

Symbolism and Expressionism in the Grazer Schule

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The Grazer Schule (Graz School) was a dynamic Austrian architectural design movement which occurred in Graz, Austria in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in the era of Post-Modernism.

Graz, as the second largest city in Austria, functioned as an architectural counterpoint to Vienna, with its more historicist tendencies. The center of this movement was dually in the architecture school of the Technical University of Graz, its students and faculty, and in the visionary practices of such architects as Günther Domenig, Klaus Kada, Szyszkowitz and Kowalski, Volker Giencke, and Team A Graz.

Grazer Schule architecture was highly dramatic, with visionary spatial development incorporating soaring volumes, structures that seem to defy gravity, innovative material usage, and the subconscious inclusion of deeper symbolic meaning still readable in the built structure.

From the outset Grazer Schule architects had no intention of following norms of design or construction. As opposed to Bauhaus Modernism, the pedagogy of their professors, with its utopian ideals and clear rules of design, the Graz School sought to be unique, individualistic and in opposition to the Viennese post-war. The opposite of a Functionalist aesthetic, it was highly regional, place specific, symbolically meaningful to the architect, and exhibited a high degree of sculptural Expressionism.

In the 1960s and 1970s some shared approaches to this rejection of new regional style can be seen in early, largely organic or cellular plan development resulting in complex non-linear, non-boxlike forms. Where Bauhaus Modernism embraced clean minimalist lines, a shared color palette, flat roofs and decoration through noble interior materials such as marble and chromed steel, the new Grazer Schule architecture embraced a return to natural materials such as wood, often raw or unfinished on interiors as well as exteriors, or metal panels made of zinc or copper paired with exposed concrete in a Brutalist aesthetic. They also experimented with pneumatics in the 1960s, super-structures, and temporal

architecture. As the 1970s progressed they outcompeted one another with increasingly futuristic constructions many with imagery derived from nature. Oftentimes based on complex geometry, these buildings would become the hallmarks of the Grazer Schule in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. During this time embedded symbolism and metaphor became the theoretical underpinning of the movement, injecting hidden meaning into the built works. In 2003 Graz was chosen as the Cultural Capital of Europe, establishing the reputation of the Grazer Schule architects as creating a node of advanced expressionist buildings, and catapulting them into the international spotlight.

This paper will trace the internalization of “meaning” in the architecture of the Grazer Schule through semiotics and overt symbolism expressed in the parti concept, elevations, and forms, culminating in the entirety of built spatial sculptural presentation and a unique regional style.

The *Grazer Schule* or Graz School is a visionary architectural movement begun in Graz, Austria’s second largest city south of Vienna, in the early 1970s. It heralded a desire on the part of its proponents to infuse built architecture with meaning beyond its mere functional use.

Inhabiting a corner of the far eastern side of Western Europe during the Cold War, with the Iron Curtain nearby and Yugoslavia to the South, the Grazer Schule gestated in a cocoon of geopolitical obscurity, overshadowed by Vienna. With the reunification of Europe in 1989, and Austria’s entrance into the European Union in 1995, the Grazer Schule Architects began to receive international attention for their highly innovative and expressionistic new architecture. In 2003 Graz was selected as the Unesco World Heritage City of the year, and foreign visitors spread its reputation around the globe.

Since its inception, Grazer Schule architects have imbued their architecture with symbolic meaning. The manifestation of these symbolic ideas was tantamount to the design intent. In returning to nature for inspiration, they sought to align their concepts with the inclusion of inanimate features of nature. “Magic stones, sacred mountains, miraculous lakes, beneficent rivers..., the need to breathe life into the ‘dead’ world, and to ascribe effects, powers and emanations to it.”¹

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

In the 1950s Modernist Functionalism, the principle that buildings should be designed solely on the purpose and function of the building, had become the standard approach to architectural design. Once highly innovative, the movement that made Le Corbusier's "Machine for Living" and the work of the Bauhaus bringing architecture into the industrial age, had become formulaic. Young architects yearned for something more than a useful standard kit of parts to create architecture. The 1960s were a time of immense social upheaval, through the Vietnam War and Civil Rights movements in the USA, along with great technological advances, culminating in the first manned landing on the moon in 1969, which America shared with the world through the medium of television. New generations became obsessed with the future. In Europe, the Cold War and the division of the continent as exemplified through the jarring separation of the Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall, would further distance architects from pre-war utopian ideals.

