



New Interiors for Modern Women's Lives: The Housing Exhibition at SAFFA 1958 in Zurich

Inge Beckel, Independent scholar, hello@ingebeckel.ch

By studying archival documents and conducting oral history interviews, this article shows that the organizers of Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit (SAFFA) 1958, a Swiss exhibition of women's work, not only embraced contemporary modernist stylistic ideals but also suggested new spatial frameworks for contemporary forms of domestic life that could better support women. The exhibition emphasised housing, illustrating options for shaping homes by presenting model apartments and drawing attention to the virtues of homeliness. The exhibition also pushed the idea that women responsible for 'home' in the bourgeois understanding of gender roles should undertake activities outside their home, whether on a voluntary or paid basis.

Keywords: model apartments; show flats; furnishings; modernity; homeliness; critique of technology



Introduction

Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit (SAFFA) 1958, whose title was *Die Schweizerfrau, ihr Leben, ihre Arbeit* (The Swiss woman, her life, her work), was a powerful expression of the growing self-confidence of Swiss women after the Second World War (Frey and Perotti 2022) and the largest public testimony ever given by women professionals in Switzerland. Those responsible for the exhibition demanded women's full private and public participation in modern life.¹

The Bund Schweizerischer Frauenvereine (BSF), the merger of almost all women's associations in Switzerland, had set up a special committee that oversaw the study of public housing and sought women's in-depth perspectives on various issues related to housing. The BSF wanted more women serving on housing cooperative boards and also wanted the experiences and lifestyle habits of all sections of the population to be included in discussions and decisions about projected buildings, settlements and surroundings, as noted by Erika Rikli, president of the Kommission für Wohnbaufragen, in a report to the BSF: 'Als ganz besonders wichtig erachtet es die Kommission, dass beim Wohnungsbau auf die Lebensgewohnheiten, auf die Zusammensetzung und die Lebensgestaltung der Bewohner geachtet wird. Es darf und kann kein allgemein gültiges, stures Schema aufgestellt werden' (1954: 1).

Rikli, the director the SAFFA 1958 exhibition in her capacity as president of the exhibition's organizing committee, was an unmarried suffragette with a doctorate in political economy who was a member of several committees, commissions and other bodies. She thus had a lot of experience in settings where the large majority of decision-maker were men, and she knew full well that they had little knowledge of women's needs and embodied experiences.

Rikli expanded on her vision in the official SAFFA 1958 booklet. She argued that user perspectives in architecture should be built on deep knowledge of many demographics, including women. She explained that the point of the exhibition was not primarily to demand equal rights and status for women (because she did not see that an argument had to be made for such a matter of course) but rather to prove that equality between men and women does not imply they have the same needs, values and experiences or that what they desire or believe in is static: 'Es ging nicht nur um Gleichberechtigung der Frau auf allen Gebieten ..., sondern es ging darum, zu zeigen, dass Gleichberechtigung nicht Gleichheit bedeutet' (1958: 3).

Gender Roles

While, as is well known, most women in the Western world began to lead more liberated lives around the turn of the 20th century, the majority of women in Switzerland were

only able to expand their spheres of action and influence after the Second World War. They increasingly aspired to professional training, and many finally took on jobs outside the household, earning their own money for the first time (Joris and Witzig 1991).

Many young women and men who lived alone in Switzerland in the 1950s were about to furnish their first homes. SAFFA 1958 explored the subject by exhibiting model apartments, or show flats, designed for people living either alone or together in other less traditional family constellations, in addition to ones designed for women who were married and living with husbands and children. These show flats depicted, for example, a young secretary living on her own in a small apartment, Miss Susanne Gerber; a graphic designer, Annelis Merker, who lived and worked in a studio; widowed seamstress, Ursula Kurz, who worked and lived in a three-room flat together with her daughter, Bettina; apprentice Hans Müller, who lived with his parents; student Elisabeth Hermann; who lived in a dormitory; and an elderly widow, Alice Kern, who lived alone. These installations challenged what had long been the norm in Switzerland: extended families that included unmarried or widowed living together in one household.

