



The citizens' initiative to promote the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) in Dresden

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Abstract

As we near the end of this century, indeed this millennium, the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden is a unique challenge for all those involved in the reconstruction of this extremely important historic and artistic example of European church architecture.

From the beginning, the Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) was more than a place of worship and an expression of faith, as important as that is. With its bell-shaped sandstone dome, it crowned one of the world's most beautiful urban ensembles, the famous panorama of Dresden's old quarter on the River Elbe.

The unique work, designed by a daring master builder and constructed by Dresden's own citizens, impresses the onlooker with its moving declaration in stone, a declaration which people felt to be true and convincing over many, many years, even after the church's destruction. For more than 45 years the ruins stood for all to see, a mountain of rubble as a chilling monument to the destruction of Dresden. Immediately after the close of 1945, committed citizens in Dresden were already planning to rebuild it.

In the autumn of 1989, with the political turnaround which brought the GDR to its end, a group convened to work actively toward reconstruction. This was the origin of the citizens' initiative, which in February 1990, on the anniversary of the destruction of Dresden, addressed the world public in its „Call from Dresden,“ appealing for support and cooperation. This call did not go unheard. It has certainly been taken up as a musical and cultural initiative by a broad movement of people.



Fig. 1. „View of the Frauenkirche in Dresden,“ detail of the painting *The Dresdner New Market seen from the Juedenhof* (ca. 1749-51) by Bernardo Belotto (called Canaletto), Dresden, Gallery of the Old Masters



Cultural and Historical Significance

Step by step the Frauenkirche is rising once again above the roofs of Dresden's old city, and we are accordingly very happy and grateful. The exemplary engagement, the encouraging words, the active support, the willingness of thousands to give, and the outstanding service of all those who daily make the church's restoration to us reality are making possible such rapid and impressive progress in reconstruction. Supporters from Dresden, Germany, Europe, and the entire world have financed the rebuilding to date with their donations. We are optimistic that this will be possible in the future also.

At the site where the Frauenkirche is being rebuilt using new sandstone together with stone from its very ruins, we meet with living church history beginning in the 11th century. Much later, the Dresden architect George Baehr (1666-1738) created with this particular church building (1726-43) a masterpiece of architectural and engineering art recognized the world over.

Its importance in cultural history is manifold. The Frauenkirche was the heart of the old city of Dresden and served as a standard in the construction of public buildings. At once monumental and graceful, the church's dome of stone curved upward with elegant lightness, crowning for over 200 years one of the most beautiful ensembles of city building in the world – the famous panorama of Dresden on the Elbe. Because of its dominance it became the city's symbol. (e.g., Loeffler or Kuke¹)

In the Frauenkirche over three thousand people could assemble for preaching, communion, singing together, and musical performances. The magnificence of the altar, the feeling of space in looking up into the inner dome and the balconies, the acoustical impressions – all of that must have been unique, indeed, overpowering. Thus the Frauenkirche, with its impressive central chamber, is regarded as the most important church building of the Lutheran faith. Those who actually experienced the church's magnificent acoustics and heard the sound of its organ, built by the famed Saxon organbuilder Gottfried Silbermann (1683-1753) can only confirm this. Beautiful recordings have, in fact, been preserved for us. ⁽²⁾

The history of the church's construction and its technical themes have been reported at previous sessions. (e. g., Jaeger et al.³)

From the time of the Reformation in Saxony the Dresdner Frauenkirche, built by the city's own citizens, was seen as the most meaningful expression of Lutheran church life in the community of Dresden and its environs. It stood indeed for the consensus and engagement of its citizens. Later, with its juxtaposition to the Roman Catholic *Hofkirche* (church of the royal court), the Frauenkirche became a symbol of tolerance in the life of both confessions side



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by side. It is our own legacy, yes, our duty to maintain this tradition in responsibility to our cultural heritage.

