

On the Work of Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron *Reculer pour Mieux Sauter?*

The buildings of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron do not have the kind of looks you immediately fall in love with. They are too stodgy, impersonal, too Kafkaesque for that. Especially in their residential designs, these architects have devoted themselves to a formal typology that is more reminiscent of utility architecture, barracks perhaps, than of the fresh-faced stock-in-trade of today's prefab merchants. The overall image, at least as it reaches the world in printed reproduction, is monochromatic and repetitious. Still, if we persist in looking a little beyond the first impression, an expressive texture begins to emerge. These designers know perfectly well what the real meaning of form and material can be. The emphatically tactile quality of their architecture makes it immediately clear that the attribution of meaning is no mere accident. On the contrary, tactility, which is usually meant to reach the observer's brain stem directly through the sense of touch, here makes a detour via the most sophisticated regions of the intelligence. The tactilism has become an artistic form of *representation*.

Architecture Between Jean-Paul Marat and JFK

According to the makers of this sober, alienating architecture, their childhood memories from the fifties play an important role. But, they claim, their work also has within it a concealed 'potential for enlightenment' (*Aufklärerisches Moment*). This assertion contrasts oddly with the fifties air of despondency that the buildings do in fact have at first sight.

Sometimes it looks as though what the eighteenth century was to world history as a whole, the fifties are to this century: a period in which a historical and moral breakthrough was coupled to an abysmal deception about what mankind was capable of. The Enlightenment brought forth the emancipation of the bourgeoisie, of the individual and of reason. Common law made way for a mature statutory system, and knowledge gained precedence over faith and superstition. The guilds system and slavery were

abolished and the free market won a definitive place as the guiding principle of economy. At the same time, however, the foundations were laid for an antithesis. Without people fully realising it at the time, the invention of anthropology, of the concept of History, of the Self and its shadow, of utilitarianism, of style and of sexuality as a human 'attribute', later provoked the greatest doubts about the Enlightenment project. In the latter days of the French Revolution, with the death of Marat and the ascendancy of *la Terreur* as a political tool, disillusion was already widespread.

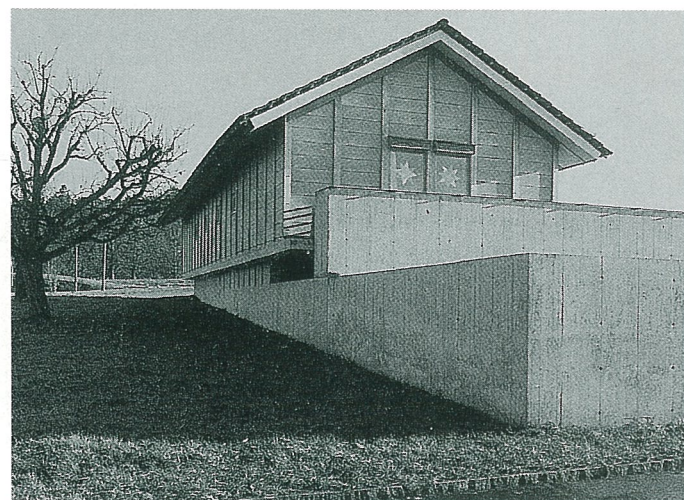
The nineteen-fifties show much the same dialectical pattern. Most of those who lived through the liberation of Europe thought that the war had ended not only militarily but also morally in 1945: that it was time for reconstruction and for a major breakthrough in a culture that was still rooted in the pre-war political caste system. But the war was not over. There was a feverish spate of building, and the world began to regain its old reassuring solidity, but it became apparent that a certain point had been passed during the war, after which courage, optimism and the will to start afresh no longer had any meaning. The baby boom cut its teeth to the accompaniment of clattering pile drivers and moral disillusion – a situation that culminated in 22 November 1963. The assassination of Kennedy, the Marat of the twentieth century, shocked the progressive tendencies of the West. The obfuscation and sense of cover-up around Lee Harvey Oswald were symptomatic of the prevailing condition – the institutionalisation of false optimism. We are not naive out of free will, but we are kept naive. Keep smiling, life goes on even if it has no obvious purpose. *Huis Clos*. Neither Mankind nor Future nor History nor the *Prinzip Hoffnung* retains any vitality. Instead, we are confronted with the theatre of Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Harold Pinter, John Osborne. And, of course, Jean Paul Sartre.

Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, two boys who were mangled by the dialectics of their own fifties Enlightenment, who even in neutral, perfidious Switzerland must

460



Thomas Ruff, House no. 12, 1989



House for an art collector, Therwil, 1986

What is the architecture that we seek, that we rush to meet? The architecture that urges and motivates us, that wants to be discovered, taken out of its hiding-place in our architectural consciousness, or rather our unconscious? What architecture, compelled like an insect to light, fulfils its inevitable fate? Why this architecture and not another although an endless number of other possibilities exists? The architecture for which we battle, which we attempt to define as a stance, which we let be defined by friendly, hired or volunteer critics so that this architecture, now a stance, can be defended against other stances, built up from the inexhaustible multitude of other forms, other masses, other surfaces, other static systems and other transparencies.

Jacques Herzog & Pierre De Meuron

Like all people alive today, we experience of course the ruptures in our cultures, i.e. the impossibility to define things clearly. We too face this non-monolithness which surrounds all subjects; it becomes the central motive of our work. We can't rely on anything: neither on an existing mode of building, nor on any tradition, since these things actually rendered useless. Concerning architecture, even the architecture of the fifties and sixties already turned historical. We can't stake them as images. Technology at large has developed far beyond that point, so that a direct application leads to unsatisfying results.

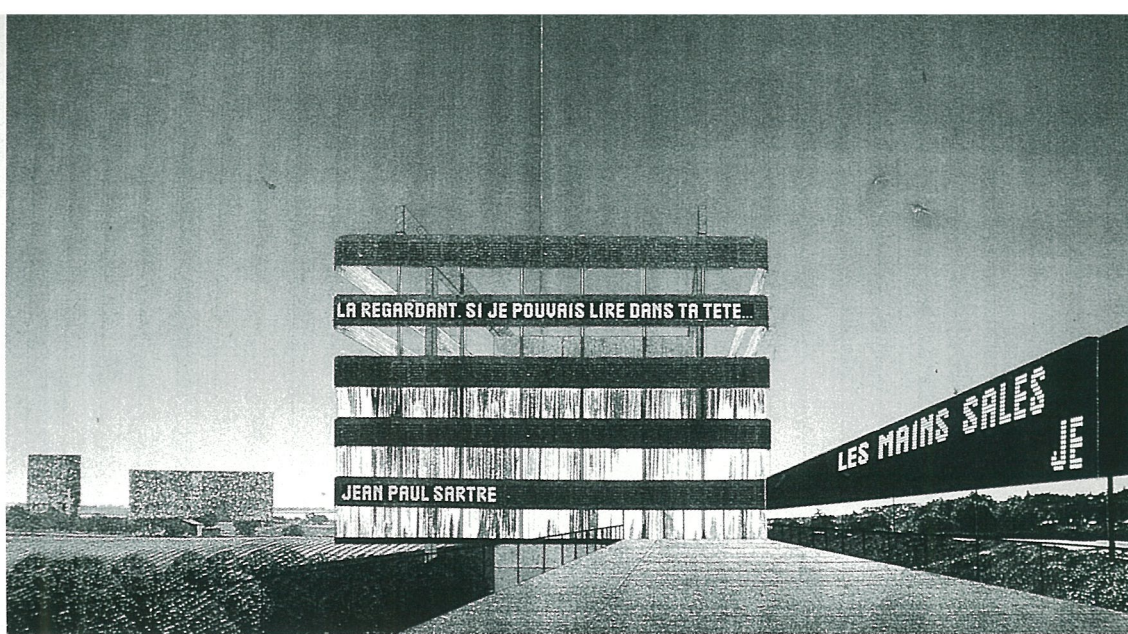
Jacques Herzog

Herzog & de Meuron are not keen on telling their own story, neither do they want to tell stories at large. What they are trying to do is find images that appear just as they do when we zap between television programmes, to apply them to buildings that tell their own stories and act as suggestive supports and catalysers for so many other personal stories.

Marianne Brausch

The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as a picture (*Weltbild*). The word picture (*Bild*) now means the structured image (*Gebild*) that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before. In such producing, man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is.

Martin Heidegger



Cultural Centre, Blois, competition entry, 1991

have gaped at a world full of people with rolled-up sleeves but without the appurtenant resolute eye fixed on the horizon, are now themselves builders. And part of that personal past now returns in a heightened form. For Herzog and De Meuron, tradition has lost its relevance and no single architectural form has an eternal validity. Memory goes back only as far as your own life-span, they argue, and everything before that is hearsay. And even your own early memories must be treated with an appropriate distance. Accordingly, these architects make conscious use of their personal history and remain ostensibly unfeeling towards any inclusive, optimistic view of life.

