

Feeding Lady Architecture's Fire on Berlin's Museum Island

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Figure 1. Niobidensaal, Neues Museum

INTRODUCTION

The focus of my paper is the Neues Museum in Berlin and the nearly finished project to restore, reconstruct and complement the ruin, directed by David Chipperfield architects in Berlin.

To more fully understand Chipperfield's attitude dealing with the ruin of the Neues Museum, I will

comment first on the building history and Stüler's interesting position as an architect of transition between Schinkel's firm classicism and the historicism of the Kaiserreich. The Stüler museum itself demonstrates a unique staging of exotic artefacts and an exemplary threshold in the way history is presented and time is conceptualized. Chipperfield's recent project, that I will discuss secondly, builds on this awareness, feeding the fire of museological

imagination by interweaving careful preservation and restoration with the more abstract but sensuous forms of the architect's own vocabulary.

What develops is an amazing architecture of archaeology, as not only was the Neues Museum built to house a growing collection of archaeological treasures, but due to the bombing in the Second World War, the building itself became a ruin and subject of archaeological investigation. The monument needed to be preserved, represented and interpreted.

The fascinating project, doors opening in fall 2009, will be part of the curriculum of a study abroad term for Master students in architecture from a Canadian University. My interests therefore are the educational qualities of the work, even more so as the entire original dedication of the museum island was educational. I will not discuss a syllabus but comment on the various ontological messages that the project demonstrates.

The Chipperfield team restores and nurtures Stüler's idealistic notions to a certain extent but they do not fake a resurrection. That critical distance disturbs part of the public. They mourn the loss of comfortable cultural continuity that museums are supposed to guarantee. They mourn that history in this project does not politely step back in a distanced neutral sphere but demands presence. Not least they mourn that this museum can no longer be called a Stüler building and the lost fiction of authorship that the current team certainly exemplifies.

I will argue that those are all reasons to praise the project. Most of all I intend to demonstrate how the Chipperfield team sustains the fire of the given heritage by first of all listening to the badly damaged ruin, hence by putting most emphasis on reinforcing the legibility of the Neues Museum. Only as a contemplated second step, only after pausing in the silence of the carcass, some new notes are added.

Building History – August Stüler

The history of the museum island in Berlin, a dedicated Unesco World Heritage Site since 1990, starts in 1823 when King Friedrich Wilhelm III accepts Schinkel's plans for the Alte Museum. It is one of the first of its kind in Europe, manifesting

the King's will to present the Royal collection as national cultural heritage to the public.

In 1840, the death of Friedrich Wilhelm III. leaves the throne to the crown prince, but only one year later, in 1841, Schinkel dies. Therefore it is August Stüler who, joining this title with Persius, becomes "Architect of the King", of a new king with outstanding architectural interests: Friedrich Wilhelm IV.

Friedrich Wilhelm IV envisions the future of the Spree Island in drawings that are inspired by the Forum Romanum. On the northern half of the island, behind Schinkel's museum, he imagines a group of temples dedicated to the arts and science.

This dream will not be completely realised. Nevertheless not less than five museums will be built on the island facing the King's palace: the Altes Museum (Schinkel, 1824-1830), the Neues Museum (Stüler, 1843-1846, interiors:1855), the Alte Nationalgalerie (Stüler/Strack, 1876), the Bode-museum (Ernst v. Ihne, 1898-1903) and the Pergamonmuseum (A.Messel and Ludwig Hoffmann, 1911-1930).

No other scene in Berlin manifests so clearly the humanistic ideas for a Prussian Spree Athens. Here Schinkel's dreams of a northern Acropolis materialise and Stüler frankly pays tribute to this heritage. Describing the girders for the ceiling of the central staircase hall, he explicitly refers to Schinkel's design for the palace of King Otto I on the Acropolis (1834), a building which never materialised.¹

The centre of Berlin becomes dedicated to cultural institutions, presenting a concept of education that idealises the desire for systematic knowledge about other times and cultures, a future constructed from sharing accumulated science and art, raised to a form of religion and finally a replacement of religion.

Hardly any other town realises this intention of enlightenment so clearly as Berlin, choosing the Lustgarten with the three institutions: palace, cathedral and museum as the centre. Recalling a temple complex as much as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux' architecture of revolution, Schinkel's and Stüler's intellectual preferences feature solitaires, each with its own entrance, each its own monad, as O.M. Ungers put it.

Stüler's translation of the King's drawing elaborates three courtyards as a fascinating spatial succession, resembling a temple complex with changing proportion and orientation. Besides the Neues Museum it is first of all the later National Gallery that is given monumental significance. Stüler installs a peripteros in the centre of his first square and lifts the temple of science on a podium. Primarily dedicated to education, the lower two floors forming the podium serve as classrooms.

