

Adventures In Architecture

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Published by Orion

Extract

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Neuschwanstein, on its commanding mountain peak. The castle, started in 1869 for King Ludwig II of Bavaria and never completed, is the great creation of the

'Dream King'. He derived intense pleasure from turning his fantasies into romantic architecture, in which he could escape the harsh realities of the world.



The pleasure of building castles in the sky

Neuschwanstein, Bavaria, Germany

I arrive at Schwangau, Bavaria to see a fairy-tale vision, created by a man who derived intense pleasure from turning his fantasies into architecture. This is the realm of Ludwig II – the Dream King – who built to escape the harsh realities of the world, to escape himself. Neuschwanstein, the castle which rises on a mountain above me, was started in 1869 and is the greatest architectural achievement of Ludwig's reign. In its form and decoration, the castle is a mix of Gothic fantasy, Bavarian folk myth, legends from the court of King Arthur and theatrical Roman Catholic imagery. And it was within this extraordinary work of architecture – set within a sublime landscape which had inspired his imagination since childhood – that Ludwig, at last, enjoyed perfect isolation and spiritual liberation. But this was a pleasure that could not last. It was in Neuschwanstein that Ludwig was overtaken by tragedy, and from this castle – almost mocking in its seemingly light-hearted forms – he went to his tragic and unexpected death.

Ludwig was born in 1845, the eldest son of King Maximilian II. Ludwig's father had taken the throne after Ludwig I – Ludwig's grandfather – was obliged to abdicate following a scandalous affair with a 'Spanish' dancer named Lola Montez, who turned out to be a British housewife. Ludwig's childhood was fairly miserable. Neglected by his indifferent mother and father and brutally treated at school, he escaped into an inner world of romantic fantasy and medieval myth.

At the age of 18 Ludwig became king, and soon discovered that the real world for Bavaria – and for himself – was a very difficult place indeed. In 1866 Bavaria became subservient to Prussia and in 1871 was incorporated into the Prussian-dominated German Empire. Only a few years after coming to the throne Ludwig ceased to be an independent monarch and became little more than a puppet king within the Prussian empire. But Ludwig saw himself as the champion of the romantic medieval ideal of the just, divinely appointed and absolute monarch. He fantasised about being a great and all-powerful Christian king – and he fantasised about other things. It was clear to Ludwig – and to most other people – that he was homosexual. And Ludwig, it seems, found it virtually impossible to reconcile his passion for the physical pleasure of his own sex with his passion to be a great Christian monarch. Love, it seemed to him, was a divine force, but one which, in his sad case, could only lead to sin if indulged. One escape from misery open to Ludwig was to channel all his energies and passion into building – the only thing that could offer him creative pleasure.

I climb the hill leading to the castle, turn a corner in the road and see its almost impossibly romantic towers rising high above my head. This is a castle of dreams, of the imagination – with little grip on reality – and so, I suppose, it's an almost uncannily accurate portrait of Ludwig. It stands on a low peak, with the Tyrolean Alps rising on one side and a wide, flat plain on the other. The castle seems to be perched on the roof of the world, a place of ultimate escape. The romantic design was provided by a theatrical scene painter called Julius Jank, although the plans were drawn up and executed by architects Eduard Riedel and Georg Dollman. But the real creative force behind Neuschwanstein was Ludwig himself, and the primary inspiration was the composer Richard Wagner.

Ludwig first encountered the artistically momentous force of Wagner in 1858 when his governess told him about the forthcoming production of Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*, about



Above Inuit children in Ittoqqortoormitt – they are most cheerful and have a dare-devil attitude to life. Most of the boys aspire to be hunters. **Previous pages** The dome of the igloo is complete. Just the entrance porch remains to construct.

has to match and then slowly cuts it to shape. He cuts and re-cuts, sometimes discarding a block and starting again. He has to create angled faces that fit together as closely as possible to maximise the areas that touch, that can be frozen together. When he's happy with his efforts, Andreas and I lift the block into place and look to see how closely the often crazily angled surfaces fit together. If the fit's not bad, Andreas does a little tailoring in situ, roughs-up the surfaces to create some moisture and we gently push the block into position. Then we hold it – and pray. We look at each other. Andreas smiles and whispers, 'One minute'. When

the time is up we slowly remove our hands to see if the precariously perched block has – seemingly in defiance of the laws of gravity – frozen into place. Mostly it has. After about eleven hours we have two thirds of the igloo complete.

