

# Une promenade architectural à travers l'univers de Heidi & Peter Wenger

**ENGLISH**

## Good morning

On behalf of the Heidi and Peter Wenger Foundation in Brig, I would like to thank you for inviting me to hold a presentation today.

I would like to thank Mr Yvan Delemontay for the professional preparations and organisation.

I would like to thank Professor Franz Graf for the interest he has shown in the architecture of Heidi and Peter Wenger.

And finally, I would like to thank you all for coming and for accompanying me as we explore the world created by Heidi and Peter Wenger.

Please excuse my terrible English; however, my French is even worse.

So, I assume you're all ready for the presentation – that's great, because I am too.

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My first chapter is called:

## My journey to another world

What drives a 24-year-old architecture student to do an internship in Valais? It is not the folklore. And it's not the mountains. Nor is it the climbing or the skiing. No, it is the draw of an architecture style that cannot be found anywhere else in Switzerland.

Young Jürg Brühlmann was drawn to Brig by the temptation of being able to immerse himself in a world in faraway Valais that teetered from Buckminster Fuller and Charles and Ray Eames to Pierre Luigi Nervi, Frank Lloyd Wright and Kenzo Tange.

This world was created by the architect couple Heidi and Peter Wenger, who I first became aware of in 1980 through their exhibition in the Kunstgewerbemuseum Zurich entitled "Lebensräume - Spielräume" ("Living spaces – spaces in which to move"). After viewing the exhibition, it was clear to me that I wanted to do my internship in the Wenger Studio.

The pieces shown by the Wenger architects in their exhibition do not fit with the usual Swiss way of thinking. For the architects at the ETH Zurich, the exhibition is too playful, while for the teachers at the arts school, it is too poetic.

For me, the architecture of Heidi and Peter Wenger opened new ways into design, new ways of thinking and new ways of using space. The Swiss box – only recently established – is being broken open by Wenger. There is no longer the trio of floor, walls and ceiling, nor is there the duality of indoors and outdoors.

There are no facades and no interior fittings, there is just the room.

The room is just structured space. I first read this in a book named "Poetik des Raums" ("The poetry of the room") which was written by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelards. From this book, I learned that architecture is crystallised space, i.e. a part of the universe. It defines the structure of space and in doing so creates a liveable environment, saturated with cosmic noise. This notion blew my mind!

I discovered this cosmos immediately in the structures created by Heidi and Peter Wenger. This was the reason why I really wanted to go to Brig and do my internship in the Wenger Studio.

However, it was easier said than done. Heidi and Peter Wenger did not want me as an intern at first. They brushed me off with phrases such as “we have no time”, “there is no work for interns” and “the study is undergoing upheaval”, etc. before adding at the end that I should call again at a later date. After weeks of unrelenting persistence, I was eventually invited for an interview. My concept for a modular catering system on a train, which I had completed for my term paper as an industrial designer, softened them up or convinced them a little that I may in fact be a good fit in the studio. They hired me and paid for my room and board.

1) In any case, I made the journey to distant Valais at the beginning of July 1980 and spent three months there. No-one could foresee at the time that this would be the start of a lifelong friendship with Heidi and Peter.

In today's presentation, I will tell you about the architecture and lives of Heidi and Peter Wenger from a friend's perspective. After I completed my internship, I was constantly traveling to Brig to help the couple work on projects.

2) The SBB commissioned the studio with the development of a standardised concrete shell for the series production of substations for the fixed electrical systems. For this project, I developed a folded plate that was could be built longer and shorter like the bellows of a large-format camera.

As a designer, I resolved issues such as that of the daylight illumination within the basement floor of the Brig post office. This was for a competition in 1981 and we were awarded first prize. Unfortunately, the post office was never built.

3) I constructed numerous models for the studio, mainly to the scales of 1:50 and 1:20. I also assembled tensegrity sculptures, for example on the ABB premises in Lenzburg and the police station in Brig.

