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A conversation with ARCHITEKTUR FILMTAGE trans Redaktion

Together with Agota, Nadine and Peter we sit upstairs in the Stüssihof cinema, where three years ago the Architektur FilmTage took place for the first time. They talk about their festival and vision with great passion, but also give a matter-of-fact account of the difficulties that every young enterprise has to face.

- TM This year you held the third edition of the Architektur FilmTage Zürich with screenings all over the city. During the first two years the Stüssihof cinema was the home of the festival. Can you talk about the early days and how it all got started?
- AK I came to Zurich after my studies at the university in Budapest and started working in an office for architecture. In 2017, I came across the London Architecture Film Festival, which I liked very much, and looked to see if there was something similar in Switzerland. I searched and searched, but couldn't find any architecture film festival in Switzerland. When I got home I told Peter that something was missing and we immediately started thinking about how we can organize a festival ourselves. The Stüssihof was a good place to start, because it is a central space and it was big enough to accommodate the event, at least in the beginning.
- PP It all happened very fast. We started working on it seriously at the end of August and the festival took place in November. So, we had to do it in a really short amount of time. When you organize an event, it's usually good to have a precise plan a year in advance.
- AK We liked the idea so much, that we wanted to do it as soon as possible to see how people would react to it. After the first edition, we felt like this can really work, even if it was then still at a very amateur level. It was also through the first edition that we met Nadine, who came to us on the last day and said that she would love to be part of the team.
- TM In Switzerland, people often worry that things have to be perfectly organized before they can get anything done. That can be a very inhibiting feeling - it's refreshing to see someone just taking a chance...
- PP We just did it, without having any experience, many things we only realized during the festival. For example, during one panel discussion after a screening in the big cinema, we noticed that we had no lights on the stage and that the audience simply couldn't see the guests who were speaking in the front. The audience didn't care, they stayed to discuss anyway. The guests and the moderator told us afterwards that they were really surprised that everyone stayed. They said that at other architecture events, people rarely stayed for the discussions and if they did they would not ask questions. So maybe people stayed and felt comfortable enough to discuss precisely because everything was not perfect. Everything was very spontaneous and people could feel that we were not a professional organization, so it had a very natural family spirit – which people liked a lot.
- NV That's what I liked about it. As you've just said yourself, it doesn't happen that often. In Switzerland, we tend to think if it's too risky, especially financially, and if it's not perfect, we better not do it at all. At the time, I had just returned from my studies in London, where I had also worked for a film festival, and there it was the other way around: lots of young people had the passion and the urge to create something and they weren't afraid to make things happen. So, it was really a happy coincidence that I passed by this film festival. The event was still very chaotic, and there were things that would be considered a no-go at more established film festivals, but it had so much charm, and their passion really came across. It was exactly what I was looking for. So, I asked them if it was a one-time thing or if they were looking for people to join. That's how it came about.
- We still try to cultivate this inclusiveness today. We do not want to become a faceless and anonymous organization. We are always looking for ways to create a dialogue with the audience and the guests, and for that we have to create a certain atmosphere in which people feel comfortable enough to talk.
- TM This year you had screenings in much larger cinemas, in Kosmos for example. How do you balance the growth and professionalization of the festival with your desire to preserve the authentic feeling of the early days?

- NV The more we grow, the more space we need. Of course, that's a challenge. Kosmos is less niche than Stüssihof. It's a hub where people come together, where culture takes place, obviously this bigger profile is a challenge for a festival like ours, since we are still a small and niche film festival. And we don't want to do it in just one building. Each year we try to figure out in what spaces it can take place and how we need to curate these spaces in order to exhibit the film accordingly and to give way to a dialogue between the guests and the audience.
- PP One difficulty with the Stüssihof was that many people simply left after the film screenings and discussions, because they didn't know how to fit in, since there is only a small room next to the bar. It didn't matter if it was a full house or not. That's why, among other things, it's important for us to screen in locations where people can stay and connect afterwards. It doesn't have to be like this every evening, but for the opening night, for example, we need a space like this.
- AK We really want to build a platform. We're always looking for places that allow people to stay longer to discuss together, and also to give people who don't want to ask questions during the event, the opportunity to go to the guests afterwards and ask in a more private setting.
- NV At the second edition people from the film industry and the architecture scene started asking us for accreditations and press cards that would allow them to see all the films. It was clear to us that although we love Stüssihof, we would have to change location, because it was simply too small. But this change was also a great opportunity, because our festival is about architecture. So, it only makes sense that the building where you experience the film is just as important as the film itself.
- TM This year all the films had a strong connection to the locations they were shown at. How did you come up with the content? Did you start with the topics and look for the right locations or vice versa?
- AK It went both ways. Sometimes we had ideas for films and then we looked for locations and sometimes we found an amazing location and then we looked for a specific film for it.
- PP What was there first, the egg or the chicken, the building or the topic, you could also ask whether the film or the topic was first. It's the same situation. Even if we have a really nice topic, it doesn't matter if we can't find a film to go with it.
- NV After the second edition we sat down to think about the topics. In general, we aim to address issues within politics, economy and ecology. In other words: things that are urgent and within the whole context of architecture. But from then on, everything ran parallel, as Agota said. One of us would come across an interesting building or for example Peter talked to us and insisted that it was important to choose a film that deals with ecology, because it is a current concern. In the end, it was all about the vision we had of bringing film and buildings together. This also led to a big change: we went from 30 films to much less, because you just can't do 30 buildings in five days, that would be insane.
- TM At ETH we have been using film as a medium more and more in recent years, with Arno Brandlhuber really introducing film as a tool. Do you think that we as architects can learn not only from watching films, but also from using the medium as a tool for designing?
- NV It is common to show new designs with images, but now more and more people are also expecting videos showing the building. Virtual reality, will be used more and more for planning and also for competitions in the future.
- NV This year we hosted the first TRANSFER Architecture Video Award in ZAZ. It's a competition for short films, organized by the Global Architecture Platform TRANSFER, that showcases films by people from all over the world. This is another way that architects are making use of film to think about the discipline.
- TM Almost all the films you show are documentaries. Could you also imagine to screen more feature films in the future?
- NV Yes, that was something I tried to push, because I am the film nerd in our team. Yet, most of the films we tend to choose are documentaries, mostly because of the topic they address and the follow-up discussions that we curate as the majority of our guests are from the architecture industry. Obviously, architecture plays just as an important role in fiction films. This is why I also pushed for some screenings that address the more cinematic and historic side of architecture. Last year, for example, we showed King Vidor's *«The Fountainhead»* and Jacques Tati's *«Playtime»*. And this year, we screened the

