

**Querkraft** was founded in 1998 by Jakob Dunkl, Gerd Erhartt, Peter Sapp and Michael Zinner. Since 2004 the group has consisted of Dunkl, Erhartt and Sapp. A discussion of the true reasons for banding together into a group, why a big black box suits a sporting goods manufacturer better than a Las Vegas-style running shoe, and whether one should invest 100,000 euros a year in self-marketing.

AUSTRIA — TEXT: OLIVER ELSER, PHOTOGRAPHY: HERTHA HURNAUS

# The Red Bull effect

**Oliver Elser:** Your first project was an art installation for the Viennese MuseumsQuartier (museum district). How did that commission come about?

**Peter Sapp:** It was a small invited competition.

**OE:** But how did you get invited to take part in a competition before you existed as a firm?

**Gerd Erhartt:** Querkraft did not exist as such, but we had already worked together on some small conversions.

**Jakob Dunkl:** Exactly, there was that party given by *Falter*, the Viennese cultural paper, for which we had set up the gastronomic facilities. One of the editors was also a curator at the MuseumsQuartier. That's how it came about. At that time we were still called Dunkl, Erhartt, Sapp & Zinner.

**OE:** And then when you got invited to take part in a competition, you thought: hey, what are we actually called?

**PS:** In the long run it was impossible to answer the telephone with: 'Dunkl, Erhartt, Sapp & Zinner – hello!'

**JD:** It sounds like a lawyer's office.

**PS:** We hadn't wanted to make up an artificial name but we didn't have a choice.

**JD:** Someone once said we cultivate a poetic pragmatism. The initiative was completely pragmatic. Not: 'We need a pop band name'. But rather: 'This is too tiresome'. And then: 'Now that we're going to have a name, it should do something; it should resonate'. Resonate emotionally.

**PS:** The name also connects with our first project at the MuseumsQuartier. That is where we noticed that our approach is to think outside the box (which is called 'Querdenken' in German). From then on, questioning the way design tasks are set became our central motif.

**GE:** Unlike many other groups, we were clear about having a



deed of partnership from the start – that is, we put things on a professional level.

**QE:** Even in the mini-competition, where you did no more than spread out a few red tarpaulins, was there already a formal deed of partnership?

**PS:** Yes, but of course it was an investment in the future; it wasn't meant as a basis for one project alone.

**GE:** We also established very precise rules about things like what happens if one of the partners leaves, how would he be bought out, what about the continued existence of the name.

**JD:** In that respect we're happy about being called Querkraft. It makes it easier for someone to join the firm a few years from now. Others are called 'So-and-so and Partners'. Then you always have this gap between those who gave their name to the firm and those who are 'only partners'. A major reason for the many groups on the Austrian architecture scene is that the architects' association here has the strictest qualification requirements in Europe, if not the whole world. I still had to provide proof of five years of professional experience to be able to call myself an architect; now it is 'only' three. We have the most expensive association in Europe. So what happens? Well, four or five people get together the way we did and then only one has to belong to the association.

**QE:** And if all the members of the group are also partners, you don't have to pay fixed salaries – everyone starves equally.

**JD:** After that starvation phase, all of a sudden within a few weeks we were extremely busy with many small projects, and we suddenly needed a lot of co-workers. But they didn't work out of our office because we didn't want those hidden, false employment conditions. The co-workers were each able to

carry out their respective small projects on their own and we saw them once a week at meetings.

**QE:** That is the ultimate in outsourcing: the co-workers even have to organize their own workspaces and computers!

**PS:** True, but it meant they had every liberty and could virtually act as independent offices. The responsibility, in other words, all matters of liability, we undertook ourselves.

**JD:** Every Friday we went out to eat with all the 'satellites'. With large projects, however, that was never possible. The Adidas Brand Center could not have been handled that way. That phase taught us how to delegate.

**QE:** A big difference between you and other young groups on the one hand, and the big firms like CoopHimmelb(l)au and Hans Hollein on the other, seems to be that the younger generation sees themselves more as a service providers than 'artists'.

