

Bauakademie Berlin



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RECONSTRUCTION
OR RE-ENACTMENT

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I have been reflecting how our chance encounter with the *Bauakademie* in the context of the research project *Curatorial Design—A Place Between* opened up a space to rethink the fundamental premises of the discipline as it has emerged under the name of “architecture”. While our research project at IZK/TU Graz with its case study on a reconstruction and re-enactment of Schinkel’s design for the *Bauakademie* focused on the question of design, I recognized the question of elements as an approach to your current design studio for the *Bauakademie* at the Technical University of Vienna. The 2017 call to rebuild the *Bauakademie* under the motto “as much Schinkel as possible”¹ falls into the realm of preservation—the sub-discipline of architecture that comes across as the most ossified, the most determined by rigid expert knowledge. This is presumably because historic preservation (viewed from the outside) negates so many aspects of what constitutes architecture as a profession that always pursues the goal of attaining the new and unseen. And yet, it is precisely this entanglement—where the task is not to create something new but an image of a building which, at least at the first glance, has no skeletons in the closet and has a “fixed” position in the canon of architectural history—that opens up a space to rethink relations that constitute design and with that the knowledge it produces and activates. What makes *Bauakademie* such a perfect companion for the process of unlearning² architecture as a form?

WK

Schinkel’s *Bauakademie* is often described as an example of innovative construction. From a structural point of view, we see a rather thick brick construction that completely lacks the elegance and spatial effectiveness of an iron construction that technically would have been possible at the time. When we read the comments of contemporaries about the early days of the school, we hear about bad ventilation and conclude that the building services were not particularly sophisticated either. That said, where is innovative content to be found? One way to simultaneously understand the *Bauakademie* as both a design and a novelty is perhaps to consider Schinkel’s comprehensive role, thereby understanding a design less as a *disegno* and more as a “designation,” i.e., as designing of a programmatic rather than a planning nature. The architect defining a building task and thus the program itself, thereby assumes the role of the client on the one hand, the role of an occupant on the other while ensuring that the building does not simply fulfill general expectations but produces something novel instead. Had there ever been a building facing the royal palace in Berlin of such a hybrid program consisting of school for architects, a planning authority, an architect’s studio, an apartment, and even a few stores? Sir John Soane’s residence in London, converted into a museum, could resemble Schinkel’s project. An update of this self-image of the architect is a starting point for unlearning architecture as a pure form. Based on this, I argue that a new *Bauakademie* should open up the possibility to rethink architecture and the education of architects in order to scrutinize our understanding of the discipline from the ground up.

DS

In this context, the call for a reconstruction of the *Bauakademie* can be viewed as a critical point, as Stuart Hall describes it with the term “conjuncture,” a constellation that holds both

a moment of danger and an opportunity, thereby simultaneously calling for action on an intellectual, social, cultural, and political level. For Hall, a conjuncture is an instance of danger and an opportunity rolled into one. The Humboldt Forum, having been recently completed across the street from the former and also future site of the *Bauakademie* could be seen as an example of a danger inherent in the call for reconstruction, manifesting as a form in space. In our engagement with the *Bauakademie*, however, conjuncture opens up as an opportunity, a chance for intervention into a configuration whose components were to be rearranged through practice.

If we stay a bit longer with the relation between Soane's House and Schinkel's *Bauakademie*, the other factors of conjuncture may become clearer. Interestingly, these two projects intersect almost perfectly in time: John Soane's Museum was established by the Parliament's 1833 Private Act, which took effect after John Soane's death in 1837. The act made it mandatory to preserve Soane's idiosyncratic London home as it was in perpetuity. The house was a modification of a generic townhouse typology of the time to house Soane's entire array of cosmology. A moment frozen in time, when the private house became public, was oddly also the time when it withdrew from the public, and along with it, a certain (self-)understanding of the role of the architect became stabilized via the tribute made. The *Bauakademie*, with its complex designation, was built between 1832 and 1836, thereby providing for dynamic and changing relationships between the individual components. Even though it contains the architect's private apartment, it is ultimately an intervention in the public sphere and in the relationships of a professional designation, that of architects, with the public.

Reading the conjuncture suggested in this connection between Soane's house and the *Bauakademie*, together with the aforementioned disciplinary self-understanding would give grounds for the existence of a third component apart from

architecture and architectural education that must be more explicitly taken into consideration in the new *Bauakademie*: the concept of public(ness) or public sphere.

