

Jacques Herzog/Pierre de Meuron 2001 Laureates Essay

The Architecture of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron

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One of the most compelling aspects of the work of Herzog and de Meuron is its capacity to astonish. They transform what might otherwise be an ordinary shape, condition or material into something extraordinary. Their relentless investigation into the nature of architecture results in works charged by memory and invention, reminding us of the familiarity of the new. The originality of their constructions stems primarily from the intellectual rigor and sensual intuition that they bring to each work, an enthralling combination that can be discerned in the taut discipline of a wall and roof connection or in the layered transposition of one planar detail to another, to mention just two such conditions prevalent in their work. When experiencing Herzog and de Meuron's work one becomes aware of such conditions as natural extensions of the architects' lucid tenacity. One is also able to understand the architects' piercing reading of site by the way they disclose its hidden or obvious specificity, initially manifested through a detail, a material, a texture, a scent, or a wedge of light.

Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, childhood friends since the mid fifties, founded their partnership in 1978 in their native city of Basel. Since they began working together, a common interest has linked them as they sought the potential for beauty in the fusion of function and site. In examining the trajectory of their built and unbuilt work, one finds ample evidence of this fusion. Often the desire for functionality results in a bureaucratic and inert architecture. Yet, in the hands of Herzog and de Meuron, the pursuit of functionality leads to a dynamic prism, emitting unforeseen subtleties as they come in contact with a site and program. This can be observed in two of their best-known works: the Ricola storage building and the train station signal box in Basel. The task of storing goods or of directing traffic acquires a beauty that transcends and singles them out amid their utilitarian progeny. The overlapping cementitious planks of the Ricola shed ventilate and lighten the storage volume while weaving an object of startling beauty. The same can be said of the signal box, whose copper ribbons vibrate amid the rumble of trains and tracks, transforming the infrastructural object into a talismanic icon.

Another work that demonstrates the architects' assertive lyricism in merging function, site and beauty is the Dominus Winery in the Napa Valley. Here one encounters a building whose earth-like fortification marks the ground, a gateway, an enclosure for producing, administering and storing an exquisite wine. The timeless echo of stone retaining walls combines with the alluring refraction of light to render a building like no other in the area, yet one seemingly familiar. The neighboring wineries, content in their Arcadian facsimiles, seem remote and out of place once one experiences the full realm of the Dominus Winery. Rooted conceptually and physically in its site, the stone wrapped winery acquires strength from the essentiality of its formal character, from the stirring play of light across the porous basalt walls, and from the seeming inevitability of its solution. Although an abrasive object in a field of delicate vineyards, the building is beautiful because of the clarity and power of its resolution. One comes to realize that the building's expressiveness is what it is because it couldn't have been any other way.

The persistent essentiality that runs through Herzog and de Meuron's work emerges from the architects' acute understanding of construction as architecture's most basic and catalytic condition. They build ideas whose formal characteristics often surprise precisely because of this essentiality. The House in Tavole, Italy, one of their earliest and most significant works is a project of great subtlety and strength because of the manner in which it is built. One senses the architects' total immersion in the culture of native materials and construction traditions common to the region. Aware of neighboring stone houses, Herzog and de Meuron's design Stone House in Tavole, Italy does not dwell on literal appropriations of matter or type but aspires to reveal the intelligence of an alternate construction

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strategy. Employing the freedom of a slender modern concrete framework filled with the region's dry fieldstone, the house achieves an unparalleled tectonic sophistication. The effect is the more compelling as the architecture affirms the vitality of an inquisitive present while recalling the venerable hands of millennial stonemasons.

Much has been written about the architects' proficiency with materials, to the extent that their work might at times be perceived as an obsession with tactile properties, surface, or textural potential. To some degree this can be true. Jacques Herzog has even expressed a predilection for fashion, clothes and textiles. He is quick though to differentiate Herzog and de Meuron's position on this matter: "It is not the glamorous aspect of fashion which fascinates us. In fact, we are more interested in what people are wearing, what they like to wrap around their bodies.... We are interested in that aspect of artificial skin which becomes so much an intimate part of people." The architects' fascination with the properties of materials has resulted in an impressive catalogue of research and experimentation while contributing a collection of images that have become deeply minted in the contemporary imagination (i.e., the serene almost ethereal Goetz Gallery in Munich, glowing in a dense morning dew; the incandescent light beam spanning the Tate Gallery's gigantic mass; or the stenciled polycarbonate panels of the Ricola storage building in Mulhouse, radiating their explosive light in a deep blue night). The concern for materiality and its effect in experiencing architecture have been a constant passion for Herzog and de Meuron as early as the Frei Photographic studio (a palette of refined *arte povera* materials) to one of their most recent works for the fashion house of Prada (a grid of diamond shaped glass panels permutating into an enveloping screen of light. In the architects' hands materials become sumptuous by their imaginative juxtaposition, eliciting the power to evoke and emit innumerable possibilities.

Another aspect of Herzog and de Meuron's work, not often discussed, yet beginning to infuse their work with insightful results, is their investigations of space and volume. The Tate Gallery in London, the architects' most celebrated public work to date demonstrates their archeological finesse in unearthing and re-shaping the space of the former power station. The extracted main volume is an astounding urban space where the energy of museum dwellers is not only harnessed but finds refuge, orientation and awe. The museum's overwhelming success is due to the architects' strategy of retaining the massive Turbine Hall while transfiguring it into an unforgettable spatial presence. Another work that explores the syntax of space and volume with expectant results is the Kramlich Residence, a house for collectors of media art presently under construction in the Napa Valley. Here the configuration of interior and exterior spaces dissolves into the bucolic landscape through a series of sinuous, undulating walls. Simultaneously, the projection of films and videos have been incorporated into the design to establish spatial limits within otherwise transparent rooms.

Herzog and de Meuron, strengthened for some time now by the integration of two other partners, Harry Guggler and Christine Binswanger, finds itself at a critical threshold, challenged by the magnitude of their success, which now expands at a global scale. The size of their commissions has increased substantially and their buildings now face urban complexities and locales that will certainly test the architects' ascending virtuosity (The M.H. de Young Museum in San Francisco comes to mind). The architects' fertile imagination, intelligence and versatility augur an exciting future, one that will continue their contributions to the discourse of architecture. Their evolving work is full of optimism and ever alert in a world of shifting paradigms. Its strength derives from a firm belief that "architecture is only and always architecture," to paraphrase their charismatic former teacher Aldo Rossi. Thus they remain firm in their conviction: "to reject classifications in architecture and to keep ourselves open, to approach architecture in as many ways as we can."

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