

Exclusion through Inclusion?: Museum Architecture and the Institutionalization of Critique

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Abstract

Architecture is not only a social product; the social is also constituted *through* architecture. This holds particularly true for museum architecture, which is a spatialized expression of social order *and* an infrastructure through which the collective imagination is generated. In this article I will demonstrate how the Military History Museum of the German army in Dresden, has been used to achieve a post-heroic mode of identity formation. The German army is compelled to distance itself from the past while articulating some form of continuity with that past in order to legitimize itself. The Military History Museum achieves this through a twofold spatial tactic: firstly, through a dramatic architectural intervention, and secondly, through the discursive interpretation of this spatial arrangement. Articulated *in* and *through* architecture, a 'critical engagement with the past' becomes institutionalized. Providing a sociological explanation for why the critical negation of the past became a prominent narrative within German memorial culture, I argue that it allows for a coherent form of self-narration under the conditions of historical fractures and multiple conflicts within a refigured form of modernity. Although a similar discourse has been addressed at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, its affirmative architecture nonetheless contradicts any claims of the same critical engagement with history.

Keywords: architecture, Military History Museum Dresden, Humboldt Forum Berlin, incremental critique, institutionalization

Introduction

The German army [*Bundeswehr*] faces a dilemma. On the one hand, it must distance itself from large parts of its past. On the other hand, as a state institution it cannot achieve legitimacy in the present without reference to the past. However, the redesign of the Military History Museum (MHM) of the German army in Dresden – which serves as the institution's official museum – and the discursive interpretation of its architecture, show that continuity can be stabilized despite historical discontinuities. Rather than taking an affirmative approach towards the past, the Bundeswehr has constructed a recent tradition of incremental negations of the past. The Bundeswehr no longer articulates its identity positively by stating who they are, it does so by defining who they are not. This is spatialized at the MHM through a steel and concrete wedge, designed by Daniel Libeskind, that cuts through the building's neo-classicist façade. Embedded in a discourse that centres on the values of criticism and multiperspectivity, a "critical engagement with the past" [*kritische Auseinandersetzung mit der Vergangenheit*] has become a crucial resource for the institution's contemporary identity (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung (BMVg) 2018: 2). By referring to its history in terms of constant negations (cf. Schimank 2002), the above-mentioned values are rendered into a tradition. As a result, criticism does not function as a questioning of the institution but rather becomes institutionalized. In other words, self-doubt provides both distance from the past as well as a minimal sense of continuity. The architectural intervention enacted at MHM is symbolic of a break between past and present in German history, and enables a discourse

of iterative self-problematization. Furthermore, by associating with Prussian reformers and resistance fighters, the MHM ‘rediscovers’ the value of being critical about German military history, helping to *construct a tradition of breaking with tradition*. The ‘critical engagement with the past’ is materialized and institutionalized within the ‘post-heroic’ aesthetics of the Bundeswehr’s official museum. However, it is not only expressed *in* the architecture of the MHM, but also made plausible *through* its spaces as it becomes an infrastructure for a discourse about identity formation. In the first section of this article, I explain my understanding of architecture as an expression and a “medium” through which “collective existence” is achieved (Delitz 2018). I will also position my perspective within the wider field of museum studies. The second section outlines the history of the MHM and its redesign by Daniel Libeskind. I will illustrate how the museum not only expresses a negation of the past but also responds to present structural challenges that are constitutive of a “refigured modernity” (Knoblauch and Löw 2020). As is then made clear in the third section of this article, the acceleration of societal change within Germany’s ‘pluralistic society’ is explicitly mentioned in official documents of the Bundeswehr and the Federal Ministry of Defence [*Bundesministerium der Verteidigung* (BMVg)] as a challenge requiring a more flexible form of self-narration (BMVg 2008: 32). In the fourth section of the article, I describe how the ‘institutionalization of critique’ becomes a useful tool to guarantee a minimum amount of continuity with the past in the face of historical, social, and political uncertainty. Section five looks to the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, which is confronted with a similar historical dilemma – between the affirmation and negation of the past – and is embedded in a similar discourse. As will be demonstrated, however, the institutionalization of critique does not succeed at Berlin’s Humboldt Forum. In contrast with the MHM in Dresden, the affirmative architecture of the partial reconstruction of the Prussian palace in Berlin contradicts any claims of a ‘critical engagement with the past’. The Humboldt Forum serves as a brief but illuminating example that shows how museum architecture can represent, legitimize, or contradict claims of ‘collective existence’. The article ends with concluding remarks upon how museum architecture creates a sense of exclusion despite claims to the contrary. However, the fact that alternative imaginings of society are *staged* by institutional actors in a given architectural setting paradoxically leads to an exclusion *through* pre-structured museum spaces (cf. Bodemann 1996). The prior framing may then limit any claims to true multiperspectivity.

