Architecture is (as) a gesture
Notatio
Bart Verschaffel

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"Architecture is a gesture. Not all purposeful movements by the human body are gestures, any more than all purposeful buildings are architecture." The author of this book, the Flemish philosopher Bart Verschaffel quotes these words by Ludwig Wittgenstein. It should perhaps be added that not all gestures are purposeful movements, just as not all architecture constitutes purposeful buildings.

At what point does an instinctive, "purposeful" movement of my arm, caused by a sudden pain, become a gesture that expresses this pain? Is the "purposefulness" of the gesture connected related to the intention of portraying the pain? Is the purposefulness of architecture inherent in the portrayal of the function of dwelling, by virtue of the fact that it alludes to a convention?

Adolf Loos once stated that houses have nothing to do with art, and that therefore architecture – with the exception of tombs and monuments – cannot be classified as art. The artist fights against convention, the architect uses it. "Architecture awakens moods in people. Thus the architect's task is to make this mood more precise. [...] The architect can only achieve this
by alluding to the buildings that have formerly engendered this mood."

Engendering moods: is this what gestures are for? This brings us back to the question of the difference between the instinctive expression of a mood (Loos cites the farmhouse as an example) and its active portrayal. Verschaffel attempts an unconditional exploration of the state of modernity. Leaving ideological preconceptions aside, he studies paintings, statues and texts as sites of interference, of indirect encounters. He is not a prophet of authenticity in the sense of the common utopia of being in harmony with oneself. He does not share Ernst Bloch’s fundamentally aesthetic vision that describes human togetherness in a state of perfection as the perfect work of art.

The modern, opposite utopia of abandoning this area of togetherness is accompanied by a painful sense of loss. In his Cantata Profana, the composer Béla Bartók developed the folkloristic theme of the sons who, leaving their father’s house, were changed into stags in the wilderness and were never again able to return home. The drama of freedom and homesickness seems to be insoluble, but the music itself, a logical continuation of the musical ideas that Bartók discovered during his explorations into the most ancient roots of folk music, provides an answer. A modernist answer, naturally – but this modernity has nothing to do with objectivity and the rejection of personal experience. On the contrary, it is a gesture of invitation to a feast of memories. As long as this mood continues to evoke
something in us that we recognise from our past, we cannot speak of the end of the story. Verschaffel emphasises the fact that “lonely, ‘weak’, works” of art and architecture – “that solve nothing and are structurally uninhabitable” – “create space for ‘possible togetherness’.” Architecture is a gesture, because it expresses and articulates the intention of consciously and resolutely coming to terms with the world.

Zurich, September 2001
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*A long discussion not about masterpieces but why there are so few of them, Par. 1: This was originally published in Arte in America 1984, and later translated to Donald Judd, Architektur, Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster 1989.*
Architecture is (as) a gesture

On 'authenticity' as an architectural criterion

Only a couple of years have passed since the artist and architect Donald Judd has denounced his 'colleagues' Philip Johnson and Helmut Jahn and their architecture because they supposedly are not 'real' or 'serious' enough. They are not 'real' or their architecture is not 'real' or 'serious' – unlike some of the recent developments in music and dance – because they are only out there to make a profit; their architecture is just 'naked fashion', and they have completely forgotten the 'original purpose'. And most architects do not do much better. 'Almost all so-called architects are now openly commercial [...] now the only purpose is money and success.' 'Real' architects do exist, but they have been pushed in a corner and have been unable to build. 'Real architects, 'real architecture', with the adjective 'real' functioning here as a synonym for serious – authentic? – architecture.

The 'real', the 'authentic', the 'sincere'; are they all bastard children of the lost, vanished 'Truth'? How are

1 A long discussion not about master-pieces but why there are so few of them, Part I: This was originally published in Art in America 1984, and later admitted to Donald Judd, Architektur, Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster 1989.
these categories to be used? A sculpture, a piece of
music or a building can be well-structured, intelligent,
ingeresting or exciting, but can it possibly be true or
untrue, 'real' or 'unreal'?
As a guest who once was invited and now refuses to
leave - though he is no longer wanted - , the category
of 'authenticity' has remained with us in our thinking
on art and architecture. There is a certain obstinacy to
the awkward, seemingly old-fashioned problem of au-
thenticity that already becomes apparent when we
consider the near impossibility to evaluate or think
about art and architecture without paying our dues to
the category of kitsch; i.e. the category of the objec-
tively untruthful. The inveracity or falseness of kitsch
cannot be directly linked with the (still to be qualified)
moral intentions or feelings of its creator, audience or
user. It refers to the quality of the different relations
operating within the work, for which the relation be-
tween the emperical creator and a work, and the lies
and deceit of specific persons can act as a model, or
function as a metaphor.
The impossibility of thinking about art without the no-
tion of kitsch - which implies the notion of the inher-
ently untruthful - force us to try to determine the
opposite of kitsch. What are the characteristics of the
'closed' or the truthful? What determines it? In this con-
text the crux of the matter is again to determine 'au-
thenticity' and 'authentic' or 'real' work without mak-
ing it definitely dependent on morally qualifiable posi-
tions or emotions of those who are involved with the
work as creator, spectator or user. We will concern ourselves here with the description of the 'structure of authenticity'. Let us try out a hypothesis: that what is 'objectively truthful', the figure of 'authenticity', that which becomes affected by the abstract and cumulative values of 'money and success', is (as) the gesture.

The nineteenth century 'pines away under the weight of the ugliness of all things' and bourgeois architecture is a lie. 'Nothing appeared anymore in its essential, true and convincing form.' For its pioneers, modern design and architecture settles the score with the nineteenth century in turning into a quest for essential, truthful and convincing objects and houses. In his 'Pages de doctrine' Henry van de Velde recollects an early memory from his childhood which explains his search for new forms and his esthetic and ethic déjection of houses, filled with thousand garrulous objects that 'fail our eyes and minds.' 'And although I have not been raised in such a smug environment, I nevertheless remember well how I suffered in my parental home. It was impossible for me to become attached to any object because none of them adapted themselves so naturally, so plainly well to their assigned goal as the domestics; the maids and the servants.'

to frivolity, to arbitrary and ostentatious styles in a most revealing way. His model for the good and suitable presence and efficacity of architecture is connected with the memory of how well maids and servants blended with life in the parental – not exceedingly rich but well-off bourgeois – environment. Houses must be helpful and discrete, like servants. ‘I loved them, because they were so plain and natural, and they humbly did the task they had taken upon themselves with their real being and true feelings.’ Van de Velde writes that one cannot attach oneself to objects that do not possess this authenticity.

