



the hills are alive

For those seeking more than five-star panoramas, Switzerland's renovated Hotel Castell has made architecture by UN Studio and site-specific contemporary art the hub of a burgeoning cultural community in the Alps.

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The train from Zürich winds through emerald valleys, past torrents so blue they look like rivers of wax, and climbs into the wind and unmitigated sunlight 2000 metres up. On a ledge above the village of Zuoz, nestled into a ridge facing Saint Moritz, is the hundred-year-old Hotel Castell, whose remarkable renovation, completed this past winter, includes the addition of a 17-unit luxury apartment building and a *hamam* (Turkish bath), the redesign of 25 guest rooms, and the ongoing commission of site-specific works by international artists such as Pipilotti Rist, Lawrence Weiner and Tadashi Kawamata. Today, the hotel has established itself as the epicentre of a cultural community that spans four adjacent villages and 5 kilometres in any direction. With the addition this spring of the 8-x-7-metre *Observatory* by American light artist, James Turrell, 'any direction' can also mean heavenwards.

As an inhabitant of the Lowlands, Dutch architect Ben van Berkel of Amsterdam-based UN Studio – which did the bulk of the renovation (Swiss architect Hans-Jörg Ruch designed nine rooms) – appreciates Alpine scenery. During train trips to the site to design the Chesa Chastlatsch apartments and 16 of the rooms, he sat with his

nose pressed to the glass. Van Berkel met Castell's owner, curator and art collector, Ruedi Bechtler, four years ago. Bechtler immediately made it clear that interesting architecture – in the form of a design hotel – was not what he wanted. Van Berkel replied, jokingly, 'Let's go for no style, no design, but a model of something different.' What they decided on was a model that 'makes architecture as inspiring as good art'. A model that 'communicates with art in a very accessible way'.

The angular metal and glass apartment complex – a rather sculptural installation that is simultaneously glossy and roughly woven – follows the articulation of the hotel building and the kink of the mountainside. Views from each unit are panoramic. Inside the hotel, an intimate, glowing, 260-square-metre *hamam*; tiled floors in electric red; knotted blond islands of pine furniture; and standing, floor-to-ceiling scrolls of milky glass (behind which silhouettes flit, dreamlike, through the changing rooms) create a painterly atmosphere. The palette of the guest rooms – each of which features a photograph by Roman Signer – links the interior to the exterior, where the scenery shifts from the high-contrast whites of snow and the deep hush of ice to timberline

greens, oranges and yellows. In the end, the team created a cultural destination and an environment (corridors, bedrooms, terraces) capable of showcasing Bechtler's extensive collection of photography, (recorded) performance art, sculpture, multimedia installations, conceptual pieces – even work by 'reality hacker' Peter Regli. The hotel regularly hosts Art Weekends during which visiting artists install site-specific pieces, lecture or perform. But, after thinking for a moment and with some pride, van Berkel points out: 'You can waste your time there in the hotel rooms. It's not something you usually think of in architecture.'

felsenbad (rock pool, 1996)

Tadashi Kawamata

Japanese visual artist Kawamata designed the Felsenbad, a swimming pool, sauna, bridge and terrace that wraps the mountain in pine and oak. Today he is a professor at Tokyo University's School of Fine Art.

The first major step in the development of the hotel's cultural identity was the creation of the Felsenbad. Early

in its existence, the hotel boasted an electrically heated swimming pool, which was located in a protected area behind the building before being torn down. To renew 'this installation', as Ruedi Bechtler calls it, the owner gave Kawamata historical photos on which to base his design. The artist used some of the old wooden slats to create a bridge

and constructed a wooden terrace with a reflecting pool and a wood-heated sauna. Perhaps because of Kawamata's Eastern influence, it became a very quiet place for sunbathing and meditation. Last year, Kawamata added a second wooden terrace, now accessed through the hotel bar.



