Recent architecture in German-speaking and Italian-speaking Switzerland

Traditionalism made avant-garde

We like to taste the wines and savour the culinary specialities. But are we equally at home with modern styles of building in our different linguistic regions? Here is an overview of architectural trends in German-speaking and Italian-speaking Switzerland.

Alice Baumann

Switzerland's four language areas and cosmopolitan tradition have always produced different regional trends. Cantonal boundaries have helped maintain and intensify local architectural characteristics. But they also allow penetration and assimilation of ideas from outside. Also, Switzerland is at the very heart of Europe, at the meeting place of its various cultures. But this can also hinder the discovery of one's own identity.

Only recently has research been carried out and published about architecture in French-speaking Switzerland. Throughout the last decade, Ticino architecture with its leaning towards rationalism has been at the centre of architectural discussion in Switzerland. Where are the equivalents in German-speaking Switzerland of names like Botta, Snozzi, Capi and Galfetti? Are there also north of the Gotthard teaching masters who have marked generations? There are a few major figures, but they are thin on the ground and their influence has been a long time coming through.

Following Aldo Rossi's example

Architecture in German-speaking Switzerland started to gain its own identity in the 1970s. Aldo Rossi's teaching at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich from 1972 to 1974 and again in 1976 marked the architectural students of the time, who are the architects of today. Rossi was followed by other visiting teachers and professors from Italian-speaking areas – Campi, Schnebli, Flora Ruchat, etc. In German-speaking Switzerland, this opening-up process nourished the debate about architecture as a discipline.

This is not an easy discussion to follow. The innovative Ticinese, Luigi Snozzi, observed that it is very difficult for architects to work in a cultural and political context such as that of Switzerland – "a land of prosperity, social peace and political stability". He added: "Such a context is not the most favourable for the blossoming of the critical spirit; on the contrary, it tends to put it to sleep". However, went on Snozzi, new-generation architects are privileged here: "The favourable economic situation and the frequent occurrence of architectural competitions for both private and public building projects enables the new generation to formulate their ideas without too much difficulty". In several neighbouring countries the majority of architecture students find it difficult to get practical experience.

A paper ghetto

But there are many more critical voices about our country, as witnessed by this statement from architect Marcel Meili: "It is said that Switzerland has succeeded, as no other country has done, in transforming the excitement and brilliance of modern times into the grey normality of everyday. The total ambiguity of this way of life, this strange mixture of progressive agility and stolid conventionality can be two things: in part the circumstances as we interpret them and in part the story of our own lives". And, looking back: "In German-speaking Switzerland, the early 1980s was a time of intense discussion among architects, which above all transformed language as a medium of reflection for ever and led more than at any previous time to a paper ghetto in the form of the drawing. You could write a small anthology of ideas which never left this ghetto, and not all of them failed to be built...". Nor does he find flattering

because they were insufficiently mature".

A scolding for Zurich...

Peter Disch, author of 'Architecture in German-speaking Switzerland 1980–1990', provides an illustration of this: "Zurich, for example, as the biggest city in Switzerland, the centre of trade and industry, possessing more than one university, has a peculiar way of approaching architecture: on the one hand, there is a total lack of will to renovate, a general feeling for architecture as seen from the point of view of the mandator and an emphasis on urban development solutions (Stadelhofen being an exception). On the other hand, there is much activity in the philosophical and theoretical dimension". Then the criticism becomes even clearer: "Zurich may also be described as a city of unrealised projects and of missed opportunities".

With reference to the competitions for the new theatre, the new opera house, the extension of the university and the Globus island in the river, Disch concludes his remarks with these bitter words: "The best and most innovative projects are disregarded. Nothing is built...". Nor does he find flattering words for the project for restructuring the main railway station: "A huge opportunity for the city, ending in a muddle, with a main station south-west and a complete absurdity beneath the lines, an architectural lie against the city's interests...".