SAFFA 1958 organizers had also concluded that the type of furniture still typical in many Swiss households was now considered 'old fashioned' and could not meet the needs of modern women. They claimed that the suites of furniture, typically made from wood by carpenters, that married women had been required to bring to their husbands' household in past generations included pieces that were no longer used in Switzerland in the mid-20th century (such as bedside tables); consisted of too many pieces for new, modern apartments and houses; and were also too bulky and too heavy. Overall, the furniture of the past dominated rooms and took up most of their space, making it hard for inhabitants to move around inside.

Owners of modern apartments, as a rule, chose furniture made of metal or glass or opted for synthetic materials. Furthermore, a young person's household budget in the immediate postwar period was small. At that time, furnishing was accomplished with simple, no-frills, adjustable and practical objects (Rüegg 2002). The model apartments displayed at the exhibition aimed to illustrate how one could implement an economical home design by mixing and matching different pieces from different designers or pairing new ones with certain old, inherited pieces. The furniture presented by SAFFA 1958 was elegantly proportioned, space-saving, and flexible. The model apartments were modestly furnished: a bed, a table, chairs, a cupboard — and for artist Merker, working tools. The pieces were not part of a set, and so a single piece could be used later in a different environment or a piece from one set could be combined with one from another set. Individual pieces of furniture tended to be put together the way items of clothing were and could be described as parts of an outfit.² Like the Bauhaus, the

new style presented at SAFFA 1958 was intended to create modern airy environments for modern living. The modernists famously replaced a premodern style with their own; what they proposed was not a general openness to different atmospheres, which ‘normal’ people often mostly like, albeit outside of specialist circles, but a formal style.

Model Apartments

The chief architect of SAFFA 1958 was Annemarie Hsubacher-Constam (1921–2012). She designed a nine-storey tower, ‘Wohnturm’, or ‘residential tower’, as the exhibition’s landmark. When entering the building one was asked to take the elevator — mimicking the American way of life, as elevators were not common at that time in Switzerland — and start the tour from the top. The way down went along a ramp on the outside (Figure 1). While Hubacher-Constam introduced her building in 1958, the Guggenheim Museum in New York designed by Frank Lloyd Wright is considered to be the first ramp-accessed building because even though the museum opened in 1959, sketches of Wright’s project had already been circulating in expert circles for many years.



Figure 1: Annemarie-Hubacher-Constam, SAFFA 1958 tower. Bequest of Hans Hubacher and Annemarie Hubacher-Constam, Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, ETH Zürich Archive.

Model apartments were staged on several floors. The architect of the sixth and seventh floors that featured the dwellings of Müller, Hermann, Merker, and the Kurzes was Beate Billeter-Oesterle (1912–86). An apartment for a couple with the last name of Rüegg, designed by Erika Schläpfer-Thöne (1923–1980), was on the fifth floor. This childless couple worked — theoretically — in the shop below. This apartment had the furniture used in the small model apartments but also had armchairs in the living room area. The apartment of the young Zimmermann family with a six-month-old son named Thomas was on the fourth floor, designed by Martha Huber-Villiger (1926–2017) (Stahel and Angst 2019). The ground floor of the model apartment had a separate room for the child near the entrance, and the bathroom was opposite the main door. At the other end of the apartment was the kitchen and dining room. The relatively large and mainly open space between the dining and the entrance areas was conceived both as a work space and a living space and also served as a bedroom for the couple (Figures 2 and 3). The apartment of the Hauser family, made up of husband Max, an academic, his wife, Annette, and their two daughters, was staged on the third floor, while the apartments for elderly people — the widow Mrs. Kern and the couple Hug — were on the third and second floors, designed by Claire Rufer (1914–1973).



