

Sacred Rubble and Humble Shelters: German Church Building after the Second World War*

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On 21 May 1947, the Cologne architect and urban planner Rudolf Schwarz wrote a letter to his long-time friend and world-renowned architect Mies van der Rohe, who by then was living in Chicago. Schwarz was one of Germany's best-known designers of modern church buildings since the 1920s and had written several influential books on ecclesiastical architecture, including *Vom Bau der Kirche* (On the Construction of the Church), published in 1938. He had been director of planning in occupied Lorraine from 1941 to 1944 and was now head planner for the reconstruction of Cologne, a post he held until 1950. On this occasion Schwarz was describing in epic tones the situation in Germany two years after the war. His primary concern had little to do with architectural design, but was instead the fate of the Christian West:

We are standing on the Rhine, or more exactly in Cologne and Frankfurt, on the last line of defense of the West, beyond which there is no more retreat, and the West ends just a hundred kilometers from us [...] We must muster up whatever can still be gathered together, in order that once more a last glimmer of the old declining light shines over the world—our world, which has become so small—so that this ancient Volk once more sees the purpose of its existence and in thinking about this grasps what stands before it.¹

For Schwarz the urgent mission of the West and its 'ancient Volk' was to defend the 'old declining light' of its threatened territory and Christian heritage from Communist encroachment. Postwar Germany was at once the geopolitical frontier and symbolic centre of Cold War confrontation. Domestically, western German cities and towns had become sites of contest between modernists and preservationists over what to do with the country's badly damaged architectural inheritance.² Schwarz was somewhere in between: whilst he had been one of the leading exponents of Catholic—or 'black'—ecclesiastical modernism during the Weimar Republic, he showed little restraint in railing against Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus as an incorrigible band of 'wild and agitated terrorists' who peddled an architectural idiom 'that was not German, but rather the jargon of the Communist International'. In 1953 his attack on the Bauhaus ignited a full-blown public controversy about the legacy of Weimar Germany's *Neues Bauen* (New Building) more generally.³ But in this 1947 letter, Schwarz's concerns were grander, as he connected the protection of Germany's vulnerable Christian heritage with the defence of the West itself.

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¹ Quoted in J. M. Diefendorf, *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities after World War II* (New York, 1993), p. 61.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 67–107.

³ U. Conrads (ed.), *Die Bauhaus-Debatte: Dokumente einer verdrängten Kontroverse* (Basel, 2014); for analysis, P. Betts, 'The Bauhaus as Cold War Legend: West German Modernism Revisited', *German Politics and Society*, 14, 12 (1996), pp. 75–100.

This article centres on the cultural politics behind the feverish West German construction of new houses of worship, as well as the restoration of damaged cathedrals and churches, in the first two decades after the ceasefire. At issue is how and why ecclesiastical architecture took on such heightened cultural significance at the time, attracting a star-studded group of international architects. After the war, church building resumed its leading historical role from before the Industrial Revolution as the avant-garde of innovative international architecture, though its comeback has been largely overlooked by architectural and cultural historians alike. After 1945, church building was less traditional and backward-looking than conventionally depicted and was directly engaged with industrial modernity from the very outset. Historically the churches—both Catholic and Protestant—have been depicted as ‘victors among the ruins’ that drew on their long-standing moral authority to shape West German civic culture in conservative ways during the Adenauer Era.⁴ Yet they were also keen to modernize their mission for a changing world and were doing so well before the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s and the wider cultural upheavals over the course of that decade.⁵ Architecture became a high-profile means of presenting this new outlook. While these changes reflected broader international trends, the German situation took on special significance in light of the Nazi legacy of defeat, destruction and dislocation, as well as the pressing need to fabricate new churches for survivors and the millions of expellees arriving in western Germany at the end of the war. Discussions of ecclesiastical architecture therefore touched on broader issues of German history, identity and Christian renewal, as the very form of these houses of worship reflected a unique blend of avant-garde architecture and Christian theology in the aftermath of war.

I. The Romance of Ruins and the Avant-Garde

The Second World War brought destruction to Germany on an unprecedented scale. While the pressing need for reconstruction shaped all discussions about provisioning survivors with food, shelter, medicine and schooling, the ruined landscape took on great symbolic expression for many Germans. This sentiment was pronounced among church leaders and ordinary Christians alike, who often interpreted the cityscapes of catastrophe as divine punishment for Germany’s supposed turning away from God.⁶ Amid the sifting through the rubble and imagining what a new Germany might be and look like, a good deal of the churches’ attention was directed towards restoring damaged church buildings to provide a moral compass after the war. The task was daunting: in Aachen, only forty-three of the 498 churches survived; in the Rhineland, over 400 churches had been totally destroyed; Greater Berlin had lost 90 per cent of its Protestant houses of worship in the war.⁷ One 1946 report from Oranienburg

⁴ F. Spotts, *The Churches and Politics in Germany* (Middletown, CT, 1973).

⁵ B. Ziemann, *Encounters with Modernity: The Catholic Church in West Germany, 1945–1975* (Oxford and New York, 2014), and G. Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican’s Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

⁶ D. Süß, *Tod aus der Luft: Kriegsgesellschaft und Luftkrieg in Deutschland und England* (Munich, 2011), pp. 311–18, and N. Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939–1945* (London, 2016), esp. part 5.

⁷ Das Evangelische Werk für Diakonie und Entwicklung, Berlin (henceforth EWDE), C.5.3 ZB 1384, Bericht über die 31 Notkirchen aus der Spende der Amerikanischen Sektion des Lutherischen Weltbundes, 1 Mar. 1949.

laconically remarked how devastated church lands ‘had suffered because of two heavy air bombing attacks and military occupation’.⁸ Rebuilding churches was considered a vital dimension of moral and material rebirth, and the achievements were impressive, as we shall see. The high-profile reconstruction of Aachen and Cologne cathedrals are famous instances of the Federal Republic’s *Abendland* rehabilitation policy, serving as a bulwark against both the Nazi past and a potentially Communist future.⁹ Jewish ruins and restitution, by contrast, played no role in the symbolic remaking of postwar Europe in general or West Germany in particular. It was only during the 1980s that synagogue restoration emerged as a political matter of national atonement across the Cold War frontier, most notably in divided Germany and Poland.¹⁰

Linking cathedral construction and national identity was hardly unique to the twentieth century. Cathedrals had emerged as key symbols of German national identity in the early nineteenth century, as witnessed in Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s proposed *Befreiungsdom* (Cathedral of Liberation) of 1814, which was to serve as a new emblem of Prussian liberation from Napoleonic domination and French cultural power.¹¹ The completion of Cologne Cathedral in 1880 played an even stronger national symbolic role. While building had started in the thirteenth century, by 1560 its construction was abandoned for lack of funds; work recommenced only in 1840 and the cathedral was finally finished in 1880 according to its original medieval plans. Cologne remains the largest Gothic cathedral in northern Europe and was the world’s tallest building when it was opened by Wilhelm I, a full 600 years after the builders broke ground. The cathedral suffered heavy aerial bombardment during the Second World War but remained standing amid Cologne’s otherwise flattened cityscape.¹²

The restoration of German cathedrals assumed a completely different tone after 1945. The focus was no longer on the staging of a proud national identity, but rather on commemorating Christian sacrifice, loss and defiance, as well as on affirming historical continuity with Germany’s long Christian past. The studied display of the badly damaged Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche in West Berlin was conceived in this spirit, as was the reparation of the city’s Protestant Nikolaikirche. The crowning celebration of the 700th anniversary of Cologne Cathedral in 1948 was hailed as an expression of Christian perseverance and power.¹³ The Western Allies, especially the Americans, offered substantial financial support for these restoration projects, welcoming the revival of the churches’ Christian religious life as a vital sign of denazification and cultural recovery. In the first year of occupation, no fewer than two-thirds of

⁸ Evangelisches Landeskirchliches Archiv Berlin, B 35/12563, Beihilfe zur Einrichtung der Orangerie gottesdienstlichen Zwecken to Ev. Konsistorium der Mark Brandenburg, Berlin-Dahlem, 5 Sept. 1946.

⁹ O. Müller, *Der Dom zu Aachen* (Königstein im Taunus, 1951?).

¹⁰ M. Meng, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

¹¹ J. E. Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 120–3.

¹² A. Swenson, ‘Cologne Cathedral as an International Monument’, in J. Rüger and N. Wachsmann (eds), *Rewriting German History: New Perspectives on Modern Germany* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp. 29–51. See also F. G. Gentry, ‘Medievalism as an Instrument of Political Renewal in Nineteenth-Century Germany’, in J. Parker and C. Wagner (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 289–302, and K. Schein and R. Wentzler, ‘Hoffnung und Gewissheit’: *Aachens Dom und Domschatz in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit. Dokumente und Berichte* (Aachen, 2006).

¹³ Süß, *Tod aus der Luft*, pp. 518–23.

all periodicals licensed in the US occupation zone were religious in nature.¹⁴ For their part, the churches were quick to rewrite recent German history from a Christian perspective. In the new Federal Republic, the churches, together with Konrad Adenauer's Christian Democratic Party, repeatedly equated Nazism with atheism and materialism, thereby underscoring Christian victimhood at the hands of the Nazis.¹⁵

Claiming that the Third Reich was anti-Christian or that Christianity was fundamentally anti-Nazi is dubious on many grounds, not least because the Nazis were not shy in denouncing the wartime destruction of Germany's 'holy' cultural monuments and churches as dramatic evidence of Allied brutality, brazen sacrilege and 'material nihilism'. In 1944 the Evangelischer Bund (Protestant League) issued a pamphlet entitled *Zerstörte Kirchen—lebende Gemeinde: Tatsachen und Zeugnisse zum Luftkrieg* (Destroyed Churches, Living Congregations: Facts and Testimony about the Air War) as a means of reassuring citizens during the Allied air offensive that 'the church has taken measures to assure that devotional life would continue, even when the old houses of worship were being destroyed. Their physical destruction could never extinguish their inner existence.'¹⁶ It went on to denounce these Allied attacks as a 'satanic destruction of life and all that is holy to it'.¹⁷ The publication was produced by Joseph Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda and featured dozens of images of ruined churches, lamenting the destruction of Germany's Christian heritage and praising the defiance of the German 'national community' (*Volksgemeinschaft*) in the face of Allied 'murderous arsonists' intent on prosecuting a 'degenerate air war'. It went so far as to compare Allied atrocities with the cultural respect supposedly practised by the Wehrmacht in occupied France—the military was described as having spared French cathedrals in 1940—suggesting that the Third Reich was the guardian of European culture and Christian patrimony.¹⁸ Other publications documented damaged German churches, hospitals and cultural monuments in their propaganda against the Allied bombers.¹⁹ Moreover, the Nazis built or rebuilt more than 270 churches in Bavaria, with twenty-eight built in Munich alone between 1932 and 1940.²⁰ But such wartime linkages between the churches and Nazi cultural policy were all but suppressed after 1945, as the religious ruin and church cemetery supplanted the public square as the key commemorative sites for postwar national and local memory.²¹

Using damaged religious buildings to symbolize the besieged nation was hardly limited to Germany. Herbert Mason's celebrated 1940 photograph of St Paul's in London was enlisted for similar purposes, serving as a symbol of Christian rectitude

¹⁴ M. M. Knappen, 'Allied Military Government Policy and the Religious Situation in Germany', *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, 16, 2 (1947), pp. 92–103, here p. 96.

