

Werner Max Moser's New Altstetten Church 1936–1941

Restoration: *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*
Silvio Schmed and Arthur Rüegg,
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For George Everard Kidder Smith, the Protestant Church at Altstetten (a former Zurich suburb, integrated in 1934) was “unquestionably the finest Modern church in Switzerland, and possibly anywhere else”.¹ In his famous anthology of Swiss architecture from 1950, he points out that it embodies on the one hand “almost all the church building philosophy which both the protestants and catholics have sought: one room of simplicity and dignity, binding the pulpit and the altar to the congregation in respectful unity”. On the other hand, he was interested in the fact that the church, built on the edge of a low hill, seeks a subtle relationship with an old village church that the congregation had outgrown. Instead of destroying it, Moser “carefully preserved and related it to the new by the angle and space relation between them and by the repetition of a mutual eave height.” With a few words, Kidder Smith succeeded in capturing the double interest that Moser’s building represents even today. As a matter of fact, the church center’s interiors are, as well as the exteriors, wonderfully calibrated, fragile compositions that fascinate us for their typically undogmatic combination of modern and conventional materials and (decorative) forms, but also for Moser’s informal but precise dealings with the architectural heritage.² It is immediately understandable that renovating and extending this building complex was quite a challenge.

By Arthur Rüegg and Silvio Schmed

A Question of Balance

A co-founder of the *Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) in 1928, Werner Max Moser (1896–1970) used to be one of the hard-core Modernists among the Swiss avant-garde. Having built the Budge Retirement Home in Frankfurt in 1928–1930 together with Mart Stam, he propagated the ribbon development as the *new form* of urban settlement for some years and initiated in 1928, together with his friends Max Ernst Haefeli and Rudolf Steiger the *Werkbundsiedlung Neubühl* in Zurich–Wollishofen. Although he didn’t go as far as his father Karl Moser, who proposed to demolish the old city center of Zurich in order to replace it with ribbon buildings even as late as 1933, he was clearly not interested in the historical context. It is all the more surprising to discover the finesse and sensitivity of the project he did together with Max Ernst Haefeli and Rudolf Steiger in 1936 for the Zurich *Kongresshaus*—a major new building complex on the lakeside—and their sudden decision to perfectly fuse their intervention with the existing historicist concert halls. That same year, Werner Max Moser entered the competition for a new church in Zurich–Altstetten with two projects: one with and one without the old church from around 1300. If we can believe his own statements, he fought vehemently for the integration of the old parish church into the new building complex. His project breaks thus, as did the one for the

Kongresshaus, an important taboo of Modern architecture and announces a new interest for the existing as well as a concentration on concrete situations. It is no accident that the *Freunde des Neuen Bauens* (Friends of Neues Bauen) began to work on a declaration of principle with the Zurich *Heimatschutz* (the local Heritage Association) in the course of the same year.³ If the progressive architects primarily meant to clear out the notorious reservations of the *Heimatschutz*, their sensibility in regard to cultural values of the past was finally sharpened as well.

Moser dealt with the question of how to fuse the old and the new with the help of numerous project alternatives, but also on a theoretical level. Art historian Adolf Max Vogt has shown in a brilliant essay how Moser formulated the relation of old and the new not as an “either-or” problem, but as a question of balance.⁴ In view of a “coexistence without any diminution of either part”, Moser established a five-point program that proclaimed the preserving of the existing topography, the separation of epochs, the stylistic autonomy of each part, the coordination of the different scales, and the tuning of the materials—all in all an exemplary mixture of dialectical opposition and morphological harmonization. The carefully balanced equilibrium of old and new parts is one of the most important legacies of this architecture. The other one is the new sensuality of the materialization that turns the new building into a “mirroring response” (Vogt) to the old village church. That this labor-consuming and loving detail work was done under the premises of wartime economy makes the achievement all the more impressive.

<. Parish hall after restoration. Old (above) and new (below) ventilation grills. New lighting fixtures designed for the church center. Photo by Michael Wolgensinger, gta Archiv, ETH Zürich.

To Show or to Hide?

The harmonious effect of the ensemble was, in other words, the result of a careful orchestration of the location, the form and the materialization of each part of the new complex in relation to the preexisting situation. Moser took profit from the hill site for his church as well as for the wing that abuts it at an obtuse angle, by putting large parts of the program—the parish hall as well as two classes—further down on the garden floor. In this way, he kept a low profile on the hill top, an effect that he considerably enhanced by dividing each one of the two roof sections in a lower and a higher part, the lower parts corresponding in height with the roof of the old church.⁵

To intervene within such a fragile composition is highly risky. Yet the parish demanded a great deal of this renovation, even without having an exactly defined program. As an example, a new generous glazed entrance pavilion was discussed that would have served as a cloakroom, a garage for prams and as information center. In the course of the planning process, we were able to integrate an outside ramp in order to improve accessibility, but also to find other solutions for clothes, prams, and information systems inside the existing building. In order to accommodate the church-based youth work, we even went as far as proposing lightweight structures on an adjacent piece of land, until we were able to offer the former technical rooms on the garden floor for reuse. Yet the new toilets, the storage and workspaces as well as the heating unit definitely didn't fit in the old envelope. They were all concentrated in a slim two-story underground addition that found its place just in under the humus soil of the church yard.