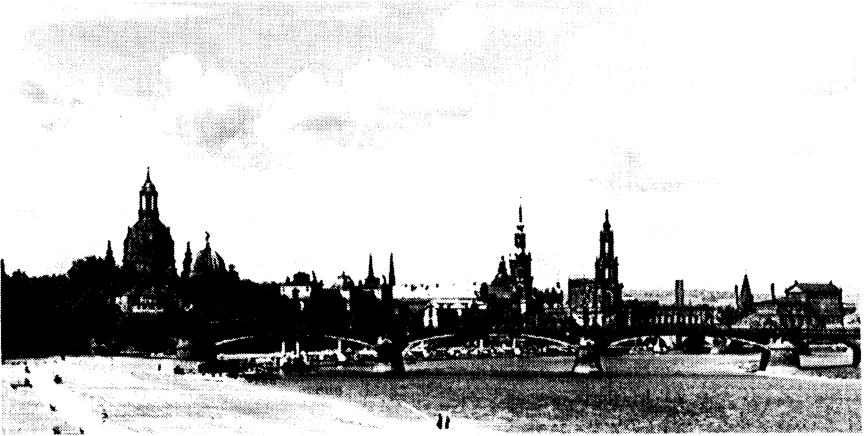


Fig. 2. View from the left bank of the Elbe toward the panorama of the old city of Dresden with the Cupola of the Frauenkirche, the Towers of the Palace and the Hofkirche, and the Opera House of Gottfried Semper, 1938

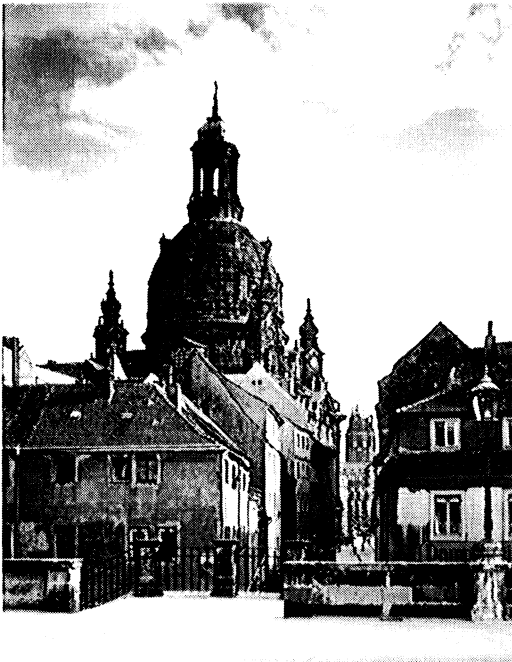


Fig. 3. The Dresdner Frauenkirche seen from the Bruehl Terrace, prior to 1945

Destruction and Initial Efforts to Rebuild in Dresden

The Frauenkirche in fact survived the inferno of 13th February 1945, standing high above the rubble as a sign of hope, and although on 15th February it collapsed, no longer able to withstand the embrittling effects of the now extinguished fires' heat, the church stayed alive in the imaginations and hearts of the people of Dresden.



Fig. 4.
Dresden following the 13th
and 14th of February 1945,
the toppled monument to
Martin Luther in front of
the ruins of the Frauenkirche

Both Dresdners themselves and dedicated historic preservationists expressed the will as early as 1946 to secure the ruin, retrieve original architectural pieces, remove the debris, and rebuild. (e.g., Nadler, Henn⁴).

Through donations and the proceeds of the sales of small building stones fabricated from the ruin's stones and of small copper crosses with the inscription from the Book of Psalms „Lord, I love the place of Your house,“ Dresdners had already tried at that time to give the rebuilding of this church its first financial foundation.

The lack of economic capacity, the general postwar discussion of architecture, and, above all, the ideological debate surrounding Dresden as a newly emerging, major socialist city brought all the efforts on behalf of the Frauenkirche to a halt. (e.g., Lerm⁵)



Fig. 5. Frauenkirche in Dresden, loading of the „rubble carts“ during the initial archaeological clearing of the ruin, 1948



Fig. 6. Clearing work on the Muenzgasse with a view of the ruins of the Frauenkirche, City Hall, and the Church of the Holy Cross, the latter of which are being restored, 1952



Contemporary documents and the recountings of witnesses demonstrate clearly the care individual Dresdners took in dealing with our cultural heritage. In a time when plans to clear the ruins presented a clear danger, Dr. Fritz Loeffler (⁶), the Nestor of Dresden's art history, described the city of Dresden and its Frauenkirche as a world cultural concern. Today, following the peaceful, liberating turn of events of the autumn of 1989 and the reunification of Germany still in progress, we are aware that this concern can become a living reality with all our help.

