

# KUNSTHAUS BASELLAND

## On the chance to work with an existing structure and help shape a place

Andreas Bründler of Buchner Bründler Architekten in conversation with Ines Goldbach, director of Kunsthaus Baselland

**Ines Goldbach:** I'd like to start with a brief look back at the time when you first began to think about and develop architectural ideas for the new Kunsthaus. On the one hand, the chosen project had to respond to the existing building, i.e. the old warehouse with its distinctive characteristics, but there were also a number of requests from our side for Kunsthaus that could be a good place for contemporary, living artists, that would be open to future ideas, and that would also help to facilitate and support a range of new on-site productions. I seem to remember that your competition design also referenced one or two recent art projects at the Kunsthaus, including one by Sarah Oppenheimer, who always works closely with the given architecture. Could you tell us about your brainstorming process?

**Andreas Bründler:** The decision to work with the existing structure came only after discussions with all of you on the selection committee at the interim meeting. The option of a new building was actually on the table at the beginning. An analysis of the condition of the existing hall revealed significant structural concerns that made replacement a very plausible solution. But in discussing how a new generation of artists would interact with an exhibition space, the idea of transforming the old warehouse suddenly became compelling; not only would it retain a connection to the history of the site, but it would also provide continuity in a more general sense. The vulnerability of the existing building offered unique potential in this regard, leading to the concept of introducing a second structure that could provide both additional space and structural support. We saw great potential in the dialogue between a new spatial structure and the existing one. Naturally, we were also inspired by the performative power of Gordon Matta-Clarke's work, particularly the power of cutting open the building envelope to flood a dark space with light and symbolically transform it. We were also struck by Sarah Oppenheimer's prismatic, space-filling sculptures, as precise interventions that engage intimately with the architecture and create a fascinating dialogue with the existing space.

**IG:** The towers were a key aspect of the spatial and architectural development for you from the start, both as structural elements and light-bringers, but

also as a visible sign of transformation. I've noticed that the artists invited for this first exhibition have really responded to the different lighting scenarios throughout the building—whether it's the shifting light through the towers and large side windows, or the artificial light strips at different heights. How did you approach the lighting design?

**AB:** You just said it: The space is lit by three light sources of different qualities. We realized that the primary lighting would come from a continuous system of strip lighting. Implementing natural lighting would have required significant changes to the existing roof, so instead we installed large glass panels in the former door openings. These openings face each other—a throwback to the building's original use as a warehouse, where goods were delivered by rail, temporarily stored in the hall and then transported on by road.

Ultimately, it's the third dimension that transforms the warehouse into a space for art. The quality of the zenithal light and its direct visual reference to the sky are what really make the new exhibition space unique. In terms of directing the natural light, we intentionally positioned connecting walls to allow light to penetrate deep into the space through the strip lighting.

**IG:** I'd like to come back briefly to your handling of the historical building substance in this project and the new spatial atmosphere you've been able to create as a result of the conversion. Integrating history into the present—especially when a building structure allows it—is not only appealing, it also means being able to start a little further in the process than you would if were starting from scratch. That's something I always really appreciated about Kunsthaus Baselland's previous location in Muttenz: the way it dealt with the potential of its site, redefining it by transforming it into an art space. I've also seen the potential and power of this in other places I've worked: Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin or Hallen für Neue Kunst in Schaffhausen, for example. But what was the most challenging aspect of this project in terms of dealing with the existing structure? You spoke earlier about the vulnerability of the existing building as having a unique potential.

**AB:** One of the biggest challenges was how to deal with elements that had changed over the decades and were no longer in their original condition, or that couldn't be preserved for structural or technical reasons. We often had to carefully consider whether to preserve, remodel, modify, or replace existing components so that they could eventually be integrated with the newly constructed components to form a cohesive whole.