¹⁵ B. Pearson, 'The Pluralization of Protestant Politics: Public Responsibility, Rearmament and Division at the 1950s Kirchentage', *Central European History*, 43, 2 (2010), pp. 270–300.

¹⁶ F. von der Heydt, *Zerstörte Kirchen—lebende Gemeinde: Tatsachen und Zeugnisse zum Luftkrieg* (1944), quoted from G. Langmaack, *Kirchenbau Heute: Grundlagen zum Wiederaufbau und Neuschaffen* (Hamburg, 1949), p. 63.

¹⁷ Von der Heydt, *Zerstörte Kirchen—lebende Gemeinde*, quoted from Süß, *Tod aus der Luft*, p. 275.

¹⁸ T. Allbeson, *Photography and the Cultural History of the Postwar European City* (Abingdon, 2021), pp. 211–12.

¹⁹ G. Kirwin, 'Allied Bombing and Nazi Domestic Propaganda', *European History Quarterly*, 15, 3 (1985), pp. 341–61.

²⁰ W. Pehnt, *Rudolf Schwarz (1897–1961): Architekt einer anderen Moderne* (Stuttgart, 1997), p. 91.

²¹ J. Arnold, *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory: The Legacy of Strategic Bombing in Germany* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 115, 185.

and steadfastness.²² Bombed churches in Britain were repurposed as ‘ruins for remembrance’ immediately after the war, and *The Bombed Buildings of Britain*, a 1947 compilation of press photographs and pictures commissioned for the National Buildings Record, foregrounded churches in its documentation of British society under attack.²³ After the war, there was widespread interest in building new churches in a modern style, and numerous publications heralded pioneering design across Europe as inspiration and guidance.²⁴ The high-profile makeover of destroyed Coventry Cathedral by Basil Spence enjoyed great public attention across Britain, with the cathedral characterized as the ‘first victim’ of the air war and Coventry as a ‘martyred city’. Its opening in 1962 attracted 3 million visitors in the first year, and the accompanying souvenir photobooks *Cathedral Reborn* and *Out of Ashes: A Progress in Pictures through Coventry Cathedral* showcased the ‘remnants of Gothic tracery’ alongside modernist church design. Similar before-and-after ruinbooks of cities and churches were common in France, the Netherlands and Belgium as metaphors of a besieged and resilient Christian Europe.²⁵

With time, German church ruins were recast in a Cold War context. The image of the cathedral towering above the ruins of various cities was interpreted by conservatives and clergymen as the church’s symbolic triumph over the spectre of secular modernity.²⁶ The reconstruction of Catholic and Protestant churches across the country substantiated the metaphor of German Christianity rising like a phoenix from the ashes. At the celebration commemorating the 700th anniversary of the beginning of Cologne Cathedral’s construction, the speeches focused on how the cathedral served as a ‘manifestation of Western-Christian thought’ and a means of reintegrating the Rhineland into the West.²⁷ The East German detonation of churches by the ruling Socialist Unity Party to expunge the material traces of an unwanted Christian heritage generated a good deal of commentary in West Germany as evidence of barbaric Communist iconoclasm.²⁸ Such views ignored the GDR’s ambivalent attitude toward its Christian—and Prussian—material inheritance, not least because both continued to serve as sources of popular identification and regional identity despite the Communist takeover.²⁹ Heinrich Dittmar’s *Der Kampf der Kathedralen: Politik, Macht und Kirchenbau im Ringen zwischen Ost und West* (The Battle of the Cathedrals: Politics, Power and Church

²² T. Allbeson, ‘Visualizing Wartime Destruction and Postwar Reconstruction: Herbert Mason’s Photograph of St. Paul’s Re-Evaluated’, *Journal of Modern History*, 87, 3 (2015), pp. 532–78.

²³ H. Casson, *Bombed Churches as War Memorials* (Cheam, 1945), and J. M. Richards (ed.), *The Bombed Buildings of Britain: Recording the Architectural Casualties Suffered during the Whole Period of Air Bombardment, 1940–1945* (London, 1947). A list of damaged churches was compiled by the Ministry of Information for propaganda purposes, as noted in B. Foss, *War Paint: Art, War, State and Identity in Britain, 1939–1945* (New Haven, 2007), p. 47.

²⁴ E. Maufe, *Modern Church Architecture, with 50 Illustrations of Modern Foreign Churches* (London, 1948).

²⁵ Allbeson, *Photography*, pp. 196–209, and L. Campbell, *Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 98–103.

²⁶ B. Städter, *Verwandelte Blicke: eine Visual History von Kirche und Religion in der Bundesrepublik 1945–1980* (Frankfurt/Main, 2011), esp. pp. 38–51.

²⁷ T. Brodie, *German Catholicism at War, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 12–13.

²⁸ R. Bessel, ‘Hatred after War: Emotion and the Postwar History of East Germany’, *History & Memory*, 17, 1 (2005), pp. 195–216, and H. von Preuschen, *Der Griff nach den Kirchen: ideologischer und denkmalpflegerischer Umgang mit kriegszerstörten Kirchenbauten in der DDR* (Berlin, 2011).

²⁹ A. Demshuk, *Demolition on Karl Marx Square: Cultural Barbarism and the People’s State in 1968* (Oxford, 2017), and M. Colla, ‘Memory, Heritage and the Demolition of the Potsdam Garrisonkirche, 1968’, *German History*, 38, 2 (2020), pp. 290–310.

Building in the Struggle between East and West), published in 1964, sought to contextualize Cold War East–West antagonism over the fate of western European sacred architecture, arguing that these latter-day conflicts replayed old struggles between western and eastern Christianity from the Council of Nicaea in 325 through to the thirteenth century.³⁰ Other books chronicled the peril of Christianity and Christian material heritage east of the Iron Curtain, both in the GDR and elsewhere in the Communist world.³¹ The French medievalist Georges Duby called the era from the late tenth century to the early fifteenth century the ‘Age of Cathedrals’ for the widespread construction of grand edifices of worship across Europe, yet the aftermath of the war was a new Age of Cathedrals in its own right, in terms of the effort, resources and symbolic power connected to their reconstruction.³²

While the West German romance with ruins may be familiar, comparatively little attention has been paid to the explosion of new church construction after 1945. West Germany faced a daunting challenge in church construction of a magnitude, as one 1951 Protestant church commission report intoned, ‘never before encountered in its [the church’s] four-hundred-year history’.³³ Much of this new architecture sought to blend modernism with traditional church design to give fresh form to a new post-fascist Christian community. A surprising number of leading international modernists rarely associated with sacred architecture designed churches after 1945, including Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, Alvar Aalto, Marcel Breuer and Le Corbusier. Some of the most pioneering churches were designed for communities of religious orders that were less beholden to the traditional tastes of congregations and thus could experiment with form.³⁴ Perhaps the most famous example is Le Corbusier’s Chapelle Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France, completed in 1954. It is located at the top of a hill in eastern France that was supposedly the site of a series of miracles brought about by the Virgin Mary; the place had been a destination for pilgrims since the medieval period, but its chapel was destroyed in the Second World War. The plan employed a number of innovative stylistic moves of light and atmosphere to underline the mystery of God, what Le Corbusier called ‘ineffable space’ (*l’espace indicible*).³⁵ His bold church design generated a whole cottage industry of commentary on the synergies of modernism and spirituality, often in connection with the revival of France’s Sacred Art movement after 1945.³⁶ Le Corbusier’s chapel also enjoyed broad coverage

³⁰ H. Dittmar, *Der Kampf der Kathedralen: Politik, Macht und Kirchenbau im Ringen zwischen Ost und West* (Düsseldorf, 1964).

³¹ F. and H. Möbius, *Sakrale Baukunst: mittelalterliche Kirchen in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Berlin, 1963), and for background, J. Luxmoore and J. Babiuch, *The Vatican and the Red Flag: The Struggle for the Soul of Eastern Europe* (London, 1999).

³² G. Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980–1420* (Chicago, 1981).

³³ Evangelisches Zentralarchiv in Berlin (henceforth EZB), EZA 2/ 5789, Grundsätze für die Gestaltung des gottesdienstlichen Raumes der evangelischen Kirchen, Geschäftsstelle des Evangelischen Kirchbautages, Berlin-Charlottenburg, 16 May 1951.

³⁴ R. Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (Oxford, 2004), p. 251.

³⁵ J. H. Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 182–5, and C. Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the Continual Revolution in Architecture* (New York, 2000), pp. 262–75.

