



*The architect's spirit*, played by Jonas Tinius. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video.  
© Tal Adler

### The Architect

*It was a horrible idea. It completely ruined my design!  
Any amateur can see it – the dome has an opening to let the light in, you understand? Why should it be covered with a lantern and a cross?! It blocks the light!  
But I couldn't tell him – the crown prince. It would have insulted him. I knew he admired me; he always wanted me to look at his unoriginal architectural sketches.  
But, that last meeting in the palace, seeing his sketch with a cross on the palace's dome... It was my end! I lost my passion to work. I couldn't imagine serving him as the new king, covering all of Berlin with crosses.*

Although I was astonished by the implications of this spirit's narrative, I had little doubt about the identity of the narrator and the historical context of the story. All the clues were already present in this short testimony: Berlin, a crown prince's aspirational sketches, plans of a new domed chapel for the palace, and the newly crowned king's interest in topping the palace's dome with a cross. I knew immediately that I was hearing the spirit of Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841), one of the greatest, most celebrated architects in German history.<sup>41</sup>

[41] There is a wealth of material celebrating Schinkel and his work – biographies, stories, films, competitions, prizes, research projects, dedicated archives and institutions, street and square names, monuments, and exhibitions. In the following footnotes, I will refer only to the sources most relevant to my exploration of this spirit's narrative, along with several interviews I conducted with living experts.



Monument to Karl Friedrich Schinkel at Schinkelplatz in front of the Humboldt Forum, 2023. A.Savin, Wikipedia (Free Art Licence).

A talented and respected architect, city planner, painter, and designer, Schinkel also educated a generation of famous architects and has an architectural style – the Schinkel School (Schinkelschule) – named after him.<sup>42</sup> After a short career as an independent architect, Schinkel joined the civil service in 1810 at the Prussian Building Authority (Königlichen Technischen Oberbaudeputation), of which he became the chief director in 1830.<sup>43</sup> In his roles at the building authority, all under the reign of King of Prussia Friedrich Wilhelm III (1770–1840), Schinkel created many of Prussia’s most famous landmarks, including dozens of palaces, churches, and national monuments, many of which – including the Altes Museum, the Schauspielhaus (then a theatre and currently a concert hall), the Neue Wache in Berlin, and the Schloss Babelsberg in Potsdam – survive to this day.<sup>44</sup>

Schinkel was admired not only for his abundant creative talent but also for his unrestricted dedication to his work. In today’s terms, he could certainly be described as a perfectionist workaholic. However, in

Schinkel, these two elements (his creative genius and his extreme diligence) were fatally combined with a third element, rarely occurring with genius artists – his managerial function at the Prussian Building Authority. As Schinkel gained more promotions, titles, and fame, he took on more building projects, supervisory tasks, and administrative duties, which slowly eroded his health. An early glimpse of Schinkel’s distress appears in a letter he sent in 1821, a decade before his ailment started



Schloss Babelsberg in Potsdam between ca. 1890 and ca. 1900. Photochrom print. Library of Congress (public domain).

[42] Eva Börsch-Supan, *Berliner Baukunst nach Schinkel 1840–1870* (München: Prestel, 1977).

[43] Peter Betthausen, ‘Karl Friedrich Schinkel: A Universal Man’, in *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: A Universal Man*, ed. Michael Snodin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 3.

[44] Many of the buildings were damaged during World War II, with some, such as the Schauspielhaus, later being reconstructed.

manifesting physically, to the minister of trade and industry, Graf von Bülow, who was also responsible for the building authority. Trying to explain why he was requesting more space for artistic work, Schinkel wrote, 'In my view the artistic sphere, which alone appeals to me, is of such a limitless extent that a man's life is much too short for it. I feel, with regret, that in other circumstances I could have achieved still more in it, but that I am being inwardly torn apart by work which draws me away from my real purpose'.<sup>45</sup>

