

# 13 May 2001, 8:01 AM—1 building, 20,000 people, and 450 kilograms of explosives: the elimination of the Kaiserbau in Troisdorf as a secular sacrifice

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*Abstract:* The demolition of undesired buildings is often an ambiguous event: it can be seen as a brutal attack by some people, whereas others consider it necessary to construct something new. What needs to be accomplished is not a simple physical act, but principally the acceptance of disposal as something needed and wanted, rather than unnecessary wastage. Here resides the controversial and ambivalent character of many acts of disposal. Detonation, therefore, is a passage that acquires its relevance thanks to a careful orchestration of the event in which an unwanted piece of architecture is thrown into the public spotlight, proffering a glimpse of a multiplicity of possibilities, while simultaneously providing a remarkably powerful dual experience of the durability and ephemerality of man-made structures. The biography of the Kaiserbau in Troisdorf illustrates these issues: once a would-be mega-hotel between Köln and Bonn, the concrete structure was dynamited on 13 May 2001—a spectacle attended by no less than 20,000 people, despite the ungodly hour at which it took place.

*Keywords:* architecture, demolition, materiality, sacrifice, wastage

In all cases of undesired architecture, elimination occupies a central place. The deliberate destruction or waste of goods that are not completely finished has often been related to the expression and acquisition of power. Not only must the destroyer be in the position to permit oneself such luxury, but vice versa—and cumulatively—“the conspicuous waste of goods always confers power and authority on their destroyer” (Connor 1992: 75). In the realm of architecture, too, destruction and disposal have an important significance. People who have

the power to reduce buildings to rubble can effectively express their control over the built environment. Even when it is not subsequently carried out, the mere *suggestion* of destruction can significantly influence the course of events. For instance, mighty destroyers can damage as well as threaten to eradicate their opponents’ representative edifices in order to impose their authority; or, on the other hand, people who would like to dispose of an edifice, but lack the means (e.g., authority, finances, or technology), are challenged to start seeking alternatives.

The radical elimination of significant buildings is often attended en masse and increasingly mediatized—in Las Vegas, it has repeatedly been combined with New Year fireworks into a dazzling and impressive spectacle. As the concrete embodiment of a crisis or transition, the disposal of buildings can also take on the character of a purification ritual, a necessary condition to start with a clean slate. Julian Rosefeldt and Piero Steinle have presented dynamiting as a metaphor for the mortality of systems, ideologies, power relations, and their status symbols (1996: 7). In the same book, Gottfried Knapp has even affirmed that the chastening elimination of Nazi references in post-World War II Germany was absolutely indispensable in order to turn over a new leaf. Finally, a world-famous elimination is that of the Pruitt-Igoe Housing Scheme in St. Louis, in 1972, which went down in art history as “the death of modern architecture” (Jencks 1987: 9). Demolition is often largely documented in texts and images, especially when it concerns a symbolically relevant building. This event can then become an important element in the collective memory of a place, sometimes still remembered years later as if it was yesterday.

The so-called Kaiserbau in Troisdorf, near the highway between Köln and Bonn, was a structurally complete, nineteen-storey concrete building from the 1970s, initially planned as the largest hotel in West Germany, and named after its contractor Franz Kaiser. Having been part of the local history of Troisdorf and its surroundings for more than twenty-five years, the concrete structure was dynamited on 13 May 2001 at eight o'clock in the morning in no more than two or three seconds—a spectacle attended by no less than 20,000 people, despite the ungodly hour at which it took place. Camera teams from all over the country and even far beyond the national borders came to document this impressive event. The arrival of crowds demanded an enormous organization, security management, and intensive communication with all people concerned. What made these 20,000 people get up on a Sunday morning so early to watch a building being blown up in less than no time?

Did people in and around Troisdorf develop a special relationship to this edifice that had become inextricably bound up with their built environment although it was regularly portrayed in the local newspapers as a negative symbolic marker? Or does such radical elimination have certain (universal) characteristics that make the event appealing *in itself*, or fascinating to a large number of people, regardless of what building it is? Finally, should we see this event as an ending, or as a process: does it radically alter the meaning or relevance of the architecture in question? Does this clarify the spectators' motivation to be there and witness what happens?

### Troisdorf's negative marker

Did people attend the demolition of the Kaiserbau because of the specific relation they had developed to this edifice over the course of several decades? A first explanation for the massive attendance at the Kaiserbau's demolition can be sought in the building's significant representative aspects: how can people's attitude toward the edifice be described, and what value did the latter have in their eyes? Such an approach presupposes a mainly sociological perspective on the reception of architecture, to be derived, notably, from the work of Howard Becker (1982) and Vera Zolberg (1990) on arts. It distinguishes itself from a more humanistic tradition, to which Louis Réau ([1958] 1994) and Alexander Demandt (1997) clearly pertain with their books on vandalism in the realms of architecture and arts. Zolberg has characterized these two approaches in her book *Constructing a sociology of the arts*. The more humanistic approach is typically based on a view from within and on the assumptions “that a work of art is a unique object; that it is conceived and made by a single creator; and that it is in these works that the artist spontaneously expresses his genius” (1990: 53). The translation and application of such premises to the realm of architecture, and particularly to the rejection of specific buildings, bear various risks. Firstly, such an approach presupposes that art and non-art can be self-evidently and naturally distinguished



The Kaiserbau: literally and figuratively a border experience. Source: Angelika Naurath (2005)



from one another (ibid.: 5). Similarly, then, there would also be two types of buildings: architecture and non-architecture.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, a significant number of edifices, conceived by construction engineers instead of architects or simply not recognized as ('high-quality') architecture, would not even be taken into consideration, and their elimination considered irrelevant. The Kaiserbau, art historically not a very 'exciting' design, would most certainly not even be given a second thought. Secondly, as exemplified by Réau and Demandt, an approach that sees true art or architecture as 'a joy forever' tends to condemn those who challenge the latter's existence as reprehensible vandals. It passes over the contested legitimacy that is inherent to most acts of disposal, and crucial to their understanding.<sup>2</sup>

