Translation of an article on the Musée des Confluences in Architektur & Bau Forum 11/12

[caption] It is hoped that the Bilbao-effect will happen in Lyon. The question of what will actually be exhibited in this museum is simply background detail considering the spectacular architecture.

Absolute architecture
By Christian Kühn

Five years passed from the competition in 2001 to the start of construction, and another eight until the expected opening in 2014. Lyon will then be able to boast of another attraction and hopes to achieve the Bilbao effect – and the construction site is already impressive.

Even before construction began, the Musée des Confluences in Lyon already had a considerable media presence. Its most popular publicity image displays the architecture of Coop Himmelb(l)au in a purified culture, so to speak: a free-standing construction lacking contact with the ground, simultaneously organic and technoid, the visual product of a collision between a greenhouse and a Panzer tank. On the bottom edge of the visualization, the blurred lights of passing cars can be seen - an effect which gives the construction the appearance of a futuristic aircraft carrier travelling at full speed.

My first three-dimensional encounter with the project in the form of a model at the Architecture Biennale in Venice 2004 was quite a disappointment. The naturalistic reproduction the size of a small car seemed as cumbersome as a stranded whale. Viewed as a sculpture, this 1:50 scale model was unsuccessful, and my desire to see this spectacular formation on a 1:1 scale was limited.

A visit to the project’s construction site when the frame construction was almost complete certainly told another story. This had less to do with the reworking, through which the structure developed further in the planning phase, than with the sheer size of the building. It measures 170m at its longest point, 80m at its widest. The height of the building is around 35m in the centre, and 45m at the highest point. At just under 27,000m², the building’s usable area is similar to that of a mid-sized shopping centre; the total area is a full 46,500m². The spatial effect of a 1:50 model of
such a structure has little to do with reality. Evidently we are at a loss when it comes to geometries that lie so far beyond our everyday experience, at least in terms of translating between the two scales. Reference examples with 30-metre cantilevers and a space underneath that amounts to a height of 18 metres upon 8 metres are rare. What appears to be a low space on the model is in reality a hall whose actual effect is not determined by the sculpture hovering above, but by how the relationship to the surrounding town, and in this case to the river, is controlled.

**Aloof, Technoid-Organic**

The enormous dimensions substantially decouple the geometry from the functional contents and make the project functionally more plausible than similar experiments conducted on a smaller scale. The basic plan of the design is familiar from the work of Coop Himmelb(l)au, at least since 1983’s ‘Open House’ in Malibu: raising the structure from the ground, the technoid-organic appearance with a body and head, the wide cantilevered arms, the strong contrast between enclosed volumes and exploding glazing. What the architects write about the design of the house in Malibu with its 100m$^2$ of useable space could also describe the 27,000m$^2$ project in Lyon: ‘created from an explosively drawn design. Designed with closed eyes. Unwavering concentration, the hand as a seismograph of the very emotions that will be awakened by the spatial construction. The house is a tilted body with curving skin. The drawing’s flux is also translated in stasis and in construction. The building almost floats. There are no predetermined divisions of the space. That comes after the building’s completion, or never: that is also open architecture.’ (From ‘Architektur am Ende’, Ed. Peter Noever, Prestel Verlag 1993, p. 23).

There is a sketch of the museum in Lyon which illustrates the basic concept in a similarly compact manner. It shows the contrast between the crystal as the entrance foyer and the enclosed cloud shape that contains a walkway placed over two floors throughout the permanent and temporary exhibition space. The dimensions of the cloud are so large that almost any museum typology could be realized here. The absolute size is also a factor here, which the architecture keeps ‘open’ despite the highly specific geometry. Outer form and inner function can remain loosely coupled, as there is sufficient space in the powerful belly of the ‘cloud’. The little working model from the competition shows how the design experiments with the spatial programme used for the fine adjustment of an already loosely determined. The exhibition rooms are
accommodated in the cloud as black boxes with a partially doubled height of up to 12 meters. In between lies an axis exposed from above which reveals the southern view of the river landscape from which the museum derives its name: the confluence of Lyon’s two rivers, the Rhône and Saône. The beginning of the axis with a spectacular ramp is oriented in the crystal on the northern side – and hence to the town centre.