Words like ‘plain’, ‘natural’, ‘real’ and ‘true’ are used in this context. Van de Velde is not the first nor the only architect who, on the fringes of his own middle-class life, finds out that he has lost a certain authenticity and immediacy and that these can be retrieved by the right kind of architecture or work. There are many architects who shared those views without necessarily agreeing on what this right kind of architecture should be like. In the famous opening pages of his essay ‘Architektur’, Loos compares the work of the farmer and craftsman with that of the architect. 3 Go to the mountain lake, and look at the houses, farms and chapels, notice the beauty and the quiet and then see how the villa of the architect (no matter whether it is good or bad) defaces the landscape. ‘A discord amidst

this harmony, like an unnecessary scream.’ It is no coincidence that Loos uses the image of the scream disturbing the harmony, the silence. Good houses do not need many words. It is furthermore no coincidence that farmers or craftsmen are important for this comparison. Those people have learned not to speak learnedly, and do not need to pretend. The craftsman ‘konnte sich nicht viel um bücher kümmern’; It comes natural to him not to mince words. He who does what he has to do, he who concentrates on the work, has no use for many words. The farmers houses or those of the craftsmen; these servant-like houses are true, not because they say something but because they say nothing; they are taciturn and ‘discrete’. ‘He makes the roof. What kind of a roof? A beautiful or an ugly one? He doesn”t know. The ‘roof.” Adjectives only enfeeble things, too much talking splits everything up. For van de Velde this has in fact become a criterion. ‘Go stand in front of any monument, façade, piece of furniture, jewelry, porcelain, or even a lamp and then try to describe accurately what you have seen.’ The more words you have to use, the less trustworthy the thing will turn out to be. ‘If that monument, façade or cupboard is all that; if I have to use all those words to describe a soup bowl, a tabletop or chandelier, than that monument is not fit to serve the purpose for which it was erected; that façade cannot be linked to a building;

and that cupboard cannot be a cupboard, and nothing
that I have found beautiful so far is as it should be.'
That which aims at its 'true goal', its 'true destination',
is, as the servant, totally orientated towards its task. It
is strong and essential and it coincides with itself. 'A
cupboard, a cupboard; 'a roof, a roof'. Naked substan-
tive, substance, essence.
The fact that it is impossible for architecture not to be
ostentatious (and ultimately incongruous) is explained
by Loos with a reference to the new barbarism. The
architect lives in the city, hence he is 'uprooted', and
has lost 'the balance between the interior and the ex-
terior man' which makes up for 'culture'. This diagno-
sis can hardly be called original, any more than this
longing for the unbroken, untouched life that harbors
no doubts nor modernity. The bourgeois conscious-
ness is an unhappy one. The longing however for au-
thenticity and genuineness that resonates with this
consciousness, is so widespread, so irritingly famil-
iar, that it remains important. But what is this thing
that the farmer has and not the architect, what is it that
the farm has and not the villa of the architect? Just as
the lies of man serve as a model for the structure of
kitsch, the lives of farmers and servants serve as mod-
els for the 'real' or the 'autentic'.
'Our life and work is somewhat impious - I really can-
not find a better word for it. Am I a pious person? No.
But a certain 'life piety' can be found in a rough miser-

5 Henry van de Velde, op. cit., p. 30.
ly small farmer, in a godless desperado like a horse
thief or in the plainest sailor. It can go together with
the most extreme lowness; absolute faith in a gin bot-
tle can also be a religion’ (von Hofmannsthal). ‘Life
piety’, pietas seems to mark plain people and their
lives automatically. How can a man – a farmer, a sailor
and consequently also a house - be ‘pious’ without any
religion? Wittgenstein, who wanted to escape philoso-
phy by remaining silent and evading the world as a
school master, a gardener or a hermit, not only con-
trived and built a house, but also wrote down ‘Ver-
mischte Bemerkungen’ on architecture. According to
him, ‘all architecture glorifies something’. ‘Architec-
ture both immortalizes and glorifies something. This is
why there cannot be any architecture where there is
nothing to glorify.’

These are old, surprisingly archaic words for

6 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, ‘Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten’ (1901) in
in dem ganzen Tun und Treiben – ich weiss kein anderes Wort. Bin ich
vielleicht selber ein frommer Mensch? Nein. Aber es gibt auch eine
Frömmigkeit des Lebens, und die steckt in einem harten, kargen, geizigen
Bauern, und in einem ruchlosen Desperado von Pferdedieb noch kann sie
stecken, und im letzten Matrosen steckt sie, und noch mit der letzten
Ruchloskeit ist sie verträchtlich, und der Glaube an die Gin-Flasche kann
noch eine Art von Glaube sein.’

7 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Vermischte Bemerkungen, Georg Henrik von
verherrlicht etwas. Darum kann es Architektur nicht geben, wo nichts zu

8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Vermischte Bemerkungen, p. 86: ‘Architektur ist eine
Geste. Nicht jede zweckmässige Bewegung des menschlichen Körpers ist
nevertheless new, modern houses. We may assume that the house built by Wittgenstein (and to which he devoted two years of his life) is not cynical, that it glorifies something and that it really, at least in the eyes of its builder, is a gesture. But with this characterization of (good?) architecture as a ‘gesture’ or a ‘glorification’ Wittgenstein gives modern architecture very consciously the ‘spiritual’ task to become a ‘true’, clear and quiet presence close to the elementary things of life (eating, sleeping, hiding, touching, sheltering yourself). This presence should contradict the predominant modernity of the dance of signs, of the cynical nakedness of money and of the mirror labyrinth of ‘information’. ‘Architecture is a gesture. Not every purposive movement of the human body is a gesture. And not every functional building is architecture.’

These statements of Wittgenstein may sound unmodern. We still are used to calling architecture ‘modern’ when it resigns from its representative function and/or when it claims some functionality or finality for its construction or use. For Loos and many others only the engineer for example can be compared to the farmer and carpenter since his building is purely based on the knowledge of available means and a precise understanding of the objectives. The architect, who has the urge to do more than plain and pragmatic building, precisely alienates himself from the ‘real’ architecture because of that. But Wittgenstein’s gesture-architec-

9 Ludwig Wittgenstein, op.cit., p. 86.
ture, for which rationality, ‘Klarheit’ and ‘Durchsichtigkeit’ is a ‘Selbstzweck’ and no means to an end, is not the opposite of the ‘modern’ architecture of purposive, useful, pragmatic or ‘functional’ houses and buildings.\(^{10}\) There is even more than purely external, formal affinity. In early modernist thought, the basic notion of usefulness and purposiveness is not linked to the really modern, industrial-economical notion of usefulness and benefit. The model for ‘usefulness’ was the servant. The farmer and the carpenter are not like the engineer, but the engineer is like the farmer and the carpenter: his work is familiar to the work of those for whom work is still a gesture.

Every act for which only the result counts is exchangeable. When a well-defined goal has to be reached, there are always other possible alternatives. When a picture has to be hung on a wall, you can use a hammer to hit the nail in the wall, or you could use a stone, or you could screw a hooknail into the wall, etc. It is the result that matters. The act ‘itself’ has no value. Hitting a nail in the wall is therefore not a gesture.