The asphalt floor, for example, was left largely in its original state, while roof beams had to be replaced with new elements that replicated the original construction for structural reasons. The result is a multi-layered composition with subtle nuances; transitions are fluid, which creates a compelling unity.

**IG:** Dreispitz, the area around Freilager-Platz and Helsinki-Strasse, is already home to a wide variety of buildings, including those by Herzog & de Meuron, Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), Morger Partner Architekten, your firm, and soon Grafton Architects as well. Would you say that a building site like Dreispitz offers more architectural freedom than the dense urban context of a city center?

**AB:** The architectural diversity you mention is without a doubt due to historical factors. Initially, the buildings were similar in terms of typology, being mainly warehouses for the storage of goods. But with the gradual evolution of the area into a center of services and production, the range of structural typologies found there has widened, resulting in a lively morphology. Recent projects based on this heritage show the possibilities and potential inherent in this heterogeneous structure. It could be considered the DNA of the site, providing inspiration and a model for free thinking and unconstrained building.

**IG:** Kunsthau Baselland is your firm's first design for a museum or exhibition building for contemporary art. Could you elaborate on the most daunting challenges you faced, perhaps in comparison to your previous projects? What lessons, if any, can you draw from it for future architectural projects?

**AB:** What was wonderful about this project was its emphasis on fundamental architectural principles like the correlation of light and space. Space can only truly be experienced through light; light has the power to transform an ordinary space and bring it to life. Doing this in a skillful and effective way is at the heart of architecture and was one of the key objectives in this transformation process. In this sense, the building has also become a light machine, capable of making the nuances of different times of day and seasons tangible and experiential. I am definitely very interested in the influence of light on space over time and intend to apply insights gained from this project to future projects.

**IG:** Architecture is inherently a reflection of its time, with years often passing between design conception and realization, perhaps also allowing for evolving visions and desires for change. While your competition design was developed in 2015 and the project completed in 2024, I really saw the positive side of being able to make changes and adjustments at various points along the way, whether

energy-related or on a more substantive level with the addition of the foyer.

**AB:** Exactly. And even though the concept is a decade old, it still feels very contemporary. Not only were we able to preserve the existing structure for the future, but we've also demonstrated how malleable or changeable buildings really are. My hope is that we've also shown how it's only through this transformation that they gain timeless value.

**IG:** Looking to the future, is there a particular aspiration or hope that you associate with the building and its architecture?

**AB:** One hope, of course, is that this building will provide the right kind of space to accommodate the art of today and tomorrow, and that it will inspire artists to develop their ideas. There is also a related desire to provide all visitors with an inspiring space that is a symbiosis of art and architecture. And now I'd like to ask you a few questions, since you obviously played a big part in the building process and now it's you who will be engaging with the building along with the artists:

It's been more than a decade since the initiative to move the Kunsthau Baselland to the Dreispitz was launched. To what extent has the institution changed or developed in that time? Have the basic curatorial principles remained the same, or can we also expect a kind of reorientation in terms of content?

**IG:** That's true. The persistent, if often rebuffed, desire to move the Kunsthau to the Dreispitz was already there when I took on the role of director and curator at Kunsthau Baselland a decade ago. In recent years, I've made it a priority to show and support artists from the trinational region, especially from the Basel area, alongside international perspectives rather than in isolation. I'd like to continue to refine this curatorial agenda at our new location, as it's very much in line with our mission to contribute to, be active in, support, and integrate with the community in which we operate.

It's also important to me that the new location allows for more and new on-site productions. After all, an exhibition space should do more than just display art; ideally, it should also serve as a source of inspiration, a catalyst for creating something new—not only the architecture itself, but also the setting, the times and their questions, and the people in that environment. What will be new, and what is already palpable, is the opportunity to transition the Kunsthau into a new context and to be allowed to play an active role in shaping that context. I envision the Kunsthau as a good and inspiring neighbor that would like to contribute to the success of the Dreispitz as a place. It's in this environment of institutions, universities, artists' studios, residents, etc. that I want to develop

new things; it's also very important to me to make connections with other stakeholders in the immediate physical vicinity. For me, an art institution is more than just a place to see and experience art; it's also a place to meet and exchange ideas. A contemporary art venue gives individuals—artists—a chance to bring incredible energy and creativity to the area. I see all of this as an incredibly exciting opportunity for the future.

