Church Communities Today: Three Alternative Visions

Endings

By now, we have also become sensitive towards the fact, that the optimism of laboratory architecture ended when the times changed and when the material refused to be bent to the will of the architect. Likewise, the story of many church buildings from the 1960s takes a turn. The history of another church in my home town, located 20 kilometres from St. Paul, is telling in this regard. St. Barbara in Neuhof-Ellers[1] also develops together with its surrounding part of town. In the 60s the miners of the adjacent potassium mine built their houses on the outskirts of the small town of Neuhof, which, like Ziehers North, is situated in the east of Hessen, close to the inner German border. And like the first-time homeowners in Ziehers, the miners of Ellers founded a building society and within just a few years raised money to erect a modern church for their community. St. Barbara is also built in a modern style of its day by the architect Joseph Bieling, who specialised in sacral buildings in the diocese of Fulda: tent-shaped structures, A-frames, rotundas, and a modern take on the traditional hall church with a slender separate bell tower – which is what the miners of Ellers chose as their form. The same optimism that we witnessed in Ziehers is present here as well, as the words of the parish priest Wilhelm Hasenau announce at the inauguration of the building:

1 I have written about St. Barbara as an example for modern fantasies and the end thereof in the realm of digitalisation, comparing the enthusiasm in church architecture in the 1960s to today's enthusiasm for building digital structures. We must be aware, I argue, that both developments are highly contingent (Henkel 2021b).

> It stands there as a triad of stone, concrete, and glass. A jubilation, a glorification of God, about which one can say: "If the people are no longer singing their hosanna here, then the material, which has come alive in the hands of the masters, will announce the praise of God"* (Hasenau 1963, p. 5).

Figure 35: Joseph Bieling: Model of St. Barbara (1958)

The history of the church is documented on the website of the parish, i.e. the *Katholische Pfarrgemeinde St. Michael Neuhof* , under the title: "Geschichte der Filialkirche St. Barbara".

In October of 2008, the parish closed St. Barbara. The church had become too much of a financial burden for the shrinking community. The dreams of unlimited growth of the 1960s had not materialised. The church's central heating, installed in times before the oil price shock, had ceased functioning and the modern flat roof had started leaking, resulting in mould growing on one of the exterior walls. For the last and final service, the miners' association – most of its members now pensioners – raised their flag for the last time before the eternal light was put out and the altar stone removed.

Figure 36: Daniela Möller, Osthessen News (2018): St. Barbara, altar stone.

In an article on *Osthessen News*, photographer Daniela Möller documented the removal of the altar stone: "Letzter Gottesdienst rührt zu Tränen - Katholische St.-Barbara-Kirche entweiht".

Looking at this church community from the specific viewpoint of this book, there is a noteworthy connection between these churches and the laboratories of the 1960s and 70s. The architectural critic Niklas Maak writes about a former VEB[2] datacenter in Potsdam which occupies the site of the former Garrison Church. Its side wall is adorned with a large mosaic titled,

> "Man conquers the cosmos", which depicts the stages of the scientific-technical evolution of man – from farming machinery and space flight to

2 VEB stands for "owned by the people", which was the prefix the nationally owned industries took on during the GDR.

> data science. In Silicon Valley they would now protect such a house as part of their own antiquity, as an early temple of euphoria for the future. Not so in Potsdam. Because the datacenter, which opened in 1971, stands on the site where the bell tower of the old Garrison Church has been rebuilt. […] An this is why [the mosaic next to the relics of the church][…] is a symbol for the rift that goes through society: It is about what city one wants and what place history and art have in it* (Maak 2020, p. 35).

Maak concludes that the euphoric utopian buildings of the 1960s have become an unpleasant and embarrassing reminder of the recent past, of the GDR and its dreams for the future. There are many residents who want to get rid of that past and replace it with historic buildings from a seemingly glorious age – the middle ages as in Nuremberg or the German Empire as in Berlin. Modernity rots away, as Maak argues, and it has become an embarrassment. The architectural critic, on the contrary, demands to keep these buildings from the 60s and 70s, because especially "research facilities and data centres […] are the most important buildings of the present time; both are places where the future of society is decided"* (ibid., p. 35). This would be a good reason to keep such buildings, which "tell the story"* (ibid., p. 35) of progress and failure.

