

Zeitschrift: Werk, Bauen + Wohnen
Herausgeber: Bund Schweizer Architekten
Band: 89 (2002)
Heft: 7/8: Zeitlosigkeit = Intemporel = Timelessness

Rubrik: English

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: 10.12.2025

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

English

Jacques Lucan (pages 22–25)
Translation: Andrew Greene

Livio Vacchini and timelessness

It is almost impossible to capture a timeless expression while relying on supposedly immutable architectural principles. All attempts to achieve this, no matter how concerted they may be, are doomed to failure: time will unfailingly catch up with whoever strives to capture the essence of timelessness, and no building can elude the mark of historicity.

But why should some architects be so set on this idea? Or more precisely here, why ask this question of Livio Vacchini's work? The architect himself is implicitly drawing us to the question, since he nurses the conviction that rules and principles are necessary, indeed indispensable, for the project. When these rules and principles are expressed in words, they aspire to universality and, by the same token, to time, if not timelessness.

Vacchini has always drawn us into a succession of constructed buildings that are as much stages of a development – a stage being the culmination of a process – as the starting point of a new conception, reshaping and re-launching of a progressive movement. In this movement, a project starts from self-examination in an attempt to understand and evaluate, a posteriori, the path followed in order to confirm, invalidate, criticize, but above all, and most often, to re-orientate the work undertaken, assigning it with more exact and explicit goals. In the same succinct way that I describe it, Vacchini's work is imbued with an undeniable formalist dimension, because his pertinence depends on his capacity to view his own work with a critical eye, because criticizing his own results boosts the advancement of his own work, continually striving towards a higher degree of coherence. As one

stage follows the next, this criticism should be conducted to increasingly demanding and strict, even dogmatic criteria. In doing so, one time frame only is observed, and certain parameters are consigned to the garbage heaps of a past that can only now be considered as incurably out of date: has the architect himself not leveled ironic and cutting remarks at his previous buildings, even if he remained somewhat sentimentally attached to them? This unyielding way of conceiving architectural work is the hallmark of Vacchini; it is almost Hegelian and therefore must involve essentialist research.

In order to at least illustrate, if not prove the validity of the interpretation that I advance of Vacchini's work, I will refer to three main stages: that of the sixties with the Losone School and its gymnasium (1972–1975), the Macconi building in Lugano (1974–1975) and the gymnasium of the Ai Saleggi school in Locarno (1978); that of the eighties with the Montagnola school (1978–1984) as a flagship building; and finally that of the nineties, for which I will look at the house at Costa-sur-Tenero (1990–1992) and the Losone sports hall (1990–1997).

The sequence of these three stages brings to light the radicalization of an architectural work project. The first stage is that of learning, not so much a language as the need for a rule to guide the development of the project, a rule that takes its reason from all syntactic declensions, a rule that here comprises the rational expression of relatively conventional constructive choices. In Losone, Lugano and Locarno, the vertical supporting components (pillars and columns) and each horizontal component (lintels and architraves) outlines the structure of the building; the rhythmic flows, dimensions and proportions are regular and executed with skill. We are confronted with the myriad possibilities of order and its quasi pedagogical expression. No wonder then that we could talk of classicism at the time: the implicit aim was to achieve a stable mode of expression, which obeys an intelligible law, an expression that moreover leaves little room for individual sentiment.