³⁶ H. R. Read, ‘Canonizing Modernism: An Avant-Garde Legacy in France’s Sacred Art Movement, 1937–1958’ (PhD Dissertation, University of Washington in St. Louis, 2018).

in West Germany at the time, as commentators praised the new form of Christian sacred buildings.³⁷

In western Germany the discussion about the appropriate form of new churches took place even earlier. At first this timing may seem straightforward, given that the churches never tired of claiming that they were the one social institution that emerged comparatively intact after the war and thus were best placed to spearhead the moral reconstruction of West German society. However, such postwar positioning obscures the ways in which the churches were severely damaged during the war, not only in terms of their sites of worship but also because of their attenuated congregations. The wartime Catholic Church (especially in the Rhineland) suffered from a severe shortage of priests, mass evacuations and the decimation of hundreds of churches and ecclesiastical properties. The bombing raids undermined religious faith and caused massive fraying of Catholic networks and milieus during the war. Clergy across the country reported dramatic drop-offs in wartime church attendance and noted with concern that parishioners were turning to folk customs, astrology and superstition (medallions, talismans, saint relics and Marian apparitions) to cope with wartime crises, mass death and imminent defeat. Over one-fifth of the German clergy reportedly had been killed or disabled, and in 1945 the country's fractured parishes faced the influx of millions of expellees from the Sudetenland and other territories east of the Oder-Neisse.³⁸ Such migration upended the geographical patterns of confession settlement in the German lands since 1555 and 1648, especially in the countryside, and those arriving found themselves in confessionally mixed areas.³⁹ Many of these new arrivals were in need of material help and spiritual guidance, yet often found themselves in towns without any churches or clergy of their own confession. In 1945, for example, some 750,000 Lutherans from the East settled in Bavaria, and Catholic refugees in traditionally Lutheran areas required new churches as well.⁴⁰ As a consequence, church communities—much like their buildings—had to be reconstructed virtually from scratch.⁴¹

In these circumstances West Germany became one of the most fertile sites of ecclesiastical modernism in the world. By 1955 some 8,000 new churches had been erected by both confessions across the Federal Republic, to the point that more churches were built in this single decade than during all church construction since the Reformation.⁴² The state of Bavaria spent more than 30 million Deutschmarks on eighteen major projects in Munich between 1945 and 1950.⁴³ The construction of thousands of new churches across Europe reflected the churches' rediscovered mission in the world, to

³⁷ M. Besset and L. Sauter, 'Corbusier baut eine Kirche für das Volk', *Magnum* 7 (1955); G. Sontheimer, 'Le Corbusiers erster Kirchenbau', *Dokumente*, 4 (1955); O. Mauer, 'Ronchamp', *Wort und Wahrheit*, 11 (1955); and A. Henze, *Ronchamp: Le Corbusiers erster Kirchenbau* (Recklinghausen, 1956). For non-German commentary, *L'art sacré*, 1/2 (1955), a Special Issue devoted to Ronchamp.

³⁸ Brodie, *German Catholicism at War*, pp. 143, 145, 151, 189, 202, 221, as well as Süß, *Tod aus der Luft*, pp. 281–95, and M. Black, *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder Doctors and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany* (New York, 2020), esp. pp. 3–42.

³⁹ Spotts, *Churches and Politics*, pp. 47–50.

⁴⁰ H. Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture in Germany* (Munich and Zurich, 1974), p. 75.

⁴¹ A. Kossert, *Kalte Heimat: die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945* (Munich, 2009), pp. 229–68.

⁴² Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 75.

⁴³ Diefendorf, *In the Wake of War*, p. 74.

say nothing of its renewed role as patron of modern art and architecture. The boom in new churches was generously supported by international organizations such as the Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen in Deutschland, the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation.⁴⁴ The Rhineland was the epicentre of this new church architecture activity, in part thanks to its high church taxes and the venerable tradition of pioneering cathedral and church construction in the region. Cologne, in particular, had long played host to key international architecture exhibitions, such as the celebrated Werkbund Exhibition in 1914.⁴⁵ Here and elsewhere, ecclesiastical building emerged as an experimental field of radical rupture and historical continuity, of German cultural memory and post-fascist Christian identity.

II. Tents in the Desert

One of the most influential West German church architects was Otto Bartning, whose famed ‘emergency churches’ (*Notkirchen*) of the late 1940s set the tone for postwar church design. Bartning designed forty-eight emergency churches in 1946, originally conceived for all four occupied zones. Forty-one of them were built across bombed-out Germany, from Rostock to Pforzheim, Stralsund to Frankfurt am Main.

Bartning was a Protestant who had been at the forefront of the ‘Los von Rom’ (Free from Rome) ecclesiastical movement before the First World War and had constructed seventeen churches before 1914. Like many Protestant reformers, Bartning felt that Protestant churches were too beholden to Catholic architectural styling, in part because Luther had offered so little explicit guidance on what exactly constituted Protestant church form.⁴⁶ In 1919 Bartning published his influential Expressionist tract *Vom neuen Kirchenbau* (Towards a New Church Architecture), complete with thirty drawings. In it Bartning not only expressed his disappointment with the church for supporting the war at the cost of its higher mission of peace, love and solidarity, but also made clear that Protestant church building needed to make use of modern materials to bring forth a new spiritual sensibility after the Great War.⁴⁷ As Bartning put it,

It is wrong to believe that by using modern materials and building techniques we secularize church construction. There is a spiritual quality in any material. It is our task to find this spirit and put it in the service of religion.⁴⁸

At issue was how to restore a sense of community to the damaged Christian congregation, which began by deploying architecture to convey a strong sense of emotion.⁴⁹ For Bartning, this approach was best achieved by eschewing traditional historical styles in favour of a more simplified yet theatrical space of worship. His ideas took form in his unbuilt *Sternkirche* (Star Church) design of 1922, whose interior space

⁴⁴ Langmaack, *Kirchenbau Heute*, pp. 65–9.

⁴⁵ W. Weyres, *Neue Kirchen im Erzbistum Koeln 1945–1956* (Düsseldorf, 1956).

⁴⁶ E. Strasser, ‘Predigt und Sakrament als raumfordernde und raumbestimmende Elemente des evangelischen Kirchenbaus’, and G. Kunze, ‘Unser Ort’, in Kunze, *Evangelischer Kirchenbau*, pp. 30–9 and 45–6, respectively.

⁴⁷ Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 33.

⁴⁸ Bartning, *Vom neuen Kirchenbau* (1919), quoted in E. Heathcote and I. Spens, *Church Builders* (Chichester, 1997), p. 33.

⁴⁹ T. Grossmann and P. Nielsen (eds), *Architecture, Democracy and Emotions: The Politics of Feelings since 1945* (London, 2018).

looked more like an Expressionist cinema set from the early Weimar Republic than a traditional place of worship, with strong echoes of Fritz Lang's *Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Fig. 1). Striking here is the stark absence of traditional Christian iconography and decorative elements in favour of a radically unadorned and intimate space, one in which the chancel and altar were brought to the centre of the service. His *Stahlkirche* (Steel Church) for the Pressa exhibition held in Cologne in 1928, one of the first steel-constructed churches that exposed rather than hid the steel framework, was another influential church design conceived in this new modern style; it blended Gothic references (especially in relation to Notre Dame in Paris) with modern materials and engineering (Figs 2 and 3).⁵⁰

For his post-1945 emergency churches, Bartning's primary objective was to create new prefabricated churches without losing the quality of a sacred building.⁵¹ It was the first time that the techniques of standardization and industrial mass production were to be applied to the construction of an entire church, based on several prototypes. Structural components for these modular houses of worship (including the supports,

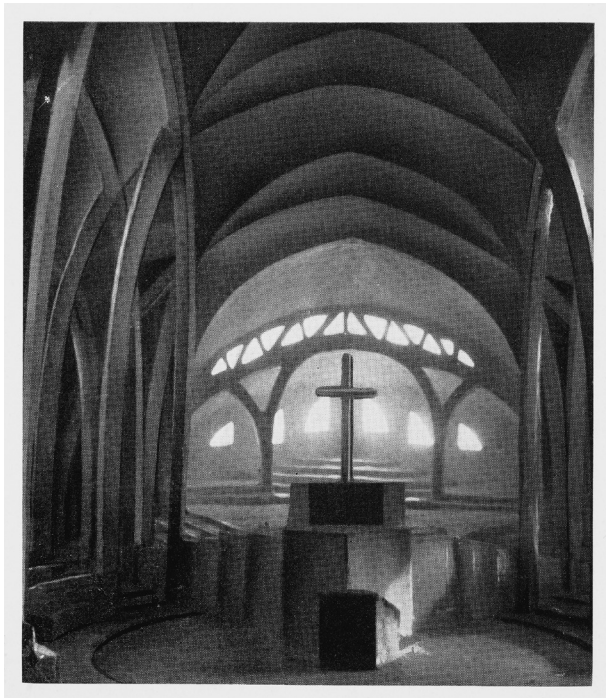


Figure 1: Otto Bartning's *Sternkirche* design of 1922.

Source: Hugo Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture in Germany* (Munich and Zurich, 1974), p. 58. All reasonable efforts were made to seek permission for the reproduction of this and subsequent images from this source.

⁵⁰ R. Maguire and K. Murray, *Modern Churches of the World* (London, 1965), p. 18, and Heathcote and Spens, *Church Builders*, pp. 22–8.

⁵¹ C. Schneider, *Das Notkirchenprogramm von Otto Bartning* (Marburg, 1997), p. 15.

