

Magazine № 01

# Pilgrimage & the Architect



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

— Part 01 of 02 —

### EDITORIAL 04

---

#### EDITORIAL

### ESSAY 05

---

#### FROM DELFT TO DHAKA

Trespassing in Louis Kahn's masterpiece

*Text: Chris Luth*

### INTERVIEW 06 - 08

---

#### WHEN THE BUILDING COMES AS A SURPRISE

Barry Bergdoll's architectural pilgrimages to Brno, Brasilia, and Bilbao

*Text: Jessica Bridger*

### PHOTO ESSAY 09 - 28

---

#### RUTA DEL PEREGRINO

Iwan Baan's impressions of Mexico's most famous pilgrimage route

*Text: Florian Heilmeyer*

### INTERVIEW 29

---

#### REACHING THE SUMMIT

Ole Bouman on redemption through nature

*Text: Jessica Bridger*

### ESSAY 30 - 31

---

#### COMING/GOING

Traveling in the name of architecture

*Text: Jessica Bridger*

### FOUND 32

---

#### HAJJ TIME

*Text: Jessica Bridger*

### ESSAY 33 - 35

---

#### ENLIGHTENMENT AT BURNING MAN

A pilgrimage of participation

*Text: Julian Raxworthy*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

— Part 02 of 02 —

**IN THE PHOTO BOOTH WITH...** 36 - 40

---

### **GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS**

*Text: Elvia Wilk*

**ARTICLE** 41 - 50

---

### **GOD'S CONCRETE ROCK**

Gottfried Böhm's church in Neviges

*Text: Florian Heilmeyer*

**ESSAY** 51 - 54

---

### **I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE**

On stalking architecture – and architecture stalkers

*Text: Rob Wilson*

**NEXT ISSUE** 55

---

### **VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE 2012**

**W**elcome to the first issue of **uncube**, our new digital magazine about architecture and beyond.

As we were planning this inaugural issue, the Venice Architecture Biennale loomed large on the horizon. Both inspired and curious about the growing phenomenon of such international roller-coaster events – and also just wanting to celebrate our own and others’ obsession with architecture – we have dedicated our first issue to the topic of the pilgrimage whether religious, professional, or personal.

We take you from Venice to Bilbao, from Neviges to Mount Ventoux, from Berlin to Burning Man, all part of a quest for enlightenment through architecture.

And of course you’ll also be starting on the new uncube journey with us – we hope you will continue with us over the coming months and years!

**ENJOY, THE EDITORS**

# FROM DELFT TO DHAKA

## Trespassing in Louis Kahn's masterpiece

Text by Chris Luth

Pilgrims aspire to the supernatural. So do architects. Mies found God in architectural details. And Koolhaas, a kind of anti-Mies, finds meaning in subverting architectural sections. As a student at Delft University of Technology during the late 1990s, both left me unsatisfied.

Some ancient and vernacular architecture managed to achieve a deep connection between place and people, well beyond abstract perfection and spatial subversion. Could contemporary architecture still aspire to the same qualities without being nostalgic?

My quest brought me to Gujarat in northern India. From ancient Hindustan step wells to the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad: never had I seen such a complete vision, such wholeness. No neutral abstract perfection here, nor interesting incongruence. It all seemed so pure and modest.

Unwittingly, I had thus been looking for Louis Kahn. Just like his son did in the documentary film *My Architect*. And, like his son, I continued to the National Assembly in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Asked to design it,

Kahn's solution blended function, landscape, and representation in a masterful way. Perfection was not found in detail, but instead in a harmony that needs no destabilizing. In the film, someone started to cry.

However during my visit in 2007, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was on trial at the Assembly on concocted allegations of extortion – or at least, that is what her political party claimed – and no visitors were allowed to enter. Crime. Not due to ornament.

This did not satisfy me either. So I tricked the guards and sneaked in, secretly taking photos everywhere I went. Without my architectural guidebook with photos of the complex, I would have been arrested. Or so said the undercover policeman who caught me. Saved by the book – how befitting a pilgrimage.

Then again, a night in jail inside Kahn's masterpiece ... Divine. ←→



Photo: Lykantrop, Wikimedia

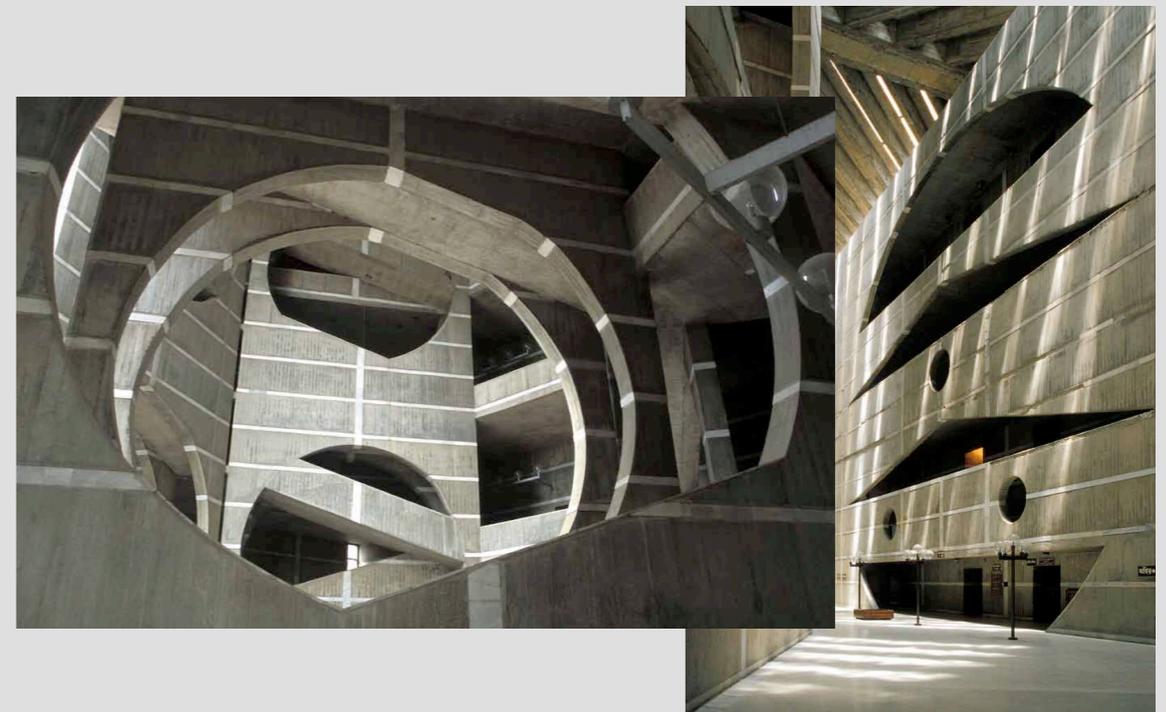


Photo: Naquib Houssain/Flickr

INTERVIEW

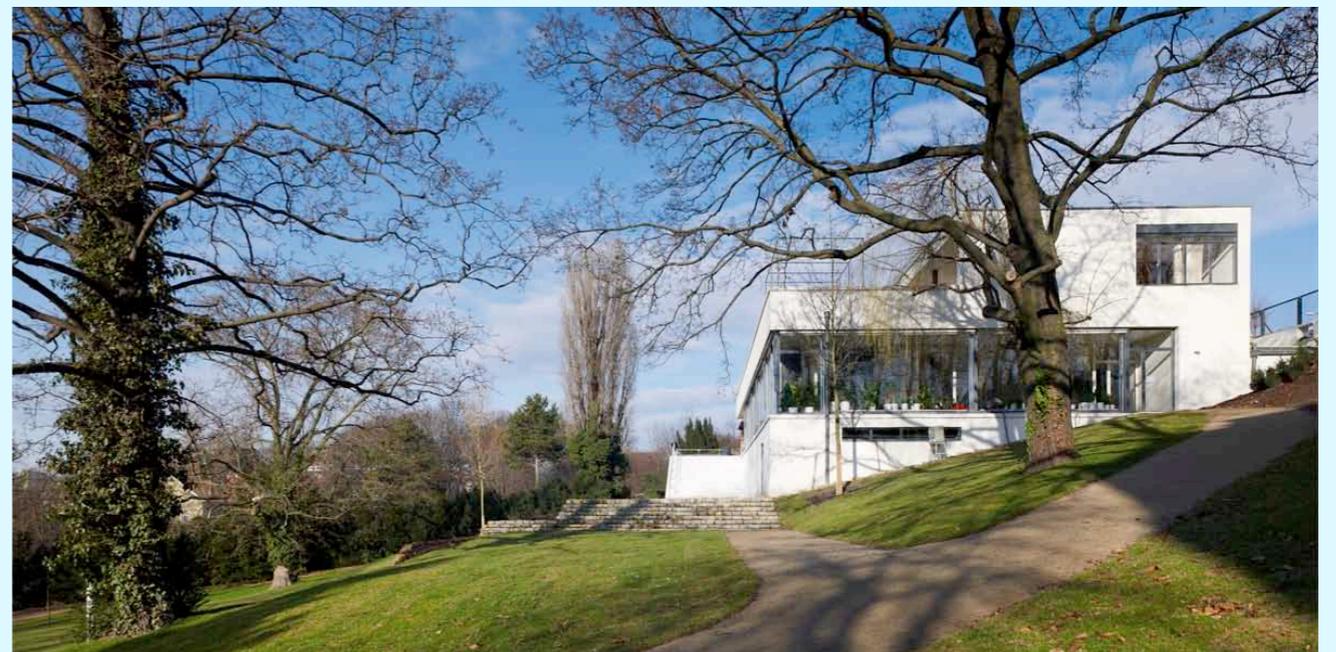
# WHEN THE BUILDING COMES AS A SURPRISE

Barry Bergdoll speaks  
about traveling to Brno,  
Brasilia, and Bilbao

Interview by Jessica Bridger



*Villa Tugendhat sits on a residential street in Brno. The street-facing façade implies a rather simplistic relationship between site and architecture ...*



*... but viewed from the garden it reveals the real complexity of Mies van der Rohe's design and the relationship between inner and outer spaces. (photos: David Zidlicky)*

## INTERVIEW

**What stands out to you as some of your most notable experiences when you have made a pilgrimage to visit a work of architecture?**

»When I consider the architectural pilgrimages that are of importance to me, I think first of the buildings I've sought out because I saw them in photographs or read about them in a books, but which then led to the revelation that what I was seeing and experiencing was different from what I'd been led to expect. The best experiences were when the buildings had fundamental qualities that I felt were moving, important, and profound, but that those qualities had been somehow eliminated from the transmitted experience of the building by reportage or photographs. When the building turns out to be infinitely better than what's been said about it. When the place is a surprise.

The first time this happened for me was in Brno at Mies' Tugendhat House. I hadn't realized that it was a more complex and completely different building than I'd expected from reading about it: in its landscape, in its cityscape, and in the way it related to everything around it. Even simply seeing how the Tugendhat house is unlike the other houses on the street, so they are always cropped out of the photographs – its difference from what surrounds it is part of understanding it. I recognized there in Brno the extent to which snapshots of buildings tend to crop out the surroundings, and how plans are shown in the abstract on white paper without topography.

