

# Adaptive Reuse of a Historic Mortuary Chapel in Dresden

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## Abstract

Historic cemetery buildings have increasingly lost their original function as burial and mourning practices change, leaving many structures neglected or threatened with demolition. Adaptive reuse offers the opportunity not only to preserve these monuments but also to reposition cemeteries as accessible and socially relevant public spaces. This paper exemplifies the transformation of cemetery culture through the adaptive reuse of the former mortuary chapel at Dresden's Trinitatis Cemetery by the author. Erected in 1843 for public viewings, the chapel became obsolete in the 20th century and fell into severe disrepair. Its conversion into a community center and café involved a careful process of defining a new program, removing interior partitions to establish a unified spatial experience, and opening the façades toward the street and cemetery entrance. New wooden structures update the building's new purpose, remaining distinct from the historic fabric and allowing the monument to be reactivated as a vibrant public space.

Keywords: Mortuary Chapel, Community Center, Cemetery Architecture

## Introduction—Germany's and Dresden's Cemetery Culture

Cemeteries in Germany have long held a distinctive cultural role as places of mourning, remembrance, and collective memory. Beyond their commemorative function, they are important cultural landscapes shaped by art, architecture, and garden design, while also serving as valuable urban green spaces that contribute to biodiversity and climate regulation. Artistic engagements with death and remembrance—particularly during the Romantic period—have left a lasting imprint on cemetery design, as exemplified by works of artists such as Caspar David Friedrich. In 2020, in recognition of this cultural significance, German cemetery culture was inscribed into the national list of intangible cultural heritage following a recommendation by the German UNESCO Commission. This designation highlights cemeteries as living cultural spaces whose meanings extend beyond burial practices alone. Dresden's cemeteries form an integral part of the city's urban fabric. Often designed as park-like landscapes, many date back several centuries and reflect Romantic ideals of nature, memory, and contemplation. Artists and architects have historically contributed to these spaces, resulting in cemeteries that resemble open-air sculpture parks. Prominent architectural examples include Fritz Schumacher's Reform Architecture crematorium in Tolkewitz and Paul Wallot's Neo-Renaissance mourning hall at the Johannisfriedhof. Together, these sites illustrate the long-standing interplay between architecture, landscape, and cultural identity in Dresden's cemetery tradition.

## Finding New Functions for Cemetery Buildings

While many historic cemetery buildings remain in use, profound changes in burial and mourning practices have rendered others obsolete. Large funeral ceremonies have become less common, and mortuary chapels—once used for extended public viewings of the deceased - are no longer required. As a result, numerous architecturally significant buildings stand vacant, dilapidated, or threatened with demolition. Since German cemeteries are typically administered by public institutions operating under financial constraints, the preservation of these structures often exceeds available resources.

In response, various cemeteries across Germany have explored adaptive reuse strategies, transforming disused buildings into columbaria, galleries, or community-oriented spaces. Such projects must balance economic viability, public acceptance, and respect for the sacred character of the site. In Berlin, for example, cafés integrated into cemetery buildings have proven successful by serving mourners, visitors, and local residents alike, offering spaces for reflection and social interaction within a contemplative environment.

### The Mortuary Chapel at Trinitatis Cemetery

The Trinitatis Cemetery in Dresden was designed in 1815 by the royal court architect Friedrich Thormeyer, with the mortuary chapel added around 1840 based on designs by



Fig. 1 Original and new facade

Arno Kießling. Executed in the Neoclassical style, the chapel reflects the architectural ideals of its time. Originally located in the prosperous Johannstadt district, the surrounding area was largely destroyed during the Second World War and only partially rebuilt in the post-war period. Today, the neighborhood is characterized by fragmented urban structures, limited social infrastructure, and a mixed migrant population with few shared communal spaces.

Within this context, the mortuary chapel represents both a historical artefact with the potential of becoming a community resource. Changes in funerary culture—shortened mourning periods, private cremations, and reduced public participation—have rendered its original function obsolete. Nevertheless, despite war damage and provisional repairs, the building has retained its architectural dignity. Its symmetrical layout, restrained ornamentation, and prominent position at the cemetery entrance continue to underscore its calibre as spatial landmark.

