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Finding a Hypothesis in the City of Failed Plans: The New House on Auguststraße

By Jill Winder

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BERLIN—During the Weimar era, philosopher Ernst Bloch wrote that Berlin is a city in a constant and perpetual state of becoming. Berlin is also regularly called a city of failed plans. Varying ideologies left their mark over the course of the last century—from monuments to Prussian militarism and Wilhelmine classicism, Weimar modernism, Nazi neo-classicism and Communist social-housing blocks, to the contemporary architectural monstrosities of Potsdamer Platz that symbolized, many hoped, a new start.

This city is a mecca for architecture enthusiasts, showcasing architectural gems and design disasters in equal measure. Berlin is also home to more architects per capita than any other city in Germany. Encouraged by the promise of a post-Wall boom, they flocked to Berlin in great numbers in the early 1990s. Even as the economy soured, unemployment soared (yes, even among them) and swanky new office buildings in the center of the city lay vacant, many architects remained, fueled by the chaos and promise of this singularly strange city.

Architect Philipp Oswald characterizes the evolution of Berlin as a kind of non- or accidental evolution, driven by the fickle nature of power and exemplary of Germany's historical drama: "With its lack of tradition and weak identity, Berlin has absorbed the powers of the twentieth century unlike any other city: first monarchy, the World War and revolution, then fascism, Stalinism and the Cold War, and finally the dissolution of the East-West confrontation. The accidental side effects of political, economic and military activities have shaped the city. What gives Berlin its form is not the result of ideal plans or organic growth. In the repeated processes of reinvention, destruction and construction, the original intentions of all grand plans were soon lost. Instead, Berlin was formed much more by a kind of 'automatic urbanism'... Berlin is an experiment without a hypothesis."¹



*Architect
Jörg Ebers in
front of his
building on
Auguststraße.
Photo: Jörg
Ebers*

Instead, Berlin was formed much more by a kind of 'automatic urbanism'... Berlin is an experiment without a hypothesis."¹

It is rare for a young architect to find a distinctive voice in the cacophony, to create a hypothesis for the urban experiment that Berlin embodies. Jörg Ebers, a 36-year-old architect, managed to craft such an intriguing new architectural proposition through the intensely personal task of building a home for himself.

* * *

On Auguststraße, one of the most famed "art streets" in Berlin's central district of Mitte, a contemporary building, its façade covered with lush green

¹ Philipp Oswald, *Berlin_Stadt ohne Form, Strategien einer anderen Architektur* (Munich: Prestel, 2000), pp. 27-28 (my translation).

mosaic tiles punctuated with large, asymmetrical windows, sits squarely in the company of late-19th century buildings with ornately carved moldings and more recent, loft-style premium apartments. An utterly unique structure, it manages to co-exist with many competing architectural styles, setting itself apart while, in the words of its designer, “maintaining a conversation with the buildings that surround it.”



(Above) A street view directly across from Ebers’s building reflects the diverse mix of traditional and contemporary building styles that frequently exist side-by-side in Berlin. (Left) View of the building’s façade by evening. Photo: Linus Lintner

If the story behind this building and the post-1989 renaissance of Mitte are chapters in the same narrative, Auguststraße is a central character. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, Mitte was a kind of no-man’s land. The historical Jewish quarter suffered severe damage during World War II and was surrounded on two and a half sides by the Wall. In reunified Berlin, Mitte was suddenly the new geographical heart of the city, populated by vacant and dilapidated buildings that were quickly taken over by squatters and transformed into housing, bars, clubs and galleries. Galerie EIGEN + Art, one of the most important galleries in Berlin, has been located on Auguststraße for years, and the now well-established contemporary-art center, Kunst Werke, was founded here as an illegal artists’ squat. EIGEN + Art and Kunst Werke function as anchors, making Auguststraße the first port of call for anyone checking out contemporary art in “new” Mitte. Chic cafes and restaurants, other galleries of lesser repute and fashion boutiques followed, making the street the hub that it is today.

During the early 1990s, when temporary (and illegal) use of old buildings on the street prevailed, the site where Ebers built his house stood empty. The first location of the legendary “Cookies” nightclub was in the cellar of the building next door, and the vacant lot where Ebers’s house would later stand was one of Mitte’s notorious “party plots.” The lot had not always been empty. Around 1900, during one of Berlin’s first urban booms, a family home was built on this loca-

tion.² Damaged by bombing during WWII, its ruins were collected and sold off as building material during the post-WWII reconstruction of the city. Soon, nothing of the structure remained.

