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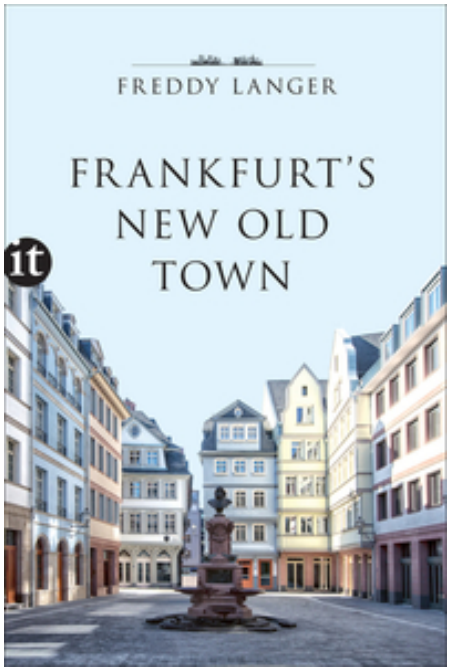

Langer, Freddy
Frankfurt's New Old Town

Mit zahlreichen farbigen Abbildungen

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Freddy Langer
Frankfurt's New Old Town

Neo-Baroque and half-timbered romanticism in a city that thinks big, is growing upwards, and already seems to have the century to come in view? Hardly had the plans to recreate the bombed-out old city between the cathedral and the Römer city hall been drafted when the criticism began.

And yet, today native Frankfurters cannot curb their enthusiasm. Around the Hühnermarkt, by now one of the most attractive squares in the city, a new world has grown which with its pubs, stores, and even a barbershop is not only tourism magnet. It is as if, together with a new heart, Frankfurt's centre has also received a new soul.

This lushly illustrated volume recounts the exciting history of the Old Town, gives a summary of the various debates surrounding its reconstruction, and takes the reader along on a tour of the most beautiful and important buildings in the new district.

Freddy Langer, 1957, was born and raised in Frankfurt and has lived there his whole life. He has been the travel editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* for 30 years, and has written numerous books on the remotest parts of the world. This book is his first on Frankfurt.

FREDDY LANGER

Frankfurt's New Old Town

With copious colour photographs by the author
Translated by Alexander Booth

INSEL VERLAG

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FRANKFURT'S NEW OLD TOWN

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FOREWORD

I like Frankfurt's New Old Town. And recently I've been spending more time there than in any other part of town. Not to go out, not to go shopping, not even to get a haircut: just to look.

I watched the construction since the beginning. Watched how things grew out of the ground on the tiny area between the historic Steinerne Haus and the Catholic convention center Haus am Dom, piece by piece – growing, well, there's no other way to put it, up out of the slab above the car park and the U-Bahn station. From the Schirn, that temple of art overlooking the Krönungsweg, you could stand on the tips of your toes and get a look over the construction fences – get an idea of how the lines would end up meeting, how all the corners and angles would turn into new nooks and squares. From Braubachstraße you could see how the buildings gradually came nearer from the south, row by row, like a whole wall getting closer, until Braubachstraße had its own row of houses months before Frankfurt's new heart received its finishing touches. And, naturally, the view from the cathedral's observation deck was the best. Looking down onto the concrete and the cranes, and onto the formwork, in which yet more concrete was being poured. In the beginning there were just two cranes, and you could tell how small the area really was. Barely 8,000 square metres; a little bigger than a football pitch. Then new cranes arrived, and you understood just how much effort simultaneously erecting 35 completely different buildings requires, how tricky it is for different construction teams not to constantly get in each other's way and for everything to be

ready at the same time. Fifteen of these were so-called creative reconstructions, plus 20 modern buildings that were based on the aesthetic of the old buildings and whose layout had to match the 19th-century Old Town seamlessly. And because the only things that had ever really changed in the Old Town were the facades, which had been altered according to the fashion of the time – from Gothic to the Renaissance to Rococo over the course of the centuries (rarely did whole rows of buildings change) – this meant copying the city's medieval layout almost to a hair.

