Old Berlin

Europe used to be ruled by kings, and its capital cities still have palaces to remind us of their days of glory. So, in a sense, what visitors to Berlin encountered in the summer of 1993 would have been a familiar sight in any other European capital. Walking or driving from the Brandenburg Gate down the grand old boulevard Unter den Linden, they approached an ornate yellow facade shimmering in the distance. Here, where the boulevard reached the banks of the Spree, resided the Hohenzollerns for four hundred years.

For Berliners, too, it was an impressive sight, but one that elicited a different response. They knew that the ruins of the palace had been dynamited in 1950—or at least they knew that the huge space at the end of Unter den Linden had been a parking lot for years. The palace they saw in 1993 and 1994 was made of painted canvas hung from an enormous scaffold in the exact dimensions of the vanished building (fig. 12). It was an extraordinary apparition of something long forgotten, or something never seen—or perhaps of something that might be. For the mockup had a purpose: it was erected by a group dedicated to seeing the palace rebuilt. The decorated scaffold brought to the general public what was already a heated debate among intellectuals.

In Berlin even the remote past cannot escape controversy. Many cities proudly display their historical pedigrees in the form of ancient buildings and monuments. But in Berlin, these buildings must be restored from ruins, if not re-created entirely. And

There is nothing in Berlin to captivate the foreign visitor, except a few museums, palaces and the army.1

—Emperor Wilhelm II, 1892

I've never loved this place. Here on the Palace Bridge, we schoolchildren were lined up in the cold on the Emperor's birthday, January 27. ... On the hot August days of 1914 I stood here wedged in the crowd in front of the palace that is now in ruins. The crowd sang one song after another. Then they pushed down Unter den Linden in the delirium of war. After four years I saw revolutionary workers marching behind red flags in the same streets. ... Nothing of that can be seen or heard any more, nothing of the people, nothing of the buildings. This place is a parcel of land through which the Spree flows. This is what history looks like.2

—Alfred Düblin, 1947

The Eastern zone regime will surely center its headquarters on the site of the old Hohenzollern palace, now "Marx-Engels Platz." The chief government building will dominate the scene just as its prototypes do in Warsaw, Moscow, and other capitals in the East. Even if the government of a reunited Germany never moves into that building at all, it will nevertheless be standing there in case unification is long delayed and we shall have to wrestle with the problem of what to do with it.3

—Friedrich Furlinger, West Berlin city planner, 1960

We should rebuild the palace as a sign that we are at least trying to forget forty years of socialism.

—from a comment book for the 1993 exhibition "The Palace"

Without the palace—at least its exterior—I lack part of my identity as a Berliner.

—from the comment book for "The Palace"
each choice of building and of identity is freighted with all the burdens of German history.

**Medieval Berlin: The Nikolai Quarter**

The demise of the Wall restored to Berlin its historical center. Both the politics and the geography of division had forced East and West Berlin into peculiar compromises with the historical city. Now the imaginary unity long projected onto the Wall could give way to a real focal point. Or so Berlin’s political and cultural leaders thought, naturally enough. For most ordinary citizens, orbits of home, work, and leisure remained entirely on one side or the other of the now invisible Wall. Their habits would be slow to change—especially since the historical center was largely empty of homes, shops, corporate headquarters, and (temporarily) a central government as well. A physical void at the center had to be filled, but so did a psychological void left by political, economic, and cultural forces pulling East and West apart. To re-create a sense of wholeness, leaders looked for points of orientation.

The oldest part of Berlin, since 1920 defined as the district of Mitte (Middle), belonged to the East. Despite its name, after 1945 it lay on the edge of East Berlin, surrounded on two and a half sides by West Berlin and thus by the Wall. Mitte had encompassed the central institutions of government, finance, and culture for successive Prussian and German regimes, including the German Democratic Republic. All had established themselves within the narrow confines of medieval and early modern Berlin. This process of continuous redevelopment has ensured that little remains of old Berlin. The bombers of World War II reshaped the city, of course, but even before the war, Berlin was busy reinventing itself. In the boom years around the turn of the century, many narrow streets of ancient houses gave way to massive new structures for government and business, and the Nazis continued the process on a few enormous sites. Speculation and redevelopment even claimed most buildings from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, replacing them with bigger, taller, more ornate and impressive ones. After 1945, once the rubble had been cleared, the heart of East Berlin was a windswept district of vacant spaces, which were only slowly covered with new buildings. The sense of desolation was hardly countered by the row of high-rise apartment houses built along the southern edge of Mitte around 1970 as a symbolic and visual barrier reinforcing the Wall.

Of course, Berlin never amounted to much as a medieval city. Its identity in later times (unlike Cologne’s or Nuremberg’s) was thus rarely linked to its medieval past, permitting that past to be neglected. The major cities of medieval Germany lay mainly to the south and west. The vast plain of northeastern Germany was on the margins of the Roman-influenced Christian civilization defined by Charlemagne’s empire. Only in the twelfth century did most of the territory of the later GDR forge permanent links to Germany and the West. Under the sponsorship of various princes, ethnic German colonists began settling the area. They founded towns and conquered, assimilated, or drove out the Slavic inhabitants of the area, who were for the most part neither
Christians nor town-dwellers. Although there may have been an earlier settlement on the site, Berlin’s poorly documented origins can probably be placed in the late twelfth century. Sometime in the early thirteenth century, town charters were granted to two settlements on opposite sides of a fordable crossing of the Spree River. The larger town on the right bank was named Berlin; the other, an island enclosed by an arm of the river, was Cölln. Each was protected by walls. The two towns would remain closely allied, and soon the name Berlin was customarily applied to both together.

Documents that could give these events precise dates are lost. An exact date is furnished only by the oldest document that clearly identifies either town, one from 1237 that mentions Cölln. In 1937, Berlin’s Nazi leaders decided that was occasion enough to stage a celebration of the city’s 700th anniversary. In 1987, neither East nor West Berlin found this precedent too tainted to stop them from two ambitious and competing celebrations of Berlin’s 750th anniversary.

Churches, fragments of churches, and one small piece of a restored town wall are all that remain of the buildings of medieval Berlin. Even the street pattern and scale of the medieval town has been virtually obliterated. The northern half of the Cölln island was appropriated long ago for royal use; the southern tip of the island has been rebuilt with high-rises; in between is next to nothing. On the Berlin side, after wartime rubble had been cleared, there remained one lonely church to the north and a few streets to the south in which one can still find the ruins of a monastery church as well as a sense of the old scale of the town.

But amid the multilane thoroughfares and windswept plazas, the visitor can find refuge in the winding lanes and intact rows of traditional houses around the church of St. Nikolai (St. Nicholas). St. Nikolai is the oldest medieval church of Berlin, and the Nikolai Quarter was the heart of the medieval town. Here is a concentration of cafés and craft shops clearly aimed at tourists. Visitors to German cities are used to finding the “Altstadt,” the ancient city center, restored as a place for pedestrian strolls, nightlife, and tourists’ deutschmarks. West Berlin had no such Altstadt, except in the remote suburb (and once-independent town) of Spandau. With reunification, all Berliners could again embrace their city’s historical center (fig. 13).

One peculiar fact about this ancient neighborhood should be noted, however: it is brand new. In 1979, it was mostly empty land. The ruins of the church and a few scattered buildings were all that stood in one of the more desolate patches of central Berlin. It was at this time that the East German authorities authorized a plan by the architect Günter Stahn to re-create the neighborhood. In addition to restoration of the church, the project entailed the careful re-creation of entire rows of long-destroyed houses. Some of these could lay claim to particular historical significance—the home of the eighteenth-century
writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, for example—but most were simply typical examples of merchants' houses from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The new-old Nikolai Quarter, finished in 1987 for the East's 750th anniversary celebration, contributed to the German Democratic Republic's rediscovery of history during the 1980s. During these years, the German workers' state sought to place itself at the end of a line of progressive development that passed through German history. Anniversaries, exhibitions, books, and (not least) urban restorations commemorated worthy predecessors, some of whom had been deemed entirely unworthy not long before. Frederick the Great, heretofore a militarist aggressor, was rehabilitated as promoter of the Enlightenment, and in 1980 his equestrian statue was returned to its prominent spot on Unter den Linden. The rediscovery of Prussia as something other than a font of militarism also transformed Bismarck from reactionary oppressor of German socialism into incubator of the progressive historical forces of bourgeois revolution.