At the same time this vocal and non-conformist young generation also increasingly questioned everything that came before it, turning inward to seek a new consciousness that would influence environments to be inhabited. When the nascent Grazer Schule architects sought to distance themselves both from traditional Styrian architecture and from the shadow of the Viennese stronghold on Austrian architecture, they sought a new philosophy to inspire new forms.

They began with organic cellular configurations, then later anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery, as well as structures from nature which they imitated. Later in the 1980s, some Grazer Schule Architects even began to embed readable symbols of significance in their work, both in floor plans and spatial development. Later younger architects of the Grazer Schule extracted cultural symbols as metaphorical inspirations in the late 1980s and 1990s. These cultural symbols were further tempered and made three-dimensional through highly developed computer software imagery and parametric design in the 21st Century.

VISIONARY ARCHITECTURE

In 1996 Hans Hollein, then Commissioner of Austria for the Venice Biennale, commissioned Architectural Historian Günther Feuerstein to prepare an exhibition on Visionary Architecture in Austria in the Sixties and Seventies. This exhibition would be significant, not only to elucidating the contribution of Austrian architects such as Günther Domenig, Eilfried Huth or Michael Szyszkowitz and Karla Kowalski to the new futuristic movement underway, but also to quantify, and categorize their symbolic imagery. Feuerstein meticulously assembled and catalogued works by iconographic typology, providing historical examples to ground each category.

Starting with the idea of semiotics as expressed through signs and symbols used in architecture, emerging Grazer Schule concepts progress through the use of obvious visual symbols

seen in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery, and continue with more veiled metaphors and psychological states or temporal experiences in architecture. Many typologies shown by Feuerstein were relevant to symbols used in the evolution of the Grazer Schule, with its imagery becoming increasingly subtle, invisible, and inherent.² Feuerstein later examined the Grazer Schule architects' use of symbolism in an international context. In the "Psycho Illusion" typology, referencing the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, he shows the subtle inclusion of metaphors in the architecture of the 1980s and 1990s, stressing the importance of dreams, symbols, and other hidden cues.

A DIFFERENT PATH, RETURN TO THE NATURAL WORLD

Early works of Grazer Schule architects such as Domenig, Huth, and Szyszkowitz and Kowalski, show an immersion in Structuralism, with inspiration linked to nature. Some shared approaches can be seen in early, largely organic or cellular plan development resulting in complex non-linear, non-boxlike forms.

Initially Domenig and other architects such as Karla Kowalski and Michael Szyszkowitz were also beginning to use identifiable symbols in their sculptural work that then carried over into their architecture. Domenig's imagery features experimentation with birds and their wings, ribcages from large aquatic mammals, reptiles, and even an elephant for the Elefant Bar (1977). Domenig was the primary protagonist in the development of the Grazer Schule as a school of Expressionism.³ Early on Domenig established himself as a force through which personal vision was made real. In 1990 Raffaele Raja carefully charted Domenig's evolution from a grounding in the Bauhaus, through a loosening of the Modernist paradigm, first in the geometries of his early megastructure "Ragnitz" to a gradual transformation to forms of organic architecture.⁴ Following Ragnitz, the Katholische Pädagogische Akademie Graz-Seckau in Eggenberg, had discreet units of the spatial program of the academy plugged into a main field-frame. Domenig continued to be influenced by the biomorphic, organic and contextual. Through these sculptural times, with works that formed his most recognized and controversial buildings, the expression of deeper meaning first through drawing and eventually built architecture ensued.

REPTILIAN FORMS

The symbolic imagery of Domenig goes through an evolution from the cellular kernel in the Structuralism of Ragnitz, to the reptilian skeletal structure of the Mensa of the Schulschwestern, to the Z-Bank in Wien Favoriten whose wave-like sculptural plates comprise a façade that resembles a tortoise shell. In the Mensa of the Schulschwestern in Graz-Eggenberg (1977), this inherent symbolism became clear through a zoomorphic expression of space which was to contain a convent dining room. In one of the earliest initial drawings the dining hall presents itself as a soft-bodied aquatic creature crouching down. The artistic vision of Domenig, and his "encoding" of symbolic information in his drawings, are perhaps his greatest legacy of

