

Whatever Happened to Analogue Architecture

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Books about architecture used to be rather straightforward and were not that numerous. Historical writing had few, if any illustrations and presupposed a considerable knowledge of the subject. Monographs were usually reserved for the mature or dead practitioner and would have a short text followed by a few photographs and enough drawings to understand the 'parti' and the construction principles of each project. These volumes were rarely more than 200 pages long and they satisfied a modernist precept of what architecture was, privileging the built artefact over any discourse about the geographical or cultural context in which it was produced. In 1978, Rem Koolhaas's 'Delirious New York' marked a decisive shift in architectural publishing. Other architects had written historical and polemical tracts before, but few were such good writers. Nobody before had the skill and the intelligence to combine the novelist's ear with the architect's eye into such a seamless instance of fact and fiction, theory and application. Although Venturi and Rossi provide obvious models for this kind of book, neither 'Complexity and Contradiction', nor 'Architecture of the City' are architectural projects the way Koolhaas's book is. With 'Delirious New York' and its much messier progeny 'SMLXL', Koolhaas had started the unfortunate trend of 'the book as practice' that is now perpetuated by lonely academics and vast commercial practices alike. These authors are motivated, by the desire to practice 'critically', by vanity, by self promotion, or often by all of these. Although Swiss architecture has been relatively immune from this trend, recent publications by two leading architects are an interesting barometer of the current state of architecture in books.

'Conflicts Politics Construction Privacy Obsession' is the title of a catalogue that accompanies the recent exhibition at de Singel in Antwerp on the work of the Swiss architect Christian Kerez (1962). It is the first book devoted to this architect who is professor at the ETH in Zurich. The book is an A5 paperback and is organised into five sections. Each section is devoted to a single project, or an aspect of a project, that in some way illustrates one of the words in the book's title. Buildings are about many things. Their design develops out of a set of complex and changing circumstances and once built, the 'meaning' of a good building can shift and remains relevant as its social and physical situation changes. Attempts to use individual buildings to illustrate singular themes always run the risk of over simplifying the significance of that building. In this book the representation of each project is brutally edited so that it corresponds precisely to the title of its chapter. Although this may communicate something of the impetus behind Kerez's work, this book is not a very good place to get an understanding of his buildings.

The final eight pages of the book contain a list of 247 films. They are typeset so that they are not quite contained on the page, a hint that this is only the tip of the iceberg. 'One Way' by Reto Salimbeni (2006), 'Bloodwork' by Clint Eastwood (2002), 'The Black Dahlia' by Brian De Palma (2006), 'Band of Outsiders' by Jean-Luc Godard (1964), 'Sweetie' by Jane Campion (1989). There seems to be a particular focus on the films of Japan, and perhaps of Russ Meyer, but the list is satisfyingly heterogeneous and includes 'Season 1 of House' and 'Rush Hour 2', a consequence, perhaps, of the length of the list. This is the 'Obsession' chapter of the book. Other than the bald statement; 'Movies watched by Christian Kerez in the first half of 2008' there is no further explanation of why this list of films is in the book. There might be a hint, hidden within the dark and moody photographs of the apartment building in Forsterstrasse. Deep within the chiaroscuro darkness of a few of these images is the presence of a spectral, glowing screen, on which, presumably, these films were viewed, very late at night.

Kerez is inspired by the all enveloping image of film. He wants to make architecture out of this raw visual data, so that his work will provide a suggestive mise en scene, or a repository, for the rituals of daily life, that is in some way analogous with the way a small time crook, or the events of 1968 are shot through the sensibility of Godard in his films. What is less credible is that there can exist such a complete equivalence between non-architectural and architectural information in the production

of architecture. That the unmediated world of images, along with the vagaries of programme, the restrictions of building regulations, and the immutable facts of physics and site, that this constellation of information can be transformed directly and intuitively into architecture. Godard's work is pre-eminently about film, about its conventions, its structure and its history. Kerez seems to be attempting to produce an architecture without conscious recourse to the culture of architecture. One feels compelled to ask why he wants to do this?

'Valerio Olgiati' is the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition of another Swiss architect. The exhibition was organised and shown at the ETH in Zurich and the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio where Olgiati (1958) is professor, and is currently touring the world. It is the latest in a series of books that this architect has produced, some of which are extreme in concept and format (a previous book entitled 'Plan 1:100', had a series of folded plans at that scale, wrapped into a package measuring 447 x 570mm), and which form a part of the production of his practice, like artists' books. This book is slightly over A4 in size and each of its 190 pages is printed on heavy board so that the volume weighs several kilograms. The book is a series of parallel narratives which interweave images and texts beginning with the words Valerio Olgiati (40mm bold black letters on matt white paper) and finishing on the back cover which contains the notes to the texts. The continuity of this endeavour is underscored by the ingenious binding which enables each double page to be a centrefold (ie there is a fold rather than a gap in every gutter) and which does away with any cloth or sewing. The combination of this radical binding and the extreme weight of the pages (which are heavy to facilitate the binding) is a book in which the spine buckles at the first reading. The drawings in the book are specially prepared, extremely edited and are reproduced at a consistent scale. Built projects are illustrated by large photographs having a strong and consistent atmosphere. Those projects that have not, or will not be built are illustrated by a single astonishing rendering with an atmosphere absolutely consistent with the photographs. Early unbuilt projects have been newly rendered in order to conform to this system.

