

Capturing the Present in Exhibition Design

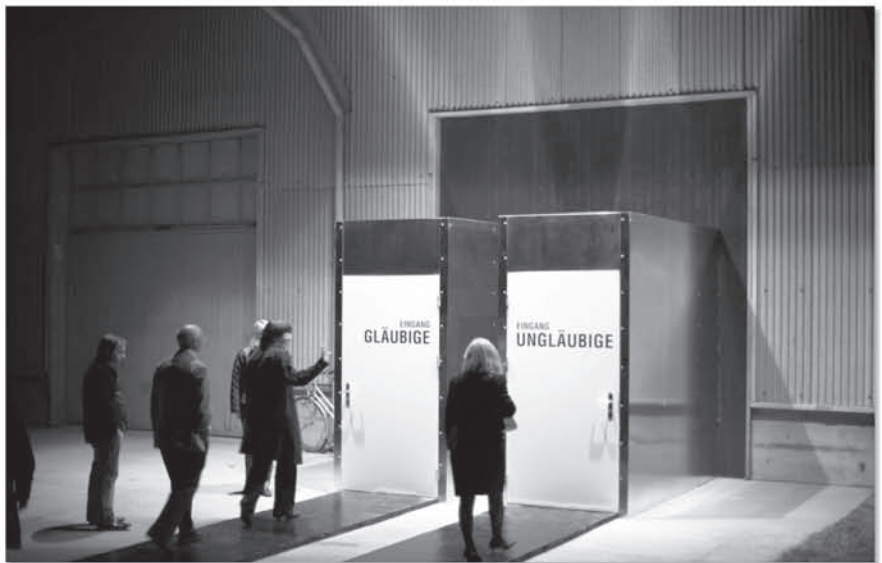
by Beat Hächler

Imagine yourself after a long, exhausting day at work. You have been attending meetings, spending hours on the phone, working on concepts, and right now, you would actually love nothing more than to go home. But you promised your friends to join them in Lenzburg, a small town near Zurich, to visit the exhibition ***A Matter of Faith: An Exhibition for Believers and Non-Believers***. Arriving in Lenzburg, signposts guide you through an anonymous residential area that could be located anywhere between Milan and Stockholm. Finally, you stand on the site of a former arsenal of the Swiss Army: no museum for miles around, only old arsenal buildings with tightly closed doors and a huge tarmac car park.

But before you realize what you are actually doing here, the exhibition is already asking you to make a decision: Which one of the two doors do you want to enter: the entrance for believers on the left or the entrance for non-believers on the right? What do you do now? Do you discuss the meaning of *believin'* and not *believin'* in our secular times? Are you annoyed that you can't choose a third door? Or are you a fast decider who doesn't have to think for long because you know what's right? As soon as you make your decision and enter one of the two doors, you cease to be solely a visitor of this exhibition and turn into its content as well. By choosing one door, you expose part of yourself, thereby becoming an *object of exhibition*. At the entrance desk, you receive a USB-data stick by way of a ticket which you can wear around your neck like an amulet, making you clearly visible as a believer or non-believer to your fellow visitors. Of course, not everyone accepts the stigmatization of all visitors as believers or non-believers. Some visitors have tried to negate

this visualization by hiding their amulets in their trousers or jackets. But a hidden amulet is a statement as well, so nobody could really escape the playing rules of the social space, called exhibition.

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Believer or non-believer? The double entrance to the exhibition demands a statement. No coming-in without a coming-out. Photo courtesy of Stapferhaus Lenzburg.

The example of the entrance concept is just a small example of how the *Stapferhaus Lenzburg* conceives its exhibition work, and it also shows the methods we apply as well as the impact we achieve with our exhibitions focused on topical subjects. The *Stapferhaus Lenzburg* is named after Philipp-Albert Stapfer, an 18th century minister of arts and education in the government of the new-born Napoleonic Helvetic Republic after 1798. What kind of institution is this—a museum which strives to represent the present through its exhibitions? And what does it actually mean to *represent the present*?



