

## Berlin, End of the 20th century

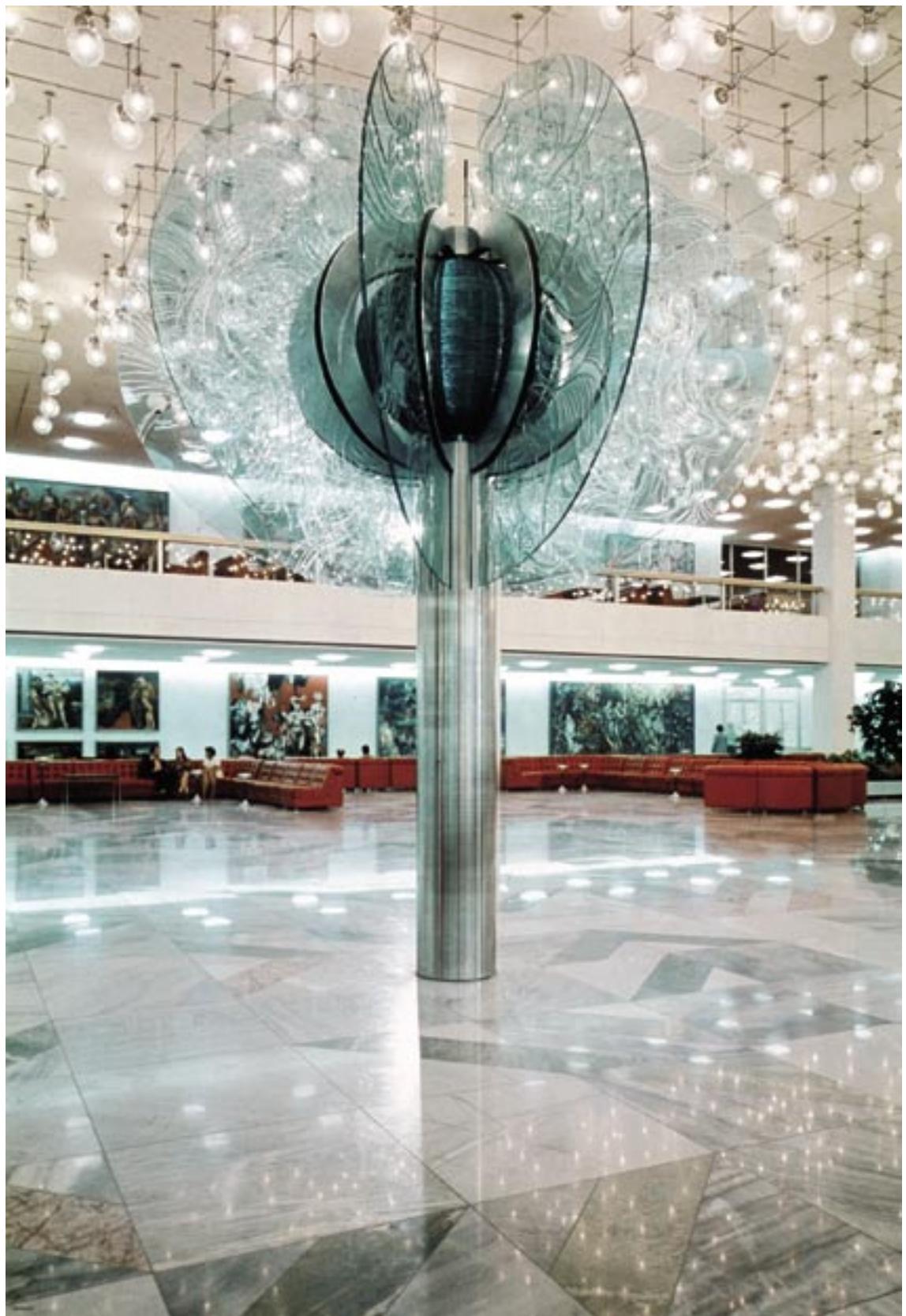


84

### → VERB

The transformation of this site on Berlin's Island of Museums stands out for its central position in the urban fabric and its significance as a representation of state power. The Palace of the Republic, built in the 1970's on the foundations of the Palace of the Prussian Emperor and the medieval city walls, survives today next to the Berlin Cathedral and the reconstructed Lustgarten as an empty relic of the GDR. Although the reunified German parliament voted for the demolition of this symbol of the socialist regime and the reconstruction of the Prussian Palace, the current uncertainty created caused by lack of funding has become fertile ground for new proposals in the definition of public space.





