

Biography of Karl Coelestin Moser (1860-1936)

1860

10 August: Karl Coelestin Moser is born in Baden, the eldest of five children, to the canton of Aargau's then-leading architect Robert Moser (1833–1901) and his wife Julia Moser, née Gubler. Karl's grandfather Johann Moser (1798–1855), a stonecutter and master builder, had initiated a family architectural pedigree unbroken to this day.

1876

Following municipal and district schooling, Moser attends the cantonal college in Aarau and becomes friends with Gustav Gull.

1878

Moser enters the building academy at the Swiss Federal Polytechnikum in Zurich. At the time the school is still under the influence of Gottfried Semper, despite his having moved to Vienna in 1871, and Georg Lasius and Julius Stadler are directors *pro tem* until Alfred Friedrich Bluntschli is made a professor in 1881. Professor of construction is Ernst G. Gladbach; Johann Rudolf Rahn teaches art history at the University (and, from 1882 on, at the Polytechnikum as well); Moser visits many historical monuments in Switzerland, and later Italy, on a series of excursions.

1881

Thesis under the supervision of Alfred Friedrich Bluntschli on the 'lakeside hotel'.

1881/82

Following completion of his thesis Moser remains enrolled at the building academy for two semesters so as to continue studying with Bluntschli, at whose office he then goes to work, as well as for his father in Baden.

1883/84

In March 1883 Moser passes the entrance examination for the second year at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and becomes a student in Jean-Louis Pascal's studio.

From April 1883 to February 1884, while continuing his studies, he also takes up a practicum at the office of Jules-Aubert-Clément Reboul, a regular salon of Swiss architects.

In the summer of 1884 he breaks off his studies.

1884–1886

Upon his return to Switzerland Moser initially works for his father in Baden.

In the late summer of 1885 he joins the staff of Heinrich Lang, his father's former university instructor in Karlsruhe, at his Wiesbaden office, where he meets the architect Robert Curjel. Born in 1859 in St. Gallen and reared in Karlsruhe, Curjel is destined to become Moser's partner, and in July 1886 Moser and Curjel leave Heinrich Lang's employment.

1887

From 26 January to 11 October Moser joins a student excursion to Italy, where he does watercolours, many of them on display at the Kunsthaus Zürich and the Swiss Association of Engineers and Architects (SIA).

In the fall, at the urging of his friend, who has recently returned from Berlin to Karlsruhe, the capital of the Grand Duchy of Baden, Moser joins Robert Curjel in his hometown.

1888–1915

Moser enters into association with his friend to found the firm Curjel & Moser. The young architects win their first commissions mainly by way of competitions and private clients.

There follow friendships and professional contact with a wide range of artists, among them Max Laeuger, Carl Burckhardt, Otto Kappeler, Paul Osswald and Ferdinand Hodler.

Curjel & Moser see such architects as Robert Bischoff (1894–1905), Ernst Häny (1898–1904 and 1909–1911), Karl August Burckhardt (around 1904) and Otto Pfister (1904–1906), Karl Friedrich Krebs (1905–1908) and Otto Rudolf Salvisberg (1905–1908) on staff.

1890

Marriage to the daughter of a renowned physician in Aarau: Eufemie Lorenz, with whom Moser is to have five children. At Curjel & Moser, meanwhile, a veritable golden age has broken out, with commissions in the Grand Duchy, elsewhere in Germany, and in German-speaking Switzerland.

1892–1896

First Swiss branch office, in Aarau.

1899

Moser is invited for the first time to take up a professorship at ETH Zurich; he declines, citing 'major building contracts'.

1901

Robert Curjel becomes a member of the board of the Karlsruher Westendbaugesellschaft.

1906

In recognition of his service to architecture in Baden, Grand Duke Friedrich I grants Moser the title of professor.

1907

Branch office in St. Gallen.

1907–1912

Moser serves as adviser on civil engineering to Baden's railway system, administered by the Grand Duchy's Minister of Finance, the most prominent product of which period is the Badischer Bahnhof station building in Basel.

Around 1911

Branch office in Zurich.

1912, 1913

Voyages to Italy; many of the watercolours Moser does there are exhibited at the Kunsthaus Zürich.

1913

The Grand Duke awards Moser the Order of the Zähringen Lion, Knight's 1st Class, with oak leaves.

1914

Moser awarded honorary doctorate on his completion of the main building (council and biology faculty) of the University of Zurich. Exhibition of his watercolours in Zurich, Karlsruhe and Berlin.

1915

Moser takes up the professorship offered him at ETH Zurich and, on 2 July, succeeds Alfred Friedrich Bluntschli as Professor of Building Arts. He requests divestment of his offices in Baden and moves his residence to Zurich. At ETH Zurich Moser rivals Gustav Gull as leading instructor in draughting. His students, in addition to his own son Werner, include such subsequent proponents of Neues Bauen in Switzerland as Flora Crawford, Max Ernst Haefeli, Hans Schmidt, Rudolf Steiger and Alfred Roth. Moser is revered in his lifetime as a 'father of modernism'.

1915

In the fall the firm of Curjel & Moser is wound up and taken over by Gustav Eckardt, who continues to run it under his own name. Curjel remains, henceforth merely in the role of architectural consultant.

1915–1936

Moser operates an office in Zurich in addition to his teaching obligations. Member of the city of Zurich's college of builders and participation in numerous juries.

1915

Construction of his own home in Krähbühlstrasse (Villa Berg) on the Zürichberg.

1919

Election to the city of Zurich's building and district planning committee, newly created to steer urban development. Chaired by Emil Klöti, the city councillor responsible for building, the committee also includes the relevant officials (chief engineer, head town planner, district planning board) as well as Moser and Werner Pfister as external experts. Moser is subsequently to intercede frequently in matters of Zurich's urban development with contributions to discussions, expertises, designs and variations.

1923/24

Construction of his own home in Freudenbergstrasse on the upper Zürichberg.

1925

Lively correspondence with Dutch exponents of Neues Bauen.

Robert Curjel dies on 18 August.

In the fall Moser steps down from the city of Zurich's building and district planning committee.

1926

In May Moser travels to Paris, where he is mainly interested in Le Corbusier's work and is able to meet the architect in person.

At Le Corbusier's request Moser sends him a 'brigade' of his students, among them Alfred Roth, Walter Schaad and Ernst Schindler, to assist him in his submission to the competition for the headquarters of the League of Nations in Geneva.

1927

As a member of the jury for the headquarters of the League of Nations, Moser joins Berlage in locking horns with Victor Horta in his advocacy of the project submitted by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret – in vain.

1928

Moser resigns his teaching position at ETH Zurich, initially proposing Le Corbusier, then aged 41, as his successor. When Le Corbusier declines, Moser champions Hans Schmidt, but to no end.

1928–1930

In June Moser is elected first president of the newly founded Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), although he does not attend the convention in La Sarraz.

1930

At the third CIAM convention in Brussels Moser resigns as president of CIAM.

1932

Moser is made honorary president of CIAM.

1936

On 28 February Karl Moser dies following a stroke.

Excerpt from Werner Oechslin and Sonja Hildebrand (eds), 'Karl Moser. Architektur für eine neue Zeit 1880 bis 1936', Zurich: gta Verlag 2010 (to appear in December).