

# THE BRUTALIST CHURCH: A CASE STUDY OF THE MARIENDOM IN NEVIGES

**VAN HEESWIJK, LAURA**

*History of Art, School of Culture and Creative Arts*

## ABSTRACT

Modern church architecture presents a specialised field in architecture. The religious building lends itself to elaborate designs that encapsulates something other than our everyday life. It poses questions on how it addresses its function and contemporary context as they become both architectural as well as religious pilgrimage sights. The Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche in Neviges, Germany, by Gottfried Böhm was built with the aim of providing a church that would house not only the rising number of pilgrims, but also the ideals of the liturgical movement. The guidelines of the Vatican Council in 1962-1965 implemented the vision of the liturgical movement to democratise faith and bring the communal mass back to the centre of church life. The Mariendom, completed in 1968, is designed to function accordingly. The ground plan uses the pilgrim way as a red thread leading to the centralised church space where the communal mass is the centre of the church. The importance of the active participation of the laity is thus emphasised. Böhm employs his own individual style, brutalist with strong expressionistic tendencies, to bring together daily life with church life. The Mariendom is an impressive mountain of concrete with an extraordinary sculptural interior and roof. Böhm creates an iconic space that is atmospheric and transcendental, echoing the spiritual function of the building. The Mariendom is a modern church that employs its own unique formal language to fulfil its modern liturgical function.

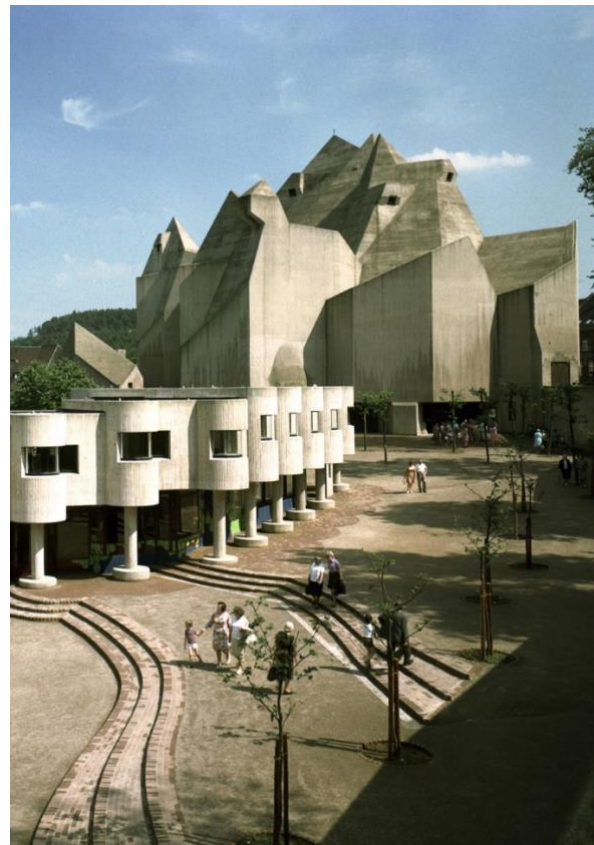
## INTRODUCTION

For the modern architect, the programme for the church was fraught with the dangers of excessive individualism of style or, alternatively, a merely superficial updating of tradition. (Proctor 2011: 359)

In these words, Robert Proctor describes one of the problems of modern church architecture: that the architect's signature style becomes more prominent than the actual church and its function as a religious space. However, the following article will use the example of the Wallfahrtskirche Maria Königin des Friedens in Neviges, Germany (hereafter "the Mariendom"; see Fig. 1) to argue that this is not necessarily the case of all church architecture. That is, this article will demonstrate that the Mariendom is not merely a "superficial updating of tradition" but is indeed a structure that properly addresses its functions as a church.

