



# “Keep your curiosity alive”

## Interview with Bernard Plattner

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by

L. Ciccarelli

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This series of interviews, with the following essay as its first instalment, conveys the choral dimension of the architect's work, exploring the biographical and professional experiences of Renzo Piano's longtime collaborators.

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*How did your collaboration with Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers begin?*

Many years have passed, and memory is selective. Sometimes we think memories as our own when they are simply induced by conversations or our reading. But if you ask me how it started, I would answer: like everyone else. I took a train from Switzerland to Paris and started looking for work. I knocked on many doors, having with me only a small portfolio of my work at the polytechnic school in Zurich. And one day, after knocking four or five times on the door of the Piano & Rogers office on rue Réaumur, Richard Rogers received me and it took five minutes, at most ten. He said: you can start tomorrow. It was April 1973.

*What was the situation like in the studio at the time?*

The Beaubourg project already existed, the competition had been won in 1971. They had already excavated the foundations and work was advancing rapidly. I was just a draftsman at the time, I wasn't involved in the creative process. I joined a small work team headed by a Swiss architect, Walter Zbinden. A great construction expert, he took me under his wing, and for a year or two I simply drew plans, sections and slowly learned about coordinating the various parts of the building and the importance of the details. At the time there were

Photo 1\_Climb to the New York Times antenna, New York 2007.

Photo 2\_Construction site area, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1974.

Photo 3\_Installation of the external escalator galleries, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1976.

Photo 4\_Assembling the gerberette, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1974.



about twenty-five people in the office. The great architects were already there – Alan Stanton, Laurie Abbott, Shunji Ishida – and I learned a lot. They were my first family.

*What was your job?*

I spent two years drafting the construction details and ducting of the Beaubourg. Today the design of the utilities is handed over to engineering offices, and that's made a big difference. When we were working on the Beaubourg, we did all the drawings for the systems, certainly in constant dialogue with the engineers at Ove Arup & Partners, but we architects made all the important decisions.

*Wasn't it tedious to just be drafting the ducting for the utilities?*

I was happy to be in Paris, and working on the most important building in France at the time. But after two years I was a bit fed up and I went back to Switzerland for a few months. Walter called me and told me I had to come back. I said, OK, I'll be back, but I want to do something else. This was a very important step. Renzo Piano and Peter Rice thought of a slightly different role for me. I was lucky enough to speak languages well – English, French, German and a little Italian – and they entrusted me the task of improving communications between building contractors, Gran Travaux de Marseille, and our office. The construction work was immense. Every day there were myriads of problems to be solved, and the dialogue between the French builders and the strange band of British, Italian, Swiss and Japanese architects at our office could be awkward. When it opened every morning, I would be on the building site and I would get the foremen to give me their list of problems that needed dealing with by the afternoon. I would

Photo 5\_West facade under construction, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1975.

Photo 6\_View of the east facade from Rue Renard, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 2000.



go to the office and talk it over with Renzo, with Richard, with Peter, and I'd return to the construction site with the answers. I spent every day doing this job until the building opened in 1977. I learned how to deal with everyone, from the great architect down to the least of the workers, from the building contractors to the suppliers, together with every detail of the building and all phases of a huge construction site like the Beaubourg. It was an extraordinary training ground. Many years later, when we had to cope with vast and immensely complex construction sites, like the reconstruction of the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin or the New York Times Skyscraper in New York, I was never intimidated. I always told myself, we built the Beaubourg and we'll cope with this too.

