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Newsletter



► Structure and colour – the German embassy in Warsaw

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Structure and colour – the German embassy in Warsaw

A German embassy in a part of Warsaw formerly occupied by Germans and designated a no-go area for Poles – what on earth would such a building look like? Can architecture make a statement about political relationships? The Berlin architect, Holger Kleine, built the new embassy and his message avoids stiff orderliness and an imposing design.

The German embassy in Warsaw is one of the most important German diplomatic representations, and, with a staff currently numbering more than 130, it is also one of the largest as well. After decades of being housed in makeshift arrangements that were strewn across the city, the Federal Republic of Germany purchased a plot of land at the end of the nineties in a prime location – at the intersection of the city centre and the Lazienki Park, one of the most beautiful palace grounds in Europe. The Polish parliament is situated in the immediate vicinity as are numerous ministries and foreign representations. Chancellery, consulate and ambassador residence could be combined on the 12,700 square metre property which includes a representative park.

In 2002, the federal government launched an open, two-stage competition for the new embassy building. 378 architects took part; finally, five architects were chosen in the course of negotiations to present their conceptions. The Berlin architect, Holger Kleine, prevailed on account of his design with differentiation that foresaw a conglomeration of building structures and varying façade materials. Kleine describes his building ensemble as “multi-faceted plastic that desires to be reconnoitred through movement in space”. The differentiation is also due to the message that the building has to impart with regards to German-Polish history. Classical marks of distinction, imposing façade and rigid symmetry, all have been avoided. These would be false gestures.

Chancellery

The embassy building in place has achieved a still finer differentiation than the one from the competition design. Above a plinth made from green prefabricated concrete components with an ivy relief, there sits an overhanging T-shaped structure which houses the chancellery offices. The façade is composed of structured glass panels enamelled on their reverse side, whose embossed rib surface exhibits very varying optical effects

according to the incidence of light. Illuminated by sunlight, it scintillates like the surface of the ocean; in indirect light, it gleams metallically; viewed from close by, it seems like tanned leather. The elements are fastened in front of the load-bearing concrete wall by supports that are invisible from the exterior. Originally, a glass façade was planned but this was not able to be implemented due to economic grounds and because of the unwelcome intrusion into privacy as well. At the point of intersection of the chancellery’s two conventionally constructed administrative blocks is found an open stairwell. The stair flights are arranged in an offset manner. This gives rise to an exceptional spatial sculpture overlaid by strip lighting running evenly over the walls and flooring. The plaster stairwell walls are of pale pink and light blue hues. “In natural light, this can hardly be noticed,” remarked Kleine, “yet the colours impart a warm, friendly character to the room. It is only the artificial light at evening time that brings out the shades more strongly.”

Residence

Under the chancellery wing is to be found the residence which is made up of a representative part and the ambassador’s private rooms. It is encased by a façade of green prefabricated concrete components with an ivy relief and rounded corners. On the ground floor, the official reception rooms are located along the garden façade facing south. They are protected from being overlooked by the chancellery through the curved course of the building. Sliding walls can connect or separate the rooms at discretion. A room of up to 80 metres can be created in this way. And from this widely spreading plinth, the tower with the ambassador’s private rooms raises its head. The concrete façade slabs with their green pigmentation anticipate a future plant covering of natural ivy. Either the artificial replica or the natural vegetation will dominate





depending on the season in a few years time. Even now with the varying twists and turns of the artificial leaves, the relief generates a living façade with rich associations that changes when viewed according to distance and incidence of sunlight.

Consulate

Another one-storey building accommodates the consulate behind a façade of black natural stone slabs. Between this and the residency building is located the official entrance to the chancellery and the public reception rooms – a foyer enclosed in glass on both sides that permits the embassy garden to be overlooked from without. Separate access can be gained to the private residence from the north and the consulate from the south.

Nature and artificiality

The property is located on the boundary between the wild, sprawling developments of the inner city and the meticulously planned landscaping of the palace grounds that have been listed under a nature conservation order. This stimulat-

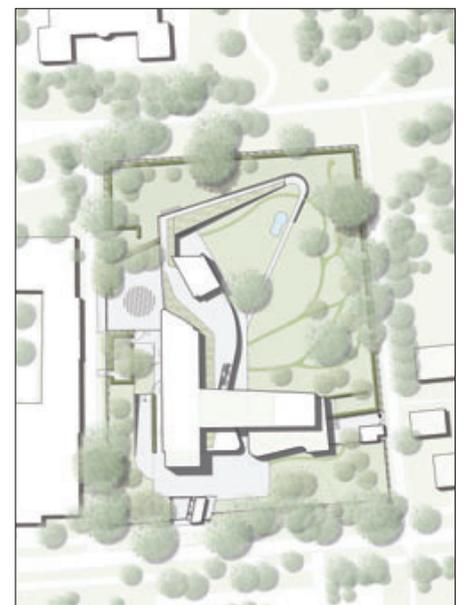
ed the planners to give some thought to the paradox of artificially designed nature and design influenced by nature – to inspire a hide and seek of nature and artificial building development. In reality, natural ivy is climbing up the façade at the same time that the prefabricated concrete components artificially simulate ivy plant covering. By way of contrast, the motive is switched around in the garden designed by landscape architects TOPOTEK 1 with a ramp planted with roses ascending from the garden to the roof garden of the ambassador's apartment. Garden paths, here, are covered with artificial green astro turf and the small pond does not contain water but has been moulded from casting resin – a work of Berlin artist Rainer Splitt.

