

The Kreuzeskirche in Essen and its new “Gospel” Glass Paintings by James Rizzi

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An unusual way to preserve an old church

The Kreuzeskirche in Essen is a pioneer. It is still the church of a protestant parish in the northern center of the city but it is also a fantastic place for music, science or to get together. After a thorough and complete renovation the church is nowadays a location for all people and for all kinds of happenings or festivals given by Christians or Atheists, Jews, Muslims or anybody else. The Kreuzeskirche wants to host everybody. If you want to rent the old church for a concert, a party or a conference, the only condition is to respect human dignity and the integrity of the building.

This is a very unusual way to avoid the decline of an old church and to give a new start to an ancient listed building.

The Kreuzeskirche as a pioneer

On the first view, approaching to the church, nothing looks unusual. There are a lot of similar churches which were built in the end of the 19th or the beginning of the 20th century in the Ruhr Area. At that time, thousands of workers came to the Ruhr. Most of them found employment in the collieries and steel works. The immigrants stayed, married and had a lot of children. The entrepreneurs willingly cared for everything. They built flats, houses, even whole settlements for their employees. The owners of the big heavy industry companies invested even in low-cost shops, leisure grounds, museums, theaters or schools. They also gave money to the catholic and protestant parishes to enable them to erect huge and impressive churches.

In 1896, Essen was announced “Großstadt”. That means, it became a major city with more than 100.000 inhabitants. Two years before, the idea to build the Kreuzeskirche for more than 1500 worshippers had come to life. A third huge protestant church seemed to be necessary. The protestant parish of Essen chose a place in the north of the city to erect its new church. At that time, the place they chose was a place of decline. Up to the middle of the 19th century a lot of weavers lived there and that is how the place got its name: “Weberplatz”. Due to the industrial revolution most of the weavers had already lost their jobs. They suffered from unemployment, worked in the collieries or the huge Krupp firm in the neighborhood. A lot of inhabitants left their houses. The new immigrants coming from rural areas in Germany or Eastern Europe took the mostly rundown shabby little weaver lodges as their first housing. Soon these huts and houses were overcrowded. At the upcoming turn of the century the Mayor of Essen City decided that the old quarter had to be restructured. The first step was the erection of the Kreuzeskirche. Richly decorated multi-storey buildings with flats for middle class families, nice shops and huge department stores followed. Prosperity and wealth moved into the northern center of Essen.

In World War II the Kreuzeskirche was damaged. During the next decades, the wealth moved from the north of the city to the south. The place around the church turned to a settlement for workers and little shops. A big good station separated the church from their parish. The decline of heavy industry hit especially the north of Essen and therefore also the parish.

Meanwhile the Kreuzeskirche had been listed and the parish had to face the fact that there was not enough money either for the maintenance costs or to preserve the building with major and following renovations. But the parish was not willing to give up and, as a consequence, abandon the church. So, they decided to choose the sell-and-lease-back-idea: The building was sold to an Essen entrepreneur and the parish leased it back to use it for its services.

They managed to finance the renovation step by step, creating a wonderful modern and bright location inside. Even the valuable organ, made by Schuke in Berlin, the largest organ in Essen at all, could be saved and renovated. The Kreuzeskirche got new basic equipment for services and also an outstanding light system situated under the top of the roof, capable of lighting every sort of festival.

Three men in a boat

There are three men and a lot of volunteers behind the new concept. The head of this trio is the parson of the parish, Steffen Hunder. He is a person of outstanding creativity. The native "Ruhrian", nearly 60 years old Hunder, a father of six children, is very much interested in culture and the history of the Ruhr Area. He is quite busy with organizing his parish, preparing pastoral services, writing crime novels, publishing something, bringing cultural events into being and also thinking about preserving his churches (besides the Kreuzeskirche, he is also responsible for the old Marktkirche in the center of Essen). In this last issue, Hunder works together with the Essen builder and architect Rainer Alt. Hunder managed to convince him to purchase the Kreuzeskirche. Alt does not really regard himself as religious. But he is fascinated by the idea that faith is capable of helping people to accept one another and to live in peace and good neighborhood – an idea that sounds strange to many people, let's say, to too many people nowadays. Last but not least, Reinhold Wiesemann joined the trio, a friend of Alt for years. Wiesemann works as an entrepreneur in culture and history. He runs the Essen Unperfekthaus which is to be found between the big shopping mall Limbecker Platz and the Kreuzeskirche. This "imperfect house" offers extraordinary restaurants, galleries and studios. You can book it as a residence for the whole day or just for a few hours. In former times it was a Franziscan monastery and now it is good place for relaxing, eating, dating, creative work or having a party. Hunder managed to convince Wiesemann to take on the task of managing the Kreuzeskirche as a location for festivals and happenings.

