

Monument Preservation and Postmodern Architecture in Frankfurt am Main, West Germany

by Gisela Hartung

There are said to be thirtysix places in the world called Frankfurt. The one I would like to talk about is located in West-Germany at the river Main. Until the eighties Frankfurt was a typical commercial city where people did their job but did not want to live. In analogy to Manhattan, New York, it was called "Mainhattan" because of its skyline. Until recently also the river did not play any part in town-planning and in the public opinion. This changed when in the early seventies the crisis of the cities was considered the crisis of modern architecture and the modern movement in total. History was rediscovered: "The Future of the Past" was the title of an architectural exhibition in Venice. With it started the rehabilitation of historicism. Since then such terms as eclecticism and rationalism have been focal points in discussions about architecture. They enjoyed the same wide-spread use in the seventies as sociological slogans in the sixties. Criticism of the social and human sciences converged with the criticism of functionalism. History, i.e. the history of art not social history, had become the platform for debates among architects. So it is not astonishing that Frankfurt, too, rediscovered its historical district when looking for an urban concept for a new image to compete with other cities nationwide and internationally.

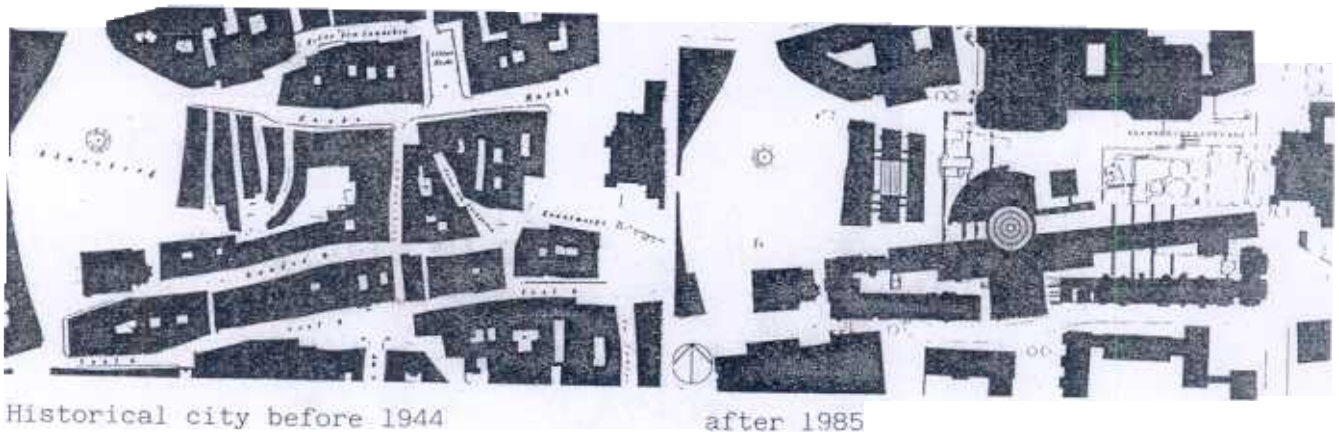
Focal points of the program became the reconstruction and completion of the historical center and the realization of a "museums' embankment", including a range of more than fifteen museums on both sides of the river. Thus, the embankments have become a new center of attraction of the city. Today, ten years later, the program has almost completely been realized, creating an area of artistic and natural experience unique in Western Europe. Some annotations could be made why the museums have become the typical and representative building projects in the eighties like the churches in the fifties. This would lead us to a sequence of ideas that would also help to explain the new important part of monument preservation since the middle of the seventies. But let me return to the topic of building in historical surroundings.

Since the effects of a megalomaniac architecture formed by international standards on historically developed cities have become evident, a reorganization has started towards the possibilities of inserting new buildings on the scale of the historical context: not only the situation in the historically grown surroundings but also the integration among the geographically characteristic features of the town structure is of utmost importance. But what does it mean in practice? To turn away the discussion from an emotional or intuitive level I would like to contribute three points of view.

