Zeitschrift: gta papers
Herausgeber: gta Verlag
Band: 5 (2021)

Artikel: From the Bear Pit : on architecture, confinement, and social distancing
Autor: Moos, Stanislaus von
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-976208

Nutzungsbedingungen
Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation
L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use
The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

Download PDF: 25.10.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

From the Bear Pit: On Architecture, Confinement, and Social Distancing

Stanislaus von Moos
Stanislaus von Moos is Professor Emeritus of Art History at the University of Zurich.

How to live in confinement while also obeying the imperative of social distancing? Logically, as in everyday life, the two conditions seem to be mutually exclusive: confinement implies forced intimacy with all its attendant risks; social distancing, the exact opposite. The last time Switzerland was forced into developing techniques for coping with this paradox was during the Second World War. The country had no choice but to negotiate its fear of being trapped within the prison of its own borders against its phobia of being overwhelmed by immigration. The price was paid by the tens of thousands who were stopped at the borders, [1] and within by those left behind by the wartime paralysis of civilian trade.

Prison

Architecture and architectural discourse have reflected these conditions no less than more obvious cultural seismographs like fiction writing and the theater. For Alfred Roth and other activist architects of his generation, the combination of the country's relative wealth and its political status of "neutrality" seemed like an excellent reason to claim a major role in future European reconstruction. In reality, the seemingly promising conditions came to narrow the margins of their actual field of action. [2] In a postcard of the Bärengraben (Bear Pit) in Berne adressed to Le Corbusier, Roth evoked the "prison"-like conditions suddenly imposed upon the country in the *Schicksalssommer* (fateful summer) of 1940. [3] fig. 1 Perhaps it was a mere joke. Not so, to be sure, when half a century later at an event to honor Václav Havel in 1990, the playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt, rather than castigating the prisons in the Eastern Bloc, spoke of Switzerland and its second nature as a "luxury prison": a ward built by its own residents in which the inmates served as their own guards. As was to be expected, the speech outraged the officials present at the ceremony. [4] It was easy for him to date his decision to become a writer, Dürrenmatt wrote on another occasion: it was January 5, 1945. The date coincides with the final weeks of the Second World War. Dürrenmatt, then a student, was serving as an auxiliary soldier in a border guard battalion near Geneva, killing time with "epic benders" on local farms with his buddies:

"*The war had been decided; there was rubble all around us ... but one was just standing about in Switzerland, the country was entirely unscathed and there was no way of leaving. We were living as if in a prison. ... There I was, sitting in my vomit-filled*

1 See Alfred A. Häsler, *Das Boot ist voll: Die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge, 1933–1945* (Zurich: Pendo, 1992). The subject matter of this essay is discussed in a broader context in Stanislaus von Moos, *Erste Hilfe: Architekturdiskurs nach 1940 – Eine Schweizer Spurensuche* (Zurich: gta Verlag, forthcoming 2021). An earlier version appeared in Irena Lehkozivova and Joan Ockman, eds., *Book for Mary: Sixty on Seventy* (New York: privately published, 2020), 398–403.

2 Roth's proposals for postwar reconstruction in Europe are discussed in detail in chapters 2 and 3 of von Moos, *Erste Hilfe*.

3 Herbert Lüthy, "Die Disteln von 1940," in Georg Kreis, ed., *Juli 1940: Die Aktion Trump* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1973), 85–110, esp. 87.

4 Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "Die Schweiz, ein Gefängnis," speech delivered at the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institut, November 22, 1990.

fig. 1 Postcard, *Bern. Der Bärengraben* (the Bear Pit)
Source: Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris

room; the rest of the world was full of corpses, but I had nothing to counter that with other than my vomit." [5]

In order not to let the matter simply rest, Dürrenmatt subsequently held a mirror to the epic comedy of "world events" by writing theater plays that that now form part of European postwar literature.

5 Cited in Peter Rüedi, *Dürrenmatt oder die Ahnung vom Ganzen* (Zurich: Diogenes, 2011), 224.

2020—1940—1915: "Discomfort in the Small State"

When, early in 2020, a sign appeared on Swiss freeways reading "(F)(D)(A)(I) *Ausfahrt erschwert*," [6] the situation was different to 1940 when sealed borders put the country in a state of confinement, lending Roth's postcard of the Bear Pit an immediate topicality. All the same, French President Emmanuel Macron's televised speech on March 17, 2020, was a declaration of war. What was new in this war was the invisibility of the enemy; as for the strategies of control, they were more familiar. Autarky through closing borders was the first step. Then, people hastened to declare their readiness to bury political rivalry in the interests of group survival, albeit just for the time being. This is to say nothing of the popular longing for powerful state intervention or of fantasies of expanding governmental power (the latter proliferating partly in response to the former and partly due to bureaucracy's innate anticipatory paternalism).