»I would argue that you really don't understand the Tugendhat house unless you spend a few days in Brno and get to know the city.«

On the other hand, Brno is a capital of the modern movement in architecture –though I defy anyone other than a true expert to name another important building there from that period. The difference between what the Czech architects built and the absolute luxury of Mies, with thirty times the budget, comes into focus. The intersection of the art historical aspects with the political, social, and economic conditions in Brno is important. I would argue that you really don't understand the Tugendhat house unless you spend a few days in Brno and get to know the city.

More recently I was in Brasilia. I was part of a generation taught to perceive it as the absolute epitome of abstract, aggressive modernism, built for the car, a total failure. Once I arrived I was waiting to have that impression, so I could go home and say the same thing. Instead I discovered this incredibly interesting place and an amazing work of landscape. Small-scale planning gestures create places that are textured and complex, especially in the spaces around the so-called Superquadra. And 50 years after Brasilia's creation, things there really function beautifully. I came away thinking Brasilia has a great deal of urbanity to it and is a successful city, and I had to overcome everything I'd been taught about it in order to realize that.

The problem with architectural pilgrimages is that commonly people go to see the one trophy and leave: you go to Bilbao see Gehry and leave; you run to Brno and see the Tugendhat house and leave. Often the trips are responding to the idea of the heroic

## INTERVIEW

architect, the starchitect, and basking in that aura. Almost as if to check something off a list of what is supposed to be important and not to criticize or analyze. I wish that architecture students going to these places would take a sketchbook and not only a camera.

The phenomena of what is important and the consolidation of a received view happen startlingly fast. For example, I decided while I was on vacation in the south of France to visit Bilbao on a whim, a week after it opened to the public. I was in a period where I was a bit off Gehry's architecture. We decided to drive to see the building, which took three days – a little bit of a pilgrimage. The building was so much more than the talking points that had somehow become the only public comment. I think that Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao is one of the most successful, important, and simply unexpected and subtle buildings of the early 1990s, particularly in the way it relates to its urban fabric. It seems an opinion gains a certain weight through replication, and only then is there some kind of trend-breaking happening, someone expressing a contrary view. I would be curious to see how this happens – how fast, in what way, to see a sociological explanation of this pattern.

I've also noticed the phenomenon of shifting pilgrimages. For example, I haven't met anyone recently who's been to Bilbao. When does it get too late to jump on the bandwagon? Currently what I find most interesting as architectural pilgrimages are places like the Open Air Museum of Modern Architecture in Ivrea, Italy, located at the site of the former Olivetti industrial complex. Sites that trace our industrial heritage.« ←→



*Souvenir postcard of Brasilia's Super Quadra.*



*The Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, as seen from a side street. (photo: Nigel Europe/Flickr)*

PHOTO ESSAY

# RUTA DEL PEREGRINO

Iwan Baan's impressions of Mexico's most famous pilgrimage route

Interview by Florian Heilmeyer  
Photos by Iwan Baan

*The Lookout Point by Swiss-based HHF Architects, completed 2011.*

## PHOTO ESSAY

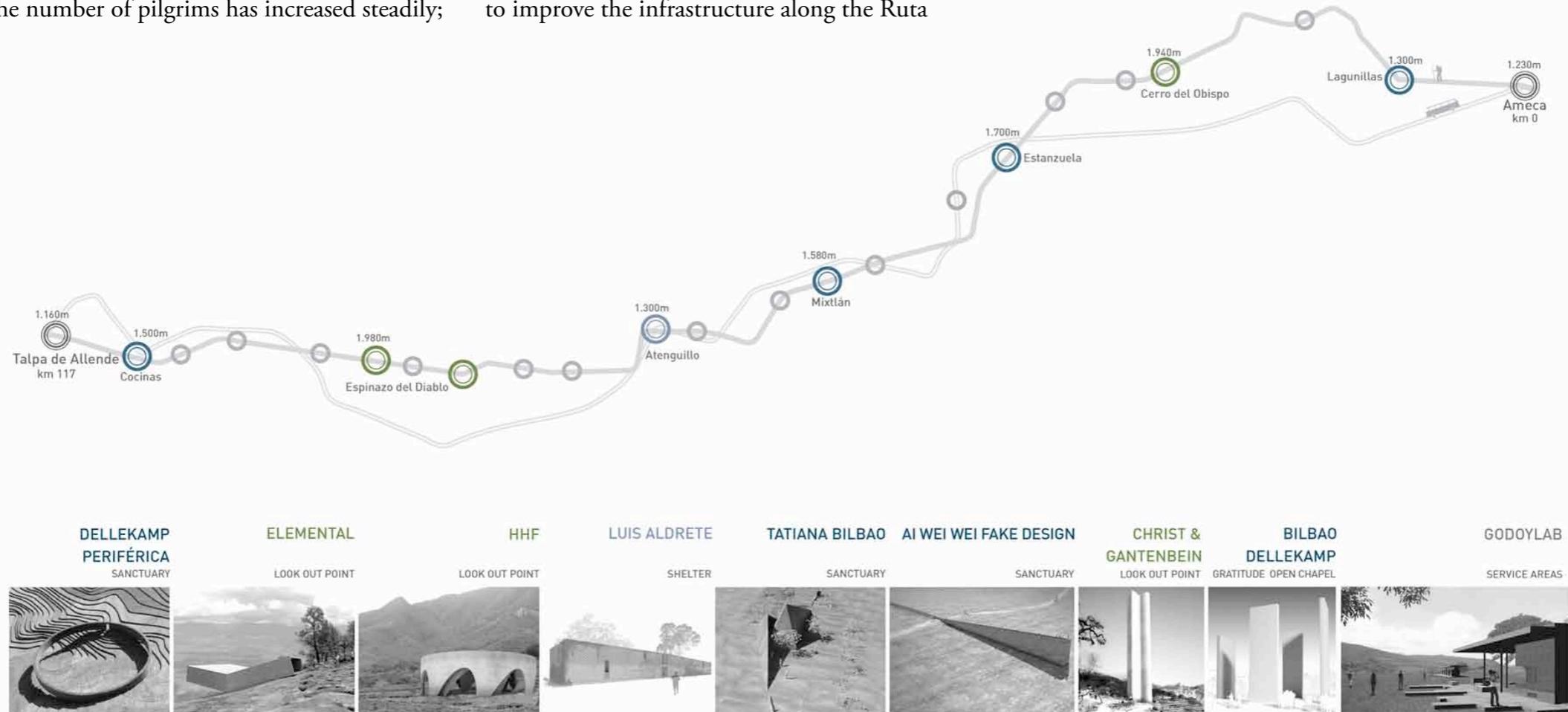
The Ruta del Peregrino is said to be the most traveled pilgrimage route in the Southwest of Mexico. For over 200 years, pilgrims have come during Easter Week to journey the 117-kilometer-long route from Ameca up to the Cerro del Obispo, then over the Espinazo del Diablo Mountains (the “devil’s back”), down to the little town of Talpa de Allende and into a church where they keep a statue of the Holy Virgin of Talpa, renowned for performing miracles and relieving suffering and fear.

Since the construction of the church in 1782, the number of pilgrims has increased steadily;

nowadays about two million people come each year, ranging in degree of devotion. They teem like ants in the short period around Easter, over the dusty streets and through the little villages. Everywhere there are tarpaulins hanging between the trees, colorful plastic chairs are set out, and people sleep wherever they can find shade. For a brief time these otherwise neglected and desolate areas along the route are turned into a noisy and lively path of celebration.

The provincial government decided in 2008 to improve the infrastructure along the Ruta

del Peregrino. Dellekamp Arquitectos from Mexico City developed a master plan that “complemented and enhanced” the existing route and “accentuated its relationship with the landscape.” Seven architecture firms and artists were invited to design nine sculptural buildings along the route. These structures were designed for resting, praying, or meditating – as viewing points, stopping and starting places, or for staying overnight. The Dutch photographer Iwan Baan has been documenting these unusual projects since 2010. We met the ever-traveling photographer at a short stopover in Berlin.



## PHOTO ESSAY



*“It’s like a great festival – people come from all over Mexico, and many travel these distances along with their entire families,” says Iwan Baan who documents the Ruta since 2010.*



## PHOTO ESSAY

*Iwan Baan, how many times have you been on the Ruta del Peregrino now?*

I've been there four times, three times during the pilgrimage and once inbetween. The first time was only for a week around Easter, 2010. Then I went again in October, 2010, to photograph HHF's project, and again in 2011 at Easter. My latest visit was just recently, at Easter 2012, to visit the lookout tower of Christ & Gantenbein which has meanwhile been finished.

*The Ruta del Pelegrino seems to be somewhat difficult to reach. How do you get there?*

You fly to Guadalajara, and from there it's about three hours by car to Ameca. You drive for hours through nothingness and suddenly you're in a great traffic jam with all the tour buses and pickup trucks, and everything is full of dust. It's like a great festival – people come from all over Mexico, and many travel these distances along with their entire families.



*Dellekamp Arquitectos designed Gratitude Open Chapel, in collaboration with architect Tatiana Bilbao, seen over the symbolic "Wall of Promises" that surrounds it. Pilgrims encounter the chapel near the beginning of the route, near the town of Lagunillas in Jalisco, Mexico.*

PHOTO ESSAY



PHOTO ESSAY

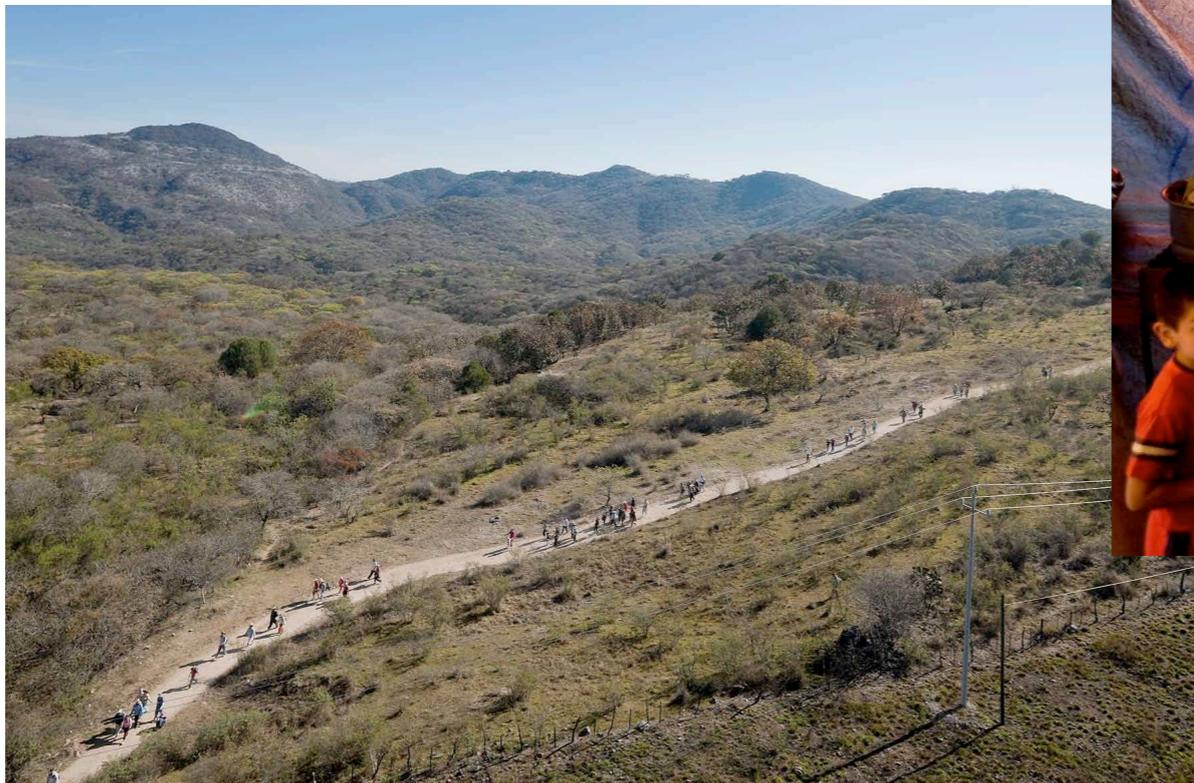
»People there don't challenge the buildings. It's more that they just wonder what they are supposed to do with these structures, because they don't know.«