The amulet-like USB-sticks label all visitors as believers or non-believers. A few refused this stigmatization and hid the stick in their pockets. Photo courtesy of Stapferhaus Lenzburg.

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What Do You Call an Institution such as the Stapferhaus Lenzburg?

To begin with, it is easier to point out what the *Stapferhaus* is not. It's not a museum in the traditional sense. It has no collections; neither is its task to establish a collection. The *Stapferhaus Lenzburg* does not carry out any scientific research and does not restore any objects. It does not even have its own exhibition area. It resides neither in a White Cube designed by a star architect, nor in a historical building attracting numerous tourists, nor in the rooms of a local museum with a long tradition. The projects of the *Stapferhaus* are homeless and of a nomadic existence. We produce our exhibitions in empty spaces—industrial areas, warehouses, arsenals—and only when our exhibitions go on tour (which they usually do) do we also use museum venues. We are not predictable as a physical room, as an envelope, and we actually like it like that, even though it is not always easy to support the uncertainty of having no fixed venues.

Now, what defines the *Stapferhaus* positively as an institution? It is a *transitory place of communication*. It investigates thoroughly and mediates content. Knowledge is sought where it is generated—often in scientific worlds—and translated into a generally comprehensible language made up of words, pictures, sounds,

and spaces. The chosen language is directed at so-called laypersons as well as experts. It is meant to appeal to both groups.

These exhibitions represent temporary thematic places, and I think this is exactly why they are so authentic. Our right to exist is not unlimited but ceases when a project ends. The exhibition *A Matter of Faith* might have something to say about religion and faith in 2007 and possibly also in 2008; further in the future, this space-world will no longer be needed. This also reveals something about the motivation of our visitors. They come to one of our exhibitions because they are interested in its theme; because they are looking for a debate, for communication. The venue comes second—it is part of the content. Exterior and content cannot be separated from each other. During the last few years, the *Stapferhaus* has staged its exhibitions in a wide variety of buildings: an 18th century villa; a former prison; a cardboard factory from the 1960s; a former police headquarters and, already twice, a wooden arsenal hall of the Swiss army. At the moment, we are investigating suitable locations for our next exhibition project, *Nonstop: About the Speed of Life*.

House of the Present and a 'Social Lab'

We explicitly understand ourselves as an institution for representing the present. We don't presume to draw up a picture of the present with historical validity, if this is possible at all. We are satisfied if we succeed in showing a meaningful *snapshot of the present* which can be reflected and discussed. Such a snapshot consciously involves the *visitors as experts of the present*. When entering the exhibition, they don't leave their life experiences at the door. This can mean that we use participatory methods to discern the know-how of our audience during the conception stage of an



The exhibition logo—golden crosshairs with a center that must be filled by the individual. Photo courtesy of Stapferhaus Lenzburg.

exhibition. Or it can also mean that an exhibition is especially designed to interact with the experiences of visitors, or again that the visitors' experiences are integrated step by step into the exhibition. In a house of the present, the human being with his or her personal experiences is the center of attention. *The exhibition turns into a social place*, a 'forum not a temple' (Cameron, 1972), a kind of 'civic laboratory' (Bennett, 2005) or simply a place of communication where meanings and experiences are exchanged and negotiated. This, however, requires a cleverly thought-out conception. The basic lines of the present must be revealed; an abstract, reduced form must be found which not only imitates the present but crystallizes its *essence* so that *reflection* becomes possible. Because reflection means that the visitor can recognize him or herself as a *protagonist of the present*, while at the same time he or she is able to keep a certain distance. Both are difficult to achieve in everyday life. We are so engaged in living, we don't often step back and reflect.

