

Good carpentry is just the beginning : insight into Röthlisberger architectural woodwork

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HOCHPARTERRE 2009

4/5 // REPORT

GOOD CARPENTRY...

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...IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Designed by renowned architects and designers, Röthlisberger creates furniture and interior fittings. Produced in Gümligen – enjoyed all around the world.

Author: René Horning, photos: Alexander Jaquemet

Entering the premises at Röthlisberger in Gümligen near Berne, no more than a sign with "Rö" indicates the way to the company's large fit out workshop. The General Manager, Peter Röthlisberger guides us towards two prototypes of a replica English-style upholstered bench and, using these two as examples, describes the to and fro between the designs provided by architects or interior designers and the work here in the company. Frank Gehry's employees were the ones who delivered the plans for this bench for the new Novartis Campus in Basel. After glancing at the drawings, the carpentry technicians ventured to comment that it would not be very comfortable to sit on. The comments were not well received by Gehry's employees who wanted to see a prototype made. So, the men from Röthlisberger got down to work and lo and behold: when the employees returned they had no option but to admit that the bench was not exactly a great success. The second time around, the carpenters built a prototype according to their experience and perception of comfortable seating.

SAWING, MILLING, SANDING While Peter Röthlisberger tells his story, the modern CNC machinery around us is sawing, cutting and sanding panels and wood. Just a few steps away the material is carefully processed by hand – craftsmanship at its finest. As the industrial curtains opens, there is a strong smell of wood, and the archive-like storage facility for the veneer becomes visible. At least 40 different types of wood are stored here in the racks because the veneers' particular grain is what gives the wood interiors their special appearance: "The veneer provides the aesthetic", says Peter Röthlisberger. Using state-of-the-art technology the thin strips of wood are glued together according to aesthetical criteria, creating a larger surface.

Up until recently, Peter Röthlisberger had very little wood on site apart from this veneer store since materials required for a job are ordered twice a day, and the panels and wood are delivered within four hours. Unfortunately, the ever tighter delivery deadlines took their toll on the quality of the wood. This is why ash, oak, birch and pear among many other types of wood have been stored on the premises since the beginning of 2009. When required, it is placed in the drying chamber because wood used in interiors should only contain between 8 and 9 per cent moisture. Without the artificial drying process, the drying would take weeks or sometimes years, depending on the type of wood. The drying chamber reduces this to a few days.

NO MASS PRODUCTION Unlike an industrial production company, the actual time spent on a particular component is not the major concern. In light of the great number of individual orders, it is more important that the machinery can be retooled rapidly and used flexibly. We are not standing in a "mass-production" carpentry and joinery workshop where running machines at capacity is of paramount importance. Röthlisberger interior finishing service is the result of a merger between a waggoner's and carpenter's workshop. Peter Röthlisberger's maternal grandfather and his father joined forces in 1928. The company has grown ever since, and what started off as a small carpentry business has now evolved into a company specialising in interior fit outs, with its own furniture collection and a ten-man engineering department.

What has engineering got to do with furniture and interiors? The department was needed because a company of this size cannot survive from its craftsmanship alone. Turnover is increased by developments of the company's own. Apart from the material and design know-how, engineering is, first and foremost, expertise in mounting the assembly sections on site. According to Peter Röthlisberger, "We do not want to use facings to conceal joints between walls, ceilings and fitted furniture." The aim is always to find an impeccable solution to connections between stairs, bars, fitted cupboards or dividing walls.

Röthlisberger looks back to the late eighties when "Just good carpentry was not good enough". And so one solution led to the next. Soon, interdisciplinary approaches were needed using materials other than wood. As carpenters we have good background knowledge enabling us to work with other materials such as aluminium, glass, steel or stone. This is not necessarily the case when craftsmen from other trades work with wood.