This sincere appeal, which was declined by the Prussian minister, reveals the contradiction that Schinkel was helplessly trying to accommodate: the tension between his insatiable craving for artistic expression and his ever-growing managerial workload. Owing to his limitless diligence, on the one hand, and the Prussian authorities' crass insensitivity to his complex disposition, on the other, Schinkel, starting in the early 1830s, often needed to go on leave and visit medical retreats.<sup>46</sup> Running on two tracks heading for collision – his deteriorating health and his demanding career full of exponentially increasing duties – he collapsed, on September 9, 1840. After thirteen months of being in a kind of coma, Karl Friedrich Schinkel passed away.<sup>47</sup>

Many of Schinkel's researchers and biographers attribute his progressing ailment and early death to his self-induced 'overtaxation'.<sup>48</sup> However, after carefully cross-checking his spirit narrative against published records, I identified a more nuanced explanation for his final collapse in September 1840 – a convergence of events and factors, some of which are individually well-documented but that have thus far not been recognized in connection with his tragic demise.

As part of Schinkel's countless projects for the royal family, he created a few preliminary sketches, in 1829, for a new ceremonial chapel inside the Berlin palace, topped by a dome that rises above the palace's west-facing entrance (Portal III).<sup>49</sup> In these sketches, the chapel's dome has a wide opening to the sky – an oculus (meaning 'eye' in Latin)

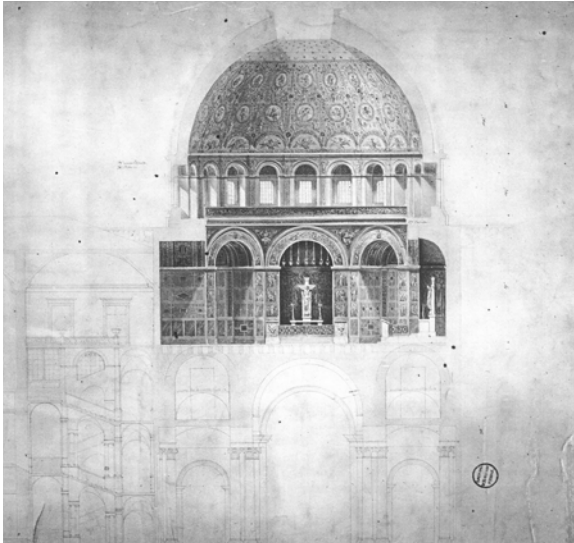
[45] Quoted in Betthausen, 'Karl Friedrich Schinkel', 3. Translation by Patricia Crampton, Anthony Vivis, and Eileen Martin.

[46] To avoid the modern recreational connotations of *spa*, I have translated the German term *Kuraufenthalt*, which Schinkel often required, as *medical retreat*. Alternatives could include *sanatorium stay* or *curative stay*, both of which retain the historical therapeutic context.

[47] Some have raised the question of whether this was truly a coma, especially considering the absence of medical interventions such as artificial ventilation, feeding tubes, or IV hydration that could sustain comatose patients for extended periods at that time. See Heinz Ohff, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel oder die Schönheit in Preußen* (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 1997), 243; August Friedrich Gottlieb Pätsch, 'Schinkels letzte Krankheit und Leichenbefund', *Wochenschrift für die gesamte Heilkunde* 49, (1841): 793–812.

[48] Betthausen, 'Karl Friedrich Schinkel', 1.

[49] The four sketches that I have found (inventory numbers: SM 41d.211 verso, SM 41d.211 recto, SM 41d.212 verso, SM 41d.212 recto, and SM 52 . 2) are part of the Kupferstichkabinett (Museum of Prints and Drawings) of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin).



Proposal for a chapel above Portal III of the Berlin palace. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, ca. 1829. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (public domain).

– a feature of the neoclassical style that Schinkel championed in Germany. Most likely corresponding with the open dome of the Pantheon in Rome – a city and architectural influence that shaped Schinkel’s style from the beginning of his career – the oculus was a feature he had incorporated into the design of the Altes Museum, which was being constructed at the time (1825–30) directly in front of the royal palace on the opposite side of the Lustgarten.<sup>50</sup> Like two open eyes imparting enlightenment – one of culture and the other of faith – these two oculi may have been envisioned by Schinkel as interconnected organs, projecting a

harmonious image of unity between monarch and citizen on both sides of the Lustgarten – the visage of Prussia’s rule.

