

THE RECONSTRUCTION AND CONVERSION OF ST. MAXIMIN IN TRIER

INTRODUCTION

Image: Zodiac Man

Modern architecture reflects the metaphysical condition and crisis of modern men. I quote Alberto Pérez-Gómez in *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*:

The poetical content of reality, the *a priori* of the world, which is the ultimate frame of reference for any truly meaningful architecture, is hidden beneath a thick layer of formal explanations. Because positivistic thought has made it a point to exclude mystery and poetry, contemporary man lives with the illusion of the infinite power of reason.¹

Now, how does an architect reconstruct or *regenerate* an architecture that does not exclude mystery and poetry and, simultaneously, serves as, quote, *spiritual-theological text*?

How does the architect critically translate Joseph Rykwert's inspiring double metaphor: *The body is like a building and the building is like a whole world*, though, not least according to Pérez-Gómez, we live in a "post-cosmological epoch"²?

Image: St. Maximin and Trier, 1991

I will present you one model, the reconstruction and conversion of the venerable abbey St. Maximin in Trier, that keeps amazing me. An investigation of this archaeological-architectural project, the conversion of the once monumental basilica into a sport- and concert hall by the architects Gottfried Böhm and Alois Peitz, reveals a genuine mytho-poetical inspiration by the sites origins in antiquity and a figurative thinking, typical for the hermeneutics of the Middle Age.

Image: Treverorum, 380 AD

This *genius loci*, - to use a dubious term -, traces a clearly exceptional continuity of use: As burial ground and coemeterial building in late antiquity, as early Christian basilica, as monumental Ottonian church and as independent, rich Benedictine and Imperial Monastery throughout the Middle Ages. What to do with it today?

Image: Pietro Cantaneo, 1537

Acknowledging a cosmological world after Einstein and Heisenberg, we cannot successfully separate matter and spirit or matter and lines of force or body and soul.

¹ Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, MIT Press, 1990, p.6

² Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Dwelling on Heidegger: Architecture as mimetic techno-poiesis*, *Wolkenkuckucksheim*, 1998/2

HISTORY / RECONSTRUCTION / CONVERSION

Image: 400 AD

The history of St. Maximin is an infinite story of changes.

293 AD Trier becomes Imperial residence and little later bishop's see. The burial of the first bishops Agriculus and Maximinus leads to a monumental coemeterial building on Trier's northern burial ground, little outside the city walls, which by the late 4th century had a length of about 100m.

Image: Archaeological Site with Ambo

Between the 4th-8th century the radical concept of the early Christians to reject any sacredness of buildings, of a temple, transforms.

Jakob's dream, to name a paradigmatic example, calls for poetical translation and expression,- also in architecture.

Image: Jakobs Dream, Rembrandt 1644 / Quam Terribilis est Locus iste

Arnold Angenendt terms the reasons „religious-psychological“. The human being desires identification, a „second religious body“, an architectural enveloping „Gewand“ to quote, as Gottfried Semper initiated, the old German term for a beautiful dress that equally refers to the „Wand“, the German word for wall.

Image: North-East Apse with sarcophagi

Such „Ge-Wand“ in the case of St. Maximin rests, until today, on up to 1000 stone sarcophagi, buried in two and more layers, slightly declined and oriented to the east.

Image: Longitudinal Cut with sarcophagi

Image: Ottonic Building

St. Maximin reaches an outstanding significance during the 10th century as, quote:

the earliest and most splendid monumental church of the Ottonian period between the Meuse and the Elbe. About 75m (250ft) long with six bays, the nave ended in the east and in the west with three parallel apses each. Four stair towers on the outer sides of the church led to upper-storey chapels which occupied the ends of the side aisles.³

Image: Reconstruction of Ottonic building, section and elevation

³ Adolf Neyses, 2001, S.270

At that time the abbey has an interior crypt under a high altar and an exterior crypt with two levels. An eastern finestella allows contact with the ancient bishops graves. The 13th century leads to the obligatory Gothic remodeling. But - I will not refer every burning down and rebuilding the abbey sees.

1684 Franz Kuckeisen builds the present church in a reduced Baroque, keeping the ground plan and partly referring to the formal language of the Gothic predecessor.

Image: 1800

In 1802 the monastery is secularized and becomes military barrack. First the French later the Prussian army house their soldiers on four floors built into the church, adapting windows and roofs.

Image: Barrack

Seventy years later the east half of the building becomes garrison church. Here the floors are taken out and the interior is remodeled with neogothic windows.

For the next 100 years the building remains divided.