The demolition of the Prussian Castle (Stadtschloss) gave place to the vast Marx-Engels-Platz, conceived simultaneously as the culmination point of all popular and military parades and as the forecourt of a new government tower to be constructed on the opposite bank of the Spree river. Twenty years later, the administrative center was redefined into a new civic center that combined the most representative institution of the republic, the Volkskammer (People's Chamber), with a wide range of venues for popular events, including auditoriums, restaurants, a bowling alley, and a discotheque.

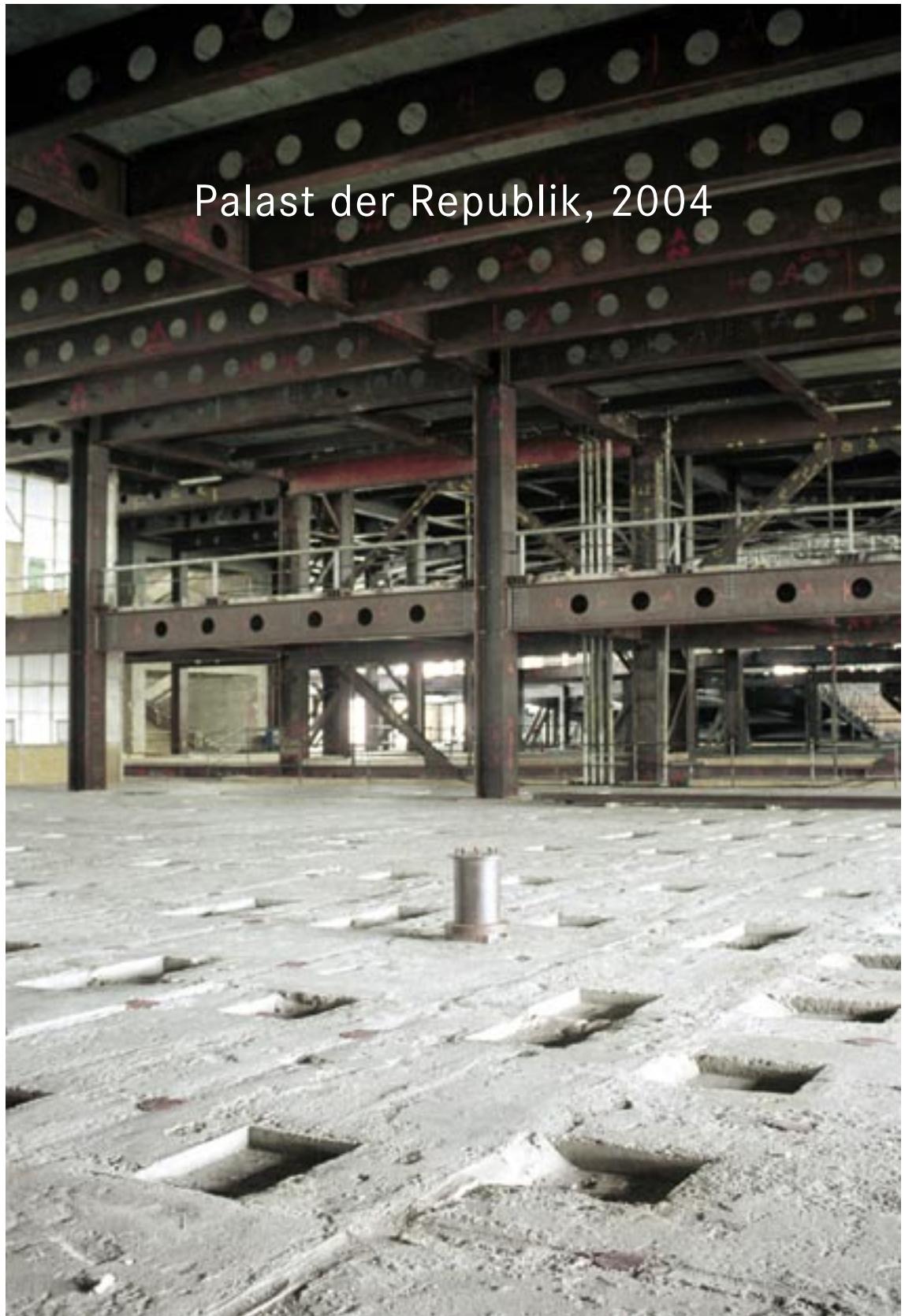
For a thorough documentation on the building and the Stadtschloss site, see Thomas Beutelschmidt, Julia Novak, ed., *Ein Palast und seine Republik*, Berlin: Verlag Bauwesen Huss-Medien, 2001.



