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THE REALITY OF THE UNBUILT

The idea of being in Vienna and talking about architecture in public, on a Sunday between breakfast, a glass of wine and lunch, makes me feel somewhat uneasy. Furthermore I also believe that the privilege of a matinée should be granted exclusively to the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Making a public appearance is for me tantamount to breaking the silence of work in order to put the word before the image, in order to evoke memories of the image by means of words and, finally, in order to use words which call the metaphor of the image into question. Despite the fear of my own voice or of having to talk at all, it would be much easier for me to talk if only I could sharpen the pencil with my words, because this would lead me back to the act of drawing. Out of these paradoxical hesitations and doubts emerges the question of why I confront the public and try to talk about architecture, when I would actually prefer creating architecture.

The most compelling reason may be that after having spent the past twenty years teaching and despairing over the atrophy of contemporary architecture I see myself as a preacher who is trying to save souls. I am trying to put up resistance and encourage others to do the same. I am hoping for resistance because the only way architecture can be completely renewed is for its schools to become places of resistance again. Schools should resist the ideologies of practitioners, the temptations of theoreticians and the cynicism of "architectural fashion designers". There is no crisis of architecture. Rather, there is a crisis of architects. One of the most renowned architects in this country once said, "I am not a moralist, I have no ideology, but I know exactly what I want to achieve as an architect." This statement is consistent with the ignorant self-confidence displayed by the building architects of our time. They have become the victims of their compulsion to build.

Due to the loss of theoretical positions and artistic messages the act of building seems to have become architecture's only justification.

Therefore, the polemic question "architecture or building?" is crucial when places are turned into construction sites, into "Wiener Bauplätze", or Viennese construction sites.

What intrigues me about the exhibition "Wiener Bauplätze" and what I perceive as its essence is that it tries to go beyond the purely aesthetic discussions on architecture and their stylistic and formal questions. This exhibition attempts to touch upon the origins of architecture, where the criterion of criticism itself determines what place is designated for building. Obviously, there is the question of who actually builds. The building industry has been taken over by professionals, practitioners, by certified and authorized architects. Certified and authorized poets, certified and authorized painters, certified and authorized sculptors, certified and authorized directors, certified and authorized philosophers may ultimately serve to express state authority in their own language. I assume that certifications and authorizations have been invented by the state in order to protect the architect's profession. But since we have learned to fly to the moon I don't think that protection refers to the competence of construction; rather, it should refer to the ethical positions taken by architects.

I regard the purpose and determination of the building process as the negation of doubt. Let me return to the topic of the exhibition "Wiener Bauplätze". Discussions restricted to aesthetic and formal architectural problems have clearly negated the origin of architecture. This origin is evoked as a text which precedes any formal consideration. A program as a text. The confrontation of the text precedes the image and predetermines any reality of translating a specific sign. Jean Jacques Rousseau said that in order to make the imagery of his yearning come true he would have to invent a new language.

If it is true that architecture can signify the program, it would be inconceivable for a trivial program to be transformed into a new and symbolic kind of architecture.

The question is not how well a pedestrian precinct has been designed. Rather, the question is what the program of the pedestrian precinct actually signifies. The question is how the existential dimension of human beings has been reduced to the dimension of a pedestrian. The formal consequence is not important. There are programs which are deeply rooted in the urban structure, such as the Städtebilder, or city portraits, by Walter Benjamin. He says that "it does not mean a great deal if you don't find your way around in a city. But it requires some training to get lost in a city the way you get lost in a forest."

"Building or architecture" is a polemic involving two realities. Of course it is also possible to translate each metaphor independently. Building for me means to build with words, lines, shadows, volume and rock. Each of these realities is autonomous. It is impossible to assume, however, that architecture can be built, architecture without an idea or a theoretical program being formulated a priori. Architecture is a profession. Architecture is a project of desire. It is an anticipation of material and construction which finds its expression in a text or a drawing - in a reality, that is, which is different from the one presented by professional architects as the only reality.

Even the principle of drawing reveals the origin of architecture - the act of interfering in, and shaping, space. For me the piece of paper is the space and the pencil the tool with which to intervene and shape. Knowing about this reality is important. It is just as important as leading Jandt's language back to the opening and closing of the mouth in order to create a sensitivity which in fact corresponds to the responsibility of building.

