

## BETWEEN STAGE AND MUSEUM. REGENSBURG'S KEPLER MUSEUM AND THE USE OF HISTORY

*In 1962, the house in which German astronomer Johannes Kepler died in Regensburg/Ratisbona was transformed into a museum about the founder of astrophysics and discoverer of the laws of planetary motion. The refurbishment of the medieval residential building and its repurposing unveils an understanding of science, history, heritage protection, and museum that is characteristic of the time and, simultaneously, allows insights into the peculiarities of cultural politics in post-fascist Germany. The architectural approach that was taken to preserve the historic monument was creative rather than scientific. For instance, it assembled parts from other houses of the same epoch to replace missing ceilings in order to create an “authentic” historic atmosphere. This authenticity was also perceived by visitors to the exhibition. A house-museum evolved with furniture that only appeared to be Kepler’s and a building that was altered in a way that makes it hard to distinguish between the different layers of time. Both the architecture and the permanent exhibition blurred the boundaries between stage and museum, props and exhibits, and authenticity and make-believe.*

On November 2, 1630, famous German astronomer Johannes Kepler arrived in the Bavarian city of Regensburg to take care of business with his employer, Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II. He stayed at the house of his friends Maria and Hillebrand Billi, a local merchant family. On November 15, 1630, Kepler died in that house after a short illness, aged 59. His death was soon forgotten, even though Kepler’s contribution to modern science stands in a row with that of Copernicus, Galilei, and Newton. Kepler scientifically proved the heliocentric model. He was the founding father of modern astrophysics, optics, and crystallography as well as the inventor of numerous mathematical and mechanical innovations. In contrast to Copernicus, Galilei, and Newton, Kepler does not have a comparable place in our memory.

In 1958, more than 300 years after his death, the city of Regensburg decided to transform the house in which Kepler died into a museum. Kepler never worked and never settled in Regensburg. He stayed there only occasionally and temporarily in different residences. Since he died in the building then owned by the Billi’s, the Kepler Museum can be defined as a house museum<sup>1</sup>. The specific conditions that led to the founding of this museum, its refurbishment approach, and its museum design stains its scientific, museological character, instead shedding light on how we make use of history.

### **The History of Kepler’s Last Residence**

The house in which Johannes Kepler died was built in the first half of the thirteenth century. It was a typical patrician edifice of four generous storeys that featured a medieval tower, which upperclass Regensburg citizens copied from their Tuscan role models back then. In 1540, the house was prolonged towards the street. In 1596, it was divided into two halves, which is still obvious today with bricked up doorframes in the east walls. The owners of the house changed many times over the years, until, in 1622, the above mentioned Hillebrand Billi and his wife Maria bought the premises. They died of the plague shortly after Kepler’s death. For the next almost 200 years, a restaurant was located in the house. In 1864, the hobby historian Carl Woldemar Neumann (1830-1888) located this house as the “true place of Kepler’s death”<sup>2</sup>, after it was erroneously assumed a few houses down the street by another hobby historian and founder of the local historical society, Christian Gottlieb Gumpelzhaimer (1766–1841). Gumpelzhaimer’s claim<sup>3</sup> led to the installation of a stone plaque which was tacitly moved to the ‘real’ Kepler house after the 1864 findings. The plaque is there until today.

Beginning with the second half of the nineteenth century, the house fell into disrepair. Regensburg was hardly destroyed in World War II. After the war, though, Kepler’s last residence

threatened to collapse due to a lack of maintenance (fig. 2). The city of Regensburg bought the building in 1957 and convened a committee to plan the Kepler museum. The driving force behind the founding of the Kepler museum was the head of cultural affairs, Walter Boll. Without him, Kepler’s last residence might have been partly demolished and partly connected with its neighbour buildings, according to the city’s urban planning.

