

**Pierre de Meuron interviewed by Tony Chapman, RIBA Head of Awards  
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**TC: Can I ask you about your Swissness, the importance of Basel in your working lives?**

PdM: Yes of course, I grew up in Basel and this is a main element of my biography, the biography of both of us and if I can understand what makes the big important element of that geographical and cultural background I would say that we are on the border and I remember that I was very early in contact with other languages and myself being bilingual, also going to France very easily, also going to Germany very easily and so I think that is the characteristic of Basel. And what was even more extreme in the 50s and 60s is where the borders were much more present and much more active and of course this is something that constantly happened in our personal but also our professional career is to open yourself and to cross borders and this is certainly one of the most important experiences in our life.

**TC: You have referred to this already – the longevity of your relationship – it's almost unique in architecture that two equal partners can spend so much of their working lives together.**

PdM: Yes, we can say that our business, our collaboration is happening still in 1957 when we met at school and this is 50 years collaboration that is still going on, and I can imagine that for other people but also for us that this is something quite extraordinary.

**TC: But of course now there are other partners in this relationship – there are seven of you, how does this work, how has the dynamic of the practice changed with the introduction of further partners.**

PdM: The practice grew so of course it is not possible anymore to deal in the same depth with all the projects with all the collaborators, with all the clients, with all the sites we have so it is necessary to have other people who can carry responsibilities. And of course this is the main target of us to have people who grow within the office and we can work with. And the partners they cover a big amount of this work, this is clear.

**TC: Could I just ask you to run through who the partners are and some idea of the projects they are responsible for.**

PdM: I have also to say not only partners, I think that everyone within the office carries part of the responsibilities and of course the partner has a higher level of responsibilities. We have also very good business people as we call them so to run this office is not only doing big projects, so we need a lot of support by business people and also there they share though maybe in the background but also there they share a higher responsibility. So it's difficult to speak of each person, it would be not be fair for others, so to speak of the partners, but there are associates, there are young coming-up people we are trying to get also closer to us and to more responsibilities, so that's a very important issue, growing as we are growing with over 200 people is also to understand where the skills are of each person who is working within the office and make those skills visible and also to the benefit of the projects and the office

**TC: Nevertheless you work in teams so can you just describe how the structure of the work is allocated.**

PdM: Yes the word team is the right word, the projects are bigger, they are more complex, so it is only possible to cover the whole work within a team, within a team there are responsibilities, there are architectural responsibilities, business responsibilities as the architect is of course with its architecture is in the foreground is in the media, this is what you see but to manage to make it possible what we have in mind. And we need a whole background so to say, a background that carries the idea that makes then the architectural concepts, the architectural visions possible to realize.

**TC: Just returning to the two of you for a moment, Kurt Foster has called you piano duettists the one hand if you like complementing the other, do you see that as a good representation of the way you work together with Jacques?**

PdM: Yes, in a general way yes. I am not sure if I would just use the same word but I think this is certainly one of the successes of how collaboration is that we are complimentary and that we accept our own weaknesses and that we highlight the qualities of the other.

**TC: A lot of your business is what you might call repeat, so how important is that relationship with the client in all these projects?**

PdM: It is most important – as an architect you are not an only person somewhere in a desert, developing ideas and making projects. So you are responsible so this is obvious you are dependent from a client who gives you a commission and the relationship to a client is most important to us. As we are not just developing projects out of drawings or out of brochures, but we always want to develop something we even don't know at the beginning and so we also think the client has to have this same perspective and there are many, many misunderstandings when or when we look at project enquiries where most of those project enquiries are only interested in a name, or may be interested in something we may have been doing already, and this is again what I am saying, this is a big misunderstanding, this is not how we think and want to do architecture. So we expect also from a client this openness and this readiness to go somewhere he does not know, yet to go somewhere which can open something for a client and not just accomplishing a programme or translating a programme one to one into a physical built structure.

**TC: But there must be a particular pleasure to return to a project, the same project like for instance with Tate Modern, how do you see that relationship as having developed over the years, how do you see it going in the next phase?**

PdM: It was very interesting and I think was very strong from the Tate and particularly from Nick Serota. And he was not looking for a project at that time, he was looking for an architect, so he was looking for people, for persons, not projects like on a piece of paper in black and white or in colours. So that is the first client that we had or the first competition that was organised in that way. And of course if it matches and if there is this interaction and this interchange between the client and the architect and it works well for both sides then it is fantastic to continue those experiences and it is fantastic also that we can work on Tate Modern 2 and that Nick Serota and Tate still is confident still in our work and that we can do something which is so different from what was the first phase of Tate and that is certainly one of the most exciting projects, the two of them, and experiences with a city, with a cultural institute like Tate – with a client this is certainly one of the most interesting spaces I have been in my life up to now.

