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Dresden Neustadt: Old Urban Form as a Place for Contemporary Urbanism

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Since the 1990 re-unification of Germany, the Outer Neustadt quarter in Dresden has evolved from a neglected slum into a bohemian republic and again into a vibrant urban neighborhood. Multiple communities—overlapping, dynamic, social entities—have emerged, within and around a built urban form that is enduring, yet adaptable. The simple, coherent spatial network, open to improvisation while maintaining its structural integrity, accommodates complex social networks, which comprise what has been casually referred to as the Neustadt Urbanität.

Dresden's Neustadt (New Town) lies on the east side of the Elbe River, across from the city's palatial center. Until the early nineteenth century, elaborate fortifications contained the original city center. The Outer Neustadt, just outside of the city walls and the Baroque city entrance, remained relatively undeveloped until the walls were removed. Streets were added and extended incrementally, with the current, imperfect grid of narrow streets in place by the end of the nineteenth century. Development occurred mostly during a period of rapid industrial and commercial expansion, the building stock consisting primarily of workers' housing in three- to five-story structures that lined the streets shoulder to shoulder. Upper levels consisted of flats; small shops and businesses occupied ground level along most streets.

The Outer Neustadt was left relatively unscathed by both the war and the central planning of the East German (GDR) Communists. Under the motto of "air, light and sun," GDR architects and planners aggressively promoted

mass-produced housing blocks surrounded by green, park-like environments.[1] Another motto could have been "order, efficiency, and control," given the rigid political structure and mechanical way of producing housing. Areas not conducive to order, efficiency and control were allowed to deteriorate, physically and socially, then cleared for new residential construction. Indeed, the Outer Neustadt was slated for demolition but saved by the collapse of the GDR.[2] At the time of re-unification, the basic physical structure of the district was largely intact, but the official neglect and institutional disregard for private property had left the buildings and infrastructure crumbling.

The Rise and Fall of the Bunte Republik Neustadt

Just as the Outer Neustadt's urban structure did not conform with the planning and construction principles of the GDR, neither did the residents of the Neustadt comport with the ideals of Communist citizenship. According to anecdotes, as buildings were abandoned by their owners, they were occupied by misfits and dissidents.

Following the collapse of the GDR, the Neustadt continued as an enclave of non-conformance, fueled by the arrival of many young people from both eastern and western Germany. It was a time and place of both individualism and cooperation, when people of different backgrounds

All photos and graphics by Raymond Isaacs.

Unrenovated building in the Outer Neustadt.

and intentions settled in a place seeking something new and discovering that it was up to them to create what they were seeking. They squatted in vacant buildings, or paid very low rent, and established their homes with makeshift furnishings, found objects and clever plumbing improvisations.

In this spirit, the early colonizers declared in 1990 the formation of the Bunte Republik Neustadt (BRN) or "Colorful Republic of the Neustadt"—an independent nation with its own currency and passports. The name "Bunte," which means "colorful," summarized the character and intentions of the self-declared citizens: individual liberty, group cooperation and fun. It was also expressed in brightly colored murals that decorated the brown and gray facades. The neighborhood developed into one of intimate meeting places, dimly lit bars and courtyards, nightclubs (often organized spontaneously) and all-night dance parties, film presentations and art installations.

Change continued. Developers recognized the desirability of a neighborhood with pre-twentieth-century street patterns and moderately high-density, mixed-use buildings to those seeking an urban lifestyle. Renovations began, sometimes meeting with resistance, graffiti and paint bombs. But even the defiant spirit of the BRN could not fend off the inevitable speculation and gentrification. Some places, like the original Reiterin, a small, candle-lit bar and early institution in the BRN, and a cafe sponsored by a social workers' organization, are gone. Others, such as Raskolnikoff, a bar with a small, pleasant garden, and the Scheune, a restaurant and beer garden that shares a former school building with a youth-oriented night club, managed to mature along with the changing social structure of the Outer Neustadt while retaining their BRN character. Several new and fashionable bars and restaurants opened in the district, and the all-night parties were suddenly stopped by the police due to noise complaints.

