

Consistent changes : Hans-Jörg Ruchs respectful conversion of old Engadine houses

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CONSISTENT CHANGES

Hans-Jörg Ruch and Peter Röthlisberger's recurrent "ping-pong" game.

Author: Barbara Wülser, photos: Giancarlo Gardin

ARRIVING The morning sun twinkles through the wooden blinds and casts rays of light on the dining-table. The rays continue along the wooden floor when they fall from the table. Hans-Jörg Ruch lets his eyes wander across the still life: table, bench and floor. The 62 year-old architect from St. Moritz has a different picture before his eyes. Let us go back about fifteen years. Hans-Jörg Ruch is standing with Peter Röthlisberger in the very same place. The two men are engrossed in their conversation, they are playing ping-pong as they put it. Larch, maple, spruce – which type of wood is suitable for the interior of the house built in St. Moritz by Alfred Verdieri in 1939?

Even then, this was not the first time that Hans-Jörg Ruch and Peter Röthlisberger had worked on a project together. During the refurbishment of the St. Moritz Hotel "Hauser" reception area two years earlier, they had put team play into practice. That experience led to renovating Verdieri's house together.

Today Hans-Jörg knows that he made the right decision concerning Peter Röthlisberger just as he knows that it was right to decide on Canadian Douglas fir. It gives the house interior a feeling of peace and security and no other type of wood, not even native wood, can emulate that. Douglas fir complements the double lattice windows also in fir, larch and oak, which were restored and reused during the 1994/1995 rebuilding project. Almost all the fittings and furniture, such as floors, tables, cupboards, doors and beds are made of solid wood. The works by Ruch and Röthlisberger are of the same ilk. "With us, there are no ruptures", says the architect. You cannot see who was responsible for any particular part. That is ultimately of no importance.

STAYING A shaft of light shines through the small slit between the floor and the bottom tread of the stairs. A band of light runs around the wooden staircase which was inserted into the building like a piece of a puzzle. The hollow, single run, ten-metre long staircase reaches resolutely from the cellar right up into the roof space. However, in summer it expands a little and in winter it contracts. The slit, measuring approximately two centimetres, ensures that the wood has room for movement.

The ping-pong game between Hans-Jörg Ruch and Peter Röthlisberger resulted in this unusual solution. The challenge was: How to overcome the cramped spatial situation, find room for a lift and create access to four floors by means of stairs. Although the company was not commissioned to build the stairs, Röthlisberger carpenters built a model and convinced the architect and client that they were the right men for the job. The company's experience in furniture manufacturing stood them in good stead. The four-centimetre thick Douglas fir boards, forming the stringers of the free-standing staircase, were assembled and glued on site. The treads of the same thickness hold the stringers together. Roland Keller, in charge of engineering at Röthlisberger, says that this furniture-like element, whose design took them to the limits of feasibility, was one of their greatest challenges.

RELAXING There is no sign of any joint between the chrome steel bath and its close-fitting wooden casing. Through the window above the bath, there are views of the spectacular Engadine mountain scenery. Fresh towels are lying ready for use in a glass element underneath the washbasin. The geometric form of the bath, shower and basin is continued in the nearby wardrobe in the master bedroom. The wardrobe is the staircase's little sister, as it too was deposited in the room and now divides the bed-

room from the bathroom. "Once you have learnt the rules, you can use them everywhere," says Solothurn man, Hans-Jörg Ruch, who has been working in Engadine for over thirty years.

A further rule, observed from cellar to roof space is: Use the simplest, plainest joints possible. Hans-Jörg Ruch is convinced that the company's awareness of detail and material expertise has enabled Röthlisberger to create such unobtrusive and durable connections between wood, chrome steel and glass: joints such as the ones in the kitchen and bathroom. Even after fifteen years they still look as good as new. The same principle has been used in dealing with objects made of wood, clear glass or frosted glass which are found all through the house. Hans-Jörg Ruch, exacting with himself as he is with his work and his partners, appreciates not only Röthlisberger specialist competence but its business acumen as well. Thanks to order bundling, the company in Gümligen keeps bureaucracy to a minimum, finances transparent and responsibility clearly defined. And it keeps its deadlines too.

RETURNING Architect Ruch has learnt how to deal with solid wood thanks to Röthlisberger. He knows that anyone working with "solid wood", has to accept certain conditions; and this knowledge is of great value. It is important for an architect, he says of himself, not only to seek beauty in the historical Engadine houses, but also to seek the truth. In the meantime, his subtle changes have won him widespread acclaim.

Hans-Jörg Ruch teamed up with Röthlisberger again three years ago, to convert a historical Engadine house in St. Moritz, this time built by Nicolaus Hartmann in 1928. Once again an extraordinary staircase was created, this time using European chestnut. This cooperation bore fruit: the cupboard "Plusminus" for the "Röthlisberger Kollektion". The cupboard is a plus-minus panelling construction in this same wood. The architect had discovered an example of this ancient style of panelling made from a staggered construction of boards in the Hartmann house and reinterpreted it for use in the interior. Peter Röthlisberger received the ball and returned it to Hans-Jörg as an idea for a cupboard.

Opening a door is an act of concentration. In the renovated house in St. Moritz it is an act of reflection. The moment is not restricted to pressing down the handle, the perfect doors actually do not have any. Instead they have a single magnetic strip. One last glance into the sun-filled living-room. Goodbye. With a barely audible suction noise, the door closes. Was that the last time? That is hardly likely. But no more information is forthcoming. "We are playing ping-pong" is all that Peter Röthlisberger will reveal.

PRIVATE HOUSE ST. MORITZ, 1994 / 1995

> Architect: Hans-Jörg Ruch, St. Moritz

> Interior fit out: Pre-qualification





<Solid wood in the living area.



∨ Bath integrated into the woodwork.



^ Seamless constructions all around the house.



<Free-standing staircase made of boards of four centimetre thick Douglas fir and held together by stair treads of the same thickness.