Heritage and the ‘Heartland’: Architectural and urban heritage in the discourse and practice of the populist far right

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Abstract
The role of architectural heritage in the discourse and practice of the populist far right is examined, referring to examples in Germany and focusing on the Alternative für Deutschland. The findings reveal that the Alternative für Deutschland appropriates historic buildings and sites in a number of ways, including visual and oral rhetoric and embodied performance, and instrumentalizes them to specific ends. Built heritage in particular serves to naturalize and therefore to legitimize and authorize populist positions by anchoring them not only in time but also at places, thus reinforcing populism’s exclusionary logic along territorial lines – including those describing the space of ‘European civilization’. This implies challenges for heritage professionals and institutions, as actors such as the Alternative für Deutschland attempt to map the notion of a national or a civilizational ‘Heartland’ onto existing heritage objects and sites or else engage in ‘making’ heritage in the urban environment.

Keywords
Alternative für Deutschland, architecture, conservation, Germany, heritage, populism

One of the characteristic features of discourse on the populist far right is its constant reference to the past: to memories, traditions and mythologies but also to the historic objects, buildings and places of cultural heritage. References often manifest as nostalgic visions of an idealized, bygone time and world that some feel should be restored in the present and future. There is often talk of the ‘good old days’, a ‘golden age’ (Priester,
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2011); or in the case of Trumpism, a time that was ‘great’ and should be made to come ‘again’. It seems clear that cultural heritage occupies an important place in far-right populist thought. Its precise role, the function heritage fulfils in far-right political identification and communication, are topics being pursued by a growing number of researchers (Blokker, 2021, forthcoming; Kaya, 2019; Kaya and De Cesari, 2020). In exploring the intersections between the discourses of far-right politics and those of history, memory and cultural identity, this multidisciplinary scholarship has begun to suggest that heritage will be key to the ability of pluralistic societies to deal with conflict, tolerate diversity and promote cohesion in the decades to come.

This is a good start but much more is needed, not least from the field of architectural conservation, as a discipline engaged in ‘making’ and authorizing heritage through its activity of identifying and listing, repairing and maintaining, displaying and interpreting historic buildings and ensembles that are considered to represent and hold value for society. With this special authority to decide what will and will not find official representation as heritage comes special responsibility; the more so given the fact that often enough, the idealized nostalgic vision of the past evoked by the populist far right seems to be inspired by, and even find its sources in, the heritage ‘made’ by conservation professionals and institutions.

This article aims to contribute to this research agenda by examining how and why far-right groups appropriate and ideologically incorporate heritage buildings and sites into populist discourses and practices. The findings reveal a variety of modes of engagement with heritage, from rhetorical evocation to embodied performance and on to more abstract practices, such as lending financial support to building and restoration projects. All of these imply challenges for heritage professionals and institutions – including the author herself, as a professor of Architectural Conservation at a German university. The discussion will conclude with suggestions for possible ways for these professionals and institutions to respond. Although the focus throughout will be on Germany and in particular on the political party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD), similar observations could be made and comparable examples found in contexts throughout Europe and beyond.

**Uses of heritage**

In critical heritage theory, heritage is described as ‘the uses of the past in the present’ or ‘for present purposes’ (Smith, 2006). Furthermore, it is understood as a present-centred practice engaged in ‘by particular people at a particular time for particular reasons’ (Harrison, 2010: 25).

Both concepts are key to understanding the role of heritage in the discourse on the populist far right. As will be demonstrated below, heritage is used by right-wing actors to naturalize and thus to legitimize the particular discursive constructions that are central to populist politics: foremost among them the Manichean opposition between the pure, homogeneous ‘People’ or in-group – the ‘Imagined Community’ in the sense described by Benedict Anderson (1983) – and an out-group or Other that is identified as criminal, corrupt or invasive (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2012). In the European context, these opposing groups can be said to correspond to the
essentialised idea of a European civilization on the one hand, and to those against whom it is in need of protection on the other – most often, the transnational liberal elites represented by the EU together with those they are seen as supporting with their policies and resources, namely migrants, refugees and ethnic or religious minorities, especially Muslims (Brubaker, 2017).

These two groups might also be said to correspond to what David Goodhart (2017) has called the ‘People from Somewhere’ and the ‘People from Anywhere’. Goodhart’s idea is not unproblematic (Freedland, 2017), but it can be usefully applied here. On the populist far right, cultural heritage – and built heritage in particular – fulfils its important naturalizing and legitimizing function by giving the imagined community of ‘European civilization’ a history, by anchoring it in the depths of time (Harrison, 2015); but also, and importantly, by locating that civilization in space, at a place, a ‘Somewhere’ in Goodhart’s terms. This seems relevant in the current moment, given the nature of the crises that have contributed to the resurgence of the populist far right (Mudde, 2019) and the increasing territorialization of ‘European civilization’ that has resulted from them. In many areas, this territorialization is manifested in actual fences and barbed wire (Mau, 2021). Here the concepts of in-group and out-group, inclusion and exclusion are no longer merely figurative or discursive but quite literal and real.