We are back at the building site early in the morning. I contemplate yesterday's work. This is the moment of truth. I simply don't see how we can make blocks stay on the upper bevels we have cut on last night's blocks. The bevels are too acute, the next blocks will have to be almost horizontal. Andreas appears unconcerned. He cuts the first block of the day and puts it in place. He ignores the bevel that promised a near horizontal block and places the new block in a near vertical position. It works, but this igloo will have a distinctly strange shape. As we work I wonder. Our dome may be odd of shape but I admire it greatly. Indeed I admire domes. The dome is regarded as one of the high points of architecture and engineering. It is beautiful, the universal symbol of the vault of heaven, and although tricky to build is immensely strong if firmly constructed. We toil on for the rest of the second day of construction. Thank goodness we're not building it in earnest for shelter. This is a hostile world and we'd be dead by now.

And so the third day begins. It's well into the afternoon before we are ready to fit the last block in place. And once again theory is questioned by practice. The last block is meant to be the keystone, the block that stops the dome from collapsing because, as it is pressed down by the force of gravity, it locks all the lower stones in place. But Andreas's keystone is very slight, just a cap-stone, and is really locking nothing in place. In fact, he cuts it in half so that he can put it in place, half at a time, from below the igloo. Surely, I say, the keystone should be a large block, with bevelled sides, rammed in place from above. Andreas is shocked and warns me of the foolishness of the idea of climbing on the outer surface of the incomplete igloo. It could collapse he says. I ask when the structure will be strong? Soon, soon. I suppose when the blocks, after a few days melting under the sun in the day and freezing in the cold of the night, have more fully turned to ice. The finishing touch is the entrance tunnel – really just a porch roofed by two enormous blocks of snow. Since this is by no means the air-lock of my theoretical igloo, I ask how the cold winds will be kept out and warm air kept in? By a snow block door, explains Andreas. Not quite as scientific as a tunnel, but I suppose it will work.

We stand outside and contemplate our work. The igloo is much more of a cone in shape than I'd expected, but it looks heroically strong and timeless, like the first building in the world. We crawl inside and build a high bench made from snow blocks, and place a musk ox hide on it. It's most satisfying. The sun shining through the thick blocks of snow and ice creates a wonderful soft, luminous light. And so the task is complete. I have helped make a building that is new but feels ancient. Andreas's determination to make the igloo not just

functional but also a thing of beauty – an ornament – shows how a merely utilitarian building can turn into a work of architecture, a work of expressive art.

To celebrate the completion of the igloo we go fishing. We drop a large hook and line through the nearby hole in the ice and attempt to catch passing fish. As we rhythmically sink and haul up the line Andreas tells me about his life and the Arctic. His direct experience confirms what I already know. The climate is changing – warming – at an alarming speed. Hunters have to curtail their expeditions now because the pack ice forms later and melts earlier than in the past times, and game is disappearing because of changing migration routes and habitats. He is angry that his people are powerless, that their world and traditional way of life are being destroyed by the irresponsible actions of remote nations such as the United States and China. The increasing difficulty of hunting in the region seems to be illustrated by our little experiment. We stand around our little hole for over an hour, and no luck. I ask Andreas what we should do. He flashes me a smile, reaches in his haversack and pulls out a frozen fish. Supper. It's the wrong time of year to catch fish like this he now informs me. This fishing expedition was, it seems, just to humour me.