The ability of the Mariendom to encompass both the form of an artistic vision and the function of a church is deeply rooted in its history. After the first and second world wars, the number of pilgrims visiting Neviges increased, and as a result, a larger pilgrimage church was needed. German architect Gottfried Böhm's design was chosen as it best addressed its function (Haun 2004). Started in 1966 and completed in 1968, the Mariendom not only displays Böhm's iconic brutalist and expressionist style, recognisable for its prominent use of reinforced concrete and sculptural roof and ceiling, but also shows clear attention to the religious purposes of the building.

In what follows, this article will review the design of the Mariendom with regard to Böhm's individual style. It will explore the historical context, function, and ideals of liturgy at the time and how Böhm attentively included these elements in the design. Furthermore, it will engage with Moyra Doorly's critique stating that modern churches fail to capture the spiritual



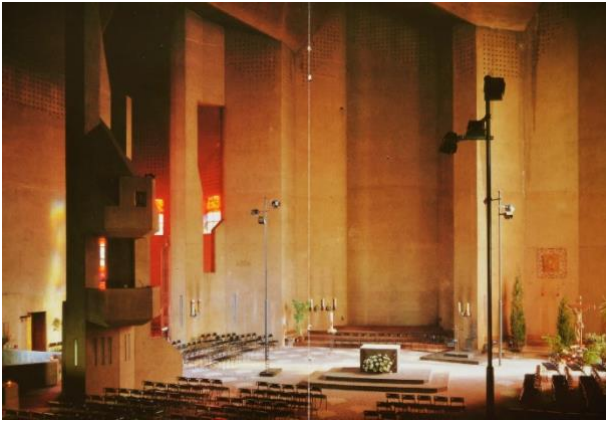
**Figure 1: Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968**

*The pilgrim's steps leading to the low entrance of the church. The Pilgerhaus on the left.*

and awe-inspiring qualities of a religious space to ultimately conclude that the Mariendom is very capable of addressing the spiritual function of the church building.

### INFORMAL CHURCH ARCHITECTURE AND TRADITION

Church architecture forms a niche field in architecture; designing a church provides a distinct challenge for the architect in terms of functionality, yet at the same time provides them the chance to create a building that can hold something greater than our daily reality (Proctor 2014: 51). The artistic aspect of churches in modern architecture has attracted artists, such as Matisse and Cocteau, but also architects like Böhm, who provide their personal artistic vision to architectural design (Christ-Janer, Foley 1962: 82). This vision can be seen in the Mariendom's outstanding roof landscape of dynamic intersecting planes which towers above the small town of Neviges, much like a gigantic rock. The use of concrete gives it its characteristic brutalist appeal. The interior, with its high fragmented ceiling, is dimly lit in the centre by street lanterns and colourful rays of the stained-glass windows - also personally designed by Böhm. Overall, the interior resembles a large cave chamber that intimately houses church gatherings (e.g., Fig. 2).



**Figure 2: Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968**

*View of the altar.*

This expression of the individual formal language of the architect contributes to a modern vision of the church and liturgy, being the manner in which the public worship is practiced. However, as missionary, and Christian art historian Urban Rapp (1962) argues, it is precisely because the church is adapted to the formal language of its architect that the design of the church becomes unavoidably subjective. Rapp points out that the modern language of church architecture is created by the individual architect, unlike for example churches designed in the Romanesque or Gothic style which are determined and developed by the catholic church. Modern churches often employ a new formal language that is invented by one non-anonymous individual rather than a group of anonymous workers, as is the case with, for instance, the Gothic style.

The famous Ronchamp Chapel by Le Corbusier (1955), for example, is often criticised for bearing the stamp of its maker and thus becoming an architectural monument rather than a sacred pilgrimage sight. However, Peter Hammond argues in his book *Liturgy and Architecture* that it is the job of architects to take responsibility and think out an afresh vision of the

church (Hammond 1961: 9). Similarly, as Rudolf Schwarz (1958) explains, architects cannot look back but instead should look forward in their design using modern building techniques. He says, “for us the wall is no longer heavy masonry but rather a taut membrane, we know the great tensile strength of steel and with it we have conquered the vault.” (Schwarz 1958: 9) Moreover, Hammond (1958: 249) praises Ronchamp Chapel (fig. 3) for being “functionally impeccable” as it expresses the cosmological function of the church without using any historic references.



