

The Reichstag: Quest for *Hauptstadtkultur* in the New Berlin

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This work examines the Reichstag’s emblematic role in Berlin’s history. Today the Reichstag is a major tourist attraction and home to Germany’s democratic parliament. However, the building has had a complicated history spanning five distinct times in German history: the Imperial Age and World War I, the troubled Weimar Republic, Nazism and World War II, the divided Cold War, and finally a unified Germany. The progressions of the building mirror those of German society and the city of Berlin over the past century, culminating in the vibrant Western European democratic country, city, and building we see today. Specifically, the revitalization of the Reichstag building itself through Christo’s wrapping project and Sir Norman Foster’s reconstruction were vital steps for a torn city to embrace its past while transitioning the building from a history museum into the seat of the German parliament. Furthermore, this change is emblematic of Berlin as a whole, in its quest for its own *Hauptstadtkultur* as the capital moved back to Berlin from Bonn. Architecture has played a significant role in this New Berlin, and the case of the Reichstag building is no different. Foster’s design, adding a modernist glass and steel dome to the nineteenth century building, emphasizes political transparency while maintaining traces of the past. Focusing on the example of the Reichstag, I argue that this merging of history and hope for the future has proved essential and successful, though often controversial, in recreating a unified, vibrant, and strong Berlin.

Contradictions riddle the Reichstag building, today a major attraction and home to Germany’s parliament. Signs of Germany’s imperial past still cling to the building designed to represent the nation’s united future as a prosperous western-style democracy. The inscriptions “F_{III}”, “W_I”, and “W_{II}” look down upon tourists queued to visit the new glass-and-steel cupola sitting atop the century-old structure. These letters and roman numerals stand for three kaisers of the German Empire after its 1871 unification: Frederick III, Wilhelm I, and Wilhelm II. “Dem Deutschen Volke” appears on the front, letting the world know that the building and its parliament are “To the German People.” However, this much debated phrase was only added in 1916, twenty-two years after the Reichstag’s completion, during a time of war when the Kaiser could no longer refuse the democratic phrase without seeming unpatriotic¹. These are only a few oddities of the Reichstag, a Renaissance-style building with a modernist glass dome, but they speak to the building’s journey through the twentieth century, as well as a general state of confusion over what the structure represents. Now the seat of the German Bundestag, this building remained unused in its intended capacity for sixty-six years. Transitioning from a history museum in a divided city to the center of a powerful democ-

racy, the Reichstag building’s post-*Wende* conversion has successfully intertwined Germany’s twentieth century history with its future as a peaceful European power, helping to create an image for the “New Berlin.”

Germany, an aggressor in two world wars and a divided nation, has experienced a unique twentieth century. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent incorporation of the German Democratic Republic into the Federal Republic, Germany and its once-split capital Berlin have struggled to define themselves. Issues of remembrance plague the nation, exacerbated by Germany’s “excruciatingly sensitive historical memory”². Controversies over designs for the Holocaust Memorial, Topography of Terror by former Gestapo headquarters, and Jewish Museum stirred debate over what to remember and what to simply “forget” by removing from the city’s text. Some want to incorporate the past into the present, while others feel that Berlin’s *Gedenkkultur* (remembrance culture) overemphasizes the past, creating “memory mania of truly monumental proportions”³. Rebuilding the Reichstag faced similar problems in dealing with the past, present, and future, including how to move forward while commemorating history. These renovations successfully transitioned Berlin to the future by adapting the Reichstag into a useful parliamentary

space while maintaining the building's identity by incorporating its unique history into the designs.

To understand why this building is central to Berlin's new identity as a democratic capital, one must look to its history, a reflection of German government. The original building, designed by German architect Wallot, was completed in 1894, twenty-three years after a national parliamentary building had been first discussed⁴. Because a national style did not yet exist, Wallot had to improvise on Germany's foremost nationalist monument. He mixed historical architecture, Italian Renaissance and Neobaroque styles, with modernist architecture, the glass-and-steel cupola⁵. Kaiser Wilhelm II hated the Reichstag, probably more for the institution it held than for the building itself. He only visited it twice, calling it "tasteless" and the "imperial money house"⁶.

