

Palais Thinnfeld, Graz

Ifau and Jesko Fezer from Berlin won a competition with a plan that refuses to make a spectacular gesture.

— AUSTRIA — TEXT: OLIVER ELSER

Graz claims to be Austria's unofficial architecture capital. But for a long time the picturesque inner city showed no signs of either the 'Graz School', that radical form-demolishing movement led by Günther Domenig, or the legendary Styrian residential designs. Experimentation took place on the outskirts of town. Not until the 'blob' of the new Kunsthaus (art museum) by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier in 2003, did a building leave a mark in the city centre that unmistakably speculated on the 'Bilbao effect' of outstanding cultural buildings.

Yet the spectacular bubble of the art museum, heavily criticized because of its dark rooms, was only the beginning. The same block is about to acquire an 'arts cluster', the prototype for which is probably to be found in Vienna's Museumsquartier (museum district). Two well-known institutions, Graz's Kunstverein (art association) and Haus der Architektur (architecture gallery), as well as offices of the city's Johanneum museum association will be moving in. By clustering them in the baroque Palais Thinnfeld, the city hopes to attract more visitors than the former separate locations. Doubts arose at the art association, whose director Sören Grammel feared the development of an 'arts mall' resembling the ubiquitous shopping malls.

However, the outcome of a competition for the conversion of the Palais succeeded in convincing Grammel, though it drew criticism from Graz's architectural establishment. That is

because the Berlin-based prizewinners, the Institut für angewandte Urbanistik (ifau, or Institute of Applied Urbanism) and Jesko Fezer, managed to prevail with a design that is hard for the Austrian architecture scene to digest. 'Where's the architecture?' the prominent architect and the reserve jury member, Volker Giencke, asked on the Styrian architecture website www.gat.st and got no answer.

Most perplexing is probably the refusal to make a spectacular gesture on the exterior. Ifau and Jesko Fezer, who is a partner in pro qm, Berlin's renowned architecture and art bookstore, bring to Graz a critical practice that is quite unfamiliar anywhere in Austria. Analysing the programme and negotiating the possible conflicts caused by spatial proximity are more important to them than creating a signature look. Thus they propose combining the social facilities and libraries of all three users and creating an unassigned passageway on the ground floor that can be occupied as required. The architectural means and their representation in the competition are as limited and as economical as possible: simple furniture and lightweight walls.

The name of the design is 'A Radical Compromise'. What is in fact radical is that, a good thirty years after the first attempts at participatory design, architects are again going in this direction. After its completion in the summer of 2007, Palais Thinnfeld will certainly not be showing up on magazine covers. Sometimes experiments are almost invisible. ←

← Exhibition room
↑ Foyer
↑↑ New facade
↑ Reading room and archive

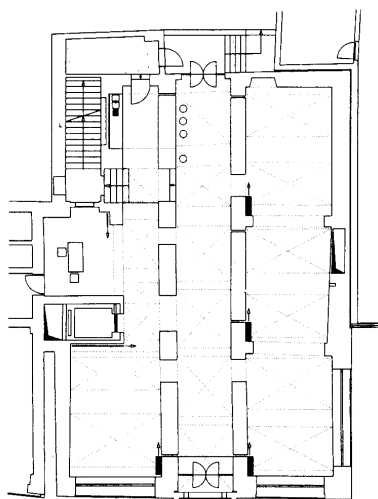
↓ Existing facade with new base



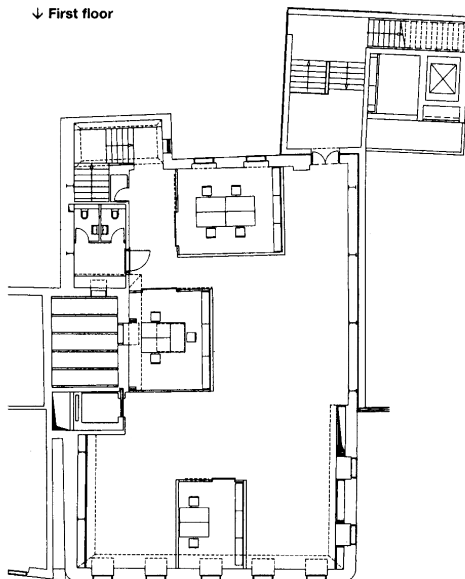
PALAIS THINNFELD CONVERSION, 2005-2007

Architect: ifau, Berlin
Collaboration: Jesko Fezer, Berlin
Client: GBG Grazer Bau- und Grünlandsicherungs GesmbH
Address: Mariahilferstrasse 2, Graz
Info: <http://berlin.heimat.de/home/ifau/>

↓ Ground floor



↓ First floor



↓ Second floor