influence in his later students' development. This critical "pedagogy of Expressionism" embedded in drawings appears from the beginning and is a consistent thread running through his work, regardless of the evolution of form throughout his career. The Mensa's central space is a large open volume supported by ribbed vaults. Although such vaulting is ordinarily associated with ecclesiastical buildings from Gothic times forward, Domenig's Mensa initially gives more the ambience of "Jonah and the Whale". The ribbed vaults are clearly influenced by zoomorphic forms, as its expressed "exo-skeleton" with spanning membranes attests. Even the skylights above, providing crucial daylight, are positioned along a longitudinal "spine", like multiple blowholes. This "personification" of the architecture has led to the nuns' affectionate nickname for their dining hall - "the Dragon".

A further evolution in the development of a carapace-like structure is evident in the Z-Bank Wien-Favoriten, (1979). The windows of the Z-Bank façade are a product of the multi-dimensional folding of the skin and are fully integrated elements like the scutes of a tortoise shell. This reptilian zoomorphic influence can be seen as a carryover from the Seahorse turned "Dragon" imagery of the Mensa, though this time fully realized in the expression of the building in its entirety. Much as a turtle extends his head on a retractable neck from below, the "tortoise shell" façade appears to tilt upwards and stand on end. This inside/outside area of the façade provides shelter from precipitation and forms a vault whose volume is a transition zone to the irregular volume of the bank lobby contained behind. Furthermore, Domenig included a sculptural representation of his own hand as a pillar near the stair construction in the main banking hall. Feuerstein comments: "the armour of an armadillo or crustacean is rendered in gleaming steel, and the first draft suggests that the façade was intended to have further leading segments thrusting deep into the street. The lower floors evoke the process of scales moving, sliding over each other." Furthermore, "there is a large supporting hand in the interior".

Feuerstein places Domenig's work "in the field of plastic-sculptural architecture."⁵

The GIG Center building exudes avian imagery, with a corner "beak" and eye-like windows that will become a theme in other Grazer Schule architects' work as well. Early perspectives of Günther Domenig's Steinhaus concept, with a site in Steindorf on the Ossiacher See, still exhibit a strong organic influence, and are far more "faceted", than his masterwork would have in its built form several decades later. There are Steinhaus concept sketches showing crystalline blocks inspired by the surrounding mountains, and a vernacular architecture sketch that hints of regional memories.

AVIAN IMAGERY

During the prelude to the Steinhaus, Domenig was involved in creating a series of sculptural architectural insertions that

seemed to be investigating deeper layers of personal meaning through the use of zoomorphic imagery. Ostensibly created to further enhance discreet architectural spaces, the Nixnuznix – (Good for Nothing) sculpture, an imaginary flying bird, originally was installed in a prominent position in the bank lobby of the Z Bank Graz, as if to invite critical dialogue on its existence. The embodiment of speed and flight, the Nixnuznix had a profile not unlike the French supersonic jet, the Concorde. It was a larger elaboration on an earlier sculptural piece of a bird nearing flight. In an article entitled "Drawing on Dreams: Steinhaus", Peter Cook and Alvin Boyarsky of the AA London, interviewed Günther Domenig in 1986. Domenig explains some of his bird imagery: "the bird for me is no malicious object, - it's just that people interpret the sharpness and austerity of the object (as for example in blades, swords, points) as malevolence. But children in particular can identify with it and delight in it." "As a child I always wanted to fly..., I don't think that I've ever had anything like that expressly in mind. I've never undertaken any project as a symbol".⁶

The inspiration of the Nixnuznix, as well as the Vogel, and the sculpture Explosion, led to a depth of imagery that would be mined for their resonance, first in the competition for the Bibliotheque National de France in 1989, and then for a building in Austria. The idea of the dynamic wing had taken hold, and Domenig created a more elaborate version of the "Flügel" (wing) for the Gründer- Innovations und Gewerbezentrum (GIG) in Völkermarkt, a complex of buildings for Austrian automation technology companies, in 1993. The "Flügel" is the most prominent sculptural building in the group of mostly low-slung linear factory production buildings that hug the landscape. Seen from above, the curvilinear plan combined with the light projecting extensions and glazed body, provides a dynamic visual highlight and acts as a beacon to the complex due to its corner entry site-placement. Matthias Boeckl comments on the "Flügel" that "wings and expressive projections are common elements in the architect's sculpted shapes."⁷

Coincident with Domenig's wing vocabulary, Coop Himmelblau had designed the Falkestrasse Law Offices of 1988 using a wing-like truss cantilevered from the rooftop, seemingly inspired by their earlier Blazing Wing at the TU Graz.