The opposite of the purely instrumental praxis is the ritual act. A ritual consists of a strictly ordered succession of acts that have to be performed according to prescribed rules and conditions. 'For a ceremony, the careful and faultless execution is of major importance. It must be executed completely according to the rules of the many rites, recitations and songs. The result is important, but it is merely significant within the context of the ritual. It can only be reached when it is executed according to the way prescribed by the ritual.'\(^{11}\) In a ritual it is not important to reach a certain result or to communicate a certain message, but rather to perform the known prescribed acts correctly or to speak the right words. Within this context you would only make fire by for example rubbing two wooden sticks together; it would be unthinkable to use a match. The precise goal of these ritual acts has almost been forgotten, but people know exactly how to build an altar, how to bury someone, how to clean someone's body etcetera, and those are the things upon which all attention is focussed. The importance of this highly essential accuracy is unclear – why three fire altars and not four? – but when things are not executed as prescribed, 'it' does not work. And it is absolutely uncertain what this 'it' may be, except precisely following the rules. In a ritual, purposiveness has faded away and only exists on a formal level. Frits Staal

\(^{11}\) Frits Staal, 'De zinloosheid van het ritueel', p. 304. This article was published in Over zin en onzin in filosofie, religie en wetenschap, Amsterdam, 1986, pp. 295–321.
writes that the ritual 'has no sense, goal or meaning'. As alternatives are unthinkable, the act itself has value. Since these rites are empty in a certain sense, you cannot account for them personally, nor can they be interpreted or appropriated. Participating in a ritual dissolves everything personal. You can only repeat it, no personal matters can be communicated or alluded to. As the ritual is essentially a repetition, it installs cyclic time, links the present to an ever more essential 'beginning', and in that way it neutralizes (secular) time. Between the instrumental act and the ritual which, in western culture at least, has almost completely been encapsulated by religion, there is a third act which cannot be reduced to the other two: the 'gesture'. The gesture – for example greeting people or pouring wine – is a clear purposive act that is a part of life and accepted as 'normal'. Greeting is not outside of 'secular time', it is no ritual. But is also not an instrumental act. It is not the result that counts when you greet someone. The gesture, as Wittgenstein observes, is not directed towards a final result. The instrumental orientation – to make clear that someone is welcome, or to give somebody a drink – is just one and fairly external aspect of the act. Using Aristotelian terms, you could say that greeting someone correctly is not a technique but an art. Greeting is not a ritual; greeting correctly or pouring wine is not dependent on a series of precise rules, but at the same time you cannot greet someone just anyhow. Greeting someone or pouring wine cannot be in-
vented all over again. 'We', people who live in the same culture, greet one another or pour wine for one another, in a certain, familiar way. There is something obligatory about those acts, and it is not a set of rules. The gesture is an act that relates to a known and familiar form (i.e. a convention, a formality), which determines the act, just like a music score or theatre text determines a performance. The 'score' for greeting someone is not a model that you can or must repeat. The gesture is always a rendition of a given and existing form, i.e. the gesture always follows what is given, but at the same time it constantly interprets. The gesture is an assignment, a task you measure yourself up to, just like a musician and his score; you compete with yourself and others. There is a certain personal obligation to greet people correctly, pour a drink in the right way. 'Correctly' means here 'appropriate', 'convincing'. 'Appropriate' can be defined by 'successfully relating to the given form' and 'convincing' means as much as 'personal', 'attentive' or 'with maximum effort'. There are various levels of commitment and perfection for a gesture and they form the basis on which every gesture is judged. 'Perfect' does not mean that the gesture is completely in accordance with the rules. A gesture can only be perfect or flawless in the way in which an actor's or a musician's interpretation can be perfect; not as a mere repetition but as a faultless, impressive interpretation in which both the score (or the part) and the performer (or the actor) are very much present.
The qualifications 'appropriate', 'convincing', 'impressive' refer to the inherently theatrical character of the gesture: it is a performance; a form of theatre that can be evaluated and appreciated as such. All these criteria are not relevant for a ritual. This is why for example the act of baptizing - when it is correctly done - always 'works': it is independent of the style or inner life of the priest. It speaks for itself that you can consider a ritual as a performance and stylize it in such a way that the 'performance' of a certain priest is more convincing than that of one of his colleagues, but that would be concentrating on one of the non-essential aspects of the ritual. A ritual can and must not be interpreted or performed 'personally'. A ritual is never the act of someone: the performer disappears in the act, the personal element dissolves or, if you like, becomes exonerated. Neither is the purely instrumental act a performance. An instrumental act is not formal and in that sense it is always spontaneous and direct. There are of course certain habits, certain ways in which to do things, but no one relates to these examples as to given forms that have no identifiable origin but are to be executed following the rules. There is nevertheless a peculiar lack of anything 'personal' in a 'spontaneous' instrumental act. You may do certain practical things in your own way, or invent new ways to do it, but even then you are not yourself 'present'. And no one will ever consider your 'personal creativity' as an act of tedious impertinence; it will not be looked upon as an attempt to ig-
nore or destroy the collective heritage of convention or culture.
To greet someone correctly is a commitment; you immerse yourself completely in the 'form' of greeting. He who performs the act is totally differently involved than during a ritual or an instrumental act. Throughout the gesture the personal presence remains emphasized. A gesture is always somebody's gesture. But it is essential that the personal element does not appear immediately within the gesture. It is not 'naked'; it always relates to an already given form. A person 'puts a lot of himself' in the gesture, but the gesture is not the immediate, spontaneous expression of his highly personal, intimate, unique personality. In a gesture the person is very much present and deeply involved, although he is concentrating not on himself but to something else. Compare it to the way an actor during his acting or a musician during his performance is more concentrated and more attentively present than when he is walking down a street just being himself. In the gesture the subjective or the 'Self' is very discreetly present, as if it is dressed or has gloves on; it is not visible and it is silent. The very personal has become here a private matter. During the gesture the personal element is only discreetly present: it fills the form completely without breaking it. Quite the opposite: every successful, totally appropriated act of greeting or pouring wine shows at the same time the personal element - circuitously because of the form, i.e. indirectly, detached, slowly - and confirms and glorifies the form.
As an interpretation of a certain formality, part or music score, the personal element is always a ‘servant’ to what is already there, to what everybody considers common property. The formality of pouring wine, presenting a meal, greeting someone or enjoying friendship is already there and common knowledge. The gesture that relates to the appropriate formality is something that we could describe as ‘commonplace’. The gesture is common property, a priori familiar and clear to everyone. A ‘lieu commun’ (a commonplace) as Anne Cauquelin writes, is also always a ‘lien commun’ (a social bond). In every gesture the personal appears, while every gesture confirms at the same time something collective – the form(ality) – that is commonly known and kept and which forms the basis on which people understand one another. On the surface every gesture is of course directed towards a goal or a result – one slices bread in order to have sliced bread – but at the same time the gestures sinks to the bottom of daily life and amplifies – ‘glorifies’ – it. It confirms and amplifies that with which one identifies. When someone wants to greet another person or pour wine in a totally new, original, ‘personal’ way, his or her act becomes incomprehensible, it destroys itself. He or she is simply not able any more to really greet someone. The act becomes a mirror in which an immediate, naked ‘Self’ appears. The act turns into a pure act of self-affirmation and stops being a gesture. The desire

