



MATTER MOVES MIND.
AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE UNWIELDY
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My steps echo when I walk through the empty, depopulated courtyard of Villa Walther. We are the last to leave. All the other Fellows, partners, children, and Zeus the dog have dispersed into the wide world, while Villa Walther, stubbornly, makes sure it is left out of the circle of mobility. If I start thinking back about this very special year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, two things come to mind that will stay with me as I leave Berlin.

Wiko as Social Experiment.

Never before in my life – and I have been on other residential grants – have I worked, dined, and lived together with an intellectually and nationally so diverse group of people – academics, politicians, artists, musicians. Wiko was much more radical than I expected it to be (and much more radical than many Institutes for Advanced Studies in other places of the world): in bringing together a cohort that had no common disciplinary or academic background, no common goal, no common god (or boss). All attempts, and there were many, to institutionally, poetically, or psychologically metaphorize the Kolleg thus had to fail: Wiko is *not* a school, *not* a monastery, and *not* a desert island to find oneself stranded on. Wiko is Wiko and no place else.

The most amazing thing about Wiko is that this institution insists on face-to-face conversation, on orality, on nearness, on the materiality of the word. It is an academia in a Platonic sense. You have to talk. If you don't want to talk, don't go there. The oral culture of Wiko is beautiful, and hard. The more we academics have turned into managers, the more we have lost the ability to listen carefully – and consequently – to speak to others. Conversation across the continental divides of our disciplines worked as often as it did not. Many of us wondered how long it actually took, more than half a year, until we had reached deeper levels of exchange. But failure or retardation is as interesting as a good outcome. And with some Fellows, friendship came first, and then free, effortless talking.

Wiko and the Unwieldiness of Place

For the archaeologist, Berlin is the place to be. Berlin feels like a huge archaeological site that is to be experienced by means of the ground, with its – physically and historically – uneven pavements, its stumbling stones, the tracing of the Wall, the iron platforms of Gleis 17. Memory lies in the many wounds that the city dares to leave open, sometimes untended. I had forgotten, not so much how ugly Berlin was, but also how haunted it still is. It is as if the city's historical layers are involved in numerous fights with one another: Prussian bourgeois modesty with Nazi to-be-Germania, the megalomaniac German Empire façades with the bullet-hole-wall aesthetics, the charm of time-forgotten West Berlin corners with the Disney World of Mitte. Berlin produces, or better, cherishes antagonisms that are sometimes beautiful, often hardly bearable, rarely both: the Reichstag, center of German democracy, whose walls are covered with Russian graffiti by soldiers

occupying the building in 1946; the Memorial Center in the Bendlerblock where German Resistance is still being remembered in the form of a nude male bronze (1953) by Richard Scheibe, a sculptor who had had a stellar career under the Nazis; or the phantom of the Palace of the Republic haunting the ready-made Humboldt Forum, an eye-for-an-eye-for-an-eye. The whole city, in the shell of the global metropolis, is an antinomy. It keeps producing and reproducing itself in the midst of a deserted Brandenburg countryside, where we meet the failures of the Prussian colonization and the German reunification project, with insects, wolves, and eagles filling the voids.

Berlin, the palimpsest of unmediated history, is archaeologically creative ground. It is a city of signs and traces to be uncovered. Many of these signs are unambiguous; they still bleed through the brittle signs of the city's wounds. Others have become largely silent: leftovers of a forgotten past, unable to adjust themselves to the meanings and values of the present. It is open whether we will be able to fill them with new meaning.

One of the erratic, unsettled, and unsettling Berlin "blocks" that deeply shaped my time at Wiko was Villa Walther, severely damaged in WWII and halfheartedly modernized after escaping total demolition in 1980. A METEORITE whose scale does not fit into our perceptual systems. The Fellows move like dwarves within the unintelligible colossal frame of the building, and they care little. The building is there, but it does not speak to us, monstrous in its eclectic decorum, forlorn, burdened with the haunted stories of its architect, an unwieldy relic of a forgotten past. I myself spent the year working on the colossal figure in antiquity, namely the Rhodian Colossus, a monument that suffers from a megalomaniac origin and its almost complete loss of meaning in modern times, and here I found myself living in a similar colossus that combined scale, pretense, and oblivion. My first reaction after moving into the building was aversion and some kind of humorous negligence, so laborious and preposterously sad looked the random mixture of archaizing and Romanizing reliefs, sprinkled with quotations of Roman morals. The first months, it remained a theatrical backdrop, unable to engage with my Wiko present. By winter, I had given the colossus a name – the mausoleum: so prominent the themes of ancient funerary iconography (such as the "garland sarcophagi" or the "ram altars" and the casts of the Hegeso stele or the Orpheus and Eurydice panel in the main staircase), so prominent the anecdote of the architect's suicide in one of the Villa's rooms. By spring, I caught myself wondering what kind of impact the Villa had on the work I was producing in it. Only by early summer, when it was time to leave, was I finally ready to look at the building: no research, just look.

