

Dr Rudolf Steiner's Shed: The Schreinerei at Dornach

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Sheds are rarely showpieces of architectural achievement, and they are often rather makeshift constructions. Sheds are multi-functional structures. They are spaces to make, to store, to meet, to celebrate, and to retreat. The essence of a shed is about the space inside, and what is going on in there.

Dr Rudolf Steiner's shed at Dornach, known as the 'Schreinerei' (the carpentry shop), like so many other sheds around the world, has been used for making and storing, for various get-together events, and as a retreat. The Schreinerei has been used for lectures, for performances of plays and eurythmy, and for dining (Image 1).



Image 1: Interior of the Schreinerei (photo: J Paull).

The Schreinerei was the first purpose-built structure on the hill at Dornach, Switzerland, built as part of Rudolf Steiner's complex of buildings for the new headquarters of his Anthroposophy movement. The Schreinerei dates from 1913. It is unprepossessing timber

structure clad in weathered vertical boards (Image 2). Inside, the novelty of the structure is immediately visible. The 'auditorium' of the Schreinerei offers a clear-span working-space (i.e. no internal supporting pillars) with massive timber arches spanning the space and bearing the roof with its skylights (Image 1).

The Schreinerei occupies a prime location in the Goetheanum precinct. Coming out from this shed and onto its forecourt, one sees the Goetheanum immediately ahead (Image 3). Looking out to the left is Haus Duldeck and beyond that is the valley and the village of Dornach. Looking at the Schreinerei from the Goetheanum, to the right of the 'auditorium' is an accretion of unpretentious conjoined outbuildings including Steiner's studio.



Image 2: Exterior of the Schreinerei (photo: J Paull).

The Schreinerei was intended as a temporary structure: "After the completion of the roadways, the so-called 'Schreinerei' (an enormous workshop containing various machine tools) was erected, a wooden structure intended for use only during the period of construction of the building [Goetheanum I], but which has lasted for decades and, we shall see, has been used for lectures and artistic programs. The 'Schreinerei' still stands in the neighbourhood of the second building [Goetheanum II]. At that time [early 1914] it was only the hall for machinery, the place for piling enormous accumulations of lumber, and the workshop of artisans, numbering between 150 and 200" (Wachsmuth, 1989, pp.225-6).

Assya Turgeniev (1890-1966), the Russian artist responsible for the glass windows of the Goetheanum, recalled her shift to Dornach: "When I arrived in Dornach in February 1914 it was like a bright winter's day in the mountains ... I met Dr Steiner in the deep snow in fur

coat and high boots in front of the wooden barracks that was the workshop” (Turgeniev, 2003, p.49).

From the early days of the construction of the Goetheanum precinct, Steiner occupied a part of the Schreinerei complex as his personal workspace: “He had moved on April 1 [1914] to ‘Haus Hansi’ ... and transferred his artistic work to a studio attached to the ‘Schreinerei’” (Wachsmuth, 1989, p.226). “His studio had become for Rudolf Steiner a refuge of inner peace in which - well protected from visitors by Edith Maryon [1872-1924] - he could both do a lot of esoteric work and also relax” (Halle & Wilkes, 2010, p.82; Paull, 2018).



Image 3: View of the Goetheanum from the forecourt of the Schreinerei (photo: J Paull).

Assya Turgeniev recalled the crowded working conditions of the Goetheanum as it was under construction: “‘There is room for people to work at the architraves,’ announced Rudolf Steiner. ‘Whoever feels called upon to do so may follow me to the workshop.’ And whether we felt called upon or not, the four of us [Russians] followed him, my sister, Pozzo, Bugayev and I across the provisional plank bridge which led from the building itself directly to the workshop” (Turgeniev, 2003, p.55).

With the workday over, the Schreinerei was repurposed: “In the evenings people sat in the Schreinerei on joiners’ benches and piles of wood, while Rudolf Steiner in the midst of this world of work spoke about the spiritual content of Anthroposophy” (Wachsmuth, 1989, p. 228) (Image 4).

The original Goetheanum was a quaint wooden structure, after the style of the Glass House (Glashaus) which predated it and which survives to this day within the Goetheanum precinct (Paull, 2012). The carpentry shop played a key role in the fabrication of both these

buildings. The Goetheanum I was inaugurated in 1920, but it was a brief incarnation and it burned to its foundations on the night of New Year's Eve 1922/23. On that fateful night, the Schreinerei was at risk from ember attack but it survived.

The forecourt of the Schreinerei still offers an ideal vantage point for observing the Goetheanum (Image 3). It was from here that Steiner watched the inferno that engulfed the Goetheanum. Assya Turgeniev was an eyewitness to the events of the night of the fire: "Under the small tree in front of the workshop stood Dr Steiner and watched our doings. Next to him was Edith Maryon ... Only much later came the fire brigade from Basel and then there was sufficient water to save the carpenters' shop" (Turgeniev, 2003, pp.124-5).

"Several steam engines spurted huge streams of water against the walls of the carpenters' shop, where a short time ago Dr Steiner had stood beneath the tree. One side of the little tree was quite burned and for years it stood there with its bare branches" (Turgeniev, 2003, p.127). I was told at the Goetheanum that the existing tree (of Image 3) is that same historic tree.

An eyewitness to the fire recounted: "... giant sparks were scattered in all directions. The firefighters flooded the roof of the Carpentry complex to prevent the fire from spreading there ... Over the next hours the Goetheanum gradually disappeared" (Ilona Schubert quoted in Selg, 2018, p.48).