PARTI SYMBOLISM IN LKH BRUCK AN DER MUR

In late 80s the competition for the built hospital LKH Bruck an der Mur, Günther Domenig and his team decided to focus on the concept of healing physicians by using the ancient Roman symbol of the god of medicine Aesculapius. The symbol's easily recognized iconography depicts a serpent entwined around a staff. In modern times this symbol is frequently utilized by pharmacies and medical arts businesses.

Literally laying out the symbol as a parti diagram and superimposing the program of the hospital onto it in proper scale, Aesculapius becomes the organizing principle for the hospital's



Figure 1. *Aesculapius Symbol; Domenig, Eisenköck, LKH Bruck an der Mur Model*. Architektur Aktuell, Springer Verlag, Vienna, Austria.

floor plan, in addition to transmitting its embedded meaning. It is still easily identifiable in the completed floor plans with the “staff” becoming the circulation spine and the closed spaces such as operating theaters and patient rooms wrapping around in serpentine curves. In the built volumes of the hospital it is under the level of perception as one proceeds from one end of the hospital to the other. In Elevation it is imperceptible, as the hospital seems more based on an International Style concept of horizontal façade with continuous window banding. To again return to his personalization of architectural design, there is an art piece by Dietmar Tanterl that is integral with the main façade based on an EKG that changes in time as one would see on a patient monitor. It is the EKG of Domenig that is displayed.⁸

ZOOMORPHIC METAPHORS

Symbolic zoomorphic images pervade the Hüttenberg region. They were natural models for Domenig to utilize in his vision for Hüttenberg’s exhibition complex, and they inspired the name chosen for the debut exhibition. The Grubenhund (ditch dog) and Ofensau (oven sow) are two tools symbolically named for working animals. The Grubenhund is a small hand-operated coal car on tracks used to transport ore from the mine shafts, named for the dog-powered cart which preceded this invention; the Grubenhund was utilized at the very beginning of the ore collection process. At the other end was the Ofensau, which refers to the refuse of the Hochofen, namely the slag heap. In this case the Ofensau was a circular dish-like mound of impurities and wastes from which further ore could not be extracted. Into this established lexicon of symbolic meanings and weighty history, Günther Domenig has interjected a powerful and massive, yet at times weightless, architecture which seems to float through the existing structures - connecting at times, separating and interspersing at others, engaging but not touching the old buildings, or even the ground beneath them. It is complex ballet of theoretical skew lines in space come to life, tangential and nonintrusive as the touch of fingertips, drawing together the subtle metaphorical components. Hüttenberg is a project more easily understood through isometrics, aerial perspectives,

or three-dimensional rotating computer-animated models, hovering like a ghost knife-fish hovering over a rocky crevasse. By interspersing new exhibition spaces that lightly touch vintage structures Domenig recalls a depth of meaning to the site while providing a twenty first century “vehicle” for modern visitors to experience it.⁹

