

The Basel Freilager on the Dreispitz

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Basel has its own tradition of free warehouses. The Dreispitz, an area of about fifty hectares on the border between the city of Basel and the municipality of Münchenstein in Basel-Landschaft, served for most of the twentieth century as a logistics hub. It had a railway connection, warehouses for transit goods and the offices of forwarding agents and customs brokers. Most of the land belongs to the Christoph Merian Stiftung, the foundation established under the will of the Basel merchant Christoph Merian, which grants building rights to the companies operating there. The free warehouse itself was run by a company established for that purpose, which stored goods under customs supervision for the trading houses of the region.¹

Since the early 2000s the Dreispitz has been transformed from a logistics area into a mixed district of culture, education, housing and commerce. The Schaulager of the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, opened in 2003 at the edge of the area and described in Part E, introduced the idea of a warehouse for art that is also a place of research and exhibition. In 2014 the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland moved its Academy of Art and Design to a new campus on the Freilager-Platz. Former warehouse buildings were converted into studios, exhibition spaces and apartments. A master plan developed by the cantons and the foundation provides for the gradual conversion of the area over several decades.²

The history of the Dreispitz shows how the function of a freeport can change with the economy around it. The commodity transit trade that justified the free warehouse in the twentieth century has largely moved to the Rhine ports and to the modern logistics centres described in the first chapter of this Part. Art storage in the region has partly moved to specialised fine-art warehouses, some of which operate as open customs warehouses under the Customs Act. With Art Basel, the Schaulager and

The Basel Freilager on the Dreispitz

the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen nearby, demand for professional art logistics has grown. Several companies offering transport, crating, climate-controlled storage and customs services for works of art are based in the Basel region.³ The legal duties that apply in these warehouses are the subject of the next section.

1 Notes

1. On the Dreispitz area, its ownership by the Christoph Merian Stiftung, its history as a logistics and customs area and the Basel free warehouse (Basler Freilager), see the publications of the Christoph Merian Stiftung and the cantonal planning documents of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft. Area and dates to be verified. ↩
2. On the transformation of the Dreispitz, the Schaulager (opened 2003, architects Herzog & de Meuron), the FHNW Academy of Art and Design (Campus der Künste on the Freilager-Platz, opened 2014) and the master plan for the area, see the publications of the Christoph Merian Stiftung, the FHNW and the cantonal authorities. Dates to be verified. ↩
3. On the Basel fine-art logistics sector and the use of open customs warehouses for works of art in the region, see the publications of the companies concerned and of the Federal Office for Customs and Border Security. To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helticaregister.com/basel-the-basel-freilager-on-the-dreispitz