**AB:** The long planning process gave us the opportunity to refine the concept, although the basic spatial concept was largely unchanged. There is a certain repetition of spatial situations in the new structure compared to the spatial diversity of the previous building. How do you see this: as an opportunity or a risk in terms of curatorial work?

**IG:** It's always been very important to me to work with the rooms that are there, in the sense that when you invite artists, you don't just look at the space as it is, but you also imagine its potential together with the artists. You allow yourself to be inspired by the space, to interact with it, to intervene in it, and ultimately to transform it through projects. What I've always appreciated about the previous location, and what you've now integrated into the new spatial program, is the range of different ceiling heights, light conditions, transitions, and so on. At the same time, it's possible to work with the architecture.

This will be evident in the inaugural exhibition, to which I've invited over 30 artists, some of whom will create works, wall pieces, or installations specifically for the new spaces. Some of them exhibited at our previous location and will now enter into a new dialogue with a different architectural structure. After that, we'll be hosting the final exhibition of the bachelor's and master's students from the nearby Institute Art Gender Nature—so a very young generation of artists will also be exploring the new structure and probably asking very different questions about its purposes, its surroundings, and our role within that context. I see all this as a great opportunity and, above all, as an important dynamic process.

**AB:** You mentioned the added value of the long-term development phase of the project and also touched on the Foyer. The latter is not only a spatial extension, but also an opportunity to further anchor the institution's presence on the Dreispitz. I'm drawing parallels here with the various activities and uses of Theater Basel's Foyer Public. Have you already thought about programming or other ways of transforming this part of the building into a meeting place?

**IG:** This sequence of rooms that we were able to incorporate into the project at a later stage has immense potential in my eyes. It's a space that opens out to both sides—to Helsinki-Strasse and Freilager-Platz—provides low-threshold access to the building, encourages movement through it, but also already serves as an exhibition space. It's essentially a place to show artwork and invite people to stay and spend time. That's a crucial aspect that reminds me of amazing places like the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern: it's not just an entrance hall; you're already immersed in the experience. At the same time, there's no expectation of the visitor. You don't have to buy a ticket; you can take a book from the free library and read it, stop in for a coffee—but you don't have to. Free spaces like this are rare, especially on this kind of scale.

At the same time, it will serve as a venue for concerts, conferences, performances, readings, and occasional KunsthausKino screenings. Other ideas include children's reading nights, family days, and other events. The possibilities are endless, not least because this series of rooms can be activated both as part of the Kunsthaus program and independently.

**AB:** Until now, Kunsthaus Baselland has been deeply rooted in the local art scene, not least because of its somewhat improvised spatial arrangement. With the new building, you now have an independent museum typology. Given the dense museum landscape in Basel, how do you envision the museum's position, both nationally and internationally?

**IG:** The identity and perception of a building is shaped by its content and its role as a "placemaker" within its surroundings. So my hope is that this anchoring will not only be about the physical spaces, but above all about the artists—nearly 2,000 of whom have contributed and worked with us over the past 25 years.

What's crucial in terms of the museum typology you mentioned is that Kunsthaus Baselland has embodied the transformation of an industrial space into an art space, both in the past and today, albeit in different ways. I still see this as a great opportunity, because buildings of this kind can serve as tools to both inspire and give freedom to artists. While aspects of the building may change over time, I hope it will continue to be a vital space for artists locally, nationally, and internationally—a place where new things can be made and experienced. That's basically my wish for any museum or art institution: that the artistic content it presents will enable it to have a wider social impact.