silent film «Manhatta», a landmark accomplishment from the 1920s, for which Peter and my brother Daniel composed music and did a live act.

TM You all come from different backgrounds, how does this shape your collaboration?

AF You have to imagine that like any team, we have discussions that can get really heated as we have different points of view on various matters. But that's also what makes the festival so beautiful. Peter is sometimes our conscience when he reminds us to keep an eye on the business side of things, Agota comes from the architecture industry and has great ideas for the buildings, and I curate from a cinematic perspective and manage it with the experience I have from bigger film festivals.

So, we share this common passion, but it's always an ongoing process of how we can combine all of these aspects into one vision. It's a work of love, it's about art, but it's also a business, because without any financial support you can't survive, and that's also one of the things we're struggling with at the moment. We had a lot of success this year and we received a lot of good feedback from both the guests and the audience. But people are really surprised to learn that it was only three people, plus one volunteer, who did all of this. At the moment, we are not yet at a stage where we can talk about profit, and this can of course become a problem over the years.

TM What ideas would you like to put into action provided you have sufficient funding?

NV This year we had a pilot project for a student screening at the Max Bill House. The educational aspect is something we really want to pursue. We have this vision of students from

different universities and disciplines coming to the festival and networking with each other. That's why we want to offer these types of educational events for free.

PP It's difficult, I don't know how much we can mention in the interview, without giving away too much information. You know it's a big race.

TM A race with other film festivals?

PP It's not just about film events, there are a lot of architectural events also from organizations that are much older and more established than us. As we have already mentioned, the Swiss mentality is to build things up slowly so that they have a strong foundation and can be really great in the end. Some people don't understand why we want to grow so fast. We believe that we can do both, build a strong foundation and also grow fast. Organizations always try to copy each other in some ways. Without naming anyone, we feel that sometimes people come up to us and ask about our concept so that they can copy us. This is not a bad thing, it is part of the competition, I wouldn't call it stealing.

NV One can tell that Agota hit the nail on the head by asking why there is an architecture film festival in New York, in London, in Rotterdam, but not in Zurich. You can sense that people in the architecture industry are wondering why nobody thought of it sooner. So, for us the struggles are the same as for any startup: you have to and want to work with all kinds of people, with more established corporations, but also smaller companies. You really have to learn to stand up for yourself and always be aware of the fact that this is a competitive field and that there will always be different interests involved. That's why it's so important that we find a way to never sell out on our vision.

ARCHITEKTUR FILMTAGE ZÜRICH

► Peter Polanyi hat sein Studium als Event-manager in Gundel Karl College Budapest abgeschlossen. Zwischen 2002 und 2007 arbeitete er als Eventveranstalter in mehreren Clubs in Budapest. Seit 2008 ist er auch als Musiker, DJ und Producer tätig. Seit Juli 2017 ist er Mitgründer und Manager der Architektur FilmTage Zürich.

► Agota Komlosi hat an der Technischen Universität Budapest – Departement Architektur studiert und hat zwischen 2013-2018 in Zürich als Architektin gearbeitet. Ab Juli 2017 ist sie Mitgründerin des Filmfestivals Architektur FilmTage Zürich. Sie ist Co-Leiterin, und tätig bei dem Management und Programmation der AFTZ.

► Nadine Soraya Vafi ist Doktorandin, wissenschaftliche Assistentin und Lehrbeauftragte am Seminar für Filmwissenschaft der Universität Zürich. Sie hat ihren Master of Arts in Film Studies am King's College London absolviert. Seit 2013 ist sie beruflich in verschiedenen Bereichen der Filmindustrie im In- und Ausland tätig, u.a. am Raindance Film Festival (UK) und am Locarno Film Festival (CH). Seit 2018 hat sie die Co-Leitung, das Management und die künstlerische Leitung der Architektur FilmTage Zürich inne.

