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***Vita est peregrinatio.*****The Cathedral of Neviges Between Sacred and Urban**

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**Abstract**

In 2020, the German architect Gottfried Böhm turned 100 years old. His sacred architecture has defined the German architectural landscape from the years of post-war reconstruction to today. The project for the new Cathedral of Neviges (1963) collects and amplifies the representativity of the religious rite with an evocative formal expression that characterizes urban space, weaving renewed relationships between the internal space of the church and its exterior. Translating both sacred and secular rites into physical actions, Böhm's work stands out as a solid reference for his capability of reinterpreting religious faith as a tool for building communities, incorporating its indispensable sense of sharing and civic sociality.

**Keywords**

Sacred architecture — Ritual — Urbanity — Post-war reconstruction

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Una vita, che non può essere separata dalla sua forma, è una vita per la quale, nel suo vivere, ne va del vivere stesso e, nel suo vivere, ne va innanzitutto del suo modo di vivere. Che cosa significa questa espressione? Essa definisce una vita – la vita umana – in cui i singoli modi, atti e processi del vivere non sono mai semplicemente *fatti*, ma sempre e innanzitutto *possibilità* di vita, sempre e innanzitutto potenza. E la potenza, in quanto non è altro che l'essenza o la natura di ciascun essere, può essere sospesa e contemplata, ma mai assolutamente divisa dall'atto. L'abito di una potenza è l'uso abituale di essa e la forma-di-vita è quest'uso. (Agamben, 2018)

The small copper plaque with the image of the Virgin Mary, engraved towards the end of the seventeenth century, was transferred to a modest parish church in Neviges, a village of medieval origin not far from Cologne. The news of its miraculous properties spread among local communities and gave rise to a cult that over the centuries has seen an ever-increasing number of believers, travelers, and clerics flock to the small center, modifying the life of the humble village, one of the last historic bastions of the Catholic counter-reformation in Germany. During the 1930s, more than three hundred thousand pilgrims a year crowded into the streets of Neviges and some particularly relevant celebrations hosted up to thirty thousand worshippers at the same time. This is when the late Baroque church started to show its inadequacy to welcome such occasions, especially in the rainy winter months. It was in the 1950s that the Franciscan friars began to imagine the construction of a new church. The Sanctuary of Neviges was set to become one of the most important buildings of the Archdiocese, second only to the Cathedral of Cologne and capable of gathering approximately eight thousand observers who returned *en masse* to celebrate Sunday service immediately after the end of the Second World War. After a series of projects



**Fig. 1**

Young pilgrims inside the Cathedral of Neviges, 1960s. (Archiv der Marienwallfahrt Neviges) (symbolic image to be associated with the essay).

that were proposed but never developed, 1962 saw the organization of an invited competition restricted to a few architects, mostly from Germany and active in Cologne. They were asked to design a building that could accommodate nine hundred seats, a sacristy, smaller spaces for prayer, confessionals, and the chapel where the sacred image of the Virgin had to be hosted. The project had also to provide shelters for pilgrims, a kindergarten, a residence for the elderly and a permanent seat for the religious chapter. Gottfried Böhm, in those years a professor in Aachen, and son of the already famous church architect Dominikus (1880-1955), was among the invited architects.

