

A RCHITECTURE AND POLITICS: AN EXPOSITION OF THE NEW REICHSTAG BUILDING BY SIR NORMAN FOSTER.

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ABSTRACT

A rchitecture is not only classified as describing the elegant and formal preferences of an architect, but it can also reveal the hopes, power struggle and the elements culture of the society. As architecture can control the way we understand the world, looking at architectural history the relation between the monumental architecture and political power can consistently be seen. Architecture gives us the choice to visualize mentally and support societies to create systems that shows their social and cultural traditions and practices. This study is therefore geared towards showing architecture as a tool of connection between social occurrences and political values of a nation. It is in this light that the New Reichstag (the German parliament building) as renovated by Sir Norman Foster is explored because of what it represented at its time of being remodelled.

Keywords: Architecture; Politics; Germany; Reichstag building; Norman Foster

Introduction:

According to Schumacher (2011), politics today exists exclusively as a professionalised sphere of activity mainly concerned with the management and administration of common resources (the state and its people). As with other specialised social activities, like law or medicine, it has very strict structures that determine its function and communication, and this internal inertia makes it resistant to outside influence. On the other hand, architecture is seen as a process and product of planning, designing and construction of structures which is aimed at fulfilling both practical and expressive requirements and thus serves both utilitarian and aesthetic ends (www.britannica.com).

To this end, architecture can be used to transmit messages when the building users invest into buildings meaning. Levels of such communication have certainly changed during time. According to Yari, Mansouri & Zuric (2015) Marxist theoreticians especially pointed at social, political and class connotations of architectural complexes, understanding them as portrayals of the existing social standing. Many in the field of architecture believe that architecture can be read as text, that it is a self-contained sign system with its own grammar. That is to say, architecture can also reveal the hopes, power struggle and the elements culture of the society if put into that context.

In the light of the aforementioned, Woods (1992) states that architecture is a political act, by nature. In his opinion, Financial, as well as material, intellectual and emotional resources of a whole group of people get involved in a particular building project. And any time you get a group, you're talking about politics. In line with this point, Poole & Shvartzberg (2015) stated that, architecture as building is always seen as being political, because it literally embodies a mixture of state interests and clan interests (probably better thought of today as corporate interests). That is to say, the sliding scale between collective and individual ambitions becomes frozen in structure; architecture is therefore always a snapshot of a political climate. Woods (1992) stated that to him, politics means one thing: How do you change your situation? What is the mechanism by which you change your life? With this notion, he went further to state that architecture has to do with the relationships between people and how they decide to change their conditions of living. By stating so, politics has a bearing on architecture, as architecture is a prime instrument of making change because it has to do with building the environment we live in, and the relationships that exist in that environment.

In this regard, this study looks at the New Reichstag Building in Germany as renovated by Sir Norman Foster, with a view of understanding the architectural manifestation, methods used in the architecture to express aspirations and connections of architecture to social occurrences and political values of the nation and the role the philosophy of the architect played during the process.

Design of Study

The study adopted a descriptive survey approach. This was aimed at exposing the methods used in the architecture of the renovated Reichstag building to express aspirations and connections of architecture to social occurrences and

political values of the nation and the role the philosophy of the architect played during the process. The main instruments for data collection was the extensive search of literatures that relates to the subject of study.

The Man Norman Foster and his Philosophy of Design.

According to the Biography.com editors (2020), Norman Robert Foster, OM, FRIBA, FCSD, RDI (born 1 June 1935) is an English architect. His company, Foster and Partners, has an international design practice. He is the United Kingdom's biggest builder of landmark office buildings.

Early Career and Education

Furthermore, Biography.com editors (2020) elaborated that his early career started by him taking up a job as assistant to a contract manager with John Bearshaw and Partners, a local architectural practice. The staff advised him, that if he wished to become an architect, he should prepare a portfolio of drawings using the perspective and shop drawings from Bearshaw's practice as an example. Bearshaw was so impressed with the drawings that he promoted the young Foster to the drawing department of the practice.

