

DANIEL NIGGLI AND MATHIAS MÜLLER.  
PHOTO EM2N



# ‘WE’RE CITY FREAKS’

SWISS DUO EM2N CRITICIZES  
COMFORT LEVELS AND CELEBRATES  
THE CITY OF ZÜRICH.

Text **Katharina Marchal**

On first impression, both Daniel Niggli (1970) and Mathias Müller (1966) are stereotypic Swiss architects: correct, reserved and possessed of good economic sense. They founded EM2N in 1997 and now have a staff of 52. They have taken part in over 100 competitions, many of which they have won, allowing them to build their designs. Yet behind this sedate, professional façade is an adventurous team that does not shy away from architectural experimentation, as long as the context permits and the challenges are there.

The firm's *oeuvre* contains a remarkable number of renovations, extensions and conversions. Two renovation projects not far from the office in Zurich are the Hardbrücke railway station and the Letten viaduct. The architects want to stay close to the city and its changing history. Their office is located just around the corner from the central station, near the drug and red-light district, in the trendy 'Kreis 5', a revamped industrial area. In this quarter of the city, with its distinctive turn-of-the-century perimeter blocks, one meets people from a wide variety of social and cultural backgrounds. The heterogeneous nature of the location is a match for EM2N's motto: good architecture doesn't need 'only' but 'also'.

**Both of you studied at ETH Zurich (science and technology university), but you also gained experience abroad. Is Zurich the ideal spot for your office?**

**Mathias Müller:** Zurich has developed in parallel with us, and vice versa. When we founded our office in 1997, new building regulations consistent with those of GATT/WTO came into force, and a lot of official competitions were held. It was an opportune time for young practices like ours to take their first steps. Surveyors' offices, consortiums and privately owned companies have promoted the competition culture in Zurich, and the organization and execution of these competitions are of a high standard. **Daniel Niggli:** This has meant that the young scene in Switzerland has not necessarily been obliged to rely on connections.

**Müller:** We value the concentration of architecture offices in Zurich. Competition is always a good thing. We're livelier when there's a lot going on around us.

**How and why do you seek out a constant exchange with other architects?**

**Müller:** We have an aversion to set lecturing formats, so we started organizing our own lectures early on. As yet, there have been 15. The last guest was Joshua Prince Ramus of REX. Once or twice a year, we push the desks in our office to one side or find another suitable venue, serve up beer and provide architects from all over the world with a platform. Some people think it's cool. After our colleague, Jens Studer, attended a lecture, he invited us to submit a design for the housing

project at Hegianwandweg in Zurich. We won the competition and built the project.

**Niggli:** These lectures are our way of establishing a national and international network. We think it's important to understand what makes other architects tick, what subjects and themes interest them. For competitions, we've often formed a temporary office unit with fellow architects for strategic reasons: when we needed extra people or anticipated having a better chance with a joint presence. The competition for the Rietberg Museum is one example. Purely out of curiosity, we collaborated with Peter Märkli on the competition design of a car park for Zurich's opera house.

**What interests you about this city?**

**Müller:** We're city freaks. We're not interested in the 'mush' in the landscape, the expanding

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— Mathias Müller —

urban sprawl. We're intrigued by the relationships between house and space, between black and white, between filled and empty surfaces. That's what makes the city for us. **Niggli:** In the city, life, programme and traffic converge. We're more interested in the complexity within a crowded space than in the dialogue between house and landscape. Even the holiday home at Flumserberg was conceived programmatically.

**Müller:** For urban space to be activated, it needs public space, the programmatic definition.

**Cost-saving projects aren't an obstacle for you, but rather a source of inspiration. Which projects were the most attractive challenges in that respect?**

**Niggli:** Theatre 11, for instance, a competition that encompassed a whole project. There the principals wanted more than was possible with the fixed cost ceiling. We take such conditions very seriously and work with them, not against them. With the resources available, we couldn't have made a new building without overspending. So we 'cannibalized' Theatre 11. We kept whatever we could use and gutted the rest. We didn't choose that approach for conservation reasons but for cost optimization.

