

The Church in the Camouflage of Mass Housing Construction. The Ecumenical Centre of Scharnhorst-Ost in Dortmund

ARTICLE

Parish Centres, Ecumenism, Urban Development, Large Housing Estate, Second Vatican Council

/Abstract

Located in the densely populated industrial region of western Germany, the Scharnhorst-Ost Ecumenical Centre is an example of the important social and urban function of parish centres, especially in the newly built social housing estates of the post-war period. Like many of the church buildings erected after the Second Vatican Council and influential Protestant Church Building Conferences such as that in Darmstadt in 1969, Scharnhorst, deliberately eschewed a traditional church building scheme as an expression of the desire for reform. They also decided to build two neighbouring churches as an ecumenical centre, which opened in 1974 after three years of construction. As the focus was to be on diaconal work, great importance was attached to the suitability of the parish centre's architecture for everyday use. The aim was to contribute to the development of social structures in the estate through interfaith life support and a wide range of educational and leisure activities. The new pastoral concept was also to be reflected in the architecture, which was to be designed as an open, low-threshold meeting place for everyone, and also to blend in with the urban context through deliberate simplicity.

The Scharnhorst ecumenical community centre is part of a dense network of church buildings in the region, many of which are currently under threat of demolition or closure. Especially in cases such as Scharnhorst, where the conceptual qualities outweigh the directly perceived aesthetic or spiritual qualities, the public communication of the conceptual strengths is important both for the protection of this historical heritage of the region, for the preservation of its urban function, and for the preservation of the socially integrative communities located here.

/Author

Anna Kloke
Technical University of Dortmund
anna.kloke@tu-dortmund.de

Anna Kloke has been a research associate at the Chair of History and Theory of Architecture at the Technische Universität Dortmund since 2015. As part of her habilitation, she is currently researching the "Internationale Bauausstellung Emscher Park" (International Building Exhibition Emscher Park) and its director Karl Ganser, supported by a scholarship from the "Stiftung Deutscher Architekten" (Foundation of German Architects).

From 2019 to 2022, she took part in the research project "Stadt-BautenRuhr". The research project of the Technical University of Dortmund, the Baukunstarchiv NRW (Architecture Archives of North Rhine-Westphalia) and the Museum Folkwang, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, investigated the contribution of public buildings and churches to the formation of identity in the cities of the Ruhr area and the region as a whole. Anna Kloke received her doctorate from the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Studies at the Bauhaus University Weimar with a thesis on the significance of manifestos in architectural discourse. From 2009 to 2015 she worked as a research assistant and lecturer at Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences. Before completing her Masters in Art and Design at the Universities of Duisburg-Essen and Bochum, she completed a diploma in Interior Design at the University of Applied Sciences Lippe-Höxter. As a member of the Chamber of Architects of North Rhine-Westphalia, Anna Kloke has been working as a freelance planner since 2006.

The city of Dortmund is located in the west of Germany. It is part of the Ruhr area, Germany's largest conurbation, which was heavily influenced by the mining and steel industries since the onset of industrialization during the nineteenth century. The industrial plants, their impact on the landscape and the housing estates for the workers have shaped the region – both in terms of appearance and identity [Fig. 1].

Attracted by the prospering industry, many people moved to the Ruhr area. The massive influx had a strong influence on the denominational structure. The regional concentration of Protestants in cities such as Dortmund and Catholics in cities of the former Electorate of Cologne, such as Essen, increasingly broke up. As a further consequence of the economic and social development in the Ruhr area, there was a building boom of churches of both Christian denominations to serve the rapidly growing population, especially from the second half of the 19th century and to a lesser extent after the First World War. The buildings were often made possible by large donations from wealthy companies operating in the Ruhr area. Along with many newly built church-run social institutions, these churches also shaped the appearance of the expanding cities.



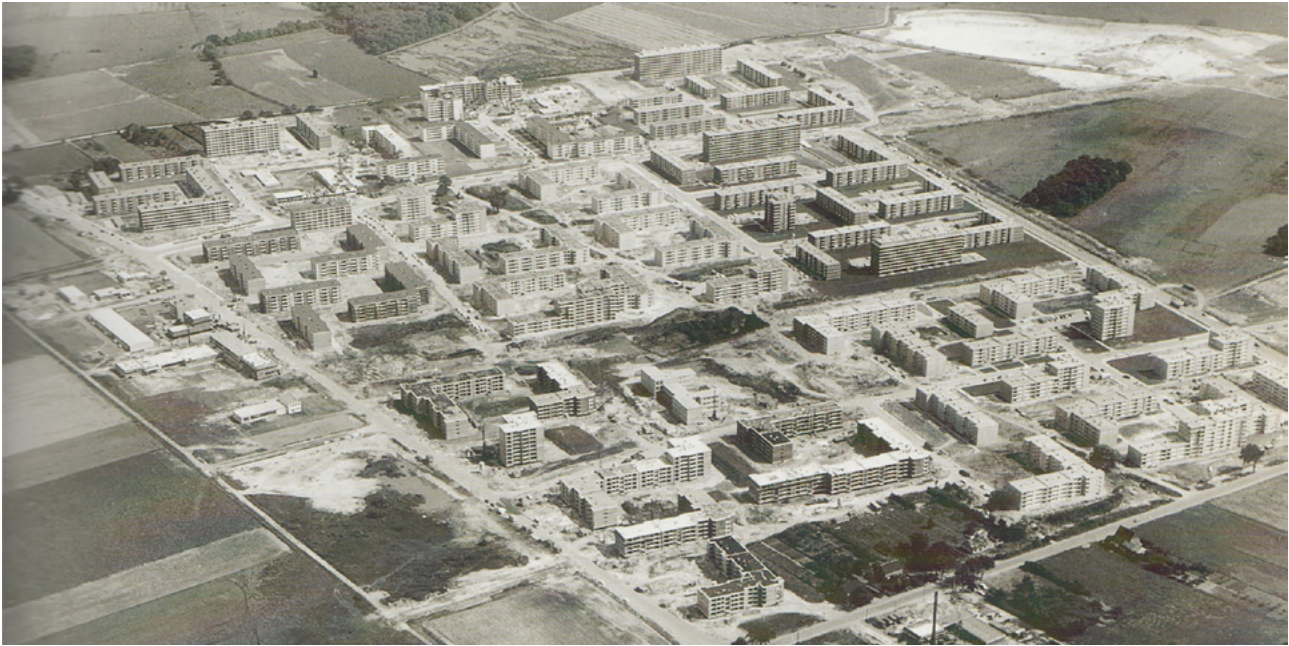
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After the Second World War the process of confessional mixing continued. There was a resurgence in the building of Christian churches in response to renewed population growth in the Ruhr region.¹ The Bishop of Essen in particular built a large number of so called "Pantoffelkirchen" (slipper churches). Every miner was supposed to have a church in his neighbourhood within walking distance (in slippers).² Many of these churches wanted to reflect the renewal

