

A Space Comes True

^E Christian Helwing is an artist who takes the concept of the spatial turn seriously and literally. He *turns spaces around*, corrects them, reshapes them, gives them other senses of direction. The spatial turn signified a reorientation of the humanities: a new direction liberated from the chains of time, acceleration, epochs, movements, and dedicated to the “slower” dimension of space. It arose out of the quaking of the major geopolitical plates, the blocks of the post-war era. Over the course of its development, it had to think its way into new types of space: virtual spaces, deterritorialization, and *global cities* are some of the buzzwords, but the “disappearance of space” was a topic of debate as well. The spatial turn had to accept that age-old crisis zones remain crisis zones, think of the Middle East, and that seemingly historically marginalized regions have been resurrected. The most successful, newly founded magazine in Germany in recent years is called *Liebes Land*. Not a day goes by without a “regional crime thriller” being published or broadcast on television. The environmental movement has also had an impact on spatial practice and theory. Spaces and land became and continue to become more valuable, increasing density is the order of the day; reutilization instead of demolition is almost a matter of course. How many barracks have been repurposed since 1980, how many attics have been converted into apartments?

This is, roughly outlined, the situation where an artist like Christian Helwing comes into play. Helwing has previously reconstituted a variety of spaces and buildings into new spatial structures: a stairwell, a church nave, a museum, various public art spaces housed in different types of buildings—retail stores, town houses, etc. In Krems he activates three places: a former church, a Marian

column in front of it, and an exhibition space; places that are some distance apart from one another and which have been interlinked for the purpose of the exhibition. Helwing finds his most-preferred parameter not in art spaces but in church spaces: distinct orientations. Christian churches are oriented upwards and toward the east. Both directions point beyond it. In 2016, for the Salvator Church in Prague, Helwing accentuated this upward orientation, the *sursum corda*. In Krems he focuses on horizontal orientations, in particular on the east; the work's title *(B)EAST!* also contains these four letters: "EAST." It should be noted that "oriented toward the east" is a tautology: the sun rises in the Orient. Christian churches are "aligned to the east." They point toward the Holy Land, where Christ rose up in the morning like the sun. (Heideggerian) "Man" knows this but does not see it. Church services are conveniently scheduled for ten o'clock in the morning; by then the night is forgotten and the sun is elsewhere. For everyday life in a Dominican monastery, however, the following applied: at dawn, the brothers were called to church for the "lauds," and the subsequent daily liturgy of the "prim" may presumably have been a celebration of the rising light, which, in the monks' choir in the Church in Krems, came streaming through at least nine windows. What's more: toward the end of the Middle Ages, the monastic and chapter choirs were physically set apart from the parish hall—this is also the case in Krems. One could say that they are sharply pointed upwards like arrows or spears in the direction of salvation, while the broad parish hall remains rather static.

Both sections of the space, nave and choir, deviate visually from the sacred axis if measured with a compass. This is nothing unusual because builders often based their alignment on the sun's position on an important day of festivities; this could have been the day marking the church saint or the founder of the Order. In this case it was that of St. Dominic, which was celebrated on August 8, but for the Order his solemn feast was on July 13, the day when the saint's bones were transferred. Or was it based on the holiday of the church patrons Peter and Paul? This would be June 29. One can see that these days are not very far apart and would justify even a minimal deviation. Building research presumes that in Krems for both sections of the church older buildings had to be taken into account. This is also not uncommon for mendicant churches. These churches were the last major structures to be built during the Middle Ages in the already mostly settled cities. One had to work with these circumstances. In Krems, however, this was not the case: the monastery was located outside the town walls, situated not on vacant ground but within an

agricultural complex whose structures were partly incorporated into the new monastery building; evidently this influenced its orientation so significantly that irregularities had to be accepted. As mentioned, mendicant orders had to deal with such circumstances, which could also be interpreted positively, as a concession towards the community. Situated on the outskirts of towns, here and there they contributed to the fortification of the outer walls. Thus, to sum things up in Krems, several major themes are addressed concerning the organization of space: positioning, orientation, deviation, and adaptation.

Inside the space of the church, overarching references to Jerusalem, the monastery, and the town are equally as imperceptible as the history of its transformations: the building has served as a church, storage depot, fire department, factory, theater, cinema, and museum; it was divided into two separate sections on two floors until it was restored to its present, original medieval form. This space has had a lot done to it. Leibniz once defined the category of space as “l'ordre des coexistences possible,” or the “order of possible coexistences.” In the case of Krems, space might also be described as a “disorder of possible successions,” in other words as an unplanned sequence of uses. This would correspond to the even more profane concept of space that Newton ascribed to this category: he defined space as that which remains of a randomly fillable vessel after all the material has been removed.