A building that "embodied the hopes and frustrations of democrats" was destined also to be unpopular with the general population⁷. Almost everyone complained about the building's discontinuity and indecisiveness⁸. Some praised the monumentalist style but detested the unnatural glass dome⁹. Others liked the dome but rejected the traditional building, arguing that it would soon look outdated because modernist architecture was quickly gaining popularity¹⁰. Such criticism reflects not only the perceived awkwardness of the building, but also the uneasy state of democratic representation in Germany, with the Kaiser ultimately in control and the three-tier Prussian voting system not allowing true representation¹¹.

The doomed Weimar Republic was proclaimed from the Reichstag, causing many to associate the building with failed democracy, since this was the only time the edifice wielded actual power¹². Ironically, the building designed to reflect democracy was used by Hitler's National Socialists to abolish civil rights and establish a one-party system after an arsonist set it on fire the night of February 27, 1933¹³. The partial destruction of the Reichstag therefore symbolized the complete destruction of democracy. Another irony is that Hitler loved the building, and rejected Speer's plans to have it torn down¹⁴. Heavily damaged in World War II, the Reichstag, though in the British sector, was dangerously close to the Soviet zone and then the Berlin Wall, so the building could no longer house a government institution. Because the West German capital moved to Bonn, the building was not repaired until Paul Baumgarten's renovations in the 1960s, in which the building was turned into

a conference center and, rather appropriately, a history museum¹⁵. A forlorn building in an island city, the Reichstag represented Berlin's former status as the capital of a European power that no longer existed.

On October 3, 1990, German unification was proclaimed from the Reichstag, foreshadowing its role in a new democratic Germany. Once again, controversy surrounded the building and its use as the Bundestag debated whether the capital should remain in Bonn or return to Berlin. In a narrow contest, Berlin prevailed by only eighteen votes¹⁶. Legislators reasoned that Berlin would be better able to "heal the wounds of the Cold War" and embody Germany's new role as a European power¹⁷. A once-divided city was now to demonstrate the unity of a powerful European nation, the democracy that was pulsing through Germany. This period after the *Wende* was the second *Gründerzeit*, or founding time, for the city according to Rogier and was the largest and most problematic rebuilding project of our time according to Large¹⁸. As a center of attention, Berlin now needed to develop its own *hauptstadtkultur* (capital-city culture) as it developed into a *weltstadt* (metropolitan city). The post-wall city is often referred to as the "Berlin Republic" or the "New Berlin," both of which emphasize Berlin's position in representing the new, democratically peaceful Germany¹⁹.

This New Berlin contrasts with the very idea of Bonn, which was utilitarian and tried to ignore the past. As Koepnick states, there were no "breathtaking public gestures" in Bonn²⁰. Berlin, on the other hand, is planned to celebrate the future while commemorating the past, drawing upon its unique history²¹. In 1998, Secretary of Culture Miachal Naumann verbalized this concept, saying, "I would like for the foreign countries to see that it's not just a matter of a new government, but that the move to Berlin sets the stage for a new self-awareness"²². A part of Berlin's self-awareness is battling its past, as Chancellor Schröder emphasized by describing the New Berlin as peaceful, though he was in favor of a powerful architectural style for the city²³. Architecture has been vital in shaping the new city and Berlin's image within Europe and around the world²⁴. Projects such as the Holocaust Memorial, Potsdamer Platz, and the Reichstag, once subjects of much debate, have become new symbols of the city, showing architecture's transformative power²⁵.