In 1932 the diocese purchases the properties back. Following the II world war they are used by several Catholic schools as emergency facility.

Image: Barbarian street and new school

Since 1958 the important exterior crypt is run over by a new street.

Post-war Germany practises amnesia with the car and the *Wirtschaftswunder*. Surely also Trier, like Berlin indeed, has too much history not to erase some.

Image: St. Maximin, 1959

In the seventies when St. Maximin needs structural securing, the question what to do with a church building of this size without congregation finally needs to be solved.

Image: Rebuilding to church

In 1976 the diocese decides to secure and restore the church in its entity from the 17th century, to use the opportunity for a thorough investigation of the ground below the building, to keep the excavations accessible and open for visitors and to use the church as concert hall and as gymnasium for the neighboring catholic school.

These excavations confirm the exceptional dimensions of the Roman coemeterial building and the monumental Ottonian church.

Image: Facade before and after Reconstruction

Six years later the west section is liberated from the five stories interior constructions, the interventions from the 19th century are brought down, and the unity of the church space from 1684 is regained.

The late Baroque windows, together with the steep roofs are restored on the entire length, including the east half. This leads to the desired perception as a unity in the exterior and interior, clerestory windows giving light to the entire main nave.

Image: Main nave, excavations

The spectacular step is the decision for the future use as gymnasium and the how: A reconstruction of what establishes the traditions of sacred space in Christianity, combining traditional aesthetic concepts with contemporary images.

Image: Main nave, goal and crypt window

Lindsay Jones in „The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture“, published by the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, identifies a moment of orientation and lure, a necessary „front-half“ leading to „self-forgetfulness“ and „reconciliation with self“ in any dialog with sacred architecture.

St. Maximin allows orientation and lure.

Mainly but not exclusively used by the school, St. Maximin still or again invites for religious dialog and a *re-conceiving of the sacred*.

The new space oscillates between the sacred and the profane. The visitor experiences something familiar and something moving.

Image: Main nave, martial art

Those who come being convinced that it is a profane space, because it is no more a consecrated Catholic church, might start to reflect about theological aesthetics and the narrative power of materials and architecture.

Even a new altar is discussed in these years but finally rejected.

Image: Fragments in Northern wall

Through the interplay of archaeological *and* architectural thinking a somehow therapeutic strata is achieved, a navigation between sign and symbol.

Image: Fragment of Column from Coemeterialbuilding

Image: Excavations

In the seventies the archaeological site lays open and the walls appear as if growing out of the stone sarcophagi. To reinforce the open future of the space this visual unity is finally not preserved. Neither graves nor the ruin shall be monumentalized.

Image: Ground Plan, Archaeological Site

The archaeological site becomes clearly separated from the church with an entrance through a former opening from the exterior crypt. The visitor starts his visit through the former interior crypt, close to the once celebrated tombs.

Image: Excavations with walkway

Steel bars are added to walkways that float over the archaeological site, recalling a thoroughly raked Zen rock garden.

Image: Scarpa / Duke on Horse 1329

To some extent Gottfried Böhm might be compared with Carlo Scarpa because of the respectful, imaginative and storytelling attitude when dealing with historical architecture. Surely Scarpa influenced German architects in these decades.

In this example, in Verona – Castelvecchio, it is Scarpa's decision how to position the famous sculpture of Cangrande on his horse from the 14th century that calls for attention and a real and lasting encounter.

Böhms or Peitz interventions are equally rooted in techno-logical sensitivity (the techné of logos and the logos of techné) and they equally play with transference.

Image: Metonymy and Corporeal Imagination

Transference in architecture very often relies on the antropomorph identification between body and building. Joints are joining body parts or building parts. Doors and windows are orifices that demand rituals and sensitive design. The Metonymy is a particularly powerful trope. The connection is made by similarity in function. In the figurative detailing of architecture it is one source for poetic signs.

Image: Modena, arc and naked figure

For instance, to be as straight forward as may be only the Middle Ages were liberated enough to be, the naked keystonefigure on the main arch of the cathedral of Modena demonstrates the techno-logical nature of the arch. The double headed being is exhibiting his sexuality and comments in a witty analogy how two elements may become one.

The example, from Frascari's book *Monsters of Architecture*, shows how conceptual transference functions. The body understands through mimetic correspondence also if the signs are much more subtle.

I will comment five iconological decisions in St. Maximins, that – using the approach of my former professor Marco Frascari – I called „Mostri Sacri“. Frascari was a critical US-Italian Academic. The term is not meant to indicate that these signs are sacred in a traditional sense but that the horizon that they might open up, has something transcending and hence sacred.

