

"Postfossil Göttingen University Kindergarten" / publication in Archetcetera blog by Phyllis Richardson 04 2011

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German Prairie Style

A new, spacious, flexible, energy-efficient kindergarten building by **Martin Despang** injects an old European site, at **Göttingen University** in Germany, with inspiration from the American prairie.

The innovative kindergarten building presents a light-gathering curtain-wall façade along a curved edge of a fanned structure that tapers backward to become partially submerged in the landscape. Roof-lights bring in direct, warming sun into the space, but utterly flexible spaces below, while the tapered form settles itself into the ground.



kindergarten at Göttingen University by Despang Architekten

The reasons behind the disappearing form are varied. In an effort to achieve Passive House standards, the thermal qualities offered by a green roof are hard to beat. The kindergarten structure is covered in an 'intensive' green roof, 35-cm thick, which will be a fertile growing medium. Also, the campus and the surrounds already feature many acts of notable architecture, so competing in some kind of highly visible scene-grabbing sculpture was never going to be economic or make much sense. **Martin Despang** started his career working with his family's practice, which began in Hanover, and has expanded to offices in Dresden and Munich. He has been teaching for several years in the US, first in Nebraska and currently in the arid desert of Tucson, Arizona, at the **University of Arizona College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture**.



interior with rooflights

Nebraska is famous for its miles of flat, grassy prairie that extends across several states. The prairie has already given its name to a style conceived by one of the great names of twentieth-century architecture. But it's a humbler reference that Despang has chosen to recognize in what he calls the 'prairie-dog kindergarten'. Early settlers on the prairie, those who first tamed its ground in an attempt to tame the wild grasslands for agriculture, often made dug-out houses in the earth. And this is where the Göttingen kindergarten gets its inspiration. Despang explains that he 'lets his global nomadism inspire my projects.' So the Göttingen kindergarten gets its 'conceptual inspiration for the tectonic method' of thermal massing concrete' from the fact that in hot weather animals stay underground during the day to keep cool.



storage and a classroom on the glazed end

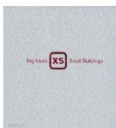
ABOUT ME

Phyllis Richardson

Phyllis Richardson is the author of several books on contemporary architecture and design, such as the XS series (including XS Green and XS Extreme), New Sacred Architecture, House Plus, the Style City volumes on London and Paris, and Designed for Kids. She contributes architecture and design features to the print versions of the Financial Times Weekend and The Plan. Her book reviews have appeared in the TLS, the sadly defunct Los Angeles Times Book Review, and elsewhere.

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the roof shot shows how the building tapers into the ground and roof panels let in natural light. In subsequent months the roof will be covered in vegetation.

Despang also credits his friend **Jack DeBartolo**, an architect in another family practice who teaches at ASU in Phoenix, with some of the ideas for the concrete methodology. 'A few years ago,' Despang says, 'Jack came to lecture in Nebraska on the use of concrete for his **Prayer Pavilion of Light**' (see below). His work 'significantly motivated and inspired,' Despang to try something similar in Hanover. 'Only instead of the on-site casting used in the desert, we chose the prefabrication of silk-smooth concrete because of the tight budget and unpredictable weather conditions in Northern Germany.'



The roof covered in soil as it slopes upward from ground level

Göttingen University was founded in 1737 as a University of the Enlightenment. It was known for putting aside the supremacy of theology and considering all of its academic disciplines in an equal field. So the architect wanted to respect the existing complex while also creating an imaginative place for learning that was built with a strong environmental conscience. With the typology of schools being a target for green initiatives, Despang explains, his team thought even harder about a building that would be as efficient as possible. Also, the single-story structure helped meet requirements for accessibility without the need for costly mechanics for elevators.