

# AN ACTIVE ARCHIVE FOR A PUBLIC DISCUS- SION

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An Interview  
with  
**Hartmut  
Frank**  
by Eglė  
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*Professor Hartmut Frank is internationally renowned curator of architectural exhibitions; the most recent was Two German Architectures. 1949–1989, co-curated with Simone Hain and produced for IFA (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen). He is also an author of papers published in Abitare, Archithèse, Bauwelt, domus, Werk-Bauen-Wohnen and several books about architectural culture, which include Fritz Schumacher, Reformkultur und Moderne (1994), Paul Schmitthenner 1884–1972 (2003) and Two German Architectures 1949–1989 (2004). Hartmut Frank was teaching at universities in different countries of Europe and the Americas.*

*The point you made in your lecture was that the faith of built heritage is still to be a tool of politicians and that we should fight it and we should decide what to do with our heritage, with the manmade environment that is left to us. My first question is – who are we? Are we scholars or are we people who are emotionally attached to certain places?*

That's a decisive question. We is all of us.

*And how does it work?*

Who is making decisions? How is knowledge produced? How is knowledge distributed? It's a cultural question on a general social level. The totality of a society has to decide. And how does it work? It's easy when there's a ruler and he's deciding, he knows everything and he's the last institution to decide. It's much more complicated in a democratic society.

*Do you have an example of how it was done somewhere in the right way?*

I don't know if it's the right way or the wrong way, but we used to denominate former periods by their rulers: *le style Louis XIV* in France, *Edwardian* or *Victorian* in Britain, *Wilhelminische architektur* in Germany. That's a sign of the conception; that the ruler is deciding about the style and physical ambience. It's the old idea that the territory of a country is a body of the King. All the territory, all the animals, the people, the plants, this forms the body of the King. And when the King is decapitated, is dethroned or passes away, and another one comes to replace him, all the portraits of the former one is taken away and the new King is installed and a new era denominated. It isn't like this anymore and it didn't work like this in former times either because there were people who made things, there were artists and architects, there were craftsmen, and they also contributed to the decision making, so it's

Hartmut Frank during the lecture.  
Photo: A. Slapikaitė-Jurkonė,  
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not totally from the top downwards.

Now we have a certain group of specialists who decide what is worth protecting. There are historians, art historians, specialists of a certain period, they make a preselection and they say what is worth protecting and what is not. But it is human made, and we cannot save everything forever, we have to transform. And even if we declare a certain area as a protected area and we want to conserve it, we change the use of it. The medieval city which is now a tourist attraction is not a medieval city anymore, it's a tourist attraction of today. So it's a very complicated system.

Maybe we have to ask why we want to protect something? In many societies this discussion does not exist. Why do we ask to protect certain parts? It's easy when there's a political conflict. Let's take Stalinist architecture for example. Those who were the opponents and that are now ruling want to get rid of the symbols of the former political system. That's easy, but it's hard for an art historian to say this has a quality as a building or structure. But the older a building gets the easier it becomes because the political conflicts and discussions of the period are forgotten. Nobody is saying we have to destroy the churches in Vilnius because Catholicism doesn't have the same power as it did in the 18th century. So time makes decisions easier, as the further you go back the fewer things are left because they are lost in wars, fires or people just didn't want them.

I think a very decisive role lies in the hands of the administration of the monument protection institutions. This is a discipline that came up in the 19th century, when art history became a scientific subject and specialists like Eugene Viollet-le-Duc in France and John Ruskin in Britain began an intellectual debate about whether we should protect anything? And there was this romantic idea that an old thing has an historic value... But even then the idea of asking the state to protect some monument and declare it a national heritage is directly linked to the idea of a nation state so it's a highly political question – what is important for this idea of a specific nation and what is the personal interest of a specific group that is deciding and what opposing groups fight for. That's true everywhere and only in a few countries of the world is the protection of heritage an issue, in the majority of countries they simply don't care, for example look at China at the moment. That is because they define their national power differently, they define it according to economic power and military power.

It's very interesting to read Viollet-le-Duc in this sense. He's

saying that the idea of the French nation and the state is the basis of the unity of the population and that it needs a certain set of declared monuments. So the French declaration of the national monuments in their territory had nothing to do with whether this monument was erected by a French king or belonged to the French state. They just took the territory they have today and declared some monuments protected status – and it could be the cathedral of Strasbourg or a town near the Spanish border – all these territories came very late to the French totality. So the monuments and protection of monuments became an important tool in a definition *what is our state?* It's not anymore the King or the King's body, so *what makes the physical generality of our state?* So these physical relicts of former times become very important and decisive, and the selection makes *les monuments de France*.