*Gratitude Open Chapel is designed as an enigmatic structure of 'gratitude and self-reflection'.*

## PHOTO ESSAY

*Two million people seems like a lot to me, especially if I imagine them spread over such a short distance.*

Not everyone does the whole route. Many just drive to a few points that are reachable by car, and not everyone travels at the same time. That's how the pilgrims spread out over the sites, and even at Easter – when the pilgrimage reaches its climax there are some quiet moments along the route. In Talpa de Allende, where everyone gathers in the square in front of the church, of course it seems rather like a huge and swarming folk festival.



*In the pictures it often looks like a long trail of ants.*

Yes, that is true in many places. Where the trail is narrow, a lot of queues build up, especially in the mornings and evenings. By day it's often very hot, up to over 30 degrees Celsius, so many travel only at night or by twilight. By day they look for shady places, to sleep or just to rest.

*Did you go on foot as well?*

No. Of course I walked a lot around and in between single pavilions, but I never did the complete route. I used a car or a helicopter. In fact, I mostly used everything but my feet.



PHOTO ESSAY



*Some of the new structures are within sight of each other along the route, like the Gratitude Open Chapel which can be seen as a small white spot in the distance (in the background to the left) from the Lookout Point designed by Swiss architects Christ & Gantenbein.*

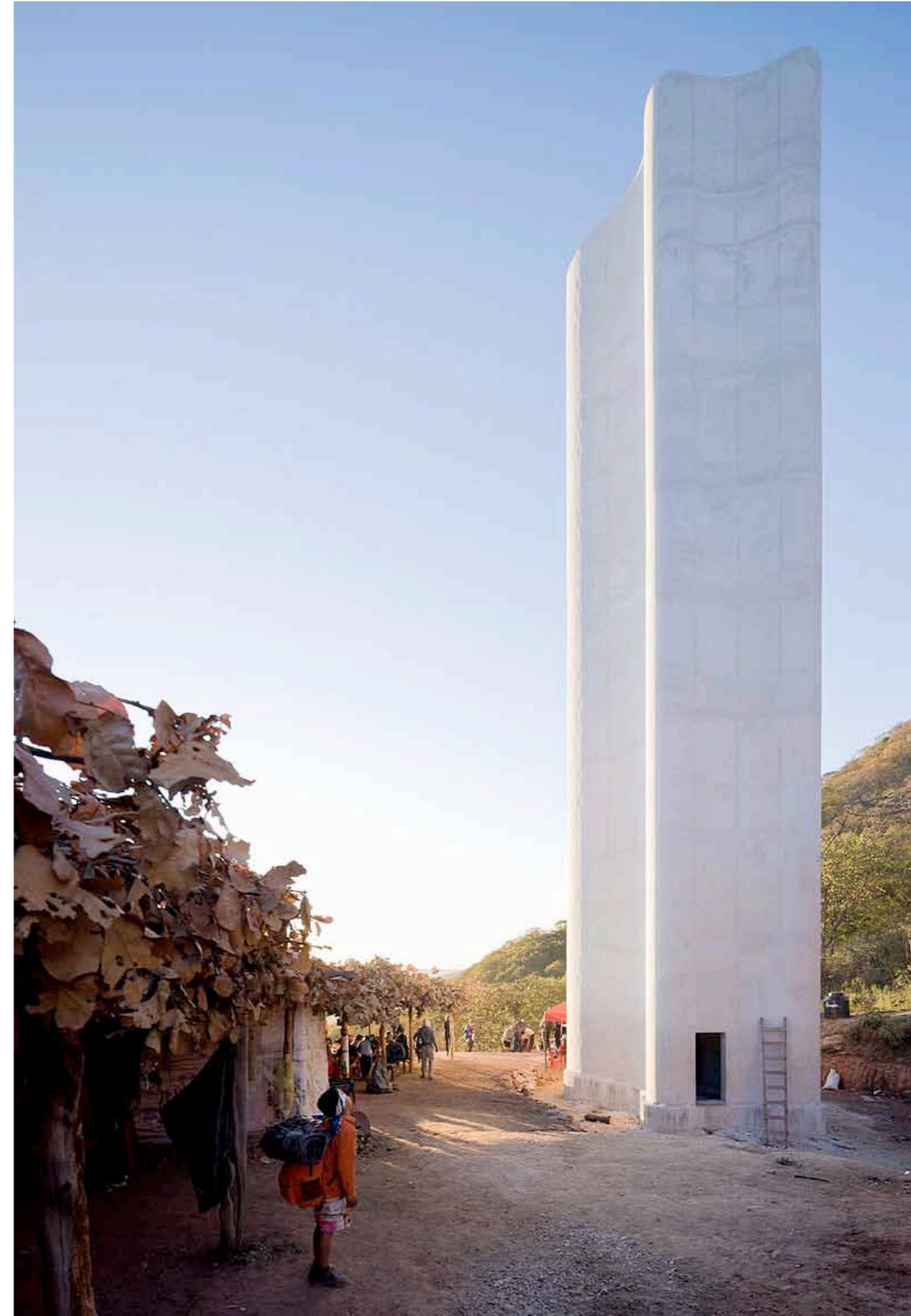
## PHOTO ESSAY

*Are the buildings situated on hills so that one can orient oneself using them as landmarks? Are they a kind of guidance system along the route?*

Some are within sight of each other. If you stand on HHF's spiral, you can see Elemental's viewing point. They are opposite each other, but on two different hills, and the walk on foot between them is really long. Also, from Christ & Gantenbein's tower you can see a tiny white dot in the distance: that's a spire of the Open Chapel by Derek Dellekamp and Tatiana Bilbao and on the other side, far, far away in the distance, you can see Ai Weiwei's structure. The buildings are far in between, but they if you look very, very closely they do become some kind of marking of the landscape.

*So how do people find the buildings?*

Some are built right on the route, so you can't miss them; for example, Elemental's bent concrete cuboid is a very lively spot. It's up on a hill, and inside the building you can sit in the shade, rest, and admire the view. Others are set a little further from the route, like Dellekamp's white concrete halo. But all of the structures become a sort of beacon in the landscape. People gather around them, the Coca Cola-stalls set up shop just next to them and they become resting places along the route.



*Christ & Gantenbein Architekten's Lookout Point is constructed from nine prefabricated concrete elements. Visitors can enter the empty space inside and gaze up at a telescopic view of the Mexican sky.*

## PHOTO ESSAY



*The Sanctuary, designed by artist Ai Weiwei, rises from the landscape.*

*How do the pilgrims react to the new buildings?*

In different ways. The buildings aren't marked yet, they are puzzling beacons in the landscape. The concrete halo, for example, is very irritating. Those who find it don't know what to make of it. So a lot of them look for signs with an explanation or instructions for its use. But there aren't any except for a leaflet by the organisation which describes the pavilions and what they do.

But for instance Elemental's bent concrete lookout or HHF's spiral are quite different. They are big sculptures that you can see from far away, and where you can enjoy a wonderful panorama. There, people immediately know what to do – they sit in the shade, they chat and drink, the children run around, and so on. Most of the structures also become meeting points because people set up their small restaurants around them. And, of course, they use the buildings as a template to spray their names and the date of their pilgrimage on it.

PHOTO ESSAY



*Ai Weiwei's sculpture provides a beautiful viewing platform to the Jalisco Mountains in the distance.*

## PHOTO ESSAY

*They spray their names on them?*

At first I completely didn't understand what was going on. Many pilgrims carry spray cans with them! To spray their names everywhere, marking where they've been: on walls, stones, houses, trees, even on churches – and likewise on the new buildings. The whole route looks like a graffiti trail. Some architects got angry about this. But ultimately, some of the buildings are very unfinished, very raw structures. People make this new architecture their own, they adopt it by spraying their names over them.

*Are there also religious rituals along the route?*

Yes, of course. When a relative dies, many people travel the whole trail with a cross or a memento, such as a photo or even an urn with the ashes of the deceased. I'm not sure whether the graffiti isn't also something religious.

*How can we imagine the sound of the place? Is it like a quiet walk in nature or a loud and cheerful festival?*

All the photos with bands, trumpeters, and guitar players are from Talpa de Allende. It's really loud on the big square. It's always full of people. There you can see the difference between those who just want to have fun and those who take it seriously. Some go the last few meters to the Virgin on their knees, and others do the whole route barefoot. Others just make noise, sing, and chatter; there are children running about and playing among them, and you can even get pony rides.

## PHOTO ESSAY



### *What was it like when you were there in October 2010?*

It was quite different, almost unbelievable. We were there completely alone! At Easter it's this enormous folk festival and in October we were alone with the cows and stars. The idea of the project is for it to also attract tourists other than the pilgrims. At present so many people come at Easter and for the rest of the year the structures are empty. Then, it's only a religious space for cows. When no pilgrims are there – eleven months of the year – mainly cows occupy the structure, they obviously also find the shade very attractive.

### *What do people say about the architecture? Is there criticism that the buildings don't fit into the landscape, that they are too modern?*

At least I haven't heard that. I believe it's all a question of attitude. People there don't challenge the buildings. It's more that they just wonder what they are supposed to do with these structures, because they don't know. But I also think that the buildings in their own way really fit well into the landscape.



