

# Anyone

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Renzo Piano Building Workshop

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By its side, the facsimile of the Globe Theatre will perfectly balance the cultural lever: Shakespearean drama and avant-garde gloom. A 16th-century replica and a 20th-century original that address the same question of true and false. Being both simulacra, both are thematically well-tuned to their contents. The audience of Elizabethan theater has its experience enhanced by the "suspension of disbelief" demanded by the facsimile, while the audience of contemporary art has grown used to industrial spaces as the vernacular of the latest avant-gardes.

Anonymity or neutrality was more readily expected from the white cube that became canonical as the exhibition space of the historical avant-gardes. But the episodes closest to us demand the rugged nature of the garage, the loft, or the shed that alone convey the factory character of

contemporary artistic production. Industrial architecture is far from abstraction: structural logic and functional expediency do not preclude a very strong and distinguishable figuration that happens to have been adopted or sequestered as the appropriate scenario of contemporary art.

Serota has probably made the right moves. In this month of November he has gotten the scandal he pursued in the Turner Prize – Damien Hirst's dead cow had to be removed, as a danger to public health, from the prize exhibition, obtaining the appropriate headlines – and the Bankside project was awarded £50 million of lottery funds in the form of a Millennium Commission Grant. (Incidentally, Future Systems, the semi-finalist firm that proposed the demolition of the power station and the building of a high-tech bubble, also obtained £50 million for a butterfly-shaped Ark at the new Earth

Centre for environmental research in Yorkshire.)

However, both the prize scandal and the museum-as-shed are so predictable as to be part of the lore of contemporary art curators. Mass audiences have strict rules, and one can only play on the safe side complying with them. The same titillating outrage, the same reassuring industrial shed. . . . It is difficult to find much risk in the whole affair, but then, risk has never been the issue in theme parks. And in any case, the gallery goes dutifully back to its origins – Sir Henry Tate was, as is well known, the inventor of the sugar cube.

New York, December 8, 1995

The architectural issues of the Tate do pale in comparison to the issues of publicity and funding that Serota has generated around the Tate. Indeed, in the museum competition itself, architecture seems to be playing Polonius to

art's Hamlet: the advisor to the king whose role provokes the action but also whose role results in his/its death.

A power station cum art museum and a reconstituted Globe Theatre no more make a theme park than does the real Tower of London on the opposite bank of the Thames, where tourists queue for faux history, or that most masterful and enduring act of "realism," Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum. What matter that another corner of London is prescribed the theme park placebo?

Part of the prescription is neutrality. No gesture like Ando's piercing of the building with two plinths that reach toward the opposite shore could be seen as neutral; no building filled with ramps and escalators and a restructured chimney tower as Rem Koolhaas proposed could be seen as neutral. But the blame for the lack of ideas here cannot

be put only on the City of London or Nicholas Serota or the Tate trustees. Rather, it is a sad commentary on the state of the British architecture community today. What could have been a major architectural event for London and the world instead was greeted passively by an architecture community that perhaps only knows how to do so-called theme parks because, in these days of growing unemployment and growing discontent, theme parks are a kind of public Prozac. Only when the drug proves in-effective or even harmful will architecture be asked to write the new prescription.

The choice for the Tate was twofold: keep the power station or tear it down. Future Systems proposed to demolish it and was in turn not selected for the final six. Of the six, all kept the basic building in some form or another. The winner said to me that he came to love the old



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the one hand or the Hallen für neue Kunst in Schaffhausen. Artists have responded very positively to working with these former industrial spaces. The Tate will be one of the few institutions that can work on a really large scale that has that kind of space available to it.

**DAVIDSON** Do you think this industrial space is parallel to work that's developed since the 1960s?

**SEROTA** I think that art and artists are deeply involved with memory, and they sometimes have a tough time moving into a brand-new house and making it sufficiently dirty. There is sufficient patina on this building for the art to be comfortable rather than simply on show. Most artists obviously are making art in the present, but they have a dialogue with the past and

building. Another finalist said he wished he had had the courage to tear it down because it is "a horrible building."

The lack of interest in the Tate competition is not due to the result, but to the fact that architecture allowed the competition to unfold as it did in the first place. This is the architectural issue that no one, architect or critic, wants to face.

**Madrid, December 20, 1995**

The new Tate will be a house of games. Financed by a lottery and designed through a no-win game among architects, it will contain the elaborate power play of contemporary art. A multilayered paradox, the Tate is like a three-dimensional oxymoron of safe risk, where the house always wins: the best millennium play.