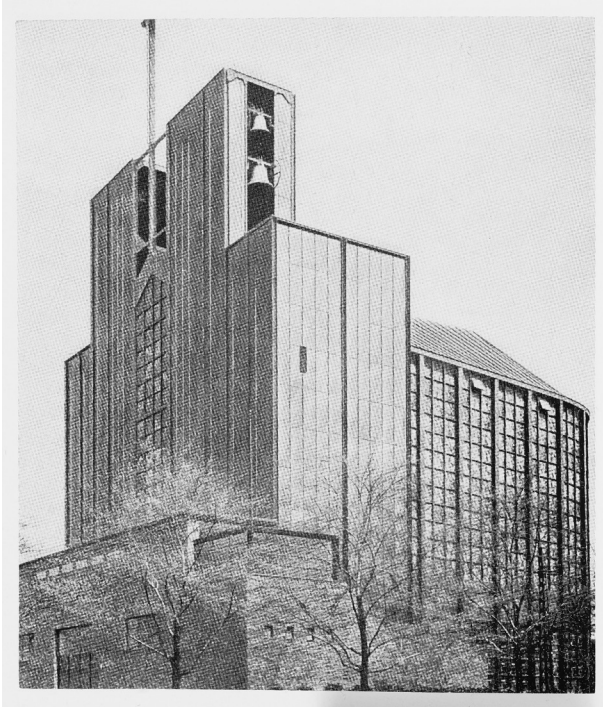


Figure 2: Exterior of Otto Bartning's Steel Church, designed for the Pressa exhibition, held in Cologne in 1928. Source: Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 58.

walls, pews and windows) were manufactured in Switzerland with prefabricated components to keep costs down—they typically cost \$10,000 each and were built in eight weeks. The foundation work was often undertaken with the help of local congregants, and the wood, bricks and stone were often sourced from ubiquitous local war rubble, including bombed-out barracks.⁵² These emergency churches were financed by the Hilfswerk der evangelischen Kirchen der Schweiz, the Lutheran World Federation (Lutherischer Weltbund) and the National Lutheran Council in the United States, along with private gifts from Protestant donors abroad. Bartning developed four prototypes, each of which seated 446 congregants and was executed in a simplified barrel-vault conception, as shown in [Figure 4](#). They were designed to be used for either Protestant or Catholic religious services. Differences in design mostly pivoted on the placement and styling of the altar spaces, ranging from polygonal to built-in altars. Protestants generally preferred the model featuring a small rectangular altar-room adjoining the nave, since it better suited their liturgical needs.⁵³

⁵² H. Hampe, 'Die erste der deutschen Notkirchen im Montagebau', *Neue Bauwelt*, 15 (1950), p. 61, and K. Keppel, *Memento 1945? Kirchenbau aus Kriegsrüinen und Trümmersteinen* (Munich and Berlin, 2008).

⁵³ Financial and construction details recounted in EWDE, Berlin, C.5.3 ZB 1383, letter from Dr Herbert Krimm, Hilfswerk der Ev. Kirchen in Deutschland, Stuttgart, to Dr Paul C. Empie, Assistant Director of the National Lutheran Council, New York, 3 Sept. 1947.

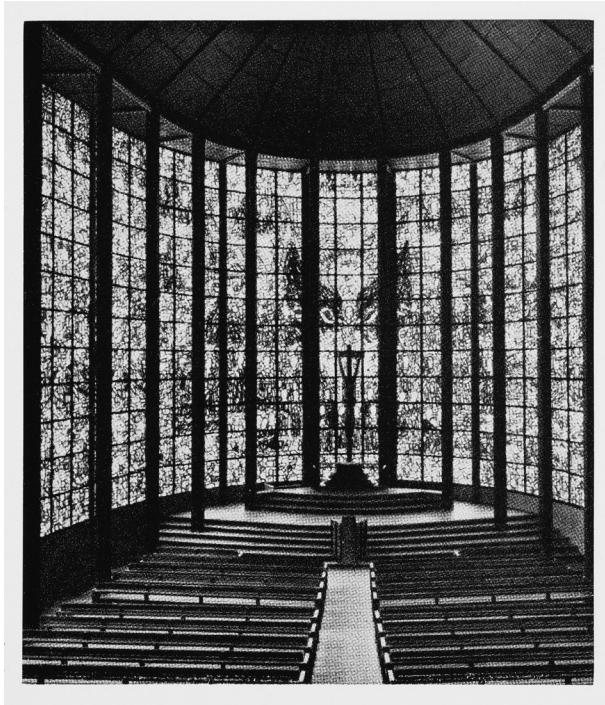


Figure 3: Interior of Otto Bartning's Steel Church, designed for the Pressa exhibition, held in Cologne in 1928. Source: Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 58.

According to Bartning, such rudimentary design captured the simplicity of the Protestant ideal. As he put it,

Thus stone has to be without rendering, wood has to be natural timber and steel has to be unclad steel. Just look at the black Lutheran robe, how fitting it is for the *Notkirche*, and consider the wealth and abundance that must have originally inspired its voluntary simplicity!

Bartning insisted that his designs also gave local communities the chance to build these simple churches with their own hands, which many did. In his words, the emergency church

develops its own inner logic [*ihr eigenes stilles Gesetz*], which, often without us knowing it, forces us to build in an economical and principled way, one that is neither overbearing nor too spare, neither too old-fashioned nor cute, but rather simple and honest.⁵⁴

Some commentators even went so far as to christen Bartning the new Schinkel, in that his 'high ethical convictions and architectural creativeness' produced a radically new 'contemporary type of Protestant church building'.⁵⁵

One can discern a direct resemblance between these post-1945 designs and Bartning's 1922 *Sternkirche* model. His emergency churches registered the desire to break down the

⁵⁴ A. Siemon (ed.), *Vom Raum der Kirche: zum 75. Geburtstag Otto Bartning* (Bramsche, 1958), p. 101.

⁵⁵ Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 34.

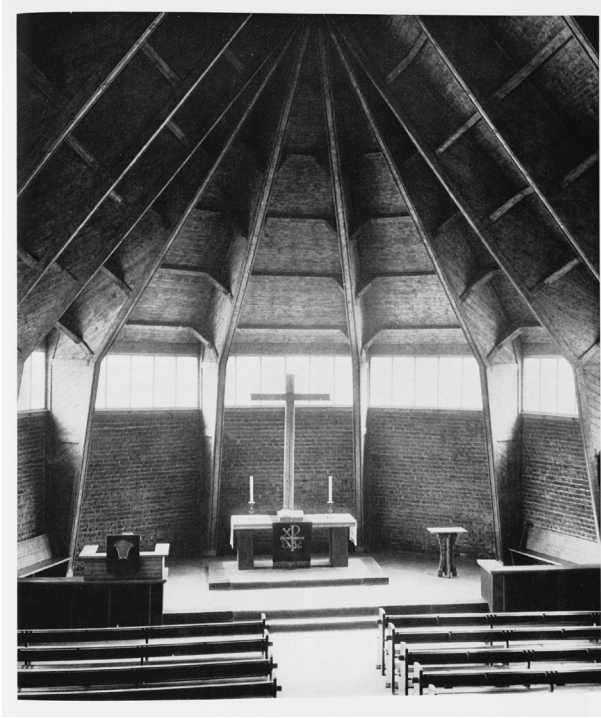


Figure 4: The Luther-Notkirche in Cologne-Mülheim, designed by Otto Bartning and constructed in 1948/49. Source: Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 99.

spatial division between priest/minister and laity in what Bartning termed a ‘spiritual tent for the postwar *Not-Gemeinde* [emergency congregation]’. According to Bartning, ‘And we stand with heart and soul—not despite being in a spiritual desert, but because of it, in which the church serves as shelter and consolation [*Halt und Trost*] of the soul.’ In a nod to French existentialism, this was the moment to embrace the inherent ‘richness of privation’ (*Reichtum der Not*).⁵⁶ These ‘tents in the desert’ were understood as befitting a chastened Christian sensibility after Nazism and the war, one that would appeal to the influx of expellees from the East. The use of wood and simple aesthetic forms had clear stylistic parallels with churches found across Eastern Europe. Bartning chose this ‘regional building style as an exemplar’ and as a ‘refuge of identification in a foreign land’.⁵⁷ Between 1948 and 1951 he developed an all-wood design specifically geared towards Protestant refugees from the East that was flexible in form for a variety of communal events; in these prototypes for refugees, the church and pastor’s house were fully integrated, as was typical in diasporic communities in Eastern Europe; in the early 1950s he developed a new serially produced prototype for versatile worship

⁵⁶ O. Bartning, *Die 48 Notkirchen* (Heidelberg, 1949), unpaginated.

⁵⁷ Schneider, *Das Notkirchenprogramm*, p. 153. See also Bartning, ‘Raumerlebnis im Kirchenbau’, *Baukunst und Werkform*, 4 (1952), pp. 9–14, and W. Hartmann, ‘Die Notkirchen von Otto Bartning’, *Kunst und Kirche*, 2 (1987), pp. 199–205.

services known as ‘diaspora chapels’.⁵⁸ Bartning was particularly proud of the fact that parishioners were often given the chance to choose which of his four models to erect for their church.⁵⁹ Local images of church construction and consecration ceremonies—as noted in Figures 5 and 6—captured this sense of religious resolve, communal involvement and congregational achievement.

The opening of a newly built church was an occasion to recast the history of the church and augur a new future. Often the end of the Nazi period and the aftermath of the war were blurred together into a kind of ‘undifferentiated—and uncritical—period of suffering, what one pastor vaguely called the ‘the destruction and poverty of the past years’.⁶⁰ Others, however, welcomed these new modest churches as an appropriate



Figure 5: Erection of the roof timbers in the ‘emergency church’ constructed in Berlin-Rummelsburg in 1948. Source and Permission: Das Evangelische Werk für Diakonie und Entwicklung, Berlin, 8.1.3 Notkirchen 2046, 1948–1949, ADW/ZBB 2046.

⁵⁸ J. Mangold, *Otto Bartning: Architekt der Moderne* (Kommern, 2020), pp. 98–103, as well as *Von der Notkirche zur Gemeinde* (Waiblingen, 1996) and *Diasporakapelle: ein serieller Nachkriegsbau* (Kommern, 2020).

⁵⁹ EWDE, Berlin, 8.1.3 2044, Otto Bartning, Memorandum zur Notkirchen-Aktion, 1 Feb. 1949, addressed to Hilfswerk der Ev. Kirchen in Deutschland.

⁶⁰ EWDE, Berlin, C.5.3 ZB 1386, Weiherede von Präses D. Heinrich Held, Einweihungsfeier der Johannes-Notkirche in Aachen, 10 Apr. 1949, pp. 17, 19.



Figure 6: Provost Högsbro, representative of the German Section of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, during the opening ceremony of the Johannis-Notkirche in Aachen in 1949.

