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Swiss Mix

Efficiency and punctuality may be the order of the day, but beneath its prim-and-proper surface, Switzerland is anything but straightlaced

by Marc Spiegler

A traveler can tell a lot about a city by its baggage claim areas. At Zurich Airport your luggage arrives within minutes and fits conveniently on the carts ordered in neat rows around the carousels. But it's only after you pass through customs that the wonder of these carts manifests itself. As foreign tourists stand with mouths agape, veterans of the airport wheel their carts onto escalators and then blithely release them, letting the hardened rubber teeth of the undercarriage lock firmly onto the steel steps.

In a million small ways, such well-calculated systems are ubiquitous in Switzerland. At the supermarket, exactly five cartons of juice fit in the bottom of the recyclable paper bag, creating a tight base for the rest of the groceries. Toothbrushes come with replaceable heads. Swiss pocketknives have been mutated to match the needs of everyone from system administrators to snowboarders. Bank checks are treated like anachronisms; almost every payment is handled electronically. And at most ski resorts, your lift ticket is a small card that you place inside your wallet, where it is magnetically detected when you approach a gondola. You can even buy more days of use online.

Such forethought is not limited to small gadgets and consumer goods; it courses through even the biggest, most creative projects. Considered a masterpiece of modern Swiss architecture, Zurich's Bahnhof Stadelhofen, a commuter train station, was designed in 1983 by Santiago Calatrava, a Spanish-born, Swiss-trained architect whose work made engineering a central focus. The entire structure has an anatomical vibe, as if one were walking the spine of a massive lizard; for a frenetically busy terminal, it is also a surprisingly airy space. Calatrava carefully thought through the traffic flow and laid out unobstructed routes for any of the myriad paths one might want to take to, through or around the station. Combining aesthetics with pragmatism, he designed two massive skylight awnings that jut above the escalators leading to an underground shopping mall. At night, the skylights pivot neatly downward like the jaws of a glass alligator slamming shut, sealing off the mall from vandals.

Of course, this very much fits the classical conception of Swiss design/efficiency, standardization, a certain cold rigor — and

indeed of the country itself, commonly portrayed as a straitlaced land of conservative private bankers, where littering lands you in jail. Under closer examination, however, this prim conception of Switzerland gives way to a more perplexing series of paradoxes. Attaining full-scale citizenship can prove almost impossible, for example, but the country lets in twice as many foreigners per citizen as any nation in Europe. And though Zurich invented those damned fiberglass cows that took over the streets of New York City and Chicago, it also gave us both the Dada surrealist movement and Oliviero Toscani, the provocateur adman who made Benetton a household name and a worldwide controversy.

True, you can't mow your lawn here on Sundays, but psilocybin mushrooms are available over the counter — the sales clerk matter-of-factly asking, "Would you like them fresh or dried? Hawaiian or Mexican?" Prostitution is fully legal (if harshly regulated), Ecstasy merely a misdemeanor drug. Not unrelatedly, every August a million half-naked ravers flood the streets of Zurich for the Street Parade, a decade-old event that started as a gay happening and has now grown entrenched enough to garner major corporate ad sponsorship. Last summer during the chaos of that weekend, I watched Indian tourists innocently descending from the train only to find the main station crawling with face-painted freaks, teens smoking huge joints, and techno music blasting the whole length of the cavernous baroque hall. Suitcases at their feet, faces frozen in shock, the unwarned travelers looked poleaxed by surprise, as if they had walked in on their grandparents getting busy. So much for stolid, sterile Switzerland.

By reputation and rumor, Zurich epitomizes Swiss grayness, and its local authorities long fought to keep it that way, harshly constraining anything that involved adults having too much fun. Predictably, this policy failed. Over time, in fact, a massive illegal commercial subculture sprang up. Wildly different activities would occupy the same spaces, the combinations defined more as a function of friendships than through careful market studies. Abandoned houses became gourmet restaurants; a former mental clinic turned into a gallery and nightclub. A few years ago, the bureaucrats and police finally relaxed — or rather, perhaps, conceded defeat in the face of a thriving, entirely untaxed economy. But the city remains dappled with these schizophrenic entities, often secreted in its nooks and niches. Tucked away in an unassuming alleyway near the municipal swimming pool, Tampopo is named after Juzo Itami's 1986 cinematic paean to eating. Customers awaiting their Thai takeout lunches can also scope a \$4,500 Napoleon II mirror or sit in a curvilinear leather chair from the 1930s, part of the store's extensive art deco collection. "Originally, we found the space to use just as a

warehouse for the furniture," explains Maja Konzelmann, a Korean-born former nurse who runs the cuisine side of Tampopo. "Then we thought it would be better to do a second thing with it, so I started the restaurant, which I'd always wanted to try."

Even more covert than Tampopo, Time Tunnel lies just off the Munstergasse, a commercial high street in the Niederdorf's old-city section of town. Its only street signage is a male mannequin — in a floral skirt and suede car coat — holding a placard scrawled with the words "Time Tunnel: 50-60-70 design." Looking down the walkway past the mannequin, you see nothing promising, just stone walls and a dark courtyard.

