

Heinz Bienefeld



Brickwork at Bonifatiuskerk, 1974.

In the Netherlands Heinz Bienefeld is completely unknown. He is also unknown to the general public in Germany, but he is a household name among colleagues. “Architekt der Stille” [Architect of Silence] and “Der Platoniker aus dem Swisttal” [The Platonist from the Swist Valley] are some of his nicknames. Peter Zumthor, who is not known as someone who praises other architects, is very impressed: “I was in Cologne a couple of months ago and young Peter Böhm was showing me around, and he took me to the Bienefeld houses. For the first time I managed to get a glimpse of the interior of two Bienefeld houses... it left a great impression on me. These houses are incredibly full of beautiful details... it was very expressive.” Belonging to the same generation as Karljosef Schattner and Gotfried Böhm, he is described by clients as a modest, eloquent yet often silent man. Like Carlo Scarpa and Sigurd Lewerentz, both of whom he admired and

Zumthor, *Atmospheres*, pp. 34–35.

was compared with, he is unique. In recent years there seems to be a reevaluation of his work, with a particularly strong interest from Japan and China.

Biography

Heinz Bienefeld was born on July 8, 1926 in Krefeld. Just like Mies van der Rohe, he comes from a family of artisans. One grandfather was a silk weaver, the other a bricklayer along with his uncles, and his father was a plasterer. As a 16-year-old student, he started working for a contractor from Krefeld, who also taught the inquisitive boy to draw, and Bienefeld took the opportunity to explore the library as well. There he found a trade magazine, which had a photo of the baptistry that Dominikus Böhm built in the Gedächtniskirche in Neu-Ulm in 1925. In the photo, we can see a star-shaped wall with light coming in from above that strikes the rough surface, creating a feeling of mystery. The photo captivated him, and thus he decided to become an architect. However, in 1943 he was called up for military service at the age of 17. In 1945, he was taken as a prisoner of war, ending up in Cambridge, England. There, he was given the opportunity to take an architecture course. He visited all kinds of modern buildings, including the London house that Walter Gropius built for Ben Levy in 1936. Initially, he was charmed by the Modern Movement, yet he remained under the spell of Dominikus Böhm. In 1948, he returned to Germany from internment and wrote a letter of application. He received a cool rejection and was advised to do a training first.

He took the entrance exam at the Kölner Werkschule led by Böhm. Three years later, he obtained his Meister diploma and was the only student to receive a stipend. This time, Böhm hired him in his office, and Bienefeld soon became his assistant. Böhm was primarily a church builder, and Bienefeld designed many glass windows, and developed brick facades for him.

In the office of Dominikus Böhm, he worked a lot with his son Gotfried Böhm. He recognized a like-minded soul in him, and they became lifelong friends. In 1953, the office won the competition for the cathedral of San Salvador. For the implementation, Bienefeld was sent to the US for six months, where the construction office was located. However, the contract was withdrawn and Bienefeld took the opportunity



Heinz Bienefeld (1926–1995).
(Photo: wikipedia)

to look at modern architecture in New York and Chicago. He became enthusiastic about SOM's Lever House and the Lake Shore Apartments, but when he saw the Woolworth Building, the 1957 neo-gothic skyscraper by Cass Gilbert, doubt struck. He was also impressed by a Japanese house from the 17th century that is in the MOMA, and became convinced that modern architecture can be done with wood. Once back in Cologne, he designed a house for himself with a flat wooden roof on steel columns, masonry discs and glass facades entirely in the style of Mies. It was never realized. For Bienefeld, his interest in the modern started to wane. To the dissatisfaction of his associate Gotfried Böhm, he began to delve into the ancient Greek and Roman architectural styles. He investigated the construction method, dimensional proportions and spatial qualities of the classics. In the discussions at the office, Bienefeld's unceasing search for the essence and substance of architecture is dismissed as 'nagging'.

After the death of Dominikus Böhm in 1955, Gotfried took over the office. Bienefeld stayed there until 1958 and then worked for Emil Steffann, who is primarily known as a church builder. Steffann stood for an architecture with modest means and a preference for simple geometric shapes. Steffann did not see him as an assistant but more as an equal, and he was permitted to work out projects independently.

In 1963, Bienefeld received his first major assignment: the restoration of the St. Laurentius church in Wuppertal that had burned down during the war. This project allowed him to start his own firm.

In that time he was also a teacher at the Kölner Werk-schule. There he met the jeweler Wilhelm Nagel and his wife. In 1966 he built a house with a workshop for them just south of Cologne. An anachronistic villa in Roman/Palladian style, it is one of the first postmodern houses. If Charles Jencks had been aware of this house, it would have undoubtedly been given a prominent place in his book *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*). Bienefeld himself was always horrified to be associated with the concept of postmodernism.

Bienefeld created around 40 houses, built three new churches (and restored several others), and participated



Dominikus Böhm, Neu-Ulm.
(Photo: Wikipedia)

UnCube Blog, Dec 2, 2014.

in countless competitions – winning several prizes in the process. Due to his refusal to make concessions, a number of these winning designs never came to fruition, and if they did, he often distanced himself from the final result. Bienefeld spent his entire life searching for the essentials of architecture. With every assignment he actually started from scratch, resulting in an ever-evolving style. His first houses are often Palladian or Roman, and later he evolved towards more contemporary views. One of his final houses was for his son in Berlin. This house is completely contemporary in style and design.

A constant factor in all his work is the traditional attitude and his tendency towards perfectionism. He referred to himself as a ‘detail fetishist’. For almost all his assignments, he also designed the door handles and lighting fixtures – so much so that a catalogue could be compiled of all the hardware he designed.

