

**RHAPSODY IN BLACK**

**Richard Meier in black**

PUBLISHED IN

Richard Meier. Monography. Waterhouse Cifuentes. New York, 2022

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As the great Spanish poet Vicente Aleixandre said: "When you see the moon, you don't see the moon; you see the image of the moon in your pupil". In the same vein let me say that "when you see Richard Meier's Architecture, you see the image of the entire History of Architecture in your pupil".

### MORE THAN 12 YEARS AGO

Many years ago, I wrote a long text about Richard Meier: "The nostos of Richard Meier". The text, which appears in Taschen's great monograph, and in subsequent editions by the same publishing house, was imbued with the admiration and affection I have for the master, but, above all, it tried to be fair and situate the figure of Richard Meier in the place that corresponds to him: at the very forefront of the History of Architecture.

Architectural criticism is always very variable and tends to be driven by fashion. Many things have happened since writing that preface, but the figure of Richard Meier has continued to grow in the architectural panorama. Indeed, we have seen the birth and death of many of the figures of the Star System that, like Laocoön, have been devoured with their sons. However, out of politeness and compassion, we will gloss over these here. In the case of Meier, his figure, on the contrary, has only grown apace.

His last work alone, the black tower in Manhattan, to which I dedicate a considerable portion of this text, would make him worthy of a place in the history of Contemporary Architecture.

### MEMOIRS OF HADRIAN

In my very extensive library of Architecture, one day I discovered that my books were talking to each other as a result of being so together for so long. In the case of Meier's books, it is easy to deduce that they were conversing with those of Mies and Melnikov and even, on account of their close proximity, with the works of Le Corbusier.

I must confess that in order to better this text on Richard Meier, I have re-read many of the books in my extensive library that would help me in my endeavor. And in Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* I have discovered pages which are true jewels and which are so relevant to this text on the American master.

Marguerite Yourcenar speaks of how long it took her to write *Hadrian's Memoirs*. Without going as far as that, I must admit that this second text of mine about Richard Meier has taken me some time but I would also be happy to do it all over again.

Yourcenar says: "Like a painter who has chosen a landscape, but who constantly shifts his easel now right, now left, I had at last found a point from which to view the book".

Well, I also think I have found the exact point from which to continue analyzing the architecture of this great maestro.

## JONAH AND THE WHALE

It is undeniable that Richard Meier is one of the undisputed masters of the Architecture of our time. He has received all the awards and all the honors, from the Pritzker to the Premium Imperiale of Japan, and the Gold Medal of the AIA.

In the same way that Mies Van der Rohe and Le Corbusier go to the United States and they triumph and are consecrated there, Richard Meier triumphs in Europe and also in South America and throughout the world and builds works that are an unequivocal sign of his prowess.

And now, as if he were Jonah himself, Richard Meier has been in the belly of the whale for some time. In his studio, with its team of truly extraordinary people, Richard Meier took the decision to step back and spend a while in the shadows, in the same way as other masters did. *Sub umbra alarum tuarum*, as Sacred Scripture says in Psalm XVI.

When one reads the story of the prophet Jonah and the whale, one thinks of Richard Meier and of the time in which he happens to be living, during which he wanted to be hidden, shrouded in silence. But, like the prophet Jonah, after those "three days and three nights", he has resurfaced again to continue working in masterly fashion. And the black tower on the East River is a clear example of this. A clear example of the mastery of Richard Meier who is capable at his age – as the great architects were – of continuing to create the finest works like this one. After a suitable time, the master has returned in his own right to preside over the architectural scene.

Meier, like Mies Van der Rohe and Le Corbusier who arrived and conquered in the USA, has triumphed in Europe. And not only in Europe but in the whole world. Like it or not, Richard Meier is the great North American architect astride the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as Frank Lloyd Wright was in the last century.

Not only that, Richard Meier is the most European of the American masters, the most universal. If Wright and Kahn, each in their own style, were "too American", Meier is more European, more universal.

## DON QUIXOTE OF LA MANCHA

If in that former preface I compared Richard Meier to Ulysses, I would like now, after an interlude of time and space, to compare him to Cervantes' universal character, Don

Quixote of La Mancha. It was that same Don Quixote that President Jefferson recommended as required reading to his daughter María.

But let me tell you how I came to know this. On one of my frequent trips to New York, I spent a good deal of time investigating in the Library of the New York Historical Society, which happens to be on West Street in Central Park, very close to my home.

