

SECTION: SPECIAL REPORT; Pg. 0

HEADLINE: Rebuilding the Past;
Monuments destroyed by war are rising again.

BYLINE: Stefan Theil

BODY:

A 14-hectare site, just off Unter den Linden, **Berlin's** old imperial boulevard, has long been the city's most fought-over chunk of real estate. There, after 15 years of heated debate, demolition began last month on the **Palace of the Republic**, the empty 1970s-era home of communist East Germany's rubber-stamp "Parliament." Once upon a time, the plot was occupied by an even vaster edifice: the 1,200-room Stadtschloss, the 12th-century palace of Prussian kings and German kaisers, damaged in World War II and razed by the communists in 1950. Now, the Bundestag has decreed, a replica of the old imperial palace will be rebuilt on the same spot, with a historically accurate façade and a mostly modern interior.

Berlin is not alone in catching reconstruction fever. Projects to rebuild prominent landmarks lost to Allied bombs and postwar wrecking balls are underway in Frankfurt, Potsdam and a host of other German cities. Destroyed monuments, of course, have been reconstructed as long as there have been fires, earthquakes and war: in Moscow, one of the latest additions to the skyline is the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a copy of a 19th-century original blown up during one of Joseph Stalin's anti-church purges. But in Germany, rebuilding seems to have turned into a national trend.

The retro wave got its biggest boost last October, when Dresden reconsecrated the Frauenkirche, one of Europe's most significant baroque landmarks until the 1945 Allied air raid that wiped out most of the city. The project--a painstakingly exact replica using some of the original blackened stones--was immensely popular, financed by donations from all around the world. Visitors love it, too: more than 500,000 have toured the church since October, and the city's hotel bookings are up over 20 percent.

In Dresden, existing 18th-century plans made possible a perfect copy. Other old landmarks are being rebuilt with a modern twist: in Brunswick, private investors are rebuilding a massive royal palace whose baroque façade will hide a shopping mall. Reconstruction projects in Dresden will house hotels, offices and shops. Naturally, purists are appalled. The German Landmark Foundation calls such reconstruction "sinful," and preservationists worry reconstruction will draw donations away from needy existing landmarks.

Why now? Architects recall similar retro phases in the past, when developers in Europe and America fell in love with fake Gothic, neoclassical and Renaissance styles--think London's neo-Gothic Houses of Parliament, or Mad King Ludwig's pseudo-medieval Neuschwanstein castle. Then, as now, such artifice evoked a simpler past in a rapidly modernizing world. Critics may call them "fake" or "artificial." But as with those beautifully gaudy monuments of a century ago, people may one day appreciate these reconstructions as an authentic expression of our times.

SECTION: NATIONAL/FOREIGN; Pg. A1

HEADLINE: A VESTIGE OF COMMUNISM STIRS PASSIONS IN GERMANY

BYLINE: BY COLIN NICKERSON, GLOBE STAFF

BERLIN The wrecking ball is once again about to rewrite German history, with the planned demolition of a gargantuan concrete-and-steel citadel erected by the same regime that built the **Berlin Wall**.

Good riddance, say many Germans, who see the hulking **Palace of the Republic** better known as the People's **Palace** as an eyesore relic of the bad old days when the country was split between the communist East and capitalist West.

"It looks like an industrial building, and an ugly industrial building at that," said Wilhelm von Boddien, a businessman prominently involved in the drive to tear down the **palace** in the center of **Berlin** to make way for a replica of a Prussian "schloss," or castle, that stood for more than five centuries on the site until it was torn down by the communists in 1950. "A great city should have a great building at its heart."

But surprising numbers of former East Germans are seeking to save the derelict structure. The passionate opposition to the demolition, which could begin as early as this month, seems to be less about architectural aesthetics than about the deep rifts that still divide Germany. The country was unified in 1990, but the economy, and to large extent national agendas, are still dominated by the far more prosperous west.

"The new Germany wants to wipe out all memories of the GDR," said Alwin Steindorf, 79, a retired schoolteacher, using the acronym for the German Democratic Republic, the formal name of the deposed communist state. "It wasn't a perfect place, but decent people lived decent lives there. This building was a proud symbol to us. Tearing it down is like tearing down our culture."

The issue is complicated. The People's Palace itself was built only after the communists demolished the earlier Prussian Palace, intent on eradicating the grand era of the Prussians, which most Germans regard as glorious but which East Germany sought to obliterate from the national memory because, in the Marxist mind, Baroque places and proud memorials symbolized imperialism, militarism, and oppression.