It is for this central icon that the neighbouring buildings are conceived and designed as background, and therefore the Neues Museum remains modest in facades and plasticity.



Figure 2. West Elevation 2008, Neues Museum

Different from Schinkel's museum concept, concerned predominantly with two valid historical periods and their characteristic art, Antique sculpture and Renaissance painting, Stüler's concept and model of education is more open. The aim is now to evaluate each period in its proper horizon and not predominantly in comparison with antiquity. Therefore the collection of gypsum casts from Greek antiquity forms a central obligation, but it is complemented with the treasures from the Lepsius Egypt expedition, the Ethnographic-, Pre- and Early-history collection, with Byzantine- and Early Christian art, Gothic, Renaissance, Classicism and finally, on the third floor, with the copper engravings and the art and curiosity cabinet.

To facilitate the orientation and to enhance each collection's atmosphere, Stüler designs a variety of spaces that not only differ in interior design but in their entire structural approach. The building grows to a labyrinth of symbols and a compendium of art history in stone. It "mingled learning, stylistic eclecticism and a dimension of palatial grandeur appropriate to a project initiated by such an ambitious and artistically-inclined monarch".²

Forty years after Alexander von Humboldt is exploring the rainforests in his little boat, Stüler aims to stage his comparable treasures in a museum-theatre, thereby re-enforcing their mystery and -sustaining them.

In many exhibition halls Stüler's system of decoration recalls Pompeii; others refer to the architecture of early Christian basilicas. The lower parts of the wall remain monochrome to facilitate the perception of the items; the upper walls are painted with allegorical or mythical scenes and figures from the respective time and country. We can assume a fully elaborated program for each room from Stüler's hand.

The central hall with its representative staircase draws the visitor upstairs, promising a comfortable visit of each floor and a chronologically staged enlightenment. In 1843 the King orders Wilhelm von Kaulbach to decorate the walls with allegorical frescos illustrating the history of men.

A fascinating subject is the variety of ceilings celebrating different structural solutions. All ceilings are composed of bricks or hollow ceramic cylinders but there are coffered ceilings, vaults and domes of different types. In the south wings all rooms have three wings and the vaulted ceilings rest on two rows of columns. In the north wings Stüler uses bowstring girders freely spanning the whole width of the room.

Iron ties, of course, had been used before to correct the flow of forces in masonry. A case in point would be the dome of the Frauenkirche in Dresden from 1740.

The combination of cast iron and wrought iron in one structural element and the sophisticated artistic articulation of the exposed material though is new and, backed up with Karl Bötticher's architectural

theories, establishes a testimony of early-modern building technologies.

The iron girders are interpreted, forming a whole compendium: They are used plain without ornament, with figurative ornament, cladded where the exposition demands heavy tectonic appearance, supported with false consoles or cladded and then decorated symbolically, as in the vestibule.

As the Neues Museum is constructed on extremely difficult ground, Stüler uses 18 m long wooden piles for foundation, but still he has to experiment with innovative light structures. The employment of bowstring girders results from the cooperation with August Borsig and his factory in the north of Berlin, famous for the early production of steam engines, locomotives and iron constructions.

Building history – Chipperfield Architect's

During the Second World War the Museum Island is bombed and most of the buildings are seriously damaged. The present restoration and preservation-project of the Neues Museum, supervised by Julian Harrap, as specialist for preservation joining the Chipperfield team, can be called one of the most significant projects of its kind in Europe. The main programme is still the display of the outstanding collection of Egyptian Art and Pre- and Early History, as was the case before the destruction. The basement presents the future connection to the "Archaeological Promenade", linking the building to the north with Pergamonmuseum and to the south with Altes Museum.

After the war the ruin received a corrugated metal canopy to prevent weathering but otherwise the situation was one of decay and dereliction during the following decades. The Southeast bay and the whole of the Northwest wing were entirely destroyed. Inside, the degrees of destruction varied. Next to spaces with highly elaborate finishes, other parts of the building and most prominently the stair hall was stripped back to the carcass, a void with exposed brick walls alluding to the picturesque sublimity of monumental ruins.

As Jonathan Keates put it, "the design utilised one of the city's most powerful images of destruction as the basis for a new work."³

With the initial acceptance of the wounded site, the team read it as a palimpsest.

Such an approach might seem most accepted in museum design as it is explicitly adopting the archaeological terminology in a process of reinforcing and preserving authentic traces and surfaces.

But city fires and fires from bombing are no easy story. They seem to trigger an intense desire for reconstructing and embalming the lost objects. The internationally most famous of German resurrections in this category is the Dresden Frauenkirche.

