

## Reinventing Public Space: Contemporary Placemaking Practices in Berlin

If the definition of *placemaking* is, as one firm puts it, to “infuse identity into a three-dimensional space,” then the practice characterizes a holistic approach to a site. As such, placemaking necessarily transcends the traditional disciplines of urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture, public art, and so on. Rather, placemaking requires sensitivity to the existing and/or historic environment and an interdisciplinary dialogue of all design professions—and stakeholders!—to arrive at an *integrated* public realm. In urban centers, success is often measured by how busy a place is with people, both local and from elsewhere, and whether a *sense of place* can be discerned.

The city of Berlin has been a hotbed of placemaking because of its unique recent history. With its founding dating back to the twelfth century, the city was 90 percent destroyed during World War II, followed by over 45 years of separation into east and west sectors during the Cold War. Since 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of East and West Germany, Berlin has been hailed for its proactive and expert redevelopment on a grand scale following reestablishment of the city as the capital. Recent events set in motion a unique coalescence of official urban redevelopment combined with herculean private and grassroots initiatives at all levels of society, commerce, and culture.

Successful placemaking is rooted in quality of the space, scale, and programming. The secret to the success of Berlin’s urban spaces is a commitment to creating truly public spaces that serve as living rooms for all. The driving factor of all well-designed placemaking initiatives is a focus on improving quality of life. Thus, the process focuses on employing the right tools that will activate public space in order to create public outdoor living rooms. There are vast differences between experiencing the grand public spaces at Potsdamer Platz as opposed to visiting smaller-scale sites in neighborhoods, such as Berlin Mitte, Kreuzberg, Spandau, and Prenzlauer Berg with its more intimately scaled public spaces including sidewalks, public plazas, landmarks, and parks. Outstanding places at all scales can be found throughout Berlin. Several unique urban design typologies make Berlin so very special, in particular its sidewalk culture, courtyards, plazas, and landmarks.

### Sidewalks

Berlin’s sidewalks offer a healthy mix of sidewalk cafés and retail shops. Street performers appear in all public spaces throughout the city, including sidewalks. Bike lanes and an extensive public transportation system lead to an intensive use of these spaces. Historic Berlin’s 1862 zoning and fire regulations required the height of buildings not to exceed the width of streets, typically five-story constructions.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in wide, airy sidewalks, where an ideal street life can naturally unfold.

A typical Berlin sidewalk in the Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood, for instance, features a healthy mix of temporary offerings for the pedestrian and passerby: sidewalk cafés, retail shops, plantings, and street performers, among other amenities. Residents will plant unsightly sidewalk edges with flowers. Cafés often feature unusual furniture, such as straw



ABOVE: Street performers at a public plaza in Berlin. BELOW: Straw bale seating at a sidewalk cafe. RIGHT: Sculpture outside the LEGOLAND Discovery Centre in Potsdamer Platz.



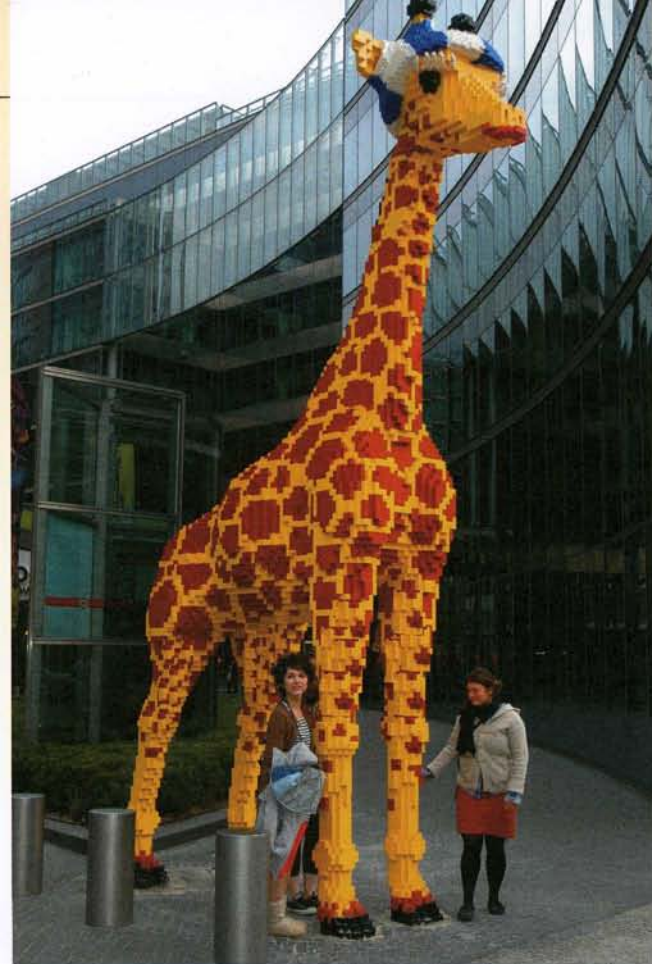
bales turned cozy seating or lovingly hand-painted benches that invite the customer to sit and repose in comfort. On many of Berlin’s popular neighborhood sidewalks, it is often the private initiative that creates a comfort zone appreciated by all, amounting to what’s been termed German *gemütlichkeit*. What’s good for the eye turns into good business as well.

