

'IT'S JUST

ME

AND MY

WORLD

**ARCHITECT AND VISUALIZER
PHILIPP SCHAERER TALKS ABOUT
PHOTOGRAPHS, PHOTOREALISM
AND THE NEW 'REAL'.**

TEXT TERRI PETERS
PHOTO GERRY NITSCH
IMAGES PHILIPP SCHAERER



IT'S NEARLY 10AM ON A SUNNY April morning at Zurich airport and as I turn the corner past security, I spy Philip Schaerer waving from the arrivals area. He bounds over grinning and kisses me three times on the cheeks. We decide to head to the airport café before catching the train to his studio.

Dressed in layers of matte black, he looks every inch an architect, from the beard to dishevelled black hair to the designer trainers. He confesses he set three alarms to be able to come and get me from the airport at such an early hour, (you only have to meet him for a second to see he's a night owl) but, he stresses, it was his pleasure to greet me in person, to welcome me, since I had come all this way.

We feel like we know each other now from emailing for a few weeks about his upcoming exhibitions (I wanted to see the one at Art Basel, but the timing was not to be) and about how to fit this morning into his hectic schedule.

The last and only other time I actually met Philipp was at the end of a long night of hopping between various German beer halls after the Smart Geometry conference in Munich in March, where he showed his dramatic and surreal visualizations for Herzog & de Meuron. After the conference I remember we ended up seated next to one another at a long wooden table after closing time, having to shout and gesture to be heard.

Now, as we perch with espressos at this tall table in the spotless Swiss airport, I am impressed by his infectious, almost childlike, sincere enthusiasm for everything as he quizzes me about where I grew up, where I am from, how I like London, where I have been in Switzerland. As we chat, I manage to extract some information from Schaerer, about his college days in picturesque Lausanne where he studied at the EPFL, about his long relationship with Herzog & de Meuron – off and on for the last eight years (first as an architect, now as a freelance visual-

izer). This has been his main job since leaving school. He tells me about how busy he is, preparing for exhibitions, but also recently on holiday. On the train, we are never at a loss for words, topics range from



PHILIPP SCHAEERER'S VISUALIZATION OF HERZOG & DE MEURON'S COMPETITION PROJECT ARTEM, ÉCOLE DES MINES ET INSTITUT JEAN LAMOUR, IN NANCY, FRANCE, 2006.

his love of graffiti, (especially the artist Lady Pink) to Barcelona's Sonar music festival (he spent time there working on a project for Herzog & de Meuron).

Entering his massive shared studio space in a warehouse in trendy Zurich West, I notice the expansive, uncluttered space has huge windows and a big glazed wall onto a balcony. It's turning into a sunny day today, and the space is full of natural light. In this shared office space a handful of his friends and occasional collaborators work quietly in pairs around the space. While Schaerer goes to make espressos in the kitchen I meet everyone, and despite the friendly surroundings, I find myself almost whisper-

ing, tiptoeing around the minimal gallery-like space, reading the spines of the (mainly German language) books in enormous half empty bookshelves that divide the grand space in two lengthwise. (He loves

space? This level of organization in an architect is unheard of. Most architects couldn't clean up this well no matter who was coming to visit. Somehow this is not what I was expecting. Where is all the paperwork? The stuff?

Your studio is so tidy. I spy a couple of physical models and some books . . . So, where is all your equipment, where do you work?

Philipp Schaerer: Normally I just work on my laptop. People think I am highly equipped with graphic tablets and multiscreens, but it's just me and my Mac. It's a wonderful thing. People assume that I have a laboratory of computers. I mean, I do have a network of freelancers, for my work, and people come and go. But as you can see, I am very low-based, low-equipped. I hope this doesn't depress you . . .

No not at all. I guess I didn't imagine you were doing so much of your work on a laptop. So tell me about these photographs here along the wall. This is the 'Bildbauten' series?

Yes, that name is a made-up word: 'bild' means image and 'bauten' means buildings – so these are buildings that exist only in images. And in January I contributed to a photography competition, the EWZ Swiss Photography Award. They have a category called 'free'. I entered eight of the Bildbauten images in this category and now they are going to be exhibited in the selection 'best photography of 2007' here in Zurich.

But this series, it it's not really 'photography'. Is it architecture?

No, no, no, these are not architecture. Not at all. But they make you feel like you are looking at real buildings. It is interesting that we can now contrive images that are – more or less – photorealistic. We have arrived at the point that images can create the illusion that this [points at one of the framed images] could be a photograph of architec-

ture. I mean, going through magazines, you sometimes hear – and you didn't hear this ten years ago – the question 'Is this real? Does it really exist?' I think this is something that has quite an impact on the practise of architecture.

