

**Commerzbank: The Social Tower****September 1995**

Many of us spend more time at our place of work than we do at home, so the nature of the workplace directly affects the quality of our lives - and indirectly that of our families. Some years ago many people were predicting the paperless office. That has proved to be a myth, despite the widespread use of computers and word processors. Today there is a similar myth, which suggests that we can all work at home and thereby eliminate the need for offices and corporate headquarters. Whilst the technology may exist to create such possibilities, the social needs for people to come together are very deeply rooted; notwithstanding teleconferencing, virtual reality and expanded horizons of private time for leisure.

What is changing, however, is the level of our expectations. This is reflected in the so-called 'green revolution'. We not only expect higher standards of comfort and amenity when we go to work, but we expect them to be created in a socially responsible manner, which will be mindful of the longer term consequences for future generations.

The legislation and attitudes to such issues are more progressive in Germany than most other countries. In particular the climate of opinion in the city of Frankfurt further encourages the pursuit of higher design standards in both the public and private domain.

To be socially responsible any building should work both from the outside in the civic context of its site, and from the inside, by responding to the special functions which generate the need for the building. It should also be remembered that function - whether in the public or private realm - also has subjective and spiritual dimension. How for example do you measure the magic of natural light - a shaft of sunlight - the view of a garden or the sculptural qualities of a silhouette on the skyline?

The tower for Commerzbank is a response to these and other related concerns. It is a reminder that architecture is about people, their needs and their aspirations. In a time of social and technological change the traditional patterns of how we work, live, play and communicate are called into question. To respond constructively to the challenge of change it is necessary to question the nature of our buildings and how they relate to the traditional structure of our cities.

The new tower starts by challenging the kind of high-rise structure that can be seen in almost any city. Traditionally this has a solid central core of lifts and stairs with a band of office space around the edge. In most buildings like this, every floor is identical and the city is presented with repetitive facades without life or variety to the office workers inside or to the public spectators outside.

The Commerzbank is a radical reappraisal of the very nature of an office building. Instead of a solid core the heart of the building is a vertical shaft of open space which expands at intervals up to the height of the building into nine large indoor gardens. Each of these green spaces is four storeys high; they spiral around the edge of the building to become a dramatic feature, visible from the outside as well as inside.

There are three different kinds of garden - Mediterranean, American and Asian. Each has its own distinctive character with planting and large trees - as diverse as maples, olives and bamboo. From inside the building these 'gardens in the sky' frame unexpected views of the city beyond. The tower's special bridge-like structure enables these to be vast holes in the side of the tower, uninterrupted by columns, even though they penetrate an entire facade of the triangular building.

As well as helping to create a more human and intimate place to work, the gardens are meeting points and offer the opportunity for a relaxing snack or social gathering. From the outside they also break down the scale of the building and offer views, which penetrate from one side to the other across the full width of the building.

The vertical atrium space and gardens are also part of a unique system of natural ventilation, which, for most of the year, allows the building's users to open windows in the outside wall for fresh air. This is one of the energy saving concepts of the design. There will of course be times when the outside temperature is too cold or the winds are too strong. On those occasions the automated building management system will take over and ensure that the internal climate is comfortable and controlled.

The lifts which occupy the centre of a traditional tower are here moved to the outside corners, where they offer dramatic views of the city and their movement animates the outside of the building.

Many historical cities offer interesting public routes and spaces, which cut through entire urban blocks. In London for example there are nineteenth-century spaces such as Burlington Arcade, in Brussels the Galeries St. Hubert and in Milan the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, which connects the Cathedral Square with La Scala. Every age in the past offered their equivalent from the alleys of the Middle Ages to the piazzas of the Renaissance and to the casbahs of the Middle East. In the twentieth century this urban tradition has been sadly neglected. However in Frankfurt, by working closely with the planners, it has been possible to continue this historic tradition of creating open spaces by making a glazed arcade to link the pedestrian area of Kaiserplatz with Grosse Gallusstrasse. This space offers the citizens of Frankfurt and the employees of the Commerzbank a unique opportunity to stroll, eat and participate in cultural events in a grand space protected from the elements.

The triangular tower is then knitted into the lower urban blocks and streets at its base whilst from a distance it presents a unique silhouette on the skyline - without the need for logos or identifying signs. Although it is special to Commerzbank, and unlike any other tower in the world, the project has evolved from pioneering work on earlier buildings such as the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, in Hong Kong, Century Tower, in Tokyo, and the Willis Faber & Dumas building in Britain.

It is difficult to separate the prosperity of Frankfurt from its commercial success in the specialised world of banking and the Commerzbank tower, with its sophisticated systems, is a long-term investment in that tradition.

### **Norman Foster**

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