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# MAKING A MESS

HERZOG & DE MEURON'S 'PILE OF BOXES' DESIGN FOR TATE MODERN SHOWS THAT ARCHITECTURE IS EMBRACING CHAOS OVER ORDER.

TEXT KARL SHARRO  
ILLUSTRATIONS LESLEY MOORE



**THIS PAGE** HERZOG & DE MEURON, TATE MODERN EXTENSION, LONDON. CREATING 23,400 M<sup>2</sup> OF NEW SPACE, THE 11-STORY TATE MODERN EXTENSION WILL INCREASE THE OVERALL SIZE OF THE MUSEUM BY 60 PER CENT. THE BUILDING IS EXPECTED TO BE COMPLETED IN 2012.



**THIS PAGE** OMA, DE ROTTERDAM. ROTTERDAM. THIS 140,000-M<sup>2</sup> BUILDING WILL COMPRISE 260 APARTMENTS AND A 260-ROOM HOTEL, AS WELL AS 40,000 M<sup>2</sup> OF OFFICE SPACE AND 5000 M<sup>2</sup> OF RETAIL SPACE. COMPLETION IS SCHEDULED FOR 2011.

LAST SUMMER LONDON'S TATE MODERN revealed plans for a new extension, designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, who had converted the disused power station on London's South Bank into the Tate Modern in 2000. The two architects have described their new design as a 'pile' of boxes, while others have likened it to a ziggurat or a pyramid. I don't often find myself agreeing with other architects on the proper description of their buildings, but I must say that 'pile' is indeed what comes closest to describing the proposed extension.

While I am all in favour of creative freedom for designers, I think the current trend of formal 'messiness' in architecture has become too recurrent to be considered a whimsical act by individual architects. Instead, it speaks more of how architects today see themselves and their profession. More importantly, it expresses how architecture today is part of the general unwillingness to impose order on the world. This attitude – which manifests itself in the abandonment of meta-theories in the social sciences and in the shift toward 'localized' resistances in politics – is finding its expression in architecture through the embracement of 'chaos' and 'disorder'.

The link between developments in architecture and in the social sciences is certainly not arbitrary.

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Deconstruction was all the rage in architectural circles in the 1980s, particularly in the US, where architects embraced the theories of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida's anti-Enlightenment stance seemed to liberate architects from the social agendas that modernism had pursued. His denial of the possibility of progress resonated with a generation of architects who were not only disillusioned with modernism, but also discontented with the historicism that was making its way back into architecture. Deconstruction opened up the possibility of an architecture that could be formally completely new, and it liberated architects from the demands of modernism.

The work of architects like Peter Eisenman was invigorated by Derridian concepts, and it can be argued that it was still intellectually rigorous,

despite its shedding of the aspirations of modernism. Eisenman used Derrida's concept of the 'spectral' to propose that a site cannot be seen as a tabula rasa, as the modernists chose to view it, but rather contains traces of its past that can be integrated into the architecture. In several of his projects, Eisenman employed these historical references to create multi-layered formal compositions that were visually and spatially exciting. In this process, the architect still controlled the formal relationships that made up the architecture and could choose which aspects of the site's history should be emphasized and translated into formal influences.

In contrast, the formal tendencies that are prevalent today seem to be a result of the architect relinquishing control and making do without having any organizational principles govern the design. Herzog & de Meuron's Tate Modern extension is a clear example of this tendency; their description of the project as a 'pile of boxes' declares their abandonment of any formal principles whatsoever. There isn't even a trace of the intellectual pretensions that characterized Eisenman's work. In this sense, the architects become no more than 'technical enablers' who are able to realize a random composition in concrete.