At the conference in Munich you said you were not interested in being photorealistic, but looking at some of these images, I think maybe these could be real – this black diamond building, with the windows, I wonder how could this be built? What would the floor plans be like?

I showed a lot of people these images and especially architects like them very much. Other people also like them because they are simple images: a floor, a body and the sky. Graphically and proportionally they like this. And architects see in images the potential to find reality. I think that for an architect, an image always has the potential of being real.

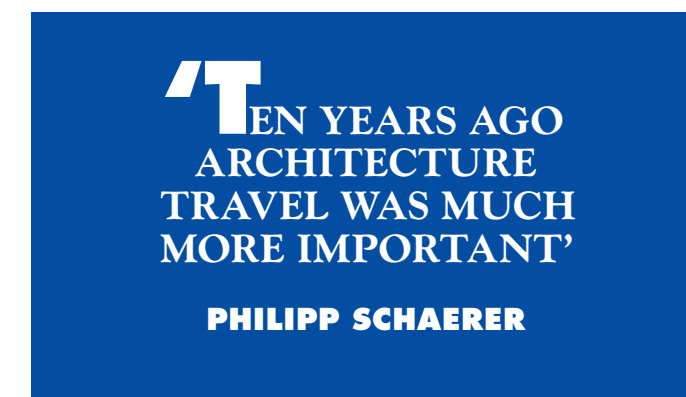
At the same time, parts of this one look so obviously collaged – the windows are obviously copied and pasted, maybe they are train windows? And the floor levels look impossible. It's subversive, and humorous. Did you want people to think they are looking at something real?

The aim wasn't to use photography to deceive people. Each of the images in this series contains a bit of humour, something that doesn't pretend to be architecture. As a building, each is impossible, because of stability, physics, the climate of the place, and so forth. This one you like, for instance, is an ironic cube, floating on the water, which has such an irregular form . . . it's nonsense . . . and to make such strong angles to the wall, with no junctions or metal struts . . . of course it doesn't work.

As a visualizer, you normally make images for people who have a certain design. And normally these kinds of images show a mass of people, lights, towers, and so on.

They are not calm images, they are real life. So maybe this is a reaction against those filled up images, with all their components.

Here I can make calm frontal views, and they are more honest, maybe, they are reduced and don't



pretend to be 3D. Only the floor, perhaps, gives the notion of a depth. It's more like architectural wallpaper.

Your visualization work is about composing different components of buildings, bits that are collaged here and there. And in your emails you talk about how architects are becoming more like stylists of buildings. Why do you think this is? Well, what is architecture about? What makes us sometimes say 'yes I like it, this is nice, it could be a nice building'? These aesthetic judgements of buildings and architecture are more and more divorced from the background, the programme, the site, circulation, the client. It's really kind of backwards to how you make architecture.

I'm not that old but I remember that ten years ago it was much more important to travel around and see architecture. You went with your friends to visit Ronchamp or the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, or La Tourette, or wherever. Today you go quickly to 'what does it look like?' It's an image. Or you simply visit something on the web. My work is about dealing with an image language that is based on photogra-

phy, that deals with this new 'real'.

This image language, how does it relate to the 'knowledge management' system you developed at Herzog & de Meuron?