By the time Schinkel drew the sketch for the palace’s open-domed chapel, he already knew the palace and the royal family very well. Not only was he involved in countless construction projects in and around the palace, but he also served as the private art teacher for the king’s eldest son, Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (1795–1861), who, from an early age, exhibited a talent for drawing and an interest in architecture. After becoming king, he often seemed more interested in sketching than in official meetings; he left more than seven thousand pages of drawings and sketches – many of which are of landscapes and architecture.<sup>51</sup> From the beginning of his relationship with Schinkel, the crown prince would develop construction ideas and prepare preliminary sketches that Schinkel would then develop further, refine, and construct, such as the crown prince’s set of apartments in the Berlin palace that Schinkel built for him between 1824 and 1826.<sup>52</sup> The relationship between them in the years

[50] The rounded shape of the Altes Museum’s dome is only visible from inside the museum, under the dome; externally, it is enclosed by a square structure that still leaves the oculus uncovered.

[51] Jörg Meiner, ‘Der zeichnende König: Friedrich Wilhelm IV. von Preußen (1795–1861)’, *Zeitenblicke* 9, no. 3 (2010): 1.

[52] Albert Geyer, *Geschichte des Schlosses zu Berlin (1443–1918)* (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2010), 67–90.

leading to the crowning of Friedrich Wilhelm (as King of Prussia Friedrich Wilhelm IV) seemed ideal: a mutually respectful relationship of mentor and disciple, an admiring prince supporting the genius architect's vision for their realm, together sketching and realizing big architectural projects.

But then, something seems to have shattered their once constructive friendship, along with Schinkel's life. In June 1840, the old king, Friedrich Wilhelm III, passed away. Already in poor health, Schinkel worsened, and once again he had to leave Berlin for a medical retreat. Upon his return, he met with his former admiring student, now King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who seemed offended by Schinkel's absence from his coronation ceremonies. It is said that during this meeting, sarcastic words were exchanged, after which Schinkel was abandoned by the king.<sup>53</sup> Shortly afterward, Schinkel collapsed, remaining bedridden and mostly unresponsive until his death.

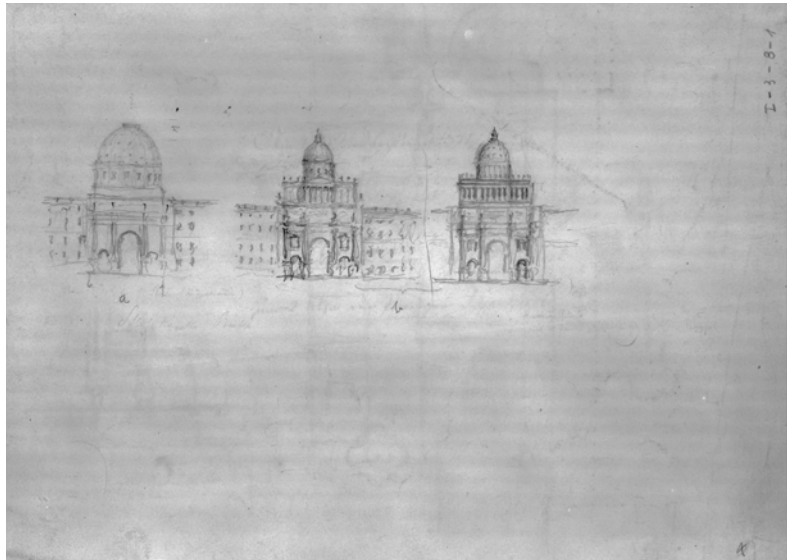
Were the sarcastic words in that meeting only connected to Schinkel's absence from the coronation? Did the king furiously turn his back on the ailing Schinkel only on account of this exchange, or did the confrontation escalate into something deeper between them, leading to Schinkel's final abandonment?

