

Interview: Richard Meier

Congratulations on winning the BADAP All Stars Award, Mr Meier! What does this award mean to you?

Well, I'm honored to receive this award and it means a great deal to me. I have built all over the world, but one of my favorite places where I've been very fortunate to have designed buildings is Germany. My first project in Germany was the *Museum Angewandte Kunst* in Frankfurt in 1979, and then I continued to work there, in Ulm and in Baden-Baden... Baden-Baden especially was one of my favorite places, because when my mother was a very young girl, her father took her on a trip through Germany – and they stayed at a hotel in Baden-Baden right across the stream from where I later built the Burda Museum.

Ah, I see. So the Museum Frieder Burda is still something special for you?

Yes, it's special because of my mother's original visit to Baden-Baden, and also because Frieder Burda was an exceptional man. It was a great pleasure to be able to work with him on the design of the museum. He knew exactly what he wanted in terms of art and his fantastic collection. He didn't have any preconceived ideas in terms of the museum. And he said: „Richard, you design it, and I'll put my paintings in it.“

That's fantastic. People in Baden-Baden love the museum. It's a landmark and still inspires other architects. What was your main goal with the project?

As you know, the museum is almost in the center of the city of Baden-Baden. You could walk there from almost any place. And people come, they spend time and they appreciate the quality of the spaces. And they really look at the art that's there because of the quality of light and the way in which the art relates to the interior spaces of the museum. (And that's what I was hoping to achieve.)

You realized fantastic projects all over the world. Which one is your all-time favorite?

That's a hard question to answer because whenever I go back to a building which we did years and years ago, it gives me great pleasure. But ultimately, I guess if I had to pick one, it would be the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Because thousands and thousands of people go there all the time – and not just once, but many, many times. Sometimes people say to me: „Oh, I loved the Getty, but I didn't have time to go into the museum, I just walked around.“ So that's a compliment! I want them to go into the museum, but they just love the place and they love to spend time there.

When people talk about architecture, it's often just about aesthetics. People look at the building and say: „Nice!“ Or maybe not. But from your perspective, as one of the most famous architects in the world, what is good architecture and what isn't?

Good architecture is a building that relates to its place, that is at home with its location and which enhances the place in which it's built. It gives something back to the people. Not only those who live there, but also those who come and visit. I think that's very important, that it is not a thing unto itself. It's something which is related to people. You don't know who the

people are, they come from all over. So it has to relate to human scale. That's very important.

But how do you plan this if you don't know the people who will come to this building? How can you imagine ways in which a building will give something back to people?

It has to do with the quality of space, with the way in which you move through the building, the way in which you see things. It has to do with the way in which the building gives you a certain enlightenment about what it is and where it is, and the quality of human scale that people feel comfortable with.

You are called the Master of Light. Why is light so important for you?

Well, light is life, you know. Without light, we can't see what's around us. The light is always changing, you can see it at different times of the day, different times of the season. And the building's architecture should reflect the light and enhance one's understanding about what's around it, so that it reflects nature and refracts nature. The light changes from season to season, and good architecture enables people to understand that change and to visualize how things are different at different times of the year.

What drives you when starting a project?

Well, we first look at where it is and what's around it, and how it relates to what's around it. So that it's not just something abstract – it has to be a part of its environment. And that's how we begin to understand what it can be.

When my friend Jürgen Grossmann designs buildings, he often acts as if he was building for himself. He says that with this approach, you will never build an awful building.

Well, building for yourself is very difficult. It's the hardest thing!

Have your views of architecture changed in recent years?

For me, that's a hard question to answer because certain things, certain principles have existed for me from the very beginning: the quality of light, the way light comes into the spaces, the relationship between the building and its location, how the site influences the architecture. These have always been a part of the work that we do, and that hasn't changed.

Quite a lot of your buildings are white. What does the color do to people?

Well, white is never only white, you know. If we look around us, white reflects color, so that whiteness changes with the color of nature. It reflects and refracts that color. And I think it lets us appreciate more clearly the changes of color of the day, the changes of how people look and what they're wearing. The whiteness helps us to see more clearly.

Mr Grossman calls you the most important museum architect in the world. What is it that fascinates you about museums?

A museum is a public place. It's a place where people come to have a one-to-one experience with works of art, but they also relate to other people who come there. It's a coming together of people who may be very different, but who have a shared experience. And the museum creates a place for that shared experience.

You have built more buildings in Germany than anywhere else outside the US. What is it that draws you to Germany? Is it your family?

It's partly that, yes. My family on both sides of my father's side all came from Germany. But more than that, I think there's an appreciation of architecture in Germany, more so than in most other places. People not only appreciate architecture, but they value it and they go and look at architecture. And I think that's unique.

Your buildings have a timeless quality, a simple elegance that strips back everything that's unnecessary and focuses on what's important. It's easy to imagine people still walking around them and marveling at them in a hundred years' time and way beyond that.

Well, it's good for people to appreciate architecture. You know, people appreciate art, they appreciate music, they appreciate all kinds of things. But when you ask people: „What do you like to do?“ They don't say: „I like to go and look at architecture.“ But what do people do when they travel? They look at the buildings, the architecture. That's what interests me because it gives them an understanding of the culture they're visiting.

What is architecture for you? Art or craftsmanship?

It's both. The art of architecture depends on craftsmanship. But that's just part of it, it's not the end of it. The art of architecture is about making space. And for that, you need craftsmen to do the work.

Thank you very much, Mr Meier.