INTERVIEW WITH Wolf D. Prix:

"The shape of the double tower will leave its mark"

The CEO of Coop Himmelblau speaks about the new ECB building, the culture of finger-pointing in the construction sector and the art of creating structural dynamics in urban areas.

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Professor Prix, "Stuttgart 21" (the railway development project in Stuttgart), the new airport of Berlin-Brandenburg, the "Elbphilharmonie" (Elbe Philharmonic Hall in Hamburg) — major contemporary construction projects in Germany seem to be ill-fated. Compared to these prominent examples of failures, flops and fumbles, construction at the new ECB headquarters appears to progress virtually untroubled. What is different in this project, what errors were you able to avoid?

The failing construction projects you have mentioned certainly reflect the changing situation. The construction business has deteriorated into a culture of mutual finger pointing, into a construction anti-culture. The reasons for this collapse are manifold, but one of them is the unwillingness or inability of the parties involved to contribute to a win-win solution. That was and is different in the case of the new ECB headquarters. The client, the project management and the architect have so far been able to jointly resolve all problems that occur in every major project.

Yet the construction of the ECB’s new premises is not entirely devoid of problems. For example, at the topping-out ceremony it became known that the initial cost estimate of EUR 350 million would be exceeded and that overall costs will probably amount to EUR 1.2 billion. What are the main reasons for this development, and do you feel in part responsible for it?

I am not authorised to disclose any detailed information, but as architects we are certainly not responsible for the cost overrun. Let me stress that it is a very complex project, involving the conservation and renovation of a very large historical monument complex. Anyone who is familiar with construction knows that the renovation of existing structures tends to get out of hand.

Initially the ECB did not want to spend more than EUR 500 million for its new premises. When you submitted your design, did you not realise that it would most certainly be impossible to adhere to this limit?

We not only made thorough calculations ourselves, our plans were even checked repeatedly. And in 2005, it was clearly justifiable to fix the budget at EUR 500 million. In recent decades, the architectural profession has been discredited enormously — partly due to our own fault — with the result that now, in a culture of finger pointing, only the architects get the blame when problems arise.
The project is also lagging behind in its time schedule by a few months. Is it an unavoidable, even negligible delay?

I’d say: yes, it's a negligible delay. In projects at this level of complexity and magnitude you always have to expect delays.

You have said repeatedly that "himmelblau" (sky blue) is not a colour. You say it represents the idea to create architecture which is — with some imagination — as airy and mutable as clouds. Uninitiated observers may not easily detect the association with clouds when looking at the double tower, or are they simply not looking at the structure in the "right way"?

This statement dates back to 1968, and it shows in a figurative sense that we were thinking about new geometries already in those days. New geometries also give rise to new forms in architecture. Such new forms are discernible in the double tower too, because only "distinct" geometry generates a remarkable shape.

You consider yourself to be a dedicated European. The ECB and the Euro are probably the most distinct manifestations of the European idea. How does the new ECB building reflect your vision of a unified Europe?

Through their shapes, our buildings are always decipherable identification points in an urban landscape. And of course we realised that this project would give us an opportunity to design a three-dimensional symbol of the European Union. Architecture is never mere illustration, and the shape of the double tower will leave its mark.

And what would it mean for you and the spectacular new building if — though we certainly do not wish for it — the monetary union would break apart?

Architects are optimists, therefore I believe that the European Union will continue to exist, also because there is no alternative. By the way: this building is designed as an office building, so it can always be used as an office building.

The head office of the ECB unquestionably requires special protection. Can you and are you allowed to give some examples of the special safety measures?

We have taken great care in our design to ensure that the obvious safety needs are integrated almost invisibly into the landscape around the building.

You despise the term "sustainability". At the same time, it is a recurring theme in the field of energy-saving construction. According to your own estimates, your firm always manages to undercut the required energy standards by at least 30%. Is this also true of this project, and have you managed to achieve even better results in some elements?

I believe that it is time and preferable to build new buildings that generate more energy than they consume; even so, we have always pursued the aim of undercutting energy standards by at least 30% in this project as well.

In future, the ECB will have the additional responsibility of supervising the
banking sector in the Euro zone — a development which you obviously could not take into account at the time of the planning. Is there enough spatial capacity for the additional staff required in the new building, or must the ECB abandon its aim to have all employees in one place?

Since it was not possible to accommodate more than the workspaces required at the time in the commissioned space, we have designed a second building as an annex to the towers.

**With the approval to build the ECB headquarters in the Ostend district, the municipality of Frankfurt has abandoned its overall skyscraper concept. Do you think it is a happy coincidence that the ECB will in future reside at a clear distance to the banking towers in the city centre?**

We believe that monocentric urban concepts limit or at least impede development. For this reason, all of our urban models have more than one centre. In this way, structural dynamics are created between the centres, provoking to new developments. This will also happen here in Frankfurt.

**A specification for the design was to integrate the Grossmarkthalle (the former market hall) constructed in 1928, also known as the Elsaesser building, into the ECB project. Did this condition sine qua non force you to make painful concessions?**

No. On the contrary: in Vienna, we have been dealing with the need to combine old and new already for a long time. In this specific case, the newly created space is a development that remains true to the proportions of the *Elsaesser* building.

**Yet the most outspoken criticism of your design focuses on the entrance to the ECB, which — it is alleged — cuts through the Elsaesser building like a chunky, disproportionate wedge, thus violating the "historical heritage". What do you make of this point?**

Nothing at all. Because it is not a point of criticism, merely obvious polemic.

**You are considered to be a star architect. At the same time you claim that you are not really wealthy. Have you ever thought about listing your company at the stock exchange?**

We have always had this idea in mind and reserve the right to keep thinking about it.

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The interview was conducted by Jürgen Klotz.