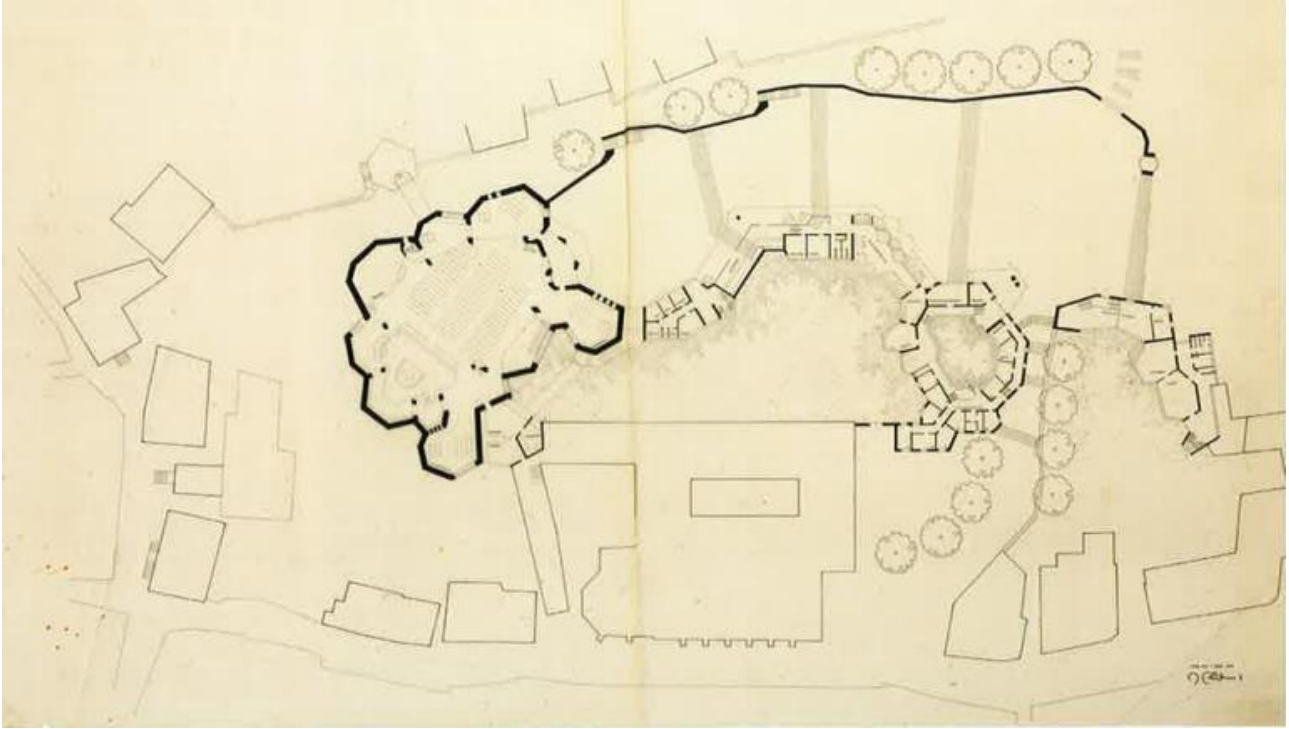
**Figure 3: Le Corbusier, Ronchamp Chapel, Ronchamp, France, 1954**

