Kenosis *as Spiritual Content:*
Transparency versus 'Visual Cacophony' on Sacred German Sites

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Transparency in architecture, enabled by clear glass, is ubiquitous. It efficiently fulfills its perfunctory roles as light-conducting, see-through curtains, visual partitions, or sonic baffles. Beyond such practical applications, however, transparency can be wielded in architectural contexts to promote an intentionally elevated experience of the sacred. In historical contexts, spiritual content is heightened in proportion to the perceived patrimonial content of the host site, which it then valorizes. What would traditionally be considered 'void' or emptiness in Western terms—in the empty clarity of transparent glass, for example—becomes the channel, the enactor, or the vessel for an exchange of light metaphysics in the simplest, most direct terms. This potentially grants a higher level of consciousness or sensory experience to the percipient.

In the context of European, English or American practices, this focus on emptied content in the 20th century indicates a radical shift. It particularly affects the use of clear glass in the relatively small sphere of glass designers. Glass artists who promoted the benefits of transparency insisted in their manifestos that their primary material was light, with the glass ground as a means rather than an end product. They attempted to liberate the 'ineffable' from its physical, architectonic housing through glass treatments. The insistence on using clear glasses to attain this ineffability can be said to constitute a physical instance of *kenosis*—the process of emptying that paradoxically allows space for an ethereal 'infilling'. Rather than seeing transparency as void or nothingness, transparency allowed for an opening to *kenotic* space, which in turn provided access to true 'being.' This explanation of kenosis came from the German theologian Jurgen Moltman (1926-), as part of a "theology of hope" influenced by Moltman's experiences as a Nazi soldier and prisoner of war in his twenties.

As Moltman, Heidegger, Arendt and others explained, the "self" suffered terrible compromises on a national level, with international consequences, as a direct consequence of the Holocaust.[1] Moltmann's focus on emptying was part of an approach that sought to redeem and transform being itself, somewhat like starting with a clean slate. Germany remained fixated from 1946 onwards not only on reconstructing its damaged physical fabric, but in resurrecting its standing in the world. Part of this campaign for moral rearmament eventually involved the need to project an expiated, cleansed conscience 'after Auschwitz'. Besides numerous films, literary works, cultural discourses, and scholarly assessments, rejuvenated by the country's reunification in 1989, the kenotic approach filtered into the design of large-scale glass installations, with the potential to affect thousands of historical complexes with regionally or nationally significant patrimonial value.

The logic behind the kenotic approach in monumental glass arrays followed several discernable trajectories. One applied clear glass treatments as a sensory palette-cleanser, offering visual relaxation that is meant to engender an ambience of contemplation, propitiation, and meditation in settings that memorialize sites where great injustices took place. As one pre-eminent Catholic art historian concluded in 1982, "Light not only became color, but *as* color, became an element that exploded and opened up the physical space, admitting a transcendent ambience—an urgent requirement in this new phase of German history."[2] Other clear glass approaches framed sites of destruction, emphasizing the ruins with 'wide open eyes' in clear glass rather than overlaying the

physical testimonials of the war with additional symbols, or muting their broken features with a wash of reflected colors. Such framing emphasized the presence of the 'sacred' in the scarred, broken landscape of rubble, where lives had been lost—if we mean by 'sacred,' the theologian Paul Tillich's category for qualities that characterized the real human condition in the modern era. Others arguably meant transparent treatments to show the world a clarified conscience, and to signal the eager reception of a literal 'enlightenment,' after the grave darkness of Hitler's regime. Transparency also rebuts a vernacular German phrase that surfaced during the postwar reconstruction period about not doing things secretively, in closets or behind closed doors—an accusation that German politicians still assiduously avoid.

Transparency and Moral Imperatives
The dominating example of transparency as a trope for moral clarity arguably emerges in Germany's renovated parliamentary center, the *Reichstag*. When Germany reinstated Berlin as the nation's democratic capital after the 1989 reunification, Norman Foster + Partners won the competition to recap the domeless Baroque structure, finished in 1894 but never used as a parliamentary site. The fire of an arsonist in 1933 left the building topless, destroying its squat, square glass cupola. Regardless of the building's historical uselessness, the site became sacred during the siege of Berlin, represented by this staged Russian photograph from 1945, for its symbolic presence near Berlin's central corridors of power, and by its proximity to Hitler's decimated bunker. The structure's symbolic strength was also appreciated by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who began lobbying to wrap the *Reichstag* in 1971, and were finally granted the opportunity in 1995. After more than five million viewed the concealed structure, the unveiling—Christo's typical 'revelation after concealment'—prepared the onlooker for the Reichstag's re-opening as the unified seat of a reunified Germany, in grand aesthetic style. One could explore the conceptual implications of this concealment, in the German context, for days.