¹ However, not only Christian churches were built. Refugees and migrant workers brought other religions with them and built their places of worship.

² Vera Bückler, *Sakrale Bauten der Industriekultur* (Essen: Regionalverband Ruhr, 2024) https://www.route-industriekultur.ruhr/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2020_TR26_Sakralbauten_RIK.pdf (last accessed December 2024).

Fig. 1
Post Card "Dortmund
Scharnhorst", 1942.



movements in the Church, expressed above all in the Second Vatican Council, with the forms and materials of modernity. Today, the Ruhr area has a dense network of these churches, which represent an important (and unfortunately endangered)³ architectural heritage of the region. This includes the Scharnhorst Ecumenical Centre, not so much for its artistic quality as for its conceptual strength and its power to bear witness to the reform movements in church and society of the 1960s and 1970s.

A Satellite Town to Combat the Housing Shortage in Dortmund

In 1871, the Scharnhorst colliery was opened to the north-east of the city of Dortmund, in an area that had previously been rural. Over time, various housing estates were built around the colliery. The new “Scharnhorst” district was created, named after the mine. Particularly in the post-war period, the (still) expanding coal and steel industries attracted workers from Germany and abroad to Dortmund. Displaced people also sought accommodation in the city, which was still being rebuilt after the air raids of the war. Between 1965 and 1972, in response to the severe housing shortage in Scharnhorst and the surrounding area, the non-profit housing association *Neue Heimat* built the satellite town Scharnhorst-Ost according to the standards of functional urban development [Fig. 2].⁴ With more than 5,000 homes planned for around 20,000 people, Scharnhorst-Ost was one of the largest housing projects in West Germany.

When four young Franciscan friars moved to the site at Easter 1968 to found a

3 Kim de Wildt, “Transformations of ‘Sacredness in Stone’: Religious Architecture in Urban Space in 21st Century Germany – New Perspectives in the Study of Religious Architecture,” *Religions* 10, no. 11 (October 2019): 602, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10110602>. See also: “invisibilis – der Kirchenwiederfinder,” <https://www.moderne-regional.de/listing-category/kirchen/> (last accessed December 2024).

4 *Neue Heimat* (1926-1990) was a non-profit German construction and housing company based in Hamburg and owned by the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB). It was the leading developer of large-scale projects and built several large housing estates in the 1960s and 1970s.

Fig. 2
Satellite town “Scharnhorst-Ost”, 1968 (© Archiv Dogewo21)

parish, there were neither social infrastructure nor shops. Although 5000 people already lived in Scharnhorst-Ost, there was not even a post box. Public transport to Dortmund city centre, 10 kilometers away, was inadequate. A supply centre, including the two major churches, was still being planned. The social structure of the new settlement was difficult. Housing benefit recipients lived in 85 per cent of the households and 46 per cent of the first residents were under 15 years old. There were still no spaces for social gatherings. The lack of festivities and events reflected the lack of traditions in a settlement that had been created on a drawing board.

Pastorate Plans on a Scientific Basis for the Secular City

The Franciscans quickly identified anonymity and isolation as the main problems of the settlement. In 1965, Harvey Cox published his highly regarded work “The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective”, in which he described the role of the Church in the secular city as “the diakonos of the city, the servant who bends over backwards to fight for its wholeness and health”⁵. Taking their cue from Harvey Cox, the friars decided that their main task in Scharnhorst-Ost should also be diakonia. So, they moved into the newly built flats themselves, to live next door to the residents and make contact with them, offering social advice and practical help. According to the motto “a church community is not built from the altar”⁶, a small community grew without any specific architecture.

The friars reflected on what the structure of the congregation and the ministry to the community in the satellite city should look like in the future. In the course of the increasing scientificisation of the social and the associated socio-political rise of the social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s, including the field of theology, they commissioned the “Wuppertal Institute for Communication Research” (IFK) to carry out a situation analysis.⁷ The aim was to create a model for church work in the structural area of metropolitan satellite settlements and to gain starting points for a more systematic and methodically effective pastoral care.⁸ The IFK first conducted a survey of the Catholics living there, asking them about their daily life on the estate, their needs and their expectations of the Church as an institution. The results⁹ showed that although 75 per cent of respondents

5 Harvey Cox, “The Church as God’s avant-garde,” in *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* ed. Harvey Cox (Princeton: University Press, 2013), 148-176: 159.

6 Josef Scharrer, “Die Dienste der Gemeinde,” in *Wer mitmacht, erlebt Gemeinde. Modell Dortmund-Scharnhorst. Eine Zwischenbilanz*, ed. Petrus Görges, Reinhard Kellerhoff, Clemens Weber and Werenfried Wessel (Limburg: Lahn-Verlag, 1972), 89-122: 113.

7 See also: Lutz Raphael, “Zwischen Sozialaufklärung und radikalem Ordnungsdenken Die Verwissenschaftlichung des Sozialen im Europa der ideologischen Extreme,” in *Europäische Wissenschaftskulturen und politische Ordnungen in der Moderne (1890-1970)*, ed. Gangolf Hübinger (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2014), 29-50: 48; Benjamin Ziemann, *Katholische Kirche und Sozialwissenschaften 1945-1975* (Göttingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

8 Josef Scharrer, “Von der Analyse zum Pastorsplan,” in *Wer mitmacht, erlebt Gemeinde. Modell Dortmund-Scharnhorst. Eine Zwischenbilanz*, ed. Petrus Görges, Reinhard Kellerhoff, Clemens Weber and Werenfried Wessel (Limburg: Lahn-Verlag, 1972), 23-39, 23.

