
Authoritarian townscapes and *laissez-faire* change: understanding central Potsdam's built form

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Abstract. *Townscapes created by authoritarian planning present particular challenges in subsequent periods of laissez-faire development. Largely the product of the visions of Prussian monarchs in the eighteenth century, what was to become the town centre of Potsdam was created according to internationally-fashionable baroque precepts. In the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century its buildings were subjected to pressures for piecemeal change to accommodate new commercial functions and a rapidly growing population. As the grip of royal control slackened, the primary initiators of change were owner-occupiers employing local builders. By the time legislation protecting the appearance of the town centre had been passed in 1923, practically all the houses had been modified, and a less harmonious townscape had been created. Consideration of changing attitudes over time contributes to an understanding of changes to historic townscapes, and can inform their future management.*

Key Words: Potsdam, town centre, townscape change, building façades, planning

A key to understanding historic townscapes is an appreciation of their *genius loci*. Each townscape reveals something of the power, wealth, ideals or even misery of its inhabitants, past and present.¹ Every new generation lives to a certain extent within the framework provided by its predecessors, but adapts and modifies the built environment to suit changing needs and aims. In this way successive generations leave their mark on the townscape as it evolves and comes to represent their accumulated experience.²

This process of townscape transformation was especially active in the later nineteenth century, as social and economic change engendered the modification of the existing

built fabric of many European towns. The nature of this process of change has been explored in a number of case studies which vary from an assessment of the relationship between building activity and commercial function,³ to examination of the influence of town hierarchy and population size on townscape change,⁴ to accounts of the evolution of building types,⁵ to descriptions of the changing streetscape as a reflection of the changing symbolism of buildings.⁶ Building upon this work, this paper examines the way in which social and economic change is embodied in the urban fabric, and how attitudes influence townscape change. These are ideas that can be particularly appro-

privately explored in Potsdam, where the townscape formed during the eighteenth century, a time of absolute monarchical power, was later extensively modified by individual owner-occupiers.

The years between the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the beginning of the Great World War in 1914 have been chosen for detailed analysis. This is a period when alterations to Potsdam's baroque town centre reached their peak as the built environment was modified to meet the demands and expectations of a new generation. Residents enjoyed unprecedented freedom of development. The variation in the amount of total change over time is examined and different types of change discussed in the context of the society of Potsdam at the turn of the century. This involves considering not only the effects of rising living standards, technological advance and fashion, but also the attitude of inhabitants towards their townscape as revealed in contemporary accounts and the planning system.

The discussion is limited to the area within the town walls: the old town, and the first and second planned extensions as shown in Figure 1. This entire area is henceforth termed the town centre.

The building of Potsdam

Although records show that Potsdam already existed in 993, the town's precarious livelihood was based on its situation at a major crossing point of the River Havel and it did not achieve stability of wealth, structure or population until the eighteenth century. In 1660, as a result of war and fires, only 50 of the 198 houses grouped around the castle were in good condition, 20 were damaged and the remainder abandoned.⁷

The fortunes of Potsdam started to improve when the town was chosen as the second seat of the *Kurfürst* (Prince) of the *Mark Brandenburg* in 1660. This rise in status brought with it renovation of the castle and the construction of homes for courtiers. Nevertheless, when King Friedrich Wilhelm

I succeeded to the throne in 1713, the town had only c. 1500 inhabitants, was economically unimportant, and had no independent authority to represent its residents. Friedrich Wilhelm took advantage of this weak political and economic position and began to develop Potsdam as a royal garrison. Regiments were transferred to the town and soldiers were quartered in the homes of Potsdam's residents. This method of providing accommodation for the military made it necessary to attract civilians to Potsdam, so manufacturing firms were encouraged to locate there. The construction of new houses for their employees increased the quarters available for the soldiers and, in their turn, the soldiers provided the demand to drive the economy. By 1740, at the end of Friedrich Wilhelm's reign, Potsdam consisted of over a thousand houses and had 11 708 civilian and 4294 military residents.⁸

Friedrich Wilhelm provided for the accommodation of the enlarged population with two planned extensions to the town. Town walls were erected around the newly-built areas and, with the surrounding waterways and marshes, deterred the press-ganged soldiers from deserting. The street plan was influenced by existing north-south roads (such as Lindenstraße and Nauener Straße), which were incorporated, and the presence of marshy areas, such as Bassin Platz, which could not be built upon (Figure 1). Initially the king provided subsidies for the building work and free building materials. Later, buildings were given to those willing to move to the town. In both cases the residents were expected to construct the necessary rear buildings, such as washrooms and stables, from their own resources. Within the first planned extension simple timber-framed buildings were cheaply and quickly built. The houses of the second extension were also timber framed but their façades were planned so as to form rhythmic interchanges of particular forms so that the streets and squares presented a strictly uniform appearance (Figure 2). This streetscape was said to be a reflection of Friedrich Wilhelm's delight in rows of