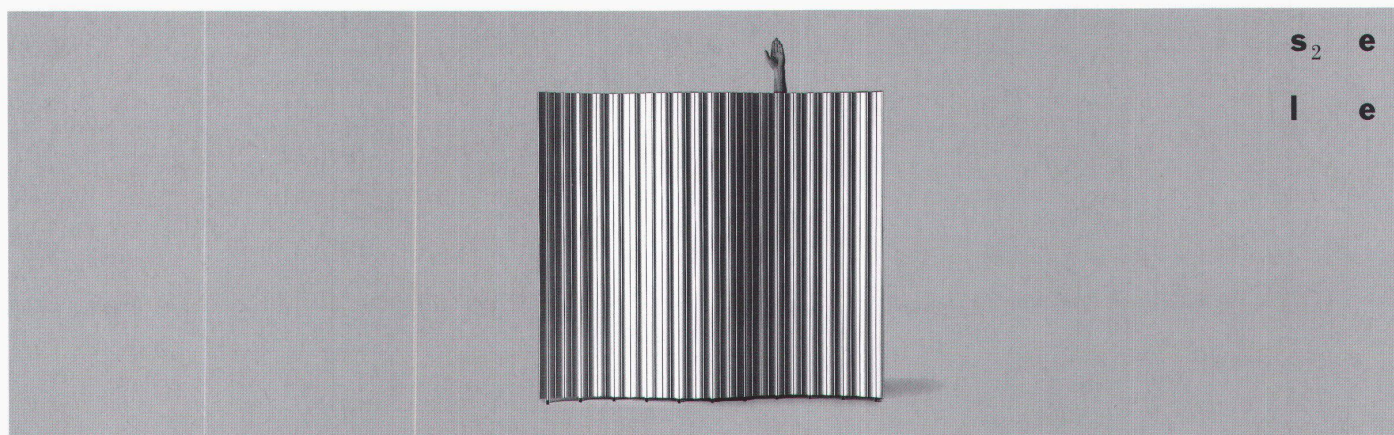
There are, however, hidden dangers in choosing a path already taken by others, namely,

in this case, adopting a classicist approach: the moment you think you have reached universality, and thereby timelessness do you not find yourself instead on the path to a new kind of mannerism?

Vacchini's response to these pitfalls can be found in the Montagnola school. This construction is testament to a change in the scale of problems encountered thanks to a change in the very conception of construction data. For example, although the Losone gymnasium linked all the combined components right down to defining its profiling, its unity, on the other hand, was the result of a composition of fragmentary parts. It is exactly this problem of unity that the Montagnola school is addressing; seen from this angle, it is a building of transition and the understanding it reveals of the architecture of Louis I. Kahn is no mere coincidence. Vacchini himself refers to plagiarism when describing the composition of the façades.

In the Montagnola building, unity of form is embodied in a new order of steps followed, illustrated by the interior portico, the spans of which have the same dimensions as the lateral side of the courtyard, with lintels punctuating pillar to pillar. Fewer intermediary supports are thus required, which would only break up the overall unity. A kind of reciprocity brings structure and space together, defining the unity of form: this is where Kahn's lesson comes into play, which is most apparent at the British Art Center in New Haven. Having already embarked on this road, Vacchini can only aim for a more radical approach, taking his work to new limits. In order to do this, he puts even fewer components to use, just as he narrows down the scope of possible reference points, with few buildings capable of reflecting the new demands. Ideally and for each variable, the equation from which a building is formulated will soon be solved by using one solution only, thus transforming architectural work into an essentialist quest.

The house at Costa-sur-Tenero and the Losone sports hall are the clearest representations the third stage of progression. In both buildings, on the vertical plane, only one kind of pillar is used, reproduced as many times as deemed necessary and without variation, while horizon-



s₂ e
l e

tally there is only one floor – a monolith for the house, coffered for the sports hall – which cannot be broken down. In each of these buildings, the dimension of each component is pitted against the dimension of the whole, confirming the initial hypothesis: we can truly say that structure and space – to which we can add light – combine as one, in the sense that one law alone reigns all, in the sense that one unity is formed and not subjected to fragmentation, a unity from which no single component can be taken away. From this, it is understood that there is no other possible choice than stability and bilateral symmetry, namely choosing a source that generates the image of an undividable whole, of a *gestalt*. The use of symmetrical layout is such that one's gaze is not diverted by the specific relations between the components that would make the whole appear to be a "composition". It is also clear that Vacchini's buildings are punctuated with archaic accents, due to the extreme limitation of components: they turn to confront the models from which they were molded, the temple for the sports hall, the shelter comprising two parallel walls and a vaulted ceiling for the house.

The path I have traced up to here is a process of abstraction: buildings possess a form that is the result of a conceptual operation for which the variables at play are increasingly rarefied, but the final outcome of which can never be predicted. At the same time, and by the same token, they are imbued with a startling physical presence, the presence of an object of heightened cohesion that presents itself immediately as a whole. This is where Vacchini wants to believe in the impossibility of tasting the essence of timelessness; his buildings are as milestones tracking time, thus returning to the need for newfound monumentality.

