

Stephanuskirche: pretty much 1900 ...

Pictures of our exhibition

Welcome at our hosts of Prima Center Berlin (PCB).

Shouldn't an exhibition concerning the 120th anniversary of a church take place in their premises? We from "Initiative Denkmal Stephanuskirche" (Initiative Memorial Stephanuskirche) thought so, too. But the parish council¹ (GKR) didn't want us. There was no written explanation for this and no conversation between the GKR and us, although we had requested both. Therefore the exhibition of the voluntary Initiative Denkmal Stephanuskirche has now found refuge here in PCB. We are very grateful to our hosts from PBC for this.

In the parish, those in charge never get tired of emphasizing their central position as owners and masters of Stephanuskirche. At least we found their care for the building questionable and their diplomacy strange. We are touching on these aspects under the heading "A Touch of Schilda." ("Schilda" here stands as a symbol for a foolish municipal administration.)

The focus is on the architecture, the interiors and the iconographic program of our church.



¹ "parish": (in the Christian Church) is a small administrative district, typically having its own church and a priest or pastor. "parish council": A council consisting of elected church members. This board is in charge of the administration of the parish.

Under the heading "The Stephanuskirche: pretty much 1900..." we are showing architectural features of the church. The sections on the interiors and on the iconographic program are going into detail: The designs and representations in the nave² are presented, and in some cases the historical background of the construction, too. You can come to your own conclusions.

The treatment of the rich plant world as depicted in Stephanuskirche is a little playful. Under the heading "Plant motifs in Stephanuskirche", plants from the Holy Land and distinctly Germanic trees, flowers and herbs have got mixed altogether. In addition to the search for meaning, the joy of discovering and deciphering the forms is conveyed here, too.

The authors have clearly left their mark on their departments.

We all benefited from the fact that cultural scientist Eberhard Elfert led us "looking" through the church. He had founded the initiative group, based on the work by Diana Schaal from Soldiner Kiez e.V. who had conducted tours of Stephanuskirche. He then turned to other projects in June 2024, but still continued to advise us afterwards. We would like to thank him cordially for his suggestions and wish him success in his work.

We also would like to thank the Action Fund of Quartiersmanagement Soldiner Straße and the Kirchbauverein Stephanus (Stephanuskirche Building Association) for their support.

² The central part of a church, stretching from the main entrance to the chancel

Stephanuskirche: pretty much 1900 ...

It only appears to be Gothic

Stephanuskirche, built in 1904, is reminiscent of the gothic architectural style of the Middle Ages when faith was strong. It is referred to as neo-gothic. Technically, the church has little of the airy construction of German cities' flowering times. The building does not have stone buttresses¹. These were stabilizing old churches like a timber frame, what created space for light-flooded windows. Illusory buttresses and supports are a bluff in Stephanuskirche. The weight of the lofty dome with a height of 22 meters is resting on a square of openwork walls, and not on four pillars in the gothic style. Additional walls were placed in front of the load-bearing walls, in order to accommodate the airy galleries and the low side aisles. While you feel elevated at the top, you feel a little depressed at the bottom.

Adolf Brückner's inelegant construction was, above all, cheap.

The Evangelische Kirchenbauverein (Protestant Church Building Association) who initiated the churches of the time period 1890 - 1914 had spent a lot of money on the construction of Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche (1891 - 1895) close to the Berlin zoo.



¹ A structure of stone or brick built against a wall to strengthen or support it

"...from now on, cheap churches must be built," wrote Ernst von Mirbach who was heading the association for Empress Auguste Victoria. For this reason, the plots of land for the churches now being built were more modest. In the case of Stephanuskirche, the tower, nave and parish hall had to be pushed into one another, creating an angled miniature square at the entrance. To the East, there is a garden allowing a rural-looking view, as the Protestant Church Building Association originally intended.

Art historians have observed that the churches of the time period 1890 - 1914 had rather more investments into the interiors than into structural finesse. In Stephanuskirche, too, the altar, pulpit and baptismal font as well as sculptures and paintings were donated by contributors from the community in which the new parish was established now.

The wealthy aristocracy wanted a certain amount of freedom, however the meaningful decorations did not create any expenses for the Protestant Church Building Association or for the State. Sometimes the Empress herself made donations. But not for Stephanuskirche. Perhaps she did not like the fact that the founding parish St. Paul was considered liberal?

The Interior of Stephanuskirche

The main parts of the interior are the **altar**, the **baptismal font** and the **pulpit**.

They had been designed by Adolf Bürckner who also created the structural design of the building. All of the parts are made of white sandstone and had been donated by wealthy residents of the Gesundbrunnen district.

Paul Hjarup, former owner of the Roller **match stick machine factory**, donated a large sum of money for the altar and the pulpit. Today you can find the neighbourhood center **Fabrik Osloer Straße** and the children's museum "Labyrinth" in the former factory buildings.

Altar, baptismal font and pulpit

A figure of Christ is standing on the **altar** in front of a neo-gothic arched alcove.

It is a replica of Christ's figure created by the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen which he made in 1838 for the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen.

It is reminding Christ's words:

„Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, I will enliven you.“

The **baptismal font** is left hand in front of the altar.

Around the edge the following inscription can be found: *„Let the children come to me.“*

The wooden **pulpit** is right hand in front of the altar.

It has a high sound reflecting vault with wooden carvings in an apparently gothic style.

The pulpit is standing on top of a brick column, supported by columns of white sandstone.

They are carrying a slab of white sandstone, supporting the pulpit and depicting cherub angels.

Chandelier and Pipe Organ

The **chandelier** was made of bronze and is carrying 100 lamps.

