

Urban Conversations: Dresden–Coventry at Kunsthaus Raskolnikow, Dresden
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Introduction:

What remains when cities confront their wounded history - and listen to each other in the process?

In our 40th episode, we explore the dialogue between Dresden and Coventry - two cities whose names are inextricably linked to the destruction of the Second World War. The bombing of Coventry in November 1940 and the destruction of Dresden in February 1945 are not isolated events but, rather, exist within a historical context that continues to resonate today - politically, culturally, and emotionally.

The live recording of this special evening at the Raskolnikow brought together numerous guests from Coventry who, with their "Father forgive" stance, contributed a perspective that extends far beyond historical commemoration. In Coventry, forgiveness is not an abstract concept, but rather an integral part of the city's identity - made visible in the reconstruction of the Cathedral and in a culture of remembrance that actively offers reconciliation.

Dresden, on the other hand, has developed its own unique way of remembering - marked by ruptures, instrumentalization, and a public debate that remains sensitive to this day. It was precisely this difference that gave rise to an intense conversation: not a comparison of suffering, but a shared reflection on responsibility, the transmission of history, and the question of what will remain for future generations.

That evening, we touched upon many levels - from individual fates to societal frameworks, from personal stories with hopeful turns to the role of city partnerships, from historical analysis to very contemporary issues.

The city partnership between Dresden and Coventry was not discussed as an official programme, but as a lived relationship - sustained by people who, over the years, have facilitated encounters, often behind the scenes.

What makes this podcast so interesting is its atmosphere: an hour in which historical gravity met human openness. An hour in which it became clear that reconciliation is not a completed act, but an ongoing process – in conversation, in listening, in enduring different perspectives.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to Galerie Raskolnikoff for their hospitality in conjunction with the Günter and Tine Starke exhibition. The space became a place of trust for the evening. This episode invites you to experience the conversation – not as a historical lesson, but as a vibrant dialogue about memory, responsibility, and the possibility of a shared future.

Recorded and produced live by Johannes Gerstengarbe (Ballroom Studios)

Musical accompaniment by Jo Aldinger (<https://jochenaldinger.de/>)

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Part 1 Transcript

Stephan

What does it mean when our senses fail us, when the world becomes invisible and all sounds fall silent? Does a child have the right to make their own decisions? How do we define happiness? You Ask, We Explain. A podcast by TU Dresden in cooperation with the Kunstverein Dresden, the Cosmo Science Forum, and the city libraries.

Christine and Günther Starke are at the table. Both take photographs; both travel with their cameras, including to Coventry, Dresden, and many other places ... And they came back and told me what was so moving about what they experienced in Coventry. It was the way they interacted with people, the way they were so appreciative, so emotional and interested. And then I added my own experiences from Coventry. I've seen a few people here already, and I have to say, it all fits together perfectly. I got to know Rainer Barczaitis as a translator, as an author of books, as a source of ideas and a conduit for ideas, and I thought, wow, that's a perfect match.

I also met Sabine Coady-Schaebitz in Coventry. The way I got to know the people, everything just clicked. And then I thought, maybe a historian wouldn't be a bad idea. So, I called Johannes Schütz and asked, "Hey Johannes, would you be interested in joining this group?" And Johannes wrote back within three minutes, I think, saying, "I'm coming from Berlin, but I can make it by 7 p.m."

Welcome to this group as well. Sabine, you're an architect, you work in Coventry, and you also live in Coventry. How do you feel about this city when you come to Dresden? What feelings do you bring with you?

Sabine

Well, I work in Coventry, I don't live there, but much of what I do is connected to Coventry. I'm at the university there. For me, it's quite interesting to come to Dresden, or rather, to have this connection between Coventry and Dresden. I've known Dresden for many years.

I had family connections here. I studied here for part of my studies and did internships during my degree. And then, interestingly enough, I established the architecture programme in Coventry. That's how I came to Coventry. There was a job opening. I applied, got the position, and thought, "This is fantastic, of course, that I, as a German, am building an architecture programme here in Coventry. The opposite of destruction, so to speak." The city fascinated me from the very beginning. The city's history, its rebuilding, and then, the more I learned about how much Coventry actually connects with

Germany - even before the war, through history, industrialization, and then also this whole pioneering role that Coventry has always played. And that's something that still fascinates me to this day.

Stephan

Günther, you went to Coventry with your camera, met people there, and captured situations. With what goal?

Günter

Our goal was actually something completely different, but I had to start differently. We were invited, after having had contacts since 2021 and having already sent some work there. And then the Coventry people, our dear friends, said, no, you have to come. And you have to come and show your work, but it would be nice if you also did something in Coventry. And that's when we said, we can't do tourist photography.