1 : CHILDREN PLAYING IN THE CHURCH

Image: Children in St. Maximin, The invisible body

Such demonstration or Mostri Sacri is first of all the use as gymnasium.
We know music as an element of sacred space and we tend to agree that musical harmony corresponds with the laws of proportion.
Children running in the main nave bend the image of a silent place for contemplation upside down. Romano Guardini called Catholic liturgy a „play in front of God“ and „the children“ as metaphor for an open and honest attitude have biblical weight.
But churches became much more monocultural and silent in the last centuries.
There is of course a gap between the two terms of a metaphor and theological aesthetics will ask *how* such gap is treated. Hence we ask about the design decisions.

2 : STEEL / FINESTELLA / STAIRCASE / DOORS

Image: Showwindow to crypt

A window between crypt and main nave replaces the former staircase leading down into the crypt. It recalls the motif of the finestella.
The gaze through the new shop-window connects the world of past and eternity with the new activities in the gym.

Image: Curtain, Showwindow and Steelplates

The window is frameless and consists of a single pane integrated into the cryptwall. It can be closed with two moveable steel plates, reminding of the stone slabs an ancient grave was closed, with a corresponding weight to contemplate about. The reduced technology and plain surfaces generate associations to the forge in the Middle Age or Renaissance.
The steel is used for all exterior doors uniting them in an archaic „Arte Povera“, reminding the chromatic work of Richard Serra and establishing slow time machines.

Image: Spiral Staircase

A spiral staircase leads up to one of the towers, resembling an Axis Mundi and retracing the lost spiral staircases from the Ottonic church.

Image: Reconstruction of Ottonian Building

Image: Peter Zumthor, Shelters in Chur

I suggest a brief visit in Switzerland to see another interpretation of the same show-window theme. The entrance to the famous shelter-building for a Roman archaeological site by Peter Zumthor recalls an old camera. The architect writes:

This treatment of the entrance represents a play on the relationship between history and the present: The Roman entrances, (...), are encased in peepshow-like constructions which afford a glimpse – but not an access – into the interior. Admission is provided by a modern steel footbridge, which runs the length of the buildings at a raised, a-historical observation level.⁴

Techné is an integral part of Zumthor's work. He desires an architecture beyond the symbol, and as Scarpa, Böhm and Peitz loves to reinforce the phenomena of the material. To Zumthor, quote:

there is something revealing about the work of Joseph Beuys and some of the artists of the Arte Povera group. What impresses me is the precise and sensuous way they use materials. It seems anchored in an ancient, elemental knowledge about man's use of materials, and at the same time to expose the very essence of these materials which is beyond all culturally conveyed meaning.⁵

Image: Zumthor, St. Benedikt

Critical to post-modern arbitrariness, where *the real thing remains hidden*⁶, the Swiss prefers objects like musical instruments or tools *which are what they are and not mere vehicles for an artistic message, whose presence is self-evident*.⁷

Obviously, when referring to peepshows, Zumthor nevertheless also plays with conceptual analogies. But such semiotic shifting is always kept in accordance with phenomenological principles and consequently is easy to decipher with the body.

Image: Hinges, St. Maximin

The use of steel in St. Maximin, recalling Serra's archaic and precise sculptures, follows a similar line. Matter matters.

Surprising combinations, a change of reference or scale, can give birth to enigmatic signs, inviting to wonder and be moved from the visible to the invisible.

According to mediaeval understanding, the *signum* participates and corresponds to the divine: *per visibiles ornatus ad invisibiles moueamur*.⁸

Image: Salt

For instance, the human body knows the crystallization of salt on the skin. Salt crystals correspond and participate in the process and the phenomena of concentration. Salt and many other signs are not arbitrary at all. The sign instead incorporates qualities of the intended field of interpretation: crystallization-purification-energy.

⁴ Peter Zumthor, a+u, 1998/ February, p.28

⁵ ebd. p.18

⁶ ebd.p.14

⁷ ebd.p.14

⁸ Kirstin Faupel Dreves, Vom Rechten Gebrauch der Bilder im liturgischen Raum, Brill, 2000, S.317

3 : KEY-METAPHOR / VELUM / BALLCURTAINS

Image: Curtain in St. Maximin

Two classes in the church at the same time require a flexible separation, which is created by two moveable curtains. The architects escape the profanity of the standard Gym-ballcurtain by changing the usual cloth and adding mysterious folds. Grounded in history, the imagination of the architect sharpens our perception of the technological world. Either even the original meaning of curtains attached to their liturgical use in Christian churches is associated or at least their use in theater.

