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**The American Impact on Western Europe:
Americanization and Westernization in Transatlantic Perspective**

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Peter Krieger
The Americanization of West German Architecture

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[ill. 1: stamp "50 Jahre Marshall-Plan", Federal Republic of Germany]

Stamps are one of the most successful mass media of visual communication and cultural memory. This stamp, edited in 1997, reminded the German citizens of a heritage which reflects the contradictory transatlantic relation with the United States. During World War II, allied forces bombed the cities of Nazi Germany; after the war, the Marshall Plan essentially helped West Germany recover from this serious damage. Fifty years after the Marshall Plan, collective memory, on both sides, the German and the US-American, may recover the importance of city and architecture planning in the political processes. While now, after the definitive end of cold war, city production faces other problems like the loss of spatial identity caused by global, and in many cases "American" enterprise, the study of the early postwar period reveals the important role of architectural mass education. Those bombed out German citizens, who received new apartments sponsored by the Marshall Plan, did understand the message, that every political system must be legitimated by its concrete living conditions. In the specific German cold war confrontations of the systems, architecture and urban planning have reached high symbolic importance, probably more than today. So the Marshall Plan stamp may invite us to a retrospective of US-American influences, economic and aesthetical, in German postwar architecture.



[ill. 2: Aerial view of the city of Hamburg, Neustadt with St. Nicolai, 1929; photograph taken from Ulrich Bauche: Flug über Hamburg. Einst und jetzt. Hamburg (o.J.)]

The city of Hamburg, after the "operation Gomorra", a systematic bombing of British and US-American air forces in 1943, radically changed its urban and architectural structure.² When, only a few months after the war had ended, Hamburg planners debated about the outlines of future reconstructions, two positions stood against each other: the

modernization, equated with Americanization, focussed in the skyscraper building type; and, the recovery of prewar structures. The latter position, explained by one of the Hamburg preservationists had certain anti-American connotations. "There is a great danger, that our city will be americanized, that our city's face will appear like any other metropolis." Aware of the New York images which

fascinated generations all through the 20th century, the preservationist warned: "The big concrete structures will cause the horrible danger of getting an American outfit and not the one we like to have."³

This quote from a crucial situation of postwar urban planning in Hamburg exemplifies a typical, and contradictory habit towards US-American architecture in Germany.⁴ A certain fascination for New York skyscrapers was not effective enough against romantic desires of reconstructing old German town structures.



[ill. 3: Aerial view of the city of Hamburg, Neustadt with ruin of St. Nikolai and Hamburg-Süd office building, 1971; photograph taken from Ulrich Bauche: Flug über Hamburg. Einst und jetzt. Hamburg (o.J.)]

If we compare the aerial views of 1929, and here of 1971, we can detect an object of anxiety and affirmation, which affected the debates on US-American influences on West German city reconstruction. Focusing on the thin slab with green glass curtain wall, vis-a-vis the church ruin (point of orientation during the bombing of 1943), we see a pure application of modern architectural principles as

elaborated by the big US-American architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), and by the German emigrant Mies van der Rohe, materialized in Lever House and Seagram Building, both constructed in the 1950s at Park Avenue in New York.⁵



[ill. 4: City of Hamburg, office building Hamburg-Süd; photograph by Peter Krieger, 1990 (copyright by author)]

The building of the shipping company "Hamburg Süd", like no other architectural structure in Hamburg, contains the controversial symbolic meanings of postwar "Americanization". The architect, Cäsar Pinnau, was interior designer of Hitler's new chancellery in Berlin before the war, and architect of business men like Dr. Oetker and Onasis after the war. For his Hamburg client, Pinnau travelled to New York and Chicago to study the new monuments of postwar "International Style". Study trips were a very important, though elitist (for the high cost), way of cultural transfer between the two countries. I have argued elsewhere, that these study trips, and the more, there public reports in West Germany have fostered a naive reception of US-American architectural trends, mainly reduced to skyscraper admiration. A former Nazi-architect was made responsible for one of the most striking symbolic representations of the so called "economic miracle", using a

model from the culturally most influential occupying power in West Germany, the US.⁶

The Pinnau case may contain specific conditions, but reflects a general tendency of "Americanizing" West German architecture, a type of cultural transfer not only reduced to the architects' discussion circles.