Liberal opinion was enraged in Britain by the use of the National Lottery profits to build elitist cultural venues – whether

opera houses or contemporary art museums. Taxation on gambling has traditionally been used for remedial social services; the well-off and educated do not buy lottery tickets, so it was thought that money obtained through a state monopoly should be used to better the lot – through social care and education – of the compulsive gambling lower classes. However, those affected do not seem to want more care and education, but more games and entertainment – though their entertainment. The Cardiff Opera House, won in competition by Zaha Hadid, is now fighting for its lottery funds – and things have not been made easier by a survey that showed the Welsh would rather have a rugby stadium.

If the financing is dubious, the architectural game was rigged. Preserving the power station put participants in a no-win situation. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott will be remembered for his red telephone

booths but not for Bankside, an awkward building by any reckoning. Besides, the frustration and disappointment expressed by some of the losers did not spring from a compelling need to build on the Thames, but rather from a race which was presented as too close to call, and in which each of the runners was made to believe he was ahead. In any case, the decision to hire a foreign architect ought to be cheered as a crack in the British fortress, which up to now had managed to keep international practices on the other side of the English Channel.

As far as the chosen architects are concerned, one should perhaps stress that French mediatic lightness and German new simplicity come together in the northern Swiss. For the stark nakedness of the contemporary art scene, the immaterial transparency of the French is too glamorous, and the heavy

discipline of the Germans, too menacing and laden with dark memories. But the zero degree minimalism of the Basel architects plays the right chord in the black-clad armies of the avant-garde. Perhaps it is neutrality after all – neutrality as laconism if not silence, and neutrality as self-conscious and self-righteous repetition: a box is a box . . . the new lay prayer of virtuous architecture.

The stage is now ready for the game of art. As Mona Hatoum explores her body with micro-cameras inserted through her mouth and other openings, so future visitors will explore the bowels of an obsolete and perhaps diseased architectural body transformed into a glittering carcass by Swiss loving care. The game is fascinating and boring, chaste and obscene. But it was Damien Hirst who provided the real carcass, cut in half in a tank of formalin, and it was he

who provided the big splash of public outrage. So it was right and proper that he should finally get the Turner Prize, "having been able to create a series of extraordinary objects that have captured the imagination of the public." **Mother and Child Divided**, the cow and calf sectioned and presented to the audience, is a fitting representation of the architectural experience of Bankside's dissection. Necrophilia is an urge that cannot be expected to spare ungainly corpses.

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# PIANO BUILDING WORKSHOP

especially the immediate past, so it seems to me entirely appropriate that we should be thinking about making a building that engages with the fairly recent past, as this building does.

**BURDETT** This goes back to one of the conversations we had at the beginning about British culture's relationship with modernism, which is at best complicated, and to your question about the symbolic representation of the building. Many people in Britain are used to the idea that in order for a new building or institution to state itself on the street, it has lots of spinach on the top, or a pediment, or tubes, or blue cranes, or whatever it may happen to be.

**SEROTA** I live in London and have been aware of the Bankside Power Station for most of my life. Simply to pull it down, eradicate it rather than try to find an

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.