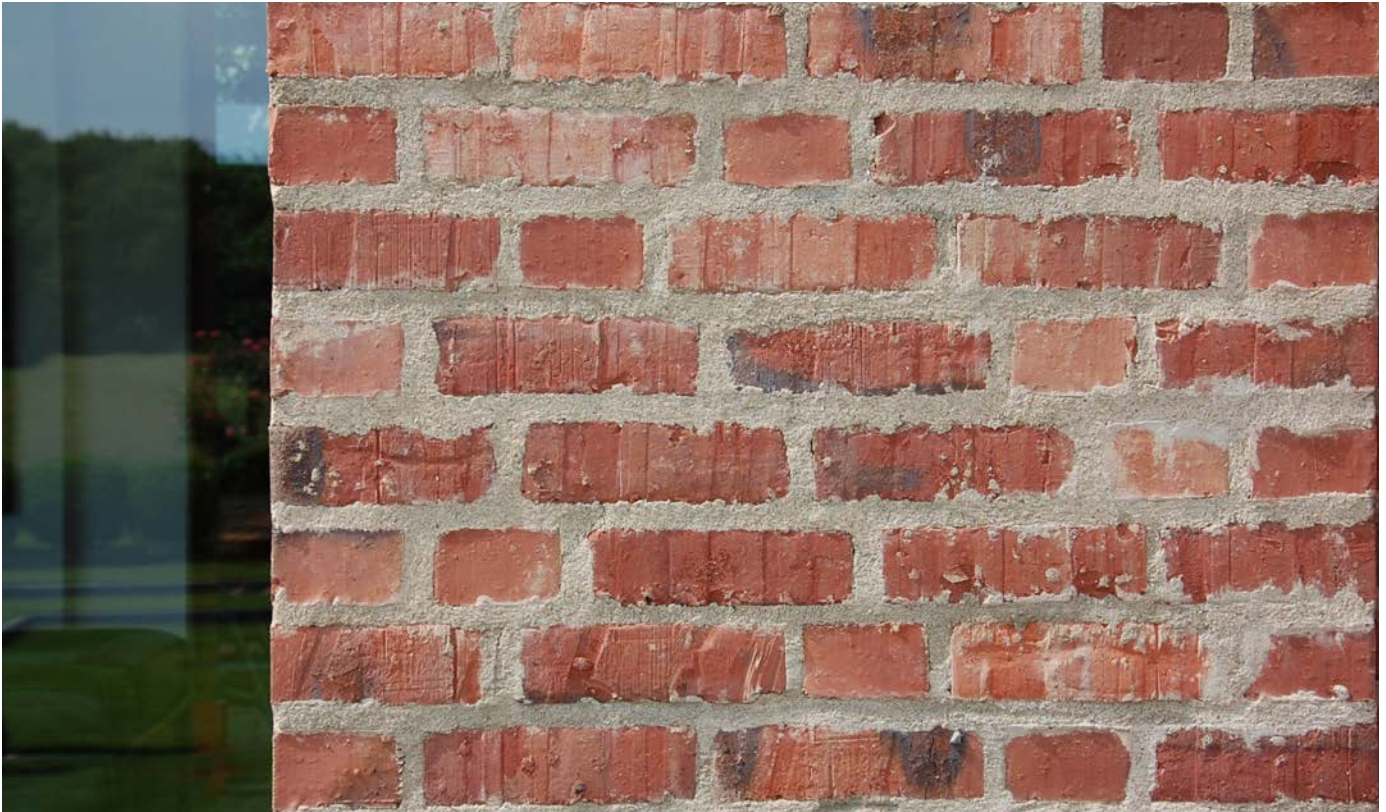


The priority in all his designs is the careful proportioning and arrangement of spaces. For Bienefeld, proportion means ‘connecting all aspects of harmony and uniformity’. Like Bruno Taut and Le Corbusier, Bienefeld developed his own measurement system. His children speak of how their father always measured buildings on holidays in Italy. He believes the Golden Ratio is beautiful, but lacks character. Due to its etymology, he controversially believes, the Golden Ratio is over-valued by lay-people who believe they can solve everything with it. Bienefeld was an admirer of the *modulor* by Le Corbusier, but he found it impractical. Like Palladio, he preferred proportions over fixed sizes, proportions such as 4:3, $\sqrt{2}:1$, $\sqrt{3}:1$, and so on.

A development can also be seen in his use of materials. Initially, he emphasized the purity of materials. For example, wood is left untreated because the treatment tends to destroy the original appearance, and the natural patina created by use over time adds character. “*Lieber Schönheit zeitlich begrenzen als sie nie haben*” [It is better to limit the beauty than to not have it at all]. Paint was rare in his buildings, as he preferred to use materials in their natural color. However, he made an exception in one of his last projects, the Kortmann house, where he uses a colorful range of bright colors.



Kortmann House, Cologne.
(Photo: Artblog Cologne)

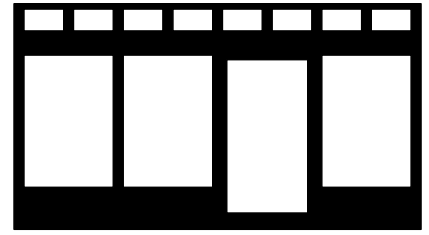


Brick is used backwards, so that the conveyor belt tracks adds visual texture to the stone. This was a trick Bienefeld used often. For floors, he re-oriented the ceramic tiles in the non-slip portions. At the Boniface church in Wildbergerhutte, he alternated layers of flat crooked stones with irregular large bricks, with fitted walls.

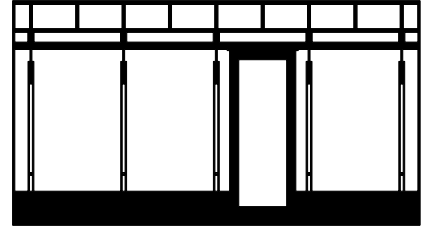
Welded connections are avoided as much as possible with steel structures. Beams are continuous and are not interrupted by columns. The steel parts are often assembled from several narrow profiles instead of one profile, so that they appear slimmer. He often convinced clients using silhouette drawings of window frames. When making wall openings, the glass plates are sometimes placed in grooves in the masonry or concrete. But to dramatize the view to the outside a window sometimes takes the form of a picture frame.