*When work on the Centre Pompidou came to an end did you stay in Paris?*

Those were very special years. Richard decided to return to London, Renzo wasn't sure whether to stay in Paris or go back to Genoa. There were six of us, in a very small room at 14 rue Saint Croix de la Bretonnerie. There was Walter Zbinden, Reyner Verbizh, Mike Dowd, Peter Merz, Noriaki Okab and me, with Renzo traveling back and forth between Genoa and Paris. Looking back on it, I don't really know how we survived. We did some competitions but failed to win any of them, then one day late in 1979 we were asked to present a project for the industrial site of the Schlumberger workshops at Montrouge, on the outskirts of Paris. On New Year's Day 1980 I climbed onto the boundary wall of the factory to take photos of the project site. A few weeks later Renzo went along to present our sketches to the client. A little later a manager of the Schlumberger works called me up and said: "OK, we want

Photo 7\_Renzo Piano, Bernard Plattner and the other architects of the studio in rue Saint Croix de la Bretonnerie, Paris 1980 ca.

Photo 8\_View of the tensile structure, Officine Schlumberger, Paris 1984 c.a.



to continue with you, the gentleman who presented your project was convincing. That gentleman was Renzo Piano, but no one recognized him. A few months later Dominique de Menil turned up at the office to commission the museum project for her collection in Houston, Texas, and that changed everything.

*What was the most important project in the development of the Renzo Piano Building Workshop?*

For the Genoa office it was the Kansai airport in Osaka. I remember that Renzo did not want to take part, and it was Noriaki Okabe who insisted, and somewhat secretly, submitted the registration to the competition. When they then told us we had won the competition, the project was moved to Genoa because in that period Renzo spent more time in Italy. It was with the Kansai commission that the office rented another floor of the building in Piazza San Matteo, in the historic center, and it was moved to Punta Nave at Vesima, where it still is. The decisive project for the Paris office was undoubtedly the reconstruction of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. We did the competition drawings in our small office on rue Saint Croix de la Bretonnerie and shortly after winning the commission we moved here to rue des Archives. I spoke German and so I found myself leading the team. Although the construction site was colossal, as mentioned, after the Beaubourg I certainly wasn't overawed.

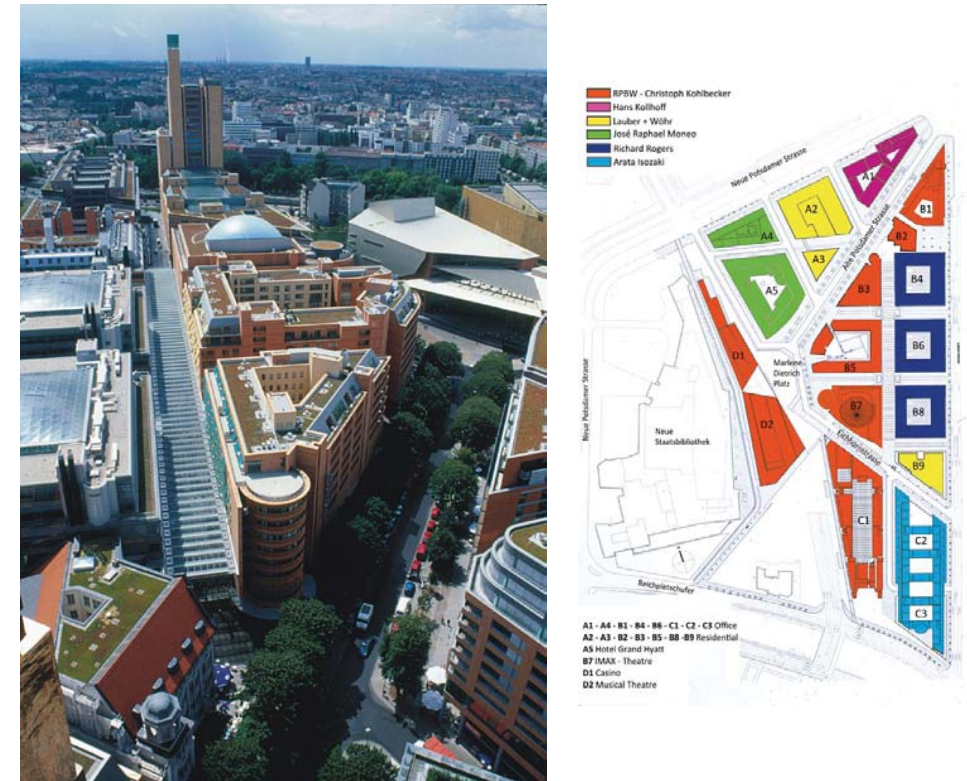
*How has the way of designing and thinking about architecture changed from the 1980s to today?*

The technical resources gained the upper hand with the arrival of computers, Internet and the relative ease and speed with which we can turn out and print numerous drawings. This

Photo 9\_General view, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin.