The church in Neuhof-Ellers shares a similar fate. Its materials, made to last for many hundred years – as the poem read aloud by the workers at the topping-out ceremony boasts – have deteriorated quickly and visibly. The hall no longer houses a community and now the question arises as what to do with it. It now stands as a monument to the all too recent past. Like the communal swimming pool – which featured an innovative aluminium roof that could transform the indoor into an outdoor pool, praised by architectural critics (Röper 1973) and that had to close in 1998 – it has become derelict, yet its massive structure still stands in the heart of the community.

Continuations

St. Mary in Ditzingen near Stuttgart is a church from a similar age which could well have shared a similar fate. Like St. Barbara in Neuhof-Ellers, it is a huge concrete hall church, modelled after Le Corbusier's Ronchamp chapel. Its outer walls feature large artificial rifts in the concrete which the architect designed

to let light in and literally break through the monumentality of the building. And like in Neuhof-Ellers and Ziehers North, the congregation is dwindling. The large hall is not filled on most Sundays. It could tell the same story from a practical theological perspective that Rainer Bucher alludes to in his article *die Gemeinde nach dem Scheitern der Gemeindetheologie*, community after the failure of the community theology. Therein the author defines community theology as

> the pastoral-theological transformation discourse that became operative in the praxis in the middle of the 1960s and that initiated the reformatting of the ecclesial base structure towards "small communities of responsible Christians." "Community" was conceptualised as a structure to follow the parochial structure of the peoples' church, which was perceived as anonymous, weak in retaining [people] and in making decisions* (Bucher 2013, p. 24).

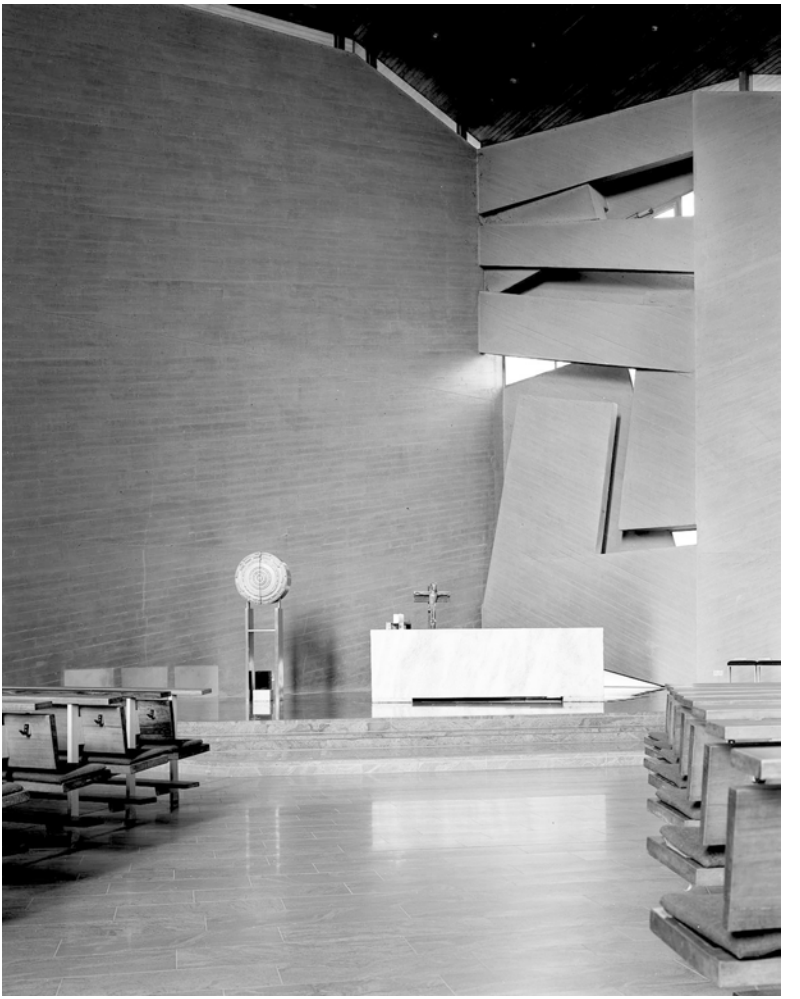
We have already seen the extensive strain such a principle put on the individual members in the discussion of Karl Lehmann's text. It is small wonder then that Bucher as a pastoral theologian[3] sees these tendencies amplified. But moreover, he also puts the failure of the community project in a larger perspective, namely that the concept wanted to be only "half modern."