Exploring the spirit's account of that last meeting, I found a sketch made by Friedrich Wilhelm IV at around the time of their last meeting, in which he returns to Schinkel's earlier plans for the palace's domed chapel from 1829.<sup>54</sup> In this sketch, however, the king draws three versions on the same page: on the left, marked with *a*, is a similar design to Schinkel's, with the chapel's dome featuring an oculus at the top. Next to it, on the right, marked with *b*, are two additional versions of the dome. Though differing slightly in detail, both are topped with a lantern. A faint vertical line, possibly representing a cross, extends above the lanterns, adding more height to the entire structure.<sup>55</sup>

[53] While Ohff only mentions 'sarcastic words', a detailed quotation appears in a lecture on Schinkel from 1864, in which the king allegedly said, 'You were apparently frightened by the cannon fire that announced my ascension to the throne to my people' (Sie haben sich wohl vor dem Kanonendonner gefürchtet, der meinem Volke meine Thronbesteigung verkündete). See Alfred Freiherrn von Wolzogen, *Schinkel als Architekt, Maler und Kunstphilosoph: ein Vortrag, gehalten im Verein für Geschichte der bildenden Künste zu Breslau* (Berlin: Ernst & Korn, 1864), 52. See Ohff, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 241.

[54] The sketch, inventory number GK II (12) I-3-B-1 Rs 3, is part of the collection 'Zeichnungen König Friedrich Wilhelms IV. von Preußen' (drawings by king of Prussia Friedrich Wilhelm IV), at the *Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg* (Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg) in Potsdam: <http://bestandskataloge.spsg.de/FWIV/92555>. In this collection, the sketch is dated 'April/Mai 1841', while Geyer dates it 'ca. 1840'. See Geyer, *Geschichte des Schlosses zu Berlin*, 127.

[55] Because of the quick and rough nature of the sketch, it is difficult to determine whether this is a cross or simply a generic vertical line that could represent a cross, sculpture, or wind vane – elements typically mounted atop dome lanterns. Because of the quick and rough nature of the sketch, it is difficult to determine whether this is a cross or simply a generic vertical line that could represent a cross, sculpture, or wind vane – elements typically mounted atop dome lanterns.



Hand drawing by Friedrich Wilhelm IV. showing three variations for the palace chapel above Portal III, 1841. © Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg

I did not find historical accounts of an argument between Schinkel and the king over such a sketch or over the king's intention to alter Schinkel's original dome design.<sup>56</sup> I can, however, imagine how Schinkel might have felt if he had indeed seen his purposefully planned oculus sealed with this thorny eyepatch – drawn clumsily, violently, by his majesty's dull pencil. I can also imagine how some sarcastic exchange about design and architecture – Schinkel was adamant about defending the coherence of his designs – could detonate a terminal blast to both overgrown egos and make the king turn and leave Schinkel in extreme distress.<sup>57</sup>

[56] In addition to searching in published texts, I consulted with three experts: Adrian von Buttlar, professor of art history at the Technische Universität Berlin; Alfred Hagemann, head of the History of the Site department at the Stiftung Humboldt Forum; and Hans-Dieter Nägelke, head of the Architekturmuseum der Technischen Universität Berlin. We discussed the possibility of an argument between the king and Schinkel over the covering of the oculus with a lantern and cross. While Buttlar and Nägelke were open to these speculative possibilities, although not necessarily accepting the notion of Schinkel objecting to the alteration to his design, Hagemann attributed lesser importance to Schinkel's plans from 1829, claiming they were not necessarily meant to be implemented in any case. Alfred Hagemann, in discussion with the author, at the Humboldt Forum, August 24, 2020; Adrian von Buttlar, email exchange with the author, 6–9 October, 2020; Hans-Dieter Nägelke, in discussion with the author, online, October 27, 2020.

[57] Schinkel was adamant in defending the coherence of his designs, as evidenced by his response to a critique regarding the apparent lack of utility in parts of the Altes Museum during its planning stages in 1823: 'The design is a completed whole, the parts of which are so related that no essential feature may be changed without detriment to the whole'. Quoted in Gottfried Riemann, 'Classical Berlin', in Snodin, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 131.

