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# Infrastructures as Public Space Modelers:

## The Case of Hauptstadt Berlin in the Proposals of Hans Scharoun and Alison & Peter Smithson.<sup>1</sup>

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*ABSTRACT:* Public space is usually conceived as a sort of "clearing in the forest", a somewhat negative-space on the highly densified urban tissue. We shall not miss, however, some proposals hitherto not fully developed and which parted precisely from the opposite idea: Increasing of scale, density and complexity as the starting point for the creation and definition of urban public space.

The *Hauptstadt-Berlin* competition (1958) offered a key opportunity to check the actual status and ideas on the city and its planning. Participants should propose a new administrative, financial and commercial centre for the city's historic core (almost completely destroyed after WW2) to be developed in a future re-united city.

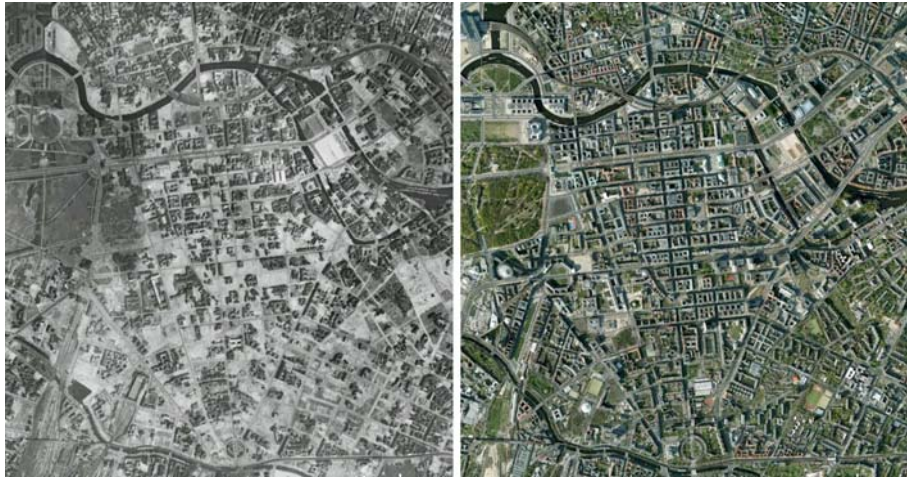
While most of the entries (including the winner team of Spengelin, Eggelin & Pempelfort) attached themselves somehow to the CIAM principles, those of Hans Scharoun and Alison & Peter Smithson (A+PS), awarded 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> prize respectively, proposed alternative schemes based on completely new and different conceptions, to some extent utopic, but whose ideas deserve a further study.

*KEYWORDS:* Public space, infrastructure, density, Hauptstadt Berlin, A+P Smithson, Scharoun

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*Competition area: 1953 and 2009*

## **1. Introduction.**

The well-known plan of Giambattista Nolli from 1748 split the urban fabric of Rome in two spatial categories: White or Black, or, in other words, Voids or full spaces. The only classification criterion was established just on public accessibility, thus streets, squares and gardens were clearly included in the first group of white / void spaces, but also Churches, Public or Institutional building's interiors joined this category. This dual classification avoided other categories which cannot be easily classified in neither of its rather schematic splitting, many of which have been playing an increasing role in contemporary cities. While public space has traditionally been understood as a sort of volumetric void in the dense urban fabric of private spaces, somehow like a clearing in the forest, infrastructure networks present their own features beyond the quoted full / void duality. Public in their accessibility, Infrastructure networks are, above all, server spaces: they consume a great deal of resources in energy and soil with a very low land occupation ratio and generating a large amount of residual surface, useless because of their environmental impact.

These considerations place this urban infrastructure spaces as the antithesis of public relationship spaces that make up the traditional public spaces. This is why it is specially significant the use of urban infrastructures precisely as a crucial element to generate new public spaces for relationship in a urban operation for the recovery of an historic centre in both the proposals of Hans Scharoun and Alison & Peter Smithson for the heart of Berlin in 1958.