9 The following figures from the study are taken from: Scharrer, “Von der Analyse zum Pastorsplan,” 23-39.

had improved their living conditions by moving to Scharnhorst-Ost, only 26 per cent had “normal contacts” in their new environment. 83% rated the leisure value of the neighborhood as low or very low. Scharnhorst-Ost was seen as a purely functional neighborhood. Of those surveyed, 73 per cent expected the church to provide contact visits, pastoral care and support in everyday life, but only 33 per cent wanted to attend worship services. As the survey showed, there was great distrust of the Church as an institution among the residents. Despite this, 50 per cent wanted to be involved in the church community.

Based on the comprehensive study, a pastoral plan was developed with the priority of salvation ministry.¹⁰ The aim was to mobilize people to understand, connect and serve one another. The plan also provided for equal rights for clergy, a high degree of co-determination for the parish council, the formation of working groups that would act as independently as possible, and a comprehensive information and communication policy. A few months later, representatives of the Lutheran Church moved to Scharnhorst. They too wanted to establish a new kind of church community in the satellite town. In 1970, in an article entitled *The church has healing structures. The Scharnhorst Experiment*, they described their church work as democratically organized and consumer-critical help for self-help. Accordingly, they wanted their church to be an open and low-threshold meeting place for the structurally weak neighborhood.¹¹

The Scharnhorst Model:

Living Ecumenism as a Joint Effort for the Neighborhood

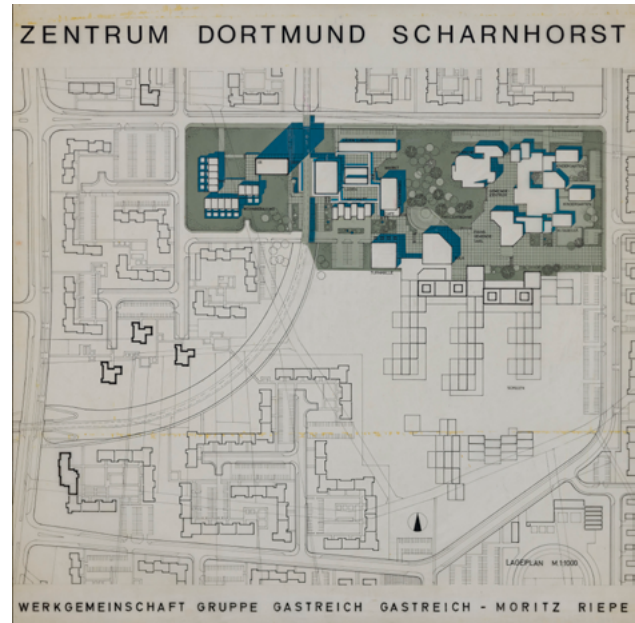
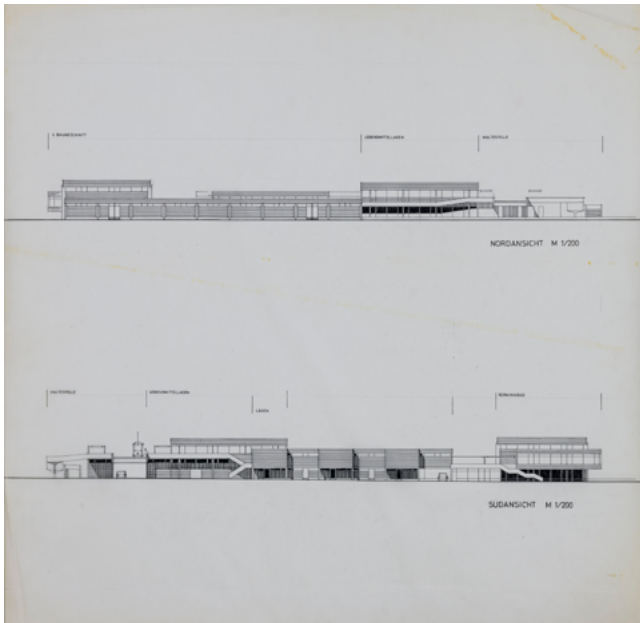
United by their common ideal of community work and faced with the precarious situation on the ground, the two denominations decided to take joint responsibility for the people in their neighborhood in a living ecumenism.¹² Together they lobbied politically for improvements in infrastructure, provided information about services and developments in the area, offered social services themselves, initiated leisure activities for families and organized neighborhood festivals. In this way, they took on a kind of substitute function for the municipality. Finally, two small pavilions were set up as a kind of interim church.

As time went on, not only did the church communities grow, but so did the pressure to build the supply centre, including the churches. In 1967, the city of Dortmund and the *Neue Heimat* housing association organized a competition for the general planning. The local architects Ulrich Gastreich, Mechtild Gastreich-Moritz and Richard Riepe won the competition [Fig. 3, 4]. They had already made a name for themselves with a number of Catholic churches and public buildings in the post-war modernist style, and were now awarded the contract for the Scharnhorst Supply Centre. Its construction finally began in 1971.

10 Scharrer, “Von der Analyse zum Pastoratsplan,” 32 ff.

11 Hans-Albrecht Pflästerer, “Gemeinde hat heilende Strukturen. Das Experiment Neuscharnhorst,” *Unsere Kirche. Wochenzeitung der Evangelischen Kirche von Westfalen und der Lippischen Landeskirche*, no. 17 (1971): 6-7.

