

## HERITAGE AND IDENTITY CONFERENCE IN DRESDEN

The last week of November the conference *Heritage, Homeland, Identity. Heritage Conservation and Society* (Denkmal-Heimat-Identität. Denkmalpflege und Gesellschaft) took place in Dresden, Germany. Organized by the Heritage Conservation Department of Dresden Capitol of Saxony, the conference was attended by participants from universities, heritage preservation bodies and NGO's from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Poland and Belgium.



*Figure 1. Constructing a new bridge towards heritage conservation.*

Central theme of the conference was the role of identity and homeland in heritage conservation. Religious heritage in its many different manifestations has a significant part in shaping a sense of homeland and identity. This was acknowledged by some of the speakers and in the excursions.

The concept of Heimat has connotations to German Romanticism and regionalism, however, the idea of homeland and local identity is shared across Europe. In Dresden the topic of Heimat and identity is related to its destruction in 1945 and consequent rebuilding first during the socialist era and later after German unification thirty years ago this year. Reconstruction of built heritage lost in disasters such as the Second World War are related to identity building, on both a local and a national level.

The importance of religious heritage in identity was briefly expressed the first day when the results of a Swiss survey about which buildings the Swiss identify themselves with. Half of the top 20 buildings are religious heritage, often cathedrals. These iconic buildings help shape the image of cities, indeed, create a sense of home and identity. The presenter, however, failed to notice this, sadly a recurrent with many of the participants that too often take religious heritage for granted.

Wednesday evening was concluded by a visit to the Jewish Community centre and New Synagogue, where participants were greeted by *Nora Goldenbogen* of the Jewish Community Dresden. As in many cities and towns across Germany, the Old or Semper Synagogue in Dresden was destroyed during *Kristallnacht* in 1938. Unlike other religious buildings after the fall of socialism in 1989, the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche being one of the brightest examples, the Jewish community of

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Dresden decided not to reconstruct but built something new. In an attempt not to erase the chilling fact the synagogue was destroyed, the location of the Old Synagogue is kept a void.

In his interesting talk Prof *Jens Jäger* of Cologne University used amateur photographs from late Victorian England (many featuring village churches) to contextualize the concept of *Heimat*. *Michael Schindhelm*, representing Dresden EU Capital of Culture 2025, spoke about the concept for Dresden 2025 called *Neue Heimat*. The theme of shaping a new homeland was



Figure 2. Model of the New Synagogue of Dresden.

introduced, further explored the following day by Ms *Katarzyna Sonntag* of Dresden University. In her fascinating talk, Katarzyna addressed the case of reshaping Wrocław (in German known as Breslau) where after the second World War much of the German population was replaced with Poles from modern-day Ukraine. Religious heritage was an important part of this remodeling. The appearance of churches, especially the interiors, was brought back to the period before Wrocław had become a Prussian city, emphasizing the Polish character of the place.

The authors presentation concerned the many heritage values religious heritage can have with sacred architecture as the material manifestation of these, related to building a sense of home and even national identity. The postwar reconstruction of churches in Warsaw during socialism was used as an illustration.

On Thursday Ms *Tanja Scheffler* dazed participants with an engaged excursion concluded by a visit to the *Church of the Magi* (*Dreikönigskirche*). Here she briefly explained the situation of religious practice during the GDR. The future of churches like this one were threatened, eventually in the 1980's rebuilt and given a community purpose including a place for worship. This chapel is found on the second floor of the building. An exiting mural was begun in 1989, months before the Fall of the Iron Curtain, and

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finished in 1990. The value of this mural is far beyond the artistic, it is a touching testimony of this significant period in time.



Figure 3. Mural by Werner Juza inside the Church of the Magi. In the first years after the fall of communism, this space was used by the new parliament of Saxony.

During the conference the many misconceptions about EU policies regarding culture and conservation became clear. Although the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 is widely known, an understanding what the EU can do to support projects remains largely unclear. This became evident when heritage preservation projects in the *Interreg Polska-Sachsen* were discussed. Here lies a task for organisations such as FRH to communicate the many possibilities, as FRH is doing in cooperation with ENCATC for example, and further de-mystify EU policies.

Concluding, the conference addressed the topic of local and regional identity in the conservation of (built) heritage. Religious heritage is a significant part of this. Difficulties regarding ownership can occur, and participation of the



Figure 4. Slide featuring the rebuilt churches in Wroclaw from the presentation by Katarzyna Sonntag.

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public remains problematic to some. This skepticism regarding participation of the public in some eastern German departments may need to be addressed. Only briefly the important issue of purpose of built heritage was addressed. Yes, heritage buildings are substantial in shaping a sense of home, both on a local and a national level, but without a purpose reaching out to the community, they become empty meaningless objects of scenery. This is maybe especially true for religious heritage.

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