#### PALACE OF THE REPUBLIC, BERLIN, GERMANY

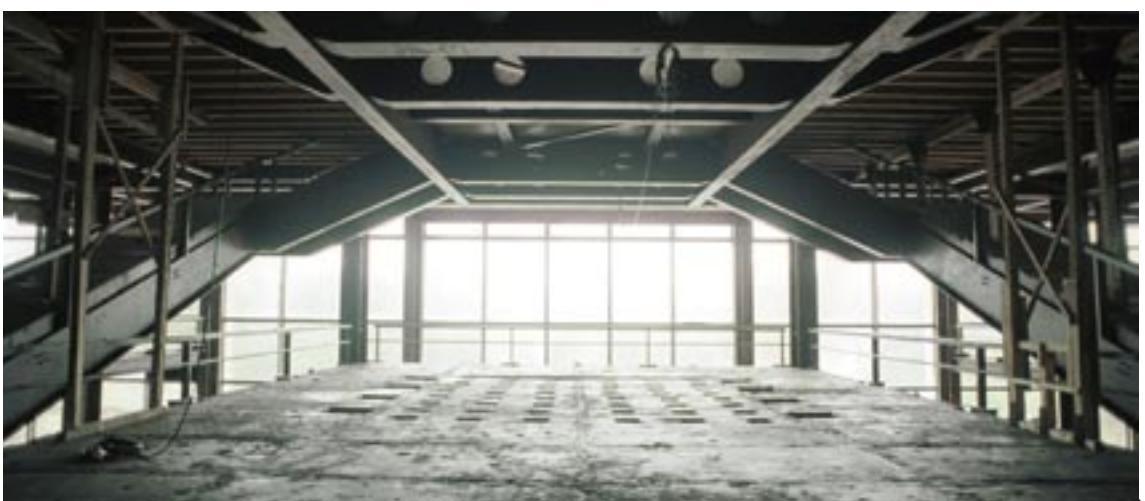
Location: Berlin-Mitte, Schloßplatz (formerly Marx-Engels-Platz). Architects: Heinz Graffunder with Karl-Ernst Swora, Günter Kunert, Manfred Prasser, Wolf R. Eisentraut, Heinz Aust. Construction: 1973-1976. Dimensions: 182 x 90 x 32m. Gross floor area: 103,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Main functional areas: 1. Volkskammer (People's Chamber) of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (35 x 29 x 11m, 540 seats + 240 on balcony for spectators); 2. Foyer and public halls with restaurants, discotheque, bowling center and 200-seat auditorium on 4th floor; 3. Großer Saal o Big Hall used for conventions, concerts and balls, with movable walls and decoration (maximum height 18m, 5,000 seats); 4. Basement with storage, kitchen and machine rooms. Also known as: House of 1,000 windows or Honecker's lamp store.

