



## 4 CANALETTO'S DRESDEN: REBUILDING A LOST URBAN IMAGE IN A TIME OF RAPID CHANGE

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The condition of contemporary cities is one of change and fleetingness. Within this condition, the image of a city and individuals' identities with that city are ephemeral qualities. As culture and commerce become increasingly independent of local and regional boundaries, there is a tendency toward homogeneity of both the social environments of cities and their spatial environments. Throughout the twentieth century in Dresden, Germany, radical transformations in ideological views and social structures have brought about dramatic transformations in the urban landscape. The process of transformation continues following the renting of the iron curtain, the re-unification of Germany, the emergence of the European Union, and increasing international exchange. Though a bit extreme, the current situation of Dresden reflects those of other cities as they struggle to define their images and identities in a time of increasing globalization of commerce and culture. As the city emerges as a competitor in the global economy, a concerted effort is being made to establish an image that is unique and readily identifiable by the residents of Dresden and by outsiders. A single painting by Canaletto has become the blueprint for that image. However, how does that time-frozen snap-shot made in the middle of the eighteenth century serve a contemporary community that is moving rapidly into the future? A closer look at both the city and the painting reveal that there is more to the picture than meets the eye.

### Twentieth Century Dresden: Waves of Sudden Change

The urban space of Dresden has been shaped by a long history of social transitions. Through earlier centuries, periods of prosperity, political prominence, social revolutions, religious revolutions, wars, bombardments, fires, and so on, resulted in a rich urban collage of spatial environments, including pre-Renaissance farm houses, narrow streets leading into plazas, broad baroque allees and palaces, and several gothic and neo-gothic churches. By the turn of the century, railroads had replaced the city walls as the demarcating line around the city core, and industry surrounded the city center which became a commercial center and the headquarters for financial institutions such as the Dresdener Bank. While National Socialism brought changes to the city, these changes were eclipsed by the events in mid-February of 1945, when three waves of allied bombers pounded the city, leaving much of the city center a smoking pile of rubble.

In the aftermath of World War II, a new social structure was established: the Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic (GDR). Some rebuilding of the historical structures was undertaken. However, other more essential needs took

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priority, in particular the need for housing. For the next four decades, the urban form was shaped primarily by mass, centrally planned housing projects, culminating in the 1980s in large high-rise blocks scattered throughout the city. Pre-war spatial patterns were often isolated from the city structure and, in many cases, removed all together. By 1989, the city had become a fragmented assortment of relatively anonymous and unconnected spaces.

For many years a larger-than-life statue of Lenin stood at the end of Prager Strasse, in the city center of Dresden. Rebuilt from scratch after the war, Prager Strasse was the showcase socialist spine of the urban space of Dresden, with gleaming white rectangular structures of ultra-human proportions. The powerful, forward thrusting likeness of Lenin dominated a vast public square which bore his name, Leninplatz. This unbounded public space was the site of mass gatherings in the time of the German Democratic Republic. Photographs show a sea of young people, many in uniform, facing the public speakers standing alongside Lenin.

Immediately following the collapse of Soviet communism and German re-unification, Lenin was sold to a very rich man, and removed from this square. The name of the square was changed back to the pre-World-War II name of Wienerplatz. Today the site is marked by a Burger King, and a large commercial building is planned to fill the empty space of the square. So begins the current social/spatial transformation of Dresden, as a sudden wave of capitalist dreams washes away years of socialist ideology. This is not a critique of value systems or political ideologies, but a story about a particular place in a time of rapid social change, including not only the renting of the Iron Curtain and the re-unification of Germany, but the emergence of the European Union, the opening up of eastern Europe, and the increasingly rapid flow of global exchange.

## Building a New Consumer Society/City

Today it appears that the symbol of Dresden is the construction crane. As in most cities in eastern Germany, Dresden is experiencing almost total reconstruction, ranging from the rebuilding of infrastructure to the renovation of the existing housing stock, along with a very large portion of new construction. Confronting construction is an accepted part of a daily routine. It can't go unnoticed, in physical space, or in social/political realms. A large room in the city hall is set aside as a permanent display of construction projects. New proposals are displayed, discussed, and even debated. The centerpiece of the display is a large, scale model of the city showing existing buildings in white and new buildings in brown. The amount of brown is roughly equal to the amount of white. Another more accessible public forum for the presentation of construction proposals and documentation of the process are the local newspapers. Almost daily appears an article about a new building project.