Yet in their negative, almost dehumanised formal vocabulary, there remains something irreducibly utopian. Theodor Adorno (with Max Horkheimer), although acutely aware of the contradictions of the Enlightenment, was not immediately prepared to abandon a critical theory with emancipatory intentions. Similarly Herzog and de Meuron, despite their 'negative' architecture, appeal to our powers of imagination to envisage something other than the mediocrity that leers at us in its barely distinguishable gradations all around the world. But what is that Other, and how do they make that appeal?

Negative Dialectics

One thing becomes clear in a confrontation with this subdued architecture, which seems so familiar yet at the same time so alien and remote. The Other, the suggestion that this work puts out, remains nameless and is never expressed as an image. If you look carefully at the contrived poverty of certain details while bearing in mind the craftsmanship betrayed by certain others, you may conclude that a deliberate strategy of anti-mimesis is in action, one that is fed by a heavily repressed iconophobia. The interior barely seems to have any importance attached to it and bears the stamp of the current standardised productivism that is so successful in that area. But neither does the exterior compensate for this restraint. The images generated by this architecture are of an unprecedented sobriety, yet at the same time they practically succumb under the weight of their doom-laden message. In the bunker-like – or should we say prison-

camp-like – façades of their 'garden suburb' in Vienna-Aspern, they mask their deeply-felt sense of a stylistic and historical endgame with an architectural poker face. This architecture, with its high windows, its blind walls, its turret-like cantilevers, its bare simplicity and its sinister loneliness suggests a moral, a purpose. But this purpose is never expressed directly in the form of imagery. Only 'negative dialectics' (to use Adorno's term) are allowed to operate. A better world can, it seems, only be achieved by forming a conception of what it should NOT be like. The *promesse de bonheur* is to be found only in its opposite, absolute desolation.

★ Adorno, Theodor, *Aesthetic Theory*, London 1986, p. 161.

As Adorno wrote, 'Dissonance is the truth about harmony.'★ Or, to put it more strongly, this is the architecture of the Second Commandment. It is permissible to evoke the hallowed Other only by negation.

'The utopian is not even conceivable in positive form, for no image is powerful enough to illustrate it without ridicule (...) The objective of modern art is to make people aware of the terrifying aspects of everyday life. Given the *circumstances* (italics Ole Bouman/Roemer van Toorn), negativity is the only possible way to keep the ideal of the utopian vivid.'★ But these subtleties are reserved exclusively for the circle around these architects. At the same time, the unfortunate inhabitants have been

★ Heynen, Hilde, 'Architecture Between Modernity and Dwelling: Reflections on Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*', *Assemblage* 17, (1992), p. 83.

landed with a myth that bears a passing resemblance to *Arbeit macht frei*. Fortunately, flourishing greenery is now alleviating the worst of the smart.

In Vienna-Aspern, the architects employed the 'negative' shock tactics of quoting a suffocating fifties mass-construction architecture as a way of simultaneously offering relief from it. Their Schwitterblock in Basel similarly offers such a passionate show of mediocrity that the perspicacious observer (but how many of you are there out there?) can momentarily escape from the predominant kitsch simulacrum, and make brief contact with the latent power of architecture itself. Herzog and de Meuron offer no alternative, no consolation or new Utopia, but an instant at which mediocrity and tunnel vision come face to face with themselves. This is, of course, a hyper-intellectual game of

We are not interested in any material as material, in any architectural tool as such (like letters, styles, images) but we use them all just in order to be flexible, to move our heads like a camera in and around this world. We use our architectures to take and to make pictures of this world.

Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron

We are not interested in a 'personal style' but very much in a specific attitude aiming towards one direction of architecture which is both intelligible and politically enlightening, and also suggestive and direct.

Jacques Herzog

Enlightenment today depends on two crucial efforts. First, substantive reason must be reconstructed as a modality of sensory, imaginative experience; and second, a 'public sphere' which could serve as a forum for individual imagination and unconstrained public debate must be created to respond to the contemporary threats of media concentration and the industrialisation of consciousness.

Fredric Jameson

Never in the history of architecture has there been such a crass loss of orientation for architects as now.

Jacques Herzog

There are things known and there are things unknown; in between there are doors.

William Blake

What really bothers us, is not that we have to make doors open and shut, but those signs of our time problems.

