



Kraus Schönberg Architects

Profile



HAUS W.
Hamburg, Germany 2006-2007
The living and kitchen area is sunk
half a storey down in the ground.

What a start to a career! At the beginning of 2009, Niklas Maak, architecture and art critic of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper, devoted an entire half page of the Arts section to one small, 105 square meter family house on the outskirts of Hamburg. The title of this hymn to the "Haus W" designed by the young architects Tobias Kraus and Timm Schönberg, was "New German Architecture - it exists after all."



If you want to form your own opinion the developer and his family are more than willing to oblige, and during the viewing enthusiastically throw in such suspiciously expert jargon that it soon emerges the young W also studied architecture and was as equal and open a sparring partner for his architects whom he knew from student days and had learned to think as unconventionally as them, but who now earned his money in a different field. Even when approaching the house in the Ohlstedt district it is evident that this is a place where the laws of German front garden culture have been abandoned. Between two neat, red clinker brick buildings cowering behind their fences a gravel path leads to a small cul-de-sac enclosed by the neighbors. No gate blocks the way. The mini gravel tract ends right in front of the front door, up to which a few steps lead, where - can you believe it - the handrail to stop you falling was forgotten. The entrance to the house is somewhat higher than ground level as the solid wooden part of the building is separated from the ground by a glass joint. Though hackneyed the term "building which seems to be hovering" (as if the architect were a fair ground magician) really is the best description of what for once, is not just an end in itself: The upper half of the house is a wooden screen, the crown in which the W. family lives, featuring small rooms which, nevertheless - and one

HAUS W.
Hamburg, Germany 2006-2007
View from the front door through
the house.



HAUS W.
Conceptual scheme



cannot discern this from outside – offer a wide range of views. They vary in height according to needs. As the house is topped with a grass roof, the rooms descend like stalactites of differing lengths into the open communal room, thus creating not only an “interesting” view down but one in which the kitchen and living areas are gently differentiated. This open zone of the house is dug a half-storey deep into the garden. Building regulations here would have permitted one and a half storeys, but in this way they managed to achieve two complete storeys.

Several weeks ago the critic wrote a follow-up. Under the title, “The New Generation” Maak introduced his theory that the most interesting trends can be found on the edges of cities. He mentions Haus W. again, saying, “if anything you would think it were in Tokyo.”

There’s something to that. On the other hand: Kraus and Schönberg are down to earth in a sympathetic way. Sure, they think Tokyo is an interesting place, but the house is in Hamburg and pulls off what it does because it fits the inhabitants like a glove the architects tailor made with them. The fascinating thing about their work is not that it is reminiscent of some images or other of areas of architectural trends that are currently considered particularly in, but that the duo go their own way accompanied by a large reserve of stubbornness and do not seem to care about what is particularly fashionable. Put in a positive way: They are part of the generation of young German architects who do make a huge fuss about developing an unmistakable signature or giving the architecture press particularly chic buildings. Starchitecture was yesterday – that is the message their work sends out, and it is a good thing someone is actually saying it out loud.

TIMM SCHÖNBERG, TOBIAS KRAUS
on the Haus H27 building site in
Konstanz.



Between the two FAZ articles things have been happening for the two architects. They received the German Timber Prize, were featured in numerous architecture magazines, and in Konstanz - Tobias Kraus's hometown – what is currently their largest current project is now emerging from the excavation pit. At the heart of the Old Town of Konstanz they are closing a gap between two buildings with a residential and commercial building - when I visited the concrete for the slender street facade was just being poured. By adding little clay beads to the concrete they avoid having to add extra heat insulation. The Konstanz office is located at present in a small neighboring building at the back of the construction site. From here they can keep a daily watch on progress. As Tobias Kraus explains in an interview, this not only gives them the chance to monitor things but also to develop details in unison with the workers. It is apparent in all the architects' projects that they take the building and not just the design seriously. While Haus W was being built, Kraus lived in Hamburg, enabling him to supervise the construction on site.

TIMM SCHÖNBERG, TOBIAS KRAUS
Office in Konstanz



His professional partner Timm Schönberg, has lived in London for the past nine years. He takes care of their joint projects in the UK. These include smaller construction sites in London as well as renovation projects in Bradford, an industrial city in northern England. In the German village there, an industrial district erected by German merchants, they are restoring and expanding the existing stock of amazingly “German” looking brick buildings. Just how different German and British building traditions are is an important theme in the following interview.

