

Presse Kunsthalle

Bielefeld

The Kunsthalle Bielefeld is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 2018. Its remarkable building, designed by the American architect Philip Johnson, was opened to the public on September 27, 1968.

The story behind the founding of the Kunsthalle Bielefeld as a place for the city's collection of artworks goes back further in time, however. It begins with the volunteer work of secondary school teacher Heinrich Becker (b. 1881), who came to Bielefeld in 1908 and committed his life to the interests of the visual arts in Bielefeld. From October 1921 onward he had an exhibition space in the Städtisches Museum, where he had presented almost 49 exhibitions by 1928. That year, Haus Tiemann, situated on what was then Hindenburgstraße (now Alfred Bozi Straße), came into use for exhibitions. The city had acquired it the previous year for this purpose, and in 1928 it opened to the public as the Städtisches Kunsthaus Bielefeld (City of Bielefeld Art House). This was the decisive step that led to today's Kunsthalle Bielefeld, because from that point on, Heinrich Becker was constantly conceiving and organizing shows and making acquisitions for the collection. His activity was cut short when the National Socialist authorities removed him from his position on April 1, 1933. Many of the works were nearly destroyed when the collection was confiscated in 1937, and during the war, the Städtisches Kunsthaus fell victim to the bombardment on January 11, 1944. After World War II Becker was restored to his honorary position. He bought back lost prints and founded a temporary Kunsthaus on Wertherstraße 3, which opened on May 7, 1950. Becker lived to see the new Kunsthalle Bielefeld open on his birthday, September 27, 1968. He died in 1972.

In 1954 the City of Bielefeld hired the first full-time director, Gustav Vriesen (b. 1912), and became a professionally led Kunsthaus. In the report that Vriesen presented to the council on June 29, 1955, his answer to the question, "How should this Kunsthaus be developed?" was succinct: "Sparingly, but with outstanding quality." Replying to the opinion that the collection should be limited to Westphalian art only: "Just as it is not really possible for the theater and orchestra to present only Westphalian playwrights and composers, or for libraries to collect only Westphalian authors, it is not really possible for an art museum in 1955 to build a collection limited to a single region. Today's art is international." January 15, 1958, can be regarded as a second significant date in the founding of the current Kunsthalle Bielefeld. That was the date of a letter to then-mayor Artur Ladebeck, in which Vriesen propounded the necessity for a new museum for Bielefeld. A year later, on January 13, 1959, a detailed plan for the required space followed. On July 6, 1959, Rudolf-August Oetker and Artur Ladebeck met for an extensive conversation; the only item on the agenda was the idea for the museum. On September 2, 1959, the City Council voted in favor of the plans for a new

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50 Years of the
Kunsthalle
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museum. A press release, prepared in advance and dated August 24, 1959, announced Rudolf-August Oetker's intention to fund a "new art house and museum for Bielefeld" through the Dr. August Oetker Stiftung, "which would provide the funds for the building and its interiors." Gustav Vriesen died at the age of just 48 on April 4, 1960, and his successor, Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke (b. 1909), took over in Bielefeld on July 1, 1962. He advanced the plans for the new building with enthusiasm and on September 10, 1962, just two months after beginning his job, he presented his scheme for the new museum. Plans were made for a competition that would include Philip Johnson, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, Karl Schwanzer (the architect of the so-called 20er building in Vienna, whose pavilion for the 1958 Expo in Brussels was transformed into a museum in Vienna) and Manfred Lehbruck, who had been commissioned to conceive a museum for his father, Wilhelm Lehbruck, in Duisburg—but it never took place. Instead, the commission went directly to the American architect Philip Johnson.

The first model for the Kunsthalle, covering an area of 40 x 40 meters, arrived in Bielefeld on December 13, 1963. A letter from Johnson, dated December 26, 1963, proposed a smaller version, because the cost for the initial design far exceeded the sum available from the Dr. August Oetker Stiftung. Johnson's second design planned for an area measuring 30 x 30 meters, and this size remained constant throughout the process. Even during this early phase, however, Von Moltke wrote to Rudolf-August Oetker on May 8, 1964, warning him that the reduced size of the space might eventually lead to the necessity of expanding the museum that had yet to be built.

The foundation stone was laid on September 21, 1966, and after a construction period of nine months, the topping out occurred on June 26, 1967. September 27, 1968, was set as the opening date. A piano concert was commissioned from Hans Werner Henze in 1967 for the occasion. Philip Johnson and Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke were supposed to speak around five in the evening, after the key was officially turned over. The opening exhibition would be *Sammlung Morton D. May* (Morton D. May Collection). Sibyl Moholy-Nagy was scheduled to give a ceremonial speech in the Rudolf Oetker Hall, and the pianist Christoph Eschenbach would debut the Klavierkonzert No. 2 by Hans Werner Henze. None of this, however, came to pass.

Beginning in August of 1968 protests over the name of the city's new Kunsthalle influenced public debate, and demonstrations occurred. After the Minister-President of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, Heinz Kühn, canceled his appearance, the City Council held a special meeting on September 23, 1968, resulting in the cancelation of the official celebrations. The Kunsthalle Bielefeld was opened on September 27, 1968, with a small circle of politicians and family members from the Dr. August Oetker Foundation in attendance.

The argument over the process of naming the Kunsthalle arose again during the Kunsthalle's thirtieth anniversary in 1998; a lecture by the Bielefeld historian Hans Ulrich Wehler in June 1998 served as the primary trigger for new debates, which resulted in the City Council deciding on October 29, 1998, to strike the name Richard Kaselowsky from the Kunsthalle's name, as well as from all printed materials, for good. From then on the institution was officially known only as the Kunsthalle Bielefeld.

In August 2017 the council also decided to switch out the 1968 dedication plaque in the entryway to the Kunsthalle, conscious that the fiftieth anniversary was fast approaching. With that, the names Richard Kaselowsky and Rudolf-August Oetker vanished after forty-nine years.

Even during the planning phase for the Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke felt that the smaller design would be too small in the future, and introduced the topic of an expansion. By 1979, eleven years after the opening, Von Moltke requested a concept for a new wing from Philip Johnson. Johnson declined, citing a lack of time as his reason. Around 1990 Von Moltke's successor, Ulrich Weisner became aware of Frank O. Gehry. He assured him of Philip Johnson's support for this project, and Gehry was commissioned to produce a design. The model was presented to the public on July 18, 1993, in the context of other architectural projects by Gehry. Ulrich Weisner's sudden death on August 27, 1994, marked the end of these efforts. His successor, Thomas Kellein—who became the Kunsthalle's director in 1996—continued to pursue the design, but the foundation's family rejected the idea. In 2003 Kellein presented the design by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov for discussion, which revived the topic of a new wing, but that, too, was unsuccessful. The design by the Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto, which Friedrich Meschede (director of the Kunsthalle from 2011 onward) presented to Günter Küppers, the chairman of the Förderkreis in 2013, did not find enough support among the citizens of Bielefeld.

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