

The New Building of Karin Dom

Concept

The desire of Karin Dom for a place where children with special needs and their families feel free, together with the highly specialized and functionally introverted programme is a challenging task. How to combine protection with comfort, specialized with comprehensive or individual with common? How to create the feeling of one home for seemingly incompatible and diverse services: medical, social, educational? How to retain the strong spirit and legacy of the first building of Karin Dom in the new one?

Taking a walk in the remote part of the Sea Park of Varna we hear children play. We barely notice an old building behind the lush greenery. What is this place? We can't see it, but we can feel it. It's a happy place. What is impressive in Karin Dom is the bright inspiring power of the professional optimism for a child's laughter.

From the Sea Park to the extended urban central part of Varna the project for the new building for Karin Dom keeps that magic and makes it perceptible also in space. The building makes its way among the trees preserving most of them. In a single gesture, the programme pieces are brought together. Everything in the building is organised around the safe space of the inner courtyard. Just like an embrace ... for the children, for the families, for the trees.

The project introduces a broader concept of specialized care in a living organism that fuses healthcare and learning with play and joy of experiencing the world. A concept that goes beyond the specific requirements of the enclosed rooms but includes a sense of openness, friendship and community.

By getting closer to nature, the new building of Karin Dom reinforces its significant role as an inspiration for the children with special needs and their families. The open inner courtyard and adjacent common spaces become the hinge in the system of specialized units. The continuity of bright spaces and constant touch with nature valorize the building.

Functionality and layout

Arriving from Prilep Str. or Hristo Shivarov Str. one enters a welcoming plaza – a shared space under the big trees. Here is the main entrance to the building. Several other independent entrances are easily accessible from the same space: to the Medical Centre, to the Montessori Centre and to the underground parking.

The programme is organised around a common inner courtyard – a safe outdoor place to learn, play, meet and rest. All the core units develop on the ground floor and on the first floor. The Training Center is situated on the second floor allowing its relative independence for flexible use. It is open to the rooftop space with an option to extend its functions outdoors.

In terms of strategy, our functional organisation proposal aims to:

- minimise the number of floors giving priority to the horizontal circulation;
- enhance the visual orientation and intuitive wayfinding, thus improving connections between the programme units;
- provide wider visibility within the entire building for facilitating safety and security.

Spaces and perceptions

The project seeks to provide inclusive spaces where all children can achieve their highest level of potential despite any physical or mental limitations.

The new building of Karin Dom is developed as a single volume in the cradle of the lush greenery of the site. A fluent volume that embraces itself a piece of that nature granting a

generously open space. The perception of a free (least restrictive) environment is enhanced also from the common inner spaces around the courtyard. These are imagined as escape and/or transitional places where children and parents could find relaxation and withdraw when needed. Such spaces are important for the general inclusive learning environment, but also for building the sense of being among friends.

The project carefully considers the need for a comfortable and healthy environment. The big windows and glazed facade towards the inner courtyard bring abundant natural light in and allow for constant cross ventilation for all the premises.

The project puts an emphasis on the continuous presence of natural environments as sensory heavens. Experiencing nature is considered essential to physical and mental maturation. Nature increases attention, creativity and well-being and reduces stress. The low height of the building and the generous openings welcome greenery in on every level. The trees reach beyond the ground floor towards the upper levels and the roof terrace. One could touch the leaves, take a nap under the tree shadow, chat in the grass.

Appearance and materiality

The uniqueness of Karin Dom is related to its strong social presence while at the same time remaining delicate to suit each child's and family's individual needs. The project acknowledges that understanding and introduces a delicate architectural appearance in harmony with the surrounding landscape and cityscape. On the inside, though, the design manifests the bright social engagement and sensitivity of the professionals.

With its outer wooden skin, the building integrates itself into the grammar of the existing urban grove. The wooden cladding over a coloured breathable facade membrane contributes to the relative privacy of the activities inside but at the same time gives a living appearance. Once in Karin Dom, though, one could embrace at a glance the whole building and its life through the inner glass skin.

The interior design is modest and unobtrusive to leave space for creativity. The materials are non-glare and non-toxic. The use of tactile materials is balanced and limited to selected locations in order to trigger certain stimulus but without becoming too excessive. Priority is given to the following materials: natural clay plaster wall finishes; wooden cladding; matt surface polished concrete and resilient floorings; integration of high-NRC tiles in ceilings (without hindering the mounting of track hoist systems and ceiling hooks); plywood furniture. The introduced materials are in muted shades of blue and natural colours. Colour accents are brought by the specialized equipment and furniture, floor mats, toys, learning materials, instruments, etc. Thus, the interior spaces enhance the feeling of a cosy, yet inspiring place.

Structure

The building is in concrete skeleton allowing for flexibility of spaces within the 'belt' layout.

Sustainability

The sustainability is achieved through integrated measures: optimization of natural daylight; cross-ventilation; rooftop greenery; walls with thermal mass; solar panels and solar thermal collectors; locally available materials.

The approximate value for the implementation of the competition project is 1 320 000 Euro.

This includes construction and assembly works, finishing works, equipment and furnishing, landscaping.