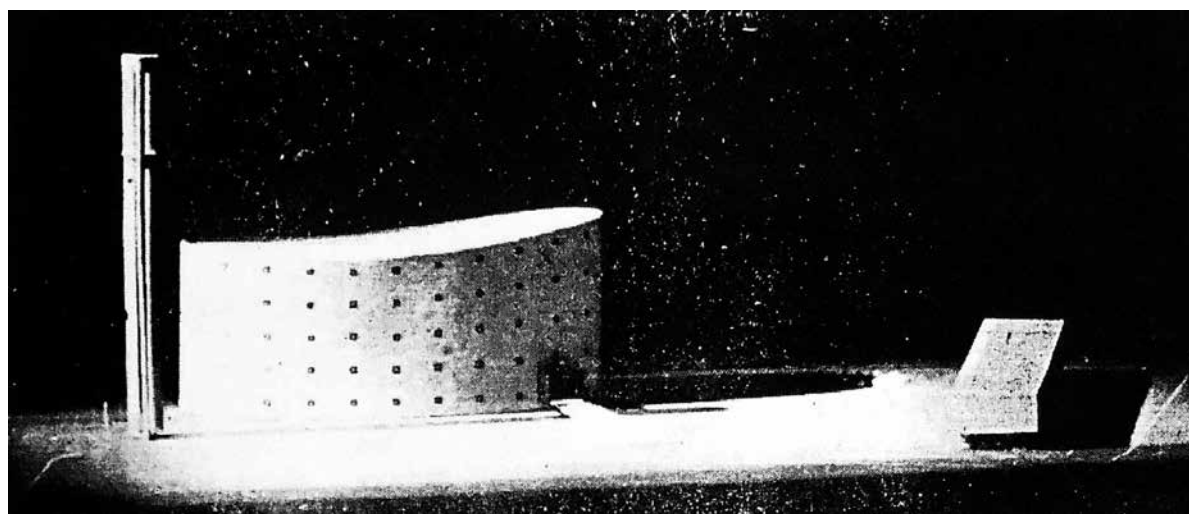


Peter Blundell Jones

...Münster



1 Model of Esser's St Sebastian as published in the local paper *Stadtanzeiger*, 1960

If you dip into almost any volume of *Buildings of England*, it is churches that gain Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's most immediate attention, not only because they are old and have historically interesting details and fittings, but because when he started the series they were still centres of the community and foci of settlements.¹ Looking back to the nineteenth century and beyond, almost the whole population attended Sunday worship, so the reading of wedding banns was simply the most practical way to inform the community. Churches had towers with bells, not only to be visible across the landscape, but to produce a sound that represented more or less the radius of the parish.² In the days before accurate clocks and watches, the peal prior to a service was a real call to attend, lasting long enough to bring people in. No surprise then, that at times of national emergency or celebration, church bells were also rung, or that considerable

sums were spent on bells and their towers. When people attended church and admitted to a confession, compulsory or voluntary tithes could be collected so the Church was well funded, with no worry about how to maintain its clergy or its buildings. But as atheism has grown and attendance has fallen off money has run short, and now even Canterbury Cathedral, Anglican seat of the first bishop of the realm, needs state subsidy for its fabric.³ The great nineteenth-century proliferation of varieties of non-conformism that produced a host of competing churches and chapels in every city has gone into reverse, many buildings being deconsecrated and sold off for conversion. New church buildings have become comparatively rare, and even important examples from the mid-twentieth century like the seminary at Cardross by Gillespie Kidd and Coia have been abandoned. There is little

opportunity for architects to explore the possibility of new liturgical expression and some members of the clergy actually relish abandoning the accumulated trappings of worship to start again from scratch in an 'upper room' as in the days of Jesus Christ.⁴

Things are not very different in Germany and, as congregations dwindle, parishes are doubling up to conserve resources. This was the reason for the building of one of the few new churches seen in recent years in a Cologne suburb, by Sauerbruch Hutton.⁵ It actually replaced an existing mid-twentieth century church of dismal quality on the same site, but rebuilding was only possible thanks to the sale of the site of another of their churches. In the south Münster suburb where St Sebastian is located, falling attendance also prompted a combination of parishes and it is hardly surprising that a large and well-built traditional church from the 1920s was chosen for preservation rather than the materially failing one from 1962, particularly as the latter, closer to the city centre on the major road Hammerstrasse, occupied a more valuable site. The redevelopment fell at a time of economic prosperity, when the German Government had promised universal provision of kindergarten places and new institutions needed to be built, so this was an obvious social choice, on a site that could also support some good quality housing. A brief was drawn up and a competition held, which Münster-based Bolles+Wilson won by proposing to convert the church into the required kindergarten, a strategy pursued by only one other of the entrants. Far from lending itself to the new purpose, the church's

volume presented about as challenging a conversion as could be, and no money was finally saved through the retention of its fabric. It has to be justified instead in terms of memory and *genius loci*.

