



concrete evidence

Pairing heavy-duty materials with panoramic vistas is taking Swiss architects Steinmann & Schmid to new creative heights

writer jonathan bell



When *Wallpaper** last caught up with Steinmann & Schmid the duo were rising fast through the Swiss architectural establishment. Herbert Schmid and Peter Steinmann started their practice eight years ago, after Schmid had studied in Basel and Steinmann in Zurich. The duo met at the Basel firm of Matthias Ackermann, but soon decided to go it alone. An early residential project, the 1996 Haus Hirsch-Burgener, epitomises their high-minded approach. Located in Naters, and surrounded by striking alpine views, the structure is uncompromisingly concrete. 'Its location is very mountainous,' says Schmid, 'that's why we used concrete so we could do something sculptural.' Comprised of a series of terraces and cantilevers, the house reverses the conventional layout, placing bedrooms downstairs, with living rooms at the top of the structure, complete with copious terraces. 'It's a contrast between nature and concrete, with

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Contact: Steinmann & Schmid, Rebgasse 21A, 4058 Basel, Switzerland, tel: 41.61 686 93 00, www.steinmann-schmid.ch
Style: Think Herzog & de Meuron without the over-blown scale.
Projects: Ranging from apartment blocks, opulent private homes and public structures.
Clients: A mixture of private clients, wealthy institutions and organisations like Art Basel give S&S maximum creative freedom.
Fame: Saas-Fee car park, MesseBasel

deliberately strong forms,' says Schmid. Internally, elements of the kitchen and bathroom were cast from concrete, finished with a smooth surface in contrast to the roughly poured exterior walls. The approach disguises the house's open feeling: a simple, rigorous – almost forbidding – façade that conceals the valley-like terraces and large aluminium-framed windows that set up the spectacular views. Building on these rock solid beginnings, Steinmann & Schmid have developed a series of commercial, private and public residential projects, mixing precision with a great sense of place and, above all, a rigorous eye for detail.

Urban forms are also of vital importance to the firm. Their car park in Saas-Fee houses 900 cars in the heart of the country's southern mountains. Won in competition, this is perhaps the most geometrically precise structure ever created for the humble automobile. The poured concrete multi-storey facility achieves the rare feat of enhancing the relationship between building and surrounding countryside, creating extraordinary architecture from a traditionally derided structural form. The car park was swiftly followed by another major project, an administration building for the MesseBasel exhibition complex, home of the city's art fair and other big trade shows.

Returning to domestic design the Haus Portmann-Brodbeck in Münchenstein was developed for two young families, who had originally sought to get two apartments next to each other at the top of a local development. Instead, they took the new-build approach. Completed in early 2002, the two-property house is constructed on a long slender plot, orientated to fit the site. Living areas face south and bathing and functional zones are placed to the north of the plan. The south façade is punctured by the practice's trademark large windows, with frames neatly recessed into the façade. The interior approach to each house is similar, with identical fittings in kitchens and bathrooms.

Externally, the house appears traditional, with a simple pitched roof and stripped, modern detailing. 'We reduced the form on the façade,' admits Schmid. Remarkably, although the pitched form conforms to the appearance of older buildings on the street, the cleanly rendered house is actually three times longer than a conventional dwelling. Long strips of roof lights are positioned at the edge of the roof at the intersection between wall and roof slope, flooding the living spaces with light that illuminates the owner's art collection. Inside, the look is minimal, with balustrades and landings demarcated by thick, sculptural walls of white render nothing insubstantial or airy here. The ceiling level is raised right to the pitch of the roof, and the windows are single panes of glass,



terrace housing: previous page, the Haus Hischer-Burgener could look brutal in a different setting, but works wonders against the mountains; this page, from top, the Haus Portmann-Brodbeck's long shape suits the two families sharing it; the façade of the Raiffeisenbank; large windows and open vistas are typical S&S; a galley-type kitchen with trademark panoramic windows



greenhouse effect:
The vast windows and sliding doors of the Alterssiedlung Rheinfelderstrasse ensure the elderly residents don't feel enclosed or cooped up

stripped of glazing bars, unnecessary frames, cills and reveals. In effect, they act as pictures, framing the outside world in a series of large, unbroken tableau.

This open approach was also adopted in the Alterssiedlung Rheinfelderstrasse, an old people's home located just outside the centre of Basel. The new building, constructed from pre-fabricated concrete, is placed between two older 1950s structures, and acts as a link and recreation area as well as containing the caretaker's apartment. The precise two-storey façade is punctuated with a series of huge windows, exploiting the home's location in one of the greener parts of the city. 'You can look through the windows and feel you are surrounded by trees and parkland,' says Schmid, explaining how the building enhances the feeling of integration with the surrounding environment, especially important for less mobile residents.



Swiss architecture has maintained a pre-eminent position for the past decade. Schmid cites the success of fellow Basel architects Herzog & de Meuron as a positive force, but believes there are many rising up to challenge the H & de M dominance, including the Zurich firm of Dürig and Rämi, currently working on a concert hall in Freiberg. Steinmann & Schmid aren't shirking either. Future projects include a major railway station in Visp in the south of the country, as well as an apartment refurbishment in Basel. This radical reconstruction of an existing block will create 30 flats – 'it's like a new building,' says Schmid. There is also talk of creating a pavilion for Art Basel's foray to Miami Beach next year, as well as private residential projects. Despite the burgeoning scale of their work, Steinmann & Schmid have managed to remain true to their aesthetic agenda, a sure sign of architects on top of their game. ★

