

Interview with

DIETMAR EBERLE



Dietmar Eberle
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Carlo Baumschlager and Dietmar Eberle set up their architectural partnership in 1985.

During the early years they designed detached houses and put their first innovative ideas for high-density, low-rise buildings into practice, which soon gained them recognition beyond regional boundaries (Hohe Wies residential estate...).

In this initial phase the core team consisted of three to six employees.

In addition to these projects the partnership extended its activities to the design and construction of commercial and office buildings as well as large housing complexes. Prominent among the clients were private and public developers and local cooperatives. Key aspects of sustainability were incorporated into their planning work at a very early stage; economy, resource conservation and social acceptance evolved into fundamental principles.

In a related development, research into different types of buildings and facades became a major factor in the working methods adopted by Baumschlager Eberle (LTW, NHT Lohbach ...). Once the partnership was firmly established in the regional context, the next logical step, undertaken in the 1990s, was to expand to the national level. Internationally, too, Baumschlager Eberle gained recognition and acclaim for such projects as the headquarters of the Munich Reinsurance Company and the new airport terminal building in Vienna. This resulted in the setting up of the first branch office in Vaduz in 1999 and the Vienna office in 2001.

At this stage the partnership had 50 employees.

Thanks to its dedication and commitment the practice achieved further successes in architectural competitions, while its specific know-how increasingly led to direct building commissions. These included the construction of the UNAIDS building in Geneva and the Moma high-rise apartment blocks in Beijing. The ground was thus laid for the setting up of further branch offices in Beijing, St. Gallen and Zurich. In view of the increasing degree of complexity involved in building and construction processes BE developed a set of complex management and control tools with the help of their own project log in order to meet quality assurance and sustainability requirements. The presence of local offices enables BE to properly understand the respective cultural context while heeding the specific needs of the client.

This 'think global, act local' approach has resulted in the transformation of BE into a network of autonomous office units and the establishment of further branch offices in Hong Kong, Berlin and Hanoi.

Carlo Baumschlager left the partnership in 2010. The BE Group continues to grow steadily and now has a permanent staff of 120.



ETH e-Science Lab HIT Zürich

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Could you tell about your childhood? How did it affected your development and your work as an architect?

Eberle: I grew up in a small village in the mountains in the Western part of Austria – in the Bregenzerwald – which is, by tradition, a very poor area. So living was determined by working very hard and being far away from any political government.

According to the political freedom in this area, there is a long tradition that men went to foreign countries to earn money during the year. They left in spring and came back in autumn. So women were the real important social factor, because they were responsible for the wealth of the families.

At the same time, there is a big tradition to manage life under such difficult conditions for cooperation between people or organizations like cooperatives. So in this surrounding there were 2 important experiences for my future life: one was the importance of women and the other one was to be very careful with everything you have because there were limited possibilities.

Besides this, as a child, I was impressed by every construction side and it was not important if the construction was a street, a river, a tunnel or a house

and I went to these places as a child for many hours because I was so impressed by this experience of projects and their development. So there is still, what I have today, a very positive feeling of all the things which grow out of ideas with limited resources.

Have there been any particular influences early in your career?

Eberle: Close, opposite of my home, there was the workshop of a carpenter and a small river. Even as a child I was allowed to use all these carpenters' machines to build mainly small interventions for the very small river. So having this possibility to build something, see if it works, go back and forward – this is something what influenced me my entire life until today.

What were the precursors influencing your interests in „every day architecture“. What do you feel is the greatest challenge when it comes to designing „every day architecture“?

Eberle: The biggest challenge to do every day architecture is to do a contribution to the site of the building and to fulfil the demands of the people which will use and pay the building - which means it's always complicated to do a balance between outside-in and inside-out.

How important is a building character to you? Are your purchasing to define a character by the building itself or should it rather be „open and free“, so that the users may create its character?

Eberle: What is a building character? In my understanding the most important user of the building is the person who never enters the building but only passes by because in his mind and in his feeling the importance of the building in relation to the public is experienced. This very specific contribution of the building to the public will decide about the lifetime of the building, which is the most important question in economic and ecological terms. The building inside has to have its very specific atmosphere - and to be open and free at the same time. So the character of the building is determined by the dimension, light, material of the spaces in the building, which are used by everybody who uses the building. The rooms, the different areas, should be free to open a lot of opportunities for the future generations.

Is the architecture, in some way, the visual representation of society?

