NEW URBAN DOMAINS: Potsdamer Platz
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Paul Keating was invited to open an exhibition on the rebuilding of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin and the design processes involved. He used the opportunity to put his perspective on Berlin, a city with which he had maintained a long interest, from the vantage point of his wider interest in neo-classicism.

In the ruins of Berlin in 1945, amid the debris, Richard Strauss mused reflectively on the devastation around him, speaking disconsolately of the world he once knew: 'Goethe's house, the world's holiest place destroyed. My lovely Dresden, Weimar, Munich, all gone!'

Like so many others, he could not understand the fate that had befallen Germany, the punishment that had been meted out to it.

The world of Germanic spirituality, the reach for new heights, the revolutionary idiom of Wagner, the science of Einstein and Planck, the art of Liebermann and Grosz, the writing of Brecht and Zuckmayer, the architecture of Gropius, the prescience of Mahler, and all that nurtured it, swept away.

In its majesty and its tragedy, Germany was at once a crucible of accomplishment and a sink where darker emotions were fed by a pervasive skittishness and vainglorious ambitions.

The German empire, having squandered the legacy of a century of peace in smouldering resentment of its detractors, set about destabilising the very homeland that was Europe.

Few saw the First World War coming, but the artists did. They understood the resonances which the statesmen and the zealots failed to feel. Mahler, who died in 1911, three years before the First World War began, had seen the twentieth century coming. His life's work in composition focused on the titanic struggle between the life force and the death force; premonitions of the gruesome conflicts to come; the carnage and the bestiality and written against one of the most languid backdrops of all history—the century to 1914.

Berlin, the provincial capital of Prussia, seat of Frederick the Great, architectural laboratory of von Knoblesdorf and Schinkel, centre of Bismarck's creation, home of Wilhelmine nationalism, of Weimar's promise and Hitler's Third Reich came to straddle perhaps the most notorious fault line of all humanity.

A small intimate capital nurtured by a generous river and surrounded by lakes, Berlin could have been the subject of a classicist's ideal, of a Caspar David Friedrich or a Turner.

A cluster of baroque and classic buildings huddled around a central tree-lined axis opened by a triumphal gate with canals that gave a hint of Venice, all surrounded by lakes and gentle hills sprinkled with palaces and follies. A fairytale prince's capital. Civil, civilised, structured, full of promise. A place of destiny.

But its destiny was to take some rueful turns.

Bismarck's fastidious statecraft with its balancing treaties and guarantees was to fall prey to crude notions of Junker glory.

The First World War scarified Germany and took away most of its sons.

After the war, the old social order crumbled in an orgy of political fashion and of social debauchery.

The always opportunist right and the old militarists shafted the Weimar Republicans while the country struggled under the yoke of Versailles' reparations and smarted at its humiliation. That was before Stresemann died and after Rathenau was murdered and before inflation wiped the floor with people's savings.

We all know the next bit. From the chaos came Mr Hitler who, on his first day in office, outlawed legal trade unionism. That story was to end as Russian troops fought a gruesome battle street by street to the Reich Chancery, but only after twenty million of their brothers and sisters had died repelling Hitler's tyranny.

And not before that fateful Saturday in the January of 1942, on a sunny day on the Havel at Wannsee when the Nazis nonchalantly decided to commit the most breathtaking and monstrous crime of all human history: the industrial extermination of a race of people, Europe's Jews.

And where even after the war, at Cecilienhof, the Allies carved Europe in two and consigned two generations to penury behind the Iron Curtain. Only now do they limp into daylight, many too scarred to make anything of it.

Berlin is no ordinary place.

This is not a talk about history but of a grand rebuilding project, part of the rebuilding of Berlin. But I do not believe that one can think about the new Berlin without putting the historic settings into open view.

Its rebuilding cannot simply be the subject of a model urban renewal program or a test bed for the world's architects and city planners; where thinking big or being creative is the only consideration or even giving the Germans back their capital. The new Berlin and its architecture must be set against its turbulent history. Seen in a context wider—and more important—than simply urban renewal.