PLANS BY DESIGNERS AND ARCHITECTS Nowadays the company collaborates with renowned architects around the world. The interior experts from Röthlisberger can be found in a Mies-van-der-Rohe building in New York, Berlin or London, or in the Zurich Stadthaus where they have been commissioned with the building of new tables for the City Council. International cooperation with architects started when the company won the contract for Daimler Chrysler Headquarters in Stuttgart. The architect, Clara Saal, knew about the "Röthlisberger Kollektion" and a recommendation led to the company being short-listed. Röthlisberger remembers that "The contract was really much too big for us".

The solution was a collaboration with Glaeser, Baden. However, a few months down the line the team from Berne decided to take over the general management of the project, which marked the start of the engineering department in 1989. The contract with the car manufacturer went off successfully, additional contracts followed and the sum climbed from 1.4 million to 7.5 million German marks.

FROM FURNITURE PRODUCTION TO FIT OUTS Setting up the engineering department put the ball in the company's court. The name Röthlisberger became known in architectural circles and the network increased. The engineering department has gradually expanded and now employs ten technicians and, with Roland Keller in charge, is run as a separate profit centre. The technicians also work for third parties who have their interior assembly sections produced at other companies.

Demanding design solutions are developed in Gümligen – Peter Röthlisberger always returns to the topic of "quality" and his motivation to deliver this quality. It is not always easy to fulfil these demands, especially in modern projects which are not designed to last any longer than ten years. However, the short lifespan of a design should not have any influence on the quality of the work. The list of high-quality work is long. About two thirds of Röthlisberger's clients are from a business or public authority background. The other third are private clients represented by an architect or designer. Orders from private customers are only accepted in exceptional cases since Röthlisberger focusses on executing designs and does not have its own design department.

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<State-of-the-art CNC machinery.

>Some things must be done by hand.



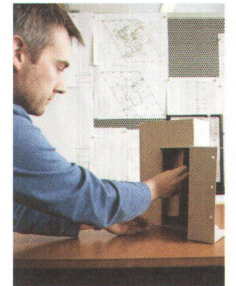
✓Careful selection.



<Veneers enhance the pieces.



✓Using the model for testing purposes.

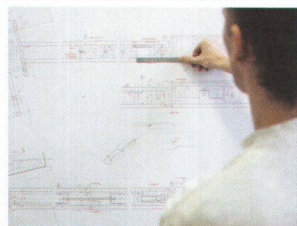


✓Lacquering is also an in-house process.



^The essential factor is not the speed of the machinery but its flexibility.

>Precision planning is everything.



>> The company has long experience of working with professionals from the architectural and design world, and Peter Röthlisberger's appraisal is: "When we are confronted with a challenge, our work is exceptional." The company must be able to hold its own against a great deal of strong competition and the recipe for success is "fostering ambitious architecture."

FAMOUS ARCHITECTS VIPs start to arrive. The carpenters from Gümli- gen work with Hans-Jörg Ruch and Renzo Piano, with the interior design- ers Peter Marino and Andreas Ramseier, and recently with Frank Gehry's office. Normally everything goes smoothly, however, it does take time be- fore people get used to working with each other, as the example cited at the beginning with Frank Gehry's office proves.

Cooperating with famous architects has not gone to Röthlisberger's head and he remarks, "We just do what we are good at, we are neither designers nor architects." In his opinion, lively discussion and open communication between external designers and the company's engineers is important because it leads to improvements. If an architect or the technicians are determined to do it their way, then it does not work. Even when we do not share the client's taste, "we must achieve an optimal solution for the technical details."

TECHNICAL KNOW-HOW Cooperation is of such importance because today's architects are rarely specialised in the detailed planning of interi- ors. How much shrinkage must be taken into consideration when a wooden staircase is put in the dry, cold climate of Upper Engadine? The technicians in the company fill the gaps in the architects' knowledge. That is when working together can become really exciting, especially when the architect takes a personal interest in the development process and comes to Gümli- gen to see how a project is progressing.