Given the social fragmentation of the surrounding district, the chapel offers the potential to accommodate new civic and cultural functions. Its symbolic association with memory and

transience provided a strong conceptual basis for adaptive reuse, enabling the preservation of architectural substance while reactivating the building as a contributor to contemporary public life.

### The Design Concept

The design concept was guided by the building's dual relationship to the cemetery and the adjacent urban quarter. A primary objective was to enhance the chapel's public presence by establishing visual connections between its interior and the entrance plaza, while also enabling access beyond regular cemetery opening hours. In doing so, the project sought to transform the former mortuary into a welcoming space for the neighborhood. A further aim was to establish a symbolic and functional relationship with the Trinitatis Church ruin across the street, now used by Christian youth groups, thereby embedding the building more firmly within the local social network.

Spatially, the design responded to the obsolescence of the original compartmentalized layout by creating a unified interior space organized around a central focus. A visual axis was

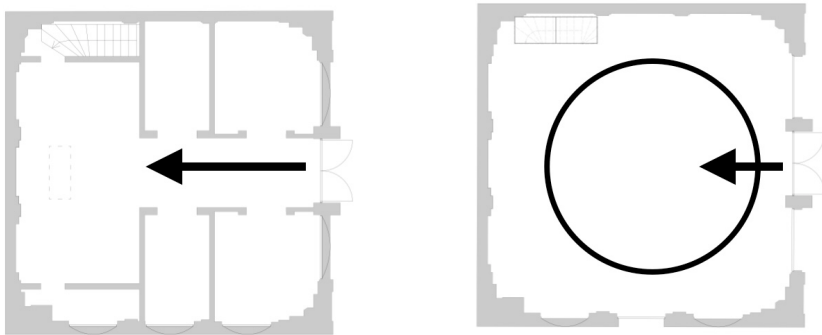


Fig. 2 Original and new interior layout

established toward the funeral hall across the entrance plaza, reinforcing spatial continuity within the cemetery ensemble.

In line with the Venice Charter from 1964: „any extra work ...must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp“, our aim was to establish a clear distinction between the original structure and any new additions of the interior—both in form and material. All additions were conceived as non-permanent, in keeping with the original notion of “meubles” (furniture), meaning movable interior elements. In line with the UNESCO charter : In safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage issued in 2003, the renovation gives new purpose to the building and we hope to invite more people to appreciate the intangible heritage that are German cemeteries.

### Exterior Interventions

To strengthen the relationship between the chapel and its urban surroundings, the street-facing façade was partially opened by replacing the infill of the central arch with a window.

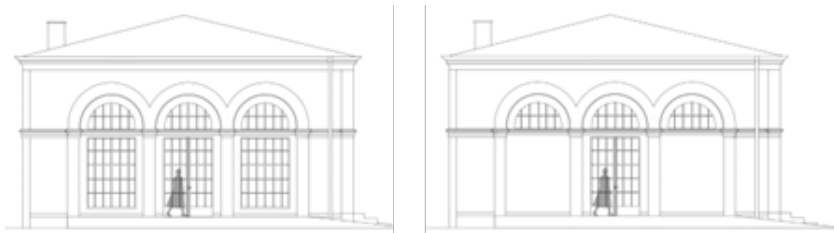


Fig. 3 Alternative designs for street-facing façade. Right: alternative chosen by client

While the original proposal envisioned opening all three arches to maximize transparency and daylight, a compromise with the client resulted in a more restrained intervention. Despite this limitation, the new opening establishes visual permeability and signals the building's new public function. A planned terrace on the south facing side outside the cemetery walls will offer additional community access.

On the cemetery-facing façade, two additional windows were inserted into the arches flanking the main entrance, improving daylight conditions and reinforcing the chapel's openness toward the cemetery grounds.