4) I was also commissioned by Heidi and Peter Wenger to develop the futuristic ball kitchen. I constructed this kitchen like a yacht – entirely out of wood and featuring custom-built hinges and fittings. We spent days on end sanding and painting wood. It was like building a boat

I am Member of the Board of Trustees of the Heidi and Peter Wenger Foundation in Brig. Our mission is to raise awareness of and look after the work of Heidi and Peter Wenger, provide the owners with restoration

advice, release publications, promote architectural discourse in Upper Valais and set the cat among the pigeons.

5) During my time in Brig, I was put up in the couple's holiday home, sitting at 2000 metres above sea level in Rosswald. Heidi and Peter Wenger built this triangular cabin among the larches in 1955. The little cabin would become the world-famous Trigon Chalet

It is a masterpiece of minimalistic architecture and a seminal development in its simple room organisation, logical clarity and straightforward triangular structure. The materials used and the design are just perfect.

The Trigon was displayed at the Saffa exhibition in 1958 and was built in a series of five units. A number of these are still standing, including those at Lake Constance and in Appenzell. The Trigon has been the subject of many reports and articles published all around the world. Television crews from Japan, the US and France have travelled to Rosswald and hiked the arduous route from the mountain station to the Trigon, which features 300 metres of elevation, just to see the special chalet for themselves.

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This brings us to a first architectural theme of Heidi and Peter Wenger:

The topography

Heidi Wenger, born Dellberg in 1926, was taught mountain climbing, Alpine skiing and climbing by her father from an early age. She had her own specific ideas and experiences of heights, depths, inclines and flats in the terrain. Throughout her life, she has utilised this experience in developing building layouts in relation to the terrain. She loves erecting structures on hillsides and slopes. Heidi and Peter have always looked for suitable solutions for optimally harmonising the terrain with the architecture, whether it be with plinth surfaces supporting structures installed transversely and longitudinally to slopes, or free-floating structures.

Let me show you a few examples.

The Trigon Chalet, which is built on supports cantilevered at right angles to the slope and aligned with the path of the Rhone

The Ryffel building, built on supports that run across the slope and hang over the direction of the terrain

The Bellavista building, built on a slope with two interlocked buildings grouped around a courtyard

Leuk Children's Village, embedded in the slope at an angle of 120 degrees along the vineyard walls

Leuk Satellite Station, an area formed with a foundation that compensates for the difference in height, tectonically broken by the different heights of the buildings

The positioning of buildings in the landscape is always determined following an intensive study of the surrounding topography.

Peter Wenger, a city boy from Basel who was born in 1923, always said to me that he also wanted to build in urban centres. He would say that the Wenger studio is involved in too many building projects in the open countryside. In the city, there are other laws and principles that would appeal to him. Of course, such a building contract never came to pass. However, Heidi and Peter Wenger knew how to incorporate the city in their buildings.

The floor plans drawn up by Heidi and Peter Wenger are urban structures.

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I will explain this in more detail in the next part of my presentation, which brings me nicely on to the second theme:

The floor plan

The floor plans drawn up by Heidi and Peter Wenger are always based on a grid pattern, which they develop from platonic bodies. Over the course of around 50 years of work in the construction industry, they developed their own “grid language”. This includes both the buildings themselves and their projection over the floor space, as well as a combinations of the two.

I need hardly mention that hundreds of combinations can be created here. It is very similar to the way in which our alphabet works. Just think, with the 26 letters ranging from A to Z, we can write everything down that we think, devise and report. We can describe everything that goes on in our world with this small number of letters – in a wide range of languages, too.

Heidi and Peter Wenger have always considered a building to be the bringing together of different functions. They never asked their clients questions such as “would you like a 5.5-room house?”, “would you like a master bedroom or a hobby room?”, or “would you like a separate or open kitchen?”. No, they asked questions like “who will you be spending time in the house – your husband, your wife, your children, your grandparents, the friends of your children?”, “what do you do when you are at home”, and “how do you want to live once your children have left home?”, etc.

