
Demolishing Modernism: GDR and Neo-Prussian Architecture in Berlin

XAVIER COSTA

Northeastern University, Boston, USA. Email: xcostag@gmail.com

This article examines the significance of some recent architecture and urban demolitions in Berlin. As an example of present-day iconoclasm in the heart of Europe, the relevance of these cases lies not only in the destruction of politically-charged artefacts, but also in their replacement with replicas of eighteenth-century architecture, thus materializing a Prussian revival and a nostalgia for the country's royal past. In 2006, Berlin initiated the demolition of the Palace of the Republic (*Palast der Republik*). The *Palast der Republik* occupied the site of the original Berlin Palace, or *Berliner Schloss*, the residence of the Hohenzollern dynasty between 1701 and 1918. The demolition of the *Palast* has been followed by the construction of a replica of the eighteenth-century *Schloss*, but now intended to house the new Humboldt Forum, a museum dedicated to non-Western art. In recent years, both Berlin and neighbouring Potsdam have witnessed several integral reconstructions of historical buildings. This series of architecture demolitions and replicas therefore appears as a calculated and well-orchestrated operation to redefine the presence of the past through built artefacts, deserving to be examined from the broader perspective of iconoclastic precedents in art and architecture.

Iconoclasm is a term seldom used in reference to cities, to their design and evolution through history. However, since John Ruskin's writings on architecture and memory in the mid-nineteenth century, we understand built artefacts as potential vessels for collective memory to continue through time. For Ruskin (1819–1900), architecture had the capacity to make the present historical – in his words, 'we cannot remember without her' (Ruskin 1849: 156). Therefore, any intentional disruptions of memory's continuity in the form of material destruction of built artefacts and urban areas proves to be a powerful form of *damnatio memoriae* applied to cities. This article seeks to examine Berlin and its *Schlossplatz* as a particular case of successive

demolitions, constructions and reconstructions as a series of architectural actions to change the meaning of the present time in its historical dimension.

Berlin is a twentieth-century urban example of intentional destructions undertaken as political and historical statements, whereby the city bears the traces and wounds of history in a most intense and complex form. In *The Voids of Berlin*, Andreas Huyssen (b. 1942) described the German capital as ‘a text frantically being written and rewritten [...] throughout this violent century, its legibility relies as much on visible markers of built space as on images and memories repressed and ruptured by traumatic events’ (Huyssen 1997: 2). As a literary critic, Huyssen examines the trope of the city as a text, even as a book, and how the case of Berlin negotiates its different political pasts in its built text. The process of successive writing and erasing the signs on the ‘palimpsest-city’ is one of remembering and forgetting critical aspects of national identity and statehood. Here we will focus on a concrete architecture, that of the imperial palace on Berlin’s *Schlossplatz*.

The Berlin Palace

If one were to identify a historical centre in Berlin, it may well be the *Schlossplatz* and its imperial palace, or *Berliner Schloss*, where the Hohenzollern dynasty resided between 1701 and 1918 (Figure 1). Wilhelm II, the last German Emperor, left into exile for the Netherlands in November of 1918 and the Weimar constitution abolished the monarchy the following year. The imperial palace, however, remained in place and was severely damaged by allied air strikes during the Second World War. It was left as a ruin for several years, and in 1950 the German Democratic Republic (GDR) government decided to expropriate and demolish the massive volume of the Baroque residence, a symbol of a past to be erased in the new Communist regime of East Germany.

The next step in the chain of constructions and destructions on *Schlossplatz* was embodied in the new Palace of the Republic, or *Palast der Republik*, which occupied the exact site of the former imperial palace. The GDR embraced the language of modernist architecture for its most representative institutional buildings, most notably the *Palast*, completed in 1976 to a design by Heinz Graffunder (1926–1994) and conceived to house the parliament of the Democratic Republic. A white volume of horizontal proportions with a large curtain wall of reflecting, golden-coloured glass, the *Palast* became a fine example of modern monumentality applied to governmental structures. There are other examples of architectural modernism as the official style of the GDR, such as the Ministry for Foreign Affairs on nearby *Schinkelplatz*, an architecture of stark and elegant geometry designed by Josef Kaiser (1910–1991) and completed in 1967.