[ill. 5: skyscraper skyline at night, scene from a film which promoted atomic energy in the United States in the 1950s]

The collective imagination of modernity expressed by New York-skyscraper skylines, has a long tradition in Germany, so that architectural re-education could be based on visual (and cultural) experiences. If we recall a wider frame of German cultural history, the modern illuminated skyline of the Metropolis seems like a logical continuation of gothic feelings watching the monlighted mountains. Threatened and fascinated -- like romantic mountain spectators of the late 18th century -- were many postwar contemporaries of popular information material like this film which tried to promote atomic energy. The skyscrapers were illuminated thanks to a technology which, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had claimed its absolute destructive potential.



[ill. 6: transmission of electric energy at night, scene from a film which promoted atomic energy in the United States in the 1950s]

But here, the spectators are shown the civil use of letal war tecnology: Electric energy for the metropolis enlighting is transferred from the Atomic Power Plant.



[ill. 7: Atomic Power Plant, scene from a film which promoted atomic energy in the United States in the 1950s]

The design of the power plant displayed here in the US-american propagandistic film of the 1950s, probably is less important than the effect which the debates about atomic energy and their military use had on the postwar urban planning proposals. Brightened up urban spaces with highrise buildings were considered as the best "proteccion" against areal atomic attacks in a virtual third World War. This was exactly the opposite of the dense urbanization scheme in New York, which also displayed the film and many other popular brochures about modern US-American culture. The consequences of the "Manhattan project" requiered a dissolution of the city's space.



[ill. 8: announcement of the film "Metropolis" in France, designed by Boris Bilinsky, 1927]

A brief flashback to the classical collective image of the metropolis,⁷ Fritz Lang's film of 1927, explains the contradictions between the iconic power of dense skyscraper accumulation in New York and the continuing German myth of the isolated tower. Already in the 1920s, German architects admired the US-American skyscraper, but criticized their dense urban accommodation caused by economic imperatives. Nearly all

skyscraper debates in Germany, until today, reflect such motives. One of the most prominent West German urban planners of the 1950s, Rudolf Hillebrecht, claimed, that the New York skyline is fascinating but no example for German cities, because it expressed a commercial spirit opposite to community values.



[ill. 9: New York City, Chase Manhattan Bank, by SOM / Gordon Bunshaft, 1961]

Not until the Manhattan skyscraper landscape was opened with a new scheme of urban accommodation of architectural volumes -- the rectangular slab situated in an open space to the street -- West German reception of US-American leitmotives was effective. But the United Nations-Building, Lever House, and here: Chase Manhattan Bank, introduced new standards which strongly influenced West German architectural aesthetic of progress.⁸ The design of 1955 from Gordon Bunshaft / SOM restructured Downtown Manhattan with a plaza setting for the transparent slab. The visual and spatial revolution, promoted as urban renewal, was received in West Germany with high attention. A German exhibition catalogue of SOM,⁹ published in 1962 poetically described the new qualities: in the introduction, the author stresses that the mountains of skyscrapers in downtown Manhattan are more striking than the overwhelming natural aesthetics of Niagra falls or Grand Canyon; but nothing compared to the new shining, reflecting, rational appearance of Chase Manhattan Bank which raises

between the old ornamented highrise buildings. It was this type of urban change which West German planners could integrate in their vision of the brightened up postwar urban landscape - without neglecting the eternal dream of the "Metropolis" New York.



[ill. 10: Leverkusen, administration building of Bayer industries, by HPP architects, 1961]

The best copies of modern US-American architecture in West Germany were made by the architect Helmut Hentrich and his team of HPP architects. Hentrich frequently travelled to the US, established close professional contacts to the US-modernists, mainly Gordon Bunshaft of SOM, and with these experiences "educated" his West German clients of business and industry to accept modern architectural representation. One of the brilliant results of this cultural transfer is the administration building of the Bayer industries in Leverkusen. Here, the new US-American architectural spirit probably occurred more "American" than anywhere else.

