**VERENA HUBER**

# Da Riehen alla Siberia

**Sabine von Fischer in conversation with Verena Huber, Oerlikon, 30 December 2021**

**Sabine von Fischer:** Verena Huber, one thing that comes through in your works is a great deal of curiosity. You're assiduous about maintaining your international contacts. When did that interest in foreign countries begin?

**Verena Huber:** Very early, when I was a child: I grew up during the war years. The house I lived in with my elder siblings is close to the German border. To this day, I know exactly where the barbed wire was laid around Riehen. Once, my brother lifted me high up over the barbed-wire fence and said: "There you are, now you've been abroad." Then, after the war ended – it was in May 1947, on the birthday of the German dialect poet Johann Peter Hebel – the borders around Basel were slowly reopened. We went looking for the people we'd known before the war. My sister found the woman who'd been our domestic help back then. I was too young to go along at the time.

**SvF:** But later you often went abroad.

**VH:** We all wanted to know what Europe looked like. While I was studying at the School of Applied Arts, I travelled to Paris, London, Athens, Berlin and Rome.

**SvF:** How much of your work is Swiss, and how much do you see as part of international traditions?

**VH:** I'm Swiss, but the international connections are part of who I am. My great-grandfather was one of the first missionaries in India. My grandfather was born in Switzerland but then he went to India too, as head of the Basel Mission Press in Mangalore. My father was born in India and came to Switzerland when he was four. I've always been proud of those roots.

**SvF:** So would you say you're both Swiss and a citizen of the world?

**VH:** Yes, definitely. Internationally, I've always been clear that I'm a Swiss citizen representing my country. Other countries have become more bureaucratic, but here we've always had a lot of freedom, professionally too. As a Swiss citizen, I've been a member of the European Cultural Parliament for more than a decade. Interacting with the people there is great, and it's also enabled me to do a lot of travelling. I've met people and invited them here, networked with them and often been invited by them.

**SvF:** You were an early advocate of dialogue with designers abroad, firstly on the board and then for four years as President of the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI). What do you find so fascinating about it?

**VH:** I want to understand other cultures and see how

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Eidgenössisches Departement des Innern EDI
Département fédéral de l'intérieur DFI
Dipartimento federale dell'interno DFI
Departament federal da l'intern DFI
**Bundesamt für Kultur BAK**
**Office fédéral de la culture OFC**
**Ufficio federale della cultura UFC**
**Uffizi federal da cultura UFC**

they all fit together. It's not like my ancestors: I don't want to be a missionary. I much prefer to understand without judging. So in that sense, I regard my work in societies and associations as a creative act.

**SvF:** How have your travels influenced your work?

**VH:** I've become more open: my travels have been part of what I do. I've always combined the professional with the private. When we went on our study trips, we always stayed with our colleagues and friends because we didn't have much money – and we did the same again later, with the IFI. That's how I learnt how people in other places live.

**SvF:** You studied under Willy Guhl at the School of Applied Arts. What was that like for you?

**VH:** It was said of Willy Guhl that he liked "hayseeds" whom he could shape from the ground up. It was through him in school that they learned about the modern world. He couldn't do that with me: I'd already spent my entire childhood in a modern environment. I was interested in different and broader perspectives. For Guhl it was clear that you work from what's simple. I couldn't always go along with that, I had to think further ahead.

**SvF:** What other personalities do you remember from your student days?

**VH:** I remained very close to Kurt Thut, whom I really valued as a teacher, until the end of his life. But I never quite subordinated myself to the school's approach. My goal was to combine intellectual interest with practical design. While I was studying at the School of Applied Arts I attended lectures at the university and the ETH, and during the summer holidays I did an internship in Berlin. Even so, Guhl wanted to keep me on as an assistant after I finished. But I wasn't keen. After I graduated, I went abroad and spent a year working at a firm of architects in Copenhagen.

**SvF:** You were the only one in your year who grew up in an early modern house. The Hackberg house in Riehen was built in 1928 to plans by Paul Artaria and Hans Schmidt as a steel frame construction, and is an example of the Swiss avant-garde in architecture. Were your family criticised for that radically modern approach?