Between 1990 and 1997, 50 billion marks (\$32 billion) were

invested in Dresden, and the city proudly maintains the lowest unemployment rate in the eastern part of Germany. New structures pop up everywhere almost overnight, including a high percentage of speculative office buildings, financed by investors from outside the region and designed by non-local architects. Along with speculative office buildings, retail shopping facilities are dominant building types among the new projects. One report claims that four out of five new retail establishments in Dresden are now owned by chain operations. These trends are reflected in the urban spatial environment. Not only is the square where Lenin once stood now occupied by Burger King, but the entire Prager Strasse is lined with a range of shops leading to a new cluster of large multi-story department stores. The message of the advertising-adorned urban space is consumption—making money and spending money.

In addition, large discount centers have appeared suddenly at the periphery of the city, taking advantage of inexpensive land and the new mobility of the citizens afforded by the availability of automobiles. The convenience of small neighborhood oriented shops is being sacrificed for the convenience of one stop auto-oriented shopping centers. Traffic clogs the streets while recent planning decisions indicate that freeways and bridges will soon be prominent new features in the landscape. While air pollution from coal is substantially lessened, pollution from automobiles is on the rise.

A series of high-profile competitions generated design ideas intended to fill in existing gaps in Dresden's fragmented center, including an entry by artist Frank Stella. These projects are given a high priority by the local planning officials. Yet, despite the large sum of money poured into the city, many of these projects are on hold, waiting for investors, emphasizing that the shaping of Dresden's urban space, and consequently the image of the city, is largely dependent upon fast, flexible and unpredictable capital. How will this image be distinguishable from that of any other city in the region, and beyond?

## The Canaletto View

A golden statue of a man on horseback stands at the end of a tree-lined alley. The man is August der Stark. The prosperous period of the 18th century, after the Sachsen Prince, August der Stark (August the Strong), became King of Poland, was the golden era of Dresden. During this time the physical form of the baroque inner city reached its maturity. In the middle of the century, August der Stark's son and successor brought the Italian artist, Canaletto, to Dresden as the royal court painter. Canaletto's paintings remain among the most famous representations of Dresden, contributing to the likening of Dresden to Florence, Italy. For many people the image of Dresden was frozen in time with those 18th century scenes, particularly one painting which hangs in Dresden's Zwinger Gallery of Old Masters, a panoramic scene of the old city viewed from across the river (Figure 1). The view of Dresden from this vantage-point is referred to as the "Canaletto-Blick",



**Figure 1**

or Canaletto View. While the statue of Lenin was auctioned off and removed, the golden statue of August remains at the old northern entrance into the city, as construction workers rebuild the city center according to the image represented by Canaletto View.

Today a large dome-shaped form is conspicuously absent from the Canaletto View: the form of the Frauenkirche, an 18th century Protestant landmark. The beloved church, the dominant form in the skyline of Dresden for nearly 200 years, was a victim of the 1945 bombing raids. Fifty years later, the people of Dresden are rebuilding the Frauenkirche, stone by stone. After 47 years, the ruins of the Frauenkirche laid in a pile, with plants growing out of it. In the meantime, other less-damaged historical structures—the Zwinger Court and Gallery, the Semper Opera, the Katolische Hofkirche, etc.—had been largely restored. However, the Frauenkirche posed a much more difficult task. While an archeological reconstruction—reconstruction using the original stones—was proposed in the late forties, and cataloging of the stones actually began, during the time of the German Democratic Republic (1950–1990), no serious consideration was given to this project. Following the reunification of Germany, this idea was once again put forth, and accepted. In February of 1992, the Dresden city council agreed to support the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche. Cataloging was resumed, and construction began in 1994. It was estimated that the structure can be finished by 2007 using 80% of the original stones at an astronomical cost (about \$200 million).

Though some argue against the idea of historical replication, the building will be built as true as possible to the original design. Interestingly, before construction began, a detailed computer simulation was made, showing, in full color, the

complete Frauenkirche, inside and out. State-of-the-art computer modeling is being used to study and recreate a building designed in the 1720s, a building using state-of-the-art construction practices at the time, a building responding to contemporary social practices and aesthetic attitudes, a building that, ironically, replaced an older, obsolete structure in disrepair. Now the building that most residents have never seen can be experienced in virtual reality. In addition, a web site is being developed which will provide photographic images of the construction process, updated several times daily. This will allow the reconstruction of this 18th century structure to be monitored from almost any point in the world.