Wiebke Arnholz sets out her concept of “informelle Architektur” [informal architecture] in order to explain how the architect's personal style expresses function in modern pilgrimage churches (Arnholz 2016: 114). She explains that in informelle Architektur, a desire for the spiritual is found in the architect's artistic expression. This artistic architectural language is then employed to realise the function of the building. In Ronchamp, Le Corbusier approaches this informal design through his own idea of men as the measure of the whole building, thus employing his own artistic language. The principle of men as the measure of the design fulfils the liturgical requirement that the church provides a space for worshippers to gather as a community. The Ronchamp Chapel literally shapes itself after the people that will use it (Arnholz 2016: 114). This results in a liturgical functional church that is nevertheless overflowed with a poetic personal form implemented by Le Corbusier. Unlike Le Corbusier, Böhm denies having a specific architectural theory: “I do not have a pronounced one, except to build well and beautifully”<sup>1</sup> (Klupp and Schirmbeck 1977: 426).

Nevertheless, in designing a beautiful building, Böhm employs his own formal language in the Mariendom and thus creates a church both functional and spiritual. For example, Böhm includes traditional symbolism and function in his design as can be seen in the steps leading to the church. The steps reference the traditional tropes of a pilgrimage site. Not only do they indicate the last part of the route that the pilgrim must take to his destination - the Holy street or ‘Via Sacra’ - but they also create a symbolic vernacular. Often the Via Sacra would have three steps symbolising the three divine virtues: faith, love, and hope. Böhm added five sets of three steps on the final section of the pilgrimage route which together make the number fifteen; this is to reflect Mary's age at the time of Annunciation (Kiem 2007: 4). The way is guided by a high retaining wall and is

<sup>1</sup> Own translation from German.

flanked on the other side by the Pilgerhaus (Fig. 1 & 4).



**Figure 4: Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, competition**  
Floorplan with the pilgrim's path and the centralised church plan.

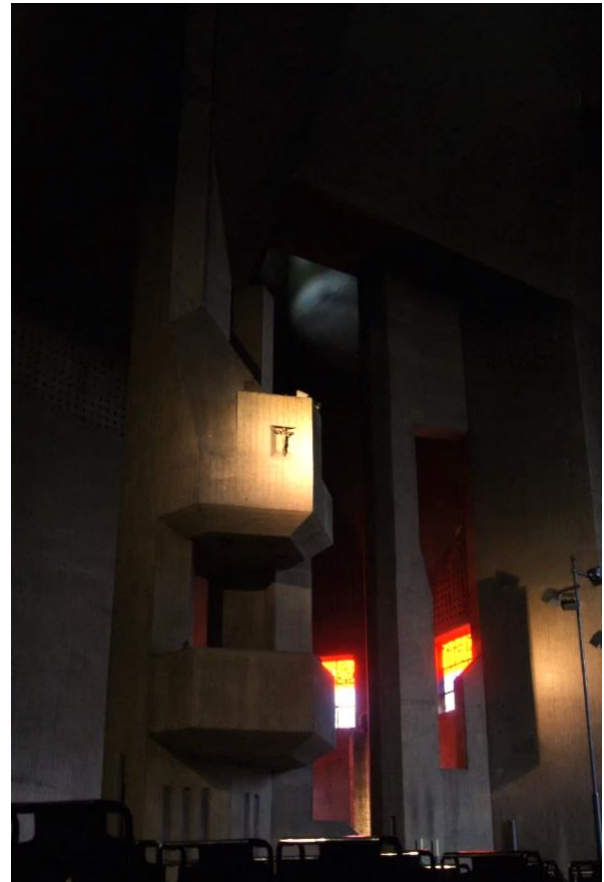


**Figure 5: Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968**

*Saint Anthony of Padua sculpture in the lower church*

The pilgrim way towards the church is not straight but rather curved with shallow steps. This invites the pilgrims to wander rather than march towards the church. These steps and the wandering aspect are ancient motives in the pilgrim's way that Böhm employs in the design (Finke 1999: 346). Furthermore, as becomes clear in the ground plan (Fig. 4) the church's central layout is shaped from the pilgrim way which extends into the church as its leitmotif, or theme. Bering Kunibert argues that the pilgrim's way shows how Böhm not only incorporated this traditional function of the pilgrimage church, but also fully incorporated this as the red thread of the total design of the church and its spatial experience. In this way Böhm unites the present with the past (Kunibert 1992: 74-75).

