

Building Bonn: Democracy and the Architecture of Humility

by Philipp Nielsen

When the West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt visited the new chancellery in Bonn in 1977, he quipped that it had all the charm of a "cooperative savings bank". The same year, West German President Walter Scheel complained that the entire capital had no coherent architectural and thus political vision; and two years later the *Bundestag's* president Richard Stücklen remarked that for the people to



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become emotionally attached to the constitutional order, the government buildings needed to give democracy "a certain splendor".[1] Scheel and Stücklen expressed a view more widely held among West German politicians at the time that the German capital failed to evoke an emotional connection between citizens and government — and to represent adequately the world's fourth largest economy. The parliamentary *Arbeitskreis Bundesbauten* established in 1970 was meant to overcome this perceived deficit and provide Bonn with a more coherent architectural message. "Not monumentality" as had been case with the awe inducing buildings of the Third Reich, but the "political, economic, and cultural potential of the state" should be displayed.[2] The provisional and humdrum nature of the Bonn buildings accomplished none of these goals. It seemed lifeless, anodyne and bland. Ironically, the chancellery that Schmidt so deplored was the only fruit of the *Arbeitskreis's* labor in the 1970s.

Considering that the *Bundestag's* budget committee, with the express mission to control spending, had considerable leverage over the implementation of architectural and urban planning, the austerity of Bonn's buildings seems little surprising. Yet the architecture of these buildings had been a decision not solely driven by financial concerns. Instead, it was supposed to create an emotional connection between people and parliament, though not one of awe and admiration that Schmidt et al. aimed for, but one where the government stood humbly before its citizens.[3] Humility or "Bescheidenheit" rather than austerity or "Sparsamkeit" was the key term in the discussions surrounding government representation in the early Federal Republic.[4] Humility itself might not seem an emotion, but rather a symbolic practice. Yet we do say that we feel humble, not to speak of feeling humbled. More importantly, looking at the architectural debates in Bonn through the conceptual lens of the history of emotions reveals that humility was embedded in, and contrasted to, a discourse of alternative connections between government and people that were clearly emotional. Humility was compared to pride, admiration and intimidation, which had marked the government architecture of the Third Reich and which had made Germans feel (and by extension act) submissive and meek. Whether or not this had indeed been the way that Germans had felt about their government when confronted with its buildings is of secondary concern here. What is important is the way that West German politicians conceptualized appropriate democratic feelings, and to them the Federal Republic needed citizens not cowering before power, but to identify with it on an emotional level, to feel that their representatives shared the same plight. While the government should display humility, ordinary Germans should not feel humbled.

Without taking this history of desired and dreaded feelings into account, we cannot adequately understand the discourse of "Bescheidenheit" and the debates surrounding governmental architecture in the Federal Republic. The discourse also reveals that beyond the futility of trying to parse out the difference between "real" emotions and "displayed" emotions, that the same might be true for differentiating symbolic practices from emotional practices. Humility was perceived as a symbolic practice, yet one eliciting one set of feelings — sympathy, contentment, trust — while avoiding another — irritation, resentment, anger. On a conceptual level, humility without emotions does not make sense.

If the "Wutbürger" as a term is of very recent coinage, even without the word German politicians in the early 1950s precisely feared these angry citizens. As the Christian Democratic parliamentarian Hermann Pünder pointed out, even though he was a "fanatical opponent" of building barracks as these provisional structures never fulfilled their tasks well, it would "leave a good impression" on voters, if they saw that politicians also lived and worked in the same provisional circumstances as them.[5] His fear and that of his colleagues was that absent such displays of humility, people would react in anger, threatening the stability of the young republic. "Quiet and measured conversations" with the people would become impossible.[6] The parliamentarians' debates, then, reveal another facet of the connection between emotions and democracy, a

connection that has not least in connection to West German history received growing attention.[7] Moreover, the discussions link up to the burgeoning field of space and emotions.[8]

