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Goetheanum II: Masterpiece of Organic Architecture by Rudolf Steiner

John Paull

ABSTRACT

The Goetheanum is one of the masterpieces of Twentieth Century architecture. The present building is the second iteration of Dr Rudolf Steiner's ideas of organic architecture for the site on a hill overlooking the Swiss village of Dornach. The Goetheanum was intended as a theatre and the global headquarters of the Anthroposophical Society. Goetheanum I was a quaint all timber structure, opened on 26 September 1920. In 1921, Rudolf Steiner considered that a rebuild would be quite different. On 31 December 1922, Goetheanum I was destroyed by fire. By July 1923, funds were guaranteed for a new build. Shortly after the Christmas Conference of 1923, Rudolf Steiner presented a 1:100 scale clay model of Goetheanum II. In June 1924, the building application was submitted, and in November approved. Site work began in Rudolf Steiner's lifetime, but he died on 30 March 1925. On 29 September 1928, Goetheanum II was officially opened with plays, lectures and Eurythmy performances. This was a building, unlike any other, a grand sculpture in reinforced concrete. The refurbishing of the interior proceeded over the following decades. The present paper relates the story of Goetheanum II, citing contemporary sources and illustrated with historical and present-day images.

Keywords: Anthroposophy, Anthroposophical Society, Dornach, reinforced concrete, Switzerland, Spiritual Science.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Goetheanum building in the village of Dornach, nearby Basel, Switzerland has been selected as one of 50 selected entries in "The Magic of Beautiful Places" (ISOS, 2022b). The Inventory of Swiss Heritage Sites (ISOS) is the government agency that manages the "federal inventory of Swiss sites of national importance worthy of protection" (ISOS, 2022b). Of the Goetheanum, the Switzerland Tourism Office states: "The colossal concrete building is a true masterpiece of expressionist architecture and hosts a wide range of cultural activities" (Tourismus, 2022).

The present paper relates the story of the Goetheanum, from the original idea through to reification, and included are photographs during construction and of the completed project as it stands today. Rudolf Steiner described his organic architecture as: "an architectural style that may perhaps be described as the transition from previous geometrical, symmetrical, mechanical, static-dynamic architectural styles into an organic style" (Steiner, 1921).

The New Age philosopher, Dr Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), launched his Anthroposophical Society in December, 1912. The initial devotees were 'defectors' from the German branch of the Theosophy Society. Until that point, Rudolf Steiner was the General Secretary of the German branch of the Theosophy Society, and the majority of members followed him into his freshly minted Anthroposophical Society.

Several strokes of good fortune led the newfound community to the hill overlooking Dornach, Switzerland, which has become Anthroposophy headquarters. Firstly, the Steiner devotees were denied planning approval to build their Goetheanum (then called 'Johannesbau') by the municipal burgers of Munich (Steiner, 1923). The second stroke of luck was the offer of the Dornach hill land by the Basel dentist, Dr Emil Grosheintz in 1912: "the gift of Dr Emile Grossheintz (sic), consisting of the site on the Dornach hill which he had at that time already purchased" (Steiner, 1923). This confluence of events fortuitously transplanted Anthroposophy from Germany to Switzerland, into neutral soil, and thereby out of the line of fire of the looming catastrophe of World War I (WWI). The nascent Anthroposophical Society was thereby shielded from the immanent conflagration of World War I (WWI), and later, also the maelstrom of WWII.

Over the next the next twelve years, Anthropop buildings designed by Rudolf Steiner appeared on the hill of Dornach. They included a dwelling for Dr Emil Grosheintz (Haus Duldeck), other private houses

(e.g., Haus Vreede for Elisabeth Vreede), several apartment blocks, a workshop (Schreinerei), an electrical transformer station (Transformatornhaus), a glass workshop (Glashaus), a boiler house for heating (Heizhaus), and the Goetheanum (Kugler, 2011; by one count, a total of 15 buildings (Gray, 2014)).

The Anthropop precinct of Dornach developed, fuelled by the enthusiasm and funds of devotees, coupled with the genius of Rudolf Steiner and his ‘magic pudding’ of mesmerising novel ideas, including for art, architecture, education, dance, ‘spiritual science’, medicine, and agriculture. Rudolf Steiner’s brain harboured a rich vein of New Age ideas and he was increasingly keen to shift them from thought-bubble to physical manifestation.

The first grand construction by Rudolf Steiner was the short-lived first Goetheanum (Goetheanum I), a twin-domed structure of timber. The foundation stone was laid in 20 September 1913, the opening ceremony was 26 September 1920, the total destruction by fire was the evening of 31 December, 1922 (Paull, 2020).

In the wake of the catastrophe, Dr Rudolf Steiner promptly declared that a new Goetheanum would be created to fill the void. A clay model of a second Goetheanum was created. The new Goetheanum (Goetheanum II) was to be bolder, more sculptural, less flammable.

