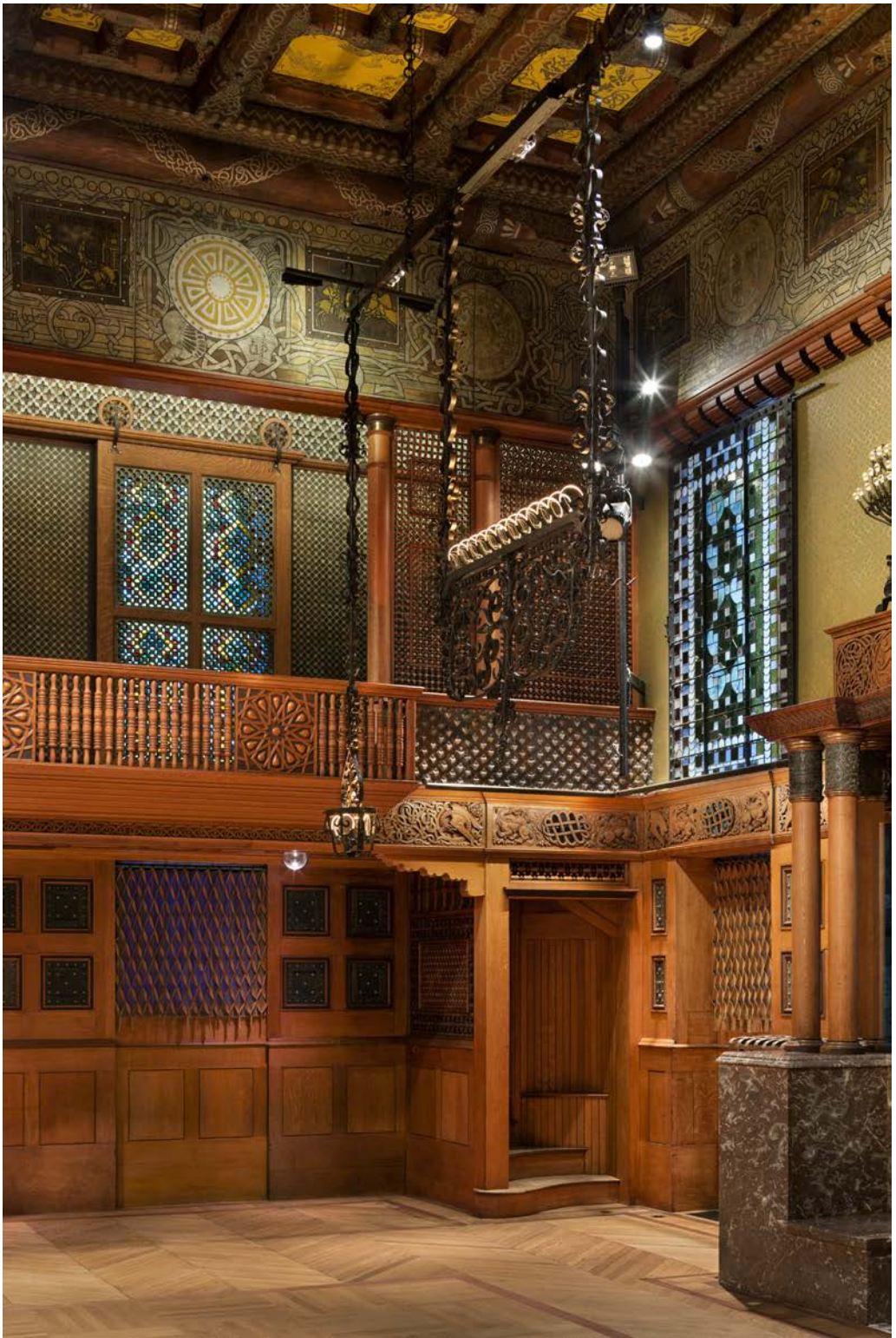




Jacques Herzog

Published by University of Minnesota Press

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1. Park Avenue Armory's Veterans Room, which has been recently renovated by Herzog & de Meuron. Photograph by James Ewing. Courtesy of Otto Archive.