In order to overcome the difficulties sketched, it seems preferable to adopt a more sociological perspective that seeks to explain how, and why, works of art come to be defined as such. The latter are then no longer seen as individual creations, but rather as "products of collective work efforts" (Zolberg 1990: 80). Accordingly, they always need to be contextualized, whether socio-culturally, politically, or ideologically. In the present case, such a viewpoint notably focuses on how, and why, the Kaiserbau has come to be perceived as an eyesore to be dynamited. Its appreciation and significance, which eventually led people to attend its elimination in such great numbers, can only be grasped by taking into consideration a whole variety of perspectives: feelings, memories, experiences, and observations. Generally, the decision to blow up the Kaiserbau was received with widespread approval or at least consensus, yet it took many years to reach this point.

### ***Disproportioned ambitions***

The Kaiserbau was very much a product of its time. Former city manager Heinz-Bernward Gerhardus explained me that in the late 1960s, after two decades of a somewhat uncertain identity, Bonn seemed to have acquired a permanent status as West Germany's capital city, and its surroundings

were developing in accordance. In the same period, the Municipality of Troisdorf fused with neighboring villages into a small town, favorably located along a new highway connecting the local airport to the capital. Urgent needs for increased hotel accommodation were felt. Gerhardus recalled: "Given the way we were thinking: 'How large should it be?', there was a time around 1969, 1970, 1971 in which ideas arose which were later labeled 'gigantomania', which were too large by today's standards. But at the time we all thought that way."<sup>3</sup> Shortly after having completed the building structurally, the contractor went bankrupt, and construction was interrupted until further notice. Kaiser was summoned to return the plot of land to the municipality, which subsequently tried—in vain—to find a new investor. Yet with the construction of other new hotels in the 1970s as well as the removal of the government infrastructure from Bonn to Berlin after 1990, the potential Troisdorfer mega-hotel had become entirely superfluous.

Due to its extremely inflexible construction, where most partition walls were supporting walls, it would have been very difficult to adapt the building to a new function. Also, for judicial reasons, it had become almost impossible for the municipality to sell it, because all benefits would have gone to the property developer who commissioned and financed the hotel. He had been forced to give back the plot of land, but did not receive any indemnity for the building, which was considered to have no further economic value—sale would have provided evidence to the contrary. At that time, Kaiser maintained that the plot and building together were worth DM 35 million (EUR 17 million), whereas the municipality estimated its value at DM 2 million (EUR 1 million) in the negative, due to the costs of disposal. Soon, the edifice started to be seen as the concrete embodiment of various failures: the failure to realize a very ambitious project emerging from the hope that the surroundings of Bonn would witness a booming development; the failure to make Troisdorf a relevant name on the map of Germany; and the failure to adapt to changing circumstances and turn the previous failures into a success story.



The Kaiserbau as a meeting point. Source: Angelika Naurath (2005)

Local newspapers repeatedly referred to the Kaiserbau as Troisdorf's negative marker,<sup>4</sup> which seems to be, indeed, the prevalent image most people had. This was not only due to its unclear status as an unfinished building evoking a range of negative associations, but also to its outward appearance. The Kaiserbau did not appeal directly to a majority of people—and was never planned as such: it was mainly disproportionate to its location, boring in its structure, and not very 'pretty' in its material realization. Newspaper articles often referred to the building as nothing else than a 'concrete skeleton'.<sup>5</sup> Had its architecture been more 'attractive', then it could possibly have counterbalanced the arguments raised against preservation, and it would perhaps have brought people to resist its demolition.<sup>6</sup> Shortly before the Kaiserbau was blown up, it was found to be contaminated by asbestos: one more confirmation of the building's undesirability.

### *Border experiences*

Simultaneously, the Kaiserbau was also a meeting point for young people from Troisdorf and its surroundings. They organized parties and barbecues, sometimes even slept there; they appropriated the walls with numerous graffiti, and some of them still present themselves as the so-called Kaiserbau Generation. Many long-lasting friendships started in the Kaiserbau, and several people recall that they took important decisions there, and made choices that would influence their further life. Photos made by Angelika Naurath and Alex We Hillgemann, two young women who spent much time in the empty Kaiserbau in their early twenties, reflect some of the almost magical appeal the building was felt to have for its regular visitors. In the (online) announcement for a small photo exhibition in memory of the Kaiserbau in 2003, Hillgemann remembered:

“The Kaiserbau was for many people like a monument, an emblem, also a place of pilgrimage. This somehow fear- and respect-inspiring concrete giant housed in its day often whole crowds of earthlings: curious teenagers, homeless people, lovers, punks, innumerable pigeons, etc.” (2002; translation by the author).

Nevertheless, even for Hillgemann and her friends, the Kaiserbau period had already come to an end long before the building was actually eliminated: doors had been barricaded, and it had become more and more difficult to enter the building, leaving the place to a handful of neo-Nazis and other fringe figures. It must be emphasized, furthermore, that even a positive valuation of the Kaiserbau was inextricably bound up with its so-called corrupt status; according to Hillgemann and her friend Francis Hall, if the Kaiserbau had been any ‘normal’ building, it would never have acquired the same relevance:

“If everything had gone as planned and it had become an airport hotel, then it would probably still not be modern, but probably no one would have given it a second thought ... it would not have been part of my reality—perhaps not for our entire generation, because it would have been just another commercially exploited building, a hotel.”

What exactly made the Kaiserbau attractive is difficult to put into words, but it has something to do with its status as an architectural outcast and the fact that it did not—or not in the same way—provide shelter and security like most other buildings do. Hillgemann still clearly remembers the last time she went onto the roof:

“There were days when you could not go too close to the edge or you would have been blown off. If you slipped up there, that was really tricky. I can imagine that some people felt compelled up there to commit suicide. I have experienced up there a sudden strong wind and a thunderstorm that started brewing; I got very scared that I would not be able to get down again, a really stupid feeling. Once we had gone down

the stairs, I had the thought—and it was indeed the last time I went up there—that something would happen if I went up there again.”