What I find interesting about the use of the

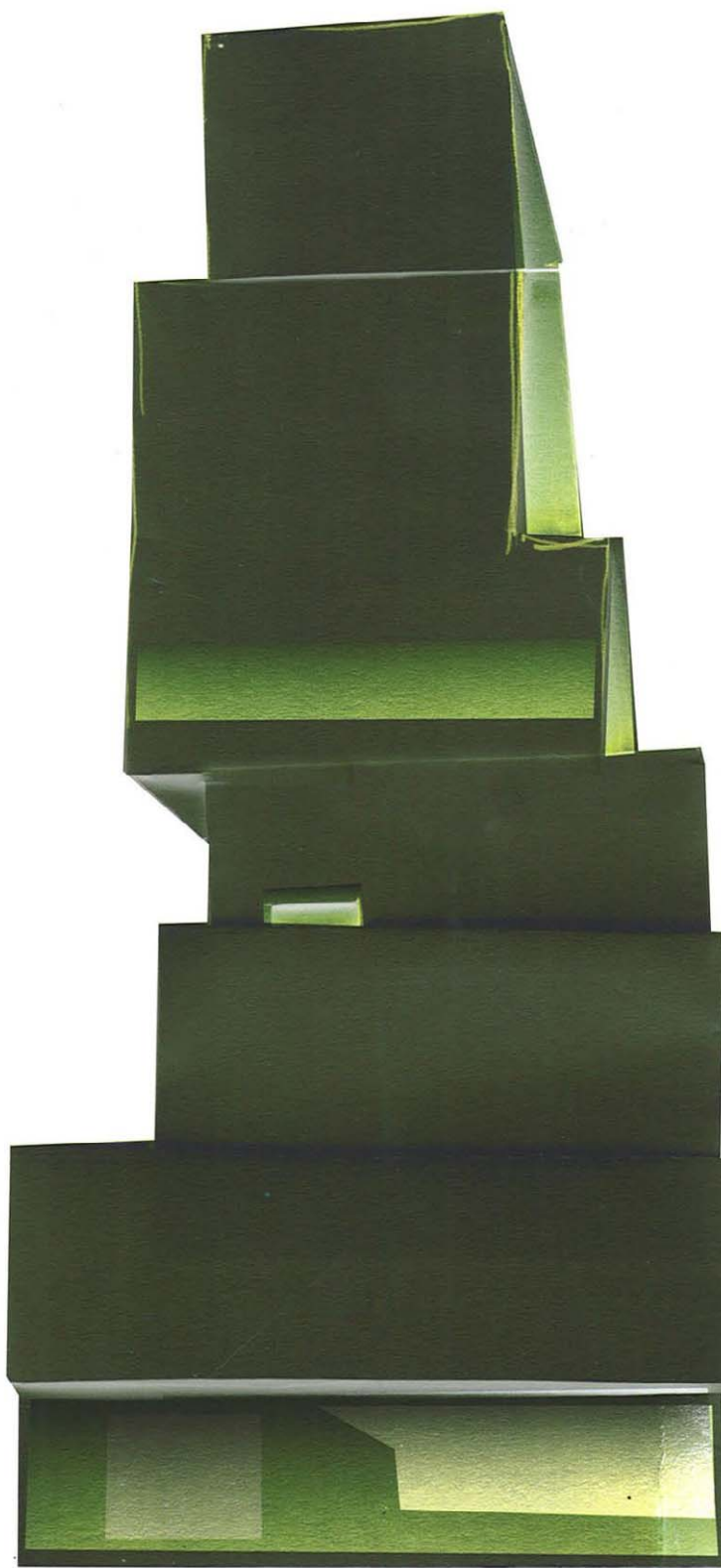
term 'pile', and about the images that have been released of the scheme so far, is how potentially malleable this project will be. The pile can be rearranged in many ways, and it would be very difficult for anyone to spot the differences between the possible compositions. In other words, the 'pile' does not have any clear organizational principle, or, as someone like Eisenman would put it, it doesn't have a 'narrative'.

