

'I ADMIT I'M KIND OF A PICTURE - BOOK ARCHITECT'

Christian Kerez studies images
as if he is reading them.

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Christian Kerez.

It's rare for high-end chefs to become famous for preparing ordinary food. It's just as rare for architects to succeed simply by erecting functional buildings. Christian Kerez, a professor at ETH Zurich, has managed to turn straightforward buildings – such as his school in Leutschenbach (*Mark 24*, page 48) – into an architectural manifesto. From his House with One Wall to the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, the buildings speak for themselves.

Like good literature, skilfully made architecture has an existential dimension, and a list of restrictions often leads to a building quite regimented in its expression. Although the world of words is rich in possibilities, it is not always a comfortable realm for the architect-cum-author. Kerez admires the authors of manga and other graphic novels, literary masterpieces and reference books. He's into both image and analysis. Where did it all start?

Do you have childhood memories of books?

Christian Kerez: Yes, I loved, collected and traded comic books before I could even read. I'd seen them at our neighbours' house; they could afford lots of them. My affinity for comics has remained, but these days I'm much more selective. I seldom find anything I really like. I think earlier comics were printed better and smelled better.

What are your favourites?

My choices are not particularly original. *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman are multi-layered and amazing. As a child I started with *Silberpfeil* [*Silver Arrow*], *Elephant Boy* and *Lassie*; during my years at primary school I loved *Asterix*, *Lucky Luke* and especially *Tintin*. When I started learning French, I acquired a taste for stories featuring Red Rogue and Lieutenant Blueberry. Then there were the omnibus volumes of Zack. But for me *Tintin* is one of the masterpieces of comic literature.

Why is it a masterpiece?

Hergé is to comics what Hitchcock is to film. He really takes advantage of the medium's possibilities. Some passages tell a different story in the pictures than in the speech bubbles; at the end of every page is a point or a moment that makes you want to keep reading. The way he builds the narrative arc, how he tells a story – that's possible only in the unique medium of the comic book. More than drawing style or content, it's about the narrative structure and how an image works together with script.

And your relationship with non-comic books...?

When I was six years old I wanted to be a novelist. But after I learned how to write, it became an increasingly torturous process. I have great respect for the intellectual achievement of writing a book, which I find fundamentally greater than that of building a house, an endeavour less influenced by circumstantial coincidence. I do love books, but I read only seldom these days – far less than in my youth and during my studies. Influential books included *The Book of Disquiet*, by Fernando Pessoa, whose diary-like descriptions – written under various pseudonyms – have a laconic, melancholic tone. The universality with which he describes everyday life – revealing the entire world in the quotidian – excited me. I should also mention Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. I read this book for weeks, and nothing else. I was 20.

What was it in Musil's book that so captivated you?

The book opened up a world, and that world was mine. It created references to my life and opened new perspectives. It wasn't that the book pulled me into a fantasy world – no, it made me more aware of my immediate surroundings. Like architecture, music or painting, language is a medium and – when someone uses it well – it provides an unbelievable, vivid experience. Things are created that seem impossible. In the chapter entitled 'Moosbrugger Dances', Musil describes what goes on in the mind of someone who's insane. Sentences and words have a different sequence than they do when language is used rationally. Rather than reading a dry description of the person's

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mental state, you actually visualize it.

And now the time for reading is over?

No, I've found a way to get back to it, thanks to seminar weeks at ETH Zurich. Many of my colleagues are using this time to view buildings, but we spend six hours a day reading a book. So far we've read Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Karl Marx's *Capital: Volume One* and, more recently, texts by Sanford Kwinter on our programme.

How do you choose the books?

They're books I regret never having read. When I read a book, I want to gain insights, not only be entertained. When I get to parts of a book that are worth the struggle, I'm more than willing to make an effort – to work and fight my way through.

Can you tell us about the insights you've gained by reading these books?

Arcades Project taught me to view the history of modern architecture more phenomenologically than stylistically. Walter Benjamin sharpens the eye that's searching for the origins of modernism, which existed long before the modern looked modern. It's a fabulous and wild collection of phenomena, which are wonderfully interconnected.

Capital meanders between scholarly writing and literature; extremely abstract mathematical models are looking for a superordinate unity. For the first time, I understood something not because it was written very clearly and precisely but because I could observe it in such a reduced way. Also interesting was the encounter between Marx expert Norbert Haug and our students. Haug represents a politically engaged generation, and although it's alleged that today's students are no longer politically engaged, they understood each other remarkably well. Haug explained how the rising complexity of political engagement impedes him – and how the situation gives extra meaning to Marx's writings. Marx's conclusions may be out of date, but his analytic support of those conclusions is more urgent than ever. Since his economic theory is based on crises, and since we are sliding from one major crisis to the next – even larger – one, his works have seldom been more relevant. Our Marx Week, with room for only 25 students, drew more than 100 applications.

What would I find on your bookshelves at home?