All our exhibition themes in the last years question the values of our society. They refer to contemporary cultural practices, thereby allowing everybody a more or less familiar approach, and they are of a more or less controversial nature. This means that the *theme of an exhibition* must be *negotiable* and *debatable*. Together, these characteristics also lead to another criterion

which we find crucial when choosing a theme: We want to deal with topics that are socially relevant during the time of the exhibition. For example: how religion and faith are lived in a multicultural society.

Individual Approach

The term *Glaubenssache* (*a matter of faith*) has different meanings in German. A *Glaubenssache* is something that one



Three polling stations evaluate the individual visitor's profile of faith. The visitor stores up his answers on his amulet-like USB-stick. Photo courtesy of Stapferhaus Lenzburg.

can believe or not. It qualifies the idea of faith as a universal truth. *Glaubenssache*, however, is also linked to the word *Privatsache* (*a private matter*) which refers to the privatisation of religion and faith during the second half of the 20th century, at least, in Western European societies. The logo of the exhibition—a golden crosshairs

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on white ground—places individual positions as to religion and faith in the center. This center, literally represented as an empty space, must be filled individually. This symbol was present on all flyers and posters, even on the cover of the accompanying book: a punched hole right in the center, just like that used by a *camera obscura* to generate pictures of the world.

In *A Matter of Faith* we focused very strictly on an individualised approach: how individuals in our society, here and now, live their religion. How they deal with their own religiousness in times of advanced secularisation, but also in times of an increasing diversity of faiths. Generally speaking, visitors are invited to play an active role in the exhibition. I would like to point out just two basic principles of this self-activation: self-questioning and exposure.

The Principle of Self-questioning

The confrontation with the two entrance doors requires a decision; if you can't make this decision, you can't enter the exhibition. Self-questioning works in the following on two levels: first with a faith test on computer terminals, and second by a confrontation with nine portrayed persons who are shown repeatedly throughout the whole exhibition.

The faith test is based on a scientific religious-psychological faith structure test of the German theologian Stefan Huber, professor at the University of Bern (2006). It measures faith orientation and intensity, independent of the religious denomination of the test person. An example would be the inclusion of the individual's behavior with regard to prayers and rituals. We had to shorten the test to about 25 questions and adapt its content and language to our needs. However, we were convinced

by the questioning format which concentrates exclusively on one's own position as to religion and faith. Another strength of this test is its interreligious approach: it explores patterns of faith rather than concentrating on the adherence to a specific religious denomination. Unlike scientific applications, we divided the test into three parts: Three times during the exhibition, visitors pass a row of eight golden touch screen polling stations, where people are asked to answer a set of questions in an anonymous, but quite intimate way, comparable to a *bancomat situation* where you enter your banking code secretly. The terminals function like barriers or check-points, 'filtering' the visitors according to their profile of faith. By doing so, the questioning is given a staged rhythm. At the third and last station the computer calculates the result and confronts each visitor with his individual profile.

Five profiles are possible; irreligious; culturally religious; patchwork religious; alternative religious; or traditionally religious. The participants also see how many previous visitors share their profile. The individual result always stays personal and private; we didn't want to expose the results in a direct way. Visitors receive an explanation of what their profile means in the next room at a huge round table with deeper text information about each profile of faith. Of course most of the people check first the content of their individual profile. Thus people who end up at the same segment of the round table realize that they have something in common. After some 40,000 visitors, we observed that almost all of them participated in the test, each spending about 7 minutes to answer all questions, and at the end of the exhibition, more than 95% of them released their data for evaluation. Our visitors showed

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a huge interest in the questions and the results of their own profile of faith. This particularly applied to middle-aged and older people, even though young people are generally much more familiar with computers.

The second element, which works indirectly but equally intensively with the principle of self-questioning, is a sample of nine portrayed persons. Based on the faith test and the five profiles of faith we drew up nine prototypes of varying religiousity, religious affiliation, sex,

flat screens and confronted the visitors with a mirror situation. The interviewed persons and the visitors looked at each other face to face. Other installations showed the same persons praying, at family rituals, at church or together with their objects of faith. They serve as a point of reference for visitors, giving an example of how faith can be lived. They are like a model, a transparency that forces the visitor to reflect his or her own practice. They arouse approval or disapproval and both are equally desired.



