

The Renovation of Germany's Deutsches Museum: An Empathetic Battle¹

Sebastian Wieschowski



INTRODUCTION

Ten centimeters. Barely four inches. To the construction team at Munich's Deutsches Museum, moving a doorway or adding another layer of insulation may seem like an insignificant adjustment. For curator Frank Dittmann, however, those few inches can determine whether a historic diorama still fits into its intended space, whether a display case suddenly blocks an emergency exit, or whether months of exhibition planning have to begin again. "For the construction team, these are minor details," Dittmann says. "For us, they can be major issues."

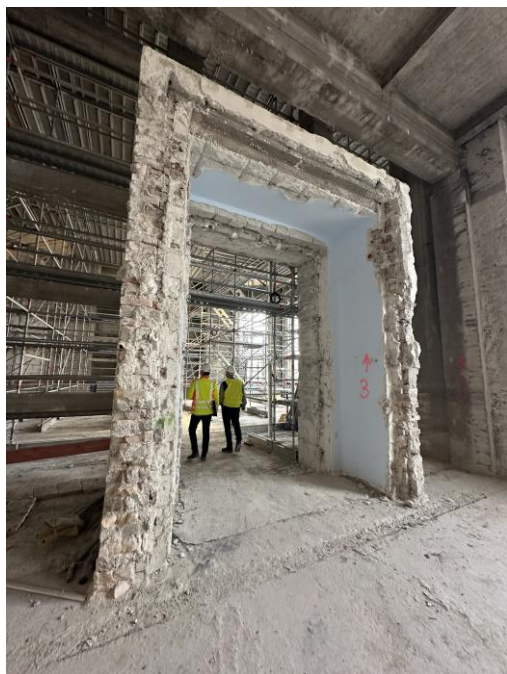
¹ How to cite this paper: Wieschowski, S. (2026). The Renovation of Germany's Deutsches Museum: An Empathetic Battle, report; *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue VIII, August.

That seemingly trivial example captures the essence of one of Europe's most ambitious cultural infrastructure projects. The comprehensive renovation of the Deutsches Museum ("German Museum") is not simply about concrete, fire protection, engineering, or budgets. It is about bringing together two professional worlds that operate according to entirely different rules. On one side are curators, who think in terms of stories, scientific accuracy, and visitor experience. On the other are project managers, architects, engineers, and construction specialists, whose daily work revolves around schedules, procurement, risk management, and technical feasibility.

Between those worlds lies what Dittmann calls an "empathetic battle"—a constant process of negotiation in which conflicting priorities must be reconciled without losing sight of the project's shared objective.

The phrase may sound paradoxical, yet it perfectly describes the management challenge behind a project whose complexity extends far beyond the construction site itself.

Since 2015, Germany's largest museum dedicated to science and technology has been undergoing a complete modernization while remaining open to visitors. The project combines the renovation of a historic landmark with the redesign of nearly every major exhibition, the replacement of outdated building systems, and the integration of modern educational concepts—all without shutting the institution down.



Like many major infrastructure projects, the renovation has encountered escalating costs, shifting schedules, unexpected structural problems, supply-chain disruptions, political oversight, and even the insolvency of the project's lead architectural firm. What began with an estimated budget of approximately €445 million has grown into a project backed by roughly €750 million in federal and Bavarian state funding.

The scale is extraordinary. About 72,000 square meters of buildings are being modernized, while approximately 45,000 square meters of exhibition space are being completely reimagined. Simply clearing one construction phase required an entire year. Rather than closing the museum altogether, management opted for a phased renovation

strategy. The first fully renovated section reopened in 2022 with around twenty entirely new permanent exhibitions covering subjects ranging from robotics and health sciences to aviation. According to the museum, visitor numbers returned to record levels in 2025, while the second major construction phase is expected to continue through 2028.

Yet the physical transformation tells only part of the story. Spend time listening to curator Frank Dittmann and project executive Dieter Lang, and another picture quickly emerges. The real challenge is not technological. It is organizational. More precisely, it is the collision of two fundamentally different systems of thought.

Curators approach every decision by asking what visitors should learn, how scientific knowledge should be presented, and which historical artifacts best support the narrative. Project managers, by contrast, must evaluate budgets, procurement procedures, contractual obligations, governance structures, construction sequencing, and risk exposure.

Neither perspective is inherently superior. Both are indispensable. The difficulty begins where they intersect.

Every technical modification can reshape an exhibition. Every curatorial request can alter construction schedules. Every design decision may create unforeseen engineering consequences. The project's greatest risks rarely stem from spectacular crises. More often, they arise from countless small decisions whose cumulative impact ripples across dozens of disciplines simultaneously.

This is precisely why the renovation offers lessons that extend well beyond museums. It illustrates how project management increasingly serves as a translator between professional cultures rather than simply a controller of schedules. In environments where experts speak different technical languages, pursue different priorities, and define success in different ways, managing interfaces becomes every bit as important as managing time and cost.

Conflict is therefore not treated as a sign of failure. Instead, it is accepted as a normal—and often productive—part of the process.

One recurring fault line lies between scientific content and exhibition design. Curators naturally see themselves as guardians of knowledge and accuracy. Designers, meanwhile, focus on spatial experience, visual storytelling, and visitor engagement. Both disciplines aim to educate the public, yet they frequently disagree about how that goal should be achieved.