> The communal theological modernisation wanted to liberalise ("the responsible Christian"), and yet rope [Christians; C.P.] in into the "parochial family". […] It wanted to be a group of volunteers, but yet it was tied to a specific territory; it wanted to be there for everyone, but it was so less and less and it became more and more […] "a place where people assiduously revolved around themselves, around the bell tower, the church festival, and the few people who at the moment (and for how long anyway?) were in charge in the parish council"* (ibid., pp. 30–31).

The second of the following pictures shows the view from a window of the meeting room of the parish council in Ditzingen, with the church on the right – next to the forgotten potted plant – looking out into green fields. This room has become particularly important, as it is the place where my interview partner

3 Rainer Bucher writes about his position: "As a pastoral theologian I am concerned with the situation of the church in late-modern societies. This situation is critical, diverse, and confusing at times, but always exciting and appealing"* (cf. Bucher 2020).

Figure 37: St. Maria, Ditzingen, main hall. Photo by the author.



in Ditzingen, a young pastoral worker, spends most of her time in committee meetings.

In this room, which on the other walls displays pictures and trophies of the parish football team from the 1980s and 90s, the parish finds its identity. It still

Figure 38: St. Maria, Ditzingen, meeting room. Photo by the author.

works well internally, with many groups and many committees, but there is already a discrepancy between the community, which in itself functions well, and the city and its life realities, as my interview partner mentions.

> I realise that even after three years I am sitting in this bubble. […] If we have people in the parish council […] who had a seat there for 50 years, who am I to deny them that they have found a home here* (FD 2020).

Besides the meeting room, which in the summer would turn hot and stifling, this self-sufficiency finds another visible expression in the church building itself. There is the question:

> how exclusive is the church community actually […] That becomes visible in the large church interior, which looks open […], but nonetheless there are concrete walls there, which are opened up, but still this is a building which is closed in itself, just like the community* (ibid.).

St. Mary is a church that stands for continuation. Its building is listed as a protected landmark and will therefore not fall under cost-cutting measures and its community is still vibrant enough to continue for many years despite recruitment problems. St. Mary could continue on a road of small reforms. Less an less people, however, would want to sit in the benches and even less parishioners would want to spend their afternoons in the meeting room pictured above. And at one point in the future the church might, as my interview partner puts it, "just cease to exist."*

New Beginnings

A different dealing with a church as a landmark can be found at the raumschiff.ruhr, a churchly "spaceship" in Essen. The city is in the middle of the Ruhr region, the former heart of coal mining and steel industry in Germany. The "Villa Hügel" of the Krupp family, one of the largest arms producers in the Second World War, still towers over the city's outskirts and the Ruhr river. From 1850 to the closure of the last mine, coal mining and heavy steel dominated the region. Today, Essen epitomises the structural transformation of the whole region, and other industrial regions in Western Europe as well. The city of 600,000 inhabitants has changed into a place of commerce and service industries, but it still suffers from the aftermaths of the decline of its old industries, its unemployment rate still doubling the German average (10% as compared to 5.1% in early 2020 before the pandemic). The town was the European City of Culture in 2010, yet it still has to deal with legendary traffic jams on its main arterial roads as well as an empty inner city as people desert the centre after closing time.

