

The Ideas Behind the Building of the Goetheanum

GA 289

2 October 1920, Dornach

Automated Translation

1. The Building as a Setting for the Mystery Plays

Over a period of three hours I shall have the opportunity of speaking to you about the building idea of Dornach. In this first lecture, it is my task to characterize how this building idea emerged from the anthroposophically oriented spiritual movement, and then, over eight days and in a fortnight, to go into more detail about the style and the whole formal language of this our building, the framework and the external representative of our spiritual scientific movement. By speaking about the genesis of the Dornach building, I would like to perhaps touch on something personal by way of introduction.

I spent the 1880s in Vienna. It was the Vienna in which the ideas were developed that could then be seen in the Votivkirche, in the Vienna City Hall, in the Hansen Building of the Austrian Parliament, in the museums, in the Burgtheater building, that is to say in those monumental buildings that were created in Vienna in the second half of the last century and which, to a certain extent, represent the most mature products of the architecture of the past era of human development. I would like to say that I heard the words of one of the architects involved in these buildings resound from the views from which these monumental buildings were created. When I was studying at the Vienna Technical University, Heinrich Ferstel, the architect of the Votivkirche, had just taken up his post as rector. In his inaugural address, he said something that I would like to say still echoes in my mind today, and it has echoed throughout my subsequent life. Ferstel said something at the time that summarized the most diverse views that had emerged in art at the time, especially in the art of architecture. He said: architectural styles are not invented, architectural styles are born out of the overall views, out of the overall development of the time and the emotional soulfulness of entire peoples and eras.

On the one hand, such a sentence is extremely correct, and on the other hand, it is extremely inflammatory for the human mind. And anyone who has ever immersed themselves with artistic sensibility in the whole world of vision from which this remarkable Gothic structure of the

Votive Church in Vienna, translated into miniature, was created by Ferstel himself, anyone who has felt the Vienna City Hall by Schmidt, anyone who has felt the Austrian Parliament in particular, which, through Hansen's genius, has achieved a certain freedom of style, at the time when this same view had not yet been spoiled by the hideous female figure that was later placed on the ramp. Those who had experienced the artistic heyday of Gottfried Semper's mature architecture at the Vienna Burgtheater could truly feel the background from which such an artistic view emerged as that of Heinrich Ferstel, which has just been characterized. In all that was built, one sees ripe fruits, but basically one sees only the renewal of the styles of past epochs of humanity.

And I was able to feel this, I would like to say, inwardly inciting fact, for example, when I heard the lectures of the excellent esthete Joseph Bayer, who, out of the same spirit that Ferstel, Hansen, cathedral architect Schmidt, but especially Gottfried Semper, created with, tried to illustrate the forms of architectural art, the forms of ceramics, and so on.

Such a fact, such a world of ideas, is inspiring for the human mind, I say this because perhaps, when faced with such an idea, "architectural styles are not invented, but born out of an overall spiritual life" in the human mind - when one sees: this view has achieved something magnificent and powerful, but from a mere renewal, from a renaissance of old architectural styles, old artistic perceptions, so to speak - because then the question arises before the soul: Are we perhaps such a barren time after all that we cannot give birth to something new in this sense from our overall view, from the scope of our world view?

At the same time as all that could so richly fill the souls from these buildings when they immersed themselves in these views, from which the buildings arose, something else, though characteristic of the time, was concentrated in Vienna. In its soul body, Vienna had at that time also absorbed a certain height of precisely the newer medical progress. Skoda, Oppolzer and others represented a flowering of the development of medical science in the second half of the 19th century. At that time, especially if you lived among those who had to deal with such things, you could often hear a saying – and this saying also stayed with me: We live in a time in which medical nihilism has developed.

This medical nihilism, which had emerged precisely in the heyday of pathology, actually culminated in the fact that the great physicians mainly studied those forms of disease that could be observed in their course merely through pathology, in which nature's healing process only needed to be helped along by all sorts of measures, but in which little could be done for the patient by taking remedies. Thus, precisely out of this medical school arose a disbelief in therapy, a skepticism about therapy. And when pathology had developed to its highest peak that it

could reach at that time, people actually despaired of the possibility of real healing and, especially in initiated circles, spoke of medical nihilism. That is what one could feel. Our world view, where it was to prove fruitful in a certain area of practical life, led to nihilism and a certain powerlessness in the face of that practical life.

