

A RING OF TOWERS BERLIN

Towards a Sustainable Concept of High-Rise Building

Berlin aims high

High-rise buildings are increasingly being promoted as a way of keeping pace with Berlin's dynamic growth, despite the lack of a coherent concept of where tower buildings can work and where they are best avoided.

Finding the right location for new high-rises requires a holistic urban planning concept based on clear and enduring principles. The long-term success of high-rise construction, moreover, depends on the implementation of sustainable mobility concepts with a strong emphasis on public transport.

While the areas around Breitscheidplatz or Berlin Hauptbahnhof may appear ideal for high-rise buildings, a closer look reveals the problems the construction of new tower blocks in these locations would entail for a city already choked with traffic. The intersections between Berlin's local train system and the main traffic arteries offer much better chances for new centres of development with new towers in a new cityscape.

Public space is worth protecting

European cities have always been structured around an urban centre characterized by places of social and commercial interaction including the market square, the church, the town hall and, in some cases, the university. The church was invariably the tallest building. With its spire pointing towards heaven, it provided a unifying spiritual framework, but also served as an important landmark, telling any stranger approaching the city where the centre was. In this interpretation of urban history, the centre is defined as public space in a free and open society, a space to which all citizens have unrestricted access. Modern urban development has tended to ignore this definition, however, often breaking with established traditions. In Berlin, the area around Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church is a striking example of an urban centre robbed of its significance, with two high-rise buildings Upper West and Zoofenster) overshadowing the church and diminishing its value as a place of collective remembrance. Current plans for high-rise buildings in Berlin mostly focus on City West, Alexanderplatz, and the main railway station. Real estate developers would term Berlin’s centre “exclusive”, and that is indeed what it may become, an area from which large parts of the population are excluded. Once a crucible of civil liberty and social interaction, the heart of the city is now seeing the emergence of gated communities securely tucked away behind walls, some of them made of glass, as if that made any difference. Unless planners learn to obey Mies van der Rohe’s rule – from his time in New York – that a ground floor area adjoining public space must be generously proportioned and accessible to the public. Some European cities have pointedly refused to recognize high-rise buildings as a mark of metropolitanism. Paris, Vienna, and Rome all spurn the idea of building new towers in the city centre, instead protecting the unique cityscapes that are their trademark. In Berlin, however, many organic structures were destroyed in the aftermath of the Second World War, ground down in the conflict between traditional urban development

and modern planning’s blind embrace of motorization. The heavy social, ecological, and economic burden is something we still have to contend with today. We should not compound past mistakes by making new ones.

Sustainable planning for sustainable cities

Developing sustainable cities means integrating high standards of urban quality with a holistic concept of sustainability as the fundamental design principle. The European city of tomorrow will have no room for private motor vehicles. Even today, automotive traffic is a serious problem in our urban conglomerations. Nearly 68 percent of commuters travel by car, losing valuable hours of their lives stuck in traffic jams. Often driving on their own in a car designed for four or five, they are lonely and bored as they approach their workplace in the city centre at an average speed of 20 km/h. This has negative effects on people’s health, on the environment, and on the sense of solidarity within society.

Landmarks in the cityscape: Where high-rises make sense

People need landmarks to know where they are or where they are going. This is true in any environment, including the city, and it is a fundamental human need. How can we determine our position within the urban space? The east-west axis through the centre of Berlin is a good example of urban design meeting this basic need. Driving east from Theodor-Heuss-Platz, you always know exactly where you are, thanks to the congenial arrangement and rhythmic sequence of identifiable places: Ernst Reuter Platz, Charlottenburger Tor, Tiergarten, Siegessäule, Brandenburger Tor, Unter den Linden, etc. Functioning as landmarks, these squares and boulevards demonstrate a principle that could prove immensely helpful in developing a sustainable concept for high-rise planning in Berlin. Contrary to the obsessive focus on the city centre, it would be strategically wiser to position new towers along the rapid transit line orbiting central Berlin, known as the S-Bahn-Ring, or along the main urban

motorway, the Stadtautobahn. Building prominent high-rises at important intersections between the city’s transport systems would create a series of architectural landmarks encircling the city like a string of pearls. The towers’ striking visibility would provide inhabitants and visitors alike with helpful points of reference in the urban fabric. The high-rises could function as gateways between the inner city and the surrounding areas Berlin is likely to assimilate in the near future. By creating jobs along the perimeter, a decentralized structure such as this would deflect individual commuter traffic from the inner city. A significant positive impact on the quality of life may be expected: people would have more time, their lives would be safer, and less noise and pollution means fewer health risks. Energy consumption would also fall, enabling Berlin to take the lead in climate protection and live up to the expectations people have of the national capital. Comparable to the Parisian portes (Porte d’Orleans, Porte de Clichy, Portes d’Italie, etc.), the places emerging around the high-rises could have meaningful names, possibly following the German tradition of naming gates after the town you eventually reach when passing through (Heidelberger Tor, Hamburger Tor, Potsdamer Tor, Frankfurter Tor).

