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Grüntuch Ernst

Architects

Profile



Building at Hackescher Markt
The real Berlin glass architecture
miracle.
(Completed: 2000)

Many of the most interesting, “relatively new” Berlin architecture studios have something Anglo-Saxon, international about them. Whether it’s that they are owned by couples from two different countries, as is the case with Sauerbruch Hutton, Barkow Leibinger, and Deadline, or whether the architects spent their journeyman years abroad – as a rule in London - and met there, as was the case with Grüntuch Ernst.

Looking back: At the end of the 1980s two young architects met in London and became a couple, in both private and professional terms. Almut Ernst, who was born in 1966 in Stuttgart, had studied architecture and urban planning in the city. Armand Grüntuch was born in 1963 in Riga, Latvia, and had taken his degree in Aachen. He was working for Norman Foster, she for Alsop & Lyall. In 1991 they opened a studio together in Berlin. There don’t appear to have been any major obstacles. As Almut Ernst says: “I don’t think there’s any need to explain why anyone would want to set up shop in Berlin in 1991”. After the Wall came down the city was indeed buzzing, and the two architects succeeded in carving out a remarkable career for themselves, which will be addressed later.

However, since November 2005 there has been another reason why Grüntuch Ernst deserves our attention: A commission has selected the couple to act as General Commissioners for the conception and realization of the German entry for the 2006

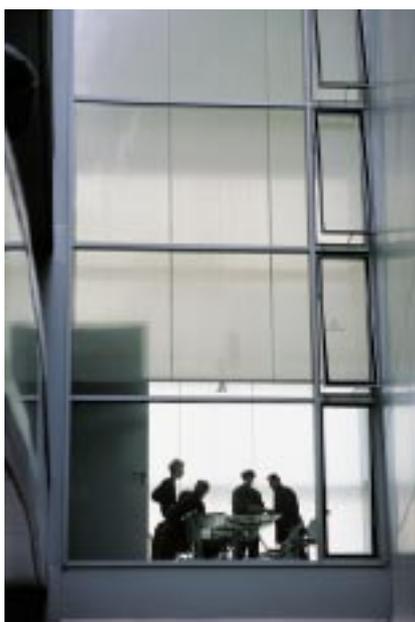
Architecture Biennale in Venice. A major success for the architects, who caught the eye of the jury not only with their concept for the exhibition but also with their own previous “award-winning” work and their “exhibition experience”. As yet there are not giving much away about what their concept for the Venice exhibition entails, but it will address the “building up of existing urban areas”, “current examples of re-usage, and buildings in empty spaces and on bridges”.

The building at Hackescher Markt
A glass joint the height of the entire building along an enormous firewall creates an exciting access area

“Simply sexy!”, was how the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung referred to the glass building.



An empty space was also what gave Grüntuch Ernst its breakthrough: In 2000, after eight years of planning and construction work, the building at Hackesche Markt in Berlin-Mitte was completed that has since become the hub of their oeuvre: a Grüntuch Ernst manifesto in building form. And for anyone wanting to speak them, there’s no way of getting round the building anyway: That’s where their studio is located.



The building at Hackescher Markt
The Grüntuch Ernst meeting room in the glass joint

“Simply sexy!” is how German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung referred to the glass building. And there can be no doubt that it is not Behnisch’s unfortunate Academy on Pariser Platz that represents Berlin’s glass architecture miracle – rather it is the Grüntuch Ernst glass building at Hackescher Markt. Next to the striking gateway to the Hackesche Höfe there is a façade made almost entirely of glass, an elegant, generous office, residential and commercial building that appears to fly in the face of everything that is considered obligatory as far as Berlin architectural policy is concerned: the height of the eaves, stone facade, and upright window formats. It is the Grüntuch Ernst urban masterpiece, one that does not merely serve to fulfill design specifications but makes the most of the restrictions that the rules enforce.

And gets everything just right: In the direction of the Hackesche Höfe the proportions and storey heights of the neighboring buildings are sensitively referenced, while on the other side, towards the heterogeneous, lower buildings at the beginning of Oranienburger Strasse the architects responded with an artistic touch: A glass joint the height of the entire building liaises between the new section and the existing neighboring building. To the front this joint accommodates two two-storey-high meeting rooms.

