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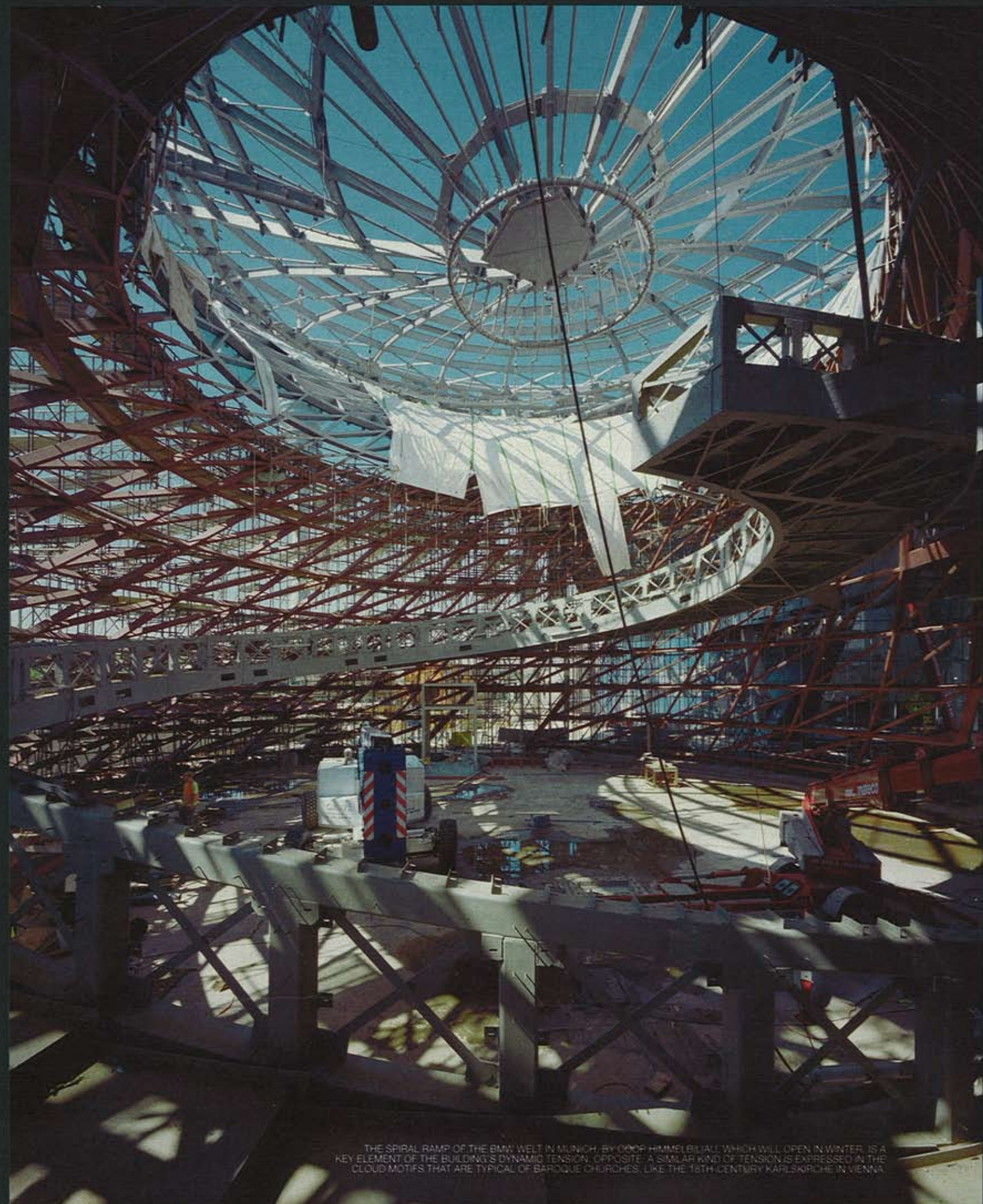
DESIGN FALL 2006



the cumulus effect

FOR EVERYTHING FROM BAROQUE ALTARPIECES TO CONTEMPORARY FLOATING BOXES, ARCHITECTS HAVE OFTEN LOOKED TO THE HEAVENS FOR INSPIRATION. HERBERT MUSCHAMP ADMIRES THE VIEW.

