

ARTIST'S STUDIO AND HOME | ALTES PUMPWERK MANNHEIM NECKARAU

Partly concealed behind a large gate, the neo-Gothic brick building of the Altes Pumpwerk Mannheim-Neckarau rises up like a cathedral and boldly asserts itself against the ominously smoking chimneys of the Mannheim coal-fired power station. Designed in 1903 by the municipal architect Richard Perrey, the Altes Pumpwerk is now regarded as one of the most important industrial monuments in Mannheim; since 2003, the building has had a new purpose as the home and studio of visual artist Dietmar Brixy. At first glance, it might seem an inhospitable place for an artist to live and work, but this setting – amid modern industrial facilities and business parks – is precisely what makes the location so uniquely attractive.

The history of the building does not really match its near-sacred appearance. Until the mid 1980s, rattling pumps raised smelly sewage from the Neckarau district to a higher elevation on this site. Then a new sewage treatment plant was built nearby, and the old brick building stood empty for many years. Having grown up in this neighbourhood, Brixy observed this development at close range. As he explains, “The contrast between the pumping station’s location and its neo-Gothic style is what makes it a unique architectural structure, and one that I, as a creative individual, always found interesting.” At first it seemed inconceivable that a young artist like him could consider making such a large acquisition as buying the Altes Pumpwerk. In the end, however, his enthusiasm for the building, and the ideas and dreams associated with it, prevailed over reason.

From 2001 to 2003, the Altes Pumpwerk was carefully converted – in keeping with its status as a listed building – into a unique home and studio. Brixy has since won a number of prizes for this project, including the Denkmalschutzpreis awarded jointly by the Württemberger Hypo, the Schwäbischer Heimatbund, the Landesverein Badische Heimat and the Denkmalstiftung Baden-Württemberg. He took the bold step with no backing from sponsors, solely on his own initiative and listening to his inner voice. “Pursuing passions, turning dreams into reality. If you want something, make it happen! Be bold. Act with courage, determination and joy,” Brixy says. Without this approach, the old pumping station would not have become what it is today – a magnificently renovated industrial monument and a stunning cathedral of art – a gesamtkunstwerk set within a paradisiacal garden landscape.

The building is divided into two parts: the treatment unit – now Brixy’s living space – and the machine room. Here, the huge pumps that once operated accompanied by loud humming and smacking noises have remained in place and lend the building an almost museum-like quality. The artist’s studio has been installed on a custom-built steel stage in this special location. “The lighting conditions are ideal, with daylight coming in through the arched windows on all sides. And I can look out into the garden whenever I like,” Brixy enthuses. The large leaves of the fig tree are now growing in close proximity to his canvases. Bamboo plants, magnolias – and of course the “Dietmar Brixy” irises that were named after the artist – transform the garden into a small paradise.

Here, in Brixy’s parallel world, the heaviness of life is transformed into boundlessness and lightness. “This island of the blessed, shielded from everyday life and nevertheless porous to the world, is the start and end point of an impressively powerful self-design (...). The place determines the painting. The painting animates the place. Both are characterised by pathos and energy,” is how Dr Ulrike Lorenz, the former director of the Kunsthalle Mannheim and now the president of the Klassikstiftung Weimar, once aptly described the unique situation. “It is of course a gift to have so much space,” Brixy says, “but even more important is the inspiration that comes from the pumping station and the surrounding garden, which stimulates and motivates me every single day.” Once a year, the artist throws open the doors of his home-cum-studio to the public and invites art lovers to view the autumn exhibition – an event that is now highly appreciated and popular not only with the local population, but also far beyond the boundaries of the Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region.

Atelier Dietmar Brixy

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