

FOREVER

INNOVATOR HELMUT JAHN HAS BEEN BREAKING NEW
GROUND SINCE ARRIVING IN CHICAGO MORE THAN
40 YEARS AGO **By Franz Schulze**

Jahn's design for the Suvarnabhumi
Airport outside Bangkok, Thailand,
instills a rhythmic grace into the
public spaces. The project was
completed in 2006.

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JAHN

AMONG THE FACTORS THAT MOTIVATED HELMUT JAHN, FAIA, TO STUDY ARCHITECTURE WAS THE DEGREE OF DESTRUCTION VISITED UPON HIS HOMETOWN OF ALLERSBERG, A SUBURB OF NUREMBERG, DURING WORLD WAR II. Born in 1940, Jahn was old enough to witness the ruination and, no less important, to grow up amid the often low-budget architecture that was erected in Nuremberg following the end of hostilities. Germany did not recover from the war as readily or creatively as it did following World War I. If there was anything that might have pointed toward a successful career as a designer, it would have to rise from within Jahn himself rather than from his environment.

That is, unless we broaden the concept of his environment to hark back to the 18th century, when German architecture could claim more than a few men of talent and accomplishment. Jahn was 20 when, as a member of a student tour, he saw for the first time the superb pilgrimage church of *Vierzehnheiligen* near Bad Staffelstein, arguably the masterpiece of architect Balthasar Neumann. The impact of the experience prompted him to seek admission to the *Technische Hochschule* in Munich. Following his acceptance, he spent four years of study leading to a professional license. During that time he spent summers as an assistant to Nuremberg architect and planner Wilhelm Schlegtehdal, who suggested that Jahn, reasonably competent in English, apply for a Rotary fellowship that would enable him to study in the United States.

1966. Destiny now took a hand. While awaiting the assessment of his application, Jahn worked in Munich for architect Peter von Seidlein, who many years earlier had been employed by the renowned Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

Nearly 30 years after Mies' departure from Germany and his 1938 appointment to head the College of Architecture of the Armour Institute of Technology (AIT) in Chicago, Jahn found his way into Mies's orbit, if not his office. Having won the Rotary fellowship in 1967, he was assigned a place as a student at the Illinois Institute of Technology (previously AIT). Even before enrolling, he applied for a position in Mies' office (Mies had retired from IIT in 1958). Though



Photo by Andrew Zuckerman

turned down, Jahn made up for it later, less—as he claimed—by what he learned in his curricular classes than by carrying on strictly informal conversations with three of the school's best known professors: Myron Goldsmith, Fazlur Khan and David Sharpe.

Further good fortune followed when Jahn heard that architect Gene Summers, FAIA, had just opened his own office in Chicago. Not only had Summers studied with Mies, but he had served as the old man's chief assistant. Jahn sought employment with Summers and was hired, whereupon he concluded his tenure as a student at IIT.

Luck was not finished with either Jahn or Summers. Enter Mayor Richard Daley as *deus ex machina*. Recognizing that Chicago needed a convention hall to replace the one totally destroyed by fire in 1967, Daley called C. F. Murphy & Associates, a major Chicago architectural firm, seeking advice. Murphy recommended Summers for the assignment.

The anticipated convention center would occupy the same site as the old one and bear its name, McCormick Place. At one point in his efforts, Summers proposed a highly innovative project: a building with a roof hanging on cables, in the manner of a suspension bridge. It never materialized. Chicago industrialist Henry Crown wanted McCormick Place to include a theater, to be funded by him and named for his mother, Arie Crown. Summers conceived the theater underground, a move that Crown rejected. Though Mayor Daley endorsed the idea, Crown stood his ground.

Frustrated, Summers sat down with his new assistant, Helmut Jahn, and the two spent a weekend seeking a new solution. Jahn came up with a scheme that was eventually built. It is identified in the literature as the work of Gene Summers. Jahn, accordingly, has insisted both privately and publicly that credit should go to Summers, who was responsible for the technical and theoretical foundation of the design. In short, Summers was the teacher, Jahn the student.

