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se dépose comme de la mousse autour du volume fonctionnel abritant les équipements de pompage. L'enveloppe en béton est effectivement composée de différents renforcements qui recouvrent le bâtiment d'un immense ornement floral. Par des ouvertures disposées avec précision, l'eau coule dans les renforcements et favorise une végétation de façade composée de mousse, de lichens et d'autres végétaux primitifs qui modifieront, au cours du temps, l'apparence de l'ornement. Le bâtiment construit pour prévenir les débordements cycliques du Rhin dans une zone exposée aux crues à la limite sud de Cologne poursuit en façade le mouvement de l'eau qui se produit à l'intérieur. La compréhension de la nature ainsi exprimée oscille ici en permanence entre représentation stylisée et performance réelle. Et, dans la mesure où la végétation de surface colonise l'ornement floral au bénéfice de la nature, l'ouvrage érigé pour contrer la nature change, pour ainsi dire, de camp.

b&k+ démontre que l'espace vert ne doit pas nécessairement être chargé de chlorophylle dans le paysage télématique, un concept architectural (non réalisé) qui signalait la présence de la Robert Bosch AG à l'Expo 2000 de Hanovre. Le paysage est ici affranchi de toute texture matérielle et défini comme une méta-perception. Celle-ci se compose d'une infinité de perceptions partielles qui vont du plus petit au plus grand, de la prise de vue faite avec un microscope électronique d'un tissu cellulaire à une image satellite de la terre. L'accumulation et la répétition de différentes échelles et dimensions produit un espace fractal dont les structures se retrouvent dans l'organisation spatiale du projet. L'intérieur du pavillon est composé d'une structure itérative formée de cubes disposés librement dans l'espace. Sur leurs parois est projeté l'univers iconographique de cette méta-perception fragmentée. Dans un puits de lumière au centre du pavillon se trouve un arbre réel qui permet au visiteur de s'orienter dans un espace sans direction. La topographie animée du sol définit un paysage réel. Il constitue le point de départ d'un voyage dans la télématique que Vilém Flusser a décrit comme «une technique qui fait elle-même approcher ce qui est au loin». Dans un espace aux surfaces animées de pulsations se lient ainsi des images de provenance, de référence, de dimension et de vitesse différentes. Elles présentent au visiteur la vision cacophonique du monde après la fin «des grands récits», une sorte de peinture de paysage conforme au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle naissant.

# English

Jean-Philippe Vassal: architect, Bordeaux/Paris  
 Andreas Ruby: interviewer, wbw  
 (pages 10–15)  
 English translation: Michael Robinson

## Séjourner sur l'herbe

"If nature were perfect we wouldn't need houses" Emilio Ambasz

**wbw:** Greenhouses are obviously a major feature of your architecture. There is scarcely a project of yours that is not influenced by them in some way: because of the materials involved (polycarbonate), the spatial typology (extended winter garden) or even the construction itself, as in the Maison à Coutras, which uses a prefabricated standard greenhouse as is for residential purposes. What explains this extraordinary importance of greenhouses for your architecture?

**Jean-Philippe Vassal:** We reached a point in our work when the greenhouse emerged as a possible way of implementing a particular idea of living in our architecture. This idea was substantially shaped through my experience in Africa, where I lived from 1980–85, in Niamey, the capital of Niger. I had just finished studying architecture in France, but out there in Africa I found myself in extreme climatic conditions that stood any European perception of architecture, houses and living on its head. In Niger the air temperature rises to 40 degrees during the day, and even at night it does not drop below 25 to 30 degrees. Under conditions like these, there are two main things that architecture has to do: it has to create and ensure cool conditions. So the building must be able to shut out the sun and at the same time let in the wind. That is why the straw hut is the usual building type: a very light structure made of branches, with straw walls and rice mats as a roof.

Interestingly enough, the Maison Tropicale, which Jean Prouvé built in Niamey in 1949, was based on the same principle. The only difference lay in the materials: the supporting structure is steel, the roof is made of sheet aluminium while the outer walls are made of horizontally arranged brise-soleils whose light aluminium skin reflects the sun, and thus stops the interior of the house getting too warm. The wind can flow into the house between the shaded gaps in the brise-soleils; it supplies fresh air to the two living-rooms that have been inserted, and is then let out again through a longitudinal aperture in the roof. Even today, Prouvé's is the only modern house in Niamey that gets by without air conditioning. It is as though the extreme conditions of this location make it obligatory to redefine comfort, liberate it from any bourgeois connotations and take it back to an almost existen-

tial plane where all that matters is whether architecture can create a place within this extreme climate in which it is actually possible to exist.

