

Veronika Zickendraht

The Stuff Castles Are Made Of

The reconstruction of the Berlin Palace.
How Wilhelm von Boddien
made a crazy idea come true.

adeo

CONTENTS

THE FIRST MEETING	13	THE CHANCE DISCOVERY	57
HE WHO LAUGHS LAST, LAUGHS THE LOUDEST	17	FOR A MERE 32 MILLION OSTMARKS	59
THE STORY OF THE PALACE	23	THE WORLD WAS OUTRAGED	59
RADICAL MADNESS	23	SCULPTURES ON PILES OF RUBBLE	61
THE LESSER NAZI PARTY RALLY GROUNDS	24	A LITTLE GRANDEUR IS IN ORDER	63
THE MASTER BUILDERS AND THEIR KINGS	31	THE DREAM TAKES SHAPE	65
THE SCENE OF SYMBOLIC EVENTS	38	THE HARD CORE OF PALACE SUPPORTERS	65
IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE PALACE	44	WHO NEEDS A PRUSSIAN PALACE?	66
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PALACE	49	INFLUENTIAL PARTNERS	67
THE PALACE WASN'T IN BERLIN – BERLIN WAS THE PALACE	51	THE BREAKTHROUGH	71
A HOUSE WITHOUT AN EMPEROR	54	HE WHO WILL NOT LISTEN WILL SEE	71
THE DESTRUCTION	56	FROM ENTHUSIAST TO PROFESSIONAL	73
THE EXPLOSION SCENERIO	56	RIDING THE HOBBYHORSE	73
		THE PALACE RESEARCH PIONEERS	74

HOMAGE TO HIS TEACHER	79	INSIGHTS	102
PROMINENT PARTNERS	80	GLEANING POSITIVES	
THE PHANTOM	81	FROM ALL THE CRITICISM	102
A STROKE OF GENIUS	84	GABRIELE VON BODDIEN,	
THE “PLASTIC PALACE”	86	THE WOMAN AT HIS SIDE	105
A MIRAGE IN BERLIN	87	REFLECTIONS ON THE VALUE OF THE FAMILY	108
A MOMENT OF CLARITY	88	THE ISSUE OF THE CROSS	111
THE BUNDESTAG DECIDES	91	THE OPTIMIST	113
THE STUFF CASTLES ARE MADE OF	93	A PARADOXICAL SPEECH	113
NO FRILLS	93	STAIRS ARE SWEEPED FROM TOP TO BOTTOM	115
THE MARKETING CONCEPT	95	THE REALIZATION	117
“THE FARMERS WERE MY TEACHERS”	97	A LUCKY FIND	117
THE ART OF FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND	99	THE ARCHITECT FRANCO STELLA –	
THE ELEGANT WAY	100	A SCHLÜTER FROM VICENZA	122
		AT THE EPICENTER OF BEAUTY	123

VOILÀ, THE PALACE IS RISEN	128	ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	159
BUILDING DATA.....	132	IMPRINT.....	160
MATERIALS.....	134		
THE ENERGY-EFFICIENT PALACE.....	134		
CLIMATE CONTROL.....	135		
STORIES FROM THE CELLAR.....	135		
A THOUSAND WINDOWS.....	137		
RADIANT JOY	140		
HUMBOLDT FORUM.....	140		
THE SPONSORS.....	142		
THE FRIENDS.....	142		
CONCLUSION.....	150		
REFERENCES.....	155		
PICTURE CREDITS.....	157		



FOREWORD

by Wolfgang Thierse

“One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write the book of happiness” – wrote Albert Camus in the famous essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”. This is what strikes me when I think of Wilhelm von Boddien. Was it not completely absurd that Boddien went public with his project to rebuild the Berlin Palace at the start of the nineties!

A Hanseatic businessman – a farm machinery dealer – wanted to raise 100 million euros for his plan. The Palace of the Republic, its future uncertain, was still standing on the location of the former castle. The public was busy with entirely different issues. The “unification crisis” was just beginning. The city of Berlin was laboring over the many economic, social, infrastructural and mental health problems caused by the unification of two parts, which had grown so disparately. There were always new reasons for commotion and everything was more important than this simply crazy project.

At the time, there was disinterest, incredulity and rejection. And today? The project is almost complete.

Boddien’s dream has become reality, even if not quite as he imagined it at the outset. He has kept his promise, when many suspected him of delusions of grandeur or at least foolishness at the time. A lot is expected of the new building, even if those expectations are contradictory. After years of controversy, ups and downs, euphoria and mistrust, Boddien has reached his goal. How much criticism, reluctance and resistance from the architects, the feuilleton and the politicians has been overcome! How much work of persuasion, how many tough conversations, how many public disputes did it take, that an apparently impossible undertaking won over enough people to be realized, step by step!

