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# English

Nicolas Bassand, Philippe Béboux,  
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Translation from German (abridged):  
Michael Robinson

## A Hall is a Hall

“In der Herti” sports hall in Zug, architects:  
Béatrix & Consolascio, Erlenbach

Most sport is played in the open air. Even though some sports are played indoors, people are not keen to call them indoor sports. We don't wear “indoor” clothing to play indoor basketball. We just put on light sportswear that can be worn regardless of where we are playing. Sports halls are like film studios: the distinction between inside and outside is blurred to an extent, but the studio can be used to stage interior as well as «exterior» scenes. The sports complex built by Béatrix & Consolascio for the town and canton of Zug is astonishingly successful in creating what is clearly an enclosed sports hall, with all the necessary equipment, while constantly creating the impression of an open-air space inside.

The new sports hall has been fitted into the western periphery of Zug. A leisure centre and a small harbour have joined it in the southern area of the site, thus giving a sense of area that is changing rapidly. A road called Allmendstrasse skirts the long side of the building plots. As this name suggests, this area was once common grazing land. The town of Zug made it possible for these huge plots to be made over to public use by assigning them sports zone status. The authorities started to adapt the area to its current purpose by simply marking out the different training facilities and landscaping them to make the divisions clear. Then sports halls started to spring up, one at a time. They were built on industrial architectural models, and were planned as temporary structures from the outset; thus the skating rink, which dominates our building on the west side like an aircraft hangar, may well be dismantled. The sports hall, which has only recently been completed, sets new quality standards: efforts to make a more precise architectural impression and demands for a greater level of comfort in the interior confirm the impression that the zone is gaining a proper hold. Other indicators support this idea: functional links are emerging between this actual sports zone and the adjacent school buildings; a disused railway line is being examined to see if it could be re-used for a municipal tram line; the major traffic axes have been expanded and provided with roundabouts. Improved access to this sports zone from the town and the region shows that the catchment area for these public facilities has reached a size that faces architecture with new challenges.

Expressing an opinion on an open site

The sports hall rises out of this changing context like an autonomous box. It is free of any geometrical links with the previous direction lines established on the site. The new building relates to itself. It has a perfectly square ground plan, and does not even attempt to create an urban spatial situation – and there is certainly not an existing one. The empty spaces and gaps do not correspond with conventional figures in any respect: they simply signal that the open space of the Allmend, the common land that has been changed into sports facilities, will continue to exist.

The completely impermeable outer covering makes a stark distinction between the enclosed space and the surrounding area. The sportsmen and women come into the hall basement from the west, on the ice rink side, through a 2.5 m wide sunken lane. The difference in height chosen for the hall floor quickly solves the problems posed by building it on very unstable subsoil. The use of waterproofed basement foundations 1 m below the groundwater level created pressure, which made it possible to reduce the number of piles (175 elements rammed in to a depth of 25 m). The building is surrounded on the other three sides by planted areas, on which it seems to float like a body that is slightly immersed and detached from its surroundings. A flight of steps, serving as an emergency exit, leads up or down to the surrounding area on each of the four sides. A wide ramp leads from the lawn to the main entrance, which is 1.5 m above street level. These additions do not make the exterior of the building any less intelligible, the doors in particular helping to suggest human scale.

Seen from a distance, there is neither transparency, nor any explicit symbol, that betrays the precise nature of this building. And everything is done to cultivate the mystery, to make people curious, and then to amaze them.

A light-hearted sporting arena

The building captivates passers-by with its simple volume, which is a shimmering mass of colour. “You're impatient to know what colour it is every morning...”, said a worker on the construction site. The building does not reveal its identity symbolically, which would mean people would have to be able to decode; instead it claims to be unique, and does this by triggering emotions in a place where urban users are least expecting this. A feast for the eye is what is intended here. The authors of the project wanted to give sport a happy, playful face. They were keen to take hold of the hall's merely functional nature, then crystallize out of it the spiritual element that involves sport in (not merely physical) culture. This was then to shine out over the surrounding area: it is the euphoria that is increasingly expressed by colourful clothing on sports fields, ski slopes and ice-fields. The concept of the façade brings constructive expertise

and three-dimensional creativity together to express the contemporary aura of sport.