In this way, the masterful equilibrium of old and new buildings remained entirely intact. On the other hand, the upper floor of the classroom and service wing underwent a serious transformation, since the apartment of the caretaker had to be replaced by a cafeteria. The small apartment windows seemed inadequate for the new use, so that the idea of a more decided orientation towards the church yard was formulated very early in the process. This idea resulted in a relatively simple operation: the cutting away of the window sills. To introduce a narrow cantilevering balcony in front of the new glazed doors connecting the access ramp with a small terrace and the garden stairs, was just a logical consequence of this decision. One may take his distance from such supposedly careless dealings with the barely preserved precious building substance. But all in all, the stronger relation of the interior and the exterior at this precise spot sharpens the idea of the existing ensemble considerably.

To Mend....

There is no doubt that the success of such an operation depends to a large degree on the way it is implemented; we remember the qualities of Moser's construction, the precision of his choice of materials and the subtleties of the details that make this complex a "mirroring response" to the historic village church. He had the finely structured exposed brickwork—consisting of specially made warm-colored ribbed lime-sand stones—tuned not only to the whitish concrete surfaces, but also to the chalked roughcast of the old church. The slight variations in color and the varying ornamental textures of the brick bonding produce a slight vibration of the wall surfaces, and break the scale of the massive volumes up.

How should one then formulate the new window openings for the cafeteria? The saw cut in the brickwork might have been shown as such, or a frame in wood, metal or stone might have been applied in connection with decidedly contemporaneous window detailing. We soon understood that all of this would have disturbed Moser's equilibrium. For that reason, we chose to "mend" the enlarged window openings with lime-sand-stones specially produced for the occasion, and to use the existing windows as a model for the larger new ones. This was all the more reasonable since we had to reconstruct the windows of the entrance part anyhow according to the instructions of the Preservation of Monuments. Even the detailing of the narrow balcony and its railing refers to the grammar of Moser's building, but there is no doubt that on a second regard, the new interventions can be made out without any problems.

Moser sought the balance between traditional and modern detailing in the interiors as well. The woodwork is executed in conventional soft pine panel construction. The door openings are smoothly plastered with rounded edges and painted white, whereas the walls themselves are roughcast and painted in pastel colors (blue, green, ochre). The restoration of these details and the reintroduction of the original polychromy produced a surprisingly fresh atmosphere that we took care not to disturb with all the newly introduced elements that were due to comfort, fire and climate requirements. We even found a way to mend the wonderful clinker floors that had been laid out in the most ingenious patterns.

Whereas the new parts (mainly sanitary and technical facilities as well as the rooms for youth work) were treated in a logic of their own, we continued to use Moser's materiality and colors in the cafeteria. But there, we tried ourselves with relish to do the splits between old and new by using the buffet, the curtains, the specially designed lighting fixtures, and the furniture for some interesting contrasting effects.

The Church, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Fortunately, the interior of church itself has been almost perfectly preserved. This is a piece of good fortune because this interior has all the marks of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Everything was specially designed, down to the wide-span benches, the lighting fixtures, and the bronze door handles. Kidder Smith points out that “considerable sensation of space is achieved through the diagonal entrance instead of the more prosaic axial doorway. This feeling is further augmented by the slight change in level of the pews on the north side, the plasticity of the pierced ‘glare’ screen, and the absence of right angles in ceiling and end walls, both of which are slightly canted, in addition to increasing the sensation of space, each of these elements contributes to better acoustics”.⁶ In fact, the church is frequently used for concerts. The informal arrangements of elements was also important for the innovation in protestant church building. The formerly axial placement of font, pulpit, and communion table was replaced by a free organic composition that is underpinned by the placement of the organ on the right hand side and held together by the large horizontal wooden board designed by Swiss typographer Ernst Keller. The huge cross

was also a novelty for protestant churches, but has since become a recurrent element.⁷ All in all, the Altstetten church set a new standard in Swiss church building.

