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APRIL 2008

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Blood simple

With two projects in the Dolomites revealing a fondness for faceted geometry, the international team behind London's Plasma Studio is all about control and balance

PHOTOGRAPHY: CRISTOBAL PALMA WRITER: JONATHAN BELL



SPACE ODDITY

Situated high in the hills of San Candido, near the Italian-Austrian border, the five residential units of Tetris Haus consist of a series of boxes, with cantilevered cut-aways creating covered parking and terraces





From the fifth floor of Plasma Studio's East End atelier – a tatty medium-rise purpose-built block of studio spaces alongside the Regent's Canal – one takes in a great sweep of London, from the Dome in the east, past Canary Wharf, the City and on to the West End. The cranked horizon might imply a world of opportunity, but for Plasma Studio, its location is just a matter of geographical convenience. 'We're not focusing on the UK any more – if something happens, great, but we're not really trying,' admits German architect Holger Kehne, who founded Plasma Studio in 1999 with his Argentinean partner Eva Castro. 'Being in London means that we're not really grounded. It's more like a hub, from where it's easy to get everywhere quickly, with a lot of people passing through.'

Since the studio was included in the W⁵⁰ Architects Directory in July 2002, its most high profile project has been the striking Hotel Puerta America, that multi-hued, collaborative venture on the fringes of Madrid, where it fitted out the whole of the fourth floor in 'trembling surfaces' of faceted stainless steel. In 2002, Plasma Studio opened an outpost in Sesto,

near Bolzano, Italy, run by Italian partner Ulla Hell. Hell's half of the studio has been busy in recent months, overseeing the completion of two new projects, the extended Residence Koenigswarte in Alto Adige and the Tetris Haus in San Candido. Both are structures that weave new space from very complex client requirements and illustrate the studio's deliberately challenging approach.

The Koenigswarte extension comprises a new wing – dubbed the Strata Hotel – containing a suite of private apartments for paying guests along with a new, self-contained 'cube' house. The wing takes its name from the striated wood façade that appears to rise up from the steep site and swathe the entire front of the building, providing privacy for the glass-walled apartments behind. The whole building appears to grow out of the landscape, sailing over the ground floor, with planes that serve as the canopy, roof and façade. 'We've always worked very elastically with space, opening up architecture, creating links between inside and out,' says Kehne. 'We look for a new spatial experience.'

While initially Plasma Studio's faceted geometry may appear complex, it arises

TRIUMPHAL LARCH
Large, irregularly shaped cut-outs in the larch-clad units of Tetris Haus make the most of natural light and the mountain views

out of a conventional palette of building materials, and is usually far easier to build than the curvaceous and organic forms associated with computer-driven design. Both the Strata Hotel's façade and the layered forms of the Tetris Haus reflect this approach, effectively melding the delight of formal exploration with the hard-nosed practicality of getting things built. 'Our architecture is all about performance,' stresses Kehne. 'It's not so much about image – the image follows. We're much more closely related to modernism than to Expressionism.'

A series of stacked elements – hence the name – the Tetris Haus contains a residential unit and letting apartments. The living areas cantilever out over the site in deference to the Roman remains below, which might require future investigation. The façade is wrapped in larch and the same wood is also used extensively inside, where elements like the sideboard and staircase represent a continuation of the external surfaces.

Kehne is keen to impress that 'we're not as sculptural as other practices. It's a generational thing,' he adds. 'We're not coming from constructivism any >>>



more. We're dealing with data.' Data is everything. The development of parametric CAD software now allows architects to tweak elements in a hugely complex model – add a window, enlarge a floor plan or re-route a pipe – and watch as the consequences cascade dynamically across the entire structure. It's the ultimate time-saving tool, but it's also a creative one in the right hands.

Both Castro and Kehne have ample opportunity to explore the software-driven world in their academic careers. Both teach a Diploma Unit at London's Architectural Association, where Castro also studied. Their students, says Kehne, are working with 'dynamic, adaptable conditions', like undersea structures and sprawling desert hotels. The research the unit undertakes feeds into the Plasma Studio's built work – 'it sets the agenda a little bit' – as well as providing a helpful source of staff. Castro and Kehne also run a research group called Groundlab, which acts as a bridge between the more abstract student work and real-world projects.

With a design language evolved from the intersection of fluid spaces and what Kehne calls the 'authenticity of material expression', it's perhaps surprising to find Kehne eulogising about the possibility of reconstructing and reusing existing buildings. A recent project proposal in China involved a far-reaching overhaul



THE RIGHT LINES

Geometric timber planes (top) link the Strata Hotel, in Alto Adige, to the landscape, as do the generous windows inside (above)

of a 270m-high tower, adding another 110m and a new twisting, sculptural façade. Kehne believes there's a coming paradigm shift towards remodelling instead of new construction, as markets like China and India realise the economic, sustainable and historical benefits.

Among the firm's other ongoing work is a nightclub on Italy's Adriatic coast, competitions for a housing scheme in the Tyrol and a masterplan near Hong Kong. The studio has also been commissioned to create a sculptural piece for the lobby of an SOM-designed tower in Dubai. As Kehne says: 'Thank God for globalisation.'

And while the UK hasn't offered much in recent years, Plasma Studio is still trying. It recently made it into the group of architects selected to provide the ambitious framework of the Athletes' Village for the 2012 Olympic Games, although Kehne is sanguine about what this will actually involve. 'I did it so that we wouldn't be able to complain that we never get anything,' he says. While Plasma Studio may boast success overseas, the architects' winning combination of practicality with avant-garde form will surely find a new outlet in their adoptive country before too long. ★

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