The Challenge of the Object

Die Herausforderung des Objekts

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Palace is gone and Germans are to eranachronistic replicas of another time in its place. Journalist J. Kolitsch tells us, reconstructions have failed. Like oftentimes disregarded coordinates which draws attention to the ultimate destruction of the urban spatial void in simultaneously evoking a sense of loss, but also, of unlimited possibility.

An attack on a building in war is usually meant as an attack on the people who inhabit it, or are hiding in the building and are defining the enemy. Nowadays we frequently find that a building itself is declared an enemy and its destruction is defined as an act of liberation. Indeed buildings and housing-schemes in their public role are often blamed for the deficiencies of those for whom they were designed or who live there today: deficiencies such as poverty, drugs, prostitution, disorder or political radicalism. Political and social issues, it seems, become much easier to handle if they are reduced to mere problems of urban design. Thus the spectacular 1972 bombing of Minow's Iwamoto Housing scheme in Stuttgart, following the early 1950s - the first deliberate demolition of very recent architecture - has been interpreted by postmodern advocates Charles Jencks as a decisive victory over modernism. And thus the photographic documentation of these two decades of destruction that was both sublime and picturesque has become an icon for the alleged defeat of the modernist architectural paradigm, in a long term battle over aesthetic and social ideals.

It is a curious coincidence that in that same year the same architect started planning another architectural complex, which was also destroyed in a spectacular event nearly thirty years later: New York's Twin-Towers, which collapsed in the invisible 9/11 plane attacks by Al-Qaeda terrorists. Although their declared aim was to kill as many people as possible in one stroke, the World Trade Center was - of course - primarily a symbolic target representing western economy and, as a significant architectural landmark, western capitalist lifestyle with all its ambivalent implications.

Hence we have to be aware that the annihilation of buildings for the sake of renewal and improvement is likewise often planned against a war ofilly buildings and architecture.

Preserving Postwar-Modernity: A Special Debate in Germany?

Adrian von Buttlar

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The Chancellor and also the castle lobby carefully avoided official arguments aiming at a reactionary restoration of Prussian monarchy or notoriously imperialistic German policy, or even an offensive annihilation of socialist values. Instead they argued in terms of townscape, aesthetics and long-term identity, pretending to heal the wounded image of the city and the distorted collective memory. As Alida Asmann recently put it, the historically relevant site should be regarded as a palimpsest, and reconstruction as a legitimate and democratic cultural technique for correcting history - which reminds us of Orwell's 1984, where this sort of brainwashing was attributed to the Stalinit party terror in 1948: who controls the past, ran the party slogan, controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past [...] All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed as often as necessary.4 On the other hand, Berlin's chief conservator Jörg Haspel was deliberately prevented from listing the Palace, or at least the plenary hall, as an outstanding historic documentary, where in 1989 the Volkskammer had freely voted for union with the Federal Republic. Although in 2002 and 2003 the Bundestag voted with a small majority for the reconstruction of the castle exterior, including Andreas Schütter's facades on three sides, which are to be financed by Boddien's private donors, the doubts about the moral legitimacy of the decision remained, as expressed in Lars Ramberg's provocation inscription " Doubt us on top of the derelict building in 2005. The boulevard-press headlines about the start of destruction in January 2006 very frankly reveal the political satisfaction of the victors. Even seven years later, when plans for the Humboldt Forum as main user being established and Franco Stella's un-inspired project being chosen as the winner of a highly restricted rebuilding competition, doubts have not really ceased. "Be enthusiastic" was the headline of an article by Ijima Mangold in the weekly "Die Zeit" on the 29th June, 2011, which advises us: it seems time to file away the troublesome case history and recognize what chances are emerging for Germany. What we learn from that case in general is Michel Foucault's "l'ordre du discours" exemplified by means of preservation issues, including the iconization of buildings in both "dannatix" and resurrection memories. A failure in the preservation discourse may be the reason that the parallel transformation of the Reichstaggebäude never reached the popularity of the Palace debate, although it meant a comparable challenge for West German identity.5 The ruin of Paul Wallot's Reichstag building (1884-1918) - which served as an impressive setting for the monumental anti-communist demonstrations after the erection of the Berlin Wall - was repaired and substantially modernized in 1961 to 1973. Omitting the glass-iron dome and stripping the structure of historical ornaments was to be understood as a considered attack against German simplicities history in favor of democratic modernism. Thus the news Reichstaggebäude became an important building block of the political iconography of the free West.