The resulting second Goetheanum, headquarters of Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophical Society, is one of the great buildings of the Twentieth Century. It is a building quite unlike the buildings that went before it. A bold carapace, squatting on a hill top, overlooking a Swiss village, it is an aspirational exemplar of Rudolf Steiner’s New Age genre of ‘organic architecture’. Albert Steffen recalled: “Rudolf Steiner ... said the task is to translate the static, geometrical structure of previous architectural forms into an organic, dynamic method of designing and shaping” (Steffen, 1961).

Without a cluster of adversities and fortuities, Goetheanum II, as we know it, would never have materialised, nor persisted. The adversities were (a) the application to build in Munich was refused, and (b) the timber Goetheanum built in Dornach, Switzerland, was incinerated (even before it was complete). These twin blows paved the way for Goetheanum II. This was facilitated by some fortuities: (i) the first Goetheanum was totally destroyed by fire - there was no prospect of repairing or restoring Goetheanum I; (ii) the destruction occurred within Rudolf Steiner’s lifetime, allowing him a second iteration; (iii) Rudolf Steiner had already considered, during construction of Goetheanum I, a second iteration; (iv) by the time of the fire, the English sculptor Edith Maryon was his closest confidante and they had worked together for nearly a decade on sculpture and sculptural principles; (v) the insurance company paid out for the lost building and so some funds were available for a rebuild; and (vi) the construction site was in Switzerland, and so was not bombed in WWI nor WWII.

The confluence of these disparate adversities and fortuities, taken together, have delivered the second Goetheanum, the zenith of Rudolf Steiner’s architectural achievements, a grand sculpture in concrete and glass, and by any measure, a most remarkable building. Goetheanum I could have been well at home in Hobbiton, while Goetheanum II is firmly footed in the Twentieth Century, and beyond. Where the old Goetheanum was quaint and curious, the new one is bold and exciting.

The present paper considers the period from the destructive fire of 31 December 1922, through to the official Opening of the new Goetheanum on 29 September 1928, drawing on first-hand accounts of those who were there, and illustrated with historical and present day photographs.

II. METHODS

The present account of the development of Goetheanum II draws on contemporary eye-witness accounts of observers, commentators and participants in the events. Accounts by Rudolf Steiner, members of the Vorstand (Executive Board) of the Goetheanum, the architect and engineer, visitors and various Anthroposophists, and newspapers, are used to document, often in their own words, the loss of Goetheanum I a century ago, and the development of Goetheanum II. Historical and recent photographs illustrate the development. Site visits have enabled present-day photographs of Goetheanum II.

III. RESULTS

The destructive fire of the first Goetheanum burned through the night of 31 December 1922, and into the new year of 1923. From that point on, Rudolf Steiner provided the drive, the creativity, the expansionary vision, and the design for a replacement Goetheanum. Rudolf Steiner was the first to ‘see’ the second Goetheanum – but that was in his ‘mind’s eye’. He lived long long enough to witness the second Goetheanum underway but not completed.

A. *Johannesbau, Munich (1911–1912)*

On 3 March 1911, a contract was signed with the Stuttgart architect Dr Schmidt-Curtius for plans for a

building of stone and concrete in Munich. On 8 July 1911, land was purchased in Munich for the purpose. “Gradually the conviction was forced on us that the authorities, and above all their artist advisors, intended to frustrate the erection of our building in Munich” (Strakosch, 1928).

B. *Goetheanum I (1913–1922)*

With the founding of the Anthroposophical Society in December 1912, and the acceptance of the offer from Dr Emil Groscheintz of the Dornach hill land as a practical alternative to building in Munich, “it was decided to give up on the idea of building in Munich and to go to Switzerland, especially as the regulations in the canton of Solothurn gave full freedom in the matter of form and architecture” (Strakosch, 1928).

Plans were promptly underway for building the first Goetheanum in Switzerland. The new building would be both the magnet and the anchor for establishing an Anthropop colony at Dornach. On 20 September 1913, the Foundation Stone was laid.

Rudolf Steiner explained: “Whoever wishes to understand rightly the meaning of the building whose foundation-stone we laid three years ago, must understand it by a living understanding of our spiritual scientific conception of the world, must understand how this, no more than a beginning, flows from a synthesis between a comprehension of heaven and earth, which we call the spiritual scientific conception of the world” (Steiner, 1916).

During construction, Rudolf Steiner described the first Goetheanum as a trial: “We should be stupid indeed to imagine that anything considerable, in the highest sense, not to mention anything perfect, could be achieved at one stroke. We shall never be able to do otherwise than admit that what we have begun is very imperfect, a first groping towards forms which must arise and yet in very many ways be completely different from those evolved by our building. But it is at least easy to see from our building that it is a trial” (Steiner, 1916).