Photographs by HART ZIMMERMANN



THE SPIRAL RAMP OF THE BMW WELT IN MUNICH, BY COOP HIMMELB(L)AU, WHICH WILL OPEN IN WINTER, IS A KEY ELEMENT OF THE BUILDING'S DYNAMIC TENSION. OPPOSITE, A SIMILAR KIND OF TENSION IS EXPRESSED IN THE CLOUD MOTIFS THAT ARE TYPICAL OF BAROQUE CHURCHES, LIKE THE 18TH-CENTURY KARLSKIRCHE IN VIENNA.

oh,

for a lazy day. We could go lie on a hillside, stare up at the sky and watch the clouds roll by. What do they remind you of? A team of white horses. Rows of cotton. The beards of wise men. The new Congress Center in Rome ...

The what?

A BMW facility in Munich. An art museum in Boston ... Are we looking at the same sky?

Or it could be that the ground has turned upside down. It can look that way when you're up in a plane sometimes, and not only when you're flying through the Bermuda Triangle. Frequent flyers often lose their sense of orientation. Perhaps that's why architects, who are among the most frequent flyers in the world today, are now constructing buildings that resemble clouds. They want our world to be as topsy-turvy as theirs has become in an era of cosmopolitan building.

Let's not call this a movement. "Formation" is a more apt term for these condensations of social space. Now wafting across urban skies in Europe, the United States and other regions too far-flung to keep track of, cloud buildings come in nearly as many types as the moist varieties produced by nature. Yet the ground-based versions share a common feature: all derive their main visual identity as urban objects from a hovering horizontal volume, a packet of aerial atmosphere that looks only temporarily tethered. Even when made of concrete, steel and other materials beloved by gravity, these structures are poised to float away on the next gust of wind or fashion.

The new Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, is of a type we'll call the Slabulus: a floating box, containing galleries, cantilevered over a rank of bleachers that faces outward to Boston Harbor. This cloud will shelter you from others if a storm breaks. Like the British architect Will Alsop's design for the Sharp Center for Design at Ontario College of Art and Design, the

ICA evokes memories of the "cloud-iron," a skyscraper proposed in 1924 by the Russian architect El Lissitzky. The new Congress Center by Massimiliano Fuksas in Rome offers a jumbo cumulus in a box. Built in Esposizione Universale di Roma, the district planned in the 1930's by Mussolini for a world's fair that never took place, this glass-enclosed piece of artificial fluff is the perfect counterpoint to Il Duce's stolid neo-Classical style.

You will recognize a Big Mama Cloud because it hovers close to the ground, so that all living creatures requiring nourishment can just reach up, pull off a puff and be satisfied. Phaeno Science Center in Wolfsburg, Germany, designed by Zaha Hadid, is an exemplary model of this type. Not since Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal has reinforced concrete been given such a lift. And you will recognize a Big Daddy Cloud because it was designed by Wolf Prix, of the Vienna firm Coop Himmelb(l)au. Prix's new BMW Welt, in Munich, where customers can go to pick up

their shiny new cars, is the fulfillment of a long preoccupation with architecture's aerial dimension. "Get Off of My Cloud," in fact, is the title of a collection of Prix's polemical writings that was published last year. But the Rolling Stones' territorial allusion must be chalked up to Viennese humor. Prix wants lots of people to leap aboard his floating constructions, start pillow fights and make it snow.

Even before Jack climbed up the beanstalk and came down with the gold, people were imagining a cloud-cuckoo land where fairy tales come true. Plans for Museum Plaza in Louisville, Ky., could finally realize this secular heaven. Supported by a cluster of skyscrapers, an aerial "island" designed by the New York firm REX becomes the foundation for a second city in the sky. The result is a downtown and an uptown all in one.

The cloud motif is not unprecedented in architectural history. Clouds are a common feature in Baroque churches. Molded from plaster, they billow above altars, wrap around columns and spread

across ceilings, occasionally providing swirling settings for sculptures like the famed works of Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini. Part of the grand spectacle with which the Counter-Reformation hoped to lure stray sheep back to the Roman Catholic flock, clouds traced the vertical path to heaven that could be attained by those who embraced the authority embodied by the altar.

The device was briefly reprised as audience bait in 20th-century movie palaces, where rolling clouds were projected onto star-spangled ceilings while moviegoers took their seats between shows. Here, heaven has been displaced by the glamour of fame, the lofty firmament inhabited by Hollywood's twinkling stars. And if the feature attraction was a biblical epic, like "The Robe," we might glimpse the stars ascending a cinematic equivalent of the Baroque altarpiece. Hollywood clouds did double duty: redemption by faith became fused with redemption by fame. The heavenly choir asks for autographs between hymns.