The Hauptstadt-Berlin competition is set under an ambitious target: the creation of a political, administrative and commercial district in the heart of Berlin devastated by the war almost to the complete disappearance of any previous trace. It is an Area bounded to the north by the Spree River, to the east By the Museums Island and Historic centre; to the south by Mehringplatz and surroundings, and to the west by the Tiergarten; it included architectural pieces as significant as the –at the time, ruinous—Reichstag. It was still an area divided in two Germanys, FRG and GDR, a political division that just three years later would materialize in the construction of the Berlin wall. So the competition refers itself to a hypothetical and future reunification of Germany, giving thus a somehow utopic and advancing character to most entries. The jury included names as prominent as Alvar Aalto, Cornelis van Eesteren, Pierre Vago and Walter Gropius, who finally declined participation. The requested program included the design of a great political and

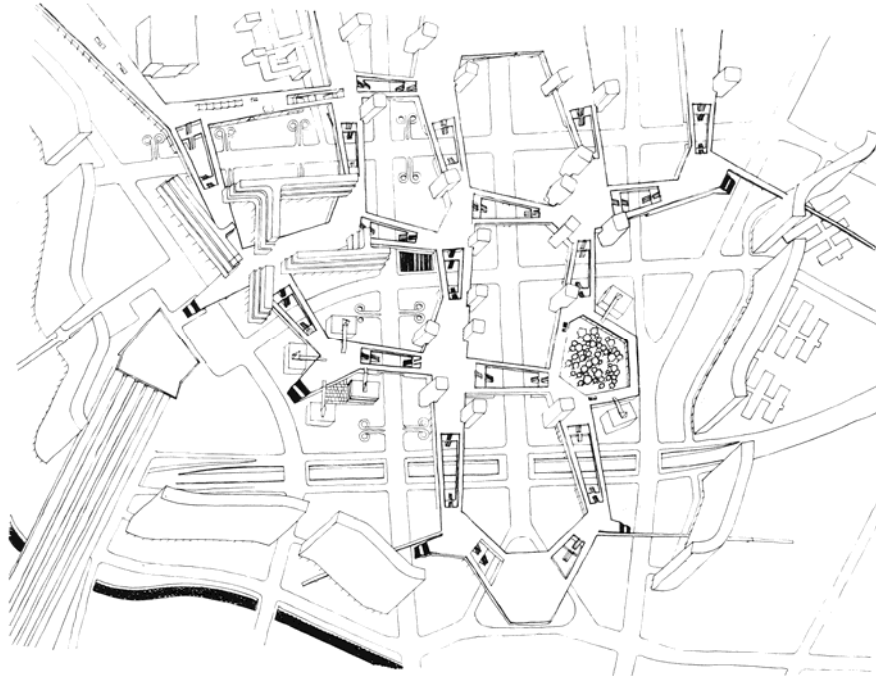
administrative centre for the future reunited nation's capital, with Government offices, Ministerial headquarters around the Reichstag and a large public area with facilities, stores and offices. Residential program was excluded, as it was considered it would colonize the boundaries of this new area. <sup>2</sup>

The competition was seen as a key opportunity to check the actual status and ideas on the city and its planning in a very exceptional time and location: redefine a new centre for an old historic capital razed by the war in a time when the country started his strong economic development and could contemplate the future with some hope. Most of the 151 entries --including the awarded 1st prize from Spengelin, Eggelin & Pempelfort or the one submitted by Le Corbusier and Mart Stam—presented schemes according with the principles of the CIAM congress: an abstract and perfectly orthogonal grid of separated traffic roads with scattered and independent object-like buildings like objects trouvés in a green continuous field, without any relation with context, neither its urban fabric nor its historic memory. In a moment when the CIAM orthodoxy was starting being questioned --among others, by the Smithsons themselves—most entries presented both schematism and simplification that were already obvious at the beginning of the 2nd half of XXth century.