This is where the architects are seated opposite their visitors. Almut Ernst is tall, she has straight hair, which is combed back. What she says needs no re-working before printing, and with the aura of concentration she exudes, one immediately sees in her the organizational talent in the office.

With his magnificent dark head of hair Armand Grüntuch comes across more as the aesthete, perhaps even the bon vivant, whose mind tends to wander now and again. In conversation they complement each other perfectly, catching balls sent



by the other – certainly one of their secrets for success.

From the meeting room the scenery stretching towards Hackescher Markt, with the streetcar passing by every few minutes provides the maximum concentration of urban charms. On the other side one's gaze falls on a marvelously orchestrated slit along the enormous firewall into the depths of the building. If there is an epicenter of the young, creative, international scene to be found anywhere in Berlin, then it has to be here. Music labels, agents, and fashion designers are all located at Hackescher Markt, and that in turn attracts a cultured "jeunesse dorée", eager to be out and about, making its way day and night down narrow Rosenthaler Strasse. It's clear that Grüntuch Ernst feel very much at home in this setting.



The floor of the meeting room is littered with innumerable models. Through the slit one can see the corridor that leads to the office door. There is a constant coming and going here. When the door opens there is a view of the open-plan office. 15 employees look studiously at their Mac screens; there is no hierarchical structure to the seating positions. A young intern, who is getting to grips with image processing, is seated next to experienced architects. If you ring up the studio it might well be the Almut Ernst herself who picks up and replies "That's me" in response to the request to speak to the boss.

This is where Grüntuch Ernst architecture is created. They have no pre-defined style or preferential material that they use as their "trademark". Formally, too, they alternate undogmatically between the staid geometry of Modernism and free form – contrasts are their leitmotif. Which provides an insight into their roots and influences: On the one hand the cool, high-eco-tech approach from Great Britain, which we associate with names such as Foster and Rogers, and on the other influences from organic architecture derived from natural phenomena, such as has been being probed by the likes of Frei Otto for decades now. And it is between these two poles that the work of

The building at Hackescher Markt
The building provides apartments as well as office space



not only Grüntuch Ernst, but also that of the internationally focused fellow architects of their generation moves.

In their basic approach, the inner-city office building projects that succeeded the building at Hackesche Markt follow the latter, with clear forms, a generous use of glass, technically activated facades, and holistic energy concepts. Where existing premises are integrated, these provide a cue for the new building. Designs for stand-alone edifices, on the other hand, are more radical and independent in terms of form. Examples of this are the entry for the European Central Bank competition, which featured randomly positioned, steel and glass mesh-covered glass towers located on an amoeba-shaped base. The media center for the soccer World Cup is reminiscent of a pointed suppository, and the rounded "Floating Homes" could have come from the set of a science-fiction film. Construction of the highly original aquatic homes is at the moment, however, still written in the stars. For the architects, every building is a one-off, each assignment approached with utter thoroughness.

Floating Homes
Architecture for anywhere,
in any urban setting



And that would appear to be a recipe for success: The architects recently won competitions for a hotel in Flensburg and a department store in Bremen, and the projects either at the planning or construction stage include office and residential buildings in Berlin, as well as apartment buildings in Hamburg. Not to mention the German pavilion...

Interview



Grüntuch Ernst

Architects:

Almut Ernst and Armand Grüntuch

www.gruentuchernst.de

GRÜNTUCH AND ERNST ON HEROIC PHASES, EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE AND WORKING ON DISPLAY...

When you arrived in Berlin in 1991 you had the impression that you had already missed the boat. In retrospect was that actually the case?

Almut Ernst

When things were really happening in Berlin all we could initially do was observe things from London. When we then arrived here, we felt that at this important moment in time we didn't really have sufficient experience. Later, when we had got together a good portfolio through competitions, things here were almost on the downhill again. Nonetheless: For us, this anti-cyclical growth was a good thing because it gave us stability with regard to the structure of the studio.

Does success always have to have humble beginnings? Bill Gates pieced together his first PC in the garage, and on the first tours Deep Purple played in school gyms and slept in damp cellars. Not long after they were international stars. Did you have a heroic phase like that?

Armand Grüntuch

Well we haven't become millionaires through our work, nor do I think we are international stars either. But we don't work in damp cellars.

