

Ancillary F1 – Tilke Engineering

This is Sidepodcast's mini series – Ancillary F1. We're talking about the companies that are around the grid, supporting the teams, but not getting much of the glory. We've looked at Bridgestone, and McLaren Electronic Systems, and today it's the turn of Tilke Engineering.

Hermann Tilke trained as an architect and engineer, but was a racer before he decided to start designing tracks. He competed in touring cars, and endurance racing, mostly on the Nurburgring circuit. As the resident expert on that particular course, after he set up Tilke Engineering in 1984, the organisers turned to him to provide a new access road at the circuit.

The first big racing track job Tilke Engineering undertook was in the mid-90s, and the task was to shorten the Austrian Osterreichring into the safer A1-Ring. The changes were clearly a success in the eyes of Bernie Ecclestone, as the design of the brand new Malaysia circuit in 1999 was entrusted to Tilke Engineering. Since then, every new Formula 1 track has been designed by the company and many more historical layouts have been touched by the hand of Tilke.

Revisions made to existing circuits include lengthening Fuji, neutering Hockenheim, and fiddling with his old favourite, the Nurburgring.

Hermann Tilke himself doesn't just design the track and hand it over to the company's 130 architects and engineers. He gets involved at every opportunity, from initially selecting the area, to deciding what buildings will be nearby, and of course, designing the entire infrastructure that will have to cope with a Grand Prix weekend. When that special moment comes, the first race at a new circuit, Tilke likes to be there, along with those colleagues that were involved. He says that they know the track inside out, whereas the locals may still need a bit of guidance.

Despite being Ecclestone's go-to guy for track designs, Tilke Engineering has come under fire for producing boring races. Bahrain and Valencia are the first tracks that spring to mind, both benefiting from the traditional Tilke style of long straights and sharp corners, but with very little to distinguish them. Turkey could be considered a successful circuit design, but even that has just the one Turn 8 super-corner and the rest pales into obscurity. Despite this, Tilke himself says that he tries to add flavours of the local culture, for example in China, some of the grandstands have roofs that commemorate the traditional Chinese lotus leaf.

Regardless, the future of Formula 1 looks to be Tilke shaped, with Abu Dhabi, Cape Town, and Korea all signed up to receive the Hermann hand of engineering. The plans for a revamped Donington Park also bear a familiar insignia. Many fans are saddened by the lack of circuits that are formed through more natural processes than a man and his Bulldozer. Silverstone came to being on an old airfield and features some of the more memorable corners on the calendar. With so many new Tilkedromes signed up for future calendars, it seems inevitable that we will lose some of the original, and some might say best, racetracks. Ecclestone clearly isn't a sentimental person.

That's it for this edition of Ancillary F1. Don't forget to leave your thoughts on Sidepodcast.com, whether about this series or about Tilke and his designs. I'll be back tomorrow with another Ancillary company.