

The Starchitecture Industrial Complex

1

A Forensic Role Play

“In today’s wars, people die when bits of their homes come flying at them in high speed”

A few words regarding perspective before you throw yourself into this essay:

We’ll watch this whole text unfold through the protective spectacles of a forensic scientist – you know, these people wearing white bodysuits, surgical masks and sterile blue rubber gloves, squatting over crime scenes, brushing for fingerprints and bagging evidence.

As during investigation this particular kind of eye wear might get stained with leaky grease-smear, rubble from dust, blood, or other matter impeding clear sight, be aware that this essay could be full of bad research, phony arguments and gross generalizations.

The Sight

A lavish modernist house with large glass windows and a broad terrace in the hills, snuggled up against a steep slope.

The Czech city of Brno, seated in the hills of the Moravia region, was put on the map of architectural history for one specific building: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s iconic Villa Tugendhat, regarded to be one of modernisms more important buildings, designed by an early international superstar of architecture. Built between 1928 and 1930 as a private residence for the Tugendhat family, Jewish-German industrialists and traders, it served as the wealthy family’s home for only a few years before the National Socialists annexed the region in 1938 and the family was forced to emigrate. The house’s architectural layout had to face a lot of critique at the time and in later years alike, the critics’ main focus being Villa Tugendhat’s supposed uninhabitability, alas, its downright hostility to human life. In 1931, it led architecture critic Justus Bier to ask the question “Kann man im Haus Tugendhat wohnen?” (“can one live in the Tugendhat house?”)¹ and in response to Mies’ credo of “less is more”, which, of course, he also mapped on the Villa Tugendhat, postmodern architect and critic Robert Venturi famously cried out “less is a bore”.

¹ *Die Form. Zeitschrift für gestaltende Arbeit*
10 (October 15, 1931), pp. 392-393

And, indeed, in the further course of the imposing house's history, it was repurposed multiple times but never again served as a home. Instead, Mies' bourgeois residency building for most of its existence was used as a Nazi war-machinery construction office, a children's hospital, a ballet school, a wedding parlor, a stable for red army horses, or simply was left to decay and didn't serve any purpose at all.

The recent renovation of the Villa Tugendhat, completed in 2012 at a cost of approximately 5.8 million Euro, turned it into one of those sterile walk-in-but-do-not-touch-type museum spaces, the visitor's forensic experience enhanced by self-sealing plastic slippers which shoes have to be cast in before entering the house.

The reconstruction of the villa has painstakingly attempted to reinstate the house's original condition. During the endeavor, the house's moved history – inscribed into its modular walls, chrome-plated steel girders and retractable panoramic windows² – was systematically and thoroughly wiped out in order to turn the Villa Tugendhat into somewhat of a life-sized model of itself.

Three Dimensions of Time

Enter the forensic scientists – that is us – in full gear, obviously including the self-sealing plastic slippers.

Forensic scientists collect evidence in an attempt to reconstruct what is not there *anymore*; they are hunting ghosts, they are time travelers of sorts, dimensional drifters, visiting a place of the now and projecting onto it a place and an action of the past. They can move and switch between different times and realities: typically operating in the in-between relations of non-spaces they connect times, realities and places with each other by quite literally (re-)constructing the plot.³

A model, instead, is projecting a possible future – it is an attempt to sketch out what is not there *yet*. This is no different in a model of the size 1:100 as it is in a model that scales 1:1. The life-sized model as a 'proxy building' however seems to be somewhat more in touch with geographic space.

A museum, as the third entity to be considered here, presents a preserved past, proposing a third condition which suspends time entirely and in turn articulates a humorless, frozen presence, an End of History of sorts: To its visitor, it is simply presenting what can be seen *now*.

The museum is also a vault, a bourgeois fortress, readily employing mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. It contains (decontextualized) objects, (alienated) artifacts, artworks (that feel just fine in this environment), attitudes (not to be contested), and behaviors, and it greedily regulates access. It is a tank filled with ideology. It is a bunker and a prison at the same time, protecting and excluding, setting the conditions for any penetration, it is the othering mother, treating visitors like intruders.

In case you didn't know: they sink into the floor: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OzK6AW9e38>

Already, we are facing time travel as the ambiguity of the term 'plot' alludes to a later moment of this text, namely to footnote 9

A speculative space in case of the 1:100 scale model, an actual geographic space in case of the 1:1 model

As forensic time travelers transgressing the model-museum, we can now start to bag first observations (our protective suit still looks okay; there are only a few blurry stains here and there since so far we feel backed by a quantity of historic research and academic writing which could be referred to at any given time): It seems that – on the one hand – a fortress which suspends any idea of passing time but instead tries to freeze a specific moment and reduce it to a timeless 'now' and – on the other hand – the model of a building which projects a quasi-structure into space⁴ are both fundamentally opposed to life within

them: Where there is no concept of passing time, life is unable to unfold and the model of a building is not creating an solid environment, a fruitful ground that can be filled with life – only the finished building itself can ever be inhabited.