I don't really like to look at the spines of books, which is like looking at a plate without eating from it. That's why I don't have a bookshelf but rather an extensive

library of books and DVDs in the basement. Books are instruments, which you take out when you need them and then put away again. I think of my library as a depot or a tool rack. I go in, take out books for a lecture or on topics I'm dealing with, and read them upstairs or at the office. I'm even starting to photograph necessary information that I can look at on my organizer.

How do books aid you in your work?

Books have a clarifying influence. What exists? How can I depart from what's already there? It's not about dealing with images allegorically – making a study of analogue architects, for instance – but about reaching an analytic understanding, tracing a conscious boundary. Take, for example, the Empire State Building, whose individual connecting elements were numbered and sized to accommodate changes in static relationships over its 284-m height. This idea led to the development of a 120-m-high tower in China that leaves the building's loads visible, including dimensional differences in supports and tensions. Steel skeletons have been around since the 1920s, but to show such changes is new. That the texts I've read on skyscrapers, which help me to prepare lectures for the courses I teach, have led to new buildings is something I realized only after the fact.

This means that image is more important than text?

I admit that I'm kind of a picture-book architect; I get more from looking at photos than from reading texts. I study images as if I'm reading them. How is the structure built? What's behind it all? How does the building really work? Why is it represented this way and not that? I'm interested in captions that explain floor plans and in the arrangement of the images, which probably goes back to my love of comic books.

'Reading' images allows you to appropriate what you see. Do you advise your students to do the same?

Today there are no longer masters and pupils; our discipline is more about star architects and imitators. I don't believe I can be an example, but I do try to help students find their own positions. That's significantly more difficult than offering recipes or rules, and it requires pluralistic thinking.

In the 1990s you photographed architecture professionally. Has that influenced you as well?

Yes, it was something like an expedition. I was interested in civil-engineering

'A THEORETICAL POSITION CAN BE AN EXPERIMENTAL ATTEMPT AT ORDER'

projects, which were not well known at the time and less humdrum than they are now. But I earned money photographing the work of successful colleagues. I profited from the experiences of those lucky enough to build their designs. I soon had so many jobs that it was impossible to deal seriously with architecture, so I stopped after two years.

Are photos the right medium with which to capture architecture?

I'm actually sceptical about that. Photography shows what is, not what could have or should have been. It's basically an uncritical medium, but if you do use it to criticize, the result is usually contradictory. Seen as such, the photographer is the architect's accomplice. Some buildings – like some people – are more photogenic than others, which says nothing about their architectural quality.

Your buildings manifest a clear architectural approach. Is it enough to let buildings speak for themselves?

I see it as a weakness to express myself more through buildings than through writing. But I do harbour a bit of scepticism towards the crossover of architecture and the work of the publicist. There are architects who write beautifully, but many buildings seem like illustrations of their texts. Or they draw beautifully, but the built project leaves you thinking that the drawing was better. In my eyes, architecture is its own immediate medium. It's limiting to express yourself only through architecture, but it's a field in which I'd like to be measured. I mistrust concepts that fail to produce interesting buildings.

And how does architectural discourse take place?

If I react to someone else's project with a project of my own, thus quasi-continuing the original project using other means – or if I completely reject what I see – the ensuing discourse interests me. Theoretical discourse, in contrast, is practically hushed in comparison. Fifteen years ago, my first competition entry wasn't anything special, but it incited a discussion because I broke with certain principles of functional classification. Now, at least in Switzerland, there's too little discussion about unbuilt projects. The critical intelligence is nearly gone – with grave consequences for the competition world and younger architects. This worries me a lot.

Are there architecture books that influence you?

Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture* is an unpretentious, descriptive book you can give even to laypeople or clients. It explains the intricacies of the discipline with very beautiful descriptions of phenomena like light and surface texture. The book, without showing favouritism, features buildings that are everyday and extraordinary, old and new, functional and classical. I also like Paul Valéry's *Zur Theorie der Dichtkunst*, Michel Foucault's *The Order of Discourse*, and the writings of Louis Kahn and Rudolf Schwarz, both of whom express themselves beautifully. Japanese architect Kazuo Shinohara interests me as well. We tried translating one of his seminal works on apartment buildings, but it was too difficult and we never finished. Shinohara is an intractable character who isn't easy to categorize.

How did you become interested in Shinohara?

When I was 22, I attended one of his lectures. What he said shocked me and never really let me go. I copied everything of his that had been translated. Now I know through my Japanese interns how fragmentary these translations are and how important his writings are in Japan.

The first Shinohara lecture I attended was called 'Preparing for the Fourth Space'. He introduced four somewhat contradictory architectural positions, the last of which was unclear even to him at the time. Architects who lecture at ETH usually show their work and tout their positions, claiming to know the best way to build. A person with four positions was disturbing at first – and then liberating. Seeing a theoretical position as an experimental attempt at order gives you the freedom to develop new positions. <