



DER TRACKMEISTER

F1 TRACK DESIGN GURU HERMANN TILKE ANSWERS THE TOUGH QUESTIONS FROM
MARK FOGARTY ABOUT WHY HIS SHOWCASE CIRCUITS ARE OFTEN SO BORING



THE SOARING sail-topped grandstands of Malaysia's Sepang circuit established the architectural aesthetic for modern F1 stadia in 1999 and since then no-one other than its creator, Hermann Tilke, has designed a new F1 track.

Tilke is one of four track designers recognised by the FIA, but he is effectively the only one authorised by F1 czar Bernie Ecclestone to shape a circuit. If you want a grand prix, you have to hire the 57-year-old German's company to design it.

The trademark of Tilke's designs is imposing stadium-like grandstands that are works of art. For many purists, though, the aesthetic splendour is spoiled by their often boring layouts.

His critics dismiss many of them as 'Tilkedromes', where overtaking is almost impossible and racing is routinely tedious.

You'd think a former accomplished amateur racer would know better. Tilke is an unabashed fan of Mount Panorama, having raced there four times, including both Bathurst 24 Hours in a Porsche 911 RSR. At the Australian GP, Aachen-based Tilke & Co. announced an alliance with the Gold Coast's iEDM, which designed the Townsville and Homebush V8 street tracks.

Joined by iEDM Chief Executive John Howe to explain how the partnership will work, Tilke also defended his designs and outlined why some will one day be regarded as classics.



How did this joint venture come about and what's the aim of it?

Hermann Tilke: We got to know them first through Rainer Hart, one of our contractors who has been working with us for more than 20 years. He is an asphalt specialist and he was contacted by John to solve some problems maybe for the asphalt for the V8s.

So we had this triangle and then we got to know them and then we spoke at the Professional Motorsport World Expo in Cologne last November. We spoke face-to-face for the first time there and the idea developed from there.

John Howe: And also through (V8 Supercars International Director) Martin Whitaker. Dr Rainer Hart would be the world's leading asphalt expert.

HT: Ah, yes, a lot of things came together. Martin Whitaker introduced

us. At the Abu Dhabi F1 race he told me about iEDM and at the same time Rainer Hart, and then we met at this motorsport exhibition in Cologne.

JH: We're both engineers and we're both similar ages, and we both started careers in motorsport 20-odd years ago.

I met Tony Cochrane when he was running the Indycar race at Surfers Paradise and then continued working with him when he went into V8 Supercars. Hermann met Bernie Ecclestone and became involved in F1 tracks, as well as all the other tracks he's involved with. Hermann does a lot more than just F1 tracks – (automotive) test tracks and things like that.

So for the past 20 years we've worked in parallel and now we have a chance to really get together and share some of our joint knowledge.

So does this mean that iEDM is going to start designing F1 tracks and that your company, Hermann, is going to be designing V8 Supercar tracks?

JH: We will work together. Hermann's client is F1 and our client is V8 Supercars, but when and if there is an opportunity to work together, then we will. But we won't be seeking to design an F1 track by ourselves. We would be working with Hermann.

The focus of the joint venture is on this region – Australasia and Southeast Asia?

JH: Correct.

HT: But it must not be limited to this region. We are open. It can also be another part of the world.

We have some different experience and some different know-hows. I

think we are leading in the permanent circuits and John is leading in the non-permanent circuits.

I was going to say, Tilke & Co.'s specialty is the grand showcase permanent F1 venues.

HT: But not only the big ones. We also do small circuits – club circuits or even kart circuits.

Hermann, your company seems to have cornered the market on new circuit design around the world. There's barely a new track anymore that you don't do.

HT: Ja. I think maybe you will agree, John, we both make less mistakes than others and that's the point.

So for the clients, it's much cheaper in the end to involve us in the design than others because in these different areas we both have a lot of experience – and with every new circuit you learn more. So this is how it happens.

It's also because you have the confidence of Bernie Ecclestone, isn't it?

HT: If it is an F1 circuit, yes, of course. But he also brings a lot of ideas to the design of these circuits. He's a very clever man and he's also influencing it.

So how did your association with Bernie come about?

