

Herzog & de Meuron Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland 2001 – 2010

The history of the Museum der Kulturen Basel traces back to the mid-nineteenth century. The classicistic building designed by Melchior Berri was built on the site of the historical Augustinian monastery on the Münsterhügel (Minster Hill) and opened its doors in 1849 – the first museum building in the city of Basel. It had been designed as a “universal museum”, as a house of science and the arts. Over the years it grew to house one of Europe’s largest and most significant ethnographic collections, above all by means of donations. After the holdings had grown to number roughly 40,000 objects, the museum was extended by a building designed by the architects Vischer & Söhne. This became known as the Vischer wing. In 2001 it was decided to add on a further extension as the collections now held something around 300,000 items. At the same time, a new and separate entrance area was planned for the purpose of lending the museum a unique identity.

Instead of merely adding a new extension to the existing building, which would have diminished the Schürhof courtyard out of proportion, it was decided to redevelop the top floor and the roof of the Vischer wing. The irregularly folded form of the new roof with its black-green tiles is a response to the pattern of the roof landscape in the medieval core of Basel, while, signalling renewal and change in the city’s historical centre at the same time. The hexagonal, occasionally three-dimensional tiles generate a fascinating play of light and shade, even when the sky is overcast. Owing to the refraction of light, each hexagon appears so small that the roof as such fits perfectly into the subtly structured surrounding roofscape. Inside, a steel truss system creates a large, column-free showroom carried by the existing walls. The hall’s unusual and expressive architectural design, echoing the conspicuous roof construction, creates a surprising contrast and an ideal complement to the rectangular, sober showrooms on the lower floors.

Until recently the Museum der Kulturen shared a joint entrance with the Museum of Natural History in the Augustinergasse. Now it is accessed directly from the Minster Square through the Schürhof courtyard with its medieval small-framed façades and extensions, which, until now, had been closed to the public, adding a new section to the Minster Square, so to speak. The courtyard area closest to the museum wing was lowered by means of a gently sloping stairway that leads to the new, glassed-in entrance. Hanging plants and creepers now lend the courtyard an animated atmosphere and, together with the new roof, furnish the museum with a new identity. At the same time, the patio is suitable for all kinds of museum activities and festive occasions.

The strongly cantilevered roof that covers the new exhibition hall, the spiral plant arrangements hanging from its underside, and the façade from which most of the window openings have been removed lend the building a ponderous, withdrawn image, concealing its precious contents. On the other hand, the steps made of red-brown bricks and the building’s base, lacerated along the entire length of the façade, beckon the visitor to enter. In this manner, the architectural and green interventions give structure to the long, angled and uniform Vischer wing built in 1917 and breaks it up into separate, discernible sections. The graded courtyard leading down to the entrance, the cantilevering roof, the creeper plants, the row of windows on the *piano nobile* above the entrance, and the glass foundation give the courtyard direction and lend the building a distinct face.

The existing window areas were not sealed off merely for aesthetic purposes, but in order to obtain more wall space for exhibiting inside. The sills of the remaining windows were removed so that the

openings now reach to the floor, providing deep reveals that provide additional space in the shape of accessible alcoves and offer a view on to the medieval part of town.

The exhibition floors feature identical room layouts. However, two rooms deserve special mention. The first-floor room directly above the entrance is a daylight room featuring a wide window front overlooking the courtyard. On the second floor, the ceiling of one of the rooms was removed, creating a two-storey hall that features a narrow, ceiling-high window slit. Standing on the top floor you get a spectacular view into the room below, in effect similar to the stairway in the old exhibition hall, which offered the visitor an impressive view of the Abelam ceremonial house from above. The new "anchor room" provides space for the display of oversize objects or pieces that serve as thematic links between two floors; apart from that the new hall also serves as an orientation guide through the museum.

All the exhibition rooms were designed along the same principles. The old rooms feature classicistic, coffered ceilings, the newer ones one-way concrete beams. Our aim was to "reduce" them to their innate structure, for example, by removing false ceilings and fitting the technical applications into the existing structures. In this way the history of the house and the changes it has experienced become visible again.

Herzog & de Meuron, September 2011