Rhetorical structures

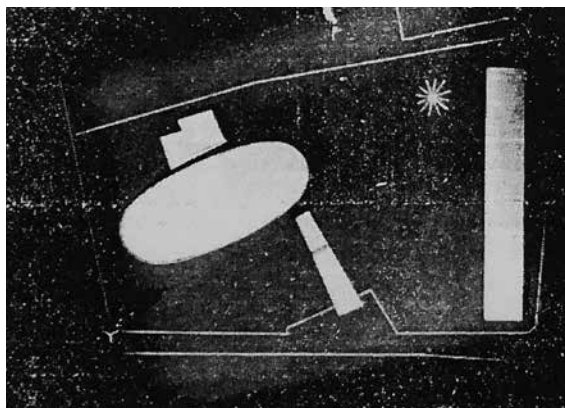
Churches have a special place in the evolution of Modernist architecture. If the Bauhaus with its boxy forms was supposedly 'rational', representing clear scientific thinking and logical distribution of functions, Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp was by contrast 'spiritual', declaring through its irregular sculptural form a concern with otherworldly values. When first completed, it caused puzzlement among the more rational of Le Corbusier's followers, even provoking harsh criticism from James Stirling in *The Architectural Review* who for a while felt betrayed by the master,⁶ but with hindsight it marked a general tendency among architects of the 1950s and 1960s to regard a church as an opportunity for formal experiments and rhetorical gestures, and to create a distinct accent amid the repetitive boxy machine-like forms of ordinary buildings. Alvar Aalto was particularly adept at this, allowing himself great license with sculptural form in churches like that at Vuoksenniska, 1956, in his native Finland, but just as effectively making more modest local foci, for example with his pair of suburban churches in Wolfsburg, Germany. When he had the chance he also built groups of sculptural buildings for art and culture, as for example in the small Finnish towns of Rovaniemi and Seinäjoki, differentiating their purposes by exaggerated functional expression: monopitch tower for council chamber, extravagant light scoops for library. The presence of such a

groups of buildings as a kind of acropolis formed an effective landmark against the background of surrounding sprawl, achieving an acuteness of place that is otherwise rare in the modern town.

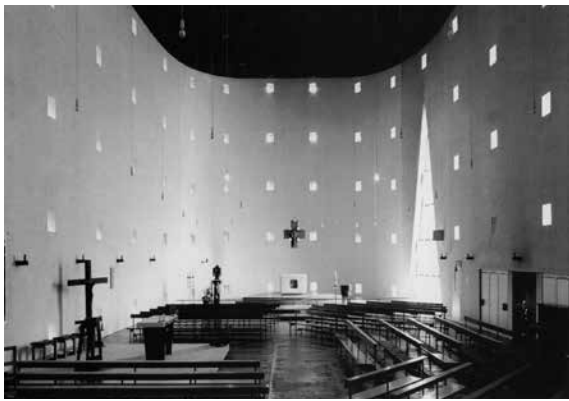
St Sebastian Münster

It was not inappropriate in the immediate postwar period to focus on a church, for parishes still had presence, and a church could claim to represent the community. St Sebastian in a south Münster suburb was designed by Münster architect Heinz Esser in 1960 and completed in 1962. He was a figure normally more at home in the Miesian mode, but he splashed out on that occasion with dramatically contrasting forms for church, belfry, sacristy, and parish offices, deployed in a processional sequence [1–3]. Unfortunately funds never stretched beyond making the church; a long oval volume with a slightly bowed roof rising at the ends. Its tall, thick outer wall was broken only by the odd triangular window at the southeast corner and a peppering of tiny ones. The effect was originally starker when the whole thing was clad in white Carrara marble [3] but technical failure led to the replacement of this cladding with brick in 1968. The altar was set at first to east on the major axis [4], but to gain greater togetherness it was later swung to north on the cross-axis. The great echoing volume with its scattered pinpricks of light evoked an appropriately sacred atmosphere.