However, we are not so interested in an approach to new urban planning concepts that were rising at the time as in some new ideas about public space and its relation with urban fabric, infrastructure networks or density and complexity as values incorporated into two specific entries for the Hauptstadt competition: those of Alison & Peter Smithson and Hans Scharoun, awarded 2nd and 3rd prize respectively.



A+PS: Proposal



*A+PS: Proposal (detail)*

## 2. project alison + peter smithson

The proposal submitted by Alison & Peter Smithson in collaboration with Peter Sigmund starts from the idea of two interlinked systems based on two different and opposed geometries:

- On ground level, the remains of the existing streets are preserved and restored, complemented by new ones provided in the city's urban planning, mostly straight lined low speed streets with orthogonal junctions. All the main outer traffic is set in new highway roads which are also already included in the city's future development.
- Over the former, A+PS' proposal superimposes a very different second grid, neither orthogonal nor concurrent with the existing one, an organic pattern whose geometry recalls a perforated elastic cloth under tension drawing a continuous pedestrian public space floating 10 m. over the actual pattern of streets. This network is conceived not as a square or a series of connected squares, but as a real elevated public infrastructure, a net that widens and densifies itself in junctions, where vertical links between levels are established.

Relation between both grids is established in certain connection points or nodes, which increase their density and signification, marked by a series of squarish towers with "knocked-off corners".<sup>3</sup> Under the platform appear offices or commercial spaces of three, two or one triple-height floors. At an intermediate height (+ 5,00 m.) some small squares appear. They are called Piazzette (Little

squares, in Italian), and they connect ground level and upper platform by escalators (looking for spatial and movement continuity).

Platforms allow almost exclusively commercial programs and facilities, with offices linked to these spaces. They were organized in clusters around some dominant themes (i.e. fashion, leisure, flower market...) with differed densities, higher around Friedrichstrasse, lower in the periphery. Even when the platform was exclusively pedestrian, the architects preview some kind of electrical vehicles, given the large distances involved.

The independence of both upper-and-lower grids introduced --as in Park Lane, a former project from the same architects—a large number of coincidences, overlaps and crosses. The platform character of an inhabited infrastructure, with its buildings, towering, links and access introduces in crossings a bridge-likeness. Alison Smithson refers to this effect: “every crossing is a kind of Rialto Bridge”. Perhaps the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, with its character of inhabited structure, complex and multiple, could give a more close metaphor.

On ground level, an increase of buildable surface is rejected; only the surviving buildings, sparsely scattered here and there, are preserved, as witness from the past. The remaining surface was treated as a green area, a vegetal wedge from the nearby Tiergarten, which included surface parking areas and trees aligned outlining the former (now none existing) buildings.