During the more than 40-year division of Berlin, the *Schlossplatz* was located geographically in the East and was therefore inaccessible to Western Berliners. In addition to the palace, this urban area included Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s *Altes Museum* as well as other nineteenth-century museum structures that nowadays are included in



Figure 1. Fragment showing the Berlin Palace in its centre, from a historic paper map entitled: Kiessling's *Grosser Plan von Berlin: mit Vororten und vollständiger Stadt - u. Ringbahn*. It was published by Alexius Kiessling in 1920. Scale 1:20,000. Harvard Map Collection, Harvard College Library, <https://maps.princeton.edu/catalog/harvard-g6299-b3-1920-k5>

the redesigned 'Museum Island', still undergoing architectural renovations. As urban historian Brian Ladd has argued in his *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, the Palace of the Republic was viewed as nothing less than 'the symbolic meeting point of Eastern and Western Europe' and therefore as the most important and representative structure of East Berlin (Ladd 1997: 55).

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the city that suffered a traumatic division at the end of the Second World War has worked tirelessly to reunify and to erase the traces of its former condition. The reconstruction of a unified Berlin, still an ongoing project, is a complex and fascinating example of the interrelation between urbanism, architectural design, history and politics. This new turn in German politics also translated in a second demolition on *Schlossplatz*, this time the GDR *Palast*. In July 2002, the Bundestag passed a resolution to tear down the *Palast der Republik*, although the demolition did not occur until 2006. The decision to tear it down was apparently justified by some existing asbestos contamination. However, to many former East Germans it seemed to respond to the desire to erase the last remaining vestige of the GDR in the historic centre. This demolition had followed others, such as that of the aforementioned Ministry for Foreign Affairs, already destroyed in 1996, and was in turn continued with significant other destructions, such as those in the city of Potsdam, near Berlin.

Dutch architect and curator of the exhibition *Cronocaos* in 2010, Rem Koolhaas (b. 1944), used the Venice Architecture Biennale to bring attention to the recent

demolition of the GDR Palace: ‘Bad taste or bad ideology? The intolerance of our generation has been breathtaking: if the same criteria that eliminated Berlin’s *Palast der Republik* had been applied to the Past [...] we would have no history left’ (Koolhaas 2010: 11). Rem Koolhaas emphasizes the selective character of urban and architectural conservation, which can obliterate, on a grand scale, the memory of certain periods or political significations of twentieth-century heritage. Koolhaas has brought attention to our disinterest towards the legacy of cold-war era architecture that relates to Soviet or Communist influence, as well as to typologies such as social housing, industrial complexes or infrastructures.

Monumentality and Destruction

The very concept of monumentality derives from that of memory and remembrance. A monument is therefore a mnemonic device that secures the continuity of its contents and meanings through its own material stability and survival through time. However, as a modern expression of the classical *damnatio memoriae*, architectural icons may become monumental precisely due to their intentional destruction, which qualifies them as artefacts of exceptional historical and political value. When the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858–1905) wrote his influential essay *The Modern Cult of Monuments* in 1903, he differentiated several kinds of values associated with all types of monuments: age, historical, and commemorative values, all of them associated with the capacity to last in their material condition through time (Riegl 1982).

As architectural historian and theorist Lucia Allais has presented in her *Designs of Destruction: The Making of Monuments in the Twentieth Century*, our time’s range of destruction has brought to an end the idea that architecture’s contribution to the modern world would be purely constructive: ‘Between 1914 and 1970 especially, physical damage to the built environment was enlarged, dispersed and routinized so far and wide that it became a new category in the public imagination, and an unavoidable datum of global historical thought’ (Allais 2018: 2). Destroying iconic, politically-charged buildings has therefore proven to be a way of monumentalizing their significance and disappearance throughout the twentieth century.

The Humboldt Forum

The demolition of the GDR *Palast* in Berlin was followed by the design and construction of an exact replica of the eighteenth-century imperial palace, intended to house the new ‘Humboldt Forum’, a museum dedicated to non-Western art that has triggered a political–colonial debate of its own, due to the contents of its collections and programmed exhibits.

In the case of Berlin’s sequence of destructions and reconstructions, the rebirth of a destroyed architecture has proved to become a complex design, in both architectural and institutional terms. Having opened to the public in December 2020, the

recent replica of the Hohenzollern Palace and the Humboldt Forum extends over a structure of 45,000 m². The Forum is a complex institution that includes the relocation of the City Museum of Berlin, the Ethnological Museum and the Asian Art Museum. The symbolic centre of the Prussian colonial empire has therefore become a museum of non-Western art. The Humboldt Forum website intentionally summarizes the history of the site, justifying one additional layer in its successive reconstructions:

There is hardly another site in Berlin that has seen as many different social, architectural, political and cultural changes over the last 800 years as the *Schlossplatz*. Here princes and politicians have built, rebuilt, demolished and planned time and again over the course of the last 800 years to express their political claims.