The two external levels have neither a base nor an upper termination: they consist merely of glass profile strips (Linit). Glass's potential for bringing daylight into an interior was neglected in order to harmonize its use with the special features of the programme – it is undesirable for sportsmen to be playing against the light. The architects chose to exploit the material's ability to allow the layers behind to shimmer through. Painting behind glass makes use of a special technique and requires a complex mode of execution. Béatrix and Consolascio have taken up this idea and invented a technique of architecture behind glass for this sports hall. Here the most important thing is not to make the functional content of the building visible from the outside, but to concentrate on visual interaction between what is cladding and what is being clad. From the point of view of structural logic, this treatment of the outer surface of the built object, which at the same time makes the layering of the architectural covering visible, proposes an original solution to the question of tectonics for rear-ventilated façade cladding. No more fake architecture, no more joint patterns simulating virtual force patterns, just a view through into deeper layers serving as colour carriers.

Reading from the outside inwards, the façade cladding is made up as follows: amethyst-coloured glass sections (Linit), rear ventilation, pre-insulation as a colour carrier, steel construction and insulation, vapour seal, derived timber product as a colour carrier, standard-coloured glass sections (Linit). The glass sections are fitted together by vertical interlocking in the lower half of the façade. But in the upper half they are fitted the other way round, which means that the hollow body is on the outside and the edges placed next to each other. This all means that the industrial materials are perceived at a level of quality that entirely shifts the usual connotations.

The four, clearly antinaturalistic colours that are visible on the outer cladding are made up of two warm shades, pink and orange, and two cold shades, green and blue. The shimmering effect that they create on the cladding is created by the surfaces, which are made up of horizontal bands, opposed to each other and running diagonally. This happens according to rules reminiscent of the experiment made by Zurich Concrete Art in the 40s and 50s.

Two factors contribute to making the abundance of strong and changing expressions on the outer cladding inexhaustible: the moving viewpoint for observers, and the incident sunlight. This Linit screen with its changing effects is only the starting-point for more sensual experiences that are waiting in the interior and – this time with filtered light and in a spatial sequence – bringing new tactile, visual and acoustic values together. Everything is intended to illustrate the conviction that sport,

alongside all its competitive functions, is essentially a senso-motoric activity: the art of handling one's own body and promoting its agility.

#### Staging an interior landscape

When we go inside through the main entrance, we discover an undreamed-of spatial scale and a completely introverted interior landscape. The space is confined to a single volume, and in it three elements that are quite different in terms of their architectural identity – an internal peristyle, a playing area and a compact stand block – make up a space that seems very easy to take in at first, but nevertheless has an inexhaustible potential for creating relationships. The mutual orientation of the elements on the plane and their co-ordination in section create a highly varied scale of spatial sequences, penetrations and possible ways of circulation.

The internal peristyle is on a grand scale, and thus triggers the collective memory of public buildings and festive communal occasions. The support structure of 64 prefabricated concrete elements 11.4 m high and 60 × 60 cm in cross-section is 2 m from the façade, so that there is access to the entire complex from a circular gallery. This spacious layer running round the whole hall, together with the sunken playing area, gives it its actual arena character and besides has the effect of making the enclosing