Developers

High-rises are an attractive option for Berlin-based companies and organizations planning to develop their business in the German capital. The City Gate project offers public institutions intelligent accommodation for large administrative units and ministries. In the past, public institutions played an exemplary role in developing good architecture. The proposed high-rises provide an opportunity to revive that tradition.

Summary: Given Berlin’s continuing dynamic growth, the construction of high-rises would provide an attractive space-saving option. Contrary to conventional planning practices, which invariably focus on the city centre, the new towers would be located along the inner city’s perimeter.

The advantages are obvious: reduction of traffic in the city centre, creation of clear and attractive identities for upcoming areas. Combining the new towers with intermodal transport hubs giving access to emissions-free public transport would significantly reduce air pollution in the city centre.

Klaus Zahn und Tobias Nöfer

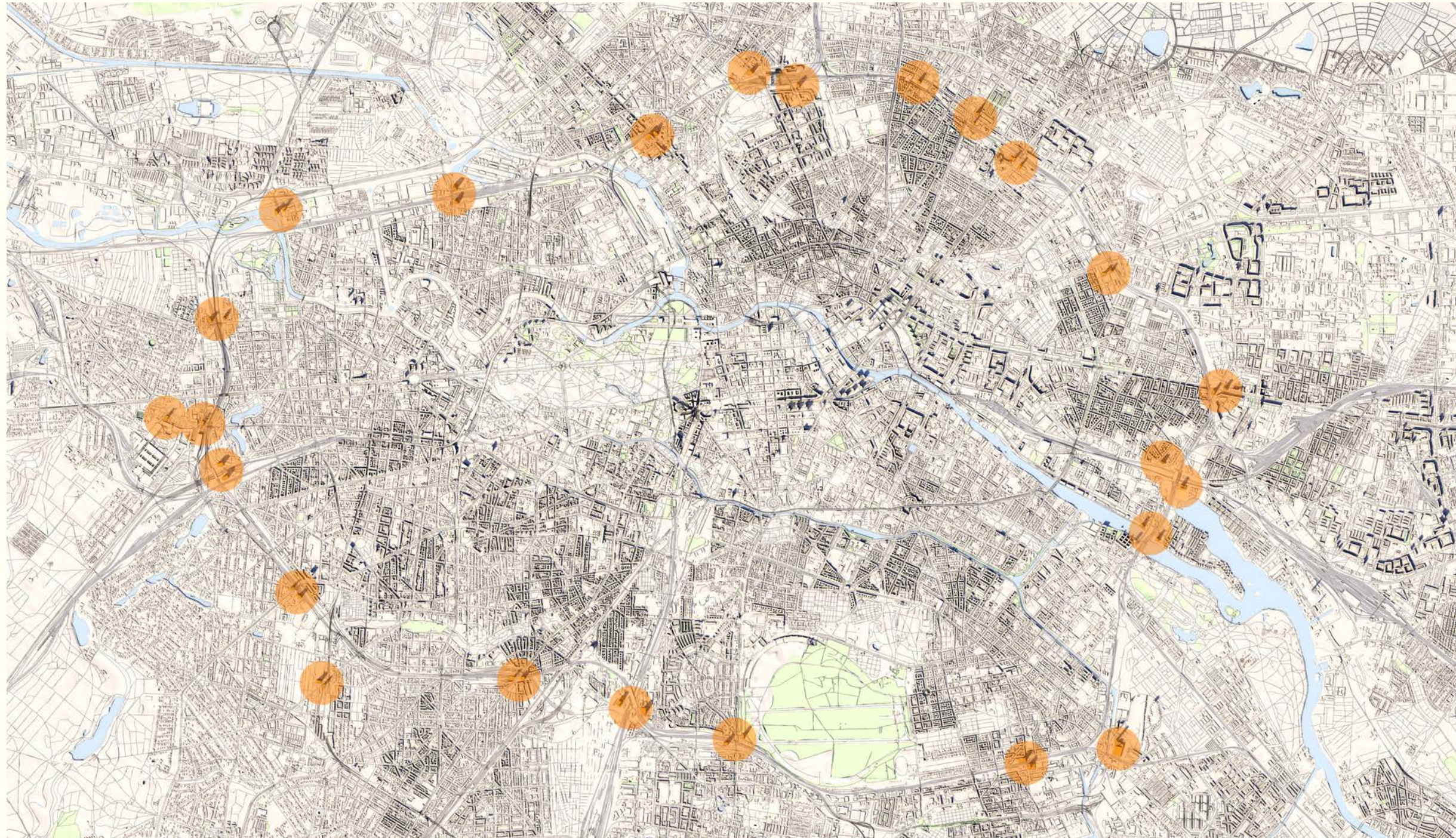


Visualization:
This is what the high-rise next to the motorway tunnel at Schlängenbader Strasse could look like. Resembling a campanile, the striking landmark gives Heidelberger Tor a clear identity.



