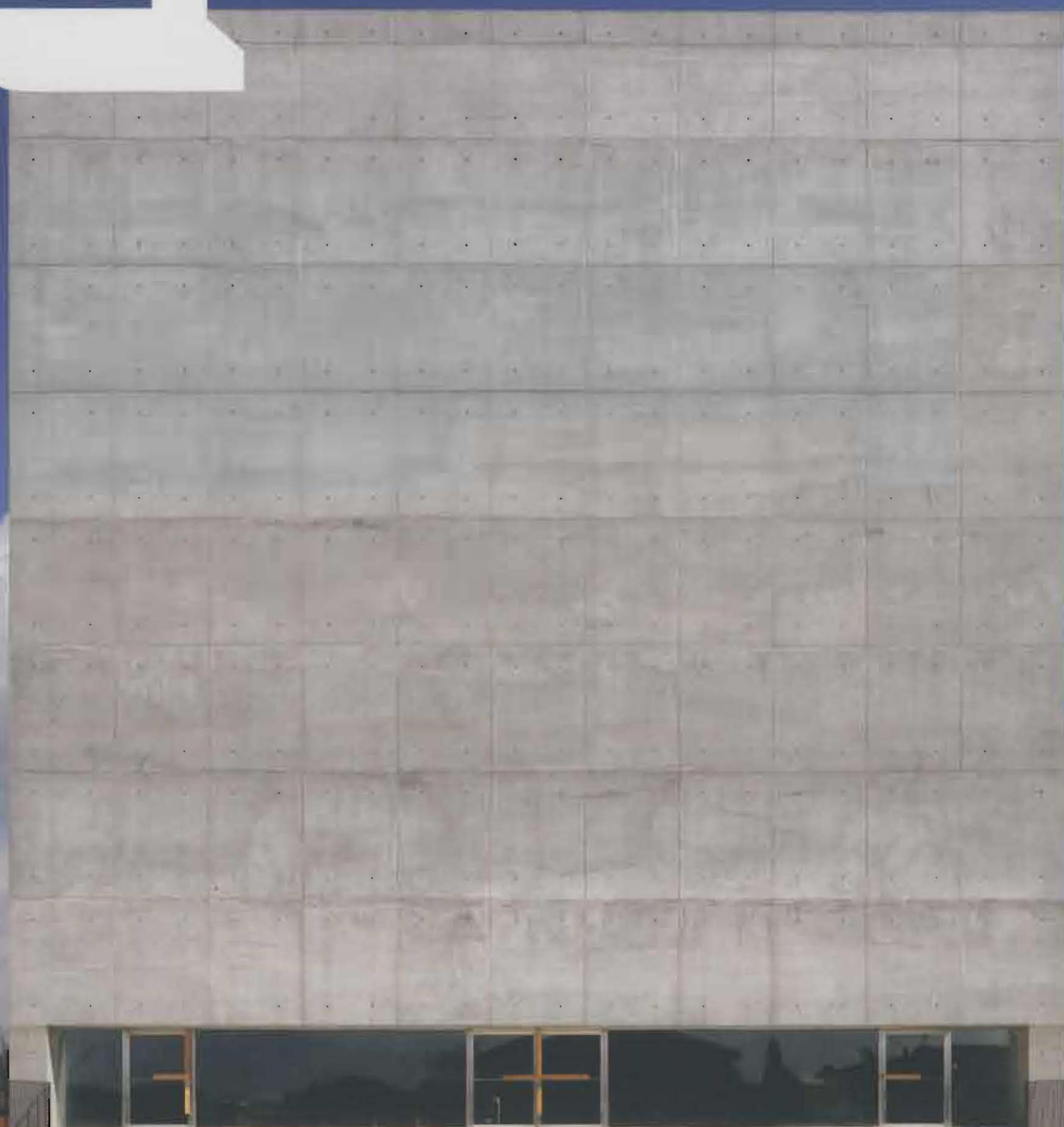


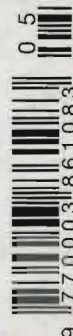
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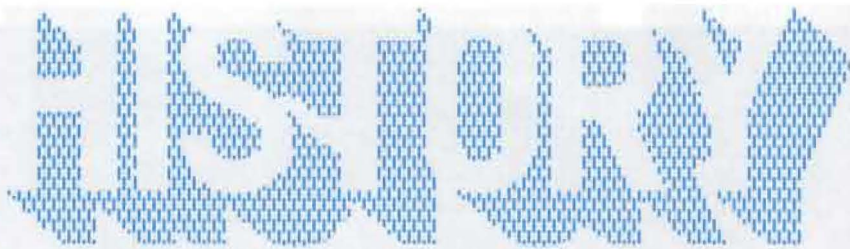


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THE REBIRTH OF THE NEUES MUSEUM IS THE LATEST STAGE IN THE ARCHITECTURAL AND POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF THE SPREEINSEL, BERLIN'S HISTORIC MUSEUM ISLAND

WRITER

ALAN BALFOUR

Berlin's Neues Museum, by Prussian architect Friedrich August Stüler, opened to the public in 1855. After the Second World War, it was left in ruins and sat roofless for over 50 years. Renovation plans began with a competition in 1994, which required adding more space and diminishing the presence of the historic structure. After disagreement over the choice of architect, this was abandoned, and in a subsequent contest, David Chipperfield Architects' resubmission (a simplified version of his original entry) was successful.

The rebirth of the Neues Museum completes the restoration of the suite of museums that evolved at the northern end of the Spreeinsel (known as Museum Island) in the 19th century. The first national museum, now the Altes Museum, opened in 1830; the Old National Gallery, also by Stüler, was completed in 1876; the Bode Museum, at the tip of the island, in 1904; and the mighty Pergamon Museum was completed in 1930. Spreeinsel is a wedge of land at the heart of Berlin, divided by the Spree