233-235.

"Potsdamer Platz Planning." Architectural Review -London-. 1223 (1999): 31-34.

"Potsdamer Platz." Renzo Piano Building Workshop. 4 Oct. 2008 <<http://rpbw.r.ui-pro.com/>>.

"Architecture." Potsdamer Platz. 04 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.potsdamerplatz.de/en/architecture.html>>.

Sewing, Werner. 2000. "Heart, Artificial Heart or Theme Park?" In Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architecture for a new Berlin, ed. Yamin von Rauch and Jochen Visscher. Berlin: Jovis, (2000): 47-95.

Wilderotter, Hans. "Outside the Potsdam Gate." In Der Potsdamer Platz: Urbane Architecture for a new Berlin, ed. Yamin von Rauch and Jochen Visscher. Berlin: Jovis, (2000): 9-28.