In a city publication, an architectural guide also referring to the 1980s, the Zurich authorities themselves write that it is possible "to find an impressive number of noteworthy objects in a city characterised but rarely by architectural boldness or any kind of innovation. But even into this selection quite a lot of third-rate architecture has found its way". Considering why things should be as bad as this brings the Ticinese,

Snozzi, to yet another point: "The city of Zurich does not belong only to the citizens of Zurich, but like all the cities of the world it represents a universal value".

...praise for Lucerne...

According to critics, however, young and very capable architects have come

"To make architecture superfluous, to let it disappear from our consciousness, to turn to other purposes: this is to make town into nature. It no longer needs invention. It cannot be extended farther. It is everywhere. It can no longer be copied because it has copied itself to the end". *(Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron, architects)* **Construction: Häfliger Grunder von Allmen. (Photo: Archives)**

to the fore in Lucerne. Their succinct and integrated conceptions have been widely praised. In June of this year, over 65% of voters agreed to a Sfr. 94 million credit for a cultural centre designed by Jean Nouvel to be built by the lake. A newspaper headline went "Lucerne: cultural city of the future?" But here too a number of excellent projects have been shelved indefinitely after much expense – amongst them the Kreis-Kreis-Schaad Art Museum. However, the establishment of the Lucerne Architecture Gallery won favourable mention.

...tradition in Berne...

Voters in Berne also buried avant-garde projects before a single brick was laid. Amongst these was the planned Tesar project in the Klösterli area near the famous bear pit. Botta's plan to extend the parliament building was also vetoed at an early stage. Since then, however, the city has gained a lobby for more modern architecture. Following Zurich's 1987 example, Berne now possesses an Architecture Forum. While the future appearance of its exhibition and lecture halls at the Kornhaus in the centre of Berne and the manner of its conversion are still open, the Klösterli area has finally been rebuilt in conventional style. "Switzerland has made traditionalism avant-garde", observes Miroslav Šik, who is Czech by birth and a former assistant professor at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. "Maintain, preserve (not convert) is one of the first commandments in looking after historic landmarks",

"We cannot leave architecture to the architects. There are certainly cases where the architect has less interest in architecture than those who live in the house made by him. In our cities this may even be normal. But the built-up area, which we call town, or architecture, is something which concerns and leaves its impression on us all". *(Dieter Bachmann, editor-in-chief of the magazine, 'Du')* **Construction: Michael Alder + Partner. (Photo: A. Helbling & T. Ineichen)**

declares Peter Disch, "but buildings which should be protected are being gutted, deprived of their insides and put to new use – all that remains is the facade as a shell, or trick. Harmony is destroyed".

...unhappiness in Basle

In 1984, the first and so far the only architectural museum in Switzerland was opened. Shortly after, a number of pioneering projects came to life near the railway station and by the river. For all that the city on the Rhine does not lack critical voices. Fault is found with the fact that after much hesitation and delay a conservative engineering project was chosen to restore Wettstein Bridge, although a unique proposal by Santiago Calatrava had been put forward.

After Peter Zumthor, Michael Alder is writ large in Basle's architectural history. He builds houses like the ones children draw. But the path towards sim-plicity and economy is not easy to find. Not much lies between the simple and the banal. In his search for basic structures, Alder has studied the buildings of peasants and artisans. For years he took his students to sketch Alpine barns. Back to basics is his aesthetic principle. Another feature of his distinctive houses is their wood exteriors. Reminiscent of tobacco-drying barns, wooden laths produce a feeling of protection and comfort.

Ideas are the thing

These are archetypes which tap into memory and the soul's dimension. His intellectual approach to building means that 90% of Alder's work is devoted to ideas. They are what determine the material used and the way it is used. Roger Diener works in a similar fashion. By introducing ferric oxide, he gave the cement structure which he built behind Basle's railway station exactly the appearance of shabbiness and rustiness which you would expect near the railway.

