

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

As We Saw It – Part 5: Berlin 1 – Architecture

Rick Meghiddo · Wednesday, December 12th, 2018

Berlin is regarded as one of the most exciting architectural experiments in the world, with a cultural life second to none. On our first visit to Berlin since its reunification, our goal was to try to understand why the city has become a mecca for artists, a place of attraction to architects and filmmakers, internationally recognized as one of the hottest cities of the 21st century. Our visit only scraped at its surface.



It is impossible to look at the present without consciousness of what happened between 1933 and 1989. In the film I tried to convey some archival footage of that period.



Hitler's Youth



Berlin Olympics – 1936



Pre-War Anti-Semitism



Reichstag burning, 1933





Berlin 1945



Brandenburg gate, 1945



Berlin 1945



Berlin 1945



The Reichstag, 1945



Berlin Wall



Berlin Wall

Buildings in Berlin tend not to be just buildings. They are manifestos, propaganda, memorials, battlefields. Our first impression of the city as a whole was one of a disjointed, urbanization in search of an identity. Some areas seemed too large or too flat, too distant or too close, too insipid box-like structures produced from economical calculations and returns on investment.

We noticed that most of the notable architectural works designed by foreign architects. Fortunately, the Berlin Philharmonic, Hans Scharoun's masterpiece, remains as a reminder of great after-war architecture.

Our architectural choices were arbitrary. The Reichstag, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Jewish Museum, the Sony Center, Potsdamer Platz, and the German Historical Museum Extension Hall

The Reichstag Dome: The People Above the Government

The Reichstag project is a superb piece of urban, architectural and political surgery. It is the dominant component of a democratic of troika, together with the Chancellery and the Paul Löbe parliamentary building. The dome sits on top of the Bundestag, the German parliament, and it symbolizes that the people are above the government. A mirrored cone in the center of the dome directs sunlight into the building. A large sun shield tracks the movement of the sun electronically and allows light, carefully filtered, to wash down into the chamber.

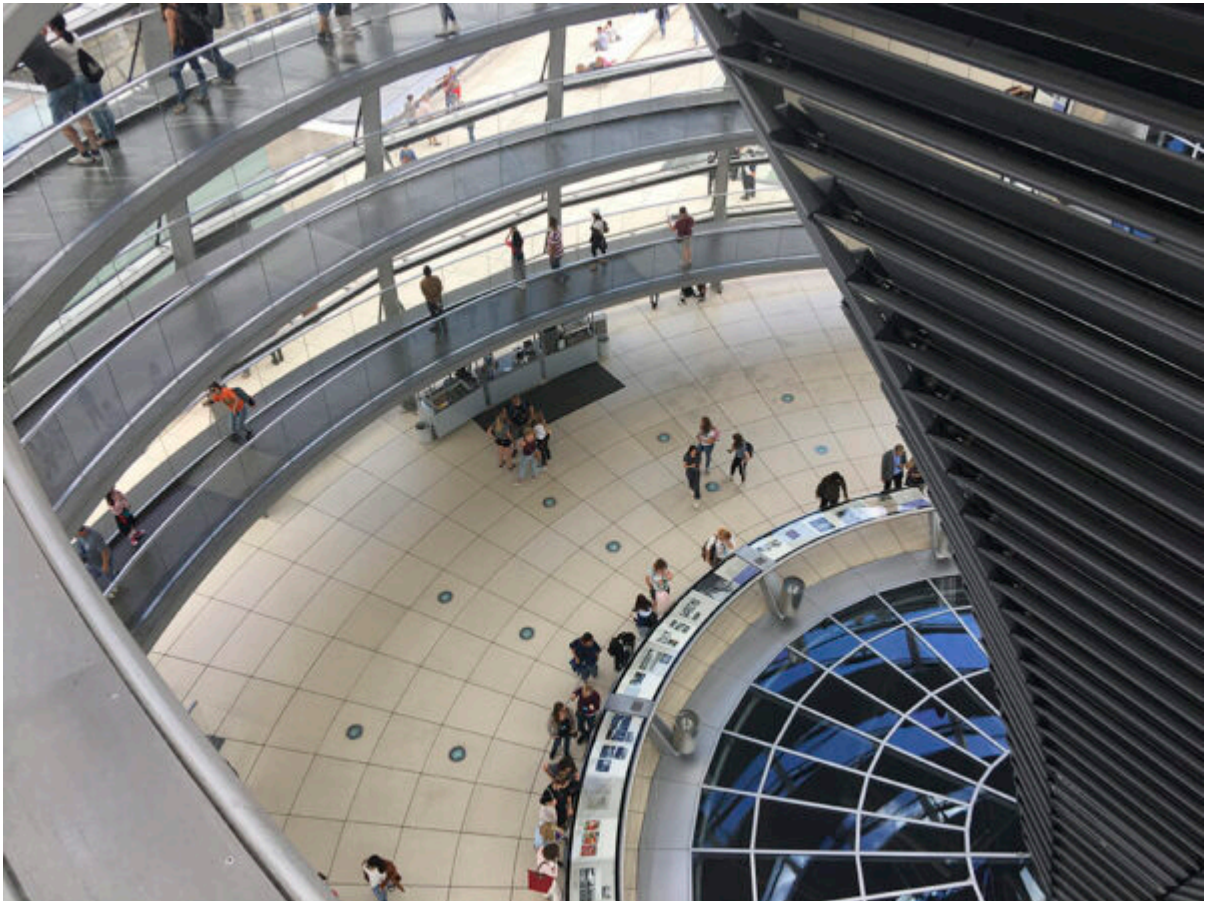
The dome can be climbed by a vertiginous double-helix made of two lightweight steel ramps, which years later inspired Foster for his design of London's City Hall.



