

THE BIG B

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The following is a description of a recent trip to Berlin, the first time I had been back since briefly living there in the early 1990's. As you will see, the weather was generally lousy when I was there, excitingly cold but also wet and overcast, which didn't help my photo skills. I only had two full days so much was missed and the pictures taken reflect my own preoccupations, mostly with the architecture of the 1970's and 1980's. I also avoided (not deliberately) too much in the way of memorials, including Liebeskind's Jewish Museum. Having said that...



...our first stop was here, roughly in the middle of this rusty steel model of the Berlin Wall memorial at Bernauerstrasse. This is an open-air museum located at a spot in which a large number of people died attempting to cross. The memorial prompted a discussion about the semantics of contemporary monuments of which Berlin has more than its fair share. These generally employ the language of high art sculpture, an abstract minimalism which confers an aesthetic solemnity whilst avoiding saying anything too specific.

The wall memorial followed this tendency, borrowing most obviously from Richard Serra in its language of abstract lumps of Cor Ten steel although these were combined

with slightly jarring information boards carrying much more didactic meaning. The metal poles that follow the line of the absent wall were also reminiscent of Carmody Groarke's 7/7 memorial in Hyde Park.



The ostensible object of our trip was to visit the defunct (since 2008) Templehof airport, where we were taken on an extensive tour that included the mile long roof of the terminal building. This is the largest area of roofing felt I have ever seen. The ridges on the darker, higher section were apparently intended to form a grandstand from which to view Nazi aviation parades. The service towers that punctuate the circular plan at regular intervals provide access exclusively to the roof for this purpose.

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Loose collections of anonymous modern cars seen from the roof invite immediate Bourne style fantasies of spy assignments and cold-war hand-overs...
...before moving on in equally mysterious fashion.



Under the under-croft. Below the expanses of roofing felt, there is a vast, cantilevered roof awning which serves no specific purpose.



Inside, the main arrivals/departure hall now plays host to displays and exhibitions under the slightly weird title of Stage For The New. The interior is used very much as an as-found object, with arrival/departure boards appropriated to communicate display information and everything else pretty much untouched and unchanged.



Which results in a strange fetishisation of banal elements such as the baggage carousels and check-in desks and the sense that the building has literally just been vacated. I have no idea whether the redevelopment of the site – which includes a vast

park designed by Gross.Max. – will impact on the original architecture, but it has been left largely untouched so far.



Having said that, the central section of the airport terminal has grown an odd 1970's extension in the London Bridge idiom.



I flew into Berlin Tempelhof once. The plane felt as though it was genuinely going to land on someone's roof. The rental values of the Neukolln district headed in the opposite direction from the planes when the airport closed causing problems for its generally poor and predominantly Turkish

population. The area also gives its name to an instrumental track on Bowie's Heroes album if that's of interest.

The Templehof building – designed by Ernst Sagebiel under Albert Speer's direction – is typical of the National Socialist-era buildings in being a vast, largely featureless brand of classicism stripped of overt decoration and employing a brutal typological purity. Norman Foster apparently called Templehof "the mother of all airports" and, it's true, like the Olympic Stadium, the building achieves a kind of crudely emphatic example of the type.



The limestone on the Templehof buildings has an odd, patchwork appearance, like a form of natural camouflage, perhaps appropriately enough. Not entirely unlike...



...Stirling's Social Science Research Campus. This is one Stirling building that I'm pretty ambivalent about. Good points: it has a completely ridiculous plan – how I would have loved to witness the client presentation when he suggested a basilica crashed into an octagonal tower as the best solution for the cafeteria block. It has his trademark horrible colours and some full-on Post Modern silliness in the Gothic arches and ruinous fragments that adorn the garden. Bad points: all of the above plus the disturbing way the various building 'types' collide at the corners which, to be fair, is much more distressing in plan than in reality.

I remember this building being reviewed in the AR when I was a student and, as was usual in the AR, they were pretty furious about it. The reviewer – who may have been Peter Davey – was virtually apoplectic about the fact that Stirling had failed to resolve the radiators in the ramped areas. Davey fumed about the fact that they followed the line of the cills and thus, at the lowest points, hung slightly ridiculously in mid-air. He was right; they do.

