

## Talking about Wood<sup>1</sup>

*Archithese, Michael Alder, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, and Peter Zumthor*

*In 1985, Swiss architects Michael Alder, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, and Peter Zumthor sat down with Archithese to discuss building with wood; the continued traditions of its use as well as the possibility of developing new traditions. All four architects articulate a specific interest of the material and offer a critical eye to the others' work. While Alder is concerned with the aesthetics of wood, Zumthor is attentive to the material from a cabinetmaker's perspective. Further still, Herzog and de Meuron describe a clear interest in discovering the physical presence of the material with an "urgency from the inside out", rather than the external appearance.*

*With Alder as the senior practitioner in the conversation, Herzog, de Meuron, and Zumthor are all relatively early in their careers. Even so, it is revealing to see how the seeds of the conversation have grown in their thoughts, ideas, and work to present day.*

- Kevin Barden, June 2020

**Archithese (Moderator):** For many reasons, the use of wood is increasing: ideologically, wood is a "natural" material; technically, wood is a material that is easy to process; economically and so on. In this publication, the tradition of building with wood is examined from the 1930s to today. The conversation at hand is intended to explore the possibilities of continuing this tradition or perhaps developing a different tradition, which I would like to call a rational one – in contrast to a sentimental one.

Included in this tradition are emotions; however, it does not prescribe them to wood as a property of the material itself; but to the forms that are created with the material. The emotions are thus not connected with the wood itself, but with its use in buildings as well as with the experiences we make in buildings. This is true not only of wood; we could also talk about stone or metal in the same way.

The nature of one material's use differs from that of another material in two respects: on the one hand, by its physical material properties, on the other by its expressive material qualities. This discussion centers around these two points and is based on the buildings you all have designed (and at least partially built) using wood.

So, to start with a simple question directed to Michael Alder: Why did you use wood for the house located in Itingen<sup>2</sup>?

**Alder:** First of all, I would say that it is not a wooden house. The structure is brick, then dressed up with wood on the outside. This gives the building the appearance of a wooden house, but as I said, it is not.

**Archithese:** We are discussing here 'Building with Wood', i.e. the use of wood in building. It is of secondary importance *how* this is done.

**Alder:** Okay, so, the ceilings – except over the basement rooms – consist of wood beams. Wood is therefore used in two places<sup>3</sup>. There were several reasons for the choice of wood. One was that I have

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<sup>1</sup>Alder, Michael. Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, and Peter Zumthor. Archithese 5. 1985. Zürich: Verlag Arthur Niggli AG, 1985. p. 2-13. Translation from German to English by Kevin Barden.

<sup>2</sup>Itingen is a small village outside of Basel.

<sup>3</sup>With the façade and with the ceiling.

wanted to build with wood for a long time. The reason for this was my criticism of double-shell masonry construction, where the second shell has no bearing function. It is a covering, but it gives the appearance of something more. For a long time, I have wanted to build a house where the outer layer expresses that it is a skin.

The context of the building's location in Itingen led me to build the exterior layer out of wood: it stands on the backside of some old houses, where there are some existing 'Schöpfe'<sup>4</sup> and a house of wood. I suggested to the client during our first conversation that a façade of the same material could be used. They agreed and we spoke of building a 'Schopf' instead of a 'house'.

The beams were their idea. I was interested in spanning the ceiling across the entire width of the house so that the supporting middle wall, which I had used in earlier designs, could be omitted. With this ceiling of beams spanning the entire 6-meter width<sup>5</sup> only the brick shell is needed for bearing walls.

The wood is painted in a glossy way on its inside face. You can't see it, but you can feel it. I wanted to avoid that since the house takes on a 'cozy' expression, inside and out.

**Archithese:** The same question addressed to Peter Zumthor: Why do you build with wood?

**Zumthor:** During my apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker, we used to make fun of the carpenters. We felt their workmanship with wood was crude. Even now, it is strange to me that wood is necessary for building, as wood is needed for cabinetmaking. Nevertheless, three or four years ago I designed a wooden house. I asked myself the reason ... Previously, we laughed at those who built with wood. Stone yes; but wood is countrified, that is rural and bucolic...