First Point of View: Strictly Modern

Strictly modern means that every structure and every street as well must clearly pronounce its period of origin and the spirit of that period. That was e.g. Ludwig Hilbersheimer's principle in 1927 when he proposed his rigorous linear buildings for city blocks in Berlin. At the same time this was an understandable response to rampant historicism. These buildings symbolized

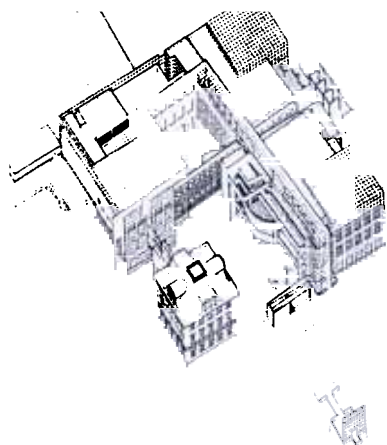
the abandonment of the old urban order based on the street ensemble and presented a radically new principle: the isolated, free standing building. It was and still is a disruptive break with the traditional urban pattern. Even the examples of isolation in the past, like churches and palaces, had proven to be disruptive of the basic urban residential and infrastructural mass.



As an example of our days I would like to show you the area between the cathedral and the Roemer (historical city hall), the area where the history of Frankfurt has started. You will find there Roman and Carolingian foundation walls, substantial remains of the medieval town center and fragments of various attempts of rebuilding in the 19th and 20th century. The effect is an unintended architectural museum as well as a documentation of German rebuilding efforts after the second world-war. The historical city had been completely demolished after a bombing raid with the exception of the cathedral, the Roemer city hall, and the church St. Nikolai. Thirtyseven years had passed until politicians and experts decided what to do with the former heart of the town. Based on an international competition in 1979 the concept of the young German team Bangert, Jansen, Scholz und Schultes was chosen to be realized. In their words: "The project seeks to provide public facilities such as an art gallery, a youth music school and workshop together with residential and commercial facilities. Basic to the concept is the relationship of the area to its immediate surroundings and thus to historical association such as destruction and reconstruction." The structure, called "Kulturschirn"- something like a street vendor's stall for works of art, is located along the historical coronation way between the Roemer and the cathedral. It represents a typically postmodern collage of symbolism, eclecticism, and historical continuity. It sets its own standards, its own order, its own idea of volume; it is a disruptive, extraneous element. Yet its volume does in no way go beyond the proportions of the historical district. Somewhat problematic is the arcade. Although pleasantly related to the archaeological garden it ends somewhat abruptly in front of the cathedral.

Before you form an opinion on this structure in its historical context, I would like to draw your attention to a very different type of architecture which nevertheless belongs to the same category of "strictly modern". The Museum fuer Kunsthandwerk (museum of arts and crafts) by Richard Meier, situated right opposite to the Kulturschirn at the southern embankment of the river Main. After a competition won by Meier in 1980 the museum was built within the park of the former Villa Metzler (1802-4). The villa had been the museum's