Another aspect of Böhm's attentive design is his inclusion of old church elements, such as traditional statues and ornaments, that are not directly part of the architecture. Böhm aims not to contrast the old and the new in his designs, but rather to unite them in synthesis (Pehnt 2007: 56). It is the totality of appearance that matters to him. In Neviges, Böhm created



**Figure 6: Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968**

*Pulpit with Jesus on the cross sculpture*

architectural elements to include traditional church sculptures such as a small shelf for a statue of Saint Anthony of Padua

(Fig. 5).<sup>2</sup> Although the figurative sculpture contrasts with the bare sand-blasted concrete of the church, it also has its own designated place within the design of the church and thus becomes part of it, making the synthesis successful. Another example of this synthesis is the Jesus on the Cross figure on the pulpit (Fig. 6). It is placed in a frame moulded in the main supporting column of the church structure. The figure has its designated display and as a result becomes part of the church's total design.

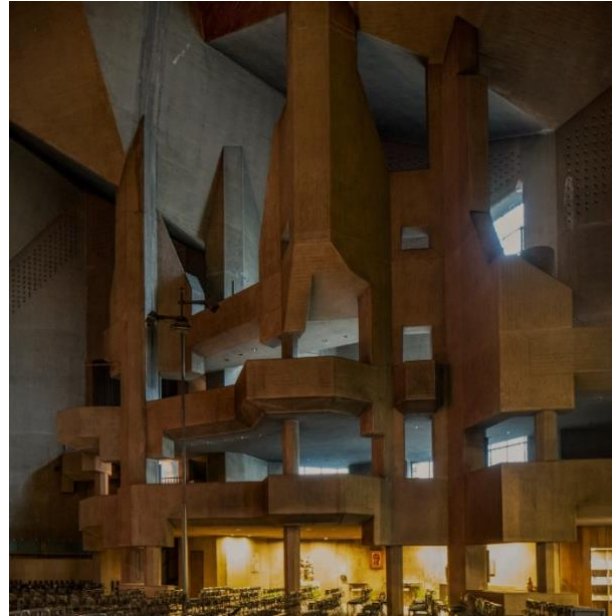
### THE LITURGICAL MOVEMENT: THE FUNCTION OF THE MODERN CHURCH.

The liturgical movement determines the function of the Mariendom. This movement within the catholic church found its roots in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a revival of the worship tradition occurred. The ground principle is the active participation of believers in mass and public prayer (Rüenauber 1995: 29). The Second Vatican Council (held during the period of 1962 to 1965) provided the guidelines for the liturgical movement as the catholic church aimed to adapt to the modern world. After the gloom of the Second World War, the ideologies of the modern church and its vision of a democratised church were revisited and strengthened. From the war's destruction, the desire arose to create a new order in the church by uniting daily life with church life to democratise faith.

The manifestation of modern liturgical ideals is typically most evident in the ground plans of modern churches, and this is undoubtedly the case for the Mariendom. As Hammond (1958: 244) points out, modern church plans are not primarily based on aesthetic grounds but on the attempt of capturing its liturgical function and ideals of the modern liturgy. Whilst in Gothic designs the altar was situated at the far back behind the choir, the liturgical movement aims to bring the altar closer to the worshippers and thus focuses on a plan that is orientated on its short axis (Fig. 4) (Hammond 1958: 244). As the mass becomes the centre of church life, plans with an emphasis on the centre of the church are favoured. For the Mariendom this means that the altar is situated in a centralised room. The platform of the altar is low, leaving it at the same height as that of the laity. As can be seen in Fig. 2, the chairs are placed around the altar like rays, emphasising this central position as well as providing a clear view of the altar to the entire congregation. To emphasise further the idea of bringing the laity closer to the altar and the importance of communal mass, the highest point of the roof is located between the altar and the congregation (Haun 2004: 16). The ceiling's construction of sculptural folded slabs of reinforced concrete is intended to create an open space that welcomes the gathering of the laity (Böhm 1987: 2).

