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Hans-Georg Lippert (Dresden)

The Appropriation of Space: Cologne Cathedral during the 19th and 20th Centuries

Cologne Cathedral is one of the best known historic buildings in Germany. Its two-spired silhouette has been turned into a hallmark, a logo or a self-explaining symbol, even in contexts which have nothing at all to do with faith or with the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. Accordingly, the building is perceived and used in many different ways: as a point of reference within a dense urban topography; as a viewpoint; as scenery for open-air-concerts; as a meeting-point for political demonstrations; as a monument of art history and the development of engineering; as a space for spiritual music; as a stage for the official activities of the Roman Catholic Church; as a destination for pilgrimage; as a place for private prayer and meditation.

Even at the beginning of the 19th century, however, nothing pointed to the fact that the Cologne Cathedral would gain such importance. When French revolutionary troops arrived at Cologne in 1794, they discovered an unfinished and partly dilapidated building within a narrow medieval town, and they used it not as church but as hospital, warehouse and stable for their horses. In 1815, after the re-installation of the archbishopric, the building was reconverted into a catholic church, and in 1842 the continuation and completion of the structure started, accompanied by an intense program of publicity and propaganda, and generously supported by the protestant royal house of Prussia. The aim of the Prussian kings was to set up a symbol of their power in the cathedral of Cologne and, at the same time, to create a monument for a future German nation. Simultaneously, far-reaching interventions in the urban surroundings of the cathedral were made, creating the impressive ensemble of 19th-century-buildings that are today registered in the UNESCO-list of world heritage (the cathedral, together with the neighbouring central railway station and the bridge of the Rhine river, which leads directly to the eastern apse of the cathedral).

After 1880, when the Cathedral of Cologne was declared complete (in the presence of the German emperor Wilhelm I and with the 'dignified reluctance' of the catholic clergy), the interpretation induced a lot of – partly acrimonious – criticism, with detractors bemoaning the demystification of the cathedral and seeking a romantic spiritual and architectural return to the period before 1840. After 1945, this attitude escalated into the idea of the cathedral as an acropolis of a new catholic theocracy, thus transforming Cologne into the spiritual centre of a better society. Of course, the symbolic presence of the Cathedral within a destroyed city favoured such speculations.

In the late 1960s, the Cathedral was connected to the newly built pedestrian areas of downtown Cologne by an enormous system of terraces, stairs and underground garages. This marked the beginning of a permanent interplay between the profane and the sacred sphere, a phenomenon that lasts until today and that has involved the Cathedral in an international culture of events. It even penetrates into the interior of the Cathedral, creating a new and strange variety of daily activities.