



09

GRAFT

Profile

VIEW FROM THE BERLIN STUDIO
Heidestrasse



At number 52 you can get a massage: “Ring Grafe” the sign says. Just next door. The next building, 50 Heidestrasse, is where Graft are located. One storey of a factory, rear building, 4th floor. From up here there is a fantastic view of wasteland, warehouses, second-hand car dealers. Somewhere around here the labor exchange gives early risers day jobs. Just a stone and a half’s throw away from Germany’s newest main station it looks like an open freight station in Detroit. A long asphalted strip leads to the building. “Our runway” the architects say jokingly.

The studio’s location is par for the course. As Thomas Willemeit says “You’ll always be able to find us where there’s upheaval.” Whereas the Berlin studio of gmp recently move out of its chic storey in a factory in the Kreuzberg district because Chinese visitors are unable to grasp the concept of an architecture studio in an industrial building, Graft deliberately goes for the undefined, non-uniform, tattered.

It was like that after they had graduated. With their degrees from Braunschweig in their pockets, Lars Krückeberg and Wolfram Putz added a Master’s in Los Angeles. It was there, in 1998, that they founded Graft. Thomas Willemeit, the only one to have worked for an international star architect, Daniel Libeskind in Berlin, came on board in 2001. The three of them are the owners of the studios in Berlin and Los Angeles.



Gregor Hoheisel, the “fourth” Graft, had worked for gmp in China and since 2003 has been a partner in the Graft Beijing studio.

Alone and without any form of protection in the hell hole that is Los Angeles, where dynamism and success are just as shamelessly visible in public as misery and violence: The young architects from Germany started out here doing anonymous garage conversions. When things were not yet going that well, they at times had to move heaven and earth just to get their Green Cards prolonged.

They fought things through and made it – to Hollywood. That is primarily attributable to the positive mindset of the three of them. The superficiality of many Americans is not their thing, but they simply adore the fifth field of operation Graft is also involved in (in addition to architecture, urban planning, exhibition design and music): the pursuit of happiness.



Anybody expecting to encounter arrogant pop stars, whose Blackberry is constantly peeping, is disappointed. Sincere, focused, attentive and with no airs and graces is how they come across – always. All three of them are quite simply pleasant from the outset – such that I have to admit occasionally having got them mixed up previously, despite the fact that they look totally different.

The human factor is certainly the main reason for their success. In their business they have to convince people, and in their case in almost all the corners of the world. You can only achieve that if you don't see the developer as a vehicle for realizing your own artistic ambitions. For Graft the developer (they actually refer to the “client”) is always a partner, never an enemy that destroys what was a lovely architectural idea. “If you impose restrictions, you are the one that makes the puzzle more difficult”, is how they see things.

“A few chic interiors plus Brad Pitt” – for a long time that was the formula Graft worked by. At the latest by the time of the Aedes exhibition, which is now touring, and currently on show in Dornbirn, things had changed completely. Never before in the history of Aedes Gallery had there been such a thick exhibition catalogue. Graft is involved in building projects all over the place, and all at the same time. It is not always entire high-rises, often “just” facades, hotel fittings, shops and restaurants, but the number and scope of the projects definitely puts them in the premier league. Just one such project would stretch many an architectural studio to its limits. From converting an enormous Interhotel in Georgia to an apartment tower in Las Vegas, from a lakeside villa in Berlin to a marina in China, they cover the whole gambit.



The FAZ newspaper refers to them as the “curve constructors”. Actually their architecture is extremely dynamic. The boundaries between inside and outside, between the wall and ceiling, between architecture and furniture become blurred and disappear. Motifs such as these are by no means unique in the present-day architectural scene; in fact you can even call a lot of them fashionable.

Yet as opposed to the Libeskind, Hadid and Gehry generation that began building late and is now condemned to delivering its branded architecture to the very end, Graft has several years in which to develop ahead of it. You can rest assured that in ten years from now the architecture Graft is producing will have totally different focuses.

It is their education that is the basis for this. If you don't know them the statement, on which they all agree, as to which teacher influenced them most as students comes as somewhat of a surprise: of all people it was the one who taught the history of building. Harmen Thies continued the principle of the search for structure in architectural analysis that the art historian Hans Sedlmayr had introduced around 1930. He divided up the entire structure of a building into individual elements before piecing it together again by describing its constituent elements.

