The Destroyed Royal Palace

At the heart of Berlin is an empty space: an archeological dig and a former parking lot. The main building in the square is the Palace of the Republic (Palast der Republik), built in 1976 on the site of the 250-year-old Royal Palace (Schloss). Today the square is a phantom theater where the abandoned Palace of the Republic stands in front of the exposed archeological foundations of the destroyed Royal Palace. There is no reason to come here; there are no cafés, no shops and no demonstrations, only occasional enthusiasts of the Schloss making guided tours of nonexistent Baroque ruins and protesters appearing with different slogans to defend the existing modern ruin.

“It isn’t that the Schloss was located in Berlin, rather Berlin is located in the Schloss.” This became the motto of the supporters of the building’s reconstruction. The destroyed Schloss is seen not merely as one of the important buildings of Berlin but as a microcosm of the ideal united city. At present the fragments of the destroyed building are dispersed throughout Berlin; from Kreuzberg to Prenzlau-berg one stumbles upon its anonymous ruins and minor stone reminders. The construction of the Schloss began in 1695. Initially, as the name suggests, it was a medieval castle that was eventually transformed into a baroque palace. In the view of its contemporary supporters, the Schloss evoked the image of a beautiful European city, not “ugly” Prussian Berlin. For many supporters of the reconstruction, the postwar ruins of the Royal Palace are their last memory of Berlin before the decisive division of Germany into East and West. Here they played as children.
hoped for a better future. The destruction of the ruined Schloss preceded the closing of the country and the construction of the wall. Thus the Schloss became a lost limb of the common body of the city, or even the lost heart.

Indeed, the Schloss is central to Berlin history. It was built on the site of a fifteen-century fort founded here by the Elector Friedrich II in 1443 to 1451. The rebuilding of the medieval castle into a palace marked the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618 to 1648) and the beginning of the era of peace and relative prosperity, of cultural flourishing and religious tolerance. The palace, built by architect Andreas Schlüter, was considered a masterpiece of Baroque architecture and became a Prussian version of the Louvre. After Friedrich III was given the title of King of Prussia, the palace became the seat of royal power until the revolution of 1918 that abolished monarchist rule. Since 1918 it has become a museum.

Hitler had no use for the Schloss and actually disliked its "un-German" architecture. It was partially destroyed during the Allied bombings, but contrary to the East German reports it was not turned into an unusable ruin or a mere shell of an old building; the ruined Schloss instead found a new use from 1945 to 1948 as the main exhibition space for artworks considered degenerate in Nazi Germany, for international art and art by refugees from the Nazi regime. The director of the prewar museum, removed by the Nazis, was called back to organize some of the exhibits.

With the declaration of the GDR the Schloss was closed. If Hitler viewed it as un-Prussian and un-German, Walter Ulbricht saw in the Schloss an embodiment of Prussian militarism and, by extension, fascism. The ruined museum turned into the enemy of the people and a symbol of monarchy that had been extinct since 1918. In 1950, Walter Ulbricht declared: "Our contribution to progress in the area of architecture shall consist in the expression of what is special to our national culture; the area of the Lustgarten and the Schloss ruin has to become a square for mass demonstrations which will mark the will to build and to fight expressed by our people." Ulbricht wished to create a German version of Red Square and build in place of the Schloss a Stalinist skyscraper, a kind of Palace of Soviets that Stalin dreamed of building on the site of the destroyed Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Symbolically, the building was to be exploded with dynamite borrowed from the Russians. Ulbricht wished to outdo Stalin in many respects. (In fact, after the Russian Revolution the seats of monarchical power—the Winter Palace and the Kremlin—were never destroyed.) Lenin, Stalin and all subsequent Soviet and post-Soviet leaders comfortably rehbabited the Kremlin with few qualms. 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.

It took several weeks to raze the Schloss to the ground. Only a few fragments remained scattered throughout the city. One facade of the Schloss with a balcony was saved on the order of Walter Ulbricht, since GDR national hero Karl Liebknecht had made a speech here proclaiming a German Socialist Republic on November 9, 1919. It seems that Ulbricht too had a fetishistic relation to the building; Liebknecht's balcony was saved and built into the facade of the GDR Interior Ministry building. No Stalinist skyscraper was built on the site of the destroyed Schloss; instead, the square became a major parking lot for the GDR's favorite cars—Trabants. Not until the 1970s did the idea come to erect a modern building here that would serve as a showcase of East German achievement—not the Royal Palace but the Palace of the Republic.

