

BERNHARD HOESLI: COLLAGES

EXHIBITION CATALOG

Edited by
Christina Betanzos Pint

With essays by
Mark Jarzombek
+
John P. Shaw



2: Vacation House of Dr. A.S. Reynolds, Emmetten, 1961-64. Architectural Firm: Werner Aebli and Bernhard Hoesli

BERNHARD HOESLI: COLLAGE/*CIVITAS* MARK JARZOMBEK

Just because you glued something to a board, doesn't mean you have made a collage.
(Bernhard Hoesli, ca. 1978)

In 1974, as a student at the Eidgenoessische Technische Hochschule (ETH), I met Professor Bernhard Hoesli at the year-end review of the First Year Course. 'Met' may not be the right word. I was ushered into a room with a long table, with Hoesli sitting at the far end. The window shades were pulled down and it was so dark that I could barely make out his features. I took my seat and handed my plans to the teaching assistant who walked them over to Hoesli. After a few moments of silence, I saw the glint of an enormous pair of scissors, and heard the crisp snipping of blades interrupted by occasional grunts. Then followed the zips and snaps of Scotch Tape being drawn out of its dispenser. After a while, the assistant brought the plans back to me and patted them down on the table. The product of three sleepless days and nights of work had been mercilessly cut up and reassembled. A few blue crayon lines were scribbled across my meticulously Rapidographed hatchings. I was speechless. What I saw still vaguely resembled my design, but it was different, and, I had to admit, much improved. I studied the plans a minute or two until the assistant kicked the leg of my chair and nodded in the direction of the door for me to leave. It was not an easy lesson I learned that day.

In my subsequent studies at the ETH, I would get to know the broader circumference of Hoesli's theories, the principal aspects of which have been mapped out, in 1992, in the book *Teaching Architecture, Bernhard Hoesli at the Department of Architecture at the ETH Zürich* by some of his assistants, Jürg Jansen and others.¹ Yet, Hoesli's use of collage and his theory in respect to it are still far from being fully understood. This exhibition of Professor Hoesli's private work, which has never been seen before and which is only made possible by the generous loan of Hoesli's daughter, Regina Hoesli-Rooney, will be an important step in that direction. My conclusions will have to remain to some degree tentative, however. We have yet to establish a full record of his work since he gave away some of his collages to friends and colleagues. Furthermore, Hoesli's theories were evolving right up to his sudden death in 1984. In this essay, I will attempt to outline the principal phases of his development, looking in particular at Hoesli's last phase in which he attempted to integrate collage with urban methodologies.² I will also discuss the differences between Hoesli's and Colin Rowe's views on collage, as well as Paul Hofer's impact on Hoesli's thinking.

In the 1950s, while working in Paris for Le Corbusier, Hoesli is known to have had contact with Fernand Léger.³ But his early work, though paralleling certain attributes of the Purists, is closer to the movement known as *Art Informel* which had dominated avant-garde European circles during that time. *Art Informel* took various forms, but in general it was opposed to the geometric abstractions and the recognizable figurative forms of the Cubists – guitars and the like. It emphasized instead plain, sometimes discarded materials, put together in compositions that tended to highlight the tactile qualities of the material. Hoesli's Collage #2, from 1963, fits into that mode. It is constructed with pieces of wood, cardboard and crumpled wrapping paper on top of a "split-level" pine board that might easily have been found on the floor of his studio. The different elements are tightly interlocked in a well-crafted balance, and accentuated by small, carefully placed patches of color, a blue square, a red stripe, and a dab of green. Though small in size, the collage emanates a quiet monumentality. One finds correspondences to his architecture. The rectilinear and angular shapes of the Reynolds House, designed in 1961,



3: Zollikofer Co. 1960-68, St. Gallen.

respond to the sloping, mountainous landscape, with the white of the stucco and the brown of the shingles re-enacting, and enhancing, the drama of earth and sky (Fig. 2). The factory building that Hoesli designed in 1960 for the Zollikofer Co. is also representative of this aesthetic. Its crisp contours, gradated massing, as well as the emphasis on visual texture by means of small openings and projections are all part of his search for a language that, though modern, is softened by a new aesthetic that emphasizes the unity between formal logic and pictorial composition (Fig. 3).