In the 1950s, after the war, planners wanted to rebuild Essen as a car-friendly city. One of the obstacles was the Market Church in the middle of town. The old hall church, which had been a house of Protestant worship since 1630, had been almost completely destroyed by aerial bombardement safe for the outer walls. A citizens' initiative campaigned against the demolition, so that the church was rebuilt as the pedestrian mall around it grew. In 2006 the architect Eckard Gerber was commissioned to complete the original floorplan by rebuilding the completely destroyed western choir. He proposed a structure made from blue glass panes which stands out from the rest of the building.

In 2016 the *Protestant Church of Essen* greenlighted a project conceived by the pastor Rebecca John Klug, who suggested a space where young adults can experiment with new forms of church in the region.[4] The raumschiff.ruhr was not planned as a traditional parish with a fixed membership and Sunday services. Rather, it was intended to make an offer to the community by hosting events that are open to all. Such offers included *orbit*, an open prayer night on Wednesdays with the telling description "sandwiches and blessing," combining the hearty culture of the steel industry workers' lunch with a rite that breaks through the everyday routine. It also housed a co-working space in the basement of the church, which had been converted with large windows to resemble a storefront. Some participants regularly returned and even saw the "spaceship" as their new church community, others just come for a single event. The project displayed similarities to the *Fresh Expressions* movement of the Church of England as well as to other pastoral innovation projects, like *St. Mary* in Stuttgart. As it happens with experiments, the raumschiff came to an end in 2021. That seems typical for the discrepancy between the ever temporary character of new approaches and the timeless attitude towards – or rather never-ending prolongation of – traditional parish structures like the one mentioned in the previous chapter. Nonetheless there are learnings that can be applied to other settings, be they temporary or permanent.

From a practical theological perspective, Michael Schüßler has written about such forms of being church today. I want to mention two of his articles to programmatically situate the "spaceship" between two different poles: liquidity and stabilisation.

Liquidity: In his article on "liquid church," Schüßler argues, that the word "liquid" can take on many meanings: flexibility, finality (as in liquidating), or affluence (as in liquidity) – meaning that a liquid church is not just flexible, but also gives freely what it has received through the power of the Gospel (cf. Schüßler 2014, p. 26). Flexibility and finality are two sides of the same coin. Under the di-

4 Essen is a church district of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland, which itself is a part of the federation of protestant churches in Germany (EKD). The raumschiff.ruhr thus was part of the official structure of the Protestant church and had been featured both locally and nationwide as a lighthouse project for the renewal of the church.

agnosis of a "liquid modernity"[5] there is an ever increasing skepticism towards permanent structures. This also affects attempts to create safe havens of stability within the church, small communities as a bastion in the tempestuous sea of uncertainty (cf. ibid., p. 27). One consequence of this diagnosis is the need to explore new spaces. Schüßler refers to Pete Ward's suggestion to find ways of being church besides the Sunday service. But Schüßler's argument goes beyond doing worship and mission in new venues. With Kees de Groot he emphasises the socio-critical aspect of Bauman's work, arguing that exploring new spaces must go deeper than proverbially pouring the old wine in new wineskins and fundamentally change the self-understanding of what it means to be church. Schüßler continues this line to Rainer Bucher's analysis by arguing that

> [t]he projects of city pastoral, youth churches, many aspects of spiritual care in prisons and hospitals, or even urn halls, are not just new spaces for church. In these spaces church functions along completely new principles. The church does not have a good grip on these spaces but it allows itself to be changed by what is happening there* (ibid., p. 31)

Going liquid, then, also means losing control. The author further substantiates that claim with Hartmut Rosa's analysis of the time structure of modernity, which is no longer slowly moving along a linear controllable structure, but constituted of events over which we have only limited control and which can upset our world in an instant (cf. ibid., p. 33). On that basis then, Schüßler can argue that church can still occupy fixed spaces within the city, but it can no longer fully control what is happening in these spaces.

