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Decline of department stores and the issue of 'third places' in German inner-cities: decline, obsolescence and reuse potentials

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Abstract. The paper explores the rise and fall of the Karstadt department stores, which used to be the focal points of many German inner-cities throughout the twentieth century. The paper addresses the current issues of their obsolescence, decline and a recent increase in vacancies of the buildings. The desolation of those, once vibrant 'third places' – commercial entities, but also communal spaces, where people could meet and socialize – is asking for reuse scenarios, and thus requires an assessment of those buildings, understanding of the layers of history, analysis of their values, but also their potentials to adapt to changing circumstances and societal needs. While focusing on this particular typology of the inner-city department stores and the specific case of Karstadt buildings, the paper aims to address the issue of decline of various retail facilities, but also a general decline of 'third places' in cities. The term 'third places' was coined by a sociologist Ray Oldenburg in 1989, and denotes places beyond home (the primary place) and work (the secondary place) such as community centres, cafes, public libraries, theatres, public parks, etc. The study aims to better understand both causes and socio-spatial effects of their decline, correlating it with the digitalisation shift, changes in retail culture, but also blurred conventional separation between the first, the second and the third places (emergence of the so-called co-living, co-working and co-mingling spaces). It presents several case studies and research focusing on reuse potentials. The paper argues that the 'third places' have an important role in the well-being of local communities, in enhancing social cohesion, civic engagement and sense of belonging, and therefore need to remain focal in adaptive reuse proposals.

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of post-war 'modernity' in Europe is commonly portrayed as "intimately entangled with state-driven actions", as

noted by Gosseye and Avermaete (2017). Nevertheless, apart from the state, civil society and the private sector contributed to the introduction of the modern elements in the build environment. Amongst other products of modernity, the private sector particularly contributed to development of consumption spaces, including the shopping centre. However, as argued by Gosseye and Avermaete (2017), “the role that corporate and commercial modernism played in reforming post-war Europe is still astonishingly understudied”. In particular the typology of the shopping centre is under-represented. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the gap and shed light on this “other modernity”, particularly focusing on the development of the inner-city Karstadt department stores in German cities.

2. COMMERCIAL COLLECTIVITY AND THE INNER-CITY DEPARTMENT STORES IN GERMANY

The conception of the department stores to function as the focal points of German inner-cities differed from the commercial complexes based on the American model of suburban shopping malls. The inner-city department stores emerged as a “tool for urban revitalization”, “called upon for its (assumed) capability to renew the city and re-establish urban vitality” – as well as a modern consumer society. (Gosseye and Avermaete, 2017)

The emergence of the inner-city department stores in German cities followed the rise of global mass consumerism, which introduced more inclusive patterns of consumption, aligned with the “social market economy” or *Soziale Marktwirtschaft*. Their design was to embody it. The Karstadt department stores were designed and built as architecturally coherent facilities, predominately enclosed structures in the high-dense, central urban areas. As such, they offered a new urban experience to the ‘consumer-citizens’, an experience of ‘commercial collectivity’ in urban context.

One of the largest department stores built by this leading retail company of the post-war period in Germany – Karstadt AG – was built in 1964 in the heart of the city of Bielefeld, as the 54. department store of this retail chain in Germany. The four-story building, located in the main pedestrian street, was designed by the construction department of the Karstadt AG in cooperation

with the local architect Karl Obbelode. The facade of the building was designed by the architect Hanns Dustmann. In April 1964, the department store was festively opened followed by a music band standing on the canopy above the main entrance, with around 80.000-90.000 visitors (see **Fig. 1**). (Vohwinkel, 2024)



Figure 1. Karstadt construction department and the architects Karl Obbelode and Hanns Dustmann, Karstadt department store, Bielefeld, Germany, 1961-1964, photo from the opening in April 1964. © Stadtarchive Bielefeld, 400,3/photo-collection, Nr. 11-342-152, photo: Rudolf Möller, Freie Presse, source: <https://historischer-rueckblick-bielefeld.com/2024/04/01/01042024/>