12 Scharrer, “Die Dienste der Gemeinde,” 119.



The Design of the Ecumenical Centre of "Scharnhorst-Ost"

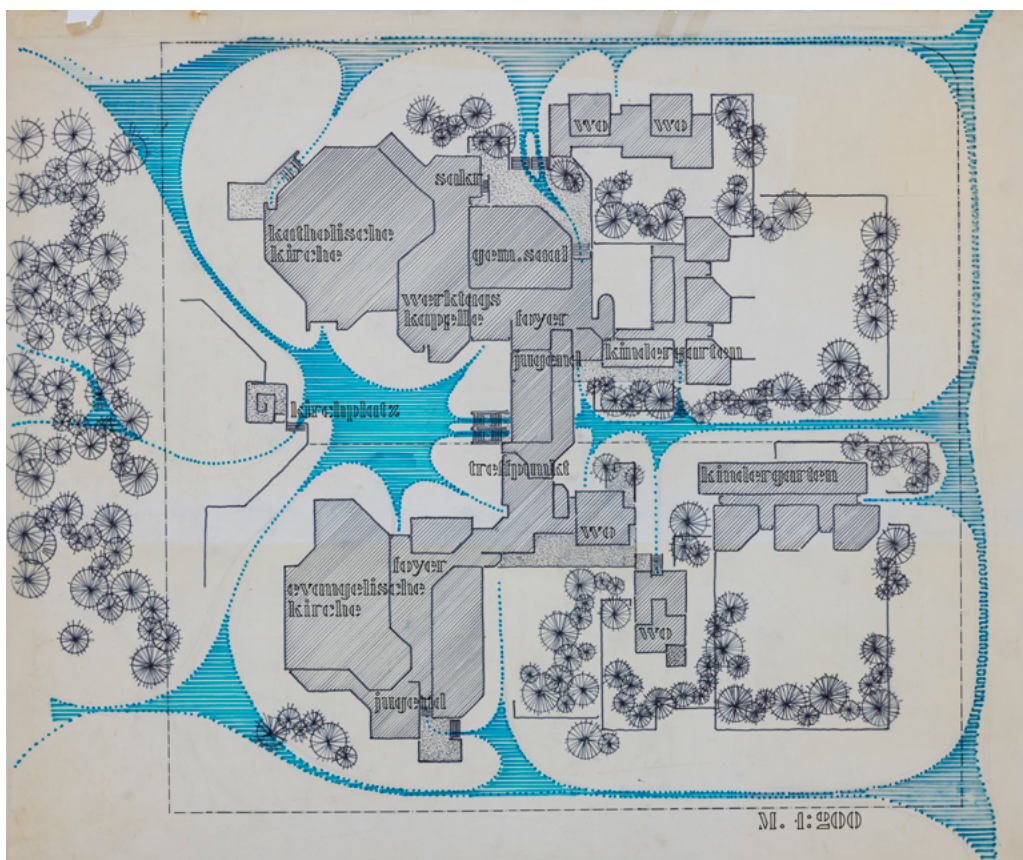
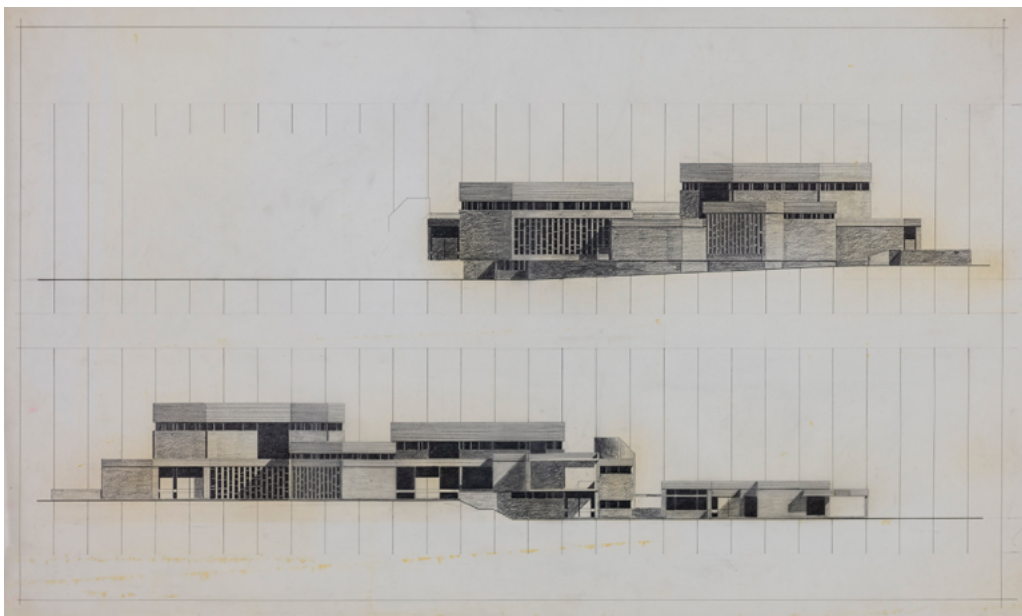
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Due to the size and importance of the Scharnhorst-Ost project, the city made special efforts to develop principles for a uniform design of the entire project. For this reason, a design statute was drawn up for Scharnhorst, stipulating that the shopping centre, the bank, the comprehensive school and the churches must form a design unit.¹³ This meant that every (new) building had to relate to the neighborhood. The statute only allowed for flat roofs and exterior walls made of scratched plaster or large-format panels of exposed aggregate concrete or artificial stone. In addition, roof cornices, cornice bands, plinths, loggias and balcony parapets had to be made of artificial stone or exposed aggregate concrete. As an expression of modernity or state neutrality, it was decided not to give the church a special position in the cityscape, thus breaking with the traditional European cityscape. Both congregations were to instruct their architects to observe the general design guidelines. They were also contractually obliged not to fence in their properties and to make them accessible to the people of Scharnhorst. With these guidelines, the city preached to the converted, since subordination to the urban planning and design context corresponded to the congregations' idea of becoming one with their surroundings and of not assuming a special role according to the traditional understanding of church and city. They wanted to break up traditional power and leadership structures and work side by side with the newly established urban social institutions in the neighborhood. Both congregations deliberately chose not to follow the traditional canon of church architecture. Wrapped in the camouflage of mass housing construction, their aim was to meet the residents on an equal footing and to reduce the fear of thresholds.

