As a single entity, structurally and spatially seamless, continuous, carved, excavated, and liquid, the building comprises three principal terrains: a 15,000sqm car park below, a 12,000sqm exhibition space above, and a public landscape in between. With the exhibition held 8m high on 10 conical piles, Phaeno could be seen as an equivalent to Herzog and de Meuron’s Barcelona Forum (AR September 2004) as both buildings compress a public space between artificial ground and an elevated triangular form. In reality, however, each have distinct qualities, and what Phaeno’s moody sheltered public space loses in terms of natural light and sparkle (without cop–it patio or a reflective metallic underbelly), it gains through a material integrity that extends from the ground to give it a more rooted sense of place. Furthermore, while the Forum’s public space is dominated by a large ticketed auditorium, Phaeno’s inhabitable pistol withdraw toward the perimeter to overlook and enliven an otherwise dray no-go zone.

To extend comparisons further, however, is of little relevance. These buildings respond to entirely different programmes and locations, and unlike the Forum that provides flexible space for mixed and multiple use, Phaeno provides a solid home for a new civic institution: a specific client in a specific place with a very specific mission – to provide an ‘experimental landscape’ in which to open up new approaches to the world of natural science and technology. This is a place where hundreds of thousands of people can gravitate to test natural law, physical truths and ingenious inventions, within a building that serves as the first and the final exhibit, expressing the material efficiency of its structure (through the thinness of its shell) and by responding to the complexities of the science centre’s organisational structure, encouraging participants to move through the space like highly charged ions, navigating a new form of internal landscape.

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