itself to stand personally close to the beginning or the origin of a gesture, to put oneself above the commonplace or the formal, perverts the gesture and makes it an obscene manifestation of destructive vanity. One can imagine a life that entirely consists of a series of gestures, or better still: a life form that is fundamentally a ‘gesture’. The prototype is of course a life that is principally and explicitly detached from all earthly objectives. In the life of a monk for instance, even the most elementary utilitarian acts – e.g. working the land – are fundamentally a ‘gesture’. Monks who work the land do not do this for the sake of a ritual – they want to harvest - but at the same time this harvest is and is not their main concern. This is why automatized agriculture, where less monks at the control panel can gather in a double harvest, is not a neutral alternative for their work. ‘Work’ here carries an ancient form, the labour itself has its own value; it is always a gesture. But there are also non-principal, ‘secular’ variants for this life form where there is neither a very basic orientation to the result, nor an explicit affirmation of the own identity. Which brings us back again to the work of the plain sailors or the horse thieves of von Hofmannsthal, the farmers and carpenters of Loos or van de Velde’s servants.

Close to the edge of bourgeois culture – which judges the result of every work according to the degree of profit, power, money or calculated pleasure it gains – the mythical (for totally ‘different’) figure of the plain man appears. He plays his known and understandable
part on the stage of the world in a suitable and convincing way. The carpenter only wants to be a good carpenter, and make a good roof: he simply cannot make a worthless or fancy roof just to earn a lot of money or make good impression. Those goals — money, success — are simply not his concern. He wants to show and confirm what a good roof is and what a carpenter is. ‘This modern nervous vanity was foreign to the old masters’ nature. Forms were dictated by tradition. They did not change the forms. But they could not loyally use these given, sanctified, traditional forms in all circumstances. New assignments changed the form, rules were broken and new forms came into being. The people in those days however were one with the architecture of their time.”13 The carpenter is a man of character. He is not ambiguous, he is completely immersed in the work that he has agreed to do. This attitude, the life piety of a trade that is attributed to the ancient world, has escaped bourgeois culture and its architects, and hence has become an ideal. The servant is a stranger to bourgeois consciousness precisely since the latter has no role to play in the world theatre. The bourgeois consciousness itself is a way to relate deceptively to all these roles. Within the

bourgeois world a gesture is always just a means to an end and it is a mask. It can be of service in a life where everything is ultimately directed towards neutral, abstract, capitalizable values like power, possession or potential pleasure and which ultimately considers everything interchangeable. The bourgeois consciousness swaps parts, it never immerses in its act since every part is always interpreted with the desire to play a different, better part later. The carpenter really wants more or become someone different: a rich man for example with a lot of money and success. In this context he is no longer concerned with the roof, and his carpentry is no longer a ‘gesture’.

The ‘life piety’ of (life as) a gesture is alien to the bourgeois mentality, but at the same time it becomes an ideal. Out of the agony of lies and false conventions this admiration for sailors and servants is born, a romantic adoration for the People with whom the artist tries to enter a pact, an analysis of ‘real’ life – a life for which the architect has to build – composed out of the elementary acts of eating, looking, moving and sleeping. This agony also wakes up the desire to become a ‘builder’ instead of an architect, the desire for ‘craftsmanship”, that serves as a model for the intellectual activity of writing, painting, designing. The lie gives rise to the desire for the real and the true, and the real and the true are at the same time always ‘simple’: clear, plain, distinct.

When this permanent ‘double’ attitude towards the formal – i.e. both as a means and a mask – prohibits
one to confirm or amplify commonplaces (since they are perceived as untrue), when one neither can choose the side of the carpenter or the servant, there is just one alternative: originality and/or genius, the 'esthetic negation of the bourgeois mentality'. When one is oneself the beginning or source, forms of expression can be conceived of, even new forms can be created that have nothing to do with the existing old forms, and therefore become entirely 'new', vibrating with 'genuineness'. Opposed to deceitful formality and lost life piety there is 'genius' or, in its later, democratic version, spontaneity. Genius is real and authentic, or in a reduced version — the spontaneous or informal is real and authentic. Everybody is original, is a genius, is an artist. The genius, the artist, the poet tries to 'speak anew' and to make — from the heart, in sudden bursts of creativity — original forms that are at the same time very personal and immediately become 'form' — universal, generally human, eternally accessible. In the best cases this strategy works, in the worst and most common cases one makes a spectacle of oneself and only an highly inflated ego appears. All by yourself, Loos writes, it is impossible to invent 'forms' — commonplaces.

When one cannot live as a servant, when you can no longer live with the servants, one can — with van de Velde — long for a house that is as a servant. Bourgeois, modern life can imagine an environment and a house
that is not bourgeois, not dissociated and deceitful, that does not stir 'feelings of deep unrest' suddenly changing into an 'intense dislike' and 'a great sadness'\textsuperscript{14}. It is possible to counter the agony of time passing and private feelings of bourgeois schizophrenia and artificiality one cannot escape, with comfort to be found in a house or in objects, the first environment where nothing is contaminated with duplicity, falseness, or simulation. To build a non-bourgeois, modern house is possible. But this dream of modern architecture, that wants to build against the bourgeois mentality, may perhaps be less 'modern' than it pretends or thinks itself to be. Affiliating with modern age and its techniques, rejecting monstrous and frivolous forms produced by an overheated imagination, and choosing for concise, rational living and building, can perhaps not be summoned up by the will to be modern, but rather by the desire to give genuine modern life an environment that does not reflect its own age, but rather the life of the servant. The modern movement is maybe sooner an incarnation of a resistance against modernity – a resistance that is itself inherently part of modernity – rather than a push forward or an acceleration. 'Functionality', the orientation of a house or a building towards the essential things of life like eating, sleeping, moving, breathing, looking, keeping silent etc., which are apparently part of 'nature' and not of history, has to lead to a 'truth', an authenticity, a 'true being' that

\textsuperscript{14} Henry van de Velde, op. cit., pp. 26–27.
gives the unhappy bourgeois consciousness space and a place to rest. For bourgeois culture, Adorno writes, functionality is in the first place dreaming of a thing that 'has lost its coldness': objects that have found their objective, are 'saved from being just a thing'. The concise, functional architecture that relates to 'life', is not a way to bring time close to oneself, but rather to retrieve the lost 'gesture'. When Van de Velde models his architecture on the servant who 'has naturally adapted himself to the objective for which he is used', he is not thinking of the unsurpassed, machine-like functionality of servants, but rather of those who 'do the task they have taken upon themselves with their real being and true feelings'. Functionality is here a metaphor that has turned literal, 'a thing turned human, the reconciliation of objects, that do not isolate themselves from man and no longer bring him shame'. Art is revolutionary, set in the future, the house is conservative - but Loos does not refer to the 'past': he uses 'Gegenwart'. Presence, present. The roof.