**wbw:** Seen like that, the living room is not really a closed interior, you are living in the open air to a certain extent. So what part does the house still have to play, where does it start and where does it stop?

**Vassal:** The house essentially provides that minimum of interior space that you need at night in particular to find a little intimacy under the infinite breadth of the sky. In the case of the Tuareg nomads this minimum is a mixture of hut and tent: a large piece of sheep- or camel-skin that is stretched like a tarpaulin over a few branches stuck in the desert sand, forming a shelter about 1.3 m high that is used exclusively for sleeping purposes. In the morning they take the cushions and sheets they have spent the night on out into the open air, so that they can warm up a little in the morning sun. When the sun gets too hot after one or two hours they move on with all their "reclining furniture" in order to find some shade under the bushes. Towards midday it gets too hot here as well, and they move on again to find a cooler spot under the trees. And so it goes on all day long. In this way the Tuareg "live" their way through a territory along a route that starts at the tent in the morning and ends up there as well in the evening.

**wbw:** Does this nomadic living also imply the concept of a house?

**Vassal:** I think it does, but it is not restricted to the tent; theoretically it includes the entire desert landscape. In fact the activity of living defines a space that is larger than the house. This means that the house loses its boundaries and becomes a territory. Ultimately this applies to European houses as well, except that here we are attached to a traditional notion of the house in which the walls also form its boundaries – which is certainly a psychologically motivated separation. Because as soon as you do so much as open a window the house inevitably opens up to the outside, the internal wall of the living room expands towards the horizon and the view becomes the wallpaper. Not only the garden is part of the house, but so is the road that leads to the house, constituting a kind of anti-chambre en plein air. Ultimately the wall of a house is more like a kind of skin, and thus a membrane, not a boundary.

**wbw:** The façade of a greenhouse functions more like a membrane as well. So what part does the greenhouse play in the context of this idea of living you observed in Africa?

**Vassal:** The greenhouse provides a way of translating the climate as needed. It goes without saying that living in the open air, which fascinated me so much in Africa, is not really possible in Europe because of the colder climate. In this situation the greenhouse makes limited climate correction possible. Because ultimately

all the greenhouse does is to give a certain culture the conditions it needs for growth at a place that is alien to it, by modifying the local climate slightly without becoming completely detached from this. Along these lines we use the greenhouse in our architecture to provide the conditions for a residential culture that actually could not exist in our latitudes.

**wbw:** In this way the expertise that has been accumulated by greenhouse architecture in its long tradition of applied research has been tapped from the side, as it were, and put to the use of a contemporary definition of living, hence making up for the general lack of research & development in the architectural field.

**Vassal:** That is why architecture intended for roses, for example, is at least ten times as intelligent as architecture intended for people.

There are worlds between the thermal comfort enjoyed by plants in a greenhouse and the conditions people put up with in a normal house. It is here at the latest that you realize how much the domestic house is still caught up in a logic of protection and how defensively it relates to its surroundings: as few windows as possible, as much wall as possible, and the maximum amount of insulation as well – everything fixed and enshrined in countless building regulations based on a completely traditional notion of a house and immune to any attempt to learn from other disciplines about how living conditions could perhaps be better designed.

In contrast with this, greenhouses, thanks to the decades of research that have been invested in them, show a degree of intelligence today that seems like science fiction in comparison with architecture. One of the ways in which this shows is the reliability with which climatic conditions can be controlled in greenhouses: the temperature can be fixed to within half a degree, and the humidity to within one percentage point; the amount of sunlight admitted can be controlled, and so can the degree to which air is circulated. And as the climate in the greenhouse is not autonomous, but depends on the outside climate, all these parameters have to be constantly adjusted to external conditions like brightness, humidity, temperature and wind strength, in order to permanently guarantee the climatic conditions necessary for the respective plantation.