Mind Moves Matter? Approaches to My Wiko Home.

Not much is really known about the architect Wilhelm Julius Walther, apart from the incredibly long list of private and public buildings he authorized and his tragic end. How come a Gründerzeit architect is as much lost to us as an ancient monument? My first step was to lift the veil of oral and written rumors, which was easy. There never was a Russian patron or buyer. What Schäche et al. describe as the Zarist coat of arms¹ decorating the balcony on the back of the building (fig. 1), an autopsy and a quick Google search quickly revealed to be the coat of arms of the city of Cologne: the double eagle, the eleven flames of St. Ursula, and above all the term Agrippina, naming the Roman colony. Cologne was Walther's native city and he must have thought of the balcony as a kind of epiphanic space, where he could step out of the private breakfast room to emerge to his guests behind his emblem. So, did he ever plan to sell the building? I doubt it. But what was the colossus then? The hand-drawn architectural plans tell us that the second floor was to host an extensive picture gallery featuring Lenbach, Stuck, and the European Masters, while the third floor contained huge studios. With the Haus zum Bieber in Wilmersdorf, Walther had already built a combined "Wohn- and Atelier-Haus", but this house went far beyond: was he thinking of a private Bau- and Kunstakademie?

Over the year, I had trained myself to see an aggressive historicism, a pictorial war-mongering in the decoration of the 1912 building. Luca Giuliani, in the Kolleg's brief publication, suggestively wrote about the clenched-fist ideology in images and inscriptions, alluding to one of the centaurs on the façade (which is actually a well-trained female hybrid bravely countering her male partner). And yes, there are the two warrior statues in the back, which, on the 1940 postcard of the building then used as the Reichsfinanzschule, one of them clearly is equipped with a Hitler Gruß! (fig. 2). And on the few personal photographs that survive in the TU-Architekturmuseum,² Walther himself, lifetime officer, always appears in military attire (fig. 3). He was drafted in 1914 at the age of 57, which is one of the reasons why his business eventually failed: he had no time to work. When taking a closer look at the images, however, I became less and less convinced about

¹ Schäche, Wolfgang, Daniel Ralf Schmitz, and David Pessier. *Berlin und seine Bauherren: Als die Hauptstadt Weltstadt wurde*. Berlin, 2018, 95–123.

² Technisches Architekturmuseum <https://architekturmuseum.ub.tu-berlin.de/index.php?p=58&O=102709> (last accessed 15 August 2019).

the bellicose iconography. What I saw, again and again, was an obsession with the arts and the gods. The mosaic on the central pediment has them all (fig. 4): to the left of the window, Pallas Athena framed by a woman with a kithara, music, and a smith, standing for the iron and steel industry; to the left, a seated stucco mason (?). On the right, personifications of sculpture and poetry approach a bare-breasted woman who can only be *Architectura*, here celebrated as *Mater Artium* (and not Cicero's *Philosophia*), and next to her a stonemason. The mosaic is one big allegory of the Gründerzeit crafts and industries being aligned with the gods of skill and the personifications of the traditional liberal arts. Above them there is room for nothing but the sky: a nude hero rises toward heaven in his chariot. But is he the sun god Helios? Where are his rays?

