

Alison and Peter Smithson: From the House of the Future to a House for Today

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

ALISON AND PETER SMITHSON: FROM THE HOUSE OF THE FUTURE TO A HOUSE FOR TODAY

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Exhibition of the work of Alison and
Peter Smithson, Design Museum,
London, December 2003–February
2004. Due to travel to Witte de
With, Centre for Contemporary
Art, Rotterdam; the Lighthouse,
Glasgow; and the Hatton Gallery,
Newcastle upon Tyne



The most recent exhibition of the work of architects Alison and Peter Smithson focuses not on their well-known public buildings, such as Hunstanton School in Norfolk (1950–4), the Economist Building in central London (1959–64) or the Robin Hood Gardens housing estate in East London (1966–72), but on the individual houses they designed and occasionally saw built, extended, and sometimes lived in themselves from the early 1950s to the present. In the book that accompanies the exhibition, its organizers Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel explain that it is in their designs for houses that “[the Smithsons’] interest in the ordinary and the everyday is expressed most clearly. It is in these designs that they concentrate on what they call the ‘art of inhabitation:’ the way in which people use, occupy and appropriate their homes” (Risselada and van den Heuvel 2004: 9). The exhibition was originally conceived in collaboration with Peter Smithson, who died in March 2003 (Alison died in 1993). By showing the way in which the Smithsons thought about and practiced their own “art of inhabitation,” book and exhibition have together become an immediate memorial to them, a biography told through their ideas about home.

Over half of the houses shown in the exhibition date from the early 1950s to the early 1960s. At that time, the Smithsons were deeply involved with the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM), the forum established in 1928 by Le Corbusier to identify and promote the role of contemporary architecture by redefining the home and, through it, the city. The Smithsons attended CIAM’s 9th meeting in 1954, where they embraced its continuing focus on the dwelling unit or “cell” used as a means to examine the collective realm. But their emphasis on the way in which the home might speak of inhabitation, might become biographical, put them in opposition to CIAM’s search for an abstractly considered minimum dwelling; their concern to explore patterns of communication between dwellings in concrete situations was very different from CIAM’s search for efficient systems of multiplication. By the 10th meeting in 1956, they had helped to establish a splinter group of young architects, Team X, and thus to provoke the demise of CIAM in 1959.

The introduction to the exhibition (reproduced on the back cover of the book) declares that the Smithsons, although great admirers of Le Corbusier, “rejected his idea of the dwelling as a “machine for living in.” To [them] . . . a house was a particular place, which should be suited to its location and able to . . . accommodate its inhabitants’ individual patterns of use.” The prototype “House of the Future,” the first project shown, then seems immediately an anomaly.¹ Installed at the Daily Mail Ideal Home exhibition in 1956, its location was a large box inside the Kensington Olympia exhibition hall, and its inhabitants were actors who “demonstrated” the imagined patterns of a glamorous couple’s life in 1980, using a wide range of built-in futuristic gadgets. Visitors did not enter the house itself. They entered

the box, which provided a corridor from which to stare through large viewing panels cut into the walls, and a staircase allowing for an overview of its roofless layout. The house was a set, staging the life of the future amongst pod-shaped cupboards (various wardrobes, a WC), curving walls (some flattened to contain the recalcitrant flatness of a television screen or fridge), and moulded plastic furniture, hiding or revealing it through yards of soft gathered curtains.

Although presented as “pure image” (Colomina 2004: 34), the careful choreography of distances between viewers and objects and people viewed made the experience of the installation oddly physical. Inside the house, the “simulated occupants” (Colomina 2004: 42) squeezed between front door, toilet pod and coat cupboard; they perched on the edge of the low, red-lined orifice of the self-cleaning bath; through a microphone, they explained the appliances they were using to an audience leaning too closely through the designated openings. After studying the “House of the Future,” the “art of inhabitation” explored throughout the rest of the current exhibition becomes more specific. This manipulation of distance, physical and visual, seems fundamental to the way in which the Smithsons understood use, occupation and appropriation.

