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## J. MAYER H. Architekten

# Profile

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**Municipal building in  
Scharnhäuser Park  
Ostfildern**

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J. MAYER H. Architekten has reached an exciting stage in its development: Ten years ago still a Berlin one-man show, it now employs 17 members of staff. To date the list of high-rise projects the company had completed was exceedingly small – as opposed to the documented art projects, installations, design objects, prizes and publications. Previously the only structure to serve as a reference was the municipal building in Ostfildern near Stuttgart, which opened in 2001. As such Jürgen Mayer H. (who was born in 1965 and hence by normal standards will be a “young architect” for some time to come) was for years a highly promising newcomer and ray of hope. He became more and more well known, but following the municipal building really proving himself a second time was still to come.

“One-hit wonders” are not only restricted to the music industry, you get them in architecture as well. Would the spatial ideas and unique formal language one was familiar with as renderings from publications and through success in competitions stand up to reality? Would they complete the step to three-dimensionality and be able to be transformed into good architecture? What would happen if nothing were to follow the prize-winning first work?

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**Refectory at the University of  
Applied Sciences  
Karlsruhe**

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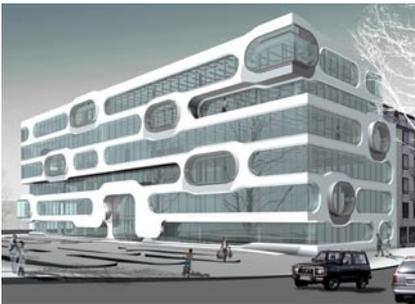
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**Danfoss Universe, Restaurant /  
exhibition and conference center**  
Nordborg, Denmark

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The bar had been set very high. And following the opening of the refectory in Karlsruhe this spring, it is clear that the success story is set to continue. The edifice, like the municipal building a contract landed on the back of a competition – has featured in publications any number of times, and among experts was certainly the topic of heated debate. Not everyone finds everything good about this project, in some cases it is the details, in others the strange color, and in others again the material concept that people find objectionable. There is no question, however, that it represents a considerable contribution to architecture, that it is a statement worth discussing. The innovative structure has also already won one prize for constructions in wood, and it will not be the last. And the MoMA in New York has included a concept model in its collection.

The success of the refectory, the “second work” alone would make 2007 a special year for Jürgen Mayer H. However, there are now also five additional projects on the go all at once: the extension of “Danfoss Universe”, a natural science and technology amusement park in Nordborg, Denmark, a large office building for Cogiton on the banks of the Alster in Hamburg, a villa near Stuttgart, and a penthouse in the Mitte district of Berlin, both for private developers, and finally the conversion of Galerie Kicken in Berlin. As such, more examples of completed architecture are laying themselves open to criticism, meaning that that the novice status is well and truly a thing of the past.



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**ADA 1 – office building**  
Hamburg

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For Jürgen Mayer H. having fun building always seems to have something to do with having “fun with the developer”. He certainly speaks of the personal relationship between the architect and the developer conspicuously often, and of how important it is that they get on, that there is a common basis, a similar interest in the potential in a project. What he wants is the willingness for architecture to be regarded as adventure. If there is agreement on that and the chemistry is right, there is no stopping him: “If the developers are the right ones for the job I take on any contract.”

It will be interesting to see what our conversation reveals about an architect with the courage to use patterns. How does he achieve the fine balance between art and architecture, between furniture design and teaching architecture? At the same time as the finishing touches are being put to the new buildings he is designing new objects for Bisazza, as well as special edition furniture for Vitra, which is to be presented in June this year. On top of which, Mayer H. is visiting professor at the prestigious Columbia University in New York.



What will he be prepared to divulge – apart from professional admiration for the Gedächtniskirche ensemble in Berlin and Erich Mendelsohn’s Schocken department store (which, he says, convinced him to become an architect)? In younger years he studied Tadao Ando’s layouts so long that he knew them off by heart. That would seem to just about still fit the bill. On the other hand though, the fact that he admits to having a “small soft spot” for Mario Botta if anything comes across as exotic to younger architects and fans of soft Blubber shapes. In Jürgen Mayer H., however, we are dealing with a trendsetter, so let’s not forget that. And not be surprised if precisely the early work of the master from Ticino’s geometric stringency and striped masonry is soon referenced and honored once again in unexpected places.