*These shelters by Mexican studio Luis Aldrete Arquitectos are designed for pilgrims to spend the night in. Their latticed surfaces, built of adobe bricks, will eventually be overgrown with vines.*

PHOTO ESSAY



*Swiss studio HHF Architects designed the concrete Lookout Point, which was completed in 2011.*

## PHOTO ESSAY

»No, I won't go on foot, and I won't carry a cross. I have my camera with me, and that's enough – that's my cross.«



*Swiss studio HHF Architects designed the concrete Lookout Point, completed in 2011. It's complex, spiraling structure, is conceived as an additional looped path within the pilgrims' journey.*



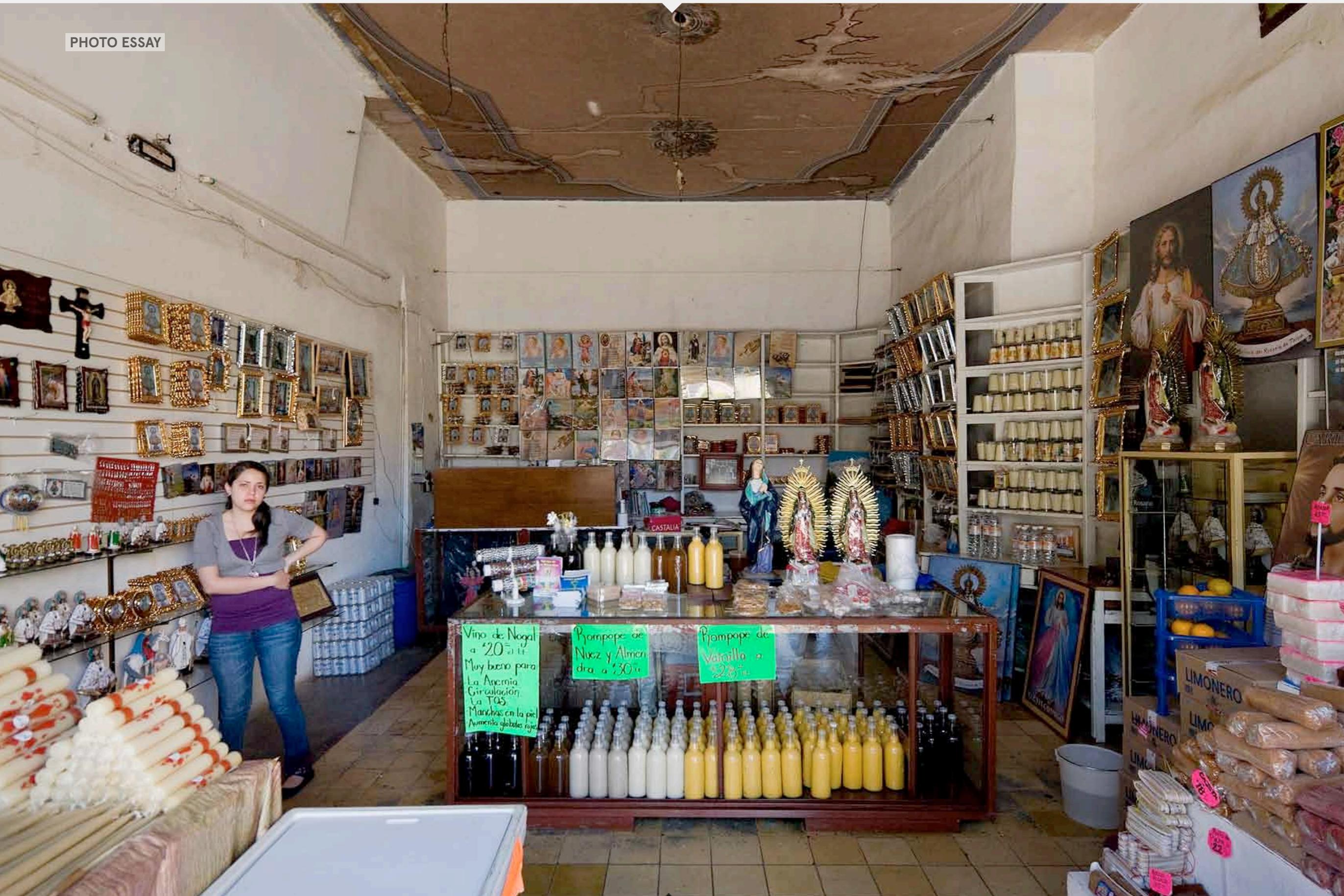
*Half-balanced on a hillside near the Las Cruces way marker, Crosses Lookout Point is a concrete pavilion by Chilean architects Elemental.*

PHOTO ESSAY



»I'm not sure whether the graffiti isn't also something religious.«

PHOTO ESSAY



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## PHOTO ESSAY



*The pilgrim's destination: The old church in Talpa de Allende where some people kneel in front of the statue of the Holy Virigin of Talpa.*

*Do you think the idea of more general tourism along the route can work?*

It's an interesting idea. The countryside is really very beautiful, and in the autumn even more spectacular, when everything is green and blooming and not so dry and dusty as it is at Easter. On the other hand there is practically no infrastructure; no hotels, hardly any restaurants. There are a few haciendas where one can stay overnight, but otherwise the route is only comfortable for genuine camping enthusiasts. But who knows? Maybe it will work.

*Is this great communal experience infectious? Will you travel the actual route next time and perhaps even go barefoot?*

No. I'll take the helicopter again. That is, if we can get a better one than last time. In 2010 ours came from Guadalajara, covered in oil, and I asked the pilot whether everything was in order. He said he just had to see to a few things, but when after four hours he was still messing around with the rotors, I said no problem, I don't need the helicopter any more. But no, I won't go on foot, and I won't carry a cross. I have my camera with me, and that's enough – that's my cross. *(laughs)* ←→

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# REACHING THE SUMMIT

Ole Bouman on redemption through nature

**What would you consider your most notable experience taking an architectural pilgrimage, be it to a building, a site or a city?**

»Traveling is not the whole story. Pilgrimage is much more than traveling. It is about suffering. It is about sacrifice. And, if successful, it is not just about enjoyment. It is not even about fulfillment. It is about redemption.

The question of pilgrimage is a religious one. It can never end just by recognition of the object. The time that passes since you

have embarked is part of the experience. The longer and tougher the journey, the more intense the redemption can be. I guess this is not a fact but a perception.

Not many buildings did this to me. Pantheon. Le Thoronet Abbey. Places where humanity obviously transcended itself. But perhaps nothing is more telling for me than biking up to mountaintops like Mont Ventoux or Gran San Bernardino, looking down to the valleys, and realizing how far people can go beyond themselves.« ←→



# Coming/Going

Traveling in the name of architecture

Text by Jessica Bridger

The architect's field of cultural fodder is ever-expanding. Recalling the line in the movie *Annie Hall*, when a young Woody Allen "can't sleep because the universe is expanding," there is simply – and increasingly – so much to see that it can lead to anxiety.

Architecture often inspires pilgrimage. We travel to the most sacred architectural sites: famous projects by famous architects, history's grand buildings, and even to obscure locations on the rumor of forgotten constructions or even despised star-architecture to experience fallout of the Bilbao effect when one can ask: is it really as bad as the critics think?

The architecture-oriented pilgrimage is a journey of primary, first-hand experience – and the journey is sometimes as important as the destination. The "Grand Tour" was historically for the elite; the travel of Le Corbusier in Italy, Greece, and Turkey was exceptional at the turn of the

twentieth century. But we now live in an era of the internet, Easyjet, and budget hostels. The inaccessible is merely a few clicks away.

A pilgrimage in the traditional sense is about repentance, absolution, and redemption. Architecture has always played a role in both secular and religious journeys, in the design of sacred enclosures or the provision of basic infrastructure for sometimes arduous travel. For architects, the ease of travel and the pressure to go to the newest, hottest sites combine to make a discipline that seeks the actual beyond internet images and slick renderings. Clearly photographs, plans, and models are not a substitute for the experience of visiting these places in real life.

We should also consider what is perhaps the most modern type of pilgrimage, travel to the Venice Architecture Biennale, the Rotterdam Biennale, Documenta, and other similar must-go events on the cul-

tural calendar. These events have an aspect of communion to them; true believers, enthusiasts, casual observers, and skeptics all come to take part in an event together – not so different from many pilgrims on the more traditional routes like the Santiago de Compostela.

In this fast-moving, digitally dependent era, it is fascinating to consider how these pilgrimages have changed, and how they have retained the qualities of the more rarified grand tours of old. What are we really visiting? The physical structures or their contexts? Are they sites of memory or concentrated spaces of common contemporary experience? We visit buildings, travel through landscapes, meet other like-minded people. How do these experiences change us by the time we get home? ←

FOUND

# HAJJ TIME

Visible in the center right, the crowds of people in Mecca for the Hajj, which draws over three million people annually and simultaneously. The pilgrimage is centered on the al-Haram Mosque, home of the cube-like Kaaba, the most sacred site in Islam.

Mecca now also holds the distinction of being home to the world's tallest clock tower. The 601-meter crescent-shaped spire is also among the top ten tallest buildings in the world. It is part of the Abraj

Al-Bait Towers, completed in 2012.

The Abraj Al-Bait Towers are part of a larger development effort in Mecca. It remains to be seen if the new development can strike a balance between exuberant, luxury-oriented architecture and the infrastructural improvements necessary for the ever-growing yearly pilgrimage. ←→

*(Photo: skyscrapercenter.com)*



ESSAY

# ENLIGHTENMENT AT BURNING MAN

A PILGRIMAGE OF PARTICIPATION

Text by Julian Raxworthy



*The Burning Man burns at the culmination of the week-long festival in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada. (Photo: Christopher Michel)*

## ESSAY

The Burning Man festival transforms the Black Rock Desert in Nevada from a lifeless lime basin to a temporary city each August, and after its three-week lifespan leaves no trace of its existence. It has been doing this for 20 years, growing from a ritual in which a few friends burned an effigy on a beach in San Francisco to mourn their break-ups with their girlfriends to a temporary urban settlement of 50,000 people with its own airstrip. The man to be burned now stands 50 meters high, standing in the center of a semi-circular grid. Rather than an event, Burning Man is really an infrastructure for a phenomenon, the organizers providing a system into which the participants, often coming from all over the world, plug in activity, building, offerings, and most of all, participation. Without commerce, without even running water (but, yes, with portable toilets), Burning Man prides itself in its radical self-sufficiency. As a site of pilgrimage it demonstrates that going somewhere for something may not involve just a location but an entire way of being – bringing a “sense of place” to the place.

The idea of being a pilgrim is tied to preparation. It's not enough just to turn up - one is expected to be ready. For a trek, it's fitness, for a religious mission, perhaps prayer, but for Burning Man it's contingency. Burning Man is at Black Rock because there is nothing alive there to be destroyed and no people to annoy. There is literally nothing there apart from the alkaline dust that is picked up by harsh storms and that penetrates all orifices in tents and bodies. Together with punishing heat reflected off the ground, preparation involves buying everything for shelter, food, and partying. Over time, this process has turned from one of survival to exuberance; themed camps build elaborate structures for shelter and visitors. We met a friend-of-a-friend at a party who knew someone who knew

»BURNING MAN IS  
THOUGHT OF AS  
A FESTIVAL, BUT  
IN SOME WAYS IT'S  
MORE LIKE A PAR-  
KING LOT.«



*The Temple of Transition, where revelers went to cleanse themselves of the past. (Photo: Perfecto Insecto, 2011)*

## ESSAY

about a camp. Our dome had a bar and a stereo, and the camp had its own shower. Preparation for pilgrimage can be research and networking – or it can be Walmart.