The Reichstag is a focal point of the New Berlin because it represents the political modernization of the city. With reunification came the need for

strong political imagery, and the Bundestag's residence is the perfect place to turn such ideas into reality²⁶. Ladd describes the building as "a monument to Germany's troubled national dignity," a building of "ghosts"²⁷. Large states that the Reichstag is the "epitome of symbolically difficult buildings," a "war-scarred fossil...laden with conflicting, many depressing, historical associations," and a place which "bore the ineradicable stink of grand pretensions and tragic failure"²⁸. For these reasons, many, including a large number of Bundestag members, thought the building too emotionally charged for use²⁹. However, the move back to Berlin ensured that the Reichstag would once again hold parliament, and the need to move forward rather than regress weighed heavily upon city planners and politicians alike.

The question of how to transform a building so burdened by memories and "ghosts" of the past was answered rather easily, for Bulgarian artist Christo had been trying to wrap the Reichstag building in fabric since 1971 in a massive experimental art project³⁰. Christo voiced his interest in Berlin, saying, "it is the site of the physical encounter of East and West...it has the richest and most valuable texture of any town in the world"³¹. Many politicians agreed with Christo and argued that now was the time for such a project, a way to symbolically remove the old and usher in the new, for the building to "be wrapped as the Reichstag and unwrapped as the Bundestag"³². Mayor Diepgen and Bundestag President Süssmuth identified the wrapping a "rite of passage," while Social Democrat Peter Conradi said it would "mark a new beginning in the history of the building" and "a new chapter in the history of German parliamentary democracy"³³. Catholic Democrat Heiner Geissler interpreted the project even further calling it a "chance to show the world Germany's tolerant and open-minded character"³⁴.

Other politicians, such as Wolfgang Schäuble, felt that an experimental project would never be allowed on a parliament elsewhere, so it would make Berlin a mockery. Chancellor Kohl labeled the idea "an insult to the building's dignity"³⁵. After a heated debate in February 1994, the project was narrowly approved by a vote of 292 to 223. Sixteen months later, the edifice was covered in one hundred thousand square meters of shiny polypropylene fabric, inviting huge crowds to come and contemplate upon the building³⁶. Huyssen says that when wrapped and invisible, the Reichstag inspired reflection instead of argument³⁷. Christo wanted

his project to begin the reconciliation of history and public memory, and by adding a new event to the collective memory of the Reichstag building, he achieved his goal by reshaping people's feelings towards the building in a more positive light³⁸.

After Christo's project readied the Reichstag for its new position, renovations began almost immediately. Englishman Sir Norman Foster, selected to engineer the new structure in 1992, emphasized two goals: respecting the original and creating a working structure for parliament³⁹. The renovation took four years and cost 600 billion Deutsche marks, 331 billion American dollars, making the Reichstag the most expensive public building in Berlin⁴⁰. Now the building is famous for its glass-and-steel dome, twenty-three meters tall and forty meters wide, composed of eight hundred metric tons of steel and three thousand meters of glass⁴¹. The dome is supported by an internal funnel covered in mirror panels to reflect sunlight into the plenary chamber below giving it natural illumination⁴². Visitors can go to the dome for a panoramic view of Berlin, allowing people to see the city from a distance, making it look more homogenous, a whole rather than a collection of parts⁴³. Atop the roof, visitors are literally standing above the plenary chamber, and theoretically they can look down upon it, showing the openness of true democracy⁴⁴.

The now-famous dome was very controversial in the planning stages. Foster's original contest-winning design had a glass floating viewing platform over the roof instead of a dome⁴⁵. Some thought a dome would call back the "ghosts of Berlin" with the "fantasy of metropolitan grandeur," while others believed preserving the spirit of the original was most important⁴⁶. Political parties had their own ideas about the roof as well. Conservatives wanted an exact replica of Wallot's original dome, whereas the Green party was against a dome altogether. Social Democrats were in favor of a cylinder to top the building as a "lighthouse of democracy." The Free Democratic Party, the only one in favor of a modern, rounded dome, eventually prevailed by convincing the Catholic Democrats that it would be less expensive than a copy of the original. Tired of the countless compromises he was forced to make, Foster created such a technologically advanced glass-and-steel cupola that it was much more costly than a replica of Wallot's would have been⁴⁷.

