

## **The Power of Smallness – Introduction**

### **Skyplane**

The Austrian Cultural Forum (also known as the Austrian Cultural Foundation, Raimund Abraham, 1992) is one of the most idiosyncratic and enigmatic towers in New York City. It is also, as Kenneth Frampton has suggested, possibly one of the most important towers to be built in New York since Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building of 1958.

The unique quality of the building is derived in part from an extreme rigour and rationality that ingeniously interweaves the spaces of the Forum within a 7.5-metre wide form that gently slopes back, in strict compliance with the building code setback, to a height of 24 storeys. The inventive use of an expressed scissor stair towards the back of the plan, walk-through elevators and void / stair sequences, which both interconnect levels and liberate the public spaces and functional requirements from the restrictions imposed by the narrow site, add further interest. Public foyers, exhibition spaces lit through skylights, auditorium and library are all skillfully interlinked to extend the public realm of the street up, through, down and in-between the narrow confines of the party walls. It is a truly brilliant and rational response to the ambitious brief and it is no surprise that Abraham was the stand-out winner of the architectural competition.

But the mysterious nature of this tower lies not only in the rigour and rationality of its plan and functional layout, but also in the means by which such discipline has given rise to an enigmatic figural and layered symbolism.

This slim, zinc-jacketed sculptural form leaning back from the street seems loaded with complex symbolism. Despite the technological nature of the materials and construction systems in all their precision and crafted detail, the overriding associations evoked by the building are more primitive. Although the inventive profile is honed out of the rational limitations of the tight Manhattan site, it could equally have been carved from stone and erected as a reminder of our ancestors and our evident mortality. Masklike apertures, layers, projections and symmetry, forming a dual anthropomorphic composition related to both the scale of the street from the perspective of the passer-by and the overall scale of the cityscape, cultivate a strong figural almost totem-like quality.

Overlayed onto the body of the tower shaft a correlation with the functional layering and hierarchy of the Forum is also achieved. The lower figure defines the extent of the public functions and is terminated by the heavy helmeted enclosure of the director's office that projects out into space, revealing open, transparent and unprotected flanks. Above, more anonymous layers of glass enclose the office administration functions. These repetitive modules are contrasted and terminated by the profile of an open face cut into zinc panelling, and signify the presence of the private domain of the director's apartment, whereas the eye-like slots of the external terrace reveal the many other architectural figures of the Manhattan skyline.

Despite the architect's formal skill, any symbolism embedded within the building (Abraham argues below) is unconscious and often beyond his intent. Perhaps the precise rigour of Abraham's schemes also offers an opening into his subconscious, an intuition that connects us with a deep recollection of our past, our essence and our knowledge of our own mortality. The ontological condition of humanity is clearly of great importance to Abraham, as is revealed both in his discussion with Kenneth Frampton below and in the beautiful drawing and sketch investigations that span his career as an architect and as an influential teacher at Cooper Union.

It is perhaps not surprising then that Abraham believes that it is not necessary to build to be an architect and that, following the realisation of this great work on east 52nd street, he returned happily to drawing and writing, escaping what he explained as 'the ontological problem of architecture, namely the split between use and form'. It is ironic that even in a building as profound as the Austrian Cultural Forum – one that seems to resolve this split, bringing use and function into a provocative ontological resolution – Abraham still feels the need to withdraw and enter the more independent world of the drawing, free from clients, building codes, contractors and the pain of compromise.

He leaves New York with a powerful and enigmatic piece of architecture, however, and perhaps too with a philosophical reminder, put so well by the German film director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, that we 'find big things in small things'.

—Richard Francis-Jones