The rebuilding of the Berlin City Palace

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22 January 2009

Following on a decision by Germany’s national parliament, the Berlin City Palace (Berliner Stadtschloss) in the city’s centre is to be rebuilt by 2013. The reconstruction of the palace has provoked much controversy in the general public and among experts. This article examines the background to the debate.

For a better understanding of the controversy, some knowledge of the history of the site is needed. Most of the palace was constructed in the first half of the 18th century during the period of Prussian absolutism under Frederick I and Frederick William I, the “Soldier-King”. It was to serve as the city residence of the Hohenzollern dynasty for almost two centuries.

The palace was extensively damaged during bombing raids in 1945 and suffered further heavy damage in the course of street fighting between Soviet troops and German soldiers, leaving it a ruin at the end of the Second World War. In 1950 the remains of the palace were demolished and cleared away on instructions from the Stalinist German Democratic Republic (GDR) regime. Now the façade of the palace is to be reconstructed, although the organisation and decoration of the palace’s interior were always regarded as its principal assets.

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In 1973 the Palace of the Republic was constructed on the site of the former City Palace to serve as the seat of the GDR parliament. The greater portion of the building, however, consisted of various rooms and halls dedicated to cultural events. Conceived of as a cultural centre, its design was closely related to that of other European buildings of the time, such as the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the palace was closed and steps were undertaken to dispose of the asbestos in the main body of the building. Two small but vocal initiatives soon formed around the figures of businessman Wilhelm von Boddien and architect Kathleen King von Alvensleben. Their proposal was to tear down the Palace of the Republic and replace it with the former City Palace. The federal parliament (Bundestag) eventually supported this policy and in 2003 delegates, by a large majority, voted for an extensive reconstruction of the Prussian palace.

According to the parliament’s guidelines, three of the palace’s baroque facades and its smaller courtyard are to be completely rebuilt. It remained uncertain for some time what would be done with the space behind this architectural scenery. Eventually, the decision was taken to integrate as unobtrusively as possible a modern structure—the Humboldt Forum, named after the great German scientist, Alexander von Humboldt—into the reconstructed palace. At the moment the plan is for the Humboldt Forum to be an ethnological museum, relocating the collection currently located in Berlin-Dahlem.

So as to realise this project, a building that was truly “historic”, the Palace of the Republic, was torn down. Prior to its demolition, the latter palace was used in 2004 as a temporary space for exhibitions, art installations and theatrical performances. International artists contributed numerous projects, taking a stand against the planned demolition and seeking to provoke a public discussion over “lost utopias” and the search for new social perspectives. However, they were unable to prevent the razing of the building in December 2008.

From the standpoint of historical preservation, the reconstruction of the Berlin City Palace is nonsense. The preservation of historical monuments, in the modern sense, means the maintenance and restoration of existing buildings along the lines of their original construction. The purpose of such projects is to preserve the structures as witnesses of their times. In the case of the City Palace, however, the plan involves the wholesale reconstruction of facades with many details unknown, which will have to be reconstructed largely out of fantasy. Nevertheless, a genuine testimony to the recent past—the Palace of the Republic—was destroyed, despite protests from concerned conservationists.

Neither can the debate be reduced, as many people would have it, merely to the question of what the palace contributes to the cityscape. Such a perspective regards the city as a collection of scenic sites and ignores the deeper historical context that shapes the image of an urban area.

The plan for the rebuilding of the City Palace could only succeed because it jibed with the needs of leading political...
circles to reinterpret the past for present-day purposes. It should be noted that the Berliner Stadtschloss is a building identified with a highly undemocratic tradition. Not only was it constructed at a time when many contemporaries saw Prussia as the epitome of the authoritarian state. Prussia was also a state stamped by a culture of militarism that fatally impacted on the course of the 20th century.

The “Prussian tradition” has therefore long been widely disparaged by the German (and not only the German) population. Now, so as to overcome this essentially correct perception of the past, the “liberal” and “progressive” character of 18th century Prussia is being invoked. However, this perspective tries to mix oil with water. The Enlightenment cannot be reconciled with the Prussian tradition so easily.

In fact, the Prussian state was profoundly antagonistic to the ideals of the Enlightenment. All of the latter’s proponents had to contend with the censorship of their works and persecution by the Prussian police. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), the renowned dramatist and critic, for example, made the following observation about life in Prussia: “Freedom is reduced solely to making as many stupid remarks against religion as one likes… but let just one person appear in Berlin, who wants to raise his voice for the rights of the lower orders and against exploitation and despotism, as is happening now even in France and Denmark, and you will soon see which country in Europe is nowadays the most enslaved”.[1]

The supporters of the City Palace appear to be no more creative in myth-making than they are in the field of architecture. The attempt to reconcile the authoritarian state with the Enlightenment goes back to the latter part of the 19th century. At that time it served the needs of the bourgeoisie, which had enriched itself in the Gründerzeit [the first decades after German unification in 1871], to reconcile itself to the establishment of the German empire under Prussian hegemony. The myth of a “liberal” Prussia made it easier for them to align themselves with Prussian bayonets as a welcome protection against the socialist-minded proletariat. The militaristic state was also a useful weapon in the politics of imperialist aggressiveness that developed more and more openly in the following decades.

Here one can note a number of parallels with the situation today. Several issues have dominated German politics over the past ten years: the question of how to impose continual cuts in social expenditure upon the population without stirring up resistance, which went along with a massive build-up of state power providing the state with the means of suppressing possible social unrest. Along with that, there has been the return to a militaristic foreign policy, despite the opposition of the majority of the population. Hence the general need felt by leading political circles to erect an object of national prestige—while suppressing other features of historical experience.

The reconstructed City Palace does not only remove the memory of the unlamented GDR from the area of Museum Island. It will also suppress memories of the destruction suffered in the Second World War—a catastrophe that represented the end-point of an authoritarian and militaristic state. Instead an attempt is being made to establish continuity between Prussian Berlin and the reunified Federal Republic, a continuity which has never existed.

The results of the competition for the city palace’s architectural design demonstrate clearly the levels of unimaginativeness and deficiency of vision that invariably arise from such attempts to distort the historical process.

First, the majority of architects voted with their feet and did not take part in the competition at all. Instead of the expected hundreds of entrants, there were only eighty-five in the end. This is an extremely low rate of participation for a competition of such a scale. Hardly any internationally renowned architects participated.

The winning design was submitted by the Italian architect, Franco Stella. A cluster of contestants tied for third place: Eccheli e Campagnola from Verona, Christoph Mäckler from Frankfurt, Kleihues and Kleihues, as well as Hans Kollhoff from Berlin. Each of the designs put forward by this group exhibited serious deficiencies, and none of them was successful enough for the jury to award a second place in the competition.

Franco Stella’s design did manage to integrate the palace into its surroundings better than those of the other contestants. However, he also was incapable of resolving the basic dilemma of the whole project. His model is marred by a striking discord between reconstructed baroque facades and the sparsely constructed new facades to be built on the palace’s original grid lines. These latter facades loom so monotonously on the side of the palace adjoining the River Spree that urgent revisions are called for.

Stella cannot be blamed for producing a design betraying his own lack of conviction. The cause of the problem is the utter lack of any positive social vision at the heart of the project.