We cook the fish in front of the igloo and as the sun goes down a lamp inside starts to make the odd-looking little structure glow. It's stunning. The igloo is an admirably functional object, but what now strikes me most is its perfect beauty. It's beautiful because of the pure logic of its design and construction; beautiful because it seems so simple, yet is complex in its functions and, of course, beautiful because of its form. The igloo's dome is not only the supreme example of a structure in which form is the rational expression of function and materials but it is also powerfully, and movingly symbolic. The igloo's dome is celestial, an image of the heavens, the Inuits' symbol of the life-giving sun in their icy world. Yes, the igloo is more than just a shelter, more than architecture – it's a world in itself.

A hunter visits the new igloo. Aboard his sledge are the skin and meat of seals and a freshly killed polar bear.



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Shibam, with its high-rise, mud-brick towers, is known as the Manhattan of the desert. It seems to anticipate 20th-century skyscrapers.

Below The central square in Shibam. The city itself is around 2,500 years old, but most of its towering, sculptural houses are less than 300 years old.



Mirage of a mud-built Manhattan in the desert

Shibam, Yemen

My first glimpse of Shibam is extraordinary. I'm flying at about 5,000 feet approaching the airport on a flight from Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. The terrain below is tough – desert with puffs of pale green, bleached-looking trees and bush, all framed by rearing, flat-topped and rugged cliffs. Then, suddenly, the vintage Boeing airliner in which I'm flying banks, comes in low over a high peak and, almost in the long shadow of the cliff, sits the ancient city of Shibam. It is a magical vision. The city is constrained by its walls, sits hard on the edge of a dry riverbed with, stretching beyond it, an irregular patchwork of large fields. Some are green and well irrigated; others are dusty brown, now only dim memories of fertility and plenty.

Yemen is a fascinating land with a culture and traditions that single it out from its neighbours. As a nation it's a relatively new creation, but it possesses some of the oldest memories in the world. It is one of the possible locations – many would say the preferred location – for the realm of the Queen of Sheba who around 3,000 years ago, displayed her wealth and wit during her legendary journey to King Solomon in Jerusalem. This may just be myth but what is certain is that Yemen contains some of the oldest cities in the world. While many of the people in the region were nomadic, those who lived in what is now Yemen were sedentary. The land was rich and well enough irrigated for them to grow crops and keep animals without having to roam to search for pastures, and being on the sea and astride ancient trade routes – notable for the traffic of incense – the people congregated from early times in cities. Shibam is not one of the oldest – current thinking is that it dates from around 2,500 years ago – but it is certainly now one of the most remarkable. Its buildings are made of sun-dried mud bricks and rise so high that from afar the city looks like a strange mirage rising above the dusty plain. Naturally, and not without cause, Shibam is now popularly called the Manhattan of the desert.

I've come here to see how the city was built, and how its buildings are maintained and lived in. I want to meet the people of Shibam – the families who occupy these unlikely towers, the brick-makers, the builders, the merchants that keep the city a living place.

Before going to Shibam I visit a brick-maker. The scene is incredible, timeless. Bricks have been made like this in the Middle East for at least 10,000 years. The work is carried out around a grove of palms near the dry riverbed. When the river rises for a brief spell each year rich alluvial soil is deposited on its banks, and that collected around the bases of the palms – a soil that lies in the shade and cannot easily be used for farming – is collected for the brick making. I see this rich soil – a renewable resource thanks to the river – being scooped from the ground, mixed with straw and water and then laid flat upon the ground where gangs of workers rapidly mould it into large, square, tile-like bricks. The bricks are left to dry in the sun for three days and are then ready for use. As I observe the industry of the workers one thing is clear – speed is of the essence. They must be paid for each brick made. I ask how many his gang of ten or so men can make a day. Three thousand, I'm told. This is back-breaking work, and to toil virtually non-stop from dawn to dusk must be exhausting.

Now I want to see exactly how this very basic material is used to construct buildings that tower as much as eight or nine storeys high. I hope I'll find the answer in the city that appears before me. Strange from the air, Shibam is even more surprising from ground level.