Round table conversations in the final room: Visitors who were confronted with their individual religious profiles in the room before meet other visitors with similar profiles in the same segment of the round table. Photo courtesy of Stapferhaus Lenzburg.

and age. We then searched for these persons in reality. In our exhibition, they are shown in several environments or situations. In film or sound installations, for example, we filmed them in a white and pure studio situation while they tried to describe their idea of God. Their statements were presented in a tryptic of

The Principle of Exposure

The second principle is closely linked to the first one but is more dependent on design features. We repeatedly force our visitors to make decisions and to adapt to specific spatial structures. They can't really choose; they have to expose themselves, thereby becoming subjects

The exhibition thereby turns into a communication platform, a social lab, making possible discussions which otherwise hardly ever would occur.

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The exhibition *Glaubenssache* will be displayed in English in the City Museum of Luxemburg, from November 28, 2008 to June 7, 2009. For further information see www.stapferhaus.ch.

of exhibition, as shown in the example of the entrance situation. This principle is applied throughout the whole exhibition.

Depending on the content, visitors are arranged standing, sitting, alone or in groups and thereby staged as well. In the central part of the exhibition, where cultural practices of *believin'* are shown, the exhibition design creates different space proportions: the intimate prayer cubicles hold only two persons; the rooms dedicated to family rituals about six and those showing church services up to 20 people, as if in a chapel. In the section about the clash of faiths, visitors move on a transparent glass floor, which gives them a feeling of groundless uncertainty. At the above-mentioned round table with the five segments illustrating the different types of faith, visitors come together, reframing the society of believers and non-believers. Visitors have reviewed their individual religious profiles in the previous space, and tend to gather at the section of the table representing their profile. On several occasions, this special situation was powerful enough to provoke spontaneous dialogues among visitors in the same faith segment of the table. In guided group visits it was of course easier to work consciously with this situation.

Impact on the Visitor and the Curator

What is the impact that we achieve with this approach? The principle of self-questioning is first of all a performative process of emerging meanings, i.e. the result is not fully controlled by curators but is based on visitors' experience. Self-questioning certainly leads to a high identification with the contents of an exhibition. It is impossible not to relate the content to oneself, provided that one is curious to gain new insights about oneself. The exhibition not only mirrors one's own experiences but *transfers*

these experiences to a new pattern of order.

In our case, this pattern consisted of the five profiles of faith mentioned above. In several instances, during guided group visits, we had traditional Muslims standing side by side with fundamental evangelical Christian believers in the traditionally religious segment of the table. They were surprised to find themselves in the same category in spite of their different religions and their polarised perceptions of the other religion. The construction of self-questioning and re-framing religious difference enabled visitors to see cultural differences with other eyes. Among our visitors 88% appreciated the exhibition as a personal examination and self-reflection, and 59% particularly highlighted the knowledge gain. This implies that the aim and the methods to represent the present were highly accepted.

This exposure touches the sphere of privacy, but the question about one's own faith, which seems to be so private, suddenly becomes coherent and debatable in the artificial surroundings of the exhibition. The exhibition thereby turns into a communication platform, a social lab, making possible discussions which otherwise hardly ever would occur. Just as the visitors not only contemplate but deal with their own biography, the *role of the curators changes* as well. In guided tours, they are now *moderators* among visitors rather than experts with a specialist's knowledge. They must be able to approach multi-religious school classes differently than a group of elderly Catholics. They have to introduce a structure to visitors so that their stories and experiences can become relevant. There must be room for discussions, dialogues, and debates. The result is—not always, but sometimes—a joint reflection about the way the present works. ✨