

# ON THE NECESSITY OF SYMBOLIC INTERVENTIONS IN DISSONANT MONUMENTS

## OSWALT Philipp <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Philipp Oswalt, Universität Kassel https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6477-9489

**ABSTRACT:** The Charter of Venice stipulates that changes to a monument are only permitted on the basis of functional requirements. Changes to the symbolic function are excluded. However, this principle leads to conceptual problems with dissonant heritage, as illustrated by a number of recent monument conflicts in Germany concerning buildings of National Socialism as well as anti-Semitic, racist, colonial and militaristic monuments.

The planned restoration of the Haus der Kunst München (1933-37) to its original state by Chipperfield Architects in accordance with the monument requirements has led to a controversial debate (since 2017), as has the symbolically unbroken continued use of the repeatedly modernized and renovated building of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.

The insertion of Günther Domenig's Documentation Center (1998-2001) into the Congress Hall of the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg (1935-43) and the conversion of the Arsenal Main Building (1873-1877) into the Dresden Military History Museum by Daniel Libeskind (2001-2011) de facto overruled the premise of monument preservation, but the results were viewed positively by the public. The discussion about the appropriate way to deal with the depiction of Jewish sows in medieval churches is still ongoing. The requirements of monument preservation are at odds with the desire to distance oneself from anti-Semitic artworks. The competition (2023) for the desired redesign of the Bismarck monument in Hamburg (1906) has recently failed due to the conceptual conflict with the rules of monument preservation.

In the Anglo-Saxon world, debates similar to those in Germany have broken out in the context of the Black Life Matters movement. The essay argues in favor of granting dissonant heritage opportunities for symbolic interventions and thus deviating from the principles of the Venice Charter.

**KEY WORDS:** dissonant monuments, symbolic intervention, Charta of Venice

In July 2021, the Brandenburg State Monuments Office registered the bell tower erected on the Plantage in Potsdam in 1991 as a protected monument. The object was a replica of the carillon of the baroque Garrison Church in Potsdam, which was one of the most important symbolic buildings in Prussia. The latter was severely damaged in a bombing raid in April 1945 and its ruins were removed in the summer of 1968. Between 1984 and 1987, a group led by the extreme right-wing German army officer Max Klaar reconstructed a 15-metre-high replica of the carillon in the German army barracks in Iserlohn in western Germany and donated it to the city of Potsdam after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was inaugurated there with a grand ceremony in April 1991. Since then, the two songs of the bell tower have resounded every half hour during the day, promoting the reconstruction of the entire church for decades<sup>1</sup>.

For a long time, little attention was paid to the right-wing inscriptions on the bells, which honored right-wing soldier associations and Wehrmacht associations that had committed war crimes, and also included the questionable Prussian motto "Suum Cuique - to each his own". However, a letter of protest published in August 2019 by numerous renowned cultural figures and academics led to the shutdown. Representatives of the church, the CDU (Christian Democratic Union, german conservative party) and AfD (Alternative für Deutschland, populist rightwing party with extremist tendencies) protested against this with a protest chant that lasted several weeks but was unsuccessful. City politicians discussed how to deal with the decommissioned bell tower. There were suggestions for its transformation, while others argued for its removal. In order to prevent such changes, a sympathizer of the bell tower filed an application for its protection in the spring and was successful. The protection rendered the previously proposed redesign ideas obsolete, as they are not compatible with monument law. And it was precisely this kind of distortion of the monument he revered that the initiator had wanted to prevent.

