

Thomas K. Keller

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From an early age, Thomas Kai Keller intensively worked on the native building culture of the past centuries, with its often instinctive, pragmatic evolutionary history. He also moved from the rural environment of Thurgau to explore the wider world – again through architecture. The young architect's affinity for architectural theory was refined during his many years' work as Assistant to Vittorio M. Lampugnani at the ETH Zurich, where he wrote his own texts on architecture. At an early stage, in a working partnership with Rolf Schulthess – he won the competition to extend the cantonal police station in Thurgau, which was implemented in the same constellation. In 2004, Thomas K. Keller founded his own architectural agency, with which he has achieved a number of competition successes.

The architectural path that Thomas K. Keller is taking can already be found in the extension to the cantonal police station in Frauenfeld. The existing 1980s building is extended to include a volume enclosed in dark steel sheeting, allowing it to be smoothly integrated into the surrounding large-scale hall constructions. The shell is structured with small, light pyramid-shaped elements that fulfil the very varied functions of the extension wing and bring them together in the façade to create an architectural unity. The building section is thereby integrated into the coherent industrial landscape. Such an artistic, impressionist approach can also be seen in the projects created in Amriswil, such as a residential and commercial building or an extension for a bank. The architecture is explicitly oriented by the surrounding architecture and the very specific atmosphere of the location. In a way, the buildings are catalysts that intensify, supplement and condense the perception constituted from the surrounding environment.

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Thoughts on construction

Thomas K. Keller

Developing one's own perspective on architecture is based on the constant interplay between reflective perception and creative design. It is the only way to create a specific rationale that enables the art of construction. The works presented in this volume embody that understanding of architecture. Their construction concepts are the result of continuous research that was begun even while studying and further refined during the first decade of architectural achievement. It has created a design culture that seeks a contemporary answer to the respective building task using a dialogue with theoretical questions.

The search for the main differences between traditional and academically characterised architecture has played an important role in developing underlying personal architectural perception. Research on the Appenzell master builder Konrad Langenegger was a key experience in this respect. It helped to understand the authorless buildings that dominate our village and townscapes with respect to their architectural instruments. Not least, it allowed the development of a personal approach to the role of the architect, who acts both as an intellectual and as a representative of the people, and mediates between the two building cultures.

Research work on construction around 1800 shows how the early 19th Century witnessed an imported intellectual perception of architecture which believed that only the directness of traditional construction can find its localisation. The successful fusion of local building culture with the internationalisms of an emerging classicism is highly inspiring. The essence of house construction is achieved when functionally and practically conceived building elements are intelligently combined with the structural and formal logic of the building. Functional objects thereby become the constructed motif. They affect the structured, designed whole, which gains its vitality and appropriateness from a dual harmony of materiality and abstraction. Interweaving the motif with the tectonic system of the building leads to a manifestation that can present itself to society in a natural way. Public buildings that represent such an architectural concept become a valid architectural strategy.

The 20th Century also produced architects who sought to work in the area of tension between popular construction and refined architecture. Above all, publications on the young Le Corbusier are very revealing in this respect. His trip to the Balkans to examine the modern fascination for abstract elements in rural and sacral architecture is a good indicator of Le Corbusier's working methods. His distinct sense of popular motifs and its skilful combination with the architectural body and space reveal a high degree of consciousness of traditional and primitive construction. Le Corbusier renewed the repertoire by gleefully playing the range of notes on the architectural keyboard, thereby revealing not only an abstract artistic concept, but also an eclectic master builder's approach. The energy with which he

attempted to find the motifs of the time and integrate them in a radical form into the wealth of architecture represents an inspired version of functionalism.

The work of Mies van der Rohe is an unsurpassed reference in the search for the essence of modern architectural form. He developed the Berlin tradition further in a radical way by condensing elementary questions to an abstract expression to achieve maximum concentration. In a three-way harmony with the architectures of Schinkel and Behrens, this work provides a fine basis for thought on European building culture. Mies van der Rohe confidently leads his design craft towards a classically viable expression. The form absorbs the overall motif and only expresses itself in consummate refinement from within. The motif and tectonics become one. Abstraction experiences its classical completion. However, such 20th Century "Miesian" classicism is not doctrinarian. It becomes the point of departure to create a postmodernism that certainly allows itself certain mannerisms. Our generation is characterised in this respect by the fact that both the heroes of modernism and their disciples are perceived in terms of their creative architectural process rather than their programmatic actions. The entity of modern daily life, which has been well researched in secondary literature, is the substance of contemporary interpretation. It takes place in a construction atmosphere that is oriented by a mannered functionalism and a reductionist architectural language of Minimal Art, which has attempted to breathe new life into abstraction.

