

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Gottfried Böhm 1986 Laureate Biography

Gottfried Böhm is an architect practicing in Cologne, Germany. His work ranges from the simple to the complex, using many different kinds of materials, with results that sometimes appear humble, sometimes monumental. He has been described in the sixties as an expressionist, and more recently as post-Bauhaus, but almost always he stands alone in departing from the conventions of established architecture, seeking to go one step beyond.

Böhm himself prefers to be thought of in terms of creating “connections”—for example, the integration of the old with the new, the world of ideas with the physical world, the interaction between the architecture of a single building with the urban environment, taking into account the form, material, and color of a building in its setting.

The Bensberg City Hall, as well as the restaurant he designed at Bad Kreuznach, both built on historic ruins, illustrate his creativity in joining the old with the new.

Some of the connections he refers to are also between private and public or semi-public spaces, new uses for deserted urban areas, and the analyzing of a design problem as both a boundary and a link. One of his projects, the Zueblin Corporate Headquarters in Stuttgart, straddling two newly incorporated townships, embodies many of Böhm’s connections.

Many of Böhm’s projects and proposals illustrate his concern for urban planning, i.e., the area around the Cathedral and the Heumarkt area in Cologne; the Prague Square in Berlin; the area around the castle at Saarbruecken; the Lingotto Quarter in Torino; and the city center in Boston. Hans Klumpp, writing in *Bauen und Wohnen*, said, “For Böhm, architecture and urban planning are inseparable.”

Böhm has said, “I think the future of architecture does not lie so much in continuing to fill up the landscape, as in bringing back life and order to our cities and towns.”

In 1981, Peter Davey in *Architectural Review*, described some of Böhm’s buildings as “unique subjective works of art that showed Germany—and Europe—that the Expressionist tradition was still alive. His brut modern concrete meets ragged medieval stone with contrast yet sympathy: the new forms are as complex as the old...” Davey was referring in this instance to the town hall at Bensberg and the Pilgrimage Church at Neviges.

But his article went on to review a more recent building, the civic center at Bergisch Gladbach. Davey acknowledged that “as usual with Böhm, everything new is new: there is no attempt to copy.” And further, Davey stated, “Böhm has traveled a very long way from Neviges, but he has never, in anything he has built, lost his wonderful, original humanity.”

Bergisch-Gladbach marked a major change in the materials used by Böhm, from molded concrete to glass and steel. of this change, Böhm has said simply, “I use different kinds of materials on different kinds of projects. Today we can do things with steel and glass that we could not do before.”

In an article that same year in *Architecture and Urbanism* (May), Donald E. Olsen praised Böhm’s works in the highest terms, saying of the Church of the Pilgrimage at Neviges, “Böhm’s ability to dematerialize this massive structure of modern concrete technology through the application of sheer volume, shape and light-modulation, advances many of the goals of modern architecture and transcends and even transgresses some of its alleged precepts.”

Olsen added, “Neviges, together with a significant portion of Böhm’s other work, preceded by far, the current attempts to create architecture in a new paradigm described as “post-modern ... earlier examples of his work ... predated by two decades or more the superficial parodying-of-history theme which is presently the avant-garde rage in America.”

Gottfried Böhm, 1986 Laureate (continued)

Praising the Bensberg City Hall, Olsen stated, "...he has fused the new construction with the old with an ease that seemingly closed the chronological gap ... it should not be surprising that such high quality should emanate from an architect of rich eclectic predilection."

Gottfried Böhm was born in Offenbach-am-Main on January 23, 1920, the son of Dominikus Böhm, one of Europe's most respected architects of Roman Catholic churches and ecclesiastical buildings. Since his paternal grandfather had been an architect as well, it is not surprising that Gottfried started on that path.

His academic career began in 1942, when he the Technische Hochschule in Munich. He received degree in 1946. For another year, he continued his education, studying sculpture at the Academy of Arts in Munich. That training has been applied often, since he models in clay of his building exteriors as he evolves a plan.

He worked in his father's office as an assistant architect from 1947 to 1950. During that time he collaborated with the Society for the Reconstruction of Cologne under the direction of Rudolph Schwarz.

In 1948, he met and married Elisabeth Haggemueller, who also is a licensed engineer and architect. They have four sons, three of whom have become architects.

Feeling the need for other points of view, in 1951, Böhm journeyed to New York where he worked in the architectural firm of Cajetan Baumann for six months. Several more months were spent on a study tour of the United States, during which time he had the opportunity to meet Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, two of the architects for whom he holds great admiration.

His study tour over, Böhm went back to work with his father in 1952. His father's influence plus the ideas and theories of the Bauhaus, to quote Klumpp again, "were, clearly apparent in his first independent projects. Nevertheless, his many sided skills enabled him to overcome this phase quickly. He did not discover a different style; what he discovered was a clear conviction of the importance of every single architectural assignment, no matter how small, and he learned that, along with the factors of time and place, man is the most important value to be taken into consideration."

When his father died in 1955, Böhm took over the family firm. In the three decades since, he has accomplished many buildings, including churches, museums, theatres, cultural and civic centers, city halls, office buildings, public housing, and apartment buildings, many of the latter with mixed use.

In his teaching, he warns against "the exaggerations of the historicizing movement, and mindless imitation of earlier eras." in the past, he has insisted on "spiritually enriching human values in architecture," speaking out against "overcrowding the environment with unnecessary design features." He has opposed both the reductivist sterility, and the brutalism that reigned for a time. Although the language of his forms is not in the of modernist" style, he adheres to many of the ethical principles of the Bauhaus such as "austerity, honesty, and expressing one's own time in one's work."

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