Right after the fall of the wall, the West German government with the Christian Democrats announced that no reconstruction of the Schloss would take place. Instead, a new modern building would be erected here to house the Department of State. Bonn politicians accustomed to anonymous state buildings took little interest in the new wave of historicist reconstruction. Yet gradually the movement for restoration of the Schloss brought together some unlikely bedfellows: conservatives dreaming of reparation of German history with a handsome and somewhat less compromised symbol of unity—businessmen hoping to restore the historical center of Berlin (to offer an alternative to the "American style" downtown construction on the Potsdamer Platz)—as well as leading historians, Social-Democrat politicians and liberal journalists who cannot all be suspected of downright nationalism or a search for uncritical German identity. Rather, they developed an elaborate critique of modern technology and modern architecture and argued for preserving urban memory. The dispute swayed between aesthetics and politics, emotive and critical arguments, arouses much suspicion from professional architects and surprising fascination among many Berliners.

Nowhere else in the world does the return to historicism, whether in the guise of restoration, preservation or postmodern citation, arouse more suspicion than in united Germany. The restoration of the Schloss frequently has been seen in symbolic terms, yet it has been turned into a symbol for different things. One journalist expressed a widespread fear that the restored Schloss will become "a misguided symbol of the state, an architectural lurch to the right and an enormous encouragement for restorative tendencies in the society." On the other hand, Joachim
Fest 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.

Is an exchange of symbolic destruction and restitution truly possible in the face of twentieth-century German history and the memory of millions of victims? Philosopher and architectural historian Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, known as one of the guiding spirits behind one of the most “archaeological museums” of Berlin’s gruesome past, the Topography of Terror, argues that the rebuilding or nonrebuilding of the Schloss should not be regarded as the reparation of history that cannot be repaired. Moreover, it should not be considered merely a symbol, but rather a site, a memorial topos, a place for critical and reflective memory: “The Schloss is needed to remind us of the unmastered history.”

Hoffmann-Axthelm examines the “ban on reconstruction of the Schloss” that goes back to Karl Jaspers’s famous statement and a certain conception of symbolic exchange and sacrifice:

The ban on reconstruction, as far as it is expressed in the name of German history, depends on its part on a kind of deal: the destruction of the Schloss figures—like the German partition until 1990—as an expiatory sacrifice for the historical guilt that we Germans must bear. To reuinte and to eventually rebuild the Schloss would be to take back the sacrifice.

It is sufficient to express the point in this manner to make the insufficiency of the imputation evident. Of the German history from 1933 to 1945 nothing can be explicated, one cannot come to terms with it, apart from the legally correct court cases, mostly of which were avoided anyway. What happened is inexplicable.

At first glance, Hoffmann-Axthelm presents an argument that would justify not rebuilding the Schloss, yet he uses it for the opposite end. If there is no Schloss, it is easier to forget the past. He proposes that the Schloss is not merely “an art-historically 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.” Hoffmann-Axthelm seems to be nostalgic for this kind of reflective moral discourse that is on the verge of disappearing in the hectic pace of development of the new united Berlin. He insists that the Schloss shouldn’t be regarded as a scapegoat for an ideological cause but rather as an architectural body with material warmth and aesthetic power.

Here again Hoffmann-Axthelm advances a dialectical argument that the Schloss can be seen as an urban home of sorts precisely because it is not a symbol of German identity. He argues that the building was a masterpiece of Baroque architecture, which can be seen as a common European heritage shared by Germans, a sort of international style—not of late but of early modernity. Thus it is not so much a symbol of German identity but of urban identity that is European, like the palace style. One could compare it to the Louvre in Paris or the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, or even the White House in Washington; surely these would have been restored had they been destroyed. The Schloss was never an expression of the German romantic soul but rather of a common European enlightened rationalism and a preromantic conception of measured beauty. The supporters carefully separate the palace from its original function. They emphasize the fact that the Schloss preceded the development of Prussian militarism and was not its symbol. The Schloss embodied that civic ideal of urban pride. The Schloss was open to the people and through most of the twentieth century served as a museum. Moreover, the Schloss was an architectural compass for the city: the scale and height of the buildings was determined in relation to it; it also held together many eclectic styles of Berlin architecture. Without the Schloss the city has only a “motor” but no compass, no orientation in space. Hoffmann-Axthelm criticized many modern urban projects for their lack of concern for the site. His urban archeology is not transportable and not translatable into cyber language. He is trying to recuperate and preserve urban foundations that are always site-specific. Yet if the Topography of Terror exhibit that bared the foundations of the Gestapo torture chambers was an antite, the foundations of the destroyed Schloss played an opposite role, that of an enabling topos where one can grasp the tragic architectural destiny of Berlin.