WK

If "public" in 1836 meant founding the *Bauakademie* and building it at the same time, what does this concept mean today? "As much Schinkel as possible" could refer to something other than simply rebuilding a lost historical architectural artifact. To begin with, this motto could mean that contemporary architects who relate in some way to Schinkel play a central role in establishing the new institution. However, the procedure for selecting the founding director resulted in exactly the opposite: the choice was made for a professional politician with no architectural background, who had to resign after some architects (among others) protested and a lawsuit was filed. "As much Schinkel as possible" could also signify the invention of a new kind of public institution instead of a mere representation of state policy that challenges our notions of institutionalism. The public character emanating from a contemporary *Bauakademie*, whose founding deliberately transcends the field of professional training, could be understood primarily as a way to conceive the mediation of architecture beyond that which is purely professional, thereby including decision-makers as well—just like Schinkel's *Bauakademie* not only included the Berlin building authorities but also challenged the royal client living in the palace across the river as well. If architecture is a practice in which design plays a central role and is elaborated by architects, then it is equally true that design decisions depend on repeated interaction with decision-makers and prevailing public interest. Interestingly, the institution of 1836 is precisely on this level. Could it succeed in arousing the interest of the public, involving them and imparting knowledge as an integral part of the design?

DS

It just has to! Isn't that precisely the crucial challenge? The fascinating thing about the *Bauakademie* is not necessarily that the project included, as its integral part, a studio and apartment for Schinkel, which could be read as a confirmation of the obsession with the figure of the architect as a powerful, creative individual but the fact that the architectural school was under the same roof as the public building authority. Schinkel's project was not about a withdrawal but about establishing mechanisms for public interest and knowledge, which is the potential we are trying to activate with our research project at IZK in relation to the re-enactment of Schinkel's design. From the very beginning, it was done in opposition to the royal power, being aware that intricacies of space as a public matter are always constitutive to political process and subjectivation. This definitely highlights a difference from the *diseño* of the Renaissance, in which a professional architect established himself through the process of abstraction from social relations existing on the construction site, and one could say that architectural education, in particular, struggles to negotiate with that abstraction. Here, in shifting the focus of the problem of reconstruction from the building to the design, and from the architect as an individual to the question of institutions and the public—is where I think the strength of the approach to the *Bauakademie* and Schinkel lies. Thus, working with space is repositioned as a problem of establishing relations.

However, it also raises a problem of the constituents: designing with, designing along, designing for, designing against. The problem of prepositions emerges, and here, I would like to return to the theme of public knowledge and interest, since neither of these categories are imposed or established from the outside. They all exist in a difficult relation, co-producing each other in space while simultaneously producing space. But that is not all: there is also the question

of knowledge, as inherent to the “discipline” and the question of the public knowledge. At the same time, interests converge within space, enticing various members of the public to engage with, and there is a belief that public interest will emerge from this engagement. Design somehow exists in between all these elements, but what is meant by design?

WK

When our students began working on their designs for the *Bauakademie*, their starting point was not the program. We started with the place, understood as an Aldo Rossian “locus” and not just as a building site. From there, we researched historical and contemporary contexts with the aim of understanding underlying and often contradictory themes and issues. These insights were then used to define the design task at hand. I would argue that this is precisely where public interest and disciplinary knowledge intersect and where design might emerge as a “non-discipline”. Here there are points of contact with Curatorial Design and with our joint research activities with the Institute of Contemporary Art at Graz University of Technology. Curatorial Design has also been a focus of our work with Kuehn Malvezzi from the beginning as an aim to overcome the disciplinary limitations of a merely professional understanding of design in favor of an equally political understanding, while not abandoning the practical *métier* of architecture, of designing and of building as an architectural studio, just as Rossi insisted on this self-understanding as a practitioner as opposed to a service-providing *professionista*. If we look at the debate about the reconstruction of a building like the *Bauakademie* from the perspective of Curatorial Design, or, as it has been stated, from the point of view of the difficult relationships involved in making space, our research opens up possibilities for shifting the main focus from re-erection to actually designing Schinkel's structure anew. With Kuehn Malvezzi, we had

already developed a proposal for the reconstruction of the Berlin Palace located across from the *Bauakademie*, approaching it as a form of re-enactment that could be related to artistic practices of repetition and appropriation. The goal was to overcome the sterile debate of so-called critical reconstruction in architecture, which since the *Internationale Bauausstellung* of 1987 in Berlin has degenerated into an ideological backlash for which architecture is no more than mere staffage. Interestingly, all of our students found the challenge of a re-enactment in the literal sense of the word to be of little relevance but made design proposals that in one way or another referred to Schinkel's design. They also made explicit reference to other designs they found during their research on the site.

