

From Berliner Stadtschloss to Humboldt-Box and Back Again: Architecture in the Conditional

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ABSTRACT. This paper deals with the reconstruction of the former Schloss of the Hohenzollern in downtown Berlin in relation to the design and appearance of the Humboldt-Box, a temporary structure completed in 2011 which serves as information, exhibition and fundraising center for the Schloss' reconstruction. It has been said that the Humboldt-Box is a deliberately "awful" modern building, not only to draw attention to the millions of tourists who visit Berlin every year, but to imply that the only adequate and possible option for that site is that of reconstructing the palace with almost exactly the same appearance that it had around 1900. This statement entails a series of philosophical underlying assumptions that require thorough examination. Specifically, there are two sorts of arguments that intertwine when justifying the Schloss' reconstruction. The first one has to do with the aesthetic reasons provided in favor of a historical reconstruction; the second one has to do with the implicit conception of reconstruction or restoration employed by the promoters of the rebuilding of the Schloss. These two elements point to a conception of architecture that I would like to call "architecture in the conditional": while one of the aims of the Humboldt-Box is to show what *could happen if* the Schloss would not be built, the reconstruction seems to follow Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's conception of restoration as "to reinstate [a building] in a condition of completeness which *could never have existed* at any given time." Both aesthetic and preservationist arguments coincide in the conditional tense in which they are formulated and this tense is articulated in both the Humboldt-Box and the Schloss. Putting these aspects together to better understand the process of the reconstruction of the Schloss through the Humboldt-Box and back to Schloss again will clarify what an "ar-

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chitecture in the conditional” may be and shed light onto the relationships between a certain aesthetic appearance and the meanings it conveys.

In the main exhibition hall at the Humboldt-Box, there is a model of Franco Stella’s design for the reconstruction of the former Schloss of the Hohenzollern in downtown Berlin. This wooden model represents the new palace at scale as it is supposed to look once built at the south of the Museumsinsel, the island in the middle of the Spree river, a UNESCO world heritage site with some of Berlin’s most significant museums. In this rendering, adjacent to the Schloss, and made out of a semi-transparent plastic is the representation of the Humboldt-Box, a temporary structure completed in 2011 that hosts this very model and which serves as information, exhibition and fundraising center for the Schloss’ reconstruction. While examining this model, we asked a volunteer guide whether the Humboldt-Box would remain after the Schloss had been rebuilt, as the model seemed to indicate. “Oh my God! No!” he said, “It would disrupt the entire site. The Box is to attract visitors, and also to show what disastrous outcomes could happen if modern architects were allowed to build whatever they wanted.” Not by coincidence the slogan of the Humboldt-Box is “Berlin’s magnet to visitors on the Schlossplatz”. This may seem only an innocent anecdote, but the statement that the Humboldt-Box is a deliberately “awful” modern building, not only to draw attention to the millions of tourists who visit Berlin every year, but to imply that the only adequate and possible option for that site is that of reconstructing the palace with almost exactly the same appearance that it had around 1900, entails a series of philosophical underlying assumptions that require thorough examination.

There have been many discussions, debates, and confrontations on whether the Berliner Schloss should be reconstructed.¹ My aim is not to provide yet another voice to the debate (though I acknowledge right from the beginning that I am against the project), but to examine two sorts of arguments that intertwine when justifying the Schloss’ reconstruction and that are closely related to the design and appearance of the Humboldt-Box.

¹ See, for example, Boddien (2000), Ekici (2007), Flierl, Parzinger (2009).

