

The Unbuilt Frankfurt

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So-called 'office machines' and 'living machines' made of concrete stretch along the river Main and tower over the city to a height of up to 100 metres. In the Westend between the Old Opera House and Grüneburg Park, the largest of these megalomaniac superstructures oppresses the villas and residential buildings of the late-nineteenth century.

Multi-level transport structures link the buildings within this complex where co-exist shopping malls, apartments and a great many offices built above the streets and light rail platforms. Frankfurt is intersected by several elevated, multi-lane freeways which means that it has truly become a car-friendly city.

This utopian concept originated in the Van de Broek en Bakema architectural offices in the year 1965, but it was never more than a vision for the future. The architects had a bold plan to build only two high-rise buildings in the Westend, but they miscalculated rather badly. Their concept was too radical for the city administration, and as a result they were excluded from design projects in Frankfurt and their vision was never built. Nevertheless, this was a period during which almost anything was possible in the city. The city authorities, led by forward-looking Social Democrats, followed an ambitious suite of social, traffic and cultural policies. These developments were to be financed through additional business taxes, which in turn meant that new office space had to be created as quickly as possible for this emerging city.

In the years that followed, Frankfurt became the most important financial centre for the whole of the Federal Republic of Germany. A number of insurance companies and banks built their headquarters in the Westend or along the Neuen Mainzer Strasse, making this the core of the modern banking quarter. Private investors saw this as a chance to make large profits, and there was considerable speculative buying of land and office spaces. In the locations where buildings were constructed, the local communities were massively displaced, and as a result, the social fabric of these areas suffered long-term damage. Developers, town planners and architects encountered growing resistance to their activities, most of which were ill-considered and motivated by a desire to make profits at all costs. The left-wing student community of Frankfurt joined with the conservative middle classes to oppose these developments. The Frankfurt housing struggle included everything from peaceful demonstrations to squatting and street battles with the police. Frankfurt soon had a reputation for being ungovernable as far as city planning was concerned and this produced an identity crisis. In the press some journalists described it in witty terms as 'Bankfurt', 'Junkfurt', or 'Krankfurt'.

There was some bold city planning at that time around the main railway station and in Sachsenhausen. The area around the rail tracks entering the station was to be built over with tower blocks and linked with a raised street. This mega-project was to provide space to create 20,000 office jobs, and the listed roof of the station was to have been torn down as well. In the end, these plans failed to materialise because of financial and technical difficulties.



Mies van der Rohe's design for the Commerzbank—as seen at the exhibition “Himmelstürmend. Hochhausstadt Frankfurt”.

In 1972, at Sachsenhausen Berg, where there once were breweries called Binding und Henninger, there was a plan to build the ‘Frankfurt Trade Center’. There was to be a brutalist-style residential complex called ‘Sonnenring’ and underneath it an international trade and finance centre with high-rise buildings all along the Darmstädter Landstrasse. The cellars of the former breweries were to be turned into car parks and underground roads. Ultimately, the

'Frankfurt Trade Center' concept was never realised, and one of the reasons for this was the intense speculative activity involving the Sonnenring real estate. This caused the Helaba-affair, which in turn led to the resignation of Albert Osswald, the leader of Hessen's regional government.

Today Frankfurt can count itself fortunate that none of these architectural and town-planning visions were ever built. There is one plan that the city certainly would have wanted to add to its skyline, however: in 1968 the Commerzbank expressed a desire to house all of its staff in a single building. Seven architect practices were invited to enter a competition to design this, including ABB Architekten, Richard Heil, and HPP Architekten, as well as the offices of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

The land for the project was at the corner between Neue Mainzer Landstrasse and Grosse Gallusstrasse and all of the designs proposed a tower, either freestanding, or with a linked base structure. Mies van der Rohe was the only one to propose two separate buildings: a 127-metre high office tower block and a one-storey pavilion. This design for the Commerzbank is one of the last designs that the architect completed before his death in 1969, and it has remained largely unknown. It brings together the elements that Mies worked with throughout the whole of his life and it resolves them in a balanced way: the steel skeleton and its reflection in grid-like facades, the elevated tower over a glazed ground floor, and the pavilion which connects the structure to the surrounding area. The square which Mies envisaged in front of the tower would have opened up the 'banking canyon' of the Neue Mainzer Landstrasse with a view of the pavilion. However, the Commerzbank was not happy with this use of the building space and the competition was won by Richard Heil, not least because he had good connections with the city administration and because he proposed, according to the jury, "optimal usage of the limited building space that was available".

It would have been Mies van der Rohe's only high-rise construction in Germany.

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