

# Aldo Rossi in the Turmoil of “German identity.” The German Historical Museum Competition of 1988

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*Aldo Rossi, Max Bächer, German Historical Museum, Architecture Competitions, Politics*

## /Abstract

The 1988 competition for the German Historical Museum in Berlin was on several layers a controversial project that testifies to the public's potential to embrace a diverse culture of dispute. Even before the competition, the idea of a museum on German history was fiercely debated, especially in the face of National Socialism. Aldo Rossi's proposal that won the competition featured a collage of typological forms reminiscent of historical German monuments. But critics contested its monumentality and naïve use of iconography, while the jury was accused to have violated competition regulations. The fall of the Berlin Wall eventually ended the debate, but this did not go without reaction: The head jury Max Bächer protested to the then-chancellor Helmut Kohl, demanding compensation for Rossi's lost prize.

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## Introduction

Aldo Rossi's winning design for the 1988 competition of the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* (DHM, German Historical Museum) came as a surprise to everyone, including Rossi himself.<sup>1</sup> In a tense political climate, the Italian architect surpassed more than two hundred German and international architects, with a cathedral-like building in a historicist composition of typological elements. The vivid discussions that this project caused came to an abrupt end with the fall of the Berlin wall a year later. But the controversies over the museum had been instigated long before the announcement of the architectural competition and accompanied the process since its initial conception.

The DHM-project offers a case study of how decision-making, negotiation between different interest groups and criticism shape an architectural project over a long period of time. What role do politicians, critics, jury members, awarding authorities, architects, the public and history itself play in such a competition? Architectural production, especially when examining larger public buildings, is often defined by the relationship between client, builder and architect, along with the ongoing public debate. The hundreds of newspaper articles, in which the conception and the political will for a museum on German history, the location of the museum, the competition and its proceedings, Rossi's design and finally the historical situation of the fall of the Berlin Wall were discussed, testify to the influence of diverse agencies and conflicts that take place before, during and after the process of architectural production.

In *On the political* Chantal Mouffe writes against the "post-political" belief in a "consensual form of democracy" where consensus and reconciliation can be obtained through dialogue. Following the concept of an agonistic pluralism, she reminds us that conflict is constitutive for "the political" and does not need to be completely resolved. Democracy, according to Mouffe, means to envision "the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted."<sup>2</sup> Differing and opposing opinions—divided not along moral but political criteria—offer the public a real choice between alternatives, and it takes political arguments rather than moral statements to convince. Rather than criticising the DHM competition or the decisions that accompanied its planning, we would like to highlight the importance of conflict in this project. The public was actively involved, not only through various newspaper reports and discussions, but also through consecutive public hearings and the collective procedures of the architectural competition. Whether the mayor of Berlin was a Social Democrat or a Christian Conservative made a real difference in these ten years of debate regarding the opening of a museum on German history.

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1 Gian Luigi Paracchini, "Un architetto Milanese per Berlino," *Corriere della Sera* (October 6, 1988).

2 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge 2005), 3.

The specific German context and history are crucial to understand the controversy surrounding the DHM. Not only was the conception of a museum dedicated to German history overshadowed by the recent National Socialist past, Rossi's design was also judged against the backdrop of the architecture built in the Third Reich. This past was not at all "past and overcome" in the 1980s. Despite earlier works by Hildegard Brenner<sup>3</sup> and Joseph Wulf<sup>4</sup> as well as Anna Teut's comprehensive publication *Architektur im Dritten Reich. 1933–1945* (1967), in which she combined historical classifications with contemporary documents, extensive studies on architecture and National Socialism only took off in the mid-1970s.<sup>5</sup> Above all, Joachim Petsch's *Baukunst und Stadtplanung im Dritten Reich* (1976) should be mentioned here. A large number of relevant publications were finally published in the 1980s and 1990s by Dieter Bartetzko, Werner Durth and Winfried Nerdinger. Albert Speer, architect for the Nazi-regime and former Minister of Armaments and War Production in Nazi Germany, died in 1981 and only then Speer's involvement and architecture's relation to the crimes and politics of the Third Reich started to turn public.<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s, when the concept of the DHM and Rossi's design were discussed, both the German public and the German architectural discourse were still struggling with their Nazi past.

## The idea of a museum of German history

### The growing historical interest

The introduction of a museum of German history triggered several and varied debates. In the 1970s historians, politicians and journalists introduced the idea of a German Historical Museum in West Berlin, especially in contrast to the developments in the eastern half of Germany. In the German Democratic Republic the *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte* (Museum for German History) had been hosting since 1952 a permanent exhibition in line with Marxist and accordingly materialist understanding of history. This institution moved in 1953 to the *Zeughaus* (Arsenal) on *Unter den Linden* where the DHM is situated today. The debate over a possible museum of German history in West Germany, as a counterpart to the communist version of German history,<sup>7</sup> gained momentum with three very successful historical exhibitions: the "Zeit der Staufer" (Time of the Staufer) Stuttgart 1977; the "Wittelsbach und Bayern" (Wittelsbach and Bavaria) Munich 1980; and above all, "Preußen – Versuch einer Bilanz" (Prussia – Attempting a balance sheet) in Berlin 1981. These exhibitions are often seen

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3 Hildegard Brenner, *Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1963).

4 Joseph Wulf, *Die bildenden Künste im Dritten Reich* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963).

5 In 1968 Barbara Miller Lane published the book *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1918–1945*, which was only translated into German in 1986.

6 See Isabell Trommer, *Rechtfertigung und Entlastung: Albert Speer in der Bundesrepublik* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2016).

7 In addition, the new Historical Museum was opened in Frankfurt am Main in 1972, which, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, also showed a Marxist view of history: Christoph Stölzl, ed., *Deutsches Historisches Museum* (Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen, 1988), 32–34. Like the GDR Museum for German History, this served as a deterrent example. See Wolf Jobst Siedler at the hearing on November 18, 1983. *Ibid.*, 134.

as evidence of a new interest in history.<sup>8</sup> The 1981 exhibition on Prussia took place in the Martin-Gropius-Bau, the former Museum of Applied Arts, and since 1922 the Museum for Prehistory and Early History, which was severely damaged during World War II. The governing mayor of West Berlin Richard von Weizsäcker (CDU<sup>9</sup>), who eventually became Federal President in 1984, set up a committee of four historians with different political orientations, Hartmut Boockmann, Eberhard Jäckel, Hagen Schulze and Michael Stürmer, to come up with a concept and a suitable location for a future museum of German history. In their exposé from January 1982, they declared that “history is the form in which a nation, a people or a society accounts for itself,” and that it plays an important role in the society’s search for identity.<sup>10</sup> Berlin was seen as the best place for such an undertaking because here “the grandeur and the catastrophes of German history” are exemplified. Specifically, the Martin-Gropius-Bau was proposed as the most suitable location.<sup>11</sup> In response to the exposé, two strands of criticism emerged.

### Concerns about a national museum of history

First, critics worried that the DHM would be a “national museum” that aims to reconstruct a “national identity” through history. The question was, if Germany in the face of the Holocaust and all the other crimes of the Nazi-regime should sincerely build a museum for its history. It was discussed whether it would even be possible to visually present a somewhat “unified” image of such a problematic history. This criticism was fuelled by the actions of the then-chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU), whose agenda was named “geistig-moralische Wende” (spiritual and moral turning point) and referred to a new consciousness of German history.<sup>12</sup> In a government statement on May 4, 1983, Kohl stated that with the help of the federal government the DHM would open its doors in Berlin—“the old capital of the Reich” and as a “divided city, a symbol of the German question”<sup>13</sup>—to mark the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city of Berlin. “German history in its European context and conditions must once again become a spiritual home for the young generation,”<sup>14</sup> he stated. Two years later the chancellor called the DHM a “national mission of European stature”<sup>15</sup> and “a place of

8 Moritz Mälzer, *Ausstellungsstück Nation Die Debatte um die Gründung des Deutschen Historischen Museums in Berlin* (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2005), 51.

9 *Christlich Demokratische Union* (Christian Democratic Union).

10 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 61. Translation by the authors. This concept of history relates to the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga.

11 Other options discussed were the Spandau Citadel, the Congress hall in the Tiergarten, and the Reichstag building, where the exhibition “1871 – Fragen an die deutsche Geschichte” (1871 – Questions for German History) has taken place since 1971.

12 See Benedikt Dettling and Michael Geske, “Helmut Kohl: Krise und Erneuerung,” in *Das Wort hat der Herr Bundeskanzler. Eine Analyse der Großen Regierungserklärungen von Adenauer bis Schröder*, ed. Karl-Rudolf Korte (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002), 229.

13 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 249. Translation by the authors. The “German Question” refers to the question of how to re-unite Germany.

14 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 249. Translation by the authors.

15 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 641. Translation from Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past. History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 127.

self-determination and self-knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> While, Kohl declared the DHM as the state’s birthday present to the city of Berlin, critics warned against the introduction of an official government image of German history.<sup>17</sup>

An alternative vision was the idea of a *Forum für Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Forum for history and the present).<sup>18</sup> Instead of a museum with a permanent exhibition, and a permanent museum director who runs the risk of providing one static image of German history, a forum with short-term directors would offer temporary exhibitions with alternating views of history. The historian Hans Mommsen, who was a member of the SPD,<sup>19</sup> declared that the idea of the forum was better suited to the current German situation: “The cultivated, elitist notion of a museum, which was the reflex of nation-state formation, cannot be credibly imitated in the twentieth century.”<sup>20</sup> The forum idea was for some time favoured but never reached the decision-making stage and was eventually abandoned when the new mayor Eberhard Diepgen (CDU) declared in May 1984 that the forum could only be a temporary solution until a museum would be formally established.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to note, that this first strand of criticism merged with the so-called *Historikerstreit* (historians’ dispute). Between the summer of 1986 and the spring of 1987 a controversy over the uniqueness of the National Socialist extermination of Jews marked the press. The triggering factor was an article by the historian Ernst Nolte,<sup>22</sup> who—in the form of rhetorical questions—argued that with the October Revolution of 1917 Bolshevism in particular, as well as the socialist workers’ movements in European countries in general, posed a threat to what he called the “liberal system” of society and thus provoked the rise of Fascism as a counter-reaction. The crimes of the Nazi regime, Nolte said, could be compared to those of the Soviet Union, such as the Gulag camps. It was the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas who opposed Nolte in a critical article titled “Eine Art Schadensabwicklung” (A kind of damage settlement).<sup>23</sup> For Habermas, Nolte was part of a tendency towards historical revisionism and neo-conservatism. In Nolte’s narrative the Holocaust loses its devastating uniqueness and appears as the regrettable result of an understandable reaction to Bolshevism. Habermas referred to the plans for the DHM as well and saw this

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16 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 641. Translation by the authors. In addition to the DHM and with a special focus on the history of the Federal Republic after 1945, the government planned the *Haus der Geschichte* (House of History) in Bonn, which was founded in 1986 and opened in 1994.