DS

The relationship between curatorial and re-enactment is exciting here. Both relate to knowledge by destabilizing the established consensus, the status quo—the generally accepted understanding of what knowledge is required for a project. They open up the possibility of breaking out of disciplinary autopoiesis. The curatorial is a practice that produces (new) knowledge and establishes relations between people, institutions, discipline, and knowledge, i.e., it creates a context in which new knowledge can emerge. By posing questions of what was and what will be, re-enactment challenges design as an existing and stable knowledge model. The important question is how to trigger this process. Here, the *Bauakademie* served as a prop,³ directing attention in the case of Curatorial Design research at IZK/TU Graz to specific aspects of architecture as a discipline, where a design is also understood as a 'container' of knowledge. In the context of your work with students at TU Vienna, *Bauakademie* alleviates the pressure caused by student work in order to reveal something entirely new and never before seen, thereby drawing attention to

space as relational, not as a given. However, if the *Bauakademie* is a prop which triggers the process, surely this process also needs a supporting structure, a system that enables this new set of relations and knowledge to emerge. In the case of Curatorial Design, this support system was a table (i.e., a physical encounter) and a workshop that we held; in the case of TU Vienna, it was the fact that you as a professor assigned a task. In both cases, there is the question of the authority of those who guide and initiate the process, thereby doing so in such a way that we come back to the question of responsibility and positionality of the entity that initiates this process. How can this be conceivable without falling back to the notion of the architect as a stereotypical all-knowing person, but still has a place in a society?

WK

Authority of course has points of contact with the authoritarian, but also with authorship. The concept of Curatorial Design is precisely designed to address forms of design authority that go beyond the idea of individual authorship and at the same time insist that architectural decisions challenge and break through consensus. Thus, neither an idealized individual nor an idealized collective automatically provide a blueprint for authorship. Here, curatorial practice offers a model for our architectural design strategy, thereby replacing this sterile binary opposition with something field-like, an in-between space.

This in-between space is to be understood as a place where conceptual decisions can be made without being measured against specific expectations or tasks, but rather must define their framework and thus the criteria themselves against which the resulting design is judged and developed. Our students were not asked to simply fulfill an assignment that I, as a professor, gave (and as an architect, I would not want to participate in a competition that is structured this way).

Most of the students worked individually; only two people were eager to work together as a team. Here we made the proposal to work together on two projects, exploring the boundaries of two different approaches to the conceptual challenge they had defined for themselves in the introductory research phase. This gave us the opportunity to expand the field while insisting on authorship and clear choices. In my view, both the search for a director for the new *Bauakademie* and the planned architectural competition for this site should be conceived and carried out in a way that allows for a curatorial approach in which tasks and objectives are defined conceptually rather than as a fixed task. In other words, policy makers should have the courage to openly pose their problem as a political question rather than initiating procurement procedures according to the market rules. Curatorial Design offers a way to define a multi-perspective approach not as a negotiation but as a debate, and to do so uses artistic choices and proposals.

- 1 Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung (October 12, 2017): "Wiedererrichtung der Bauakademie Berlin als Nationale Bauakademie. Offener, einphasiger Wettbewerb". https://www.bbr.bund.de/BBR/DE/Bauprojekte/Berlin/Kultur/Nat_Bauakademie/Programm Wettbewerb-Bauakademie (accessed April 28, 2021)
- 2 Here I borrow concepts of companion and unlearning from Ariela Aïsha Azoulay as developed in her recent book *Potential History* in which she states that "[Unlearning] is effectuated—can be effectuated—only with companions who are not experts in delineated fields and guardians of their delineated histories." See Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha: *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London 2019, p. 15
- 3 On the concept of a prop see: Harney, Stefano/Moten, Fred: "The General Antagonism: An Interview with Stevphen Shukaitis." In: *idem* (eds.): *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson 2013, pp. 100–159