



Caramel

Profile



Caramel, Office in Vienna

Caramel Architekten's offices are located in a building in a rear courtyard in the only municipal district of Vienna governed by the Green Party, not far from the revitalized belt. The youngest part of the seventh municipal district, known as the "Schottenfeld", was at one time home to silk and tape factories. Nowadays, with their loft-like premises those factory buildings still standing naturally boast a high concentration of creative professions. A potpourri of film producers, graphic designers, agencies and IT companies, photo studios and architects. The large number of ongoing projects and the team itself, which has grown accordingly, are all housed in 540 square meters.

Right at the front door visitors become aware that it is par for the course here to use materials in unusual ways and to present unorthodox variations on simple functions. A door that resembles a piece of artificial turf standing vertically. It opens with the help of a section of hose that users pull towards themselves. The floor of the spacious office is covered with black protective matting made of granulated rubber. Another indication of Caramel's predilection for occasionally using construction and indeed other materials outside their expected spheres.



Caramel consists of the founding members Günter Katherl, Martin Haller and Ulrich Aspetsberger plus their employees, who have now grown to 20 in number. The first two people mentioned set up shop on their own back in 1998. However, it was only their partnership with Ulrich Aspetsberger as of 2001 that resulted in the successful chemical process that transformed them into Caramel, burnt sugar. They definitely do not wish to apportion any special significance to their choice of name, though in times of sensory overload it does sound better than stringing together three surnames. The three masterminds come across as likeable, open and completely unpretentious and their flat hierarchy immediately sounds completely credible. All three have moved to the big city by choice, either from the provinces to study or, in the case of Martin Haller, for work, and they stayed. Their building sites and projects stretch right across Austria north of the main chain of the Alps, from Dornbirn to Salzburg and Linz, then on to Vienna. All coincidence, they do not wish anybody to suggest that they favor their home region. Until very recently all three were under 45. In other words: young if we are talking about architects and not about top athletes.

BETRIEBSWERKSTÄTTE ANSFELDEN

Competition, First Prize, Realisation
Ansfelden 2002



INFOPOINT LINZ 09

Competition, First Prize, Realisation
Linz 2007



Caramel is one of those splendid bureaus that were founded in Vienna as of the late 1990s. Outfits with high quality standards in terms of concept and details. Upwards of two architects (females unfortunately all too seldom) with a name that usually says a lot about the kind of creative work the company is engaged in. Relations are anything between relaxed and supportive. Competitive talk might be whispered, if there is any at all. They are not only engaged in traditional construction assignments, their spectrum just as much includes exhibition installations and designs, and design studies. As befits current times their self-images is more open than those of their counterparts in previous decades, moving away from the boss/employee principle towards a flat hierarchy.

Caramel operates at various levels removed from questions of design in ecological and architectural policy-related themes, which in turn is characteristic of the young scene in Vienna. Vociferously their own working party in the architecture iG (syndicate) established in 2002 of which Caramel is, of course, a member, performs important work in the field of architectural policy. One of their concerns is transparency in the awarding of contracts. This blind spot in contemporary architecture production is of particular interest to Caramel: competitions and their conditions are one thing that they very much like to train the spotlight on.

Now that they have become established, Caramel, once known as the competitions studio in the city, still sees the contest between architectural ideas under understandable and regulated conditions as the only way to go in acquiring projects. No PR department, organized small talk at pertinent events, ringing the doorbells of politicians or representatives of the real estate sector gets them new contracts. Which unfortunately results in their not being so well-known by local decision-makers and hardly ever being invited to take part in competitions in Vienna. Nonetheless, they fight for fair conditions in open or anonymous bidding for construction contracts. When, for example, Caramel calls for a boycott of dishonest invitations to tender they hope to set an example because of their experience and their success. At the same time they wish to promote their young colleagues also receiving adequate payment for their services. In fact, they are so concerned about the subject that when potential clients approach them directly, they even advise them to organize a little competition in order to come up with the best solution.



