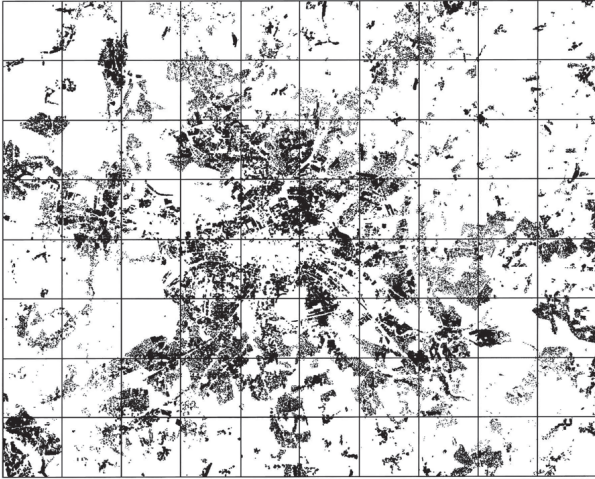
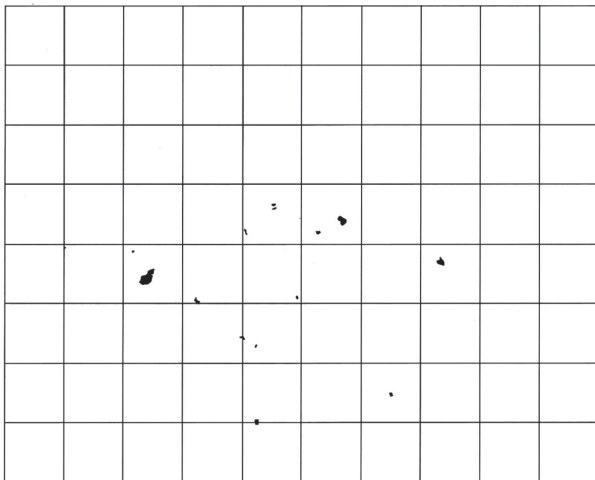


THE NEGATIVE ACROPOLIS

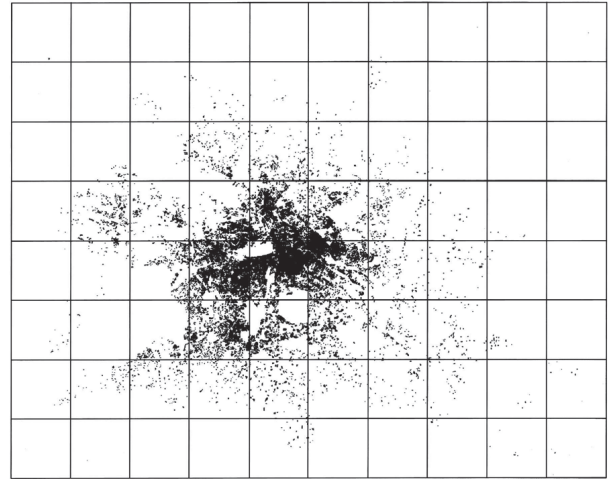


Berlin 1945: In WW II, hundreds of allied bomb raids had turned Berlin into a „Landscape of War“.

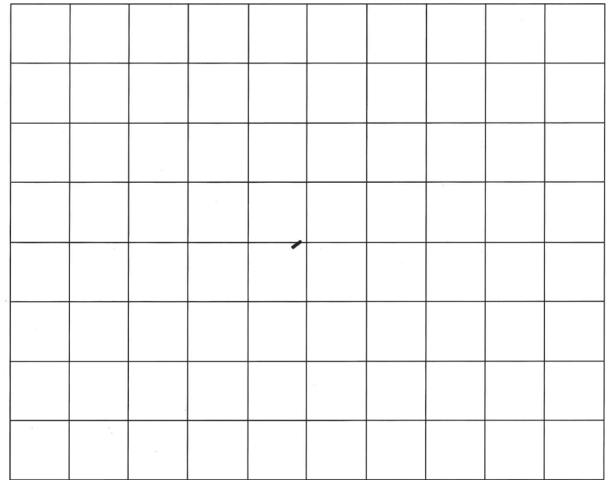


The 55 million cubic meters of rubble were piled up in an series of suburban „Rubble Hills“.

