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# Ulrike Jehle-Schulte Strathaus

## Modernism of a Most Intelligent Kind: A Commentary on the Work of Diener & Diener

*Translated from the German by Claire Bonney.*

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The work of architects in the Ticino gave new impetus to Swiss architecture in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the Ticinese took up the values of the more rationalist side of modernism and a conscious confrontation with Le Corbusier. But on the other hand, they responded to their own local building tradition — characterized by buildings that stand isolated in this rural canton in the south of Switzerland — a tradition that has significantly altered the discourse in design culture well beyond Switzerland. A younger generation of Swiss architects has been influenced by those experiences and, more specifically, by those Ticinese architects who held teaching positions in Swiss universities. One figure must here be given special notice: Luigi Snozzi, who, as a teacher at one time or another in all three architectural schools in Switzerland, has influenced the younger generation not so much in a formal sense as in a methodological approach and interpretive sensibility. To speak of a theory of design would be presumptuous, even though some of Snozzi's "Twenty-four Commandments" still resound loud and clear. For example, "If you must avoid monotony, make use of the same element." It is not surprising given Snozzi's pedagogic strength that the two most interesting

young offices in Basel are rooted in his teachings: the partnership of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, and Roger Diener, Wolfgang Schett, and Dieter Righetti at Diener & Diener.

If designs by Diener, Schett, Righetti and their colleagues clearly betray their origins in the "Snozzi school," they point as well beyond these origins to the architects' own perceptions of site specificity, to the city of Basel. The achievements of modernism are understood as the indispensable foundations of these works — *not* as in the perverted, trivial functionalism of *Wirtschaftswunder* architecture, but in recombinations of such apparently incompatible positions as those of Mies, Le Corbusier, and the "organic" contribution of Häring. The respective special, new problems of each specific case, which cannot be answered with a universal solution, are bound together with an understanding of general principles interpreted from modernism. And what is more, how the spaces look is less important than how they serve the people who use them.

The breach in social consciousness of the past fifty years, which has made naive allusions to the modern style as a moral position difficult, is here formulated criti-

cally and with architectonic means. Diener & Diener's buildings, especially their urban apartment houses, never appear formally or functionally as completely "pure"; instead, they are radical confluences of different typologies and uses according to each specific contextual and economic prerequisite. A consciousness of the city — the city as background, the city as a space for acting out the history of the city, its changes, its contradictions, its modernity, its pathos, its trivialities, all completely in line with Baudelaire, the mouthpiece of the exciting urban present of one hundred years ago — is thus the leitmotiv in the work of Diener & Diener. But there is also a certain recognition of contemporary culture expressed in the renunciation of fashionable, *heimlich*, or historic forms, in a free recognition of the fragility of precisely *this* civilization. In apartments by Diener & Diener coziness, in the sense of prefabricated idylls, is never evoked. Rather spaces are organized to enter into relationships with the existing conditions of the specific site and the greater frame of the urban environment. Neither is monumentality introduced as a nostalgic symbol for other, more stable cultures than our own; rather it results, if at all, from the dimensions of the proj-

ects. This also means a choice of forms and materials that seems to negate the notion of an inherent morality of things. The challenge of the city, its anonymity and changeability, its noise, its luxury, and its poverty are the preconditions for plans drawn for the particular situation, for the individual within society. Attributes that have disappeared from architectural discussions and that have recently seemed as if taboo — elegance, anonymity, discretion — are standards by which these works can be measured.

#### Continuity of Urban Structure

The U-shaped project in an industrial area of Basel on Riehenring, Amerbachstrasse, and Efringerstrasse continues the general morphological structure of the apartments on the neighboring Bläsiring. The pedestrian passageway through the adjacent block is extended as a narrower path ending next to the entrance of a covered garage on which a basketball court is placed to serve as a recreation area for city youths. Instead of the usual green idyll made of garages, the back courtyard remains true to its own image; the architecture strives to convey the condition to which it owes its existence: that of the city and the industry of this city.