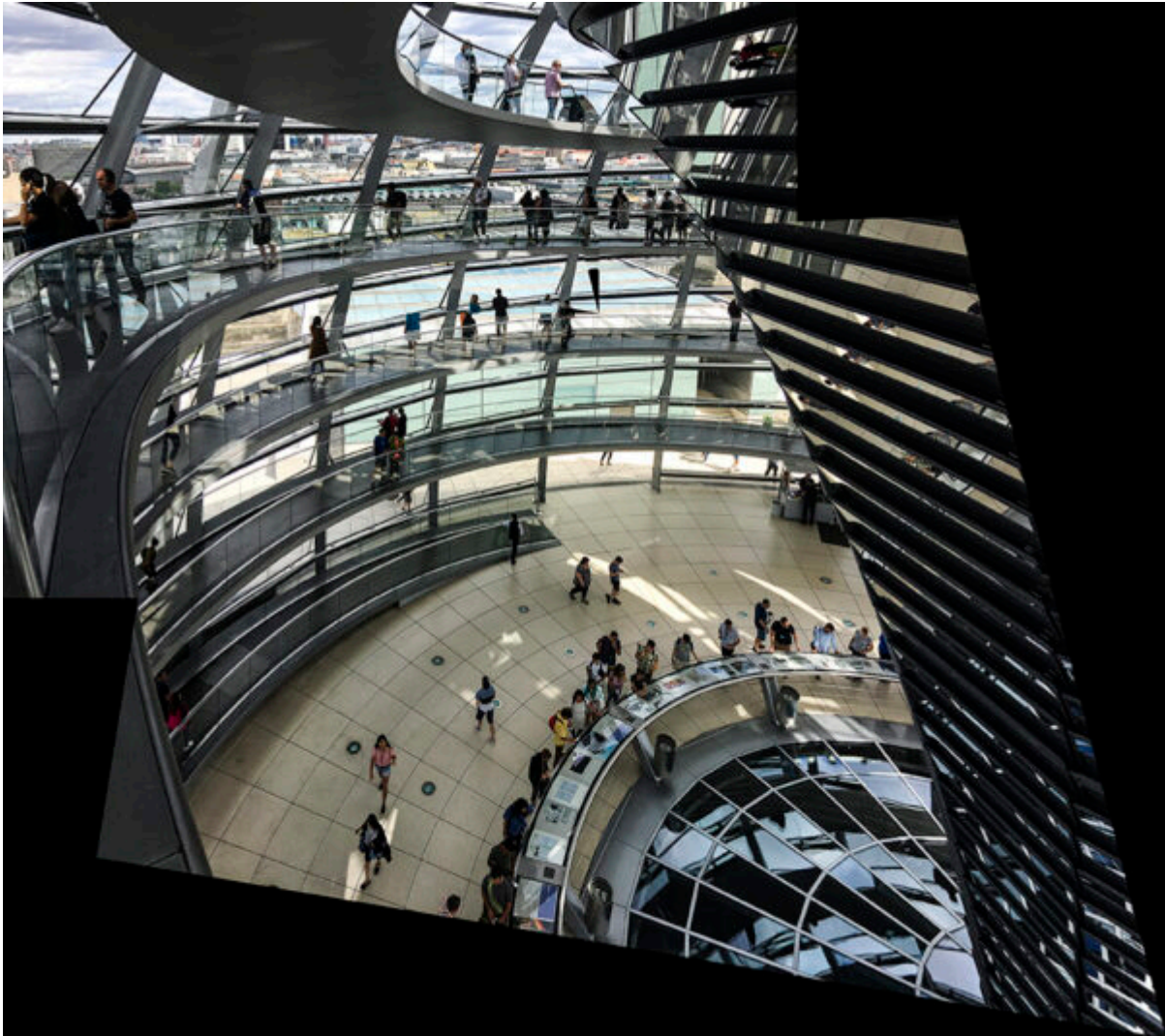
Reichstag Dome



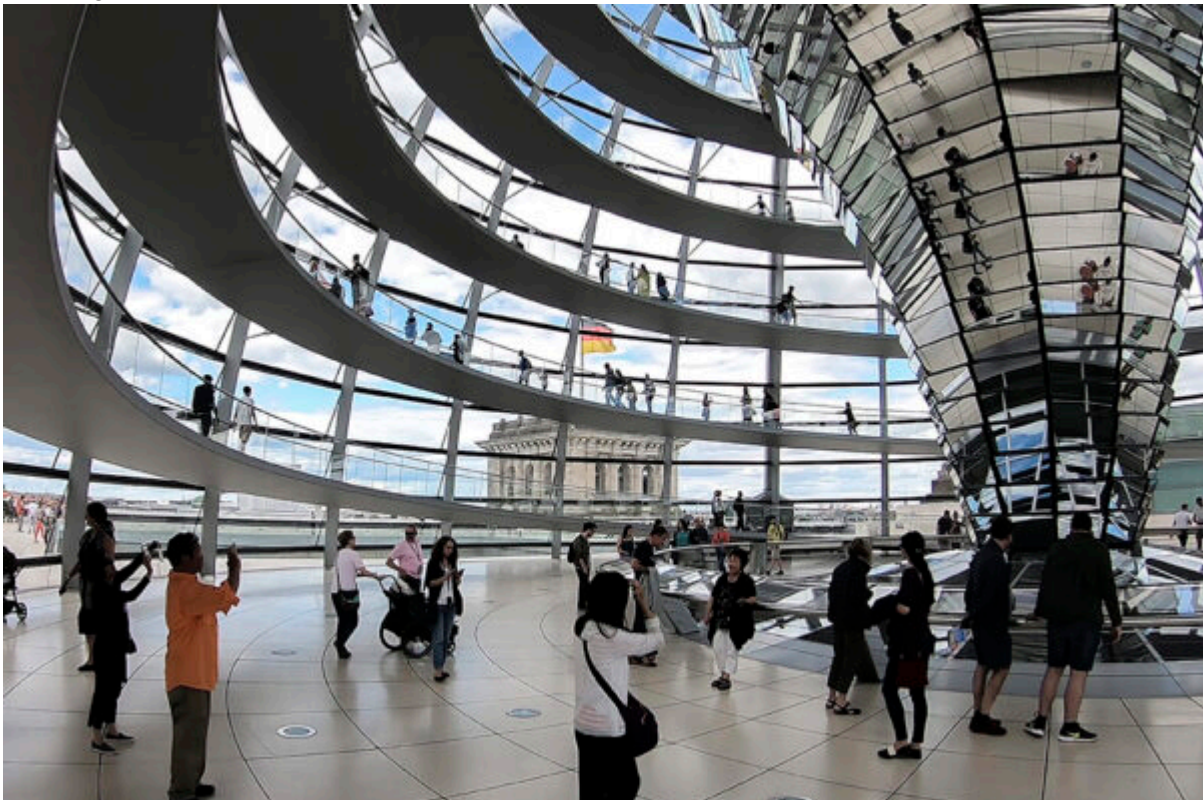
Reichstag Dome



Reichtag Dome



Reichstag Dome



Reichstag Dome



Reichtag Dome

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

Designed by architect Peter Eisenman, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is a vast field of concrete slabs in the historic heart of Berlin, which before the Nazis came to power, had the largest Jewish population in Germany. Paradoxically, the monument is a few hundred yards from the site of Hitler's bunker.

No other country had erected a monument to "the biggest crime in its history" in the middle of its capital, Wolfgang Thierse, the president of Germany's parliament, said during its inauguration. Covered with 2,711 concrete slabs or stelae, arranged in a grid pattern on a sloping field, the project was designed to produce an uneasy, confusing atmosphere. The whole memorial aims to represent a supposedly ordered system that has lost touch with human reason. An attached underground "Place of Information" holds the names of approximately 3 million Jewish Holocaust victims, obtained from the Israeli museum Yad Vashem.



The Jewish Museum

The Jewish Museum in Berlin is the masterwork of the Polish-born musician-turned-architect Daniel Libeskind. The zinc-clad structure is designed to create a sense of disorientation, interspersed with feelings of claustrophobia and panic. Corridors tilt, cross and funnel to nothingness. The world outside is glimpsed only occasionally through slit windows.

Libeskind's building has no entrances or exits of its own. There are promises of doors, but they turn out to be dead ends. Nothing now is soothing. Every edge is jagged, every corridor

unremitting. The floors slope. The concrete walls oppress. You are not in charge of your own destiny.

Libeskind has expressed the hope that his creation would “communicate memory across receding distances and deletions, across a landscape both vivid and imaginary, across light, both dim and exhilarating”.