The People's Palace rose in the 1970s, when the Soviet-sponsored East German regime was at peak power. The vast structure on boulevard Unter den Linden covered an area equivalent to 24 football fields. Theoretically serving as the seat of government it housed the dictatorship's rubber-stamp "parliament" the Palace was intended to provide entertainment for the masses: It contained a 5,000-seat concert hall, theaters, state-subsidized restaurants, a wine bar, a youth center, and spaces for art exhibitions, plus rooms for weddings in a land where church ceremonies were all but banned.

"It is a building that reflects a certain time and place, and, by the standards of that time and place, it is a good building," said Lisselotte Schulz, who worked as an electrical technician in the East German postal service and is one of the fiercest campaigners in what appears to be the doomed bid to preserve the structure. She has collected more than 100,000 signatures for a petition against demolition.

"Germany is intent on eradicating all fragments of the GDR," she said. "Germany wants to destroy even places where people were married or celebrated anniversaries or enjoyed cultural events. They want to smash everything that was ours."

Few East Germans truly mourn the passing of the oppressive Marxist government, whose symbol

was the Berlin Wall. Nonetheless, there is considerable nostalgia for an era when life was predictable and when jobs, if low-paying, were guaranteed for life.

The brave new world of capitalism has been a mixed blessing for Ossies, as easterners are called. The government has invested billions to improve infrastructure in the east, but unemployment has soared and many easterners are resentful that after 15 years of unification their standards of living lag behind the west. Their housing is shabbier, rates of joblessness are reckoned to be three times higher than in the west, and whole regions of the east are emptying.

Easterners also resent what many see as the haughty attitude of West Germans, who dominate the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and businesses.

"We weren't unified," Steindorf said. "We were annexed."

That's an exaggeration, of course. In perhaps the only indisputably historical event to occur in the People's Palace, the first, and only, democratically elected East German government convened in its main hall in 1990 and voted overwhelmingly in favor of reunification with West Germany.

Soon afterward, it was discovered that asbestos levels were dangerously high in the building. Cleanup crews moved in. Interior walls were ripped out; the marble work, mirrors, and garish carpets removed; hundreds of monstrous chandeliers were carted off; and the huge hammer-and-sickle symbol over the entranceway disappeared. The People's Palace today consists of a steel skeleton, stained structural concrete, leaking roof, and broken panes of glass covered by plywood.

The People's Palace has been shuttered for much of the past decade, occasionally serving as a venue for brash young painters and sculptors, as well as graffiti sprayers and protesters of various stripes.

In 2004, the main hall was intentionally flooded by self-styled performance artists, who pulled visitors through hip-deep water in rubber rafts a "cultural fantasy," as it was billed, that perhaps didn't help the building's mildew problem. Last year, a huge light installation atop the Palace visible from a mile away spelled out the word "doubt." Commentators said the exhibit captured the angst of the east.

By then, however, the German government had already voted to knock down the shabby monster on the River Spree to enable the \$800 million reconstruction of the Hohenzollern Schloss. The castle, with portions dating to the 1400s, was destroyed by the communist regime ostensibly because of damage inflicted by World War II bombing. But the real reason for the demolition was ideological: The Marxist leadership derided the Baroque Prussian edifice as a reminder of an imperialist past.

Today, infuriated Ossies accuse the present government of similarly trying to eradicate history through demolition.

"In the new Germany, we celebrate the old Kaisers" the Prussian rulers of Germany until 1918 "and try to wipe out the 20th century," Schulz said.

Nonsense, said von Boddien, whose group has raised \$14 million toward a re-creation of the exterior of the Prussian castle, similar to archeologically precise reconstructions of historic buildings in Dresden and other cities in Germany. "Removing an eyesore doesn't mean we're trying to erase history," he said. "We want to restore an architectural treasure."

What is expected to be the last art exhibition in the crumbling, obscenity-smeared landmark ended last week. "I don't care so much about this building, but I do feel that Berlin needs a forum for local artists more than it needs a Prussian castle to amuse tourists." said Lisa Junghanss, one of the organizers of the exhibit.

Among those who turned out for the display of ultra-contemporary paintings and sculptures was Steindorf, the retired teacher. He was bemused by the abstract artworks, he said, but grateful for one last opportunity to linger in an edifice that East Germany's people truly considered their own.

"I came to say goodbye to a building that is an old friend," Steindorf said. "Perhaps the building is ugly, but for me, it evokes warm memories . . . and a life that was never as bleak as the West Germans try to portray."

