



HANOVER WATERLOOPLATZ

**A PHOTO ESSAY ABOUT THE STATE OF
THE WATERLOOPLATZ IN HANOVER, GERMANY**

2020

by Clemens Pörtner

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WATERLOOPLATZ

The Waterlooplatz is a large square in Hanover, the capital of the federal State of Lower Saxony in northern Germany. The history of the square begins in 1815, after the successful liberation wars against the First French Empire and the battle of Waterloo. Within the local government, plans were made to build a monument to the memory of the soldiers who fought in the battle. The city architect Georg Ludwig Friedrich Laves proposed an extension of the esplanade in front of the royal castle and the placement of a victory column in its center.

In 1825, plans became more concrete and the Waterlooplatz was laid out as a military parade square with the monumental column at its centre. Also, barracks and other military buildings for the troops of the kingdom of Hanover were built around it. According to Laves' plan, the axis of the square was aligned with the royal castle and the Market Church in the center of the city. Despite its peripheral position, the square was well connected to the old town by this axis and quickly became the most important military square in Hanover. Roughly a hundred years passed until the status of the Waterlooplatz began to change within the urban structure.

For a brief period of time, in the wake of World War I and the collapsed German Kaiserreich, the square declined somewhat in importance in the city. There simply seemed to be no need for a military square anymore, and the symbolism of the axial alignment and the overall layout of the square started to be questioned. Within 10 years, however, as power was seized by the Nazis, the Waterlooplatz became the subject of city planning once more. In a megalomaniac plan to create a gigantic political centre for the new Gauhauptstadt Hanover, similar to the ideas for the new Reichshauptstadt Germania in Berlin, the Waterlooplatz became a pivot point for an extensive axis stretching from the city centre down to a newly planned government district at Maschsee.

Another world war later, not only the Nazis' plan for a representative political centre at the Waterlooplatz were history but also the city's physical condition had changed drastically due to the great destruction during the war. More than 80% of Hanover's historical city centre was destroyed. Hanover city planners, led by the newly appointed director of planning Rudolf Hillebrecht, saw a chance for radical change in the city's appearance. The city would not just be reconstructed but transformed into a city of the future. And in 1950 that meant a city for cars. For the Waterlooplatz this new dogma meant the definitive disconnection from the city centre.

Hillebrecht introduced the City Ring as Hanover's new main traffic infrastructure, with a four to six lane highway around the centre and five feeder roads bringing cars from the suburbs into the city. The new roads were implemented with little regard for the structure of the old city and therefore created trenches which still today shape the appearance of the city. One of these feeder roads, the Laves Allee, passes by the Waterlooplatz. By design, it does not follow the old axis planned by Laves. Instead, the road makes a long stretched curve that dissolves the symmetry of the square and gives it its present shape. Planning director Hillebrecht explained: "I didn't want to have an axis anymore and no reminder of a dusty military-parade square."

In the ensuing years, the square repeatedly became subject of discussion: In the 60s as a plot for the newly planned State Chancellery, and again in the 70s as a new government district of a proposed new federal state of Northern Germany. In 1988, for the 200th anniversary of the architect of the Waterlooplatz, Georg Ludwig Friedrich Laves, the square was the topic of a workshop with architects and urban planners discussing its future. Proposals like a carousel around the victory column, a huge lake or a 400 meter long stoa were proposed. The square has also been suggested for housing developments or buildings with public functions.

Eventually none of the plans panned out. Today the Waterlooplatz remains essentially without purpose, untouched since Hanover's transformation into "the city of the future". The big streets that surround it, which were supposed to connect the city with the people, instead disconnected it from the city. Today the square is surrounded by offices, ministries, police facilities and schools. The City Ring separates it not only from from the historical centre but also from the residential district north of the square, the Calenberger Neustadt. Not many people pass by Waterlooplatz. Only the few who work there. But nobody really seems to care about the square.

