

FUN PALACE

CULTURAL CENTRES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY – INTERNATIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE, 15 – 17 OCTOBER 2004

In 1961 British architect Cedric Price (1934-2003) conceived the project Fun Palace, a radical vision for an urban cultural centre which, although unrealised, has since become legendary, providing inspiration for numerous buildings such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Working with theatre director Joan Littlewood, Price proposed a programmatic fusion of inherited cultural institutions such as theatre, museum or university within a single, temporary mega structure. The architecture of this gigantic laboratory was not conceived as a finished object but rather as a constantly changing structure that, like a theatre stage, would adapt itself to diverse and unforeseeable uses.

Between 15 to 17 October 2004 Berlin's infamous Palast der Republik* will host the three-day conference FUN PALACE: a homage to one of the 20th century's most influential and controversial concept architects, and an opportunity to reflect upon one of the most significant cultural experiments presently taking place in Berlin: After fourteen years of closure and already agreed plans for demolition, the Palast der Republik building has recently been reopened to the public as a cultural laboratory for a limited period of three months. As the most significant event in a series of temporary appropriations, FUN PALACE will provide a stage to discuss how this experiment might inform a new medium and long-term vision for the site as a contemporary public space, providing a momentary escape from the prospect of the Palast's imminent demolition and official plans to develop the site as a banal, privatised business complex, clad in the reconstructed facade of the long gone Prussian castle.

The event will include a programme of lectures, discussions, conversations within a unique setting that seeks to emulate the Fun Palace vision of Cedric Price with artistic performances and installations, an exhibition of Price's Fun Palace scheme and a FUN PALACE Lounge. Over three days some of the most renowned international architects, curators, and theoreticians are asked to debate with local Berlin actors: What are the programmatic, organisational and spatial characteristics of an urban cultural centre for a 21st city that could be developed on the site of the Palast der Republik? Which new typologies of cultural institutions are presently being developed in contemporary China, Japan, Africa or Eastern Europe? Can the concept of multidisciplinary and temporary cultural use of a disused building as currently tested in the Palast der Republik serve as a model for open cultural experiment in an era of tight public budgets?

Berlin still has the choice between a radical and ambitious vision or resignation and backward provincialism, provided that courage and ambition can be mobilised. FUN PALACE is a laboratory, stage and creative retreat – and an invitation to share one of Cedric Price's favourite delights – the delight in the unknown.

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supported by: Hauptstadtkulturfond Berlin, The British Council, The Canadian Centre for Architecture Montréal, The Canadian Embassy in Berlin

* Palast der Republik:

Built as the combined parliament and cultural centre of East Germany, the Palast der Republik (English: Palace of the Republic) was closed abruptly on the 31 October 1990 on grounds of asbestos contamination - only fourteen years after its inauguration. The future of the building and its surroundings remain one of the most controversial questions of unified Germany. After long and difficult negotiations with the building's new owner, the Federal Government of Germany, the pressure group >ZwischenPalastNutzung< (initiated in 2002 by the urban research group >studio urban catalyst< and various local cultural activists) succeeded in obtaining a temporary lease agreement, limited to three months (August until November 2004). The building, stripped to its structural core, will thus be transformed into a laboratory for diverse cultural activities. What follows next remains unclear. Over a decade of intense planning effort have led to the decision to demolish the Palast and replace it with a building emulating the shape of the destroyed Prussian castle and clad in an imitation of the old facade. Yet with the city nearing bankruptcy and a deepening nationwide recession public funding for the project has been ruled out and despite huge concessions to potential private investors (including large scale privatisation of the site) have not helped to mobilise the necessary budget of EURO 800m. With the tender for demolition in an advanced state and demolition scheduled for the end of the year, Berlin is likely to replace a thriving cultural appropriation with a grass area, a landscaped void for years to come.