If you could choose a setting between the two world wars that said much about Europe and its society, I suppose you would have to have the Hotel Adlon in Berlin on the list. Nestled in the corner of Parisier Platz, flanked on its left by the Brandenburg Gate, it was one of the social hubs of the Continent. In the 1920s and early 1930s, over a week, you might have seen political icons like Gustav Stresemann, or Walther Rathenau, or even Max Planck, or Greta Garbo, or Otto Klemperer or Lotte Lenya.

The creative and artistic life of Europe, once hubbed in Paris, had migrated to Berlin. The place was skittish but wired with enormous creative energy. For instance, between the wars the royalty of western music lived and worked there.

Richard Strauss, Ferruccio Busoni, Karl Böhm, Vladimir Horowitz, George Szell, Arturo Toscanini, Arnold Schoenberg, Erich Kleiber, Gregor Piatigorsky, Herbert von Karajan, Rudolf Serkin, Claudio Arrau and Igor Stravinsky lived there. Arthur Nikisch and Wilhelm Furtwängler ran the Philharmonic, Otto Klemperer the Kroll, Erich Kleiber the State Opera and Bruno Walter the Municipal Opera.

Parisier Platz was the elegant forecourt of the Unter den Linden's long axis. Its chic catchment.

Frankly, I doubt it will ever be again. A forecourt, maybe. A place of bustling elegance, I cannot imagine. Today in the new capital, the New Adlon Hotel is about as appealing as an old Hilton. Devoid of originality and the ferment with which it was once invested by Berlin society.

The only concession made in the new plan to Parisier Platz is the pre-war height limitations; the great classic structure of Langhans' Gate now set between two buildings that resemble double stacked mobile homes. Around its perimeter, the architecture has every chance of being pretty ordinary. Dumbed down by those few devices taught in modern architecture schools. Sheer walls, blade walls, windows without architraves, pediments without cornices, etcetera. Raw beams exposed like a good pair of legs at every available opportunity. Mies and Corbu certainly left Berlin, but their spirit still lingers.

Friedrichstrasse, once one of the most elegant and bustling streets in Europe, with its canvas awnings decked out for its summers and pulled together by its variegated architectural homogeneity, is now a cold copy of its old self.

It is a street of architectural brand names. Every architect in the world has been invited to have a go at it. Acres of marble and glass, a canyon to Corning and Carrara, aesthetic flights of fancy curtailed only by height. It is about as inviting and people-friendly as a WalMart after shopping hours. Not even Renzo could strike a note here. But he tried! God bless him.

The French gave back Schinkel's sculptures that adorned his bridge over the Spree—the Schloss Brüche. It has to be one of the most romantic bridges in Europe, but the modernist mausoleum built by the GDR on the site of the Old Palace adjacent to it rains on its parade. And if one turned around quickly, the site of Schinkel's Bauakademie is adorned with another piece of junk also courtesy of the

GDR: its Foreign Ministry, obliterating the building which was the model for many from Times Square and Wall Street to Chippendale and Pyrmont.

All along the Unter den Linden the buildings look much as they did in 1838 in Gartner's famous picture which hangs in the nearby National Gallery. Except that their façades were deformed by artillery and pockmarked by shrapnel, many replaced; given a quick makeover in render—their interiors gone. Cavernous spaces given shape by plasterboard or a quick rebuild GDR style, terrazzo abounding. More is the pity but much of it is fake like the interior of Schinkel's Altes Museum. A cost of adventurism and defeat. The patination of one's history suffers.

Today we are to talk about the phoenix at Potsdamer Platz, the gleaming bit of the rebuild.

Let me turn to the exhibition itself, and begin by complimenting the organisers, especially Peter Droege. It is extremely comprehensive and impressive, one of a kind Sydney too rarely sees.

It is an architect's feast and a show for ordinary mortals too.

There are many plans and models and much background provided to the scheme. It is very illuminating.

The scheme itself is ambitious. It tries very hard, and better than most, to establish some of the rhythm of the old precinct, such as keeping to the original street forms, etcetera.

For me, the problem the new Potsdamer Platz has—that is outside the wider problem of Berlin itself—is the classic problem of all large urban renewal programs. They lack that calibrated organic quality that evolutionary architecture and town building brings.

