

Ready For Take-Off

Arthur Wortmann

Meixner Schlüter Wendt received some 30 phone calls after their villa in Karlsruhe (see *Mark #4*) was featured in a popular German home magazine. All potential clients who wanted to know a little more. 'As long as they don't bring up money in the first four, five minutes,' Florian Schlüter came to realize, 'there's a chance it can lead to something.' In the end, a new house came out of one of these contacts: House F, in Kronberg im Taunus, an exclusive residential community near Frankfurt.

The F family – a couple with three young children – had few specific demands. They did have some ideas about the functional aspects of the house and they wanted something modern, with a flat roof. That was in fact why they were still unsure about the building site they had chosen. It was a beautiful piece of land on the outer edge of hilly and leafy Kronberg, looking out over a valley. An orchard bordered the back garden and a little way off was the Opelzoo animal park: in the quiet of the night you could sometimes hear the apes. The only downside to this site was that zoning ordinances prescribed a saddleback roof. 'We'll get around that,' said the architects, who had immediately recognized the location's potential; 'even a roof that isn't flat can look modern.'

Schlüter: 'From the start, we wanted to keep the ground floor open, in order to connect the green surroundings to the house as much as possible.' The resulting design process featured three residential levels: a sunken basement level, a transparent living level and a floating sleeping level. After this sleeping level had gone through several different forms and developed a certain 'kink' that eliminated the notion of a flat roof, came the moment that typifies the way the Frankfurt architecture firm works. Association entered the mix. In previous designs by the firm, everyday objects or household products had been adopted, sooner or later in the design process, as conceptual models, and this time was no exception. The design, at that stage, showed a certain similarity to a Stealth bomber. Why not elaborate on that association?

Rarely has an arbitrary conceptual design choice produced such brilliant results. It is almost too self-evident. Making buildings float is an effect often attempted in architecture, particularly since the advent of the modernist movement. There is a sub-trend within the profession in which overcoming gravity and apparently operating independently of the laws of physics has been elevated to a sublime ideal and become the trademark of the true master designer. Load-bearing walls became columns; the columns were taken out of the façade, made more and more slender and concealed in cunning ways. Building volumes were suspended from roofs, window frames sometimes acquired load-bearing functions, experiments were conducted with load-bearing glass. Each time, an impression of floating was generated with structural means. Meixner Schlüter Wendt's solution is visually much more powerful: make a mysterious airplane hover above the ground. We don't wonder how the thrusts are transferred; after all, we *know* the thing can fly.

Which is not to say that the structural implementation was not a focus of attention. Project architect Georg Kratzenstein explains that, in his view, two essential design solutions followed from the conceptual road map. The first was the choice of the cladding material for the top storey. The black aluminium sandwich panels were selected because they could be folded, creating sharp seams that would withstand a comparison with an industrially produced airplane. The second was the choice of an expensive glass wall on the ground floor, with its frame concealed in the floor and ceiling. This allows the floor surface and the floating volume to retain their autonomy. At the boundary between the dining and living room, the glass – as if to underscore its immateriality even further – curves around two corners without mouldings.

Airplanes are not stiff structures. Airplanes have a nimble and fragile quality. Wings vibrate, ailerons move. House F, a little like the Concorde, has a moveable nose – two, in fact. Above the

terrace on the garden side, the nose of the Stealth bomber forms an overhang, adjustable by remote control, that provides shade. It is a gadget that turns the house itself into something of a toy. House F is a house out of a boys' adventure book. The client, a researcher working in chemical technology, was delighted by this. Kratzenstein: 'When we wondered, at one point, whether it was really necessary, this moveable tip, the client made his position very clear: we had staked our proposal on this concept, including the moving parts, and we were going to make them.' Another unusual element the client was very keen on was not implemented. Because there is no room to turn a car around next to the house, the plan was to build a rotating parking space at the end of the driveway, which would turn the car 180 degrees. Unfortunately there turned out to be no room even for that system. The swimming pool in the garden, however, was fitted with LED lights that can turn the water different colours. After sundown, it must be a strange sight: a pool filled with a mysterious liquid and in the background a futuristic airplane rising into the air.

The interior combines domesticity and a certain sense of adventure. On the ground floor, of course, the connection with the exterior space is at its utmost. When the sliding glass panes are opened during the summer, the terrace doubles the living space. The bedrooms on the upper floor are arranged in two sections: a section for the parents, including walk-through closet and bathroom, and a section for the children, with three different bedrooms in a row. The arrangement of two plateaus at different levels creates a dynamic space. This makes the central corridor between the two bedroom wings something of a command post, from which the plane is controlled.

After the Wohlfahrt Laymann House – a suburban villa from the 1930s which was extended by being 'packaged' into a new house (see *Mark* #2) – Meixner Schlüter Wendt has built another instant classic with House F, a house in which a very bold concept is combined with a painstaking use of materials while remaining eminently liveable. No doubt the phone calls will start pouring in again. In fact, as construction neared completion, the architects were approached by a man at the site who wanted to buy the house on the spot.

In: *Mark* no. 12, 2008, pp. 168-175