GALLON HOUSE
Bradford, UK 2006-2007
Conversion of the former office
buildings in the “German Village”

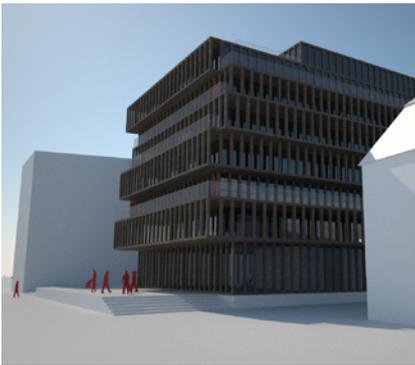


Incubator for architectural ideas
“house as small city”



KrausSchönberg are also regarded as promising young talent in Great Britain. The Architectural Review featured a report about them in conjunction with the AR Award for Emerging Architecture and in the “Young Architect of the Year Award” (YAYA) they took third prize back in 2008.

Terence Riley, a respected critic and curator who until a few years ago worked at the MoMA in New York, came up with the fine phrase “un-private house” to describe what an immensely important role the single family home has played in the experimental environment of new architecture at least since Modernism. Though designed for a private client, architects have repeatedly attempted to wrest it away from the private sphere in order to transport the ideas accumulated in it to different standards or to make it known as an experimental building beyond the exclusive circle of the developer. At the latest during my visit to Konstanz it becomes clear that for the architects Kraus and Schönberg the justifiably much publicized Haus W is likewise far more than a “private house”. It is also an incubator for architectural ideas that point far beyond it. On the shelf there are models which transport the principle of the “house as small city” - nothing new, but realized. in a more compact version in Haus W - into other dimensions and building tasks. The architects are primarily interested in the question of how social relationships are presented in architecture in a way which is different from the norm, and how these can be stimulated. There are several elements in the



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single family home in Hamburg which actually require an urban planning vocabulary to describe: There are plazas, traffic intersections, viewing perspectives, intimate retreat areas and balcony situations which reappear in other larger, not yet realized projects. A hotel designed for Konstanz would not be a bunker full of beds but a labyrinth of caves, and a new residential area opposite the Old Town of Konstanz would adopt its medieval structure and create any number of opportunities for communication: Between the residents and, so it would almost appear, between the individually planned building lots, on which the architecture presents itself as if it had just grown over from the Middle Ages to the present - even if the buildings were absolutely contemporary ones in which Kraus and Schönberg set out to make such strong images real.



GREAT LAKES KONSTANZ
Masterplan Competition Entry
2007, Konstanz, Germany

Interview



Tobias Kraus, Timm Schönberg on the Haus H27 building site in Konstanz. In the background the recently stripped insulating concrete façade.

In principle we are two small offices.

Apart from this interview, what is the reason for you both spending the week here in Konstanz?

Timm Schönberg

We work in Konstanz and London. Our daily work is local. In principle we are two small offices. Tobias has his construction site here (he points to outside the window, where concrete is just being poured). We work on a daily basis as project architects, just like in a larger office. We meet if there are important things to do. At the moment this involves a major revitalization project for a London railroad station. A competition amongst investors who have each joined forces with architects.

How often do these meetings take place?

Timm Schönberg

About every six weeks. In between we phone and mail each other.

How long have you been doing this?

Timm Schönberg

Three years, that's how long we've had a joint office.

Which was never at the same location?

Timm Schönberg

Exactly. I was already in London at the time. Tobias was initially based in Hamburg and now he's back in his hometown of Konstanz. But we have known one another for a good 15 years, since we studied together at the Universität der Künste in Berlin, in a seminar by Adolf Krischanitz.



TOBIAS KRAUS

I get out there, speak to the workers and we develop the details together.

HAUS W.
Hamburg, Germany 2006-2007
Construction: Glued laminated wood.

Tobias Kraus

A year later we met again in Barcelona, at Enric Miralles.

How do you manage to work together with such a distance in between?

Tobias Kraus

We have always given each other stuff to correct. This way we each develop our own ideas, but often doesn't know what we're actually doing. You need outside judgment.

So there no joint initial project which brought you together?

Timm Schönberg

Let me go back a bit: In 2000 I went to London and worked at Grimshaw. Basically, working for ourselves the result of dissatisfaction with the circumstances in the companies we were working in. At Grimshaw and Arup Associates in London I was not really able to do what interested me. And so we gradually started to apply to project developers, and that's how the projects in Bradford, a small city 300 km north of London, came about. And then Haus W in Hamburg came along. Tobias was prepared to open an office in Hamburg and we thought we can really start things moving now.

You moved to Hamburg because of "Haus W"?

Tobias Kraus

It was a really complex affair which required precise handling. It is very important to us to be available locally, during the construction phase as well. Things are different in large companies, of course, where you draw every detail, pass them on to the workers and they take care of it. Or not, as the case may be. I, on the other hand, get out there, speak to the workers and we develop the details together.





