

office.furniture gleisdorf

this is the extension to the headquarters of a firm of financial consultants that has decided to modernise its old offices and construct a new building commissioning the project to the firm lichtblau & wagner.

once again the matrixes of this new construction are dictated by the urban layout: a juxtaposition of long, narrow lots sets the pattern of parts forming this modern block in gleisdorf, marking its boundaries through a geometric criss-cross of successive pieces of land. a rounded corner of the block leads through to a more internal lot. a faceless brick building rises up across the middle: one of the shorter sides backs onto the boundary, the other (respecting the distances set in the building regulations), leaves room for a narrow path connecting the two areas into which the ground has been divided. seeing as a landscaped open space leads through to the old building at the front, the garden has been placed separately at the back.

this most intimate part of the construction is where the transparent prism is entrenched in the ground parallel to an old opaque prism.

the void created by the distance between them (corresponding to the portion of garden behind them) is the same size as the breadth of the two building blocks. despite its rather anonymous presence, the old building sets the rhythmic pattern of built and free parts, dividing the surface allocated to the new project into four equal rectangles, whose regular base measurements form respectively an empty space, a sort of patina, a solid structure, the new construction, and another empty space, the garden at the very back of the property.

the main reason for this glass monolith is an attempt to set up a sort of architectural oxymoron in this regular layout of even webs, like a sort of play on opposites: a structure of exactly the same dimensions as the old volume, but "different", empty, the opposite to the other solid structure made of brick. Yet despite their conflicting characteristics, they co-exist in a state of symbiosis, primarily functional so that the second structure complements the first in distributional terms, but also an emotional symbiosis since the two large opposing glass walls are a means of injecting more topological charm into the project design. in this case transparency serves two purposes: it is the seductive realisation of the architectvoyeur that filters together the inside and outside world through a glass framework which, like a huge monitor, displays and diffuses the goings-on inside to the outside world, at the same time drawing inside an infinite array of perspectives across the surrounding environment; on the other hand, transparency allows people working in the old building to glance through the panes of glass and instantly perceive (as was the case before the new building was constructed) an unblocked view down the garden.

this is not just a cascade of now rather familiar high-tech glass or a desperate desire to project a sense of lightness through curtain glass surfaces or even an attempt to use their increasingly sinuous and unexpected forms to reveal new structural types or sculptural forms. two simple glass walls close off the ends of the rectangular prism.

in "towards architecture", le corbusier claimed that: "a volume is enveloped by a surface, a surface divided up along the volume's generative and directional lines, highlighting the individual nature of this volume.... leaving a volume the splendour of its form in the light, while on the other hand adapting the surface to what are often utilitarian needs, means having to find elements that bring out and generate form through the division imposed by the surface".

this is a clever interplay of pure volumes beneath the light, which simple, secular works of architecture in central european austria have, throughout the course of this century, often clearly pointed the way towards the construction of a modern sense of space: from ludwig wittgenstein's intellectual house designed for his sister margaret to loos's experimental research laying the foundations of architectural purism, peichl's early designs, and even this latest work of architecture.

whereas glass has been incorporated in contemporary architecture as a sign of lightness, transparency, and the breaking down of the boundaries between interior and exterior, here we have a clear and simple case of how a mass-wall can be dematerialised to enhance the bonds between an old and new building, using the latter's transparency to create a sense of continuity with the surrounding environment.

examining the ground floor plan, we can see how the brick framework of the faceless old building has dictated a simple layout that the new building reproduces in its pattern of tubular iron bearing columns. the slenderness of these columns is the key to creating a sense of lightness and the possibility of letting the building breathe through two large glass walls placed along the sides. these walls follow the same pattern as the bays between the columns themselves.

everything right down to the most minute detail exploits lightness in the name of transparency. even the stanchions made of a cement mix, which act as partitions and wind braces, draw on their lenticular form to help us glance across from one wall to another until we reach outside. this permeability is also created by the careful use of clear colours, like the white plaster covering the stanchions, by the choice of a parquet floor made of clear wood, and by the layer of white paint over the iron structures.

everything is lightness and transparency because, in the end, the project is really staged in the seasonal colours of outside nature in the gardens.

gabriele szaniszlò l'arca, may 1999