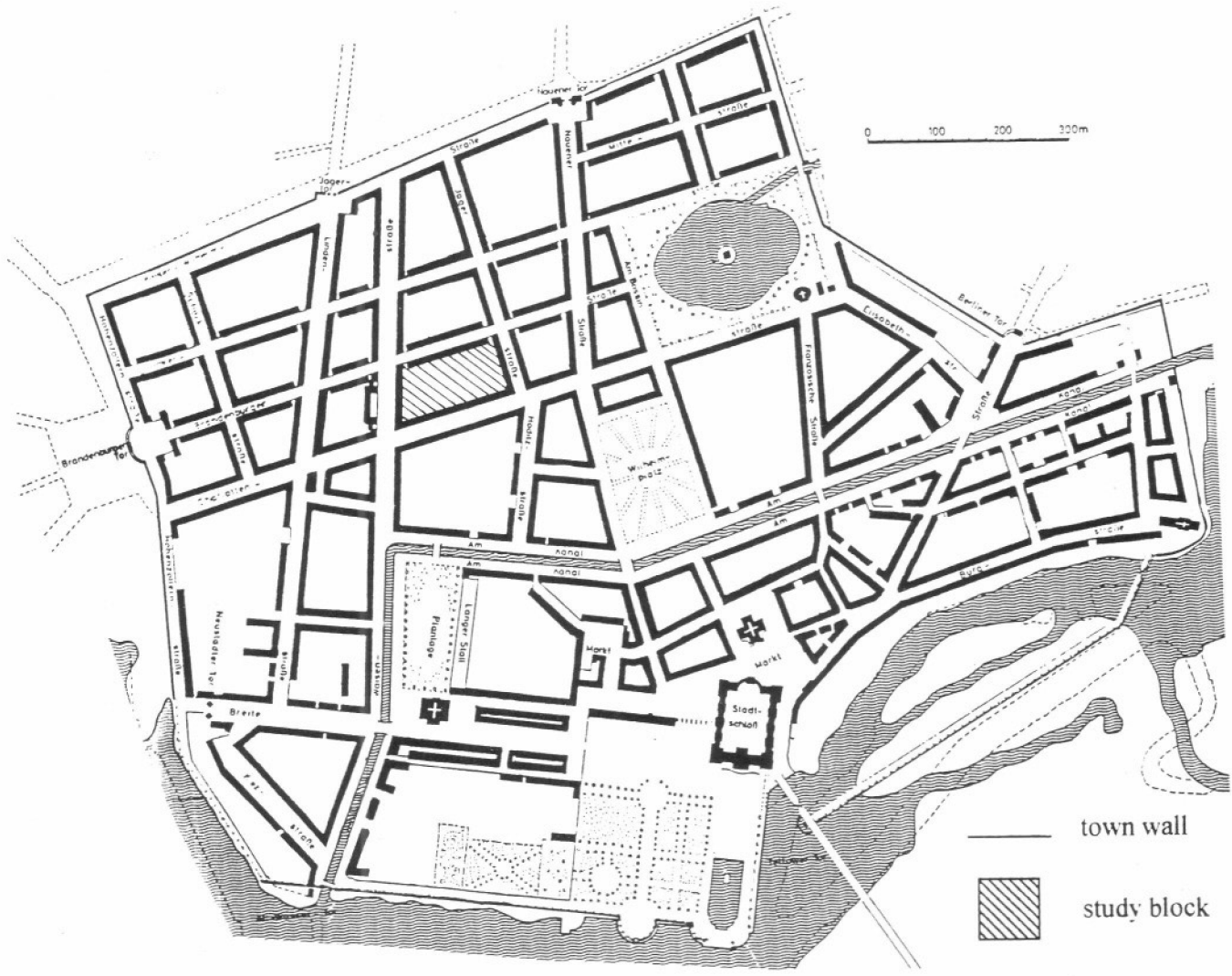


Figure 1. The town centre of Potsdam, 1845.⁹

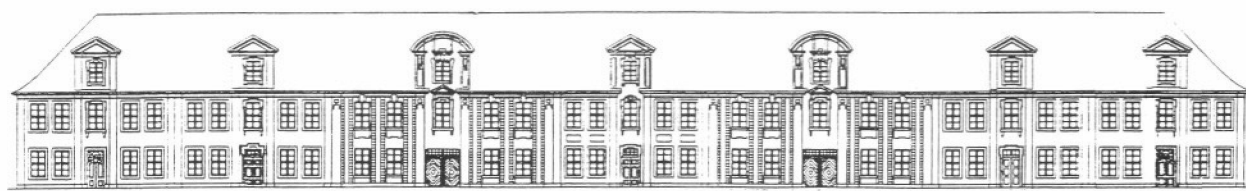


Figure 2. Example of a streetscape of the second planned extension, as constructed 1733-40.¹⁰

parading soldiers, but was obviously influenced by international fashions, particularly the Palladian style which was increasingly popular in German-speaking Europe at this time.¹¹ Peter v. Gayette, of French origin, and Johann Boumann from Holland, were responsible for the building of most of the houses of the second extension. The original inspiration for the development of the town was said to have come from Tsar Peter I of Russia when he visited Potsdam in 1713.

