

PROJECTS & PERSONALITIES

62

Words by James Haynes

# REIMAGINING THE WOULD-BE BORING

**Herzog & de Meuron defy the paradigm  
that hospital buildings need to be  
charmless and dull**

**Perhaps it is the overtones of rigid institutionalism dictating the décor, mindset, and manner of its design that hospital architecture is so often unremarkable, boring even. Corridors lead to corridors, opportunities for people to comfortably gather are highly limited, and drabness descends, ultimately producing a spatial and emotional landscape deprived of the tools required for remedy.**

Dialectically speaking, ‘boring’ is often seen as the opposite of ‘interesting’, of ‘fun’, of the sort of details we get excited about, but to be boring isn’t intrinsically bad. While a little nonsensical (boredom is often coupled with statements about having nothing to do), to be bored is to be open, to be free to grasp at opportunities that both command and capture our attention. In his book, *Not Interesting: On the Limits of Criticism in Architecture*, architect-academic Andrew Atwood suggests this, contending that while ‘boring’ cannot be ‘interesting’ as a consequence of their axial opposition, both conditions pose questions, allowing us to consider what it is that makes something what it is.

Through an oeuvre developed over a 40-year period, architects Herzog & de Meuron are no strangers to this challenge. They debunk the boring, unpack the mundane, and reorganise the pieces into forms beyond the limits of the considerable. A Florida car park, better known as 1111 Lincoln Road in Miami Beach, achieves this, blurring perceived boundaries of use, in an architecture that blends typological ordinariness with a rigorous programme that includes offices, retail, and dining spaces – designed to engage users through a mixed offering. Similarly, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg concert hall, a structure that brings together a diverse programme, distils an urban offering down to a more sub-urban scale. Again, the architecture is re-imagined beyond the boundaries of what could have previously been conceived.

Despite the different briefs, locations, and contexts that are illustrated across these projects and others, is H&M’s concerted and long-standing effort to unsettle notions of use, producing programmes that lean upon cheek-by-jowl relationships, that are facilitative of intimacy and that offer, through their unusualness, an expanded way of thinking. The mundane, the boring, and the expected are abandoned in favour of a playful architectural language that advocates for a childlike

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variance, an approach somewhat unfamiliar to a profession that is all too often unquestionably faithful to idealistic paradigms that forget the possibilities inherent within change.

Across a curated yet eclectic portfolio, healthcare architecture has been a common staple of the practice. In this, H&M has adopted an analogous approach, questioning normative thinking, placing value on the opportunity to dispel ill-founded programmatic creeds. Its first hospital project, REHAB Basel, begun in 1998 and realised in 2002, set a clear trajectory.

Although aided by a brief that expressly rejected the aesthetic vernacular of healthcare, H&M clasped at a rationale that facilitated an architecture of permeable intimacy, drawing on the client’s desire to create the atmosphere of a small town. Perhaps best known contemporaneously for its pool, dazzled as it is with streams of light that are produced by apertures akin to sparkling stars, the continuation of this approach throughout, constructs a space that is clearly in conversation with its surroundings. It is thoughtful and reflective. By offering patients with limited mobility the chance to engage with the sky, with patient-spaces each having their own window, H&M’s architecture offers a subtle moment of intimacy – perhaps even a secret moment of play. The sky becomes an ever-changing playground, a backdrop to which the imagination can be unleashed; clouds become a canvas, the boring becomes imbued with opportunities for play and upliftment.

The more recent 416 New North Zealand Hospital in Denmark, begun in 2014 and scheduled for completion in early 2025, embraces a similar logic. Merging H&M’s fondness for the idiosyncratic with the client’s desire to produce an architecture packed with curiosity, non-conformity and ‘dizziness’, the design is centred around “the healing of the ailing human being” – a noble and fitting goal for the typology. H&M’s response unhinges the functionalist language of preceding eras, instead preferring a geometry that shrinks the architectural footprint and produces the impression





REHAB, Clinic for Neurorehabilitation and Paraplegiology © Herzog & de Meuron

of a pavilion-like building. Patient rooms share this language, retaining privacy while also harnessing opportunities for play, reflecting the client's desire to radically rethink healthcare as part of an individual's celebration of, or reflection on, a moment.