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The idea of reconstructing the former Schloss of the Hohenzollern, i.e., the Prussian royal family but now called now called the Berliner Stadtschloss – probably to erase any trace of monarchy in the current German Republic – came about at the beginning of the 1990s. The Schloss does not date from a single period, but is rather an assemblage of several periods and styles. The architectural structure intended to be reconstructed does not exactly correspond to the original, but leaves out certain parts, such as a Gothic wing known as the “Königliche Hofapotheke,” which was an annex at the northern façade of the Schloss built in 1585 and served as “royal pharmacy” for centuries, until its partial demolition in 1898.² It also ignores the Renaissance façade to the East so that what is being reconstructed is the appearance of the Schloss as constituted by its three baroque façades (West, North and South), designed by Andreas Schlüter in 1702, an enhancement to its final size by Johann Eosander von Göthe shortly after, and a final addition of an imposing dome in the mid 1800 hundreds. The Schloss was heavily bombed during World War II and demolished in 1950 to free up a central area in East Berlin. Only a part, known as the Liebknecht balcony because Karl Liebknecht declared from there the German Socialist Republic in 1918, was saved and inserted in the façade of the Council of State building (“Staatsratsgebäude”) just next

² See Froschauer (2012).

to the Schloss' esplanade. The area remained empty until the mid 1970s, when part of the spot was occupied with the Palast der Republik (the former GDR Parliament and also cultural center or Volkshaus). In 1990 the Palast was closed due to an asbestos contamination and, after removing the toxic mineral, it was completely dismantled by the end of 2008, not without great controversy and protests,³ which run parallel to the debate of reconstructing the Schloss.

After Germany's reunification in 1990, the Federal Government created an international commission of experts called "Berlin's Historical Mitte" (Mitte, literally "Middle", is the neighborhood in the center of Berlin) to establish a series of guidelines to further make political decisions on what and how to build in Berlin's historical downtown.⁴ The main idea that came out of this commission was to create a public space for culture, communication and union of East and West in the city center, whose core would be the Humboldt Forum, a global meeting space for culture, art, and sciences which would reflect the spiritual heritage of the Humboldt brothers, Alexander and Wilhelm. Organizationally, the Forum is managed by a cluster of public institutions (museums, university, library) and, of course, private businesses. The Forum was allotted the same site that had been occupied by the Schloss, and the commission of experts had to issue recommendations about the architectural structure that had to host the Forum. After considerable discussion, and without a unanimous decision, the commission "Berlin's Historical Mitte" recommended that any construction should follow the shape and the orientation of the original building, i.e., the Schloss, so that it would have the same volume, and favored the reconstruction of the three baroque façades on the north, west and south sides of the new construction but, and this is important, without excluding other options.⁵ However, due to the lobby of the promoters of the Schloss, who began raising money for the reconstruction before any final decision was made, the Government slowly changed its position. This is

³ There is extensive literature about the demolishing of the Palast der Republik and especially about demolishing the Palast in order to rebuild the Schloss. See, among others: Butlar (2007), Carroll La (2010), Durán (2009), Ledanff (2003), Neill (1997), Schug (2007).

⁴ See: AAVV (2000) and AAVV (2002).

⁵ Flierl, Parzinger (2009, 60).

shown in the official resolutions regarding the Schloss from the years 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2007⁶, which evolve from relatively open-ended architectural guidelines to the obligation of reconstructing the three baroque façades and the cupola. This caused the rules of the design competition for the new building to be so strict that there was barely margin for creativity or to propose interesting projects, in fact, these conditions, together with external pressures by the promoters of the reconstruction is what provoked the resignation of the head of the jury, British architect David Chipperfield.⁷ By the end of 2008, the jury ended up choosing the only project that fulfilled the imposed requirements (and not the best one, even by their own judgment), which was by Italian architect Franco Stella. In words of Jean-Louis Cohen, member of the jury, Stella's project was "the object of a consensus strangely lacking in enthusiasm within a jury that was almost astonished to get out of the impasse it was in" (Flierl, Parzinger, 2009: 103).

While construction works now slowly begin and money is being raised to finance this huge project (roughly 16 of the planned 80 million euros have now been collected), the Humboldt Box, designed by the team of Berlin architects KSV Krüger Schuberth Vandreike, opened its doors on June 29, 2011 (Vandreike, Schuberth, Krüger, 2011). The Box is a five-story building with two terraces on the top floor and a total area of 3000 square meters which host temporary exhibitions on the future contents of the Forum, a gift shop, a restaurant, and areas to lease for private events.