Thus, when characterizing the populist use of heritage, saying that populists identify with the ‘good old days’ or a ‘Golden Age’ does not entirely capture the present situation; neither does a more precise analytic term such as the ‘retrospective utopia’ described by sociologist Katrin Priester (2011). For utopia is literally a ‘no-place’, whereas for the populist far right today, ‘European civilization’ clearly occupies a particular place. For this reason it might be more accurate to use Paul Taggart’s term ‘Heartland’, with its inherent spatial and territorial aspect. In Taggart’s definition, the term refers to the populist identification with ‘a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of the imagination’ (my emphasis) (Taggart, 2012).

Like Anderson’s ‘imagined community’, the Heartland is no less real or consequential for being imagined, but it can also be argued that the Heartland increasingly corresponds to actual places. From the perspective of architectural conservation, representatives of the populist far right can be seen and heard to communicatively and performatively map the abstract, imagined Heartland onto the cultural heritage that visibly and materially exists in the built environment, appropriating monuments, ensembles, whole heritage landscapes and cityscapes and recasting them as markers of the territory of ‘European civilization’. At the same time, populists can also be seen ‘making’ heritage for the same purpose, for example by promoting building and planning projects that promise to recover the past and restore a particular, purportedly historically rooted sense of identity attached to a particular place.

None of this should come as a very great surprise, for heritage is about identity (Graham and Howard, 2008), and identity, as political scientist Francisco Panizza notes – again using a territorial metaphor – necessarily involves the ‘performative drawing of . . . [a] frontier of exclusion’ (2017: 410). Using historic monuments and architectural traditions to mark this frontier likewise stands to reason: for buildings are inherently contextual, and built heritage in particular is intimately bound up with specificity of place. It thus lends itself particularly well to making arguments about the connection
between place and identity, and by extension between territory and citizenship or non-citizenship.

**Heritage in the discourse and practice of the AfD**

Specific examples from Germany illustrate this heritage-appropriating and heritage-making activity on the part of the populist far right. Most of those addressed here emerge from examination of the discourse and practices of the AfD since its establishment in 2013, and all have been the focus of broad public discussion as well as significant media attention. As an organization with broad popular support as well as formal representation in the German national parliament (since 2017) and in many state legislatures and city councils (since 2014), the AfD is better positioned than any other far-right group in the country both to influence public perceptions of cultural heritage and to shape official policy with regard to it. The party has also made clear from the start that culture, history and identity are key to its political programme. In its main political platform document, defending and promoting the ‘lived tradition of German culture’ and ‘common cultural values and historical memories’ are specified as central party goals (AfD, 2016: 6). These in turn are embedded in a notion of ‘European civilization’ conceived as a set of ‘traditional Christian values’:

> First, the religious tradition of Christianity; second, the scientific-humanist tradition, whose ancient roots were renewed in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment; and third, Roman law, on which our constitutional state is based. (AfD, 2016: 47)

This formulation is likewise taken from the AfD’s platform document, and it points to a porous and shifting line between nationalism and (European) civilizationalism that is typical of parties on Europe’s populist far right. The *Front National* in France, Italy’s *Movimento Cinque Stelle*, *Fidesz* in Hungary – all share the feeling that their respective countries’ particular national values are embedded or rooted in common European ones (Brubaker, 2017). These are difficult to pin down, but in populist communication they are often linked, as here, to a concept of democracy, seen as emerging from the humanist tradition of the Enlightenment and underpinned by ancient Roman legal tradition.

**The Paulskirche in Frankfurt am Main: Landmarking the Heartland**

One of the ways in which the AfD asserts a Western Christian identity and lays claim to the democratic principle, then works to substantiate and legitimate these positions, is through recourse to (built) heritage. Nowhere is this more immediate or more explicit than in the AfD’s appropriation of the *Paulskirche* (Church of St. Paul) in Frankfurt am Main. Constructed between 1789 and 1833, this church is perhaps best known as the seat of the 1848 Frankfurt Parliament, the first freely-elected legislative body in what would later become Germany. It is thus a site of powerful symbolism for German democracy (Mommsen, 2001). An attempt to adopt – some might say to coopt – the *Paulskirche* was made by the AfD in 2018, through the renaming of the party’s meeting room in the
Reichstag parliament building in Berlin as the ‘Saal Paulskirche’, or Hall of the Church of St. Paul (AfD, 2018). To further press its claim, the party had the room decorated with a programme of large-scale drawings depicting key moments in the history of German democracy, including a session of the Frankfurt Parliament (AfD, 2019b). Using these very simple means, the AfD sought to give the historical weight and authority of built heritage to the notion – already stated in its platform (AfD, 2016: 6) – that the party is the immediate heir to the revolutionary ‘spirit of 1848’ and as such has legitimacy and standing as a member in today’s Bundestag. With the same gesture, the party implicitly delegitimated the other, established ‘parties of consensus’ by suggesting that it alone remains genuinely committed to the history associated with the church and to the democratic principles and grass-roots popular will for which it stands.