In the course of working on the McCormick Place design, Jahn met Deborah Lampe, an interior designer who had studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh. Lampe's skill as a draftsman brought her and Jahn into



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(left) Built between 1743 and 1772, the *Vierzehnheiligen* (or *Basilica of the Fourteen Holy Helpers*) near Bad Staffelstein, arguably the masterpiece of architect Balthasar Neumann, inspired the young Jahn to explore architecture.

(right) Jahn re-entered Europe with this 1990 project, the 63-story *Messturm*, or *Trade Fair Tower*, in Frankfurt, Germany.



close contact that led to their marriage in 1970 and a seven-week honeymoon, which began with a skiing trip to Davos and proceeded to Italy, Turkey and Greece.

In 1973, Gene Summers resigned from C. F. Murphy to join Phyllis Lambert (another former student of Mies) and develop real estate in California. Jahn remained in Chicago, where he was named as the director of planning and design at C. F. Murphy. Meanwhile, the commission for the R. Crosby Kemper Memorial Arena in Kansas City, Miss., had been won by Summers, who turned the assignment over to Jahn.

Jahn began work on the project in 1972 and finished it in 1974 as his first independent work. Once again Mies van der Rohe played a role in this narrative—the use of overhead trusses in the Kemper Arena follows the example of the plate girders in Mies’s masterly *Crown Hall* (1956), on the IIT campus. Yet to a degree Jahn was his own man: The arena’s exterior is white and the corners are rounded, devices foreign to Mies’s vocabulary.

In the early ‘80s, C. F. Murphy, FAIA, owned the firm outright. But Jahn was clearly the central designing figure, and he called for a new relationship. In fact, he demanded 100 percent. Since Murphy was an administrator and not an architect, he acceded, aware that Jahn was too valuable to be countermanded. In turn, Jahn himself recognized the importance of Murphy’s name. The firm became known as *Murphy/Jahn* in 1983 and has remained so ever since.

By the time the State of Illinois Center opened in 1985, Jahn had divested his work almost completely of Miesian stylistic components. The principal exterior elevation is curved. It moves diagonally upward from the base. The ground floor columns are colored salmon and blue. Color—a rich scarlet—is especially striking in the 17-story atrium, which also features diagonals. The plan likewise runs counter to the rectilinear pattern of the Loop streets. In the eyes of some traditional observers, the building is a blasphemy, while others have called it a vanguard triumph, a brilliant signal of the power Jahn brought to the post-modern aesthetic.

Those factors paled once the center began operation. A major failure in the heating and ventilation system left interior temperatures sometimes skyrocketing to 90 degrees in the summer, or plunging to near freezing in the winter. Needless to say, the media were fascinated, more by those conditions than by Jahn’s stylistic gestures. Eventually it developed that the cause of the problem lay more with flaws in engineering rather than architectural design. The chief defender and champion of the building was former Illinois governor James R. Thompson, for whom it was named in 1993.

A persuasive case can be made that Jahn’s most impressive American design is the United Airlines terminal at O’Hare International Airport in Chicago, completed in 1988. It consists of two parallel concourses, each home to a structure of steel and glass, with a roof in the form of a depressed arch supported by perforated beams 30 feet apart. A major asset is the huge amount of natural light that Jahn has provided, through fritted glass that admits light but not the heat associated with it.

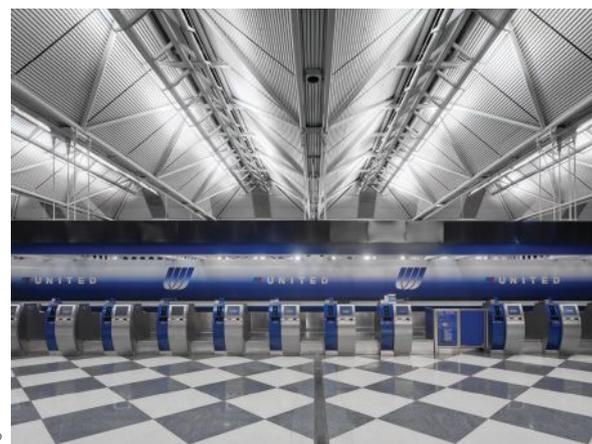
At a level beneath the two buildings is a perceptibly innovative bonus—a 744-foot-long tunnel with walkways serving the travelers who walk from one concourse to the other. Overhead is a group of neon tubes of white, yellow, orange, red, green, blue and purple, moving constantly. Music provides an accompaniment—recorded passages from George Gershwin’s “*Rhapsody in Blue*.” Color is visible elsewhere as well, through curved plastic membranes on the walls of the tunnel.