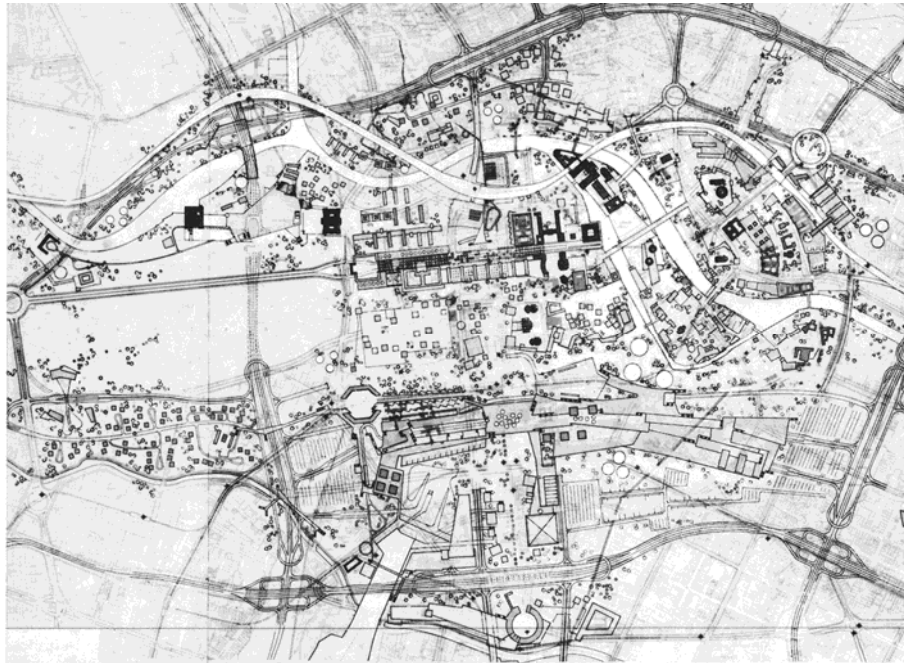
The requested office program is moved to a perimeter belt, an incredible long and almost continuous building –just interrupted in crossings—which surrounds all the area (only the north river boundary is excluded) with a constant height of 100 m (!), a powerful gesture that enclosed the site and which was call “the Chinese wall of offices” by the architects. According to these ones, its position was calculated to project is huge shadows just in free areas and traffic roads. In passing trough Fischerbrücke, the small village were the city has its origin, the wall-building changed its content (from offices to dwellings), nor its scale or dimensions.

To the north of the site, and linked to the Reichstag, some new elements were introduced: a big public Agora, a large open amphitheatre at the platform level, but crowned with stepping-back towers like the fingers of an open hand (a clear wink to Le Corbusier). This entire huge complex included the main government buildings, while north of the Spree River were set the Ministry headquarters, according to organic schemes that allowed their constant growth and evolution, designed by Alison Smithson.

### **3. Project Scharoun**

As most of the entries –and contrary to that of Alison & Peter Smithson—The proposal submitted by Hans Scharoun and Wils Ebert,<sup>4</sup> keeps nothing from the previous street network, as Scharoun pointed out that the former street pattern had lost all its previous significance.

Scharoun and Ebert's entry was a rather schematic and not fully developed design. Later, Edgar Wisniewsky would recognize that its development took hardly three weeks.<sup>5</sup> As in most entries, Scharoun and Ebert placed the Government area linked to the remaining Reichstag, in an East-West avenue that extended the historic Unter der Linden avenue; In its main Façade, the Reichstag faced a series of skewed squares, its recognized aim was, according with Scharoun himself, to break



*Hans Scharoun+W.Ebert: Proposal*

the old building's symmetry and hierarchy (which brought in mind ominous connotation to one of the few modern architects that stayed in Germany under the Third Reich).

But perhaps the most singular point in Scharoun's proposal is the introduction of a gigantic building close to the southern boundary of the site-area, a colossal single volume piece that runs East-West (like the northern axis) in a length over 2.300 meter. A single volume that includes all non-institutional program: Facilities, Commerce, offices and leisure. The building swallows in its interior two main longitudinal roads and many crossing streets, most of which disappear underground before reaching the massive building.

Merely outlined in its geometric definition, we can asset for sure that the building, instead of appearing as a unitary mass which imposes a solemn presence, is conceived as a multiple and heterogeneous volume, an additive formation that looks never completed, never definite, ever subject to changes.<sup>6</sup> Its scale and dimensions confers the building the character of a real inhabited megastructure, a colossal Rialto Bridge, quoting Alison Smithson's own metaphor.

The remaining buildings are located on an somehow green intermediate Terrain-vague, not enough defined in the entry, but under a clear guideline: their relative size appears deliberately reduced, like a series of little tinny objects scattered around a continuous urban landscape a *Stadtlandshaft* –quoting an expression frequently used by Hans Scharoun—presided by the silent presence of an inhabited mountain.