Hoesli's collages soon became looser, however, and more experimental and personal. Not only do we see paint applied to various parts of the surface, but we also see lines and sketches on them. Appearing for the first time is a sad, moon-like face as well as various found objects like cigarette wrappings and newsprint. Also to the fore comes his renewed pre-occupation with the work of the Cubists. He constructs Collage #26 in Paris after having visited the 1966 Picasso Exhibition there, as we know from his remarks on the back.⁴

How this change filters its way into his architecture can be seen in his 1968 competition design for a Catholic Church in the village of Glattbrugg (Fig. 4, 5) just outside Zürich. The over-all premise of a search for a Late Modernist aesthetic is still present, but he has now allowed the compositional elements a greater degree of freedom than he would have a few years earlier. The monumentality that was pervasive in his earlier work has been transposed into a scaled hierarchy of differentiated elements. A dramatic funnel-shaped church rests on a generously proportioned platform, bounded on one side by the street and on the other by a low, linear building that contains the Vicarage and its associated school. The Vicarage, oriented to an open field, becomes the new "urban edge" of the town. A small and compact baptistery not only marks the entrance to the platform, but in its position on the very edge of it, helps define its space. Within this larger scheme, Hoesli accommodates, even features, the pre-existing. An old bell tower along the street, for example, much like a found object in a collage, is integrated into the design by means of a clever diagonal alignment with the side of the church, and a pre-existing gabled house, to be used for guests, is given its own small courtyard. Its presence is noted in the design of the church by a dent in the flank of the church's lobby.

It is important at this point to acknowledge Hoesli's commitment to arguments first articulated in the book *Transparency*, (1955) by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, when they, along with the other so-called Texas Rangers were teaching at the University of Texas.⁵ Rowe and Slutzky, as is well known, presented the case that "transparency" was not about a literal transparency, like the glass corner of the

Bauhaus building, for example, but rather about spatial presences that extend, by implication, through solids and that tend to reassert themselves in various and often remote parts of the composition. It was in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Ferdinand Léger, so they argued, that this was best exemplified. Hoesli was familiar with Rowe and Slutzky's book already at its inception since he shared an office with Rowe.

In the mid 1960s Hoesli decided to translate the book into German, adding some commentaries and examples from his own studios.⁶ And it was only at that time, I would argue, that he truly internalized its message, as can be seen in a host of collages from that time period. In Collage #27, for example, whites, blues and browns create a field of ingeniously shifting relationships between figure and ground. Purist tendencies are the strongest in Collage #46. We should, however, not see Hoesli's work in art historical terms as "Late Cubist," or "Neo-Purist." In his eyes, transparency, now that it had been properly identified, was nothing less than a universal attribute of modernist space. Cubism's main contribution did not consist in a fracturing of the image, but, on the contrary, in the discovery of a new synthesizing modality. "I am impatient," he wrote, "with the interminable insistence on the undeniable perceptual differences between buildings by F.L. Wright, Le Corbusier and Mies."⁷

Transparency, in other words, was not only a unifying element in the seeming chaos of early modernist explorations, but also harbored the potential framework for a disciplinary structure that had yet to be fully worked out. Furthermore, in being worked out by the generation of architects who inherited that duty, it would, hopefully, yield a new social structure within that discipline. It was Hoesli's growing interest in defining "the social" within the disciplinary realm of architecture that drove him to continually interrogate the pedagogical. Hoesli believed very much in a world in which disparate elements could enhance each other and fertilize each other for the larger general benefit. This quasi-civic endeavor demanded a considerable amount of self-effacement from the architect, who in Hoesli's eyes, was to be perceived more as a functionary for the public good than a star performer.

