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## Museum

Oliver Elser, Wilfried Kuehn  
and Roland Mönig in conversation

Elser: Let us begin by approaching the building from the outside, across the forecourt that was designed in collaboration with the artist Michael Riedel. The forecourt is not a work of art subsequently added to the building. On the contrary, collaboration with the artist already began during work on the entry for the architectural competition, the decision having then finally been made in 2013, after much confusion, and realized exactly as proposed by Kuehn Malvezzi.

Kuehn: Collaboration with an artist was not a competition requirement but rather a free decision on our part. The complexity of the situation surrounding the project did not in our opinion call for a form without content that could simply be placed over what had gone before. Instead of making a clean break with an inglorious past, we aimed to lend the situation a form that had a definite starting point, namely art as the very contents of the museum. The alienation that had formerly developed between the museum and the members of the public now had to be turned around, and our approach was to make architecture and art the public protagonists in political confrontations. The textual parts of the installation on both forecourt and façade are a direct expression of this.

Mönig: There are hardly any museum projects that have been more complicated and crisis-ridden than that of the extension to the Modern Gallery. The building project ground to a halt on account of quarrels and difficulties at all levels. The decision to collaborate with an artist on the project made it possible to resolve problems and questions that could not be resolved hitherto, such as the approach from the urban space to the museum complex or the question as to how it will be possible to solve the problem posed by the façades, which on the one hand should emphasize the autonomy of the new building and, on the other, constitute a bridge to the architectural monument by

Hanns Schönecker, who had not only designed the Modern Gallery but had also put forward early proposals for its extension.

Elser: Assuming I could imagine the finished result without the texts by Michael Riedel, I would see in my mind's eye a cube with grey, rough-cast rendered walls and partly lined with concrete slabs. That is quite a fragmentary picture and hardly the kind of thing an architect would strive to achieve, wouldn't you say?

Kuehn: The task set by the competition focussed on the façade and included the urban space only marginally. So we turned the task the other way round, as we, for our part, were concerned with how the building stood in the urban context and how it could be reached from the city. The exhibition already begins in the outside space, as Schönecker's sculpture garden is part of the exhibition. For the next step, the designing of the surrounding forecourt, we decided to design the façade at the same time. We simply folded up the forecourt, so to speak, allowing it to continue upwards over the façade. The fragmentary character of the design results from the unusual circumstance that it was not the extension that stood there prior to the designing of the surrounding forecourt—as is usually the case with almost every building—but rather the other way round. Indeed, the design of the building results directly from the design of the surrounding forecourt. It's all about a process that begins with Schönecker, continues across the forecourt and ends in the façade of the new building. The process was very important to us, and so, too, was our collaboration with the landscape architects bbz and with the artists—involved in the project from the very beginning was not only Michael Riedel but also the photographer Hans-Christian Schink—not least because it's a completely different way of working if one doesn't start with a sketch or drawing that would permit a constant check of the result than if a process is spontaneously set in motion by all involved.

Mönig: There was one very essential point to watch in this dialectic process, namely the need to observe the requirements of historical monument and building conservation. And this brings us to the question of fragment and unity. While one is committed to the fragment, one creates out of the fragment a new unity through one's choice of materials, surfaces and colours. Cooperation with the conservation authorities

was important to us inasmuch as we were extremely concerned with such questions as the colour shade of the artificial stone slabs and the colour tone and the mesh size of the aggregate used for the rough-cast rendering. This point of transition to the left of the entrance, that is, the highly precarious point between the Schönecker ensemble and the extension building, was our constant acid test.

Elser: Is there a form of protection for the building on the whole that necessitated consultation with the conservation authorities on every question concerning the extension?

Mönig: All questions were discussed and agreed with the conservation authorities.

Elser: In what sense? As conformity with the rules or as a clear specification?

Mönig: As a clear specification. But not just that: there was also the wish on both sides to preserve the uniqueness of the Modern Gallery and to strengthen its status as a historical monument. The regional conservation authorities headed by Professor Baulig basically gave us two alternatives for our work on the extension. Either to extend the ensemble, including the façades, and to seek the greatest possible closeness to the design of the existing buildings, or to develop our own concept that would harmonize with the existing buildings but also stand out from them—in terms of material, surface texture and choice of colour. The latter was the chosen solution.