Where did the Nikolai Quarter fit in? This neighborhood of merchants testified to the vigor of the new middle class at the end of the Middle Ages, rising to power in a feudal society and thus illustrating (in the most basic Marxist theory) the bourgeois revolution that was the prerequisite for the proletarian revolution that the Red Army brought to Germany in 1945. As inner-city redevelopment, the Nikolai Quarter also contributed in a more tangible way to the GDR's search for urban identity. It was one of several projects East Berlin undertook during the 1980s to revive its inner city. Planners hoped that the Nikolai Quarter would encourage tourists to linger after visiting the scattered historical sites nearby, but it also contained apartments for two thousand privileged residents in a part of town long uninhabited.

The visitor to the Nikolai Quarter first encounters large buildings with uninviting concrete facades. They are intended to shield the interior of the quarter from the traffic and noise on the wide streets outside. Unlike the typical East German high-rise slabs, the mass and form of these buildings are oriented to the streets of the quarter. Some of them also mimic Renaissance gables in their concrete rooflines. Only after passing these buildings does the pedestrian arrive in the quiet lanes of new houses that try to imitate their vanished predecessors in every detail. For many people familiar with the old GDR, this painstaking effort was a galling sight. The Communist state had inherited many of the least bombed German cities after 1945; forty years later, complete neglect had doomed many blocks of intact buildings in the centers of cities such as Halle, Erfurt, and Potsdam. Money and attention that might have saved them had instead gone to Berlin. For that matter, even in Berlin the so-called Fishermen's Island, the southern tip of old Cölln, had survived fairly intact into the 1960s, when it was leveled to make way for high-rise apartment buildings. For somewhat different reasons, the Nikolai Quarter's architecture was poorly received in the West. The concrete buildings were seen as ugly, the re-creations as an offense against proper historical preservation, the entire design as unalloyed kitsch. The quality of the food and drink served in the many cafés and restaurants offered Western critics a final confirmation of their established belief in the aesthetic bankruptcy of East German Communism.

—Little about this historical stage set is uniquely Communist, however. In it, rather, we see a longing for urban tradition bound far beyond Berlin and Germany. Indeed, the Nikolai Quarter's transition to capitalism has been relatively smooth. Not painless, of course: the privatization of businesses and the setting of market rents is never easy, and the summer of 1993 saw a heated conflict between café owners seeking to expand the seasonal beer-garden trade and residents who discovered that order, quiet, and early closing hours were East German customs they were loath to surrender. They will probably have to adapt or move, later if not sooner, since this socialist project is a perfect haven for free-enterprise tourism. West German intellectuals generally scorn the kitschy Alstadté built out of the ruins of cities like Cologne and Düsseldorf, but tourists and business travelers continue to patronize their bars. With the Nikolai Quarter, reunified Berlin came with a ready-made Altstadt that quickly began to absorb visitors from the West. The intellectuals will have to accept that visitors in search of authentic old Berlin will find it in the counterfeit form created by the East German government during its final years.

A Tale of Two Palaces

Once we leave behind the Middle Ages, we find that historical nostalgia in Berlin becomes politically explosive in ways that might dumbfound planners and preservationists elsewhere. The
identifiable building blocks of German unity and identity can be traced back to the princes and dynasties of the early modern era. And all national symbols, including palaces, are prized by some Germans and feared by others.

The early fifteenth century marked the beginning of a new era that would leave more lasting traces in the sandy soil of the twin towns. The Holy Roman Emperor granted the territory of Brandenburg to Burgrave Friedrich of the south German family of Hohenzollern, and gave Friedrich and his heirs the title of elector of Brandenburg. Although the territory was named after an older town to the west, Berlin-Cölln had meanwhile emerged as the leading commercial center of the sparsely settled region. The following years were marked by tensions and disputes as the citizens of Berlin and Cölln fought to protect their legal rights against Friedrich and his successors, who sought to establish a firmer hold over their subjects. In 1442, the elector compelled Cölln to hand over land on the northern part of the island for construction of a castle from which he could assert his authority. By the end of the century, the castle had become the permanent residence of the electors of Brandenburg. Berlin and Cölln had lost the independence prized by medieval townspeople, and had become entirely subject to the ruler’s will. That was a great blow to their prosperity as well as their pride; in this feudal era of German history, it was not the capital cities but the free cities—Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Augsburg—that flourished.

In the seventeenth century, however, the electorate of Brandenburg emerged as one of the most powerful German principalities. It was in this age, which we associate with the principles and practices of absolutism, that princes strove to make their residences into capital cities. Berlin was no exception, despite the devastation it (along with much of Germany) suffered during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48). The elector Friedrich Wilhelm, who came to the throne of Brandenburg in 1640, has been known since his lifetime as the Great Elector. Through diplomacy and military posturing, more than through conquest, he enlarged his territorial holdings while strengthening his control over them. As part of his mercantilist policies of promoting domestic trade and industry, he also sponsored the expansion of Berlin. To the two walled towns of Berlin and Cölln he added a third and a fourth: in 1662, Friedrichswerder, just west of Cölln, and in 1674 a larger planned grid, Dorotheenstadt, centered on a grand western boulevard, Unter den Linden, which led from the castle to the prince’s game park, the Tiergarten.

Meanwhile, he settled disputes between Lutherans and Calvinists in 1664 by issuing an edict of religious toleration—a rare practice at the time. This edict proved valuable in attracting skilled merchants, craftsmen, and farmers to populate the expanded Berlin and neighboring villages. Friedrich Wilhelm actively recruited persecuted Protestants, notably French Huguenots, and, with somewhat less open arms, Jews expelled from Vienna.

The Great Elector was succeeded in 1688 by his son, Elector Friedrich III, who immediately founded a fifth town, Friedrichstadt, larger than the others and laid out in blocks extending south from Unter den Linden. In 1709, he officially united these five towns into a single city of Berlin (fig. 14).

Friedrich failed to match his father’s successes in diplomacy...
and expansion. More interested in establishing a grand court, he did manage to score one important success: he acquired the title of king. He obtained his crown through complicated diplomatic maneuvers. German sovereign princes were electors, grand dukes, counts, and many other things, but not kings, because they were nominally subordinate to the Holy Roman Emperor. Friedrich, however, took advantage of the fact that Brandenburg had acquired the duchy of Prussia, which lay to the east, outside the Holy Roman Empire's borders. After currying favor with the emperor, Friedrich was granted the right to crown himself Friedrich I, "King in Prussia," in the Prussian city of Königsberg (now Russian Kaliningrad) in 1701. (Not "King of Prussia" because part of Prussia belonged to the Polish crown.) Thus did Berlin become a royal capital, of a kingdom named for a territory far to the east.

Friedrich recognized that art and learning could also contribute to the glory of a grand court. But his queen, Sophie Charlotte, deserves credit for the establishment of the royal academies of arts and sciences (the latter first headed by the philosopher Leibniz). Friedrich also left a substantial physical legacy in Berlin. Most important was his expansion of the royal palace. His sixteenth-century predecessors had turned the medieval fortress into a Renaissance palace on the Cölln side of the Spree, but it was Friedrich who sponsored an enormous extension of the pal-

15 Royal palace and Palace Bridge, 1913. Courtesy of Landesbildstelle.
acc to the west, across the entire breadth of old Cölln. He found a gifted sculptor and architect, Andreas Schlüter, to design the new building, beginning in 1698. Schlüter added a courtyard enclosed by new and renovated wings on the west side of the old palace. The courtyard and the exterior portals were richly decorated with sculpture. His design has been praised as a masterpiece—even the masterpiece—of northern baroque architecture, effusively sculptural but more restrained than the better-known baroque of southern Europe (fig. 15). Its long and ornate facades, four stories and 100 feet high, established the final scale of the palace and—it has been argued—of all Berlin architecture. A second, larger courtyard and extension was subsequently designed in the same style by other architects, chiefly Johann Friedrich Eosander von Göthe. Eosander and others also built a palace several miles west of town for Queen Sophie Charlotte. After her death it would be named Charlottenburg.

