Art spaces in the German capital are enlisting the help of architects to re-develop the city’s historic locations and change contemporary ideas about the white cube in the process.
Berlin’s cultural landscape is changing. A mere glance at the city’s cranes filled skyline confirms it. This March, Frank Gehry’s Pierre Boulez Saal Concert Hall opened to unanimous praise, and the nearby Staatsoper (state opera) is currently undergoing major renovation. Moreover, the contemporary art world is following suit, albeit in a different manner. Rather than imposing further additions to the sprawling urban center, many galleries are choosing to install themselves in Berlin’s underappreciated post-war relics, employing the subtle skills of architects to help achieve their vision. By regenerating forgotten structures like military bunkers, airfields and diplomatic buildings, they’re also offering new ways for audiences to view and engage with art.

With the advent of a diverse range of artistic practices such as virtual and augmented reality, the clean and socially-coded framework of the white cube seems dated. Recent exhibitions in Berlin prove this: their immersive environments pushing the boundaries of which’s expected of video art. “Dream Journal’66’16” by Jon Rafman at Sprüth Magers in September included sculptural seating with built in 3D vibrations tuned to the video’s narrative. Meanwhile, Hanne Lippard’s Kw exhibition “Flash” in January and Sol Calero’s Preis der Nationalgalerie nominated “Amazonas’ Shopping Center” at Hamburger Bahnhof have both used elements of set design in their shows. These new demands on the exhibition format require new spatial strategies. But how does one achieve this? Architect Johanna Meyer-Grohbrügge has some suggestions.

Responsible for two recently-launched Berlin art spaces – the Julia Stoschek Collection (JSC) in Mitte, and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler (KTZ) in Kreuzberg – Meyer-Grohbrügge is at the forefront of this transformation. When asked how she grapples with the demands of her clients, she says that her main aim is “to design spaces that artists, gallerists and curators can interact with and even change. The space should challenge them without dictating anything, but rather give them different possibilities” – Johanna Meyer-Grohbrügge

“Another champion of minimalism is British architect John Pawson. He recently transformed a WW2 telecommunications bunker in the German capital into a home for Destri Feurie’s private collections. Opened in 2016, the owner collaborated with Pawson on the design, creating a holistic spatial experience that is itself a work of art. They subsequently decided to stratify the space into distinct cultural zones: the ground floor, for instance, is dedicated to contemporary art - last year it hosted the Berlin Biennale. Elsewhere, Feurie’s interest in ancient Chinese and Southeast Asian art and furniture is presented on shelves system for the Slavs and Tatar collective’s work “Reading an interdisciplinary dialogue that could push the white cube beyond its traditional Chinese incense culture, and the Lake Room provides the museum’s hearing using a geothermal pump. The Sound Room, for instance, features compositions by John Cage, whereas the Incense room is dedicated to traditional Chinese incense culture, and the Lake Room provides the museum’s hearing using a geothermal pump.

Given the nature of the concrete bunker, the task of envisioning these spaces wasn’t easy. “On the one hand, achieving this subtle form of engagement represented a challenge,” says Pawson. “But I could also instinctively see how light and shadow would play a critical part in shaping both the interior landscape and the choreography of moving around within it.” Thus, rather than acting as a backdrop, the Feurie Collection’s architecture functions in dialogue with the works it houses. Sculptures on pedestals - these ‘introverted’ artworks - are thrown into relief by the use of dim spotlights in the darkened rooms, casting elegant shadows. Here viewpoints are integral to the experience - a true gesamtkunstwerk.

A similar renovation was undertaken at Berlin’s St. Agnes, a Brutalist church designed by architect Werner Düttmann in 1967, which has been the headquarters of König Galerie since 2013. The firm responsible for this makeover was Brandlhuber, who had to contend with strict heritage laws surrounding the historic building. As such, their sole intervention consisted of a concrete floor giving the high-ceilinged church an additional level. The first floor has since played host to several stimulating exhibitions, in which the formerly ecclesiastical surroundings have lent the artworks a new sense of importance.

What many of these exhibition spaces have in common is a tendency toward subtlety and flexibility – qualities shared by performance-focused venues. The new director of Volksbühne Berlin, one of the city’s most prestigious theatres, recently commissioned Francie Krér (the architect of the 2017 Serpentine Pavilion) to create a stage for actors inside the former Tempelhofer Airport building. Since October 2015, the 95-year-old airport has served as an emergency shelter for over 8000 refugees. With this fraught context in mind, as well as a local referendum in which residents voted against new buildings on the former airport, Krér is in the process of developing a theatre accessible to different audiences.

Set on wheels and surrounded by a semi-transparent white textile, Krér’s wooden stage design is humble compared to the monumental architecture of Tempelhofer. Emerging from inside the site’s hangar, the structure can be placed on tarma, but may only accessed from inside the old airport. Due to the aforementioned prohibition against construction in the park, the theatre is required to remain in the vicinity of the old building. Despite this, the mobility of Krér’s design promotes inclusiveness, making it less imposing than its institutional partner. “The ultimate goal of the project is to foster a new type of theatre experience conducive to collaboration, improvisation, and communication,” says the architect. “The barriers between audiences and artists should literal- ly and metaphorically dismantle, promoting inclusiveness through ver- bal and non-verbal exchanges. This new architecture will offer the di verse community a physical, tangible, and direct experience of theatre, dance and music outside the boundaries of a traditional theatre setting.”

Architects frequently face obstacles like planning regulations and her- itage laws. However, few have used these as cues for such deft and nuanced designs as those transforming the German metropolis’s me dia-centric galleries and theatres. Indeed, architecture’s foray into the art world is itself a prompt for exercising new spatial strategies, begin- ning an interdisciplinary dialogue that could push the white cube be yond its traditionally stark and supposedly neutral format. If the num ber of architectural projects at the fringes of Berlin’s contemporary art scene is any indication, this might just be the case.
Installation view of The Feuerle Collection.

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Daniel Turner, Particle Processed Cafeteria, 2016, KÖNIG GALERIE
KÖNIG GALERIE, St. Agnes, architect Arno Brandlhuber

(Top left) Installation view of The Feuerle Collection.
(Bottom left) Installation view of The Feuerle Collection.
(Top right) Daniel Turner, Particle Processed Cafeteria, 2016, KÖNIG GALERIE
KÖNIG GALERIE, St. Agnes, architect Arno Brandlhuber