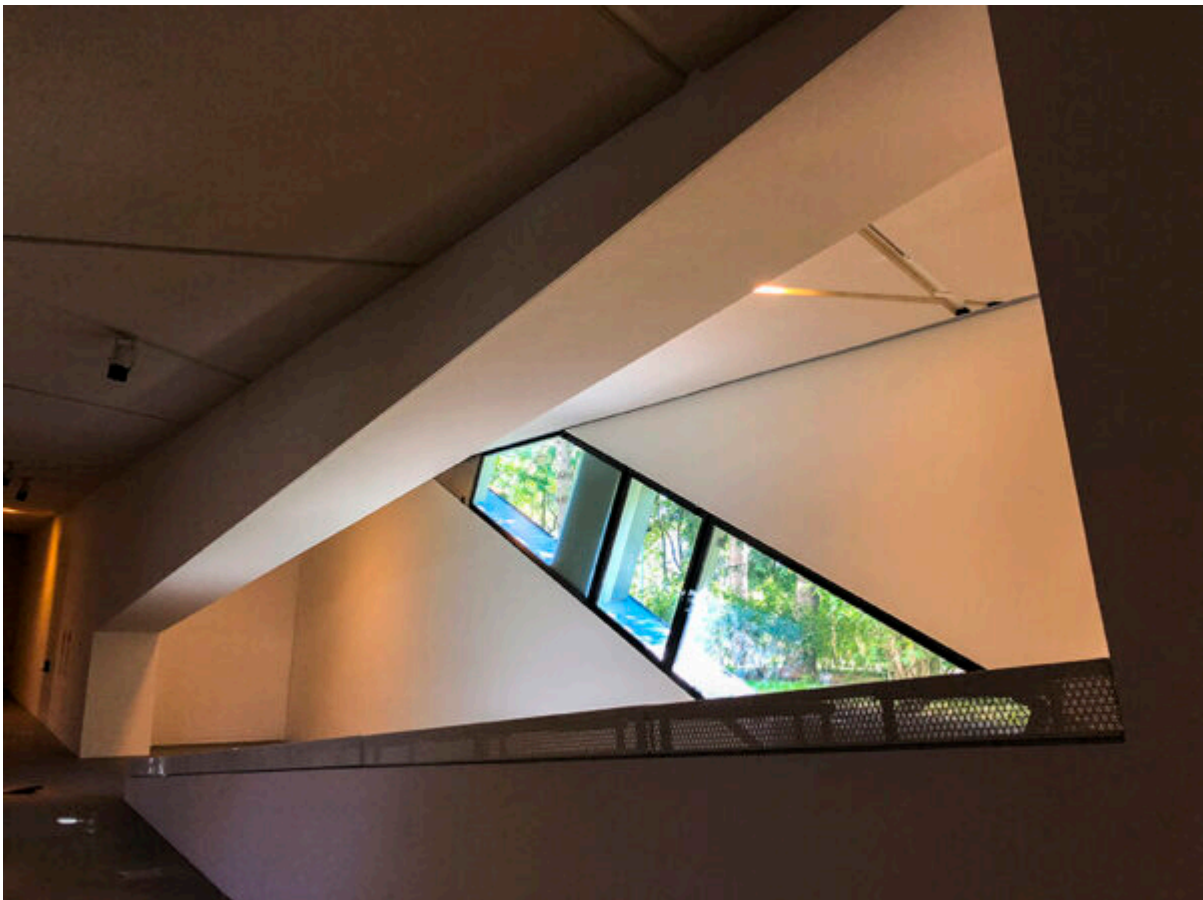
The Garden of Exile denies us the relaxation we expect of a garden. It is a plantation of concrete columns from which Russian olive trees cascade. Nothing is as it should be here. The ground won't stay still, and the sky itself appears displaced. People wander this disconcerting garden a long time, uneasy and reflective. Walking here might not teach us the experience of exile – how could it? – but it parts us momentarily from ourselves and reminds us of the fragility of the familiar. You certainly come back out on to the street sadder and wiser than when you entered.