Architecture is a profession in which it is difficult to make plans. But if you go about something with passion, feelings and perseverance and acquire more and more expertise, then you do indeed get to a point where you have a sound economic base.

Almut Ernst

In 1991 and the years that followed we had something to fall back on through our jobs at the Academy of Arts: These gave us the freedom to go about things at leisure. Which meant we did small conversion jobs, compiled expert opinions and entered a lot of competitions. And when we actually won one, the School for the Mentally Retarded, that was our breakthrough.

However, given the precarious condition of the Berlin city budget it was actually nine years before the building was completed. I did sometimes think about what

they would do if... a young studio like ours couldn't wait that long? Because the fee doesn't increase the longer the project takes, on the contrary... And so we were actually very happy to survive the nine years we needed, until we had the Hackescher Markt to rely on as a visible reference of our work.



How is your studio organized? Do you have draftsmen, apprentices, secretaries?

Armand Grüntuch

We started off as a relatively small unit and have grown successively. From this we have developed a style of working in which everyone has to do everything. This sort of lean production means that all our employees have to think holistically.

Almut Ernst

I did actually think about training a draftsman. I couldn't, because only those studios that actually draw their plans manually are allowed to do so. Studios that work exclusively with computers are not allowed to train draftsmen. Nobody gives any thought to just who is going to employ them afterwards, though.

While we're on the subject of studios that only use computers: Many studios use computers not only for drawing, the software is also used for generating shapes. What do you use them for?

Armand Grüntuch

"Studios that only use computers" is a little misleading. We draw a lot by hand, but freehand, not with a T-square. And we use models a lot. For almost every project we carry out extensive spatial studies using real, three-dimensional models. We have an extra room at the back that has something of a workshop about it and is terribly untidy. Especially when you are working with computers you constantly have to check the tactile dimensions of spatial perception using models.

There's no doubt that it would be ludicrous to resort to complex aesthetic geometry in an empty gap between buildings.

Almut Ernst

The basic idea behind drawing using a computer is that you can apply various levels, which you can superimpose on each other in different ways, or even make invisible. That in turn trains you to think in a certain way and is different approach from an ink drawing done by hand, which we also came across in our early office days.

Armand Grüntuch

We try to get by with as straightforward software as possible, which means we tend not so much to use large software packages with all sorts of components, preferring instead special software for drawing, rendering and modeling. The data are then linked to each other via interfaces.

Almut Ernst

We grew along with the MiniCAD and Vector Works software solutions. As opposed to programs that stem from mechanical engineering this is a tool that has extremely simple geometric definitions. Even when I was a student there were two distinct camps with regard to using computers: There were engineering programs that involved a lot of mathematics and scientific software, and then there were the Apple fans, for whom images and graphics were a priority. The Mac world always had a particular attraction for us.

“Anything is possible. That’s what we fought for”, to quote Frei Otto in an interview you yourself conducted with him. Nowadays you can build any shape imaginable. Do we have to, just because it’s possible?

Armand Grüntuch

No, definitely not. But it was important to initiate the process, such that it is now possible to respond to different requirements in different ways. There's no doubt that it would be ludicrous to resort to complex aesthetic geometry in an empty gap between buildings. But take the Olympic Stadium in Munich, one of the outstanding post-War constructions in Germany: If you consider the difficulties in calculating complex sets of geometry and balance of forces like these from the very outset, then the means we have at our disposal today indeed make things a whole lot easier. You know that you can calculate a shape like this and are not reliant on experimental models with soap bubbles.

Almut Ernst

You can just as well turn round the question “Do we have to build the blob?” and ask: “Do we really have to build today in the same way as we did in previous times?” Is the right angle still the only point of departure? Harmonious design in nature and an organic formal language can just as much serve as a leitbild – which is something that was looked into time and again in the work of Frei Otto, not only with regard to construction, but shape as well.



You write: "Exceptions have to become the yardstick for cities as a system." An exception that is the rule – the result would be an architectural circus but certainly not a city.

Armand Grüntuch

The question arises as to what extent and how often these exceptions reappear. Here at Hackescher Markt there is a design specification. Yet the examples that adhere closely to it are by far the worst buildings – not only in our eyes, but even in the eyes of those who made the rules.