**wbw:** Despite or perhaps because of this deep gulf, your architecture has been “Learning from the Greenhouse” for years now. What are your experiences, particularly with engineers, in terms of this typology and technology transfer?

**Vassal:** When we realized our first project, the Latapie House, we needed the expertise of a mechanical engineer. But because the budget for the project was very small, it was difficult to interest the kind of engineering practices that usually do such things for architects. We finally found a specialized institution, the “Agence pour les Economies d’Energie”, which had two

separate mechanical engineering departments; one dealt exclusively with greenhouses, the other only handled domestic houses. We explained our project to both departments and found ourselves confronted with to completely opposing notions about a building’s desired thermal performance: the engineer from the one department constantly talked about how you can protect yourself from the outside world – through heat insulation, double glazing, avoiding cold bridges etc. – while his colleague from the other department kept enthusing about how you can take advantage of the outside conditions – by using completely transparent façades to admit warmth and with simple, light ventilation and shading systems to control the interior climate. I need hardly say that the two of them never talked to each other.

**wbw:** And where would you place yourselves in this struggle between climatic ideologies?

**Vassal:** Probably somewhere in between the two, even though our own in between position is somewhat closer to the greenhouse than to architecture. From this position we develop our projects, so that we can realize the unlimited concept of the house that I came across among the nomads in Niger. The greenhouse pretty well suggested itself here, as it maintains a permanent, almost intimate relationship with the outside world thanks to its filigree structure. To this extent it is the precise opposite of the “biosphere”, whose glass dome, while using the heat of the sun to warm itself up, creates a biotope that is completely sealed off from the outside world.

In contrast with this, we tend to see architecture more like layers of clothing against the skin. If it’s warm outside you just wear a light shirt. If it gets a bit cooler you put a pullover on. Later you take a coat, because it’s getting really cold, and then a mack because it has started to rain and finally an umbrella to protect your hair from the wind and rain. And in just the same way a house is made up of a succession of layers to act as clothing for the life that happens under its roof.

**wbw:** This is basically a programmatic justification for your use of the greenhouse. But greenhouses are also a particularly cheap way of building. And since your architecture is infamous for its very low building costs, the question automatically arises whether your frequent use of the greenhouse isn’t primarily driven by a consideration of costs?!

**Vassal:** One thing does not exclude the other. It is important to us that the greenhouse as a standard industrial product is cheap. But we are not interested in its cheapness as such, but in what you can do with the money that is saved. You have to remember that a square metre of greenhouse with all the equipment like shading, ventilation, automatic window control and a 4 – 5 metre high volume does not cost any more than a good quality tiled floor – approx. 600-700

FF/m<sup>2</sup>. And so we settle for a simple concrete floor and use the money this releases to build considerably more space – about 2-3 times more than you would get in a conventional house with the same budget.

And this additional space is crucially important to us, because it brings the house more into line with that concept of territory we were talking about earlier. Increasing the amount of space in the house makes it possible to liberate the act of living from the straitjacket of the ground plan. Instead of being confined to room cells, the living functions can “go for a walk” in the space to a certain extent. And because the transition from inside to outside is very easy in a greenhouse, life can move outside the house as well – for example, when the weather is fine, and you decide to eat in the garden.

**wbw:** With the promise of a life in green surroundings, the prefabricated housing industry lures millions of people a year into the suburbs, which in turn are becoming increasingly less green. Doesn’t this disqualify it as a vision for contemporary housing research?

**Vassal:** No, because the prefabricated building industry does not even try to keep this promise, but simply presents it as a cliché. These clichés become all the more lifeless the more they draw on rural models. Thus for example a *maison landaise*, which you can buy as a prefab, conjures up the idea of a farmhouse in the endless forests of the Landes in the south-west of France. In reality, the *maison landaise* very much teams up with its immediate surroundings in the woods. It stands by a clearing with a large single tree in the middle, usually an oak. There’s a bench and a table by the tree, and as soon as the weather permits the people go out of the house across the clearing and sit down under the tree to have their meal there, for example. The tree and the clearing are thus very much part of the house. Now if you sell a *maison landaise* as a prefab, thus reducing it to a house as a mere object, it has no longer anything to do with the original *maison landaise* (quite apart from the fact that if you put 500 farmhouses in the woods together there’s not going to be much left of the wood). In fact the prefabricated *maison landaise* only pretends to relate to its location, but in reality it is completely cut off from it. On the other hand the greenhouse, which seems to be totally devoid of a location, builds up a very intense relationship with its surroundings.