I don’t know when my first meeting with Boddien took place, but I remember my first impression. “Here is a man who’s pretty tough, but he clothes his stubbornness with affability.” A first impression that confirmed itself repeatedly afterwards. Wilhelm von Boddien is an extraordinary mixture of intractable pain-in-the-neck and confident cheerfulness, inexhaustible tenacity

and untiring eloquence, anything but typical northern German. With his zealous conviction and masculine charm, he won over more and more people for his idea and convinced them of the merits of his project. Including me.

What were and still are his (and my) convincing arguments? To start with, it was and is about healing a wound in the heart of Berlin. The castle, almost destroyed during the war, but still a place for exhibitions thereafter, was destroyed on the orders of Walter Ulbricht in 1950. In its place was built a military parade ground. I always considered this a culturally barbaric act, the yawning emptiness of the place in the center of the city being a painful reminder until well into the 1970s. This gap was filled in the middle of the 70s by the “Palace of the Republic”, the GDR's architectural and cultural prestige project. The People's Chamber sat in session and large events like the East German Communist Party (SED) conference or the entertainment revue “Kessel Buntel” took place here. Even when it was a truly unsuitable parliament building, many people have happy memories of “Erich's lamp store”. There was a colorful entertainment program, subsidized meals, a working bowling alley and even telephone boxes, from which one could make cheap calls to the West.

Why should they have torn down the Palace of the Republic but for the severe asbestos hazard that was

found? Even today some people suspect this was an evil plot by the “victorious Westerners”. It was only during the final demolition that a new question arose: rebuild it? But by whom and for what purpose? Or a new building? An urban development/architectural competition did not yield any convincing results (I will definitely not forget my deep disappointment after visiting the competition exhibition in the Berlin State Council building).

That was the momentum Boddien needed, the chance for an alternative of the historic and historicizing kind! With the castle mockup in 1993, the idea had taken on suggestive, sensual persuasiveness. One could really see, in an urban and aesthetic sense, what the structure of the palace meant for the city center. It was visible from the Brandenburg Gate, where the street Unter den Linden ends, where it finds its fulfillment even.

It is good for the city of Berlin to have in its historical center, its most precious place, namely the Museumsinsel, a place where history is reclaimed. In a city, that – according to a famous dictum – destroys itself every 40 years, in a city with so much modern architecture of very good and good, but also of bad and very bad quality, it is good for its inner balance to have such reclaimed, visible history. Most people experience cities as beautiful, as rich and human, when the various layers of their history are visible, when

history is physically tangible in their buildings. Think of Rome, Prague, Paris; think of German cities, which have grown through the centuries. How boring, in comparison, are cities with minimal history!

That is what irritated me – why should Berlin not be allowed to do what many other German cities had done successfully? How would Münster, Hildesheim or Munich appear without the restoration or reproduction of historical buildings, streets or cityscape-defining ensembles? That is why the dogma of cultural heritage preservation irritated me – that what has been destroyed, what has fallen or disappeared, whatever ‘for’ reason, may not reappear. That would be fake, Disneyland (but George Dehio formed his maxims long before the awful destruction wreaked by 20th century warfare). That is why I am irritated by the lack of a sense of history and its influence on urban and living spaces in many architects. As if contemporary architecture can only be had without history or be against it. That is why I am irritated by the ideological hijacking of the Berlin Palace as the ultimate symbol of Prussian-German militarism and imperialism, a symbol of the past and hopefully one forever defeated. That the rebuilding of it would be something reactionary, an expression of a false desire for the past. But is that really so?

At the end of the 90s, the German parliament appointed an international committee of experts,

“Berlin’s historical center,” of which I, as president of the parliament, was a member. This committee was to work on ideas for the layout of Berlin’s city center and the future of the empty space on the Museumsinsel. There was intensive debate on urban and architectural, historical and political questions, but most of all, we were moved by the question, what should the historical center be in the future and for whom? To whom should it belong? What should take place there for the citizens of Berlin, of Germany, and for all the overseas visitors?

These questions found a convincing answer in the proposal of Klaus-Dieter Lehmann, the president of the Foundation of Prussian Cultural Heritage. Berlin’s center should be a place of openness to and relationship with the world – for which the name Humboldt stands! Global culture and history should rub shoulders with European cultural history, on display in the neighboring museums, and inspire lively discussion. It should not be another museum but a place of cultural dialogue and topical communication. The idea of the Humboldt Forum was born, an idea of the old and the new, of history and modernity!