The department store served for a multitude of needs and activities of the modern 'consumer-citizens'. It acted as a focal point for the "other" functions, fulfilling necessities and leisureliness beyond the "primary" (housing) and the "secondary" (work) places, as phrased by a sociologist Ray Oldenburg. Oldenburg (1989) coined the term "third places" to denote places beyond home (the primary place) and work (the secondary place) such as community centres, cafes, public libraries, theatres, public parks, etc. There was a need for the "other" functions, or the "third" places, and in particular places of collectivity in the urban environment. This need was recognised

and commercialised, thus incorporated in the setting of the shopping centres, or in this case department stores, offering an “alternative definition of the collective realm”. (Avermaete, 2017)

Besides retail, the Karstadt department stores included entertainment and programs such as photo-laboratories, DIY sections, as well as exhibition spaces and spaces for socialisation, as it was the case of the Karstadt department store in Bielefeld. One of the exhibitions was a four-week exhibition of the Art and Culture of the Continent, opened in August 1970 with 2.500 objects from 14 countries presented and offered for sale – including dance drums and masks from Nigeria and instruments from Bali. (Vohwinkel, 2024) The cultural activities acted in the service of commerce and contributed to the sales annual result (almost 160 million DM annually in the mid 1970s, as reported by the archive of the city of Bielefeld). (Vohwinkel, 2024)

3. DECLINE OF THE KARSTADT DEPARTMENT STORES

After the peak in the 1970s, around 10 years later, the department stores faced the first crisis. In order to maintain the attractiveness, in the following years the company invested in renovations of the department stores. However, despite those efforts, by the end of the 1980s the department stores faced de-growth in terms of the annual results in sale, as well as in the number of employees (e.g., the department store in Bielefeld had a decrease from 1.200 to 570 employees in 1989, as reported by Vohwinkel (2024)). Further investments in modernisation of the department stores followed in the beginning of 2000s, but the trend of decline remained. Eventually, the Karstadt company faced insolvency, and the department stores changes in ownership, further decline in sale and the number of employees (e.g., in 2014 the department store in Bielefeld had around 170 employees, as reported by Vohwinkel (2024)).

Currently, the Karstadt department stores – in total 90 stores (or, after the merge with Galeria, in total 129 stores) throughout Germany – are facing vacancies and gradual desolation. In some cases, e.g., in the case of the Karstadt department store in Hamburg, the city bought the building, and a temporary purpose is planned until the competition for the new concept is conducted. Some of the department stores, e.g., the department stores in Dresden, Chemnitz, Erfurt and Magdeburg are

expected to remain and be modernised in the upcoming period.

Some of the buildings, e.g., the building in Magdeburg designed by Karl-Ernst and Anne-Monika Zorn in 1970, have very recognisable appearance and facade design. (see **Fig. 2**) Also, the size of the buildings, which is usually much bigger compared to the surrounding, contributes to them remaining remarkable within the urban landscape they were built in.



Figure 2. Karl-Ernst, Anne-Monika Zorn, Centrum Warenhaus/Karstadt, Magdeburg, Germany, built between 1970–1973. © B.A.C.U., Socialist Modernism, 2015, source: <https://www.facebook.com/SocModernism/photos/centrum-warenhauskarstadtmagdeburg-germanybuilt-between-19701973architect-karl-e/588711577938254/>

The altered patterns of consumption, changes in the retail culture and the digitalisation shift have an additional impact on the plans to dissolve the department stores and re-purpose the buildings.

Due to the scarcity of the 'third places' and community spaces

in German inner-cities, in particular the non-commercial ones, the conversion or adaptive reuse plans for the vacant department stores need to consider involvement of different spaces for leisureliness and collectivity in order to improve the vitality of the inner-cities, enhance social cohesion and sense of belonging. In that way, the buildings would preserve their primary role as places of collectivity in the urban environment, yet de-commercialised and suited to the contemporary needs of the citizens and local communities.

An additional change that has an impact on the use and reuse of those spaces is that the conventional separation between the first, the second and the third places is becoming more blurred, leading to the emergence of the so-called co-living, co-working and co-mingling spaces. This too needs to be considered when creating future reuse scenarios.

