

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 31 (2004)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Architecture : Swiss architecture : beautifying the world
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906799>

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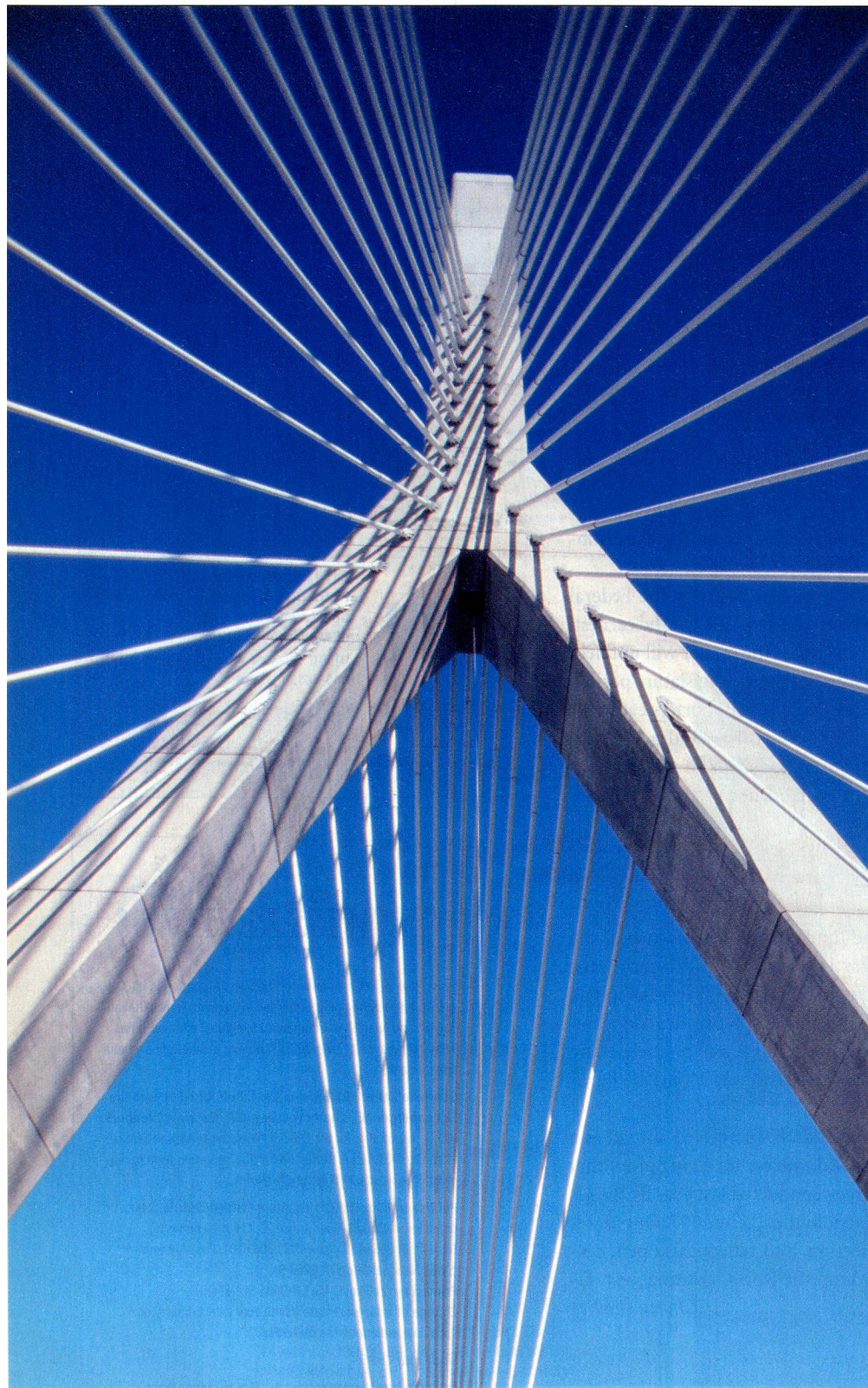
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Swiss architecture: beautifying the world



Heldin / A. Dietrich

Museums, churches, residential and commercial buildings designed by Swiss architects for clients outside Switzerland are among our country's best exports. This boosts the self-image of younger, up-and-coming architects. Architectural design based on the reduction of stylistic device combined with poetic charm is setting a global example.