16 Theodor W. Adorno, op.cit., p. 123: 'Das Nützliche wäre ein Höchstes, das menschlich gewordene Ding, die Versöhnung mit den Objekten, die nicht länger gegen die Menschen sich vermauern und denen diese keine Schande mehr antun.'
Good architecture does not resemble us but only slightly, it is not a contribution to modern age, but a way to accept and endure modernity. Good architecture has ‘life piety’, like the servant; not the slave of exchange, money or success. Architecture as a gesture then, a variation on the already given score of the house’s ‘form’, as the proud and confident confirmation of the commonplace house like a child would draw it. ‘Ordinary, but with a reference to its original power. However weak that reference may be, it is the commonplace that holds it down. It renders it debatable and accessible, without this property losing itself in the distant reflections of a refined high culture. The commonplace is a protection of, but also against, the great emotions. It resists rational one-sidedness. Common and popular, without referring to national customs or tradition, as interpreted in heimat literature, but rather to the universal sense of the word which Marx used for his concept of the proletariat, i.e. that part of the population that is not only oppressed but for which the immediacy of life, the commonplace, the tradition of the ordinary, the experience of daily life with all its banality and singularity, its life and death, predominates any cultural expression.\footnote{Geert Bekaert, ‘Belgische architectuur als gemeenplaats. De afwezigheid van een architectonische cultuur als uitdaging’ in Archis, 9/1987, p. 10.}
Good architecture does not resemble us but, even slightly, it is not a contribution to modern age; but a way to accept and endure modernity. Good architecture has ‘life pieté’, like the servant, not the slave or exchange, money or success. Architecture as a gesture, then, a variation on the already given score of the house’s ‘form’, as the proud and confident confirmation to its original power. However weak that reference may be, it is the commonplace that holds it down. It renders it debatable and accessible, without this property losing itself in the distant reflections of a refined high culture. The commonplace is a protestsion of, but also against, the great emotions. It resists rational one-sidedness. Common and popular, without referring to national customs or tradition, as interpreted in heimat literature, but rather to the universal sense of the world which Marx used for his concept of the proletariat, i.e. that part of the population that is not only oppressed but for which the immediacy of life, the commonplace, the tradition of the ordinary, the experience of daily life with all its banality and singularity, its life and death, predominates any cultural expression."

"Mon lieu commun. Over de betekenis van het werk in het moderne" was first published in: De Witte Raaf, nr. 83, 2000, p. 8–9.

Mon lieu commun

On the Meaning of ‘work’ in Modernity

‘We are all born in chains. There are those who forget about them, and there are those who have them gilded or silvered. But we, we want to break them. Not with brutal, savage violence; we want to grow out of them little by little.’
R.M. Rilke

“Somehow I, too, must manage to make things, not plastic, written things, but realities, born of craftsmanship.”
R.M. Rilke

Just as we know that we were children once and are marked by this ‘kindgewesensein’, even if we have no memory of it; just as we never quite become adults, because we carry a child within, banished to an inner realm; just so, the world is ‘modern’. The world was not always modern, not from the beginning; it became modern. That is precisely why the modern is always marked by ‘what used to be.’ In other words, we are always from somewhere. Every identity begins somewhere. And how far can we get away from that beginning? On the other hand, that beginning is of course always lost: the adult has lost the child, and no one re-
members who he or she used to be or what it was really like back then.
Franz Kafka wrote about this in The Neighboring Village\(^1\): ‘My grandfather used to say, ‘Life is remarkably short. In my memory, it has become so condensed that I cannot understand, for example, how a young man can decide to drive to the neighboring village, without fearing that – unforeseen circumstances aside – the course of an ordinary, happy life would be nowhere near sufficient for such a drive.’ Is a lifetime long enough to get away from the beginning and reach a different village, to break away from the origin and become modern? Who is that young man who left, to his grandfather’s incomprehension, perhaps because he wanted to get away, perhaps with a destination in mind? Who is that young man who left without arriving anywhere, who lives halfway, on horseback? The grandfather’s life runs its course in a single place. It is the life of someone who does not leave, who cannot and will not leave; someone who stays, who has to stay and yet at the same time chooses to remain, to stay together and do the things that must be done: the necessary, inescapable, everyday acts. In this old, pre-modern world, lives are unfragmented; people are solid, proud, and have no doubts. They do not believe in leaving. Among the many accounts of these kinds of lives in the pre-modern world, I want to look at a few pages by the Flemish writer Ernest Claes (1885-1968).

\(^1\) Franz Kafka, The neighboring Village.
In the opening chapter of his book 'Jeugd, Het land van de lemen Huizen en de open Haarden' [Youth. The land of loam houses and fireplaces], Claes describes the ancestral world of the house with its fireplace, animals, guests (the traveler, the peddler, the soldier, the eccentric), those who leave for the black mining country and are never heard of again, the land and its night, and especially the work. Because it is labor or work that preserves the Old World.

'Whether they were happy or unhappy was a question that never arose. They were glad when something went better than expected, and they handled disaster and misfortune with sad equanimity. Amid the hard work of every day, amid the constant worrying over daily bread, there was no desire in their minds for a welfare beyond their reach, no bitterness in their heart over what they did not have. Their life was cloaked in a semblance, if not of satisfaction, then certainly of resignation. They accepted it as immutable, something not worth brooding over. Those who live on the land, who witness the peaceful coming and going of days, sowing wheat and planting potatoes, watching them flourish and ripen over Spring, Summer and Autumn, are oblivious of the rush of easy profit, measured day by day. They carry inside some of the slow growing of wheat and trees, some of the calm patience of animals. Work on the good, eternal earth

causes no inner turmoil, resentment, or rebellion. Man is connected with the soil, and nothing is ever pulled out of balance. The spirit of the patient earth carries over into man and makes him steady and strong.

The old world: work as service, pietas or devoutness and – mixed in with supervised Christianity – a heathen awareness of the otherworldly and the elusive. This makes the old world introverted and closed but not narrowminded. Science, technology and medicine have not yet created the feeling that everything is under control: the familiar does not coincide yet with the knowable, controllable artefact. In and around the domestic realm and beside the world of work, there is a large remainder: the strange and incomprehensible realm of night and dark forces, of magic and spirits, of the unspeakable body. This strangeness is given a place and at the same time kept at a distance by telling stories about it. The two basic operations in 'Jeugd' are working and storytelling.