**wbw:** But greenhouses were not invented to be lived in. How does it need to be adapted to become inhabitable?

**Vassal:** Essentially all you have to do is complement the greenhouse with an insulated house structure, either as an extension or a built-in, to where you can retire on days when the weather conditions are too extreme or whenever else you might need to. This structure has to be fitted out with transitional devices, to allow living to expand in a larger space when necessary. One

example of this is the large folding wall on the ground floor of the Maison Latapie between the solid living room and the greenhouse extension. When it is open, the living room expands out of the solid building into the greenhouse and thereby triples in size. The clients immediately made use of his continuity by furnishing the space as a living room and thus transformed it into a kind of séjour d'hiver, which very quickly became the main living room in the house.

In the Maison à Coutras the living area is only separated from the winter garden by sliding glass doors, so that here too life can shift imperceptibly from the solid house into the winter garden. Unlike in the Maison Latapie, the floor of the winter garden is not solid, but made of the same soil you find outside. The clients use it as a real garden "housed" in a greenhouse; they have planted flowers and vegetables and even dug a well, but the winter garden is also used for hanging out washing, as a storeroom and as a breakfast terrace – a kind of *séjour sur l'herbe*. And of course the greenhouse can be opened up to the outside in both houses, so that when the weather is fine you can live the house into the territory.

**wbw:** And yet its façade still forms a boundary that has to be passed through. The logical conclusion to living in this way would be a greenhouse that performs this transition from interior to intermediate to exterior space by entirely

disappearing itself.

**Vassal:** That is precisely the direction that greenhouse architecture is moving in at present. For example, the corrugated polycarbonate which has been used so far used as a primary façade material is increasingly being replaced by thin but stable plastic foil consisting of two superimposed layers which can be pumped up like an airbed. The cushion of air is about 30 cm thick and gives the "façade" very good heat insulation, retaining the warmth partially even after the sun has set, when normal greenhouses get cold. The disappearance of the greenhouse is also reflected in the price: from 50 FF/m<sup>2</sup> (polycarbonate) down to 5 FF/m<sup>2</sup>. The plastic foil actually only lasts for about two years, but because it's so cheap and easy to fit you just replace it by a new one whenever necessary.

"Open Sky", the most recent greenhouse from Filclair (the world's leading greenhouse manufacturer) dematerializes the façade completely. It can roll up its foil like a shirt-sleeve within three minutes, and all that's left is the bare metal structure. This means that the greenhouse only exists when you need it, in other words above all in winter. In fine summer weather you can roll up the foil and only need to let it down again in heavy rain or hail.

So far, you can't use this product in architecture because it doesn't meet the fire regulations (it doesn't actually catch fire, but it does

melt very quickly, and therefore does not transfer the fire to the metal structure). We regret this, because in a way it represents our ideal notion of architecture: to add to nature not more than it lacks to perfection.

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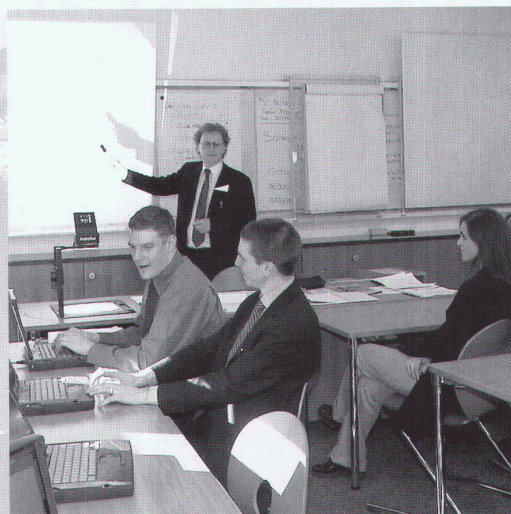
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**Wo man sich wohlfühlt, werden Gedanken frei für kreative Ideen.**



Jacques Herzog, architect, Basel  
 Marcel Meili, architect, Zurich  
 Andreas Ruby: interviewer, wbw  
 (pages 42–47)  
 English translation: Michael Robinson

## Update to the present

Studio Basel: Research in Switzerland

**wbw:** What motivated you to found Studio Basel as an architectural research institution, given the fact that national architectural culture does not really have such research tradition?