Anyone with the ability to feel and perceive these things will, in the subsequent period of European civilization, be able to fully sense how, basically, those impulses, which on the one hand found expression in the fact that an architect as important as Heinrich Ferstel had to say, "Architectural styles are not invented, but are born out of the overall development of the time," and yet still built in the sense of an old architectural style, on the other hand, expressed itself in the fact that in a practical area of life, people's views have led to nihilism.

What developed from this in the period that followed was basically a continuation of what had been expressed in this way. Through the most diverse circumstances, seemingly, but probably through a necessary connection, I was confronted with the necessity of setting up impulses of a new spiritual life everywhere in the face of the appearance of what lay in the lines of development I have indicated. This new spiritual life would in turn draw from such original sources of human thought, human feeling and human will, as they repeatedly existed in the epochs of human development and as they proved fruitful in order to give rise to the artistic, the religious and the cognitive.

If we want to feel in an even deeper way what the human mind was actually like at a time when, in art, only a kind of renaissance was living in the highest expressions of the artistic, and when, even in practical areas, views have led to a kind of nihilism. When we delve into what was actually taking place in the soul and spirit during this time, we have to say that the spiritual matters that directly concern the human being, the scientific, and even to a high degree the religious life, had taken on an abstract, intellectual character. Man had come to cultivate less that which can arise from his entire human essence, his powers and impulses. In this most recent period, he had come to establish a mere head culture, a mere intellectualistic culture, to live in abstractions.

This is something that occurs as a parallel phenomenon in the materialistic age: on the one hand, people believe that they can completely immerse themselves in the workings of material processes; but on the other hand, precisely because of this striving for immersion in a tendency towards abstraction, a tendency towards mere intellectualism, a tendency through which the urge to shape something that can directly reach into the full reality of existence fades from the most intimate affairs of the human soul. One withdraws into an abstract corner of one's soul life, leaving one's religious feelings to take place there. They withdraw into the closed rooms

of the laboratory and the observatory, and devote themselves to specialized investigations in these fields, but in so doing they distance themselves from a truly living understanding of the totality of the world. One withdraws as a human being from real cooperation with practical life, and as a result one arrives at a closed intellectuality. And finally, everything that we see emerging in the fields of philosophy or world view in this period bears a distinctly abstract, a distinctly intellectual character.

I believed that anthroposophically oriented spiritual science had to be placed in this current. It was not surprising that this spiritual science, when it was first placed in an intellectualist age, when it had to speak to people who, in the broadest sense, were fundamentally oriented towards intellectualist abstraction, initially had to appear as a worldview as if it itself had arisen only from abstraction, from mere thinking. And so it was that in our work for our anthroposophically oriented spiritual science, that phase arose which filled the first decade of the twentieth century and of which I would like to say: it was inevitable that our anthroposophically oriented world view should take on a certain intellectual character through the very nature of the people who were inclined towards it. It had to speak to people who, above all, believed that if you wanted to ascend to the spiritual and divine, you had to do so completely detached from the lower reality, you even had to arm yourself with a certain world-contempt, with a certain unreality of life. This was already an attitude that was alive in those who, out of their inclinations, had found their way into the current of anthroposophically oriented spiritual science.

And on the other hand, the world's judgment of this anthroposophically oriented spiritual science arose: Oh, they are dreamers, they are visionaries, they are people who are not relevant to practical life. This judgment arose - such things are very difficult to destroy - and still lives on today in most people who want to judge anthroposophically oriented spiritual science. Of course, people saw that something different was alive in what appeared at that time as this anthroposophically oriented spiritual science than in their theories, in their world-view ideas. And since they regarded what they had sucked out of their bloodless abstractions from their materialistic orientation as the only spiritual reality to be attained by man himself, what the anthroposophically oriented spiritual science spoke to the world from completely different foundations seemed to them to be something fanciful, something fantastic.