So, what were we doing there? We started looking around a bit, seeing what in Coventry interested us. Two things stood out. One is the insane gentrification that's taking place there. And the second is the automotive industry, which is always portrayed here as having completely collapsed, causing Coventry to go downhill and leaving everything in chaos and ruin. And then we said, we can't deal with the gentrification in such a short time, but we could look into the automotive industry, if we could find people who had worked there and talk to them about what happened.

And then we got to the automotive industry, the remnants and the new automotive industries rising from the ashes.

Stephan

Rainer, you came to Coventry, I think in the year I was born. So, if I remember correctly, that was 1972, right?

Rainer

That's right.

Stephan

Was this your first time in Coventry? What brought you to Coventry?

Rainer

First of all, simply curiosity, because I knew, I had read, that a new Cathedral had been built in Coventry. It was only ten years old at the time, and I had a job as an assistant teacher for a year in a small town called Banbury, teaching German.

Yes, and then at some point I just got on the train and went to Coventry. Yes, and since that first encounter - initially just with the Cathedral - I've been back again and again. I was so impressed that I said, "If we ever come back to Great Britain," and we went there quite often, my wife and I. for holidays, since Wales is on the way, I always made sure we travelled in a way that allowed us two or three hours to enjoy the Cathedral.

Stephan

Tine, you travelled with Günther. Is there a particular moment in Coventry during your work, perhaps with your camera, that stands out in your memory, a moment that you would say was a game changer?

Tine

I don't know if it's a game changer. But we got there knowing that we wanted to explore biographies that had themselves experienced ruptures, just like our own biography. And in my eyes, it was like a small social study we were going to conduct there with the veterans of the automotive industry.

In the rooms of the Coventry Transport Museum, which was ideal for this. And thanks to the friends at CAIF, who searched intensively for people during the preparation, found them, and then introduced us to each other, we even had the opportunity to meet this number of people in those eight days.

That was interesting for me, and in retrospect, when I think about the interview Dave gave to the BBC, I believe - I'm not entirely sure - he emphasizes that these photos are also meant to pay respect and honour to the veterans, because it seems that the fact that these people created Coventry's wealth has been somewhat forgotten.

And basically, it was hardly ever in the public eye, so I don't know exactly, I'm looking too much from the outside, but maybe it wasn't noticed or maybe it wasn't appreciated. And that now there would be such an occasion to ...

Stephan

Did people reflect back to you that they thought it was good...

Tine

From the article by Dave, that this is a moment I didn't expect. The people we met were interesting because, on the one hand, they were naturally proud to show off their beautiful old cars.

They were very willing to pose for portraits and were quite happy about it. But I wasn't aware of the idea behind it. It all came about gradually. I mean, we had eight days. We photographed so many people - they're just a small part of the picture - that we didn't really reflect on it while we were there. But when I then tried to develop an exhibition concept or write the travelogue, that's when it all started to sink in a bit more intensely.

And then, through the interviews we got, including those from Dave and Brian, who gave an interview about how it feels for him when the conventional auto industry collapses. There are still aspects of the auto industry, like design, styling, and research, but not in production anymore. So, if I understand correctly, that ended in 2007, the pure production. And that was, of course, painful for the workers who had lived there for a long time.

So, I think it was interesting for them to see someone come along who didn't know anything about it, but was interested. And, of course, a bit fascinated by these old cars, yes.

Stephan

And the fifth person in our group is Johannes Schütz, a historian. He deals with the polyphony of his homeland or has dealt with it for a long time. So, personal stories, personal experiences, how they are reflected in a societal context, or how one finds oneself as a personality within a larger whole. Is that a good summary?

A and B, how one finds oneself in the grand scheme of things. And perhaps one can consider whether one can develop a similar reflection on this.

Johannes

Reflection on home?

Stephan

For example.

Johannes

Yes, so the project actually thrives on the tension, on how society has spoken about this phenomenon of home and how individuals have then appropriated it for themselves and probably used it to ... somehow implement this idea of home. I call that "home practice."

So that it's not something that remains an abstract idea, but that one wants to help shape it in concrete terms and then actually does something about it. I then looked at various practices, and one of them was the act of remembering in Dresden, how, after 1945, through the GDR era, but also during the transformation period since 1989/90, the old city before its destruction was remembered, and how this remembrance didn't just remain a quasi-remembrance but led to concrete actions.

Stephan

Not at the main table, but at the next table, sits the person at the organ. And that's Jo Aldinger, a gifted jazz musician who usually gives large concerts and also often entertains people with his bands. And we were able to get him to be a permanent member of our podcast project, and he, along with another band member, Patrick Neumann, is essentially our permanent musical accompaniment.

Stephan

And every single piece is always composed specifically for the respective podcast.