It's a bit like that. Let me open it up

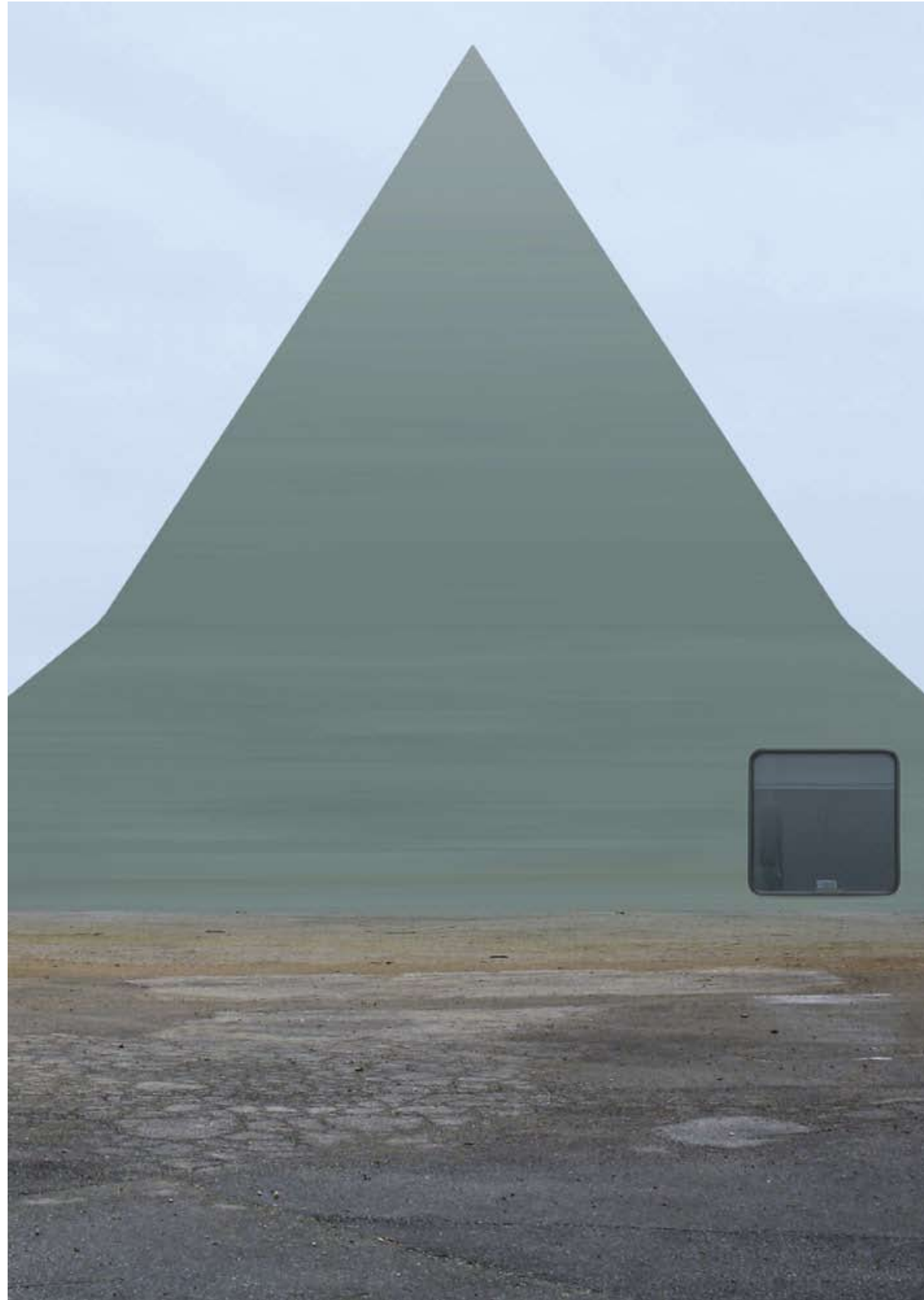
Police Station Compound image or maybe it is a roughly calculated CAD rendering or the sketch and then I source image components in my library – the layers come from bits of the 32,000 images. It is important to always ask yourself what the main idea you are trying to bring to the image is. The layering and mapping and putting the people inside – I think it is a very hand-crafted work.

With normal architectural rendering, there is usually the simplification of elements, to keep the time down. This can lead to things being treated equally – there is no focus perhaps on the part that is important to us as architects. I call what I do an image-processing technique. You need to express what you are thinking about in the best way. It is not out-of-the-box rendering, it is about creating a visual language.

This image is the Artem school in Nancy, France. It was for a competition, also for Herzog and de Meuron. This plaza view shows that it's a very expressive building and we wanted to communicate the idea of more or less intimate spaces and views. You can see these cantilevered offices spaces and circulation corridors. I took the image and added skies, perspective lines, and so on. The geometry is fixed because the original is rendered. This adding, mapping textures that I do from my image database, lends a sense of richness to the image.

This enormous image database, is this your kind of bookshelf?

Hmmm . . . The difference is that you can place a book only in one place on your bookshelf, but in this media database you can tag the content to different criteria. A book about stairs is put in a section about stairs. But this image [taps his touchpad twice] of Lincoln Centre stairs can be put in many different places, by tagging place, location, topic, adding all sorts of keywords. Maybe you could say my work is a bit like what a librarian does.



IMAGES FROM THE BILDBAUTEN SERIES.
PHILIPP SCHAERER: 'THIS TYPE OF IMAGE
LEADS TO CONFUSION AND QUESTIONS
THE MEDIUM "PHOTOGRAPH" AS A
DOCUMENTARY PIECE OF EVIDENCE
DEPICTING REALITY'.