The first Goetheanum was described as an imperfect beginning and a stimulus to greater creations: “Only if we humbly see imperfection, and an inadequate beginning in our building shall we develop the right feeling, with which the beginning of any evolution should be regarded, when the imperfect beginning is nothing but a stimulus to so much that is still to be created” (Steiner, 1916).

From the outset, the Goetheanum was to be “No ordinary building” (Steiner, 1916). It was to satisfy: “The longing of our movement to build its own sanctuary ... it should be to the world a visible representation of our spiritual movement” (Steiner, 1916). “The building ... revealed in its outward forms the existence of a movement of some kind” (Steiner, 1916). This was “monumental art” (Steiner, 1916).

Rudolf Steiner declared that: “new impulses must come through spiritual science ... We must therefore make a start with new artistic forms which must be the natural fruit of a new world-outlook” (R. Steiner, 1916, p.15). The fruit of Anthroposophy was to be novel forms: “our spiritual science has such inner vitality as to be able to give birth to forms of its own” (Steiner, 1916).

On 26 September 1920, the first Goetheanum was officially opened, although it was still not fully complete. The new building was no conventional building: “this building had to be kept free from all conventionality, and that thus only the spontaneous perception flowing from the spiritual scientific conception of the world can be embodied in it” (Steiner, 1916).

Already in June 1921, Rudolf Steiner was entertaining the idea of a second Goetheanum: “If I had to put up this building a second time, it would be out of the same background and out of the same laws, but in most of its details, and perhaps even totally, it would be different” (Steiner, 1921). The fire of 31 December 1922, gifted him the opportunity to progress these thoughts.

The building was “burned down to the level of the concrete foundation” (Steiner, 1923). Rudolf Steiner related: “the whole of the building, made of wood stood on a sub-structure of concrete ... now ... a heap of debris, with the low ruins made of concrete jutting out of it” (Steiner, 1923). It was a void for a second Goetheanum to fill.

C. *The Spiritual Goetheanum*

There are three Goetheanums, the first build, the second build, and the ‘spiritual Goetheanum’. Dr Ita Wegman stated: “When the Goetheanum was taken from us by the disastrous conflagration of 1922 ... Though we no longer possessed it on the physical plane, spiritually the Goetheanum stood there still; spiritually we were united with it” (Wegman, 1925).

Despite the destruction of the first Goetheanum, Rudolf Steiner continued to sign off his ‘Letters to Members’ with the byline “Goetheanum” (Steiner, 1925). For Anthroposophists, the Goetheanum is an idea greater than its material manifestation.

Anthroposophist Ludwig Polzer-Holditz went further, stating that: “the spiritual Goetheanum is everywhere - wherever a few people unite in an earnest and worthy spirit, in the spirit of Rudolf Steiner, for anthroposophical work” (Polzer-Hoditz, 1928, p.346).

D. *Goetheanum II: Design*

Promptly after the destructive fire, Rudolf Steiner was preparing the path for the second Goetheanum,

and signalling that a replica of the old was out of contention. In April 1923, he ruled out timber: “In rebuilding a Goetheanum we shall probably have to think on different lines ... There can, of course, be no question of a second Building in wood” (Steiner, 1923).

The Goetheanum is named after the revered German polymath Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) (pronounced ‘gerta’). At a lecture in April 1923 Rudolf Steiner explained the rationale for the name: “Many people were scandalised at the very name, ‘Goetheanum’, because they failed to consider the fundamental reason for this name, and how it is connected with all that is cultivated there as Anthroposophy ... this Anthroposophy is the spontaneous result of my devotion for more than four decades to Goethe’s world-conception ... this building is a Goetheanum; for I derived my world-view in a living way from Goethe ... the anthroposophical world-view feels the deepest gratitude for what has come into the world through Goethe” (Steiner, 1923).

Rudolf Steiner explained that the Goetheanum was the progeny of Anthroposophy: “The building was to be an outer garment for Anthroposophy, which came wholly from the spirit of Anthroposophy, but was there for physical eyes to see. There was nothing symbolic, nothing allegorical” (Steiner, 1923).

By 22 July 1923, funds were guaranteed for a new Goetheanum: “The teaching of Anthroposophy, a visible form of which was expressed in the Goetheanum, is so much a living reality it is inconceivable that this visible form should not again be represented, since everything spiritual must eventually find expression in physical form. The memory of the catastrophe and the smarting grief vivid by the sight of the ruins have nurtured this feeling of firm resolve and it is therefore no occasion for surprise to hear of the extraordinary spirit of willing sacrifice which has pulsed all around the globe and bought together the means of an immediate construction of the second Goetheanum. A movement started by a few members of the Society resulted in the Delegate’s Conference of July 20th to 22nd ... A sufficiently large sum of money was guaranteed by July 22nd to enable Dr Steiner to say that he could make plans for the new building. The sum guaranteed at that moment provides for the building so far as the roof ... it is naturally expected that the remaining sum necessary will also be guaranteed. Fifteen months are allowed for the payment of the full sums guaranteed ... The immediate response to the call for funds at the moment when the whole world is suffering economic tribulation is a good one” (Editor, 1923).

