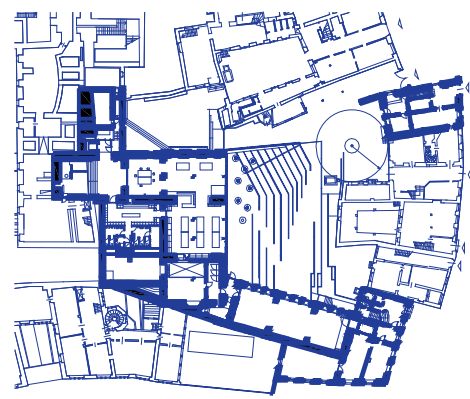
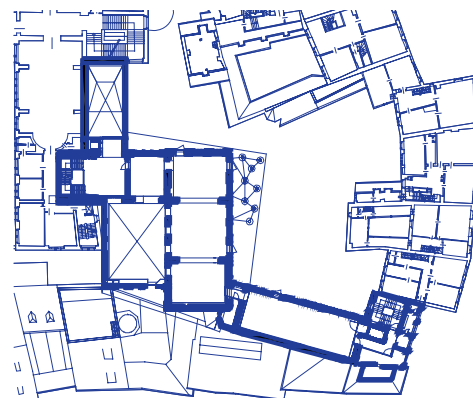


# Herzog & de Meuron

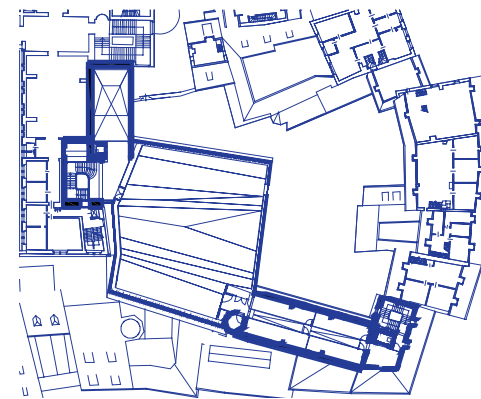
## familiarizes the unfamiliar



Ground floor.



Third floor.



Fourth floor.



Text [Katharina Marchal](#)  
Photo [Iwan Baan](#)

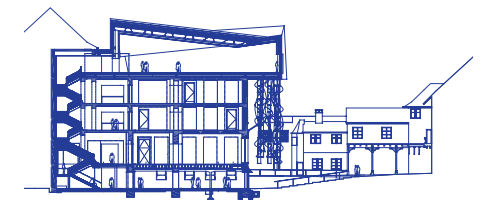
'A museum of culture is a museum of strangers,' says Martin Heller as he leads a tour through the renewed Museum der Kulturen Basel by Herzog & de Meuron. The first question posed by this renowned ethnologist, author and curator is: Here in this building, do I need symbols to explain the museum's contents?

Herzog & de Meuron answers him with a self-confident gesture: a roof construction that is an integrated part of the city's historical tableau. An appropriate container for Europe's most important ethnography collection emerges from what seems to be a minimal intervention into the classical museum complex with an inner courtyard at its heart. Previously, Basel's oldest museum shared access with the adjacent Museum of Natural History. In order to expand, the Museum der Kulturen required a separate entrance. Today, visitors follow a rather narrow passage to the museum's new forecourt, which used to be a courtyard at the rear of the building. A broad, deep-stepped stairway descends to the entrance. By lowering the courtyard in the direction of the main building, the architects repurposed the basement level, transforming it into an entrance foyer. The museum's new supporting base, slit open along the entire width of the façade, unmistakably invites visitors to enter. Major portions of existing façades were closed to make more exhibition space, but projecting above the austere, subtle design is an expressive roof level enlivened by jagged peaks and edges and clad in reflective green hexagonal tiles that are partly three-dimensional. Steel beams enable a column-free exhibition space inside the museum. Spiral frames for climbing plants hanging from the roof's soffit give both courtyard and rooftop a fresh identity.

Heller also wonders how the building can communicate to a broad audience,

including those with no background knowledge who walk in for a quick look round. Orientation seems self-evident. The architects rethought the existing main staircase and extended it to the roof. The few windows that remained were enlarged and now reach the floor. Deep reveals make them small rooms in themselves: alcoves with views over the old city. The removal of a ceiling in the upper exhibition area created a double-height space with a slit window, a spot for use in displaying taller objects. Surveying the new premises, Heller points out the high degree of ease generated by the architects' intuitiveness and 'regulated integration', all part of an approach that provides a familiar environment for a better understanding of unfamiliar topics.

[www.herzogdemeuron.com](http://www.herzogdemeuron.com)



Cross section.