



STYLIZING SCHINKEL A STUDY OF THE "BERLINER KONZERTHAUS" - HISTORY AND CHALLENGES OF RESTORATION A CRITICAL VIEWPOINT

Berliner Konzerthaus

History and challenges of restoration

A critical viewpoint

1- Abstract

The Berlin concert hall, formerly known as the Schauspielhaus (Theatre hall), in the Gendarmenmarkt square (Fig-1) in the heart of Berlin, presents a unique case of dealing with a historic building that is significant for the collective memory of its city and nation. Its reconstruction project (1979-1984) presented a dilemma that, even after the project is finished, is still argued upon till this day. Although its original function in the 19th century could not be brought back to life in the modern world, the project architects understood the cultural value of the building itself, and tried to inspire a new life cycle for it. So, was their “resurrection” successful? Culturally and economically?

Another paradox is that this building is closely connected to its architect as one of his masterpieces, despite the fact that he was not able to implement his original ideas for many reasons. The final outcome of the restoration project was celebrated as much as criticized. Some considered it as “original” while others regarded it as a “fake copy”.

The case of the Berlin concert house is as controversial as any restoration project can be, always trying to maintain the fine balance between Heritage and the modern world. This article is trying to look at this reconstruction project from a critical viewpoint, to extract useful lessons for the future.

2- The Theater house from 1821-1945

2.1 The Architect and his dreams:

Karl Friedrich Schinkel¹ became the Senior building counselor for king Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1814, but he was never able to carry on his dreams and plans for Berlin because of the severely damage economic situation of the kingdom of Prussia after several wars against Napoleon. He had many unrealized projects like the Mausoleum of Queen Louise or the new gothic cathedral by the river.

Schinkel proposed a comprehensive plan for central Berlin linking its civic centers in 1817, he was aiming to reorder the city's civic spaces beginning from the Neue Wache building, which was recently finished, but it never received royal sponsorship for financial reasons.

Schinkel had his own ideas for theater design influenced by the prototype of the Greek Amphitheater, and also inspired by Goethe who saw the concept of art is to condense experience into a heightened essence rather than to represent life in its ever-changing details. Thus, he proposed a single backdrop for every scene instead of the usual baroque style big stage that must be filled up by lots of furniture and decorations.

Iffland the former director of the national theater always rebuffed Schinkel's proposals. It was only after Iffland's death in 1815 and the appointment of Count Bruhl as the new director that his ideas began to win a sympathetic ear, he even designed several playsets between 1815-1817

2.2 The old Königliches Nationaltheater:

The original National Theater was built by Langhans in 1802, Langhans' timid classical building was ridiculed for its huge hipped roof (Fig-2) which the Berliners called "the coffin lid", although under the direction of Iffland and his successor Bruhl became a major focus of cultural life in the capital.

2.3 The new Schauspielhaus

When the Nationaltheater was destroyed by fire in 1817, a precious opportunity presented itself to the Architect. Only days after the fire, the theater's director Count Bruhl asked the King, to consider assigning the reconstruction of the theater to Schinkel. However, the task of planning the reconstruction was by no means an easy job. There were many practical and budgetary constraints, as well as complex programmatic demands, for example:

¹ Karl Friedrich Schinkel (13 March 1781 – 9 October 1841) was a Prussian architect, city planner and painter who also designed furniture and stage sets. Schinkel was one of the most prominent architects of Germany and designed both neoclassical and neogothic buildings. His most famous buildings are found in and around Berlin.

- The old foundations must be re-used, thus keeping the new building on the same footprint of the old building.
- The original Ionic columns that survived the fire are to be incorporated in the new design
- The king required the new building to include a concert hall, practice rooms, workshops and storage for theatrical sets.
- The theatre stage must be, as specified by Count Bruhl, thirty-six feet in depth, contrary to Schinkel's proposals of a reformed shallow stage design that he dreamed of for years.
- The new building must fulfil strict safety measures to prevent future fire hazards