4. REUSE POTENTIALS FOR THE KARSTADT DEPARTMENT STORES

Possible reuse of the Karstadt department stores was set as a task and explored within a research-oriented Master module “C5 Conference and Communication”, at TH OWL in Detmold (Germany), led by the authors. In total 16 interdisciplinary student groups conducted a study on reuse potentials while focusing on different case studies of Karstadt department stores. (see **Fig. 3**)



Figure 3. MID/MIAD Master students TH OWL, 16 teams – research study on Karstadt Reuse. © Authors, 2024, source: results of the C5 module, 2023/24.

The groups were focusing on different aspects of past, present and future of the Karstadt department stores, in particular exploring the questions of urban identity, the role of digitalisation and altered shopping behaviour; as well as developing an analytical and assessment framework applicable to the department stores, and assessment of facade components through a digital facade autopsy.

The facade autopsy method is involving comprehensive documentation, disassembly, material identification and testing, which provides a deep understanding of the existing facade components, perceived as a “material bank”. (see **Fig. 4**) The method is crucial in identifying potential for material reuse and recycling in case of buildings not recognised as architecturally significant, and in assessing the environmental impact of facade materials, providing architects with valuable insights for informed decision-making in the reuse process.

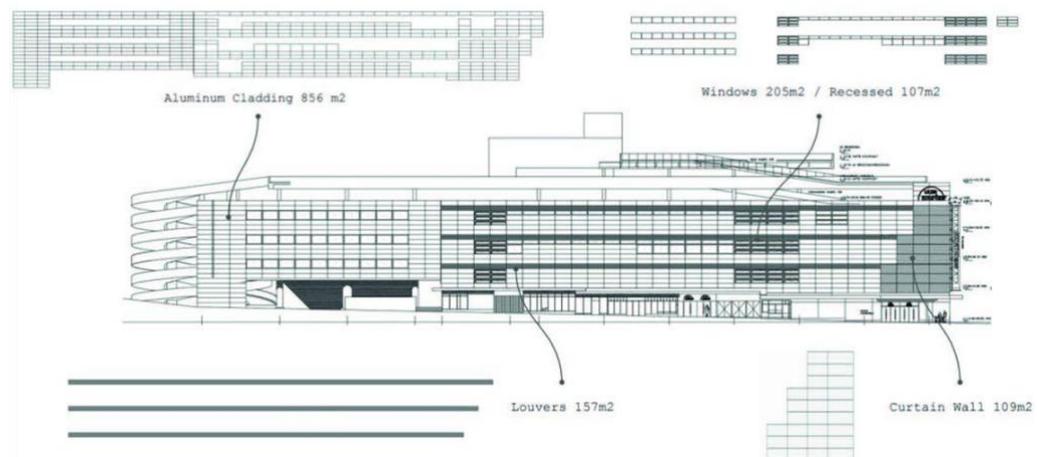


Figure 4. Karstadt Reuse: Digital Facade Autopsy, Case study Karstadt Dortmund. © MID/MIAD Master students TH OWL, Team 14: Chemseddine Amrani and Ahmet Faruk Cakir, 2024, source: results of the C5 module, 2023/24.

Furthermore, some of the groups were exploring what are decisive measures for creating a sense of belonging in reuse scenarios and how to transform the buildings into vibrant community hubs.

The students particularly recognised the capacity of the buildings to re-emerge as catalysts of urban revitalization, community development and overall well-being of the citizens. Transforming the vacant department stores into community centres and cultural hubs can provide opportunities for social interaction, facilitate community engagement and foster community cohesion.

One of the groups recognised a critical factor for reuse of the department stores, which is their closed facades, and explored possibilities of increasing the amount of natural light in the buildings. Depending on the new program for the building, they proposed daylight optimisation to suit the new function, e.g., creating a light shaft and re-designing the facade (see **Fig. 5**).

