Buildings are not made by a single person. Rather, a small army of contractors, consultants, and craftsmen contribute to the completion of any project. Those who study architecture may like to think that this effort is commanded by the master Architect, an individual whose singular vision shapes a building from seminal concept through completion. Perhaps this image is propagated through the celebration of masters like Steven Holl, Zaha Hadid, Tadao Ando, and Peter Zumthor who have a unique ability to inject personality into their projects. Their ‘personal stamp’ remains a part of the building forever, a testament to the individual who first imagined it.

The roster of the Pritzker Prize, one of architecture’s highest honors, is populated by the names of these and other masters. Until 2001, the Pritzker had been awarded to an individual. That year, however, the jury chose to honor the Swiss team of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron (The Hyatt Foundation, 2001). At the award ceremony, Thomas J. Pritzker, president of the Hyatt Foundation which oversees the prize, introduced the architects by saying “[Herzog and de Meuron] have a long-term, true collaboration making it impossible to honor one without the other” (The Hyatt Foundation, 2001). A study of their work shows that this remarkable partnership has produced architectures that rival any in terms of innovation and expression of materiality. Their multi-headed approach continues to produce projects that are both fresh and diverse. And while it is possible to find elements characteristic of their work, their projects lack the ‘personal stamp’ one might expect.

This fruitful partnership is truly curious; Forster (2002) suggests that Herzog and de Meuron’s relationship is that of “voluntary twins” (pg. 41). Indeed, their stories may be more similar than those of ‘involuntary’ twins. Their biographies in the Encyclopedia of 20th Century Architecture are nearly identical (in fact, there is a typo in one of the biographies that suggests the entries were duplicated by the author) (Sennott, 2004, pg. 608). Both men were born within three weeks of one another in Basel, Switzerland, a city on the
Rhine where the borders of France, Germany, and Switzerland meet. The two were friends as early as kindergarten and both attended the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (abbrev. ETH) in Zurich. They graduated in 1975 after studying under Aldo Rossi, the Italian-born architect and theorist who himself won the Pritzker Prize in 1990. Following graduation, they both served as assistants to Professor Wolf Schnebli at ETH. In 1978, Herzog and de Meuron founded their architectural practice in Basel (Sennott, 2004, pg. 607).

The firm has been extraordinarily successful since then, growing far beyond its modest beginnings. So modest, in fact, were their beginnings that Jacques Herzog was able to actively pursue a career in art until 1986 (Ursprung, 2002a, pg. 13). This strong connection to art will be revisited later. The firm began to gain notice following the completion of the Ricola Storage Building in Laufen, Switzerland (1987) and the Stone House in Tavole, Italy (1988). The simple forms and rich materiality of these works served to foreshadow their subsequent projects. Herzog and de Meuron began to flex their architectural muscle through the Nineties culminating in the conversion of London’s Bankside Power Station into the Tate Modern art museum (2000), a work that thrust them into the spotlight of international architecture (Sennott, 2004, pg. 607). The duo received further acclaim after broadcasts of the 2008 Olympics exposed the world to their spectacular ‘Bird’s Nest’ design for Beijing National Stadium.

Today, after more than three decades of success, the firm of Herzog and de Meuron looks very different. There are now seven partners and scores of employees (Gössel & Cohen, 2007, pg. 424). The firm continues to utilize collaboration in its designs, a value no doubt inherited from the unique design process of its founders. And although it is impossible to gain full insight into something so complex as design, the process material generated by the studio may offer some understanding. The material produced by Herzog and de Meuron is unusually well-documented thanks to their long association with the art world. It has been included, even featured, at major museum exhibitions in London, Barcelona, Frankfurt, Paris, Venice, Tokyo, and New York (Mack, 2009, pg. 248). As for the process itself, Gregory (2005) can offer only a glimpse:
With no web site, an extremely tight door policy (even employees’ partners are screened before visiting their loved ones at work), and a cool phone line that is rarely answered, [insight into their working practices] is a rare opportunity” (pg. 24).

Collaboration between designers is an important, perhaps revolutionary, concept to glean from Herzog and de Meuron’s success. In the short term, it means a design is unique to a particular interaction, not a particular individual. Over time, it prevents their work from being dismissed as monotonous. This approach is in stark contrast to the methods of other architects including the Pritzker Prize winner featured in Sydney Pollack’s documentary *Sketches of Frank Gehry*. In one scene, Gehry is seen directing his so-called ‘design partner’ Craig Webb through a model-making exercise (Pollack, 2006). The apparent lack of these single-minded efforts has earned Herzog and de Meuron a great deal of attention from writers. One particularly interesting analogy comes from Kurt W. Forster:

In contrast to the familiar celebration of the master architect, Herzog & de Meuron recall famous duo pianists: like their musical counterparts, they manage to obtain results that cannot be produced by one of them alone, rendering futile, even mistaken, the cliché that one player is always in the lead, the other merely in tow. (Forster, 2002, pg. 41)

Herzog and de Meuron seem to have redefined how architects work with one another. Now that they have gained real influence, their body of work is redefining how the world feels about architectures. As mentioned earlier, the Ricola Storage Building (1987) in Laufen, Switzerland was well-received by the architectural community. According to Rafael Moneo (2004), its completion meant that “suddenly [Herzog and de Meuron] were architects whose careers were worth tracking” (pg. 362). The warehouse’s power does not come from its form; it is a simple cuboid. But its restraint of form gives the exterior surface greater liberty to express itself. Speaking of their approach to the project, Herzog and de Meuron explain:

The interior is generally not accessible. The space occupied by the building is devoured by the goods that are stacked inside it…The warehouse
displaces space...That is what motivated us architecturally to try to shift the space to the outside. In the façade – in the space between the building and the cliff – one can still experience a sense of space despite the restrictions of the brief. (Ursprung, 2002b, pg. 192)

The space they describe is a favorite of pilgrims and photographers alike. The exposed striations of the cliff face (the warehouse sits in an old quarry) speak to the stacked wood panels of the building. Interestingly, this stacking was not inspired by the layering of rock but by the practice of stacking of wooden planks in industrial yards (Ursprung, 2002b, pg. 192). To achieve the appearance of planks, careful attention was paid to the cladding and foundation details, what Moneo (2004) lauds as a “visual unfolding of the construction” (2004, pg. 375). These details reveal themselves only as one nears the warehouse; perception changes from that of layered bands to that of stacked planks. Through this clever effect, Herzog and de Meuron have successfully created a uniquely dynamic space around a simple warehouse.

The architects responded similarly with their design for Signal Box 4 (1994) in Basel’s rail yard, a project described by Moneo (2004) as “a solid in all its splendor” (pg. 394). The design is striking, an austere box wrapped in strips of copper and placed amongst the numerous railroad tracks. The copper is attached in such a way that the strips curl away from the building’s center and create an energizing visual pattern that changes based on the observer’s position. The cladding is able to withstand the harsh industrial setting and simultaneously act as a Faraday cage to protect the equipment inside from electromagnetic disturbances (Sennott, 2004, 607). The surface treatment is therefore practical, but, like at Laufen, activates the space around it.

Unfortunately, that space in the rail yard is all but inaccessible to the average person. Perhaps it is best, then, that Herzog and de Meuron’s design for the Central Signal Box (1999) is nearly identical. This project was the firm’s third contribution to the city’s rail yard following the original Signal Box 4 and the adjacent Railway Engine Depot (1995). The Central Signal Box was completed on the opposite side of yard from its predecessors, though only about 800m separate them. This building uses a similar formal language and the same characteristic copper cladding as its older sibling. Interaction with
the Central Signal Box is, however, markedly different as it was placed next to a bridge spanning the railroad tracks. A trapezoidal ground-level floor plan is slowly corrected along the building’s vertical edge, creating a single dramatic ridge. Being seven stories tall, it commands the space surrounding the bridge and its adjoining intersections (Gössel & Cohen, 2007, pg. 424). Here, the object maintains a serious, severe beauty while the simply-stated form prevents the architecture from becoming oppressive.

Another project characteristic of Herzog and de Meuron (perhaps their finest) is the Dominus Winery (1998) just outside of Yountville, California. This building, too, is a simple cuboid that sits long and low to the ground. The construction technology is conventional: a concrete slab on grade, tilt-up walls backed by site-cast columns and beams, and a roof made of precast slabs; the winery’s second floor offices are framed with steel. Its cladding of steel gabions and local basalt has, on the other hand, generated a great deal of interest. The gabions are set on a perimeter beam and tied back to the concrete wall or steel frame (LeCuyer, 1998, pg. 44). The basalt performs as both rainscreen and thermal mass to temper the interior air. The gabions are filled with one of three grades of stone. The largest grade has the lowest density and allows air and light to penetrate while the smallest grade is completely opaque. This flexibility is used to maximum effect in spaces with different environmental demands. The tank room, for instance, houses insulated vats which require no further environmental control. Therefore, this room could be detailed with permanent openings to allow for natural ventilation and lighting through the gabions. Only the offices require active heating and cooling (LeCuyer, 1998, pg. 46).

