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David Chipperfield

Neues Museum

Berlin, 2nd Competition 1997 (1st Prize), since 1997

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The first question that has to be asked about a new design and master plan for the Neues Museum and the Museum Island in Berlin is: why David Chipperfield? Of course he is a well known and distinguished British architect and he did, at the end of the day, win a competition that was both politically and architecturally complex. British talent is popular in Germany - is there something in the climate that encourages British talent to do so well there? Lord Norman Foster rebuilt the Reichstag; James Stirling designed the best building of his career for the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart; Nicholas Grimshaw is the architect of the new Stock Exchange in Berlin; and now Sir Simon Rattle is the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic.

The answer is not just that Britain is producing highly talented architects (and musicians); it is also because the British are good at dealing with the problems of working with tradition. Architects are experienced in adding on to and restoring old buildings, and in all three recent examples - the Reichstag, the Stuttgart Gallery and the Museum Island in Berlin - there is a need for pragmatism and compromise as well as talented new design. It is also the case that a foreign architect can, ironically enough, break through the complex network of local politics and produce an objective solution.

The Museum Island in Berlin has been a problem for the city for a long time. War damage, neglect, and communism have worked against the provision of a secure future for Berlin's remarkable collections of antiquities and art. It was the miracle of the reunification of Germany that became the unexpected catalyst for the rationalization of the museums of the new federal capital.

The cultural buildings of Berlin have acquired new significance as icons of civilization in the redevelopment of the city. The Museum Island has exceptional European historical importance too - philosophically it represents in its ensemble of buildings a special "omnium gatherum" of cultures that have inspired the West. Berlin's unique island of culture owes much to the triumph of German art history in the nineteenth century and to the architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel and his clients. Writing as the Altes Museum opened in 1830, Schinkel and the director of the museum, Dr. Waagen (who traveled to Italy with Schinkel in 1824), explained the rationale of the museum - "The principal and essential purpose in our opinion is this: to awaken in the public the sense of fine art as one of the most important branches of human civilization... all other purposes, concerning individual classes of the population must be subdued to this." The first displays in the museum were to follow carefully defined art-historical principles, and the neoclassical architectural style, derived from Gilly and Durand, was employed to produce a temple of art. The eighteen fluted Ionic columns of the Altes Museum create the perfect noble façade for a temple of art and at the heart of the museum is the domed pantheon that Schinkel called "the sanctuary."

David Chipperfield's skills are twofold: he is a designer of integrity and originality, and he is

experienced in placing his "architecture of ideas" within existing contexts. He has described England as the "land of pragmatism" - suggesting in fact that ideas come secondary to functionalism. But his successful buildings demonstrate that it is possible to integrate original architectural ideas into existing contexts. He succinctly described his philosophy (almost a creed) in the introduction to his submission for the Berlin Museum Island competition:

"I am not by nature a 'conservative.' I believe in the possibilities of the future as well as in the evidence of the past. Neither am I a formalist. I believe every project must determine its own character, identity and logic. At the cusp of the twentieth century we should be able to deal with the past without parody and look to the future without whimsy.

Our continued work on the Neues Museum over the last years has given me the unique opportunity to come close to this great physical presence and to give some measure to its form and possibility. I believe our proposal is a sophisticated work in the positive meaning of the word. I am grateful for the opportunity to contemplate the problem of the Neues Museum; it is a challenge that engages the very significance of memory and the continuity of history."

The history of the competition needs to be briefly described. In the spring of 1994 the Italian architect Giorgio Grassi won the competition with a contextualist solution ahead of four other entries from David Chipperfield, Francesco Venezia, Frank Gehry, and Axel Schultes. However, a long period of modifications and changes called for by the client between 1995 and 1997 led to Grassi's eventually abandoning the project. Two of the runners-up, Frank Gehry and David Chipperfield, were then asked to resubmit to a mini competition, which Chipperfield won. The major sticking point of the long debate during the complicated competition was the exact status of the restoration of the war-damaged Neues Museum itself, which stood as a ruin between the Pergamon Museum and the Altes Museum. The German museologists were originally determined that the rebuilt Neues Museum should be restructured in such a way that it would become the main entrée to the entire Museum Island. They also wanted to ensure that the winning design made it easy to link the three main museums and allow the possibility for visitors to complete a tour of the star items of the collections.