Stabilisation: But within the departure into the unknown waters of a liquid modernity, each organisation needs moments of stability. This can be best understood if we, for a moment, turn from practical theology and ecclesiology towards the scientific research on organisational development and innovation. In his concept of social change, the economist Uwe Schneidewind argues

5 The term has been employed by Zygmunt Bauman, who argues that liquid modern times do not need fixed governing structures, since power is no longer exerted by telling people what to do but by leaving them with the choice of life options, ever unsure whether or not their choice is a good one. This creates a situation of permanent stress – Have I chosen the right occupation, friends, or clothing? – and vulnerability (Haugaard and Bauman 2008, p. 112).

that organisations do not change continuously but that there are windows of opportunity, within which new developments accelerate and take off (cf. e.g. Schneidewind and Scheck 2012, p. 49). In a similar fashion, Frank Geels describes (technological) transition processes as change that happens in between phases of stability. It is important to note, however, that change in Geel's model happens on different levels, so that even during phases of relative stability on the upper levels of the societal sectors, small niche innovation already path the way towards organisational change, which happens when the tipping point is reached.

Figure 39: Frank Geels: A dynamic multi-level perspective on technological transitions (Geels 2002, p. 1263). This model for change resembles in part the theory of paradigm shifts within science as brought forward by the above mentioned Thomas Kuhn (cf. page 28).

The image in the above source shows the rocky path that some (but not all) developments in "technological niches" have to take to disrupt the current "socio-technical regimes" and then begin to influence the wider "landscape developments" in society.

On that basis, we can understand that institutions have an inherent inclination towards stabilisation. This holds true for churches in changing times as well. Michael Schüßler's argument in his article on the *Fresh Expressions of Church* movement makes a case in point: The fresh expression movement could either lead towards a prolongation of the established models of church as a community, which has been portrayed above, or it could become a "theology-generating cipher for different new forms to bring one's own life and its resonances in the world in contact with the god of Jesus"* (Schüßler 2016, p. 334). As theologians we are drawn towards the latter perspective, but we must recognise that many church communities who adopt approaches from the *Fresh Expressions* movement are rather interested in stabilising their community, continuing history instead of letting go of the idea of duration as a distinguishing feature of church (cf. ibid., p. 344).

Thus a pastoral theology which recognises the organisational structure as well as the dynamics of change within the church must reckon with both

movements, liquidity and stabilisation.[6] This can be experienced at the raumschiff.ruhr, especially if we are sensitive to both the potential of people and the materiality of places, as the following picture illustrates.

With Kirsten Graubner[7] we look out of the doors of the Market Church, where the raumschiff.ruhr is housed, and onto the busy pedestrians in the shopping district of Essen. Trained as a pastoral and social worker, she was leading the spaceship and coordinated its programming. I want to point to two material details in this picture to begin a conversation on the materiality of a liquid yet stable church.

1. We observe that the protagonist in this picture is wearing hiking boots, an outdoor attire, which in this context not only stands for practicality but also for the ability to go out into the unknown.[8] The founder of raumschiff.ruhr, Rebecca John Klug features in a volume on the experiences of churchly innovators with the title *Vom Wandern zum Wundern,** from wandering to wondering, which aptly fits our protagonist's attire. Therein Maria Herrmann and Sandra Bils collect essays from different, mostly young, church professionals, many of them describing their personal journey and the factors that led them to become innovators. In the first chapter, Maria Herrmann gives and overview over the different types of "wanderers" that the volume brings together. Under the heading *A Miracle in His Eyes,** she argues, that wandering away from the established forms of church and searching for new ways to live one's faith has been the staple of church history.

6 Michael Schüßler suggested, with reference to Hartmut Rosa ("dynamic stabilisation"), that these terms are not antithetical. However, I want to emphasise the revolutionary character of going liquid since the powers of change can hardly be contained by a single organisation, be it as large as the Catholic church.