By Friedrich's death in 1713, the royal palace had largely taken on the form it would have for more than two centuries. Each succeeding king, however, had his architects renovate and adapt the palace to contemporary tastes and needs. The largest later addition was a massive dome (1845–53) designed by August Stüler, rising to a height of 232 feet over Eosander's western portal. It sat atop the royal chapel and has been interpreted as the pious King Friedrich Wilhelm IV's reactionary response to the threatening tendencies of the modern world (in particular to the revolution of 1848). Others have seen it more benignly as an attempt to maintain the palace's profile in a rapidly growing city.

In the early 1700s, however, the twelve-hundred-room palace dominated a fairly small city. (After falling by half during the Thirty Years' War, the population tripled under the Great Elector and tripled again during Friedrich I's reign, but at 60,000 it was still about a tenth the size of London or Paris.) While rulers came and went—and often lived elsewhere—the palace's physical presence defined the city center, linking old Berlin across the Spree with the new, planned extensions to the west. The architects of all new buildings had to take account of it. Dominated by its new sections, the palace's orientation was now to the west. Its new facade marked the eastern terminus of Unter den Linden, which during the eighteenth century became the grand axis of royal Berlin. The intersection of boulevard and palace, at an oblique angle, became the pivotal point of Berlin's urban space. The same spot looms large in the planning of the reunified German capital in the 1990s.

Among Friedrich I's successors, three may be singled out for their notable contributions to the palace's immediate vicinity. Friedrich II (ruled 1740–86), grandson of his namesake and better (if perhaps not more accurately) known as Frederick the Great, was no great lover of the palace and resided there infrequently. His major contribution to Berlin urbanism is located a few steps down Unter den Linden. The “Forum Fridericianum” is a complex of buildings centered on Unter den Linden and an adjoining square. It consists of four buildings from Frederick the Great's reign, not built according to a unified plan (as originally foreseen) but nonetheless an impressive ensemble. The state opera house designed by Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff (1741–43) was the first opera house anywhere built as a freestanding building. Behind it, St. Hedwig's Cathedral (1747–73), with its low dome modeled on Rome's Pantheon, is a Roman Catholic church built by Frederick the Great as a gesture of reconciliation with the Catholic inhabitants of the province of Silesia, which his armies seized from Austria. Across Unter den Linden stands the palace of the king's brother, Prince Heinrich, which has housed Berlin's university since its founding in 1810. Across the square from the opera house is the curved facade of the former royal library (nicknamed, in typical Berlin fashion, the “Commode”), built according to an old design for Vienna's Hofburg palace by the baroque architect Joseph Emanuel Fischer von Erlach. A later addition in the middle of Unter den Linden is the nineteenth-century equestrian statue of Frederick the Great, which the East Germans banished to potsdam in 1950 and returned in 1980. Although the opera house alone has been badly damaged and rebuilt three times, this ensemble is happily intact and certain to remain so. The only touchy subjects were two plaques put up by the GDR. One commemorated Lenin's visit to the library; it has vanished. The other commemorates what happened in the square on May 10, 1933, when a Nazi bonfire consumed “un-German” books. It will apparently remain, although reunified Germany has added its own gesture, a sunken memorial to the book-burning under glass in the center of the square.

The immediate surroundings of the palace took their final
monarchist sentiment or out of a desire to distance the new government symbolically from the monarchy. That is, unlike many former monarchies, it did not give the palace a new, high-profile use as, for example, a presidential residence. It employed the vast building for various purposes, mainly as museum space. The Third Reich made few changes; it, too, declined to occupy the palace’s symbolic space.

The next regime was forced to make more difficult decisions. By 1945, bombs had seriously damaged much of the palace and burned out most of it. It was not a complete ruin, however, as evinced by four public exhibitions held in intact rooms between 1946 and 1948, while the city was under four-power occupation. In 1948, however, the municipal government was reorganized as four-power control broke down. In the Soviet sector, German Communists took firm control. Plans to rebuild Berlin as a socialist city took form in July 1950 at the Third Party Congress of the Socialist Unity Party (the name of the governing Communists after they absorbed the Social Democratic Party in the Soviet zone). In his speech to the Congress, Walter Ulbricht, the party’s general secretary and undisputed leader, declared: “The center of our capital, the Lustgarten and the area of the palace’s ruins, must become a grand square for demonstrations, upon which our people’s will for struggle and for progress can find expression.” On August 23, the government decreed the palace’s demolition.

This decision unleashed a storm of indignation in East as well as West Berlin. Protests came from prominent art historians in East Germany, notably Richard Hamann, an authority on baroque art who had come to East Berlin’s Humboldt University after his retirement in West Germany. Hamann, keen to preserve a great architectural monument, argued that revolution and socialism were no enemies of old buildings: “The Louvre in Paris has survived all revolutions, and the Kremlin in Moscow, likewise the former seat of forces opposed by the government, is still today the seat of government.” Public replies from responsible officials did not challenge such claims. They defended their decision solely on the grounds that the palace was too badly damaged to be rebuilt. Mayor Friedrich Ebert (son of the Weimar Republic’s first president) assured Hamann, “If the palace were still undestroyed, no one would have seriously considered tearing it down. Since, however, the English and American bombing attacks have left the palace eighty percent destroyed, as expert opinion has determined,” there were only three choices. To leave the ruins standing would not be possible, “since the new Berlin must not become a city of ruins like Rome.” To repair them would cost far too much in light of the city’s other pressing obligations. Hence the decision to clear away the ruins.

Ebert’s allocation of blame typified the early Cold War: Hitler bore some responsibility, but the main source of troubles was the current capitalist enemy. East Berlin newspaper articles published during these days echoed the party line. According to the Tägliche Rundschau, “The destruction of this monument by American bombers was an act of cultural infamy that Berlin will long remember.” The National-Zeitung wrote of “the barbaric vandalism of their flight crews, for whom unrestrained destruction was a mere matter of sport and of business, and from which they returned home with briefcases stuffed with dollars.” (One wonders how the crews could have managed such feats. Here we seem to have an overzealous Communist editor furiously mixing party-line metaphors.) But the question of blame was clearly beside the point. For whatever reasons, preservation of the palace was not a high priority. In fact, it appears that the palace’s crucial location in the city—so important to its defenders—sealed its fate. Elsewhere ruins might be left for future disposition, but not at the vital center of the capital. The dynamiting began on September 6, 1950. Despite official assurances to the contrary, salvageable parts of the palace were not reerected elsewhere, with a single exception.

The removal of the ruins took months, but once they were gone the way was clear for construction of a reviewing stand from which Ulbricht and his colleagues could survey their grand demonstrations of proletarian power. While plans for new, monumental buildings came and went (see chapter 5), little changed for years on the site. As the proletarian will became less demonstrative (or as the GDR became more bourgeois), the palace’s site came to be used for parking the proletariat’s diminutive Trabant automobiles. The cathedral, museum, and arsenal, the other main buildings on the Lustgarten (now, in its expanded form, renamed Marx-Engels-Platz), remained. Across the Spree’s western arm, Schinkel’s Bauakademie sat in limbo until 1961, then was razed to make way for the long white slab of the new foreign ministry. To the south, a new Council of State building
was also built during the 1960s. Into its facade was incorporated
one of Eosander's baroque portals—the only piece of the palace
that was indeed reerected, not for its architectural significance,
but because Karl Liebknecht had stood on it to proclaim the
socialist republic of Germany on November 9, 1918. Liebknecht
was one of the pantheon of GDR heroes; in the following weeks
he had helped to found the German Communist Party and been
murdered by nationalist soldiers.