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Final Edition

SECTION: A Section; A18

HEADLINE: One German Building And Two Ideologies;

Communist Symbol Scheduled to Be Razed

BYLINE: Craig Whitlock, Washington Post Foreign Service

DATELINE: BERLIN

BODY:

In a few weeks, demolition crews will descend on a grand monstrosity that has sat empty in the German capital for 15 years: the **Palace of the Republic**, former home of the East German parliament and one of the few Communist relics left in the city.

The **palace's** destruction is eagerly awaited by many Berliners who view the rust-colored structure as a shameful eyesore. And it won't be the first time that Germans have used the wrecking ball to rewrite history on this swampy plot of land in the heart of **Berlin**.

In 1950, East German Communists blew up another **palace** that stood on the site for 500 years: the Berliner Schloss, a baroque castle on the Spree River and an architectural showpiece of the historic German capital.

Officially, the castle was razed because of damage incurred at the end of World War II. But that was largely a pretext to get rid of the castle for ideological reasons; the Communists derided it as a symbol of Prussian imperialism.

Today, the Communists are the ones who stand ideologically disgraced, while memories of Prussian times are growing fonder: The present German government has given approval to plans to replace the East German parliament not with a modern addition to the city skyline but an \$800 million replica of the long-gone Berliner Schloss.

Officially, German lawmakers and bureaucrats condemned the Palace of the Republic, created by dictator Erich Honecker, because it was infested with asbestos. But like the Communists half a century ago, many are driven by an ideological aversion. "In the West," said Uwe Hacker, a German government official in charge of the demolition, "they think of it as evil, as a home for

Honecker and his parliament."

The campaign to rebuild the castle is emblematic of how many Germans want to celebrate honorable chapters in their nation's troubled history. While not discounting the 20th century horrors of World War I, the Third Reich or the Cold War, these people say they'd like to recall parts of their past without feeling guilty.

Since the Berlin Wall came down, that sentiment has helped restore the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag parliament building and the 19th century neo-classicist museums in the city center. But some Germans wonder whether the zeal to erase all remnants of the Communist era is tantamount to pretending it never happened.

"You can't wipe out history just by tearing down a building," said Lothar de Maiziere, the first and last democratically elected leader of East Germany, who presided over the final legislative moments of the palace in 1990. "The people who want to rebuild the castle see it as a way to reverse what happened in 1950 and go back to Prussian history."

The decision to tear down the Communist palace has stirred a protest movement among citizens of the former East Germany who feel shortchanged by the promises of reunification 15 years ago. Disillusioned by unemployment rates that remain twice as high in the eastern states, they have become sensitive to efforts to rub out East German symbols. On a recent weekend, about 500 people demonstrated outside the vacant Palace of the Republic, demanding a last-minute reprieve for the decrepit building. "They can't tear it down. They can't take it away," said Lieseotte Schulz, 74, a retired postal worker and resident of East Berlin. "It's one of the only things we have left!"

"It is a cultural memorial, and it should be preserved," added Marie Luise Musiol, a 19-year-old college student. "It is a historical symbol in Berlin, and in general for Germany. This idea with the castle is crazy, and it's a senseless waste of money."

But easterners are a distinct minority in Berlin, as well as in Germany as a whole.

Wilhelm von Boddien, a Hamburg businessman who has led a civic drive to rebuild the Prussian castle, dismisses the idea that easterners feel an emotional bond with the palace building. Protesters opposed to the forthcoming demolition, he said, are merely disgruntled with their place in society and looking for a cause to make themselves feel better.

"The first four years after reunification, nobody was interested in the palace," he said. "Then after that, the East German leaders and business people, they lost faith in the reunification revolution. They were lonesome and they lost privileges and perhaps a little money. And so this chorus developed in which they felt like they were underdogs. They looked for a symbol, and the symbol turned out to be the palace."

Von Boddien's plan would resurrect the facade of the castle, stone by stone, with the intent of once again making it the architectural jewel of Berlin. He said surveys show that the proposal, which was approved by Parliament two years ago, is enormously popular in the West.

"For many Germans of a certain generation, Germany was a Stone Age before the Nazis," he said. "They don't know anything about Goethe or about Beethoven. It's not time to forget what the Nazis did, but we do need to remind our people that what Germany did in its history has not always been criminal."