On the same subject: "Interview with Livio Vacchini", *Cahiers de théorie* ("Louis I. Kahn. Silence and Light. A Thought Updated"), no. 2–3, Lausanne, EPTL-ITHA-Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2000.

For an analysis of Louis I. Kahn's "formalist" work, see my own text: "From the Fragmentation of the Window to the Room of Light", *Cahiers de théorie*, no. 2–3, op.cit.

Gerda Breuer (pages 31–37)
Translation: Michael Robinson

Timelessness and the avant-garde

Marrying Modernity and Timelessness in European Americanism

Many pronouncements by historical Modernist architects and designers indignantly attempted to deny that they had anything to do with aesthetic traditions. For this reason the ideology of industrial form entirely subject to its own inner laws provided a good visual and intellectual argument in favour of ostensibly non-historical forms until well into the 20th century. When engineering structures with no artistic component started to emerge, industry began to be seen as an advance force, hurrying ahead to put its stamp on a new age. As the author explains, most of the admiration was channelled towards American industrial structures, and paradoxically also towards the American continent's lack of history, which developed in a rather complex way as the actual projection area for modernity and timelessness.

Paradoxically, historical Modernist artists and designers also defined the stone structures of "archaic" times in terms of simple static principles like support and load, as such projection areas for timelessness were the forms of so-called pre-history, lying "beyond history", and the "primitive" and exotic extra-European world of Japan or Ancient Egypt. For this reason the architectural theoretician Sigfried Giedion referred to these times as the "eternal present". In their early days, the historical avant-garde used such links reaching backwards and sideways as a device for finding themselves, and as an aid to implementing their own aims. Effectively they offered prototypes and primary forms that were still pure and unspoiled in the happy early stages of human history.

One contradiction is evident: at the same time as they were struggling to be modern, the avant-garde rejected fashion (German *Mode*) in the same breath. The persistent "addiction to novelty" or "addiction to change" in the fashionable world, which is "not capable of recognizing values", and always equates architecture with fashion, was considered to be the same as despising the aims of Modernism. The early 20th century used pertinent metaphors to express this contempt for the historicism of the late 19th century, with its rapidly changing quotations of historical styles. The word "costuming" was often used – a reference to the hollow superficiality of the fashionable dress. This culminated in the period of German-French chauvinism in a rejection of "foreign trumpery", the French inclination towards fashion, against which the Germans set the rigid values of "essentials". This made it very difficult for fine art to address flourishing Modernism in the French capital without prejudice. A

campaign was launched against addiction to decoration and ornament, regardless of the difficulty the concept of Modernism presented for precisely this polemic: in fact fashion, *Mode*, and Modernism come from the same root: the Latin word *modus*, a way of doing things, a mode. One of the greatest threats they perceived had always been that Modernism could all too quickly fade and be overtaken by something that was even more up-to-date and could thus come closer to short-lived fashion. Karl Kraus referred to these fears when he remarked that it could turn out that the word modern was simply being stressed wrongly. And the Expressionist Alfred Döblin wrote in an early prose sketch: "When I hear the word modern I always have to think of a word-play. (Modérn wird módern) (modern will decay). The first time the stress is on the second syllable, the second time on the first! – a very true and instructive image." And so the emphasis with which optimistic faith in progress and innovation is evoked in the attribute "modern" always brought out the sceptics who associated it with the idea of dissolution, transience and decay. But despite all this, early Modernism was remarkably conservative: it put its faith in lasting values. The aim was to swap the vacillation of the times for timelessness.

Early Modernism itself developed some of the elements of today's image of the *Modernist Classic*. These include timelessness, which obviously is still the case today, as the ideology of the *Modernist Classic* would like to insist. After all, what does it say in a popular guide to furnishing with classic designs: "Classics do not die, even if they are not always immediately alive. But things that have been pronounced dead live longer. Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, classics have the gift of constantly renewing themselves and shining in a new light."

America: the old land of the future

The mystery of the marriage between future-oriented movement as striven for by the avant-garde and timelessness concerned Modernism in a number of ways from the outset. One example of this construct will be described below

The European protagonists of new architecture and design tried to achieve eternity via a detour that seems remarkable to us: via America. The new continent was in the truest sense the setting – *topos* – for the construction of modern eternity. There are significant parallels between American Americanism and European Americanism.