The end result at Dominus is another work that expresses itself through materials rather than iconography. Moneo (2004) believes the winery serves as Herzog and de Meuron’s “ultimate endorsement of affirming materials as architecture’s vehicle of expression” (pg. 396). Just as at Laufen and Basel, the building takes the form of a humble cuboid as if to minimize itself. Yet each of the buildings asserts itself through a highly innovative cladding material. An interesting approach, to be sure, and one that makes sense when the architects speak of their design philosophy. From an interview with Herzog and de Meuron:
Our architecture is always based on the one-to-one experience... That is the first priority, and the only way architecture can compete with other media... Physical on-site experience is still the most vital factor, and that ties in with our deepest convictions and lies at the heart of everything we design. (Ursprung, 2002c, pg. 83)

It could be argued that a building’s form is critical to on-site experience. Herzog and de Meuron would acknowledge this and point out that they too have designed buildings that are iconic or ‘photogenic’ (the more recent Bird’s Nest in Beijing (2008) or Elbphilharmonic Hall in Hamburg (2010) can attest to that). But what matters most to the duo are a building’s “intrinsically architectural qualities” – its elements that cannot necessarily be captured by a photograph (Ursprung, 2002c, pg. 83). And with that in mind, the building’s form becomes secondary.

The bounds of this idea were explored in Herzog and de Meuron’s design for the Eberswalde Technical School Library (1999) outside Berlin. The library is, again, a simple cuboid with a highly innovative cladding. The cladding takes the form of screen-printed concrete panels and windows arranged in a grid. Each row of panels and windows features a reproduction of a photograph from the collection of artist Thomas Ruff, a frequent collaborator (Richardson, 1999, pg. 12). The printed concrete panels are a highly engaging and innovative element. A concrete surface retarder was applied to a half-tone version of the photos and placed in a form. Once the concrete was poured and set, the form was released and the uncured concrete washed away leaving an imprint of the photo. This means that the image is not printed on the surface, as with glass, but in the concrete itself.

Reaction to the library has been decidedly cooler compared to the firm’s other the projects. Frankly, the building is not so easy on the eyes. The printed panels, unlike the claddings at Basel and Dominus, do not engage the building’s interior which is entirely conventional. Nor do they generate a space so dynamic as that created by the wooden planks in Laufen. Even Moneo (2004), who speaks so highly of the Swiss team, writes flatly that Eberswalde “is only in control of the skin, fundamentally epithelial, and therefore does not have that transcendental character we find in other works by Herzog and de Meuron”
The architects, however, stand behind the design and reiterate the focus of their work: “[Eberswalde] is a spectacular building, but it is almost impossible to make adequate photographs of it because of its shape. On-site experience of the building, direct confrontation with it, is essential” (Ursprung, 2002c, pg. 82).

Clearly, a memorable interaction with the building is one of Herzog and de Meuron’s core values. This moral can be attributed to the duo’s long history with the art world. The city of Basel continues to be a major center of art in Europe and this provided the duo with easy access to exhibitions containing works by Donald Judd, Andy Worhol, and Joseph Beuys. The architects actually had the opportunity to work Beuys after being commissioned for a theme to Basel’s Carnival in 1978. It seems that they contacted him for advice and ended up working together thanks to Beuys’s enthusiasm (Mateo, 1989, pg. 7). The architects traveled to his studio which “had a very special atmosphere, like a factory, with copper sinks, bases of felt, industrial materials, and indefinable smells” (Ursprung, 2002c, pg. 81). Beuys and his studio “full of unsightly, odorous materials” deserve some credit, then, for awakening an interest in materiality in the young architects.

In surveying the literature, there seems to be an ongoing debate regarding the status of Herzog and de Meuron’s work as art or architecture. As mentioned earlier, Jacques Herzog was an active artist for a number of years. The firm is known for occasionally drafting artists into the design process; Helmut Federle, Thomas Ruff, Ai Weiwei, and especially Rémy Zuagg have contributed to various projects (Sennott, 2004, pg. 607). Many of their works, especially those considered here, could be described in borrowed terms such as ‘minimalist’ or even ‘reductivist.’ The architects themselves have joined the discourse with comments such as “it is impossible to do art and architecture at the same time” (as cited in Ursprung, 2002a, pg. 14).

This type of purely academic debate is far less interesting than the actual architectures of Herzog and de Meuron. Sorting through writings about the architects is often stymied by discussions of what it means rather than what it is. What it is, to conclude, is a rich body of work focused on the intrinsic qualities of space and materials. For over thirty years, the Swiss firm has been producing designs ranging from brilliantly original to quietly clever. Whatever its exact status, their work is at least ‘artful.’ Their
ongoing efforts continue to be interesting, as if refusing to have their work pigeonholed. The success of their unique partnership and willingness to collaborate with others has caused the industry to rethink how to best design (indeed, as of 2010, Herzog and de Meuron are no longer the only co-winners of the Pritzker prize). In a profession pervaded by the image of master Architect, this may prove to be the duo’s greatest legacy: that collaboration itself may be elevated to an art form.

Andrew Budke, 2011
References