The use of these electronic media illustrate that the situation of Dresden at the close of the 20th century is very different from that of the time of the original construction. The conception of the original design was at the intersection of specific time and place events and constraints. It was a structure that was born in the imaginations of the citizens of Dresden at a particular point in time, but with an eye to the future, reflective of their political and religious beliefs. It was the physical center of their community, the house of the most sacred aspect of their collective identity. It was the social and spatial heart and soul of Dresden. They had a vision and they pushed the construction technology of the time to achieve that vision.

Amidst the current situation of technology and society, the people of Dresden proceed with the archeological reconstruction, stone by stone, of a costly, outdated building. Clearly the sacred nature of the Frauenkirche goes way beyond the structure's meaning as a church. In a time when the spatial environment of cities is shaped by consumerism, speculative construction, transient investment capital, and globalization

of culture and economy, with little sense of space and time, the individuals of Dresden seek an image to establish their own identities and to present to the region, the nation, and the World. In this light, the Frauenkirche is no longer a church, but an event, a spectacle, a sensation.

One does not need to look very far for evidence of the sensational nature of the reconstruction project. Continuous updating of the construction progress can be seen almost on a daily bases in the local newspapers. Hardly a move is made on the construction site that isn't documented with a photograph, often including a prediction of when the next major level of construction will be achieved. But, one can find more than a running account of the construction process. Periodically, an important public figure, such as the new minister of the church, appears, explaining to the readers the significance and importance of the reconstruction. Books and posters can be bought in local bookstores and souvenir shops. Even Frauenkirche T-shirts can be bought just outside the construction fence.

In its unfinished, or perhaps better, hardly begun, state, the Frauenkirche is the site of organized public events. In the summer of 1996, Dresden was the site of an international theater festival, Theater of the World. Several playhouses and temporary theaters were designated for the performances with the ruins of the church being one of those sites. Also in the summer of 1996, the completion of the cellar of the Frauenkirche was celebrated with a series of high-profile, as well as high admission price, string quartets.

The reconstruction of the Frauenkirche is rarely out of the view of public attention. This is due in part to a genuine public interest in the building, and also to the uniqueness of the process, which was declared by a Berlin newspaper as the most difficult historical reconstruction in the world. But, it is also one of the most expensive. While the municipal government has agreed to support the reconstruction, much more funding is needed—in a time when funding from the public sector is increasingly tight and under scrutiny by the citizens. Thirteen years is a long time to build a building by contemporary standards. If precious public funding is involved, public interest and enthusiasm has to be maintained, perhaps even manufactured by high profile events and media attention. Perhaps more importantly, these events draw money from the private sector. Expensive concert tickets, books, and posters all contribute to the construction funds.

Other fund-raising events are also employed. Two men build a large "Lego" model of the Frauenkirche, which, if you ignore the typical Lego colors, has a pretty good formal resemblance. However, each lego block must be "purchased" by a contributor before the model builders will attach it to the model. The money paid for the block is added to the reconstruction fund. Through another scheme, contributors "adopt" specific stones to be placed in the building. They pay a higher price for more significant stones. For example, a man paid \$1700 for the cap stone of an arch. For his contribution he gets to be the honorary construction superintendent for the day his stone is placed. Like every

other event, his day on the job site, along with the placing of his stone, is made into a media event.

As the structure grows higher and more visible, it is likely that the enthusiasm will grow as well. When it is complete, well into the 21st century, the panorama of Dresden will once again resemble those 18th century paintings by Canaletto. The inaugural religious ceremonies will be marked with a lot of fanfare and media-coverage. Those services will be attended by politicians and city officials, and also by curious citizens. But what will be the meaning of those services? For Dresdeners it will mean a reconnection to a fragmented history, and the overcoming of decades of war (hot and cold). The consecration of the building will tie a once glorious past into an uncertain future, looking back in order to move forward and put the last sixty years behind them. It will also symbolize Dresden as the beautiful Baroque city, an image that can be marketed to outsiders, bringing tourism and investment capital.

In a more abstract sense it represents a need among an urban society for a symbolic re-centering of urban space and culture. The significance of the Frauenkirche as a 21st century church is overshadowed by its significance as a sacred landmark in a secular-social sense. In the rapidly transforming environments of contemporary cities, image of a place and identity with a place are fleeting qualities. While the reconstructed artifact lacks the poetics of the ghostly ruins, and many question the appropriateness of rebuilding the church and, even more, the replication of the 18th century building, the recognizable icon provides a visual anchor unique to a specific place. A symbol that Dresdeners can identify with, as well as a symbol that outsiders can identify.

