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Florian Nagler Architekten

Profile

The meeting room in the Munich studio



Refreshingly direct

Florian Nagler designs buildings for anyone, and if he can afford to, for friends as well.

His homepage has a black background and minute text, concise information, brief explanations. Photos are configured in a strict grid. It is all a question of mindset, the right level of energy. Florian Nagler's website is not flattering, is rough-edged, distanced. And pleasantly architectural, though the 40-year old Munich-based architect is certainly not the type to wear roll neck sweaters. For the interview he turns up in jeans and a polo shirt and offers me a cup of coffee, a frothy latte macchiato, before placing his notebook and a project file on the desk. It's an entire book. Dark clouds are gathering over Obermenzing, it won't be long before it starts raining. Nagler pulls the door to. The meeting room is actually in the garden behind the studio. It's a purist box in the shade of the trees, like a meditation room, with a large desk and floor tanks with power points. That has to do.





The church center in Riem

Nagler opens the file up. And what appears? EXPO 2000 of course. It catapulted him to fame overnight, though it seems so long ago now. In 1997 the then 30-year old won the competition for the German Pavilion. Nagler's proposal envisaged a forest of 20-meter high exposed concrete pillars. The spaces between the 28 trunks were intended for exhibition space, podiums, and restaurants. The jury loved Nagler's stringent design, and though the revised concept won a second competition, it failed to win over the trade fair company staging the event. When the client started making ever more requests for changes, Nagler threw in the towel. An investor ended up constructing the German Pavilion, and paying for it itself. Nagler buried his dreams of a mega Expo contract – after all it would have been worth around EUR 50 million. Having won a few competitions in his time, the following year he relocated to Munich. Then things really took off. It was as if he wanted to show that Expo had not been pure chance, in fact it was only the beginning of things to come. Nagler proceeded to win even more competitions and in quick succession built a distribution center in Bobingen, a church center for the new development in the Riem district of Munich, and Weihenstephan University of Applied Sciences. Straight buildings with a hint of experimentation, featuring unconventional materials on the facade.

Anybody wanting to observe the merciless aging of Modernism should visit the Neuperlach district of Munich. Each and every era has left its mark on Hanns-Seidl-Platz there. As if in a bazaar faceless residential blocks, lifeless glass casks, and brick shopping fortresses stand huddled together. Heavy-duty fronts obscure the view. Opposite the weather-beaten post office, however, there stands a building that does everything differently: it boasts a flat roof and sheds, a projecting canopy, slender supports and clear fronts – Florian Nagler's cultural offering provides an alternative to the gloating architecture all around. Multi-functional and movable, and, being made of prefabricated wood panels, quick to erect. Citizens' meetings and cultural events are held here. And he also presented his design here.



Cultural Center Neuperlach

Nagler is not someone to dodge an issue, and if anything difficulties in particular are a motivation for him. When his church center met with criticism from incensed local residents who had visions of a religious fortress set behind high surrounding walls he discussed the issue with them. "It wasn't unpleasant," he says. Nowadays his 12-meter high church center is a blessing in comparison with the far higher facades of the neighboring shopping mall. Having been in charge of construction of the cubic primary and secondary general school on the edge of a landscaped park on behalf of the Stuttgart studio Mahler Günster Fuchs, he knows what he is doing with regard to the project in Riem. For the 'Datenwerk', the office building he designed for an IT provider, he has just been awarded the prize of the Bavarian branch of the Association of German Architects (BDA) – the jury's prize, that is, not that of the general public. Architects love Nagler's work, as well as others who appreciate straight lines in design.

The eulogy for the distribution center in Bobingen , for which in 2000 Nagler received the Balthasar Neumann Prize, and in 2001 the European Union's Mies van der Rohe Award and a commendation in the German Architecture Prize was nothing if not full of praise. "Elegant architecture" had emerged that was sensuous and boasted "strict geometry" at one and the same time. And the glistening industrial hall with its giant roller gates is indeed a blend of opposites. What you have is a brittle crate, cloaked in transparent plastic that captures light, reflects it and transcends the industrial architecture. New materials and clear shapes are Nagler's strengths. He briefly studied the history of art and Bavarian history, and then became a carpenter before taking a degree in architecture in Kaiserslautern, while at the same time gaining practical experience at Auer + Weber und Otto Steidle.



Nowadays Nagler himself teaches the next generation of architects, in 2002 for example as visiting professor at the Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen. He is not one for great theorizing, and is quick to get to the point. His buildings are intended to speak for themselves, clearly constructed one-offs that make a confident impression in the surroundings. Like the single-family dwelling in Gleissenberg, which Nagler cloaked in polycarbonate web plates, as if the courtyard were an oversized Tupperware container with a saddle roof, and the church center in the Riem district of Munich. High white walls, solid walls, which, viewed from the side, appear to be as porous as a sponge, a miniature old town, consisting of alleyways leading into the cluster of churches while at the same time linking it to the new development in Riem. That is where the strength of this Munich studio lies: fitting it while at the same time setting standards.

