

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Building in Public:**

### **Critical Reconstruction and the Rebuilding of Berlin after 1990**

by

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Reconstructing Berlin's ruined contours after 1990 was one of the most important ways that reunified Germany made a public display of its relationship to its violent past. By integrating historical forms into new buildings in the city's commercial center, Berlin's urban planners hoped to show the world that the nation had transcended totalitarianism and was worthy of a prominent place in the new global order. In order to achieve this, they adopted an approach called "Critical Reconstruction," which required architects to follow rigid design standards based on traditional, pre-war building typologies. In doing so, they also sought to rein in a flood of eager international investors who threatened to turn central Berlin into a landscape of flashy, corporate experiments.

However, because of its strict insistence on historical styles, Critical Reconstruction was interpreted by many observers as a reactionary attempt to whitewash Berlin's traumatic history by rehabilitating fascist aesthetics and selectively excluding newer styles. This dissertation fundamentally reassesses the discourse of Critical Reconstruction and argues that this "conservative" turn in Berlin city planning practice was in actuality driven by socially progressive planners making a failed attempt to shape a new democratic society through the

regulation of built form. It thus casts doubt on one of the most central post-Enlightenment claims about architecture: that its aesthetic qualities can directly influence people and politics.

Historians and social scientists commonly refer to Critical Reconstruction as a controversial, backward-looking representation of German national identity. A handful of architectural historians have also examined isolated facets of its deployment as a city planning method in Berlin. However, without considering how it functioned discursively on multiple levels and in diverse arenas (professional, economic, and political), scholarly portrayals of Critical Reconstruction are reductive at best; at worst, these accounts risk reinscribing the same rigid and simplistic view of Berlin's planning culture that they seek to critique. My project offers the first detailed examination of Critical Reconstruction as both a public discourse and a planning methodology, showing how planners' endeavors to revive Berlin's landscape in a socially responsible way ultimately gave rise to the opposite: a landscape of homogenous commercial buildings whose construction mainly served corporate interests. Meanwhile, discussions in the national media grossly overstated Critical Reconstruction's aesthetic affinities with fascist architecture, making its authors appear conservative when they were actually long-time members of the political left.

This research adds substantially to the scholarship on Berlin's post-Wall rebuilding by looking past one-dimensional depictions of Critical Reconstruction as a unilateral statement about German identity, revealing its status as a set of planning tactics situated within a network of conflicting institutional and political formations. As such, it also addresses two fundamental problems faced by architects and planners in the global age: how to productively contend with the forces of capital while advocating for sustainable local growth, and how to make buildings into legible signifiers of history and identity.