Museum architecture and social imagination

Within the realm of contemporary museums, architecture is not a mere expression of social order but a ‘medium’ through which societies produce an image of themselves (Delitz 2018). Architecture provides an important discursive arena in which contested imaginations of society are spatialized. Museum architecture acts as a monument as well as an instrument (Giebelhausen 2006: 223). Societies not only express themselves in architecture but also receive an idea about themselves through their buildings. The contribution of museums to a nation’s self-image has long been acknowledged. For instance, Benedict Anderson illustrates how the institution of the museum has played an important role in imagining and manufacturing new pasts and collectivities (Anderson 2016: 178). In particular, the triad of museum, nation, and heritage – which spread from France across Europe in the nineteenth-century (Savoy 2018: 30) – served to legitimize a nation’s sense of identity through the architectural construction of heroic pasts. Museums are places where claims to a sense of collective identity have been produced ever since (Kaplan 2006). Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Tony Bennett provides a lively historical and diachronic genealogy of the ‘birth of the museum’ as a disciplining institution that expresses knowledge and power regimes within a given epoch (Bennett 1994; Bennett 1995). Through exhibitions and the canonization of knowledge (MacDonald 1998), the museum constitutes an important site of what Foucault would call “games of truth” (Foucault 1997: 297). Historical perspectives such as this provide important insights into the diachronic development of the MHM in Dresden. Although the ‘truth games’ played in and through these museums have changed enormously over time, their functions as sites for constructing political self-understanding have remained unchanged. Similar to Bennett, who emphasizes how the museum becomes a form of disciplinary apparatus (Bennett 1988), other authors foreground

the museum's role as an institution for civilizing and disciplining subjects (Duncan 2004). The museum is understood here as a quasi-sacred institution, a "heterotopia" (Foucault 1986) that follows a different set of rules, and in which the experience of everyday life is put on hold. Unlike literature within the museum studies field that focuses upon exhibitions and their impact on the formation of subjectivities (Hooper-Greenhill 2004; Pearce 2005; Hein 2006), this article foregrounds the importance of architectural exterior.¹ Architecture is not only seen here as a symbol of the power and knowledge regimes representing the hegemonic episteme of a particular historical moment, but also as an infrastructure that enables a particular discourse about respective institutions. The central object of investigation here is not the *diachronic* shift of epistemic truth claims and the changing formation of subjects through exhibitions, but rather the *synchronic* and therefore potentially contradictory discourses through which museum architecture acquires its significance. Instead of an instrumental understanding of museum architecture as an apparatus or as a "space syntax" that prefigures the movement and reception of visitors, my main concern here is not the "language of museum spaces" (Hillier and Tzortzi 2006) but to reconstruct the various "languages about museum spaces" through which museums receive their meaning. The argument that society is not only expressed in architecture, but also made feasible through it, reveals how the meanings of buildings are not inherent but dependent on processes of signification that emerge from discussion and discourse. For example, as Paul Jones and Suzanne MacLeod emphasize, the contested meanings of architecture result from an expression of social order *as well as* the vivid and unpredictable social life that permanently (re)produces it through interaction in everyday use (2016: 207, 209). Inspired by Actor-Network theory, scholars have argued against a static understanding of architecture (Latour and Yaneva 2008). For Albená Yaneva, architecture plays a 'mediating role' insofar as it is an actively involved entity that structures both social practices and the attribution of meaning by those who engage with or make use of it, often contrary to the intentions of those who professionally produce it (2008: 10).

Daniel Libeskind's intervention within the classical architecture of the MHM played a crucial role in the redesign of the building, as it has in his other work, for instance at the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester (Loxham 2015), the Jewish Museum in Berlin (Chametzky 2008), and the redesign of Ground Zero in Manhattan as a memorial site (Jones 2006). Each is loaded with a symbolism that is not inherent to the architecture but a product of the meanings attributed by the architect. Libeskind, along with other 'starchitects' (Knox 2011: 278; McNeill 2005: 503-6), becomes both a creator of the material architecture and an engineer of symbolic meaning. The relationship between tangible forms and materials, and the intangible symbolic aspects of architecture, can best be grasped according to the dialectic of the social construction of reality within the realm of architecture proposed by Silke Steets (2016), whereby a world of intangible actions ('subjective meanings') is turned into a world of tangible objects ('objective facticities') (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 30). Architecture can therefore be understood as "part of the world-building process through which every society produces its own reality" (Steets 2016: 99). As material objectifications are internalized by the viewing subject in various ways, they again lay the ground for further externalization. Steets' approach helps us first to perceive architecture as a crucial and clearly changing aspect of the endless chain in the 'world-building process', or as Suzanne MacLeod has put it, a "social and cultural product, continually reproduced through use" (2005: 10). From this theoretical vantage point, conflicting interpretations of museum architecture can be understood as the attribution of meaning that is changing diachronically over time, as well as being in conflict at one particular moment.

