

The Glass House: Crucible of Biodynamic Agriculture

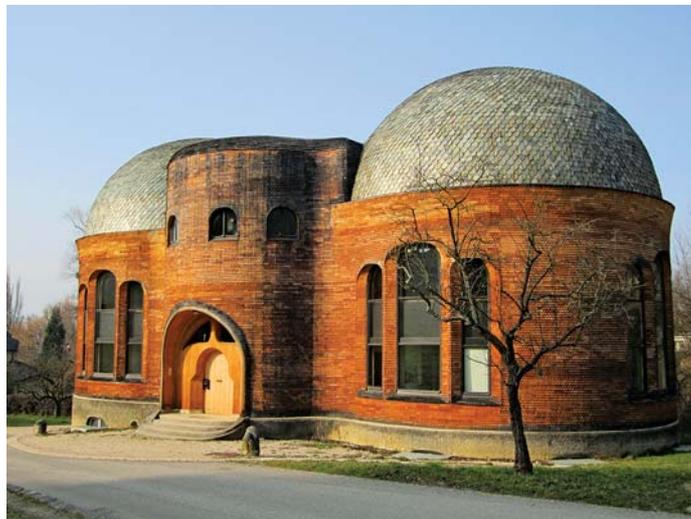
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The Glass House (1914) is the oldest extant building designed by Rudolf Steiner. The building is intimately associated with the development of biodynamic agriculture – but that is not why it is called the ‘Glass House’ (Glashaus), and the pursuit of a new agriculture was not its original use.

The Glass House is a timber building with walls clad with timber shingles and the roof sheathed with Norwegian slate (Pic 1). With this rather quaint building, Steiner played out some of the design ideas that were to be dominant design elements of the first Goetheanum – twin-domes roof, the extensive use of timber throughout, a retreat from right-angled design, and the use of flowing, ‘organic’, deeply faceted window and door frames. The building can be regarded as a prototype for the first Goetheanum (which was destroyed by fire on New Year’s Eve of 1922/1923).



Pic 1: The Glass House (1914) at Dornach, Switzerland, designed by Rudolf Steiner.

The Glass House is within the Goetheanum precinct which comprises some dozens of buildings, many of which were designed by Steiner, and which are dotted across a hillside overlooking the Swiss village of Dornach, which is, itself, a short tram, train or bus ride from Basel, and close by the German border. Steiner's retreat to Switzerland proved to be a propitious choice – Dornach was within earshot of two world wars but remained a safe haven.

The Russian artist, Assya Turgeniev (1890-1966), describes the Glass House as "so beautifully proportioned" (2003, p.62). She reported that in the summer of 1914, "The finishing touches were added to the glass studio ... it ... was here before us, but nobody knew how to work with glass ... we took the advice of Dr. Grosheintz, a dentist, to acquire something like a dentist's drill, but in much larger proportions" (2003, p.66). By such means Turgeniev produced the remarkable engraved coloured glass windows of both the first and the present Goetheanum buildings (Pic 2). Turgeniev's husband, Andrei Belyi (1880-1934), wrote of, "The new technique of glass grinding, used here for the first time, the material itself, the tremendous achievement of all the workers – it was all very impressive" (1987, p.58). On the death of Rudolf Steiner (1925) Turgeniev wrote that, "dark clouds gathered over us ... but the work went on as best it could and as far as strength allowed" (2003, p.136).

Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1899-1961) came to the Goetheanum as a young man in 1919. It was the beginning of a lifetime devoted to manifesting the visions of Rudolf Steiner. In that year Guenther Wachsmuth (1893-1963) and Ehrenfried Pfeiffer set up a research laboratory in the basement of the Glass House (Wachsmuth, 1989) (Pic 3).

