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Primal Fantasies

Heike Hanada's *Four Square House*

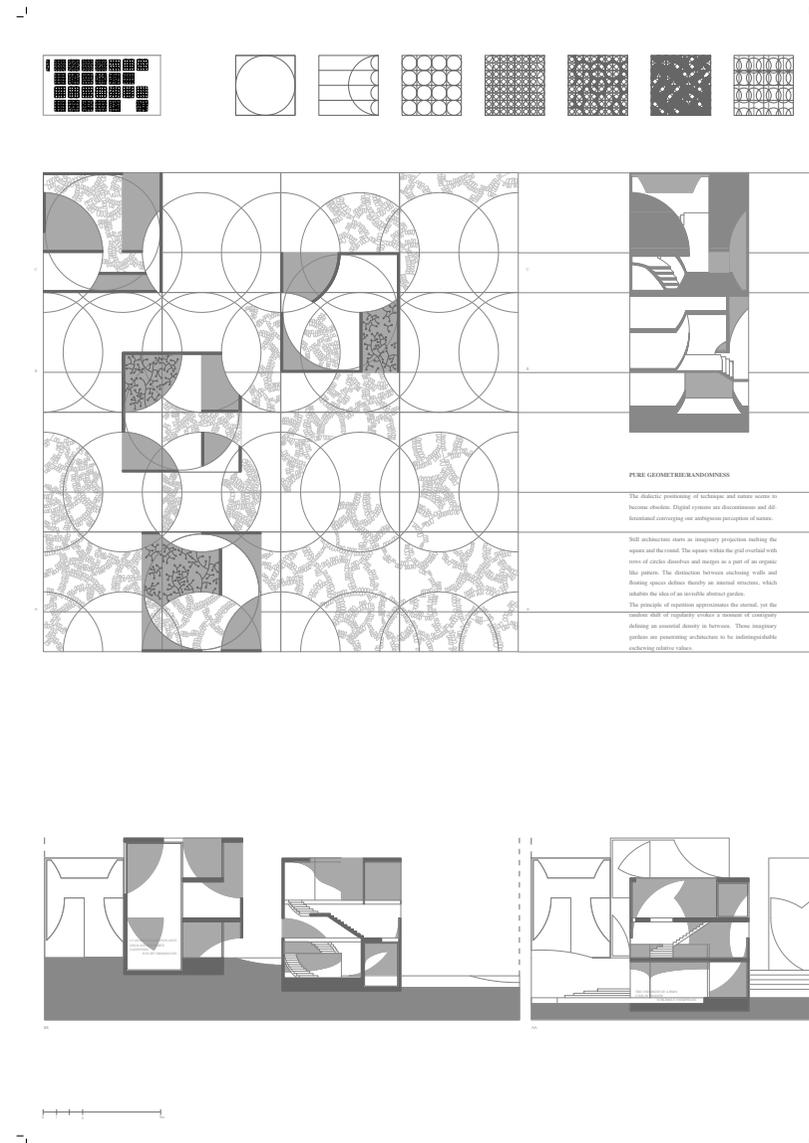
In: Zona #4, Ornament: Return of the Repressed (supplement to abitare #494, 8/2009)

A particular artistic impulse guided *the* hand that drew the elements in the geometrical figure pattern from which Heike Hanada's *Four Square House* is made. The *Four Square House*, while immaterial and ephemeral, has arisen from an ornamental process and its pattern language. It is purely idea and seems to have no place in this world, and for this very reason stands in the tradition of thinking architecture. With her crystalline cube Hanada has taken up a question that has occupied architecture since Vitruvius, interpreting modernism anew with the white, Platonic cube and extending it into the constructivist: the question of beginnings, about the first house, the primitive hut.

Ornament Hanada's ideal design is ascetic and disciplined and therefore nowhere near as random as its poetic description of *Pure Geometry_Randomness* would suggest. With creative precision, Hanada takes up the constructivist line of modernism, but bursts out of its hermeticism with its quasi-ornamental opulence. The house opens itself to a multifarious field of associations that is far too intricate to be reduced to the simple opposition of randomness and geometry.

As with Gordon Matta-Clark, but without his raw power, extra-large, circular openings are cut into the surfaces, into the walls, floor and roof slabs, with the effect that the constructivist moment is pushed back in its presence and transformed into an organic figure ornament. Hanada speaks of an "internal floral structure". The oversize, striking figures seem to be related to the processes of the concrete art of Sol LeWitt, for example his work *Geometric Figures* (1976). The floral structure, which is extensively applied to all surfaces, also however recalls *art nouveau* motifs such as Otto Wagner's floral pattern that, baked onto tiles, like a veil adorns the facade of the house on the *Linke Wienzeile* in Vienna, or Herzog & de Meuron's facade for the library in Elberswalde where, in a similar fashion to Wagner's ceramic tiles, plant motifs are printed onto glass panels.