In Germany it was the same: when the German Reich was founded in 1871 it took just a part of the cultural area which it belonged to – we call it Kleindeutschland. Großdeutschland would include Austria, but Austria was not Germany. So all the Austrian things didn't belong to the patrimony of the German state, and it was defined in a new way. The cathedral of Cologne became very important, the castle of Königsberg also – this was a new set of objects that defined the measuring points in the territory. I'd mention mental maps, so this would be a collective mental map, which is invented. Our personal mental maps are connected to our experiences but the collective mental map is produced and there are people that produce it.

*You were speaking of heritage as a product of modern thinking which began with the French revolution or the steam engine. Do you see some any signs of postmodern changes in the attitude towards heritage?*

I dislike this notion of postmodernism. I think we're still in the same period, nothing has really changed. Only the role of a radical modern, of the specific style or fashion or general rule in producing architecture was abandoned. Modernism was not a general rule in the twenties, not at all in the thirties, and after the war it became a dogma of Western culture. International style was presented at MoMA in New York in 1932 and then came to Europe after the war. In Germany it was tagged as communist and Bolshevik and then the same protagonists of International style came back as Western democrats. In the socialist countries it was forbidden until the 20th Party Congress in Moscow when the Stalinist era was abandoned and International style became a subject here too, it was called Socialist modern. It was said here: "Yes, it looks the

same as in the West, but the content is different, ours is Socialist, and theirs is Capitalist". We had this discussion all the time while preparing the exhibition "Two German Architectures".

*I agree, but what I was referring to was this so-called change from modernity to postmodernity in the thinking of heritage. An example of this change would be the case of Lietuva cinema theatre in Vilnius, where an artist-run movement fought to save this emotionally and culturally important place, even though aesthetically and historically it was not of great value, as it was built using standard design. One can say that the movement, the actions of saving this place as heritage came from below, even though it was organized by artists and scholars, who are somewhere in-between below and above.*

I think it is another notion of heritage. When we talk of heritage as defined heritage of classified monuments it's one field, which has to do with power, state, with the constitution of society. What you are talking about is the common understanding of what is ours and what is worth protecting. In general, it is not related to style or fashion; it's related to memory and identification. You can identify yourself with a very ugly building if you have positive memories of this place. It's the same with the most beautiful castle where you have a criminal affair taken place and it loses its charm. We talked of this definition of national monuments to create a common identification with a territory. It's a political decision – we want that our population would identify itself with the state and they would be willing to fight in the army, to sacrifice themselves for the nation, oath and the flag, and so on. And what you talked about is what the identification really is and how it is produced. In the case of a cinema it was produced by people for whom it was a point of reference in their life and they wanted to protect it. It's more an anarchistic tendency.

Concerning the exhibition, we talk here about squatter movements in West Germany and in East Berlin. These people did not squat there because they liked the architecture, they squatted because they had no home, or they wanted to live in communities and hated the new mass housing and prefabricated housing. At first they had a romantic approach but then professionals came in and invented new strategies for urban renewal and rehabilitation. In the end new paradigms entered the professional discussion, but in the beginning it was more an emotional thing. Maybe this also had to do with changing life conditions and changes in society after 1968. I belong to this post-war generation which had no intention of being identified with the warfare generation, we wanted to define a



new lifestyle, and in this background the normalized production of housing for a standardized lifestyle of couples with two kids, both working for 8 hours could not go on anymore, because society was much more complicated. The rundown area of the city already abandoned by the official policy gave the space for the students, artists, sexual minorities and others to live. Afterwards we see the processes of gentrification, when people with more money start to want to live there too. The squatter movement in the beginning was against speculation but it produced another type of speculation in the end. So the definition of what is good and what is bad is a changing thing, over time it changes its character. You can call it postmodernism but it's just another modernism.

*So modernism learnt how to adapt its oppositions?*

It's always a reset of elements. When we say that the modern times started with the French revolution you can look at how many different political systems, different organizations of society are included in it: the Restoration of the 19th century, the return of feudalistic elements mixed up with the new classes; after WWI we had these democratic movements and dictatorships all over Europe; and in the post-war period we had the Iron Curtain and two opposing systems. But the development of architectural thinking and urban planning thinking was not detached in both sides of the Iron Curtain. Sometimes the change was a little bit difficult but we were all cooking with water. Even if the commission is different the means I have to fulfil this commission are restricted and as an architect I am always included in the system of thinking. It's a discipline and it means there's a whole set of ideas, dogmas, concepts, and they are regulating what I do. There is a certain part of free will in it of course but it is not much.

