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Breathing Cathedral

American artist Stuart Williams’s moving light work
in remembrance of lives lost during the Dresden bombing

BY CHRISTINA LANZL

Ever since I saw the film Slaughterhouse Five in 1972, based on Kurt Vonnegut’s seminal novel, I have been haunted by a scene in which American prisoners of war are arriving in Dresden by train...unknowingly, just a few days before the bombing of the city in February 1945. As the train rolls across the River Elbe, the American prisoners are looking out the window and have their first view of Dresden’s famed skyline. One of the Americans says, “I’ve never seen anything like it...it’s so beautiful.” And from that touching scene, it is the distinctive silhouette of the Dresden Cathedral that has been etched in my memory for all these years.

—Stuart Williams

SEVENTY YEARS AFTER THE ALLIED FIREBOMBING reduced most of Dresden to rubble during the final days of World War II, the city’s iconic cathedral—which was not destroyed during the war—pulsed with life. New York artist Stuart Williams’s LED light installation illuminated the exterior of the church with waves of colored light that rose and fell at the pace of human breath.

The son of an American soldier who was fighting with the Allied troops in Germany when Dresden was bombed, Williams describes his installation *Lebensatem/Dresden (Breath of Life/Dresden)*, which took place from February 13 through March 27, as “a breathing beacon of hope for peace and reconciliation.” He notes, “The irony is not lost on me that I am a citizen of one of the two nations [that] destroyed Dresden.”

The illumination of one of Dresden’s architectural treasures during the dark winter days enchanted visitors who cherished the intervention during the coldest month of the year. Because of the historic significance of the cathedral—which was commissioned by Augustus III, Elector of Saxony; completed in 1751; then badly damaged in the bombing and finally restored to its old glory by the East German government in the 1980s—the project underwent a thorough review by the commissions of the City of Dresden, the State of Saxony (one of 16 states in Germany), and the Catholic Church. During the three-and-a-half-year process, Williams submitted minutely detailed plans in order to guarantee that the installation would be absolutely noninvasive.

His elegant solution involved unobtrusively threading nearly 2,000 feet of electrical cable through the interior of the cathedral’s 275-foot-tall bell tower and attaching three tiers of lights with nylon straps. Working with lighting technicians,

Williams created a visual score for his up-lighting concept using 28 LED lamps.

SISTER CITY PROVIDES INSPIRATION

Williams’s previous *Breath of Life* LED light installation in Columbus, Ohio, during the citywide bicentennial celebration in 2012 provided inspiration. Visitors from Dresden, Germany, a sister city to Columbus, toured Columbus and saw the piece, which had been commissioned as part of Finding Time, a temporary public art exhibit organized by the newly constituted Columbus Art Commission. According to the commission, as quoted in the exhibition catalog, the aim for the exhibit was to help make “the City of Columbus aware of the passing of time, the use of time, measurement of time, the chronology of a life, world time, and the notion of temporary and permanent.”

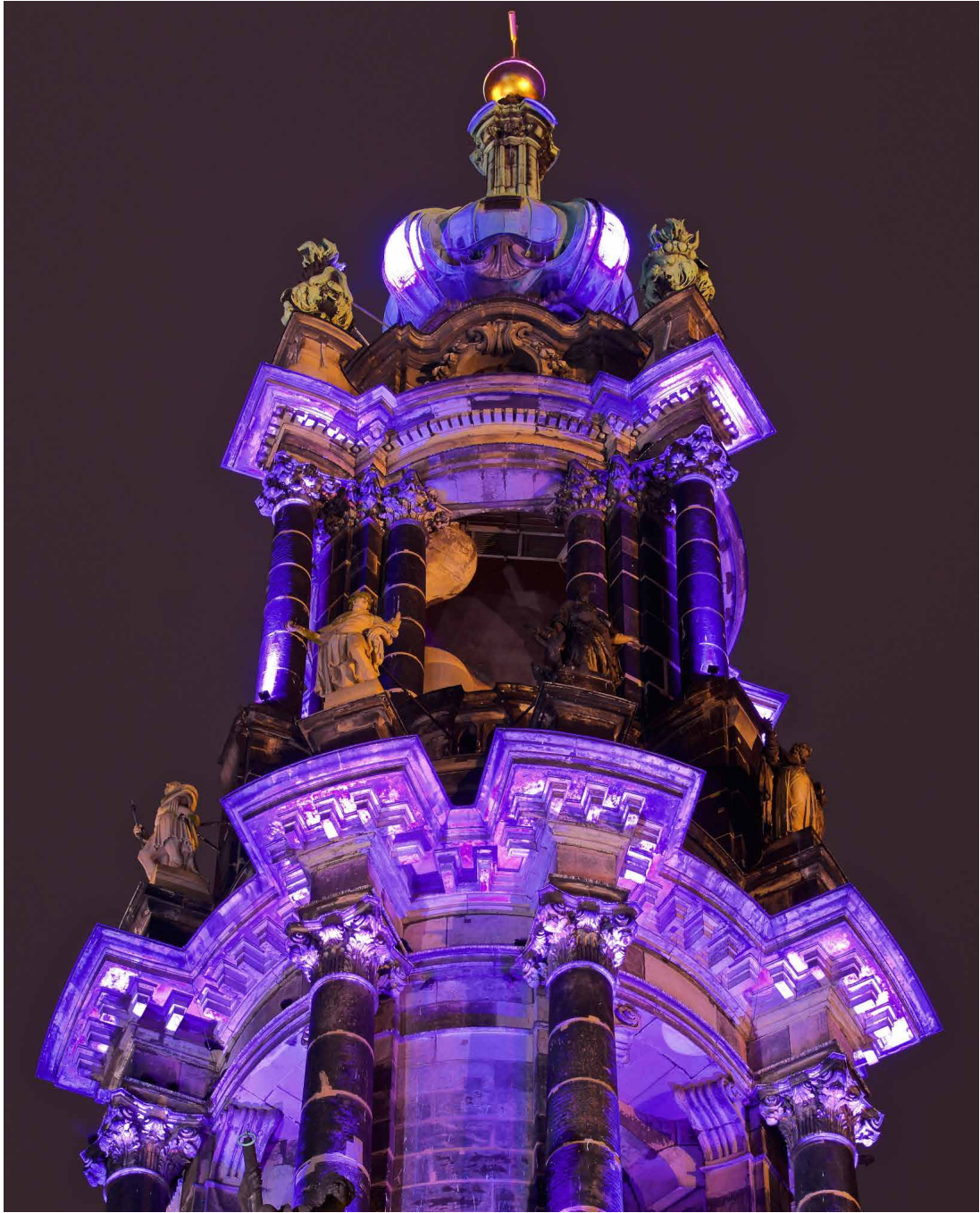
Williams’s first *Breath of Life* piece also involved large-scale architectural lighting, in which intermittent waves of light changed in color while rising and falling smoothly and continuously. In Columbus, Williams projected onto the impressive classicist façade of the original Central High School, which was preserved as the exterior of the new COSI (Center of Science and Industry) building, a science museum, research center, and cultural hub. “The relaxed pace of the rising and ebbing washes of light imitate slow breathing, as though the building were in a Zen-like state of meditation,” wrote Williams. The reflection of the kinetic lighting in the Scioto River added dramatic effect.

