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## FREI OTTO

*From building model planes as a child, to being a champion of sublime, intuitive architecture – every inch of the Pritzker Prize 2015 laureate’s life and career has been nothing short of awe-inspiring. In his birth month, Bimal Patel reasons why he is worthy of immortal greatness*

He was born to a family of sculptors, however, his personal interests were in complete contrast to the heaviness of stone. He spent much of his free time inventing and building model planes, fascinated by the behaviour of thin membranes stretched across light frames and their response to aerodynamic forces. In his lifelong quest to achieve more with less, he embodied the very meaning of the first name given to him by his mother (Frei literally means “free”). A pilot in World War II, he found himself becoming the architect of a prison camp. There he had to create structures using very few construction materials.

After the war, he studied architecture at the Technical University of Berlin and visited the United States to see the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Charles and Ray Eames and others. Brimming with ideas, he then founded his own architectural practice in a structure that

was the prototype for the German pavilion at the International Exposition in Montreal, which later came to be known as Institute of Lightweight Structures. For his creations, he drew inspiration from natural principles rather than the usual geometric forms. His pioneering lightweight projects focused on tensile stresses. He used models to explore them and collaborated with philosophers, historians, naturalists and environmentalists to develop his vision.

I had the opportunity to apprentice under him for five months in the summer of ‘81. I was just 19 then but my memories of him are vivid: The way in which he invigorated the entire research group with the sheer force of his energy and enthusiasm; him standing in front of the institute’s well-organised slide collection and crafting an inspiring talk; being scared as he drove us to Mannheim in his Mercedes at 180 km/h.... He was indeed a remarkable man. ♦ **Bimal Patel**