



CHENOT PALACE
WEGGIS, SWITZERLAND

Swiss movement

A new addition to a prestigious lakeside wellness resort in the Swiss Alps produced a dynamic but discreet form, as part of a landscaped composition that gently enhances its setting. James Parker reports

Sitting on the shores of Lake Lucerne, in the Swiss Alps, is a grand hotel from the 'Belle Epoque' era of the turn of the 19th century – the Chenot Palace. In 2017, Turkish hotel developer Dogus Group decided to dramatically increase the footprint of the flagship '5-star plus' hotel of the long-established wellness group founded by Henri Chenot. However Davide Macullo Architects faced the challenge of a sensitive, highly visible, and hilly site, as well as ensuring the historic buildings were respected, and hitting a tight deadline.

Swiss architect Davide Macullo, based in Lugano, was familiar with Chenot and its values, having worked on several projects for them previously, including schemes for the Dogus Group. Further qualifying his practice for this timber-focused hotel project in the small, picturesque village of Weggis, were recent timber schemes completed nearby.

The practice is responsible for leading-edge projects from hotels, to healthcare and houses, globally and in Switzerland, including a striking multi-coloured and curvilinear house constructed of timber in the Calanca Valley. Further showing its fondness for the material, Davide Macullo completed a series of sculptural installations composed of wood planks in a forest close to the house.

Macullo says that Chenot's ethos is to provide a "second home" rather than a traditional hotel, and the grouping of buildings now created around the original hotel (also including the company's administrative HQ) provides an elegant, understated addition to the lakeside. With neighbours' houses cheek-by-jowl with the

new hotel buildings, consultation with the community was a must. The architects put substantial effort into presenting plans and models and answering questions at various stages.

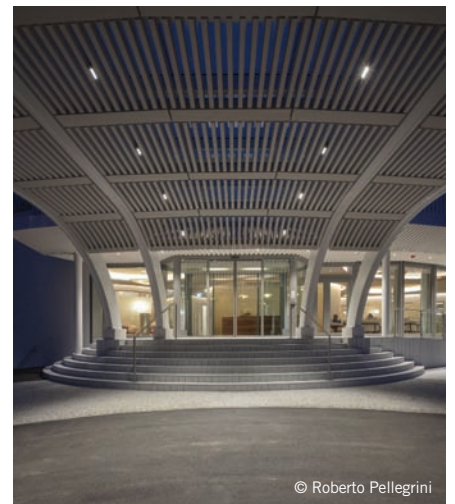
As well as refurbishing the 52 rooms of the existing hotel, the approximately 20,000 m² project doubled the existing footprint with a substantial new timber guest block of 45 rooms and three storeys, plus a connecting podium level which is partly below ground, having been built into the hillside. This houses a luxury spa with special facilities including a cryochamber, and medical analysis and 'anti-gravity' equipment, plus a 21 metre swimming pool. In addition there's a single storey, C-shaped office block for the client, as well as extensive landscaping and a car park. The project underwent the highest Swiss level of historic protection and scrutiny, abiding by the requirements of two bodies responsible for preserving local identity and that of the historic hotel, plus also the lake's conservation body.

Form

The architects' overriding precept for hospitality schemes was that in order to create a feeling of wellbeing for guests, and answer the client's requirement to create a feeling of 'home,' a strong connection must be created between past and future. In this way, the architecture provides a "link between the DNA of a place and its future." Macullo says that what was "really important for us," was the "charm given by the existing hotel," and the design would have a gentle humility to ensure that the new additions didn't overshadow them, literally or figuratively.