# Palast der Republik, 2004

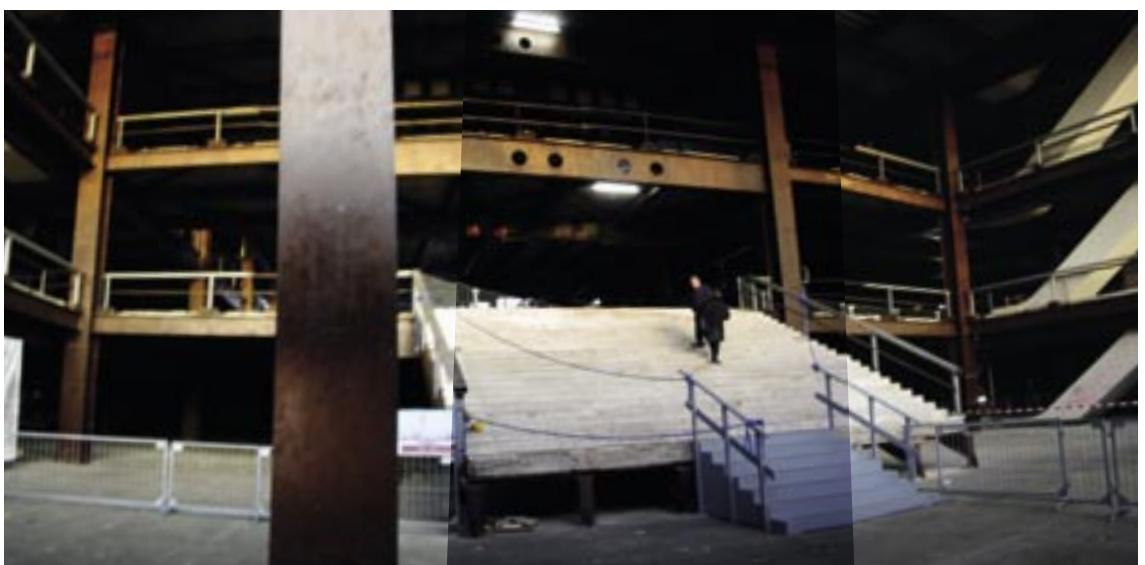




Main Auditorium



Foyer and entrance



**1950:** Demolition of the Hohenzollern-Castle after a decision of the ruling Socialist Party.

**April 1973:** Council of Ministers of GDR decides construction of the palace. **Architects:** Heinz Graffunder, Karl-Ernst Strowa. **April 1976:** Opening of the “Palace of the Republic”. The palace is divided into the sections: “People’s Chamber” (GDR parliament), “Lobby” and “Great Hall”(convention hall for 5000 people). While the parliamentary chamber is rarely active, the Palace is popular as a public cultural venue. The building is a primarily a multi-functional Superbox, including thirteen restaurants, cafés and bars; a theatre, bowling alley, discotheques, etc. With its 15.000 visitors per day it is the most frequently visited location in Eastern Berlin’s centre. **March 1990:** Constitution of the first freely elected parliament of East Germany. **August 1990:** The “people’s chamber” votes to dissolve the GDR and join the Federal Republic of Germany. **September 1990:** The palace is closed due to asbestos contamination (sprayed asbestos was used as a fire protection for the steel structure). **October 1990:** The government of the Federal Republic of Germany becomes the new owner of the Palace. **1990-2004:** Sealed box: the building remains closed for fourteen years. **1998-2001:** Stripping of interior to expose structural shell in order to remove asbestos (overall cost: approx. 70 million euros). **November 2000:** Federal Government establishes the “International Commission of Experts ‘Historical Centre’” consisting of fifteen German, one Austrian and one Swiss member. **April 2001:** Final report recommends demolition of Palace and reconstruction of new building (‘Humboldt Forum’) on the footprint of the destroyed castle; the programme of the Humboldt Forum is envisaged as a combination of two existing Berlin libraries, the scientific collections of the Humboldt University and the relocated collection of Non-European Art (estimated cost: 670m Euros); an interim cultural use of the existing structure is recommended. **July 2002:** The German Parliament (Bundestag) formally votes for the demolition of the Palace and the reconstruction of the main historical facades of the Hohenzollern-Castle around a future building. **July 2002:** A second expert group ‘Schlossareal’ (Castle Area) is set up to develop detailed spatial and financing concepts for new building. **March 2002:** The local initiative consisting of studio urban catalyst and diverse cultural users create pressure group to campaign for a temporary use. **November 2002:** The pressure group organises exhibition of ideas, ‘Zwischen Palast Nutzung’ displaying possible temporary use scenarios and initiating public debates. **March 2003:** Formal constitution of ‘Zwischen Palast Nutzung’ as a non-profit organisation and beginning negotiations with Federal Government about a cultural interim use. **May 2003:** Asbestos removal from contaminated sites is completed. **July 2003:** ‘Zwischen Palast Nutzung’ and local tourist association conduct guided tours through the palace-shell reopening of the building for the first time since 1990 to thousands of visitors. **October 2003:** The official expert group ‘Schlossareal’ (Castle Area) recommends a two-year-lasting moratorium for building plans in view of current economic depression. **November 2003:** Bundestag votes again for the demolition of the Palace. The site of the Palace designated as grassed park area until funds for a new building can be found. **March-June 2004:** Commercial exhibition of reproductions of the Chinese “Terracotta army”. **June 2004:** Annual Congress of the Federal Association of German Industries (Bundesverband der deutschen Industrie – BDI) held inside the appropriated Palace. **July 2004:** Final signing of temporary use contract limited to three months (official contract holder is the cultural venue Sophiensaele Berlin and the Hebbel Theatre). **20. August–9. November 2004:** VOLKSPALAST – period of temporary cultural use opens the building with over 40.000 visitors to date. **September 2004:** The original plan to demolish the Palace of the Republic by the beginning of 2005 is cancelled due to irregularities in the tendering process. **October 2004:** the Federal Minister for Culture, Dr Christina Weiss, agrees to postpone the opening of the Palace for cultural use until mid 2005. **16–17. October:** FUN PALACE Berlin 200X – international conference.

