

Recent developments on the Vitra Campus

The remarkable ensemble of contemporary architecture on the Vitra Campus brings together the commercial and cultural aspects of the Swiss furniture manufacturer: for decades, the buildings designed by renowned architects have made the production site a magnet for fans of design and architecture from all over the world. In June 2016, a second entrance to the Campus was inaugurated – along with the Vitra Schaudepot, a new building by Herzog & de Meuron.

The Vitra Campus in Weil am Rhein has undergone various changes over the past several years. The first of these projects, the VitraHaus by Herzog & de Meuron, was completed in 2010 and has since served as Vitra's flagship store and visitor centre. Along with the Vitra Design Museum, designed by Frank Gehry in 1989, the VitraHaus is a focal attraction in the northern section of the Campus. Another highlight is found in the southern part of the grounds, the Fire Station (1993) by Zaha Hadid, her first major built project. The VitraHaus and Vitra Design Museum are connected with the Fire Station by the main thoroughfare of the Vitra Campus. However, this street axis cuts across the production premises and is only accessible to public visitors during guided tours or special events. Since 2014, the Álvaro-Siza-Promenade, an unrestricted pedestrian pathway conceived by Álvaro Siza, provides a further connection between the VitraHaus and the Fire Station along the western perimeter of the Campus.

The newly constructed Vitra Schaudepot represents another important milestone in the process of opening up the Campus. The Schaudepot and neighbouring Fire Station form a second public focal area, creating a counterpoint to the VitraHaus and Vitra Design Museum on the other end of the company premises. The border of the internal production grounds has been moved and now runs along the edge of the factory building designed by Álvaro Siza (1994). This makes the Fire Station directly accessible to visitors.

A second entrance to the Vitra Campus

The previous orientation of the company premises towards the north created a closed boundary between the Vitra Campus and neighbouring properties in Weil am Rhein. People travelling by bus or car had to drive around the eastern or western side of the grounds in order to reach the VitraHaus or Vitra Design Museum. This entry route was especially unattractive for pedestrians. Consequently, the erection of the Vitra Schaudepot is also linked to the construction of a second entrance to the Vitra Campus on the side facing the city. Such a solution has become all the more urgent since many visitors from Switzerland now travel to Weil am Rhein from Basel on tram line 8, an extended trans-border connection that was inaugurated in 2014.

From the final tram stop or from the main train station in Weil am Rhein, travellers walk northward, parallel to the main highway. The new pedestrian path splits off underneath a pergola and leads directly towards the striking brick façade of the Vitra Schaudepot. In contrast to the northern part of

the Campus, where the widely visible buildings are situated amongst meadows with scattered fruit trees, the structures on the southern end are integrated in the residential and commercial architecture of the surrounding area. Vogt Landscape Architects, based in Zurich, designed the pathway as a sequence comprising a garden, pergola, plaza and terrace. At the end of the pergola, the path widens into a bell-shaped plaza outlined by the fire walls of the surrounding buildings. All of the walls have been painted white to create the impression of a unified, yet artificial ensemble that still reveals the transition to the urban scale of the city along its edge.

Vitra Schaudepot

The Vitra Schaudepot offers an eye-catching view to visitors coming from Weil am Rhein. Standing directly opposite the Fire Station, it is adjacent to a former production hall with a saw-tooth roof, which was built prior to the major fire in 1981. Currently, this structure is mainly occupied by the Vitra Design Museum: the lower level serves as a storage area, while the floor above – recently designed by Konstantin Grcic – is an open-plan office with integrated glazed cuboid volumes providing enclosed spaces for the library and meetings.

The desire to present parts of the Vitra Design Museum's furniture collection to the public has existed for many years. A new opportunity arose when the derelict older structure across from the Fire Station had to be demolished. The first idea was to tear the building down and create a subterranean structure that would be accessible to the public. In joint discussions, Rolf Fehlbaum and the consulting architects Herzog & de Meuron successively developed the idea of a visible storage facility as an upward extension of the basement – a structure that would fulfil the needs for public use while also providing views into the restricted areas of the museum's extensive holdings. This has finally solved a major problem, namely the fact that most of the Vitra Design Museum collection – whose core holdings currently comprise approximately 7000 furniture pieces – was hidden from view.

In 1986, Rolf Fehlbaum commissioned Frank Gehry to design a building for the presentation of the furniture collection, which at that point was still relatively small. By the time the building was completed in 1989, its intended purpose had shifted: under the museum's founding director, Alexander von Vegesack, the Vitra Design Museum became a venue for temporary thematic exhibitions – many of which drew on its own holdings, but did not present a cross-section of the collection. Parts of Vitra's chair collection were shown in different places on the Campus at various times, yet these displays were never permanent. The purpose of the Vitra Schaudepot is not only to show highlights from the museum holdings to visitors, but also to provide a survey of the history of (seating) furniture since 1800. In line with this aim, the objects are chronologically organised on three levels of steel shelving. The shelf installation was designed by Dieter Thiel, who has collaborated with Vitra for many years and staged many of the Vitra Design Museum's previous exhibitions. In accordance with the concept of a visible storage facility, the presentation in the main hall of the new building is austere: concrete floors, white walls, steel shelving, tube lighting on the ceiling. A central area remains open to allow flexible displays, and roughly three small temporary exhibitions are planned for this space on an annual basis.

The main entrance is situated in the middle of the south elevation, so that upon entering the hall, visitors find themselves in the direct vicinity of the reception area and a shop offering design

publications and assorted objects. The coat room and public restrooms are on the right, while stairs lead down to the accessible spaces of the lower level, where visitors have a view through four windows into the actual storage depots – previously existing on one side and newly installed on the other. This transparency is an important aim, and a similar panorama window in the new Depot Deli, which is located in the adjacent building, also affords a view of the Vitra Design Museum offices. Observers can see all the way through the space to the conservation workshop on the far end.

The Depot Deli, whose interior was designed by Studioilse from London, is the second culinary location on the Vitra Campus after the VitraHaus Café. The dominant design element of the Deli is a large counter, where guests can place their orders and pick up their take-away products. The furnishing of the space is also conceived to accommodate small events, such as lectures or discussions.

The Vitra Schaudepot and Depot Deli share a brick-paved terrace, which is raised a few steps above the plaza and main axis of the Campus. The simple orthogonal volume of the Vitra Schaudepot itself has no windows and is covered by a gabled roof. The only ornamental detail is found in the split cored bricks of the façade, which were cut on site – a stylistic element also recently used by Herzog & de Meuron for their addition to the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar.

The thematic idea of an archaic dwelling or prototypical house runs like a leitmotif through the work of the architects – from the Blaues Haus in Oberwil (1979/80), the Rudin House in Leymen (1997) or the Schaulager entrance building in Münchenstein near Basel (2003) to the Parrish Art Museum on Long Island (2012). The VitraHaus is also based on this concept, although its ‘extruded’ house elements are assembled like an extroverted architectural sculpture.

In comparison to the VitraHaus from 2010, the design of the new Vitra Schaudepot is subdued. Corresponding to its function, it has affinities to a warehouse, alluding to the character of a single-purpose building. In any case, it would have been problematic to erect another highly expressive edifice in close proximity to the Fire Station. Yet despite its aesthetic restraint, the Schaudepot has emerged as an emblematic work of architecture.