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Visual Library

Architecture, Culture and Influence

HARTMUT LEHMANN

Introducing the Property. The Francke Foundations as a Unique Project for the Advancement of Humankind

A long series of famines and plagues in the 17th century caused terrible suffering across the entire European continent, and especially in Central Europe. At this time, there was abject misery, poverty and fear everywhere. Millions died young in the countryside, the towns and the cities. Moreover, although the Thirty Years War drew to a close in 1648, this did not usher in a period of peace – quite the contrary. With Louis XIV of France attacking the western territories of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and the Ottoman Empire threatening south-east Europe, war continued. In 1683, the Turkish forces were at the gates of Vienna. Large swathes of Central Europe were regularly exposed to violence, devastation and the chaos of armed conflict. Villages were plundered, houses burnt, and harvests destroyed; beggars and cripples were met at every turn in daily life. Only in the 1720s, after the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1714 and the Great Northern War in 1721, did this situation gradually improve. In the second half of the 17th century, though, millions of people in Central Europe were still the victims of the violence of war, plague and hunger.

Children in poverty and misery

Just as today, children were especially at risk. They experienced the horrors of war, with many forced to fight, and many witnessing wartime atrocities. Tens of thousands were orphaned, often losing not just their parents, but all their relatives. Many thousands were left homeless, reduced to begging to survive. Where war and plague raged, the vast majority of children had no prospect of any kind of education or a life in peace. Their daily existence was accompanied by a pall of fear. At that time, most hoped for help in vain, just as they did in Halle and in Glaucha, a suburb of the city.

Francke's humanitarian initiative

Against this background, August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), a Protestant pastor and scholar in Halle (Saale), decided to take the unusual step of founding an orphanage. In the face of the destitution he saw and confronted every day, he refused to stand idly by. Francke believed that orphans ought to have a place of refuge, somewhere they would be given food, clothes and a secure place to sleep. Moreover, despite their poverty and deprivation, he wanted them to have the prospect of a better future. In this way, Francke was offering just what the vast majority of orphans needed at the time, and the promise he held out fulfilled their most fervent hopes. This was the situation in 1695 when Francke created the basis for his Foundations, which should be viewed, first and foremost, as a genuinely humanitarian achievement.

A new concept of education

In 1695, though, Francke did not just want to establish a traditional poorhouse and orphanage. Since the 16th century, numerous orphanages had been founded across Europe. In these, the children taken in had to work at such simple tasks as, for example, knitting socks for soldiers. However, they received no formal training or education of any kind. They remained on the margins of society and, in the vast majority of cases, continued to be trapped in poverty. This, though, was to be different in Francke's vision of his orphanage in Halle. From the outset Francke connected his orphanage with schools to provide the orphans with a solid education. This, in turn, was intended to enable them to train for a profession and grow up into responsible citizens able to make their own way in the world. Francke put considerable emphasis on lessons with *realia* and, in turn, on the natural sciences as intimately connected to these objects from real life.

As this example indicates, Francke's focus was on applied knowledge and preparing children for the world of work. Since children have a range of abilities, Francke founded a number of different schools. Yet, at the same time, Francke's schools were an open system, always allowing gifted children from lower social strata the chance of obtaining a better education and acquiring the skills for the higher professions – a type of school structure quite unusual in its time.

In this context, it should also be noted that Francke attached particular importance to the education of girls. In this respect as well, Francke's schools were a pioneering innovation far ahead of their day. Finally, since schools can only be successful with good teachers, Francke also set out to provide his teachers with proper training. The first teacher training college was established in the Francke Foundations as early as 1696. This further pioneering step represents the start of professional teacher training in Central Europe.

Help for body and soul

In Francke's new institutions, both the heart and the soul, the body and the mind, were equally protected and fostered. To stimulate and improve the mind and the soul, Francke founded a printing shop and a printing press with the objective of publishing improving literature at an affordable price. Above all, he wanted to ensure a sufficient supply of copies of the Bible so that everyone interested in the word of God could read it for themselves. In this respect, Francke was a true disciple of Martin Luther. In addition, since Francke was also concerned about the health of the orphans and good quality, effective medicines were expensive and hard to come by, he founded a pharmacy. It was in keeping with his pragmatic approach that he produced the majority of these medicines in the Foundations.