HAUS KAPS

Realisation

Kaps Saalfelden 2004



Caramel's official approach is to start over from scratch in every project and in every competition. They live in the here and now, look back on what they have experienced and achieved without emotion, and do not plan the future. They aim to approach every new job as ingenuously as possible and to place it in an appropriately new context. They never want to stop enjoying what they are doing. The word enjoy is one that crops up very often. In this, to a certain extent, Caramel appears torn between the responsibility they feel for their team and an emotional defense of their creative leeway.

The result of their non-linear way of working is now a large number of expressive projects, each boasting a deeply individualistic approach to suit its particular context. From a space capsule to complement a 13th century farmhouse to black industrial buildings, from a checked info center for Linz, the 2009 Cultural Capital, to social housing projects in Vienna.

An attractive series of private residential buildings that have been planned very individually is a notable project, an assignment that Caramel describes as wonderful and strenuous at one and the same time. They talk directly with in each case just a few users at a time, and the architectural answer to their needs can be agreed on immediately. However, the efforts involved repeatedly seem boundless, and it goes without saying that they would not be able to make a living from this type of thing exclusively. In the case of the Lina house, a box-shaped dwelling for mother and child, the efforts paid off. Several prizes and countless publications quickly made the rationally planned building with high-quality living space covering only 65 m² famous. The M house is interesting as well, also located in a good area of Linz, featuring a high degree of prefabricated parts, with optimally positioned, large windows and an absolutely homogenous outer skin.

HAUS LINA

Realisation

Linz 2004



The outer skin, time and time again. The first thing people see when they approach the buildings, the design of the façade, is for Caramel either the logical, homogeneous (as far as possible) sheath of the structure, or the detail the team comes up with as a finishing touch. Where possible, a single material is used for the purpose. A material that can do anything, that completely covers the volume. This can be a yellowish vanilla-colored, fiberglass-reinforced PVC membrane, better known as a truck tarpaulin, stretched over the relevant construction, as is the case with the Lina house. Another example is the gleaming black covering of an industrial building for the road maintenance depot in Ansfelden, Upper Austria. This consists of an EVA plastic membrane, dot-shaped fittings structure and dissect the large area as well as lending it a sculptural quality.

SCIENCEPARK LINZ

Sciencepark Mechatronik

Realisation

Linz 2009



In the case of what is to date Caramel's largest project, the Science Park in Linz, the large shape of the bent components is accentuated and structured with the help of the façade made of aluminum lamellas. Here, the design also serves as a visual reinforcement of the special structural engineering. The load-bearing structure was calculated as if it were a bridge. Once again, logical.

One recurring facet of Caramel's projects is their sensitive approach to the location of their buildings as a central element – something that is particularly visible in the master plan and the construction of the Science Park in Linz. After completion, this large-scale extension to the Johannes Kepler University will consist of four individual buildings. What is impressive is the very special attitude to the existing location, the way this extension communicates with its surroundings and the way it answers to its circumstances. Several long edifices follow the lines of the slope. With differences in height and bends, the sections stand out, while at the same time responding to the neighboring edifices with their long histories. The result is a coherent ensemble with functioning buildings developed from the inside outwards, with a strong identity and aura. Or, as the competition jury's assessment read, "despite the many references they make, which make the design stand out, the new buildings are markedly independent. The balance between reference and autonomy particularly characterizes this project".

Team Caramel



Interview



birthday and competition finalisation – enough reasons to celebrate!

The entire team is gathered at a large table around the corner from the entrance, the mood is good, and drinks are being served. It is one of the three bosses' birthday. For some of them it is an informal morning get-together, for others a reviving breakfast after yet another night was sacrificed for a competition entry. The topic of competitions runs like a red thread through both the company's history and the following discussion.