We take a seat in the office right next to the technicians' workplace and the Röthlisberger Kollektion showroom. The office is furnished with pieces from the collection. Now Peter Röthlisberger draws an equilateral triangle on a piece of paper. In the first angle he writes "proportions", this covers architecture and design, then in the second "planning" or "suitable materi- al processing". The manager's long experience has convinced him that when these two poles work well together, the result in the third corner is bound to be good. Everyone in the company knows that they focus on the "planning" corner. The spectrum of tasks is, however, wide and ranges from private homes or offices to meeting rooms in banks or the interiors of ships.

Santiago Calatrava once came with an order of a different kind: drawings of a round table measuring eight metres in diameter and whose outer edge should only be a few centimetres thick. The engineer, Calatrava, left it to the technicians at Röthlisberger to work out how this fragile construction could be produced stable enough to support its own weight.

A circular steel pipe and strengthening panels were the solution. Peter Röthlisberger recalls that, "Before the last screw was tightened, we did not know whether the construction would really work." The table held firm – but the room it was originally intended for was too small. The reason was a misunderstanding between Calatrava and the client: feet and metres had been confused. The table – made in Gümli- gen – has found a new home and now stands in a conference room in Dallas.

MACHINERY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

Meret Ernst spoke to Peter Röthlisberger about perfect craftsmanship and the company's plans for expansion in the USA – despite the crisis.

Your company attaches great importance to perfect craftsmanship. What does that mean for a company which employs about sixty people? State-of-the-art tools and machinery are essential in producing our furni- ture and interiors but craftsmanship is also indispensable. For example, the components for the "Shell" cupboard can only be produced by computer- controlled machinery but we need experienced and highly skilled carpenters for the assembly. Perfect craftsmanship begins with the optimum choice

of materials and paying precise attention to detail throughout the whole production process. It also requires a sophisticated knowledge of planning and technology in order to create reliable, durable and unique products.

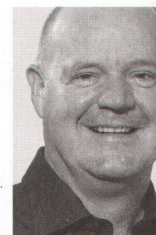
You do not do your own designing, your ideas come from outside the company. Why is that? The simple reason is that everyone should do what he or she is best at. An architect can draw upon our technical know-how when planning interiors, but without the architect's design know-how we would be unable to create credible results. In addition, we enjoy the new and continuing challenges which designers and architects present us with. That is only possible when the design is not influenced by our own produc- tion facilities in the company. These facts aside, we do not want to enter into competition with our most important partners.

In terms of developments, where is Röthlisberger heading? We com- pleted a new production workshop with a wood competence centre in Janu- ary 2009. So, we are now in a position to improve the quality and speed of delivery for solid wood, too. This year we are going to set up a "bridgehead" in New York with one of our engineers providing a local service for our customers there.

What measures have you implemented due to the difficult economic situation? We have also felt the effects of the financial crisis. Projects were postponed or cancelled from as early as autumn 2008. We are pre- paring ourselves with a variety of scenarios for the possible developments and can react quickly as our company structure is non-bureaucratic. In spite of the general uncertainty, we are investing in the future and acting in accordance with the motto: when the economy begins to prosper again, we will be ready and prepared.

COMPANY HISTORY:

Röthlisberger Interiors has developed from the merg- er of a carpentry and joinery company and a wain- wright founded in 1928. The emphasis has been steadily moving towards furniture manufacture since the 1960s. When Peter Röthlisberger was a young carpen- ter his father involved him in the development of the Röthlisberger Kollektion, which was launched in 1977. He was the third generation of the family to be "infected" with the wood bug. In 1981 he was promoted within the company and a year later he was put in charge of the furniture collection and made it known on the international market. The interior fitting section remained regional for some time, although the company worked in close collaboration with architects from an early stage. Contact to architects and commissions for interior fitting came about through the furniture busi- ness. Nowadays the two Röthlisberger profit centers, Interiors and Collection employ sixty people. Peter Röthlisberger is responsible for the overall company. Roland Keller, Head of Interiors, and Jürg Scheidegger, in charge of the furniture collec- tion, are both members of the company manage- ment. Röthlisberger is a family – public limited com- pany. About one-third of the shares are owned by ten external persons.



>*1954 Peter Röthlisberger.

