



"RUSSIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM MEETS GERMAN RATIONALISM"

Interview with Markus Penell

MARKUS PENELL IS A GERMAN ARCHITECT AND WORKING FOR THE ARCHITECTURAL OFFICE OF "ORTNER & ORTNER BAUKUNST" SINCE 1996.

Mr. Penell, which part does Ortner & Ortner take in planning the new Alexander Towers and what is your job there?

As an office, we are simply the planning and designing architects. My partner Florian Matzker and I are in charge of the project. In large projects, it helps to work in teams, because exchanging knowledge stimulates us professionally.

As the managing director of the Berlin Office of Ortner & Ortner Baukunst, and not least because of your studies, you are living already a long time in Berlin. The plans are not entirely new. Have you followed the design process around Alexanderplatz for a long time?

You're right, the master plan exists for a long time. But right now things are shifting and perhaps a change of generation was needed to create new perspectives. Maybe it needed these 20 years to come a decisive step closer to the realization. In addition, new investors, as in our case the Russian company MonArch, again will bring with them new influences into the venture.

Mr. Matzker and I both know Mr. Kollhoff, who created the original plan, as well as the revised plan of converting the site,

well and personally. In 2002, we were involved in the competition for the shopping mall and the connected skyscraper and won with our draft.

Has the design of the tower since changed significantly to the one in the original contest for the Alexa plot?

It hasn't remained the same. The original sketch included a twin tower on a kind of pedestal. The twin tower structure is a gimmick to make a building appear slimmer. However, it gave the impression as if there was a front and a backside. It is very uncertain how the surrounding of the square will develop so we didn't want to define the Alexanderplatz necessarily as a "front". We returned to the Model playfully and came to implement these rotations. We also got inspired by the Russian Constructivism.

By rotating the crown, it appears sometimes slim and sometimes wide. At the same time it takes away clear directions from the building, therefore it has no explicit sides.

Does such a prominent place like the Alexanderplatz influence a draft? Does perhaps the fact that they represent a starting point, play a role?

Of course. An important part in the development and planning of such a building is the awareness that you also have a responsibility to the city, not only to the square and the immediate vicinity. For now, one will see the tower from afar. Of course, it is our desire that he will not remain solitary. Ultimately, in all its individuality, it is still part of an overall concept.

How much leeway did you have? How far have you been influenced by Kollhoff's plans?

Ultimately, the Kollhoff master plan in its basic structure is binding. In the end, these are questions of a social, political and professional competence. This is a public space, at which a lot comes together. In the planning, needs and wishes meet visions and targets.

It needs general applicable arrangements, a "common sense", on its basis we all sit together on a table and work on this major project. The plan saw and still sees a base and a skyscraper. It will create a block that separates urban spaces. The pedestal is aimed towards the square, the skyscraper is offset to the rear. Two neighbors have preferred to bring the building of the base forward, so the tower can be realized later. Ultimately, one could say that for the Alexa too. Another binding criterion is

the elevation, in particular the maximum height of 150 meters. When designing our tower and its elevations we have taken into account the environment and the city structure in general.

You say that the Alexander Tower takes reference to the two historic buildings of the "Alexanderhaus" and the "Berolina". Could you briefly say something about that?

The first height level, and so the first rotation of the Alexander Tower, can be found at a height of 30.5 meters. This is to take on the height of the Alexanderhaus, the building directly opposite, designed by Peter Behrens. The Berolina has the same height. In addition, the tower at this place, considering the original plan, is intended to be without block. The Alexanderhaus serves in this case as its base, if only visually.

After the first height level, with the next rotation at 60 meters, we pay respect to the classic residential high-rise buildings of the city, which usually play in this league of height. Also the neighboring "House of the Teacher" is only very scarce underneath.

The next level starts approximately at 100 meters, where we come into the range of





office buildings as the Kollhoff- or the DB-Tower on Potsdamer Platz. With the crown, we finally expand the skyline by another 50 meters

In the description of the project, you describe a meeting of two avant-garde cultural worlds – the German rationalism and the Russian Constructivism. Can you describe this a bit closer?

We wanted to relate with our design. The Berolina and the Alexanderhaus are examples of the classical Modern, at the same time, they are strongly correlating with the tradition of the Berlin building culture. This is important for conceptual development of a skyscraper – particularly at this place – and needs to be included. At first glance, the Russian Constructivism and German Rationalism in Architecture may appear similar. However, the Russian Constructivism is considerably more playful, he is searching for limits, testing them. Whereas the German rationalism is much more self-possessed and looking more for like clarity. Our aim was to unite both influences in a clear conceptual approach. Which is found again, for example, in the layering of the building. The visible parts, separated by the altitude levels and rotations are not stacked like detached units, but layered. There is always a new layer added to the city that grows slowly into the air. So the references to the environment are being read more subtle and contextual which makes the tower in the best case perceptible as a natural part of the city.

In the media, the Alexander Tower was initially designated as an office building. Meanwhile, he is but a big step in the direction of housing extension towards the center, wherein "Centrally located", of course, is entirely new defined here.

The base is still intended for retail and commercial use. No one really wants to live on the ground floor at Alexanderplatz. In the current planning housing occurs from the first "Rotation", i.e. from the seventh floor upwards. That would mean that housing would occupy around 30 floors. Since the number of apartments depend on the apartment sizes, we cannot yet say anything about them.

Nevertheless, let me finally say this: the diverse and dense juxtaposition in the city receives at Alexanderplatz again a new metropolis vibe.

Interview by Anna Ebert