River. Historically, it enclosed the district of Cölln, the southern of two districts that formed Berlin. This was the nexus of the medieval city, and at its core was a royal castle, later replaced by a palace, the Stadtschloss. A key element in the formation of the

museums, the Stadtschloss was damaged during the war and then totally demolished by the East German government. It was on the land north of the palace that the rulers of Prussia began to exert a temporal order on the landscape.

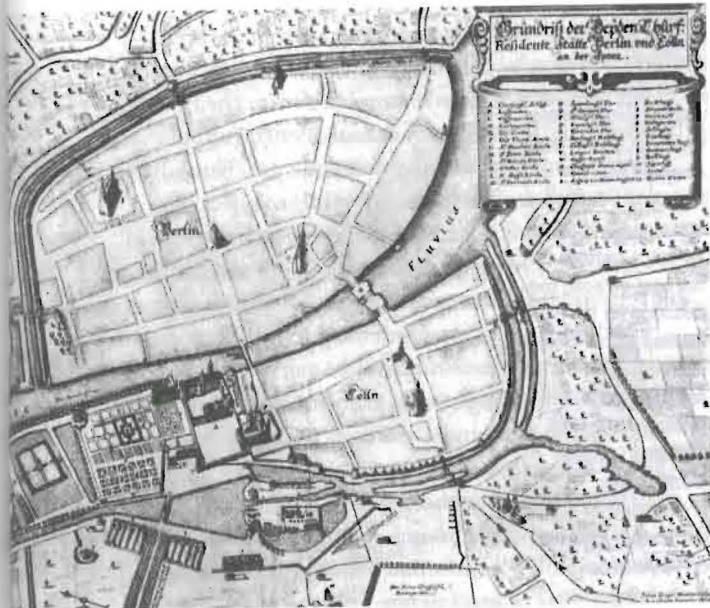
In the 17th century, this became the site of the Lustgarten (literally, a garden of desire), a name that has stayed with the space, and the surprising results are displayed with some realism in a plan of 1648 by Johan Gregor Mamhard. Beyond a parterre garden and over a bridge, two island gardens are shown in the waters of the Spree: the first, a simple rectangular field (where the Neues Museum now stands); the second, an elaborate circle of segmented islands. The geometric order of the 17th-century parterre is in total contrast to the surrounding walled city: an introverted, God-centered community that constrained all medieval reality. In an aerial view of 1688 by Johan Bernhard Schulz, the Stadtschloss dominates the centre, facing the Lustgarten to the left. The island gardens are gone, replaced by an orangery behind a baroque curved facade, and there is a strengthened bastion in the enclosing city wall.

