

The Letter

Steiner Architecture ff

A

2023

The Letters ABCD is Steiner Architecture's inaugural magazine. Necessarily open-ended, protean, confident, cheeky. It strives to be more than a glorified business card. But can it? Nevermind. It showcases the studio's built projects, unbuilt projects, preliminary arguments, not-so-preliminary arguments, inchoate ideas.

We begin this issue with **The Underdogs**, a recap of the main projects designed in our office since we started six years ago. **Will the future get you high?** is a meditation on Austrian urban sprawl. The baton is then relayed onto **Profond Chagrin: Le Corbusier in Zell**, a brief account of the architect's hypothetical sojourn in

the town of Zell-am-See. And **Professor Garpo in the Angewandte** reports on a very curious lecture in Vienna.

Sincerely,
The Editor



| | |
|---|----|
| 1. The Underdogs | 3 |
| 2. Will the future get you high? | 9 |
| 3. Profond Chagrin: Le Corbusier in Zell | 11 |
| 4. Professor Garpo at the Angewandte | 12 |





1. The Underdogs

SMASH!
Broken glass
shimmers on the
Lufthansa carpet.
Someone just
tried to kill
themselves in
First Class.

F gets a bottle of champagne for restraining the passenger, while the younger F asks for a 3-parts-vodka-1-part-soda “medicine” for his nerves. And as the sun rose, we descended on Los Angeles for a meeting at the Petersen Museum. Welcome to the home of the brave.

Was it an omen?

After all, 2022 did begin with a pistol.

A starting pistol. It was late January and the gunshot brought the thunder of engines at **GP Ice Race**. There we built a portable pavilion for drivers to unwind in—note the glistening yellow Pantera poised on hand-woven carpets.

By May, **Sputnik Bar** was completed. Customers flocked to this fancy watering hole, as we wondered if the Soviet-inspired name would bomb in the face of the Ukraine war. It didn't.

Mid spring: our **first house**.

It looks like Frank Lloyd Wright in front of Lake Zell. Images of friends wading through the water at sundown and the lights of the old town across the lake will be fondly remembered. This is what architecture permits.

And as the summer sun faded, it was time for a rooftop apartment in Vienna to see the light of day.

Ground was broken at **Mankei**, the new pit-stop on the Grossglockner High Alpine Road for **GP Ice Race**. Ground was broken too around Salzburg, where two commissions meant several commutes on the Vienna-Munich line.

And right in the heart of Salzburg began our most ambitious project thus far: a 400 year-old villa once home to none other than Stefan Zweig and his beloved French wallpapers.

In November the phone rings and we're invited to compete for an exhibition design at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

But let's not forget the previous years. Let's not forget the addition to the **Auwirt Hotel** (2017) or the renovation of **Prielau Castle** (2016–2017).

Light a candle for the truckloads of projects that didn't see the light of day, or our first office which had no heating, and the sight of three grown men huddled around a coal stove in February.