A Place of Silent Prayer and Remembrance

In the 1960's as the initial archeological clearing and the stopgap securing of the ruins had, in the meantime, become history, the aura of the wreckage grew. In the broad, planar landscape of the inner city, now cleared of its ruins, the pyramid of debris with its soaring, ruined towers left an indelible impression. The ruin had become a monument of warning. For the powerless it was a place of silent protest against violence and despotism. At each anniversary of Dresden's destruction it was a place of silent prayer and meditation, illuminated by flickering candles.



Fig. 7. Canndlelight Memorial
February 13th at the ruins
of the Frauenkirche in Dresden

The start of the redevelopment of the New Market and the progressive deterioration of the mound of rubble provoked with increasing urgency the question of what to do with the monument itself.



The year 1988, the 250th anniversary of the death of the Frauenkirche's builder, George Baehr, finally provided the opportunity for redoubled reflection on his work. With this in mind, dedicated individuals searched once again for possibilities to reactivate the notion of restoration. (e.g., Roßberg et al. ⁷) The bond felt by former Dresdners in 1988 to their home city brought together many in the western part of Germany as well with the goal of rededicating themselves to reconstruction.

The „Call from Dresden“

No one could have known that just one year later, in the autumn of 1989, the idea of rebuilding would coalesce so quickly. Indeed in November 1989 a group of friends met in Dresden to give life to the „Citizens' Initiative for the Rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden.“ It was the enthusiasm, the hope of regaining the city's identity, and the certainty that the time to act was at hand which in the fall of 1989 brought this circle of dedicated Dresdners together. Strengthened by their newly won confidence, given life by the necessity of reconstruction and the resulting performance of a commonly felt duty of reconstructing this edifice, indispensable well beyond the confines of Dresden, the Initiative came before the public on the eve of the 13th of February 1990 with its „Call from Dresden“ and asked for the help and support of the world. These few were the ones who took the first step.

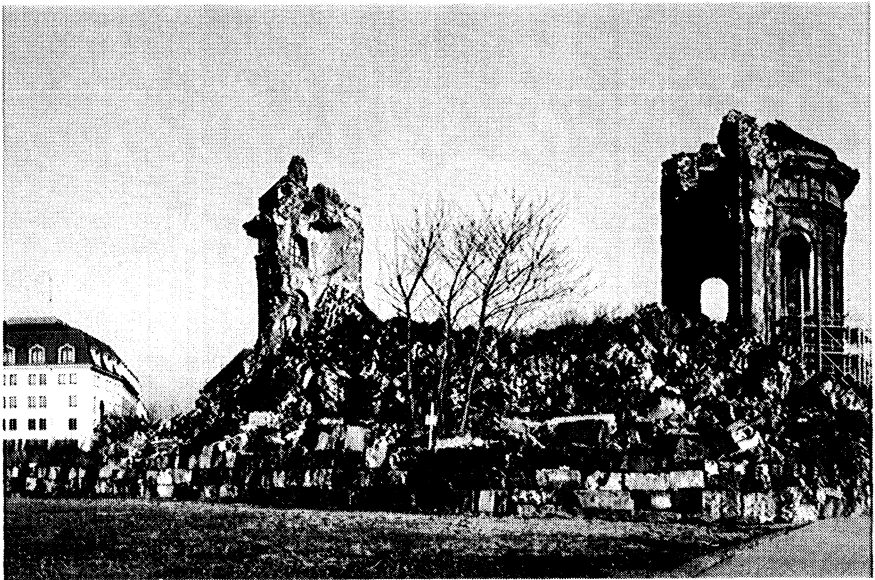


Fig. 8. The ruins of the Frauenkirche in Dresden; the area around the Neumarkt is beginning to be rebuilt (background), 1991



In Dresden's old city invaluable items of cultural heritage had been irretrievably lost in the years 1945 to 1989. For this reason the initiators of the „Call from Dresden“ wanted to make a statement against this senseless destruction and not be „reconciled to this unique and magnificent building's continuance as a ruin or, much less, to its removal.“ World culture was to have „restored to it an architectural artwork of unique significance,“ which is „bound together with the names of Gottfried Silbermann, Johann Sebastian Bach, Heinrich Schuetz, and Richard Wagner.“⁽⁸⁾

