1.5

Approaches to Viewing a Building

A house that looks as if it had always been here. A house that we seem to know as if we had stood in front of it before. A house that is necessary.

Now that it is here it is hardly imaginable that other buildings in the neighborhood, such as the one with (the red-slab façade) across the street by the old rampart, have already had their place here for quite some time. Where does this impression come from?

What is this feeling based upon, this rather strong sensation after the first encounter with the new building? Was it perhaps a hasty assessment, a short-lived illusion, merely the result of a showy, superficial type of architecture that is content with outward appearances? Or are there, on a closer critical look, any arguments for this, which can be put together like building blocks to delineate an architectural attitude?

If so, they would have to have other manifestations as well, of which this first impression mentioned before, this feeling of familiarity, might be something like a substrate, a particularly noticeable quality. We applied this type of deepened perception to different parts of the building, which resulted in different viewpoints that could be grouped in proper architectural categories such as base, volume, etc.

We will confine ourselves to just a few of these categories here, given the limited scope of this investigation as well as the fact that the goal is not to put things in a comprehensive, reconstructive, so to speak, perspective. In particular, we will only address matters relating to the interior of the building if they pertain to outside aspects. The descriptive method chosen, using traditional architectural categories, seemed particularly appropriate to us, notably so since individual features will be given priority over larger categories.

Construction

The street façade consists of two separate walls, as is common in building today. Here the two walls are in fact detached constructions, different in shape and support; functionally, statically, and constructionally, they are utterly independent of one another. The inner wall of unclad concrete poured on site remains invisible, covered and sheathed on the inside by different materials used in the office world with its changing needs. The outer wall consists of a grid of prefabricated solid concrete cubes, each 12 cm deep, 40 cm high and 140 cm long, with an average weight of 150 kilos. The size and weight of the blocks is more than a human individual could lift up to pile them up into a wall. They are beyond the so-called human measure, i.e. they are too heavy to be easily moved, optically and physically.

Industrially fabricated, they all have the same size and weight, almost as if they were stone weights. Apart from standard-size blocks, there are, as in any wall, some blocks of different sizes used as cornerstones or for door or window lintels. However, these exceptions are reduced to a minimum and virtually disappear in the mass of the wall as a whole.

The impression of a compact, massive wall is reinforced by the close stacking of the concrete blocks. The tight joints are filled up to the surface with cement, which creates an impression of a wall of hewn natural, and not industrial, stone. The predominance of the stone surface over the small share of cement joints further contributes to this impression. The greenish grey color of the concrete blocks and their surface porosity give the façade a kind of compactness and density of their surface, as if it had absorbed the dust and asphalt of the street.

The Volume

Viewing the complex from the court side, one might feel tempted to speak of it in the plural, for it seems as if it consisted of several buildings, a group or composition of edifices. If this were the case, it would be an extended jagged base, overlaid by a stepped wedge-shaped body which in turn leans on to the ⊥-shaped body by the side of Steinentorberg which, in a circular movement, leads up to the wing along Innere Margarethenstraße.

Any attempt to describe this transition in terms of building shapes, that is, to mark off one shape from the other, is bound to fail. The

circular body cannot be separated from the wing alongside Steinentorberg or the stair tower. Together, they form a monolithic shield the stone front of which is fortified by the stone stair tower.

Thus it seems that this wedge-shaped, stepped, and plastered courtside part—with its differently treated surfaces—leans against, and is enclosed by, this protective walling as if it had been positioned with a dialectical intent in a conventional architectural composition the way dialectics is normally understood by architects and employed as a popular means. It would be somewhat peculiar, though, to see the courtside wedge as an independent part of the building as compared to the streetside front, all the more so since both form part of a continuous spatial and functional unit inside the building.

Can the mere fact that this courtside part is plastered and not enclosed by a wall suffice to justify this view? Or would the stepped gradation not indicate an entirely different view?

This gradation—necessitated also by the light incidence angle, that is, constructionally—cannot simply be a nonchalantly added, playful annex. Looking at the cross-section of the building, it becomes clear that the gradation and the streetside part form one unit, statically, functionally and in purpose. The gradation is continued as a static, slanted line down into the basement where it becomes part of a grid of uniform supports extending over the entire floor space of the complex.

The sectional view thus shows that the courtside wedge and the streetside parts share a common base and are distinguished in surface treatment only in the upper storeys. The wedge is not an annex or of secondary static or functional importance in any way. It complements and supports the streetside front and vice versa.

