

Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron 2001 Laureates Acceptance Speech

Dear Mrs. Pritzker and all of the Pritzker family, dear members of the jury, dear friends, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for so many things. Thank you for your ongoing and uncompromising commitment to architecture. Thank you for choosing us for this prize which we were longing for and hoping to get, like only children can wish to get things deep in their hearts. Thank you to our clients and friends, some of whom are here this evening, for their support and their willingness to dialog also in difficult phases of a project.

Thank you to those who have opened us the door at the GSD many years ago. That has proved to be a critical step for us into this country quite some time before we, actually, were given the chance to realize some of our best work here. Thank you to our partners, Harry and Christine, and to all our collaborators who have been working with us for many years with an unbelievable commitment.

In 1978, Pierre and I opened our joint architectural offices, but it was neither a historical decision nor a momentous founding event. During our last semester at the Federal Institute of Technology, we had already realized that we had a great deal in common. The fact that we struck out on our own was more or less an act of rebellion and desperation. What else were we to do?

The economy was not very rosy and architecture both at home and abroad seemed foreign to us. We had no idea what we wanted, we only knew what we didn't want. A few semesters with Aldo Rossi who was forty at the time had filled us with enthusiasm.

In his earliest buildings made of poorly processed concrete, we discovered an affinity something that swung to rest between Pasolini and *Arte Povera*. And we loved his dry dictum "architecture is architecture" because it seems to be so provocatively simple minded and pinpoints something that is still vital to us today: architecture can only survive as architecture in its physical and central diversity and not as a vehicle for an ideology of some kind. It is the materiality of architecture that paradoxically conveys thoughts and ideas. In other words, its immateriality. That's an old story, but it is more relevant today than ever before: architecture lives and survives because of its beauty, because it seduces, animates and even inspires people, because it is matter and because it can—if only sometimes—transcend matter.

But this anarchist and poetic side of Rossi, which we loved so much as students, was gradually assimilated into the postmodernist *Zeitgeist*. What remained was an academically rigid ideology of permanence and typology, and a sudden dominance of decorative historical elements of style, a kind of coming-out of the decorative, which had beaten an embarrassed retreat since the rise of Modernism.

In the fine arts which are usually more critical, more radical and ahead of architecture in adopting artistic and social changes of paradigm representatives of the *Transavanguardia* and the so-called Wild Painting came up with so many new pictures that in spite of or, perhaps, because of this inundation, there was no room left for our own. Nor did we see any latitude of this kind in deconstructivism; although we were fascinated by its chief philosophical exponents, we were bored to tears by its architectural advocates and their explanations. In the early years, we experimented with all kinds of forms and materials trying to subvert their conventional usage as if to squeeze something hidden, something invisible out of them that would breathe life into our architecture. Yes, that was what we wanted: to breathe life into architecture although we could not specifically describe what we meant by that, despite endless attempts to put it into words. There was no philosophy that we felt we could embrace unconditionally although phenomenological questions have always played a salient role, for instance, questions of sensual perception or of signified and signifier.

The artist Rémy Zaugg with whom we have often collaborated over the years relentlessly asks questions that address our concerns as well. Obvious perhaps and simpleminded, but all the more profound—what, where, how, who? Our designs became increasing minimal, radically minimal.

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Suddenly, the room for action became huge. At the beginning of the eighties, no one used a rectangle as ground plan and section, that is, a box as the basis of design. We wanted architecture without any distinguishable figuration, but with a hesitant non-imitating analogy. We were looking for a hint of memory, of association. We did not want complete reduction or pure abstraction. We were not trying to simplify the world or to reduce it to so-called essentials. There was no religion, no ideology at stake.

We did not want a sect of Minimalists. On the contrary, we were aghast at the ravages caused by so-called Minimalism in architecture, which was linked with morals and perfection and had the imprint of latent Protestant zeal. We in turn began to have more and more doubts about the dominance of the rectangle in our designs.

