



# **Building Beyond the Periphery**

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Figure 1. Paläon. HolzerKobler Architects. Photo: Jan Bitter

To begin with, I'd like to attempt to define the term periphery. Near to the sites of the projects I will present today is a particular European phenomenon, the Hollowcore as defined by Rem Koolhaas. Amsterdam, Brussels, Dortmund, and Cologne define, more or less, the outer boundaries of a networked periphery. The Hollowcore defined by Rem Koolhaas in the exhibition catalogue *Content* from 2004 is in fact a periphery that includes non-peripheral cities and lies between the larger cities of London, Paris, and Berlin. Beyond this periphery are places such as Nebra, Schoeningen, St. Peter-Ording, Cuxhaven, Schleswig, and Warnemuende. In particular I'd like to evaluate the qualities of these extra-peripheral places. Places beyond the periphery are located more than 200 kilometres from a major city in relation to the task of making an architecture.

The first project I'd like to present is an archaeological research and experience centre called paläon. Paläon is in its own right a small archaeological museum housing a permanent exhibition, a temporary exhibition space, pedagogic rooms, an archaeological laboratory, a shop, and a restaurant with spaces for meetings and events. The museum is located next to the archaeological site where seven wooden spears were discovered in 1994. Those are over 300,000 years old and therefore turned the current research upside down as they are the oldest hunting weapons known to humankind.



Figure 2. Paláon, HolzerKobler Architects. Photo: Jan Bitter



Figure 3. Paláon, HolzerKobler Architects. Photo: Jan Bitter

The “Schöninger Speere” were found on the edge of a coal mine and are on the property of the coal mine. From the discovery to the realisation of the museum was a long way and obviously such a project involves many people. I'd like to single out four men who played a significant role in deciding where the building should be located and how it should be financed.

The archaeologist Hartmut Thieme is outstanding for his persistence in the face of doubt and pressure from the mining company. After many years of mining, the site Mr. Thieme had located was to be mined in the mid 1990s. In a last minute act the director of the mine, Klaus Friedrich, finally gave in and rerouted the mining in order to preserve the site. This costly act saved the site from being destroyed. Shortly after this decision, Mr. Thieme made the sensational find.

What was so sensational about it? The dating of the spears puts it in the time of the Homo heidelbergensis. The fact that many horse skeletons were found in combination with the spears implies a complex group hunt. Until this sensational find, archaeologists believed that the Homo heidelbergensis were not capable of complex communications. This awareness refuted the theory, and the history books were corrected in accordance with these newly found facts.

What was to be done with the found artefacts? It took about ten years after the find until Dr. Wolf-Michael Schmid, the president of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce of Lower Saxony invited Prime Minister, Christian Wulff, to visit the site. This region of Lower Saxony was and is a coal-mining region. The coal-mining was diminishing, which led to a reevaluation of the economic future of the area. The economic future of Lower Saxony should be partially oriented towards culture and tourism. Wolf-Michael Schmid was not only able to convince Christian Wulff of the value of locating the museum at the site of this find; he was also able to secure the necessary funding for the entire project.

For the town of Schoeningen, paläon was to be a significant cornerstone in the new economic development of not only Schoeningen but the entire region.

It is relevant to understand the weight and importance of the building characteristic of all extra-peripheral locations. Typically, as in Schoeningen, the place has had a long period of lack of development. The new culturally significant theme is to be housed in an architecture that not only fulfills the functional requirements but also, and more importantly, symbolizes a new beginning for an economically weakened area. Schoeningen, as said, was and is a coal-mining area. In addition to that it was a border town between the former East and West Germany during the time of the Iron Curtain. It thus became a dead-end which led to a decline in population and economic strength. The discovery of the spears and the decision to erect a museum on the site paved the way for the beginning of a new era.

Our approach to design is rooted in communicating the content and reacting to the context. The design for the new museum is from one point of view an attempt to address the issue.



Figure 4. Watt Besucherzentrum. HolzerKobler Architects.  
Photo: Jan Bitter



Figure 5. Watt Besucherzentrum. HolzerKobler Architects. Photo: Jan Bitter

We began by analysing the spears and their particular qualities. Their technical and aerodynamic nature is very sophisticated. The flight-path is very precise, and so the vector is an appropriate symbol of this. By orienting the vectors towards points of interest on and around the site as in the archaeological site, we positioned the vectors in the direction of the coal mine, the mountain of Brocken, and the city centre of Schöning. These lines formed the outer shell building.

Then we organised the spatial programme around the path through the building. The sequence of approach, entry hall, access using the main stair directly to the second floor, and the temporary exhibit, through the permanent exhibit, down to the first floor and the visitors laboratory, the archives, and returning to the entry hall, shop, and cafe determined the organisation of the interior spaces and remoulded the exterior.

