



Exterior view of the Metropol Parasol, Seville, Spain.

THE SPECULATOR

Jürgen Mayer H. considers the future role and uncertainty of architecture

Jürgen Mayer H. is a German architect whose trademark sculptural buildings in Europe include the world's largest wooden structure Metropol Parasol - completed earlier this year - in Seville's historic central market square [above]. The building - which has been variously called 'the mushroom', and the 'waffle' was inspired by the city's cathedral design and sports a winding path, terrace and restaurant atop. Below resides architectural ruins

which have been made into a museum, along with a community centre and shops. Mayer, who even re-architected his own name, displacing the initial 'h' from middle to end, studied at University of Stuttgart, the Cooper Union and Princeton, and lectures at Harvard, Columbia and University of Arts Berlin, among others. *ISBN's* Stephen Short spoke with him on the eve of a visit to Hong Kong's Business of Design Week last December.

What are the concerns of the Columbia students you lecture?

Teaching is an extremely important element in my discourse on architecture. I am interested in how cultural phenomena condensate on architecture, frame new challenges in how we produce and look at architecture, and how we can speculate about the future role of architecture. Columbia University has recently developed into a breeding ground of intense enquiries

PHOTO: DAVID FRANCK

toward that uncertainty of what architecture is. Students become scouts and specialists, or even better 'speculationists'. What can be tested in a semester as a theoretical theses is what in parallel concerns us in our practice.

You like 'multiple readings' of your work. Which work can we most easily apply that to?

We try to establish parameters as a skeleton or framework for the project. These are conceptual conditions rather than design driven compositions, based on a clients brief, contextual references and programmatic logistics. We established for example for the student canteen "Mensa Moltke" a 3D-diagram called the gum.gram or nutella.gram. Imagine two pieces of bread with a thick paste between them. We accepted the given site layout as the footprint of the building and only looked at the relationship between the floor and the roof. By compressing the functional programme between those two layers quite naturally the position of the roof ended up on a strange angle, thicker and closed volume at the rear side, thinner and more open to the front.

What's the best compliment you had about Metropol Parasol?

In many cases, it's the clarity of a concept itself that can be most fulfilling. And then, independent of art, architecture, or design, the feedback from people who use it or see it can be quite touching too. It's most rewarding when you see how our buildings become an attractor in a city and help to generate a dynamic context around it. For example, we do get some e-mails and calls from people in Seville out of the blue who want to tell us, how glad they are about the project and how much hope and expectation comes with it for the future of their city as a contemporary metropolis. This is moving!

Is Metropol Parasol your greatest architectural adventure?

The final project is based on a

PORTRAIT: JENS PASSOTI

competition entry we won in Summer 2004. We continually developed the scheme afterwards with the input of our engineers, feedback from the client and cultural committees in Seville. The project connected different forces and interest groups as a major group achievement.

What did you learn from it?

Architecture is a catalyst, not only a background to everyday life; ideally it can provoke us to rethink our built environment and speculate on its potentials. We are very curious to see how our speculations about communication and public space might transform once they are handed over and begin their own life. Currently in Spain you find demonstrations by the people for more democracy and social justice. And one of the hot spots for this movement became Metropol Parasol in Seville. Here social media dynamics and public space collapse into a packed place with overnight camps, concerts,

speeches and workshops - a real urban democratic open cathedral.

What of China and how do you access Hong Kong's cityscape?

I am really interested in working on high-rises. What fascinates me is the simultaneity of different scales, from the urban context on a skyline level to specific relationships on the ground. Every part of a high-rise refers to a different context, even according to height. Concerns about details and extreme urban conditions seem possible to reflect similar thinking processes and the co-existence of scales is inspiring. There is of course a political and cultural dynamic that jumps directly from the past to the future, somehow ignoring the Now and the New - a euphoria about the future that we now miss in Germany. Thinking about the future of technology, nature and the urban is at the heart of our work, and Asia seems to be a perfect place to expand this into another dimension.