Upon a closer look, the same and similar figures of arts and crafts appear again and again. The bronze panel over the main door shows Athena framed by the bronze smith and *Architectura*, the fine stucco pairs on the staircase ceilings are Athena and the iron industry, *Pictura* and *Architectura* (fig. 5), Apollo, Athena, each with the muses of Tragedy and Comedy, and a boy making a dedication to a saintly man with scroll and globe, maybe *Philosophia*. Is this “eclecticism”? Painstakingly, Walther created this network of visual and textual references across the entire building, covering different places and materials: the arts, crafts, and gods weaving the semantic and material web of the Villa's divine materiality. A similar game might be played with the Greek, not Roman, gods and heroes in the awkward-looking, severe-style reliefs that populate the walls (why on earth did Walther resort to the archaic and severe style in 1910?). Next to the Phidian Zeus, the protector “Gott”, I managed to recognize Helios, Zeus, Poseidon, the baby Dionysos, Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Asclepius, and Hermes, and there are more. The reliefs are difficult to read even for the archaeologist, as most of them are idiosyncratically designed, even if already employed for other Berlin buildings,³ again combining gods and personifications in a visual language that was intelligible only to Walther himself.

All the Latin phrases about work and hardship, *labor* and *aspera*, about learning (*doceri*) and competition, all calls to persevere (*ne cede malis*), all symbols of hand-to-hand fighting and victory suddenly become comments not only on the ideology of productivity in the Deutsche Kaiserreich, but on the hard and hilariously successful life of the

³ The façade of his 1910 building for the Wohlfahrt GmbH (once Am Karlsbad 23) already employed the relief with seated and standing gods (?) offering wine that we find above the balcony in the courtyard of Villa Walther.

Königliche Baurat Wilhelm Walther himself, a workaholic and gifted draftsman, who, according to his preserved hand drawings, conceptualized, designed, and drew all of his buildings himself, outside and inside. Even the *carpe diem* panel in the courtyard has an image of Herakles wrestling with a hind: work is in every moment.

Villa Walther as embodiment of Bauhandwerk – Villa Walther as a globe of artistic productivity and creativity (a third globe, now missing, was once perched on the roof) – Villa Walther as mausoleum – Villa Walther as school of learning. Which of these interpretations is right? Any? Or maybe all? Did Walther, a multi-millionaire, single, and childless, think of his house as an architecture school, museum, and heritage foundation after his death, a small successor to Schinkel's Bauakademie, and of himself as a patron of the arts? Is this a monument to commemorate his achievements in life and to announce – preemptively – his glorious apotheosis after death? Is that why he added the ambiguous image of a man rising to the skies in his chariot? The charioteer, who is not Helios, might be Walther himself.

Walther's memory has faded quickly and the imperial meanings of Villa Walther are inaccessible as if buried by archaeological layers. Is there a way to uncover them? Maybe yes. Is there a way to bring them back to life? Maybe not. Walther's allegories and self-glorifications will never mean much to us now, his personal tragedy will. But the Villa has physically endured, a monument to nothing but "herself", and this is what matters to us now. Virgil's *mens agitat molem* – mind moves masses – under the Aeneas-Dido panel is, among the many sententiae, the one that time has shown to be most blatantly wrong. It is not the mind, but the unbecoming, unwieldy *molis* – the rock – of the Villa, that, by her sometimes sullen, sometimes serene persistence, sets our curiosity and creativity in motion. We were lucky enough to call her home for the year. Thank you, dear team at Wiko and dear friends, for a year spent together on good ideas, in good company, and: in good stones.



Fig. 1. Coat of Arms of Cologne, integrated in balcony on garden façade.



Fig. 2. Villa Walther, Reichsfinanzschule (1940), historical postcard.



Fig. 3. Wilhelm Walther, center, undated photograph, Architekturmuseum der Technischen Universität, Inv. Nr. 62674.

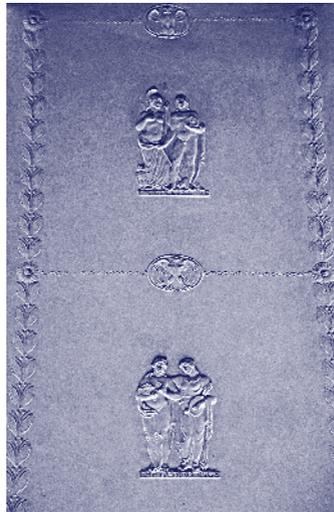


Fig. 4. Mosaic in central pediment with Athena and personifications of arts and crafts.



Fig. 5. Stucco reliefs in staircase: Athena and industry (above); architecture and painting (below).

Credits

Fig. 1, 4, 5 photo author.

Fig. 2 public domain.

Fig. 3 Technische Universität, Architekturmuseum.