Helwing has set himself the rigorous task of approaching the Dominikanerkirche spatially and artistically as “the church that is no longer a church.” This does not mean undoing its secularization, but rather developing a historical-geographical topology from the ground up out of its austere, reduced state—with minimal means, hence in a way that respects the emptiness and reflects modern art conventions. Here, Minimal Art becomes Minimal Topology. Helwing assigns to the two spaces of the church, the choir and the nave, two vectors that deviate from each other and from the east-west axis. He corrects the orientation of the choir so that it aligns with the east; in the nave he indicates how the orientation of the monastery complex deviates from this axis, he calls this the “diagonal traverse of the basilica”: the former a distant target, the latter a closer one. It should be pointed out that the architects of monastic churches also had to take the neighboring monastery into account so that an “order of coexistence” could be established. The relationship of the church to the monastery complex was almost a question of faith. In Krems, the basilica is situated on the adjacent side, which means that it is also and mainly connected on the side and that the

choir shares the longitudinal wall facing the monastery with the latter and remains without windows. Such a dual use is practical, but this situational relationship is also, similar to how the entire complex is integrated into the existing structures, a bearer of meaning, signaling solidarity and affiliation.

Helwing works from the ground up. The artist draws attention to the heraldic symbols on the floor—which is not often the focus in the vertically oriented art and museum world—both visually, through the use of various colored patterns, as well as haptically, underfoot, by providing slippers. The further into the depths one goes, not only are the diagonals encountered, but the flooring also changes between carpet and stone slabs. The incline, experienced sensorially, is thus incorporated into the orthogonal structure. Medieval sensibilities would have considered this incline impure and it would have only been permitted as a *cross vault*—see the vaults of the central nave. However, the Dominicans would have viewed these surfaces favorably given that their two coats of arms are characterized by their diagonals or tapering lines. The so-called mantel crest brings the black liturgical cloak and white habit underneath into a strict, heraldic order, which, however, is more visually dynamic than the balanced disposition of the so-called Marian cross crest.

The choir and basilica are from different phases of construction. The remodelers drastically heightened their differences by turning them into two separate entities, thus depriving the building of its momentum, directional sense, and qualitative division between people and Orders. Helwing reminds us of this by reconfiguring the floor surfaces and by installing a black curtain at the transition between nave and choir that visitors can walk through, a velum of spatial art. One might say that its profane function is also made apparent by the fact that it continues around and encircles the entire choir, thereby creating a zone of its own, serving as a frame for the coat of arms. But—and this is the But of the artist who thinks from the ground up—Helwing assigns the two interior spaces a common task: that of alluding to external spaces, creating higher-order references through a vector-based rearranging of the floors. Thus, we have to add a fifth task to the parameters and challenges of positioning, alignment, deviation, and adaptation. Let's call this reference, the linking of one place to another. In concrete terms for Krems and Helwing's projects: how does one establish a connection between the nave, the Mariensäule, and then Kunsthalle Krems? This calls for aesthetic leap frog.

External reference Jerusalem, external reference monastery—thus far we have only mentioned the third relatum by name, but

have not yet addressed its content. “Beast,” namely the devil, is defeated in front of the monastery by the Archangel Michael as part of the Mariensäule’s sculptural ensemble. From this comes the project’s title, which turns “beast” and “east” into *(B)EAST!*; thus, spatial orientation and iconographic placement are merged together in the unison of the names. The beast is also banished twice since two versions of it exist: one as a copy outside on the base of the column, where Helwing has encased it in a “black cube,” the other an original from the late seventeenth century presently located in the Kunsthalle Krems skylight hall. Here, Helwing has implanted an historical, sacred work of art in a profane space devoted to contemporary art, whereas in the church, in a formerly sacred space, he works without any physical body or work of art. If Helwing’s main concern is the intensification of spatial dispositifs, he also knows that a body, a human figure automatically signifies the production of an existential space. In Krems, he leaves this added aspect to the satellites of the initial site to a certain extent, creating a field that forms a configuration of church space, Mariensäule, and art space.

And what about the beast? The beast and the existential realm? In 2021 we recall that a devastating plague ravaged the lands around the Danube in 1679—with an estimated 12,000 deaths in Vienna alone. A few years later, Marian columns were erected in Krems as well as in numerous other places—in gratitude for the victory over and as a defense against the “beast.”