The 1970s was the highpoint of Hoesli's career. From 1969 to 1972 he served as Chair of the Department of Architecture and initiated several important reforms that included bringing in visitors like John Hedjuk, Robert Slutzky and Aldo Rossi.⁸ He amassed a large crew of about 13 assistants to work with him on his projects.⁹ Furthermore, from 1975 onward he began teaching various urban design seminars, one for example, on "Collage City," was based on early drafts of Colin Rowe's book, which was followed by another one entitled "Collision City." In 1976 he was made Director of the Institut für



4: Catholic Church, 1968, Glattbrugg, Competition Project, plan, Architectural Firm: Werner Aebli and Bernhard Hoesli.



5: Catholic Church, model

Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur [Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture] at the ETH, a position he held until 1980. Of particular importance to the present discussion is the fact that in 1978 he began teaching advanced-level urban design studios.

It was during this period of intense activity, that Hoesli fully united the principle of "transparency" with his social philosophy. He would now see collage as a type of finger exercise in preparation for a fundamental reform of modernity, one that had to take place promptly, however, before all its aspirations were frittered away by what, for him, were the self-serving encroachments of the Postmodernists. The purpose of his work was to establish what he called a "dialogical" relationship to the deterritorialized spatial conventions of modern architecture. The density of space that the Purists were able to envision in their art was now seen as analogous to the historical and *sociological* density of life. This "density" had, for Hoesli, both an earthly and a spiritual side. It was earthly in the sense that it was linked to the empirical world of people, time and space, and spiritual in so far as the metaphysical premise of communication always revolves around the question of finality. It is the fate of mankind, Hoesli seemed to suggest in his work, that it was be trapped both consciously and unconsciously in the vortex of that question.

A "conversation" with his daughter Regina on this subject is transcribed on the back of Collage #43.

Regina says that she likes it.

To her: "What then do you like about it?"

[Regina:] "It is, well, not yet finished."

[She says] I have to finish it.

It is clear that "finishing it" is exactly what could not be done at the time of the conversation on October 21, 1976. We read that Hoesli had begun the collage a few days earlier in Paris on the 16th of October. He worked on it again on the 19th, 20th, 21st, and 24th, of October. From the prominent location of the dates on the back of the collage, it is clear that Hoesli thought on the 20th of October and again on the 30th that the work was finished, but on the 6th and 8th of November he was back at it again. Then there is a gap of six years until January 18, 1982, at which time he gave the piece to Regina. Two days later, however, on the 20th he was at work on it once again, writing "Prezisierung, Jetzt ist es ok," meaning "Making it precise, Now it is OK." But even this "finality" is tentative. On Collage #33 he admits as much when he wrote, "Von 1967 bis 1975 - Je le laisse comme fini." In other words, "I leave it as if it were finished. It may be, as of the indicated date, OK", but that is not the same as 'finished'.

This self-conscious embedding of collage in the temporalities of its production paralleled Hoesli's idea that the broad flow of history on the one hand and the existential dimension of human time on the other hand were always translations of one into the other. What transpires in the space of a day, a week, or a year in the making of a collage replicates what, in urban terms, might transpire in a year, decade, or century. This "coming into and out of focus" as he would sometimes say in studio reviews, was part of the natural biology of history. And yet, because of the double encoding of temporality in both work process and history, one synchronic, the other diachronic, collage, for Hoesli, was the only possible key to the resolution of modern architecture. His philosophy removed architecture from its throne of independence and forced it to acknowledge its operative role in what he called the "dialogical city."

The city was the stage, both in a tragic and in a positive sense, where mankind's relationship with form continually plays itself out. It was for this reason that Hoesli marks the point of origin of his collages as having taken place always in a city, be that Rome, London, Amsterdam, Istanbul, Ithaca, or Paris. The theme of urban travel as a form of existential/sociological fieldwork found its symbolic expression in his tote bag collage (#50) and satchel collage (#1). It also explains the fact that many of his collages were made on cigar box lids. Strong, portable and lightweight, he could work on these collages anywhere, be that on a train or at a café.