The structure is built upon a foundation of steel pyles, which support a primary cast-concrete bearing-wall structure. Enclosing this structure is a steel frame which supports the enclosure made out of metal and fabric. This steel frame is referred to as a "skeleton" by the architects, as though it were the primary structure of the building, and as is articulated in the exterior of the Box. However, this is not the case because the concrete provides the primary structure. The main element of the exterior is re-

⁶ See (Anon., 2002), (Anon., 2003), (Anon., 2007).

⁷ In a lecture given at Columbia University on February 2, 2012, Chipperfield said that there had never been a real debate around the reconstruction of the Schloss, and he accepted being in the Jury to provide another voice, but the whole process was so politicized that he quit. The idea that there should have been more debate around the project is also in (Chipperfield, 2007).

placeable fabric, so that the Box can be used as an advertising billboard in order to raise funds for the reconstruction. In fact, the advertising company Megaposter GmbH is the company responsible for planning, erecting, refinancing and managing of the project Humboldt-Box and the one that commissioned the building from the architects KSV.

The Box is planned as a viewing platform for the Schloss' construction site, although paradoxically the main windows face the Lustgarten at the north and not the construction site to the south. Even more, most of the tiny windows facing the construction works are covered, so that, apart from the cafeteria at the top, there remains only one opening to see what is happening on the site. Perhaps for this reason Hermann Parzinger, the president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, which is in charge of the contents of the Humboldt Forum, prefers to say that "the capital [Berlin] can now finally see what it itself looks like from the Humboldt Forum" (Kilb, 2010) thus omitting the central function of showing the construction works and also the not very pleasant view of the Humboldt Box from other architectural structures, such as Schinkel's Altes Museum.

The Humboldt Box was inspired by a similar structure erected from 1995 to 2001 at the Postdamer Platz, the Visitor Box on Stilts, which Andreas Huyssen characterizes as follows: "More image box than info box, this space offers the ultimate paradigm of the many Schaustellen (viewing and spectacle sites) that the city mounted in the summer of 1996 at its major Baustellen (construction sites)" (Huyssen, 1997: 71). The same applies to the Humboldt Box, maybe with the addition that the Humboldt Box is also a sort of fund-raising machine in all its aspects: there is an entrance fee, donation boxes, shop, cafeteria, renting of interior spaces and renting of the exterior surfaces for advertising banners.

Aesthetically, the Box has been described as an "ugly block," with the "charm of a dumpster," a "crime against architecture," a "UFO" and even "Kotzbrocken," literally a "chunk of vomit." (Dpa., 2011; Srs., Dpa. 2011; Heinke, 2011). These insulting expressions only differ in degree with the harsh comment by the volunteer guide that I mentioned at the beginning. In fact, the aesthetic opposition between Humboldt-Box and Schloss, put simply, the first one is ugly and second one beautiful, is similar to the one used by the promoters of the historical reconstruction: the Schloss is contrasted to the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. This building is con-

sidered adequate in its purpose but not in its form nor in what it stands for:

What is to be built here? The enhanced Palast der Republik? A sort of Centre Pompidou as evidence for the creative potential of modern architecture?

Or just only the historical castle - and if built, should its atonce-precious interior rooms be included? Or combination of castle and Palast, for example, or of Palast and Centre Pompidou? (Boddien, Engel, 2002:13)

And elsewhere:

It [the Humboldt Forum] will build on the idea behind the Pompidou Centre and develop it for the needs and demands of a globalised world in the 21st century. (Flierl, Parzinger, 2009: 23)

Even more, in one of the promotional publications that the supporters for the reconstruction regularly publish there is a photomontage to show how the Pompidou would look in the Schloss' spot. However, this photomontage is very tendentiously done, for the Centre Pompidou is shown occupying the entire island without respecting the streets and space around and, to the contrary, the Schloss is represented proportionally. While the aim is certainly to dismiss it as a foolish idea that will make people donate money in order avoid a the placement there of a "machine made out of bars, pipes and ventilators," (Adam, 2011:82) one could probably make a reasonable argument in favor of putting the Pompidou, or a similar structure, in the middle of Berlin.