The German parliament made the committee’s proposal its own and passed resolutions for the Humboldt Forum, the Berlin Palace, an architectural competition and the financing and usage of the building, each with a large majority. Resolutions with a higher

authority are not possible in a parliamentary democracy. Nevertheless, antipathy, defensiveness, rancor and criticism in some parts of the press and the public remained – and the doubt that the necessary donations for the historical façade could really be raised. For that was Boddien’s imposing demand: the reclamation of the building’s historical visage should belong to the people. The fact that exactly this has happened, despite the malicious doubting, is down to the effort of Wilhelm von Boddien and his supporters’ association. Everything that was planned to be built through donations has been built through donations. Promise fulfilled – Chapeau, dear Boddien!

“The struggle towards the summit can fill the human heart. We must imagine Sisyphus a happy person.” Thus ends the text by Albert Camus. Wilhelm von Boddien has achieved his goal. He should actually be a very happy person. But will perhaps the infamous and bittersweet melancholy of fulfillment come next?

Dr. h.c. Wolfgang Thierse (SPD) was president of the “Deutsche Bundestag” from 1998 to 2005.



Wilhelm von Boddien (1994)

THE FIRST MEETING

In the summer of 2019, the final branch of the “anti-Berlin Palace spirit” withdrew to the alpine upland.

A group of handpicked architects met for a symposium in the befitting location of Cumberland Castle in Gmunden, Austria. As the speaker before the guest of honor, Wilhelm von Boddien, decried the reconstruction of the baroque façade of the Humboldt Forum, he acted as if he was talking about cleaning up a local disaster. His volume increased from sentence to sentence and his choice of words climaxed in verbal blows. Before Boddien could take the stage, he had already been decimated.

Somewhat amused, I thought to myself that the specialist for the “structural quality of national historical buildings” probably wanted to show that he knew what was happening in the world. Before I had collected my thoughts, Wilhelm von Boddien stood up and walked calmly towards the lectern. He turned towards the audience, listened as he was introduced, nodded, smiled, and stood for a long time, as if he was already expecting applause.

His first words were full of gratitude for the previous speaker. Assuredly, he weaved the accusations into his speech. He confirmed them and thanked the

speaker again for how authentically he had introduced “the Berlin business.” I observed him as he spoke – his gestures, his facial expression, his tone of voice. Wilhelm von Boddien was completely relaxed. The blows of the previous speaker had not affected him. On the contrary – he used them, confidently played with them.

“Moreover I am pleased,” he said, “to be in beautiful Szakkammergut, to breathe the healthy mountain and lake air, and to have the honor of speaking in a castle of the House of Welf.”

It appeared to me he was wearing a bulletproof vest under his polo shirt. How many years had he needed to become so resilient? To cope with crises, to survive and overcome stress, frustration and setbacks and even draw strength from them!

After the end of his 30-minute speech, which was extemporized, off the cuff, peppered with episodes and anecdotes, his listeners were full of curiosity for Berlin. We Austrians could even swallow his Prussian-Hanseatic accent, which at first stirred up feelings of a military “Attention!”

I was standing in front of him before the applause had ended and asked, “Can I get us something to drink?”

He was eyeing the buffet at the end of the room and, laughing, said, “I’ll bring the sandwiches.”

Then we sat there together drinking white wine and apple juice spritzer. He ate, enjoying the view of the

emerald green Traunsee and the jagged lines of the surrounding mountains.

I was still dwelling on the abrasive words of the speaker before him. I wanted to water them down and stammered something about narrow-mindedness. As if nothing could cloud this fine day, he answered casually, “Did you know, before work started on the Berlin Palace, I was invited by the Charlottenburg CDU to speak at the Tennis Club Blau-Weiß.” He nodded as if to confirm this, bit into his salmon sandwich and continued, “I thought to myself, ‘my goodness, 300 kilometers from Hamburg to Berlin, and what for?’ I was a bit more arrogant back then and said, ‘You know what? I’ll come to speak, but only if you guarantee that at least fifty people are there. I won’t travel for less.’ He generously promised me a hundred.

When I got to Berlin, only thirteen people were there. I was really angry. But then I thought, ‘These thirteen people can’t help it if the Charlottenburg CDU isn’t working. They are going to hear the best talk I’ve ever given. Who knows, something good could come of it.’