An innovative ensemble of institutions

As a result of these initiatives, the Francke Foundations were soon far more than just an orphanage. Within the space of just a few decades, a series of innovative decisions had created a unique ensemble of intimately linked institutions. Gradually, the original poorhouse and orphanage grew into an ensemble of teaching, residential and service buildings, in many respects a truly exceptional *Schulstadt* ('school town') which was also economically independent and largely self-contained. In particular, visitors to the Foundations valued the Cabinet of Artefacts and Natural Curiosities, Francke's *Wunderkammer* ('Cabinet of Wonders'), which displayed a collection of rare and strange objects from the distant realms of the world. In Francke's view, these natural and man-made objects not only illustrated the wealth and diversity of creation, but were also evidence for faith from 'God's book of nature'. The Foundations' library collected books from all across the world. In just a few years, Francke's *Schulstadt* was also admired far beyond Halle's borders, and came to be regarded as a model to be copied.

Changing the world by changing people

Francke's vision, though, was much larger. In many of his publications, he explained that his ultimate goal was to "change the world by changing people". In this sense, Halle was the centre for a new impetus to help all humankind. In various ways, the Prussian sovereign repeatedly sought to limit Francke's activities to their own monarchical territories, but in vain. Francke was a good subject to the temporal authority over him, knowing full well the value of the monarchy's support, yet as a child of God, as a labourer in the Lord's vineyard, as he put it, he felt a responsibility to everyone across the globe, to those in faraway lands just as much as those in his immediate vicinity. Although many of his pupils and students served the Prussian state, working as military chaplains, teachers and pastors, Francke always preserved his independence towards the Prussian rulers.

Activities outside Europe

In the early 18th century, Francke had the chance to carry his work beyond the borders of Prussia. When the Copenhagen royal court asked him to assist in spreading the Christian message in the Danish colony of Tranquebar in distant southern India, he lost no time in sending former pupils from his Foundations there as missionaries. Until then, comparably to the Dutch or English in their colonies in southern India, the Danish had primarily focused on trade. It was thanks to the Francke Foundations' emissaries that a school system, which also included girls, was established over the following decades in Tranquebar, as well as printing shops which printed large numbers of books. In this way, the Francke Foundations in Halle provided a quite outstanding contribution to overcoming illiteracy in southern India at that time.

In the same way, in the course of the 18th century, the Francke Foundations had an especially close relationship with emigrant religious communities in North America. The Foundations in Halle not only advised and guided the settlements of the Salzburger emigrants in the state of Georgia, but in particular the German-speaking emigrant communities in Pennsylvania. Pastor Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, sent on his mission by the Francke Foundations, brought together the Lutheran parishes in Pennsylvania as one independent synod, and is justly regarded as the founder of Lutheranism in North America. As the 18th century drew to a close, Mühlenberg's sons played a leading role in American politics and science. As innumerable examples show,

Francke was also interested in events in eastern Europe and the Middle East. In fact, he regarded the entire world as his congregation.

Francke's international network

Francke never limited his aid and support to his activities in Halle. On the contrary, he offered assistance wherever help was needed. Not only did the Foundations' pharmacy send medicines to other continents, but the printing workshop also dispatched writings and books, in particular copies of the Bible, to many distant lands. Characteristically, Bibles and medicines were frequently sent overseas together, providing assistance for both body and soul. For those days, Francke's packages travelled down trade routes over a vast distance – just as vast as his vision. The network of routes stretched from southeast Europe to the New World, and from southern India to the Baltic countries. These diverse activities were also supported by a broad network of correspondents. From the outset, Francke and his assistants never hesitated to systematically exploit the potential of modern communications to support their cause. After Francke's death, his son, Gotthilf August Francke, carried on his father's work. Under his guidance, particularly close contacts were established with the United Kingdom and the British colonies in North America.

Francke's religious and spiritual world

What were the beliefs and convictions that motivated August Hermann Francke in his work? To begin with, he was rooted in the tradition of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, as well as, above all, such major contemporary revival movements as Puritanism. Before Francke, Martin Luther and Johannes Calvin had also given special emphasis to children's school education. In their view, a good education not only strengthened children's faith, but also allowed them to find a worthy place in the society of their day. Francke felt equally committed to this impetus for reform. Yet on the other hand, Francke had also absorbed key ideas from the early Enlightenment. He was familiar with those writers in the decades around 1700, above all in the Netherlands and Great Britain, whose works sought to open up new intellectual horizons. Since education in such views was meant to create an awareness of events and processes in the entire world, it is hardly surprising that Francke was just as interested in technological innovations as he was in discoveries and in life, culture and faith in other countries. In this way, Francke took the opportunities offered to gain greater influence in his society. His unwavering religious convictions helped him overcome all the difficulties he faced.