Material and Performance

An Interview with Jacques Herzog

The Olfactory Object “Rotterdam” was first presented on the occasion of the relocation of the exhibition *Herzog & de Meuron. No. 250* at the Netherlands Architecture Institute in 2005. First shown at the Schaulager Basel in the autumn 2004, the exhibition was then transported nearly a thousand kilometers down the Rhine Rotterdam, and thereafter shipped across the channel to the Tate. The inclusion of the olfactory object, with its notes of Rhine water, hashish, wet dog, and patchouli, was a reference to the characteristic odors of the two cities, as well as a pun on Cologne (that other trading city on the Rhine). Basel is the highest city that oceangoing container ships can navigate to, and is therefore Switzerland’s only seaport. Rotterdam, for its part, is at the mouth of the Rhine. The two cities are linked by commerce, history, and Protestant temperament, but above all, by the river that binds them.

The exhibition, curated by Theodora Vischer and Jacques Herzog, provided insight into the design practice of the renowned firm through models, fragments, and archival material. Such artifacts—“waste products of a thought process” in the words of the architects in conversation with Theodora Vischer, February 24, 2004—are scrupulously documented and cared for by the firm. Far from being a minor element in the exhibition, the olfactory object was an animating spirit, a gift, and a memento. Its presentation was, in the sense that Jacques Herzog implies in the interview below, a “performative act,” one that evokes the famously pragmatic, sensual, and playful qualities of the firm’s often highly complex projects. As Remy Zaugg observed in an interview with Philip Ursprung:

Herzog & de Meuron cultivate open-mindedness. Their method varies according to the project. It springs from the project, is subordinate to it, and not the reverse. If they have a method, it consists in asking themselves again and again: exactly what are we doing there? Hence the precision, functional appropriateness, and diversity of skin, façade, and aspect in their creations. They belong to no movement. (Remy Zaugg in interview with Philip Ursprung, “Architecture in Itself Doesn’t Interest Me,” *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History*, ed. Philip Ursprung [Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers], 231.)



2. Herzog & de Meuron's Olfactory Object "Rotterdam," developed for their 2005 No. 250. *An Exhibition, Beauty and Waste in the Architecture of Herzog & de Meuron*, at the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Copyright Herzog & de Meuron, 2005.

Furthermore, in their collaboration with the ETH Studio Basel, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron have been researching the complexity and structure of cities since 1999. Among its many architectural and infrastructural projects, the firm was also commissioned to undertake the restoration and renovation of the Park Avenue Armory, the most important Gilded Age building remaining in New York City. From the scale of the urban, down to the scale of a wearable perfume, Herzog & de Meuron have therefore consciously engaged with the evocative power of materials. Jacques Herzog spoke with *Future Anterior* on March 31, 2016.

FUTURE ANTERIOR: Tell us about the Olfactory Object "Rotterdam," that you created in 2005. How did that project come about?

JACQUES HERZOG: That was an old dream, actually. I was always fascinated by smells and perfume, how it is bottled and how it is produced and marketed. Our interest in the world of the olfactory was based on a more general interest of Herzog & de Meuron to reach out for things in architecture which go beyond the purely visual, beyond moments that only exist in the foreground.

Architecture — and I insist on this — has an archaic dimension. It is limiting, but this also makes architecture survive because, more than any other artistic discipline, it represents

exactly what is missing in our world or in our society. A lot of people, through their work, and through their business, are removed from that very archaic physical moment which makes all the senses inevitable and necessary, not just the visual one. We needed those senses to survive in the past; so smell and touch, these senses make our life what it is. If we want architecture to really exploit its full potential, it should go far beyond the purely visual, optical moments.

We have often seen people touch the surfaces of our buildings as if they were touching the bark of a tree or the skin of a living object. Touch is part of how we perceive the world, and so is smell. Architecture, especially in the past, had more specific smells. Today, contemporary architecture tends to have a smell which does not originate from architecture itself, but from added scents. In supermarkets and malls, and even in public transport systems, smell is infused and steered from outside. But we all know what an old oak floor means, how it smells when it is freshly waxed, or asphalt after rainfall — if it was warm during the day, it smells differently from if it was cold. If you go out in nature in the different seasons, the smell is different. Those are all wonderful experiences, and basically we all could have those sensations, but they are a bit lost.

The perfume we designed — we didn't call it a "perfume" but called it an "olfactory object" — relates to that very moment. Smell is like a time machine: it suddenly reminds you of some moment in your life you had forgotten. Like a film that brings you back to that moment; that is what was interesting for us.

We tried to conceive of a scent, an "olfactory object" that has a mixture of scents. The scent is called Rotterdam because the show was there, and it is based on the water of the Rhine River, which, from swimming there, has a very specific, artificial, industrial smell underlying the natural water. Then we added other scents that were also characteristic for this city on the Rhine.

