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William Morgan: Cool Modernism along the highway

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A GERMAN COMPANY in Warwick proves that the buildings along the highways leading to cities need not be boring industrial stepchildren of high-style design. The American headquarters of Viessmann, Europe's largest maker of heating systems, also shows that outstanding new architecture can appear in the least expected places.

The Route 95 North approach to "Historic Providence" (as the sign says) is hardly a grand, or even an attractive, entrance to the city. The harbor and the power plant do give an appropriately vigorous foreground to the downtown skyline. But for miles before that, travelers pass through a twilight zone of factories and box buildings. Except for the brooding granite state prison, in Cranston, few of the structures contribute anything notable to the landscape.

So it comes as a pleasant shock to see an exceptionally handsome white block on Warwick's Route 95. For a moment it makes you think that you are approaching Frankfurt or Zurich. How did this crisp piece of architecture land here? And why aren't there more like it?

Even if one did not know that Viessmann makes efficient, environmentally friendly heating systems, the building's total demeanor is one of purposeful functionality. The large rectangle that forms the rear of the building is the distribution warehouse, while the public front, facing Route 95, contains offices, training facilities and a showroom.

The architect is Richard Reichard, a Canadian who worked closely with Viessmann's corporate designers in Germany. The gridded faades. One such White, Richard Meier, is known for the Getty Museum, in Los Angeles, but his minimalist factory-like buildings in Germany and the Netherlands are better and more influential.

The quality of Warwick's Viessmann building has nothing to do with celebrity architecture. Rather, the company seeks only to deliver the best product to its customers, while visually enhancing the communities in which it builds.

What you do not see at the Warwick building is as important as what you see. The utilities are buried, for example, and the cooling units -- normally an ugly rooftop presence -- are inside the warehouse, so as not to mar the exterior's clean lines.

The company was founded in 1917 by a bicycle maker, Johann Viessmann, whose interest in tubing evolved into heating pipes. Today, the company is the largest supplier of boilers in Europe, with 50 facilities around the world. Directed by the bike maker's engineer grandson, Martin Viessmann, the company remains a family-run business with strong ideas about corporate identity. There is a philosophy of total, consistent design: every element of the business -- whether boilers or the trucks in which they are delivered, art work on corporate walls, stationery, advertising, or buildings -- represents the company's belief in industrial aesthetics.

The Warwick building, which opened in March 2003, is one of the first of a new generation of architectural templates for the company. The warm orange of the company's logo (symbolizing fire) contrasts with a silver color scheme, echoing the metal finishes on Viessmann's products.

The good-form-makes-good-business philosophy appears in the circular showroom, where the furnaces and parts are practically yet artistically displayed. (When did you last see a plumbing-supply place that looked like the Museum of Modern Art?) Your search, as a customer, may be for an energy-efficient furnace -- but you could end up with a sleek piece of sculpture, as well.

Viessmann's second-floor training classrooms are what one expects in a high-tech company. What is unexpected is the "art show" created by the colored-coded pipes: a sort of Mondrian painting in three dimensions. Yet the layout of the pipes was dictated by a rational approach to teaching salesmen and technicians.

Only 20 people work at Viessmann in Warwick, yet the aesthetic influence of this European company on our American landscape could be significant.

Viessmann is not the only business to have discovered that attention to details, environmental efficiency and aesthetics pay good dividends. But we Americans so often need reminding of that. A good product and its packaging, the Viessmann building shows us, are inseparable.

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