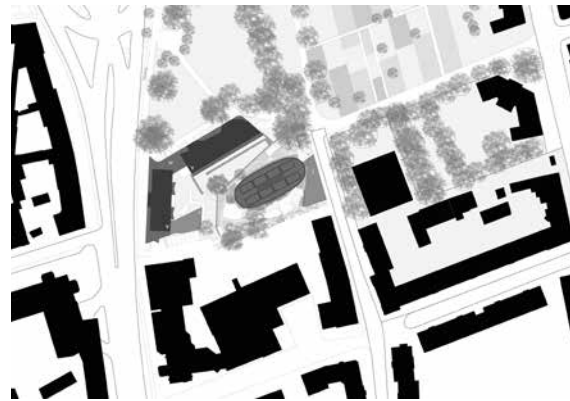
When developing their entry for the limited architectural competition held in 2009, Bolles+Wilson saw the church not only as an interesting and distinctive building in its own right, but also as a landmark in the city that had already become embedded in people's memories.



2, 3 Esser's church; general plan as published in *Stadtanzeiger* and photo on completion with white marble façade that later failed.



4 Interior of Esser's church looking towards altar illuminated by the triangular stained-glass window to right.



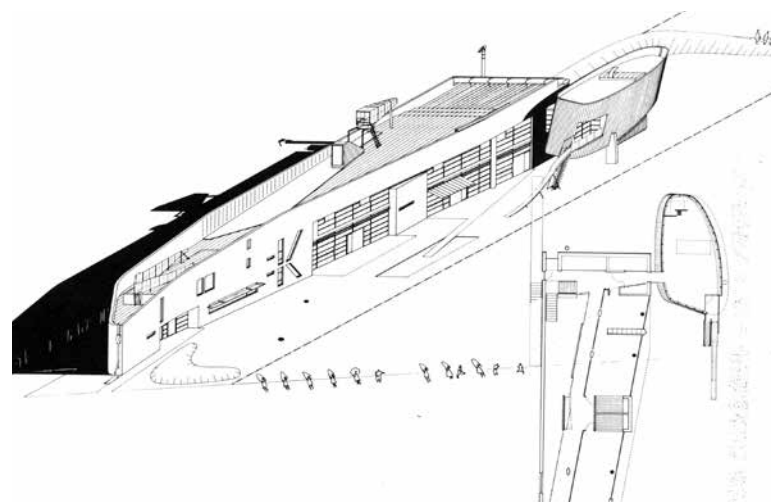
5 St Sebastian, centre. Bolles+Wilson's site plan, adding a triangular wing to the east of the oval church, and making an enclosing L-shape of housing to west and northwest on to Hammerstrasse and park. North and city centre are top.

They soon realised that the northwest corner of the site could easily take the mixed housing development, including sheltered housing for old people, some normal social housing, and some sold-on owner-occupier flats including group ones for people wishing to opt out of the single occupant formula [5]. The main question was how best to turn the church into a kindergarten. Esser's original concept of a series of discrete objects on a naked platform was no longer relevant or tenable, for both kindergarten and housing needed secure gardens, so a boundary line had to be drawn between them. On the west, the busy Hammerstrasse could be completed with housing, which folded around in an L-shape to border the park to north. Diagonal placing of the fence allowed most of the intervening space to become garden for the housing with garages beneath, leaving the area south of the church as the kindergarten playground. On a new project the oval volume might have been more advantageously placed, but it could of course not be moved. The act of enclosure was completed with a couple of low wedge-shaped volumes, one extending the south end rear of the housing, the other completing the street to east of the church and forming an entrance wing for the kindergarten.

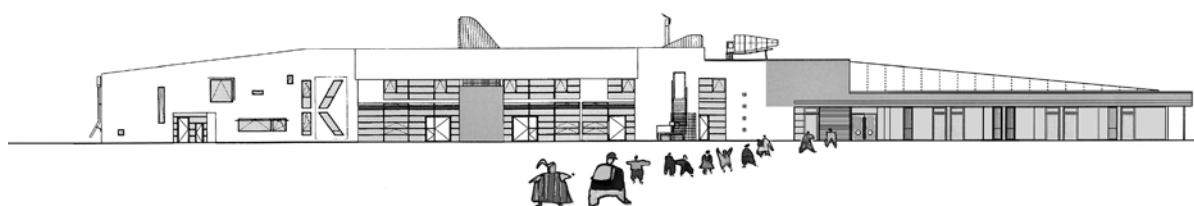
Kita Frankfurt-Griesheim

Bolles+Wilson already had experience of kindergartens, having built a notable one in Frankfurt in 1993, one of their very first projects [6, 7]. It occupied a narrow rectangular east-west site caught between a pair of narrow north-south lanes, part of the grid formed when fields were turned into allotments, which can still be seen in the background [8]. Adjacent to the west is a housing estate, to the northeast at some distance an elevated ring road, to the south again roads, and eventually the old village of Griesheim. This humdrum small-scale context has no obvious accents. The architects made the