At the same time, the wedge must be seen as a metaphor, symbolizing the ideal wall stabilized by an earth bank. It would therefore be misleading to see the complex as a hard shell/soft core composition. These are not independent building parts that put together according to some compositional principle. Rather, it is a unified complex which affords a different aspect in the courtside upper storeys than on the other sides of the building, just like a mountain that is steep on one side and descends smoothly on the other, therefore developing different type of surface vegetation.

The base

Three storeys are entirely dug into the earth. Due to the strong declivity of the site, half of the fourth storey, counting from the ground-floor, stands out above slope level. The circumference of these lower four storeys is almost identical with the building lot. These lowest, invisible parts of the building are thus almost congruent with the site it stands on; the building does not have a self-determined, individual shape in these sections; rather, it extends to the maximum, rest upon a maximum surface, the only boundary being the random line of the wall to the neighboring lot. At this constructed site, the true base of the building, all vertical forces are transferred into the ground.

Here, the building almost resembles a plant trying to stretch out its roots into the farthest corner. Inside, there are no definite, specific shapes recognizable either, apart from the concrete stair and elevator walls. The entire ground-floor layout is structured by concrete support columns and concrete slabs turning in different directions as if they were still in search of their final position. This is somewhat perplexing at first, but facilitates the optimum use of the available parking place. Only the fifth storey (the first above ground) does not conform to the outline of the given subterranean base. Receding on the courtside, it rises up all around to full height. The courtside façade follows an apparently random, irregularly jagged line. In the context of the other terraced floor levels, it creates an impression of an artificial, cartographic landscape with the jagged line representing a somewhat abstracted kind of contour line.

This view of the base, which develops out of the ground and, in this upward movement, gradually gains a building contour, ideally corresponds to our observation of the uniform, almost monolithic nature of the entire volume. Comparisons to nature and the relationship of nature and architecture have been a recurrent theme in architectural history. From the classical up to the postmodern period, this resulted in the establishing of a structural hierarchy of building, a stratification of the house from the base upward.

The base is closest to the earth, or still is a part of nature: a piece of rock or a bank of solid stone blocks. Above that, the other floor levels pile up from ground to roof/sky in an gradated, harmonious composition tending toward classical integrity.

This idea of the building, reformulated in numerous variants up until the present, the so-called Rational or Analogous Architecture, is based on a view of the world derived from a-priori propositions which only allow for stylistic nuances, but leave no room for questions of principle or conceptual re-orientation.

In the case of the Fides House, this classical hierarchy is altogether absent. The jagged-line storey turns out to be the link between the lower invisible parts of the building and the terraced storeys above and not simply as a basis for the upper volume to rest upon. The jagged line which created the impression of an topographic architectural element, in fact marks out the legal minimum distance to the neighboring building.

So this line is not the abstract representation of some figural or natural motif imposed from outside, an architect's fancy, but derives from the site itself, the urban building lot and the zoning regulations applying to it. The idea of the base is not limited to a small stratum between below and above, but comprises the volume in its entirety, the invisible subterranean and the visible above-ground storeys.

Urban Planning

The Fides Building is situated in a part of the city characterized by numerous large buildings and large-volume conglomerates. These large buildings are orientation or corner points, blocks planned as urban ensembles. Renowned architects (among them Hans Bernoulli) implemented far-reaching and holistic urban-development concepts here. So this is not a place of haphazard urban planning where a new building could be placed as an isolated object that competes against the existing architecture. Schlotterbeck, Rialto, Heuwaage-viaduct, Bahnhof, and Markthalle are all stones placed with exceptional care in the city mosaic.

They indicate the intended layout of the whole quarter, embodying the urban-development concept to be pursued by future projects like a message that still needs to be spelt out, a kind of advance on architectural and urban-planning achievements still to come, so as to give expression to the intended, complete, long-obscured quality of the place. In this sense, it is an old, historical urban district, not because it consists of old buildings, but because the envisaged ideal of a city is inscribed in its outstanding edifices. [...]

A city built of elements structured in a well-composed hierarchy and inspired by an idea.

The Markthalle complex takes up the upper and inner parts of the triangular area between Centralbahnstraße, Steinentorberg and Innere Margarethenstraße. In a style closely related to classical tradition, the outer layer of the building encloses a large inside space completely occupied by the Markthalle building with its mighty dome. The rhythmicizing of the outer layer underscores the enclosing gesture and relates to the street triangle as a whole, while the two rounded side wings call for unified and consistent adjacent planning. In fact, the mentioned rhythmicization allows for the integration of the buildings along Innere Margarethenstraße with their playful individual shapes, readable only in the context of their respective design ideas, with their entrance courts and stairways.

