

Anyone

An Interview with Herzog & de Meuron

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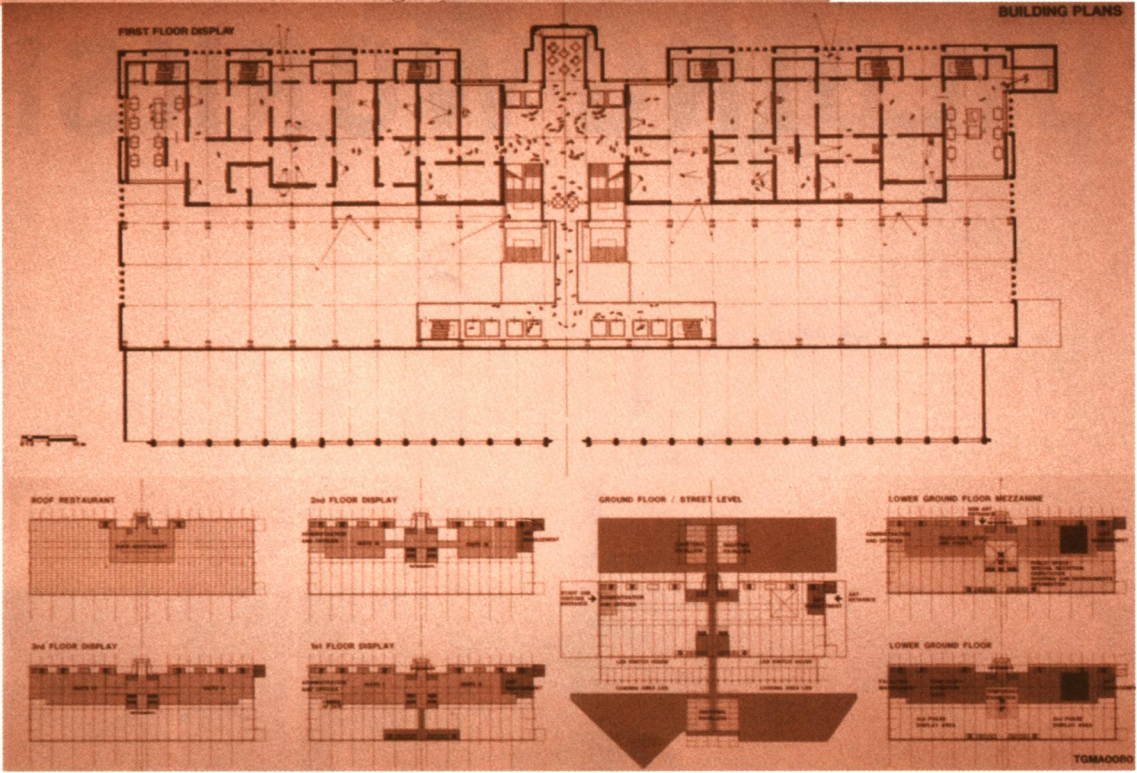
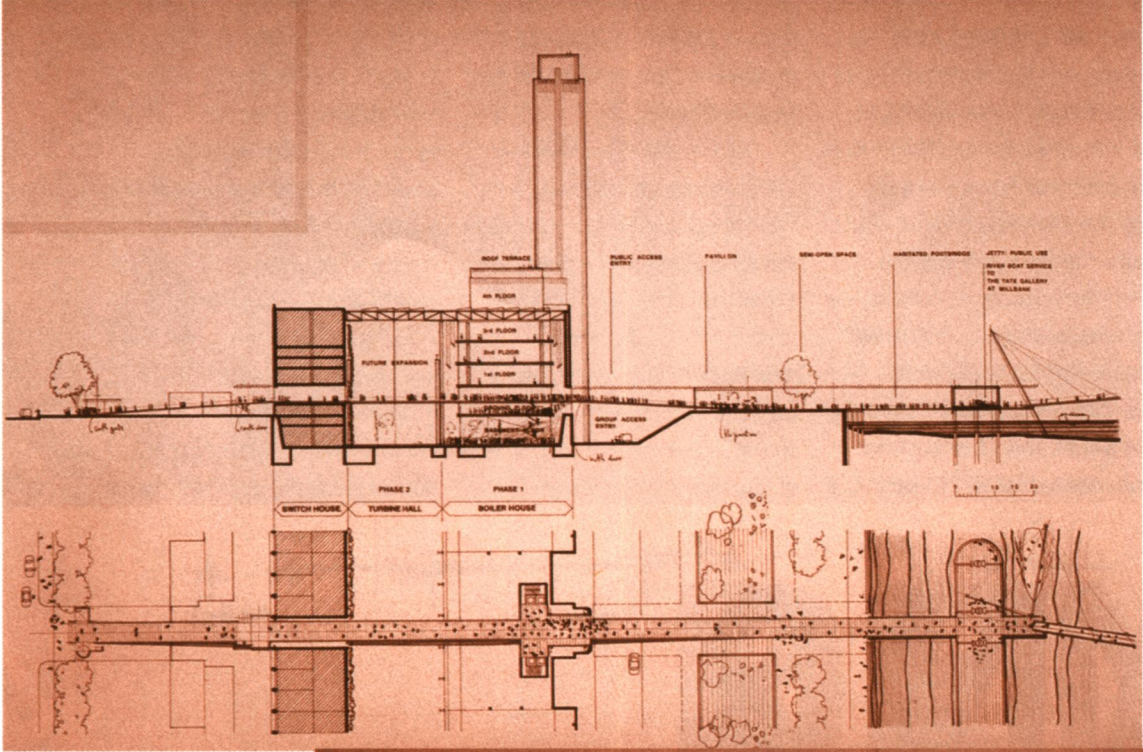


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The following exchange is based on a transatlantic telephone conversation between Jacques Herzog and Cynthia Davidson that took place Friday, November 10, 1995, at 11:00 a.m. New York time, 5:00 p.m. Basel time. Herzog and Pierre de Meuron edited and revised the transcript until December 4, 1995.

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effective new use for it seemed wasteful to me. We grow up in cities that have landmarks, and one shouldn't try to reinvent at every moment. When you build with the number of pieces in the jigsaw, some of the older pieces are worth keeping.

