Grüß Gott!

-An Architectural Exploration of Religion in an Austrian Context through a Community Centre and an Urban Park Landscape

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Religion affects us and our society, no matter where our personal beliefs lie: It is the foundation of our moral rules, our ethics and thus our laws. In this way, different religions give rise to different societies and cultures.

In Austria, the Catholic church has a prominent and influential position but at the same time, there are quite a high number of immigrants, often with different faiths. However, in the Austrian schools the subject of Religion is always taught according to one’s own confession, which means that Austrians can proceed through school without ever learning the fundamentals of other religions, being bereft one of the gateways to appreciating foreign cultures.

I make a connection between ignorance, fear and lack of knowledge and so the questions I want to discuss with my diploma project is: How can the different religions of Austria be made visible? How can the believers claim space and right in the Austrian context? How can architecture contribute to educate about these religions? How can architecture encourage this multitude of religions to be regarded as positive and a strength of the Austrian society?

The Objectives

The objectives of this project is to work on three different levels: Firstly as a national symbol of not only acceptance but also appreciation of the diversity of the Austrian society and furthermore to stimulate the discussion about Austria and its immigrants. On a citywide level it is supposed to function as a meeting place, information source (for schools etc.) and to be everyday usable to surrounding congregations. For the individual, the project should also provide opportunities to enrich and educate oneself. There are also to be possibilities to practice one’s faith.

The Brief

The brief contains a community centre, with facilities for meeting, learning and eating in various settings and groups, open to all congregations but with the five world religions as basis. The roof is an urban park area with six designated individual worshipping spaces.

The Site

The site is located close to the new main station (under construction) in Vienna, which provides excellent visibility and public transport. The neighbouring 10th district, Favoriten, is also under development with 5 000 dwellings, 20 000 workplaces, a school campus and a large park being planned.

Important views are from the pedestrian crossing in the north, the long pedestrian streets in the south as well as the view from the passing trains and those waiting on the platform (ca 5 m above the entrance level of the building).

Mapping of religious sites in Vienna via Google Maps; the site marked with red
Grüß Gott (literally ‘Greet God’, see explanation below) is a greeting, less often a farewell, in Switzerland, Bavaria, Swabia and Austria, particularly in Catholic areas. The greeting was publicized in the 19th century by the Catholic clergy and along with its variants has long been the most common greeting form in Southern Germany and Austria. Grüß Gott is the shortened form of both (Es) Grüße dich Gott and its plural (Es) Grüße euch Gott (may God greet you!). The verb grüßen originally had a meaning similar to segnen (‘to bless’), although it now means ‘to greet’. The essential meaning of Grüß Gott is ‘God bless you’.
Material and time

The building has an automated wooden façade of larch, which will turn silver over time. Every third panelling piece is elongated and this will prolong the greying process as the uneven surface will be exposed to weather at different degrees.

The park on the roof follows the same principle with a wooden floor and steel pillars being allowed to rust, once again displaying the passing time.

**Worship/Culture**

There is space for worshipping in the park area, which is accessible at all hours from the square and the assembly hall can also be used for ceremonies on special occasions, when the normal spaces of the congregations become insufficient. Furthermore the assembly hall and the auditorium can also be used for cultural events and performances.

**Meeting**

The community centre provides spaces to meet informally and formally, spontaneous and planned in the café/restaurant, the assembly hall, the auditorium, the library, the assembly hall, the meeting room, on the roof, outside…

**Knowledge**

The library offers possibilities to both gather and share information about different religions. The study room can be used both individually or booked for groups. The exhibition space is to make information easy accessible on different themes different religions. The auditorium can be used for lectures, discussions, films etc.

**Food**

Food linked to various celebrations and festivities is a common factor for all religions and an uncomplicated way to get in touch with something unknown. The assembly hall has a large kitchen connected to it, divided according to a Jewish kosher tradition. This also applies to the restaurant kitchen. The café/restaurant has its tables arranged not in groups but in long rows, in order to encourage spontaneity and natural curiosity.