**Müller:** The good thing about 'planning with costs' is the possibility to sharpen a project, to radicalize it, to heighten the focus. When Central Europe – and particularly Switzerland – has a problem, there's that lukewarm 'everything must work perfectly' attitude. Comfort above all else. All the rough edges are smoothed away; nothing's allowed to age. In the end, we're living in technically perfect sterility.

**Niggli:** For the Aussersihl Community Centre project, we persuaded the clients to accept our critical attitude towards comfort levels.

**Müller:** There's a functions room at the top of the building and a restaurant below. We decided to omit impact sound insulation and to create a monolithic structure, contending that a restaurant would have to withstand the cost-saving intervention.

**Niggli:** The viaduct arches are a more extreme example. The walls there are permanently damp.

**Müller:** When rain penetrates the layer of ballast, water runs through the quarry-stone piers, exits the wall from the interior of the structure, and runs off into one of the channels we placed in the ground. Of course, the SIA [Swiss Association of Architects and Engineers] standard does not address the issue of rain inside buildings.

**Niggli:** It's not the SIA standard that's the problem but the users, with their absurdly demanding comfort requirements.

**Müller:** It was more important for us to leave the stone structure of the viaduct exposed than to remove the water from the space. Insulating the viaduct had proved to be prohibitively expensive and difficult to press home to the railway company. The viaduct has listed status, so there were also special conditions.

**Your repertoire contains a vast range of conversions, refurbishments and extensions, as well as temporary structures. Why is that?**

**Niggli:** We value the overlapping of stories, the urban and cultural concentration.

**Müller:** Our works are building assignments that represent only one chapter of a story. We would never maintain that our projects should not be remodelled in ten years' time. That would be the end of architecture.

**Niggli:** To our mind, architecture is an evolutionary discipline. The nice thing about working with existing buildings is that the existing material always offers some resistance, regardless of whether you work with or against it.



**What's your take on the City Garden Hotel, which is to be used 'temporarily' for 12 years and had to meet four-star standards?**

**Müller:** The temporary aspect was hard for us. We didn't want the building to look like an asylum-seekers' centre. In view of its limited useful life, planning and construction could not take too long, so we conceived a timber-frame structure. We were keen to see how we could design something poetic using the modular principle of building in wood and the serial nature of hotel rooms. By turning around the customary arrangement of one room next to another, we produced corridors featuring a special ribbed effect – rather like a crocodile – and a jagged exterior façade.

**Niggli:** The façade echoes the luxury of the building – it gleams like a pimped-out Lamborghini. The sumptuous, sensuous appearance does not give the impression of a provisional structure. You're drawn from the bright surroundings of the park into the dark yet elegant lobby and led into the 'serrated' corridor. The rooms are very bright and airy.

PHOTO EM2N

**Müller:** We consider each job as a whole and, if possible, interpret it comprehensively. What is its significance for the city, for the clients and users? How does it position itself socially? We maintain that architects have something to say to everyone. Since clients often don't know what they want, we explain it for them.

**What projects were positive surprises for sceptical principals?**

**Niggli:** Because the budget for Theatre 11 was tight, the project eventually acquired the character of a factory. Initially the proprietor, Freddy Burger Management, had problems with its industrial character – the bare concrete floor, for instance – assuming that it was not in keeping with public performances. Today they're very pleased with the building and its atmosphere.

**Müller:** For the opening, they put a larger-than-life statue of Freddy Mercury in the foyer. It looked awesome.

**Niggli:** The large numbers of visitors prove that a lot of different people enjoy going to this theatre and appreciate its ambience.

**Müller:** And it's easy enough to decorate the building without completely ruining it.

**You're gradually starting to build outside Switzerland. What has deterred you so far?**

**Müller:** There's no scope as regards remuneration for Swiss architects abroad. They have to pay out more than they earn. Trips abroad are profitable only in the premium segment. Then, too, it's almost impossible to monitor a project – a good example being our project for a school in the new Mongolian city of Ordos in China. It looks as if our project will simply be transposed, without any counter-monitoring.