With its rebuilding the Frauenkirche will be a symbol of the healing of the wounds of war and a widely visible monument to the will for peace.⁽⁹⁾

In reporting today on the Initiative and reconstruction we must express our thanks to those who, in the critical hours of threatened loss of the ruin itself, remained true in their unshakable conviction that the church would be rebuilt, preserved its ruins, and saved for us this magnificent task, which has brought so many people together. (e.g., Nadler¹⁰)

Others from Dresden joined the Citizens' Initiative and signed the Call. Although at the time Germany was still divided, out of the original group a „Support Organization for the Rebuilding of the Dresdner Frauenkirche“ constituted itself.

Support, Criticism, and Justification for Rebuilding

However, almost fifty years after Dresden's destruction and its ongoing reconstruction, the desire to rebuild the Frauenkirche was not without opponents. Dresden and the public experienced for themselves a debate such as had been carried on in practically all the destroyed cities of postwar Europe. This spirited public discussion proved itself necessary and correct because it was able to deepen the understanding of the reasons for rebuilding. (e.g., Magirius, Paul, Traeger¹¹)

The Citizens' Initiative received overwhelming approval and significant and sustained support as well. From the very beginning Dresden's musicians figured prominently, performing at many benefit concerts in carrying the idea of restoration to the German public and out into the world.

Later, in 1990, the Support Organization received an important boost on the occasion of the 60th birthday of then Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who asked that instead of personal gifts donations be given for the benefit of the Initiative to rebuild the Frauenkirche.

In the spring of 1991 the Support Organization, which, under the leadership of the world renowned Dresdner musician and trumpet virtuoso Prof. Ludwig



Guettler, had been constituted almost simultaneously out of the Citizen's Initiative, invited prominent professionals to Dresden for an initial working session to discuss engineering and technical questions relative to the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche. At the conclusion of the conference (¹²), the participants voted to undertake the "archaeological reconstruction," of this baroque church in the spirit of George Baehr.

Thus, the Frauenkirche is to be rebuilt in its historic form, made possible by the completely preserved documentation dating from 1726 to 1943. The portions of the ruin which remained standing and the original stones and architectural pieces salvaged in the carefully executed clearing of the site will be used once again.

The juxtaposition of old and new bespeaks the fate of Dresden's Frauenkirche and the hope and will of all who have been part of the effort to rebuild. In the ensuing months the specialists of the Initiative produced a series of basic requirements to be fulfilled in the reconstruction. The uniqueness of the magnificent dome construction, designed and built completely out of sandstone by George Baehr, is the standard against which the restoration will be measured.

Paving the Way for Rebuilding

After a thoroughgoing debate the Lutheran Church of Saxony agreed in 1991 to work within the Frauenkirche Foundation, yet to be founded, toward the goal declared from the beginning in the "Call from Dresden".

Thus, the Lutheran Church and the Society for the Promotion of the Rebuilding of the Frauenkirche Dresden e.V., constituted out of the Support Organization, founded together the forerunner of the present Frauenkirche Foundation - the Frauenkirche Foundation e.V. (¹³) - which became the client/builder for whom the incipient construction was being carried out.

Worldwide Support

With their active engagement members of the Initiative were able to persuade the Dresden City Council to support reconstruction. On 20th February 1992 the Council declared its approval with a large majority (over 80%), thereby guaranteeing financial and moral support. At the beginning of 1995 on the occasion of the anniversary observance of Dresden's destruction, the Board of Governors of the now public Frauenkirche Foundation could be formed (¹⁴).

With pleasure and satisfaction we noted that its founders, the State of Saxony, the City of Dresden, and the Lutheran Church of Saxony had embraced the goal formulated by the Initiative, the complete archaeological reconstruction of Dresden's Frauenkirche.



Fig. 9. Aerial view of the Frauenkirche, after the archaeological Clearance and Removal of the Rubble, Mai 1994



Fig. 10. Frauenkirche in Dresden, placing of the copper document capsule on the occasion of the laying of the cornerstone to begin rebuilding, 27th May 1994, the 251st anniversary of the completion of the Frauenkirche.