But a quite different phenomenon was involved. What was spoken at that time out of truly shaped spiritual science oriented to anthroposophy is not the speech of fantasy or enthusiasm. It is the speech of spiritual research that can give an account of the nature of its research to the most exacting mathematician, as I said at another time. But it is true: what has been spoken here out of spiritual realities sounded different from the bloodless world views of modern

times. It sounded different, not because it was more abstract, or because it ascended to regions of the spirit more bloodless and frozen than those which have given rise to the theories developed out of the modern way of thinking, but it sounded different because it proceeded from spiritual realities, because it proceeded from those regions of man where one not only thinks, where one feels and wills, but does not feel and will in a dark way, not in the way that modern psychology considers to be the only one because it only knows this; not out of dark feeling, but out of feeling that is just as bright, as bright as the purest thinking itself. And the words were spoken out of a will that is suffused with a light that is striven for as the bright clarity of pure thoughts is striven for, and these thoughts are grasped when we seek to comprehend reality. Thus, in this anthroposophically oriented spiritual science, there lived that which wanted to come from the whole person, which therefore also wanted to take hold of the whole person, to take hold of the thinking, feeling and willing human being.

When one was able to speak in this way from the innermost being of the whole person, one often felt the inadequacy of even modern modes of expression. Anyone who has felt this way knows how to speak about it. One felt that modern times had also brought something into external language that leads words into abstract regions, and that speaking in the way language has now become itself invites abstraction. And one experiences, I would say, the inwardly tragic phenomenon of carrying within oneself something that one would like to express in broad content and sharp contours and developed with inner life, but that one is then rejected back to what modern language, which is coming out of an age of abstraction and is theoretical, alone knows how to say. And then one feels the urge for other means of expression. One feels the urge to express oneself more fully about what one actually carries within oneself than can be done through the theoretical debates in which modern humanity has been trained for three to four centuries, the theoretical debates that have shaped our concepts, our words, in which even our lyricists, our playwrights, our epic poets live more than they realize. One feels the necessity for a fuller, more vivid presentation.

Out of such feelings, the need arose for me to say what was said in the first phase of our anthroposophical movement, which was clothed in more intellectual forms, through my mystery festival plays. I tried to present, in a theatrical way, in scenes and images that were to embrace the whole of human life, the physical, soul and spiritual life, what can be seen in the course of the world, what is contained in the course of the world as a partial solution to our great world riddles, but which can never be expressed in the abstract formulas into which the laws of nature can be expressed. This is how that which I then tried to depict in my mystery dramas came about. I had to resort to images to depict what comes from the whole human being. For only from the human being in his head comes what modern language has created for our science and our popular literature, and what today's people, if you listen to them, are able to un-

derstand. You have to touch the deeper sides of their minds if you want to speak to them what anthroposophical spiritual science actually has to say.

This is how the need for these mystery dramas arose. These mystery dramas were first performed in Munich, in the surroundings, in the setting of ordinary theaters. Just as it literally blew apart the inside of the soul when one had to express the anthroposophically oriented spiritual science in the formulas of modern philosophy or world view, so it blew apart one's aesthetic sensation when one had to present in an ordinary theater, in an ordinary stage space, what was now to be depicted in a pictorial way: the spiritual content of the anthroposophical worldview and world feeling, of the anthroposophical world will. And when we worked in Munich on the theatrical presentation of these mystery plays in ordinary theaters, the idea arose to create a space of our own, to perform a building of our own, in which there would no longer be the sense of confinement that one in the manner just described for anthroposophically oriented spiritual science, but in which there is a framework that is itself the expression of what lives in anthroposophically oriented spiritual science.

Therefore, this building was not created in the sense of an old architectural style, where one would have gone to any architect and had a house created for what anthroposophically oriented spiritual science is to work out, but rather it had to arise from the innermost being of anthroposophically oriented spiritual science, because it did not merely work out of thinking and feeling, but out of the will itself, a structure had to arise out of this living existence of anthroposophically oriented spiritual science as a framework, which, as a style, as a formal language, gives the same as the spiritual-soul gives the spoken word of anthroposophically oriented spiritual science. A unity had to be created between the building as an art form and the living element present in this spiritual science.

But if there is such a living element, if there is a living element that is not merely theoretical and abstract, if there is a truly living spiritual element, then it creates its own framework, because with such a spiritual element one lives within the creative forces of nature, within the creative forces of the soul, within the creative forces of the spiritual. And just as the shell of the nut is formed out of the same creative forces as the inside, which we then consume as a nut, just as the nutshell cannot be other than it is because it follows the laws the nut kernel comes into being, so this structure here in all its individual forms is such that it cannot be otherwise, because it is nothing other than a shell that has come into being, been formed, created according to the same laws as spiritual science itself.