After Schinkel's collapse, the king commissioned architect Friedrich August Stüler (1800–1865), one of Schinkel's talented students, to process his sketch with the three-dome designs. Stüler submitted detailed plans based on the king's suggestions, and in early 1841, the king chose the winning version: a high dome with a lantern and a cross at the top.<sup>58</sup> Construction of the chapel took years to complete, and in October 1854, especially timed for the king's birthday, the final element – a gleaming golden cross standing seventy metres tall – was finally unveiled.<sup>59</sup>

A hundred and sixty-six years later, after this cross had witnessed social and political transformations, imperialist expansions, world wars, and its own destruction, a replica of the same cross was unveiled in the exact same location, symbolically completing the reconstruction of the Berlin palace in its new role as the Humboldt Forum.<sup>60</sup> The mounting of the new cross in 2020 marked the end of a heated three-year public debate on whether the cross should be mounted atop the Humboldt Forum – a discussion that itself was part of a larger, on-going dispute over the rebuilding of the palace and the establishment of the Humboldt Forum within it.<sup>61</sup>



New cross and lantern before installation on the dome of the Humboldt Forum, Berlin, May 29, 2020. © Tal Adler

[58] See Geyer, *Geschichte des Schlosses zu Berlin*, 77.

[59] For a detailed explanation of why a higher dome and a cross were so important for Friedrich Wilhelm IV, see Alfred Hagemann, 'Symbolism Politics: Frederick William IV's Cupola for the Berlin Palace', part of the feature 'What's It All About? The Cross on Top of the Humboldt Forum's Cupola', *Humboldt Forum Magazine*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/magazine/article/symbolism-politics>. Interestingly, in this text, Hagemann does not mention Schinkel and his original plan for the open dome without a cross. In the interview I held with him (see footnote 55), after his article was published, Hagemann warned me against using Schinkel's original plans from 1829 to support the idea that Schinkel was against the cross. Other texts published in the same publication do refer to Schinkel's plans. See Laura Goldenbaum, 'The Crux of the Cross', in 'What's It All About?', *Humboldt Forum Magazine*, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/magazine/article/die-sache-mit-dem-kreuz>.

[60] For a thorough exploration of the processes behind the planning and erection of the Humboldt Forum, see Friedrich von Bose, *Das Humboldt Forum – Eine Ethnografie Seiner Planung* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2016). To read about the critical discourse around the Humboldt Forum, see Friedrich von Bose, 'Strategische Reflexivität. Das Humboldt Forum und die postkoloniale Kritik', *Historische Anthropologie* 25, no. 3 (2017): 409–17; Mareike Heller, ed., *No Humboldt 2.1! – Dekoloniale Einwände gegen das Humboldt Forum* (Berlin: AfricAvenir International, 2017). For a discussion on the multilayered connection between the so-called Gall skull from the Charité and the Humboldt Forum, see my text 'Who is ID8470?', in this volume.

[61] The online *Humboldt Forum Magazine* published a special edition focusing on the public debate around the cross, including a chronology of the debate, a review of media articles covering the topic, and various articles, interviews, and short statements showcasing some of the positions expressed in the contentious debate (two of them were mentioned in footnote 59). See 'What's It All About? The Cross on Top of the Humboldt Forum's Cupola', *Humboldt Forum Magazine*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/magazine/article/symbolism-politics>.

As I was preparing an artwork for display inside the Humboldt Forum, I was acutely aware of this contentious debate, and I was among the large crowds that gathered outside the reconstructed palace, on May 29, 2020, to witness the celebratory mounting of the lantern and cross atop the Humboldt Forum.<sup>62</sup> Whether this event was connected to my reception of Schinkel's spirit narrative at around the same time is unclear. The cross remains mounted, unchallenged, atop the Humboldt Forum; the public discussion around it has long subsided. Myriad visitors flock to the Humboldt Forum every day, wandering through its various exhibitions, while Schinkel's spirit repeats its tormented narration every seventeen minutes as the *Who is ID8470?* video plays on loop, during opening hours, beneath the gleaming cross.

[62] My colleague at the time, Duane Jethro, who was there with me, later wrote an elaborate analysis of the symbolic aspects of the cross of the Humboldt Forum, its implications for both religion and heritage discourses, and the debate's relation to the palace's colonial history. See Duane Jethro, 'Crossing Heritage: Material Religion at the Humboldt Forum', in *The Routledge Handbook of Material Religion*, ed. Pooyan Tamimi Arab, Jennifer Scheper Hughes, and S. Brent Rodríguez-Plate (London: Routledge, 2023), 185–204.