Herzog & de Meuron

Collective as well as individual identity is defined by a strategy of cultural appropriation and both symbolised and realised by visual consumption.

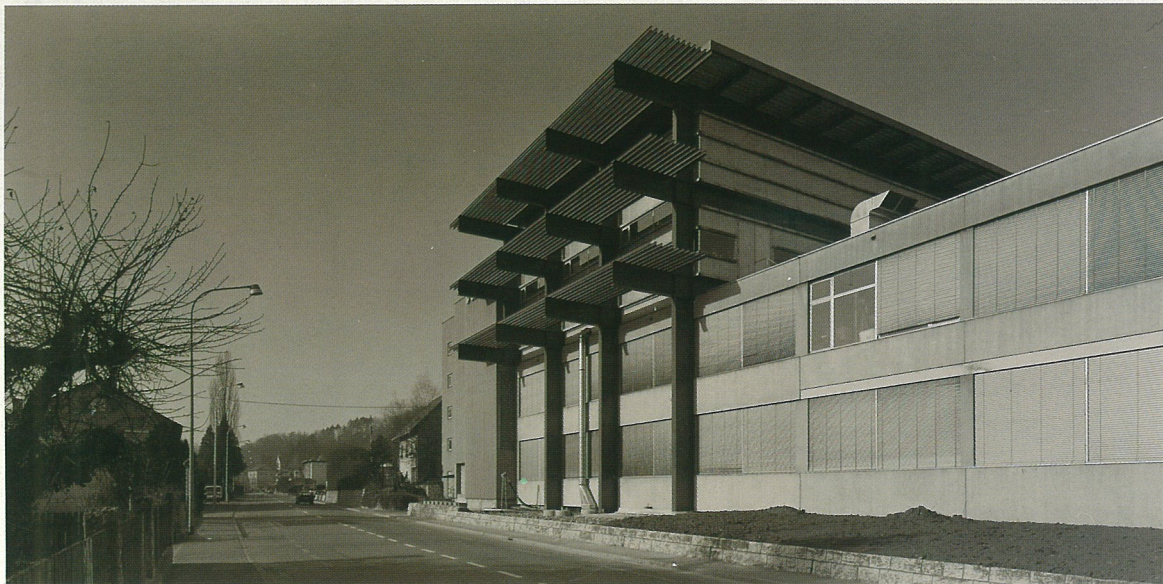
Sharon Zukin

The fifties are much closer to us, therefore, from the images we can understand the era correctly. These buildings possess an inherent faith in progress, almost in the naive sense.

Herzog & de Meuron

Buildings of the past can only be relevant to us today if they never had presentness at all but rather a spirit of all time because it is this which gives it relevance over a long period of time.

Peter Eisenman



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Ricola factory addition and glazed canopy, Laufen, 1991

462

theirs that calls for a sensitivity of spirit to equal their own. In as far as architecture is both a participant in the public discourse and serves as a forum for that discourse, their method is exasperatingly recondite. But for those who have lost all confidence in this discourse and can only hang on until retiring age in a kind of Sartrean nausea, the instant of confrontation can offer a moment of great relief. The architects' intention of proffering a 'potential for enlightenment' must thus be sought principally in this 'reality therapy'. Now that the surgical approach to curing the social condition has lost its credibility for the tired intellectual, he can still clutch at this one final straw of homeopathy – a dose of negative dialectics, an image at infinite dilution but maximum potency.

So perhaps homeopathy is the real social role of this oeuvre: a mirror in which mediocrity is shocked to recognise itself, a trampoline that bounces the symbolic order of architectural totalitarianism (*Heimatstil*, garden cities and *Neue Sachlichkeit*) back onto itself.

The Tactile as a Mental Tactic

Besides a spine-chilling iconography and an ultra-dilute, almost transparent image, there is another respect in which Jacques Herzog's and Pierre de Meuron's subversive strategy thwarts the pure, tactile experience. Their architecture is visibly steeped in the Husserlian precept of 'back to the things themselves'. Their buildings do not so much attempt to speak out, as to be themselves in a cryptical, reserved way. It is this 'self' of a building, its actual identity, with which they wish to confront the spectator in a phenomenological perceptual relationship. Through the continual references to the importance of perception and the repeated emphasis on tactility, we can guess an influence from the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. This philosopher wished to

restore the lost primacy of existence by positing a preconscious implication of bodily existence in perception.

The work of Herzog and de Meuron derives much of its strength from its ambiguity at a similarly preconscious level. However, this ambiguity is not only deployed for the sake of the existential experience itself, but as a tactical device: the work seizes us by some ill-defined part of the body only to let us drop in confrontation with the results of their montage.