### The crisis of the primacy of immutability

The Venice Charter, adopted in 1964 as the basic document of modern monument preservation, stipulates that the structure and form of monuments must not be altered, none of their parts must be translocated and additions must not disturb the original monument<sup>2</sup>. At first glance, this seems to make sense, as the purpose of monument conservation is to preserve monuments and ensure that they remain as unaltered as possible for future generations. However, in the history of architecture, there are numerous examples of how the symbolic transformation and alteration of important monuments contributes to their current monumental value. Examples of this include the symbolic transformation of religious sites from ancient sanctuaries to churches and mosques, or from churches to mosques and vice versa. This applies, for example, to the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the Mezquita of Córdoba and the Cathedral of Syracuse. They are representative of a millennia-old tradition of symbolic

For a detailed description of the projects history: Oswalt P. (2022). Die Potsdamer Garnisonkirche. Wiederaufbau zwischen militärischer Traditionspflege, protestantischer Erinnerungskultur und Rechtsextremismus. *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Juli 2022, (pp. 549 - 590).

Venice Charter, §§ 5 - 8, 13.

appropriation and reinterpretation that came to an end with the advent of modern monument preservation in the 19th century. Seen in this light, monument preservation finds itself in the paradoxical situation of breaking cultural traditions with its claim to preservation.

The problematic nature of the orthodox handling of these immutability rules is illustrated by the monument conflicts of recent decades in Germany in dealing with the architectural legacies of National Socialism and with anti-Semitic, militaristic and colonial monuments.

In 2013, David Chipperfield Architects proposed that the 'Haus der Kunst', which was built by Paul Ludwig Troost between 1933 and 1937, should be restored to its original state from 1937 in line with its listed status. Strong protests were immediately voiced. Charlotte Knobloch, then President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, strongly opposed the idea that the building, "conceived according to Hitler's desires should be restored to fulfil his preferences." She found it worrying that Chipperfield justified his proposal by saying that the building no longer posed a threat today: " Of course a building in and of itself does not present a threat, but the ideology manifested in and connoted by National Socialist architecture still bears responsibility for the Holocaust, for mass murder and a war of extermination, for the deaths of over 60 million people"3.

For these reasons, the building had been altered several times previously. In 1956, the architect Josef Wiedemann had the ceiling in the central hall of honour taken down, the walls covered with white fabric and everything heavy painted over in white, thus virtually dematerializing and de-heroizing the former marble hall. Later, a row of trees was planted in front of the building and a podium and open staircase were removed from the main front, which significantly reduced the monumental appearance of the building.

The planed undoing of these changes outraged many. The Süddeutsche Zeitung asked architecture students to formulate counter-designs to Chipperfield's restauration concept, which were then published<sup>4</sup>. All of these provided for the refraction of the monument desired by the newspaper, but - in contrast to Chipperfield's plan - contradicted the requirements of monument protection. As a result of the controversial debate, the restauration of the Nazi building has not yet begun, but the conflict has not been resolved and remains virulent.

A related, albeit far less heated, controversy broke out at the end of the 1990s regarding the 1936 Berlin Olympic site. In its overall layout, but especially with the Langemarckhalle and the large sculptures by Arno Brecker, it still represents core messages of Nazi ideology today. In unbroken continuity, the Nazi architect Werner Mach continued to oversee and develop the ensemble of buildings he had planned after 1945 and also reconstructed buildings that had been lost in the meantime. After his departure, further modernizing interventions were made in the ensemble, which was placed under protection in 1966, in order to adapt the buildings to new usage requirements. However, the symbolism remained unbroken, which was viewed increasingly critically.

Quoted from Braidwood E. (2017). Chipperfield defends proposal for Nazi-era Haus der Kunst, [in:] Architects journal, January 24, 2017.

Süddeutsche Zeitung. (2016). Radical ideas for the Haus der Kunst, December 9, 2016.

When Berlin applied for the 2000 Olympic Games in the 1990s, the cultural commissioner Hilmar Hoffmann therefore suggested temporarily suspending the monument protection for the Olympic site in the event of success and repositioning the statues on the outdoor area and contrasting them with works of art by artists persecuted under National Socialism. The chairman of the German National Olympic Committee, Willi Daume, advised that the statues should be temporarily wrapped in cellophane<sup>5</sup>. However, the Olympic bid was unsuccessful, so the planned interventions were not carried out.