That was something new for Frankfurt, a place not really on anyone's bucket list, a place that feels comfortable in the here and now because everything is always changing, looking towards the future. Tear it down, build something new, then tear it back down again; that's how things go in Frankfurt, year in, year out. There has not been a single month in the last half-century when native Frankfurters might have thought: *now* the city's done, now the construction sites are gone, from now on, this is where we'll live. On the contrary, hardly had the detour for one large site been removed when a new detour for the next large site would be installed, sometimes just an intersection away.

In one part of the city, the tallest building in Europe was followed by *truly* the tallest building in Europe. In another part, there was briefly a question as to whether you could build on top of a Jewish cemetery before they decided to put up the huge administration centre there anyway, just as planned. In yet another part, they tore down the headquarters of an international company to set up an inner-city residential area without any further ado. In Osthafen as well as in Westhafen, new blocks of luxury apartments were strung together along the docks where ships had been dropping off their cargo. And before you know it,

there, where there had just been a freight depot: the tallest apartment building in the country.

But here, constructing the New Old Town, the view was different: it was directed into the past. And this time, more than with the half-timbered houses on the Römerberg – the Ostzeile, which every local understands to be a historical backdrop and possibly has more to do with 1980s postmodernism than with any Gothic sense of form – the project would be loaded with a certain understanding, a different understanding of living, maybe even a different kind of city. They were not erasing an area to risk another experiment in modern architecture, but to resurrect a bygone way of life.

Construction took six and a half years. Peeking over the construction fences or looking down from the cathedral, there was something new to see every month. Buildings grew, at times surprisingly quickly. Wood appeared, then it was plastered. Roof frames appeared, then they were covered. At some point, the facades were painted in different colors and began to shine like healing promises in the sun. From the cathedral's observation terrace, the silver-grey slate from all the gables and rooftops resembled a wildly jagged mountain landscape. Then it was finished, the New Old Town, all at the same time: the buildings, alleyways, courtyards, and fountains. And even those who had followed construction for years, or been lucky enough to take part in a tour of the various construction sites, even they could not resist the impression that the entire ensemble had appeared overnight like some kind of giant spaceship landing between the cathedral and the Römer. It was as though it had been poured out of a mould, that's how suddenly the New Old Town appeared. And it looked so new, everything almost aseptically clean, nearly

artificial. Not a single crack in the plaster and absolutely no graffiti. Not a single spot on any wall and no loose paving tiles anywhere. The New Old Town looked dressed up for company, smartened up for a holiday, no, for a celebration that would last a whole weekend, or maybe a few weeks – an occasion, in any case, that would be over sooner or later. And then the New Old Town would disappear again, or at least that's what it felt like.

And that's why I come here so often: out of fear that in the meantime it might have returned whence it came. Like those spaceships at the end of sci-fi films, flying back home.

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And Then There Was Nothing Left –

The Nighttime Bombings of March 1944

For a long time, Frankfurt had hoped to make it through WWII unscathed, or at least with a minimal loss of life and architecture. In half a year, a few bombs had rained down on the Old Town: there had already been a few fires in October 1943, and after the attacks on the Sachsenhausen district and other targets in the city centre in late autumn and early winter the Main river embankment must have resembled a lunar landscape. And yet a great deal had been saved, people were still living in the Old Town and they had good reason to believe they'd be able to cover up the holes that had appeared in the rows of houses and thus blot out the traces of destruction. But then Frankfurt was to be literally ploughed up in just two attacks: on 18 March 1944, it was the eastern half of the city between the cathedral and the Hospital zum Heiligen Geist, and with the subsequent and decisive bombing on the night of March 22, whatever was left.