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**Soft Mosaic Collection, Bisazza**  
Italy, 2002 / 2003

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# Interview



*Now that would have been a nice way to start off: Was Jürgen Mayer H. in any way influenced in his early childhood by Ken Adam, who created the legendary James Bond worlds? The rooms, furniture, curves – it all fits in very nicely, there surely can't be a better way to begin an interview! Unfortunately it's not to be: "No, I'm not at all familiar with any of that, I can just about remember a few of the titles. I saw my first Bond movie extremely late, not until I was in my mid-20s."*

*That's a pity. In that case let's get right down to the nitty-gritty:*

**An architect who designs buildings and furniture, and who on top is also an artist represented by a renowned Berlin gallery. How do all these disparate strands fit together?**

Architecture, design, art: The themes are actually almost always the same.

For me they are all very closely related. What is particularly interesting is to consider everyday life, which is articulated in several criteria. In architecture the procedures are more complex, simply because there are more people involved. With regard to smaller dimensions, on the other hand, it is easy to find out what one actually wants to say, to search for different formulations, it is far simpler to experiment. The themes are actually almost always the same.

How can I deliberately employ material “wrongly”? How can confusion be triggered?

**So what can transcend the boundaries of a particular genre?**

I think primarily output with what I would call functional and material potential. What opportunities does a particular material offer? What happens if I remove it from its usual context and place it in another? How can I deliberately employ material “wrongly”? How can familiar ways of viewing things be questioned, consciously trigger confusion? These are topics that I find exciting and my addressing them is one explanation for why, for example, the polyurethane cover used for the refectory in Karlsruhe actually comes from the field of roofing, or why with regard to the Bisazza furniture lots of people like the fact that something soft emerges from what are actually hard materials.



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**Bisazza Collection,  
Haus am Waldsee “Full House”,  
Berlin 2007**

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**Do not precisely these two cases illustrate a difference between the two criteria? With regard to furniture, which perhaps has something of mini-pieces of architecture about it, anything goes. As far as a building, which stands on a campus like a piece of furniture, is concerned, you are quickly accused of infringing strict principles relating to the just use of materials.**

The just use of materials and innovation with materials – where is the borderline here? And who is to say what is better or more valuable? We aimed to create an elastic space with continuous surfaces; that was the basic idea behind the design, which we initially pursued without actually making a final decision on a specific material. Keeping to the budget we were given would have meant a box with a few windows, so we had to be ruthless in our calculations. Concrete and steel were ruled out, which is why it was a wooden structure. An economical and highly progressive system involving pre-fabricated elements: Hollow cases, panels of laminated timber planks and particularly sturdy plywood, all of which is then coated with that layer of plastic. We got the maximum out of the materials so as to create the space and atmosphere we wanted with them. We met our targets in terms of construction costs and time, and it’s easy to look after as well, which in the Baden-Württemberg region can be of greater significance than elsewhere.



**This stretching, the “extending” of surfaces, the creation of confusion – these are themes you have been addressing for a long time now.**

Yes, and several others as well. Whenever I look back at the last ten years of “production”, certain things keep coming up and networking with something new. Something we perhaps researched at a totally different time, and under quite different conditions, produces the answer to a question relating to a quite different project. And it’s right: I believe there has to be more to architecture than just looking at it once, there has to be something to discover, that we as observers should find be addressed on several levels. I at least aim to produce architecture that cries out to be looked at a second time.

**...like the municipal building in Ostfildern, which at first sight you don’t realize tilts a few degrees...**

Exactly, or our buildings for Danfoss Universe, which are not to do with ballooning, like in current free shapes, but with precisely the opposite, with a vacuum, with shrinking and condensing. For me it is an expression of quality if architecture has various levels of accessibility, if its appearance seduces, but on a deeper level there is also “material for discourse”, in other words matter for theoretical, intellectual discussion.

**You have been searching for and promoting intellectual discourse for years now as a teacher. Your company is becoming bigger and bigger and New York is not exactly the closest of places. Nonetheless since 2004, each fall, you have been teaching at Columbia University, and prior to that you were visiting professor in Harvard and at the AA in London. What do you get from it, apart from it looking good on your CV, and lots of flight miles?**

The time I spend in New York is always at the cost of the company, there’s no doubt about that. The pressure really builds up then and it’s becoming increasingly difficult to organize everything. On the other hand it is enjoyable and valuable ‘input’ for me personally to discuss certain questions a group and really get to the bottom of them. You only get that in a college, not in everyday office life. It’s fascinating to see how the students develop and discuss their ideas with them, as a teacher it’s of enormous benefit. Which is why all the effort is worthwhile.



