



Berlin Palace Rebuilding Begins 63 Years After Explosion

by Catherine Hickey

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■ An architect's impression of the Berlin royal palace, viewed from the Unter den Linden boulevard. German President Joachim Gauck laid the foundation stone for the reconstruction of the palace on June 12, 2013. Source: Stiftung Berliner Schloss - Humboldtforum/ Franco Stella via Bloomberg



Germany began reconstruction of Berlin's royal palace 63 years after the original was blown up by East Germany's communist authorities, as ministers and the mayor brushed aside criticism of the project.

The baroque palace, once home to Prussia's rulers, is to be rebuilt at a cost of 590 million euros (\$787 million), with the federal government providing the bulk of the funds. The Italian architect Franco Stella won the competition to build it in 2008. Construction was delayed because of the cost in 2010.

The plan has its critics, with architects and some politicians arguing that recreating the palace decades after it was demolished is artificial, especially when there is no longer a royal family to live there. Proponents say the demolition left a hole in Berlin's historic center, and point to the success of other reconstructions, such as Dresden's Frauenkirche.

"These days there is only a bit of complaining going on, the skeptics are in the minority," Construction Minister Peter Ramsauer said at today's ceremony, where German President Joachim Gauck symbolically hammered in the foundation stone. "The world is watching to see how we are healing the wounds of war and division."

The rebuilding of the palace, opposite the UNESCO world heritage site of the Museum Island and the cathedral on Berlin's Unter den Linden boulevard, is Germany's biggest cultural project this decade.

Dome, Facades

The palace was first built in 1443, when the city was made up of two small settlements and of little political significance. The most important construction work took place under Frederick I of Prussia, who appointed Andreas Schlueter as the palace architect in 1699.

The German parliament insisted that three of the palace's four facades should be rebuilt as they were, and Schlueter's dome over the main entrance will also be reconstructed.

The building is scheduled for completion in 2018 or 2019. The palace's ground floor will house exhibition halls in its covered courtyards, two restaurants, a theater, a movie theater and an auditorium. A library and Berlin's non-European art and antiquities collections, most of which are currently on display in the western suburb of Dahlem, will be on the upper floors.

"I realize that replicating historic buildings should not be a rule for architects," Culture Minister Bernd Neumann said. "Architects work in their own era. But this is a unique project."

Backward Architecture

Olaf Zimmermann, executive director of the Deutsche Kulturrat, an association of German cultural organizations, described the architectural plans as backward-looking.

"Now the content has to make up for this cowardice," he said in a statement.

In the 1918 revolution, the palace was occupied and looted. Karl Liebknecht proclaimed a socialist republic from one of its balconies on Nov. 9, the day the Kaiser abdicated.

In World War II, the palace suffered severe bomb damage and burned for four days after an attack in February 1945. Soviet artillery added to the damage at the end of the war.

After taking power in East Germany, the communist leader Walter Ulbricht ordered the palace's demolition in 1950. In 1976, the East German government oversaw the building of the Palast der Republik, a bronze-glass, steel and concrete block that housed the country's sham parliament, on the site where the palace stood.

To rebuild the palace, the asbestos-ridden Palast der Republik was dismantled, prompting street demonstrations in early 2006.

“Blowing up the palace was a crime,” said Klaus Wowereit, the mayor of Berlin. “This is not a backward-looking project. I hope that acceptance will grow.”
