Mundane beauty in art and architecture

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Abstract: In the twentieth century a specific kind of beauty emerged from art: the increased value of the mundane. Contemporary art shows that common situations have an aesthetic significance. But architecture does not pay any attention to this scope. What is more, it tries to deny it. Nor the design process nor the architectural photography show the presence of mundane things. Fortunately, we have some works to go in depth into this day-to-day issue. Let's analyze the photograph *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona,* (Jeff Wall, 1999), the intervention *Phantom, Mies as Rendered Society* (Andrés Jaque, 2012) and the film *Koolhaas Houselife* (Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, 2008). By considering the visual and spatial value of these cases, we reconsider them as an experimental space. What if architecture starts looking at its surroundings?

Key words: contemporary art, architecture, mundane, day-to-day, social.

Belleza de lo mundano en arte y arquitectura

Resumen: A lo largo del siglo XX ha emergido un tipo de belleza singular en el campo del arte: lo mundano. El arte contemporáneo muestra que los objetos y situaciones cotidianos tienen una trascendencia estética. Pero la arquitectura parece no prestar atención por estas cuestiones. Y lo que es más, las rechaza y evita. Ni el proceso de diseño ni las imágenes finales de la obra enseñan la presencia de lo mundano. Afortunadamente, hay ejemplos con los que investigar en la presencia de lo ordinario en arquitectura. Los ejemplos considerados son *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* (Jeff Wall, 1999), la intervención *Phantom, Mies as Rendered Society* (Andrés Jaque, 2012) y el documental *Koolhaas Houselife* (Ila Bêka y Louise Lemoine, 2008). Examinar el valor visual y espacial de estas obras permite situar las cosas y acciones ordinarias como vía de experimentación y toma de nuevas posiciones. Es momento de que la arquitectura se replantee estos aspectos vivos propios de su entorno.

Palabras clave: arte contemporáneo, arquitectura, mundano, cotidiano, social.

Introduction

Although not easy to recognize at first sight, contemporary art depicts a key item that appears to be hidden in the modern architectural legacy. In the twentieth century a specific kind of beauty emerged from the mundane. Painting, sculpture, photography, and performance art show that common situations have an aesthetic significance. Also, we reach an experimental field by considering the visual, spatial and social value of these situations. But architecture does not look to pay any attention to this scope. What is more, it tries to deny it. Nor the design process nor the architectural photography show the presence of quotidian objects or daily tasks. So,

what can architecture learn from contemporary art to get over the negation to this day-to-day context? Let's take a photograph, an installation and a film to go in depth into this question.

Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, a Jeff Wall's photograph, shows the interior of the German Pavilion, the iconic glass-walled building designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona. Whilst the building's formal rigor and its opulent materials convey a sense of luxury, in the background, an attendant is in the process of cleaning. *Phantom, Mies as Rendered Society* (2012) is the installation produced by the architect Andrés Jaque in the German

Pavilion, as well as the previous work. It represented an inventory of the Pavilion's basic facts on a totally pragmatic basis: from materials, maintenance, and management to social and political issues. *Koolhaas Houselife* (2008), the last of the examples, is an Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine's 58-minutes-long documentary. It presents a portrait of the *Maison à Bordeaux* (1994-1998), a country residence designed by Rem Koolhaas. The hero of the film is a housekeeper and as she starts bustling through the house, she animates her surroundings to perfection.

Each one of the cases shows an interpretation of an inner space. We need to delve into them, looking for the architect's objective, the user's experience, and the story of the work.

Morning cleaning

Jeff Wall (1946) is renowned for large-format photographs with subject matter that ranges mundane corners of the living and urban environment. *Morning Cleaning* is a cibachrome displayed as a transparency in a light box that measures over three and a half meters long by two meters high. It depicts the glamorous inner space of the pavilion in the bright light of the sunrise. One of the pavilion's cruciform-sectioned steel columns punctuates the composition slightly to the right. The room is closed off at the left by a freestanding wall of onyx doré with the splendid patterns of striations, divided into larger rectangles. At the rear, the main interior space is partly closed off by floor-to-ceiling glass panels, beyond which we see a reflecting pool. The Travertine marble floor of the