¹³ Many of the files relating to the competition and the construction of the Scharnhorst housing estate and the Scharnhorst district centre are kept in the Dortmund City Archives. The design statutes can be found here: Stadtarchiv Dortmund, Akte 123/01 Lfd. Nr. 126.

Fig. 3
Ulrich Gastreich, Mechtild Gastreich-Moritz and Richard Riepe, Supply Centre Scharnhorst (Zentrum Dortmund Scharnhorst), undated, North and South elevations (© Baukunstarchiv NRW Dortmund).

Fig. 4
Ulrich Gastreich, Mechtild Gastreich-Moritz and Richard Riepe: Supply Centre Scharnhorst (Zentrum Dortmund Scharnhorst) including the Ecumenical Centre Scharnhorst, undated, plan (© Baukunstarchiv NRW Dortmund).



The two parishes also decided to commission the local architects Gastreich, Gastreich-Moritz and Riepe, who thus had a wide-ranging opportunity to design Scharnhorst. Buoyed by the ecclesiastical reform of the 1960s and the Second Vatican Council, the congregations worked with the architects to develop open, low-threshold meeting places for the neighborhood. On the basis of their good cooperation for Scharnhorst, they initially planned to share a house, including the worship room.

In the second planning phase, two parishes were designed, structurally linked

Fig. 5
Ulrich Gastreich, Mechtild Gastreich-Moritz and Richard Riepe, Ecumenical Centre, Scharnhorst, undated, elevations (© Baukunstarchiv NRW Dortmund).

Fig. 6
Ulrich Gastreich, Mechtild Gastreich-Moritz and Richard Riepe: Ecumenical Centre Scharnhorst, undated, planimetry (© Baukunstarchiv NRW Dortmund).



by a common meeting place. As can be seen in the design drawing, even the childcare facilities were already separated according to denomination [Fig. 5]. However, the representatives of the diocese and the regional church were unable to agree on even this small common framework. As a result, two completely separate community centres were finally built, which nevertheless form a single design unit. The division into two parts can be seen in a photograph taken at the time of construction [Fig. 7]. To the right of the staircase in the centre of the picture is the Catholic part with a raised sanctuary, the three-storey rectory and the kindergarten building in front of it. To the left of the staircase is the Protestant part with a kindergarten in front.

Using the village square as a model, the architects arranged the individual service areas of the parishes around a central main square and lower side squares [Fig. 8]. In addition to the worship areas, the spatial program includes community halls, youth and elderly centres, social counselling centres, a library, kindergartens, a restaurant, a one-world-shop and a second-hand-shop. This spatial program is reflected in individual, interconnected cubatures, designed as one- to three-storey flat-roofed buildings. By dividing the volumes of the architecture in this way, separate addresses are created for the respective “meeting points”. Together with the low building heights, this division also generates a human scale in relation to the surrounding area. The square opens up to the municipal facilities on the west side, such as the citizens’ office, the library and the indoor swimming pool. Well integrated into the urban fabric, the square provides a link between the shopping centre and the residential area, which is why it attracts a lot of public traffic.

Residents crossing the church square on their way to the supply center should perceive their neighborhood as a single unit. This impression is also conveyed by a photo from the construction period, which shows the facades of the Ecumenical Centre clad in the simple panel material that was common in the area [Fig. 9]. The windows and doors are also made of the same white plastic material as the surrounding houses. A Parish Centre with (largely) the same façade, the same simple windows and doors as its own block creates a sense of unity, but also breaks with familiar images and helps to create new ones. In this photo, only the sacred space of the Catholic Parish stands out, with a row of small windows and an octagonal structure clad in sheet metal.

Fig. 7
Ecumenical Centre
Scharnhorst, undated
(© Baukunstarchiv NRW
Dortmund).



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Fig. 8
Satellite image of Scharnhorst-Ost, 2024.

Centre: Ecumenical centre of Scharnhorst around a common forecourt; Catholic parish in the north with an octagonal dome, next to it the detached rectory and the Catholic kindergarten with a (newly covered) blue-grey roof; Protestant parish in the south of the forecourt with a detached Protestant kindergarten. Bilder © 2024 Google, Bilder © 2024 Airbus, GeoBASis DE/BKG, Maxar Technologies, Kartendaten © 2024 GeoBASis DE/BKG (© 2009), https://www.google.com/maps/place/Scharnhorst-Ost,+Dortmund-Scharnhorst/@51.5519799,7.5458388,119mdata=!3m1!1e3!4m6!3m5!1s0x47b911145765a2d7:0xa38c6ac73823eaa2!8m2!3d51.5537616!4d7.5555914!16s%2Fg%2F11b7481gt9?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI0MDkyOS4wKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D (last access October 2024).



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Fig. 9
Catholic Parish Centre St. Francis with the octagonal dome of the sanctuary, Ecumenical Centre Scharnhorst, undated (© Baukunstarchiv NRW Dortmund).

Fig. 10
Entrance to the Catholic Parish St. Francis and the restaurant "Am Brunnen", 2021 (© Detlef Podehl/ Technical University of Dortmund).



The Catholic St. Francis Parish

The otherwise ubiquitous demonstration of simplicity and equivalence with the surroundings culminates in the “portal” of the Catholic St. Francis community [Fig. 10]. Above the glass door system, framed in white plastic, is a large, much-needed sign indicating the use behind it. The sign defines the two equivalent entrance options: To the left is the parish centre *Katholisches Franziskus Zentrum* with its sacred space. To the right is the restaurant *Am Brunnen*, which also belongs to the church community. In the middle of the sign is a crown, the logo of the local brewery.

This design concept of simplicity and proximity to the people continues inside. As one of the earliest examples of an ecumenical centre in the region, Scharnhorst was deliberately designed as a unit. However, there are two unequal twins, especially inside. The Franciscans wanted their church interior to have a “festive but not pompous or exclusively sacred character”¹⁴. First one enters a furnished vestibule that doubles as a meeting place [Fig. 11]. The doors leading off from this do not distinguish between the entrance to the sacred space and other rooms.¹⁵ The sacred space of the Catholic parish has a polygonal floor plan and is clearly orientated towards the chancel [Fig. 12, 13]. The apse of the chancel is marked by an octagonal shape and an octagonal dome. The rough exposed concrete walls are framed by floor-to-ceiling windows at the corners and a

14 Josef Scharrer, “Kommunikation und Gemeinde,” in *Wer mitmacht, erlebt Gemeinde. Modell Dortmund-Scharnhorst. Eine Zwischenbilanz*, ed. Petrus Görges, Reinhard Kellerhoff, Clemens Weber and Werenfried Wessel (Limburg: Lahn-Verlag, 1972), 63-88, 87.