Photo 10\_Functional diagram of the project, 1995 Berlin.

Photo 11\_General view of the square, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin.



ease means we think less before starting to design, and lines are often drawn on a sheet or a computer screen without first focusing on the essential characters of a project. This is a risk we have to bear in mind. This is why we accustom young architects who come to the office to draft by hand and produce models, because it compels us to think things over at greater length. The computer screen enables us to focus on the details and we lose the overview. For this reason, I believe that the dialogue between Renzo and each of us is very important. In our office, the drawings for each new project are hung on the wall and every architect can come, take a look and start talking, asking for explanations and the reason behind a decision and often suggesting an alternative. This type of communication is crucial to escape the mental constraints a computer screen often involves.

*What advice would you give young people embarking on the profession of architect?*

To open their minds to art, the sciences, literature, the cinema. To be curious, to seek to understand how materials work, how to build, and constantly break down those barriers that architects often erect around their work. This constant exercise of curiosity will help protect them from getting swept away by the currents of fashion and style.

Photo 12\_Renzo Piano and Bernard Plattner in the construction site of the P&C department store, Cologne 2004.

## BERNARD PLATTNER

Bernard Plattner was born in Bern, Switzerland, in 1946. He studied architecture at ETH in Zürich and started working with Piano & Rogers on the Pompidou Center. Since then, he has continued to work with Renzo Piano in the Paris office.

He became a Partner in 1989. A sampling of his notable projects includes: the Rue de Meaux Housing in Paris, the Beyeler Foundation Museum in Basel, the reconstruction of the Potsdamer Platz area in Berlin, the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern and the New York Times Building. As a recent and notable project, he was in charge of the construction the Paris Courthouse.

As a fellow of RPBW, he has recently actively supported a number of large scale projects in Europe: a mixed-use development in Vienna, the Float office building in Düsseldorf, the City Gate Project in Malta as well as the Fondation Pathé or the Maison de l'Ordre des Avocats in Paris.



PHOTO CREDITS

**Photo 1, cover\_Climb to the New York Times antenna, New York 2007.**

The New York Times Building, 2000/2007

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**Photo 2, pag. 3\_Construction site area, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1974.**

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971/1977

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**Photo 3, pag. 3\_Installation of the external escalator galleries, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1976.**

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971/1977

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**Photo 4, pag. 3\_Assembling the gerberette, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1974.**

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971/1977

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**Photo 5, pag. 5\_West facade under construction, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1975.**

Centre Georges Pompidou, 1971/1977

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**Photo 6, pag. 5\_View of the east facade from Rue Renard, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 2000.**

Refurbishment of the Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996/2000

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**Photo 7, pag. 7\_Renzo Piano, Bernard Plattner and the other architects of the studio in rue Saint Croix de la Bretonnerie, Paris 1980 ca.**

Refurbishment of the Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996/2000

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**Photo 8, pag. 7\_View of the tensile structure, Officine Schlumberger, Paris 1984 c.a.**

Schlumberger Renovation, 1981/1984

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**Photo 9, pag. 9\_General view, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin.**

Potsdamer Platz, 1992/2000

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**Photo 10, pag. 9\_Functional diagram of the project, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin.**

Potsdamer Platz, 1992/2000

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**Photo 11, pag. 9\_General view of the square, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin.**

Potsdamer Platz, 1992/2000

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**Photo 12, pag. 11\_Renzo Piano, Bernard Plattner in the construction site of the P&C department store, Cologne 2004.**

P&C department store, 1999/2005

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