Friedrich II was as important for the townscape of Potsdam as his predecessor, Friedrich Wilhelm I, had been. He did not extend the street plan any further, but he attempted to rebuild the existing town to create a townscape more in keeping with his own position. He replaced most of the houses within the first planned extension with monumental buildings, the façades of which were copied from villas in France, the Netherlands, England and especially Italy. The architects and sculptors that he employed were also of mixed nationality, such as the Italian Francesco Algarotti and the French architect Jean Laurent Legeay, and many of them had international training. Like his predecessor, Friedrich II assumed the building costs and was thus able to exercise complete control over the style, position and speed of the redevelopment. He was concerned only with the appearance of the town, particularly in areas visible from or near to the castle: the ground plans of the new houses were generally much the same as those of the houses that they replaced. New ornate façades gave an impression of affluence similar to that of the villas of the nobility in Berlin, but the upper classes never found it necessary to move to Potsdam, as it was only the second seat of the monarchy. Thus, manufacturing workers, builders and soldiers lived behind the façades in often 'quite poor petty bourgeois houses with wretched stairways, halls, and rooms'.¹²

With the end of Friedrich II's reign, the most significant development of Potsdam's town centre was completed. Its development had been financed and controlled by the

monarchy as a response to their personal plans and visions. Friedrich Wilhelm I created a garrison town: he encouraged civilians to settle there by providing housing and employment, he forced soldiers to move there, he supervised the construction work and he controlled the appearance of the town. Friedrich II transformed the streetscape of much of the old town and first extension, moving towards his personal vision of a baroque town. In a manner typical of a royal seat, the finance, architects, craftsmen and artistic inspiration originated from outside the area.¹³ The eighteenth-century townscape of Potsdam thus reflected the near absolute power of the monarchy and its international perspective, rather than the needs and resources of the residents.

Change to the townscape

Within the town centre, one street-block lying on the southern edge of the second planned extension has been selected for detailed analysis (Figure 1). The block includes three streets of what were originally timber-framed houses built between 1733 and 1740. The buildings on the fourth street (Charlottenstraße) are two- to three-storey, plastered brick buildings originating between 1774 and 1786 and constructed as part of Friedrich II's drive to beautify the town. In this street, two or three houses were hidden behind each palace-like façade. The block lies in the historic commercial centre and has thus been subject to a higher level of development pressure than that found in other areas. It has, however, always been characterized by a mixture of uses: retail, residential and small workshops. Examples of most types of change characteristic in Potsdam can thus be found among the 37 houses examined.

The principal primary source for the research is the building records kept since approximately 1870. There exists for each house a separate file containing planning applications with sketches of the proposed changes, the names and usually the addresses of the owner and builder involved, records of

planning permission granted (including any special conditions that may have been attached to it) and, in some cases, written discussion of the proposed alteration and records of the condition of the building at the time of the application. The date when each file was opened varies somewhat from house to house and, unfortunately, some of the files are incomplete. Nonetheless, they record not simply the alterations to each building but also arguments for and against alteration, the factors taken into account when judging applications and, to a certain extent, the attitude of the participants to the townscape. When used in conjunction with the Potsdam address books, which were published in each year of the study period, they also provide an insight into the characteristics of those involved in the process of townscape change.

Research undertaken by Mielke¹⁴ provides a useful context for the more detailed analysis of this single street-block. His main interest was in the original form of the buildings in Potsdam, but he examined the planning records of over 900 houses and recorded the type and year of building alterations that occurred between 1850 and 1950. He did not attempt to explore the process of, or background to, the changes, nor did he work at the townscape scale.

Figure 3 uses the data collected by Mielke to summarize changes to the built fabric of the entire town centre between 1871 and 1914. The cyclical patterns of building activity revealed in the histograms correspond roughly to building cycles for Germany as a whole, with peaks of activity in the early 1870s, in the early 1890s and around 1905.¹⁵ As has been noted in other towns, these local figures do not accord perfectly with national trends;¹⁶ they do not, however, differ by more than the 5-year mean deviation found to be typical by Gottlieb.¹⁷

The mixed nature of development is obvious and a number of explanations for the changes may be inferred. The extensions to living space (namely, attic conversions, additional storeys and building within the block interior) should be seen in relation to the fast growth in population: from 43 834 in

1871 to 62 059 by 1913.¹⁸ Increasing population density in the town centre over this time period shows that this growth was not accommodated merely by outward expansion.¹⁹ The rising population meant that the demand for goods increased, so that more shops were established and more façades and interiors were altered. This development was accelerated by increased ease of access to the town centre with the establishment of a horse-drawn tram service along *Brandenburger Straße*, and the introduction of reduced suburban fares on the Berlin-Potsdam railway, which encouraged day-trips.