Following the ostentatious representation of power during the Third Reich and amidst high unemployment, personal hardship and widespread destruction of the urban landscape, the German parliamentarians involved in the design process agreed that above all the new republic needed to seem modest and humble — "bescheiden". Pünder, who had been a politician for the Catholic Center Party in Weimar, positively invoked the first German republic in this regard. He knew full well that the "'infamous' [verruchte] *Systemzeit*" was not necessarily the standard against which his fellow parliamentarians and especially his fellow party members wanted to be judged, yet the "humility and modesty" that had marked the circumstances in which the chancellor and president had worked and lived then had been exemplary.[9]

Throughout the discussions on the building of Bonn, parliamentarians both in plenary sessions as well as behind closed doors in the committee meetings referenced emotions when describing the desired, and feared, relationship to their voters — hoping to create a "good impression", elicit "understanding" stave of "discontent" and "anger". Through the debates on architecture we see what politicians thought democracy should feel like.[10] Across party lines the budget committee's members, who were in charge of signing off any construction project, were convinced that both for historical reasons, i.e. the disastrous history of the Third Reich, and for intrinsically democratic reasons the new republic needed to confront its citizens with humility.

The new capital of Bonn provided the site for the implementation of this theory. Beyond some former military army barracks, the leafy (and provincial) town on the banks of the river Rhine had few buildings suitable for the new government. The *Bundestag* met in a former pedagogical academy, erected between 1930 and 1933 in the Bauhaus influenced *Neue Sachlichkeit*. In 1949, the architect Hans Schwippert, who had worked in the office of the Weimar modernist Erich Mendelssohn in the 1920s, extended the building with a glass-walled plenary hall, open to the river and the views of the public.[11] Apparently the new chancellor Konrad Adenauer had chosen Schwippert personally. Even though privately a man of conservative tastes when it came to design, Adenauer appreciated the symbolism of modernity and transparency as important for the new democracy.[12]

Prefigured during the Weimar Republic, the discussions about the design of democracy were neither entirely new nor confined to the role of public architecture, most prominently demonstrated by the establishment of the Ulm School for Design in 1953. Yet even as the Federal Republic had the chance to put its social and political ideas about representation into literally concrete practice, not being saddled as Weimar had been with Imperial architecture, the debates among parliamentarians were not necessarily about a specific style.[13] This was initially not an argument about modernism versus classicism or international versus national — though the GDR government faulted Bonn for subscribing to a cosmopolitan and "un-German" design under the influence of capitalist Americans;[14] and though Schwippert conceived of his architecture of the *Bundeshaus* as inherently democratic.[15]

Instead, the argument about humility hinged on the emphasis of the provisional, the modest, in keeping with the temporary character of the West German state.[16] Nothing in Bonn should forestall the move to Berlin as the capital of a future re-united Germany, a future that in 1950 still seemed relatively close. Some of that architectural language was also directed to the outside. Humility was to make sure that Germany's neighbors would not feel threatened. The primary focus of the members of the Federal Republics' first budget committee, however, was domestic. The new government buildings should be simple, even spartan, and accessible. Wherever possible, existing buildings should be used; and after a visit to a camp for German expellees from Eastern Europe, Pünder, as noted, remarked that barracks were appropriate also for high government officials — anything grander would rightfully draw the wrath of the people. One would not even be able to show one's face to them anymore, let alone hope "to still discuss something like that with the people out there in a calm manner." [17]

Reviewing recent renovations done to the neo-classical Palais Schaumburg, the provisional residence of the chancellor — again personally chosen by Adenauer whose willingness to embrace architectural modernism only went so far — another member of the committee was incensed over their luxurious nature. The grand park design including tennis courts, or the replacement of perfectly sensible doors by cherrywood doors throughout, were "not of the style that was appropriate for our impoverished people. We have to defend these buildings in front of the people", something that would be "impossible"[18] "[T]he public had rightfully complained" about these and other measures.[19] If politicians wanted to find any sympathy in the public, they would "have to have a simple and modest style." [20] The Federal Republic needed to break with the "megalomania" of the Third Reich.[21] The minister of finance Schäffer concurred that the government was no longer in the business of representation.[22] When it came to the interior furnishings of government offices, even in the mid-1950s when the economic situation of ordinary Germans had begun to improve, the finance ministry felt the need to assure the committee that these offices were in fact "cigarette pack like" and "quite modest". It was aware that "anything beyond the reasonable [*Zumutbare*]" would provoke "increased public criticism." [23]