# Architects as agents

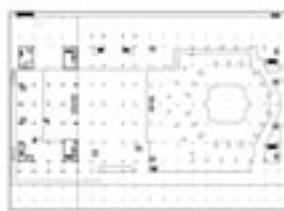
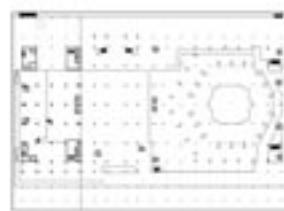
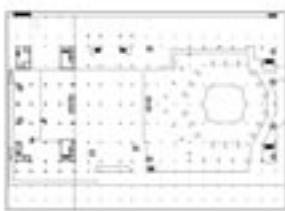
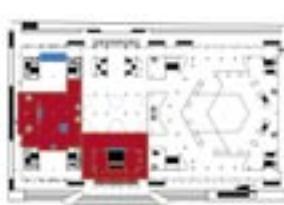
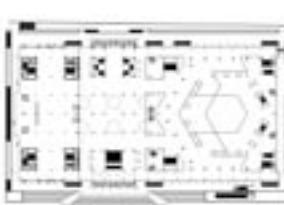
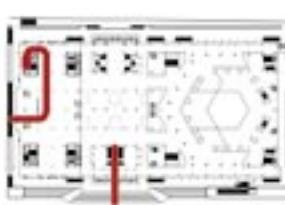
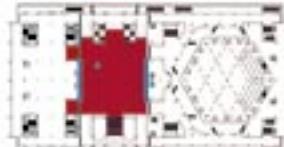
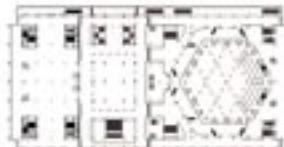
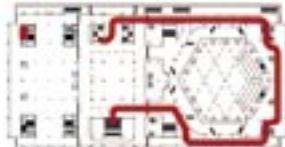
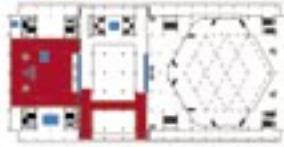
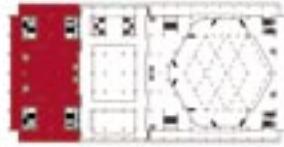
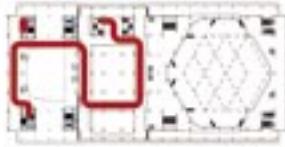
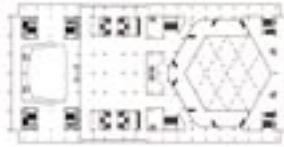
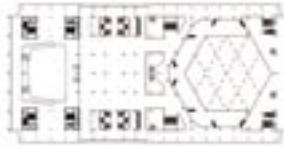
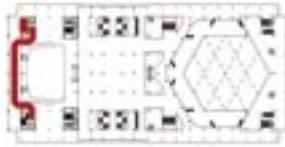
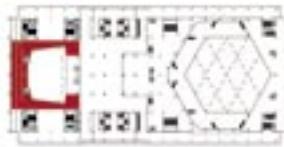
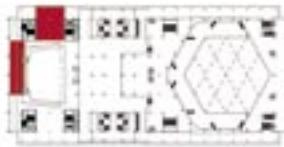
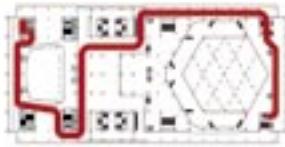
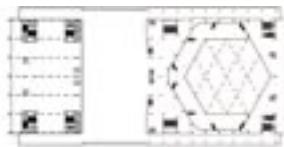
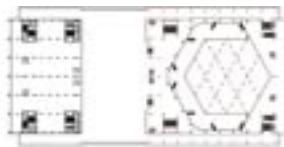
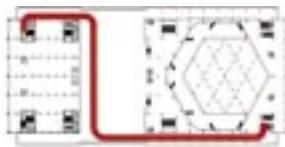
Studio Urban Catalyst

