

Blossoms and bombs: speculations about a roof garden

Dirk Reimann

In 2017, the WZB Archives received an unusual enquiry: did the old building of the WZB, until 1945 the seat of the Reichsversicherungsamt, the highest supervisory and legal authority of social insurance in the German Empire, survive thanks to its roof garden? The question came from Stephan Leibfried, who had been with the WZB since its inception as a critic, then as a provider of ideas and advisor on the Board of Trustees and the Advisory Board. Two judges from the Federal Social Court, who

had worked in the Reichsversicherungsamt prior to 1945, had reported the existence of such a garden to his colleague Florian Tennstedt, and this had sparked his interest.



Thick vegetation was said to have been spread on the roof of the building – designed by August Busse and erected between 1891 and 1894 – which had the unlikely side effect of preventing the edifice from being destroyed by air raids. The garden topped the official residence of Dr. Paul Kaufmann, who until the mid-1920s had been president of the Reichsversicherungsamt, and is also said to have kept bees in his little garden.

Aerial photographs from 1953 and 1977 failed to confirm the elusive roof garden. From a bird's eye view, single areas of the eaves showed evidence of established green-

ery, but a full-fledged roof garden on the central block was nowhere to be found. Inspection of the reconstructed roof revealed bullet holes and splintering, but no other relicts of the war.

Damage reports in the Federal Archives confirm that the offices of the Reichsversicherungsamt had been a bombing target. The president of the Reichsversicherungsamt reports that during two night-time waves of bombing in November 1943, between 50 and 60 incendiary bombs and three phosphorus bombs had fallen on the building and courtyards. In December 1943, the neighborhood was hit by heavy aerial mines whose explosive power could destroy entire blocks. The roof of the Reichsversicherungsamt was penetrated a number of times by bombs;

however, they burned out on the cement floor of the attic or were extinguished without causing major damage. The shock wave of the detonated aerial mines shattered windows in





the building, blew holes in the roof had to be repaired with roofing felt. During the later air raids of January 1944, incendiary and phosphorus bombs again rained down on the building despite efforts to black it out with paper in every window. Incendiary bombs penetrated the roof and ceiling of the top floor, but, for whatever reason, they do not appear to have caused any major damage to the building. This is made all the more astonishing as the neighboring buildings in the then heavily built-up district around St. Matthew's church were all almost completely destroyed.

Nazi air defense regulations of the time stipulate that no flammable materials were to be used in the roofing of public buildings and attic floors had to be covered with masonry material, gravel, sand or dry soil from gardens and parks. This was to prevent burning rafters and flying sparks and to diminish bomb penetration depth. This regulation could be the origin of the possibly fanciful account of the roof garden. However, a scholarly essay on the history of green roofs does show that there was more to it than a protective layer of earth as they had been in use since the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period, Berlin was a major center for roof planting, and, with the roof terrace of the Karstadt department store on Hermannplatz, built between 1927 and 1929, it also possessed the biggest roof garden in Europe. The article does mention that the Reichsversicherungsamt, had a late nineteenth-century wood-cement roof that while not cultivated, had spring up from air-borne seed.

If one looks at the aerial photographs with this in mind, deliberate roof planting can be seen as perfectly possible. The green roofs of the building wings could have been used by Reichsversicherungsamt employees during their breaks, as was common practise elsewhere.

Even if such a green roof was later to have proved its worth in cushioning bombs, no more than routine tending would have been maintained during the War. The National Socialists planned to transform Berlin by 1950 into the "World Capital Germania" and planned for the entire site around today's Kulturforum to be demolished to make way for a future "Round Square" running on the North-South Axis. The entrance area of the old St. Matthew's Churchyard at the Yorckstraße S-Bahn station had already been demolished as part of the first construction phase before being interrupted by the war years. So, even the fabled roof garden would not have saved the old Reichsversicherungsamt from elimination at the hands of city planning. Only the capitulation of the Third Reich and the end of the war brought it salvation.

Dirk Reimann is a staff member of the Research Information unit and in charge of the WZB Archives.