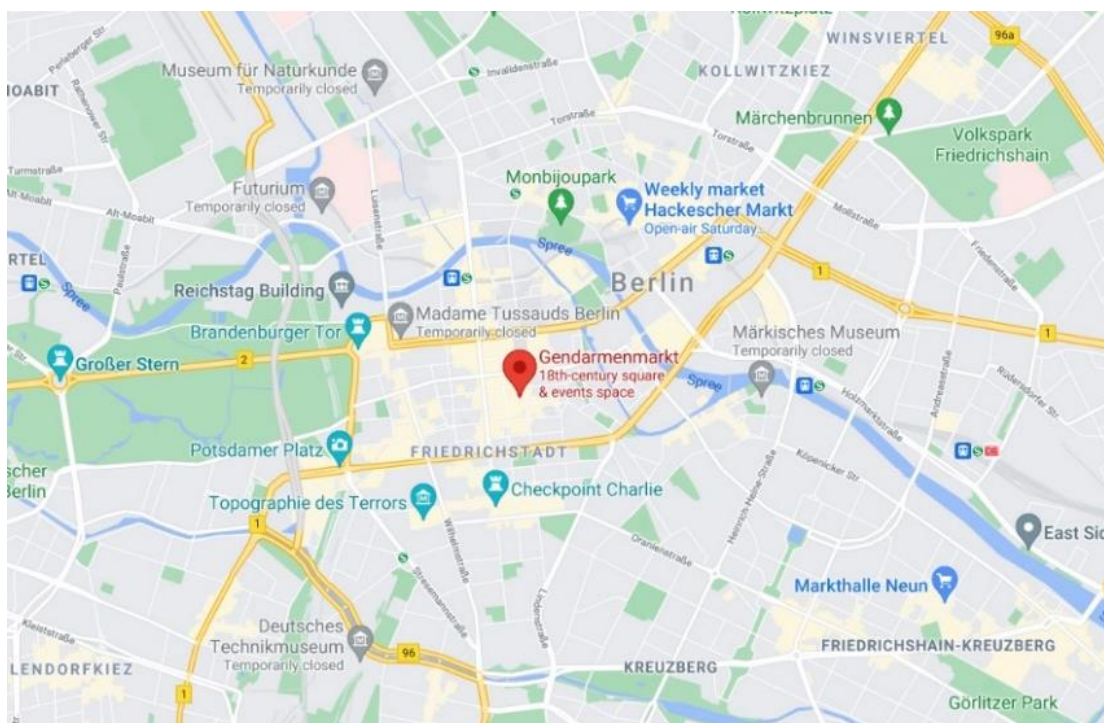


Figure 1: location of the Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin (google maps)



Figure 2: The old Royal National theater by Langhans (1802)

2.4 The form of the Theatre and its civic role:

Despite programmatic difficulties, Schinkel was determined to reshape the form of the building to express a new civic role for his new theatre building. Instead of Langhans's timid palladian style building that reminded the public of the baroque palaces that used to house theatrical performances to the nobility, Schinkel's Schauspielhaus was recast as a monumental freestanding public theatre in a civic dress (Fig-3). It entered a dialogue with the neighbouring twin churches to create an urban ensemble for the square.

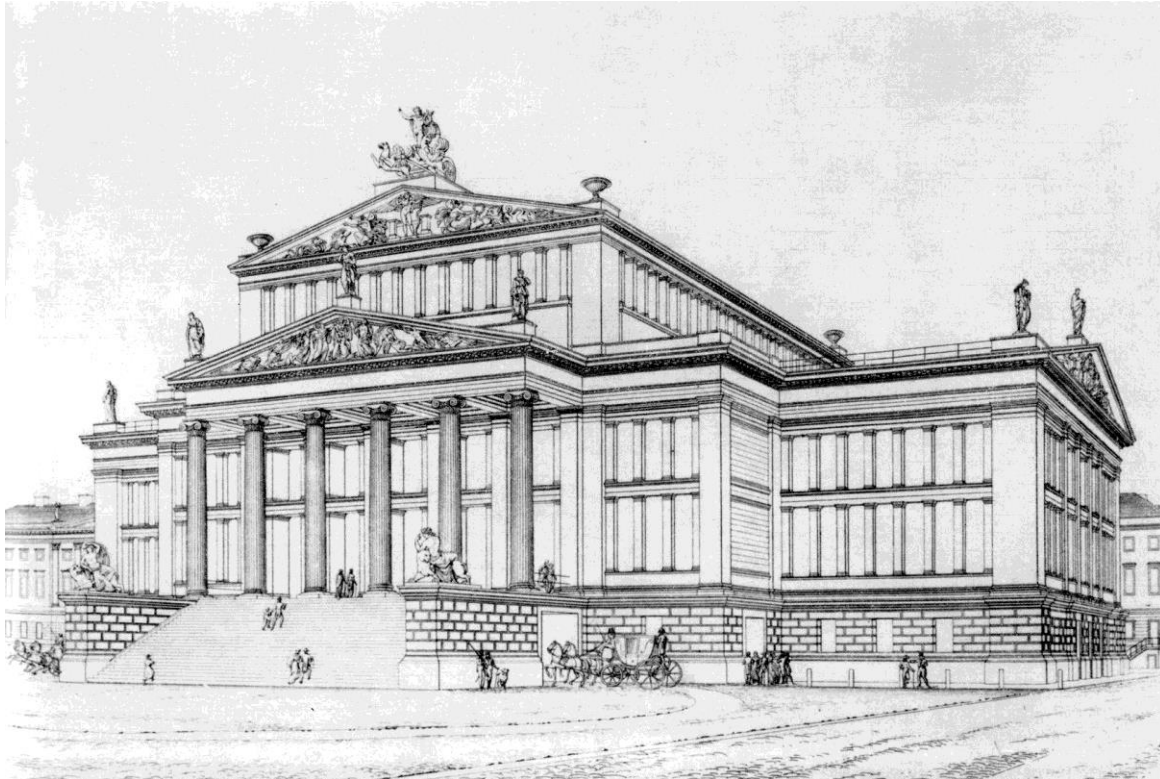


Figure 3: sketch of the building from the square

Schinkel created a simple, yet monumental, form of the building as a temple of muses under the aegis of Apollo, whose chariot crowns the upper pediment, as a symbol well understood by people at that time (Fig4). The sculptures on top of the building and its ornaments are connected to the mythological story of Eurydice's liberation from the under-world by Orpheus's music.