Concomitant with this last period is a shift in Hoesli's aesthetics. The "frames" of his middle phase give way to vigorous patchworks of blues and reds of different hues, put into tension by means of shifting patterns of color and underlying fields of white and black. In Collage #40 collage segments leak out from underneath the dominating form of the central rectangular shape. We see in this a sensitivity that is intense, precise, and observant. The impact of this new and more complex aesthetic is once again apparent in his architectural practice. In the 1977 competition project for the city of Basel we recognize multiple geometries, spots of localized "urban" intensity between gardens and fields, integrated by means of a network of alleys, paths and streets, the total yielding a rich interpenetrating network with sudden, surprising views (Fig. 6).

Let me return to the synchronic element embedded in Hoesli's collages. At the heart of the matter was Hoesli's increasingly vigorous attempt to tackle the problem of intentionality. His reshaping of my design, for example, was done with just this in mind. The negative part of his critique – in so far as it involves a degree of loss and destruction – was counterbalanced, in Hoesli's eyes, by his implicit faith in the utopian potential of his theory. Collage restructures the notion of individuality in preparation for a new sense of community, which is why Hoesli often worked on collages together with his teaching assistants. The method to which he aspired, he said, was "Socratic."

No one is in possession of 'truth'. . . . The core of the Art of Teaching is to develop the faculty of transfer.¹⁰

There is no doubt that Hoesli saw collage as socially constituting. The most notable example of this is the wall collage that he made in his ETH office (now in the office of Professor Mark Angèlil), where he would meet with his teaching assistants. It was organized around a dozen or so square panels with each assistant responsible for the design of one of them. When it was "completed," Hoesli gave himself the privilege of "entering" into the whole thing adding or even subtracting here or there. The collage wall was



6: "Green 80," Competition Project, 1977, Architectural Firm: Werner Aebli and Bernhard Hoesli

more than just a testimony for the strong bond Hoesli had with his assistants.¹¹ Like the *comitium* in Rome, it was the physical and symbolical "center" of Hoesli's dialogical community, where its first inhabitants would meet and debate.

Hoesli made it clear that not all students could understand his concept of *civitas*. In fact, by the time I took Hoesli's fourth year urban-design studio, he had developed a pedagogical test that served to single out the chosen few, namely those who were, symbolically-speaking, to become citizens of his experimental dialogical city. On the first day of class we were told to make an eight-inch square collage from the various materials that he provided for the class. We were given ten minutes. Everyone eagerly began to cut and paste. The pieces were Xeroxed and brought back to the studio. But instead of reviewing our work, Hoesli redistributed our collages so that we were all now working on someone else's. We were then told to do whatever we wanted and given 30 minutes to work. Hoesli then collected the collages and began his critique. Several people had totally obliterated the theme of the collage to which they were assigned. Several others had done very little, having spent the time talking. Some put in pictures of faces or people that they had cut out of magazines. All of these he ignored. The rest he discussed in detail commenting on how the 'critiquing' author, using the original collage as raw material, had picked up this or that formal tendency in the collage and had enhanced it, altered it, or otherwise worked with it. Many, fond of their own work and unable to take a distancing view, found this disconcerting. The next day- as he probably had anticipated- our class size was much reduced!

At the time, the only other person with a similarly coherent theory about collage was, of course, Colin Rowe, whose book *Collage City* appeared in 1978. Rowe and Hoesli came to be close friends, with Hoesli spending considerable effort in the 1980s translating the book into German. Nonetheless, one has to draw important distinctions between their respective attitudes towards collage. For Rowe, collage was a metaphor for the palimpsest of time. It served to exemplify how architecture of the past filters into the present. Though Rowe won converts by promoting his *Collage City* as a struggle of Humanism against totalitarianism, he was no fan of the bourgeoisie. The structures he admired the most, such as Hadrian's Villa near Praeneste or the Place des Vosges in Paris, exemplified the determination of their makers to control space. All in all, one could argue that Rowe saw *Collage City* as if it were the product of an ideal constitutional monarchy. If the politics of democracy and rationalism had to come from modernity, aesthetic values at least should be derived from the good old, pre-egalitarian past. For Hoesli, more the closet socialist than the closet monarchist, urban collagists, always suspended in the warp of their anguished temporal conditions, were never allowed to forget the alienation that lies at the heart of all modern speculation.