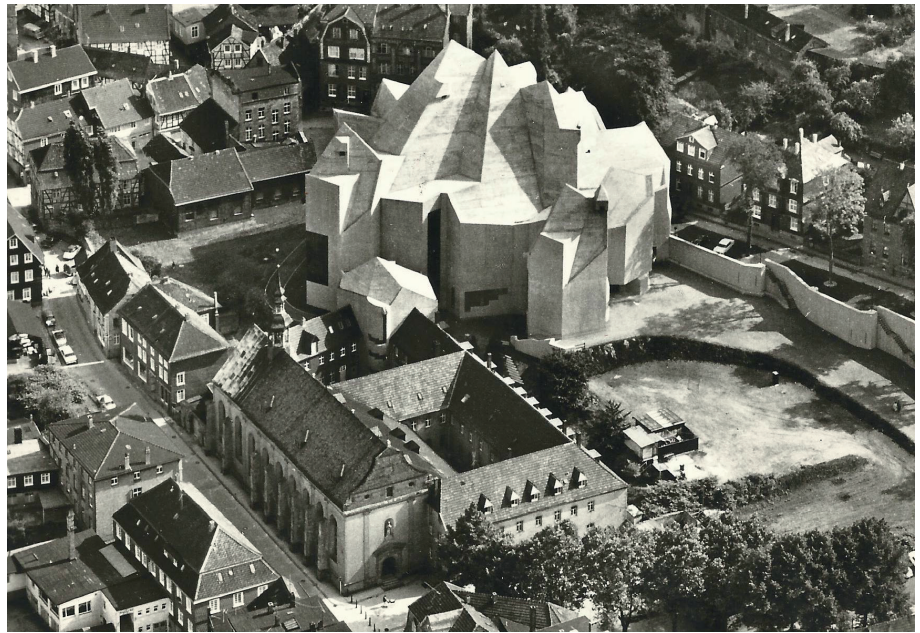
The architectural context of those years was marked by the desire of moving over the destruction wrought by the Second World War by pushing for a rapid – yet often reckless<sup>1</sup> – reconstruction. The enormous production of new housing built in standardized and inhospitable<sup>2</sup> neighborhoods – a strict interpretation of the late International Style – soon led to the appearance of a certain nostalgia for places where communities could meet and deem their own; a feeling to which Böhm was not indifferent and that characterized his work<sup>3</sup>. He reinterpreted the competition brief, proposing a different position for the church rather than the one foreseen by the commission, considering more appropriate to set the building as close as possible to the core of the village, instead of physically annexing it to the existing monastery on the eastern front; a vision that was preferred by the friars. Böhm chooses to set the new building towards the existing buildings, further south than the monastery, generating an ensemble that is harmoniously balanced with the surroundings.

The main feature of the proposed urban composition is the system of open spaces – defined by a generous flight of steps surrounded by small buildings at the edges – to be crossed to reach the sacred hall. As the only project providing this availability of public space, Böhm's architecture implements a dynamic way of experiencing the ritual of the pilgrimage, as a gradual and slow ascent to the sacred image. This act of devotion at the end of the long and tiring journey of the pilgrims is slowed down by stairs, steps or ascents, a feature that recurs in the architecture of sanctuaries such as in the Abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel in France – separated from

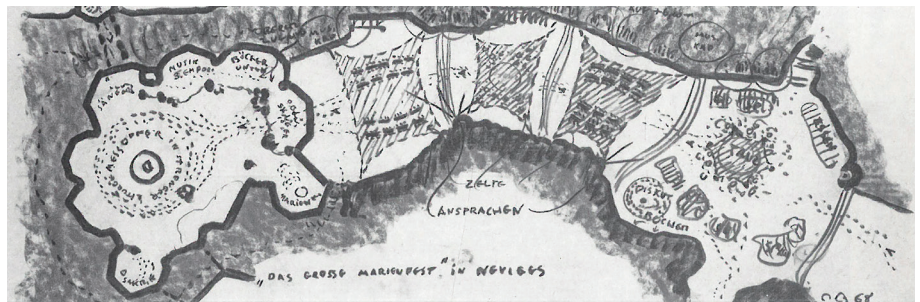


**Fig. 2**

The Neviges sanctuary and its context, 1968. (Archiv der Marienwallfahrt Neviges).

**Fig. 3**

Gottfried Böhm, Design sketch for the external spaces of the Cathedral of Neviges, 1968.



the shore by a tongue of land regularly submerged by the tides – and the Sanctuary of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, end destination of a long journey where the sacred building is separated from the actual square by two twin staircases. In the project for the new cathedral, Böhm welcomes and reinterprets this architectural theme in the light of the specificities of the place, combining the precise design of the rite with the fascination for the characteristics of the natural landscape of the Bergisches Land – its orography, the shifting ground elevation, the contrast between solid masses of vegetation and wide-open spaces, lawns and ponds.