We found the whole inner skin of the church intact but quite soiled. Professional restorers cleaned the wall surfaces in several steps. The original ochre-white plaster had been scratched off according to a pattern of six by six centimeter squares. When cleaned, this relief-like surface was shimmering again like mother-of-pearl. Together with the fresh grey of the concrete surfaces, the naturally treated soft wood, the bronze parts and the clinker floor, it produces a warm, finely fashioned impression. In addition to this sensory effect, the church interior seems more intimate today since some of the benches in front and in back were removed. The now wider entrance area got a better definition by way of a linear multi-functional wooden sideboard. Finally, we carefully reconstructed the lost original wall light fixtures. Only the equally lost “somewhat unsatisfactory gourd-shape” (Kidder Smith) hanging lamps were replaced by long opal-white glass cylinders that convey an elegant yet very discrete touch of contemporary elegance to Moser’s mainly beige and brown *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Figure 1. The old Altstetten church (right) and the new church complex designed by **Werner M. Moser** (left); the parish hall is on the garden floor. Photo by Michael Wolgensinger, gta Archiv, ETH Zürich.





Notes

1. Kidder Smith, George Everard, *Switzerland Builds – Its Native and Modern Architecture*, New York/Stockholm, Albert Bonnier, 1950, 146–149, and frontispiece (color photograph of church interior).
2. Sonja Hildebrand, "Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche Altstetten", Hildebrand, Sonja; Maurer, Bruno; Oechslin, Werner, *Haefeli Moser Steiger. Die Architekten der Schweizer Moderne*, Zurich, gta Verlag, 2007, 296.
3. *Weiterbauen – Diskussionsblatt für die Freunde des Neuen Bauens und verwandter Gebiete*, 6, September 1936, 41–45.
4. Adolf Max Vogt, "Werner Moser's fünf Punkte zum 'Bauen im Kontext'. Am Beispiel der Kirche Zürich-Altstetten", *Archithese* 10, 1980/2, 45–47.
5. Sonja Hildebrand, "Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche Altstetten", op. cit., 299. Hildebrand's article gives a complete yet concise description of the project.
6. Kidder Smith, George Everard, "Switzerland Builds", op. cit., 148.
7. Urs Baur, "Die Reformierte Kirche Altstetten: 'The Finest Modern Church'", Schmed, Silvio; Rüegg, Arthur, *Evangelisch-Reformiertes Kirchenzentrum Altstetten*, op. cit., 28–35.

References

This article is partly based on Arthur Rüegg, Silvio Schmed, "Erneuerung und Erweiterung", Schmed, Silvio; Rüegg, Arthur, *Evangelisch-reformierte Kirchgemeinde Altstetten, Evangelisch-reformiertes Kirchenzentrum Altstetten*, Zurich, gta Verlag, 2012, 36–43.

Arthur Rüegg

Architect ETH SIA BSA, Professor Emeritus ETH Zürich. Born in 1942 in Bülach, Switzerland, he has worked in Zurich, Paris and Boston and has his architectural office in Zurich since 1971 (ARCOOP-Ueli Marbach and Arthur Rüegg from 1971 to 1998). Associate Professor of Architecture and Technology at ETH Zürich from 1991 to 2007 he has been the author of several publications on Swiss architecture and design, especially on Sigfried Giedion and Le Corbusier. He has also been involved in several important exhibitions, such as "Synthèse des Arts" (Karlsruhe 1986), "L'Esprit Nouveau" (Zurich/Strasbourg/Berlin, 1987), "L'aventure Le Corbusier" (Paris 1987), and "Le Corbusier. The Art of Architecture" (Rotterdam, Weil, Lisbon, Liverpool, London, Berlin, 2007–2010).

Silvio Schmed

Architect BSA SWB, Member of the Swiss Association of Architects since 1996, he has been in charge of several restorations such as Villa Schönberg by architect Friedrich Bluntschli (1888), Villa Langmatt by architect Karl Moser (1912) and the Zürich-Altstetten Church by architect Werner Max Moser (1940), together with Arthur Rüegg. He has also been the editor of several publications such as *Villa Moser-Nef. Raumkunst original*, Zurich, Gta Verlag, 2006 and *Villa Schönberg. Entstehung und Erneuerung*, Zurich, Museum Rietberg, 2003.

Figure 2. Moser's church after restoration. The new lighting fixtures designed for the church can be lowered by means of built-in machinery. Photo by Heinrich Helfenstein, Zurich.

Figure 3. The classroom and service wing in its original condition. The caretaker's apartment is on the church yard level. Photo by Michael Wolgensinger, gta Archiv, ETH Zürich.

Figure 4. One of Moser's built-in ceramic fountains. Used in circulation areas. Photo by Michael Wolgensinger, gta Archiv, ETH Zürich.

Figure 5. Historic «Zwingli Room» with its original table and chairs; new double door with original detailing; in the back is the new cafeteria. Photo by Heinrich Helfenstein, Zurich.

Figure 6. The classroom and service wing in its present condition. The caretaker's apartment was transformed into a cafeteria. New windows; new ramp, balcony and terrace. Photo by Arbeitsgemeinschaft Silvio Schmed and Arthur Rüegg, Zurich.



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