'before the sun rises ...' (façade sculpture, 1999)

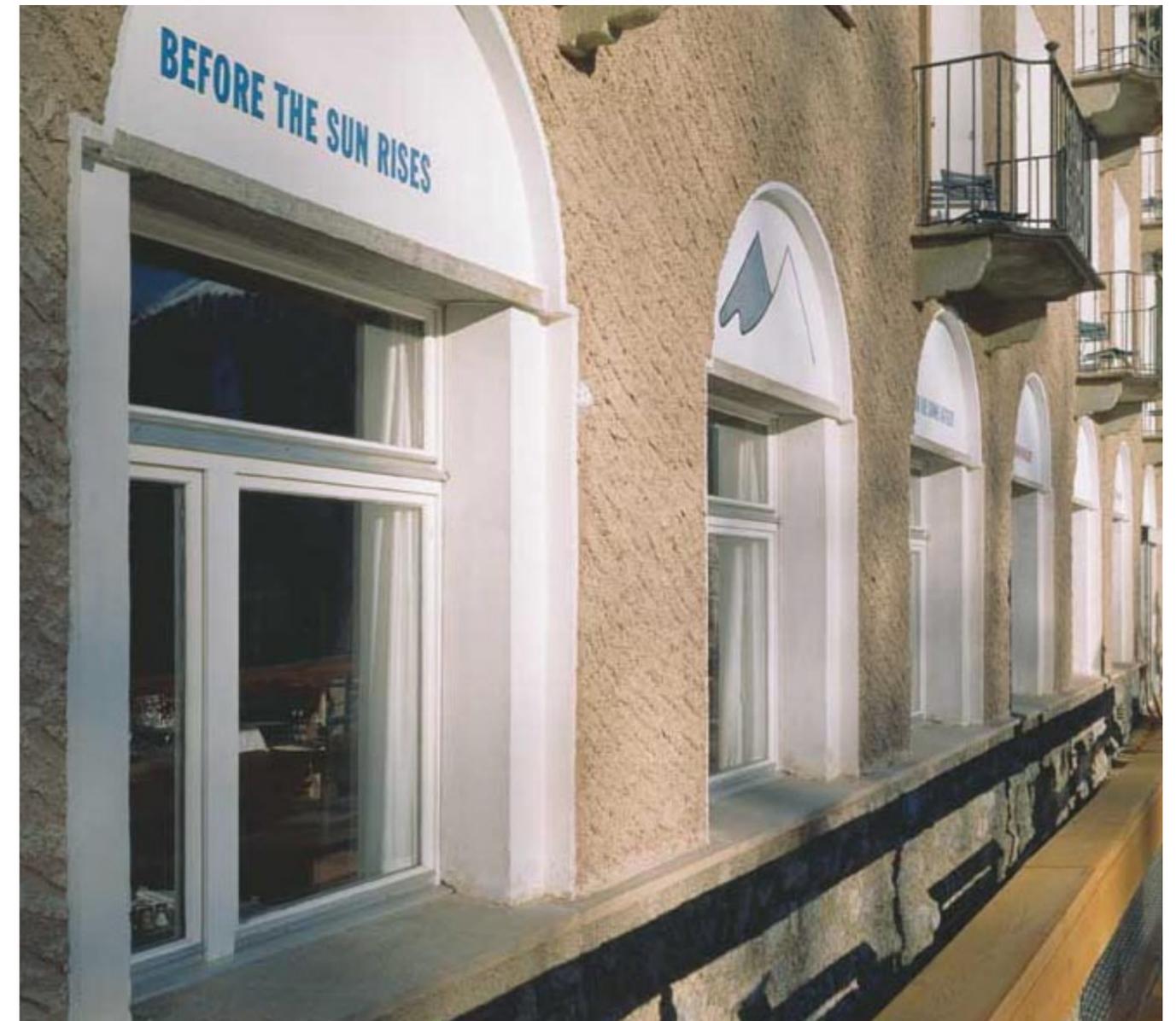
Lawrence Weiner

Weiner's 'sculpture' features haiku-like words in German and English accompanied by paradigmatic drawings painted in black, red, yellow and blue on the façade of the hotel. The visual art of Bronx-born Lawrence Weiner often relies entirely on language. Weiner divides his time between homes in New York City and Amsterdam.

*'Before the sun rises
Hidden from moonlight
Left in the wind'
'Bevor die Sonne aufgeht
Vom Mondlich versteckt
Im Wind gelassen'*

'The work is not site-specific,' says Weiner. 'It became site-specific when it was put there. Part of the work was

done when I was staying in the hotel, working on a book with John Baldessari. It was done in the normal flow of the artist's life. The work is non-metaphorical, but when it enters into the culture, it begins to take on a metaphor for where it is; it finds its place. We're all part of the same culture; we're just human beings in the landscape. As an



rote bar (red bar, 1997)

Pipilotti Rist and Gabrielle Hächler

Multimedia and video artist Pipilotti Rist, a native of the Swiss Rhine Valley, designed the art installation that inhabits the work of architect Gabrielle Hächler of Fuhrmann und Hächler. Both women live in Zürich.