The pilgrimage is a convergence of journey, place, and event. Burning Man is thought of as a festival, but in some ways it's more like a parking lot. Its semi-circular grid is organized alphabetically by city names, which are arranged in rings, marked by clock numbers around their circumference. The first city is called Esplanade, then Amsterdam, Baghdad, and on and on. Each camp has its own peculiarities and specialties. Apart from porta-potties, this is the only structure provided – the visitor must bring the rest. At the center of the semi-circle is an open area called the Playa, where people drive around in art cars at night and stage parties, happenings. In the middle is the Man, who is burned on the second-to-last night, and behind it is the temple, a structure where people place things they want to grieve, leave, and move beyond, like notes to departed love ones. We all hope to leave the pilgrimage a different person.

Pilgrimages are supposed to involve some form of enlightenment, and enlightenment can be quick, unexpected but profound, its significance outweighing its duration. Nothing happens at Burning Man except you, times 50,000. Nothing is expected of anyone, but everyone wants something to happen – otherwise the event would be a bummer. So, despite numerous tourists, most cross a line and eventually join in. The spirit of participation is high, and it's contagious. Many adopt a persona, some people a new persona each day. Like enlightenment, the moment of participation feels amazing when it happens, and we're disappointed when it's over – until we come again the next year. ←



*The constantly shifting pattern of people celebrating belies the highly regularized structure of the temporary settlement. (Photos: Christopher Michel; Geo Eye/Satellite photo)*

»NOTHING  
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IN THE PHOTOBOOTH WITH ...

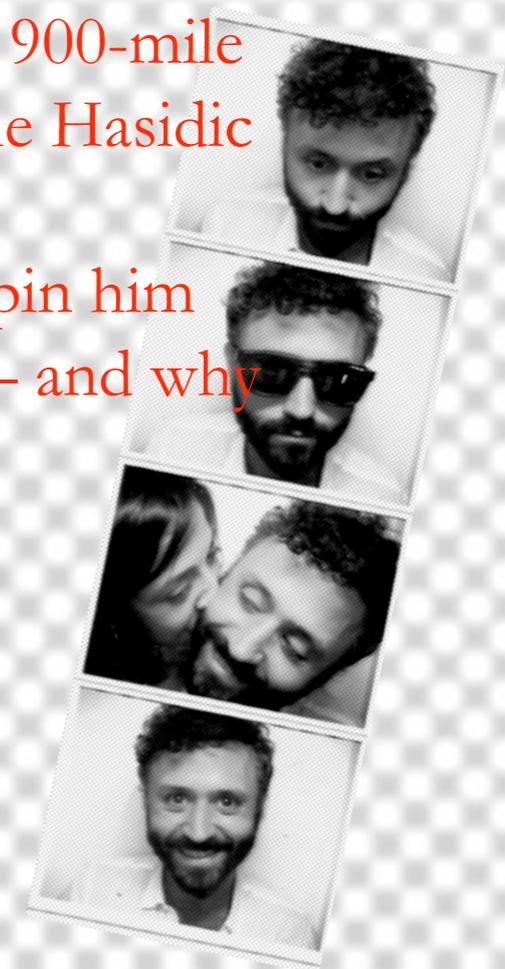
IN THE PHOTO BOOTH WITH ...

# GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

Gideon Lewis-Kraus's first book, *A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful*, is the story of three pilgrimages he made – from the famous Camino de Compostela in Spain, to a 900-mile solo journey around the Japanese island of Shikoku, to the Hasidic pilgrimage site of Uman, Ukraine.

Gideon is still traveling these days, but we managed to pin him down and ask him a few questions about his pilgrimages – and why he doesn't need to be a pilgrim anymore.

Interview by Elvia Wilk



IN THE PHOTOBOOTH WITH ...

**YOU TRAVELED TO THREE PILGRIMAGE DESTINATIONS DESIGNED FOR RELIGIOUS PURPOSES, BUT YOU WEREN'T PURSUING RELIGIOUS ABSOLUTION. WITHOUT A SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS GOAL, WERE THE DESTINATIONS COMPLETELY ARBITRARY?**

»The question for me, though I think I only dimly understood this when I set out, was how I could give myself a way to remain in suspension. The whole question of arrival, for a secular modern pilgrimage, is a completely arbitrary one; arrival just represents the place where you can't keep moving. The creation of an arbitrary goal – of, say, Santiago de Compostela – is actually just the frame for being suspended in motion. Or, rather, it's a kind of suspension that's masquerading as motion. That first journey became a completely formal exercise, though my ideas of form and content were subsequently complicated. We told ourselves we had no expectations about what the end might bring.«



IN THE PHOTOBOOTH WITH ...

**THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO IS AN ORCHESTRATED, TOURISTIC EXPERIENCE, BUT IN JAPAN YOU WERE IN A FOREIGN, RURAL PLACE WITH VERY LITTLE PILGRIMAGE INFRASTRUCTURE. BEING CONFRONTED WITH THIS CONTRAST LED YOU TO BREAK DOWN THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN TOURISM AND PILGRIMAGE. HOW DO YOU DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN THE TWO?**

»Other people I met along the way were concerned with being “authentic” pilgrims in different ways; I got caught up in that, too, at first – a big part of any pilgrim’s self-image is that he or she isn’t a tourist. But authenticity doesn’t exist in the abstract; it only has meaning in terms of the aims of the experience. It might mean being true to some idea of the original experience’s religiosity – going to pilgrims’ masses and so forth. But, absent of religious belief, most pilgrims come to think of it in terms of just playing by the rules, which is to say it has mostly to do with whether you walked the whole way or let yourself take the bus. My favorite pilgrims didn’t worry about stuff like this too much; by the end of the book, most of these distinctions have broken down.«

IN THE PHOTOBOOTH WITH ...

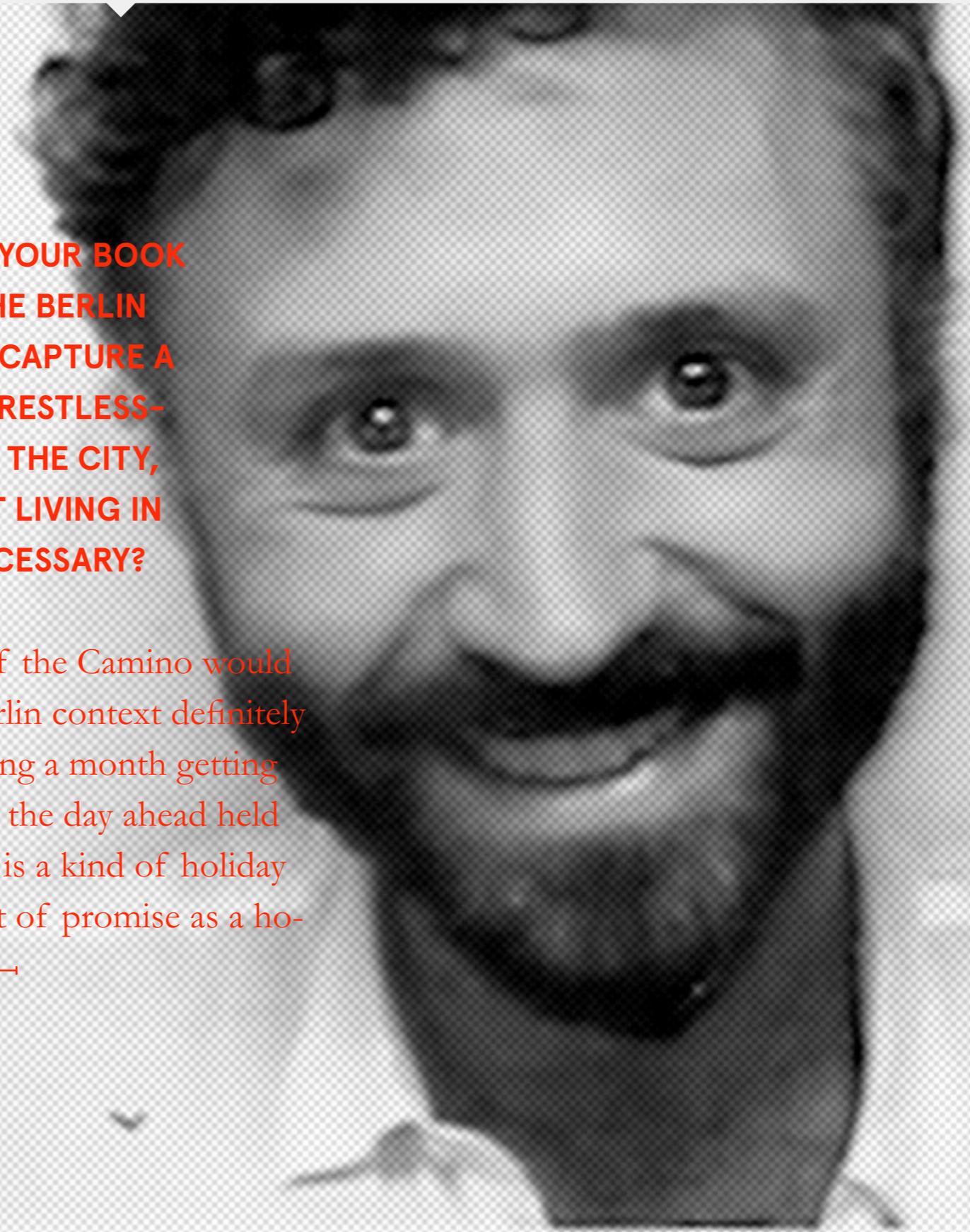
**UNLIKE A RELIGIOUS STORY, YOUR STORY DOESN'T HAVE A DRAMATIC RESOLUTION. HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH THE LACK OF A CLIMACTIC CONCLUSION TO YOUR REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCE?**

»I had this fear, which was of course also a wish, that the only possible resolution of a book about restlessness and commitment was the Eat Pray Love example, but I was lucky enough that no Javier Bardem character appeared, and then the book was finished. The end of the book becomes, in part, about how rarely we get any real sense of closure, or rather that closure often comes in the counterintuitive form of a new openness. If there was a dramatic result, it was beginning anew with my dad. There could be a whole epilogue – probably a whole second book, though I won't write it – about his reaction to it. The absolution in the end wasn't divine but personal.«

IN THE PHOTOBOOTH WITH ...