Praised as a cutting-edge representation of military history, the architectural intervention at MHM has been interpreted as a suitable expression of the self-image of the Bundeswehr. Simultaneously, the museum was criticized by right-wing protestors as a "second bombardment of Dresden" in its destruction of a work of heroic architecture (Teidelbaum 2011: 1), providing a clear demonstration of how the social life of architecture is in the hands of competing discourses. The building is meaningful in different ways to different sections of society. Compatible with the arguments provided by Delitz and Steets, museum architecture can be seen as an infrastructure through which social collectives continually constitute an idea of who they are: "through exposure to and reception of cultural artefacts, such as monuments,

architecture, sites, novels, poetry, lyrics, and other artworks”, social collectives come into being (von Scheve 2019: 270). The redesign of the MHM, outlined in the following section, offers an example of how a particular social imagination is spatialized and stabilized through architecture. As a negation of the past, it allows for a post-heroic vision of collective identity, whereby traditional forms of pathos and heroism are rejected and criticism becomes an institutionalized norm.

Heroic architecture and post-heroic values

In the late nineteenth-century, one of the largest military complexes in Europe, Albertstadt, was built in north Dresden. This arsenal building served as the military and state representation for the Saxon army during the German Empire, the Reichswehr during the Weimar Republic, the Wehrmacht during the era of National Socialism, and for the National People's Army during the German Democratic Republic of East Germany. In 1994 the former arsenal building was elevated to the rank of the leading museum of the Bundeswehr, and in 2001 it was explicitly stated that the formation of a new identity for the German army should be expressed in the redesign of the building: “the Bundeswehr and...the entire state should identify with this museum”, as Manfred Rauchensteiner put it (2011: 11). Precisely *because* the museum has continuously served as a site of military representation across various German states, many redesigns were suggested. Those responsible for the choice of Daniel Libeskind – whose wedge of steel and concrete cut asymmetrically across the three-winged building's late-classicist façade, the triumphal entrance portal, as well as each floor – demanded that the architectural design express a symbolic break with the past. Several authors have interpreted the design as marking a historical caesura. The new wedge-shaped building is intended to break up the old architecture of the arsenal building, open up new perspectives within the interior, and upset and re-establish urban spatial relations (Libeskind 2013; Pieken 2012; Pieken 2013; Pieken and Rogg 2011a; Pieken and Rogg 2011b).² The dramatic staging of an historical break was seen as a necessary disruption of classical forms of representation. By interpreting the architecture discursively, the old building receives a predominantly negative assessment. The problematic history of the German military was understood as expressed in the spatial attribution of the old building, in terms of its rigid symmetry, and an enclosedness that is associated with an equally “narrowed nationalistic view” of the military (Pieken 2012: 163). The new building, on the other hand, is therefore considered a necessary disruption of the old. A critical examination of the past is seen to be expressed through the ‘rupture’ of the asymmetrical wedge. Its translucent and floor-spanning openings allow for multiple viewer vantage points and therefore multiple perspectives; its openness is seen as an expression of a democratic society (Libeskind 2011; Libeskind 2013). By subverting traditional spatial structures and old habits of architectural taste and meaning, the wedge poses a critical challenge to old architectural forms (Pieken and Rogg 2011a: 17). As Gorch Pieken observes, the wedge-shaped, asymmetric extension [...] cuts through the massive existing building and its classical vocabulary’ (2013: 10). As a result of the sharp contrast between the different periods in history and historical values assigned to the different architectural forms, the old building has been retained under the conditions of its negation. Because of Libeskind's dramatic intervention, the historic site loses its affirmative heroic character and thus gives the Bundeswehr a place to represent itself anew.

Precisely because the past still appeared to be present in the architecture of the ‘triumphant’ building of old, a strong symbolic demarcation was seen to be required. The MHM wanted to overcome a “heroized military image” (Pieken and Rogg 2011b: 8) that has been historically delegitimized, particularly through Nazi atrocities. The project director of the reconception of the MHM, Gorch Pieken, stated that its principal aim was to present a “museum without pathos, which endeavours to combine reflections on history and critical debate”, and that it “should encourage thinking more than attempt to endow meaning” (2012: 164). Pieken directly links this objective to the museum's new architecture: “The wedge becomes an instrument of force severing the arsenal, a thorn, a symbol of war and pain, the counterpoint of the arsenal that does not accept war, but questions it” (Pieken 2012: 164; Pieken 2013: 12). Similarly, the MHM's director, Matthias Rogg, described how the “formal

language of the architecture” was used as an instrument to “question [a history characterised by violence] through new perspectives and, where necessary, to break them” (Pieken and Rogg 2011b: 15).



Figure 1: MHM after the redesign. The wedge cuts through the strict symmetry of the old building.