For the last few years, awareness has been growing about this unused plot in the middle of the city. A few containers were set up for a kindergarten and a homeless shelter, both temporary installations, allowed until 2026. What happens after that is not clear. Maybe it is time for something more permanent.

THE FOLLOWING PHOTOGRAPHS ARE THE PRODUCT OF MY LAST VISIT TO HANOVER IN SEPTEMBER 2020 AND PORTRAY THE WATERLOOPLATZ AND ITS IMMEDIATE SURROUNDINGS. THE PICTURES WERE NOT TAKEN STRATEGICALLY AND IN ORDER TO CREATE AN INVENTORY OR TO DRAW AN OBJECTIVE IMAGE OF THE CONTEXT BUT RATHER INCIDENTAL IN AN ATTEMPT TO CAPTURE THE ATMOSPHERE OF THIS PLACE. THEY ARE THE RESULT OF MY OWN EXPLORATION AND EXPERIENCE OF THE CITY.



Today the Waterlooplatz is a vast, almost empty grass plane with the victory column as the only point of reference on its southern end. A few trees along the east side populate the square. Right next to the column, city authorities installed a homeless shelter just a couple of years ago. On the other end of the square, a kindergarten was put in place in a similar manner. Both facilities are



1

just temporary solutions and not intended to stay. Along the western edge the Lavesallee, one of Hanovers five big feeder roads, separates the square from all neighboring buildings. Ironically the street is named after the man whose ideas of symmetries and axis it is meant to disrupt – Georg Friedrich Laves.











From the northern end of the Waterlooplatz, following the City Ring towards the east, three of Hanovers most iconic buildings come in sight lined up like pearls on a necklace. The neoclassical City Hall with its tall green copper dome, constructed in 1914, opposite to the slowly but surely decaying ruins of



the once-proud Maritim Hotel build in the 60s, and a bit further down the road the futuristic Tetris-like structure of the Nord LB Bank, built in the early 2000s. Three buildings that could hardly be more different, and precisely because of that illustrate nicely the tensions existing in Hanovers urban structure.











The City Ring above ground is not the only piece of infrastructure closely connected to the Waterlooplatz. Three metro lines pass by below the square. A metro station is located at its northern tip and shares the square's name – Waterloo. Next to the people working and going to



school around the Waterlooplatz the station has especially heavy traffic on the weekends. That's when thousands of football fans use the station to get to the nearby HDI Arena to support the cities football club Hanover 96.

















The urban fabric north of Waterlooplatz is rather diverse. Seen from Lavesallee, the urban structure is gradually changing from large office buildings, both from the 1970s as well as the Gründerzeit era to a more fragmented apartment block structure dominated by the expediency of postwar reconstruction. In some cases, both typologies stand side by side and thus create an interesting contrast between profane functional architecture and decorative representative buildings. The Calenberger Straße somehow marks the border between this in-between part of the city and more dense residential areas further north. The street can be seen as an axis between the Ihmezentrum, a brutalist megastructure with controversial reputation, and the city center, marked by the red brick bell tower of the Marktkirche.























A mix of old military facilities partially dating back all the to the initial times of the square and large office blocks mainly build in the second half of the 20th century define the fragmented urban fabric south of the Waterlooplatz. A maze of path and small streets, none of them public, connect a series of parking lots in between the solitary buildings. Just like in most urban areas with monofunctional use related to business, the area seems deserted after working hours and especially on the weekends.





















Further south the urban fabric dissolves ever more and eventually fades out onto the vast emptiness of the Schützenplatz. A multifunctional square occasionally used as a parking lot for visitors of the football matches or during certain periods of the year for festivals and fairs.