I am committed to the architectural approach of my work. It consists of a number of attempts to reach the limits of architecture represented as language, to touch these limits, to sound them out and to go beyond them at times. When I have not built it is not an indication of the wish not to build. Rather, it is the fear of having to sacrifice the...
attempts and autonomy of thinking and drawing architecture to the building process. In those times of unfulfilled wishes of building something I remembered Jandl’s text: “In order to get some fresh air the two teachers Friederike Mayröcker and Ernst Jandl would walk up Kahlenberg and down Leopoldsberg or would walk up Leopoldsberg and down Kahlenberg on the weekends. They always did their walking in the western part of the Vienna Woods, usually wondering whether they would ever be able to publish their works”.

The power of building and the power held by building architects also involves the belief in something new. These architects believe that what they do is topical and that they can give shape to a new architectural dimension because they create new styles. I would like to cite two passages from Georg Kubler’s book Space of Time which address the phenomena of topicality and of style: “Topicality is when the lighthouse appears dark between flashes of light. It is the moment of silence between the ticking of a clock. It is the void interval slipping forever through time. It is the rupture between the past and the future. It is the seam of the surrounding magnetic field lying at the poles and, while being minute, it does exist. It is a pause in the course of time during which nothing happens. That is the void between events.” The second quotation: “Style is like a rainbow. It is a phenomenon of perception and depends on the coexistence of certain physical conditions. We can only observe it for a short time as we stand between sun and rain. Style eludes our perception whenever we go to where we think we have just seen it. Whenever we feel we can grasp it, such as in a work done by an individual artist, it vanishes and reappears in more remote perspectives which are expressed in the works of the artist’s successors or predecessors. Style means to consider static groups of things. Style is out of reach as soon as these things or identities are once again subjected to the course of time.” I would like to add that I am not a theoretician. As a theoretician I would have to speculate. Theory for me is merely a mechanism for calling my work into question over and over again.

At this point I would like to try to link images with the theoretical fragments that I quote. I start with phenomena which have influenced my theoretical thinking in architecture and have led to my own works. In an effort to explore the limits of architectural language I try to go further back than the history of architecture itself. Back to an ontological location that Heidegger called a spearhead. It is infinitely small, but it unites all the forces and radiates them. According to Heidegger the word design has two roots.

The first one is signum, to signify, to set a signal. The second one is secare, or cutting, plowing, scratching. I have always been more interested in the second definition because it logically leads to the place of interference, to the place where the earth is touched and the scratch eventually becomes the actual drawing. This is how physiological language turns into geometrical language. The act of realizing that architecture originated in an ontological location was developed as a dialectic argument. Mach defined space as being comprehensible only as a polarity between the physiological, limited space which is the only one we can perceive by our senses and the metric or geometrical space which, by its nature, is a mere invention of our mind and thus becomes infinite. This is where the argument of the text and the confrontation of the text as a reality before the image comes into play. The axioms and theorems of geometry can therefore not be drawn or they will lose their ideal quality. There is, for instance, the tangential axiom which describes two circles touching each other with only one point in common. It will be impossible to literally translate this axiom into a drawing. The drawing thus becomes the first transposition of the written text into built constructs. These very instances of interfering and shaping which take place in an ontological location affect the horizon. This horizon is created by sky and earth touching each other. It is a line belonging neither to the sky nor to the earth. We are then in fact left with only two possibilities of interference: building into the sky or digging into the earth.

It is essential that this intervention be perceived as an architectural event and that the appearance of this event be defined by the formal reconciliation of design. In other words, a hole must be dug or a hill must be formed before the shape of the hole or the hill is determined.

There is a conventional definition of the origin of architecture – a hut was built as a shelter, thereby further developing nature’s logic in an effort to achieve perfection. Eventually this original architecture, which is exclusively aimed at physical survival, gives rise to ever more complex and sophisticated protective coverings. What do our airplanes, our hangars, our train stations, our office and public buildings express? They express nothing. They are functions devoid of any symbolic significance. They are centers of energy and ornaments of will. They are signs radiating power, yet never achieving symbolic significance. In contrast, the manifestations of antiquity represented the reality of what was real and ideal, while the manifestations of technology merely serve to operate what is real.

For technology the world is neither a reflection of an idea nor a model of the universe. It becomes the obstacle which we necessarily have to overcome. The image of the world vanishes and is replaced by the towering realities of technology. Despite their solidity they are fragile, for they are condemned to be negated by new realities. The second origin, which I consider a true origin of architecture, is that of the grave. The grave protects a human being who needs no protection anymore. It is, as it were, a purely symbolic program which no longer signifies the presence but the absence of man.