There seemed to be little danger of this. In fact, the buildings in Bonn apparently transported the desired feeling of humility quite successfully, though not to everyone's liking. In a speech in 1960, the leading Social Democratic politician Adolf Arndt complained that he had not heard from a single visitor to the *Bundeshaus* who did not favorably comment on the modesty and austerity of the building; yet not one of them considered what toll this "muddled and cheap container", he did not even want to call it building, took on the work of parliamentarians.[24]

Other politicians started to think that the Federal Republic's architectural language needed to change, too. In the context of building a new home for the German constitutional court in Karlsruhe, the budget committee with some of the same members as in 1950 and 1955 insisted that "in accordance with the importance of

the Federal Constitutional Court a representative official building should be erected." [25] Rejecting the idea to house the court in the former ducal palace, the committee insisted that the constitutional court must not be seated in a building that was traditionally associated with its own character. [26] With the West German economy booming and democracy starting to develop its own still short but stable history, the budget committee was now more willing to commit resources and slowly move out of the provisional stage and invest into an architectural future. Yet the selected design by the Berlin architect Paul Baumgarten stayed resolutely modernist and low key. The same was true for the chancellor's new residence, the "Kanzlerbungalow", commissioned from the modernist Sep Ruf at the same time. As opposed to the early years of the Federal Republic, by the 1960s, Bonn's insistence on humility had become closely linked to Weimar's modernist discourse on transparency and openness even for committee members of a conservative bend. The complaint of the Christian Democrat Wilhelm Brese that the "square glass pavilions [of the constitutional court] did not correspond to the German national character" was a singular opinion easily dismissed by the other budget committee members including his party colleagues and fellow former National Socialists. [27] A general agreement among the delegates on the appropriate architecture for the Federal Republic had evolved out of their debates on the emotional make-up of democracy in general, and a democracy built on the ruins of a megalomaniac totalitarian regime in particular. The historical contingency of humility as the desired emotional practice for West German democracy, though, was highlighted by the growing discontent with the lack of representation the Bonn buildings provided by the 1970s; and in the 1990s discussions about the design of the new governmental buildings in Berlin, self-confidence and occasionally even, albeit still hesitantly, pride were invoked as desirable bonds between people, parliament, and world to be provided by architecture. [28]

Further Literature

- Deborah Ascher Barnstone, *The Transparent State: Architecture and Politics in Postwar Germany* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).
- Christian Berndt und Robert Pütz, eds., *Kulturelle Geographien. Zur Beschäftigung Mit Raum Und Ort Nach Dem Cultural Turn* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2007).
- Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi und Mick Smith. eds., *Emotional Geographies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
- Lisa Findley, *Building Change: Architecture, Politics and Cultural Agency* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).
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- George E. Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotions in Democratic Politics* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).
- Till van Rahden, "Clumsy Democrats: Moral Passions in the Federal Republic", *German History* 29, no. 3 (2011): 485-504.
- Nina Verheyen, *Diskussionslust: Eine Kulturgeschichte des "besseren Arguments" in Westdeutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).
- Perri 6, Susannah Radstone, Corinne Squire and Amal Treacher, eds., *Public Emotions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[1] Cited in Michael Z. Wise, *Capital Dilemma: Germany's Search for a New Architecture of Democracy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 32.