The nature of the changes to façades was influenced by the spread of fashions, as evidenced in the penchant for balconies, large shop windows and so-called American adverts. Rumpf suggested at the time that the shopkeepers of Potsdam were trying to compete with the businesses of Berlin and copying styles more appropriate to large cities.²⁰ However, such alterations were inspired not only by changes in fashion, but also by the poor state of repair of many façades. Repair was sometimes combined with alterations.

Changes to the interiors of buildings primarily reflected the number of conversions from residential to retail use, but minor changes were a reflection of a new standard of comfort inspired by the luxury of the villas built in the suburbs. New toilets, bathrooms and kitchens were introduced. The space for these was often provided by technological progress in heating systems, as 'Russian pipes' replaced large chimneys.

The general trend of intensification of use within the town centre as a whole was reflected in the study block. Between 1871 and 1914 the number of businesses in the block rose from 67 to 85, and the space occupied by retailing in part of *Brandenburger Straße* more than doubled. Despite rising living standards, the number of households in the block also increased from 167 to 191, and building extensions were numerous (Figure 4A). The mean number of alterations per house over the study period

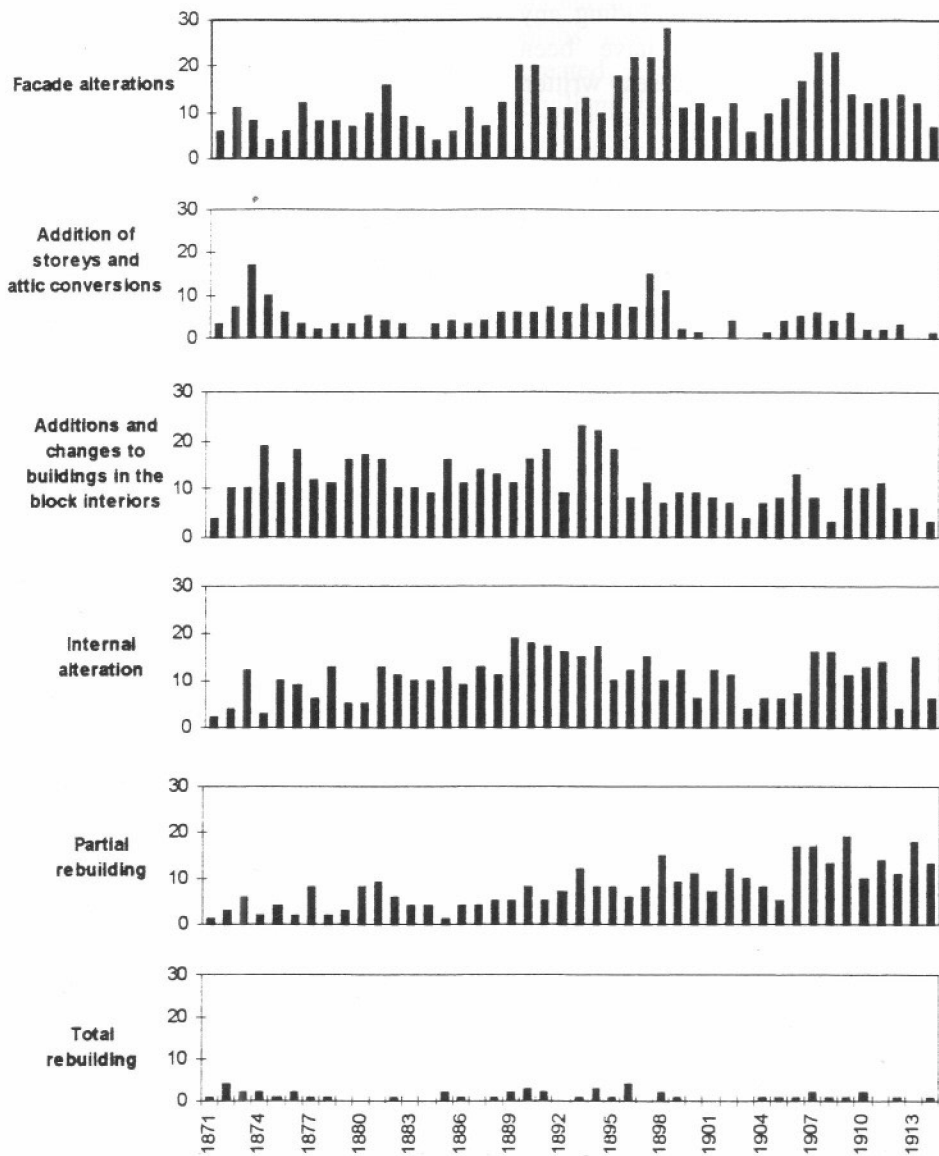


Figure 3. Number of changes of different types to houses in the town centre of Potsdam, 1871-1914.²¹

was 3.6, with a range of 0-8, although this varied between the streets: Brandenburger Straße showed the highest development pressure, measured both in total applications and implemented applications. Brandenburger Straße was the main shopping street, so this larger amount of change corresponds with the finding in Utrecht, the Netherlands, that hard core shopping streets undergo more change than secondary ones.²²

Examination of the functions with which changes within the study block were associated reveals their spatial segregation.