### Courtyards

Courtyards are a typical feature of Berlin’s architecture. They usually offer an intimate scale and the advantage of quiet, protected zones off the street, where one can enjoy a sense of privacy and comfort in a car-free zone.

A prominent example are the sensitively renovated historic Hackesche Höfe with its web of eight mixed-use interconnected courtyards lined by small retail boutiques and eateries, narrow passages, and public art features that enhance the experience throughout the complex. Of particular renown is Hof 1 with its





*Klinker*—glazed facings of commercially produced tiles, beautifully arranged by local craftsmen in geometric patterns. Also of note is the Rosenhof passage and café, created by architect Hinrich Baller.

Tacheles, near Alexanderplatz, was a 1980s hot spot for squatters protesting developers who boarded up habitable buildings. Tacheles is the only former squatter site that remains and is now a state-sponsored studio building and center for the arts. The funky courtyard features a sculptors' metal shop gallery, as well as an array of graffiti, underground sculptures, and hip seating. Its charm lies in its welcoming, low-key atmosphere.

## Plazas

Many of the larger cultural attractions are fronted by or feature public plazas, where visitors and tourists mix with the locals. They provide an ideal playground for street performers and other public spectacles.

Potsdamer Platz,<sup>2</sup> and the SONY Center in particular, features numerous attractive plazas—essentially hard-scape pocket parks—that provide access to this large-scale new private development with its mixed-use arrangement of office, retail, restaurants, and cultural attractions. Noteworthy is the Berlin Wall memorial site, a popular tourist and street performer spot. Attractions for children and families include a LEGOLAND Discovery Centre with a giant LEGO giraffe on the fronting plaza, and a playground that doubles as a grouping of public sculptures.

Ten million people annually visit the 36,000-square-foot Forum, whose central covered plaza is spanned by a 200-foot high, 920-ton tentlike roof. The Forum provides public space 365 days a year at all hours of the day. A mixture of free open-space options combined with retail serve to bring life to the square. SONY “sells” its corporate image by offering high-tech entertainment, such as large-scale plasma screens to showcase

Berlin, events, and movies. A movie theater complex draws large crowds that add to the life in the square. Public seating conveniently surrounds the large, round, central water feature. In addition to eateries and retail, SONY's Forum offers ample free public seating opportunities.

Berlin's public spaces at Potsdamer Platz are major examples indicative of the siting of many American artists/architects in prominent public spaces. The Daimler public art collection demonstrates an international outlook, corporate prestige, and serves as draw and highlight for international cultural tourism. Notably, Daimler's outdoor collection is exclusively comprised of American blue-chip artists, including Keith Haring, Jeff Koons (*Balloon Flower*), Robert Rauschenberg, and Mark di Suvero (*Galileo*). Throughout the Daimler development, public plazas tend to be vast and void of pedestrians, indicating a failure of Renzo Piano's master plan to design spaces that attract the visiting public.

Throughout the city, public and private investments on all scales have created a vibrant cosmopolitan center that attracts visitors and new residents from Germany and all over the world to Berlin. Particularly among artists, Berlin ranks high as a potential place of residence. Thanks to continued low-rent opportunities, artists and cultural outlets continue to move there. This factor alone significantly contributes to Berlin's cultural vibrancy.

Berlin's creative/cultural economy is thriving. In addition to Berlin's official cultural agenda that serves the capital of Germany, cultural life is complemented by a booming subculture, comprised of alternative, nonprofit, and commercial spaces, and a highly popular indoor and outdoor café and pub culture; a healthy presence of street performers add to the mix. Free access and use of public space combined with public art features further enhance the quality of life.

The dominating presence of the pedestrian and bicyclist throughout the city and its streetscape is aided by Berlin's latest innovation to improve air quality: rerouting through-traffic on tangential roads and an extension of zones with parking fees for cars that do not adhere to the highest environmental standards. Thus, environmental policy and public health go hand in hand with revitalized and more attractive neighborhoods.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The plan was named after general building inspector James Hobrecht (1825–1902) and remained in effect until 1919. “Hobrechtplan für Berlin und seine Umgebung im Auftrag des Polizeipräsidenten Berlins 1859–1862,” <http://www.hobrechtstrasse.de/hobrecht/hobrechtplan.htm>, accessed March 26, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> After World War II the former Potsdamer Platz neighborhood with its major train station and transportation hub was reduced to a rubble field that became part of the wall strip. Its location and gigantic proportions prevented redevelopment. Today, the SONY Center and the neighboring Daimler complex offer a mix of shops, restaurants, a conference center, hotel rooms, luxurious rented suites and condominiums, offices, art and film museums, movie theaters, and an IMAX theater.