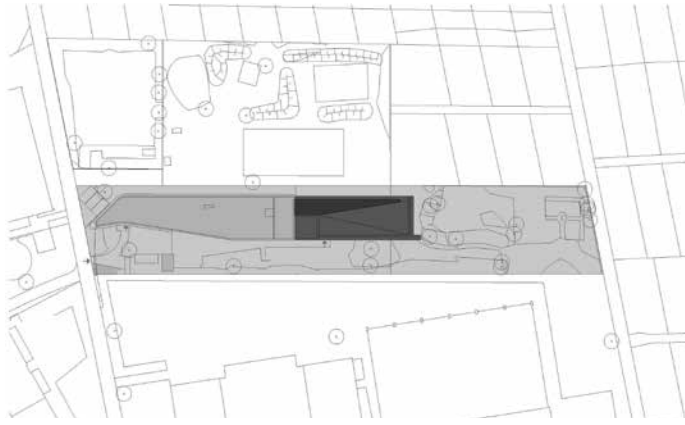
most of the site with a linear south-facing wall of building which gives onto a pool of protected play space with sandpit, slide, etc. To acknowledge the entrance at the west end, they broke from the parallel, developing a tapered plan that turned the main façade to be seen obliquely on entry to the site while leaving the best part of the outdoor space by the entrance. The gradually widening internal spaces accommodate the group rooms, and running stairs make the most of the contrasted levels. The space at the back culminates in a two storey workroom which is day lit from the roof. Interestingly, the architects' initial project [see 6] included an irregular oval pavilion



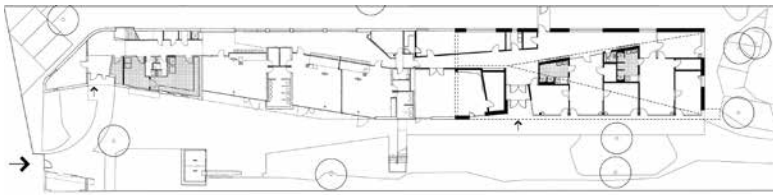
6 Bolles+Wilson, initial project for the kindergarten in Griesheim, suburb of Frankfurt, 1993, projection and part plan.



7 South elevation of the Kita Frankfurt Griesheim with recently added extension, right.



8 Kindergarten site plan with extension shown darker. The surrounding pattern of allotments divided by narrow lanes remains visible. North is top.



9 Kindergarten Frankfurt Griesheim, plan including extension to east.

on legs somewhat similar in shape to St Sebastian, but it was not the whole thing. This element was intended as the children's sleeping room, given a protective feel and made tree-house-like with its steps and a slide to counterpoint the rest of the accommodation. It would have presented a more convincing climax to the whole spatial progression, but was cut for economy. Generally speaking, the long, low building offered little opportunity for architectural rhetoric, its sphere of influence being appropriately local, so its development required cheerful forms and colours to stimulate the children in their everyday life rather than making any kind of public or monumental statement. The south façade was the principal opportunity and carried a lively assortment of windows including big double storey ones with

unfolding sun-blinds for the group rooms where the children spend most of their time, but there is also a big window playfully made in the form of the letter K for *kita*, the German for what we mistakenly call a kindergarten. The roof deck was also initially seen by the architects as a potential play space, but that also proved too ambitious.

The small scale and highly specific design helped to establish a friendly atmosphere to stimulate the children's imaginations and, after twenty years, the architects were invited back to design an extension, more allotment land having been purchased to the east. It was completed in 2014. Further group rooms at ground level were requested along with toilets and offices, and have been added under a gently sloping roof in an economical manner, letting the rear corridor taper away.

The extension has been completed in a straightforward and economical manner, with a change in style and technology that shows the architects moving on rather than aping their earlier work. Again it is the south façade that has received the main attention, though, through its scale, transparency, sun protection, and point of transition between inside and out.