Foster's dome, completed in 1999 after furious rounds of criticism, projected confident metaphors in several directions.[3] By intention, the new dome reveals a virtual "theater of democracy" to visitors, who could peer directly into parliamentary sessions and see government operating with total transparency. Louvered mirrors simultaneously emphasize the process of self-reflection for visitors, and support a logistically innovative heating and cooling system. The transparent dome symbolically channels the metaphorical light of redeemed knowledge directly into the country's main governing chamber. From the inside out, Foster's treatment also provides a panoramic view of a revitalized city, and beams an illuminating beacon into the night sky. This generously proportioned dome rapidly assumed symbolic prominence as the primary emblem of Germany's moral transformation and transparent conscience, after decades of a type of national kenosis enforced by the watching international community.

Of course, early modern German architecture led the field in embracing the spiritual qualities of glass, epitomized by Gropius and Meyer's workshop wing at the Bauhaus. In the cultural context of Germany's renewal after World War I, architect Rudolf Arnheim's first impression of the structure described it as "a triumph of purity, clarity, and generosity," with an "architectural honesty," he felt tempted to say, that delivered moral impact."[4] The enlightened presence of the gleaming glass box, hovering above the ground during its night-time opening reception, dovetailed with the mysticism of glass constructions that Scheerbart and Taut promoted in their *Glasarchitektur* and Glass Chain discussions, and Taut's airy rhetoric about his *Glashaus* at Cologne, which he called the cathedral of the future. Insisting that "the crystal palace would symbolize the spiritual core of community,"[5] Taut hailed transparency, clarity, purity, and "the flowing, graceful, faceted, sparkling, flashing…!"[6] Taut exhorted others to embrace unbuildable "eternal" crystalline building complexes that emitted pure essences, "free from complex structures, nonessential functions or descriptiveness."[7] Fifty years after Taut, postwar glass

designers were intently attuned to the historical dialogue that toggled between these mystical, objective and rationalist architectural approaches.

They also tuned into the modernist discourse regarding the church idiom in Germany, although this narrative was suppressed by the anti-religious stances of modernist academic critiques, until recently. In 1919, the architect Otto Bartning implored architects to strip the dishonesty and insincerity from their church designs in his influential treatise, *Toward A New Church Architecture* (*Vom neuen Kirchbau*). Bartning (1883-1959), who directed the architecture program at the old Weimar Werkbund and Bauhaus building after the Bauhauslers were evicted in 1925, disparaged the "lying façade of sacred symbolism… where dim interiors…feign atmosphere."[8] He lamented that piety had only found a temporary shelter in the church building, a realization that he said "seemed to me like a second expulsion from paradise."[9] Church architect Rudolf Schwarz (1897–1961), greatly admired by Mies van der Rohe when Mies ran the Berlin Bauhaus, provided the earliest example of architectural kenosis in 1930 with his minimalistic *Fronleichnamskirche* in Aachen.

The postwar glass designers deeply appreciated the parallels with their own struggles to transcend the styles of the past, such as neo-medieval and expressionist approaches, and to find design solutions that accompanied and enhanced the spatial affect of the host site. Those who intentionally chose the visual kenosis of clear or white glass grounds felt convicted that transparency and intelligent light treatments would figuratively cleanse and purify the occluded souls of Germans, stained by Germany's role in the Holocaust.

Cropping up in the mid-1950s at significant heritage sites and sanctuaries, the transparent approach seemed completely counterintuitive at first, particularly in the German context. For one thing, clear glass appeared on thousands of sites because it was the only glass available immediately after the war for the provisional reglazing of major German heritage complexes that had lost their glass. Designers had to convince clients that using mouth-blown, antique or vari-colored clear glasses differed from the industrial grade clear glass replacements, used for the sake of efficiency at sites with tremendous patrimonial value. The cost of using craft-based clear glasses, prized for their custom-made pigmentation, interior 'seediness,' or textured surfaces, did not significantly lower the cost of an installation, usually priced by the square-foot/meter. In the stringent economy of the early postwar environment, clients naturally anticipated that paying the same price for clear glass treatments as for traditional polychromed windows made no sense; they naturally wanted the fullest visual impact for their *pfennigs*. Moreover, ineffability was difficult to illustrate in the available black-and-white photographic collages, or hand-drawn mock ups available in the 1950s.