Figure 2: Martha Huber-Villiger, lounge for the Zimmermann model apartment at SAFFA 1958. Bequest of Hans Hubacher and Annemarie Hubacher-Constam, Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, ETH Zürich Archive.

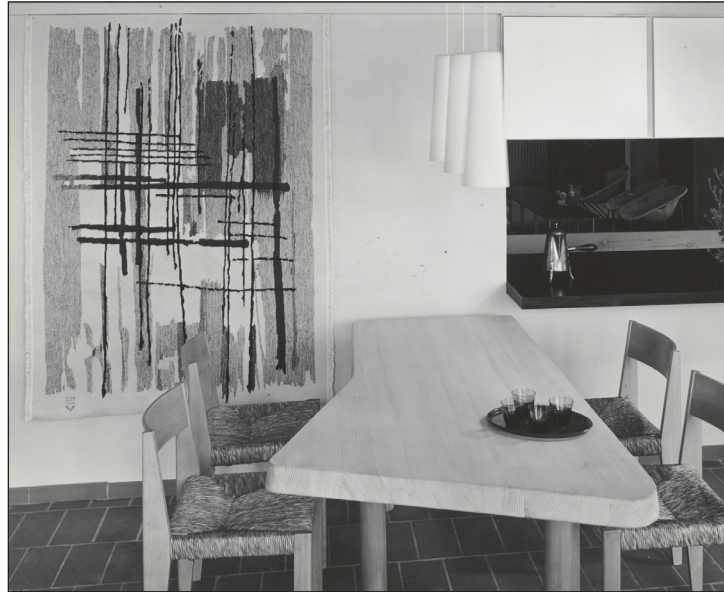


Figure 3: Martha Huber-Villiger, solid fir table (1959), dining chair in steamed beech with straw braid (1955). Bequest of Hans Hubacher and Annemarie Hubacher-Constam, Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, ETH Zürich Archive.

Breed Modern Living

SAFFA 1958 not only wanted to advocate modern living but also to teach people how to furnish their homes in a modern way (Bignens 2002: 180). In an oral-history interview after her death, Martha Huber-Villiger's husband pointed out that he, his wife, and their colleagues had been on a mission to educate the general public about how to dwell and how to lead a modern life.³ The aim was to develop a concept of modern living that could serve as a general guide for people in their everyday lives (Colomina 2007).

The furniture on display in the model apartments of the SAFF 1958 exhibition were largely mass-produced, that is, standardized and industrially manufactured objects that could be purchased from the specialist dealers listed in the exhibition's catalogue. Visitors were thus supplied with advice on how to set up their home and told where to buy what they needed, and so the exhibition had an educational as well as normative character that was represented in a fairly uniform way (**Figure 4**).

Modernity as depicted at the exhibition was not the ageless, generic style of acting and living that its *avante-garde* originally had in mind. Swiss art historian Adolf Max Vogt once contrasted the attitude of seeing one's own period as ageless and atemporal with an approach that views it as *in the continuity of time*, thus bound to an age or an epoch (1955). Premordial modernism had aimed at agelessness but eventually became a time-bound style, albeit a very influential, weighty one.



Figure 4: SAFFA 1958. Creating a new style: modern living. 1. Dining area on a covered balcony; 2. Nursery; 3. Dining and living room. From *SAFFA 1958: Wohnen – habitation – abitazioni* (1958: cover).

Aiming for a Homey World

Because women's primary role in Swiss society in the mid-20th century was to be a housewife and mother, they were thought to give more weight to their homes and living environments. In contrast to SAFFA 1928, the first Swiss exhibition for women's work, presented in Berne, where the thematic focus was women as professionals, the second SAFFA in 1958 highlighted unpaid home work. However, Rikli was emphatic in stating that the woman of tomorrow would not retreat into the 'snail shell' of private life. On the contrary, she stated that 'our living room is the world. Help make it homey!' (1959: 3).