Visiting the Kaiserbau was literally and figuratively a border experience.

### *Threatening extremes*

Two characteristics in particular made the Kaiserbau very vulnerable to rejection or, in the eyes of many, corrupt: its ‘extreme’ nature and its marginal status. As regards the first characteristic, René Girard has analyzed collective persecutions throughout history in *The scapegoat*; his findings can equally be applied to the present subject. Girard states that in a stereotype accusation, “persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society” (1986: 15). Certain individuals, specifically those with extreme qualities, are particularly subject to such accusations: the extremely rich and the extremely poor, the extremely successful or unsuccessful, beautiful or ugly, vicious or virtuous, the extremely attractive or repulsive (ibid.: 19). All these terms can easily be transferred to pieces of architecture. The Kaiserbau, notably, was no inconspicuous building: it was an enormous edifice made of concrete that should have become the largest, and one of the most prestigious hotels in West Germany. It was doomed to inspire not only admiration and longing, but also envy, jealousy, and animosity.

In addition, as construction had been interrupted, the building remained for many years in an unclear, ‘in between’ status, when nobody could tell whether it would be finished or not, whether it would be given another function or not, whether the owner would change or not, and whether it would be demolished or not. It belonged to Troisdorf, but remained on the margin—as did many of its ‘inhabitants’: punks, homeless persons, countercultures. As Mary Douglas has exposed in *Purity and danger*, marginality is frequently associated with danger. Transposing her insights with regard to

persons in a marginal state to the present case, we could say that marginal buildings—either at the margins of society or in a transitory period between two identities—are so-called classificatory anomalies;<sup>7</sup> they are “placeless. They may be doing nothing morally wrong, but their status is indefinable” ([1966] 2002: 118). This marginality makes them both vulnerable and dangerous because: “To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power” (ibid.: 120). Actually, this is a kind of vicious circle since the questioning of a building’s existence relegates it to a marginal condition, while simultaneously this ambiguous status (combined, in the present case, with extreme qualities) renders it more susceptible to being designated as ‘corrupt’, as well as making it logical prey to the hammer of potential persecutors.

### *Happy and sad*

All in all, except for a small minority of people, the Kaiserbau’s presence was contemplated with indifference at best.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the best summary was given in Julia Horn’s documentary *Der große Knall aus dem Leben eines Sprengmeisters* (2002): “Many cursed the Kaiserbau, others liked it, most just drove on past.” People who had a special relation to the building, such as the Kaiserbau Generation, either did not form enough of a coherent group to raise their combined voices against demolition, or else the Kaiserbau referred to a period that, for them as well, had already ended some time ago. As a result, there was no large-scale public discussion to contest the building’s demolition, and as such, we could speak of a situation of relative consensus. Klaus Elsen, journalist at the local *General Anzeiger*, firmly assured me: “There was no widespread, open rejection.”

Still, the building’s generally bad name is not enough to explain the extent of public attendance at its demolition. Despite its uncanny aura, people in the surroundings had also got used to its presence: several mentioned to me that on their way back from their holidays, the sight of the Kaiserbau would let them know from far away that they were almost home. “Although it was ugly, it somehow belonged to Troisdorf,” is what

many people said. People disliked its outward appearance, but it did not arouse an extreme hatred as certain buildings can do, for example, after a radical social upheaval or ideological break.

The Kaiserbau had a multiplicity of meanings, and people felt concerned by its demolition for various reasons: some of them were simply seeking free entertainment, some wanted to witness the elimination of what they saw as a blot to their city, but for others 13 May 2001 had a much deeper meaning. Indeed, a primary explanation for the building’s bad name that all my respondents mentioned is the fact that several young people died at the Kaiserbau, either by accident or suicide. Nobody knows the exact number of people who lost their life there; it varies between six and twenty. As each incident was always reported in the local newspapers, people knew about it, and these tragedies have always shed a negative light on the building’s reputation. Franz Schmoll, father of a young man who committed suicide at the Kaiserbau, appeared in the documentary *Der große Knall* to explain that 13 May 2001 was like a deliverance to him and his wife. Referring to his wife, he told the journalists: “When she left the house and walked a bit down the street, then the Kaiserbau became visible. She was always reminded of it. When such a reminder is removed, we can breathe again freely, especially my wife ... This is a very happy day.” Hillgemann and other members of the Kaiserbau Generation, on the other hand, compared the event to a burial or an execution; to them, it was a very sad day. The multiplicity of Kaiserbau images in people’s minds explains why the explosion was such an ambiguous event, a true ‘iconoclash’ indeed, where “one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive” (Latour 2002: 16).

### **Overwhelming materiality**

So far I have attempted to explain the massive attendance at the Kaiserbau’s elimination through an analysis of merely representative aspects. Yet Gosewijn Van Beek, in a discussion of book



burnings, already reached the conclusion that such an analysis cannot be entirely satisfactory, because it passes over the crucial importance of the materiality of objects:

“The effort to remove (eradicate would be the better word) objects, be it human or otherwise, from the face of the earth escapes such disembodied notions of meaning. It must in some way involve the embodied, material aspect of the ‘objects’, their autonomous ‘being there’ upon and above their ethereal ‘meaning’” (1996: 16).