**PS:** That's right, we see the client as a partner. But if there is a need for us to convince him, because we ourselves are convinced by a solution, we pull out all the stops. Then nothing is too much trouble to get our idea across.

**GE:** Architects of the artist generation were happy when the client left them in peace. But nothing good comes of that.

**QE:** The first projects were low-budget single-family homes and...

**JD:** We want to erase the term 'low budget' from our vocabulary. Efficiency is what it's all about. We have learned that when you build in a low-budget way – as we did when we started – then you work efficiently with the means at your disposal. That marks you for life. The Adidas Brand Center was not a cheap building, but you can make very efficient use of the

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money and thus build much more of a spatial programme than called for in the brief. A nice example to my mind is Citroën: they built the 2CV and the DS, the 'goddess', at about the same time, in the same spirit, with the same engineers. You don't have to build 2CVs all the time; you can also use a lot of money and create a car that goes down in history.

**QE:** How did you succeed in producing that efficiency at Adidas?

**JD:** We were the only one of the twenty-nine teams to manage to contain the required 5000 square metres of exhibition space in one rectangular box.

**PS:** Which meant we could then afford 4000 square metres of space for free. We presented them a gift, and because of the compact way we built, we were able to do some other things as well.

**JD:** The additional areas are shaped like an arena, like a stadium. A gigantic foyer.

**QE:** That was not part of the spatial programme?

**GE:** Not in those dimensions. But they got a real events area from us. At first Adidas was almost overwhelmed by the options that the building offers. For instance, they hold General Marketing Meetings. They never imagined they would be able to hold it in that building; now they can.

**QE:** So did Adidas radically review its architectural ideal during the competition?

**GE:** Corporate architecture is not really suitable for competitions. Probably the better way would be to choose an architect and discuss the corporate philosophy with him. In a competition, however, you get a very wide range of responses. We took an exceptional position in this whole game because we did not give in to the reflex of designing a building in the shape of a huge running shoe.

**PS:** There really were such entries!

**GE:** We began with an analysis: what does Adidas stand for; what is the difference between it and other brands – that is, mainly Nike?

**QE:** And?

**GE:** Adidas is the enterprise with the longest history. Because of this history, Adidas has a different emphasis: tradition, unique developments, and functionalism. The company is in

a position to assure quality for a long period of time. That is why you cannot propose a building in the shape of a running shoe. It may be up-to-date today but it will be superseded by another model next season.

**QE:** You could tell Nike the same story.

**PS:** Nike is completely different. Purely a product of marketing, developed from a diploma thesis on how to build up a company with marketing alone, without production, without technical know-how.

**JD:** Like Red Bull, financially the most successful company in Austria. They have never produced a single can on their own.

**GE:** A lifestyle bubble.

**QE:** Instead, you have banked on German virtues: tradition, diligence, reliability?

**GE:** From the outside, the building radiates timelessness; but inside, we gave Adidas a stage on which they can constantly present themselves anew. There's a 120-metre-long wall serving as a screen, where beamers installed in series can project images, moving images. After all, the wholesale buyers who come there twice a year have to be offered new attractions every time.

**JD:** It would not have been enough to build something that just says: I am Mercedes; I am Adidas. Calmness has power. The hall is perfect, no expansion joints. Then I open the door and the emotional element breaks out. We had our first brainstorming session with the head of the Young&Rubicam advertising agency. That is how we arrived at the concept: build up tension. All quiet on the outside, but then it discharges.

**QE:** That recalls the debate between rationalism and functionalism: you sound a bit like Mies van der Rohe, who said to his ultra-functional colleague Häring: 'My dear fellow, just make the place big instead of bothering with special rooms for specific functions.'

**GE:** It is also much more sustainable when a building can change because it is not too specific.

**QE:** Back to the taboo subject of low-budget work: What do you do nowadays with clients with next to no budget? Do you send them away?

**PS:** There still are some. We are just now building a private museum for the art collector Liaunig which has the budget of an industrial building.