This act of appropriating the significance of the Paulskirche not only enhances the party’s own image but also transforms the meaning of the Frankfurt church as a heritage site. In the AfD’s presentation of it, the building is imbued with the content of its nationalist-civilisationalist platform and transformed from a symbol of a supranational democratic ideal into a marker of a specifically German and Western tradition. In other words, it is made into a landmark of the populist ‘Heartland’.

The power of such a manoeuvre has not been lost on the AfD’s political opponents, both in Frankfurt and in Berlin. In response, a coordinated campaign to reappropriate the church and its heritage significance for a more mainstream understanding of German democracy was launched in 2019. At its centre is a planned 40-million-euro restoration of the Paulskirche, as well as its enhancement into a ‘national monument of democracy’ by revamping its displays and creating a new interpretive centre, a House of Democracy on a nearby site (Deitelhoff, 2020). It remains to be seen whether this effort will succeed in reasserting the interpretive dominance of Germany’s political establishment over this heritage, and whether the creation of a new ‘national monument’ will prove an appropriate or effective response to the AfD’s attempt to claim the Paulskirche for the ‘People’ and the ‘Heartland’.

**Hambach Castle: Performing and occupying the Heartland**

The Paulskirche is not the only site of memory appropriated by the AfD in its programme for the Hall of the Church of St. Paul. The cycle of seven drawings also includes images of Wartburg Castle, the German National Theater in Weimar, the Reichstag building, and Hambach Castle – the next example to be discussed here. All are potent cultural symbols and all are being recast through their appropriation by the AfD as landmarks of a populist ‘Heartland’.

Hambach Castle has been the object of a particularly intensive campaign of appropriation and reinterpretation by the party and its supporters. Its special significance for the history of democracy in Germany derives from the Hambacher Fest or Hambach Festival of 1832, a protest march and rally attended by some 20,000 people demanding freedom and political rights from the local princes and petty rulers who at that time ruled the Palatinate along with most of the German-speaking territories of central Europe. Historical depictions of the event show the crowd ascending the hill on which the castle stands, waving flags bearing the black, red and gold of the movement – later adopted as
the German national flag – and singing patriotic songs (Noack and Frisch, 2011). It is this scene that the drawing now hanging in Saal Paulskirche seeks to recapture.

During much of the 190 years since the Hambach Festival, the castle has been presented as the scene of ‘Germany’s rebirth’, a motto that appeared on the flags of the marchers in 1832; the marchers themselves are often characterized as ‘courageous fighters for freedom’ (Steinmeier, 2019). These are also themes central to AfD communication about the party’s character and aims, and correspondingly, representatives and supporters have moved to appropriate this heritage site and its meaning in other ways as well.

In the spring of 2018, Max Otte (2022), a German economist and self-proclaimed ‘democrat’, organized the New Hambach Festival as a revival of the historical event. Otte himself led a group of approximately 1200 marchers, most of whom had been expressly invited to participate, along the established route in a procession complete with flags and songs. As in 1832, upon arrival at the castle the participants were addressed by the movement’s leaders: in 2018, these included then-AfD chairman Jörg Meuthen and former politician Thilo Sarrazin, an outspoken critic of migration and asylum policy in Germany and Europe and an advocate of stronger borders. Their speeches touched on a range of themes common to far-right populist discourse: the threat to ‘our European way of life’ and to ‘Christian-Western culture’ posed by those who are ‘alien and hostile’ to them; the corresponding need to strengthen Europe’s borders against such people; and the need for the ‘silent majority’ to ‘raise a voice for the True and the Right’ and to show the elites that ‘their time is past’ (Bender, 2018; Lombard, 2018).

Thus, the message communicated at the event was entirely familiar. What made the New Hambach Festival different and gave additional impact to the message was the broadening of the discursive strategy to include a performative element in the form of a heritage practice – a commemorative re-enactment of the historical event both at and with the authentic historic site that served to activate its cultural significance in and for the present (Crouch, 2010). The effect was a more comprehensive and thus more powerful appropriation of the meaning of Hambach Castle, one that involved quite a literal occupation of the site and its meanings through the bodies as well as the voices of those participating. The intention was summarized by Otte himself: ‘We are Hambach’, he told the audience in his own address. A more succinct expression of identification with this heritage can hardly be imagined. Nor can a more explicit claim to dominion over it, and in turn over the German territory to which its meanings extend: continued Otte, ‘Let us put the Hambach Festival where it belongs . . . as a national celebration of the Germans’ (my emphasis) (Otte, 2019: 7, 8).

