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Gemeindezentrum der evangelischen Thomasgemeinde

Johannes-Hoffart-Straße 1
68163 Mannheim, Deutschland

Community centre

Netzwerk have created a successful interplay of architecture and town planning.

von Ursula Baus

Neuhermsheim near Mannheim, a town with a population of 300,000, is a cheerless expanse of urban sprawl. A modest heart has now been implanted into this architectural no-man's-land in the form of a new protestant community centre. At the transition between detached houses from the 1960s and mediocre multi-storey housing from the 1990s, St. Thomas's Church owned a piece of land that became the site for the single-storey, flat-roofed building. In 2003, netzwerk architects from Darmstadt won a two-stage competition against 440 other entries. netzwerk (German for network) live up to their name: the six partners are all in their early forties, all come from the Darmstadt area, and set up a joint office in 1997. Since then they have worked alongside one another, boldly realizing a string of unconventional projects.

In this case, they won with a design that is immediately recognizable in the built result, having remained almost unchanged. In Germany, with a heterogeneous decision-making group including the pastor, representatives of the congregation and members of the town council, this amounts to a small miracle. All the more surprising since the snow-white outer shell with its curvy shapes is an unusual sight – resistance to the unfamiliar would not have come as a surprise.

Surrounded by a row of upright supports that recall plants, the community centre attracts passers-by, offering views of the interior and what lies beyond. It is set around a semi-public garden courtyard; rather than shutting itself off from its mundane surroundings, the structure of meeting hall, meeting rooms and youth centre seeks contact. The eye-catching, load-bearing outer shell consists of two basic modules: prefabricated unclad concrete components that could be installed either way up, and an all-round glass facade. The perfectly moulded concrete parts with their sophisticated geometry called for experienced and extraordinarily precise production, supplied by a manufacturer located some 200 km away.

Inside, this glaringly bright atmosphere continues. Of course, a cosy, solid atmosphere with plenty of wood and coloured walls was discussed with the community, but the architects were able to persuade all involved of the potential benefits of a white, apparently high-maintenance interior. The generously proportioned space can also be used for a range of purposes, thanks to conventional partition walls and full-length white curtains running along serpentine rails set into the ceiling. The items required for church services – organ, font, etc. – are on wheels, allowing the room to be structured

ARCHITEKTUR
netzwerkarchitekten

BAUHERRSCHAFT
Evangelische Thomasgemeinde

TRAGWERKSPLANUNG
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LANDSCHAFTSARCHITEKTUR
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and furnished differently as needed.

In this ambience of variegated white, one is easily reminded how thin the line can be between the religious and the clinical – the light of Germany's southwest supports this balancing act. The extravagant formal idiom marks the community centre out as something special and creates a feeling of being in a town centre that is, for once, not occupied by commerce. A successful interplay, then, of architecture and town planning.

DATENBLATT

Architektur: netzwerkarchitekten (Thilo Höhne, Karim Scharabi, Philipp Schiffer, Jochen Schuh, Markus Schwieger, Oliver Witan)
Mitarbeit Architektur: Niklas Storch, Alexa Eißfeldt
Bauherrschaft: Evangelische Thomasgemeinde
Tragwerksplanung: Dr. Kreutz und Partner
Landschaftsarchitektur: club L94
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Lichttechnische Beratung: Belzner, Holmes, Architektur, Licht und Bühne, Heidelberg
HLS: Ebert Ingenieure, Leipzig

Funktion: Museen und Ausstellungsgebäude

Wettbewerb: 2003
Ausführung: 2006 - 2007

Grundstücksfläche: 2.016 m²
Baukosten: 1,7 Mio EUR

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