Fig. 11. Thousands of Dresdners, members of the construction trades, and many guests took part in the ceremony. From the Book of Psalms was read, „Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain,“ 27th May 1994





The tireless work involved in the rebuilding and the accomplishment of the corresponding prerequisites brought with it the encouragement of growing support and active help. In this process the Dresdner Bank joined the effort as an important patron, which in the time-honored tradition of large institutions in recognizing their responsibilities as citizens, conceived and carried out with extraordinary entrepreneurial engagement the charitable project "Stifterbriefe (Donor Certificates)" (e.g.,¹⁵) for the benefit of the Frauenkirche Foundation.

In 1995, supported by the Initiative, the Foundation's Board of Governors, and moreover, by the German government, a 10-DM-coin was minted for the benefit of the rebuilding, expressing the idea of reconciliation. (e.g.,¹⁶)

To support the planning in the reconstruction, the most modern computer techniques are in use. With special support from IBM multimedia programming and the related methods of virtual reality brought the vision of the rebuilt Frauenkirche to the public as early as 1993. This presentation assists in the soliciting of donations and is regarded as an important contribution from an industrial sponsor. (e.g., Brueckner¹⁷)

So, the "Call from Dresden" didn't go unheard! It was taken up by a broad movement of citizens. Meanwhile, in a narrower sense it has become the membership of the Society to Promote the Rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden e.V. (e. g. Paul¹⁸) and with it the membership of other closely cooperating initiatives inside and outside of Germany with currently 9000 members and supporters in 22 different countries.

Outside of Germany dedicated, effective support organizations have come into existence in the short years since 1993: in Great Britain The Dresden Trust (e.g., Inf.-folder and Annual Reports¹⁹), in the United States the Friends of Dresden, Inc. (e.g., Inf.-folder a. FoD-Newsletter²⁰) and in France the *Association Frauenkirche Paris* (²¹). As a result of their work the Frauenkirche will be crowned by a cross financed by British donations and fashioned by British artisans. The choir apse will be restored through American generosity, and the Frauenkirche's friends in France are also active in contributing important building blocks. Together with the Society to Promote the Rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden e.V. these support organizations all contribute mightily to our grand project.

In a further sense it is the practically innumerable private donors and generous sponsors, who with their valued contributions have also helped to make the preparation, planning, clearing, and reconstruction possible.

Here it is appropriate as well to mention tens of thousands of Dresdners and their guests, who come every year on the 23rd of December to Christmas vespers at the Frauenkirche or to the wintery services held there in observance of Dresden's destruction.



Fig.12. Once again many thousands took part in the 6th Christmas vesper service at the Frauenkirche in Dresden. Local musicians, the Kreuzchor, soloists, and brass instrumentalists from the many regions of Saxony contributed. 23rd December 1998

Especially memorable is the 13th of February 1994, when the altar, freed during the removal of the rubble, could be seen again for the first time in 49 years. Despite the icy cold thousands came and waited to see the construction site, particularly the altar, often to pause before the altar in silent prayer and thought. Hundreds of thousands do indeed visit the site annually to inform themselves as to progress and to help with their donations.

Many feel drawn to the religious and prayer services and to the concerts, which have taken place since 1996 and at which many artists and musicians contribute to the reconstruction effort.

Indeed many well known artists and ensembles have supported the rebuilding with benefit concerts in every part of Germany and throughout the world. To this must be added the myriad efforts on the part of individuals and firms to solicit donations. They have all supported the rebuilding in a truly unique way.

The responsive chord which this Initiative for the restoration of the Frauenkirche in Dresden has struck in Germany and well beyond the shores of

