

Interfaces : connecting architecture and interior design

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INTERFACES

Great stage productions are required when the public witnesses the connection between architecture and interior design.

Author: Meret Ernst, photo: Alexander Jaquemet

Switzerland is built up, there is little space left. That is what some people say. Others contradict, saying "Yes, but...". The crucial question in the next years and decades will be what we do with existing buildings. Will we tear them down and rebuild, or will we renovate and build extensions? This is the domain of architects and interior designers. Both specialize in planning renovations or extensions, developing temporary buildings or refurbishing existing constructions for different purposes. They must have thorough knowledge of state-of-the-art technology and the very latest developments in the construction industry.

Various professions are involved in the interface between buildings and interior design: architects are, of course, always aware of serving the most noble of the arts. Interior designers who, unlike air-conditioning engineers, do not have a quantifiable brief must prove their worth by creating an aesthetic ambience, i.e. in realms where architects also show their competence. There are consultants responsible for furnishing rooms, artists who visualise a room as a stage, light planners who know that without light there is no room, designers whose designs for furniture, materials, lights etc. demand recognition. There are the interior decorators whose consummate craftsmanship skilfully closes up the gap between inside and outside.

CONVERTING EXISTING SPACE Basically, two time frames meet at such interfaces. Buildings are not designed, planned and built to last forever but for a very long time. Interior design encompasses a shorter period, at least in commercially used public buildings such as restaurants, bars and boutiques. Their design depends on trends and changing owners – As soon as you become used to a room, its design changes again.

Such places are responsible for the cliché regarding interior design, i.e. always following the latest fad, being fickle and therefore not to be taken seriously. But this is not all. People also say that interior design makes architecture legible and viable. It makes such a difference if, for example, a surgery such as the one designed by Lucius Überwasser for the Hirslanden Clinic, is patient-friendly, if a parliament building meets the public's need for information and if tradition is linked to modern times. In order to establish values that last for decades, the architects, Aeby & Vincent, have read and analysed these historic traces in the Bundeshaus (parliament) and, as a result, designed a contemporary parliament building.

In other words: Many people are affected if an open-plan office either facilitates or hampers communication, as can be seen in Iria Degen's work. She designed new tailor-made furniture for Novartis. If the economic connection appears doubtful, just look at numerous restaurants and bars frequented by people because they feel at home in them. Pia Schmid's rebuilding project at the Bellevue Hotel is a prime example of this trend.

STAGE PRODUCTION Every rebuilding project raises the question of how much new identity a building should be given. The architect, Andreas Ramseier, always explores to what extent his ideas should or may express a company's self-image. A golden rule helps him in such situations: Is it a bespoke building for the client? In that case, the design may be as bold as in the case of the museum he designed for the Steiff company: As far as shape and materials were concerned, Ramseier adhered to the famous button in the cuddly toys' ears.

Things are different if an existing building is converted to be used for a different purpose and if it is certain that, one day, it will belong to someone else. Such projects entail linking inside and outside more flexibly so that

they can be disassociated again at some later stage. Interiors are always a stage where various people act according to their individual requirements. This holds true for owners as well as their customers. Among the architects presented here, Peter Marino is a most gifted stage production artist. He and his large New York offices design interiors for international labels. These rooms tell stories about the products to be sold in them. He provides the stage setting for female customers. In short, he creates understandable connections and links. His task is very similar to the Oi designer studio's project at the "Laténium" Museum. The architecture for the exhibition provides structures as well as additional information for visitors.

LIVING IN A DIFFERENT WAY "Interior design has little to do with living – it is all about rooms and space" – a classic misunderstanding according to Verena Huber, the doyenne of Swiss interior design. First you have to understand a room and clarify the functions it must fulfil. Then you can think about living. The architects' points of reference are cities, neighbouring buildings or volumes, whereas interior designers refer to the people who use the respective rooms. "We take the occupants much more seriously because we do detailed planning," says Verena Huber. "Our clients are often the occupants, or they are more closely linked to the daily tasks of the people who frequent these rooms."

Interior designers create a kind of culture as can be seen in the Engadine region where Hans-Jörg Ruch has rebuilt houses for private clients. He examines existing buildings with archaeological precision and adds new parts. He is in an ideal position to enhance these buildings, not only because he shows great respect for them, but also because he knows the materials used. Old gems are embellished by new additions, and his decisive changes are even accepted by the authorities responsible for the preservation of historic buildings. Why? Because old buildings have a new purpose and are preserved for many years to come.

THE DETAILS Inside the building we encounter architecture. We touch handrails, feel the floor beneath our feet, open cupboards and doors. Wood, metal, glass or plastic surfaces are scanned by the eye which means that they have to be haptically and visually attractive.

Interior design is planned on a small scale. An eye for details is more important than in architecture as mistakes come to light very fast. Perfect planners are needed and the demands placed on the finishing are very high. Nothing is more irritating than unprofessionally placed joints, crooked edges, imprecise corners between wall and ceiling or the wrong materials. Röthlisberger has learnt this the hard way, especially when working for the architects Robert and Trix Haussmann who apply the same eye for detail required for furniture to large building projects. Röthlisberger has grown with the task and his dedication to detail never falters.