By September 1923: “Dr Steiner has now declared himself ready to start the building of the second Goetheanum with the money that has been guaranteed. It remains for the members to continue the sacrificial work giving money in order to complete the building” (Editor, 1923). The Report of the Delegate’s Meeting of July announced commitments for the rebuild, from ten regions: Switzerland (200,000 Swiss francs); Honolulu (200,000); Holland (150,000); England (127,000); Denmark (100,000); America (50,000); Tschechoslovakia (30,000); Italy (20,000); Austria (10,000); Sweden (10,000); along with “several substantial sums” added since then (Editor, 1923). Germany is noticeable by its absence in this tally of commitments. The Editor noted: “the [financial] catastrophes in Germany, which of late have been increasing so disastrously” (Editor, 1923).

On 31 December 1923, a year after the fire had erased Goetheanum I, Rudolf Steiner urged his followers to flip the tragedy of the loss to a blessing: “if we are able to change the pain and grief into the impulse to action, then we shall also change the sorrowful event into blessing. The pain cannot thereby be made less, but it rests with us to find in the pain the urge to action” (Steiner, 1927).

Dr Ita Wegman recalled: “It was only after the Christmas Foundation Meeting [December, 1923] that Rudolf Steiner could enter deeply into the thought of a new building. This new Goetheanum ... had to be like a castle to withstand the storm of adversary powers. It had to be built of a firm and powerful material - artistic, beautiful, yet severe and strong in its forms and lines” (Wegman, 1925).

A 3-D model was created: “In the Spiritual World the new Goetheanum must first appear; only then was it possible to bring it down on the physical plane. And this Rudolf Steiner did for us ... The sacred moment came ... after the Christmas Foundation Meeting [December 1923]... When the time had come, the master put on his white overall, ordered the specially prepared clay, and began to model the new Goetheanum. Feverishly he worked - scarcely a rest or break. I was privileged to be present and witnessed with astonishment ... how the model came into being. In three days it was finished, and stood there unique in its severe and mighty forms, and yet so beautiful. From this model we are now to erect the new Goetheanum on the Dornach hill - the building for the Anthroposophy of the present and the future” (Wegman, 1925).

Rudolf Steiner designed in 3-D, it was for others to prepare the building drawings (for which he himself lacked both the skills and the patience): “Radiantly happy, the master stood beside his model ... when the model had been carried across from the Studio to the Glasshouse for the plans” (Wegman, 1925). Rudolf Steiner’s studio was a rudimentary annex of timber attached to the Schreinerei (carpentry workshop) and looking out to the Goetheanum building site (Paull, 2018). The Glasshouse (Glashaus) is the oldest extant building designed by Rudolf Steiner (in 1914), a timber building with twin domes, somewhat reminiscent of the first Goetheanum, and so named because it was used to engrave the Goetheanum glass windows (Paull, 2012; Turgeniev, 1938).

In June 1924, a building application was submitted, it was revised and resubmitted, and approved in

November 1924 (Hasler, 2010). A submission in support of approval addressed head-on the issue that the new building was not going to be a ‘fit’ or a match with indigent architecture of the region. It stated: “As soon as the community of anthroposophists is granted the right to its own way of thinking and perception, it must also be granted the additional right to choose a form of building in keeping with that way of thinking. That this will not be a form commonly found in our country is self evident” (Hasler, 2010).

In December 1924, Rudolf Steiner recalled: “For a whole year I carried in my mind the conception of the new Goetheanum Building. To translate it from wood, of which the old Goetheanum was built, to the unyielding material of concrete was an artistic task by no means easy. At length, in the beginning of this year [1924], I began to elaborate the model ... For many years past I have said, again and again ... that Anthroposophy is not only a theoretic world-conception; but there arises out of its very nature a special style of Art. This being so, a building for Anthroposophy must grow entirely out of Anthroposophy ... I beg you to believe me, that this is done under the compulsion of an iron necessity” (Steiner, 1926).

E. Rudolf Steiner RIP, 30 March 1925

Dr Rudolf Steiner passed away on 30 March 1925 (Collison, 1925). His public life had come to a close six months prior when, on 28 September, 1924, he withdrew from public life, and retired to his sick bed (Paull, 2018). In the twenty seven months since the fire, the site had been cleared of debris, the funds for a rebuild had been secured, a model had been created (scale 1:100), a talented team of architect (Ernst Aisenpreis), engineer (Ole Falk Ebbell), and carpenter (Heinrich Liedvogel), had been recruited (Biesantz & Klingborg, 1979; Hasler, 2010), building approval had been secured from the local authorities, and site work was underway.

With Rudolf Steiner’s death, his beloved project would have to continue to completion without ‘the master’: “As he lay on his sick bed at the feet of the Christ statue, he had carved, in his studio, where the stillness was broken only by the noise of masons and carpenters at work on the building, he asked again and again: ‘How is the building getting on?’. We are still asking ourselves this question” (Vreede & Wachsmuth, 1926).