Chipperfield's solution has developed over time into a master plan for the whole site as well as an architectural solution. Stylistically his minimalist approach has enabled him to learn without prejudice from the presence of the neoclassical and neogrec originals without copying them. The Neues Museum was once one of Europe's most discussed museums because of its rich iconographical decoration and its associational spaces like the Roman Hall and the Medieval Hall. Its architect, Friedrich August Stüler, designed a formal and symmetrical building, which was severely damaged in World War II. Chipperfield plans to reinstate the symmetry of the façade also allowing the re-creation of the internal courts. His plan is to make an archeological route through the entire site which partly takes the form of some critical interventions and new links. Since July 1998, David Chipperfield's firm has been working with local planning experts, Heinz Hilmer, Christoph Sattler, and Heinz Tesar. This team brings together the detailed knowledge of the individual buildings and overall planning skills.

The Planungsgruppe in Berlin has tried to retain the autonomy of the individual buildings and keep their historic entrances. However, the museum requirement is for links between the buildings to ensure that the new arrangement of collections is accessible and comprehensible. The collections of the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz will be seen in a joint museum complex for the first time in the history of the Staatliche Museen. The following collections will now be brought together from their scattered homes in Berlin onto the Museum Island: the Pre and Early History; Western Asiatic Antiquities; Egyptian collections; the Antiquities Collection; the collections of the Museum of Late Antiquity and Byzantine Art and the Islamic Collection. Although seen as a group of separate

collections they will form together a Museum of Antiquity that will be unequalled in the world. The architects will have to organize the existing buildings and the new links to enable historical, thematic, and geographic points of contact between the collections to be made easily. The concept of a main tour route that links the major architectural elements of the Pergamon will allow an easy tour of the main attractions without disturbing other visitors following more specialized or more detailed and longer routes (in time as well as distance). Shared temporary exhibition space enhances the concept of bringing together the varied collections.

The provision of new space to the northwest of the Museum Island on the site of the former Friedrich Engels Barracks will allow the removal of much of the administration and storage and workshop areas of the existing museums, thus freeing up large amounts of space for circulation. The Chipperfield plan provides three major new benefits.

1. A link between buildings at the current Level 0 of the Museum Island, which will create, without major new construction, an "archeological promenade." This links the interior courtyards of the Altes Museum, the Neues Museum, and the Bode Museum. It can be entered from each museum and from the new entrance building.

2. A newly constructed entrance building with a new temporary exhibition area on the open space by the Kupfergraben.

3. The north and south wings of the Pergamon will be linked to improve circulation and to allow for the use of the Ehrenhof for large elements of Egyptian architecture - the Egyptian Temple and the Kalabsha Gate - to be dramatically displayed. A new large entrance hall will also be provided for the Pergamon.

This plan has achieved what initially must have seemed almost impossible because it preserves the appearance of a campus of individual buildings - an ensemble of architectural monuments while effectively unifying the archeological displays in a coherent public display route that will be both informative and visually dramatic. The plan should also allow for the comfort of an increasing number of visitors - up to ten thousand a day - and for improved administration and storage and service facilities.

To return to the original question - why Chipperfield? - the solutions in the master plan demonstrate both his perceptive understanding of the site and an intriguing awareness of the historical and contemporary architectural problems and solutions. His pragmatism has made it possible to unite the wide range of collections, and his architectural skills will produce interventions and adaptations where necessary in the old buildings that will be appropriate. His master plan will also look at the urban and transport issues of the island to enhance it as an important cultural center for the new capital.

Chipperfield's other museum projects to date have inevitably been much smaller. But they are an indication of the architect's approach. The modest private Gotoh museum in Japan and the larger Henley-on-Thames River and Rowing Museum are both distinctive but entirely contextual solutions. The Henley museum especially demonstrates an original use of forms and materials that relate directly to the idea of boats and boat building, and the pitched roofs continue the vernacular tradition of boathouses.

Among his competition projects Chipperfield has several museums. The most important is his unsuccessful submission to the Tate Gallery of Modern Art for the adaptation of a redundant power station into a gallery. Chipperfield treated the enormous existing brick building as an umbrella to cover the inserted new concrete elements. His new cubic tower would have been as dramatic but more dignified a landmark as the former giant chimney.

The Diocesan Museum in Cologne also incorporated the ruins of an older church, the church of St. Kolumba, as the entry cloister to the new art museum. The new building was to have been

constructed of wood with very controlled sources of natural light.

Both these projects and others demonstrate the architect's concern with utilizing and adapting existing buildings. They also show that Chipperfield is a master of introducing his own contemporary design in such a way that it retains its own integrity and enhances the earlier architecture.

The Grassimuseum in Leipzig is also a master-planning project for the restoration of the largest museum in the city and the incorporation of its three separate collections - musical instruments, ethnology, and arts and crafts.

All this experience has culminated in his success in the competition for the Museum Island in Berlin. His skills have eased the complexities of the site and will, by the year 2010, make the island one of the most remarkable assemblages of architecture and antiquities in Europe.