THE HOUSE OF WAR COMPETITION

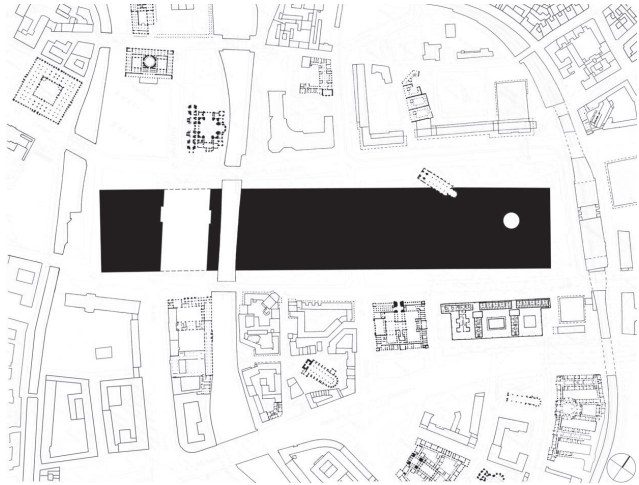


The „Field of Rubble“: Nearly one third of the city, including most of its historical center, was destroyed or severely damaged.



The „Negative Acropolis“ is a monument of that rubble, and of „The Discomfort in Culture“.

THE NEGATIVE ACROPOLIS



plan

THE HOUSE OF WAR COMPETITION

„Prepare to make the fantastic assumption that the city is not only a human inhabitation but also a psychical entity with a similarly rich and substantial past where all that has ever been in existence has never perished, and parallel to its latest phase of development, all earlier incarnations remain.“

Sigmund Freud
The Discomfort in Culture



longitudinal section



cross section

Text: Maik Seidel, Daniel Schütz

The City, the Rubble, and the Color Black: Strategies against Urbanism

War is the continuation of politics by other means.
Karl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz

Politics is the continuation of war by other means.
Michel Foucault

The project "The Negative Acropolis" explores the relationship between war and urbanism. The destruction of a city employs the same strategic intelligence needed to build a city, only with the opposite intention. One relates to the other. This correlation between destruction and creation is part of what Freud called "The Discomfort in Culture". The Negative Acropolis is the monument of this discomfort.

The City of the Gods

When the Persians sacked Athens in their failed attempt to conquer Greece, they destroyed the first Parthenon on the Acropolis, which was then still under construction. The Acropolis, despite its original purpose as a fortress, had been abandoned by the Athenians who had retreated to Salamis. This tactical move proved successful: The invading Persian army was eventually defeated by the alliance of Greek city-states, leading to a period of Athenian hegemony. During this "Golden Age of Athens" under Pericles, the Acropolis was rebuilt as a city of the gods. The new temples were built on top of the old, the ruins of the first Parthenon becoming the foundation of the building we know today. While the religious and practical purposes of the Acropolis are long obsolete, its temples remain monuments to an epochal military victory, a founding event of Western civilization.

Landscape of War

In 1945, Berlin was the final stage in one of Western civilization's biggest crises. The war had returned to the place from where it had been initiated. Hundreds of allied bomb raids had turned the city into a field of rubble, leaving nearly one third of Berlin, including most of its historical center, destroyed or severely damaged.

Berlin was of course neither the first nor the last city to be destroyed in a war; it shares this experience with many great cities, Athens being no exception. However, in Berlin the rubble did not become the foundation of a new city. Instead, the rubble was hauled away like waste, transported to the outskirts and piled up in a series of suburban "Rubble Hills". The physical density of the rubble hills corresponded inversely with the fragmentation of the razed city center. In an almost tragicomic way, the rubble hills surround the city like new commander's hills.

The City of Patricide

After 1945, Berlin gradually transformed into the landscape of a new war, this time a cold one. Its most prominent urban features were the wall and its accompanying death strip. Rebuilding the city became a competition between two political systems. Ideological differences notwithstanding, East and West remained united in their ambition to redesign the city from scratch. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the latest urbanistic models were implemented more radically than elsewhere, turning Berlin into a patchwork of incomplete ideal cities. However, the new was never built on top of the old, but was always meant to replace it. This attitude, which is prevalent until this day, has done more damage to the city than any bomb raids. The most notorious example is the demolition of the baroque Royal Palace by the East German government, and its replacement with a new representative building, the "Palace of the Republic". After reunification the "Palace of the Republic" was itself demolished, and is to be replaced by a replica of the old Royal Palace in the future. The reversal of the real or perceived mistakes of 20th century urbanism, not only in the former socialist part of the city, has dominated the architectural and planning policies for the last two decades. The preferred method of fixing mistakes is, once again, to erase them. This oedipal obsession has a long tradition in Berlin: Destroy the heritage of your predecessors. Start with their most original work. Ignore the mediocre examples, which are allowed to stay as a warning for future generations. As a result, Berlin is a city deeply committed to its own failures: A city of negative monuments.