In 1991, because of its spatial integrity and uniqueness, the Outer Neustadt was listed as both a historically protected district and a redevelopment district, primarily to preserve its appearance. Thirty percent of the buildings were listed as historic monuments, the re-use of the remaining buildings was encouraged through financial incentives to private developers and the massing of new buildings was controlled. The urban structure may remain, but the renovations are stripping much of the texture and signs of earlier life away. The crisp cleanness of the new—following the nineteenth century practice of coating masonry walls with plaster—stands in sharp contrast to the diminishing number of unrenovated structures.

Today there is still tension but co-existence, as

Neustadt residents include middle-class professionals, along with students, runaways, travelers, immigrants, some citizens of the former BRN and some longer-term residents remaining from the GDR era. Indeed, the alternative-dissent image of the BRN has become a marketable commodity, celebrated annually with a weekend street festival promoted with heavy advertising from local merchants:

The [Outer] Neustadt will remain Dresden's liveliest but loudest quarter. Here the poor and rich must come together; noble restaurants alongside punk hang-outs. Above all, young people would live here. They can live with noise and traffic chaos. The Outer Neustadt will be very chic.[3]

Community and Urbanism

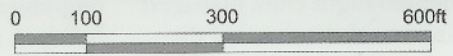
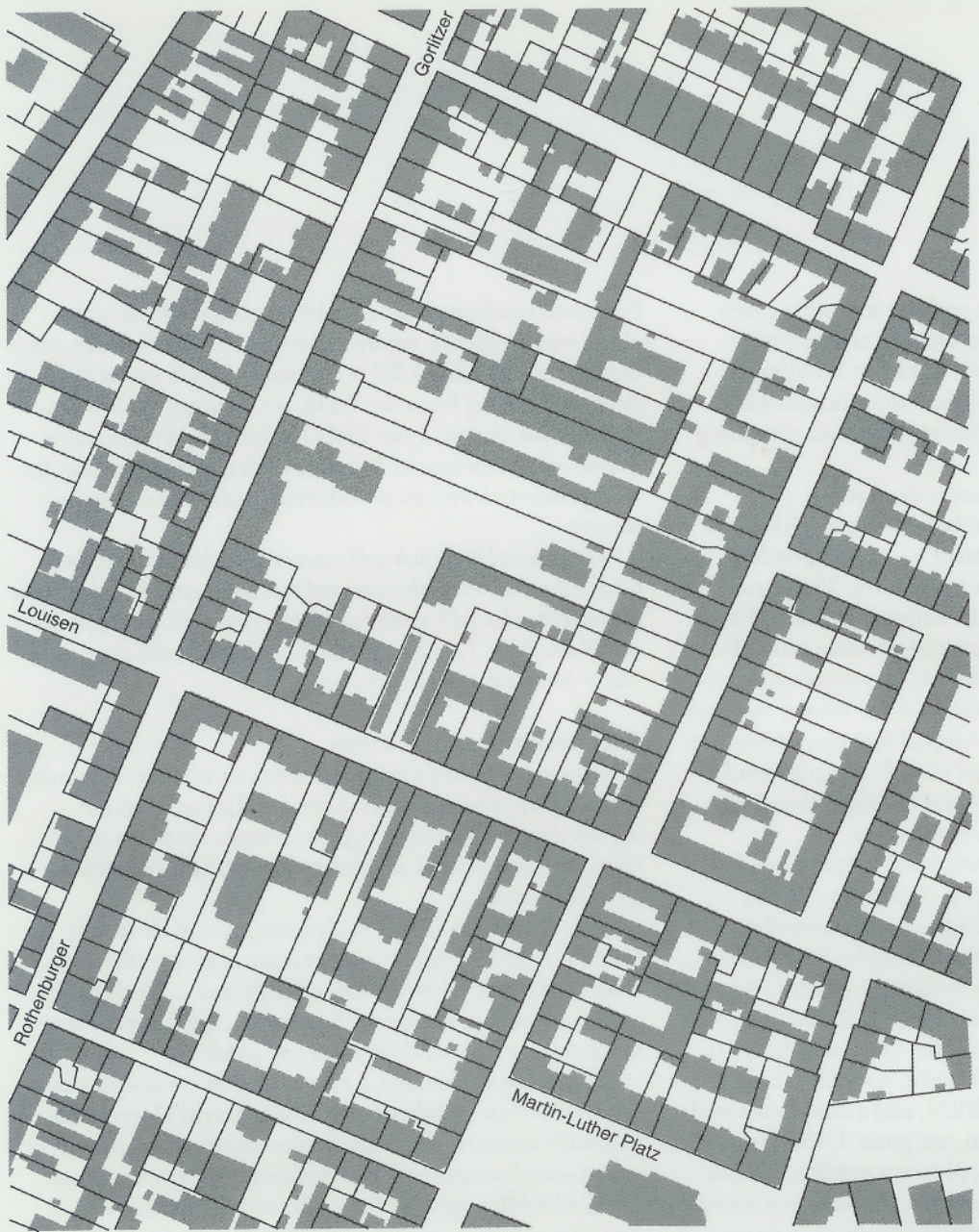
One may call the Outer Neustadt an urban community. But is that a contradiction in terms? Richard Sennett argues that "community" (exclusiveness based on commonality) is blatantly antithetical to "urban" (exposure to difference):