In the abovementioned defense for a historical reconstruction, Wilhelm von Boddien – a businessman from Hamburg who is the head of the *Förderverein Berliner Schloss e.V.* and one of the most devoted promoters of the reconstruction – tendentiously combines the aesthetic and architectural styles of the Palast der Republik and the Centre Pompidou, perhaps to kill two birds with one stone and disregard both of them as equally possible and adequate options for the center of the Museumsinsel. As with the Humboldt Box, a sophisticated, awful, and modern aesthetic is put in contrast to the simple, beautiful, and traditional aesthetic of the Schloss

(“just only the historical castle”), thus precluding from the get-go any other non-historicist construction and also the possibility of leaving the spot empty. Another important point made by Boddien is that a building like the Pompidou Centre would become “evidence of the creative potential of modern architecture,” as though this should be necessarily a bad thing and as though all newly constructed buildings should become evidence of such kind of creativity. By stigmatizing any contemporary alternative, the historical reconstruction seems to be the only possibility for the “needs and demands of a globalised world in the 21st century.” This is especially clear in the conditions (again very tendentious) that Boddien establishes for any building to be a good candidate for the Schloss’ spot:

Are there any examples of a modern building that, in lieu of its historic precedent building, has put together again an old city ensemble in a way that the individual building of this ensemble has regained its original artistic-individual significance, has restored the artfully woven communication network among the other buildings and that this modern building became also the qualitatively best of the ensemble? (Boddien, Engel, 2000: 13)

I would say that the Pompidou Centre does exactly this and this might be the reason that it is chosen as a counter-example. But supposing there might not be actual instances of a modern building that fulfills such characteristics, this does not mean that it could not be built. There is a similar example at a smaller scale very close to the Schloss’ site that proves it: the Reichstag, the building that houses the German Parliament and remodeled by British architect Sir Norman Foster, whose glass Dome certainly achieves Boddien’s criteria. Moreover, it is doubtful that the reconstructed Schloss will ever be the “qualitatively best of the Ensemble” having Schinkel’s Altes Museum just in front of it. And third, there is no reason why these imposed characteristics should be the only ones acceptable (i.e., necessary and sufficient) for any building to be designed in lieu of the Schloss. The Humboldt Box seems thus not only to work as a magnet to attract visitors, but to exemplify the worst a modern building could do in the same site as the Schloss: it does not fit with the context, it does not bring together the surrounding buildings, it is not the best at all. All this reinforces the arguments in favor of a historical reconstruction and not

the construction of a contemporary structure (or the never contemplated possibility of leaving the space empty). Furthermore, if the Box is taken to reproduce at miniature the future contents of the Humboldt Forum, one might say that the purpose of developing the idea of the Pompidou Centre (exhibition areas, a public library, and a center for events) cannot be achieved in such a building. Thus it seems that Schloss and Box could not be more different.

Nevertheless, despite their two opposite aesthetic features, Schloss and Humboldt Box have a common element which can be drawn from the implicit conception of reconstruction or restoration employed at the Schloss and the justification to build the Box to show what disastrous outcomes could happen if the Schloss were not to be recreated. This is a conception of architecture that I have called “architecture in the conditional”: while one of the aims of the Humboldt-Box is to show what *could happen if* the Schloss would not be built, the reconstruction seems to follow Eugène Viollet-le-Duc’s conception of restoration as “to reinstate [a building] in a condition of completeness which *could never have existed* at any given time” (Viollet-le-Duc, 1875: 9). It is true that Viollet-le-Duc claims that “[t]o restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair, or rebuild it” (Viollet-le-Duc, 1875: 9), thus explicitly differentiating restoring from rebuilding or reconstructing; nevertheless, the idea of achieving a completion “which could never have existed at any given time” is what fosters the reconstruction of the Schloss. This is also the same tense that prompts the construction of the Humboldt-Box, a conditional structure that anticipates a possible unwanted design outcome and, by being built, reinforces the opposite aesthetic solution, one that, like the Humboldt-Box, had never existed before. Both aesthetic and preservationist arguments coincide in the conditional tense in which they are formulated, and this tense is articulated in both the Humboldt-Box and the reconstruction project for the Schloss. Both buildings are prompted by the aim of freezing an instant of an imaginary timeline: whereas the Humboldt-Box points toward a nonexistent near future, the preservationist intentions behind the reconstruction of the Schloss intend to go back to an unreal past.

