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Delugan Meissl Associated Architects

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Profile

As is often the case they recently won a competition: a high-rise hotel at Munich's Olympic Park, that even makes the neighboring BMW-Welt building look dull. It comes as no surprise that precisely these architects established themselves building welfare housing.

They don't need to draw attention to themselves with a loud name plate, as is the vogue in Vienna. The two halves of the name are very much an onomatopoeic reference to the studio's activities: Delugan = fluid, flowing, soft; Meissl = razor-sharp and jagged. The studio's expressive edifices are a blend of early and late Zaha Hadid, are hovering structures and receding spaces – spaces that actually are frequently just a single room that give those in them the sensation they are on Earth for too short a time to experience everything there is on offer.

For four years now Delugan Meissl has been called DMAA (Delugan Meissl Associated Architects). Though this new formula has been adopted neither in their own nor in common parlance, it is a symbol of rejuvenation, expansion, and as such success: in 2004 the long-serving employees Dietmar Feistel, Martin Josst, and Christopher Schweiger became the new partners of Elke Delugan-Meissl and Roman Delugan, who had founded the studio in 1993, at the time only 34 and 30 years old respectively.

Pole Position

Back then the Mischek Tower, which is still Austria's tallest building, was not only their first edifice, it was their "Waterloo": their ardent search for innovative apartments was shattered by the hard reality of investment and was washed up on the banks of the Danube. On the inside of the high-rise in Donaucity nothing save the unusually high rooms (as of the tenth storey 2.7 meters) and the resplendent entrance to the building bears the architects' signature. Completed shortly beforehand, the neighboring «Girder», a mighty residential block kept upright by props, fared somewhat better: Delugan Meissl determined the layout of the (subsidized) apartments. In these, the studio's first two structures, two themes are dominant that concern it even today: buildings that detach themselves from the ground and the graphic treatment of the facades by means of patterns printed on them.
In the studio's first few years it was the rubbing of their ideas against hard fact that determined their output, which was hardly surprising; after all it consisted almost exclusively of the construction of welfare housing. They are remarkable buildings nonetheless, because the architects succeeded in including at least some of their intentions in built Viennese reality. By way of example, beneath the «hat» of the residential building on Paltramplatz there is an expansive volume made of perforated sheet metal— a truly communal area boasting sauna, roof terrace and a fantastic view. On the courtyard side behind the residential structure in Wimbergergasse there is a «landscape» of intermingling office tracts with light and access corridors and green sloping roofs. In the case of the city lofts on Wienerberg the architects transformed a low sleeping area, a high living area, and different width units into 47 apartments, none of which resembles any of the others. It would appear that in these reality checks go-ahead ideas such as car elevators to the apartments, lofts, and multifunction furniture lose out – but it seems to be just a question of time until they are used.

Turning Point

In 2003 Elke Meissl and Roman Delugan completed their own apartment. It forms the new roof of the office building opposite their studio. With its flowing rooms, the gushing edges and daring cut of its penthouses it represents their ideal of architecture. An apartment as a «platform for a nomadic, individualist life style», Bart Lootsma called it, while a friend referred to it as “something between Barbarella and John Lautner”, before leading me into Roman Delugan’s kingdom. Not a form of architecture that is not exactly all the rage, but one that is just about to take off! An aluminum balustrade arches upward, becoming a roof apron, a slender pool divides the roof terrace from the abyss and, through a (load-bearing!) glass slit beneath the black leather one looks down at the street below. The floor becomes a ramp becomes the floor, and the foot of the architects’ snow-white fitted bed is so close to the glass and thus the panoramic view of Vienna, that it takes a good dose of self-confidence to have pleasant dreams here. As Karl Kraus, a citizen of Vienna once commented, I’m quite happy, thank you very much.