Jean-François Lyotard has described and conceptualised this place of the grandfatherly life and the neolithic world of Claes in Domus et la mégapole:
‘temps commun, sens commun, lieu commun’: common time, common understanding, common place. The domestic is an order: a temporal mode (the seasons, repetition, rhythm), a spatial mode (condensed meaning, a centered world), a condition of the body

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(fertility, force, fear, death), and a determination of the nature and significance of work. The domestic is the order of nature, i.e. of continuity, of care and helpfulness, of the passing on of life, of physis: that which brings the world into existence. Cows have to be milked, walls whitewashed, children brought into the world; we have to eat, care for the sick, and bury the dead. These are things that have to be done, work that has nothing to do with making money or getting ahead in life. This natural life, made up of work, is anything but charming or idyllic: one cannot long for it. It is certainly not easy to live a life that is entirely real, without alternatives, without possibilities or dreams. In a life that runs its course in a single place, which one cannot leave, everything is inescapable and fatal: the everyday as well as the 'rage of blustery days' or the remains of turmoil and anger, which cannot be turned into nature – continuity, cycle, life. But the grandfather does not believe that these can be avoided by leaving. Of course Kafka did leave, as did all of the moderns. Claes was secretary of the House of Representatives. He studied, read several languages, and wrote 'Jeugd' in a suit, not in working clothes. The pre-modern way of life is to remain attached to a single place. The modern way is to leave, depart from that first place, break free from the origin. It is the impossibility of living a domesticated life in a single place. Of course, one can return, visit the family back home, even get a little sentimental, but Claes, Lyotard, and the other moderns know just how much they have become strangers to
the 'domus'. To brothers and sisters and those who stayed behind, they may only seem to have changed somewhat, perhaps become a little harder to understand; at least they have gone far in the world. In the meantime, however, the moderns themselves know that they can no longer talk about who they are at home, that they can only be quiet and play along. They know how irrevocably they have left and betrayed the house. In fact, not only did they leave, but it turns out that — while they were not looking — the world they left behind has changed too. In the end, there is no way back.

The point is not just to know what happened or to reconstruct a history. What matters is to treat memory in such a way as to understand what 'used to be' means today, here and to us. What matters is to analyse those memories in which the present calls to mind a past. For example, what did 'used to be' mean to the people who made modern art and architecture? Within the concept and self-conception of the modern movement, modernity stands first and foremost for modernization: the modern is understood as a global process of innovation and improvement, of replacing and breaking with the old. This means, first of all, that old techniques and methods make way for more efficient, more productive, and faster ones. It means that more rational and complex ideas, emotions, or ways of life are generated, creating greater freedom and self-determination, more possibilities and opportunities for development, more temporariness and future.
Modernization implies that old differences, based on tradition and inherited power, are replaced with equality, parity and equal pay for equal work: social equality, equality between the sexes, are on the rise. In short, modernity, according to this conception, rests on a belief in science and technology, individualism, and democracy. Architecture certainly made these values part of its cause. It chose to explore new possibilities in materials, techniques, and constructions, to create an architecture that would make a modern life, self-consciousness, and society possible. The loam houses were torn down and, Claes writes, 'the stone houses that took their place are bigger, healthier, lighter'; 'everything is healthier, better.' In this sense, modern architecture has a clear social-utopian purpose: after all, modernization means improving the world on all kinds of levels.

The great project of modernization and the Enlightenment remains implicit in a widely accepted view of what makes 'good architecture'. Good architecture has a world in mind: it is utopian and calls for change. In itself, it is a realized fragment of a better world and has an exemplary function. Meanwhile, however, the modernization project has lost a great deal of its power and clarity, and so the notion of good architecture needs to be reconceptualized. Does a good building take a stand amidst banality as a trendsetter or trailblazer? What is good architecture doing out there? Is it waiting, pathetically maladjusted, for allies to come and join it, so that the world will at least partially be
filled with good architecture? If that is a naïve or oversimplified notion, then what is it all about? What is truly at stake in good architecture today? Over the past few decades, the notion of modernity has been further developed and refined. This allows us to distinguish local, hybrid forms of modernity – next to the canonized, heroic variety – and to understand them without measuring them by the standards of an international conception of modernity. For example: when did Belgium and Flanders become ‘modern’? Sometime between 1950 and 1970? There you have a generation that claimed the right to a time of its own that wanted to clarify and intensify its own sense of existence, by creating modern art and architecture. It was a generation that left to live a modern life, mostly outside the city. So what is it like to tear down the ancestral home and make modern lives and modern architecture? What are these white, light, modern houses? Who built them and why? What does it mean to dispose of content and paint abstractly or internationally? Is one life (one generation) not too short to become completely modern?

It is undeniable that architecture and lifestyle ‘modernized’ our life and our country. It is clear that here, too, modernity means trading in the old for that which is better, healthier, and freer, more efficient and more equal. Art and architecture have truly been laboratories for the development of a modern self-consciousness and a sense of the new. And yet, at the same time, this modernity does not get very far from where it left
off. It is becoming more and more obvious, as the modern shifts back into time and becomes history in its turn, how deeply the modern is marked by its own 'used to be'. 'Au moment même ou la pensée témoigne que la domus est devenue impossible, ... elle appelle à la maison, à l'œuvre, en laquelle elle inscrit ce témoignage' ['At the very moment when thought bears witness to the fact that the domus has become impossible, ... it appeals to the house, to the work, in which it inscribes this testimony'] (Lyotard). Modern art and architecture are marked by their beginning, by 'what used to be': they bear witness to the domus, to the world they reject and leave behind, through the very desire or will to make work. Real art and architecture are not made for the sake of money, comfort, success, or a career but so that the image, the text, or the building might exist and, by its existence, give meaning and purpose to the matter it consumes, as well as the time and place it takes to make or live with it.

The mental space and form that fostered the awareness of the modern, within which the avant-garde was created, is that of the work: the work of art, the piece of architecture, the œuvre. Gertrude Stein, who was born in the United States but spent most of her life in Paris, wrote in An American and France⁴ that in order to make something one needs two civilisations: one to come from and one to stay in, without actually living

there, thus creating a space for work. America is ‘the half that made me’ – people are where they come from – but Paris is not the other ‘half that made me.’ Paris is not a second home but the half ‘in which I made what I made’. The second place of modernism is therefore not a destination; the domus is gone and lies behind us. Precisely in order to make art and architecture, the modern breaks out of that confining first place, out of the domus, which has no place for art, thought, or writing. But it leaves, not in order to be at home everywhere and nowhere or to surf, but in order to choose a second place, where work that one connects with is made: a text, a book, a statue, a building that stands in the world and in life as a fact and a decision, as a statement. The work or œuvre is not a place in the world in itself; it is uninhabitable and cannot become a second home. Yet at the same time, although chosen and contingent, it is as necessary and compelling as a beginning.

