

PETER
ZUMTHOR
THINKING
ARCHITECTURE

BIRKHÄUSER

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A Way of Looking at Things

In search of the lost architecture

When I think about architecture, images come into my mind. Many of these images are connected with my training and work as an architect. They contain the professional knowledge about architecture that I have gathered over the years. Some of the other images have to do with my childhood. There was a time when I experienced architecture without thinking about it. Sometimes I can almost feel a particular door handle in my hand, a piece of metal shaped like the back of a spoon.

I used to take hold of it when I went into my aunt's garden. That door handle still seems to me like a special sign of entry into a world of different moods and smells. I remember the sound of the gravel under my feet, the soft gleam of the waxed oak staircase, I can hear the heavy front door closing behind me as I walk along the dark corridor and enter the kitchen, the only really brightly lit room in the house.

Looking back, it seems as if this was the only room in the house in which the ceiling did not disappear into twilight; the small hexagonal tiles of the floor, dark red and fitted so tightly together that the cracks between them were almost imperceptible, were hard and unyielding under my feet, and a smell of oil paint issued from the kitchen cupboard.

Everything about this kitchen was typical of a traditional kitchen. There was nothing special about it. But perhaps it was just the fact that it was so very much, so very naturally, a kitchen that has imprinted its memory indelibly on my mind. The atmosphere of this room is insolubly linked

with my idea of a kitchen. Now I feel like going on and talking about the door handles that came after the handle on my aunt's garden gate, about the ground and the floors, about the soft asphalt warmed by the sun, about the flagstones covered with chestnut leaves in the autumn, and about all the doors that closed in such different ways, one replete and dignified, another with a thin, cheap clatter, others hard, implacable, and intimidating ...

Memories like these contain the deepest architectural experience that I know. They are the reservoirs of the architectural atmospheres and images that I explore in my work as an architect.

When I design a building, I frequently find myself sinking into old, half-forgotten memories, and then I try to recollect what the remembered architectural situation was really like, what it had meant to me at the time, and I try to think how it could help me now to revive that vibrant atmosphere pervaded by the simple presence of things, in which everything had its own specific place and form. And although I cannot trace any special forms, there is a hint of fullness and of richness that makes me think: this I have seen before. Yet, at the same time, I know that it is all new and different, and that there is no direct reference to a former work of architecture which might divulge the secret of the memory-laden mood.

Made of materials

To me, there is something revealing about the work of Joseph Beuys and some of the artists of the Arte Povera group. What impresses me is the precise and sensuous way they use materials. It seems anchored in an ancient, elemental knowledge about man's use of materials, and at



the same time to expose the very essence of these materials, which is beyond all culturally conveyed meaning.

I try to use materials like this in my work. I believe that they can assume a poetic quality in the context of an architectural object, although only if the architect is able to generate a meaningful situation for them, since materials in themselves are not poetic.

The sense that I try to instill into materials is beyond all rules of composition, and their tangibility, smell, and acoustic qualities are merely elements of the language that we are obliged to use. Sense emerges when I succeed in bringing out the specific meanings of certain materials in my buildings, meanings that can only be perceived in just this way in this one building.

If we work towards this goal, we must constantly ask ourselves what the use of a particular material could mean in a specific architectural context. Good answers to these questions can throw new light on both the way in which the material is generally used and its own inherent sensuous qualities.

If we succeed in this, materials in architecture can be made to shine and vibrate.

Work within things

It is said that one of the most impressive things about the music of Johann Sebastian Bach is its “architecture.” Its construction seems clear and transparent. It is possible to pursue the details of the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmical elements without losing the feeling for the composition as a whole—the whole that makes sense of the details. The music seems to be based upon a clear structure, and if we trace

the individual threads of the musical fabric, it is possible to apprehend the rules that govern the structure of the music.

Construction is the art of making a meaningful whole out of many parts. Buildings are witnesses to the human ability to construct concrete things. I believe that the real core of all architectural work lies in the act of construction. At the point in time when concrete materials are assembled and erected, the architecture we have been looking for becomes part of the real world.

