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Holy order

David Chipperfield Architects turns a 17th-century German convent into a 21st-century office complex

PHOTOGRAPHY: SIMON MENGES WRITER: SOPHIE LOVELL



Successful architecture serves its users as well as its environment. It responds to its physical, social and historical context. It gives back more than it takes. David Chipperfield Architects is not only great at getting the aesthetics right, but also a master at responding to existing context, then harmonising and enhancing. Its recently completed Jacoby Studios office building, in the small German city of Paderborn, is a perfect example.

Paderborn, in North Rhine-Westphalia, is, as the name implies, where the river Pader is 'born' from some 200 springs across the city centre, threading together in interconnecting streams. It was founded by Charlemagne in the 8th century but, like many European cities, suffered damage during the Second World War – 85 per cent of it was destroyed. Nevertheless, the central urban plan from the Middle Ages is still very much intact. There are parts of the old city wall, large Catholic churches and smaller buildings in a typical 1950s West German style – a shopping arcade, large roads, some pedestrianised areas and the odd brutalist structure. In short, it is a fairly typical German city.

Similarly, the clients for this project are, at first sight, a family firm fairly typical of the Mittelstand, the medium-sized businesses that form the backbone of the German economy. Founded in the 1970s by Franz Jacoby, and now run by his daughters Ellen and Yvonne, the firm is Germany's biggest retailer for DIY arts and crafts materials and has around 1,000 employees, 85 per cent of whom are women. For the site of their new

company HQ, the Jacobys had acquired a plot of land near Paderborn's old city centre. On it stood a disused 1950s hospital building, built on the remains of a baroque convent for the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Saint Vincent de Paul.

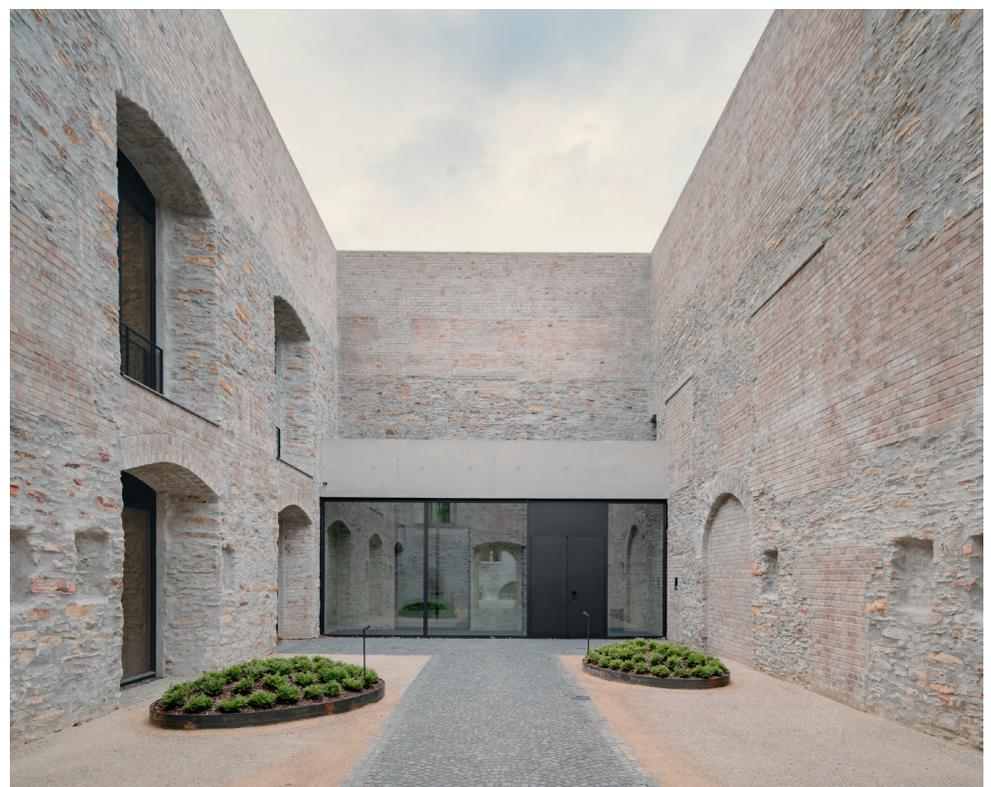
'When we first saw the site,' says project architect Frithjof Kahl, 'nothing was visible of the old 17th-century building apart from the original chapel façade, the only part of the building that was listed.' Kahl, along with his co-project architect Franziska Rusch, design lead Alexander Schwarz and practice partner Martin Reichert, originally planned to demolish and build anew, 'but during our first site visit we began to wonder whether more of the original building remained than expected. We were then able to convince the clients to use the ruins as a foundation for the new project, despite it being a much more involved undertaking, and they trusted us,' explains Kahl. 'Great clients!'

The appreciation was mutual: 'We loved what David Chipperfield Architects did with the Neues Museum in Berlin so much,' says Ellen Jacoby, 'that we just let them work their magic. I have never built a house before, but when you are building, you only have one chance to make it really good – so we wanted to make the best of this chance.'