The union of church and everyday life becomes apparent in Böhm's multipurpose plans of the layout (Fig. 7, next page). Sketches illustrate that he considered how the chairs could be arranged differently to allow the church to serve different functions, such as hosting music festivals. Böhm also demonstrates in the drawings the possibility of covering the pilgrim's steps with canvas and arranging tables there to create a marketplace for festivities around the pilgrimage, like a street festival (plan G in Fig. 7, next page) (Finke 1999: 347). This shows how the architecture enables multiple functions of the church and make pilgrimage a special event (Arnholz 2016: 165). By bringing together the outside world with the sacred church space, Werner Finke argues that the Mariendom is "above all a humane architecture"<sup>3</sup> (1999: 347). Finke

emphasises that the Mariendom was created to make it as accommodating to the pilgrims and its other visitors as possible by drawing both on its history and its future functions. Furthermore, the fragmented design of the gallery facing the centre of the church creates the feeling of a church square that is surrounded by houses (Fig. 8) (Arnholz 2016: 159). Adding to this are the street lantern-like lights that flank the mass (Fig. 2). The brickwork pattern used on the pilgrim steps outside continues inside the church and covers the whole ground plan (Fig. 9). This not only creates a continuation of the pilgrim route to the mass, but also shows the idea of the inside and the outside world united.