Schinkel decided to rotate the whole theatre to be entered from the square itself, instead of entering from the short side. The ionic portico which was a mere decorative element before, now denotes the main entrance which is now elevated on a high podium. A broad flight of stairs raises the building over the street level; thus, the ground floor can be used as storage spaces for theatrical sets (Fig-5). But on the aesthetic level, raising the building above the usual level of construction denotes a higher meaning than the residential buildings of the surrounding district. From the square itself, the new elevated structure came to dominate the space rather than being inferior to the high domes of the twin churches.



Figure 4: the Aegis of Apollo on top of the building

2.5 Design decisions:

The Schauspielfestspielhaus consisted of a central section and two lateral wings. In the middle part there was an auditorium and stage area, in the side wings the concert hall and a ballroom on the left and a rehearsal hall on the right (Fig-6).

The elevated portico created a two-level entry: a carriage entry at ground level in the vaulted undercroft of the great staircase, and the direct pedestrian entry atop the broad stairs. At the same time, it moved the public drama of theatregoing from the vestibule directly into the public square. But as the square was not deep enough, the staircase had to be so steep, which created a dramatic effect, standing on the stair landing the stairs disappear and one can watch the city skyline as if from a cliff (Fig-8).

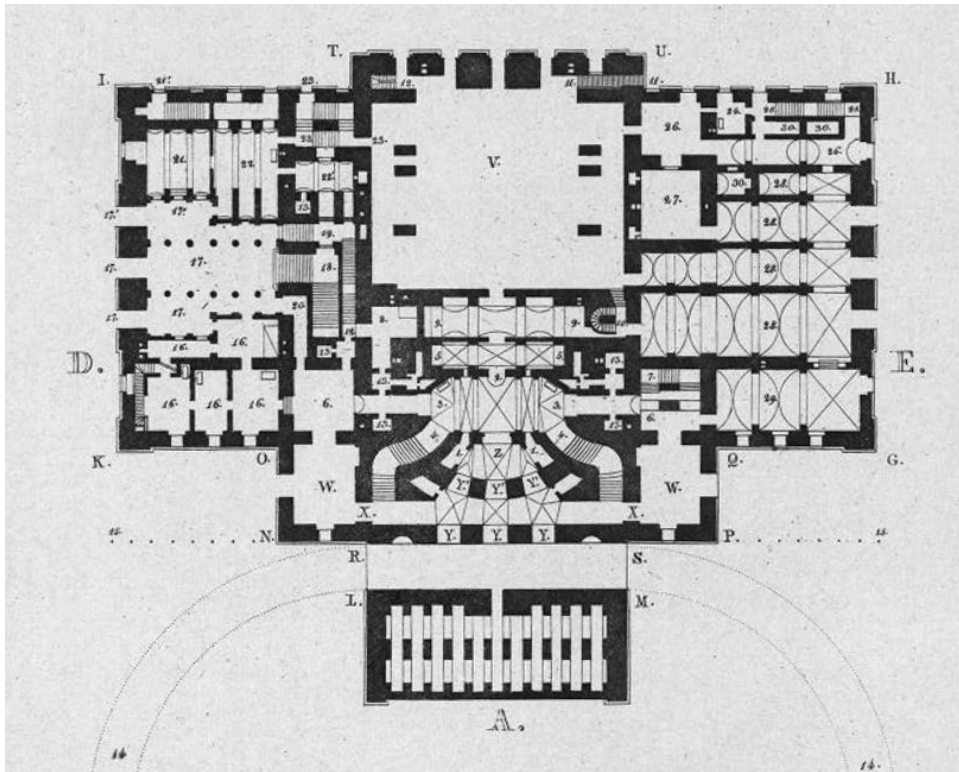


Figure 5: Ground floor plan

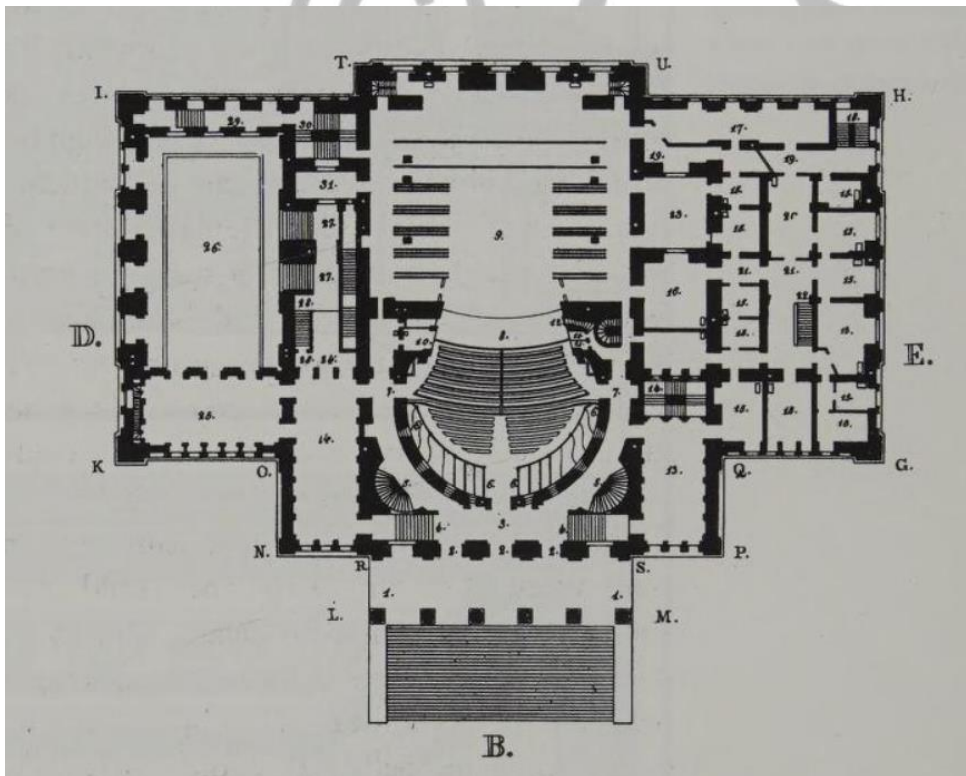


Figure 6: First floor plan

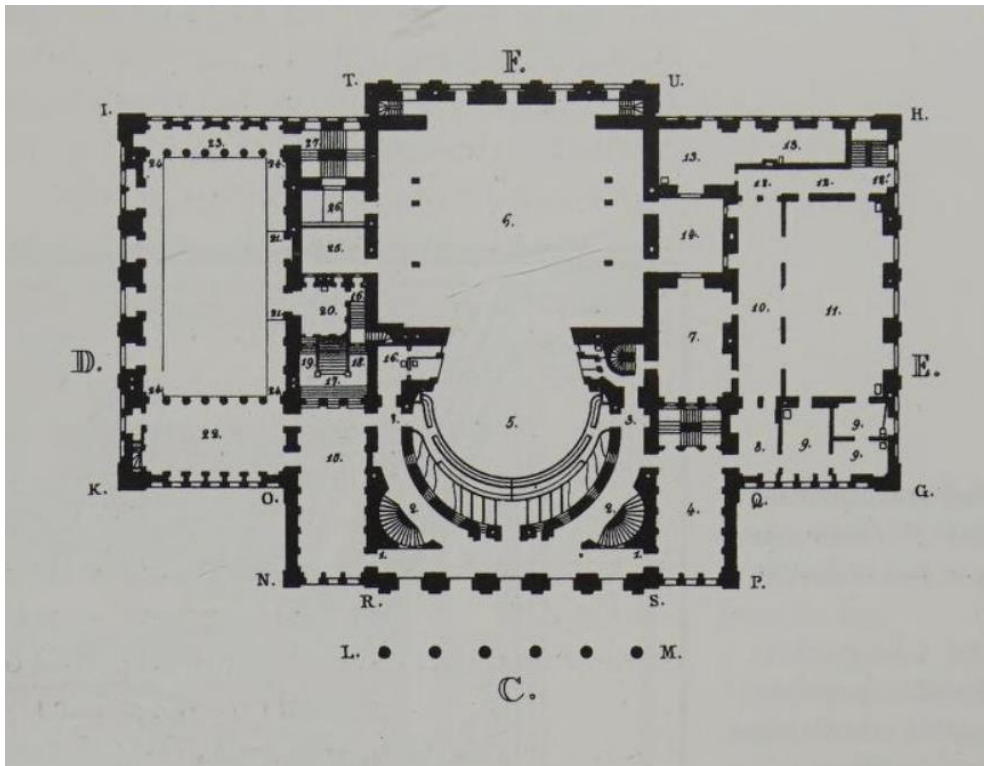


Figure 7: Second floor plan

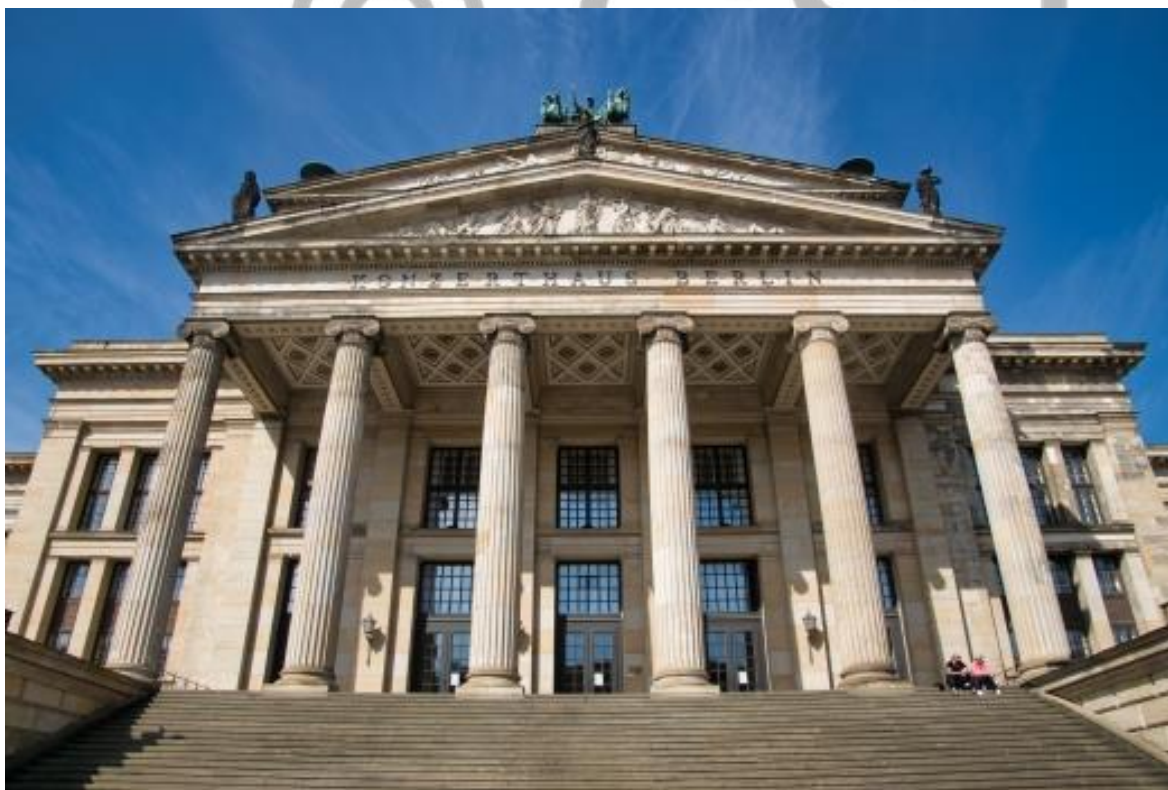


Figure 8: Entrance stair & portico

The auditorium was designed to dramatize the public as much as the stage. Although he was unable to build a shallow stage with a fixed background, like the one we see in theatres today, Schinkel was able to build an auditorium inspired by the Greek semi-circular amphitheatre plan, to give the viewer a commanding view of the stage (Fig-9).

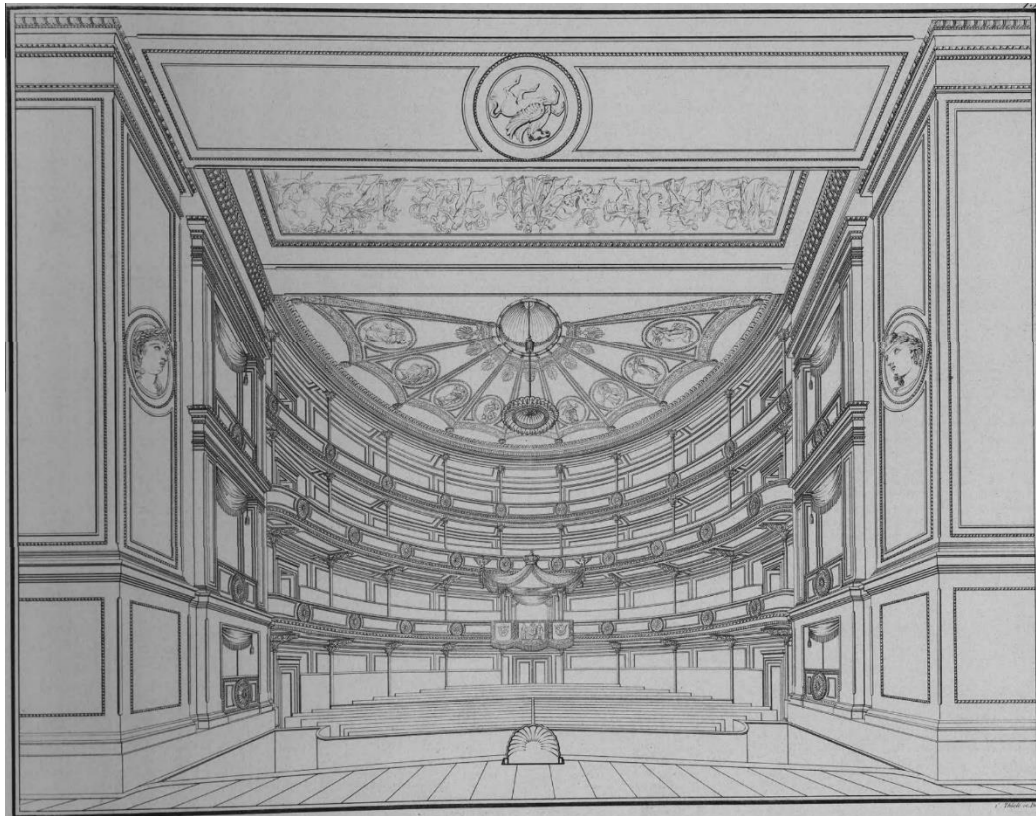


Figure 9: Semi circular auditorium

The aim was that every spectator should be able to hear the actors and view their expressions to the maximum. Of course, in compliance with the tradition, a row of boxes was reserved behind each tier with open balconies for the Prussian royalty and nobility. This hybrid design between civic democracy and formal aristocracy was achieved by a state of the art, modern solution of wrought iron colonettes (Fig-10).

The model for the structuring of the façade by pilaster orders was the Athenian Thrasyllus monument, built in 320 BC as an award for the victories of the choir leader Thrasyllus in the musical competition. Schinkel wanted to unify the building into a homogeneous body by choosing Greek "forms and construction methods" while avoiding all arches and vaults. he devised a system of stripped pilaster supports and horizontal entablatures that unify the building's masses. Forming continuous bands of fenestration, this structured grid dissolves the wall surface into a screen. It still looks

very modern today and has been regarded as a forerunner of modern architecture (Fig-11).

Therefore, it is obvious that Schinkel had more freedom of choice on the **overall form and outside of the building**, than for the interior arrangement, where he was trying to organize and fit functions and their relations in the limited space available.