**VH:** I can't recall. I took it for granted, I grew up in it: the yellow walls were my walls, the grey doors with black frames were my doors. For me, the big dining room with the various utility zones and the little living room with the piano and radio made it a wonderful place to live; you find the same arrangement here in my apartment in Zurich-Oerlikon. It never bothered me that the Hackberg house was poorly insulated. I always loved the ice crystals at the top of the windows in the corridor: the grown-ups had to lift me up so I could see them better. When it was really cold we had to go to the nearest public toilet, because the waste pipe at home would be frozen. That was just how things were. I was also influenced by the fact that I started school during the war and my first year of school was taught in the air raid shelter. Others who didn't live so close to the danger of war didn't experience that. It's something that's often interested me: what's it like, and what does it do to people?

**SvF:** Your attachment to your parents' house also comes through in your archive. What's become of it?

**VH:** Unfortunately, the house was sold. My mother was my father's second wife, so I was the newcomer amongst six siblings. Because the house had been commissioned during the first marriage, I didn't inherit a share of it and I wasn't given a say in how it was refurbished. The renovation by my brother Benedikt, who was a professor at the ETH in Zurich, took the state of the architecture after completion as its reference point, and transformed the house into a kind of museum. Both the new owner and my brother understood the house differently from me. The house as we lived in it exemplifies an architecture of modesty.

**SvF:** Is modesty important to you in your own designs?

**VH:** Simplicity certainly is. For me, modesty is a different category. Someone wrote about me in the gazette ZFV-Unternehmungen. that I had a "love of the simple".

**SvF:** Do you think that's accurate?

**VH:** I'd say so, yes. But simplicity isn't always modest. It can be opulent in terms of materials, for instance. Look (*points to the portrait in the gazette and laughs*), I've still got that brooch and that pullover.

**SvF:** You've also often written that interior design is "the face of the room", in which everything comes together: user-friendliness and the ambiance, the appropriateness of the materials and the aesthetic, as you put it in your text on the Hotel Seidenhof. In your explanatory text on the conversion and redesign of the SBB boats, you write that you should be able to feel the experience of nature on a boat trip even when you're inside. Where did that idea come from?

**VH:** For me, travelling on a boat across a lake was about being on holiday. When I went on holiday with my mother – my father had died when I was six – she always crafted the route into an adventure. We only ever went on holiday in Switzerland back then: we travelled part of the way by train and then switched to a boat or post bus. I used the same strategy on my travels through Europe. Designing the SBB boats in the 1990s – three for navigation on Lake Constance and three for Lake Zurich – those were major projects. The boats are still operating today. When I got those commissions, I wanted to bring out that sense of adventure, that capacity for experience. On the Lake Constance boats we achieved that with the art of Rosmarie Vogt. On the Lake Zurich boats we used the materials and stairwells like large steam chimneys to set the tone.

**SvF:** Capacity for experience is a good way of putting it. You've also described interior design as an interface and hinge between architecture and human beings.

**VH:** Yes, that definition was an important moment for me. It was in 1967 at the IFI conference in Amsterdam. A Dutch theorist had designed a graphic to represent it. I thought, exactly, that's it, that describes what we do. People were always saying that a house's interior is different from its exterior. But that's just not true! It's the scale that's different. Interior design operates on the scale that is closest to people. That meant I could always apply myself to the interior design. The human being is the user, the use is the starting point, and perception matters.

**SvF:** Has that idea of interior design as mediator between house and human being vindicated your practice?

**VH:** My practice, my teaching, everything in fact.

**SvF:** One of your early furniture designs was commissioned in 1967 by a magazine. It shows the "Flair-Boy", once as a serving bar on rollers, then in black and white as a sewing table, a desk for a typewriter and a cupboard for children's toys.

**VH:** Unfortunately the magazine was never published, there's only that dummy issue of "Flair". The Flair-Boy is a typical example of a piece of furniture developed for a particular use. Wohnhilfe went on to produce a couple of dozen. I recently gave the prototypes to a child friend of mine. I also developed some other adaptable furniture for Wohnhilfe, shelves and cabinets with various inserts.

**SvF:** The first major projects of your career came about in the 1970s: the Wollenhof in Bern and later Hand-Art in Zurich's old town. In both of them you showed a great deal of initiative.

**VH:** The Wollenhof in Bern was a fairly routine commission for the interior of a shop. The father of Bern's chief architect Urs Hettich was the boss there. He knew me from our research on housing and recommended me. The unique thing about the history of the Wollenhof is the arrangement of the colours: we wanted the entire shelf wall to be organised in accordance with the colour wheel, with the yellow wool next to the yellow cotton and sock yarn, and so on, and not (as normally) with the same types next to each other.

