

# THE NEW FARM



CONTEMPORARY  
RURAL ARCHITECTURE

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# Schönenberg Farm

Basel, Switzerland



Georg Schmid is a Swiss architect and co-owner, with Johannes Feld and Jonas Wuest, of F.A.B. – Forschungs- und Architekturbüro (Research and Architecture Office), based in Basel. Schmid's farm, just outside the city, has been in his family since the 1930s and is the site for a remarkable new cow barn that F.A.B. designed. He explains, "As we are not farmers, we leased some of the property to farmers. Around the millennium we had to reevaluate the farm's orientation. Along with that came the plan to redesign a part of it and to build a new cow barn, to be used for milk production." And then there was the notion that if they had to spend money on a barn to increase milk production, "Why not a nice barn?"

When I arrived at F.A.B.'s courtyard office in a residential section of Basel on a foggy fall day, Schmid's partners, Feld and Wuest, gave me a quick introduction to the firm before driving me out to the farm. I learned that Schmid had held an internship with the internationally known Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron, and that the three partners are fans of Charles and Ray Eames, whose midcentury-modern furniture is permanently on display at the Vitra Design Museum (incidentally, designed by Herzog & de Meuron) in Weil am Rhein, Germany, just over the border on the outskirts of Basel. One Eamesian tenet that seems especially relevant to F.A.B.'s work is "Design depends largely on constraints."

The constraints in this case were their goals "to create an ensemble with the existing buildings" on the sloping site without obscuring the view of the historic farmhouse and to embed a new twenty-one-thousand-square-foot barn for seventy cows in a steep hill "so that it would seem to be part of the landscape, in spite of the large volume/program."

They worked with professional barn builders, adapted their techniques, and ultimately reinvented the idea of a barn. The attenuated shed shifts axis as it follows the contours of the land and, thanks to the spreading eaves of the shallow-gable sod roof, almost disappears into the slope, especially as seen from the apple orchard down the hill; as Schmid says, the "same grass as on the surrounding meadows creates a kind of mimicry." In a particularly ingenious twist, the exterior walls are not walls but screens consisting of the tall trunks of hazel trees woven together and embedded in the concrete perimeter wall. Why hazel? The trees are indigenous and found throughout the farm—naturally!



I asked if any historical or contemporary buildings had an influence on the design of the barn. The reply was that the surrounding nature, the landscape and flora, were the key influences, but "not without including the industrial character of agricultural constructions." The architects have deconstructed key features of the landscape and artfully recombined them: cow barn as enlarged hedgerow! Two tall milk silos in gleaming stainless steel act as a vertical counterpoint, drawing the eye and confirming that this is not just another "artificial pasture" but an industrial building. Steel posts and engineered beams permit a floating roof and wide-open interior that allow everyone to see the cows being milked. It was feeding time when I walked through, and the inhabitants seemed contented, though perhaps unaware of their environmentally avant-garde setting. Even though the building takes its cues from nature, it has a strong architectural presence (a pleasing contradiction), making it a vivid exemplar of a modern approach to farm design.

Gustav Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde" ("The Song of the Earth") comes to mind at the sight of the cow barn at Georg Schmid's farm near Basel: the walls of trees and roof of grass appear more landscape than structure. Only the gleaming milk silos add an industrial note.



The dairy barn at Schönenberg Farm blends into its hillside site with a sod roof and hazel branches for walls.





Recent generations of farmers have reinvented the family farm and its traditions, embracing sustainable practices and bold modern architecture. *The New Farm: Contemporary Rural Architecture* profiles sixteen farms around the globe, highlighting the connections among food, design, terrain, and agricultural heritage.

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