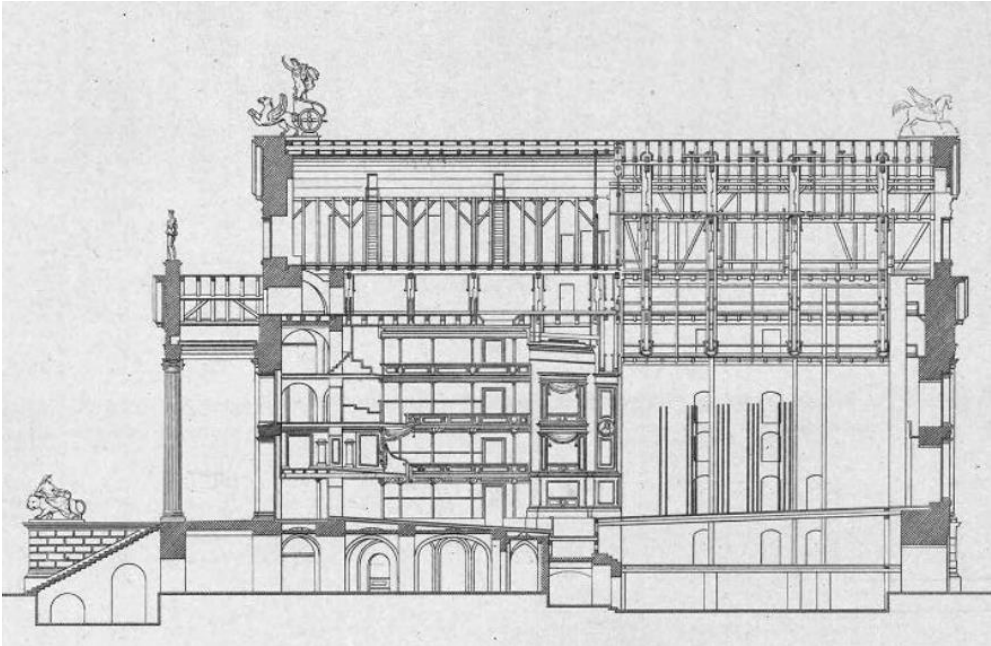


Figure 10: Transverse section through the stage and auditorium



Figure 11: Side elevation

2.6 Destruction

In May 1945, SS units set fire to the building. The auditorium fell victim to the flames, but the walls, which were up to four meters thick, withstood the fire (Fig-12). The theatre remained standing on Gendarmenmarkt for many years as a ruin, until well into the 1970s.

3 Reconstruction as a Concert Hall (1979-1984)

3.1 A political decision

By the mid seventies, when the economic situation in East Germany stabilized, Political tide shifted towards the ruins of the Schauspielhaus in Berlin. In 1976 it was settled that it should become a concert hall, not a theatre. "If you don't want to destroy the *Schinkel on the outside*, you can't build a theater in," said the architect Manfred Prasser: "For that you need an upper machinery, side stages, a backstage. And that didn't work"

Another reason was that East Berlin, already had many theatres, but no representative concert hall like the Philharmonie in West Berlin on the other side of the wall.

The commissioned architects Ehrhardt Gißke, Klaus Just and Manfred Prasser did not have an easy task. The same team of architects that scored a big success on the great hall of the "palast der Republik" had many mis-understandings with the political leadership. The officials who visited the Frankfurt Opera earlier this year in west Germany, wanted something like that: old on the outside, modern on the inside. Prasser's idea of orienting the interior design back to Schinkel's classicist interior design did not seem interesting at first. Schinkel was considered by architects as the father of national German architecture, but the communist government officials regarded him as a symbol of much hated aristocracy. To resolve this debate Prasser turned indignantly to Minister of Culture saying:

"If my GDR doesn't even have its ass in its pants to do its own thing and don't always imitate what others are doing, you can do your own mess."

They end with the agreement that the interior design should be done in Schinkel's style!

The program consisted of a large concert hall for about 1700 listeners, a chamber music hall for about 400 listeners and an intimate music club for 70 visitors will be fitted into Schinkel's "envelope" (Fig-13)



