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***Renzo Piano***

***Beyeler Museum***

***Riehen near Basel, 1992-1997***

**Benedikt Loderer**

Architecture, like collecting art, is a long distance discipline; and for Renzo Piano the path to the Beyeler Museum was a long one. It began with a bang. In 1978, when the Centre Pompidou opened, it was the sensation of the decade. It was no longer a building, but rather a machine, Le Corbusier's "machine à émouvoir." Only upon closer study does the machine reveal itself to be a gigantic stack of artificially lit utilitarian spaces, a six-story, multipurpose hall. Inside are black non-spaces, bare containers for rotating exhibitions. The Centre Pompidou is an exterior building; everything that makes it good happens outside on its skin. But something is radically missing: the light and its control.

Piano is a functionalist of the inventive school and thoroughly studied the lesson of controlling the light after Pompidou. The architectonic and artistic theme of the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, which was opened in 1986, was natural light: zenith light, daylight from the sky. To that end, Piano developed a technical building element that determined the very nature of the museum: a translucent roof. Wanting to control the ambience, and thus needing to control the light, he invented a clever system of coordinated roof elements. In step-by-step development, the "leaves of light" grew - organically formed concrete louvers that filter and distribute the light, reduce its intensity, and form the wave-like ceiling of the exhibition spaces. The solution of the daylight as a partial problem determined the solution of the museum as the main problem.

Piano deliberated, made assumptions, and tried everything. He does not distance himself from any notion more decidedly than that of the architect as genius, in whose mind and heart an idea appears as the divine spark. Trial and error - first on paper, then with models, and finally at one-to-one scale in the laboratory - this is Renzo Piano's method as the practical minded architectural scientist. Ernst Beyeler saw the Menil Collection. It convinced him about Piano.

In Riehen, Piano paid attention to the terrain - a narrow, gently rolling piece of vineyard. He found a wall here. It separated the street from the agricultural land, a clear truism. But this wall does more: it steers our view. It creates a "before it" and a "behind it." It turns its back to the street and peers out into the landscape, looking upon an unobstructed green field and the Tüllinger hill beyond, whose crown is adorned with something medieval. The subject for a postcard.

But the wall follows the street along a bent line, thus emphasizing the parcel's elongation. Still more: the second wall, too, a garden wall that separates the site from the open farmland, runs parallel to the street wall. Thus, Piano found two directions on the land: the transverse view into the landscape and the longitudinal movement of the walls. He reacted to that with the four sides of the building: the closed wall against the street, the winter garden against the distant landscape and the view out into the park at the ends of the building.

The wall is old. It tells a story - a story of the Berower estate as a patrician seat, as a form of

dominion, as an agricultural unit of production. It tells of privileges and their downfall. Walls protect, walls exclude, and walls confine.

This wall must have particularly impressed Piano, since he elevated it to the generative element of his design. He built a museum out of a series of four parallel walls. They reach into the park and anchor the building to the land. They establish the horizontal and emphasize therein the movement of the land. The ground waves become readable at the "water line."

The walls are heavy. Piano, the former featherweight builder, found particular joy in giving his walls weight. He clad them with unplaned red porphyry from Patagonia. Piano emphasizes that porphyry is geologically ancient, having been formed before the continents drifted apart. Must these walls suffice for eternity? Might four fragmentary wall planes - long, parallel, and secretive - be witness some day to the Beyeler Museum?

Above the walls is the roof. Piano enjoys the contrast between the heavy walls and the light roof, "a butterfly, who lit upon the four walls." The connection to the walls remains hidden. The urge to demonstrate how these things are assembled, which was all too clear at the Centre Pompidou, has seemingly been brushed away. Nothing more need be claimed, nothing more need be proven. The construction has withdrawn into the back ground.