And yet the internal tension of the *Four Square House* is derived from the fact that the ornamental pattern always remains geometrically subdued. Nothing outgrows or overgrows the Platonic ideal form, nothing oozes out or seeps in between. It does not follow the development of the Corinthian capital according to Vitruvius, whereby an acanthus plant grew from under a woven basket placed on the earth, profusely entwining itself around it and thus effortlessly recovering its geometrical form for nature, both then becoming a metaphor for the reconciliation of culture and nature. In Hanada's design the ornament



does not burst the geometrical process: while each individual form is in itself geometrically broken, the ornamental motif does not however break the superordinate geometrical form: the cube and the ideal form remain untouched.

Cube Undoubtedly, the cube of Hanada's *Four Square House* stands in the tradition of the "primitive house" metaphor of classical modernism. It does not however do this directly, but rather as a homage to John Hejduk and the *Cube Problem* that for him took centre stage from the mid-1960s. This was, he believed, the fundamental question after the "house of man", and Hejduk therefore gave this as their first task to his architecture students at the Cooper Union. *The Cube Problem* was for him a special task affecting the basic principles and the very nature of architecture: it is universal, outside place and time, like the idea of the primitive hut. The *Cube Problem* linked to the speculation about the elementary forms of architecture, about the Greek *arche*, and thus about the beginning, the prime cause or principle of architecture.

With the cube as his elementary task, Hejduk once more took up the constructivist thread of classical modernism that had been lost in postwar functionalism, at a time when this was discredited by the crude functionalism of the reconstruction years. In fact the criticism of modernism, that it leads to the liquidation of ornament, always fails to recognise that the abolition of ornament was never an end in itself: behind it always stood the central question of the nature of architecture, the original form of the house. In its obsession with the Platonic solids, it becomes evident that modernism regarded itself as an age of cultural rebirth, as a time of the return to the supposedly ideal beginnings, as a new Renaissance in the machine age, with its own language and logic of form, with its own ornament.

Modernism's claim to be an epoch of cultural rebirth stems from its discarding of the notion that the primitive hut is derived from nature, replacing the nature metaphor with a purely constructivist postulate. The ideal house, previously presented as a tree house, grass hut or pile dwelling, was replaced by the accurate geometry of a Platonic solid (a cube, as for example in Johannes Itten's *House of the White Man* (1920) or Farkas Molnar's *Single Family House* (1923)). Hejduk then supplemented the basic form of the square with the circle and triangle, but no longer in their pure, ideal forms, but, as in the *One-Half-House* (1966), by halving the ideal forms, i.e. by halving a cylinder and the diagonal – i.e. both triangular and axial – i.e. lengthwise-rectangular – division of a cube. The Platonic solids are now no longer fully ideal, but only semi-ideal solids and thus fragments. Thus we can also speak of a basically negative aesthetic strategy, through which Hejduk articulated his doubts regarding the positivism of classical modernism.

Negative aesthetics Hanada follows on from this; it is however as if she bursts Hejduk's geometrical fundamentalism, with the nature metaphor in her *Four Square House* returning to the speculation about the elementary in architecture, but not in the sense of an imitation of nature, but rather in its intercession through a geometrical process. Even if Hanada's house is consistent with the reformulation of the primitive house by modernism and Hejduk, the design procedure, the architectural statement and the intended effect are all different. *The Four Square House* is a product of a unique architectural strategy. It rejects the constructivist logic at the point where Hanada separates the appearance of the architectural sign from the actual architectural-constructive process. The design impulse is not primarily aiming at three-dimensionality, volume or space, but rather appears as a

diagrammatical-figurative procedure. It can also be described as a process of programmed poetics. The rest is assemblage.

Repetition, scaling and shifting are the formal techniques with which Hanada prepares an ornamental basic structure and develops the procedure's own pattern language. What was previously pure geometry is thereby transformed into organic-metaphorical figures. Their developmental dynamism is however based more on a technique of subtraction than of construction, as nothing is in the real sense developed or combined and therefore built; the figures, in a reversal of constructive thinking, thus come into being through a process of taking away and removing. Form and figure is given to the house by what is cut or punched out. What is visible is what is missing, what is material-free and in the process remains only as a negative form.

In contrast to classical ornament and the Corinthian capital, in which the nature metaphor grows from a positive, additive process, the ornamental figure in the *Four Square House* develops from a strategy of subtraction, from a procedure of negative aesthetics. From this procedure arise the actual poetic spaces of the imagination, where the cube's narrative content and range of associations unfold. This also constitutes the artistic and poetic impulse of Hanada's primitive house: the poetic momentum rises up from the negative, ornamental figure and infects the architecture. (2009)