main space extends past those panels to the edge of the pool. At the far side of the pool there rises abruptly a wall of Alpine Green marble, beyond the top of which we glimpse a band of tree branches and sky. *Der Morgen* (George Kolbe, 1925), a sculpture of a standing female nude with arms raised above her hands, rises on a pedestal from the pond. Six Mies' Barcelona chrome-and-leather couches sit at the two ends of a long black carpet, and two matching chairs sit just beyond the carpet. In the background of the image, in blue trousers, sandals, and a white T-shirt, a dark haired window cleaner bends at the waist over a large yellow bucket on wheels. His engrossment in his task leads the viewer to look at him and to the floor-to-ceiling glass panels blurred by the suds.

Mies' Pavilion was first constructed for the 1929 International Exposition held in Barcelona. It was disassembled at the conclusion of the exhibition, but reconstructed by Barcelona City Council in the 1980s because of its cultural and architectural significance. The building conveys a sense of luxury with the formal rigor and opulent materials. However, Jeff Wall pictures the Pavilion in a new but everyday stage. There is a primacy of aesthetic concerns, with notions of beauty, pleasure, and quality, while at the same time calling attention to the congruence with an art of the everyday. The image resembles very closely what occurs at the Pavilion and make visible an activity which is normally unseen and overlooked. Wall remarks "Baudelaire was right when he said that the most fascinating element is the common place". And: "The everyday, or the common place, is the most basic and the richest category. Although it seems familiar, it is always surprising and new" (Wall, 2001: 112).

Figure 1.- Jeff Wall. Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona (1999). Transparency in lightbox, 187.0 x 351.0 cm Courtesy of the artist.

Phantom

Andrés Jaque (1971), the founder of the Office for Political Innovation, leads crucial debates for contemporary architecture. For example, *Ikea Disobedients* (2011) and *Superpowers of Ten* (2013) work on the assemblage of the diversity ordinary life is made of. In this case, *Phantom, Mies as Rendered Society's* intervention unmasks the German Pavilion. The research project describes it as a two-storey building with two inter-dependent notions of the political lie in dispute. The upper floor is physically transparent, but in order to provide an extraordinary experience of the everyday architecture it conceals the activities and pacts that take place there. The lower floor is opaque and it is the place where the experiments and conflicts which construct the Pavilion are confined. The basement is the place where spare parts, tools, and machines are stored to prevent us from seeing those objects around the building. Also, it is the place where derelict items are hidden from the experience of the visitors: faded red velvet curtains, worn-out white leather cushions from the Barcelona chairs and stools, and broken pieces of the Travertine slabs. At the end of the basement, there are a sink and a plastic round table where the staff dines together, and on the wall, some pinned photographs, portraits, exhibitions flyers and newspaper cut-outs. Their shared intimacy is visible in the basement, but leaves no trace on the floor above. The Pavilion operates together: "the exceptional emerges in the absence of the ordinary" (Jaque 2012: 3).

The 1986 reconstruction of the Pavilion faced the decision to incorporate this huge basement to make or not to make the staircase accessible for people. At the end, and with disabilities in accordance with current regulations, the architects in charge of the reconstruction decided that the only access would be via a dangerous and uncomfortable 63-cm wide spiral staircase. The concern was to preserve the original experience of the building as a reception space. The Pavilion was redesigned on the basis of criteria which had shifted from Modernist to Postmodernist, from formal approaches to mankind thoughts. As Jaque noticed, the hidden items are the architectural equivalents to the Oscar Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray*. The dilapidated pieces of velvet, glass, or travertine are simultaneously hidden and preserved for the respect of what they once ideally represented. By having been part of the Pavilion's materiality, somehow it retains the essence of Mies' critical image. But while in aspects such us composition and materiality has been massively documented, its new conditions, like the basement, the cleaner task, and the ordinary life have remained a totally unseen and unstudied reality. Walter Lippmann's *The Phantom Public* (1925), the reference of the intervention's title, shows a civilization that is unable to be involved in the relational complexities of the societies. Jaque's intervention is about experiencing how it became part of the daily reality.