A main exhibit in 1958 was 'Die Line', an artistic-pedagogical installation by the artist Warja Honegger-Lavater (1913–2007), conceived with the theologian and women's rights activist Marga Bührig (1915–2002), who developed the content. It presented a long series of larger-than-life portraits of exceptional women from Swiss history. Putting the emphasis on the contemporary modern part of Swiss history, Bührig declared that the work could be summed up in the word 'Wohnstube' ('living room'). However, the new living room would no longer be surrounded by four walls. According

to Bührig, the living room, rather, was a space wherever women dared to be themselves and take on both private and public responsibilities: 'Das Leitwort dieses Teiles ist die "Wohn-Stube". ... Die neue Wohnstube ist nicht mehr umschlossen von vier Wänden. Sie entsteht überall, wo Frauen es wagen, sie selber zu sein' (1958: 2).

Declarations such as these express an insistence on participating in shaping the world and sharing responsibilities. In addition, they criticize the status quo by implying that the world as it was at the time was not cozy or at least not homey enough. What did Rikli and Bührig think was lacking in their world? To answer this question, we can consider statements made by architects a number of years before SAFFA 1958, since they partly reflect Rikli's and Bührig's views.

Not a Specialist but a Synthesist!

Rikli and Bührig's position can be understood in the context of other critiques of modernism that were voiced in the 1940s. Alvar Aalto, for example, worried about excessive standardization causing 'psychological slums' (PM 1941). In his opinion, which he elaborated on in a 1948 exhibition on his work and that of his wife, Aino (although the exhibition's title only mentioned Alvar and omitted Aino), the architect was not a specialist but a synthesist, since architecture affects all spheres of life (PBV 1948: 44). In commenting on the exhibition, Sigfried Giedion succinctly made the point regarding standardization by saying that architects should not let it become 'master' but keep it as a 'servant' (1948: 269).

In the same year, Danish architect Kay Fisker expressed similar views in an essay published in the Swiss architecture journal *Das Werk*, stating that architecture of the time could be compared to a template; it was narrow, characterized by inner poverty, even inhumanity (1948: 133). In 1958, Swiss engineer and journalist Adolf Ostertag, who worked for the journal *Schweizerische Bauzeitung*, wrote thoughtfully that arrogance would tempt people to only believe in rationality, a cool masculine idea that would, as Ostertag put it, erase all feminine warmth, eradicating nurturing and caring sentiments from our consciousness (O[stertag] 1958: 715). While Ostertag was not thinking of SAFFA 1958 when he wrote these words, his social criticism paralleled Rikli's and Bührig's warnings.

Were these critiques progressive or backward-looking? In technically oriented circles, the attitude of the Scandinavian architects and Ostertag as well as the SAFFA curators probably was seen as the latter. But in other circles, which include thinkers such as Swiss architects René Haubensak, Manuel Pauli and Beate Schnitter from the Zurich urban planning work group Zürcher Arbeitsgruppe Städtebau (ZAS) (Beckel 2000: 3), they were viewed as correctives, in their embrace of holism, to the potential alienating

quality of modernist housing. Benedikt Huber, Martha Huber-Villiger's husband, was also a ZAS member. Perhaps the view adopted by different circles as to whether the critique was progressive or conservative corresponded to whether they saw themselves as in the flow of time or outside or beyond it (Vogt 1955).

Critique of Technology

'Holistic' thinking in the context of SAFFA 1958 also meant questioning the relevance of technology — not as such but aspects of or sequels to it. In 1958, trade specialist Liselotte Kessler argued that women tried to defend their imaginary worlds, their mental mind and their love of humanity, against the background of soulless mechanization — comparable or understood as human *reduit* on a mechanical battlefield: 'Die Frau versucht, sich mit der seelenlosen Mechanisierung abzufinden, daneben aber ihre kleine Welt der Phantasie, des Gemüts und der Liebe zum Menschen zu verteidigen — gewissermassen als menschliches *Réduit* auf mechanischem Kampfgebiet' (1958: 33). Kessler added that the women of SAFFA 1958 wished to show their husbands other values, different from those that only focused on 'technical ability', values needed by all people at all times.

