

Normalization and Constraint

Socio-Spatial Constellations at the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz
in Berlin

Lars Frers, December 2002

frers@zedat.fu-berlin.de

http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~frers/norm_space.html

This text is an abbreviated version of my presentation at the biannual congress of the German Sociological Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie) held in October 2002. The presentation in turn is based on the study that I conducted in 2001 to gain my Diploma in sociology at the Freie Universität Berlin.

The text is published under the Creative Commons License (2.5 ncsa)

Contents

Introduction	3
The Site	3
Observations.....	5
Wrapping Up	10
References.....	10

Introduction

In this text I want to get involved in space and the materiality of a concrete place. The site of my explorations is the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, itself part of the Potsdamer Platz area in Berlin. The focus of my study is to look at the interactions between the concrete shape of a space, the characteristics of objects and their surfaces, and the actions of people.¹ This study does not deal much with discourse in general. Instead of talking about the planning of the Potsdamer Platz area, the intentions of investors, architects and politicians, the history, and the abundant stories produced about this place, I directly delve into the physical and social aspects of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz. These aspects are captured in an essayistic account and an evaluation of the observations I made in the Potsdamer Platz area (due to space limitations there is only room for a single map). By proceeding in this way, I want to recreate a feeling for some of the qualities of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz; qualities people experience while moving through time and space in this particular urban location. To avoid phenomenological entanglement in the immediateness of this place, I confront part of my observations with theoretical concepts of space. These confrontations in turn allow for the reconstruction of certain socio-spatial constellations characterizing the production of space and human action in this place.