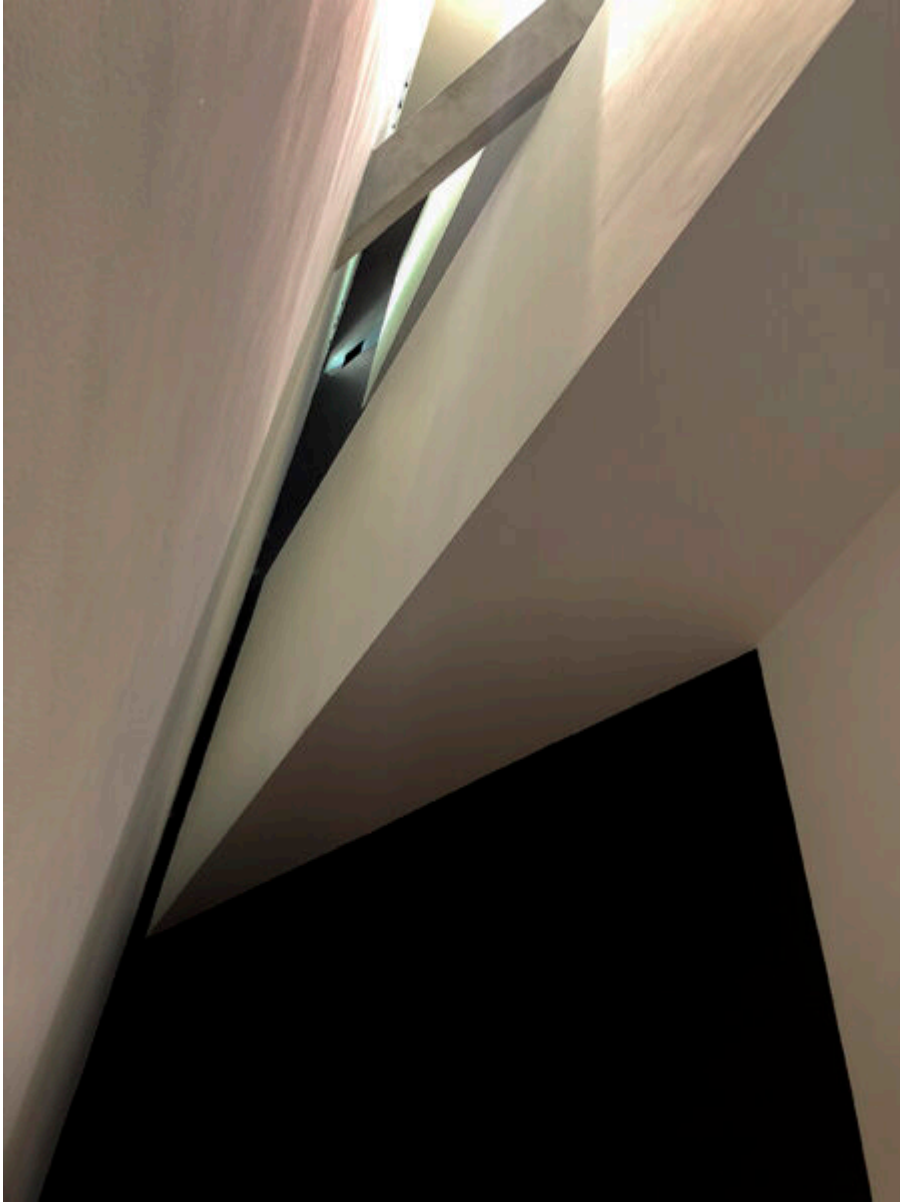
Jewish Museum



Jewish Museum



Jewish Museum



Jewish Museum



Jewish Museum



Jewish Museum

Sony Center and Potsdamer Platz

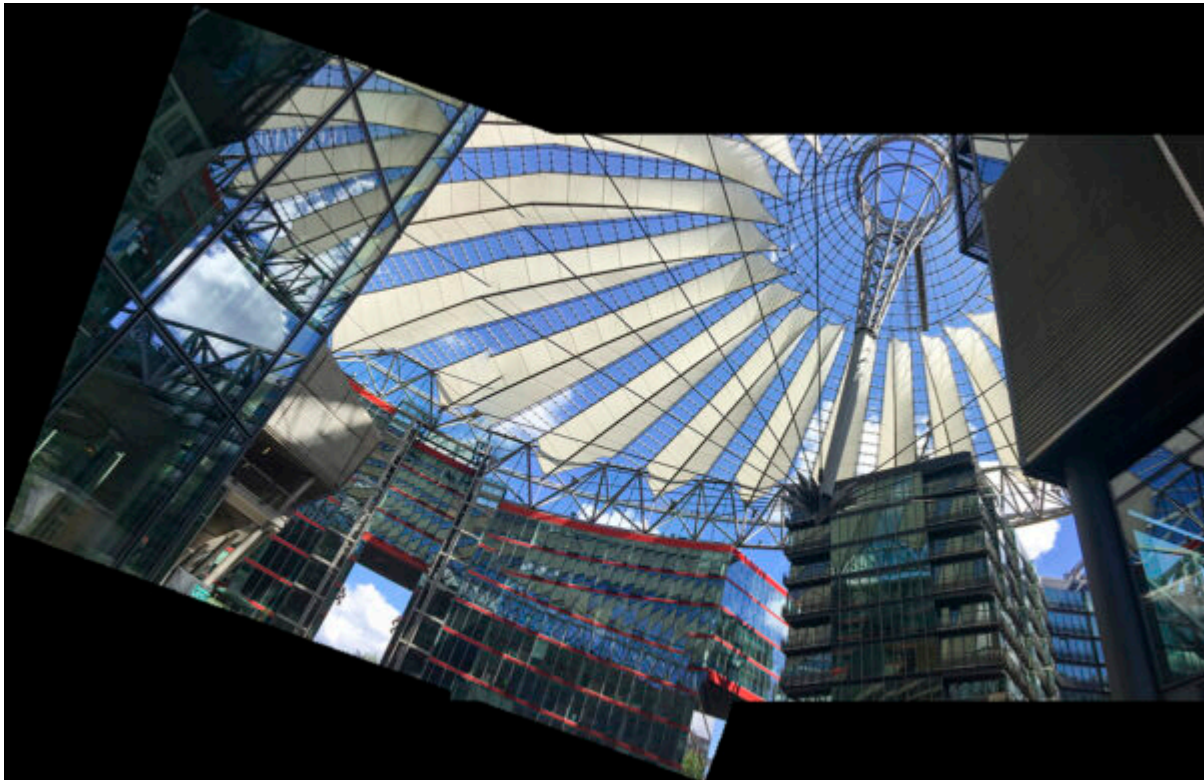
The Sony Center, designed by Helmut Jahn and Peter Walker as landscape architect, is one of the most impressive public spaces in Berlin. Its roof structure is iconic and came to symbolize the whole Potsdamer Platz itself. It is one of the few buildings in the area which offers a public plaza which is always lively and happening. It is the star of the show. Its huge atrium covered by an umbrella-shaped roof contains a cinema, a shop selling Sony gadgets, and the remains of the ground floor of the old Esplanade Hotel.

Potsdamer Platz, an important public square and traffic intersection in the center of Berlin, about a thousand yards south of the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag, is the result of extensive competitions, designs, and planning. Nineteen of the buildings in the area were conceived and designed by an international team of architects headed by Renzo Piano.