Rikli made similar points. She noted that the hardships of their generation would be felt more deeply by women than men; they intuited more keenly the anxiety and hustle, the turmoil of traffic and noise, the restlessness of the entertainment industry, the lack of reflection and calm. Only reflection could produce 'new products' and new ideas, she argued, concluding that women were less likely to overestimate the wonders of technology or 'dead mechanics': 'Vielleicht erfühlt die Frau die Nöte unserer Generation noch stärker als der Mann? ... Sie unterliegt weniger der Überschätzung der technischen Wunder unserer Zeit, der toten Mechanik' (1958: 3).

Hubacher-Constam also addressed what she saw as the needs of her time in a 1956 lecture (Walther 1990: 6). The focus of the SAFFA 1958 exhibition program, she said, would probe what she described as a mental health crisis and urge women to remain positive in the face of this crisis. Lore Wyss, a journalist who worked for a time for the exhibition's press office, was asked by an architectural journal in the summer of 1958 whether the exhibition had a cultural policy, to which Wyss responded that it did, a policy that amounted to nothing less than a countermovement against the signs of decay of the time: 'Nichts weniger als eine Gegenströmung gegen die Zerfallserscheinungen unserer Zeit soll sie sein' (1958: 244).

While this outlook might sound pessimistic and perhaps suggest the women behind the SAFFA 1958 exhibition had simply been unable to keep up with the times, Bührig insisted that their doubts amounted to neither a diagnosis of general decline nor a proclamation that they should 'go back'. Instead, there was a way forward, she said,

a way that would allow modern women to escape the narrow confines they had fallen into, despite the great possibilities of their time (1958: 2). The furniture shown in the exhibition was designed by the SAFFA 1958 women architects, among others, and later manufactured by furniture factories. This was an example of a way forward.

Final Thoughts – Both/And

Traditional gender ideology represents progress, technique, and speed as inherently ‘masculine traits’, and prudence, soul, mood, and questioning as ‘feminine’. The women who organized SAFFA 1958 did not want to stand in the way of either modernization or technical development but called for complexity beyond technical progress, since technological trends often lead to standardization and constrictions; they wanted both technological advances *and* support for social and human causes.

The aim of SAFFA 1958 was to formulate new environments that corresponded to the housing needs and desires of women, a goal that was informed by the idea that housing and life as a whole are not simple matters. Life does not mean *doing* — it means *being*. Home consists of all facets of life: the good, bad, easy, and difficult. This idea was related to Rikli’s attitude toward gender. The formulation of new environments had to be undertaken on several fronts. First, it called for showing a different kind of woman in the model homes and trying to create the physical framework for a new way of life in which women were more liberated and also educating people about how to approach life differently. Second, it entailed introducing more ‘homeliness’ in terms of materials, shapes, and symbols in the design of homes, furniture, and interiors. Katharina Bricchetti and Franz Mechsner report that our bodies influence our perception, thinking, and feeling (2019: 34). Bricchetti and Mechsner even speak of ‘embodied minds’. What people need, as Kessler noted, is more than what technical or rational modernity by itself offered. In this sense, the approach of the organizers of SAFFA 1958 was both modern and pre- or even postmodern. Their goal was to bring together airy modernity *and* cozy homeliness, to classify both sides as equal, to give expression to equality/equity with difference.