Precincts created in a single stroke—all that is the antithesis of the evolving city.

The old buildings of old cities were scaled to serve a function. Handcrafted, they were tailored to meet a particular need, each denoting its relative commercial importance. And naturally limited in height by their materials and structure, they lived in genuine harmony with their streetscape despite their undesigned juxtapositioning.

Notwithstanding this scheme's earnest aspirations and, indeed, efforts, it demonstrates how impossible it is to recreate organic human scale precincts at a single stroke, especially when commercial imperatives demand that developments be so grand and so dense.

Architects are constantly confronted with developers' schemes that are too commercially driven for their sites. Potsdamer Platz will stand alone in the historic medium-rise of Berlin, a site where the buildings are too large and too clustered, its periphery not feathered back into anything approaching the old medium rise that surrounds it. Rather than being a part of the whole, it will stand alone.

The precinct is heralded by two commercial high-rise towers which act as a de facto entrance. Potsdamer Platz is going up, when as any aerial photo of Berlin reveals, it doesn't need to. There is much more land around for more medium-height use. Berlin was always generously proportioned.

Piano himself admitted to many of these concerns a couple of years ago when he addressed the Biennial Jerusalem Seminar in Architecture:

'Making a scheme for Berlin is an impossible job, although I would never say this in front of my clients. A civilised person is called urbane, even in English, and when we refer to this term, we immediately think about all the beautiful cities that have ever been. We know, however, that they were not designed. They were and still are a product of organic growth. When you walk around these cities, what is beautiful is the very fact that what you are looking at has not been designed. Instead it represents the materialisation of the millions of life stories that have been enacted within their respective walls across centuries.

When you are asked to design a piece of a city, even as little as fifteen buildings, it is really difficult, because you don't have the time to do such a thing. However, being an architect you still accept the challenge to do it . . . Being an architect, especially when you are asked to design a piece of a city, is like being an acrobat. However, if you have grown up in the European humanist atmosphere, you have a net beneath you.'

That net had quite a few holes. Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin pour Paris of 1925, fortunately rejected, provides a case in point. It would have utterly changed a large part of central Paris, removing completely any notion of this area remaining part of the organic whole. Cold, dismal and deadening, it provided a lesson in what not to do with a large urban renewal project in an old city.

The new Potsdamer Platz avoids that trap but falls into others by virtue of its scale, density and 'instantness'.

The Potsdamer Platz project gives us the opportunity to ponder whether Berlin, the new capital of the Federal Republic, can become the lively credible place that its champions hope for and that the country, or at least the government, seems to want.

For my part, at one time I thought it might. But I do not believe so anymore, to the extent that I ever thought breathing life back into Berlin was easily capable of accomplishment, or was desirable.

Berlin is now and, I think, will remain a shadow of its former self, in substance and in spirit. A collage of made-over gutted historic sites mixed in with the GDR's greyest and new architecture's finest.

Will the whole add to more than the sum of the parts, creating a flux of its own and a new legitimacy? In short, can Berlin reinvent itself yet again? While much went on in the subsidised and pampered west side of Berlin, you don't get the sense that the whole city, free of its Cold War straitjacket, will—in social terms—come to anything remarkable.

The war and what happened before it not only belted the body of Berlin, it belted the soul out of it. One should not wonder that Berlin has been gasping ever since.

The rebuilding of Berlin is, in a great many respects, a hoax against postwar German history and achievement.

The Bonn republic, in restoring Germany's credibility among the society of nations, garnered its legitimacy through its people's earnest intentions and their profound labours. Bonn in its modest surroundings came to represent all that was real and good about the new Germany, the Federal Republic.

A return to Berlin, to reclaim the capital, is to reclaim it in the name of what? And to reclaim what? The ungainly reunited state, with its great disparities? Its eighteenth or its nineteenth-century romanticism? Prussian intellectualism, Germanic notions of the Second Reich or Weimar's culture? The brief, dark glory of Hitler's '1000 years'? A flicker in the German soul of how much better it might have been, given the chance to start over?