The jury considered the intervention too radical and not adequate for the size of the village. The proposal was therefore rejected. Cardinal Josef Frings, Archbishop of Cologne at the time, however, was not satisfied with the work of the commission and the competition was relaunched in 1964. Böhm, among others, was invited to take part again. Its second version confirmed the urban concept already developed in the first competition, with some differences regarding the design of open spaces: the access stairway, more akin to a square on several levels, assumes an even more central role in the general composition, so that it appears almost like a succession of rooms guiding its pilgrim along his path. The buildings on the western front, already present in the first version of the project, are here replaced by a sequence of stairs that responds to the different changes of height, introducing a balanced system in continuity with the orography of the site. After the meeting of the jury, Frings approved the new version of Böhm, which was built in just two years, from 17 July 1966 to 22 May 1968<sup>4</sup>.



**Fig. 4**

Laying of the foundation stone, 1966. (Archiv der Marienwallfahrt Neviges).

### The rite between urban and sacred

The themes explored in the project by Gottfried Böhm reflect his refined critical sensitivity towards both the physical and cultural context. There are two registers within which we intend to analyze the Neviges Mariendom: the relationship between the building and the built environment and the rite as generator of the architectural system.

The new church of Neviges presents itself as a huge mass compared to the village made up of small traditional wooden houses with steep pitched roofs. The compositional mechanisms behind this imposing building, that allow it to harmoniously resonate in the existing urban system, come from past references. Böhm's strategic choice was to rely on a way of settling typical of medieval churches. This becomes clear observing how, just south of the Franciscan monastery, the Evangelical Church of late medieval origin is inserted in the center of a hybrid courtyard, as a result of the arrangement of the houses in a circular form: a (physical) circle that encloses another (symbolic). It is a consolidated position that the symbol precedes the formulation of a constructive form (Hautecoeur, 1954; Rykwert, 1963) and precisely the circle, among pure shapes, is the one that suggests a double symbolic value: the circle is destined «to protect from external dangers» or to «enclose, imprison. The first are city walls, then temples, and the second are funerary circles. In both cases they constitute sacred limits, *ἄβαρα* that only some rites allow to cross»<sup>5</sup>. The houses, thus the circular limit in defense of the sacred, enclosed in another room with a circular vocation. The same symbolic matrix is perfectly absorbed by Böhm's work by keeping a sequence of circumferences under trace – shaping them in space – that draw, layer by layer, thresholds so that the pilgrim feels protected and safe in crossing the limits of the sacred.





**Fig. 5**  
The Cathedral of Neviges as seen from the village, 1968. (Archiv der Marienwallfahrt Neviges).

The generating idea inextricably links the lesson inherited from history with the strategy expressed in the construction of the Cathedral. Precisely from the context, from its geometries, from its perceptible grain, the new church takes shape, as modeled in clay (a material of which numerous scale models were made by the architect) in which to discover a mineral object – a crystal, reminder of the influence of the expressionism experience of Paul Scheerbart and Bruno Taut of the *Glasarchitektur*<sup>6</sup> of the 1920s – and of Böhm's training as a sculptor at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts in the same years in which he was studying architecture). How much the tools used by the architect guide the design activity and influence the choices of the project is still a fertile field of research, however it is evident that Böhm's scratching of the mass of the new building is the result of a careful study of the context. The pitched roofs of the small houses surrounding the new building functioned as references for the modulation of the folds and faces that characterize the large concrete roof. The strong intention of acting in a way that is specifically anchored to a precise historical and physical reality allowed Böhm to imbue his compositional choices with a double level of signification: on the horizontal plane the planimetric insertion is essential for a renewed urban centrality while, on the vertical axis, a slow process of subtraction of material enables the construction of a volume made up of mediated relations, apparently generated by mimicking the textures of the roofs of the surrounding houses but on the contrary the result of a calibrated ability to see and synthesize the reality of the built environment. The Cathedral of Neviges is an urban project, built to sit at the center of a new composition and at the same time being in tension with existing references. The structure of the fabric in which it is inserted

becomes a propulsive rule for the morphology of the new, amplifying the sculptural vocation of Böhm's work.