German architect Hans Döllgast was hired by the city to create a masterplan which also contained the Kepler house. Döllgast was a prolific architect who refurbished historic monuments like Leo von Klenze’s Alte Pinakothek in Munich. In lack of heritage protection legislations<sup>4</sup>, Regensburg took an experimental path between conservation, new buildings, and laissez-faire<sup>5</sup>. Döllgast’s approach is dubbed ‘creative’ refurbishment (*schöpferische Denkmalpflege*), a German post-war trend in which ‘originality’ is not as important as evoking a specific impression of history and ‘authenticity’. The approach to conserve and refurbish not only famous architectural monuments but also rundown medieval residential houses was new. It was a turning point in the architectural history of Regensburg and had an effect also beyond the city<sup>6</sup>. Walter Boll used this situation as an argument to push forward his ambition to transform the Kepler house into a museum. Döllgast’s masterplan for the refurbish-



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Fig. 1 Kepler Museum, Regensburg. The building after its renovation (photo A. Reisinger; © Historisches Museum, Regensburg).

Fig. 2 Keplerstraße, Regensburg, before 1957. The second building from the left is Kepler's last residence (photo C. Lang; © Historisches Museum, Regensburg).



<sup>1</sup> See the definition in R. PAVONI, *House Museums in Italy. New Cultural Itineraries: Poetry, History, Art, Architecture, Music, Arts & Crafts, Tastes and Traditions*, Roma 2016, p. 11; similar definitions are given in P.H. BUTLER, *Past, Present, and Future: the Place of the House Museum in the Museum Community*, in *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, edited by J. Foy Donnelly, Walnut Creek 2002, pp. 18-42: 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> C.W. NEUMANN, *Das wahre Sterbehaus Kepler's*, Regensburg 1864, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> C.G. GUMPELZHAIMER, *Regensburg's Geschichte, Sagen und Merkwürdigkeiten von den ältesten bis auf die neuesten Zeiten*, 3 (Vom Jahre 1618bis 1790), Regensburg 1838, p. 1142.

<sup>4</sup> The Bavarian law to protect historical monuments passed only in 1973.

<sup>5</sup> STÄDTEBAULICHES SEMINAR DER STIFTUNG REGENSBURG, *Erneuerungsplan von Regensburg*, "Das Werk. Architektur und Kunst", LV, 1968, 3, pp. 154-156: 154.

<sup>6</sup> A. PUTZ, *Bitte in Farbe. Authentisierung durch Kolorierung, in Authentizität und indusriekulturelles Erbe. Zugänge und Beispiele*, herausgegeben von M. Farrenkopf, T. Meyer, Berlin-Boston 2020, pp. 57-81: 67.

<sup>7</sup> See P. MORSBACH, *document Keplerhaus. Dokumentation zur Besitzer-, Bau- und Restaurierungsgeschichte*, ms., 2020, pp. 29-30 and 101-102, conserved in Regensburg, Stadtarchiv.

<sup>8</sup> R. WERNER, *Wie Walter Boll zum Widerständler wurde*, "Regensburg Digital", 22 February 2019: <https://www.regensburg-digital.de/wie-walter-boll-zum-widerstaendler-wurde/22022019/> (consulted 7 July 2023). See also W. BIERWIRTH, *Die Sehnsucht nach Entlastung*, "Regensburg Digital", 8 February 2023: <https://www.regensburg-digital.de/die-sehnsucht-nach-entlastung/08022023/> (consulted 7 July 2023).

<sup>9</sup> A fact Boll was well aware and proud of, see R. WERNER, *Die ganze Stadt ist wie ein Kind von mir*, in *Täter Helfer Trittbrettfahrer*, herausgegeben von W. Prose, 14, Gerstetten 2022, pp. 87-105.

<sup>10</sup> Only in recent years, the continuity of personnel with Nazi backgrounds in Germany's cultural administration is being reappraised or uncovered, shown by examples like *documenta* and *Berlinale*; see e.g. German Historical Museum's exhibition in 2021 on *documenta: How the Federal Republic of Germany shaped its image anew at documenta*, 16 June 2021: <https://www.dhm.de/en/press/press-release/how-the-federal-republic-of-germany-shaped-its-image-anew-at-documenta> (consulted 7 July 2023) and the study on *Berlinale's* founding director by W.R. KNOLL, A. MALYCHA, *Schaufenster im Kalten Krieg. Neue Forschungen zur Geschichte der Internationalen Filmfestspiele Berlin (Berlinale) in der Ära Alfred Bauer (1951-1976)*, Berlin 2022: [https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Neuigkeiten\\_2022/IFZ\\_Zusammenfassung\\_Berlinale\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Neuigkeiten_2022/IFZ_Zusammenfassung_Berlinale_FINAL.pdf) (consulted 7 July 2023).