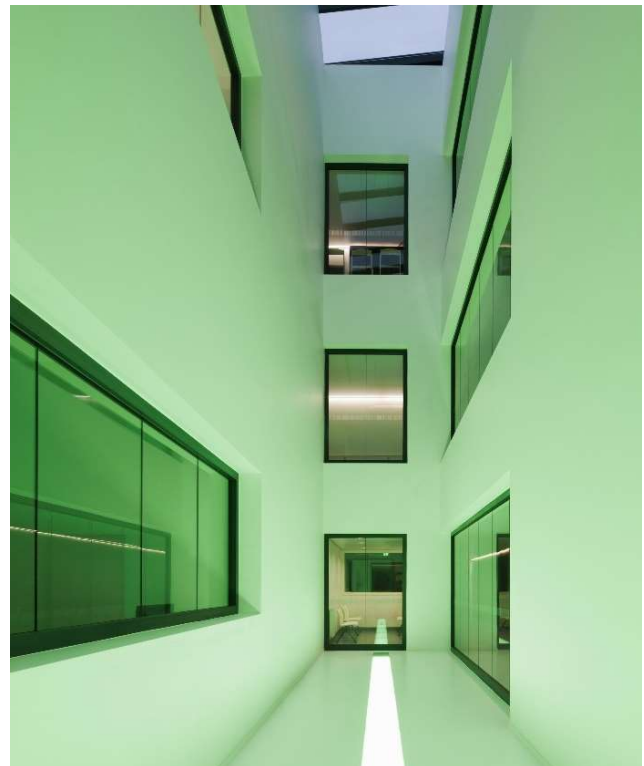
Eberle: Yes – architecture represents the values of the society in different periods of their development. Architecture is a mirror of the different values according to the different periods.

You have never sought to create a continuous signature in your architectural designs, but rather always having very individual approach to each project, focusing on the particular geography, culture and local resources, gaining the best possible benefit and quality out of each?

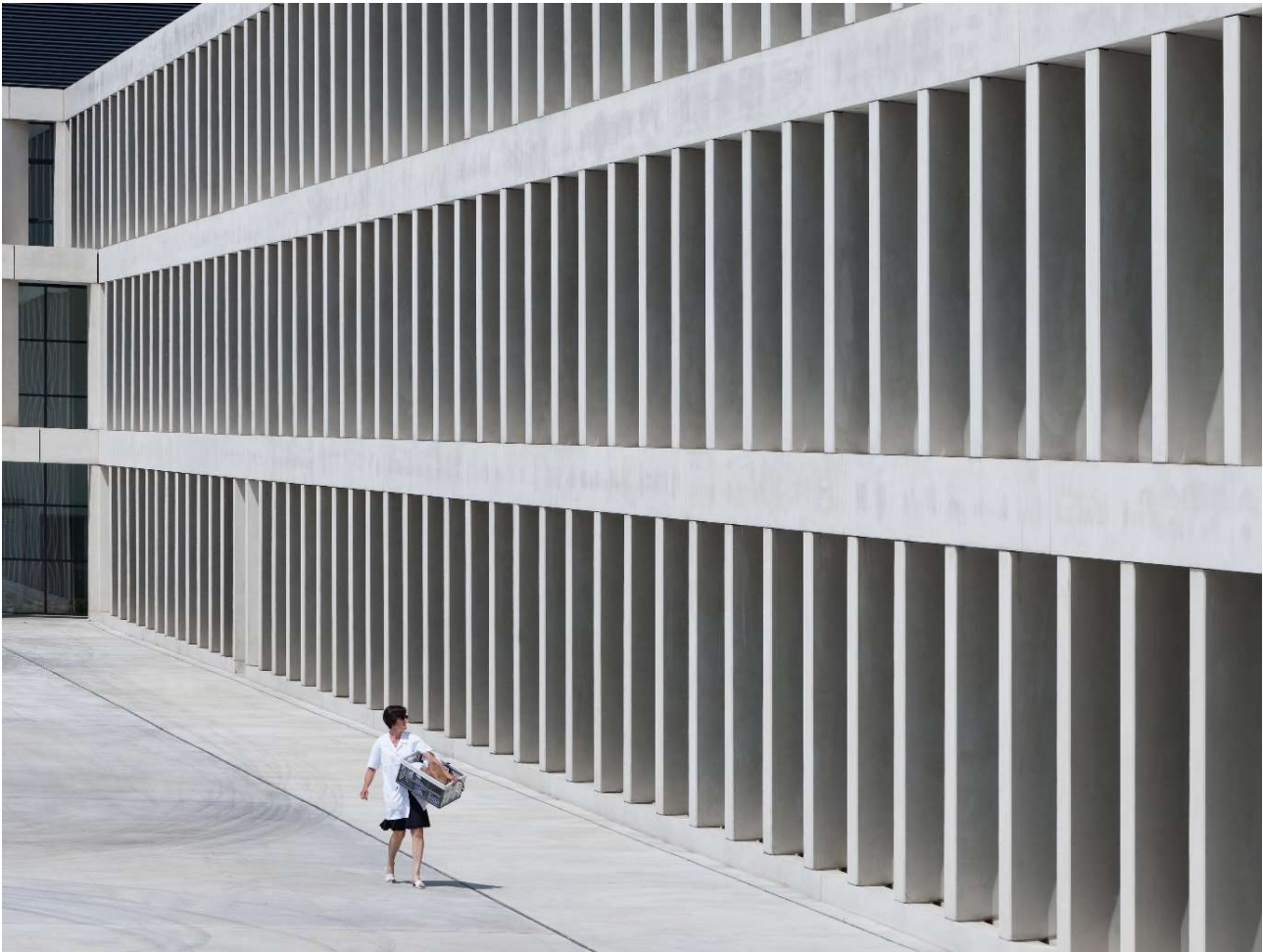
Eberle: No I'm not interested in a continuous signature. For me the richness of Europe are the differences. So the atmosphere of a city like London in relation to a city like Paris or Budapest is for me more important than the question, if you can recognize me as a person in London, Paris or Budapest. In every building I try to develop a building as a contribution to the site where it is. My personal signature is the way how you do this contribution – national, highly efficient and open for the future.

