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h4a | Gessert + Randecker Architekten BDA | Stuttgart, Munich, and Moers, Germany

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h4a: Creating Modern Beauty in Germany



Albrecht Randecker (left) and Martin Gessert (right), the founding partners of h4a Gessert + Randecker Architekten BDA

Martin Gessert and Albrecht Randecker are the founding partners of h4a Gessert + Randecker Architekten BDA, an architectural firm with offices in Stuttgart, Munich, and Moers, Germany.

Gessert received his architecture degree from both RWTH Aachen and ETH Zurich, and Randecker received his architecture degree from FH Biberach. Gessert and Randecker met in 1995 at the architectural firm Auer + Weber + Associates, where they won the prestigious National German Architecture Prize in 2001 for their project management of the "Ruhfestspielhaus in Recklinghausen." This prize has also been awarded to Daniel Libeskind in 1999 and Zaha Hadid in 2005, among other well-known architects.

Several years later, in 1998, Gessert and Randecker formed their own firm. In 2010, they added an office in Munich, and the company now employs approximately 40 professionals. With these two men at the helm, h4a has garnered over 30 prestigious architecture awards in the past few years. In 2005, both Gessert and Randecker were appointed to the Bund Deutscher Architekten (BDA) or Association of German Architects, which represents 5,000 of the leading architects in Germany.

"The development of holistic innovative architecture inspires us," explains Gessert. h4a takes a big-picture approach to design, often acting as a general contractor for its own projects. As such, the team oversees architectural and engineering tasks for new construction, reconstruction, and restoration of cultural, school, administrative, and residential buildings, as well as public buildings and outdoor units. The firm's philosophy is grounded in efficiency, functionality, and sustainability. However, its designs supersede the practical and evoke pure emotion with their sheer beauty and skillful capture of light.

Since its inception, the firm has actively pursued building competitions to challenge itself. h4a's stable of accolades attests to its drive for success. "Since 1998, due to our continuous participation in architectural competitions and bidding contests, our office

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Co-Founder and Principal Architect,
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has developed into a pan-European architecture firm for buildings with high architectural and technical requirements. Our long-term experience in planning and design-build of extremely diverse and complex architectural projects ensures high quality and efficiency," notes Gessert.

BUILDING A COMPANY PHILOSOPHY

When it won first place in a European-wide competition in 2008, h4a had achieved something equally grand—it had physically manifested the spirit and philosophy of Wala Heilmittel GmbH, a 70 year-old company located in Bad Boll, Germany. This well-

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A rendering of Wala Heilmittel GmbH's headquarters which illustrates a synergistic fit with the surrounding landscape.



known company develops, produces, and markets hundreds of natural products that promote an anthroposopic understanding of man and nature; the lines are named WALA Medicines, Dr. Hauschka Skin Care, and Dr. Hauschka medicines. Wala Heilmittel GmbH asked h4a to help it design its new headquarters. Since the natural environment so strongly inspires the company's mission, h4a carefully crafted a synergistic fit with the surrounding landscape. The result is a complex of spaces that harmoniously blend a working environment with the fluidity and peace of a landscaped park—an innovative set of buildings that simultaneously complements and contrasts with its surroundings.

"This complex represents a new kind of holistic design approach where the harmony between humans and nature, as well as a respectful attitude toward landscape, constitute a dominant design factor," explains Gessert. The team designed the headquarters in the same manner as Wala Heilmittel GmbH creates its medicines—as a malleable object capable of future growth and change. "The cellular structures reflect the individual growth levels of the basic configuration," Gessert says. h4a employed a modular technique, with each building stage self-contained. Gessert maintains that this allows them to focus their attention on providing high-quality work at each stage, while also laying the groundwork for a logical and consistent expansion with minimal disruption.

To further marry the natural surroundings with the natural products company, h4a designed the buildings to reflect the curvature of the land. As seen from above, the soft curves of these stone-like shapes loosely frame a new man-made lake. The fillet and reshape tools were extremely useful when working out the design's various shapes. The team created the master plan with Vectorworks® Architect, using the modeling tools to build a landscape plateau that connects the different buildings to their surroundings. The architects also designed a unique back and forth swinging façade to reduce the visual weight of the buildings. Using the Vectorworks Architect software, as they do on all projects, they created a very attractive presentation that sold their design.

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ALL LIGHT AND COLOR

In 2003, h4a won a competition for a completely different type of project. The firm was charged with designing and building the Munich Technology Center (MTZ) to house both new entrepreneurs and existing companies from the technology industry. h4a oversaw the master planning for the 10 hectare Technology Park M-Campus, which includes the 73,500-square-meter MTZ. Unlike the Wala Headquarters, h4a created a highly technical, modular building concept to anchor this architecture. The lines are not soft or natural, but straight and precise. This urban theme is carried throughout the complex with very detailed motifs. They completed the first module in August, 2008. The building has five stories and is divided into two spaces, but a large winter garden connects and unites the two buildings. This garden creates a stable climate within the building and provides the setting for many activities.

Currently, the team is working to develop the next section of the technology park's M-Campus which will have a direct view of the Olympic stadium on Munich's East side. The MTZ campus will line the western edge of the central square and link a group of buildings housing public services. The main lobby sits above this square, directly at the intersection of the campus axis and the line of sight to the "Uptown München" skyscraper. From the lobby, one can also

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right: The striking winter garden of the MTZ creates a stable climate within the building and provides the setting for many activities.

below: A front view of the 73,500-square-meter Munich Technology Center (MTZ).



see the Olympic Park. Using urban planning methodology, h4a designed modular, flexible units. It integrated eight different modules as a “House within a House” on a uniform structural grid. This presents endless options for expansion; the building can conform to each tenant’s individual needs and any combination of office types, from single, group, and combined offices, to open-plan offices and business clubs, to laboratories, workshops, or clean-room technology. Each module contains about 370 square meters of floor space per level.

The building is full of light. The ground floor features the striking winter garden—several small trees clustered horizontally. Soaring staircases and block-like green elevators flank the garden and balance the space with their vertical lines. Both the eastern front, which looks out to the pool and meadow, and the western front, which overlooks the campus square, feature a curtain-like layer of mobile, vertically-arranged sliding units of printed glass in various bright colors. In conjunction with the closed



front panels on the first level, these provide a very effective sun shield. h4a offset the sun protection panels from the façade to keep the building views free from obstruction. To achieve this, the architects automated the movement of the outer sliding panels at precise intervals, tracking the position of the sun. The sliding elements are also color-imprinted; along with the colored panels, they create a unique and constantly changing image.

The team uses the Vectorworks Architect software to complete all of its projects. “We use Vectorworks in all phases of our work and find the program to be exceptionally versatile—from graphic work for competitions, to listing items in a detailed design. We especially appreciate its user friendliness, which ensures that the program can be easily learned. In particular, workgroup referencing ensures precise concept design. The software also features good interoperability with dwg and dxf files. Additionally, we can access either attractive presentation plans or works in progress at any time without the need for any additional programs,” says Gessert.

h4a continues to win awards for its distinctive designs, among them the BDA Award for Good Buildings in 2000 and 2005, the North Rhine Westphalia Architecture Award in 2001, and the Award for Exemplary Building Accomplishments in 2008. But beautifying spaces around Germany is its own best reward.

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Images: Courtesy of h4a Gessert + Randecker Architekten BDA

Original text and publication by: Nemetschek Vectorworks, Inc.
www.vectorworks.net