**ONE THING THAT IMPRESSED ME ABOUT YOUR BOOK IS HOW ACCURATELY IT DESCRIBES THE BERLIN EXPERIENCE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. YOU CAPTURE A FEELING THAT'S IN THE AIR HERE, THE RESTLESSNESS, THE REASONS PEOPLE COME TO THE CITY, AND THE REASONS THEY LEAVE. WAS IT LIVING IN BERLIN THAT MADE A PILGRIMAGE NECESSARY?**

»I have no idea, really. I suspect the idea of the Camino would have appealed to me either way, but the Berlin context definitely gave a special allure to the idea of spending a month getting up early every morning and knowing that the day ahead held nothing in the way of decisions. If Berlin is a kind of holiday from obligations, the Camino held out a lot of promise as a holiday from decisions.« ←→



ARTICLE

# GOD'S CONCRETE ROCK



*The pilgrimage church Mary, Queen of Peace, rising from the medieval town of Velbert-Nevigés in 1968 ... (Photo: Arved von der Ropp)*



*... and exactly 40 years later. The only visible change is the light grey paint that has been put on the leaking roof. (Photo: seier+seier, 2008)*

## GOTTFRIED BÖHM'S CHURCH IN NEVIGES

Text by Florian Heilmeyer  
Photos by Arved van der Ropp, seier+seier



*Aerial, ca. 1970. (© Picture archiv of the city of Velbert)*

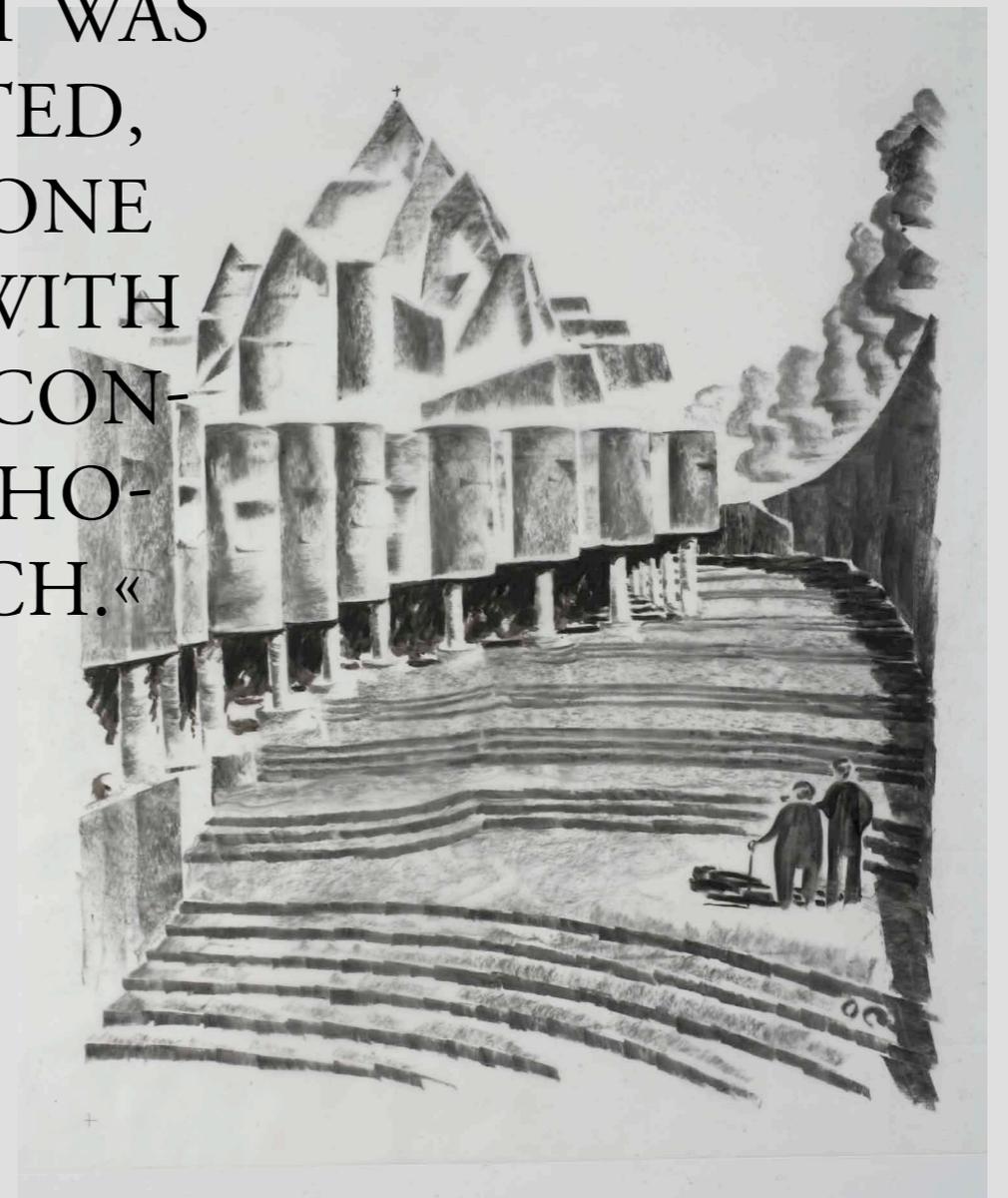
## ARTICLE

The small German town of Neviges is home to about 19,000 inhabitants and a spectacular concrete structure, which looms over the narrow medieval alleys. This is the pilgrimage church called Mary, Queen of Peace, built in 1968 and designed by German architect Gottfried Böhm, which continues to hold a special place in many people's minds – including architecture and Catholic pilgrims alike. Why did this bold expressionist building land in this small, medieval (and Protestant) town?

It all began in 1676 in the small German town of Dorsten when the Gray Friar Antonius Schirley knelt down in front of a painting of the Virgin Mary, just as he did every day. Yet on this particular day a voice suddenly spoke to him: "Bring me to Hardenberg. There I will be praised." The voice alluded to certain healing powers, which convinced the Friar to do as he was told. He brought the Virgin Mary canvas to the newly founded Franciscan mission in the nearby town of Hardenberg-Neviges. A few years later Ferdinand von Fürstenberg, the Prince-Bishop of the region, fell ill nearby and traveled to the small chapel where the Virgin's image had been placed, where he was miraculously cured. This was the birth of the Catholic pilgrimage to Neviges.

Infrastructure grew along with the growing numbers of pilgrims: a cloister was built next to the chapel, and the chapel was replaced by a church. In the nineteenth century the monks started to expand into surrounding property, adding processional paths, and creating a "Hill of Mary" and a "Hill of the Cross," including grottoes, groups of statuary, and smaller chapels. By 1740, about 20,000 pilgrims were coming to Neviges every year – and by 1954 the number

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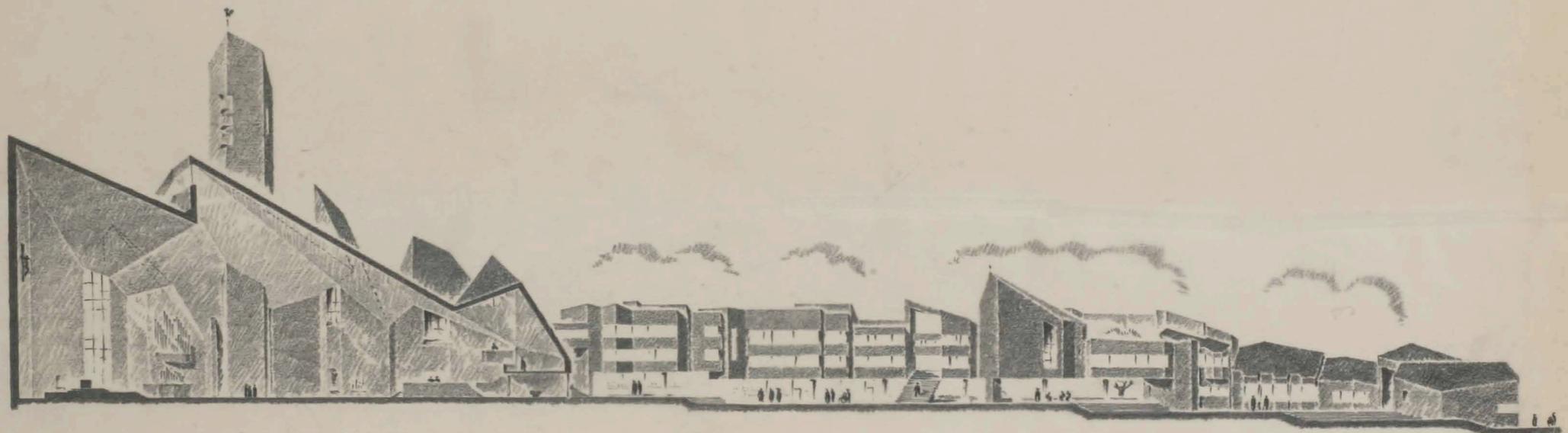


*Gottfried Böhm's original charcoal drawing from 1968. In his drawings, Böhm usually included a pair of spectators representing himself and his father, Dominik Böhm, who was also a famous church designer. (© Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main)*

ARTICLE

WALLFAHRTSKIRCHE IN NEVICES

88888



*Long Section through the church and the Via Sacra, showing how important the connection of outside and inside spaces were to Böhm. The concrete church was actually intended to be more like a tent-like structure spanning over the end of the pilgrimage route. (© Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main)*

## ARTICLE



*The space of the main nave roars spectacularly upwards. But underneath the Via Sacra is unspectacularly leading right up to the main altar: Böhm continued with the same paving and the same street lamps from the outside to the inside. The open galleries are like small houses with balconies surrounding this „market place“. (Photos: Arved von der Ropp, 1975).*



had grown to about 300,000. Most of the pilgrims stayed overnight, turning the pilgrimage into the main economic engine of the area. This also encouraged the Protestant majority in this region to stay mostly tolerant of the Catholic pilgrims.

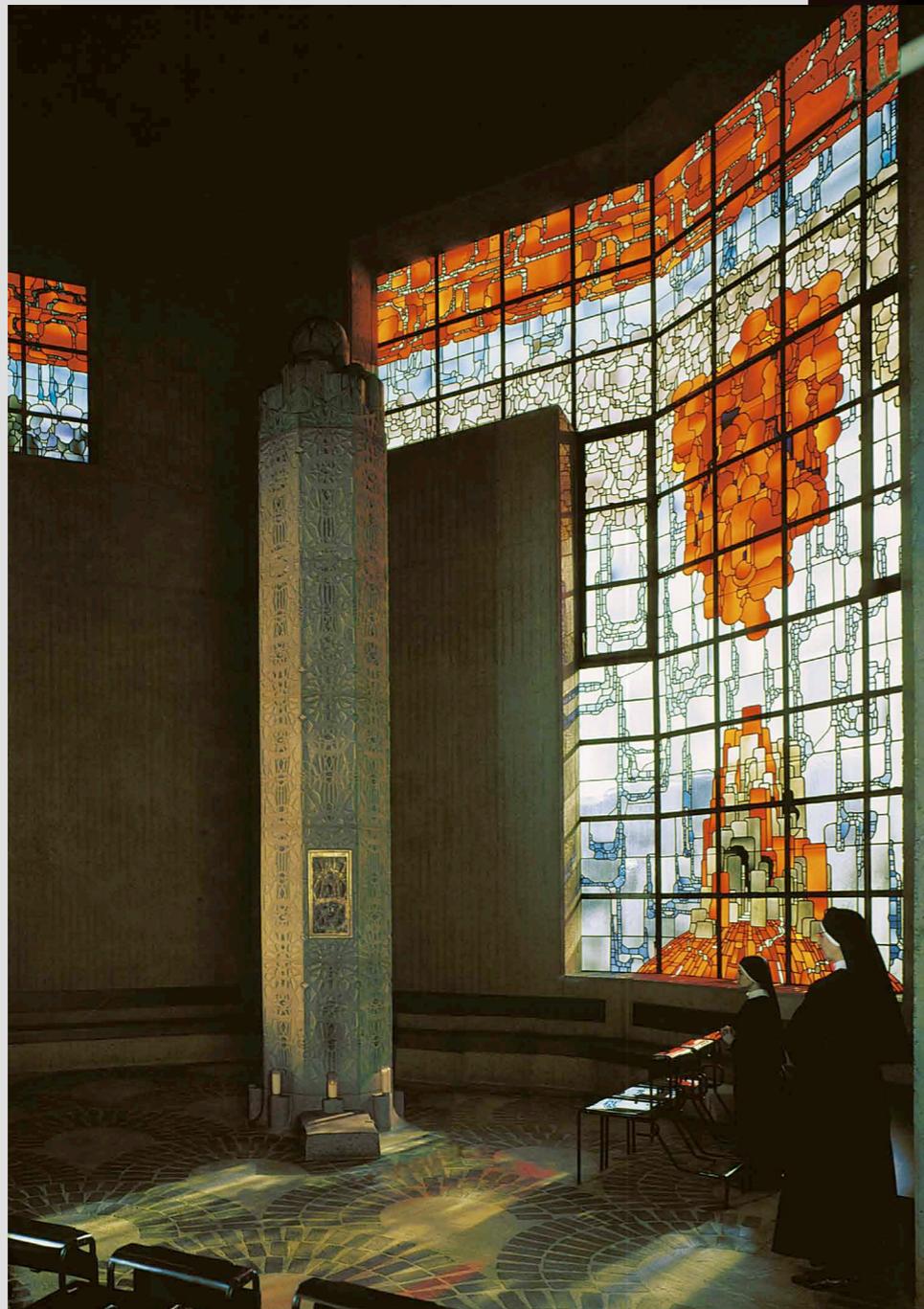
## CORBU OR MIES?

