



Church of Reconciliation in the former concentration camp Dachau, 1964-67, plan without scale.
Architect: Prof. em. Dr. Ing. E.h. Helmut Striffler

Against The Banality Of The Orthogonal

Obituary on the architect, university teacher and humanist Helmut Striffler.

Shortly after completing his 88th year of life, one of the most renowned German architects of the 20th century, Helmut Striffler, deceased on February 2, 2015 in his hometown of Mannheim.

Not just colleagues and the professional architectural world regard Helmut Strifflers architectural work as independent and outstanding. His expressive architectural language was undoubtedly influenced by the experience of a generation that after the end of WWII stood in the middle of a rubble field devoid of any illusion how to design a future.

Striffler was born in 1927 in Ludwigshafen. The young high school student Striffler had to serve as 'Flakhelfer' in the last days of war. Starting an apprenticeship as a bricklayer, it took some time before he decided to study architecture. His experiences as a young architect include an employment at Egon Eiermann's office. With the experience he had gained there, he very soon became an expert in designing churches. After his work on the Pforzheimer Matthäuskirche he founded his own office in 1956, followed by numerous projects for churches and community centers. Striffler himself often mentioned the listed Trinity Church in Mannheim as one of the most important projects in his professional career.

On March 14, 2015, the public bid farewell of the renowned architect in this light-filled building in a moving funeral service.

Helmut Strifflers commitment to sacral buildings culminated in the years 1964-1967 in the construction of the Protestant Church of Reconciliation on the grounds of the former concentration camp Dachau. The experiences throughout the planning process and the execution of the memorial have influenced him deeply: "For me, there is a life before and a life after Dachau."

The Dachau memorial was internationally regarded as a milestone building within this typology and still is, up until now. The intensity of its architectural and spatial gesture remains unmistakably clear and continues to fascinate. Only rarely, if ever, feelings such as guilt, shame and punishment, but also hope, reconciliation and confidence have been translated into the language of architecture and spatial planning so successfully in such a "tainted" place.

Ulrich Conrads wrote on the Church of Reconciliation: "[It] carries calmness, peace and solace in a place where the bottom burns through the soles of our shoes, even if we had never entered it. The building I am talking about is Helmut Strifflers church in the grounds of the leveled concentration camp in Dachau. There neither is nor was a comparable building task before, and - God help us - there won't be one again in the future.

[...] The fact that this building had silenced all the previous criticism, that chased away all the irony, that turned all the vanity of speech into nothing, and that denied all description, indicates a new dimension of building. It points to more than just functional performance and purpose. It points to the new home of man, to which the architecture of our days has to contribute. "

(Dr. Ulrich Conrads, Berlin: Speaking at the ceremony of the BDA Prize for Architectural Criticism, in "Der Architekt", No. 12/1967).

Peter Blundell Jones, the English architecture critic, stated in one of his publications:

„But his masterpiece at Dachau is a building of world significance, confronting one of the toughest programs an architect has ever had to face. At a time, when much architecture across Europe had descended into a banal utilitarianism, this chapel's purpose was almost entirely representational, and that representation was of the most difficult kind imaginable: the remembering of and attempted reconciliation of the worst mass murder in history. Of all the works in the book, it has the greatest right to be called ‚poetic‘, because of the dual appeal to head and heart, its evocation of an appropriate mood under the most difficult conditions, and its great economy of means, with every detail contributing to the impact of the whole [...]"

(Peter Blundell Jones: Modern Architecture through case studies, Architectural Press / Elsevier, 2007).

In this case, the design concept for the architectural competition for the memorial in Dachau defined a completely different set of parameters than the usual design pattern at that time. This included the conscious renunciation from the right angle, as Striffler identified in it the barbaric and relentless force of the concentration camp layout. A few years later he gives a more detailed account on this position in the article "Bullets Fly Straight" (Werk und Zeit, 1985). Henceforth Striffler's architectural language is determined by lightness, oscillation and the "non-orthogonal": "In the so-called post-war modernism the banal rule of the right angle was sold as a production-related logic. [...] Gradually, however, I discovered that the relation of space and human beings does not "naturally" lead to the abstract rationality of the orthogonal, but that it also points at a reciprocal interaction: the dialogue of space and our senses." (From Helmut Striffler's farewell lecture at the TU Darmstadt on October 28, 1992).