17 Cf. e.g. Hans Mommsen, “Verordnete Geschichtsbilder. Historische Museumspläne der Bundesregierung,” *Gewerkschaftliche Monatshefte*, no. 37 (1986): 13–24.

18 This was proposed by the Senator for Cultural Affairs, Volker Hassemer (CDU) in “Vergegenwärtigung der Vergangenheit,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (October 6, 1983). Cf. Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 123ff.

19 *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (Social Democratic Party).

20 Mommsen, “Stellungnahme zur Errichtung eines Historischen Museums in Berlin,” n.d. [ca. 1985], cited in Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, 128. Mommsen very actively criticised and influenced the DHM conception. In May 1985, he and the SPD parliamentary group in the *Abgeordnetenhaus von Berlin* (Berlin House of Representatives) established a committee to develop its own concept for a future DHM. Cf. Mälzer, *Ausstellungsstück Nation*, 114.

21 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 59.

22 Ernst Nolte, “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (June 6, 1986).

23 Jürgen Habermas, “Eine Art Schadensabwicklung,” *Die Zeit* (July 11, 1986).



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as a risk of historical revisionism with national aspirations.<sup>24</sup> The members of the DHM committee participated in the *Historikerstreit* too. Especially Stürmer, who was one of Kohl's political consultants, insisted on the necessity for a people to value its history in order to imagine a positive future: "If German history continues to be told as a collection of catastrophes and crimes, the Germans will never stand up again."<sup>25</sup> The *Historikerstreit* marked a political discussion of how to tell the history of Germany closely linked to the debate over the organisation of a museum of German history.

### Problems finding the right location

The second strand of criticism was targeted towards the location of a future DHM. The Berlin cultural scene envisioned the Martin-Gropius-Bau as an open forum for temporary art exhibitions of various institutions and associations. This was primarily promoted by the *Akademie der Künste* (Academy of Arts), which at that time was headed by the writer Günter Grass. In September 1983, they organised a discussion that led to an open declaration of protest.<sup>26</sup> In response, the Senator for Cultural Affairs, Volker Hassemer (CDU) organised a hearing in November 1983 and a second one in January 1984, which intensified the debates between supporters of the idea of the forum and the advocates of a museum. The historicity of the Martin-Gropius-Bau and its surroundings stood out as well [Fig. 1, C]. The committee of the four historians preferred the

Fig. 1

Map of Berlin in its current state, showing (A) Reichstag building, (B) Zeughaus, (C) Martin-Gropius-Bau, (D) former Prinz-Albrecht-Palais, today the Topography of Terror documentation center, and (E) site for the DHM, now the Bundeskanzleramt. The former wall is shown hatched.

24 "Historikerstreit" – Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung (München: Piper, 1987), 72. English Translation: *Forever in the shadow of Hitler? Original documents of the Historikerstreit, the controversy concerning the singularity of the Holocaust* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993).

25 "Historikerstreit," 295. Translation by the authors.

26 Cf. Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 101–22.



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Martin-Gropius-Bau because of its proximity not only to the border, but also to the Prinz-Albrecht-Palais [Fig. 1, D], where during the Third Reich the head of the Gestapo and the top management of the security service of the *Reichsführer-SS* were accommodated. This proximity to historically charged sites gave some cause for concern. For instance, the architecture historian Julius Posener stated: “Either the historical museum will blur the claim of this place, or the claim will be so great that the entire German history will only be seen *sub specie* of National Socialism, and that is wrong! [...] The best thing would be to build a new house.”<sup>27</sup> Effectively, in 1985 it was decided to build a new building in the *Spreebogen* near the Reichstag building [Fig. 1, A].<sup>28</sup> There was a reported myth about how the location was determined: “It is said that Helmut Kohl stood at a window of the Reichstag building and pointed out: That’s where it should go! The story is true, although the place has been discussed before. That this story is so easily replicated is not a good sign: a little dictatorial, the gesture: with Louis XIV, yes, with Hitler, certainly. But with Helmut Kohl?”<sup>29</sup> This myth expressed the fear of a museum that was authoritatively decided by those in power.

### The foundation of the DHM

In October 1985, a Committee of Experts was set up to finalize a concept and a permanent exhibition for the future DHM. The first conception, released in April 1986, rejected one single historical image and proposed a pluralistic representation of German history in its European context in a new building with three different types of exhibition approaches: epoch halls, theme rooms and in-depth study spaces. The museum “should provide a survey of German

27 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 118. Translation by the authors.

28 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 666.

29 Julius Posener, “Geschenkt bekommt Berlin ein Geschichtsmuseum,” *ARCH+*, no. 96–97 (November 1988): 20. Translation by the authors.

Fig. 2

Chancellor Helmut Kohl and founding director of the DHM Christoph Stölzl at the foundation ceremony in 1987. (© Hans Peter Stiebing)

history in its European connections and its inner diversity—neither excusing nor accusatory, but sober, self-critical, and self-aware.”<sup>30</sup> This concept was communicated to obtain opinions and was discussed in three successive hearings from December 1986 to March 1987. The final concept from June 1987 led to the official establishment of the DHM on October 28 on the occasion of the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary [Fig. 2]. Kohl personally handed over the founding certificate to the new director of the German History Museum Christoph Stölzl, who was previously director of the Munich City Museum and had made various critical exhibitions on Bavarian history. Meanwhile, in December 1986, the “Platz der Republik” competition was launched in search of a general urban planning solution for the *Spreebogen* area surrounding the Reichstag and to locate the lot for the DHM. The jury could not agree on a first prize<sup>31</sup> and subsequently, it was concluded that the property in the north-western part of the *Spreebogen*, as suggested by individual competition entries, was the most suitable for the DHM [Fig. 1, E]. In August 1987, the architecture competition for the new museum building was announced.

## The competition and Aldo Rossi's winning design

### Competition brief

According to the public announcement text, the call was inviting German professionals to an open, one stage and anonymous architectural competition.<sup>32</sup> As stated, the museum would cover German history “as comprehensively as possible from its beginnings to the present” and the competition’s objective was to “further the historical awareness of the visitor and his understanding of the social and cultural life in this country;”<sup>33</sup> to “encourage interest in questions concerning German history;”<sup>34</sup> and to “promote critical debate and also offer possibilities of identification.”<sup>35</sup> From these first steps, the whole process was bound to tread on a fragile course balancing between the aim of honouring German history while at the same time opening up to critical discourse and subjective interpretation. As such, the architects’ proposals would have to please both the political administration in national and regional levels, as well as the public sentiment, with the brief referring repeatedly to the “historical importance”<sup>36</sup> of the project.

The expansive brief went on to delineate the elaborate programmatic needs of the museum, the on-going landscape and urban developments of the area

30 Cf. Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 310–33, here 311.

31 Wolfgang Pehnt, “Stadtgestalt statt Stadtgehalt – Museen mitten in der Brache,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (June 2, 1986): 25.

32 *Public Announcement Text*, Bundesbaudirektion, August 3, 1987, typed copy of the original document translated in English in Rossi fonds, CCA, reference number: AP142.S1.D122.P2, 4.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*



to which design entries would need to adapt, and construction regulations that they should conform to. Moreover, the issue of history was prevalent as a design prerequisite in itself. An extensive part of the brief was recounting the history of Berlin, and the specific site emphasised the historically charged context. There were listed 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape paintings of the *Spreebogen*; 1845 plans for the *Kroll'scher Wintergarten* (Kroll Opera House); a lengthy and richly illustrated account of the 1872 Reichstag competition; and equally informative descriptions of 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural and planning developments in the greater area of Berlin including the Royal Opera competition of 1912, Hugo Häring's and Peter Behrens' 1927 proposals for the *Platz der Republik*, and planning studies of the recent post-war era.

Raising the stakes high, during the following "Enquiries Colloquium" in October 1987, that was meant to answer interested architects' questions, the director of the museum Stölzl repeated Kohl's expression, that the museum would be "a national task of European stature."<sup>37</sup> The Committee of Experts, he said, decided on a "real museum of a classical type," one that poses a question of remembering, introspection and making certain with all the rigor provided by the various historical disciplines.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, he said that the Museum must be a "house that unites all the means and experiences of the art museum," a mixture of an art museum, laboratory and production facility.<sup>39</sup>

Making the promises real and opening the museum to the European and international stage, the jury invited a list of nineteen well-known architects from outside Germany. Although not all responded, included in the list were architects like Norman Foster, Aldo van Eyck, Hans Hollein, James Stirling and Aldo Rossi, the last of whom managed to steal the limelight.<sup>40</sup>

With the entries submitted in February 1988, the jury consisting of 11 *Fachpreisrichter* (Technical jurors), 10 *Sachpreisrichter* (Consultant jurors), 5 advisors and 28 preliminary examiners, and led by Max Bächer came to a final decision in June 10, 1988 awarding, with 14 to 7 votes, the first prize to the Italian architect, followed by the Germans: Peter Schweger (2<sup>nd</sup> prize), Axel Schultes (3<sup>rd</sup>), Florian Musso (4<sup>th</sup>) and Eckhardt Gerber (5<sup>th</sup>); the Austrian architect Wilhelm Holzbauer (6<sup>th</sup>).

