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GONE IS GONE IS NOT GONE - PHOTOGRAPHY AS A
SOURCE FOR RECONSTRUCTION

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vii.

When the *Berliner Stadtschloss* will finally be rebuilt, the architect will not be Andreas Schlüter, who built the original building, nor Franco Stella, who won the architecture competition in 2009, but an architect called Albrecht Meydenbauer¹. The reconstruction of the facade will be based on 45 different photographs that Meydenbauer took between 1916-21. From the late 19th century onwards, he invented methods and cameras to document the architectural heritage using state-of-the-art photography. The formats of his images often reached 40 x 40 cm (15 x 15 inches). He was able to secure funding from the state and in 1885 the *Preußische Meßbildanstalt* was established, an institution that documented 2600 buildings in over 20,000 images in the following 35 years. His technique is based on an exactly defined geometry that let two dimensional photographs be converted into three dimensional data. It was called Photogrammetrie (photogrammetry). Some 150 years after its invention, with the advent and progress of digital processing and imaging, photogrammetry could develop into a field of ever increasing importance. It is not surprising, given the cultural background concerning the artistry of copying, that large parts of the worlds photogrammetry businesses operate from China nowadays. Maybe the most audacious example for the technique was the exact copy of the Austrian UNESCO world-heritage listed village of Hallstatt in the province of Guangdong, which opened to the public in 2012.

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We must not forget that reconstruction is no modern phenomenon, and does not stop at architecture either. There has always been the urge to rebuild something that was thought to be lost for all times. In biology, the fictional Jurassic Park comes into mind. And in fact there are dozens of historical attempts to re-breed extinct animals. One of the most famous in Germany are the breeding projects by the brothers Heck, Heinz and Lutz, directors of the zoological gardens in Berlin and Munich during the 1930s and 40s. Back in those days the technological advancement in genetics was on a rather shaky ground, but the political climate was in favour of racial ideology and related projects being put into practice. The test object selected was the long extinct *Aurochs*, the wild cattle that inhabited German soil (and not only that) in the middle ages. The last specimen reported was killed in 1627, but the myth surrounding it made it a perfect subject to exemplify Germany's scientific prowess. It was an endeavour that could not rely on properly scientific methods though. Advancements in genetics were very premature and all the Heck brothers had in their hands to start their projects was a single image, the so called *Augsburger Bild*, found and reproduced by C.H. Smith in the 19th century, apparently a reconstruction in itself, based on an image made by a historical unknown painter.

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Are we dealing with a new form of conservatism or are we experiencing a postmodern form of canonization that other sections of culture already have witnessed? Future Fatigue? The death of avant-garde? Retro-culture as a crisis of contemporary identity?

As a positive side effect, photogrammetry could be seen as an expansion of possibilities concerning the photographic print, where a reference to visual reality, at least at some point in time, stays intact. It is therefore dependent on existing visual data. But in the end there is a loss that can be mourned: that of context. In this process, the signifier and the signified are torn apart. The time and location shift of something that "once was"—that will be resurrected by a photogrammetrical endeavour—is indeed severe and requires a contemporary iconographic approach. At the moment, and not for the first time, it looks like visual studies lag behind interpreting what is technically possible. Photogrammetry as an academic subject stays in the realm of technology, mastered by engineers.

The phenotype of photogrammetrical reconstruction is the physical rendering of a photograph put into a whole different context, be it in time or place, that creates a new criteria for cultural classification. Along with the outer geometry, we have to find ways to represent the inner geometry of this very cultural act. The *Aurochs* and the *Berliner Stadtschloss*, as diverse as those examples are, share an undercurrent of ideological interests. The decision of where to resurrect what, and at what time, reflects the political will of an era. In the case of the *Stadtschloss*, the reconstruction followed the deconstruction of another iconic building of historical significance, the *Palast der Republik* of the deceased German Democratic Republic.

The reconstruction of vanished buildings must not be seen as being conservative. It is rather a manifestation of visual references encroaching upon history, and therefore a truly postmodern process. History repeats itself, but not in photogrammetrical exactitude.

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Notes

1 Oswalt, Philipp: **Die Geburt der Architektur aus der Fotografie**. Rotary Magazin 2011, <http://www.rotarymagazin.de/titelthema/thema-des-monats/die-geburt-der-architektur-aus-der-fotografie-a-672.html> (20.07.2013)