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The 'Vierzylinder': BMW's Munich HQ 40 years on 20 July 2013 | Alexandra Felts

BMW's distinctive Munich headquarters, otherwise known as the 'Vierzylinder' (or four-cylinder), celebrates its 40th birthday this year, and the Bavarian motor company's HQ is still an architectural icon today...

Two kestrels have wisely chosen one of the most spectacular nesting sites in Munich. Located almost 100 metres up, the birds – perched on the blue and white corporate emblems – share their view with around 1,500 BMW employees in the dramatically styled high-rise.

The architect – Karl Schwanzer of Austria – was able to convince sceptics of his radical design and the high-rise tower was raised in just 22 months, alongside a concrete bowl in which the company's museum would be housed. Construction delays and cost explosions were unheard of in those days, and the project was finished well in time for the 1972 Munich Olympics, costing an impressive 100 million Deutsche Marks.

The outlandish building was soon christened 'the 'Vierzylinder' (four-cylinder, in English), although Schwanzer never envisioned the engine component in his design. Inside, there were innovative open-plan offices, as well as relaxation areas. The spacious and bright lobby included sumptuous reception rooms, and bore three large pictures on its walls, painted by Gerhard Richter: one of the world's most important contemporary artists. At the time he was paid a mere 10,000 Deutsche Marks for each painting. Nowadays, his works are worth millions...

After 30 years, what was now a protected historic building was thoroughly renovated and modernised. Its significance not just to the company, but also to the city, is enough to ensure that new investors won't abandon the revolutionary edifice.

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