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Proceedings of the first ArCo Conference



Art Collections 2020

Design and Museum Design,
Digital Heritage, Historical Research,
Posters

Editors:

Francesco Valerio Collotti,
Giorgio Verdiani,
Alessandro Brodini

The volume: **Art Collections 2020,
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1st ArCo – Art Collections

Cultural Heritage, Safety and Innovation

International Conference

Original dates: May 28th-30th 2020

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Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy



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Art Collections 2020, Historical Research Session (ARCO 2020, HR)

Renzo Piano, Dominique de Menil and the Artifice of Intimacy

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Abstract

The Menil Collection in Houston (1982-1986) was a pivotal project in Renzo Piano's biography and career. After the pyrotechnic and provocative Centre Pompidou, this was the building in which he established the main qualities of the exhibition spaces that in the following decades come to characterize the many other American and non-American museums he designed. The paper seeks to stress the strategic role that Dominique de Menil played in this evolution. When they met in the early Eighties, Piano was a young and talented architect in front of one of the world's most refined art collectors. Dominique de Menil was deeply involved in the Menil Collection's design process: she attended many of the meetings and discussed intensely with Piano and the Arup engineers Peter Rice and Tom Barker. The sharing of ideas about what an exhibition space has to be, and the subtle but decisive influence of the Menil House and the Rothko Chapel, both in Houston, fostered Piano's interest in sober plans and calibrated proportions for the galleries, the use of natural light, the careful studies on materials, and to a close relationship between the new building and the urban context. All aspects of a programme that, according to Dominique de Menil, had to create an aura of "intimacy" that could ease the appreciation of the works of art. This was a way of conceiving the exhibition spaces unrelated and contrary to the Centre Pompidou that will characterize Piano's later museums such as the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas or the Chicago Art Institute.

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Keywords: Renzo Piano; Dominique de Menil, Menil Collection, Museum, Natural light.

In 2007 Renzo Piano came back to Houston to give a talk at the Menil Collection (1980-1987), commemorating the museum's twentieth anniversary. He spoke less about the design of the building, or the fame that the institution had gained in the last decades, devoting almost the entirety of his speech to the special relationship he had at the time with the customer, advocating that if «architecture is in a way the mirror of the client... this building is a portrait of Dominique de Menil» (Piano, 2010: 218).

Piano pronounced this speech when he had just started the design of the Kimbell Art Museum Expansion in Fort Worth (2007-2013) and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (2007-2015). He was also building the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston (2005-2012), the Harvard Art Museum (2006-2014), the Chicago Art Institute (2000-2009) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2003-2010), and he had completed the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas (1999-2003) and the Atlanta High Museum expansion (1999-2005), among the others. An impressive body of work that made the Italian architect one of the leading figures for the American museums in the last decades (Bucci, 2011).

The great part of this fame dates back to the Menil Collection. This essay aims to explain how, at the beginning of the Eighties, the encounter between the young architect and the old, elegant, and cultivated Dominique de Menil (1908-1997) was a pivotal moment in the Renzo Piano's career.

After the completion of the Centre Pompidou (1970-1977) he had dismantled the partnership with Richard Rogers, coming back to Genoa with a small group of collaborators and little work. It was thanks to the commission of the Menil Collection that, in 1981, he was able to set up his firm – the Renzo Piano Building Workshop – hiring some of the most trusted partners that still work in the office today (Carroll, 2009). And, if the Centre Pompidou was a pyrotechnic and provocative gesture, it was also thanks to the intense discussions with Dominique de Menil that Piano tuned the tones of his well-known museum spaces made of sober geometries, natural light, and calibrated glass walls in order to merge the internal spaces with the surrounding natural and urban context (Newhouse, 2007).



Fig. 1. From the left: Lois, Georges and Dominique de Menil, Walter Hopps, Renzo Piano and Adelaide de Menil during one the frequent design reviews of Menil Collection's project in Houston, 1986 (Renzo Piano Foundation, Genoa).

Dominique Schlumberger (1908-1997) came from a catholic family who gained a considerable fortune through the Société de Prospection Électrique, founded in 1926 by her father and uncle, that discovered and patented a new way of using electricity to detect oil fields. A society in which her husband started to work as well – Jean (later John) de Menil (1904-1973) – soon after their marriage in 1931 (Middleton 2018: 84-87, 193-194). During the Thirties, the couple started to buy pieces of western and non-western art simply following their interest, also commissioning a portrait of Dominique (1932 ca.) to Max Ernst and buying African and Oceanian masks during John's voyages around the world (van Dyke 2010). Since the early years of marriage Dominique also developed a great passion for furnishing their apartments, entrusting the modernist architect Pierre Barbe (1900-2004) to renovate their houses at the château in Kolbsheim and in rue Las Cases in Paris, where she started to set up and show the paintings they had bought (Minnaert, 1991: 54-57).