The objective of the ‘critical engagement with the past’ that is mentioned in official documents of the Bundeswehr (BMVg 1982: Art. 17; BMVg 2008: 34; BMVg 2018: 2, 7), and which is central to the publications that interpret the architecture of the museum (Pieken 2010; Pieken 2013; Pieken and Rogg 2011a; Pieken and Rogg 2011b) becomes the core value of the institution. This holds for the exterior as well as the interior of the building. Cutting through the floors of the old building, the wedge offers fascinating views across the various parts of the museum space, and allows for the connection of different thematic parts of the exhibition. Another central value claimed here is multiperspectivity: instead of a “narrowed nationalistic view of the military” (Pieken 2012: 163), the new museum design is intended to present contradictory views of military history and a “diversity of reality” (Pieken and Rogg 2011b: 24). The museum’s architecture and exhibition space serve as an instrument to create a multiperspectival self-understanding. Irrespective of whether this is actually realized, the claim that what defines the Bundeswehr is a permanent form of critical self-reflection, becomes a central resource of identity and distinguishes the MHM from other national military museums.

The act of distancing the contemporary German military from the past becomes the central function of a “critically coded architecture” (Pieken 2010: 7). This entails a rejection of classical forms of pathos and heroism. Post-heroic narratives do not mean the denial of the potential for new forms of heroism but rather a critical concern with classical forms of heroism (Bröckling 2020; Kibel 2022). If we understand heroic figures as personifications of social value systems, it is not surprising that the Bundeswehr has distanced itself from the past heroes of German military history. Nonetheless, the Bundeswehr is tasked with recruiting new heroes who fit its contemporary values. Official documents in which the Bundeswehr codifies its self-image make it clear that an ever-changing processual self-imagination not only reacts to historical fractures but also responds to the structural challenges faced by ‘pluralistic societies’ (BMVg 2008: 32), characterized by dynamic social change and polarization. By problematizing its past, the Bundeswehr is compelled to re-invent new traditions that align with contemporary

German values (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 2014). Providing a sociological explanation, I will now proceed to demonstrate why these reinventions can become functional in the refigured modernity of Western societies of the present, and how a post-heroic architectural language can contribute to this.



Figure 2: War toys indicating how military and civil aspects are interwoven.

Refiguring traditions

The dilemma facing the German Bundeswehr is that in order to achieve legitimacy it must on the one hand distance itself from the past, and on the other hand seek a strong sense of purpose and direction that aligns with contemporary German values. This dilemma is made explicit in official documents of the Bundeswehr. Moreover, literature published by the museum can be used to show how the critical self-reflection of the Bundeswehr have been made explicit in

interpretations of the museum's architecture. In the first paragraph of the Tradition Enactment [*Traditionserlass*] issued by the Bundesministerium der Verteidigung in 1982, the formation of traditions as a link between past and future is referred to as an "essential foundation of human culture" (BMVg 1982: Art. 1). However, since the history of the German armed forces has not developed without "deep fractures", the sixth paragraph of the same document states that a "regime of injustice, such as the Third Reich, cannot establish tradition" (BMVg 1982: Art. 6). Understood in this way, the past cannot be used unreservedly as a foundation of tradition; the difficulties of forging a tradition for the German military, as well as the attempt to resolve this, are manifest in the design of the MHM.

As a parliamentary army, the Bundeswehr has to present itself as part of society. The challenges of a 'pluralistic society' are emphasized in a central policy [*Innere Führung*] of military service – according to this policy, "members of the Bundeswehr recognize each other as members of a free and pluralistic society and engage with social developments" (BMVg 2008: Art. 313). It is explicitly stated that in 'pluralistic societies' with multiple perspectives, 'historical events' lose their binding force (BMVg 1982: Art. 3). The museum's attempt to adopt a multiperspective outlook constitutes a central response to the issues problematized. This applies to the 'narrow' nationalistic view of the military (Pieken 2012: 163). A self-narration that is exclusively framed in national terms seems inopportune, given the current involvement of the Bundeswehr in a "multinational environment" (BMVg 2008: Art. 634). According to the Tradition Enactment, the Bundeswehr needs to show sensitivity to "constantly changing technical and tactical, political and social circumstances" (BMVg 1982: Art. 19). It has responded to these contemporary challenges through the constant development and dynamization of tradition itself (BMVg 2008: Art. 20). Hubert Knoblauch and Martina Löw (2020) perceive contemporary Western societies primarily in terms of the polarization and tensions between different and potentially conflicting visions of society: "instead of assuming a shift from a modern order to a late modern, ultramodern, or postmodern order", the plurality of and the tensions between different social figurations both result in and are expressed through the 'refiguration of spaces' (Knoblauch and Löw 2020: 276). By emphasizing conflicting opinions within 'pluralistic societies', the Bundeswehr attempts to address the contemporary characteristics of a *refigured modernity*. Refiguration means that the multiple spaces of experience within a society can no longer be fully integrated. The belief in unifying grand narratives – of a heroic past, for example – has been called into question. In sociological terms, the Bundeswehr acknowledges the 'polycontextuality' of a functionally (and culturally) differentiated society (Schimank 2021). The loss of unifying (Schimank 2021: 2) master narratives in this context is reflected in the guiding principles of the Bundeswehr, and is expressed in the architecture of the MHM. An emphasis upon post-heroic values of multiperspectivity and self-criticism can therefore be explained sociologically as a response to the contemporary challenges of identity formation. The homology between structural challenges and the self-narration of the Bundeswehr shows that it becomes functional to imagine the identity of the institution through more flexible and processual values. The spatial redesign of the museum facilitates new ways of narrating the Bundeswehr's identity. Discussion about multiperspectivity, self-criticism, flexibility, and adaptation thereby becomes institutionalized. The myth about an ever-changing and self-critical institution is achieved by linking such values back to the history of the German military, therefore constructing a tradition of breaking with traditions (Kibel 2021: 310).

