

glass

Architectural panache in Prague



Two distorted corner towers fused in a sculptural embrace

Prominently poised on the banks of Prague's Vltava River Prague, this bold project houses the Dutch insurance company Nationale-Nederlanden and is the brainchild of architect, Frank O. Gehry. The office building is located on the corner of Jiraskovo namesti and Rasinovo nabrezi and neighbours the Art Nouveaux house of the Czech Republic's president, Vaclav Havel, a distinguished writer.

Each of the two towers is essentially a distorted cylinder; the diameter of the dominant, solid male tower expands as it extends upwards, while its glazed female partner is dramatically cinched at the waist like an hour glass.

Metaphorical legs and petticoats fall onto the street from the skirts of the female, while her male counterpart has robust contours clad in neutral stucco, animated by a wavy bas-relief pattern and lines of windows that project

slightly from the curving wall planes. These two distorted corner towers are lyrically fused in a dancing embrace that gives one the idea of natural balance, fluidity and harmony.

This project has been heralded as an outstanding symbol of Prague's architectural, economic and political renewal, in that a contemporary building has been transplanted into the ancient heart of an Eastern European city. The history of the site includes bombing by the

projects



Top of glazed "female" tower

American forces in 1945, which devastated a neo-classical apartment block on the corner of the two streets, Jiraskovo namesti and Rasinovo nabrezi. During the post-war Communist period, the site where the bombed residential block stood was vacant, with attempts to utilise it gaining ground during the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Havel envisaged a building which would house an altruistic mixture of cultural and social functions, including a bookshop, gallery, multi-purpose hall and rooftop café. The first architect to work on the project was Croatian-born architect Vlado Milunic who sketched an angular building, but when market forces prevailed over Havel's philanthropic ideas and the Dutch insurance company bought the building in 1992, Mr. Milunic



Neutral stucco is animated by undulating windows and a wavy bas-relief

was retained only in a collaborative capacity.

Frank O. Gehry was given the principal design role, but the evolution of the scheme stemmed from Milunic's original proposals. The final result includes six floors of offices topped by a bar and restaurant with panoramic views of Prague, shops on the ground and lower ground floors, and a small café at pavement level, set back under the fat circular legs of the larger tower. A degree of animation and public interaction at ground level makes the building less insular than many traditional office developments, which tend to exclude the outer world deliberately.



Office work station and interior

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