It could take a long time before the royal Prussian seat returns to Berlin. Although the German

government has committed the cash to tear down the Communist palace, it hasn't set aside any money to rebuild the castle. Van Boddien's nonprofit group has raised \$14 million in private donations and pledges, but that's just a fraction of the estimated \$800 million price tag.

As a result, once the palace demolition is completed in a year or so, the parcel of land could, for the foreseeable future, become a giant vacant lot. In that, skeptics see the potential for another historical parallel: After the Communists blew up the old castle in 1950, winds blew across an empty square for almost a quarter-century.

Finally, in 1973, the East German government decided to replace the castle with a grand monument to socialism. The Palace of the Republic was constructed in 1,000 days. It was as big as an outdoor sports stadium, with enough floor space to contain 24 soccer fields.

Although the palace served as the home of the one-party parliament, in other respects it truly was a home of the people. It had a big concert hall, with 5,000 seats, and movie theaters and subsidized restaurants. Admission to the Great Hall was free, and it soon became a popular meeting place for East Berliners.

Unknown to the public, the building was also full of asbestos, a carcinogenic insulator and fire retardant. The Communists kept the hazard a secret until a few weeks before Germany officially reunified in October 1990. The palace was promptly vacated and has sat abandoned ever since.

One thing that virtually all Germans agree on is that the building is ugly. But for many easterners, aesthetics are beside the point. De Maiziere, the last East German prime minister, said the palace should be preserved on its historical merits alone. He ticks off the date and time: On Aug. 23, 1990, at 2:57 a.m., the East German parliament voted to dissolve the nation and merge with its estranged western half.

"If there was a building in West Germany with this kind of historical importance, you'd see it with golden placards inside, describing the significance of it," he said. "At a place where there was once a German dictatorship, you could really make clear that this is a place where democracy has taken hold."

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HEADLINE: Feature - Wiping out the GDR;

Victor Grossman reports on the politically motivated demise of **Berlin's** cold war-era **Palace of the Republic**

BYLINE: Victor Grossman

BODY:

The last word has been spoken. The demolition crews began moving their equipment up even before the delegates to the Bundestag voted by a 431 to 120 majority to tear down the **Palace of the Republic** in central **Berlin**.

The Christian Democrat and Social Democrat ruling parties, as well as the right-wing Free Democrats, joined in the vote. With few exceptions, only the Left Party and the Greens voted against.

Although the big structure, which was shut down in 1990 because of asbestos used in the steel frame, was gutted, neglected and run-down, countless emotions were involved in an act which can only increase mental barriers that remain strong between easterners and westerners in Germany.

Despite constant criticisms of the building's architecture, few deny the political nature of the decision.

The old palace once situated on its site, the residence of Prussia's kings and kaisers, was heavily damaged during the war.

Instead of rebuilding it, the very young government of the German Democratic Republic had it torn down in 1950.

There is little doubt that anti-royalist views were in play and Prussian relics were not valued highly at that time - indeed, the four victorious powers had outlawed Prussia as a political entity in 1945.

Some groups in the campaign to remove the palace of the republic recalled the alleged beauty of the old Prussian palace, demanded that it be rebuilt and even set up a full-size plastic replica to show what it would look like.

Some were certainly nostalgic old monarchists, the kind who still attend ornate ceremonies honouring members of the Prussian clan, both dead ones like Frederick the Great and living ones, who still treasure archaic titles.

They waved aside analyses showing that rebuilding even the facade might cost billions in a very bankrupt Berlin.

But the main motivation for the decision was to remove a symbol of the GDR, centrally situated on a key site at the end of Berlin's traditional promenade Unter den Linden.

The Palace of the Republic opened in 1976. It did, indeed, house the Chamber of the People (Volkskammer), the largely rubber-stamp parliament of the GDR which, after open elections, voted for German unification just before being shut down.

But two-thirds of the long, low building had been used and enjoyed by the people of east Berlin.

A recent, lengthy article in the New York Times mentioned in unexpectedly glowing terms the "concert hall that was one of the most technologically advanced of its day - its seating could be mechanically configured to suit different events."

In other words, most seats could be removed for dancing at a big ball or put back so that thousands could either attend a party congress or enjoy a concert with Miriam Makeba, Pete Seeger or other singers and musicians from around the world.

There were several pleasant cafes and restaurants offering food at reasonable prices, a bowling alley, a disco for young people, several small theatres, a large post office and, most prominently, a "dazzling public lobby once considered the centre of social life in east Berlin," as the NYT author writes.

