

Interview

David Chipperfield

“It is not about scars, but about remembrance and history. It is like a painting: if it was left unfinished and you complete it, then you no longer have the original.”

Andres Lepik, curator of contemporary architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in conversation with architect David Chipperfield on the Neues Museum in Berlin.

It's great sitting here with you in the Treppenhalle. This is probably one of the last times we'll experience the Neues Museum without a throng of visitors around.

After ten years of working on the building, for us it's very strange, having seen it gradually take shape, to have arrived at a point where it is beginning to feel like a museum again. As the spaces develop their own qualities—the new ones, the ravaged ones, and those in less disrepair—it seems like the scale of the building has changed. In recent months, we've experienced very different moods at different times, and as the finishing elements, such as the floors, are completed, the mood changes again.

I would like to start our conversation by discussing the photos by Friederike von Rauch: they were taken just prior to everything being cleaned up; the ruin is gone, and all of the new parts of the building are approaching completion. I think this is a historic moment, and it is manifested in these photos. Do you see anything in the pictures you haven't seen before?

I think that first of all, one has to say that the photographs are very beautiful and they confirm what we all feel—that there are moments of great beauty in the building, which Friederike has captured. In this project, we worked intensively with the existing building, so we sometimes focused on the surfaces. Our reaction had to be to proceed room by room, piece by piece, and our concern throughout this elaborate process of dealing with fragments was to continuously maintain a sense of the whole. This was sometimes very difficult due to the restoration

method and the construction process, so we often went from one piece to another, trying to keep in mind what these pieces would eventually add up to. Now, when we look at the completed building, we're satisfied that this whole has been achieved. It's very interesting, however, to go back to the pieces through Friederike's photographs—we spent so much time examining them while maintaining a sort of intellectual framework for the whole. It's quite relaxing now to see these pictures, which beautifully convey the individual moments and particular conditions within the overall concept.

How did you arrive at your vision for rebuilding the Neues Museum?

We worked with a number of strategies and ideas. In 1997, we inherited the enormous physical context of what remained of the Neues Museum. There was something both sad and beautiful about it. It had stood there for some sixty years with only few attempts at stabilization, not the result of a recent action, but of one that occurred during World War II. This was one of our responsibilities. Another one was taking into factors the original building by Friedrich Stüler. We believed that the new Neues Museum building should be based on these two historical factors. We felt from the beginning that a historical reconstruction—in other words, a complete rebuilding according to the original plans—was not appropriate in this particular situation, where time had created a strange monument that was neither building nor ruin, and yet both. Clearly, we were not maintaining relics; this was not an archaeological site, like Pompeii, to be protected in its destroyed state, but at the same time, we didn't want to spoil what remained of the original material. It's our physical connection to history—not an interpretation, not a projection, but reality. So this was our starting point. Of course, we were confronted with a difficult task—how to complete the building—because we were not interested in monumentalizing the damage, but rather in protecting the repaired original material. This is a strategy that is more difficult to implement in architecture than it is in archaeology or painting, where it is a very normal and undisputed approach. The idea of trying to restoring original form in order to conceal the effects of damage is a conventional restoration technique in these areas.

Compared with the Berlin Schloss, the situation you had here was somewhat more favorable, because the building and its spirit still existed when you began. Furthermore, the building's function was to be retained: this was a museum and would be a museum again.

I sat on the jury for the Berliner Schloss and it was a difficult task. The architects in the final round, including the selected architect, presented projects of different qualities and responded to the question in a competent and professional manner. But the task they were confronted with was already confused by the intensity of the discussion, which by then had become over-contaminated by the involvement of the media, politicians, and public opinion. It's quite a paradox that while this extraordinary interest and projection of concerns about history in Germany, specifically within Berlin, promote a discussion of such interest and fascination, they sometimes create a stalemate. The Schloss is one of those cases where the conditions have made it quite difficult for an interesting architectural solution to happen, and the selected project probably represents what can be realized under these conditions. A number of projects

that have suffered in this way. What is unique about the German—and specifically the Berlin—circumstances is that there is such willingness to discuss these issues. This is in stark contrast to the Anglo Saxon condition, where such things don't get discussed enough. It might be that here, they're discussed too much. I think that the great chance of the Neues Museum lay in the fact that while we experienced an incredible and controversial debate at a very high level—the general director, the president of the Stiftung, the Denkmalamt, curators, the BBR, as well as other experts were involved—it was always carried out with remarkable intelligence and sophistication, a process that was an absolute joy. While the public discussion has at times been difficult, I still regard this as positive, as it has forced us to explain the project continuously, reminding us of our responsibilities. This process, however, was not quite as claustrophobic as that involving the Schloss, and in many ways I think we can be very happy that we've been able to pursue such a radical and articulated idea in the spotlight of public opinion and public debate.

Since you started work on the Neues Museum, you've won a number of other competitions for museums around the world. Do you think that your work on the Neues Museum has influenced the way you approach other museum projects?