So the rules can only be the lowest common denominator. Even if you want to achieve a certain uniformity, you always need architects who use their imagination and produce something using these rules that is more than just the lowest common denominator.

What's more, certain situations require special answers. A theater or town hall certainly bears no resemblance to a normal building. We need exceptions like these to generate an image of cities that does justice to people.

Almut Ernst

Any rules designed to ensure the quality of a city are an important topic of discussion, but they can't claim to be valid for decades on end. Rather, open-mindedness to urban development means that these rules need to be in a constant process of change in order to reflect the changing work and lifestyles of those affected by them.

Peter Richter said of your building at Hackescher Markt that from the conference room you can indeed see the city, but you don't have to hear it: "Just good windows. Really nothing other than windows." Whether at Hackescher Markt or in Neumühlen in Hamburg: People working here are on display. Have they improvised at all to produce countermeasures?

Armand Grüntuch

They are not so much improvised as planned countermeasures. The façades we design have many layers. Here at Hackescher Markt there is a dual façade with an outer layer and, in between, solar screens, and an inner layer of opaque sections. Generally the façades can be opened and the solar screens and other gadgets can be set individually. The façade is also a part of the building; we try to plan gaps, spaces between

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Almut Ernst

And we try to design our façades in such a way that they provide those on the inside with maximum daylight and things to see. As such, as well as putting them on view, we give them a tool to create privacy, protection, concealment, i.e., to adapt to their needs. Just as we change our clothes as a matter of course, this “third skin” serves the same purpose.

What is the Grüntuch/Ernst mindset on ecological building?

Armand Grüntuch

Ecological building sees an edifice as an organism, as a complex unit made up of construction, technology and outer fabric. For us it is second nature to use the construction as a storage mass as well. Whenever we can we also activate the compo-



nents, in other words we also use concrete ceilings for heating and cooling purposes. What's more we fit nighttime cooling systems, thereby producing a pleasant ambient temperature with relatively simple means. In the cold season winter gardens transfer warmed air into the interior. Aspects such as these have since become a matter of course – for architects at least it will become second nature to think in these terms.

Almut Ernst

However, the debate on sustainability must not only address operating energy and its technical perfection and efficiency, but also urban planning. Housing developments and infrastructures have to be consolidated in terms of surface area so that the volume of traffic on the route we use every day is reduced. That too has something to do with architecture, with town planning.

Which keywords are most important in your work?

Armand Grüntuch

People say of us that we are often surprising with the solutions we come up with. At the start of any project we invest a lot of energy in breaking down supposedly predetermined approaches and research alternative possibilities for the solution to a job.

One more question: Current circumstances are dictating that the generation of very young architects is effectively being prevented from entering the profession. What is your advice to your young colleagues?

Armand Grüntuch

If you have decided to become an architect it is a matter of the heart, a question of passion, and you shouldn't let yourself be discouraged. You should just stick with it. Architecture also always means sticking to your guns when the going gets tough.

Almut Ernst

We regularly receive post from former interns who had no alternative but to gain experience abroad for a number of years. And although it is perhaps not always the optimal path you would choose yourself, those who come back will nonetheless at some point contribute to the enrichment of the German architectural scene.

Many thanks for the interview. All that's left is for me to wish you every success for your designs for the German pavilion in Venice. We can't wait to see it!

Armand Grüntuch

Neither can we...

Interview: Benedikt Hotze

The architecture journalist has been head of the BauNetz editorial office for ten years and lives in "Onkel Toms Hütte", the Bruno Taut development in Berlin.

Projects

Photo 1: Hotel
on the Baltic Sea, Flensburg,
Competition 2006, 1st Prize



Photo 2: Neumühlen
- office building on the River Elbe,
Hamburg,
1st Prize: 1996;
Completion: 2002



Photo 3: Neumühlen
- office building on the River Elbe,
Hamburg,
1st Prize: 1996;
Completion: 2002



Photo 4:

Marie Curie High School, Dallgow-
Döberitz,

1st Prize: 2001,

Completion: 2005



Photo 5:

Marie Curie High School, Dallgow-
Döberitz,

1st Prize: 2001,

Completion: 2005



Photo 6:

Conversion shopping mall at Brill,
Bremen, Project



Photo 6:

Conversion shopping mall at Brill,
Bremen, Project