Transparency as a Visual Palette Cleanser
In 1961, Ludwig Schaffrath (1924-2011) scored the first monumental win for clear glass in Germany by persuading the tenders of Aachen's famous Palatine Dom to reglaze the adjacent cloister with 32 bubbled, seedy, and crazed clear glass compositions. This cloister, which houses the incredibly valuable Treasury of Charlemagne, is a mixed bag of 11th-, 15th-, 18th-, and 20th-century remnants that now projects a restrained Cistercian effect, in white stucco and gray wacke ribbing. More than 250,000 tourists a year reportedly funnel through its passages to see one of the greatest collections of Christian relics in the world. Apart from this valuation as a prime tourist and religious destination, the cloister basks in the tremendous reflected status of Charlemagne's prestigious 9th-century *Kaiserdom*—the first German UNESCO World Heritage Site, selected in the 70s shortly after the program began.

Schaffrath's solution, titled "Epitaph" in homage to the passing of things, dynasties and humans, models kenosis because its clear glazing did not compete with the site's physical dignity. The 32

window designs intentionally avoided any hierarchical placement, and the artist categorically rejected any suggestions that his compositions represent traditional religious symbols. The transparency allowed the green grass in the atrium to shine through its clear, textured panels and organic forms—an effect that was utterly lost when the court was paved for the choir boys' soccer practice (another sacred aspect of German life). Clear glass, Schaffrath argued, would abet rather than fracture the cloister's serene Cistercian palette. Colored glass would have stippled, darkened and contracted the interior space. He also practiced a form of personal kenosis, choosing not to impose his own artistic ego into a site with far more historical significance than almost any other German monument.

Transparency Framing Historic Ruins
Using transparency to frame or focus attention on historically significant ruins, made sacred by their mute witness to destruction, developed on a parallel in England and Japan, other countries that had survived intensive physical damage. England's Coventry Cathedral constitutes one of the largest, earliest, and most prominent examples of a new postwar trend that intentionally sanctified war ruins by preserving them as memorials. Sir Basil Spence's addition to the Reformation-era cathedral ruin, completed in 1962, is filled to the brim with symbols and polychromed palettes in floor to ceiling expressionist windows, set like gills along the body of the nave. Some of us experience this as overwhelming, claustrophobia-inducing visual cacophony. The only visual relief and breathing space comes as one turns back to the entry to depart. There, on a completely clear façade of glass panels, etchings of angels and saints hover over the ruins, which lie just beyond the entry portico. They seem to protect the threshold between the sacred and profane, but gaze with equal intensity at the holy sites within the new nave, and out in the world, providing a passage for the healing spirit of God.

This humble asterisk in the huge decorative complex of Coventry provided a compelling example of the way transparency could channel spiritual energy, figuratively speaking. It influenced graphic designer and professor Johannes Schreiter (1930-), who completed hundreds of large-scale glass installations since 1959, for which he was decorated with Germany's highest civilian honor. As one of Germany's architectonically-attuned designers, Schreiter preferred opaque white grounds and limited color palettes that extended the mural quality of the walls, and wrote passionate manifestos about the need for 'space' and serenity rather than didactic content in contemporary stained glass windows. In 1993, Schreiter made the unusual choice to use a clear glass ground—one of his only concessions to a transparent treatment, but with good reasons. A congregation in Plauen, on the Czech border in former East Germany, commissioned him to create a window wall for a new church dedicated to reconciliation, on a personal and universal scale. Schreiter, born in East Germany, resonated with Plauen's postwar reputation as a center of peaceful protest. In 1989, however, thousands of Plauen's citizens initiated one of the first East German protests against the Communist rule and the one-party system—an event widely acknowledged to contribute to the eventual destruction of the Berlin Wall that year. This event counteracted Plauen's main claim to notoriety, unfortunately, which revolved around the fact that it sponsored the first Nazi party chapter outside of Bavaria.