**Archithese:** ... or perhaps a bit domestic.

**Zumthor:** Yes, that too. My father disguised his stone house as a kind of chalet – a bit like an early 'Alder' – to make it seem like a carpenter's house.

Then when I designed Haus Urech in Obersaxen<sup>6</sup>, which was rejected in many respects, it was precisely these associations that I was looking for: the simple, the provisional ... I thought, if a person from Zürich builds a vacation house in Graubünden<sup>7</sup>, this house should not be buried in the ground. It should make the impression that you could get rid of it again tomorrow. I think the owners of vacation houses should be modest and in a literal sense be light on their feet. This gave me the rationality for designing a wooden house.

**Archithese:** In this context, another picture of wooden provisional buildings comes to mind: that of barracks used by construction workers and soldiers in the mountains – which are now more often made of sheet metal.

**Zumthor:** I thought of lighter buildings and wanted to show that one can also work with raw wood in a relatively refined way, as if a cabinetmaker were to build a house.

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<sup>4</sup>Schöpfe has a tricky translation and can mean: creature, head, tuft, or shock (as in a shock of hair) among others. 'Schopf' is the singular of 'Schöpfe'. In this case 'Schopf' is referred to some of the buildings in the area.

<sup>5</sup>Approximately 20 feet.

<sup>6</sup>Obersaxen is a region of Switzerland far back in the mountains.

<sup>7</sup>Graubünden is the state in which the region of Obersaxen exists.

**Archithese:** The house built by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron in Bottmingen<sup>8</sup> corresponds to this idea. It does not remind one of a 'Schopf' like the house by Michael Alder, rather it reminds one of a bathhouse ...

**Herzog and de Meuron:** ... or a piece of furniture; something handmade, precious. We are working with similar ideas on the project for a multi-family house on Hebelstrasse.

**Archithese:** This is the design in the backyard of a medieval street in Basel.

**Zumthor:** Both are true semantically: the use of wood is correct for a house in a backyard, even for a studio. Both are tasks where one says ... yeah, but<sup>9</sup> ...

**Herzog and de Meuron:** Wooden structures for architecture in backyards, for studios, for workshops etc. is only one possibility. Consider how much our cities and our ideas change. If you say 'wood' and 'backyard', then both are meant as something provisional, easy, cheap, even if you love these qualities.

In backyards, the main buildings are an important urban development, as are the houses built of stone in our medieval city centers. Or it could be that the processing and use of wood reaches a point where this simple, everyday perception is shaken. This familiar classification of urban architecture types and materials is of great interest to us, so much so, that in each design we undertake, we have to answer these questions again.

**Archithese:** This also applies to Michael Alder's house; justified by its context.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** For the house made of plywood in Bottmingen, the characteristics of the context included: the park-like garden, the large Paulownia tree, the existing villa from the late 1940s, the programmatic use as a private marionette theater and its use as a dwelling-house. We planned wooden frames for the house similar to the suspension device used for marionettes and lifted the building off the ground and surrounding grass. A furniture-like body should be a plywood body. The outermost layer of the plywood is veneered and painted which reinforces this impression of furniture.

**Archithese:** Plywood was used in the Atelier in Weil you designed as well.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** Yes, but in that case the plywood was designed, veneered, and treated in a different way. It looks like a worn leather jacket, big and bulky.

**Zumthor:** That's what I meant by 'semantic'. A studio made of wood is something that is not questioned. I am about to build such a thing for myself. These associations, however, end at the transition of the Alpine mountains. When I showed the design of my studio to a colleague from Val Poschiavo<sup>10</sup>, he did not understand me: an architect does not build a wooden house for himself. In Val Poschiavo, all buildings are made of brick, even the chicken house.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** We are much more interested in the question: How do we work with a material,

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<sup>8</sup>Bottmingen is a town near Basel.

<sup>9</sup> Said in a manner of shrugging shoulders.

