

# THE GAP IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER. TREATMENT OF LACUNAE IN NEUES MUSEUM BERLIN

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**Abstract:** As in 2009 the *Neues Museum* ("New Museum") in Berlin was reopened after restoration, the long awaited moment triggered most various reactions between praise and criticism. The core of all debates was the treatment of loss and the reconstruction (or non-reconstruction) of the missing architectural parts such as the staircase (*Treppenhalle*). Being one of the most debated contemporary conservation projects, we ask ourselves how does the restoration of the Neues Museum work in the eyes of the beholder and what could be the judgment behind the rejection or approval?

**Rezumat:** Redeschiderea a Neues Museum din Berlin în anul 2009 a declanșat nenumărate reacții, unele admirative iar altele critice. În centrul dezbaterilor s-a aflat tratamentul lacunelor și al pierderii în general, precum și reconstruirea (sau ne-reconstruirea) părților lipsă din arhitectură, așa cum s-a întâmplat cu casa scărilor (*Treppenhalle*). Întrebarea principală, pe care articolul o ridică, este: ce declanșază în ochi privitorului restaurarea a Neues Museum – unul dintre cele mai discutate proiecte contemporane de conservare – și care ar putea fi judecățile, care stau în spatele reacțiilor?

## Brief History of the Neues Museum: Construction – Destruction – Restoration

Awarded the Mies van der Rohe Prize for Architecture in 2011, the Neues Museum has been one of the most intriguing Berlin buildings from the last two decades. Built during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the UNESCO Monument<sup>1</sup> was destroyed in World War II and restored only after the German Reunification. The Museum has been open for public since 16<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

The construction of the Neues Museum was supposed to be realized by the famous German architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel, but his death led to a change of plans. The project was taken over by Schinkel's favourite student, Friedrich August Stühler. The idea of the project as well as the architectural programme were initiated by the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm the 4<sup>th</sup>, a *romantic on the throne of Prussia*, as he is often described. The Neues Museum was designed to receive national heritage,<sup>2</sup> Egyptian and Middle Eastern artefacts, the Collection of Cooper Engravings and other objects from the Ancient Prussian Art Chamber.<sup>3</sup>

The exterior architecture brings together the king's vision with that of the architect himself: romantic Doric columns stand together with simple forms and parsimonious designed surfaces.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Stühler develops his own ideas departing from the ones of his master, Friedrich Schinkel. The main difficulty the construction had to face – the same that the restorers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century faced – was the consolidation of the ground. As the terrain was solid, the ground stone was put in 1843. In 1846 the exterior construction was finished, but work has been interrupted during the 1848 Revolution. In 1859 the museum was opened for the first time.<sup>5</sup>

The architecture is notable for the constructive performances Stühler realized while building the Neues Museum. Firstly, he used atypical technology and was the first German constructor to borrow steam power engineering – usually used in railway construction – as well as consolidation techniques from industrial architecture.<sup>6</sup> Another particularity of the building is the diversity of the ceiling construction: ceilings sustained on beams, cassette ceilings, barrel vaults, or calotte, gothic stellar-vaults (actually hanging metal lathes).<sup>7</sup>

The Second World War is a dark chapter in the history of the Neues Museum. In the night between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 1943 the middle roof truss and the staircase together with Kaulbach's frieze burn and are completely destroyed. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 1945 the North-West Wing and the bridge between the Neues and Altes Museum are also destroyed.

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<sup>1</sup> The Neues Museum is part of the UNESCO World Heritage since 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Germ.: *vaterländische Altertümer*.

<sup>3</sup> Steingraber 2009, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Henze 2009, p. 208.