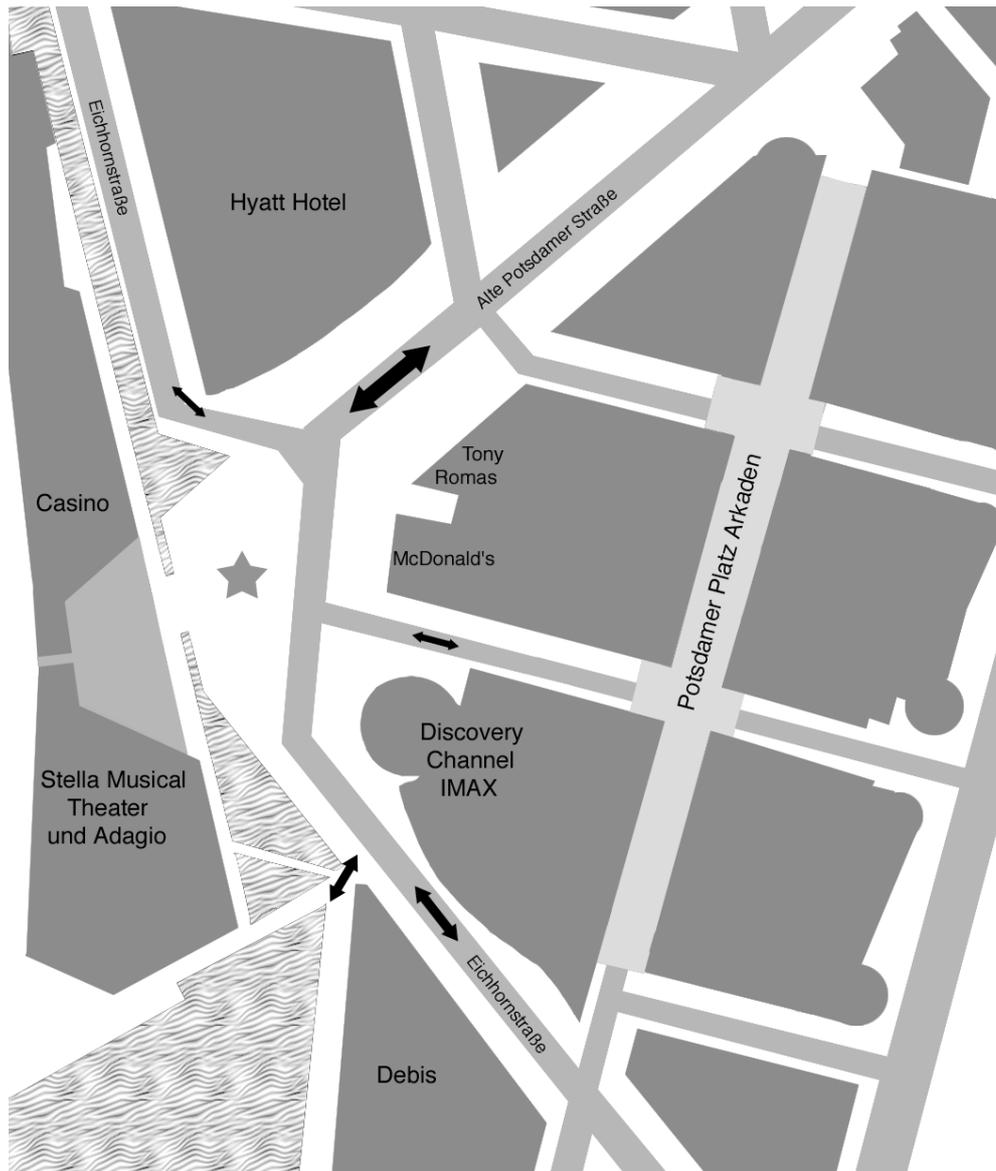
The Site

The Potsdamer Platz occupies a distinct area in the central district of Berlin, called Mitte. The borders of this area are defined by several spaces that divide the Potsdamer Platz from the rest of the city: To the south the Landwehr canal; to the west the Kulturforum with its large open spaces; the Tiergarten park to the northwest; to the northeast and east a few housing units are distributed between government and office buildings. Since getting to the Potsdamer Platz is not a matter of walking out of an apartment and around a few blocks, one can describe this area as being *insular* and not

1 Two years after publishing this text I stumbled upon an interesting link to a page on which Michael Pryke of the Open University offers an intriguing montage of video clips, sounds, and pictures portraying the atmosphere of the Potsdamer Platz. His montage and the accompanying text are inspired by Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre+, '96).

directly embedded into the surrounding city. For most people getting to the Potsdamer Platz requires them to take either subway (U- or S-Bahn), bus or car. The major exception to this rule are tourists coming from Mitte and the Brandenburg Gate area.

The Marlene-Dietrich-Platz itself is part of the newly built Quartier DaimlerChrysler south of the Neue Potsdamer Straße and southwest of the actual intersection called Potsdamer Platz. The map shows the immediate surroundings of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz. The Platz itself marks the end of the major axis leading to it (the Neue Potsdamer Straße). The surrounding streets lead into the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, which is formed like a shallow bowl that descends to the casino and the musical theater.



I conducted my observations in May and June 2001 as a participant observer, jotting down detailed notes about what I saw and heard and about how I felt in the setting. Additionally, I also made less systematic observations before and after this period. During this time I have observed many people walking onto the Platz, both in groups or alone, slowly losing momentum while trying to orient themselves and deciding where to go or what to actually do there.

Observations

Entering the setting at the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz is a process of critical importance. During the time it takes to walk from the streets into the relatively open space, people will perform a tentative approximation of what they can do at this place under the then present circumstances. Several components will influence this process; many of them are fleeting and highly context sensitive. What people will perceive as options depends on where they came from and what their intentions are for going here. It depends on the time of day, the weather, the number of people present at this location, and on the actions of others. However, some perceptions present themselves with a high degree of constancy, most of them related to the physical structure of this place and to the social activities that are produced in the nearby facilities (i.e. shopping, staying in a hotel, gambling in the casino, eating at Mc Donald's, or going to one of the movie theaters). In the following paragraph, I will present some examples describing this process of orientation, and I will show how the resulting actions are influenced by the setup of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, thereby reconstructing spatialized hierarchies and exclusions.

What are the visible options at this location? As mentioned above, 'just walking through' is not possible because of the dead end nature of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz. One option would be to take one's time and stay at this place for a while, delaying the decision about how to proceed. If this is the case or if one wants to watch what is going on in this famous, central, and supposedly public space (which actually is private property belonging to DaimlerChrysler – with the exception of the Alte Potsdamer Straße), a difficulty arises: There is no place to rest. There are no benches at the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, and the stairway which leads down from the streets to the Platz has steps that are only a few centimeters high. The absence of benches and the low height of the steps practically prohibit resting. Only under specific conditions constellations arise in which people will actually rest here: One has to be physically able enough to do this, one should not care much about sitting on the ground, and the weather has to be warm and dry enough. There are several bodies of water surrounding the western part of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz (see map). These, however, do not offer a place to rest for most people. Unlike many fountains in public spaces, the water here is not in a walled basin, allowing people to sit on the wall. Instead the basin is lowered down into the ground. The height of the water level is such that one's shoes will get soaked if one sits with the lower legs dangling in the basin. Therefore resting is not an easy path to take through time and space at this particular location. Instead, other

things vie for attention and events are taking place that do not present as many obstacles for participation.



