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CALCULATED MADNESS

The European Central Bank is constructing its headquarters in Frankfurt – and it will be a new landmark for Europe that could hardly be more daring. (by Hanno Rauterberg)

Has anyone forgotten how unrestrained, how fundamentally insane this architect once was? He wanted to tear up the world order. Demolish the foundations of existence. Break open false relationships. According to him, this was the only way – freed from oppressive walls and burdensome roofs – for an individual to finally be free. He called for architecture “that bleeds, that exhausts, that revolves and – as far as I’m concerned – may also break. Architecture that shines, that stings, that shreds and that tears when it’s stretched!”

There was a good reason that Wolf Prix was considered the great enfant terrible among master builders – someone who threatens the system and who even today, at the age of 70, dreams of escaping from capitalist constraints. And of all people he, the constant subversive, received the green light to erect one of the most important banking headquarters in the world. If it were just a matter of stacking as many office spaces on top of each other as efficiently as possible, any other architect might have planned it just as well. But this called for something that one wouldn’t necessarily suspect from the cold logic of the banking business: metaphysics. Otherwise rather strict, the monetary authorities speculated with a value that can’t be captured in numbers: They wanted symbolic excess. Their headquarters, the new main office of the European Central Bank, was intended to become a landmark. But what exactly it was going to mark was still up in the air.

Last week Wolf Prix, founding member of the Viennese architectural studio Coop Himmelb(l)au, invited guests to the first public viewing. The official opening is still some time away, and so far not even the dynamic glass facade is finished. But his pride already drove Prix out onto the construction site, up to the 45th floor, so that all the world could see what he has accomplished here.

Cheap suppliers have shops all around the expensive tower

The Berliners may as well orbit their nostalgic palace for eternity; power and significance have long ago departed – they will reside instead in Frankfurt’s East end, where the huge, abandoned market halls stand. The Salvation Army is right around the corner and Caritas serves coffee nearby; across from the bold new bank tower, numerous cheap suppliers pursue their trades – kebab restaurants, aquarium supplies, a piercing paradise. This is probably a part of the symbolic excess already: The Euro has its new center in a place where Euros are in short supply. Glamour and pride in haggard reality.

The ECB has not settled in the banking district with its own kind. Its powerful tower stands in isolation, as if it had to keep its distance to maintain an overview: over the other banks and everything else that may be happening in the vast lands of Europe. The new construction looks out beyond the Main River, across the old worker's district in the East end, as well as the new residential districts that have popped up in recent years. The bank is foreign here, it doesn't fit in. It is set back from the street, secured by high fences.

That Europe finally gets grounded here. That it becomes comprehensible what holds the continent together. That this otherwise abstract state construct gets a face. This was what some were hoping for when the new construction of the ECB was started. But none of these things have happened. What the architect Prix and his colleagues erected into the Frankfurt sky for a colossal 1.2 billion Euros resists a clear expression. Those who walk around the building will get a series of changing impressions – sometimes the tower looks strangely disjointed, a wedged and twisted glass formation; at other times it seems blunt and monolithically banal. But no matter from which direction the building is seen, the architecture always stays unapproachable. It doesn't want to win anyone over, doesn't want to please anyone; it dispenses with the mediating power of the pictorial. Its character is as cool and placeless as the currency that is monitored inside.

And yet the eye can't let go of this building. Despite its sharp edges, it stays mysteriously blurry. Instead of solidifying into a trite symbol, it presents something that has not yet existed in political iconography in this form: its own disjointedness. Wolf Prix has built a structure of open conflict.

Many of his predecessors were building towards the eternal; far into the 20th century, a bank had to look like a temple for money, made of precious granite, decorated with pillars and resting on protective columns. In contrast, the story that Prix tells with his ECB, above all, is that nothing in this world is as it seems. And that you can't expect absolute reliability even from a bank like this one. This architecture is derisive, with no illusions. And it doesn't even have to bend to look terribly bent out of shape.

The facades are formed out of many rectangular panels – even, rectilinear, rational. But Prix has arranged them into hyperbolic paraboloids, which looks as complex as it sounds: Surfaces that are so audaciously skewed into themselves that one might think the tower would start to stagger, tumble, crash. What seems rational in its details proves to be a glittering irrationality on a grand scale. One might say: a calculated madness. And this could certainly be understood as a metaphor, for the banking business and the idea of Europe.

This financial house does not conceal its own vulnerability, especially not on the inside. It's actually a hollow tower, a middle without a center. To suitably accommodate the required office spaces, Prix and his colleagues first condensed the entire room volume to a model cube and then divided it into two slices with a curved, slanted cut, one of which they rotated by 180 degrees. This means that half of the ECB is standing on its head; it has reversed its lower part to be on top and turned its inside out: The classical and the anti-classical order mutually face each other. This is a tremendously shaky affair which is only

prevented from toppling because the intermediate space is glazed and because powerful steel cables connect the two halves. They shoot through the empty center. In a certain way, they are the actual emblem of Europe.

The order that dominates this bank is not one that is natural but one that has been achieved. Not an eternal bond, but one that always has to be determined and solidified again. There is no absolute Europe here, just a relative one – and it can never be sure of its own balance.

Here the free fall becomes a controlled form

All of this can be dismissed as a deconstructive gimmick or a self-enchanted architectural spectacle. But with his ECB, Prix has accomplished an astonishing and paradoxical embodiment of strength. Here the monetary authorities and Europe demonstrate that in the end, that which strives to be apart sticks together. Free fall becomes a controlled form and here one is even capable of stabilizing the most severe instability. Bearing its own opposition, not concealing it behind harmonious facades but actually showcasing them with a good deal of pride – that is the basic principle of this architecture. This, it says, is the substantiation of Europe's power.

When this building is inaugurated in a year, will it also be understood this way? Will the bold interplay of the two tower slices even be recognized? Prix himself says that the European thought is shown above all by how the old and new come together in his building. His structure stands right next to a gigantic hall from the peak of modernity; it was once the central great market of Frankfurt that was built in the 1920s. What is being bargained for on its inside now no longer consists of mangoes and celery but the correct prime rate and interventions into the economic life of Europe. Prix has accommodated several conference and meeting halls at once. And yet there is no unanimity here. The relationship between the wonderfully, finely articulated building monument and the new rough bank tower could hardly be more adversary. And this, at the latest, is where the casual observer comes to an insight: The new ECB wants nothing to do with the usual Europe rhetoric that keeps evoking history as a source from which the future communality should grow. It crisscrosses through all formulas for reassurance.

Originally Prix was planning a virtual desecration of a monument; in the end, after loud protests, only some of the market hall sections that were reconstructed after the war had to make way. A wide cantilever arm of the ECB tower that functions as an entrance gate penetrates, catches and deforms them.

Again there is no harmony, again the landmark marks the truth of a conflict. This won't be called beautiful, nor accomplished. Because this would mean that something would have come to an end. But here – what a cheerful message – Europe is just beginning.