

## Modernism in Switzerland: Approach to Modernist Buildings in Zurich

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This article describes how much modern-age buildings are appreciated in Switzerland and how this appreciation has changed over the years. Four examples in Zurich represent the buildings erected during the 1920s and 1930s. The bottom line is: in principle, all buildings are much appreciated. However, we have to watch out because masterpieces of their time are still endangered and threatened by what some people call “more important issues”.

In the autumn of 1977, the former Zurich arts and crafts museum hosted the exhibition entitled “Zurich around 1930. New thinking, new living, new construction”. This exhibition was triggered by the imminent demolition of the Rotach Houses. They were to make way for a motorway tunnel access road. Thanks to the exhibition, it was possible to persuade the planners to build the motorway access elsewhere. The houses were saved and restored.

The 1977 exhibition brought the times around 1930 nearer to the general public – with a distance of almost two generations. This is typical and still holds true today: we do not like the architecture of our fathers, but we do like the architecture of our grandfathers.

Just like in other countries in the late 1920s and early

1930s, architects in Switzerland experimented with the new use of forms. At all times, architecture is a mirror of society. It is therefore quite typical of the Swiss that modern architecture – which is often referred to as “New Building” – is not very distinctive. There were people like Paul Artaria and Hans Schmidt in Basel who sought to standardise construction and reduce the use of forms. Moreover, Schmidt was much interested in small and very small dwelling units for political reasons.

The Zurich-based members of the Swiss CIAM Group – people such as Max Ernst Haefeli and Werner Max Moser – pursued different goals. Their target was the carefully designed individual object. They opted for less experimenting in construction. Their window openings often have scuncheon, the flat roofs usually have small canopies, and the windows frames are frequently made of wood.

These four examples represent the “Zurich style” of modern architecture of the 1920s and 1930s. We will take a look at their time of origin and their history up to date:

**1 The Neubühl “Werkbund” Estate 1928–1932**, Paul Artaria & Hans Schmidt / Max Ernst Haefeli / Carl Hubacher & Rudolf Steiger / Werner Moser & Emil Roth. The estate built by the Werkbund, a work federation of architects, is one of the most important, maybe even the most important contribution of New Building in Switzerland. Contrary to other estates built by work federations, for example in Stuttgart or in Wrocław, the Neubühl Estate is not a collection of works by different architects. It is a joint piece of work created by four groups of young, contemporary architects. Owing to their modest design, their lack of constructive experiments and their use of discreet colours, they created a remarkably homogeneous housing estate. The estate includes 195 apartments with between one and six rooms each.

**2 The Zed House 1930–1932**, Carl Hubacher, Rudolf Steiger. When it was built, the Zed House (Zed as in Zurich) was the city's most modern commercial building. At the time, Zurich was definitely developing into the largest city in Switzerland and the country's commercial centre. The four-storey, elegantly curved office front above the two-storey glass shop base is a true eye-catcher. The attic floor houses small apartments, and there is a swimming pool on the roof. Behind the commercial building there is a cinema with a roof that can be opened. A four-storey building containing a restaurant and apartments is situated on one corner of the block. The curved main part situated on the former arterial road to Bern and Basel is a frame construction, while the adjoining building is conventional brickwork.

1. Book cover of the 1977 exhibition in the Zurich arts and crafts museum





2. The Rotach Houses built in 1928. Baugeschichtliches Archiv Zürich, BAZ



3. The Neubühl Werkbund Estate, built in 1928–1932. ETH library, Zürich

**3 The Congress House** 1937–1939, Haefeli Moser Steiger (Max Ernst Haefeli, Werner Max Moser, Rudolf Steiger). The Congress House was built for the 1939 National Expo. Like in some kind of mini world exhibition, Switzerland presented its activities in all areas of business, science and culture. In view of the gloomy situation in Europe and the outbreak of World War II in September, the “Landi” – as the National Expo was called – unintentionally became a symbol of the strife for independence and the willingness to defend their country. The architects had to integrate the Tonhalle concert hall built in the 19th century into their plans, and they created a mix of old and new buildings. The Congress House is one of the leading and guiding constructions of its time, when the strict modern-age way of building was already disappearing and the significance of ornamental design was increasing.