There are several reasons—both empirical and theoretical—why the significance of the Kaiserbau’s elimination cannot be grasped in terms of pure semiotics like that of a supposedly typical iconoclastic gesture. Firstly, as Van Beek has justly remarked, if everything could be reduced to questions of meaning, then this would imply that things (and their disposal) do not really *matter* (1996: 16). This hypothesis is convincingly contradicted, for example, by people’s frequent and fervent desire and efforts to get rid of certain things. We could argue with Freedberg (1989) that the difference between signifier and signified can be so seriously blurred that people really perceive the former as the latter, and that despite physically altering the *thing*, they actually really *think* that they are acting against a reprehensible meaning, idea or concept (rather than against a material object). This, perhaps, holds true for the destruction of many works of art, but buildings also have a very essential reality as public, three-dimensional, material, and utilitarian objects, which cannot be reduced to textual metaphors.

The second argument against a purely semiotic approach is an awareness of the agency of buildings, as derived from Gell’s insights into works of art (1998). Whatever meaning an edifice embodies, it does, indeed, precisely *em-body* it: this meaning is intensely connected to, or engraved in, the building’s material shape—it depends on the *thing* in order to *be*. Since buildings are simultaneously symbolic and material objects, their potential elimination also has both a symbolic and material character. Finally, if the Kaiserbau’s elimination had been a purely representative act, then

it could hardly have brought together so many different people in a joint experience, because people’s relations to the edifice were too divergent for that. These objections against a purely semiotic approach engender the next supposition: that the crowd was drawn by certain universal and fascinating characteristics, rooted in the materiality of the event, and common to all (or most) destructions, independent of the specific significance of the object.

### ***Almost supernatural and intensely sensory***

When people were asked in *Der große Knall* why they were so keen on witnessing the explosion of the Kaiserbau, many of them referred to the power of the event in itself, mentioning it was a unique opportunity to watch something exceptional and very exciting; something as impressive as the force of nature, that could otherwise never be seen during a time of peace. Several confirmed this to me, and described a very solemn, almost religious atmosphere, starting in the days preceding the explosion. Heike Glomb, for example, who lived opposite the Kaiserbau for one and a half years, recalled that in the last few days before detonation, preparation work continued by night. There was no electricity in the edifice, so workers had to use torches to pursue their work. In the dark, when they were on the higher floors, it looked from a certain distance almost like a heavenly light or some kind of supernatural phenomenon: “Very, very eerie.” Although she had no particular relation to the building, except for the fact that she lived in the same street, Glomb went to pay it a last visit with her family and friends on the evening before the explosion. She described the building to me almost like an agonizing friend: “We took our leave of the building, went to it and looked at it once more, how it stood there with all its cables.” Sven Axer, musician and member of the Kaiserbau Generation, also reported an exceptional atmosphere as well as a very uncanny encounter with an unknown young man, on the evening before detonation:

“The moon was full, it was very bright, and there was a kid standing near the Kaiserbau, really in



the shadows, and he said he did not want to live any longer. Perhaps he intended to climb into the building. I have no idea. He looked up at the height of the building and said: 'Too late, too late'. It was a very strange encounter."

Roman Hümb, photographer and ex-inhabitant of Troisdorf, described the unusual, solemn atmosphere on the day itself, in particular the absolute silence of the crowd in the minutes before detonation: "No one dared say anything; everyone felt a real, internal tension. It suddenly went quiet, no birds singing, nothing, it was really still, as if everything was actually waiting for a big event."

The explosion in itself was a total sensory experience. Hümb gave me a detailed description of what happened after the first signal ('leave security zone—detonation in sixty seconds') and the second signal ('detonation is imminent'):

"It took two or three seconds, and then it was gone. By the time we heard the blast, it was already in rubble. First you see a bit of smoke, and then it just starts to shake. I have never lived through a real earthquake, but everything was simply shaking! And as I said, then comes the sound, and you notice that the shaking goes completely through the earth. Terrific."

Enormous dust clouds, which left the firemen completely helpless, and the trembling of the earth when the 42,000-ton colossus hit the ground, completed these strong audio-visual sensations. Everything was covered with a thick layer of dust, and all the people looked like extraterrestrials dropped into a bucketful of chalk. Some people were crying, others were clapping, and no one could leave the place because the roads were closed to all traffic. This situation of total chaos was further increased by the masses of people who set out for the smoking ruins in search of debris, for a tactile experience of the deceased giant.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Mastering detonation***

In the course of disposal, the edifice overwhelmingly came to the fore in all its materiality: it had been placed in the spotlights for many weeks as

a colossus that needed to be overpowered; detonation brought its materiality into the reach of all senses; and the tons of debris that remained had to be handled with powerful bulldozers and excavators. The overwhelming physical potency of the event made it necessary to closely direct it, and, inversely, this careful orchestration brought materiality to the fore. In other words, materiality and performativity mutually reinforced each other. Edward Schieffelin, in his article "Problematizing performance," has written that performativity is something inherent to social life, and indispensable to the social construction of reality. It manifests itself in "the expressive aspect of the 'way' something is done on a particular occasion: the particular orchestration of the pacing, tension, evocation, emphasis, mode of participation, etc., in the way a practice (at that moment) is 'practised', that is, 'brought off'" (1998: 199). Schieffelin's approach seems very appropriate for the present case, since it recognizes that the orchestration of the Kaiserbau's demolition was not self-evident, that the interaction between performers, witnesses, and the building was very relevant in this respect, and that the performance could also have failed.

"[F]rom the observance of the correct procedures to the resonance of the symbolism, the heightening of emotion, the sense of transformation, all depend on whether the performers and other participants can 'bring it off' ... Thus 'performance' is always inherently *interactive*, and fundamentally *risky*. Amongst the various people involved (who often have different agendas) there is always something aesthetically and/or practically at stake, and something can always go wrong" (Schieffelin 1998: 198; italics in the original).

With such a perspective on performance, we are not pinned down to one specific meaning carried out in ritualistic form. Rather, meanings are unpredictable and created in the course of performance, in mutual interaction between performers and other participants.