#### 4. Conclusions

Both proposals are the expression of a very optimistic time (in architecture and society as well), with a deep faith in technology and the future of humankind, that somehow advanced the coming 60's. An optimism, in our view, not lacking of some naivety, and in which we can recognize its freshness and values, but also its limitations. We can admire the formers and try to incorporate them into our tools, but secretly, we celebrate –as with many other visionary projects—that they were not finally carried out. Hardly could we today overlook the scale problems the introduction of a 100 meter high continuous wall-building over a sensitive context such as Fischerbrücke, the problems of connection with the surrounding street network or the introduction in an historic centre of such a large theme-city (a ghost city at high time) by the lacking of dwellings required in the program.

Even though the differences that separate these two projects from most of the entries, conceived under the CIAM rules, they could be the last card of modern urbanism, as properly pointed out Maria Teresa Muñoz and Juan Antonio Cortés, the swan-song of modern urban planning in the sense that under both projects lie the will of solving the city from the scratch, imposing an structure or shape alien to the site's local or historical context.<sup>7</sup>

However, out of urbanistic considerations that would set both projects in a framework of a certain time and culture, we are especially interested in them by their different approach to the idea of contemporary public space. On the contrary of the traditional conception of public space as a negative volume of a dense private urban fabric, as established in Nolli's plan, both projects approach public space, not as an antithesis of density, congestion and complexity, but instead taking advantage from these values. In both projects, traditional public spaces as green areas play a subsidiary role in front of the real public place for relationship: In the Alison & Smithson's proposal, the lower green area, crossed by a pattern of streets and scattered parking lots and isolated remaining buildings, can't hide its auxiliary and dependent character from the upper platform, a network of linked open spaces in an extended pedestrian area, whose scale and dimensions overpass most historic centres, a grid of streets and squares floating over ground, at the height of the higher tree top, a dense net of commercial spaces and facilities that configures a living infrastructure.

Neither in Hans Scharoun's proposal the wide intermediate green area plays a role as a public space as much as a base ground or framework for the real encounter & relation place, a large hybrid multiprogram space whose increasing density and complexity have come to enclose it in a massive volume. This is evidenced in the low attention given to the design of this intermediate green area in comparison with the formal definition –even three-dimensional—of the large building.

In Scharoun's project, complexion and complexity had been swallowed in the interior of a large edified bulk of scale and characteristics never seen before. Its final image refers to the before quoted metaphor of the inhabited mountain, frenzied inside, silent outside. In 1978, Rem Koolhaas wrote his well known "Delirious New York", On it, he claimed a strategy that, even while we know it was referred to a Raymond Hood project in Manhattan, it suits perfectly Scharoun's magical mountain for Hauptstadt Berlin:

"The paradoxical intention to solve congestion by creating more congestion suggest the theoretical assumption that there exists a "congestion barrier".

By aiming for a new order of the colossal, one would breakthrough this barrier and suddenly emerge in a completely serene and silent world, where all the hysterical and the nerve-wracking activity that used to occur outside, in the subways, etc., would now be completely absorbed within the buildings themselves. Congestion has been removed from the streets and is now swallowed by the architecture".<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Epilogue

Four years later we found the same architects working in the same place, a very rare opportunity: in 1962 a new competition was launched to redesign the Mehringplatz, just south of the former competition, but within its limits. In this case the competition is quite more pragmatic, and its completion is intended.

Both Hans Scharoun (on this occasion without Ebert) and the Smithsons (also without Sigmond) face the task. However none of the architects are the same as they were four years before: In 1958, Hans Scharoun was just emerging from the Third Reich, war and post-war dark years. He had hardly built anything since the late 30's. But in 1962 he has concluded some of his most renown post-war works (such as Romeo and Julia, Stuttgart, 1959, Charlottenburg nord, Berlin, 1961, the Geschwister-Scholl School, Lünen, 1962) and he is close to the conclusion of his masterpiece, the Berliner Philharmonie (1963). On their side, Alison and Peter Smithson, even when his "House of the future" (1953) brought in some celebrity, it is not until the 60's that they will become world wide recognized, as prominent members of the Team X (first formal meeting: Bagnols sur Ceze, 1960) or their first important building, The Economist (1959-65).