6 "(F) [France], (D) [Germany], (A) [Austria], (I) [Italy]: exit hindered," meaning that crossing the border was only possible in special cases.

For better or worse with respect to Switzerland around 1940, many of those fantasies were doomed, ultimately crushed between the "bumpers of the national buffer system." [7] Word had spread that after the fall of Paris, Le Corbusier had left the capital and taken up residence in the town of Ozon in the Pyrenees; the postcard was addressed to him there. The Bärengraben postcard was signed by the phalanx of the Swiss Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), which had apparently just ended a meeting in the Swiss capital of Berne and decided to let the absent *éminence grise*, Le Corbusier, know about it. [8] We do not know what was on the meeting's agenda, but given its date of October 21, 1940, the war was inevitably on people's minds. Both the image and the message suggest that the international situation had played a role in the discussions. For those present, the German occupation of large parts of France in July 1940 led to the complete closure of the border with France. Virtually overnight, Switzerland was a country entirely surrounded by Axis forces. The Zurich/Paris connection, vital to CIAM, was interrupted indefinitely. For some, the complications associated with that change must have weighed more heavily than the feeling of relief in early summer of the same year, perhaps already forgotten by then, that German troops had not skirted the Maginot Line at

7 Lüthy, "Die Disteln," 92.

8 The postcard is in the collection of the Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. The complete list of signatories reads as follows: Francis Quétant, Geneva; René Schwertz, Geneva; Hans Brechbühler, Berne; Otto H. Senn, Basel; Ernst F. Burckhardt, Zurich; Hans Schmidt, Basel; Alfred Roth, Zurich; Max Bill, Zurich; Werner Krebs, Berne; Werner M. Moser, Zurich; Rudolf Steiger, Zurich; and Sigfried Giedion, Zurich.

France's largely unsecured southern flank (that is, via Switzerland, a fear that had been the source of considerable panic in May of that year). Rather they had broken through in the north, by way of the Netherlands and Belgium, with devastating consequences for both countries.

The postcard's somewhat jocular motif suggests that the group sought not to be overly destabilized by the circumstances. That said, the image of the bears trapped in their pit got right to the crux of a state of mind shared by just about everybody in the group (note, by the way, that the bear has always been Berne's heraldic animal). The text, written by Alfred Roth, himself of Bernese descent, reads "*chers amis, les CIAM suisses se réunissent dans leur prison pour l'embellir*" ("dear friends, the Swiss CIAM has come together in its prison in order to embellish it"). The message seems clear: as far as CIAM was concerned, the closing of the border meant nothing less than the end, for an indeterminate period, of international collaboration. Whatever *grands projets* were waiting to be tackled, [9] for those left behind in Europe's neutral backyard there were not many alternatives except to settle and isolate in local daily life.

Among the thousands of postcards stored at the Fondation Le Corbusier, there are quite a few from between 1940 and 1941 when the architect's notoriously ambiguous political entanglements entered a critical phase. [10] The Bärengraben postcard sits awkwardly within the universe of Le Corbusier's collection of postcard motifs, at least at first sight. Popular most of all as a destination for field trips of Swiss primary school students (surely including those from La Chaux-de-Fonds, Le Corbusier's birthplace), the *Bärengraben* may have resonated with the architect's own memories of claustrophobia in Switzerland. If it did, then these memories go back to the years of the First World War, when as the young Charles-Édouard Jeanneret he began to voice his frustration with the narrow-mindedness of clients and politicians and the limits imposed upon architectural endeavors that transcend the scope of the given budget, both recurring themes in the letters he exchanged with Auguste Perret between 1914 and 1915. More often than not, such limits were imposed in the name of "democracy." In hindsight, the decision to leave Switzerland for Paris during the First World War looks like an inevitable consequence of these local tribulations. On the other hand, the famous inscription added to the frontispiece of *La Ville Radieuse*, a book published sometime later, marks the point where the author's frustration with the constraints of life at home had definitely tilted into the fantasy of omnipotence that, by then, had already become his trademark—*dédie à l'autorité*. [11] Note

9 We know that Le Corbusier was desperate to get backing from Vichy for his extravagant plans for Algiers, whereas his cousin Pierre joined the politically opposed camp of the *résistance* in Grenoble.