**SvF:** You turned the system on its head, in other words.

**VH:** We got our own way with that one because I offered to pay for the reorganisation if it didn't work. They never reorganised it.

**SvF:** Did that give you the courage to take risks with Hand-Art too?

**VH:** We never considered that. I always used to be annoyed that shops just sold horse's heads to embroider and other ghastly things. So we found that shop on Neumarkt and opened a branch there as a working partnership. The shop is still there today, though it operates under another name. We were able to choose the range ourselves, and we even formulated instructions that were much clearer than the usual knitting instructions. We handed them out free of charge to people who bought the material from us. In the end, we even ran a school at the Schoeller complex, where people could learn textile techniques with a creative element.

**SvF:** You were able to buy wool from your own shop, then.

**VH:** Yes, exactly, *(laughs)* and always on special offer, because nobody wanted green and I really liked it.

**SvF:** Your appreciation of textiles and handicraft generally, direct contact with the material, really comes across in your work and also here in your apartment.

**VH:** That's down to my mother. She was a seamstress, and at home we made everything that involved textiles ourselves; I still can, and I'm happy to pass what I know on to others. My aunt, who built up the Swiss Heimatwerk in Ticino, also played a part. She brought a culture into the family that I felt very much at home with. When we worked on the holiday village for Swiss Federal Railways staff in Scuol (inaugurated in 1980, now the Reka holiday village), we used Ticino chairs of a kind I'd known in my childhood. They were made by the carpenters from Ticino whom I knew through my aunt.

**SvF:** The holiday village in Scuol also combines the themes of modesty and simplicity with art. What sparked the idea?

**VH:** There again, it was memories of holidays from my childhood: we had less comfort when we were on holiday than we did at home. I drew on that for the design. The artistic element wasn't ostentatious: we hung the covers of "Beobachter" magazine adorned with Swiss art in the holiday apartments. Incidentally, Scuol was the project site furthest from my office. Outside Switzerland I've only designed things, I've never been able to execute them.

**SvF:** In 1980 you made your first trip to what was then the Soviet Union. How did that come about?

**VH:** I attended an interdisciplinary workshop in Tbilisi, Georgia; it was during the Brezhnev era. Back then, in the East, you had to go looking for handicrafts; you never saw anything lying around on the street. You only found them in museums, and production was heavily industrialised.

**SvF:** But there, as in Switzerland, you were interested in the traces of use. Was your interest in how people lived there a continuation of your residential construction research in Switzerland?

**VH:** The research on housing goes back a long way. I was involved in a working group for the federal government's residential construction research commission as part of the Swiss Werkbund. That led to my 1977 publication "Fundamentals of the Selection and Use of Apartments". My work with the research commission went a bit further, and I developed new interests and things such as travelling. And those interests also flowed into my work at the Technikum in Winterthur (now the Zurich University of Applied Sciences): I always encouraged the students to examine closely the situation they were confronted with. We visited a lot of places and talked to the people involved.

**SvF:** The workshop in Tbilisi was a high point for

you. Your drawings combine old wood construction techniques and prefabrication. The mediation between scales that you talked about earlier is evident there.

**VH:** We analysed traditional and modern construction techniques and linked them together. I think it's one of my most exciting projects: it's design and documentation in one. Yuri Soloviev, the head of the Soviet design institute (VNIITE), made it possible for the 1980 workshop to be opened up to members of other associations on an interdisciplinary basis. The French architect Pierre Vago, who had set up a coordinating group for non-governmental organisations in the field of man-made environment (COG, since disbanded) two years earlier, was brought on board to lead the seminar. We were asked to design a community centre and stops for public transport, an outdoor area and green zones for a planned satellite city with a population of 17,000. We had to come up with analyses, concepts and designs.

**SvF:** Why wasn't the project implemented?

**VH:** For political reasons. It came at a time when many things were being centralised from Moscow. We don't exactly know. In any event, Tbilisi airport now bears the name of the planned satellite city: Lochini.

**SvF:** In Zurich, you designed a restaurant with Russian motifs long before the East became trendy here. Were you ahead of your time?