In 1956 Foster won a place at the University of Manchester School of Architecture and City Planning. Foster was not eligible for a maintenance grant so took up a number of part-time jobs to fund his studies, becoming an ice-cream salesman, night-club bouncer and working night shifts at a bakery to make crumpets. He combined these with self-tuition via visits to the local library in Levenshulme. Foster took a keen interest in the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer and graduated from Manchester in 1961. He later won the Henry Fellowship to the Yale School of Architecture, where he met future business partner Richard Rogers and earned his master's degree. Vincent Scully encouraged Foster and Rogers to travel in America for a year. After returning to the UK in 1963 he set up an architectural practice as Team 4 with Rogers and the sisters Georgie and Wendy Cheesman. Georgie (later Wolton) was the only one of the team that had passed her RIBA exams allowing them to set up in practice on their own. Team 4 quickly earned a reputation for high-tech industrial design.

Foster and Partners, London Office

After Team 4 went their separate ways, Foster and Wendy Cheesman founded Foster Associates, which later became Foster and Partners in 1967. A long period of collaboration with American architect Richard Buckminster Fuller

began in 1968 and continued until Fuller's death in 1983. They collaborated on several projects that became catalysts in the development of an environmentally sensitive approach to design (www.fosterandpartners.com). He is recognized as one of Britain's most prolific architects of his generation. In 1999, he was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize, often referred to as the Nobel Prize of architecture. In 2009 Foster was awarded the Prince of Asturias Award in the Arts category.

His Design and Design Philosophies

Sir Norman Foster has established an extremely prolific career in the span of five decades and during these period created more than 50 landmark designs all around the world. The type of structures included; Bridges, Government buildings, Cultural centers, Higher Educational buildings, Sport buildings, Transport buildings, offices, Leisure centers, Mixed-use buildings and Residential buildings.

Design Philosophy

Foster's earlier designs reflected a sophisticated, machine-influenced high-tech vision. His style has evolved into a more sharp-edged modernity (www.fosterandpartners.com). For example, the tallest bridge in the world, the Millau Viaduct in Southern France, with the Millau Mayor Jacques Godfrain stating; "The architect, Norman Foster, gave us a model of art."

Another aspect of his design philosophy is flexibility. As stated by him in an interview by the European, "We design with an awareness that circumstances will change — that a building's context will evolve; it may be used in different ways and will need to incorporate new technologies that we cannot yet predict". This is very notable in the headquarters for the insurance brokers Willis Faber building in the 1970s. The building was able to accommodate the shift from typewriters to word processors just a few years later. This was made possible by the provision of a raised access floor, this was revolutionary at the time (because such features were confined to computer rooms. The Hongkong and Shanghai Bank is another exemplar. It relegated the normal central core to the edges of open, flexible floors. This meant that the bank was able to introduce a large trading floor quite easily and without disruption. It was something that could never have been anticipated when the building was designed.

Another aspect that characterized his designs is the deep respect for history. This is exemplified in the rebuilding of the Reichstag, it connoted the interplay of old and new.

Today, his designs are geared towards environmental sensitivity as Foster works with its engineers to use computer systems. They pay attention to basic physical laws such as convection and have created efficient buildings like the Swiss Re London headquarters in London. The walls let in air for passive cooling and then let it out as it warms and rises.

The Reichstag-German Parliament Building

The German Parliament (Reichstag) by Foster and Partners was originally built to house the parliament of the German Empire. The Reichstag was controversial before its construction even began. In 1871 the competition to design the building was announced, the chosen site in Berlin was already occupied by the Prussian Count Raczynski's Palace, he refused to sell his land during his lifetime. Another controversy over the selection of a half-Russian Architect in the Design Competition, delayed progress even more.

Later on Second Design Competition limited to German-Speaking Architects only, won by Paul Wallot, and the construction finally began in 1884. Due to Kaisers' (German Emperor) whim of decisions, Wallot's Neo-Classical Design was subjected to many revisions, the building was finally completed in 1894. One of the most recognizable element of Wallot's design, the Inscription 'Dem Deutsche Volke' (to the German People) on the main Pediment of the building. The Kaiser viewed the Inscription as distastefully populist, and it was only added in 1916 as a Patriotic Symbol during World War I.



