

The Pioneer

In her buildings, architect Tilla Theus attaches great importance to access paths. After all, they make us understand the organisation of a building.

Text:
Werner Huber

Tilla Theus is a Zurich based architect with roots in the Grisons. Specialising in solving difficult tasks and dealing with historic materials, she has been in business for more than forty years. Following her work on the Widder Hotel in Zurich Old Town, opened in 1995, she became firmly established as one of Switzerland's premier league architects. A master of detail, materials and colours, Tilla Theus was able to pull out all the stops in this project. Other tasks such as the facade reconstruction of the Jelmoli department store in Zurich, the Fifa Headquarters or the mountain restaurant on Mount Weisshorn (GR) clearly show that she has an eye for detail both in large and small projects. As a female architect, especially a woman of her generation, has needed a great deal of assertiveness to make her way in a male dominated profession. Perhaps that can be put down to typical Grison tenacity? At any rate, her work shows that she always seeks to find the right solution and that she makes great efforts to win over planners and craftsmen as well as clients and authorities. There are hardly any architects who have not complained about fire regulations which prevent open spaces and call for doors where there should not be any. However, for Tilla Theus, fire regulations are, at times, quite helpful: for example, if they ensure that corridors and staircases are not blocked by furniture and fixtures. This means the architect's design purpose remains visible even after the inauguration of a building. For Theus, open spaces do not mean a waste of space or that there is not enough floor space left; open spaces are the base frame of a building. Horizontal and vertical connections give the building a clear structure, she says and adds: The organisation of a building is determined by such connections. Four examples show how the architect plans access in different situations. The lift plays a particular role because even though we know very well that climbing stairs is good for us, a push of the button is far more convenient.

The Widder Hotel: The Pair

Thirty years ago, most lifts were hidden in shafts. This was convenient because the thick concrete walls also stiffened and bore the weight of the building. Using lifts was a technical process. Fine materials for the cabin walls were the ultimate luxury. Coming from America, glass lifts slowly made their way to Switzerland. Today they are almost omnipresent, and we tend to forget the masterly performance that went into the lift system completed in 1995 in the Widder Hotel in Zurich's Old Town.

The architect started planning the hotel in the mid eighties. Eight buildings, scheduled to be completely gutted, were to be preserved and converted into what people today refer to as a boutique hotel. The structure of the buildings suited this purpose: Thick masonry walls had to be breached in order to connect the individual buildings and allow rooms with bathrooms to be built on both sides of the corridors. The vertical access to the building, however, could not be integrated into the existing space. To create the required space, half of one of the buildings was entirely emptied. The door and window openings remained in place and offer a host of views. They also help people to find their way through the twists and turns of the building complex.

Tilla Theus set a steel construction for the stairwell and the lift into the high space with its impressive natural stone walls, and thus created maximum contrast to the old building substance. In those days, this was definitely not the accepted practice in a hotel of this category. The architect remembers, In those days people used to build antique style pillars and use red velvet. The general contractor feared that the guests might dislike the contemporary steel construction, which bears little resemblance to the usual galvanised T sections. It is not an industrial product but a finely designed work of art. From the onset, the stairwell and the lift were the key piece of the building. Theus smiles and comments: Sometimes, architecture can be contraband.

Swiss Re: The Capsule

The refurbishment of the Swiss Re Headquarters on Mythenquai in Zurich, built in 1913 by Alexander von Senger and Emil Faesch, was completed by Tilla Theus in 2000. In this case, the lift does not seem to have left its original shaft, but that the shaft has turned out to be too large. But, looks can deceive: The glass lift capsule does not move up and down in its original shaft. One of Theus's architectural targets was to turn the previously unused courtyard into the core of the Swiss Re Headquarters. She covered it with a glass roof and created a connection to the corridors, staircases and lifts. Horizontally, the building structure usually allows for such measures, as is the case here where the access routes and the adjoining rooms form a circle around the courtyard. This is more difficult in vertical terms.