The following years saw the growth of the collection, in particular under the advice of Father Marie-Alain Couturier (1897-1954). Couturier educated the eyes of the couple towards contemporary art and the spiritual influence that the works of those artists could exercise in an appropriate architectonic environment (Middleton, 2018: 185-187; Lion 2005). And when during the war the couple and their children decided to move to New York and then to Houston – the American location of the Schlumberger company – one of their first decisions was to build a new house (Middleton, 2018: 327-350). A building intended not simply as a private residential accommodation, but rather a place for receiving artists and guests, and «a mechanism to display» the hundreds of works of art in their collection (Webb, 2008; Vassallo, 2015). Dominique and John de Menil decided to hire Philip Johnson (1906-2005). Despite that, at the time, he had not accomplished the construction of any building, he was associated at the Museum of Modern Art in New York since 1932 so, in the vision of the couple, he could introduce modern architecture in Houston, linking the provincial city to the most prominent American centre for artistic experimentation. In addition, because of Johnson's lack of experience, Dominique could exercise a more pervasive influence in the design of the house rather than facing off against a famous architect. In fact, she had precise ideas about the house and, as it will be for all the other buildings that the couple decided to fund in the following years, she was deeply involved in the design process alongside the architect¹.

In 1937 Dominique wrote two articles for “L'Art Sacré” – the small publication led by Couturier and Maurice Denis on art, architecture and contemporary creation linked to sacred spaces – about a chapel built in Kolbsheim and a small church in Japan (de Menil, 1937a; de Menil, 1937b). Those two articles clearly show what she appreciated in a building.

The chapel built in the village of Kolbsheim was a small construction, made entirely with stone blocks from local quarries. Avoiding any traces of emphasis or monumentality, «une des qualités de cette construction – wrote Dominique – c'est d'avoir été faites avec de moyens simples et par les artisan du pays... Tout est simple aussi et le charme de cette chapelle provient seulement de l'excellence de ses proportions et de la finesse des détails» (de Menil, 1937a: 90). In opposition to the «construction faussement audacieuses, où la plus déplorable fantaisie s'allie au plus stérile conformisme», the interior space of this small construction is pervaded only by the «sobriété et sensibilité ambiante» and the crucifix and the tabernacle are simply hung on the wall without any further decoration (de Menil, 1937a: 91). In the Karuizawa chapel as well, Dominique de Menil appreciated «la connaissance parfaite des qualités matérielles et spirituelles des matériaux» (de Menil, 1937b: 118). The careful design of sober and proportionated space, the respect of the environment through low height and the use of local and well-crafted materials, and the avoiding of any excess in decoration can convey - according to her judgement - the perception of a building that seems «simple», in which the visitor can breathe an atmosphere of «intimité» (de Menil, 1937a: 91). The enduring preoccupation to convey this artifice of “intimacy” – that she thought as the better condition for penetrating the meaning of a work of art – was the recurring request to the architects she hired, and to Philip Johnson *in primis* (Welch, 2000: 40-57; Smart, 2010: 26).

¹ The couple made large donations to the University of St. Thomas and the Rice University for establishing new programs and new buildings and, beyond the Menil Collection, they financed the construction of the Rothko Chapel, the Cy Twombly Pavilion, the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, and Richmond Hall, all in Houston.



Fig. 2. The Menil House designed by Philip Johnson (Courtesy of the Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston).

Dominique requested to the architect a single-story house, with the front to the north and a patio in the middle, in which she wanted to plant a series of lush vegetation reminiscent of the period that the couple spent in Venezuela during the war (Fox, 2010: 203). Moreover, she demanded some black inexpensive ceramic tiles for the floors, and generous glass walls toward the garden. The house is a rectangular volume, clad with red bricks, of approximately 50 per 21 meters, with flat roof and ceilings of 3,65 meters height. The private part of the house is confined in the rear and, after looking at the first version of the project, Dominique asked Johnson to avoid a dining room and to considerably enlarge the atrium, which became the veritable entrance gallery of the house, with works of Yves Klein, Giorgio de Chirico and René Magritte displayed on the walls. As a further demonstration of her clear ideas and independence from the architect, Dominique didn't request Johnson's advice for the interiors, instead hiring the fashion designer Charles James (1906-1978) for that purpose, and designing some of the furniture herself, as the heptagonal ottoman for the living room¹.