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37 Enquiries Colloquium minutes, Aldo Rossi fonds, CCA, reference number: AP142.S1.D122.P4.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 The complete list of invited international architects was: Dissing + Weitling (Denmark); Norman Foster (United Kingdom); Ralph Erskine (Sweden); Aldo van Eyck (Netherlands); Hans Hollein (Austria); Wilhelm Holzbauer (Austria); Arata Isozaki (Japan); Helmut Jahn (USA); Richard Meier (USA); Elmar Moltke-Nielsen (Denmark); José Rafael Moneo (Spain); Jean Nouvel (France); Ieoh Ming Pei (USA); Reima Pietilä (Finland); Kevin Roche (USA); Aldo Rossi (Italy); James Stirling (United Kingdom); Robert Venturi (USA); and Yitzhak Yashar, Dan Eitan, Moshe Kogan (Israel). Source: Bundesbaudirektion, *Wettbewerb Deutsches Historisches Museum. Auslobungstext* (Berlin: Bundesbaudirektion, 1987), 6.

## Aldo Rossi's design

The winning design of the Aldo Rossi Studio di Architettura<sup>41</sup> is best described as an assemblage of historicist building types, dominated by a cathedral-like building. The project's segments are individually identifiable while forming a richly structured composite all together. Apart from their formal differentiation, these building blocks were also different in terms of their programmatic function. A massive, cylindrical "rotunda" served as the visitors' entrance point. On its one side, an elongated "colonnade" housed the Museum's administration, and on the other, an E-shape building with wide staircases inscribed as "palazzo" served the museum's instruction spaces. The "rotunda," "colonnade" and "palazzo" constituted the main, formal facades of the complex facing the *Tiergarten* park on the south, and the *Platz der Republik* on the east of the lot [Fig. 3]. The longer back side of the triangular site facing the Spree was visually informal, partly reminiscent of an industrial environment with chimneys and warehouses, and partly of a vernacular townscape with a series of houses facades grouped together. The central, inner part of the lot was reserved for the "red cathedral," a massive longitudinal structure accommodating the exhibition spaces on both sides of a "nave" of 120 meters long, and 28 meters high covered by a pitched glass roof. While in its interior this building was essentially a covered street, not unlike the Milanese *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II*,<sup>42</sup> from the outside, the mass of the "cathedral" rose higher to top the architectural composition. Its sides, one facing the Spree, and the other the Reichstag, were visually forming an accumulation of houses. Rich in analogies, the complex would look from afar as a massing of houses or a small city, rising above a collection of formal, monumental buildings.

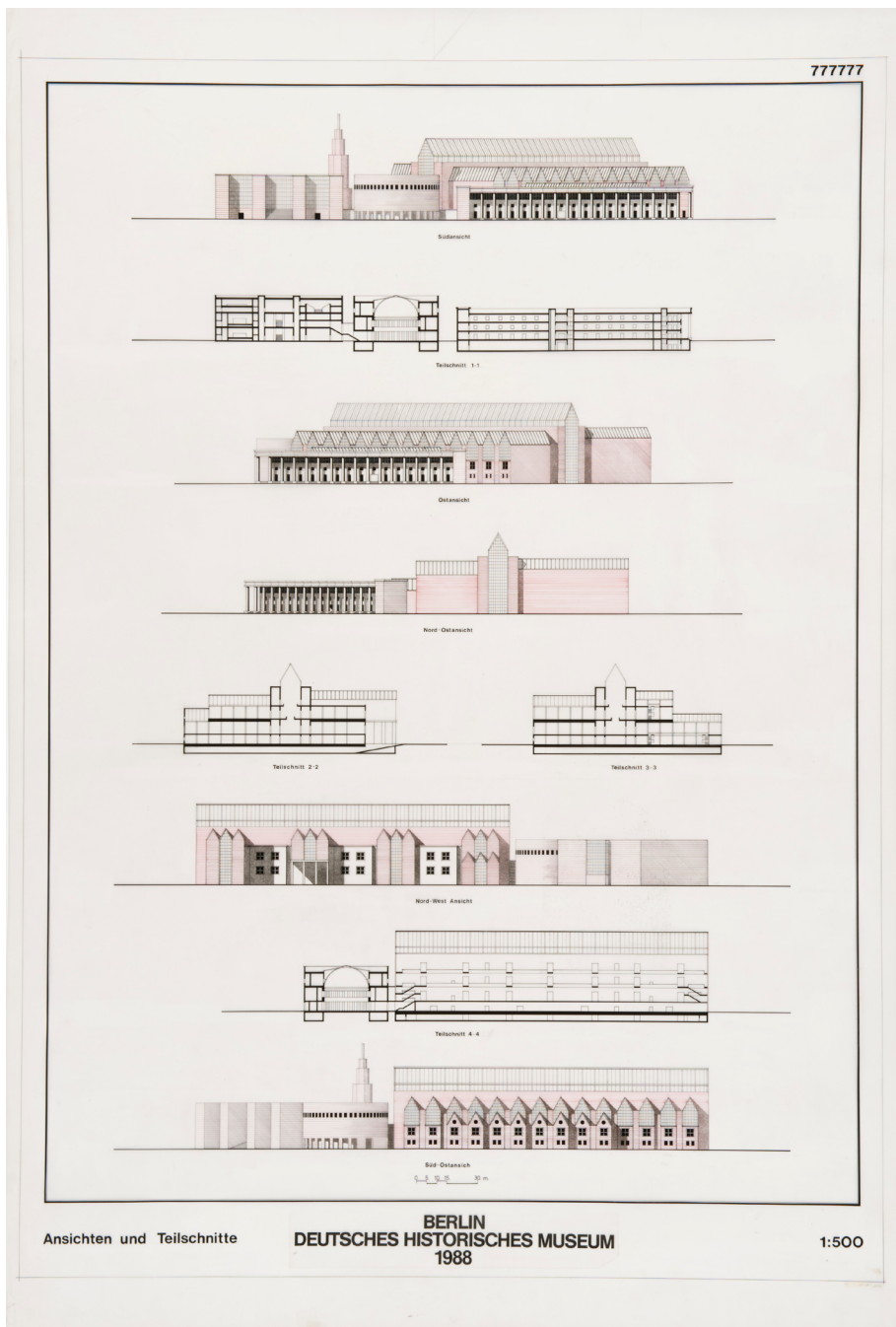
The city-metaphor, with the formal and programmatic differentiation of its parts brought together in a miscellaneous, asymmetrical way, pitted Rossi's design against the vast majority of the competition entries that featured monolithic buildings of well-defined geometrical shapes and which weighed on their functionalism or one-dimensional, easily-identifiable visual appeal. Instead, Rossi's iconography and autonomy of parts brought forward the idea of a museum-city as a means to give a public character and sense to the massive program without needing to provide an architectural icon as a single solution. As he described in his competition entry: "[...] the process of the autonomy of the parts, defines a small and complex part of the city that identifies with the functions, the image and the urban role of the museum."<sup>43</sup> But more than the abstract concept of an architectural composition of urban forms, Rossi's design bore also specific historical references which became central points

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41 The team members credited for the DHM winning design from Aldo Rossi's office, in order of appearance in the entry, were: Aldo Rossi, Giovanni da Pozzo, F. Saverio Fera, Ivana Invernizzi, Daniele Nava, and Massimo Scheurer.

42 In fact, amongst concept sketches in the Rossi archive were several photos of glass-roofed public markets and the *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II* in particular. Rossi fonds, CCA, reference number: AP142.S1.D122.P4.

43 Alberto Ferlenga, ed., *Aldo Rossi: Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlino* (Milan: Electa, 1990), 11. Translation by the authors.



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of critics that dismissed the design as “kitsch historicism”<sup>44</sup> or a return to 19<sup>th</sup> century eclecticism.

### Historical references

The decision of Rossi to feature historical references in such a politically charged competition raised questions about their meaning. Accentuating this impression, the first panel of the submission framed a grand perspective sketch of the proposed museum complex with a series of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>

Fig. 3  
Panel of the Rossi Studio competition entry, showcasing the project’s facades. Note the monumental south façade on top, the industrial-looking north-east and the vernacular house-shapes of the south-east one. (© Eredi Aldo Rossi)

44 Mathias Schreiber, “Ein Triumph der alten deutschen Italiensehnsucht,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, no. 135 (June 13, 1988): 27.



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century architectural projects of Germany, as if the architect wanted to provoke a historical dialectic with them [Fig. 4]. As such, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's 1921 Glass skyscraper<sup>45</sup> for *Friedrichstraße* was to be related to the red cathedral's glass roof, Behrens' AEG factory to the palazzo of brick and metal, Karl Friedrich Schinkel's *Altes Museum* to the rotunda and classicist colonnade, Walter Gropius' Fagus factory to the industrial-looking riverside, and Heinrich Tessenow's *Festspielhaus* to the pitch-roofed house-forms.

Even on the issue of the landscape design of the project, Rossi managed to incorporate symbolic references, by posing a single German oak tree surrounded by columns in white Italian marble in the courtyard between exhibition and administration buildings. Rossi himself explained that this German oak tree is "sacred and connected with the *Waldesnatur* and the beginning of the Germanic culture."<sup>46</sup> The marble columns shall indicate the German passion for Italian Journeys—in this courtyard Germany and Italy are supposed to come together. The oak tree is traditionally considered to be an archetypical symbol of the German admiration of nature.<sup>47</sup> Decorative oak leaves are added to orders,

45 This project has also been referred as a "cathedral of the future" by historians, making their relation with Rossi's "red cathedral" starker. Mies van der Rohe, "Building Art and the Will of the Epoch!" in *Der Querschnitt* 4, no. 1 (1924): 31–32; Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 99.