America was quick to reinterpret the role of the cultural underdog ascribed to it by arrogant Euro-centrism in artistic fields while it was reassessing national qualities in Romanticism: America redefined the inferiority ascribed to it, its lack of culture and history, as a cultural *avant-garde*, and played this out against Europe. And to do this the United States used European art criticism's own intellectual and artistic figures: white America saw itself as a continent without history, any identification with the original inhabitants,

the American Indians, was completely out of the question. The *Indian princess*, a symbolic figure on the American continent from time immemorial in both the South and the North, was thus an art figure, and did not serve to provide a sense of identification with the Indians. The concept was much more tied up with the connotations of the *noble savage*, which had been a European metaphor of longing and a projection figure since the 18th century: this was how Europe dressed up its critique of its own civilization and its own time, projecting its wishes on to a condition of naturalness in distant countries and times that was still undamaged by the depravity of civilization, still pure.

But even naturalness and things that were new and unburdened could not manage without the authority of history. Prehistory was also frequently invoked. Thus for example American Romantic Thomas Cole describes the American Great Lakes as an immeasurable amphitheatre built "by giants of the primal world" then destroyed by the flood: "yet it remained: A ruin more sublime than if a thousand Roman Colosseums had been pil'd in one."

This comparison shows both the ambivalence of the enthusiasm about ruins that was generally typical of Romanticism and a simultaneous compulsion to reject it – as America had no historical ruins. But it also records a reference to the lack of history, and a naturalness, that go a thousand times beyond the history of antiquity, presented in the form of ancient Rome – the Colosseum was the symbol of all symbols of ancient greatness. Any comparison with antiquity demonstrates that one's own time and one's own country are worth considerably more.

The naturalness of one's own landscape, its sublime quality, which is reminiscent of primeval times, nature in its untouched and paradisaical state, was seen as greater in value than the Europe of history. The natural condition not only "proved" America's cultural *advantage* over Europe, but also fed the hope of the *Great Awakening*, the religious renewal movements, the establishment of an earthly empire of a thousand years in America.

At the same time, this view was transformed into the secularized notion of an America that was to be the greatest and most powerful world empire in the series of past nations. The imaginatively described dream of the American empire in the 18th century was converted in the next century into the political myths of an imperial fate, the *Manifest Destiny* of the nation, an awareness of mission that had to proceed along a predetermined path. According to this the path led towards the West, into the untouched world of the American continent.

One of the elements of the significance of the West was that it bestowed a series of geopolitical advantages that were intended to guarantee the moral integrity of American society. Here the concept of the benign influence of nature acquired a specific meaning: nature was identified purely and simply with the topography of the

North American continent, and the specific quality of its constitution was seen as a source of the dominant character of the people as a whole. The freehold farmers or pioneers who operated in the lands wrested from the Indians in the frontier areas, pushing ever further to the West, were the American counterpart of the "noble savage", living in nature, untouched by the corrupting influences of civilized life. Their virtuous and natural life was seen as a reliable foundation for national happiness.

The West, which was imagined to be extremely fertile and beautiful terrain, was seen first as an inexhaustible potential for an agriculture striving towards autonomy, promoting the country's independence from trade with Europe, a characteristic feature of the northern states. For this reason, expansion towards the West was very often invoked in any discussion about patriotic attempts at liberation. Supporters of the manifest destiny idea saw themselves in the role of someone like Moses, leading his people out of subjugation into the Promised Land. The pioneers moving towards the West, ploughing the virgin soil, and the farmers settling on the frontiers became the new heroes of the nation.

In the Romantic period, America prepared for European Americanism by accepting the role that Europe cast it in, but converting it into its own national values. Its specific formulations – the Americans have their own area of discourse – were not picked up by European Americanism but the premises would be the same.

European Americanism

Americanism was very important for European Modernism's artistic Utopia, particularly in architecture. It did not just come up with the idea that a fresh cultural start would be possible if ancient building forms were taken up again, in this case anonymous industrial forms. This would mean starting from the origins themselves – a platform without history. It also nourished the idea that the paradise that was thought lost could be regained. The Americans themselves had adopted this piece of wishful thinking for their country. This was made easier for them by the fact that the exotic worlds of European wishful fantasy had always been projected on their continent. The attraction of Americanism for European Modernism lay in the Utopian dimension, and in the secondary effect of finding a way to the eternally ancient through America. European Americanism did certainly differ from its American variant, but corresponded with it in that both versions saw America as the land of naturalness and lack of tradition.