BURDETT The possibility of building a space like the turbine hall, which is 120 feet high, is nowadays economically impossible. Yet the scale of the artwork is such that you need to create an environment that you really would not be able to do in a new building.

SEROTA In a way the responsibility in creating a museum is to create an instrument that can be played by artists, by our successors, and by visitors in ways that I can't possibly predict. We are trying to provide a series of spaces that could be played in different ways rather than a box with movable partitions. In the 1960s one

thought of flexibility as being created simply by having a box with the optimum technological conditions of air-conditioning and lighting, with partitions and walls. We know now that that results in a very transient, temporary feeling and that art doesn't sit very comfortably in such spaces.

DAVIDSON Was keeping the turbine hall open to its 120-foot height a condition of the program?

SEROTA No. Several of those who got to the final stage filled it in various ways.

BURDETT Chipperfield uses most of it.

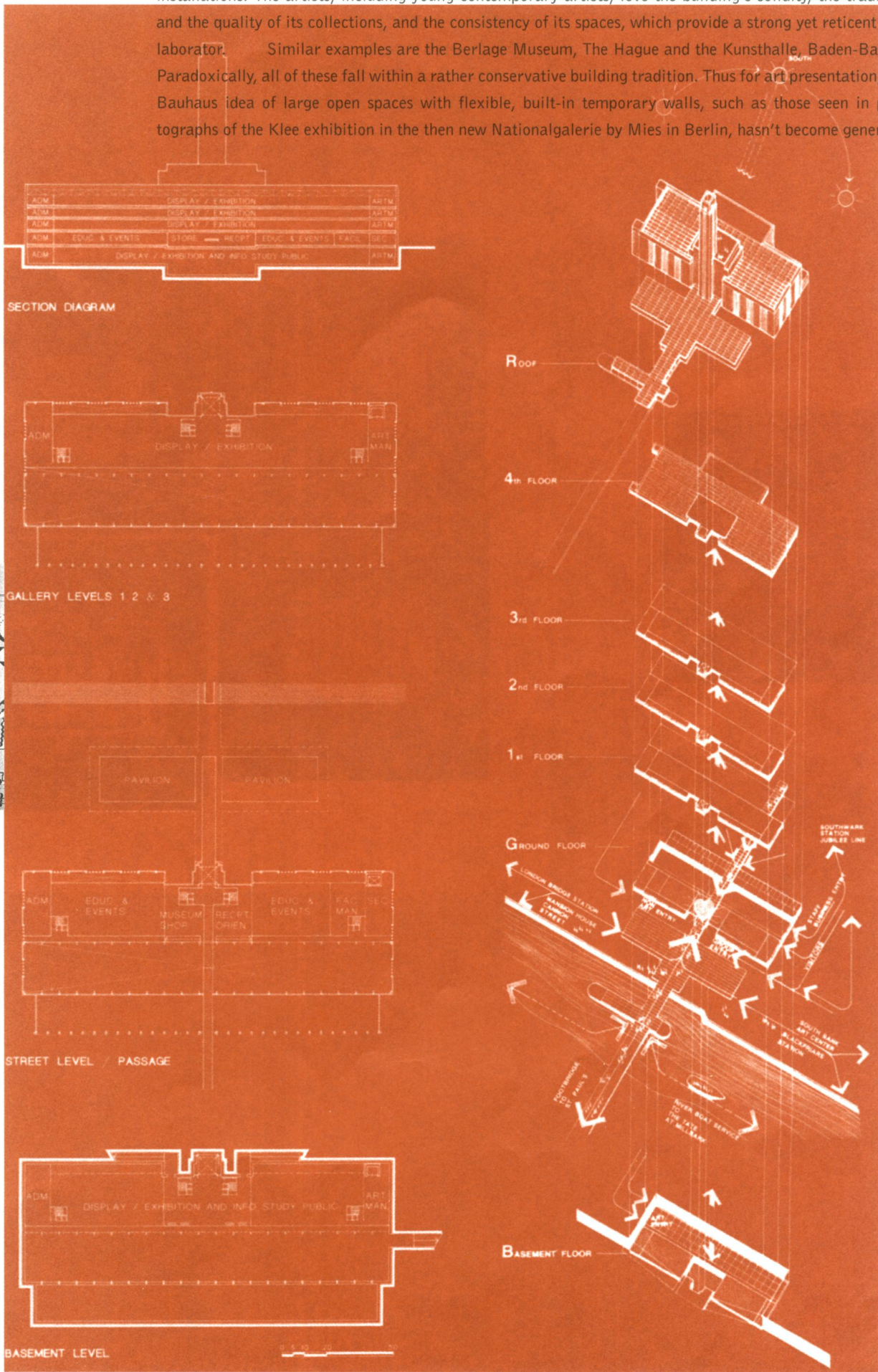
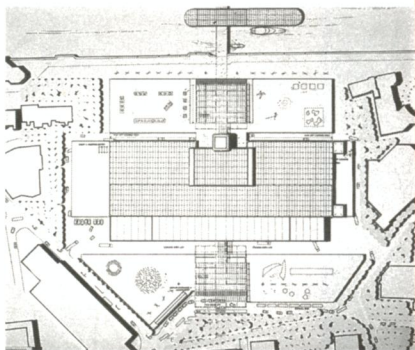
SEROTA Chipperfield recreated that sense of height somewhere else. Koolhaas filled the turbine hall to a large extent but created an atrium, a piazza at the west end of his building that again would have used that full height.

BURDETT When the brief was first issued, there was an implication – it wasn't a statement – that maybe the best thing would be to occupy the building sequentially, occupying only the western or only the eastern half, for example. It wasn't a given, and in fact it became merely

Interview with Herzog & de Meuron

Cynthia Davidson How will the 21st-century museum be different from the 20th-century museum?

Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron That is a question nobody can answer! No architect, no curator, and certainly no market-trend researcher. We are sure that we could make a museum for today that would correspond to the needs and wishes of today's artists and today's public. If this museum of 20th-century and contemporary art can adequately present and represent, it will also become an important topical building in the 21st century. The Basel Kunstmuseum is interesting in the context of your question. It is a massive stone building from the 1930s, built to conservative taste, that at the time led to massive confrontation with the city's progressive cultural powers. In spite of criticism, the building has proven to be practically ideal for showing 20th-century art, for all eras and all disciplines, for painting, sculpture, drawing, and installations. The artists, including young contemporary artists, love the building's solidity, the tradition and the quality of its collections, and the consistency of its spaces, which provide a strong yet reticent collaborator. Similar examples are the Berlage Museum, The Hague and the Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden. Paradoxically, all of these fall within a rather conservative building tradition. Thus for art presentation, the Bauhaus idea of large open spaces with flexible, built-in temporary walls, such as those seen in photographs of the Klee exhibition in the then new Nationalgalerie by Mies in Berlin, hasn't become generally



natural that if you have that thing, you want to use it in some way.

DAVIDSON I find it interesting that already the semi-natural image from the competition is the Herzog & de Meuron turbine hall perspective. Earlier, when you were talking about

typology, you said that Rem's was absolutely the opposite of Herzog & de Meuron's. Can you elaborate on that?

BURDETT Well, one is the sort of restless dynamism of a Rem building. You come in, and, as he describes it, you either take the fast route or the very fast route or

the extremely fast route to level minus 14 or level plus 18, but in his case it is

from level zero to level four or level three to level six, with ramps, escalators, and

an enormous number of things happening – spaces of very different angles and

definitions, using the ceilings and the floors as transparent surfaces to

engage with the building at

different levels. This analogy also happens on the exterior. He literally rams through from one side until it comes out on the other, the chimney is stripped, and only the structure is left.

DAVIDSON Would you call that a typology of movement?

BURDETT Well, it is a typology of a great dynamism, and he challenged Nick at a certain point to say that this is a museum of contemporary art. There was some difficulty on the curators' side, if I'm right.

Where would we put the collection that we actually have, which documents 20th-century art – that which has been produced up until now? In that sense, the opposite typology, the more contained typology of Herzog & de Meuron, doesn't mean that it is a series of boring boxes; I don't think that for a moment.

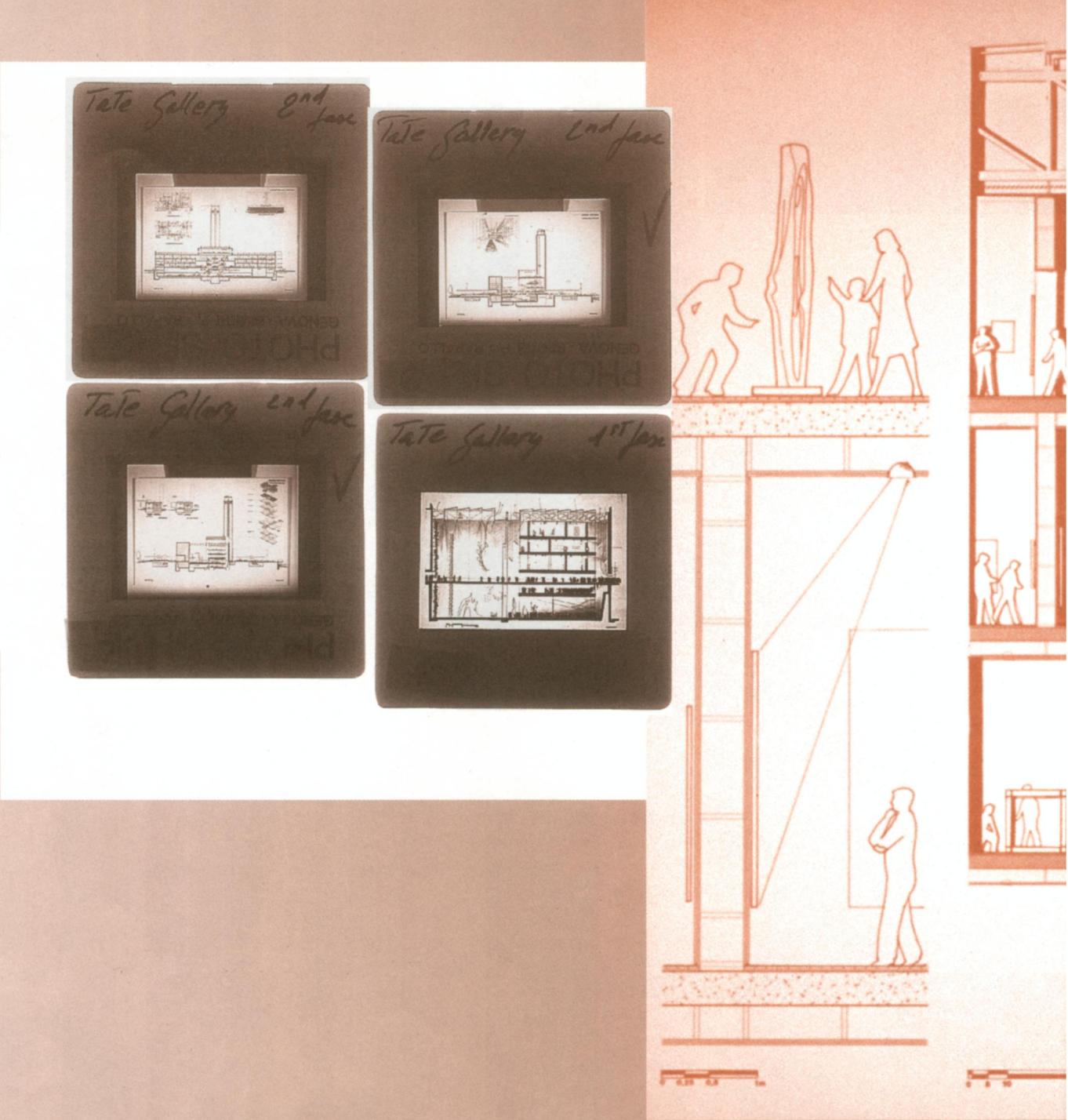
It allows for the dynamism and excitement necessary for the public spaces but also for the quiet and containment and the new sort of spiritual engagement with art necessary in the galleries. We know from Rem in Rotterdam that a ramp through a major gallery is exactly what he wants. That was what he proposed for this building, and it was a very challenging proposition.