Thus we come to the clamor for rebuilding the palace—
almost. The matter was enormously complicated by one more
cumbrance on the site. In the 1970s, after having failed to act
on all the grand schemes proposed over the years, the GDR
finally constructed its new building atop the palace's site. By
virtue of its location, if not its size or appearance, this "Palace-
of-the-Republic" became the old city center's most prominent
structure. Designed by an architectural collective under the lead-
ership of Heinz Graffunder, the building did not loom especially
large in the enormous square. It took up only one side of Marx-
Engels-Platz, covering approximately the site of the Renaissance
palace, thus leaving a vast space—a parking lot most of the
time—bordered by it, the Council of State building, and the
foreign ministry. In most respects the exterior of the Palace of
the Republic would not stand out in a suburban office park. It
was not a cheap building, but its grandeur took the form of
high-gloss international modernism (fig. 16). It was a rectangular
box clad in white marble and bronze reflective glass; the best
view of the cathedral was its reflection in this glass.

The Palace of the Republic accommodated an array of spaces
and uses. One auditorium served as the meeting place of the
East German parliament, a body that met infrequently and had
as little public visibility as it had power. A five-thousand-seat
assembly hall hosted more conspicuous but less frequent meet-
ings such as party congresses and conventions of the national
youth organization. The same hall was equally prominent, how-
ever, for the popular concerts held there, notably the infrequent
(and hence legendary) appearances by Western rock musicians.
The building also included other spaces for meetings, concerts,
and theater performances, as well as restaurants, cafés, and a
bowling alley. Perhaps nowhere else in the world did a parlia-
ment share quarters with a bowling alley.

In 1990, the building briefly became a center of attention.
After the fall of the Communist regime, the new, freely elected
parliament became the state's real government; here, on August
23, 1990, exactly forty years after the decision to raze the old
palace, it voted to join the Federal Republic. Then came a twist
of fate, the symbolism of which seems more farcical than tragic.
Just two weeks before the parliament—and the state—would
cease to exist, an official inspection declared the building hope-
lessly contaminated with asbestos and ordered it closed and
sealed. And so it continued to stand for years, in many eyes the
symbolic legacy of a poisonous state.

In March of 1993 came a decision to tear it down, but—as
with the old palace in 1950, and innumerable recent cases—that
only heated up the public debate. By no means all opponents of
rebuilding the royal palace wanted to preserve the Palace of the
Republic, but the empty GDR showpiece and the ghost of its
baroque predecessor were competing for the same site. We can
see rival nostalgias at work in the efforts of their respective
advocates. Those who longed for a return of the royal palace
wished to restore not the monarchy (though one could probably
find a few monarchists among them), but rather a cityscape and
with it a civic wholeness that had been lacking since 1950, or
1933, or 1918. Those who wished to keep the building that was
there, the Palace of the Republic, may have had certain practical
Old Berlin

considerations on their side, but their deeper wishes were no less fixed on the past. They did not want to restore the Communists to power (though in this case there probably were a few more exceptions), but they sought to hold onto certain memories and experiences of life in the Communist state. A third group that wanted to wipe the square clean and start anew might present itself as free from these longings, but others have imputed to it yet another nostalgia: for the heroic architecture of the 1920s that claimed the ability to create a new urban world. The motivations on all sides deserve more careful attention, which will help us better understand what is at stake in their polemics.

The palace mockup that stood during 1993 and 1994 probably marked the high point of the debate. The scaffolding extended westward from the empty Palace of the Republic; a team of Parisian art students painted Schlüter's and Eosander's facades on strips of canvas which were then mounted on the outside. Since the Palace of the Republic (like the Renaissance portion of the old palace) extended farther to the north than the baroque wing, an additional scaffold covered the exposed part of its western facade and a mirror was mounted on it to give the illusion of a continuous baroque facade longer than had in fact ever existed. Inside the enclosed space was room for summer concerts and for a large exhibition on the history and future of the palace. All of this was privately financed—a most unusual initiative in Germany—by an organization especially created for the purpose. Though the exhibition's organizers strove to present different ideas about future plans for the site, the driving force clearly lay with proponents of rebuilding the palace, led by a Hamburg businessman, Wilhelm von Bodien. They were rewarded with large crowds of visitors willing to pay nine marks to view the exhibition. And they were further rewarded: the exhibition and the sight of the mockup generated a wave of popular enthusiasm for the idea of reconstruction. Even many who opposed reconstruction on one principle or another admitted being moved at the sight of the resplendent baroque facade on a sunny day.9

Especially in 1993, an enormous amount of ink and breath was expended in arguments about the two palaces. A look at the arguments reveals several issues at stake, but these issues—architectural aesthetics, urban form, civic and national identity, historical preservation, historical justice—were hopelessly intertwined with one another. The confusion was unavoidable: these arguments about buildings and squares are inevitably arguments about history and identity.

Some of the arguments were in fact explicitly about politics and symbolism. Those who were outraged over the Communists' act of destruction saw reconstruction as an act of justice. "The foul Communist crime must be reversed!" commented a Viennese visitor to the exhibition, adding that "German society needs to regain a healthy self-confidence." As another visitor wrote in the comment book, anything short of reconstruction "would be a German anti-historical vindication of the Red explosives expert Walter Ulbricht." This thirst for justice (or vengeance) had a particular historical context: a rebuilt palace would represent a declaration of victory in the Cold War. One of the palace's leading proponents, the journalist Joachim Fest, put particular weight on the Communists' justification for destroying the palace in 1950: they had wanted to create a Red Square to demonstrate their control of the masses. "In the worldwide conflict that lies behind us, not the least of our goals was to prevent the advance of that kind of control. If the destruction of the palace was supposed to be the symbol of its victory, reconstruction would be the symbol of its failure."10

Would it not be possible to erase the Red Square—parking lot, actually and symbolically, without rebuilding the old palace? Fest is certainly right about the significance of the site in Ulbricht's mind. However, as we have seen, the Communist leaders did not admit to any enmity toward the palace itself. Fest's argument sprang in part from his conviction that the Communists intended the destruction of the palace as a symbolic death blow to Prussian militarism. Certainly some German Communists hated the building for its historical symbolism. One can speculate that self-hatred was at work: that Ulbricht and his fellow Communists took out on the palace their rage at the failure of revolutionaries to change the course of German history. But the architect Heinrich Moldenschardt, who made this argument, also turned it against conservative proponents of rebuilding the royal palace. He saw self-hatred arising from their sense of responsibility for the Third Reich and suggested that the return of the royal palace would soothe "the repressed recognition of having brought at least the destruction of the palace upon oneself."11

A rebuilt palace would celebrate victory in the Cold War by
The historical importance of the site is surely beyond dispute. But its future role in a nonroyal, non-communist capital remains to be determined. Those who seek to maintain the importance of the site hope to link the twenty-first-century capital to its pre-twentieth-century forebears. In light of Berlin’s history in the twentieth century, that is an understandable but nonetheless controversial desire.

Some who argued for the importance of the site went on to assert that only the baroque palace could fill the void there. This conclusion made no sense to the architectural historian Tilmann Buddensieg: “If you see this only as urban repair, then please leave out the Prussian and the historical elements of the building.” Buddensieg opted for starting anew: if the need is for a building worthy of the site, “then we can have it built by a modern architect.” But here we come up against the sour reputation of modern architecture. For many, the old palace was the best solution precisely because they could not imagine a modern building that would not prove an embarrassment. The 1993 exhibition convinced many visitors—or confirmed them in their view—that reconstructing the old was preferable to creating the new. The comment books were filled with sweeping condemnations of modern architecture.