The Viennese architect Adolf Loos formulated a discourse of this kind. He was one of the first exponents of European Americanism in architectural Modernism. Loos remains in the minds of posterity above all as an enemy of ornament, undoubtedly to a large extent because of the title of his best-known work *Ornament and Crime* (1908). He had been largely inspired to produce this work when travelling in America

himself by the American architect Louis Sullivan, above all by his 1892 *Ornament in Architecture*.

Loos felt that ornament represented a leveling down, an act of semantic concealment, a representation secured *qua auctoritatis historiae* of a Viennese spirit (of the times) that was committed to old practices in a way that was no longer appropriate. It was part of an outdated façade culture that was not used only by the court and the nobility, but also imitated inadmissibly by the bourgeoisie: Vienna, a city of sham façades. The closed completeness of the historicist Ringstrasse in Vienna was – in his eyes – a document of this mendacious symbolism. For Loos it did not represent the foundations of a modern tradition.

He suggested a counter-model that worked in terms of differentiation that he said he had got to know from his trip to America. He was fascinated by the Americans' different ways of adapting to their surroundings.

The Americans were now able to create a differentiation repertoire of their own in general terms, one that was not weighed down by the traditional European architectural canon of decorum, but that simply involved fitting in with the surroundings. Multiplicity in unity, difference in a fundamentally egalitarian society, for Loos that expressed a truly Western culture. "Nowhere hampered by the laws and traditions of a venerable past and thus also spared the ingrained defect of the Old World, namely sentimentality about ruins caused by historical hypertrophy" – that is how the architecture critic Walther Curt Behrendt praised the American lack of history in 1920.

Here as in America itself the idea of the perfectibility of culture was involved as well, but with a different stress: a connection was made back to the purity of the beginnings, to the monumentality of the original forms, if Europe's own culture was to be fundamentally revitalized. From Berlage to Behrens, from Gropius and Mendelsohn to Le Corbusier, and indeed on to Sant'Elia and Futurism, America was the place where the rigid laws of architecture were transformed into a perfected, timeless, Western culture (classical in this sense). For this reason it was "built Atlantis"; this was the slogan that the architecture critic Reyner Banham coined for the American continent.

Even in 1927, when Americanism was strongly linked with the model of Henry Ford, and economic effectiveness could be associated almost effortlessly with an essentially paternalistic attitude, Behrendt wrote that German architects and town planners had made pilgrimages to the USA in droves, "filled with the desire, and the curious anticipation, of looking into the future".

This admiration was clearly expressed in the response to American industrial buildings, which – if they were not seen in real life – were circulated among architects in the form of photographs. People talked of a real 'silomania'. Walter Gropius compiled a collection of these photographs of grain silos and factories, offices blocks and yet more silos – silos in North America and

silos in South America – for the Deutsches Museum für Kunst in Handel und Gewerbe in Hagen. He brought them together in an exemplary show called *Vorbildliche Industriebauten* (Model Industrial Buildings), at the Werkbund exhibition in Cologne in 1914, and compared these structures with the those of the ancient high cultures, above all in Egypt, in his famous lecture *Monumentale Kunst und Industriebau* (Monumental Art and Industrial Building). It was the simplicity of the building cubes, the elementary stereometry and the accumulation of the same forms that made these industrial buildings so similar to the architecture of antiquity.

At the same time, these records of anonymous engineering achievement were not just indebted to the basic principles of ancient building – as presumed by Europeans – but they also expressed the socially defining power of the nation: industry. The productive force was expressed in the monumentality and plain completeness of the structures, and the accumulation and articulation of serial parts in the office and factory buildings added up to an image of the people lined up and working at the machines, and the equality of these individual beings within the mass. The Europeans thought that they could see in this formal basic configuration of the accumulation of equal parts and of the ancient principles of load and support in the frame architecture the completeness of a culture of the kind that the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl had defined in the terms of "Kunstwollen". They could use the concrete skeleton as a way of returning to ancient building and claiming it back. At the same time this was a modern culture: they could see an architectural symbol of modern industrial society in this anti-ornament.