'Our piece is *especially* site-specific,' says Hächler, speaking of the opportunity to incorporate the Rote Bar into the building. 'The bar conversion can be

likened to a heart transplant: an artificial, pulsating red heart has been implanted in the old, late-19th-century hotel. The intention was to create a realm between dream and reality, in which guests can immerse themselves.' She explains that the form of the bar adapts to 'the spatial situation and functional demands' and that 'it appropriates the motif of fluency', exemplified by a

seamless counter that flows like a liquid. Under the lighting, says Hächler, 'the bar becomes a glowing stream of lava' that invites visitors to bask in its warmth. Reiterating 'images of indulgence' are the video installation and the bottle rack that contains it. 'After a hard day in white, cold snow,' she concludes, 'you are sucked into the heart of the hotel.'



dining room

Nicolaus Hartmann

The dining room was designed as part of the original hotel by architect Nicolaus Hartmann in 1912. The hotel opened in 1913.

'We kept the dining room as it was originally built for several reasons,' says hotel manager Bettina Plattner. 'It is under the protection of *Heimat* *schutz* – meaning it is a historical Swiss landmark

– so we could not change it. But it also has this stucco ceiling, which is one of the most beautiful in hotels of the area. It's big. It's rich. It's very impressive. It was part of the strategy of the renovation to keep all that is authentic from the pioneer time. Tourism was "invented" in this area between 1850 and 1912 by British visitors; before then it was only

countryside, a poor area of farmers. We kept the dining room for its storytelling value. The mix with the new architecture gives the building a lot of personality. When you stay here, you feel as though it's 1912 – you can imagine staying here at that time. The hotel is like an old lady, and we think it's worth keeping her old.'



room no. 000

Hans-Jörg Ruch

These rooms were designed by Swiss architect Hans-Jörg Ruch, a native of Zürich who now works in Saint Moritz, Switzerland.

The architect says, as quoted in the hotel brochure, 'Contrasts need to be visible in order to sustain a degree of tension. And for vibrations to start.'

Ruch was responsible for the renova-

tion of nine of the Castell guest rooms.

'The proportion between the old and the new is crucial,' Ruch continues. 'Both can not be allowed to vie for domination.

Tangency at most is permitted – not random mixing.'



room no. 000

UN Studio

'The hotel rooms are oriented around the idea of being in a holiday home,' says van Berkel, who speaks of 'comfort' and 'views to the outside'. He cites the mountain environment, which prompted UN Studio 'to connect the materials in the room to their surroundings. For example, the pine trees in the area have an amazing smell, so we used

pine in the rooms. There are changes of colour in the landscape, from snow and ice to green landscape. We played with these changes by using certain colours: a greenish atmosphere in the bathrooms and, in some, shades of white. We used oranges and a bit of greenish-yellow, almost fluorescent colours.' Linking colour to movement, he says that simply

opening or closing a curtain brings colour into or shuts colour out of the room. Van Berkel believes that colour should not be used without a particular reason.



hamam (turkish bath, 2004)

UN Studio

Founded in December 1998 as an adjunct to Amsterdam-based Van Berkel & Bos, UN stands for United Network. A 'network practice' that links specialists in architecture, urban development and infrastructure, the daughter studio represents a deepening of the firm's commitment to technological innovation. UN Studio designed the 260-square-

metre *hamam*, which features the use of tile, stone, sandblasted glass and coloured light.

'It's rough and shiny and glossy,' says UN co-principal Ben van Berkel. 'In the *hamam* there is no art, so we wanted to flirt with art ourselves. In the changing rooms, you feel as though you're looking at a painting, because colours of glass

change with the light. You're almost walking in a watercolour painting. It is quite intimate. The rooms are made in curved glass, and in these curved rooms you can sit between the baths. The colours provide a dreamy atmosphere. You see silhouettes moving through the glass.' He speaks of being 'in a fairytale'.

