

Anyone

Letter from Berlin

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Editor's Note: After the following exchange of letters with *Der Spiegel*, Daniel Libeskind sent ANY his "Letter from Berlin."

February 9, 1994

Dear Mr. Libeskind:

Thank you for your polemic, which we so kindly translated [into German] as the manuscript enclosed proves.

The results of the more exact reading concludes the following: your polemics seem to us very general, confused and mostly incomprehensible, well probably too "deconstructivist."

As an editorial contribution, this article cannot be expected to be read by the large public of Spiegel readers. I suggest that you restrict yourself to one item and write approximately one manuscript page for the Reader's Letter Section. Your opinion — should it be phrased comprehensibly — should on no account go by the board.

Sincerely,

Dr. Mathias Schreiber
Der Spiegel

February 14, 1994

Dear Mr. Schreiber:

1. Thank you for your polemical reply. My article obviously touched a raw nerve.

2. Your translation was confused, incomprehensible and deplorable. Your magazine needs to hire a better translator.

Your response confirms my analysis of the ugly climate in Germany today. Your impertinent and insulting tone is an affront which belies your rhetoric in publishing opinions which differ from your own.

Daniel Libeskind

Today in Germany one constantly hears a particularly depressing comment about architecture and planning: "It's over." What's over? Some would have you believe that the time when vision and dream mattered is over, that the time in which the fatality of the past was transformed into something new by the courage to build has ended. Building is perhaps the only art that is essentially optimistic. For no one can construct the city and its

buildings without feeling that they will usher in a better future. Yet today pessimism and a loss of nerve thwart the desire to embrace the future as a challenge. The ghosts of the past are now invoked in an authoritarian mood determined to undermine the extraordinary achievements of postwar Germany.

Since the end of World War II Germany has played a leading role in architecture and urban planning, striving to create fresh environmental alternatives and technically innovative ways of living through building. This tradition of expanding possibilities through realizing dreams has been associated with Germany ever since the great experiments in architecture and planning, beginning with the Werkbund, the Bauhaus, and the Siedlung developments and continuing through the postwar building exhibitions. Invoking poetic rationality Josef Paul Kleihues demonstrated in the recent I.B.A. projects in Berlin that planning can incorporate diverse elements from around the world into the rich mosaic of the city.

Is this legacy about to end? Certain forces now seek to deny the preeminent role that innovative architecture and urban planning have played in Germany. I believe that the continuity of this tradition of hope is today threatened by reactionary tendencies that seek to eliminate the awareness that Germany has produced truly great visions, buildings, and cities, and that its energy has given real substance to the very premise of European culture.

Some months ago I sat in a hall in Magdeburg at a conference devoted to the planning and building of the newly opened areas in the former D.D.R. I listened as Vittorio Lampugnani dictated to planners and architects from the East the new ABCs that would make them successful in the reunited Germany. His proposed set of rules called for a rigid and reactionary order that employs a seductive simplicity in attacking complex problems; in short, he demanded iron discipline during a time of transition. Lampugnani instructed the delegates on the various points of the new order: no new ideas were needed in architecture or urban planning, no dreams, no thoughts, no

vision — only silence and conformity. As I sat there amidst the architects and planners of the former D.D.R., listening with an increasing sense of dismay, I felt a sense of outrage that what was being advocated was a reactionary call to order: be silent, don't dream, relinquish vision, forget individual creativity, follow the rules of the game if you want to build.

This dogmatic and antidemocratic view of society has begun to affect and transform the architectural climate of Germany. Let there be no mistake: Lampugnani's speech may have been presented under the heading of architecture and urban planning, but it revealed a dangerous and authoritarian political sensibility. Even more distressing is the fact that Lampugnani's position is representative of what is now happening in Berlin — not only theoretically but practically in building. Architecture in Berlin is now subjected to a staggering degree of regimentation and control, which is disguised by a rhetoric of order. Arbitrary constraints under the guise of rationalism now exist, which even able architects such as Philip Johnson, Arata Isozaki, and Richard Meier cannot overcome. Six months ago Philip Johnson delivered a public apologia in Berlin for his scheme for the Business Center at Checkpoint Charlie, explaining that no other modern city would have been able to force him to do such a boring and mediocre design. Without commenting on the aesthetics of these architects, the point is clear: if leading and successful architects find it impossible to produce architecture that would match the great architectural legacy of Berlin, then what hope is there for the younger generation?