The publisher Wolf Jobst Siedler was the most articulate exponent of this point of view. Siedler, though a West Berliner, was clearly no single-minded opponent of Communist architecture: for decades he had passionately attacked Western urban development for the destruction it wrought on Berlin and other cities. He could praise the great modernist architects of the early twentieth century for the marvelous buildings they created, “but nowhere did this generation succeed in giving form to the center of a city.” Siedler and many others believe this is a task modernism has never mastered; hence, we must look to earlier eras for guidance. Moreover, Siedler added, the entire vicinity of the palace consisted of buildings designed with an awareness of and an orientation to the palace’s dominant presence. According to Siedler, for example, Schinkel intended the classical simplicity of his museum to offer a dialogue with Schlüter’s intricate baroque forms. Thus, only the palace would restore what was left of central Berlin to any kind of visual coherence.

For others, particularly architects, this conclusion amounted to an admission of defeat by contemporary architecture and perhaps a declaration of despair in the face of the modern world. Siedler did not entirely disagree: whereas his opponents continued to “believe in the genius of the new,” his side was skeptical. It was with “melancholy” and “resignation” that he declared his support for rebuilding the palace.

Perhaps a gesture of resignation, even of despair, would not be the most inappropriate symbol of the new German capital, but it would not be a popular one, and such a sentiment surely did not explain the enthusiasm for rebuilding the royal palace. Nostalgia, rather, was at work. Nostalgia for what? As part of his plea for rebuilding the palace, Joachim Fest wrote a beguiling description of the palace’s former role in Berlin life. Unlike most palaces, he observed, it was both a public place and part of the neighborhood, only steps away from ordinary houses and workshops, psychologically approachable because of Schlüter’s inviting facades and physically approachable because most of the time anyone could pass through the inner courtyard. Fest makes his readers feel the pain of the building’s loss, and he also makes the point that the palace was not only—perhaps not even primarily—the king’s house. The palace made the pieces of old Berlin fit together.

In the absence of a king, this fortunate combination of uses cannot be recovered, so what, exactly, would be rebuilt? The practical answer was that only the facade—and probably not all of that—would be reconstructed. The palace’s friends agreed that rebuilding the interior—the magnificent throne rooms and ballrooms—would be pointless as well as impossible, since there would be no use for them. But they did believe that the city center needed the palace facade to help heal wounds and to restore a coherent urban identity. Opponents countered that a palace facade would repress half a century of historical memory and create the illusion of a continuity and wholeness that had never existed: “Neither in a monumental nor in a political sense could a palace function today as the city’s crowning glory. For it would be—in the sense of its original purpose—empty. It would be an utterly misguided symbol for this state: an architectural lurch to the right and an enormous encouragement for restorative tendencies in society. It can be assumed that this is one of the palace lobby’s intentions.”
This outburst came from a journalist writing for a respectable middle-of-the-road newspaper. Its imputation that the palace debate was really about right-wing politics should not surprise anyone who knows that deep philosophical and political divisions lurk just beneath the surface of German debates about form and identity, including debates about architectural form and urban identity. Many on the German left are deeply suspicious of anything reeking of nostalgia for the old Germany: how can anyone be nostalgic about German history? (Foreigners are likely to nod their heads in agreement at this point.) Nostalgia, according to this thinking, implies a denial of inconvenient facts, in particular, an exclusion from German history of the Third Reich and the GDR. And behind this selectivity lurks a conservative strategy to cleanse and unleash the left’s bête noire, German nationalism.

What does this have to do with the royal palace? Its defenders would protest that the palace is not a symbol of Prussian militarism or German chauvinism—and they would be largely correct. The palace was essentially completed prior to the death of Friedrich I, before one can discern anything resembling Prussian militarism or German nationalism. Several later kings lived there seldom or never—including Wilhelm I, who presided over German unification and was the first Hohenzollern to be called emperor. Also—an important if rarely voiced argument for the palace’s friends—it can be seen as uncontaminated by the stain of Nazism. It played essentially no role in the Third Reich. Hitler, wary of any sentiment to restore the monarchy, shunned the building.

Nevertheless, the attempt to salvage German traditions has been a project associated with the political right, despite some similar efforts by the GDR in the Honecker years. And the same political divisions carried over, by and large, to the debate over the royal palace. Berlin’s Christian Democrats endorsed its reconstruction. The Social Democrats did not, leaning toward the support for the Palace of the Republic represented most vehemently by Eastern-based leftist opposition groups.

The lines in the debate over the two palaces were in large part determined by West German polemics about the Third Reich and German history in the 1980s, the so-called historians’ debate. One aspect of that debate involved the left accusing the right of trying either to justify the Third Reich or to expunge its crimes from German history. The kind of history mistrusted by the left was exemplified by the Christian Democrats’ parliamentary leader, Alfred Dregger, who boasted that he, like his American allies, had fought in the 1940s to save Western civilization from the tide of Bolshevism. (Dregger was a Wehrmacht officer on the eastern front.)

Similarly, after 1989 the left accused the right of trying to remove the GDR from the history of postwar Germany. Conservatives, suspected of sympathy for aspects of the Third Reich, in turn saw an affinity for Soviet-style socialism behind opposition to the royal palace. As one visitor wrote in the comment book at the 1993 palace exhibition: “Whoever is fundamentally against a reconstruction of the palace today puts himself at the same level as the narrow-minded philistines Ulbricht, the Socialist Unity Party, and company.” But was the proper answer to Ulbricht’s crime to undo it, or to avoid doing it again? Many pages away in the comment book someone else wrote that those who want to raze the Palace of the Republic “are at the aesthetic and moral level of Ulbricht and his apparachiks.” In any case, Ulbricht was the standard of vituperation. Disagreement arose over how best to inscribe the differentiation from the GDR in the urban fabric.

Proponents of reconstruction cited many examples of projects they saw as comparable. Their favorite was postwar Warsaw, a city much more thoroughly destroyed than Berlin. Although (or because) there was virtually nothing left standing in the center of their capital, the Polish leadership decided soon after the war to undertake a careful restoration of the royal palace and the adjoining Old Town, returning it as closely as possible to its prewar appearance. The reconstructed buildings represented an obvious statement of national pride and defiance in the face of near obliteration. Statements of what might appear to be German national pride, however, make many people nervous—not least many Germans. Moreover, it is a different matter to envisage the reconstruction of a building gone for nearly half a century, one remembered firsthand by relatively few Berliners. The fact that this would be contemplated is itself evidence of a remarkably strong historical sense at work in the city. The obvious historical precedent for such an undertaking was in sight just across the river: the Nikolai Quarter. But the palace’s proponents never mentioned it. Praise for any GDR project would presumably have been seen as tainting the palace proposal.
The lapse of two generations—evidenced by the presence of the Palace of the Republic—separated the royal palace from any conventional understanding of historical preservation. Preservation has become professionalized and bureaucratized, giving preservationists a distinct identity and point of view. The professionals did not respond favorably to the idea of re-creating the palace. Current practices and theories of preservation have their roots in the nineteenth century's growing awareness of historical change and decay, manifested in the Romantic fascination with ruins as well as the conscious re-use of many historical styles of architecture. Schinkel himself played an important role in early efforts to protect historical monuments in Germany. But it was Schinkel's idea (fortunately never realized) to rebuild the Acropolis in Athens as a royal palace. A few years later, the Englishman John Ruskin taught that past works of art are unique and irreproducible, and that they should therefore be preserved, not restored. This practice slowly caught on and was encoded in theories of preservation around the turn of the century—in the German-speaking lands, for example, by Alois Riegl and Georg Dehio.

The fundamentals of modern preservationist practice still derive from these notions of historical authenticity. The only important change over the past century has been a gradual expansion of the class of structures or relics deemed worthy of preservation: from individual works of genius, to ensembles of buildings, to any artifacts of an era, and from a desire to preserve the very old to an interest in any style or epoch no longer current. Belief in the authenticity of the original artifact has remained constant among preservationists, but the enormous destruction of World War II forced a rethinking of their practices in Germany and other European countries. So much had been lost so quickly; ruins were the spectacle of daily life, not the exceptional reminders of a distant past. Compromises with principle, backed up by overwhelming public sentiment, permitted the restoration or, in a few notable cases, the complete reconstruction of destroyed buildings.