**QE:** And the clients who want to have a low-budget single-family home?

**PS:** Our telephone used to ring non-stop, for years: 'We want a house for half price. You do that, don't you?' We don't do it any more.

**JD:** We still enjoy these private houses as much as ever. The problem is only the matter of the fee.

**PS:** You would have to ask three times the fee.

**GE:** Then we pass on these requests to younger colleagues.

**QE:** Wouldn't a mass-produced item solve the problem?

**JD:** There are already a few quite acceptable single-family homes on the market. Also as semi-finished products. The trouble is that this kind of product cannot take the site into account.

**QE:** When I think of your residential buildings, for instance on Leebgasse in Vienna, I wonder whether you couldn't use the same design for a different plot.

**JD:** We have already discussed that, and fortunately decided that it will not look the same.

**QE:** Why?

**PS:** There are always parameters that are different. Housing is so detailed; building those small units, you cannot allow yourself to give away even a few centimetres.

**JD:** We do always try to see whether it's possible to adopt solutions from earlier projects. But it never fits! Whereby it must be said that we don't see our office as an architectural creative studio only, but also very definitely as an economic enterprise. So we would certainly like to have a cash cow, a mass-produced item. After all, the idea of not just making architecture for people with a lot of money but also making something that is affordable for everyone is attractive. But we do believe that quality costs something. It sure is absurd: in architect's fees, the gap between bad architects and superstars such as Zaha Hadid is quite minimal. Nothing comparable to the gap between an average soccer player and David Beckham.

**QE:** In an ig-Architektur (an architecture interest group) mailing, you once suggested raising fees by thirty per cent.

**JD:** We and all other firms in ig-Architektur certainly work forty per cent harder than the average architect.

**QE:** What was the response?





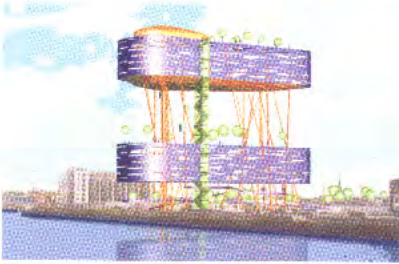
↑ **VIT SHOWROOM, ASPERHOFEN (2003)**  
Instead of terracing the sloping lot in the business park, the industrial building was stood on thin stilts. One "trunk" serves as the entrance to the showroom for prefabricated conservatories, the other contains the office. (See also A10 #1)



↑ **ADIDAS BRAND CENTER, HERZOGENAURACH (2006)**  
The spatial programme, 5000 m<sup>2</sup> of presentation space, was combined into a "black box" in the form of a plain trade-fair hall. That left surplus space for realising a bonus: a huge foyer.



↑ **BLOCK OF FLATS, LEEBGASSE, VIENNA (2004)**  
Filling the vacant lot with artificial nature sets the building off from its neighbours. All rooms have access to balconies and feature deep windowsills that can double as seating indoors.



↑ **'LANDMARK TOWER', DUBLIN (COMPETITION ENTRY, 2003)**  
The brief called for a 60-metre tower with very unfortunate proportions. The solution projected twin towers, but horizontally positioned. On the roof: rehearsal rooms for the rock band U2.



↑ **LIAUNIG MUSEUM, NEUHAUS (2006-2008)**  
A private museum for the price of an industrial building. After an international competition, the art collector had rejected the design by Odile Decq initially selected. An abstract slab will be built instead.



↑ **DOR-FILM OFFICE, VIENNA (1999)**  
Dividing walls of transparent synthetic material reduce noise without destroying the loft space.



↑ **TWI FRONTCOURT, VIENNA (2001)**  
At the foot of a high-rise by Massimiliano Fuksas, a spatial edge upgrades the draughty frontcourt. Thuja branches magnified by 2000 per cent and printed on glass provide shelter against the wind.



↑ **SPS HOUSE, VIENNA (2001)**  
Querkraft's first house: two lots in an allotment garden colony were merged for the site. Perched on a pediment that encloses the living space, two synthetic-coated shells house the offices with a view.