During the museum's second construction phase, external exhibition design firms assumed a much broader role. Beyond developing gallery concepts, they became responsible for coordinating large portions of the project's technical interfaces. That shift improved coordination but also introduced new complexity, requiring design teams to balance architectural, engineering, curatorial, and operational requirements simultaneously. In many respects, project management became an exercise in translation between professions that shared a common objective but spoke entirely different professional languages.

Another source of friction comes from the unpredictable nature of working inside an active museum.

A relocated doorway, an additional equipment room, or a thicker interior wall may appear insignificant on an architectural drawing. Yet those changes can prevent a historic artifact from fitting into its designated location, make a heavy exhibit structurally impossible to install, or require an object to be lifted through a window because conventional access routes no longer work.



From a project management perspective, Dieter Lang describes these situations as the inevitable consequence of extraordinary interface complexity. Electricians, conservators, exhibit fabricators, audiovisual specialists, fire protection engineers, construction managers, and curators often work simultaneously within the same space—each following different priorities and schedules. A seemingly isolated technical modification can ripple through multiple workstreams, affecting interpretation, conservation, visitor circulation, and construction sequencing at the same time.

Time creates another unavoidable tension.

Creative work rarely follows the logic of a construction schedule. Exhibition concepts evolve. Artifacts arrive damaged. Scientific discoveries continue. Technology changes. Particularly in rapidly developing fields such as robotics or digital technologies, curators argue that exhibitions must remain adaptable until shortly before opening day.

Construction projects, however, operate according to a different reality. Delayed texts, incomplete object lists, or unfinished concepts can trigger cascading delays, contractual claims, and significant additional costs.

The museum has responded by deliberately building flexibility into certain exhibition areas. Display cases and gallery spaces are intentionally designed as placeholders, allowing late adjustments before opening. While this preserves curatorial freedom, it also creates additional coordination work throughout the project lifecycle.

Perhaps the most fundamental conflict concerns perfection versus pragmatism.

Every curator naturally strives for the ideal exhibition. Every project manager knows that, eventually, the doors must open.



Both Dittmann and Lang describe situations in which compromise became unavoidable. Occasionally, an exhibit had to be replaced at the last minute. Sometimes a display case remained temporarily empty. As Dittmann puts it, "The visitor doesn't experience the phantom pain that we do." His observation captures an important truth: large cultural projects can never be planned to perfection. Unexpected challenges will always emerge, making adaptability just as valuable as careful preparation.

The renovation's broader lesson extends far beyond museum management.

Its greatest achievement is not the production of schedules, budgets, or Gantt charts. Rather, it lies in creating an organizational framework that enables scientists, curators, architects, engineers, conservators, designers, government agencies, and project managers to work productively despite fundamentally different perspectives. The project relies on a sophisticated matrix organization, extensive cross-functional communication,

lessons-learned processes, structured risk management, and deliberately strengthened interface coordination. At the same time, its leaders openly acknowledge that no risk register can anticipate every disruption—from hidden structural defects to pandemics, geopolitical crises, or the bankruptcy of key contractors. Consequently, change management is treated not as an exception but as a permanent feature of the project itself.

Frank Dittmann's phrase, "an empathetic battle," ultimately offers an elegant definition of modern project management.

Everyone involved fights for something different. Curators defend scientific integrity. Designers advocate for compelling visitor experiences. Engineers insist on technical feasibility. Project managers protect structure, coordination, budgets, and delivery.

The objective is not to eliminate conflict. It is to create an environment in which disagreement becomes constructive rather than destructive.

That may be the most valuable lesson emerging from the renovation of the Deutsches Museum. In today's most complex projects, success depends less on controlling complexity than on making it manageable. Project management succeeds not by forcing consensus, but by providing the communication, governance, and mutual understanding that allow diverse stakeholders to solve problems together.

In the end, the museum demonstrates that the most important structures built during a megaproject are not always made of concrete and steel. Sometimes, they are built from trust, dialogue, and an empathetic battle worth fighting.

About the Author



Sebastian Wieschowski

Nuremberg, Germany



Sebastian Wieschowski is an editor at the German Project Management Association (GPM), the national member association of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in Germany. He is responsible for developing GPM's media relations and serves on the editorial board of PM Aktuell, a quarterly magazine distributed to more than 6,500 GPM members as well as external stakeholders.

Born in 1985 in northern Germany, Wieschowski developed an early fascination with journalism. His formal education began with active contributions to school and local newspapers. He later completed journalistic training at the Cologne Journalism School for Politics and Economics, earned a Master Level Diploma from the School of Journalism at Eichstaett University, and undertook professional training at a regional newspaper publisher. He also holds a postgraduate M.Sc. degree in Public Health from Hannover Medical School.

In addition to his freelance journalism for national and international outlets, including major German media such as DIE ZEIT, Wieschowski has held senior communications roles since 2012. He first worked as press officer for a private university specializing in social work, then for a psychiatric hospital, and later for an industrial company. In September 2024, he joined GPM's Marketing and Public Relations department, where he focuses on strengthening the visibility and public relevance of project management through editorial formats such as storytelling.

Alongside his professional career, Sebastian Wieschowski is also active as a freelance author in his lifelong passion, numismatics. He writes for both German- and English-language specialist publications, and his work has been recognized three times by the Numismatic Literary Guild, a writers' association based in the USA.

Sebastian is a reporter at heart and enjoys discovering inspiring stories and meet people from around the world, a goal that is particularly easy to pursue in the field of project management. He can be contacted at s.wieschowski@gpm-ipma.de.

Author's note: This article was originally prepared in the German language, after which AI tools were use to translate the story and assist with structure, grammar and punctuation. All details are in the author's own words, based on a tour and interviews with museum staff.