The performative character of populism understood as a political style has been explored by a number of researchers. Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey (2014), for example, point to the spectacular and the theatrical as ‘important elements of populist appeal’ and argue for the applicability of ‘dramaturgical’ concepts to the analysis of populist political communication. The relevance of these concepts to New Hambach Festival, with its self-conscious choreography and staging as well as multiple forms of role-play (including Otte himself as a modern-day Philipp Jakob Siebenpfeifer), seems clear. The ability of such dramaturgical means to bring forth the populist subject – in this case, the ‘we’ in ‘We are Hambach’ – out of ‘the multiplicity of voices and identities’ among those gathered is amply demonstrated here.
It is in the shaping of the performance as a heritage practice, however, that an event like the New Hambach Festival becomes a particularly effective tool for consolidating positions and securing constituencies. For if performance is the essence of representative politics, of ‘acting’ on behalf of a constituency (Saward, 2010), and if it is deployed by populist political actors to advance claims to represent ‘the People’, then performance as heritage practice significantly enhances that claim, by invoking the legitimizing and naturalizing power of heritage as well as the deep emotional attachments that heritage involves (Smith et al., 2018; Vinken and Herold, 2021). Moreover, heritage practice is a kind of performance that itself calls forth a People: it too is a way of closing what Frank Ankersmit (1996) calls the ‘ineradicable “aesthetic gap”’ between the multiplicity of identities and values in society and the buildings, artifacts or sites of memory that are understood to represent them. This conceptual congruence between ‘heritage’ and ‘the People’ is central to the argument about the role of heritage in populism that is being made here.

By re-enacting the historical events at Hambach Castle, or by naming the AfD meeting room after the place where the ‘freedom fighters’ of 1848 held their own meetings, actors on the populist far right undertake an ‘imposition of the past on the present’ (Kaya, 2019: 89); they engage in the heritage practice of ‘past-presencing’ (Macdonald, 2013). Otte, for example, proposed a direct analogy between the historical situation and the present one. As he explained to one interviewer, ‘[i]n my opening address [at the Festival], I read aloud long passages from [Siebenpfeifer’s] original speech of 1832. You can transfer them almost entirely to the Festival of 2018’ (Christogeros, 2018). The interviewer in this case was quick to notice that ‘past-presencing’ necessarily involves a flattening of complexity (Falser, 2008), a denial of the historical specificity and irreducible uniqueness of the events evoked at these historic sites, in order to make them meaningful to, and useful in, the present situation. Such ‘flattening’ is endemic to all heritage practices and indeed to all memory work. In the case of the AfD and the populist far right, however, it is especially problematic: it attempts to impose a celebratory Heartland vision that is ‘uncomplicated’ and ‘non-political’, to return to Taggart’s terms, in the sense that it is fundamentally intolerant of complexity and of the processes of negotiation and compromise that are definitive of democratic politics.

At Hambach Castle as at the Paulskirche, this mapping of the Heartland onto the historic building and the site transforms their meaning as heritage. And here too, the struggle for control over this meaning is ongoing: after reprises of the New Hambach Festival in 2019 and 2020, the foundation that manages the site moved in 2021 to forbid its use as a venue for ‘events . . . with extremist, racist, antisemitic or anti-democratic content’ (Stiftung Hambacher Schloss, 2021).

The Spandauer Zitadelle: Fortress and Fatherland

The AfD has likewise been forced to abandon another stronghold, the historic Zitadelle or Citadel in the city of Spandau, one of the twelve boroughs of Berlin. This sixteenth-century fortress was built by the Margraves of Brandenburg, the same branch of the House of Hohenzollern from which would emerge the kings ‘in’ and ‘of’ Prussia in the eighteenth century, and then the German emperors after 1871. These associations with
the sources of modern German power and the glory of its imperial ‘Golden Age’ have made the Citadel – now repurposed as a museum and event location – a favoured meeting place for nationalist and right-wing groups (Gürgen, 2018).

It is the AfD’s own use of the Spandauer Zitadelle, however, that has drawn the most public and media attention. Between 2014 and 2018, the Citadel was the location of the annual party congress organized by the AfD’s Berlin chapter as well as the scene of one of its autumn festivals; in 2017, the party’s Spandau chapter also rented the venue for an election campaign event featuring former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, at that time president of the anti-EU coalition Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) within the European Parliament, alongside AfD Berlin co-chair and EFDD member Beatrix von Storch (Gürgen, 2017). The latter occasion was also used to push one of the main planks in the AfD platform, the idea of a ‘Europe of the Fatherlands’: that is, a Europe defined by traditional notions of its common Western-Christian cultural roots and secured by strong external borders against culturally and geographically ‘non-European states’, as well as by internal barriers to overreach by Brussels (AfD, 2016: 16–7; Meuthen, 2019). It is also a position that resonates with the idea of ‘fortress Europe’ that began making its return to political discourse in the years following the refugee crisis of 2015 – a metaphor frequently used on the far right to designate the ‘EU as a closed space with hermetically sealed external borders as well as highly restricted immigration and asylum policies’ (Volk, 2019: 13).