I feel respect for the art of joining, the ability of craftsmen and engineers. I am impressed by the knowledge of how to make things, which lies at the bottom of human skill. I try to design buildings that are worthy of this knowledge and merit the challenge to this skill.

People often say “a lot of work went into this” when they sense the care and skill that its maker has lavished on a carefully constructed object. The notion that our work is an integral part of what we accomplish takes us to the very limits of our musings about the value of a work of art, a work of architecture. Are the effort and skill we put into them really inherent parts of the things we make? Sometimes, when I am moved by a work of architecture in the same way as I am moved by music, literature, or a painting, I am tempted to think so.

For the silence of sleep

I love music. The slow movements of Mozart’s piano concertos, John Coltrane’s ballads, or the sound of the human voice in certain songs all move me.

The human ability to invent melodies, harmonies, and rhythms amazes me.

But the world of sound also embraces the opposite of melody, harmony, and rhythm. There is disharmony and broken rhythm, fragments and clusters of sound, and there is also the purely functional sound that we call noise. Contemporary music works with these elements.

Contemporary architecture should be just as radical as contemporary music. But there are limits. Although a work of architecture based on disharmony and fragmentation, on broken rhythms, clustering and structural disruptions may be able to convey a message, as soon as we understand its statement our curiosity dies, and all that is left is the question of the building's practical usefulness.

Architecture has its own realm. It has a special physical relationship with life. I do not think of it primarily as either a message or a symbol, but as an envelope and background for life which goes on in and around it, a sensitive container for the rhythm of footsteps on the floor, for the concentration of work, for the silence of sleep.

Preliminary promises

In its final, constructed form, architecture has its place in the concrete world. This is where it exists. This is where it makes its statement. Portrayals of as yet unrealized architectural works represent an attempt to give a voice to something, which has not yet found its place in the concrete world for which it is meant.

Architectural drawings try to express as accurately as possible the aura of the building in its intended place. But precisely the effort of the portrayal often serves to underline the absence of the actual object, and what then emerges is an awareness of the inadequacy of any kind of portrayal, curiosity about the reality it promises, and perhaps—

if the promise has the power to move us—a longing for its presence. If the naturalism and graphic virtuosity of architectural portrayals are too great, if they lack “open patches” where our imagination and curiosity about the reality of the drawing can penetrate the image, the portrayal itself becomes the object of our desire, and our longing for its reality wanes because there is little or nothing in the representation that points to the intended reality beyond it. The portrayal no longer holds a promise. It refers only to itself.

Design drawings that refer to a reality which still lies in the future are important in my work. I continue working on my drawings until they reach the delicate point of representation when the prevailing mood I seek emerges, and I stop before inessentials start detracting from its impact. The drawing itself must take on the quality of the sought-for object. It is like a sketch by a sculptor for his sculpture, not merely an illustration of an idea but an innate part of the work of creation, which ends with the constructed object.

These sort of drawings enable us to step back, to look, and to learn to understand that which has not yet come into being and which has just started to emerge.

Chinks in sealed objects

Buildings are artificial constructions. They consist of single parts which must be joined together. To a large degree, the quality of the finished object is determined by the quality of the joins.

In sculpture, there is a tradition that minimizes the expression of the joints and joins between the single parts in favor of the overall form. Richard Serra's steel objects, for example, look just as homogenous and



integral as the stone and wood sculptures of older sculptural traditions. Many of the installations and objects by artists of the 1960s and 70s rely on the simplest and most obvious methods of joining and connecting that we know. Beuys, Merz, and others often used loose settings in spaces, coils, folds, and layers when developing a whole from the individual parts. The direct, seemingly self-evident way in which these objects are put together is interesting. There is no interruption of the overall impression by small parts that have nothing to do with the object's statement. Our perception of the whole is not distracted by inessential details. Every touch, every join, every joint is there in order to reinforce the idea of the quiet presence of the work.

When I design buildings, I try to give them this kind of presence. However, unlike the sculptor, I have to start with functional and technical requirements that represent the fundamental task I have to fulfill. Architecture is always faced with the challenge of developing a whole out of innumerable details, out of various functions and forms, materials and dimensions. The architect must look for rational constructions and forms for edges and joints, for the points where surfaces intersect and different materials meet. These formal details determine the sensitive transitions within the larger proportions of the building. The details establish the formal rhythm, the building's finely fractionated scale.