For Delugan Meissl the building referred to as «Ray 1» also meant an exponential leap into media perception. There was scarcely an international lifestyle magazine that failed to feature an image of their apartment. Neue Zürcher Zeitung detected something “typically Viennese”, “humorous elements», whereas Standard in Vienna
discovered if anything something Swiss about it, namely “the implicit will to perfection, down to the very last detail”. And even if one considers there to be a specific element of Viennese Modernism in the complexity of the cut, Delugan Meissl’s architecture is less Adolf Loos and more an international, indeed universal idea of Modernism. The appearance of the material, the construction, usage – everything is for the most part neutralized, put at the service of the space, on which the latter can unfold all the more clearly. The rooms, it would appear, might permit everyday life, though they would prefer wild sex and flying knives – in other words life that is fit for the big screen.

Stealthbomber

What applies to the space all the more so to the edifices. Here too, haptic themes seldom play a role: The way something blends in should not burden anyone. The fact that much of the studio’s work reflects a similar formal language is just as obvious as its preference for white and black. The “RT building”, the “Dark Star” table and the range of door handles for Hewi all correspond to what the latter calls a “dynamically folded silhouette”: a black surface, crafted from triangular facets. Chance? If anything, the forced attempt to put motion into shape. Whatever, it was not conscious marketing of the “Delugan Meissl” brand the owners say.

It one takes a look at images of those Delugan Meissl projects currently being worked on, of which there are many, there is no escaping the fact that motion is one of their
main themes, with regard to both objects and spaces: The Porsche Museum in Zuffenhausen, Stuttgart (due for completion at the end of the year) is an ode to speed, even if (or perhaps precisely because) the Group’s cars are seldom able to speed as they do on the project’s renderings. A museum that is not about moving fast cars but about moving images is due to open its doors next year: the Film Museum in Amsterdam, an «intense repose» sculpture, as the architects themselves say – and the name they gave to their exhibition, which toured Europe in 2006-07. Despite an order book bursting with projects such as the concert hall in Erl and the campus for the University of Applied Sciences in Vienna, these two cultural buildings under construction are Delugan Meissl’s eagerly awaited main works and will surely, once again, put the studio in a different league.

The Porsche Museum in Stuttgart
In your projects the portrayal of speed plays an important role. Where does this wish for dynamism come from?

Roman Delugan: In our studio we generally like things to be "dynamic". In our projects and our work we try to integrate the future – and that implies motion. This most certainly plays a major role in our architecture, but it is not the only design parameter. Only in combination with a static, latent space can dynamism really express itself. This duality is important to us. Take the concert hall in Erl, for example: From the outside it's a dynamically conceived volume of two intertwining edifices. Stepping over the threshold, going inside is laden with excitement; in the auditorium itself one encounters calm and concentration for the performances – quality architecture also has to achieve that. We don't have a trademark: Delugan Meissl = dynamic.

Dietmar Feistel: One important aspect is certainly the appearance of our buildings. Dynamism, however, should not be limited to something purely formal. Our welfare housing projects are not stacked uniform boxes, designing dynamism is far more a general stance against rigid systems.

On your website you mention architects that for various reasons you hold in high esteem. Out of nine seven come from the Anglo-Saxon world, in other words almost all of them have a different tradition from yourselves.

Elke Delugan-Meissl: We hold their work in high esteem, but don't make it our own. John Lautner, Oscar Niemeyer … are a source of inspiration. Quite apart from that our work is full of a wide variety of forces – sequences and snapshots from totally different contexts – including emotions.
Roman Delugan: For me operating within a restricted sector is not that exciting. There are several, frequently even chaotic influences that you can’t exactly pinpoint. It goes without saying that vehicles, landscapes, and other images influence design work. Viewing work as an open system without showing allegiance to a particular school or group is the approach we take.

Elke Delugan-Meissl: We don’t pursue trends; more, as you already stated, a claim to permit all possibilities.

So you’re not interested in what already exists but what is still to come?

Elke Delugan-Meissl: We’re of course not in a position to have all-embracing knowledge of what is in store and use our concepts to try, with regard for example to apartment construction, to respond to current and changing ways of life.

In other words you don’t go in search of shapes that consciously that point the way away from the here and now?