To be urban is to be open to the strangeness of the outside world, to be willing to take risks in order to grow and change through contact with others who are different. ... Community, on the other hand, is a barrier against the city. It is a construction erected to keep the different others at bay.[4]

According to Sennett, a reliance upon community is a symptom of an inability to be urban. David Harvey shares Sennett's concern about the limits community imposes on urban social structures. The problem is not community itself, which he sees as a "crystalization" of a moment in ongoing social processes, a social dynamic of tension between rules and rule breakers "... It then follows that communities are rarely stable for long." The problem emerges when the idea of community is a static entity to be maintained, and a fixed, finite space is construed as a container within which community can be created and preserved.[5]

Claude Fischer's comparison of large city (urban) and small town (rural) social networks illustrates a more fluid concept of community. His research revealed that city dwellers have complex social networks based on choice and lifestyle, rather than on physical proximity, which is more characteristic of village communities. In an urban environment, community is not necessarily defined by the physical limits of the place but is more intricate, flowing through the space of the city.[6]

Following Sennett, Harvey and Fischer, then, a truly urban place is not composed of a single, stable community defined by a delimited space, but of dynamic, multiple, layered communities, transformed by the interaction of



Block pattern in the Outer Neustadt; lot and building patterns on selected blocks.
Opposite: Painted house.



confronting difference and changing. Ironically, the citizens of the Bunte Republik Neustadt, in their determination to create an alternative urban neighborhood, fell into the trap of trying to establish a spatially delimited community with a single social network. When confronted with the dynamic process of urbanism, some resisted.

The more recent influx of residents, businesses and visitors into the Outer Neustadt has led to the development of multiple social networks, absorbing the BRN and becoming more characteristic of an urban place. Within the streets of the quarter one now encounters a dense, diverse mix of businesses and people. Within a stretch of two short blocks, one can get a tattoo, a banana, an expensive watch, a bicycle pump, a digital camera or a special blend of tea. A Turkish fast-food restaurant, "Sultan Döner and Pizza," stands alongside "Chez Samy," a chic French bistro and wine store. One may attend a film or a play.

This variety of businesses, consisting of many small specialty stores, depends on a high concentration of potential customers. Walking the streets, a casual observer will see a large number of young adults, many of whom are students in the local university and colleges, as well as their teachers and other middle-class professionals, some of whom have offices in the Outer Neustadt. One highly visible group includes young adults who have multiple piercings and brightly colored hair and drink beer at regular places on the sidewalks. The elderly are also visible, particularly a large number of long-term residents who chose not to move after 1990. Small children have a surprisingly large presence, young teenagers less so.

The Outer Neustadt is not a segregated neighborhood, in that the different groups of people must, and do, occupy the same spaces—hence, the harmony and dissonance of the urban composition. The neighborhood's ethnic composition is predominantly German, though the Vietnamese, several of whom operate fruit and vegetable shops, and Turks, who operate many fast-food restaurants, have a noticeable presence, and smaller groups of Polish and Russian immigrants live in the district as well. The gay and lesbian communities have had a strong presence from the very early days of the BRN.