The architects recalled: “Soon after the Christmas Foundation Meeting [1923] ... our revered and beloved teacher pressed us with the model of the new building. We did not then suspect that when we came to erect the building, the wise guiding hand of the teacher would be lacking. Through his death the model, one of his last spiritual creations on the physical plane, has become a cherished legacy; the erection of the building now in progress and its completion have become a sacred duty. We were conscious of the difficulty of carrying on the building without the guiding hand of its creator” (Aisenpreis, Moser, & Ranzenberger, 1926).

F. Goetheanum II: Progress

The five member Vorstand (Executive Board), appointed by Rudolf Steiner at the Christmas Conference of 1923, were now the final authority for the build. On 1 November 1925, the Vorstand stated that: “We are glad to be able to report that ... it will be possible to carry out in the most precise way everything that Dr Rudolf Steiner has indicated ... we can, with the means at our disposal, complete the whole Goetheanum in its outer structure. There will then be lacking ... the means for the inner decoration and the inner accessories. The sum calculated for this runs to about one and a half million francs” (Steffen, Steiner, Wegman, Vreede, & Wachsmuth, 1925).

The Vorstand considered the unfunded part of the new build: “the suggestion of the Dornach Executive that the inner completion of the new Goetheanum should be shared by the different National Societies ... It would be gratifying if ... portions of the building were gift offerings of different countries ... Switzerland – Windows and doors; ... Germany - The Stage; England - Lighting; Holland - Heating, flooring and wall linings; France, Italy, Belgium - The drop curtain; Austria, Poland, Czecho-Slovakia - The seating; Finland, Esthonia [sic] - The staircases; Norway, Sweden, Denmark - The slate roof; America (U.S.A.) - The terrace and ventilation; Honolulu - The initial, simple decoration. [Australia and New Zealand are not mentioned] ... In order to carry out the construction quickly and cheaply, it is of the greatest importance that the sums portioned out to the different countries should be *guaranteed* by the end of this year [1925]... [to] give our orders at the beginning of the year [1926]” (Steffen *et al.*, 1925).

On 3 January 1926, Marie Steiner reported: “already now the walls of the new building lift their castle-forms, strong and protecting, secured as though from a hostile world. The effect of it is altogether different from the radiant, luminous building of wood” (Steiner, 1926).



Fig. 1. Goetheanum scaffolded, with the Schreinerei in the foreground, in 1926 (detail) (source: Editor, 1926).

On February 1926, photographs in *The Weekly News Sheet* reveal the new Goetheanum well underway, with scaffolding all around, the stage in the course of construction, and a lecture hall and rehearsal room with floors, walls and roofed (*Weekly News Sheet*, 1926). Elisabeth Vreede could report “the second Goetheanum is growing up ... erected on the Foundation Stone of the old building” (Vreede, 1926, p.71). There was optimism: “only the Goetheanum can provide the citadel of the future” (Stuten, 1926, p.75). The actors were upbeat for completion: “Full of hope and anticipation, our eyes gaze every day at the growing building ... Until then our artistic work is being carried on in five buildings scattered over the country-side, limited by lack of space and many other hindrances... in the Schreinerei, few realise under what cramping difficulties these performances have had to be prepared” (Gümbel-Seiling, 1926) (Figs.1&2).



Fig. 2. The Goetheanum takes shape, Level 1 in 1926 (detail) (source: Editor, 1926).

The Richtfest, the traditional German topping-out ceremony with a wreath or a tree hoisted to the highest-point of a new build, was scheduled for the Michaelmas Gathering of 1926 (29 September to 3 October 1926). Albert Steffen reported the forthcoming Richtfest as the “festival to celebrate the reaching of the

highest point in the outer fabric of the Goetheanum”. “The completion of the exterior is now assured”. Funds were still sought for the interior: “the speedy completion of the Goetheanum is a vital necessity for the Anthroposophical Movement ... the authorities ... are watching vigilantly to see whether the building really will be completed ... One thing is certain: we shall win recognition, if we complete it, not otherwise ... without a building the Anthroposophical Society remains homeless” (Steffen, 1926).

For August 1926, the programme of events for ‘English Week’ promised a: “Visit to the new Building” (Executive, 1926). One English visitor related: “As one toiled up the Dornach hill, luggage-laden ... the stark, tall bulk of the new Goetheanum suddenly loomed, without warning, overhead, still swathed in an intricate mass of scaffolding from top to bottom ... this new massive structure, stern and incomplete, obscured by scaffolding. Within, busy workmen labouring early and late; without, the masses of material ready for the completion of the great work” (Smith, 1926).