The building form has settled down as well. More exactly, it no longer appears in its totality. Embedded in the park, the building - nonetheless 110 meters in length - ducks down into the ground. It does not want to draw attention, none whatsoever from the street. Piano refrains from big gestures, adapts himself, and even seems to have grown a bit Swiss in it all. One of the most noteworthy private art collections in the country is displayed in a pavilion that is indeed elegant but still as unpretentious as possible. In a discrete place, in a suburb of Basel, art makes no noise. Whereas the Centre Pompidou was an angry overstatement, the Beyeler Museum is the whisper of understatement.

The building is a tailor-made suit for an existing collection. Piano had every piece of art photographed in order to have all of them present in his studio. The interior organization heeds the walls. The package of service spaces lies neatly placed against the street in the closed layer of the building's backbone. There follows the entrance zone, where - here and only here - one feels the size of the building. One proceeds from the entrance portal along the wall, spots the white glass roof for a moment among the trees, and comes down a gentle slope toward the main entrance. One enters and - peering through the entire building - sees far ahead out into the garden. One enjoys the view and vista, with the length of the building on show.

In the center of the entrance zone lies the piazza - a space of reception. Whoever has reached this space has arrived, with the longitudinal movement of the parallel walls now standing still. Here we are returned. The large landscape panorama retreats as we delve into the museum. Outside stays outside. We find ourselves in another, closed, world.

Inside the building there are no prescribed paths and no enfilades. The directions, which had been of such importance outside, are now forgotten, while the walls that informed the design become indistinguishable from the transverse walls. Outside and inside have nothing more to do with each other. One only sees out of the narrow end façades. But one sees only into the garden, and not into the landscape.

In the Beyeler Museum there is no more architectural vanity to be found, trumpeting its self-importance with spatial excess. No ramps, no free-standing stairs, no vistas and no detail games. The architecture can take leave, its job now done. It has generated neutral and bright spaces. The pictures remain. Pictures in light, in natural light. Piano brought his experience from the Menil Collection to Riehen. Yet the light machinery is no longer the spatial generator; it has retreated into a light chamber above the halls. Yet it is still quite extravagant and must be able to do everything,

meaning it must allow every possible type of mixed light as well as provide the lighting at night. Daylight, though, should proclaim the day. The weather, the time of day, and the turn of the seasons - in short, the natural oscillations of the light - are not filtered out, homogenized, and denied. Rather, they remain perceptible within the exhibition spaces. One never sees the same picture, only the same picture in ever-changing light.

The exhibition spaces are at ground level and can be reached by the piazza. Besides the technical rooms and an archive, the lower level has an auditorium equipped with all possible technical equipment, allowing lectures or performances in all possible media. It can also be used as an exhibition space and receives light from the side through the winter garden. The winter garden is positioned like a gallery in front of the west façade. Here one can recover from the work of viewing art. One's eye strays out into the greenery, while the mind grows meditative. The winter garden layer also refers to the stair from the lower level, and this is the only place where the architecture is more important than the exhibits. By using the entire height of the two-story space, the straight, cascading stair scenically depicts its ascent and descent while being viewed from the winter garden. And then comes the height of the spaces: Piano made everything high enough. One can move about and breathe freely.

The Beyeler Museum is born of one mold, even when it originated in dialogue with the client. It is complete, with nothing having been left to chance from the site. The architect controls everything: from the interiors to the coatroom, from the technical services to the inner life of the elevator.

Piano tells of Ernst Beyeler's wish for "calme, luxe, and volupté." The quietude is obvious. It is reached by concentrating upon the inner realm, enriched by light from above. The luxury, though, is not visible. It is the absence of detail, the hiding of the technical installations, and the limitation to four surface materials: oak floors, smooth walls, perforated steel sheet, and glass. The expenditure for the invisible is enormous. Even the green electric "Exit" signs required by law, impeccably built into the wall, require ingenuity and the work of persuasion. *Et la volupté finalement?* It is the marriage between the collection and the building - the delight of enjoying art in a captivating space.