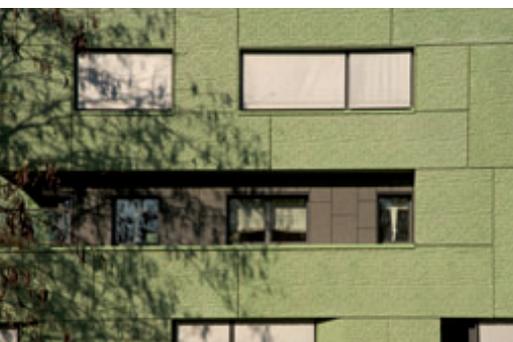
Facing concrete façade

All load-bearing walls have been made out of 30 cm thick reinforced concrete. The floors have also been executed in concrete and are neither clad nor suspended. Depending on the structure, the concrete walls or load-bearing balustrades have been clad with different materi-

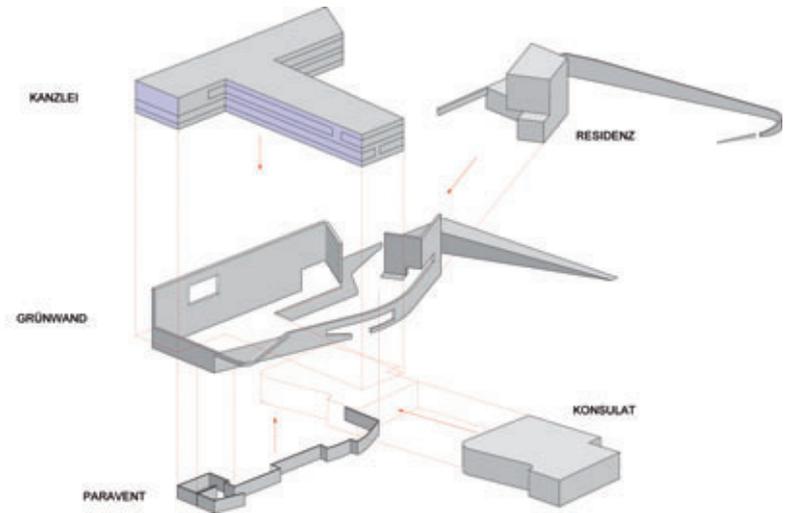
als. Flamed natural stone (Nero assoluto) and precast components made from pigmented concrete were employed as well as glass with an embossed rib structure whose elements have been set up in a curtain-type ventilated façade with no visible fastenings. The ivy relief on the prefabricated concrete components is based on the photograph of a wall greening. It was transferred onto a threedimen-

Site plan





Axonometry of the building elements



sional drawing from which a uriol model was created using a CNC milling cutter. Uriol is a foam type substance made from epoxy resin which can be worked in a similar way to wood but with the advantages that it does not yield and is built up very homogeneously. This relief model formed the positive for the elastic polyurethane formliners. 1,600 m² of relief slabs were produced. Once poured, the slabs were treated with acid to remove all slurry. The hydro phobic reinforced concrete slabs are ten centimetres thick; the relief two centimetres deep. A lively interplay of light and shadow – especially in glancing light - is created through the varying twists and turns of the leaves. The colour saturation and luminosity of the green coloured prefabricated concrete slabs have been enhanced by the utilisation of white cement and a high proportion of cobalt blue pigments. The quartz particles mixed in with the aggregates gleam in direct light. These slabs, measuring up to eight times four metres, curve in varying radii in keeping with the building structure's geometry. The minimum radius for the silicone matrices is eight centimetres. All elements were poured on a horizontal plane with the exception of the angular corner slabs. These were cured in vertical casing. The joints have been closed off at a depth of three centimetres with a green-coloured silicone to prevent the Virginia creeper from growing there.

Holger Kleine made a conscious decision in rejecting the idea of a compact building for the embassy. He has fragmented his design and simultaneously baffled his own tripartite architectural division according to functional areas by pursuing a hide and seek motive. This has been accomplished by not assigning the façade materials unequivocally to the building structures but rather arranging them in an overlapping manner. The green concrete residency façade thrusts itself out to the north and east even to above the chancellery block in height. The cladding of the consulate with its black natural stone slabs emerges again at the residence. For him, it is not a matter of a “static juxtaposition of individual bodies but rather a growing together, a merging of specific events that emanate from one another so as to activate the freeflowing space between the solid bodies,” said Kleine. By first displacing and thereby obscuring the boundary, movement is generated that is a stimulation to go on still further and look. It is only to be hoped that governmental relations do not suffer from such a lack of clarity and explicitness.

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Concrete façade



Formliner



Relief model