The entrance hall and the living room of the Menil House were the first experiments that Dominique made to find a way to convey such an "intimacy" for observing her collection. She mixed ancient and contemporary art, western and not-western pieces, large seats, and the direct and constant view toward the tropical patio and the garden. Approximately thirty years later, she made almost the same requests to Renzo Piano, to which, during their first encounter in Paris in November 1980, she asked for an anti-monumental and almost "domestic" museum that had to be «small on the outside and big on the inside» (Piano, 2010: 218). It was Pontus Hultén (1924-2006), first director of the Centre Pompidou, that suggested to Dominique de Menil (member of the Acquisition Committee of the Parisian cultural center since 1974) the name of Renzo Piano as an architect able to "listen" the requests of the client.

¹ Despite a diplomatic approach, Johnson distanced himself from the house after the appointing of Charles James as interior designer and refused to include the Menil House in later publications of his works.



Fig. 3-4. The strict connection between the oceanic sculptures as displayed by Dominique de Menil in her house and by Renzo Piano at the Menil Collection (Renzo Piano Foundation, Genoa).

And, as for the house, Dominique de Menil had precise ideas for the museum as well. The project of a place to show their private collection dates back to the early Seventies, with an initial commission to Louis Kahn – interrupted by his death in 1974 and the death of John de Menil one year earlier – and later studies by Howard Barnstone (Loud, 1989: 245-247). And if at the time of the Menil House Dominique was a relatively young and inexperienced collector, in the late Seventies she had accumulated a strong expertise as curator since 1964, when she succeeded Jermaine McAgy (1914-1964) as director of the Houston Contemporary Arts Association through which she organized and set up several exhibitions (Smart, 2010: 26-27). Dominique assembled a working team – composed by, amongst others, the future museum’s directors Paul Winkler and Walter Hopps – which established a facility program for the museum, before involving an architect. The complete report with all the museum’s spaces, their dimensions, position in the general plan and condition of light was delivered in January 1980, while Piano was only in charge of the project starting the following November².

Dominique did not need an architect that proposed or imposed his vision, rather she looked for a sort of builder who could give a material substance to her personal ideas about what the Menil Collection had to be. In Renzo Piano, Dominique probably recognized a young and promising architect, with little experience but keen in listening, understating and – in the architect’s words – «concerned and able to help build *her* building, rather than mine» (Farrelly, 1987: 34).

When on January 19, 1981, Piano moved to Houston for the first time, he lived at the Menil House (Ishida, 1987: 69). In the following meetings Dominique insisted to host Piano again, in order to talk about the project while breathing the atmosphere she infused in the house and amongst some pieces of the collection. She explained to Piano that, as she did for the Menil House, she wanted to be closely involved in the design process of the museum and, giving the architect wide freedom on the general design of the building, she wanted to retain the right to oversee the design of the galleries (Middleton, 2018: 585).

Dominique disliked the Centre Pompidou. She asked Piano to respect the visual and urban unity of the neighborhood in which the museum had to be inserted, made almost entirely of one or two-story wooden bungalows that she had bought during the previous years in order to host the ancillary functions of the Menil Foundation and museum (Middleton 2018: 575). She looked at a horizontal building, not as aggressive as the Centre Pompidou, with dark floors and full of natural light. According to Dominique, the Menil Collection had to be different than the other museums she visited extensively prior to giving the commission to Piano (Middleton, 2018: 533-534). She did not want a café or a bookstore in the main building, nor explanatory text or curatorial remarks on the walls, except for the name of the artist, the title of the work, the medium and the year (Smart, 2010: 27; Middleton 2018: 4). The works of art had to be hung at a lower height, with no visual filters

² The report is kept at the Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Menil, Pfitz/MEN/001.

or physical barriers in front of them. The architect had to avoid an emphatic entrance, and in the foyer the name of the museum and the names of the donors were not to appear. She requested the same domestic proportions, understatement on the outside and “intimacy” on the inside that characterized the Menil House, with the galleries interrupted by the same lush patios (de Menil, 1987: 62).