Apparent in both REHAB Basel and 416 New North Zealand Hospital, is the practice's recognition of its role, as architects, in shaping the experience of the user, offering a framework in which to play. Perhaps mimicking the enduring inquisitiveness of a child rejecting the mundane and the rules that govern the boring, H&dM's latest healthcare project, 377 Kinderspital in Zürich, scheduled for completion in 2024, again seeks to problematise preconceived notions of the typology. H&dM has sought to understand the experience of those who use the space, rejecting the cookie-cutter culture of production that dominates contemporary construction. As with previous projects, the client – importantly, an equal collaborator – provided the initial impetus, inviting the radical, the kind of architecture that goes to battle with the entrenched. This was explicitly reflected in the project brief, in which comfort and shelter were given equal status alongside a desire to produce a place for patient treatment, an unfortunate faux pas in many contemporary equivalents.

In terms of its purpose, 377 Kinderspital is certainly not fun. It is destined to be Switzerland's largest hospital, with a design aspiring to accommodate a range of inpatient and outpatient care for children and adolescents. That said, through an architecture that includes courtyards dotted along a central 'street' (itself designed to mimic the Niederdorf, a main street in Zürich's mediaeval old town) and patient rooms with wood-clad ceilings and floors, it is evident that an effort has been made to produce an architecture at

## Reimagining the Would-Be Boring

odds with the grim greyness that plagues allied structures. H&dM has gone to substantive ends to construct a hospital that certainly isn't boring or weighed down by its purpose.

Despite the building's as-yet unfinished state, the presentation of a mock-up patient-room displayed at the Royal Academy of Arts in London last year, offered an insight into the new spatial landscape inside 377 Kinderspital. Demonstrated in

digital to move from a form of mere representation to another form of 'real'; an idea coined by architect-academic Ellie Abrons. Here, the boundary between the real and the imaginary becomes blurred – the childlike nature of H&dM's architecture and approach finds a moment of exposure.

While creating a record of their intent – appropriate, given the exhibition's focus on 'Kabinett', which is H&dM's particular method of

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part through the method of display was H&dM's commitment to mischief, to playfulness, to the production of an architecture that unsettles long-standing notions of what we think it should be. Occupying a whole room within the exhibition, which itself offered an unfiltered view into the inner workings of the practice, the presentation of 377 Kinderspital in augmented physical and digital form was intriguing, yet characteristic of the duo in a practice that now extends to over 500 collaborators. Blending a physical wall, a bed, and a window with a virtual world rallied at the command of the visitor's phone, H&dM not only provided a glimpse of a soon to be realised space, but also demonstrated a dogged desire to continue to confront boundaries, challenging the once binary line between the digital and the real. Despite being chastised as a gimmick, a charge that does find a little ground, the use of technology to merge two worlds allowed the

archive and display – the openness produced at the intersection of the digital and the real does prove a little challenging. Designed as an intimate space, the arrival of the smartphone (an instrument of globalism and connection) as the method of engagement dispels the architecture's closeness. The room, imagined as a place for patients and their families, is opened up and unbounded; the curtain is quite literally pulled back. Consequently, in a playful attempt to reimagine how people interact with spaces, the essence of the project becomes a little lost. Perhaps that's the point, though? The 'real' architecture remains intimate, while in digital form it gains a new layer; an audience is able to engage with it, understand it, and sit with it. The architectural experience is widened and offers a far-reaching embrace. H&dM, through exploration at the boundaries of the possible and in a childlike fashion, yet again uncovers something previously unseen. It

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invites us, the viewer, to question, to probe, to consider. The historical standard of the typology is forgotten as the architecture grasps at an opportunity to command our attention.

In this moment of engagement, H&DM's attempt at creating an architecture of intimacy becomes clear. It is in the juxtaposition of the gallery and hospital experience that the architect's ability to create an environment that goes beyond the language of the prototypical hospital is evidenced. There is an obvious effort to frame views, to consider materiality, and by extension, tactility, and to provide accommodation for those who support children. All qualities that are often absent.

Throughout H&DM's vast portfolio of work, there's clearly a constant pursuit of something different, a recognition of opportunities and the chances these pose to break with typological norms, to produce architecture that responds to the call for something that's a little more fun, perhaps a little more alive. Although explored across its oeuvre, H&DM's hospitals are exceptional in this area, offering a welcome foil for others to work from. The boring is reimagined as an enabler of the fun. <