While remaining attentive to Schieffelin's warnings of the pitfalls of overly symbolic



Detonation: a total sensory experience. Source: Alex We Hillgemann (2001; [www.auge-und-ohr.de](http://www.auge-und-ohr.de))

analyses of rituals, several remarkable parallels might be drawn between the demolition of the Kaiserbau and sacrificial ceremonies as analyzed by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss in their seminal work *Sacrifice: its nature and function*. Firstly, both consist of the careful orchestration of a public event, centered on the destruction, or consumption, of a valuable item—an act which can only be carried out by a specialist (1964: 35). Secondly, both are very similarly structured temporarily (with destruction as an absolute climax), spatially (in concentric circles in which the closer to the centre, the less that people are allowed), and organizationally (discerning a victim, a sacrificer, often a sacrificer, and witnesses; *ibid.*: 29). And thirdly, architectural eradications often aim at goals comparable to those of a sacrifice: to get rid of an impure status or to reach a superior one (*ibid.*: 9). Especially in, or after, a period of revolutionary upheaval, eliminations can attain the character of real purification rituals: officiants and witnesses together sacrifice the three-dimensional representatives of a dark period in history, to remove the stain on their collective identity, get rid of the burden of corruption, and attain a new, ‘clean’ status. A priori, this is perhaps less obvious in the case of the Kaiserbau, which was not in the first place connected to a specific ideology or socio-cultural background. Yet the event, centered round destruction, was very clearly structured in terms of space, time, and personal roles, in a similar way to the rituals described by Hubert and Mauss.

The ‘*Sprengmeister*’ (literally: ‘master of detonation’) had been commissioned by the municipality to act as their ‘sacrificer’: an intermediate, initiated in the secrets of dynamite.<sup>10</sup> As Hümb's notably told me, the ‘master of detonation’ was the one and only ‘big hero’ on that day. He had been chosen through an official competition and had come all the way from Dresden to flex his skills. Everybody knew him by name, since he had regularly appeared on television in the weeks before. He and his crew had taken possession of the building six weeks before the explosion to install 450 kilograms of explosives, and on the day itself, all eyes were focused on him: he was coordinating the whole event; he was ordering

the police, helicopters, and other security forces to check if all security zones were really free of people; he was giving the warning signals; and finally he pressed the button for detonation—after he himself had, like the captain on a ship, finally left the central security zone. For him, there was more at stake than purely the removal of the Kaiserbau; he also had to make up for the failure of his colleagues to eliminate the city hall in nearby Sieglar a few years before when, after detonation, half of the building was still standing. People in Troisdorf had not forgotten this incident; they feared another failure, and it was now up to him to restore his profession's good name and, inferentially, the reputation of those who commissioned the previous demolition.<sup>11</sup>

During the few hours before and after the explosion, the tension mounted, granting the occasion a very special atmosphere. All people living in a radius of three hundred meters of the edifice had to leave their houses one hour before detonation; many of them were worried and spoke of a real evacuation. Although they had been informed that they could leave their houses just the same as any other day, I was told by Bettina Plugge, municipal public relations manager, that many called the hotline to ask if they could leave their chinaware in the cupboard, their goldfish in the bowl, whether windows should be left open or closed, and if they would have to sleep in tents if the explosion failed and evacuation would be prolonged. On the day itself, ‘evacuated’ people were treated like VIPs and accommodated in special areas together with journalists and local government representatives—who had completely handed over their power to the ‘master of detonation’. At this point, the normal order of things had been turned upside down, and the situation was similar to that of a state of emergency; lots of police, firemen, security agents, obstructed traffic, and forbidden zones.

## Needful legitimacy

Given that materiality and performative structure jointly contributed to make the occasion special, where people sensed that ‘something’



exceptional was going on, we might rightfully then ask, *what* precisely happened? At the moment of detonation, no one knew what life would be like without the Kaiserbau, or what would be built in its place. For the time being, people focused, with a little melancholy, on their farewell to the imposing edifice. As Hümb's and several others summarized:

"First, people applauded, and then elderly people, who had lived there practically forever, said: 'Something is missing, now you can look over there, and there is light entering'. Before, they had always complained: 'It looks like a bunker up there, it looks so ugly'. And then very surprised: 'Oh, it is no longer there, it has gone.'"

Very soon, while many were still submerged by clouds of dust, people started clapping or cheering, while others blinked tears away. Hillgemann was really upset when people started clapping. If she had felt, for a moment, a kind of solidarity with a young couple in front of her who were also very touched by the event, as soon as others started to express enthusiasm for the downfall, she wanted to distance herself from the crowd:

"Some people rejoiced: 'Yes! Finally!' That really arouses hatred. Those people were much younger than we were, had never created a connection with the building, they just visited it at some time with their parents and thought it ugly, a nuisance, and repulsive. They had never even been inside it."

People began to negotiate the meaning of what had happened after some moments of simply being overwhelmed by the intense sensory experience. The negotiation carried on in the days and weeks that followed. Indeed, the elimination of a building is not necessarily an end in itself; it is also very often a means to reach an end, or just one step in a larger process. Schieffelin already insisted that "a performance is always something accomplished: it is an achievement in the world" (1998: 198). Performances, typically, are ephemeral; they "create their effects and then are gone—leaving their reverberations (fresh insights, reconstituted

selves, new statuses, altered realities) behind them ... While they refer to the past and plunge toward the future, they exist only in the present" (ibid.: 198). What was the demolition of the Kaiserbau meant to accomplish? Should we see the explosion as an ending, or as one stage in a larger process?

### *Identifications*

As Hubert and Mauss have emphasized, a sacrifice generally has an effect on many more people than just the one who commissioned it. Notably it affects those who witness the ceremony and identify with it (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 9f.). Like the sacrificer, they can either reach a higher status of purity or eradicate an impure status; in both situations, the ritual has a very similar structure. With regard to the Kaiserbau, at first glance it is rather difficult to tell whether those who identified with the explosion intended to attain a higher status or get rid of an unwanted one, and whether it was a constructive or destructive act. The ambiguous character of the event—an 'iconoclasm', in the truest sense of the term—was reflected, particularly, by the wish or refusal of various firms to have their name and image associated with detonation.