**VH:** I probably was, yes. We opened the Troika restaurant in 1996, but the business was a flop. The Troika was my chance to design a Russian-themed interior. It was at Amtshaus 5, which was built in 1934 at the time of "Red Zurich", when pro-Russian sentiments were widespread. So the café on the ground floor was named "Troika". The engineer Robert Maillart was responsible for the big sliding windows. When the café was redesigned in 1954, it referenced Russian folk art with a mural by Alois Carigiet and a panelled ceiling based on old Russian picture arches. When we were called in, in 1996, we created a design that respected and preserved the interior. We also referenced the Russian avant-garde with the colour scheme, a signet by Eva Leuba and artistic window curtains by Vrendli Amsler. It was commissioned by the Zurich Women's Association, which was still alcohol-free at the time, and that probably contributed to the commercial failure.

**SvF:** Then you later discovered that you had family ties to Tbilisi. What did you find out?

**VH:** That I had a great-aunt in Georgia! My eldest brother mentioned it after I came back from my first trip there. That got me interested, and I began researching it on an almost professional basis. Amongst the family documents, I found envelopes with Cyrillic writing on them that bore my great-aunt's address. And I found drawings of a residential house in Georgia that piqued my interest in inhabited spaces. Those treasures and handwritten letters sparked my curiosity. The drawing was my great-aunt illustrating the first place she lived in Georgia, in around 1875, to her younger brother, who was my grandfather. The last letters describe how an elderly widow lived in Tbilisi (Tiflis at the time) in the 1920s, when Georgia was part of the Soviet Union. Thanks to the envelopes, I was able to find the house on a later visit, and became friendly with the people who live there now.

**SvF:** Your archive gives equal status to your own designs, the photos of your parents' house and your travel diaries. When do you decide between observing and designing?

**VH:** They belong together: perception is my starting point and inspiration.

**SvF:** Observation became the key element in the "Open Doors" project, where your understanding that interior design is a sociological project comes through especially clearly. Is that how you see it too?

**VH:** I think you can put it that way, yes. "Open Doors – how do we live, how do others live?" started after my interior architecture practice closed. It enabled me to channel the energy that had been freed up. I'd presented the idea in 2004 at a meeting of MitOst, an association for networking and exchange between active citizens and players in Western and Eastern Europe. The participants were the countries whose representatives expressed an interest. Living situations were documented with students at universities. The key was provided by our Swiss core working group: Martin Bölsterli as set designer, Susanne Rock as architect and housing expert, and me. We turned it into an exhibition that fitted into two transport crates, which we then travelled around with on public transport in 2005, visiting ten countries and venturing as far as Siberia. It was a great success. Later on, we wondered what had become of the houses and the people who lived in them. We visited them again in 2017 and documented the changes in a book. "Open Doors" is an exhibition project that brought a lot of people together, and I learned a lot from the linking up of different working groups. I've always enjoyed bringing people together, and those networks still exist to this day.

**SvF:** When I open the book on "Open Doors", I think: houses stay the same, people change, families get bigger or smaller. Do houses need to become adaptable or more flexible in response to changed life situations?

**VH:** Houses have always been adaptable. Photos of living situations are mostly published when new architecture or trendy interiors are involved. But that rarely reflects the way people actually live, which is mainly influenced by life and biographical changes. It's much more stable over time than people suppose.

**SvF:** Are you interested in the traces of use more than the form?

**VH:** Use is the starting point, the traces don't come till later. The world of form as such has never greatly interested me; I'm interested in the content. If form were all that mattered, in most cases I wouldn't have been able to get involved – in that respect I've often been closer to my

Russian friends than my Swiss colleagues. I'm interested in people, their traditions, their history, where they come from and where they go next.

**SvF:** Were you really so surprised to receive the Swiss Grand Award for Design?

**VH:** It was genuinely a shock. I've never sought an award like this, and never viewed the aesthetic as the goal of my work. I think I shouldn't just be measured by the aesthetic value of my products but also by the evolution of a project. So I'm delighted that a different way of thinking has been recognised.

**SvF:** Thinking in processes, then?

**VH:** Yes, a way of thinking that isn't just focused on the product. It's always about understanding what's already there. And then about which intervention to choose in order to write the next chapter of the history.

Sabine von Fischer is the author and editor of several books, most recently *Das akustische Argument*, gta Verlag 2019. For the feature section of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, she was in charge of architecture and design from 2019 to 2022.