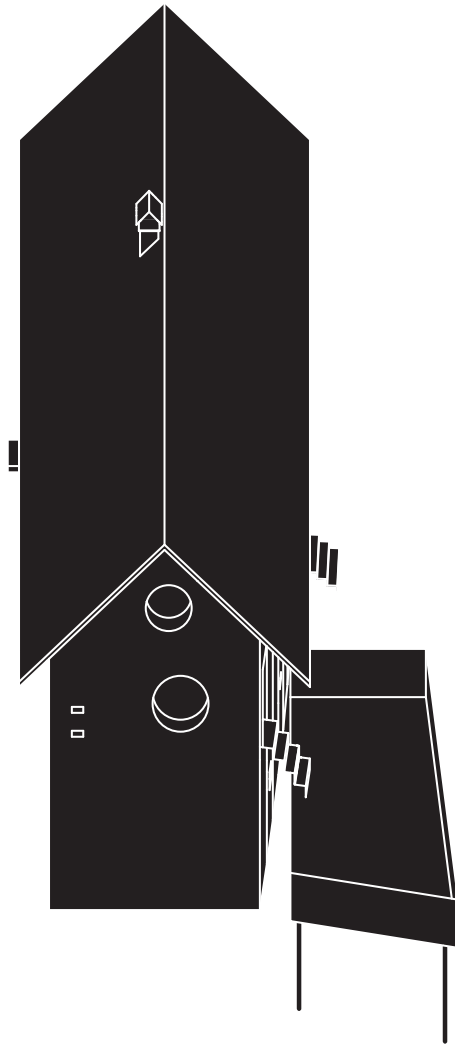


ESTRANGEMENT: THE BLUE HOUSE

Beth Hughes



On the periphery of Basel in the banal suburb of Oberwil is the fifth built project of Herzog & de Meuron – the Blue House. Commissioned by an art collector in 1979 and realized in 1980, this obscure, small, almost comical project is seminal, tenderly referenced by the architects in key discussions of their work. Contained in this impolite¹ little house are the first naïve explorations of the obsessions that would hold them captive for the next twenty years, somehow all the more explicit in their nascent prototypical form: the instrumentality of architecture in the city wrought through the construction of the image and the manipulation of materials.

This almost clumsy assembly of suburban accoutrements twists that which is common and accepted into something peculiar and yet still familiar. The project's curious play with the Swiss vernacular (another reoccurring motif in their work), coated in ultramarine-blue paint (Yves Klein) connoting a sort of Tim Burton-like representation of suburbia, creates a subtle and effective process of estrangement that brings about an awareness otherwise concealed behind the topiary.

Despite its unusual colour, the house nestles comfortably among its neighbours – a simple box with a pitched roof. On closer inspection, however, it reveals itself to be a complex project full of nuanced deviations that detach it from its context and help to define a coherent reading of the place. The typical rectangular volume is deformed by the curvature of the northern wall, which bends out, away from the street. The pitched roof is slightly lopsided, its asymmetry gently competing with the arc of the wall and sheltering the southern façade, which is far more delicate and permeable than expected, unfolding onto the partially walled garden through a fully glazed wall and loggia-style balcony.

The predominantly blank eastern façade is set back from the street and punctuated by only two intriguingly awkward prefabricated circular windows. The simple construction of concrete blocks (deviating from the Swiss cliché of wood) alludes to a kind of functional strength and massiveness that is contrasted by the intricate dovetail corner joint and the block-work texture that permeates through the fragile layer of paint. The totem of suburban life – the carport – is casually placed next to the curved northern wall, framing the entrance and cunningly serving as a balcony for the upper-level bedrooms. The humble acceptance of this prosaic, utilitarian object is testimony to the architects' comfort in playing with the image of the domestic house, co-opting and corrupting suburban artefacts to create a sense of comprehensible "otherness".

1 Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron interviewed by Stanislaus von Moos, "Appearance and Injury", *Quaderns d'arquitectura i urbanisme*, nos. 167–68 (1985), 54. During the interview the Swiss architects describe the Blue House as "much less 'polite' amid the urban agglomeration" than the later and more refined Dagmersellen House.

2

Herzog & de Meuron, "The Specific Gravity of Architectures", in Gerhard Mack, ed., *Herzog & de Meuron, 1978–1988: The Complete Works, Volume 1* (Basel, Boston and Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1997), 206.

3

See Herzog and de Meuron interviewed by Von Moos, "Appearance and Injury", 52.

4

Jacques Herzog and Theodora Vischer, "Conversation between Jacques Herzog and Theodora Vischer" [May 1988], in Mack, *Herzog & de Meuron, 1978–1988*, 212.

The interior gives itself over to the modern dwelling, avoiding the convoluted corridors and vestibules of conventional Swiss suburbia and leaving the exterior responsible for the construction of an altered impression of the setting. A traditional plan would have bifurcated the space with a central hallway, typically running parallel to the roof ridge and orienting the house toward the street. In the Blue House, the circulation space is all but eliminated, for its interior spaces are organized by freestanding furniture and a fireplace, with everything oriented optimally to the south and the stair neatly arranged against the curved wall to take you to the upper level of bedrooms.

