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Dorothy Huber

The Hidden and the Apparent: Comments on the Work of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron

*Translated from the German by
Francesca Rogier*

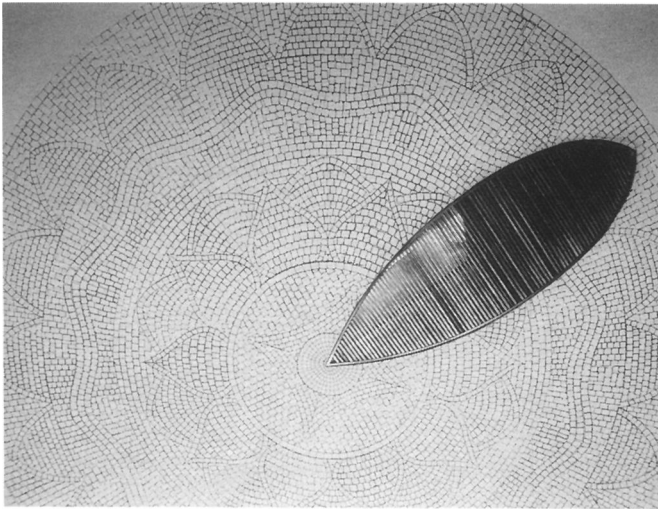
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In discussing their position in today's architectural scene, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron refer to the time of their education at the Eidgenössischen Technische Hochschule, Zurich (Federal Technical College of Zurich) as an age of the reawakening of real architectural value, of architecture in the narrower sense of an architectural discipline.¹ At that time, around 1970, architectural education in European schools was largely determined by disciplines related to architecture (from economics across the technical fields to sociology and psychology), which to a certain extent had established the theories of the new architecture as constitutive of the social legitimation of architects. The change that subsequently took place — aided in Zurich by the teaching of Aldo Rossi — could be described as the new formation of a value system that would be registered by the architectural project: rather than the value analytically won by the instruments of the related disciplines, the appeal would be to an "internal architectonic reality," the insistence on the autonomy of architecture.²

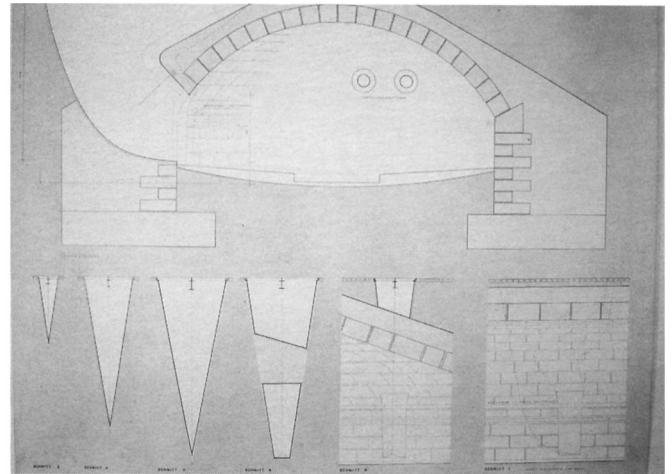
In the haze of theoretical exhaustion that spread parallel to this paradigmatic transition, certain concepts were magically

loaded without having had to undergo a more precise clarification. "Place" and "image" became almost monstrously inflated empty formulas that had to take in all that a critical stance sought to evade. With the turn toward the artistic qualities of architecture, the word of the architect also experienced a revaluation. This can be seen in the increasing trend of architects writing about their own buildings and projects, or allowing themselves expression through interviews in the architecture media; it is also evident in the popular practice of architects' lectures, from which the audience expects a performancelike production rather than comprehensive factual information.

In the following search for aspects of internal architectural truth in the work of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, I will call attention to a rhetorical moment, an architectonic quality in an actual sense, which secures for the projects a certain independence, a kind of immunity in the process of critical appropriation of their architectural substance. This does not mean that the buildings are inaccessible; on the contrary, a large potential for communication lies in their perceptual presence (*Anschaulichkeit*), in the fact that to a certain degree they ex-



1. Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, project for a marketplace, Basel, 1979, section



2. Herzog and de Meuron, project for a marketplace, plan

plain themselves, convey themselves, without at all becoming garrulous.