Details express what the basic idea of the design requires at the relevant point in the object: belonging or separation, tension or lightness, friction, solidity, fragility...

Details, when they are successful, are not mere decoration. They do not distract or entertain. They lead to an understanding of the whole of which they are an inherent part.

There is a magical power in every completed, self-contained creation. It is as if we succumb to the magic of the fully developed architectural body. Our attention is caught, perhaps for the first time, by a detail such as two nails in the floor that hold the steel plates by the worn-out door-step. Emotions well up. Something moves us.

Beyond the symbols

"Anything goes," say the doers. "Main Street is almost all right," says Venturi, the architect. "Nothing works any more," say those who suffer from the hostility of our day and age. These statements stand for contradictory opinions, if not for contradictory facts. We get used to living with contradictions and there are several reasons for this: traditions crumble, and with them cultural identities. No one seems really to understand and control the dynamics developed by economics and politics. Everything merges into everything else, and mass communication creates an artificial world of signs. Arbitrariness prevails.

Postmodern life could be described as a state in which everything beyond our own personal biography seems vague, blurred, and somehow unreal. The world is full of signs and information, which stand for things that no one fully understands because they, too, turn out to be mere signs for other things. Yet the real thing remains hidden. No one ever gets to see it. Nevertheless, I am convinced that real things do exist, however endangered they may be. There are earth and water, the light of the sun, landscapes and vegetation; and there are objects, made by man, such as machines, tools, or musical instruments, which are what they are, which are not mere vehicles for an artistic message, and whose presence is self-evident.

When we look at objects or buildings that seem to be at peace within themselves, our perception becomes calm and dulled. The objects we perceive have no message for us; they are simply there. Our perceptive faculties grow quiet, unprejudiced, and unacquisitive. They reach beyond signs and symbols; they are open, empty. It is as if we could see something on which we cannot focus our consciousness. Here, in this perceptual vacuum, a memory may surface, a memory that seems to issue from the depths of time. Now, our observation of the object embraces a presentiment of the world in all its wholeness because there is nothing that cannot be understood.

There is a power in the ordinary things of everyday life, as Edward Hopper's paintings seem to say. We only have to look at them long enough to see it.

Completed landscapes

To me, the presence of certain buildings has something secret about it. They seem simply to be there. We do not pay any special attention to them. And yet it is virtually impossible to imagine the place where they stand without them. These buildings appear to be anchored firmly in the ground. They give the impression of being a self-evident part of their surroundings and they seem to be saying: "I am as you see me and I belong here."

I have a passionate desire to design such buildings, buildings that, in time, grow naturally into being a part of the form and history of their place. Every new work of architecture intervenes in a specific historical situation. It is essential to the quality of the intervention that the new building should embrace qualities that can enter into a meaningful dialogue

with the existing situation. For if the intervention is to find its place, it must make us see what already exists in a new light. We throw a stone into the water. Sand swirls up and settles again. The stir was necessary. The stone has found its place. But the pond is no longer the same.

I believe those buildings only be accepted by their surroundings if they have the ability to appeal to our emotions and minds in various ways. Since our feelings and understanding are rooted in the past, our sensuous connections with a building must respect the process of remembering.

But, as John Berger says, what we remember cannot be compared to the end of a line. Various possibilities lead to and meet in the act of remembering. Images, moods, forms, words, signs, or comparisons open up possibilities of approach. We must construct a radial system of approach that enables us to see the work of architecture as a focal point from different angles simultaneously: historically, aesthetically, functionally, personally, passionately.

The tension inside the body

Among all the drawings produced by architects, my favorites are the working drawings. Working drawings are detailed and objective. Created for the craftsmen who are to give the imagined object a material form, they are free of associative manipulation. They do not try to convince and impress like project drawings. They seem to be saying: "This is exactly how it will look."