Interview



*Here is someone there does decent work.
Florian Nagler in conversation*

We only design
single-family
dwellings if we really
can't turn them
down

For the most part urgent matters get dealt with before important ones. How do you go about things, do you have a schedule for the day?

No we don't. And I can't say that some projects get preferential treatment, we have so many different ones, from cowsheds to the Free University in Berlin. We are interested in any project if it represents something exciting in terms of subject matter. We put just as much effort into the minor ones as the major ones.

And the major ones help finance the smaller ones.

As a rule if you put as much effort into the smaller ones as we do you're going to make a loss. That's why we only design single-family dwellings if we really can't turn them down, if they're for acquaintances, friends, and relatives.

You say a project has to be exciting. How can you be tempted to design a private house?

The developer needs to be someone with whom you feel you can really achieve something, but with whom there can also be friction. There's nothing less interesting than someone who says here are two million, build me a house and do what you want. I wouldn't even know where to start.

The Munich studio

A limited budget and a clear vision are a good prerequisite.



So is this restriction appealing to you?

Indeed. A limited budget and a clear vision, which need not necessarily be compatible with mine, are a good prerequisite. You can make something out of that. Of course it's nice if we're talking about an attractive plot of land, not one stuck in between other houses, but even that can be a challenge, to which you really have to give some thought about positioning and slotting in. What is important is a developer who challenges us, who gives us an opportunity to really come up with something.



But not just through money – through too many, or indeed insufficient means.

(He laughs). That's always a challenge. But it has much more to do with wishes, and of suggestions for ways of satisfying them. In doing so you might argue, but you establish a viable working relationship. Anybody interesting in getting a result comes to us, someone, that is, who is familiar with our buildings, and realizes that you can't lump them all together.

How do you land contracts? There can be very few people who are actually familiar with buildings in the vicinity, but there are newspapers, prizes, competitions...

We win our major contracts through competitions, and as a rule they are the ones that keep us going. The smaller ones we get through word of mouth, not through publications.



The church center in the Riem district of Munich

So in other words publications are all very well, nice among fellow architects, but don't generate much business? What about specialist construction magazines that potential clients read, are they really not a source of business?

As far as developers in the public sector are concerned it is perhaps important to keep reminding them that we are here, that here is someone that does decent work. Not that I push it. It's not as if we send information to magazines every week.

So you can sit back. Very nice too. It is the clients that do the approaching.

(He laughs). As a rule, yes. And we are of course extremely pleased if our buildings attract attention and get published.

Have you really never landed a contract on the back of a publication?

Not yet, though we did win the contract for the 'Datenwerk' office building, which was recently awarded the BDA Prize through critical press reviews of our church center in Riem, attacking the 12-meter high walls.

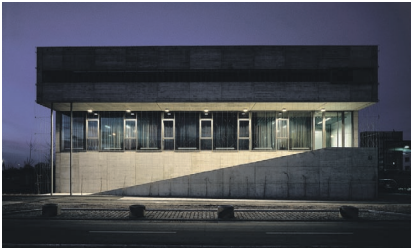
The church fortress...

... exactly. Though Ralf Lemkau rather liked the fact that there was someone who is not as streamlined and who doesn't just revise his plans.



He would seem to be an ideal developer. Did he leave things up to you or just provide opportunities for friction?

He knew what he wanted and had clear ideas about how things ought to be run. In terms of design he initially actually imposed hardly any conditions at all. Then of course we did get down to discussing design as well, in a very constructive way.



The Lemkau "Datenwerk" office building

To my mind
architecture makes
no sense if
it's provocative

The 'Datenwerk' office building has emerged as a sort of monastery...

... we never associated it in that way. It might well be due to the fact that the users are not keen on light, because they are working at screens, and in their previous office, with the shutters down, it was always dark. It was awful for the working atmosphere. So that was our first priority, light. There is no direct sunlight at all: The large window faces north, and to the south there is a projecting roof and the expanses of greenery, which has an additional filtering effect. According to Mr. Lemkau, previously there was always somebody ill; that is now no longer the case, because the working conditions are better.

Exposed concrete promoting health. What was reaction to the 'Datenwerk' office building like?

There was none, apart from fellow architects, who liked it. I assume that most people in Riem are still disturbed by it, but when it's eventually totally green it shouldn't be a provocation any more. As far as the showcasing of architecture currently going on there is concerned, if anything it's somewhat reserved.

You mentioned the fact that fellow architects liked it. After all, it didn't win the BDA Jury Prize, as opposed to the Public's Prize, for nothing. What, then, are the reasons for these two worlds being so far apart, for architects speaking a language that the general public just doesn't understand?