Thus, the modern is not just set in the future but also implies living with a ‘used to be’. Blanchot writes, in connection with Cézanne, about the obligation to create art. This demand – ‘appelons donc cette exigence peinture, appelons-là œuvre ou art’ ['let us call this demand painting, let us call it work or art'] – does not say whence it derives its authority, nor why this authority does not require anything from he who sup-

ports it, attracts him or abandons him completely, demands more from him than any morality or human being could, and at the same time does not compel him to do anything, does not hold anything against him or give him any advantage, does not relate to him, all the while appealing to him to maintain a relationship – and thus torments and agitates him with boundless joy.’ (Le livre à venir, pp. 46–47). This place where the oeuvre is thought, connecting with the modern and claiming it without obligation, is, all things considered, essentially pre-modern. This standard of the work, by which the modern measures its own art and architecture, is a memory. Take Claes again: as he sees it, the child is not ‘initiated’. That is to say, it is not introduced to an ‘initium’ or origin, in order to become part of a community and continuity. On the contrary: in ‘Jeugd’ Claes describes how childhood ends when the child is expelled from that continuity. Initiation into the modern is not an inauguration but an experience of loss and departure. The inauguration is a turning point that sticks in one’s mind and marks one’s life as a ‘used to be’, a memory of the moment and the way in which the child belonged to the old world unfragmented, not for the first but for the last time. In ‘Jeugd’, these are the moments when Claes became a storyteller, when he worked for the first time.

The child by the fireplace has heard a lot of stories, but telling them is something he learned from his father. In a few great pages, Claes recounts that, as a child, he went deaf for some time and then blind for an
entire year. While the others worked on the land, he remained behind with his ailing father in their house between Zichem and Averbode. ‘There we were, just the two of us, my father and I, home alone, while the others were working in the stable or the barn or outside somewhere, doing winter chores. My father told stories and I listened. I sat on a chair or a footstool in front of him, my blindfolded face lifted towards him, hands on my knees. ... He was close beside me and because I could not see, confined as I was to a hole of black darkness, all the intonations of his voice, along with the images summoned by his words, had twice the effect on my imagination. ... ‘When you’re telling a story, you’re always looking at me, right?’ ‘Sure, son.’ Consequently, when the father goes outside and the child is left behind, unmentionable fear creeps in: ‘As I realized that I was alone with silence, and that suddenly everything in the room – the table and chairs, the hanging clock, and the walls – was staring at me, with a cold, hostile look that I was unable to resist, I crawled into a corner and sat there, trembling with fear.’ His first strategy is to call out to his father: ‘Come and take a look ... I think my bandage has slipped off.’ The second is to placate the ghosts: ‘If you don’t hurt me, I’ll give you my candy.’ The final, truly successful strategy, is to tell stories: ‘And so, one time, I promised, ‘If you all sit quietly and don’t hurt me, I will tell you a story.’ And suddenly, I thought, they shut up and sat there waiting, motionless and full of attention. I did not even hear the hanging clock anymore. My fear was
suddenly gone. And in that deathly quiet room, alone, I told stories to the spirits of our house, stories about Genoveva.’ The father dies, the child goes to school and becomes a writer who mostly writes to tell stories, usually about storytelling. What is writing if not telling stories on your own, to the spirits of the domus, to no one?

The second experience is that of the work. In the closing pages of ‘Jeugd’, entitled Working, Claes describes how he was momentarily accepted into the old world, before leaving it eventually. After his father’s death, the child is forced to leave school, so he can work at the farm. ‘You have to spade that stretch at the back of the garden; we could sow beets there,’ Hein commands in the same tone as he would use to Lowie or Frans. That tone in itself is the greatest sign of acknowledgement and trust.’ Then, when the plot has been turned over: ‘Look at the eleven- or twelve-year old child, leaning on his shovel like an adult, looking down on that stretch of fresh soil, which he has turned over shovel by shovel, his work, the visible and tangible result of his solid labor – he is no longer a child. ‘I’m finished back there in the garden, Hein’; ‘Good.’ A single word of praise would have been too much.’ ‘There was a satisfaction in the work that made the joy of a first in the ‘sixième préparatoire’ or the ‘sixième latine’ seem very small.’ This joy, or the moment when it can be felt, coincides with an awareness of distance and loss: it is a memory, linked to the memory of leaving. Because in those days, in the evening when the

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work was done, they all had time to themselves, including the children: stories and the spirit of Hendrik Conscience (Flemish writer 1812–1883) returned, carrying 'the yearning for something closer, with greater possibilities, wider and sunnier, something beyond the slave labor I saw around me – the poetry of which grew dimmer every day. Something beyond the roughness of life, in which – I already felt it back then – the dream was crushed. And without a dream there was no joy in work.' When it is not just a spontaneous force but is treated consciously, this yearning becomes a dream, affecting reality and the house. And the child wants to leave: he goes to work in a printing office and heads out in the direction of 'the promised land of the mind and the soul.'

The moderns left in search of freedom and a dream that the domus does not understand and for which it cannot make room. The domus has no library. It is no small matter to write instead of telling stories, to create art instead of working a real job, to make architecture that those you left at home would not want to live in. But the question still remains what this leaving entails. One leaves in order to write, paint, or build, but precisely in this striving to create modern work, one is impossibly faithful to that which one leaves and betrays. The modern departs from a compelling and suffocating communality, from the tyranny of the commonplace and of shared, fixed meanings and gestures: all in order to make something that, once again, has the structure of a common meaning and that, despite
everything, demands approval. Storytelling and the work of the child remain the hidden reference and standard for the work of art or architecture: it is the subservience of Henry Van de Velde’s domestic servant and Lyotard; Loos’ farmhouse; the grandfather walking in silence. But that faithfulness naturally comes after the betrayal: it cannot be recognized as faithfulness and therefore cannot make up for anything. The modern work never becomes part of a world, the way the work of a child turning over the soil belongs to a world and reinforces it. Books are of course read, paintings admired, and houses inhabited, but at the same time there is never someone — a community or a world — to receive the modern work. The modern work is marked by a standard and a memory of communality, always leaving the writer or reader, the maker or viewer, alone. The modern work is made for no one and certainly not for an audience. Lyotard offers a striking formulation of this structural loneliness and contradictory character of the modern work, when he says that the house or the work remains — ‘la domus demeure’ [‘the domus stays’] — as an impossibility: ‘elle demeure comme impossible’ [‘it remains as an impossibility’]. The work, in modernity, is not logically impossible or unthinkable but is the ‘degree zero’ of the attainable, just as the content of a memory is al-