In an unusual twist of fate, the pre-war owners of the building (who moved to West Germany when the Berlin Wall was built) still held title to the property and were willing to sell when Ebers inquired about the space. The reason why this premium lot in the center of the city remained vacant soon became clear: it was deemed unfit for building by state authorities because of its unusually small size (approximately 26 feet wide and 66 feet deep). At a loss for what to do with this centrally located but tiny bit of land, the city had even considered building a small playground on the site. The purchase price, reflecting the limited uses of the lot, was extremely low. Excited about this central location at a premium address, the undaunted Ebers bought the lot in 2002, convinced that he could find some resourceful way around the regulations.



Drawing of the façade of the turn-of-the-century building originally found on Ebers’s lot at Auguststraße 26 A in Berlin-Mitte. Courtesy: Jörg Ebers

For Ebers, who studied architecture at University College London and the University of Fine Arts, Berlin, the modest size of the lot was both a blessing and a challenge. The size fit Ebers’s approach: thinking about building on a one-to-one scale that reflects how people inhabit and move in a space. He also felt it a manageable site for his first major building project. The challenges were two-fold: First, how to uti-

² Berlin’s population doubled between 1871 and 1920 (Oswalt, 2000).

lize architecture to create a building that expanded and took advantage of the square feet available in inventive ways; and second, how to come up with a design that would meet the strict city code.

In a city where intense sentimentality and nostalgia for *Altbau* (pre-war) apartments competes with an equally strong tradition of modern and contemporary architecture, Ebers gave a lot of thought to how a radically new design could insert itself into the area. “Obviously, remaking the past isn’t interesting from an architectural point of view, but neither are many contemporary buildings... my house is meant to be foreign to some degree, but it also has a relationship with the other houses.” While some might criticize the result as a vanity project, anyone who knows Ebers or hears him talk about the creative process behind his work thinks otherwise. When discussing the history of Auguststraße, Ebers noted that the buildings on the street were originally owned by families who lived in all or part of the house (sometimes renting out the rest), a fact that gave owners, “a sense of responsibility toward their location and their place in the city—it was not the renter community that you find here now. I built this house with that lost sense of responsibility to one’s space and investment in a neighborhood in mind.”

Ebers generated a building plan with dozens of variations, handcrafting architectural models where various elements of the structure could be interchanged and new configurations imagined. At every stage, he took the



A view of the intricate and interchangeable models Ebers fashioned for himself during the design process.

neighboring buildings into account, creating details and shifting elements of the façade so the new structure would both challenge and harmonize its surroundings. But the real subject of the project, the true labor of love, is the house’s interior. “I thought about the complex inner life of the building first,” Ebers explained. Sitting in his living room surrounded by building models brought out of storage to show me, the architect likened the process of designing his own house to “tailoring one’s own suit.” While most practicing architects must work within the visions and parameters of their clients, creating a space to house yourself is an unusual task, not without an existential dimension. Ebers joked that at times the process seemed close to “acting as my own psychologist.”

After extensive research into the intricate rules and regulations of the city’s building authority, Ebers realized that the lot could legally accommodate a building plan if it fit strict regulations relating to buildings housing no more than two apartments. With blueprints and charisma in hand, he finally received the necessary permissions and permits from no less than 15 various regulatory agencies—a process that took longer than building the house itself. Nearly three years transpired between the purchase of the lot and the building’s completion. Ebers moved in a little over a year ago, in July 2004. While reluctant to name the price of the finished product, Ebers does offer that the cost per square meter is commensurate with other real estate in the area—a fact that is all



View of the lot during construction. Photo: Jörg Ebers



View of Ebers's building, located in between a renovated early-20th-century house and the renowned gallery EIGEN + Art (to the right).

the more striking because of the house's specialized details and architectural innovations.

* * *

One of my favorite cafes, Ruz, is directly across the street from Ebers's house. Over the course of multiple coffees, I have seen hundreds of people pass by the building. Almost without exception, they stop and stare, peer into the small, round glass windows in the (rather vault-like) heavy wood door, run their fingers over the surprising tiled façade, or curiously eye the name plates next to the door. On the street, the building presents itself as both open and secretive: the large windows provide a peek into the apartments while the smooth, unbroken hue of the façade protectively encloses it.