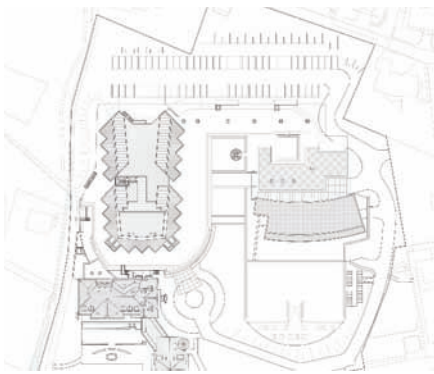
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The project was very carefully planned to not encumber any of the existing views from the lake, and scaled such that the new building virtually disappears behind the old hotel. Taking advantage of the slope, the architects designed a new basement level into the hill using 5,000 m² of blocks, which, as Macullo says, preserved views from the lake to the hills behind.

To help it sit discreetly in the site, the new rectangular guest block was firstly therefore set back behind the original building although above a new entrance and podium level. When a visitor arrives at the new entrance, which is near the lake, the new building is virtually invisible. And, with most of the entire podium volume housing the spa hidden underground, “you don’t really feel there is a built volume,” says Macullo, “you see the landscape continuing up from the park by the lake to the top of the hill.” He adds that this continuity makes the effect of the overall composition “very light.”

The guest block’s elevations have been staggered, creating deep terraces with generous outdoor space for guests. These offset balconies around three facades resemble teeth in plan, and are a result of angling all the rooms so they all have views of the lake. This also creates canopies viewed in section, that continue the roof

slope downwards over the terraces. The balconies are screened in pinkish white-painted planks on the north side, with gaps creating a “game of shadows” and allowing further light into rooms while giving guests privacy.

The language of the new building follows its function, but also “adopts the symbolic traits of the historic buildings,” commented the architects, “recalling the proportions and character of the vernacular, but expressed in a contemporary way, combining the organic with the geometric.” There is a clever drainage detail terminating the pointed canopies; square-profiled downpipes, painted off-white to blend with the timber screens, and providing a discreetly harmonious solution.

The choice of timber as the key material for the project was also important to help the building tie in to traditional Swiss architecture, and appealed to the architects as a means to help a somewhat abstract form blend with neighbouring buildings. The pale colours of the new volume, in addition to the roof’s shape and material, have been carefully chosen to complement the existing buildings.

Davide sums up the effect of the whole (the new guest block, the landscaped spa podium level, and the new office building for the client, plus the historic hotel) as

creating “not a building, but more a backdrop or scenery, more like a fence in a field.” However this belies the complexity of addressing an existing site with various underground areas, and the resulting level changes and other structural challenges.

Super-fast construction

For the new guest building, timber’s chief practical benefit was the speed facilitated by its offsite construction, meeting the client’s stringent programme requirements. The offsite timber industry is highly developed in Switzerland, and construction was very swift, with each floor taking two days to erect, and the roof structure being completed within two weeks. The timber frame was under construction before the concrete basement slab for the podium level was dry. Structurally speaking, the building is all-timber, including lift cores, although the frame has been concealed internally, a “practical choice” of the client, says Macullo.

The architects put together a ‘preconcept’ scheme for a tight, 14 month construction programme, and this resulted in the building being handed over on time in January 2020, opening in June. The offsite method, while bringing considerable efficiencies, also meant a different set of challenges, reports the architect. “There was an extremely unusual amount of co-ordination and pre-planning, we’ve never seen that level before.” He adds: “There were 12 site supervisors, and on a project where you have to work so efficiently and fast, the first thing you do is to work on trust.”

He says that part of successfully meeting the demanding challenges was having “one of the best contractors.” A large family firm who were new to the architects, Anliker AG impressed with the degree to which “all of their staff were highly professional, serious, and engaged.”

This high-profile project for the local area was the source of a lot of pride for, but also scrutiny from, the community. One of the main objectives for the contractors was to minimise disruption to this affluent locality during the construction programme. Davide Macullo says that it’s “amazing that in this expensive area, with small streets and many villas, that all the work over about a year didn’t disturb anybody.”

Arrival & spa level

Working closely with the landscape architect Christoph Fahrni, the architects focused on tree planting around the new



entrance, “so that when you arrive you are suddenly in a kind of village square which all the buildings face into, and you don’t really perceive the size of the building.” He says that guests are helped to feel they are going to “their own villa” after entering under the new canopy. “You never have the feeling you are in a huge structure, rather a cosy environment.”

