

Existenz-minimum

Throughout the history of architecture, the small scale has played a disproportionate part in the development of new ideas. Brunelleschi hailed from the goldsmiths' guild, where one practiced the art of miniature cabinet making. Bramante's architectural revolution was made with a building – the Tempietto – just large enough to hold a person, and we have all heard the story of how Borromini's S. Carlino could fit into a single pier of Saint Peter's basilica. The work of Xavier Wrona belongs to this long tradition of experimentation on a minute scale, so central for architectural creativity. At the same time, his way of engaging smallness is distinctive in at least three ways.

First of all, scale is a means to downplay the visual and foreground the tactile dimension of architecture. This quality is most evident in the "Superminimum" exhibition, where a profusion of microscopic close-up shots effectively re-orients the viewer's attention towards an intimate dialogue with surfaces and textures. Instead of the strong visual signals one is accustomed to in architectural exhibitions (the seminal traces of the master's hand, the concision of gesture), small detail views offer moments of perceptual awareness of ordinary buildings and everyday life. Much the same could be said about Wrona's use of titles and accompanying texts. Conspicuously lacking in sensational content, these poetically resonant commentaries are nothing if not the negation of the visual/scenographic registers through which architecture is so often produced and consumed.

This emphasis on the work's tactility, which Benjamin theorized as the specificity of architecture's mode of reception, also generates an original approach to architectural form -- which is another way in which Wrona engages the small scale. In a very general terms, his work appears to be indebted to a minimalist conceptual aesthetic, as seen in his references to Jean Pierre Raynaud or John Hejduk. But just as the partial view serves to undermine the dominance of vision, so the incompleteness of the fragment disturbs the strong filial relations to a source, emphasizing the inherent ambivalence of any formal system. Interestingly, many of these works represent the "almost nothing" as a form of Batallian excess, like in the Saint-Marcel Pavillion extension, for example, where a seemingly rational trellis suggests a decorative outgrowth evoking the subterranean world of the grotesque. Nothing could be further from Wrona's sensibility than a moralizing "arte povera" approach. Asceticism for its own sake holds no interest, except perhaps as a symptom of modernism's obsessions that must be handled with care, like one might do with alcoholism or other addictions. Hence, also, the almost hypnotic appeal of materials like the MFP (panneau de particules structurels) and OSB (Oriented Strand Board) whose virtues are said to derive from "economic, ecological, practical and aesthetic" considerations. There is no need to expunge aestheticism, Wrona seems to be saying, so long as it is contained within a moral horizon.

This leads to a third way in which Wrona addresses the small scale, namely through the choice of projects and the work's particular mode of production. As regards the first, it is enough to say that by operating on the intimate realities of domestic space – especially the private world of bathroom and kitchen – Wrona rethinks everyday life in a way that is much more effective than through the strong architectural gesture. It is in relation to his chosen mode of production, however, that Wrona's work is most radical. The decision to work for the poor on multiple "micro- projects", to honestly partake of an ethics (not just an aesthetics) of the

minimum is clearly a driving theme of his work that sets it apart from the mainstream. Two further considerations could be made here. The first is that an ethics of the minimum makes possible a whole series of liberating trade-offs. Wrona enumerates them with a certain nihilist glee: projects are small, he says, but they can also be numerous; budgets are minute or even non-existent, but the corresponding percentage fee can be higher; there is no high-tech support, but neither is there the expense and aggravation of upgrades and repairs, and time is abundant. Keeping one's "chiffre d'affaires" below 27K euros a year also avoids value added taxes and other

unpleasant paperwork. All these practical trade-offs are ways through which architects can resist the corporate business culture that over the last three decades has seeped into almost every aspect of daily life, poisoning human relations no less than the environment in a headlong rush to impose a single model of life on the planet. In looking for a term to describe this particular mode of resistance, Slavoy Zizek's notion of the "Bartelby's strategy" comes to mind (Bartlesby is the character in Melville's comic short story who always answered: "I would prefer not to"). Wrona's work shows that a disruptive kind of abstention is sometimes more effective than obstinate refusals.

The second reflection is that the mirage of changing architecture's "mode of production" is one of the great utopian themes of architectural history, reappearing at every moment of crisis from antiquity to the present. Its most recent incarnation is in the twentieth century marxist tradition articulated by, among others, Walter Benjamin in his famous essay "The Author as Producer". The notion that significant cultural change must attack not only the content of a given work, but the productive processes and alienated relations of production underlying it, is a recurring theme of marxist critical theory. By and large, progressive architects in the 1920s took it to mean an alignment with the most advanced methods of industrial production. The notion of the "existenz minimum" for example, developed to respond to the demand in article 155 of the Weimar Constitution for a decent dwelling for all Germans, was also a means to integrate architecture more fully into the industrial production process. Like the European architects after the war who were attempting to redefine the discipline on the ruins of a discredited socio-economic order, Wrona is also using the existenz-minimum to refocus on more urgent tasks. In sharp contrast with the scientific determinism of his predecessors, however, Wrona attacks the entire political economy of architecture through a radical reduction, not only of scale, but of budget, equipment, and management costs. His work thus stands as an example of how the most vital sources of modern architecture can and must be re-engaged from an activist perspective on the present.

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