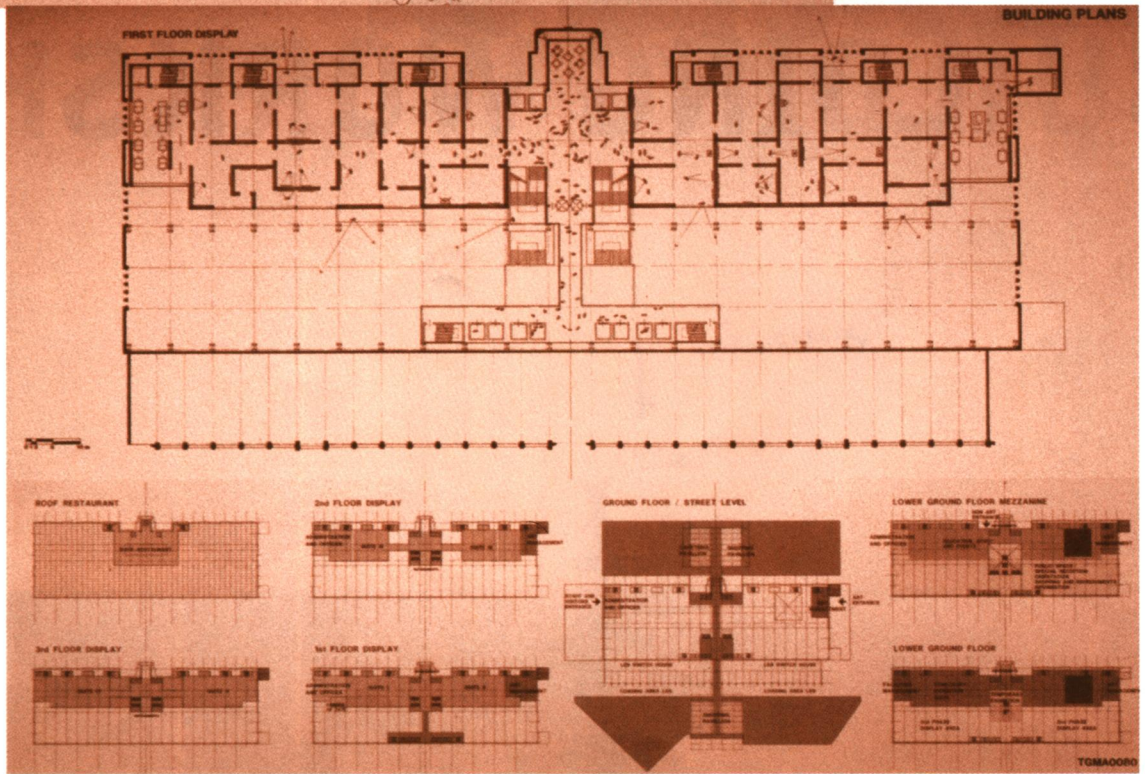
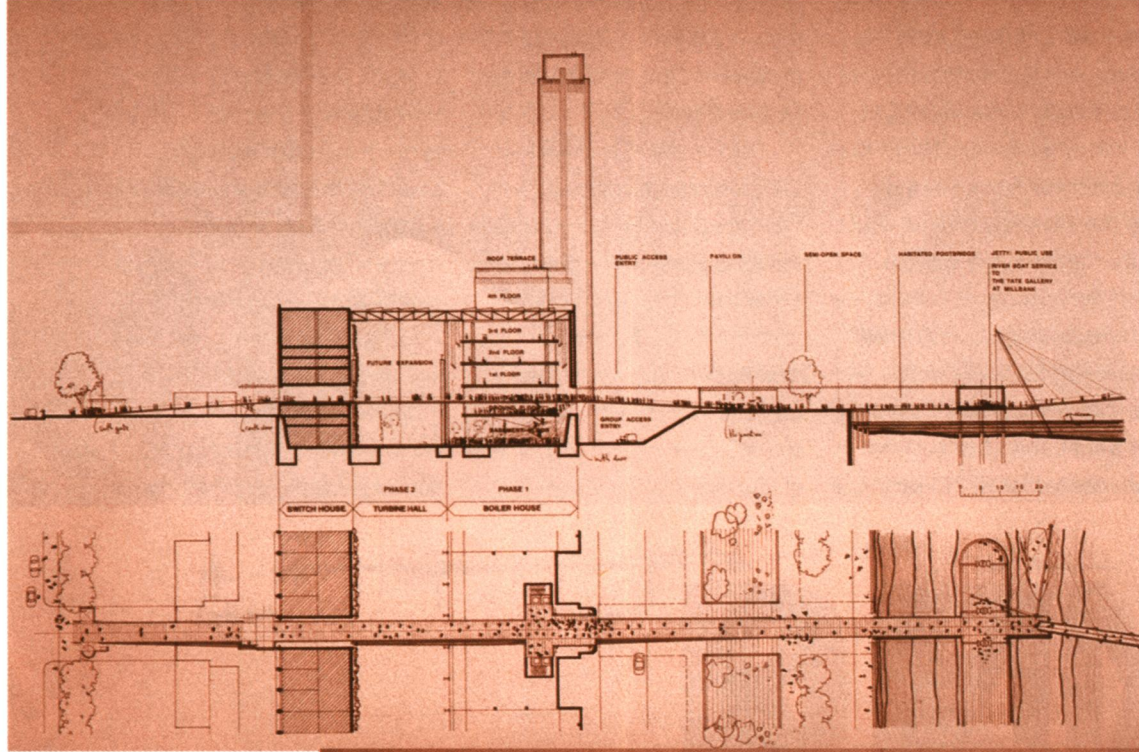
**DAVIDSON** Was keeping the turbine hall open to its 120-foot height a condition of the program?