“The approach to a house is the occupants’ link with society as a whole,” they wrote in 1953 (Smithson and Smithson 1970: 24). They were concerned that, from a distance, a house should be readable as such.² Yet scrutinizing the plans (which in both book and exhibition are frequently frustratingly small and blurred), the actual entrance to a house is often contrived to be awkward. At the Sugden House (1955–6), the drive allows the entire building to be seen as an object, starkly displayed on a podium, overscaled compared to its neighboring bungalows. But the small front door is squeezed between garage door and huge expanse of dining room window; it opens into a hallway which is large enough only to force you to turn through 90 degrees, towards the light. At the house designed for Joseph Losey in 1959–60, the approach road clings to an existing low wall to the north, with broad views across a wide river estuary to the south. It leads directly into the garage. The entrance is then buried behind the car. From it, a long, narrow slot labeled “living room corridor,” the width of a single door leaf, slides along the outer face of the rough stone wall of the existing farmhouse, which was to have been wrapped by the new building. The corridor opens eventually into the living room, and out again across the valley.³ In the small London terraced house that the Smithsons designed for themselves in 1952, the door from the street gives directly onto a completely open ground floor containing nothing but a wooden staircase that winds closely against unplastered brickwork. Plumbing fittings, pipes, and wiring would have stood out against the brick. They proposed a building that “appears to be made of what it is made of.” “It is our intention,” they wrote, “to have the structure exposed entirely, without internal

finishes wherever practicable”.⁴ In all of these houses, to occupy them means to be very aware of physicality, of materiality, and of the palpable manipulation of closeness and distance.

For the Smithsons, the house is a container of objects. The way of life it embodies is represented by the relationships between container and objects and amongst the objects themselves. They describe the approach used at the Sugden House or in their own proposed terrace as the “select and arrange technique,” (Smithson and Smithson 1973: 47, quoted in van den Heuvel 2004: 21) which considers objects such as staircases, boilers or baths as “separate and distinct pronouncements” (Smithson and Smithson 1973: 44). The molded interior of the “House of the Future” was an early attempt to suppress such pronouncements by integrating contents with container, to allow them to become the background to other elements, other events. The exhibition includes a series of schematic prototypes, from the “Appliance Houses” of 1956–58 to the “Put-Away House” that Peter Smithson worked on sporadically between 1993 and 2000, which experiment with different levels of “display to concealment” (Smithson and Smithson 1973: 8; van den Heuvel 2004: 22). The two stories of the “Put-Away House” are divided by a large storage core for accumulated possessions, a glut where objects can be permanently forgotten, or retrieved and displayed one by one.

For Le Corbusier, the extent to which the elements of a house recede to become merely background is the extent to which it can be considered a “machine for living in.” He makes a distinction between two roles of the house: it should be both an efficient, diligent, attentive machine that satisfies the needs of the body, and a place of beauty and meditation, in which the spirit finds calm (Le Corbusier 1926: 29). As machine, it should recede, to allow for contemplation. Alison Smithson saw, in Renaissance paintings of St. Jerome’s study, a “machine for living in” raised to the level of an art (Smithson 2004: 227). Le Corbusier’s own houses carefully orchestrate the actions of daily life through a series of visual transformations that work to give them the status of ritual, to elevate them from particular mundane events to universal enactments. From the meal table of his “Petite Maison de Weekend,” the occupant looks past the rough, dark monolith of the chimney straight to the end of the garden, where a sunlit pavilion, white and smooth, is framed in the window. The chimney is unlike the pavilion in the garden—it is its opposite—but because the two are placed in such a direct relationship, they begin to allude to each other; the hearth is made to stand not only for the actual cave-like house, but also to aspire to be the “perfect house,” the temple, brought into contact with it from the distance.