15 The ceiling opening in the entrance area seen in the current photos and the stained glass in the doors were only added later and were not originally intended.

Fig. 11
The vestibule of the Catholic Parish St. Francis, 2021 (© Detlef Podehl/ Technical University of Dortmund).



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continuous band of windows, making the ceiling appear to float. The geometric pattern of the exposed concrete beams is striking. Typical of a church built in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the aim was to create flexible and multifunctional spaces. As a result, the worship area has loose seating and can be opened up to the adjoining rooms. The interior, which was originally less ornate, has been partially adapted.

Over time, the original clear-glass windows have been replaced with stained-glass, artistically designed wall sconces have been installed and various devotional objects have been placed. In addition, the original altar table of simple block elements was replaced by an artistically designed wooden table. The intentional leveling of the floor was cancelled out by the subsequent raising of the area immediately around the altar [Fig. 14]. This reveals a recurring

Fig. 12, 13
The church room of the
Catholic Parish St. Francis,
2021 (© Detlef Podehl/
Technical University of
Dortmund).



conflict between the Catholic parishioners and the conceptual profanity of the interior and exterior design. Feelings of lack of legibility, dignity and spirituality led to these “improvements” through architectural semantic cues with the aim of re-sacralisation.¹⁶

The Protestant Shalom Parish

As with the Catholic St Francis Parish, a simple glass door system leads into the Protestant Shalom Parish [Fig. 15]. Again, there is an anteroom with seating for informal meetings [Fig. 16]. One of the similarly designed doors leads into the worship area, which is much less organised and simpler than the Catholic one.

The non-directional, almost unadorned room has no clear basic geometric shape and has no fixed choir [Fig. 17, 18]. It also has loose seating and can be divided by folding walls. The altar is a simple wooden table that can be positioned as required. On one of the whitewashed walls hangs a simple wooden cross, left over from the interim church. There are no stained-glass windows. A striking feature are the exposed tubular radiators in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows. The Protestant worship space clearly reflects the demands of the 1969 Protestant Church Building Conference in Darmstadt, such as profanity rather than

¹⁶ A deliberate break with the design line right from the start can be found in the Restaurant Am Brunnen. Here, a historic-looking indoor fountain, half-timbering and murals create a cozy atmosphere. Wall paintings with impressions of Assisi are a reference to the patron saint.

Such a tendency towards the re-sacralisation of deliberately simply designed multi-purpose church rooms was identified as early as 1981 by the Institut für Kirchenbau und kirchliche Kunst der Gegenwart (Institute for Church Construction and Church Art of the Present) at the University of Marburg in a study of 17 community centres with multi-purpose rooms over a period of several years. In all of the community centres, attempts were made to “enhance” the rooms through artistic design, the use of valuable materials and the display of devotional objects, or to place them back into a clearer context of use by fixing the altar, pulpit and baptismal font. See: Martin Görbing, Hans Graß and Horst Schwebel, eds., *Planen-Bauen-Nutzen. Erfahrungen mit Gemeindezentren* (Giessen: Wilhelm Schmitz, 1981).

Fig. 14
The church room of the Catholic Parish St. Francis, undated (© Baukunstarchiv NRW).



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Fig. 15
The Protestant Parish, 2021
(© Detlef Podehl/ Technical
University of Dortmund).

Fig. 16
The vestibule of the Protestant
Parish, 2021 (© Detlef Podehl/
Technical University of
Dortmund).

Fig. 17, 18
The church room of the
Protestant Parish, 2021 (©
Detlef Podehl/ Technical
University of Dortmund).



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sacredness, service rather than representation, worldliness rather than detachment from the world.

In the early years, visitors would ask if it was really a church. Even today, despite many adaptations, especially on the Catholic side, few weddings take place there. In an interview with the author on 24 February 2021 in Dortmund-Scharnhorst, Pastor Reinhard Bürger reported that most couples choose a historic church in the neighbouring district. This shows that the understanding and acceptance of this conscious simplicity is not particularly well developed and needs to be communicated.

Scharnhorst compared to other Ecumenical centres built in the 1970s

In line with an increased focus on diaconia, many churches in West Germany in the 1970s were designed as low-threshold parish centres.¹⁷ As in Scharnhorst, this was particularly the case in urban expansion areas, where strong population growth created a need for new places of worship. Encouraged by the Second Vatican Council and the Ecumenical movement, some of these new church buildings were built as Ecumenical centres.¹⁸ If we look at examples built in the 1970s in West Germany in the context of urban expansion, such as the *Gemeinsame Kirchenzentrum Meschede*¹⁹, the *Gemeinsame Kirchenzentrum*

Fig. 19
Satellite image "Ökumenisches Gemeindezentrum Scharnhorst", 2024.
Bilder © 2024 Google, Bilder © 2024 Airbus, GeoBasis DE/BKG, Maxar Technologies, Kartendaten © 2024 GeoBasis DE/BKG (@2009), https://www.google.com/maps/search/Ökumenisches+Gemeindezentrum+Scharnhorst/@51.552028,7.5452078,161m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI0MDkyOS4wIwIXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D (last access December 2024).

Fig. 20
Satellite image „Gemeinsames Kirchenzentrum Meschede“, 2024.
Bilder © 2024 GeoBasis DE/BKG, Maxar Technologies, Kartendaten © 2024 Google, GeoBasis DE/BKG (@2009), https://www.google.com/maps/place/Kath.+KiTa+St.+Franziskus/@51.3626951,8.2916214,88m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m1!1m7!3m6!1s0x47bbe7d8db8b7133:0xd5241289014118b5!2sGemeinsames+Kirchenzentrum+Ev.+Kirchengemeinde+Meschede!8m2!3d51.3627589!4d8.2918036!16s%2Fg%2F11btmqm29f!3m5!1s0x47bbe7d8dbb2b03b:0x2ff47a71482c93a3!8m2!3d51.36293!4d8.29208!16s%2Fg%2F11bzym8kz?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI0MDkyOS4wIwIXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D (last access December 2024).