46 Architects' report, page 6. DAM Archive, 408-100-152. Translation by the authors.

47 The reference to the oak tree was curiously mentioned in a Dutch regional newspaper: "Aldo Rossi wint prijsvraag Duits Historisch Museum," *Leeuwarder courant: hoofdblad van Friesland* (June 17, 1988): 2.

Fig. 4

Panel of the Rossi Studio competition entry, framed above by a line of historical references to architectural monuments of Berlin, in addition with Tessenow's *Festspielhaus* in Hellerau, Dresden on the far right. (© Eredi Aldo Rossi)

honorary marks, national emblems and the like, at the latest since the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871—one reason why the German oak tree in Rossi's design was met with unease among the German public.

In the end, what was the underlying incentive of the design's historical references and their parallelization with German buildings? To the architect's own accord, there was no hidden meaning, other than the intention of admitting that what we have inherited is a fractured history: "Does our building wish to provide a picture of German history? No, this is surely impossible from today's point of view. The possibility for synthesis is broken at the present time, we can at the most provide fragments: fragments of life, fragments of history and fragments of buildings."<sup>48</sup> In the same passage, Rossi stated that he was against "reducing the museum to a clinic for history and art, a unity comprising white, antiseptic walls, windows, repeated and repeating galleries, that take it in turns to house this or that piece of history (or art or ethnology)." In addition, the idea of the city gave to the project both a programmatic solution and the identity that the competition was in search of: an accumulation of monuments that fit a museum and offer a space where history and the present may come to terms with each other. On the one hand, the historical references can be read as fragments of a history that cannot be seen as a unity, and certainly not a positive one; on the other hand, they also provide stereotypical ideas about what is German, with an emphasis on "the German."—a conflict between these two ways of interpretation was pre-programmed. But both the historical references as well as the broken down volumes were not developed specifically for this competition and the German context but were part of Rossi's typical design process and his so-called rationalist architecture.<sup>49</sup> It should be added that this rational architecture, especially in Germany, has been accused several times of a dangerous proximity to the architecture of the Nazi period, which made a neutral assessment of Rossi's design difficult.

### Design process

Developed rapidly between December 1987 and March 1988, the first sketches of Rossi's team consisted of literal interpretations of the programmatic diagrams provided by the competition brief.<sup>50</sup> The structured *Funktionsschema* (functional diagram) of the interlinking "epoch," "theme" and "study" rooms of the brief led to the first diagrams of how to structure these programs around a central pivot serving the main entrance. A second element that defined the early design concept was the projected urban development also provided by the brief.

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48 Architects' report that accompanied the submitted panels, page 4. CCA, Aldo Rossi fonds, reference number: AP142.S1.D122.P8.

49 Rossi, was the main representative of the Italian variant of the rationalist architectural movement, otherwise called "La Tendenza," that protested to the idea of the "avant-garde" and the constant search for new, innovative architectural forms. On the contrary, Rossi and his colleagues developed a transcendental rationalism, which is about the search for a universal architectural language with invariants ("permanenzas"), such as typological and historical elementary forms. The central thesis there is that architecture has autonomous principles and forms.

50 A more detailed description of Rossi's DHM design process, and its particular ties to the idea of the museum-city can be found in: Phoebus Panigyrakis, "La città dell'architettura": Rossi, Stirling and the image of the city in their Berlin projects," in *Aldo Rossi, perspectives from the world: Theory, teaching, design and legacy*, ed. Marco Bovati, Michele Caja, Martina Landsberger and Angelo Lorenzi (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2020), 267–77.

Willing to set the museum in its urban context, Rossi's sketches set a hard border to the south and east sides of the lot, therefore anticipating the longitudinal formal facades that would continue the urban front of their surroundings. The rotunda as the point of entrance, was a result of the programmatic structure colliding with the perimetral border. The first sketches of the rotunda, were in fact accompanied by an early sketch showcasing the project's main concept: the image of a town made up of typologically different blocks breaking over a formal façade of lower height. This scheme, turned diagonally, was developed into the cathedral that was initially portrayed as a massing of houses. In itself, the glass and red brick cathedral, was an idea that recurred for almost a decade in Rossi's firm, as historians have noted for example, in his 1979 Karlsruhe library competition entry.<sup>51</sup> These ideas and design processes, while being particular to Rossi, found in the Berlin museum a new meaning. Discussing the importance of the museum to Berlin, Rossi said that: "[...] it was a similar matter in former times when the ancient cathedrals were erected. I believe that the Berlin museum is a cathedral in this sense [...] Cathedrals, basilicas, museums and town halls are sites of the collective memory. Which site encompasses the collective memory more strongly than a museum?"<sup>52</sup> The question for the German public was certainly much more about what should and should not be included in this collective memory, and how this memory should best be represented.

### The decision of the Jury

The jury's statement, released on June 10, 1988, positively viewed Rossi's playfulness towards history, characterised by the "exciting structure of different, partly fragmentary components" and "style elements" that reference history. The problem of history and its possible glorification in a museum of such scale found resolution in Rossi's "interplay of grand form and small-scale form" where monumentality emerged only to be swiftly de-constructed.<sup>53</sup> Despite being a "certain ironic" design with a "quote-character," the jury issued that the "small town" of Rossi is "confident in itself" and resolves the problem of the discontinuity of history. The jury also replicated a part of the architects' own description embracing his appeal for a museum that would neither provide a clear picture of German history, nor remain passive and pretend of not being part of it by building an "aseptic clinic of history."<sup>54</sup> His design was judged to balance successfully between these two tendencies, with an additional poetic touch.<sup>55</sup> Applauding the jury's decision, the museum director Stölzl, who was also part of the jury, underlined Aldo Rossi's status as "an architect-thinker of international standing," whose design would contribute to the completion of the theoretical formulation of the museum, and to raise the problem of German history to a European

51 Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi: Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlino*, 9.

52 Aldo Rossi, "Prefazione," in Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi: Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlino*, 7. English Translation: *Aldo Rossi – Architect*, ed. Helmut Geisert (London: Academy Editions, 1994), 65

53 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 693.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

and global level.<sup>56</sup> Stölzl emphasized that Rossi was not a German architect, but an Italian, European and international one who had submitted a “European” museum design, probably to counter the frequent criticism towards the DHM of creating an official image of German history sanctioned by the government. The architect’s nationality was thus turned into a political argument to give the project a European pretense and to appease the heated debate.

Practical considerations were also deemed positive aspects of the project. Mainly the fact that Rossi’s complex allowed the partial construction of the project, and that its “urban qualities” meant that the museum would not have to wait for the urban developments around it to be completed.<sup>57</sup> But not all about Rossi’s entry was viewed positively. A lack of connection was noted to the administration wing, and “strong deviations” in individual programmatic needs, and that “unanswered questions” remained over the orientation and actual function of the exhibition hall that was meant to be completed in the first construction phase.<sup>58</sup> With these issues in mind, the jury directed the architect to continue working on the design by commissioning a study on the technical, construction and economical aspects of the project in consultation with the *Bundesbaudirektion* (Federal Building Directorate) and DHM officials in December 1988. This resulted in an altered design presented in May of the following year.<sup>59</sup> In the meantime, Rossi’s victory had provoked various debates. Two main controversies dominated the discourse: the criticism of Rossi’s design, and the criticism towards the jury.

## Criticism to Rossi’s design

### German responses

In the newspapers, architecture critics such as Manfred Sack (*Die Zeit*), Gottfried Knapp (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), Falk Jaeger (*Tagesspiegel*) and Christian Marquart (*Stuttgarter Zeitung*) complained that a “big hit,”<sup>60</sup> an architectural “stroke of genius,”<sup>61</sup> had not taken place. While Jaeger associated the exhibition hall with a huge prison,<sup>62</sup> Knapp drew a parallel to Nazi buildings:

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56 Bundesbaudirektion, *Wettbewerb Deutsches Historisches Museum: Dokumentation* (Berlin: Bundesbaudirektion, 1988), 12.

57 Stölzl, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 693.

58 Ibid.

59 Explained in detail by Rossi in his text “The definitive project,” the most important changes were the transformation of the central axis of the “exhibition” into a cruciform plan; the addition of a second tower on the Spree riverbank acting as a landmark; the reworking of the facades of the exhibition sides and the rotunda (now called foyer); the redesign of the instructive and the administrative blocks; the enrichment of the landscape design now featuring a “garden promenade.” Other changes included the addition of a bookshop, a bar, an IMAX movie theater and technical treatments to acoustic, lighting and fire-escape issues. Despite these changes, the character of the complex remained intact. In addition to his own team, Rossi credited the architect Dieter Kroos and Fritz M. Sitte of the *Bundesbaudirektion*, and Christoph Stölzl and Hans Gerhard Hannesen of the DHM. Cf. Rossi, “Il progetto definitivo,” in Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi: Deutsches Historisches Museum*, 71–115.

60 Christian Marquart, *Stuttgarter Zeitung* (1988), cited in press review, *Bauwelt*, no. 28–29, (1988): 1219. Translation by the authors.

