

A Philosophers House. An interview with Brett Littman.

'Language, it's been said, is the House of Being. To cut the house into pieces is like messing around with syntax, turning grammatical structures inside out'; a sentiment which perfectly encapsulates Gordon Matta-Clark's work from the 1970s. Perhaps if we look deeper as Matta-Clark did, there is an implied possibility of an archaeology of forgotten and unrealized significance, hidden in the architectural and urban fabric.

Ludwig Wittgenstein often drew parallels between language and ancient cities: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses. These images were very much in the back of my mind as I circled Wittgenstein's house in a taxi drawing as we drove. This and other projects pop up in a conversation with Brett Littman.

BL: Can we talk about your interest in the concepts of modernism, construction and Ludwig Wittgenstein's house that he built in Vienna in 1928 for his sister?

BE: It's hard to know where to start. My wife and I lived just outside of Vienna for a summer about three or four years ago. During that time we used to wander around looking at the wonderful buildings by the Secessionists and Adolf Loos. It wasn't until two years ago when we returned to Vienna that somebody who knew about my interest in philosophy and architecture said, "You must go and see Wittgenstein's house." My wife and I later went over to see the house and I was immediately fascinated by it. It looks like it just dropped out of the sky as a series of austere white cubes. That really made me think about the whole crucible of modernism and particularly about what was going on in Vienna in the 1920's and 1930's in the intellectual and artistic communities.

BL: I think that people often describe the Vienna house with terms like precision, rigor, logic and austerity. There is no ornamentation on the outside of the house at all.

BE: That is true, but you know, the most extraordinary thing about the house is the undercurrent of a sort of neoclassical style. I mean, it's almost like the Acropolis sitting on top of a pediment. When you go into the door and you through up through the vestibule and into the hall, it is like going into a temple. Everybody considers modernism to be this great

break from previous ideas - but you do get a sense of continuity with the past here, and I think you find that a lot in early Austrian and German modernism.

BL: In your studio in Dublin, you showed me some drawings in your studio of the Vienna house from different perspectives. How do those fit into this investigation?

BE: One of the first things I did before I actually went to the house was look it up on the internet. There are several exterior shots of the house that are all over the web which really influenced the way I envisioned approaching the actual structure. So when I did finally see the house for the first time I did a couple of drawings from a "just outside of the front door" perspective - very much in line with the images that I had seen on the internet. I did a second set of drawings the next time I flew to Vienna. As soon I landed, I jumped into a taxi and asked the driver to take me to the house, and we drove around the house while I sketched much to the taxi driver's amusement. These are all quick ten to fifteen second drawings which I felt were like Fluxus pieces. Later I made *Untitled (study of a house in Vienna)*, 2008, based on these drawings, which formally has very little relationship to the structure of the actual house.

BL: For the exhibition you made a very large scale drawings (*They came to a place*, 2008) based on your thinking about the cottage to which Wittgenstein retreated, on

the west coast of Ireland in Connemara during the last years of his life when he was working on his late philosophy.

BE: When I started these two drawings, I had just finished working on a body of drawings of buildings that I had remembered from childhood. These drawings were inspired by Brian O'Doherty telling me that "remembering a building is a way of inhabiting it." In the large scale drawings I wanted to move away from these older drawings and use memory as the generator to try and render space devoid of architecture.

BL: These are all made with black markers?

BE: That's right, those big and indelible black markers that I love using. The sort of markers you would use to write your girlfriends name on a wall or something like that.

BL: These drawings look like cliffs. They are quite imposing and really engage and envelope your whole body in the image. *In They Came to a Place*, 2008 the black hatch marks begin to dissipate a little bit and become whiter on bottom allowing for a sort of release from the drawing. Was that intentional?

BE: Since they are such large drawings, when I start in the corner the markers are full of the ink but by the time you start moving your way through the drawings, the ink and nib are gradually being eroded and the tip is destroyed. Eventually there is no ink left. This is why there is that

lovely gradation in the drawing from dark to light that adds to the three-dimensional effect. In addition, because it's such a large a drawing the actual measure of your arm's length and stretch affect your lines and they begin to curve a bit in corners. Each one took a good four to six weeks, but for me the material aspect in my work is very important and I like engaging with things, even if it is just a pen, in a very material or physical way.

BL: Since your practice also includes working in sculptural and installation formats is there something specific about the Vienna house that you see relating to your personal, intellectual, and aesthetic interests?

BE: Well, I think the Vienna house is quite unique. Probably only the Steiner Houses come as close to the pure intersection of philosophy and building. I guess what really interests me is that the Vienna house represents an attempt by Wittgenstein to project his philosophy into the outside world beyond the sort of abstract ideas and notions that philosophers tend to deal with.

BL: I also had read that Wittgenstein had designed and built a house in 1914 in Skolden, Norway. I don't know if you've seen the picture of that. It was on top of a cliff, so he had to engineer a winch and bucket system to hoist water up.

BE: That's right.