That is indeed the case, but I would claim that as far as we are concerned we are working hard on narrowing the gap. We managed to very well in the case of the church center. There was initially a huge amount of opposition, along the lines of "they're building a wall around the places of worship". Now that everything is finished it is actually very well received. To my mind architecture makes no sense if it is provocative, it shouldn't be an end in itself, it stands in public spaces and needs to come to terms with that. I strive to design buildings that not everyone necessarily has to like, but that are aware of their responsibility in public spaces and are not intended to be provocative. The 'Datenwerk' office building could never have won the BDA Public's Prize because it's so difficult to portray as an illustration, whereas the jury actually went to see it.



For me it's important for a construction to be coherent and one that people can understand.

The cowshed in Thankirchen

Competition, 10,000 square meters. I have problems dealing with that.

Does modern architecture need hard selling?

I hope not. That was referring to the 'Datenwerk'. The buildings have to speak for themselves. If you have to stand in front of them for a whole hour to explain what needs to be understood, there's something wrong. Buildings need to be self-evident, to be understood in their context. Your average observer doesn't ask why, was there any opposition, any problems?

You already mentioned some criteria for good architecture. Even though there can't be a magic formula, what is crucial for you personally?

First: the location. It makes several demands that have to be met. Architecture needs clarity; we try to respond with a straightforward, manageable solution; things become complicated of their accord. Things ought to be "normal". It's easy for masons to build straight walls, and if there are special requirements, such as an apse in a church, things are done differently. Functional features are exciting and influence the building, but what ultimately interests me is the question of how things are done. I am not speaking of honesty with regard to construction, but for me it's important for it to be a coherent construction that people can understand. This stems from the fact that I trained as a carpenter and want to understand how two beams are joined together. If anything it's a bit old-fashioned. And I certainly wouldn't want the developer and his requirements missing from the list.



Do you have a favorite building?

I tend to grow fond of whatever I'm involved with, which at the moment is the cowshed we're working on. On the other hand there are no projects we need to keep quiet about. In the spot on which it is standing, each and every building represents a modest contribution to building culture.

You cover a wide spectrum. You've done a church, is there anything still missing, a museum perhaps?

(He laughs). Not really. A big office block perhaps. Until now we've tended to avoid them because you don't have an opportunity to argue things through with the developer. For the most part you just read: "Competition 10,000 square meters." I have problems dealing with that. But one thing I would like to prove is that we are indeed capable of designing a good office block.



Wouldn't you have to alter the structure of your studio for that? Where direct contracts are concerned a lot of clients demand, say, 60 CAD work places.

That wouldn't be the sort of contract we want, I'm not striving for that sort of size. We're currently about ten people, and, for the size of the operation, relatively successful.

What is the upper limit?

When my wife becomes more involved again, around 16. I would like a cut-off at 20.

Are you good at delegating?

Not really. If I think about it I was often faced with problems because I hadn't made things known and delegated them in good time. I like to keep an eye on everything, which, given our size, works fairly well. For example with regard to the cowshed I'm also interested in things like the way screws are screwed in. It might be a lot of work but for me it's important to enjoy work.

The role of architects is changing. What is your view on architects as service providers?

We are attempting to assume this role as well, as the developer puts up a lot of money and we have to deal with it in a responsible manner. We take costs and deadlines seriously and see service as an integral part of our activities. I have no problem with that as long as I'm not misused in the process.

Are you still brooding about EXPO?

No. We were fortunate enough to win the direct contract for the hall in Bobingen. Working on that project enabled us to drag ourselves out of the quagmire. We didn't have a chance to even think about it.

In other words the right constellation of architect and developer is always necessary?

Yes, I think so. Without developers nothing at all is possible.



Florian Nagel was in conversation with Oliver Herwig.

Oliver Herwig was born in 1967 in Regensburg and is a freelance journalist and author. The publications he writes for include Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, Monopol, and Stern. He lives in Munich with his wife the children's authoress Henriette Wich.