**4 The City Indoor Pool** 1938–1941, Zurich city architect Hermann Herter. After some private projects for the construction of a public indoor pool had failed, the City of Zurich built the pool themselves. The architects followed the example of the “Stadtbad Mitte” pool in Berlin. The design of the entire complex is axially symmetrical which is typical of city architect Hermann Herter, and yet there are traces of some restrained modernity. The complex consists of two parts: the entrance and cloakroom part and the indoor pool. Owing to the large windows and, above all, the glass roof, much light enters the hall illuminating the 50-metre long pool.

#### Short Heyday

The first heyday of modern Swiss architecture did not last long. The 1939 National Expo marked a turning point: Classic modern-age construction was out, the return to traditional virtues was in. This so-called “Landi-style”

4. The Zed House, built in 1930–1932. Baugeschichtliches Archiv Zürich, BAZ



characterised architecture in the 1940s and well into the 1950s. The houses had gabled roofs and the windows had wooden shutters. The walls were rendered and painted in warm colours.

The modern 1920s and 1930s provided no mass phenomenon in Switzerland anyway. The really modern buildings were few and far between, and most of the population did not understand the character of modern architecture. “New Building” was restricted to a small intellectual elite, but this was also the case in other countries.

The Neubühl estate was originally planned to provide middle-class housing, but it was mostly young intellectuals who moved into the apartments. The press reaction was mostly benevolent, but there was criticism, too. One magazine wrote that Neubühl was not the result of “building art” but rather of “building science”. They wrote that “living” or “the home” had nothing to do with “homely” in its original sense.

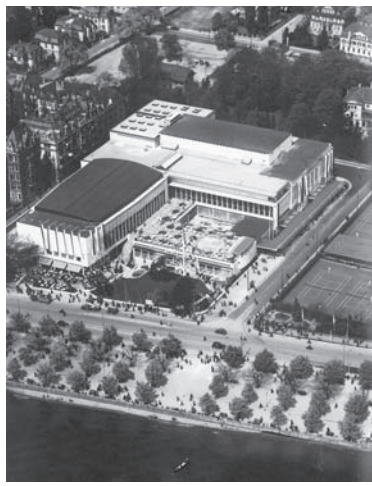
However, the modern buildings made an impact. During the economic boom when business was blooming, when man prepared to fly to the Moon and when faith in our future had no limit, architecture freed itself from the “Landi-style” chains. Flat roofs, smooth façades, concrete, steel and glass became socially acceptable. The 1960s marked the heyday of Swiss architecture. Here are two examples in Zurich such as the Freudenberg and Enge school building and the “Palme” tower block in Zurich city centre, which was incidentally designed by the same architects who designed the Congress House: Haefeli, Moser, Steiger.

#### Changes over the years

The use of a building requires certain adjustments. Minor reconstruction and some repairs may be necessary. Usually, this does not harm the original structure. After all, Switzerland has been quite wealthy, which means that houses were well-maintained over decades. What is more, the country was spared from damage during the war.

In some buildings, the first major redevelopment is needed after 20 to 25 years. Kitchens and bathrooms are outdated, sometimes even the façade needs renewing. This is the moment when the architectural style of the time when the building was erected is ill-fated. The original materials and colours are considered to be obsolete. Nobody would even think of seeing the construction as a historic or monumental building. So, we orientate ourselves by contemporary taste and use the appropriate colours. The original structure is hardly affected. But many buildings lose their original face – and maybe even their soul.

The second major redevelopment after 40 to 50 years is critical. In most cases, the original occupants have moved, requirements have changed, windows often need replacing and the shell structure is mostly amortised. Major reconstruction is called for. The architecture prevailing at the time of origin is eyed with criticism, especially by lay persons. Only the experts recognise and see their real value. Such buildings are endangered.



5. The Congress House was built for the Swiss National Exhibition in 1939. Baugeschichtliches Archiv Zürich, BAZ



6. The City Indoor Pool, built in 1938–1941. Baugeschichtliches Archiv Zürich, BAZ

You may now ask yourself about historic preservation. The City of Zurich is obliged to keep an inventory of buildings that are worth protecting. However, the fact that an object is included in the inventory does not mean that the building is protected. But whenever changes are planned, the Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments is involved. A building may become a listed building and an entry is made in the land register; or it is deleted from the inventory. The last change of inventory in Zurich took place in 1999, covering buildings erected between 1935 and 1965. So, the buildings built in the 1960s and 1970s are most endangered.