The interior space was completely pitted, in order to house the new plenary hall designed by Paul Baumgarten for the German parliament, which in effect was still residing in Bonn. Its use, if only for committees or the president's election assembly, according to the political doctrine of three territories, was highly provocative and caused symbolic reactions by the Soviet airforce. Our concern is about the metaphorical quality of Baumgarten's rebuilding, which was listed as a monument: it seemed to combine an unpretentious simplicity with a somewhat sublime transparency, expressing the noble modesty and democratic openness of the abettors Germany. In addition Bernhard Heiliger's abstract steel sculpture "Kosmos" 1963 to 1969 expressed the optimistic western potential for freedom and technological superiority. The Vice-president of the Bundestag, former East German citizen Wolfgang Thierse, in 2005 explained in the opening of a retrospectice, that Heiliger created "Kosmos" 70s in close collaboration with Baumgarten, both of them symbolizing the values of the democratic system and the future-oriented determination for freedom.6 Immediately after the German union in 1990 this seemed an obsolete statement of Cold War politics and had to be replaced by a more imposing representation of Germany's new role in the world. Baumgarten's severe but modest political space subsequent to Christo's mystic action of packing and symbolic unveiling of the fabric (24th of June to 7th of July 1995), was replaced by Sir Norman Foster's new plenary hall and his spectacular dome, opened in 1999 and becoming the nation's most popular emblem of state.

Political branding had a long tradition in Cold War building practice, including monuments which at first sight seemed apolitical, like West Berlin's Congress Hall by Hugh Stubbins, opened in 1958. As Stephan de Rudder has shown in his 2007 monograph, the site was deliberately chosen close to the border of the Soviet sector, so that the building could be seen from there, and could also be visited easily by East Berliners before the close-down in 1961. The project was promoted and financed by the special Berlin-deputy Eleanor Dullies, sister of the Foreign Secretary, John Foster and CIA-chief, Alan Dulles. Moreover its shell construction, despite its famous nickname "pregnant oyster", served successfully another metaphor for the dynamic and progressive habits of western freedom. This function as an iconic medium was even considered more important than its constructive solidity, when in 1956 the young architect Frei Otto warned that the building might collapse as a consequence of deficiencies in its construction.7 That is exactly what happened twenty three years later. At that time the Congress Hall just had become obsolete because of Linz's gigantic new International Congress Center ICC was opened in April 1979. Thus there emerged a critical discussion on whether the collapsed pregnant oyster could and should be repaired. As a prominent symbol for the American-German partnership in the heyday of Cold War struggles, it became clear that the removal of this icon would have a disastrous effect. The salvatio memoriae included an alternative roof construction that had only a small impact on the aesthetic outline.8 When the student camp Schlachtensee, built in 1963 also by the support of the United States and their deputy Eleanor Dullies, was under serious danger of demolition by the government authorities who planned a speculative real-estate deal, preservationists successfully employed the same arguments of its historic importance and significance as an instrument and post-war symbol of democratic re-education by our allies. Meanwhile it has been listed as monument of national importance.9 In 2000, greed fostered by restrictive building regulations was declared responsible for tearing down the Ahornblatt, a modern restaurant in East Berlin. It was built from 1971 to 1973 as a canteen for more than 800 employees of the GDR Building Ministry and the workmen of the nearby Palace of the Republic by a collective together with the engineer-architect Ulrich Mütter. It served as an eyecatcher in the new neighborhood of the Fischerinsel by emulating the organics inventions of reinforced concrete pavilions by Felix Candela, Eero Saarinen and also Stubbins's Berlin Congress Hall, which Mütter had imitated in 1967 for the Tea-Pot Restaurant in Warnemünde. In order to exploit the full capacity of the real-estate after the union of Germany the investors insisted on building another high-rise apartment building on the site of the popular Maple Leaf, a scandal which coincided with the new Masterplan, established by Berlin's municipal building supervisor, Hans Stimmann. This plan looks with disdain upon the landscaped postwar city with its open spaces.
Chancellor and also the castle lobby carefully avoided official announcements of any reparation or restitution of the Berliner Altona neighborhood, and they continued to demand the restitution of the whole area as part of a comprehensive plan for the reintegration of the city.

The issue of the Grunewald monument, which was one of the most controversial issues of the postwar period, was also a major concern. The monument was erected in 1913 to commemorate the sacrifices of the Oldenburg army during the First World War. It was located in the Grunewald forest, which was a popular tourist destination. The monument was a large statue of a soldier, and it was surrounded by a large park. The monument was seen as a symbol of the city's military glory, and it was a popular tourist attraction.

In 1963, the monument was placed in temporary storage, and it was not restored until 1980. The National Socialists had used the monument as a symbol of their own military glory, and they had removed it from its site in 1933. After the war, the monument was returned to its original location, and it was restored in 1980. The monument is now a popular tourist attraction and a symbol of the city's military history.

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The patterns visible in my series of examples show what sort of disputes have been fought within the complex historical framework of recent German history in the name of or through architecture.

In the light of what I have discussed, I would summarize that the preservation debate has been and is still, extremely lively, and at the same time serious and bitter in Germany. But I leave it to later discussions, whether similar sets of actors and motivations – as I assume – are not also present in less dramatic circumstances whenever buildings are up-graded to icons for various beliefs and different affiliations.

Notes
7 George Orwell: 1984, 1st book, chapter 3.