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Natural Collaboration: Fox Wälle Architects

Jul 16, 2013 **Eco architecture, Homes & Tech**

Embracing a sexy collaboration of form, function and environment, green architecture is the building design of the future. In many ways, that future is already here, as architects incorporate solar, wind, even algae power into new projects, always seeking new, sustainable energy sources.

But at its most elemental and effective, green architecture creates structures that work with the environment—both built and natural—rather than against it. This simple yet powerful philosophy provides the inspiration for Fox Wälle Architekten SIA, fronted by husband and wife team Philippe and Cordelia Fox Wälle.

Based in Switzerland, the firm is dedicated to sustainability through renewable energy sources, locally sourced materials, greened roofs and building envelopes, holding its work up to Minergie standards.

A trademark of sustainability and energy efficiency for new and refurbished buildings, Minergie standards lay down recommendations for insulation, air circulation, and energy efficiency. Minergie is registered in Switzerland and recognised worldwide.

In this exclusive interview, we learned more about gardening trends, toilet heat, the architectural process, and how it relates to peak oil...and fashion.



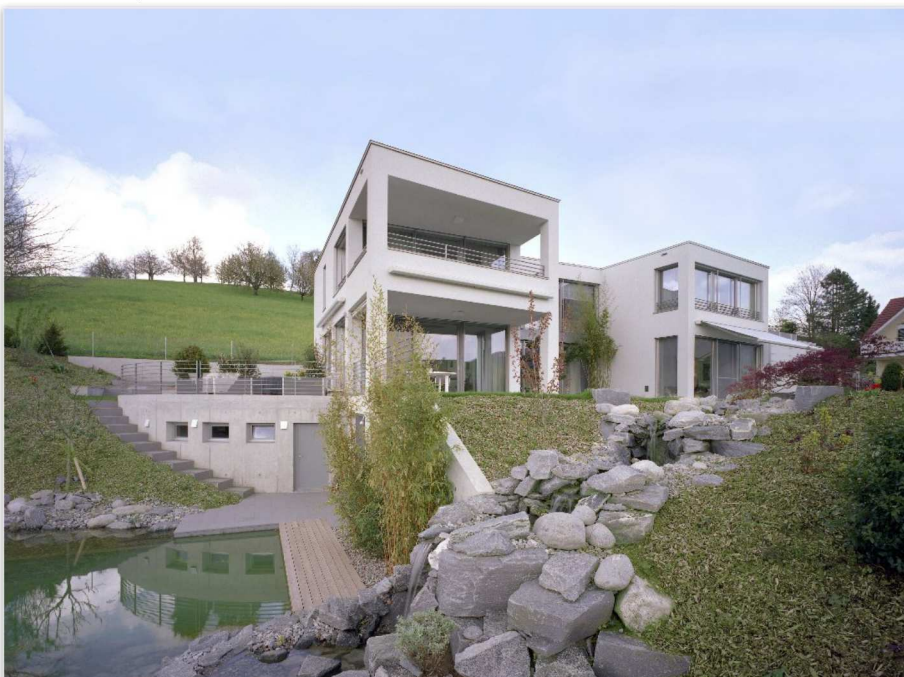
The combined CVs of you and your partner, Philippe Wälle, offer quite a well-rounded picture of completed projects: residential, commercial, and civic structures. Do you have a specialty?

Philippe and I started our partnership last year and have pooled together our combined portfolios from the last 15 years. We don't have a specialty; however, our projects have very quiet detailing so that the urban forms are expressed.

What are the primary decisions your firm makes toward practicing eco-sustainable architecture?

As an architectural design firm, our purpose is to create inspiring buildings in which our clients desire to live and work. This requires an understanding of both the built and natural context—similar to designing a dress, for which it is important to understand where the dress will be worn and by whom. We strive to create beauty in the built environment. Our projects go beyond the walls, and are composed with consideration of the context. Being ecofriendly is fashionable, and is easy to make attractive. It provides us with a palette of exciting components. The 'Minergie' label defines the maximum energy use of a building.

When we learned about 'peak oil' and the problems of relying on fossil fuels or nuclear power, we realized we had to be part of a 'rethink' in energy use. Eco-friendly is very low energy use, combined with the use of local and sustainable products.



You designed many buildings, including an apartment in New York for Jerry Seinfeld. What's your personal favorite?

My favorite project is the Dornach/Arlesheim Bus Terminal.



Can you briefly explain Minergie standards and how they relate to your firm's commitment to eco-friendliness?

The Minergie Standards are in various levels. Essentially the focus is on eliminating heat loss in the winter months so that very little energy is used to heat the building. In the summer months, the building is shielded from the sun to keep it cool without airconditioning. The standards also define electrical and water usage. 'Minergie' buildings have approximately 26cm of rigid insulation, and they perform like an 'ice box.' Fresh air circulation is provided in an exchange system. Fresh, cold air is brought in from the outside and warmed up by the warm exhaust air before it exits the house. Low energy appliances are used. Encouraged is the use of solar collectors to create warm water in the summer months, and solar panels to generate electricity. In addition, greened roofs have many qualities such as giving a place for local flora, and cooling summer air. The rainwater is retained in the substrate of the green roof, and slowly goes into the sewer system or even better is used in the garden.

For one of our projects with 90 apartments, the warm sewage water provides the energy to heat all the apartments. The sewage water is 14 degrees and in a heat-exchange machine this heat is compressed up to 40 degrees and the heat is transferred to the water in the heating pipes. This technique is new. I laughed because all energy sources seem to be 'dirty' but this sewage energy is our dirt, and we will always have enough of it! Local, sustainable, renewable—it seems to hit all the right buttons.

Other green energy sources are woodchip-burning furnaces, where the wood comes from local forests, and heat pumps, which rely solely on the temperature differentials between the inside and outside air.



You like to incorporate gardens and greenery in your designs. Which trends do you see in landscaping?

When composing the landscaping, natural flora for which rainwater is sufficient nourishment is considered. As an experience, the garden should be inviting to view, walk on, and even pick. Instead of green lawns we like to include babbling brooks and swimming ponds. I have observed landscape architects who allow dead trees to remain as a feature in which birds are happy to make their homes. Also a trend is to use fruit and vegetable plants instead of decorative flowers and bushes.

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