In the Ricola warehouse (Laufen, 1988), the underlying construction is almost obscenely displayed. Everything, the stacking of the material, the material itself, the structural joints, the slight elevation above ground level, the incidence of light, the horizontal articulation of the cladding, makes it obvious that the architects are playing a strategic game of tactility here. In their own words, they generate a 'corpus experience' which initially forces the public (in as far as there is one) back to a phenomenological level of experience in which the entire body plays a role. In the first instance it looks as though these architects must feel perfectly at home in the school of sensory realism which includes Alvaro Siza, Luigi Snozzi, Peter Zumthor and Tadao Ando. The Ricola warehouse design is unarguably rooted in the architects' keen interest in the haptonomy of architecture. On further consideration, however, this is clearly yet another example of the heightening of experience as a tactic within a highly cerebral strategy. Just as you start thinking that here, for once, the authentic experience has managed to stay one step ahead of representation, you realise that this tactility has degenerated into a code. However physically immediate the building may seem at first, it remains utterly remote in conception. Again, the game is played using the opponent's weapons and on the opponent's territory. Herzog and de Meuron are not interested in the tactile as an

The reality of architecture is not built architecture. An architecture creates its own reality outside of the state of built or unbuilt and is comparable to the autonomous reality of a painting or a sculpture. The reality of which I speak is also not the real building, the tactile, the material. Certainly we love this tangibility, but only in a relationship within the whole of the (architectural) work. We love its spiritual quality, its immaterial value.

Jacques Herzog

Making architecture superfluous, letting it disappear from our consciousness, directing attention to something else: then the city becomes like nature. It needs no more inventions. It cannot be expanded upon. It is omnipresent. It cannot be copied again since it has already copied itself infinitely. The entropy of architecture.

Herzog & de Meuron

We used to think of culture as the thing that would protect us from nature – from the earthquake and the famine and the cold. Now we look helplessly to nature for some cure for culture. And nature might not be there to offer a cure, having reciprocally been absorbed into culture at the same time that culture was being revealed as sunken into the chaos and randomness of nature.

Thomas McEvilly

It is the physical-sensual presence of the film in the movie theatre and of the sound in the loudspeaker (and not any biographical or entertaining component) that fascinates us, that moves us, that enables us to meet with our own physical presence. Thus the architecture, created by us, embedded in our biography, would be a corporeal part of ourselves? A projecting being constantly projected by us who soon turn from this to new projects, untrue, merciless, abjuring, moving away from it, pushing it off like the burnt-out projectile of a rocket.

Herzog & de Meuron



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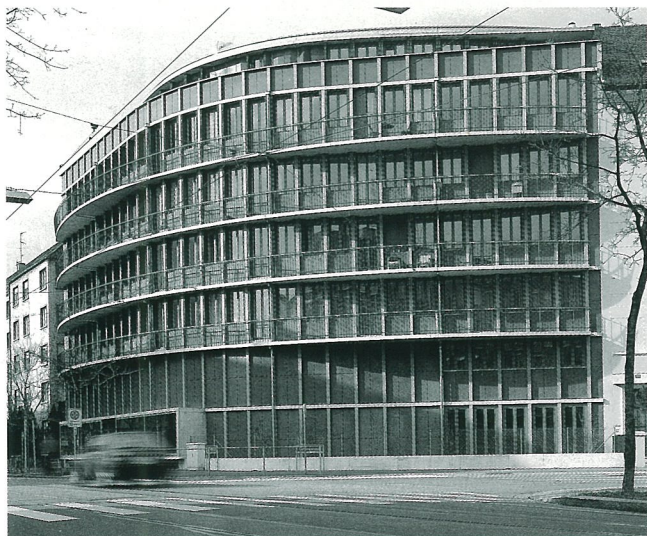
Storage building for Ricola, Laufen, 1987



end in itself. They show, by means of exaggeration, monumentality and a patent irony in their manner of presentation, that even the body is a concept, a mere projection of (artificial) intelligence. Only the naive observer would believe that this material embodies true authenticity. It all looks so honest and truthful, but in fact the warehouse is a specimen of pure Baroque, more a suggestion than a reality.