It is this metaphor of a ‘fortress Europe’, taken together with the historical associations of the Spandauer Zitadelle with Prussia and the German Empire, that reveals the use of this heritage site by the AfD and other right-wing groups to be less than innocent. To be sure, these groups have not been explicit in evoking the Citadel’s history or associations to support their claims. Yet it is striking how well the massive walls of the fortress express the idea of a civilization under siege and suggest the readiness of those inside to defend it. It is also striking how prominently the Citadel features on the website of the AfD’s Spandau chapter, appearing (until spring 2022) not only as a picturesque backdrop to the slogan ‘We are Spandau’ but also as the group’s logo, which evokes the ground plan of the fortress with its highly recognizable pointed bastions (AfD, 2022). It seems plausible to suggest that the concept of ‘fortress Europe’ is being mapped onto the Spandauer Zitadelle, that built heritage is again being recast as a vision of the imagined Heartland. Moreover, the Citadel complex now houses a museum displaying the collected remains of monumental Prussian- and imperial-era statuary that once decorated the public spaces of Berlin before they were removed following the two World Wars (Föderl-Schmid, 2021). This may well enhance the identificatory potential of the site for some far-right groups, given their desire to rehabilitate aspects of German nationalism and militarism.

As indicated, however, the AfD has meanwhile been forced out of its ‘last bastion’ in greater Berlin: mounting public criticism of the use of the publicly-owned and funded Citadel as a venue for major AfD events led to the decision to restrict access for all political parties in December 2018 (Klages and Görke, 2018).
The Berliner Stadtschloss and the Garnisonkirche in Potsdam: Making Heartland heritage

Identification with Prussia and ‘Prussian values’ on the part of national-conservative and populist far-right groups certainly seems to stand behind their engagement at two other prominent sites having historical associations with this era in Germany’s history, the Garnisonkirche or Garrison Church in Potsdam and the Stadtschloss or City Palace in the centre of Berlin. Both are examples of the ‘making’ of heritage evoked above, in this instance by reconstructing historic buildings that were damaged in the Second World War and then demolished in its aftermath. In both cases, the lost buildings were sites highly charged with cultural and historical significance for German national identity – a significance which is ‘presenced’ through their reconstruction and put to use by populist far-right groups for their ‘present purposes’.

The Stadtschloss, now home to the Humboldt Forum museum of ethnology and German colonial artefacts, is perhaps the best-known and most visible of the dozen or so major reconstruction projects that have been completed in Germany since about the turn of the millennium, in the wake of Reunification. It is also one of the most controversial, not least in conservation circles (Braum and Baus, 2009; Habich, 2011). While there has been much debate over the German government’s 2003 decision to allow and even promote the erasure of the most prominent architectural symbol of the East German regime, the Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic), from the heart of the reconstituted capital, still more attention has been paid to the decision – likewise promoted by the government, at a cost of some 580 million euros – to replace it with a modernized copy of the Renaissance and Baroque Stadtschloss that previously occupied the site, before its own demolition by the East German authorities in 1950.

Like the Citadel in Spandau, the original Stadtschloss had been built and expanded over several centuries by the Hohenzollern Margraves of Brandenburg and Kings of Prussia. With the construction of the boulevard Unter den Linden and the Brandenburg Gate in the 1700s, the Altes Museum (Old Museum) in 1830 and the Berliner Dom (Berlin Cathedral) in 1905, the Stadtschloss had become the focus of a highly representative urban ensemble, and from 1888 to 1918 served as the primary residence of Germany’s emperors. As such it was a manifestation of the Golden Age of Prussian and imperial power and thus a potent architectural symbol.

The decision to tear down the Palast der Republik and to put back the Stadtschloss has therefore been discussed as both a revanchist measure against the East German regime, and an attempt to restore the integrity of an historically and aesthetically valuable, even iconic architectural and urban ensemble (Vinken, 2017). Not a few critics, however, see a return to a Prussian and imperial Golden Age as a central motivating force behind the effort to reconstruct the Stadtschloss. They point to the emergence of the project from within Berlin’s and Germany’s national-conservative milieu, starting with its main promoter, the former businessman and avid student of Prussian history Wilhelm von Boddien, himself the proud scion of a Prussian noble family (Loy and Schönball, 2013). They also emphasize the support, both moral and financial, that the project has received from prominent figures on the right and far right of the political spectrum (Oswalt, 2021b).
To be sure, as these same critics have also pointed out, the vast majority of the 100 million euros that it cost to reproduce the facades and cupola of the destroyed *Stadtschloss* came from individuals – at least 45,000 of them, and likely many thousands more – who cannot necessarily be described as right-wing, or even as ‘fans of Prussia’. Yet the broad spectrum of motives for donating, including historical interest, cultural enthusiasm and love of architecture (Peitz, 2021), may be precisely what allows nationalist and far-right ideas to enter the mainstream unchallenged and to become an established presence, even a ‘celebrated’ feature in the urban landscape. In other words, it is not the connection to this or that right-wing donor or politician that presents a problem, but the larger subtext that is inscribed in the *Stadtschloss* itself – in its monumental formal language, in the biblical inscription running around its cupola together with the iconography of the imperial orb and Christian cross crowning it and in the building’s very presence on this site, which has emphatically ‘presenced’ the Prussian past of Berlin – or at least its Prussian-sized ambitions – in the city’s cultural and political centre.

