

“A question of light and place”

A sculptural roof top light installation for the Plaine de Plainpalais in Geneva by Susanne Rottenbacher

The work consists of two perspex corpuses mounted on a metal support structure. Both have a rectangular dimensions of 50 x 25 cm. The larger of the two is 7,5 m long and 3 m deep, the smaller of the two is 1 m long and 1,2 m deep.

On all four sides, varying patterns of parallel running stripes are painted in yellow and amber colours on the translucent perspex. Inside the corpuses two lines of neon lights, yellow in colour as well, are installed - one close to the bottom another close to the top. Unlit, during daytime, the painted structure defines the appearance of the sculptures' translucent bodies. Illuminated, at night, the corpuses appear as solid bodies of emanating yellow and amber. Now the painted stripes function like a rhythmic punctuation in the flow of light.

The sculptures take on a dynamic, progressing form. The larger of the two takes its point of departure in a wider half-circle which embraces the roof's hip. It further extends into an elegantly elongated curve that in its run progresses parallel to the building's facade facing the Square. With some spatial interruption this movement finds its correspondence smaller sculpture. A much tighter half circle with a defined, yet short extension aims back at the larger figure rounds up the installation and completes it.

The shape of the sculpture is determined by its location. It is defined by the architectural particularities of the given roof, by the building, as well as by reflections upon some characteristic uses of rooftop space common to Geneva.

Firstly, there is a playful formal tribute paid to some details of the building's design and its surroundings: The curve echoes an element of stucco design that appears on the facade. The stripe pattern echoes the green and white awnings as well as the grid of the glass pyramid that tops the roof. The open-half circles reference the concrete seating modules surrounding trees, which are one of the most prominent features in the sparse re-design of the Plaine de Plainpalais.

Most importantly however the design of the installation takes into consideration the specific roof design of the building where it is to be located. The installation creates a dynamic link between the chimneys, generating the idea of a visualized dialogue between these formal figures that are the domestic players on the stage, which the light sculptures set out to board. This stage is mainly defined by the roof's slope that is now claimed in almost its entire spatial depth. The larger sculpture's half circle curve draws attention to the side-facade of the building that is part of how the building is perceived from the square. Elegantly conquering the roof as a place, not a mere location, the installation claims its main argument.

Rooftop advertisement in Geneva takes the form of neon writing held in place by airy metal support systems. Formally they extend the facades well above the eaves, thereby creating a state of "dislocation" for themselves. They are not on the facades but above them. They are not on the roofs but in front of them. And they certainly never take into account whatever is happening formally in the space behind them. Such ignorance is intended to fuel the pretence that if not for their metal stilts to ground them they would float in mid-air.

In all reality however the advertisements obstruct the appearance of the buildings and many intentionally ignored architectural predispositions obstruct the appearance of the neon ads.

In dialog with the existing design elements "A question of place" refers to its location with aesthetic precision and highlights the location's particularities with conceptual persuasiveness. It thereby redirects the attention back to the common use of rooftops for neon light features common in Geneva and constructively questions such use of architecture and space. Quite appropriately, when read as a figure, not a form, the installation can be interpreted as a big question mark lavishly reclining on a "rooftop, shout it out!"