Indeed, with its large paintings by the leading GDR artists, the many lamps and countless comfortable sofas and armchairs, it was a favoured spot, free of charge, to escape bad weather, relax after a visit downtown or meet friends and Berlin visitors.

The west German press was almost unanimous in denigrating the building.

But New York Times writer Nicolai Ouroussoff speaks of "less dogmatic architectural activists ... who refuse to see the palace in purely ideological terms ... they have cited elements of the building's beauty that many Germans - conditioned by decades of cold war oratory - find difficult to see."

Their calls to save the building, the Times added, was a "revolt against historical censorship." Ouroussoff states that "the more quickly you shed your prejudices, the better the building looks as a work of architecture."

But, undeniably, it was a symbol of the GDR. German reunification - or, as many disappointed east Germans call it, annexation - led to the destruction of nearly every trace of the old system.

A first step was the seizure of TV and radio stations and all but a tiny fraction of the print media, followed by shutting down the great majority of factories, taking over or closing most institutions and privatising farm collectives. A lasting 20 per cent jobless rate was the result.

The process was not so simple with buildings. Tax breaks, subsidies, credits and unlimited access to materials and pools of craftsmen, often from eastern Europe, permitted the renovation of countless homes and house facades and this was certainly a blessing, although it often involved a six, seven or eightfold increase in rents.

The new city and state governments were happy to take over the beautiful opera houses built in GDR years in Dresden and Leipzig, the new Gewandhaus concert hall in Leipzig, the rebuilt Schauspielhaus in Berlin, the restored Zwinger Palace in Dresden and Frederick's Sanssouci and Winter Palaces in Potsdam, to name a few.

But obvious GDR symbols were taboo.

The building which housed the central committee of the GDR Socialist Unity Party was hidden behind a new extension and became Germany's Foreign Ministry.

The former centre of the World Federation of Democratic Women was replaced by an car showroom. The State Council building, Erich Honecker's official office, with a balcony salvaged from the old Schloss - from which Karl Liebknecht declared a short-lived Socialist German Republic on November 9 1918 - has been turned over to a private management school for young capitalists. And, next door to it, the Palace of the Republic is now doomed.

East Berliners comment wryly that anything recalling the old GDR gets covered up or torn down - only the nearby TV tower will probably be spared.

At over 1,200 feet tall, it is too big to get rid of. Plans to surround it with giant skyscrapers had to be dropped due to lack of public finances or private investors.

In recent years, ironically, the Palace of the Republic, although only an empty shell with a steel construction framework, was rediscovered for temporary uses and exhibits, including the Chinese terracotta soldiers, a "philosophical mountain-climbing" installation and even a business convention.

Despite its bareness, the users were enthusiastic about possibilities of saving and reconstructing this very practical building. Their views were ignored.

Original plans to rebuild the old royal palace faded when it was realised that this was not only

exorbitantly expensive but also totally useless, for it would be unsuited to any modern use.

The plans were altered - some old sections and stone ornaments from the Kaiser's palace would be used to reproduce at least the old facade.

Plans for the interior varied from a private hotel and parking building to a combination of museum exhibits and libraries.

Nothing is certain, except that at least 1.5 billion euros will be required. Construction cannot begin until 2007, with completion in 2012 at the earliest. Private investments will be required but nothing is clear about their intent.

The only thing definite seems to be that for, a very long time, the empty space will be covered by lawns. Perhaps, some day, some building will recall the old Schloss, but, as the New York Times article stated, "the government's support for a kitschy castle should be viewed as the worst kind of architectural crime - an act of cultural parricide that rules out the possibility of redemption."

Some bitter east Berliners make a dire prediction. Since the building was set on an ingenious foundation to spite the marshy grounds next to the Spree River, they suggested that its removal and subsequent shifting of ground pressures might cause big cracks in the huge Protestant cathedral across the street, built around 1900 for the Kaiser and his family - atrociously, many architects believe - and housing the remains of most of the Hohenzollern royalty who once ruled Prussia and then all Germany.

The cathedral, like the giant Olympic Stadium built in nazi style in 1936, has been carefully restored.

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SECTION: Culture, Entertainment

HEADLINE: FEATURE: Landmark of Communist **Berlin** makes way for Prussian **palace**

DATELINE: Berlin

BODY:

"It's pretty ugly, if you ask me," says Robert from New York, looking at the great concrete and steel block of a building that dominates the east end of **Berlin's** most famous street, Unter den Linden.

