

BERLIN 2014: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PRUSSIA CONTINUES

In an interview published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on February 14th, 2000, Hans Stimmann – the Head of Urban Planning for the Senate of Berlin – stated: ‘This is a place where the discussion should not be about architecture. [...] I seriously doubt about modern architecture being able to offer to Schlossplatz a politically satisfactory solution.’

The issue of the interview was the destiny of the historical square of Berlin that had been occupied, until the bombings in 1943/44, by the ancient Hoenzollern Castle. Within the architectural debate about Berlin, very lively reflections are being brought up today about this area, which is historically abundant with meanings and which, due to such statements, seemed to have been declared as ‘extraterritorial for architecture’ (M. Pogacnik, 2001), or at least for the 21st century architecture.

In 2002, the German Parliament approved the reconstruction of the ancient city castle with a two-third majority. This building was constructed in 1443 and was meant to be the residence of the great power Prussia. In the 18th century, it was turned into a baroque castle by Andreas Schlüter and Eosander von Goethe and it was completed in its final shape with the dome by August Stüler in the 19th century. In the following years, it became victim of the destructive ideologies of the 20th century.

After being bombed and half-destroyed in 1943/44, it was eventually razed to the ground in 1950 according to Walter Ulbricht’s will – President of the German Democratic Republic -, who was reluctant to rebuild a symbol of the absolutism of the ancient Prussia. Therefore, during the 1970s, two buildings of the ‘new’ socialist city were erected: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Palace of Republic, which was the seat of the GDR Parliament.

After the fall of the wall in 1989, and hence the end of the GDR, the desire to delete the direct memory of socialism from the fabric of the city and to close the previous political and cultural chapter led to the demolition of both of the two buildings in order to make room for the reconstruction of the castle, for which the population had been longing for such a long time. The castle would then be given the name Humboldt Forum and it would become a new cultural institution hosting non-European ethnological collections – which now are in Dahlem –, besides being an additional seat of the central and regional Library and room for the Humboldt-Universität and for prospective events.

Since the earliest times, Schlossplatz has therefore been subject of ferocious ideological debates between interest groups that extremely opposed each other. The most recent matters underline what seems to be the new objective of the reunited Berlin: ‘Delete GDR, reconstruct Prussia’, which is a clearly political objective and is most evidently expressed in architecture.

In 2007 a competition was advertised. The coordinator was the Head of Urban Planning for the Senate of Berlin Hans Stimmann and the supervision was carried out by a jury of international architects, whom were presided over by Vittorio Magnano Lampugnani. The winner of the

competition was the architect from Vicenza Franco Stella, who presented an idea that completely corresponded to the strict and controversial rules set by the government: the reproduction *à l'identique* of three of the historical facades, including the dome and the three internal facades of the large court. On the contrary, the side that was in the direction of the Spree and that had a view on Alexanderplatz could be freely interpreted, since the baroque building by Schlüter and Eosander itself had redrawn only three facades of the castle of the princes from Brandenburg.

‘The big rectangular block of the royal and imperial palace, to which the construction of the main places of the city and the architecture of many of its buildings and monuments has referred, wants to come back in the place where it had been for some centuries, after fifty years and with the appearance of someone who has always been here.’ [Franco Stella]

Coherently with what he said, Stella’s project presents a reproduction of the ancient appearance of the building (clearly studying even the shadows, the chiaroscuros, the thickness of the historical facades, etc.). It reconstructs the same volume of the baroque castle that had been destroyed and it marks the difference between the reconstructed bodies and the new ones, as if it seriously were a combination of the new compared to the ancient.

Such an operation aims at reproducing, after sixty years, the iconographic value of a building that was the symbol of the monarchical power. This shows, as Dezzi Bardeschi writes in an article published in ANANKE in September 2009, ‘a superficial relationship to history’ and the predominance of an exclusive interest for the nostalgic reconstruction of an image that reminds us of the historical center of Berlin before the war, as if nothing had happened in the meanwhile. It is an image that hides ‘a messy political container’ (P. Oswalt, 2000) behind a baroque cover.

Among other things, due to the need to reduce the building costs (caused by today’s financial crisis), some absurd ideas have been brought up. These prove once again the inconsistency of the operation: they include the reduction of the dome’s size – compared to the dome of the Hoenzollern’s ancient castle –, which might even become a mere framework of the construction, and the elimination of the decorations on the facades, which might be added once the funding is guaranteed.

At the moment, the area is like a big urban lawn, in the center of the city and with a view on the Dom, on the Altes Museum by Friedrich Schinkel, on Alexanderplatz with its Television Tower, its Red City Hall, and Marienkirche. It is a vast ‘room of not-being,’ where the ‘absence’ itself of the architectures that have been followed one upon the other in that place seems to be ‘stronger than their presence,’ as Rem Koolhaas wrote about the similar urban situation that emerged after the fall of the wall (R. Koolhaas, 1998).

However, the time to enjoy this peculiar urban situation will soon be over.

According to recent news, the construction of the castle will start in 2014, the end of the works is expected by 2019 and the estimated cost would be around 590 million dollars.

At that point, it will be rather legitimate to consider the baroque castle as one of the many spatial representations of the ideological conflicts that have bolstered the various governments of Berlin along the 20th century. These governments have been continuously encouraged by a will for a never-ending new beginning and by the desire for a new identity and they have carried on ‘destruction / reconstruction’ operations – where destruction, being a ‘relieving act’, as P. Oswalt says, as taken a ‘pathologic’ form and reconstruction, rather than towards a new future, is directed to a far away past, whose reconstruction in the contemporary age has no cultural meaning.

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