It is enough to look at the winning projects in the last three years of competitions in Berlin to see how these new rules are transforming the fascinating diversity of Berlin into banal uniformity. With few exceptions, those buildings now under construction around the city represent an unimaginative regurgitation of bureaucratic administrative formulas subsumed under the banner of rationalism. The style is simple, quick, and sterile, tolerating no deviation in form or material. It provides the perfect background for the emergence of the one-dimensional individual, the individual without qualities.

Berlin is a fascinating montage of conflicting histories, scales, forms, and spaces — a rich mix of substance and imagination. The current criteria of the Senatsbau administration of Berlin are not just basic guidelines to guarantee responsible future development but are authoritarian and repressive edicts. The planning framework no longer covers simple measures or parameters for construction, but actually interferes with the materials, forms, expression, and, finally, the message of architecture. In using stone facades, gable roofs, punched-in windows, invariable grids, unrelenting symmetries, and closed blocks, the buildings and streets conform to one bureaucrat's idea of the good. Recently the winner of the Alexanderplatz competition stated that the city can no longer be built with glass, concrete, and steel, but must be rebuilt in the eternal material of granite.

Life in a pluralistic society involves tremendous vitality and the necessary diversity of experience and views of reality. One of the aspects that made me feel welcome in democratic Germany was the condition of openness that confirmed a fundamental respect for the individual, for initiative, for the different, for the other. Yet today this precious state no longer exists. An intolerance, a fundamentalism, a truly destructive hostility toward the new has crept into the present discourse of architecture and urban planning. A strong polarization based on power and control attempts to further the illusion of unanimity through exclusion.

In certain circles in Berlin and elsewhere there is an ugly atmosphere that resembles the pathology of a time in which the notion of degenerate art was born. It is an atmosphere of defamation, in which those kinds of architecture and planning that do not fall into a prescribed parameter are excluded from consideration by not being invited to compete or to build. Countless architects who refuse to toe the line have been blacklisted and removed from participation.

Lampugnani's belief that architecture has fallen into the wrong hands — capitalist investors, the media, artist-architects, and ignorant people — is itself part of the crisis he decries. His position demands a definitive transformation of the city from an all-too-human institution to a perfectly controlled

and singular image. Such a nihilistic analysis of history reduces the complexity and mystery of the city to a diagrammatic and lifeless entity.

In the planning of Berlin as the capital of Germany, instead of spirited and exhilarated development one sees the slow-turning wheels of a grinding bureaucratic administration. These planning decisions are not concerned with creating a vital city that looks toward the future. The city is a great spiritual creation of humanity, a collective work that develops the expression of culture, society, and the individual in time and space. Its structure is intrinsically complex; it develops more like a dream than a piece of equipment. The impact of the spiritual, the individual, and the creative cannot be relegated to some outdated past. As long as there are human beings there will be the possibility of dreaming the impossible and achieving the possible, which is the very essence of humanity.

This dimension of the city is not the "orgy of depth" that Lampugnani derides but rather a fundamental structure. As Peter Behrens said: "Architecture, too, strives towards infinity; but more than any other art it is the art that, because of its techniques and purpose, remains bound to tangible materials . . . it remains tied to Earth but seeks a spiritual link to the universe." If the creative space of architecture is reduced to some abstract formula of "reading simple plans and strong elevations" then there is no more possibility for architecture, only for critics who read buildings and build readings. Is the urban realm to be reduced to a nullity by these heartless materialists and spiritless technocrats?

Simpleminded analyses of society, economy, politics, and architecture cannot deal with the problems of density, ecology, and reconstruction of cities. It is no answer to rummage through the debris of history in order to cartoon some moment within it for further exploitation. In selecting for Berlin and the newly opened lands particular points in history from the 19th century, or from the Art Deco period, or indeed from the Third Reich itself,

Lampugnani and his cohorts pretend that one can choose one's history as simply as one chooses a breakfast cereal.