**Marcel Meili:** We all date from the time of the Rossi school at the ETH, where a theoretical grasp of the city was fundamentally important. This is an interest that has never left us. For us, architecture was never just a form relating to itself alone, adopting this or that shape according to a subjective mood. It was always something that has to be developed in a more general urban context. This frame of reference has taken on increasingly general social characteristics as our work has progressed, and the ideas of urban order behind them have become increasingly blurred and uncertain as a result of the concrete design work. Clearly the instruments that the typology and morphology of the 70s placed at our disposal are no longer adequate for understanding the

real processes that shape the built world around us today. Against this background, Studio Basel is an attempt to develop the intellectual models that are essential if we are to understand such current urban structures on a larger scale.

**Jacques Herzog:** Exploring the contemporary city is in fact a theme we constantly address at Herzog and de Meuron. We have been conducting urban studies ever since we finished at university, the best known of which was conducted together with Rémy Zaugg: “Basel – a city in the making”, and in it we actually discovered the city’s tri-nationality and launched it as a concept. But whenever we came to the point of taking a project like this further we had to accept that it

wasn’t really possible alongside the work we had to do in the practice. Against this background, the Studio Basel project opens up quite new scope for action by creating a permanent infrastructure for just this kind of research. Secondly, Studio Basel opened up possibilities that we simply didn’t have at ETH on the Hönggerberg in Zurich because of its sheer size, and resultant bureaucratic impenetrability of the way the school operated. Studio Basel gave us the chance to break up this structure from the inside and to develop a dynamic that ultimately stimulated the mother house as well. This is already visible in the imminent reorganization of the Institut für Orts-, Regional- und Landespla-

nung (ORL; Institute of Local and Regional Planning). This is a Modernist instrument that was founded in the 60s but was making little headway; it wasn’t in a position to make any up-to-date statements in its previous form. By placing Studio Basel in this structure almost as a garaging experiment we are reinterpreting what the institution can do and creating a potential that one would not previously have believed it capable of. And thirdly I liked the idea of not just teaching conventionally in Studio Basel, but conducting a joint examination of the contemporary city with fellow architects that will affect the architectural work done by everyone involved.

**wbw:** Interest in this feed-back effect has led other architects to change the entire structure of their practice. For example, MVRDV now has its own research department in the practice, and OMA has opened AMO in New York, a sister office exclusively for research purposes. The four Studio Basel architects could have set up a joint research office in the same way. Instead of this you chose an academic structure. Why?

**Meili:** One reason for that is the completely different way that Swiss architects work in comparison with their Dutch colleagues. In Europe, Switzerland offers an incomparably privileged working basis for the traditional architectural practice: architects here have a fairly high degree of control over the processes and are comparatively

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well paid for this. In Holland, architects' working techniques are much more hybrid. Many traditional areas of work have been taken away from them, some have been given up by the architects of their own accord, and yet other fields have been discovered totally anew. For this reason the combination of conceptual, seemingly Utopian planning, theory and design is not only programmatically motivated in Holland today, but also a business management strategy used for maintaining and developing a practice. This research model, as pursued in Holland, was not the aim of our studio in Basel. Probably the special context of our work and our Swiss origins come together in our model. We would like to exploit the privilege of being in academic conditions to be able to work more analytically, more calmly and perhaps even more cold-bloodedly, to dig deeper, reveal several layers, and to keep the marketing efforts down which are necessary to make this work economically viable. If a commercial figure were to be put on the work that our students do, then enormous sums of money would have to be invested. And this urge to look at things as precisely as possible would probably be scarcely sustainable on the open market, even with good organization. Incidentally, that was something that always used to fascinate us about Rossi: the fact that he was an intellectual of extraordinary poetic force who also observed extremely precisely without that mak-

ing him a technocrat or even an "academic".