provisional home since the end of the second world-war



L. Preis: Richard Meier & Associates, New York. Lageplan o. M

Museum of arts and crafts

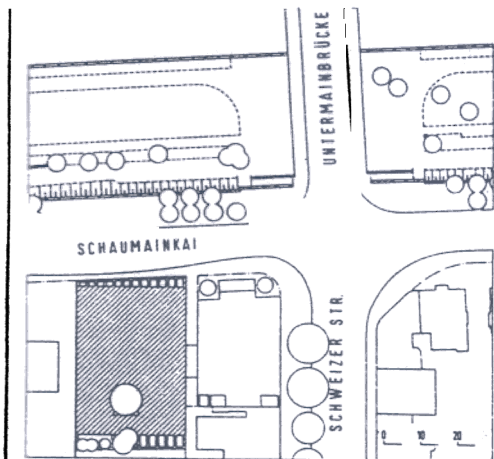
Meier demonstrates the qualities of the modern movement in opposition to postmodernism. His design is part of a total scheme incorporating the new museum, already standing buildings, and a tree-filled park. The Villa Metzler, with the exception of a linking-way, is almost completely separated from the new building which keeps respectful distance. It incorporates the proportions of the villa by three rectangular blocks placed around it repeating the dimensions of the villa. The axis of the other parts of the new building was turned by 3.5 degrees against the blocks to follow the course of the embankment. Each of the flat roofs reaches not higher than to the ridge of the villa. Originally, the gutter of the villa was proposed as ultimate height by the curator. As a compromise, a marble band marking the height of the gutter cuts the windows on the third floor like a cornice. The walk-way, too, did not find the curator's approval. But he rejected the concept of the new building especially for two reasons: the planned volume would degrade the classicistic villa to a mere appendix of the new building and would destroy the ensemble of villa and classicistic-romantic park. Politicians decided against ensemble conservation favouring the development of the museum and thus, as I see it, against a good old ensemble in favour of a better new solution. Critics today already accept the museum as a piece of architectural history. Nevertheless, Meier's white castle is an absolutely new and uncommon structure within Frankfurt's building history, in no way related to local tradition.

Second Point of View Continuation

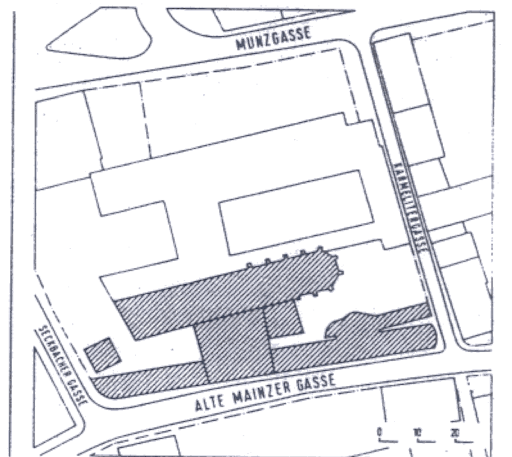
Continuation is the adaptation of elements and syntax from surrounding buildings. Yet it demands more than just a copy, more than an imitation or quotation of the elements that compose the neighbouring ensemble. This essential "extra input" has to be learned once again in order for architects to produce successful urban repairs. Today, thanks to postmodernism, architects explore more often the possibilities of contemporary design developed in respectful dialogue with the immediate surroundings. Let me show by two other examples how postmodernism applies this kind of solution.

was and still... cally new urban order based

By his Museum fuer Frueh- und Vorgeschichte (museum of early history) presently under construction Josef Paul Kleihues wants to reconstitute a sense of uniformity to the whole area around the former monastery St. Katherin. For this reason he designed a compact and uniform, only sparingly segmented facade along the street. But still the facade ignores the former area built-up in small units. Just as little reflects the striped sandstone facade the frequently conjured "genius loci". There might have been a similar facade in Frankfurt times ago but not at this place. The intended dialogue with traditional surroundings looks artificial if not arbitrary.



Museum of architecture



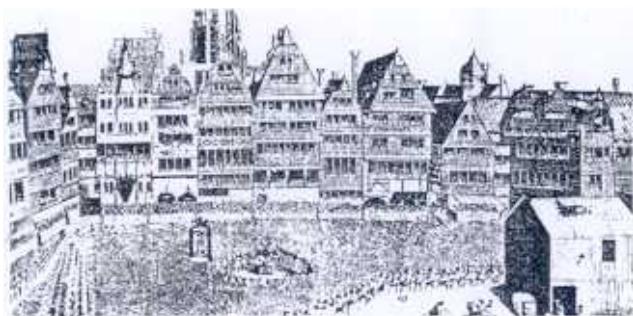
Museum of early history

A more radical way of treating a historical building structure represents the Deutsches Architekturmuseum (museum of architecture) by Oswald Maria Ungers, 1984. Of the turn-of-the-century villa used as a basis for the museum little remains other than a perfectly repaired facade and roof. As Ungers said: "Important is just the memory of the building... This is worth enough to keep it alive. The whole piece of land was transformed to a house, to a room by bordering with a stone wall. Through this step the old house itself now works as an object in a gallery and becomes the same time a meaning that goes far upon its original purpose." I think there is nothing to add.