In January 1927, a local newspaper reported: “During the last few days, the roof over the two main parts of the new Goetheanum - the hall and the stage - has been finished, and a definite stage in the erection of this greatly-desired theatre has thus been reached. The entire building ... is of reinforced concrete, and is, of its kind and in its vast dimensions, one of the most interesting buildings recently erected in Switzerland ... the Solothurn Association of Architects and Engineers paid a visit to the site ... Under the guidance of the chief architect, Herr Aisenpreis, supported by Herr Ebbell of the Engineering Firm, Leuprecht and Ebbell of Basel ... the building was inspected from top to bottom ... About 15,000 cubic metres of concrete have been used, for which no less than 1,700 railway-trucks of sand and gravel, and about 450 trucks of cement were required ... The main girders over the great hall stretching over 30 metres ... made a great impression on all visitors ... the scaffolding was still here, and the low-lying terraces which will surround the structure were still missing ... One felt that in spite of its great size, the building would fit comparatively well into the landscape. Indeed, the many and severe misgivings which were expressed in this respect would seem to have been without foundation” (Zeitung, 1927).



Fig. 3. The Goetheanum takes shape, south wall, in 1927 (detail) (source: Vorstand, 1927).

By Easter 1927, the Vorstand was foreshadowing a 1928 opening of the new Goetheanum: “Now the building is covered with its roof of slate. A few days ago the scaffolding supporting the roof from inside was removed ... and now the roof is poised over the hall and stage - a clear span [sic] of 1350 sq. m ... Two years have passed since Rudolf Steiner’s death. We can now set ourselves the great and worthy aim: to complete within three years of his death the worthiest monument of all ... We have one year left in which to complete this task” (Vorstand, 1927) (Figs. 3&4).



Fig. 4. Rear view of the Goetheanum in 1927 (detail) (source: Vorstand, 1927).

Funds were still an issue, as they would be forever more: “Of the original appeal for about 1,950,000 francs for the erection of the building in its simplest structure, about half has been contributed in this last year. We could reach our goal if another 1,000,000 francs were given in 1927” (Vorstand, 1927) (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Fund-raising image of the Goetheanum, rear view, with Glashaus in the foreground on the right, and Heizhaus on the left, in 1927 (detail) (source: Treasurer, 1927).

By 29 May 1927: “In spite of all difficulties, the construction of the immense building is nearly finished, that last great work of Rudolf Steiner on which he set so much store ... But the work may yet have to cease for want of money if members all over the world do not contribute generously once again and that quickly” (Wheeler, 1927).

On 18 July 1927: “the Goetheanum is ever more visibly approaching its completion”. The installation of the huge (8.5 m high) wooden sculpture by Edith Maryon and Rudolf Steiner proceeded: “On the 18th July the setting-up of the Wooden Group in the Bau was begun ... the transport was begun on rail laid down for the purpose and leading from the Schreinerei over the terrace to the eastern entrance ... [the sculpture] was carried out piece by piece. As the separate wooden blocks weigh from 400 to 600 kilos and also on account of the fragile forms, the transport was an exceedingly difficult one” The Representative of Humanity sculpture (Halle & Wilkes, 2010) was moved from Rudolf Steiner’s makeshift studio (the atelier attached to the side of the Schreinerei): “the event ... an important epoch in the evolution of the new Goetheanum” (Stuten, 1927).

On 31 January 1928, occupation of the Goetheanum began: “the Secretariat of the General Anthroposophical Society moves into the new Goetheanum Building. We therefore ask all friends to look for us not in Haus Friedwart [guest house] but in the Goetheanum itself ... It is a beautiful and festive moment to have our place of work henceforth in Rudolf Steiner’s Building” (Anthroposophical Movement, 1928).

On 6 February, 1928, the first lecture to be presented in the new Goetheanum was by Ernst Stegemann, Biodynamic farmer, at the Agricultural Conference (5-10 February, 1928) (Anthroposophical Movement, 1928; Eckstein, 1928).

On 3 June 1928, the Vorstand announced the date for the Opening of the Goetheanum. The Vorstand of the Goetheanum, comprised heads of Sections appointed by Rudolf Steiner at the Christmas Conference of 1923: “Albert Steffen, Marie Steiner, Dr I Wegman, Dr E Vreede, Dr Guenther Wachsmuth” (Vorstand, 1928). Michaelmas, 29 September, the feast of St Michael the Archangel, was the date selected for the Opening: “we wish to send out this happy Whitsuntide message already now, so that all may make preparations in good time ... Owing to the wide and generous help that has been given in the last few months we are now lacking only 89,000 Swiss francs (about £4,000) for the completion of this work on the physical plane” (Vorstand, 1928).

In July 1928, Guenther Wachsmuth reported: “Members will no doubt be interested to hear that every Sunday, when non-members are shown around, the building is viewed by hundreds of interested visitors. On Whit Sunday afternoon there were more than a thousand ... Scarcely a week passes without Societies of scientific, technical, artistic or social character asking for permission to view the Goetheanum ... unfinished as it still is” (Wachsmuth, 1928).

