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Basel in need of a museum strategy

One construction project after another: Basel, the “city of museums”, is building museums on a grand scale, but these institutions lack the funding to meet their running costs.

CHRISTOPH HEIM

While Marc Chagall and Paul Klee set the tone this autumn in Basel, the city of art and museums’ culture management is in turmoil – its museums’ policy simply isn’t working. As there is nowhere near enough money available, Josef Helfenstein, who has been Director of the Basel Museum of Art for almost a year now, has appealed to the public for help. The museum faces a 2.5 million Swiss franc shortfall in revenues needed to cover running costs in 2018.

The major autumn exhibition in the art museum’s new building looks at Chagall’s “breakthrough years” and focuses on the Franco-Russian painter’s artistic exploits in the 1910s. At the same time, the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen is exploring Klee’s approach to abstraction in art. Both exhibitions are exquisitely beautiful and bring together absolutely outstanding pieces from their own collections as well as from museums and private collections worldwide. Basel is once again Switzerland’s art hotspot.

The Klee exhibition is also the pinnacle of a year of exhibitions in which the Fondation Beyeler celebrates its 20th anniversary. With 300,000 to 350,000 visitors a year, the private museum – which is also planning to build an extension designed by Peter Zumthor – is more successful than any other art museum in Switzerland. This development will be set in villa gardens, extending the existing grounds considerably. It is being funded entirely by private patrons. “Chagall – the Breakthrough Years” at the Basel Museum of Art is the fourth major exhibition in the new annex designed by the Basel-based architects

Christ & Gantenbein. It is the first exhibition curated by its director Josef Helfenstein, a native of Lucerne who was enticed away from the Menil Collection in Houston.

Increase in space with repercussions

The remarkable new building, which resembles a fortified tower and, with its light brick façade, represents a contemporary interpretation of the old building constructed in 1936, opened in April 2016 with a large-scale public celebration. The extension, with its rather understated interior, was funded by Roche shareholder Maja Oeri and the canton of Basel-Stadt, which each contributed 50 million francs. It gives the museum one third more space and makes operational procedures easier. The world-famous art collection no longer has to be continually taken down and then hung back up again to accommodate temporary exhibitions. The museum nevertheless faces major issues.

The increase in space requires more staff to guard the paintings and to handle the higher number of exhibitions, both content-wise and organisationally. However, the additional costs will not be met by higher revenues. The budget for 2018 faces a 2.5-million-franc deficit. This is an amount that the cantonal parliament, even in the wealthy city of Basel, is reluctant to provide especially since the planners and former president of the cantonal Executive Council Guy Morin have been accused of playing down the running costs in order to gain approval for the new building scheme.

The Basel Museum of Art’s funding gap is not the only major issue for Basel’s culture policy, which has been stretched to its limits by an unprecedented number of construction projects. The main building of the barracks overlooking the Rhine is to be



converted into a creative workspace with shops at a cost of 45 million francs. There are also plans to relocate the Natural History Museum – which is bursting at the seams in its building on the Münsterhügel – together with the Basel cantonal archives to a new site in the district of St. Johann at a cost of no less than 190 million francs. Furthermore, a number of private museums, namely the Swiss Architecture Museum, the

House of Electronic Arts and the Swiss Sport Museum, are in dire financial straits because the federal government has either fully or partially withdrawn their funding.

Museum strategy required

After the planning errors at the Basel Museum of Art there are now doubts over not just the credibility of the calculations for other projects in the region but also the competence of the culture section of the cantonal execu-

standing public museums costing Basel-Stadt around 50 million francs a year. It is therefore not just a matter of the increased operating costs of the expanded Museum of Art in Basel, but also the Natural History Museum, the History Museum, the Museum of Ancient Art and the Museum of Cultures.

The Museum of Cultures, previously the Basel Museum of Ethnology, was able to relocate to a new building designed by Herzog and de Meuron in 2011. Neither it nor the Museum of

Who wants to move to the Natural History Museum?

Some 11 million francs has already been ploughed into the plans for the Natural History Museum’s new building. If the relocation actually comes about, one of Basel’s largest and most prestigious museum buildings will be left empty. With its high ceilings, the listed building constructed by Melchior Berri in 1849 is just as unsuitable for apartments as it is for office space. This is why Morin tried to entice the Museum of Ancient Art here so that it could combine its original exhibits with the plaster casts from the sculpture hall. The Museum of Ancient Art declined the offer. The wooden flooring is apparently not robust enough to bear the weight of heavy marble sculptures. Basel now has to deal with the luxury problem of who will occupy this empty museum. Nobody has come up with an answer yet.

On a final note, the History Museum is also sending out SOS signals to those responsible for Basel’s nebulous culture policy. Marc Fehlmann, the museum’s new director, has identified a significant lack of funding there too. As, in contrast to Helfenstein, he sees little chance of securing more funding from the canton, he has decided to close the Museum of Music, which is located in a former prison, as an emergency measure. Historic walls are also in urgent need of repair at the Haus zum Kirschgarten which belongs to the History Museum.

Many parts of Basel, “the city of museums”, are in a sorry state of affairs, and the city wants to know how its new mayor plans to restore order after the costly mess left behind by her predecessor.

tive, which until recently was managed by Philippe Bischof, the new head of Pro Helvetia. Basel’s cantonal parliament is calling upon Elisabeth Ackermann, Morin’s successor as mayor, to finally provide the museum strategy that Morin and Bischof failed to deliver.

An overall political strategy is required for the museum city of Basel, which not only has a world-famous art museum but also funds five out-

Ancient Art has expressed any expansion plans. All museums nevertheless want to know whether they are meant to serve as institutions which look after and exhibit their collections – for which they can more or less meet operating costs – or whether the canton also expects them to carry out exhibition and educational work with a local, regional or even international reach. This would require more funding.

The distinctive new building of the Museum of Art in Basel was officially opened a year and a half ago.
Photo: Keystone