Figure-ground plan

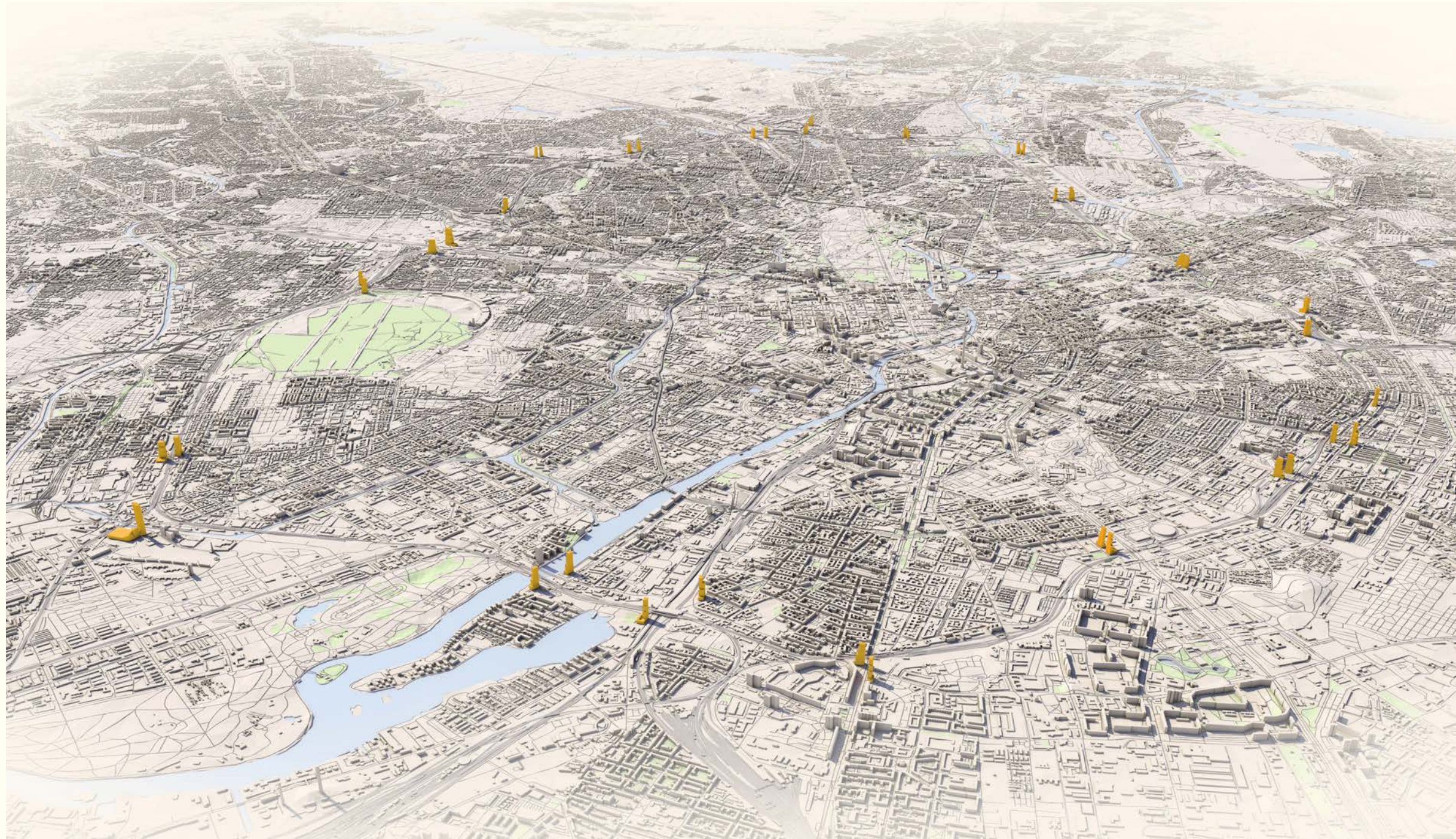
The rapid transit ring encircles the inner city in a clearly legible manner: every Berliner knows its dog's head form. It marks the boundary between city and suburbs. Locating along the transit ring means tapping into one of the city's most powerful transport systems.



