Swiss Architecture: Designing – Constructing – Building

International Symposium
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
School of Architecture + Design
October 11th + 12th, 2006
Honorary Chair: Lorenz Moser, Architect
Chair: Dr.-Ing. Markus Breitschmid, S.I.A.

The School of Architecture + Design at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University will host an international symposium on the topic of ‘Swiss Architecture: Designing – Constructing – Building’ and is planning a publication on the subject matter of the symposium. The symposium will be held in Blacksburg, Virginia on October 11th and 12th of 2006.

The intent of the symposium is to present the newest achievements of contemporary architecture from Switzerland to students, faculty, and professionals in the fields of architecture, art, building construction, civil engineering and build upon an already existing foundation of architectural knowledge relative to Swiss architecture of previous decades.

The symposium has a clearly defined pedagogical aim that has attracted internationally known Swiss architects Valerio Olgiati, Meinrad Morger, and Beat Consoni and the architectural editor Heinz Wirz to commit to participate at the symposium.

The presentations given by the invited architects and architectural critic will demonstrate that the triad ‘Designing– Constructing – Building’ - for which contemporary Swiss architecture is considered exemplary by international standard - is fundamental and necessary to building.

The Stature of Recent Swiss Architecture

Museums, churches, stadiums, residential and commercial buildings designed by contemporary Swiss architects in the past decade for clients inside and outside of Switzerland have been described as “world class” and have achieved extraordinary high regard from a variety of news media ranging from leading daily newspapers such as the London Times, New York Times, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, or Le Monde, to CNN Headline News and focused programs on Swiss
architecture on other television networks, to the leading professional journals on architecture.¹

Because of its “high level of achievement”, states Roman Hollenstein, architectural critic of the equally reputable daily Neue Zürcher Zeitung, contemporary Swiss architecture “is observed and discussed around the world and is seen as the currently most important cultural achievement” of Switzerland.² It can be justifiably asserted that buildings designed by Swiss architects have become one of the more visible and recognized exports of this small Alpine confederation. “Swiss Made” has established itself as an identifiable label in the world of architecture.

While architects and engineers from Switzerland have been receiving worldwide acclaim for their built work during the past centuries (e.g. buildings by Francesco Borromini in Rome and Dominico Trezzini in St. Petersburg, the work of Le Corbusier, or more recently the internationally renowned ‘Ticinese School’), there has been a renewed breakthrough for a swathe of first-class architects from the German-speaking part of Switzerland making an international name for themselves with their plans, projects and buildings. Martin Steinmann, Professor of Architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, has pointed out “that contemporary Swiss architecture enjoys such high regard abroad primarily because it is a ‘group phenomenon that draws attention to itself’”.³

Following in the footsteps of the achievements of the Italian-Swiss architects led by Luigi Snozzi and Mario Botta in the 1970s and 1980s, international “megastars”-architects like Jacques Herzog and Pierre De Meuron, Bernard Tschumi and Peter Zumthor have risen during the last fifteen years.

A younger generation of architects has grown in the footsteps of those architects and has become internationally recognized in their own right in more recent years.

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³ Ribi, Rolf. Ibid., p. 5
Our four invited participants all belong to the newest group of Swiss architects. Their innovative architecture significantly contribute to the fact that the inherent Swiss characteristics and the quality of their “Swiss Made” products has catapulted Switzerland (and wherever Swiss architects now build around the world) to become the Mecca for contemporary architecture.\(^4\)

Sometimes labeled as “New Simplicity” or “Minimalism”\(^5\), Professor Steinmann explains, “one special quality and strength of modern-day architecture is the ‘reduction of architectonic style’”.\(^6\) This is a distinct expression, Christoph Allenspach states, of the Swiss mentality that “tends towards succinctness of expression, rationality of design, and a passion for construction, realism and pragmatism” without excluding “poetic charm and sensuality”.\(^7\) Rather in contemporary Swiss-German architecture, quite contrary to many celebrated idiosyncrasies of contemporary architecture, succinctness, rationality, and constructive and material ingenuity facilitate and promote the poetic, sensuality, and innovation.

The Invited Lecturers for the Symposium

The symposium will present three architects who are demonstrating through their work the qualities of the most recent Swiss architecture. The invited architects have a significant record of buildings, have been recognized internationally, and their work has been published in various international journals and monographs.

The following architects have accepted invitations to participate in the symposium: Beat Consoni, dipl. Arch.SIA-BSA of Beat Consoni Architekten in Horn-St.Gallen (Switzerland),\(^8\) Meinrad Morger, dipl. Arch. SIA-BSA of Morger & Degelo Architekten in Basel

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\(^4\) Ribi, Rolf. Ibid., p. 5


\(^6\) Ribi, Rolf. Ibid., p. 5


\(^8\) Beat Consoni is a trained architect and a member of the Swiss Institute for Architects & Engineers and of Federation of Swiss Architects. He is the principal of Beat Consoni Architekten in Horn in Eastern-Switzerland. Consoni is currently teaching architecture at the Swiss University of Applied Science. Consoni’s buildings have won various awards and recognitions. The following monograph on the architecture of Beat Consoni has been published: Mack, Gerhard. Fünf Arbeiten – Beat Consoni. Luzern: Quart Verlag 2003
Fig. 4: Johanneum, Neu St. Johann Monastery, 2002 Architect: Beat Consoni

(Switzerland), and Valerio Olgiati of Valerio Olgiati Architekt in Zürich (Switzerland).

