

CASE STUDY

Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany: a university campus in a building (1969–76)

A number of universities qualify to be megastructures. Bielefeld is one. The idea of a new university in Ostwestfalen in northern Germany was initiated in early 1965 by a professor of sociology, Dr Helmut Schelksy, together with the Minister of Culture, Prof. Dr P. Mikat. Serious planning began later in that year. In June 1966, it was announced that the university would be located in Bielefeld. The first chancellor of the University, Dr E. Firmhaber, was selected in 1968 and the first provost, Prof. Dr E. J. Mestmäcker, in the following year. The academic structure of the university is the evolving work of many hands. The campus design, however, like almost all buildings, was very much in the hands of one team.

Bielefeld University is located on the periphery of the city. It was the subject of a design competition that received a number of entries from well-known architects. The prize for the concept that formed the basis of the university's design went to a team comprised of Klaus Köpke, Peter Kulka, Wolf Siepmann and Katte Töpfer, with Michael von Tardy. That design team in conjunction with university officials and the Quickborner Team then developed the complete space program for the university. The actual final design was begun in 1970. Ground was broken for construction in April of 1971, and the building was completed in 1976 at a cost of DM 623 million. The university now has 14,000 students.

The building is substantial in size (see Figures 6.9a and b). It is 380 metres long and 230 metres in width (1247 feet by 754 feet), and altogether 140,000 square metres (over

1.5 million square feet) in floor area. It is a commuter college with surface parking around it in much the same manner as a suburban shopping centre. Like a shopping centre it has a glass covered central mall, with anchors at the ends and small shops and cafés along its sides. At one end of the mall is a swimming pool and at the other end the main auditorium. The various faculties and schools are located in rectangular blocks perpendicular to the axis of the mall.

In its publicity material the university administration notes that people accustomed to traditional universities 'will appreciate the efficiency' of moving from refectory to classes to the library all under one roof. The layout is said to foster close links between disciplines. The aspiration was also to foster a link between research and teaching following the educational model of Alexander von Humboldt. The mall is described as a vibrant meeting place for students. In the rainy Bielefeld climate, perhaps the greatest asset of the design is that one can walk from place to place without getting wet.

Publicly funded, Bielefeld University is, indeed, very much a single-design effort having been guided step-by-step by one set of planners, designers and university officials working as a team. In contrast to most universities where individual buildings have been located in open spaces, Bielefeld University is in a single building surrounded by parking and sports fields. A small allotment of student housing is on the periphery of the campus. The Teutoburger Wald (woods) lies to the north of the campus.