The washstand for FunderMax from 2001, the mobile structure in the form of an inflatable cloud for the 2004 Biennale; and the Lina house, a compact residential box for mother and child are some of my first memories of caramel. Just a few years down the road you have completed a series of major projects. Has Caramel grown up?

Ulrich Apetsberger:

No, I sincerely hope not! The trend over the last ten years was super, but we would put it down to chance. We still do everything that is in our spectrum. We have taken part in competitions and won them, and against all expectations they resulted in concrete contracts. But we still enjoy working on small assignments just as much.

Do you still have the time and capacity for them?

Günter Katherl:

Oh absolutely! The small assignments and design themes are the icing on the cake. We try to keep working in the office enjoyable. Spending five years working day and night on a major project is not always fun. Bigger companies often do one after the other, start off working on small projects and if larger ones follow do not do smaller ones any more. For us there is no forwards or backwards, no one contract is too small. In fact precisely the opposite is the case: The smaller they are, the more fun and sillier they are.



VOESTSTEGE

Competition, First Prize, Realisation
Linz 2005

**Ulrich Apetsberger, Günter Katherl,
Martin Haller are Caramel**



Competitions are our
main topic.

Ulrich Apetsberger:

At most there would be something we don't really want to do ...

What would that be?

Ulrich Apetsberger:

A competition that is poorly organized, that doesn't comply with the rules.

Martin Haller:

I see that more in terms of content, a competition being lacking not just form-wise, but that also reflects the construction assignment poorly.

Günter Katherl:

We are trying to assume a pioneering role, for example in the fees architects charge. It shouldn't be that in the ranking they are joint last with kindergarten teachers. To some extent we also serve as a role model when we say we are not taking part in a competition if those are the conditions.

Ulrich Apetsberger:

And in concrete terms right from the start. Even if it is unfortunately already common practice to draw up the preliminary draft free of charge, as a sort of preliminary service. We say on the contrary: the preliminary draft is the core, the foundations of the entire process, it has to be paid for.

In the past few years you completed four major projects, all the result of competitions you won. How much do you invest in competitions?

Martin Haller:

Competitions are our main topic! As for how much we invest, that can be anything from just one day to several weeks, depending on how quickly we come up with the basic idea. In an ideal situation the final outcome is just a sentence, a word, a sketch. This idea, depicted with very little elaboration, explains and carries the whole project. That stroke of luck, if it all works out, those are the really nice moments! The size of the competition is not important.

We don't want to have to know people. We don't play golf and we don't hunt ...

Günter Katherl:

We actually started out as just a pure competition studio. We don't want to have to know people, we don't want to be mustered anywhere ...

Ulrich Apetsberger:

We don't play golf and we don't hunt ...

Which competition are you working on right now?

Martin Haller:

We have just submitted an entry to a competition for a school. We started it yesterday lunchtime and it was ready today!

Ulrich Apetsberger:

That's how we approached competitions earlier ... De facto, competitions really wear you out and at times are self-exploitation.

Günter Katherl:

In reality they are about one, perhaps two statements, we can pen those well in a short space of time. We are never bothered about having nice rendering.

Martin Haller:

We are mainly invited to take part in competitions in Germany, and there good rendering is less a part of the architectural presentation and serves rather as a reference, to show that you are a company that can actually afford good rendering.

Ulrich Apetsberger:

What is important is that our employees also ought now ought to be able to do a competition entry. That is something that is no longer easy to fit in a time frame ...

Günter Katherl:

Of course it also has to do with company policy, to do with employees having an opportunity to be involved with competitions, even if they have no experience. Team members' personal development is the main thing, and that is part of it.

So are competitions a tool for motivating employees?



Caramel, Office in Vienna



Ulrich Apetsberger:

Yes, exactly! If all somebody ever does is draw up plans for electrical systems at some point they are going to go mad.

Your projects are stand-alone buildings that are strong in character and for which for the most part the design of the façade plays an important role. How do you develop a project, what is the relationship between “skin and bones” in your structures?