From 2000 to 2004, the architects Gerkan, Marg and Partners modernized the stadium for the 2006 World Cup. However, symbolic interventions were not planned, even if the "pathetic heaviness of the stone grandstand bowl" of the stadium made the architects uncomfortable. They campaigned for a critical permanent exhibition, largely in vain. As part of the construction measures, at least a commentary on the area was realized by means of panels and an information terminal, which, however, was "little noticed" and "powerless" in the opinion of the architects.

Many years after the major sporting event, a debate began that was triggered by the publication of a fundamental critique by former Social Democrat building senator Peter Strieder in 2020. He wrote: "Here, however, on the Olympic site, the Nazis' propaganda is being continued with the support of the monument protection authorities. [...] Obviously, when I was still a senator, I, but also other politicians, did not sufficiently question the world view of Berlin's monument protection authorities". It was necessary to "subject the entire site and the monument protection to a critical revision and to de-Nazify, modernize and transform the site into a lively sports and leisure park." While the Berlin monument preservation authorities defended their handling of the site, historians such as Magnus Brechtken and political scientists such as David Marquard also considered it problematic. This controversy is also symptomatic of the conflict of objectives between the requirements of monument preservation and the demands for a critical and enlightened approach to a "dark heritage", to dissonant monuments.

#### Successful rule breaking

On the other hand, there are two prominent examples from the recent past which contradict the principles of monument preservation, but which have found a high level of acceptance and recognition in public discourse. The first is the Nuremberg Nazi Party Rally Grounds Documentation Center designed by Günther Domenig in the unfinished shell of the Congress Hall, which was built between 1935 and 1943 as part of the overall site. In 1973, the entire site was placed under

Marquard D. (2024). Denkmalschutz und NS-Architektur: Ein Spannungsfeld, [in:] S. Salzborn (Ed.), Monumentaler Antisemitismus? das Berliner Olympiagelände in der Diskussion. *Interdisziplinäre Antisemitismusforschung* (5), (p. 139).

<sup>6</sup> Marg V. (2020). Enlightenment instead of sculpture controversy, [in:] Die Zeit (23).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ibidem (p. 140).

Strieder P. (2020). Away with these sculptures!, [in:] *Die Zeit* (21), (p. 142), quoted from: Marquard D. (2024). Denkmalschutz und NS-Architektur: Ein Spannungsfeld, [in:] S. Salzborn (Ed.), Monumentaler Antisemitismus? das Berliner Olympiagelände in der Diskussion. *Interdisziplinäre Antisemitismusforschung* (5),

protection after the US Army had already demolished Nazi symbols in a deliberate iconoclasm in 1945 and the city of Nuremberg had demolished a number of towers in 1963 due to dilapidation. A civil society initiative, which had campaigned for a documentation and information center from 1977, was initially unsuccessful, as was an investor project in the 1980s, which envisaged the commercial conversion of the Congress Hall into a leisure, shopping and adventure center. In 1996, however, the museums of the city of Nuremberg finally took up the idea of a documentation center and submitted a memorandum on the subject. In accordance with the specifications of the State Office for the Preservation of Monuments, this was to use the existing rooms inside the congress building; a temporary, free-standing reception pavilion with a "neutral design" was to function as an entrance sign<sup>9</sup>. In 1998, a competition for the realization of this project was announced, in which the listed status was mentioned, but no specifications were formulated for dealing with the existing building and issues of monument preservation. Dr. Matthias Exner<sup>10</sup> was involved in the competition jury in an advisory capacity as a representative of the Bavarian State Office for the Preservation of Monuments. Nevertheless, the jury agreed on prizewinners who deliberately intervened symbolically in the listed building and counteracted it. For example, the design by Austrian architect Günther Domenig, which was awarded first prize and realized between 1998 and 2001, envisaged a cut right through the existing building. Domenig openly explained that he wanted to destroy the "architectural translation of power - there were only right angles and axes"11. Instead, he envisaged a "pile" that would cut through the right-angled geometry of the north wing of the existing building, accommodate the vertical and horizontal development for the new use and reveal new views of the existing building. The intervention was physically quite limited, regarding the destruction of historical building fabric, and achieved effectively a maximum symbolic effect. Nevertheless, it fundamentally contradicts the principles of monument preservation. The client remains silent on the matter, and despite intensive research by the author at the City of Nuremberg and the State of Bavaria, no files can be found that explain the monument conservation assessment and approval<sup>12</sup>. Obviously, the monument preservation authorities refrained from exerting any influence here and allowed other actors and their assessment standards to take precedence. Afterwards, it was described as a "borderline case" of monument preservation<sup>13</sup>. The second-place winner of the competition, architect Johannes Hölzinger, also envisaged a symbolic intervention in the fabric of the monument in his design by proposing to cut out and relocate parts of the building in a straight strip. Obviously, there was a broad consensus among participants and jury alike that the overwhelming overall complex required a disruptive intervention.