In the JF Schneider plan of 1802, the Stadtschloss is the rectangular figure enclosing two courtyards. The

Lustgarten has been cleared of all its pleasure gardens and pavilions, the great moated bastions removed and the land regained from the river, ordered and planned. This was the situation in 1798 when architect David Gilly was asked by the king, Friedrich Wilhelm III, to landscape the area immediately north of the palace. Though a gifted architect, he bowed to the modest taste of the king and simply proposed transforming the parade ground into a field of grass flanked by a double row of trees, as shown in a 1819 Schinkel drawing.

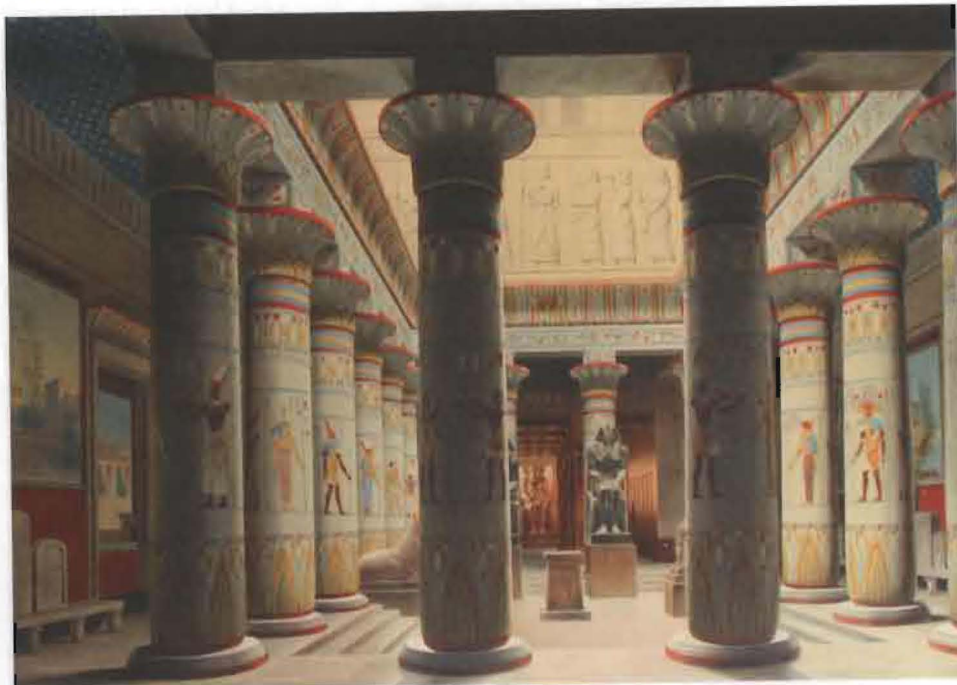
Such modesty reflects an anxiety over events playing out across France in the aftermath of the revolution, and uncertainty over Napoleon's growing ambition. This insignificant landscape is in extreme contrast to the project his son Friedrich Gilly proposed the previous year for a monument to Wilhelm's grandfather, Friedrich the Great. The young Gilly conceived of a perfectly formed Grecian temple in white marble to be placed at a critical entry into Berlin, raised up and visible to all, deifying the hero king. Whether this reflected a genuine passion for Friedrich the Great's achievements or was merely the romance of fresh imagination to the idea of the ancient gods, the competition drawings had a force that deeply impressed the person whose imagination would most shape the future of the Lustgarten: Karl Friedrich Schinkel.