On the Berlin Museum Island the traumatic condition of the patient is listened to and perceived with all its aspects of strengths and naked beauty. The desire to reproduce the complete original decorative scheme, as if the intervening experiences of the world war and the following dilapidation had never taken place, is rejected.

The authentic fabric has priority and the necessary completions and sustenance are fine-tuned vis-a-vis each space and material, each time with the question of how much support is needed to reinforce the original figure, surface and intention. The idea is neither a reconstruction nor the monumentalisation of the ruin nor the dwelling in an old-new rhetoric. It is a sensuous dialogue to allow the Neues Museum to catch fire again, but this time the creative fire of a careful re-animation.

As we distinguish flora by their seasons and by the morphological realms they belong to as roots, leaves, fruits or seeds, building materials carry analogous associations. They need very different amounts of energy to be produced, processed, put into place or maintained and consequently taste very differently to a trained architect.

In a heritage building as precious as the Neues Museum we are potentially dealing with a complex re-generator of energy. The artefact is storing energy as cultural memory, as human knowledge, embodied in the outstanding quality of the structural ideas, details and finishes.

The use of the term "generator" in this context is also linked to ideas of divine creation and human creativity. That might sound self-evident but in the



Figure 3. Northern Cupola Hall, Neues Museum

discussion of sustainability it is a point often neglected, with fatal consequences.

My underlying thesis here is that a caring cosmological re-orientation of architecture is key to any poetic perception of creation that we are invited to live up to. As Luis Fernández-Galiano discusses in his book 'Fire and Memory', form and information are linked closely and the notion of embodied energy really has to embrace all categories, acknowledging the immanent poetic a-priori in nature.

In fact the conflict is dwelling in the reflection of the words 'sustainability' and 'sustenance'. In one scenario energy consumption is sustained by predictable measurements, analogous to the architects of Fernández-Galiano's 'cosmology of the sun'. In the second scenario the matter at hand is an animated 'mother', an unpredictable earth and nature that is nurtured through empathy and mimesis to be sus-

tained by continuous transformation, by the architects of the 'cosmology of fire'. In my eyes Fernández-Galiano does not do justice to Corbusier as he disqualifies him without further notice of the poetical qualities of his work and the cosmological insights of his writings. But sometimes it is helpful to outline oppositions for the sake of didactic or rhetoric purpose. In this sense it seems an iconic problem that most of solar architecture today is unfortunately still inspired by mechanistic concepts that re-establish a utilitarian prospect towards nature.

The fire that the museum island is nurturing and that itself needs to be nurtured, initially stems from primordial animation. Triggered by mimesis, it is "the fact that architecture is created by human beings – that injects energy into the core of architecture."⁴

Fire is thus associated with the house and the city in foundation rites – the establishment of the city, the creation of the home – and in subsequent civic and domestic ceremonies requiring the continuity of the flame, but it is so by virtue of its role as an image of fertility and a metaphor of life. This identification between fire and life, notoriously present among alchemists, comes as no surprise. (...) Drawing a parallel to the concept of the soul that animates the physical body of the person, the fire, then, is the animating spirit for the body of the house.⁵

The link to the fire that first Vitruvius and later Semper imagine as the origin of architecture and which demands sustenance is though not merely metaphorical but corporeal and visceral, even without our introducing the sparkling notion of Eros⁶, an experience that is hopefully again as much carnal as it is transcending.

In a culture of consumption, superficial desires and accelerated secularization, to speak about eros unfortunately invites affliction. In fact the desperate post-structural calling for the *Other* probably added to this confusion as architecture thereafter had to lean even more towards fragility and fugitive impression, beyond calculation and the mastering of material heaviness.

Still the stunning gesture of a beautiful being may invade our existence with the voice of the *Other*, as art and as architecture do in their best moments. But it seems not to be very helpful to call such shaking encounters erotic, as the term is deflated. Practice seems to differ from theory and few architects still consider "the ability to transcend physi-

cality" as "the very basis of architecture" , as David Chipperfield does.

In our work we try to ensure that decisions about materials are given priority in the conception of the project. Our method has been encouraged by our experience of small projects, interior work where possibilities of plan and form are limited. In these cases we have elevated material decisions above the normal status, and have then concerned ourselves with trying to make their priority and their qualities apparent.⁸



Figure 4. New Staircase, Neues Museum

It seems as if that discipline established the ideal training for Chipperfield's encounter with the Neues Museum.

The main competition idea was directed towards the carcass of the great staircase hall, once beckoning the visitor upwards towards a redeeming enlightenment on a windowed landing with a pseudo-Erectheum. Nothing was left from the staircase however, no delicate cast-iron railings, no spectacular panels by Kaulbach, no caryatids.