The Empty Center

The war, the holocaust and the other Nazi crimes are well documented and memorialized in Berlin. But the city is increasingly oblivious about its own destruction. At first, the magnitude of the destruction was evident. Today, Berlin tries hard to look as if nothing ever happened. Even the rubble hills are undistinguishable from natural hills and serve as public parks: Great places for skiing or paragliding. However, the discomfort is still present. In a few places the gaps left by the destruction have not yet been filled. Nowhere is the emptiness more tangible than in the center of the city, around the now vacant site of the Royal Palace and the Palace of the Republic, and the former medieval city center across the river Spree. The nucleus of the city is now a vast open space dominated by the TV tower, the church of St. Mary, and the city hall, a surreal ensemble of towers. The name- and meaninglessness of this space is typically attributed to its lack of history – it has replaced the lost "historical" center. This interpretation misses the point, as the very existence of the space is the result of important historical events: The destruction of the city during (and after) the war.

Total Rubble

“The Negative Acropolis” proposes to bring all the rubble of the war back into the city, and pile it up in its empty center. The bomb raids have left behind an estimated 55 million cubic meters of rubble, about 21 times the mass of the Cheops pyramid. The project avoids the selective reuse of rubble for new construction. The rubble, result of a “Total War”, is used in its totality - and treated as a huge anonymous mass. This reflects the character of 20th century warfare. The individual warrior has been replaced by a soldier, an anonymous body in case of his death. Similarly, the rubble is not neutral matter, but consists of deceased architecture, rendered anonymous by the destruction. Through its relocation to the city center, the rubble regains its significance and its dignity while maintaining its anonymity.

Concentrated on the site with its given dimensional constraints, the rubble mass translates into a block 880 meters long, 190 meters wide, and 350 meters high. The drawings show the mass as a crisp cuboid volume, an abstract “architectural” object. A few existing buildings are wholly or partly within its boundaries and buried by the rubble: The TV tower, the church of St. Mary, and the site of the former Royal Palace / Palace of the Republic. These solitary, formerly freestanding buildings are now isolated voids within the solid mass. An arm of the river runs right through it in an artificial gorge. There is no design beyond defining the overall shape of this massive object. How the loose rubble is contained in its crisp shape, and how the enormous loads are dealt with, remains unanswered in this stage of the project. Design is not the intention here.

The Negative Acropolis

The scale of the rubble volume resembles that of a geological formation, a suprematist version of an Acropolis hill rising above the city. The assembly of solitary buildings, now voids, seen against the neutral background of the solid mass resembles the plan of the Athenian Acropolis, with its solitary structures on the neutral ground of the plateau above the city. It is as if the temples had sunken into the rock that was meant to support them, and the rock has partly sunken into the ground. Unlike Athens, Berlin has no foundations. It was built on sand (and blood), both literally and metaphorically. On the Athenian Acropolis, the buildings interact in carefully composed relationships, while the Acropolis as a whole communicates with the hills of the surrounding landscape. In the flat plain of Berlin, the Negative Acropolis has no neighboring hills to communicate with. Inside, the solid mass has voided all relationships between its buildings in the most radical way possible. The urban space has been occupied/annihilated by the rubble. There is no space left.

Paint it Black

The drawings are strictly black on white, like a text. There is a direct coherence between form and content in the graphical presentation. The erratic way the black rectangle appears on the background of the city evokes associations with Kubrick’s monolith, with its mysterious appearances marking evolutionary steps in the history of mankind, its first appearance triggering the invention of weapons and warfare; the black bars used to cover people’s eyes in press photos, to protect their anonymity (a strategy typically applied to both criminals and their victims); the black hole that is so dense that all matter and even the light gravitates towards it, making it invisible; the silence in the John Cage composition, when the instruments have stopped playing; Malevich’s exploration of the limits of painting, the Black Square On White Ground. All of these associations are independent of, but related to, the subject of the project: What they have in common is the use of the (non-)color black. In Western civilization, black is the color of absence and loss, and of mourning, in this case reflecting the loss of life, culture, civilization, architecture. At the same time, black is also the color of presence, as in written language – the black ink on the white paper – and architectural representation of solids (versus void). The black of the rubble relates to the solid walls of the surrounding buildings in a direct and obvious way, and also to the solids in the large-scale drawings; as if the ink used to draw the lost city had been scraped off the paper and concentrated on one sheet. The absent is very much present.

Reduced to the Max

The project can be read as a series of conceptual reductions, each step being more abstract than the previous one. A complex historic event, the destruction of Berlin in World War II, is reduced to one of its phenomenons: The rubble. The rubble with its manifold characteristics is then treated as an arithmetic abstraction of quantities: A mass of 55 million cubic meters, which assumes the form of an architectural solid volume. The solid volume is represented as a black rectangle on the background of an urban setting, on drawings that read as a visual elegy on the color black itself. Each step implies a reduction in content, but an increase in meaning.

Despite the physicality of its subject, the Negative Acropolis addresses the literary dimension of the city rather than its physical reality. There is nothing megalomaniac about it. It is essentially a small project on a large scale: The scale of war.