61 Manfred Sack, “Klötzchenspiel für die Geschichte,” *Die Zeit*, no. 25 (June 17, 1988). Translation by the authors.

62 Falk Jaeger, “Wie ein riesiges Gefängnis,” *Der Tagesspiegel* (June 26, 1988).

“It was above all this provocative columned hall [...] that caused horror at the press conference. Because, of course, at first glance all German observers uttered rejection words such as ‘Haus der Deutschen Kunst’ [House of German Art], or ‘Reichskanzlei’ [Reich Chancellery]. In fact, the design presented as a colourless model is reminiscent of some cult buildings from the Nazi era.”<sup>63</sup>

The House of German Art in Munich was built by Paul Ludwig Troost from 1933 to 1937 and was one of the first Nazi-propaganda architecture. According to journalist Bernard Schulz (*Tagesspiegel*) Rossi’s design provoked “reminiscences of Troost”<sup>64</sup> and Jaeger wrote that “one cannot build such monstrous, two hundred meter long colonnades in Berlin for an understandable reason.”<sup>65</sup> Rossi’s use of columns and the monumentality of some of the building parts were the main cause of concern. The museum itself was seen by many liberal and left-wing intellectuals as an attempt to politically exploit German history. The fears that National Socialism would be relativized as a normal “building block” among many others seemed to be confirmed by Rossi’s design. As evidenced in the debate, reference was repeatedly made to the similarity with the House of German Art. Allegations that designs were fascist or similar to Nazi buildings were not uncommon in the 1970s and 1980s in West Germany. Designs with colonnades or natural stone facades were defamed as “Nazi architecture,” for example James Stirling’s contribution to the competition for the expansion of the *Staatsgalerie Stuttgart* (State Gallery) in 1977.<sup>66</sup> Rossi’s rationalist architecture faced similar accusations. For instance, Rossi’s housing in Gallarate near Milan has been accused of showing formal parallels to the architecture that was built in Fascist Italy.<sup>67</sup> Rossi himself replied, when faced with these allegations in an interview for *Ambiente* in September 1988:

“There is no connection between certain forms and a certain politic. That was precisely the modern error in identifying form with progress. Glass was progressive and stone was reactionary. It’s just stupid. If you attack fascist or Stalinist architecture, you have to explain why you can find the same architectural elements in democratic metropolises, in Paris as in New York. And you have to know that during Mussolini some of the best examples of modern architecture in Italy were created.”<sup>68</sup>

Bächer, the chairman of the jury, was very familiar with this topic. From 1971 to 1974 he held lectures on the connection between fascist politics and

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63 Gottfried Knapp, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (June 13, 1988), cited in press review, *Bauwelt*, no. 28–29 (1988): 1219. Translation by the authors.

64 Bernhard Schulz, *Der Tagesspiegel* (June 11, 1988), cited in Mittag, “NS-Motive in der Gegenwartskunst: Flamme empor?” 95. Translation by the authors.

65 Falk Jaeger, “Wie ein riesiges Gefängnis,” *Der Tagesspiegel* (June 26, 1988). Translation by the authors.

66 Cf. Rosenfeld, “The Architects’ Debate. Architectural Discourse and the Memory of Nazism in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1977–1997.” *History and Memory* 9, no. 1–2 (Fall 1997): 193.

67 Cf. Magnago Lampugnani, “Eine neue faschistische Architektur? Eine Tendenz im Bauen bricht mit den formalen Tabus der Machtdarstellung,” *Die Zeit*, no. 49 (December 1, 1978): 52.

68 Rossi, cited in Aldo Rossi. *Deutsches Historisches Museum* 1989, ed. Kristin Feireiss (Berlin: Aedes Galerie für Architektur, 1989), 50.



architecture which are little known today because they were never published. Similar to Rossi, Bächer assumed an “international classicism” with regard to the architecture of the 1930s, whereby the specificity of the National Socialist buildings lay in the exaggeration of the classic formal vocabulary with the aim of demonstrating power. For him, “neoclassical” forms were at most an indication, but not evidence of fascism in contemporary architecture.<sup>69</sup>

Rossi’s design for the DHM continued to be judged against the backdrop of the heritage of National Socialism and the architecture built in the Third Reich. Partly in response to that criticism, in 1989 the Senate of Berlin organised three hearings about the concept, the location and the architectural design. In the last hearing on Rossi’s design on November 27, most of the participants criticised Rossi’s use of images of buildings from German history as naive. Jaeger made it clear that Rossi was not doing himself a favour when he made connections to Schinkel’s classicist architecture or to the atmosphere of a German *Bierhalle* (beer hall).<sup>70</sup> In his article in *ARCH+*, Posener had already sarcastically questioned the meaningfulness of Rossi’s proposal to plant a German oak tree between the exhibition and the administration buildings.<sup>71</sup> The architecture critic Christoph Hackelsberger called Rossi’s design a “superficial interpretation which is flooded with simple allusions, a sloppy handling of common rationalist components such as rotunda, colonnade and an archetypical house, which induces a sloppy handling of history.”<sup>72</sup> In a similar direction pointed the architecture critic Dieter Bartetzko. According to him, it is not correct to accuse Rossi of having designed Nazi architecture, but it should not be forgotten that architects such as Troost and Albert Speer had used the rotunda and the colonnade, with references to Schinkel’s *Altes Museum* and the Pantheon, to create Nazi propaganda buildings: “After the misuse of these forms in the Third Reich, [...] public buildings, especially in Berlin, can only be designed as antitheses, as literally and figuratively broken, questioning, sceptical and frightened recourses to this misused architecture of antiquity and classicism.”<sup>73</sup> What Rossi offered was, according to Bartetzko, not this type of architecture but a collage of fragments that are linked to form a new, not bulky, but harmonious unity.

Not everyone agreed with Bartetzko’s assessment at the hearing. The architecture critic Mathias Schreiber highlighted that the collage is not harmonic, but a disparate collection of fragments of monumental forms. He concluded that Rossi’s handling with monumentality “is much more sympathetic to me than the sweaty German handling of monumentality.”<sup>74</sup> Schreiber was one of the few who already responded positively after the competition result was announced

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69 Frederike Lausch, *Fascism and Architecture. Max Bächer’s Confrontation with Albert Speer* (Weimar: mbooks, 2021).

70 Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen Berlin. *Protokoll der Anhörung über die Architektur für das Deutsche Historische Museum, Reichstagsgebäude November 27, 1989*, 60.

71 Posener, “Geschenkt bekommt Berlin,” 20–21.

72 Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen Berlin. *Protokoll*, 1989, 33.

73 *Ibid.*, 41–42. Translation by the authors.

74 *Ibid.*, 54. Translation by the authors.



## Die Deutsche Historische Kür

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in 1988. In his article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, he complained about the uncreative solutions of German architects, which are clearly revealed in comparison with Rossi's design.<sup>75</sup> The critic Werner Strodthoff (*Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*) reacted similarly: Instead of trying to symbolize the newly won democracy after World War II with a transparent glass building—as was customary at that time for German architects like Günter Behnisch—Rossi offered a varied and evocative, by no means clumsy building collage that perfectly matches the Berlin city collage.<sup>76</sup> These arguments were broadly consistent with the evaluation of the competition jury.

Similarly positive in the assessment of Rossi's design, in July 1988, *Bauwelt* dedicated an entire issue to the DHM competition [Fig. 5]. The editor Peter Rumpf argued that the task of architecture is to deal with history, but one should not confuse cause and effect: the use of historical references in architecture does not mean that the social and political past is resurrected.<sup>77</sup> He further

75 Mathias Schreiber, "Ein Triumph der alten deutschen Italiensehnsucht," 27.

76 Werner Strodthoff, "Entwurf von Aldo Rossi 'herausragend'," *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* (August 5, 1988).

77 Peter Rumpf, Lead of *Bauwelt*, no. 28–29 (July 1988): 1194.

Fig. 5

Issue of *Bauwelt* (Nr. 28–29, 1988) devoted to the DHM. The cover shows the jury with Max Bächer on the far right.

emphasized that, firstly, a museum “to promote historical awareness” was not compatible with enlightened and future-oriented thinking and, secondly, that the location in the immediate vicinity of the Reichstag was “out of place.” However, this has nothing to do with Rossi’s design, which answered the task correctly: “It challenges answers to the questions of how building tasks of this extreme size can be solved in terms of urban planning *and* how architectural spaces which enable a contemporary presentation of historical exhibitions have to look like.”<sup>78</sup> According to Rumpf, Rossi was the only one who broke up the programme into smaller volumes and who offered open and versatile exhibition spaces. In the *Bauwelt* issue, Bächer described the jury meetings and represented its decision. According to him, it was rather decisions that had previously been made, such as the location in the *Spreebogen*, that had to be viewed critically. That is why he judged that “the *Spreebogen* would be the most beautiful as Axel Schultes [3<sup>rd</sup> prize] suggested.”<sup>79</sup> Schultes’ introverted project offering a complex arrangement of rooms and voids, hidden behind a high exterior wall, was definitely appreciated by the jury, but eventually lost, because the unconventional project was seen as running the risk of overshadowing the exhibits.<sup>80</sup> Bächer himself preferred Schultes’ over Rossi’s design, but as chairman, his job was to defend the jury’s decision, and he acted on his role.<sup>81</sup> He welcomed the public discussion about how the DHM should be designed, because for him one of the general aims of a museum was to promote debates. In his notebook he wrote: “How right + necessary Aldo Rossi’s design is, is confirmed by the discussion and its manner – it seems to promote political [discussion], that is the meaning of the ‘museum’.”<sup>82</sup>

### International responses

As for the response to the competition results from Rossi’s home country of Italy and abroad, they ranged from laudatory to questioning and concerning. The *Corriere della Sera* entertained its readers with the Italian architect’s win over 200 local professionals that led to an interrogation of chancellor Kohl about how this could have possibly happened.<sup>83</sup> Schreiber’s article titled “Ein Triumph der alten deutschen Italiensehnsucht” (A triumph of the old German longing for Italy), in which he embraced Rossi’s design, was reprinted in *Tribuna Tedesca* where he stated that the project of the third prize winner Schultes was “less ostentatious but no less valid” in comparison to Rossi’s.<sup>84</sup> But in most newspapers, the design, as well as the whole endeavor of the museum was a point

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78 Peter Rumpf, “Ein Kommentar,” *Bauwelt*, no. 28–29 (July 1988): 1201. Translation by the authors.

79 Max Bächer, “Worte des Vorsitzenden,” *Bauwelt*, no. 28–29 (July 1988): 1199.

80 Rumpf, “Ein Kommentar,” 1201.

81 Cf.: “Max Bächer speaks frankly. He particularly likes the third prize, but he represents the decision of the jury against the waves of indignation that is now spilling over everyone involved.” Falk Jaeger in *Festschrift for Max Bächer*, 1990, n.p.