In Hoffmann-Axthelm’s view, present-day Berliners who “used to live in a desert of cars and residential cities, between disconnected traffic facilities, department stores, and apartment buildings” do not have any point of support in the city that would remind them of “humaneness and civility”. “The newly united Berlin citizens experience nostalgia but no longer remember what they have lost. They lack the urbanistic education, that kind of nursery room of history on the backdrop of which they could admit that lack.”

The absence of the Schloss, then, is not merely an absence of one building, but of the entire infrastructure of the old-fashioned public sphere that could remind Berliners of urban warmth and civility. Conversely, the absence of the Schloss
does not allow Berliners to realize what they are missing. Nor would the rebuilt Schloss offer Berliners the ultimate homecoming. This would be an a priori melancholic reconstruction, affectionate and critical at the same time, reminding the city dwellers of Berlin’s tragic fate and modern beauty.

Hoffmann-Axthelm does not advocate the destruction of the Palace of the Republic in order to preserve the topos of the Schloss. Rather, he suggests that in the new project of critical reconstruction the two should coexist, tolerate each other, and make each other readable through this coexistence. It will always be an affront, an unassimilable challenge; instead of covering up the destruction, it will leave the wounds of the past open. Yet Hoffmann-Axthelm does not conceal his predilection for the Schloss. It seems to stand not for actual German history as it happened but for a potential history that could have happened if enlightened rationalism and urban civility had prevailed. In these potentialities the historian sees a new beginning. After all, perhaps there could be a way of avoiding the ultra-teleological approach that has prevailed in the study of German history, a hindsight reconstruction of the history of the past three centuries of Prussia and the other German states as inevitably leading to Nazism. Hoffmann-Axthelm would like to see the Schloss Platz become a common memory of East and West and “a third city” that is not divided and has never been walled (or rather had common walls). This site-specific critical reconstruction strives in its utopian dimension. The bricks of the Schloss are the stuff dreams are made of. Hoffmann-Axthelm advocated rebuilding the Schloss. Yet the building’s affective warmth that he so lovingly described seems to be predicated on its ostensible absence.

The Palace of the Republic

It has not yet occurred to anyone to compare the geometric, glass-and-concrete Palace of the Republic to the heart or soul of Berliners. Yet it too has become a palace of souvenirs. I will start with my own. In 1976 my mother and I went on a trip to East Germany. This was our first trip “to the West” and the first crossing of the Soviet border. We were going to Dessau to visit my mother’s friend, married to an East German officer who had studied at the military academy in Leningrad. There in Dessau we saw the first modern ruin, the Bauhaus, the symbol of the international avant-garde—closed, fenced off, and looking like an empty provincial warehouse with peeling paint that one might have been white. We traveled to the Dresden gallery and admired its treasures “restored in spite of the imperialist destruction.” We visited the clothing stores as one would visit a museum and gawked together with a group of Soviet military wives at jackets and boots available to the German people. We were treated with cool impatience like cheap barbarians with bad manners. With a new friend I escaped to the unofficial house-discoteque where we danced to West German rock music that our host strictly forbade us to listen to. In Berlin we walked on Unter der Linden, abando- ded and empty at six o’clock in the evening, whispering something about the wall—another one of the unspoken East German words. We were stopped by a police officer politely inquiring about our identity. In short, we had what in retrospect would appear to have been a typical East German experience.