Hmmmm.



These window frames were much puzzled over too when the building was completed. How to explain their strange cill-less formation and gargantuan over-shading effect in a city not known for its excessively bright sunlight? I have two theories. One, it was a rubbish joke on the architect's name – to whit: Big Jam. Two, it was a reference to Templehof which has similarly chunky stone frames albeit ones that are almost flush to the wall surface. Knowing Stirling's legendary insensitivity and fondness for the bad taste gag, I suspect the latter.



There are the familiar mushroom headed columns and acid colours on the inside. The balustrades are an oddly straight, floral pattern though, not particularly Stirling-esque at all.



The original building to which Stirling's creation is attached has some of the most amazing rustication I have ever seen.

Some of which is the result of shelling and street fighting at the end of the second world war. When I was in Berlin in the mid 1990's quite a few buildings still bore extensive bullet hole damage, most of which appears to have been repaired these days.



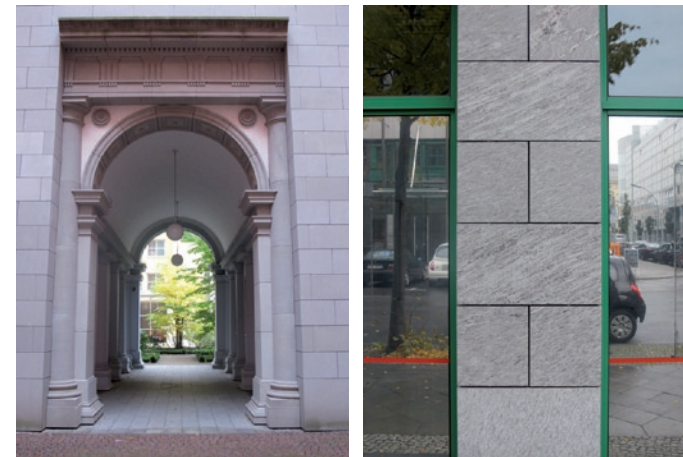
From Stirling I took a walk to Mitte, the area where most of the IBA's 1980's housing blocks congregate. This is a veritable architectural zoo and there are buildings by OMA, Peter Eisenman, Aldo Rossi (above), Herman Hertzberger, John Hejduk and Zaha Hadid amongst others. Many of these have been described thoroughly and extremely well on the now sadly quiet Architecture in Berlin blog.



The picture above is one of two Rossi buildings that are within a couple of streets of each other. I was a big fan of Rossi as a student, especially of his early miserabilist phase. I still am

really and this block isn't wholly awful with Rossi caught somewhere between the bleak melancholy of his early work and the later slightly distressing attempts at overt jolliness.

It occupies an entire Berlin block and attempts to appear as a random assortment of different buildings. Although this conceit is pursued pretty thoroughly, it only ever really appears as a number of Rossi buildings butting up against each other.



A number of courtyards are carved out of the centre and take on different characteristics. This one is pretty straight classicism though, albeit with a couple of not particularly exciting mannerist touches.

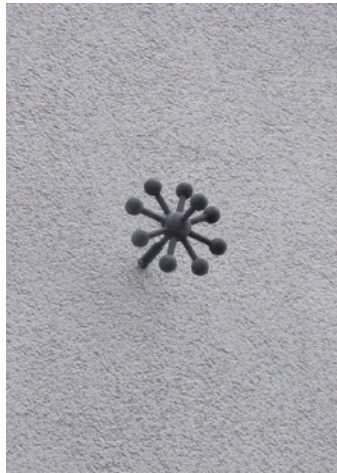
The stone cladding has been cut with a disconcerting diagonal grain making it look oddly unreal, more like a pastel rendering of granite blocks rather than the real thing. At ground level it is a bit grim it has to be said.



Very early Zaha. The renders for this – much reproduced and discussed when I were a nipper – showed a billowing, semi-translucent blue facade which on reality turns out to be a slightly cranked one clad in dirty gold panels that may or may not be a nod to nearby Scharoun.

ZHA's work has become so vastly overblown and didactic since this point that it's almost impossible to imagine her working on anything as humdrum as some kitchen layouts. Here, though, the obvious constructivist borrowings were still being applied to a relatively mundane programme and seem all the better for it.