Ulrich Apetsberger:

Earlier at least we only started thinking about the design of the façade at the very last moment, in the form of a few graphic lines. For us the façade is the final part of an assignment.



HAUS P

Realisation

Klosterneuburg 2008

Martin Haller:

There are two different aspects, one is the form, and the other the façade. The form is the stand-alone, which we think about from the outset, whereas the sheath around this form is not the focal point.

Günter Katherl:

The shape, the inner life, is all developed from a concept. The façade is a detail. Ideally it is the façade that is the sheath, which emerges from the overall concept. All other aspects have an inner logic that emerges from the building site and the users’ needs, but then all of a sudden we have to include some windows! If we see no logic in it we say we can no longer do it!

Martin Haller:

With projects like the inflatable cloud you can see that as long as the sheath, like the form, is a homogeneous skin, a material, we are operating in an ideal condition. That also applies to houses and major projects. If there are too many requirements in terms of functions and materiality, things become difficult!



HAK+HLF KREMS

Competition, Prize Winner,

Realisation

Krems 2001



WIFI DORNBIERN

Competition, First Prize, Realisation
Dornbirn 2002

Filtering out the
general criteria for
the surroundings,
that is the challenge!

Your approach to the location is also indicative: In Linz the way the site is modeled means there is a link to the university campus, at the WIFI in Dornbirn a transparent edifice integrates the urban space as well. How important is communication with the urban environment, the surroundings?

Günter Katherl:

For us that is precisely what architecture is, at least that is how we see it!

Ulrich Apetsberger:

Linz is a good example of interlacing in urban planning. The place was so special that it was easy to respond to it. However, just churning out urban planning and producing an ideal model, that's not for us. We need help with the design, reference points. The place itself is important, but the spatial program is and always will be the foundations.

Martin Haller:

What is important with the orientation tools is that one doesn't get them mixed up. The protagonists of the international style refused references to the specific location in architecture. In the sense that it was geared too much to the cultural, local background, it was seen as negative from the outset. We are also looking for generally valid aspects we can keep to. Such as topography, atmospheric things, which can be just the same in Jena as they are in Vienna or Innsbruck ...

Filtering out the general criteria for the surroundings, that is the challenge!



SCIENCEPARK LINZ

Sciencepark Mechatronik
Realisation
Linz 2009

In Linz the master plan for the Science Park was your work, and the third of four buildings is just being built. What was the special challenge?

Günter Katherl:

Hemmed in between the slope above and buildings that pointed in a specific direction and dated from the between the Wars beneath the campus, it was clear which direction we had to build in. What were also decisive were the fall winds from the north, which are important for the urban climate. We opted for this more airy, playful footprint. Looking at the urban planning model, the missing head, which will probably never be built, was a major challenge. How can you plan a building without a head? You begin with the shoulders! That is how this game with bends and parts jutting out began, first across the footprint, then via the layout as far as the façade ...



SCIENCEPARK LINZ
 Sciencepark Mechatronik
 Realisation
 Linz 2009

The architect as a universal artist is a thing of the past.

MA 48
 Competition, First Prize, Realisation
 Vienna 2005

There was a very nice piece of work here that emerged from your collaboration with the landscape architecture firm Idealice, which congenially translated your path concept into a graphic structure. What form does this sort of cooperation take?

Günter Katherl:

The transition from rigid buildings dating from between the Wars to the open surroundings, to nature corresponded precisely with this game with lines. It begins in the footprint and just doesn't stop, the lights are just positioned any old way, and even the furniture continues the theme. Lots of people will say it is too playful but it was our very first concept. It doesn't matter if we are inflating a balloon or building a major structure, the basic idea is the basis! There are strong reasons for it, it is logical and is implemented so consistently that ultimately you find it all over.