SEROTA If you want to generate a really good building for art, for curators and

accepted. Today you can still learn a lot about quality, simplicity, and spatial consistency from these old museums. Spaces with floors, ceilings, and walls that really earn their names are rare today and taken by themselves make an incredibly strong architectural statement. They can communicate an elementary spatial experience that is ideal for the presentation and the perception of art. As much as we love the spatial consistency of single exhibition spaces in old museums, we dislike the mostly hierarchical concept of these buildings. We try to make spaces that, while they differ in size, proportion, and lighting, all have the same value, the same importance. We try to avoid the *bel étage* effect that, surprisingly enough, we find again in numerous new buildings: installations and video spaces are located on underground levels because it is dark down there anyway, good enough for video, or mezzanines only three meters high that, logically enough, have to be used for photos and drawings (instead of single low rooms scattered throughout the building). The famous new museums of the past few years that predominantly present architectural promenades and primarily express the design talents of their architects are also annoying. We reject the newest examples of museums with large, glass exterior surfaces supposedly demonstrating the immateriality of present and future art. That's nonsense. That kind of architecture bores us because at the bottom line, it is conservative, literally speaking: it aims to make propaganda for and conserve an image and an idea of art.

CD So you try to develop nonhierarchical space?

H&deM By nonhierarchical space we mean an ordering of spaces that are of equal importance and equal height but are nonetheless varied. This variation is important in a large museum to prevent the whole from becoming barren and monotonous. On the other hand, we want to avoid giving the spaces too much individual character, making them "artificially interesting." We do not want overly expressive spaces such as those seen in museums in Mönchengladbach or Frankfurt (both by Hans Hollein) and the American Center in Paris (by Frank O. Gehry). We also don't want neoclassical, imitative spaces such as those in

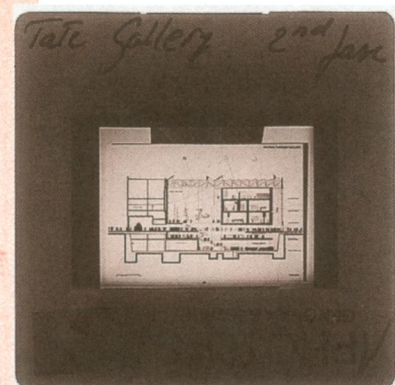
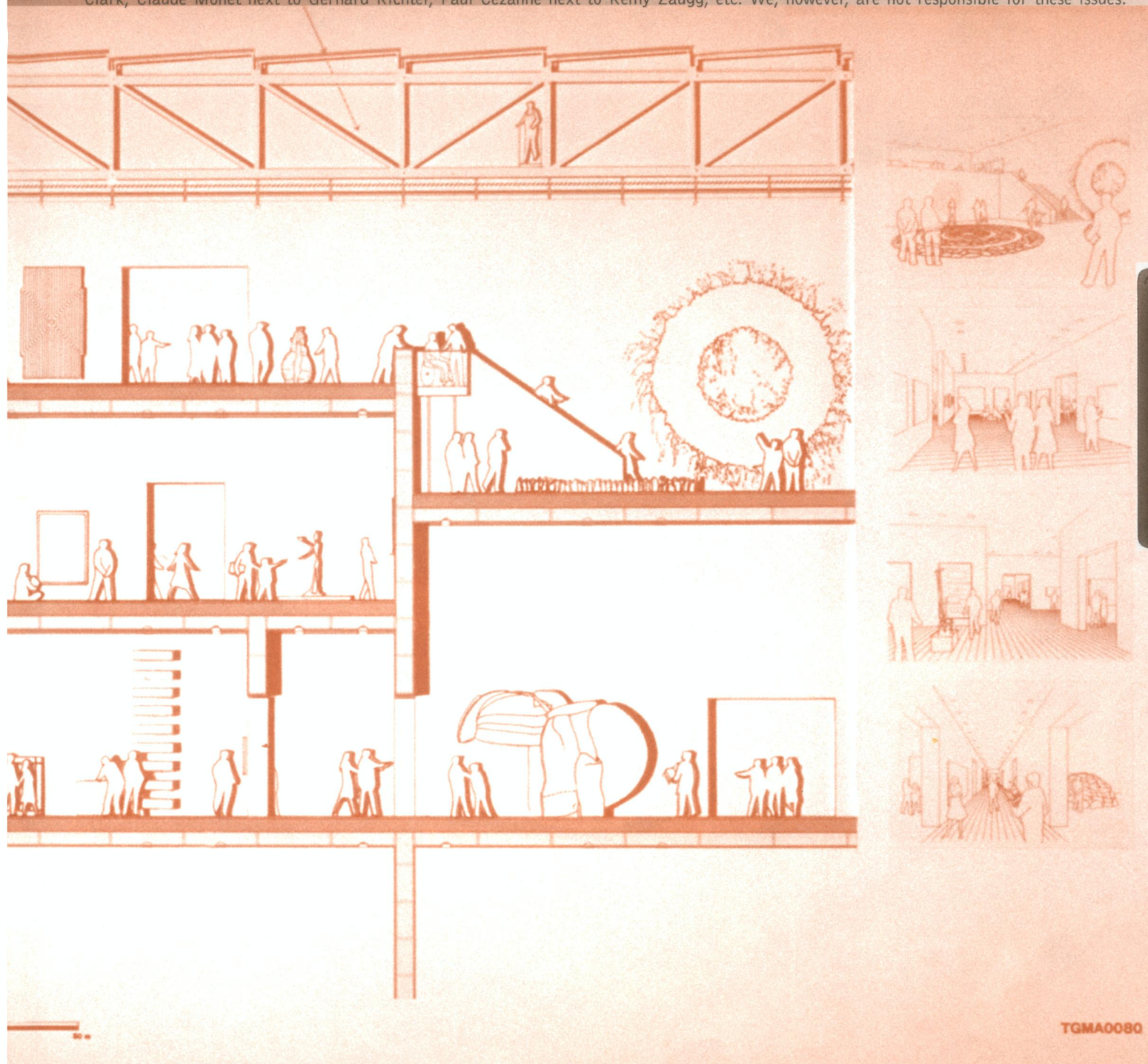


Stuttgart (James Stirling) and the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London (Robert Venturi.) But we don't want spaces that question the solidity and materiality of spatial borders, such as the Cartier Foundation in Paris (Jean Nouvel), either. We want spaces that are as simple and obvious as possible, that, precisely because they radically fulfill the most elementary conditions for spatial enclosure, express a strong physical presence: four walls, one floor, and one ceiling.