Both examples show the difficulties conservation has with postmodern architecture which, in sharp contrast to antihistoric modernism, embraces the past. For a number of monuments new forms of utilization have to be found to reduce costs of maintenance. This confronts the planning architect with a hundred year old question: Where does end the duty of preservation and what is the scope of innovative conceptions? The subject of monument conservation as well as of postmodern architecture is history: preserving monuments and resuming the meaning of historical elements respectively. Postmodern architecture makes it more and more difficult for us to distinguish new buildings from old ones, today's architecture from monuments. Public opinion does not care much about this discrimination but rests content with a smooth and apparently historical facade. It does not ask if there has been preserved a historical structure of documentary value.

Third Point of View: Reconstruction - a blind alley

There must be some deep-lying reason allowing supposed reconstructions of an often only fictitious "original" to be accepted over new or "continued" designs. One reason may be that architects have disappointed the public by paying only lip service to continuity while actually reverting to old stupid-boring designs reduced to most primitive elements. So it is understandable that this gave birth to the wholesale rejection of modernity. Architects were to live with the constant repetition of the phrase "better an imitation of something old than a questionable innovation". Reservation against innovation has stimulated monument preservation by becoming the political basis for its administrative acts. The amazing increase of the number of registered monuments since the middle of the seventies gives evidence of this development. Reservation against the new, however, also puts monument preservation in distress.



Roemerberg houses 1711



1987

This happened in case of the eastern area of the Roemerberg just opposite the city hall and destroyed by war. The political answer to the question discussed in the public whether to reconstruct or to rebuild the area in modern style favoured a reconstruction. Now you will find there seven half-timbered houses dating from 1983. Although thoroughly recreated by handicraft skills these houses had never looked like that at any time of their history - a regional drollery and a defeat on modern architecture. In reaction to the pseudo-historical reconstructions professional analysts have unleashed a barrage of malicious criticism ranging from "Disney Land" to "Potemkin Village". And so did monument preservation. Yet it has not been tried to find an answer to the crucial question, which historical state of a building should be conserved. The houses' condition in 1944 was agreed upon to be more or less binding for the reconstructions, some amendments were made towards "more genuine" medieval facades. From the very beginning the fictitious old houses have been very popular with the majority.

Conclusion:

Public reference to monuments does not reveal historical knowledge but a feeling of nostalgia which is the source of the present flood of fictitious reconstruction activities in West-Germany. Reconstruction mania and new

historicist building activities are presently at their peak. Innovative modern projects are often put aside while old buildings, perfectly renovated, degenerate to examples of an ageless pseudo-history. The so-called monument protecting restoration presently destroys as much historical substance as was lost by demolition in the fifties, i.e. 100 % of the roof covering, 90 % of the ceilings with coloured plasters, almost all of the windows, doors, and roof frame-work. A typical example is the old Frankfurt opera house, completed 1880 and largely destroyed 1944: while the destroyed vestibule was reconstructed still standing parts like the staircases were demolished. Since this kind of monument "protection" is also reckoned by the public among the activities of monument preservation, its main task in the future can be expected to be design of the new instead of preservation of the old. Considerations of the city of Frankfurt to classify as monuments the half-timbered houses of 1983 only follows this trend. The examples in Frankfurt demonstrate the treatment of historical buildings under the predominance of postmodern ideas, namely the tendency towards preservation of merely optical values while destroying at the same time testimonies to the history of architecture by creativistic renovation. Monuments lose their historical significance in public life by degradation to decorative, pittoresque elements functioning primarily as centers of touristic attraction and thus becoming repetitive and disposable objects of a handsome environment.

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by Giselher Hartung

Summary:

In the early seventies the effect of the modern movement in architecture on historical cities became evident. Since then a rapid reorientation has started towards the possibilities of inserting new buildings into a historical context - the preservation of the city features had taken priority.