10 Le Corbusier's enthusiastic commitment to Maréchal Pétain and his puppet government in Vichy, and the many nationalist and racist policies it decreed from 1940 onwards, have been discussed in great detail in François Chaslin, *Un Corbusier* (Paris: Seuil, 2015). For a comprehensive assessment of Le Corbusier's politics before and during the Second World War, see Jean-Louis Cohen, "Le Front Populaire De Le Corbusier," in Rémi Baudouï and Arnaud Dercelles, eds., *Le Corbusier 1930–2020: Polémiques, mémoires et histoire* (Paris: Tallandier, 2020), 83–96.

11 "Dedicated to authority." See Le Corbusier, *La ville radieuse* (Paris: Vincent Fréal & Cie., 1933 [1964]), frontispiece. The book's date of publication, 1933, adds an ominous ring to the inscription.

that when Karl Schmid wrote *Unbehagen im Kleinstaat* (Discomfort in the Small Nation), [12] the protagonists of this Swiss phenomenon were Jacob Burckhardt, Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, and Max Frisch. Had the survey included architects, Le Corbusier would have been the most conspicuous example.

The Temptation of the Archaic "Empiricism"

I do not know whether Dürrenmatt, who also came from a small town near Berne, ever wrote about the Bärengraben. For the Milanese architect Aldo Rossi, the Bear Pit was the epitome of an archaic era where there was no distinction between city and countryside. In connection with a project for the Klösterliareal, a site near the Bärengraben, he wrote in 1981:

"The bears, as the symbol of the city, are not simply a promotional gag or a mini zoo for tourists. ... The bears represent the forest, the countryside, a pre-Roman civilization where the city and the countryside were not separated by walls; this mixture of city and countryside, in which the Gothic world behaves strangely analogously to the Greek world, is Bern's greatest asset."

Likewise, Berne's annual *Zibelimärit* (onion market) is "neither an urban nor a rural festival," Rossi argued; "it goes further back than this distinction." [13] Rossi's evocation of a primeval world populated by bears where people are busy cultivating onions seems like a late, pointed characterization of the Homeland Spirit, or *Landigeist*, that has so enduringly shaped everyday life in the era of the national *Anbauschlacht* (battle of the cultivators). [14] Is Rossi right, or is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1763 characterization of the country as "one big city," divided into thirteen neighborhoods more appropriate? [15] Both images may be read as characterizations of a process that has shaped the urban and suburban areas of life and work in the national ecology of modern Switzerland: the slow but steady neutralization of any clearly articulated difference between city and countryside in favor of a process ruled by the law of agglomeration; that is, avoiding, wherever possible, planning beyond the scale of a given construction project while also discouraging the formation of high-density urban clusters.

Compared to the rest of Europe, Switzerland experienced a veritable construction boom during the war years. The protagonists of "New Construction," as programed by the CIAM in the late 1920s, were now obliged to make peace with the *Heimatstil* and to reappropriate traditional methods of construction in wood and stone or else find themselves without commissions. In 1946, a large traveling exhibition summed up the results. [16] "When our misfortune began," Rudolf Schwarz wrote in the catalogue for the

12 Karl Schmid, "Unbehagen im Kleinstaat: Untersuchungen über Conrad-Ferdinand Meyer, Henri-Frédéric Amiel, Jakob Schaffner, Max Frisch, Jacob Burckhardt," in Judith Niederberger and Thomas Sprecher, eds., *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4 (Zurich: NZZ Verlag, 1963), 109–366.

13 Cited in Heinrich Helfenstein, "'Un revolver, c'est solide, c'est en acier': Zu einem wenig bekannten Entwurf Aldo Rossis für das Berner Klösterliareal," in Ákos Moravánszky and Judith Hopfengärtner, eds., *Aldo Rossi und die Schweiz: Architektonische Wechselwirkungen* (Zurich: gta Verlag, 2011), 107–17, here 114.

14 The term *Landigeist* is derived from the Swiss National Exhibition held in Zurich in 1939 and colloquially called the *Landi*. The *Anbauschlacht* refers to the battle for food self-sufficiency imposed by the government due to the massive reduction in imports after 1940. See Friedrich Traugott Wahlen, *Anbauschlacht* (Berne: A. Verlag and A.G. Francke, 1941), and Peter Maurer, "Landwirtschaftspolitik, Plan Wahlen, Schweizerisches Anbauwerk 1937–1943" (PhD thesis, University of Berne, 1984).

15 Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Maréchal de Luxembourg, January 20, 1763, in Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, eds., *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), 1813–4.