## An Alternative Image

In 1996 a new school building, the St. Benno Gymnasium, was completed. The Catholic Church hired Stuttgart architect Günter Behnisch to design and build the neo-Modern structure, located in a housing district built in the 1960s. The colorful building of concrete, glass, and steel stands in stark contrast to the simple brown and gray buildings in the surrounding neighborhood. The reactions to the building have been strong, both in support and in criticism. Some Dresdeners are dismayed that the Catholic Church would build a building with such a chaotic form and color palette, and that is so insensitive to the surroundings.

Others argue that this building is a symbol for the future of Dresden, rather than the sandstone replicas of the 18th century. The dynamic form, spectacular colors, bright interior, they argue, are the qualities that Dresden's students should be exposed to as they are prepared for their futures, rather than the gray and static forms of the last fifty years. The school is an image that demonstrates confidence in the present to face to challenges of the future, rather than a static reminder of the glory of the past. It is an architectural metaphor for opportunities that were not possible neither in the time of the



GDR nor in the 18th century.

The St. Benno Gymnasium is a unique building in Dresden. However, as a symbol for Dresden, the individuality of the building within a larger context is questionable. Though the architectonic form of the building is particular to its site, the materiality, detailing and overall character of the building bear a striking resemblance to other schools designed by Behnisch, such as one on the outskirts of Frankfurt. The paradox here is that in order to be non-conformist in Dresden, the school conforms to a larger social/spatial realm from which the city of Dresden can never really separated.

## The Neustadt: Dissent

The Neustadt (New town) is on the opposite side of the river from the city center and historically divided into two parts. During Renaissance years, the inner Neustadt was an expansion of the old city and served as the north gate into the city. It was originally an assortment of narrow, irregular streets over which a Baroque trivium was superimposed in the 17th century, establishing a formal link to the old city. Portions of the inner Neustadt were destroyed during the 1945 bombing. In the decades following the war the area was largely transformed by the planning practices of the GDR, as large areas were cleared and rebuilt with long rows of mass housing surrounded by broad open spaces. The pre-war buildings that survived the war and the GDR are being renovated, with many being converted from housing into office buildings.

Today when someone speaks of the Neustadt, they imply the outer Neustadt. The outer Neustadt was a 19th century city expansion, based loosely on a grid of moderately narrow streets, providing workers housing in three to four story buildings with small shops and businesses at the street level. The outer Neustadt was left relatively unscathed by both the war and GDR planning. At the time of re-unification the basic structure of the district was largely intact. However, the building stock and infrastructure were in a crumbled condition. As the urban structure did not conform with the planning and construction principles of the GDR, neither did the residents. As many buildings were abandoned by their owners, they were occupied by the misfits and dissidents within the socialist society.

Following the collapse of the GDR, the Neustadt became an enclave of non-conformance in an emerging capitalist society, fueled by the arrival of many young people from both eastern and western parts of Germany. It was a time and place of both individualism and community, when people of different backgrounds and intentions settled in a place seeking something new and discovering that it was up to them to create what they were looking for. In this spirit the Bunten Republik Neustadt was declared in 1990, an independent nation within the city limits of Dresden. A currency was established, based largely on barter and exchange. The name "Bunten", which means colorful, summarized the character and intentions of the community, based on individual liberty, group cooperation,

and having fun. It developed into a community of intimate meeting places, dimly lit bars, independently—and often spontaneously—organized night clubs and all-night dance parties, film presentations and art galleries, and apartments furnished primarily by found objects and clever plumbing improvisations.

Even the defiant spirit of the Neustadt cannot fend off the inevitable influx of speculation and investment development. Late in 1996, Roskolnikov, one of the prime meeting places in the Neustadt, a bar listed in the American travel guides to Germany as representing the true character of the "east", was closed as renovation on the building began. Next door opened a trendy film oriented bar, named Oscar, as in award. Several other fashionable bars and restaurants opened in the area earlier that year and the all night parties are now stopped by the police. The Bunten Republik Neustadt exists only on one weekend in June, when it is celebrated by a heavily advertised street party. Even the non-conformist image has become a marketable commodity.

Fortunately, strong building and housing preservation laws will protect the basic structure of the Neustadt. However, the crisp cleanness of the new, often marred by the graffiti of the dissenters, stands in sharp contrast to the un-renovated structures, sometimes singing with brightly colored murals. The tension is high, as developers and speculators persist and the Neustadt residents resist. A person seen taking photos of buildings can expect to be interrogated by people on the street: "Why are you taking pictures? Are you renovating that building?" They know that along with the changes in the spatial character of the place comes a change in the social character—one that may not include them.