The dialectically structured understanding of design as architecture that expresses itself in the tension between concreteness and abstraction, motif and tectonics, and objectivity and expression, comes close to the core questions of our age in the early 21st Century. The London experience is characteristic for a connection with the contemporary. Without much ado, the term *volkstümlich* (traditional) is now replaced by popular. It is a free train of thought to regard pop culture as giving the momentum that intervenes in the tectonic system of objectivity and drives it forward. The perspective on the strictly defined German-Swiss *Konzeptarchitektur* thereby becomes more discerning, developing an affinity towards an artistic stance that can be described as a post-concept. The patterns of perception with respect to the world of architecture now become significantly freer. Within the autonomy of architecture, an overview suddenly emerges that no one could have expected. The unprejudiced tectonic analysis of important architecture now allows strategies that are similar to approaches in art and photography. Crossovers and sampling of tectonic main and sub-concepts allow the construction of architecture that dissolves historical experiences by means of contemporary input. In a multilayered process of finding a form, scenarios are composed that clearly play with fictions, deceptions and shifts in time. They become intelligently contemporary, because they do not appear fast and loud, but are instead woven into a consistently objective fabric.

Working on all available aspects of architecture can be regarded as fleeing from

a precise manifest, but it is not. Instead, it means a dominant scepticism of quick fixes, a number of which have left their mark on the postmodern zeitgeist. The true heritage of modernism may well be the “intellectual perception” that goes hand in hand with abstract and concrete art. One is only abreast with the times if one can develop the heritage of modernism further, including its consciousness of its own theoretical substance. One should thereby look further than the apparent simplicity of modern images and work towards architectural concepts that are conceived in a multilayered way. Only a broad-ranging approach to the kaleidoscope of conceived and constructed modernism strengthens the autonomy of architecture. In today’s times, we cannot completely shield ourselves from a certain degree of eclecticism. This is a period in which we are attempting to adapt the experiences of architecture to suit the multi-optional habits of contemporary society. The trend lies in wait-and-see, integrating behaviour, rather than pioneering avant-gardism. It seems as though the clockwork is being readjusted for the challenges of the 21st Century. The more precisely and honestly we think, the clearer the forms will appear in bodies, space and structures.

Extension to the cantonal police station and cantonal prison, Frauenfeld

The architecture of the extensions for the cantonal police station and cantonal prison consists of three types of yards that merge to create the overall form. They react to the typological organisation of the existing buildings, which were designed in the late 1980s by the architects Stutz und Bolt. In the cantonal police station, the system of departments organised on respective floors is continued in the new building. The prison’s existing central wing is extended. The project with the competition title Pomonochrom picks up on the postmodern rhetoric of the existing buildings. Deep-drawn panels with an engrained diamond ashlar motif are organised on the building volumes in variations, thereby creating a specific and striking rhetoric for each building function. Train travellers catch a glimpse of the significance of the police station, the prison and its yard.

The architectural language of the new building reacts to the context like a seismograph. It receives the noise of the urban sprawl, absorbs it and strikes back using its architecture. This method of hypercontextualisation has only become conceivable through contemporary art. The elevation of brand products to fetishes of society, as Sylvie Fleury 1998 staged in her series of sculptures entitled Kelly Bag, Nike etc., affected the architectural concept as strongly as the figurativeness of the monochrome cast sculptures by Rachel Whiteread (House, London; 1993). Above all, photographic art has also provided a contextual staging of content and form. Direct access to historicity and its merging with the contemporary (Jeff Wall, A Hunting Scene; 1994 and Thomas Struth, San Zaccaria, Venice; 1995) also allows new strategies of figurativeness in architecture.