Production (for instance a carpenter's, a brewery, and a pottery) comprised 6 per cent of implemented applications and was concentrated in the interior of the block. Retailing (44 per cent) was found primarily on the ground floors of the buildings, with shops facing the street and storage of goods on the ground floors of extensions in the back yards. Change associated with residential use was mostly in the upper storeys and also made up 44 per cent of implemented applications.

Figure 4B shows the extent of façade

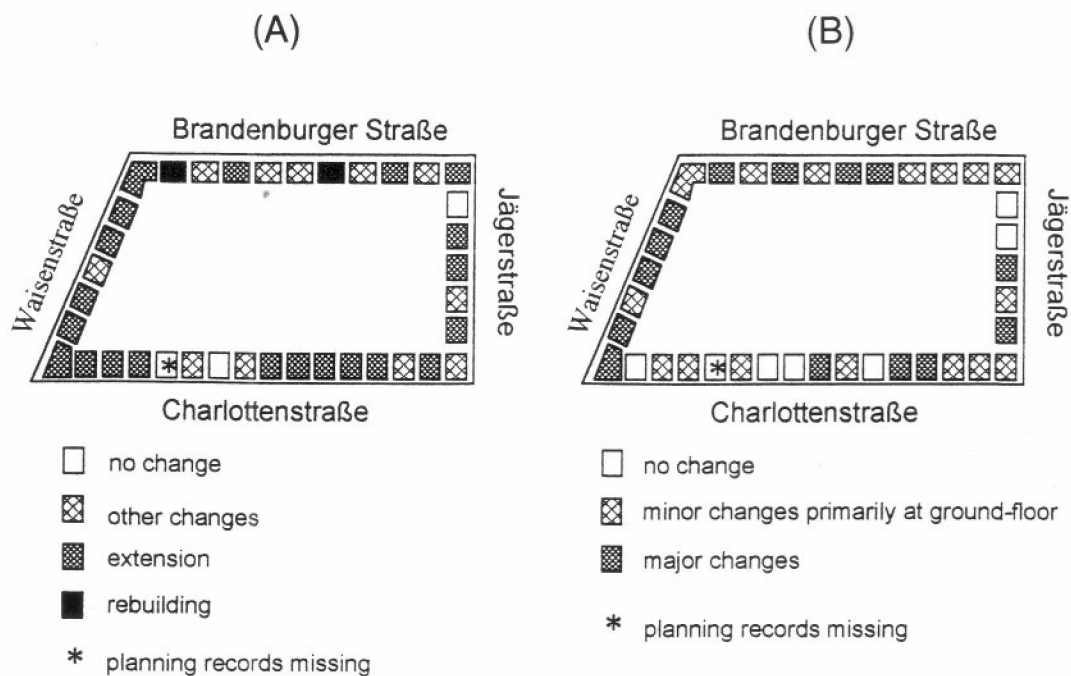


Figure 4. Changes to the study street-block (shown diagrammatically), 1871-1914. (A) Rebuilding, extension and other changes. (B) Alterations to façades.

modification in the study block, including the construction of shop windows, the introduction of new windows for the attics, the addition of storeys, and changes in the decorative elements of the façades. Although a limited number of alterations had already taken place before 1871, the volume of change over the study period was such that the appearance of very few houses remained unaffected. The impact on the townscape of Potsdam was correspondingly great. By 1914 there were large display windows in the ground floors, storeys and balconies had been added, and there were other changes to the façades: the uniformity had all but disappeared.

The townscape created by Friedrich II had been dominated by the impression made by individual façades. This was very vulnerable to change. Because several houses, and thus several owners, were hidden behind each façade the unity of the façade could be easily disturbed by piecemeal change. Figure 5A shows a reconstruction of the original façade of Charlottenstraße 96 to 98, where the two outside buildings were given the same

decoration and the middle building emphasized, so the whole appears to be a palatial villa. Figure 5B shows the condition of the building in 1914, as reconstructed from the planning records. Not apparent in this drawing is another common source of disunity, namely the painting of different sections of such façades in different colours.