Plans for a bigger and more appropriate church had been around since the beginning of the twentieth century, but economic and political changes impeded the start of construction for almost half a century. It was not until 1959 that the Diocese of Cologne invited 17 teams to participate in an architecture competition. Meanwhile the plans had grown to such an extent that the design brief asked for the second largest church north of the Alps (only the Cologne Cathedral is bigger), a dome that could not only hold about 3,000 people, but also included a kindergarden, a museum, and a few apartments exclusively for the nuns amongst the pilgrims.

In his essay “The Multi-layered Concrete Rock” (in: Gottfried Böhm, Jovis Publishers, Berlin 2006), Karl Kiem describes that all competition entries could be placed stylistically into two (modern) baskets. The new structure was envisioned as either a functional square or an organic, nature-inspired figure: “[There was] basically the choice between a functional modernism modeled on Mies van der Rohe’s IIT Chapel in Chicago (1952) and others that were more freely formed based on Le Corbusier’s pilgrimage chapel in Ronchamp (1955).” We can only guess whether Le Corbusier’s Ronchamp, which lies about 500 kilometers south of Nevigis, served as an inspiration for Gottfried Böhm’s winning design.



*A nun's pilgrimage (Photo: Arved von der Ropp, 1975).*



*The glass-stained windows of the chapel show roses, a motif commonly connected to the Virgin Mary. Böhm's architecture seems to connect effortless postwar modernity with expressionism and a dose of German romanticism. (Photos: Arved von der Ropp, 1975).*

## ARTICLE

The decision in favor of Böhm's proposal was also made because he was the only architect to include the existing topography as part of his scheme. While the other proposals suggested leveling the entire area, Böhm placed the dome on the highest point of the slightly sloping site, creating a promenade for the pilgrims that continuously rises upwards with a few stone steps every couple of meters. This gesture connects the church to the town and the pilgrimage path, making the dome the enclosed end of the open-air pilgrim's route: Approaching the church, the path winds through the narrow alleys of the medieval town, spiraling around the "concrete mountain" which only appears every now and then over or between the old buildings of the city center. This continues until one enters the slightly curved promenade and – finally – the church itself.

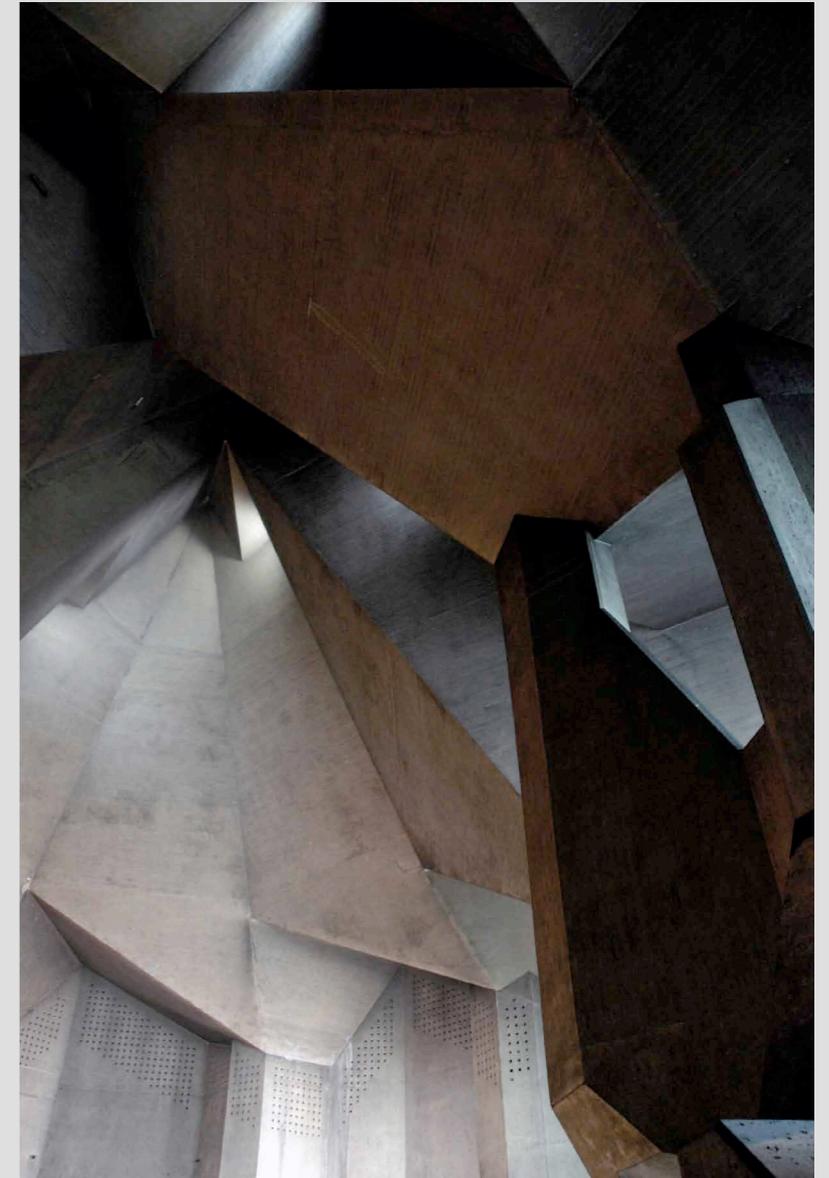
It's easy to imagine that in 1968, when it was inaugurated, not everyone was happy with this giant concrete (Catholic!) church rising in the northeast of Neviges. It was certainly an intrusion. Böhm's structure has been compared to all sorts of things: a bunker, a tent, a fortress, a rock with a giant cave and a crystal. The expressive form of the roof might also be seen as a protective coat, a metaphor that is often found in the design of churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Gottfried Böhm has never explicitly explained his inspirations, so we might assume that he intended for his design to be open to all of these interpretations.

However one interprets the form, it cannot be considered completely alien; It is not an isolated monolith, but rather a greyish crystalline rock – God's rock! – placed in front of the green hills of Neviges. It seems like a logical conclusion that evolves out of the slowly changing spaces along the route. The church is both connected to and set apart from

the town by a modern version of a Holy Precinct, including the nuns' residences and the kindergarten, which are placed to the left and right of a via sacra directly in front of the church's main entrance. This kind of attention to context and details continues inside. Of course, at first the central room makes freezes one in awe after passing the rather small and modest entrance. All of a sudden everything about the space seems to roar up towards the sky until, high above, and one's gaze comes to rest on the bottom side of the roof, the many-folded structure of which is visible inside. The room feels much bigger than you would expect from the outside. But then one starts to discover all these familiar materials and structures: Böhm used the same paving and street lamps inside as outside, so there is continuity in the atmosphere of the exterior and interior spaces, beneath the 7,500 cubic meters of the concrete roof's structure. Together with the open concrete galleries this looks like an abstract version of the small-scale town that one has just passed through, like a light covered, very robust marketplace.

## UNCANNY AND EXHILARATING

Today it seems that the people of Neviges have developed pride in "their" church, which remains a considerable sensation, not only in the context of Neviges but also worldwide. It's like an open house that attracts many different visitors: believers and non-believers, Catholics and Protestants, pilgrims of the Virgin Mary and pilgrims of architecture. The church is widely considered Gottfried Böhm's masterpiece, although he built some 60 other churches most of which



*Photo: seier+seier, 2008*



*Photo: seier+seier, 2008*

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## ARTICLE

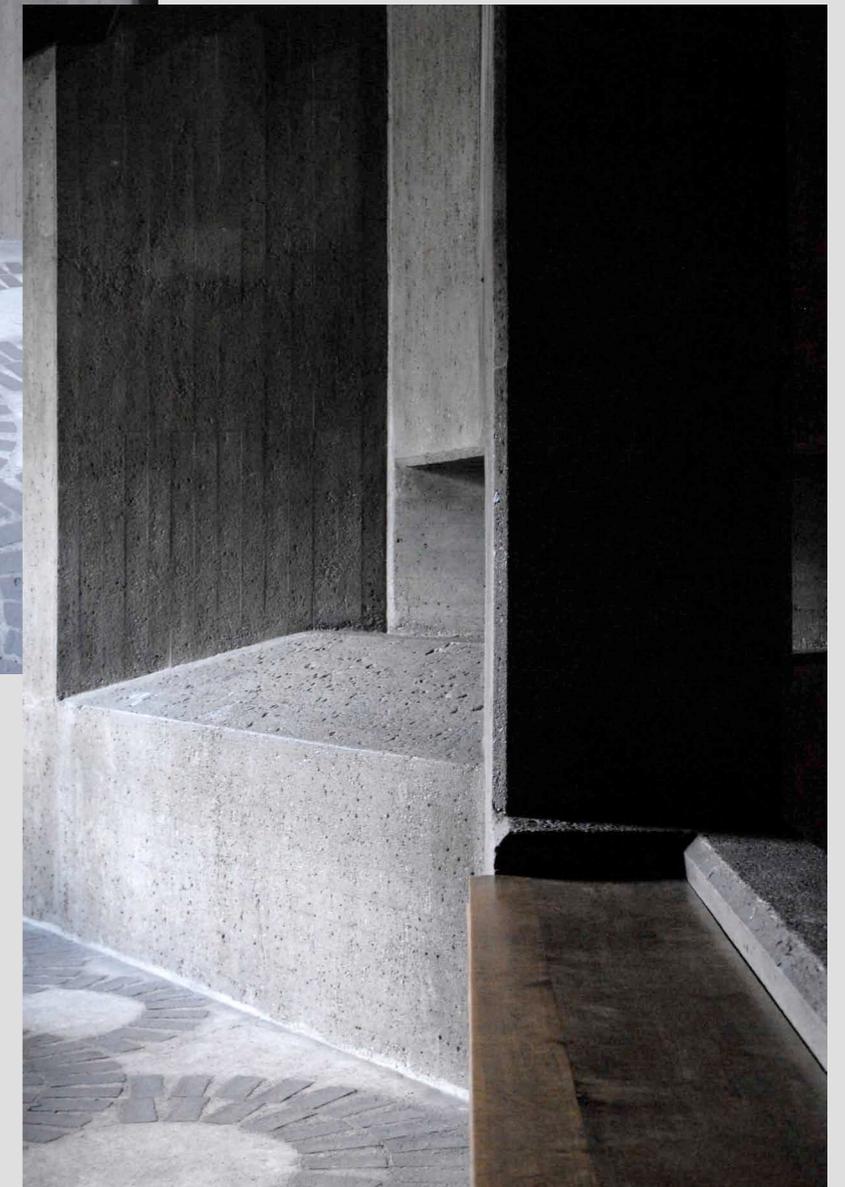
are also beautiful and impressive buildings. But never before or after he was able to develop such a convincing gesture and comprehensive design, from the exterior spaces to the chairs and the bright colored windows of stained glass.