Entrance furniture, St. Georgen Monastery Museum, Stein am Rhein

The St. Georgen Benedictine monastery that was moved to the River Rhine in the early 11th Century and is one of the best preserved monastery facilities in Switzerland. The ensemble, which has been converted several times, was in its prime at the turn of the 15th and 16th Centuries. The last and most powerful abbot, David von Winkelsheim, took office in 1499. He extended the monastery facility towards the Rhine by building his quarters. The ballroom with its cycle of frescoes, which were produced in 1515, is one of the earliest examples of the Renaissance north of the Alps. Since 1945, the facility has been owned by the Swiss state and can be visited as a monastery museum during the summer months.

The new entrance furniture was developed as a spatial object that fits against the walls of the small entrance room without touching them. The visitor walks through a small, newly built section that provides modern museum services in the otherwise unheated and only sparsely lit monastery. The free geometry of the wooden structure is developed from the position of the doors and the logic of the museum circuit. The contemporary design and construction details contrast with the classical use of the local hard and soft wood. With its carpentered display surfaces for postcards and publications, the furniture develops an attractive materiality, while the enamelled metal plates in the interior base area provide a heating function with their radiating warmth. The multifunctional furniture thereby creates a natural architectural reference to the existing stoves and alcoves in the secular areas.

Residential and commercial building, Amriswil

The small town building with a shop, an ophthalmology practice and two loft apartments is situated in Bahnhofstrasse and replaces the dilapidated urban building from the mid-19th Century. The different requirements and alignments on each of the four floors are disciplined in a playful way in the building to create a unity. Despite the contrasting heights of the rooms and constructions, the window height remains constant on all upper floors. That allows a calm façade composition which does not openly communicate the hybrid use of the building.

The building is accessed via a large hall that leads to a staircase. The rented flats are designed as elegant apartments that allow variable tours and room connections. Typological clarity is subjugated to the flow of the rooms and their proportions.

Inside, the windows receive the same rhythm as the load-bearing wall sections by means of slightly recessed spandrel niches, giving the fitted rooms a noble character. The effect of the inner relief is expressed accordingly on the plastered façade. Continuous aprons and shear walls are freely aligned to create a façade image, while the plaster areas of the exterior insulation system are framed with coloured anodized aluminium profiles. An aluminium pilaster construction applied to the Styrofoam combines the image of a shop building with the context of plastered homes. The specific combination of two façade systems creates an architectural innovation that immediately feels familiar due to its graceful implementation.

Entrance area, Forum Schweizer Geschichte Schwyz

The Forum Schweizer Geschichte Schwyz, a Baroque building on Hofmatt that was originally a representative granary and later an armoury, was converted into a museum of cultural history by the Lucerne architects Scheitlin und Syfrig and opened in 1995. Together with the National Museum Zurich and the Château de Prangins, the Forum Schweizer Geschichte Schwyz belongs to the Swiss National Museum group. Temporary exhibitions are presented in the basement, while the upper floors accommodate the permanent exhibition on the history of Swiss daily life between 1300 and 1800.

The reason for the building work on the museum were improvements to the security systems, which required the renewal of the existing entrance portal. In this context, the reception area also had to be reconsidered. The existing architecture is an interesting example of sober Swiss postmodernism, which moves in the tension between Italian and Dutch tendencies, but seemed to be a little too “tightly meshed” in the reception area.

The new foyer design is dominated by two angularly aligned counters and cupboards that create a calm atmosphere through their uniform height, as well as an open room for visitors and museum personnel. The furniture is covered with cast-in artificial resin and polished to shine. The lacquer furniture thereby fits well in the existing material opulence consisting of cherry wood veneer, sandblasted glass and black rubber granule surfaces. The newest layer of the interior architecture, which also refurbishes the shop and the bistro, adds a contemporary trace to the relatively young existing elements, without undermining them.

Commercial building extension to include a bank, Amriswil

The commercial building in Kirchstrasse 13 is part of the industrial ensemble with main features that were designed in 1907 by the architects Curjel und Moser. While the factory halls have already taken the step from the industrial to a service-providing age through their transformation into a shopping centre, the front section of the building did not yet fulfil today’s requirements. The Raiffeisen bank required a more open architectural structure on the ground floor to facilitate public access for the Amrville shoppers. A new access core transforms the building into an attractive service building for new users.