CD How do you give the walls and the floors that strong expression and that presence?
H&deM The walls have to be solid (and not sound like a woodpecker hammering every time they are touched). The walls have to stand on the floor and not be floating objects cut off from it by a horizontal slit running around the space. The floor and the ceiling should be presented as undivided places and be seamlessly connected to the four walls. Although grids and screens are many architects' favorite children, they are annoying in exhibition spaces. In short: the exhibition space that we want is, in many ways, equivalent to a loft space or a normal room. To build such a simple thing has become very difficult today when one is faced with the unbelievable masses of required technical installations and the resistance from museums' technical departments. Thus today it is much simpler to make an exhibition space with all kinds of gewgaws and crooked corners behind which technical installations can be hidden. The simple, consistent exhibition space that we want is thus in no way the product of a banal or boring approach but is a complex architectural installation.

CD The Tate is a museum of so-called modern art. How do you deal with the category of the modern when considering the museum building? Does it cause you to do a different kind of museum than, say, you would do for a museum of art from the Renaissance?

H&deM We'd like to pierce through those historical categories, make a building, a place for art of all eras: Joseph Beuys next to Leonardo da Vinci, Marcel Duchamp next to Jeff Koons, Rachel Whiteread next to Gordon Matta-Clark, Claude Monet next to Gerhard Richter, Paul Cézanne next to Rémy Zaugg, etc. We, however, are not responsible for these issues.



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artists and visitors, you can't start with the certainty that you are going to pick an architect from a given generation. But there was quite a strong sense that if we could find someone in their forties or fifties and who was aware of what had been happening and was happening in the field of contemporary art, we would probably get a better building in the long term. I can remember not long after I arrived here having a meeting with everyone to talk about a big project to reinstall the whole collection. We were talking about what kind of publication we should do alongside it, and someone proposed that we should engage someone who was brilliant to write it – but who had retired from the museum three or four years before – on the grounds that he was brilliant and had the time to do it. My response was, "No, it is your turn. You have to stand up and say what you think for this generation" – good or ill.

DAVIDSON I thought you were going to lead somewhere with your comment other than the generational issue, perhaps that in the end you were looking for an architect who was conceptually or theoretically rich but hadn't developed something so strong that you couldn't work with it.

SEROTA I don't think it was a question of being so strong that we couldn't

Nonetheless, they are a further argument for the nonhierarchical spatial conception that we are trying to attain. The spaces should not give more weight to one artistic direction or one era than to another. The height and size of the spaces should be adaptable to different hanging methods. This is a technical requirement that is not difficult to achieve (and that we will consider in the Tate project). Fundamentally, we aren't interested in historical categories and ideologies, in art or in architecture. We are interested in the creative energy, the perceptual achievement that the observer can bring – now, today – whether to 16th-century Venetian painting or to a video by Gary Hill. **CD** Is architecture always contemporary?

H&deM What is fascinating about architecture is its real physical existence, its being. Architecture becomes contemporary the instant you focus your eyes on it, the minute you start to get interested in this or that architecture for any reason, a detail perhaps. It starts to live because you notice something about it that preoccupies you and puts your mind to work. The object of your interest, the architecture, can be good or an anonymous building. We are mostly interested in anonymous architecture without any special art historical or design pretension on the author's part. For us, a traditional house from the Magreb or from northern Japan or from the Swiss Alps has more sex appeal than the famous works of Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, or Frank Lloyd Wright – sex appeal in the sense of Herbert Marcuse's aesthetic theories describing the politicizing, activating effect of art on its observer. For us, an old dilapidated house or barracks in the Gavelas or a hut in the mountains is often more topical, more contemporary, than much of that brought forth by the modern and contemporary movements. To us, the present is not a historical category but a perceptual theoretical one.

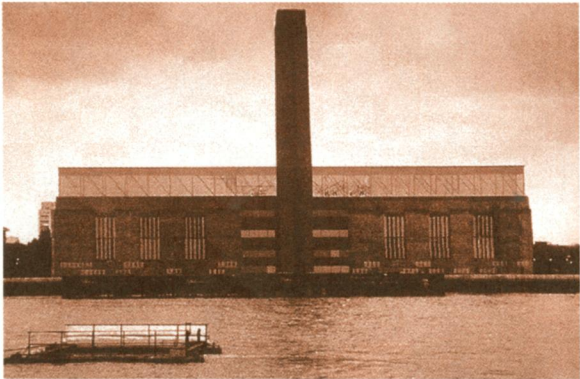
CD Then where do you start? As you say, there are so many simultaneous directions one could follow: perceptual, material, etc. Where do you begin to make your decisions? What kinds of ideas sustain your work if tradition is gone and the 1990s are uncertain?