Both of the specially treated corner buildings are reserved for stores and offices. The articulation of these buildings strengthens rather than denies their large dimensions. The apartments on Riehenring are organized in towerlike vertical blocks. At the location of staircases the building steps back to create patios oriented toward the street. The courtyard elevation of the apartment house is terminated with continuous balconies that, true to Snozzi's dictum, extend along the front of ninety identical windows, expressing in a calm matter-of-factness the collectivity of its users. The upper edge of this part of the building is determined by a sun deck planned for the use of all the building's inhabitants. The floor plans of the apartments, all of which extend through the depth of the building, allow for generous interior spaces with clear references to the outside of the structure. It is possible to merge the spaces of the apartments into larger units and thus to respond to changing living requirements. On Efringerstrasse indentations for the kitchen areas seem to dissolve the strict volumes. In contrast, the continuous lines of the balconies emphasize the building's horizontality and length. Seen from the perspective of a passageway from the street to the courtyard, a

technique of the sort often used by the architects becomes evident. At precisely that point where asymmetrical expansion joints, resulting from the overlapping of the concrete ceilings above the supports, are located, a lamp is mounted. The intent is not to hide this problematic spot, but on the contrary to emphasize its contingency, to “shed light” on it and thus lend to this constructional contingency, too, its own special quality.

### Constructional Composition

The apartments and shops in the St. Alban-Tal stand at the former site of two mills where the mill canal meets the Rhine River. The simple volumes of the two new buildings enter into a sophisticated dialogue with the surrounding area. The bank of the Rhine to the north determines the location of the easterly building, which responds to the bend in the canal pond on two levels and opens to a southern courtyard. The building to the west relates to the square and closes it on its eastern side.

The main façades of both buildings reflect their different constructions and the various and conflicting themes of their site conditions. The longitudinal load-bearing walls of the façade of the larger building are oriented parallel to the Rhine, while the freestanding supports behind the façade of the smaller building are oriented toward the square. The dialogue with the neighborhood is expressed in the differences between the wall of identical windows that faces the river and the freely subdivided, non-load-bearing curtain wall that faces the individual buildings surrounding the square. The images of the façades refer to the order and arrangement of the apartments behind — the inner life of the building — and the contingencies of site; but beyond this, they function as an almost picture-book demonstration of constructional

possibilities. The base of glass bricks, the bands of windows leading around the corners, and the round piers located behind the skin denote that the west wall is not load-bearing. On the other hand, the river façade of the larger building with its pronounced base and rows of windows above, and its top-floor panoramic window, proclaims itself as a load-bearing wall that becomes lighter as its height increases. Moreover, the depth of the metal window jambs plays quietly off the Gothic window bands of the bearing-wall constructions that are still visible here and there in the neighborhood.

The main living rooms of the apartments are oriented toward the river or toward the square. Behind this layer of rooms are halls leading to bedrooms and children’s rooms, undifferentiated spaces that allow for more flexible use. This layer of equivalent rooms utilizes yet another constructional system and set of materials. The longitudinal load-bearing wall of the larger building is clad in wide wooden laths similar to those used on the nineteenth-century workshops in the neighborhood. The back façade of the smaller house facing the pond is a concrete grid. Double-glazed windows protect against the noise of the pond’s rushing water. Closed, recessed balconies create small transitional areas between the outer walls and the nucleus of the apartments on both sides of the stairs and elevator shafts. The typical plan is broken only in the top floor of the larger building where individual rooms are oriented to the north and collective rooms to the south, thus creating the band of windows that terminates the building at the top.

### Montage of Fragments

The conditions of the apartment house and bank project are surely among the architects’ most difficult. Set in an outlying district of Basel, the building was

planned to include such disparate functions as a bank, a bakery, office space, and apartments. Neither the image of a business nor that of a dwelling alone was appropriate. Façade types delineating one or the other of the functions had to be superimposed. The Missionsstrasse façade, with its bank entrance, logo, and signet, is understood as the public side. The façade on St. Johannis-Ring adjoins and repeats in many ways a row of apartment houses that date from the period when this neighborhood was established.

The building comprises five levels on Missionsstrasse and four on St. Johannis-Ring. Another two-story structure, recessed and at a slight diagonal, was added to the roof. The complicated roofscape is an interpretation of the different zoning profiles of the two streets as well as of the traffic intersection. The Missionsstrasse façade, establishing a relationship to the square and to its traffic, is a slightly curvilinear, concrete “visor.” It extends beyond the building line of St. Johannis-Ring and stands out slightly from the top floor, exaggerating its lightness and transparency. The curve of this concrete plane transmits the dynamism of the urban condition, a traditional theme of modernism. Responding primarily to external pressures, the porous façade visor begs the question of the expression of the upper-story apartments as discrete units. The base of the Missionsstrasse façade is twice accentuated: first by the wide ribbon window and secondly by the entrance on the corner marked by marble facing. The thin stone facing stretches around the door that leads to the banking hall. The concrete wall is folded up protectively over the entrance. In the zone of the façade above the entrance, the ribbon windows step up, a modification that further emphasizes the dynamic insertion of the opening. At the top, where the visor permits a view of the more strongly curved, wood-faced roof addition, the

impression of the gentle swing in the street façade is intensified. In spite of its openness and thinness, the concrete façade does not seem flimsy. Rather, it conveys an image of a taut skin.

