

The New Art Architecture Complex



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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

Text by Alison Hugill

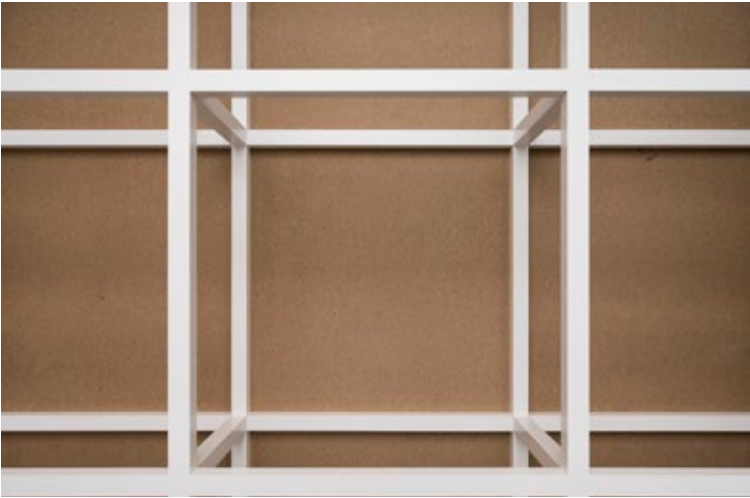
Berlin’s cultural landscape is changing. A mere glance at the city’s crane-filled skyline confirms it. This March, Frank Gehry’s Pierre Boulez Saal Concert Hall opened to unanimous praise, and the nearby Staatsoper (‘state opera’) is currently undergoing major renovation. Moreover, the contemporary art 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 what’s expected of video-art. “Dream Journal ’16-’17” by Jon Rafman at Sprüth Magers in September included sculptural seating with built-in 4D vibrations tuned to the video’s narrative. Meanwhile, Hanne Lippard’s KW exhibition “Flesh” 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.” Opened in 2016, JSC concentrates on the moving image but straddles various disciplines: not only video, single and multiple projections of analog and digital film material, multimedia environments as well as computer and internet-based installations, but also ephemeral art forms, such as performances. Based in the former GDR-era Czech cultural center, Meyer-Grohbrügge’s design for the art space has preserved the building’s original appearance while adjusting its aesthetic with soft furnishings. For example, instead of plastering them, the architect chose to finish the walls with thick, pleated white curtains. This ensures the gallery’s rooms are infinitely adjustable and do not impede exhibits requiring different types of illumination.

Meyer-Grohbrügge used some of these ideas when imagining the premises of KTZ. With a roster of young conceptual artists working at the interstices of philosophy and art, the gallery also needed a space that could respond to a diversity of gatherings, including lecture series and conferences. Addressing this, Meyer-Grohbrügge also implemented curtains separating areas, as well as a modular white wooden shelving system for the Slavs and Tatar collective’s work “Reading Room”. The open structures dividing the spaces are used, on the one hand, for everyday purposes – bookshelves, storage, kitchen facilities, etc. – and at the same time for showing art,” the designer explains.

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Gallery Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, architecture by Meyer-Grohbrügge,



Gallery Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, architecture by Meyer-Grohbrügge, artwork by Alexander Carver

(Top left) Photo by Thomas Meyer-Ostkreuz; (Bottom left) Photo by Thomas Meyer-Ostkreuz; (Top right and bottom right) Photo by Jan Bitter

“They can support a white background if needed, provide a vitrine, a space for technical equipment or create connections between the exhibitions. [They] will look different with each show depending on the concept of the artist and gallerists.”

Another champion of minimalism is British architect John Pawson. He recently transformed a WW2 telecommunications bunker in the German capital into a home for Desiré Feuerle’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 Biennial. Elsewhere, Feuerle’s interest in ancient Chinese and Southeast Asian art and furniture is presented on



Julia Stoschek Collection, architecture by Meyer-Grohbrügge



Julia Stoschek Collection, architecture by Meyer-Grohbrügge

the floors below, where they run parallel to three themed chambers, each with their own purpose. 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 heating 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 Feuerle 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 2015. 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 stunning exhibitions, in which the formerly ecclesiastical surroundings have lent the artworks a near-holy quality.

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 Francis Kéré (the architect of the 2017 Serpentine Pavilion) to create a stage for actors inside the former Tempelhof Airport building. Since October 2015, the 93-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 airfield, Kéré is in the process of developing a theatre accessible to different audiences.

Set on wheels and surrounded by a semi-transparent white textile, Kéré’s wooden stage design is humble compared to the monumental architecture of Tempelhof. Emerging from inside the site’s hangar, the structure can be placed on tarmac, but may only accessed from inside the old airport. Due to the aforementioned prohibition against construction in the park, the theater is required to remain in the vicinity of the building. Despite this, the mobility of Kéré’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 literally and metaphorically dismantle, promoting inclusiveness through verbal and non-verbal exchanges. This new architecture will offer the diverse 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 heritage laws. However, few have used these as cues for such deft and nuanced designs as those transforming the German metropolis’s media-centric galleries and theatres. Indeed, architecture’s foray into the art world is itself a prompt for exercising new spatial strategies, beginning an interdisciplinary dialogue that could push the white cube beyond its traditionally stark and supposedly neutral format. If the number of architectural firms taking on projects at the fringes of Berlin’s contemporary art scene is any indication, this might just be the case.



(Top left) Photo copyright Gilbert McCarragher; (Bottom left) Photo by Roman März, copyright The Feuerle Collection



(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