A TEMPLE TO SCIENCE
THE ANATOMICAL THEATER IN BERLIN

K. Giese
Urbanstr. 175, 10961 Berlin, Germany

Hidden away among the research institutes of the Charite and the College of Veterinary Medicine in the center of Berlin lies one of Europe’s few surviving anatomical theaters, the old Zootomie (Fig. 1). The plans for this masterpiece of strict Berlin classicism were supplied by Karl Gotthard Langhans (1733-1808), the builder of the Brandenburg Gate. The building, which was to be the center of the Veterinary College newly established in 1789, had been commissioned by King Friedrich Wilhelm II. (1786-1797). The building work was completed as early as 1790. Right up to today the building functions as a lecture theatre, in which lectures are regularly held by the Institute of Food Hygiene.

The unusual feature of this largely unknown temple-like building lies in the fact that it is an example of Palladianism, that architectural movement which takes its name from the Vicenzan architect of the Italian Late Renaissance, Andrea Palladio (1508-1580). While this style of architecture, emanating from early 18th century England, conquered America, it was not able to establish itself on mainland Europe. Architectural developments in Germany did indeed receive some important impulses from English Palladianism, but it never attained as dominant a role in the field of architecture as it did in the Anglo-Saxon world. It is therefore astonishing that Langhans’ Anatomical Theater has right up to the present remained for the most part neglected by art historians and
that as a result it has not been recognized as one of the rare pure Palladian buildings in Germany.

Langhans chose an almost square ground plan for his compact cubic central structure (Fig. 1, 2). Over the low base floor which was structured as a souterrain, rises the only main floor which is topped off by a Tuscan entablature. It forms a border around the rigidly structured building and encompasses its parts into a compact whole. In the middle it is overarched by a low dome which rests on a low drum with openings provided by semicircular windows. On three sides of the building flat projections protrude and each of these enclose three windows on the five-axial facades. As against that the facade of the entrance is distinguished by a portcullis-like porch. It emphasizes the central axis of the facade and, with its Tuscan columns positioned at the open front, it frames the portal lying behind it. The smooth plastered walls of the facades are divided in the vertical by semicircular blank windows. They enclose the windows installed in the main and base floors and they give

Fig. 1 Anatomical Theater Berlin, facade of the entrance
Photo: Landesdenkmalamt Berlin
obviously vertical features to the horizontal character of the building. Their apexes are decorated with bucranias which, in addition to the lion fleece fascines above the portal, represent the only plastic decoration to be found on the Anatomical Theater.

The internal structure and ground plan layout of the inside are reflected in the outer structure of the building. Thus the dome vaults a central rotunda, which contains the actual anatomy hall. The steeply rising amphitheater-like circles of the auditorium are inserted in it. Around this center, which is inscribed in a regular rectangular ground plan, are grouped the eight side rooms and halls of the building. Their arrangement is once again reflected in the external structure. While the large halls are marked by the projections at the facades, the recessed walls mark off the smaller corner rooms. The column-lined portico lying in front of the entrance portal again matches the width of the staircase on the inside of the building.

If one looks for models for the building, which is a once-off example in Berlin classicism, then the ground plan of the building provides some clear clues. Without a doubt Langhans used as a model one of Palladio’s most famous works, the Villa Rotonda in Vincenza (1566-
1570), the plans of which are published in the "Quattro Libri Dell’architettura" (1570) compiled by Palladio. The four books on the architecture of the architect from Vincenza, which in the course of the 17th century had never lost any of their relevance in England, became the architectural bible at the beginning of the 18th century for all Palladians who were finding more and more followers outside of England as well. Langhans ground plan of the Anatomy Theater does not completely correspond to the layout of the named building by Palladio, but the parallels are much more strongly evident than in the case of other, better known Palladian key buildings of the 18th century. Neither the famous Wörlitz Castle (1769-1773) belonging to the anglophile Prince Friedrich Franz von Anhalt Dessau built by Friedrich Wilhelm von Erdmannsdorf (1736-1800), nor the larger number of English examples and models show such close adherence to the ground

Fig. 3
Anatomical Theater Berlin, detail
Photo: Landesdenkmalamt Berlin
plans of Palladio’s Villa.
If clear models from Palladio’s work can be claimed for the ground plan, the exterior structure of the Anatomical Theater at first glance shows far less clear references to or even exact models from the work of Palladio. But here too some basic principles of Palladian architecture can be detected from individual architectural motifs to the overriding structures of the building. In addition to the overall plan of a domed central building, which are a reminder of Palladio’s villas, it is above all else the layout of the floors that is significant. The staggering of the low base and main floor can be found for example in the Villa Badoer (post 1556) in Fratta Polesine and in Villa Emo (around 1564) in Fanzoio. But numerous examples can also be found even for the associated layout of the windows and their axes in the "Quattro Libri". In contrast to the ground plan one can also assume that Langhans was familiar with and analyzed English architecture. The semicircular windows, which light up the central domed rotunda of the Anatomical Theater, are also to be found in the English country house Chiswick House (approx. 1724-approx. 1728) while these elements in particular are not to be found in Palladio’s villas. When designing the Anatomical Theater Langhans made use of Palladio’s original plans and the ideas of Palladianism as mediated via England. In doing so he never abandons the rational basic principles of architecture postulated by Palladio. The correspondence between interior and exterior to form a harmonious whole and the required simplicity of the buildings, which were to be freed of all unnecessary ornamentation, are the basic principles of the Vicenza architect, which are creatively realized in the Anatomical Theater.

Langhans’ temple-like Anatomical Theater shows that the architecture of Greek antiquity, which again and again is adduced as being the model and as determining the style of his architectural work, cannot have been the sole determining factor. Without his intensive fertile analysis of the ideas of Palladio the building of the Anatomical Theater would not have been conceivable. To what extent Langhans analysis of Palladianism affected his other works should therefore be considered in future by art-historians when examining his work.
Langhans’ Anatomical Theater shows the high position of the medicine and the science in the Age of Enlightenment. The science was elevated to the new religion in this century. In this context it is explainable that the temple motif was used for the Anatomy – a motif that was restricted to church architecture and noble architecture.

The outstanding position of the Anatomical Theater is not, however, exhausted just by its architectonic design alone. His locating of the building in the context of its immediate surroundings can be regarded as extraordinary for early Berlin classicism As the contemporary engraving only inadequately reveals, the building was deliberately embedded in the park of the Charite; the very first landscape garden of a scientific institution in Berlin! Langhans’ building was accordingly part of an overall plan, which was based on the latest principles of the garden designers. They demanded for college gardens an environment designed according to natural perspectives as a recreation area for students. At the same time it is necessary to remember that the garden was not a garden for the nobility, but rather a public park which was accessible to all. The dome of the temple-like building stood out as if by chance in the landscape on a gently rising slope, framed by naturally growing bushes and trees. Along the meandering paths manifold views of a greek antique scenery are revealed to those strolling in the garden. Langhans’ Anatomical Theatre was therefore a reflection not just of Palladian architecture but also, by its association with a temple, it supplied the central motif that just could not be absent in an English garden. Langhans’ Anatomical Theater can therefore be rightly called a temple to science.

References