Figure 12: Destruction after fire

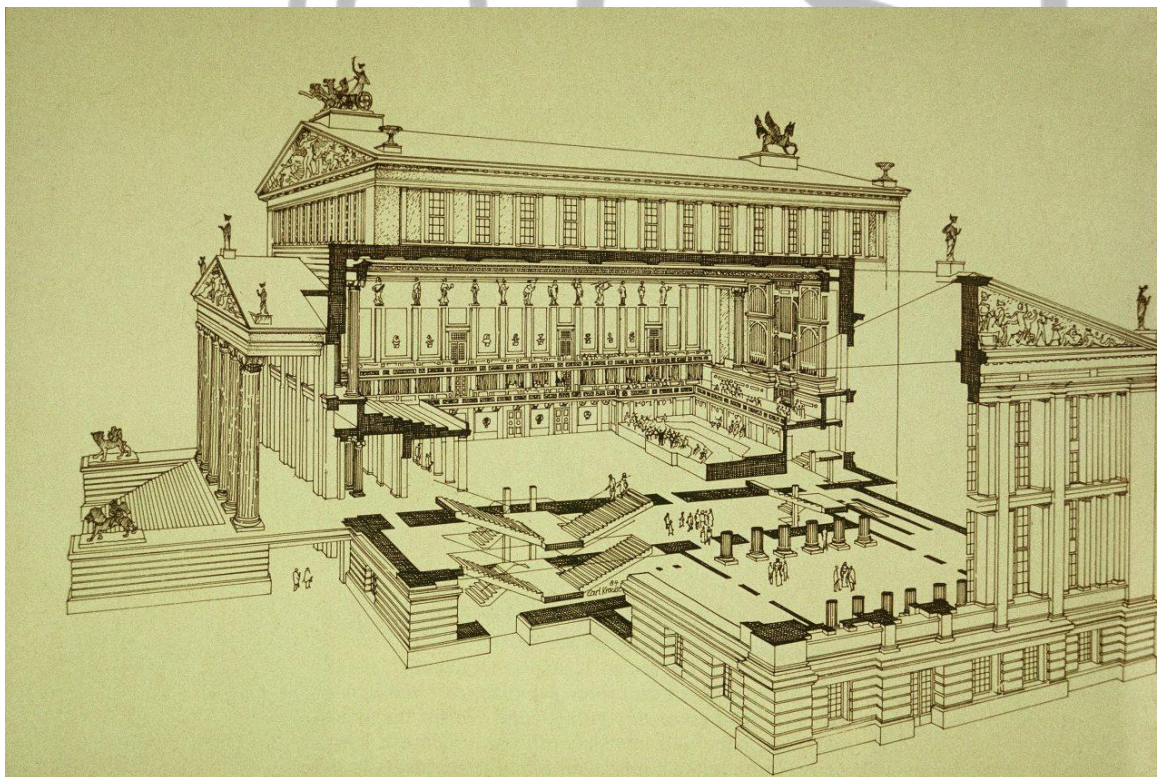


Figure 13: Isometric showing the inner arrangement of the new Concert hall.

3.2 Problems of construction

The decision mobilized construction in 1979. The major problem was clearing the old structures. The tiers in the auditorium, walls, ceilings, galleries and stairs have lost their stability due to bombs, fire or vandalism, and were no longer needed because of the new floor plan. Heavy demolition devices were used inside the building like pneumatic hammers, crawler excavators and mobile cranes. None of the existing building openings were sufficient for the vehicles; an additional breach was opened for them on the side of the stage.

Quarrying was by no means safe. The structural engineers suspected the stability of every element, even the walls that reached up to four meters in thickness. After evacuation, only the outer masonry, the longitudinal walls and the roof of the building remained. i.e, only the *outer shell* remained (fig-14). But even the remaining parts of the building required extra reinforcements by steel structures.

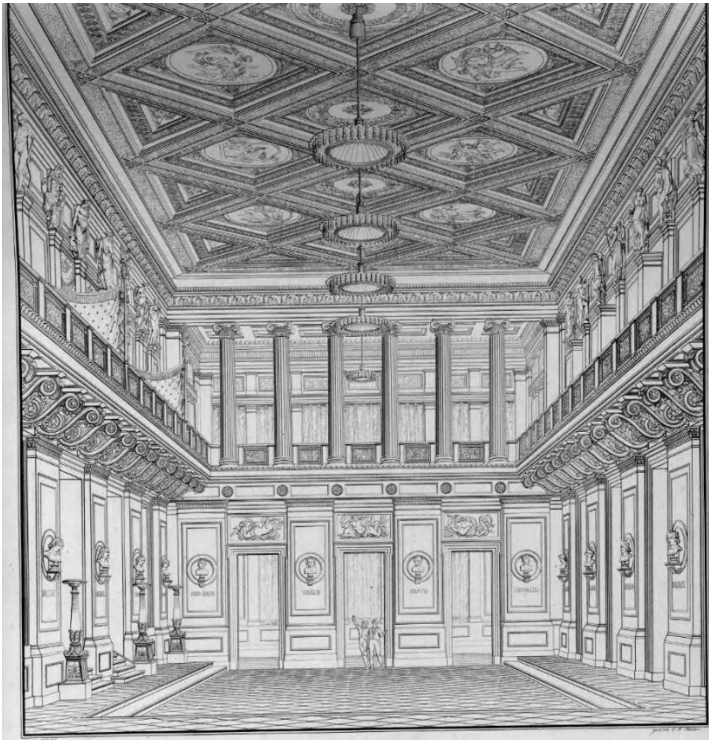


Figure 14: Demolition and clearing works for the interior

3.3 Revival of Schinkel?

The interior design of the building respected the Facade structure, the interior grid system and heights followed the exterior dimensions of the building, that was essential to reach a harmonious relationship between the old and the new.

Since the building was decided to function as a concert hall, the rooms could not be rebuilt in the form designed by Schinkel. But the architects needed to do it in the spirit of Schinkel’s interior design. The best solution was to use Schinkel's small concert hall as a model for the large concert hall (Fig-15&16), whereby the dimensions were sometimes increased by four to five times. The foyer and small concert hall were decorated in classicist forms, but have no concrete model. The architects oriented themselves towards other buildings by Schinkel as well, such as the Charlottenhof Palace in Sanssouci as a model for the Small Hall. “That's where I got the black, silver and green. the chamber music hall has a feminine style, small and delicate, while the great hall is masculine” says Prasser.