The reason for this was that years ago, in that same museum I had seen a reproduction, a photocopy, of a letter that the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, also an architect, wrote to his daughter Maria urging her to read Don Quixote de la Mancha “you are not Reading Don Quixot”. The letter was dated New York, May 23, 1790. Maria's reply, from Eppington, May 23 was immediate: “I read in don Quixote every day to my aunt and say my grammar in Spanish”.

As Don Quixote had to fight with the giants and the windmills, so too has Meier fought and continues to fight with the new giants of our new millennium. But, like Don Quixote, he has already won and will continue to win.

#### TOWARDS A WISE ARCHITECTURE

“We may expect Architecture to approach maturity at a time when it has a critical sense of the past, confidence in the present, and no conscious doubt of the future.” (You will see that I have replaced the word “language” with “Architecture” for our purposes here). These qualities, a critical sense of the past, confidence in the present and no conscious doubt about the future, were the qualities that TS Eliot demanded for language in his delightful address What is a classic? to the Virgil Society of London on October 16, 1944. This uniting of past, present and future is one of the qualities that adorn Richard Meier's architecture, and that makes it abide in time and in the memory of the people.

In that same paper TS Eliot makes a sharp distinction between information, knowledge and wisdom. And it is with these criteria that we can say that Richard Meier's architecture is wise.

Other architects whom I know well have a prodigious amount of information, which they develop, thus accumulating enormous knowledge; they are a veritable well of learning. But when the time comes for them to act, to design, it seems that their memories enter crisis mode.

Richard Meier, on the other hand, is wise. He acts with great wisdom without the need to make an erudite display like these friends of mine. And in his works one feels the deep aroma of History, of the best History of Architecture: all of which places his works in the History of Architecture.

## PHIDIAS. THE LOST COLOR WHITE.

How many times has Richard Meier been asked about the color white? In a recent interview, Richard Meier was asked once more about the use of white in his work, and again his intelligent answer was: "Time, space, existence. White is all colors. It refracts light. Whiteness".

And in his acceptance speech for the prestigious Pritzker Prize, Meier went so far as to say: "The whiteness of white is never simply white, it is almost always moved by the action of light and by everything that changes: the sky, the clouds, the sun and the moon".

Listening to Meier, I thought of Ictinus and Callicrates and Phidias, the architects and the sculptor of the Parthenon. And I imagine the day when they laid the last stone; how the three must have trembled with emotion before so much beauty. The Parthenon with only its white stone, white Pentellic marble! Surely, as happens to me so often, their eyes must have filled up with tears.

And later how much they must have suffered the day when they saw it in color, painted. The scene that the Dutch painter Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema represents so well in his famous painting of 1868 shows Phidias presenting his colored work to Pericles. I can imagine a scene with the four of them, Phidias, Ictinus, Callicrates and Pericles, praying to Chronos to make time pass quickly, so that the lost whiteness could be recovered. And having recovered the magnificent white of the bare stone, the deep emotion they must have felt when it disappeared again.

When Sir Thomas Bruce Elgin took the restored white sculptures of the Parthenon to the British Museum in London in 1791, he must have felt something similar.

For that whiteness, that of the Parthenon before being painted, or that of the Parthenon naked after the passage of time, is the white so beloved by Meier, and by me and by all architects. And the passing of time favors Richard Meier's Architecture.

## ICONS

In more recent years, Richard Meier has erected new buildings that are true landmarks, icons of contemporary Architecture.

The Tower on Avenida de la Reforma in Mexico City, 2012-2018. I remember that when I first saw in situ, I was surprised by the novelty, the audacity of carving into the building enclosure in a tower. And the result was quite magnificent.

It made me think of Michelangelo's beautiful painting in the Sistine Chapel representing God the Father with his extended finger touching the newly created finger of Adam. And I thought of how the very pure prism of the Tower on Avenida de la Reforma, having been conceived as a perfect prism, had later been touched by the hand of divinity; how

the wise fingers of Richard Meier managed to bring a very special tension to his architecture by carving out hollow spaces at the corners, something he goes on to create with possibly even greater intensity in the following towers, and especially in the black tower in New York.

Of course, it was with the same underlying philosophy that Richard Meier built the Harumi Residential Towers, in Tokyo, 2009-2016. Already in these towers formal operations had appeared that were to reappear in his subsequent works.

