mass production is also absent in a one-off building. So with the Kunsthau, what was really happening? The smooth blue external surface, seductively predicted in the competition proposal has become a series of acrylic plates individually heat-formed to follow the curve and retained by stainless-steel bolts at the corners. Rather than being sealed, they are divided by relatively wide gaps with the real weatherproof skin behind, a plastic membrane with sleeves welded in where the frequent support struts come through. Beneath is insulation and a supporting structure of steel ribs. On the inside you encounter a system of triangular panels of grey mesh with another void behind. The whole thing is relatively thick, solid, and completely immobile, and the problems of roof turning into wall have resulted in wider gaps in the outer layer to increase ventilation, cone-like stools to retain snow, and careful design of individual drainage nodes. A sprinkler system needed to counter the flammability of the acrylic panels can be used for cleaning, and wiring has been incorporated for ultrasound apparatus that may be needed to eject nesting birds.

Far lower-tech than originally envisaged, all this was still a constructional headstand, and it depends on the continuity of the almost invisible real skin. From the start the architects intended to make the outer layer into a glowing sign, pulsating with colour like a squid. The technology surely exists, for every panel could be a bank of LEDs or even liquid crystal like a flat-screen TV, but the cost would be prohibitive. Instead, hundreds of circular fluorescent tubes have been installed in the void beneath the transparent outer shell, linked to a computer that combines them as a mobile array. This brings the skin to life as promised and gives the building even more presence at night than in the day. It also brings potential for readable messages and artworks, though the pixel size is rather large.

Despite some shortcomings, the Kunsthau is a highly innovative building with potential for a new and exciting dialogue with street; it takes a prominent place in one of Europe’s best preserved old cities, again throwing into question the popular wisdom that the post-Second World War period is to some extent a “lost decade.” It vindicates a typically long process of architectural development via three competitions and much serious debate. For Graz architects the result is a fitting homage to Peter Cook, who helped inspire the “studio revolution” of the 1960s with his magazine Archigram, and who has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Graz movement ever since. It has also allowed the Cook/Fournier partnership, which began with the brilliant but ill-fated Monte Carlo project thirty years ago, to finally prove its worth in a realized building. PETER BLINDSCHILD JONES

1. Reported in A/R since the special Austria issue of December 1996, also summarized in British Design in Theory: New Graz Architecture by Peter Blinderschild Junes, Haus der Architektur, Graz, 1996.
3. ibid. p.196
4. ibid. p.33-35.