Elser: The entrance is not located in the extension building but in the existing museum, where the foyer always was. Does that weaken the new building?

Kuehn: The idea of relocating the entrance to the museum in the extension building harks back to the early history of the project. For Schönecker's building, however, it would have meant degradation, as the existing building would have then been reduced to the status of an annexe. So we reversed this decision and, consequently, considerably improved the new building, not least because the highest room in its centre is now no longer a foyer but an exceptional exhibition gallery. However, as the entrance—when viewed from the Old Town—is hidden by the new building, it was necessary to create a wayfinder system.

Elser: The wayfinder system is the text?

Kuehn: Yes, the text does indeed serve simultaneously as a wayfinder system—the surrounding forecourt and the façade with their

integrated texts together create a place in which one is still outside and yet already, and physically, in the context of art, that is to say, in the museum. This is where the city and the building oscillate, so to speak.

Mönig: Perhaps we could speak at this juncture about the public. The forecourt on the west side of the museum functions like a forum and also serves as a hub for people coming from different directions. Approaching from the north-west, one can walk southwards down to the Saar, or one can decide either to walk to the museum or—and this is where the external design of the museum functions like a kind of railway points system—walk to the Saar University of Music, the latter having now gained much in prominence through this new aspect. The members of the public were extremely critical. And it was not least the unfortunate history of this building project that had tarnished the identity of a highly meritorious museum that for decades had been part and parcel of the social life of Saarbrücken and its outskirts. The people of Saarbrücken and those living in neighbouring areas confronted us with many questions and justified criticism. We had no other choice but to involve ourselves openly in these discussions. We had to be ready to suffer, for others had suffered before us. By “we” I mean not just those directly involved in the project but also the entire team of the Saarland Cultural Heritage Foundation. In Bernd Therre I had a head of administration at my side who considerably helped to shape this difficult process, not least by reason of his enormous experience with building projects. It was also a great stroke of luck that we all had discussion partners who were altogether open-minded—the Saar capital, Saarbrücken, with its Building Department, the Saar University of Music, the neighbouring Langwiedstift Old People's Care Centre and—not to be forgotten! – the various ministries of the regional government: the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Finance and European Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior and Sport.

Elser: Did not some of the voices demand that we should simply go ahead and build without being constantly reminded of this scandal until the end of all time?

Kuehn: I can understand anyone who would like to free himself from an inglorious past. But this can hardly succeed without facing up to the past, as the whole thing can easily take on

traumatic proportions. In 2013 I experienced a really poisoned atmosphere with reference to the project. It was clearly discernible in the newspaper reports and in the mood of the people. If one attempts to break free from the problem without dealing with it, one runs the enormous risk of sweeping the actual issue under the carpet. Things might then have taken a completely different turn than in our case. But I don't think a fictive new beginning would have liberated us anyway.

Elser: Perhaps there is indeed something cathartic about having to go through this process without just talking about beautiful new architecture.

Mönig: The very communicative character of the building project itself made us feel obliged to be communicative to an extent that went far beyond everything we would have to do in order to heal the wounds and trauma of the past. This communicative demand, which Michael Riedel and his artwork express—an artwork that is at once a forecourt, a façade, a wayfinder system and a textual display—left a deep mark on all of us at the museum. And it will continue to have a determining influence on our thoughts and actions in the future.

Kuehn: As soon as one involves an artist like Michael Riedel, one must take a completely different yet deliberate decision. Not in order to use art as an alibi and to hide behind a different authority but because this dialogue with the city, as a “performative space”, can now be configured so differently. Here art's purpose is not to be exhibited—Riedel is not exhibited either—but rather to define a basic dialectical rule. It is about more than just a procedural element. This is not a work of art that was subsequently added to the building, which would have been completely different and would also have functioned differently because it came about without any interaction on the part of the architect. What we are doing here is architecture-integrated art.

Elser: But do you not also think that all that will fade relatively quickly, and that it is alright like that? If one is familiar with the debate before coming here, one is really surprised how quickly the notion that one can expect to read a coherent text dissipates. One can read one fragment of text after another but one cannot form a picture of a contiguous narrative.