ROLF RIBI

AT THE END OF HIS VISIT TO CHINA last year, Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin was given the pleasant task of opening the "Work in Progress. Swiss Art of Architecture" exhibition in Shanghai, featuring works by well-known Swiss architects. The main attraction for visitors was a trio of projects in the Chinese capital, Beijing: the design by Basle architects Herzog & de Meuron for the National Stadium for the 2008 Summer Olympics, the futuristic Culture and Sports Centre for the Olympics designed by the Zurich firm of Burckhardt Partners, and the museum of art project designed by Ticino native Mario Botta for the university – three exciting plans by three architects of international repute, all in Beijing. Swiss architecture is in great demand abroad.

"Swiss architects have become international stars," writes publicist Christoph Allen-

The Charles River Bridge in Boston, designed by Christian Menn of the Grisons.

spach in his book "Architecture in Switzerland. Buildings in the 19th and 20th century". He cites several reasons for this: The Pritzker Architecture Prize (regarded as the "Nobel Prize" of architecture) was awarded to Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron in 2001. This award "also honours Swiss architecture, which has attracted increasing acclaim in recent decades." The international press repeatedly reports on Swiss architects and their striking designs for projects such as the Tate Gallery in London (Herzog & de Meuron), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Mario Botta) and the Museum of Fine Art in Bregenz (Peter Zumthor).

Arguments for success

Martin Steinmann, Professor of Architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, believes that contemporary Swiss architecture enjoys such high regard abroad primarily because it is a "group phenomenon that draws attention to itself". Switzerland boasts a swathe of first-class architects who are making an international name for themselves with their plans, projects and buildings. These bear the signature of Mario Botta and Luigi Snozzi, Jacques Herzog and Roger Diener, Peter Zumthor and Theo Hotz, Mike Guyer and Annette Gigon, to name but a few members of this avant-garde group.

The first major breakthrough was achieved in the 1980s by Ticinese architects, led by Luigi Snozzi, an authority on urban architecture, and Mario Botta, an internationally renowned architect. Basle-based Roger Diener is regarded as the co-founder of a sober, honest architectural style: the New Simplicity. In recent years Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron of Basle have become global players whose strongly individualistic projects are much in demand worldwide. But Swiss nationals living far from their home country are also scoring successes in the international architectural business: for example, Bernhard Tschumi in New York, Max Dudler in Germany, and Remo Riva in Hong Kong.

Small wonder, then, that Swiss architects tread the world stage with such self-confidence. This has helped to boost the self-image of younger architects, all of whom benefit from a first-class education at Federal Institutes of Technology and Swiss universities of applied sciences, where they not only hone their creative skills but also study the

technological and economic aspects of architecture. The faculty chairs of our universities are occupied by leading names in contemporary architecture.

As Professor Steinmann explains, one special quality and strength of modern-day architecture is the "reduction of architectural style". "The Swiss mentality tends towards succinctness of expression, rationality of design, and a passion for construction, realism and pragmatism," says Christoph Allenspach. But this by no means excludes poetic charm and sensuality. Rather, it facilitates and promotes them.

The success of Swiss architects abroad has also been helped by access to global markets. "The opportunity to work abroad is enormously important for us. It forces us to take a fresh look at our own work, and we receive an important stimulus from abroad," says architect Mike Guyer. By the same token, the architectural scene in Switzerland is influenced by major foreign names like the French architect Jean Nouvel (Culture and Congress Centre in Lucerne), Italian architect Renzo Piano (Beyeler Museum of Art), Americans Richard Meier and Frank O. Gehry, and the Spaniard Santiago Calatrava.

Herzog and de Meuron: megastars

Currently, the best-known global players of Swiss architecture are Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron (both born in Basle in 1950). The projects produced by the 130 members of this creative workshop and design factory on the banks of the Rhine regularly win international acclaim. When the Basle architects received the Pritzker Architecture Prize three years ago, the jury in Los Angeles cited their "inventive, aesthetic architecture that combines economy of means with pristine detailing and craftsmanship." One of the most fascinating aspects of the work of Herzog and de Meuron is "their capacity to astonish".

