“A collective reflection of creation, demolition and rebirth”
With Guidance of Trevor Howels.
Research to what extent architecture contributes to population growth
Colofon

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Prologue

This booklet is made in the context of “New Design in Old Settings”, arranged by Trevor Howells, as part of the Post-Graduate exchange program arranged between the Technical University of Eindhoven in the Netherlands and the University of Sydney in Australia. This booklet will focus on the strategy of David Chipperfields new design for the Neues Museum in Berlin. It will briefly tell about the relevant history of the museum, explain the design approach by David Chipperfield and then compares his approach, and with it his theories, with different views on conservation architecture by John Ruskin, William Morris and the general theme of the Venice Charter of 1964.
When crossing the main entrance towards the Museum Island, following the Bodestrasse at the heart of central Berlin, a neoclassical structure rises above the surface at the left side of the quay. It is a structure that, in spite of its beauty, you could take for granted while wandering past, it being a typical object that reflects its time of creation. In that sense the Neues Museum is an honest building. However, it is a misleading one as well. It doesn’t find an exuberant amount of pride in showing off its history, but when looking closer it becomes evident that the esthetic composition of the Neues Museum is a collective reflection of its different times of creation, its time of demolition and its time of restoration and rebirth: All the consequences of David Chipperfield’s fine vision on conservation in architecture. This essay will consider the historical, social and architectural value of the Neues museum before recent interventions were made to it, to then examine whether the envisioned design of David Chipperfield, and with it the elemental reality that stands today, honors these values, preserves them and possibly even surpasses them.

Museum Island, Museumsinsel as it referred to in German, is an island situated within the edges of the River Spree, which through its gentle curves separates the centre of Berlin into a northern and a southern part. The island’s name derives from its function as a host to five internationally significant museums, yet although its name leads us to believe differently, the museums only cover the northern part of the island. The southern part offers space to the Berliner Dom and several educational and sports facilities.

Initially, the creation of the island was a single man’s idea. Friedrich Wilhelm IV was a visionary Prussian king who, because of his education by private tutors, developed a major interest in both architecture and landscaping. Driven by these interests, Friedrich Wilhelm IV became a patron of several Berlin artists amongst which was an architect named Karl Friedrich Schinkel. An intensive collaboration between the two during king Friedrich Wilhelm IV’s reign, that lasted from 1840 until 1861, resulted in the construction of a large number of buildings. Today, these buildings have not lost their importance and contribute not only to Berlin’s architectural image, standing proudly among the Neue Wache, the National Monument for the Liberation Wars and the Schauspielhaus (theatre), but also throughout Germany. Yet it was the commissioning of several Berlin architects to build a large amount of neoclassical buildings spread all over the city that brought the king the title of „the Romanticist on the Throne“¹. Perhaps what reflects this well-earned title the best is the Museum Island. The kings’ vision for Museum Island was to create a modern Acropolis right at the heart of Berlin, by which he meant a combined public sanctuary of culture and education.² The result was a complex of neoclassical buildings that together host the Altes Museum, the Alte Nationalgalerie, the Bode Museum, the Pergamon Museum as well as the Neues Museum.

The first museum to be designed was the Altes Museum, then called the Königliches Museum. In 1823 King Friedrich Wilhelm IV commissioned close friend and architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel to design the new Museum Island.
museum. In an attempt to reject the Imperial Roman architecture, Schinkel designed a strictly Grecian neoclassical building that was constructed from 1823 until 1830 and still stands today. Only eleven years later, in 1841, before the king could pursue the realization of his modern Acropolis, Schinkel suffered a stroke and died. The king then commissioned the second building of his prestigious plan, the Neues Museum, to Schinkel's protege called Friedrich August Stüler and eventually made him the successor of Schinkel by naming him Architekt des Königs in 1842.

During the design process of the Neues Museum, Stüler began to notice some forms of cracking in the facade of the Altes Museums. Subsequent research then discovered that because of the river running on both sides of the island the soil was less stable then expected at the time of constructing the Altes Museum. This was a shocking discovery given the fact that the Neues Museum was to have three floors over a basement, whereas the Altes Museum was only a one-story building. Stüler decided to design the Museum as light weight as possible and started researching the innovative British design technologies using ironwork as a load bearing structure. Stüler visited several iron factories in Birmingham but also made a stop at John Soane's Bank of England by which he got strongly inspired to make each space into a new esthetic surprise. Ultimately the Neues Museum got constructed using timber piles as a foundation and building the weight bearing structure out of shallow vaults of hollow terra-cotta pots, between a grid of ironwork supported by columns. The third floor columns and the roof trusses were made out of iron, finished with cast zinc ornaments to meet the Kings desire of a classical style. Construction began in 1843 and finished in 1855.