Heidi and Peter Wenger were always interested in the lives of their clients – living also means working, so this involved questions such as “how do you work?”, “what do you do?”, “where do you work alone and where together with other people?”, “how do the people interact?”, and “where do they meet?”. The collective and the individual were important to them. As a result, they wanted to design spaces that could be flexibly used for a wide range of functions, and not to meet set requirements. The transformation of rooms and spaces is important to them in this respect – they want to be able to make rooms larger and smaller, lighter and darker, and open and closed, as is appropriate.

These are all qualities that can be found in urban spaces. For this reason, their buildings are like cities with streets for living in, with squares to meet in and with cabins to retreat to. The streets are sometimes narrow and sometimes wide, while the squares are sometimes over one floor and other times over two, sometimes flat and other times on an incline, and sometimes even set into the ground.

Here, you can really see their fascination with Le Corbusier. The great man came from the area surrounding Lake Geneva and often travelled through Valais on his way to Milan and Venice. Heidi and Peter Wenger used to peep in awe into the first-class carriage to see whether he was in there. When he was in fact sat there, he usually just slept!

They of course also learned about Le Corbusier during their studies at ETH Zurich. They both graduated in 1954 under the tutelage of Professor Hans Hoffmann, a brilliant exponent of the modern elegance of the post-war era.

At the Wenger Studio, I didn't learn through reading and writing, but by designing rooms with points, lines, spaces and volumes. It was no coincidence that Heidi and Peter gave me this small book as a birthday present. I would have placed it under my pillow, had Peter Wenger not explained to me after dinner and demonstrated the platonic bodies and their inner relations to each other as well as the ratios to the number of edges, spaces and corners.

I then opened the plan chests and at a glance saw the basic structures of the various floor plans. The transformation of squares and the addition of triangles was probably the most frequent design they used for the floor plans.

Some examples:

A pavilion for customs office: hexagonal and triangles

The CIP Tramelan: the addition and subtraction of squares

The Gondo car port: triangular spaces in the floor plan and the layout

Leuk cupola: triangular spaces curved in a spherical design

Last month, when I was in the SFRA in Changins near Nyon, I discovered that the floor plan had been developed from a square in the diagonal and in the perpendicular rotation.

The principle of rotation used in Changins pre-dates the creation of the floor plan of the CIP in Tramelan.

The aspects of the design in Changins that are playful and functional at the same time are exaggerated in their mannerisms in the layout of the CIP. The interplay of the shapes are in themselves sufficient, highly complex and artistically virtuoso, but this structure reaches its limits in the spatial implementation. The CIP is the most virtuous of the work carried out by Heidi and Peter Wenger.

I designed and realised a lot of the furniture and the light fittings in the furnishing of the CIP. However, I can tell you, if there are no longer any right angles in the design and everything is polygonal and triangular, you will have trouble finding a reasonable position for a bed. Not to mention setting up a classroom or ensuring the correct production processes in a commercial kitchen.

It is worth taking a closer look at the floor plan of Changins here. It is not a secret, but when I was there, the situation, the lack of materials, the refined detailing, the clever lighting, and the functional and three-dimensional arrangement of the rooms totally captivated me.

I was taken back in astonishment, when I first came into contact with the architecture of Heidi and Peter in 1980.

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This brings me to the third theme

My stroll through SFRA Changins

It has been 39 years since I travelled from Zurich to Brig with a suitcase in my hand and the many expectations in my head. The train journey through the Lötschberg tunnel and down the southern approach, high above the aluminium factories in Chippis, seemed to take forever. Once I arrived in Brig, Peter Wenger came to pick me up from the train station himself! I was proud.

Over this past summer, I travelled to Changins. I had never been there before, but when preparing for this presentation, I thought that I needed to have visited this building.

There are other buildings that I have not yet visited, for example the single-family houses in Merlingen, Ausserberg and Oensingen. I will also take the time to visit these over the next few weeks. I have also not seen the camping area in Sierre, which is reason enough for a quick stop there.