Graft as Deconstructivists, who dismantle architecture and reassemble it? As dynamic Baroque successors to Borromini? Rock over Baroque (Wolf D. Prix)? Perhaps. They analyze the structural wealth in the history of architecture and, using new materials, transpose it to the present-day.

As such Graft architecture is totally different from computer nerds' machine-generated blobs. At Graft they know when and why something has beauty because their roots are the classic architectural benchmarks.



And this could well be the second main reason for their success: They win over developers not with their personality alone, but precisely with their architecture too. What they do is *interesting* – in the eyes of architectural laymen as well. And it has brought them worldwide success – of which in the meantime many are envious. Yet what is actually wrong with young architects from Germany being in worldwide demand on the back of their ideas?

If you think the success has been handed to them on the “Hollywood plate”, you'd be wrong: It is the result far more of ability, integrity and a whole lot of work, performed for the most part in the rhythm of foreign time zones. But it is worthwhile.

Interview



GRAFT

For the photo shoot we succeeded in assembling all three Grafts at the exhibition in Aedes Gallery. However, for the interview in the Berlin Graft studio in Heidestrasse we were welcomed by just Lars Krückeberg and Thomas Willemeit – Wolfram Putz was already on the road again.

How did you actually get to know each other?

Thomas Willemeit

We met for the first time on the very first day of Fresher's Week at Braunschweig Technical University. We really got to know each other *well* in a choir there, which we founded ourselves. It was a jazz choir, and we even went as far as Italy and the United States with it.

Lars Krückeberg

And the third stage was the drawing class. To begin with we were all in different existing ones, but it only became good fun when we all set up a drawing class together, which in fact is still going today. Drawing classes are an important part of the course at Braunschweig. The self-organized system of studying architecture there functions as an agreement between generations: young students help final-year students, who in turn give advice. It has produced a form of exchange of creative ideas we have been practicing ever since. Even today we still try to create the culture of the drawing class in the studio.

Studying architecture in the drawing class is an agreement between generations



BERLIN STUDIO
Heidestrasse

In 1998 you took part in the Architecture Internet Prize organized by BauNetz and won a prize. Were you already operating as Graft at that stage?

Lars Krückeberg

Yes. If I'm not mistaken that was the "Graft 4" project; it was certainly before number 10. It was very early on.

And what came after "Graft 4"?

Lars Krückeberg

A lot happened all at the same time. We went to Los Angeles, where to begin with we converted garages into studios, as you do if you are a young architect in L. A. – it's your bread and butter, just to earn money.



FIX
Restaurant and Bar, Bellagio,
Las Vegas

But we never relied on any one field alone. For example we also wrote, and helped launch the Las Vegas edition of *Stadtbauwelt*. We also did a lot for San Francisco and Silicon Valley, the e-commerce sector: new offices for Young Turks, who work 24/7 and have no private life whatever. How do you design areas where they can meet one another, how do you get these characters a girlfriend?

And finally, early on we tried our hand at art projects and were involved with the Biennial in Santa Fé. At the time we also designed the first home for Brad Pitt and have remained in contact with him ever since. To begin with we designed projects *for* him, and later on together *with* him.

What was it exactly that you built for him back then?

Lars Krückeberg

First of all it was his guest house. He was going to move into it for a time while he was having his beautiful Arts & Crafts home restored. That's how we got to know him. Next to it there was another building he wanted to have demolished. But we had different ideas and told him he needed a place where he could think and work, where we could work together. So we completely converted it, making it into a totally different building – the studio is now used for holding meetings and presentations.

You need a place
where you can
think and work

Is your friendship with the star beneficial or harmful?

Thomas Willemeit

It would be a bit arrogant to call it harmful. It goes without saying that it is beneficial, and we are well aware of the fact. Now that we have become really good friends, and because we really value working with him on the basis of the work itself, for us the fact that he is famous is not an issue.

Hollywood and a few chic interiors: This is the image people have had of you for years now – and is totally out of date. What are you building these days?

