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Biennale d'architecture Venise

Venise, 27.8.2012 - Allocution du Conseiller fédéral Alain Berset lors du vernissage du pavillon suisse à la Biennale d'architecture - Seules les paroles prononcées font foi.

Venezia è una città rinascimentale. Nel Rinascimento, l'architettura rientrava nel gruppo delle cosiddette «belle arti»: anzi, per alcuni, era addirittura la più nobile fra di esse. Nel XIX secolo ha avuto inizio il rapido progresso tecnologico che ha portato alla produzione in serie. Nella percezione comune, l'architettura si è quindi progressivamente allontanata dalla concezione artistica rinascimentale per diventare una disciplina autonoma, ad alto contenuto tecnologico, insegnata nei politecnici. Oggi l'architettura si piega agli imperativi economici, che prescrivono uno sfruttamento massimo della superficie disponibile.

Nevertheless, architecture has lost none of its social relevance. Good architecture is neither a cultural luxury nor a merely decorative craft. We must never forget that architecture has a very direct impact on the environment we live and work in. We are constantly surrounded by buildings. Good functional design can contribute greatly to making daily life more agreeable. The impressions that buildings make on us have a direct impact on our mood. What is shaped out of stone or concrete, wood or glass creates an urban identity and can be life-enhancing. The obvious conclusion is that architectural quality must always remain a key issue.

Here, right now, we are standing in front of a tangible example of the art of building. Precisely 50 years ago, Bruno Giacometti, the younger brother of Alberto Giacometti, designed the Swiss Pavilion. With its natural restraint and clear formal language, it serves as a symbol of Swiss architecture. It stands alone, a solitary building among other solitary buildings here in the Giardini of Venice. In this sense, it is at odds with the Miroslav Šik exhibition it hosts. Šik, a professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, advocates a contrasting approach. In his view, new constructions should be made to fit into an existing environment. He is against stand-alone, limelight-seeking forms of architecture, and appeals for a greater modesty of approach from his fellow architects.

Since the 1980s, Miroslav Šik has been considered one of the most influential and most radical thinkers in the field. As a theoretician and teacher, he has

influenced an entire generation of outstanding Swiss architects. Architects who today are leaving their mark around the globe. And who are thereby adding to the excellent reputation that Swiss architecture enjoys worldwide. This is underlined here in Venice by the large number of Swiss architects that have been invited to participate in David Chipperfield's «Common Ground» exhibition, the main exhibition at this year's Biennale.

Miroslav Šik places the accent on dialogue. He emphasises the aspect of integration, whereby new buildings interact with existing ones. This seems to me a typically Swiss approach. With Switzerland's strong and very much alive tradition of direct democracy, it is characteristic for us Swiss to seek a balance among diverse interests and opinions. Without eradicating differences, we are constantly forced to bring them into some form of harmony. This applies to numerous aspects of our lives, and not least to architecture. More than one high-flying but solitary piece of planning has been rejected at Swiss ballot boxes. A key factor is, of course, the very limited amount of space available in Switzerland. This alone reduces the possibilities of realising grandiose, stand-alone projects.

With his visual manifesto called «And now the Ensemble!!!», Miroslav Šik has obviously captured something of the spirit of the age. This morning, I took a look at David Chipperfield's «Common Ground» exhibition, and was immediately struck by the parallels to Šik. Chipperfield, too, is urging his colleagues to think more in terms of cooperation. And also reminding them of their social responsibility. Therefore I am convinced that this 13th Architecture Biennale will animate many of our leading architects to conduct a more intensive dialogue with the environment in which they are building. And to ask themselves basic questions such as: What is good architecture, in the sense of life-enhancing architecture? What does it take to architecturally enrich an existing environment?

I am pleased and proud to be here to open the Swiss Pavilion today. The Venice Biennale offers a unique platform for international cultural exchange. Unique also in the sense that there is always an element of surprise in the exhibitions. This may be because the Biennale is one of the last remaining vehicles for the presentation of arts on a nation-by-nation basis. Some may say that, in the age of globalisation, this is an anachronism. Yet in a commercialised world, Venice provides important scope for creativity that is not primarily driven by monetary and utilitarian considerations, and that shows some specifically national characteristics. Switzerland, with a whole row of artists and architects who are on demand at international level, has a lot to offer in this respect.

Fostering cultural exchange at international level is also one of the key tasks of the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia. This now includes the responsibility for Switzerland's contributions to the art and architecture biennials. The new Culture Promotion Act, which came into force at the beginning of 2012, has

led to a clearer division of tasks in the promotion of culture at national level. With its new competencies, Pro Helvetia has initiated the «Salon Suisse» at Palazzo Trevisan here in Venice, to be opened tomorrow. Inspired by the literary «salons» of the 19th century, «Salon Suisse» will function as a place of international encounter and stimulating debates on architecture-related topics. It is aimed not only at specialists, but also at Biennale visitors in general. Switzerland is therefore represented not just at one venue this year, but at two - the Pavilion and the Palazzo. This has only been possible thanks to close cooperation among several Federal institutions. My special thanks go to the Swiss Consulate representatives in Venice and in Milan, the Swiss Embassy in Rome, the Federal Office for Buildings and Logistics and the Istituto Svizzero di Roma. And last but not least to the Federal Office of Culture, which took care of Switzerland's contribution to the biennials with so much dedication up to the end of 2011, before passing the baton on to Pro Helvetia. But now, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is high time that I let you go and discover the Pavilion for yourselves. I wish you an enjoyable and stimulating visit!