For the Dresden delegation, the *Breath of Life* concept offered an expressive opportunity for their hometown to come to terms with a difficult past, which included, in addition to



Photos © Craig Collins 2015.

OPPOSITE: To mark the 70th anniversary of the Dresden bombing, ten thousand people surrounded the old city and Stuart Williams’s *Breath of Life/Dresden* illuminated the cathedral. ABOVE: Stuart Williams at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin in February 2015 following the installation of *Breath of Life/Dresden*.



Artist Stuart Williams strung nearly 2,000 feet of electrical cable and 28 LED lamps on the tower of Dresden Cathedral.

the destruction of priceless architectural treasures, extensive casualties. Tens of thousands, perhaps as many as 135,000, were killed in the three days and nights of Allied firebombing. Most of them were women, children, and elderly who had sought refuge there. War-weary Germans fleeing the advancing Russian front had sought refuge in their city, believing it was a safe haven due to its historic landmark status.

The *Breath of Life* concept offered the possibility of a healing and life-affirming antidote, and Dresden officials extended an invitation to Williams to develop a parallel piece. Columbus

Sister Cities International, Dresden Sister City Inc., and the New York Foundation for the Arts provided seed money.

VISUALIZING BREATH

Inhale, exhale—your chest rises and falls as your lungs take in air and release it. How can this bodily function be translated into the medium of light? The development of energy-efficient light-emitting diodes (LED) technology revolutionized creative lighting design, paving the way in 2002 for Apple Computer to develop, as a sleep-mode indicator, a slowly pulsing light

that rhythmically imitates breathing. And in 2011 Christopher Capener of Palm Inc. obtained the patent for “adaptive brightness control of a display.”

Artists, including Williams, have been exploring light as an artistic medium for decades. Williams completed his first and largest light installation more than 20 years ago in the hills of Northern California. There, *Luminous Earth Grid* (1993) imposed a matrix of luminous squares over the topography of eight acres of grassland, an area equal to eight football fields. The concept of breathing architecture for *Breath of Life* emerged in 2009 while he maintained a studio in Paris, leading to the creation of *Paris & New York Light Plumes*. Conceptually, the *Breath of Life* installation can be linked to the indoor architectural lighting design installations of Dan Flavin and Robert Irwin, as well as the poetic outdoor and building scenarios of Leni Schwendinger and James Turrell.

A PERSONAL INVESTMENT

City administrations and the public, both resident and visiting, embraced *Breath of Life* with a tremendously appreciative reception. The viewer felt an immediate kinship with the slow and familiar rise and fall of the luminosity; the measured quality

presented a meditative environment, allowing the viewer to experience the grace and beauty of an historic structure in a whole new way.

As a trained architect, Williams not only understands light as the medium that shapes form, but he also appreciates buildings at a professional level and supports historic preservation. Says Williams, “As both an artist and an architect, I’ve felt the poetry and living presence of architecture. Buildings stand in silent witness to history unfolding around them.”

The Dresden project became a personal passion for Williams. He obtained basic grant support, as well as his hotel stays and pro bono marketing by the Berlin-based PR firm WildKat. However, when fundraising fell short, the artist dipped into his own life savings to offer Dresden an emotional remembrance of lives lost with a reaffirmation of peace and the magnificence of being. At the opening ceremony, Williams spoke, explaining he was “honored to be able to offer *Breath of Life/Dresden* as my gift to the City of Dresden, free and for all to see.”

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Williams programmed a computerized “visual score” for *Breath of Life/Dresden*. It controlled periodic color shifts and changes in the pace and rhythm of the lighting that mimicked human breathing.

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