“Two days later I opened the *Berliner Morgenpost*, one of Berlin’s largest local newspapers and saw, to my amazement, an article about my talk on the first page. Suddenly, I had one hundred thousand listeners – that’s the newspaper’s circulation. What had happened?” he asked, and pushed his empty plate away.



The Berlin Palace, The Great Elector and Palace Square Façade before the Second World War.



The “Palast der Republik”

“One of the thirteen listeners at my talk was the head reporter of the *Morgenpost* and because he found my talk good, he had convinced the editors to report on it. Imagine if I had talked nonsense or let my anger out on those thirteen listeners. Two days later I would have been roundly clobbered a hundred thousand times.”

Later in the evening of that eventful day, I would read from Franz Kafka’s “The Castle” as part of the architectural program. Between you and me, the somewhat spooky Cumberland Castle has been a nursing home for the mentally ill for some time, but of course, that does not mean anything.

I was happy not to have told Wilhelm von Boddien anything about my plan to write a book about him. He does not willingly open his heart to journalists.

HE WHO LAUGHS LAST, LAUGHS THE LOUDEST

When Wilhelm von Boddien declared in a press conference that he would like to raise 105 million euros in donations to rebuild the Berlin Palace, nobody thought it necessary to hide their laughter. A farm machinery dealer from Schleswig-Holstein ... What could he possibly organize with his salesmanship? There was no obvious sign of what was to come.

Before 1990, nobody was interested in the palace. Neither in the east nor the west. Only after reunification, when the cards had been reshuffled, did the vision of the Prussian castle reappear out of the fog in the minds of the people of Berlin. The publicist Wolf Jobst Siedler wrote in 1991, “The palace wasn’t in Berlin – Berlin was the palace.”

The debate about the Palace of the Republic arose. The question was, “Let it be or demolish it?” The Berlin Palace suddenly became the symbol of the center of Berlin. Well-known people like Wolfgang Thierse and Joachim Fest rallied behind Boddien and strengthened his position. Their reputation could not be disputed.

Boddien founded the supporters’ association *Förderverein Berliner Schloss e. V.* to start implementing his plans and collecting donations in 1992.



1993. Demonstration against the palace demolition



Great Elector and Palace Square Façade.

The Palace before the blasting.





2020. The rebuilt Palace Square Façade before the completion of the Palace surroundings. The eight balustrade figures above the portals still needed to be reconstructed.

As the chances of a possible reconstruction grew, so did the number of mockers. Wilhelm von Boddien became the “palace ghost” and “boss of the castle-forger gang”. But they could not laugh his spirit away.

From now on, the arguments between proponents and detractors became increasingly raw. The waves of anger rose and fell after every step of the approval process. It was just what the media was waiting for – the battle raged: rebuild the Berlin Palace or keep the Palace of the Republic.

There was a similar situation a long time ago, when the Elector, Friedrich II, known as Iron Tooth, took power and forced the people of the twin-city Cölln/Berlin to give him land by the ford over the river Spree to build a castle, which later became the palace.

The people of Cölln and Berlin defended themselves vigorously against him. At the end of December 1447, Friedrich tried unsuccessfully to calm the storm and reach an agreement in his favor. Eventually, in 1448, the citizens rose up openly against their ruler. They



The palace as seen from the “Brüderstraße”, a pre-war photograph.

laid siege to the Hohes Haus and partly destroyed the documents and certificates archived there. At the climax of the disturbance, the locks on the Spree were opened and the building site of the Palace, “Zwing Cölln”, was flooded. These events went down in history as the *Berliner Unwille*. The Palace was built eventually.

And so today there was also a fight. But fortune was with Boddien. In 1993, when he spread out huge plastic sheets showing the façade of the Berlin Palace, a desire

grew in the populace, which could only be satisfied by a real castle. The “plastic palace”, as it was known, was more than a gag.

Wilhelm von Boddien has the necessary portion of self-deprecation and is a skilled tactician. He is a master at the art of compromise. Whenever he was in a tight spot, he practiced using the word “nevertheless” without becoming defiant.

For twenty-five years, together with builders, sponsors and the whole team from the Humboldt Forum, he has woven a thousand threads into the magnificent castle. Today, the joy of success is written in his face. “It is not possible to be that crazy anywhere but in Berlin”, he says, and laughs loudly, reconciled with the difficulties.

He managed a grand seduction with the gloss of his “plastic mockup”. That the mockup could turn into a real baroque-adorned palace built from 3.5 million brick is the wonderful result of his persistence.



The same motif in 1950: The blasting works have begun. In front of the destroyed façade is a tipping wagon used to dispose of the rubble.