



City within the city - the Erbacher Hof

Thoughts on the building concept of the new education center by Lothar Willius

The word "conception" is a synonym of "design, plan thought model". The Latin verb is concipere: "to recognize, to conceive, to imagine". I want to write about the thoughts that came to me over the years that I worked on this building task. These thoughts may seem a little bit rough to the reader, just as the finished building may seem a little bit rough to some. But I hope that after reading my thoughts, he will understand this building more clearly, better. I will try to present the thoughts in the order in which they came to me one after the other while I was working. When the task was given to us, in 1971, my first realization was: "This will be a city within the city."

It was not the variety of functions that impressed itself on me. Many different functions can also be combined in a building which, isolated from its surroundings, has a uniform, self-contained character and which in no way makes one think of a city. No, it was the force of the old city, it was the density of the streets, the houses, the churches of old Mainz, which directly abutted this building, which virtually besieged it. It was the beauty of this old Mainz, the narrowness, the angularity, the ups and downs of the eaves and roofs that beset me. Here, everything that we were asked to plan anew was to fit into this almost "living" abundance of old house designs and building structures of the past.

Very soon the realization came: this is not just a "fitting in", this will probably become a part of the old city, from also more, it must become something more intense, something of its own. It will be a "city within the city". After this recognition came the comprehension - the comprehension, noting, sketching, the working out in oneself, the "internalizing", as it were, of how this historical environment of the old city was to be incorporated into the new, how it was to grow into the Erbacher Hof of the future. This did not yet exist, not even on paper, not even in thought.

What stood, what was very concretely present, were the chapel and the wings of the Baroque period attached to it. They were a bond - thank God! They were a core, they fixed the old "courtyard". However, to add was more than just a shell to this core. To add was to add a living thing, a much larger entity, which could not develop its power only from the old courtyard, but had to grow from itself, from its own contents, from its own dynamics.

This larger structure, this whole - old and new together - this place of learning and inner construction, was now also to become a "courtyard" as a whole - and specifically: a courtyard with a new gate on Grebenstraße and a new gate on Mauritzenplatz. At the same time, the old gate of the Erbacher Hof on Erbacherhofgasse was to be preserved in order to make the core recognizable in its dimensions and to show how small the old courtyard was, how secluded the Erbacher monks lived here at that time.



Thus the thought of a "city" condensed in me; for as in the Middle Ages and at the beginning of modern times one enlarged a city by building a new city next to it, so also here. And I saw before me, and I see before me now, how this place will be filled with all kinds of life; how "public" it will be, how one walks through it from Grebenstrasse to Mauritzenplatz, only to pass through it, to another destination, because walking through it is a pleasure, because it is interesting, just as one walks through some old streets because one would like to see their old houses again once in a while. The more I thought about what "character" this building should have, the more the idea of walking through it gained imagery. I said to myself: one must be guided, the spatial sequences must direct me - where to?

To the stairs, to the halls, to the important points of the house. And on the way, it must be possible for me to be distracted, for my gaze to linger on a corner, a protrusion, an angle that causes me to pause or go another way, to other rooms. There must be surprises, unpredictable glances not only inside, for example from a corridor, from a gallery down into the hall, glances also outside. Views of a special kind, for example of the chapel, of the cathedral, of Grebenstrasse. The purpose of these floor plans is not the mechanical flow of the routes, not the fastest and straightest connection between the dining room and conference room and the bed area. Certainly, the connections must "work", but not as in a company that is oriented toward rational work. Walking in this house must always be able to be a "walking", a "building".

The more I thought about this "character" of the new building, the clearer it became to me that the building and house forms of the surrounding area, of the old city, must reach into it here, must find their continuation - however not in their imitation, but in a thoroughly own, new, modern language. This was without question the most difficult part of the task, also the most laborious. It was about the following: The people who built these houses in the old streets at different times and with different intentions never had the goal of achieving this colorful multifariousness that we perceive and admire as "beautiful" today. All this has become so unintentionally, unconsciously through many influences and factors that worked together, which were from completely different than the factors that influence and determine our today's new building. It was now necessary to achieve this state of the "unconscious", "unwanted" in the architecture of the Erbacher Hof.

There is an essay by Heinrich von Kleist about this process: "Über das Marionetten- Theater". Kleist explains it using the example of the movement of man, animal and marionette. The quintessence of the study: An observer recognizes a certain movement, a certain posture of a boy as "beautiful". He asks the boy to repeat the movement, the posture. He does not succeed, although he tries several times and tries very hard. The consciousness is at first not able to reach unconsciously created things in their beauty. However: after innumerable practicing, after finally giving up the will, it succeeds at the moment when no intention, no conscious will wants to force the movement anymore.



These were thoughts that moved me. We have to go through consciousness so that we come back to unconscious action in the things we want to achieve.

Certainly, a building cannot be constructed - especially not such a building as this one - without every detail being precisely drawn and thus also precisely premeditated. But what surprised me several times in the course of my visits to the building site were vistas, spatial connections that I had not yet seen on my plans, even in the model, even in my imagination, that had "emerged" in the true sense of that word much used today for new buildings. Thus, some of this unconscious, about which Kleist wrote in relation to movement, has also flowed into this building. Here, too, there is movement.