**Bilbao Effect**

The layout in the form of a long, stretched triangle with the main entrance and crystal foyer on the apex is a result of the site’s unique topographical situation. The Rhône and the somewhat narrower Saône flow in parallel through the city centre over a distance of about 3 kilometres before they unite in this pointed angle. The museum is located on this point on the headland between the two rivers and is separated from the rest of the peninsula by a midtown motorway, which is currently elevated but will be lowered to normal ground level in the foreseeable future. On the other side of this barrier lies Lyon’s old harbour which was developed as the most important inner-city development district in recent years with a broad mix of uses, ranging from a conference centre, hotels and offices to an extensive residential quarter. Among other things, office buildings from Odile Decq and Jakob + Macfarlane and residential buildings from MVRDV have appeared here. The museum was conceived as a cultural attraction for this area and simultaneously as a landmark with promotional appeal for the town of Lyon, whose centre is under the protection of UNESCO as a site of global cultural heritage. The middle-class residential building determines the pulse in this town – it is lacking in prominent public buildings, with the exception of the opera house extended by Jean Nouvel, the barrelled roof of which stands out as the only element discernable among the sea of houses.

The Musée des Confluences clearly owes much to the Bilbao effect. The model in Bilbao, completed in 1997, must have been what the jurors had in mind when the competition jury agreed on the project from Coop Himmelb(l)au in 2001. However, the city took its time in the execution of this project, in comparison to another project that Coop Himmelb(l)au was able to win in the same year through a competition for the BMW World in Munich. The ground-breaking ceremony in Lyon took place in autumn 2006 at a point when BMW World was almost completed. Previously in Lyon there had been a protracted process in which the Viennese office was originally engaged only for the design planning and not for further planning or overseeing the project’s realization. This
practice, not unusual in France, was stretched to its limit on a project of this complexity in terms of geometry and supporting structure. While Coop Himmelb(l)au was able to gain experience with the realization of the ‘sister project’ in Munich, the planning for Lyon only progressed at a slow pace. The leap of know-how that Coop Himmelb(l)au had been working on in Munich ultimately convinced the contractors to give the architects a stronger role in the planning process. Completion is expected in 2014, and one suspects that the long construction time (due to budget constraints) is not uncomfortable for the contractors. Indeed, the construction site already has promotional appeal.

**Founded in itself**
The question of what will actually be exhibited in this museum is simply background detail considering the spectacular architecture. The topic of the museum is nothing less than the development of humanity and its technologies, which will be depicted using articles from several installations that are already in Lyon and a new scenography. Coop Himmelb(l)au will not participate in the formation of the exhibition, and this corresponds to the principle of their architecture. Because it forecloses the relationship between form and function, the Musée des Confluences finds its purpose in itself. What purposes it will serve in the end is a secondary matter as long as the space and form makes an impression on the visitor.

It could also be said that Coop Himmelb(l)au uses every project as an opportunity to create a monument for a discipline that is threatened with extinction: architecture.

From this point of view, the differences between Peter Zumthor and Wolf Prix, who both belong to an architectural generation who believed in absolute architecture, are blurred. The fact that Prix, born in 1942, is still a wild young thing and Zumthor, born in 1943, is a wise old man is part of the theatricals of the profession. As much as the Kunsthaus Bregenz (1996) and the UFA-Filmpalast in Dresden (1997) or the Kolumba-Museum (2007) and BMW World (also 2007) represent formally opposing poles, they are connected just as much by the belief in an absolute architecture that serves no master. We in Europe will probably not see anything similar being built in the coming decades - not funded by public finances, at least. Anyone who views projects like the Kolumba-Museum or the Musée des Confluences as an expression of long-gone wealth must of course abandon the evidence that the growth of the average GDP in the EU from 2000 until 2011 was in fact 1.8%. Europe has become richer since 2000, even though this wealth has evidently not remained in the public coffers. In the ecosystem of
architecture, extraordinary (and undoubtedly extraordinarily expensive) projects such as this one function as catalysts for innovation. They explore technical developments such as CAD and new completion techniques and drive further innovations in existing technologies. The coming years will show what will remain of this process's reputation for cost-efficiency across the board.

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