It is different from scents on the market that are commercially available. But it's not actually about producing a perfume for the market, because that would be a conflict of interest. Commercializing the scent would make it banal and vulgar, and it would kill it to some degree. If it is mass produced and available in a supermarket or airport, it loses its magic and uniqueness. That goes against the particular interest that I have in a scent.

FA: You describe this project as Rotterdam, as a city, a shared object. On the one hand, there are shared objects that we are all familiar with that are represented or encapsulated in this smell, but on the other hand we often think about smell as a



3. This table within *No. 250. An Exhibition, Beauty and Waste in the Architecture of Herzog & de Meuron* was used to display all the ingredients of the Olfactory Object "Rotterdam." Copyright Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2005.

very private experience. Is smell, for you, somewhere between the public and private? Were you trying to pursue some sense of the collective with this project?

JH: On the personal side, people often have a perfume for a period of time, and then leave it because they get bored for a while, but then rediscover it. It is the rediscovery that brings it back, or creates a new, fresh moment.

On the public side, if a scent can penetrate beyond branding to make people become aware of the real components of the scent, then that would make it a publicly shared experience. But that is very difficult to achieve. Similar to wine, very few people consuming perfume or drinking wine penetrate the general "like or dislike" moment to really try to distinguish the different components making that particular scent more or less interesting. I don't want to give the impression that I have any didactic interests, but it is interesting to remind people to find out what you really like in that wine or in that perfume. Few people want to do this or even can do this. But if an individual can find out the component in even something very simple like a rose, or more difficult like a wet concrete surface, then that is a moment of discovery, an individual moment of perceptive energy. Such a moment has something erotic and powerful. It is a really interesting thing, and represents the moments in life that we are really after.

The act of perception is more interesting than the object perceived. I am relatively uninterested in this or that specific material form. I am relatively uninterested in this or that particular scent. I am more interested in the fact that I discover it. It is this moment of active involvement which I think is most interesting.

FA: Is that why you called it an “object,” in the sense that when you talk about smell it’s very difficult to think about an object having physical boundaries? The smell is diffuse, and somehow, if you were to take the example that you gave us of concrete, and think of it as a smell, it is both concrete and a smell. It is very hard to tell where the object actually ends when you’re trying to incorporate smell into it.

JH: That is a very good point. The term “object” is maybe the wrong term because it references that it is limited to a little bottle. The object that we talk about is not a single object. It does not have limits, and it opens up a space. It opens up a memory. It opens up potential experience in different directions. That is much more what we are actually after.

FA: There is a fragment from Heraclitus that runs something like, “If all things were to turn to smoke, it’d be the nostrils that would tell them apart.” Is it possible to communicate an “atmospheric” concept by translating it into something more physical or corporal?

JH: I was never interested in a particular architectural form, or color, or smell, or style, or even method. What is interesting is this moment when architecture actively involves the viewer. Human existence is defined through this act of perception and the most real moment is that moment of discovery, of curiosity, of perceptive energy. Rémy Zaugg’s work was amazingly inspiring because he pushed this moment, this aspect of the perception. Going back to Merleau-Ponty and other French philosophers, our approach to architecture and art is very analytical, but also to the sensual world as a whole. The archaic world that smell gives access to is also what connects it to architecture. Architecture is the most archaic discipline, but it is only interesting when you understand it as a holistic discipline that incorporates structure, form, space, surface, smell, and sounds. It’s a bit like a dream. What we all love about dreams is that they are personal. As soon as you start to express your dreams, you destroy them, and they evaporate. Creating a perfume was like that.

If I reopen a bottle of Rotterdam, I enjoy the scent. So I do attach a value to it independently from my perceptive

obsession that I mentioned before. I feel fashion deals with the moment of “like or dislike.” That is not my business. I am not in the fashion world. But I understand that the fashion world tries to please people, make people look nice, and perfume is an element in making that seductive moment.

That is not the intention of the olfactory object. When Comme des Garçons started to do experimental perfumes, some of which are really nasty and ugly and terrible, they used a similar experience that I did with Rotterdam. They also have no problem using quite nasty smells and putting them together into something that makes for something more interesting.

Our interest was to do a scent that was like a city. We have done urban studies and analytical studies of many cities around the world for our book *The Inevitable Specificity of Cities*. We love cities for their diversity, their differences, their specificity. Cities are specific, not generic. As an urbanist, you can do whatever you like, but you can never really describe a city. You cannot catch a city. Cities are complex and fascinating. They are the greatest thing that humans have created, and they escape all the attempts to be described.