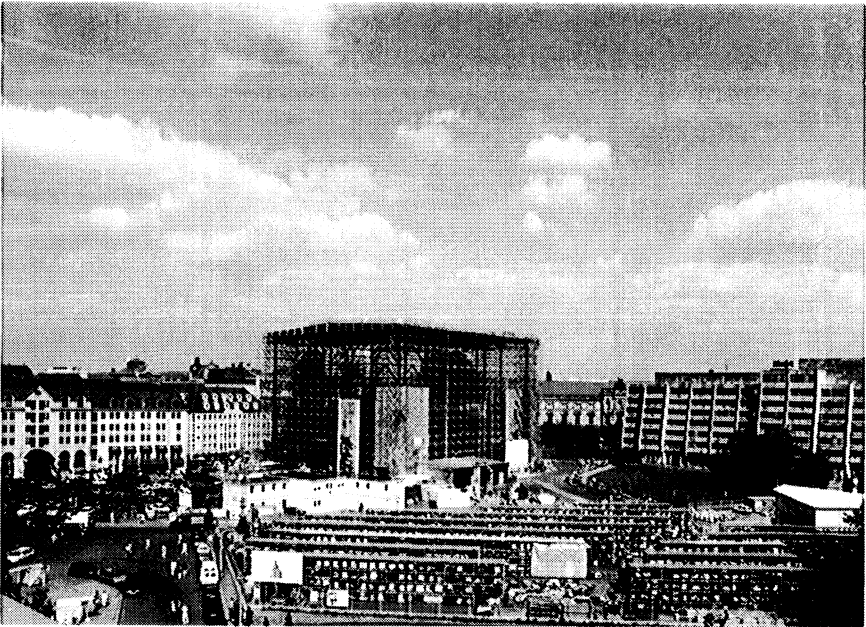


Fig. 13. The site of archaeological rebuilding of the Frauenkirche at the Neumarkt in Dresden. Before the structural framework stands the depot for old sandstone from the clearing of the rubble, Dezember 1998

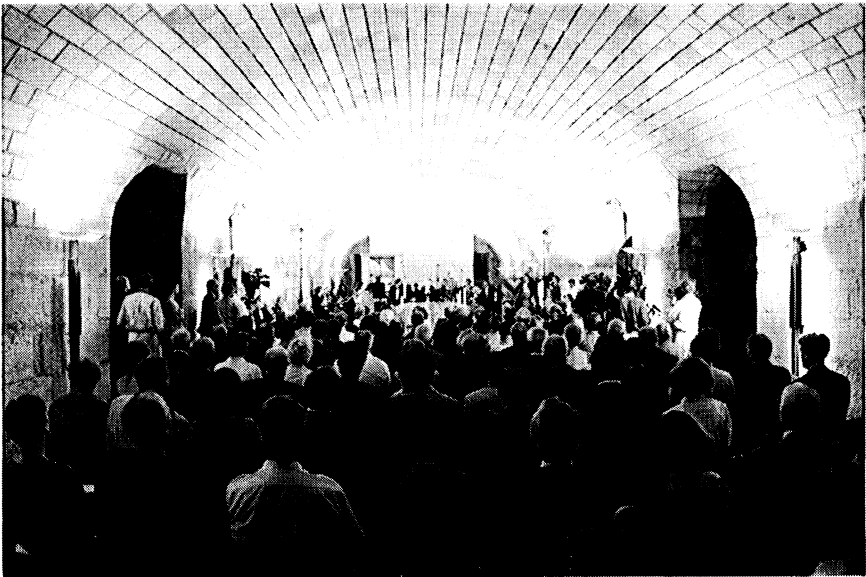


Fig. 14. Frauenkirche in Dresden, reconstruction concert in the newly completed undercroft, August 1996