A Christian paradise in a land of snow and ice

Church of the Transfiguration, Kizhi, Russia

I arrive at the new train station on the edge of St Petersburg. It's late at night and I'm catching a sleeper to Petrozovodsk, about 500 kilometres to the north in Karelia. At every door stands a guard, dressed in a long, tight-waisted, brass-buttoned coat and wearing a tall fur hat. Very Tsarist. These guards are unusual – they are all female, mostly young, glamorous and sporting high-heeled boots. Clearly rail transport in Russia is looking up. I scramble aboard and, precisely on schedule, the train moves off and the strange waxworks on the platform and in the corridors momentarily come to life. They shout and gesticulate, then like spectres all disappear in the dark, mist and falling snow.

Train journeys in Russia are strangely solemn affairs, almost religious acts of departure. Tonight this sacred atmosphere is most appropriate because we are on a pilgrimage of sorts. We're on our way to a place regarded by Russians as the spiritual heart of their nation, as the tangible expression of time-honoured Russian values and spirit; it is the repository of the national soul, a very personal evocation of paradise. We're going to an island that lies in Lake Onega – a vast expanse of water, and the second largest lake in Europe – to see a collection of ancient timber-built churches. I'm told they are buildings of exceptional beauty, masterpieces of traditional engineering. The island is called Kizhi and at this time of year, the heart of winter, it's locked in a world of snow and ice.

Petrozovodsk was founded in the early 18th century by Peter the Great as an industrial city, but it now has the look of a typical Stalinist-era Socialist Realist new town, its long straight streets with hulking blocks bedecked in most incongruous manner with delicate neo-classical frills. We drive through these unprepossessing boulevards and arrive by the side of the lake. It's an amazing sight: frozen solid, white and vast. We climb aboard a small hovercraft and glide away. The journey will take about two hours, we're told, depending on the weather. We scoot along on our cushion of air and we are soon lost in a world of white. We can see no shore, no sky – just icy white. It's disconcerting, I can tell you.

Finally a tree-lined shore comes into view, then groups of small houses almost buried in snowdrifts, and suddenly a mighty form like a huge fir tree appears. It's the Church of the Transfiguration of the Saviour, and the strange shape of the church is compelling. Its silhouette, almost black against the leaden sky and white snow, is formed by a cascade of cross-topped, timber-clad onion domes. I'm drawn towards its towering form – around 37 metres high, it's a sign of God in a landscape which may be idyllic in summer but is bleak and unforgiving in winter. I crunch through the snow and approach the church from the frozen lake. I'm overwhelmed by the power and beauty of the place. Here, all man's creations appear in harmony with this elemental landscape. The man-made structures I see are wrought from the trees that grow on the island, and all are designed and built to flow with the forces of nature. I observe that roofs are pitched to shed snow in the most efficient manner and windows are small to keep heat in and cold out. This is true, traditional, organic architecture.

Opposite The magnificent Church of the Transfiguration on Kizhi Island. It was constructed in 1714 and is full of sacred symbolism.

Below In winter the only way to travel to the remote island of Kizhi, in Lake Onega, is by hovercraft, for the water is frozen to the depth of about a metre.



Opposite, clockwise from top left Detail in Ludwig's throne room showing Christ in judgement, seated on a rainbow. Below him are images of six perfected Christian kings.

The walls of Ludwig's bedchamber are decorated with paintings illustrating the tragic tale of Tristan and Isolde, a warning from history about the trials of forbidden love.

The ceiling of the Throne Room is embellished with a sun and starry heavens – an image of creation over which, in Ludwig's imagination, the divinely appointed absolute monarch has the right to reign.

Facing the throne was this image of Ludwig, in the person of St George and the pure Swan Knight, killing the dragon of lust.

The interior of Ludwig's private apartment is richly decorated in a style that is a 19th-century evocation of the Middle Ages combined with modern comforts, particularly efficient stoves, left, and plumbing.