When, in 1999, artist H. A. Schult realized his project *Hotel Europa* and hung over a hundred portraits of famous people in front of each room on one side of the ex-would-be hotel, one of the walls was painted in yellow with a big black post horn: the logo of the German post office, the main sponsor. In expectation of the building's elimination however, the wall was painted over because the post office did not want to have its image associated with—in their eyes—such a destructive event. Interestingly, the Internet firm Ich-Zieh-Um (I am moving) would have been willing to pay DM 10,000 (EUR 5,000) for permission to place an enormous banner with their logo on the building on the day of its demolition. This organization, which provides firms with organizational support when they are moving, has made it a trademark to have its name on dynamited buildings. Apparently to them, detonation is synonymous with a clean slate, a new start.

## Acceptance

Similarly, the possibility of destroying H. A. Schult's portraits along with the building was envisaged: to blow them up simultaneously with, or separately from, the building; to blow up some of the pictures and keep the rest; or to project the images on the building and explode it at night. In the end, all pictures were removed before the edifice was handed over to the 'master of detonation'. Politically, this was probably the cleverest option. After its artistic facelift as *Hotel Europa*, people had become aware that the Kaiserbau could also have a more attractive look if it was given a chance; during this last period, its reputation improved significantly. For the Christian-Democratic majority in the municipal government, who had commissioned the edifice's demolition, it would not have been very diplomatic to explode a work of art—even with the artist's approval. Before detonation the building therefore had to be returned to its unattractive, pre- or non-artistic state.

For the Christian Democrats, eliminating the Kaiserbau was a political act, an attempt to improve their reputation by freeing the Troisdorfer citizens from a blot on their cherished townscape. In the weeks that followed the demolition of the Kaiserbau, representatives of the municipality were very busy thanking all participants for their help, or interest in the event. Fragments of the Kaiserbau with an authenticity certificate were distributed as an expression of gratitude, as well as a 'Daumenkino' or 'thumb cinema': a miniature book that, when thumbed through very quickly, showed the end of the Kaiserbau—or, in reverse, its virtual resurrection. Clearly, local politicians wanted to present the edifice's demolition as something undoubtedly constructive. Before removal, promises were made regarding an industrial estate to be built on the plot; demolition should not be seen as an end, a break, but instead continuity warranted. Some were already skeptical at that time, and indeed, two years later, a large quantity of fragments still had to be removed, while nothing new had been constructed. Nonetheless, at the time, the argument of continuity of

'use' of the Kaiserbau piece of land was needed to help people accept demolition.

Furthermore, it was important to present the end of the Kaiserbau as a 'natural death'. Neil Harris, in his book *Building lives: constructing rites and passages*, has observed that "[g]reat buildings are generally assumed to have been murdered; the idea of their dying a natural death seems unacceptable" (1999: 166). For the local government it was very important to prevent this kind of accusation; therefore, the mayor regularly appeared on television and included in each of his speeches an expression of regret for the loss of a symbolic marker that somehow belonged to Troisdorf, while conveying the message of an inescapable end, since this ugly and sick landmark had been standing without a function for almost thirty years. The mayor did not hide himself like a murderer, quite the contrary: after the explosion, he went to shake hands with the 'master of detonation' and congratulated him on the excellent work carried out; each time, he appeared as someone who commissioned a regrettable, but necessary change. Demolition was the final issue of more than twenty-five years of negotiations and attempts to reorient the edifice to another function and find a new investor. This relatively long time span significantly contributed to make disposal acceptable. Had the building been eliminated earlier, then people would probably have reproached politicians with rash and unnecessary wastage.

More abstractly, the very moment of detonation was a moment of total freedom presenting innumerable possibilities. It was a glimpse into unknown potentialities; in those brief seconds, history could still be written, performance could still fail, or Man's control over the built environment confirmed. At the same time, deliberate destruction tends to be highly controversial, requiring, as previously documented, careful justification. Both aspects of expansive freedom and careful planning are, in this case, fundamentally complementary. Hubert and Mauss already wrote, with regard to the culminating point of sacrificial ceremonies:

“That which now begins is a crime, a kind of sacrilege. So, while the victim was being led to the place of slaughter, some rituals prescribed libations and expiations. Excuses were made for the act that was about to be carried out, the death of the animal was lamented, one wept for it as one would weep for a relative. Its pardon was asked before it was struck down” (1964: 33).

Both the elimination of buildings and religious sacrifices consist of the deliberate destruction or consumption of an item that has not yet been ‘used up’; this makes the performance of elimination inherently controversial, and susceptible to failure. Their risky aspect has much to do with the notion of expenditure that lies at their core.

In his *A theory of shopping*, Daniel Miller built on the work of Hubert and Mauss, and Georges Bataille, to accentuate this idea of expenditure understood against the backdrop of sacrifice. After a detailed comparison between sacrifice and consumption—especially shopping—Miller reached the conclusion that “[i]n many societies the effect of these various relationships between sacrifice and consumption is to subsume the general sense of expenditure or spending within an economy of devotion” (1998: 83). Miller insists, with Bataille, upon the high value of the sacrificial victim,<sup>12</sup> which causes its imminent destruction to be seen, in a first stage, as a “vision of excess” (ibid.: 90). In a second stage, this vision must be negated (ibid.: 100), which consists, in the case of shopping, of “a split between the concern for the profane or social consequences of the act which comes to constitute the third stage and the constitution of a transcendent goal to which shopping is dedicated which must be equivalent to the divine recipient of sacrifice” (ibid.: 100).