Plate 1: The Original Reichstag Building

Source: www.arch20.com/German parliament

Since its completion, the building has played many supporting roles in the World History, starting with the Fire in 1933, allegedly set by a Dutch Communist, allowed Hitler to seize Power. As World War II came to an end in Europe, the Soviets used the heavily-damaged Reichstag as a setting for propaganda photos to re-enact their capture of the city. Restoration efforts were carried on slowly after the War, as the building was located on the front lines of the Cold War, just on the Western side of Berlin Wall. Finally in 1971, plans to restore the building for eventual parliamentary were stalled, when the West German Government agreed not to hold any Bundestag (federal constitutional and legislative body) sessions at the Reichstag in exchange for East Germany easing access to West Berlin.



Plate 2: The Reichstag on fire in 1933



Plate 3: The Reichstag in post war occupied Berlin, 1945

Source: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/file: Berlin-reichstag](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/file:Berlin-reichstag)



Plate 4: The Reichstag building without the dome, 1970

Source: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/file: Berlin-reichstag](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Berlin-reichstag)

Prior to the beginning of the construction by Foster and Partners in 1995, the entire building was wrapped in enormous strips of fabric in an art piece by the artists Christo and Jean Claude (Cichanowicz, 2016).

After the German reunification, two close votes in the Parliament confirmed the relocation of the Capital to Berlin. The Reichstag was the home of the German Parliament or the Bundestag (federal constitutional and legislative body). In 1992 Foster and Partners was one of the fourteen non-German firms invited to participate in a design competition. Lord Foster was skeptical that there will be less chances for a non-German architect to win the competition. But the results were breath-taking, the last three finalists were all non-German: Lord Foster, Santiago Calatrava and Pi de Brujin. Foster's original competition design was to cover the original structure with steel and glass, stretching it to the north to connect with the Spree River.

But as the illumination of the Reunification got dimmer, the financial realities of rebuilding national infrastructure began to step in, and the three finalists were asked to reduce the costs of their proposals in the Second round of the Competition. Despite this request, the competition committee refused to supply a Budget for the proposed building. While others busy in making adjustments

to their designs, Lord Foster started from scratch and proposed four possible schemes with 'a range of estimates to show how more or less work could be carried out on the building'. And one of these schemes was selected finally for the construction. But it was just the beginning of a very lengthy process, as the home of the German Parliament, nearly every major to the minute design decision was based on a political significance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Dome.

The New Reichstag Building by Foster and Partners

Lord Foster initially refused to consider adding a dome, but a separate proposal from a German Architect to add a reconstruction of the historic Dome put Foster's vision for the building's interior spaces in a tragic mismatch, and he began to explore ideas for what he came to call the 'Cupola'.

The 'Cupola' is the most publically accessible portion of the building. The symbolic landmark glass dome brings natural light and ventilation down to the parliament floors and into its own entrance, reflected by its mirrored core (arch20.com). Helical ramps inside the Dome allows people to climb up to the top and enjoy a 360 degree view of the Berlin city. There is also a restaurant on the roof terrace. A mechanism fitted in the Dome to track the movement of the sun and blocks direct sunlight to avoid excess heat and uncomfortable glaze. At the same time, skylights at the base of the 'Cupola' open into the Debating chamber below, provide a transparent visual connection to the Government at work (Cyganiak,2015). An inverted cone of mirrored panels in the center of the dome reflects daylight down into the Debating chamber, and also supports ventilation in the building, exhausting hot air through the top of the 'Cupola'.



Plate 6: Approach of the Reichstag



Plate 7: An angle view of the Reichstag

Source: www.arch20.com/German parliament



Plate 8: The Reichstag Dome (Cupola)