The great quality of these architects, according to Benedikt Loderer, editor-in-chief of "Hochparterre", is their "inventiveness". "We do not offer a style. We offer thinking models," explains Pierre de Meuron. The Basle duo emphasises the sensuality of materials and talks of poetic images in architecture. Their projects "evoke mood and poetry through radical innovation," says publicist Christoph Allenspach. Added to this, they skillfully incorporate works by renowned artists in their work.

Herzog and de Meuron achieved their major breakthrough with the construction of the Tate Gallery of Modern Art in London, whose collection of contemporary and modern art is on a par with the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The Swiss architects won a major international invitation to tender to convert a former power plant in the little-known London borough of Southwark, on the south bank of the River Thames, into a gigantic temple of art. Expert critics widely praised the successful interplay of Old and New, using the former turbine hall as the main attraction (it is as high as the tallest cathedral in England).

In addition to many other high-profile projects, Herzog & de Meuron are building the Olympic Stadium in Beijing, with seating for 100,000 spectators. In the summer of 2008 this new Beijing landmark will be the venue not only for Olympic track and field athletics events, but also for the opening and closing ceremonies. Even now, Jacques Herzog claims that "The stadium will become a Beijing icon."

Botta, the most famous

When one considers the entire body of work he has produced over the past three decades or more for projects at home and abroad, coupled with the body of literature on his work, Mario Botta (born in 1943 in Mendrisio, Ticino) is undoubtedly the most famous Swiss architect of our time. In 1965, after completing his studies in Venice, he worked in the architectural office of Le Corbusier. During the 1970s and 1980s a group of Ticino architects joined Luigi Snozzi and Mario Botta to found the "Ticino School", an internationally acclaimed atelier which focused on the relationships between buildings and their urban environment. Architecture is always "the formal expression of the awareness of an age," explained Mario Botta. Since 1996, thanks primarily to Mario Botta, the Ticino has even had its own university of architecture: the Accademia Ticinese Architettura.

The Ticino artist achieved world fame with the construction of the cathedral in Evry near Paris and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Opened in 1995, this museum boasts two distinctive features: on the exterior, a distinctive geometric design with central tower, and in the interior, a lofty atrium. "I wanted to make something strong,

to emulate the architects of the Renaissance.” For Botta, an admirer of Le Corbusier, natural light was the most important element for the interior.

In addition to high-profile projects and grandiose ecclesiastical buildings, Mario Botta regularly designs small, tranquil works. “Botta is an artist in the Baroque sense of the word. His buildings exude dignity and the charm of the South. With generous gestures, he prepares a rich menu based on surprising spatial sequences and inventive use of light,” writes author Christoph Allenspach.