I had to search for Changins in my satnav system, as I had no idea where it was exactly. I had only been told by Heidi and Peter that it is between Jura and a lake, and in the middle of vineyards that are flatter than those in Valais.

When I turned onto the gravel parking area after a two-hour car journey, I was overcome with excitement. I was actually quite familiar with the building from the plans. However, the image you have in your head of a place is always different to the reality when you see it in person.

The diminutive size of the building surprises me. The long building hugs the ground from the top of the hill, slopes gently towards the lake, and is held up by an 18th century castle that stands on the slope.

6) As I explained with the floor plans, the building has evolved from a square shape, and has been halved, pushed outwards diagonally and offset. You do not notice this in the surrounding terrain, as it acts as a continuum with the different heights between the floors. You can only notice the nuance at a second look.

I stroll through the vineyard and recognise how the vine structures fit in with the roof structure. I like it when a theme from nature matches that of a structure – it might be coincidental, but it is noticeable. The only ugly aspect is the multitude of large trees and cypresses that cover the house, as if they are ashamed about the architecture.

After walking around the building, one thing becomes clear to me – it really is a masterpiece. Heidi and Peter were at the time at the peak of their creativity. In terms of quality, the building can be talked about in the same breath as those designed by Kenzo Tange, Louis Kahn and Alvar Aalto.

As I walk around the building for the second time, I start studying the structure in much closer detail. Flagstones are not used, with tables being used instead. The building stands on tables, columns and baulks of timber that are large and hollow. The statics and installations are combined. All of the media are routed into the columns. There are no cable ducts or riser shafts. The architecture is visible, segmented and structured. I like the building more and more.

I then take my first steps into the building. What a lobby! It is a two-storey room with a concrete sculpture and stairs. Concrete, glass and wood are all there. My mind takes me back 30 years to when I visited La Tourette by Le Corbusier. I felt the same electrifying sensation then as I do now.

I stroll through the building. There are no corridors and the connecting paths are a sequence of bays, alcoves and spaces. My mind is brought back to the concept of the city in the house. I become quite devout and now also realise why Heidi and Peter liked the sculptor and architect Walter Maria Föderer so much.

He was of a similar age to Heidi and Peter Wenger (1928–2006) and built, among other things, numerous churches that rise up to the heavens like concrete sculptures.

The concrete elements were all prefabricated in the concrete factory, which is why they have remained so beautiful, even after 50 years. The joints are straight as a die and the edges have been cut as if with a knife. Nothing is crumbling and there is no wear and tear to be seen. It's wonderful!

7) What's more, I keep discovering the little "houses" within the house. This is a theme that Heidi and Peter Wenger loved, long before the conceptualisation of postmodernism and the proclamation by the architect Oswald Mathias Ungers, who was also born in the same year as Heidi and Peter Wenger (1926–2007).

8) Heidi and Peter Wenger utilised the "house within a house" theme in 1964 in the Forest, Hunting and Fishing Pavilion at the Expo in Lausanne. The individual subject areas were combined under a megastructure, with visitors able to view each one by making their way through the exhibition. The Postgarage Brig, which is considered a precursor to Changins, contains houses with various functions underneath an all-encompassing concrete structure. The office cubicles are also positioned freely underneath the rhythmic roof structure in the building layout. In Changins, the cabins for the simultaneous translators, the library and the toilets were designed as "little houses within a house". This is also a reference to city life.

I am constantly amazed by the witty playfulness in the detailed design. We mainly have Peter Wenger to thank for the fact that the structural details were designed with such care and attention to be logical, correct and humorous. Peter studied mechanical engineering for two semesters, wanted to be a pilot in the military or a photographer, and had a passion for yacht building. All of these interests were incorporated into this architecture. He is the "inventor" who after dinner – usually Valais cheese, sausage, rye bread and wine – went down to the studio, smoked a pipe effortlessly and drew for another hour or two. He also loved listening to Louis Armstrong, Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald.