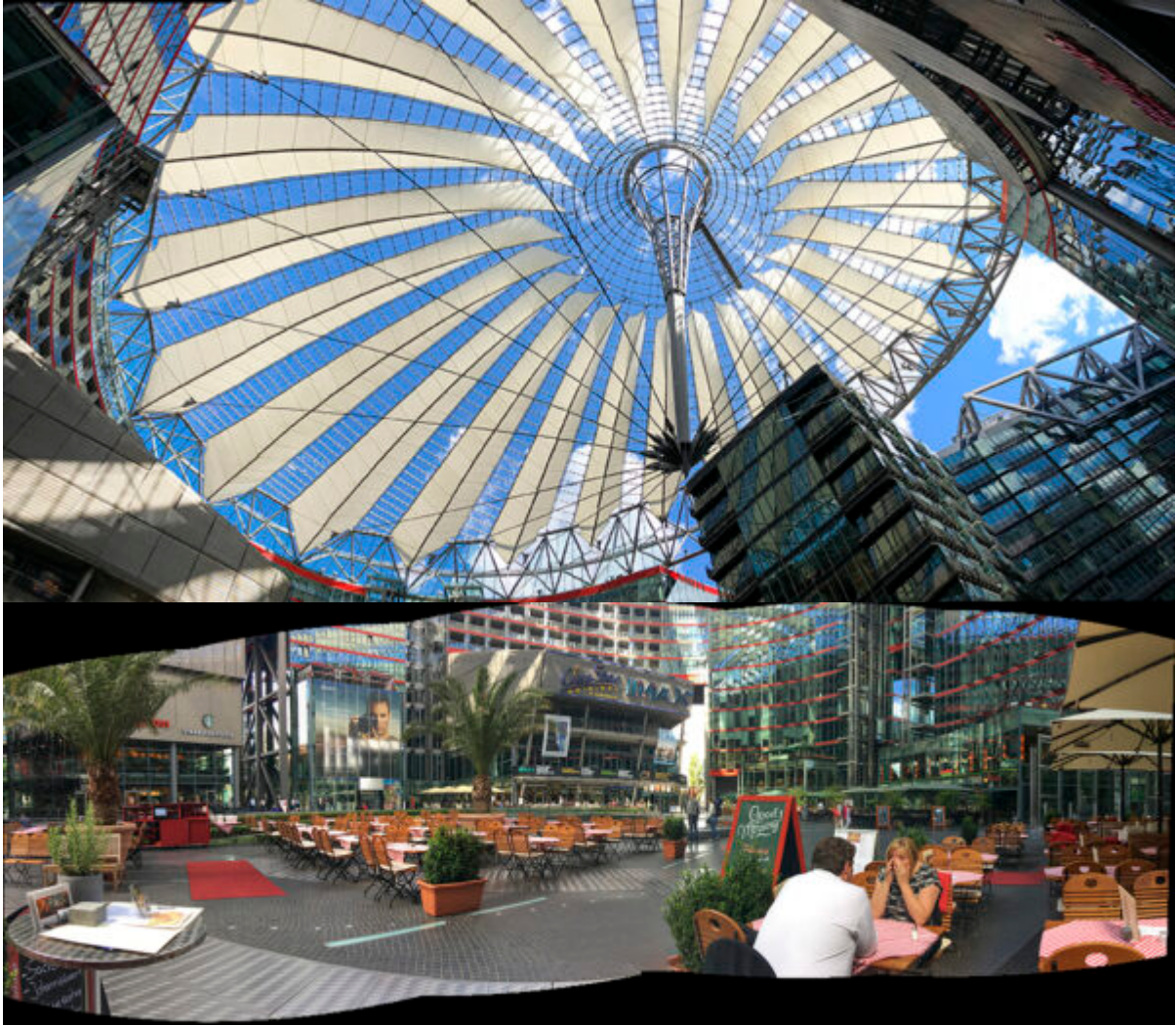
Renzo Piano's master plan for the area called for typical Berlin blocks courtyard buildings with a maximum height of 9 stories. British architect Richard Rogers designed a project on commission from Daimler Chrysler. It contains offices in the first two blocks and residential in the last block. Retail functions occupy on the ground and lower floors. Rogers reinterpreted the constraints and designed courtyard buildings with an eroded corner. This would open up the courtyard, allowing sunlight to reach in and air to circulate through. The courtyard is then covered with a transparent membrane to provide climatic control.



Sony Center



Sony Center



Sony Center





Sony Center

Berlin Philharmonic

The Berlin Philharmonic is Hans Scharoun's most important work, the embodiment of organic architecture principles, in which the buildings are designed from within. In this case, the built form reflects and establishes a balance with the music contained within.

The main hall presents a vineyard-style arrangement of the stage and audience, with terraces rising around a central orchestral platform. This feature led to the tent-like design of the hall's ceiling, with a higher center draping down towards the edges; a move also reflected on the building's outside appearance.

The sequences of spaces leading to the hall play with tension and release. Low, small entrance areas lead to a vast, multi-layered foyer. Here, stairs in all directions, movements up and down, and a multiplicity of shapes play with the visitor's senses. A smaller corridor leading to the hall damps the excitement and builds expectation which is then rewarded by the spectacular hall.