Piano was able to fully adhere to the vision of the client, mixing his design approach with the specific requests of Dominique de Menil.

He designed a two-story building with a rectangular plan. The ground floor hosts the galleries, the library and the conservation laboratory, while the first floor is devoted to the “treasure house” where the main portion of the collection could be preserved in ideal light and humidity conditions, open to scholars, students, and art lovers. A metal structure, painted in white, is filled by a series of Louisiana cypress boards painted with the same pale grey that Dominique de Menil adopted for the nearby bungalows.

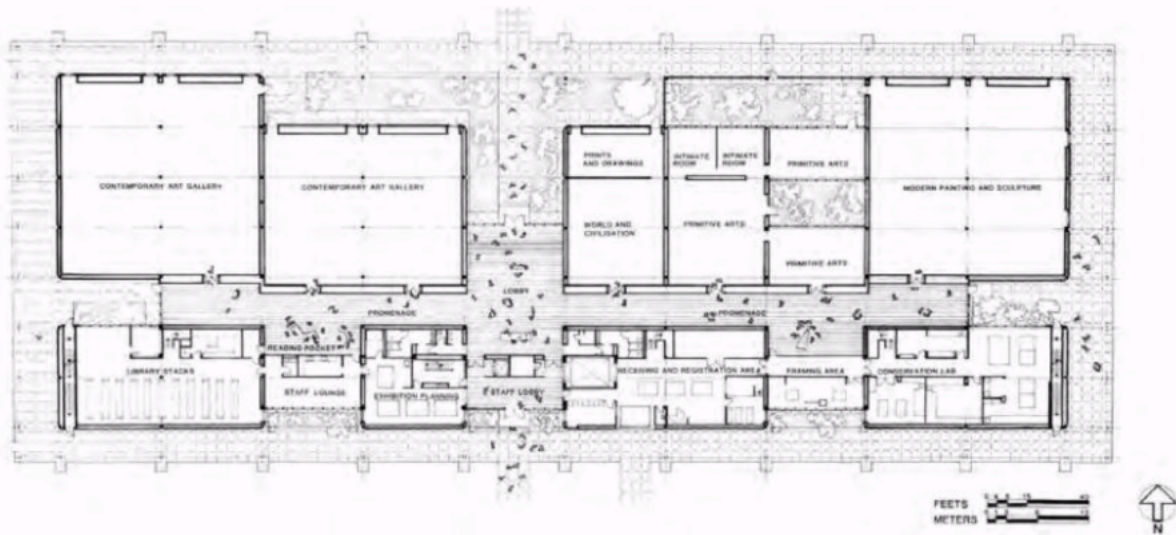


Fig. 5. Menil Collection’s ground floor plan (Renzo Piano Foundation, Genoa).

A tripartite glass door breaks the quite opaque long façade almost at the middle, leading not to a conventional lobby, but rather to a bigger version of the entrance gallery of the Menil House. To reinforce this close connection Dominique suggested a similar black colour for the floors – here in pine boards – and she designed a new version of the ottoman placed in the living room of the house. At the entrance of the Menil Collection there were no information or ticket desks, no cloakrooms or bookshop. As the visitors enter the house of the collector, they are directly plunged into a gallery with four works of art: Barnett Newman’s *Now II* (1967) and *Anna’s Light* (1968) facing two sculptures from Congo (Middleton, 2018: 17-18).

This entrance gallery is crossed by a long corridor that, as is typical in a common house, divides a series of rooms on the left and on the right. Six galleries were placed on the north: two large exhibition spaces for 19th and 20th century modern art on the left of the lobby, and a large space for modern paintings and sculptures with smaller galleries for primitive, classical, and oceanic art on the right. On the south of the central spine Piano placed the library, the research rooms, and the preservation and conservation laboratory. Due to a precise request from Dominique de Menil, those complementary spaces were given the same importance as the exhibition galleries, with large glass screens that encouraged people’s curiosity from inside and outside the museum (Ishida, 1987: 67).

To reinforce this domestic aura of “intimacy” all the plant machineries, such as the electricity generator and the boiler – noisy, smelly and in danger of explosion – were housed in a separate “energy room”, placed at the southern corner of the site, beyond some of the bungalows, and connected to the museum through underground ducts. Nothing had to distract the visitors’ attention and appreciation of the works of art.