Thank heavens there were so many toilets in the building, the architect remembers. She simply gutted two adjoining cubicles, took out the sub ceilings and created two lift shafts similar to the two protected wooden stairwells. Theus welcomed the fact that they were larger than the lift cabins because this allowed her to turn the motorised circulation elements into an experience even when →



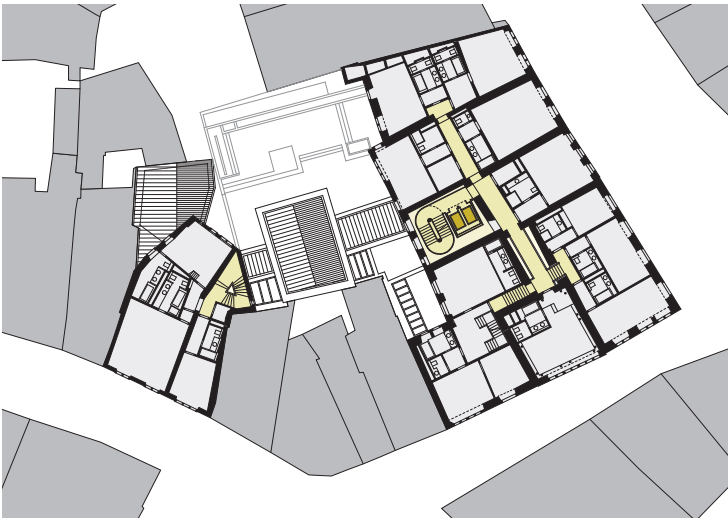
The horizontal and vertical connections give the building a clear structure : Architect Tilla Theus inside the lift at the Thurgau Mammertsberg Inn.



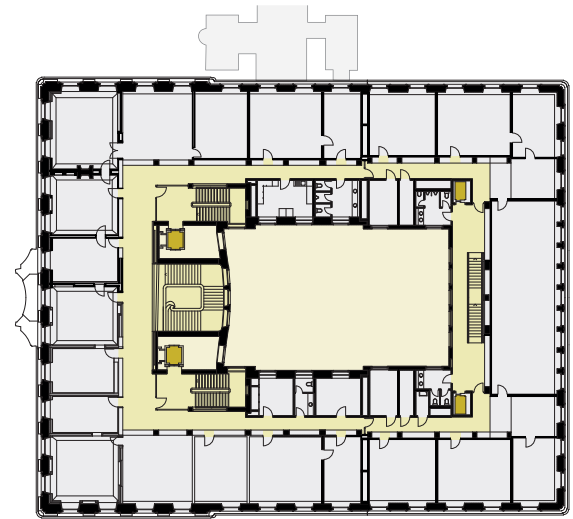
The Widder Hotel in Zurich: Steel stairs and lift form a contrast to the historic building.



Swiss Re, Zurich: The lift moves up and down the former bathroom facilities past an art installation.



Space had to be made for the access elements in the Widder Hotel.



Access space provides structure in the Swiss Re building.

→ the lift is stationary and guests only look through the glass door into the shaft. This explains why all technical installations are concealed by an aluminium plate along which the lift moves up and down. From the glass cabin, the original toilet windows offer views into the courtyard, and of the works of art: "lafur El assonis coloured light tubes and Tatsuo Miyajima's digital figures.

Fifa: The Tower

The 130 metre long Fifa Headquarters on Zurichberg were completed in 2006. Two corridors, which are almost as long, provide access to the offices on the upper floors. You have to live with this, Tilla Theus comments laconically. She helps by providing two different designs for the corridor walls. On the outside, American walnut cabinets structure the long corridors punctuated by the office doors while a glass band on the ceiling stretches along the entire length. Daylight falls through the glass, supported by indirect artificial light. On the inner side, a staccato of struts stretches along the corridors. The chrome steel struts reflect the surroundings and make them appear smaller; walking past, they have a kaleidoscope effect. They also reflect the vertical strips of light. Three crossovers connect the two long corridors:

the Rednerbrücke (speaker's bridge) above the foyer, the Raucherbrücke (smoker's bridge) in the centre, and the rear bridge in the high hall.

This network of pathways provides horizontal access and structures the long building. Four stone towers made of dark quartz slate provide a vertical connection between the storeys. Each of these towers houses a stairwell and a lift, and two of them support an auditorium with 300 seats above the foyer. The architect explains that, the four towers turned into a vertical building. The glowing banister rail meanders upwards, creating a mystic atmosphere in front of the dark stone. During the day, light fills the towers, turning the lift shafts into light shafts. The cabin hangs inside like a lantern, quietly moving up and down.