I was happy to see that the campaign (by Jim at Architecture in Berlin, amongst others) to save John Hejduk's housing from a fate worse than demolition has been largely successful. The two low blocks have been carefully refurbished and repainted in the correct gloomy shade of green. The gable end 'faces' still stare out lugubriously from behind their hooded lids.

The odd, enigmatic spandrels fixed through the facade have also been retained.



The central skinny tower is still yet to be refurbished and much effort is being made with the Dulux colour swatch.

Backing onto the Hejduk plot is a very hard to place building by the late Raymond Abraham, a favourite of Kenneth Frampton and supposed Critical Regionalist. The street frontage is a strange, neo-constructivist composition...

...while the rear – visible from the garden of the Hejduk buildings – contains a much more straightforwardly modernist, curving courtyard.



A late '80's avant-garde collision occurs at the crossroads that used to be known as Checkpoint Charlie. OMA and



Peter Eisenman's blocks stand on either side from each other. Neither building has been regarded subsequently as high points of their authors' careers, although I have a soft spot for OMA's, particularly as it features a bit of that Memphis derived fauz marble patterning that they used to use.

Eisenman is doing his whole twisted grid thing of course, the effect somewhat diminished due to the cancellation of a park/remembrance garden that was to be constructed as an extension of the block's geometry behind.



Both buildings are also victims of circumstance. Much of the logic of OMA's has been lost now that the ground floor parking and turning area for allied vehicles has been filled in with supermarkets.



From the area around Friedrichstrasse I wandered towards Potsdamer Platz, which contained almost no buildings at all when I was last here. Now it hosts the enormously horrible Sony Centre and a predictably nasty glass tower by Helmut Jahn. The success of architects like Jahn is a mystery to me. I've yet to meet anyone who rates him, so who commissions this stuff? The architecture around Potsdamer Platz flits between a blingy, commercial vacuity – International Westfield Moderne you could call it – and a worthy, sombre modernism.

Some of the more interesting buildings in the middle seem to be searching for the missing link between early New York or Chicago and Stalin era Soviet Realism, a very Berlin kind of meeting point I guess between early modernism and its aftermath. I've no idea who designed these two but they mine a very current seam in European architecture of a stripped back modernism with classical inflections, the kind of architecture that seems eminently suitable for European banks and expensive but tasteful hotels. Appropriately enough the one on the left is the Ritz Carlton.



These two towers epitomise the two tendencies perfectly. On the left is one of Renzo Piano's offering (of which more later) and on the right is Hans Kolhoff's very '30's NYC skyscraper. I liked the latter a lot, particularly the Alvar Aalto at MIT trick of mixing in 'bad' overfired bricks to give a subtle textuality to the precision brickwork in general.

The more I wandered around Kolhoff's building the more I admired it. I'd go so far as to say it is the best new building I saw in Berlin which is no doubt a staggeringly unfashionable thing to say. I've no idea about Kolhoff's current standing but fifteen years ago he was a big cheese, someone who, along with Joseph Kleihues – the director of the IBA during the 1980's – shaped the way that Berlin was rebuilt after the cold war, much to the annoyance of more obviously progressive architects. Anyway, this building is very finely proportioned, beautifully built and has a nice moment of bling on the top with a gold, pointy parapet.



Back to Piano, who must be the most second most overrated architect in the world, after Rafael Viñoly. Berlin seems to have escaped Viñoly but, boy, has it suffered from the hand of Renzo. His work around Potsdamer Platz is truly dreadful, an incoherent mess of vomit coloured, terracotta clad overstuffed blocks that together seem to suck the life out of the city.



The architecture is both incredibly fussy and strangely devoid of character, all clipped on panels and extraneous pieces of fiddly flim-flam that fail to make up for an obvious underlying blandness. Nothing quite fits together either.



The streets by the mall are almost all back-of-house access for retail units, creating an arse-end urban landscape of grilled up openings and very little else. Slightly more dispiriting than the blasted cold war no-man's land that existed here before.

This happens a lot too, where blocks arranged at slight angles to one another create odd alleyways to nowhere...