The space was empty.

Even the floor and ceiling above the entrance floor were missing so that the huge bare brick walls introduced the dramaturgy of gigantic ancient Italian ruins to Berlin's Museumisland.

Chipperfield designed a new staircase, taking the volume and place of the former, constructed as a white cast-stone marble volume. Fortunately this central idea survived the following public discussion and was backed up from the city department for historical preservation, escaping the restorative diligence that John Hejduk would call "a kind of pathological exhumation". The visitor of the new 'Neue Museum' will have to live without caryatids and cast-iron railings.

The design sustains the wounds of the building and this narrative certainly affects the dialogue with the space itself, the listening to the new, more earthly, heavy staircase and the understanding of the role of the museum. The result is a partly subversive interaction with symbolic form.

It does not astonish very much to learn that Chipperfield appreciates the work of artists like Richard Serra or Joseph Beuys. His own work avoids the sanitising process that goes hand in hand with most reconstruction projects, and equally he seems to know about the mystery of materials and the sheen in countering gravity.

The destroyed Northwest wing and the Southeast bay are rebuilt but not reconstructed. The design closely follows the original volumes and room sequences but does not fake age. Instead the completion of the northwest wing facade recalls Döllgast's design for the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, a much praised example for critical reconstruction shortly after the Second World War.

The historic colonnades, linking the building with the square in front of the Old National Gallery, are re-mounted. Both interior courtyards are once again roofed over.

The elaborate reconstruction of vaulted ceilings in the Southwest bay with hollow ceramic pots reenacted Stüler's innovative technology, this time meeting 21st century load requirements. Doors and windows were fortunately almost completely con-

served and only had to be upgraded in accordance with fire protection and security requirements.

The structural framework of the Egyptian courtyard, the apse in the Greek courtyard, the flooring and ceilings were rebuilt with high finish reconstituted stone. The double-layer exterior and courtyard walls are recycled self-supporting brick masonry.



Figure 5. Egyptian Courtyard, Neues Museum

SUMMARY

In the past Schinkel has demonstrated how innovative architecture may bridge past, present and future. Today nobody would dare to do with Charlottenhof in Potsdam what Schinkel did to the previous country house that he recycled and transformed under very economical terms.

Most of the visitors do not even dare to imagine that this is not a 'Schinkel' from the bottom to the top but the voice of a genius, adding a new stratum.

The preservation field is once again struggling with a superficial desire for a history safely out of touch with the present, a public that applauds full scale simulations of lost objects, while ignoring the destruction of original strata to meet with a simulacrum.

In such projects Lady Architecture is well protected from fire, in fact she is closer to mud than to the chance to ever breathe again.

In the Neues Museum project, as I tried to make visible, the fire is guarded.

In this respect the project, as practice, is exemplary, in sustenance.

Today the project receives substantial funding from the state and Unesco. It will attract millions of international visitors, demanding to see and pretending to having seen the Nofretete, the Pergamonaltar or the Babylon gate.

The collections are reorganized to tolerate and facilitate such kinds of illusionary instant consummation. Most of these visitors will not see any silence or hear any voice of the Other because of their digital cameras blocking the contact surface from any possible real exchange.

I would argue therefore that the discipline that the Chipperfield team sustains, at best should include the staging of the time of the visit, possibly inventing rituals for closing and opening gates and protecting a spiritual fire from an obstreperous overflow.

If the challenge is indeed our ability to listen and to perceive, the answers cannot be found on purely aesthetical coordinates, without the project drifting either towards a bourgeois pleasure ground or a voracious tourist food-counter.

That said, I am not blaming the architects of any such intentions but simply intending to celebrate and *sustain* the project's intentions into practice.

ENDNOTES

1. Eva Börsch-Supan and Dietrich Müller-Stüler, Friedrich August Stüler, 1800-1865, Deutscher Kunstverlag, München-Berlin, 1997

2. Thomas Weaver (Ed.), David Chipperfield, *Architectural Works, 1990-2002*, Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona, 2003, chapter by Jonathan Keates, p. 300
3. Thomas Weaver (Ed.), David Chipperfield, *Architectural Works, 1990-2002*, chapter by Jonathan Keates, p. 301
4. Luis Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy*, MIT, 2000, p.6
5. Luis Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory*, MIT, 2000, p.13
6. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love*, MIT, 2006
7. David Chipperfield, *Theoretical Practice*, Artemis, London, 1994, p. 22
8. David Chipperfield, *Theoretical Practice*, Artemis, London, 1994, p. 54