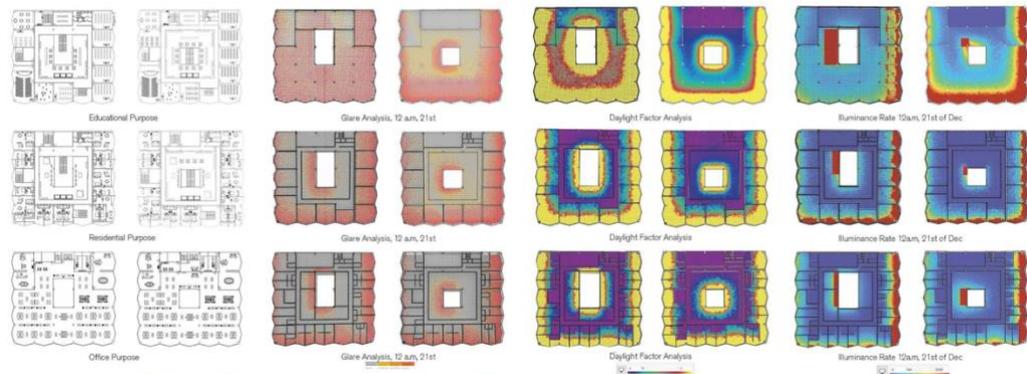


Figure 5. Karstadt Reuse: Daylight Optimisation, Case study Karstadt Celle. © MID/MIAD Master students TH OWL, Team 13: Aysegul Gurleyen, Ghazaleh Valipur and Meltem Durmus, 2024, source: results of the C5 module, 2023/24.

Additionally, in order to improve visual connectivity with the city and mitigate the closed-off atmosphere often associated with the large department stores, it is necessary to open up the building, re-design its facade as a more porous structure and re-configure pedestrian paths to optimize the flow and accessibility, as concluded by one of the groups.

5. CONCLUSION

The study explored the inner-city department stores as one of the typologies of the “commercial” modernism, which played as well an important role in reforming urbanity in the post-war Europe. These commercial facilities strongly contributed to the creation of the modern consumer society, offering a new urban experience to the ‘consumer-citizens’, an experience of ‘commercial collectivity’ in urban context.

The study of the past, present and future of the Karstadt department stores shows how those once vibrant ‘third places’ – commercial entities, but also communal spaces – became obsolete and are facing increase in vacancies. Although some of the buildings have very recognisable appearance and remain remarkable within the urban landscape they were built in, they urge adaptation in order to suit the changing circumstances and societal needs.

The paper presents findings from the Master module, which was assessing and exploring reuse potential for the Karstadt department stores in German inner-cities. The findings highlight the capacity of the buildings to re-emerge as catalysts of urban revitalization, community development and overall well-being of the citizens. This needs to remain focal in adaptive reuse proposals. Possible multifunctional cultural hubs and comparable programs, which were the most commonly addressed in the student works, could facilitate diverse activities, including social gatherings, workshops, cultural events, and tailored services, addressing the nuanced needs of the citizens.

Nevertheless, as noted by one of the student groups, development of the transformation process for the department stores necessitates meticulous city-specific analysis, the formulation of a comprehensive space catalogue, and the strategic planning of interventions for optimal effectiveness.

6. NOTES AND QUOTATIONS

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3. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*. New York: Paragon House, 1989.

4. Tom Avermaete, "Collectivity in the prison of plenty: The French commercial centres by Claude Parent, 1967-1971", in *Shopping Towns Europe: Commercial Collectivity and the Architecture of the Shopping Centre, 1945-1975*, ed. Janina Gosseye and Tom Avermaete (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 110-121.

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8. BIOGRAPHY

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UTA POTTGIESSER, DR.-ING. (PHD), licenced architect (1993), studied Architecture at TU Berlin (1984-91) and finished her dissertation at TU Dresden (2002) in Germany, with the title: Multi-layered Glass Constructions. Energy and Construction. She is Chair of Heritage & Technology at TU Delft in the Netherlands (since 2018) and Professor of Building Construction and Materials at Detmold School of Architecture and Interior Architecture, Germany (since 2004). She was appointed Professor of Interior Architecture at Faculty of Design Sciences of the University of Antwerp, Belgium (2016–2019). As a practicing architect and academic she is concerned with the protection, reuse and improvement of the built heritage and environment; and she is a board member of DOCOMOMO Germany since 2016 and the chair of the DOCOMOMO International since 2022.