

The fairground on the Kleinbasel side

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The fairground on the Messeplatz is today one of the most visible pieces of architecture in Kleinbasel. Its development over a century mirrors the ambitions and the financial constraints of the fair business. The first halls of the 1920s were functional buildings. In the 1950s, the cooperative commissioned the architect Hans Hofmann to build a new main hall around a circular courtyard. Completed in 1954, the *Rundhofhalle* became the emblem of the post-war fair and is today recognised as an important work of Swiss modernism. The open courtyard in the centre, around which the exhibition floors are arranged, has served for decades as the meeting point of visitors and as a venue for receptions.¹

In 2003, the Messturm was completed at the edge of the Messeplatz. Designed by the architects Morger & Degelo together with Daniele Marques, it rises to about 105 metres and was for several years the tallest building in Switzerland, until the Prime Tower in Zurich surpassed it in 2011, before the towers built by Roche in Basel rose higher still. The tower contains offices, a hotel and a bar on its upper floors, which offer a view across the three countries of the Dreiland. Its construction marked a shift in the economics of the fairground. Instead of a site used only for a few weeks each year, the Messeplatz was to become an urban centre with permanent uses, so that the land would generate income throughout the year.²

The most ambitious project followed ten years later. In 2013, the new Hall 1, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, was opened in time for that year's Baselworld and Art Basel. The architects placed a two-storey structure over the Messeplatz, with a large circular opening, the so-called City Lounge, through which daylight falls onto the square and which is meant to function as a public space outside the fair dates. The building's façade of twisted aluminium bands gives it a light, almost textile appearance. The project cost several hundred million francs and was financed through a

combination of the company's own funds, borrowing and support from the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft. The voters of Basel-Stadt approved the canton's contribution in a referendum.³

Hall 1 became a monument to a moment of confidence that did not last. When it opened, Baselworld still attracted more than a thousand exhibitors and the large watch brands built multi-storey stands inside the halls. Within six years, the most important of those brands had left. The hall that had been designed for them had to be filled with other events. The investment did not cause the crisis of the watch fair, which had its roots in changes in the watch industry and in the cost of participation. It did, however, add a heavy burden of depreciation and debt to the balance sheet of the fair company precisely when its revenues fell. The architecture of the fairground thus tells the economic story of the fairs in concrete and aluminium.⁴

1 Notes

1. On the Rundhofhalle of the Messe Basel by Hans Hofmann (completed in 1954) and its status as a listed monument, see the inventory of the cantonal monument preservation office (Kantonale Denkmalpflege Basel-Stadt) and the architectural guides to Basel. Date and listing status to be verified. ↩
2. On the Messeturm Basel (completed 2003, architects Morger & Degelo with Daniele Marques, height about 105 metres) and its status as the tallest building in Switzerland until it was overtaken by the Prime Tower in Zurich (2011) and later by the Roche towers in Basel, see architectural guides and press reports. Height and dates to be verified. ↩
3. On the new Hall 1 of the Messe Basel by Herzog & de Meuron (opened in 2013), the City Lounge, the construction costs of several hundred million francs and the financing through MCH, loans and contributions from the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft, including the cantonal referendum, see the annual reports of MCH Group (2012–2013) and the publications of the canton of Basel-Stadt. Figures and details to be verified. ↩

4. On the relationship between the investment in Hall 1, the depreciation and debt burden of MCH Group and the decline in revenues from Baselworld after 2017, see the annual reports of MCH Group (2017–2020) and the analysis in the financial press. To be verified. ↩

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