

Press release
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THERE IS NO GAP BETWEEN YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW

An interview with Odile Decq



With projects such as the recently opened Macro Museum in Rome, Odile Decq has managed to realise architectural visions that unite the past and the future under one roof. The French architect and urbanist is committed to contemporary aesthetics, based on both continuity and contrast. She was awarded the Golden Lion at the International Venice Architecture Biennale in 1996. Since the death of her partner Benoît

Cornette, she has continued to run the internationally operating firm ODBC architectes urbanistes as well as directing the École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris since 2007. Odile Decq develops her significant architectural language by analysis of the existing structural situation, followed by supplementation with her interventions and opening up to the future.



Madame Decq, your office in Paris is located in the heart of the city, in the Marais quarter. Is this historical neighbourhood a source of inspiration for you?

Odile Decq: Since more than 30 years I live and work in Paris. For me it is very important, to be in the middle of the city centre. The historical neighbourhood does not have any relevance in my eyes. But in the centre, all we need is near and we are very well connected in terms of transportation, in terms of how to get through the city. I found our current studio 18 years ago. It is a former workshop for copper tubes. In the 18th and 19th century, there used to be many of those workshops in this area. Today, those ateliers are often used by architects, that's why there are so many of them in the Marais.

Do you have a personal favourite of historical architecture in your neighbourhood?

Odile Decq: For me, the Centre Pompidou is already a part of the history. When it was built, more than 30 years ago, I was a student in architecture. I remember well, that the building changed our approach to modern architecture in general. It really shows the border line between history and tradition on one hand and a new starting point on the other hand. For the society, of course, the Centre Pompidou was a big shock, a sort of sensational bang that showcased unexpected possibilities for urban spaces.

Your architecture is known for its significant contemporary aesthetics. Can you describe the impact of continuity and contrast on that?

Odile Decq: Continuity is the question of how to inscribe buildings into a context. That means that buildings are designed just for one special place, they cannot be transferred or built somewhere else. The Macro Museum in Rome for example is an interpretation of continuity of the city, but in a contemporary way. The city enters the inside of the building, it sprawls in the foyer and over the terrace. The structure of the building's volume admits continuity, but the way space is organized is different and contemporary. Continuity, in my opinion, has also a relation to the human body and to its movements. Therefore it is not a category of formal architectural language, but rather refers to the organisation of spaces and volumes. Contrast, however, refers to the question how to develop something contemporary in a historical context. New buildings that are inserted in a more ancient context always contrast, wherever they are.

If buildings set up a dialogue within the urban context, what are the qualities that contemporary architecture must achieve?

Odile Decq: I cannot answer this in general, because the dialogue always depends on the specific context of the site. Therefore I try to understand within the design process, what is a



city, who was living there, what was the development of the city, and how I can continue this development in another way. The challenge in this is to find new ways that lead to the future.

Is analysing part of your design method?

Odile Decq: It's true, I am doing a lot of analysing. The aim is to understand and develop a programme as well as an image for new buildings. It is not a question of form and shape that is important at this point. First, you have to understand the structure of the place.

Is the relation to the past important to build future cities, in your opinion?

Odile Decq: By all means. There is no gap between yesterday and tomorrow. Both are combined in a continuous stream.

Conversions, extensions and renovations become more and more important in architecture. What is your general attitude to this challenge?

Odile Decq: With the Macro Museum in Rome I have had significant experiences in that field. The former brewery building was from the 20th century, that's not really historical in a city like Rome. Nevertheless we had to keep the façade. As a result, we kept it like a screen and built a new volume behind it. I was against it – in France we even have a name for this method called "façadism". But there was no arguing about this point. A lot of people are afraid of contemporary architecture and want to preserve everything instead.

In France there had been the phenomenon of the avant-garde. Do you think that vanguard ideas still have a chance in architecture nowadays?

Odile Decq: The avant-garde is a historical movement. In France, there is definitely no more vanguard architecture being built. Perhaps there was a period at the beginning of the 1970s and later the periods of the Grands Projets, that brought some fresh air into architecture. But it was not real avant-garde. I think there is no more avant-garde, because architects are too close to power nowadays.

Where do you pick up ideas for your designs?

Odile Decq: For me, architecture is always a thinking about the future, dreaming and figuring out the ways of life of tomorrow and trying to build houses for the future. Maybe they won't be accepted today, but they will be efficient for tomorrow.

What is the role of technical innovations in your work?

Odile Decq: It is very important to discover new tools that we can invent new buildings with and improve the methods of building. Sometimes it is a long process to convince the clients, the controllers and the suppliers of innovations. But it is fantastic if you succeed in the end.

Time and again, architecture is proclaimed a leading discipline in today's culture. Can you share this viewpoint?

Odile Decq: I am sure it is. Being an architect is a profession, in which you have to think further ahead and keep your ideas for a long period of time to be able to succeed. Architects have to think about tomorrow, to be curious about what there will be beyond today's horizon and discover how society will develop. An architect never builds for today, he builds for the future. Therefore architecture is one of the few disciplines that can help to invent the world of tomorrow.

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