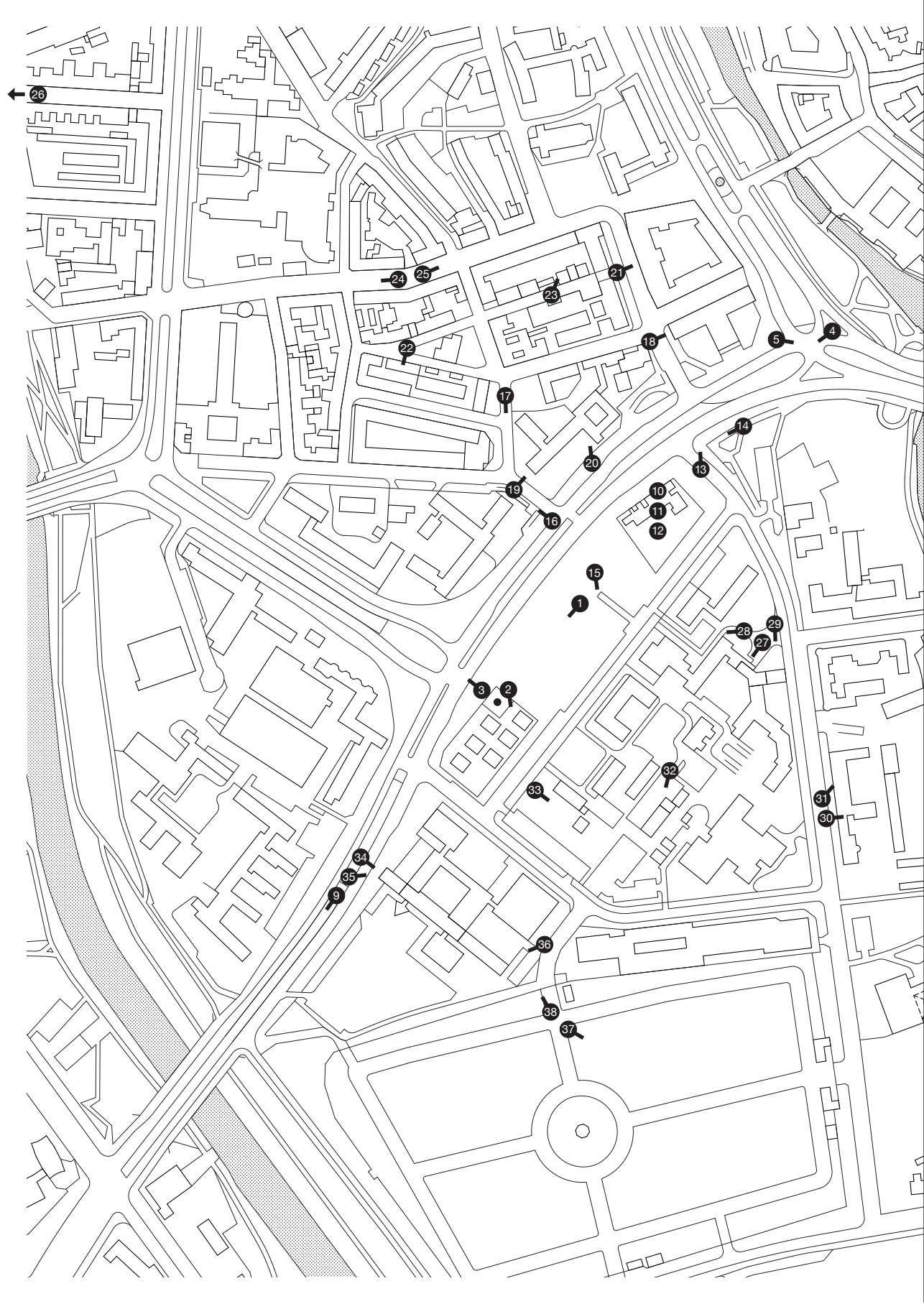


36

That is the only time of the year that the square becomes really lively. When carousels, bumper cars, and food stands create an incentive to visit. The rest of the time, throughout most of the year, the Schützenplatz is a rather sad place to be.







26

24 25

23

21

22

18

5

4

17

14

19

20

16

16

10

11

12

15

1

28

29

27

3

2

33

32

31

30

34

35

9

36

38

37