82 Handwritten note by Max Bächer, no date. DAM Archive, 408-100-152. Translation by the authors.

83 Gian Luigi Paracchini, “Un architetto Milanese per Berlino.”

84 Mathias Schreiber, “Trionfo del vecchio amore tedesco per la cultura italiana,” *Tribuna Tedesca* (June 10, 1988): 10.

of contestation for aiming to give an overview of German history “including the time of Hitler.”<sup>85</sup>

As for architectural press, the project saw significant exposure in all major American and European journals. The late 1980s was a period even called “Tempus Rossi”<sup>86</sup> that brought the Italian architect to a wide audience, and “portfolio issues” of his projects and writings were a commonplace in professional magazines and only two years later, in 1990, he was to be awarded the Pritzker prize. Reporting on the DHM, the *American Architectural Record*, wrote that “Rossi’s elusiveness has become an advantage, and greater successes are likely to follow.”<sup>87</sup> Similarly, in the *Architectural Digest*, Rossi had found an enthused supporter in the face of Vincent Scully, who called his architecture one of “love and memory.”<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, *Progressive Architecture* called it a “surprising” win and warned that several German architects’ entries had received more positive reactions making it uncertain whether Rossi would be finally commissioned to build or not.<sup>89</sup>

The French *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui*, publishing a special issue on Rossi, noted that the museum was in line with the tradition of the “Age of Enlightenment, which tends to recount history following criteria of continuity.”<sup>90</sup> A list of selected projects, the DHM being the last one, was followed by an article from Rossi, translated in French twenty years after its original publication, titled “Une architecture pour les musées” (An architecture for museums).<sup>91</sup> The combination of Rossi’s design for Berlin and his article implicitly staged Rossi as the most suitable architect for museums and for a contemporary, architectural approach to history. On the contrary, in Britain, the critic Stephanie Williams commented on the project in both architectural and art journals, noting its “colossal” site and investment,<sup>92</sup> that in combination with Rossi’s design, resulted in a puzzling and dangerous project that attempted a simplistic yet urgently needed reconciliation with the past.<sup>93</sup>

Similar to the German press, the international reception worried more about a “great” museum of German history and, unlike most German architecture critics, less about Rossi’s design—probably because the controversial comparisons with the architecture of the Third Reich were not prevalent outside Germany.

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85 “Aldo Rossi wint prijsvraag Duits Historisch Museum.” *Leeuwarder courant: hoofdblad van Friesland*.

86 Karen Stein, “Tempus Rossi,” *Architectural Record* 176, no. 8 (August 1989): 74–89.

87 *Ibid.*, 75.

88 Vincent Scully, “Aldo Rossi, Architect of love and memory,” *Architectural Digest* 45, no. 10 (October 1988): 148.

89 Mary Pepchinski, “Berlin win for Aldo Rossi,” *Progressive Architecture*, no. 8 (August 1988): 88.

90 “Musée d’histoire de Berlin,” *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui*, no. 263 (June 1989): 181.

91 Original: Aldo Rossi, “Architettura per I musei,” in *Teoria della progettazione architettonica*, ed. Guido Canella et al. (Bari: Dedalo Libri, 1968), 122–37.

92 Stephanie Williams, “Reconciliation with history: The future German Historical Museum in Berlin,” *Apollo* 128, no. 322 (December 1988): 413–16.

93 Stephanie Williams, “Rossi in Berlin,” *The Architect’s Journal* 187, no. 32 (August 1988): 24–27.

## Criticism towards the jury

### Questioning Anonymity

The second criticism focused on the competition proceedings, and one has to ask how the two strands of criticism were connected. Architecture critic Paulhans Peters (*Baumeister*) was one of the first to express his mistrust of the jury's decision-making: "It seems to the outsider as if the jury wanted to push a certain work at all costs because one suspected a name behind it."<sup>94</sup> Because of the confidential nature of jury meetings, he could not prove this. He therefore took up an old demand that competition decisions should be made in public. Peters' article was less influential. Rather, it was Ingeborg Flagge's editorial in *Der Architekt* in September 1988 that sparked further discussions; especially since both Flagge and Bächer were members of the editorial board of *Der Architekt*. Flagge argued similarly to Peters, but more decisively. She accused the jury members that the anonymity of the contestants was not warranted. As evidence, she named a jury member who called her four days before the jury's decision and said that it had already been decided that Rossi would be the winner. What Flagge reported here would mean that, first, the judges would not have decided on the premise of anonymity and, second, violated the ban on contact. The alleged lack of anonymity is an accusation that poses problems. Even if the design was submitted anonymously, Rossi's drawing style is so unique that it can be easily recognized. Can this be blamed on the jury? Besides, Flagge criticised the general competition procedures, where a chairman—"especially an eloquent one"—can exert a lot of power: "No more jury in which a great chairman speaks and keeps down all other judges; no more decisions that ignore entire criteria such as cost-benefit ratio, user interests, etc.; no longer an award-winning design that is measured against purely formal-aesthetic or formal criteria, but cannot be realized."<sup>95</sup> In her comment on the influence of a great chairman who prevails against the will of others, she implicitly pointed towards Bächer, the head of the jury.

Bächer was known for his eloquence and was considered a string puller. Between 1960 and 2010, he participated in over 400 competition juries. In some competitions, it is obvious that Bächer skilfully played with the rules to influence the composition of the jury and invite additional international architects who then won the competition. This was the case with the Fellbach town hall. The Swiss architect Ernst Gisel, who was invited to participate, finally won the competition. In a long letter to Gisel, Bächer described the jury meetings and how he campaigned for his design.<sup>96</sup> In the case of the DHM there is no direct evidence of such behaviour on Bächer's side, especially because Rossi's design was not the one he personally preferred. But in his notes on the opening speech

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94 Paulhans Peters, "Zur Entscheidung des Wettbewerbs Deutsches Historisches Museum," *Baumeister* 85, no. 7 (July 1988): 11. Translation by the authors.

95 Ingeborg Flagge, "Wettbewerbe?" *Der Architekt*, no. 9 (September 1988): 477. Translation by the authors.

96 Cf. Lausch, Frederike, Oliver Elser, Carsten Ruhl and Christiane Salge, ed. *Max Bächer – 50 Meter Archiv* (Weimar: mbooks, 2019), 37–39.

of the jury meeting, one can read, that he insisted several times that the jury was not looking for a functional and trivial design. He imagined an architecture that amazes people as an event. He added that “foreign and famous architects have been invited to support this effort.” He also asked the jury members not to be afraid of historical and “generation-laden” forms: “Culture is not possible without taking a risk,” he stated.<sup>97</sup> His opening speech shows that he was open to a rather bold architecture which may even use historical forms as in the rationalist architecture that Rossi and the “Tendenza” movement represented.

### The reaction of the jury chairman

Bächer immediately responded to Flagge’s editorial. He publicly rejected her accusations in an open letter, published together with numerous letters to the editor leading to a reply from Flagge herself in the December issue of *Der Architekt*. He blamed her of distorting reality for journalistic eagerness and sensationalism: “From a questionable phone call, a misinterpretation of confidentiality and her personal attitude, Ms. Flagge constructed a dramatic distortion of the architectural competition in order to be outraged by it with journalistic zeal.”<sup>98</sup> Bächer was supported by his friend Eberhard Weinbrenner who was also a member of the jury and chairman of the *Bundeswettbewerbssausschuss* (Federal Competition Committee). He also contributed an open letter in which he defended the jury and its decision. He stated that Flagge’s criticism was based more on the political debates related to the DHM than on the actual proceeding of the competition which was, according to Weinbrenner, completely irrefutable: “The German Historical Museum is controversial as a project and because of its location. The so-called *Historikerstreit* has added explosives. In this respect, the assumption is allowed that this could be about things that have little to do with competition proceedings and more with ideology.”<sup>99</sup> Weinbrenner basically accused Flagge that her criticism of the architecture competition actually served political goals. In her public statement on the letters to the editor, Flagge rejected the accusations and expressly reiterated that she was not looking for a spectacular story, but was seriously concerned about the state of architecture competitions.<sup>100</sup>

### An invitation to the hearing

In letters to friends and colleagues, Bächer expressed his regrets over Flagge’s allegations that were being spread and believed.<sup>101</sup> When he was invited to the third hearing organised by the Senate of Berlin on November 27, 1989, Bächer declined. It must be said that in the public discourse, the hearings were seen as a political assault: On the one hand, the opposition, a coalition of the Social

97 Max Bächer’s notes. DAM Archive, 408-100-152. Translation by the authors.

98 Max Bächer, “Richtigstellung,” letter to the editor, *Der Architekt*, no. 12 (December 1988): 634. Translation by the authors.

99 Eberhard Weinbrenner, “Falsch,” letter to the editor, *Der Architekt*, no. 12 (December 1988): 636. Translation by the authors.

100 Ingeborg Flagge, “In eigener Sache,” *Der Architekt*, no. 12 (December 1988): 636.

101 See for example his letters to the architect Rambald von Steinbüchel, January 23, 1989, and March, 1, 1989: DAM Archive, 408-700-004.

Democratic Party and The Greens<sup>102</sup> which ruled the Senate of Berlin since March 1989, and on the other hand, the government of Germany which at that time consisted of a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and the Free Democratic Party. The DHM was mainly a project relating to Kohl and the CDU. Until 1981 the Berlin mayor was from the SPD, while from 1981 to 1989 from the CDU (von Weizsäcker and Diepgen respectively) and again in March 1989 Walter Momper took back the mayorship for the SPD. Bächer's reason for rejection was the impression of a political instrumentalisation of architecture: "The handling of expert decisions by the Senate of Berlin destroys the basis for the process of the architecture competition and turns it into a game ball of political arbitrariness. Against this dismantling of the competition I call on protest on behalf of the architects."<sup>103</sup> In his rejection letter, he interpreted the hearing as an attack on the architectural competition as a democratic instrument to decide what a society wants to build. For him the competition went according to the rules and therefore its result cannot be called into question because of "political despotism." Bächer also criticised the fact that the moderator of the hearing was the journalist Flagge. According to him, in this setting, the hearing would not lead to new and objective findings. He called for the democratic decision of the jury members to be accepted.

