

The historical spirit of Potsdam: between conservation and commercialisation?

The Longing for History

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Abstract. The enduring history and spirit of Potsdam started with the construction of the Prussian summer palace with terraces (1744-1747) and park Sanssouci by King Frederick II (the Great). He was a connoisseur and collector of Italian and French art. He was a king inspired by the muses, but he was also guided by the god Mars and these two opposite poles, culture and military, are the red line of Prussia/Germany. Prussia has its myth of music, literature, art, education, industry, military, drill, and suppression, and virtues such as reliability and tolerance. How can a city with its marvellous architecture and interiors recognized by the UNESCO as World Heritage Site achieve an optimal balance between these two opposite poles? What is appropriate for the architectural development of this city?

The city of Potsdam is located south-west of the German capital Berlin in the Brandenburg Marches. Until 1990 Potsdam was a district town in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). Potsdam was first mentioned in a document of 993 as “Poztupom i”. The oldest parts of Potsdam are around the Alter Markt (Old Market). During the late Middle Ages a fortress stood here. Later it was the site of the City Palace of the Prussian House of Hohenzollern. The systematic expansion of Potsdam as a residential and garrison town began under the Great Elector Frederick William of Brandenburg after the devastation of the 30 Years War in Europe (1618-1648). Beginning in 1652 the Great Elector developed a project for redesigning Potsdam based on the example of Kleve (today North Rhine-Westphalia). The motto was “The whole isle must become a paradise” After 1662 the centre of this

paradise was the City Palace with its orangery, coach stable (Kutschstall), and a Dutch pleasure garden. The idea was to build avenues which would connect this main palace with the garland of pleasure palaces around Potsdam. The Dutch influence is still visible today by the avenues connecting the suburbs of the 19th century with the centre of Potsdam. Also the Dutch Quarter of Potsdam, erected for Dutch colonists in 1734-1744, with its red brick buildings around the Bassin Square evokes the Netherlands. Today it is a very attractive neighbourhood with shops and pubs for locals and tourists, too. Since the reunification of Germany the festival of tulips takes place each spring in the Dutch Quarter, creating the atmosphere of a Dutch town.



Figure 1. Dutch Quarter in Potsdam, 2008 © Horn.

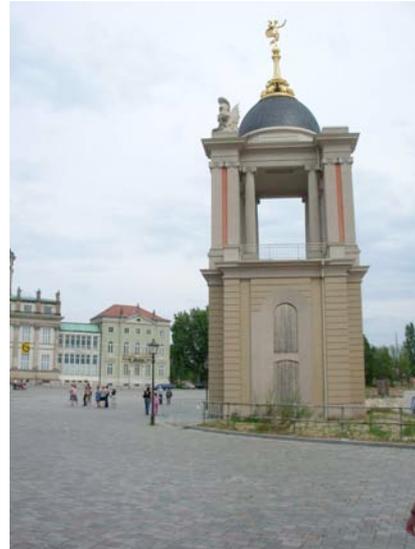


Figure 2. Reconstructed Fortuna Portal of the City Palace, 2008 © Horn.

In 1701 the elector Frederick III crowned himself King in Prussia in the city of Königsberg (today Kaliningrad in the Russian Federation). He was known from this time on as King Frederick I. On this occasion, he constructed the Fortuna Portal at the Old Market as the northern final conclusion to the gallery of the City Palace. During World War II, on the night of April 14th, 1945, exactly 200 years after the foundation stone of Sanssouci Palace had been laid, the City Palace was partly destroyed when British bombers attacked not only the stronghold of the Deutsches Reich, but also Potsdam's historical centre. Within 20 minutes, 1750 tons of explosives devastated large areas

of the city. (Sigel 2006) The remains of the City Palace (Verein 2008) were completely demolished in 1959/60. Only a few main parts of the cellar were preserved, though some parts were destroyed before the reunification in 1990, and others around 2007 because of a future underground car park for the former state parliament of Brandenburg in the new City Palace. The city and the state of Brandenburg now would like to construct the outer walls of the new building in the same shape as the old City Palace. The idea is to reconstruct the lay-out of the city and one of the main buildings of the old centre. The first step towards this goal was the reconstruction of the Fortuna Portal through private funding between 1999-2002.

