

Gottfried Böhm
1986 Laureate
Ceremony Acceptance Speech

Last year I built a small chapel with my son, Paul. It is almost four feet square and not quite eleven feet high (47¼" by 47¼" by 10' 9¾" to be precise). I mention this building because rarely did anything come so naturally. I think I may say this because the chapel is so small and because of my son's contribution.

The chapel shelters a figure of Christ for which it is both frame and habitat. Figure and chapel have become one; indeed the figure is the heart of the whole. And a little of the drama and love contained within the chapel is expressed on the exterior.

The chapel has clean lines, not in the sense in which such lines today are often equated with geometry—even a complex shape can have clean lines—but in the sense that you cannot add to it, and you would not want to take anything away, either.

I think the influence of my father, Dominikus, who was my guide, can be discerned in this small building. It seems to me a good thing when a building has not been designed entirely on a moment's inspiration.

Although the chapel is clearly new and of our time, it has formed a bond with the other buildings in the neighborhood—it seems to have been there all the time. Despite its small size, it and the others form a living space.

Its details are not very complicated, but they were applied with great feeling. In this too perfect, streamlined time details are especially important, because by having to take a close look, we discover new things. Because of this, details will remain part of the building in the mind's eye.

Fortunately, I have been entrusted with larger projects, including city planning, yet all have presented me with the same problems as the little chapel:

A building is a human being's space and the background for his dignity and its exterior should reflect its contents and function. New buildings should fit naturally into their surroundings, both architecturally and historically, without denying or prettifying the concerns of our time. You cannot just quote from history and above all you cannot take it out of context, in however humorous a fashion. On the contrary history has a natural continuity that must be respected.

Especially after World War II, we have cut wide gashes into the fabric of our cities the world over—we put great traffic arteries through them and erected buildings whose function, shape, size, materials, and colors had no bearing on the existing urban environment.

It is therefore important today to heal these wounds, retaining the positive aspects, and re-establishing the necessary cohesion of the urban environment, so that we can once more experience the natural sense of community which we so admire when strolling through old cities.

With her extraordinary straightforwardness my wife— to whom I owe much professional gratitude, once said to our sons (three of whom are architects): "Our generation has built a lot, but your generation will have to work hard to heal all that."

I don't overestimate the influence of architecture on people, but I am sure that the physical alienation of our cities contributes to our inability to live together harmoniously.

Gottfried Böhm, 1986 Laureate (continued)

It is clearly important to keep its integrity in mind when designing a building, but it is especially necessary today to consider its neighbors and to find out what they might have in common.

To be given this prize must mean that you have understood and accepted my principles. That is a wonderful feeling. I thank you very much!

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