7 This is the only picture in this chapter that includes a person. It could be understood as a blend between the architectural typologies of Bernd and Hilla Becher and the personal typologies of August Sander.

8 There is a discussion around the cultural significance of wearing outdoor attire in the sociology of fashion. It is important to note, that the protagonist's work "uniform" differs greatly from clerical clothing. Cf. Fellini's references to clerical clothing in his film *Roma*. For the use of fashion as a tool for the self-staging of religious professionals cf. Berenike Joachim-Buhl (Joachim-Buhl 2018).

> The ministry of those who in retrospect might command admiration, often starts with something that seems less glamorous and gracious, that is a premonition that something does not fit, maybe does not fit anymore. […] All too seldomly can we trace back, centuries or just decades later, which and how many wounds have been inflicted on these hiking paths, which the church often only saints in retrospect* (Herrmann 2017, pp. 8–9).

Hermann then goes on to describe the moments where something "does not fit anymore."* For example, if someone asks themself "why this hour on Sunday morning at 10 am has so little to do with the rest of the week"* or "[w]hy one's own musical taste, one's own aesthetic, one's own ways of life matter so little in the current conducts of churchly life"* (ibid., p. 11). Such findings, brought about by the "gift of not fitting in,"[9] often evoke feelings of self-doubt and loneliness, the "wounds" that Herrmann talks about. The "miracle" that the author mentions in her title then is the transformation of these feelings into productive change.

Thus, the physical act of putting on different clothes could be seen as one step on the way towards such a transformation. It signifies a shift in self- and world-perception, marking the beginning of small individual interventions that in the end result in systemic change within the organisation. A change that continues even after the raumschiff has moved on and other volunteers now need to find a way to make something of the space in Essen without a full-time church-employed facilitator like my interviewee.

2. Another detail is the glass door. We have already looked into the different symbolic meanings that glass can take on in architecture. Here I want to turn our attention to the similarity between the double entrance door of the church and that of the many shops in the city. The stele to the front right even looks vaguely like the anti-theft devices found at the entrances of chain stores and the heavy-duty floor mat further underlines the shop-like appearance. When I interviewed Kristen Graupner, she confessed that coming for the first time to Essen she had not noticed the church in the pedestrian area.

   Yet, at the same time, the door handles form a cross and the glass is inscribed not with brand names but words mainly from the religious

9 Herrmann borrows this term from the *Fresh Expressions of Church* movement (cf. Herrmann 2017, p. 11; Baker and Roll 2014).

> spectrum – cross, baptism, chalice – or signifying something out of the ordinary – anguish, consolation, silence, birth. Thus with that door, the church first of all references what is already there, the stability of the church as a building and its theology clad in well-known terms. But the door also recognises that the cultural reference system is increasingly lost. It looks out onto a shopping district where glass doors are ubiquitous but words like chalice and consolation are not.
>
> Good architecture should consist of both a reverence to its surroundings and a conscious break with them. The design of this door then could be understood as an answer to the question as to how a church deals with what Rainer Bucher has described as the separation of three things that once belonged together "the experienced social reality of the church […], its sense and symbol system […], and what is accepted and experienced within society"* (Bucher 2013, p. 28).

Another picture of the raumschiff.ruhr tells a similar story that features both liquidity and stabilisation coming together in one object. It is a sofa that sits in the co-working space in the basement below the church. Large shop windows light the room which opens towards a small square.

I want to emphasise two points with this picture.