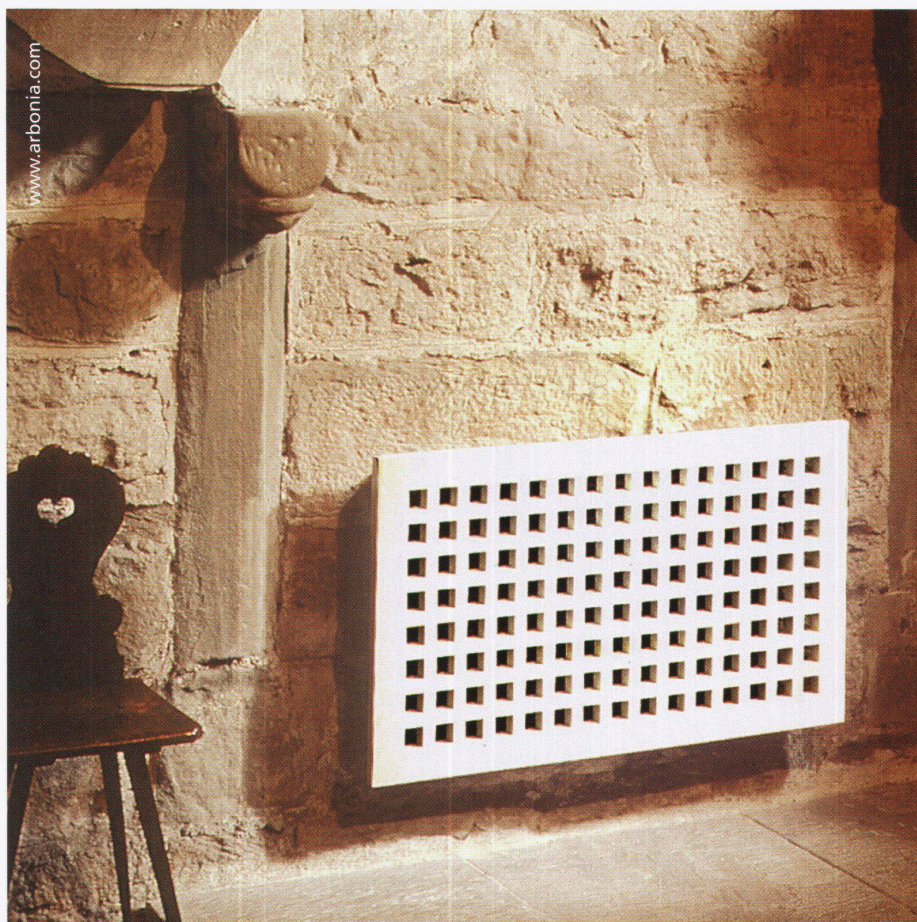
wall seem less solid. A boundary is clearly set, but the first thing that visitors see is a permeable "enclosure" that makes the sense of a boundary fade into the background. The gap is used as a gallery by the sportsmen and women at ground level, as a circular path connected with the stands on the upper ground floor and also serves as a source of light, aligning with the glass roof that runs above it.

The glazing introduces a diffuse light whose source is at first difficult to detect. The incident highlights on the Linit walls lends an additional dimension to the aesthetic experience that goes well beyond the expectations associated with the sporting programme. To avoid the effects of playing against the light, the building deliberately has no openings to the outside. This plunges viewers into an artificial universe. The colour both reinforces and also distorts the perceived effects. The hall is surrounded by red and yellow, which give it the effect of an arena. Giving that hitherto disparate functional elements are fused into a communal colour plane, the colour enlarges the scale of objects, while at the same time reducing their number. It also contributes to evoking an effect of an open space.

A three-dimensional layer (approximately 54.6 × 54.6 m, the static height varies between 2 and 2.4 m) supports the roof and defines the hall ceiling, which consists of a network of 256

square lighting units (approximately 1.6 × 1.6 m). The lighting units are mounted in both directions in the fields between the piers, forming a virtual homogeneous area in which the eye loses itself. Once again the clear boundary of the space disappears behind a first level that has been dematerialized.

Placed as a box-within-a-box or a piece of furniture in space, the black concrete stand block contains all the technical equipment and secondary training areas on three levels. This leaves the hall landscape free. Despite the fact that the stand block is so heavily subdivided, it retains its compact appearance. The rooms it contains are so mutually independent in their geometry and dimensions that it seems to be folded from a single sheet of cardboard. The base contains the cloakrooms, apparatus rooms and the retractable stand. The middle level contains a broad platform on the playing-field side, on the axis of the main access ramp. This inner terrace provides access to the spectator stand from above, to the public rooms (cafeteria) on the same level, and to the training rooms via a corridor. All the rooms accessible from this intermediate level or located on the upper level are without ceilings, which links them acoustically and involves them in the same spatial continuum: the open space used for sporting activities, which should ideally be placed in the open air.



## Heizen im Quadrat

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At the very top, the weight-training room, which is surrounded by low 1.8 m walls, benefits most from the panoramic view of the hall. The direct view of the ceiling elements from below is reminiscent of Bestegui's penthouse, where Le Corbusier wanted to make the play of the clouds in the Parisian sky into a tangible experience.