H&deM Your question is very difficult. You mean: "How do you make your architecture? What is the intellectual creative process?" We've already written and spoken about it in other texts, interviews, and lectures. Compared with other architects, we write a lot, but like them, we are not philosophers. Architects carry around images in their heads that, if the opportunity arises, are

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then converted into architecture. These images are made of the world which the architect dreams of and longs for: visions of a past and future world. We are not that interested in telling stories. That is why we do not produce a very narrative or didactic architecture. Rather, we make architecture that, in the most elementary way possible, expresses the being of the materials used, the being of the site, the being of the physical reality of the world. We are interested in such elementary questions as: What is a wall? What is a surface? What is transparency? These questions have an immediate effect on the sensual, perceptual abilities of the observer and the user. We often just stand up some material – like in a warehouse – so that it gains its optimal effect. Think of the stones in the house at Tavole or the cement boards in the Ricola building. Sometimes we only manipulate a pair of walls or ceilings to reinforce the potential spatial qualities. An example of this is the turbine hall in the new Tate Gallery, which will be a central part of the new museum. **CD** How do you deal with the building as an urban piece? **H&deM** The large horizontal light box on the building looks like a lantern. It transforms the dark, gloomy brick building. It lights it from two sides: from the outside and toward the inside. This light box is also an important horizontal counterweight to the vertical dominance of the existing brick chimney. **CD** That provides a reading from the Thames side, but what are you doing to incorporate building with the neighborhood? The Tate sees it as an anchor to improve the neighborhood. **H&deM** This is, in fact, a very important component. The building (especially the huge turbine hall, which will work like a covered street where people can walk without necessarily visiting the museum), the galleries, and the landscaping are part of the neighborhood. We have already taken down some of the existing buildings so that the Tate can be seen. Now it is a power station that people are kept away from. We want to do the opposite: to attract people. We will take down small buildings so that some view of St. Paul's and the River Thames is possible and so that you can approach the building. We propose different types of landscaping, just like a London park, with big trees and green grass, that will be clearly defined, or an open space that is all gravel so that the mass of brick will be standing on the ground. The existing building is huge, but optically it does not touch the ground because there is so much stuff around it that hides its lower part. Using both the old bricks from the low-rise buildings and new bricks (we are thinking of using shiny coal-black bricks for some of the new parts), we want to create armlike extensions into the neighborhood. We want to have paving on the sidewalks that extends to the tube station and deep into the neighborhood – like the string that Ariadne gave to Theseus to guide him out of the labyrinth. We would like to realize this idea of the brick pavement because it evokes a very old London detail and is also a contemporary strategy. **CD** What is your idea of grounding? You have mentioned this idea twice. The wall touches the floor, and the building touches the ground, and you have signs in the ground as to where the building is in terms of the neighborhood. What is important to you about the ground? **H&deM** It is so obvious that



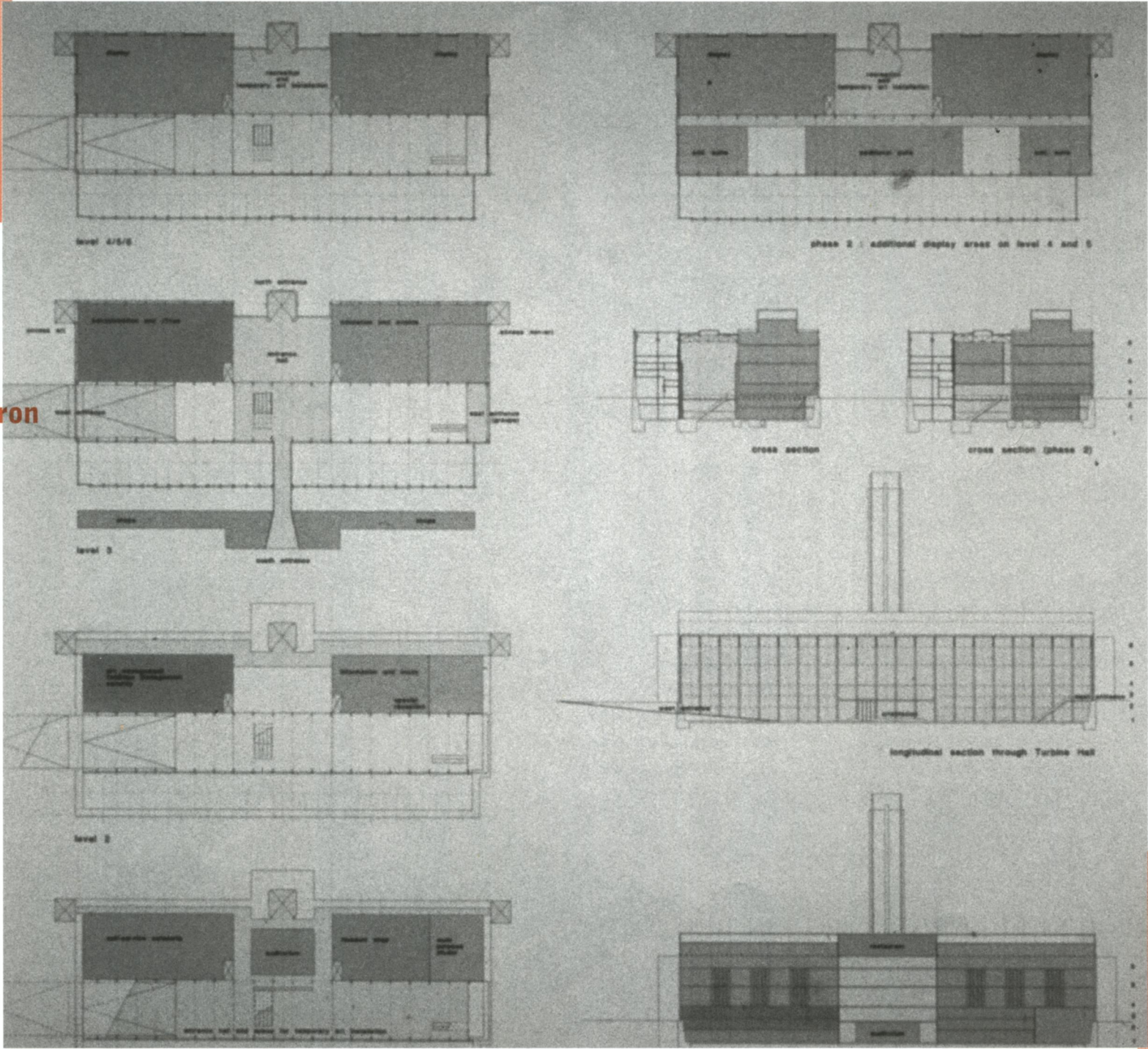
The building will be set within its urban context, particularly regarding public access. To this end, some of the low-rise buildings around the main body of the former power station have been (or are going to be) removed. This will improve the site's orientation, linking it with existing walkways and emphasizing the new museum's entrances. It will also allow a clear view of important London landmarks. The landscaping around the Tate Gallery of Modern Art is of great importance. The four areas on the south, north, east, and west sides will be transformed into four different public spaces, each with a unique character. These spaces will promote a variety of urban experiences: a grassy, tree-filled park; a large open space for public activities and the display of large sculptures; coach and taxi drop-off and handicap-ped parking set within a shady zone formed by

several layers of different kinds of trees; an enclosed sculpture garden dotted with groups of trees; a large fountain directly connected to the cafeteria inside the museum; and, finally, the ramp leading into the turbine hall, the Tate Gallery's grand public space. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's Bankside Power Station is a historic landmark on the River Thames. Its powerful but austere architecture needs to be modified so that the brick building can express the activities appropriate to a museum, which revolve around vision, perception, and communication. Our project for converting Scott's structure into the Tate Gallery of Modern Art retains and enhances the existing architectural qualities, such as the vast interior space of the turbine hall, the external brickwork with mullions, and the cathedral-like windows.