Most impressive of all was our trip to Alexanderplatz and Marx Engels Platz with the newly built Palace of the Republic. We had never seen such a triumph of modern architecture that for me represented the West. It had windows of shaded glass that spoke of exotic places and bristled with opportunities. It was open to the public and appeared more democratic than Russian government buildings. It was in this palace that we tried our first Western drink: chilled orange juice, one for two, which was as much as we could afford. (Like many Soviet visitors, we might not have paid for our train ticket to Berlin on that day, I am sorry to say.)

These kinds of sentimental memories come with a fine—blindness to the senti- mentality of others. Yet now, when I can afford all the orange juice I want, and freshly squeezed, too, it helps me to understand what the Palace of the Republic stood for. The building was erected during a relaxation of tension between East and West Germany. It was rather a prosperous time for the GDR, with a warmer attitude toward the East on the part of the German chancellor, Willy Brandt. The Palace of the Republic, a geometric structure of steel and concrete with tinted glass, was built according to Western architectural standards of the time. It was something of an exemplary socialist construction site; the palace was built in a thousand days and the best mason brigades from all over the GDR were called in to contribute to this showcase construction. While the Palace of the Republic was notably smaller than the Berlin Schloss, it made explicit allusion to the symbolic structure of the destroyed building: the People’s Chamber was erected on the site of the Royal Chamber; and the Tribune for Communist demonstrations was de- signed in the area of the Emperor’s Throne Room. The Palace of the Republic was at once a seat of the GDR parliament and the “people’s home.” It had a congress room, ballrooms, concert hall, a bowling alley and an unusually rich choice of gastronomic offerings at a fair price. Only in the Palace of the Republic and the nearby Alexanderplatz could one get decent treatment, so the cafés here became the choice meeting places for Easterners and their foreign friends. Moreover, the palace had the best telephone service to the West; here in the public phonebooths intimate connections with the outside world were established. Many Western
singers, artists and intellectuals were invited to perform at the palace, including Harry Belafonte, Carlos Santana and Udo Lindenberg, a Berlin chansonner. In one of his songs he dared to address Erich Honecker himself to the tune of “The Chattanooga Choo-Choo.” The words went something like this: “Erich, honey, I know you like to put on your leather jacket and listen to rock music in your bathroom.” Honecker apparently took on the challenge and invited the subversive singer to perform at the Palace of the Republic. The singer came and faced the silent first rows filled with smirking men in gray and brown suits and excited young people in the balcony clapping fiercely.

In short, the palace was an ambivalent site, at once the site of power and a place for the people. It was a sign of the GDR’s greater openness to the West, but it was also the official showcase of that openness, a kind of Potemkin village-palace in the international style. One former East German writer commented that the palace embodied the official politics of giving people at once “a sugarbread and a whipping.” And yet the place was inhabited by the East Berliners in many everyday ways, even if only for lack of a better choice. It acquired an aura of people’s everyday memories of the last decade before “the change.” It manifested that double bind between people and power in the GDR. The palace acquired many aliases: The Ballast of the Republic (instead of Palast der Republik), Palazzo Prozzo (Palazzo Ugly—a German stylization of Italian) and Erich’s Light Shop.19 These humorous nicknames are testimony of popular affection for the building, albeit a qualified one; they gave the concrete structure some lightness and domesticated it for the Berliners.

There are many ironies in the final two years of the palace’s existence. On October 7, 1990, the palace held an official celebration of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the GDR just at the time when Easterners were escaping en masse via Czechoslovakia and Hungary. In 1990, the first free elections also took place here, and it was here that the plans to organize the unification of the two Germanies were announced. Erich Honecker would not have imagined in his wildest dreams that people could some day actually take over the Palace of the People. This could have been one reason for placing a memorial plaque here: In this place the decision was made in favor of German unification. In just the final two weeks of the existence of the GDR, asbestos was discovered in the Palace of the Republic and the decision was made to close the building for renovation—which happened to be one of the last East German verdicts. East German authorities had built it and they convicted it at the end. Yet asbestos alone does not condemn the building to destruction. Ideology does. A similar kind of asbestos was discovered in the Palace of Congress, and soon the engineers found a solution to the technical problems. After all, the Palace of the Republic followed Western standards.

