

IS THERE SUCH THING AS A *PHOENIX* OR WE JUST TALK ABOUT ARCHITECTURAL OBJECT AND ITS *NEAR-DOPPELGANGER*¹

Mariela Cvetić

marielacvetic@yahoo.com

Abstract

The proposed paper discusses the most extreme form of architectural reconstruction (reconstruction considered as returning a damaged building to a known earlier state by introduction of new materials; different than restoration and preservation): creating the total replica of a completely destroyed building. There is a lot of examples of reconstructed and replicated buildings and the most prominent among them are those in German cities: Dresden, Lubeck, Berlin.

This paper presents as a case study the recent reconstruction / building of The Berlin City Palace (Berliner Stadtschloss). The Berlin City Palace was originally built in the 15th century, heavily damaged in World War II and finally - being part of the East Berlin - demolished in 1950 by the German Democratic Republic. A new large modernist building built at the same site from 1973 to 1976 - the Palace of the Republic - was demolished in 2006 in order to start rebuilding The Berlin City Palace.

The paper is focused on the replica building considered as a kind of “falsification of history” or mode of production of a “false original” where signifier changes its signified in different historical circumstances and different political conjecture.

This case study will be compared with the German director Christian Petzold's film “Phoenix” from 2014. If the film can be read as a German self-deception in the post-war era, than the rebuilding of The Berlin City Palace can be understood – similar to the film where the invention of the “near-doppelganger” is an opportunity to access the (undeservedly) fortune - as opportunity to gain new (undeservedly) political face.

Keywords: replica, reconstruction, The Berlin City Palace, Phoenix, original, doppelganger

Walter Benjamin wrote in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” about the relation between past and present and their photo-montage like overlapping. In accordance to historical materialism, he wrote:

“The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. “The truth will not run away from us”: in the historical outlook of historicism these words of Gottfried Keller mark the

¹ This paper was realized as a part of the project "Studying climate change and its influence on the environment: impacts, adaptation and mitigation" (43007) financed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia within the framework of integrated and interdisciplinary research for the period 2011-2015.

exact point where historical materialism cuts through historicism. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (The good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the very moment he opens his mouth.)” [1].

The past is always constructed, always in the process of construction and therefore „the news from the past“ are ever possible. Different meanings of the past are produced in the present. Monuments (and buildings) constitute both social memory and social oblivion. In Lacanian formulation superego is the harbinger of the imperative: “enjoy!”; here, “forget!” and “remember!” intertwines forcedly and violently in similar materialistic formula. [2]. Creation of total replica of a completely destroyed building, as one of the most extreme form of architectural reconstruction, is also a process of memorizing and forgetting. Replica building can be considered as a kind of “falsification of history” or mode of production of a “false original” where signifier changes its signified in different historical circumstances and different political conjecture.

1 THE BERLIN CITY PALACE: CONFISCATED MEMORY

There are a lot of examples of such reconstructed and replicated buildings in the world, specially in the end of the twentieth century. The most prominent among them are those buildings in German cities: Dresden, Lubeck, Berlin as well as famous example of The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (Храм Христа Спасителя) in Moscow, Russia. 1812 Tsar Alexander I ordered the erection of a cathedral commemorating Russia's victory over Napoleon, but the project of the architect Alexander Vitberg was never realized until 1839 Nicholas I chose another architect Konstantin Ton. The cathedral became an important religious center and a familiar urban spot. After the Soviet revolution this place was selected for the largest monument to be built - The Palace of Soviets which was never completed due to resistant terrain of the site. Finally it became the largest heated outdoor swimming pool in the Soviet Union: instead of ritual water baptism hygiene and physical fitness took place. In 1994, government made a decision to rebuild the original cathedral and the newly rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior became a symbol of the "unity and repentance of the Russian people." The re-building of the The Old Bridge in Mostar, Bosni and Hercegovina, destroyed during the war in early ninethinies is one of the such examples in the former Yugoslavia.

The Berlin City Palace reconstruction is just the latest in a slew of historical reconstructions across Germany and Central Europe that includes the Alte Kommandantur, a former Baroque palace just next door to the Schloss and the Stadtschloss in Braunschweig, which has become a mall. One of the project of complete reconstruction of the buildings in Germany, after the reunification, in 1989, was The Dresden Frauenkirche, a Lutheran church, which was completely destroyed in the bombing of Dresden during WW2. The church was rebuilt starting in 1994, the reconstruction of its exterior was completed in 2004, and the interior in 2005.