17 See: Jan Hermelink, "Programm und Praxis kirchlicher Inklusion. Praktisch-theologische Beobachtungen zum Bautyp „Gemeindezentrum“, in *Diakonische Kirchen(Um)Nutzung*, ed. Alexander Deeg and Kerstin Menzel (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2023), 95-111.

18 For the history of the development of ecumenical community centres, see also: Albert Gerhards and Stefan Kopp, eds., *Von der Simultankirche zum ökumenischen Kirchenzentrum. Sakralbauten im Spannungsfeld christlicher Konfessionen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2021). Gerald Hagmann, *Ökumenische Zusammenarbeit unter einem Dach. Eine Studie über evangelisch-katholische Gemeindezentren* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007). Marta Binaghi, *Ökumenische Kirchenzentren: Bild der Einheit oder Spiegel der Trennung?* (Regensburg: Schnell + Steiner, 2015). Stefan Kopp and Joachim Werz, eds., *Gebaute Ökumene. Botschaft und Auftrag für das 21. Jahrhundert?* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2018).

19 The *Gemeinsame Kirchenzentrum Meschede* (trans.: Joint Church Centre) was built between 1975 and 1976. The architects were Norbert Düking and Peter Iseken. It was built in connection with the construction of the *Gartenstadt Nord* housing estate, which was built between 1960s and 1970s. The *Gemeinsame Kirchenzentrum Meschede* was sold to the *Christen Gemeinde Sauerland* in 2023, which has applied for permission to use the building for non-religious purposes for cost reasons.

For the history of the origin and development of the *Gemeinsame Kirchenzentrum Meschede* see also: Stefan Kopp, "Gemeinsam leben – gemeinsam beten – gemeinsam bauen. Ökumenische Kirchenzentren im Erzbistum Paderborn," *Catholica* 74, no. 38 (July 2020): 203-217. Hartmut Geller, "Ökumenische Beziehungen in einer Kleinstadt – Meschede," in *Ökumene und Gemeinde. Untersuchungen zum Alltag in Kirchengemeinden*, ed. Helmut



21

22

*Helfe*²⁰ in Hagen-Helfe, the *Ökumenische Zentrum Thomaskirche* in Marburg²¹ and the *Ökumenische Gemeindezentrum Scharnhorst*, we can find parallels in urban planning and architectural design.

What is most striking is the absence of dominant urban gestures. The function as a church is more likely to be recognised at second glance through applied semantic references. Only the *Gemeinsame Kirchenzentrum Hagen-Helfe* has a modern interpretation of a church tower, otherwise this clear sign was omitted. All four examples are characterised by a highly structured building volume, the adoption of typical contemporary building forms and materials from secular buildings, and the functional integration into a centre for social service and commerce [Fig. 19, 20, 21, 22]. With the formation of courtyards and squares, the churches create an integration into the urban context and at the same time form a kind of forum for the new settlement.

Inside, including the worship areas, all four examples use loose seating, minimalist furnishings, “unglamorous” materials such as rough concrete or exposed brickwork, and visible load-bearing structures to create a sense of authenticity and truthfulness.

Ecumenism has different architectural expressions in the four examples. From the outside, there is no visible separation between the different denominations in Hagen-Helfe and Meschede, although it is practised inside. In Meschede, there is only one place of worship, but it belongs to the Catholic parish. It is made

Fig. 21
Satellite image “Gemeinsames Kirchenzentrum Hagen-Helfe”, 2022. Bilder © 2024 Airbus, GeoBasis DE/BKG, Maxar Technologies, Kartendaten © 2024 GeoBasis-DE/BKG (©2009), https://www.google.com/maps/search/Gemeinsames+Kirchenzentrum+hagen+helfe/@51.3925862,7.4832563,203m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI0MDkyOS4wKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D (last access December 2024).

Fig. 22
Satellite image “Ökumenisches Zentrum Thomaskirche”, Marburg 2024. Bilder © 2024 Google, Bilder © 2024 AeroWest, GeoBasis-DE/BKG, Maxar Technologies, Kartendaten © 2024 GeoBasis-DE/BKG (©2009), https://www.google.com/maps/place/che+Zentrum+Thomaskirche/@50.792991,8.7860198,99m/data=!3m2!1e3!5s0x47bc89db2e38e333:0xbb63e05f247290cb!4m6!3m5!1s0x47bc89c8d54a447d:0x193c256dd7e9533f!8m2!3d50.79307!4d8.78666!16s%2Fg%2F11c488r_2q?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI0MTAwMi4xKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D (last access December 2024).

Geller, Eckart Pankoke and Karl Gabriel (Obladen: Leske und Budrich 2002), 163-218.

20 The *Gemeinsame Kirchenzentrum Hagen-Helfe* (Joint Church Centre) was built between 1975 and 1976 and is still in ecumenical use. The architects were Funke, Manfred Krug and Bernhard van der Minde. It was built in connection with the construction of the *Gartenvorstadt Hagen-Helfe* housing estate, which began in 1964. For the history of the origin and development of the *Gemeinsame Kirchenzentrum Hagen-Helfe* in Hagen-Helfe see also: Kopp, “Gemeinsam leben – gemeinsam beten – gemeinsam bauen”; Hartmut Geller, “Nähe ohne Distanz – Ökumenische Beziehungen im Ökumenischen Kirchenzentrum Hagen-Helfe,” in *Ökumene und Gemeinde. Untersuchungen zum Alltag in Kirchengemeinden*, ed. Helmut Geller, Eckart Pankoke and Karl Gabriel (Obladen: Leske und Budrich, 2002), 55-110.