<sup>10</sup> Val Poschiavo is a small Italian speaking valley/region in the mountains of Graubünden.

for example with plywood? The board-like and asphalt-sculpted building of the Atelier in Weil is rather compact and repulsive at its peripheral location near the motorway. The house in Bottmingen is different: less by its external appearance than by its physical appearance, it reminds us of a resonance box, of something urgent from the inside outwards. In any case, we understand and feel the building in this way, and it is precisely this "physicality" that we seek in our work.

**Archithese:** Can you be more precise in what you mean by physicality?

**Herzog and de Meuron:** It is difficult ... it is a crucial point for us, but it is difficult to find and determine ... In Godard's 'Je vous salue, Marie'<sup>11</sup> the woman, Maria, once asked: 'Does the soul have a body?' As architects, we seek to give the soul of a building a body, that is, to give form to the sensations we want to connect with a building. Physicality means the relationship between the perceptive human body and the actual body of a building.

**Archithese:** Now, sensations are not only found in forms in themselves, but also in experiences we have made with them. Through experiences, forms become images.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** There is this perception of architecture in images; this 'reading' of architecture. But we are looking for something else: we do not 'read' our buildings, we are looking for an immediate physical expression of architecture. The most important example of this in a historical sense is the Gothic cathedral. The quality each Gothic cathedral possesses is not that it tells us this or that; or even in the apparent dissolution of matter that Le Corbusier criticized in his puristic thinking. It lies in its presence and all its effects: the light, the cold stone, the sound, the smell, the fragility, the work that is never-finished ...

**Archithese:** The processing and appearance of materials plays an essential role. In itself, Michael Alder's house does not remind me of a 'Schopf', but with how it processes wood – i.e. the standing boards – and how it corresponds with reasons already mentioned, it really stands as a 'Schopf'.

**Alder:** As I already said, the individual boards form a skin. It was important to me to show through the way the façade was assembled, that air goes through it. So, I got rid of the trim pieces that typically cover the joints between the boards. These strips are not necessary. The top of the boards also end with an uncovered joint.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** The extremely simple workmanship – the sawed boards, the open joints – is wonderful; but the idea is limited to only a part of the house – the exterior.

**Alder:** That's true to a certain extent, but it was enough at that moment to limit the construction of this façade to its essentials.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** It appears to us, as if it had been made later, to an existing house for example.

**Alder:** That does not matter to me, because the boards are nothing more than something worn by the

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<sup>11</sup> 'Je vous salue, Marie' [English: *Hail Mary*] is a 1985 French film written and directed by Jean-Luc Godard. The film is a retelling of the story of a virgin birth.

building.

For example, with the studios I designed in St. Alban Tal<sup>12</sup>, the case is different. It is also a kind of 'Hof'<sup>13</sup> partially demarcated with walls. These walls are made of stone and concrete and have studios on both sides. The studios are two-story wooden buildings made with pre-manufactured parts. The theme is therefore quite different: it is about wooden buildings, which stand in a certain tension to the stone and concrete walls.

**Archithese:** One way to make a design here is to refer to the architectural character of such 'Höfen', which are often built with wood workshops. Another way is to use wood in contrast to the stone, and thus to characterize the studio as an installation, in the sense of what Jacques Herzog called "physicality", apart from the image of such Höfen.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** Physicality is not bound to wooden structures. We are currently building a house made of broken stone in Italy, in an abandoned area of olive trees and stone wall ruins. While our previously mentioned wooden structures work as hollow bodies, this house seems to have been condensed into a stone block by an implosion of the landscape. *This* effect also has to do with physicality.

**Alder:** Here lies a big difference between our designs. For me, the house in Bottmingen is in this sense literally a hollow body. But I am interested in something else; the question of typology. The house in Itingen is about a typology. Therefore, it cannot serve as an example of building with wood.

**Archithese:** However, the house is a use of wood.

**Alder:** Unlike Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, my interest is not the body. My interest is the structure.