Berlin Philharmonic – Architect: Hans Scharoun



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German Historical Museum Extension Hall

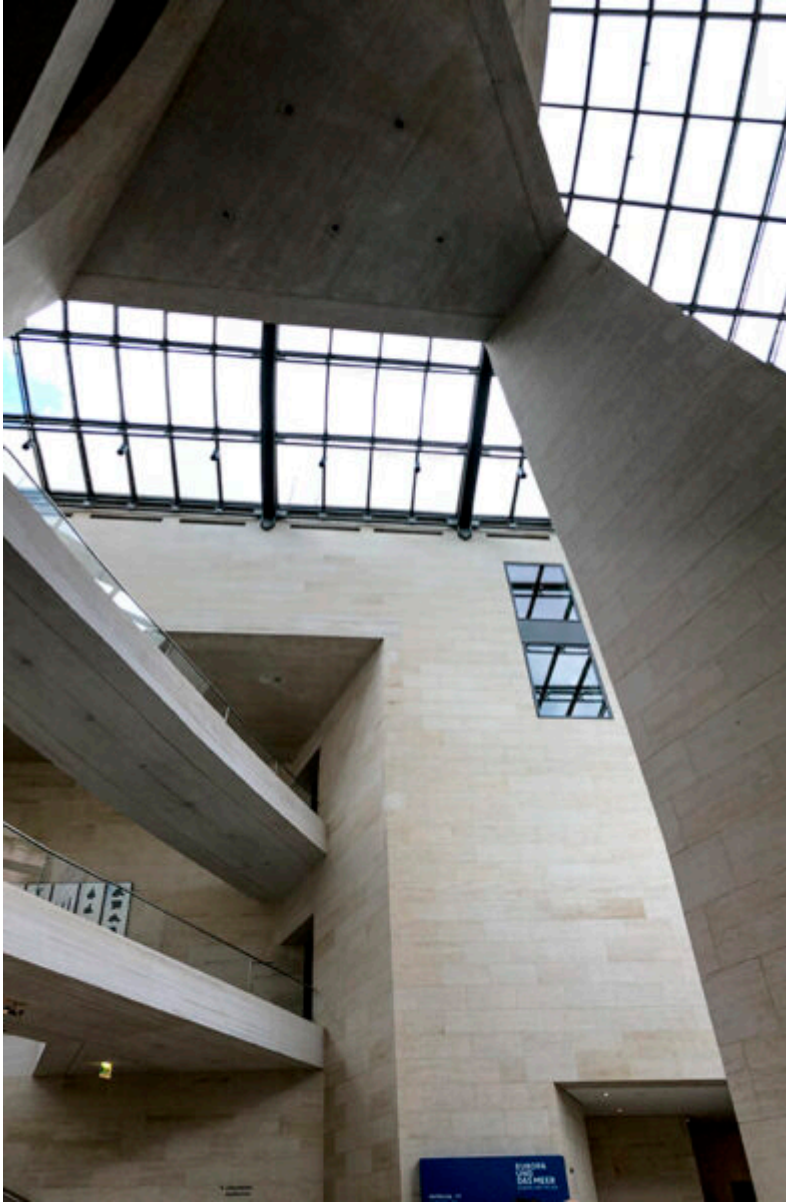
Chinese-born, U.S.-based architect Ieoh Ming Pei designed a small extension to the German Historical Museum. The four floors of the Exhibition Hall are devoted to the Museum's temporary exhibitions. Pei said the project presented him with three challenges: the new building had to be integrated into the classical ensemble around it, it had to be connected with the baroque architecture of the German Historical Museum, and lastly, it had to be a magnet for visitors.