**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





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.

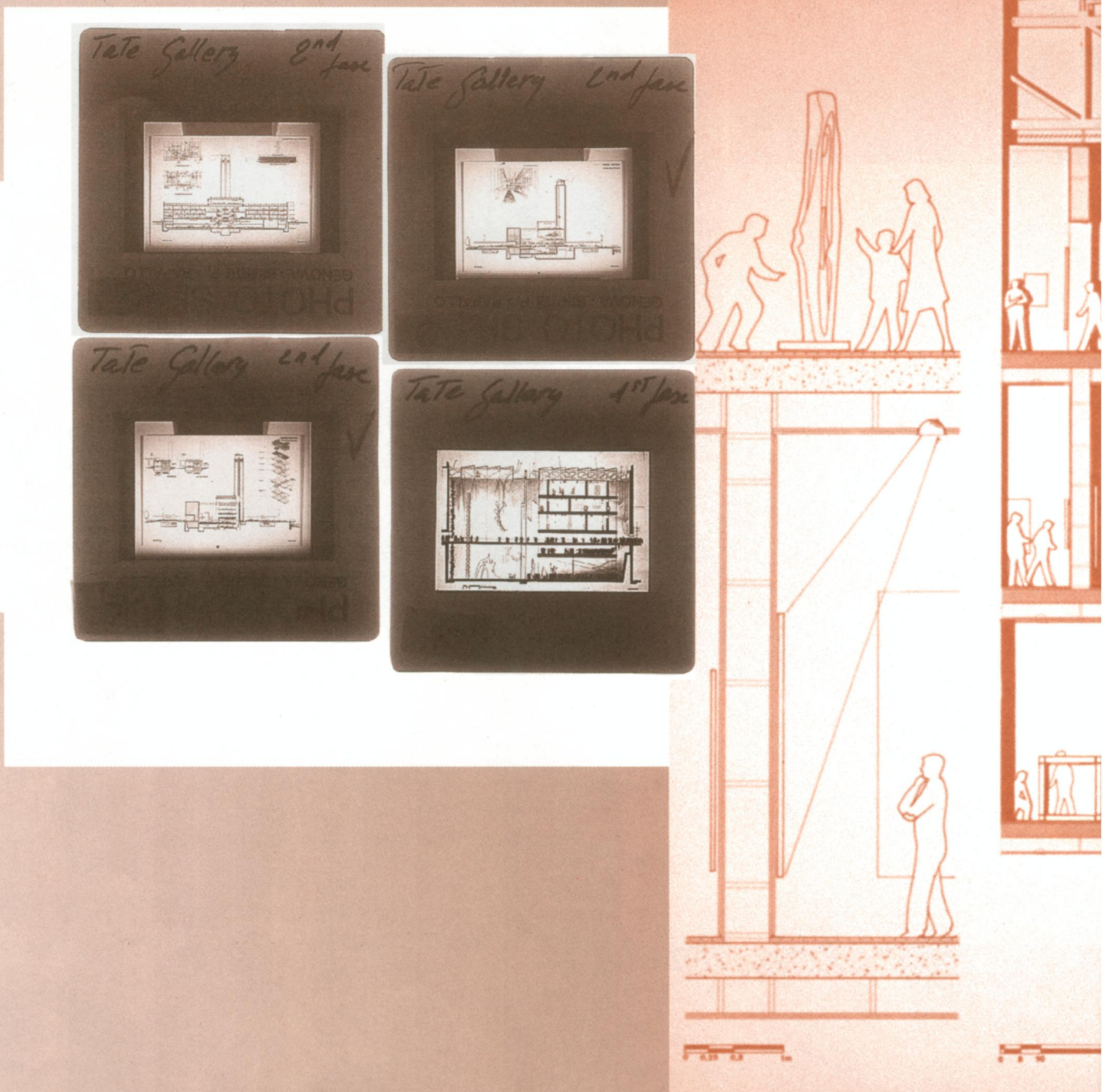
Where would we put the collection that we actually have, which documents 20th-century art – that which has been produced up until now? In that sense, the opposite typology, the more contained typology of Herzog & de Meuron, doesn't mean that it is a series of boring boxes; I don't think that for a moment.

