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A temple to sustainability

The new Environment Arena in Spreitenbach cost 45 million Swiss francs and was paid for by the Zurich-based construction entrepreneur Walter Schmid. It primarily deals with the issue of how the energy turnaround can be achieved. The message from Spreitenbach is that this is feasible without dispensing with luxury items. A look at the world of eco-shopping.

By Reto Wissmann

It is situated in a business park surrounded by giant shopping malls, retail outlets and furniture stores where growth, prosperity and the apparently limitless availability of resources are celebrated. But those behind the Environment Arena have something very different in mind – they are aiming to provide a “world of experience for energy and environmental issues” and to achieve a “milestone in environmental commitment”. When the futuristic building was officially opened at the end of August, Doris Leuthard, Federal Councillor for the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications, proclaimed: “Reconciliation between ecology and economy has finally been achieved.” The media acclaimed the project as “a centre of expertise for tomorrow’s world” and a “new star in ecology’s sky”.

Even the structure itself is absolutely captivating. The external design with its black shimmering roof symbolises a giant diamond. The entire building site operated on a CO₂-neutral basis during the construction stage – a world first for such a large-scale

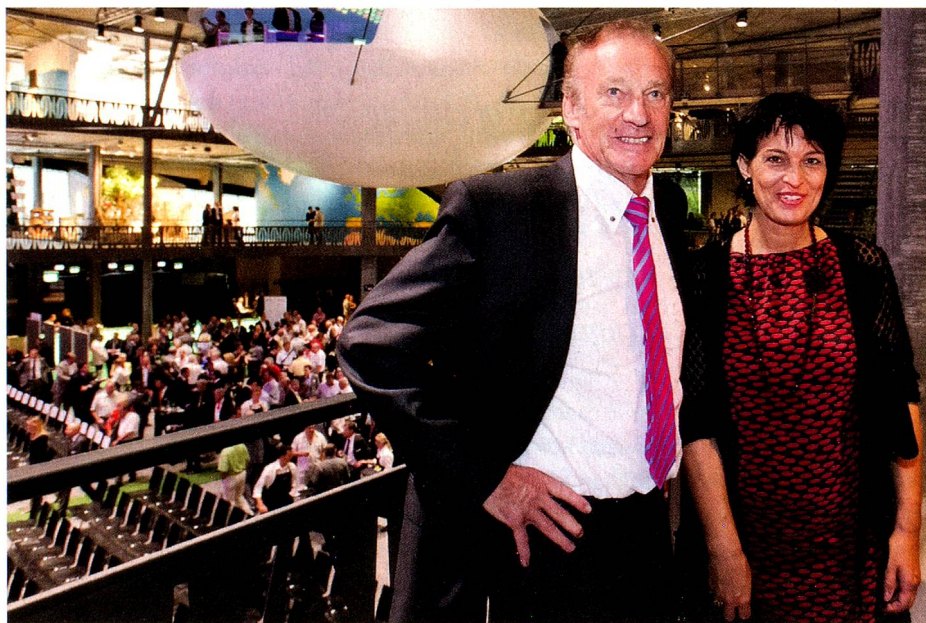
project, according to its creators. Solar panels were assembled on portable buildings and a wind turbine erected on the crane. The excavators and trucks ran on biodiesel and natural gas. A photovoltaic plant has been installed in the Environment Arena’s roof, which is expected to generate 40 % more energy than the building consumes. However, this figure does not include the exhibitions held on the site. Solar power is also used for heating and air conditioning, and leftover food from the restaurant does not end up in the refuse but is instead converted into biogas by an on-site fermenter. The arena profiles itself as a model structure for large plus-energy buildings.

Toboggan power plant

Inside, around 100 companies are currently displaying their eco-friendly products at 40 interactive exhibitions. There is also an events arena for up to 4,000 visitors. The Swiss Solar Awards, attended by the then Swiss President, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, were hosted here in October. The Environ-

ment Arena’s slogan is “Nachhaltigkeit zum Anfassen und Erleben” (sustainability made real and tangible). Visitors can get behind the wheel of the latest electric cars, communicate with people on the floor below via video conference, generate their own electricity on a toboggan or learn how packaging can be recycled at the drinks machine. The impact of modern window insulation technology on room temperature can be experienced first-hand and a comparison made between energy loss in old and new buildings at a house built within the main structure. Visitors also discover how organic meat and organic cotton are produced in a replica supermarket.