HT: I started to be a race driver when I was 18. And then I studied (engineering



"F1 IS BROADCAST EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD AND YOU CAN SHOWCASE YOUR COUNTRY WITH THIS KIND OF DESIGN" HERMANN TILKE

and architecture) at university and during my studies, I did race driving.

After I graduated, I worked in an office, but I didn't have enough holidays to do my hobby. At this time I was racing in the European championship and I needed a lot of free time, but my boss didn't want to give me so much time off to go racing, so I quit and formed my own company.

I started it by myself at home – the kitchen was my office – and, of course, as a race driver, I wanted to design something on a racetrack. But I never expected to do a whole circuit. I was just working in the first years mainly with the Nurburgring to do small changes here and there.

After some years, people say I am an expert and then it happens.

But how exactly did you become involved with Bernie?

HT: The first F1 track we did was the A1 Ring in Austria (the redesigned Österreichring) and, of course, during the design stage, I had some contact with Bernie because he had to approve the changes. And that's how I made the contact with him.

And then at the same time, F1 came back to the Nurburgring and Bernie asked "Who did this? Oh, it's the same guy who did the A1 Ring".

So then I get the contact with Bernie. We also redesigned the Sachsenring MotoGP track in Germany and then we did some refurbishment of the (former) F1 track at Estoril (near Lisbon, Portugal), and then it comes to Sepang in Malaysia.

Sepang was the first of the new F1 circuits – let's say, the very big one. The Malaysian government and the Prime Minister at that time, Dr Mahathir, he gives us the task to do something that you can recognise and to make something special.

Sepang established the signature of your track designs, which is their architectural splendor.

HT: Yes, this was the first. Up to this time, racetracks were only functional facilities. But this change (emphasising appearance as much as the track layout) was also happening with other sports stadia.

For example, the Bird's Nest in Beijing (main stadium for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games). You could make it as a very simple building, but they didn't want that. The Chinese wanted something spectacular to show to the outside world.

F1 is broadcast everywhere in the world and you can showcase your country with this kind of design. It's the

same with the Olympic Games and other big international events like the soccer World Cup. The host countries not only want these stadia to be functional, they want to show the flavour of their culture or their region.

So, John, do you take inspiration from that sort of approach – that tracks should be architectural statements as well as good circuits?

JH: It's interesting listening to Hermann because he's just explained very well the importance of the iconic status of the big F1 tracks for the countries that buy the event.

Hermann has a large architectural part of his company as well – we don't. In our world, which is mainly street-based temporary events, what we have is a large tourism, leisure and events base. So for a street circuit, for a government to spend the money that it does, it's very important that it showcases the city and that it has all the economic drivers of tourism and economic spin-offs – multiplier effects.

So our complimentary skills are that Hermann has the architecture and the very strong permanent circuits, and we have the tourism, leisure, design and construction aspects for a street circuit.

We are also now able, if Hermann wants to do a street circuit, to broaden



Tilke says his business relationship with Bernie Ecclestone began when he was first contracted to redesign the Austrian F1 Circuit in the 1990s

the skill set. We can also look after the recurrent build of the tracks each year like we do with our contracts. We've had 20 years of experience with the street circuit on the Gold Coast.

So, for instance, with the New Jersey Grand Prix, we can jointly help Hermann with that. If the client wishes, we could put a team together that would help set it up every year like we do at Surfers, Townsville or Homebush. So there are a number of different elements to what our two companies do and the combination of the two is a perfect match because we're not actually competing with each other in that space.

If you were redesigning the Albert Park Formula One street circuit, what would you change?

HT: Nothing. It's good, it works – it

works very well. They did a really good job. It's excellent.

What makes it so good?

HT: Oh, what makes it good is the environment – where it is.

This makes it really special. It's almost in the middle of the city. It's in a park with a lake close to the city and that makes it really good. And the layout of the track is something that is not found anywhere else in F1. It's unique.

It's something of a hybrid because it's a street circuit that has elements of a permanent track in terms of the mix of corners...

HT: It's a very interesting mixture, yes.

And it has its own character, so it has its special place in Formula One and in motor racing.