Already at the beginning of the 1950s, a publication of the American Institute of Architects (AIA)¹⁰ for West German readers had introduced some criteria for architectural re-education from Nazi-classicism to US-American modernism. New brightened spatial concepts and the expressive quality of modern skeleton steel and concrete buildings were praised by the authors as essentials of postwar US-American architecture. From the beginning, these qualities defined worldwide standards, the more, in West Germany, they had symbolical dimensions: prefabricated facades displayed the image of industrial recovery after severe war damage and demontage of industry. When in 1957, in the context of the West Berlin "Interbau" architectural exhibition, the Marshall House, presented a series of skyscraper models with curtain walls of glass and aluminum, a West German architectural magazine wrote, that the construction method and its aesthetic cannot deny the origins in standardized car production.¹¹

Indeed, mass production, standardization, and structural repetitions became significant elements of modern US-architecture which caused both, admiration (of efficiency) and fears (of alienation).



[ill. 11: Chicago, Lake Shore Drive Apartments, Mies van der Rohe, 1951; photograph by Peter Krieger, 1995 (copyright by author)]

Besides the "Metropolis" New York with its rich history of modern imagination, Chicago became focus of West German interest in postwar US-modernism. The presence of Mies van der Rohe obviously attracted many West German architects who hoped to recover Bauhaus-traditions as symbolic blueprints for postwar democracy.¹²

Once Mies himself had been regarded as a messia, or as a colonizer, when he began to teach his rude aesthetic principles of modern architecture at IIT in 1938. Frank Lloyd Wright ironically remarked, that Mies coming from oversea, introduced the invasion of glass boxes in the US. Later, the writer Tom Wolfe in his satirical essay from "Bauhaus to our house" expressed similar cultural criticism of a seemingly German invasion in the field of US-American

architecture with strong consequences: "The term glass boxes and repetitious, first uttered as terms of opprobrium, became badges of honor."¹³



[ill. 12: slum area in Chicago, 1965]

How these "badges of honor" also became the aesthetical tools of slum clearance projects in the US, was more than apparent in Chicago. A West German group of industrialists interested in US-American rationalization processes, who in 1954 visited Chicago, stated that almost half of the urban population would live in slums.¹⁴ Slum clearance projects inspired by the Housing act of 1949 and subsequent federal laws, changed many of these areas in bright

modern "dreams", one of them "Praerie Shores".



[ill. 13: slum clearing at Prairie Shores, Chicago, 1965]

Large housing units in modern construction and transparent outfit, accommodated in open spaces impressed the West German visitors in 1954, a time when the reconstruction boom in West Germany also used such urban and architectural models.¹⁵ The Prairie Shores project contained a series of 5 highrise buildings including almost 1,700 apartments, a shopping center, open green spaces and a large number of parking lots. Here West German architects and

investment managers found the ideal solution. -- The illustration (no. 13), which I present here, is an important historical document: it was taken by a Hamburg architect during his study trip to Chicago, and than later shown to a Hamburg audience of educational evening lectures on modern architectural tendencies in the US.¹⁶ -- Such images of new US-American middle class lifestyle also served as stage prospects for innumerable action movies of the 1950s and 60s which visually "educated" a whole postwar West German generation.



[ill. 14: US-Consulate building in Bremen, Germany, by SOM with Otto Apel, 1955, recently remodeled for commercial uses; photograph by Peter Krieger, 1998 (copyright by author)]

Apart from this visual education via lectures and movies, the citizens of Bremen, Düsseldorf, and Munich, were able to evaluate US-American modernism in the most striking manner: new consulate buildings introduced US-American construction technology and aesthetic standards. Gordon Bunshaft in collaboration

with Otto Apel (former architect of the Albert Speer staff) designed low rise office buildings with green spaces at central sites of the cities. At the same time when popular architectural taste in West Germany slowly began to incorporate the aesthetic of transparency, the US consulate buildings set new standards.¹⁷ - The West German answer in architectural representation of the state came some years later with Egon Eiermann's transparent buildings for the Brussels Expo and the West German embassy in Washington.¹⁸



[ill. 15: Amerika-Haus in West-Berlin; photograph by Peter Krieger, 1998 (copyright by author)]

An important function in American-German cultural transfer fulfilled the program of the "America houses", planned as a peaceful weapon of information in the cold war. Hugo Leipziger-Pearce¹⁹, a German born architect, who emigrated to the US, in 1950 and 1951 was one of the advisers for the architectural design of the "America houses", which had to present an image of modernity and progress in contrast to Stalinist cultural policy and

neoclassical design in East Germany.