A parallel example of heritage ‘making’ is the process currently unfolding at the site of the *Garnisonkirche* or Garrison Church in Potsdam. Here too, the reconstruction plans include prominent symbols of Christian hegemony and Prussian state power, and here too a public fundraising campaign has been instrumental in winning governmental support for the project as an expression of the popular will. In contrast to the *Stadtschloss* project, however, the political intentions behind the effort in Potsdam and the far-right affiliations of those initiating and driving it have been apparent from the start.

The attraction of the *Garnisonkirche* for the far right arises from the building’s history. Completed in 1732 on the orders of the Prussian ‘soldier-king’ Friedrich Wilhelm I (who is also buried here, as is his son and successor, Frederick the Great), the church had developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into ‘a kind of Valhalla’ for the mythos of the ‘Prussian-German rise to become one of Europe’s great powers’ (Sabrow, 2011). After the First World War, it then became a centre of right-wing, anti-democratic opposition to the Weimar Republic, providing a setting for ceremonies and demonstrations by groups such as the German National People’s Party with its paramilitary arm the *Stahlhelm*, the German Officers’ League, and not least the National Socialist Party (Grünzig, 2017, 2018).

Famously, it was also the site of the *Tag von Potsdam* (Day of Potsdam) in March 1933, the encounter between Adolf Hitler as Germany’s newly-elected Chancellor and the 85-year-old *Generalfeldmarschall* Paul von Hindenburg, veteran and hero of the First World War, as the country’s President. The occasion was interpreted in National Socialist propaganda as marking a new accord between the old elite and the new representative of the German ‘People’ – between ‘old greatness and young power’, as propaganda minister Josef Goebbels put it – and was used to feed the legend of the Third Reich as the continuation of the Wilhelmine Empire that had been defeated in 1918 (Grünzig, 2017; Sabrow, 2011). In other words, the ‘Day of Potsdam’ was for the National Socialists a ‘heritage-making moment’ and as such was enormously significant for the consolidation and legitimation of Nazi power (Sabrow, 2011). Moreover, it followed a pattern typical of heritage discourse and practice on the far right: a critique of the present driving recourse to an idealized past as the basis for a vision of a better future, according to a relevant set of right-wing ideals. It is a pattern that can also be observed at the *Garnisonkirche* site today,
in the more recent efforts of the AfD, among others, to ‘make’ heritage here once again, according to their own contemporary vision of Germany’s and Europe’s future.

These efforts represent a late reaction to the decision by the East German authorities to demolish the war-damaged ruin of the church in 1968 and to replace it with a modern building complex housing a thoroughly modern function: the state-owned Rechenzentrum or Computing Centre, completed in 1971. Calls to undo this ‘outrage’ and to reconstruct the Garnisonkirche could be heard as early as 1984, emanating from ultraconservative nationalist and pro-militarist groups in West Germany. For these groups, the church and its reconstruction became a vehicle for a larger campaign of advocacy for German reunification, one that envisioned a country reconnected with its traditions and sense of history after finally having put the National Socialist interval in proper perspective; a Germany restored ‘within the borders of 1937’ and transformed through a ‘recommitment to Prussian values’ (Juhnke, 2021: 11; Oswalt, 2021a).

By 1987, funds raised from some 3500 donors – among them the Kyffhäuserbund, Germany’s oldest military association with roots in both the Weimar and the National Socialist eras and a vision of Germany as an ‘Occidental, Christian, European Empire’ (Der Spiegel, 1990) – had already made possible the recreation of the church’s eighteenth-century Glockenspiel or carillon of forty bronze bells, which were then gifted to the City of Potsdam after Reunification in 1990. The decision to rebuild, taken by the Protestant Church in 2001, was in turn influenced by city officials, then actively pushing the post-Reunification discourse of ‘restoring the City of Potsdam to its former beauty’ by returning to it some of the Baroque and Neo-Classical splendour of its Prussian and imperial past (May, 2018). At the same time, the Church was self-conscious about the need to address head-on the specific history of the Garnisonkirche as a Prussian institution. It did so by proposing to reconceive the building as a ‘Place of Reconciliation’, with exhibitions on the site’s difficult history as well as spaces for political education and intercultural encounter. Moreover, the outward appearance of the church should reflect the notion of a ‘Spirit of Change’. While its characteristic tower would be ‘rebuilt in its old form’, it would also include ‘aesthetic moments’ of both ‘rupture and continuity’ that would make it possible to ‘see [the tower] differently’. In this way, the building’s features could be effectively ‘reframed’, and with them, the heritage significance of the site subtly but perceptibly changed (Vogel and Hohberg, 2001: 9).