Once more we note the iconophobia. No positive declaration of architectural postulates is issued; no model is presented, no act of obstetrics committed. The only means deployed are the means of those who are forever trying to give architecture an ontological basis, the lovers of ground and foundations. The net result is that the intentions behind these means are ridiculed. The two architects thus situate themselves halfheartedly somewhere between fascinated awe for the authority of the *fête accomplie* of a carnival world, and those efforts to resist it that are still undertaken. *Das Ding...*, sure, but no longer *an sich*. Their architectural image has an 'open' character; every individual observer can experience a sensory stimulus. Meanwhile, the institutional programme is explicitly upheld.

So this is as far as their 'potential for enlightenment' goes. The two architects search continually, seriously and assiduously for an architecture that is capable of communicating 'directly from body to body' with the observer, for an artistically manipulated architectonic surface that by direct confrontation sets the observer thinking about the identity of the things he perceives. But – and this is something that distinguishes them from many of their professional colleagues – this thinking has in no way to be guided to a conclusion. It is good enough that thinking takes place – let everything well up in a transgressive fever that opens up the darkest crypts of feeling. Homeopathy is one thing, but at a certain point it becomes catharsis. If architecture really can contribute to a better time and a different world, then it will have to rise up from the mud and excrement of an absurd present. *Reculer, pour mieux sauter*. Hands will have to be dirtied.



Schwitters apartment and office building, Basle, 1988

Rebels Without a Cause

Herzog and de Meuron commit the architectural tradition resolutely to the scrapheap of history. For them, a building must never be a representation of realities that have long been dispensed with. The architecture of the past can, in their opinion, still serve only as part of the arsenal of images on which the architect draws when assembling an architectural image. The contract between image and meaning has been broken, and betting on God, as George Steiner suggested, is no solution either. Herzog and de Meuron describe the act of montage, which plays a significant role in their strongly image-oriented design process, in physical terms as a 'bodily filtration' or a 'Turkish bath'. The process is supposed to result in an image that coincides perfectly with 'architectural reality'. In the long run the building must speak 'a language of its own'. They want their buildings to be without 'bad faith' (to use Sartre's term). They must be buildings whereby architectural autonomy may be claimed with conviction. They are pure surface, without centre, without a subject in the literal sense of the word.

Herzog and de Meuron cleverly run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. We can detect the serenity of the phenomenological but it seems to penetrate no deeper than the retina. It looks somewhat as though Herzog and de Meuron are not quite sure which 'reality' they prefer. This disturbing impression is underlined by the observation that the provocation in the final montage is hyper-aesthetically crafted; it is so well-finished that there is a slight effect of a mildly ironic embracing, a sanctioning of the 'represented' reality. The provocation is disarmed, and this architecture thereby loses its character of a statement. Herzog and de Meuron say themselves that it is the observer who decides on the nature of what he encounters, and hence 'makes' the architecture. But the buildings themselves project no identity against which the viewer can test his conclusion, so it really is an anonymous power that continues to rule the world after all. Indeed, the potential for enlightenment is... no more than that.



In effect the artist and intellectual must be understood in terms of their lifestyle, which is socially recognisable and locatable in the social space. They also have a social interest in: (1) the wider acceptance of their perceptions on life, namely the value of the aesthetic gaze, even while challenging and negating it; the value of cultural and intellectual goods in general and the need for instruction into how to use and experience them; and (2) the proclamation of the superiority of their