After the unification of Germany, the Social Democrats made the decision to preserve what was then Marx and Engels Platz as a GDR landmark. Over the next few years, however, the discovery of asbestos, renewed enthusiasm about the Schloss reconstruction and the new developments market in Berlin Mitte all conspired to threaten the survival of the Palace of the Republic. The Christian Democrats were ready to annihilate it as a symbol of GDR government and an “eyesore” in the face of Berlin. Talk of new destruction opened up Pandora’s box of divisive memories and resulted in numerous demonstrations of protest by disgruntled East Berliners. One of the demonstrators carried the following sign: “The Palace wasn’t built by and for the central Committee of GDR Communist Party. It was built for and by the people. Now colonial Ladies and Gentlemen from the West want us to pay two times more. Once for the destruction and another time for those tycoons from Bonn (Bonnites).”

In this sign a socialist discourse and capitalist discourse are strangely intertwined. The poster makes the argument that the palace was for the people, at least for the simple reason that they had built it and paid for it with their labor and money. The “West” is seen as a colonial power that conquered the people’s palace and now is intent to waste the people’s money by destroying and rebuilding it. Berlin patriotism is directed against “foreign colonizers.” The poster parodies the Western discourse of political correctness and at the same time it appeals to the financial argument—the only one Westerners would understand. Some East Germans argued that this act of proposed destruction was symptomatic of the Westerners’ attitude in general and that Westerners tended to reduce the whole of their existence during the years of the GDR to obsolete political symbols that they now used for the election campaigns. The building for them was not merely an emblem for a lost political cause but a warm space of everyday practices that often defies that central narrative, even if in very minor ways. As Brian Ladd puts it, the fight for the Palace of the Republic “became an emblem for a fight to vindicate their former lives.”20

The duel of the two palaces revealed a lack of dialogue and empathy between East and West. At the same time, it showed a similar relation to confiscated memory. The arguments in defense of the Palace of the Republic mirrored those for the reconstruction of the Schloss. The Palace of the Republic was presented as a Palace of Memory and a Palace of the People, not the symbol of the GDR. In both cases the nostalgia is based on a sense of loss that endows the building with a powerful melancholic aura. The Palace of the Republic is present in its physical form
but disempowered; the Schloss is absent but politically strong. In both examples the symbols of power have been appropriated and refashioned as emblems of disempowerment. Paradoxically, the Palace of the Republic that once appropriated the Berlin Royal Palace architecture of power, now took upon itself its status of victimhood. Two victims rarely sympathize with one another; they engage in comparing suffering and counting losses, and there is no end to it.

Both buildings were at once symbols of power and memory sites, real and imaginary. They had a powerful existential quality of unrealized potentialities, many “ifs”: if only the Schloss was not a seat of Prussian power but a museum of European culture and an architectural beauty without political decorum; if only the Palace of the Republic really was a Palace of the People. The adversary in both cases swiftly confused partial identification with memories and potentialities of a site with a coherent sense of identity: if one admires the Schloss, one nurtures conservative tendencies; if one advocates against the destruction of the Palace of the Republic, one defends East German politics. The debate itself became a revealing verbal monument to the epoch of transition—a monument made of the labyrinthine walls in people’s minds.

Of course, there were other kinds of arguments that tried to break the siege of two sites. One former East German writer reminded his fellow Berliners that the so-called Easterners do not represent a united front. They should not be turned into nostalgic stereotypes. Here is what he says about the Palace of the Republic:

The Palace was 300% GDR. You can, of course, put a layer of nostalgia over it but if that is our identity, then it is precisely what some conservative politicians tell about us. The East Berliners had an ironic practical relationship with the Palace. You were there because there were no alternatives and that shouldn’t be idealized.71

This is the voice of the East Berliners that is most rarely heard. They do not conform to the rightist conception of the Easterners as an undistinguished people nostalgic for the former GDR. Nor do they play on their political mill with the criticism of the former GDR and praise of Kohl. At the same time, they cannot be easily appropriated by the traditional left. They do not praise the GDR’s social services or speak about unrealized Marxist dreams. Neither do they fit into the image of the Easterners corrupted by Western consumerism. These East German intellectuals speak about the need for hope and liberation with a somewhat unfashionable vocabulary that is neither green nor red. Nor is it drab gray and brown. Their dreams conflict with the dreams of the Western left intellectuals and with the conservative vision of the future. As Hoffmann-Axthelm is nostalgic for the disappearing reflexive discourse on memory, responsibility, guilt and aesthetic beauty, so one could be nostalgic for that particular discourse of liberation shared by dissenting intellectuals in the former Eastern bloc countries. There is little use for it now. For some of the East German intellectuals the debate around the Palace of the Republic is a distraction from the more important misunderstanding of the hopes and dreams of liberation that they harbored in the East and that nobody needs now in the changed circumstances. So their collective dreams of liberation gradually turn into a private pursuit of opportunities, not all of them materialist and consumerist.