Predictably, these proposals were met with opposition from the right-wing groups whose ongoing fundraising efforts aimed at realizing a reconstruction ‘entirely faithful to the original appearance’ of the destroyed Garnisonkirche. In their view, both the form of the building and its content must ‘correspond to its significance as an historic monument and a symbol of Christian Prussia’ (TPG, 2005). This would mean dropping all references to internationalism and reconciliation; moreover, it meant ensuring that the church would not be used for purposes incompatible with its symbolism, including granting sanctuary to asylum-seekers, blessing homosexual couples, promoting feminist theologies or offering counselling to those refusing then-mandatory military service. If such uses (and users) could not be excluded, then what threatened to emerge from the project was the opposite of what its backers intended, namely an ‘Antigarnisonkirche’ (Karutz, 2003).

The latter term proved useful as a rallying cry and was quickly picked up and spread by the media, including the Märkische Allgemeine newspaper and its editor at the time,
Alexander Gauland, future national chairman of the AfD (Gauland, 2003). Gauland’s early commitment to the effort in Potsdam would be reflected in the consistent support given to it by that party in the years that followed. In the AfD’s election programme for the Brandenburg state elections of 2019, for example, the building is described as ‘an artefact of our Brandenburg-Prussian history and our culture’ without which ‘the history of Brandenburg is unthinkable’ (AfD, 2019a: 35). This text also calls for the ‘de-ideologization’ of the Garnisonkirche and similar monuments: in other words, it calls for a flattening of the church’s historical complexity and a reduction of its heritage significance to just those elements that make it usable and useful to the AfD in achieving their ‘present purposes’, disregarding the rest.

Such a call is typical of the way the party deploys heritage within its broader cultural-political strategy, which is to arouse its audiences’ emotional and intellectual commitments to the concepts of art and culture, history, tradition and identity while relativizing or eliding the difficult aspects of those concepts and carefully avoiding any contextual specificity (Taggart, 2004). Perhaps the most characteristic example of this kind of usage was offered by Gauland himself, in his now-infamous ‘Vogelschiss’ (bird-dropping) speech of June 2018:

We have a glorious history . . . Hitler and the Nazis are a mere bird-dropping in a thousand years of successful German history. And the great figures of the past, from Charlemagne to Charles V to Bismarck, are the yardstick by which we must measure our actions. Precisely because we have assumed responsibility for the twelve years [of National Socialist rule], we have every right to admire Emperor Frederick II . . . The Bamberg Rider belongs to us, just as do the donor figures of Naumburg Cathedral. (Gauland, 2018)

As a rhetorical device, the Garnisonkirche can be seen to function in a very similar way to the legendary figures and famous artefacts evoked in this statement – namely, as an historical point of reference for the legitimation of the AfD’s political positions, but importantly, one that predated National Socialism and could therefore be presented as innocent of its corruption.1 Indeed, Gauland had already written about the church in exactly this way some years earlier (Gauland, 2003). It is in fact its very Prussianness – which Gauland equates with Europeanness – that makes the Garnisonkirche immediately useful as heritage in a way that, for example, the medieval Bamberg Rider is not. For as historian Matthias Grünzig argues, once its Prussian associations are foregrounded, the building presents the AfD with ‘an ideal surface onto which to project the anti-democratic and authoritarian longings’ that may be present within its audiences. With the taint of direct association with Nazism safely relativized, these impulses can be given free rein, even encouraged and developed – and this among constituencies well beyond the populist far right. ‘Fans of Prussia can identify with [the Garnisonkirche]’, Grünzig concludes, ‘as much as can nationalists and supporters of authoritarian forms of rule’ (2018: 23).

In supporting and promoting the reconstruction of the church, the AfD together with the various right-wing groups backing the effort are therefore making a new heritage: one that transforms the tainted legacy of the Tag von Potsdam into a celebratory legacy of Prussia as a ‘hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of the imagination’, to return once again to Paul Taggart’s formulation. If completed in accordance with this vision, the Garnisonkirche could thus well become another landmark of the populist Heartland.
As things stand in mid-2022, however, the chances seem somewhat greater that the project will end by producing the opposite of a Heartland landmark – perhaps even resulting in the *Antigarnisonkirche* predicted and feared by many on the far right. For although Germany’s Ministry of Culture has committed millions in public funds to what officials have called ‘a project of national significance’ – thereby earning themselves sharp critique and accusations of insufficient distancing towards the right – the long years of campaigning to raise funds from private sources have so far failed to generate the capital necessary to complete the new *Garnisonkirche* as a faithful copy of the original. What is left is an unfinished structure that approaches to within less than 2 m of the modern Computing Center building, seeming to threaten its walls – but not quite manage to breach them. The latter structure, meanwhile, has likewise been transformed: in 2015, it was repurposed as a *Kunst- und Kreativhaus* (House of Art and Creativity) and has since developed into a hub for a thriving community of artists and activists (RZ-Potsdam, 2022). As an expression of repudiation of the East German regime, as well as a locus of resistance to the *Garnisonkirche* project, the *Kunst- und Kreativhaus* now enjoys a substantial and growing lobby of its own (Linke, 2022) and is likely to be preserved rather than demolished as planned. Proposals for a House of Democracy to be established in the building are now under discussion (HPI, 2022). The result could indeed be an *Antigarnisonkirche*: if realized, the accidental ensemble of new, historicizing tower and older modernist block will illustrate more clearly than could any architect’s concept the clash of histories, heritages and visions for the future taking place at this site.