Institutionalized criticism: a tradition of breaking with traditions

The Bundeswehr has responded to the challenges of forming a positive identity in the contemporary age by pluralizing and dynamizing its sense of traditions. One of the MHM's numerous publications states that "[the exhibition] shows that the Bundeswehr has always been changing – it has been flexible enough to adapt not only to new security parameters but also to changes in society" (Pieken et al. 2015: 3). This means that the emphasis upon the value of self-criticism has been 'rediscovered' in the past in order to solve problems of the present.

The reformers of the Prussian army, the citizen-soldiers of the 1848 – 1849 revolution, and above those involved in the 20 July 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler, play a central role in the contemporary formation of Bundeswehr's tradition (Pieken and Rogg 2011b: 189).

The Bundeswehr was founded on 12 November 1955, on the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Prussian military reformer Gerhard von Scharnhorst. The date was chosen to represent a progressive spirit, including the guiding principles of 'reform' and the 'citizen in uniform' enshrined in the *Innere Führung* (BMVg 2008). The critical self-scrutiny, the questioning of existing structures, and the ability to reform, are anchored in a military tradition given legitimacy at the MHM through the honourable commemoration of reformers, revolutionaries, and German military officials who (eventually) sought to sabotage the project of the Third Reich. It is no coincidence that the streets Stauffenbergallee and Osterstraße intersect at Olbrichtplatz in front of the museum, thus commemorating high-ranking Wehrmacht officers Friedrich Olbricht, Hans Oster, and Claus von Stauffenberg. As conspirators against Hitler, they make it possible to construct an alternative form of identification and a tradition of breaking with traditions within modern German military history. The post-heroic values of critical self-reflection and multiperspectivity require new heroes whose ability to reform and engage critically with the deeply discredited image of the German military institution is indeed 'rediscovered' in the past. However, the need for critical confrontation arises again and again (in an endless chain of negations), and narratives are formed anew. This mode of identity construction can be described as 'muddling through' in organizational sociology (Lindblom 1959). Far from being irrational, tactics of muddling through become functional wherever institutions have to deal with uncertainties and wherever it can be potentially dangerous to make decisions that cannot be revised. The need for constant course correction corresponds to the process of persistent self-problematization, as the case of the Bundeswehr attests. Despite the endless process of incremental re-adaptation, institutional actors manage to achieve a notion of constancy and unity. Uwe Schimank (2002) refers to biographical narratives to demonstrate how this process unfolds. Even under conditions of discontinuity, a 'unified life story' can be constructed through what the author calls "biographical incrementalism" (2002: 244): the "unity of incrementalist processes is rather constituted by the fact that they repeatedly react to themselves as problematic in the form of certain negations" (Schimank 2002: 244). The construction of a unity and a coherent notion of selfhood, then, abides by the following rule: "I never know what I want – but at least I always know what I don't want" (Schimank 2002: 245). Equally, the story the Bundeswehr tells about itself can only be integrated as a 'processual unity' that is incrementally maintained through a chain of continued self-negation. Such a story could not be told within the narrow boundaries of the heroic and triumphant architecture of the old arsenal building. Expressed through the architecture of the museum and its exhibition, this "institutionalization of permanent reflection" makes possible the establishment of new routines (Schelsky 1957). A 'critical engagement with the past' also allows the formation of an identity that is stabilized through infinite course corrections. Indeed, the Bundeswehr's own institutions – for example, the Bundeswehr's Centre for Military History and Social Sciences (ZMSBw) in Potsdam, and the Zentrum Innere Führung in Koblenz – help to institutionalize this reflexive discourse. In Dresden this is achieved through the architecture of the MHM and the multitude of publications through which it is made meaningful.