#### **A decision-making conflict**

At the hearing, Peter Conradi (SPD), member of the *Bundestag* (German federal parliament), deputy chairman of the Committee for Spatial Planning, Building and Urban Development in Bonn and, according to Bächer, at the time romantically linked with Flagge, indirectly responded to Bächer's criticism. He made it clear that the parliament and the government respect and take the majority decision of the jury seriously, but responsibility for what will ultimately be built rested with the political body: "[...] the decision of a free jury does not take away the decision of the parliament and the government elected by the people."<sup>104</sup> It is interesting to note that for the professional politician Conradi, the political takes place primarily in the parliament and in the federal government through elected deputies.

In 1989 and 1990 Bächer and Conradi exchanged letters in which they respectfully discussed the conflict between the jury's and the political body's claims to power. This was essentially a decision-making conflict. Bächer continued to deem the hearing as an SPD-attack on the CDU. That is why, according to Bächer, SPD members always referred to it as the "Kohl-Museum," although the idea had already been coined in the 1970s when Berlin was ruled by the SPD: "Or does it bother that Aldo Rossi is a communist? In any case, Kohl

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102 At that time it was the *Alternative Liste für Demokratie und Umweltschutz* (Alternative list for democracy and environmental protection) that joined *Bündnis 90* (Alliance 90) to *Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen Berlin* in 1993.

103 Max Bächer, Erklärung zum Hearing des Berliner Senats über das Deutsche Historische Museum, November 24, 1989: DAM Archive, 408-100-152.

104 Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen Berlin. *Protokoll*, 1989, 71. Translation by the authors.

didn't mind," wrote Bächer as a provocation.<sup>105</sup> Conradi refused this accusation and pointed to the now changed German situation. The Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989. It soon became clear that the two German states would reunite. The *Spreebogen* had already been discussed as a place for future parliament and government buildings. "Under these circumstances, no responsible planner and politician can continue to pursue the DHM project as if nothing had happened," wrote Conradi to Bächer.<sup>106</sup> At the hearing, Conradi stated that it does not feel right to build a history museum in West Berlin while at the same time the Eastern German people with the *Friedliche Revolution* (Peaceful Revolution) make history.<sup>107</sup>

The two strands of criticism, one aimed at Rossi's design and another one at the jury, were both connected to political debates between different parties and discussions about how to deal with history, especially with German history. While architecture in the first strand of criticism was viewed as a representation of how German society deals with its history, architecture, in the second criticism, appears as a decision-making process in which it is debated who has the right and the power to decide what should be built.

## The fall of the Berlin wall and Max Bächer's letter to Helmut Kohl

### The historical event that changed everything

In the end, the actual history, as a result of a collective political will, turned the tables of the architectural competition. The fall of the Berlin wall changed the whole debate tremendously. In the article "Was nun? Mauer und Museum" (What now? Wall and museum), Schreiber stated that for the first time the claim to reconsider the DHM-project has factual and not merely party-tactical validity.<sup>108</sup> But they were not just party-tactical decisions, nor was the fall of the Berlin Wall a factual matter. The issue was which alternative had the upper hand in the current political situation and was able to convince. In this respect, the fall of the Wall was a very convincing argument against the construction of a German history museum. One question that came up was how to deal with the situation where two historical museums would exist in a city that would probably be reunited, the former GDR museum and the new historical museum in West Berlin. The famous GDR architect Hermann Henselmann who attended the third hearing spoke in favour of Rossi's design because he brings "the Attic salt" that the Germans lack.<sup>109</sup> This is why Schreiber imagined that "perhaps the East

105 Letter from Max Bächer to Peter Conradi, April 10, 1990: DAM Archive, 408-700-004. Translation by the authors.

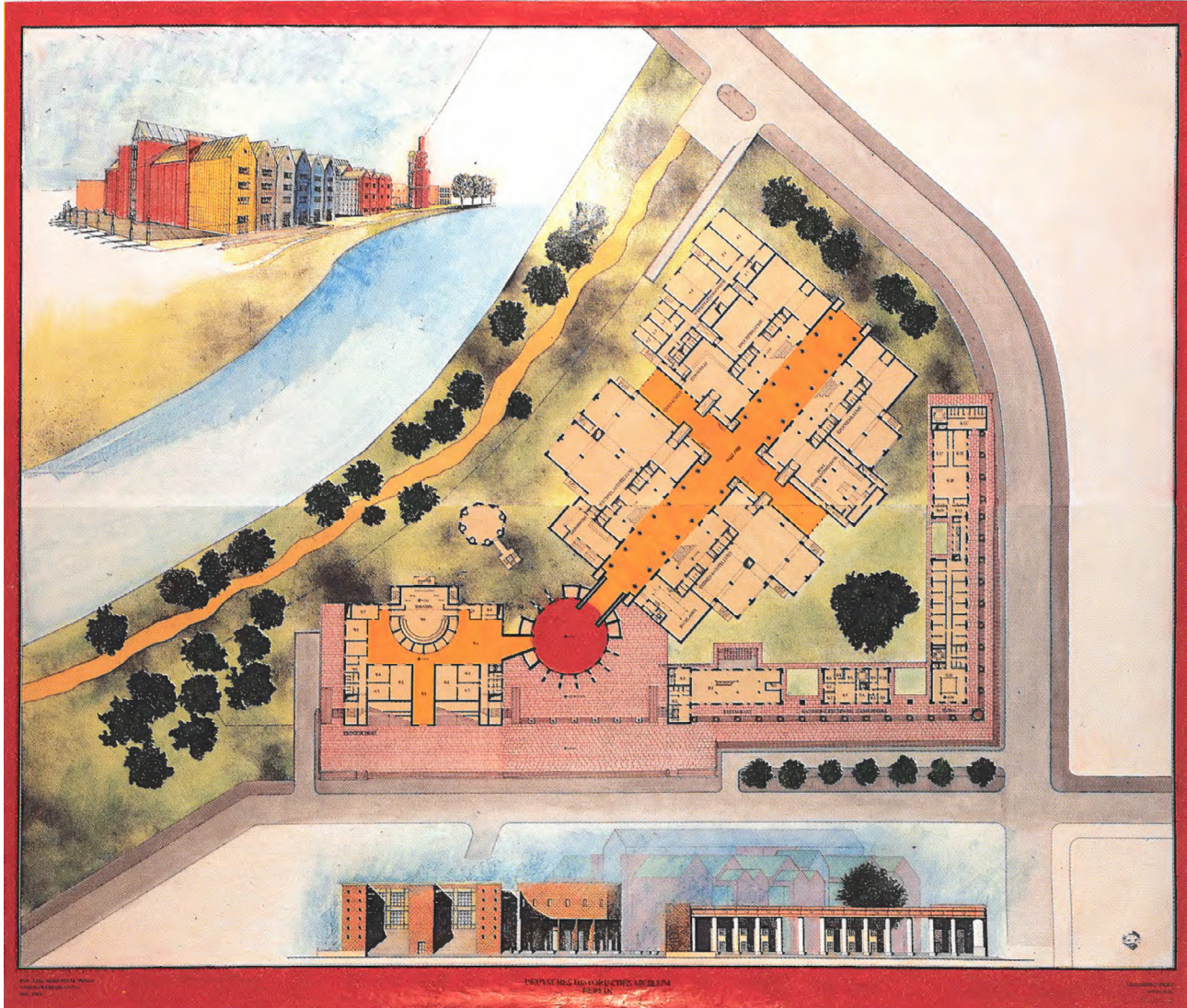
106 Letter from Peter Conradi to Max Bächer, April 26, 1990: DAM Archive, 408-700-004. Translation by the authors.

107 Cf. Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen Berlin. *Protokoll*, 1989, 72.

108 Mathias Schreiber, "Was nun? Mauer und Museum," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, no. 277 (November 29, 1989): 33.

109 Cf. Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen Berlin. *Protokoll*, 1989, 64.





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Berlin people will save Rossi's design in the end."<sup>110</sup> This was not the case, of course, because the debate about the DHM was neither an East German nor an all-German affair.

A few months before the *Mauerfall*, an exhibition promoting Rossi's design was opened by Stölzl on August 31, 1989, at the *Aedes Galerie für Architektur* in Berlin. He declared that, despite some new hearings, the time has come to make peace and to let Rossi realize the museum.<sup>111</sup> Stölzl received support from the architecture historian Werner Oechslin, who pointed out in the exhibition catalogue the German inability to design representative buildings and deal with the subject of monumentality. He ended his essay with an appeal: "The shameful commentaries and resentment should be ignored and these qualities, well suited to a museum for German history, should be given the consideration they deserve."<sup>112</sup> Until September 22, visitors were able to find out about the changes that Rossi had made in accordance with the demands and comments of the jury and in cooperation with the museum management.<sup>113</sup>

110 Schreiber, "Was nun?", 33. Translation by the authors.

111 Cf. Kurt Geisler, "Ein Ort der Begegnung, Bildung und Unterhaltung," *Berliner Morgenpost* (September 1, 1989).

112 Werner Oechslin, in Aldo Rossi, *Deutsches Historisches Museum 1989*, 13.

113 From December 8, 1989 to February 18, 1990 Rossi's design was exhibited in the *Schweizerisches Landesmuseum* (Swiss National Museum) in Zurich. The title was "Aldo Rossi. Entwürfe für das Deutsche Historische Museum."