STEINHAUS EXPLOSION

The spatial development of the Steinhaus, beginning in the early 1980s, takes the avian imagery of dynamic flight and grounds it in its own site. With metaphors playing an ever-greater role in the design, “Explosion” is a posited early inspiration for the Steinhaus on Lake Ossiacher. It has an expansive energy being expelled outward from a centroid: the spring that is the underground water source at its heart. At the same time the coincidence of the inclusion of the capsule’s “launch site” within the center of the Steinhaus, ironically meant to deliver the remains of the architect in the form of an encapsulated urn to the final resting place of his mother’s grave, has a comically morbid precedent in the 1965 film “The Loved One”. Domenig would continue to include self-referential symbols and imagery in most of his work. In a published conversation from 1986, Alvin Boyarsky queries Domenig on the Steinhaus. He comments: “there is the metaphor of the rolling rocks splitting apart and releasing a bolt of energy. A long thin birdlike form is moving through the earth-work in a mysterious way. The bird might be from the region or derived from a local legend, perhaps”. Cook continues to inquire of Domenig: “In your studio at one point there were a whole lot of these birds. The bird was there long before the house. The aesthetic language of the Stonehouse is so close to that of the bird that it can’t rest on coincidence. And both pieces - the bird and the house - have had long gestation period”. Domenig replies that the development of a controlled geometric concept is the most important part of his work. “Through geometry the personal element in the design opens up”.¹⁰ The Steinhaus would be the turning point in the inclusion of a level of metaphor and meaning that would not only mark the significant buildings of his later career, but would radically influence his students and staff architects in the years to come. More than any other architectural work of the Grazer Schule, the Steinhaus has become a larger symbol, representative of the whole Grazer Schule genre. Now, administered by the state of Carinthia, it has become a center for architectural discourse and educational seminars with various activities, including some for children. There is a model “Flying Bird” event held there, inspired by the Nixnuznix, who has come to roost at the Steinhaus.

GATE TO HOPI TUSQUA

In Dietmar Froehlich’s Gate to Hopi Tusqua (1984) the symbolic content of the cultural and religious symbols of the Hopi people fuels the project’s inspiration. The project begins with a program for a tribal cultural center with two elements: a visitor’s center, and a museum for the iconic artifacts of the Hopi People.



Figure 2. Domenig, *Steinhaus* (1983-2011). Photo: Hans Peter Schaefer. *Steinhaus Axonometric*. Image: EU Mies Award

SZYSZKOWITZ AND KOWALSKI

Despite their frequent protests to the contrary concerning conscious decisions to create metaphoric “monsters”, it is clear that majority of the work of Michael Szyszkowitz and Karla Kowalski is deeply imbued with nature imagery that is more consistent than in any other architects’ early works. Although zoomorphic overtones are “largely coincidental according to the architects”, it is difficult to deny the message behind the imagery. “Karla Kowalski sees speculation concerning a conscious use of animal imagery as imposed from the outside. Formal similarities with animals, faces, or fairy tales are not intended by us.”¹¹

In the church at Ragnitz Michael Szyszkowitz and Karla Kowalski created an organic angular layout for the church nave, its forecourt, and surrounding structures with an angled cellular grid. Gone is the squared ortho grid of Modernism supplanted by a natural system. The ritual use of a church with its many viewing angles and processional movement works comfortably in this geometry. Prominent structural ribs were a key development in the church’s architecture. This externalization of the rib cage was to be a feature of the work of Szyszkowitz +Kowalski for some time to come. The Ragnitz church’s prominent structural members are massive timber ribs that form an internal skeleton. Interestingly though, its congregation after many decades perceives it in ship-like metaphorical terms as an “ark of their faith”.¹²

Another example of one of their projects that was seemingly constructed using cellular geometries is the TU Graz Bio-Chemistry Complex, especially when seen in aerial view. Feuerstein categorizes these structures as “Organic Architecture” in that there is a “rejection of the rectangular”¹³, as orthogonality is rarely found in nature with the exception of certain crystals, and is an expression of their internalized resonance with organic structures.

MYTH AND LEGEND, THE ART OF ARCHITECTURE

The First Generation of Grazer Schule architects as represented by Domenig and Huth, Szyszkowitz and Kowalski, and their peers, exercised their own sculptural self-expression. In the Second Generation of Grazer Schule architects, their students and office protégés, the symbolic became more diffused. Aside from direct symbols that echoed natural structures or creatures, the Second Generation internalized cultural metaphors, myths, semaphores, symbols, logos and fairy tales as an inspiration for their work with new approaches to architectural development through specific vocabulary. Clearer, less visually “busy” and using distinct imagery, their architecture internalized metaphor.