Thomas Willemeit

In Berlin we are working on various interior conversions, a second dental practice – and we're proposing a temporary art gallery on Schlossplatz, with which we are pretty much preoccupied.



LAKESIDE VILLA

Berlin

Lars Krückeberg

And we are also building a huge villa on the outskirts of the city. It's a really exciting, ambitious project that we can't actually say much about: The client doesn't want it to attract public attention.

This lakeside villa is reminiscent of Scharoun's Baensch building, which was also located overlooking the water. Is Scharoun, the organic designer, an influence on you?



Thomas Willemeit

Thomas Willemeit

Bingo! He produced some incredibly good projects that absolutely fascinated us. Take the Philharmonie concert hall in Berlin – a contemporary meeting point for music if ever there was one. I know of none better, none that is so poetically charged and where there is such a good atmosphere. I had an opportunity to perform there once with a choir, now that was a great experience!

Colin St. John Wilson wrote a book about "forgotten modernity". In it he addresses independent, organic and dynamic shapes in architecture. They are an inspiration to us. Wilson demonstrates how there have always been these threads running parallel to mainstream modernity, even though in terms of appreciation they have been overshadowed by functional, rectangular and white architecture.

Let's talk about your international projects.

Lars Krückeberg

We're still building in the USA: First of all a pool complex with restaurants and bars on the largest building site in America, the City Center Project in Las Vegas. The overall design is the work of Cesar Pelli; Foster and Libeskind are building high-rises there.

There's no bigger pool anywhere in the world!

Designing pools might sound a bit trivial, but as far we are concerned it's gigantic: There's no bigger pool anywhere in the world!

In addition we're designing a large hotel in New York in one of the World Trade Center towers. And finally, in collaboration with others, we are involved in an urban planning project in "post-Katrina New Orleans" to do with low-income housing, sustainability for the poor – in a part of town probably no one would otherwise enter.

Thomas Willemeit

In Georgia we are converting a large Interhotel and constructing nine villas on a slope overlooking Tiflis. We also have the prospect of an urban planning project in the heart of the city, a major residential development covering 100,000 square meters. And finally in Latvia we are working on a residential building on the outskirts of Riga, right on the beach.

And in Asia?

Lars Krückeberg

In Tokyo we're planning a ten-storey apartment block, above Roppongi Hills. In China there are several projects in Dalian. First, an entire bay with hotels, restaurants and shops in the shape of a sickle. And second, our biggest project of all: "Dalian Daily".

DALIAN DAILY

Dalian, China



This comprises two residential towers, one 180, and the other 120 meters high, and an office block – overall an enormous volume, which the Lord Mayor has now approved. The ground-breaking ceremony should be held later this year.

As far as things like dental practices and hotels are concerned you've very much developed your own signature. But how about when international high-rise projects like these are concerned? Aren't you more or less told what to do?

Thomas Willemeit

Of course costs immediately begin to soar as soon as you break out of the traditional mold of a local form of construction. But we actually always take things to the limits – and doing that you can actually achieve quite a bit.



Lars Krückeberg

Lars Krückeberg

We need to differentiate here first and foremost between the building assignments. With an office block most clients are interested in revealing their own face, and paying for the privilege. With residential high-rises, however, it's a different matter. Here there is an infinite variety of clients with different requirements and wishes. The investor is only interested in them for as long as it takes to sell all the apartments. When it comes to actually doing the building, that's where savings are generally made – to the detriment of the quality.

Apartment blocks are one of the most difficult architectural tasks you can get. However, as international architects we have to tackle them because, as the last Biennale demonstrated, the world's major cities are becoming ever more concentrated. In China for example, where everybody is well aware that the masses are coming and apartments are needed, considering how many old city structures can be preserved would be for nostalgia purposes only.

Turning our attention to Germany again: What is behind your "Art Cloud" on Schlossplatz in Berlin?

Thomas Willemeit

When the magazine "Monopol" asked us to take part in the competition to produce sketches of ideas, the topic really grabbed us. It was to do with developing an image for a location that had had already been over-planned hundreds of thousands of times.