Plate 9: Mirrored core that brings light into the chambers

Source: www.arch20.com/German parliament



Plate 10: Inside the parliamentary chambers



Plate 11: A view from up the dome into the chambers

Source: www.arch20.com/German parliament

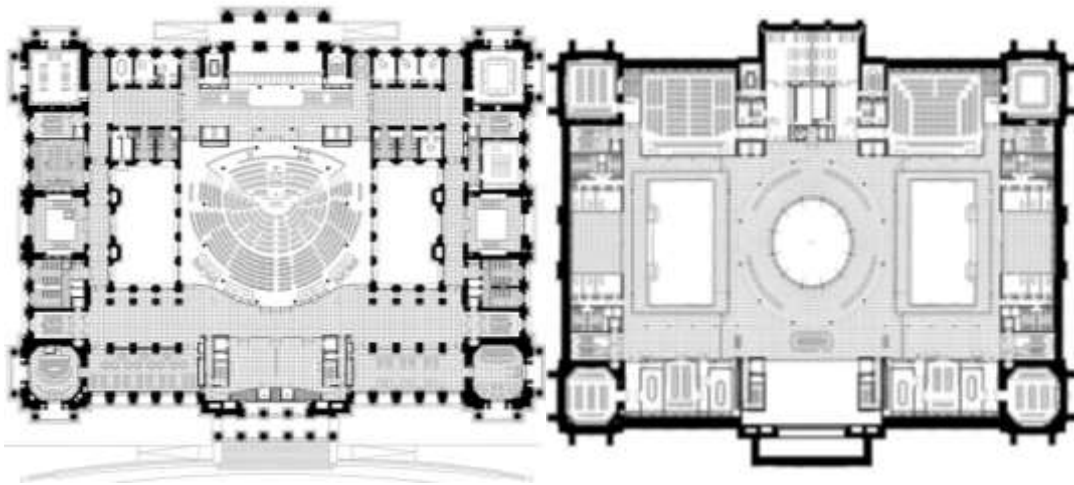


Plate 12: Ground Floor plan of the Reichstag

Plate 13: Upper floor plan of the Reichstag

Source: www.arch20.com/German parliament

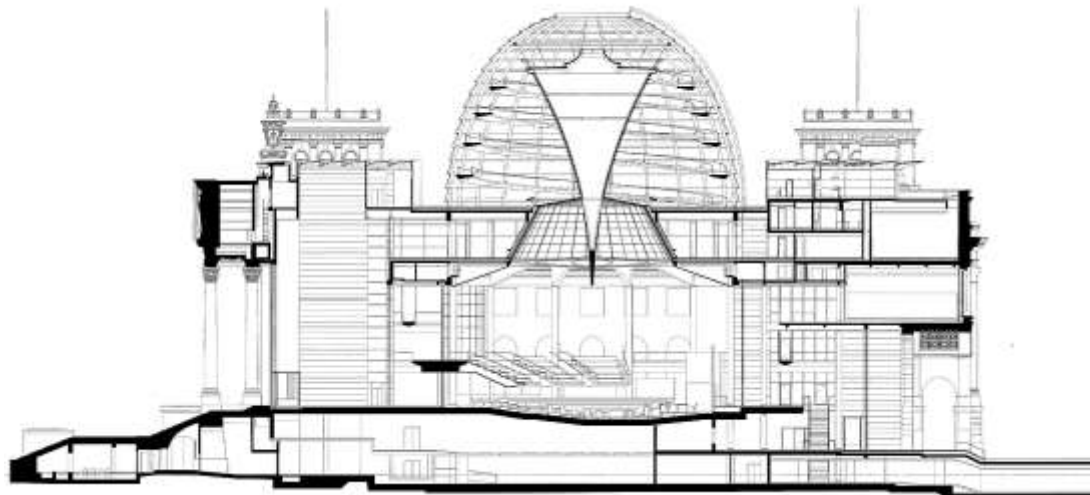


Plate 14: A sectional view of the Reichstag

Source: www.arch20.com/German parliament

Other than Cupola, Lord Foster's other interventions in the building were no less significant. The design was able to consolidate the functional spaces of the Parliament back into a single building. It is most notably for the MPs, the 'Faction rooms' where the party gather to discuss new policies. Lord Foster was also intent to enrich the history of the building, through preserving the Cyrillic graffiti Soviet soldiers scribbled on the stone walls at the end of the World War

II, the one of the most notable example of it. The important symbolism of the Public and the Politicians entering the building through the same entrance, under the Classical Pediment inscribed, 'To the German People'.

One of main important aspects of the Reichstag is that it runs on renewable bio-fuel and refined vegetable oil, this system is far cleaner than burning fossil fuels. So energy requirements of the building allow it to perform as a local power station by supplying power to the nearby government buildings. Surplus heat generated by the Reichstag's power plant is stored in a natural aquifer 300 meters below the building. In winter, stored water is used to heat the building or pump to an absorption cooling plant that produces cold water. This water also being stored below the ground and withdrawn in hot weather to provide cooling via chilled ceilings.