Such types of adaptive change have been shown to be quite characteristic of European towns at this time.²³ The distinctiveness of townscapes became blurred as they underwent similar processes of adaptation for more intensive residential and commercial use: the break-up of ground-floor façades for shop windows was particularly characteristic.²⁴ In eastern and middle Prussia, many of the adaptations led to an increasing similarity between different building types as part of a progression towards the multiple-dwelling form, with several storeys, extensions in the form of wings, and buildings in the backyards.²⁵ The contrast, however, between the harmonious townscape of Potsdam created by the monarchy in the eighteenth century, and that

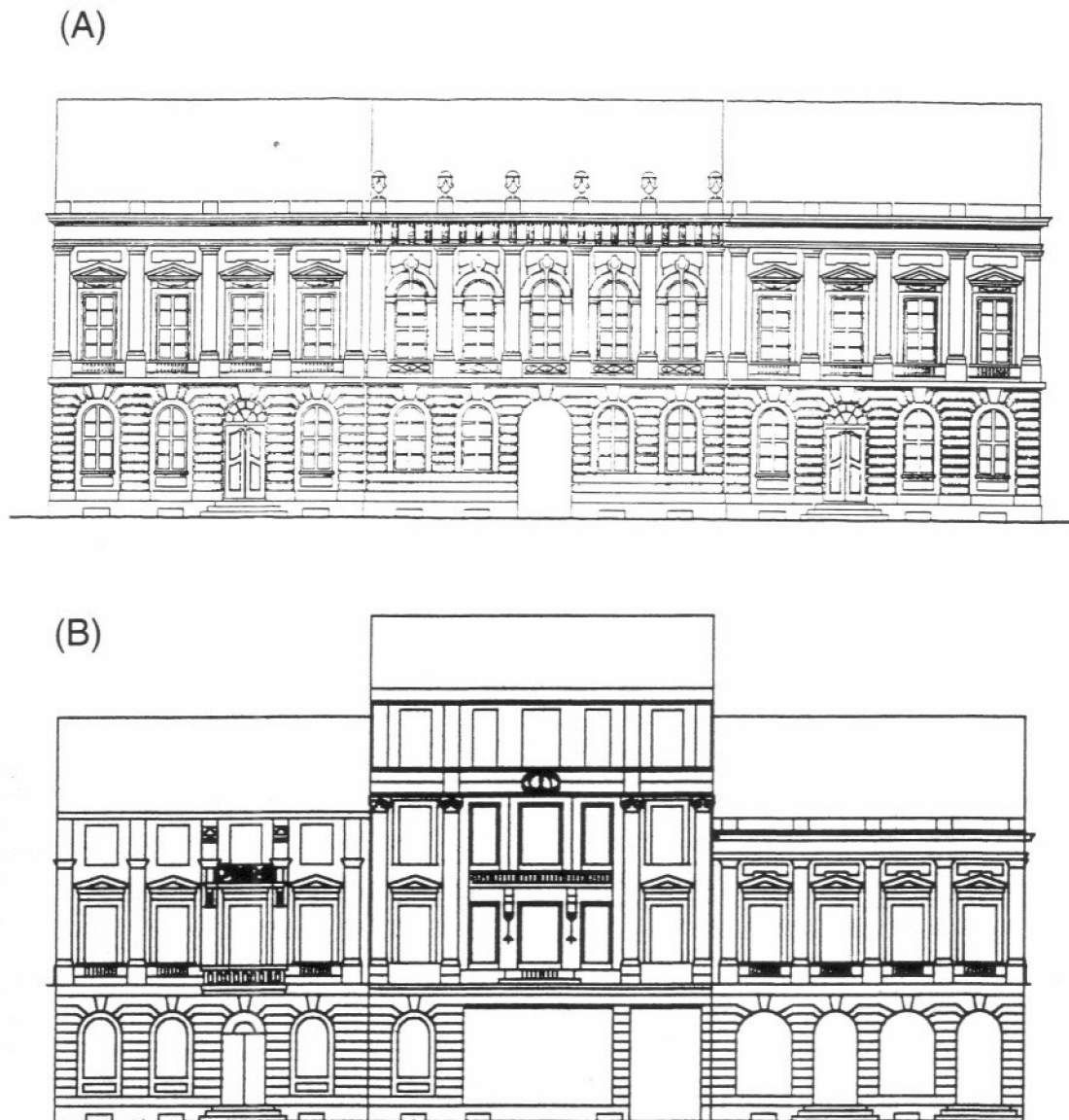


Figure 5. Charlottenstraße 96-98. (A) Reconstruction of the original façade.²⁶
 (B) Reconstruction of the façade in 1914, after alterations.²⁷

created by the actions of many individuals, is extreme. Developments occurred within the existing morphological frame, which constrained and shaped their form, but they modified the townscape to reflect new realities.