The lower part of this triangular block is occupied by the Fides Building. When we—irritated by the seemingly formalistic or mimetic approach on the courtside and along Steinentorberg—raised the question of the base of the building, we discoverd the rhizomatous extensiveness of the basement storeys of the building that the upper storeys seem to grow out of in seemless succession, growing into the visible volume. This full use of the given space can also bee seen differently, as the insertion of a missing link in an urban ensemble, of a keystone. Considering, in particular, the large building excavations in the cities, which often extend to the bare fire walls of neighboring buildings or even below their foundations, the comparison with a stone that is seamlessly fitted comes to mind almost naturally.

Later, however, after the completion of these buildings, their sites rarely bear any trace of the generous dimensioning which the excavation seemed to promise. It looks as if the hole in the ground had only been filled up to put a building on top. Too often, buildings of this type merely sport superficial design relationships. Projecting and receding elements and all sorts of other arbitrary design variants are playfully exercised on the back of the hidden, subterranean basement structure, and the visible above-ground volume level is not at all related to the invisible parts below.

The Fides Building is developed out of the excavation; it does not simply fill it up, but expands in it, rises out of it without leaving any useless residual spaces, any awkward dead corner. The courtside jagged line is not an architect-invented shape, but rather a found shape. It is not accidental or bothersome just because it is an expression of limits set by zoning laws.

Here accidentalness is reversed into its opposite, intention: the zoning law was taken literally, because this enabled a specific architectural expression in this location. The stepped courtside part, the back part of the volume, is plastered, as are the back and inner parts of the Markthalle complex. Since, as we could see in considering the entire volume, this stepped back part is not a detached, unintegrated wing, but forms part of a block conceived as a whole, a large shape, there is no rivalry with the plastered parts of the Markthalle building.

Rather, the space enclosed by the triangular array of buildings is emphasized as a unity, a space already occupied by the large Markthalle dome, which does not need to be reinvented or entered like a stage, just because it might be tempting to do so in view of the unusually open urban space at the viaduct and the Markthalle ramp. The front of the Fides Building toward Innere Margarethenstraße and Steinentorberg is one continuous façade, a façade for a purpose, for an urban block which in fact is a kind of keystone in a triangle of streets predefined by the Markthalle complex.

The rounded façade makes it possible to do with one continuous brick-built wall, which is a significant urban-planning gesture in the first place, an expression of the decision to keep architectural manifestation within a given concept for the street triangle.

However, the curved front does not only make sense with regard to urban planning, but also to the volume and the construction itself, since it is accentuated by the brickwork and the windowlessness and thus becomes integral to the whole idea of the building. It could not be replaced by another shape, or detached from the whole, or isolatedly considered or described.

In this respect, it widely differs from numerous others, superficially similar shapes in the quarter: the rounded glass façade of the La-Suisse Building at the central station, or the marble-clad variant at the shopping mall on Steinengraben, not to mention the modernizing restoration of the Steinenschanze bastion: this accumulation of rounded shapes is like an architectural theme park. What can be seen here is how a specific shape can either be an integral part of a coherent architectural concept or a detached element which makes the whole thing appear implausible and random. The Fides Building thus fits in with a given urban-planning structure intended to create a harmonious ensemble; and what is more, it truly completes this structure.

For it is only now that the hitherto undiscernible urban-planning intention becomes apparent. The buildings along Innere Margarethenstraße are integrated in the rhythm of the Markthalle complex, as they are in the window axes of the Fides Building. These proportions change, expanding and elongating on the Steinentorberg side where the urban space opens up with the Heuwaage viaduct. What shows here is that the radical architectural insertion creates a new dimension of urban-development, which moves the volume with its unobtrusive physical presence to the foreground.

The exceptional consistency of volume, construction and urban-planning background effectuates the integration in an urban ensemble, while at the same time it gives the building the kind of noticeability which makes it stand out in its urban surrounding as an object that arrests our attention.

7.3

The Hidden Geometry of Nature

Out of our preoccupation with architecture, houses, and plans, models, sketches and text fragments arise. These text fragments can be put together into a text progression.