The mirrored façade was an attempt to make the building both ephemeral and through the form of the building simultaneously distinctive. To make a building that is present and absent at the same time, depending on the light and the reflection of the weather on its surface. The large cut-like windows on the façade mark the points where the view-lines exit and enter the building.

The exhibition architecture is based on the cellular structure of the bone of a horse. The ins and outs of the space-making form give the exhibition its rhythm while providing the necessary exhibition cabinets and spaces for the scientific narrative of the exhibition. Surrounding and within this element are the thematic narratives created by artists such as Misha Shenbrot, Alexej Tchernyi, and Stephan Hüscher. The combination of low-threshold (artistic) and scientific information ensures the communication at varying levels. There is something for all visitors, that is to say, something for the “skimmer, swimmer, and deep diver”.

The final station in the permanent exhibition is the 270° cinema which provides the opportunity to tell the story in yet another medium and from another perspective. One exits the permanent exhibition into the three-story atrium space. This is the core space, a space for reorientation. It provides a view onto the coal mine, as well as a display of the diverse laquerwork specimens or “lift-offs” hung as paintings on the multi-storied wall, a positive model of the mine which shows what might have been there before, and a video installation dealing with the story of strata or archaeological layers in a playful manner.

Arriving at the first level, the path leads to the visitors’ laboratory, and the display windows offer a view into the real research centre where one can experience the entire archaeological process from the found artefacts to cleaning, analysis, and documentation.

The building becomes in its architectural expression a symbol for the museum, easily recognizable. It offers itself as a symbol of a new start used in advertising, on stamps and clothing. The fact that the architecture is unique to its purpose allows it to effectively market itself and thus fulfill its role as a cornerstone to the future of tourism in this extra-peripheral region.



Figure 6. Watt Besucherzentrum, HolzerKobler Architects, Photo: Jan Bitter



Figure 7. Watt Besucherzentrum, HolzerKobler Architects, Photo: Jan Bitter

The second project I'd like to present is a visitors' centre for the Unesco World Heritage site of the Wadden Sea in Cuxhaven. Inspired by the stilt houses on the North-Sea Coast of Germany the Wadden Sea Unesco World Heritage Visitor Centre symbolises the rebirth of Cuxhaven in the beginning of the twenty-first century. It was the first project in Cuxhaven since the Doeser Strandhaus from 1953 that attempted to start a cultural revitalisation.

Like the Doeser Strandhaus, the Wadden Sea World Heritage Visitor Centre began with an architectural competition. We started with the idea of a stilt house inspired by the wooden stilt structures on the North-Sea Coast of Germany—but it soon became clear that the task was to design a simple readable house which focused on marking and informing about the Wadden Sea in Cuxhaven. The inspiration of the stilt house combined with a desire to build using sustainable materials led to the decision to use wood for the entire structure.

The protruding glassed-in staircase not only marks and protects the entrance to the building but intuitively wakens the curiosity of the visitor and the desire to enter. Upon reaching the top of the main stair, the visitor is not only introduced to the theme of Unesco World Heritage sites around the world but is also confronted with the place by the framed view through the first of two large windows. The window frames the heathland outside of the building. It also works as a frame from the outside of the building, framing the large-scale back-lit aerial photograph of the Wadden Sea landscape. Our focus throughout the design and building was on the views from inside showing the magnificent landscape of the Wadden Sea. One day, while leaving the site, I pointed out the building and this particular aspect to a taxi driver, Mr. Graf. Upon seeing the aerial photograph framed, from the outside, by the heathland window, he was overwhelmed and spontaneously suggested that the project is a sort of "forced sensual seduction" (*zwang-sinnliche Verführung*).

Continuing through the exhibition, the visitor is informed about the specific attributes of the Wadden Sea in Cuxhaven. By means of the flooding model, media stations showing weather conditions, a physical book of tides, video interviews, collages, and a diorama, the visitor is guided to the larger of the two main windows. The Wadden Sea window fills the entire wall, thus practically bringing the entire Wadden Sea into the exhibition space. In this area the plant and animal life of the Wadden Sea are explained and displayed.

The programme of the house is rounded off at the uppermost floor with seminar rooms, laboratories, offices, and a library. The aspect of sustainability culminates with the solar collectors on the roof. The levels of energy gained are displayed in the exhibition.

Clearly the main attraction of significant places within the extra-periphery is the main attraction. Good architecture succeeds in calling attention to and informing about the uniqueness of the place. Distinctive architecture alone is not enough to attract a visitor to an extra-peripheral location—but it helps.