A Place for Contemporary Urbanism

Urbanism is a social process, but social processes cannot occur in the absence of space. In a book dedicated to this topic, Allan Pred writes:

It is within and partly through these historically specific geographic configurations, these time-bounded spatial structures, these actually lived spaces, that gender, class and group relations

are constituted, that social structures come into being, continue to become, and are transformed.[7]

In other words, social practices are not environmentally determined, but they are environmentally dependent. Human agency acting within the context of "dialectically entwined" social and spatial structures is limited by and within this context and—simultaneously—a force with the power to change that context. In time, both the social structure and the spatial structure are transformed. Because of the necessarily place-specific requirements, "the outcome of the making of histories and the construction of human geographies is not precisely predictable." [8] It is dependent upon existing space and previous social practices that have produced that space; in the case of the contemporary city, that means a pre-existing urban structure with its very own history.

There are several, inter-related reasons why different groups of people are able to occupy the Outer Neustadt as residents, business owners, workers or visitors, rather than keeping to other parts of the city. Undoubtedly, the neighborhood's central location and convenient access, as well as its reputation and the success of marketing its alternative image, make a difference. Another reason, equally or even more significant, is the ability of the physical space of the Outer Neustadt to accommodate a variety of practices associated with the mix described above without losing its integrity as a durable urban neighborhood.

In *Built for Change*, Anne Vernez Moudon calls this quality "resilience," which she defines as the ability of a place to adapt to changing social structures "without major disruption to the principles of the [physical] structure of that space—resilience balances continuity and change in space." She argues that resilience is important for two reasons. From a practical perspective, an adaptable built form that allows for the re-use of existing infrastructure and building stock is economically prudent. From a cultural and psychological point of view, she says, older neighborhoods and buildings have an emotional attraction "because they are part of our personal as well as collective memory of place and history." [9]

Indeed, an adaptable urban form becomes layered with history as it is occupied by successive groups of individuals. The permanence and adaptability of urban space are mutually supportive: The general permanence of the physical structure facilitates the incremental adaptations that are required to accommodate the changing practices of groups or individuals. These adaptations, in turn, enrich the physical structure over time, leaving imprints of the different occupying communities in a recognizable continuum of space and history.

Vernez Moudon further notes that resilience must be considered over a range of urban scales, emphasizing “the interrelationships between the cell [lot] and the city.” Physical changes at one scale will have a ripple effect across the entire spectrum. She concludes that a successfully adapting urban form includes, at the city scale, “a simple, straightforward, and easily legible urban framework that is accessible and usable by the residents” and, at the building scale, “building practices based on formal integrity and on the simple configuration of built space.” [10] The resiliency of the Outer Neustadt depends in large part on the city–cell relationship, specifically streets, blocks and buildings.

Streets and blocks. Streets, being public rights-of-way, are the most permanent physical features of an urban setting. The network of streets in the Outer Neustadt developed over the course of a century into an irregular, grid-like pattern. Only the two oldest streets, Louisen Strasse and Alaun Strasse, continue uninterrupted through the neighborhood. Other streets were added in segments, which resulted in T-intersections, offsets, changing street names and a variety of street widths. Despite this irregularity, the network of nearly perpendicular and parallel streets is a simple, straight-forward, and easily legible urban framework.

The irregular character of the street pattern and street widths has helped to generate a hierarchy of activity among the streets and a variety of spaces within the neighborhood. The widest streets, along with the narrower through street, Alaun Strasse, are the most active, while other streets are much calmer.

Buildings. The buildings along the streets reinforce this hierarchy of activity. Buildings on more active streets have ground-floor spaces designed to accommodate commercial uses, with residences above. Buildings on calmer streets often have ground floors designed as apartments. This pattern, likely an architectural response to the context of the streets at the time the buildings were built, is generally continued today, the result being that street activity is influenced by the existing architecture. This mix also gives residents a choice between living on an active, commercial street, or on a noticeably quieter, residential street.

