

Search 1,000+ destinations

Go


Plan Your Trip

Times Picks

Select a Region or Country

HEADS UP

Basel's New Center for Design



Peter Frommenwiler/Bloomberg

A Frank Gehry building on the Novartis corporate campus in St. Johann.

By RATHA TEP

Published: June 1, 2012

ON a brisk Saturday morning in April, a group of young architecture students from Bologna, Italy, walked down a white granite promenade in the St. Johann neighborhood in Basel, Switzerland, to take in 14 “starchitect”-designed buildings that have sprung up in recent years. An opaque glass structure by Yoshio Taniguchi resembled a floating box. A soaring Frank Gehry design of contorted cubes stood just beyond. And over near the large Richard Serra sculptures, a Tadao Ando building converged into a razor-sharp triangular edge.

That a group of art and design geeks would be visiting this corner of northern Basel, which hugs the Rhine River, would have been unimaginable just a decade ago, when it was a gloomy stretch dotted with nondescript office buildings and chemical factories. But the new buildings, part of an ambitious 2.2 billion Swiss franc plan by the pharmaceutical giant Novartis to turn its production facility into a gleaming corporate campus, has drawn curious onlookers to the 50-acre site, where a project by the hometown firm of Herzog & de Meuron is still on its way. (Guided tours by Basel Tourism on select Saturdays, in English for groups of 10 or more, must be booked in advance; 22 francs, or \$23.50 at .95 Swiss francs to the dollar; 41-61-268-68-68; [basel.com](#).)

Improved infrastructure connecting St. Johann to nearby France and Germany, including a new tram line and a 1.5 billion Swiss franc underground highway, has proved a further boon to the neighborhood, attracting businesses at a rapid clip. The most intriguing among them are boutiques and showrooms that have helped the area emerge as the city's latest nexus for big-time architecture, art and up-and-coming local design. This month, Art Basel, the mother of contemporary art fairs, gives the area its stamp of approval with its Art Parcours installations there.

“There weren't any reasons to come here before,” said Rainer Kyburz, who with his brother Tobias formed Rainer & Tobias Kyburz Produktdesign. It is one of 25 young fashion, product and furniture design firms that are part of Stellwerk Bahnhof St. Johann, a creative incubator that opened in the former Bahnhof St. Johann station in 2010.

On a recent visit, **Showroombasel** (Vogesenplatz 1; 41-61-313-40-56; [stellwerkbasel.ch](#)), on the space's airy ground floor, had a deliberately makeshift aesthetic, with display cases made from wooden shipping crates. Items from the artisans tinkering close by included a wall-mounted cardboard light fixture from the Kyburz brothers and multiple-buckle leather belts from Noelle Harris, who studied design at the Swiss shoe firm Bally.

“This area was dead a few years ago; now it's getting a new pulse,” said the fashion designer **Bernadette Koch**. “The city and its culture are heading north.” Ms. Koch opened a store that bears her name (St. Johannis-Vorstadt 23; 41-61-261-37-65; [bernadettekoch.ch](#)) on a narrow street on the neighborhood's southern fringes in 2009, and added a tiny atelier in its cobblestone courtyard in February. Her modern, understated made-to-measure blouses and dresses come in exquisite fabrics — rolls are upended casually about the shop — including hand-drawn silk by the Norwegian artist Mette Stausland.

At **Matrix** (St. Johannis-Vorstadt 38; 41-61-281-54-54; [matrixdesign.ch](#)), across the street, the designer Fabia Zindel displays serving trays and cotton, silk and fine merino wool scarves adorned with boldly colored, geometric silk-screen patterns. When Ms. Zindel was deciding on a space in 2010, she said, she chose this one partly because she liked that other artisans had moved into the neighborhood.

Among them were the fashion designers Gigi Rindlisbacher and Rosita Notter, who opened **Die Zwei** (St. Johannis-Vorstadt 72; 41-61-261-29-04; [rositanotter-gigirindlisbacher.ch](#)) in 2009, a mash-up of atelier in back and showroom up front. Their cool, clean-lined boat-neck tops and pleated skirts vie for attention with a wall of vintage purses that, recently, included a navy blue Karl Lagerfeld clutch.

St. Johann's latest coup — one that puts it firmly on Basel's cultural map this season — is its starring turn in the third edition of **Art Parcours** (June 13 to 17), an official sector of Art Basel that presents site-specific artworks in a different neighborhood each year. “We wanted to bring art outside of the show,” said Jens Hoffmann, the Art Parcours curator and director of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco.

“Historically, St. Johann has been one of the areas of Basel that was leading people in and out of the city,” Mr. Hoffmann said. With a dozen planned pieces by artists like the Cuban group Los Carpinteros, and an installation comprising the former studio of the legendary Swiss artist Dieter Roth, it appears that there are more reasons than ever to stay in the neighborhood.

FACEBOOK

TWITTER

GOOGLE+

EMAIL

SHARE

PRINT

REPRINTS

THE BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL

A version of this article appeared in print on June 3, 2012, on page TR4 of the New York edition with the headline: Basel's New Center for Design.

FACEBOOK

TWITTER

GOOGLE+

EMAIL

SHARE