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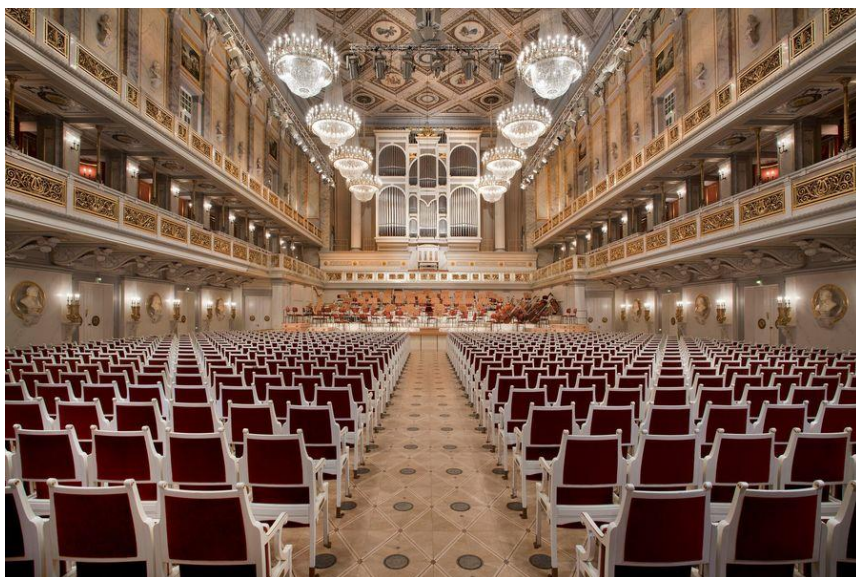


Figure 15: Small hall in the old building

Figure 16: Big hall in the new building

Many elements of the decoration come from classicism. The decorators used the forms and working methods from the Schinkel period. The columns based on ancient models (Fig-17), the plastic decor made of plaster and stucco (Fig-18), the paintings and statues that are reminiscent of ancient myths. Most notable is the ceiling of the big hall that was artfully decorated with paintings, stucco and gold decorations. (Fig-19)

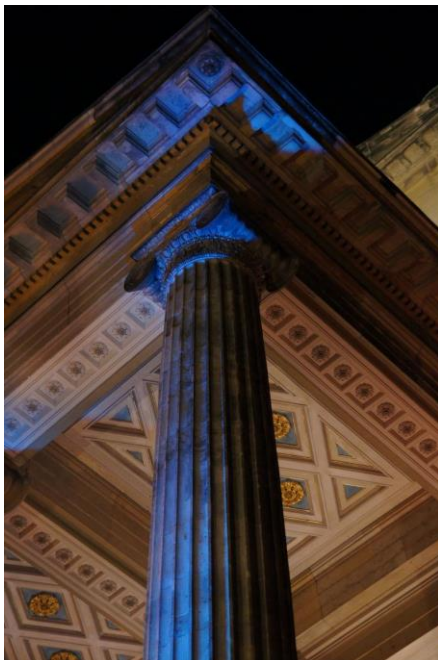


Figure 17: Ionic column at entrance

Figure 18: Stucco formwork at site



Figure 19: Decorations of the concert hall

4 Conclusion: A critical point of view:

The reconstruction of the Schauspielhaus, ***succeeded in resurrecting the building with a new function as a concert hall***, which proved more suitable to the needs of the society at that time, and is still operating successfully till this day.

The project ***succeeded in restoring and preserving the original building exterior envelope*** for future generations.

However, the architects fell into the trap of “stylizing Schinkel”, or in other words, looking for an architectural language that was often used by him. But this concept is in fact self-contradictory, as Schinkel himself used many styles in his designs, beginning from classicist Greek to neo-gothic to early modernist styles. He even proposed four different stylized designs once for a church in Berlin². This search for a specific style of one architect ends up usually, to a speculating process, where one assumes that this element or the other could have been used by the former architect.

That is why the interior design ended up, in my opinion, as a “copy” or a fake representation of the old. If we analyze Prasser’s own words: “just like schinkel, who stole from pompeii and Greece, ... What was stolen was also implemented here”, which means that the outcome was a copy of the copy.

It is true that Schinkel used elements of the Greek architecture in this specific building, but it represented the spirit of his time, the age of classicism, when Greek ideals of democracy and arts were rediscovered and became symbols of the enlightened society. The envelope design, although Greek looking, adapted a modern industrial organization. And that is the genius of Schinkel: modern interpretation of classic ideals.

Perhaps it would have been interesting, if the interior was remodeled according to the ideals of its time (1980s), it could have proved compatible with Schinkel’s ideals. After all, he originally imagined the theater hall to consist of a shallow stage, much like modern theaters nowadays, but was forced by the theater director to apply the old-style deep theater design. If Schinkel was given the freedom to apply the ideals of his time, the building would have been more compatible to the functions of not only the 19th century, but also the 20th and 21st centuries.

² Friedrichswerdersche kirche, Werderschermarkt, Berlin

The lesson that could be extracted here, is that understanding the philosophy of an architect is more important than his stylistic elements. The spirit of Schinkel's work was freedom and innovation, even if he borrowed elements of the Greek architecture. and the other lesson is that "retro-fitting" or trying to fit past elements to present functions always renders problematic outcomes.

Therefore, if we are evaluating the Konzerthaus not just as a beautiful building, but as an asset for the cultural heritage of Berlin in the time of Schinkel, Then the only authentic "Schinkel style" is from the outside.

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