Source and Permission: Das Evangelische Werk für Diakonie und Entwicklung, Berlin, C.5.3 Kirchenbauten Otto Bartnings, ZB 1386.

artifact of contrition, soul-searching and humility after military defeat and moral collapse. At the opening of the Johannes-Notkirche in Aachen on 10 April 1949, Pastor Rolf Artur Girardet solemnly remarked that the new church

seems to me an emblem of divine friendship, in which we can no longer build ostentatious cathedrals, but rather should erect these kinds of emergency churches with their distinct functionality and sobriety [*strengen Sachlichkeit und Nüchternheit*], infused by the experience of extreme deprivation and simplicity received in their unadorned walls. Is this not a sign of the fact that the church has finally come closer to the people of the twentieth century, to those people who live in bombed-out bunkers and who have lost their homes and are unable to believe in any affirmative future? It is with this *Notkirche* that God's special promise lies.⁶¹

The idea that these rudimentary and unadorned churches best befitted a damaged and spiritually impoverished humanity just emerging from the bunker was echoed by others

⁶¹ EWDE, Berlin, C.5.3 ZB 1386, Auszug aus dem Schlußwort von Pfarrer Girardet, Aachen, Einweihungsfeier der Johannes-Notkirche in Aachen, 10 Apr. 1949, pp. 17, 19.

at the time. At the opening of the last of Bartning's forty-eight emergency churches, a journalist covering the event in Worms added that St Luke's Church

is no cathedral, but rather a house of God, in which it is plain that the time of shiny facades for the church is over. We should not feel ashamed about our poverty. We do not want the church to be what we are not. We want the church simply to stay true to its word and provide no place for dishonesty.⁶²

For congregants and observers alike, the primary task was to be honest, humble and contrite, and these emergency churches were to express these virtues. The opulent Age of Cathedrals had come to a close, as these commentators wrote, and German Christians were the better for it.

But for all of the cross-denominational understanding in ecclesiastical design, Bartning's models did cause confessional conflict, as churches competed to have an 'emergency church' built in their parishes. In the late 1940s Protestant leaders wrote to regional authorities begging them for the building of emergency churches in their areas, since they could not manage to erect one on their own given their lack of resources, technology and manpower. The arrival of refugees was altering the confessional map of the country. In letters of complaint to regional authorities, several Protestant pastors claimed that local Catholic churches were blocking church construction to undermine Protestant communities.⁶³ One alleged that Catholic construction workers were refusing to build Protestant churches. The message was plain: new Protestant churches must be built quickly, to attract refugees looking for a new church.⁶⁴ At times the race to put up new churches took on alarmist political overtones, as petitioners drew attention to the potential political fallout from not accommodating these refugees' spiritual needs. One Protestant authority apprehensively wrote that refugee parties were springing up all over Bavaria and might be 'a dangerous source of political radicalism'. He continued, 'The establishment of community centres, as we plan them, will be a moral support for refugees in this respect as well as in others, to which they can hold and which holds them.'⁶⁵

But these were generally isolated cases of conflict, as ecclesiastical modernism typically found adherents across Protestant and Catholic architecture circles, first during the Weimar Republic and then after 1945.⁶⁶ Here it is worth recalling that between the wars, a number of Catholic ecclesiastical architects—above all, Rudolf Schwarz and Dominikus Böhm—had designed new Catholic churches in a spirit

⁶² 'Worms baut eine Lukaskirche', *Rheinhesisches Kirchenblatt*, 25 June 1950.

⁶³ See EWDE, Berlin, C.5.3 ZB 1414, letter from Evang-Luth. Stadtpfarramt, Schwandorf to Hilfswerk der Ev. Kirchen in Deutschland, Zentralbüro, 16 Feb. 1949.

⁶⁴ One 1948 source claimed, 'Die einsässigen katholischen Handwerker werden, wie anzunehmen ist, der Errichtung eines solchen Baues mehr verbissenen Widerstand entgegenstellen als sie ihn fördern. Zur Überwindung dieser örtlichen Widerstände ist nichts anderes als gewissermassen die Überrumpelung durch das rasche, in wenigen Tagen vollendete Ersten eines Hauses möglich, das den evangelischen Flüchtlingen zum Mittelpunkt ihres kirchlichen Lebens werden soll.' EWDE, Berlin, C.5.3 ZB 1417, typed letter from Herbert Krimm, head of the Hilfswerk der Ev. Kirchen in Deutschland, Stuttgart, to Director of Wiederaufbau-Ausschusses des Weltrats der Kirchen, Geneva, 11 Dec. 1948.

⁶⁵ EWDE, Berlin, C.5.3 ZB 1417, Dr Herbert Krimm to H. C. Koch of Flüchtlingsdiaspora-Zentren in Geneva, 25 Oct. 1948.

⁶⁶ Such Catholic 'black modernism' was often set against the functionalist dictates of the Bauhaus and *Neue Sachlichkeit*. See H. Brülls, *Neue Dome: Wiederaufnahme romanischer Bauformen und antimoderne Kulturkritik im Kirchenbau der Weimarer Republik und der NS-Zeit* (Berlin, 1994).

similar to Bartning's, in what is sometimes called 'gothic expressionism'.⁶⁷ Schwarz had studied theology and liturgy and was a close friend of Mies van der Rohe, as indicated by the letter to van der Rohe with which this article opened. Schwarz designed or renovated thirty-nine churches over his career and was extolled by Mies as the 'great German church builder'.⁶⁸ Catholic ecclesiastical modernism during the Weimar Republic is perhaps best illustrated by Böhm's 1926 Church of St John the Baptist in Neu-Ulm (Fig. 7) and Schwarz's 1930 Corpus Christi Church in Aachen (Fig. 8). Böhm's 1954 St Maria Church in Cologne-Marienburg (Fig. 9) and Schwarz's 1956 St Anna Church in Düren (Fig. 10) elaborated on these themes, connecting the post-1945 period with its interwar predecessor. In their designs, the stress fell on creating an Expressionist ambiance of mystical community, one that deployed theatrical light as a replacement for overt quotation of historical style. For Schwarz and Böhm, such simplified styling celebrated the fundamental idea that 'God is holy, God is light'; Böhm, writing in 1930, averred that light 'is the most noble, the chastest building material, presented to us by God'.⁶⁹ For these Catholic

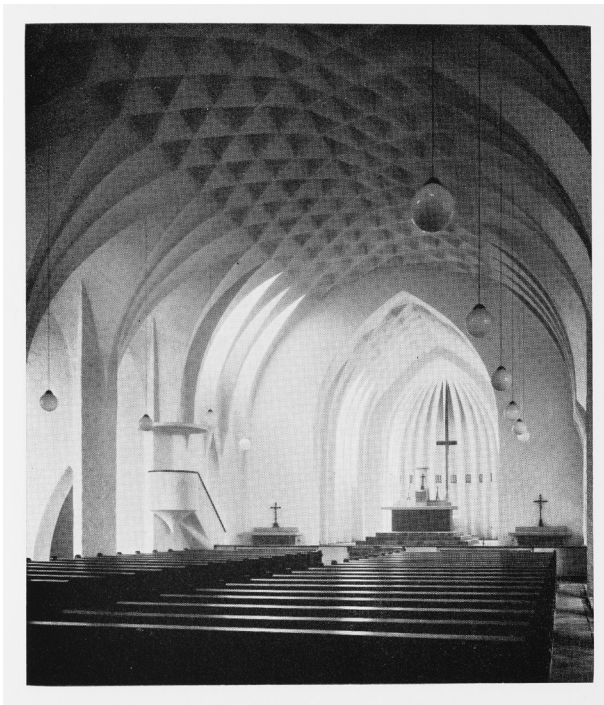


Figure 7: Church of St John the Baptist in Neu-Ulm, designed by Dominikus Böhm and constructed in 1926. Source: Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 55.

⁶⁷ The term 'gothic expressionism' comes from Heathcote and Spens, *Church Builders*, p. 26.

⁶⁸ Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone*, pp. 230–62, and W. Pehnt, 'Another Modern', in A. Caruso and H. Thomas (eds), *Rudolf Schwarz and the Monumental Order of Things* (Zurich, 2016), pp. 158–81.

⁶⁹ Quoted and discussed in K. James-Chakraborty, *German Architecture for a Mass Audience* (London, 2000), pp. 61, 68.



Figure 8: Corpus Christi Church in Aachen, designed by Rudolf Schwarz and constructed 1928–1930. Source: in Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 72.

modernists, the glass-enclosed space was the most appropriate form for the modern sacred sensibility.⁷⁰

Promoting the virtues of light and transparent architecture has a long history in Germany. Its origins can be traced to Paul Schneebart's writings on crystal architecture in the late nineteenth century and to Bruno Taut's Glashauss exhibition pavilion in Cologne in 1914. Ever since, it has been a strong presence in twentieth-century German architecture, ranging from Walter Gropius's 1926 Dessau Bauhaus Building to Mies van der Rohe's 1929 Barcelona Pavilion, from Hans Schwippert's 1949 Bonn Bundeshaus to the West German Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World Fair, and found more recently in Günter Behnisch's 1992 Bonn Bundeshaus and Norman Foster's glass cupola atop the Berlin Reichstag, opened in 1999.⁷¹ Preoccupation with light, fresh air and hygiene was a pivotal theme of mass-housing construction in the Weimar Republic, and the progressive elements of solar energy became a central motif of American domestic

⁷⁰ R. Nocken, 'Licht im modernen Kirchenraum: Licht als Baustoff?', in W. Amholz (ed.), 'Liturgie als Bauherr?' *Moderne Sakralarchitektur und ihre Ausstattung zwischen Funktion und Form* (Essen, 2010), pp. 225–40.

⁷¹ D. A. Barnstone, *The Transparent State: Architecture and Politics in Postwar Germany* (London, 2005), esp. pp. 27–137.



Figure 9: St Maria Church in Cologne-Marienburg, designed by Dominikus Böhm and constructed in 1954. Source: Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 108.

architecture in the early Cold War, functioning as a symbol of Western openness and transparency decades before it became a staple of hippie alternative culture in the late 1960s.⁷² But far less attention has been paid to how natural light was resacralized in postwar church architecture. In fact, Spence's modernist reconstruction of Coventry Cathedral, discussed above, was directly inspired by Böhm's Church of John the Baptist in Neu-Ulm, and Böhm's designs exerted an influence in America, particularly in the civic building of Erich Mendelsohn and Eliel and Eero Saarinen.⁷³ The airy spaces, unadorned surfaces, white walls and use of strong light in modern architecture provided backdrops for fashion shoots as emblems of modernist lifestyle across the United States and Europe from the 1920s onward, as well as serving as the visual vocabulary of Western empire abroad.⁷⁴

⁷² D. A. Barber, *A House in the Sun: Modern Architecture and Solar Energy in the Cold War* (New York, 2016).