A ring of high-rises

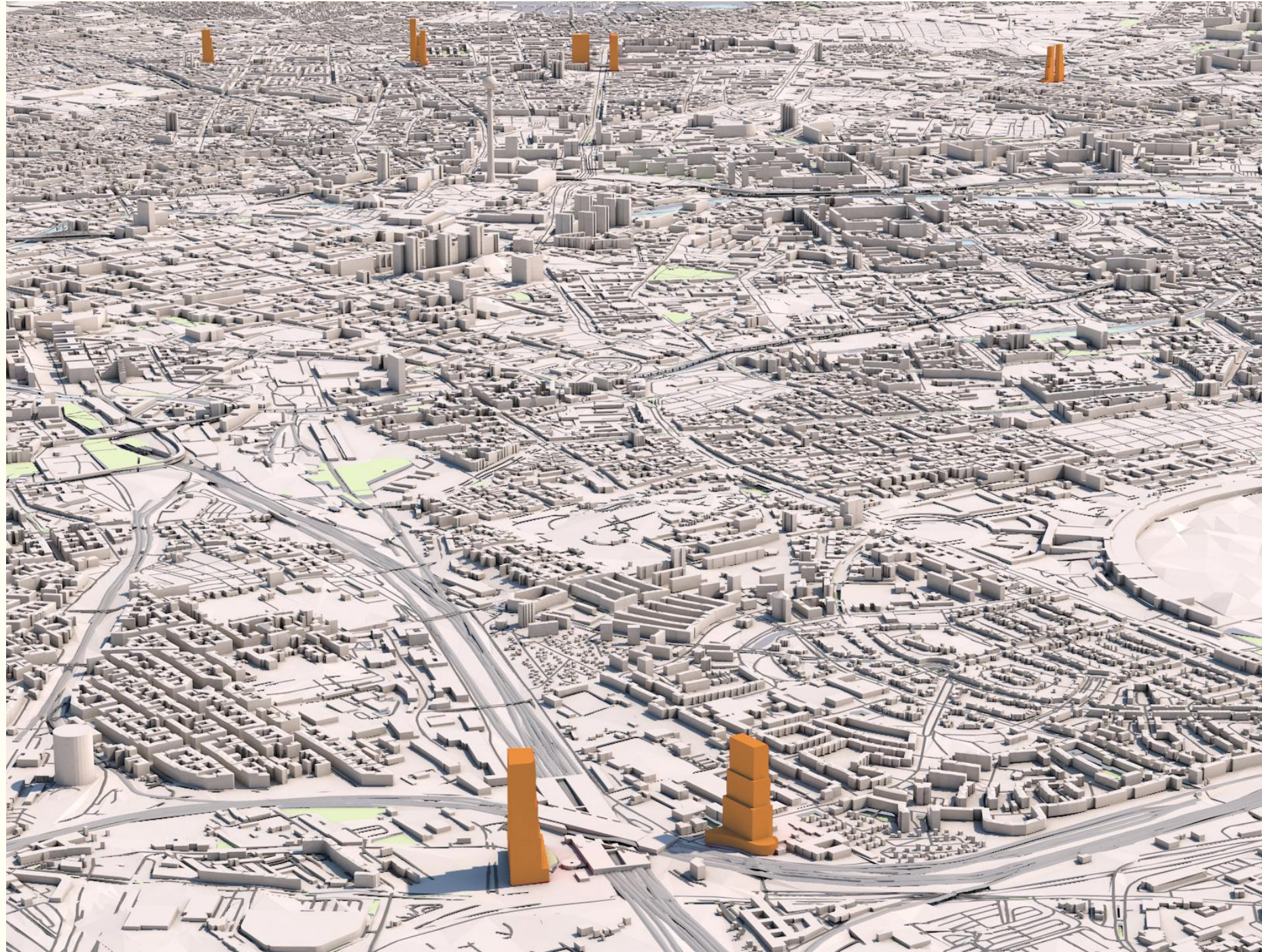
Berlin's main traffic arteries radiate from the historic centre to the suburbs and on to other cities. The intersections between these traffic arteries and the rapid transit ring form prominent transport nodes, many of which are also connected to the inner motorway ring. Despite their excellent transport links, most of these sites are underutilized.

Many were formerly characterized by activities that relocated outside the city after reunification. Other sites were devoted to mediocre mixed uses but have fallen into dilapidation and are in urgent need of redevelopment, while yet others were never developed in the first place



A ring of high-rises

View of Lichtenberg and Friedrichshain, looking from the east towards the Mitte district



A ring of high-rises

View of Südkreuz railway station with two new high-rises, looking towards the Mitte district

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Contact:

Klaus Zahn
Kastanienallee 32, 14050 Berlin
phone. 0179 116 30 51
zahn@klauszahn.org

A proposal by Tobias Nöfer and Klaus Zahn

NÖFER ARCHITEKTEN
Nöfer Gesellschaft von Architekten mbH
Binger Straße 64, 14197 Berlin
phone 030 887 104 40
buero@noefer.de
www.noefer.de