

Weaving Stories into Meaningful Interiors

**An Interview with Erich Bernard,
BWM Designers & Architects Managing Partner and Co-Founder**

by Finn Varpio

A thread weaves through the work of BWM Designers & Architects: context is never just an afterthought. Whether it is the Austrian Pavilion at the 2025 Expo in Osaka—a collaboration that transforms the Expo’s theme into a spatial composition of sound and structure, embodying the idea of composing the future—or the sensitive restoration of Bad Gastein’s historic hotel ensemble, their designs grow organically from place, purpose, and people. Their portfolio spans interior design in the hospitality sector and shop design, classical architecture as a general planner in an urban context, and cultural projects, including museum and exhibition concepts. This conversation focuses on one of their latest interior projects: A by Adina Vienna Danube, a hotel nestled within one of the city’s newest high-rise landmarks. Founding partner Erich Bernard speaks of listening as a vital design tool, the quiet presence of Vienna embedded in the materials that converse with Australian elements in the interior, and how spatial choreography—from floorplans to furniture heights—can open up a view rather than obscure it.



Finn Varpio: As managing partner and co-founder of BWM Designers & Architects—what originally led you to architecture? Was there a defining moment or influence that sparked your interest in this profession?

Erich Bernard: I basically grew up in this world because my father was an architect. He always told me, “Don’t study architecture, it’s so tough.” Honestly, I didn’t even want to study it at first. But the moment I enrolled, I just knew—that was my path. Most of my partners come from similar backgrounds—almost all are children of architects. So you really grow up surrounded by this atmosphere. Architecture is incredibly versatile. I like to say an architect is a specialist in generalization—the only specialist whose expertise is dealing with everything. That’s what fascinated me most: constantly thinking beyond the obvious, beyond the usual limits. That’s how we work at BWM, too. Our work has such a broad scope. We work a lot in teams, and also closely with our clients. Usually, we bring them into workshops and make them part of the team, engaging in

intense, ongoing communication. This is especially true in hospitality—where communication is central because many people work directly with guests. That's why we're actually so passionate about it. Our team often develops friendly relationships with our current clients. This communicative, interdisciplinary approach and the habit of thinking beyond the obvious—that's always been what makes architecture special for me.

FV: Could you tell us a bit about how BWM Designers & Architects was founded? What vision or need did you want to fulfill when starting the firm?

EB: After graduating, I started a firm with some colleagues— BEHF, where Johann Moser, Daniela Walten, and Markus Kaplan also worked. About eight years later, I left BEHF and founded BWM with Johann and Daniela as an independent office. Markus also joined us and later he became a partner. We've known each other for around 30 years now, and honestly, we're really proud of that. We often reflect on how rare it is to stay good friends for so long. Today, there are five partners who all work closely together in a very small space—it's the principle of sharing. We share everything—ideas, responsibility, projects. We work tightly integrated, not like five separate offices under one roof. People often ask me how such a long partnership is even possible—because it's not easy in private life, and in business, you often have fewer 'ties'. That could be even more risky. But the secret is, we knew each other well before, so we knew what we were getting into personality-wise. That helped a lot.

FV: What do you think distinguishes BWM Designers & Architects from other firms in the industry? Are there particular values or approaches that shape your work?

EB: I think what sets us apart most is our strong team orientation. We deliberately invest in our office spirit. Not artificially—because you can't force that—but we cultivate it consciously. We spend so much of our lives at work, so we want to create a place where we actually want to be. And that's true for the entire team. Sharing isn't just about space; it's about ideas, too. We have clear roles, but inspire each other and involve everyone deeply in the process. This workshop culture and high communication orientation are central to what makes us different. Our team has grown quite large by now, and we put great value on exchange with our clients. Especially in interiors, you need a lot of empathy to truly understand users and their needs. That only happens through active listening, real attention, and open dialogue. Because in hospitality, the real experts are often the clients themselves—like the restaurant owner or hotel director. They know their space best. Integrating that knowledge is essential, and that demands a lot of communication. So we make clients an active part of the process. That's quite different from some architects who don't prioritize communication much and work more independently, with a distinct signature, then just deliver the finished product. For us, that wouldn't work. That's why we do it this way. We don't have much competition in this field because it's so time-intensive. I like to compare it to the difference between a fashion designer and a tailor: the designer creates something you either take or

leave. We're not the designers, we're the tailors. We work closely with clients during design development and customize everything precisely. It's not off-the-rack; it's custom design. And that's a whole different way of shaping things.

FV: A by Adina is an Australian hotel brand. Your interior design for the Vienna Danube location blends Australian flair with Viennese charm. What does this cultural dialogue mean to you—personally and in terms of design? Which specific aspects of Australian and Austrian culture, history, or identity inspired you?

EB: Even though we never went to Australia, we worked intensely on capturing a cohesive image—together with Mary Noonan, an Australian interior designer. She gave us a lot of the spirit that we then developed further with images, stories, and impressions. It was important for us to capture the vibe of Australia without using obvious symbols or clichés. That shows up in the color palette: sandy tones, dry greens, the red of Uluru. Materiality was also key—natural surfaces, harmoniously balanced. Another theme was curves—you saw them on the wallpaper, lamps, and carpet. Sometimes organic, sometimes geometric, inspired by Australian art. We wanted to keep the connection to Vienna subtle. The city reveals itself in all its glory through the views—you're already in Vienna, so there's no need to stage it extra. Still, there are some references: herringbone parquet and natural stone, like Adolf Loos used. Just a few details that, if you catch them out of the corner of your eye, make you feel a little bit in Vienna. The Viennese presence is more atmospheric—like a subtle memory in the space. The color combinations had to be Australian but also fit Vienna well. The result is a space that feels special—cosy, but not generic.

FV: How did the building itself—the Danubeflats Tower, where the hotel is located—influence your design? Can you give an example of how the architecture shaped your design decisions, especially regarding the layout of rooms and apartments?

EB: The layout was definitely a major factor. The tower was not yet completed, it was still a work in progress, so we could make big interventions early on, for example, with the placement of shafts. Originally, there were many shafts that severely limited the space. We managed to consolidate them behind the bar into one compact block, which was very important so people can walk past the bar on both sides, and the bar can stand freely in the room. The mirrored furniture behind the bar is designed so you barely notice the block behind it. Originally, that area was closed off—you could only go around it. Our intervention turned it into an open, generous space. We also insisted that the fall protection railing not be too high or massive, which would block the view. We pushed for a lower railing so guests can enjoy the outlook freely, and that was non-negotiable for us. With Adina, we deliberately oriented the spatial layout towards the beautiful views: seating heights in the bar are staggered from the lowest seats in front to the highest in the back, so everyone has a clear sightline outside. We could also influence the rooms, especially regarding partition walls and arrangements within the floor plans. Due to the

unusual architecture of the new building, the floor plan of each room is individual. The shafts in the rear, under the high-rise, were fixed, so there was little room for change there. The front section mainly houses Adina's floors, where we had the most freedom. Under the high-rise, the structural constraints were greater.

FV: Thank you for this insightful conversation!

EB: Thank you as well.

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