

The architecture of discretion

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The old town of Basel, on the hill of the Minster and along the streets that descend to the Rhine and the market square, is a landscape shaped by the *Daig*. Its houses, many of them built or rebuilt in the eighteenth century, present to the street façades of restrained elegance: plain plaster, regular windows, a modest portal. Behind these façades lie courtyards, gardens, staircases, panelled rooms, painted ceilings, libraries and collections that the passer-by cannot see. The architecture of the Basel patriciate expresses in stone the culture of discretion that this chapter describes.¹

The houses bore names, which were painted or carved on their façades and which served as addresses before the introduction of street numbers: *zum Kirschgarten*, *zum Delphin*, *zum Raben*, *zur Mücke*, *zum Hohen Dolder* and countless others. The names survive. Even today, the old families of Basel often refer to their houses by these names, which connect them with centuries of history. A family that has lived in the same house for generations, in a city that has not been destroyed by war since the earthquake of 1356, has a sense of continuity that shapes its attitude to time, wealth and responsibility.

The continuity of the built environment of Basel is itself a form of capital. The city was spared the destruction of the world wars, which is why its old town has preserved its medieval street plan and a large part of its historic buildings. The protection of this heritage by cantonal law, which regulates the alteration and demolition of historic buildings, preserves the value of the properties and the character of the city. For the families who own these properties, they are both a heritage and an obligation, since their maintenance requires resources that only substantial wealth can provide.

The private banks of Basel occupy houses in the old town. Their offices, with their discreet brass plates, their panelled meeting rooms and their collections of old paintings, continue the architecture of discretion. A client

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who visits a Basel private bank enters a world that presents to the street a modest face and reserves its richness for those who are received inside.

1 Notes

1. On the architecture of the Basel patrician houses of the eighteenth century (restrained façades, rich interiors, courtyards and gardens), see the publications of the Denkmalpflege Basel-Stadt and the Kunstdenkmäler der Schweiz, volumes on Basel-Stadt. To be verified.



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