The Berlin City Palace was originally built in the 15th century, between 1443 and 1451, ordered by Fridrich II. The construction of The Berlin City Palace began in 1695 - a medieval castle that was eventually transformed into a baroque palace. The palace became the seat of royal power until 1918 since it has become a museum. The Berlin City Palace was damaged in WW2. Afer the war The Berlin City Palace served as a museum, the main exhibition space for artworks considered degenerate in Nazi Germany. Finally - being part of the East Berlin – it was demolished in 1950 by the goverment of the German Democratic Republic as an emblem of Prussian militarism and imperial power. Walter Ulbricht, a German communist politician, saw in The Berlin City Palace an embodiment of Prussian militarism and fascism.

“The destruction of the Schloss was an efficient, modern way to surgically remove the past. The GDR was proclaimed to be the nation of antifascists; the fascists, supposedly, were all in the Western sector. Many East German children began to think that their parents fought together with the Red Army, not with the Nazis”. [3] Svetlana Boym refers to Joachim Fest who argues that “the destruction of the Schloss was an exercise in controlling the masses: "In the worldwide conflict that lies behind us, not the least of our goals was to prevent the advance of that kind of control. If the destruction of the Schloss was supposed to be a symbol of its victory, reconstruction would be a symbol of its failure." Reconstruction then becomes a form of symbolic retribution” [3].

A new large modernist, bronzed glass-and-steel building was built at the same site from 1973 to 1976 - the Palace of the Republic. The palace housed the East German parliament but also served as clutch of restaurants, theaters, art galleries etc.: the palace was an ambivalent site, at once the site of power and a place for the people. According to Boym “The Palace of the Republic is present in its physical form but disempowered; the Schloss is absent but politically strong” [3].

In 1993 next to the Palace of the Republic a steel scaffolding was erected with a canvas representing the facade of the Berlin Schloss in actual size and in the exact place of the destroyed building. The ghostly presence of a baroque palace that had been demolished forty-three years earlier arose. Inside the scaffolding a pavilion hosted an exhibition on the history of the destroyed Schloss and projects for the future reconstruction of the square. “Of course the artful trompe l’oeil also contributed to the overall idealization. Thanks to its canvas alter ego, which reacted to every gust of wind, the bombastic Schloss gained a lightness the original had never had.” [3]

The Bundestag rejected all the petitions for the preservation of the Palace of the Republic and decided in favor of its complete demolition. After many years of planning the new The Berlin City Palace, the Palace of the Republic was demolished in 2006 in order to start rebuilding the Schloss. The plan was to erect a fake Baroque palace, a copy of The Berlin City Palace. Architect of the project Franco Stella designed three of the four original facades and much of the interior courtyard, but the fourth facade is led to his own. The inside of this new Schloss is supposed to be a museum of non-Western art, a library, restaurants and cafes – it was named “the Humboldt Forum”, rather euphemistic, but actually it is “A Schloss-shaped mall”. What a museum of non-Western cultures might look like within this imitation of an imperial palace is still vague.



Fig. 1 *The Berlin City Palace, 2015*

2 THE DOUBLE

The idea of the double was emerged in writings of Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank, Sigmund Freud's closest colleagues – “The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study” (“Der Doppelgänger. Eine psychoanalytische Studie”) which deals with the phenomenon of the double as found in the literature. The double refers to a representation of the ego that can assume various forms: shadow, reflection, portrait, double, twin. The double doesn't function only as a subject double, but, concerning architectural objects /houses, rather as literal *space doubling* of the space itself, or doubling of architectural objects/houses.

In accordance to the Friz Lang's film “The Secret Beyond the Door” from 1948, where the theme of doubling of the architectural spaces is the central one, it is possible to question: *Is There a Secret Behind the Facades* and what this secret is? What lies behind the exterior, not only in terms of content, but in terms of meaning: is rebuilding of the palace a step toward healing the wounds inflicted by the Cold War division or an attempt to override the East Berlin history. Or, through this attempt, glorification of the German pride and magnificence?