Koolhaas houselife

Koolhaas Houselife is one of the *Living Architecture* series, in which Bêka (1967) and Lemoine (1981) show a Pritzker Prize winner's building based on specific features, such as the purpose of the architect, the experience of the users or the confined stories. Their studies in architecture, art, and philosophy lead them to explore the building from other point of view to put into question its iconic image. In fact, the structure of the film is based in twenty-four chapters that allude to common elements of living architecture: staircase, light, leaks, among others. *Maison à Bordeaux* is a rectangular three-level flat-roofed private residence on a hill overlooking Bordeaux –already under the protection of *France's Caisse Nationale de Monuments Historiques*-. The lower level is a series of caverns caved out from the hill, designed for the most intimate life of the family; the ground floor is a glass room for living; and the upper floor is divided into a children's and parents area. The house was commissioned by Mister Lemoine, a newspaper editor who was paralyzed in an automobile accident. Because of the wheelchair, the hearth of the house is a 3x3.5-m elevator platform that moves freely between the three floors, becoming part of the living space, the kitchen, or the office space.

Guadalupe Acedo, the Lemoine's servant, makes her initial appearance in the movie's opening scene as she ascends with her cleaning equipment on the elevator accomplished to the Accelerationen waltz of Johann Strauss. Her non-stop, throw-away commentary is by turns gossipy, sagacious, and pragmatic while she remains self-effacing to their bizarre but essentially wonderful task. The second essential figure in the running of the house is the "house doc", the house doctor. He finds solutions to dysfunctions and deteriorations of all prototype mechanisms. Several scenes expose the deplorable physical condition of the building, which is falling apart after little more than a decade. Leaks degradation of the concrete core that holds up the house, blocked doors, and narrow corridors are far from the only problems.

Daily life

There are four facts we can go in depth to take them from art to architecture. First of all, those examples define the world as an ensemble of daily objects. They are focus on portraits, still life, nude, nightlife. Without pretension, yet full of precisely daily nature. Everything looks fresh, as if seen for the first time. Although the abstract appearance, there is no clear line between these situations and realistic ones. So, the quotidian world is accessible and valuable to art. They make all the cultural and aesthetic forces visible. They bring realistic and spatial scenes to mind. The artist and photographer are in close relationship to common things in common places, but also, for the same reason, with architecture.

To deep into this concept, the designers Naoto Fukasawa (1956) and Jasper Morrison (1959) take in account the value of the "Super Normal" (2007). That is something bases in the

prevailing scheme of common sense designs; a consciously designed normal above-and-beyond normal. Fukasawa admires "when viewing something with expectations of a new design, our negative first impression of "nothing much" or "just plain ordinary" shifts to "… but not bad at all" and supports the fun and pleasure of reconfirming what we would disregarded as "naff". In words of Morrison, the "Super Normal" object is the result of a long tradition of evolutionary advancement in the shape of everyday things, not attempting to break with the history of form but rather trying to summarize it, knowing its place in society (Morrison 2007: 21,29). "Super Normal" is concerned with the homely memorable elements of everyday life.

Also, some contemporary artists have worked on this issue: William Eggleston (1939), Stephen Shore (1947), and Wolfgang Tillmans (1968). Eggleston's *Democratic Forest* catalogue refers to a democracy of vision, through which he represents the most mundane subjects with the same complexity and significance as the most elevated. The images, made in the 1980s, travels from his familiar ground in Memphis and Tennessee to several American cities. Shore states: "I've left often like an explorer, and I'm interested in not just bringing my set of values and ideas to the rest of the country, but I'm also interested in seeing what's there". He remembers the Hamlet's words at Shakespeare's *The Death of Gonzalo* play: "the purpose of playing was and is, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (Shore 2004: 183).

The inherent coolness of ordinary Tillmans' photography is taken to an extreme along with the apparent indifference to pictorial composition or techniques. In fact, the photographer affirms "That's how I want to convey my subject matter to the viewer. Not through the recognition of predetermined art historical/image categories but through enabling them to see with the immediacy that I felt in that situation" (Tillmans 2003: 303). In part, contemporary photographs of buildings come as quite as plain because they suddenly hide the underlying spatial theme, forgetting the living architecture. The photograph print of Tillmans absorbs all the architecture and all the life.