One side of the neo-Byzantine Throne Room.

Ludwig's bed is like a High Gothic shrine – here he slept below a portrait of the Virgin Mary, a reminder to the king to moderate his thoughts and conduct.

the heroic and pure 'swan-knight'. Ludwig was intrigued. The walls of the royal lodge at Schwangau – meaning swan's town – were decorated with frescoes showing Lohengrin, and the tale had become a key part of Ludwig's escapist fantasy. He acquired a copy of Wagner's libretto and was hooked. Prince and composer seemed soulmates. Ludwig's passion for Wagner found an outlet in 1863 when, reading the preface to the published libretto of *The Ring Cycle*, he noted Wagner's observations about the miserable state of the German theatre. In order for *The Ring* to be produced, moaned Wagner, an artistically enlightened and generous German prince would have to be found. To Ludwig this was a challenge from the hero he worshipped but had never met, and he resolved that he would be the prince Wagner needed. His chance came the following year when his father died and Ludwig became king. Within days of ascending to the throne, Ludwig invited Wagner to Munich, and a friendship that had existed only in Ludwig's imagination became real. The infatuation seems to have been mutual. Ludwig believed he had found a man who gave substance to his passion for the past and who, through his operas, was reviving German culture, indeed forging a modern Germanic identity inspired by ancient chivalric virtues. Wagner, flattered by Ludwig's attention and no doubt impressed by his genuine feeling for medieval myths, wrote, 'Ludwig knows and understands everything about me – understands me like my own soul.' Wagner must also have been deeply thankful that Ludwig's support took a most tangible form. The king paid off Wagner's debts, installed him in a villa in Munich and funded the completion of *The Ring*. Indeed, such was the intensity of Ludwig's support for Wagner that the composer was, in late 1865, obliged to quit Munich to allay growing suspicions. But there was no breach. Wagner knew what it was to be persecuted for your art and passions, and the king and composer remained staunch friends.

It was perhaps this severing with Wagner, and to escape the drab atmosphere of the repressive Munich court, that made Ludwig decide to build Neuschwanstein on the site of an authentic but ruined medieval castle. This castle was to be not only a place of escape but a monument to Wagner and the mythic knights and princes of his operas. As a starting point for its design, Ludwig took Wartburg Castle in Thuringia, where Wagner had set key scenes in his opera *Tannhauser*. Neuschwanstein was to be Ludwig's own castle of the Holy Grail where, as in the tale of Parsifal, redemption and forgiveness could be found.

I approach via the main gate and enter an outer court with the castle rising above me. The forms and Gothic details are as if from a fairy tale. Ludwig created the most extraordinary setting to live out the theatre of his life. This is more than just architecture – it's like entering the soul and the mind of a man in torment. I pass through a door and find myself at the foot of a richly decorated, stone-built spiral staircase. This leads up to the various worlds created within the castle. In fact, despite its seemingly rambling appearance, the castle is logically planned. At the top are the staterooms, neatly separated from Ludwig's private apartment. Below this level were to be guest rooms and below these were more utilitarian spaces. I ascend to the most symbolically important of all the spaces in the castle – the throne room. The most strikingly obvious thing about this room is that its design is based on that of a domed and columned Byzantine church, stressing Ludwig's belief in the divine nature of kingship and of anointed kings. On the floor is an image of the earth, rich in animal and vegetable life, locked in a wheel representing the cycle of earthly existence; all very Buddhist-like. Above this, on the ceiling, hovers an image of the sun and starry heavens, and, set in an apse where the altar should be, was to be the throne. It was to have been made in ivory, symbolising purity, but was never installed. Perhaps it was never meant to be for, in Ludwig's fantastical imagination, this room was not for him but for an ideal king – perhaps for a king such as he might become. Inspired by legends of Parsifal and his son Lohengrin, this room was for 'the unknown king of the Holy Grail', for a ruler who, purified