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I would now like to show you a few details that are very typical of Peter Wenger's work:

On my fourth or fifth walk through the building, I concentrated on looking at the distribution of light. The SFRA is a building that would function without building signage, as the light guides visitors through the building. It is light wherever there are spaces and it becomes dark in the narrow passageways. Furthermore, you always have two different views of the surrounding landscape, regardless of where you are in the house. The only way to spot the building is through its lighting. Projections, recesses, it is the coming and

going of light, i.e. sunlight. None of the other buildings designed by Heidi and Peter Wenger have been designed so intelligently in terms of the use of light.

They know that architecture is the designing of space by harnessing light. I will now show you a few photos of Changins on this theme.

Light also plays a major role in the design of the facade here. In the changing of the time of day, the light and shadowy sides, the hard shadows, the reflection, the colour of the smooth concrete – everything is affected by the light. The vividness of the building is constantly transformed by the light.

The now ageing intern said farewell to SFRA Changins with a sense of devotion and enchantment. You should definitely visit! You will recognise many of the features that I have described today.

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Spherical sounds in Berner Jura – the Centre interrégional de perfectionnement (CIP)

It is just a two-hour car journey to Tramelan in Bernese Jura. Here, standing in the middle of the green fields as if a spaceship has just landed, you can find the Centre – referred to as CIP for short – an adult education institution and hotel operated by the Canton of Berne.

This is the last largescale building designed by Heidi and Peter Wenger. The time it took to build alone is impressive. The competition was launched in 1979 and just ten years later in 1989, the building shell was completed after three years of work. The building was inaugurated and commissioned in 1991.

The facility is based on a contorted square grid and is set into the ground like a pavilion. The white building envelope with the bright yellow steel structure surrounding it has a strange appearance. It brings to mind the book written by Buckminster Fuller – “Spaceship Earth”. The sophisticated design of the facade and the tiered windows connect the earth with the heavens. The circular windows in the hotel – one of Heidi and Peter’s favourite motifs – also make the building look like a spaceship.

I spent years working on the furniture and the fixtures for the CIP. However, I was not entirely happy with

the layout plan. The rooms were hard to furnish, as a wide range of teaching methods had to be taken into consideration, but these were not even used. Some of the ceilings with their stepped soffits have a somewhat oppressive appearance. The large amount of freedom offered by the megastructure was sacrificed for the geometry.

Nevertheless, the CIP is the absolute highlight of Heidi and Peter Wenger's work. And they were right. In this building, they have left behind the purely functional and at times brutalist architecture and created a spatial structure that is free of pernicious function and organisation.

Heidi and Peter Wenger took a huge step closer to their ideal, which is unique in the world of architecture. In the spirit of the great Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), the floor plan of the CIP merges into a geometric pattern and transforms into one form or another, much like music. Sometimes big and sometimes small; sometimes fast and sometimes slow.

9) It is no longer important to the architects that the facility is also an education centre. What is important is that it provides an opportunity for them to create their music.

It is no coincidence that Heidi and Peter Wenger named the exhibition they held in Siders in 2003 "50 years of spirited architecture". This unusual architectural couple based their architecture and their relationship with one another on the ability to think for themselves and the ability to act independently. They were suspicious of any kind of compromise throughout their entire lives. This brought them a great deal of admiration from the architectural world, but also resulted in them making a few enemies. Heidi and Peter Wenger lived and worked in Brig for more than 50 years – however, it was as if they were from another planet. They didn't care.

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Conclusion

What did I want to say with this presentation:

- Stay curious

- Keep your eyes open

- Think for yourselves

- Have an open mind for new ideas

The bottom line is that you are starting your professional careers with an internship in a unique office – and it could change your lives.

Thank you for your attention.

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Jürg Brühlmann

Designer/Architect

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EPFL Atelier Prof. Franz Graf Lausanne