It had become too confining. Paradoxically, the box, conceivably the simplest and most basic architectural shape had acquired the value of its own like a stylistic device. And that was exactly what we always tried so assiduously to avoid. But there may be another entirely different explanation. The reasons for the supposed breaks and changes of style in our work may not only be design-motivated, but also psychological. The supposed objectivity of the modernist formal canon may merely have served to simply the workings of our long-term cooperative venture and the discussion of projects; it may actually have held us together as a team. The fact is that we've worked as a duo since our youth and have in recent years involved two other partners, Harry Gugger and Christine Binswanger, who are also here in Monticello today and rightfully so.

Possibly, co-authorship with Pierre and later with our partners, has in recent years yielded the startling realization that individually distinctive gesturally expressive forms and images for our projects are, indeed, feasible and are now surfacing all the more passionately in our work.

Working with last year's winner of the Pritzker Prize, Rem Koolhaas, on the project for Astor Place in New York shows that our experience of a complex team structure is capable of generating an even more complex architecture than emerges from the hermetically sealed isolation of the single author. Precisely because Pierre and I have developed projects together for so long, we have been able increasingly to involve other people and other areas in our cooperative undertakings and therefore other forms and spaces as well. The sculptural and even seemingly accidental elements, the figurative and the chaotic, which have recently appeared in our work, are as much a consequence of conceptual strategies as our previously developed formal idiom and not the result of a singular artist gesture.

This conceptual approach is actually a device developed for each project by means of which we remain invisible as authors. Of course, this invisibility does not apply to the name Herzog and de Meuron which cannot remain hidden and even less so now, thanks to the Pritzker Prize; rather it applies only to our architectural identity. It is a strategy that gives us the freedom to reinvent architecture with each new project rather than consolidating our style. It also means that we are constantly intensifying our research into and with materials and surfaces, sometimes alone, sometimes in collaboration with various manufacturers and laboratories with artists and even with biologists. We look for materials that are as breathtakingly beautiful as the cherry blossoms in Japan or as condensed and compact as the rock formations of the Alps or as enigmatic and unfathomable as the surfaces of the oceans. We look for materials that are as intelligent, as virtuosos, as complex as natural phenomena, materials that not only tickle the retina of the astonished art critic, but that are really efficient and appeal to all of our senses—not just the eyes, but also the nose, the ears, the sense of taste and the sense of touch. Much has failed and continues to fail because the large concerns that would set up the technological and methodological conditions for new developments show too little interest, because there is no market for such things.

Moreover, politically, demands for improving both the ecological and energy aspects of society have not been radical enough in addressing the construction sector of the economy. Does this wish to extend architectural research into major industrial concerns express a romantically transfigured view of

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the world, a kind of after-effect of the ideas of Joseph Beuys whom we had the privilege of assisting for a brief period, or does this refer to a possible role of the architect in the twenty-first century? We are not interested in making prophetic statements about the future of architecture. In this respect, however, one observation must be made: The rise of a global star system in recent years is indicative of the colossal battle of displacement in the world of architecture.

A narrow elite of author-architects stands opposite an overpowering ninety percent majority of simulation architecture, an architecture essentially without an *appellation contrôlée*, as it is called in the world of wines. There is hardly anything left in between, only a few young people desperately seeking salvation in the few remaining niches and the largely hopeless prospects of design competitions.

Rampantly spreading simulation architecture is no longer projected on the world by an author but instead simulates, reproduces, manipulates and consumes existing imagery. Instead of passively letting ourselves be sucked into the maelstrom of this simulation architecture which not only absorbs all the imagery, but also any and all innovation in order to survive, we can actively deploy simulation as a possible strategy in our own architecture—in a kind of subversive reversal, as in biotechnology. And that may well be the most exciting prospect in architecture today and indeed in human society, this incredible latitude that leaves room for the most extraordinary achievements—and the ghastly ones as well. Thank you.

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