



THE BEYELER FOUNDATION MUSEUM

1991 – 1997 (extension 1999 – 2000) Riehen, Switzerland

In 1991, Ernst Beyeler commissioned the Renzo Piano Building Workshop to design the museum that would house his exceptional collection of modern art.

The museum was both a public and private initiative: in fact, the land was donated by the town of Riehen, 5 km north of Basel near the Swiss-German border.

The site extends north along the main road leading into Germany, and is linked to Basel and the nearby border via a tramway. The parkland, which is dotted with ancient trees, is that of the eighteenth-century Villa Berower, which has remained as a historic monument at the western end of the complex. Moving off the main road and heading west, the area opens onto a landscape of cultivated fields that extend into the low hills on the far side of the valley.

Beyeler had envisioned a museum that would be lit entirely by natural light and immersed in the surrounding greenery.

The museum has a rigorous site plan: four main walls of the same length run in a north-south direction, parallel to the boundary wall, and mark the succession of exhibition spaces, which originate from the central atrium, in an orderly fashion.

The cross-section, on the other hand, is more dynamic: the walls, have differing heights, with that to the east extending into the park and becoming a low wall that guides visitors towards the entrance.

All of the walls, including the one delineating the park, are covered with a type of stone that closely resembles that of the Basel cathedral: a red porphyry mined in Patagonia.

To the west, below the edge of the overhanging roof, a glass wall surrounds a long and narrow winter garden. This gallery houses the sculptures and also serves as a compensation area for the visitors that have passed through the museum.

The roof is composed of a transparent and overhanging canopy. The glass roofing material has a surface area of 4,000 square metres and is supported by a welded horizontal grid of 250 x 140 mm steel box beams.

Cast steel elements rise off of this grid to support the sun screens, which are set at an angle above the glass roof in order to shield it against the direct sunlight. The screens are made up of screen-printed, 12 mm-thick, tempered glass plates capable of filtering out 50% of the sunlight. The natural light penetrates through the filters in the roof, which “floats” above the dividing walls. The roof is somehow independent of the building itself: it is sustained by the metallic structure and extends considerably beyond the perimeter defined by the walls.



Furthermore, the support structure cannot be seen from the galleries below, thus creating a sense of lightness, which contrasts beautifully with the rocky texture of the external walls.

The museum, particularly its roof and floor, have been designed as an adjustable and self-adjusting mechanism. In fact, special sensors measure the brightness levels and adjust the screens to filter out any excess natural light.