In addition to this graphic material and the three commissioned texts is a continuous sub-text provided by what Olgiati has entitled the 'Iconographic Autobiography', a series of 55 photographs, paintings and drawings annotated with texts by Olgiati. These show a range of things which form touchstones for the life and the work of the architect; Floor covering in front of the Taj Mahal, Agras/IN, 1931-1963 'I see individual slabs or combinations of slabs. At least five figures. At some point all I can do is thinking', Kitchen Table in Valerio Olgiati's house, Flims/CH 'Italian food, French wine', Paulo Mendes da Rocha, House Mendes da Rocha, São Paulo/BR, 1964-1967 'First of five houses I would like in', Jean Dubois, Villa Canzi and Torno (Lake Como), ca 1840 'This picture has hung exactly at head level near Valerio Olgiati's cot for 45 years'. Although every aspect of this book has been controlled by the hand of the architect, this autobiography is the only part which explicitly acknowledges his voice.

The images are architectural, art historical or autobiographical but their relationship to the architect's work is elliptical. Some of these images, like the stone floor in front of the Taj Mahal, appear in Olgiati's competition entries. The geometric figure and material qualities of the stone have been faithfully reproduced, but because of the startling juxtaposition of this traditional pattern into the vast concrete carapace of the EPFL Learning Centre project, one is uncertain whether the proposal is a serious one. Is the floor a symbol for luxury that will be developed in later stages of the project or is this monumental interior a kind of surrealist exquisite corpse? The EPFL project is one of a series of unbuilt projects (with the University of Lucerne, and the National Palace Museum Taiwan in Taipei) in which square plans twist from floor to floor, supported by an elaborate system of raking columns. Vast floor plates are populated by constellations of lifts and escape stairs, often gathered together by cruciform structural figures. The relationship between these heroic shells and their intended use, the formal juxtaposition of the primary structure and secondary elements, these are not conventionally resolved and are intended to provoke and unsettle.

Late night films and a photograph of good food on an old timber table, it is clear that these talismanic subtexts are of significance to the work of these architects, or at least to the manner in which they want their work to be received. It is a relief that neither book includes the customary and page consuming interview with the architect. However, the gulf between these autobiographical fragments and the work is too wide. The architects' reluctance to mediate or explain the relationship between these found cultural icons and the production of their work is irritating and compounds a tendency towards the obscure that is characteristic of both books. Kerez and Olgiati are friends and their work shares what one could term a singularity or a formal autonomy. They have both cultivated the reputation of outsiders, not being part of any group and not saying very much about their work, which presumably can speak

for itself. One can understand a reluctance to refer explicitly to 'precedents' or to architectural history, these things being deeply unfashionable in the contemporary architectural discourse. One can also understand the desire on the part of these architects, to distance their work from the 'starchitecture' of the last decade, work that aspires to communicate with the immediacy, and the lack of depth, of fashion and advertising, work that will hopefully recede with the arrival of the current economic crisis. But why this refusal to communicate (which, incidentally does not preclude the widespread publication of their work) and this insistence on a mysterious 'point zero' as the origin for both architects' work? This diffidence is even stranger if one considers the trajectory of the currently robust state of architectural practice in German Switzerland, and the role that Kerez and Olgiatei have played in this.

The generation of Swiss German architects born in, or around 1950 is an illustrious group that includes Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Roger Diener, Christian Sumi, and Marcel Meili. All of these architects were educated at the ETH in the 1970s and have recounted in interviews the traumatic effect that the arrival of Aldo Rossi as a visiting professor between 1972 and 1975 had on their formation as architects. The school, in common with many other schools of architecture, all over the world, had become a product of 1968 with a curriculum that was dominated by the social sciences, and whose graduates were being trained to be politically engaged social agents. Rossi's programme for an autonomous architecture where form and history were the only things worth thinking about, struck this group like a bolt of lightning. Although he managed to rock the boat to such a degree that his tenure in Zurich was short lived, all of these architects cite his presence as having been instrumental during their studies. What has been less widely recognised is influence that the work of Robert Venturi had at the ETH. While the example of Rossi was powerful, its undiluted southern European rigour was almost too much, too pure, for this group of young architects. Venturi was saying many of the same things as Rossi, that architecture was primarily about form, not social action, that one needed to look more closely at existing typologies and at the city, and that cultural continuity was not necessarily something to be avoided at all costs. Although Venturi is clearly a Europhile, 'Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture' was written from an American perspective and broadened its viewpoint accordingly. Cathedrals, piazze and statues of saints could be supplemented with diners, strip malls and Main Street. The example of Venturi provided a new world emotional counterpoint to the old world certainties of the Tedenza and was useful in engaging with the heterogeneity of Zurich and the sprawling ubiquity of its suburban edges. This juxtaposition was introduced to the studio by Rossi's teaching assistants, but would have been sustained by Rossi himself, who had an affection for American culture that encompassed Shaker settlements as well as the Strip.