The person who influenced Hoesli the most in this period was the still under-appreciated Paul Hofer. A modest man of tremendous cosmopolitan reach, Hofer, who came to teach at the ETH in 1964 was an archaeologist as well as historian, and by then already well-known for his contribution to the burgeoning field of urban archaeology.¹² It was because of Hofer's research and suggestion that the Apulian city of Lecce served as the model *par excellence* for Hoesli's "dialogical city" in his urban design studios. Its rich fabric of Greek, Roman, Islamic, Medieval, and Baroque "layers", labyrinthinely conjoined, was a fertile testing ground for a study of change and adaptation.

Though Hofer in appearance was delicate and fragile, he was indefatigable in the streets of such cities. On the trip that he and Hoesli took to Lecce in 1979 with their students, we would find him in basements, on rooftops, and in church spires, measuring and drawing. His fluid sketches written over with his scribbly handwriting influenced all of us (Fig. 7). They certainly influenced Aldo Rossi. Yet Hofer was no naïve champion of the past, and on several

occasions he amazed us, and also Hoesli, in his appreciation of unadulterated modern forms. The only way to hold history by the horns, so to say, was, according to Hofer, not to be too beholden to it.

It was inevitable that Hoesli and Hofer came to be close. Nonetheless, their friendship was driven to some extent by the internal politics of the ETH. The late 1970s saw the rise of the Ticino architects around the figure of Dolf Schnebli and the typologist faction. Their position in the school received considerable support by the arrival of Aldo Rossi, who came to teach there off and on in the 1970s.¹³ Hoesli's relationship to this group became increasingly "polite." Architecture, as he would comment under his breath to the students, had indeed to be answerable to context, but to restrict oneself to typological forms was to reduce modernity to a process of simplification and abstraction. For Hoesli, typology was a form of fool's gold.

Collage, on the other hand, was something by which one could assert the positive aspects of modernity *in nuce*. We can see this articulated in notes he made about his work with Hofer.

This city quarter... With PH [Paul Hofer] analyze historically, then 'sociologically,' i.e. establish present use, then spatially, structurally, and then transpose! A GREAT LESSON.¹⁴

The German word for transpose is *umsetzen*, meaning to convert or to transpose something from one reality or *métier* to another. It was in this process of transposition that the Hoeslian collage was to effect its historiographical assignment, facing Janus-like both backward and forward in time. This was also the reason why his urban design studios did not focus on the city in the conventional sense. Students of Hoesli's studios were, in fact, among the first in Europe to study the city at its periphery. Instead of the urban edge being set out simply as an example of all that was wrong with modernism, Hoesli argued that it was the professional architect's task to tackle these situations, rather than to shirk them. His 1981 studio, for example, had as its theme the unsightly housing development of Tscharnegut outside of Bern (Fig. 8). The challenge assigned to the students was to restore a sense of urbanity while acknowledging the inevitable (Fig. 9).

Originality, for Hoesli, was thus to come in the form of a delayed re-action to the past, a delay caused by the temporal disjuncture of modernity as well by the energy it takes to marshal one's aesthetic forces and project them into the future. Collage was thus both society-constructing, bound up as it was with the pattern of a dialogic community, and, because of its latent subversiveness, a form of modernism in process. It was a powerful philosophical tool that could not be simply normalized into some pattern



7: Drawing on Paper, 1969, Paul Hofer



8: Tscharnegut, Bern, 1956-1966



9: Example of student work (1981), Project by Willi Kladler

Mark Jarzombek is the Director of the History Theory Criticism Section in the Department of Architecture at MIT. He received his Diplom Arch. from the ETH in 1980, and he earned a Ph.D. from MIT in 1985. He is the author of *On Leon Battista Alberti: His Literary and Aesthetic Theories* (The MIT Press, 1992), and *The Psychologizing of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). He was a Fellow at the Getty Center for the Study of the Humanities and Arts (1986) at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (1994) and at the Canadian Center for Architecture (2001). Before coming to MIT, he taught at Cornell University from 1987 to 1995. He has published widely on modernist history and theory. Jarzombek continues to make collages and teach courses in that art form.