Similarly, those who question a building’s existence are usually well aware that their claims are likely to be contested and that they need to legitimate their acts properly. The most desirable situation is when they can present disposal as an unavoidable or even liberating issue. This corresponds, in David Riches’s terms, to “the ultimate defense for all violent acts,” namely, “the unimpeachable necessity of immediately halting

some aspect of the social activities of the person to whom violence is imparted” (1986: 5f.). In the same way, the argumentation in favor of the disposal of buildings often revolves around dealing with a supposedly threatening aspect which needs to be disarmed. Decisive arguments for the elimination of a building are often found in issues of safety: concretely in the form of potentially collapsing ceilings that would injure visitors, or more abstractly in the reference to a dictatorial regime that commissioned it and could continue to cause damage through the building’s survival. While the destruction of the Kaiserbau did not require the latter argument in the sense of symbolically eradicating the memory of a former regime, there was still a crucial political and symbolic aspect to the eventual demolition.

### *Grace or purification*

Hubert and Mauss recognized that sacrifices essentially consist of a transformation: whether they are intended to benefit the persons who carry them out or the objects with which these people are concerned, in any case, the beneficiary “has raised himself to a state of grace or has emerged from a state of sin” (1964: 10). In their further analysis, Hubert and Mauss observed that sacrifices present a curved structure, in which all participants progressively ascend to a culminating state of religiosity at the moment of destruction, and then progressively descend into a more profane sphere (ibid.: 45–49). The duration of each stage varies, depending on the function of sacrifice: when it confers a superior state to the beneficiary, the phase prior to destruction is generally more elaborate; when the beneficiary eradicates an impure status, practices of exit are usually highly evident. Finally, Hubert and Mauss added that in reality, sacralization and desacralization are often “so closely interdependent that the one cannot exist without the other” (ibid.: 95).

The elimination of buildings often combines the rise to a state of grace with the purification from a state of sin—it is, thus, rather difficult to distinguish so-called pure cases. Nonetheless, in line with Hubert and Mauss, practices meant to



elevate participants to a superior state generally take place prior to elimination. A long period of assessment and negotiations is usually necessary to achieve acceptance of disposal as the one and only issue—and destroyers as welcome liberators. In a situation of conflict or war, on the other hand, this stage is often almost entirely lacking, and destruction much more spontaneous; acts of purification following revolutionary upheavals also frequently occur impulsively. In

these situations, meaning is generally negotiated after the event has taken place.

Attitudes after detonation often present remarkable parallels with a situation of mourning, varying between resignation and indignation according to the extent of acceptance. In Troisdorf, undecidedly coping with the loss of the Kaiserbau, people started gathering souvenirs, in the form of authentic Kaiserbau fragments. Probably inspired by the phenomenon



Kaiserbau debris. Source: Alex We Hillgemann (2001; [www.auge-und-ohr.de](http://www.auge-und-ohr.de))

of ‘Wall peckers’ after the fall of the Berlin Wall where authentic debris was avidly collected, an announcement by the municipal government, indicating that fragments of the building would be available, was issued days before detonation. Harris would call this “a prepaid burial arrangement” (1999: 147). Real Kaiserbau fans nevertheless did not want to have remains collected by those who commissioned the Kaiserbau’s demolition and as a result the fragments from this source were, in their eyes, corrupt. They preferred to go by themselves and collect what they considered to be some ‘real, authentic’ relics, like Klaus Schlich, a habitué of the Kaiserbau, who gathered some pieces with traces of his own graffiti. Spectators also took many photos, both before and during detonation; Harris has compared the photographing of doomed buildings to photographing corpses, “to retain memories of loved ones whose earthly lives had been brief” (ibid.: 136).

The so-called Kaiserbau Generation would probably have been the most likely group to criticize the building’s elimination, even in retrospect. Actually, they mainly strove to rehabilitate the building’s memory, rather than contest its disposal. One year after the explosion, Hillgemann organized an exhibition with photos from before, during, and after detonation. It was an occasion for her to contact all her Kaiserbau mates, with whom she had partly lost touch. All of them came to the exhibition, and some of them brought their partner or friends with them. New friendships were started, and the Litro Pinte, a local pub, became a meeting point, as it was before each of the Kaiserbau escapades in former times. Photos were exchanged, and other artists reflected on the Kaiserbau heritage; various projects inspired by the Kaiserbau were brought together on the occasion of the second Memorial Day in May 2003, attended by no less than 150 people. The third (and provisionally last) Memorial Day took place in June 2004, when an enlarged version of the exhibition of 2003 was presented in the Troisdorfer town hall, officially granting the Kaiserbau a place in local history. Hall, who continued to keep me informed of the latest developments, concluded

one of his e-mails with the sentence: “The Kaiserbau is dead; long live the Kaiserbau!”

## Conclusion

Elimination placed the Kaiserbau in the spotlight; after many years at the periphery of society, it became the center of much discussion and excitement; after years of habituation, it became a visible and three-dimensional issue again. The case of the Kaiserbau has illustrated that if extreme qualities and a marginal status can make a building more vulnerable, they do not entirely explain its rejection. Actually, demolition is often a very ambiguous event: it can be seen as a brutal attack by some people, whereas others consider it a necessary act to construct something new. People had extremely diverse reasons to attend the demolition of the Kaiserbau, but in the moment of detonation, they were all overwhelmed by intense sensory stimuli and tangible materiality, intensified by the structure of the performance, which greatly resembled a sacrificial ceremony. This thrilling experience was for many people an important motivation to attend the event. In sum, the performance’s structure and the diversity of the crowd in terms of people’s relation to the building were indispensable to each other: the performance’s structure allowed participants a shared experience, while the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and interpretations before and after detonation were needed to make the event relevant enough for 20,000 people to attend it.

The spectators’ presence also permitted them to participate in the negotiation of meanings, and it was crucial in order to determine whether *acceptance* would be achieved or not. Elimination is not an end in itself; what needs to be accomplished is not a simple physical act (which could also fail, as was shown in nearby Sieglar) but principally the acceptance of disposal as something needed and wanted, rather than unnecessary wastage. Here resides the controversial and ambivalent character of many acts of disposal.