**Figure 8: Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968**

*View of the Galleries*



**Figure 9: Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968**

*Transgression of the brick stones that continue into the church interior*

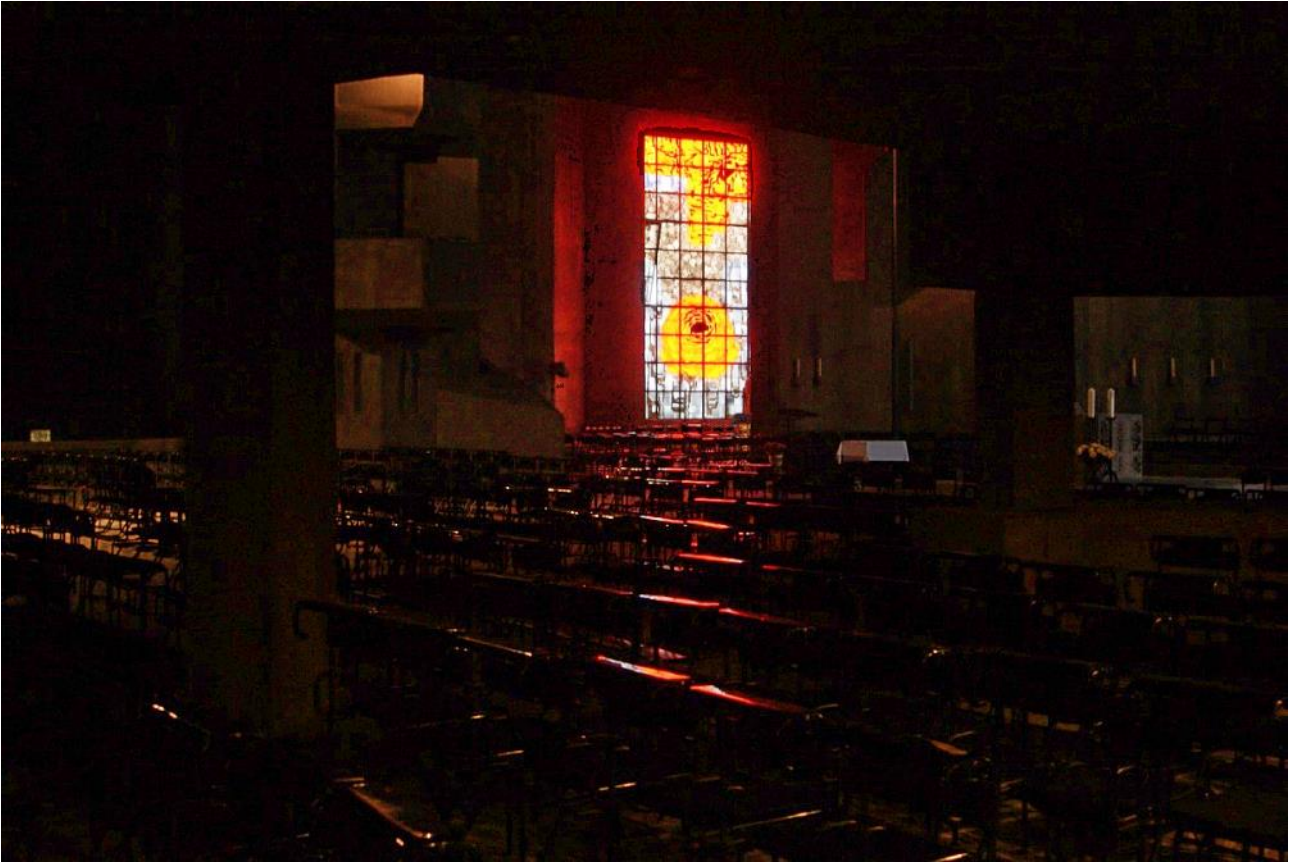
### CREATING A TRANSCENDENTAL SPACE

The great artistic freedom of modern churches in the 1960s can be explained by the liturgical movement as it allowed for individual and experimental design. Whilst the designs of most new buildings had been very rational in the 1950s, churches became manifestations of architectural creativity (Pehnt 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Personal correspondence with Stefanie Schmitz, no further information available on sculpture.

<sup>3</sup> Own translation from German.





**Figure 10: Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968**

*The Easter Rose window bathing the church in warm red light*

more and more marginalised". Since the function of the church has been thoroughly envisioned to create a space for the church community to gather for worship, modern churches have come to look more like public spaces such as libraries and town halls. Doorly argues that a hierarchy of spaces is necessary in order to uplift the church as a sacred space which differs from any other public building (Doorly 2007). For this reason, Doorly critiques the bare concrete walls of modern churches which she views as failing to inspire and uplift the mass and its spiritual bearing.

The characteristic concrete walls of the Mariendom can be seen to fall under this critique. Indeed, the Mariendom's focus on uniting daily life with spiritual life takes the everyday, rather than the transcendental, into the church. However, Böhm's boldly formative and expressive designs break with the clean and purely functional formal language of the rational architecture (Pehnt 2007: 35). The Mariendom's Expressionist character is seemingly removed from those modernist buildings that prioritise function.

Additionally, it is counterarguable that the bare concrete walls fail to inspire awe. German architect Rudolf Schwarz lays out in his influential book *Vom Bau der Kirche* how to design a well-functioning modern church and specifically encourages an empty wall behind the altar in his guidelines (Schwarz 1947). He explains that by decorating churches and making them tall, we aspire to recreate the holy; however, he argues, this is a doomed mission. Instead Schwarz proposes a more suggestive language that can speak for itself, which he envisions as an empty wall behind an altar that creates an "infinite fullness," or openness and extension beyond the altar (Schwarz 1958: 88). Böhm seems to have adopted this idea in the Wallfahrtskirche in Neviges. Figure 2, for example, shows how the simple altar is framed by a bare wall of concrete that transforms into the fragmented ceiling. As the seating is intended to be set-up around the altar, the spectator's eye is

guided up and above during the mass. Thus, the bare wall alludes to the realm beyond everyday life and aims to become a transcendental space.