To summarize, by using critique as a resource, the manifold breaks in German military history, as well as the dynamic changes of the contemporary age, can be 'processually unified' into a coherent self-image. The task of critical confrontation arises again and again in an endless chain of negations, whereby new routines of communication can be established. When constant social and political change is marked by multiple conflicts in a refigured modernity, institutionalized doubt becomes a form of certainty.

Failed institutionalization at the Humboldt Forum, Berlin

The act of critical self-reflection seems functional wherever a connection with the past endangers moral integrity, whilst at the same time a coherent identity requires some sense of historical continuity. The affirmative architecture of the Humboldt Forum – a partial reconstruction of the Prussian palace of the Hohenzollern family – allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between architecture and the imagination of 'collective existence' (Delitz 2018). The Humboldt Forum shows how local history has been seen as a resource by which the symbolic centre of the German capital could be reimagined. Similar to the discourse of 'critical

engagement with the past', a narrative of 'critical cosmopolitanism' has been used to bridge the gap between Germany's colonial past and the claim to the moral integrity of an open society. However, at the Humboldt Forum any claims of a 'critical engagement with the past' are frequently contradicted by the building's affirmative architecture.

When Frederick III of Brandenburg crowned himself King Frederick I of Prussia in 1701, he asserted his newly-acquired status through architecture, employing the Polish-German architect Andreas Schlüter, who subsequently transformed the royal seat of power from a Renaissance-style residence into a Baroque palace. By adapting the façade of the Palazzo Madama and the triumphal arch of Septimius Severus in Rome (Bredekamp 2019: 281-85), royal dignity, aspiration, and social status, were represented and legitimized through the form of the building. The long and complex history of the Hohenzollern family's palace extended from 1440 to its iconoclastic destruction in 1950 given its association with the Prussian military.³ New plans during the 1950s envisaged a monumental skyscraper for the Socialist Unity Party of the Germany as a replacement on the same site. This would have destroyed almost the entire historical centre of Berlin (Flierl 1993). In the end, the ambitious plans of the GDR to transform the centre of the city through monumental architecture into the centre of the state were shelved in the course of the following decades. Meanwhile, the site of the former palace became a May Day parade ground and car park. Eventually in 1976 the Palace of the Republic [*Palast der Republik*], which was both the seat of the GDR's People's Chamber [*Volkshammer*] and a cultural venue, was erected on the former site of the Prussian palace in a more modest modernist design than the initially planned Stalinist party building. With the collapse of the GDR, the Palace of the Republic was pulled down. As Dominik Bartmanski and Martin Fuller put it, the cyclical "life and death" of great Berlin palaces show how "materiality and meaning are interwoven to entrench political legitimacy" (2018: 202). The authors' argument draws upon Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966), in which she observes that the Palace of the Republic "had to go because within the now dominant 'symbolic system' of reunified, capitalist Berlin it has become a polluted symbol" (2018: 213). Regardless of political ideology, the underlying cultural logic of iconoclastic erasure remains similar in both cases (2018: 217). The role of architecture within the 'collective existence' (Delitz 2018) of societies also becomes visible at the moment of its destruction. As Xavier Costa observes, it is "precisely their intentional destruction which qualifies them [the palaces] as artefacts of exceptional historical and political value" (2022: 4). The argument that society is produced through architecture also means that the architecture of the GDR became a hindrance to (re)imagining the new society of a reunified Germany during the 1990s.

On 4 July 2002 the death of the Palace of the Republic was sealed when the German Bundestag decided to reconstruct the Hohenzollern family palace. Eventually the German parliament opted for a partial reconstruction of three façades. This included the main façade of the palace to the south, the façade facing the Lustgarten – which forms a triad with the Berlin Cathedral and the Altes Museum to the north – and the façade to the west, with its triumphant adaptation of the arc of Septimius Severus that was crowned with a dome later in the nineteenth-century. It was also argued that the main courtyard of the former Prussian palace – the Schlüterhof – must be reconstructed according to its historical appearance, since it was considered one of the most important examples of baroque architecture in the north of Germany.



Figure 3: Modernist Palace of the Republic and the Fernsehturm as a reminiscence of the Sputnik satellite. Both render the capital of the GDR as a prospective socialist utopia.