Another consequence of perceiving this confrontation between the physiological origins of intervening in locations and the idealization of these interventions by geometry, or the ideal language of geometry, has led to a new definition of archaeology. When this confrontation
between the ideal language of geometry and the physiological language of building has taken place, the idea of the entire building has to be present and visible in its smallest element. I believe that there is only one contemporary architect who, by the process of radical reduction, has joined the other pioneers of modernism in the fields of painting, literature and film in attempting to reduce language to zero: Mies van der Rohe.

Building for me is not so much the ultimate or most complex reality of architecture. Rather, building is the knowledge of exposing matter to the forces of time. If you want to understand the responsibility of building you need to know how material develops in the course of time; you need to know that the physical building process can predetermine the disintegration of the building.

Out of these very prerequisites of confronting the physical impact and the ideal language of architecture arises the question of time and its visual representation by the clash of various impact formations. There are clear points of overlapping, there is a direct proximity, a direct influence of one location on the other. This concept of clash and moving architectural conditions has influenced my own work in a series of experiments aimed at finding a new architectural formal idiom by means of the clash of various memories and geographical configurations. I came up with a plan which covered seven different themes of the project Seven Gates to Eden for the Biennale 1967. The example of the first gate shows that the constant of the solidified archaic house clashes with seven different interventions of my own invention. This clash, this collision creates a new architectural location.

Another experiment was the project of the Kongreßhalle (conference center) in Berlin which had collapsed a few years before. It was a contemporary building which could no longer become a ruin but a building fragment. The aim was to achieve a new architectural composition by this clash of an ideal geometrical body with the fragmentary ruin of a building. In the House for the Sun I wanted to have elements of the house clash as planetary elements in order to reinforce the main element, which faced the light, i.e. the sun, as a dialectic contrast. Possibly the most obvious clash of an object with a narrative memory and an abstract architectural element was Monument of Aviation. The program of the ‘flight’ metaphor is called into question, although no more flights are scheduled.

There was also the clash of an ideal setting with a fragment, a fragment in Venice. The structure of an ideal location and its fringes branching out clashes with the fragments of the city and can thus create a new urban infrastructure by this dialectic confrontation.

Another experiment was carried out much earlier – back in the early 60s. The aim of these projects was to question the reality of formal architecture, its scale and social program. The metaphor of the ‘city’ was seen as challenging the limits of what one could imagine a city to be. Again, the location itself became the starting point of, and eventually the inspiration for, the urban structure. While these first attempts could be regarded as autonomous visual poems, a later attempt to intervene in the city dealt with the program of typologically recognizable elements of the city of Paris. The process of intervention itself emerges from the awareness of a typologically dominant element of an open place, while possibly recalling the first radical urban experiments.

Another experiment, maybe one of the most important ones in my work, is a project entitled House in Oggun which I carried out in 1963 together with my friend Walter Pichler. We were both aware that the location, the memory of the location and its topology can lead to the architectural program. This awareness influenced a series of other projects. The first project was a competition entry for a Square in Niagara Falls, which I did in cooperation with an architect’s firm in New York. The motive of the hill as a location was re-created artificially. I believe that the series entitled 10 Ideal Houses expressed the principle of the discovery that the location becomes the catalyst of the architectural program. At the same time I wanted to question the program of the house.

Of course this program can never be translated physically. It is an attempt to show what architecture can do and what it cannot do. These projects are defined by the topic of the architectural landscape which describes the infinite complexity of the program of housing or the rituals of housing. There is the House with a Permanent Shadow, where, at a certain moment, an upright wall casts a shadow. The shadow is transformed into transparent skin which forms the protective cover of the underground house.

This is again a formal attempt to confront physiology and geometry and make them collide so that the idealized glass surface confronts and clashes with the amorphous body of the mound.

The House with Flower Walls expresses anticipated decay. The withered and disintegrating flowers that are stored between the walls of the house, the process and the observation of disintegration become the ritual of living in a house.

Then there is the House Without Rooms. The aim was to sacrifice geometrical space to physiological space, to compress the house and to achieve a direct confrontation between the body and architecture. “The fragmented elements of the House, archaic by their own nature, become inseparably compressed within a fragile cosmology, denying the conquest of habitation, unless space is stripped of its Euclidean dimensions. Then the House is virtually born: submerged and erect, receiving and rejecting, fertile with sediments of an unknown intimacy.”

Eyes bare vision for touch perpetuating memories of the future embedded in layers of the past. Walls are transformed into sensory constructs defining movement through tactile sensations.
Horizons appear tilted, verticalized. Strips of sky are buried in shadows of the earth's crust. Gravity loses its eternal dominance.