16 *Switzerland Planning and Building Exhibition* (London: RIBA, 1946; Zurich: Orell Füssli, 1946).

exhibition's venue in Cologne, "the architecture of Switzerland was not very different from that of Germany ... in those years, freedom went into the mountains, and now it is returning to us from there." Today, he continued, the country can "show us what it would be like around us if all this had not happened."

Schwarz then went on to emphasize that what was perceived as Swiss was, after all, "the human decency of the buildings shown." [17] Given German architecture's saturation with the rhetoric of Speer, Schmitthenner, and Bonatz, one imagines what Schwarz might have had in mind. Nevertheless, to some Swiss ears the flattery may have had a different ring: what Schwarz praised as decency might equally be understood as his pinpointing of a modesty of ambition. No wonder, then, that being restricted to decorating the status quo, in 1940, resulted in a rather atypical kind of gallows humor from those unexpectedly trapped by the confinement imposed by the war, as if a profession entitled to practice surgery on the body of the city was now suddenly forced to restrict its efforts to palliative care. Note that Roth's barbs in the postcard ("the Swiss CIAM has come together in its prison in order to embellish it") cast light on a condition that was not specific to Switzerland—the twilight of an avant-garde in search of a role in a nation suddenly thrown back upon itself. After the war, Roth, now the editor of the architectural magazine *Werk*, grudgingly put up with the common-sense modernism that became the lingua franca of Swiss building for years to come; an Alpine variant of New Empiricism, even though, for him, much of it was a "mixture of Hollywood and Berchtesgaden." [18] Sigfried Giedion, by contrast, spoke of "New Escapism" instead of New Empiricism in referring to what he chastised as the era's ingratiating "handicrafts style." [19] Both Giedion and Roth knew well enough that significant parts of the Swiss CIAM, too, had by this point succumbed to the fever.

As to the effects of all this on the economy of sentiments, we lack the cavalier perspective needed to get the necessary overview. The March 2020 issue of Switzerland's leading architectural magazine declared "clay, chalk, wool, hemp, and straw" to be the heralds of today's building. [20] That would be considerably more down-to-earth than to retreat into the therapeutic mysteries of private or group wellness as prophetically proposed for the twenty-first century by the legendary Blur above Lake Neuchâtel at the 2002 Expo.

For the years around the Second World War, the return to craft traditions, and a restrained interest in folklore in general, were seen as necessary and healthy signs of cultural authenticity (as opposed to, say, a mere variant within a global spectrum

17 Rudolf Schwarz, "Helvetia docet," in *Schweizerische Architektur-Ausstellung Köln* (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1948). For an assessment of the London venue of that exhibition, see John Summerson, "Swiss Architecture in London," *Listener*, September 26, 1946, 412–13.

18 Alfred Roth, "Zeitgemäße Architekturbetrachtungen," *Das Werk* 34, no. 6 (June 1947), 182–87, and 38, no. 3 (March 1951) 65–76, here 71.

19 Sigfried Giedion, "A Talk Given at a Joint Meeting of the MARS Group and the Institute of Contemporary Arts...," *Architects' Journal* 108, no. 26 (1948), 206–7. See also the preface in Sigfried Giedion, ed., *A Decade of New Architecture/ Dix ans d'architecture contemporaine* (Zurich: Editions Girsberger, 1951), 2–3.

20 Daniel Kurz and Roland Züger, "Authentisch konstruieren," *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen* 107, no. 3 (March 2020), 1–2.

of administered ethno-centric traditionalism). More intriguing, perhaps, is the long-lasting appeal of ruralism amongst planners. Around 1940, this was regarded as a prophylactic against bombs even though, as a dogma, it may not have been officially formalized until 1969, when the Federal Department of Justice and Police distributed its curious civil defense manual among Swiss households. [21] However, the pendulum has swung back and architects have begun to crusade in favor of densification. To what degree they may be able to shatter the collective confidence in the single family home and the private car remains to be seen. The current stigmatization of public space and public transportation as hazard zones is unlikely to help them. As for the possible postcard that sums up this contradictory condition, it may already be floating unrecognized in the ether as an Instagram post. One hopes it will soon land in an appropriate archive.

21 Eidgenössische Justiz- und Polizeidepartement, ed., *Zivilverteidigung* (Aarau: Miles-Verlag, 1969), esp. 58—59, 76—77, and 110—11. Gerold Kunz sees the manual's strong tendency towards ranking low-density forms of cohabitation above high-density ones as a coded instruction by the Swiss military to the planning authorities. See Gerold Kunz, "Zieht Hinaus! Der Kalte Krieg und die Zersiedelung der Schweiz," *Heimatschutz/Patrimoine* 4 (2010), 14—16, here 15.