St Sebastian's conversion

St Sebastian's church was hardly suitable for use as a kindergarten, with its unusual height, deep span, and tiny windows, for kindergartens are usually set at ground level with intimate connection to the outside for sunlight, air, and space for play and socialisation. By contrast the church was fortress-like, in effect four storeys high, and its landmark value lay in the very scale of the embracing wall, which would be destroyed if interrupted by adding normal windows. But it contained far more volume than was needed by the kindergarten, so only a storey and a half had to be filled. New doors and windows could be added in holes left by the former sacristy with bays projecting at floor level without destroying the visual continuity of the wall above.

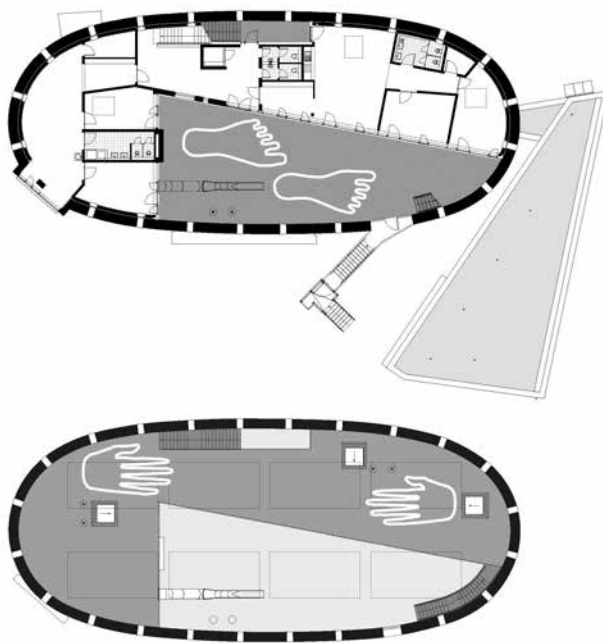
Bolles+Wilson's major design move was to open-up the leftover volume to daylight, using it as a two-level indoor playground. Leaving the original windows as open air holes, this volume could be defined bureaucratically as external, serving climatically as a buffer zone and avoiding insulation problems, but with children able to play inside whatever the weather [15, 16]. The lower rooms were constructed as a building within a building, taking advantage of the possibilities of *plan libre* and changing plan from



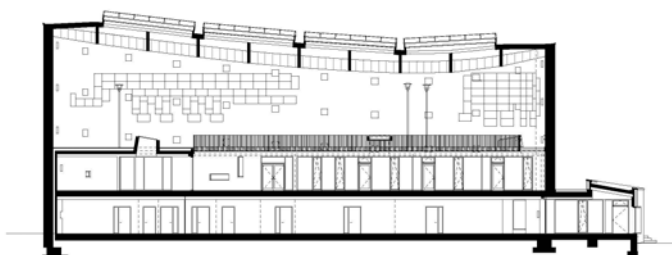
10, 11 Kindergarten Frankfurt Griesheim, The original building, left, and the newly built extension, right, seen from the other end.



12 Conversion of St Sebastian, ground floor plan. Entrance is from the east, playground to south and west. The new wedge-shaped building bottom right includes kitchen and dining room.



13, 14 Conversion of St Sebastian, middle and upper floor plans. The upper group rooms open onto the inner court, which then takes over completely at the top level. The giant hand and footprints are printed on the green floor covering.



15 West-east section showing the two floors of kindergarten rooms and the open top-lit volume above.

floor to floor since there was no structural skeleton. Service rooms were placed to the north and children's group rooms to south, opening to the garden. A new entrance was made at the east end connected with the administration wing, while the single pointed triangular stained glass window could be redeployed as a two-level entry, conveniently accepting the connecting staircase between internal and external play areas which also serves as fire escape. Access to ground floor rooms is by a corridor that tapers with reducing traffic, and the main staircase, starting in a lobby on the north side to meet fire regulations, runs in linear form up the north wall, carrying on up to the floor above. As this stair is echoed by another at the opposite corner linking the inner playground levels, pedestrian movement, always a concern for Bolles+Wilson,⁷ is consistently in an anticlockwise direction.

The children's accommodation consists of separate flat-like units, each with group room, cloakroom, and a bedroom area for daytime rest [17]. They therefore have a second home to which they can retreat, made more private than the garden or the shared indoor play area, and scaled-down to child size. The indoor playground [see 16] is brightly lit through the roof lights, but also well ventilated for solar gain and possible smoke evacuation and the floor, which needed a soft surface for safety, has been finished in bright green with giant footprints for decoration. To damp resonance, acoustic tiles have been added in a playful way, just about recognisable as animal profiles. It is a lively, dynamic space, with a children's slide between levels, and is easily supervised from an upper vantage point. The dividing wall between levels inflects the whole space south. For the groups of the upper level the indoor space is effectively their outside world, though everyone can also descend to the outside garden when weather permits.