Tragically, he was diagnosed with liver cancer and passed away on 18 April 1995, at the height of his career. At this point, he was becoming widely recognized, also internationally, and he was being awarded high-profile projects. His son Nikolaus Bienefeld took over the office and completed his ongoing works.

Heinz Bienefeld was the first architect to receive the grand prize of the Bund Deutscher Architekten posthumously. In 1996, a major retrospective followed in DAM. Due to the often extensive construction time of his projects, he was still included in the German Architecture Yearbook for four consecutive years after his death.

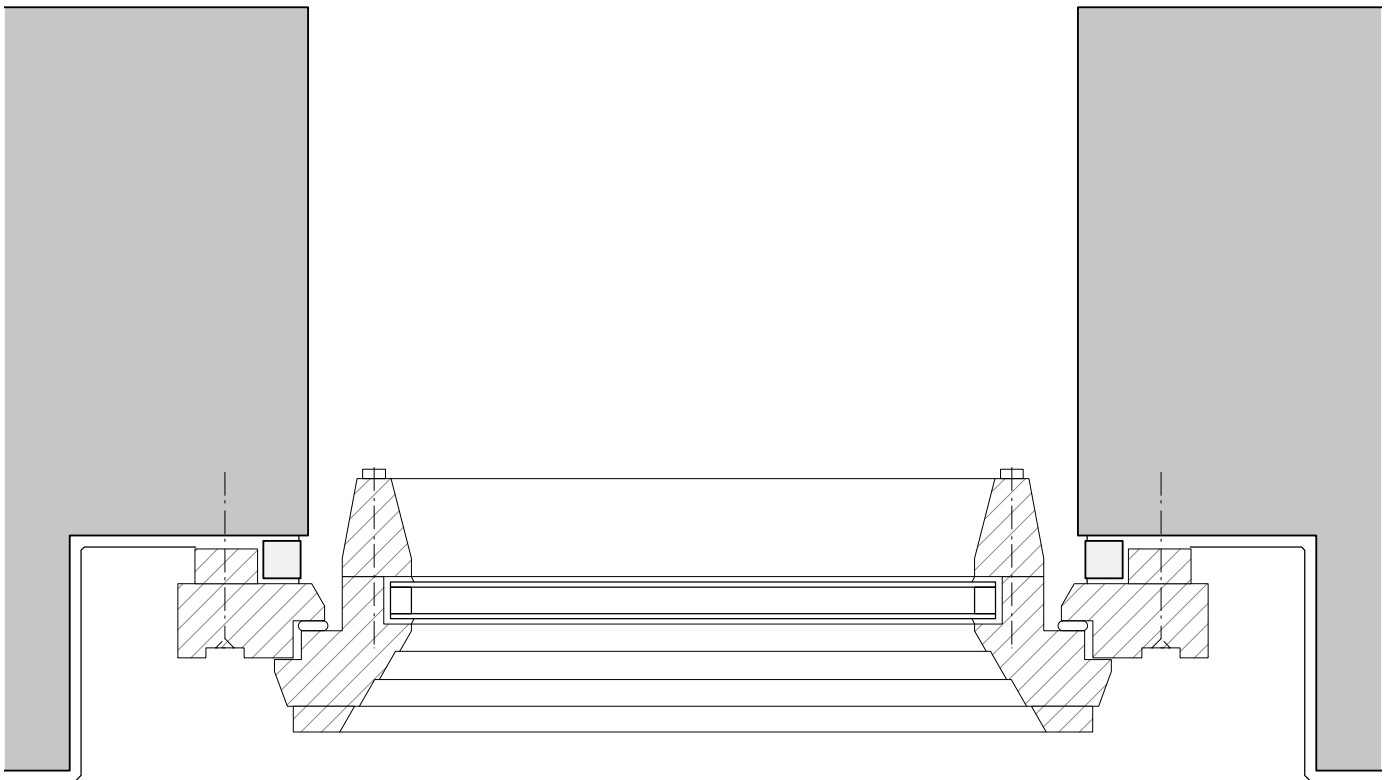


Traditional window frame.



Bienefeld window frame.

Bienefeld window frame detail.