How have the four protagonists stood the test of time?

#### The Neubühl “Werkbund” Estate

The Neubühl Estate has had a good life! It was an architectural milestone, and most residents have been well-aware of this. But what is more, one owner owns all buildings: the Neubühl Co-operative. This means that all maintenance work has been carried out taking into account the entire Estate.

Adjustments were made several times to meet requirements. However, in the early 1980s, major redevelopment was unavoidable. The architect’s office Marbach and Rüegg prepared comprehensive documentation including plans and photographs of objects to serve as redevelopment basis. All houses were thoroughly checked, and a list of problems to be solved was drawn up for each of them.

Then, a precise redevelopment concept was worked out for each part of building. Issues relating to structural engineering, energy and historical protection were taken into account in equal measure. Windows were replaced, kitchens and bathrooms were modernised. After all, the Estate is not a museum but a place of residence.

The redevelopment of the Neubühl Estate was groundbreaking and has set new standards even up to now, 25 years later.

#### The Zed House

The Zed House was one of the most radical buildings of its time. Being a privately owned commercial building means that it is prone to changes. There is hardly any emotional connection between the owners – in this case an insurance company – and the building. To the owners, a building is a profit-making object. People responsible often lack the sense for an architectural quality.

The Zed House is a prime example. The original substance has been preserved. However, two major mistakes have been made: the formerly high, two-storey shop area was split by a canopy. This is the smaller mistake. The serious mistake is the windows from the 1980s. Thick, bright green profiles replaced the delicate original windows. The elegance of the house has been seriously damaged.

#### The City Indoor Pool

The first major redevelopment of the City Indoor Pool took place in the 1980s. Even though the value of the

building was appreciated, it was not considered to be a first-class monument. During the redevelopment phase, technical aspects had priority. This explains why the splendid glass roof was removed to make way for a ventilation system.

Now, 25 years later, everything seems to turn out well: the building is being refurbished again, and the people responsible are taking this opportunity to make up for mistakes made in the past. According to the plans of the architect’s office Ernst Niklaus Fausch, the building received its old look and opened again in January 2013.

#### The fight for the Congress House

The above three examples may make believe that all is well when it comes to handling modern-age architecture in Switzerland. Actually, the buildings from the 1920s and 1930s are meanwhile much appreciated. But the example of the Congress House shows that there are endangered buildings of that time.

After more than forty years, the House underwent its first major reconstruction. In the early 1980s, the experts were well aware of the qualities of the building. However, people responsible in the City’s Structural Engineering Office mostly lacked this awareness.

They said that the building should be “carefully redeveloped, preserving its old qualities”. Indeed, much was preserved. But many things were willfully destroyed, and some items were sold at jumble sales or auction sales. Worst of all, the Garden Hall was raised, destroying one of the building’s main qualities: the view from the foyer onto the lake. But here again, much of the original substance has been preserved. Future redevelopment might well make this jewel shine again.

Then, after the millennium turn, the City of Zurich was looking for a new location for a new and larger congress centre. Of all locations, the City of Zurich suggested the site

7. The Zed House as it is today. Photo by Werner Huber





8. The City Indoor Pool after the refurbishment. Photo by Werner Huber

of the old Congress House. The 1939 building was to make way for the new building, and only the 19th century Tonhalle concert hall was to remain untouched. In 2005, the City started a competition. The Spanish architect, Rafael Moneo, won this competition with a project which outmatched everything else. Architects and architectural historians were shocked.

This was a great moment for Swiss democracy. We may not be able to vote on architectural issues, but we can vote on all major credits and expenses – such as school

buildings, roads, old peoples' homes ... and, of course, a congress centre. And so, the majority of the Zurich citizens rejected a credit for the purchase of additional land in September 2008.

The value of the existing building was not the only reason for their rejection. But it was decisive and a severe slap in the face of the City Council. The Congress House, built by Haefeli, Moser & Steiger, has been saved. But we have to watch out!



9. The Congress House after the 1985 reconstruction. Photo by Werner Huber



10. The project of Rafael Moneo for a new Congress Centre. Press Material



11. Posters of the referendum pro and contra the new Congress Centre, 2008. Photo by Werner Huber