In addition, we like to experiment with building materials and types of construction. In Switzerland, this isn't a problem, but in Prague, for example, even the use of insulating concrete or the installation of a faceted aluminium façade represents a big challenge. **Niggli:** Our projects abroad are due to our love of adventure. If we had to depend on such projects financially, we'd have been bankrupt long ago. Nevertheless, we would like to discover new places for experimentation.

**What would be your dream project?**

**Niggli:** An appeal to all principals: we're looking for a potential client who would like to have an experimental luxury villa built.

**Müller:** How about an unusual museum . . .

**Niggli:** . . . or an intelligent, CO<sub>2</sub>-free building that would allow us to scrutinize all that 'eco madness' from an architectural perspective?

[www.em2n.ch](http://www.em2n.ch)



HAVING STRIPPED AWAY ALL UNNECESSARY FEATURES, THE ARCHITECTS WERE LEFT WITH ONLY COLOUR AND FORM.

ALL OF THE PARK'S EXISTING TREES WERE PRESERVED.

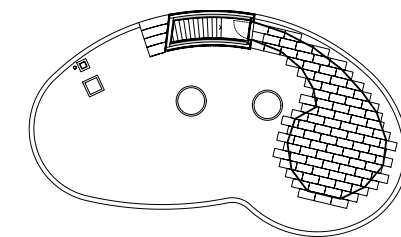
## Aussersihl Community Centre

Zurich / Switzerland  
2004  
Photos Hannes Henz

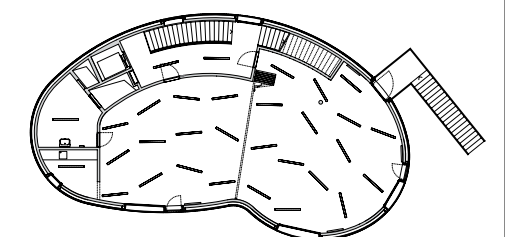
Located in Zurich's notorious Aussersihl district, an area known for drugs and crime, this community centre was realized despite strong political polarization concerning sociocultural infrastructures. In parliament, the project became a battlefield. Finally, in a typically Swiss compromise, the budget was practically halved from 5.4 to 3.0 million Swiss francs. At that point, the architects had to discover what and how much could be built with the new budget. To retain as much floor space as possible, they employed 'strategic minimalism', which enabled a radical reduction in building costs.



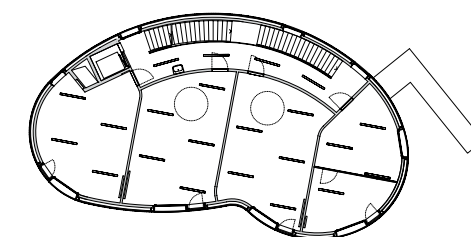
A WALL-LESS RESTAURANT ECHOES EM2N'S PROPOSITION THAT THE ENTIRE PARK - AND NOT JUST THE BUILDING - FORMS THE COMMUNITY CENTRE.



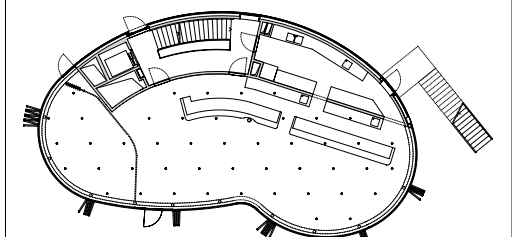
ROOF TERRACE.



FIRST FLOOR: ACTIVITY ROOM.



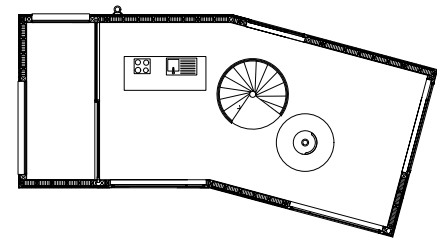
SECOND FLOOR: MEETING ROOMS.



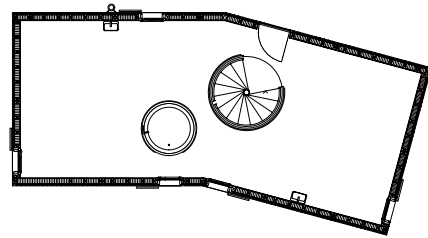
GROUND FLOOR: RESTAURANT.