I think that the work on the Neues Museum, the new entrance building, and the gallery building on Kupfergraben these past ten years has had a profound effect on the way we work and the way we think. It has been an enormous part of our lives, and of my professional and personal life. It's very difficult to analyze the extent of this influence. I'm not sure if it has an impact exclusively on museum projects, because this is a very unique situation—in some ways the Neues Museum is irrelevant to so many of our other experiences. However, I think that working for such a long time on a single project and so closely with the physical fabric, and articulating ideas about history, negotiating at times between contrasting curatorial and restoration-related concerns, have had a profound influence on our work and contributed enormously to our experience.

You are the last architect to have the opportunity of constructing three buildings in the heart of Berlin, on the Museum Island, and in the immediate vicinity. Karl Friedrich Schinkel built the Altes Museum, Friedrich August Stüler the Neues Museum, and Alfred Messel the Pergamon Museum—one architect for each building. You rebuilt the Neues Museum, you will construct the new entrance to the Museum Island museums, and you have already completed the galleries on Kupfergraben across the Spree. What is your urban view of the area here as a whole?

I think our approach has been consistent throughout all of these projects. We are interested in regaining and restoring certain qualities that have been fractured and exposed, while at the same time attempting to find a way to achieve an openness and a direction toward the future. The blighted condition of Berlin and the Museum Island is something that needs to be addressed, and this blight is a quality that should not necessarily inspire us to restore exactly what was lost. On the other hand, however, we should consider how we can intervene and return some sense of completeness. We want to try to find a balance between borrowing from

and completing existing things and the creation of new ones. So when the new entrance building is completed in three years' time, I hope that there will be both a sense of familiarity and strangeness; that the three new structures create something that supplies a sense of comfort and completion, while containing a certain element of discomfort, or at least stimulus, awareness, and openness—the door should still be open, not closed.

Will the picturesque quality of the building affect the perception of the objects inside, how will visitors react to the differences between them? There are so many layers of time—the objects, the building, and the renovations all belong to a different time. This seems to be a very difficult balance to achieve.

By approaching the project with such intensity and investing the building with such importance, it is true—and I think this evident in Friederike von Rauch's photographs—that the building has taken on its own quality, its own nearly exhibit-like presence, and of course in the end it has to assume the role not of exhibit, but of background. How will these two things sit together? This is a question that will be answered by the end of the year when the objects are placed in the museum. We have created new spaces that are very neutral, which will contain some of the most important items in the collection. The curators of the exhibitions have taken into consideration the fact that certain rooms, because of their original design, have a very heavy presence, which has to be addressed. Others are easier to place exhibits in. We've also worked closely with Michele De Lucchi and the directors of the museum to consider the design of the display cases—they all have metal frames, which creates a context for the object as well as a kind of separation between the space and the objects. Interestingly, we have considered the lighting and the location of display cases from the very first days of our work on the project. This was only possible thanks to the involvement and commitment of the museums, the curators, and the directors, who discussed their concerns and their ideas about how the objects will be placed within the finished building.

How do you compare your concept with the historic way of creating atmospheric spaces?

There was an unavoidable task in dealing with the Neues Museum, as its concept was the intense connection between the objects and the spaces that contain them—the Egyptian room, for instance, was adorned with Egyptian decoration. This is no longer modern. We regard it as confusing to use artists and the architecture to somehow create a setting for the objects that is itself articulated and part of the communication of this encyclopedic presentation of culture, something we no longer feel comfortable with. Interestingly, the first white spaces were contained in this very building—the building, in particular the Egyptian spaces and the Moderner Saal, was so over-decorated, that when the Amarna collection was brought to the museum—I believe it was in the twenties—a number of the rooms were converted into white spaces to present these objects. So there is a very odd history associated with the building, where the dialogue has changed from the space as a contextualizing presentation to the space as a neutral presence. This was rehearsed once before in this museum, and of course now we are repeating it, trying to deal with a building that has a tradition of contextualization at a time when we are shy of such concepts.

I like this, because the twentieth-century idea of the “white cube” as the perfect space for a museum is getting boring. People want to go to a museum to see originals. And if they also encounter the original architecture, like they can here, they will perceive more layers with the building itself an object. It is therefore important to preserve the historic framework of the building and its decoration.

It's true that the neutral space remains the space in which we find it easier to present exhibits. In terms of paintings, in particular contemporary ones, then we tend to turn away from the notion of contextualizing through the architectural environment. The idea of the neutral space as a reaction to the over-contextualizing and over-decoration of spaces has produced a certain synthetic and sterile environment, and that many museums are now reexamining it. While they are not necessarily returning to the nineteenth-century notion of the decoration and elaboration of spaces specific to the items being exhibited, they are trying to discover a presence of architecture that is sufficiently powerful but at the same time does not threaten or overpower exhibits. So I believe that the presence of the architectural space in relation to the exhibits on display is a very interesting dialogue for architecture and museum design. This will vary depending on the type of exhibit—it is a very different problem with respect to ethnographic and archaeological objects than to the display of artwork. Clearly it's much more accepted that anthropological exhibits require more explanation and more contextualizing than does a very pure work of art, which does not need to be understood in terms of its historical or geographical context.