Against this background, the unique importance of the Francke Foundations in Halle is based on the close, reciprocal relationship of the two outstanding factors outlined below.

An architectural *Gesamtkunstwerk*

First, the architectural design of the Francke Foundations as they developed in the early 18th century is unique. This is an architecture applying a rational and functional design to fulfil a given purpose. Nothing comparable or of an equivalent standard was to be found anywhere in Europe at that time. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, European royal rulers were building magnificent palaces that primarily served to display their absolutist power. Their subjects had to make considerable sacrifices for such projects, yet they themselves could never benefit from the achievements made possible by those sacrifices. In Halle, the situation was different. The children of those donating money to the Francke Foundations, helping them, in this way, to develop, could obtain an education and training in Halle together with Francke's orphans, a group he cared for especially. This policy created a strong emotional bond.

The educational programme in Halle was comparable to a quality seal. Those educated and trained in the Francke Foundations were highly valued in many countries. In those days, no church, merchant or craft guilds in Europe were constructing any complex of buildings that even came close to the Francke Foundations; none were producing an architectural ensemble of a comparable number of connected institutions informed by a similar vision. It is particularly notable that this architectural ensemble has survived into the 21st century, and can still be visited and experienced at first hand.

An educational and social vision

Second, the social and educational mission of the Francke Foundations in Halle was also unique in its day. The main objective was initially to provide a home and a good education for poor children. However, the initiative started in Halle soon only made sense from a European, indeed a global, perspective. After all, Francke's higher aspiration – and one he actually achieved in many places – was to change and improve conditions in as many parts of the world as

possible, as far as his own strength would allow. With Francke's implicit trust in God, his own strength proved sufficient to have an effect over vast distances.

The Francke Foundations' former pupils were active wherever there was a need for committed teachers and educators. Just as much as the Bibles and writings printed in Halle, the medicines produced there were intended to help people around the world. There was, of course, a certain discrepancy at any given time between such ambitious aims and what was actually achieved. Nonetheless, one should note that the Francke Foundations in Halle were, in their form, a uniquely and genuinely international cultural phenomenon whose activities, as the other experts' reports will show in detail, had a considerable impact across many different countries. From the 18th century onwards, frequent attempts were made to transfer the Francke Foundations' model to other locations. In this respect too, as an outstanding international pilot project, the Francke Foundations in Halle still retain a very special significance today.

Francke's legacy down the years

The aim must be, then, to conserve, support and pay tribute to the vision realised in the Francke Foundations, which gained its unmistakable structural and architectural expression in the buildings created by Francke and his successors. From the very start, Francke's efforts were directed towards helping young people. He wanted to assist individuals, and above all children who were in distress. He was not prepared to accept the restrictions imposed by the structure of the three estates, class differences, or national borders. From the outset, his work was designed to serve all of humanity. Far beyond his own era, Francke's work generated an impetus to overcome a rigidly stratified society, and hence played an important role in the creation of modern civic society. Even in the early 21st century, the pedagogical goals and social values reflected, not least, in the Foundations' buildings still have a distinctive and unique value.

This is an indication of how, far beyond the 18th century, the Francke Foundations have remained true to the aims of their founder, despite inevitable ups and downs. The Foundations first suffered temporary setbacks under the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, initially in spirit under the National Socialist regime and then both in spirit and materially during the forty years of East Germany. However, the damage of those days has now been repaired. Since 1989/90, thanks to the outstanding achievements of Paul Raabe, the first Director after the revival of the Francke Foundations, it has proved possible to re-establish the Foundations and reproduce their original form and character. This not only applies to their structural substance, which – at considerable cost – has been successfully restored and refurbished, but also to their content and educational and social purpose.

The Francke Foundations in the 21st century

As a result, it is today once again possible to experience what makes the Francke Foundations so exceptional, indeed unique, in their historical buildings as well as in the cultural, social and educational activities which fill them with life. Every year, many thousand visitors from many different countries come to Halle to experience the Francke Foundations. Numerous scholars from around the world work in the Francke Foundations' library and archive, and the Foundations' schools are flourishing once again. Three hundred years on, the work of August Hermann Francke has lost none of its remarkable fascination.

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