Returning now to the 18th century, King Frederick II (the Great) developed the city into a representative royal residence. This included the extension of the City Palace from 1744 to 1748 and many architectural changes in the city. Many houses were given facades in the style of Andrea Palladio's book *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* (1570). From 1744 to 1747, the construction of King Frederick II's summer palace as pleasure palace became his biggest gift to Potsdam.



Figure 3. Sanssouci Palace in Potsdam © SPSG.

On the basis of a sketch by the King himself, architect Georg Wenzelslaus Knobelsdorff designed the palace and the gardens of Sanssouci on a hill terrace offering views over Potsdam. (Horn 2008) Sanssouci Palace became a meeting place for artists and philosophers. This was

the launch of the cultural landscape of Potsdam-Berlin. After the Seven Year War (1756-1763) he constructed the New Palace in Sanssouci Park. This constituted a vital step by the state to promote Prussia's economy, which had been much weakened by war. Potsdam, with its parks and palaces, was to assume its unique position in the Prussian state from this point on. All of the Prussian kings and the German emperors as well became involved in construction works in Potsdam until the end of World War I (1914-1918) and the abdication of the German Emperor. This construction entailed new palaces, such as the Marble Palace in the New Garden, Charlottenhof Palace with the Roman Bath and the Orangery Palace in Sanssouci Park, Babelsberg Palace in Babelsberg Park, and Cecilienhof Palace in the New Garden.

World War II (1939-1945) caused most of the cultural, political and aristocratic elite to leave the city of Potsdam. From 1945 until 1990, Potsdam experienced an influx of 50.000 people. (Sigel 2006) This meant almost a complete change in the population. In 1990, only a smaller part of the population had a deep relation to the history and heritage of the city. But after German reunification, the decision was made to move the capital of Germany from Bonn (North Rhine-Westphalia in the former German Federal Republic/West Germany) to Berlin. When this happened, many people, such as actors, entertainers, designers, medical doctors, business people, and others moved to Potsdam, because it is close to the capital of Berlin and has such an Arcadian atmosphere around the historic parks and palaces. These people joined forces with the local people to form societies and associations for reconstructing the main buildings of the Potsdam city centre, for example, the totally destroyed City Palace, and the Garrison Church. Other societies, which were formed, are dedicated to the restoration of the Bornstedt or Klein Glienicke cemetery, the Lepsius house, the Winzerberg Hill, the Church of the Neuendorfer Anger, etc., and have undertaken extensive fundraising.

Already in 1987 a group of Potsdam citizens (ARGUS Citizen Action Group) had decided to devote themselves to Pfingstberg Hill, in order to save the Belvedere, the Pomona Temple and the garden grounds by Lenné from further decay. From this working group, under the auspices of the Culture Association of the GDR, the Society of the Friends of Pfingstberg Hill in Potsdam, registered organization was founded after the political changes of 1989. (Pfingstberg 2008) This society raised money for the preservation and the restoration of the building and the garden grounds – in addition to the budgetary allocations already at the disposal of the SPSG. The mid-19th century

Belvedere on Pfingstberg Hill close to the New Garden in the north-east of Potsdam is one of the most beautiful vantage points in the city. It is situated within a park and garden landscape created by Peter Joseph Lenné. South of the Belvedere there is the Pomona Temple, a tea pavilion designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel already in 1801. After 1945 it came under the auspices of the “State Palaces and Gardens Potsdam-Sanssouci”. Only after the erection of the border fortifications (Berlin Wall) in 1961 did Pfingstberg Hill become inaccessible to the public. At the lower part of Pfingstberg Hill and at the Mirbachwäldchen Grove, the Soviet KGB housing settlement was established, the so-called “7th City”, this being the headquarters for Soviet foreign espionage in Europe. Also, the view from the towers in the direction of the Bornstedt fields – a tank training ground during GDR times – and towards West Berlin was not desired. From this time on, the grounds were not listed on Potsdam city maps. During this time the Belvedere suffered great damage due to the neglect of building maintenance, damage from frost and damp, and vandalism. The regular presence of Soviet soldiers from the barracks in the vicinity was attested to in the graffiti. The Pomona Temple was the first building which was partly reconstructed by ARGUS Citizen Action Group until 1993. The restoration work at the Pfingstberg Belvedere, which lasted ten years, was completed under the management of the SPSG in May 2005. The Pfingstberg Belvedere received an international award in 2007 from Europa Nostra. (EU Prize for Cultural Heritage)