Mönig: That's the point. What Riedel has created is interpretable on many different levels

and will in future be understood in ever new ways and from new and different perspectives. The artwork must not be reduced to the text that served as its starting material.

Elser: Nor to the process of overcoming the trauma.

Kuehn: A process has been set in motion that puts us on a new level.

Mönig: Thanks to Michael Riedel's artwork the Modern Gallery has acquired an unmistakable place, in terms of both time and space. Considering all the random noise that has been turned into an ornament, there is one thing that will survive and remain in the centre of the discourse, namely the word “museum”. It can be read from a distance of several hundred metres. That's architecture parlante at its most literal.

Elser: And at the same time it is completely self-referential and hence makes it almost meaningless, the museum, that is.

Mönig: Yes, there is of course something Dada about it.

Elser: One repeats the obvious over and over again and writes on a museum building “Museum, Museum, Museum”.

Mönig: Perhaps it is sometimes necessary in our society to repeat the obvious to make sure it is seen at all.

Elser: It almost has something orchestrated about it—that is to say, a great many concerns and reservations have already been cleared up before one gets to the text, and a debate takes place in our minds about it having been recorded and placed on the façade. Basically the approval of all involved in the project is already a foregone conclusion. I see this text rather as a kind of integration machine that presupposes the approval of all involved. Every building process is a process of integration for the simple reason that people have to be brought round a table.

Mönig: The people who represent our political interests are an integration machine. What we have here are the minutes of a parliamentary debate transformed into a work of art. And these minutes were not just made public with Michael Riedel's great work of art but are there for everybody to see on the parliament's website and in the records office.

Kuehn: The theatrical aspect brings with it the notion of a kind of script with which the whole thing is performed like a great play. There is a script and there are the actors, there is the

recording and there is the production, and everything culminates in a work of architecture. It is this theatricalization of the planning and building process with all its social ramifications that interests us. We see architecture as a script and dialogue with the public, not as a finished product. On the one hand we are scriptwriters and on the other hand we produce the play. But the architecture we produce is “catalytic” in nature, for it sets things in motion without itself standing in the foreground.

Mönig: As much as I appreciate and respect your theoretical slant on all of this, what we are concerned with has nothing to do with theory but rather with hard social reality. I’m very sorry, but I’m going to have to demystify matters. The situation was as follows: after having discussed the necessity of a museum extension for a good thirty years, it was finally decided to go ahead. But precisely at that time, when this museum of high renown was about to break out into the future, it had fallen into dire existential straits. There was no need for theatricality, for a dramatic *mise-en-scène*, as nothing could have been more dramatic. The adopted procedure was certainly a good way of coping with this drama, but there was no reason to script an additional one. That was the reality with which all of us—the architects, the museum the Saarland Cultural Heritage Foundation and its committees, the Minister of Culture—had to come to terms.

Elser: We are again reminded of the fragmentary character of the façades when we enter the building, for instance by the open ceilings. Is it perhaps the pride in limited resources that is meant to be expressed here?

Mönig: While in all its details the architecture of the extension building testifies to a focus on the actual purpose of the building, namely to show art to its best advantage, it also testifies to strict discipline when it comes to the use of resources. One might also call it a pride in thrift or in purposefully modest decision making. We must be clear, however, that Hanns Schönecker, too, won the competition back in the 1960s not least because he had designed a modest style of architecture, an extremely plain and simple style without any ornamentation whatsoever. Moreover, the building complex was modular, which meant that the entire ensemble could be built in separate steps—there were three building phases in all. This pride in a certain frugality and modesty lies in

the museum’s genes and has of course been heightened to a virtue following the dramatic circumstances surrounding the project.

Kuehn: We have always found that a shortage of resources can also be positive, for it is indeed an aid to discipline. It is then necessary to define one’s priorities and to be clear about what is important and what is not. The jointless Bitu Terrazzo flooring is costly but essential for the museum, while the open ceiling is elegant yet inexpensive. It’s the right balance that counts.

Elser: Will the presentation of the collection take a chronological form, a linear passage through the history of art, as it were?