Any architect or historian might have a preferred period of history, but that is very different from abusing history in order to suppress and politically legislate against other histories and against the present. An architect working in an open society has the responsibility to struggle with the conflicting interpretations of history expressed within the city. To produce meaningful architecture is not to parody history but to articulate it; it is not to erase history but to deal with it. One must take, for example, the existing context in the former D.D.R. seriously, not because one likes the ill-conceived buildings, but because its history and its people must be respected.

The richness and historical heritage of German architecture cannot be purged of everything that is thought to pollute it. The architectural "lunacy" of deconstructivism or any other architecture that Lampugnani does not like is condemned as infecting the innocent *Kleinbürger* who must be protected from this evil. But this ideology goes beyond architecture to condemn thought itself by attacking not only architects but also writers. To call distinguished thinkers such as Jacques Derrida or Jean Baudrillard "cryptic, subversive and nihilistically destructive" is not reasoned or reasonable.

The explicit belittlement and dismissal of the art of architecture (or as Lampugnani calls it, the artist-architect) is a radical denial of the tradition that extends from before Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Peter Behrens and goes beyond Mies van der Rohe. It includes significant architects such as Hans Scharoun, Bruno Taut, Erich Mendelsohn, and Hans Poelzig. The policy of antimodernity is a policy against culture itself. The words *art* and *culture* are used in a pejorative manner to discredit certain approaches to architecture and urban planning.

The call for "solidity" and the praise Lampugnani bestows on architecture from the Third Reich is

extremely frightening. It is impossible to separate Nazi ideology from what it has produced — as if one could separate technique from its goal or a chicken from its egg. German fascist ideology built solidity into its political policy in opposition to the openness and transparency of the short-lived Weimar democracy. It sought to express the "1000 Year Reich" by means of an oppressive architecture that would intimidate people by making them believe that cities are not made of citizens but of thick walls. The totalitarianism that led to the erection of the Berlin Wall produced a very solid, well-detailed, well-constructed concrete wall, which did not make it any more acceptable to those trapped behind it.

An unethical architecture, whether politically or economically motivated, is unacceptable and deplorable because it is profoundly antihumanistic — an embodiment of the ideal of mass conformity. The old trick of lumping humanity into a single mass of submissive users in the name of the one and only truth is malignant and dangerous. Those who decry the lack of order only testify to their own confusion and lack of talent. Lampugnani's phrase "the myth of innovation" brings forth a comparison to those who saw the whole humanistic basis of the 20th century as a myth to be debunked. Something is wrong when architecture is conceived as no more than a technique for adjusting the *Kleinbürger* so completely to the times that he or she no longer feels a desire for anything but silence. This way of thinking and building becomes a device for preventing people from acquiring the knowledge that would enable them to ask real questions about architecture and the space of the city. Lampugnani's claim that the cities of Siena and St. Petersburg are products of monotony and repetitiveness is ridiculous since these cities share a unity based on a shared spiritual belief rather than on technocratic legislation.

The desire for a universal national style coupled with the privileging of handicraft is not a refinement of architecture in our time but a dead