Figure 4. Pfingstberg Belvedere, around 1990 © SPSG.



Figure 5. Pfingstberg Belvedere, 2005 © SPSG.

In Sanssouci Park the Klausberg Belvedere was designed by the architect Georg Christian Unger in 1770-1772. In April 1945 it was badly damaged and burned as a result of the fighting during the last days of World War II. Until 1945 there was no use of the building due to the lack of funds to repair it. In 1990 a project began to renovate and reconstruct the building, which was finished in 2002. The SPSG had only been able to accomplish this with the help of the Messerschmitt Foundation in Munich.



Figure 6. Klausberg Belvedere, around 1990 © SPSG.



Figure 7. Klausberg Belvedere, 2002 © SPSG.

In 1997-1998 the former Holy Ghost Church was rebuilt as a modern home for retired people, designed by the architects Romano Burelli, Paola Gennaro, and Ingo Wende, just to mention this major landmark in the Potsdam city silhouette. The foundations of the former church underneath the building have been preserved.



Figure 8. The Old people's home on the site of the destroyed Holy Ghost Church, 2008 © Horn.

A big discussion arose from the different ideas for reconstructing the Garrison Church. On the one hand the Garrison church, built in 1735, was a burial place for the Prussian kings. (Garnisonskirche 2008) On the other hand, it served as the location for the meeting of the old Prussian elite (Paul von Hindenburg) and the national socialist elite

(Adolf Hitler) on March 21st, 1933. Ruins of the church from World War II were removed in 1968. There has been much debate since German reunification concerning the significance of the church and how it would be best to reconstruct it, the main questions being whether to put up a Cross of Nails like in Coventry/Great Britain as a memorial for the destruction of World War II or to re-hang the old cross in the church. Once again. Citizens are still collecting money for the reconstruction.



Figure 9. Former site of the Garrison Church in Potsdam, 2008
© Horn.

In the centre of Potsdam, small parts of the city channel, which had been filled in 1960, were excavated and reconstructed between 1999 and 2003. Until 1945, some parts of Potsdam made a Dutch impression because of this channel.

The integration of the „Palaces and Parks of Potsdam and Berlin“ into the UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage List in 1990, and its expansion two times in 1992 and 1999 was the onset of the nation’s deeper identification with the Prussian Heritage. (Horn 2008) In addition, there was the subsequent transport in 1991 of the remains of Frederick II (the Great) to be interred in the terraces of the Weinberg Hill close to Sanssouci Palace, thus fulfilling a wish by the king himself, and the 250th anniversary of the construction of Sanssouci Palace in 1994 – all of these events raised the acceptance of the Prussian Heritage among the Potsdam populace a second and third time as well. But it is worth mentioning that the aforementioned centre of Potsdam (City Place, Garrison Church, Holy Ghost Church) is not part of the UNESCO-World Heritage Site and in fact, it is not even close to it.

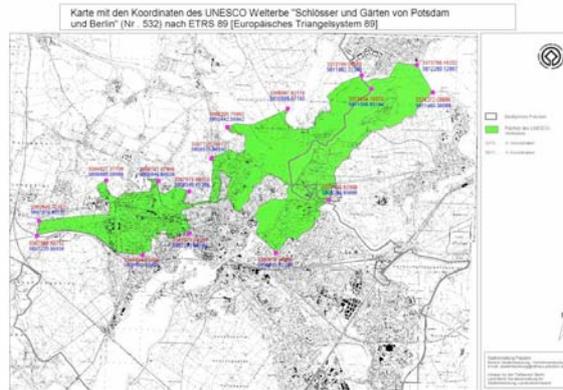


Figure 10. UNESCO-World Heritage Site 532c “Palaces and Parks of Potsdam and Berlin”.