The façade on St. Johannis-Ring is, in contrast, a large wall with clearly delineated, repetitive windows. The openings and the wall are brought into an ingenious relationship with one another. Since the flush openings are so powerful as a plane, there is no impression of perforation; and since the wall courses are so strong, the wall refuses a reading as frame. The stucco seems rather to be stretched between the windows with a smoothness and reduction similar to that of the concrete on the Missionsstrasse façade. It is remarkable how the different façades work at another level as one differentiated whole, effected by the equivalency of materials and the precision of details, especially the details of edges. There is no symmetry and no formal rhyme, but rather a free play of balanced fragments.

The back walls of the courtyard are yet again of a completely different conception. They are clearly the façades of dwellings. The two characters so obviously varied on the street sides are brought together as one in the rear, corresponding to their uniform use as dwellings. The small balconies in front of the windows point to the location of bedrooms. The terrace on the second floor fulfills the traditional requirements of a back courtyard; kitchens and laundry rooms are located here, illuminated by natural light.

The floor plans of the apartments are of great simplicity. To reduce circulation areas, the hall is included within the living space. A narrow built-in cabinet, just high enough to permit the ceiling to be seen as one continuous surface, partitions the living room. Apartment windows are

articulated differently on each side of the building. From inside the apartments, the large caisson window reaches to the floor, establishing a strong relationship to the street and the city. From the outside, however, the impression of the sliding window is cancelled by the stronger image of the traditional two-by-two window. On the Missionsstrasse side the interstice between the curved surface of the façade and a second wall of high French windows is used as a winter garden for the apartments.

Yet the special quality of this building resides not simply in such details. What is convincing above all is the large plastic form at the entrance to the city, a form that contorts to accommodate the various pressures of this difficult site, a form that corresponds to its particular location and use in the urban landscape.

#### Assemblage of Typologies

The building on Allschwilerstrasse is located at Basel's western periphery, on the ditch of the railway line to France. This easement and the orientation of the street determine the form of the site and the analogous irregularly shaped floor plan of the building.

The ground floor is for commercial shops. Above the first floor are three stories containing conventional flats that, as in the St. Alban-Tal project, are ordered in zones of spaces. On the Allschwilerstrasse side the orientation of the spaces corresponds to the oblique angle of the terrain. To the rear of the building are repetitive rooms at a different angle. Between these two zones the core containing bathroom facilities and circulation functions as a joint. The staircase and elevator, in turn, form an armature around which the various parts of the floor plan rotate.

Above these three floors are triplex apart-

ments entered from either side of a *rue intérieur*. Although the apartments, like the *unités d'habitation* by Le Corbusier, are laid out according to the conception of an interior street, they do not take the form of *bouteilles*, but rather that of bridges spanning the street. Another echo of Le Corbusier's architecture is found in the courtyard wall's table and "window" looking out over the railway embankment. A long stair on the west side of the building, enclosed in a gridded, permeable wall, connects the kitchens of the flats and the *rues intérieurs* of the triplexes to the courtyard. The continued confrontation with Le Corbusier can easily be read in this building with its combination of the *rue intérieur*, one-level apartments, and the triplex typology. Here materials are used and connections made with clarity, making evident the principle of a typological montage.

In works by Diener & Diener the image of the building is analogous to the building itself as a conceptual, material, and historical construction. In this game played with the elements of modernism's own history the architects encourage inhabitants and observers to take part in the recombination and invention of typologies. This is modernism in its most intelligent form.

#### Notes

1. The first formulation of the architecture of the Ticino as a coherent movement was Martin Steinmann, "Wirklichkeit als Geschichte: Stichworte zu einem Gespräch über Realismus in der Architektur," in *Tendenzen: Neuere Architektur im Tessin* (Zurich, 1975), pp. 9–14; trans. as "Reality as History: Notes for a Discussion of Realism in Architecture," *Architecture and Urbanism* 9 (1976): 31. Also see Kenneth Frampton, "Mario Botta and the School of the Ticino," *Opposition* 14 (Fall 1978): 1–25.