To read the design evolution of the religious complex, it is essential to understand how important the rite of the pilgrimage has been as a generating reference for the architectural system in its entirety. In one of the first sketches of the project, what emerges strongly is how much the flow of life and its dynamics, thus the formal construction that is defined by the actions of man, is central to the way of understanding design for Böhm. «A building is a human space, background and representation of its dignity, architecture [...] must naturally adapt to its physical context, both formally and historically, without denying or fantasizing about the needs of our time»<sup>7</sup>. The artificial ground, a churchyard extended to the size of a real square before the sanctuary, is a fundamental part of the composition of the entire religious complex. In that sketch, there is no distinction between covered and open spaces: the building seems to define an excavation on the village ground (always generated by the geometric shape of the circle) in which all the different ways of living the pilgrimage rite, the different possibilities of using space, always aim at creating community. Four “plates”, in the first sketch, then transformed into a slow ascent limited to the west by a row of trees and to the east by the reception buildings. The sense did not change. The square becomes for Böhm the opportunity to make clear the indispensable necessity of an “empty” space ready to welcome pilgrims, placing them in the first place at the right distance from the access to the church (thus favoring a different visual perception from the one obtained from walking between the streets of the village) and generating, during the path, a slow ascent, both physical and emotional. The architecture of the religious complex is therefore a constructed form capable of expressing the desire to be at the service of the community and its rituals, while retaining the strong role – typical of good architecture – of guiding the gaze, marking gestures and actions, in short, orienting human life by making it better.

### **The Mariendom. An Urban Architecture**

In short, there are three elements that make up the cluster of the Cathedral of Neviges: the large public space on several levels, the building of services and hospitality for the pilgrims – with its cellular and recursive structure – and, finally, the big church. The slow ascent towards the seemingly impenetrable concrete mass, modulated by the ground of the open-air rooms, takes place in the access to the sacred hall, a large space of urban vocation enclosed under a roof. The planimetric situation strengthens a better understanding of the relation of continuity that exists with the external space; in section, the thresholds carved into the body of this architecture, like cavernous spaces, physically let perceive a change of state and its different conditions: from a civically urban space, one is projected into a metaphysical, transcendent and strongly sacred dimension.

The church of Neviges is a continuous spatial sequence with a strong emotional power that reveals, after accessing a low narthex, a place of physical decompression where the eyes can get used to the dim light and the body to a different temperature, the complex power of the liturgical hall. A space enclosed under a roof made of folds – concave and convex – calibrated so that the light is at times reflected, while at others is absorbed. The space of the hall is defined by the high altar, center and fulcrum of the celebration, one of the few fixed elements of the liturgy, central but slightly rotated towards the entrance to allow the celebrant to observe the whole congre-

gation and from which the other spaces appear to be generated. Two internal stairways lead to three tiers of balconies overlooking the congregation, ensuring that no pilgrim is too far from the celebrant. The roof reaches its highest point between the altar and the assembly, placing the rite of Communion in close relationship with the community that participates in the sacred action «consciously, godly and actively»<sup>8</sup>. All around, smaller cavities, as if they have been dug into the church external wall, host the chapel of the Sacraments and that of the icon of the Virgin, the final destination of the pilgrimage rite, located to the left of the entrance: explicit action aimed at emphasizing through the composition of the space how the true goal of the *peregrinatio* is the collective act of celebration – rather than the intimate and personal act of veneration.

The innovations regarding the organization of the space of the liturgy were already absorbed and implemented by Rudolf Schwarz, Emil Steffan and Dominikus Böhm in the first decades of the twentieth century – and subsequently promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (coeval with the competition for the sanctuary of Neviges) – and had considerable influence on the shaping of the sacred space for the new Cathedral. From the *motu proprio* of Pope Pius X of 1903 *Tra le sollecitudini*, the traditional arrangement of the interior spaces of the churches was questioned by some figures of the *Liturgical Movement*, a theological current aimed at re-establishing the active participation of the believers in the rite, which saw Germany as fertile field of experimentation. The meeting between Rudolf Schwarz and Romano Guardini – theologian and spiritual guide of the German youth movement *Quickborn* – paved the way for a generation of German architects who, in the post-war period, experimented with possible layouts of the sacred liturgical space that corresponded to a renewed way of celebrating that is authentic and heartfelt, and which would gather the worshippers in prayer in a rite that would be strongly participatory. «A god, a community, a space! [...] to merge all the spatial elements in a single room that holds them together, forming a large roof over the altar»<sup>9</sup>.