Notes

- ¹ The exhibition also made a net profit of over two million Swiss francs, which was quite impressive for the time, and incurred no debts.
- ² Interviews with Benedikt Huber, 6 March and 3 May 2017, Schösslistrasse 14, Zurich, Switzerland.
- ³ Interviews with Benedikt Huber, 6 March and 3 May 2017, Schösslistrasse 14, Zurich, Switzerland.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Unpublished Sources

- Bührig, M.** 1958. SAFFA 1958. Die 'Linie'. Beiblatt zu Protokoll der 44. Sitzung vom 29.5.1958, Zurich, Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv. Ar. 17.10.3.
- Rikli, E.** 1954. Auszug aus dem Referat der Präsidentin der Kommission für Wohnbaufragen. Protokoll der 53. Delegierten-Versammlung des Bundes Schweizerischer Frauenvereine, 24/25.4.1954, St. Gallen. Zurich, Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv. Ar. 17.10.1.
- Rikli, E.** 1959. Rückblick auf die SAFFA 1958. Pressekonferenz vom 15.9.1959. Beiblatt zu Protokoll der 53. Sitzung vom 1.9.1959, Zurich, Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv. Ar. 17.10.4.
- Stahel, F, and Angst, J.** 2019. Martha Huber-Villiger: Innenarchitektin aus Leidenschaft. Unpublished graduate paper, Hochschule Luzern Technik & Architektur.
- Walther, M.** 1990. Die SAFFA 1958 und ihre Architektinnen. Unpublished undergraduate paper, ETH Zürich.

Published Sources

- Beckel, I.** 2000. Zürcher Arbeitsgruppe Städtebau ZAS. *Schweizer Ingenieur und Architekt (SI+A)*, 118(20): 3.
- Bignens, C.** 2002. Ausbruch aus dem 'befreiten Wohnen'. In: Rüegg, A (ed.), *Schweizer Möbel und Interieurs im 20. Jahrhundert, 176–195..* Basel: Birkhäuser.
- Brichetti, K, and Mechsner, F.** 2019. *Heilsame Architektur, Raumqualitäten erleben, verstehen und entwerfen.* Bielefeld: Transkript.
- Colomina, B.** 2007. *Domesticity at War.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Fisker, K.** 1948. Die Moral des Funktionalismus. *Das Werk*, 35(5): 131–134.
- Frey, K, and Perotti, E.** 2022. Conservative Ideology, Progressive Design: Planning SAFFA 1958. In: Pepchinski, M, and Budde, C (eds.), *Women Architects and Politics: Intersections between Gender, Power Structures and Architecture in the Long 20th Century*, 127–145. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Giedion, S.** 1948. Über Alvar Aaltos Werk. *Das Werk*, 35(9): 269–276.
- Joris, E, and Witzig, H.** 1991. *Frauengeschichte(n): Dokumente aus zwei Jahrhunderten zur Situation der Frauen in der Schweiz.* Zurich: Limmat Verlag.

K[essler], L. 1958. Einige Wünsche für die SAFFA. *Schule u. Leben: Zeitschrift des Vereins Ehemaliger Handelsschülerinnen*, 48(4): 32–33.

O[stertag], A. 1958. Review of *Hochmut und Angst*, by Karl Schmid. *Schweizerische Bauzeitung*, 76(47): 714–715.

PBV. 1948. Helsinki: Aino und Alvar Aalto, Kunsthalle, Herbst 1947. *Das Werk*, 35(4): 42–44.

pm. 1941. Vortrag Alvar Aalto. *Das Werk*, 28(4): XVI.

Rikli, E. 1958. SAFFA 1958. In: *SAFFA 58. 2. Ausstellung: Die Schweizerfrau, ihr Leben, ihre Arbeit*, 3–6. Zurich: Europa Verlag..

Rüegg, A. 2002. *Schweizer Möbel und Interieurs im 20. Jahrhundert*. Basel: Birkhäuser.

Vogt, A. M. 1955. Das Problem, Zeitgenosse zu sein. *Das Werk*, 42(8): 257–261.

Wyss, L. 1958. SAFFA 1958, Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit in Zürich. *Schweizerische Bauzeitung*, 76(16): 243–244.