Ebers decided to include retail space in the plans so that there would be a semi-public part of the building, a place where interested parties could gain access to it without infringing on the privacy required for private residences. The ground floor boutique currently housing designer Claudia Hill's clothing line fits in seamlessly with other shops and galleries on the street where pedestrians flow in and out, perusing items. A rented studio apartment is located on the second floor, and the top levels function as an independent family house—Ebers's domain.

Entering the building, you encounter the beautiful

sculptural staircase, a curve of light olive-green lined on the bottom with concrete, cast into a corrugated texture. It winds up to the second floor apartment and up another flight to Ebers's front door. The unusual sweep of the stairs is continued in the house itself, this time appearing in pure white. Once inside, it's nearly impossible to explain the intricate configuration of levels and rooms in Ebers's home; photographs cannot entirely capture the organic fluidity and tension he created between two seemingly contradictory poles: privacy/intimacy vs. transparency/access.

Technically, the house comprises a mere 1,200 square feet, but four stories and seven levels are found within that area. And "split level" doesn't do justice to the organizing principle, at least as I associate the term with the suburban house I grew up in, built to a set plan that was endlessly repeated to fill an entire block with the same house. The power of the rooms in Ebers's house is that they are totally defined by their functions. Uses are completely predetermined and not flexible, yet people naturally move through the space in a fluid, organic way, creating a constant traffic between all rooms of the house. The organization of the rooms is the most unusual aspect of the home, particularly because nearly all apartments are built based on standard, legally-set minimums for certain spaces (bedroom, bathroom, etc.) or are otherwise predetermined, dictating the size of the rooms and layout of apartments—an arbitrary link that often ignores the ideal space for various functions. In the Ebers home, space is apportioned based on the importance of certain functions (cooking, relaxing, reading, sleeping, washing). The resulting spatial relationships are utterly surprising. All seven levels are layered: Wherever you are in the house, at least one other floor is directly visible. Borders between inside and out are only semi-opaque and thresholds are always penetrable. As Ebers explains, "Through the open levels and the flow of the space, the relatively small amount of square footage becomes quite generous and allows for communication." Flow and openness make the house feel at least twice as large as it actually is.

Ebers, a soft-spoken character with a warm personality, was exposed to architecture early, which certainly encouraged the development of his innate sense of perspective and space. "My parents hired interesting architects to build our family home in Krefeld and a holiday home in Majorca, Spain. That definitely made me aware of space in a different way." When asked about his earliest interest in architecture, Ebers replied with a smile, "I remember being very small, lying on the floor and staring up at the pitched roof ceiling of our house. I spent hours visualizing how I could turn it around, set it right-side-up, or walk on it...I suppose you could say that was an early architectural thought."

You enter the house on the middle level, with a small hallway leading up a few stairs to the living room. To your right is a guest room, and to the left, the winding

staircase continues up to the next level. Varying ceiling heights (from nearly 14 feet in the living room to 7 1/2 feet in other areas) open and close the spaces, where niches and nooks create intimate corners in large rooms. In a statement for the magazine *Radius Berlin*, Ebers explained the overall concept: “The interior...consists of personal spaces with various spatial volumes, like inhabitable pieces of furniture: intimate spaces as well as open ones; proportions in line with the human body; stacked levels with complex fields and lines of vision opening up scenarios and allowing for treasured personal niches all over the house; ledges to sit on, kitchen lab, flower box, cubicle, corrugated concrete, store room, colored spaces...” .

In the living room (approximately 180 square feet), for example, a large window dominates, which Ebers says is meant to “function like furniture.” The room is a large, white-cube square, yet set back ten feet in one corner is a small library nook containing book shelves and a single chair. The walls are painted in the same green shade found on the stairs in the outside entrance, and the ceiling is half the height of the main room. The shift in scale creates a totally different atmosphere than can be found in the main living room area—instead of an airy, modern-gallery feel, you are instantly transported to a cozy warmth which reminded me of a rustic cabin.

Color and décor play a significant role throughout the house—which Ebers furnished himself, averse to the



Image of the living room. To the left, the nook-like library is visible, and in the upper-right-hand corner of the picture, you can see up to the kitchen on the next level. Photo: Linus Lintner



Another historical reference hidden in the house is stairs leading up to the bathroom in the guest bedroom. The arrangement mimics the design of Ebers’s favorite old Berlin shops, where the ground floor was used as commercial space and a short staircase of four or five steps would lead to the owner’s private living quarters.

trend of hiring an outside interior decorator—where surprising textures and materials are mixed and matched, often paired with design details and elements from 1950s modernism, a favorite period of the architect. The idea was not to create a “retro style” but to include small details “which look familiar and comforting but where you can’t quite place the association or link them to a specific period.” One such example is the cage-like structure of metal wire that separates an open space in the wall in the kitchen, allowing you to look down upon the living room—a typical ‘50s touch that looks both classic and utterly new.