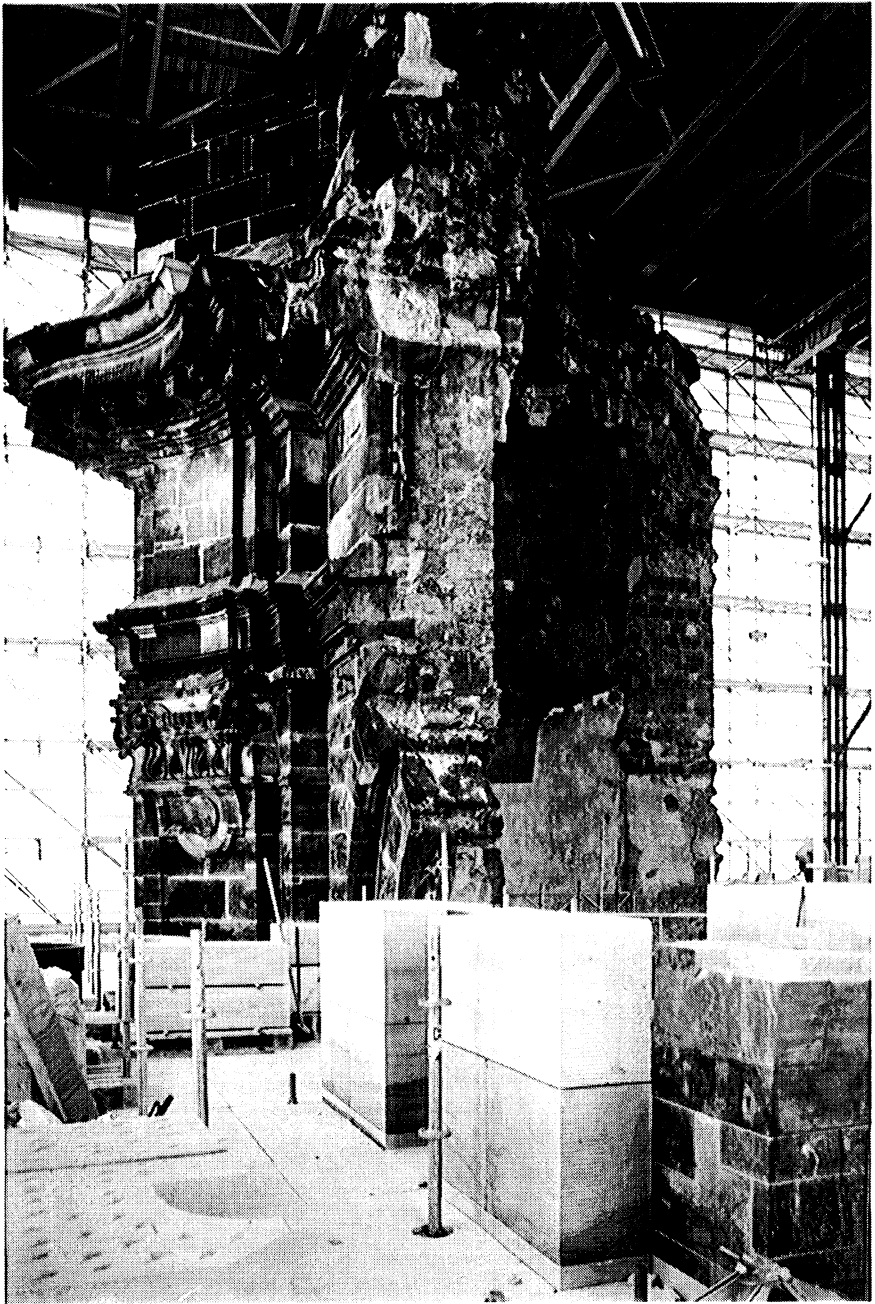


Fig. 15. The now secured original walls of the stairwell tower E and the new wall of old and newly hewn sandstone, now reaching above the scaffolding, November 1998



Europe, has made it the most successful citizens' initiative currently in Germany.

An Action Engendering Common Purpose

The rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden has brought people together in the solidarity of a common task (e.g., Guratzsch²²). With all its attendant problems and difficulties as well as its successes and the oneness of all whose emotion, work, and help has awakened such hope and optimism, the effort in the church's behalf carries a supremely important message into the next millennium. The rebuilding of the Frauenkirche is today an unparalleled example and an important signal of the step-by-step turn to individual responsibility, personal dedication, and strong initiative. (e.g., Guettler²³) These are all essential prerequisites for the enhancement of our democracy and its values. From this work, in its continuous fostering of commonality, the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche is becoming a symbol of understanding, indeed of reconciliation, and a work which exhorts men and women to peace (e.g., Koschnick²⁴).

We ask most heartily for your help in accomplishing this.
(further Reports²⁵)

Acknowledgements:

The author wishes to thank the members of the Board of the Society to Promote the Rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden e.V. for their help in providing information. Translation from the German: William Clapp, Dresden

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25. Further reports and treatments of the subject are found in *Die Dresdner Frauenkirche: Jahrbuch zu Ihrer Geschichte und zu ihrem archaologischen Wiederaufbau* (The Dresden Frauenkirche: Yearbook of its History and Archaeological Reconstruction), prep.by the Society to Promote the Rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden e.V., Weimar 1995, -6, -7, -8, (-9) Verlag Hermann Boehlaus Nachfolger.

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