At the same time, the scheme adds a powerful contemporaneity to the building. The glazed light beam on top of the brick building relates to the verticality of the existing brick chimney and creates a strong, luminous urban sign. It is both a beacon and a viewing tower. The new internal facade of the museum facing the turbine hall will contain large glass openings of different shapes and be clad with shiny black brick. The black brick continues and contrasts that of the existing building envelope. The charcoal-like surface of the new brick evokes the reflective character of the large sheets of glass inserted in the brickwork inside and outside. The same black brick will also be used for some of the pavement surrounding the building and appear on the walkways leading to the museum from the Southwark neighborhood. It will therefore be more than just a building material:

the point where we can even call up the spirit of Louis Kahn. We have to move forward, much as I enjoy being in his museum buildings. You could ask the question, if we were so conceptually set on the idea of someone doing this building who was of our generation, then why do we have Piano and Moneo and Ando on the final list? We had a sense that everyone on our final list of six had either another or a great museum building in them. I don't think Piano has finished designing great museum buildings, by any means, and his response to this project was really breathtakingly impressive, I have to say. He didn't need this project at all. He's got big projects all over the world and really intriguing projects as well as big ones, but the way in which he approached this building was impressive. **BURDETT** He added a lot of issues that were then shared by the other competitors and are very important to how this building will eventually end up, such as being able to traverse it from south to north rather than from the river side across, which is a fundamental gesture. The Tate said, "No, you can't do that

we all stand on the ground and we all live under the law of gravity. Gravity is a human condition. **CD** It sounds as if you are not very interested in flying! **H&deM** You mean in an airplane? That's pretty tiring! We try to limit ourselves to the minimum necessary. Flying doesn't interest us any more than driving a car or taking a train or riding up and down in an elevator or an escalator. To us, these are all purely technical transport systems without any additional, e.g., philosophical, components. We're also not interested in the ideas of immateriality or weightlessness often associated with flying. Neither flying nor the increasing speed of other activities in our daily routine has been able to free people from their corporeality and from gravity. On the contrary, the more people become estranged from their bodies, the more the body seems to develop strategies for bringing "bodiness" back into it, for reminding them of it: body shaping, body building, tattoos, jogging, aerobics, etc. We are more interested in this phenomenon than in flying. Flying and weightlessness were important themes for 20th-century architecture that fascinated several generations. But actually nothing really interesting came out of that. The results were always merely illustrations of a dream. We are trying to take a new path. We insist on the world's materiality, on the multiplicity of senses as a central condition of humanity. In our opinion, the spiritual quality of architecture and art lies exactly in this emphasized materiality. Richard Serra's heavy art is not interesting because of its tons of weight or its rusty surfaces or the arrangement of its steel plates. It is interesting because its spiritual qualities allow the unbelievable presence of its material condition to be overcome, forgotten. **CD** There seems to be a theme, not just here, but in other interviews you have given: your interests in materiality, in linking materials, in being grounded all have a weight to them. **H&deM** We like weight just as much as we like light constructions. We don't have a preference. There is a specific weight to everything that we are interested in, not an absolute weight. **CD** Do you think there are things in your work that are light? **H&deM** Sure. The Goetz Gallery seems to fly away – and at the same time it is like a heavy piece of ice. The glass looks like ice. Because it is slightly opaque, it seems to be heavy. We like this kind of double aspect: lightness and heaviness at the same time. In fact, architecture is always heavy. It is never really light. But what's the issue? It is not



important that something is light or heavy. It is not that we would prefer one to the other. At the beginning we did more really light buildings, often wooden constructions that we just put on the ground like a pile of boards, such as the plywood House-Puppet Theater. At the moment many of our projects are all glass that we treat in different ways: silk-screened, etched, mirrored, translucent, or transparent. In some projects the glass looks very heavy and solid. In others, it is very light, very transparent and pure, like a glass of water. In fact, all of these buildings, ours as well as others, are built out of steel, concrete, and glass, which are very heavy. In architecture, "light or heavy" thus has more of a perceptual than a physical meaning. Something transparent appears light to us; something opaque appears heavy. These categorizations are deceptive; this is why we want to question them and infiltrate them. For this reason we've started making opaque concrete walls look light, using, for example, a thin layer of water flowing over them as in the Ricola Europe Building in Mulhouse. Another method is printing photographic images on concrete, as we did in the Sports Center Pfaffenhof in St. Louis, France, or in the library project for Eberswalde near Berlin. "Tattooed" with images, the concrete seems porous and light.

CD What process did you use in the Ricola project? **H&deM** In the Ricola building we have this watery, reflecting cement wall that seems very light, and right next to it, printed with a leaf motif, is the translucent polycarbonate wall that, by day, looks matte and nearly impenetrable. This paradoxical image changes into its opposite as soon as lights go on inside the building or when, during a period of dry weather, water stops running down the roof over the concrete walls and the concrete looks like concrete again. To say it simply, the world's physical reality is much more complex and not as clearly tangible as we, out of pure habit, assume it to be. In our architecture, we try to express this complexity.

CD Does your interest in material and its lightness or heaviness and with our preconceptions about that lead to an emphasis on surface and a lesser interest in volume? **H&deM** At a certain moment it did. But you cannot base all of your work on questions of surface. In the larger, urban-scale projects on which we are working we use spaces and columns in a way that enhances similar issues of irritation and strangeness versus normality, reliability, and orientation.