A part of these texts is entitled "The Hidden Geometry of Nature". The title is the expression of an approach, a search for perception and meaning, a search of something hidden, something that is integral to nature, that occurs in nature. A search that must fail at the moment I believe I have found my geometry. [...]

Tradition is a utopia. The utopia of a unified culture and the yearning for the integration of life within a collective functioning at a highly complex level. Tradition is a comprehensive category of being and cannot therefore be split apart.

I want to repeat that our architecture stands in no real tradition with earlier architecture. It does, however, allude to it through observations, critical perceptions, copies of it or denials of it. [...]

The relationship to pre-existing architectural and building form is unavoidable and important. Architecture has never arisen out of nothing. But there is no longer a mediatory tradition. This can also be seen in the way that contemporary architecture so often tries to fabricate a relationship to historical forms by means of quotation and with this practice penetrates no further than the surface of the eye's retina.

What else can we do but carry within us all these images of the city, or preexisting architecture and building forms and building materials, the smell of asphalt and car exhaust and rain, and to use our pre-existing reality as a starting point and to build our architecture in pictorial analogies?

The utilization of these pictorial analogies, their dissection and recomposition into an architectural reality is a central theme in our work. [...]

The Presentation

Thinking about the presentation of an architecture is identical to thinking about the architecture itself. To say it in another way, each architect's presentation communicates insight into architecture not so much through the images presented of this architecture, but through the presentation itself; hence, our problematic relationship to conventional architectural models and to perspective drawing. Unwillingly, we bow to the competition rules which require the well-known white site models. Although they are supposed to be "neutral", they, in fact, reduce architecture to volume and geometry. Thus they appear to comply with a view expressed by Le Corbusier who wrote in "Vers une architecture": "Architecture is a scientific, correct and wonderful game of volumes assembled under light."

What, however, if architecture is not a game at all, especially not a scientific and correct one and if the light is often clouded over, diffuse, not so radiant as it is in the ideal southern landscape?

Sometimes architects are also required to present a perspective drawing in as naturalistic a style as possible. Such architectural pictures, always equipped with details from the latest contemporary design repertoire, are even more impossible than the neutral white models. Yet these two presentation techniques are internally related: while the one technique suggests knowledge through the omission of information, the other naturalistic technique achieves the same end through an overabundance of information. The more naturalistic such a perspective drawing is, the more deceptive is its intention. A pictorial space comes into being which is more and more often perceived as real. Nonetheless, only a mood is captured, the single illusion of a not-yet-existing reality. The traditional filmmaker uses this means to begin the action. But in the case of an architectural image, aside from the emotional field of action of the architect himself, this action is wholly lacking.

Architecture, that is, the reality of architecture, cannot be represented through a perspective, naturalistic and illusionistic, manually or computer-aided produced drawing. Once fixed, the image of such an architecture will turn against its creator. It will wear out and become as ludicrous as the love letters once intended for an ex-girlfriend. The image will become

confining because it fears the reality of the architecture arising from it. The perspective drawing will become confining because it does not allow its observer any new mode of seeing other than that which its author intended or any new perspective other than the one chosen.

The perspective, naturalistic mode of presentation for architecture is therefore authoritarian and anti-enlightening. To the same degree, the architecture presented in this manner will tend to reflect such a position.

The precision of an architectural presentation cannot be found in an intensification of the naturalistic outward appearance of the architecture. Rather, it is realized in a mode of presentation which calls up other images of this architectural expression, both visible and invisible. This is a presentation which develops from the structure of architecture itself and changes from project to project just as the architecture itself changes from site to site.

The Reality

The reality of architecture is not built architecture. An architecture creates its own reality outside of the state of built or unbuilt and is comparable to the autonomous reality of a painting or a sculpture.

The reality of which I speak is also not the real building, the tactile, the material. Certainly we love this tangibility, but only in a relationship within the whole of the (architectural) work. We love its spiritual quality, its immaterial value. The artwork is the highest ontological state of material once it is taken out of its natural context. All other ontological states of material describe a gradual devaluation ending in the total rape in which mankind participates through his production of the utilitarian objects of daily life and the typical architecture of today.

These thoughts on the spiritual quality of the material world, like those on tradition and presentation, are to be seen in one context. This context tends to let reality be felt and intellectually confronted because we feel this to be a political necessity.

As a matter of fact, the architectural plan and the architectural work interest us as tools for the perception of reality and confrontation with it. Here too, we would view the moral and political content of our own work from a more questioning stance. Not only as a stance during the draft-

ing process, but also as the self-reflecting quality that we try to bring into the finished buildings themselves.