<sup>11</sup> The quarrels of Germany's post-war historiography are well depicted in the figure of the rather conservative and nationalist historian Ludwig Dehio. Classified as a 'quarter-jew' by the Nazi, Dehio was not allowed to publish between 1933-45. After the war, he insisted on not following the mainstream historiography that interpreted the Nazi-reign as an 'accident' within German history. Dehio, by contrast, focussed on the continuities. This approach made him an outsider in a profession that sought to reintegrate the many history professors of the Nazi reign that temporarily lost their jobs due to the allies' denazification trials ("discretion" was the watchword of those days" writes W. SCHULZE, *German Historiography from the 1930s to the 1950s*, in *Central European Historiography from the 1930s to the 1950s*, edited by H. Lehmann, J. van Horn Melten, Cambridge 1994, pp. 19-42, here pp. 34-37).

ment of Regensburg's historic town included the partial demolition of the basement of Kepler's last residence. Boll picked a fight over this and pushed through a conservation of the basement – against the architects and against city planning authorities<sup>7</sup>. As a well-connected head of cultural affairs this move can be read as a local politician's power play. But to understand why Boll's efforts focused so much on this topic, to understand why he was so eager to build a Kepler Museum in a town Kepler hardly ever stayed in, we have to take a look into Boll's earlier biography.

### A German Prototype

Walter Boll is a prototypical figure in post-war German cultural policy. In 1928, the mayor of Regensburg, Otto Hipp, offered Boll a job as art historian in Regensburg. Three years later, aged 31, Boll became head of the city archives and founding director of the city museum. Hipp was fighting against the rise of the Nazis. When Hitler was elected in 1933, he was forced to leave office. Boll, to the contrary, had no troubles coming to terms with the Nazi rulers. In fact, he advanced his career considerably until 1945, leading all cultural affairs of Regensburg<sup>8</sup>. He joined the paramilitary wing of the Nazi party (SA) as early as October 1933, and became a member of the Nazi party in 1935. After the war, the American military government suspended Boll from

all his duties. In 1948, however, he could continue as museum director. In 1950, he was head of cultural affairs of Regensburg again. He stayed in both positions until his retirement in 1968. Except for the three years after the war, he shaped the city's cultural policy for decades and was influencing the city's heritage protection programs even after his retirement<sup>9</sup>. Like many others in similar positions<sup>10</sup>, he had a seamless career before, during, and after the Nazi regime. After the war, he was decorated with numerous awards, such as the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1978.

For a person like Boll, founding a museum about Johannes Kepler in the post-war period appears to have two major advantages. Firstly, Kepler is an undervalued revolutionary of science, a heroic figure beyond reproach, and he is German. With a figure like Kepler, Boll reached so far back into German history that Germany's immediate history – and Boll's role in it – lost its significance. This understanding, or rather use, of history was in line with Germany's post-war historiography<sup>11</sup>. Above that, Kepler is internationally known, if only through his laws of planetary motion. Kepler is a character of the 'good' Germany, a representative of the *Land der Dichter und Denker* (the country of the poets and thinkers), suitable to bring a nation of mass murderers back on the map. He was internationally accept-

able, a fact that Boll knew to exploit<sup>12</sup>. Secondly, the renovation of the old town needed a show-piece that would bring the project more attention also outside of heritage protection circles. To refurbish ordinary residential buildings with the same standards as listed monuments was new back then. It can also be read as a demonstration of the civilian motives of post-war Germany that did everything but talking about the Nazi past. Three aspects in the development of the Kepler Museum speak in favor of this hypothesis: Boll's own description of the result, the way in which the Kepler house was refurbished, and the way the exhibition was designed.