City of Nuremberg, Minutes of the meeting of 27.11.1996, Archive Documentation Center Nazi Party Rally Grounds.

Academic Stuff there, focus on medieval buildings.

See press release of the City of Nuremberg, November 2001.

The answer from the Bavarian State Office for the Preservation of Monuments dated 12.2.2024 was negative, and no documents could be obtained from the City of Nuremberg either, despite intensive research by Daniela Harbeck-Barthel from the Documentation Center Nazi Party Rally Grounds, whom I would like to thank very much.

Böhler I. (2024) et al ed., Ver/Störende Orte: Zum Umgang mit NS-kontaminierten Gebäuden. Vienna: Mandelbaum Verlag eG., (p. 144).

A second prominent example of such a structural intervention is the Military History Museum of the German Armed Forces in Dresden, although the parameters here are different: The starting point is a military building of the German Reich from 1873, which was converted into an army museum as early as 1897. After German reunification, the building, which had been used as an army museum in the GDR since 1972 and was placed under a preservation order in 1992, was to be fundamentally redesigned. It is not known whether and, if so, which monument preservation specifications were made for the redesign, as these documents can no longer be found at the responsible state authorities<sup>14</sup>. Architect Daniel Liebeskind was able to win the contract award procedure put out to tender in 2001. His design envisaged superimposing a large wedge over the existing building, which would also fundamentally change the external appearance of the building. In the competition presentation, Libeskind largely refrained from interfering with the fabric of the building and presented the design as an addition, using a cluster of gypsum walls on the inside. Unlike Domenig in Nuremberg, however, this is not a quasi-surgical, almost minimally invasive cut for the new development, but a rather voluminous sign that dominates the existing building.

The Saxon State Conservator Gerhard Glaser, who was involved in the process as an expert, nevertheless commented positively on Daniel Liebeskind's competition design during the process, which in his opinion "breaks the historic building with architectural means without physically damaging it in any significant way, does not do this in the central axis and thus remains true to its original message. The urban relationships to the city are not obscured, but rather reinforced with contrasting means" <sup>15</sup>.

Libeskind was commissioned with the realization. As the planning proceeded the architect now asked for a solid construction method for his wedge instead of the addition of gypsum walls, which required extensive partial dismantling of the existing building structure. The State Monuments Office was initially hesitant about these changes, but then decided to approve the project as planned. This decision "resulted on the one hand from the advanced state of planning, the unmistakable will of the client to build Libeskind, and not least from the realization that the interior of the Arsenal was and is actually a pure storage building without spectacular design details." Nevertheless, a "feeling of unease remained until the opening" 16. Here, too, decisions were made against the basic principles of monument preservation, whereby their approval was facilitated by Libeskind's salami tactics.

Neither the Staatsbetrieb Sächsisches Immobilien- und Baumanagement nor the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr have these documents, as inquiries from 2021-2024 revealed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Assessment of the Saxon State Conservator Gerhard Glaser on the VOF procedure, 14.12.2001.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Email from Dr. Hartmut Ritschel, responsible employee at the State Monuments Office to the author, August 2021.

