

STEFAN BANZ — À LA RECHERCHE Baselland Cantonal Library, Liestal, 2001-2005

À LA

Inlaid into the roof tiles of the new Cantonal Library, on the front, entrance side of the building, are the two words “À LA.” While certainly being sincere words of welcome for the visitor, “À LA” is also mysterious, ambiguous and yet immediately understandable. It awakens in us a diversity of associations, not least with Marcel Proust’s famous, four-part novel of the century “À la recherche du temps perdu” (“In Search of Lost Time” or, in an earlier translation, “Remembrance of Things Past”), which transports the most unremarkable observations of everyday life into the very center of our perception, drawing a richly detailed, subtle picture of early 20th century society. Time past is stored and preserved in the library, accessible to us all. Here the visitor can set out in search of what is lost, find it again, mix and combine it with other things, creating a new kind of reality. The library is the guardian of time past, the place where one can rediscover, recover and unravel the complexities of history.

With its glazed, beige tiles, “À LA” merges seamlessly with the red coloration of the entire roof, at the same time standing out as an assertively autonomous signal that gives the building its identity.

RECHERCHE

“À LA” continues inside the library on the floor of the light well. Here there is a water-filled pool that is visible from all floors and is lined with the same red tiles that cover the roof. These tiles, however, are broken—for they are imagined to have fallen from the roof—and have been joined together again in crazy-paving fashion. Among these tiles, likewise glazed yet beige in color—are various letters in jumbled arrangement and composing, after lengthy scrutiny, the word “recherche”. In other words, it is only through searching, combining and matching that disparate elements can be animated and rendered meaningful. And it is precisely these qualities that are the essence of the creative approach to what a library can offer us in the way of knowledge and writing. But not only that: the constantly moving water above the mosaic floor of the pool generates in the very heart of the library a pulsating dialectic between light and dark, abstract and concrete, thinking and being—an effect further heightened by the lighting on the side walls.

In this sense À LA RECHERCHE is a metaphorical allusion to the essence, purpose and function of a library.

BOOKWORM & CO

Standing on the cantilevered platform above the entrance to the library are two cast-aluminum sculptures, each measuring 100 cm in length: a “bookworm” and a “glutton for reading”, the latter in the guise of what in German-speaking countries is known as a “Leseratte” (“Reading Rat”). Symbolically, they embody the ideal visitors to the library and allude at the same time to the fact that the Baselland Cantonal Library is also, and in particular, visited and used by children. Children are the future—the generation of our society that is yet to come and make its mark. “Bookworm & Co” also underscore the adventurous, enjoyable and entertaining aspects of the library. A library has many different facets, and it is here in Liestal in particular that the library bids children a fond welcome.

THE SPIRIT OF WINE

On the original dark brown timbers of the building, which existed prior to its transformation into a library and are visible everywhere, we can read, in deep-red stenciled letters, the names of fifty outstanding varieties of wine that at one time had been stored in the building or might well have been stored there. These names evoke the still extant “spirit of wine,” for the building used to belong to a wine merchant. They are all names that begin with “Château,” a word that also awakens associations with castles and palaces, with wealth, power, comfort and well-being. But it is missing from these names, invisible and left to our imagination. Thus it is that we are suddenly confronted by names that fire our fantasy in many different ways and remind us of the strangest of stories: “Angelus, Beauregard, Belair, Gloria, Gracia, Magdelaine, Montrose, Pensée de la fleur, Petit-Village, Petrus.”