"EVERY NEW CIRCUIT HAS TO FORM ITS OWN HISTORY – A CIRCUIT BECOMES INTERESTING BECAUSE OF ITS HISTORY" **HERMANN TILKE**



So as a circuit designer and also as a racing driver, does it upset or offend you that your tracks are criticised by some for producing boring racing?

HT: Look, we have a lot of restrictions when we build circuits.

The first restriction is the location and this is a restriction nobody sees from the outside. It depends on the shape of the land that we get. If you have a flat land, you cannot make hills. If you have the money, you can do everything, but it's very expensive to make hills. If the shape of the land is long, then you need to make a circuit that fits.

And the second thing is that also with the big circuits, we have a limited budget *[albeit, hundreds of millions of dollars]* and this also makes restrictions in the planning process. You can't make it too long, you can't make it with too much elevation – and, and, and.

The third thing is that most of the permanents want to host every kind of racing – motorcycles and cars – and normally you should design two different circuits. Especially for motorcycles, you need these big run-offs. For cars, in some areas you need big run-offs, but in other areas you need no run-off. But the motorcycle authorities, they don't

accept this. They need a lot of run-off, so it seems sometimes that it's these big open spaces that make it boring.

But, I tell you, if you would take the modern circuits and do the guardrails right on the edge of the track and make it narrow, all the circuits would then be the same.

So it's no coincidence that the tracks around the world that are regarded as the great circuits are all more than 50 years old. They weren't subject to those restrictions when they were made, and the other thing they share is dramatic changes in elevation...

HT: I don't agree. I think modern circuits can also be very interesting. But every new circuit has to form its own history. At the beginning, they have none.

For example, at Spa and other old circuits, their history is full of accidents and incidents that happened many, many years ago. A circuit becomes interesting because of its history.

We are seeing this in some modern circuits. They are nowadays attracting a following, even though at the beginning many people didn't like them. Sepang is a fantastic circuit, for example. Turkey was a fantastic circuit and also some others. India is a great circuit.

So do you think that in 20 or 30 years, any of your tracks will be revered

like Spa and the old Nurburgring Nordschleife are today?

HT: Yes. Not only in 20 or 30 years, but sooner. It needs some years, but not 20.

But, of course, after 20 years, more things will have happened – more special things.

You really think they'll be held in the same high regard as the Nordschleife and Spa-Francorchamps?

HT: Spa is a good example.

Eau Rouge is one of the most well-known and interesting corners at any racetrack in the world.

You cannot build it now because for a corner like Eau Rouge you need 2.5km in straight length and then half of the track is done with one corner. And then you need this elevation. Eau Rouge lives from the elevation. It's a huge hill where you climb up and you don't have this kind of steep rise in the places you can build circuits these days.

Also, Eau Rouge is not a driving corner anymore [in Formula One]. They all go flat through it. Ten years ago, it was for the drivers very challenging. Nowadays, it's easy-flat for F1 cars – easy-flat. It's more interesting to drive with a Porsche 911 GT racer because with the Porsche it is not flat. But in F1, it's easy – easy-flat.

So if you do this nowadays, people say "Oh, so what? It's flat-out".

Yes, of course, the topography of where Spa and the Nordschleife (hilly areas) are determined their classic layouts. The other two circuits that are regularly mentioned as among the greats are Mount Panorama, Bathurst...

HT: Yes, a fantastic circuit. I raced there four times. It's fantastic.

And Phillip Island is the other...

HT: They are great circuits. Mount Panorama is really fantastic.

But, you know, if somebody gives you the task to design Mount Panorama, then everybody will say "Okay". But then if you add that we also want to use it for MotoGP, it's not possible to make another Mount Panorama. You can no longer replicate these kinds of tracks.

The task is different now because they're all thinking economically and also never could a circuit like this be homologated – certainly not for motorcycles or other purposes.

These great circuits grew organically from their environment.

HT: Which is very nice. Mount Panorama, I like very, very much.

NEXT WEEK: Tilke's verdict on how the V8s will go at his new Texas track and he explains more of his philosophy on circuit design

Tilke says the Sepang Circuit in Malaysia – the first of the "big" new F1 tracks – is one that was designed to be "something special"