[ill. 16: House of the teacher in East-Berlin at Alexanderplatz; photograph by Peter Krieger, 1998 (copyright by author)]

Yet, post-stalinist changes of architectural ideology in the Eastern block also introduced international style in East-Berlin. The "house of the teacher", at the beginning of the 1960s, neutralized political codes of architecture: modernism was no longer a "western" form, but a global principle. Only applications at the facades, here a thematic mural of the socialist society, versus in West-Berlin the firms' logos (like Coca Cola, Mercedes Benz, etc.), allowed political understanding of modern, functionalist architecture, once promoted in the US.



[ill. 17: Congress Hall in West-Berlin at the Reichstag, by Hugh Stubbins, 1957; photograph by Peter Krieger, 1996 (copyright by author)]

Aware of such pluralistic, even excluding interpretations, the United States donated a more specific architecture parlante to West-Berlin in 1957. Designed by the US-architect Hugh Stubbins, former student of Walter Gropius, the congress hall of Berlin with its exaggerated shell construction symbolically served as a monument of free speech next to

the urban border of East-Berlin.²⁰ The building which contains the name of Benjamin Franklin in its foundations was spectacular but lacked stability. Already during the construction, architectural experts like Frei Otto criticized the inconsequent static structure.



[ill. 18: Congress Hall in West-Berlin at the Reichstag, construction detail, by Hugh Stubbins, 1957; photograph by Peter Krieger, 1996 (copyright by author)]

In May 1980, the hall broke down and thus fulfilled all contemporary criticism. Its immediate reconstruction, with enormous costs of 50 million Deutschmarks, was the last act of political architecture documenting American-German relations

before the Berlin wall was torn down. Political representatives of both countries would not accept an architectural ruin with fatal symbolic implications.



[ill. 19: Auditorium Maximum, University of Hamburg, 1961; photograph by Peter Krieger, 1996 (copyright by author)]

Similar structures like the Auditorium Maximum of the Hamburg University, built in 1959, although less spectacular, survived sin damage. The design of the Hamburg Audimax, as well as many other shell constructions of the 1950s in West Germany, had been inspired by the Kresge Auditorium at MIT, a design of Eero Saarinen in 1954. But also this striking form of "Americanization" had its

parallels in Eastern Germany, especially in the Hanseatic city of Rostock. So, we have to state a certain dissolution of political references to modern architectural forms. The more, if we take the "Americanization" in its full geographical and cultural complexity, we must include Latin America, especially Mexico, a country of architectural avantgarde in shell buildings.

It is not only my present engagement at the Mexican University²¹ which makes me widen the bi-national frame of cultural transfers, and the dominant role of the US in these processes. Felix Candela, a Spanish emigrant in Mexico was able to experiment with light shell structures before he imported them to the US, and then to Europe.²² A fast flow of information via architectural magazines and study trips, allows almost arbitrary exchanges and connotations of architectural forms.



[ill. 20: Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, 1997]

At present, large scale commercial projects like shopping malls, are the most successful type of US-American architectural exportation. But also the most striking signature architecture, which has to compensate the cultural standardization of the neoliberal world, is made in the USA. Like no other architect, Frank Gehry's work is present in architectural magazines, and of course, in many cities, like here Bilbao. Corporate Identity via spectacular, but not specific regional or national architecture:

this is the US-American lesson of today, which has no more special relations to Germany, like in the early postwar period. At the definitive end of the cold war remains only a business superstructure. Thus, it may seem reasonable, that the US government in post cold war Germany closes "America houses" as well as the very significant consulate buildings, and sell them to private investors.²³

Footnotes:

- ¹ This article for internet publication contains a reduced number of bibliographical references. For further information please consult my article "Learning from America: Postwar Urban Recovery in West Germany." in: Heide Fehrenbach / Uta Poiger (eds.): *The Challenge of American Mass Culture*. (will be published soon by Berghan Press). I would like to thank the organizers of the Americanization / Westernization conference and all members of the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., and especially Prof. Carol Krinsky, New York University, for her advice and hospitality.
- ² Peter Krieger, "Germany Reconstructed? Destroyed Postwar City-Scapes as 'Witnesses' for Collective Memories.", in: *Arte y Violencia*. (XVIII Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte), Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM. (México, D.F. 1995), pp. 31 - 58.
- ³ Quote by Dr. Stierling in a postwar debate on preservation in Hamburg; see Hamburgisches Staatsarchiv, Bestand Denkmalschutzamt, Nr. 32; translation by Peter Krieger.
- ⁴ Dietrich Neumann, "*Die Wolkenkratzer kommen!*" *Deutsche Hochhäuser der zwanziger Jahre. Debatten, Projekte und Bauten*. (Braunschweig, Wiesbaden, 1995).
- ⁵ Peter Krieger, "Types, Definitions, Myths and Ideologies of US-American Modernity in West Germany after 1945" in *Arte, Historia e Identidad en América: Visiones Comparativas*, ed. Gustavo Curiel, Renato González Mello, Juana Gutierrez Haces (México, D.F. 1994), vol. III, 829-40; see also my doctoral dissertation published in the internet: "*Wirtschaftswunderlicher Wiederaufbau-Wettbewerb*": *Architektur und Städtebau der 1950er Jahre in Hamburg*. <http://www.sub.uni-hamburg.de/disse/13/inhalt.html>, chapter X, pp. 158-206.
- ⁶ See footnote 2.
- ⁷ *Metropolis*, director: Fritz Lang, story: Thea von Harbou, film-architects: Otto Hunte, Erich Kettelhut, Karl Vollbrecht; see Dietrich Neumann (ed.): *Filmarchitektur. Von Metropolis bis Blade Runner*. (München 1996), p. 94.
- ⁸ Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill*. (Cambridge/Mass, London, 1988).
- ⁹ *Architecture of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1950-1962*, (Stuttgart 1962), p. 14.
- ¹⁰ Mary Mix, *Amerikanische Architektur seit 1947*, AIA, 1952.
- ¹¹ *Bauwelt* 38/1958, p. 1017
- ¹² Peter Krieger: "Spiegelnde Curtain walls als Projektionsflächen für politische Schlagbilder." In: Hermann Hipp, Ernst Seidl (Ed.): "*Philosophia Practica*" - *Architektur als politische Kultur*. (Berlin 1996), p.297-310
- ¹³ Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to our House*. New York 1982, p.65.
- ¹⁴ Rationalisierungs-Kuratorium der Deutschen Wirtschaft (RKW), Auslandsdienst, *Bauen in USA. Reisebericht einer deutschen Studiengruppe* (= Heft 22), (München, 1954)
- ¹⁵ *Neue Heimat Monatshefte* 5/1964, p. 44.
- ¹⁶ Archives of Arthur Dähn, Hamburgisches Architekturarchiv.
- ¹⁷ Ron Robin, *Enclaves of America. The Rhetoric of American Political Architecture Abroad. 1900 - 1965* (Princeton 1992). Recently edited: Jane C. Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy. Building America's Embassies*. (New York 1998).
- ¹⁸ *Architectural Forum* 6/1958; *Bauwelt* 31/1958, p.755.

- ¹⁹ Hugo Leipziger-Pearce, born in 1902 in Breslau (today Wroclaw), died in 1998 in Austin, Texas. His archives holds the Deutsches Architektur Museum, Frankfurt/Main; see obituary in *Der Architekt* 10/1998, p.537.
- ²⁰ Heinrich Wefing, "Eine zerbrechliche Freundschaft." In: *Der Architekt* 10/1998, pp. 554-557.
- ²¹ Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, and Facultad de Arquitectura, División de Estudios de posgrado, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- ²² Colin Faber, *Candela: The Shell Builder*. (New York, London 1963).
- ²³ The Bremen consulate building now serves international trade firms; the Düsseldorf consulates closed in 1992, and was in 1998 remodeled for the office uses of a big lawyer firm, by the architects Ingenhoven, Overdiek, Kahlen und Partner. Symbolic representation of Corporate America in cold war contexts now are smoothly redefined for business purposes.