Should one then free oneself from both the Schloss and the Palace of the Republic? Many architects would like us to do just that and transform the very nature of space so that it will no longer be a site of two oppressive “ballasts” of memory. French architect Yves Lion proposed eight ways of transforming the square, all of them described with a good deal of humor that is often absent from the current debate. One of his proposals is to get rid of both and leave it as a “hyphen, a continuation of Unter der Linden, offering a beautiful view for a new government building.” The square can become a garden, a green beauty for the enjoyment of all. One can imagine it as a cheerful theater of future Love Parades littered with the gilded wrap of Viagra ice cream.

Daniel Libeskind, the architect of the new Jewish museum who also took part in many competitions for redesigning the center of Berlin, wrote that “the lost center cannot be reconnected like an artificial limb to an old body, but must generate an overall transformation of the city.”72 Libeskind insists that “the identity of Berlin cannot be reformed in the ruins of history or in the illusory reconstruction of an arbitrary selected past.” The new city for him has to come to life as a collage, a mosaic, a palimpsest, a puzzle. The Berlin of the twenty-first century will be traversed “by ten thousand thunderbolts of absolute absence.” The Berlin that Libeskind imagines carries on and transforms its own modernist legacy of a cosmopolitan city of the 1920s, one epoch that seems to be excluded by the defenders of both palaces. Now it has to become “a post-contemporary city where the view is cleared beyond the constriction of domination, power and grid-locked mind.” Is this a nostalgia for the future, for the postcontemporary moment that transcends the contemporary discussion of the defended memory sites? For better or worse, it appears that Schloss Square will not be postcontemporary anytime soon. Nor will it turn into a lovely garden, a Berlin Common of sorts. It is now too much of a discursive topos, and forgetting here will not come naturally. Schloss Square might appear as a prison house of memory, or a house of mirrors that reflects many possibilities for Berlin’s future that are linked to the confrontations of the present.
The Screen, the Mirror and the Compromise

In 1993 a new specter appeared on the Schloss Square. Next to the Palace of the Republic a steel scaffolding was erected with a canvas representing the facade of the Berlin Schloss, actual size, in the exact place of the destroyed building. A gigantic mirror was placed next to the Palace of the Republic in order to indicate the full extension of the Schloss. The painted facade was a gold-brown color, to give the impression that in some anachronistic game of history the facade of the Schloss was reflected in the tinted glass of the Palace of the Republic. Inside the scaffolding a pavilion hosted an exhibit on the history of the destroyed Schloss and projects for the future reconstruction of the square. The canvas was a meticulous trompe l’oeil of the facade of the destroyed Schloss, yet its effect was anything but illusory. Thousands visited the exhibit every day, and its success went beyond all expectations. The guest book exploded with comments, mostly pouring rage on Walter Ulbricht or celebrating the shimmering beauty of the Schloss. Suddenly everyone was persuaded that Schlüter’s building should be resurrected, because, as the guide in the souvenir shop told me, “it simply belonged there.” This was a perfect trompe l’oeil that brought together baroque tradition and postmodernism. The Schloss canvas was called a curtain—an allusion to the Iron Curtain, only this one was meant to enable people to come together and overcome the destruction. Susan Buck-Morss calls it “a brilliant example of post-modern principles: what couldn’t be resolved politically was resolved aesthetically: a pseudo Schloss to provide a pseudo-nation with a pseudo-past. It reduces national identity to a tourist attraction and stages German nation as a theme park.”

Yet this was precisely what the architects of the canvas wished to avoid. Goerd Peschken and Frank Augustin comment that they did not intend to destroy the Palace of the Republic; quite the opposite. The mirror was not intended merely to underscore the size of the building... but rather to create a subtle distortion of visual effect with its different facets. We would have liked to see a vibration of colors on the baroque facade enhanced with the help of reprographic techniques such as dissolving the surfaces into dots or fields of dots as in the painting of Roy Lichtenstein. A glass facade could be animated in such a way that passers-by would see, depending on their position, either the intact Schloss or its ruins.