⁷³ N. F. Swift and D. Paisey, 'Dominikus Böhm, Sir Basil Spence and the Dream in the Dentist's Chair: A German Source for Coventry Cathedral', *German Life and Letters*, 64, 2 (2011), pp. 235–54, as well as K. James-Chakraborty, 'Dominikus Bohm in Amerika', in *Dominikus Böhm 1880–1955: aus der Sammlung des Deutschen Architektur Museums* (Tübingen and Berlin, 2005), pp. 89–101.

⁷⁴ M. Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), and M. Crimson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (London, 2019). For the American reception of Schwarz, see S. J. Schloeder, 'Rudolf Schwarz and his Reception in America', *Das Münster: Zeitschrift für christliche Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft*, 64, 1 (2011), pp. 47–54.



Figure 10: St Anna Church in Düren, designed by Rudolf Schwarz and constructed in 1956., p. 117.
Source: Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*

III. War and the Theology of Modern Church Design

The evident synergies between church architecture and secular building after the war obscure the deeper theological roots of this new church architecture. This modernist shift in ecclesiastical architectural design goes back to Catholic reform circles just before the First World War, particularly in connection with what came to be known as the ‘Liturgical Movement’. Above all, this movement strived to emancipate the church and its liturgical practices from the dead hand of Catholicism’s medieval inheritance and stifling liturgical regulations codified at the Council of Trent (1545–1563). It was the nineteenth-century stranglehold of Gothic and Romanesque as the dominant ecclesiastical styling that these modernist architects aimed to challenge. While offshoots within the Protestant Church called for more ‘spatial unity’ among nave, choir and aisle, the Liturgical Movement championed more radical reform. It originated in the late nineteenth century in Benedictine abbeys in Belgium and Germany, from where it then spread quickly.⁷⁵ Most of the reform initially centred on the redesign of fonts

⁷⁵ Dom Anselm Schott of Beuron published his Roman Missal for the laity in German in 1884, and by the mid-1920s it had sold over 6.5 million copies; see Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 8, and W. J. Stock (ed.), *Europäischer Kirchenbau: 1900–1950. Aufbruch zur Moderne / European Church Architecture: 1900–1950. Toward Modernity* (Munich, 2006), p. 155. More generally, J. R. K. Fenwick and B. D. Spinks, *Worship in Transition: The Liturgical Movement in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1995), pp. 13–36.

and baptisteries, but the experience of military defeat and cultural crisis after the First World War spurred the movement to create what it called ‘the new congregation’ (*die neue Gemeinde*).⁷⁶ Two figures electrified the movement: Romano Guardini, a university philosopher from Breslau, and Johannes van Acken, a priest from Gladbeck in the Ruhr, whose co-authored *Christozentrische Kirchenkunst* (Christocentric Church Art) caused a furore when it was published in 1923. For Guardini and Acken, ‘Christocentric’ architecture meant breaking away from Gothic, Romanesque or Baroque styles to ‘design in truth’. It began by placing the altar as the starting point for new church architecture, so as to return to the spirit of early Christianity.⁷⁷ The movement was hailed for its ability to ‘restore to the faithful their dignity as a holy people and a royal priesthood’, prioritizing the emotional experience of religious worship free of historical style or decorative distraction. Premium was placed on the active engagement of the whole worshipping community in church rites, in particular the Eucharist, along with an unobstructed view of the altar for all congregants.⁷⁸ Columns placed between the nave and aisles were reduced to spindles designed not to impede the sight-lines and the experience of contemplative collective space. Schwarz was good friends with Guardini, whom he knew from their days in the Catholic youth organization Quickborn, and both were keen to fuse architecture and theological reform, and Schwarz remained closely linked to the Liturgical Movement.⁷⁹

Church architects and theological reformers were brought together by a common desire to build religious spaces of communal participation. They called for a new spatial design that would overcome the separation of the presbytery and laity, put the altar at the centre of the church ceremony and shift the position of the priest so that he would face the congregation from behind the altar table during service. As Schwarz put it in his highly influential 1938 *Von Bau der Kirche* (On Construction of the Church), the Liturgical Movement was primarily an effort to move away from the ossified conventions of the church design practised since the Council of Trent, which put the altar as the ‘threshold to the beyond’, and instead relocate the altar away from the exclusive space of the clergy and into what was called the ‘layperson’s domain’.⁸⁰ Schwarz was particularly outspoken in challenging the idea of the church as a ‘liturgical machine’, insisting that it should rather be a site of artistic exploration, providing freedom for liturgical services and practices.⁸¹ ‘We cannot’, Schwarz added, ‘continue on from where

⁷⁶ Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 9; B. E. Meland, ‘The Modern Liturgical Movement in Germany’, *Journal of Religion*, 11, 4 (1931), pp. 517–32.

⁷⁷ H. Schnell, ‘Contemporary German Church Architecture’, in *Modern Churches in Germany*, exhibition catalogue (Munich, 1964), pp. 11–15, and W. Birnbaum, *Die katholische liturgische Bewegung: Darstellung und Kritik* (Gütersloh, 1926), pp. 96–7.

⁷⁸ James-Chakraborty, *German Architecture*, pp. 57–8, 63–4, and P. Theodor Bogler, ‘Zum Verständnis’, in *Liturgische Erneuerung in aller Welt: ein Sammelbericht* (Maria Laach, 1950), pp. 18–19.

⁷⁹ W. Zahner, *Rudolf Schwarz: Baumeister der neuen Gemeinde. Ein Beitrag zum Gespräch zwischen Liturgieologie und Architektur in der liturgischen Bewegung* (Alterberge, 1992), pp. 63–170.

⁸⁰ R. Schwarz, *Vom Bau der Kirche* (1947 [1938]), quoted in A. Gerhards, ‘Spaces for Active Participation’, in W. J. Stock, *Europäischer Kirchenbau, 1950–2000 / European Church Architecture, 1950–2000* (Munich, 2002), pp. 16–52, here p. 19; W. Pehnt, *Die Plangestalt des Ganzen: der Architekt und Stadtplaner Rudolf Schwarz und seine Zeitgenossen* (Cologne, 2011), pp. 227–305.

⁸¹ Quoted in W. Pehnt, ‘Under the Sign of Liturgical Form’, in Stock, *Europäischer Kirchenbau, 1950–2000*, pp. 154–182, here p. 159.

the last cathedrals left off. Instead we must enter into the simple things at the source of the Christian life. We must begin anew and our new beginning must be genuine.⁸² His 1930 Corpus Christi Church in Aachen drew explicitly on Guardini's ideas of the 'meaningfulness of emptiness', accompanied by an Expressionist use of theatrical light.⁸³ The Liturgical Movement had gathered pace across Europe between the wars, but after 1945 it surged across Europe and North America as a means to modernize the church service for a new postwar world.⁸⁴

It was during this period that the leading figures of this Weimar reform movement—Bartning, Böhm and Schwarz—re-emerged as West Germany's architectural avant-garde.⁸⁵ For them, the postwar mission was no longer to design *ecclesia triumphans*—that is, proud monuments arising from urban landscapes. New churches needed to provide spiritual service and to act as an 'empathetic partner in all worldly joys and challenges'.⁸⁶ Whilst many of these postwar publications claimed that such modern church construction was a break from the Nazi past, it is worth recalling that hundreds of new and/or redesigned churches were built in Germany after 1933 by both confessions—370 by Catholics, 190 by Protestants. Friedrich Seeßelberg's 1936 book *Die kirchliche Baukunst als neuzeitliches Problem* (The Art of Church Construction as a Problem of the Modern Age) advanced the cause of architectural modernism in the realm of sacred buildings.⁸⁷ Moreover, both Böhm and Bartning continued to design churches after 1933.⁸⁸ Bartning's initial emergency-church concept was favourably covered in the press in 1941, especially in relation to the Nazi concepts of the 'emergency community' (*Notgemeinschaft*) and the 'community of fate' (*Schicksalgemeinschaft*).⁸⁹ Such Nazi-era links were fully expunged after the war, however, as Bartning's post-1945 emergency churches were welcomed for their timely ability to address what he called the 'inner crisis' (*innere Not*) afflicting all Germans.⁹⁰

After the war, these church architects used the opportunity to broaden the Liturgical Movement's ecumenical legacy of interwar modernism. Such design ideas were further developed by other West German architects in the 1960s, as in Sep Ruf's 1960 St John's Church in Munich, Hans-Busso von Busse's 1965 Holy Ghost Church in

⁸² Quoted in R. Proctor, *Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955–1975* (London, 2014), p. 138.

⁸³ Maguire and Murray, *Modern Churches*, p. 24. Many other European churches, from Finland to Italy, were built in a similar style.

⁸⁴ E. B. Koenker, 'Objectives and Achievements of the Liturgical Movement in the Roman Catholic Church since World War II', *Church History*, 20, 2 (1951), pp. 14–27.

⁸⁵ K. Martin, 'Introduction', in S. Ruf (ed.), *German Church Architecture of the 20th Century*, exhibition catalogue (Munich, 1964), p. 5.

⁸⁶ Pehnt, *Rudolf Schwarz*, p. 165.

⁸⁷ For general discussion, W. Nerdinger, *Bauen im Nationalsozialismus* (Munich, 1993), and F. Weber and C. Methuen, 'The Architecture of Faith under National Socialism: Lutheran Church Building(s) in Braunschweig, 1933–1945', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 66, 2 (2015), pp. 340–71.

⁸⁸ B. Rossié, "'Symbolhafte Sprache, die aus der Weltanschauung entspringt': kirchliche Kunst im Nationalsozialismus', in S. Endlich, M. G. von Bernus and B. Rossié, *Christenkreuz und Hakenkreuz: Kirchenbau und sakrale Kunst im Nationalsozialismus*, exhibition catalogue (Berlin, 2008), pp. 96–110. See also H. Prolingheuer, *Hitlers fromme Bilderstürmer: Kirche und Kunst unterm Hakenkreuz* (Cologne, 2001).