The Smithsons recognized that Le Corbusier’s house-machines usefully absorbed machines into the background (Smithson and Smithson 1973: 64). It was not in fact the “machine for living in”

that they rejected, but the aspiration to the universal through visual meditation. They were alarmed by Le Corbusier's model of "an introspective scholastic life where the only relationship that matters is that between God and Man" (Smithson and Smithson 1970: 87). Their own fascination for the relationship between objects or elements was not in the service of a universal synthesis, but in the search for an ordering of background and foreground that could allow the things we take for granted to be transformed into events that are literally remarkable. For this to happen, we as inhabitants need to become aware of our own visible or tangible relationship to those objects. From immediate, unthinking involvement, we need to be able to hold things at a distance, to create a space between ourselves and them which Peter Smithson saw as allowing for interpretation and appropriation.⁵ It can also make daily occupation, although not into sanctified ritual, still somewhat hard work.

For the architect, the ordering of relationships can never be carried out without distance. A designed house can never quite be the "direct statement of a way of life" (Smithson and Smithson 1973: 6) that the Smithsons intended, because that way of life has inevitably been conceptualized as a picture or an idea. At the Sugden House, this conceptualizing has been done with a tactful understanding of the particular way of life that is being housed. It is very tightly planned. Each activity is given its place, designated by fireplace, dining table, staircase or bookshelves and desk. Each of the places seems focused and protected, perhaps by the unexpected lowness of a window head which controls light and view, perhaps by the sheer solidity of a dark wall. Yet from each one is aware of the rest of the house; they open up to each other and out to the garden in a calm gregariousness. From the exhibition's photographs and plans of the Smithsons' own houses, they too appear to build up relationships between activities and objects with a lightness and ease.

The houses of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were almost always conceived as prototypes. They might be designed for particular clients and specific places, but the Smithsons also thought of them as possible models to be multiplied and adapted to form parts of a village, town or city. The exhibition, in its focus on the individual house, gives little space to this concern for houses gathered together as settlements that was so important to their work (the book shows rather more, though without extensive discussion). The Smithsons spoke of the relationships between elements in the city in the same language as those of the house. The "looseness of organisation and ease of communication" that a house, however concisely planned, should allow for is also "essential to the largest community" (Smithson and Smithson 1970: 44). Peter Smithson suggested that the facade of a house in a town is like a cupboard door in a house; it is "a face which like the cupboard door brings the miscellaneous contents of the house to *the right level of attention* in the town" (Smithson

2004: 218). The individual dwelling, then, while identifiable, should recede behind its facade to become background at the urban scale. An understanding of the particular, however subtle, is no longer adequate, and the tactics the Smithsons used to hold things at a distance became, at Robin Hood Gardens or in the housing proposal for London's Golden Lane, more brutal and more alienating.⁶ Sensibly, they did not claim that the particular could be made universal, but at such a generic scale it is hard for the home to be, as they so much hoped, "ordinary and heroic at the same time" (Smithson and Smithson 1973: 92).

NOTES

1. Beatriz Colomina describes the "House of the Future" as "the project that doesn't fit with anything else—despite the architects' repeated attempts to locate it within their multiple chronologies of their own work" (2004: 31). Colomina's essay then outlines the many ways in which the project fits within the concerns of the 1950s, looking back towards the traumas of war and forwards towards a new consumer culture.
2. "...we attempt to give volumetric identity to each unit. The parts of the house ... add up to 'home' which is: aedicule, a roof over one's head, shelter" (Smithson and Smithson 1970: 78).
3. The descriptions of the projects in the exhibition occasionally mention which of the two architects was responsible for aspects of a particular project. The proposals with highly orchestrated entrance sequences would seem to be Peter's. Projects identified as Alison's are more loosely and simply planned according to a clarity of structure.
4. From a handwritten specification included in the exhibition, and quoted in Risselada and van den Heuvel (2004: 136).
5. See Smithson (1975), mentioned by Max Risselada in the Preface to *Alison and Peter Smithson: from the House of the Future to a House for Today*, (Risselada and van den Heuvel 2004: 4).
6. For critic Reyner Banham, the Smithsons were the first proponents of what he called the "new brutalism," referring to the harshness of materials and detailing at the school in Hunstanton. The Smithsons experimented with a version of aesthetic distancing that, because of its sheer ugliness, would be hard to ignore through indifference.

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