Day-to-day task

The presented works pay attention to the everyday task in domestic settings. In *Morning Cleaning*, the cleaner washing the windows represents many different notions of space. Its original subject is the maintenance of the transparency of glass architecture through the labor of cleaning, mainly cleaning the glass. This connects modernity and modern architecture with nature and household duties, since it is nature that makes glass dirty. While the building's formal rigour and rich materials carry the image of luxury, the cleaner calls the attention to the system necessary to maintain the architect's vision. On the other hand, it makes visible activities

which are normally unseen or overlooked. Each picture is documentary in the sense that is exactly what we would need to do to keep the essence of the Mies' Pavilion; it is the openness to the daily architecture.

It is related to other Jeff Wall' pictures like *Volunteer* or *Housekeeping* (1996), where a man mops the floor of a drop-in centre kitchen and a chambermaid exits a pristine hotel room, respectively. Seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, like *Interior with Reading Woman and Sweeping Maia*, performed this field. The affinity between both paintings has been already studied (Städelches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt am Main, 2002). Wall states the interest in the complexity of the experience we must have every day in developing relationships with the past. This point of view brings to our mind the work of the sociologist and photographer Lewis Hine (1874-1940). Hine treated the dirty workspaces as a stage-set to see from the photographic peephole what is hidden to ordinary sight. Even, he used it as a tool for social reform by using them as instrumental in changing child labor laws in the United States.

Living architecture

About the spatial context of the contemporary art, the circle of peolple and experiences interposes itself much more forcefully that the landscape and architecture. The artist makes a space in which they can live by taking human stories and daily activities, and forgetting how intelligent and beautiful the structure is. While this might imply a certain clarity or honesty, the modernising impulse also homogenises, tending towards rationalised modular forms that often cut the ties between function and legibility.

Phantom and *Koolhaas Houselife* explores architecture from an unusual point of view. *Jaque* defines the Pavilion's basement as the mechanism whereby the traces of all the negotiations, experiments, and accidents that define the building are hidden from visitors and effectively rendered invisible. It is the place where a number of micro-stories around the building's existence, preservation, and performance are *black-boxed* (Jaque 2012: 8). It is not the visitor but the staff who truly know the complexity of the twofold Pavilion. Only they see the opposing but interconnected aspects of the building.

Bêka and Lemoine put into question the iconic building by the deconstruction and construction of daily life. Between changing the sheets and vacuuming the floor, we get onto the everyday reality. This house shows the existential ambiguity between effort and routine. Architects try to reconcile the utopian component of the modern house with the age-old habits: the rhetorical model of "life as it should be" and he wearied reality of "life as usual" (Fernandez-Galiano 1998:1). *Koolhaas Lifehouse* is the proof of the hard maintenance that the house needs due to the modern ideal. The *Museum Photographs* series of Thomas Struth (1954) brings living presences to the scene to compose a new life. Each to their photographs makes the person into a figure giving a renewed life to interiors which have been

corroded by the accidents of time. On the other hand, his work renders the experience, which is the encounter with various aspects of the outside world.

Social construction

The described works leave the realms of the symbolic to engage directly with social and political reality. They work the production of a situation, inventing the rules of a game, the scenario for a situation that affects a reality, a negotiation between the contingent and the necessary in architecture. The Pavilion's staff experiences the building as the confrontation between two ways of socializing daily life. The first is a self-referential architecture, fixed in its precious materiality and far from conflicts and contingences. The second is the one whose mutability makes possible the purity of the previous one. It is the socializing daily life.

The attention to the ordinary relation between constructed space and social and individual states has been developed by the artist Gregor Schneider (1969). *Hans ur in Rheydt* is the house where he lived for many years between the original walls and the newly constructed sections, describing double windows in front of a solid wall, moving wall sections and connecting narrow passage ways between rooms. He even changed and installed the house in different galleries and festivals. This is an artistic work of an architectural scale. He affirms the existing building, but only because of the connection with a deeper level that questions the existential possibility of dwelling by finding refuge in a house. With the change of location inside the house, it is visible the contradiction between the inconsequential ordinaries of a room and the uncanny foundations of domestic living. In the same sense, his contribution to the 2001 Venice Biennale defines a house's historical exterior and his private house: outer world versus the inner, the collective sphere versus the individual.