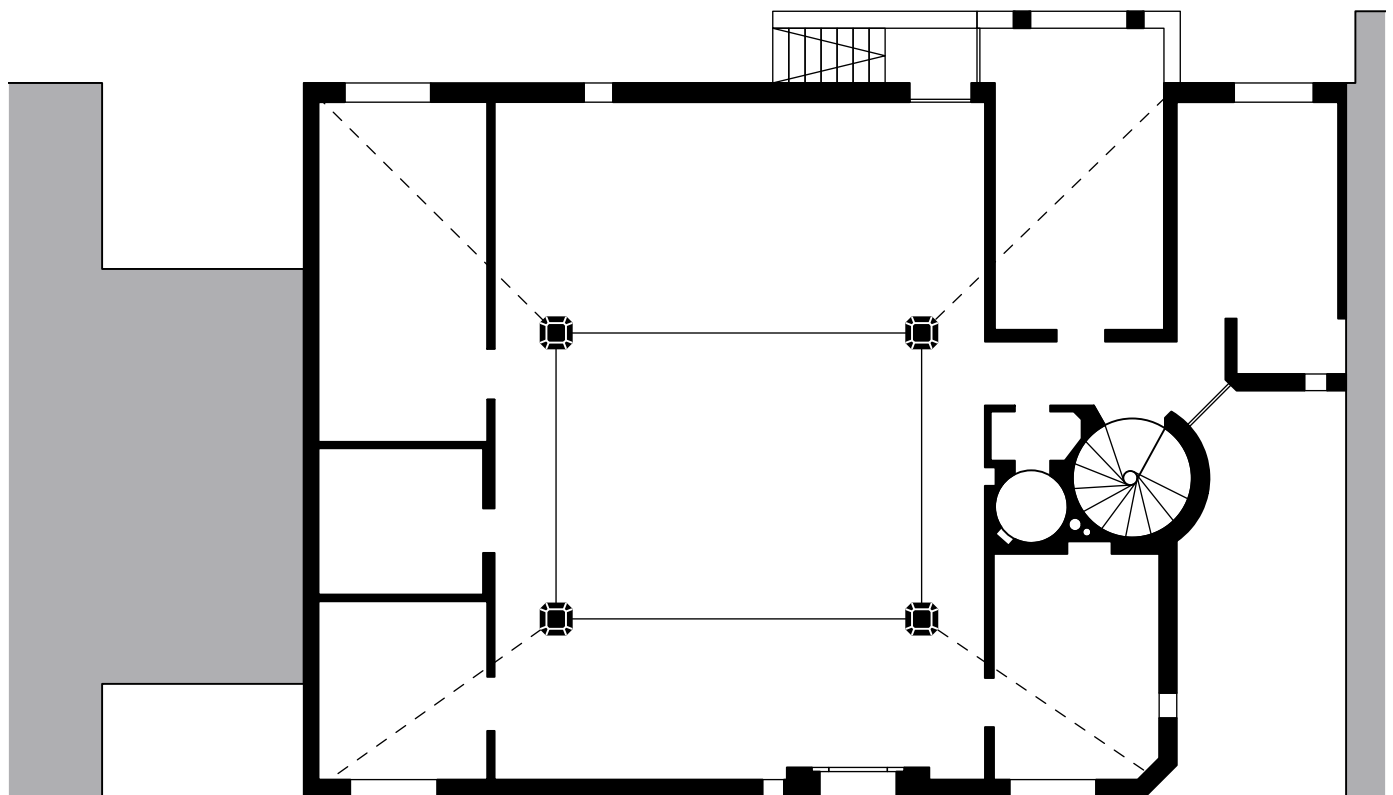


Haus Pahde

1972

He built a house in Cologne in the Rodenkirchen district for the Pahdes, a couple who happened to be musicians. The property is part of a continuous row of single-family homes in a potpourri of styles. The home has an introverted character, orienting around an atrium with a closed street wall. The facades are made of red brick facing backwards so the visible side had more texture. The pavement in front of the house is made of the same material as a facade, which gives the house a sense of belonging in its environment. The walls are made of solid brickwork that are also unfinished on the inside. The kitchen and bathroom tiles from the 19th century were reused by the couple. Another house by Bienefeld is nearby: the Heinze-Manke double house.

Floorplan.



Pahde House.



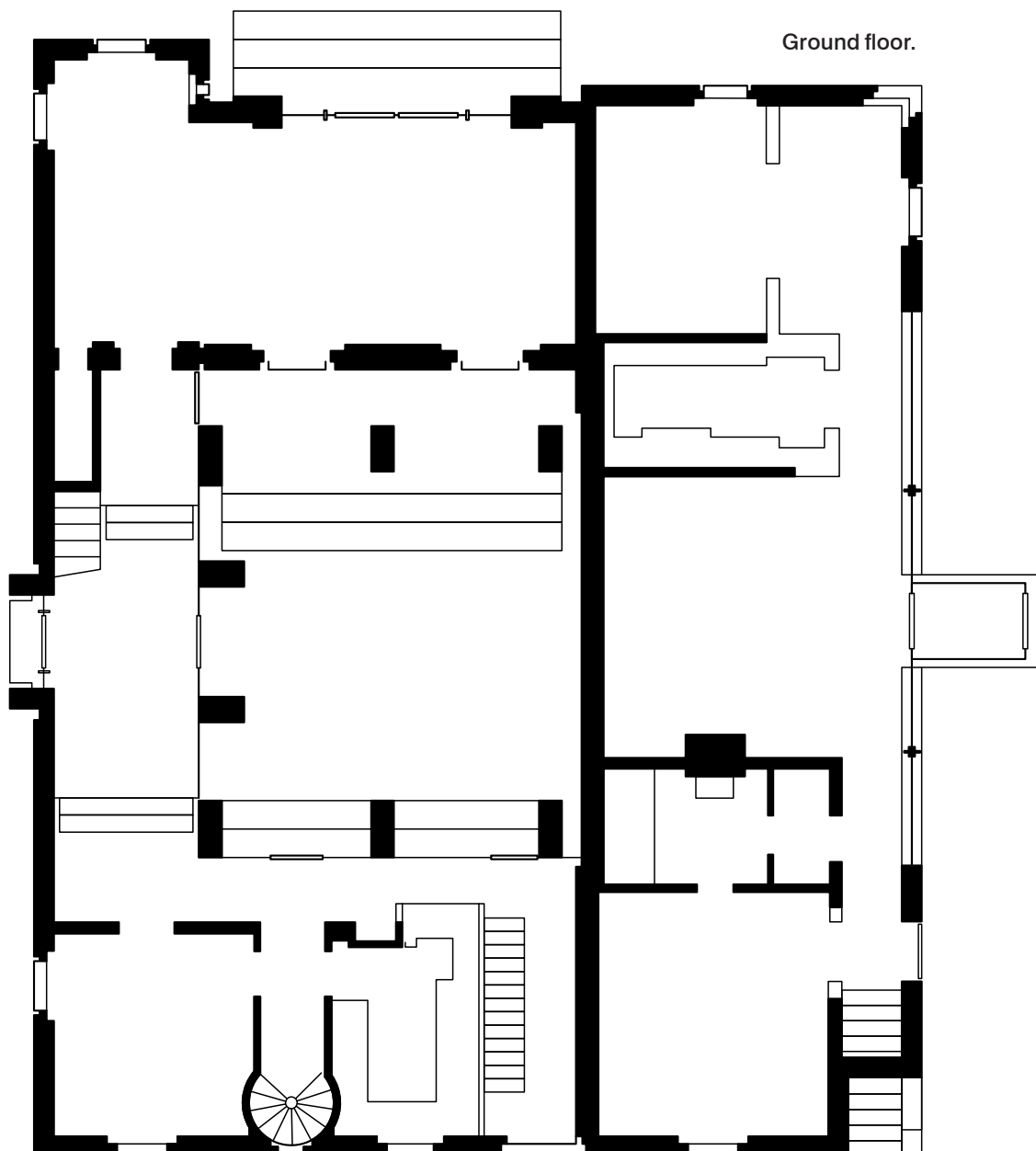


Pahde House.