The last constructed museum that was part of the official Museum Island master plan was the Pergamon Museum, of which construction was completed in 1930. By then the Museum Island was fully in use, functioning as the modern Acropolis that King Friedrich Wilhelm IV had imagined it to be. The main attraction of the Neues Museum was the large number of Egyptian artifacts with the Head of Queen Nefertiti as a centerpiece: a 3,300 year old painted bust of the Great Royal Wife of Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten, that has mainly become iconic because her facial proportions exemplify what by the Egyptians was perceived as beauty. But the glory days for the Museum Island didn't last any longer then nine years, as in 1939 the Second World War began.

That year, 1939, the museum decided to disperse the art displayed in the museum to alternative locations. A decision that would later prove to save numerous of artworks works, but sadly not all. Artworks that proved to be too large for transportation were kept inside the Neues Museum, with sandbags covering them in order to protect them as far as that was possible. When the British Allied started bombing Berlin in 1943, using incendiary bombs, the central stair hall got hit and was entirely gutted. In 1945 the already fairly damaged museum got hit a second time. Two bombs were enough to completely destroy the north-west wing and the southeast tower, resulting in the collapse of one-third of the museums mass. So far, only the damage done by air raids was considered, but military ground groups further contributed
generously to the demolition of the museum. All facades of the museum got hit during the gunfire, leaving countless bullet holes in the stones, causing crumbling brickwork. Not one window was left intact. Stülers’ Neues Museum was considered to be the most important monumental Prussian building of its era, but within a time-lapse of hardly two years it was shattered into pieces and then left to nature.  

After World War II, the Neues Museum found itself to be part of East Berlin, being neglected by the communists who were busy attempting to build a new sort of society and thus had no interests in the old ruins on Museum Island. For forty-four years the museum stood there, deprived from its glory, its function and its effectives. Yet it did not get demolished by the communists.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Neues Museum received a shot at a new life when a design competition got held in 1994. The competition asked for two things: the adoption of the site in such a way that it would be well prepared to host mass tourism (before the war the number of visitors were limited and the only entrance to the museum island was by ringing a bell) and a master plan for the redevelopment of the Neues Museum.

Numerous ideas got sent in by architects scattered all over the world, which caused a lot of commotion amongst various parties involved. A large number of widely differing design possibilities were considered. Some german critics were afraid of creating a sort of „ruin nostalgia”, by which they meant that the reuse of the ruined Neues Museum could lead towards the country being bound to its history and Germany becoming a hostage of the worst part of its history. Some even took it a step further and pleaded a rebuilt version of the Neues Museum, an exact replica without any traces referring to the Second World War. Others pleaded for the reuse of the existing museum but only when whitewashing everything in an attempt to keep the artworks separated from the buildings history.

The competition jury recognized Giorgio Grassi as the best entry to the competition. Giorgio Grassi’s plan maintained all the museums on the island as separate structures. But when the Staatliche Museum zu Berlin, the overarching organization that runs Museum Island, had to make a final decision, they changed their minds and set up an entirely new competition in 1997, inviting the top five firms of the earlier contest.

The winner of that competition was the runner-up at the 1994 competition. Ironically, sixty years after the British bombed the Neues Museum, the jury decided to commission a British man to rebuilt the complex. This man was David Chipperfield and had participated in the design competition in a collaboration with Julian Harrap, another British conservation specialized architect. The choice of a collaboration between two British architects can be deemed even more astonishing once one realizes that Stüler was so clearly inspired by John Soane’s Bank of England.
Discussions like the ones arising after the press release which announced Chipperfield as new architect for the Neues Museum are nothing new. No matter what conservation project, there are always tough decisions to be made, and theories about which methods are best, extend far back in time. However a few of the early ideas on how to handle ancient buildings evolved into much of the current thinking.

One of these thinkers was John Ruskin, a British social thinker who in his book, „The lamp of Memory” describes why it is impossible to conceive a good work of architecture through restoring it. His book first got published in 1849, at which point the Neues Museum hadn’t yet been finished. In „The Lamp of Memory” Ruskin advocates as follows:

“Do not let us deceive ourselves… It is impossible, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture. That spirit which is given only by the hand and eye of the workman can never be recalled. And as for direct and simple copying, it is palpably impossible. What copying can there be on surfaces that have been worn half an inch down? The whole finish of the work was in the half inch that is gone”.

