

Placemaking. Atmosphere and Urbanity in Three Churches by Gottfried Böhm

Alberto Calderoni & Luigiemanuele Amabile

Throughout the twentieth century and still today, Gottfried Böhm's prolific production – especially his sacral architecture – succeeded in creating new environments by holding together the sacredness of the congregational space with its civic, secular vocation in crafting urban spaces of great quality and care – placemaking. The atmosphere evoked in the interior reverberates on the exterior through different architectural features 'all intended to circumspectly forge new social spaces and linkages with the surroundings.' This relationship will be explored in this contribution focusing on the architectural composition of three of Böhm's most relevant examples of religious architecture: the parish church St. Gertrude in Cologne, the pilgrimage church of Mary in Velbert-Nevinges and the Church of Christ's Resurrection in Cologne-Melaten.

In Western culture, religious architecture had been considered as the main gathering place of a community until recently. Regardless of their scale, chapels, churches and cathedrals are all protected and sheltered by divine will. Transposing sacral statements into physical actions, Böhm's projects stand in the tradition of church architecture having a 'centralizing, community-forming spatial thrust'. Liturgical spaces are shaped and forged, while on the outside possible new declinations of urban space are explored. This double register of composition is particularly evident in Böhm's churches. On one side they perform iconic and expressive ways to celebrate spiritual life, thus claiming their formal autonomy from the physical context; on the other they achieve a certain urbanity by blurring the actual boundary between inside and outside, allowing elements from both realms to meet, and merge. An osmotic exchange between impenetrable sand-blasted concrete folds and brick-paved ordinary streets. When Böhm's architecture is praised and discussed as a symbol of expressive impetus – iconic, yet adequate – in the monotonous panorama of functionalist postwar German architecture, it retains its strength in the immersive, precise experience provoked by its urban role. Small courts, recesses, generous forecourts, precisely crafted pathways, bold connections with adjacent buildings, are some of the often-overlooked features that demonstrate a belief that urban 'atmosphere can be produced' through the juxtaposition of architectural elements within a physical context in order to affect how people experience a space. To do so, it is necessary to produce a multisensory engagement with the city.

As our field becomes ever more fluid and detached by physical reality, studying the physical and atmospheric relationship of Böhm's built examples and their contexts not only inspires further research and new, in-depth study of its historical relevance and legacy, but also fosters new debates on the buildings as examples for the precise craft and civic role of architectural composition. In moments of uncertainty, the lessons, which Böhm's buildings can teach us, are urgently needed.