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A Fortress for Art

The New Building of the Kunstmuseum Basel

Pablo Müller

In April, the Kunstmuseum Basel opened its new building. More recently, the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur followed suit, and in Zürich construction on the extension of the Kunsthaus is well underway. These building projects suggest long-term confidence in publicly funded art museums. But what understanding of «public» is conveyed here? An inspection in Basel.





Extension of the Kunstmuseum Basel, 2016. Photo: Börje Müller-Nolasco.

Going by the press releases, Basel saw «one of the oldest public art collections of the world become one of the internationally most prominent museums» this spring. The Kunsthaus Zürich—funded by what is, «after Tate, the second largest art association in Europe»—will become the «largest and most dynamic art museum in Switzerland», once its extension is completed, and in Chur the museum's established image is further strengthened. On the websites of the respective museums one can find the new quantitative potency pre-calculated: greater attendance, greater reach, more space. Zürich expects to be able to display 20% (compared to 10% today) of its holdings; Basel announces a 29% increase of its floor area and the Bündner Kunstmuseum even speaks of almost doubling its floor area. The announcements brim with confidence, euphoria and optimism for the future.

Unabated Confidence

This confidence in the future of the public art museum is by no means a given, especially considering that, recently, the ideology of growth in the museum world is once again being called into question. Obviously, the current imperative is a quantitative increase in holdings, exhibition space and attendance. In the process, quality often takes a back seat—such was the starting hypothesis advanced by a symposium that was recently held at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.[1] In addition to this criticism, there has been increasing political pressure on publicly funded art institutions in Switzerland in recent years. In 2013, the youth branch of the Free Democratic Party of Switzerland demanded that the Kunsthalle Bern be closed due to scarce financial resources. And the Kunstmuseum Olten, too, was on the brink of being closed in 2014, as the politicians in charge argued for the need to save and even considered summarily selling the collection.

Moreover, publicly funded art institutions nowadays compete with privately run museums. This development started in Switzerland in the 1990. On the occasion of the symposium *Museumsland Schweiz: Wachstum ohne Grenzen?* (Switzerland Museum Country: Boundless Growth?) which was held in Winterthur in 1999, the Schweizerischer Kunstverein (Swiss Art Association) referred to a shift of power from the public to the private museums.[2] And in

an article published in conjunction with the symposium, Edith Krebs concluded that the well-endowed collector's and artist's museums compete with public museums not just in terms of audience. They also mean fewer donations and bequests.[3]

Against this backdrop, the current investments into the public art infrastructure in Switzerland are quite remarkable. And what is even more astonishing: the new buildings that are realized after protracted decision-making processes not only reflect a strengthened self-confidence of public cultural institutions in Switzerland, but also convey a conservative understanding of the public art museum.

Hermetic

What strikes one first about the new building in Basel, which was designed by the architectural firm of Christ and Gantenbein (who are also responsible for the extension of the Landesmuseum in Zürich), is its forbidding overall appearance. The bunker-like structure takes up the entire corner site, which is bounded by streets on two sides, and prominently protrudes in the direction of the Basel Minster. At this location the museum points the way to the existing Kunstmuseum on the opposite side of the street and further down to the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, reinforcing the urban axis of culture from the Kunsthalle via the Antikenmuseum (Museum of Ancient Art) and the Kunstmuseum to the Museum für Gegenwartskunst (Museum of Contemporary Art). Based on its exterior, this building is a real «archi-sculpture» [4] A solid, closed form. Windows break the façade only in some places



Extension of the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur. Photo: Hochbauamt Graubünden.

In Chur, too, the extension building, which is located behind the old Bündner Kunstmuseum, relies on a similarly clear language of forms. Designed by the Barcelona-based architectural firm Barozzi Veiga, this building likewise provides an emblematic counterpoint within its urban environment. Just as in Basel, the closed façade haughtily seals itself off vis-à-vis public urban space and reveals none of its inner life to the passersby.

Presence in Stone and Concrete

These new Swiss museum buildings contrast with some international museum projects from the 2000s particularly in terms of their materiality. On the occasion of the 2004 opening of the renovated and expanded building of the Museum of Modern Art in New York—an architecture made mainly of glass and steel—Hal Foster still referred to a disappearance of architectural presence in the museum building, quoting Yoshio Taniguchi, the architect of the new MoMA, to make his case: «Raise a lot of money for me, I'll give you good architecture. Raise even more money, I'll make the architecture disappear.»[6] In the case of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, which also opened in 2004 and is likewise made mainly of glass and steel, the pavilion architecture creates an inviting permeability and an interactive element in the possible lines of sight between museum spaces and the surrounding public park setting. In this way the art museum becomes part of an urban recreational space.