There is a very short distance to walk to any of the rooms in the new or existing building, thanks to moving the entrance to the centre of the new group of buildings, adjacent to the spa’s curved frontage. Guests can walk to the private beach and spa via underground routes, without ever needing to pass the hotel reception.

The substantial spa level is daylit using beautifully landscaped sunken courtyards, with a Bonsai feel that complements the landscaping of the spa’s grass-covered roof which is punctured by these spaces. “From the spa, you see the Japanese garden, then the mountains behind,” says Macullo.

Connection challenges

Macullo says that the “most difficult work” in this project in terms of design, was not the refurbishment of the old hotel, or the new buildings, but “connecting the old to the new,” as well as the groundworks required for the existing and





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PROJECT FACTFILE

Architect: Davide Macullo
 Architects (Project architect: Aileen Forbes-Munnelly)
Client: Dogus Group
Hotel operator: Chenot
Interior design: Davide Macullo Architects
Contractor: Anliker AG
Interior contractor: Poliform Contract
Structural, M&E and acoustic consultant: Basler & Hofmann

new buildings. An addition to the historic hotel done around a decade and connecting its two volumes was demolished, but designing its replacement caused some serious headaches.

These ranged from “cutting the slab, and making the waterproofing and movement joints,” but there were also two pre-existing underground concrete levels to contend, one of which runs across the entire site. The whole project is “supported by piles that go through the old buildings to the technical rooms below,” says Macullo.

This extends to the otherwise lightweight new timber building. Working with the structural engineers, the designers included piles that go through the existing two basement storeys and terminate at the ceiling of the ground floor, supporting a “huge beam on which the new building is settled,” says Macullo. He adds that in order to minimise costs, these structures had to be designed to go through the existing basement levels “without touching them.” He adds: “It was like an archaeological intervention, very interesting, and very delicate, but also quite demanding.”

Interiors

With the internal structural walls being made of ‘mass timber,’ acoustics were

another challenge, and the slab had to be separated from the walls in order to avoid sound but also vibration transmission. Further partition walls included ‘sandwiches’ of insulation, as well as integrated services, to further assist this.

Macullo says that in both the new and old buildings, the approach to interiors was one of “liberty,” so that a certain ‘boutique’ look is achieved, with each room having a different feel, “like ancient palaces.” He says that in this way, the old hotel’s rooms have a connection with those of the new block, “you flow from the new to the old – we have played with the finishes and colours so you have an experience that is continuously changing in a way, but there is a smooth transition from one space to another.” The challenge was to create spaces with different characters but “at the same time belonging to the same place.”

The refurbishment of the old hotel was straightforward, with no major works, but upgrading all electrics and plumbing. The restaurant’s verandah was closed off to provide an “arched space” however. In the new building, materials were kept simple; the circular ceilings are “handmade from gypsum board, and very well crafted,” says Macullo, their forms “connecting to the surroundings, the lake.” He designed the new carpets based on his own paintings, and the architects provided a collection of works from young Swiss artists to promote their work, alongside Macullo’s drawings.

Conclusion

The success of this challenging project was about community involvement and engagement as well as sensitive, elegant architecture that blends with historic antecedents, and a highly co-ordinated level of construction efficiency. As its architect says, it was about ensuring that “everybody feels comfortable,” adding that for a project on this scale, in a small village, “you don’t only build for the owner, you build for the future of a community. What you do influences its life in a very important way.”

Above all however, according to Davide Macullo, the most important thing on luxury hotel projects such as this is to “take care, and find a synthesis of all the elements that makes people feel at ease, externally as well as inside.”

He says in his 30 years in practice, he’s “remained friends with all my clients, and contractors,” which is testament to his belief that his firm “really cares about the process,” as was fully demonstrated on this project. ■