Even if the dome is different, the building still has a "stylistic discontinuity" between the edifice and the cupola. Contrary to Wallot's intentions, however, Foster shows the "breaks and

fissures” of twentieth century history through this rupture⁴⁸. The dome’s glass represents “political transparency,” a key of the democratic process, which Germany has previously lacked⁴⁹. Glass is unusual because it is a spectacle from both outside and inside, creating elegant architecture but also allowing one to look through it from within. This back-and-forth nature of glass symbolizes the political discourse between politician and constituent, which was missing under Wilhelm II, Hitler, and Honecker⁵⁰. Glass also separates structures from the monumental stone architecture of Hitler and Albert Speer, who wanted Berlin to last for the thousand-year Reich or at least to be prominent in a state of decay, according to Speer’s Ruin Value Theory. For these reasons, glass has been used in many New Berlin buildings, such as Axel Schultes’ chancellery and the government office buildings on the Spree⁵¹. Glass was also used to update the Third Reich’s Reichsbank and Luftwaffe Headquarters in the transition to the Foreign and Finance Ministries in order “to break the spell of an oppressive past”⁵².

Many other controversies surrounded the Reichstag reconstructions. The name Reichstag itself posed problems, for it translates to “Imperial Diet,” and Germany is no longer an Empire. Therefore the building’s official name was changed to *Deutscher Bundestag – Plenarbereich Reichstagsgebäude*, or German Federal Assembly – Plenary Area, Imperial Diet Building⁵³. This official change, though not practiced in everyday usage, shows the intense need to make a distinction between then and now. Another controversy was that of the Renaissance architectural style beneath the dome, still criticized for being imperialistic and undemocratic. People in favor of keeping the original style argued that this is used in English, French, and American government buildings, so Germany should be able to do so as well⁵⁴. Certain decisions to retain history, such as the preservation of graffiti left by Soviet soldiers during the 1945 occupation, also created debate⁵⁵. Conservatives demanded the removal of the writings, which contained quotes like “Glory to the Stalinist Falcons” and “Death to the Germans,” but Foster was adamant about representing the building’s history in the present. Foster, however, did not win every battle. The inside meeting chamber, conference rooms, and press lobby are entirely new, but parliamentarians insisted that they retain traces of Bonn, such as familiar purple seats and a replica of the Bonn eagle statue behind the speaker’s podium⁵⁶.

Since 1999, the Reichstag building has housed the German Bundestag, “centre of the country’s political life and...supreme democratic organ of the state”⁵⁷. This body elected Germany’s first female chancellor, Catholic Democrat Angela Merkel, in 2005⁵⁸. The election of a female head of state is very progressive and shows the true openness and liberalism of the new Germany and of the building in which she was elected. Furthermore, the first Bundestag session in the Reichstag, April 19, 1999, occurred when German troops were in combat for the first time after World War II. German participation in the Balkan conflict as a part of NATO forces coincided with the Reichstag move and represented returning to normalcy and the past without making the same mistakes⁵⁹.

The renovated Reichstag no longer stands for aggression and imperialism, but is now acclaimed as an emblem of the New Berlin and of German democracy⁶⁰. The dome is “the Berlin Republic’s new signature piece: a site of powerful identification and irresistible astonishment...[that] invites the nation’s subjects literally to look up to their capital again”⁶¹. The Reichstag’s popularity shows the success of the transformation, with over fifteen million visitors since its 1999 opening, making the Bundestag the most visited parliament in the world⁶². Foster’s design for the dome and the building as a whole, emphasized transparency and democracy, allowing an old structure to be transformed. Although the ghosts of the Imperial, National Socialist, and divided Berlin have not been removed, the New Berlin centered upon the Reichstag is focused on the future and its role as a European power.

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