#### **Unresolved monument conflicts**

Elsewhere, monument preservation is less willing to compromise on the wishes of the building owners, for example when dealing with the Jewish sow in the St. Stephani Kirche in Calbe, Saxony-Anhalt. This anti-Semitic sculpture dates from the end of the 19th century. The sculpture was removed and restored in 2019 as part of the restauration of the church. At the end of the same year, the parish council decided not to reattach the defamatory sculpture to the church in future "because it distances itself from anti-Semitic symbols of any kind"<sup>17</sup>. However, the application for permanent relocation submitted by the parish was rejected by the Monuments Office. The office insisted that the anti-Semitic sculpture be reinstalled as stipulated in the building permit for the restauration project. For months, the church and the town debated the appropriate way to deal with the artwork. In the end, the congregation agreed to mount the now renovated figure, but to cover it up temporarily. Permission for this was granted in February 2021 for a period of three years and then extended by another two years<sup>18</sup>. A possible permanent solution to this monument conflict is not yet known.

The city of Hamburg's attempt to find an appropriate way of dealing with the Bismarck Monument has been a complete failure. The sculpture, which is over 34 meters high and was erected in the center of the city between 1901 and 1906 to celebrate the colonial policy of the German Empire, has been a listed building since 1960. The sculpture was thoroughly cleaned in 1969 and has been renovated at a cost of almost 9 million euros since 2020. This honorable treatment of the long-disputed building led to massive protests, especially as critical graffiti was always removed in the process. In summer 2020, several initiatives demonstrated in front of the monument and demanded a halt to the restauration work, and in some cases even the demolition of the building<sup>19</sup>. The City of Hamburg's Department of Culture then launched a participatory process to contextualize the monument in a new and critical way. In 2023, an artistic competition was announced for the "creation of a sensually perceptible artistic intervention that encourages a critical examination of the monument"20. The competition brief stated: "Information and education in the form of exhibitions or explanatory text panels are common practice when dealing with complex monuments and places of remembrance and are undoubtedly important, but cannot break the effect of a colonial-nationalist-ethnic burdened building such as the Bismarck Monument. An artistic-aesthetic approach is necessary for this. Artistic interventions that can be perceived by the senses are of central importance for the future development of the monument's reception". At the same time, however, the competition text points out: "All interventions must comply with the binding requirement that the substance of the monument, which has been protected by law since 1960, must not be altered or damaged so that it remains possible to engage with the authentic object in the future"21.

https://figurenkranz-calbe.de/chronik-der-aufarbeitung/, accessed on 27.4.2024.

Email from the Calbe-Brumby municipal office to the author, 19.3.2024.

Diehl A. (2020). Denkmalstreit in Hamburg: Wenn Granit wird weich taz.de, December 30, 2020; retrieved on April 27, 2024, https://www.hamburg.de/bkm/koloniales-erbe/15177800/ bismarck-denkmal-hintergrundinformationen/, retrieved on April 27, 2024.

Stiftung Historische Museen Hamburg. (2023). Rethinking Bismarck. International Open Ideas Competition, contributions. (p. 4). Hamburg.

Ibidem. (pp. 6-7).

It was precisely these contradictory requirements that caused the competition to fail. At the end of the two-stage process, which initially involved 76 works, the jury unanimously decided not to award a prize. According to jury member Jürgen Zimmerer, the failure was "not down to the artists, but the task is impossible." He was "very frustrated with the competition and the parameters of the competition, which stated that no changes could be made to the monument itself, including the plinth, and that nothing could be added structurally. This basically made an artistic contextualization, a decolonization of the monument impossible." Zimmerer sums up: "If you are not allowed to change anything on Bismarck, then Bismarck cannot be decolonized. [...] Because the task of monument protection is to say that it should be preserved as it was back then. Whereas decolonization says we can't leave it as it was because the world has changed and we have to respond to that"<sup>22</sup>.