Elke Delugan-Meissl: Our goal is to come up with shapes and living spaces that will hold their own in the future. Modern versus fashionable.

Christopher Schweiger: I think that when we are talking shape what we are striving for is a strong, timeless statement. With regard to the future it’s to do with the functional – given the extreme speed of developments, what are going to be facing in, say, two years? Where is society going? Future ways of living, the future museum: it’s enticing, it’s a challenge. In formal terms there is if anything independence, timelessness.

Are there such things as timeless shapes? Or does the attempt to remove buildings from time and conventions not produce shapes that are domiciled somewhere between futurism and retro, as, for example, in the case of Oscar Niemeyer?
Dietmar Feistel: You just mentioned conventions – that is precisely the right term! An unconventional shape is not per se the same as a futuristic shape.

Elke Delugan-Meissl: Let’s not just talk about shapes, but rather about contents. What are the goals we are striving for? Atmosphere, rooms that offer a specific experience, that are conceived to suit their users but are also fit for use in the future. The priority in terms of design is not to conceive volumes that are as dynamic and folded as possible. The design process is subject to intensive exploration of the contents. The formal language is a result of these considerations.

You talk about experimentation, that your approach to every assignment is new. Nonetheless in terms of shape your projects are closely related to one another. Is that not a contradiction?

Roman Delugan: Recognizability is not all there is to our work, but is certainly an element. It’s not as if we change on a daily basis. Nonetheless if you look closely the projects are different, they respond to the concrete demands whilst at the same time maintaining a common language.

Martin Josst: Within this language there has been a major transformation over the course of the studio’s 15 years. I don’t know what form the projects are going to take in the next five years. Perhaps a certain similarity will be detectable again in this period of time, but there is a development, a process taking place. The major priority is to come up with a concrete solution for a concrete assignment and not adhere to a formal superstructure.

There are studios where every project looks different. And there are also studios – and I would say you come unto this category – where there is a strong linking thread, in your case even between the various benchmarks. A door handle is similar to a door, is similar to a residential building …

Dietmar Feistel: Whether we are talking residential building, Porsche, or Film Museum – the focus was always on the idea of experimentation. The shape that ultimately emerged is the result of these considerations. The experiment did not involve producing shapes that didn’t previously exist. The experiment is the idea for the building itself, the contents.
Delugan Meissl has now been in existence for 15 years. Four years ago an additional three partners joined the existing two. What did that mean for the studio?

Elke Delugan-Meissl: We can bundle our forces better, are able to operate on a broader base. We have been working with the three partners for a lot longer. The contents of our work have not changed.

The range of the contracts you land is extremely wide: From as basic as it gets, welfare housing, to the exclusive museum for Porsche. Where does your heart lie?

Elke Delugan-Meissl: We’re not fixated on any one topic or line, aim to keep the spectrum as open as possible and derive the same pleasure out of product design as the design of a museum. There is still any number of aspects of architecture that we are interested in and which we would like to address in the future.

Dietmar Feistel: Both have their charm: Re-thinking things one has already done, and coming up against a totally new subject matter. It wasn’t without reason that we became architects, because that is precisely how we see the world: with as broad a view as possible.

Axel Simon conducted the conversation.

Axel Simon, who was born in 1966, writes about architecture in the international specialist and popular press. He lives with his wife and two sons in Zurich. www.architekturtexte.ch
Works

RAY 1 BUILDING, VIENNA

Commissioned 11/2002 (excl. interior), 06/2003 (incl. interior)
Usable space 230 sq. m.
PORSCHE MUSEUM, STUTTGART

Competition, 2005, 1st prize
Commissioning 12/2008
FILM MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

International competition, 2005
1st prize
Commissioning 2009
WINTER CONCERT HALL, ERL

Competition 05-09/2007, 1st prize
E-BUSINESSPARK SIMMERING
“SIMPLY 11”, VIENNA

“LIESING BREWERY” RESIDENTIAL BUILDING VIENNA

www.deluganmeissl.at