Haus Heinze-Manke

1984

On the edge of the Rodenkirchen district, on a property with views to the Rhine floodplains, is a two-storey U-shaped house (Haus Heinze) and an oblong two-storey building volume (Haus Manke), with an apartment in the basement. Together they enclose an inner court. Haus Heinze is the most introverted/closed of Bienefeld's atrium house. In contrast, Haus Manke has a more open character. The construction time was four years, and over a thousand drawings were created. This volume was typical of the intensity with which Bienefeld worked.



Heinze-Manke House.



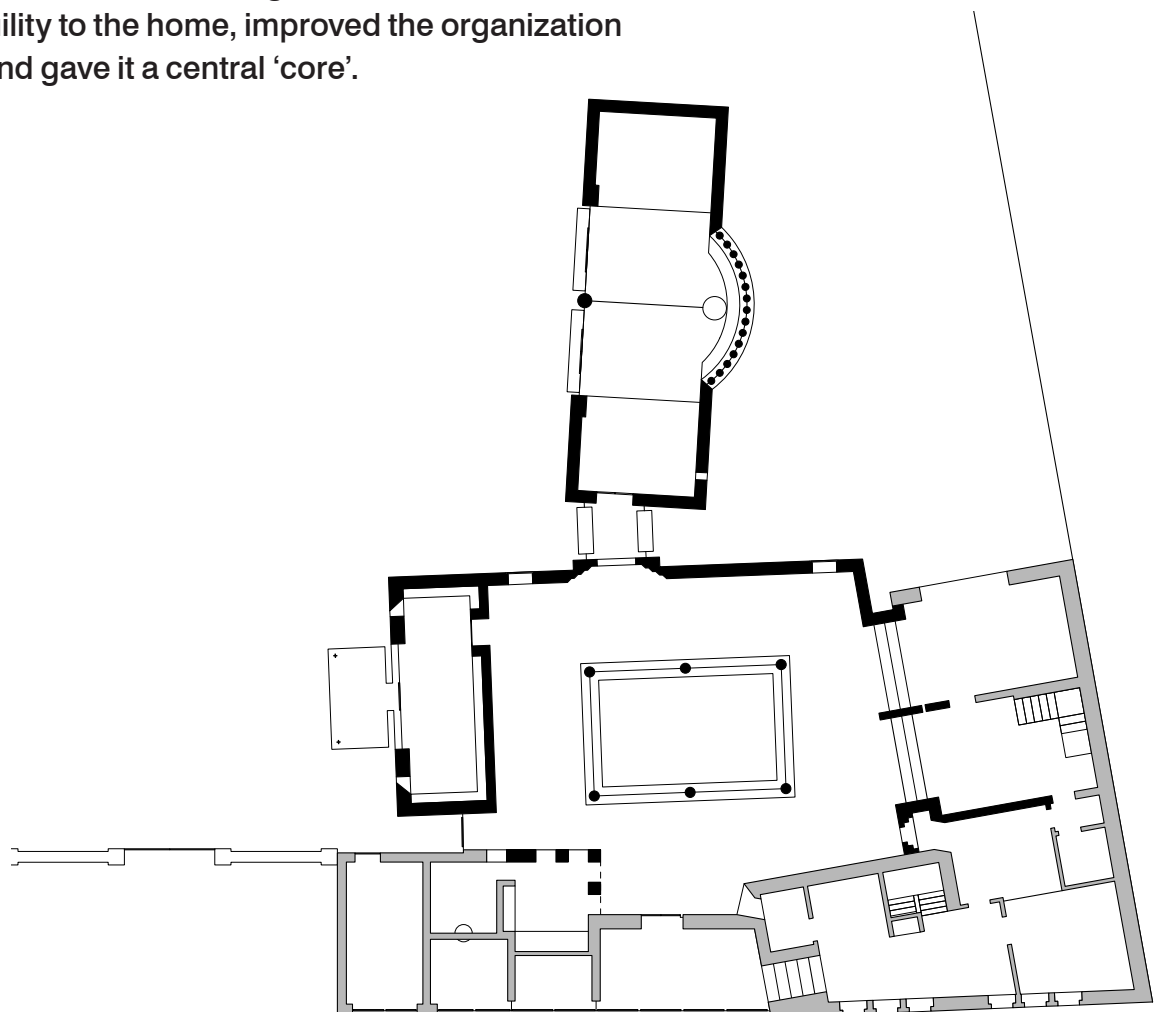
Heinze-Manke House.



Haus Kühnen in Kevelaer

1988

The Kühnen couple, both doctors, lived in a corner house from the 1950s. They had their house rebuilt in 1980 and expanded with two practice rooms. Unsatisfied, they decided to rebuild their house in 1988. Although they were interested in cultural affairs, they did not know which architect to commission. So they decided to go to the opening of a large architecture exhibition in Cologne. They were hesitant about taking on a celebrity architect such as Gottfried Böhm. Outside the crowds, they were introduced to Heinz Bienefeld. It clicked, and as a test they asked him to design a garden wall. When the wall was finished, the bricklayer living across the street told them that the wall was wrong, as Bienefeld used his signature rear-facing bricks, which the bricklayer saw as a fundamental error. But the couple liked the result and Bienefeld was commissioned to design the living room for the house. He created the living room as an atrium that brought tranquility to the home, improved the organization of the house, and gave it a central 'core'.



Kühnen House, ground floor.

In the summer, the atrium area can be opened to the sky. In the winter, the atrium can be closed with separate windows and the covered area can be heated. In the covered portions there were Gothic statues and East Asian art objects. The atrium is completed with a library and a garden room. The library is an introverted room with a view of the garden. The same stones are used in the atrium, the library floors and in the walls (but in a smaller size and with a carpet-like design). The garden room is an elongated high clear space with a view of the garden and the church tower of the town of Kevelaer. The floor is a fine-grained light-gray Estrich, with narrow marble strips, and the walls are made of stucco with marble additions. The wooden roof is supported by a white steel ridge beam. In the southern end, there is a large round window with blue mouth-blown glass, a reference to the glassblowers who used to work in Kevelaer. Once a month a full moon shines through the window and throws a blue light into the white space – creating a *Blue Moon*.