A unified Germany in a uniting Europe can form, as Helmut Kohl saw, the basis for a much more hopeful century on the Continent. But the ghosts in the capital will make the task just that much harder.

Wishful thinking that a reunited Germany embedded in Europe anchored in Berlin can, by its reincarnation, deal with the stain of Wansee or the fact that history's greatest criminal set up shop there? Or that it was the seat of trouble in the two world wars that destroyed Europe, robbing it of the promise and the opportunity of the twentieth century?

The reality is that the new nation of the Federal Republic will begin the twenty-first century in the old capital with its fake buildings and its haunted streets. That dark history. I think it is a pity.

If there was one city in the world that would have been better left in ruin, it is Berlin.

A monument to false notions of glory, to nationalism, to idolatry, to racism, to political criminality. A reminder to all that some places can never be remade. That history cannot be replastered. That a place from where such devastation was wrought and from which such evil sprang should be left to its own haunted spaces.

What people in Australia might call, with reference to Aboriginality, an unsacred site.

A site made sacred by its unsacredness. To be remembered for why it was destroyed rather than the living that went on there in the past. Not that that living was not good. Or that the people were not good. But that some of them were not good and that others were exceptionally bad. That it is fruitless to try and attribute value to particular layers of history and not to others but the sum total of it led to Berlin's destruction in 1945 and attempts to unravel it, to unscramble it, to erase it, by rebuilding it would have best been left untried.

It is, I suppose, a question of weight and meaning and memory rather than utility.

Schinkel's Schauspielhaus with its pediment holed by artillery, its corinthian columns smashed by shrapnel, dangling like stalactites, overgrown with weed, would, I believe, have been more authentic and relevant to its history than it is now with its new cosmetics.

Ditto for ground zero at Potsdamer Platz. It would have better been left uncleared as after 1945.

Piranesian romanticism provides, I believe, relevant instruction when thinking of Berlin. Piranesi scoured ancient buildings seeking to distil their essence, improvising as he went, bringing the buildings to life by reducing their essentials to ruin.

In Berlin in the twentieth century, he would have found a real one. Ruined in pitiless attacks, by an indefatigable enemy seeking an exasperated vengeance.

This exhibition is one about architecture and the city. About a huge rebuilding plan for an old, worn place. It is a discussion of a new vision. But is it the only one? Or the right one?

Let me give another: the Brandenburg Gate pockmarked by shrapnel, twigs growing from its crevices, the Apollonian horses and carriage still forlornly heading skywards.

Down the Unter den Linden, through the rubble of Parisier Platz, the Adlon Hotel squatting in its own decadence. No smart cars, no one in smart dress, just the odd crow providing the banter.

Along the Linden, those young trees planted in the 1930s, now fully grown but deformed.

Tufts of weeds growing from the gutters and between the cobblestones. The craggy presence of the great classic buildings, façades blown away, pediments smashed, columns hanging, nature doing its best to reduce everything further to rubble.

The Arsenal, in its baroque grandeur, stoically holding itself together, its face pockmarked, wearing its classic statuary on its cornice like a crown; all overgrown with moss.

The old Imperial Palace reprieved but still standing; shell-shocked, its grand front to the river shattered beyond recognition. The National Gallery perched high on its rock, intact but burnt back by incendiaries, its doric colonnade sprayed with shrapnel, its egg-and-dart cornices carved away as if by a knife. And across the Spree, Schinkel's Altes Museum, its magnificent frescoed façade charred black by the explosion of that fuel truck. Its Lustgarten obliterated, but its great red granite urn standing proudly unscathed.

When the children looked at such a Berlin they might well have asked: why is the place like this? And they could have been told, without pretence or apology, why. Or they could inquire of another vision, a newer one at Potsdamer Platz, one of

spangling buildings and creative invention shooting skyward and the answer would probably be—‘This is Potsdamer Platz. It was the subject of an architectural competition where all the world’s great architects were invited to contribute and where many of the great corporations are housed.’

And a child replies, ‘Oh, I thought Potsdamer Platz was flat, flattened’. And is told, ‘It was, but that was long ago.’