The elements of the liturgical space of the church of Neviges contribute to the construction of the urban character of the work and become a proof of Böhm's continuous search for a renewed urbanity so necessary for building communities. The hall appears to be a large square surrounded by facades made of houses – the balconies – inhabited by the faithful. Its ground is “furnished” with light elements (mobile chairs instead of benches anchored to the floor), just like a public space in a village. The church, from dusk, is entirely illuminated by elements made as outdoor lampposts capable of reverberating the brick texture of the pavement continuing the external one. Light is used to enhance the evocative character of the space. Of the three high windows, the one facing south-west illuminates the altar at noon, while in the morning the sun bathes the sacramental chapel in a scarlet light, due to the color of the large windows on which the *Hardenberger Rose* is painted, based on a design by Böhm. Other smaller ones, on the other hand, by selecting almost single sunrays as blades, allow the light to penetrate the heart of the liturgical space.

In a continuous and fluid dimension typical of an urban *unicum*, the Cathedral of Neviges stands out as an important machine for experiencing the sacred. Böhm has succeeded in translating the pilgrimage rite into a constructed form to hold together a living and multifaceted community, materializing an architectural expression into a design that sees collective



experience as a profoundly natural act, to be preserved and always kept alive. Urban atmosphere and the material reality of the place are merged in this huge building which, thanks to its physical presence, manages to be a condenser of characters and permanence, explicating the values shared by the community through an evident use of compositional methods that are all contemporary, but which sink deeply the roots in history. The complex relationship between soil, texture of the existing urban fabric and the indispensable monumentality of a church make the Cathedral of Neviges an emblematic example of intentions and actions aimed at the construction of sacred architecture with an evident civil character.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> LEICK R., SCHREIBER, M. e STOLDT, H. (2010) “Wie Deutschland aus Ruinen auferstand”, *Der Spiegel*, 20, 16.05.2010. [online] available at: <<https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/out-of-the-ashes-a-new-look-at-germany-s-postwar-reconstruction-a-702856.html>> [Last access 18 settembre 2021]

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. MITSCHERLICH A. (1965) – *Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Staedte: Anstiftung zum Unfrieden*, 10th ed. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971) trad. It (1968) – *Il feticcio urbano. La città inabitabile, istigatrice di discordia*. Einaudi, Turin

<sup>3</sup> «We find these uniform estates and characterless cities everywhere, full of blocks of buildings with no sense of scale, featureless, with no depth or sculptural form. Resistance to this makes it easy to understand our interest in the formal richness of old things and the delight we take in the great formal variety offered by the new architecture». BÖHM G. (1963) “Über St. Engelbert in Köln-Riehl” In: HOSTER, J. e MANN A. (edited by), *Vom Bauen, Bilden und Bewahren. Festschrift für Willy Weyres zur Vollendung seines 60. Lebensjahres*. Greven & Bechtold, Colonia, 377.

<sup>4</sup> HAUN G. (2017) – *The Mariendom Neviges*. Kunstverlag Josef Fink, Lindenberg, 4.

<sup>5</sup> HAUTECOEUR L. (1954) – *Mystique et architecture. Symbolisme du cercle et de la coupole*. Picard, Paris, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. SCHEERBART, P. (1918) – *Glarsarchitektur*, Verlag der Sturm, Berlin, trad. It. (1982) – *Architettura di vetro*. Adelphi, Milan.

<sup>7</sup> BÖHM G. (1986) – *The Pritzker Architecture Prize. Ceremony Acceptance Speech*. [online] available at: <[https://www.pritzkerprize.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/Gottfried\\_Bo%CC%88hm\\_Acceptance\\_Speech\\_1986.pdf](https://www.pritzkerprize.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/Gottfried_Bo%CC%88hm_Acceptance_Speech_1986.pdf)> [Last access 18 settembre 2021]

<sup>8</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium. Costituzione Sulla Sacra Liturgia* (1963), 48.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. ACKEN, J. v. (1922) – *Christozentrische Kirchenkunst. Ein Entwurf zum liturg. Gesamtkunstwerk*. Theben, Gladbeck.



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