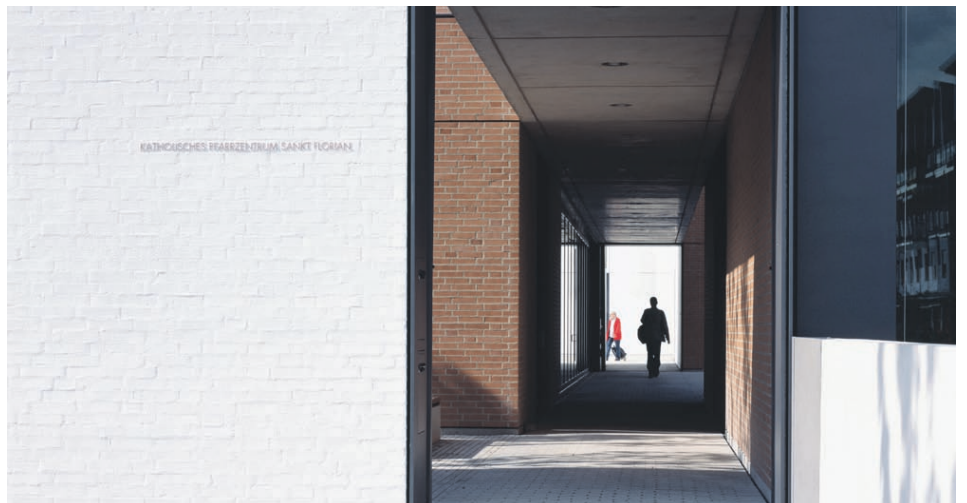
Works

CHURCH CENTER IN RIEM, MUNICH



In the 1980s one of the mottos the churches bandied about was “tear down walls, build bridges”. Nowadays the two Christian faiths are going down new paths, moving together in terms of premises but surrounding themselves with a wall. The wall was a thorn in the side of the residents of the new development in the Riem district of Munich, which was built on the site of the former airport, on several accounts. Ten-meter high walls. That took some getting used to for those living in the vicinity. Nowadays no one gets incensed by the church center, on the contrary. It has become as established as the pine trees on the square where it stands. Compared with the neighboring shopping mall and its rear wall the whitewashed brick wall comes across as pleasantly reserved. Twelve meters of white. The perimeter wall might well have turned out higher.

One spire, two denominations. Two thirds of the ensemble belongs to the Catholic Church, the rest the Bavarian Evangelical-Lutheran Church. A white wall with deep indents surrounds the complex. Following one of the alleyways to the heart of the complex leads visitors to a series of open courtyards and roof terraces with greenery. A small city within a city has emerged here, a sort of modern monastery with a kindergarten, two parish centers and two separate churches. Though enshrined in the mesh of the parishes the places of worship are recognizably independent. It is calm. Quiet rooms open up, a place for concentrating on one's faith. Both the churches are striking for their clear proportions, attracting our gaze as it ascends the walls before coming to rest on the wooden load-bearing frame in the ceiling. Bustling Neu-Riem is far away; and yet so close.



CULTURAL CENTER ON HANNS-SEIDL-PLATZ



One associates the Neuperlach district of Munich with concrete. Residential blocks, a shopping mall. Work catching up on urbanizing the neighborhood began in late fall 2001, with a temporary edifice, a 773 square meter community center. This 'wooden box' was made of prefabricated container elements that together formed a presentable square measuring 30 by 30 meters, which opens up by means of a wide glass front and doors. Solid walls shield the event venue in the middle, which is surrounded by offices, the kitchen and the Internet café. The auditorium has a 200 capacity, which can easily be increased to 300 if the floor-to-ceiling sliding doors to the foyer are opened. Each of the heavy doors disappears in pockets in the wall between two container elements, creating even more space that extends as far as beneath the canopy and across Hanns-Seidl-Platz. There can scarcely be a more pleasant welcoming gesture.

Much about the edifice seems paradox: It is designed as a temporary structure, and yet exudes solidity; it is located on the edge of the square and, with its clear fronts adds a sense of calm to the busy architecture all around. The temporary nature of the community center is recognizable by the decidedly simple materials, oriented strand boards, a plastic floor, and the spartan fittings. It does not, however, look cheap, on the contrary. The strict rhythm of the prefabricated elements makes it self-contained and gives it and formal strength. From the side we view, which, observed from the corner of one's eye, does have something of Mies' National Gallery about it, to the emergency exit at the rear, everything appears to be a single piece. On the inside natural light that enters evenly, without glare, through a polycarbonate ceiling provides additional formal space. Florian Nagler left nothing to chance. But scarcely has the structure been erected than its time is running out. At some point the box is going to have to surrender and make room for the permanent community and cultural center. But it is a well known fact that temporary things survive for a particularly long time.



OTHER PROJECTS BY FLORIAN NAGLER ARCHITEKTEN:

THE DISTRIBUTION CENTER IN
BOBINGEN



THE DISTRIBUTION CENTER IN
BOBINGEN



**WEIHENSTEPHAN UNIVERSITY OF
APPLIED SCIENCES**



**WEIHENSTEPHAN UNIVERSITY OF
APPLIED SCIENCES**



**LEMKAU 'DATENWERK' OFFICE
BUILDING**



LEMKAU 'DATENWERK' OFFICE
BUILDING



LEMKAU 'DATENWERK' OFFICE
BUILDING



THE COWSHED IN THANKIRCHEN



THE COWSHED IN THANKIRCHEN