In the gesture of show, the work indicates a readiness for communication. To this an appropriate analogy is made linguistically. This is different from the gesture of concealment. Here the architectonic substance detaches itself from the grip of linguistics; spaces for association open up in which individual or collective cultural experiences echo. In the collaboration of these two approaches lies a seductive tension.

In a project of 1979 Herzog and de Meuron proposed, along with a fountain and a new lighting concept, an opening in the earth for the renovation of the marketplace in Basel, created in the manner of an auditory canal, by which the flow of the river through a canal under the square would be made audible.³ With this intervention they call attention in an extremely restrained way to the changes that came about in the course of the city's history, a simple as well as em-

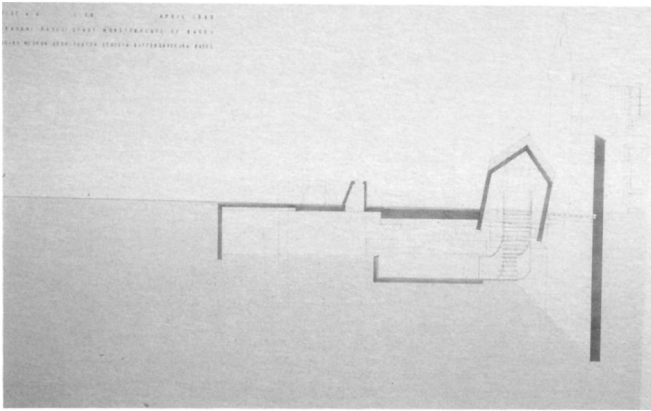
phatic work in its meaningfully conveyed referential character.

A second work developed somewhat later, in 1980, similarly discloses a finding significant to the city's past, namely a buried rampart of Celtic origin from the first century B.C.⁴ This *muris gallicus* once protected the oldest place of settlement in the city on the cathedral hill toward the south. The architects designed an underground exhibition space, to be illuminated by two rows of cubic metal skylights. Above the exit to the archaeological site stands a small house with a gable roof, recalling in its elementary-schoolbook form temporary hut shelters. This building stands slightly crooked, angled as if it threatened immediately to sink into the in fact barely visible moat that is recalled here.

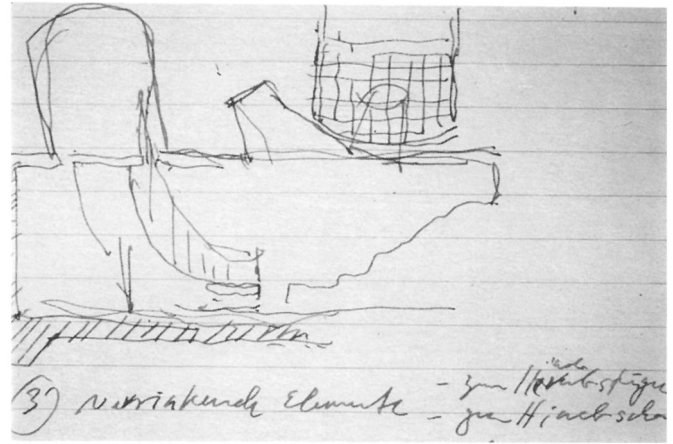
The constructive elements of a project of 1986–87, the garden pavilion of the resort hotel Eden, at Rheinfelden near Basel, are quickly listed: four supports on a plinth, formed as thickly outlined let-

ters — E, D, E, and N — support a metal frame roof; all five elements are poured of black concrete.⁵ Here the rhetorical form rightly assumes a literally verbal gestalt. Once again the slightly trite, shabby name of “Eden” for a resort hotel reclaims something of its original tone: it signifies a cheerful, “paradisical” place for small occasions in the midst of ancient woods. The observer experiences this disclosure only if, while wandering in the garden, he directs his view to the pavilion from a certain point. A relationship to mannerist garden designs of the cinquecento, where guests were offered diverse kinds of surprises, is thus suggested.

The Blue House of 1979–80, at Oberwil near Basel, is at first glance a conventional structure, a right-angled volume underneath a gable roof, distinguishable from its environment only by its coloring.⁶ On closer inspection, however, the house allows the recognition of a few subtle intrigues. The northeastern corner



3. Herzog and de Meuron, project for an underground exhibition space for a Celtic wall, Basel, 1980, section



4. Herzog and de Meuron, project for an underground exhibition space, section study

forms a hinge point for the reading, where the spread-out, staggered cornerstones reveal to the observer that the northern side of the building does not connect to the eastern side in a right angle. They also show that this wall is curved, or rather, in tension, and visually pushes outward: this moment of tension is apparent at the corner. The curved wall presents itself in an inviting gesture that leads the visitor to the entrance. The gable roof is, in its orthogonal regularity, the norm against whose background the deviations, the deliberate asymmetries in the east façade and the sweeping north side, become perceptible.