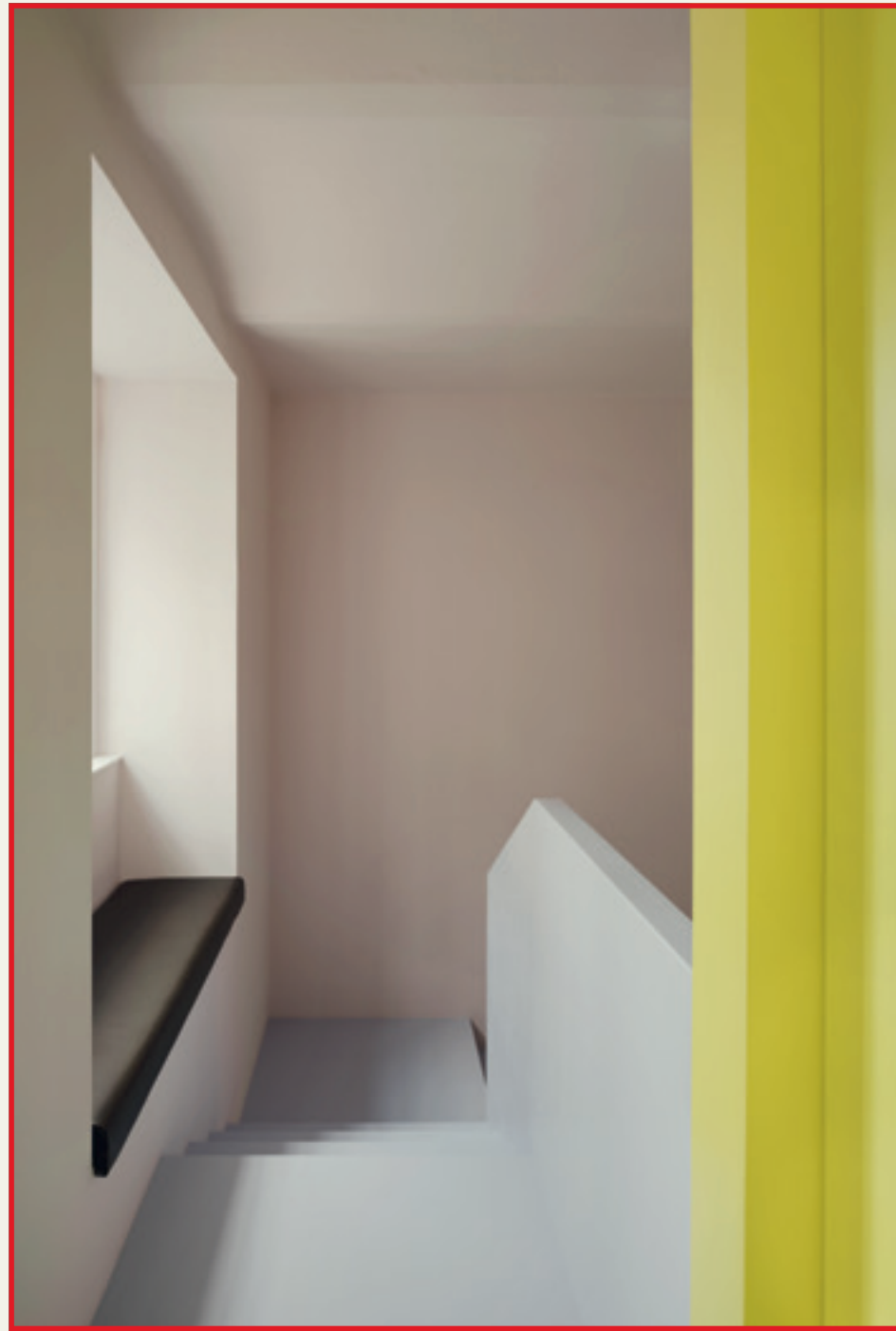
We've landed at LAX. There's an ambulance for the suicide survivor, and a black car for the underdogs.

2022 was a hinge.

PREVIOUS PAGE: GP Ice Race Pavilion, Zell-am-See. Photo by Amy Shore, 2022

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP-LEFT: Sputnik Bar, Vienna. Photo by Simon Oberhofer, 2022; Private Sportscars Museum, Leopoldsdorf. Steiner Architecture ff, 2020; House on Lake Zell, Zell-am-See. Photo by Florian Holzherr, 2022; Auwirt Gasthof, Aurach bei Kitzbühel. Photo by Florian Holzherr, 2020

NEXT PAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT: Auwirt Gasthof, Aurach bei Kitzbühel. Photo by Florian Holzherr, 2020; House on Lake Zell, Zell-am-See. Photo by Florian Holzherr, 2022







2. Will the future get you high?

Austrian urban sprawl is a fact, and a future where cities grow tall, not wide, seems the less likely outcome.

But place old towns on the psychoanalyst's couch and you will find this: Behind the fear of tall buildings lies not the phobia of things high but of things modern: flat roofs, posts and lintels, right angles and glass. The whole modernist alphabet.

Tall need not imply modern but it does. Why? Because a future where tall buildings aren't modern—God forbid!—is so radical, that it doesn't even occur to modernism's enemies.

