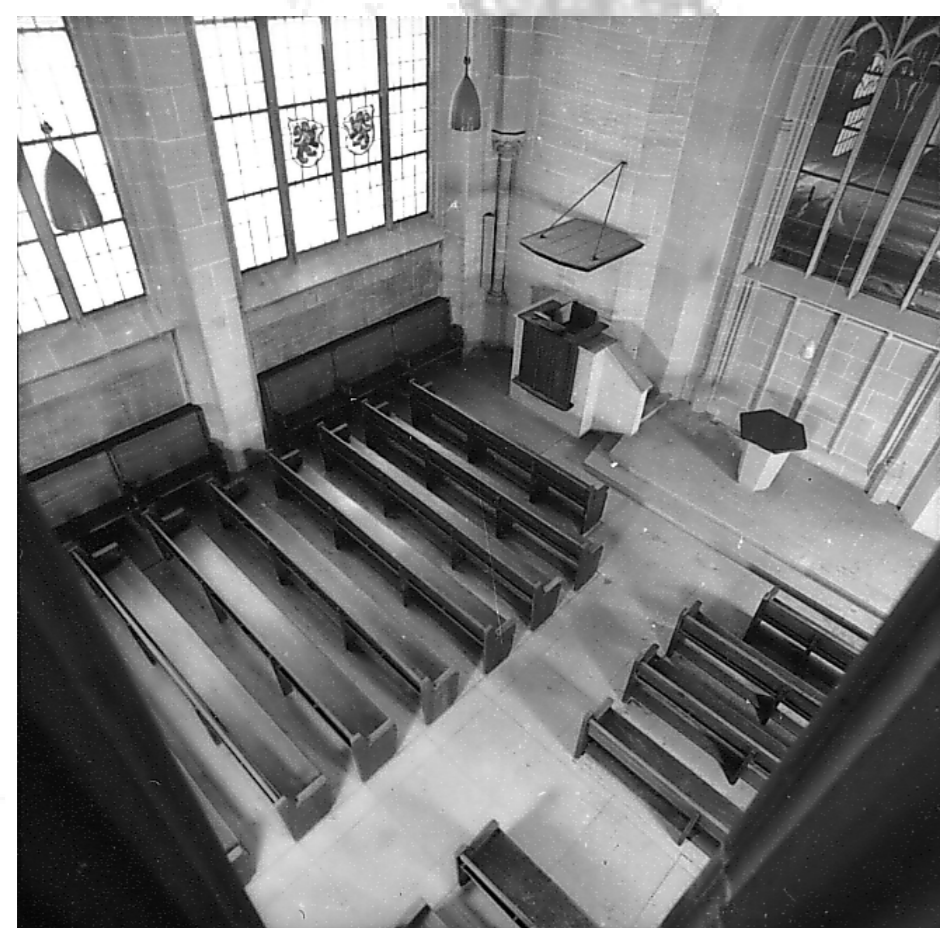
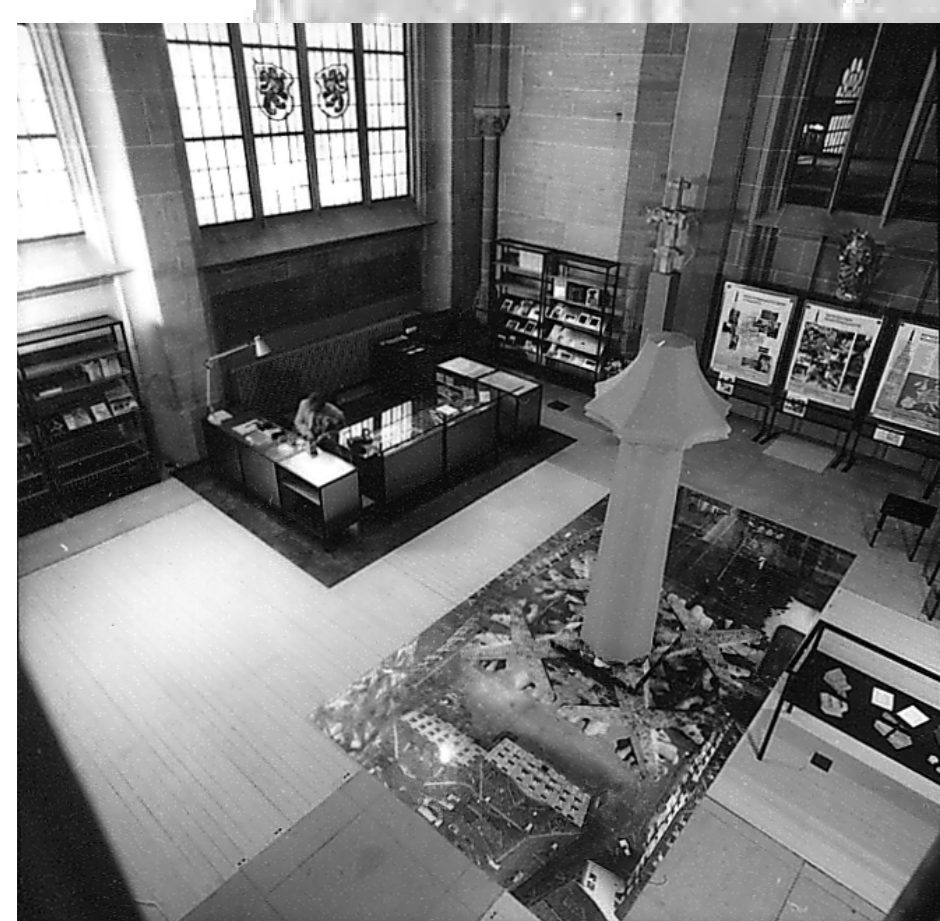