1. First of all, the sofa is a carefully chosen design element. Many commercial co-working spaces as well as the inner-city branches of large corporations have now adopted the ragtag look of basement workshops or inventors' garages. They stage themselves as creative places with flat hierarchies and transparent structures. However, the "designed" nature of such spaces often shines through and beneath the surface one often finds the hierarchical "Californian Ideology" described earlier.[10] On the other hand, there are spaces where creativity and the challenge of the powers that be is actually encouraged: the fabrication laboratories (FabLabs), community cultural centres, or even the public libraries in a city quarter. Eric Klinenberg de-

10 Churches themselves are not immune against the "designed" nature of spaces that camouflage hierarchies. Youth church projects, be they Catholic, Protestant, or Pentecostal, are sometimes little more than old concepts of church staged in modern spaces. I have written about the hierarchical nature of projects that on the surface speak an equal and accessible design language elsewhere (Henkel 2018).

scribes them as "Palaces for the People," arguing that beautiful places open to all give the city dwellers dignity, regardless of their income (Klinenberg 2018).

The ragged old sofa can stand for both, a stabilisation of the old commercial hierarchies clad in shabby-chic attire and a break with the powers that be in the market place. Only when we look at the actual use of the space, an open space for different social groups regardless of their income, we can see that in the case of the spaceship, the sofa does not signify commercial appeal but giving back something to the city that has become a rare good: a non-commercialised yet beautiful space. Speaking a modern design language is more than just a gimmick in this regard, it is more than simply modernising a church basement, it is treating with respect all city dwellers, as they are invited in an aesthetically pleasing environment. Architecture can treat people well, as we have discussed, and the sofa is a small but vital element of that trait.

2. Secondly, I want to turn our attention towards the fact that the sofa is a disused piece of furniture which the raumschiff.ruhr's team saved from the dumpster. This might happen out of necessity – shedding weight in the literal sense to change places – but it also comes at a cost: people have to let go of something beloved. Within a church we experience similar trends. One pertinent example is the synodal process in the diocese of Trier. From 2013 to 2016 it followed the central metaphor of a "change of perspective" which, amongst other things, included a new look on the parochial structure. The closing document, which employs a wandering metaphor in its title *Heraus gerufen. Schritte in die Zukunft wagen* – called out, venturing steps into the future – promotes the opening up of new pastoral spaces. It wants to lay to rest the ideas that "every parish can and should look the same on the outside"* (Bistum Trier 2016, p. 21), that "the life of the church must be centrally organised"* (ibid., p. 23), and that "the church acts only where church officials are present"* (ibid., p. 19). It encourages parishes to try new "milieu- and situation-specific offers"* (ibid., p. 27) basing their actions on the people they want to serve.

   Drawing on the life forms of individuals is more important than following one's own ideas when making offers. The leading question comes from Jesus: What do you want me to do for you? (Mk 10:51)* (ibid., p. 45).

> Yet with this change of perspective also came the need to let go of some beloved ideas of how the church should function, especially on the local level. The storm of indignation that followed the synod was primarily driven by the outrage over the merging of parishes. As in other dioceses, people did not want to give up their individual parish and its full array of services – and, as we have seen above, buildings –, however seldomly they used them. The sofa can point towards a different way: a re-contextualisation. It is no longer part of an individual private living room for which it was designed and bought in the first place, but it is now used by different people in a open space. In the realm of the church with its furniture consisting not only of buildings and their inventory but also of ideas and social forms, Michael Schüßler calls such a reconstextualisaion "freigeben," liberating, releasing (to the public). Referring back to the social and material form finding we discussed earlier, that requires to look at these structures in detail and with as many members of the community as possible to find out what to keep, what to recontextualise, and what to lay to rest peacefully.[11]

The raumschiff.ruhr shows that design choices can be liberating (in the sense of Friedrich von Borries), that the design of church spaces can contribute to the church's mission to "let the other come to life"*(Schüßler 2016, p. 344). But such design choices have to be made deliberately, they require expert knowledge in design, architecture, and their connection to practical theology. And they require space that can be designed. But what happens if there is no longer a religious space in the midst of the city?

11 Regarding the ability to say farewell to beloved churchly structures cf. also (Müller-Zähringer, Knorreck, and Henkel 2019).

Figure 40: raumschiff.ruhr, Essen, view from the church. Photo by the author.

Figure 41: raumschiff.ruhr, Essen, view of the co-working space. Photo by the author.