**Zumthor:** What interests me in our conversation is the architectural point of view. I would like to return to the question: Why does one suddenly build again with wood when one can build harmonious houses with concrete or stone? It seems to me that there is a new sensitivity in dealing with wood. 'New' in quotation marks, because you also notice that other architects used to work with wood in the past and that you now have to learn how to work with the material again. I myself notice that wood can be treated differently than it is typically treated in Graubünden. Wood has qualities different from those that are generally attributed to it – i.e. comfort, etc. As much as I appreciate Michael Alder's wooden house with its simplicity, I think that we must also discover other properties of wood.

When I think about how we looked at the wooden houses in Vorarlberg<sup>14</sup> two or three years ago, they were interesting, but too simple. With those structures the path does not lead in the direction I am looking for. Also in art, wood is used again and again to achieve a certain expression.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** We do not believe that there is a special interest in wood, wood is a material among others ...

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<sup>12</sup> St. Alban Tal is a neighborhood in Basel characterized by old timber-framed buildings and a millstream.

<sup>13</sup> 'Hof' can be translated as a farm or courtyard. Instead of writing 'urban-farm-courtyard type building', I've left it as 'Hof'. 'Höfe' is the plural of 'Hof'.

<sup>14</sup> Vorarlberg is a region in Austria, between Bregenz and the Alps, known for its craftsmanship.

**Archithese:** The point is not particularly interesting if we are just using wood. What we want to do is talk about dealing with materials, and in this case, wood.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** Building with wood is constructing. But it is difficult to find a cabinetmaker who has a good mindset. We don't have a technical foundation like Peter Zumthor, who is actually a cabinetmaker and who sees everything from a 'making' point of view. We ourselves have a cabinetmaker in the office: and it is extreme how he sees everything from a cabinetmaker's point of view. This tendency is much stronger with wood than with brick. The house in Bottmingen, for example, has many different woods, many parts; it's a puzzle. Because of the painting one cannot currently see the difference of the wood, but you will see it when this painting is slightly aged.

**Archithese:** You have secretly concealed the seams, in favor of the body. One can also get an expression from these seams. One can also show the individual parts – and the logic of their relationship. Of all types of wood construction, in this sense weaving is the most elementary ...

**Zumthor:** ... it is the 'wooden'. The work that Maria Nordman showed in 1984 at the sculpture exhibition in Basel is the pure form of knitting. That's where one must start. She shows factually what knitting is, as construction and as form, without ideology.

This is one extreme when building with wood. The other extreme would be to remove wood from the constructive connections, to dematerialize it by form and color. There are also examples of this in modern art: works composed of 'Stäben'<sup>15</sup>.

Aalto also worked with 'Stäben', but with him they are still involved in building and construction, they are in a sense, concrete. When I use them, however, they are abstract. I can best explain this with the design for my studio in Haldenstein:

On the facade of the studio I use wood in the form of 'Stäben', which creates a kind of slat-like<sup>16</sup> image. They are not constructive, but they are related to the design. The façade is black, made of roofing material, so that the 'Stäben', which have a certain distance from this skin, flicker to a certain extent. Like the slats of a garden fence, air passes through. They have little to do with the character of wood. In fact, they do not have to be wood.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** Such slats are a picture from the 1950s ...

**Archithese:** ... wood weathering already appears in the Kongresshaus in Zürich, built in 1939. It was the first modern building in Zürich, which set a festive, social stake in the ground. These architects – Haefeli, Moser, Steiger – were replaced by slats, as well as by other structures which assumed the role of abstract decoration. From Giedion, they found kinship to abstract art. In other words, this art seemed to show the possibility of a new decoration.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** Today we can deal more freely with all these things, we need no legitimation,

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<sup>15</sup>'Stäben' are pieces of material that are milled precisely, but are not part of the structure. Typically edges are squared off and can be thought of little siblings to timber columns. Later in life, Zumthor refers to the language used for the Topography of Terrors as concrete 'Stäben'.