Streamside Day by the artist Pierre Huyghe (1962) works on the empowering of a community. A residential development was constructed in a forest on the Hudson River in New York State. The new residents were invited to an event to celebrate the birth of their community. That is how Huyghe invents a tradition for the new suburban settlements. The ceremony consists on a tree planting ceremony, speeches by local authorities, a barbecue, and so on. The work is the support of meetings, signs, and corporations. This event is a form of art that is able to modify the public space rather than just temporarily occupying it.

For all its sensuous and natural beauty, the described images are a laboratory test, a forensic exposure of a renewed way of architecture. The next step is to debate about how it can become part of a daily spatial perception.

On everyday architecture

It is important to consider how the sensibility in ordinary takes place in architecture. Robert Venturi, Scott Brown and

Associates staged the exhibition 'Signs of Life: Symbols of the American City' at The Smithsonian Institution in Washington in 1976. The exhibition approached the American urban scene as a complex puzzle in need of decoding. In the gallery space various images were placed in relation to real objects (neon signs, furniture, pieces of architecture). Stephen Shore, who was then deep into his photography of vernacular towns and buildings, was commissioned to make the documents. Shore explains: '"The apparent is the bridge to the real. For many photographers, architecture serves this function. (…) A building also expresses the aesthetic parameters of its builder and its culture. This latter is the product of all the diverse elements that make up 'style': traditions, aspirations, conditioning, imagination, posturings, perceptions" (Shore 2008: 10). In the book *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), Venturi concludes: "Learning from popular culture does not remove the architect from his or her status in high culture. But it may alter high culture to make it more sympathetic to current needs".

Due to their friendship, we can review the point of view of Jeff Wall and the architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron. Jacques Herzog once said that art is twenty years ahead of architecture. That means, in words of Jeff Wall, that if you want to experiment, it is easier if you are an artist than an architect, since an artist does not have to deal with all the practical constraints of architecture. So, architecture is never a free art. However, Herzog & de Meuron seems to play in an in-between space. In 1984, they designed *Lego House* as contribution to "L'architecture est un jeu… magnifique" (Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1985). They show a view into and from one both specific and common room: the child's room. That is, the youth, the memories of day and night fantasies, of fear, sleep and eroticism. The atmosphere in these photographs is created by the chosen architectural elements: a wooden chair painted white, a shelf for the clothes, a desk, an open cupboard with the heart-like ornaments, a bed, the bedside lamp, the harmless ceiling map, its shadow on the nocturnal wallpaper. It is the image of a villa and the image of its architecture. Herzog & de Meuron's use of conventional, quotidian elements of architecture may even belong to the banal but, at the same time, shows a respectful appreciation toward them. Through the real materials, the language, the construction, and the tectonic composition they create connections to the users, the domestic surroundings, and the site's history (Herzog & de Meuron 2003: 219).

Three years after the *Koolhaas Lifehouse* documentary, Koolhaas published *Junkspace* (2002). The short essay makes architecture aware of the People's Architecture. Junkspace seems an aberration, but it is the essence, the main things. Elements such escalator, air-conditioning, sprinkler, fire shutter, sparkling infrastructures of light, LEDs, and video have truly revolutionized architecture, but all them are missed from the history books. Junkspace is everywhere, Junkspace is additive, layered, and lightweight, Junkspace knows all your emotions,

Junkspace is political, Junkspace pretends to unite, Junkspace creates communities (Koolhaas 2008: 182). However, when we think about space, we have only looked at its containers. As if space itself is invisible, all theory for the production of space is based on an obsessive preoccupation with substance.

Art and other practices are aware and face the proximity of everyday life. What if space started looking at People's Architecture? The thoughtful and playful narrative of all these works re-examines many important architectural concerns and that itself is definitely something worth holding on to.

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