Zumthor, the quiet artist

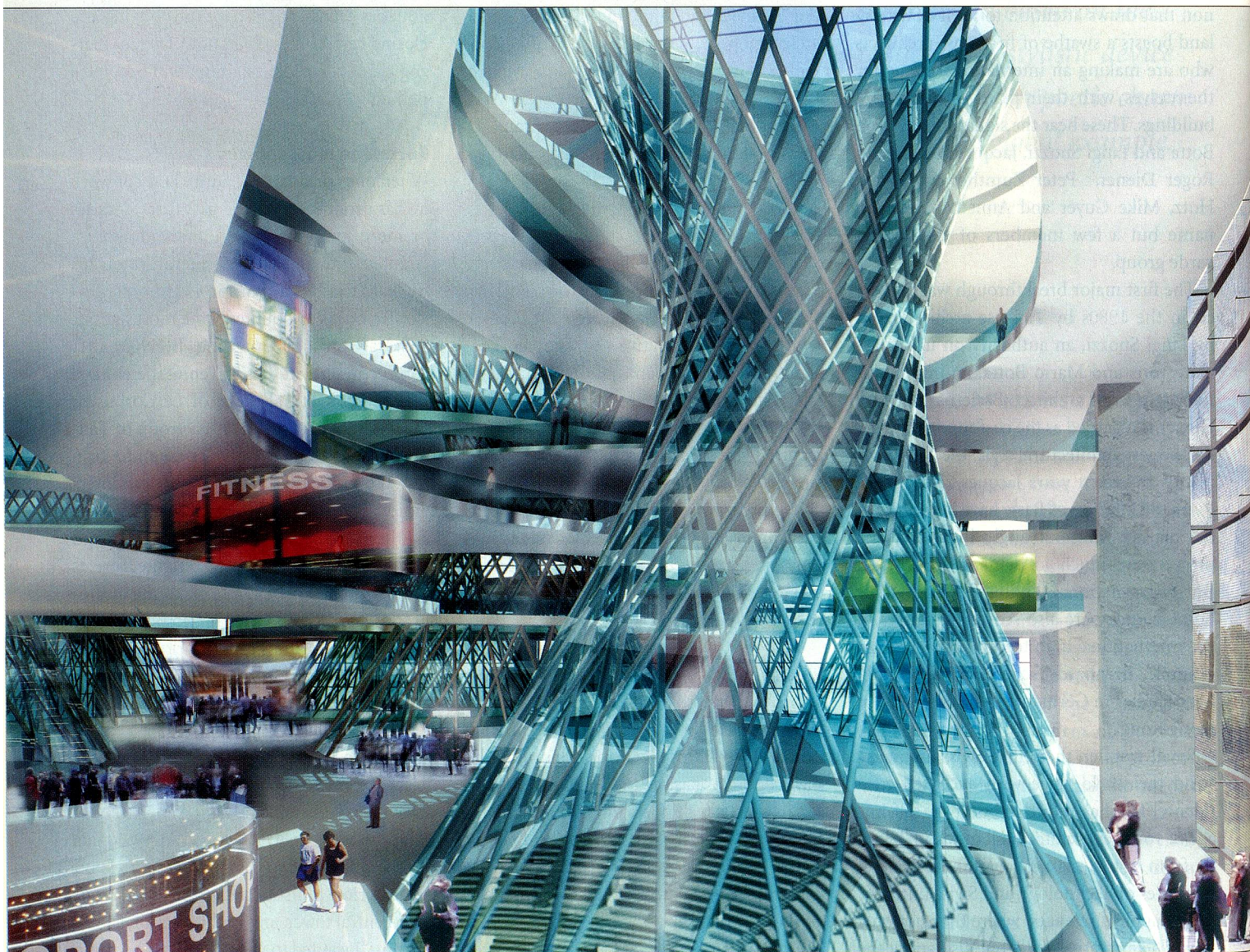
Peter Zumthor (born in Basle in 1943) goes his own way. Working from his base in Hal-

denstein, Grisons, his “architectural manufactory” and body of work is smaller than other great names in the sector. He finds the process of drafting and refining tedious. “I let the images which are in me take hold. I do not approach the work of designing via the path of thinking. When I work I mainly go where my fancy takes me. It is a process of great naivety.”

Zumthor, who at one time wanted to be a composer, has already been called an “essentialist of the sensual”. When one looks at his work, whether it be in Switzerland in the form of the Sogn Benedegt Chapel in Sumvitg or the thermal spa in Vals, or abroad in the form of the Bregenz Art Gallery or the “tonal elements” in the Swiss Pavilion at the World Fair in Hanover, one encounters at

first glance an ascetic. His buildings appear stern and abstract. Peter Zumthor’s response to this is: “As objects, buildings frequently appear hard but also self-aware and proud. By contrast, they have warmth in the interior. The mood must be gentle. Architecture is always somewhat maternal, always somewhat sheltering.”

These ideas of Zumthor are visualised in the Bregenz Art Gallery. Situated almost directly on the shore of Lake Constance and visible from afar, the modern building of glass, steel and concrete is enclosed in an abstract veil of matt glass panels. “This is my concept of a museum. I believe in the spiritual values of art. I am fascinated by the irrational, the intellectual, and the spiritual,” says Peter Zumthor.



The Wukesong Stadium in Peking: a breathtaking Olympic project by Zurich-based Burckhardt Partners.

Burckhardt+Partner AG

Burckhardt Partners: the element of surprise

In the summer of 2002, when Zurich architects Roger Nussbaumer and Heinz Moser were announced the surprise winners of the bid for the Olympic Stadium in Beijing, the reaction was tremendous. Even Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Deiss congratulated the architectural firm of Burckhardt Partners on the success of its futuristic project. The Swiss architects have designed a quadrant of 1.6 kilometers in length, on which the "Beijing Wukesong Cultural and Sports Center" with ten stadia is to be constructed.