Meinrad Morger and Heinrich Degelo are trained architects and members of the Swiss Institute for Architects & Engineers and of Federation of Swiss Architects. They have been practicing independently as Morger & Degelo since 1988 and their buildings have received various international awards. They have lectured at various universities in Europe and North America. They have also held various visiting teaching appointments. Meinrad Morger is currently a professor of architecture at the Swiss University of Applied Science. Their buildings have been widely published in international journals on architecture and daily newspapers. The following monographs on the architecture of Morger & Degelo have been published: Bürkle, J. Christoph. Morger & Degelo Architekten. Zürich: Niggli Publishers 2000; Morger Degelo Kerenz: Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein. Wettingen: Lars Müller 2000; Luis Fernandez-Galiano. Casas de Autor. Madrid: Arquitecture Viva 1998; Adam, Hubertus; Walti, Ruedi. Messeturm Basel: Architektengemeinschaft Morger & Degelo und Marques. Olten: Swiss Prime Site AG 2003.


Valerio Olgiati is a trained architect and a member of the Swiss Institute for Architects & Engineers and of Federation of Swiss Architects. He is the principal of Valerio Olgiati Architekten in Zürich. Olgati has held teaching appointments in various European countries. He is currently a professor of architecture at the Accademia della Architettura in Mendrisio (Switzerland). His buildings have been widely published in international journals on architecture and daily newspapers. His buildings have received various awards. The following monographs on the architecture of Valerio Olgiati have been published: Olgati, Valerio. Das gelbe Haus - The Yellow House. Ostfildern/Ruit: Hatje Cantz 2000; Olgati, Valerio; Dell’Antonio, Alberto.Valerio Olgati: Paspels. Zürich: Edition Dino Simonett 1998; Olgati, Valerio; Oechslin, Werner et al. Valerio Olgati: Das gelbe Haus Plims, Umbau 1950-1999. Zürich: GTA Verlag 1999

An additional invited participant will present the qualities of contemporary Swiss architecture in a historical and theoretical context. Heinz Wirz, the publisher-in-chief and architectural editor of the Swiss publisher Quart Books – Press for Architecture and Art, is an expert on current Swiss architecture and will portray its achievements (beyond the work of the three invited architects) in full context.

Heinz Wirz, a trained architect, is an award-winning publisher of books on architecture, architectural theory, art, and landscape architecture, an editor of books on architecture and architectural theory, and an organizer and curator of exhibitions on architecture. He has proven to own a keen artistic appreciation and understanding of architecture, in particular of architects who have not yet been ‘discovered’ by international ‘main street’-publishers. For example, Heinz Wirz initiated and organized the very first exhibition of the architect Peter Zumthor in 1987, now a world-famous architect but at that point in time not yet known beyond the region of his native canton of Grison. Wirz has published and edited books on the following Swiss architects belonging to the group of ‘New Contemporary Swiss Architects’: Andrea Bassi, Quintus Miller & Paola Maranta, Dieter Jüngling and Andreas Hagmann, Beat Consoni, Max Boisshard & Christoph Luchsinger, Miroslav Sik, Valentin Bearth & Andrea Deplazes, Gion Caminada, Valerio Olgati, Niklaus Graber & Christoph Steiger, Buchner & Bründler.
The Pedagogical Aim of the Symposium

The pedagogical aim of the symposium is the revalorization of ‘constructing’ as a task of the architect. The educational and professional model of the architect in America focuses first on ‘design’ (the conception and design of an idea for a building) and leaps immediately forward to ‘building’ (building understood as the erecting of a building by hand or through the help of tools and machines). The differentiation of the realms ‘building’ (execution of a building) and ‘constructing’ (the act of constructively preparing the execution of a building) is not satisfactorily, if at all, recognized. The topic ‘Building Construction’ does not exist in many curricula of schools of architecture, or it exists only in marginalized form. Moreover, it is understood rarely that ‘constructing’ always is a theoretical act of the architect, namely the theoretical discourse to construe the building object in its complete physical presence. While ‘building’ is the production made by craftsman and factory workers, ‘constructing’ is an intellectual achievement of architects and engineers by means of reason and intuition. The symposium and the publication – by presenting contemporary architecture of German-speaking Switzerland - will demonstrate a thought that is lapidary for Swiss architects but is significantly less well established in the American context of building, namely that a building first ought to be constructed before it can be built.\(^\text{12}\) In other words, the presented examples of Swiss architecture will demonstrate that there exists a significant difference between building construction, understood as an advanced technical devising and thinking up of a building, and building, understood as the material existence of that technical-constructive system. The symposium will demonstrate that first-rate achievements in the art of building grow out of a continued discourse of designing, constructing, and building. The contemporary architecture of the German-speaking region of Switzerland is probably the world’s leading example of such an understanding of the making of architecture. It achieves its excellence among international contemporary architecture exactly through adhering to this comprehension.\(^\text{13}\) In this sense, there is a didactic dimension to Swiss architecture that is of educational significance and could be formulated as the ‘didactics of beauty’. The invited architects will explain, visualize and illustrate the relationship of ‘designing – constructing – building’. This succinct relationship is immanently present in their buildings and they will demonstrate their process of working in their lectures.


Schedule of the Symposium

The two-day symposium will consist of an introduction, of four lectures by the invited lecturers, of a podium discussion with the invited lecturers, and concluding remarks.

Wednesday, October 11, 2006:
Heinz Wirz
Architectural Editor and Publicist
Lucerne, Switzerland
3.00 PM

Valerio Olgiati
Architect / University Professor
Chur, Switzerland
7.00 PM

Thursday, October 12, 2006:
Beat Consoni
Architect
St. Gallen, Switzerland
9.30 AM

Meinrad Morger
Architect
Basel, Switzerland
2.00 PM

Podium Discussion with all Participants
3.30 PM

All events are held at the Hancock Hall Auditorium at Virginia Tech.