The housing project

The housing is presently under construction and should, when complete, blend well into the city. Typical of Bolles+Wilson is the clever exploitation of ends and corners to produce spatial variety in the flats, and there is consistently advantageous exploitation of irregular plan angles. There will be appropriate contrasts in the



16 View from the top floor east end, showing the upper volume of the former church and the daylight flooding in through the roof. Climatically it serves as a buffer space.



18 The upstairs group room at the west end where the windows break through the old church wall.

façades, given the larger scale to north and west where it faces street and park, and balconies are added on the calmer, better orientated inward side. In plan, the residential part is essentially inward looking, so that stairs, lifts, and access

galleries create a buffer against road noise and pollution. In section, a largely glazed ground floor will enliven the street front and assure continuity of urban life, while three storeys of hanging walls above mask the residential levels,

punctuated by tall inter-storey windows for stairs and smaller ones at each level for corridors and service rooms. At ground level there are garden facing units with garden terraces, a bicycle store, and a community kitchen/dining-room for those in need of a warm midday meal, which in Germany is referred to as the Bielefelder model. The uppermost level is a lively roofscape of penthouses set back to reduce visual impact on the street, while creating open terraces, which look across the city. The classic formula of base, *piano nobile* (the flats) and attic is recreated in a modern manner and the articulation of units can be traced by an external observer.

Site as palimpsest

Ever since their astonishing debut with Münster City Library, still a wonderfully inspiring and successful building,⁸ Bolles+Wilson have had a merited reputation as contextual architects, always dedicated to understanding the givens of a site and locality. Although it is difficult to show the virtues of this approach in a limited range of images, it has always produced pieces of architecture richly relevant to their setting and satisfyingly varied in content. With this reputation, it is hardly surprising that they chose to keep St Sebastian's Church even though it was such an unlikely candidate for use as a kindergarten. Many technical complications emerged. Following the competition the architects discovered not only the necessity of lowering the main floor but also that the roof had been poorly built, so that it had to be completely replaced. Peter Wilson admits the whole thing ended up probably more expensive than an entire new building would have been. All the same, the housing development pays for the kindergarten and the retention of the church will be increasingly appreciated as the architecture of that currently despised period becomes more rare. But it is only as an exterior that it survives, for in the kindergarten interior there remains scarcely a hint of its former ecclesiastical existence, no recognition for example of where altar or font were, no sense of a former holiness. So Esser's interior space and its intended atmosphere of sanctity has gone, leaving one to wonder whether



17 Children's group room at ground floor level looking out to open-air playground.



19 Kindergarten from the southwest with playground, showing new two storey bay that breaks through the old wall. The upper window is that seen in [16].