TIMM SCHÖNBERG

How would you rate the building culture in Germany compared with that in Great Britain?

Timm Schönberg

In Germany there is more interest in constructing a good building than there is in England ...

Interest from whom?

Timm Schönberg

From everyone! Architects, craftsmen, developers. In England the main concern is that it sells.

You mean, the level of craftsmanship is higher in Germany?

Timm Schönberg

Yes, much higher!

Your colleague is pulling a face!

Timm Schönberg

Here you can buy finished products which are near perfect. Everything is regulated. There are regulations on how to build windows. They don't have that over there.

Tobias Kraus

Hmm, if I request something here that doesn't comply with regulations the craftsman writes me a memo stating that he cannot guarantee anything.

Timm Schönberg

The tendering culture is different. In Germany, as the architect, I specify what kind of sealing I want. In England they define the "performance": How does the sealing perform? It is the craftsman who then decides which one he is going to use.



HANOVER HOUSE

Bradford, UK 2005-2008

Construction of the roof in glued laminated wood as a "self-supporting bodywork". The attic has no supports.

You get more satisfaction if you have helped build it.



TOBIAS KRAUS

Building site Haus H27, Konstanz

And which is better?

Timm Schönberg

The work has to be done either way. You get more satisfaction if you have helped build it.

Tobias Kraus

If I look out of the window here I can see what is happening on the building site. I can always intervene. Sooner or later the workmen accept you.

Timm Schönberg

In Great Britain there are just a few architects who think in continental European terms. The most well-known is David Chipperfield. But the British scene was far more heavily influenced by the 1980s high-tech architects: I think that this school of thought really derives from industrialization. It's about assembling elements. We Germans think about compactness, perforated facades, space ... the British don't. Everything is screwed, plugged, not poured in solid concrete. Over there everything is made of steel. Even in the City of London, where for listed building reasons lots are then clad with sandstone, there is always a steel construction behind the facade.

Tobias Kraus

Framework construction is also prevalent in the United States: Wooden frames for smaller buildings, steel frames for high-rises ...

Timm Schönberg

The thought process there is technical: What kind of screw do you use? But spatial considerations fall too short. They can make wonderful halls, for example, for train stations. But the sense for other spatial contexts has been lost. They used to be able to do it. We have often visited the John Sloane Museum and were impressed with how complexly the space was thought through.

When do you make the decisions about material?



TIMM SCHÖNBERG, TOBIAS KRAUS
Office in Konstanz



HAUS W.
Hamburg, Germany 2006-2007

Tobias Kraus

Late, in the tendering process ... no, that was a joke. But if anything the material is not decided on at the beginning. We look for it. For example, the building out there. We are here in Konstanz, an old town which is built very densely and compactly. There was a competition, strict stipulations. As a modern-day material we suggested a concrete which with certain additive materials needs no damp-proofing, no insulation.

An architect's dream! In Modernism concrete fulfilled the boldest wishes, and then as a result of the oil crisis, nasty heat insulation was applied on top. Now, however, technology has advanced to the point where we can build pure concrete buildings again.

Tobias Kraus

Well, as a result of the new energy saving regulations the dream is a thing of the past again and construction such as this no longer gets approved!

How thick are you concrete walls over there?

Timm Schönberg

50 centimeters!

And how many centimeters will be required in the future to satisfy energy saving regulations?

Tobias Kraus

More like 80 cm.

How did you convince the developers to build in concrete?

Timm Schönberg

They were happy to be able to build something that was a little atypical in the Old Town!



TIMM SCHÖNBERG, TOBIAS KRAUS
Building site Haus H27, Konstanz

You can also see the raw concrete on the inside of the building?

Tobias Kraus

Yes (laughs). On the other hand, there are very few contemporary buildings in the Old Town in Konstanz. As such you can expect a different clientele. Clients who want something special for once. Haus W. in Hamburg on the other hand, is more of a little Black Forest building. In the old houses there you always come across huge beams and ask yourself what kind of trees there must have been back then. And things creak ... it's a bit like that in the Hamburg building as well. You can feel the warm material everywhere.

Thanks to an article by Niklas Maak in the FAZ newspaper the Hamburg building house pretty much put you in the media spotlight.

Tobias Kraus

The response was great. But it has to be said: you don't land building contracts on the back of a newspaper or magazine writing about you. Not yet, anyway!



HAUS M.
Hattenhofen, Germany 2007-2008

The most reliable way is from friend to friend ...

Timm Schönberg

It's better when it's your direct friends who want to have something built. Sure, Haus W was all over the Internet. In England we were nominated for two young talent prizes and this was taken up by a couple of blogs. In the magazine HÄUSER, which also published an article about Haus W the editors said that an article would bring 3 or 4 jobs ... well, we got a few calls at least.