Image: Fastentuch/ Vela, Zittau, 1472

Representative of the 13th century, the widely published liturgical handbook *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, by the bishop Durandus von Mende testifies a special paradigm for the „correct“ use of textiles, velum and vela.

Image: The veiling of the Cross before Good Friday

Hardly we find today the veiling of the entire main nave but the Catholic Church still practices the veiling of the Cross before Eastern. This is a school project from 2019 that I find very interesting: 200 Masks, partly as mirrors, veil the cross.

Beyond the term, to veil/ to unveil, „hides a key metaphor of the allegorical method“.

Image: Leibzig

Ironically then, it is in St. Maximin where the curtain returns into the church and with it a sign of ritual and metaphorical play. This space shall not be an object of Cartesian clarity but has folds like Leibzig's house of the human soul, a gesture that is unusual in a gym but appropriate in St. Maximin and the folds of history present. These curtains do not promise an eschatological revelation at some perspective point in time. They recall the “poetic a priori of the world”.

Image: Sydney, *Incarnation*

Image: St. Maximin, curtain seen from the crypt

Both curtains also can be raised. As the architect Gottfried Böhm intended, they make the space mysterious. They recall a *different* space, though their function may on first sight seem profane.

4 : THE LIGHT SYSTEM / AMPHION AND ZETHOS

Image: Amphion/Orpheus Frontispiz Perrault

The magical beauty of Amphion's seven string harp make the stones obey. Certainly a desired object for any architect, this music forces matter floating through the air into place. Many ancient cultures regard the transitive element of musical harmonies as the Anima of pure matter. Ambiguously the material creation of the world is linked with the silencing of an original sound.

Image: St. Maximin lightboard

In St. Maximin two light groups allow warm and cold light for the sport and the concert use. They are named Amphion and Zethos in reference to the origins of the place in late antiquity. The twinsons of Zeus build the walls of Theben and since 1995 their Greek letters now adorn this light board.

Image: Concert, main nave

The names of the halfgods Amphion and Zethos replace their associated functions: the concerthall and the gym. Both forces are needed: musical and corporeal strength.

Image: Feuervogel /Children

The lightboard recalls a myth that is essential to architecture, probably commented in all courses on architecture theory. Architects should be aware that not only animals, trees, stones and architecture are connected to a musical origin, but that the human body is a most exceptional example of such silenced music.

Image: Feuervogel / Boy

The naming demands a holistic concept of the body which hopefully provokes changes in the often rather unmusical concepts of physical education.

5 : BASKETS

Image: Doge kneeling

The scenery in a museum is successful, when the items of a collection are presented in a subtle dialog. Carlo Scarpa demonstrated his talent for museum-choreography and mimetic gestures many times. Here the tool, the iron support for the sculpture, performs the same kneeling gesture as does the doge.

Image: Baskets

In St. Maximin the baskets are presented like icons referring to the topology of the sacred space and the former way of the cross.

A transparent board and an unusual presentation in line, make them strangely equate with the old church. They focus concentration and movement and therefore demonstrate an amazing analogy to the historical line of altars on these walls and the stations of the cross. In a witty but as much also serious and deep translation they mime the religious precedent.

The leap to the basket becomes transcription for the religious experience of temporally losing ground, to be so to say „beyond oneself“. Also arthistorians use the term ek-stasis in this context.

RÉSUMÉ

Image: Children

St. Maximin is a manifold architecture of archaeology, preserving, re-constructing and critically re-interpreting sacred architecture.

Surely we often deal with monuments with less substantial changes in the past, where structure, surfaces and architectural elements (doors, windows, staircases) are still in situ. Every monument is very different. Calling it a “model” refers to the conceptual profoundness, the reading of traces and the poetical strength.

Though the emphasis on first sight lays on a strategy of respectful reconstruction and preservation, these principles are amusingly completed by an imaginative and surrealistic play with history that anticipates future.

Comparable with the monstrous figures that adorn and comment mediaeval architecture or books, the described signs do not subvert the center and main structure of the architectural body. Instead the architects worked similar to a rhetorician recalling topoi and tropes, thereby moving very powerful gears. Materials are chosen and treated in order to show aging. Surfaces are not polished and shining but partly as rough and unfinished as the processes of nature.

The mythopoetical project excellently contributes to the discussion about the future use of Christian churches, because it demonstrates profound historical formation and a theological and aesthetical dialog between past, present and future.

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