*Concerning the exhibition Two German Architectures – did it start in 2002?*

Actually it started in 1999 or 2000, we made a decision to organize a show of all the architectural archives we have in Germany, at least of those organized in the Federal Republic of Germany. We had the idea that we would have a representative exhibition on the occasion of the 10 years of reunification in Bauhaus Dessau and include the material from the German Democratic Republic into this discussion. After we agreed the director of Dessau changed. Suddenly the whole thing was off and we even had a legal dispute with the new director, who said that the concept belonged to them as they had paid an advance. We won the dispute and the IFA made a contract with us for a travelling exhibition.

So we had to totally abandon what we had in minds before because for a travelling exhibition you can't use originals. We experienced internal problems rethinking the idea, I fought heavily against the idea of confronting the West and the East and Simone Hain, my collaborator, accepted this very quickly as the two countries were too unequal considering their size, economic power and population – the GDR had 17 million and the FRG had 60 million citizens, and that's quite a difference. And all the economic resources – coal and steel – were in the West, as were the big harbours and airports, and there was only light industry like textiles in the East. Moreover, till the mid-50's the GDR had to pay reparations to the Soviet Union and the FRG received money from the Marshall Plan, so it really was unequal. And when you look to the number of objects, we don't have one to one, there's more examples from the West in general and the real relation would be much more different, so we had to reduce and to equalize the quantity of the examples. There was a big difference in terms of quality also because architecture was not a big issue in the GDR, there were only three schools training architects – the bigger ones in Dresden and Weimar and a small one in Berlin. The majority of those responsible of the building processes were engineers so the impact of the engineers was much higher in the East than in the West. All of the architects in the West had private commissions, and there were only four or five private architects in the East, all others were employed in state collectives.

*The reviews of this exhibition were all saying that it is an apolitical exhibition that tries to avoid politics in arranging the objects. However it came up exactly in time to prompt a political dispute, as socialist modernism was being torn down and those places were being taken by buildings commissioned for Western architects. Were you thinking of doing a political event when you made an apolitical exhibition?*

Well, it's not an apolitical exhibition, I think it's highly political. But to exclude the politics from the arrangement of the exhibition and to mention politicians only in the prologue and epilogue of the catalogue was a provocation against the general interpretation of the other side during the Cold War which is rooted very deep together with a great ignorance. We wanted to present the exhibition in the Palace of the Republic which was still standing. It had been renovated, and all of the incredible constructions where, for example, you could change the big auditorium for 3000 people into three smaller ones were gone, so it had become a strange place, used for theatre performances. But we were not allowed to present this exhibition in there, it would have been a very political

thing and they could never destroy the building.

*Do you see a change in this discussion of what to do with Eastern Socialist heritage after this exhibition?*

Yes, but maybe not because of this exhibition as it was not shown so much in Germany, only in Leipzig and in Hamburg. The interest in both places was very intensive but it came mostly from the architects. In Hamburg I remember there were several architects that looked at each of these drawers closely. So the judgment according to art historical criteria is very far from common sense. The information about the Eastern part is still very weak in the West and the interest for the Western part in the East is also weak. So mentally it will take some time till the division of the country is over. It is starting now with a new generation and the possibilities to look at the case as we did 10 years ago have become more common. It's not a provocation anymore. On the other hand, we have already lost some things that were worth protecting, especially in the housing area, as there was a programme implemented to destroy the prefabricated houses on a large scale to create more demand in the housing market to protect the owners of the housing estates.

*My last question would be about making of the exhibition, were there institutional archives of architecture in the Eastern part?*

No, they never established an archive in the East, they never collected these things. When the unification came all of those state collectives were dissolved and things disappeared. So we may not have made this exhibition without the personal contacts of Simone, who knew a lot of Eastern architects who had the material at home. So in parallel to us collecting the material the IRS (*Institut für Regionalentwicklung und Strukturplanung*) situated close to Berlin started to collect this material as a public collection. But it's not a central archive of a former GDR neither it is a collection of the most important things. It's a random collection of things that somebody wanted to get rid of. In the Western part the situation was similar 20 years ago, so we have already started to collect things, but also on more or less private initiatives: we did it in Hamburg for example with the help of the Chamber of architects. We had an idea of an active archive, so from the beginning we started publishing books on the materials we had collected; we have 25 books published up to now. And this is the first step in establishing a scientifically better discourse on the quality of our built environment. We cannot talk about the quality of a building without knowledge. I don't like closed archives; you need people



to research them. As archives and research are interconnected you need universities as research centres. So in the end the real democratic discussion on heritage is possible only when there's a cultural level reached in which people can discuss and decide; this needs information and discussion inside the architects', historians', cultural politicians' world, which has to be linked to publicity, collaboration with media and with the holding of exhibitions.