⁸⁹ A. Leitzl, 'Zwei protestantische Notkirchen', *Bauwelt*, 39 (1941), pp. 1–3.

⁹⁰ D. Deschermeier, 'Die zweifache Wiederaufbau der Gustav-Adolf-Kirche von Otto Bartning in Berlin', *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, 41 (2014), pp. 267–87.

Schaftlach, Upper Bavaria, and Paulfriedrich Posenenske's 1967 Protestant Church in Hassenroth (Fig. 11). Experimentation was also underway with round churches, which had been a controversial subject in church architecture for centuries. By the mid-1950s the churches were promoting new designs very openly. One 1960 travelling exhibition on modern German church design, which started in Amsterdam and then moved to Bombay, proclaimed that there was a new 'feeling of solidarity' among German Christians, in which the church was 'once more conceived mainly as the space round the altar' and as a 'tent of God set up amongst men'.⁹¹ An accompanying catalogue to the travelling 1964 exhibition on West German religious architecture tellingly featured essays by Catholic, Protestant and Jewish theologians, complete with photographs of eleven Protestant churches, eleven Catholic churches and two Jewish synagogues.⁹²

With surprising speed, the West German marriage of the Liturgical Movement and modern architecture became more and more accepted within official church circles. In 1947 a Liturgical Institute was founded in Trier, and in 1950 the first German Liturgical Congress was held, in Frankfurt am Main. Pope Pius XII's 1947 *Mediator Dei* was the first encyclical exclusively dedicated to sacred liturgical issues and strongly supported the Liturgical Renewal Movement, though there was some apprehension

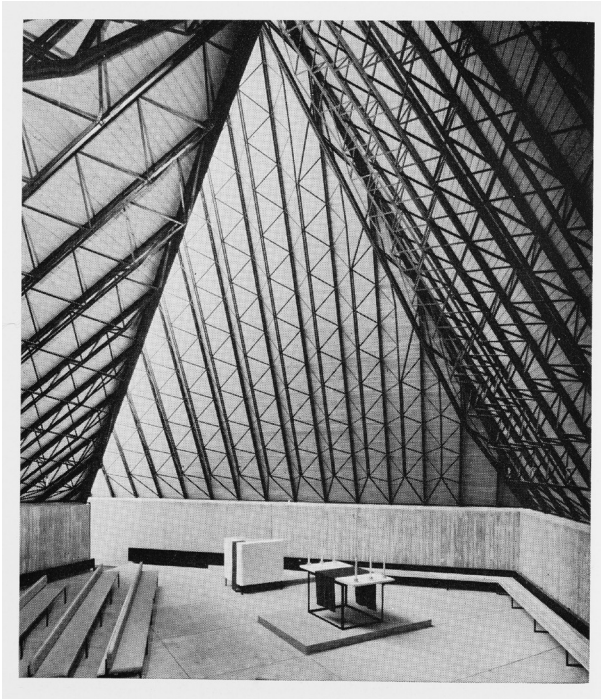


Figure 11: The Protestant Church in Hassenroth, designed by Paulfriedrich Posenenske and constructed in 1967. Source: Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 154.

⁹¹ Martin, 'Introduction', p. 5.

⁹² Julius Cardinal Döpfner, untitled entry in *Modern Churches in Germany*, exhibition catalogue, p. 5.

from the Vatican about removing sacred images of Christ from churches and converting the altar into a primitive table.⁹³ By the late 1940s, urban planners, architects and church authorities (especially in Protestant circles) were working together to erect a slew of new churches under the modernist slogan ‘Honesty in Design’ (*Ehrlichkeit in der Formgestaltung*).⁹⁴ One 1948 publication on concrete churches looked forward to a new Age of Cathedrals whose church design would provide needed quiet and calm for believers, ‘as was once the case for the cathedrals in their time, which would help congregants strengthen their spirits, overcome their fears and reinvigorate them.’⁹⁵ In 1949 modernist church design was formalized at the Bishops Conference at Fulda, supposedly capturing postwar Germans’ ‘desire for community, a need for truth and authenticity, a wish to move from the peripheral to the central and essential, a longing for clarity, brightness and transparency, a yearning for tranquillity and peace, warmth and shelter.’⁹⁶ In 1960 the Liturgical Movement made inroads into England and Ireland thanks to the publication of Peter Hammond’s *Liturgy and Architecture*; though written by an Anglican, his book had direct influence on Catholic church design in these countries—in fact, Hammond identified the work of Rudolf Schwarz as his model.⁹⁷

The campaign to rethink the church as a modern space of cultural renewal spilled beyond the church and even architectural circles. *Das Münster*, an art journal founded in 1947 that was dedicated to Christian art and culture, and the widely read journal *Kunst und Kirche*, first published in 1957, regularly featured new modernist churches in their pages. This was in keeping with broader trends elsewhere in Europe, as noted with the journals *L’Art Sacré* (founded in France in 1936), *L’Art d’Eglise* (started in Belgium in 1959) and *Church Buildings Today* (published in Britain from 1960). Sacred architecture exerted great influence on secular building too: the flagship West German modern architecture journal *Baukunst und Werkform*, founded in 1948, commonly featured sections on ecclesiastical building, and a large number of travelling exhibitions on new West German church architecture were organized in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹⁸ Values of simplicity and humility were central to postwar church architecture and neatly dovetailed with West Germany’s preferred cultural identity in the 1950s. Recall that ‘modesty’ (*Bescheidenheit*) was the selected theme of West Germany’s pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World Fair, the first world’s exhibition since the Paris World’s Exposition in 1937.⁹⁹ Here and

⁹³ M. Bialkowski, ‘Main Revival Movements in the Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council’, *Historia i Polityka*, 24, 31 (2018), pp. 73–86, and S. J. Schloeder, *Architecture in Communion: Implementing the Second Vatican Council through Liturgy and Architecture* (San Francisco, 1998), p. 24.

⁹⁴ O. Messert, ‘Die Kirche im Rahmen des Wiederaufbaus, dargestellt am Beispiel Hannovers’, in G. Kunze (ed.), *Evangelischer Kirchenbau vor neuen Aufgaben* (Göttingen, 1947), pp. 6–12.

⁹⁵ F. Pfammatter, *Betonkirchen* (Cologne, 1948), pp. 88–9, as well as G. Langmaack, ‘Die Situation des Kirchenbauers in der modernen Zivilisationslandschaft’, in R. Hellwag (ed.), *Kirchenbau in der Zivilisationslandschaft: Evangelische Kirchenbautagung in Essen 1963* (Hamburg, 1965), pp. 55–6, and H.-D. Wendland, *Die Kirche in der modernen Gesellschaft: Entscheidungsfragen für das kirchliche Handeln im Zeitalter der Massenwelt* (Hamburg, 1958).

⁹⁶ T. Klauser, *Kleine abendländische Liturgiegeschichte: Bericht und Besinnung* (1965), quoted in Gerhards, ‘Spaces for Active Participation’, p. 23. For an earlier version, T. Klauser, *Abendländische Liturgiegeschichte: Forschungsbericht und Besinnung* (Bonn, 1949).

⁹⁷ Schloeder, *Architecture in Communion*, pp. 25–6, and Proctor, *Building the Modern Church*, pp. 135–6.

⁹⁸ Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture*, p. 77.

⁹⁹ P. Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design* (Berkeley, CA, 2004), pp. 189–98; J. Paulmann, ‘Representation without Emulation: German Cultural Diplomacy in Search

elsewhere, these West German modern churches generated a cottage industry of cultural commentary and praise, both nationally and internationally.¹⁰⁰

The spiritualization of simple building materials and shelter was not limited to church construction after 1945, for it also influenced the cultural understanding of mass housing at the time. In Germany housing acquired special meaning with the legacy of mass death and destruction, genocide and forced population transfers. The wave of harsh deportations during and after the war deepened this new sense of existential homelessness in the aftermath of conflict. In various publications, the refugee was commonly identified as the ‘symbol of uprooted existence, part of the grey army of the homeless, the defenceless soldier of misery’.¹⁰¹ ‘Homeless humanity’ was a stock phrase used to describe dismembered Europe, ravaged nation states, sundered families and the cultural condition of postwar Europe.¹⁰² A high-profile example is the 1951 Darmstadt Conversation (*Darmstädter Gespräch*), the third in a series of debates that had started in 1949 as a means of bringing together leading thinkers from a variety of fields to contemplate the pressing issues of the day. The theme of the 1951 discussion was ‘People and Space’ (*Mensch und Raum*), and it was accompanied by an exhibition held at Darmstadt’s Mathildenhöhe under the slogan ‘The Crisis of Our Age is Homelessness’. Gathered for this three-day conference in early August 1951 were leading West German architects such as Rudolf Schwarz, Hans Schwippert, Hans Scharoun and Egon Eiermann, along with several celebrity intellectuals like José Ortega y Gasset and Martin Heidegger, and it was on this occasion that Heidegger delivered his famous lecture entitled ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’. At the event, the architects mostly pleaded for the revival of denigrated or forgotten architectural styles from the modernist past (ranging from Jugendstil to the Bauhaus) as postwar guidance, whilst insisting on the need to place postwar building on a more humanist footing. Atomic Age anxiety provoked wide West German discussion among intellectuals and peace activists about living in a world of spiritual homelessness, planetary threat and existential vulnerability, and new church building was a key part of that sensibility.¹⁰³

By the mid-1950s, West Germany had become Europe’s epicentre of ecclesiastical architectural experimentalism, creating what one architectural historian called the ‘most momentous changes’ in Christian architecture in its ‘nearly two millennia of history’.¹⁰⁴ West German cities held competitions for the construction of modern church buildings and commissioned a number of international star architects to build religious buildings in their towns. Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, for example, designed a number of churches and parish centres in Wolfsburg in the 1960s.¹⁰⁵ Ecclesiastical building had

of Integration and Self-Assurance in the Adenauer Era’, *German History*, 25, 2 (2007), pp. 168–200; and G. Castillo, ‘Making a Spectacle of Restraint: The Deutschland Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels Exposition’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47, 1 (2012), pp. 97–119.