Europe re-entered Jahn’s career in the 1990s. The *Messturm*, a 843-foot skyscraper that went up in Frankfurt in 1990, was followed in 1994 by the *Munich Airport Center*, featuring the elegant *Kempinski Hotel*. Jahn then shifted his attentions to Berlin, which, after the collapse of the wall in 1989, had regained its rank as the capital of Germany. On the city’s most famous thoroughfare, *Kurfuerstendamm*, an office building (*K-damm 70*) was completed in 1994. Jahn’s most memorable effort in Berlin, and surely the most complex, is the *Sony Center*, completed in 2000. A combination of office buildings,

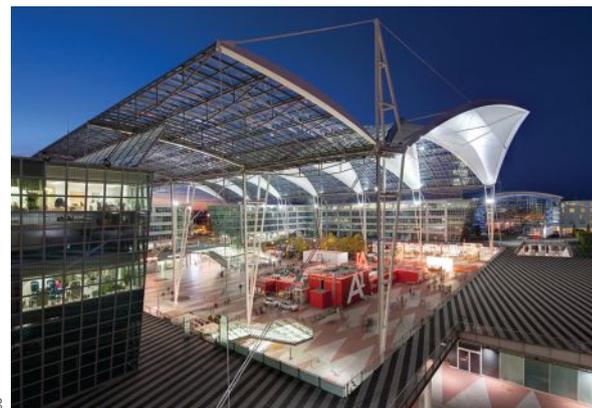
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Jahn's bold use of form, pattern and color are evident in, among many others, these three projects: (1) Sony Center in Berlin, completed in 2000; (2) the United Airlines terminal at O'Hare Airport, completed in 1988; and (3) the Munich Airport Center, completed in 2003.

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condominiums, cafes and restaurants, film theaters and Sony's European headquarters, the center occupies a triangular site in the Potsdamer Platz. It is dominated by a single structure: the Forum, an immense, column-free oval space larger than an American football field. The roof consists of panels that resemble the spokes of a bicycle wheel, held up by cables extending to the edges of the walls. Pertinent to the makeup of the center is the influence of German architect and engineer Werner Sobek, with whom Jahn developed a profitable relationship in 1994. Sobek's specialty, lightweight structures, is apparent in the low weight of the glass in the center.

Back in Chicago, the State Street Village, a group of IIT dormitories built in 2003, was material evidence of Jahn's return to his alma mater after 37 years. The building is composed of three separate structures built adjacently and sharing the same façade. Most prominent from the street is the five-story-high curved façade. At first glance that element would seem distinctly un-Miesian, but an examination of the remainder of the building calls attention to the dominance of vertical and horizontal lines, as well as the generous use of glass. The prodigal son had come home.

In the 21st century, Jahn has designed extensively for the near

east and China. Among his most successful works is the Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, Thailand. An accomplishment loaded with superlatives, the airport measures 6.06 million square feet and boasts the world's tallest free-standing control tower, at 434 feet. The main structure's roof is supported by eight pairs of clustered columns, each holding up a primary truss. Secondary trusses provide protection from the tropical sunlight. In cross-section the building is oval in profile, with scallop-shaped forms creating a translucent membrane.

With a career spanning almost four decades and still moving forward, Helmut Jahn has earned the respect of the international architectural community. **CA**

Franz Schulze is the Betty Jane Hollender Professor of Art, Emeritus, at Lake Forest College. A prolific writer, he has published books on Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson and others. His critical biography of Helmut Jahn, Helmut Jahn: Life and Work, is scheduled to be published in Germany in November, and his Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography, Expanded Edition (University of Chicago Press), co-authored with Edward Windhorst, came out this month.