In Berlin, for example, those who wanted to save the royal palace in 1950 did not propose to leave it as a ruin. In West Berlin, the same was true of the Charlottenburg palace: the debate was between proponents of restoration and those who declared it irretrievably lost. The demolition of the royal palace in East Berlin may have been decisive in the victory of the former group shortly afterward. With a few notable exceptions left deliberately as ruins, West Berlin by the 1960s had chosen either obliteration or repair for all its major buildings. Things moved more slowly in the East, but the result was not radically different in the long run, although some Western observers thought the GDR too flexible with its heritage—for example, in recreating old buildings on different sites. Many ruins still stood after 1970, but most of them had been slated for reconstruction. Even on the overgrown remnants of August Stüler's New Museum (the slightly newer neighbor of Schinkel's Old Museum) work had begun—just barely—by 1989.

Berlin's preservationists saw the proposed reconstruction of the royal palace as a clear case of the falsification of history. For them, and for other opponents, the project amounted to a declaration that the entire existence of East Germany had been some kind of aberration, not worthy of mention and best wiped from the urban tableau. Meeting at the old State Library just down Unter den Linden while the canvas facade was going up, many of them scorned the effort to erase authentic traces of one history in order to re-create a different one. For the preservationists, the proper course of action was to keep the Palace of the Republic, an authentic, existing monument. The coalition of that building's friends thus comprised professional preservationists in East and West, nostalgic former East Germans, and left-leaning Westerners opposed to whitewashing German history. The result was a fairly clear division along party lines. In January 1992, word got out that the city's preservation bureau was contemplating the designation of the Palace of the Republic as a historical landmark. It was, after all, the site of the GDR's historic decision to join the Federal Republic in 1990. One of the leading Christian Democrats in the Berlin legislature immediately denounced any protection for this "architectural monstrosity" as an expression of "historical ignorance."20 (Ignorance of which history? Note that both sides make this charge.) His party and the Free Democrats declared their firm opposition to the move (and threatened to fire the city preservationist), while the Social Democrats announced that preservation was "acceptable" and a representative of the leftist Green Party accused the Christian Democrats and Free Democrats of politicizing preservation just as the GDR had.21
Among the general public, enthusiastic supporters of a rebuilt palace presumably cared little about the preservationists' notions of authenticity. The more thoughtful proponents of reconstruction had a reply, however. Siedler, Fest, and Boddien all conceded that a rebuilt palace would lack authenticity, but they denied that the concept had any relevance. Siedler noted that Unter den Linden today is a row of counterfeit buildings, some (like the Opera House) damaged and rebuilt more than once. “The architectural history of Berlin, like that of Europe, is a history of counterfeits”—whether Goethe’s house in Frankfurt, the campanile in Venice, or the so-called crown prince’s palace on Unter den Linden, which was totally destroyed during the war and then rebuilt from scratch twenty years later by the East Germans. Boddien added that the same inauthenticity would also apply to the Palace of the Republic if it were stripped to its frame to remove the asbestos and then restored to its earlier appearance.21

Few voices defended the Palace of the Republic on aesthetic grounds; many condemned it as an eyesore. Most preservationists believe aesthetic arguments should not be decisive in determining a building’s historical value. In any case, they had good reason to be suspicious of assertions that Honecker’s palace was just plain ugly. As the preservationists pointed out, similar-looking buildings in the West were never torn down just because they were unattractive (much as one might wish it!). On the other side, advocates of reconstructing the royal palace recognized that the sheer beauty of the old building—at best only partly reproducible—was not a sufficient reason for rebuilding it.

No party and no principle could claim a clear victory here. In the absence of any consensus, government budget cuts became decisive, forcing cancellation of plans to construct new buildings and to demolish old ones. In 1995, the decision to tear down the Palace of the Republic was reversed, leaving undecided how the asbestos would be removed, what the building would be used for, and what its long-term prospects were. The new lease on life for the Communists’ vacant palace also left Marx-Engels-Platz empty, except for its ghosts.

The Brandenburg Gate

In a paradox typical of contemporary Berlin, supporters of the royal palace drew sustenance from the disdain for the building expressed by some of its owners. This strengthened their argument that the palace represented first and foremost the city center, not the king’s house. After the death of its main patron, Friedrich I, in 1713, the palace was in fact shunned by many of the rulers that local patriots would most like to forget, from Friedrich Wilhelm I to Adolf Hitler.

Among the words that do not come to mind to describe Friedrich I’s son and successor are charming, dashing, contemplative, and generous. Friedrich Wilhelm I hated his father—in this he was a true Hohenzollern—and scorned his parents’ ambitions as patrons of the arts and the sciences. Facing large debts, the new king drastically cut royal expenditures, which meant canceling further plans to expand the palace. His thriftiness might perhaps be admired from afar, but his personality combined stinginess with cruelty: he liked to drive his point home by beating recalcitrant subjects with his own cane.

His one passion—and the one place he did not stint on money—was his army. If we want to find a tradition of Prussian militarism, here is its beginning. He removed the plants and statues from the Lustgarten and turned it into a military parade ground. Hitler, too, later had the Lustgarten paved for mass rallies, and Ulbricht, as we have seen, had the palace razed to accommodate his even bigger demonstrations. Though Friedrich Wilhelm greatly expanded his army, however, he avoided risking it in battle. His son and heir, a young man of very different temperament, longed to preside over a court filled with music and philosophy. But when the tyrannical father died in 1740 and Friedrich II inherited the large army as well as a full treasury, he decided instead to conquer Silesia. At one point his wars brought Prussia to the brink of destruction, but ultimate success brought him the appellation “Frederick the Great” and assured Prussia’s reputation as a military power.

Berlin, it is worth remembering, came of age as a garrison town. Though Friedrich Wilhelm I was not interested in beautifying the city, he did seek to promote its growth. Needing more space to quarter soldiers and more artisans to supply their needs, he gave away hundreds of lots and compelled the recipients to build houses on them. He expanded the city limits and, in the 1730s, replaced the Great Elector’s old fortifications with a new wall built around the expanded city (see fig. 14). This was not a fortification but a customs barrier to regulate commerce and
prevent soldiers from deserting. (For all the differences, in both these purposes we can see a resemblance to Ulbricht's later wall.) Among the wall's eighteen gates, the most prominent lay at the southern and western edges of the expanded Friedrichstadt, where large plazas were laid out inside the gates: a circular plaza inside the southern Halle Gate, an octagon at the Potsdam Gate, and a square at the western terminus of Unter den Linden. Friedrich Wilhelm envisioned all three spaces as military parade grounds.

The last of these gates concludes our look at the eighteenth-century city. It marks the outer end of the grand axis of Unter den Linden, scene of royal processions, military parades, and elegant promenades throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though it is not the original Brandenburg Gate, it is all that remains of the eighteenth-century wall, apart from a fragment excavated in Stresemannstrasse. The original baroque gate that separated Unter den Linden from the Tiergarten was replaced at the order of King Friedrich Wilhelm II, Frederick the Great's successor. The commission given to the architect Carl Gotthard Langhans ushered in a new era in Berlin architecture. To the end of his long life (in 1786), Frederick the Great had insisted on building in ornate rococo forms that had long since fallen from favor in Europe's more fashionable capitals. Langhans's Brandenburg Gate, completed in 1791, brought the more severe lines of neoclassicism to Berlin (fig. 17).

Langhans's simple design, modeled on the Propylaea of Athens, comprises a double row of Doric columns that frame five openings. The gate's other famous feature is the copper quadriga
that was mounted atop it in 1793. This work of the young sculptor Johann Gottfried Schadow portrays a goddess riding in a chariot drawn by four horses galloping into the city. The Brandenburg Gate, with its quadriga, has long been Berlin’s most famous symbol, rivaled only by the more ephemeral Wall. Its image has adorned commemorative coins, playing cards, historicist and expressionist paintings, posters for all kinds of events, and East and West Berlin postcards and tourist brochures. It may be an admirable work of architecture and sculpture, but that does not explain its symbolic resonance. Nor does its intended function. Unlike many nineteenth-century structures, it was not erected as a national monument. Its size and form made it much more than a utilitarian structure, but it was nevertheless a functional gate in the city wall, flanked by guardhouses.