Alan Balfour remarks that these alternating images of an intact and ruined Schloss would be a true monument to German history, far more than a reconstruction of the Schloss in stone ever would.

Thus the mirror is his case was not to be a reflection but a refraction, a space for reflective thinking, not for literalist reproduction. This was to be a Borgesian mirror leading to potential worlds of the future, not to faithful reconstruction of the past. The architects intended to erect a modern building behind the facade and leave the canvas as a screen for future reflection on history. It was not meant to be a theme park of the German nation, but rather a city of reflective memories where the tinted glass of the Palace of the Republic and the trompe l’oeil of the facade of the Schloss reflected each other.

The canvas can be compared with the Wrapped Reichstag, Christo’s most successful project, only in the latter case, an actual historical facade was covered by a shimmering screen, whereas here the screen covered the empty site. Yet if Christo’s Wrapped Reichstag was perceived as a festive occasion that allowed Berliners to take their history lightly and play with it, the canvas of the facade that wrapped the empty scaffolding persuaded Berliners of the need for a real reconstruction.

"Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear"—such is the wisdom of our car culture. Or rather, people wish them to be closer than they appear. The newest project of the reconstruction of the square, advertised in the newsletter of the Berlin Story, was intended to please everyone. These days politicians from both parties are wary of destructions; instead they speak for building consensus, tolerance and communication. (One of the streets in the new center of Berlin was even renamed Toleranz Strasse, but the name hasn’t yet caught on.) The Social Democrat Hans Stimmann adopted a version of Hoffmann-Axthelm’s plan for critical reconstruction of the center of Berlin and issued a series of guidelines for the building and preservation of the city’s historical plan. Contemporary architects immediately attacked this as a reduction of the “heterogeneous and plural reality” of a contemporary city to a bureaucratic grid and conservative gridlock.

The 1998 project of the Schloss Platz proposes to reconstruct three facades of the Schloss and keep the general plan of the building with a courtyard so that it will form an ensemble with Unter der Linden and Lustgarten Bridge. The fourth wall will be a glassed modern structure that will reconstruct a slightly smaller version of the asbestos-free Palace of the Republic to “connect to the Marx and Engels Forum and Alexanderplatz.” The new Schloss will be partially occupied by government offices, but otherwise it will be open to many possible uses, ceremonial, cultural and scientific. It will have conference rooms for scientists, economists, businessmen, ecologists, and halls for cultural events, as well as cafés and other facilities to attract Berliners and guests of the capital, who will find there “a place that reflects the richness of their multicultural experience.” This way, the
foundational plan of the Schloss will be restored as well as the foundational structure of the Palace of the Republic, which will be used for cellars and storage for the stores and cafés, as well as a library depository.

At last, a perfect cohabitation, and a politically correct one at that—complete with Turkish restaurants, Polish shoe shops and Jewish bakeries. What will happen then with that complex dialectic suggested by Hoffmann-Axthelm that reveals rather than covers up the tension between two buildings, that does not "silence the destruction" and leave the "wounds of history open"? The new reconstruction may provide that urban warmth and order that many Berliners are nostalgic for. It may also put an end to the reflective and powerful discourse that revealed many potential urban archeologies and memory lanes that accompanied the period of transition. After all, it seems that the mythical topos of the Schloss is more poignant and powerful in the absence of the actual building. Or is this a nostalgia for nostalgia?

Meanwhile the Schloss remains symbolically central to the new Berlin, yet physically nonexistent, displaced and dispersed. Once a monument of the united city of Berlin, it turned into a monument of its division. Just like the wall, traces of the Schloss are everywhere; they become barely visible landmarks for the alternative Berlin tour. Recently, walking around Prenzlauer I discovered a body of a strange creature—a decapitated bird with stylized Prussian wings lying like a piece of abstract sculpture in one of the inner yards in the bohemian part of East Berlin. Nobody remembers how it got there, but this last piece of the Schloss, its emblem, the Prussian eagle, has been protected by the residents of the building, not as a political symbol but as a piece of neighborhood memorabilia.