Perfume can do that in a limited way. It is impossible to represent a city as a whole, but a scent or a short poem can catch its specificity perhaps better than a large publication by an urbanist. That is part of what we wanted to do with Rotterdam, but it is just an attempt. Maybe even a failure because, as I said before, as soon as you attempt to capture a scent, you somehow kill it.

FA: Let’s unpack that. The city is a fascinating and all-encompassing subject, and in recent decades, this conversation has shifted slightly from the historic city (specifically in terms of preservation) to the smart city. But in that, there is still the discussion of the city as an existing object that needs to be constantly transformed, and that it needs to be constantly updated. It’s a process. It’s what fascinates many of us about cities: they are not fixed, even though we may fix certain parts of it. Within that, your smell of Rotterdam raises the question of the relationship between the object you created and the city that it’s from. Would it be very different if this smell were meant to perfume Rotterdam versus a smell that was meant to represent Rotterdam?

JH: I would never do something that was meant to represent Rotterdam. It’s really a moment that we wanted to raise, it’s like a chapter of Rotterdam. But it’s also a provocation—it’s not meant to be something that is finished. It’s a fragment.

FA: From the point of view of preservation, we constantly talk about objects—existing objects, cities—and the way that pres-



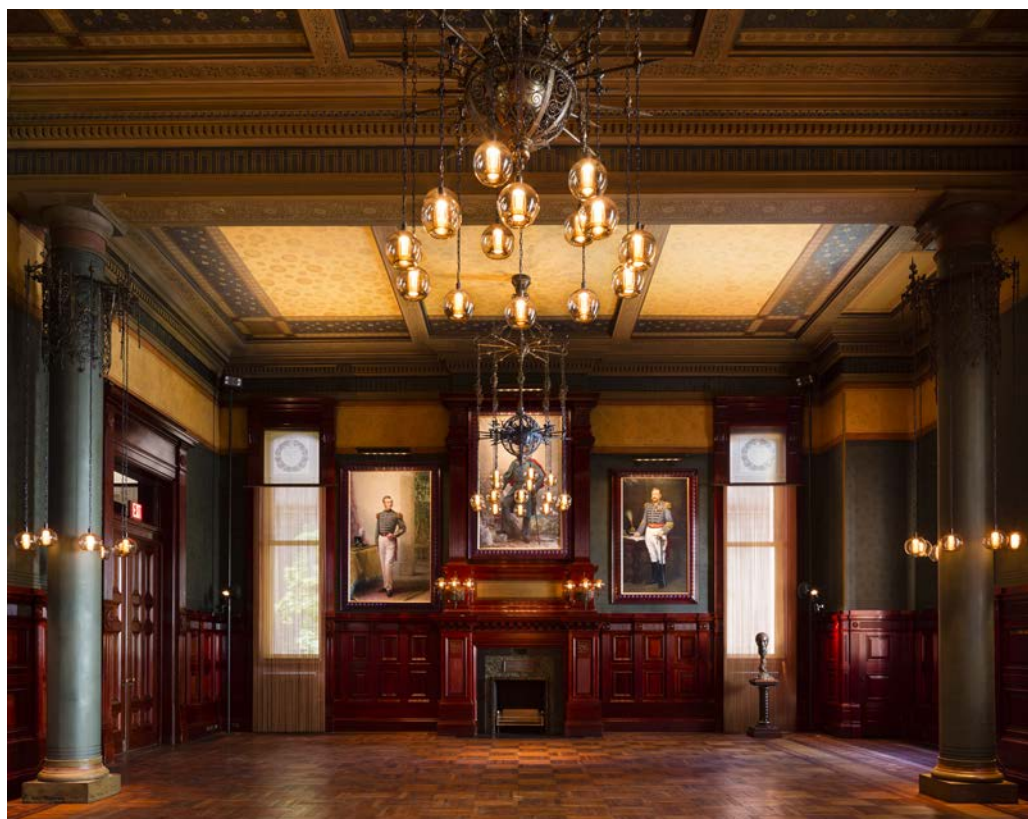
4. Display tables within the firm's 2005 *No. 250. An Exhibition, Beauty and Waste in the Architecture of Herzog & de Meuron* at the Netherlands Architecture Institute. Copyright Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2005.

ervationists intervene is to treat those objects in some way. So I wonder if you could think of smell as a treatment of cities, or a treatment of architecture, which would mean that the smell could be added later as a way to modify itself?