Figure 1: Natural ventilation and Lighting concept in the plenary

Figure 2: The building ecology

Source: www.arch20.com/German parliament

The Architecture and Politics in the New Reichstag

The cupola then becomes a beacon, signalling the strength and vigour of the German democratic process.

The design of the Reichstag into the seat of German Parliament by Foster is rooted in four interconnected issues; the significance of the Bundestag as one of the world's great democratic forums; a commitment to making the process of government publicly accessible; an understanding of history as a force which shapes buildings as well as the life of nations; and a passionate adherence to the low-energy, environmental friendly agenda which is fundamental to the architecture of the future.

The project being entrusted to a foreign architect signal a German desire to be perceived as having moved beyond reflexive nationalism. This is further

strengthened by the fact that the three finalist in the Reichstag competition were all foreigners; Foster; dutch Pi de Bruijn and spaniard Santiago Calatrava (Chametzky, 2001).

Chametzky, (2001) further stated as historian David Clay observes, “ clearly, the parliamentary officials had a fear of seeming too assertive,too Germanin the traditional sense.

As the chairman of the Bundestag building committee admitted; there was perhaps some anxiety that if we did it in a purely German manner, we would taken a whack.

The president of the Bundestag, Wolgang Thierse writes: “ the decision to chose Norman Foster demonstrates that Germany is serious in its attempts to unite Europe and its people.

Hence, awarding the commission to a foreigner was thus one way to assert internationalism and to deflect criticism that dangerous, old fashioned nationalism was driving the building restoration and the re-establishment of Berlin as the capital.

The Reichstag reflect profoundly the locale synchronically, in terms of the building site and function today, and diachronically as a repository and embodiment of conceptions of the history of the German nation and the conceptions of the German body politic.

The building is therefore polyphonic, giving voice to the multiple associations, histories and individuals. Some of these voices come from the past, as interpreted in the present.

Jenny Holzer’s LED installations proclaims democracy to the heavens as it sends excerpts from speeches delivered by parliament members streaming endlessly upwards.

As we peeled away the layers of history, the bones of the old Reichstag came to light, revealing striking imprints of the past, such as fragments of the nineteenth century mouldings, the marks of masons, infill from the 1960’s, the scars of war and the graffiti chalked by the soviet soldiers in 1945. 30 (i.e to say history resonated through the Reichstag fabric; allowing Reichstag to function as a living Museum of German history).

The Reichstag is to represent a nation that hardly existed and to house and represent a democratic body in what was essentially an imperial oligarchy.

The dome has be argued, was not only the modern element in the building; its transparency and visible armature also made it a democratic symbol

(Buddensiege, 1993). As one of the three prominent dome in central Berlin (along with those of the Berlin cathedral , Schluter's palace) it was seen to represent the third pillar of society; the people, along with the church and court. The central metaphor of work in the new Reichstag by Foster is transparency. The transparent dome and glass curtain wall behind the west portal thus connotes an ideal of an open, observable, transparent German democracy.

Summary and Conclusion

The Reichstag Building in Berlin, Germany has a long history dating back to the nineteenth century, and has reflected different phases of the German social standing and politics especially with the world. Right from the onset of bringing the Reichstag to reality, it has been marred by controversies ranging from the acquisition of the land to the nationality of the architect commissioned to do the project and finally the world war in which Germany played a major role. Its renovation after the unification of the German Nations (East and West) in the 1990's was a landmark as the Germans wanted to present themselves as being a democratic nation as against the earlier authoritarian nature of government they operated. In trying to right the wrongs, they started by allowing foreigners have an edge during the competition for the project, in which Norman Foster won. That presented the Germans as internationalist as against their nationalist nature which they were known for and in line with this their aspirations, Sir Norman Foster presented an architecture that showcased this transition. This is by the integration of the high tech dome which represented transparency (a great attribute of any democratic government) to the old Reichstag.

In conclusion, from the history of the Reichstag Building as already highlighted, politics had played a substantial role in its design and construction and the philosophy of design of sir Norman Foster, that is, his symbolic hightech approach and respect for history underlines the New Reichstag and it was a success as the parliament building is now a tourist attraction for people from around the world and has portrayed Germany as a democratic nation as visitors and citizens are able to view the plenary sessions of the parliamentarians.

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