Planning

At the beginning of the study period, all proposed building work was subject to

certain fire and safety regulations and thus required a permit from the police commissioner. These regulations stipulated the building materials to be used, the density of development, the maximum height in relation to the width of the street or yard, and so on. They thus had an obvious effect on the nature of townscape change, but were not intended to control design or to address the aesthetic value of proposed change. There also existed a declaration, made by Friedrich

Wilhelm II in 1787, forbidding residents of houses that were built with the financial support of the monarch to alter the façades. It prohibited the removal of any decorations from the façade and obliged the inhabitants to preserve everything in the state in which they were given it. In return the king stated in the same declaration that repairs to the façades would be carried out at his expense. Limited protection to the outward appearance of those houses that were built with royal finances was thus provided. The declaration was an attempt by a king to protect the creation of his predecessors. It was not the result of a popular movement for preservation of the townscape.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the declaration was not only unpopular but had a very dubious legal footing, as repairs to houses were no longer financed by the royal household. Nonetheless, in 1898 it was confirmed by the royal governor that all proposed changes to the visible sides of buildings which had been constructed with the financial support of the monarch had to be approved by him. Minor proposals, which involved no substantial change to the existing character of the building front, would continue to be regulated by the police commissioner.²⁸ In the planning records the importance of this regulation is made clear, as all applications involving a change to the façades constructed as part of Friedrich II's rebuilding programme were referred by the police commissioner to the royal governor.

It seems that both the 1778 declaration and the 1898 regulation revealed a concern for the townscape by those in authority, but they were largely ineffectual in controlling development. Although local residents used the legislation to try to prevent neighbours from carrying out developments which could adversely affect the quality of their own properties, there was no demand for more stringent controls. Indeed, the planning records and contemporary accounts show that the existing regulations were generally unpopular, as they were elsewhere.²⁹ In one case, in 1900, one owner wrote a three-page letter in support of his application to

construct a new shopfront. He questioned the relevance of financial support received for the construction of the house 150 years previously. He believed that, in any case, the king was only entitled to restrict the changes proposed by owners of property if the financial support were continued.³⁰ As a result of the prevalence of this attitude, the legislation was handled with discretion to avoid discontent and most alterations were permitted with minimal conditions. In one case, in Charlottenstraße, the breaking-up of the ground-floor façade into shop windows and entrances, accompanied by changes to the façade at first-floor level, was proposed. The police commissioner suggested, in his referral to the royal governor, that this would cause serious damage to the façade. The governor agreed, but was not convinced that the courts would accept this view, and permitted the changes at ground-floor level in return for the preservation of the façade higher up.³¹

The building records reveal that the primary initiators of change were owner-occupiers who employed local builders from Potsdam or the surrounding villages, seldom from even as close as Berlin. The residents of Potsdam were, therefore, the people with the greatest influence over the amount and type of change that occurred in the town, and their relationship to their built environment was of great importance.³²

The fact that the inhabitants of Potsdam had very little influence over the initial construction of the town is important. Mielke³³ identifies a dependency relationship that developed between the monarchy and Potsdam's residents, which corresponds to social historians' views of society in Prussia.³⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm I and Friedrich II tried to realize their own visions of Potsdam, and so suppressed the spontaneity and initiative of the residents. It seems that the inhabitants of the buildings did not feel responsible for them or identify with them. When later monarchs failed to maintain the buildings, their inhabitants allowed them to disintegrate, even though many among them were by this time wealthy enough to afford

the necessary repairs themselves. Häberlin reports that they believed it to be the king's duty to build, and they were determined that he should continue to be offended by the state of the houses until he repaired them. Indeed, when one resident began building work himself, neighbours smeared his house with dirt.³⁵

By about 1850, it had reached the point that houses would collapse if they were not repaired. The residents started to repair them and, in so doing, to adapt their property to suit their needs rather than the visions of the king. Yet the evidence suggests that the inhabitants still did not regard their townscape as valuable. Friedel reports on interviews he conducted with owners of houses with ornate façades in which he was told that the façades were no cause of pride but regarded only as a burden.³⁶ Unlike the monarchs, the residents of Potsdam were not interested in creating a great artwork, but individually adapted the built fabric to suit themselves and reflect their commercial standing. The result was extensive changes to the townscape, as a *laissez-faire* townscape emerged out of an authoritarian one.

In the second half of the study period, the consequences of this scarcely-controlled development began to be recognized and regretted. Complaints, particularly about the style of adaptations designed to suit the fashions and demands of the modern world, began to be heard from about 1910, and various organizations concerned themselves with the question. The conclusions were that the residents of Potsdam needed to be educated about the value of their townscape, that architects should replace the builders who commonly designed the alterations, and that legislation (an *Ortsstatut*) controlling development should be passed.³⁷

The debate continued in and out of the local newspapers for over 10 years. One party outlined the benefits of an *Ortsstatut* while attempting to play down the limitations it would put on the freedom of the residents, and the other party argued vehemently for the right of the property owner to develop his house as he desired. Legislation was finally

passed in 1923, by which time practically all houses in the town centre had been modified and the townscape of Potsdam contained clear signs of the change from a society dependent on, and strictly controlled by, the monarchy, to one of loosely-regulated profit-seeking individuals.

