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LED BY ARCHITECTURE

to plan and complete the interior design at the museum "Laténium" in Neuchâtel.

Author: Renate Menzi, photos: Yves André

In winter, when the lake shores are white and the opposite shores are shrouded in mist, you could mistake Lake Neuchâtel for the sea. The people who lived in the lake dwellings here in the Bronze Age did not know the sea, and they were certainly thinking of other things when they looked out over the water. How on earth did they manage to survive in these temperatures? Approximately three thousand archaeological objects have survived from those distant times, and are now part of a state-of-the-art museum exhibition in the spacious building of the "Laténium" in Hauterive/Neuchâtel. A lake dwelling on piles and a Gallo-Roman ship are examples of the numerous full-scale reconstructions to be found in the three-hectare lake shore park. The archaeological museum "Laténium" was opened in 2001 and has since been awarded the Council of Europe Museum Prize.

The permanent exhibition is designed so that visitors move along a path laid out like a time line: from the medieval period back to the Neanderthal period. The spatial element is a crucial factor here. The tour comprises two-storeys and eight distinct chronological sections. It leads visitors below and above the original level of the lake and provides information about the story surrounding the finds and the archaeological work: excavating deep in the earth, searching and finding both underwater and in glacier ice. Didactic games and mini laboratories are provided for children and young people in every room. Short films, videos and models visualise the life of bygone eras.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MICROARCHITECTURE Atelier Oï, an interdisciplinary architecture office from La Neuveville, won the competition to design the exhibition in 2000, and numerous building companies were interested in carrying out the work. Finally Röthlisberger and Glaeser, who had applied together, won the contract. Aurel Aebi from Atelier Oï remarks "We actually favoured their candidature", and adds that it would not even have been possible to carry out the project with a different line up. This statement refers not only to the high technical standards but also to the tight time schedule: a matter of months for the entire exhibition fit out.

What was the designer's greatest challenge? Atelier Oï joined a project which had a ten-year lead time. The building works were finished and the spatial parameters for the exhibition determined by the interior, even the wood parquet and the slightly sloping ramps which lead underground were already there. These were not the only design limitations, there were also the various requirements of the specialists participating in the project to consider. Atelier Oï's, Patrick Reymond describes the enormous difficulties they had trying to meet all the different expectations from political authorities, curators, archaeologists and the museum management.

The designers developed a "micro-architecture" for the various exhibition areas and divided the overall space into smaller and larger rooms to aid orientation and enhance the themes. Unlike the archaeological approach – reconstruction of a historical context – Atelier Oï did not want the exhibition design to be illustrative, but sought a more open interpretation for the contents. For instance, the glacier is represented by insulation material, which refracts rays of light in the same way as ice. A sculptural arrangement of organically shaped surfaces merely hints at a bears' den. The design does not draw on standard archaeological visuals, and Röthlisberger's experience and technical know-how was essential in both developing and executing the work. Apart from developing made-to-measure rooms

Atelier Oï and Röthlisberger unite

and containers, the task was also to display and protect objects which are thousands of years old. The difficult conservation conditions meant that innumerable tests were required, and the range of material which could be used was restricted – an additional challenge for the interior designer.

COLOUR CONCEPT, ABSTRACTION, TECHNOLOGY Atelier Oï have achieved their goal when visitors can move around the different historical and spatial dimensions without getting lost, and the hands-on encounter with archaeology is completely safe. Does the exhibition design still work eight years after it was opened? Unlike other archaeological presentations, visitors are in a light and airy environment from start to finish. The colour palette of cool tones offset with white creates a pleasant contrast to the earthy hues of the exhibits. The micro-architecture is semantically unobtrusive yet this setting enables visitors to see the archaeological finds in context. On top of that, the sophisticated technology is so well concealed that it does not detract from the exhibition. Every visible screw would compete with the exhibits in the showcases, themselves representing the earliest stages of technology, and transport the visitor back to the here and now. On the whole, the colour scheme, the precise lighting of exhibits and the thematically associated micro-architecture make science more digestible. The spatial arrangement of the objects is not only a coherent composition, it also promotes understanding of the finds. The architecture is not heavy handed or didactic with the visitors when it gently indicates the direction, suggests encountering the past and proposes reorientation.

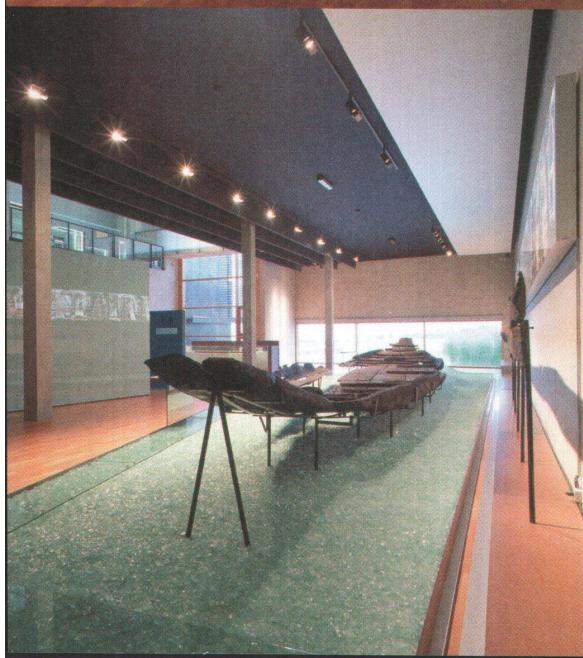
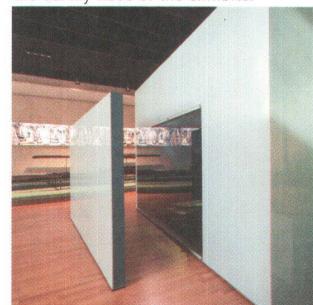
LATÉNIUM – PARK AND ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM, 2001

- › Client: Canton Neuchâtel
- › Architecture: Laurent Chenu, Bruce Dunning, Pierre Jéquier, Philippe Vasserot, Pieter Versteegh, Geneva
- › Museography/scenario/coordination: Museum Development, Vevey
- › Scenography/design/graphic concept/signage: Atelier Oï, La Neuveville
- › Execution of "evolutive standards": Glaeser Interiors, Baden
- › Micro-architecture: Röthlisberger Schreinerei, Gümligen
- › Interior fit out procedure: Pre-qualification
- › Exhibition surface area: 2,750 m²

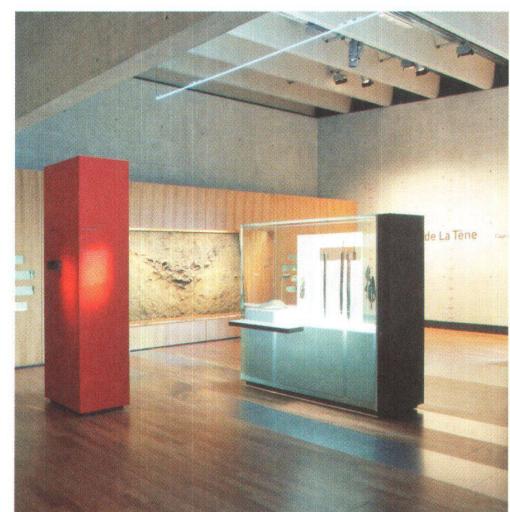
Atelier Oï developed a "micro-architecture" which makes orientation within the building easier and guides the public through the exhibition.



▼ Fittings in cool tones contrast with the earthy hues of the exhibits.



◀ The reconstruction of a Gallo-Roman ship stands on a bed of glass splinters.



^ Exhibits are displayed in showcases.