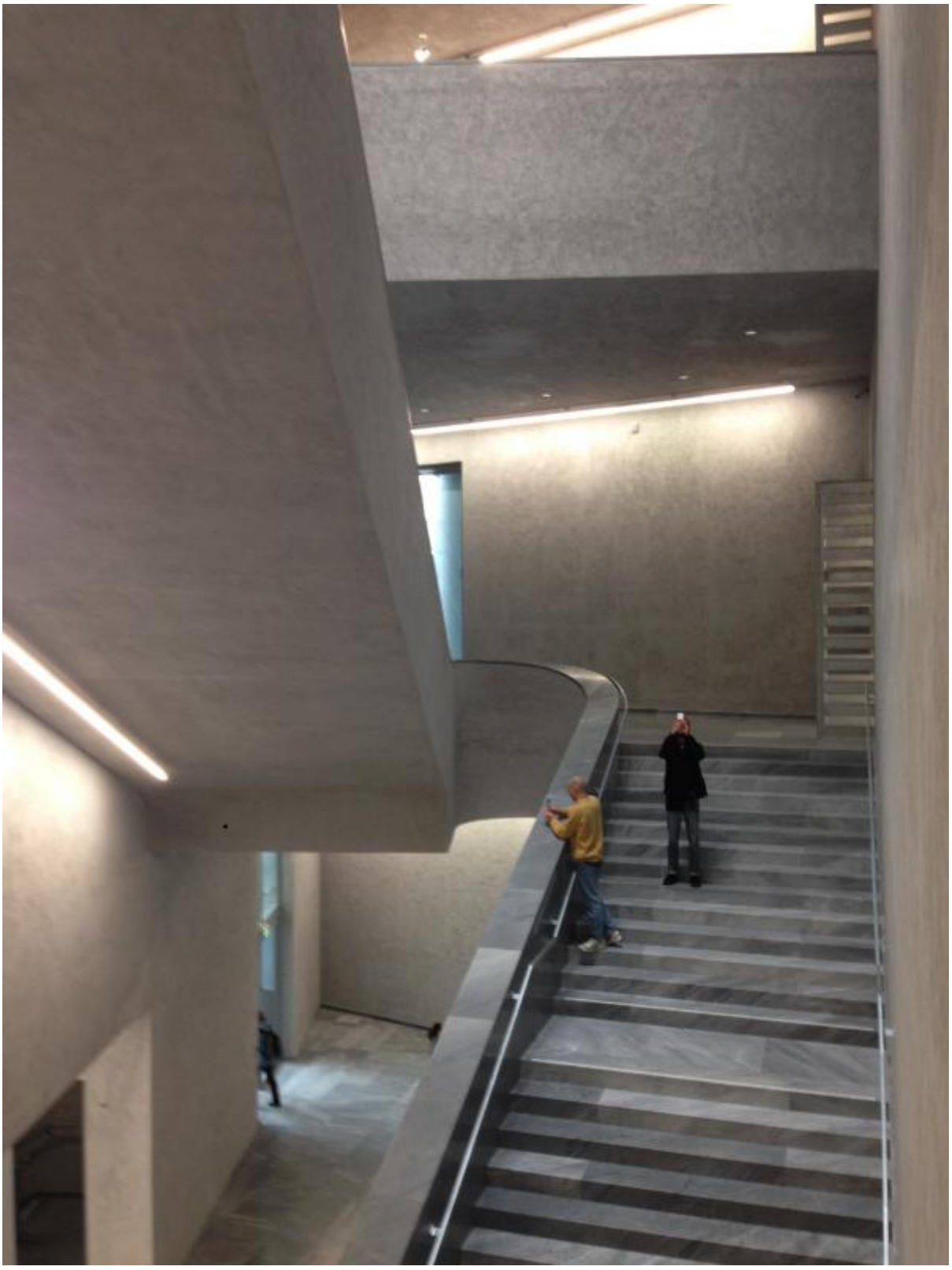


Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa. Photo: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.