Fig. 6-7. On the left the ottoman designed by Dominique de Menil for the living room of her house and, on the right, the Menil Collection's lobby through the east corridor in his original setting, with a new version of the ottoman, again designed by madame de Menil (Courtesy of the Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston; Renzo Piano Foundation, Genoa).

As in the Menil House, the museum's rectangular plan is fragmented by a series of patios and small gardens that convey all the possible views to the outside. At the ends of the central spine, two small gardens are cut out into the museum's side walls. And three similar oblong green areas are placed to the rear façade – in front of the staff entrance and the conservation workshop – and to the main façade, in front of and next to the main entrance. Finally, a small patio – with the same tropical plants that characterized the Menil House – is placed between the primitive art galleries. In particular, Piano focused his attention on the way of filtering natural light asked by Dominique de Menil. She experimented the changing beauty and delicate modulation of natural light during the design and the construction of the Rothko Chapel (1964-1971), along the same street where the Menil Collection was to be built (de Menil, 1970; Barnes 1989; Dohoney, 2019).

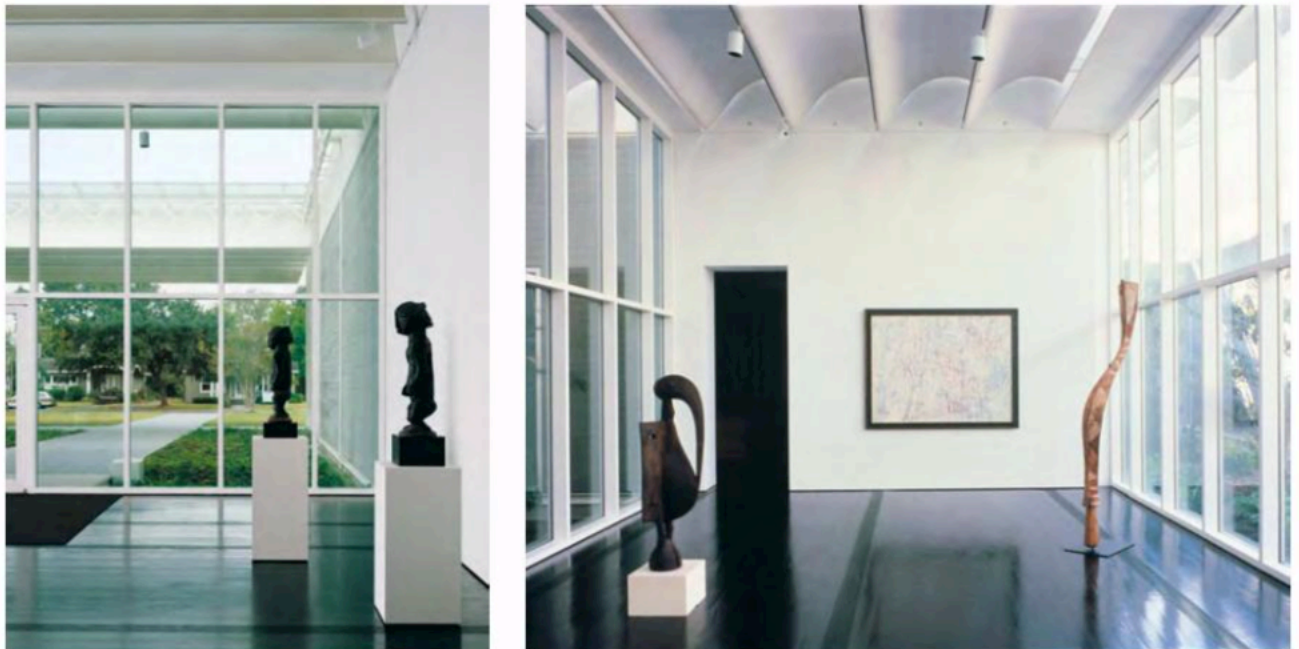


Fig. 8-9. On the left, the lobby through the main entrance and, on the right, the primitive art gallery between the patio and the rear garden (Renzo Piano Foundation, Genoa).

Rothko's New York studio presented a large skylight in the centre, and he used to paint and appreciate his work under the natural light that he could modulate as well (Middleton, 2018: 478). In 1964 John and Dominique de Menil commissioned Rothko to realize ten mural paintings for a new ecumenic chapel they wanted to build in Houston. He asked to be involved in the project and insisted that his work has to receive only natural light. For this reason, both the first project by Philip Johnson and the definitive one by Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry presented a large central octagonal skylight made of steel and glass. However, just after the inauguration of the chapel, it was realized that the intense light of Texas was too strong for Rothko's paintings, and a dark diaper was added under the glass opening in order to decrease and better diffuse the light.

