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The fascinating and risky business of

BY ALICE BAUMANN

Arenas as entertainment venues and cauldrons of emotions: for the first time in decades Switzerland is again building sports stadiums.

IN SEVERAL SWISS CITIES the same vision is being replayed in the minds of wealthy investors: the image of families travelling to leisure complexes in city outskirts. Getting there is child's play thanks to good motorway connections and generous parking. After shopping in the mall, the family can eat at the in-house restaurant. Following this, the complex tempts you further with a choice of football, cinema and a disco.

In Basle, Berne, Geneva, St. Gallen and Zurich this vision is already taking concrete shape. Plans are under way for football sta-

diums which, combined with entertainment and shopping facilities, will create an entirely new consumer product.

In 1998 the National Council authorised CHF 60 million for the extension and construction of sports venues. The beneficiaries included the football arenas of Geneva, Basle and Berne. Construction has already begun in Basle, and projects in the other cities are in full swing. A perfect deal: sports fans gain a modern stadium and investors get construction sites that would otherwise not be available. But will it pay off in the long run?

Risk of backfire

The danger lurks in the vision: if there is a choice between soccer and a multiplex cinema, not everyone would favour football over Hollywood. It may be difficult, especially for clubs like Young Boys and FC St. Gallen, to find additional fans among shoppers in the malls. Naturally international games are attractive, but these cannot be conjured out of a hat. One wonders therefore if sports clubs could even afford the rent. At least the

stores would be closed in the evenings when a match is on, but this is small consolation for clubs with half-empty coffers.

"The new stadium complexes must be turned into venues for the entire family," says Bruno Marazzi, an enthusiastic promoter of the multifunctional concept. His company, Marazzi AG, is building the new Wankdorf stadium in Berne and also the St. Jakob Park in Basle, featuring restaurants, cinemas, discos, fitness centres, offices, stores and car parks, and in Basle's case even a senior citizens' residence. Only by providing facilities like this can a stadium be built nowadays, he argues. "We sought a way of building a stadium without the need for State subsidies," explains Marazzi director Werner Müller. Bruno Marazzi adds that this is the only option: "Neither the sports clubs nor the cities or cantons have the money for new stadiums."

Sparkling arena

The Swiss architects feel challenged by the futuristic ideas. The world-famous architect bureau Herzog & de Meuron of Basle is



Photo: 2000 Herzog & de Meuron, Basle

Besides the actual stadium, plans for the St. Jakob complex include a senior citizens' residence with 111 apartments, a shopping centre covering 18 000 m², and an indoor car park.