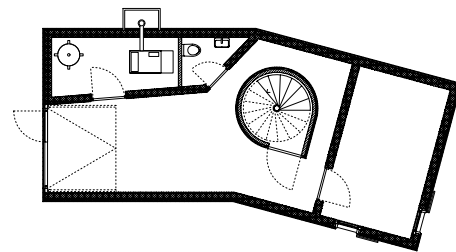
THE OPEN PLAN PROVIDES OCCUPANTS WITH PANORAMIC VIEWS.



LIVING FLOOR.



SLEEPING FLOOR.



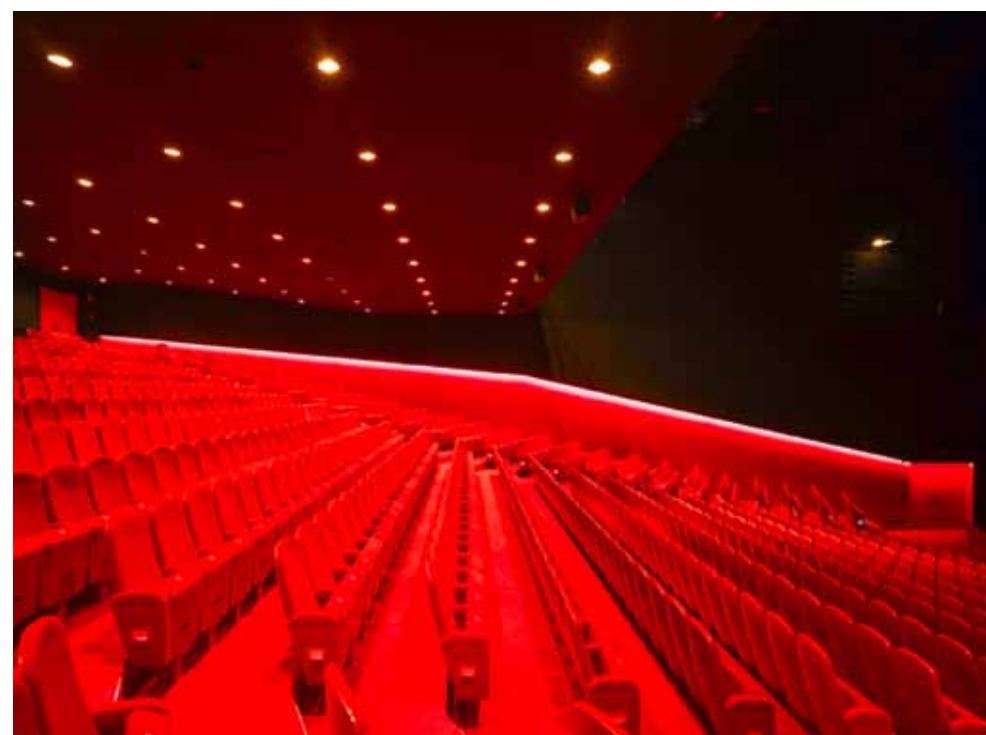
BASEMENT.



### Holiday Home

Flumserberg / Switzerland  
2003  
Photos Hannes Henz

Instead of colonizing the site, EM2N created a vertical structure with a minimal footprint: a holiday home that rises to take advantage of the spectacular views. No fence or garden alters the surrounding alpine summer meadow and winter ski run. Living spaces are also atypical, owing to the absence of separate rooms. Each level fulfils several functions. Only the exterior, with its dark wood cladding, pays tribute to the conventional Swiss chalet.