Its diameter is 8 m, and its weight is more than 30 hundredweight – that is more than 1.500 kg! The chandelier is hanging from a doubly secured pulley. After all, it should not fall on the visitor's heads! The chandelier is probably the largest still existing round candelabra in Germany.

The church still has the original **pipe organ** which was installed here in 1904.

The instrument was crafted by the pipe organ building company Schlag & Sons in Silesia. It is the only pipe organ still existing in Berlin by this company. Hence it is classified as a historical monument. The pipe organ has three manuals and 41 organ stops. In 1971 an electrical keyboard had been built in.

The photo is showing the interior of Stephanuskirche around 1910.

In the chancel behind the altar you can see the original colourful church windows, which were made of leaded glass.

All of the church windows had been destroyed during World War II. In the post-war period the windows had not been replaced in the original style. Due to financial reasons windows in a more simple style had been built in.

The original interior of this church is almost completely preserved!

This is very rarely the case with churches of the time period 1870 - 1914.

And Stephanuskirche is the only church of this time period, still existing in the Gesundbrunnen district!

The Iconographic Program of Stephanuskirche

The entire iconographic program¹ is consisting of several elements:

The 6 Figures in Sandstone

They had been created by Edmund Wende.

Each figure is about 3 m high and is standing in front of a golden painted background.

Above each figure is a tower-like stepped top piece, reminding of a canopy for figures in cathedrals of the Middle Ages.

¹ Subordination of sculptures and paintings under a theme

Each figure is standing on top of a pillar which is built in front of an illusory buttress.
They may be considered as **pillars of Protestantism**.

Left hand and right hand of the altar: The apostles **Paul** and **Peter**

Left hand of the altar, at the north window:
Jan Hus, Bohemian Reformer of the Middle Ages

Right hand of the altar, at the south window:
Bonifatius, missionary of the pagan Germanic tribes, considered the "Apostle of the Germans"

Facing the altar

Left hand of the organ, at the north window: **Friedrich Schleiermacher**,
philosopher and Protestant Church Father of the 19th century

Facing the altar

Right hand of the organ, at the south window:
Martin Luther, most important German Protestant Reformer



According to our knowledge Stephanuskirche is the only existing church of the time period 1870 - 1914 which has these figures on top of the pillars!

The 4 Angels

In each of nave's four corners, at the bottom of the illusory buttress, there is an winged angel's bust with a wreath of roses.

They may be considered as the four archangels Michael, Gabriel, Uriel and Raphael.

The original 9 Portraits in the Chancel

In the blind windows of the chancel there were originally 9 portraits of different persons. They had been persecuted due to their religious beliefs or they had their special contributions to Protestantism or social work.

These portraits were painted like icons against a golden background, and in a three-quarter view.

During the restoration after World War II some of them had been painted over.

Only four of them had been restored.

In the plan-sketch they are lettered in **bold**.

The portraits which had not been restored are lettered in *italic*.

The portraits of the persons being treated in the **album „Heretics, Sovereigns, Social Workers”**, which can be found on the table in this exhibition room, are lettered in **red** in the plan-sketch.



Three portraits on the **left** hand behind the altar:

Bishop Ignatius of Antiochia, martyr (portrait not restored)

Petrus Waldus, French Reformer of the Middle Ages

Ulrich Zwingli, Swiss Reformer (portrait not restored)

Three portraits **directly behind** the altar:

Great Elector of Brandenburg, Supporter of persecuted Calvinists in France (portrait not restored)

King Gustav Adolf of Sweden, saved Protestantism from downfall during Europe's Thirty Years' War

*King Friedrich Wilhelm. I. in Prussia,
Supporter of Protestants from Salzburg und Bohemia (portrait not restored)*

Three portraits on the **right** hand behind the altar:

August Francke, founder of an orphanage and the Francke Foundations (portrait not restored)

Theodor Fliedner, Founder of the Protestant deaconesses as hospital nurses and district nurses

Johann Hinrich Wichern,

Founder of an institution for neglected children
and founder of “City Mission” for homeless people, both in Hamburg

These portraits as a whole are depicting an **altarpiece** which - according to our knowledge - cannot be found in this form in any other church of the time period 1870 - 1914 in Berlin.

The Altar Window

The stoning of **Stephanus** was depicted in the original altar window, the church’s namesake. As member of the early Christian community in Jerusalem he was taking care of the poor.

The Iconographic Program

Freedom and Authority in Stephanuskirche

Around 1900 the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 - 1834) was revered by "liberal Christians" as a kind of modern church father. The imperial opposition party, which pushed the church building program at the time, had other priorities. There were only three depictions of Schleiermacher from this period in Berlin churches. Here, liberal founding congregations had prevailed. The Stephanus congregation was built up by the church St. Paul in Badstrasse. In Epiphaniienkirche in Charlottenburg, the stained glass windows with Schleiermacher's depiction were shattered during the Second World War, and in Nathanaelkirche in Schöneberg, his picture was painted over in the 1950s.

In the time of Emperor Wilhelm II. (1859 - 1941), ecclesiastical liberalism and political liberalism differed from today's meaning of the word. At that time, a "national liberalism" was supported which was advocating a strong power of the State and a hard hand towards the people. In Stephanuskirche, the parish councils of St. Paul set corresponding signs. However, the pictures of sovereigns could be seen as bows to the patrons.



A painted-over picture in the chancel is clearer. It was depicting Ignatius of Antiochia, a successor of the Apostle Paul around 100 AD. He is only known to pious people. But he was the first in early Christianity to demand power for the bishop and obedience from the believers.

In this way, the church elders of St. Paul indicated their own claim to power. The iconographic program of Stephanuskirche combines liberal and authoritarian characteristics.

A bourgeois mixture that remained alive in Germany in the 20th century.