...or to private inner sanctums that need to be roped off.



It's very strange, this architecture of polite banality combined with bombastic commercialism. You could say that Piano is trying hard to humanise a demanding commercial brief but that wouldn't explain the all round awfulness of the architecture. The fact that the tallest building is topped off with an illuminated sign for the fucking Blue Man Group says it all really...

Insultingly, the building adjacent to Hans Scharoun's magnificent library fuses his gold cladding panels AND Piano's interminable terracotta tiles to spectacularly ill-advised effect.

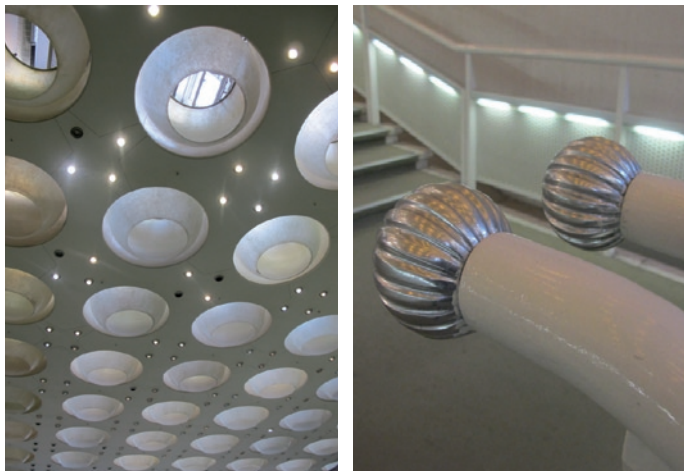


Bob Evans once said that one of Scharoun's great virtues was his lack of taste. He was spot on. Scharoun's buildings have very little in the way of decorum or restraint. In fact, they are exceptionally bling: gold cladding, stained glass, perforated metal balustrades, space-age light scoops and pistachio green carpets jostle together within a space that is more landscape than interior.

As if to prove Evans' point, the rather outre balustrade finials are modelled on the shape of Terry's Chocolate Orange.

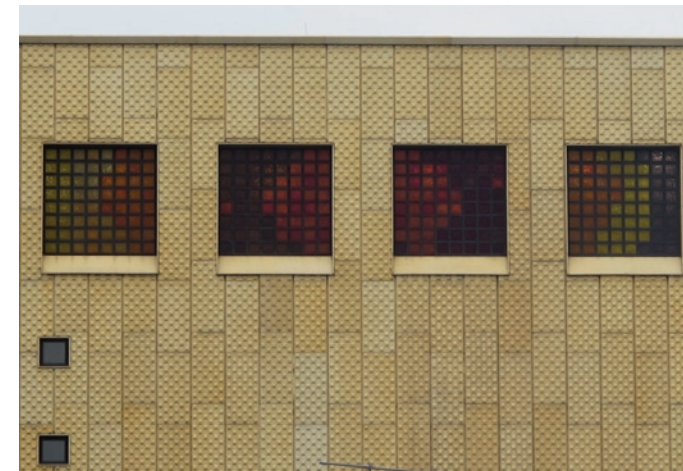


The building's sheer spatial generosity is overwhelming, as is the intensity of stuff going on. Lights come in every conceivable format: hanging, recessed, globular, chandelier, coloured glass, florescent strip and backlit kitchen sink.



A rather un-heroic shot which nonetheless has an exciting mission-control-under-refurbishment air to it. There is simply so much space in this building that you get the impression no one knows quite what to do with much of it and so patches lie dormant or act as informal repositories for obsolescent library equipment.

Another shot which could have been of a set designed by Ken Adam for a megolamiacal Bond villain. Ordinarily, this wouldn't necessarily be a compliment in my book but there's something about the fact that Sharoun achieves this level of brilliance in casually un-showy ways that seduces.



Back outside, the dimpled gold cladding is still like nothing else in Berlin. Except Sharoun's other building, the Berlin Philharmonic Concert Hall, which I didn't get to go into and which sits across the road. The Philharmonic, with its epicly complex circulation systems and brilliantly bonkers section, was originally clad in something much more pragmatic than gold panels. These were only added in the 1980's when much of Scharoun's work around the Kulturforum was finally completed.