Detonation is a passage that acquires its relevance thanks to a careful orchestration of the

event in which an unwanted piece of architecture is thrown into the public spotlight, proffering a glimpse of a multiplicity of possibilities, while simultaneously providing a remarkably powerful dual experience of the durability and ephemerality of man-made structures. The questions that this experience raises are also evident in even the simple consideration of demolition. When a building is ultimately preserved or only partly transformed, therefore, the possibility of demolition still has a central symbolic significance. A final significant factor is that through elimination, a building is sometimes granted a form of martyrdom, a status that would never have been conferred during the time when it stood. Once the threat of the Kaiserbau's direct, three-dimensional, and inescapable presence had disappeared, it was relatively easy for some to start claiming its 'innocence' and nostalgically remember the good times that were had within its walls. In other words, radical eliminations are the only means, in the long term, to canonize corrupt architecture.

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## Notes

1. With regard to architecture, representatives of a merely humanistic tradition as described by Zolberg would, notably, consider that "[n]ot all building is usually thought of as architecture. We use the word 'architecture' most readily when speaking of building that is not casual or routine but planned, thought about, and designed by people educated as architects. That education includes much instruction in how buildings are to be designed, how their construction is organized, where they should be located, and much else" (Sparshott 1994: 4).
2. The crucial importance of this contested legitimacy has been emphasized by David Riches with regard to acts of violence. The notion of violence (and similarly that of 'vandalism') implies partiality from the outset in the sense that "violence" is very much a word of those who witness, or who are victims of certain acts, rather than of those who perform them" (1986: 3). To label an act as violent generally consists of condemning it. Yet a violent act is inherently controversial: it is conceived of as illegitimate by a number of witnesses, and nevertheless—or perhaps precisely because of that—enforced by the performers who simultaneously claim its legitimacy. Riches's definition of violence as "an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses" (ibid.: 8) can be fruitfully translated to the destruction of buildings.
3. All quotes by Heinz-Bernward Gerhardus, Alex We Hillgemann, Francis Hall, Klaus Schlich, Klaus Elsen, Heike Glomb, Sven Axer, and Roman Hümb's are taken from interviews held on 9–10 July 2002, 9–11 November 2002, and 17 May 2003.
4. Newspapers headlined, for example, "Six months reprieve for the negative symbol" (Schmitz in *Rhein-Sieg-Anzeiger*, 19 December 1996; translation by the author), or "Negative symbol should be dynamited soon" (*Rhein-Sieg-Rundschau*, 8 May 1997; translation by the author).
5. See, for example, Bode (*Die Zeit*, 6 October 1995), Effern-Salhoub (*General Anzeiger*, 31 July 1993), General Anzeiger (12 December 1990), and Tüllmann (*Reinische Post*, 26 February 1993).
6. This is not to disqualify the building's outward appearance in order to *explain* its removal, but aspects of taste should not be omitted altogether, since they certainly contribute to a building's potential rejection or appreciation—among many other aspects such as politics, ideology, and memory. In other words, aesthetic qualities should not be seen as explanatory in themselves, as something inherent to the edifice that ineluctably determines its fate, but formal aspects, proportions, and the choice of materials should not be dismissed as entirely insignificant and irrelevant. They determine that buildings do not all start their biography with absolutely 'equal' chances.



7. Douglas's notion of classificatory anomaly could erroneously suggest a marginal, but nevertheless somehow fixed status besides other, more clearly defined categories. Actually, the status of the Kaiserbau between the contractor's bankruptcy and the building's definitive elimination could primarily be characterized as fleeting and floating. Yet it is mainly Douglas's emphasis on the threatening aura of marginality that should be retained here.
8. One attempt was made to improve the building's image, in 1999: H. A. Schult, an artist from Köln, realized a project in the Kaiserbau, entitled *Hotel Europa*, which aroused great interest in various media in Germany, and even abroad. It consisted of providing the Kaiserbau with some virtual guests, by hanging over one hundred huge portraits of famous people in front of each of the hotel rooms on the west side. It brought the building into the spotlight for several months, but economic benefits failed to appear, and the second part of the project, on the east side, was never realized. It is evident that the project had nothing to do with the specific meaning of the building, apart from its initial function as a hotel—which it never fulfilled. The portraits could just as well have been hung on the façade of any other empty hotel. Certain people in Troisdorf told me that the project had been initiated by people 'from outside' who wanted to create a distinct profile for themselves and organized an expensive party for the 'high society' to celebrate the opening. Klaus Schlich, a young man who had spent much time in the Kaiserbau, was particularly indignant when Schult's project was realized—it gave him the feeling that the Kaiserbau had been taken from him and his friends: "It was our Kaiserbau, and now they come along and impose this frippery." In revenge, they tried—unsuccessfully—to steal one of the portraits.
9. Testimonies of the removal of other buildings elsewhere, confirm this impression of an overwhelming total sensory experience. See, for example, Knapp (1996).
10. Hubert and Mauss have written, with regard to the sacrificer or priest, that "generally one does not venture to approach sacred things directly and alone; they are too lofty and serious a matter. An intermediary, or at the very least a guide, is necessary. This is the priest. More familiar with the world of the gods, in which he is partly

involved through a previous consecration, he can approach it more closely and with less fear than the layman, who is perhaps sullied by unknown blemishes" (1964: 22f.).

11. Here lies another significant parallel with Hubert and Mauss, who noted that "the priest becomes ... the mandatory of the sacrificer, whose condition he shares and whose sin he bears" (1964: 23).
12. With regard to the disposal of architecture, it must be added that, in order to make a building's elimination significant, its high value can either be positive or negative—as long as it does not have a neutral value. This means that the building must be either cherished or rejected, but should not find itself in a kind of 'grey zone' of routinely unnoticed edifices.

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