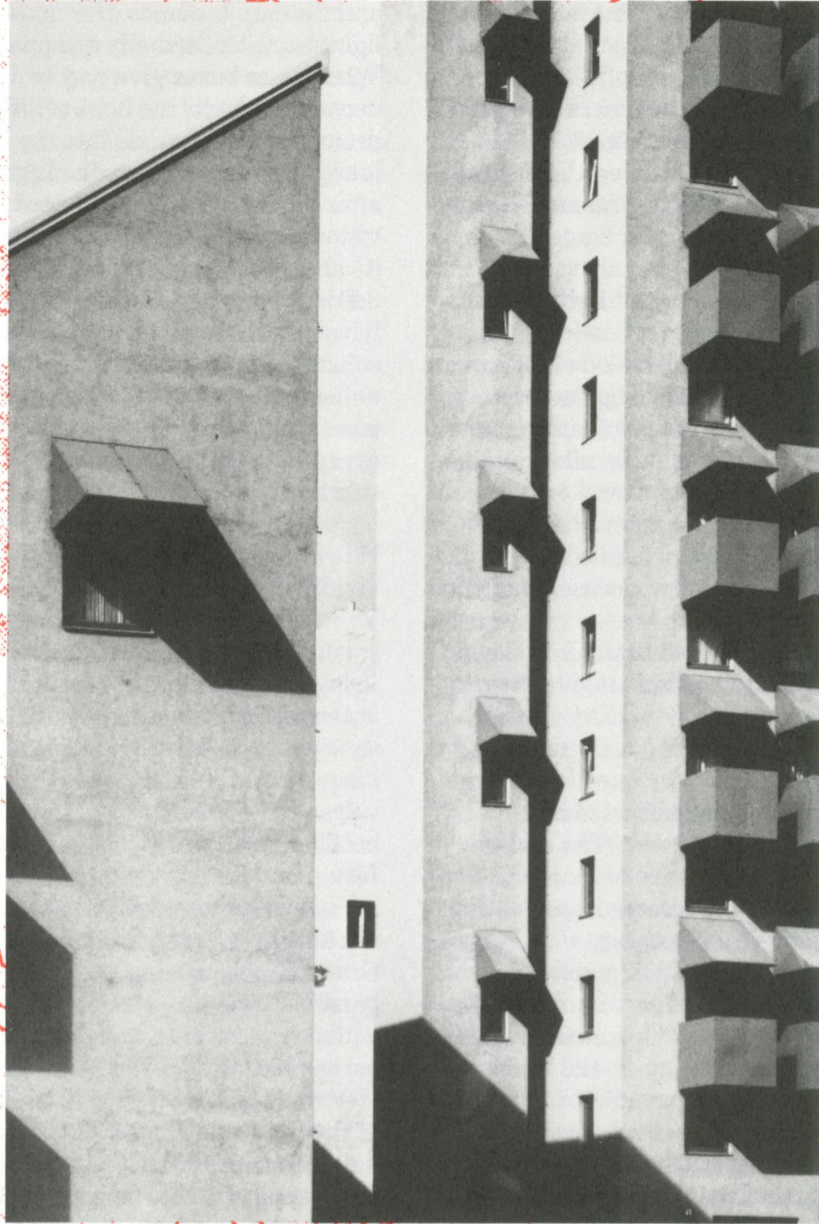
end. No one involved in architecture can possibly be deluded into believing that contemporary industry and technology will suddenly give way to stone masons hewing obediently according to clear patterns. The present ecological crisis necessitates a serious rethinking of building in relation to materials and functions. The facile cosmetics of corporate architecture are not needed, nor is the banal formalism of 22-meter-high blocks with courtyards and internal green space. Instead we must be concerned with the architectural and human quality of buildings. Mies van der Rohe's famous adage "God is in the details" has been deliberately misinterpreted. Now technique and details have themselves become gods.

What would Europe be without the cultural power of Germany? Many praise the powerful German economy, the famous engine that fuels European growth. Yet it is seldom recognized that without the enormous cultural developments that have taken place in postwar Germany, Europe would indeed be a poorer place. And in these times of economic difficulties there is a natural turning away from dreams and hopes.

Although we must question and criticize the obvious crass commercialism and pretentious excesses of the 1970s and 1980s, the solution to the complex problems that now exist in Germany is not to be found by looking 50 years into the past, nor by advocating repetitive anonymity in the future. The answer is not to suppress individual creativity, nor to abandon tolerance and diversity. One must never forget nor forfeit the universal sanctity of thought and its expression. The architect must be more than a mouthpiece for the prevailing opinion. The architect's soul must have a part in the creative struggle. The intelligence, desire, and ambition of the people of Germany should not be underestimated in the task of creatively mastering the challenges of today.

Daniel Libeskind is an architect in Berlin. He is currently building the new Jewish Museum of the Berlin Museum.

DANIEL LIBESKIND: LETTER FROM BERLIN



Top to bottom: John Hejduk, Berlin Tower, 1988, an example of the metaphysical architecture no longer tolerated in Berlin. J.P. Kleihues, Museum of Pre- and Early-History, Frankfurt, an example of forms and materials not tolerated in Berlin today.

