

EXHIBITION REVIEW

COOP HIMMELB(L)AU. *Beyond the Blue*

Exhibition Concept: Wolf D. Prix, Peter Noever

Curator: Martina Kandeler-Fritsch

MAK – Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst / Gegenwartskunst, Wien
12 December 2007 to 11 May 2008

On the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of COOP HIMMELB(L)AU an extensive exhibition reflects on the work of the renowned Viennese architecture firm. Entitled *COOP HIMMELB(L)AU. Beyond the Blue*, the exhibition – following shows on Zaha Hadid (2003) and Peter Eisenman (2004-05) – adds a third chapter to the MAK's cycle of retrospectives on grandmasters of “deconstructivist architecture,” a term created twenty years ago by Philip Johnson subsuming those architects along with others in an eponymous MoMA exhibition.

Founded by Wolf D. Prix, Helmut Swiczinsky and Michael Holzer in 1968 with the intention to create an “architecture with fantasy, as buoyant and variable as clouds,” COOP HIMMELB(L)AU initially could be seen as the architectural counterpart of what was then the “Wiener Aktionismus.” In 1988, after having worked on conceptual projects, the architects emerged publicly with a loft conversion for a Viennese law firm. The Dresden Ufa cinema built in 1993-98 then proved the ultimate feasibility of their unconventional designs. Consequently, the former *enfants terribles* ascended to become global players with renowned projects. Due to exponentially increasing commissions in the last 15 years, COOP HIMMELB(L)AU today is one of the leading architectural firms worldwide with offices in Vienna and Los Angeles.

The exhibition consists of two parts permitting both a general overview of the diversity of the architects' formal vocabulary and a detailed focus on particular projects. A lavish installation in the center of the show presents COOP HIMMELB(L)AU's architectural production over four decades: a huge table features 170 architectural models of eighty-five projects condensing the team's creative cosmos

View of the exhibition *COOP HIMMELB(L)AU. Beyond the Blue*
MAK Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna
presentation of the European Central Bank project in Frankfurt
Photograph: © Wolfgang Woessner/
MAK



to a city in miniature – a *theatrum urbanum* that is revealed by complex lighting choreography and that can be viewed from a spacious platform. The installation is completed by film sequences and a video interview with Wolf D. Prix reflecting on the development of the team.

In the wings embracing the central section, three current projects are exhibited. Here, in front of photographs giving a chronological overview of the firm's opus since 1967, the automobile delivery center BMW Welt in Munich (2001-07), the Musée des Confluences in Lyon (2001-09) and the headquarters of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt (2003-11) are vividly presented in large-scale models, plans, photographs and computer simulations. Extensive drawings—even including construction details—permit a close examination of each project. Working models providing brilliant insights into the form-finding process round out the presentations.

The three projects exemplify the diversity of construction tasks and the wide range of formal solutions with which COOP HIMMELB(L)AU are currently dealing. The least common denominators of the designs are unconventional eye-catching structures fulfilling the investors' desire for a unique architectural profile. In some cases, however, the appropriateness of the architectural means has to be questioned: while projects such as BMW Welt are shaped quite comprehensibly reflecting the dynamism of the automobiles exhibited, the justification of the Lyon project is less conclusive. Here, the characterization of the building as “changeable” and permitting a “permanent reinvention of an urban event” remains rhetoric. Architectural decisions in the Frankfurt project have to be questioned as well: is it absolutely necessary to intersect Martin Elsaesser's outstanding market hall built in 1928 in order to achieve a stunning architectural effect?

In any event, the exhibition succeeds in offering a dual approach to COOP HIMMELB(L)AU's architectural work enabling both productive exploration and critical reflection. The show will set a milestone for a new perception of the team's opus in their hometown Vienna – a city that has ignored COOP HIMMELB(L)AU's work for years and is now gradually discovering the firm's artistic potential which is already highly appreciated abroad.

View of the exhibition COOP
HIMMELB(L)AU. *Beyond the Blue*, MAK
Museum für Angewandte Kunst,
Wien, model table in the center of
the exhibition
Photograph: © Wolfgang Woessner/
MAK



COOP HIMMELB(L)AU, Musée des
Confluences, Lyon, 2001–2010
Photograph: © ISOCHROM.com,
Vienna/MAK



Publication related to the exhibition:

A well-illustrated catalogue with texts by Jeffrey Kipnis, Sylvia Lavin and Peter Noever presents – in chronological order – selected manifestoes and projects of COOP HIMMELB(L)AU as well as photographs of the exhibition:

Peter Noever, ed. *COOP HIMMELB(L)AU. Beyond the Blue*. München, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2007, 192 pp., 90 color and 58 b/w illus. € 39.90, ISBN 978-3-7913-3962-7.

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COOP HIMMELB(L)AU, Musée des
Confluences, Lyon, 2001–2010,
detail
Photograph: © ISOCHROM.com,
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