A glance at the Columbia events calendar is enough to turn you green with envy. In just a single week there is discussion between Mark Wigley and Charles Jencks and three lectures by 'Foreign Office Architects'. In the following week the picture is much the same.

It really is a luxury I'll admit. Since Mark Wigley has been Dean there things have been really hotting up, there's a lot going on right now.

**"the expanded architect – away from it's default settings"** is the motto that appears in large letters on the start page.

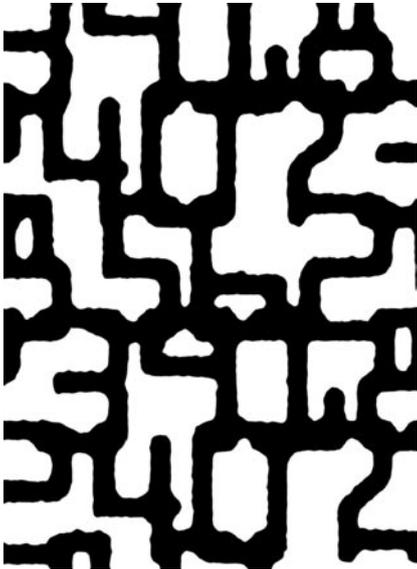


I got my students to work on the color beige for an entire semester.

In the USA too architecture has become more complicated. Here too there is the issue of changing professions, of new opportunities in architecture and the question of what constitutes the right training. The renowned schools of architecture are always at pains to have a clear profile and are very much in competition with each other. Of course Columbia too is placing ever more importance on computer and parametric design.

As far as teaching is concerned my major interest is developing and imparting a critically productive stance towards certain cultural phenomena – in conjunction, of course, with the question of its impact on architectural output. I once got my students to work on the color beige for an entire semester. Or on those remarkable 45 degree angles you got in the '70s, which in my opinion paved the way for the flowing transitions between floor, wall, and ceiling that are so matter of course today. Last fall we took a look at the inflation of "future".

**On the Internet I discovered the sentence: “Jürgen Mayer H. designs suburban railroad carriages, collects preprints and designs bed linen”. Two of these activities are pretty accurate, but the one in the middle is a bit perplexing: What in the world would prompt anyone to collect preprints? What are they anyway?**



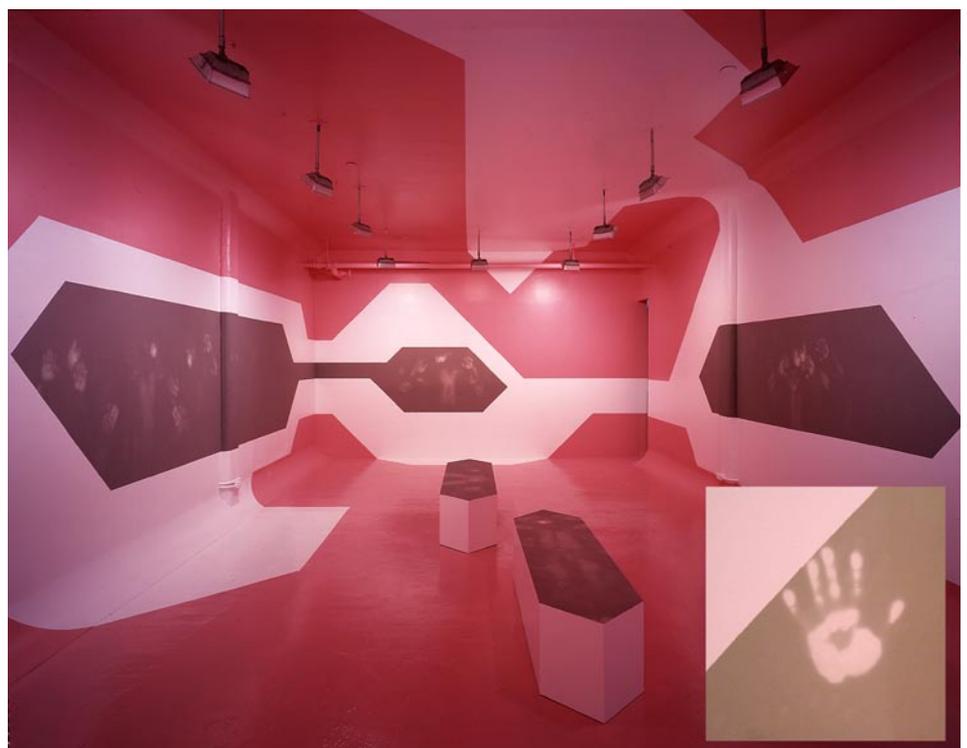
They are data security patterns, in other words the sort of multi-leaf forms that courier services use. When somebody sends us something they have to declare its value on the front, where the address is. This information, however, is not meant to be seen by everyone. How expensive the thing was is of no concern to the person delivering it. These forms have several layers and on the various copies the patterns, which are always a jumble of figures or letters, can conceal certain information.