### Interior Design

The interior program supports three primary functions: community use, cultural events, and exhibitions. The space accommodates informal gatherings through flexible seating, a communal table, and alcoves for private conversations, complemented by a compact kitchen for café use. This configuration encourages intergenerational exchange between local residents, cemetery visitors, and nearby youth groups, while also allowing civic organizations to rent the space. The terrace on the south side expands the outdoor seating for café guest during warmer months. For cultural events, the chapel can host small-scale concerts, readings, and performances for approximately forty people. A small, foldable



### INTERIOR ELEVATIONS

Fig. 4 Interior sections for multifunctional programs



Fig. 5 View of the northern walls with exhibition panel, kitchen unit, and book shelves

stage was designed to support intimate performances and readings. This element is planned for future implementation once additional funding becomes available.

Exhibition use is facilitated through mobile wall elements and existing niches, enabling flexible displays without permanent structural alterations.

Central to the interior design is a multifunctional wooden lattice system that defines the spatial layout and character of the interior. Its modular construction allows ongoing adaptation to changing spatial needs, while integrating furniture, shelving, lighting, and display surfaces. The system also enhances acoustic comfort, and provides visual coherence through a harmonic proportional system. This concept extends into the vestibule module, where it supports climate regulation, visitor orientation, and informational displays, forming a transitional threshold between exterior and interior. It creates a transitional space that improves climate regulation while providing a welcoming threshold between exterior and interior environments. In addition, it is valuable space for announcement panels, flyer boxes, and a modular wardrobe. Subtly illuminated with recessed lighting, the vestibule functions as an initial point of contact for visitors. Glazed doors connect the vestibule to the main multipurpose area.

Interior materials were selected for durability and compatibility with the historic fabric, including larch wood, linoleum flooring, mineral paints, and acoustic ceiling panels. Floor heating and supplementary radiators in the niches across the entrance, as well as floor convectors beneath arches and windows ensure thermal comfort while protecting the thin building envelope.

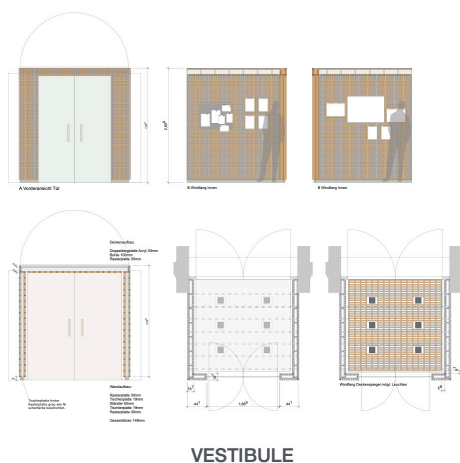
### Planning and Building Process

The transformation of the mortuary chapel unfolded within a prolonged and structurally fragmented planning framework shaped by multiple institutional actors, shifting



Fig. 6. Multifunctional wooden lattice system

programmatic expectations, and incremental funding mechanisms. Rather than following a linear design logic, the project developed under conditions of continuous renegotiation, as additional functions were introduced by stakeholders while construction was already in progress. This situation necessitated an adaptive planning approach in which architectural



VESTIBULE



Fig. 7 Vestibule

decision-making was repeatedly revised in response to external constraints. Public funding—secured in successive stages through municipal, district, and European programs—proved both enabling and restrictive. While it made the project possible, it also imposed a temporally discontinuous logic that subordinated architectural coherence to funding availability. As a result, construction phases proceeded without reference to an overarching implementation strategy: façade elements were renewed prior to decisions on spatial permeability; structural components critical to later interior interventions were



addressed only retrospectively; and technical systems were specified before the spatial and material concept had fully crystallized. These asynchronous sequences generated redundancies and limited the capacity of architectural design to operate proactively, effectively reducing it to a reactive practice. That this long and at times rather arduous process was ultimately successful is partly due to the commitment and perseverance of the head of the cemetery, Beatrice Teichmann.