The use of images, or the constructed estrangement, is consistently found (in varying degrees of saturation) in almost all of Herzog & de Meuron's early work. The images operate as a mechanism for creating knowledge through the viewer's emotional response to the architecture – through nostalgia, as Herzog has articulated: "I believe that architecture evokes in us memories of our own life, but hardly any memories of the history of architecture. I believe that its effect is more subjective and quite often more unconscious."² The unravelling of the domestic dream is achieved through the deliberate dissolution of the generally accepted idea of the house in order to engage in a critique, thereby "revealing a conversation about the fallaciousness of our utopian vision of suburbia".³

The visual clues and manipulation of materials creates a grammar that helps us to parse Herzog & de Meuron's architecture. This grammar enables the architects to create a statement on the milieu in which they are operating. The drive to constantly evaluate the context within which they work is born of their ongoing concern with the roles of both site and architecture within the city. The construction of pictorial souvenirs derived from quotidian elements directly appropriated from the context connects the architectural project to the city:

Other design aspects become effective according to each place, and ultimately give the buildings their special character. It is important to us to find the right architecture for each place, which, if possible, is then completed by the city. We have no desire to set up new establishments, but on the contrary, we want to pursue existing inceptions in order to complete the city, so to speak.⁴

The apparent integration of their projects reveals the subtle duplicity in their work and reflects Herzog & de Meuron's equivocal stance between conformity and rebellion. After their inclusion in the first



Herzog & de Meuron, Blue House.
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5
Herzog and de Meuron
interviewed by Von Moos,
"Appearance and Injury", 51.

6
Herzog and Vischer,
"Conversation between
Jacques Herzog and
Theodora Vischer", 212.

thematic issue of *Rassegna* 36 *Minimal* in 1988, Herzog & de Meuron have led the vanguard of Swiss Minimalism, and yet as soon as they were aligned with this, they distanced themselves from their role as agents of Swiss architecture. There is something deviant in their work, some inexpressibly altered quality, as well as a deliberate ambiguity that services their questioning nature. They have always worked with content, a content constructed from the site itself, and their work (or their early work, at least) operates on many levels that reach beyond their reputation for Swiss calm and precision:

In relation to our work we are interested in precisely this non-definitiveness, which can also be understood as a kind of insidiousness or double standard, as a metaphor for today's city and its inhabitants, their social cohabitation, the difficulties of couple relationships, perhaps too simply as the expression of insecurity and the impossibility of expressing a social Utopia with a formal architectural canon as was attempted today through the forced Mannerism of a few recognized protagonists of the so-called Post-Modern Movement.⁵

Herzog & de Meuron's interest in site, context and the city is an ongoing legacy of Rossi's tutelage. Their work builds on this understanding and engages with it in a more fluid way, incorporating the emotional, experiential and material qualities of a given site to establish this link to the city. Herzog has said:

In Rossi's case, this relationship to a place has a very individual dimension. He has tried to categorize place by means of a certain scientific approach, specifically addressing the notion of typology. We studied with Rossi and learned these things from him. However, we have also absorbed something quite different from him, and that is his charismatic personality, which transmits a kind of energetic impulse – something that was perhaps even more decisive in so far as he helped us to develop our own experience of a place, thus sharpening our awareness of architecture . . . We have certainly expanded the notion of place. We have begun to see, to feel, to incorporate different perceptions of a place. Our experience also occurs against a completely different background from Rossi's. While Rossi's experience is formed by the landscape of Lombardy, we are strongly influenced by the Swiss situation, especially that of Basel where, after all, quite different images exist.⁶

It is the familiarity of the image that is essential for the project to be able to operate in the city and to decipher that image. It is the

manner in which the house approaches its neighbours by mimicking them while simultaneously distancing itself through its perturbing discordance that renders the project legible. In Herzog's words, "I believe we are trying to create a piece of reality that can be dismantled, if you will, and therefore becomes understandable."⁷

7
Ibid., 217.

In the Blue House, the dismantled reality is blatant, the fragments jarringly assembled. Layered on top of the explicit abnormalities are a series of eccentric details that complete the picture: cantilevered concrete steps, zigzagging downpipes traversing the balcony, an ovoid skylight illuminating the basement, peep-hole windows, mesh balustrades and tarpaulin shading on the balconies. So established is our understanding and accepted vision of the suburban house that we are acutely sensitive to any disturbance, no matter how subtle. Herein lies the agency of the architecture of Herzog & de Meuron, the way in which the architecture acts within the relationship between the image and its context. The notion of estrangement is inherently linked to the notion of relationship: it is the idea of disassociation (voluntary or forced) from a social group, and this can only occur in the presence of some sort of co-dependency. In the case of the Blue House, it is the way in which the image of the house necessarily coexists with its context – their mutual imbrications – that sets up the narrative, and then it is the complicity – the inherent betrayal in turning on itself – that frames the critique; its supposed assimilation is its strength.

The Blue House's deliberately hostile and explicit rupture makes the statement tangible. The exploitation of the familiar makes it powerful.