In 2006 an initiative was launched to give Potsdam a new edict of tolerance, thus repeating a significant event in history. In 1685, the elector enacted the Edict of Potsdam. The Edict mainly applied to France and Switzerland and essentially allowed French religious refugees, the Huguenots, to settle in Brandenburg. It was a sign of religious solidarity, but at the same time it was also a necessity. After the 30 Years War (1618-1648) Brandenburg was depopulated, and the Great Elector Frederick William needed support from the Huguenots, the Swiss, and the Palatines to bring needed skills and to repopulate his devastated lands. The Huguenots received many privileges. Around 20.000 Huguenots settled in Brandenburg in their own colonies, which contributed to the development of this backward country. Together with the association *prowissen Potsdam e. V.*, a registered society, a university professor of political theory in Potsdam, Heinz Kleger, has now issued a new Edict, the so-called Potsdam Edict of Tolerance, because he believes it is necessary. (Potsdamer 2008) The text of the Edict “For an open and tolerant city of citizens” strives to encourage inhabitants to reflect upon their opinions on tolerance, its meaning, and its advantages for the city of Potsdam. Now he and his fellow proponents are looking for people who wish to discuss and perhaps join this initiative. The aim is to strengthen civil society. But does it bear any meaning on city-planning, preservation, and the overload of historic gardens and historic monuments with the modern claims for their use? It goes without mentioning that the professor of political theory is no specialist on the maintenance of historic gardens and monuments. Is it possible to transpose the idea of tolerance into the acceptance of different values of preservation? The civil society

believes that there are too many restrictions in acceptance and maintenance of historic buildings and gardens in our days.

The spirit of Potsdam is the idea of being a city of tolerance, a city of Prussian Heritage. Can Potsdam fulfil this self-assessment? Deeply rooted in Potsdam and other German towns is the longing for history. It is perceptible that many people would like to reconstruct the lost city centre of Potsdam, and furthermore, that they and others want to preserve the historical monuments and gardens. This is why the people are engaged in societies for raising money for the construction of a new Garrison Church and City Palace. They hope to do this because they wish to bring history back into the so called Neue Mitte new centre in Potsdam. The main questions are which histories should be evoked or emphasized and should contemporary architecture simply be abandoned? (Nassehi 2008; Pehnt 2008) My personal feeling is that society is looking for a new orientation and believes that it may be found in the history lost during World War II and in the post war era in all parts of Germany. Do people want to attach to history before 1945, before 1939, before 1918, before 1914, or do they just want to quote history in the sense of a reconstruction as a sign of the individuals or society? Architecture is becoming an expression of the need for society to retrieve order and security using replicas of historic monuments, in an attempt to achieve continuity and closeness in a technical world. The question is what does this mean for acceptance of modern architecture and the preservation of historic buildings? (Nassehi 2008; Pehnt 2008) Conversely, acceptance has not been widespread concerning the historic gardens and monuments. Neither has the acceptance been widespread of the idea to protect the buffer zones around the UNESCO-World Heritage Site by preventing inappropriate buildings, such as the ones in Potsdam-Bornstedt, in Potsdam-Klein Glienicke, in the suburbs or close to the historic gardens. The possibilities for regulating this are very limited. At the moment we have the impression that people prefer raising money for replicas instead of preserving the historic buildings and gardens already in existence.

The yearning for history is also evident in literature and cinema. The present is a period of rapid decline, whereby history is the realm of eternal freshness, a period which craves relentlessly for newness, and is therefore inclined towards the development of a passionate longing and love for history. Thus, neo-historic consciousness leaves its mark on the current cycle of reconstructing lost buildings. General opinion concludes that the use of history to create newness will no doubt help Potsdam – as well as other similar places – in rejuvenating its image.

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