6 Henry van de Velde, Leerstellingen. Op zoek naar en bestendige schoonheid (Pages de doctrine), Antwerpen s. d., pp. 26; cf. ‘Architecture is (as) a gesture’.
ways impossible and can only be reached as a ‘used to be’ that is gone. The modern work is ‘Mon lieu com-
mun’ [‘My common place’]: a restitution that comes too late, a commonplace that leaves one alone. Thus, the work contradicts itself and can be nothing more than an attempt. The great œuvres, considered accomplishments of modern culture – Nietzsche, Kafka, Benjamin, Musil, Blanchot, Duchamp, Giacometti, Rothko – all have the structure of rough drafts or ruins and are almost openly focused on the awareness of their own experimental nature. Certainly, the inadequate character of the work, the awareness of impossibility, does not always or necessarily have the clarity and sharpness of these great failures. Particularly in architecture, things are a bit different: what is built unmistakably exists and is being used, so in a sense it always succeeds. The architect, moreover, rarely makes decisions on his own and can blame his client, building regulations, or the budget. But the modern piece of architecture, too – even the average, sleepy architecture without heroic aspirations – is marked by the impossibility of the work and also fails. The modern work is never as strong as a farmer’s table, and the modern architect is never truly a builder. Architecture, I feel, must be considered independently of urban planning and understood as art once again: good architecture is not the beginning or a part of a better world, just as a work of art does not demand that more – or indeed everything – become art. Architecture will not redeem or save the world. It cannot be
made into an example. The meaning of a piece of architecture is not the degree to which it contributes to modernization but the fact that it marks this modernized, ever more enlightened world with that which it has left behind. Good architecture – in the case of modern architecture: that which intends to take its place in the world as work – stands as a testimony. Precisely because it fails, and at the same time reveals itself and the impossibility of the work, architecture inscribes ‘what used to be’ into the present, creating a wound. Just as a testimony is a somewhat solemn speech, which is marked by what it has seen, interrupts the babbling, and neither requires nor bears a reply, just so architecture interrupts life. The meaning and importance of architecture – like that of art – lies, right now, in the resistance it offers. Utopia? A text, a building, a statue obviously do not make any difference in time or in the world. And yet there is the belief, or at least the hope, that these lonely, weak works, which do not solve anything and are structurally uninhabitable, nevertheless create a space for a possible community. The work is the location of a postponed and indirect encounter. It is a place where an unattainable community of ‘Einzelgänger’, who reject the warmth and conviviality of the circle or the public, pass each other in different directions. The shock of reading a second-hand book; a sentence that stuck in one’s mind and then shows up unexpectedly elsewhere; the brief, distant exchange; the recognition of a forgotten image as a place where someone used to
live, an image that bears traces and impressions that, when they are found, almost become greetings. The revolution that does not change a thing...

Architecture criticism assumes that a distinction can be made between, for example, good and bad architecture and believes that this distinction matters. Criticism is not a form of quality control, testing what is built against criteria. Criticism is a reflective occupation: it makes history, decides what is to be remembered, what is to be carried over into thinking about another work. In the process, criticism always does more than merely judge; it always, and primarily, comes down to articulating and being honest about one's own experience and choices.

One's own experience is always at the same time the experience of a generation. Therefore, criticism demands – above and beyond sharp vision, careful description, and understanding – openness about what is at stake, for example in architecture. What is put on the line in architecture? I have situated the modern – the meaning and importance of modernity – not in its contribution to the future but in the way in which it handles its 'used to be.' If that is where the modern is marked and bears witness – in the work – and if the stakes of modern architecture are connected with something that is at issue in people's lives, with the extraordinarily powerful experience of breaking away and leaving, then what is on the line for who comes after the 'modern'?
Bart Verschaffel

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1956 Born in Eeklo (B)
1978 Masters degree in Philosophy at the University of Leuven (B)
1980 Medieval studies
1985 Doctorate on the epistemology of history
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14 Student Projects with Valerio Olgiati 1998–2000 (multilingual: Ger., Engl. and It.)

Anna Maria Kupper, Lucerne: Tafelbilder und Zeichnungen 1999-2001 (Ger.)
Giorgio Grassi, Milan: Ausgewählte Schriften 1970-1999 (Ger.)
In preparation: Helmut Federle, Vienna: Arbeiten im Zusammenhang mit Architektur; Heinrich Helfenstein, Zurich; Raphael Zuber, Zurich: Sigurd Lewerentz

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Ignasi de Solà-Morales has done much to show that there is a middle way between nostalgia and disillusionment. Based on his experience of large modern cities, where the distinction between the form and content of visual mediation is becoming more and more difficult, Solà-Morales discusses the traditional concept and thus the historical vocation of architecture, thereby evoking Gille Deleuze’s model of a kaleidoscopic cultural condition of multiplicity. At the same time, however, he refers to Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in order to lead architecture out of its state of crisis into a new condition in which it can establish a new identity.

Unfortunately, Ignasi de Solà-Morales did not live to see the publication of this book. The author of important texts on architecture (e.g. Diferencias. Topografía de la arquitectura contemporánea, 1995), who was also responsible for the reconstruction of Mies van der Rohe’s German exhibition pavilion in Barcelona, died in March this year.

The architects Valentin Bearth & Andreas Deplazes from Chur have an impressive oeuvre to their credit, an oeuvre that has grown continuously over the past ten years. Their architecture is free of all repetition and stereotyped convention, and it cannot be classified in any category of trendy architecture. Each work responds to the place and the numerous parameters upon which each specific architectural task is based.

Ákos Moravánszky, professor of architecture at the ETH Zurich, describes six of the architects’ buildings. His text takes the reader on an imaginary journey that stops off at six stations, analysing, comparing, asking questions and seeking answers. A high calibre theoretical architectural essay.
Since the beginning of the 1990s, Miroslav Šik has been recognised as one of the actively innovative and analytical spirits of the Swiss and German-speaking architectural discussion. His architecture is not spectacular, nor does he flirt with short-lived architectural trends. In a manner of speaking, Miroslav Šik seeks the subversive and powerful middle path between banal and over-ambitious architecture. His interest and attention is focused on the people who live in the buildings and populate the cities, and he is concerned with the necessary rather than the superfluous.

The book introduces three recent works by the Zurich architect and professor at the ETH Zurich in subtle photographs by Christian Kerez and Walter Mayr, accompanied as by plans. The high-quality texts draw attention to architectural cross-references and plumb the depths of the attributes of a powerful new whole that has emerged from a building complex. Selected texts by Miroslav Šik document the foundations of his rich theoretical basis.

Architectural works by students are practice workpieces. Nevertheless, in addition to the formidable and arduous acquisition of craftsmanship, they – and I am speaking in particular of these fourteen programmatic works, bear witness to the joint quest of teacher and pupil for a meaningful development of the architectural task. It is here that the special significance of these projects lies. Let us consider the impressive atmosphere of the schools and master classes, filled with a remarkable dynamic force, where teachers fired by the passion of their calling disclose the still dormant potential of their students and are rewarded by a magic, almost forbidden glimpse into the future.