Ulrich Apetsberger:

The collaboration with Idealice is an excellent example: we have 20 people sitting here in the office, but working with external partners is very important to us. It is not imposed landscape planning, but part of the overall concept we drew up together. Reference is also frequently made to the structural engineering early on. A new generation of structural engineers like those at Werkraumwien has played a role in something highly attractive emerging between the two specialist fields.

Günter Katherl:

The architect as a universal artist is a thing of the past. With any project we start talking to people from other disciplines early on. It is only possible to create something together, as a group.



You are in the process of constructing what has to be the most typical Viennese building assignment, publicly funded residential accommodation. What is the missing contribution, in terms of type or concept, you can make with this small but fine project?

Martin Haller:

From our point of view we succeeded in making residential accommodation something conceptual. There are 17 apartments, but actually they are 17 intricate multi-storey single-family dwellings. No two are alike, they all have a garden and loggia or loggia and roof terrace. And the intricacy is also expressed in the façade, even from

100 meters away everyone can say where they live.

What is working together as a team like?

Günter Katherl:

We are three extremely different characters. That, and the development of an argumentative atmosphere, have always been our strengths. As much as harmony in the company is important, arguing among us three is all the more important. Martin once said that "if we ever stop arguing we'll never win anything again."

Martin Haller:

... then there will be no more Caramel! We argue with each other about content, in what is ultimately a productive, positive way.



**Ulrich Apetsberger, Günter Katherl,
Martin Haller**

We intend to be working, winning and building, but we have no life plan.

Where do you see yourselves in ten years?

Ulrich Apetsberger:

We intend to be working, winning and building, but we have no life plan. Ten years ago we didn't say that we wanted to have a 540-square meter office and 20 employees a decade later.

Günter Katherl:

We want to be just as satisfied as we are now. We created the structure, and the life we lead we lead in the company on a small scale, and we can continue it on this scale as well.

Martin Haller:

The most important thing is that we have projects that are fun, regardless of what size they are! Winning three unexciting major contracts would be a horror scenario. Working on a few exciting projects with fewer employees is not.

Ulrich Apetsberger:

One topic that is very important to us is the future: ecological thinking. And it is not so important that we only use super-ecological materials. We pursue a more holistic way of thinking. When dealing with resources, be it on the plot of land, with regard to construction, in the appearance.

**Günter Katherl, Martin Haller,
Ulrich Apetsberger**



Martin Haller:

If anything, preferably a return to low-tech rather than exaggerated building services engineering for passive and low-energy houses. After all if you look at the CO2 footprint of all these high-tech solutions that have been used a lot turns out to be just a lie.

Ulrich Apetsberger:

The discussion must lead in a different direction. Away from isolated buzz words such as "kwh/m2" towards overall contexts, that is where we would like to play a role!

Thank you very much!

Interview: Ulrike Haele

Ulrike Haele lives and works in Vienna. Studied Product Design at the University of Applied Art in Vienna, and Journalism and Communications Science at the University of Vienna. Research assistant at the Institute of Design Research Vienna (IDRV). Works as a freelance author, among other things as a contributing editor for A10.

project management: Andrea Nakath

Projects

SCIENCEPARK LINZ

Sciencepark Mechatronik

Realisation

Linz 2009



HAUS M

Realisation

Linz 2008



HAUS P

Realisation

Klosterneuburg 2008



INFOPOINT LINZ 09

Competition, First Prize, Realisation
Linz 2007



VOESTSTEIGE

Competition, First Prize, Realisation
Linz 2005



MA 48

Competition, First Prize, Realisation
Vienna 2005



HAUS KAPS

Realisation

Kaps Saalfelden 2004



HAUS LINA

Realisation

Linz 2004



HAUS H

Realisation

Linz 2003



BETRIEBSWERKSTÄTTE ANSFELDEN

Competition, First Prize, Realisation
Ansfelden 2002



WIFI DORNBIERN

Competition, First Prize, Realisation
Dornbirn 2002



HAK+HLF KREMS

Competition, Prize Winner,
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Krems 2001