“Our aim is to ensure people are better informed about environmental technologies”, explains the head of marketing at the Environment Arena. It is not idealistic visions of the future that are on display here but products that are ready for the market. While many things will be familiar, there are still plenty of interesting discoveries to be made, such as a hybrid collector, which produces electricity and heats up water simultane-



Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard with Walter Schmid, the founder of the Environment Arena, at the grand opening and, pictured right, the building in Spreitenbach from above

ously, or a full-surface induction hob that only gets hot under the pan base. Visitors will enjoy not being approached immediately by salespeople and being able to look at and test out the exhibited items in peace. The displays are largely self-explanatory and nothing is sold. The advertising of the participating companies nevertheless has a strong presence. The German weekly newspaper "Die Zeit" very aptly described the Environment Arena as a "mixture of trade fair and technorama".

Revenue from the sale of Kompogas

Walter Schmid constructed the Environment Arena without any public funding. The Zurich-based businessman became well-known in the 1990s as the founder of the company Kompogas and the inventor of systems that produce biogas from green waste. Schmid has a good track record in demonstrating his pioneering spirit for environmental issues with geothermal drilling and the construction of Minergie houses. He has since sold Kompogas to the energy group Axpo and invested 45 million Swiss francs of the proceeds in the Environment Arena. He is financing its operation through revenue from exhibition and sponsorship partners, which include many international corporations. Though, visitors also make a contribution, with adult entry tickets costing eight francs. 300,000 visitors a year are anticipated. However, according to its media spokesperson, the arena is only currently

attracting 300 to 400 visitors on the four days a week that it is open.

The new style is met with scepticism

"Energy saving must become an experience", declared Walter Schmid at the opening ceremony. He firmly believes that an energy turnaround is achievable without sacrifice. This outlook and conviction are omnipresent in the exhibitions. An energy-saving tumble drier, for instance, is available, while there is no mention of drying washing in the open air, which also saves a lot of energy. There is also no talk of switching to public transport at the Environment Arena, while the display of electric and hybrid vehicles takes up half a floor. The fact that tap water in Switzerland is on a par with bottled water is not highlighted anywhere either. The focus is instead on promoting PET recycling. The message is that every issue can be resolved by technology and that there is no need for changes in behaviour. Environmental organisations say politicians also like this standpoint as it is more appealing than calling for restrictions. Federal Councillor Leuthard believes that the Environment Arena has achieved a small miracle by making "the energy turnaround tangible".

Jürg Buri, Director of the Swiss Energy Foundation, has mixed feelings about the Environment Arena. He agrees that Walter Schmid has noble intentions. Buri remarks: "He is a progressive and successful individual who believes in sustainability." There is abso-

lutely nothing wrong with making money from environmental technologies, he says. However, if the "energy turnaround palace" is leading people to believe that climate change can be kept at bay solely with new technologies and without any change to behavioural patterns, then "the wool is being pulled over their eyes".

Environmentalists and climate protection campaigners have long distanced themselves from their image of cantankerous, woolly-sock-wearing advocates of community composting. Walter Schmid has certainly set new standards with his Environment Arena. His creation can barely be distinguished from the bright lights of unbridled commercialism in terms of aesthetics and size. "We are not used to people thinking big rather than small when it comes to the environment", replies Buri from the Energy Foundation when questioned about the new style. It remains to be seen whether it can make a broader spectrum of the public aware of conscientious consumption. A married couple from Berne who came to Spreitenbach just to visit the Environment Arena say: "It's great that it's not just aimed at highly committed environmentalists."

The Environment Arena may well enliven the debate on climate change and sustainability in Switzerland. What the outcome will be is unclear. Somewhere in the halls of the Environment Arena, the expression "saying is one thing, doing is quite another" can be read.

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