If I may express myself hyperbolically, it seems to me that at the end of my life I would not have been haunted by Heinrich Ferstel's thought that "architectural styles cannot be invented"

if the truth contained in it had not been clearly reckoned with. Yes, architectural styles cannot be invented, they must arise out of an overall spiritual life. But if such a spiritual life as a whole exists, then it may dare, even if in a modest way, even with weak forces, to also gain an art style from the same spirituality from which this spirituality itself is created.

I believe that I know better than anyone else what the faults of this building are, and I can assure you that I do not think immodestly about what has been created. I know everything I would do differently if I were to build such a structure again. I know how much this building is a beginning, how much of what is intended by it in the sense of its style may have to be realized quite differently. In any case, I do not want to think immodestly about this building. But with regard to what is intended by it, it may be pointed out how it wants to prove that architectural styles cannot be invented, but that they can be born if, instead of the nihilism of world view, a spiritual positivism is set, if, instead of the decadent decline of old world views, new sources of world view are sought. This building has therefore been created with a certain inner necessity. Just as feeling led us to present our world view in the mystery plays, as if feeling were to be taken into account in addition to thinking, so should the will, which is inherent in anthroposophically oriented spiritual science, first express itself artistically in this building.

The fact that there is life in this spiritual science should, however, be shown in an equally modest way, just as a beginning – I always have to emphasize this – by the fact that we do not want to use this building to shut ourselves away and, as it were, strive for a higher world view as if it were a satisfaction of our inner soulful desires. No, in the next lectures on this building I will show you how all the building forms here live in such a way that they basically do not represent walls, but something artistically transparent. This is how the wall, which is designed here, differs from the walls that one is accustomed to in other architectural walls. The latter are final; one knows oneself inside a space that is limited in a certain way. Here, however, everything is shaped in such a way that, by looking at the frame, one can get the feeling, if one feels the thing in the right way, of how everything cancels itself out. Just as glass physically negates itself and becomes transparent, so the artistic forms of the walls are meant to negate themselves in order to become transparent; so painting and sculpture are meant to negate themselves in order to become transparent, so as not to lock up the soul in a room, but to lead the soul out into the world. And out of this tendency there also arose the impulse, still modest, which I call the social impulse and which in my book *The Core of the Social Question* should be presented to the world, not as a theory but as a call to action.

Spiritual science could not remain with intellectuality. In its first phase it had to take human habits into account, had to speak to those people who were still educated entirely in abstract intellectualism. But it had to progress from thinking to feeling in order to present to the world

what was to be expressed not only through the abstract word, but also through the dramatic play, the dramatic action, the dramatic image. But this spiritual science could not stop at mere feeling. It had to progress to the realm of will. It had to overcome and shape matter, it had to give form and life to matter. Therefore, a new framework, a new formal language, indeed a new architectural style, had to be sought for the mystery plays and for everything that wants to express itself through them, including the living anthroposophically oriented spiritual science itself. In order to affirm what lives as the deepest impulse in this anthroposophically oriented spiritual science, the social impulse also arose quite naturally in the time when adversity taught people to replace the tendency of decline with the tendency of ascent. We wanted to gain through this building, even through its style, that state of mind through which the human being goes out to experience all of social existence, goes out to be able to participate in the necessary social reconstruction of our time with living soul content.

Thus, I believe, this structure can be seen as standing within what reveals itself as the deepest needs of our time, which in turn want to lead people out of mere abstractness and the materialism associated with it, out of mere thinking and into living feeling, and into active will. And we believe that in this way we also have what must be the substance, as it were, for what is so urgently demanded of us today, for what we know: If we humans are unable to accomplish it, the slide into barbarism will continue. A worldview that encompasses the whole person, the thinking, feeling and willing human being, must also be able to provide the state of mind that enables people to work together on what is a vital necessity of the present and the near future: social action.

This material is made available through the Rudolf Steiner Archive, rsarchive.org, a project of the community funded nonprofit, Steiner Online Library. Please consider making a tax deductible [donation](#) to support our work.