

A Without State: Haus Wittgenstein – Inverleith House

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‘The highest utility is non-utility.’

Theodor Adorno

‘You think philosophy is difficult enough but I can tell you it is nothing to the difficulty of being a good architect. When I was building that house for my sister in Vienna I was completely exhausted at the end of the day that all I could do was go to a ‘flick’ at the end of every night’.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

It was a major political event that prevented my first attempt to visit Haus Wittgenstein from succeeding. After being ‘detained and redirected’ on a trip through Bulgaria, some time later it was more than ironical to find that ‘The Haus’ was owned by the Bulgarian state as a feature of its diplomatic presence in Vienna. The building and its distinctive features had long interested me and it had made its presence felt in my memory as kind of talisman of abstract form.

Later, when I was a student in London it reappeared in a sense quixotically. As an observer and listener, to a debate between supporters of the utilitarian-linguistic notion of Wittgenstein and his ideas, the discussion touched prosaically on ‘The Haus’. I noted then that this non-visual definition of architecture as strange. This seemed to represent a fascinating and yet somehow odd contradiction. A matter peculiarly unique, to put it simply, that I felt it could only exist within linguistic philosophy. That visual thinking, essential in the process of making architecture could seemingly be dispensed with, as unnecessary was a peculiar proposition. Could Wittgenstein’s work as a visual thinker really represent this utilitarian, non-visual methodology? This, I suppose lingered as a distinctive memory, until in the passage of due time I found myself within the portals of the daunting austerity of Haus Wittgenstein. A built space of enormous complexity. This complexity of spatial form had above all a great sense of geometry, a geometry as tactile as the built form encapsulates and enhances our sense of space, touch and that most non linguistic of senses, reflection. Yet this hidden, until comparatively recently, work of architecture, had also an anonymous, strangely self-deprecatory presence. A presence which was documented for the first time accurately in Bernard Leitner and Kasper König’s timely book on the house at Parkgasse1, a book which started to bring the ‘Haus’ into view. To me, the unschooled ‘speculator’, the ‘Haus’ naturally confounded the idea of Wittgenstein being part of that utilitarian-linguistic group. This

feeling was heightened by my exploring the writing of G.E.Davie, and I quote an apposite passage or two here, first from 'A Passion for Ideas'², and then 'The Crisis of The Democratic Intellect'³

'Let us summarise the point Rorty and Derrida are making.....This is the only looking glass by which we can, in some measure, with eyes of other people, scrutinise the propriety of our own conduct. Here we find the metaphor of light and the looking glass which are ruled out by Derrida and by Rorty as self-evidently nonsense, and we find that like Smith, Hume too has recourse to the same analogy when he is trying to clear up the relations of language and of consciousness. "The minds of men are mirrors to one another..... only in so far as they are *accompanied by a reflection*, of which custom renders us insensible".

'In the present case, one need only draw attention to the very remarkable passage in the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, in which Wittgenstein, defending the disappearance of the conscious self, points to the fact that the eye, i.e. the organ of sight, does not itself occur in the visual field it makes possible, and using that analogy, goes on to justify his destruction of the conscious self by suggesting to us that it means nothing more than this, that just as the eye is outside the field of vision so the self is outside the field of consciousness which makes it possible. Now in the light of all I have been saying, it would appear that Wittgenstein here is on the verge of breaking through to a doctrine very different from his own, and similar to that held by Alexander, by Adam Smith, by Schelling or Leibniz, or for that matter by Sartre, orby J.F.Ferrier.'

'the insights of Wittgenstein as to how sight by concealing the eye, gives a very different consciousness of bodily relation to the things seen, compared with what is acquired via tactual feelings with their presentation of the interval between the eye and the thing seen, and combining with this Wittgensteinian epercu the complimentary insights, due to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, that the sight fully pays back it's debt to it's brother sense of touch, as a tactual explorer and manipulator, the hand, which reveals things as hard and soft, does not reveal it's presence as a hand ,but is, in it's turn, indebted to the counter - indications of vision for knowledge of the physical nature and whereabouts of the organ with the help of which the table or other external body reveals to feeling it's palpable shape'.

These passages, not only brought a sense of the 'Haus' to me, I felt they were very close to my own work as in the sense of 'a tactile geometry'. So in my travels, (perhaps really a kind of Odyssey), began the germ of an idea, of installing and making a contribution, that is a set of works in some way site derived, drawing on notions that contributed and commented, that exorcised this potential spatially. At the same time an analogy came to mind, this was spatial in another sense, on a kind of central-peripheral axis, an Atlantic Periphery-Mittel Europa axis. This was a long latent notion.

On visiting Vienna in 1993, Hubert Winter without prior discussion suggested I make an installation in Haus Wittgenstein. Immediately Inverleith House came to mind as a companion installation. Its context in Edinburgh, the source of enlightenment ideas, and an architectural-philosophical situation of which I was naturally familiar, and a city which had

an undercurrent of association with Vienna⁴, brought forth the possibility of creating installations in both, in the severe, melancholic and silent 20th century space in Vienna and in the elegantly simple 18th century structure set in the Botanical Garden in Edinburgh. This combination emphasised a philosophical reading of the spatial context of vision, referring not only to Wittgenstein's plastic notion of that, but also David Hume's perceptual distinction of abstraction in black and white and in cube and sphere.⁵

'There is a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous.

