

Utopian Construction? The Work of Frank Thiel

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“Only skyscrapers under construction reveal the bold constructive thoughts, and then the impression of the high-reaching steel skeletons is overpowering.”

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe¹

“Through emergency after emergency will emerge
Utterly unprecedented adjustments
Which will seem so logical to all the world
As to seem quite natural,
Ergo, permitting, utter change
Which seems like no change at all.
Thus avoiding all opposition.”

R. Buckminster Fuller²



Fig. 1
Flames engulf the Reichstag,
Berlin, Germany,
February 27, 1933



Fig. 2
Yevgeny Khaldei, Soviet Flag on the Portico of the Reichstag,
Berlin, Germany,
May 2, 1945

One is awed by the photographs of Frank Thiel. Their large scale has an immediate impact. And the rigor of the compositions, framed with a precision that appears to hint at a hidden geometric order, is often beguiling. The infinite latticework of construction scaffolding forming a suspended matrix that sections visual space (*Stadt 10/06/A [Berlin]*) (ill. p. 46); the beveled rectangular units of the concrete façade of the Palast-Hotel, stripped down for final demolition (*Stadt 5/23/A [Berlin]*) (ill. pp. 122/123); the jutting, angular object-like masses of newly minted skyscrapers (*Stadt 6/21 [Berlin]*) (ill. p. 60); the all-consuming crosshatch of rebar woven together with the intricacy of lace (*Stadt 2/60 [Berlin]*) (ill. p. 125)—these are some of the images that organize Thiel’s vision. Indeed, confronting such striking visions of city making, one quickly falls under the spell of the subject matter, eyeing the vast construction project that sutures two Germanys and is the symbolic locus of a recently united Europe.

The encompassing body of work that Thiel has produced since the mid-nineties, when he began to focus exclusively on the architectural and urban subject matter of Berlin, traces a building process fraught with political reverberations. Perhaps no other image filters the political nuances of Thiel’s laconic approach better than *Stadt 5/03 (Berlin)* (ill. p. 121), which depicts the gaping central atrium of the Reichstag. The German parliament building, one of the most powerful emblems of Berlin’s complicated passage through the twentieth century, is captured by Thiel in the simultaneous process of destruction and construction. This paradoxical condition encapsulates both the personal and public meanings that circulate in Thiel’s work—an oeuvre that coincides with Berlin’s ascent from divided Cold-War battleground to robust capital of twenty-first-century Germany.

The Reichstag is a unique building imbued with a history that intimately mirrors Germany’s, wracked by “indescribable

catastrophes and ferocious hopes,” to use Andreas Huyssen’s phrase.³ Erected in 1894, the Reichstag served as the original parliament house of the German empire. In February 1933, one month after Hitler came to power, the building was set aflame and so damaged that it could no longer serve its governmental purpose. Presumably this was one of Hitler’s initial acts to compromise democratic elements of the faltering Weimar Republic. The edifice, which was further damaged by Allied bombs, is imprinted in the communal memory of the Second World War because of an iconic photograph that marks the fall of Nazi Germany—the image of Soviet soldiers flying the Red Flag atop the Reichstag’s portico. When Berlin was partitioned, the Reichstag was narrowly sited in West Berlin, actually functioning as a near dividing line. In 1964 a reconstruction was completed, and the refurbished building fulfilled a civic purpose. The Reichstag again functioned as built metaphor of the national character when, on October 3, 1990, it served as the backdrop for the official reunification ceremony that consecrated the joining of the German Democratic Republic with the Federal Republic of Germany. Following the decision to relocate the capital of Germany from Bonn to Berlin, the Reichstag was yet again redesigned, this time by British architect Norman Foster, who conceived it as a transparent governing structure crowned by a spherical glass dome reminiscent of the long-destroyed original (figs. 1 and 2).⁴

Thiel chose to photograph the Reichstag as the nineteen-sixties-era renovation was being ripped out in preparation for Foster’s design. A soaring, fully extended mechanical arm reaches upward to jackhammer a corner pillar. Immediately beside this concrete column a neatly arrayed grid of new construction scaffolding is visible, and a recently erected metal roof crowns the structure. This contradictory condition—of destruction and construction—is also evident on the foundation floor, where piles of debris pushed to the perimeter suggest chaos, while in the center a space has been cleared for the machine to operate. The metaphorical floor of German history is again seen to be swept clean, an arduous and messy task that must proceed nevertheless.

Taken in 1996, at the beginning of Thiel’s commitment to documenting the city’s architectural transformation, this image remains seminal because it visualizes the physicality of a political process. Thiel pictures the formation of new German political space, seeking to find in this seemingly banal scene a point of contact among the will of the state, historical memory, and architecture in transition. Unlike most of Thiel’s Berlin images, which are photographed and often presented in series that may unfold with a chronological or thematic unity, the Reichstag image is one of two that considers this iconic structure. While the other photograph pictures the domed building from afar, gauging its form across a horizontal distance, here Thiel presents the building in its paradoxical state of re-becoming—its inner grid structure revealing dark recesses