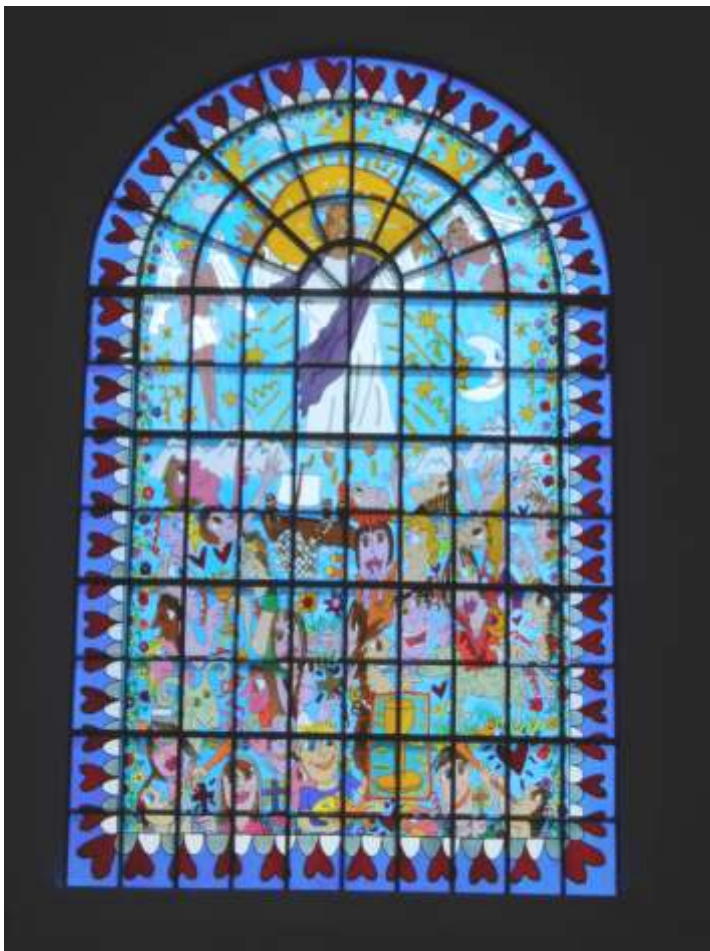
Many volunteers

The trio gets a lot of support by the former Essen head of cultural department Professor Dr. Oliver Scheytt. He is also a native Essen and a member of the parish. Scheytt was member of the board to bring the European cultural capital Essen 2010 into being. Currently he is working as a cultural consultant. He is the head of the Forum Kreuzeskirche, an association that cooperates with the two universities of Essen on arranging cultural and scientific events in the old church, most of them music festivals. Together with the Bauverein Kreuzeskirche, the Forum has brought up to now a lot of manpower, financial support and energy to realize the idea of a church as a location for both religious and cultural happenings. The renovating of the church came with the rebuilding of the whole neighborhood. At the same time a new quarter with nice modern multi-storey houses was

built close to the university at the place of the former goods station area. There is a lot of hope and future for the northern center of Essen.

James Rizzi

So far, so good. Parson Steffen Hunder was very lucky but he tried on to achieve new goals. During a trip to New York he discovered the art of James Rizzi. Promptly he fell in love with the strong colors and radiated joy of Rizzi's artworks. Rizzi had been educated by nuns and was totally unreligious, his art is absolutely worldly. But Hunder developed the idea to have new huge windows designed by James Rizzi over both side entrances of the Kreuzeskirche. A journey to the south of Germany brought him to a special area in the south of Hesse. There, in the so-called Taunus, he discovered one of the most famous glass painting companies in the world. The Derix Glasstudios work with a lot of artists, for example with Gerhard Richter. (Derix realized Richters magnificent window of the Cologne Cathedral). Hunder managed to get into the company and contact the owner. The lady was on her way to New York. She promised to see Rizzi. And Rizzi promised to design two glass paintings for the Kreuzeskirche in Essen. In 2010, one year before Rizzi died, Hunder got the final drafts. Five



years later, the glass paintings, realized by Derix Glasstudios, were installed. Since August 2016 they can be admired by every tourist, guest and especially by the worshippers attending the services.

There hadn't been any stipulation or demand about the themes. Hunder had just told Rizzi to remember his bible lessons in school and think about the most joyful messages of the Holy Bible.

James Rizzi chose the subjects "Father and Son" and "Jesus is Life". He did not change his style in creating the paintings. They are childlike and very colorful. For some people, Pop-Art or naïve paintings in churches might be quite strange. The paintings are 12 meters high and very prominent inside the elegant white appearance of the building.

On the other hand, the artworks of James Rizzi are very popular and attractive even for people who are basically not much interested in art. The Germans love the art of Rizzi. Germany provided the artist with a lot of continuous employment. Currently two or three galleries are presenting Rizzi paintings and 3D-graphics. For example, you can purchase graphics after the glass paintings of the

Kreuzeskirche in a gallery in Duisburg. Eduscho sells coffee machines and mugs in the typical James Rizzi style.

It works

With the outstanding new windows, the Kreuzeskirche is expected to be another magnet for tourists in the Ruhr Area. And beyond, Steffen Hunder hopes that this magnet will also work for people who are looking for a new way to step into the Christian faith. Anyway, until now the idea to use the Kreuzeskirche in a multifunctional manner has been working.