Wachsmuth wrote that: "this research laboratory in Dornach came about at that time through my contact in life and my friendship with Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. Brought into a united work by destiny and freedom at the same place and with the same interests



Pic 2: Coloured engraved glass for the Goetheanum.

and objectives, we inevitably soon sought for a space where we could carry out experimentation to test and to bring to realization what was in our thoughts ... Rudolf Steiner had granted our request to make use of this space in the basement of the 'Glass House', on the first floor of which the glass for the



Pic 3: The laboratory of Ehrenfried Pfeiffer in the basement of the Glass House (the green house (gewächshaus) is visible through the windows).

windows of the Goetheanum building were engraved. There with the most primitive and limited equipment, we began our research" (1989, pp.420-421). Thus began two decades of research work by Pfeiffer at Dornach, which culminated in publication of his book *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* (1938) and emigration to the USA.

According to Pfeiffer: "In 1923 Rudolf Steiner described for the first time how to make the bio-dynamic compost preparations, simply giving the recipe without any sort of explanation – just 'do this and then that'. Dr Wachsmuth and I proceeded to make the first batch of preparation 500. This was then buried in the garden of the 'Sonnenhof' in Arlesheim, Switzerland. The momentous day came in the early summer of 1924 when this first lot of 500 was dug up in the presence of Dr. Steiner, Dr. Wegman, Dr. Wachsmuth, a few other co-workers and myself... Dr Steiner ... called for a pail of water, and proceeded to show us how to apportion the horn's contents to the water, the correct way of stirring it... Such was the momentous occasion marking the birth hour of a world-wide agricultural movement" (Pfeiffer, 1983, p.2) (Pic 4).

Steiner presented his Agriculture Course in Koberwitz (now Kobierzyce, Poland) in the summer of 1924 to 111 attendees from six countries (Paull, 2011a). Wachsmuth attended, Pfeiffer remained at Dornach to look after an ill colleague (Pfeiffer, 1983).



Pic 4: Sonnenhof at Arlesheim, site of the earliest BD preparations.

Steiner commented after the course that: “Now we have accomplished also this important work” (cited by Wachsmuth, 1989, p.552). “Seldom have I seen him so joyfully moved after the completion of a task as in this moment after the agricultural conference” (p.552).

Already at Koberwitz, Steiner had set up the Agricultural Experimental Circle. Steiner’s injunctions were that these agricultural ideas were to be put to the test before their public release. Transcripts of the Agriculture Course were forwarded around the world, including to Australia and New Zealand, and each recipient signed up to be a participating member of the Experimental Circle (Paull, 2011d).

Steiner retired from public life on 28 September 1924, and he passed away on 30 March 1925 (Collison, 1925), and so he did not live to witness the blossoming of his agricultural ideas. The development work was co-ordinated from Dornach: “From the first, actual practice has been closely bound up with the work of the spiritual centre of the movement, the Natural Science Section of the Goetheanum at Dornach. This was to be the source, the creative, fructifying spiritual element; while the practical workers brought back their results and their questions” (Pfeiffer, 1983, p.5).

Pfeiffer published *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* in 1938. This was the public ‘coming out’ for biodynamic agriculture (Paull, 2011c). Steiner’s agriculture now had a name, the ideas had been field tested and were now available to a worldwide

audience with Pfeiffer (1938a,b,c,d,e) releasing his book to the public in five languages (Dutch, English, French, German and Italian) (Paull, 2011d).

Pfeiffer presented the first biodynamic conference to an English speaking audience at the farm of Lord Northbourne at Betteshanger in Kent, UK, the following year (1-9 July, 1939) (Paull, 2011b). Northbourne (1940) drew on these ideas and published his manifesto of what he called 'organic agriculture' in his book *Look to the Land* published in the year following the 'Betteshanger Summer School and Conference on Bio-Dynamic Farming'. Pfeiffer migrated to USA and, for a further two decades, he continued his researches and advocacy of Biodynamics, always in pursuit of the proposition that Biodynamics was "for everybody, for all farmers" (Pfeiffer, 1983, p.5). Now nearing its centenary, the Glass House of Dornach has served as home for two enduring anthroposophic endeavours. It was the production centre for the magnificent vibrantly-coloured engraved windows of the Goetheanum, and it was the crucible for evolving Steiner's Koberwitz lectures through to 'biodynamic agriculture', Steiner's new agriculture for the world.

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