

The MPreis Is Right

Nutritionists often tout the merits of shopping along the perimeter of the supermarket. They reason that spending time and money on that outermost *Ringstrasse* of produce, dairy, bakery, and meats cuts down on all those dietary beasts like processed foods and sodas. Of course, one must occasionally dash into the middle rows for staples like baking powder and toilet paper, dodging trans fats and high-fructose corn syrup all the while. But suppose you were drawn to the edges of the grocery store for something other than your triglycerides? Suppose your Ralphs or Whole Foods had a bank of windows or even, radically, a view.

That's the theory behind MPreis, a chain of design-conscious Austrian supermarkets. Although design and supermarkets are antithetical in the United States, the Innsbruck-based MPreis Markets has wholly embraced ▶

Austrian architect Peter Lorenz designed the MPreis market in Nlederndorf, a small town in the Tyrolian Alps. Each MPreis responds to its mountainous environs: this one takes up the sheer verticality of the wooded peaks with an abstracted forest of its own.

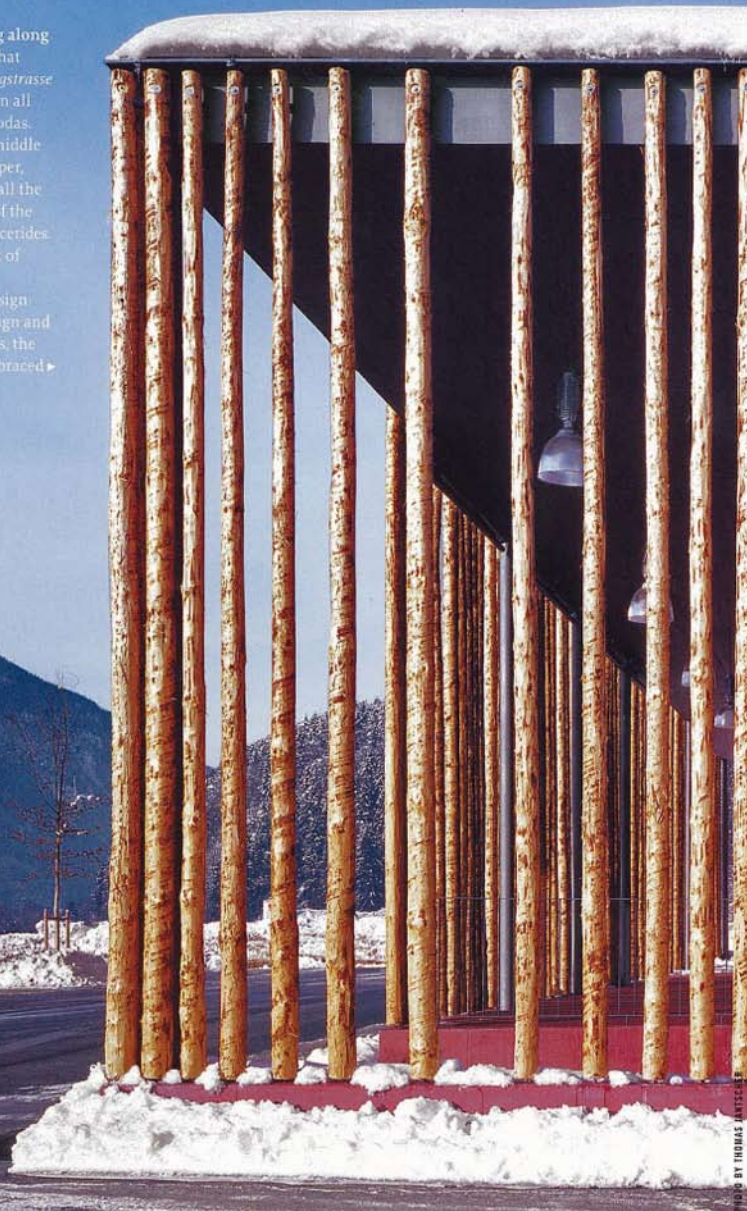


PHOTO BY THOMAS HANTSCHER

the forward-looking talents of young local architects. They're betting this emphasis on architecture will not only beautify the already magnificent Tyrol but also push profits to alpine heights.

"For us the communication between the building and the landscape is essential," says MPreis co-CEO Hansjörg Mölk. "Every market is designed for the space it stands in." That MPreis markets have little to do with stucco boxes is evident: Rough-hewn logs support the roof at the Niederndorf store like a bare forest; the pitched roofline in Matei in Osttirol mimics the nearby mountains; and the floor-to-ceiling windows in St. Anton let in copious natural light and incredible views. "Our stores are part of the landscape, part of the everyday environment," says Mölk. "To us this results in an obligation, a responsibility to co-design the living space of our customers and to

improve the quality of life in the region."