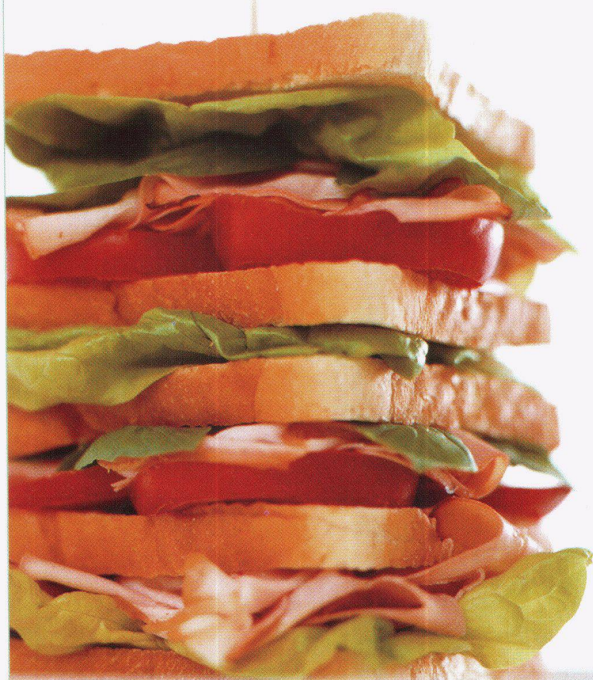
**Herzog:** And we are also trying to establish a contrast with the typical way in which an architectural practice works, we would like to have a more open and a more heterogeneous structure. Also, we think that contemporary urban research cannot be done only by architects. The internally heterogeneous nature of the approach and of the people involved is a basic condition for new insights. For this reason, geographers, photographers and video artists work in Studio Basel, as well as architects and town planners. Of course that brings with it the additional problem of having to co-ordinate all these different forces within a single working project; and not all working cultures can be combined with one another. But nevertheless we feel the urge to integrate approaches which are almost opposite to ours to get rid of the formalist logic that is so firmly anchored in Swiss architecture. The point is that we would like to discover something that is not immediately obvious. This inverted view is actually the central point of the research for me.

**wbw:** The majority of the architectural research centres that exist at present are primarily concerned with aspects of design, of form or also of new construction techniques (Columbia, Bartlett, AA, UCLA), and so they are essentially directed at the architectural object. But in the case of Studio Basel the city is quite clearly the central

point of interest. Can this focus be explained solely with biographical reasons and the Rossi renaissance, or does it also articulate a criticism of those other research centres?

**Meili:** Of course our individual interest in the city is one reason for the themes addressed by the Studio. But we are also quite consciously trying to intervene in the international debate. We are looking for a way of linking things together that carries both affirmative and confrontative traits, not least because of the self-satisfied and isolationist aspects which are obvious both in Switzerland as a whole and its architecture. Seen in this way, we are expressly interested in taking a look at some approaches with quite different shapes to them as well. I would probably draw the line of demarcation with confrontation at the point where these projects take on demiurgic traits. When a delight in creating the world starts to distort the perception of reality, then it is becoming difficult for us to join in the dialogue. Naturally, our capacity for discussion is not unconditioned. We need a dialogue partner who also thinks on the basis of a perception and wants to work on what is already there. On this level it is interesting to talk to Winy Maas, for example, because behind his comic-like fun there is sometimes a pretty profound analytical provocation that is reminiscent of Superstudio. In the same way there are a number of projects in Europe at the moment that are examining the

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emergent hyper-city structure – like Stefano Boeri, or some people in Belgium, for example –, and these are challenging in the best sense of the word.

**wbw:** What is your idea of teaching at the studio, is the emphasis mainly on conveying or on producing knowledge?

**Herzog:** In contrast with traditional teaching, we teachers at Studio Basel don't really have a clue either about what we want. We have 20 students per term, working in ten groups of two students and driving bore-holes into a free research field. And because we want students to be able to find things out that even we don't know, but at best devine, we work with the students more like coaches than direct teachers. Teaching is added on in the course of time, and is more about conveying skills – how to present work, how to label plans, and in doing this controlling the way in which one's work is perceived to a significant extent. The students need these skills at the end of the term, even though their material is probably not used on its own in the final publication, but in combination. Here it will probably not be possible to make the selection until the texts are being written and the book assembled, because it is only then that the argument is properly articulated.

**wbw:** How would you describe the status and function of the book: is it a collection of students' projects or the studio's actual project?