So, there are no repetitions or pre-recorded tracks; it's always freely composed to match our mood. I always find that very beautiful.

We're currently in the exhibition space of the Raskolnikow Gallery, where Günther and Tine Starke have exhibited the photos we've already mentioned. Or at least a selection of them, which quite well illustrate the context and show how people work and live there, with what self-image, and what statements they make.

And between the two beams, there are two banners depicting those who, as I see it, always acted as catalysts, right Günther?

Günther

So, as catalysts and connecting links, they always brought us all together, right? One part was yes, and the other also played a bit like mom and dad. So, they really ... thank you, thank you again, they looked after us. Up until then, the artist exchange had always involved a few younger people, and then these two older people came along, and they really needed a bit of help and support.

Stephan

Rainer, you first came to Coventry in 1972, then you moved to Dresden.

I'll try to shorten this a bit, because otherwise I think we'd be sitting here for several more hours. And then you came to Dresden and had your first "aha" moment and said, "Ah, wait a minute, there are parallels, there are bridges, there's actually an exchange." And there should continue to be an exchange. And that's how the stories in your books, which you co-edited and translated, came from these sources; they essentially came to you.

One of these projects completely blew me away. It was about a teacher who came to the Kreuzgymnasium (Kreuzschule) in 1936/37 because he simply wanted to understand why Germans somehow found the Nazis appealing and why they fell under their spell.

He then set out to become a teacher here in Dresden to develop this understanding.

How did this story come to you?

Rainer

The story came to me via Coventry. Incidentally, there was already a group in Coventry right after the war called the Coventry German Circle.

And Len, who's been leading this group for many years, showed me the book at some point and said, "Do you know this?" I had to say, "No, I don't, let me have it." And then it went on like that. A young man came up to me and said, "Do you know the story of my grandfather? It also has something to do with Dresden." He told me a bit about it, which I initially found quite fascinating. I went back to Dresden and sent an email two or three weeks later.

And he told me afterwards that he thought nothing more would ever come of it. No, I sent him an email and we've been really good friends ever since. He already told the story once in Dresden in 2015. Then, if I remember correctly, he presented it again in 2000 at the Kreuzkirche. And then the book was published in England. He presented it in Coventry, and my translation came out a year later - I'm not a very fast translator - and it's called "Loving the Enemy" and tells exactly this story, specifically the story of the grandfather of the man who wrote it down.

Stephan

And the story went on a bit further, if I remember correctly?

Rainer

Well, the story is, first of all, a truly remarkable story about a young man who came from a middle-class family - his father was a primary school teacher - and received a scholarship to King's College, Cambridge. And that is an absolute exception. He was a truly exceptional caregiver, he was really highly gifted, and then, because he was also politically interested, he said, exactly what you had suggested to him, learned German specifically for that, then spent a year in Dresden and of course met one or two people there.

Among others, there was a family in Langebrück, where he was often invited and became friends with them. The sons came to visit him in England when he returned. And then the war came. Then World War II began, and there was no contact at all. And then, when this young man, who was 36 and had been in Dresden, came back from the war, he wrote. And tried to re-establish contact. Yes, and it

turned out that at that time, only the youngest daughter of the family, whom he didn't know at all or had no real memory of, replied to him.

Yes, and that's how an exchange of letters developed. And this correspondence forms roughly the third of this book, which is actually quoted, showing how the two get closer and closer and then he comes up with the idea, yes, she could perhaps go to England and in the end maybe even more than just help her a little ... In short, she came to England, they got married and had children and the children had children again and the grandson is the one who wrote the book.

Stephan

Life can be so simple, really. Isn't it, Johannes? Isn't that perhaps an example of how personal stories are reflected in the social landscape? Aren't so many people looking for that?

Johannes

Well, it's actually a good example of how you can't have both, you can never have them without each other. That is, the personal is always embedded in something else. And that this interplay always exists. You can't detach yourself from it. And it's even the case that one or two generations later, you can't simply detach yourself from it because ...

Family memories carry it on. That's what's so fascinating about it, yes, about these narratives of remembrance in general. Even if, for example, you have a competing narrative - in the GDR there was a competing narrative that clearly linked itself to a partisan ideology in how one spoke about Dresden, for instance, and its destruction - a completely different narrative is passed down within families. And this happens from generation to generation because there are letters, because there are accounts of memories, because there are various ways in which this memory is then passed on.

For example, there's a family who have a piece of Meissen porcelain in their cupboard. It wasn't destroyed in the bombing, but it was badly burned. You can see the burn marks on it, and then, using this artifact as a scholar, you can explain how it all comes together. Because it was brought out, and they experienced firsthand what it meant to have that experience and then pass it on.

And so, you see that the individual, the familial, and society are always intertwined. You can take them apart and look at them individually, but they all refer back to each other.