Historically, the Bunten Republik Neustadt is past. Its imprint on the social and spatial realms of the district remain, coexisting with financed development, but how long this will last is uncertain. Perhaps the current economic downturn will result in a harmonious relationship within a truly multicolored urban space. In many ways the example of the Neustadt, representing diversity and change, is a microcosm for the larger city. The current situation in Dresden illustrates that urban places are not frozen in time, and that there is a mutually interactive relationship between the social and spatial environments of urban places. At the moment the spatial Dresden is a fragmented collage of various urban "typologies", reflecting not only historical transitions of social structures, but a range of social environments residing in Dresden at this particular point in time. Those with the power are making important decisions regarding which images will dominate. These images will also influence the various identities of individuals with their city.

With this in mind, take another look at the Canaletto painting. Canaletto framed a picture from a particular point in space at a particular moment in history. If you look closely, you can see construction scaffolding against an unfinished tower. The artist could have easily edited the scene to exclude the scaffolding, but didn't. This very painting, held today as a timeless image of Dresden, shows that, even at the time of its

execution, the city was being transformed. Stepping back again to see the bigger picture, one apprehends a truly timeless image: the river landscape, complete with workers on boats and on the shore. The painting is not a rendition of architectural icons, but an instant's glance of a living, working, and changing human settlement in a unique landscape setting: the Elbe River Valley.

The Elbe River flows north out of the Czech Republic through the Sachsen region, reaching the ocean near Hamburg. It flows craggy mountains, past hillside villages and terraced farm land, through rolling hills and wide meadow flood plains, past villas and chateaux, under a bridge called the Blue Wonder, and into the city. Over a thousand years a primitive village on the banks of the river transformed gradually into the modern city of Dresden. The river is the reason for the city's existence, and also the natural source of the city's beauty. Throughout the centuries artworks by countless artists have featured the relationship of Dresden to the river. It is the river setting that inspired the urban form that in turn inspired the images of Canaletto.

Today the river and its broad banks are the primary public space of the city. It is a visual focal point, as well as a place to be. It affords unique opportunities for recreation, relaxation, gathering and socializing. In the last six years the banks have been the site of public festivals, performances and other events. As for social class and architectural styles the Elbe River is impartial. The well executed modern glass façade of the new state capitol building is as welcome as the sandstone palace structures and terraces. The non-conformist members of the local society are as free to circulate within this setting as those who desire a more conventional lifestyle. In these respects the river has always been neutral and always will be. All are a part of this river landscape, and it is a part of them.

In many ways the City of Dresden is a mirror of contemporary urbanism—a situation of change and fleetingness, of flexible investment capital and quick turn over time, of cultural homogeneity in a time of multi-culturalism, of a trend toward a time and place lacking a sense of time and place. In this situation the Frauenkirche is an identifiable icon of the re-establishment of Dresden at the regional, national, European and global levels. It is an image that says this is Dresden. It is an anchor in both space and time. The image can be marketed and sold, but it can also be held sacred. However, individuals' identities with and within the city require more than an icon. For some this identity is with the Neustadt, for others with the socialist housing community, for others with the new shopping centers, for most it is with some combination, perhaps including even the former Leninplatz. The real challenge in Dresden is to weave these multiple images and identities together, enhancing the rich collage of urban places and the potentially rich experience of these places within the context of the unique landscape.

The rebuilding of Dresden will never be complete. A city is not frozen in time. Conflict and cooperation—dissonance and harmony—these are the qualities of the urban composition. The Canaletto View provides a vision, but the

true vision is in the process as much as it is in the product. City building is a piecemeal art,<sup>1</sup> and the degree to which Dresden succeeds in balancing the city-shaping forces during the next decades will teach us much about the state of the art. Vision is required to establish an urban image. But an image based on an icon will be limited. A truer and more enduring image can be found in a city's unique relationship to its landscape: the city in the landscape and the landscape in the city.

## A Postscript

While the re-construction of the Frauenkirche advances, the speculators race to hasten their returns, and Dresdeners complain about traffic, a little girl plays in a fountain just a few blocks from the Elbe River. I don't know this little girl. But, she probably has a good eighty years ahead of her. In her lifetime Dresden will change in ways which we today can't even imagine. Her memories and images of her home will be influenced in part by the physical space of the city. Buildings will come and go. Some will be selected as monuments. The Elbe River will continue to flow north, rising and falling, sometimes freezing, but always present. That river landscape will provide the setting for the drama of a large part of this little girl's life. She will be a part of that landscape and it will be a part of her.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Lynch, Kevin. *City Sense and City Design*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 499.

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