**Meili:** Definitely the latter. It is a kind of conceptual condensation of the observations and models that are being passed around the Studio, which we teachers produce partly in the Studio and partly in parallel. One information level among others is the students' work: essentially different sorts of cartography, edited maps, and also graphics and photographs. We do not include written matter, because architecture students – in our experience at least – do not achieve anything like the density and precision in texts as they do in visual material. Nevertheless texts do play a large part in the book because many of our perceptions are literary rather than object-based. And that will probably be a pretty profound challenge for us as well...

**Herzog:** As well as this, there will be a CD-ROM with the book, where you'll be able to click on the Studio's individual bore-holes to a certain extent. You'll also find little films on the CD, inspired by Jim Jarmusch's road dolly-shots, which we want to use to illustrate inconspicuous transitions in the real world – for example the transition from a French to a German quarter in Basel. The CD will also contain the results of our field research, interviews with residents about critical situations, airing all the pros and cons. We see this as a documentation of the contemporary city that could be immensely important in ten years, in that it brings out the complex diversity of perceptions that can exist of a particular situation. To that extent it's possible to see the book as an analytical view of contemporary urban quality, accentuated

by essays by us and selected work by students.

**wbw:** In almost all existing research programmes there is one recurrent methodological problem to be seen: the gap between the diagrammatic analysis of a situation and the formal concept of the project which pretends to be developed entirely from this analysis. But the leap into the second phase is often entirely random: the form is not deduced from analysis, but simply produced with the help of a formal language which is mostly chosen for quite different reasons. By deciding that Studio Basel should concentrate first on the perceptual analysis of existing structures and formulate them analytically in a book, you are steering clear of this problem to a certain extent. Is that chance, or does it express a didactic programme?

**Meili:** I have made very similar observations in recent years as an AA juror, and this gap fills me with a mixture of amusement and concern. Over and over again, highly original analytical approaches are formulated, involving considerable intellectual effort, and yet one is left with basically the same formal result all the time. While the analysis examines complex realities, when it comes to design people tend to fall back on inventing the world again. And this brings analysis into disrepute because it is not even directed at preparing an operative field from which a design can emerge.

In fact there are not an infinite number of opportunities for avoiding this dilemma. I have mentioned some of the few there are: Superstudio, and in a rather different way Archigram as well. The shock of the comic conceals a surreal component whose subversive power lies in condensing the present in the immediate vicinity of the buildable into a plausible form. Because of this supposed closeness to reality, projects of this kind open up a mental building site right next to the excavation ditch, so to speak. And that is the moment at which the analysis acquires a transformative twist.

**wbw:** And what is the Studio Basel transformative project aiming at?

**Meili:** At the map in Swiss people's heads. We want to teach Switzerland that it finally has to abandon the idea that it is a country made up of towns, villages and landscapes, of language communities and morphological formations – not just because we say so, but because these rural or historical myths have long been devoid of any reality. And this assertion is not just a sloppy provocation, we can justify and explain it as well. We now have the theoretical tools to prove that and why even a mountain peak in Switzerland is part of a large-scale urban system, and that this does not apply to every mountain peak in the world, not even all over Europe. And we want to show the Swiss that this apparently very contained country definitely does not stop at the point they think it does, regardless whether we join the EU or not. These attacks on the images in people's minds are Studio Basel's central project.

**wbw:** So Studio Basel is a political project as well?

**Meili:** It certainly is a political project, addressed to the Swiss public. We are not bothered about the ORL planners, who are annoyed because we don't stick to their conventions, nor about the architects, who would like our projects to be more flashy and "visionary". We are not (yet) bothered about Europe as a whole – our project area is Switzerland. As a research area it is both a working field and a model case.

**Herzog:** And if we're going to correct the mental map of Switzerland in this way we also need new ways of reading the physical map. For example, Switzerland likes to see itself as being on the periphery. But for us it is much more like the beginning of a new greater urban space that in the case of Basel extends to Frankfurt and in the case of Ticino to Milan. But up to now most people think that Switzerland stops where it stops on the map; beyond that they assume Antarctica starts – an absurd reduction of reality through which Switzerland is turning itself provincial.

**wbw:** This isolation against the outside world corresponds with the extremely atomized structure of Swiss federalism, the inclination to think in the smallest possible cells and the ceaseless recourse to ancient Helvetic themes.