Like the destruction of The Berlin City Palace as an efficient way to surgically remove the past, the destruction of The Palace of the Republic was at the same trace: rebuilding the earlier building, the Schloss, will not only heal the wounds of the post-WW2 and Cold war past, but also revive the past that the Schloss implied: here is at stake the revival of the past through the doubling of the architectural objects. Svetlana Boym quotes philosopher and architectural historian Hoffmann-Axthelm arguing that if there is no Schloss, it is easier to forget the past: “that the Schloss is not merely 'an arthistorically or urbanistically important or even irreplaceable building' but rather a site that enables the discussion of aesthetics and politics, of guilt and expiatory sacrifice. The Schloss is a topos in two senses of the word - a concrete place and a place in discourse: 'it is entangled in that historical and at the same time moral discussion for which there is almost no place in our modern society'.” [3] An Old Testament law – *Lex Talionis* - seemed to be developing: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; a house for a house.

It is *phoenixlike* projects one after another, re-building of the double that was destroyed. Although it is not possible to craft ‘faithful’ reconstructions, these restorations / reconstructions are even undertaken and their pastiche nature is already designated. Here, the signifier – reconstructed buildings - changes its signified in different historical circumstances and different political conjecture. According to Barthes: “The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it.” [4] Same is with buildings. Architecture is part of space-time structure that serves to simulate social life.

Architectural *phoenixlike* doubling can be compared to medical, plastic surgery proceeding of face reconstruction. Reconstruction - both as architectural term and medical - is a term whose precise meaning varies, depending on the context in which they are used. "Reconstruction" means returning a damaged building to a known earlier state by the introduction of new materials. Therefore, the rebuilding of the Schloss is similar to the face reconstruction in German director Christian Petzold's film “Phoenix” from 2014. If this film can be read as a German self-deception in the post-war era, than the rebuilding of The Berlin City Palace can be understood – similar to the film where the invention of the “near-doppelganger” is an opportunity to access the (undeservedly) fortune - as opportunity to gain new (undeservedly) political face.

In the film “Phoenix” Nelly plays is a German-Jewish night club singer who has survived a concentration camp, but with her face disfigured by a bullet wound. After undergoing reconstructive surgery, she emerges with a new face, one similar but *different enough* that her former husband doesn't recognize her. She walks into a dangerous game of duplicity and disguise as she tries to figure out if the man she loves may have been the one who betrayed her to the Nazis. Her husband doesn't recognize her, he just sees in her *similarity with herself*. In this strange *near-doppelganger* play he finds an opportunity to gain her heritage. And, she makes endeavour to look *more like herself* (or how the other sees her); she begins to see herself through a different pair of eyes as well. There are similarities to Hitchcock's film “Vertigo”, where a man remaking a woman in the image of somebody else, even though it turns out that she is exactly the same person who he's thinking of in the first place².

3 NEAR-DOPPELGANGER

The film “Phoenix” can be read as a cautionary tale about German bad faith and self-deception in the post-war era. Here the question of *site* arises: what is the true face of the site? is the face the site the face of the memory? Svetlana Boym's question in *The Future of Nostalgia* is: “Is this a nostalgia for the future, for the postcontemporary moment that transcends the contemporary discussion of the defended memory sites?” [3] Like heroine Nelly who rises from the ashes, but doesn't manage to brush them off, the Schloss is in the same position. It is not possible to arise from the zero ground and become the same (face - person, building) along with getting rid off the ashes: the remains of the previous are inevitable. Being *phoenix* means to obtains new life by arising from the ashes of its predecessor, but not all the same as late: there is no double, doppelganger, only *near-doppelganger*. As Boym argues: “The obliteration of memory is at the foundation of each new project. The erection of each new symbol enforces a collective amnesia about past destructions that have occurred as if by some uncanny ritual every fifty years. What is being forgotten here is forgetting itself. Umberto Eco has argued that forgetting, especially when it is enforced, has its own strategies. The *ars oblivionalis* operates through enforced confusion and "multiplication of false synonyms" (pseudosynonymy): one forgets "not by cancellation, but by superimposition; not by absence, but by multiplying presences." [3] The replica of the Schloss is a kind of pseudosynonymy (*near-doppelganger*) that tries to replace memory and history.

² there is an old noncertified story about Elvis Presley entering an Elvis look-alike contest incognito and coming only third!



Fig. 2 *Phoenix*, 2014, dir. Christian Petzold

REFERENCES

- [1] Benjamin, Walter. 1968. Theses on the Philosophy of History in *Illuminations*, p.255. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World
- [2] Cvetić, Mariela. 2012. Monumentalna memorijalna politička skulptura u Srbiji in Šuvaković, Miško *Umetnost u Srbiji 2*, Beograd: Orion art
- [3] Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books
- [4] Barthes, Roland. 1999. Semology and the Urban in Leach, Neil. *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*. p.166-172. London: The MIT Press