Shortly after 8:30 p.m. the few sirens that had withstood the bombing four days earlier began to howl. Just a few minutes later, the first blasts could be heard in the north. The air raid lasted 45 minutes, and 816 airplanes were counted. The first ones dropped 3,000 high-explosive bombs onto the city, destroying most of the roofs. These were followed by more than a million stick-type and liquid-incendiary bombs. Burning phosphorus rained down on the city like a glistening curtain and darted through the streets. It must

have been an infernal roar. The pressure from the impacts alone caused large buildings and churches to sway. In no time at all, the houses were in flames. Whatever had not been hit directly was set alight by flying sparks. The first walls collapsed. In the streets and alleyways, stones and beams began to pile up and then even more stones and beams. One house after the other collapsed, tipped over, or imploded, until the city's silhouette disappeared and only the cathedral's spire could be seen amidst a sea of swirling flames. Of the 1,500 half-timbered houses only 11 remained standing. For days the city did not see the sun, hidden under the pall of smoke rising from the rubble.

When not even six weeks later, at the beginning of May, an employee of the *Frankfurter Anzeiger* knocked on the bull's-eye panes of the cathedral's little gatehouse, the spire's custodian sat there in his city-employee uniform as if nothing had happened. A lot of people are making their way up these days, he said, on Sundays it's a veritable river. They come back down with tears in their eyes. The view from above is a gaping field of rubble with only a few points of reference poking up here and there: the staggered gable facade of city hall, the Römer, its windows empty; a stump which was once the fountain niche on the Belvederchen roof garden of the Haus Zur Goldenen Waage; a decorated archway rising above a bomb crater. That is the extent of what the chroniclers of the *Frankfurter Anzeiger* saw.

Yet there was definitely more that had survived the hail of bombs, but no one saw it that way. On the contrary, in the shortest amount of time a thoughtless approach pitilessly delivered the foundations and remains of historical buildings to the pickaxe. First, whatever was still standing was torn down, then the rubble was removed. In October 1946, Mayor Walter Kolb allowed him-

self to be photographed in front of the Römer wearing a suit and crushing pieces of stone with a jackhammer. What was to be rebuilt on top of it triggered furious debates. The churches were understood to be not only historically meaningful, but pieces of a spirtual *Heimat* as well. And discussions regarding the Paulskirche and the Goethe House – the former a symbol of German democracy, the latter of German culture – were fierce, and centred on whether reconstructions would be tantamount to hushing up guilt and falsifying history, or whether they might function as a beacon, pointing a new society in the right direction.

The Goethe House was 'not destroyed by a fire caused by an iron or a stroke of lightning or an arson attack,' Walter Dirks wrote in 1947 in the *Frankfurter Hefte*. 'Had the people of poets and thinkers (and with them Europe) not deviated from Goethe's spirit, from the spirit of moderation and humanity, they would not have embarked on this war and thus not have provoked the destruction of this house.' It had been bitter logic, and by no means a historical mistake, that had led to the Goethe House lying in ruins. 'This loss is just,' he summarized, 'and that is why there is no choice but to recognize it.'

How different the argument in May 1944 in the Nazi newspaper *Völkische Beobachter*. There, art historian Ernst Benkard understood the ruins to be a memorial to the enemy's crimes. For the enemy with its 'murderous fires … has taken out a mortgage on the entire still civilized world, one which can never be repaid.' And just like the ruins of the Goethe House, the ruins of the Old Town were to be seen as an eternal denunciation, 'accompanied by the curse on all of those who gave the order for this inhuman act.' And they had been explicity excluded from Hitler's promises to build – in consideration of something greater, as the *Völkische*

Beobachter once again explained: 'In place of the once thriving and healthy city there shall be a Forum Romanum whose monuments will be visible within all the green. And they shall stand, even as ruins, for us as a melancholic, and for our enemies as a perpetually shameful, testimony.'

The question of what to do with the square that had once been the Old Town and was now an empty space between the cathedral and the Römer would become a heavy burden for the city of Frankfurt.