The theme of addition/attachment/enclosure is addressed in a project published here, the so-called Plywood House of 1984–85, at Bottmingen near Basel. A 1940s house in an expansive, well-tended garden was the setting; the forties house, through such elements as the use of dark-stained wood, indicated the effort to integrate itself with the region. In the Plywood House, a residential addition with a small stage for marionette performances, Herzog and de Meuron display consideration toward the existing situation in several respects. What for others would have been troublesome conditions in the contract, to the point of obstruction, these architects take as a basis for developing their architectural themes. The house — figuratively put — proceeds cautiously. It touches the ground only on two concrete

bars that run the length of the building, upon which wooden balconies are laid in the cross direction. These meet far beyond the line of the house and give the impression that the house is being pushed or taken away without greater extravagance. On the southern side, the façade recedes to move away from a valuable tree. The careful demeanor toward the given situation corresponds on the structural level to the display of a craftlike sincerity: at every opportunity, the Plywood House indicates how it is made, how it is put together.

Thus, in one sense, a relationship is established toward the main building, but, conversely, a distance from it is also maintained. If, in the 1940s, one leaned toward local materials and established production methods because of (war-dependent) economic and ideological necessity, Herzog and de Meuron make clear that though they thoroughly understand the local craft and iconographic production of this age, they are unwilling to reactivate either, particularly the connotations of the latter. Thus the architects introduce elements of this former epoch, such as the dark brown wood and the exposed balcony structure, into another tradition, namely that of the *neue Bauen*, which is evident in Basel with a few noteworthy projects by Rudolf Steiger (1900–82), Paul Artaria (1892–1959), and Hans Schmidt (1893–1972) as well as Hans Bernoulli (1876–1959). From this

confrontation develop effects of alienation that secure for the Plywood House individuality and a contemporaneous quality.

Certain demonstrative structural traits are also peculiar to another project published here, the Ricola storage building at Laufen of 1986–87, but these appear less in historical, iconographic relation than in one that corresponds pragmatically to the building program. The storage building stands as an independent volume in a disparate industrial site; it is engaged in production and distribution at the functional level, but maintains its architectural autonomy by the definition of its cubic compactness. An outer envelope is placed around a typical storage infrastructure, which unfolds its components exposed in their order of assembly. The consistency of the transparency aspired to here (in a literal sense) is revealed at the corners, where the wall construction becomes visible in section. This envelope or shell is a lesson in materials and structural clarity, but it does not remain an additive inventory. Since every five rows of panels/sheets/tiles comprise three zones increasing in height from bottom to top, compositionally the cube becomes an event. The overhanging roof forms the buildings' terminus in the fashion of a cornice indirectly fastened to the cube and carried by narrow rows of wood supports.

The storage building as formal program: here, like elements arrange and sort



themselves in an overall order. Through architecture the meaning of “storage building,” *Lager* in German, is metaphorically extended. *Lagern* signifies not only the transitive verb “to deposit” or “to store up,” but also the intransitive verb “to lie” or “to rest.” A further significant relationship is revealed in the geological notion of “sedimentation”: to the rear of the Ricola storage building is an abandoned limestone quarry in which the deposits of mineral layers are exposed. In this opposition of a geological finding and an architectural work, the autonomy of the architectural artifact holds true.

Notes

1. See Jacques Herzog, “Das spezifische Gewicht der Architekturen” (The specific weight of architectures), *Archithese* n.s., 2 (1982): 39–42.
2. Bruno Reichlin and Martin Steinmann, “Zum Problem der innerarchitektonischen Wirklichkeit” (Toward the problem of internal architectonic reality), *Archithese* 19 (1976): 3–11.
3. For this project, see *Herzog & de Meuron* (Basel: Architecture Museum in Basel, 1988), index of projects, no. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, no. 10.
5. *Ibid.*, no. 35.
6. *Ibid.*, no. 5.

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Plan and sections courtesy of the architects.

5. Herzog and de Meuron, Blue House, Oberwil, 1979–80