Both in Basel and Chur, as well as in the planned extension in Zürich, the dominant use of stone is striking. And quite contrary to the «disappearance» described by Hal Foster, the extensions focus on a real, architectural presence. In this combination—compact, closed form and stone as material—the buildings take on a defensive quality. They promise durability and stability. *Die Zeit* aptly headlined about the extension in Basel: «In Basel they are building for eternity», noting that this is a building «that is meant to still stand in a hundred years.»[7] According to the architects, this timelessness is intended to create a deliberate contrast to the flexible ‹event architecture› in museum construction today (the extension of the Städel Museum in Frankfurt and the new Whitney Museum in New York are cited as examples).[8] The museum architecture in Basel counters this ‹eventization› with a resistiveness of the public museum. The museum as a place that prioritizes not so much the active encounter and event-driven exchange between art and public as the task of protecting and conserving cultural values. With this attitude, the new building in Basel takes up a bourgeois ideal of art in which it is supposed to appear independent of ‹worldly› embroilments and assigned a sublime, timeless quality.

Rhetoric of Potency

What appears as closed monumentality from the outside transforms into an atmosphere of cool grandeur inside the new building in Basel. The lobby, the staircases and passages present themselves in various shades of gray: elegant, smooth marble has been used for the floors, the handrails and doors are of galvanized, shiny steel and the walls have a roughened plaster surface.



Stairway, extension of the Kunstmuseum Basel, 2016. Photo: Pablo Müller.

The real centerpiece inside is the monumental stairway. What traditionally characterizes a building as unmistakably public on the outside has been moved into the museum’s interior here. Far from being a meeting point for the general public (think of the staircases in front of

churches or government institutions), this staircase serves above all to demonstrate the monumentality of the spaces.[9]



Function room, extension of the Kunstmuseum Basel, 2016. Photo: Pablo Müller.

Grandeur is also conveyed by the downstairs space, which is intended for receptions, lectures and other public events. The potency staged in the stairwell becomes a demonstration of prestige and capital in the function hall, and the only purpose of the artworks placed on the walls (Sol Lewitt's wall drawing and Frank Stella's *Damascus Gate*) is to represent said prestige and capital. Accordingly, the two gathering places in the building—the staircases and the function room—serve primarily to represent cultural prestige. Thus the new building relies on a conservative understanding of the museum in its interior as well. Art and culture here become exclusive prestige goods for a well-to-do, upper-class elite which can reflect its wealth and privileged position in the exclusive artworks and thereby reassure itself of its own social status.

Of course, the curatorial direction of a museum is not predetermined by its architecture and art can also set its own priorities. Yet whether this building indeed provides productive «resistance» for curators (Emanuel Christ) remains to be seen.

[1] *Grenzen des Wachstums. Kunstmuseum gestern, heute und morgen*, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, November 26–27, 2015. The event was a joint project of Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and the cultural program of Südwestrundfunk SWR2. See

grenzendeswachstums.com.

[2] *Museumsland Schweiz. Wachstum ohne Grenzen?* A survey of the Swiss Art Association for the September 25, 1999 symposium, ed. by Schweizerischer Kunstverein (Zürich: Schweizerischer Kunstverein, 1999).

[3] See for this also Edith Krebs, «Kein Tag ohne Kunst. Museumsland Schweiz. Eine Standortbestimmung», in *Kunstbulletin* 11 (1999), http://www.kunstbulletin.ch/router.cfm?a=199911A01.

[4] *Archiskulptur. Dialoge zwischen Architektur und Plastik vom 18. Jahrhundert bis heute*, ed. by Markus Brüderlin (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004).

[5] «The building is appealing and repelling at the same time, a paradox feat, yet one that does, in fact, encapsulate the essence of the (new) Kunstmuseum Basel.» See for this Christoph Heim, «Zurückhaltend und selbstbewusst. Jetzt ganz ohne Gerüst. Der Erweiterungsbau des Kunstmuseums», in *Basler Zeitung*, September 30, 2015, 17.

[6] Hal Foster, «It's Modern but is it contemporary? Hal Foster at the New MoMA», in *London Review of Books*, vol. 26, no. 24, December 16, 2004, 23–25.

[7] Marcus Woeller, «In Basel baut man für die Ewigkeit», in Die Zeit, April 16, 2016, http://www.welt.de/kultur/kunst-und-architektur/article154416275/In-Basel-baut-man-fuer-die-Ewigkeit.html.

[8] Ibid.

[9] The architect Emanuel Christ says about this: «Every museum is a public building and the commanding stairway, perhaps, reinforces this sense.» Karin Salm, «Die Museumsarchitekten lieben Ecken und Knicke», in *SRF 2 Kontext*. Wachstumszwang? Schweizer Kunstmuseen werden immer grösser, April 15, 2016, http://www.srf.ch/sendungen/kontext/wachstumszwang-schweizer-kunstmuseen-werden-immer-groesser.

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