Cloud buildings today offer redemption by architecture. That's one of their meanings, at least. Build something like this and your town will be redeemed from obscurity, decline, backwardness, dullness and other undesirable attributes. You will be on the map. You will be up to the minute, gazing toward the horizon of the future. A cloud building is a rainmaker, in other words. It showers cultural prestige and the economic benefits that flow from it.

I'm singing in the rain. I grew up in the years when the idea of the urban center was equated with irreversible deterioration. And I lived through the postmodern period, when the belief took hold that the glory days of the industrial city could be recaptured by constructing wan imitations of period styles. But retro ballparks and ersatz Art Deco office towers conveyed little optimism about the fate of cities in the age of globalization. By contrast, these floating horizontal structures lift the eyes and invite the imagination to glimpse the city's evolving place within a cosmopolitan frame of reference. I accept the invitation with pleasure.

Considering the striking novelty of their appearance, it is worth noting that these levitating pieces of the city are actually the fruits of almost four decades of urban research. Wolf Prix and Helmut Swiczinsky got the idea to name their firm Coop Himmelblau on a flight from Paris to Vienna in 1968. Like many people of their generation, the two Viennese were charged up by the spirit of solidarity



MASSIMILIANO FUKSAS'S CONGRESS CENTER (LEFT AND ABOVE) IN ROME, OPENING IN EARLY 2008, CONTAINS A STEEL-AND-TEFLON "CLOUD" — THE IDEA FOR WHICH CAME TO FUKSAS ONE DAY WHEN CLOUDS WERE BLOWING IN A STRONG WIND.

MUSEUM PLAZA (TOP) IN LOUISVILLE, KY., DESIGNED BY THE ARCHITECTURAL FIRM REX, WILL BE A MIXED-USE BUILDING WITH TOWERS (ONE 57 STORIES HIGH) EVENLY DISTRIBUTED ABOVE AND BELOW AN AERIAL PLATFORM, CREATING A "CITY IN THE SKY."

PHAENO SCIENCE CENTER (ABOVE AND ABOVE, LEFT) IN WOLFSBURG, GERMANY, DESIGNED BY ZAHA HADID AND OPEN SINCE LAST NOVEMBER, IS LIFTED OFF THE GROUND ON CONCRETE CONES, CREATING A PUBLIC PLAZA AND GIVING THE BUILDING A SENSE OF WEIGHTLESSNESS.

TOP: BOSTON'S INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BY DILLER SCOFIDIO + RENFRO, OPENING THIS FALL, IS A MIX OF TRANSLUCENT AND TRANSPARENT GLASS, WOOD AND METAL. SWOOPING OUT TO THE WATER'S EDGE, THE 65,000-SQUARE-FOOT BUILDING SEEMS TO HOVER IN MIDAIR.

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in
DETAIL



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that accompanied the student protests in Paris in May of that rambunctious year. That spirit — the desire to work in a collaborative setting — is reflected in the “Coop” part of the name.

“Himmelblau” means “sky blue,” an image they acquired while gazing out the window on the flight home. (About a decade ago, when their practice took off, they altered the name to Himmel(l)au: “bau” means “build.”) Couldn’t buildings aspire toward the condition of clouds: nebulous, shape-shifting, perpetually in transition? An adolescent dream, perhaps, but why shouldn’t there be a place for such fantasies in the metropolis? Why should there be this split between architecture as the instrument for imposing adult order and the pop culture we consume to escape from it? What forms might emerge if this convention were laughed away?

For a long time, the blue skies remained solely on paper. But many of Coop Himmel(l)au’s contemporaries were also thinking along cloudy lines. An elevated memorial and park for downtown Los Angeles, “Steel Cloud,” was designed by the New York firm Asymptote in 1988. An artificial cloud, generated by computerized nozzles, was the centerpiece of Blur

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Building, a pier pavilion designed by Diller + Scofidio for Lake Neuchâtel in 2002. That same year, the Fresno Metropolitan Museum selected the Los Angeles architect Michael Maltzan’s design for a hovering “parasol” for its future building. Kunsthaus Graz in Graz, Austria, a little acrylic glass pileus cloud designed by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier, was completed in 2003.

Despite the notoriously radical impatience of the 60’s generation, the decade’s architectural fantasies have endured the long period of incubation that such ideas traditionally require before reaching physical form in urban space.

The wait was worth it. We need clouds more urgently than we did 40 years ago — need to enlarge our consciousness of the cosmopolitan framework, need to be reminded that the cultural relationship between cities transcends the political differences between nations. If that is only a dream, then let’s just fall asleep peacefully on our lazy hillside while the clouds of discord gather. ■