On 26 August 1928, as the opening date neared, it was clear that the planned Opening festivities were to be a success. The event was already sold out: “applications ... are already sufficient to fill the Building twice over; therefore all events will be given twice ... We are thus obliged to close the Application List” (Vorstand, 1928). This doubling-up would be achieved by distributing events across the Goetheanum and the Schreinerei: “the number of the seat in the Goetheanum is the same for that in the Schreinerei, and this seat will be reserved for the holder throughout the whole of the Conference”. Tickets were not transferable. Meals were to be “good and sufficient vegetarian meals”, and attendees were to “refrain from walking across the meadow lands”. Attendees were reminded that “Dr Steiner expressed the wish that smoking should not be indulged in anywhere in the grounds of the Goetheanum” (Anthroposophical Movement, 1928).

G. *Goetheanum II: Opening, 29 September (Michaelmas) 1928*

The mega-event in the Anthropop calendar for 1928 was the Opening of the Goetheanum. Two thousand Anthroposophists came to celebrate (Hasler, 2010), with nearly 100 from Great Britain (Executive Council, 1929).

Three months shy of six years since the first Goetheanum was incinerated to dust, the new Goetheanum was opened. Three and a half years had elapsed since the passing of Rudolf Steiner, yet the work had progressed now to the point where there was once again a material Goetheanum to show Anthroposophists and the world, and to present Rudolf Steiner’s plays, Eurythmy presentations, lectures, and readings of the ‘master’ (Fig. 6).

For the week-long Opening (Saturday, 29 September - Sunday, 7 October), Albert Steffen advised: “the new Goetheanum building is to become the scene of Mystery Plays, Choral Recitation and Eurhythm”, an improvement on the Schreinerei where such events had been presented for so long “in spite of the primitive conditions” (Steffen, 1928). Steffen thanked the chief fund-raiser: “thanks to Dr Guenther Wachsmuth ... for having thrown all his energy into the collection of financial resources for the Goetheanum building” (Steffen, 1928).



Fig. 6. The Goetheanum exterior is completed for the Opening in 1928 (detail) (source: Steffen, 1928a).

The ‘Anthroposophical Movement’ weekly reported: “The chief event of the year which can rightly fill us with hope in spite of all adverse circumstances was the Opening of the Goetheanum at Michaelmas. It was attended by nearly 100 English members ... Those English members who have been to the Conferences arranged by the Vorstand at the Goetheanum are the best missionaries to bring home to individual members in all localities what the Goetheanum is for us all and for the world” (Executive Council, 1929).

A visitor wrote of the novel architecture: “He sees the Building. He must leave behind the wonted joy in architraves and Gothic arches and baroque adornments; they are the expression of another time ... we begin to understand the living and moving forms of this most modern Building” (Kutscher, 1928).

A newspaper account stated: “The colossal building with its remarkable style of architecture makes an unique impression on the visitor ... It is now complete in its general structure. The joiners and carpenters are beginning to make it habitable ... The entrances to the rooms are unsymmetrical in shape. At the end of the corridor is the great auditorium” (Olten 'Tageblatt', 1928).

Another newspaper reported: “the Goetheanum of the Anthroposophical Society, stands above Dornach on a small hill, the last spur of the Jura Mountains of Solothurn ... from the foundation to the roof it is a huge skeleton of iron, drowned in tons and tons of concrete ... one feels in the movement of each line of the Goetheanum the first utterances of what we might call a living architecture ... the Goetheanum is less temple than a kind of theatre and special school. It is in any case a first-class centre of culture, at the head of which stood Rudolf Steiner, one of the greatest minds of the first quarter of the 20th century ... the curve of the roof harmonises wonderfully with the lines of the Jura Mountains in the background ... Not the least surprise for the profane is the shape of the doors and windows, not one of which resembles its neighbour. We are miles away from the uniform rectangles to which we are accustomed” (Tribune de Lausanne, 1928).

A further newspaper reported that: “the immensity of the structure astounds us ... the mighty sweep of the lines relieves the concrete of its weight. The whole edifice responds to an inner law, excluding arbitrariness and confusion ... It is not too much to say that the Goetheanum opens new paths to Architecture ... which no one has yet succeeded in inspiring with new life since the Renaissance” (Matin, 1928).

Dr Emil Grosheintz, the dentist whose generous gift of land had, by 1913, enabled the whole enterprise (Steiner, 1923), reminded visitors at the Opening that: “Rudolf Steiner laid the Foundation Stone fifteen years ago. Over this same Foundation Stone the old Goetheanum first arose, whose radiant beauty was taken from our sight, even before its purpose as a home of the Mystery Plays could be fulfilled ... Scarcely completed, it was consumed in the flames of New Year’s Eve, 1922 ... A year later, at Christmas 1923, Dr Steiner laid in our hearts the spiritual Foundation Stone of the new Goetheanum ... our movement would be unthinkable without the Goetheanum ... Rudolf Steiner’s prophetic vision pointed out for our time ... that man who springs from the Divine may unite himself again with the divine Wisdom: *Anthropos* with *Sophia*. To proclaim these glad tidings is the purpose of this Goetheanum” (Grosheintz, 1928).