With his own unique vernacular, as explained through the concept of Arnholz' *Informelle Architektur*, Böhm manages to create a spiritual atmosphere in the Mariendom. In photographs of the Mariendom's interior (Fig. 10), the lighting is enhanced to make the complete sculptural structure of the walls visible. However, the sculptural interior is harder to behold in real life. The space is dark and only dimly lit by the sparse windows that are scattered in the folded roof. When you enter from the low entrance into the cave-like main body of the church, it takes a couple of minutes before your eyes get used to the darkness and take in the large and impressive space that surrounds you. Nevertheless, despite its dark cave like quality and colossal size, it still manages to convey a sense of intimacy and warmth. The concrete material can be perceived as dark and cold, yet it is warmly lit by the street lanterns and the colourful stained-glass windows designed by Gottfried Böhm himself (see Fig. 2 & 10).

Böhm's expressionistic style, although it integrates the everyday rather than the transcendental, seems far from the conform public building Doorly describes in her critique of modern churches. The Mariendom does not appear to act as the "marginalised" space she fears modern churches turn into, nor does its concrete structure limit the transcendental quality and function of the church space. As art historian Gabriele Weissemann beautifully describes, the Mariendom creates a spiritual atmosphere through the use of light:

In the morning, when the sun penetrates the Easter rose window with its monumental deep red rose, the entire church is bathed in a reddish light – even the concrete seems to glow red (Wiesemann 2007: 217).

## CONCLUSION

This article has provided a way of viewing the modern church by investigating its tendencies and significance. It has developed an understanding of how and why the Mariendom is built both formally and functionally. The modern church should not be viewed merely as a timeless work of impressive architecture, but also as a product of its time and context. Böhm's formal language serves rather than refutes its function. It aims for a synthesis with tradition, modern liturgical principles, and modern architecture. The church design encapsulates the pilgrimage way as its leading motif, thus fully embodying its function as a pilgrimage church. Böhm's sculptural formal language shapes the Mariendom and creates the spiritual atmosphere of a church whilst at the same time

following the democratising liturgical principles. Doorly criticised modern churches arguing that modern liturgical intentions obliterate their sacred character and function, but this critique falls short. Böhm succeeded in not only formalising a space for the Christian community to meet, but also in creating a spiritual atmosphere that inspires awe and is embedded with meaning.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ILLUSTRATION LIST

- (Fig. 1) Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968. Retrieved from: DAM Archive, <https://dam-online.de/en/pr/boehm-100/>.
- (Fig. 2) Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968. (Interior detail). Retrieved from: Gerard Haun, *The Mariendom*, 20-21.

- (Fig. 3) Le Corbusier, Ronchamp Chapel, Ronchamp, France, 1954. Retrieved from: <http://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/corbuweb/morpheus.aspx?sysId=13&IrisObjectId=5147&sysLanguage=en-en&itemPos=3&itemCount=5&sysParentName=Home&sysParentId=11>.
- (Fig. 4) Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, competition drawing, 1964. Retrieved from: Gottfried Böhm, edited by Wolfgang Voigt. (Berlin: Jovis, 2007), 65.
- (Fig. 5) Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968. Saint Anthony of Padua sculpture, further details unknown. Photo by author.
- (Fig. 6) Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968. (Interior detail). Photo by author.
- (Fig. 7) Gottfried Böhm, Sketches of the Mariendom showing the adaptation of the plan for different functions, 1968. Retrieved from: "Pilgrim Church in the Rhinel and: Church at Neviges, West Germany." *The Architectural Review* (Archive: 1896-2005) 145, no. 864 (1969): 134.
- (Fig. 8) Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968. (Interior detail). Retrieved from: <https://www.frankhanswijk.nl/portfolio/architectuur-design/neviges-mariendom-gottfried-bohm.html>.
- (Fig. 9) Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968. (Detail). Photo by author.
- (Fig. 10) Gottfried Böhm, Mariendom Wallfahrtskirche Neviges, Neviges, Germany, 1968. (Interior detail). Photo by author