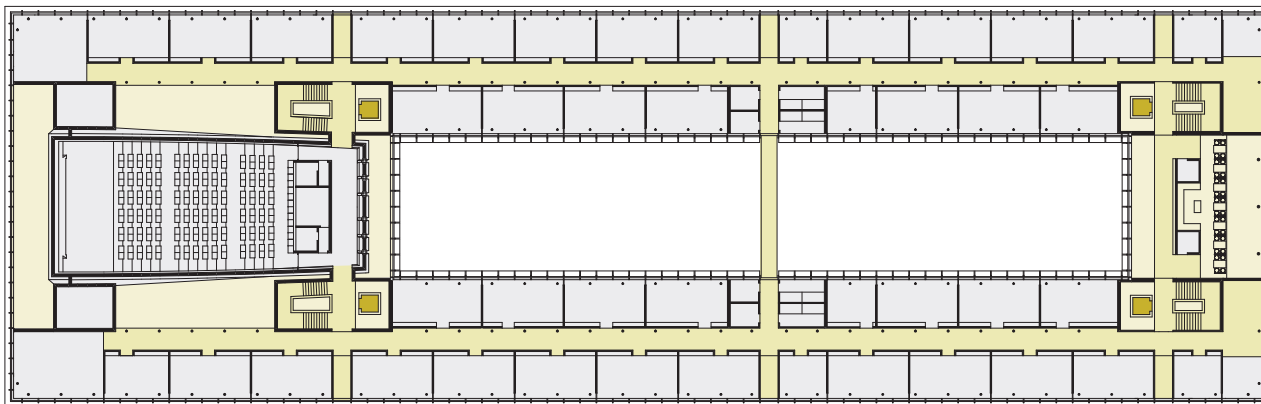
Few materials, but perfect skill and workmanship, were used for the stairwells and the lift towers. The highly polished chrome steel handrail is so flawless that, before you notice the reflection of the meandering light, you might think that it glows. The lift lampion was also the work of a pioneer: it is lit by LEDs rather than fluorescent tubes. Today, LEDs would be standard, but at the time of planning more than 10 years ago, they were new on the market. At that time, both lift planners and light planners took on a challenge.



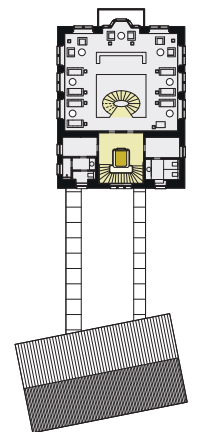
Fifa Headquarters, Zurich: The stairs and the lift are luminaries in the stone tower lit from above.



Mammertsberg , Freidorf: The lift inside the restaurant glides upwards like a green bottle in a white glass.



The four lift and stairwell towers are located on the corners of the long courtyard and provide access to the two main corridors of the Fifa Headquarters.



At Mammertsberg , the lift runs along the historic staircase.

Mammertsberg: The Bottle

Tilla Theus implemented one of her most recent projects in the Thurgau village of Freidorf with a view onto Lake Constance. The traditional Mammertsbergí Inn and a new building next to it now house a top class restaurant and some guest rooms. Guests do not simply eat here; they experience a gourmet highlight. First, they take the lift to the top floor to enjoy an aperitif. Then they descend on a wide spiral staircase to their tables below. Finally, they can take the lift down to the wine cellars in the basement.

As in many old buildings, the stairwell provided the ideal location for the lift. However, the lift does not fill the entire space like a massive plug; it is a filigree glass skin. When designing the shaft, I thought of a wine glass, explains the architect. But the cabin is a green bottle. In addition to the shape of the stairwell, this is another reason why the edges of the glass shaft and the cabin are rounded. The construction had to be as light as possible to support this bottle in the glass impression. A steel skeleton with glass casing was out of the question. Therefore, in conjunction with the lift engineers, Tilla Theus developed a construction with steel straps which suspends the lift shaft glass from the ceiling. This may be a simple thing to do if the glass is straight, but if the cor-

ners are rounded, it is a lot more difficult. The shaft shell glass had to be stable and mounted in a manner to avoid any tension which might break the glass.

Looking rather than evading

It is said that in New York there are so many shoe shine boys because everyone looks at your feet in lifts. When travelling up or down in a lift, you should definitely not look others up and down or even talk to them. Hence, people look at other people's feet or at the lift door.

In Tilla Theus' lifts, such etiquette is redundant because moving up and down is not simply a means of transport but a sensuous experience. However, such experiences are also exceptions in the architect's works. Not every building is suited, and sometimes the budget is too small. However, given the chance to turn a lift into a special object, she seizes the opportunity! With great perseverance and an eye to detail. ●