Working drawings are like anatomical drawings. They reveal something of the secret inner tension that the finished architectural body is reluctant to divulge: the art of joining, hidden geometry, the friction of

materials, the inner forces of bearing and holding, the human work that is inherent in man-made things.

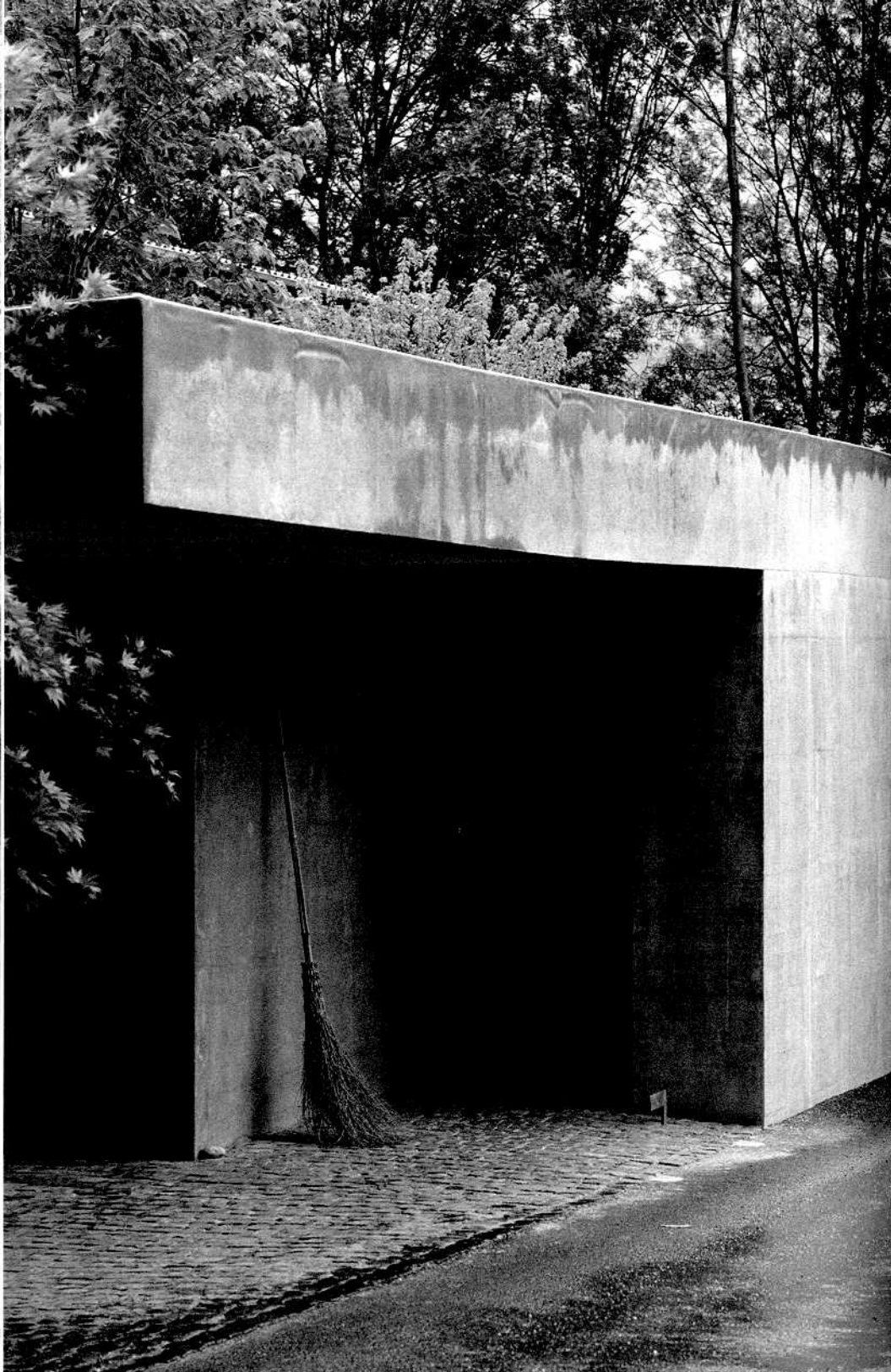
Per Kirkeby once did a brick sculpture in the form of a house for a Documenta exhibition in Kassel. The house had no entrance. Its interior was inaccessible and hidden. It remained a secret, which added an aura of mystical depth to the sculpture's other qualities.