Atrium, winter arrangement with removable frames. (Photo: DAM Jahrbuch 1993)

After Bienefeld's death, the house was modified a number of times by his son Nikolaus Bienefeld, adding furniture and a bathroom with a toilet. He is currently working on the entrance gate to the garden based on a design by Bernard Korte, who also designed the landscape garden in Insel Himbruch.

Atrium, Kühnen House.







Kühnen House.







Haus Babanek

1997

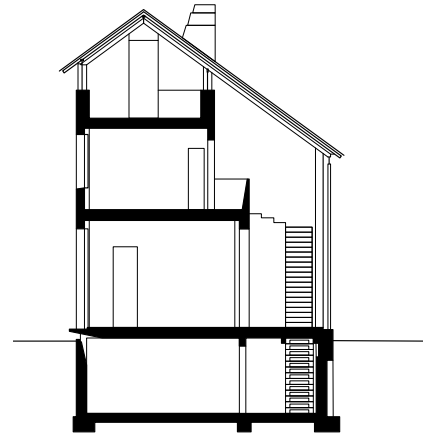
In Brühl, a district of Cologne, the Babanek house is located at the end of a cul-de-sac. Here, it is clear how Bienefeld is constantly striving for a simplification of building volume and detailing. The house has a simple shape with a stone and glass portion. The living areas are found in the heavy 'stone' volume, while the glass volume encloses a void with stairs. Defying expectations, the closed stone portion is located at the garden in the southwest, while the glass portion faces the street on the north east. Because the glass is behind the brickwork, it creates the illusion of a glass house surrounded by a layer of brickwork, with a roof floating above the volume. The construction time was long, partly because Bienefeld wanted a single bricklayer so that the workmanship would be uniform. In the interior, it is striking that the operation of equipment and lighting is done through switches and consoles, following the example of Chareau's Maison de Verre.

Bienefeld received the Mies van der Rohe Award for this work posthumously in 1996.

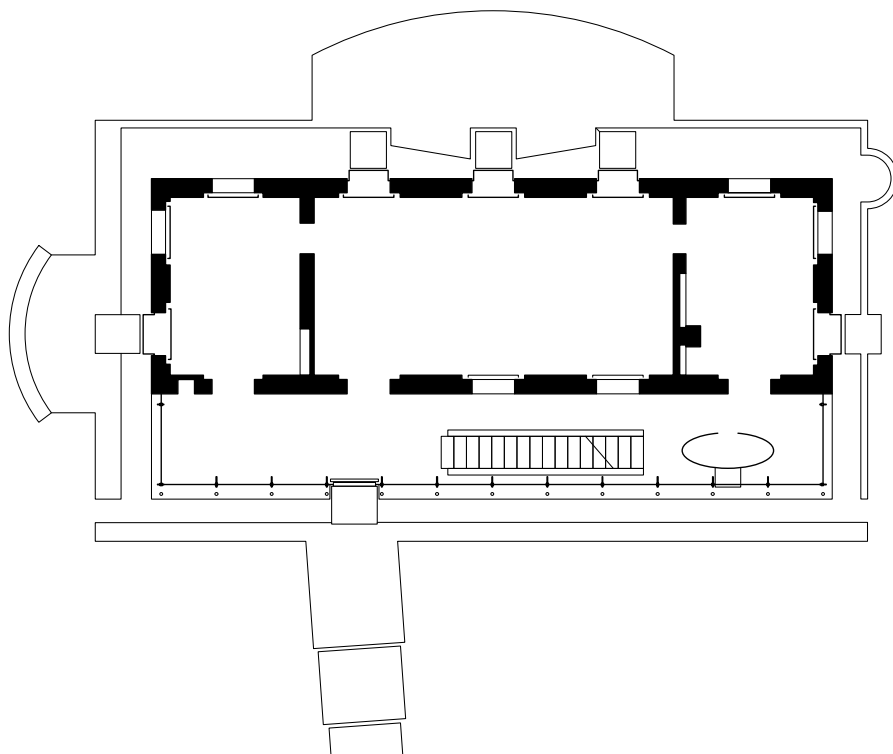
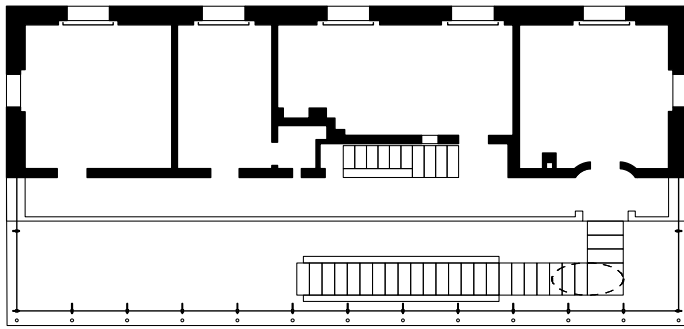
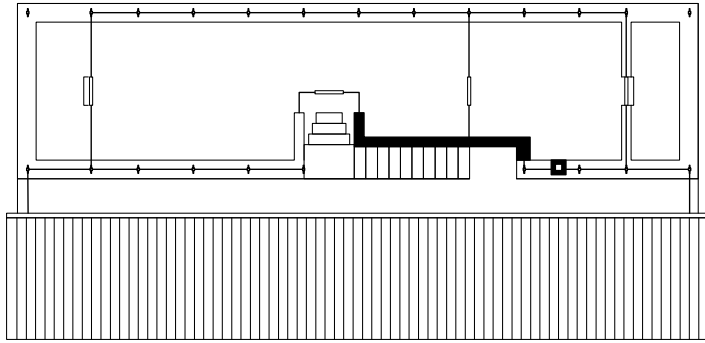


Babanek House.