Because supermarkets aren't necessarily the sexiest commissions, Mölk sought to employ the hometown talent. "In the beginning architects generally refused to plan supermarkets," says Mölk. "It seemed minor for them. So we started to work with only the best young, local firms. Now it's the other way around—architects come to offer their ideas, hoping to realize a project with us."

Of the dozens of modern markets built, only one has been designed by a foreigner—French hot shot Dominique Perrault, who designed the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. And he got the job only by dint of meeting Mölk while working in Austria.

Peter Zelger, of the Innsbruck firm Holz Box, completed an MPreis market in Salzburg in 2003. Nestled against a wooded hillside, the glass-and-blond wood structure ▶



The Achenkirch store (top) by Giner and Wucherer is a long, approachable building that allows plenty of natural light and enviable views of the crags a few miles away. A pastoral mosaic of deer and trees adorns the façade of the Elbigenalp store (bottom right); the sleek steel of the Zirl store (bottom left) refers directly to its modernist parentage.



PHOTOS BY LUKAS SCHALLER (ACHENKIRCH/ELBIGENALP), THOMAS HANTSCHER (ZIRL)



looks more like a speed-skating complex than a place to pick up spaetzle. Zelger says that MPreis allowed Holz Box "a mostly free creative hand" in the design process, adding that the great upshot of having designed such a visible store is that "now we know where things are when we go shopping."

MPreis was founded in the early 1920s by Mölk's grandmother Therese. After Hansjörg and his cousin Anton Mölk took over in the mid-1970s, it began moving toward a more design-conscious identity. The first MPreis designed by an architect was built in 1982 and was born of a friendship with Austrian architect Heinz Planatscher. "He planned a few stores with us and inspired us to invest more in the quality of the space," says Mölk. "There was no planned strategy we followed, but in the end it turned out to be something that made us very different from others in the business."

North American supermarkets have also tried to distinguish themselves through design, most notably the

shiplike Publix by the Bay in Miami Beach, by Wood and Zapata, or the skylit glass palace of the Queens Quay Loblaws in Toronto, by Rebanks Architects. Greg Fontana designed the lighting for an energy-saving Stop & Shop prototype in Foxboro, Massachusetts, that makes extensive use of natural light, a strategy that's been shown to increase sales. In the 1960s, supermarkets like Safeway and Penn Fruit Co. tried to present a unified modernist front. Safeway's "Marina" model, with its archlike, glassed-in façade, was based on a store in San Francisco's Marina neighborhood and replicated hundreds of times around the country.

Unlike the Safeway plan, though, each MPreis market is architecturally unique and linked to the others not through the same front entrance or predictable location of the deli, but by an effort to make MPreis and modern design synonymous. "People in the Tyrol think of MPreis when they pass by a construction site with modern architecture and lots of wood and glass," says Molk. "The ▶

The dramatic and graceful swoop of Machné and Durig Architects' MPreis in Matel in Osttirol creates a parking lot that feels more like a small harbor than an uninviting field of endless blacktop.

PHOTO BY PAUL BITT

stores all look different, but they have one sign in common: the red cube, our company logo."

Red cube, wood, and glass aside, it's more than just the exterior that sets MPreis apart. Each store has an attached café called Baguette, and the high ceilings and natural light keep shoppers lingering, which is good for both business and sun-starved patrons.

What seems to be at work with MPreis (and far less apparent in American supermarkets) is an emphasis on design. Though not naïve enough to credit their success to architecture alone—co-CEO Anton Mölk reports that "business increased not only due to architectural design, but due to the combination of a good price-performance ratio, friendly employees, and customer proximity"—MPreis confirms a notion that still hasn't taken root in the States: that good design is something that can, and

perhaps should, happen everywhere, not just at contemporary art museums.

MPreis's commitment to modern design is so strong that it earned the company a spot representing Austria at the 2004 Venice Architecture Biennale. Musing on his company's place in Austrian design, Hansjörg Mölk says, "With conformity no discussion would arise. At an MPreis market people start to be more aware of the quality of the spaces they're entering. For us, investing in architectural space means creating value for our colleagues and our customers."

By virtue of progressive architecture, excellent siting, and stunning environs, MPreis elevates an often-mundane fact of daily life. And if the vista from the produce section doesn't provide sufficient awe, the view from the parking lot isn't half bad either. ■



MPreis's outpost in Wennis (top), tucked deftly among the Alps, was designed by Astrid Tschapeller and Rainer Köberl; the elevated concrete market is reminiscent of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye. The store in Wattens (bottom left) opts for live trees over stripped trunks, and the glassy store in Fügen (below right) by Helmut Seelos positively glows at night.

PHOTOS BY LUKAS SCHALLER (WENNIS), GÜNTER BRESSER (FÜGEN), GÜNTER B. WETT (WATTENS)