The *Versöhnungskirche*, or Church of Reconciliation, presides over a park landscaped by war rubble—the fallout of Plauen's proximity to Dresden, a city that was notoriously firebombed to a wasteland of 15-square miles in 1945. The placement of its window wall intentionally corresponds with a view towards the site of a Nazi prison, long since destroyed, where political dissenters or deserters were tortured or eliminated. Schreiter's concept converted the emptiness of transparent glass from a void to a content-giving frame that allowed the Plauen congregation to see the prison site. Yellow and white veils, suspended in space by an invisible, persistent spirit, remind onlookers that the exterior situation—site of the sometimes egregious errors of human choices in the world's narrative—is not the final condition of humanity. The veils conceal the

mysteries that separate human understanding from divine knowledge, that parse the complicated tensions between good and evil in this world. One of those mysteries involved Germany's transgression. The Plauen congregation did not want to forget the town's history, for better or worse. The transparency trope in this example provides an opportunity for sober reconciliation with the tainted past, but the contemplation of this process only begins at that point, and ends with the individual's actions in an infinite range of responses to that contemplation.

Transparency as a Reification of a Clear Conscience
Part of the German pathology after its humiliating defeat in two major wars involved projecting at least an appearance of humility or restraint, and this tendency, combined with the aggressive campaign to locate Germany in the modern era, often suggested asceticism in architectural practice. This asceticism, which involved a physical expression of kenosis, emerged in the aggressive minimalism or rationalism of Rudolf Schwarz, among others. Concertedly applied from the 1920s on to liturgical architecture, it signaled the country's modernity and progressivism. In 1947, Schwarz accepted an invitation to redesign the bomb-gutted interior of Frankfurt's *Pauluskirche*, one of the nation's most significant cultural, historical, and political monuments. The *Pauluskirche* operated for centuries as the site where newly elected emperors greeted their public, then as the nation's first, short-lived democratic parliament in the 1840s. Until the Reichstag renovation, the structure accommodated representatives who met to elect West German presidents. Frankfurt officials reasoned that Schwarz's minimalist white walls and black slate floors and fittings would enhance the historical value of the site, marking it as a signature example of postwar modernism. Retrofitting the site as a historical replica, during one of its many incarnations, would have been considered a false and unauthentic solution at the time.

Schwarz's 1948 renovation had called for a contemporary glass program, but the architect did not specify the design. At the time, he began to favor clear glass block treatments in his church crossings, although the approach often failed because the blocks could not bear the weight of stacking. As a result, the 23-window array was provisionally glazed without a design until a competition in 1986, driven by Schwarz's 1960 memo about the windows. Schwarz's expressed concerns about balance on many levels, calling for artists who "were modest enough to keep their work in the background and not make it the most important thing."[10] Schwarz, in other words, called for kenosis in both execution and character, creating an opportunity for one of Germany's earliest uses of postwar era aesthetic transparency on a governmental site. In abeyance to Schwarz's parameters, Jochem Poensgen (1931-) submitted a rationally abstract approach that would harmonize, rather than disrupt, the "clean, light propositions of the building," emphasize the quality of lightness in the room, and support rather than dominate the architecture.[11] Poensgen appreciated the challenge of balance: clear glass conveyed coolness and rationality, as well as openness and a transparent conscience. Too much clear glass, however, might appear boring, coldly rational, or even trivial and cheap, rather than an elegant and controlled creative concept. Too much transparency might exaggerate the distractions of trees, spikes of sunlight, and red sandstone edifices from the exterior, disrupting the interior's austere, but dignified spatiality. Although another artist eventually snared the commission, Schwarz and Poensgen evidently influenced the spare design approach. Today, antique, semi-opaque and mostly transparent glasses, punctuated by rods of yellow, beige, black and clear glass, generate a quiet but dynamic presence as light circulates across the rounded chamber. The restraint, according to Poensgen, signified an important departure from "shallow" or "exaggerated artistic efforts and big gestures."[12] For him, transparency gave homage to Schwarz's minimalism.