↑ **DRA HOUSE, VIENNA (2003)**  
Another garden allotment development: two-thirds of the house "floats" above the slope. This leaves more precious garden land free on the tiny property.



↑ **CAFÉ WEINWURM, VIENNA (2005)**  
1950s retro in the heart of Vienna, featuring floors and a bar in terrazzo. Glass mosaics cover the walls.

## 10 projects by Querkraft

### (The Red Bull effect)

**QE:** The profession is so intimidated, so lacking in self-esteem, that architects don't expect their work to be remunerated properly. If you compare our fees to those paid elsewhere in business, such as to consultants, top lawyers and top doctors, there is simply no comparison.

**QE:** Would you like to form a cartel?

**PS:** The market regulates things, but never in the sense of quality.

**QE:** But the top lawyers have also formed their cartel.

**JD:** We should be able to say that CoopHimmelb(l)au, Zaha Hadid and Querkraft simply demand twice the fee. The expense of planning a building usually constitutes six per cent of the total costs for the building – that is, from the creative process to the execution of the detail. Whatever a firm such as Hadid's does, costs six per cent. If she were to double that, then the building would be a bit more expensive, but in relation to the overall costs, including the cost of the land and including the technical infrastructure, it would make almost no difference to the client.

**QE:** Norman Foster charges more.

**JD:** He sure does. But I was in London last week, in the Hadid office, and they sit three times as closely together as we do. It can't be right, that in one of the top offices, in the Beckhams of architecture, there should be such conditions.

**QE:** You mentioned ig-Architektur, a coalition that is probably unique in Europe. What are its aims?

**JD:** When we sense inequity it really makes our hair stand on end. The profession has a poor reputation, is poorly treated and

poorly remunerated. And the professional association is silent about it. We couldn't just stand there and watch this happen, so we and other young offices founded ig-Architektur.

**QE:** Have any goals been achieved?

**QE:** Not as far as the restricted access to the profession is concerned. But we have had some success on a broader front: architectural policy has been the subject of a parliamentary inquiry. And the first government report on the culture of architecture is in preparation.

**PS:** We regard it as a long-term social project. To really change something one would have to – of course that is old hat – start with education.

**JD:** Or else, something that works really quickly: don't go via the kindergartens and schools but via marketing. We need a Red Bull of architecture. Somebody has to get an idea to make architecture into something that everybody wants to have.

**QE:** Except that architecture can't be bought and consumed to the same extent.

**JD:** If it's possible to entertain the public on television for three quarters of an hour with animals and plants in a flowery meadow, then it should be possible to devote the same amount of time to a new building. In the UK there are programmes that bring architecture to the people.

**QE:** But there is also the opposite: a public vote on the ugliest buildings in the country.

**QE:** In any case, no one has ever tested the effect of popular architecture presentations. When I think of the 100,000 euros we invested in competition entries last year, it's crazy. A single

commission, small in comparison to the investment, was the result. If we used those 100,000 euros in a targeted way for marketing, I'm one hundred per cent sure we would be better off.

**JD:** Although they already say that our office is very much present in the public sphere. But what would someone do who has a similar turnover and twelve co-workers? He advertises, puts on some events. The theatre in Austria receives 120 million a year in government subsidies. Architecture gets a measly six million. If architecture had even fifty million, we wouldn't even know what to do with all that money.

**QE:** And why not? Because architecture has not been clearly allocated anywhere. Architects receive no promotion for economic or cultural development; architecture falls between two stools.

**JD:** Architecture is such a simple tool. As a company you have to build a warehouse anyway. For a few per cent more, you could get something that projects an image. It's that simple. Make it a bit better and you have a monument. Two months ago we talked to a consultant on cultural affairs about that, about how to go on from here. Whether we really should labour at one competition after another for the next thirty years. He asked us how we had developed so far and whether we wanted to continue like that. Then we realized: in principle the steady, not spectacular, growth of the last eight years is quite all right by us. Not every architect has this attitude. All three of us have children, have a private life and do not work on weekends or in the evenings. That is not so common. ←

www.querkraft.at