I think that the hidden structures and constructions of a house should be organized in such a way that they endow the body of the building with a quality of inner tension and vibration. This is how violins are made. They remind us of the living bodies of nature.

Unexpected truths

In my youth I imagined poetry as a kind of colored cloud made up of more or less diffuse metaphors and allusions, which, although they might be enjoyable, were difficult to associate with a reliable view of the world. As an architect, I have learned to understand that the opposite of this youthful definition of poetry is probably closer to the truth.

If a work of architecture consists of forms and contents that combine to create a strong fundamental mood powerful enough to affect us, it may possess the qualities of a work of art. This art has, however, nothing to do with interesting configurations or originality. It is concerned with insights and understanding, and above all with truth. Perhaps poetry is unexpected truth. It lives in stillness. Architecture's artistic task is to give this still expectancy a form. The building itself is never poetic. At most, it may possess subtle qualities, which, at certain moments, permit us to understand something that we were never able to understand in quite this way before.



Desire

The clear, logical development of a work of architecture depends on rational and objective criteria. When I permit subjective and unconsidered ideas to intervene in the objective course of the design process, I acknowledge the significance of personal feelings in my work.

When architects talk about their buildings, what they say is often at odds with the statements of the buildings themselves. This is probably connected with the fact that they tend to talk a good deal about the rational, thought-out aspects of their work and less about the secret passion that inspires it.

The design process is based on a constant interplay of feeling and reason. The feelings, preferences, longings, and desires that emerge and demand to be given a form must be controlled by critical powers of reasoning, but it is our feelings that tell us whether abstract considerations really ring true. To a large degree, designing is based on understanding and establishing systems of order. Yet I believe that the essential substance of the architecture we seek proceeds from feeling and insight. Precious moments of intuition result from patient work. With the sudden emergence of an inner image, a new line in a drawing, the whole design changes and is newly formulated within a fraction of a second. It is as if a powerful drug were suddenly taking effect. Everything I knew before about the thing I am creating is flooded by a bright new light. I experience joy and passion, and something deep inside me seems to affirm: "I want to build this house!"

Composing in space

Geometry is about the laws of lines, plane surfaces, and three-dimen-

sional bodies in space. Geometry can help us understand how to handle space in architecture.

In architecture, there are two basic possibilities of spatial composition: the closed architectural body that isolates space within itself, and the open body that embraces an area of space that is connected with the endless continuum. The extension of space can be made visible through bodies such as slabs or poles placed freely or in rows in the spatial expanse of a room.

I do not claim to know what space really is. The longer I think about it, the more mysterious it becomes. About one thing, however, I am sure: when we, as architects, are concerned with space, we are concerned with but a tiny part of the infinity that surrounds the earth, and yet each and every building marks a unique place in that infinity.

With this idea in mind, I start by sketching the first plans and sections of my design. I draw spatial diagrams and simple volumes. I try to visualize them as precise bodies in space, and I feel it is important to sense exactly how they define and separate an area of interior space from the space that surrounds them, or how they contain a part of the infinite spatial continuum in a kind of open vessel.

Buildings that have a strong impact always convey an intense feeling of their spatial quality. They embrace the mysterious void called space in a special way and make it vibrate.

Common sense

Designing is inventing. When I was still at arts and crafts school, we tried to follow this principle. We looked for a new solution to every problem. We felt it was important to be avant-garde. Not until later did I re-

alize that there are basically only a very few architectural problems for which a valid solution has not already been found.

In retrospect, my education in design seems somewhat a-historical. Our role models were the pioneers and inventors of *Das Neue Bauen*. We regarded architectural history as part of our general education, which had little influence on our work as designers. Thus, we frequently invented what had already been invented, and we tried our hand at inventing the uninventable.

