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I like making structures as an engineer. I used to seek in mathematics, and now I do it more in construction, and today I tend to create combinations through seeking.

Markus Peter: I assume that all the really new industrial developments in all aspects of timber are still to come, and will go in the direction of breaking down and re-assembling the components of this material or in the direction of transforming the molecular structure. Certainly we are sufficiently provoked by current questions about composite and hybrid combinations; but it is very difficult indeed for two materials not just to be associated, but to fit together as well.

Hermann Blumer: Statical calculations are not the engineer's basic task; what he really has to do is make sure that people can digest technology, that building materials are made environmentally viable or that raw materials are treated carefully. The express requirement that materials should be used frugally inevitably leads to hybrids and composites. And this question includes how we dispose of these materials so that they do not become hazardous waste. Now that engineers have brought people closer to technology and this having almost degenerated into an evil they now have to show people that they can take responsibility in this field and know how they intend to do things tomorrow. And then do that. This is only related to building materials to the extent that we need to ask which is the right one at any particular moment. The day of wood has now dawned. It will last until we find man-made materials that are better than wood.

Markus Peter: Does the question of using other material apply primarily to the technology of composite materials?

Hermann Blumer: Yes, based on the functionality of the end product. We are looking for a wall that is well insulated against heat, cold and noise, that stores heat and cold, that repels or absorbs moisture and perhaps exudes exciting aromas. This combination has to become part of an engineer's mental stock-in-trade. The next step in a great timber-building evolution will be bringing the right materials together. This could possibly include sheep's wool and a steel sheet as well as wood, a fibre-optics data carrier, window-glass with built-in solar cells, paraffin wax as a heat storage material and so on. In brief, all the materials that make it possible for a building element to have all the desired effects. This will all have to be worked out in close co-operation with partners, but in the case of system combinations all sorts of different craft skills and planning groups will have to be involved as well.

Markus Peter: That is how I got to know Hermann Blumer! It wasn't so much about designing a particular load-bearing system as a permanent question of everything a wall or a ceiling has to do and all the other problems you want to solve at the same time. He always challenges you to make synergetic links. So for example

the extended side aperture in the lower chord of the box girder in Bienne led to a collapse in his system. This did not affect actual statical function, but came up against the changed fire safety requirements caused by the new cross-section. Changes in the dimensions of the webs and integrating sound absorption into the open cavity stabilized the system on a higher plane. This way of overlapping and charging parts is typical of work with Hermann Blumer.

werk: Are there any more things that you have been turning over in your mind for years, where you think: something has to happen there, it's just important that the time is ripe?

Hermann Blumer: Of course, and the spectrum is constantly getting wider. At the same time the questions are asked more consistently, and require even more comprehensive answers. I feel that there is something in the offing in terms of home health but I can't yet say what it is and I also don't know how it will happen. What will perhaps come in the near future is genuine interdisciplinary practice; it will be feasible and viable to address an issue in its entirety.

werk: ... and perhaps economically as well?

Hermann Blumer: That is one condition! Addressing a problem in its entirety leads to friction losses

between the people involved. If you manage to motivate partners to a greater than average extent, if the working processes start to flow better, then you start to think together. Architecture can make a material perform more cost-effectively if people are linked together in the best possible way. Of course all this can just as well happen without involving wood.

werk: But you will continue to commit yourself to this Utopia in the field of wood?


Hermann Blumer: Yes, it would be nice if we could help wood to be more highly esteemed across the whole field in which it is used. It could be particularly interesting for young people if we could integrate their creativity and the great variety of nature into the processes of planning, building and change rather more effectively.

werk: What would you still like to experience in the context of wood?

Hermann Blumer: Let me think: – A kind of collective creativity involving "human wood" ... I have the following image in mind: a lot of people come together and use wood's many qualities in a totally creative way. I stand by and watch them doing it. – That would be my idea of bliss.

Interview edited by Irma Nosedá

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