A number of further directional and ground-breaking buildings followed. The ÖVA, an office building for the "Öffentliche Versicherungsanstalt der badischen Sparkassen" in Mannheim (1974-1977) is a German prototype for new office landscapes, as it introduced the typology of group workstations. Striffler built offices, housing schemes, schools, ... the list of commissions featuring his refusal of the "normal" is long.

His late work included the cultural center and grammar school in Remchingen, which were highly acclaimed by architectural critique.

Striffler's architecture is sensual and elementary. He has always opposed the temptation of the fast-paced zeitgeist ("architecture as business "). He refused the consumerist and vociferous publication of his projects in glossy magazines. By that he ennobled his work in a very modest way.

"My goal as an architect is to develop an art of building that brings forth the elemental connection between man and space in its most beneficial way", that has always been Striffler's comment on the effective publication of his work.

His work has been honored with many prestigious architectural awards.

From 1969-1974 Helmut Striffler was professor for building theory and design at the Hannover Technical University and from 1974 until his retirement in 1992 he taught at Technical University Darmstadt. Striffler's teaching was characterized by a profound humanism and generations of students owe him their high-quality education. Another credo in his work as a university teacher was the idea that spatial and architectural form derives from archetypal and familiar approaches that are all known to us. In his lectures he was highly concerned about the issue of "light" and statements such as "directed lighting as a means for the creation of space" and "groping for contours of light as the beginning of design considerations" remain immortal. Truly visionary is a quote from a lecture from the mid-1980s (!) dealing with the topic "light and

energy": "For the sake of mankind, I see the spatial future to have gradient boundaries, just like the edge of a forest with multi-level transitions. It will no longer be possible to draw those zones on plane surfaces. It will be possible to build them, however, and experience them as a kind of wide hem. There will be numerous window soffits on which the daylight can be reflected. That this will effect energy management and our relationship with the environment is of course obvious – a circumstance that not only architecture will benefit from."

In his buildings he has led the tension between "light and space" to a masterly achievement. For Striffler language was a precise tool for the discourse on architecture, but also its interpretation – he regarded this a vital part of the architectural education.

As a judge for numerous architectural and urban design competitions he could contribute to the quality of our built environment, even though he often had to fight against the "mainstream". Striffler was a leading member in many professional associations. In a leading position he has influenced the fate of the "Deutsche Werkbund" for decades. Emerging out of the Werkbund, Striffler founded the "Rhine Kolleg eV" in 1988, an association of volunteer scientists from the Rhine area. Immediately after the Sandoz disaster the "Rhine Kolleg eV" devoted itself to the protection of Europe's largest river. In the following years cultural and economic questions about the Rhine were added to its fields of interest. As part of numerous symposia and annual meetings both problems of flood protection as well as issues of heritage along the Rhine were discussed across national borders. Striffler was significantly involved in the listing of the Middle Rhine Valley as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He was honorary chairman of the "Rhine Kolleg eV".

The connection of Helmut Striffler with the BTU goes back to the start-up phase of the University. As chairman of the jury of an international competition for the new BTU library building in 1993, he prevailed to award the second prize winner (Herzog + de Meuron, Basel) – against considerable resistance. At Strifflers initiative the preparation of the master plan in its present form was instructed to both KSP and HdM. Many of the difficult decisions underlie his guidance in the following years as part of the implementation process and participation – even I was able to sufficiently benefit from it. The Faculty II for Architecture, Civil Engineering and Urban Planning owes him its present organization. For our founding dean Mr. Prof. Dr. Ing. Klaus Dierks, Helmut Striffler was a competent advisor on several matters – the structure of the curriculum and the professional guidance of the faculty. He was also an advisory member of the Committee of the Science Council and the "Working Group TU Cottbus", which established and approved the guidelines for the structural development of our university.

For all those achievements we owe this valiant colleague our gratitude and appreciation.

We mourn the loss of a gifted architect, academic and socially active humanist, who undauntedly, passionately and with great devotion stood up for "good architecture in a decent environment".

Architecture in this country has lost a role model.

We bow before his great and unprecedented oeuvre. For his work, and his scientific achievements in research and teaching the BTU Cottbus awarded him an honorary doctorate on October 15, 2008.

His ideas and ideals live on in us.

His works will outlive time.

For his family we wish power and strength to overcome this immensely painful loss.

Prof. Jörg J. Kühn