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## ***Giorgio Grassi***

### ***Neues Museum (Project)***

***Berlin, 1st Competition 1994 (1st Prize)***

#### **Wolfgang Sonne**

#### ***The Museum in History***

Giorgio Grassi concentrated on three particular problems in his project for the reconstruction of the Neues Museum on the Museumsinsel (Museum Island) of Berlin, with which he won an invitational competition in 1994: the question of how to deal with a partially destroyed historic structure with regard to the issue of historic preservation, the question concerning the architectonic and urbanistic ordering of new buildings in an existing high-class ensemble, and the question concerning the functional conception of a large museum complex with regard to its cultural history. For all three problems, which are related to the historic meaning of the ensemble, Grassi found exemplary solutions. They foresaw neither a simple reconstruction of what had been there before nor a clumsy contrast of contemporary manners with those of the past. Like the good historian, who neither lets historical facts speak solely for themselves nor builds only upon his own self-constructed narrative, Grassi developed his plan through a constant dialogue between his own theory and the buildings at hand.

#### ***I. Reconstruction***

The Neues Museum by Friedrich August Stüler (1841-66) had stood as a ruin since the Second World War, burned out and half destroyed, between the other reconstructed and reused buildings on the Museumsinsel. With its stylized historical spaces, the structure was an innovative contribution to museum architecture from Schinkel's most important student. Should one minutely reconstruct that which had been lost, or should one rather regret the loss but then move beyond that to new avenues? Grassi did not respond to these questions with a general answer and a false radicalness. Instead, he built his solution upon a set of answers to individual questions. The fact that some critics felt moved to accuse him of schematicism for the particularly lucid result speaks to the architect's insistent search for architectural consistency.

The building type, an orthogonal form with four wings, a connecting middle tract, and two courtyards, as well as the exterior volumes were all of such importance to the identity of the building that Grassi resolved to reconstruct them. With the reconstructed northwest wing, the building received its appropriate compactness. As for the articulation of the façade with its windows and moldings, he restricted himself to the proportions of the existing building in order to restore the symmetry with the existing southwest wing. While strictly adhering to the archetype and volumes of the architectural logic of the extant building, he dealt with the choice of materials and detailing with considerably more freedom; while forming the façade with brick masonry he also revealed a deeper layer of the building. The newly constructed masonry seems to have emerged as if the stucco layer had been removed from it, entering as such into an inverted relationship with the existing

stucco façade. The ornamental details of the window frames and moldings are subjected to an abstract reduction, as if they had fallen victim to a hammer during the renovation of the façade. The façade avoids therein any echo of historicization, which would certainly have been present had it been provided with finely proportioned ornament in the year 1994. And it communicates a sovereign humility similar to Hans Döllgast's reconstruction of the Alte Pinakothek in Munich after the Second World War.

Even had small ornamental elements still been available today, the grand staircase with its valuable paintings from Wilhelm von Kaulbach was irretrievably lost. Consequently, Grassi decided to forgo reconstructing the stair space back to its original function. Instead, he transformed the huge hall - using parts of the old museum structure - into an "Antiquarium", a museum of the museum itself. This operation contains the essence of how the architect deals with the existing building: by reflecting its essential qualities, the building comes back, as such, to itself (a museum grows out of a museum, brick masonry grows out of brick masonry, etc.). Hence, Grassi creates something that is not only closely related to the existing building and agrees well with it; it appears particularly appropriate since it allows the building's most intrinsic qualities to become manifest. And something new appears that does not have the superficiality of a spontaneous discovery. Rather, it provides the contentment born of a serious response for which one had always been searching.

## ***II. Context***

On the Museumsinsel in Berlin a great variety of different museum buildings had arisen, ranging from Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum (1823-30), Stüler's Neues Museum, Stüler and Johann Heinrich Strack's Nationalgalerie (1862-76), and Ernst von Ihnes's Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum (today the Bodemuseum, 1897-1904) to the Pergamon Museum (1907-30) by Alfred Messel and Ludwig Hoffmann. With the Altes Museum having at first played only second fiddle to the overpowering castle, the ensemble had developed into an Acropolis of art, eventually endeavoring to break the boundaries of the island. What united them despite their differing architectonic conception (although they all nevertheless remained within the sphere of classicist architectural language) was their desire not just to house the development of human culture but to present themselves as its actual zenith. How, then, should this building extension act within such a dense ensemble of the highest pretensions? Should one look up on this historical development as concluded, or attempt to continue it? Here, too, Grassi did not reach a blanket decision; rather, he fittingly answered each question individually.

He began by underscoring the island like character of the ensemble by shifting the main entrance for the Neues Museum, the Nationalgalerie and the Pergamon Museum to Stüler's colonnaded court (as is well known, nothing had come of the many expansion plans for the surrounding city area, and now such plans were no longer under consideration). The typological re-evaluation of the Pergamon Museum (the entrance court became a garden court) allowed Grassi to remove the bridge over the Kupfergraben (the Copper Moat). He completely oriented the extension to the ensemble and provided it with a rear façade bordering the Kupfergraben. Then he accented the solitary character of the Altes Museum (the most important building in the ensemble, having been the only one built as a free-standing solitary) by forgoing reconstruction of a connecting bridge to the Neues Museum. And finally, he conceived the extension as a typological continuation of the Neues Museum, to which the new structure should be closely related, both spatially and functionally.