The core and hallmark of the complex is a cube measuring 130 meters long and 70 meters high, embedded in a crater. Inside, it houses a basketball stadium with seating for 18,000, above which are nine levels of shops, hotels and a congress centre. One unique feature is the hanging screen panels which are transformed into gigantic screens by means of state-of-the-art light diode displays relaying stadium events to hundreds of thousands of spectators on the outside. "The project is a high-tech challenge for the Chinese nation," says Roger Nussbaumer.

Over the past five years, Burckhardt Partner's architects have won significant bids at home and abroad. But the two top designers still have a major dream to realise – a 160-meter-high, virtually transparent glass tower in the Chinese metropolis of Shanghai for the 2010 World Exhibition.

Menn, the bridge-builder

Decades after the famous bridge engineer Othmar Ammann, another Swiss bridge-builder is making an international name for himself. In Boston on the east coast of the USA, 76-year-old Christian Menn from the Grisons has built the city's new landmark: the Charles River Bridge, which will open to traffic in 2004. With ten lanes, the elegant 227-meter-long construction is the widest suspension bridge in the world. The two towers, in the form of an inverted "Y", rise 90 meters into the sky. The white steel cables span only the central section of the bridge, and are fastened between the lanes at both landward ends. The bridge is part of a gigantic urban renovation project.

Bridge-builder Christian Menn has long been famous among Swiss nationals. Menn has collaborated as designer, builder and expert on virtually all important bridges built in Switzerland over the past four decades.

Famous architects of the past

History also has its share of famous Swiss architects: Francesco Borromini, Domenico Trezzini, Le Corbusier and the bridge-builder Othmar Ammann.

Together with Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Francesco Borromini (1599-1667), born in Bissone on Lake Lugano, was regarded as one of the leading architects of Roman Baroque. Borromini left his mark of craftsmanship on many Roman churches and palaces in the 17th century. For visitors to the Eternal City, the palace church of Sant'Agnes in Piazza Navona, the university church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza and the church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane are familiar sights.

Domenico Trezzini (1670-1734), born in the Ticino alpine village of Astano, was the first architect of the city of St. Petersburg, founded 300 years ago by Tsar Peter the Great. In 1703 the Russian ruler invited the Ticino architect to the new city arising on the banks of the River Neva. Domenico Trezzini worked as municipal architect for three decades and constructed the first architectural landmarks of St. Petersburg. His masterpiece is the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in early Russian Baroque style.

Speaking on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Le Corbusier's birth in 1987, Ticino architect Mario Botta claimed that the famous Swiss architect was "the very embodiment of 20th-century architecture". "He had the genius to capture the moods of history and his time and transform them into architecture." Born Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, Le Corbusier grew up in the watch-making town of La Chaux-de-Fonds in the Swiss Jura, and in 1917 moved to Paris. In 1922 he developed the concept for a city with three million inhabitants and in 1935 published his town planning concept, "La Ville radieuse". The "Unité d'Habitation" in Marseille was an important experiment in mass housing. Among Le Corbusier's late works is the pilgrimage church of Notre-Dame-du-Haut in Ronchamp, France.

Another architect who achieved worldwide fame was bridge-builder Othmar H. Ammann (1879-1965) of Schaffhausen. After emigrating to America as a young engineer, he constructed the George Washington Bridge over the Hudson River in New York. Le Corbusier regarded the suspension bridge, which is over 1000 meters in length, as "the most beautiful bridge in the world". Later, as a consultant engineer, he collaborated on the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. In 1964, shortly before his death, he opened his largest and most stylish work in New York: the Verrazano Narrows Bridge between Brooklyn and Staten Island, with load-bearing steel towers as high as seventy-storey skyscrapers. The American-Swiss architect was denied his last project for a 1439-meter-long suspension bridge over Geneva's harbour: the plans still lie dormant in the drawers of Bernese bureaucracy. RR

Sweeping concrete arcs over Grisons valleys, monumental motorway ramps in Giornico and above Mesocco, and the Sunniberg Bridge in the Prättigau, completed in 1998, bear witness to his engineering skills.

Despite the beauty and elegance of his constructions, Menn does not regard himself as an engineering artist. "What counts in bridge construction is a physical aesthetic that transcends the static." He believes the relationship of the construction with its surroundings plays as important a role as the construction itself. He will also be applying these principles to his next prestigious project: the renovation of the Peace Bridge over the Niagara River, near Niagara Falls.



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Translated from German