Philipp Oswalt, Philipp Misselwitz

**BACKGROUND** The Palast der Republik, opened in 1976, was one of the most important and ambitious public building projects in East Germany, housing the GDR parliament as well as several major cultural venues, clubs, bars, restaurants and conference facilities. In 1990, after only fourteen years of use, the structure was vacated on grounds of asbestos contamination, and currently the building remains unused – the period of vacancy already exceeding the duration of use. During a six-year and costly asbestos removal programme, the building was stripped down to its core structural elements, a steel frame and pre-cast concrete elements, and became a gigantic space of rough and evocative beauty located in the very heart of the city, hidden behind its largely intact brownish mirror façade. Throughout the last decade the future of the Palast has been the subject of a heated and polarised debate. In 2002, by a slim margin, an international expert commission and the German parliament eventually voted in favor of demolishing the Palast and of constructing a new building that would integrate elements of the imperial Prussian castle that had formerly occupied the site; this plan would have an estimated cost of 668 million euros. Today, the future of the site is still unclear. Although it was determined that a new ‘Humboldt Forum’ would occupy the property in order to house the state-owned non-European collections, the science collection of Humboldt University and the central library of Berlin, the scheme has neither funding nor a credible architectural solution<sup>1</sup>. During a recent session held in October 2003, the German parliament conceded that the initial plan would be postponed until after the current economic recession and it is widely believed that a lack of public funding could postpone construction for another five to ten years. This waiting period is exemplary for the failure of traditional planning in conditions of crisis: whilst the final form of the project has been fixed, the key questions of finance, client and program remain unanswered. Moreover, the almost ideological fixation with the building’s final image seems to block any sense of realism and appropriateness of the project and makes a pragmatic discussion of alternatives nearly impossible. In a paradoxical decision to conceal the inability to act and the lack of a clear concept, the German Parliament voted to invest a further 20 million euros into the demolition of the existing Palast. Thus, the site would remain indefinitely a large, grassed over area.

1. See: <http://www.bundesregierung.de/artikel-,413.535194/Abschlussbericht-der-Arbeitsgr.htm>  
<http://www.bundesregierung.de/-,413.534455/pressemitteilung/Kulturstaatsministerin-Weiss-E.htm>

## TEMPORARY OCCUPATIONS



## Visitors

Sophiensäle

DTM

**THE IDEA OF TEMPORARY USE** The idea for the temporary use of the existing, structural remains of the Palast der Republik was proposed in the spring of 2002, at the same time that Studio Urban Catalyst became involved in the project. The Senator for Culture, Adrienne Goehler, and the architectural critic Bruno Flierl had responded to expressions of interest by several cultural institutions, such as the Berlin Sophiensaele (off-theatre) and the Staatsoper (State Opera), but the idea remained without a clear and realistic concept. As we contemplated the possibility of getting involved as architects, we had to concede that the situation was rather absurd: there was no client, the building was already there and there was no money to pay for its necessary appropriation. In response to this situation we developed a multi-track approach. As a first step, we began to identify and contact initiatives and institutions that had voiced an interest in temporary use and to inform other groups that would likely be interested. Six groups eventually joined us in regular meetings, forming a loose network in which each of the initiatives pursued a different programmatic idea, representing a spectrum that seemed realistic and appropriate to us: concerts, opera, art installations, exhibitions, discotheque, as well as sport and youth culture. In parallel, we began to develop ideas for necessary improvements of the pre-existing structure, guided by the belief that the installation of temporary uses would cost a fraction of the officially published ten million euro estimate. At that time, access to the well-guarded building was nearly impossible, the owner (the Ministry for Construction and Built Environment) was unavailable, and updated plans of the stripped interior of the building were non-existent. In order to move forward, we needed the help of those politicians that had expressed their support for the idea in the past. In April 2002, we persuaded the planning authority of the Mitte district to host a large meeting, which for the first time, assembled representatives of the owner, the planning authority and potential users. As a result of a rather difficult and inconclusive discussion, we were given the mandate to lead a smaller working group in order to develop a feasibility study based on the following objectives:

- > To develop an architectural solution that addressed the issues of fire escape and safety and to propose a basic infrastructure for a wide spectrum of temporary use scenarios;
- > To focus existing ideas to form a coherent concept;
- > To propose a management structure that would assume all responsibility for the implementation of the proposal;
- > To identify realistic strategies for the financing of the necessary initial investment and operation costs.