"I don't know its history, so I don't know if it should stay or go," he adds, explaining that he is just visiting **Berlin**. "But it doesn't match everything else here, so I would say it should go."

Robert's opinion is a commonly-held one. The building in question is Palast der Republik (**Palace of the Republic**), the former seat of East Germany's rubber-stamp parliament. Built between 1973 and 1976 in classic socialist style, it stands in stark contrast to its mainly 19th century surroundings.

But its days are numbered.

The controversial building is scheduled to be demolished, with work likely to begin early in 2006. It will be replaced by a reconstructed Stadtschloss (City Palace), a replica of the baroque residence of the Prussian kings which once occupied the site.

The demolition plans are a neat example of history repeating itself. Although extensively damaged during World War II, the original Berlin Stadtschloss could have been rebuilt, as happened with razed old town centres in Frankfurt and elsewhere, if the political will had been there.

However, the communist rulers decided in 1950 to blow up the remains of the Stadtschloss as they claimed it symbolised "Prussian imperialism" - a decision widely condemned at the time as the regime rewrote history.

Other passers-by see a parallel between that decision and the current plans.

"The (communist) Palast der Republik is a part of the history of this city," says Susanne Muhle from Lower Saxony. "When you demolish it then you're erasing an unloved chapter of the city's history, and building another part of the city's history that is already past."

East Berliners Detlef Seeger and Ursula Wunsch, who describes herself proudly as "an East German citizen", are also sceptical of the plans.

"The palace should stay," says Seeger firmly. "It's a piece of history. It's lived in this city for 30 years, why shouldn't it stay here?"

Wilhelm von Boddien disagrees. As managing director of the charity Forderverein Berliner Schloss (Berliner Palace Association), he is dedicated to getting the Stadtschloss rebuilt to "restore the old cityscape".

"The Berliner Stadtschloss was the central building of the city," he explains. "The old town is still there, but severely damaged because its heart was removed when the Stadtschloss was blown up."

He compares the plans to the recent successful reconstruction of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, which was reconsecrated on October 30. One difference is that the new Stadtschloss will resemble the original only in its exterior and one courtyard. Plans for the interior have not yet been finalized, but it is likely to include a museum complex to be known as the Humboldt Forum.

Boddien disputes the historical significance of the Palast der Republik.

"The Palast der Republik has existed in total for only 30 years. Only half a year of this time is actually relevant, namely the session of the Volkskammer (East German parliament) that made the transition to democracy in the German Democratic Republic."

Boddien notes that one of the leading figures in this democratic transition Volkskammer was a theology professor, Richard Schroeder.

A member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Schroeder has been chairman of Boddien's rebuilding foundation since 2004.

Boddien emphasises the future significance of the Stadtschloss. "The Stadtschloss which will be built here looks towards the far future, whereas the GDR's history will fade away as its citizens who experienced it die off."

Boddien and his lobby certainly have the political establishment on their side.

In November 2003, the German parliament voted to demolish the Palast and rebuild the Stadtschloss, and incoming chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU and their SPD partner reiterated

during coalition talks that decisions about the Stadtschloss's reconstruction should be made quickly.

There is also considerable popular support for the project, which the Foerderverein Berliner Schloss hopes to harness by raising 80 million euros (93 millions dollars) towards the reconstruction through private donations.

However, critics argue the cost of rebuilding the Stadtschloss, currently estimated at 670 million euros, have been radically underestimated and do not take into account factors such as the real price of demolishing the Palast.

Many think the cash-strapped capital has got better things to spend its money on. As Gerd Appenzeller, editorial director of the Berlin newspaper Der Tagesspiegel, pointed out in a recent article, the average Berliner is more concerned about the city's crumbling infrastructure than the reconstruction of historical buildings.

Boddien disagrees. "There are countries which are much poorer than Germany, like Latvia, Poland or Russia, which took for granted that they should rebuild their cultural heritage which was destroyed during the war."

Although the Palast is almost certainly doomed, a few groups such as the Palastretter (Palace Saviours) and urban catalysts have been mounting increasingly quixotic attempts to secure a stay of execution. A series of demonstrations aimed at saving the Palast are planned for the coming weeks.

Berlin's celebrated hipsters have also been voting for the Palast with their feet by flocking to art and music events in the building, whose cavernous spaces (much of the interior was ripped out in the 1990s because of asbestos contamination) make an ideal venue for post-industrial art.

The latest and probably last, event is an exhibition of contemporary art called "Fraktale IV", which runs until November 19. Its theme, appropriately, is death.