Enter Bad Gastein. That Austrian oddity, shaped like an Alpine Sanaa. Unrepentantly monarchic, unilaterally loved by the crowds, built to challenge any notion that (i) mega-dense and (ii) aesthetically reactionary cannot share a bed.

But Bad Gastein is a product of the 19th Century, not the 20th, and it was not *aesthetically reactionary* when it was built. To draw from the past—nay, imitate the past—was not a crime then.

It is today.

Real felonies aside, conceiving new buildings to look like old ones is the ultimate architectural misconduct. Nothing will bring a designer such immediate isolation than refusing to be contemporary. And the countryside's demands for the continuity of old forms is regarded by designers as politically conservative at best. Xenophobic at worst.

According to this cruel logic Bad Gastein cannot be reproduced: density will be modern or it will not be at all.

Architects of course believe they negotiate with the crowd's ineducable taste for the picturesque: they respond with abstractions of past forms that they hope will be to be taken for historical continuity. They're not. They're enjoyed by other architects.

But the public wants Bad Gasteins. Not *interpretations* of Bad Gastein.

Will the future oblige them?

LEFT: Bad Gastein, Salzburg. Photo by Filipa Miguel Ferreira, 2016

RIGHT: Sanaa, Yemen. Photo by Dominic Sansoni, 2007



3. Profond Chagrin: Le Corbusier in Zell



Zell, le 15 juillet 1949

Je suis arrivé à Zell-am-See et j'ai tout de suite trouvé l'endroit déplorable. L'étalement fait mal aux yeux. J'ai ressenti un profond chagrin devant la profanation de ce si beau lac alpin. Quelle que soit la sagesse qui unissait les villages médiévaux, elle a été irrévocablement perdue. Le bulldozer est maintenant la seule issue.

Le Corbusier

PS : Le service à l'hôtel est absolument terrible.



This never happened, but when the cranky Swiss visited Zell-am-See he was not impressed. He's supposed to have brought the Voisin C7 Lumineuse to tour the circuitous Grossglocknerstrasse, then headed to the old town and checked in at the Grand Hotel. During breakfast on the terrace, over sub-par coffee and waffles, he observed the sprawling town and wrote:

"I arrived in Zell-am-See and I immediately found it deplorable. The sprawl hurts the eye. I felt a deep sorrow, and lamented the desecration of such a beautiful Alpine lake. Whatever wisdom held together Medieval villages has been irrevocably lost. The bulldozer is now the only way out.

PS: The hotel service is terrible."

On a photograph he's sketched a utopian vision of Zell-am-See. Five colossal towers loom over seemingly virgin country. Modernism from before the fall of Mankind. Prelapsarian phantasms. And below it he's written:

DISCIPLINE

Hypothetical records of a trip that didn't take place: Vision of a disciplined Zell am-See; unsent letter; and Le Corbusier on the Grossglockner High Alpine Road. Steiner Architecture ff, 2023. The images of the Grossglockner collage have been reproduced with permission of the Fondation Le Corbusier and Bildrecht Austria; and Malte Dressel



4. PROFESSOR GARPO AT THE ANGEWANDTE

Speaking in his seductive International English, Prof. Mario Garpo¹ captivated his audience as he introduced his latest book, *What is the Mirabilia Urbis Serpensiae?* Professor Garpo has dedicated his life to the study of the *Mirabilia Urbis Serpensiae*, regarded as one of the strangest architectural manuscripts known. Allegedly published in the 10th Century, the *Mirabilia* reports on the artistic and architectural achievements of the extinct Amazonian city of Serpensis. Yet far from the expectations of neo-Marxists, anarchists and decolonialists, Serpensis is described as a colony of pedantic and highly affected Italians.

House on Lake Zell,
Zell-am-See. Photo by
Florian Holzherr, 2022

¹ Mario Garpo is Professor of Archaeology at the Politecnico di Torcello and has published widely on the complex case of the *Mirabilia vis-à-vis* Western architectural writing. The highly improbable city of Serpensis is believed to have existed somewhere in the Peruvian rainforest. But dozens of archaeological excavations have yielded nothing.

We promise to publish excerpts from Professor Garpo's work in the following issues of The Letters ABCD.