These drawings persuaded Schinkel to transform himself from a painter of grand topographic views into an architect. He became close to Gilly and his son, and eventually emerged as Prussia's formative architect. His practice and writings laid the basis for an architecture defined more by programme and technology than by historical styles, and for some, this was the precursor of the modern. The young Gilly died in 1808, but Schinkel would have experienced his prescience. He would have seen the pages of Friedrich's 'thought drawings', where he explored an architecture stripped —



Left, from top to bottom: Map of Berlin and Cölln by Johan Gregor Mamhard, 1648, showing the early development of the Spreeinsel; Aerial view of the Stadtschloss and Lustgarten by Johann Bernhard Schulz, 1688; The Neues Museum in the 19th century, showing Stüler's original staircase hall, replete with friezes, monumental statues and a caryatid porch;

The Neues Museum in 1855 from the river. Below: The original Egyptian Courtyard in 1882, repository for the extensive spoils from German excavations in Egypt. Though largely destroyed during the War, it exemplifies Stüler's idea of evoking ancient worlds through theatrical interior design. Bottom: Drawing by Schinkel from 1834 of warehouses on the site of the future Neues Museum.



CHIPPERFIELD'S RENOVATION IS SUPERB, AND ITS STRENGTH COMES IN PART FROM THE BRILLIANT IMAGINATIONS THAT PRECEDED HIM IN CONTEMPLATING THE REALITY OF BERLIN

Below left: The staircase hall in 1943, following Allied bombing raids on Berlin. Sadly, the museum was to remain in a damaged and overgrown state for half a century, the cost of repair too daunting for the East German authorities. Plans for repair were eventually formulated in 1993, following German reunification. Chipperfield's restoration aims to convey a sense of the building's rich yet difficult history

Bottom left: The Roman Room in 1939. Stüler's original decor boasted emerald green walls, stucco moulded ceilings and wall paintings depicting suitably uplifting scenes from ancient Rome and Pompeii

Below: The roofless, rotting hulk of the Neues Museum in 1985, with the Pergamon Museum (top left). By that time, the damaged section originally containing the Egyptian Courtyard had been completely destroyed

of decoration, free from the styles of history, reduced to abstract space and structure. In *Berlin: The Politics of Order* (Rizzoli, 1990), I wrote: 'Desire for fundamental change had led [Friedrich] Gilly to reject the texts of history, to detach the idea of space from that of God, and to reconnect the idea of beauty to that of ideal order. With reverberations of the French and American revolutions growing ever stronger throughout Europe and cries for freedom and equality heard on all fronts, it must have been inevitable that Gilly would see in such conceptions a direct connection between the act of freeing architecture from the bonds of history and the cause of political freedom. Liberation from the structures of the recollected histories of autocracies could mean liberation from constraining social order.' Though Friedrich Gilly had no direct influence on the plans leading to a century of museum building, there is an echo of his imagination, at its most intense, in Chipperfield's renovation of the Neues Museum.

Napoleon did invade Prussia and occupy Berlin, then left defeated. The Prussian monarchy was re-established within the uncertain structure of the German Confederation and by 1820 had regained its autocratic presence, tempered, however, by concern over the desire for democracy spreading through all levels of society. Revolutionary events in France and America could not be kept secret.

In 1819, Friedrich Wilhelm III commissioned Schinkel to construct a bridge linking Unter den Linden – the great avenue connecting the Stadtschloss with the royal hunting grounds – to the Lustgarten. In 1823, he proposed a comprehensive masterplan of the area west and north of the Stadtschloss, a plan that involved realigning the canals, demolishing old buildings and proposing a number of new structures. Foremost among them was a public museum facing the Stadtschloss that would enclose the



Lustgarten on the north side and, in Schinkel's mind, complete it. The museum was to be built over the moat that had for centuries crossed the island, and the plan also called for the construction of warehouses and upgrading of the existing wharves to continuing the support of trade in the area. This project would, Schinkel assured the king, bring eminence to the court: clearly, the court was reaching out to the people.