A careful, almost archaeological, excavation of the site followed and, with the aid of a tiny historical sketch of the convent, the architects exposed the old walls, much of the former chapel, sacristy and cloisters. The original walls are limestone-rubble masonry work, typical for the area, but on top are also later layers and additions of 19th-century >>

Above, the former convent's baroque chapel is now a courtyard at the heart of a group of interconnecting low-rise office buildings with slim, recessed balconies, wood-framed sliding glass doors and roofscape gardens

Right, the remnants of the chapel interior form a walled courtyard leading to the main entrance





Left, located in the former sacristy, the large entrance foyer features an imposing concrete staircase that nods to the grand entrance of David Chipperfield's 2009 Neues Museum in Berlin

Below left, one of the office floors, featuring whitened oak wooden flooring by Wimmer, another German family business, and polished concrete ceilings

put to good use, harnessed for underfloor heating and cooling in the ceilings using a heat exchanger.

Some parts of the new buildings are two-storey, others three-storey. The third storey contains three penthouse-like office spaces for Franz and his daughters, surrounded by roofscape gardens, planted in different styles, from scree gardens to mini copses, by the Belgian landscape architects Peter Wirtz and Jan Grauwels, who also landscaped the garden surrounding the site.

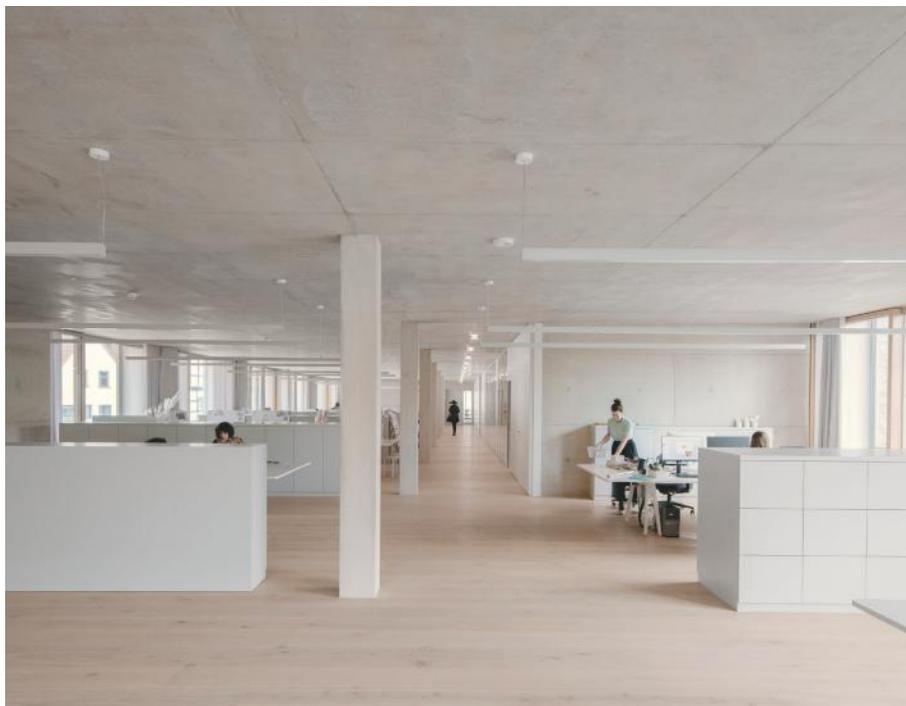
The rooftop area is very private. Ellen loves working up there: 'I always fancied a treehouse I could escape to from my work environment for a bit, so I added it as a requirement in the programme,' she explains. 'The architects turned this dream into my new office and gave me my beautiful space up in the treetops – overlooking blossoming chestnut trees in spring. Most importantly,' she adds, 'I can sneak over the roof to my sister's office.'

The Jacobys worked closely with the architects and added their own touch with the interior details. A lot of the furniture Ellen bought is by Italian brand Azucena, part of B&B Italia. She also commissioned bespoke furniture, including tables, stools and sideboards, from her old Royal College of Art friend, designer Michael Sans, and added artworks, including two huge mural paintings by Christoph Ruckhäberle.

This building is not the cheapest option, but it is one that gives back much to the clients' hometown, as well as providing a beautiful place to work. 'It is so nice to work with people who are building for themselves,' says Kahl. 'The value of the building lies more in its use than the maximisation of profit. The clients also wanted to build something for the city and its future with a special piece of architecture.'

Ellen adds: 'I think Paderborn really deserves this, and it would be great if we inspired others to take similar risks.' ★ davidchipperfield.com

'When you stand in front of it now, it is like looking at layers of sediment in stone'



brickwork, which were also kept. New bricks filled any gaps. 'When you stand in front of it now, it is like looking at layers of sediment in stone,' says Kahl. Most of the historical elements form part of the external space.

The chapel, for example, is now an entry courtyard and the cloister became a roofless atrium at the heart of the complex. The foyer with its main staircase – an echo of the grand

entrance of Chipperfield's 2009 Neues Museum – is in the former sacristy. The office spaces are new buildings around it: concrete constructions with slim, recessed balconies and floor-to-ceiling sliding glass window façades in wooden frames, affording views towards the historical parts of the complex.

An arm of the river runs right past the building and the water supply has been