It is important to highlight that the historicizing façades and the Schlüterhof make up only a thin layer that covers the modern building. The only façade that reveals the modern character of the Humboldt Forum is the one to the east. In sharp contrast to the baroque ornament, the rectangular cube orientates itself to the Marx-Engels-Forum and the iconic Fernsehturm on the opposite side of the river Spree. Despite a contrast of aesthetics between new and (allegedly) old architecture, the architect of the Humboldt Forum, Franco Stella, never sought to make this explicit. On the contrary, Stella has claimed that the modern building and the baroque façades would rather form a unity due to their height and volume. Instead of contrasting with the old, Stella argues that the modern aesthetic would represent a contemporary interpretation of Schlüter's baroque architecture, which he strongly admires (Stella 2022). Whereas Libeskind's dramatic intervention within the old arsenal building in Dresden explicitly serves the purpose of disrupting and *deconstructing* the symmetry of the existing spatial relations between the building and its urban surroundings, Stella's partial reconstruction was legitimized through the claim that it would *reconstruct* the former spatial relations of the pre-war urban fabric. Accordingly, the discursive interpretation of the modern façade at the Humboldt Forum creates an image of unity rather than plurality – a sense of continuation with the past rather than the discontinuity that was attempted in the redesign of the MHM. A publication by the Humboldt Forum Foundation exemplifies how the modern façade has achieved a surprisingly unified effect, observing that the “reconstructed and new structures blend harmoniously into an architectural ensemble”, and that the “modern design of the east wing completes them [the Baroque façades] with its extension and façade articulation as a uniformly conceived building.” (Stiftung Humboldt Forum 2020: 7). The architecture of these museums are rendered meaningful in quite different ways by the official publications of their respective institutions. The harmonizing and affirmative relation to the past observed in the design at the Humboldt Forum can be seen in total opposition to the negation of the past enacted at the MHM in Dresden.

Embedded in a wider trend of reconstructing 'Prussia's Gloria', the partial reconstruction of the Prussian palace and the replicas of both the three facades and the Schlüterhof became an experiment in whether Prussia could or could not eventually become a "normal" part of German history' (Colla 2022: 2). In the early stages, the authorities held discussions about whether the 'new' palace should host the collections of Berlin's ethnological museums (Morat 2019: 142). Since nobody had considered the colonial provenance of a still unknown number of items in these collections, it was unfortunately decided that the "symbolic centre of the Prussian colonial empire" would therefore become a "museum of non-Western art" (Costa 2022: 5). This 'non-Western art' was of course brought to Berlin through colonial exploitation and often brutal robbery.

One of the most prominent critics of the Humboldt Forum, art historian Bénédicte Savoy, points to an inconsistency between the affirmative façade of the building and the lack of critical research on the provenance of many of the museum's collection items. According to Savoy, there is an "contradiction" inherent within a reconstruction of the Berlin Palace which "signals that history can be undone" but which does the "opposite" when countries ask for the return of objects.⁴ Discussions about the colonial provenance of exhibits and the history of the site itself, which was closely linked to Brandenburg and Prussia's colonial past, became increasingly heated. It is also worth noting that it was not the institution itself that generated subsequent 'critical insights'; these were the result of the "tireless work of civil society actors" – for example, such as No Humboldt Forum 21, Berlin Postcolonial, and BARAZANI.berlin – as Mareike Heller points out (2017: 13).

Similar to the dilemma the Bundeswehr has faced in demarcating the past from the construction of a sense of continuity, it became necessary to bridge the increasingly visible tension between a colonial past and the integrity of the museum in the present. In the same way the MHM tried to build its new identity around the discourse of an alleged 'critical engagement with the past', the Humboldt Forum has tried to address this with what Daniel Morat calls a "strategic cosmopolitanism" (2019: 141-44). The façade of the Prussian palace, which was an expensive investment costing approximately €650 million – would supposedly be "neutralized in terms of historical politics and freed from the smell of revisionism" (Morat 2019: 142). By trying to incorporate a postcolonial critique, a critical engagement with the colonial past is understood to be a key element of the Humboldt Forum. A constructed cosmopolitan tradition – similar to the *tradition of breaking traditions* referred to earlier in the context of the MHM – drew inspiration from Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt; indeed, especially the latter assumed the status of a 'patron saint' (Bach and Nienass 2021: 11) and provided a moral link between the past and present. In a rather dramatic but telling analogy, Bénédicte Savoy compared the baroque façade with the Chernobyl nuclear plant. Like the concrete dome that was erected to contain the nuclear radiation, the triumphant architecture of the Humboldt Forum would suffocate any truly critical engagement with the past.⁵ The architecture works against any discursive claims to construct a tradition of cosmopolitan reflexivity. However, the example of the Humboldt Forum highlights how pre-structured institutional and architectural frames detract from a truly reflexive and inclusive vision of society.



Figure 4: *Triumphant Portal III*. representing the retrospective and affirmative architecture of the Humboldt Forum.

Staged multiperspectivity: exclusion through inclusion?

Regardless of the notable attempts of the Humboldt Forum to engage critically with the colonial past, this is conducted within a framework that is set out by the institution and – most visibly – *through* the affirmative architecture of a replica of a baroque palace. As Kien Nghi Ha has emphasized, the Humboldt brothers are commemorated as “representatives of the cultural cosmopolitanism of German humanism”; Ha states that it is the “German nation [that] celebrates itself in the same act” (2017: 27-28). Notwithstanding serious efforts to engage with the past in the Humboldt Forum and the MHM, the tipping point between critical historiography and foundational myth-making is evident at this point.