The documents of this period seem remarkably alien to today's readers, as the description lent a mystical quality to the American buildings by comparing them with the structures of Ancient Egypt. But the analogy between America and Egypt still became a *topos*, as European architects felt themselves to be spiritually related to the builders of the pyramids.

Linking ancient building methods with praise of the American continent's lack of history was not seen as a contradiction. Richard Neutra's 1927 book *Wie baut Amerika?* (How Does America Build?) or Erich Mendelsohn's 1929 national comparison *Amerika-Europa-Russland* (America-Europe-Russia) established the image of a closed continent whose genetic building bricks were a grid pattern, pure construction, the accumulation of equal elementary parts. This expressed democratic equality for all. It was the basis premise for the subsequent International Style in architecture, which intended to eradicate individual national characteristics. Typically, Adolf Loos was one of the first people to call the formal architectural language developed in North American industrial architecture *Esperanto*.

The rational building concepts that were developed in Europe in the 20s represented a mass implementation of what Taylorism had already introduced on the socio-economic plane. The "American principle" had already established itself in European economics. But this did not do any harm to the cult celebration of America in architecture. Thus Henry Ford's River Rouge factory in Detroit, for example, became a subject that appeared frequently in art and photography. The "new Ford factory" was described as follows as late as 1932: it was said to be a "symbol and document of everything that was connected in any way with the concepts of rationalization, mechanization and technical beauty. For this reason a visit to this factory makes one of the most powerful impressions that America is able to offer." Fordism became a key concept for understanding modernization processes based on the American – the rational – principle, and the culture-critical traits that European Americanism had still had in the days of Loos and in the 20s became increasingly less significant. It led to the functionalism within the construction industry that was familiar after the Second World War. Authors who proclaimed Postmodernism were thus right to attack the effects and perversions of the Modernist models, the schematic accumulation and high-rise buildings without a trace of imagination, but

without themselves having taken the developments in Modernist architects' arguments into account.

Walter Gropius was forced to recognize the fact that America was projection terrain for the desires of Neues Bauen in Europe at an early stage, when he took part in the Chicago Tribune competition in 1922. The grid pattern on the façade taken from American industrial buildings made the high-rise building's (almost) unornamented skeleton structure seem too much like the unsublimated form of an industrial structure, and thus of raw capitalism; the design thus found little favour. The Americans wanted comparatively traditional decorative forms for the building

Lasting ideals

The emergence of a style beyond the styles, detached from fashion's addiction to change, was one of Classical Modernism's Utopias in Europe. This aim was pursued into the second half of the 20th century, and reached another high point in 50s and 60s Germany at the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* in Ulm. Functionality that could stand the test of time was one of the Ulm "design engineers'" recurrent themes. The Braun company in Kronberg/Ts, which was one of the first German firms to set up a product design department, appointing Dieter Rams as the team leader, expressed this understanding of design prototypically for decades – not without acquiring some absurd traits in terms of their steadfastness from time to time and eliciting them from the reactions of their disciples. The Ulm people retained this orientation by rejecting any concession to the taste of the times. Dieter Rams' motto "less design is more design" took up one of Modernism's principal aims, which had become accepted over the decades through Mies van der Rohe's dictum "less is more", and above all through International Style. Thus the durability of these guiding aims lent historical authority to this perception of design, and timelessness had developed a prestigious reliability in terms of value.

Die Messe für Neubau, Umbau, Renovation, Schöner Wohnen

SONDERSCHAU:

Sauna • Wellness Welten

- Rund 450 Aussteller
- Alles zum Thema: Küchen, Bäder, Innenausbau, Fenster, Türen, Haustechnik, usw.
- Sonderthema «Badewelten»
- Sonderthema «Wohnungsanpassung» alters- und behindertengerechtes Bauen
- Samstag und Sonntag in Halle 7: IMeX Immobilien-Expo für Miete und Kauf

29.8. – 2.9.2002

Täglich: 10 – 18 Uhr

Messe Zürich

Organisation und Sekretariat: ZT Fachmessen AG, Badenerstrasse 58, 5413 Birmenstorf

Infos: Telefon 056 225 23 83 • Internet: www.fachmessen.ch

