

The model

This is the second part of a loose series on the theme of flats and houses for families. Without making any claim for completeness, neutrality or absolute truths, the houses presented here can be said to represent opposing positions. Simply to show that there is no clear-cut definition of the housing concept.

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The Lang House, Gleißenberg



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In the last essay we showed you family houses by the French architects Lacaton & Vassal. Buildings which avoid traditional architectures to free the living space of its meaning. Instead concrete structures are born, which are intended for the specific place and inhabitants.

In the second part we now jump from the southern French countryside to the province of Bavaria. Because the houses of Florian Nagler are – in complete contrast to the “No Architecture” principle of Lacaton & Vassal – shaped by the examination of the traditional constructions of his homeland.

The Lang House, Gleißenberg

The house is situated where the Bavarian Forest becomes the Bohemian Forest. The landscape of the province is characterised by areas under cultivation and woods, with saddle-roofed houses dotted here and there. At first glance the residential house and studio exhibits all the stereotypes of the neighbouring buildings. It consists of a truncated cube with a steep saddle roof on top. Instead of setting a formal counterpoint to the prevailing monotony, the simple basic shape fits in with the architecture of the village. The Langs consciously decided for a life in the country in the traditionally Catholic village of Gleißenberg and against a life in the modern city. But if at the same time we assume that the family does not lead a conventional life (four children, father an artist), the question arises about their relationship with tradition. On that subject it's worth having a look at everything that can go wrong with this. One example would be the romanticising, hackneyed “Yodeler style”, furnished and fitted with excessive elements thought to be typical for traditional farmhouses. It doesn't seem to matter that it's more a

case of relicts bereft of any meaning, whose original purpose doesn't exist any more. But it doesn't as a rule get any better when there's less money available. Plenty of prefabricated industrial products are on offer, of which what is supposedly worth preserving has literally been poured into rigid shapes.

What makes the difference between the fossilised cliché and the Lang House?

The detached residential house and studio obviously springs from the traditional type of the rural, large-volume saddle-roofed farm. It stands on a base made of concrete walls, built into the slope of the hillside. The wooden supporting frame can be described, in a phrase, as a conventional carpenter's construction.

You don't find an unusual contrast until the outer layer. That the roof surfaces are tiled with wooden shingles is less surprising than the fact that the outer walls are made of plastic. The semi-transparent twin-walled sheets are used as a simple and robust industrial product, above all for industrial buildings, carports and the like. It's not just a cheap material but also one that is easily worked. You could just call the result a plastic house and label it as ironic modernity. But closer examination results in a subtly different picture. What tradition teaches has been taken seriously and applied to a modern house. As in a traditional farmhouse, the walls and ceilings that touch the ground are made of stone or concrete. Because protecting wood against damp would be too expensive. For this reason the wooden construction only begins above the base. (In the past timber frames were quicker to build and wood as a readily available raw material was cheaper than mortared stone

walls. There was no central heating, thermal insulation or regulation of heat insulation and so the timber frames remained visible. The constructions were traditionally handcrafted and the best examples still radiate a satisfying beauty today. Also on account of their understandable economic simplicity.)

It's true that today it is possible to build more cheaply with big industrial concrete blocks, but since timber construction technology has also developed, amazingly wide and light space frames can be made. But most modern houses wear a coat made of insulation and a facing. The construction can no longer be seen, often pointless substitute embellishments take its place. In contrast to this it becomes clear that the light plastic skin on the Lang House does not just constitute a cost-effective solution. It creates a multi-layered complexity, which permits different kinds of reading.

On the one hand the twin-walled sheeting takes on the function of a conventional insulating material, as the layer of air between the walls acts like double glazing. At the same time the wooden construction of rigid sheets projects astonishingly far out over the concrete base and overlaps the entrance to the house. Subject to perspectives and light conditions the house can seem like a sharp-edged, reflecting basic shape. A smooth, cool reduction, which could be drawn with just a few strokes of the pen, appears to float over the base. The outer skin's semi-transparent materiality allows the supporting timber construction and the rooms lying behind it to shine through. The affinity with the traditional architecture of the region becomes symbolically apparent.

The rest is swiftly explained. The utility rooms and adjoining rooms are accommodated in the unheated base. The family's living rooms and bedrooms are above these. A central room between the individual rooms serves as a centre for the family, similar to the function of the kitchen and parlour in an old farm. The traditional loft space has become the artist's studio. As in old farmhouses the slope of the ground is used to connect all levels of the house directly with the outside space. If in earlier days the accessibility helped the flow of operations in running the farmyards, today the direct access to the garden and the terrace makes it easier for a large family to live and work together under one roof.

The Fiedler House, Penzberg

Penzberg is a small town in the Alpine foothills in Bavaria, lying between Garmisch and Bad Tölz. The existing single-storey farmhouse was no longer offering the family enough space. As the existing construction was an old, brittle, L-shaped building from the 1960s, the required extension was doubled up. This intervention in the existing building is the equivalent of a face lift. Another addition at ground level would probably not have improved the faceless farm but have emphasised its deficiencies. And all the more successful the old building had turned out. On the other hand the building on of another storey made a change possible. The sparing amount of stonework with a couple of windows and doors turns into the solid base on which the new house for the increased demands for space now stands.

On the mostly enclosed cube sits a glazed volume of the same proportions with a balcony jutting out and running all round the house. A regular pattern of simple wooden posts supports the new roof, whose outer edges extend past the balcony. The balcony, the roof eaves and the gable ends are clad with wooden shingles. The motif of the encircling balcony and the protecting saddle roof came from the regional building culture.

Possibly with this renovation it will become more obvious how the architect's office allows local traditions and themes to leave their mark on the designs. For example, the big influence of the projecting balcony on old farms can be verified all over the region, this is imparted, proven knowledge. However the local carpenter was not commissioned to build the roofing trusses and balcony as normal. The ceilings and the floor are boarded in an equally flat fashion with smooth, planed boards; the top is the same as the bottom. The surfaces extend as a mirror image of one another as far as the balcony and there are no solid outer walls. The thermal borders consist of room-height

windows, the shingles on the balcony railings and the gable ends are affixed in a regular, staggered pattern. Looked at from the outside, they appear to be enclosed surfaces. Balcony and protruding roof act as protective constructions. The true extent of the glass facade behind them cannot be seen, the view inside is restricted.

Inside a less distinct picture presents itself. It's not easy to determine where the borders of the single room are. Should you look upon the thermal glass skin or the open, light-permeable shingle structure as the room border? The undisguised panorama also makes this definition difficult. The room seems at the same time open and sheltered. It extends greatly beyond the physical borders.

The traditional motif of the encircling balcony is complemented with the open glazed structure of the single room. It strongly links the insignificant old building with the place, lends it character and at the same time creates a living room, of such brightness and openness as would have been impossible in an old farm.

In lectures the architect Florian Nagler likes to make clear what is exemplary for him in the traditional building culture of his native country in such a simple but impressive way. To do this he shows the wooden gate leading to a meadow. Then he illustrates what happens, so that the gate does not remain open accidentally: a rope has been stretched between the gate and the fence, a heavy stone then attached to the rope. If the gate is opened, the rope tightens and the stone is lifted upwards. Then when the gate is released, it is closed again by the stone as it lowers itself. A great model, isn't it?

The Fiedler House, Penzberg