"Those who don't know about us won't find us by accident," explains owner Daniel Saitz, who previously promoted underground nightclubs. "It's an insider store, and it would be a disaster for us if we became mainstream." (He says the word "mainstream" in the same intonation that other people might use for, say, "leprosy" or "child porn.") Among the first mixed stores to open as a legit business in Zurich, Time Tunnel has a hair salon in back, while the front sells a wide range of designer goods from the 1960s and '70s, everything from clothes and clocks to radios and lamps to bug-eye tinted sunglasses and high-end furniture by Nordic design stars such as Verner Panton and Eero Saarinen. Along the loose border between store and salon stand DJ turntables, on permanent standby for the social sessions that take over the space intermittently. "We used to do it all the time," says Saitz. "But it got to be too much — too many people and too much energy. After a while, you settle down and need to make some money."

Not surprisingly, given its illegal origins, nightlife drives much of the mixed-milieu scene. A model of Swiss efficiency in the heart of the red-light district, the now-defunct clothing and lifestyle store Box had every display rack on wheels. In a flurry, all the wares could be pushed against the walls; huge metal plates would then be erected around them, transforming the space into an indestructible nightclub where legendary turntablists such as DJ Cash Money and Sven Väth played early-morning sets that sometimes extended until dawn.

Right around when Box closed, miniskirted models and their would-be beaux started flocking to the al fresco Rimini Bar, a minute's walk from Tampopo, in a space that by day serves as the men-only swimming area for the city's Orthodox Jews. During winter, along the shore of Lake Zurich, the Seebad Enge sauna regularly transforms into a nightclub run by the local electronica label Straightahead records, with DJs descending from as far away as London to spin.

Breath fogging the air, you enter Seebad Enge through an outdoor space, walking on a gangway that surrounds a large square

of freezing-cold lake water. A long pier stretches out toward the Alps, providing a beautiful view of the Seefeld neighborhood's upscale skyline. Downstairs, superimposed upon the bath's high-ceilinged locker room, a loosely arranged lounge offers couches and large chairs, a full bar serves champagne, and sneakers fight with Prada hybrid shoes for space to gyrate. The rhythm of Seebad Enge nights runs thus: dance until overheated, walk upstairs, feel refreshed, see steam rise from clothes, wait until steam dissipates, feel very cold, go downstairs again. Repeat.

Though Zurich's strict authorities, and the illegal commerce that they spurred, made the city a hotbed of multi-use spaces, there are such projects afoot all over the country. In Geneva, for instance, a restaurant called La Sixième Heure serves fig-and-scallion omelettes while doing a steady trade in vintage housewares; a series of old warehouses known as L'Artamis has become a counterculture nexus, housing everything from artist ateliers to theaters to Internet cafes.

Similarly, Le Flon, a deep valley that runs through the center of Lausanne, long housed rail depots, stolid concrete warehouses that resemble army barracks. But inside them now is a warren of art galleries, extreme-sports shops, a nightclub, software companies and so forth. Committed to the idea of mixing design's various domains, architect Carlo Parmigiani recently opened Abstract, a private bar and exhibition space that aims to serve as a meeting point for Lausanne's designers. It sprung out of a public-access television show co-hosted by Parmigiani, focusing on design and architecture issues. Although the show has a potential viewership of almost a million, Parmigiani says, "TV is very abstract, so we decided to make something physical — a space that wasn't like a typical club stuffed with teenagers." Despite its heavy concrete walls, Abstract has a lightness to it. The slender chairs and tables counterbalance the room's industrial vibe.

Given the nature of the Swiss underground scene, it's no sure bet that Abstract, or Tampopo, or any one of these spaces, will be around two years from now. There's a strikingly un-Swiss inconstancy to the Swiss-mix scene, a constant flow and ebb and disappearing. Often, nothing announces new venues, aside from the sudden armada of bikes chained up where none had been seen before. And just as often, nothing at all announces their vanishing.

Still, not all of these spaces are so transient. Consider Les Halles, a huge organic grocery in Zurich where cheese shelves spill over into a rough-hewn bistro that seems transported from the backroads of Provence. In the burgeoning postindustrial zone known as Züri West, the customers are just as likely to be dot-commers from the nearby Technopark as designers from the

ateliers within the Maag Areal. It seems a perfect example of ephemeral cool.

Yet Les Halles sprang out of a long-term business. "We started as a fruits and vegetables wholesaler fifteen years ago, but then my wife and I started making mussels in cream and selling it, just because I love that dish," recalls owner Christoph Gysi. "Then a chef we knew started doing gastronomic evenings here, illegally." Eventually, the health inspectors demanded that Gysi build a full-scale kitchen, which then completed the space's transition to real restaurant.

Sited hard by some of Zurich's best underground nightclubs, Les Halles also hosts one-off events that range from movie-themed nights to house-music parties. It has a license to serve liquor until five in the morning, but Gysi says he hasn't yet had the courage to undertake a wee-hours venue. "In the future we'd like it to be like the original Les Halles area in Paris — truck drivers and wholesale customers mixing with our nighttime crowd," he explains. "But already, we're a 24-hour-a-day operation — the restaurant stays open late, and the produce trucks start work at two a.m. Now we fear becoming too professional. We'd like to keep our chaos." Parse his statement closely and the paradox trumpets forth: In Switzerland, even the disorder is engineered.