CD Where do you think art is now in

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Activities inside the museum have been organized on five floors in the boiler house. The three upper floors host the galleries and are organized into six suites of rooms. All other activities are located on the lower floors: the entrance area, information area, and plant room are on the lowest level of the turbine hall, as are the cafeteria, auditorium, educational facilities, art handling area, and loading bay.

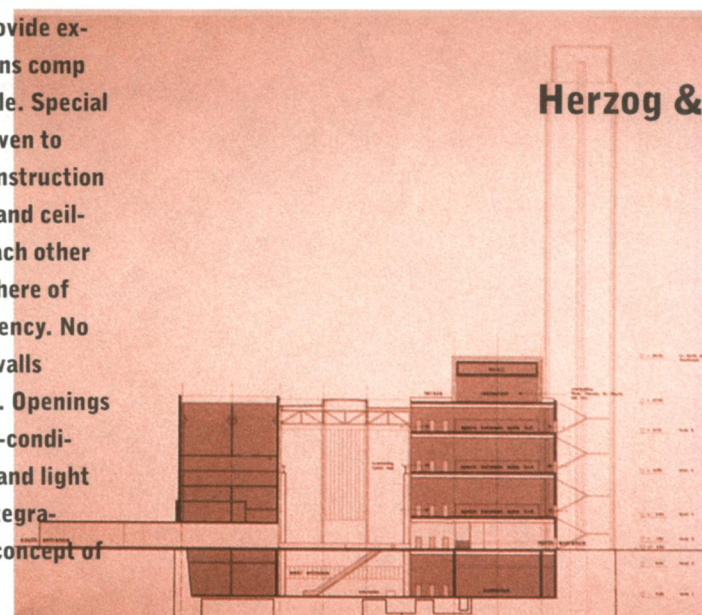
The plant facilities, including the turbine engines, have been removed from the turbine hall, transforming it into one of London's most impressive covered public spaces: a galleria with a unique industrial character. In this ideal area between the interior and the exterior, thousands of people will come together to decide what show to see, where to go for a snack or drink, or simply to meet. It is also a very special space to display temporary art installations and to show video and film projections on the large movable screen suspended along the crane gantries.

The new galleries are to be places of encounter between people and works of art. Because this very simple idea has often been neglected in the architectural concepts for museums of the last few years, the new Tate must face the challenge of being outstanding among comparable international museums.

Six gallery suites on the three top levels will offer a wide variety of spatial experiences: rooms of different sizes with different wall heights, either with artificial light or natural light from the side and from the top. Most of the display spaces provide wall heights of between 5.5 and 5.0 meters. A double-height space between levels 3 and 4 with a room height of 13.5 meters, showing one of Scott's cathedral windows in full length, will house special installations; other exhibition spaces, 10 meters in height, are to be installed under the light beam, inundated with beautiful daylight to give them a unique character.

The east wing on level 4 will house the temporary exhibition gallery. Wall heights of 5.5 meters and flexible display areas will provide extraordinary conditions comparable to a Kunsthalle. Special attention is being given to detailing and the construction of the walls, floors, and ceilings, which touch each other to create an atmosphere of stability and consistency. No joints separate the walls from floor or ceiling. Openings for displacement air-conditioning, electricity, and light are also carefully integrated into the spatial concept of the galleries.

Escalators lead to the concourses overlooking the turbine hall and also provide access to the galleries. The central suites in immediate proximity to the concourses may be used for special exhibitions or to link the galleries in the east and west wings. Large glass boxes resembling bay windows overlook the turbine hall and serve as ideal places within the display area for visitors to sit and rest.



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because the land belongs to someone else." He said, "You can. Just do it." Then we made a phone call simply to ask if it might be possible. That is why a competition is good. It is also incredibly positive for architecture in this country at a time when confidence in the profession has never been lower; at least in the last few years it was very, very low.

SEROTA For the architects who reach those final stages it is undoubtedly difficult, especially for the younger ones. A practice as large as Piano's or even Ando's or even Moneo's can afford to carry a competition of this magnitude and to invest resources in it. I think we really stretched Chipperfield and probably in a different way Koolhaas, and certainly Herzog & de Meuron, in terms of what we were asking them to do for the amount of money that we were paying them – in terms of developing their thoughts, attending workshops, having discussions with us, investing emotional energy. But then this was a singular project.

END

relationship to architecture as a cultural phenomenon? **H&deM** Art is more progressive. Artists react more openly to changes in this world. That is why in past decades more creative and engaged young people have been going to art schools than to architecture schools. Artists point to new ways of seeing the world. Architects do not. They cannot do that because they are too bound up with responsibility and other people's money. Why didn't we become artists then? Because architecture and urban planning have an incredible and immediate influence on people, because architecture and urban planning are the strongest and most enduring expression of every epoch. This is also why many artists are interested in architecture: Dan Graham, Rémy Zaugg, and Gerhard Richter are all fascinated by the idea of working in public space. **CD** If you feel that art is more progressive than architecture, does this present problems for you when you are asked to do an art museum? **H&deM** No, we don't think that art is superior to architecture. It is just different. We do not have problems with artists or with being architects rather than artists. Our collaborations with artists are very interesting for both sides because we are working at an equal level, making contributions of equal importance to a project. It adds a new dimension to a project. That is what interests us. **CD** When architecture is paired with art, it is traditionally thought to be more conservative and it certainly moves more slowly. **H&deM** Absolutely. It is extremely conservative because of the issues of money, responsibility, and fighting to be someone in a market prevent architects from thinking. We also find it grotesque to be attacked from the left for being too conservative and from the right for being too, let's say, radical. There is too much ideology in architecture. This stupid discussion in Berlin about the city of stone is just amazing. On the other hand, the whole ANY group is rather the antithesis of Berlin because its writers are the light construction people, deconstructivists, and people who are attracted to French philosophy. We always find this a bit boring, but the people themselves have a lot of potential. But potential alone is not enough. We would like to have one-on-one discussions in which one could really get beyond these old questions and develop new things.