So, even though the Humboldt-Box was built as a temporary structure that recreates a modern aesthetic that deliberately clashes with the historicist reconstruction of the Schloss, both buildings share the fact of be-

ing architectures in the conditional. The full size mock up of the Schloss, built in 1993 with the aim that the idea of its reconstruction would gain sympathy from the people, can also be considered a temporary structure in the conditional. The mock up showed how the site would look, but in a way that it had never looked before: not only because the surroundings were different, but because it used a mirror that covered a façade of the adjacent Palast der Republik to simulate the Schloss' actual size. Shortly after, the non-conditional and genuine Palast der Republik was being dismantled and the Schloss had entered Berlin's imaginary cityscape.

There is a clear nostalgic drive that underlies the reconstruction of the Schloss, a sort of nostalgia that Svetlana Boym calls "restorative nostalgia" and that shares with Viollet-le-Duc's conception of restoration the same conditional tense which expresses the return to something that never existed nor could have existed (Boym, 2001). Boym distinguishes between two sorts of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Whereas restorative nostalgia "stresses *nostos*," i.e. the return home, "and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home," "[r]eflective nostalgia thrives in algia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming-wistfully, ironically, desperately" (Boym, 2001: xviii). Restorative nostalgia (the one that concerns us here), "does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition." And, in a description most suitable here:

Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time. (Boym, 2001: 41)

Is it probably not a simple coincidence that the promoters of the restoration of the Schloss are driven by this sort of restorative nostalgia to try to bring back 19th century Berlin, the very 19th century when "nostalgia became institutionalized" and "for the first time in history old monuments were restored in their original image" (Boym, 2001: 15). It is also in the 19th century when Viollet-le-Duc carries out his restoration projects and writes his definition of restoration. We have thus a nineteenth-century nostalgic drive to reconstruct a nineteenth-century Schloss, but, alas, in the 21st century. And here is the last point I would like to make, because, as Boym says:

Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. (Boym, 2001: xvi)

All these buildings that I have called architectures in the conditional, the Humboldt Box, the Schloss and also its 1993 mock up façades, all of them have the power to make a real impact, they are not only retrospective but prospective. Through them, the events or the instants in the imaginary time-line that “could happen if” or that “could have never happened” are provided a real size and site-specific structure in the present. They become the junction between imaginary and actual time, so that “which could never have existed at any given time” is suddenly existent. The nostalgia “not for the past as it was, but for the past the way it could have been.” It is in this sense, “it is this past perfect,” the tense that articulates Viollet-le-Duc’s notion of restoration, “that one strives to realize in the future,” as Boym says (Boym, 2001: 351). By determining one of the many possible outcomes or fixing the future, that is, by building the Humboldt Box as though it were that which would occupy the Schlossplatz if no measures are taken, the rest of future options are precluded, so that resorting to the past seems the only feasible option. The conditional and temporary Humboldt Box brings about another transformation from a conditional state to an actual one: the Schloss turned from that “which could never have existed” into that “which should always have existed” and, ultimately, it will turn into that “which will exist.” Nostalgia for a past that had never existed makes its way through the present and future through architectures in the conditional and, in their turn, architectures in the conditional become actual and erase not only existing buildings, but existing pasts and histories.⁸

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