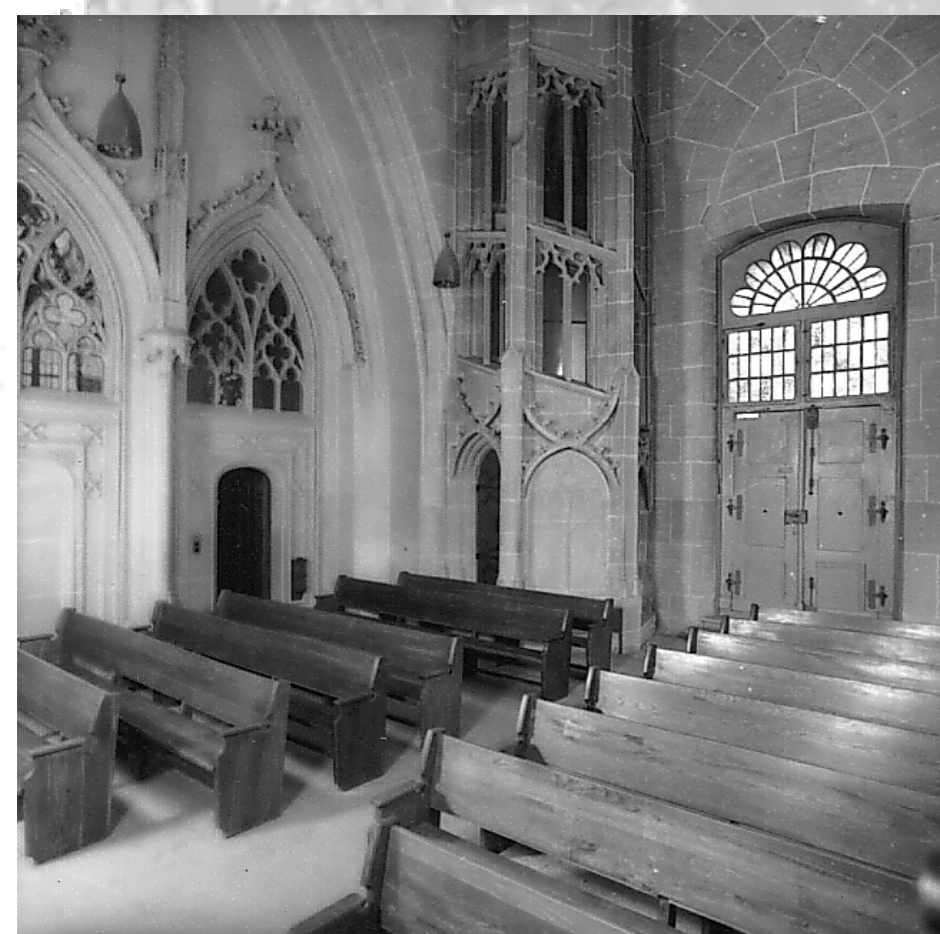
# THE GERBERN CHAPEL



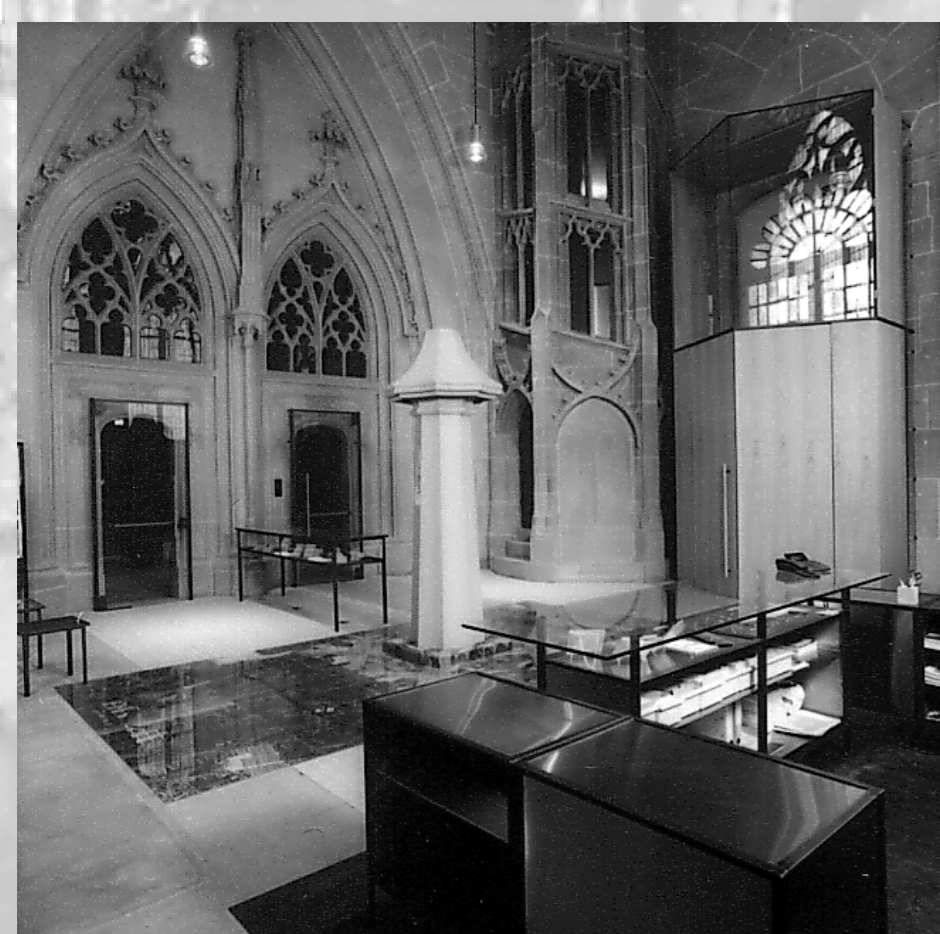
The Gerbern Chapel before 1999



1999 renovation: entrance and information centre



The Gerbern Chapel before 1999



1999 renovation: entrance and information centre

## The history and architecture of the Gerbern Chapel

Together with the opposite Erlach-Ligerz Chapel, which is stylistically slightly broken up by the addition of later fittings, the Gerbern Chapel is the largest of the numerous family and guild chapels that frame the Cathedral's side aisles. Before the Reformation, the chapels were used as private venues for prayer and worship, each with its own altar. In terms of its architecture, the Gerbern Chapel belongs to the west part of the building with its portals and tower, and it also served as a private chapel and west porch leading off the north side aisle. The chapel was constructed after the foundation of the whole west section of the building around 1460; the huge tracery windows were completed and glazed in 1471, and the vaulting was carried out in 1476. The chapel was donated by the three medieval Guilds of Niedergerbern, Obergerbern and Mittellöwen. These guilds probably paid not only for a considerable part of the construction and glazing, but also for the vaulting on which their coats of arms are emblazoned, and the altar to the patron saint of tanners (Gerber = tanner), the martyr St. Bartholomew who was skinned alive and is shown with the attributes of skin and knife – the somewhat gruesome affinity with the tanners' trade is clear enough.

The fact that there were three tanners' guilds in late medieval Berne and that they donated the Cathedral's largest chapel is not surprising, since the production and export of leather played a major role in 15th century Berne. Accordingly, the members of these societies were rich, important and influential citizens.

The guilds continued to take an interest in the chapels even after the Reformation, as is shown by the double coat of arms of the Mittellöwen Guild in the right-hand window dated 1544. In 1858, it was decided to separate the chapel from the side aisle and organ screen in order to create a small venue for purposes of worship. It was newly fitted in 1947 in the style of the 1940s and was largely unused in recent years, except for the organ which was used for practice purposes. In 1998, the Cathedral Community converted the chapel into a new reception and information centre: the new fittings were installed and the simple renovations carried out by the Cathedral architect Hermann Häberli in 1999 (in collaboration with Jürg Zulauf, dipl. architect ETH/SIA and Monika Marti, architect HTL).