JH: “Rotterdam” is just like a poem on a city . . . it’s meaningless, I would say. I wouldn’t give it too much importance. It’s in that moment when we did the show in Rotterdam—and Rotterdam being a city on the Rhine River, just as Basel is—that there was an immediate connection. I always had sympathy for Rotterdam, as the city with a big port, which has its beauty and its ugliness in a very strange mixture that was just like a gift to Rotterdam, without any other meaning.

Issues of preservation are often connected to issues of cities and to smell. We often say that you cannot reconstruct or bring back anything in architecture and urbanism—and it’s true what you say that we had a lot done in that moment of renovation, reconstruction, simulation, preservation—you may call it what you like. Somehow we see it as dealing with the existing world, and more than in modernism and even in the time before, we cannot escape it. So somehow we are always exposed to the question of how to deal with what is already existing. Whether we give it more or less value is a different question.

Smell is part of the impossibility of bringing back a given moment in time because smell also changes. Smell is connected to heating and lighting—technical constraints that



5. Park Avenue Armory's Board of Officers room renovated by Herzog & de Meuron. Photograph by James Ewing. Courtesy of Otto Archive.

also cannot be brought back. When we began the job on the Armory, for instance, that building once had gas lighting and totally different mechanical systems, the rooms were heated in a different way, and the building didn't have electrical cables. So everything has changed: the people smelled different, wore different clothes, everything was totally different. It's ridiculous to believe that we can copy everything, and the American system of preservation has that dream. It's like a maquillage: somehow you uncover the most important layer and then you cover everything and you paint it and you bring back the woodwork as if it were the first day. That's a simulacrum of what was there before, but it has nothing to do with preserving or extending the life of a particular piece of architecture.

What is interesting is to somehow inspire new energy and new life into existing structure, and sometimes you're more violent and sometimes you're more held back, and that's how we see our job in preservation, and that's what's different about our approach to the Armory. It's very different from what American preservationists would have done in the past. As a result, the spaces have a very lively character. This becomes clear if you have seen what we have done in the Veterans room. The room "speaks" to you.

Our approach to the Armory is also different from the preservation strategies that were established and perpetuated



6. A glimpse of Herzog & de Meuron's stage design for the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Atilla* in 2010, with scenes and costumes by Herzog & de Meuron and Miuccia Prada. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

since the 1960s. That was a kind of dialectic approach of preservationists with a modernist moralism that always wanted to separate and value the old over the new parts. That approach is totally artificial and kills the spatial integrity of architecture.

FA: It goes back to what we were talking about before. Like smell, the object is not quite finished in one place. The old object doesn't fit here, nor does the new object. Like smell, this is also an object that doesn't have those types of boundaries, so it calls forth a different aesthetic.

JH: Yes, it really connects scent to space and to architecture, and it's for everybody who doesn't understand when I say that you cannot renovate or preserve a space as it was. Smell is part of why this is not possible.

FA: Gas lighting in the Armory is a fascinating point: is it something that you thought about, to create a smell for the Armory?

JH: No, why should we do this? The armory creates its own smell . . . it is a very lively place for installation and performing arts, a subject of constant change and innovation . . .

FA: Smell is temporal.

JH: Yes, and also local. When we did the stage design for *Atilla* at the MET Opera, there was a moment when I thought that we could use smell to enhance the sensation of humidity and

darkness of the gigantic forests in which the Huns established their military camps before invading the Roman Empire. We soon gave up that idea; we were not convinced that we would be able to really translate that idea into something powerful. Nevertheless, I believe that performance/opera could use scent as a curatorial ingredient, but other people can do that better than we could.

FA: It's very interesting, this idea of performance, and architecture as a type of performance. Because we talk a lot about the performance of materials—in terms of their durability, and efficiency, and so on—but you're talking about performance in a different way.

JH: Architectural space is also performing space. Over time and namely with large public projects such as Tate Modern, we have learned to understand how people move in public space. Our best work is when we can translate that into architecture where people feel animated and encouraged to move and communicate freely and naturally.

Biography

Jacques Herzog, born in Basel in 1950, studied architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH) with Aldo Rossi and Dolf Schnebli from 1970 to 1975. He received his degree in architecture in 1975. Since 1994, Jacques Herzog has taught as a visiting professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and at the ETH Zurich since 1999. Jacques Herzog established Herzog & de Meuron with Pierre de Meuron in Basel in 1978. The practice has designed a wide range of projects from the small scale of private homes to large scale urban designs. Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron have been awarded numerous prizes including The Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2001 and the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 2007. In 2014, Herzog & de Meuron were awarded the Mies Crown Hall Americas Prize (MCHAP) for *1111 Lincoln Road*, Miami Beach, Florida, USA.