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

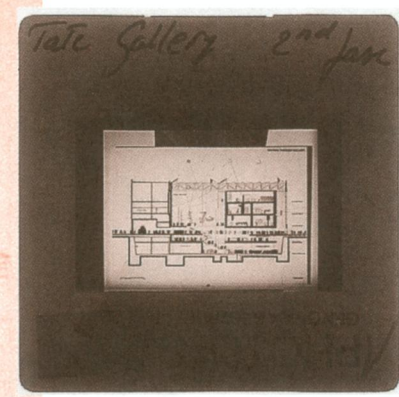
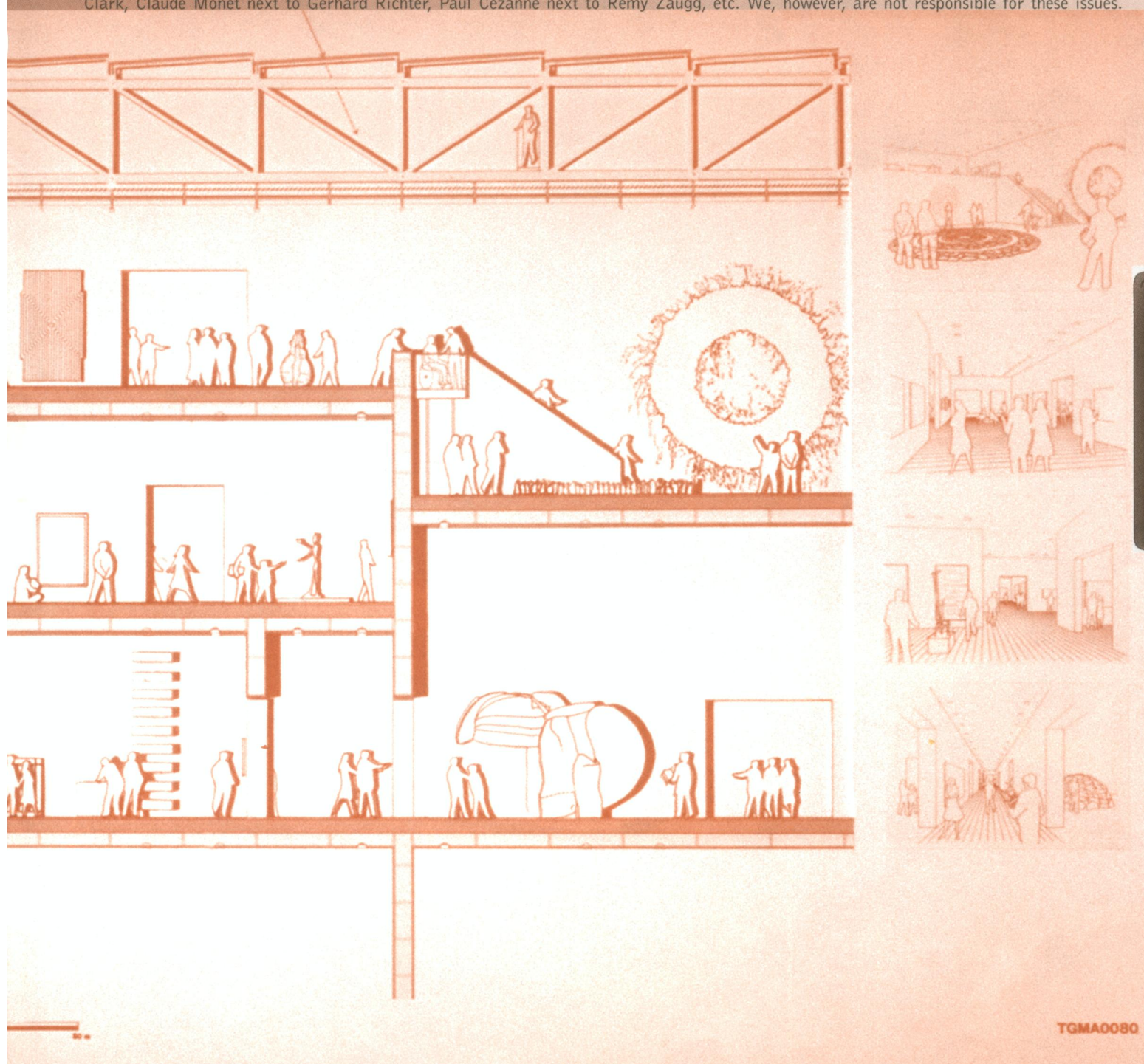
accepted. Today you can still learn a lot about quality, simplicity, and spatial consistency from these old museums. Spaces with floors, ceilings, and walls that really earn their names are rare today and taken by themselves make an incredibly strong architectural statement. They can communicate an elementary 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