Another considerable vision on historic preservation are the writings of William Morris; an English artist, writer, textile designer and socialist who, though never becoming an architect, founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). Morris was convinced that the ruins of a building had greater meaning to society than the re-completion or reproduction in whatever way or attempt, simply because the ruin possessed the physical notion of a journey through time. Morris writes that in his opinion off all restorations he in his life has seen the worst ones were in some manner robbed from their materialistic features and compares them to the best, which are still in dispose of of their ‘exact analogy’:

“It is for all these buildings, therefore, of all times and styles, that we plead, and call upon those who have to deal with them, to put Protection in the place of Restoration, to stave off decay by daily care, to prop a perilous wall or mend a leaky roof by such means as are obviously meant for support or covering, and show no presence of other art, and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands; if it has become inconvenient for its present use, to raise another building rather than alter or enlarge the old one; in fine to treat our ancient buildings as monuments of a bygone art, created by bygone manners, that modern art cannot meddle with without destroying.”

More recently and often referred to, the Venice charter of 1964 also discusses how to handle ancient buildings, or any leftover from history. Somewhat aligned with the visions of Ruskin and Morris, the charter states:

„Replacements of missing parts must integrated harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence”
Sir David Chipperfield was born in 1953 in London and studied at Kingston School of Art and the Architectural Association in London. During his early career he worked at different firms, amongst which were the practices of Douglas Stephen, Richard Rogers and Norman Foster. In 1984 he started his own practice. Currently David Chipperfield Architects has offices in London, Berlin, Milan and Shanghai and relies on 180 full-time staff members. Chipperfield has won over 50 international competitions\(^1\) and over 100 international architecture prizes\(^2\) amongst which are countless prizes, such as the Stirling Prize, for the Neues Museum.

Trusting on the prizes Chipperfield won with his design for the Neues Museum, we can expect that the man did well. After 12 years of conservation works, amounting to the stunning cost of around 200 million Euros, which may also be seen as 6,340 Euros per square meter\(^3\), the Neues Museum proudly opened its doors to the public in 2009. At that moment a new life started for the Neues Museum. But what kind of life are we talking about here? What makes the average critic so thrilled and enthused about the Neues Museum?

Chipperfields’ design was unique amongst other entries because it considered the remains of the Neues Museum as a ‘Piranesian Pile’,\(^4\) being convinced that what was left over could be perfectly put back together. Describing his own approach to the conservation of the Neues Museum in an interview with his right hand office partner Rik Nys, Chipperfield says as follows:

“The alternatives were either to recreate Stüler’s building intact as a replica […] or the alternative was a sort of Old and New contrast. You restore the old bits, you build the new bits, and say that was the past and this is the future. It freezes both elements; it freezes the past as being a caricature of the past and freezes the new as a caricature of the modern.\(^5\)

This vision can be criticized as a vision that doesn’t allow any innovation in intervention architecture. Its total opposite solution would be a solution of contrast. Contrast in character, context, setting, form and scale. Yet Chipperfield rejects this solution, when saying:

“This works quite well in a project where you are not trying to complete any more, you are just trying to place a roof over something, or you are putting a path through it… You do not want to touch the old. But we had too much destruction to deal with in the Neues Museum to do that. It would not have been enough to put a glass roof over the top, to be read as completely independent architecture. In the Neues Museum we had another responsibility, which was somehow to complete the building, not necessarily by reconstruction. It was important for me that we should not deny the idea of completion, in my opinion this was the only way to give back significance to the remains of Stüler’s building.”\(^6\)

The result of this vision was the general desire to protect and repair the remains of the Neues Museum. All leftover parts of Stüler’s Museum had to be reconnected into what was called “one whole piece of Architecture.”\(^7\) The new building shouldn’t celebrate its history, nor should it hide it. It should be included in the total, creating a notion of continuity. To do so, Chipperfield came up with a number of
design strategies that helped him create a perfect balance between repair, conservation, restoration and intervention. These strategies were considered as rules throughout the decision-making process, independent of the scale of the dilemma. This ‘method’ of designing meets Chipperfield’s general opinion on architecture. In his book “Form Matters”, Chipperfield advocates:

“Architecture is a complex cocktail of considerations, but it is this cocktail that must inform our search for form; we cannot only respond to history (memory) or place (context), but nor can we ignore such clues. We cannot rely on invention and innovation, but nor can we resist technology’s potential. We cannot expect to become the silent voice of a collective culture nor should architecture become only the signature of the individual architect. This is the challenge and the power of architecture.”

Chipperfield’s first strategy took into account the vision of William Morris and of James Ruskin; considering the gap between all great traditions of the Beaux Arts present in Stüler’s design. A special group of people were selected to create a vocabulary of English and German words that in some manner dealt with the subjects of repair, reproduction, recreation, restoration and intervention. This vocabulary would be used to research and analyze every component of the building that had to be debated.

The second strategy then considered different methods of conservation so that each question that evolved during the work could be subjected to a single-minded vision. Explicitly related to materials, artworks or issues of intervention, these strategies were perfectly construed amongst all parties that were involved in the process.