This kind of training in design is not without its educational value. Later, however, as practicing architects, we do well to get acquainted with the enormous repository of knowledge and experience contained in the history of architecture. I believe that if we integrate this in our work, we have a better chance of making a genuine contribution of our own. Architecture is, however, not a linear process that leads more or less logically and directly from architectural history to new buildings. On the search for the architecture that I envisage, I frequently experience stifling moments of emptiness. Nothing I can think of seems to tally with what I want and cannot yet envisage. At these moments, I try to shake off the academic knowledge of architecture I have acquired because it has suddenly started to hold me back. This helps. I find I can breathe more freely. I catch a whiff of the old familiar mood of the inventors and pioneers. Design has once again become invention.

The creative act in which a work of architecture comes into being goes beyond all historical and technical knowledge. Its focus is on the dialogue with the issues of our time. At the moment of its creation, architecture is bound to the present in a very special way. It reflects the spirit of its inventor and gives its own answers to the questions of our time

through its functional form and appearance, its relationship with other works of architecture, and with the place where it stands.

The answers to these questions, which I can formulate as an architect, are limited. Our times of change and transition do not permit big gestures. There are only a few remaining common values left upon which we can build and which we all share. I thus appeal for a kind of architecture of common sense based on the fundamentals that we still know, understand, and feel. I carefully observe the concrete appearance of the world, and in my buildings I try to enhance what seems to be valuable, to correct what is disturbing, and to create anew what we feel is missing.

Melancholy perceptions

Ettore Scola's film *Le Bal* recounts fifty years of European history with no dialogue and a complete unity of place. It consists solely of music and the motion of people moving and dancing. We remain in the same room with the same people throughout, while time goes by and the dancers grow older.

The focus of the film is on its main characters. But it is the ballroom with its tiled floor and its paneling, the stairs in the background, and the lion's paw at the side that creates the film's dense, powerful atmosphere. Or is it the other way around? Is it the people who endow the room with its particular mood?

I ask this question because I am convinced that a good building must be capable of absorbing the traces of human life and thus of taking on a specific richness.

Naturally, in this context I think of the patina of age on materials, of innumerable small scratches on surfaces, of varnish that has grown dull



and brittle, and of edges polished by use. But when I close my eyes and try to forget both these physical traces and my own first associations, what remains is a different impression, a deeper feeling—a consciousness of time passing and an awareness of the human lives that have been acted out in these places and rooms and charged them with a special aura. At these moments, architecture's aesthetic and practical values, stylistic and historical significance are of secondary importance. What matters now is only this feeling of deep melancholy. Architecture is exposed to life. If its body is sensitive enough, it can assume a quality that bears witness to the reality of past life.

Steps left behind

When I work on a design I allow myself to be guided by images and moods that I remember and can relate to the kind of architecture I am looking for. Most of the images that come to mind originate from my subjective experience and are only rarely accompanied by a remembered architectural commentary. While I am designing I try to find out what these images mean so that I can learn how to create a wealth of visual forms and atmospheres.

After a certain time, the object I am designing takes on some of the qualities of the images I use as models. If I can find a meaningful way of interlocking and superimposing these qualities, the object will assume a depth and richness. If I am to achieve this effect, the qualities I am giving the design must merge and blend with the constructional and formal structure of the finished building. Form and construction, appearance and function are no longer separate. They belong together and form a whole.

When we look at the finished building, our eyes, guided by our analytical mind, tend to stray and look for details to hold on to. But the synthesis of the whole does not become comprehensible through isolated details. Everything refers to everything.

At this moment, the initial images fade into the background. The models, words, and comparisons that were necessary for the creation of the whole disappear like steps that have been left behind. The new building assumes the focal position and is itself. Its history begins.

Resistance

I believe that architecture today needs to reflect on the tasks and possibilities which are inherently its own. Architecture is not a vehicle or a symbol for things that do not belong to its essence. In a society that celebrates the inessential, architecture can put up a resistance, counteract the waste of forms and meanings, and speak its own language.

I believe that the language of architecture is not a question of a specific style. Every building is built for a specific use in a specific place and for a specific society. My buildings try to answer the questions that emerge from these simple facts as precisely and critically as they can.