Attention to detail, not show

New Building distinguishes between white (chalk sandstone), grey (stone, concrete, weather-bleached wood) and silver (aluminium) in its architecture. The last of these gives an impression of movement and lightness – elements well known in vehicle and aircraft construction. But this is a trend which is described by some experts as "non-Swiss". Typical of Switzerland, they say, would mean paying more attention to detail than to show...

Dolf Schnebli, a Zurich architect with an international spectrum, replies to this self-criticism very pragmatically: "I do not believe that there can or should be 'Swiss-German architecture', but I think I am justified in hoping that there will be a lot of good architecture in German-speaking Switzerland". ∎

Ticino: Central to architecture

No one doubts that Ticino is at the edge of Switzerland. But perhaps the economist, Rimigio Ratti, is also on the right track when he says that it is in the centre of Europe. This certainly seems to be true for architecture. We conjure up with ease the names of the great builders from Ticino and Lombardy, such as Fontana, Maderno, Borromini, Trezzini and Solari, who played no small role in creating the great European cities from Rome to St. Petersburg in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. To them Ticino owes its reputation as a land of artists and architects. Clichés have the annoying characteristic of losing the specific in the general. But in the case of Ticino, the cliché contains much truth, because today the name and works of its contemporary architects are also known to a wider public, well beyond the closed ranks of the initiated.

And it is in Ticino – which apart from the Faculty of Technology in Lugano as yet possesses no university of its own – that the idea was recently born in the mind of Mario Botta to create an
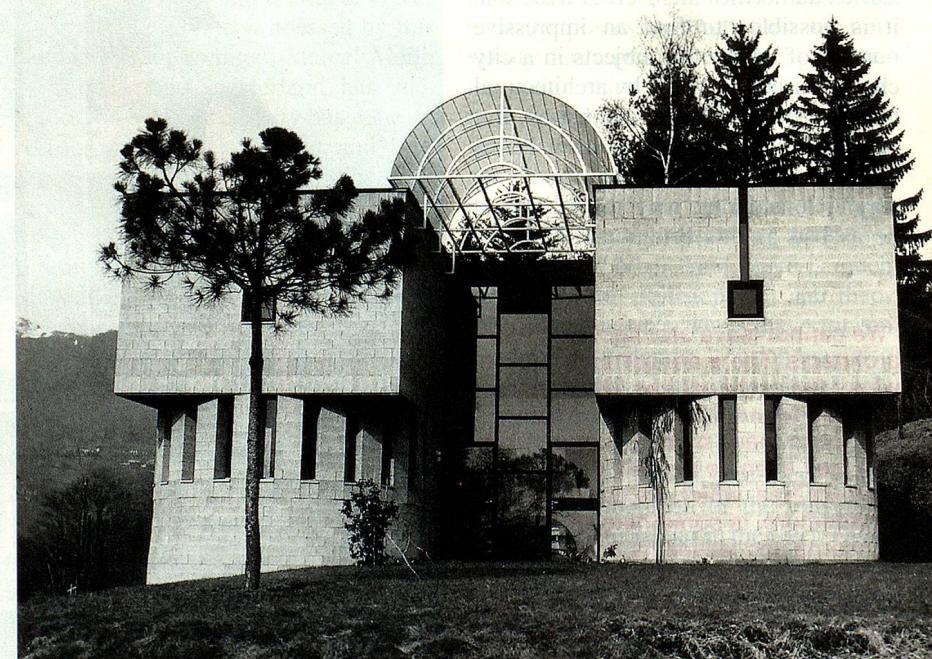
"In the 1960s, a type of architecture grew up in Italian-speaking Switzer-land which succeeded in combining various types of rationalist architec-ture – above all, Le Corbusier's – with the local style and with the living habits it expresses. As a result, German-speaking Switzerland became captive to the ideas of Aldo Rossi". (Architecture critic Martin Steinmann)
Construction: Mario Botta.
(Photo: Keystone)