The buildings line the streets solidly, except for a few gaps, giving precise three-dimensional form and architectural character to the streets, which are the primary public space of the neighborhood. The buildings are very simple, rectangular forms with generous dimensions for both circulation and habitable spaces, especially after removing the old coal-fired heating ovens. Most, about ninety percent, were built during the Gründerzeit, the period between

1870 and 1910.[11] While there are certain similarities among the buildings, there are differences in width (thirty to ninety feet), height (four and five stories—shorter buildings are from an earlier period) and detail (some more elaborate than others).

The original flats were large by today’s standards, with smaller attic units. In some cases the buildings have been modernized, maintaining the original, large apartment layouts of basic rectangular rooms arranged around a hallway and now occupied by either families or groups of single, young adults. In other cases, large apartments have been divided into several smaller ones, in response to the contemporary trend of smaller household size. The simple, generous plan of the buildings makes these conversions possible without compromising the integrity of the building and its contribution to the street.

Inner-block spaces. The most interesting improvisations occur in the more flexible, semi-private, semi-public spaces of the inner blocks. Because of the irregular street pattern, blocks vary in size, creating an extraordinarily complex subdivision pattern. Most residential lots tend to have narrow street frontages and a longer dimension extending into the block. In many cases a passageway through the building at the street leads to the rear of the lot where a second building—and sometimes even a third—were often built. The units in the rear building are generally smaller and less elegant than those in front. But being off the street, they are quieter and more private, with access through an open courtyard or garden. The role of the courtyards and gardens cannot be understated. Separated from the streets, they are the places for dinners with friends, children’s play, even drying laundry. With limited public green space in the quarter, they can be semi-private oases.

The larger blocks are more complex. The larger internal areas allow for more space, more flexibility and a greater mix of uses and building types. In the nineteenth century these spaces were filled with workshops and small factories. Around 1900, as residential demand grew, apartment buildings, schools and a swimming hall—recently renovated and open to the public—were built in some of these spaces. Contemporary developments, which cannot be easily accommodated in the building types along the streets, can be worked into these spaces as well. In a new mixed-use complex, suburban-style office buildings are tucked behind the existing buildings along a very narrow street. In another case, a modern grocery store, complete with an underground parking garage, covers the area of three Gründerzeit buildings, one of which remains and has been absorbed by the new development. The rhythm of





Garden at the Scheune.

the nineteenth century buildings and of small businesses—a bakery, a travel agent—along the street remains uninterrupted, but behind is an uncharacteristically large store.

Sometimes existing inner-block buildings, often former workshops, have been converted into businesses, such as cafes, bookstores and offices. The courtyard may have tables and chairs for customers. These spaces, appearing to rely more on individual initiative than on larger investment capital, are often more reflective of the spirit of the Bunte Republik Neustadt. Here, the feeling of intimacy and spontaneity remains. One example is the colorful Kunsthof Passage, a complex of buildings on three separate parcels that are joined by an inner-block passage. Shops and restaurants with outdoor seating are clustered along the passage, which is like a small pedestrian mall, with apartments above. The value of the inner-block spaces, including the variety of buildings, activities and spaces, whether semi-public or semi-private, is extremely high in terms of the Outer Neustadt's ability to accommodate change and diversity.

One of the most difficult adaptations the Outer Neustadt must make is accommodating cars—an inescapable contemporary urban issue. The district is increasingly congested with traffic, and the noise is amplified in the confined space of the streets. Even though the district is connected well to the rest of Dresden by a street-car network, many of the visitors from other neighborhoods drive into the quarter, and many residents choose to own a car, even if they don't drive every day.

The pre-automobile urban framework has a limited capacity to accommodate cars. One response, unfortunately, has been to convert inner courtyards into parking lots. In a neighborhood with limited outdoor space, especially semi-private space away from the street, the courtyards are important to the quality of life, and losing them to parking could make the area less desirable. Another adaptation is underground parking garages, which have been tucked into a few of the medium- to large-size lots.