History has made the Brandenburg Gate a German monument. At first its official name was the “Gate of Peace”; it was not, after all, a Roman triumphal arch. But its identity changed in 1806, when Napoleon defeated Prussia and triumphantly entered its capital through the western gate. He showed his admiration for the quadriga by ordering that it be taken down and shipped to Paris to join his other confiscated art treasures. The emperor thus became known locally as the “horse thief of Berlin,” and the denuded gate became the symbol of Prussian and German resistance. In 1813 Schadow himself proposed to fill the quadriga’s place atop the gate with an enormous cast of the Iron Cross, the new military medal designed by Schinkel at the behest of King Friedrich Wilhelm III. Upon Napoleon’s defeat in 1814, however, a triumphant procession returned the quadriga to Berlin, the neighboring square was renamed Paris Square—(Pariser Platz), and the “Gate of Peace” became a “Gate of Victory.” Schinkel designed new insignia for the goddess’s staff: a Prussian eagle and, within a wreath, the Iron Cross.

Thereafter, the gate became ever more firmly established as a symbol of Prussia and its capital. It became the traditional backdrop for military parades (following Napoleon’s example) and for the ceremonial reception of state guests. When the entire customs wall was torn down in the 1860s, the Brandenburg Gate remained; from then on, it was strictly a monument. After Germany was unified under Prussian leadership in 1871, the victorious troops returning from France were welcomed at the Brandenburg Gate. The Prussian monument had become firmly established as a German national symbol, the site of many more ceremonies before soldiers marched through it on their way back to France in 1914. The Nazis, too, embraced the old symbol of victory. The night Hitler was appointed chancellor, January 30, 1933, thousands of torch-bearing Nazi brownshirts marched through the gate.

When the bombers came, the Nazis generally did a better job of evacuating art treasures than saving people. But they apparently did not dare risk morale by removing the goddess and her horses. Instead, in 1942 they had plaster casts made of the quadriga. By 1945, when Soviet soldiers planted their red flag atop the gate, it was badly damaged and only fragments of the quadriga remained. The East German leaders who inherited these ruins decided to keep the gate and adopt it as their own. The shattered quadriga’s fate was less certain. Artists and politicians entertained several proposals for a suitable new sculpture: a group of workers, children dancing around a globe, a mother with child, Picasso’s dove of peace. A Western newspaper, hearing of the last proposal in 1949, declared that if the dove of peace were to nest placidly at the entrance to the Communist world, the West would be obliged to raise a banner in front of the gate with the words Dante had affixed to the gates of Hell in his Inferno: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” Eventually, however, the East decided to restore the quadriga instead.

Unfortunately, the gate stood in the Soviet sector, the plaster casts were in the West, and during the 1950s the two regimes were busy denouncing each other as criminals and usurpers. After the failed uprising against the East German government on June 17, 1953, the West renamed the street that continued Unter den Linden west of the gate “the Street of 17 June.” But the two Berlins had only one Brandenburg Gate, and it provided a rare opportunity for cooperation. West Berlin agreed to recreate the statues while the East restored the gate. This joint venture did not, of course, proceed without incident. In 1958 the reconstructed quadriga was brought to the sectoral boundary, a few steps from the gate, and simply left there for the East Germans to claim. Before putting it up, the Easterners sawed the Prussian eagle off the top of the goddess’s staff and the Iron Cross out of the wreath. For the Western public, this was vandalism and deceit, but it should not really have been a surprise. In 1957 West Germany had legalized the display of the Iron Cross,
which the GDR had banned as a militarist symbol. In 1958 the Eastern press was filled with editorials and letters demanding the removal of these “fascist” ornaments. The Brandenburg Gate was once again to be a gate of peace, declared the East Berlin government (fig. 18).

With the goddess's staff crowned only by a wreath, the quadriga and gate would remain from 1958 until 1990; only their surroundings would change utterly. At first the gate still filtered traffic passing across the sector line between the Tiergarten and the shattered ruins along Unter den Linden. As the two halves of the city grew apart, the gate acquired a rich new symbolic resonance, captured, for example, in scenes of the 1961 American comedy film One, Two, Three, directed by Billy Wilder (whose ties to Berlin went back to the 1920s) and starring James Cagney as a representative of the Coca-Cola Company caught between the intrigues of Communists and ex-Nazis.

But the film was a commercial flop: by the time it was completed, the Wall had made crossing the Brandenburg Gate anything but a laughing matter. Because the western edge of the Mitte district coincided with the location of Friedrich Wilhelm I's wall, the sectoral boundary followed the same course after 1945, and after 1961, so did a long stretch of the new wall. The Brandenburg Gate was thus once again part of a wall. Here was a historical continuity that no one wanted to acknowledge. This time it was not a gate; the crossing points lay elsewhere. Erich Honecker, the Politburo member in charge of national security and hence the man directing construction of the Wall, apparently pressed for the gate's closure because he thought any activity around it would attract Western media attention, demonstrations, and provocations. He was probably right, but he may also have been swayed by his own regime's frequent evocation of the Napoleon-like specter of West German troops marching triumphantly through the Brandenburg Gate on their way to destroy peace and socialism.

Both the gate and the quadriga had been designed to face into the city—that is, to the east. That is not what a visitor would expect, but the gate's intended audience was local residents, not outsiders. The folk memory of Berlin seems to offer evidence of confusion on this point. Visitors are often told that the quadriga originally faced the other direction and was turned around at some point—something that never happened. This is an old legend: an 1860 guidebook asserts that the goddess had faced away from town before Napoleon, but had been reerected looking inward in 1814. Late-twentieth-century versions of the legend tend to be vaguer about the date of the reversal; Ulbricht as well as Napoleon comes under suspicion as a possible culprit.

In its uncertain stance toward inside and outside, residents and visitors, the Brandenburg Gate resembled nothing so much as its newer neighbor, the Berlin Wall. With the Wall's presence, the poignancy of the gate as symbol became stronger than ever. On its Eastern side, Pariser Platz starkly illustrated the desolation brought by the Wall. Once among Berlin's most elegant squares, a place of palaces, the French and U.S. embassies, the Academy of Arts, and the city's premier hotel, the Adlon, it was now bare except for the gate and the Wall. Tourists were restricted to its far end, but distinguished guests and officially invited delegations were brought to the gate and asked to admire the work of the border guards. From the Western side, the gate was now entirely
inaccessible, and could only be seen from a dead-end street in the middle of the Tiergarten. Nevertheless, tourist buses regularly came by, and state visitors were brought there too. In 1963, when John F. Kennedy came to see it, he found that the East had hung red banners between the columns to block any view beyond the gate—a Cold War gesture with more figurative meaning than the East had intended. In 1987, the gate served as the backdrop for Ronald Reagan’s speech, with bulletproof glass erected behind the rostrum. (Bill Clinton, in 1994, was the first U.S. President privileged to speak on Pariser Platz, under the heads of the quadriga’s horses instead of their posteriors.)