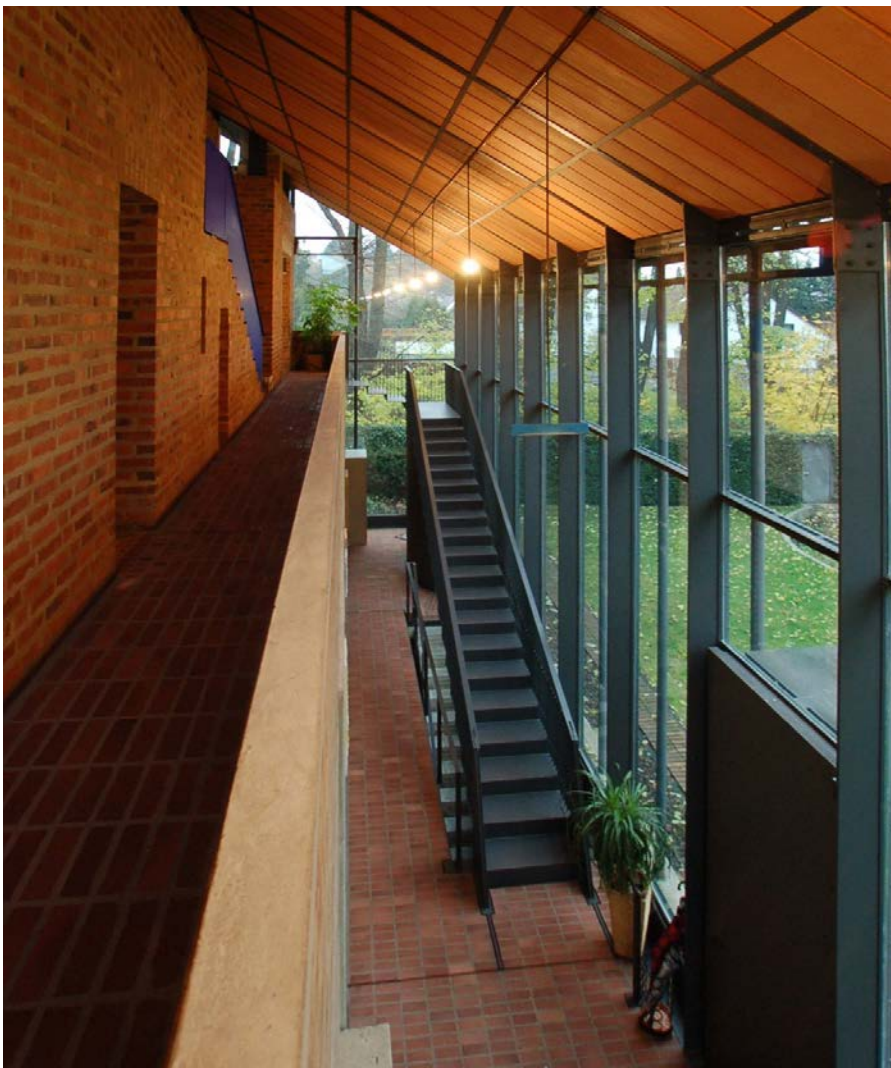


Babanek House, floorplans and cross section.





Babanek House.



Haus Kortmann in Cologne

1994

Anyone approaching the front door of the Kortmann's home will need to be warned that they will pass a masked man in black wielding a bat. Upon closer inspection, he will reveal himself as a work of art by Jeff Wall – an art piece from the couple's extensive collection.

Bienefeld had already rebuilt two homes for this couple, but this time they wanted to have a completely new house when a suitable location became available. Eventually they decided to renovate an existing house. These were actually two adjoining houses that were transformed into a unit of architecture, design and art. This was one of his last works, and with a construction time of one year, it was very short for Bienefeld. This was not the only unusual aspect since Bienefeld also wanted to merge architecture with abstract painting. Bold color combinations have been used for this purpose (incidentally only in the interior). Orange, pink and violet encounter one another. The colors are made from natural pigments, which change with the light intensity and weather. Malachite is used in the stairwell, with a green copper connection, a 'pink' is created using an English Red with a grey Lasur layer. The areas of color are not limited by the spaces – overflowing onto the doors and sometimes even turning corners. Brushed stainless steel plates are fixed to the floors with copper screws. The stairwell is reminiscent of the gallery of Le Corbusier's Maison La Roche. Nikolaus Bienefeld, who is not only an architect but also a furniture designer, painter, color expert and sculptor, played a major role in this project.



A picture of Jeff Wall at Kortmann House.



Kortmann House.