You often say that we cannot exactly predict the changes of society in the future. Thus, the architecture should be flexible in order to be able to respond on future demands and challenges. In this course, should the architecture strive for influencing the way society works or is it reversed?

Eberle: Architecture should be open for the different uses of society. So, for me it's not important if a building is for housing, working or education – the things should be possible in the architectural structure.



Hospital AZ Groeninge, Belgium
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Hospital AZ Groeninge, Belgium
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Following your statements „Replace the hardware with the software...Use knowledge to dematerialise the building as much as possible...“ you have shown in the project Office building 2226 an excellent concept of architecture with minimum of technic. Do you think this approach is the key for future projects?

Eberle: The approach to use more knowledge and less hardware → which means less resource, is a general approach towards managing the future of high development. This planet is limited in resources, which are the basic of hardware, but not limited in thinking, believing and this is the biggest resource for managing the future.

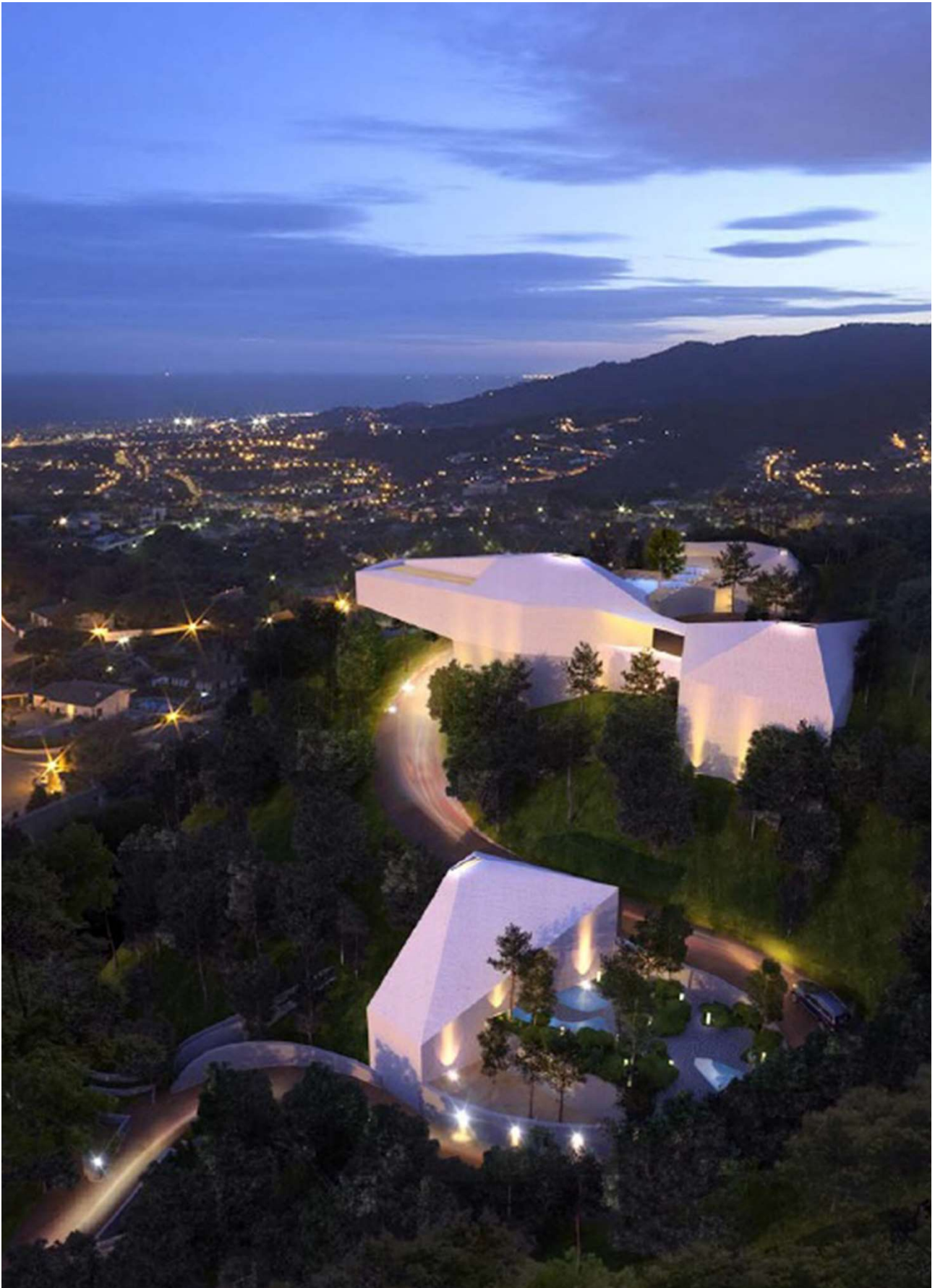
We have this approach not only in the building industry but in all industries and therefore the biggest companies in the world nowadays are not any more the hardware companies but the software companies. What they do, is learning to use all the existing knowledge in a more efficient way. But the building industry, according to its locality, always was an industry which developed much more slowly than other industries.