#### Specific solution and an experienced office

We do not need to take the analysis any further to be convinced that this sport complex addresses the specific uses to which it is put precisely. But if we draw up an inventory of the resources used – prefabricated piers, a wide-spanned support structure, façade with glass sections, polychromy, spatial subdivision even at the shell stage etc. – and place this most recent building in the context of the office's overall output, then it is clear that it is the culmination of a long sequence of work. It draws on previous experience with commissions that were explored in depth in other contexts, especially in Salzburg (Heating plant "Heizkraftwerk Nord") and St. Gallen (Olma fairgrounds Hall 9). The will to do the maximum possible justice to the programme requirements and as it were devise a tailor-made solution does not mean that buildings that were realized earlier have to be faded out of the equation, and that the starting-point is zero. Quite the contrary, if one has the best levels of expertise at one's disposal (technically, and in terms of design and method), then one is best prepared to react to the special requirements of a commission in a particular place. And so the architects' work, as is clear from the example of the B & C office, obviously lies above all in the art of combination, in the ability to reorganize the resources available according to the demands. The oriental concept of the jigsaw puzzle comes to mind at this point. Unlike the western jigsaw puzzle, in which a number of individual pieces allow only one picture to be made, the Tangram and its three-dimensional variants, starting with a small number of different geometrical elements, make it possible to create a large number of figures. Games of this kind are found in French catalogues under "casse-tête" (brain-teasers). This notion is appropriate to the extent that it makes it quite clear that a pinch of creative imagination is needed to solve the problem. This new sports complex is a fine example of a working approach in which rigour and economy of resources do not exclude spatial values and perceptual experiences that have never existed before, but positively encourage them.

Angelika Schnell (pages 34–41)

Translation from German: Michael Robinson

## Tailored to life today

MVRDV: between rational requirements and individual transformations

It must be the exception rather than the rule today for a tailor-made building approach to involve an "organic" concept based on precise studies of functional sequences, local conditions and individual wishes, as was Hans Scharoun's practice, for example – tacitly based on the happy nuclear family. And even when ideals of this kind have long since been dismissed and when the profoundly neurotic structures of social and family ties become a programme, as in Rem Koolhaas's private villas, the solution tends to remain without imitators, which is surprising in itself in the case of such an influential architect.

New approaches to living and society have been put forward and expected for decades now, but despite this the ground plan diagram for a nuclear family that has practically become holy writ is still a compact grouping of living-room, kitchen, bathroom, master bedroom and two children's bedrooms, one or both of which can also be used as a study if wished; this is the line that is almost always followed. The scheme, closely linked with the building industry's production sequences and costs, constructional logic and building regulations, is also followed even when there is a lot of money or a different ideology about. And why not? It has proved itself, and within limits it can also be adapted to other ways of living, or of organizing shared accommodation. Anyway it has become the norm to move quite frequently in the course of a lifetime now, and so this scheme involving a main room, service rooms and individual spaces according to the number of people living there offers enough that is familiar to mean that people don't need to make entirely new arrangements, but also enough flexibility to make yourself feel at home in a different way.

#### Expressing individuality

But now we constantly hear people saying that we live at a time of increasing individual needs. So wouldn't the tailor-made home as a kind of third skin be the right answer? We live in the age of body-design; surroundings don't have to adapt to people, in fact more and more people are prepared to adapt to their changing surroundings. Now, something that is perhaps not tailored for everyone, but rather more for a significant group: at the moment a company is placing large advertisements in the Berlin U- and S-Bahn for "Loftland". This is a building complex with an "enclosed campus and security service" where people can buy various lofts and, it goes without saying, design them to meet their

own requirements: Office Lofts, Garden Lofts, Family Lofts, Business Lofts and Whatever Lofts (spectacular verbiage from the creative department). With its slogan "Layout your Loft, Layout your Life", and by offering a gym and an indoor pool, the firm is trying to lure precisely that young, dynamic clientele with high disposable incomes who are fed up with being hemmed in and want to indulge their personal life-style into the upper middle class, green south-west of Berlin. This would suggest that tailor-made building means offering flexibility and openness by using a standardized grid: unisex as a politically correct response to divergent life-styles and cultures.