Residential density and diversity. The vitality, diversity and convenience of the Outer Neustadt also depend on a dense concentration of people. Considering the area as a whole, the net residential density is about forty units per acre with 10,000 residents—potentially 12,000 when fully renovated and occupied. The housing choices in the Outer Neustadt provide for a mix of residents as well. There are a variety of apartment sizes and configurations. While most apartments are owned by investors, managed by professionals and rented to tenants, a trend toward individual ownership of apartments is slowly developing. This could stabilize portions of the population over the long term, though

much of the neighborhood's colorful mix depends on its ability to accommodate people who are in various stages of phases of their lives, and for whom home ownership is not compatible.

The dynamics of the quarter are augmented by the population of non-residents who occupy the quarter. The porous physical and social boundaries of the quarter, which in some cases are hardly perceptible, play an essential role. Indeed, the communities that occupy the Outer Neustadt are not spatially defined: Many people come from neighboring areas or farther away, flowing freely into and out of the quarter to work, shop, eat, drink, see a play, visit a friend, take a walk or simply hang out. This additional population contributes a great deal to the process of urbanization and the evolution of multiple, dynamic, overlapping communities.

The lack of public open space is mitigated by quick access to Alaun Park, a large park to the north, and the broad, park-like banks of the Elbe River to the south—both of which are major recreational areas for Dresden. Consequently, they draw non-residents into the district, seeking a drink or a meal, or dropping in on friends who live in the quarter, after walking or biking along the river or playing soccer in the park. This again demonstrates the importance of the porosity of the physical and social boundaries of the quarter, as individuals move freely into, through, and around the space of the Outer Neustadt and may even be members of one of the communities—a community of students, a community of bicyclists—who occupy the quarter, without actually residing there.

Prospects for Urbanism in the Outer Neustadt

A dynamic social structure has emerged within and around the space of the Outer Neustadt. Multiple communities, whose territories are not limited to the confines of the quarter, have found a place there—confronting each other in the space of the quarter, transforming it, and so transforming themselves. As such, the district challenges the conception of community as a static entity with fixed geographical boundaries and architectural forms.

The Outer Neustadt has been able to support this successive, overlapping occupation by different groups of people, and has enabled them to form their own communities, for various reasons. For many years it has been an available space, largely because of the GDR's policies of neglect. The irregular mix of streets, blocks and lots has provided opportunities for buildings and spaces that are of various scales and accommodate different uses. Many of the buildings were built in a manner that allowed them to be reconfigured to accommodate changing household

demographics. Its good street and transit connections, and location near major public amenities, have given it a porous or accessible character.

The urbanizing process continues. Because the Outer Neustadt has been designated as a historical district, the general structure of the physical form—a simple, coherent structure—will remain. However, some of the urban characteristics of the Outer Neustadt and its ability to accommodate change and foster diversity are threatened. For example, if the trend towards converting apartments from rental to individual ownership becomes too widespread, some classes of citizens may be excluded, and the issue of parking cars will continue to push the spatial limits of the neighborhood. There will certainly be other challenges. Yet the form of the Outer Neustadt—balancing permanence with flexibility, coherence with variety, and defined urban space with simple, generous architectural space—has long demonstrated the capacity for change and improvisation, allowing multiple, overlapping communities to continue to emerge in unpredictable ways.

Notes

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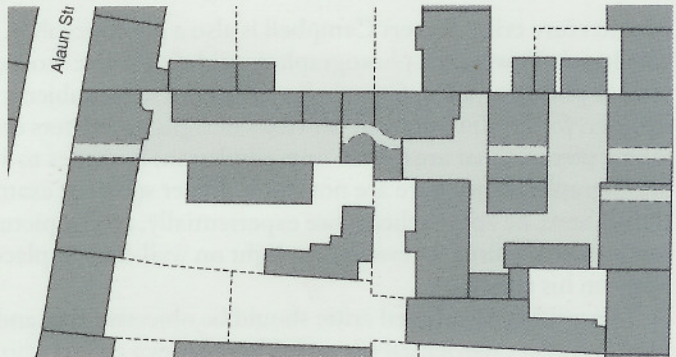
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Kunsthof Passage.