

Museum Neues Berlin, by David Chipperfield: completing the past with a minimalist intervention

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The Neues Museum sits within the Museum Island in Berlin, a location that became part of the UNESCO Heritage List in 1999. The island is a patchwork of different museums built between 1825 and 1904, the first one being the Altes Museum, a Neoclassical masterpiece designed by Friedrich Schinkel, which completed the cultural public agenda of the former Royal Palace, currently in reconstruction. The Neues Museum, originally built by August Stüler in 1840, transformed in the 1920s and heavily damaged during World War II, finally opened in 2009 after an integral intervention by British architect David Chipperfield (Rykwert, in Nys and Reichert 2009, 25).



It can be argued that the Neues Museum is quite a dramatic example of salvaged architecture, thanks to the minimal approach that completes a museum which had become a ruin as a consequence of bombings during World War II. The renovation project designed by Chipperfield brought this building back to life, back to its original use; moreover, the Neues Museum has become not just a museum which holds again its original historical collection; it can also be considered a museum of history, a palimpsest which can be read through the different traces on its walls, on its gaps, on its scars; a museum where different episodes of German history can be read (a royal commission, a museum destroyed during WWII, a ruin untouched in Eastern Berlin, a symbol of reunification).



This act of salvaging was successful thanks to the approach that Chipperfield took from the beginning of the international competition (which started in 1994). During most part of the competition process, Chipperfield's proposal was on a tight with Frank Gehry's one, a project which had no intention of recovering the essence of the original Stüler's building: his approach was simply to use the Neues Museum as the main entrance to the Museum Island complex. That was the main difference between Frank Gehry's and David Chipperfield proposals, the role and significance they were giving to the pre-existing ruin: for Gehry, Stüler's work had no significance or value, he considered it "a pastiche" of Schinkel's style and masterpiece, the Altes Museum (Gilbert-Rolfe: 2001, 41); whilst for Chipperfield it meant yet another layer in the built environment, another story to be uncovered and told, just like the scars of the Second World War. By doing so, "Chipperfield represents the unflashy antidote to the expressive tendencies that dominated museum architecture until lately" (Ketchman, 2011, 74), avoiding the language and approach of iconic architecture. Moreover, Chipperfield's approach resonates with the Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994, which:

In a world that is increasingly subject to the forces of globalization and homogenization, and in a world in which the search for cultural identity is sometimes pursued through aggressive nationalism and the suppression of the cultures of minorities, the essential contribution made by the consideration of authenticity in conservation practice is to clarify and illuminate the collective memory of humanity (http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/nara_e.htm)



By highlighting the authenticity of the different layers of history, Chipperfield combines the use of new materials (concrete, timber and metal) with the old building, encouraging a more cohesive reading of the past: showcasing the damage of the mural paintings, the permanence of history through the bullet holes on the walls, the loss of whole sections of the building with the new architectural additions. This intentional preservation of the ruin in the Neues Museum is summed up by Chipperfield Architects as “a project carefully placed between de-historicised reconstruction and monumentalised preservation” (quoted in Long, 2009, 12).

Some critics have criticised the Neues Museum restoration choice, labelling this work as “Fuddy-duddy restoration” (Niesewand, 1997). However, Chipperfield’s approach to savaging the Neues Museum has been praised by many precisely for the dialogue it promotes between the old structure - its decoration and collection - and the new additions, which have been designed following an un-iconic programme, introducing “history as an integral theme of the restoration and of the new display” (Rykwert: 2009, 22). Chipperfield has moved away from iconic solutions in other occasions, like the extension of the Folkwang Museum Essen, also in Germany: in both occasions history has prevailed in order to maintain a former identity, rather than adapting a language which removes any connections with the past, in order to look current and recognizable as a brand. In both

occasions, Chipperfield's solutions competed with well-known star-architects, Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry. But, whilst these architects create distinctive images which talk about their own style of architecture, rather than highlighting the identity of the places they are building for, Chipperfield has proved that a modern but minimal approach, and the conservation of pre-existing structures, can salvage not only historical buildings, but also memories which are still important as part of our heritage.



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UNESCO (1994) Nara Document on Authenticity
http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/nara_e.htm

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