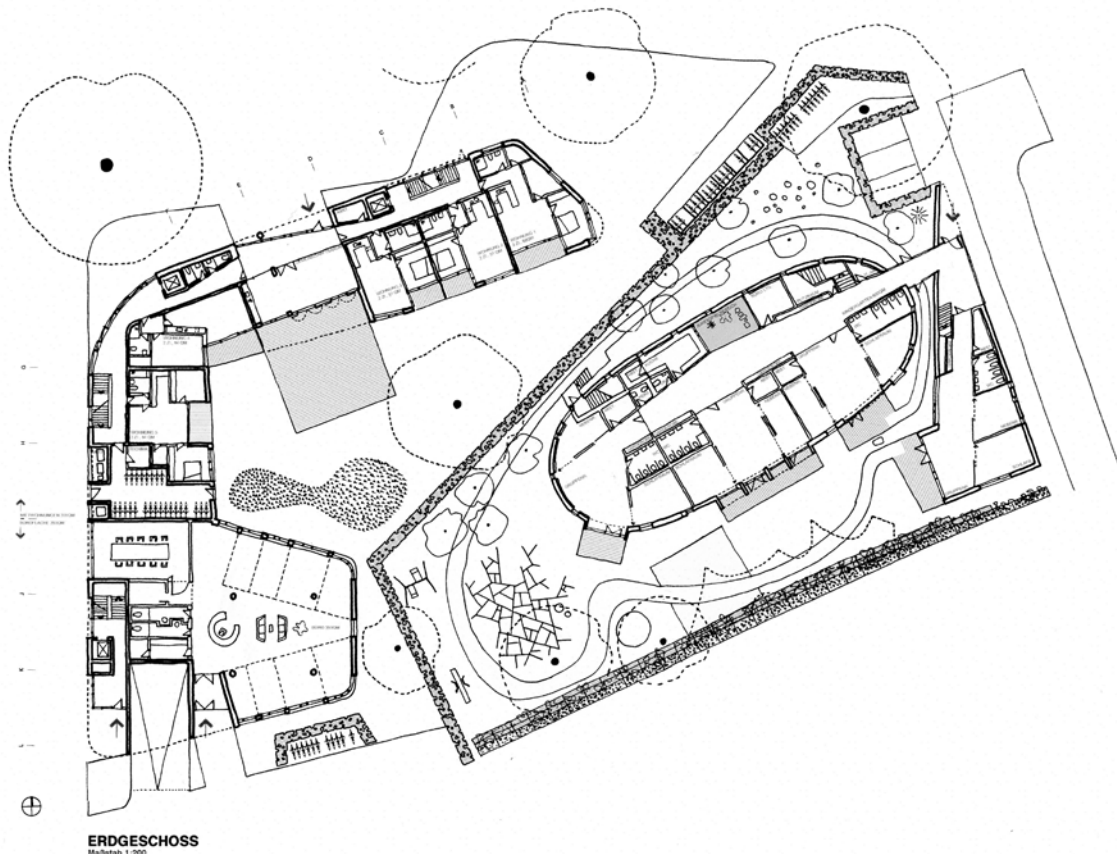
20 The entry corner seen from the northeast with the small wedge shaped wing added by Bolles+Wilson to close the space on the street.

this will ever be regretted. Period photographs do of course help one to imagine it. The converted building does have its own values, including an intriguing complexity and shifts of scale, which would not have emerged in a merely functional and economic design, while the great roofed upper space – outside/inside as it were – would never have been affordable or justifiable as new build. The trouble with so many straight modernist buildings of the postwar period, if not merely overwhelmed by a technique of standard components on a repetitive system, was that they became such bland and reductive statements of bureaucratically defined institutions. A prescribed brief and building regulations failed to provide anything uniquely identifiable or surprising, just the dull minimum, and often without revelation of their being occupied by children. There was usually little reaction to surroundings or reflection of the past, the context being understood as a blank slate without consideration of local history.

One could suggest an alternative general reading of architecture that seeks a less absolute 'solution' to less tightly defined 'problems'. It would instead see all sites as palimpsests of history, with buildings present for limited periods but making a persistent accumulation. The Mediterranean hill towns that so many architects admire on holiday are the result of centuries if not millennia of accretions, and not all the additions have been well executed, but the complexity of the whole carries a shared social memory. When it comes in such towns to replacing some part of the fabric, the practical limits of scale on any individual project tend to make some response to the surrounding fabric compulsory, and the task therefore easier. Such collaged concoctions have not always been well received by architects, who are traditionally seduced by the lure of monuments and belief in their mythical unchanging status. A preference for the normative and the individual genius has been encouraged by art history and by the perpetuation of examples in print, but it may be a misunderstanding. Even great institutions like the Palace of Westminster or the Bank of England turn out, on close



21 Housing elevation facing park to north, with church behind.



22, 23 Housing development, ground floor plan with kindergarten and first floor plan, as presented for the competition project. North is top; for context see [5].