BL: But in your mind, is the Vienna house really a visual and physical

analog of his ideas, because I think that there is a disconnect there?

BE: Yes, I think there is a disconnect here as well. The Vienna house is more anecdotal than anything else. The fact is that this building manifests the transition between the *Tractatus* and the development of his later thinking that we associate with *Philosophical Investigations*. For me the question that the Vienna house really poses is the more general question of whether or not philosophy and architecture can be merged, and if so, what form that would take.

BL: Can we talk about some of the specific sculptural pieces that you showed in The Douglas Hyde exhibition? I would like to start with the *Untitled (study of a house in Vienna)*, 2008, a small, discrete aluminum sculpture that was installed along the wall.

BE: That was the sculpture that came out of those drawings I made of the house from the back of the taxi. In some ways what interests me at the moment is the way that my sculptures tend to be more like drawings and my drawings tend to be more sculptural. The aluminum piece is quite flat when you look at it from above. It was also, for me, a way of breaking up those solid cubes that made up the Vienna house and see what would happen.

BL: Can you talk about *I wanted to start again*, 2008? I know from our conversations in Dublin that this has a complex origin that belies the simplicity of the sculpture itself.

BE: *I wanted to start again* came out of a frustration with the exhibition process. My concept of the show had changed so often that it was really hard to get a handle on it. While I was waiting for the show, I had been doing these funny little interventions in spaces such as open wastelands behind large factories or malls and working in car parks and in waiting rooms.

BL: What did these interventions look like? Would you build structures on-site and then leave them there?

BE: Exactly. One of the earliest ones I built was a large Styrofoam structure in the top floor of an underused multi-story car park in Vienna. Every night I would go back up and change the orientation of the Styrofoam. It took on all these formal variations and eventually started to vaguely look like something that Mies van der Rohe would have built. I assumed that it would be taken away within the first few days but no one actually moved it. The Viennese would drive around it, and they would park their cars beside it, but they wouldn't touch it. So after about seven days, I just packed it up and brought it back to my studio. I had also done another piece in an industrial wasteland behind a large warehouse. I made that work with flat pack kitchen cabinets that I bought from the B&Q, a kind of Irish Home Depot. I used about seven or eight packages of materials and started to fiddle around in an attempt to mimic the huge, plain white-box warehouse that

was in the background. I left it there for a few days, and when I came back the sculpture had been vandalized and burned. Of course it was out in the field over Halloween, when these sort of areas come alive at night!

One of the things I noticed at the site after the piece was burned was a large dark burn circle about 1.5 meters wide. It kind of stuck in my mind. I collected the bits and pieces and brought them back to my studio. At the time I think I felt a bit bad about adding to the litter in the field. Later I started to work my way through the bits and pieces of the cabinets and decided to reconfigure the sculpture using this leftover material. I also reintroduced the black circle as a formal and schematic element that related back to the scorched earth in the field.

BL: This piece is interesting because you placed it in the center of the below-ground gallery which makes it the first thing you see when you enter the main entrance balcony.

BE: I was thinking a lot about those beautiful Constructivist posters with the circles and the rectangles and I wanted this sculpture to evoke those graphic elements when you looked down on it.

BL: What about the *Large Complex*, 2008. This is a massive sculpture (5m) that is built with flat-pack kitchens and sitting rooms from IKEA?

BE: Well, IKEA had just opened up in Belfast a couple of months before the show to a big a fanfare. It was supposed to open up in Dublin but because of planning permission they couldn't go ahead. So I packed myself into the car and drove up and bought some material. I bought enough flat-pack gear to make up three kitchens and half a sitting room. This piece was assembled in the gallery right before the exhibition. Because of the limitations of the material you end up with these sort of large improvised geometric shapes. For some reason, the process of building this sculpture made me think of jazz music's extemporaneous nature. You start off with a certain amount of materials or a certain amount of scales, and you just work your way through them.

BL: Do you manipulate those pieces of wood at all in the flat pack to achieve new potential shapes?

BE: One of the things I like to do is impose limits on my projects and on my work. In my really early student work, I only allowed myself to use materials that I found outside on the street. Later I became more and more interested in buildings and what happened to buildings as they progressed through a life span. I was fascinated by the annexes that were built onto them, the different bits and incongruous pieces that were added over the years, and then what happened to them when they were knocked down. So I started collecting discarded building materials associated

with these kinds of extension/demolition projects and used them in my sculptures. In my mind, this body of work related to the idea of after-thoughts – operating more like the shadow of something than the thing itself.

BL: I am interested in the history of the flat pack. It is a kind of manufacturing conceit that allows you to pack the most things into the smallest possible space and transport it easily with the least volume from point A to point B. Have you done any investigation into the origins of the flat pack? I remember reading something about the history of flat pack objects and I can't remember when the first one is manufactured, but is it in the 1910's or 1920's?

BE: No, I couldn't confirm that, but what is interesting to me is that this is part of the industrialization of design that the modernists were fascinated by, and that is why it plays an important role in this last body of work.

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