Mönig: The Modern Gallery has hitherto suffered from an extreme lack of space. We were able to show either the highlights of classic modernism or the contemporaries. And even then we had to resort to makeshift solutions such as closing up windows and installing partitions. A presentation of both at the same time—the famous classics of the collection and their contemporary counterparts—was impossible. The one ruled out the other. Thanks to the extension building Schönecker’s pavilions are no longer burdened by works and themes for which they were not designed. Moreover, we can now at last catch up with the present again. All this simply has to do with the changes in formats and techniques, with completely new artistic practices, although there is still no reason why works of classic modernism should not be shown in the extension building or, alternatively, works of contemporary art in the old pavilions. As I see them, the three wings of the museum are communication channels that mutually support and strengthen one another.

Kuehn: A museum is not a made-to-measure suit. It should not be built just to meet the needs of a certain collection or exhibition practice. And in order to allow for different possibilities and forms of use, it is necessary to provide heterogeneous types and models of galleries that can be readily and specifically adapted to the needs of curators and artists. As Schönecker’s architecture is oriented horizontally, we considered it essential to orient the architecture of the new building vertically and thus made the high atrium the focal point of our deliberations on the visitor routing system: the visitors walk around and experience the atrium several times on their upward way through the museum. This is made possible

not least by the precise location and dimensioning of the galleries along the spiral route, each gallery having its own individual dimensions and orientation. The galleries also differ from each other in respect of their relationship to the building's exterior.

Mönig: The floors have a very important part to play in the museum's architecture. I sensed this in particular when we opened the new part of the building—still empty, without any works of art—to the members of the public. My impression is all the stronger now that we are filling the rooms with works of art. While the Bitu Terrazzo recedes optically, its basic colour shade, a quiet medium grey, quite literally takes hold of the museum space. It flows seamlessly from room to room and thus also furthers the free flow of visitor movements. There are no thresholds and one can stroll unimpeded through the museum.

Elser: Schönecker's building has a parquet floor.

Mönig: Yes, now it is parquet-floored throughout. It was originally carpeted and in one of the pavilions there was even a tiled floor. The parquet floor is now a good solution, but it was not Schönecker's own idea. There is something else I'd like to say about the flooring: it has its counterpart in the design of the ceiling. The very tight character of the floor—tight in the sense that there is no single element that stands out from the others—corresponds to the very tight organization of the open ceilings, in which the pipes and cables run according to a strict configuration. This same strictness is also featured in the LED skylight, its abstract form having been reduced to that of a workshop lamp.

Kuehn: A light we developed ourselves in collaboration with our lighting engineers, Bamberger Ingenieure. LED lights do not have a specific form, as LED is simply a technology. We have given it a form that doesn't look like design at all. In fact the lights look more like models of lights, mock-ups even.

Mönig: Like the Platonic idea of a lamp.

Kuehn: It is all in keeping with the Schönecker idea of a cast lamp, like the one in the foyer. Viewed in the context of the 1960s it is of a similar simplicity. For a museum of that time it was probably more understated than overstated. One must deal with each and every detail with the utmost care and attention, and yet it is about very much more than a simple addition of details. There's teakwood in the

new building and stained oak in the old building. Nonetheless, we have succeeded in reiterating Schönecker's design in the new building without the stained oak. In teakwood we have found a wood that is even similar in appearance to stained oak.

Mönig: It was precisely with regard to the foyer that it was important for us to collaborate with the regional conservation authority in finding solutions that could hold their own in the dialogue. We have turned things over in our minds time and time again and come up with ever new approaches. Kuehn Malvezzi were very consistent in maintaining that we should be very restrained as regards the delicate matter of the transition zone between the old and the new building and should utilize a kind of "mimicry", for instance with the panelling, which since its conversion as an L-shaped inlet now accompanies the L-shaped foyer continuously on one entire side.

Kuehn: Here we have not taken any black-or-white decisions between old/new contrasts and complete amalgamations but rather deliberately adopted to process the grey shades in between. Where we have been very close to the Schönecker building, at the "joint", so to speak, we have also come very close to an amalgamation, while in other places we have moved much further away. The decision is always carefully calibrated and is, precisely for this reason, a consistently, even radically, situational one.