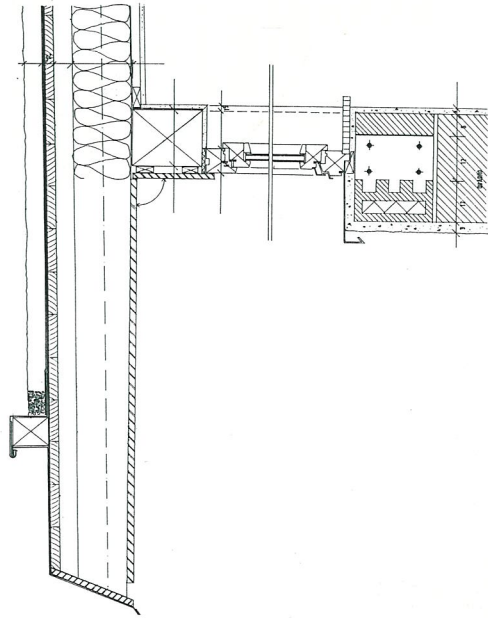
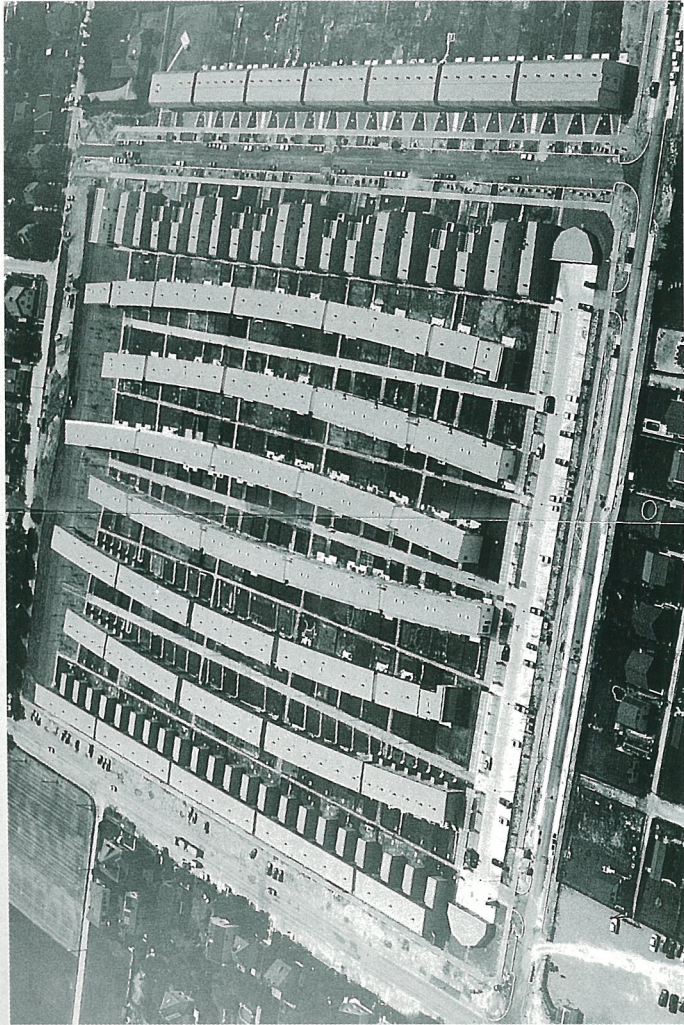
lifestyle manifest in their subcultures so that others will adopt the off-duty fashions, styles and perceptions they embody - if not those of the very moment, put forth by the avant-garde, then those of yesterday which would maintain the useful distance between the *cognoscenti* and their eager, but lagging behind, audiences and followers.

