The need for an art gallery and museum was debated for decades, and at the height of the Graz architecture movement in 1989 one very nearly happened, with a major competition held by the regional government for a so-called Trigon Museum in the Pfeugerberg. Won by a radical contextual proposal from Schöflauer, Schrom and Tschapallger, this would have been an impressive building, but it was cancelled for political reasons. A later proposed Kunsthaus carved into the Schlossberg, the acropolis, was again the subject of an architectural competition and also came to nothing. It took Graz’s impending elevation to European City of Culture in 2003 to provide the final impetus. The competition was announced in 1999 and was judged in April 2000 by an international jury chaired by Volker Gierecke. It attracted 102 entries including submissions by Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau, Klaus Kada and Morphosis. The sole prize winner was the proposal by Peter Cook and Collin Fournier, the remaining prize money being divided equally between eight commendations.

The new site could hardly have been more prominent. Graz grew up around the Schlossberg, a steep-defensible outcrop of rock next to the wide, fast-flowing river Mur. The main market place developed immediately south of this rock, connecting westward to the first bridge. Just across this bridge on the north side lies the Kunsthaus, fully visible across the river and enjoying some of the best views of the old city. The west bank has always been the less fashionable side, starting as a medieval suburb just like the south bank of the Thames, and placing a major cultural institution here is, as in London fifty years ago, a bid to redress the balance. The site’s frontage to the street crossing the bridge was occupied by the Eisernes Haus (Iron House), a listed commercial building of 1847 with an iron facade of castings from Sheffield. This was to be restored and retained, along with some other old buildings to the west which preserve the traditional frontage to Mariahilferstrasse. The north half of the site had long been a car park, and a busy street by between the site and the river bank.

The competition programme called primarily for flexible spaces in which to mount changing exhibitions of contemporary art (there is no permanent collection), offices for meeting, curatorial work and publication, a workshop and areas for reception and refreshment. A public garage was to be provided beneath the building, part of the idea with the department store Kastner and Oehler across the river who had owned the site. A lifespan of over a hundred years was mentioned, with some stress on the changing and unpredictable nature of artistic production, but the presentation of the submitted projects suggests that the greatest importance was placed on external image, for competitors submitted a model which became the sole vehicle for publication as photographed looking towards the corner connecting

**ALIEN ENCOUNTER**

Clad in a pulsating skin, Graz’s new Kunsthaus is a spunky modern interloper that adds both to the life of the city and to its historic fabric.