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Autor: Grunder, Jürg / Baumann, Alice
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Architect Jürg Grunder on his work

“Buildings are like people, they have their histories”

How do architects meet market conditions? An interview with Jürg Grunder, aged 45, partner in Häfliger Grunder von Allmen, a firm of architects specialising in public works, and lecturer in the architectural department of Burgdorf Engineering College.

Swiss Review: What does your architecture express?

Jürg Grunder: When I design a top-quality building, I am making an artistic contribution.

At the moment you are involved in a Sfr.50 million project, the training

centre for the Insel Hospital in Berne. How is that going?

I am responsible for design, execution and the artistic side. I am part of a team comprising 17 people. We never work alone.

“He who pays gives the orders”. In

your work, do you often hear that said?

If that argument is used, it means we have done something wrong: we have not provided the mandator with enough information. Such a remark is the equivalent of pulling the brake lever on an intercity train. But interpreting the mandator's needs and converting them to our ideas of design is always like walking a tightrope. We experienced that in Simmental, where chalet-style building is popular. When voters spoke out against our school project in contemporary wood, the municipal authority objected to the building contract it had itself awarded. We do not go along with such U-turns, since we take our responsibility as architects seriously.

Academy of Architecture as an important component of the future university.

It is also true that there exists in Ticino a contemporary architecture – indeed a very vital one – which, as Giuseppe Curonici writes, emerged from two “cultural movements” at the beginning of the century. One stemmed from the close contact between the Ticino architect, Mario Chiattoni, with the futurists, and the other from the group of artists, philosophers and scientists from the most varied origins who were drawn to Monte Verità. Later, other modern architectural movements also penetrated Ticino. The first important work to emerge from this remarkable combination was the cantonal library in Lugano which was built by the Ticinese, Rino Tami, in 1941. According to Tita Carloni, the new Ticino architecture really took off after 1968: “We find the roots of it in the work of the older architects (Rino Tami, Augusto Jäggli, Alberto Camenzind), the humus in the lives and work of the middle generation (Peppo Brivio, Franco Ponti and Tita Carloni herself), and they came to full fruition in the projects and buildings of Luigi Snozzi, Livio Vacchini, Aurelio Galfetti, Giancarlo Durisch, Ivano Gianola and of course in the work of the best known and most distinguished of them all, Mario Botta”.

But what was really behind this second renaissance of Ticino architecture? Tita Carloni takes the view that a number of specific circumstances favoured this development. Amongst these were the very rapid and tempestuous transition from the old agrarian economy to today's new structure, dominated as it is by service industries; “the continued existence of old robust cultural and social elements in the midst of a progressive urban society”; the acceptance of cultural experimentation by the upper social strata; the construction of the motorway (in itself a remarkable architectural achievement); the maintenance of a high level of craftsmanship in the local building trade; and by no means least of all the fact that the architects of Ticino “put passionate involvement in their work and architecture as art above making money and raising bureaucratic structures”. And I would add yet another reason: careful study of the local architecture of the past.

But what are the consequences of the increasing fame attached to Ticino's new buildings? This Swiss canton has become something of a guidebook to modern architecture, and it is visited by an increasing number of enthusiastic tourists from abroad, even from other continents.

Giuseppe Rusconi ■

How do you win contracts?

Our firm would not exist without the competitive scene. In 95% of all cases, we obtain our contract because of something special we have provided. What makes things rather difficult for us is that we do not belong to any special interest group or lobby, but only to professional associations. So we do not profit from any internal advertising campaigns. Instead we work independently, creatively, insisting on quality, with enthusiasm and chaotically – in the positive sense of that word. You sketch a project, you pull it to pieces, you start again you pull it to pieces once more – it is all a very long process.

But you still teach. Is that in order to survive?

I do not work at the Burgdorf Engineering College just to earn money, but as a missionary. The teaching work is exciting. I know I am training our future competitors, but we learn an awful lot from each other.

Every year the Federal Institute of Technology produces talented architects. Why is it that in Switzerland, particularly on the central plateau, there continue to be so many uniform one-family houses? Are the Swiss really so lacking in imagination? Or

is Switzerland too small for good ideas?

Architecture is shaped by its cultural background. If the future owner of a house thinks he can lead his life without thinking artistically, then that will be reflected in his house. I give Holland very good marks on this score. Many of our study trips end up by going there. But in the last few years there has been an enormous increase in quality in Switzerland too – in both private and government building. It is interesting that the incentives for this came from various engineering colleges.

On the other hand, the Halen estate near Berne is still seen all over Europe, 30 years after it was realised, as a perfect example of compact building, of the trend towards constructing “a town within a town”.

Does Switzerland’s scarcity of land lead to innovative thinking here?

The problem is that credits for working out a project and producing a model are subject to referendum. The voter does not decide according to the actual quality of a construction scheme, but rather on whether he likes it or not. The shape of a roof can make all the difference as to whether a municipality builds a school or not.

What do you expect from architecture?

It depends on use. What must a building be able to do? The monument effect – “this house looks so good from outside that it absolutely must be kept” – interests me not at all. In any case, for me the process is more important than the result... Every building has its own history by the time it is finished; that makes it attractive. It is the same as with people.

As an architect, do you consider yourself an artist?

Not really. An artist is totally free, and we are not able to realise our full potential. We make architecture to be used. Art is of course very important to us, since it influences our thought. I learned that very thoroughly in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time I used to go to the Kunsthalle in Berne “to take a look at the world”.

Where is architecture going?

The emotional side is becoming more important than the rational. Analogy is taking a bigger role. For example, a facade may look like fish scales or a house like a pile of wood. But developments in architecture are very gradual.

**“We are emerging from an analytical period. Towns have been taken apart – horizontally, vertically and in terms of time. The word architecture has been more and more closely defined. When we talk of architectural culture, we mean concepts which refer to the man-made environment as a whole, in which the same principles are valid in matters small and big, for a tram waiting room as much as for the basic principles of urban development”. (Carl Fingerhuth, Basle City cantonal architect)
Construction: Häfliger Grunder von Allmen. (Photo: Archives)**

The wheels of democracy also turn slowly. In Switzerland particularly, big building projects take so long that often there is a whole generation between preparation, planning and execution. Have you had the same experience?

Yes. Take the training centre at the Insel Hospital. We won the competition in 1986, and the building will be inaugurated in 1996. It is unique in Europe for a project to last so long. In these circumstances the team has to take a deep breath and show great endurance and mutual support.

What about architecture for export? After the war, Swiss architects helped with the reconstruction of German cities. More recently, Swiss firms have won many competitions, prizes and contracts abroad, three in Berlin alone. Why has Swiss architecture such a good reputation worldwide?

The fact that ideas flow from one place to another is not a Swiss but a global phenomenon. Since the Iron Curtain fell, the competitive struggle has become truly international. Quality has improved as a result. There are many very good architects, in Switzerland as elsewhere.

What in fact is Swiss architecture?

A Swiss architect is capable of mastering all stages of his art. He is able to take full responsibility from the first sketch right through construction to project management. Basle’s Michael Alder is a very typical example of this.

Which Swiss city is at present the most innovative with respect to architectural projects – not just plans?

The honour must be shared between Basle and Baden. This has a lot to do with local politics. In Basle, Carl Fingerhuth has pointed the way. St. Gall is also coming up strongly.

What will Swiss architecture be like in the year 2020?

It will be international. At present many Swiss architects are opening branch offices in other countries. I would like to work outside Switzerland myself. This means that ideas from abroad will flow back here. Women will become more important as architects. Student groups already in existence contain more than 50% of women. When these really get going...

Interview: Alice Baumann ■