super stadiums

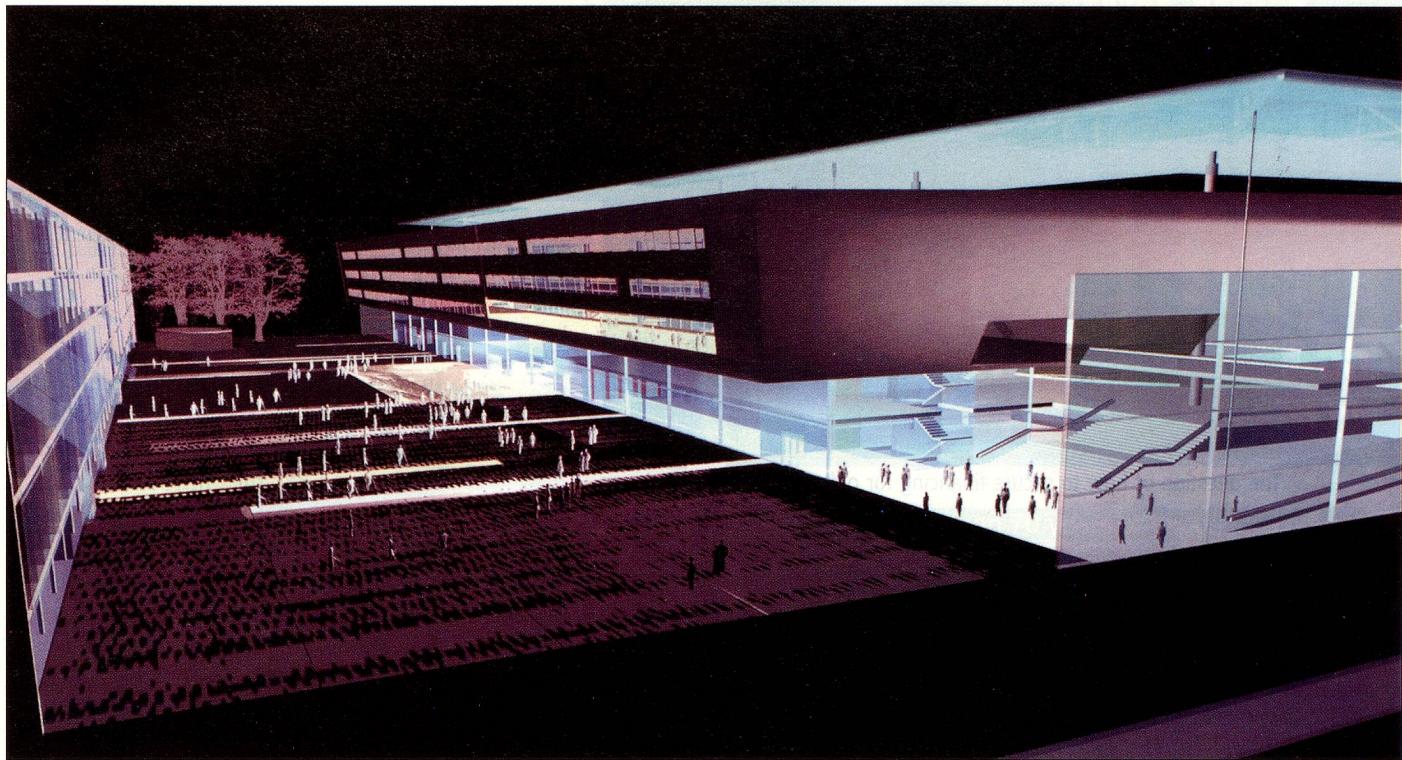


Photo: Lüscher Architekten, Lausanne, Schwaar & Partner, Berne

The stadium built in Berne for the 1954 World Cup is to be torn down at the end of 2000 to make way for a football stadium with seating capacity for 35,000, a hotel, a multiplex cinema, and a department store.

designing the first relatively large stadium reconstruction in Switzerland for 40 years. The "Joggeli", built for the 1954 World Cup, was torn down at the end of 1998, since which time Switzerland's most state-of-the-art stadium has been under construction. "We are creating something that Switzerland has never seen before," explains Herzog with shining eyes, "A stadium that sparkles."

Explaining his plans to the magazine "Facts", Herzog said the building should reflect the "festive feel of an evening game". The stands will sparkle, the facades and the roof as well: red like a foyer of a theatre and blue like the sky. Red and blue are also the colours of FC Basle, the new arena's home club. According to Herzog the stadium should be a place that leaves behind good memories and "where the emotions of the spectators are closely linked with the architecture". The huge construction is 35 metres high and 160 metres long and will seat 36,000 compared to the 60,000 capacity of the old "Joggeli".

Shaky plans in Zurich

In 1997 Hardturm AG, the owners of Zurich's Hardturm stadium, decided to proceed with the extension plans drawn up in 1984. The first stage of this project was completed in 1998 with the reconstruction of the West stand

However, the nation-wide discussion on the desolate condition of Swiss football stadiums has once more cast doubt on the Hardturm plans. Moreover, the project for extension of Zurich's Letzigrund stadium was also due for consideration. The economic and political problems of extending two existing stadiums soon became apparent to all those interested in a new stadium.

In association with Hardturm AG and other investors, the Zurich Municipal Council decided to construct a single, entirely new stadium instead of renovating two existing stadiums. The new stadium would be home to both Zurich football clubs as well as the world-class Zurich Gold track-

and-field meeting, and is scheduled for construction on the site of the present Hardturm stadium within the next five years. Initial studies and models attest to the keen interest in building such an international showcase object.

Avoiding financial nightmares

In the meantime executives and investors have become more uncertain, since projects abroad have shown that planning and construction always takes longer and in some cases costs considerably more than a renovation or extension. To safeguard against these social and architectural dreams turning into sporting and financial nightmares, they are taking their time before kicking the project ball into the proverbial goal.