**How do you collect something like that? And why?**

I keep preprints like that whenever I get them and have actually specifically gone out in search of them. I now have over 300 different types. I contacted printers and the German Museum of Technology, and did a lot of research finding something out about how the principle came about. But hardly anyone really knows anything about it. The patterns are of interest to me as “strategic ornamentation”.

**What does that mean? The patterns can be seen on your website, on bed linen and in an installation for the MoMA in San Francisco. But it can’t just be about decoration, about an alternative to floral and checked patterns?**

No, the exciting thing about these patterns is that though they came about through pure expediency they are full of background symbolism: It’s to do with data monitoring, the appearance and disappearance of something. At an exhibition ten years ago in Chicago I designed a guest book that had data storage patterns, and treated them with temperature-sensitive print. Anything anybody wrote in it was initially invisible, but through the effect of heat, for example the body heat of a hand, emerged from the patterns and became legible. If you let go of the page, the writing disappeared again – appropriate for the coming and going of the guests in the gallery.



Home? Previously my first thought would have been 'restriction'.

**You live in Berlin, build houses in Spain and Denmark, commute to New York and come originally from Winnenden near Stuttgart. You can switch from English and High German to perfect Swabian, your local dialect, just like that. Does the term "home" mean anything to you?**

Previously my first thought would have been 'restriction'. Nowadays I see it less drastically, but I still have mixed feelings; I would say primarily the word stands for 'loss'. Winnenden is small and close-knit; I always knew I wouldn't stay there for ever and certainly wouldn't be going back, apart from to visit of course. Nowadays I do feel a certain sense of gratitude, because it was certainly a good place in which to grow up.

**We become less critical as we get older...**

Of course. When you are young you think you have to rebel against such like – against Swabia, and its small and medium-sized enterprises, which I would lovingly have swapped for the highly intellectual environment of an academic family in an exciting big city. Fortunately, however, at some stage you realize why you became who you are. How much support you actually got at home or precisely the liberation from what seems to be a preordained destiny, makes you particularly strong. Nowadays I appreciate all of that and admire my parents' openness and ability to learn. They come to my exhibitions, look at my architecture and address things that initially are totally new. They always say that being "confronted" with things like that are an enrichment for them.



Actually it just occurs to me that when I was a student I did Winnenden a huge favor.

**You did? What was it? An early building?**



No. far better, I'm actually quite proud of it: I wrote a very forward letter and saved the town's old freight station from being demolished; nowadays it houses the Firefighters Museum. A few years ago though there were plans to build a new bus station for which the beautiful, but dilapidated wooden station would have had to make way. At the time I was studying in Stuttgart, heard about the plans and protested, as the building was a typical example of the development of infrastructure. And the Lord Mayor responded, saying I shouldn't just complain; he wanted to see proof from me, that there could actually be a bus station on the site if the old buildings were left standing. So I drew up the plans. I never received any money for them, but at the time I wasn't bothered about that. Any anyway, ultimately something completely different was built. But the old building was left standing. Nowadays whenever I arrive by sub-urban railroad I always think: That really was a good deed for the town.

*Katrin Voermanek conducted the interview.*

*Like her conversation partner she too studied architecture in Stuttgart. She, however, does not design buildings but crafts language. She was born in 1969 in Saarbrücken, in 1994 was a Bauwelt intern, and between 1997 and 2001 on the editorial team of BauNetz; nowadays she is a research associate at Stuttgart University, a freelance employee of Barkow Leibinger and freelance author in Berlin.*

# Projects

## ADA 1 – OFFICE BUILDING AT ALSTER 1, HAMBURG, 2007



The “floating eyes” in the horizontally structured facade symbolize the view of the water of the Alster. Inside they serve as an extension to the flexible office space as meeting points and places for communication.