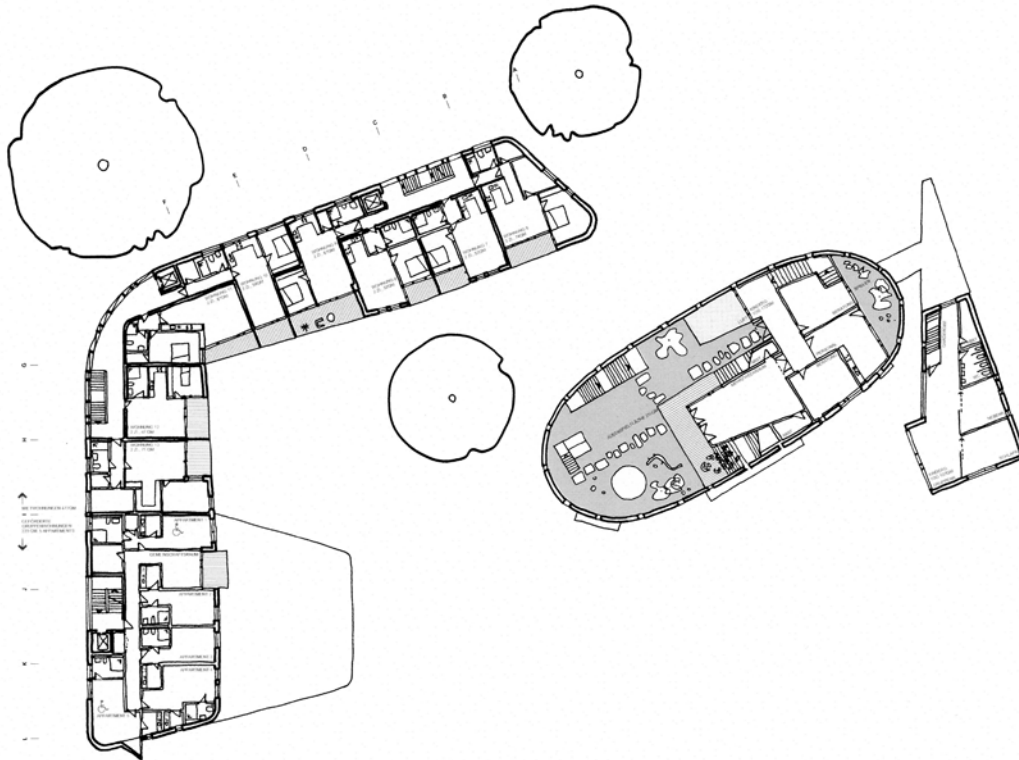
examination, to be multi-layered conversions. It is now almost universally regretted that, at the Bank, Herbert Baker destroyed not only the best work of John Soane, but also that of Soane's predecessors which had caused from the master such fascinating planning moves, and which still kept alive some sense of the mansion from which the bank originated. The temptation for Baker, as always, was to make a new 'neat, sweet picture' but his spaces were sterile and their functional validity endured but a few decades.

In a period dominated by brands and stars, a distinctive architecture is still sought which encourages differentiation of the monument from everyday building. It now panders to the creative genius of

certain form-givers who bestow objects on sites across the world without bothering to gain much local understanding. Bolles+Wilson do of course have a certain style that is visible and recognisable alongside others but their work can also stand deeper scrutiny, improving with a visit and with knowledge of its generative circumstances. They showed at the Münster City Library how profoundly contextual their intentions were, and they have continued in this vein ever since to produce rich and distinctive works, which are not only formally and compositionally interesting, but also meaningful in use and engaged in the local. They deserve more scrutiny and a deeper understanding.

Notes

1. 'Buildings of England' is a series of books recording village-by-village the buildings considered to be significant with a short text on each but relatively few illustrations. There is a volume for each county and others for large cities. Started by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and the publisher Allen Lane in the 1940s, the series continues today with regular updates published by Yale University Press. In its wide-ranging scope and attempt at blanket coverage, it has as yet no serious competitor.
2. See: the essay *Acoustic Space* by R. Murray Schafer in David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer (eds.), *Dwelling, Place and Environment* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985).



1. OBERGESCHOSS
Maßstab 1:200

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3. As revealed in the BBC television series *A Year in the Life of Canterbury Cathedral*, see: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04vf10f>>.
4. This was the reaction of the chaplain at Fitzwilliam College Cambridge when interviewed about the gift of Richard MacCormac's masterly chapel. I noted it in my article 'Holy Vessel' in *Architects' Journal*, 1:July (1992), pp. 24–33.
5. See: 'Hues and Pues' in *Architectural Review*, May (2014), pp. 80–9, a criticism of Immanuel Church at Cologne-Stammheim by Sauerbruch Hutton.
6. See: James Stirling, 'Le Corbusier and the Crisis of Rationalism', in *Architectural Review*, March (1956), pp. 126–34.
7. See: Peter Wilson, 'Odysseus and Calypso – at home', in Peter

Blundell Jones and Mark Meagher (eds.), *Architecture and Movement* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 81–90.

8. See: Peter Blundell Jones, 'Brought to Book', *Architectural Review*, February (1994), pp. 41–50.

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- Author, 7, 16–20
 Bolles+Wilson, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12–15, 21–3
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 Willi Hänscheid, courtesy of the Stadtmuseum Münster, 3
 Rainer Mader, 10, 11
Stadtanzeiger Münster, 1, 2

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Peter Blundell Jones is Professor of Architecture at the University of Sheffield. He is an architect, historian,

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