Piano visited the Rothko chapel with Dominique de Menil during his first trip to Houston, and he studied the roof structure of the nearby Louis I. Kahn's Kimbell Museum as well. In November 1980, under the advice of Pontus Hultén, Piano visited with Dominique de Menil a small museum in the Ein Harod kibbutz in Israel, that adopted a similar solution of one-piece monolithic diaphragm just under the skylights.

Piano refined the plastic-prefabricated roof structures he built during the Sixties and, with the advices of Arup structural engineer Peter Rice (1935-1992) and services engineer Tom Barker (1936-), adopted a slightly different solution for the Menil Collection. He fragmented the roof structure into a series of different and superimposed layers, carefully studying a "piece" for diffusing the light that could be mass produced and assembled on site. Those three hundred ferro-cement "leaves" represented the lower layer of the roof structure, hooked to ductile-iron reticular trusses that also bear the skylights on top³ (Dal Co, 2014: 154-155). Here, for the first time, Piano adopted a strategy that will later become one of his signatures: charging the roof structure not only for functional reasons, but treating it as the aesthetic mark of the building. This was evident in the decision of posing the ferro-cement leaves inside and not outside the skylight, where the *brises-soleil* are usually placed. A choice that weakened the water-proofing of the skylights and trapped the heat inside the building, producing an extra-cost for the air condition. But, in doing so, this carpet of leaves is always visible from the inside of the galleries and the outside walkway along the external perimeter of the museum, as a modern reinterpretation of a Renaissance palace's *cornice* (Ingersoll, 2010: 227).



Fig. 10. The Menil Collection's ferro-cement leaves as a modern *cornice* (Renzo Piano Foundation, Genoa).

³ The construction of the ferro-cement leaves was undertaken by Ferrocement Laminates Ltd of Leeds, while the ductile iron trusses, a particular type of cast iron – spheroid graphite – were made at the Crown Foundry in Northampton. The minutes of meetings and field reports between Piano, the local firm Richard Fitzgerald and Partners and the general contractor E. G. Lowry Inc. are kept at the Renzo Piano Foundation Archives, Menil, Pfitz/MEN/006.

The reception of the Menil Collection was highly positive. Critics pointed out the «domestic scale» of the building and how it was «unpretentious» (Glancey, 1983: 61-62; Davey 1987). Unlike the Centre Pompidou, the Menil Collection seemed to «derive its strength from its concept rather than the memorability of its form» (Ingersoll, 1987: 40). And Reyner Banham, who visited the construction site several times before the completion, spoke about «a structure that doesn't even try to look like a museum» marked by a light of «ethereal beauty» (Banham, 1987: 125, 128).

The Swiss art dealer Ernst Beyeler (1921-2010) was so impressed by the museum that a few years later requested Piano to design a similar building for displaying his collection in Basel. The same was for Raymond Nasher (1921-2007), for whom Piano designed a sculpture center in the downtown of Dallas, adopting the same strategy he set up in Houston: simple plans, closed walls along the streets, glass panels open to internal gardens or patios, dark floors, and a layered roof structure for conveying the exact amount of natural light that the works of art requested. A museum that does not impose its presence but rather disappears with discretion under the skyscrapers of the nearby downtown (Self, 2004).



Fig. 11-12. On the right, the layered roof structure of the Fondation Beyeler in Basel as a reinterpretation of the Menil Collection's one, on the left (Renzo Piano Foundation, Genoa).

The vision of Dominique de Menil – the artifice of “intimacy” that the galleries convey, and the primacy of the artworks over the spectacularism of the building – completely change the “image” that Renzo Piano derived from the Centre Pompidou. In later articles and publications, Piano was able to stress the crucial role that Dominique de Menil played in the design process, implicitly suggesting to the others collectors and museum directors that the architect has not to impose his style and mark, but rather to adopt and interpret the requests of the client (Farrelly, 1987). If other American museums completed during the Eighties – Richard Meier's High Museum of Art in Atlanta (1980-1983) or Arata Isozaki's Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (1980-1986) – were characterized by highly photogenic exteriors and impressive foyers and circulation spaces, Piano proposed a quite different way, focusing on the quality of the light, the feasibility of the galleries, and the inclusion of the urban context, following the path traced by Dominique de Menil.

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