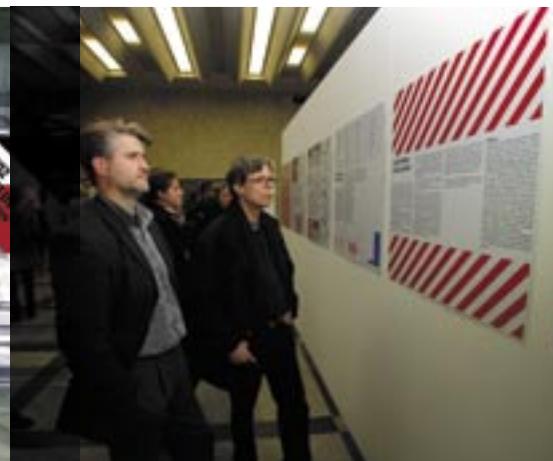
Over the following period of 8 months we developed a concept based on the following premises:

- > Only a limited selection of spaces should be appropriated for temporary use in order to reduce costs (two alternative scenarios were considered);
- > Minimizing the necessary interventions to the structure in accordance with the provisional character of the building, designed for a transitional time-frame of 2-3 years (with the option of extending this period in accordance with the progress of plans for a new building), before the building's eventual demolition;
- > Ensuring that implementation costs incurred by the owner of the building (the Federal Republic of Germany) remain little to none – no revenue (e.g. rent) is expected (temporary users take on running costs of the building);
- > Laboratory: the interventions would ensure a maximum spectrum of possible uses, with the belief that cultural events help to reenergize a public discussion about site's future while acknowledging the deep attachment to the Palast still felt by many East Germans.

TEMPORARY USE GOES PUBLIC With the help of expert advice, the spatial concept and necessary interventions to the structure were refined with an estimated cost of 1.3M € – less than 15% of previous renovation cost estimates and a fraction of the cost for new development. But whilst the necessary preparatory work had been done, relations with the owner remained difficult. Requests for meetings were left unanswered. Even the initial support of several politicians turned cautious and half-hearted. In order to move forward with the project, we realised that direct negotiations with the owner would not be given serious consideration unless we managed to build strong public support in the background.

In November 2002, a 5-day public exhibition was organised in an abandoned governmental building adjacent to the Palace of the Republic. For the first time, the feasibility study

94



and an exemplary selection of programmatic ideas were presented to the wider public. Several thousand visitors attended the opening event of the exhibition, and the presence of over 100 journalists at the preceding press conference confirmed the widespread media interest. The almost unanimous support for the initiative in the national press, TV and radio during the following weeks generated a favourable backdrop for the start of negotiations. The German Finance Ministry, by then the official owner of the building, accepted the viability of the proposed measures but refused to be directly involved in the management of the temporary use project. The necessity of securing an appropriate partner, with limited legal viability, led to the re-constitution of our initiative as the legally recognised, non-profit society ZPN “ZwischenPalastNutzung” (UseBetweenPalaces). Studio Urban Catalyst continued to be a vital engine within the framework of this organization. The formalisation of the loose network of users and agents (suc), enabled ZPN, as a potential lease-holder, the ability to manage the constant inquiries and declarations of interest posted by an extremely varied user community.

**DIRECT ACTIONS** As negotiations for a temporary-use tenancy agreement stalled, ZPN devised a new strategy of small actions, hoping to generate a ‘Trojan horse’ effect. In partnership with the event organiser Partner für Berlin, the building was opened again for the first time to the general public within the framework of limited guided tours, again accompanied by major media coverage and public attention. Studio Urban Catalyst, in partnership with the stage-design specialist Mediapool, devised a series of low-budget interventions that secured a path through the central part of the building and remained in place even after the tours had finished. In September 2003, the secured area could therefore serve as a basic infrastructure for ‘musical walks’ – a sound performance by Christian von Borries and the Brandenburg Philharmonics – the first cultural event,



which again attracted several hundred visitors. It is hoped that the continuing strategy of accumulating small-scale interventions will maintain a high level of public interest and convince the owner of the feasibility of temporary use as a viable option, which would generate a modest income and cover some of the costs of security and maintenance. Simultaneously, the curatorial concept was refined in discussions with renowned curators Hans Ulrich Obrist (Paris), Boris Ondreicka (Bratislava) and Hannah Hurtzig (Berlin) and presented to the public on December 19, 2003, along with a revised concept for the appropriation of the former Palast-Foyer – a much cheaper and more realistic option based on an external and potentially mobile fire escape system of temporary scaffoldings and an internal mobile sprinkler system that can be placed in areas of high fire risk. The curatorial concept ‘1000 day’ formulated, with an ironic relationship to the former building structure, three platforms for the programme: entertainment, politics, communication. A set of seven rules were devised in order to regulate the interaction of actors, e.g. limit the size of projects by time and space, ensure a dynamic change over time as well as refreshing impulses from the outside. The building would become an open source project, highly inclusive and non-hierarchical.