Conclusion

By the onset of the First World War the townscape of Potsdam, created by the authoritarian power of the Prussian monarchs, had been transformed to reflect fundamental changes in society. The harmonious façades of the mid-eighteenth century had revealed the dominance of royal control, not only over the built fabric, but also over the people. 'No town in Prussia was so privileged and pampered by the Hohenzollern, but nor was any town so severely dominated by them, as Potsdam'.³⁸ As the grip of monarchical power slackened, so residents began to invest in their own property, leaving barely a house in the town centre that did not display signs of quite considerable alteration by 1914. Although the process of categorizing such alterations can invest them with a certain sense of uniformity, it should be emphasized that they are unplanned variations on a number of themes. The growth in height and depth of building cover on each plot, the grouping of buildings around backyards, and the break-up of ground-floor façades for shop windows, are general tendencies of development, but their physical manifestation can vary considerably. A street of houses that all have their ground floors given over to retailing rarely forms a harmonious unit. The contrast between the planned regularity of the authoritarian townscape and the diversity resulting from a period of *laissez-faire* change is thus considerable.

While each physical alteration in central Potsdam was the result of an individual decision to initiate change, a number of factors can be seen to have encouraged adaptation and to have influenced its form. The continuing urbanization of Prussia was accompanied by rising land values and rents,

which increased the profitability of developing land more intensively. The growth of the urban population in combination with increasing mobility, and the emergence of a bourgeoisie with leisure time, provided a larger market for retailers. The growing wealth of property owners allowed them to follow the latest fashions. As the correspondence between building cycles in Potsdam and the rest of Germany suggests, these largely economic developments were not restricted to Potsdam, and their effect can be seen in many towns.³⁹

Important for the nature of the physical changes is the more nebulous factor of attitude to the built environment, as revealed in the building records, contemporary accounts and the planning framework. Building and planning regulations help to steer development, and their step-by-step development can reflect the changing image of the built environment.⁴⁰ When eighteenth-century Potsdam was constructed, the monarchy formed a townscape reflecting their own visions. There was little concern for the views of the town's residents, and change to the streetscape was forbidden. As property owners in the later nineteenth century found themselves with no alternative but to finance their own building work, they began to adapt and develop buildings for their own use and so to identify with them. Impressive shopfronts, extra storeys and new façades were symbols of the owner's importance in the community. The townscape created by the monarchy was unappreciated, and the freedom of the individual to adapt it was upheld. The building regulations provided a framework for development and revealed a concern for health and safety, but the appearance of the town was effectively unregulated. Although not always easy to achieve, this uncovering of attitudes towards the built environment can form an important part of the explanation of morphological change.

It is, perhaps, insufficiently acknowledged that, among townscapes dating from before the First World War, some of the most unified originally and some of the most

acclaimed today were products of particularly authoritarian rule. While few would recommend a return to such rule, there is no doubt that there has been a price to pay in the townscape in many cases in which primacy has subsequently been given to the rights of numerous individual small-scale property owners. At a time when many historic townscapes in Eastern Germany are undergoing processes of change not dissimilar to those seen in Potsdam 100 years ago, it is important to be aware of the far-reaching effect of piecemeal change on a townscape, and the numerous relationships that influence it, not least the balance between authority and the freedom of the individual. An understanding of these relationships is not only central to historical urban morphology, but is fundamental in the formulation of policies for effective townscape management.

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 32. For a discussion of the importance of the various agents of change in the alteration of the townscape see, for example, Whitehand, J.W.R. (1993) *The making of the urban landscape* Institute of British Geographers Special Publication 26 (Blackwell, Oxford).
 33. Mielke, *op. cit.* (note 9).
 34. Brandt, P., Hofmann, T. and Zilkenat, R. (1981) *Preußen: Zur Sozialgeschichte eines Staates* Preußen: Versuch einer Bilanz 3 (Rowohlt, Berlin).
 35. Häberlin, C.L. (1855) *Sanssouci, Potsdam und Umgegend* (Ferdinand Riegel, Berlin).
 36. Friedel, *op. cit.* (note 12).
 37. Anon. (1912) 'Versammlungen und Berichte', *Deutsche Bauzeitung* 46, 836-37; Rumpf, *op. cit.* (note 20).
 38. Haeckel, J. (1909) 'Die Einführung der Städteordnung vom 19. November 1808 in Potsdam', *Mitteilungen des Vereins für die Geschichte Potsdam* NF5(2), 1. Author's translation.
 39. See, for example, Albers, *op. cit.* (note 23); Bobek and Lichtenberger, *op. cit.* (note 5); Conzen, 'Zur Morphologie', *op. cit.* (note 24); Schöller, *op. cit.* (note 25); Tiborski, *op. cit.* (note 6).
 40. Frick, D. (1970) 'Einflüsse der Baugesetze und Bauordnungen auf das Stadtbild', *Berlin und seine Bauten* 4, 41-4.