In 2005, Poensgen won a Getty grant for a commission to design replacements for 80 failing windows in Eastern Europe's oldest surviving Romanesque brick church, a sacred site owing to its venerability and uniqueness. Its location in former East Germany, where it was benignly neglected for decades, probably saved it from a visually cacophonous glazing solution. Poensgen

immediately responded to the beautiful architectonic beauty of the space, awed by the stolid architectonic quality of its massive pillars, its unmarked and uncluttered walls, and its total lack of the usual historic accretions in various styles. Poensgen resorted to a new technology he had devised, a system of clear glass slats punctuated by regularized lead brackets rather than continuous lead lines, in proportions that reinforced the height of the brick courses, and duplicated their mortared lines with sandwiched strips of clear laminated glass or epoxy. Any overriding color treatment, he reasoned, would destroy the inherent and satisfying coherence of the existing space. Angling the slats and varying the reflectivity of the glass with silk-screened patterns selectively minimized the harshness of low-angled sun, as it traversed through the sanctuary space, but brought as much light as possible through the clerestory level. Poensgen achieves his greatest objective, when the observer hardly registers that his windows exist at all, because this signals that they have successfully enhanced, rather than interrupted, the calm visual silence of simple, strong interiors. In experiential terms, this kenosis consecrates the pre-existing sacredness of the space.

In conclusion, the kenotic use of transparent glass has far exceeded the conservatory technology that fostered aesthetically minimalistic, yet inspiring 'glass box' architecture, or pragmatic hi-tech approaches that masquerade as spiritual nodes. The transcendent qualities promoted by clear glass in palaces of commerce, information technology, and cultural centers has worked well for consumers and tourists, but only as a branding tool—the sublime experience it may provoke is merely a chance byproduct. Whatever meaning transparent but aesthetic uses of glass serve in their architectonic context, the subtle variations that a handful of articulate designers brought to an ancient craft, in response to a despicable moment in human history, will continue to color Germany's path toward transparency in the age after Auschwitz.[13]

Footnotes

[1] In this presentation, glancing statements about Germany's identity issues before and after the Holocaust are informed by a long list of texts. Some of the most helpful include: James E. Young's *The Texture of Memory*: *Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (Yale University Press, 1993); Geoffrey Hartman's *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 1996); and *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture*, edited by Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche (University of Ilinois Press, 2002). Sources that focus particularly on art and architecture include Yule Heibel, *Reconstructing the Subject* (Princeton University Press, 1995); James E. Young's *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (Yale University Press, 2000), and Barbara Miller Lane's standby text in the field, *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1918-1945* (Harvard University Press, 1968). For excellent analyses of German identity and collective memory issues preceding World War II, see Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat,* referring to the crucial German concept of homeland (1990), and Alon Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory 1871-1918* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Descriptions of the postwar climate for preservation and identity concerns is well represented in Rudy Koshar, "On Cults and Cultists: German Historic Preservation in the Twentieth Century" in *Giving Preservation a History*, edited by Max Page and Randall Mason (Routledge, 2004): 66*ff*. Multidisciplinary analyses about German identity include: *Imaging Modern German Culture: 1889-1910*, edited by Françoise Forster-Hahn (CASVA vol. 53, 1996); Norbert Elias' *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1996); and Rudy Koshar's *Germany's Transient Pasts Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), as well as Koshar's *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870-1990* (University of California Press, 2000).

[2] Erich Stephany, "Introduction," *Licht-Glas-Farbe: Arbeiten in Glas und Stein aus den Rheinischen Werkstätten, Dr. Heinrich Oidtmann* (Aachen: Brimberg, 1982) 11.

[3] See Michael Wise, *A Capital Dilemma: Germany's Search for a New Architecture of Democracy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998) 121-134, and Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 90-96; 241-242; 245. Wise, a Reuters reporter, does not endorse the linking of Germany's moral clarity with the Reichstag dome's transparency. Sir Norman Foster, also somewhat reluctant to aggrandize his firm's aims, also contributes to the discussion in his preface in *Rebuilding the Reichstag* (New York: Overlook Press, 2000).

[4] Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus 1919-1933* (Cologne: Taschen, 1990) 122.

[5] Barbara Miller Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918–1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968) 48, 49.

[6] Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973) 11.

[7] Iain Boyd Whyte, ed. and trans. *The Crystal Chain Letters: Architectural Fantasies by Bruno Taut and His Circle* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985) 11, 15.

[8] Hugo Schnell, *Twentieth Century Church Architecture in Germany* (Munich: Verlag Schnell und Steiner, 1974; transl. Paul J. Dine) 33–34.

[9] Schnell 34.

[10] Jochem Poensgen, *Glaskunst in Architektur: Gedanken und Anregungen* (Düsseldorf: Studio Jochem Poensgen, 1987) 38, 64.

[11] Poensgen 27.

[12] Poensgen 38; interview with the author, 9 August 2005, Soest, Germany.