## EXTENSION TO DANFOSS UNIVERSE, RESTAURANT / EXHIBITION AND CONFERENCE CENTER, NORDBORG, DENMARK, 2007



In a natural science and technology amusement part close to the Danfoss HQ the new buildings emphasize the educational, innovative basic idea behind "Danfoss Universe" and aim to arouse interest in nature and science.

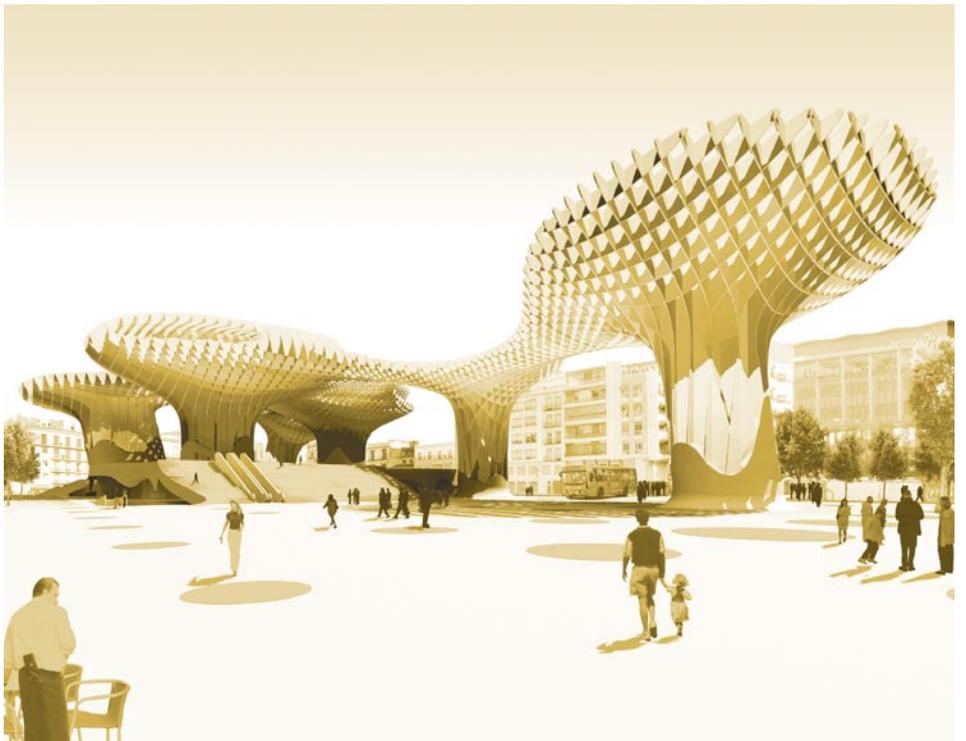


**REFECTORY AT KARLSRUHE UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES, 2007**

The refectory serves up to 1,800 meals daily. The building emerged as an “elastic” space on the basis of a design process in which there was talk of, among other things, Nutella rolls.



**METROPOL PARASOL, 2009**  
REDESIGN OF “PLAZA DE LA ENCARNACIÓN” IN SEVILLE, SPAIN





The mushroom-like, polyurethane-coated wooden structure will accommodate an archaeological museum in the basement, a covered market at plaza level and on the "parasols" a raised area for events with bars, restaurants and a panorama walkway.

### MUNICIPAL BUILDING IN SCHARNHAUSER PARK, OSTFILDERN, 2001

Not merely on account of the purpose it serves but also its uniqueness and presence the municipal building swiftly became an urban hub in the newly developed area. Among other things it houses public administration authorities, an adult education center, a library, the municipal art gallery and the registry office.



### IN HEAT / HOUSEWARMING, 2005

The exhibition, which was on display in New York and Berlin is an homage to Friedrich Kiessler's 1947 exhibition "Blood Flames". Using heat-sensitive color Jürgen Mayer H. creates interactive images whose color the observer can change by touching them.



### HAUS AM WALDSEE "FULL HOUSE", DESIGN MAI, BERLIN, 2007

In spring 2007 seventeen renowned designers transformed "Haus am Waldsee" in Berlin into a residential building. The room designed by J. MAYER H. features data protection patterns on wallpaper, seating and wall pictures. These patterns were developed at the beginning of the 20th century for the secure delivery of confidential information on multi-leaf forms and the insides of envelopes.