But is this actually all that new? Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, when explaining his block of flats in the Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart, formulated something that cannot now be omitted from any architectural project description: "The constantly increasing sophistication of what we need from our homes requires the greatest possible freedom for the ways in which they are used."<sup>1</sup> Mies does exactly what old or new lofts also offer so that individual needs can be articulated: he simply lays down the outline, prescribes the skeleton building method and explains the service shafts; the occupants were to be responsible for the arrangement and furnishing of each flat, using movable screens.

#### Differences achieved by stacking and accumulation

And so it is possible to meet what clearly only seem to be contradictory demands for personal and individual expression and openness with a single mobile element, by playing a kind of trick, if you like. Mies van der Rohe could also have proclaimed "Layout your Life"; the present is different only in the degree of refinement and in the level of sophistry, as we shall see. The infamous adjustable screens, that impressed do-it-yourselfers at best, are rejected by many of today's architects in favour of a kind of "Ars combinatoria", a concept involving simple at and first abstract modules, whose apparently ransom stacking and accumulation produces differentiation in both public and private spaces. The practical thing about this is that it works on any scale; a single module can be a room, a dwelling or a block. The Dutch architects MVRDV have been leading the way in this field for some years. Ground plans and views of early projects like for example their EUROPAN contribution "Berlin Voids" (1991) or their urban development proposals for the Hoornse Kwadrant housing estate near Delft are reminiscent, as Bart Lootsma has pointed out, of the computer game Tetris, in which modules like little boxes have to be packed as closely as possible, though a few holes are bound to remain. These holes are, as you can imagine, the said trick, the surprise element, that creates identity. As a negative expression of the basic module it makes the structure transparent and

articulates it at the same time. It is “the difference that creates difference”.

#### The terraced house on Borneo Sporenburg

The second house by MVRDV completed on Borneo Sporenburg (on plot 12) in Amsterdam shows how this principle brings all its qualities into play when there is very little space available, and in relation to a single house. At first glance the spatial organization involves exactly the things you would conventionally expect from a narrow terraced house: kitchen dining area and garden on the bottom floor (at ground level with water behind), entrance, car-port and living room on the next floor, which is at street level at the front, and two rooms called “studios” on the next two floors, which can be used as bedrooms, guest-rooms or studies, as the occupants wish. Two flights of internal stairs lead to the individual floors, as is customary in most terraced houses. But this house is in fact very different from the standard type. Instead of being treated as a compact volume, in which the programme is distributed around the various areas, the house is split up into sections that are either closed or open. This applies to the whole house, which is divided into an closed and an open half lengthways, and this also applies to the way in which each of these halves is structured. The closed half consists of levels, the open half is defined by closed bodies that are placed inside it. The two halves are divided by a glass wall. This interplay of “solids” and “voids” creates a different rhythm of openings and boundaries on each floor of this 5 m wide and 16 m deep plot, both lengthways and transversely. This may well remind you of Adolf Loos’s “Raumplan”, which also made use of constantly alternating open and closed, high and low spaces. But the MVRDV concept is a long way from the theatrical sequence of space staged by Loos in any of his villas. The house on Borneo Sporenburg came into being for pragmatic reasons, and is certainly not tailor-made in the sense of being an individual solution for a specific situation. Even so, it has enough surprising features to be acknowledged as “individual”, without therefore seeming strange. And that is what’s wanted today. People who wear Nike trainers, skim.com clothes and Swatch watches are well aware that these products are manufactured in the most rational way possible; the small design variations that the principle of rationality admits are enough to give them a feeling of individuality.

#### Using subtlety to break the mould: WOZOCO

Many of MVRDV’s projects draw on this “Zeitgeist”. Perhaps the best example is their WOZOCO residential block on the Osdorp housing estate in Amsterdam, offering 100 dwellings for old people. This project shows quite clearly that the “Ars combinatoria” is much more like an “Ars rhetorica”, heading the two basic rules of classical rhetoric, firstly that “two opposing speeches are possible