The new ground-floor organisation sidelined the century-old main entrance. Two new architectures on both sides of the building and a new staircase in the characteristic style of the existing building create a balance between preservation and renewal. The extension for the bank and the roof of the new main entrance articulate a new entrance gesture towards the street through the forms of the roof. The shape of the extension’s floor plan is developed with the flow of passers-by in mind, as it moves over the “plaza” towards the shopping centre. The portico architecture this creates combines its static frame with the existing building’s structure of columns and

pilasters. At the transition from old to new, it clings to the older section and creates an interior with a flow of rooms that has a harmonious, generous feel. The interior finishing, using artificial stone, granite, elm and painted pinewood, accords with the century-old building substance. A consistently modern language of forms and the traditional materialisation create an elegant self-confidence.

Stahlton Bauteile AG office building, Frick

The Stahlton works estate is an impressive example of the Swiss building industry's economic and technological development. In recent decades, prominent buildings have been erected using various construction methods. The surrounding area also shows evidence of a striking transformation in its urban structure during the second half of the 20th Century.

The "Fibrestone" project works with two main strategies. Firstly, the industrial tradition is continued. A striking volume is proposed for a building that is constructed using contemporary technology to express its function in an unpretentious, yet elegant way. Secondly, a dense green area is created. The wood-like park structure surrounding the car park and office building connects the office facility with the green area on Kantonsstrasse. The rapidly expanding, car-oriented town receives a new atmosphere through the large-scale plantation.

The building with five prominent floors has a central core structure in which the lifts, the emergency stairs and the basic facilities are organised. The top floor is a special element for use as an event space, while also accommodating common rooms and other special rooms. Together with roof terraces, it creates an exclusive world that serves as an ideal supplement to the office rooms. The view beyond the building's own woodland park and into the Fricktal valley gives the building an identity. The vertical pilaster structure that emulates the 1.35 metre scale of the building's axis is conceived as a fibrous concrete profile that was to be developed by the Stahlton company as a prototype for other applications in service construction.

School gardens, Arenenberg agricultural school

The unique scenery of the Arenenberg palace grounds has an architectural character of interplay between the Napoleonic palace and its manor grounds, which have been expanded to create the agricultural school. In its prominent location above the Untersee lake, its sensitive integration of buildings into the landscape makes a significant contribution to the quality of the area. The gardens include kitchen and ornamental garden sections to create an attractive transition from the agriculturally used meadows to the highly cultivated landscape architecture of the palace. The planned replacement building for the nursery, which needs renovation, therefore positions the new building as near as possible to the adjoining buildings of the manor grounds.

The nursery building is a compact gardening building with utility rooms oriented towards all sides. It thereby reacts to the topographic conditions. The low, inclined

front areas on the east and west sides serve as ramps for forklifts and machinery to overcome the different levels. The composition of the overall facility is based on the primary construction of greenhouse systems and is extended to the entire building. A structure of rigid binding frames made of galvanised steel acts as the static frame for distinctive infilling and cladding systems. While the greenhouses represent a standardised greenhouse system, the adjoining building sections are developed according to their climatic requirements. The steel structure with wooden infilling is enveloped in untreated cladding made of local, raw-sawn spruce. The proposed roof cover is copper.

Lommis municipal building

The new Lommis municipal building fills a gap in one of the village's most important streets. The building was designed on a square floor plan and is oriented towards all sides due to its unfolded gable forms, thereby acting as a joint in the street network. It mediates between two parts of the village and gives both sides a "face". The chosen position of the building and its main entrance creates a striking entrance area towards the main street.

While the halls for counters are situated on the ground floor, the council chamber is on the upper storey. It is oriented towards the street junction and can be clearly seen from the street-level. As with many municipal and council buildings, it is diagonally oriented towards its public representative side.

The construction principle is based on two materials. The planned service core, ceilings and interior supports along the façade are made of concrete. Maximum spans of 8 metres are achieved in this way. The offset order of supports is a special element to make the interior functional structure along the façade recognisable. Large "windows towards the public" are included to conform with a contemporary administrative building. To shield the façade, a sun-protection structure with copper and wood cladding (brise soleil in wood) provides a framework for dialogue with the half-timber buildings in the surrounding area. The wooden cladding gives the concrete its appearance, thereby excitingly reinterpreting well-known perception habits, as does the specific roof-form with its differing jamb wall heights over a square plan.