**Meili:** That's what I mean by mythologies. The concept of the Swiss communal autonomy is at the core of the deeply rooted Swiss self-perception, because it is here that the idea of co-operative, non-aristocratic and decentralized self-organization is anchored. Compared with other countries, every little community is a country in its own right in Switzerland. This starts with tax autonomy and continues via education to autonomous planning powers.

**Herzog:** Paradoxically, this atomized idea that the country has of itself is reinforced even further by globalization. Take Riehen as an example, a town with perhaps 25,000 inhabitants and a world-class art collection (the Beyeler Collection). The FDP is currently coming up with the political aim of "Riehen as a canton in its own right"! Here at the latest you have to realize that local autonomy does not stand for freedom, but points to a certain lack of solidarity. The concept of freedom is ruthlessly instrumentalized to isolate oneself from one's neighbours and to defend privileges that people then use as a way of creating an identity – paying less tax, for example. In this sense our investigations in Studio Basel are not restricted to analysing material spatial structures, but always aim at the psychological dimensions that are inscribed in them as well.

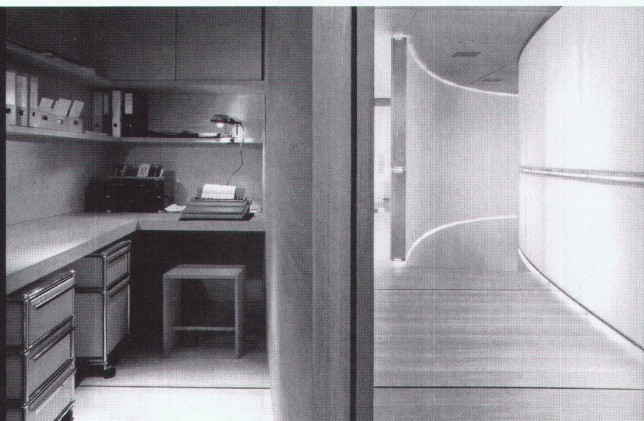
**wbw:** Is the book enough to move Switzerland's discourse about itself forward, or are you relying on other infiltration practices as well?

**Herzog:** The book on its own is definitely not enough, even if it runs to several series. We need to be active in parallel with it, appear at symposia and discussions, and also speak to politicians and economists. Of course we can only do this to

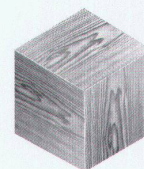
a certain extent. But ideally the project has such explosive intellectual force that other people jump on to the train and drive it forward because they are motivated themselves.

**Meili:** We are really curious to know what will happen when the book comes out. Everybody knows that Switzerland is brilliant at suppressing things. The book will thus present a number of facts that "actually everybody knows", but that are not really taken into account, but collectively suppressed. Our "project" emerges from putting facts like this together in an unusual and provocative way. Precisely because people "actually know" quite a lot, we hope that this "urban topography of Switzerland" will find its way into some of the deep veins of the public political (sub-)conscious and that at some time or another the debate about our project will go forward of its own accord as well. Because of course we will not educate Switzerland. We are just stating general realities and trust on the fact that there is an intellectual free market in this country that will respond to them.

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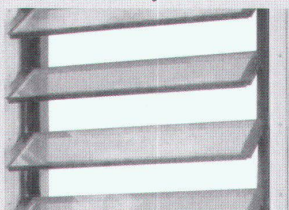
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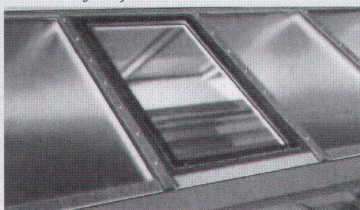
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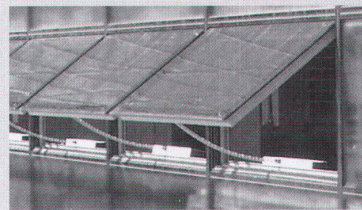
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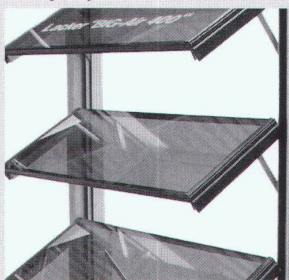
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