The third strategy contemplated individual space. Spaces which were so significantly damaged that they couldn’t be restored were newly designed by Chipperfield. By doing so these designs could be used to hide modern facilities and leave Stüler’s design unimpaired, using it as a sort of crutches for the old patient. While Chipperfield was busy reconstructing space, Harrap was carefully restoring all murals, frescoes and mosaics.

In the case of intervention, the most destructed spaces display the application of these three strategies the most effectively. Those places are respectively the north-west wing, the southeast tower, the grand stairs, the courtyards and several details spread over the building.

The north-east tower, bombed in 1945, was designed along the lines of Stüler original. By copying the original proportion of Stüler and replacing lost sculptures by new zinc casted ones, Chipperfield created a situation that respects the original and does not reject, nor celebrate its history. Furthermore Chipperfield used reclaimed brickwork of the ruins, and placing a glass dome on top of the tower. Yet this glass dome is not visually present from the inside of the museum because a brickwork dome, like the one in Stüler’s original plans, is placed underneath it. A hole in the lower brickwork dome then provides the directed but diffuse entrance of daylight on the presented artworks.
The grand stairs got completely demolished in 1943 but were of considerable value to the museum’s image. A central stairway used to be joined by two separate stairs that bring you up to the third level of the museum. Once, all three of these stairs were surrounded by frescoed walls and decorated roof trusses, but those were all lost. Chipperfield repaired the walls but left them in bare bricks that were yet again recycled from onsite debris, and then covered the space with a new roof made out of dark stained oak trusses, which are slightly larger proportioned than the original ones. The stairs themselves then were proportioned completely following the original plans of Stüler and Schinkel and are perfectly crafted out of white marble and white concrete.

The south-west wing was replaced by a completely new structure. However, again the design of this new structure was completely done in consideration of the three strategies concerning structure, material and its function. The facades are again constructed out of recycled handmade brickworks while the domes were constructed out of pre-casted concrete, evolving into an image that has the proportions and structure of Stüler’s original building. Chipperfield simply created a situation in which the new looks new, and the old looks old, but the two go together gracefully.

The courtyards themselves posed a design issue, due to the fact that they were additions to the old floor plans. At the western courtyard Chipperfield designed a visibly modern glass roof which covers the courtyard. Within that courtyard he placed a table-like structure, entirely made out of concrete and finished with sandblasted stone-concrete. This material can regularly be found in the museum, both in polished, as well as sandblasted form and is used as a sort of “filler” wherever considerable parts of Stüler’s original building were lost. The table, a three leveled box as some pronounce it to be, reduces light that comes in from the glass roof for the lower levels by only letting in a strip of light that gets reflected against the repaired brick walls. The first level, in disposal of the upper side of the table, receives more daylight and is used for the display of additional artifacts. Similarly, the eastern courtyard is provided with a glass roof as well, yet here the glazing is seen to be transparent rather than diffuse. The result is that the entire courtyard is left completely open, offering one to get a feeling of the building’s height.

Though the tower, the south-west wing, the grand stairs and the courtyards resemble the biggest interventions and additions to the building, it is the general handling of the detail that makes this building grand. The level of consideration for each unique piece of the building, small as it could be, is simply ravishing.

For instance, the structure of the north-dome room was resorted, subsequently its survived plaster works were conserved and the outlines of the lost panels were recreated using lime washed brickwork. It allows the viewer to see the three layers of this building in one sight: a time of creation, a time of demolition and a time of new life, using what is new to complete the picture of its original form.

Another example is the level of detail in the floors. Marble floors that were damaged were conserved and then supplemented with no more than the framework of the original pattern dimensions, again leaving behind an assemblage of the old and new, working together in total harmony.
Leftovers from old interior choices were preserved as far as possible and new design infiltrations were shaped around these leftovers. Previously, one of the gallery spaces had been covered in green walls, and to include this color into the new design, the restored surfaces were treated with a soft green wash. This created a situation in which the difference between the old and the new would not be a strict separation, but seen as a whole.

Almost every element, every decoration, or even anything retained from the past was kept to form a cohesive picture through Chipperfield’s additions. By restricting the infills of the building within the new designs, they simply do not detract attention nor any joy from what has literally survived time, war, weather, communism, and not to be underestimated, the ideas of another architect. Chipperfield’s design meets a lot of theories evolved over time, including the work of Ruskin, Morris and the Venice Charter. Some even claim it to be “the ultimate embodiment of the principles Ruskin set out” 31 or “what Western culture has become” 32.

As stated in my introduction, the Neues Museum is a collective reflection of its different times of creation, its time of demolition and its time of restoration and rebirth. Like its keystone artwork, the head of Queen Nifertiti, Neues Museum was made into something that exemplifies a general understanding of beauty, both consisting heavily of a notion of time, culture and history. With that, David Chipperfield gave us one of Europe’s finest buildings.


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