**TC: And there is a dynamism to this new project, as there is with the Roche Tower perhaps it is the maturity of this relationship which helps the one suggests the other to accept the daring.**

PdM: If you know someone and know a client and the client knows you and both are ready to open again and to go somewhere as I'm saying and somewhere that is not already fixed and this is very different quality of experience – let's say to an experience with an investor who is only interested in the business programme or a business track of a project. To have this one dimension, of course all these things are so important to a project, of course there is the programmatic, there is the financial, there is the political and all those things are very important in a project and we take them very seriously otherwise we would not be able to fulfil all those projects. But there must be a surplus, there must be a plus-an added value to the project and this added value is even if it is just your own secret or your own private gain that we can do and the client doesn't even notice it or even better the client wants that and we are very happy to a few of those clients, Prada, and Christian Wecc (?) and Ricola and Roche as you mentioned. So those are clients who want a relationship with an architect and to develop several projects with one architect.

**TC: Obviously you've done a lot of museums, a lot of projects that are about storing things, but it seems to me you are always looking at fresh ways, fresh approaches. I was particularly impressed when I was taken round yesterday and looked at Parrish Art Museum – a project where the whole scale seemed to be different. I'm interested in this fresh approach to the storage of art.**

PdM: You know the fresh approach is also one way to say how we approach projects and in this case and in this case how we approach museums. Again here we are not interested to repeat and to make another museum, to add on the list of museums another museum, so it's also quite difficult because then you could repeat yourself and then you weaken the project you are working on or then you weaken the project you have already accomplished. So this fresh view is the most important quality of the people who are involved in that. And so to do a museum in San Francisco or to do a museum in Miami or to do a museum in South Hampton for the Parrish is so different, it is not only different because of the geographical position or because of the climatical conditions but the cultural conditions, the background of the museum, the history of the museum, the people are behind it, the art they have or don't have, this is like the basis for us to start to think this project or this museum, whether they have the money, whether they have to work in phases - this is an important element of the project.

**TC: Another aspect I'd like to touch on: the green agenda seems to be very dominant in architecture today. We ran a conference recently where we were surprised how much to the fore that was – how important in your work is it to consider these environmental factors.**

PdM: From the beginning we have been working with those issues– not in a purely technical way, so to say to this plate, to put on this plate ecological issues and the house says look I am sustainable, I am ecological, I do not think this is enough and the solutions are not very convincing in my eyes. We are looking at that in a much more wider way. Let's take a very early project we have been working on, Tavole (?). the stone house on the Ligurian coast in Italy – we used the existing stones, and this was both, this was of course an environmental, a context idea, this was to match in the landscape, this was certainly the most important part of it, but also we were thinking to re-use the material which was in site and not have a lot of energy to use in transporting new materials as the site is very remote. So just to say we use the term in a much broader way, much wider way and not only the technical proposals.

**TC: And you use the same approach in the Dominus winery.**

PdM: Yes, the Dominus Winery is a very good example of that as this is a statement on the wall. This was a statement also against the American wall which is very thin, has no mass and as a wall is not protecting enough the inside from the outside influence of temperature, of heat. And doing this gabion wall we added mass, so to control the inside temperature and to control it with the envelope with the architecture and not with technical devices like cooling systems.

**TC: I know Jacques is keen that we don't talk too much about typologies – he is interested in Architecture and I'm sure you are and yet are there any types of buildings you've never had a go at you'd like to try?**

PdM: No I think we make a very thorough selection of what we want to do as we have a lot of project enquiries and we are only selecting very few of them as we are not interested in quantity, only quality - quality is only possible if we see a potential in a particular project and working with a particular client. And you are asking what we'd like to do. I think this will come up so I am a little, very much open. We focus very much at the time on cities on urban themes. That we are also working on in our teaching jobs at the ETH and in Harvard and so that the city, became, becomes very important issue to work on so something for the people and sometimes architecture overtakes the role in city planning ....also sometimes architecture. Tate is one of the best examples how with a building, with architecture to develop a whole neighbourhood that was at that time almost unknown even to Londoners. So a building an architectural project redeveloped or redefined a whole part of the city.

**TC: Is it important you are excited by projects?**

PdM: Yes of course. There is nothing should be that you are not excited about because this excitement is the fuel and the energy for developing projects and without that I wouldn't do, I would do something else, I would stay around or lay around.

**TC: What does winning the Gold Medal mean to Herzog and de Meuron and to you as individuals?**

PdM: After having getting it I understood that it's a great thing, it's a great honour. Of course you are not aiming at it, I almost didn't know that it exists. And it's knowing what it has, the reactions I had on that are very important and very wide and so for many people to understand it, it is a very honourous award and being awarded in London and London being one of the world cities and of course being here and having the opportunity of working in London and being rewarded in London is fantastic and I must admit I am proud of that.