## Description

The Gerbern Chapel is built on a square ground plan and includes some magnificent tracery vaulting. The keystones bear the coats of arms of the above-mentioned Gerber Guilds, as well as a boy carrying a banderole bearing the date 1476. The same date also appears in the ceremonial memorial inscription at the top of the entrance wall: *ano dmi · m · cccc · lxxvi · iar · uff sant bartholomes obent · des zwelfbotten ward diß gewelb volbracht* (In the year of the Lord 1476, on the evening of the Holy Apostle Bartholomew, this vault was completed). Thus the vaulting was finished on the day dedicated to the chapel's patron saint, St. Bartholomew (24 August), a witness to the high symbolic value attributed to the chapel and similar architectural donations.

The space is dominated by the tower's spiral staircase, a delicate structure that was originally open on all sides and which bears various renovation inscriptions. Two doors opening towards the south are set in the neo-Gothic partition walls dating from 1858. The chapel is primarily characterised by the monumental group of windows consisting of two pointed arches and rose windows with the brittle tracery typical of the third quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which is also seen on the staircase. In the heraldic glass of the Gerbern societies, dating from 1947, the coats of arms of the Mittellöwen are seen on the right and those of the Obergerbern and Niedergerben in the top tracery. The most important of these is the large coat of arms of the Niedergerbern on the left dating from 1471. This is the oldest window in the Cathedral, and it was one of the first to inaugurate the popular custom of donating heraldic windows. The coat of arms depicting two lions holding the tanners' knife is integrated in a section of Gothic architecture with a stone cornice bearing two pillars with a foliated arcade.

Text: Dr. Jürg Schweizer; photos: Foto Schmid, Berne 1999

Further information:

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