



TRADING IN THE TYROL

Wolfgang Pöschl has injected new vigour into the otherwise uninspiring task of supermarket design for a small chain of food stores in the Tyrol: M-Preis. As Peter Wislocki reports, his three latest stores in Lienz, St Johann and Hall have provided the client with value for money and a unique commercial identity. Photographs by Paul Ott.

Wolfgang Pöschl is a generous and hospitable Tyrolean. Unlike most drivers, he seldom refuses hitch-hikers lifts – but always subject to a condition. The passenger repays the favour by cooking a traditional meal from their country of origin. Applying this principle, Pöschl's hitch-hikers have occasionally encountered difficulties: for example, the Chinaman who, the architect recalls, could not easily obtain the requisite elephant lice for his banquet. The greatest problem of all, however, was that of the American who knew of no national dish, and resorted to a Mexican recipe.

The anecdote is told with surprisingly serious intent. The status of food in any culture is universally central; and the issue of national and regional identities – whether embodied in food, clothing or buildings – is sensitive and topical in the Tyrol (see Essay WA 41). Pöschl's client, a small chain of food stores operated by several generations of a Tyrolean family and trading exclusively within the region, shares the architect's concern with matters other than the purely pragmatic and commercial. Identified by their bold, red logo, M-Preis have flourished by following a philosophy which aims to offer customers value and service in equal measure. Their supermarkets are a modest size, and air:



to supply the staple needs of a community in their immediate environment. However, the Tyrol has experienced the international increase in dependence on the car – with the consequence that M-Preis stores are increasingly located in the suburbs, where vehicular access and parking are less problematic.

Hi tech at high altitude

Wolfgang Pöschl's architecture is always contextual, but never vernacular, his career having developed from a crafts background. The architect's father died when Wolfgang was 19 years old, leaving him to manage the family cabinet making business. For some years, Pöschl's architectural practice developed in parallel with the workshop, and whilst his interest in arts and crafts still flourishes with his postgraduate teaching he has withdrawn from the family's business.

Pöschl's craft-inspired approach to architecture far transcends traditional joinery techniques however. As a student, his masters degree design thesis submission was failed, on the grounds that he had combined polythene with timber in the design of a table, in a manner which the examiners considered to fall outside the course syllabus. Pöschl's latest buildings likewise combine traditional and more innovative technologies.

As a business concerned with offering value

for money to its customers, M-Preis drove a hard bargain on its building procurement. Pöschl claims that his supermarket designs prove, on average, 15-20 percent cheaper than more conventional rivals. The saving in cost – and improvement in quality – is achieved through the pragmatic evolution of simple details and often utilitarian materials. Buildings often combine industrially fabricated elements such as galvanised steel structures and aluminium glazing systems, juxtaposed with less finely finished, and hence more tactile, timber products and fair-faced concrete. In other respects, M-Preis specify the best available equipment for their stores: for example systems for recovering energy from fridges for heating public areas.

Wolfgang Pöschl's approach to buildability and value engineering derives from his "hands on" crafts background. Partly due to the speed with which M-Preis procure their buildings, details are never documented fully in construction contracts, but are discussed between the architect and individual craftsmen on site and in their workshops. Compromises and late changes inevitably result – but, the architect maintains, are seldom a problem.

At a strategic and structural level, Pöschl's forms are generally efficient and rational. For example, the wave form of the roof of the St Johann building not only articulates the linear

space beneath, and frames ever-changing glimpses of the surrounding mountains, but functions as an inherently stiff structure – rather like a giant proprietary metal cladding sheet, stiffened by its profile.