We very quickly decided that for the presentation of contemporary art we would design a totally non-monumental, ephemeral shape. What emerged was this hovering something or other, which some people refer to as a cloud, and others as a UFO. What we are aiming to do is come up with a poetic expression for presenting art – and not the sort of "neutral" backdrop people frequently swear by, which there can't be anyway. *Each and every* backdrop tells a story.

Bearing this particular project in mind: To what extent do computers influence your design process? Do you let the machine produce the shape, with the designer shouting "stop" at the right place?

Thomas Willemeit

Even with computer-aided designs someone has to pre-determine the conditions, specifications and parameters. Our design for Schlossplatz was based on Michelangelo's Capitol in Rome, a free shape, seemingly totally independent of the surrounding buildings and comprising two different circles. Having entered this geometry, we used the computer to generate a shape that is curved in several places – a shape that previously you could only sculpt.

KUNSTHALLE
Berlin, Schlossplatz



Lars Krückeberg

The decisive factor in this type of computer-generated shaping process is why say stop? And what sort of “stop” do we actually mean? – “Stop – I have to alter that again” or “stop – that’s it!” or then again “stop – the one before...” – Criteria with which to judge a design in all its complexity. Just to get Vitruvius involved: beauty, usefulness, sturdiness – they all have to feature. We really are filled with joy when we say “stop” and see that something really is beautiful.

Kant equates beauty with interestingness. That, ultimately, is what drives us: What makes something interesting?

To finish up with let’s move on from interesting to practical aspects. Jet-lag architects: How do you manage to run three studios on three continents? What sort of people do you have working for you?

Lars Krückeberg

“Jet-lag architects” is a nice way of putting it, and certainly hits the nail on the head far better than “jet-set architects”, which in the past we have also been called. Especially if you have three studios and always sit in Coach Class: flying being exciting, now that was a long, long time ago.

The synergy effects we anticipated from the three studios are only now slowly beginning to impact. We are now able to transfer people: Germans working in America who, like us back then, find out about new things. Who in a new cultural environment become quicker, more intelligent, more bastardized, more robust. And, vice-versa, we are now sending more and more Angelinos here to Berlin.

Germans mostly go to our newest studio in China. Getting the Chinese to leave their home country, on the other hand, is far more difficult. In principle we strive for a heterogeneous blend – the more international, the better.

Thomas Willemeit

Incidentally, the ideal Graft employee works in our China Office: a Chinese, who studied at Columbia and is married to an Austrian. Perfect synergy!

What do the three studios still have in common?

Lars Krückeberg

Los Angeles, Beijing and Berlin are cities in which there is an incredible amount of change, and tremendous dynamism. They are at one and the same time immensely beautiful and extremely ugly – urban planning laboratories. And that is precisely why we are there.

“Jet-lag architects”
is a nice way of putting it



Thomas Willemeit

Change attracts us like magic. Wherever there is change we are jump at the opportunity. It inspires us. Koolhaas turned his back on Berlin in horror: Berlin had been reunified precisely at a time when intellectually it was not in a position to be. I wouldn't go quite that far, though there are a few missed opportunities in the city. But let's not complain about them because Berlin is big and full of energy – history moves on, and it's up to the people there to now make something of it.



Graft spoke to Benedikt Hotze.

Benedikt Hotze was born in 1964 in Essen, studied architecture in Braunschweig and Lausanne, and is editor-in-chief of BauNetz since 1996.

Projects

HOTEL IVERIA

Tbilisi, Georgia

Conversion of a

Former Interhotel



HOTEL IVERIA

Casino, front-of-house desk area



HOTEL IVERIA

Hotel room



LAKESIDE VILLA

Berlin



FIX

Restaurant and bar, Bellagio,
Las Vegas



FIX

Restaurant and bar, Bellagio,
Las Vegas



FIX
Restaurant and bar, Bellagio,
Las Vegas



AMBER BAY
Dalian, China



AMBER BAY
Dalian, China



AMBER BAY
Dalian, China



DALIAN DAILY

Dalian, China



DALIAN DAILY

Dalian, China



DALIAN DAILY

Dalian, China



PANORAMA 1 + 2
Apartment blocks
Las Vegas
Completion 2007



PANORAMA 1 + 2
Apartment blocks
Las Vegas



CHURCH
Wünsdorf

