

## A 21st-century reincarnation on Berlin's Museum Island

**A vestige of the divided Germany has now been refurbished and updated**

A hurdle has been cleared in the marathon renovation of the German capital's cultural showcase known as Museum Island. The Bode Museum — which houses important collections of sculpture, coins and Byzantine art — will reopen on Oct. 19 following a six-year overhaul. It is the second of five major venues on the island to be restored, after the Alte Nationalgalerie, or Old National Gallery. That the Bode project was brought in on schedule and on budget augurs well for the timely completion of the entire ensemble by the target date of 2015.

Klaus-Dieter Lehmann, president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, says that valuable lessons can be drawn from the Bode Museum renovation. Among these, he mentions "respect for the preserved historical materials," while rejecting "imitations of totally destroyed architectural elements."

Instead, he suggests supplementing that architecture with forms that are appropriate to our times. He also recommends the discreet employment of top-quality technology systems. This strategy, says Dr. Lehmann, "creates a harmonious yet suspenseful arrangement of space with a high degree of acceptance and functionality."

Originally opened a century ago as the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, the neo-Baroque building suffered extensive damage during World War II. Administered by East German museum authorities in the postwar era, it was partially repaired in the 1950s and renamed after its original director, Wilhelm von Bode. By the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the construction was showing serious signs of decay. German reunification presented a new opportunity to restore the building and reunite the various collections, which had been separated throughout the Cold War.

At the beginning of the postunification era, Berlin's museum authorities faced a daunting task. Aside from the necessity of merging two separate cultural administrations, the city was confronted with enormous curatorial challenges. In the case of the Bode Museum, it had to be decided exactly what function the museum should fulfill. The building had provided a home for all kinds of collections over the decades, becoming something of a curatorial hodgepodge. When the Wall fell, the Bode Museum housed parts of Berlin's divided Egyptian collection. Before that, it

had been used to display artifacts from the Museum of Ancient History and, at one time, items from the Children's Museum.

As curators pondered their options for reunifying Germany's cultural treasures, it was meanwhile clear to all in 1990 that the entire Museum Island architectural complex needed attention. In the case of some structures on the island, war damages had never been repaired. The Neues Museum, for example (next to the famous Pergamon), remains a ruin to this day. Fortunately, the Bode Museum itself was in relatively good shape. But for both the artworks and the museum-going public, conditions were far from ideal. Steps had been taken immediately to secure the collections and bring the building up to basic international standards. Safety was as much an issue as comfort.

Improvements at the Bode Museum began in 1992. All windows were replaced and a new heating system was installed. The lighting and security systems were updated, and structural alterations were made to the two cupolas. Though visitors today can still see war-era pockmarks on the sandstone facade, the



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exterior walls were largely restored before the comprehensive overhaul of the building got under way in 1999.

Much of the initial renovation work was integrated into the ultimate restoration plan. All these measures — together with the extensive planning and assessment studies — were factored into the final cost. Altogether, the renovation carried a price tag of €152 million.

The work involved sophisticated (and sometimes antiquated) techniques that had to be carried out by highly skilled craftsmen. As with the renovation of all listed historical buildings in Germany, the Bode Museum restoration project was obliged to follow strict preservation guidelines. Since 1999, Museum Island has gained further historical recognition through its listing as a Unesco World Heritage site.

The principal goal of the Bode Museum renovation was to create conditions that would allow visitors to experience the museum and its contents in their entirety — to make the collections highly accessible, both physically and aesthetically. Achieving that goal required close cooperation between Germany's federal construction ministry, the National Museums in Berlin and the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation.

The partners are clearly pleased with their result, describing it as a "metamorphosis" based on the principle of "maximal authenticity." ■

Text by TERRY MARTIN