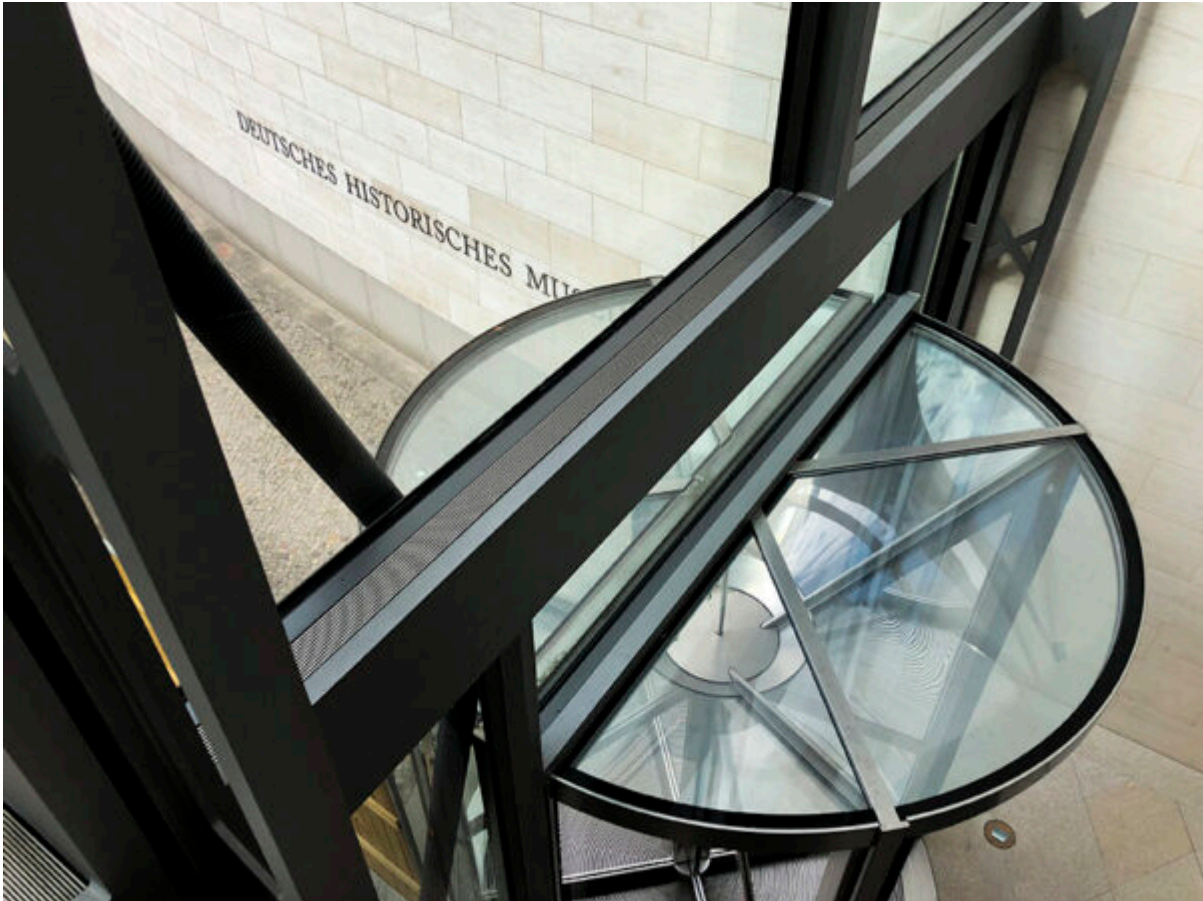
German Historical Museum – Addition by I. M. Pei



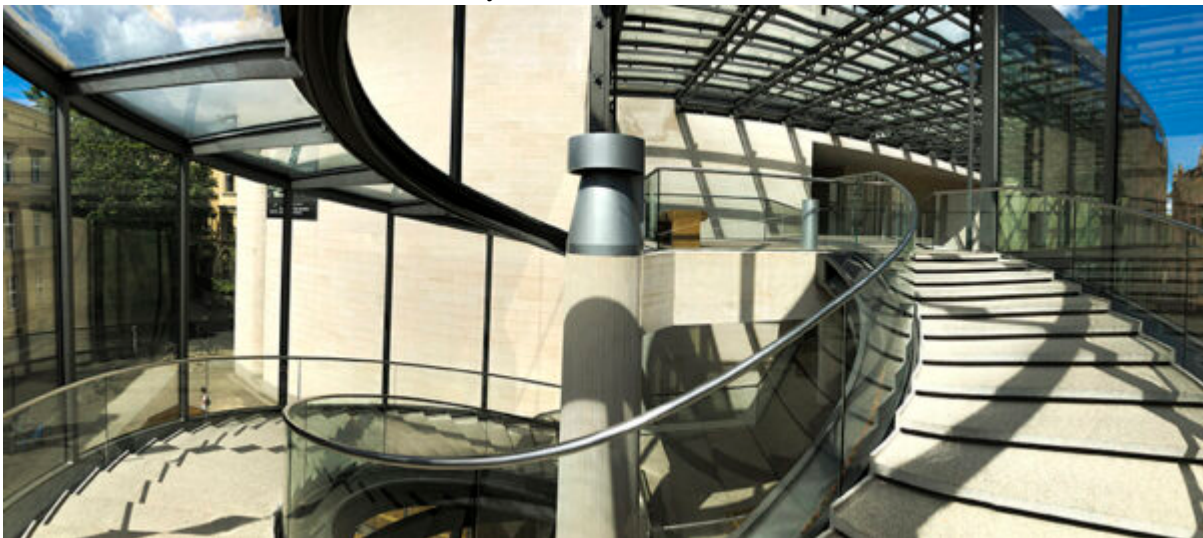
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German Historical Museum – Addition by I. M. Pei

DZ Bank

The DZ Bank building is an office, conference, and residential building designed by Frank Gehry. Located at Pariser Platz, the bank has an austere classical facade which reflects historic forms and materials. The inside of the building forms a contrast to this. The large hall is covered by a vaulted glass roof in the form of a fish. The jewel of the building can be found in the center of this hall: a sculpture made of brushed high-grade steel, which is simultaneously the skin of the conference room for around 80 persons. Room for events with up to 500 guests is provided by the forum in the basement.



A City in Flux

Thirty years after the fall of the Wall, Berlin still struggles with its urban form. It is a city in flux, complicated, with an urban fabric that seems to resist all attempts to reorder it, a reminder of the more messy, contradictory and organic qualities that all cities should have but are elsewhere being replaced by homogeneous commercialism and more extreme segregation of rich and poor. It becomes charming, full of life and the envy of other cities, not for its beauty or its wealth, but because of its vitality.

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