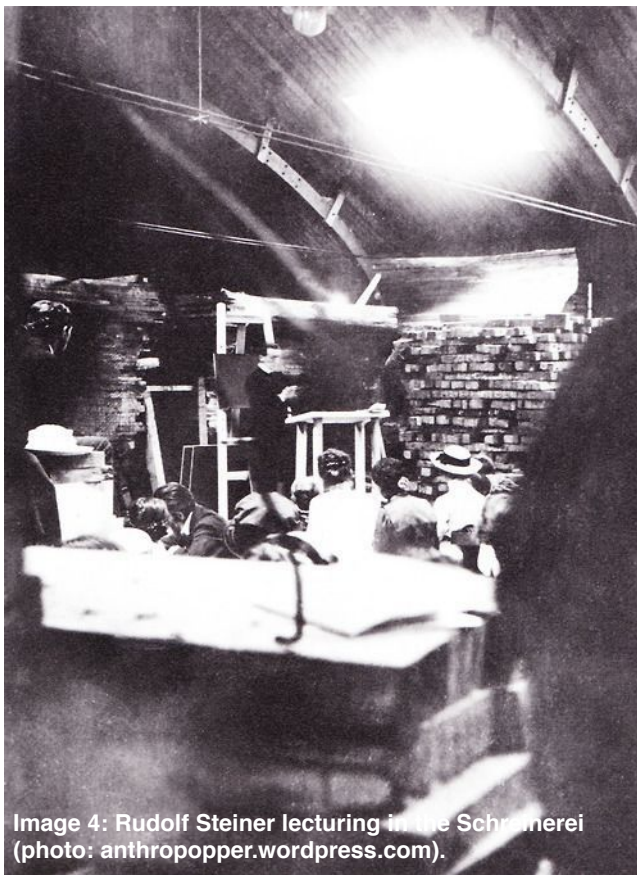


Image 4: Rudolf Steiner lecturing in the Schreinerei (photo: anthropopper.wordpress.com).

The Schreinerei was saved, the Goetheanum was not: "Now people were busy returning all the things that had been taken out of the carpenters' shop. The Christ statue had also been carried from the studio into the meadow behind" (Turgeniev, 2003, p.127).

In the aftermath of the fire: "Standing near the carpenters' shop, I discerned two shadows that slowly ascended the pathway in the dark. Bowed and with heavy steps, Dr Steiner, followed by Edith Maryon, made his way to the workshop ... Dr Steiner had explicitly asked that the work - undisturbed by what had happened - should go ahead. A lot had to happen before the carpenters' shop could be made ready again. Complete chaos still reigned in DrSteiner's studio when I peeped in. He stood there among overturned furniture and chests ... When Dr Steiner

arrived in the carpenters' shop to give his evening lecture everyone rose spontaneously from their seat. For years this was to be our workspace again" (Turgeniev, 2003, p.128).

After the Goetheanum fire, the Schreinerei resumed its role as the venue of choice for Rudolf Steiner's lectures at Dornach (Image 4). The shed was extended to host the Christmas Conference of 1923/24. Steiner then re-founded the Anthroposophy Society and named the management committee ('vorstand') and heads of sections of the Goetheanum including Dr Ita Wegman (Medicine section), Dr Elisabeth Vreede (Astronomy), Edith Maryon (Fine Arts), Marie Steiner (Eurythmy), Dr Guenther Wachsmuth (Natural Science), and Albert Steffen (Poetry).

Steiner's lessons of the First Class of his School of Spiritual Science were presented in the Schreinerei through 1924, with at least one Australian anthroposophist, Ernesto Genoni, attending as a member of the Class (Paull, 2014). Steiner's final lecture was presented in the Schreinerei. The Representative of Humanity sculpture was carved in the studio of the Schreinerei complex. The models of the new Goetheanum were crafted in the Schreinerei complex by Steiner and Maryon.



Image 5: Rudolf Steiner's studio in the Schreinerei complex (photo: J Paull).

Turgeniev recalled that: "During September of 1924 Dr Steiner gave lectures to priests of the Christian Community, to actors and to medical doctors. The series of lectures to workmen at the Goetheanum was also continued. Within the space of three weeks he gave about 70 lectures ... Then he became ill. For the first days he stayed in his studio in the carpenters' shop. One anxious week followed another ... Then the Michaelmas lecture was announced. It was perfectly quiet in the carpenters' shop as Dr Steiner entered the lecture hall through the blue curtains. How frail and delicate he had become and how different was the sound of his voice, as though it came from an immense distance ... Soon

he had to break off. We knew it was a leave-taking; yet who would dare to admit it? ... I never saw him alive again. A few days later we heard that Dr Wegman [1876-1943] had elected to attend to his nursing in the studio in the carpenters' shop" (Turgeniev, 2003, p. 130).

The final difficult six months of Steiner's life were spent confined to his studio in the Schreinerei complex (Image 5). It was a most abstemious choice of place, in contrast to the more salubrious accommodation available at his home, Haus Hansi (a comfortable home a short walk down the hill from the Goetheanum which he shared with Marie Steiner and others). In contrast, the studio is of rough-sawn timber, it is unpainted, unheated, and it lacks windows and amenities. Nevertheless, as a choice, it was Steiner's own space. For Steiner the Dornach adventure began with the Schreinerei as a place of work and industry and it ended there as a place of respite and retreat. The choice kept him close 'to the action' and, until very near the end, he continued to read, to write *Letters to Members* for the *Anthroposophical Movement*, and to pen chapters of his autobiography (Steiner, 1928).

The Schreinerei is the most unpretentious of buildings in the Goetheanum precinct. Yet, it has stood the test of time. It has been a silent witness of the key events in the life of the hill of Dornach. It served Rudolf Steiner as a productive workspace for over a decade. And it has served the Anthroposophy movement for over a century, with versatility, in a multitude of roles, all in the best traditions of a shed.

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