Grassi connected an exhibition hall, identical in width but only one story in height, directly onto the central hall of the existing building. This continues the connective and exhibitive function of the old hall, but leaves the façade and the exceptional pediment of Stüler's building unimpaired. There follows a two-story cross wing with gallery and service spaces, which the middle tract pierces with

a further exhibition space. The new building finds its conclusion by virtue of the terrain which seemingly cuts off the hall by chance, as if this typological extension could have continued on forever. However, with the annex space toward the Kupfergraben, a dignified form inadvertently arises that readily offers itself for the exhibition of one of the most superior pieces of the collection: the bust of Nefertiti. This modest extension building - small in dimension, with simple brick masonry and guarded avoidance of ornamentation - wakens, in addition, memories of the former service buildings of the Packhof by Schinkel, once located on the site. Thanks to the almost logical consistency with which it connects to the existing structures, the extension can consequently not be interpreted as historical reminiscence.

The solution thus attained responds aptly to the high contextual demands. No trumped-up contrast, no righteous overkill, no incongruous fragmentation and also no overly modest subordination - such as can be found in the positions of the other competition entrants - characterizes the nature of the intervention. Instead, the substantial attributes of the complex are embraced and clarified: the island character is accentuated by turning away from the water, the ensemble character is emphasized by the first real extension (the older museum structures appear more like solitary buildings with makeshift connections versus genuine extensions), the continuing historical development is implied through a continuable typology, etc. It is this working out of the significant attributes of the context that generates such a solution, equally coherent and autonomous: coherent, since it elucidates the existing; autonomous, since the investigative process follows Grassi's own rules.

### ***III. Function***

The most difficult task was the functional articulation of the entire complex. This had already been implied in the title for the official competition announcement for "planning the reconstruction of the Neues Museum and the construction of building extensions and connecting structures in order to connect the archeological collections of the state museums of Berlin - the Prussian cultural heritage on the Museumsinsel." After decades of separation it was time to reunite the museum collections after the East/West political transformation. The requirements were extremely demanding and contradictory. On the one hand the diverse archeological collections (Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, and Germanic) were to be meaningfully distributed as self-contained units in the individual buildings. On the other hand, they should be connected by the shortest possible routes in order to enable a quick tour of the highlights for everyday tourists - a special request of the museum administration.

Grassi's proposal is nothing short of a paradigm in its clear suitability to elucidate the irrelevance of a simplistic functional understanding of architecture. In his design he tries to do justice to the multilayered tasks inherent in the museum complex while not raising one particular usage requirement to the level of doctrine. Besides the required user-friendliness, he saw the function of the Museumsinsel first and foremost in the presentation of the cultural history and the architectonic significance of the museum institution and its edifices themselves. Grassi attempts to fulfill the first demand with two underground connection passages and by connecting a two-story extension to the Pergamon Museum as well as an entrance for quick tours in the new building. He fulfilled the second aspect above all by virtue of his typological consistency, with which he distinguished the Altes Museum as a solitary while connecting the extension to the Neues Museum. Indeed, it is Grassi's own accomplishment to have drawn attention to the architectural historical value of the ensemble by virtue of an appropriate design position - a task that should have been of interest to the museum administration.

Paradoxically, this particularly complex, functional understanding was to become his doom. With the pretext that he was not able to fulfill the functional requirements of the museum operations (this

meant above all the short museum tour), he was repeatedly required to rework his design. Although responding with bridge structures to the museum administration's wish for close connections while compromising his own architectonic values - such as the solitary role of the Altes Museum - his suggestions were rejected. In 1997 a new competition was announced for the prize winners, this time dealing solely with the reconstruction of the Neues Museum and new connecting structures, all under changed financial parameters. David Chipperfield, who had previously placed second, won the ensuing contest that same year and his design is now being built. The cause of this long and - especially for Grassi's design - unsatisfying process was actually the preference of the general director for Frank Gehry's design. In its own fashion, Gehry's fourth place proposal sought to contrast the existing substance of the Museumsinsel with a varied collection of deformed building elements. His design - publicity magnet and inappropriate in equal measure - can only be interpreted after the fact as a deep cultural misunderstanding: the Berlin Museumsinsel as fast-food amusement park. Despite any relief that the dignity of the museum and its buildings did indeed predominate in the end, it appears a hollow victory. The moderate proposal from Chipperfield to reconstruct and modernize won out at the expense of Grassi's equally complex and convincing solution.

What no doubt remains are the most beautiful architectural drawings generated by contemporary architectural practice. With their exacting veracity - which would do justice to any technical working drawing - and their poetic color - which could well echo a metaphysical architectural capriccio - the most substantial qualities of Grassi's design are reconnected and made manifest: intelligence and beauty. And they speak in lasting fashion of the befitting solutions he has designed in response to the problems of reconstruction, contextual relationship, and the function of a museum building in a historic ensemble.