Indeed - when one walks through the various parts of the courtyard, picture follows picture. The "educational center" has itself become a "structure" - a structure that has grown, also influenced by coincidences, by subsequent wishes of the builder, by feelings.

It is not the "ratio" that dominates here, but rather the association with a natural process of development. When one sees the photograph on the following page, one thinks of a hill being built up by termites.

The construction has the character of a "game". Johann Huizinga writes in his book "Homo Ludens - From the Origin of Culture in Play" of the forms of play also in art, in music, in dance, in liturgy. His representations also apply to architecture.

Thus, for me as an architect, it was a unique stroke of luck to build a work that, in its interweaving of the old and the new with the most diverse contents - from church to kitchen - from garage to guest rooms, from academy to conferences - at the same time made the highest demands on an artistic drive that was not free, but integrated - into the form of this courtyard.



On the redesign of the Gothic chapel and the neighboring St. Bernard chapel

The Gothic chapel is the center of the newly built Erbacher Hof. Like a jewel in a setting, it stands with its Gothic tracery, its pointed gables, its buttresses between the simple gable roofs, the eaves cornices and sober rows of windows of the courtyard houses - not obtrusive, but recognizably distinct. When you enter the courtyard through the gate and look around, you see: there, that is the space of worship, the place of the altar. There, this building, that is the historical substance - centuries old. Around it, everything new, education and culture, meetings and public, information and society. Up there, the chapel, is the core, there is the space of prayer, silence, holy celebration.

What is recognizable in the outer appearance of the building is further enhanced in the interior. Here one experiences the centuries as effective, sees time as a tangible dimension. Here the eye, looking upwards over the carpet-like painting of the base zone, discovers the remains of faded frescoes, searches and finds, recognizes the Risen Christ, the "Noli me tagere", the Magi. These frescoes are inserted in a strict three-bay vault system with an axial alignment of an east and west window, both of which have pointed arches that match the vault centers.



The St. Bernard Chapel

The planning and construction of the Gothic chapel and the neighboring St. Bernard's Chapel were one of the most interesting tasks of my practice as an architect. Both rooms are conditioned and determined in their location by the old preserved building components. The St. Bernard Chapel was fixed in the baroque part next to the Gothic Chapel. Both rooms belong together, complement each other in their liturgical and worship function, are connected with each other by a very small doorway fixed from the old building. They are thus linked and at the same time separated and have quite different prerequisites for their interior design - also due to the old building.

It was fascinating to me how, in the course of planning, these preconditions led to compellingly different forms that complemented each other and which, despite all the distinctness of the separation, allowed the two spaces to become a liturgical-worship unity.

St. Bernard's Chapel was determined in its proportions, in the height of the floor, ceiling, width and length. It was a room without all the prerequisites for the proportions and forms of a "church" - much more suitable as a sober assembly room. But it is not just that; it is the space of liturgical celebration and prayer, for all those who are together for a short time in the Educational Center at conferences, meetings, congresses. The space is stored, it stretches horizontally, it is wide. Its character is determined by the multitude of people who are all gathered around the table of the Lord. When one enters this "great chapel", one should not only feel, but see the many sitting in tension with the altar - even if no one is present. This was my thought - this is how the planning opened up to me.

The character of the "Gothic" chapel is determined by the severity of the vaulting, the joyful colors. When you enter the gothic chapel, at first people are quite unimportant. Thus, its pews are light, transparently adapted to the walls. In St. Bernard's Chapel the pews must suggest the gathering of all those who are here a congregation - a congregation "for a time". All those who during the day meet somewhere in the many rooms of the house, listen, learn, discuss, live, come together here for the celebration of the divine service, comparable to a village community that comes from many houses and yards to the church for the divine service. The Gothic chapel and the "Great Chapel" are opposites in their spatial proportions given by the old building.

The Gothic chapel faces upwards. It is a reliquary enlarged to the room. In contrast, the chapel of St. Bernard is wider. Its proportions are reclining, horizontal.

All gather around the table of the Eucharist. It is the important center. Around it, the chairs run in circular lines like waves around a stone thrown into still water.



Everything is dark-colored: the ceiling, the table itself, which in its darkness connects to the ceiling, the sedilia, the ambo, the pews. The table stands on a carpet - only the symbol of a pedestal - only lifted by this carpet from the floor of the hall.

Radiantly bright, however, namely rock crystal, silver and polished aluminum, are the standing cross and the liturgical vessels: chalice, paten and candlestick.

The room is dominated by the three-part tapestry behind the altar. The central image depicts the burning bush - symbol of the flaming presence of God. The bush is burning, but it does not burn. The left and right pictures show the people of God under the law, seized by the spirit, and entering the heavenly Jerusalem. But this "trypitichon" is not the final goal of the room. The goal is always the congregation gathered around the altar. The two rooms, centuries apart in their construction, now brought together in worship in our present, open up to each other. From the "Great Chapel" the way leads through a narrow gateway over three steps into the depths to the Gothic room. Once one has passed through the gate, the view expands upward - the new room is high and colorful - it is strictly ordered in the rhythm of the vault ribs. One has entered the "shrine" where the Blessed Sacrament is kept. But from the silence of adoration and the worship celebration in the small group, the way always points back to the large congregation.