And demonstrating the same wisdom, this was followed in 2013 by Fire Island House, a small jewel in New York. And after that Oxfordshire House, 2007-2017, a wonderful house in England perched on a hill with its wide open façade looking out at the landscape and a more closed rear. And the Vitrum in Colombia, 2013-2018, an exquisite glass box with a very interesting sharp-angled bow theme. And so many other works.

## RHAPSODY IN BLACK

685 First Avenue, Manhattan, NEW YORK

This is a building of enormous beauty, a true icon for New York. Just like George Gershwin with his Rhapsody in Blue, Meier decided to make his Rhapsody in Black in New York.

At his still youthful age, Richard Meier, the teacher, is placing the most beautiful tower right in the best site in Manhattan next to the United Nations, and it's black!

Having learnt the lesson of the Seagram so well from Mies, Richard Meier, the 'white' architect builds the most beautiful tower in the world along the East River, in black! A black tower, at the water's edge, which is reflected in the mirror of the river. And, not only that, with the most beautiful incisions that tense its smooth façade with shadow.

The plan proportions –as were those of Mies with his Seagram– are almost double square and almost coincide in the number of floors, 39 in Mies and 42 in Meier.

To say that Richard Meier's last work is a *pièce de resistance* is an understatement. I think the wonderful black tower is a masterpiece. The master of white creates a black masterpiece!

In that wonderful photo that Luca Vignelli took of the maestro, Richard Meier is impeccably dressed in black, *comme il faut*! May I add that the shoes that the master wears in that photo are Campers, made in Spain. I will never forget the day when, amused, he pointed out that my shoes were identical to his. I think Luca's photograph is the most beautiful photograph ever taken of Meier. Well, some of the elegance of the man himself, *habillé en noir*, is there in this his latest tower in Manhattan.

For it's true that Richard Meier is "Relentlessly seeking Beauty". That was the title I gave to my inaugural address to the Spanish Royal Academy of Fine Arts: "Relentlessly Seeking Beauty". Because that's what I think that we as real creators are trying to do. Because that's what Richard Meier is seeking without a doubt.

## GENEROSITY

In Spain we refer to someone as a quijote, referring to Don Quixote of La Mancha, when the person is generous and pursues his life for a good cause. Richard Meier is a quijote of Architecture. Not only has he erected buildings that already belong to the History of Architecture, but he is also very generous with others, with his collaborators, with young architects and with students. Images abound of Meier surrounded by all his collaborators, so that they can feel supported by him. And this is not usual with other well-known architects. And whenever he can, he mentions them and has their names written in the project credits.

And what indeed is the Richard Meier Model Museum if not yet another example of this proverbial generosity? Open to students, schoolchildren and everyone else, it contains first-rate pieces. A gift for young architects and students, the like of which few architects have the generosity to offer. In addition to the numerous models of many of his best-known projects, the Model Museum contains many of the master's sculpture and painting pieces. I remember well the first pieces of his that I saw, so close to Motherwell or Jasper Johns, masters of contemporary American painting.

## CONCLUSION

Richard Meier is a true master of Contemporary Architecture.

I compared Richard Meier to Ulysses and I think those words are the most appropriate to finish this text.

As a new Ulysses, Richard Meier has crossed the straits of fame and recognition strapped to the mast of the ship of Architecture with the bonds of reason and honesty and beauty.

He has seen everything and all of it with his ears and eyes wide open.

As with the Trojan hero, fascinating mermaids tried to tempt him with their seductive song of money, fame and power. And they were unable to woo him.

And like Laertes' son, Scylla and Charybdis tried to suck him into incomprehension, contempt and oblivion. And they were unable to do away with him.

But nothing and no one can stop him from reaching his Ithaca to return to Penelope. His enemies have fallen, they are still falling and they will continue to fall before his constancy and his patience.

Richard Meier still has many years ahead of him, as many as God wills, to continue offering us masterpieces. Like Don Quixote of La Mancha, he has battled and continues to battle against the giants that later turned out to be nothing more than windmills. And he has defeated them in a clean fight. And he will continue to win in the battle of time. He is not lacking in the necessary courage and strength.

## FINALE

I wanted to return to that parallelism that exists between Meier and Ulysses, because I believe that much of what is happening to Meier in the world of architecture today is very similar to the fate of our Trojan hero.

Ulysses, at the end of the Odyssey, defeated all the pretenders. And Richard Meier, like Ulysses, hand in hand with Time and History, has defeated and will defeat these suitors. Richard Meier, maestro!