language. Nor did Hoesli, in opposition to the recommendations from *Collage City*, allow students to reach into the grab-bag of nostalgia for help. For better or worse, Hoesli held fast to the proposition that the principal architectural form of *modern* architecture should be *modern*, as the studio work from that time so clearly indicates. Nowhere do you see any "Rowian" stabilizers.¹⁵

Despite the social purposefulness that permeated the world of Hoesli, one must not overlook the fact that he was capable of a great deal of wit. The collaged high heels are an excellent example, as was the garage door collage at his home, and the most amazing collage of all, an oblong, football sized stone covered with his typical designs used as the door stop to his office. Do you stop to investigate its ambiguities or do you pretend to ignore it, stepping over it on the way in and out? Hoesli would have wanted you to answer both in the affirmative as you would have done with any good architecture, which should have qualities that go unnoticed by many. Collage was not the celebration of our victory over modernity. It was living out the true promise of modernity as something both existentially fateful and yet socially cohesive.

¹ Jürg Jansen, Hansueli Jörg, Luca Maraini, Hanspeter Stöckli, *Architektur lehren, Bernhard Hoesli an der Architekturabteilung der ETH Zürich* (Zürich: Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, 1992).

² Hoesli's papers are in the archives of the Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur in Zürich and have yet to be thoroughly studied.

³ Léger is known to have held master classes in his studio during the 1950s. Whether Hoesli participated in these in any formal way is not yet known. Another possible influence could be from the direction of *décollage* artists such as Jacques de la Villeglé and François Dufréne, for example, who in the 1960s introduced the issue of temporality into the production of art. Temporality was, of course, an important theme in Hoesli's later work.

⁴ The exhibition "Hommage à Picasso" opened on November 19, 1966 at the Grand Palais and Petit Palais in Paris. Hoesli visited it on December 31.

⁵ For a sustained discussion of the history of the group of artists and architects known as the Texas Rangers, of which Hoesli was one, see: Alexander Caragone, *The Texas Rangers: Notes from the Architectural Underground* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

⁶ For Hoesli's translation see: Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, *Transparenz. Kommentar von Bernhard Hoesli* (Zürich: Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, 1968). It was updated with student work in 1974.

⁷ Jansen, *Architektur lehren*, p. 33.

⁸ In the late 1970s, Slutzky, on several occasions, took students from the studios of Hoesli and Professor Franz Oswald to Italy for intense collage seminars. One such memorable trip was in the massive fortifications of Lucca in Tuscany.

⁹ They were Rudolf Wienands, Jeanpierre Stöckli, Theodor Meyer, Udo Heitmann, Andy Raeber, Gerard Butz, Bruno Scheuner, Jürg Jansen, Luca Maraini, Daniel Gerber, Urs Z'Graggen, Peter Haeusler, and Wolf Maier.

¹⁰ Jansen, *Architektur lehren*, p. 118.

¹¹ I would like to recognize Professor Angèlil's timely rediscovery of this piece and his subsequent efforts at protecting it.

¹² Hofer was well known for his study of Bern. See: Paul Hofer, *Bern, die Stadt als Monument*. (Bern: Benteli-Verlag, 1951). For other aspects of his work and for a brief summary of his life, see also: Paul Hofer, *Fundplätze, Bauplatze. Aufsätze zu Archäologie, Architektur und Städtebau* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1970).

¹³ Rossi taught third and fourth year courses from 1972 to 1974, and was Visiting Professor from 1976 to 1978.

¹⁴ Jansen, *Architektur lehren*, p. 151.

¹⁵ At the end of *Collage City*, Rowe establishes a "list of stimulants," a-temporal found objects that could be used, he hopes, in the making of an "urbanistic collage." They consisted among other things memorable streets, like Fifth Avenue in New York... "stabilizers," like Place de Vosges in Paris and public terraces, like Adelphi Terrace in London.