VOLKSPALAST Three years after the start of the initiative, a three month, temporary-use contract was finally signed. The Palace of the Republic was reopened as ‘Volkspalast’ (people’s palace) on August 20, 2004 as a multi-purpose space. Initial investment was secured through private sponsorship in order to meet safety standards and fire regulations. The diverse program consisting of concerts, art installations, music festivals, theatre performances, club events, sport and leisure events, water city and labyrinth, exhibition space or conferences has attracted over 40,000 visitors. The projects constitute a temporary laboratory testing new forms of public space, interaction and communication



with the intention to generate close proximities of different, otherwise segregated social and cultural groups. Volkspalast was closed on 9 November because the current lack of heating facilities made the continued use of the structure impossible.

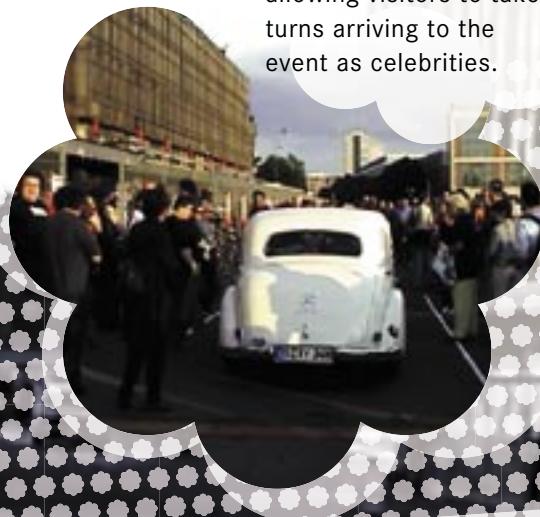
**PROSPECTS** Despite the bleak prospects for the realisation of the planned Humboldt Forum and the apparent success of the interim use, the German government insists on the rapid demolition of the Palace in accordance with the original parliamentary vote. The recent postponement of demolition until autumn 2005, due to irregularities in the tendering process and the possibility of hosting the 2005 World Championships in Beach Volleyball in front of the building (July 2005), may have unexpectedly created the opportunity for a second period of temporary use (possibly May -September 2005). However demolition, lasting twelve to fifteen months (2005/6) at an estimated cost of twenty million euros, remains high on the agenda and will yield no more than a grassy field, marking the footprint of the pre-existing building for an indeterminate period of time. Before seeing a substantial improvement in the alarming economic situation or the taking of another parliamentary vote, it is unlikely that this or any future government would commit public funds for a new building, thus eliminating the possible elaboration of a potential programme and subsequent architecture competition. Through the vehicle of a well-known and symbolic building, the discussion of alternative approaches to urban development was given a unique platform that could provide impetus to future projects and encourage the acceptance of temporary use as an integral part of urban development. For us as architects, the involvement of Studio Urban Catalyst as an agent and facilitator of the temporary use initiative is an experiment of lasting value – a potential model for a new territory of action for architects, acting less as builders and more as urban agents.



# Volkspalast Opening, 20 August 2004

LIMOUSINES FOR ALL  
A few limousines circle around the Schlossplatz allowing visitors to take turns arriving to the event as celebrities.

98



## THE "VOLKSPALAST" (PEOPLE'S PALACE) PROJECT

Having been pushed to the forefront by the process of unification, Berlin now runs the risk of becoming a bastion of defence: its conquests and former momentum have faded and it is now fighting on the back foot. Faced with such a lack of drive, a new experiment is being developed in the heart of the city: the "Palace of the Republic", a gift from the past waiting to be granted a new use. This bare skeleton, which currently permeates only emptiness, represents a unique space; a space that highlights the tension between the past and the future, a space of transition.

Thanks to this "open" dimension, the 'Palace' shows great potential quite unlike any other location in the Republic, in that it can be transformed into a provisional cultural centre used to host experimental projects that will be highly attractive to the international community. The temporary use of this place, which is full of references to the past and symbolism, will provide new ways to explore the unknown. [http://www.volkspalast.com/\\_vp/splashf.htm](http://www.volkspalast.com/_vp/splashf.htm)



**GRAND OPENING** The red carpet leads to a red ribbon that is repeatedly cut, restrung, and cut again, in a reception ceremony by every new group of visitors.



100 EVENTS Since its opening, a wide variety of cultural events such as the recent Fun Palace Berlin 200X conference: [http://www.volkspalast.com/\\_vp/a15.htm](http://www.volkspalast.com/_vp/a15.htm), an architectural debate discussing the future of the Palast der Republik, have taken place in the Volkspalast.

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(pages 100-103)

