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**news** [Chipperfield's Subtle Berlin Designs Charm in London Show](#)

Review by Colin Amery

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June 25 (Bloomberg) -- Sir John would have approved.

He left his extraordinary London house to the nation in 1837, intending it to be an inspiration to those interested in architecture. The Sir John Soane's Museum today displays the work of contemporary architects in the context of his remarkable, eclectic collection.

The latest exhibition focuses on the work of U.K. architect [David Chipperfield](#) at Berlin's Neues Museum on the city's Museum Island, which is located between the River Spree and Kupfergraben canal. The buildings on the island house the art and archaeological collections formed in the 19th century.

The development of the extensive complex began with the Altes Museum, which was designed by architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel to house the collections the Prussian kings wanted to make accessible to the public for the first time in 1830. One hundred years later, the island complex was completed with the opening of the Pergamon Museum. During World War II as much as 70 percent of the buildings were destroyed.

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- A reconstruction and modernization program is underway to overcome the results of the wartime bombing and the years when the city was divided. The complex task of reuniting the original collections, which were divided between east and west, continues and it will be next year before the Neues Museum, with its Egyptian collections, opens to the public for the first time since the war.

Chipperfield's work on the Museum Island, which he won as a result of an international competition, includes the subtle process of conservation and renewal of the Neues Museum and a grand colonnade linking the Pergamon to the archaeological promenade at a lower level. The linking steps and gardens will unify the urban landscape and the museums for the first time.

The Soane Museum is the perfect venue for an exhibition that is really about the conservation dilemma. The drawings and photographs show work in progress. In fact, they actually show the thought process of the architects faced with a bomb-damaged museum that has been neglected for 60 years.

The Neues Museum was designed by Friedrich Stueler and completed in 1859. He was a pupil of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, who had built the neighboring Altes Museum, and Stueler was encouraged by his royal patron to create interiors that were some of the finest highly decorated classical spaces built in the 19th century.

**Lost Interiors**

The quality of the interior poses delicate questions about restoration, and Chipperfield and his restoration architect Julian Harrap have opted not to replace or replicate any of the lost interiors or plaster casts. Their new elements will be in modern materials.

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Throughout Germany, the post-war rebuilding has raised such issues about the renewal of historic buildings. In Dresden, it was decided to rebuild the Frauenkirche as an accurate replica. In Berlin, the authorities decided to create a collage of ruin and 20th-century intervention at the Kaiser Wilhelm Church - almost as a permanent reminder of World War II.

The Federal Parliament, meeting in its own combination of the old Reichstag and Norman Foster's stylish additions, has voted to rebuild the Berlin Schloss, the royal palace demolished by the communist regime, complete with its elaborate Baroque facades.

#### Coffee Stains

At the Soane Museum, visitors can view the coffee-stained drawings from Chipperfield's office and see the detailed consideration that has been paid to every inch of the remaining museum building. Internal decoration is to be preserved, but not renewed if it is missing, while externally the rebuilt elements often re-use old materials but do not replicate missing historical detail.

In the staircase hall -- well illustrated in the exhibition -- the philosophical approach of David Chipperfield Architects is clear. The firm has retained the original volume but new architectural elements define the staircase using concrete and reconstituted stone. This emphasizes the importance of the elements, such as original door cases or plaster vaults that survive.

This is a serious display that merits quiet study because it is really a discussion of the whole question of the conservation of historic buildings.

[John Ruskin's](#) views are worth recalling as you look at Chipperfield's approach. "Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a lie from beginning to end," Ruskin wrote in "The Seven Lamps of Architecture" in 1857. Chipperfield understands this and in Berlin we see that it is possible to honor the past without copying it or faking it. The original building has been enhanced, yet it still has an indelible presence.

"The Neues Museum, Berlin: Restoration, Repair and Intervention" is at Sir John Soane's Museum, 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3BD through Sept. 6. For more information, go to <http://www.soane.org.uk>.

([Colin Amery](#) is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

To contact the writer of this review: Colin Amery in London at [colinamery@yahoo.com](mailto:colinamery@yahoo.com).

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