The design was completed in 1822 and the museum, displaying the royal art collection, opened to the public in 1830. (By this time, there were a number of public museums throughout Europe, such as the British Museum, opened to the public in 1759.) The facade is arranged in the manner of a Greek *stoa*, a vast colonnade consuming the full length of the south facade. Walls enclose the three sides and galleries run in enfilade round two courtyards, with a full hemispheric dome at the centre. In detail it emulates the Pantheon, now only partially reconstructed. This was concealed on the outside so as not to compete with the dome of the cathedral nearby. It is a work of consummate artistry, in which all its consciously theatrical elements create exactly the appropriate stage for such royal patronage.

In his last decade, Schinkel became increasingly concerned with new materials and means of construction. This is seen at its most inventive in his *Bauakademie* (Building Academy), built between 1832 and 1836. Sited just to the west of the *Stadtschloss*, it housed the Higher Council of Architecture and the Royal Technical College – an indication of the importance of architecture to his royal patron.

A rudely rational brick box, it is urbane and frankly democratic in its omnipresence. It is also the work that greatly influenced his former student, Stüler, when, at the time of Schinkel's death in 1841, he was commissioned to design the Neues Museum to adjoin the then-renamed Altes Museum (Old Museum) on its west

side. This was intended to house additions to the royal collection: ethnographic material, plaster casts and spoils from German excavations in Egypt, including the bust of Queen Nefertiti. Celebrated more for its advanced construction techniques and cast-iron frame than for its architecture, the Neues Museum was not completed until 1855. But there was still much to admire.

In 1842, Stüler became the architect to the king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, and with his help became immensely successful, designing churches, museums and palaces from Budapest to Stockholm. His last great work was the Neue Synagogue in central Berlin, completed in 1866. It is not easy to determine how much of an individual's imagination is formed from internal creativity and how much from circumstance. You sense, for instance, that Gilly had a strength of vision that could transform any age, and the strange perfection of Schinkel's drawings and the expansive theatrics of his best work allowed him to lead an anxious court into an acceptable reality. Stüler, on the other hand, seems much more the servant of the state, adapting styles and harnessing new technologies to whatever task he was given.

Externally, Stüler's museum never had the commanding presence of the Schinkel, nor was it meant to. The facade follows the form of the Altes Museum. Entrance is through a columned portico, which leads to a great hall transversing the building and containing an intensely majestic staircase. Nothing in the Altes Museum compares with this. Concerned much more with illusion and interiority than with a public face, the Neues Museum reflects the changed times. The design of its interiors evokes ancient worlds, but also creates a new kind of public stage.

Almost fifteen years ago, in *World Cities: Berlin* (John Wiley, 1995), I noted that the competition for the Neues Museum produced results free from the uneasiness that infected the

many other competitions launched to recreate the newly united city. It was won by an archly conservative project from Italian architect Giorgio Grassi, whose restoration was characterised by a carefully abstracted classical language and sparing use of decoration, emulating one of Schinkel's warehouse projects for the same site. However, I concluded that the two most engaging entries had come from David Chipperfield and Frank Gehry. Gehry was also much more concerned with finding a place for his architecture than with the renewing the presence of the Neues Museum. At the time, I wrote that he is 'at his most exuberant, fragmenting the museum into a sequence of anthropomorphic figures that... not only tease the pomposity of the 19th-century surroundings but reveal how tired they are'. On reflection, Gehry's exuberance would have been wholly misplaced and I was wrong. I also wrote: 'With an elegant and firm object containing precisely framed spaces, Chipperfield demonstrates the superiority of a critically defined modern project in an historic district, over the tendency to historicise.' In his 1994 submission, Chipperfield suggested that the project's pivotal decision would be 'the restoration at the heart of the building, the staircase'. And so it has come to pass.

It is rare to see the outcome of a project that an architect has contemplated for many years. But this delay provided Chipperfield with more time for reflection and deepened his historical understanding. It has resulted in a renovated Neues Museum redolent with complex associations and with a gravity and poignancy well beyond what was present in its original form. Chipperfield's renovation is superb, and its strength comes in part from the brilliant imaginations that preceded him in contemplating the reality of Berlin. The work is made profound by the persistence of past visions and desires, whose intent may have been long since forgotten. 