With the exception of offices and some housing the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz as part of the Potsdamer Platz is part of an urban entertainment center. There are many possibilities for consuming commercially produced entertainment in the multiplex movie theaters, the musical theater, the casino, or in one of the PR stores that are located here, for example the Swatch store at the Alte Potsdamer Straße, as well as PR stores belonging to Sony and Volkswagen on the other side of the Neue Potsdamer Straße. Other possibilities are going to one of the restaurants spanning the range from fast food to haute cuisine, shopping in the mall-like Potsdamer Platz Arkaden, or marveling at the (at least for the state of affairs in Berlin) uncommon and exclusive architecture. In combination, the physical and social design of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz creates a *subtle hierarchy of actions*; actions that are fitting for this place while others are problematic and *illegitimate actions* under the present circumstances. This hierarchy is related to what Pierre Bourdieu describes as ‘Ortseffekte’ (‘effects of place,’ my translation) in the short text bearing the same title (Bourdieu, '97). In this article he writes that in a hierarchically organized society space itself will be appropriated according to and representing these hierarchies. Whereas Bourdieu is focusing on symbolic hierarchies I want to further the understanding of the production and reproduction of what is legitimate by looking at the concrete and material aspects of space.

From my perspective, one aspect of the observations was perhaps the most surprising: I never saw security personnel taking action at the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz. In other areas, even those close by, like the Potsdamer Platz Arkaden or the Sony Center directly north of the Quartier DaimlerChrysler, I several times witnessed security personnel giving people a reprimand, even though I spent much less time at

these locations. How can this be explained? Two dimensions become relevant in this context; one is the specific setup of the Potsdamer Platz area as a whole, and the other is the way visibility is produced at the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz.

The Potsdamer Platz area has some of the characteristics of what Lyn Lofland calls 'counterlocales' (Lofland, '98, 209). It is of sufficient size and has enough functional diversity to absorb an entire range of different activities and to channel them into specific directions. People can arrive by U-Bahn in the morning, to work in one of the offices, they can have lunch here, shop, eat dinner, go to the movie theater and afterwards even go to a club with a view of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz (the 'Blu'). Even if people do not perform all of these activities here, the area makes it possible to do mundane tasks, such as shopping at Aldi, while at the same time allowing for 'extras', such as entertainment.



Activities are channeled into controlled paths and they happen in controlled environments. The size and diversity of the Potsdamer Platz area *purifies* this realm of undesired activities and their traces. Lyn Lofland also calls this type of place a 'sanitized locale'. The role of sanitization and purification becomes even more evident when connected to another aspect of my observations: The one group of uniform-wearing

Observations

people that spent the largest amount of time at the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz was cleaning personnel.

The other dimension relevant for the explanation of the ‘functioning’ of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz in absence the intervention of security personnel, as mentioned above, was the production of *visibility*. The Marlene-Dietrich-Platz offers no cover. It can be watched from all sides: from people on the sidewalks, from employees in the casino, the musical theater, and the restaurants, and even from the nightclub.



At night – I observed the Platz at different times of day, thereby covering every period from dusk until 3 a.m. – the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz is illuminated from different angles; there are no dark places. As a result, everything that one does is visible

Observations

for others that are present. The Marlene-Dietrich-Platz is no Panopticon, as watching is a two-way action at this location. The only exception is area, that is observed by a visible video camera. This is the area between Mc Donald's and Tony Roma's. A stairway is leading up from the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz to the apartments that are accessible through a gated entrance from the inner courtyard of the building. In relation to the high walls to its sides the stairway produces the impression of being pressed between two high walls. It is shady and in most weather conditions there is a slight draft that makes it a somewhat cool and uncomfortable place.



The level of control achieved through this kind of visibility-enhancing design may best be illustrated by the fact that I often found myself in a constellation where I was feeling uncomfortable as an observer in this setting, i.e. as someone who does something that is not normal there and that is recognizable as being deviant by others present. When I spent an extended period of time at one location – depending on the time of day and the crowdedness of the Platz, approximately between fifteen and forty minutes – at one location, I felt more and more uncomfortable with every passing minute. Whenever I was under the impression that I had become the focus of observation for a musical theater's security employee, I always chose to leave and continue my observations somewhere else, not only to prevent getting into a conflict with security personnel, but also to prevent feeling like a weird and suspicious person.

Wrapping Up

The physical, economical, and social setup of the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz and the surrounding area co-produce constellations in which activities become ordered according to a specific hierarchy, from most preferred (spending money in one of the shopping and entertainment facilities), to tolerated (marveling at the architecture, window shopping, meeting others to do something), to deviant and illegitimate (waiting, loitering, etc.). The maintenance of order is achieved dynamically by means of a physical and symbolical purification of the observed area in combination with the production of control through visibility. It is important to note that the specific order of this place realizes itself in a fluid way. Deviation is always possible, but deviators will quickly become part of socio-spatial constellations that coerce them into a normalization of their behavior. It is obvious that security and law enforcement agencies can intervene, but in the vast majority of cases this is not necessary. People visiting and walking through spatial arrangement that is the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, flexibly manage their actions according to implicit and subtly produced rules that manifest themselves in bodily and cognitive discomfort.

References