The work of Herzog de Meuron, Diener and others in the 1990s, arguably the period when these practices were at their most influential, clearly displays its genetic code. The work adopted new critical strategies with regards to working in the city, engaging with typology and betrayed a pop art sensibility. At the scale of building; roofs, windows, eaves and other architectonic elements were given distorted scales that resonated with the 'dumb' buildings that inhabit most contemporary cities, and these were rendered in quiet, but often quite radical, tectonic assemblies. This work is clearly connected with other post-modern production, but without the cartoony, card board thinness of its more famous (at the time) Anglo Saxon cousins.

Rossi left Zurich in 1975, but his teaching assistant Fabio Reinhart (who was born in Bellinzona, and provides a link to the Ticinese version of Rationalism, that predates its influence in Zurich) remained at the ETH and together with recent graduates continued to teach and to develop this line of inquiry, looking at the 'ordinary' places in the city and exploring ways to bridge the gap between a Rossi idea of typology and a car dealership in Zurich Oerlikon. This work would come to be called Analogue Architecture and would find a home in the ETH design studio led by Miroslav Sik, a part of that generation of 1950 and an assistant to Reinhart after Rossi's departure. There continued to be, in the late 1980s, a reciprocity between academia and the profession and a common purpose between Sik and other teachers at the ETH. In 1987 there was an exhibition entitled 'Analogue Architecture' held in Zurich which showed the work of Sik's students and a number of competition entries undertaken by Sik himself. The projects were represented in magnificent perspective drawings, precisely executed in Jackson pastels and containing more than a hint of Hopper, De Chirico and even Marvel comics. The projects for car showrooms and trade halls draw out the melancholy of a sparsely inhabited city seen in gentle early morning light. The character of these buildings in the city and the emotional effect of their interiors are given priority over the abstraction of plans. The tectonic qualities of these projects are also poignant and lend the images a palpable weight. This moment represents a high point in the activities at the ETH and in Swiss German architectural practice in general. This work is one of

the very few instances of a conceptually argued and formally powerful challenge to an arid modernist hegemony. The promise of Rossi and of Venturi was put to good use, and results in a substantial body of buildings and projects by Herzog de Meuron, Diener and Diener, Sik and others. Works that use typology to rediscover a purpose and a place for architecture in the city, buildings that employ 'normal' construction techniques to extraordinary artistic ends, work that also develops a critical attitude towards building in the city, neither blind 'reconstruction of the European city' nor a prolongation of the post war indifference.

Christian Kerez and Valerio Olgiati were participants in all of this. Although the buildings of these two architects still work with the idea of image and project a strong sense of melancholia, Analogue Architecture's contention that typology, mimesis and the history of the city could also be powerful agents of communication in contemporary architecture, has been emphatically rejected in their practices. In this, they are not alone. Although the occasional project by Miller Maranta, Bearth Deplazes and Joseph Smolenicky may betray a lineage with Analogue Architecture, this potent hypothesis, one that was instrumental in establishing German Swiss architecture as a major force at the end of the 1980s has been largely rejected. Although Swiss architecture, its competition system and construction industry have been remarkably resistant to the more corrosive effects of globalisation, its pre-eminent architectural practice has not. Herzog de Meuron after showing the way with a decade of exemplary work succumbed to the possibilities of scale and coverage afforded by global practice. So influential is their position in Basel and Zurich that this decisive move was read by their contemporaries, and by the generation that followed, as a condemnation of what had come before. Analogue Architecture had been consigned to the status of being 'old fashioned', and even worse 'provincial'.

Kerez and Olgiati subscribe to this assessment at the same time as appearing to be critical of globalised practice. Paradoxically, the real gulf between Analogue and Icon, between regionally specific and global, is not so much formal as it is intellectual. The real strength of German Swiss architecture has been the intelligence of its practitioners, the fact that discussions began at the ETH were relevant to, and indeed could be deepened, in practice. This is a discourse that has now become seriously diffused. In their work, Kerez and Olgiati continue to declare the autonomy of architecture, in a way that is much more substantial than the alien offerings of globalised practice. In their teaching they provide an important and intense example to students of how to make work that has some significance in a world that no longer wants significant architecture. In order to realise the obvious ambition and potential of their respective practices, they should shed the veils of obscurity exemplified by these two books, and communicate full bloodedly with a profession that wants to hear their voices.