

The KinderKunstLabor in St. Pölten Is Now Open and Wins the Austrian Builder-Owner Award 2024

“An uncompromising design from a child’s perspective”

Program & Idea

The KinderKunstLabor, a centerpiece in St. Pölten’s bid to become the European Capital of Culture 2024, recently opened its doors – a one-of-a-kind building and an internationally unprecedented project. It wins the Austrian Builder-Owner Award 2024. St. Pölten, the capital of Lower Austria with a population of just under 55,000, is located around 60 kilometers from Vienna.

At the KinderKunstLabor, children and their families can discover contemporary art and culture in workshops and exhibitions featuring top international artists. It is not a museum rather an inviting laboratory for children up to the age of twelve from all social and educational backgrounds, a place where they can engage playfully and sensually with the diversity of contemporary artistic production – from video art, photography, and painting to sound art, installation, and performance – all at the highest level.

“The scope of the project was unique. On the one hand, we had to think from a child’s perspective throughout the entire design phase, and on the other, we had to create a befitting space for a resolute concept of art.”

— Michael Salvi, partner at Schenker Salvi Weber

A distinctive aspect of this project was the active involvement of a Children’s Advisory Board – a “think tank” comprised of kindergarten and school groups – in the planning and design of the exhibition spaces and park. They regularly exchanged ideas with the architects and artists in so-called co-creation processes. This resulted in an ecologically sustainable, aesthetically ambitious, and participative architecture tailored to the needs of children.

“As opposed to a didactic approach, we wanted to convey a sense of playfulness and take the children’s ideas seriously. Our aim was never to just make a cute and colorful building.”

— Michael Salvi, partner at Schenker Salvi Weber

The Architecture

The building’s footprint has a triangular form with slightly inward creased sides and chamfered corners, which gives rise to a recurring hexagonal motif inside. Originally conceived as a timber structure, the framework later proved to be too costly and massive. The architects then collaborated with structural engineers at Werner Sobek to devise a new solution: a central “tree trunk” made of concrete at the center of building with six “branches” that distribute the load literally and figuratively.

The central core housing this support column accommodates the main programmatic spaces of the KinderKunstLabor. A circulation pathway spirals around it to the top of the building – the “helix staircase,” a rich space of activity with generous places for crafting, playing, working, and exhibiting. This winding stair element connects the entrance foyer with the exhibition space on the first floor and the indoor and outdoor labs on the second floor, tapering as it rises. The two-story outdoor lab, sheltered by timber slats that clad the complete building, seems to float among the park’s treetops.

Inside, the timber slat facade creates a fascinating interplay of light and shadows while offering breathtaking views out into the park through its openings; outside, they lend an impression of lightness and transparency. The glazed surfaces behind are structured in a timber mullion-transom matrix. Complementing the steel and exposed concrete structure, wood offers a warm and welcoming atmosphere both indoors and outdoors.

Building Structure

The ground floor of the four-story structure houses the entrance foyer, an indoor playground, and a café. Exhibition rooms and lab spaces are found on the next two levels, while the more intimate offices and a library perch on the top floor. The inner structure is designed to encourage participation and communication. The children’s creativity can unfold as they move through a continuum of flexible spaces that can be opened up or partitioned off as needed. Strategically placed round windows at children’s eye level create playful peepholes and make orientation easier.

“The whole institution is centered around the perspective of children.”

— Mona Jas, Artistic Director

“The KinderKunstLabor bolsters St. Pölten’s reputation as a city of culture. This is not your conventional cultural institution: it inspires children to come into contact with all forms of art and culture and remain enthusiastic for a lifetime – a true center of attraction.”

— Matthias Stadler, Mayor of St. Pölten

Urban Planning

With its distinctive form, the building serves as a landmark on the route from St. Pölten’s baroque old town to the cultural district. The timber structure is set elegantly in the north-western corner of Altoona Park, integrating harmoniously with the trees, among them a magnificent sequoia. The park features sculptures by international artists, including a water zone and play sculptures by Andrea Maurer, Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler, mischer'traxler studio, and Regina Möller – an inviting recreational experience for young and old alike.

Project Details Architecture

- **Type of commission:** open, one-stage realization competition
- **Awards:** 1st prize, [BAUHERR:INNEN PREIS 2024](#)
- **Clients:** City of St. Pölten / State of Lower Austria / Austrian Federal Chancellery

- **Location:** St. Pölten, AT
- **Competition:** 2020
- **Realization:** 2021–2024
- **Gross floor area:** 2,957 m²
- **Team members:** Michael Salvi, Thomas Weber, Otto Bäuerle, Thomas Morgner, Christoph Frantes, Rostislav Stoklásek, Tristan Hunt, Veronika Ševčíková, Maximilian Dietz

About

Founded in 2009 by Andres Schenker, Michael Salvi, and Thomas Weber, Schenker Salvi Weber Architekten has offices in Vienna and Bern and employs over 50 people. The firm realizes projects in education, office, residential, care, and cultural sectors in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. In 2018, its *Post am Rochus* project in Vienna was nominated for the Mies van der Rohe Award and received the State Prize for Architecture. In the 2022 ten-year ranking by competition-online, Schenker Salvi Weber Architekten is listed among Austria's ten most successful firms.

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