Zimmerer is not the only one to point out this dilemma. A year earlier, there was an artistic competition for the colonial monument in Braunschweig. The participating artist Anike Joyce Sadiq states: "The Braunschweig Colonial Monument was not erected to merely remember, but to honor and commemorate. In doing so, it also honors the racist ideas on which it is based." As an artistic project, she therefore suggested submitting an application to have the monument's protection lifted. She justified this as follows: "The lifting of the protection and care of the violence immanent in the monument, constitutes the basis for the hands-on engagement with post-colonial, artistic perspectives in the first place. The protection of the monument and the simultaneous invitation to engage is emblematic of the paradoxical relationship between the colonial past based on racism and exploitation (worthy of protection) and the realization that this past is never closed. [...] My proposal for the removal of historical monuments is about changing society's relationship with regard to this unfinished past. [...] The removal of the historical monument lays the foundation for the ongoing and processual debate" 23.

#### Summary

Ultimately, however, the problem is not the preservation of monuments as such. After all, it makes sense to preserve even dissonant monuments and not to suppress the history associated with them, but to remember it. The problem is that monument protection regulations do not permit symbolic interventions in monuments. But monuments are by no means merely historical artifacts like collection items in a museum. Unlike these, they are not decontextualized and translocated into a specific institutional setting, but are part of our everyday environment. They therefore lack a form of distancing.

As cultural objects, they are inscribed with values that do not belong to a closed past, but which potentially continue to have an effect in the present (and the future). This becomes particularly clear when it comes to artifacts that belong to the recent past and are therefore close to us in time, or that represent unacceptable values that - like anti-Semitism or racism - have great persistence.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Zimmerer J. (2023). in conversation with Misch Kreiskott: Kein Gewinner beim Bismarck-Wettbewerb. *Eine unmögliche Aufgabe*. NDR, 26.7.2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Sadiq A. J. (2022). Explanatory text of the competition entry "Lifting monument protection", manuscript.

The first two sentences of the introduction to the Venice Charter state: "Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generation of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions. People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage."

This formulation reveals that cultural values are fundamental to heritage conservation and that it ascribes a bridging function to monuments, which transmit values from the past to the present. Now, neither human values nor the past are positive per se, and an important question for every present is which traditions of the past it wants to continue and appropriate (transforming them), and which traditions it wants to break with.

Seen in this light, heritage conservation finds itself in a conceptual dilemma:

On the one hand, it purports to be an objective, scientific discipline that places great value on the authentic, pure, unadulterated preservation of cultural assets from the past into the future. Similar to a geologist who preserves the geological layers of sediments when securing a soil sample, and therefore neutrally historical sources that provide us with information about a closed past.

On the other hand, heritage conservation claims that this material (and immaterial) heritage has a significance for our society today and its future. In this sense, the past is not closed, locked and barred, but extends into the present and the future. Monuments therefore embody cultural values, traditions and identities that are relevant to the present.

And it is not least for this reason that the practice of monument preservation differs from the practice of the geologist, in which the preserved objects are always maintained, renewed and usually also used. The supposedly unadulterated and value-neutral preservation is a fiction. It is no coincidence that it is precisely such conservation measures that repeatedly lead to protests in the case of controversial monuments, such as the Hamburg example mentioned above.

Historic preservation must admit that this conceptual dilemma cannot be resolved and that it finds itself in a conflict of objectives here. This should not be resolved by abandoning one of these objectives and thus advocating a new iconoclasm. However, if the conflict of objectives cannot be resolved in such a banal way, heritage conservation must create a space where it can be negotiated. And this also requires the possibility of commenting symbolically on monuments and breaking their former message without eliminating, overwriting or rendering them unrecognizable.

If this is made possible, such special monuments (and we are only talking about a small part of the entirety of monuments here) do not embody a frozen historical state, but the transformation of a civilizational heritage. And precisely this is an imminently important cultural experience, for which the historical sacred buildings in Damascus, Córdoba and Syracuse mentioned at the beginning also stand.

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