The Goetheanum was opened, however, it was: “Outwardly finished as it is ... but inwardly quite unfinished” (Steffen, Steiner, Wegman, Vreede, & Wachsmuth, 1929). In a plea for donations the Vorstand stated that the Goetheanum was encumbered with “no mortgages whatever” (Steffen *et al.*, 1929), but that “The heating and lighting applies only to a very few rooms” (Steffen *et al.*, 1929). There was no avoiding that, as yet: “it is a building in course of construction” (Pyle, 1928).

H. Goetheanum II: A project for decades

Rudolf Steiner’s widow, Marie Steiner, came to see the Opening festivities as a lost opportunity: “The intense efforts that had been made for the Opening of the Building had drained our treasure. The tickets had really been too cheap and we had not ventured ... to ask for fresh donations ... with the means at our disposal only the most necessary work for the Opening could be accomplished ... But it is not yet finished. What was intended to be done in it cannot be done because it is not finished. The bare external shell is not enough ... there are no floors in the unfinished rooms of the Ground Floor ... The Goetheanum was built for the Mystery Plays... we resolved to increase the entrance tickets for the Mystery Plays” (Steiner, 1928).

In January 1929, Albert Steffen indicated some Vorstand-fatigue with the pace, and called for a refocus on maintaining the Goetheanum: “Following the model which Rudolf Steiner gave, the Society has erected in the Goetheanum a building of 105,000 cubic metres. The very sight of the Goetheanum - opened last Michaelmas - has convinced many a non-anthroposophist that Anthroposophy is of world-embracing significance ... the completion and internal elaboration of the building must be left to the future. Our present task is simply to maintain the building and the School of Spiritual Science which it contains ... the Goetheanum is subject to no mortgages whatever” (Steffen *et al.*, 1929).

In March 1930, Guenther Wachsmuth in his Treasurer’s report, returned to the issue of completion. He related that: “about 17,000 strangers - non-anthroposophists - visited and were shown around the Goetheanum. We began with a very low entrance fee and gradually increased it in the course of the year ... From the 17,000 strangers ... during the course of a year, we often hear the question, whether and when the Anthroposophical Society will complete the Building internally ... We ... resolve to complete the entrance halls, ante-rooms and staircases if possible by 1932; and also the smaller practice-rooms and lecture-rooms which are urgently needed ... What we most urgently need by 1932 ... an organ ... completion of the stage machinery” (Wachsmuth, 1930). He declared: “a World Movement such as ours cannot in the long run leave an unfinished building like the Goetheanum in its present state” (Wachsmuth, 1930). The organ was finally installed in the 1950s (Hasler, 2010).

Wachsmuth revealed that the income stream for 1930 was not on a secure footing; accounted for as: 72% one-off donations, legacies etc; 20% regular donations and contributions; and 8% “business undertakings” (Wachsmuth, 1930). Eighty years later, the Goetheanum was still not self-sustaining with: 25% donations and legacies, 25% regular contributions, and 50% operational income (Hasler, 2010). For 2020 (a Corona-19 pandemic year), the General Anthroposophical Society reported income as: member contributions 47%, legacies 27%, and property income 26% (with conferences making a loss, and overall a loss carried forward) (Wittich, Kaliks, Girke, & Hurter, 2021).

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Following the opening in 1928, the Goetheanum remained “a work in progress” for decades. It progressively gained all the accoutrements of a performance space, a conference venue, and office working space, as “donations and legacies” permitted (Hasler, 2010). In 1961, more than three decades after the official opening, Albert Steffen reported that: “Certain parts of the interior of the present building are not yet complete” (Steffen, 1961).

Goetheanum II can still strike a visitor as startlingly ‘modern’ (Figs. 7&8). That is despite a century having elapsed since the fire-clearance of the site which offered Rudolf Steiner, for a second time, a *tabula rasa*. The site still serves some version of Rudolf Steiner’s vision for the site. He did not appoint a successor, and in the near century since his death, the Society has not thrown up another such charismatic character.

The Goetheanum presently hosts two auditoria, a cafeteria, a bookshop, a library and archive, lecture rooms, as well as the Secretariat and other offices of the General Anthroposophical Society. The main auditorium seats approximately 1,000. The Goetheanum, along with ancillary buildings, is a heritage listed site on the Federal Inventory of Swiss Heritage Sites of National Importance, with protected status since 1993 (Hasler, 2010; ISOS, 2022).



Fig. 7. Goetheanum interior, showing impressions on the concrete of the timber shuttering (formwork) (image: J.Paull).



Fig. 8. Goetheanum exterior, front view (image: J.Paull).

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