### Cherry-Picking History

More than 15 years after the opening of the Kepler Museum in 1962, Boll wrote a small book about the exhibition that he created and that was still on display. In the foreword, he regrets how much Kepler was not honored in the past and how much other cities are neglecting the buildings Kepler lived in. He outlines Kepler's reception history, starting with his death in 1630. He continues to the 300th anniversary of Kepler's death and a conference that was held in Regensburg in 1930. Then he jumps to the year 1959, when the scientific committee for the Kepler Museum first met<sup>13</sup>. His repression of the years 1933-1945 went as far as omitting the founding of the Kepler Museum in Kepler's birthplace Weil der Stadt in 1940. This cherry-picking approach to history is witnessed in the refurbishment, too.

When the Kepler Museum opened on August 10, 1962, Rudolf Schlichtinger, the mayor of Regensburg, mentioned at length the approach that has been taken to refurbish the Kepler house

We endeavoured to conserve every original beam and every single detail [...]. It came in handy that simultaneously some neighbouring houses were

demolished. They delivered doors, paneling, and fittings, so much so that we could obtain from the long-established material of the surroundings everything missing up to the door-locks and door-hinges, floor slabs and even worn-down floorboards, and were only very little dependent on modern additions. The beautiful Renaissance gate and the Renaissance grille in the ground floor level also come from buildings of this district<sup>14</sup>.

The ceiling in the second floor is a gothic ceiling from the "storage yard". The inner wooden walls of the first floor are also historic, but from other buildings (fig. 3). The staircase is partly a new construction with at least 14 steps and many decorative elements delivered by a local carpenter in 1961. The main entrance portal was designed completely new by a local stonemason (fig. 1). Metal works not only added missing elements but also adjusted historic fittings when needed. Going through the receipts and expenses of the city museum's archives leaves the impression of an eclectic bricolage between old in the sense of part of the house, old in the sense of part of other Regensburg houses, and new in the sense of built during the refurbishment in the style of the old. It is almost impossible to distinguish between these different layers. The aim of this 'creative' refurbishment (*schöpferische Denkmalpflege*) was to evoke an atmosphere of history. In his museum guide, Boll writes: "[...] exterior and interior is shown like it presented itself since 1540 and until Kepler's time. The interior residential milieu was not reconstructed. With a few examples of local furniture this was only outlined"<sup>15</sup>. Both was only half true. The furniture that was bought for the museum at antiquities stores came from all over Bavaria, not only the Regensburg area. And the explicit aim of the museum design was to suggest an ambience of 'how it was' when Kepler died here. This is also evident in Boll's museum guide, in which he describes the details of the interior without mentioning which (historic)

<sup>12</sup> Boll organized an international fundraising campaign (Regensburger Tages-Anzeiger, 4.-5. October 1958, quoted in MORSBACH, *document Keplerhaus...* cit., p. 28).

<sup>13</sup> W. BOLL, *Kepler-Gedächtnishaus*, Regensburg 1975, pp. 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> MORSBACH, *document Keplerhaus...* cit., pp. 33-34. The mayor's speech most probably was written by Boll. Translation by the author.

<sup>15</sup> BOLL, *Kepler-Gedächtnishaus...* cit., p. 7. Translation by the author.



Fig. 3 Kepler Museum, Regensburg. Interior view after renovation (photo A. Reisinger; © Historisches Museum, Regensburg).

Fig. 4 Kepler Museum, Regensburg. Interior design of the first exhibition (photo W. Spittka; © Historisches Museum, Regensburg).



part was added in the refurbishment. Beside antique tables, chairs, and chests, all of which never stood in the house originally, the museum was equipped with astronomical instruments (none of which Kepler ever used), didactical models, and graphics, mixed with original editions of Kepler's works. In one of the central rooms, a desk with two chairs was arranged, on it an ink-pot with three feathers, a lit candle, a facsimile of a letter by Kepler's hand and a globe on the desk, in the background a portrait of Kepler (fig. 4)<sup>16</sup>. If visitors did not know that Kepler spent not even two weeks in this house, terminally ill, they could have thought Kepler just got up from one of the chairs to take a break from his calculations and only forgot to blow out the candle.