Architect Franco Stella's design for the Palace attempts to send a message about not being a complete, uncritical replica by including a newly-conceived façade that is discreetly placed at the back side of the building, away from the main view from the *Schlossplatz* and facing the river Spree.

The reconstruction of the Palace and its Humboldt Forum draws on a republican tradition of using former palaces of different European monarchies as exhibition spaces for cultural treasures, inaugurated by the Louvre in Paris following the French Revolution and emulated in other European cities, from Madrid to St Petersburg. The exhibitions in the newly established Humboldt Forum will continue this tradition of using museography as a strategy to cleanse an otherwise politically charged architecture. This Humboldt Forum follows other cases of demolition of urban markers of Germany's different pasts and present – imperial, fascist, communist, democratic. Architectural action therefore acts as a privileged medium to erase or rebuild the troubled history of Berlin and Germany, confirming Huyssen's view of the city as a site of 'discontinuous' and 'ruptured history' (Huyssen 1997: 58).

Potsdam

In recent years, not only Berlin but also nearby Potsdam have witnessed several integral reconstructions of historical buildings. In Potsdam, the City Palace, also a Hohenzollern residence, the Garrison Church and the Barberini Quartier have been rebuilt to provide exact replicas, in what is an extraordinary scale of a rebirth of historical structures that had been either destroyed or mutilated. These architectural facsimiles have provoked substantial controversies, given their historical significance. For instance, the Garrison Church is known to have staged the Day of Potsdam in March of 1933, when the National Socialists staged a public event to present themselves as heirs to the Hohenzollern dynasty and its Prussian past, with Wilhelm II's participation. In his article 'What do the Hohenzollerns deserve?', David Motadel has compiled the participation of different historians to elucidate this collaboration between the imperial dynasty and the rise of National Socialism in

Germany, together with the role of the mentioned palaces and churches in Berlin and Potsdam (Motadel 2020: 25–26).

In ‘Should Germany rebuild its past?’, Tom Fairless’ recent *Wall Street Journal* article (Fairless 2019) reflects on the extent the debate has superseded its European academic and political context to become a matter of wide public interest. This series of architecture demolitions and replicas therefore appears as a calculated and well-orchestrated operation to redefine the presence of the past through city re-design, and so deserves to be examined from the larger perspective of iconoclastic precedents in art and architecture. The relevance of Potsdam and the Humboldt Forum lies not only in the destruction of politically-charged artefacts, but also in their replacement with replicas of eighteenth-century architecture – materializing a Prussian revival and a nostalgia for the country’s imperial past.

References

- Allais L (2018) *Designs of Destruction: The Making of Monuments in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fairless T (2019) Should Germany rebuild its past? *The Wall Street Journal*, published online 28 December.
- Huysen A (1997) The voids of Berlin. *Critical Inquiry* 24, 57–81.
- Koolhaas R (2010) Cronocaos. Available at <https://www.oma.com/projects/venice-biennale-2010-cronocaos>
- Ladd B (1997) *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Motadel D (2020) What do the Hohenzollerns deserve? *New York Review of Books* 67(5), 25–27.
- Riegl A (1982) The modern cult of monuments: its character and origins, tr. KW Forster. *Oppositions* 25, 21–51.
- Ruskin J (1849) *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. London: Smith, Elder & Co.

About the Author

Xavier Costa is currently Professor of the History of Art and Architecture at Northeastern University in Boston, where he served as Founding Dean of the College of Arts, Media and Design between 2010 and 2015. Professor Costa is also a Visiting Researcher at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and a Visiting Lecturer at the Metropolis Program, Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. His publications include: ‘Metaphorical peripheries. Contemporary architecture in Spain and Portugal’, in EG. Haddad and D Rifkin (eds), *A Critical History of Contemporary Architecture, 1960–2010* (London: Ashgate, 2014). As editor: *Ai Weiwei* (Barcelona: Mies van der Rohe Foundation, 2011); *Coup de Dés. A Symposium on Housing and Public Space* (Barcelona: Mies van der Rohe Foundation, 2010).