<sup>16</sup>'Slat-like' is translated from the German word 'Rost'. 'Rost' can mean rust, grating, or slat (among others). 'Rost' is also the root for 'hash browns'. Think, long, individual pieces of wood, or potato, or even cheese.

even if we are usually looking for an architectural picture of the post-war period.

At the house in Bottmingen, wood slats connect to the existing villa. The intention was to 'dissolve' the body of this connection.

**Archithese:** Another means of altering the character of the wood – apart from complete alienation – is its treatment. You can take away its 'natural' character with using a white color, or you can imitate its 'natural' character with a brown color – or with even a different kind of alienation, you can ...

**Herzog and de Meuron:** At the house in Bottmingen, we painted everything with a dark brown oil varnish, also parts that are not made of wood.

**Archithese:** ... like a wood cabinet from the late 19th century.

**Zumthor:** ... however, you can still feel that it is a light material; painted wood looks different than painted concrete. You can use color without losing its 'wood-ness'!

**Alder:** The remark that the house in Itingen is poor, I have heard several times; a criticism not only of its simplicity, but also of its history! The wood is exposed to the weather, which has a different effect on the four sides of the house: in the course of time each side takes on its own expression, so that the "skin" depicts the forces that affect the house. This has nothing to do with 'coziness' and anyone who deals with these forces will see something else in wood. This is what occupies me about this skin: it changes with time, and a story becomes visible. This also applies to other materials which are not treated and is one reason to use them: to show the effect of time.

This is also the difference between the buildings of Herzog and de Meuron. When they work with paint, something else is added. I do not want to say 'makeup', but just something else is added.

**Archithese:** Jacques Herzog did not want to use the 'meagerness' of a façade with boards. I think it depends on the social class. For instance, the houses by Metron in Windisch<sup>17</sup>, which have a similar form, are intended to screen the shanties which are not too far away. They had this existing association and the form was felt to be 'meager' to better relate to the context.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** The use of wood is different for those houses: the form is much like a shanty or hut, but its coverings are much more of a one-liner.

**Archithese:** Can one say the form used by Michael Alder is estranged?

**Herzog and de Meuron:** Every single board of the façade is recognizable as such, so it is much more of a planking construction than a facade construction, which from our point of view is the interesting and strong aspect of this work. The construction has an analytical quality to it and we don't see any estrangement.

**Alder:** I think it's wrong to talk about a meaning or an ideology concerning a material. For me, wood is important for quite other reasons.

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<sup>17</sup>Metron is an architecture firm based in Brugg, Switzerland. They completed a housing project in Windisch in the early 1980s. I couldn't find much more information about it.

**Archithese:** The importance in social use is one aspect, however, there are many others. That is why we have this conversation and have called wood a 'building material and expressive material'.

**Alder:** There is, however, the danger that only this side is perceived so that an attitude is reinforced with wood, and that we just reject an ideological attitude. For instance, who is reading this conversation? Most people only look at the pictures.

**Archithese:** Among them are the pictures of your house. There is an ideological attitude, whether we are talking about it or not. That is why we are talking about it: to disassociate ourselves from the naturalization of certain meanings in connection with wood.

To come to a conclusion, we were not of the opinion that building with wood leads to another, new architecture. The interesting thing about our conversation was just how three different architects (communities) deal with three different architectural attitudes with wood and its material and cultural characteristics. We did not think that this material led to a uniform architecture. The interesting thing was how you work with wood, because in this, your architectural attitudes show. In this sense, it was only partly a conversation about building with wood. In a larger sense, it was a conversation about building and about architecture, with a focus on wood.

**Herzog and de Meuron:** It was a conversation about the 'How'; with what we mean, not the question of whether wood is used 'naturally' or, on the contrary, 'abstractly' or 'artificially'. We mean: How to use the various forms of processing so that the building makes a statement about physicality. A cube made of concrete or a cube made of wood awakens different sensations. We must examine these possibilities. How does a particular processing of wood or stone or whatever – affect a certain place and surrounding context?

**Archithese:** It was a conversation about architectural questions. One can better recognize differences in attitudes when there is a uniform background from which they are emerging. This background was wood, building with wood.