After Scharoun I headed to Mitte to see some *adopts Kevin McCloud voice* Exciting Contemporary Architecture. In this case it was Arno Brandlhuber's studio and gallery on



Brunnenstrasse. Built on the site of a failed development and accepting the constraints of the existing basement and lift shaft, the building is an urbane riff on local building and planning laws, exploiting the site for all its worth and turning this into a sardonic architectural syntax.

The language is neo-Brutalist, bare concrete and industrial materials used in an artfully as-found manner. There are some nicely disconcerting spaces inside including the one above offering a sharply angled view up to pedestrians on the pavement. There is also a somewhat inexplicable chrome Barcelona Pavilion column in the office space to remind you that you can never escape the shadow of Mies...



Mies's Neue Nationalgalerie lies across a wide street from Scharoun and with Stirling's miniature collage city sticking up a candy coloured finger in the background.

I'm never quite sure what to make of Mies. I love the Barcelona Pavilion with its exquisite surfaces, myriad reflections and complex symmetries and the staggering purity and indifference to circumstance of the Farnsworth House is admirable. In the case of the Nationalgalerie though, I am usually left admiring the epic uselessness of the space, the fact that Mies invented a modernist language of solemnity and grandeur that is given full such reign here that to describe it as a gallery or to go there intending to look at art seems to be missing the point entirely.

Its use of space is mind blowing. Almost nothing happens in the upper part that is generally considered to be, you know, the building. Instead, Mies' vast abstract walls of marble and wood sail serenely across acres of space beneath the deep, dark grid of the ceiling. Below ground are the galleries and a sort of sunken, corporate atrium. The bookshop is tiny, completing the buildings lofty disregard for mere corporeal concerns.

Its scale and indifference to site, the way it removes itself from the city and settles behind hedges, manicured lawns and, of course, the granite plaza, is also very American and corporate and, in a strange sort of way, rather suburban. Or at least non-urban.

At the back is a slightly unsung, deeply sunk sculpture court.



Finally, I trekked out to the Olympic Stadium on a particularly glum late afternoon, following a small trickle of visitors.

The stadium itself is a bludgeoning, parade ground piece of shock and awe. Everything – floors, walls, ceilings, sculptures and totemic clock towers – is made of the same material, a porridge-brown limestone that absorbs light and looks like a computer render of ancient Rome.

It is an utterly relentless and intimidating piece of architecture, as you might imagine. Expressively it inhabits the strange neo-medievalism of dungeons and dragons and certain bits of science fiction: faux flaming torches and vast fortress like steel doors which have a kind of primitism that echoes the brute force of the building's planning. In amongst all this are



incongruous bits of well-meaning, contemporary signage.

The stadium's current status is highly ambiguous. It is a working stadium – home to Hertha Berlin football club – as well as a museum about the 1936 games and a relic of the National Socialist era. So, information boards detailing Hitler's close involvement in the design sit alongside signage for the hospitality suites in the same way that the jaunty, high tech roof structure perches on the vast stone colosseum below.

In the Marathon Gate – the only break in the stadium's relentless oval ring – sits the bronze bowl for the Olympic flame, a ceremony that was revived for the '36 Berlin games. On the day that I visited a man was selling corporate golf days and idly whacking balls down the vast steps to the running track.





The park in which the stadium sits also contains the former 1916 games stadium which for 1936 was turned into a parade ground. It is looked over by two enormous equestrian statues in the Nazi romantic-realist style and a stripped classical column adorning Hitler's personal grand stand.

Two further towers – one supporting a clock and the other a swastika – mark the edge of the grounds...

...where heroic, naked Aryans are depicted flinging discus and pole vaulting.



The Olympic pool lies off to another side of the park and appears to be in working order. The top tier of stands were removed after the games but it's still an impressive if desolate looking structure. By this point the sun was going down and a beer in the reassuringly unchanged Kapelle bar in Prenzlauer Berg loomed, so I off headed towards the huge S-Bahn station that was also built for the games.

Once there, over the tree tops, loomed Le Corbusier's Unité, which I failed to find the entrance to. It was time to leave. ■