I am tempted to use a word that is highly unfashionable in architecture circles today: integrity. Herzog & de Meuron's pile lacks any sense of integrity, a quality that allows the architect to control the transition of the project from idea to execution while retaining the original intentions. Instead, the pile will be open to compromises in response to different demands, and there will be numerous demands on a high-profile public project like this one, ranging from community participation to environmental considerations.

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What is particularly troubling about the Tate Modern extension is that it is not a one-off example of this new approach to architecture, which is, in fact, becoming the norm. Even at the height of modernism, some pretty atrocious buildings were built, but that fits perfectly well with the experimental nature of the modernist project – you can't expect architects to get it right all the time. In contrast, today's haphazard formal approach is becoming pervasive, finding its way into architecture schools where the very nature of architectural education is being transformed as a result of the abandonment of objective criteria for assessing projects.

Some would argue that this form of freedom of expression contributes to more exciting possibilities in architecture, but this argument can work only if architecture is considered an art form. In reality, architecture is a far more com-



**THIS PAGE** SANAA, NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, NEW YORK. THE 5500-M<sup>2</sup>, SIX-STORY NEW MUSEUM WILL BE THE FIRST ART-MUSEUM BUILDING CONSTRUCTED IN DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN IN OVER A CENTURY. THE BUILDING IS DUE TO BE COMPLETED IN 2007.

THIS PAGE REX, MUSEUM PLAZA, LOUISVILLE. THE 110,000-M<sup>2</sup>, 61-STORY BUILDING FEATURES 235 APARTMENTS, 12 OFFICE FLOORS, RETAIL SPACE, AN ART MUSEUM AND A 300-ROOM HOTEL. COMPLETION IS SCHEDULED FOR 2010.



plex proposition that has to respond to a variety of considerations, including programmatic requirements and construction technologies. Far more complex to teach, and to agree upon, are the spatial and architectonic aspects of architecture, aspects to which different societies and different periods find varying responses. The response today seems to be that our incapability of making sense of the apparent complexity of the world should be reflected in architecture.

There will no doubt be those who will criticize the Tate Modern extension for precisely the opposite reasons that I am criticizing it for. No doubt some will criticize the scheme as a manifestation of the 'ego' of the architects, and others will decry its 'heroic' nature. These two charges have become standard accusations against any architectural project that seeks to be distinctive. But these arguments entirely miss the point about the Tate Modern scheme.

Rather than being heroic and egotistical, the project is a mundane exercise in self-effacement. What Herzog & de Meuron seem to be saying with their 'pile of boxes' analogy is that the idea is so simple that even a child playing with some wood blocks could have come up with a similar composition. Again, this idea would not have been so troubling had it not been symptomatic of

how architects see their place in society today. In participating in the general retreat from imposing order on the world, architects are relinquishing the transformative powers of architecture in favour of expressing the 'messiness' of the world through their designs.

On one level, this attitude can be seen as a manifestation of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. Why then should architects depart from mainstream thinking and challenge the prevailing assumptions of our age? My immediate response to that question is that this new breed of 'accidental' buildings almost demystifies the role of the architect. One could even argue that they appear to have come about organically, without the efforts of a designer. In that sense, they aspire to be 'faultless': there are no obvious intentions to be questioned, and, consequently, critical responses are pre-empted. If these buildings are seen to be simulating organic processes that operate in the world independently of our will, then they acquire validity automatically.

The problem with this logic is that it will lead to an impasse in architectural theory and practice. If we abolish the critical space in which architecture is conceptualized and produced, we will end up in an 'anything goes' situation that, arguably, the arts have been languishing in for

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some time now. If the only way for architecture to continue to develop today is to suppress and disguise the role of the architect, then we will quickly exhaust whatever relevance the practice still retains. Whether it agrees with our contemporary sensibility or not, the very premise upon which architecture is based is the ability to transform the natural world and, consequently, to leave our mark on it. The fact that we choose to think of that premise today as necessarily negative is a reflection of our own uncertainties; simply disguising our interventions as the products of organic processes will not allow us to resolve the contradiction between our aspirations and our insecurities.