

The Design Concept of the Open-Air Exhibition “Peaceful Revolution 1989/90”

As curator of the exhibition “Peaceful Revolution 1989/90”, the Robert Havemann Gesellschaft e.V. developed a very comprehensive concept in terms of content that was to be implemented in the exhibition’s design. The remit for the project’s design stated, among other things, that “In the summer and autumn of 1989 a broad cross-section of the population in the DDR surged with criticism, resentment and hope out of the closed spaces and into the public spaces. Two crucial decisions were therefore made in advance. Firstly, it was to be an open-air exhibition that would be inviting to visitors and open to all citizens and secondly, Alexanderplatz, a historic, authentic space, was to be the exhibition venue. These two specifications were to decisively determine the form and aesthetic of the exhibition’s overall design.

An open-air exhibition requires free space, a public area, so design considerations concerning the construction of exhibition buildings or a roof or the like were ruled out from the outset. The amount of text and image material, with a proposed exhibition area of approximately 300 metres and exhibition panels of a maximum height of 2.50 metres, also demanded an open form. Two apparently contradictory problems therefore had to be solved. Alexanderplatz, bustling, windy, and relatively inappropriate for a temporary exhibition, had to be transformed into a quieter, more enclosed and intimate space. At the same time, the public and the many transport routes in the square were to be left undisturbed. By far the greatest design challenge was posed by the necessity of preventing competition between the external space and the form of the exhibition.

The Design Concept at Alexanderplatz

The exhibition walls radiate out from an Information Pavilion. A total of five of these large exhibition walls (height 2.5 metres/ length ca. 40 metres) move, depending on your perspective, either towards the formal centre, the Pavilion, or away from it. The long exhibition wall spotlights – graphically arranged – make the exhibition’s content clear in images and texts.

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There are breaks in the walls at regular intervals, providing visitors to the exhibition with greater freedom of movement and interesting views into other areas of it.

A special device was used enabling visitors to still recognise Alexanderplatz, with its vast array of visual distractions, criss-crossing by tram lines, and the strong influence of the forms of transport at its edges, as a square, while at the same time highlighting the exhibition visually and in design terms. Abstracted banners, which lend the space a strong symbolic character, were used as a kind of superordinate subtext. The banners refer in a direct, yet silent and therefore impressive way, to the exhibition's theme. The result is a large, extensive sculptural installation that draws the space together in design terms, without allowing it to compete with the exhibition's content.

The idea of using the striking symbol of the banner was inspired by photos of demonstrations taken during the Peaceful Revolution showing the huge number of imaginative banners. It was not possible to use a direct one-to-one adoption of the forms of banners carried at the time, because this information was already covered by image material on the exhibition walls. For this reason, an "alienated", elevated form of banner structure was chosen. Abstracted metal banners create the desired metaphor. Almost as if protecting the exhibition walls, a network of light, metal mesh banners that seem like fabric is elevated at a height of four to five metres. The slender banner pillars are made of stainless steel and give the square structure. They are connected with each other for reasons of static stability, creating the impression of a huge metal pergola. Despite the considerable formal rigour of the overall installation, the materials used (various metal meshes, perforated sheet metal and stainless steel piping) generate a great lightness. No passer-by has to walk around them. This installation makes the lively goings-on in the square, with its countless people and the noise of the environment, conditions which would normally detract from the success of an exhibition, into a united entity.

Different lighting of the installation depending on the weather or time of day and the various optical crossovers and overlaps support this impression.

The powerful call of the GDR population, "Wir sind das Volk" (We are the people), is the main text used on the banners. The sentence is fragmented and distributed in various

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ways across the metal mesh in individual words. Its letters are also made of metal and form a kind of low relief together with the background. Only several of the banners together recreate the whole text, like the many individual voices that formed into an immense outcry that those in power in the GDR could no longer ignore.

This exhibition design requires the involvement of visitors and passers-by; they are an important part of the concept. The person and the banner become a single entity. A successful exhibition lives from an interplay of the individual, space and information.

Thomas Gusenburger and Professor Peter Sykora

Overall design planning of the exhibition:

Neumann Gusenburger Landschaftsarchitekten, Scenography: Prof. Peter Sykora,
Pavilion: Baumgart Becker Architekten, Exhibition graphics: eckedesign Berlin

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