**Conclusion**

This article has illustrated the ‘use’ of heritage on the populist far right, with specific reference to examples of sites and buildings in Germany. It has shown that groups such as the AfD appropriate and incorporate heritage into their political discourse and practice in a number of ways, including oral rhetoric, performance at and with heritage sites and other material, spatial and conceptual practices. Built heritage in particular serves to naturalize and therefore to legitimize and authorize populist positions by anchoring them in time but also in space and at places; in the process, historic buildings and ensembles become reflections or manifestations of the ‘Somewhere’ or the ‘Heartland’ that features so prominently in populist political communication and is so fundamental to its exclusionary logic. As a political party, the AfD also uses heritage to support its claims to democratic legitimacy, using ‘democracy’ as a conceptual key with which to gain entry into discourses well beyond the far right and indeed deep within the mainstream of German society. The party’s evocation of Germany’s illustrious past as represented in cultural heritage artefacts serves a similar purpose: to activate and mobilize new and broader constituencies through the appeal to national traditions and identities that are untainted by National Socialism on the one hand, and through an emphasis on supposedly pre-political, value-neutral categories of aesthetics and historical authenticity on the other.

In all of these activities, the AfD also exploits the authority of architectural conservation, with its power to determine what does and does not represent German or European culture and identity and to designate buildings as landmarks of Germanness or
Europeanness accordingly. It is therefore to be hoped that examples such as those examined here will make apparent the need for conservationists to be self-conscious about their special responsibility as ‘makers’ and authorizers of heritage. Disturbingly, both the Garnisonkirche and the Stadtschloss projects have been supported, one might even say aided and abetted, by conservation and the wider heritage industry: assistance in planning and execution have been given to their promoters by conservation experts and professionals in the name of restoring authenticity and recouping supposedly neutral historical and artistic value (Gerlach, 2017; Röd, 2014; Vinken, 2017). Actors on the populist far right such as the AfD know to exploit this (self-)illusion of value-neutrality: architectural conservation as a sphere of specialized knowledge provides a kind of cover for the political goals of groups who support such projects, supplying authoritative arguments to justify the work and lending the appearance of legitimacy to their plans. Given the conservation seal of approval, heritage objects have even greater power to authorize and authenticate the discourses and practices into which they are incorporated.

For this reason, I would suggest that my field – and with it organizations such as UNESCO as well as agencies of the EU that likewise ‘use’ heritage for the purpose of promoting their own versions or visions of ‘Europeanness’ (Van Weyenberg, 2019) – may be complicit in the populist cooptation and instrumentalization of cultural heritage, that we may be enabling and even encouraging populist groups to use heritage in this way, if only unintentionally and unconsciously. And this lack of intention and consciousness is part of the problem. I would therefore urge heritage professionals and institutions to be more self-conscious of and alert to the political significance of our objects and themes and to assess our rhetoric and check our assumptions accordingly. At the same time, we must be vigilant and sensitive to all attempts by others to instrumentalize heritage for exclusionary political ends, and must work to call attention to such attempts.

In terms of day-to-day practice, I would suggest that those working in the heritage field as inspectors and researchers, as conservation architects and restorers and as heritage presenters and communicators should offer resistance to the ‘flattening’ and simplification and homogenization of heritage by recommitting ourselves to the complexity and contradiction of history and its artefacts. This is something we are not always conscientious about doing, for example when we lend our support to calls for the destruction of ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘unsightly’ yet authentic witnesses to history – such as the Palast der Republik or the Computing Center in Potsdam – in the name of aesthetic integrity. Realizing that populists look to the heritage environment for reflections of the Heartland, and recognizing that, as Paul Taggart writes, ‘the Heartland provides the raw material from which values are formed and from which a populist constituency is derived’ (2004: 278), we need to develop a greater awareness of our own responsibilities. We should ask ourselves more often: what communities with what values are we helping to shape with our work?

Note
1. Those with knowledge of the cultural politics of National Socialism would immediately recognize both the ‘donor figures of Naumburg Cathedral’ – specifically the statue of Uta of Naumburg – and the Bamberg Rider as important touchstones in the heritage discourse of the Nazi Party in the 1930s (Ullrich, 2001).
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