Perhaps Haus W is too unusual?

Timm Schönberg

Perhaps. But we have already thought about developing a prefab house from Haus W.

From a construction point of view it bears similarities to your Hanover House in Bradford, England.



HANOVER HOUSE
Bradford, UK 2005-2008

Ultimately it is always about relationships between people and not about creating chic containers.

Timm Schönberg

Right, its roof construction is also made of glued laminated wood. In Bradford we didn't want any supports in the room and therefore the roof cladding had to be like a self-supporting structure. We developed it with the structural engineers at KLH, the Austrian timber construction company. They have their own fitters in England as well. The system is a great success there. Steel has been so expensive in recent years.

"Self-supporting bodywork" sounds very technical in a British way. Might I just remind you what you said about the differences in architectural thinking a while ago.

Tobias Kraus

The load-bearing structure came about in the course of the work and in our case also generates space, in other words becomes space. This is something which really interests us. Pretty much at the start of things we had a childhood image, which consisted of building caves by placing some chairs and cupboards together and covering them with a carpet. The client did not want a wooden house for himself and his family and by no means a "bodywork". He had nothing specific in mind, he just said, "We would like a dignified home."

Timm Schönberg

He grew up in a "coffee grinder", a house with a square footprint and a pyramid roof.

Now that you mention it: You came up with a very individual interpretation of a "coffee grinder".

Timm Schönberg

Oh no!

Tobias Kraus

But, you're right in a way, even if we have adjusted the footprint. It does follow a 3x3 room concept as far as the upper floor is concerned. But it was not the form, the material, the construction or the building regulations which were important to us initially. We simply built a model which placed all the desired rooms together as modules.

Timm Schönberg

This "relating" is for us the most important aspect, regardless of whether we are talking about a residential building, a larger building or an urban planning project. Ultimately it is always about relationships between people and not about creating chic containers.

Thank you for the interview!

*Oliver Elser is a curator at Deutsches Architekturmuseum. He has written numerous architectural reviews in newspapers and magazines (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Texte zur Kunst, Frankfurter Rundschau, Der Standard, Profil, Bauwelt etc.) as well as in catalogues and books. He has taught in Graz and Vienna. He lives with his wife and two children in Frankfurt/Main.
www.architekturtexte.de*

Works

HAUS W.

Hamburg, Germany 2006-2007

Construction: Glued laminated wood.



The upper edge of the concrete surround is at the exact height of the lawn.



GALLON HOUSE
Bradford, UK 2006-2007



GREAT LAKES KONSTANZ
Masterplan Competition Entry
2007, Konstanz, Germany



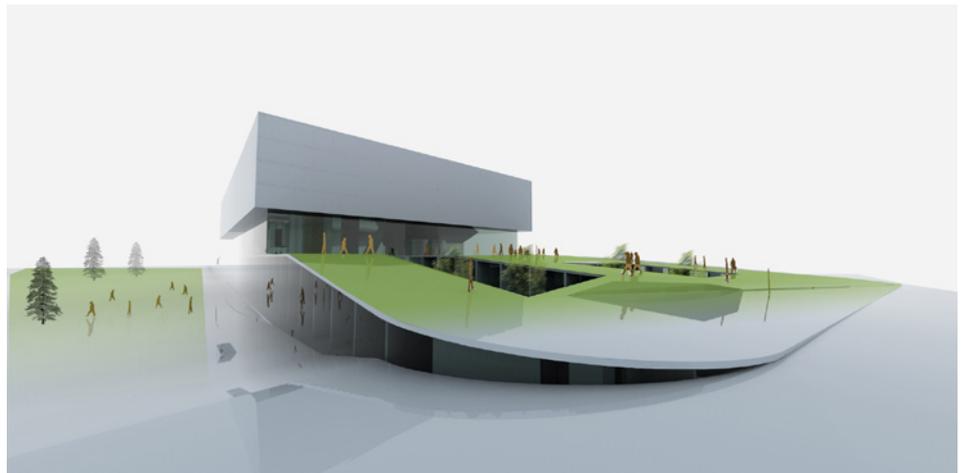
HANOVER HOUSE
Bradford, UK 2005-2008
Construction of the roof in glued laminated wood as a "self-supporting bodywork". The attic has no supports.



HAUS M.
Hattenhofen, Germany 2007-2008



MAISON DE LA PAIX
Competition Entry 2008, Geneva,
Switzerland



TAYSON HOUSE
Bradford, UK 2006-2008



HAUS H27

**Konstanz, Germany 2007-2009
(under construction)**

**The façade is made of 50-centi-
meter thick insulating concrete**



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