Cologne-Blumenberg Church Center

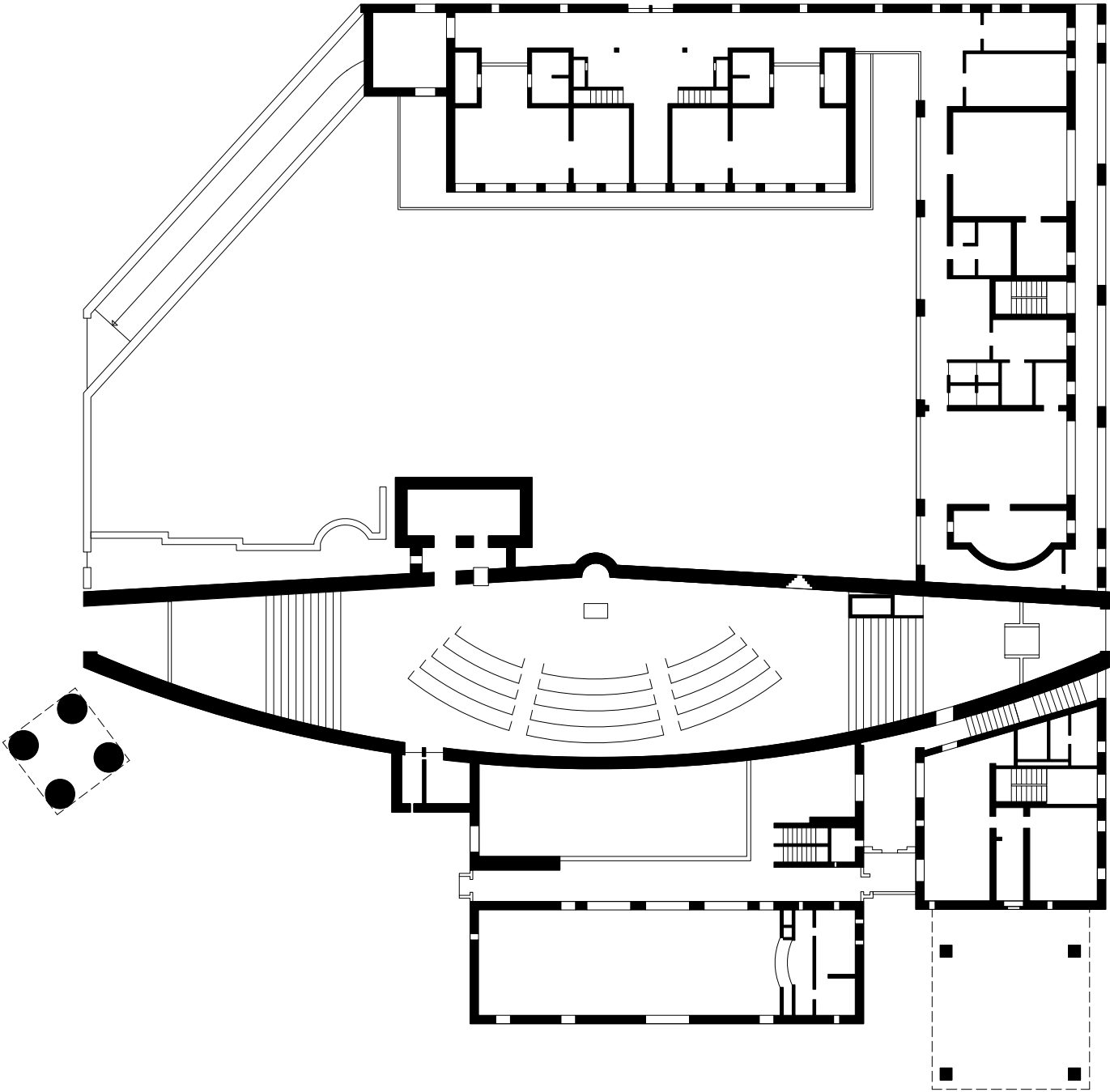
1995–2003

The St. Catherine of Siena church center is located in the Blumenberg district of northern Cologne, near the S-Bahn station. This was a project Bienefeld won in a closed competition by convincing the jury with his unconventional design, where the church space was placed across the complex. The congregation is also located across the longitudinal axis of the space shaped like a ship. The introverted church space runs right through the complex and connects the two streets with each other.

After the death of Heinz Bienefeld, his son Nikolaus further developed the design and worked it out in detail. Construction started in August 2001 and the church was inaugurated in December 2003. Originally, the walls were to be made of clean concrete, but in the end Nikolaus opted for concrete with a supplement of crushed quartz and granite gravel in a dozen earth-colored layers, the surface of which was 'broken' after demoulding. In addition to the church, there is also a daycare center with a playground on the inside of the complex – as well as a parsonage, a service home, rental accommodation, and a parking garage. These parts are also designed by Nikolaus Bienefeld.



Cologne-Blumenberg
church center.



Cologne-Blumenberg church center.



Cologne-Blumenberg church center.



Churches

Pfarrkirche St. Andreas (1964)
Eichholzerstraße 66

Wesseling – Keldenich

Pfarrkirche St. Willibrord (1968)
Willibrordplatz, Waldweiler

Mandern – Waldweiler
(just below Trier)

Pfarrkirche St. Bonifacius (1974)
Fritz-Schulte-Straße 2, Reichshof

Wildbergerhütte – Reichshof
(East of Cologne)

Gemeindezentrum Blumenberg (1996)
Schneebergstraße 63, Cologne

Cologne – Blumenberg

Friedhofskapelle Frielingsdorf (1970)
Alte Landsraße t.o. 24, Frielingsdorf

Lindlar – Frielingsdorf
(East of Cologne)

Kindergarden

Kindergarten Allerheiligenberg

Lahnstein (at Koblenz)

Residential

Haus Kühnen (1988)
Willibrordstraße 19, Kevelaer

Kevelaer
(Close to Weeze)

Haus Heinze-Manke (1984)
Auf dem Stumpelrott 53

Cologne – Rodenkirchen

Haus Pahde (1972)
Emil-Nolde Straße

Cologne – Rodenkirche

Haus Stupp (1978)
Käthe-Kollwitz Straße

Cologne – Rodenkirche

Haus Stein (1976)
Römerstraße 50

Wesseling

Haus Wilhelm Nagel (1968)
In Flecht / corner Pützstraße

Wesseling – Keldenich

Haus Schütte (1978)
Weizenweg

Cologne – Müngersdorf

Haus Helpap (1987)
Turmfalkenweg 10

Bonn

Haus Babanek (1996)
Donatusstraße 5

Brühl
(Close to Cologne)

Haus Klöcker (1975)
Laurentiusstraße

Lindlar – Hohkeppel

Haus Grodeck (1984)
Ziegelkämpe

Bad Driburg

Haus Kortmann (1995)
Wertmannstraße 23

Cologne – Lindenthal

Featured projects

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where more projects by
Heinz Bienefeld are marked.



Thanks

I would like to thank the Heinze family, Mrs. Pahde, Gerd and Hanna Kühnen, the Leiseifer family, Gabriele and Karl-Dieter Kortmann for the warm welcome in their homes. I'd like to thank Nikolaus Bienefeld for the information provided and the conversation about his father, and Martin Groenesteijn for his support.

🎯 Local Heroes is an initiative of Office Winhov in memory of Joost Hovenier who was always targeting new perspectives.

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Reach out if we missed you.

Local Heroes •12