It is clear that our cities are changing. You are convinced that walking itself is a future way of mobility throughout the city. Could you explain this?

Eberle: The way of how we transport ourselves or our goods determines the layout of the city. The different characteristics of the cities out of different periods are determined by the mobility question. In history you can see this very clear.

At this moment, we experience, nearly in all cities in all over the world, the problem how mobility is organized. It's not important if you speak about traffic jam, air pollution, sound pollution and a lot of other impacts on the build environment which is done by our mobility systems. Nobody is happy with this situation and therefore there is a lot of research about new ways of mobility like self-driving cars ...

Everybody understands that there is no growth of this system possible anymore and everybody experiences the time, which he spends for travelling, to manage his everyday life, becomes much too high, because the distances between working, housing, education, leisure



Villa K, Los Angeles
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are much too big. But when you put these things much closer together, so that you have a walking distance between these different issues, which we use for everyday life, it'll be more comfortable again.

The density of the city would increase and at the same time, you would no longer need any more a lot of resources in economic and ecological terms. So walking means higher densities. This is a contradiction to a lot of development what we have done in the 20th century, where we lowered the density, and at the same time increased the area for the necessary transportation. In history we developed a lot of city models without any traffic systems, as we used to use in the 20th century. Therefore I believe all this models – it does not matter in which country of the world – are characterized by much higher densities. These models are a good starting point to learn again to use the land in a more efficient way. This kind of thinking represents once more this idea of replacing hardware, traffic area and vehicles, by more knowledge and walking. Use the things you have in a more efficient way – even if it's only your legs.

Sometimes you are using small building projects to perform experiments, as with different materials, design forms, etc. How important are these experiments for your work?

Eberle: Yes – the way of my training to know something means do it and afterwards judge it and the best process it to learn something. This is the most common scientific method to be used in a lot of different fields for increasing your knowledge – do experiments!

In terms of designing numerous buildings (mostly for competitions), from which only 5-10% will actually be built, there are opinions that „humiliation is a part of architect's daily lives“. However, your studio has an excellent productivity. You have built approximately 400 buildings. What approach had led to this extraordinary outcome?

Eberle: To do competitions is based on very different experiences in very different countries. So your general saying that only 5 - 10 % will actually be built is a question which is very different in the different cultural backgrounds.

Why we built so many buildings and will build even more buildings – this approach is very simple. Listen to your clients and ask yourself if you can help them. Architecture is not about you and your continuous signature – architecture is a contribution to different cultures, different cities and different users. All of these things you have to consider properly and it's the obligation of the architect to find the best solution for these questions.



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The word „sustainability“ has been one of the most debatable, or almost abused, terms over the past decades. What is the sustainability in architecture for you and should we define it at all?

Eberle: The definition of sustainability in architecture is very simple. Do something efficient for the society and the user in the most long-term view you can imagine. So all the thinking about different timeframes is the meaning of the word sustainability.

What is a “responsibility” in our profession and how would you define the “responsibility” of an architect?

Eberle: The responsibility of an architect is nothing special or more important than the responsibility of anybody in the society but the architect has to respond on to 3 different systems of thinking:

He has to respond to the history and the state of the art of his discipline, he has to respond to the needs of the society in a long term view and the needs of the user in a short term view.



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