With the word "moral," I am not referring to an objective or affirmative moral concept, or even to a moral precept. The morality of which I speak is not the morality of good form and pure stylistic means that was demanded by the famous architects of the International Style for a new modern man. We are not against variety in stylistic means, but against the arbitrariness of its use. We are against arbitrariness because it always serves to dismantle resistance, an aesthetic political resistance to simple consumerism, to the dizzying speed with which this consumer behavior has to be maintained by new picture material. Our moral-political resistance to this arbitrariness is also related to a fear of being pulled into the current ourselves, a fear of what we could call the time grid of the media, a fear of being ourselves degraded into guises.

One work which we feel may express the questioning of both self and site, is the Ricola warehouse we built in a former quarry in Laufen. The brief was the encasement of a warehouse in steel construction with fully automatic stocking installations.

Since the outer mass of the building had already been determined by the inside installations and the steel construction, the building's proportions, which through their huge dimensions would completely change the scale of the site, had to be created by the structure of the building's sheath. This structure has been realized as a kind of giant "pile of boards" in which the vertical and the horizontal carrying elements, wooden beams, wood cement panels and wooden platforms "shelve" the elements of the façade in an analogy to the inner stock shelves of the building. The outer structure thus corresponds to the inner warehouse structure of the building. The idea of stocking shelves is not applied to the building, but is embodied by the building itself. The varying dimensions of the horizontal layers emphasize this concept. The building acquires an almost "breathing" effect in which—visible in the roof frieze—the inner steel construction enclosed in sheet-metal is unmasked. In contact with the floor, the idea of a stacked pile is again strengthened by the placement of concrete consoles directly on top of the approximately six-foot-high stone foundation that remains visible along the north façade. The viewer's perception of the stone is heightened by its contrast to the delicate wood cement construction and its meaning as a constituent topographical and historical element on the site becomes clear-

er. The limestone, once quarried here, now for the first time becomes apart of this factory area. [...]

The Hidden Geometry of Nature

Most of the objects we use in everyday life have for us a clear identity, which is defined only by their utilitarian value. We do not pose any further questions to such an object, e.g., where it comes from, how and from what material it is produced. Because it is helpful, we accept it without getting to know it better.

Even if I wanted to and had had a technical education, I could not understand objects used daily: the TV, the refrigerator, the personal computer. All these objects seem to me to be a kind of synthetic conglomeration in which the resulting products are barely still recognizable. They are in a way so mixed up with other materials that decomposition back into the original form is no longer possible. Here, the original form would not even be the natural one. Rather, it would first decompose back into industrially finished products: cables, glass panels, steel blades and cooling liquids.

The culture in which we live today, especially the western one, is a culture of blending and mixing substances until they are unrecognizable. These substances are a part of that matter which, according to a basic law of physics, is never lost. However, in innumerable products of our industrial age, these substances, this matter, can only re-enter a natural cycle with great difficulty. This means that after they are scrapped, they harden into a useless degenerated state in a dump or depot. Only there do they become poisonous, life-threatening substances. In this context, substances such as lead, mercury and chlorine are connected in our minds to negative values. Their harmless ordinary guise as batteries for toys or as a refrigerator has vanished. Their heyday is over: their identity, which we believed we could exhaust in their utilitarian value, is scrapped.

My discomfort and my questioning astonishment in the face of our daily production are thus not unfounded. I could not dissolve these aesthetic clumps, these conglomerates, in my own head. I could not dismantle them any more than the junkyards and depots of our culture can. Thus there seems to be a connection between aesthetic critical perception resulting in physical discomfort and the real measurable destruction of the natural world. But what does all this have to do with architecture? Where does this mode

of seeing lead to when applied to architecture? I come, with all my discomfort, from the field of architecture. Architecture whose limits I try to extend; architecture which I use as a thinking model for a critical perception of our whole culture.

Our interest in the invisible world is in finding a form for it in the visible world. That is, in breaking through the deceptive, visible and familiar guise to take it apart, to atomize it, before relating to it anew. The invisible world is not a mystic one, but it is also not a world of natural sciences, of invisible atomic crystalline structures.

With this we mean the complexity of a system of relationships which exists in nature, in an un-researchable perfection, and whose analogy in the realm of art and society interests us. Our interest is thus the hidden geometry of nature, a spiritual principle and not primarily the outer appearance of nature. [...]
