

Why should a Building look like a Cubic Zebra?

Speech delivered at the dedication ceremony of the pressurizing station Vogelweh-Kleeblatt and the Team Vogelweh water supply network.

Early last year the Technische Werke Kaiserslautern started to work on a new lay-out for the water distribution network, in order to hook up the US-housing area of Team Vogelweh. For this, two new pressurizing stations were needed and one of these was going to end up at the western city entrance, at the Vogelweh road intersection. The required volume was determined by the technical installations, storage and back-up systems. As it turned out, this volume was fairly substantial, almost too large for the limited space available on the intersection. The City of Kaiserslautern and TWK were well aware that a building, on this prominent location, the very city entrance and the doorstep of the world renowned Team Vogelweh, was going to receive a lot of attention. Therefore TWK insisted that the project should not look like a bulky, singular unit. If possible, the building should underplay its size; perhaps look like a collection of small buildings. Furthermore, the building should do justice to the prominent location. It should be visually present in a relevant, meaningful and interesting way. Naturally the costs should be kept as low as realistically possible. These somewhat conflicting parameters determined the architectural project-brief.

When we first visited the site the first clue to any design approach was obvious: it is the nature of location itself, determined as it is by traffic. The building was to be located at a cloverleaf (in German, ein Kleeblatt), a road intersection without left turns. More precisely, the building will mostly be seen from a moving point of view, that is, from moving cars. But there is more to the site than immediately meets the eye. Apart from being right next to the US housing area, the other side of the intersection is occupied by the Opel car factory. Now the American Army and Air Force have been a continuous presence in Kaiserslautern since 1945, and the Opel car factory since 1966. Both provide employment for a large part of the population of Kaiserslautern, and thus, by extension, two determining characteristics of the City of Kaiserslautern are very much present at this location.

Pretty soon after that first visit, the idea was born to design a city sculpture, to mark the entrance to Kaiserslautern. As a sculpture the building should be able to underplay its true size and purpose. But if you seriously intend to hide the actual size of a building, it probably is a very good idea to carefully study camouflage techniques.

In 1909 the American naturalist and painter Abbott Handerson Thayer published a book called "Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom". It was the first scientific inventory of camouflage in nature, and it became an instant bestseller. Since then, the military, for obvious reasons, and artists share a keen interest in camouflage, and they have been learning from nature and from each other. From the early Futurists and Rationalists of the time right up until the present day, artists, and architects, have applied camouflage patterns to their designs. One particular technique of camouflage (commonly attributed to a British artist, Sir Norman Wilkinson) has always received attention. It goes back to the First World War, to the time before the invention of radar, when range finding and aiming were still done completely visually. This type of camouflage was extensively applied to the primitive aircraft of the time, but, in its most extreme forms, it was used at sea where it is impossible to hide (obviously, for ships, not for submarines). It was the next best thing to being invisible. The technique intended to hide the vector of a ship, its exact speed and direction, and thus its future location, by breaking up silhouette and form through the use of contrasting colors and patterns. In short, it was camouflage intended for moving objects. This type of camouflage has since become known as dazzle-paint, or dazzle-design.

As a matter of fact, the car industry has also adopted this technique. It is used when road-testing new car models. In order not to immediately give away the latest design developments to the competition, the prototypes are carefully camouflaged. Indeed Opel partly produces their road test prototypes in the Kaiserslautern plant. Around this phenomenon, in Germany, this car loving nation, a whole culture of car magazines has sprung up. These magazines put a tremendous amount of effort into being the first to present pictures of the latest sightings of these cars. The road test cars are called Erlkings, in German "Erlkönige", a strange name with an interesting background. Originally the Erlking was a mythical figure from an ancient Nordic fable, around which Goethe composed a rather chilling poem. The poem tells us that the Erlking is force of evil, preying on our children and newly-borne. Somehow, in a strange inversion of meaning, the word Erlkönig nowadays has evolved to indicate something precious, something that must be protected from preying eyes and theft, and therefore must be hidden from sight. Erlkönige, now the prototype test cars again, sport high-contrast stripes and shapes in order to hide in plain sight: the very essence of camouflage. To us, it seemed somehow fitting to apply these dazzle-paint patterns to an unmovable object in a vortex of moving spectators, hiding shape and size but drawing attention to its presence, which, by the way, in a public space constitutes a form of additional security.

Over the last decades ambitious cities all over the world have used architecture and art as instruments for marketing and branding, sometimes successfully, at other times less so. The creation of identity and meaning through architecture is always difficult. It rarely rings true. If a project does not become a part of the local culture, a part of everyday life, then even the best marketing and branding campaign will simply fail. One might think then that the best strategy is to not loudly state that something is art or architecture. As the French artist Jean Dubuffet said (somewhat freely translated): "art does not sleep in beds especially made for it. It would rather disappear than be put on display: what it does like is to be incognito. Its best moments occur when art becomes almost invisible." But funny enough this very artist produced intriguing, playful black and white sculptures, sometimes the size of this building, sometimes even bigger, but always loud, very much visually present. As always in life, it is better to act, to initiate something new than not to act. For this you do not need state-of-the-art expensive building techniques or exclusive materials. With an off-the-shelf industrial product, a few good craftsmen and a bit of creativity you may end up creating a building that hopefully communicates fun and vitality but also communicates something about its location and context.

Actually, one of the big cultural debates in contemporary Germany (which of course also includes architecture) revolves around the notion of authenticity. This is not surprising: in Germany approximately 50 percent of all buildings had to be rebuilt after WWII. In the big cities this percentage was considerably higher. In the immediate post-war period an incredible amount of buildings were erected in a very short time, most of them built cheaply and in a boring, repetitive modernist style (not withstanding beautiful exceptions of course). All in all this has resulted in a latent aversion for anything looking modern, or even different.

Surely, it is to be expected that a lively debate will develop around the outspoken looks of this project. Guaranteed there will be champions and opponents. But if this happens, and we believe it will, this building will find in a very natural way its place and acceptance in the life of the people living in Kaiserslautern and hopefully it will remind them of the things that make up this city. And, with a little bit of luck, it will then also come to reflect and represent the tight knit bond between the City of Kaiserslautern and its US-partners.

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Attending:

Mr. Wolfgang Herzog,
CEO Technische Werke Kaiserslautern

Dr. Klaus Weichel
Mayor of the City of Kaiserslautern

Brigadier-General Mark C. Dillon
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