Rather than being silenced or censored, the multiple perspectives of ‘pluralistic societies’ within a refigured modernity are acknowledged by and incorporated into the MHM and the Humboldt Forum. However, the way they are staged within an institutional and architectural framework is exclusionary rather than inclusive. As multiple perspectives of different social groups are represented in museums and at the same time embedded into discourses of alleged critique and cosmopolitanism, they are instrumentalized for the construction of national identity in these institutions. The myth of a critical or cosmopolitan tradition creates exclusion paradoxically through claims of inclusion, since multiple perspectives are only acknowledged in a pre-structured space. This only allows for inclusion within limited frames and pre-defined categories, instead of re-framing the frames of commemoration themselves. A predefined frame in which categories and spatial arrangements are already set, however, requires a different form of critique and different spatial tactics for a truly inclusive vision of society to be achieved. A true criticism of the museum’s identity – both spatially and in terms of artefacts and their interpretation – would require multiple perspectives to be consulted in the design of the museum’s spaces, instead of being positioned within a given spatial framework and a form of heroic architecture that constantly contradicts claims of inclusion.

Conclusion

The heroic architecture of the traditional MHM building has been challenged by a set of newly constructed meanings that engage critically with the past. Architectural intervention and the

discursive construction of a tradition of critique and multiperspectivity were used to bridge the gap between the old problematic associations of the old building and a new vision and understanding of the image and tradition of the Bundeswehr that meets the requirements of a pluralistic and everchanging society. In the case of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, which revived Schlüter's triumphant baroque design uncritically, this was not possible.

The sociological argument given in this article allows us to think about discourse relating to identity that emphasizes a 'critical engagement with the past', not only as ethically motivated signs of moral progress. Instead, it is worth thinking about them as functional tools to imagine and construct claims of collectivity under the uncertain and ever-changing horizons of a refigured modernity. Under these circumstances, the idea of a binding tradition and a uniform interpretation of the past loses its persuasive power. The institutionalization of a 'critical engagement with the past', which is at the centre of contemporary German memorial culture, offers both minimal continuity in the face of historical and current ruptures, and the formation of a relatively open unity in differentiated societies that integrates itself through the affirmation of plurality and multiple perspectives. I therefore also argue that a postcolonial critique no longer presents a challenge that must be resisted, but rather a resource to retell and reimagine more suitable forms of collectivity. As criticism becomes institutionalized (and instrumentalized), an opportunity arises to create a mutable self-image. This incremental, more fluid, and diverse political rhetoric at the same time grants a minimum amount of historical continuity. The MHM has achieved this by constructing continuity incrementally, and by using critique as a resource to establish its identity. In the case of the Bundeswehr, reformers and resistance fighters serve to construct a tradition of breaking with traditions. Remarkably, the German military in Dresden seems to succeed better in meeting the demands of a refigured modernity than the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, whose efforts at a cosmopolitan interpretation seem rather helpless and unconvincing in the shadow of its heroic and triumphant architecture. Where the MHM succeeds through Libeskind's dramatic architectural intervention and its discursive interpretation, the Humboldt Forum fails because its architecture undermines any possibility of a critical distancing from the past. The latter's appropriation of critique as a diversion against a more fundamental questioning, provides an example of the failed institutionalization of a critical engagement with the colonial past. The museum's moral integrity becomes undermined despite its 'strategic cosmopolitanism'. The attempt to traditionalize more progressive and processual values by referring to Alexander von Humboldt and his cosmopolitan worldview is delegitimized by the affirmative architecture in the reconstruction of the Hohenzollern Palace. In the shadow of the Humboldt Forum's triumphant baroque architecture, any such attempts seem hopelessly lost.

Notes

- ¹ For a more detailed interpretation of the interior of the MHM and its exhibition see Kibel (2021: 288-309).
- ² See also Daniel Libeskind, 'Military History Museum: Dresden, Germany', Studio Libeskind 2011. <https://libeskind.com/work/military-history-museum>, accessed 14 March 2023.
- ³ A detailed exploration of this history is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.
- ⁴ Bénédicte Savoy, quoted in Michaela Maria Müller, 'Bénédicte Savoy über einen unlösbaren Widerspruch des Humboldt-Forums', *Piqd* 2017. <https://www.piqd.de/zeitgeschichte/benedicte-savoy-uber-einen-unlosbaren-widerspruch-des-humboldt-forums>, accessed 14 March 2023.
- ⁵ Bénédicte Savoy, quoted in Jörg Häntzschel, 'Das Humboldt-Forum ist wie Tschernobyl: Interview mit Jörg Häntzschel', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2017. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/benedicte-savoy-ueber-das-humboldt-forum-das-humboldt-forum-ist-wie-tschernobyl-1.3596423?reduced=true>, accessed 14 March 2023.

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