Dominique Perrault has made his own path in contemporary architecture, gaining in notoriety over the years both in and outside of his native France. Born in 1953 in Clermont-Ferrand, he studied in Paris and received his diploma as an architect from the École des Beaux-Arts in 1978. He received a further degree in Urbanism at the École nationale des Ponts et Chaussées in 1979, as well as a Master’s in History at the EHESS (École des hautes études en sciences sociales) in 1980. He created his own firm in 1981 in Paris. Though he completed works before that date, Perrault’s career took a sudden upswing when an international jury selected him to design the French National Library in Paris in 1989. The last of President François Mitterrand’s Grands Travaux, a series of cultural projects that included the Louvre Pyramid by I.M. Pei, the Library is made up of four 79-meter high towers, imagined like open books around a sunken central courtyard. This project underlines a number of characteristics of Perrault’s other work, in particular the use of “chain mail” cladding for surfaces, replacing the more usual smooth, modern appearance. The central garden merits attention. “The modern movement always had a very Puritan relationship with the earth,” says Dominique Perrault. “When Le Corbusier imagined setting buildings up on pilotis so that they would not touch the earth, his attitude was very peculiar. In my project, the idea
of the natural level of the earth disappears, and the building blends with nature. In Paris, one has the impression that the garden of the Library is at the level of the Seine, but in fact, it is ten meters lower. One almost feels that the garden was there before the building and that the Library somehow protects it. This relationship with the earth is complex, and it contradicts the usual Modernist tenets." When pressed on this point, Perrault goes on to explain "The garden is not only beautiful, it is sacred. Visitors cannot enter it. It is the symbolic place of origin of the Library, it brings calm and light to the interior. It is in some sense the first garden." Twenty years after its inauguration in 1995, the French National Library remains one of the most significant contemporary public buildings in France.

Perrault went on to dig into the earth in such seminal projects as the Velodrome and Olympic Swimming Pool (Berlin, Germany, 1992–99), or more recently the Ewha Womans University in Seoul (South Korea, 2004–08). The Ewha project appears like a slash in the earth, leading users down to the facilities. This kind of typological and stylistic inversion is indicative of the profound nature of Dominique Perrault’s contribution to contemporary architecture. With the 2015 Praemium Imperiale award to Dominique Perrault, notice is duly taken on the international scale of the significance of his work.

With projects such as the reconstruction and expansion of the Court of Justice of the European Union (Luxembourg, 2008/ ongoing), the repurposing of the former Poste du Louvre (Paris, 2018) or the 250-meter DC Tower (Vienna, 2014), Dominique Perrault has engaged in different types of work, often on a large scale and with considerable technical challenges that he always meets with an inventive spirit. His innovation is first theoretical but then also esthetic. Although his work is identifiably contemporary it is also permeated with unexpected materials and surfaces. Dominique Perrault has actively sought to make his approach to architectural innovation known through an initiative he calls DPAX, a research platform “that calls for a multidisciplinary dialogue to explore architecture from a wider perspective.”

Through his built work, his projects and his thought, Dominique Perrault has created a unique place for himself in the world of contemporary architecture. He is young by the standards of the highest level of his profession and it is clear that Dominique Perrault will more and more be considered one of the outstanding figures of his generation.

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September 1, 2015