When he was awarded with the Pritzker Prize in 1986, the laudation seemed to make direct reference to the church in Neuges: “His highly evocative handiwork combines much that we have inherited from our ancestors with much that we have but newly acquired — an uncanny and exhilarating marriage.”

Although the construction was highly experimental in the 1960s, Böhm’s building has not required any significant changes until today. Since the interior cannot be heated (it was meant as a summer church for the pilgrims), a smaller, warmer chapel room has been created inside. Böhm had designed freely movable chairs for visitors, which are now anchored in defined rows. The roof had to be fixed after water damage occurred in the 1970s, and a light grey paint was applied which disturbs the general impression of the monolith for the keen-eyed pilgrim as the other walls have meanwhile turned a much darker grey. These days, the monks – together with the 92-year old Gottfried Böhm – are conducting tests for an alternative roof construction strategy. A covering with lead plates is currently being discussed. Böhm, who still lives in Cologne, has remained closely connected to his building and continues to visit it regularly. ←



*The robust and scant surfaces and materials inside have remained their quality.*  
(Photos: seier+seier, 2008)



ESSAY

# I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE

On stalking  
architecture – and  
architecture stalker

Text by Rob Wilson

*The Corbusierhaus in Berlin. (Photo: Rob Wilson)*

## ESSAY

Often when I arrive home, walking towards my apartment block, there are figures hanging around in the shadows at the edge of the trees, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups, staring at the building, marshalling cameras. And on leaving in the morning, it's not unusual to run the gauntlet of a massed crowd of twenty-something students, hardly noticing me as they hold their iPads and phones up to capture the block beyond.

I live in Berlin's Corbusierhaus – the fourth iteration of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation. At least it was originally designed by him, though he subsequently almost disowned it, demanding it be designated a lesser species "Type Berlin," as the ceiling heights in the apartments had to be increased to 2.5 metres to conform to the minimum standards of the Berlin Building Code, thereby countermanding his beloved Modular of 2.26 metres. Living there, this height increase is frankly an improvement, but in any case it hasn't stopped the building becoming an architectural pilgrimage site.

Many of these architectural pilgrims venture inside the block as well. Frequently when exiting the lift, you find odd people milling around the lobby, perusing the relatively poor manna offered up by a series of information boards explaining the block's design, construction and layout, whilst also eyeing up the lifts hungrily, desperate to get deeper into the building.

Occasionally more daring types do ride the lifts, in the vain hope of seeing an apartment, only to be faced

floor-by-floor with anonymous corridors stretching into the distance. Once when I was in our old flat – on the fifth floor, at the far end of a cul-de-sac corridor – I left the door open to get a through-breeze, only to hear a slightly embarrassed cough behind me. Turning, I found a couple, already half in the flat's hallway, asking whether they could take a quick look around. Our flat at the time was only a single studio, no balcony, dodgy carpets, and so they left again pretty quickly, grasping for something positive to say aside from a weak "great view," and looking somewhat crestfallen that they hadn't received the double-height modernist masterpiece experience which they'd hoped for.

And that is what is most fascinating for me about pilgrimages – strangely, even architectural ones: the people watching. Just read Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* of 1387: "It was ever thus." After all, it's to a degree all in their (or your) head. People's reactions are often so strange, rich, and extraordinary, ranging from brazen annoyance at others daring to be there also, getting in the way of their pure communion with Architecture, to those who are self-conscious and half-embarrassed at their own interest and presence. I wonder what might be the experience they are looking for – their own unique promenade architecturale, a moment of enlightenment, a touch of genius – the hand of the Master speaking to them? And what is the qualitative difference in expectation brought by their differing reasons for visiting – whether it be viewing a key masterpiece, an extraordinary construction, a sacred site, or merely the ghost of association in a building?



*Heidegger's Hütte, Todtnauberg, Schwarzwald.*  
(Photo: Rob Wilson)

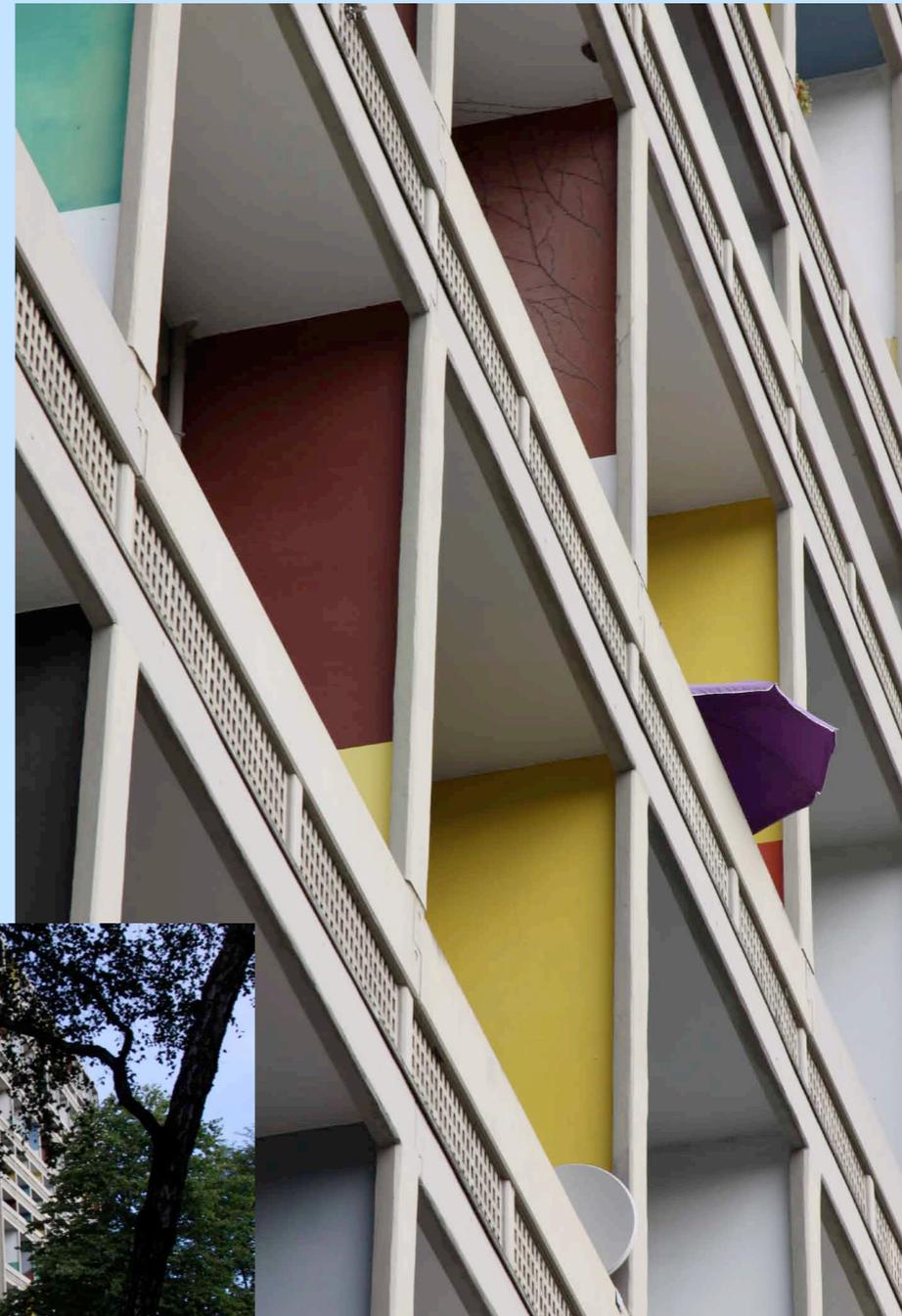


*When Peter Doig painted the Unité D'Habitation at Briey-en-Forêt in northeast France, it was semi-derelict. This painting's slightly sinister feeling shows the block in a very similar setting to its 'sister-ship' in Berlin, the Corbusierhaus. The glimpsed view and approach through the trees has the sense more perhaps of being a stalker rather than a pilgrim. (Peter Doig, Concrete Cabin II, 1992, Oil on canvas, 200 x 275 cm. Courtesy Warren and Victoria Miro, ©Peter Doig)*

## ESSAY

This came into focus last month when I was on holiday in the Schwarzwald, observing my own feelings as I took a mini-pilgrimage of a sort – a short diversion on the way up the Feldberg mountain, to see a tiny building – all yellowed shingles and bright green shutters: the hütte of Martin Heidegger. There was no one around, and alone for a moment, I thought: what am I here for? Do I think I'll be touched by genius? Or feel the essence of dwelling, of Bauen Wohnen Denken – or be alone with the ghost of the man? It was a bit of all of these things, mixed with an amazing setting and view.

Meanwhile, back in Berlin, like flies in ointment, I am just one of the many architects that came first as a pilgrim and got stuck in the Le Corbusier block, which is now encrusted with designer-types living there. Maybe it's the chance to reside in a piece of the true cross, but perhaps it's just the same as those aging, addled hippies who travel to and end up staying in Varanasi in India – we're all hoping for that elusive, endlessly removed (architectural or other) Nirvana. ←→



*The Corbusierhaus in Berlin. (Photos: Rob Wilson)*

NEXT ISSUE

13 Sept. 2012

## NEXT ISSUE VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE 2012

Following our pilgrimage issue, uncube No. 02 is going to be packed full of the bounty of the Venice Architecture Biennale 2012, we will return with more than armfuls of tasteful fabric bags, but also with our key impressions, images, video interviews, – and of course some must-see suggestions from this year's grand architecture event.

*Sign up for our Newsletter to stay tuned.*

*Australian architects Denton Corker Marshall's visualization of their forthcoming Australian Pavilion is an homage to Aldo Rossi's 1974 Biennale Theater, which arrived on a barge. Construction start envisaged for the end of 2013.*