**DURING THE DAY, THE FAÇADE OF PERFORATED STANDING-SEAM METAL HAS AN INDUSTRIAL LOOK. AFTER DARK, AS THE WINDOWS BEHIND THE TRANSLUCENT MEMBRANE BEGIN TO GLOW, THE BUILDING TURNS INTO A LANTERN.**  
 PHOTO ROGER FREI

**THE RENOVATION OF THEATRE 11 REQUIRED AN ADDITIONAL 700 SEATS AND A LARGER FOYER.**  
 PHOTOS HANNES HENZ



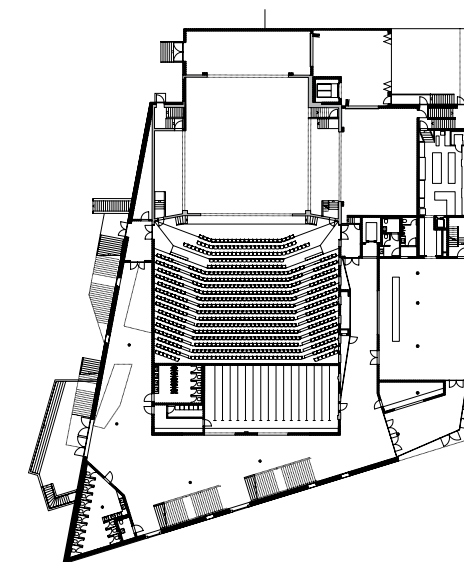
### Theatre 11

Zurich / Switzerland  
 2006

For the renovation of Theatre 11, EM2N 'cannibalized' existing building elements to save on building costs – thus remaining within the specified budget – and to expand the programme of the building.

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– Daniel Niggli –



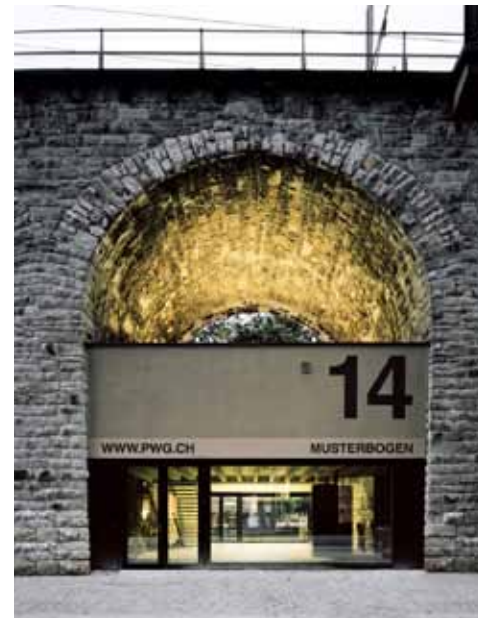
GROUND FLOOR.



**Letten Viaduct Arches**

Zurich / Switzerland  
2010  
Photos Roger Frei

Now a protected monument, the Letten viaduct began as part of a railway line. EM2N converted the viaduct into a linear shopping park. The new structures are restrained and emphasize the existing arches.



ENTRANCE TO ONE OF THE SHOPS.

‘TRIPS ABROAD ARE PROFITABLE ONLY IN THE PREMIUM SEGMENT’

– Mathias Müller –



THE ATMOSPHERE IS GENERATED LARGELY BY THE CHARACTERISTIC CYCLOPEAN MASONRY.



THE LOBBY FEATURES PIMPED-OUT MIRRORING COLUMNS.



FIRST FLOOR.



GROUND FLOOR.



DYNAMIC 'CROCODILE' CORRIDOR.

**City Garden Hotel**  
 Zug / Switzerland  
 2009  
 Photos Roger Frei

City Garden is a temporary hotel on a public site that will accommodate services – in 12 to 15 years' time – for a road-building project. Despite its limited life span, the hotel was designed to meet the requirements of a four-star facility. A time-saving construction system features a timber frame braced by a concrete core.

THE IDYLIC LOCATION – AMONG THE TREES AT THE EDGE OF A WOODED AREA – LED TO THE CREATION OF A REFLECTIVE FAÇADE OF POLISHED CHROME STEEL. THE FACETED BUILDING MIRRORS ITS NATURAL SURROUNDINGS AND TRANSFORMS THE PLACE INTO A KALEIDOSCOPE OF BUILDING AND NATURE.



JUDICIOUS USE OF COLOUR BRIGHTENS THE SIMPLE, AIRY ROOMS.