Mike Featherstone

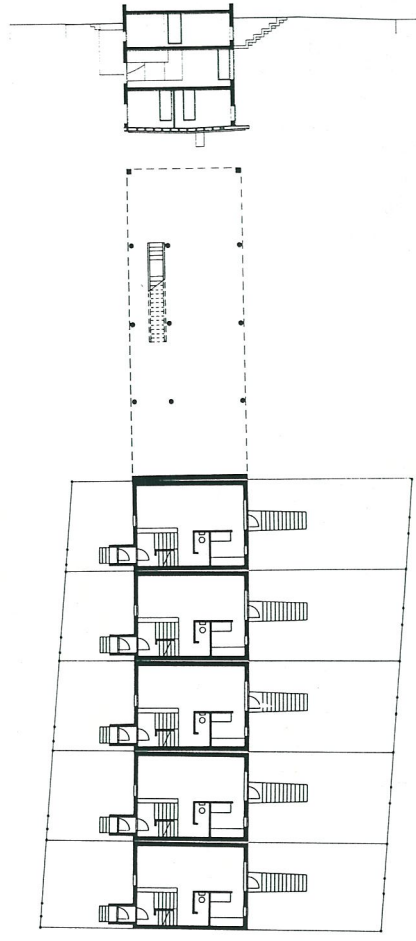
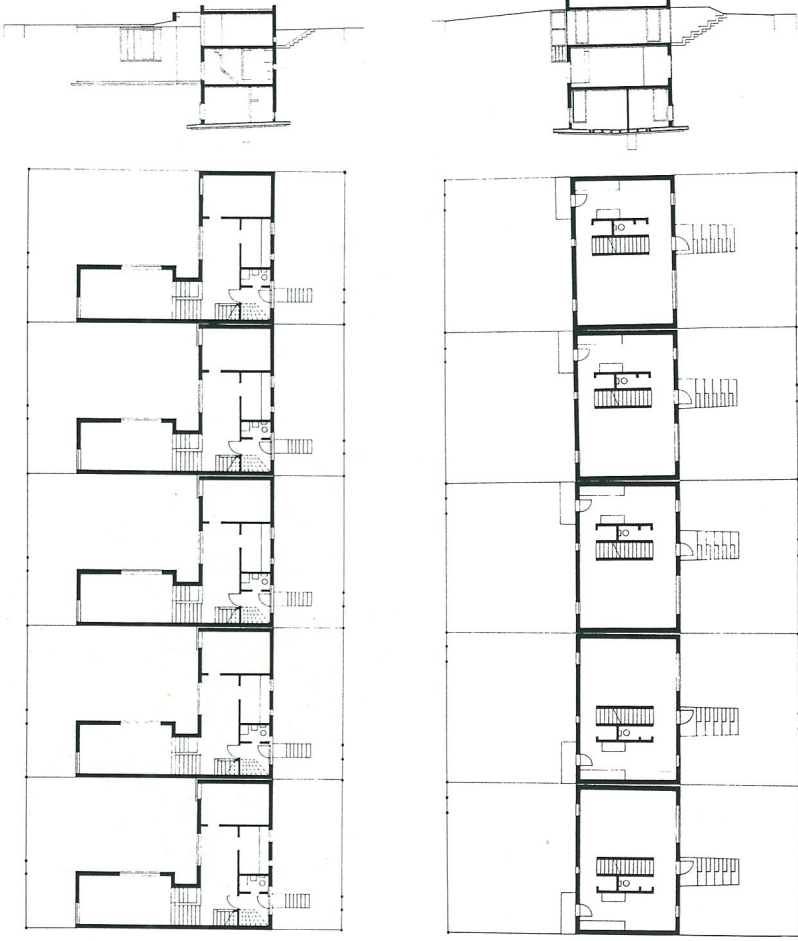
And the architecture? For its part, it distances itself from us, long since appropriated, maybe of use and used as a capital investment, but surely with a communicatory value for others, impressive through its own entity, freed from our biographical coincidences. It stands there as if it had created itself, without the ludicrous particularity of an author, without his handwriting, without fingerprints, sweat rings or even injuries like those con-

tracted in an unsuccessful forceps delivery. The architecture is comprehensible only through itself, without crutches, only manufacturable from architecture, not from anecdotes or quotations or functional systems. Architecture is its own essence in its own place.

Herzog & de Meuron



The development on a level tract of land in the east of Vienna consists of some two hundred single-family row houses. The town planning concept was realised in collaboration with Adolf Krischanitz and Steidle + Partner. Each group of architects who participated designed about a third of the low-rise dwellings. The artist Helmut Federle collaborated in the Herzog & de Meuron design for colour and surface treatment. The goal was a maximum simplicity of design in order to underline the flatness of the terrain. The curved rows of houses emphasise a certain movement toward a centre without giving this centre undue weight in relation to the lateral spaces. The curving external spaces help to give specificity to the houses while at the same time emphasising the unity of the urban scheme. Herzog & de Meuron pursued essentially three house types. Type A is an L-shaped unit that encloses a more intimate, private garden by the 1.5 storey studio wing. The lower ground floor, designated as a workshop, could be used as an additional living room. Type C is a rectangular unit that has all the



services contained in a slot placed together with a winding staircase, whereas type D is organised around a single-flight stair that, with the guest WC and a store, forms a core at the upper ground floor. The exterior finishes were originally to have been alternating vertical stripes of smooth and rough self-coloured plaster render. Later on, this idea was dropped for reason of production technology in favour of a concept that was to have left the surfaces and materials in their own colour (unfinished external render), and Federle only permitted the coat of paint as 'protection' to balustrades and window frames. In the end all façade surfaces were painted in the colour of the bearing material, contrary to the intention of Herzog & de Meuron and the artist Federle.

Based on: Theodora Vischer, et al., *Architektur von Herzog & de Meuron*, V+ Venice Biennale Swiss Pavilion exhibition catalogue, 1991; and: Wilfried Wang, Herzog & de Meuron, Zürich 1992; and: Diemar Steiner, et al., *Siedlung Pilotengasse Wien*, Zürich 1992.

Location Pilotengasse, Vienna-Aspern, Austria **Assistant** G. Wiederin **Client** Österreichisches Siedlungswerk **Design** 1987-88 **Completion** 1989-92

Herzog & de Meuron Architekten **Pilotengasse Garden District Masterplan and Housing**



Allan McCollum, Plaster Surrogates, 1982-1984



Thomas Ruff, House no. 7 I, 1988