The fragmented process was further complicated by the initial distribution of planning authority. Overall coordination was located within the cemetery administration, which oversaw multiple architectural offices and engineering consultants without a clearly articulated hierarchy. In this configuration, architectural authorship and responsibility were diluted, and design decisions emerged from administrative negotiation rather than from an integrated spatial concept. Only at a later stage - when the realization of the interior design became imminent - was coordination consolidated and decision-making authority reassigned to the designing architect. This clarification of responsibilities ensured that a high level of design quality of the interior concept could be maintained throughout the subsequent stages of realization. This process revealed the extent to which architectural quality in adaptive reuse projects depends not only on design intent but on governance structures and procedural clarity.

From a critical perspective, the project illustrates the inherent tensions of publicly funded adaptive reuse within heritage contexts. While flexibility and perseverance enabled the realization of the project, the necessity to “design on the fly” exposes systemic limitations in funding models and planning protocols that lead to short-term decisions over long-term architectural coherence. The case thus underscores the need to rethink institutional frameworks governing heritage adaptation, advocating for planning structures that recognize architectural design as a strategic, rather than merely responsive, agent in processes of cultural transformation.

## **Conclusions**

The adaptive reuse of the Trinitatis Mortuary Chapel illustrates the potential of cemetery architecture to respond to evolving cultural practices while preserving historical and symbolic integrity. By transforming a disused mortuary into a multifunctional community space, the project establishes a hybrid environment that accommodates remembrance alongside civic engagement.

Through reversible design strategies, enhanced spatial permeability, and sensitive material interventions, the chapel has been reactivated as a social interface between cemetery and city. At the same time, the project acknowledges the challenges inherent in adaptive reuse, particularly within publicly administered and financially constrained settings, where conflicting demands of preservation, utility, and policy must be continually negotiated.

Ultimately, this project shows that funerary architecture need not remain marginal or static. Instead, such buildings can be reimagined as active components of collective memory and contemporary urban life, contributing to cultural continuity and social cohesion.

Images: drawings and photographs by the author

## **Notes**

1. C.D. Friedrich's painting, The Cemetery. (oil on canvas , 10 x 143 cm, Inv. Nr.: Gal.-Nr. 2197 B, Galerie Neue Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden) became one of the most influential paintings for the design of cemeteries in Dresden. The gate of the Trinitatis Friedhof resembles the cemetery gate in the painting.
2. In 2000, Cemetery Culture in Germany was awarded the title of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the German UNESCO Commission <https://www.unesco.de/staette/friedhofskultur-in-deutschland/>
3. The official website of the City of Dresden has a special section on all of Dresden's cemeteries with their history and cultural significance. [https://www.dresden.de/de/stadtraum/umwelt/gruenes-dresden/Friedhoeft.php?pk\\_campaign=Shortcut&pk\\_kwd=friedhof](https://www.dresden.de/de/stadtraum/umwelt/gruenes-dresden/Friedhoeft.php?pk_campaign=Shortcut&pk_kwd=friedhof)
4. Because of space limitations, illustrations important architectural examples of cemetery architecture could not be shown. Please consult the following sources under public domain: Fritz Schumacher's Reform Architecture crematorium in Tolkewitz ([https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urnenhain\\_Tolkewitz](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urnenhain_Tolkewitz)) Paul Wallot's Neo-Renaissance mourning hall at the Johannisfriedhof, Dresden ([https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannisfriedhof\\_\(Dresden\)#/media/Datei:Johannisfriedhof\\_dresden\\_trauerhalle\\_-\\_d.jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannisfriedhof_(Dresden)#/media/Datei:Johannisfriedhof_dresden_trauerhalle_-_d.jpg))
5. Kippenberger S. and Gyarmaty J. Ausruhen in Frieden ( Rest in Peace) Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 19. November 2023 <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/reise/friedhofs-cafes-in-berlin-so-einzigartig-wie-die-hauptstadt-19322256.html>
6. The history of Dresden's Trinitatisfriedhof is presented in <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/>
7. Trinitatisfriedhof\_(Dresden), and <https://johannisfriedhof-dresden.de/friedhoeft/trinitatisfriedhof/trinitatisfriedhof-historie/>
8. International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter). Venice, 1964, Article 9.
9. UNESCO. Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. 2003.