He must paint on a thin stretched parchment with a special brush and black

water paint in such a way that an unnatural or interrupted stroke will destroy

the line or break through the parchment. Erasures or changes are impossible.

These artists must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea

to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that

deliberation cannot interfere. The resulting pictures lack the complex composition of ordinary painting,

but it is said that those who see well will find something captured that escapes

explanation'. Bill Evans, from the liner notes of the Miles Davis recording 'Kind of Blue'.

A major factor in terms of the forming of my work has been the East. A further point on the global 'askesis'. I find parallels in early Japanese nature poetry and Duncan Bàn MacIntyre, between Hume's 'Void' and Zen. However within the context of the observation from Odysseus 'on that wine dark sea' quoted elsewhere in this publication, and the irony of having found the east by travelling west, as John Barth has it,

'It is an insight which, if the hero has it, he acquires exactly at the *Axis Mundi*, as a feature of his general illumination. The hero voyages westward, but it is

the east he reaches; the realm of selflessness and mystical transcension.

The truly westward motion, at least potentially, is the long voyage home from

the east, to the country of the waking consciousness:....it is one voyage after

all, and its philosophical hemispheres impinge.'⁶

Cultures merge or are reconfigured, and influences are exchanged. There is reference to the cosmological ideas of Zen reflected in my interest in the work of the Japanese artist-gardener Sesshu. Whose work I encountered on the occasion of my first exhibition in Japan, the garden and temple of Joei-ji in Yamaguchi, is an extraordinary manipulation of space, living space. Sesshu was described by John McLaughlin as the creator of 'The Marvellous Void', a 15th Century conception of abstraction. At Joei-ji the temple floor is seen as a

viewing platform for the cosmos created as the garden. The site and role of the 'Enlightenment' Inverleith House parallels this as a viewing platform overlooking the apotheosis of 'Enlightenment' thought, the planned cosmos of Edinburgh. 'The City of Enlightenment'. ('Satori', that is 'Enlightenment').⁷ I had in mind another set of symbols and parallels from Sesshu's garden cosmos to the finding of the fresh space in the stone of Mont Sainte Victoire, to the Geddesian symbol of the living cosmos as the city itself, a new sense of the socio-spatial, a new light. The subsequent meeting with Paul Nesbitt brought an immediate synergy of purpose, which resulted in Inverleith House being brought in as the companion to Haus Wittgenstein.

'The patterns of nature can be as many as our consciousness
is capable of drawing on'
Naum Gabo.

The works in both structures emphasising different aspects of the analogy, would reflect a black and grey mirroring tone bound by a precise yet formed geometry. Providing I would hope, an independent yet related intimate view on the speculative aspect of space as vision and tactility, and to an insight of nature. Yet again indicating a paradoxical totality, a self effacing non-objectivity, provoking a hyperspace, koan like, in it's content without content. Bringing to the viewer, a stoic and neutral sense of themselves. This it may be stressed may happen through exploring the work's resolute passivity, observing perhaps the tone, then the space between the lines and it's ensuing ambivalence, where this actually occurs. Perhaps through 'The', Common Sense.

'Aristotle observed that the faculty by which we distinguish
the object of the different senses, e.g., white from sweet,
must be a faculty distinct from both space and taste. Some of his
followers gave the name of the Common Sense to this faculty,
some of them made it to be the Intellectual Faculty, they thought
Vision imperfect without this Faculty.'

Thomas Reid.⁸

'All great art is engaged in silence. The silence of art is not mere absence of sound, but an independent sensory and mental state, an observing, listening and knowing silence. It is a silence that evokes

a sense of melancholy and a yearning for the absent ideal'.
Juhani

Pallasmaa.⁹

<p>1 'Die Architektur von Ludwig Wittgenstein'. The Nova Scotia College of Art Press. + N.Y.U.Press, N.Y.C.1973. 2 'A Passion for Ideas' George Elder Davie.Polygon.Edinburgh.1994. 3'The Crisis of The Democratic Intellect', George Elder Davie.Polygon.Edinburgh.1986. 4 For example through the influence of Robertson Smith on Freud. 5 See David Hume,' Treatise of Human Nature', pages 72-73.Ed.Mossner Penguin 1984.Also Kenneth White's' Pilg Void', where he makes a comparison between Hume's notion of 'The Void' and Nagarjuna. Mainstream. Edinburg London.1992. 6 John Barth, 'The Friday Book' G.P. Putnam's Sons.N.Y.C.1984. 7 See Frantz Fanon,' The Wretched of the Earth, 1967.'.... came to lighten their darkness'. Another dimension of 'a 'Enlightenment'. 8 Thomas Reid.' Curâ Primâ on Common Sense'.</p>

9 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The Limits of Architecture-Towards an Architecture of Silence'. Arkkitehti. Helsinki.1990.

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