on any subject” and secondly that it is possible “to make the weaker side the stronger”.<sup>2</sup> The subject of this project is post-war Modernism tested against the Postmodern search for identity. The strictly orthogonal Osdorp housing estate is based on a sixties master plan by Cor van Eesteren: it is flanked by multi-storey sections with open access corridors on the edges and the main traffic arteries, and inside consists mainly of two- to three-storey terraced houses and strips of green, with or without canals. The brief for building an additional nine-storey section with open access corridors on the edge of the estate entailed some difficulty. 100 dwellings were required, but only 87 could be fitted into the prescribed building type. MVRDV’s response is well known: rather than embarking on a laborious search for a different type of building (which would probably have been rejected anyway), or reducing the size of the dwellings, the missing thirteen homes were simply suspended in front of the north façade in four projecting boxes. This was doubly advantageous: all the official requirements were met, and at the same time the building as a whole and its individual storeys became quite unmistakable in character, even though the individual homes are as alike as two peas in a pod. And the open access corridors, which are usually more that uncomfortable in windy Holland, are partially protected from the wind and from being overlooked, which is more appropriate to their semi-public, indeed almost private character. Skillful arguments ousted the much-vilified monotony of modernist town planning and architecture, while keeping to its conditions.

So is this a Postmodern paean of praise to Modernism? Or even the rise of Neomodernism? Probably not quite. MVRDV are using something like the sophistry of shady lawyers in their search for holes in the “wording of the law”, for the large and small gaps in the doctrine that give them precisely the creative freedom they need to make the weaker side into the stronger one. Something that Mies van der Rohe was trying to do in the Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart when he expressly emphasized that “the problem of the new dwelling is an architectural problem” separate “from the atmosphere of one-sidedness and the doctrinaire”<sup>3</sup>, now becomes a rhetorical principle even in the design process, a “speech of praise and blame without any particular purpose” about its rational conditions, taking the sting out of the dogma not through architecture, but by an interpretation employing parody. But Postmodernism, with its search for identity that falls exhausted into symbolism, gets its comeuppance as well. The south façade of WOZOCO presents the surprising spectacle of colourful balconies in various sizes. The north façade reveals its rationalistic principle precisely by using the parody of the rationally justified boxes suspended in front of it, while the south façade employs dummies suspended under many of the balconies to disguise the fact that

they are in fact all the same size and the same height because they are part of a standardized steel skeleton building that cannot admit height deviations for the balconies. The principle of the “decorated shed”, in itself a parody, is critically examined again – transferred to a block of flats in Amsterdam whose occupants, even though they are certainly not part of the Nike generation, like to be able to pick out “their” balcony despite uniform design. This project is not tailor-made in the sense of following a particular line, it is much more that it is negotiated: between rational requirements and individual transformations, between the determined and the undetermined, between local constraints and creative freedom. The result is not a synthesis and not a compromise, it is more like the best of both worlds, wanting to pass creative mobility on to the users, so that they can avail to themselves precisely the sophistications and areas of scope that are needed to live life to the full.

#### Borneo-Text

Holland’s most compact housing project has been built on the Borneo Sporenburg peninsula in the former Amsterdam harbour, to a master plan by West 8. Family houses by various architects – with a few larger forms scattered in between – have gone up on a myriad of narrow strip plots. Houses designed by MVRDV, intended to create a generous sense of space and diversity on the restricted plots, were built on plots numbers 12 and 18.

Plot 12 is 5 m wide and 16 m deep. West 8’s method of dividing the land up into strips is taken up as a design idea for the plot itself. Thus the plot is divided lengthways into the narrowest house imaginable, 2.5 m wide, on one side and on the other side into a private thoroughfare or passage.

The façade running along the long passage is glazed on its full height and width, while the ends remain completely closed. This open façade focuses the whole house on to the side passage. The full area is broken down into a wide variety of areas that are both interior and exterior spaces. Thus an extremely narrow house becomes an extremely wide house.

The passage contains three elements: a shed with a sloping roof for car-parking, and two closed volumes, one containing a guest room and a bathroom, and the other with additional space for the two studios on the first and second floors. These two volumes are suspended on the glass façade and conclude the external space at this point. The passage is lit by daylight so that the interior of the house has any degree of light intensity available. Interior lighting is not needed. MVRDV

1 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “Zu meinem Block”, in: *Bau und Wohnung*, 1927, p. 77

2 Gert Ueding, *Klassische Rhetorik*, Munich 1995, p. 20

3 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, foreword to the special “Werkbundaussstellung: Die Wohnung” issue of the magazine *Die Form*, 1927, p. 257.