HOTEL FOR SPIES

The Ost-West Hotel, a 1985 competition winner by Adolph-Herbert Kelz, employs a larger cultural symbolism, playing with the interaction of a city, Vienna, and its iconic film: Orson Welles’ “The Third Man” (1949). Using the archaic mechanical device of a Paternoster combined with the main symbol of the City of Vienna, the *Riesenrad* of the Prater amusement park, it exposes the intricacies of post WWII relationships, politics and the capital of spydom in the late Twentieth Century. In attempting to provide a symbolic built environment for the underground activities of those engaged in espionage, in a building that is at once cloaked and transparent, Kelz makes a wry comment on the state of international relations during the Cold War. An appropriate monument to the end of the Cold War and the Berlin Wall, it is at the same time a welcome center for the reunited Europe. As in the film “Brazil” (1985), a convoluted tenement atmosphere coupled with the suggestion of chronic eavesdropping and the “perpetual motion machine” of the Paternoster add to the paranoia generated from the construction.¹⁴

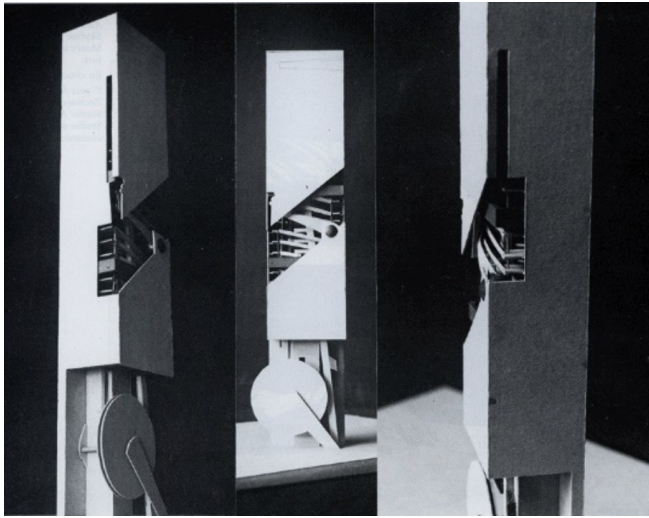


Figure 3. *Kelz, Ost West Hotel, Vienna (1986)*. Courtois, Robert & Nihoul, Dominique, *Architektur Aus Graz/Architecture De Graz*, Editions C.I.A.U.D., Brussels, 1987

A line between the Hopi and the spirit world beyond falls in the center of the museum, which acts as an *Axis Mundi*, the Kiva of the Hopi. The movement through the sequence of spaces is a physical path that reflects upon the spiritual values of the people. Where the western way is represented as linear and sequential, the Hopi movement through space is spiraling, with radial offshoots. This path is symbolically represented in the plans of both structures.

The outer elevations provide for some of the most poignant gestures of the museum. Exterior facades are masked and totemic, and while this allows for sun-screening in the harsh desert sun, there is also the metaphysical masking of intimate religious beliefs of the tribe from non-initiated, non-tribal visitors. The kachina façade masks play the dual roles of concealer and revealer, while protecting the museum under the auspices of the old gods. The stark visages that meet onlookers in their quest for a convergence of two cultures provide a sober ambience for the introduction to the mysteries of the Hopi nation. Spatial extrusions provide the cubic massing which tells of the longevity and stability of the tribe in their lands. The movement through the sequence of spaces is a physical path that reflects upon the spiritual values of the people. Where the western way is linear and sequential, the Hopi movement through space is spiraling, with radial offshoots, grounded in the four corners of the Earth Mother.¹⁵ Froehlich, as both a former student of Günther Domenig, as well as an architect who spent his early practice years in his office, projected a desire to provide the Hopi nation with the depth of meaning that their culture deserved. He has expressed diagrammatic, spatial as well as experiential architecture through a distillation of the essence of potent cultural symbols.

SHARED AND DIVERGENT PHILOSOPHIES

A critical contributing factor to Grazer Schule architecture was the desire to embed a deeper level of meaning in their works, whether through a discernable symbolic representation or a metaphorical approach. Although a confluence of architectural style in the various Grazer Schule architects isn't evident, upon analyzing design approaches their similarities can be exposed. This may be credited to their shared pedagogical experiences at the TU Graz, a sense of active auto-didacticism, the influence of their mentor offices who they shared affinities with, and a constant observation, imitation and desire to best their peers, and above all to build.

In conclusion, the Grazer Schule architects can be seen to have included the natural world, at first organizationally, then thematically and symbolically, and finally metaphorically in their quest to infuse their work with meaning beyond its physical presence. Although they may be included by historians within Deconstructivist Architecture of the turn of the 21st Century, their design evolution and language although resonant, came about independently, signaling their uniqueness and importance.

ENDNOTES

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