Light is filtered through stairs toward the inner parts of the House, barely illuminating motionless landscapes of flesh and stone: fossils of an unchallenged presence.

The inner silence remains protected by the armor of the outer walls, metallic reminiscence of ancient shelters. The Elements become the House itself, transformed into simultaneous projections of Room, Window, Wall, Sky, Earth, Stair, Door. And within this total fusion of objects and sensations, bodies are transmuted into forms."

Returning to a place, not an imaginary or an invented place but a place with specific memories — the place, the wall in Berlin and the attempt not to interpret this wall as a political reality but as a phenomenon of separation and to overcome this separation by a single architectural fragment.

The Church at the Berlin Wall — “Walls are borders between the political and the private spheres. They divide the world into two realms. Into the expansive outer realm where history happens and into the small inner realm with its concentrated specific experiences. But the walls also divide in a strange way. They create privacy by separating. If there were no walls, everything would be political, which would signify totality in a very obtrusive meaning of the word. By means of their strange dividing character walls represent a typically human condition. They are typically human because making decisions is impossible. Either one leaves the confines of the walls to conquer the outside world or one stays inside to find oneself. This is clearly shown by walls. Conquering the world means giving up oneself. Finding oneself means losing the world. Walls are compact and do not allow for osmosis. This vision of civilization comes true when we imagine one of the four walls being torn down and transformed into a window without glass; the remaining three walls thus form a stage on which the tragicomedy of civilization is performed. This vision is historical because it has a symbolic character and because this process is limited in time. Civilization therefore appears as fiction. The three remaining walls enclose the realm of human efforts to subject nature, but also the possibility of defeat due to universal inertia. In the last act the three remaining walls will collapse as well.” Vilem Flusser

Fragmentary walls, defining the volume of the church, cast their shadow across the Wall that divides the city of Berlin.

In the jargon of construction programs a current project for IBA Berlin is referred to as a Housing and Office Building. For me, however, it is an attempt to come to terms with the typological location of a construction gap, i.e. to intervene in a place which already bears memories and defines these memories by the adjacent building fragments. In an effort to design and fill this construction gap I put the program of the city before the program of use. Or maybe I accepted the program of use. I tried to see this building as a fragmentary element of the city which has a façade facing the street. This façade becomes a landscape put in front of the building. The house is separated, and the separating cut becomes the gate, true to the scale of the street. The cut then leads into the stairwell bridging the cut and eventually to the courtyard which embraces the private area in a hemisphere.

While this architectural landscape of the façade can almost be considered an X-ray of the chest of the round rear portion, I attempted to uphold the tradition of a typical Berlin tenement house in the rear portion of the building facing the courtyard. “One of the strangest places in the world,” said Azweil (taken from Robert Musil’s Die Amsel) “are those Berlin courtyards where three or four houses show each other their backs. Women are cooking, sitting in rectangular holes in the middle of the walls and singing. The pots and pans made of red copper on the ledges give you an idea of how loud the clattering sounds must be. From deep down a man is bawling, hollering words up to a girl. Heavy wooden shoes are heard on clattering cobblestone as they move to and fro – slowly, forcefully, restlessly, senselessly, perpetually, day in day out. From the kitchens and bedrooms you can see outside and down below. They are as close as love and digestion in the human body. Floor upon floor matrimonial beds are stacked on top of each other, for all the bedrooms have the same position in the building. The walls of the windows, bathrooms and closets determine the location of the beds, true to less than about two feet. Dining rooms are piling up floor upon floor; the same holds true for the bathrooms with their white tiles and the balconies with their red lampshades. Love, sleep, birth, digestion, unexpected reunions, anxious and sociable nights lie on each other in these houses like stacked sandwiches in glass cases. One’s personal life is mapped out as soon as one moves into one of those rented apartments. You will admit that human freedom essentially refers to where and when you do something, because what people do is almost always the same. Therefore it is damned significant if the ground plan is the same for everybody. I once climbed upon a closet only to take advantage of the vertical, and I can tell you that the unpleasant talk I had seemed quite different from there.” Robert Musil, “Die Amsel”.

Another place, New York, another attempted translation of the program; a Tower for Times Square, where I tried to transpose the program of the theater as a symbol of the square directly into the architectural formal idiom. This unequivocal transposition of theaters placed vertically on top of each other is probably as important as the allusions to Brancusi’s infinite column. This may have been the most consistent attempt to transform the program, the program of building, the program of use directly into a formal structure in order to achieve a universal form.

A universal form of memory – not a memory that we can remember but a memory that remembers us.