Fig. 6

The reworked design, produced in collaboration with the *Bundesbaudirektion* (Federal Building Directorate) and delivered in May 1988. The coloured plan was a central feature of the following exhibition of 1989. (© Eredi Aldo Rossi)

New drawings produced in Rossi's studio were particularly designed for this exhibition [Fig. 6], most specifically a painted panel of several meters long and a large physical model that has since been a major exhibit in recurring presentations of his work.<sup>114</sup> In addition, several sketches of the early phase were edited and re-drawn<sup>115</sup> from scratch in the signature art-style of Rossi that deliberately depicts crude and quickly-drawn elements, as expressions of spontaneity. What is important in these exhibits was that they showed emphasis on the element of colour of the DHM. While the competition panels and technical plans were in black and white, these ones were vividly coloured depicting the museum uniformly in bright red, except from the riverside facades rendered in multiple colours. This change in the project's presentation was arguably done in anticipation of the wider public that the exhibition and the publications addressed, and perhaps even to avoid comparisons with the blank and austere Nazi representational buildings by using bright colours.

### The DHM project is cancelled

Despite such efforts, Rossi's design was never executed. In September 1990, the journalist Gabriele Riedle titled an article in the *taz* with "Ost-Berlins Ulbricht-Tempel wird Kohl-Museum" (East Berlin's Ulbricht temple becomes the Kohl museum). She informed the public that in August the *Ministerrat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Council of Ministers of East Germany) had decided to give the Eastern museum of German history over to the West Berlin's DHM, without previous public discussion and without involving the museum employees concerned. Thereby, the DHM not only received a huge collection, but also a building: the *Zeughaus* on *Unter den Linden* [Fig. 1, B]. This transfer was decided without the involvement of neither the Senate of Berlin (West) nor the Magistrate of Berlin (East). Yet, the coalition of SPD and the Greens, who governed West Berlin, may not have been unhappy with this rather undemocratic development. When the government was taken over, the coalition had decided to reject "Kohl's present," but soon the SPD made concessions—certainly because Bonn insisted on linking all donation to Berlin to the approval of the Rossi building—thus provoking dispute with the Greens, who categorically refused a new building for the DHM.<sup>116</sup> The move of the DHM into the *Zeughaus* solved this dilemma. In 1991, the Senate elections led to the re-election of Diepgen (CDU). Despite the political change, the plan to construct Rossi's design in the *Spreebogen* was not taken up again. Instead, the plans for the construction of parliament and

114 One recent exhibition of this kind was the 2017 "Aldo Rossi. Il gran teatro di architettura" in Milan, with the DHM being one of the seven selected projects to be exhibited in detail.

115 A large percentage of Rossi's sketches of the DHM at the CCA are dated between 1988 and 1989. The design phase took place in November and December 1987 and the competition entry was submitted in February 1988. Since the submitted panels contained no such sketches, these later reworkings were produced for the purposes of publications, and exhibitions, that took advantage of Rossi's popular status as an "artist-architect" to promote the museum. For instance, such sketches were the sections of the rotunda's interior that made part of promotional leaflets as well as a combined sketch of "the DHM and other Berlin buildings" that was often featured as an opening concept sketch of the project, e.g. in: Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi: Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlino*, 8. For studying Rossi's work, the blurring between working, finished and re-drawn material is both a methodological problem and a manifestation of his ideal for the never-ending design process.

116 Cf. Gabriele Riedle, "Ost-Berlins Ulbricht-Tempel wird Kohl-Museum," *taz. die tageszeitung*, no. 3215 (September 20, 1990): 7.

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2. April 1992 B/Z

*DHM Preiswahl*

Betr: Deutsches Historisches Museum zu Berlin

Sehr geehrter Herr Bundeskanzler,

bei einem Italienaufenthalt erfuhr ich mit Bestürzung, dass der Entwurf von Aldo Rossi für das DHM im Spreebogen nicht verwirklicht werden soll. Als damaliger Vorsitzender des Preisgerichtes kann ich meine Enttäuschung darüber nicht verhehlen, zumal ich mit meinem Engagement für die Durchsetzung des Museums Anfeindungen und Verleumdungen ausgesetzt war und bin. Ich bedaure die Entscheidung nicht zuletzt auch deswegen, weil ich durch die Wiedervereinigung die Chance einer breiteren Zustimmung, nicht zuletzt die Integration des Museums in ein neues Regierungszentrum erhoffte.

Nun geht es darum, dieses Kapitel auch nach aussen zu einem würdigen Abschluss zu bringen. Ich weiss, wie gross die Bewunderung für Ihre positive Haltung zu dem Entwurf von Aldo Rossi war. Nun habe ich auch die bitteren Worte vernommen, wie man in Deutschland mit Architekten umgehe. Ich hielte es daher für eine sehr schöne und versöhnliche Geste, wenn Sie an Herrn Prof. Rossi ein Wort des Bedauerns und des Dankes richten würden. Da ich mich sehr gut an ein Gespräch mit Ihnen anlässlich der Verleihung des Architekturpreises für Rheinland-Pfalz in Ludwigshafen erinnere, wo ich den Festvortrag hielt und danach Gelegenheit hatte, mich fast eine Stunde lang mit dem damaligen Ministerpräsidenten über Architektur zu unterhalten, weiss ich auch Ihr Urteil und Ihr Verständnis zu würdigen. Mehr als eine Geste, sondern ein gültiger Beweis wäre es daher, die Bundesregierung würde Herrn Rossi als Entschädigung mit einem Direktauftrag für einen gewichtigen Neubau honorieren. Das würde im Ausland und bei vielen Architekten mit Genugtuung aufgenommen werden, die den Rossi-Entwurf, das Museum, den Standort und nicht zuletzt Sie gegen die gezielten Hintertreibungen verteidigten.

Mit freundlichen Grüssen  
Ihr sehr ergebener

*Max Bächer*

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government buildings were pushed ahead. A year later, it was officially decided to abandon the realisation of Rossi's design for the DHM, and remodelling work on the *Zeughaus* and the creation of a permanent exhibition began.<sup>117</sup>

After this decision, Bächer wrote a personal letter to Kohl [Fig. 7]. He expressed his disappointment and suggested compensation for Rossi's missed opportunity to build the museum: "I deem it a nice and conciliatory gesture if you wrote Rossi a word of regret and gratitude."<sup>118</sup> Bächer went on to propose to the chancellor what he considered an appropriate response: "More than a gesture, it would be an effective proof if the federal government rewarded Rossi with a direct commission on a major new building." We do not know whether chancellor

117 Cf. Mälzer, *Ausstellungsstück Nation*, 129.

118 Letter from Max Bächer to Helmut Kohl, April 2, 1992: DAM Archive. Translation by the authors.

Fig. 7

Letter from Max Bächer to chancellor Helmut Kohl from April 2, 1992. (© DAM Archive, 408-100-152).

Kohl followed Bächer's request and wrote a letter to Rossi. It seems to be that Rossi had not received a direct commission.<sup>119</sup> Bächer's behaviour testifies to a self-confident assessment that his role as chairman of the jury empowered him to make direct demands on the chancellor for Rossi.

To his credit, Rossi's reaction to these developments was more docile than would be expected for an architect deprived of such a commission. In the face of the historic developments undergoing in the process of the reunification of Germany, Rossi called the project "already a fortunate one" and gave the priority to the people's fights. He stated that in the face of history, architecture and art cannot do much other than recount and celebrate it.<sup>120</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper the history of the *Deutsches Historisches Museum's* early instigation as an institution and the entanglement of architectural discourse in this process was recounted. What is significant from this retelling is that the political quarrels over the treatment of history by West Germany which struggled with the past and was anxious over the future, were projected onto the architectural competition and its subsequent debates. The criticism of a possibly glorified German history in the DHM was meant to be absorbed by the choice of a foreign architect. This architect delivered a design that could be read in various ways and further fuelled the public debate. At the same time, however, the design and its playful approach to history was also a good and ultimately welcome occasion to literally argue about the way German representative buildings should look after the National Socialist era. Both the competition process and its public communication can take unpredictable courses. The claims regarding the lack of anonymity in the competition process and malpractice from the part of the jury, or the mixed and ambiguous responses from popular and professional media showcase how architecture is both a collective construction and deconstruction, how architecture is deeply political, and how it functions through a fragile system that arbitrarily perseveres or fails.

Society appears here as truly political as well, in the sense of Mouffe's theoretical body. The "post-political" is aiming for consensus ignoring the existing conflicts between different interest groups, while the political is always a struggle where agonistic demands collide. There are arguments and negotiations, power battles and temporary victories and this is not necessarily problematic. It constitutes a public which is willing to debate over what is going to be built. Mouffe reminds us that there is no rational decision and there will be the "inescapable moment of decision – in the strong sense of having to decide in an undecidable terrain."<sup>121</sup> The final decision to abandon the plan for a new building

119 After the DHM, Rossi executed a project for a complex of residential and office buildings in the *Schützenstraße* area, Berlin, Germany from 1992 to 1997.

120 Aldo Rossi, "Prefazione," in Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi: Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlino*, 7.

121 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, 11.

for the DHM was to some extent made by uninvolved people—the East German society. And the fact that the DHM moved into the *Zeughaus* and took over the collection of the GDR Museum for German History was a deeply undemocratic decision taken behind closed doors. One wonders what would have happened if the Berlin Wall had not fallen. Would Rossi's design today be the built testimony to German society's struggle to find the best way to deal with its history—a play of historical references as a house for a German history that, in contrast, cannot be viewed playfully, or the gift of a conservative chancellor who wanted to relieve German society of a so-called guilt of German history through a cheerful building? Probably there would have been public discussion about it again and again, with each new exhibition.

Considering the architecture that emerged in Berlin after the unification of Germany, the DHM proposal of Rossi's studio was starkly different from the so-called "Berlinische Architektur"—a conservative architectural tendency, which was about closing gaps, resuming old building lines, returning to block development, respecting old eaves heights and reinterpreting classical arrangement principles. While Rossi's close engagement with history left a bitter taste to critics and public alike, compared to the deadly serious return to old building styles in the 1990s, his collages of historical references offered a joyful view of the past. This playful approach is—despite the unease it provoked—more convincing than ever in view of the external reconstruction of the baroque *Berliner Schloss*.

Rossi's design, even unbuilt, and the debate which it triggered are a testament to the public's potential to embrace a diverse culture of dispute, and to architecture's resilient ability to host and mediate it.

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