[2] Cited in Thomas Maria Schaffrath-Chanson, "Die Entwicklung bundesdeutscher Repräsentationsarchitektur: Untersuchung zur politischen Ikonographie nationaler Baukunst im demokratischen System" (PhD diss., University of Cologne, 1998), 182.

[3] There was a general consensus on the desirability of a "humble democracy" also in the post-war debates among political theorists and practitioners, see Paul Nolte, *Was ist Demokratie? Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Munich: Beck, 2005), 289-293.

[4] "Bescheidenheit" can be translated as humility and modesty. According to the Oxford English Dictionary both carry the meaning of moderation and self-control, and both see "pride" as one of their antonyms that seems particularly relevant in this context. Particularly in modern usage, however, modesty primarily appears in the context of sexual mores and decorum. Accordingly, humility will primarily be used in the context of this text to translate "Bescheidenheit".

[5] Parlamentsarchiv (PA), 1st LP, 50th session of the budget committee, 13 July 1950 – Hermann Pünder (CDU), 9.

[6] Ibid. Pünder, 8.

[7] See for example Till van Rahden, "Clumsy Democrats: Moral Passions in the Federal Republic", *German History* 29, no. 3 (2011): 485-504; Nina Verheyen, *Diskussionslust: Eine Kulturgeschichte des „besseren Arguments“ in Westdeutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); or more generally: Paul Hoggett und Simon Thompson, "Toward a Democracy of the Emotions", *Constellations* 9, no. 1 (March 2002): 106-29.

[8] For a very brief introduction see Davidson, J., M. Smith, L. Bondi, and E. Probyn. "Emotion, Space and Society: Editorial Introduction," *Emotion, Space and Society* 1, no. 1 (2008): 1-3; and Bondi, Liz, Joyce Davidson, and Mick Smith, "Introduction: Geography's 'Emotional Turn'," in *Emotional Geographies*, Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi and Mick Smith, eds. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 1-16.

[9] PA, 1st LP, 50th session of the budget committee, 13 July 1950 – Pünder, 9.

[10] The emotions the politicians themselves invoked as part of the debate are another important element of emotions in democratic politics, one that, however, is beyond the confines of this essay.

[11] On Schwippert and his ideas of transparency see Deborah Ascher Barnstone, *The Transparent State: Architecture and Politics in Postwar Germany* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 111-2.

[12] Ibid. 115.

[13] In that sense the distinction between the Bonn and Berlin republic is entirely justified, as the move to Berlin once more made for a complete makeover of the architectural representation of democracy, see Wise, *Capital Dilemma*.

[14] See Wise, *Capital Dilemma*, 39-40.

[15] See Barnstone, *Transparent State*, 106, 115-6.

[16] PA, 1st LP, 50th session of the budget committee, 13 July 1950 – Pünder, 6.

[17] Ibid., Pünder, 8.

[18] Ibid., Paul Bausch (CDU), 11,16.

[19] Ibid. 15.

[20] Ibid. 16.

[21] Ibid.; see Barnstone on the conflict between Schwippert and Adenauer on the interior furnishing of the Palais, with Adenauer rejecting Schwippert's modernist furnishings, Barnstone, *Transparent State*, 114-5.

[22] PA, 1st LP, 50th session of the budget committee, 13 July 1950 – Fritz Schäffer, 17.

[23] PA, 2nd LP, 116th session of the budget committee, 12 December 1955 – MinDirig Karl Friedrich Vialon (BMF), 15.

[24] Adolf Arndt, "Demokratie als Bauherr", *Geist der Politik: Reden*, Adolf Arndt (Berlin: Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, 1965), 217-238, 226.

[25] PA, 4th LP, 9th session of the budget committee, 16 February 1962 – Friedrich Schäfer (SPD), 6.

[26] PA, 3rd LP, 138th session of the budget committee, 27 October 1960 – Friedrich Schäfer, 14.

[27] PA, 4th LP, 108th session of the budget committee, 23 January 1964 – Wilhelm Brese, 23.

[28] See Wise, *Capital Dilemma*, 16-8, 158.

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