21 The *Ökumenische Zentrum Thomaskirche* (Ecumenic Centre St. Thomas) in Marburg was built between 1972 and 1973 and is still in ecumenical use. The architects were the members of the “Theodor London Collective”, Dirk Bäumer, Johann Georg (Graf zu) Solms and Karl Hermann Stärk. It was built in connection with the construction of the large housing estate *Wohnstadt Richtsberg*, built between 1963 and 1970. For the history of the origin and development of the *Ökumenische Zentrum Thomaskirche* in Marburg see also: “Ökumenische Zentrum Thomaskirche,” Evangelische Kirchengemeinde am Richtsberg. <http://thomaskirche.aion.de> (last accessed November 2024); Karin Berkemann, “Marburg-Richtsberg Ökumenisches Zentrum,” <https://strasse-der-moderne.de/kirchen/marburg-richtsberg-oekumenisches-zentrum/> (last accessed November 2024).

available to the Protestant parish on a permanent basis. The restaurant and the youth rooms belong to the Protestant community. Only the foyer is jointly owned. The *Gemeinsame Kirchenzentrum Meschede* has been a listed building since 2021. Despite the clear separation of ownership, because of the “consistent implementation of ecumenical principles in the building structure and liturgical furnishings, it is the most important testimony to the new construction of Ecumenical centres in Westphalia-Lippe {Note: Region in West Germany} after the Second Vatican Council”²², according to the responsible monument authority. In Hagen-Helfe, there is also only one building, but it has two independent places of worship with separate sponsorship. As a special feature, there is a common hall, larger than the worship rooms, which serves as a meeting place for the ecumenical community.

The *Ökumenische Zentrum Thomaskirche* in Marburg also has a shared building with two worship spaces. These were originally only intended to be separated by a movable partition. It was only during the construction phase that they were permanently separated by a non-bearing wall. In this case, the duality is also clearly visible from the outside, with two cube-shaped roof structures marking the worship areas of the different denominations. The Ecumenical Centre in Marburg has

the status of a cultural monument due to its artistic significance, which is committed to classical (post-war) modernism {...}, as well as its role in the history of liturgy and type as an effective stage in the development of ecumenical community centres throughout Germany.²³

In Scharnhorst, ecumenism is only structurally expressed in the common forecourt and the unifying architectural language. Compared with the architectural examples from Meschede, Hagen-Helfe and Marburg, this is the clearest reflection of the existing separation of denominations.

²² “Gemeinsames Kirchenzentrum Meschede,” Untere Denkmalbehörde Stadt Meschede, https://gis.hochsauerlandkreis.de/arcgis1/rest/services/meggi/Meggi_Boden_Baudenkmale/MapServer/0/540/attachments/943 (last accessed November 2024).

²³ Ellen Kemp and Annekathrin Sitte-Köster, “Chemnitzer Straße Ökumenisches Zentrum Richtsberg/ Thomaskirche,” in *Denkmaltopographie Stadt Marburg II*, ed. Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Hessen (Darmstadt: WGB Theiss, 2014), 211-212.



Conclusion

In view of the prevailing alienation from the Church and the great need for social support, the Scharnhorst Ecumenical Centre was developed as a meeting place and social service centre.

In terms of design, the aim was to counter the prevailing reservations about the church as an institution with a new formal language that makes little distinction between church, retail, administrative, residential, cultural or leisure buildings [Fig. 23]. An architecture that has been deliberately designed to be inclusive. This was not a renunciation of self-expression, but the demonstration of a new self-image. As with many other church building projects of the time, the aim was to present modernity and worldliness.

Although some may perceive a lack of spirituality, dignity and clarity, the avoidance of ecclesiastical design and the everyday functionality of the architecture help to ensure that the centre and its services to the neighbourhood are also accepted by a wider society of non-believers and people of other faiths. In addition, the tailored architectural language makes it easy to repurpose areas and rent them out to external parties, such as the local sports club.

In Scharnhorst, the urban integration of the Ecumenical Centre into the supply centre, the creation of a church square as a “forum” for the residents and the routing of the pedestrian path through this square contributed significantly to the integration of the centre into the district. As such, the Ecumenical Centre

Fig. 23
Rectory (middle) and library (right) of the Catholic Parish St. Francis, 2021 (© Detlef Podehl/ Technical University of Dortmund).

has been instrumental in compensating for the lack of social structures in the satellite town and in creating communities.

The example of the Ecumenical Centre in Scharnhorst illustrates the important role that Christian institutions have played in the social and urban development of the city in the past and present, and raises the question of possible successor institutions in view of the announced church closures in the Ruhr area and beyond. With the Ecumenical Centre in Scharnhorst, the church has become a living part of the city within the camouflage of mass housing construction. In its integration into the urban context and its deliberate renunciation of representation and a traditional canon of forms, as a comparison with other ecumenical church centres of the 1970s has shown, it is a built expression and witness to the ecclesiastical and social will for reform of the 1960s and 1970s, and thus part of the architectural and religious heritage of the region and beyond.

Particularly in cases such as Scharnhorst, where the conceptual qualities outweigh any immediately perceived aesthetic or spiritual quality, public communication of the strengths is important both for the protection of this historical heritage of the region, for the preservation of its urban function, and for the preservation of the communities that are based here and have a socially integrative effect on society.²⁴

24 The archive material of the *Scharnhorst Ecumenical Community Centre* from the estate of architects Mechthild Gastreich-Moritz and Ulrich Moritz can be found in the *Baukunstarchiv NRW* in Dortmund. The *Ecumenical Community Centre* and its extensive archive material were the subject of the *StadtBautenRuhr* research project (2018-2022) funded by the *Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)*. In addition to the *Baukunstarchiv NRW*, the *Museum Folkwang* in Essen and the *Technical University of Dortmund* were also involved in the project. The holdings of the *Baukunstarchiv NRW* were used to investigate how specific building projects (such as museums, theatres, libraries, town halls, universities and churches) have contributed to the formation of identity in the Ruhr region. See: "StadtBautenRuhr," Museum Folkwang, <https://www.museum-folkwang.de/de/stadt-bauten-ruhr> (last accessed November 2024).

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