Both East and West Berliners claimed the gate as the symbol of their city and of their version of German unity. But it may have been the foreign media from the West that made the gate the preeminent symbol of the less telegenic Berlin Wall. During the days after November 9, 1989, the TV networks made the Brandenburg Gate the backdrop for their cameras. It was a fortunate coincidence that the semicircular barrier blocking the gate was the only section of the Wall wide and flat enough to stand (and dance) on (fig. 19). Since the Brandenburg Gate was not a functioning gate, however, the hordes of East Germans actually passed through the Wall elsewhere for several weeks. Finally, on December 22, 1989, West German chancellor Helmut Kohl led a phalanx of politicians in a ceremony reopening the Brandenburg Gate. Evidence later surfaced that Kohl had in fact pressured the East Germans to delay the opening for five weeks so that he could be present.27

A few days later, New Year’s revelers climbed up to the newly
accessible quadriga and left it seriously damaged. Soon afterward, while the gate was being restored, the quadriga, too, was taken down for a careful restoration. Thereupon controversy erupted anew. The summer of 1991 saw a reprise of the 1958 debate about the quadriga, this time without the Cold War to define positions. A young Christian Democratic member of the Bundestag, Friedbert Pflüger, called for the Iron Cross and Prussian eagle to be left off the restored quadriga. (They had been preserved since 1958 in an East Berlin museum; the reunification of the quadriga coincided with that of Germany.) His campaign found supporters across the political spectrum, only some of whom could be dismissed as leftists antipathetic to any sign of German national pride. The Berlin press and public was nonetheless hard on Pflüger. He argued that symbols of Prussian patriotism had no place in the new Germany; but others suspected that his real motive was bitterness over the decision to move the government from Bonn. He was, more pointedly, accused of wanting to falsify history “à la Ulbricht.” Little attention was paid to his claim that he wanted to restore the original “Gate of Peace” and the original quadriga as it had existed up to 1806. It was easy for Pflüger’s supporters to conclude that Berlin was rejecting historical authenticity in favor of patriotic nostalgia.

In fact, no one was proposing the return of the goddess’s original staff, gone since 1814, when Schinkel had not merely added the Iron Cross and Prussian eagle but had redesigned the entire staff. The quadriga Napoleon took, for example, had a Roman eagle where the Prussian one later perched. And that had actually been the goddess’s third staff: Schadow’s first two designs had proved so unpopular that he was obligated to replace each of them within months. In other words, the debate in 1991 was between restoring the 1814 quadriga and the 1958 version. Since the latter’s repudiation of Prussian militarism had been the work of Ulbricht’s regime, it found few defenders. Amid good words for Prussian symbols—the Iron Cross, it was pointed out, came out of the wars of liberation against Napoleon, not World War I or II—Berlin’s leaders ceremonially rededicated the restored quadriga, with the staff of 1814–1945 as well as an artificial patina, on August 6, 1991, the two hundredth anniversary of the gate.

The gate itself could thus claim its traditional place as the symbol of Berlin as well as its newer status as the preeminent symbol of unity. Yet it stood in the middle of the city’s main east-west thoroughfare; the symbol of unity physically separated the two Berlins. The relationship between the gate and the all-important circulation of traffic sparked another debate. The attachment many Germans have to their cars has always stopped short of the American practice of tearing down cities to make way for cars, but the passion of German car lovers seems to arouse in Green-thinking Germans the same kind of suspicion that passionate patriotism does. Happily the question of driving through the Brandenburg Gate did not create clear battle lines. Some car haters wanted to reserve the gate for pedestrians and bicyclists, but others thought that the gate could serve to limit and slow auto traffic. Car lovers’ favorite solutions were a tunnel under the gate or a scheme to circumvent it. The latter, in fact, had first been proposed at the turn of the century, and Nazi planners as well had sought to remove the buildings on each side of the gate to make way for traffic. In the 1990s, those buildings were long gone, but plans to direct traffic away from the gate were nevertheless opposed by some who thought it should serve as a gate, a symbol of German unity, not a traffic island, and by others who wanted to rebuild Pariser Platz as the enclosed space it once had been. An initial compromise permitted only buses and taxis through the gate, and they were restricted to the wider central passage, once reserved for the emperor’s carriage.

When the monarchy ended in 1918, that central passage was not the only place that lost its identity. For all the turbulence of Berlin’s history under the Hohenzollerns, they arguably presided over a degree of stability that has not been approached in the rest of the twentieth century. Many Berliners are understandably reluctant to frame their identity in terms of the troubled eras that followed: the weak Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, and the divided city. Hence the wish to reach back to the relatively placid era of monarchs. How can that nostalgia possibly be satisfied? Since hardly anyone actually wants a king, it is difficult to know just what to salvage from the royal past. The much-restored but never removed Brandenburg Gate, with its thrice-removed and twice-reconstructed quadriga, is as authentic a symbol as Berlin can offer. Other buildings, visible or remembered, embody too rich a variety of meanings to permit any consensus about the legacy of old Berlin, or about how to restore it.
Because Berlin is the site of the physical encounter of East and West, of two value systems and ways of life, it has the richest and most varied texture of any town in the world. The Reichstag is situated on the limit of that space and stands up in an open, strangely metaphysical area.

—Christo, 1985

Ride back with bus number 5. Stand on the bus's platform, facing the Wertheim side of Leipziger Strasse. The picture of unbelievable movement of people, lights, and vehicles that now presents itself to the eye—that is Berlin.

—recommendation for visiting Potsdamer Platz in a 1912 travel guide

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Metropolis

Berlin is a city of brick, stone, and concrete, but textiles have recently played a prominent role in its architecture. The years 1993 and 1994 saw the royal palace's facade re-created out of canvas; 1995, Christo's "wrapping" of the Reichstag. Their very transience enabled the two projects, different as they were, to make bold statements about Berlin's urban space as a repository of memory. The palace facade (see chapter 2) called attention to an invisible past; the wrapped Reichstag stirred buried memories about a visible, and visibly ravaged, building. If the vanished royal palace is the most notable absence among Berlin buildings, the Reichstag may be the single most resonant presence.

This pair of buildings, a mile apart at opposite ends of Unter den Linden, stand as symbolic centers of power from two eras and two kinds of government. The second era, the era of parliaments, saw a vastly larger and more diverse city, one less susceptible to domination by any central place or institution. After the middle of the nineteenth century, Berlin's expanse, appearance, social structure, and sources of livelihood changed rapidly and profoundly. And even things that didn't change looked different: thanks to modern technology—trains, then automobiles and airplanes—natives and visitors alike crossed the city via new routes and at new rates of speed. In this new world, no king could command the same allegiance as before, and no parliament could project the same kind of unity as a traditional king—especially when the palace still stood and (until 1918) still housed a royal resident. What came to Berlin in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with startling speed was the bewildering set


17. Ibid., 127–28.


Two: Old Berlin


4. See, for example, Günther Stahn, Das Nikolaiviertel (Berlin: Verlag für Bauwesen, 1991), 52.

5. Quoted in Bodo Rolka and Klaus-Dieter Wille, Das Berliner Stadtschloss (Berlin: Haude und Spener, 1987), 95.


7. Ibid., 194.

8. Ibid., 186.

9. This discussion of the Hohenzollern palace and the Communist palace is confusing enough in any language, but more so in English than in German. In German, the word for a royal palace (Schloss) is entirely distinct from the name the East Germans gave to their parliament building: Palast der Republik. Perhaps this linguistic confusion hampered the proponents of rebuilding the royal palace in their attempt to gain foreign support. Appended to a brochure they issued in 1992 (Förderverein für die Ausstellung, Die Bedeutung des Berliner Stadtschlosses für die Mitte Berlins—Eine Dokumentation [Berlin: Förderverein, 1992] are numerous letters of support solicited from prominent German scholars and cultural figures. Also included are three letters in English, all from prominent architects. Two of these—from Frank Gehry and Michael Wilford (partner of the late James Stirling)—oppose rebuilding the old palace. In the third, the American architect Robert Venturi comes out firmly against tearing down the royal palace!


Three: Metropolis
6. Ibid., 38.
7. Quoted in ibid., 32.
8. Ibid., 407.
11. Quoted in Cullen, Der Reichstag, 7.
13. Ibid., 249.
14. Ibid., 255.
29. Quoted in Alan Balfour, Berlin: The Politics of Order, 1737–1989 (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 114. Columbus Haus should not be (but often is) confused with the SS’s notorious Columbiahaus concentration camp, a different building.

Four: Nazi Berlin
2. Quoted in Hilmar Hoffmann, Myrhos Olympia (Berlin: Aufbau, 1993), 27.