Moving to the next level up the curved staircase, you enter the kitchen, the heart of the house. That the kitchen has such pride of place is not surprising: Ebers is passionate about cooking (his dinner parties are as well-known and well-received as the house itself), and he once responded to the question, “What do you read?” with “Cooking recipes as poetry.” The 170-square-foot room is “open” on both sides; a large window facing the back courtyard fills half of one wall, and the other wall is partially open, providing a view (through the metal details) of the living room below. A relatively low concrete ceiling opens up at one end of the kitchen creating a vault painted in a brilliant ocean blue, leading to a glass panel that exposes the bathroom and master



(Left) Detail of the kitchen, with the “vault” space visible. Through the glass on the left, the master bedroom is visible, through the right window is a view of the outdoor terrace. Photo: Linus Lintner (Right) The turnable green island dominates the kitchen and allows for radical reconfiguration of the space.

bedroom on the next level, as well as a view outside to the terrace in the other direction.

Two elements that seemingly clash but work brilliantly when paired fill the kitchen: concrete and oil-treated oak. In contrast to the feel of the living room, the aesthetic of the kitchen is more that of a modest hunting lodge, where fine wood surrounds you. Storage shelves and appliances are hidden behind wall-to-wall oiled oak panels, textured to compliment the corrugated concrete of some of the kitchen walls. A large green kitchen island housing a sink, range, storage drawers and work space can be turned around, completely changing the proportions and arrangement of the room.

On the top level, the master bedroom and bath are found, and again the contrasts are striking. We shift from the textured, complex arrangement of heights and materials in the kitchen back to white walls, reminiscent of the staircase, hallways and living room. The bedroom is sparsely decorated and dominated by white. It has almost a clinical, “sanatorium” feel, emphasized by elements such as a white antique apothecary chest. Yet on the



(Above) View from the hallway leading to the master bedroom. To the right is a glass panel affording a direct view to the kitchen below, to the left is the master bath. Photo: Linus Lintner (Right) Detail of the Japanese master bath, covered floor to ceiling in green mosaic tiles. Photo: Linus Lintner

way to this austere room, one passes the luxurious Japanese bath with floor to ceiling green tiles and a glass door—a space that has everything to do with the body, sensuality and exposure. Suffice it to say that the large outdoor terrace (accessible through a sitting nook off the master bedroom as well as a staircase) and the rooftop providing 360-degree views of Berlin are also integral parts of the house, which constantly offer access to the outside and provide other areas for communal gathering.

Ebers, who runs his own architecture firm, Ebers Architekten, has enjoyed plenty of attention since the house was finished. (He is currently designing two private apartments in Berlin and Hamburg). He has been written about in influential architectural magazines such as *AD* as well as the local and international press, and was awarded the Bauwelt Preis for the house this year. The shared

consensus among experts and admiring passers-by alike is that Ebers has managed to build something authentically new and innovative—an accolade that few working architects garner in Berlin today. In a rave review that appeared in the influential *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* this March, critic Niklas Maak optimistically wrote: “Ebers’s building is a hopeful sign for a new, less dogmatic, intelligent city architecture.”

After a first project with such a striking result, one hopes to see many more Ebers buildings in Berlin, a locale badly in need of unique vision and sensitivity towards possibility and new ideas.

As the house clearly announces, Ebers has created a new hypothesis for the way one can live in the city. □



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With a B.A. in History from Yale and an M.A. in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex is in China examining how the country is adapting to economic and cultural globalization following its accession to the World Trade Organization.

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • INDIA

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for *Somerville This Week*, in Somerville, MA.

Cristina Merrill (June 2004-2006) • ROMANIA

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • IRAN

A journalist and researcher for the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Nick is finishing a Master's program in Comparative and Regional Studies (Middle East/Central Asia) at American University in Washington DC. He is studying intensive Persian — as is his fiancée, Rikki Bohan — in anticipation of his departure for Iran after his marriage in autumn 2005.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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