¹⁰⁰ H. W. Hegemann, *Vom Bergenden Raum: die Zeitformen kirchlicher Baukunst* (Frankfurt/Main, 1953); H. Maurer, *Moderne Kirchenbau in Deutschland* (Kassel, 1958); and R. Biedrzyński, *Kirchen unserer Zeit* (Munich, 1958).

¹⁰¹ H. Zbinden, *Der Flüchtling und die Humanität* (Zurich, 1945), pp. 7, 67, as well as E. Pfeil, *Der Flüchtling: Gestalt einer Zeitwende* (Hamburg, 1948).

¹⁰² H. E. Holthusen, *Der unbehauste Mensch: Motive und Probleme der modernen Literatur* (Munich, 1951).

¹⁰³ F. Biess, *German Angst: Fear and Democracy in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Oxford, 2020), esp. chap. 3.

¹⁰⁴ G. E. Kidder Smith, *The New Churches of Europe* (London, 1964), p. 9.

¹⁰⁵ S. Singler and M. Sternberg, ‘The Civic and the Sacred: Alvar Aalto’s Churches and Parish Centres in Wolfsburg, 1960–1968’, *Architectural History*, 62 (2019), pp. 205–36.

been at the architectural forefront for centuries but had lost its pre-eminent position to secular architecture after the Industrial Revolution. It was only after the Great War that church building again became a site of cultural innovation, and it assumed even greater gravity after the Second World War. It did so to such an extent that avant-garde church architecture not only inspired secular building, but also often surpassed it in artistic creativity. Not for nothing did one critic writing in the mid-1960s confidently claim that the ‘leading architects in Germany are once again church architects’, and the post-1945 careers of Bartning, Böhm and Schwarz testify to the dramatic comeback.¹⁰⁶

In Catholic circles, this stripped-down sacred architecture anticipated some of the key points of the Second Vatican Council, at least to the extent that the council could facilitate new communities of the faithful without being overwhelmed by tradition, custom or hierarchy involving clergy and laity. In the introduction to the new edition of the Roman missal, the council was described as having ‘convened in order to adapt the Church to the contemporary requirements of its apostolic task’.¹⁰⁷ A churchman writing in the early 1960s praised these West German architects for designing buildings that brought ‘all Christians around the altar, making the faithful, by the very structure of the Church, conscious of their right and obligation to be “Communicantes” at the Eucharist sacrifice’.¹⁰⁸ Others hailed the architects for having transformed the altar into a ‘clean and sacred block’.¹⁰⁹ After the council, ecclesiastical reforms authorized the redesign of the sanctuary, with simple and low free-standing altars brought nearer to the congregation and communion rails removed.¹¹⁰ Pius XII’s 1947 *Mediator Dei* encyclical had introduced the issue of vernacular language and designs in Mass, saying that even if the ‘use of the Latin language’ is ‘a manifest and beautiful sign of unity’, the ‘use of the mother tongue in connection with several of the rites may be of much advantage to the people’.¹¹¹ His first encyclical on the Catholic Church’s renewed missionary work in Africa and Asia, the 1951 *Evangelii Praecones*, also encouraged the church to adopt a more open and respectful attitude toward indigenous cultural traditions abroad with sacred rites, liturgical objects and church furnishings.¹¹² This reform impulse was made even more central at the Second Vatican Council: the ‘Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy’ of 1963 stated that ‘the art of our days, coming from every race and region’ shall ‘be given free scope in the Church, provided that it adorns the sacred buildings and holy rites with due honour and reverence’. Once the council had sanctioned these changes, a large number of Catholic churches were transformed in the next decade along these design principles. In doing so, the council recast the house of God into the ‘house of God’s people’.¹¹³

Not everyone was pleased with these modernist developments, however. Catholic critics objected that church architecture after the Second Vatican Council had become

¹⁰⁶ Schnell, ‘Contemporary German Church Architecture’, p. 15.

¹⁰⁷ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (4th edn, 27 Mar. 1975), introduction.

¹⁰⁸ Valerian Cardinal Gracias, Archbishop of Bombay, in his remarks in Ruf, *German Church Architecture of the 20th Century*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ Kidder Smith, *New Churches*, p. 12.

¹¹⁰ Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone*, p. 262.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Proctor, *Building the Modern Church*, pp. 54–5.

¹¹² J. Pollard, *The Papacy in the Age of Totalitarianism, 1924–1958* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 415–46.

¹¹³ J. F. White, *Roman Catholic Worship: Trent to Today* (Collegeville, MN, 2003), p. 124.

unduly beholden to the unwelcome ‘neo-iconoclastic agenda of the modernists’. They condemned the Liturgical Movement for brazenly removing images of saints from church spaces, tearing out communion rails, doing away with side altars and statues of saints, replacing pews with individual chairs, and debasing the holy altar as a make-shift dining table.¹¹⁴ Criticism of the coming of modern technical features in postwar churches was already a common theme of the 1950s, best noted in discussions of music. One West Berlin commission report of 1955 recorded the overwhelmingly negative reception among congregants of the controversial introduction of recorded music in church services as a cheap substitute for live organ music. The same went for the use of the ‘electro-acoustic ringing of bells’, which was characterized as ‘rigid, flat and cold’.¹¹⁵ So it was not just the visual face of church buildings that was changing, but also the church as a modern media soundscape.

But by the late 1950s such objections were too late, as the modernist crusade was in full force. There was broad interest in making good on these new impulses to redesign churches and congregations in a fundamentally new postwar spirit.¹¹⁶ The 1960s introduction of folk, rock and—later in the GDR—even punk music in German churches was a further indication of the modernization of the devotional experience. By that time, the discussion was shifting towards the idea of the church as a more accommodating social space, as church reports detailed internal discussions about the need to balance stringent budgetary concerns, design minimalism and the congregants’ ‘demands for material comfort’ (*Komfortanspruch*) during services, as well as the need for churches to provide youth clubs and family-friendly spaces for meetings, since people’s homes were far too small for these activities.¹¹⁷

The legacy of these early postwar churches can be discerned in other ways as well. For one thing, the styling and use of local building materials reflected a postwar penchant for regional architectural vernaculars, which drew on ideas of regional *Heimat* traditions, in stark contrast to both the hyper-nationalizing dynamics of the Nazi state and a homogenizing Bauhaus modernism.¹¹⁸ Secondly, these new churches helped give form to broader understandings of the conservative modernity of the Adenauer Era. The radical simplicity of these modernist houses of worship, for example, was accompanied by the traditional vestments of the priests, pastors and provosts leading the services, as noted in [Figure 6](#), as the provost was dressed in conventional Lutheran cassock and collar ruff for the occasion. Perhaps the most far-reaching dimension of

¹¹⁴ Schloeder, *Architecture in Communion*, pp. 10, 22–4. On the links between the Liturgical Movement and the Second Vatican Council, see also W. J. Stock, ‘Departures and Setbacks: European Church Architecture between 1900 and 1950’, in Stock, *Europäischer Kirchenbau, 1900–1950*, p. 17, and Fenwick and Spinks, *Worship in Transition*, pp. 61–70.

¹¹⁵ EZB, EZA 2/5759, Abschrift: Kirchliche Zentralstelle für Orgelbau beim Evangelischen Konsistorium Berlin-Brandenburg, Betr. Elektronengeräte, 17 Dec. 1955. See also T. Grossboelting, *Der Verlorene Himmel: Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945* (Paderborn, 2013), pp. 148–80.

¹¹⁶ T. Filthaut, *Kirchenbau und Liturgiereform* (Mainz, 1965), and T. Filthaut, *Kirchenbau in der Diskussion: Wanderausstellung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Christliche Kunst* (Munich, 1975).

¹¹⁷ EZB, EZA 2/ 5789, H. Röbler, ‘Das Gemeindezentrum als Lebensmitte der Gemeinde—eine neue Aufgabe des Kirchbaus heute’, Referat auf der Tagung der Baureferenten und Bauamtsleiter der westlichen Gliedkirchen der EKD in Berlin-Spandau, 24. Oktober 1964, pp. 2, 14.

¹¹⁸ M. Umbach and B. Hüppauf (eds), *Vernacular Modernism: Heimat, Globalization and the Built Environment* (Palo Alto, 2005).

these German churches was the way in which they broke from traditional ecclesiastical architectural styling, and even in a Catholic context they marked a break from Rome. At first this may seem odd, given that the ‘Free from Rome’ movement was closely associated with Protestantism. But after the war, Schwarz, Böhm and other Catholic church designers rehabilitated Germany’s distinctive interwar heritage of sacral modernism as a postwar compass, pointing away from conventional Roman Catholic ecclesiastical forms and liturgical practices. It was a stripped-down version of ‘spiritual functionalism’ championed by both Protestant and Catholic architects after the Great War and then popularized even more after the Second World War. These ‘tents in the desert’ of Christian devotion and service were seen as befitting the material and moral demands of the times, during which these West German church builders became the vanguard of spiritual reckoning, Christian renewal and moral reconstruction for West German believers.

Yet for all the technical, theological and sociological changes of church design after 1945, the key driver of transformation was the war itself. It was the legacy of man-made mass destruction that inspired the wave of new West German church construction, which brought together a unique partnership of modern theology and modern architecture. In the end, West Germany’s new ecclesiastical buildings—including Bartning’s emergency churches—reflected wider discussions of how best to lay a new moral and material foundation for post-Nazi West German society, one in which church construction—whether restoration or innovation—played host to new visions of the post-fascist Christian community and West German society.

Abstract

This article centres on the cultural politics behind the feverish construction of new houses of worship in West Germany, as well as the restoration of damaged cathedrals and churches, in the first two decades after 1945. At issue is how and why ecclesiastical architecture took on heightened cultural significance at the time, attracting a star-studded group of international architects. After the war, church-building resumed its leading historical role from before the Industrial Revolution as the avant-garde of innovative international architecture, although its comeback has been largely overlooked by architectural and cultural historians alike. While these changes reflected broader international trends, the German situation took on special significance in light of the Nazi legacy of defeat, destruction and dislocation, as well as the pressing need to fabricate new churches for survivors and the millions of expellees arriving in western Germany. Discussions of ecclesiastical architecture therefore touched on broader issues of German history, identity and Christian renewal, and the very form of these houses of worship reflected a unique blend of avant-garde architecture and Christian theology in the aftermath of war.

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