This time is Hans Scharoun who is awarded first prize with a project that later, he manages to build. It is a rather pragmatic and constrained project that recovers the original circular shape of the square, but that stands far away from other projects he is working on at the time.

However, the proposal of Alison and Peter Smithson deserves a further consideration. In its report, they mention the 1957 competition, but now, current reality is recognized, with the city's political division and the wall. Finally, they submit a proposal far more ambitious than the one of the German architect: they leave out any historical reference or recovery of the original plan because of its loss of significance at present (exactly what Scharoun pointed out referring to the previous street network on his 1957 proposal). In its place, A+PS present a large piece all along an East-west axis that was integrated in the planned traffic infrastructure (in this case a high-speed road complex) containing all the commercial and facilities program, and extending itself through two colossal side wings flying over the former square and thus blurring its rigid geometry. The reference to the Scharoun's project for Hauptstadt Berlin is not just obvious, but also explicit, and so is recognized by the authors themselves.<sup>9</sup>



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## **Biographies**

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Both authors founded their own architectural office in 1990 since then working together in projects of public equipments.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Both authors of the current presentation have been working on their doctoral thesis in Berlin and the Berliner Avant-garde, one of the two specifically on Hans Scharoun's work. However, the origin of this presentation should not be found in those research works as much as in one short but suggestive and interesting article, "El Concurso de Berlin Capital. Canto del Cisne del Urbanismo Moderno" (The Capital-Berlin Competition, Swan-song of Modern Urban-Planning), written by Maria Teresa Muñoz and Juan Antonio Cortés, and published in the *Arquitectura* magazine in 1979, in which both Competition entries were richly discussed. Let us therefore express our acknowledge and gratitude to both of them.

<sup>2</sup> A large selection from the most qualified entries were broadly published at the time, both in German or international architectural magazines. Among the first ones: Hoffman, H., "Hauptstadt-Berlin" in *Bauen Wohnen*, march, 1959. Outside Germany, the most complete publication was: Rosenberg, S., "Berlin and de Hauptstadt Berlin Competition" in *Architect's Yearbook* n° 9, 1960. The referred projects from Hans Scharoun and A+PS were at great length included in their respective monographs or publications, collected in the cited Bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> This public space marked by knocked-off corner towers advances somehow *The Economist* project, which the architects were going to undertake on next year.

<sup>4</sup> Wils Ebert was a former collaborator of Walter Gropius. He joined Hans Scharoun's team to design the first Berlin plan after the war, the Planungs-Kollektive, in 1946. The Plan was very much discussed and promptly abandoned.

<sup>5</sup> See Jones, P.B.I., Hans Scharoun. London: Phaidon, 1995, p. 230 n. 6-22. Edgar Wisniewski would become Hans Scharoun's main associate, and took charge of his works after the death of the architect in 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Those are frequent features in Hans Scharoun's work, most especially in his post war projects. See: Author's doctoral thesis, in ETS Arquitectura's digital library on line: <http://oa.upm.es/1745/>

<sup>7</sup> Muñoz, M.T, Cortes, J.A., op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Koolhaas, R., *Delirious New York*. Rotterdam: O10 publishers, 1994 (English transl.), p.177

<sup>9</sup> "Such a chain of focal places is, for us a logical continuation of the theme of Scharoun's Hauptstadt project: the natural tendency for the cultural and social urban events of Berlin to form east-west lines". Smithson, A., "Berlin Mehringplatz report", in *The Charged void: Urbanism*. New York: Monacelli Press, 2005, p.89 (Our underlining).