Pöschl's response to contexts is both analytical and subjective – related to measurable topography, and more subjective perceptions. He is a keen musician, his close friends numbering artists working in many media, and each building, in Wolfgang Pöschl's eyes, is associated with a tune or an image. The Lienz store, he explains, "is a portrait of this south-eastern part of the Tyrol and its people." This was the first M-Preis commission to be realised by Pöschl, and occupies an inauspicious roadside site, which the "L"-shaped plan addresses, enclosing a more spatially ordered forecourt. "The building has a hard side to the north, a soft side to the south, a noisy side near the street and a quiet side on the back," the architect continues. "It tries to fit into the chaos of the town's edge, lying between two filling stations." Pöschl responded to the harshness of the context with a vocabulary of fragmented elements: a gently vaulted roof picking up the silhouette of nearby hills; and the tilted, perforated metal logo which resonates with the dynamics of the setting.

"M-Preis St Johann is also a portrait of the place and its people," Pöschl continues, arguing



M-Preis, St. Johann

The wave form of the supermarket's roof represents the extrovert character of the indigenous population. Its highly efficient structure also allows for a memorably spacious interior. The innovative roof form has since been imitated throughout the region



that the wave form of the supermarket's roof represents the extrovert character of the indigenous population. The building, completed in July 1994, is not purely gestural however – Pöschl acknowledges that not everyone will understand his personal iconography – but, unlike Kazuyo Sejima's work, with which the project has been compared, simultaneously provides a highly efficient structure and a memorably spacious interior. The town's mayor hesitated before granting the project his seal of approval, fearing its shocking novelty would lose him votes. Fears of the building's likely collapse under heavy winter snow loads have proved groundless, however; and a number of similar roof forms have since begun to appear throughout the region.

Structurally and spatially, the St Johann project is perhaps the most ambitious of the three. Unlike Lienz and Hall, the store has a basement car park. The large clear span over the basement inspired some structural gymnastics above. A concrete cantilever covers the rear part of the store, containing shopping space and private stores; the steel wave roof being perched on the cantilever's edge. The inherent structural strength of the steel profile has minimised the roof's weight, to the extent that its supports are little more than slender, widely spaced mullions. The experience within

the supermarket is dominated by the quality of light and materials; the glow of refrigerated display cases at low level, juxtaposed with the metaphorically aquatic turquoise soffit, weightlessly peeling away from the building's several layers of structure overhead.

Constructed between January and June 1994, the supermarket on the outskirts of Hall lies in one of the most memorable of Tyrolean landscapes, within sight of the Bettelwurf. The 1200m² building is dug into the hillside, making it almost invisible from the west. The building's simple rectangle is split along its longitudinal axis, half being covered by a concrete vault supporting a turf-covered roof, the other part sheltered by an asymmetrical, inverted vault. To perceptually lighten the interior of the underground accommodation, the concrete vault's reflective metal permanent shuttering system is left exposed. The curving monopitch clerestory, by contrast, is externally clad in profiled metal, and conceals its laminated wood joists behind a particle board ceiling. The construction of the roof is revealed at its ends, where the cladding is peeled away exposing the glulam structure.

The asymmetrically curving roof is both a formal gesture – a deferential nod towards the mountains – and a means of admitting light and views of the outside scenery

throughout much of the interior without loss of display and sales space. The building is intentionally reticent: a long, low plinth beneath the distant mountain horizon. As at St Johann, however, largely blank facades are softened by means of the clear layering of planes, vertically and horizontally, and by the use of warm, organic materials in the cladding of galvanised steel and fair faced concrete structures.

Market values

To do justice to Pöschl's designs one might refer to his hitch-hiking parable. These buildings are neither intended to appease indigenous kitsch-loving reactionaries nor are they self-consciously works of international aesthetes' architecture, of the kind which all too often fills architectural magazines. Like the Chinese hitch-hiker, Pöschl is concerned with authenticity: not doctrinaire functionalism, but the application of a well understood craft to quite specific, everyday situations. These buildings could have been cruder, and still have fulfilled their purpose adequately. But in identifying the unique qualities of each site, and allowing his contextual analyses and personal cultural understanding to influence each design concept, Pöschl has added a vital ingredient – not unlike the Chinaman's elephant lice. □