Two of the focal points of municipal building activities in Frankfurt during the late seventies and the eighties had been the area of the historical city, delimited by the former city ramparts, and the embankments of the river Main.

Two different problems are to be distinguished: on the one side the re-utilization of existing buildings which can range from modernization and urban renewal to structural conversion, on the other side the construction of new buildings in close vicinity to historically important buildings. The construction or renewal of a building in a historical setting starts a whole series of considerations - starting with the evaluation of the "genius loci" satisfying the demands of monument preservation policy, at the same time taking into account the creative schema of architects, and ending with a number of structural and physical questions related to construction. In order to obtain representative solutions to the problems in Frankfurt, nationally and internationally well reputed architects were engaged and the results already to be seen have made Frankfurt to become one of the crucial points of contemporary architecture.

Three principal ways of building in a historical context can be discussed:

1. Strictly modern

Within this category the new structure in the center of the former historical city between city hall and cathedral is a piece of postmodern architecture, whereas the museum of arts and crafts at the southern embankment represents the qualities of the modern movement.

2. Continuation

Possibilities of contemporary design in respectful dialogue with the historical surroundings are shown by the museum of early history as well as by the museum of architecture.

3. Reconstruction

"Better an imitation of something old than a questionable innovation!" This was the background of the reconstruction of seven half-timbered houses just opposite the city hall which had never looked like that in their history. Monument preservation under the predominance of postmodern ideas shows the tendency towards preservation of merely optical values, thus degrading monuments to decorative tourist attractions within a handsome environment.

Preservación de Monumentos y Arquitectura Postmoderna en
Francoforte/Meno, República Federal de Alemania

por Giselher Hartung

Resumen:

A comienzos de los años setenta se hicieron evidentes las consecuencias de la difusión de la arquitectura moderna en los centros urbanos históricos. Desde entonces se observa una reorientación en cuanto a la forma de insertar edificios nuevos en contextos históricos - la preservación de conjuntos urbanos se tornó prioritaria.

Dos de los puntos de concentración de la actividad constructora municipal de Francoforte hacia fines de los años setenta y en los años ochenta se ubican en el área histórica de la ciudad, entre el emplazamiento de las antiguas murallas y las orillas del río Meno.

Se distinguen aquí dos problemas: uno relacionado a la reutilización de edificios existentes, y que va desde la modernización y la renovación urbana hasta una reestructuración completa, y otro relacionado a la construcción de edificios nuevos en la proximidad de monumentos históricos. Tanto la renovación como la construcción de edificios en contextos históricos demanda una serie de consideraciones que va desde tanto el reconocimiento del "genius loci" y el respeto de las políticas de preservación monumental como del aporte creativo de los arquitectos, hasta cuestiones estructurales y físicas relacionadas con el proceso constructivo. El deseo de buscar respuestas fundamentales a estos problemas llevó a la ciudad de Francoforte a buscar el asesoramiento de arquitectos de reputación internacional y nacional. De esta manera, los resultados obtenidos pueden ser, desde ya, considerados como aportes cruciales al desarrollo de la arquitectura contemporánea.

Se pueden discutir tres formas básicas de construir en un contexto histórico:

1. Estrictamente contemporáneos:

Dentro de esta categoría se ubican los edificios nuevos en el antiguo centro histórico entre la Municipalidad y la Catedral, de lenguaje postmoderno, y los del Museo de Artesanía y otros en la orilla sur del río Meno, de lenguaje mas bien moderno.

2. Continuación:

En esta categoría se explotan las posibilidades de un diálogo con el entorno histórico; pertenecen a ella edificios como el Museo de Historia y el Museo de Arquitectura.

3. Reconstrucción:

El lema "preferible la imitación de lo antiguo que una innovación de valor dudoso" dominó la reconstrucción de siete "Fachwerhauser" directamente al frente de la Municipalidad en una forma que en realidad nunca tuvieron. Esta forma de preservación de monumentos bajo los principios de un pensamiento postmoderno tiende a conservar situaciones tan solo ópticamente, degradando de esta manera los monumentos a atracciones turísticas en un entorno agradable.