

## The open Block

### Careful design strategies of the Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin 1984-87<sup>1</sup>

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After the Second World War, many European cities faced with the need for urban reconstruction. Particularly in Berlin, a city not only destroyed, but also divided by a wall for almost thirty years, urban reconstruction was a remarkable issue and aroused international interest.

The earliest reconstruction plans of the Fifties and Sixties, both in West and East Berlin, were based on the principles of the Modern Movement and ignored the compact tissue of the historical Berlin consisting of streets, squares and urban blocks. The latter, basic components of Berlin's fabric in the Baroque expansions as well as in the Hobrecht plan of 1862, experienced with the earliest post-war reconstructions the most acute phase of a crisis that had already begun at the end of the 19th century and was strongly affected by modernist criticism. The first reconstruction plans envisaged that much of the nineteenth-century fabric would be demolished and replaced by new buildings, even where it was not razed to the ground by the bombs. Already in the Seventies, though, the working class opposed these initiatives, claiming the restoration of the historical buildings and obstructing, with their occupation, the ordinances that foresaw the displacement of their inhabitants in the peripheral *Großsiedlungen*. Such spontaneous and rebellious episodes were the earliest ones, after decades of criticism, in which the Berlin block was defended and not rejected. Alongside, from the Seventies onwards also some architects began to show skepticism against the policy of demolition and to reflect on the potential of Berlin's historical fabric as well as on the need for its recovery.

Within this background, in 1979, the Internationale *Bauausstellung* (IBA) was organized in West Berlin. The exhibition, inaugurated in 1987, aimed to restore proper living conditions in the city center and to recover the urban identity compromised by bombings and demolitions. To fulfill the aim, both the restoration of damaged buildings and the reconstruction of the destroyed historical fabric were planned. Due to this duplicity of objectives the IBA was organized into two minor subgroups: IBA *Altbau*, directed by H.-W. Hämer and responsible for the urban renewal of the *Luisenstadt* and SO36 areas in *Kreuzberg*, and IBA *Neubau*, guided by J. P. Kleihues, which worked

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on the reconstruction of four different areas of Berlin: *Tegel Hafen*, southern *Tiergartenviertel*, southern *Friedrichstadt* and *Präger Platz*.

The urban block played a key role for the IBA, both as an object of renovation for the *Altbau* sector and as a reference for new projects of the *Neubau* one. The present research focuses on the blocks designed by the IBA *Neubau*, projects developed assuming the features of the historical typology as reference point. The IBA aimed to reconcile tradition and modernity. As long as the layout and height of the historic blocks were respected, architects could design according to their own tastes and the built outcomes of the IBA show various morphological solutions, styles and materials. Even modernism was not ignored, although its urban principles were not shared by the organizers of the exhibition. In some IBA blocks, indeed, modern languages were used, while in others morphological solutions, such as bars and towers, were integrated within the block itself.

The research analyses ideas, processes and, of course, projects of the IBA *Neubau*. The redrawing and graphical analysis of the latter represent a remarkable aspect of the work, which aims to clarify the design criteria of the IBA. For example, to highlight the extent to which the traditional block was actually taken as a reference. As a necessary prerequisite for a critical understanding of this aspect, the research traces the most important stages in the historical development of the Berlin block, focusing in particular on the nineteenth-century one assumed as major reference by the IBA.

Beyond the specific features of each project, it can be noticed that the IBA blocks define spaces differently from the traditional typology. IBA blocks are indeed more open. The reason of that lies sometimes in the fact that they are the partial and incomplete outcome of a project of restoration of the whole perimeter of the historical block. In many cases, however, the openness of the block was a design choice that brought further a process of opening already started with the porous reform blocks of the early twentieth century, where communication between courtyard and street was not prevented, yet desired.

Far from providing a mere defense of the IBA, the research sees its critical reconstruction as a transient phase in the urban development of Berlin which began, although not without errors and weaknesses, a process of recovery of the urban block whose importance was acknowledged also out of German borders and that served as model for following reconstructions, beginning with the *Planwerk Innenstadt* in the unified Berlin of the Nineties.