The way the exhibition was installed has, in parts, similarities to the Galilei room of *Deutsches Museum*, Munich's science and technology museum. The Galilei room was erected in the museum's section 'physics' in 1959, when the planning for Regensburg's Kepler Museum just started. The meeting minutes from the archives of *Deutsches Museum* document a fight between two camps of curators. The first camp wanted to re-enact the working environment of Galileo Galilei "like on a stage"<sup>17</sup>. The second camp aimed at a more critical approach with integrating the pre-Galilean dynamics to better understand Galilei's work and his contribution to science. The first camp won. The curators built furniture based on photographs of the *Istituto*

<sup>16</sup> BOLL, *Kepler-Gedächtnishaus*... cit., p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Quote from the meeting minutes in J. TEICHMANN, *Der Galilei-Raum im Deutschen Museum*, in *Miscellanea Kepleriana. Festschrift für Volker Bialis zum 65. Geburtstag*, herausgegeben von F. Boockmann, D.A. Di Liscia, H. Kothmann, 47, Augsburg 2005, pp. 81-87: 83.

e *Museo di Storia della Scienza* (today: *Museo Galileo*) in Florence. In addition, the museum bought other historic furniture and produced instruments in the museum's own workshops. The reproduced Galilei room exists until today<sup>18</sup>. The Galilei room most probably had an influence on the concept of the Kepler Museum, as Adolf Wissner, one of the curators of *Deutsches Museum*, gave advice to Walter Boll<sup>19</sup>.

#### Displaying the Blind Spots of History

Like the Galilei room, the Kepler Museum was more a stage than a house museum when it opened in 1962. Not only the exhibition, but the entire house became a *mise en scène*. Visitors were drawn into a performance that lacked the possibility of a critical gaze as it did not differentiate between an original ceiling and a ceiling that never was in that house, between a letter Kepler actually wrote and a table he never sat at, between historical ambiance and history. How the Kepler Museum was designed is an expression of the *Zeitgeist*. Other museums like the *Deutsches Museum* took a similar approach. In Regensburg, part of this *Zeitgeist* was a head of cultural affairs, city archive director and museum director in one person, a person with a Nazi background who had to redefine his relationship with history like so many other reinstated Nazis in Germany in the 1950s<sup>20</sup>. Being also director of the city archive made that easier, since he could whitewash his personal file himself<sup>21</sup>. While Boll's relationship to his own history might not have been a conscious driving force for the foundation of the Kepler Museum, without it there was no urgent necessity for a Kepler Museum in Regensburg, either. Neither Prague, nor Linz, nor Graz, the cities where Kepler actually lived and worked for years, had a museum dedicated to the astronomer back then or in the decades to come<sup>22</sup>. Regensburg's Kepler Muse-

um staged history rather than exhibiting it. The make-believe dominated over an actual understanding of history. A critical debate with the museum's contents and ways of displaying them as well as with its building and refurbishment approach was made impossible firstly by the indecipherable synthesis of building and exhibition, secondly by the amalgamation of different layers of old and new, and thirdly by the similar treatment of objects with a direct relationship to Kepler and objects which had nothing to do with him. The original Kepler Museum can be read as a manifesto of how its maker understood history: as a warehouse of which to keep on choosing and combining until it fits one's liking. It became a stage rather than a museum, telling a story that never happened.

The museum will reopen in February 1, 2024, with a new permanent exhibition after a renovation and extension of its building. The claim of the redesign is to enable visitors with a critical view on our access to and use of history.

<sup>18</sup> The former museum director, Jürgen Teichmann, introduced performances inside the Galilei room, in which an actor appears 'on stage', who experiments with the instruments on display. See *ivi*, p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> BOLL, *Kepler-Gedächtnishaus...* cit., p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>21</sup> See WERNER, *Die ganze Stadt...* cit.

<sup>22</sup> Prague's Kepler Museum opened only in 2009 and closed down in 2017. Only Kepler's birthplace Weil der Stadt has another Kepler Museum, connected to the German Kepler Society. The city museum of Leonberg has a permanent exhibition on Kepler in the building where he went to school. For all Kepler memorials see W.R. DICK, A. LANGKAVEL, *Die Kepler Gedenkstätten*, in *Miscellanea Kepleriana. Festschrift für Volker Bialis zum 65. Geburtstag*, herausgegeben von F. Boockmann, D.A. Di Liscia, H. Kothmann, 47, Augsburg 2005, pp. 255-277.