Demarcating the Lines and Claiming the Right Plot

From our forensic expert tool box, we take out a magnifying glass to have a clearer view on the puzzle of information scattered around so carelessly here in an attempt to reconstruct the operation, to (re-)write a storyline and to reconstitute a relation to the present.

With its recent renovation, the Villa Tugendhat has ultimately been turned into the artificial and authoritarian museum space it might have been conceived as in the first place (to the pitiful family, though, it was sold as a home): The house has become like most (modernist) museum buildings and their art: The only thing disturbing the perfect setting in the immaculate white cube is you, the visitor. It is your living, physical presence, your corporeality that is an annoyance to a space which is designed at most for a pure, disembodied, downright anorganic gaze.⁵ This type of architecture creates a buffer zone, a cordon sanitaire, devoid of life, which admittedly can be trespassed with plastic bags on the feet and maybe even – given the right type of ergonomic office furniture prostheses⁶ or other protective gear (think surgical masks, blue rubber gloves and protective specs, of course) – worked in but which is absolutely unsuitable to be permanently inhabited by any form of life.

The modernist experience is (re)created perfectly and convincingly in the villa's recent reconstruction. It is hostile to life, the visitor – rather trespasser – as 'the Other' is only able to enter this vacuum wearing a protective (space-) suit, and will remain an intruder and witness to a proxy building for a proxy human. The house has become a time vault, attempting to conserve one specific moment in time rather than being a living witness to decades of a moved past.

The rest of the palpable history of the Villa Tugendhat, once inscribed into the house's physical structure, has been transformed into the virtuality of narratives, banned into documentary films and Wikipedia articles.

And yet, in all its artificiality, the building holds an iteration of the real which is absolutely discomfoting as it seems to function as an agent of contemporary interests that employ starchitecture as a strategic tool. How so?

Mies' modernist, onyx- and glass-walled 'white' cube "is in fact the Real with a capital R: the blank horror and emptiness of the bourgeois interior"⁷, as Hito Steyerl writes in regard to historic buildings which are transformed into museums. But not only that: The Villa Tugendhat has finally (been) turned into scenery, staffage, a prop – which in some way it always might have been – and for us now this is not only reformulating (and making accessible yet once more) the elitist terror of modernist architecture and thought. Moreover, it has undergone an update to contemporaneity in the sense of being renovated to ultimately constitute yet another representative of invasive, neo-colonial Disneyland-ish starchitecture – an architecture that formulates hostile-to-life Potemkin buildings of sorts⁸ which bear the horrendous void and vacuum but nonetheless take up real, geographic space to demarcate the physical frontline of speculative capitalist expansion, readily providing an all-inclusive luxury-commodities transit buffer zone of uninhabitability.

So, the above-mentioned term of the 'museum as a tank' here ultimately and inevitably comes to reveal its second meaning⁹: it is a tool for violent, armored

⁵ Justus Bier consequently speaks of "proxy living" ("Paradewohnen") in this proxy building. This clash of living and exhibiting, of life and exhibition with all odds against life recalls Jacques Tati's 1958 film *Mon Oncle*, a film which Tati could only conceive as a comedy because apparently he wasn't a forensic time traveler. Else, he would have been able to anticipate the tragedy which was about to unfold

⁶ With his *Barcelona* chair and his *Brno* furniture-set Mies himself coherently provided an authoritative proposition of how to outfit representative offices (and art showrooms) of the capitalist world. Myriads of interior designers followed throughout the years until lately, the *Barcelona* chair could be found in skateboard shops – the new offices for a new capitalism, conclusively, <http://www.alumind.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/civilist3.jpg>

⁷ *Is a Museum a Factory?*, in: *e-flux Journal* #7 (06, 2009)

⁸ More accurately, one should mention to mention Pripyat and Namie here – the towns which the nuclear disasters at Chernobyl and Fukushima contaminated forever

⁹ Through the muck on our spectacles which has gradually accumulated, we're pretty sure we can spot Walter Benjamin somewhere alongside us in the space. The hazed blur might have caused us to misinterpret his features, though. Note to self: check *The Doctrine of the Similar (Lehre vom Ähnlichen)*, 1933

4

It wasn't grease-smear or dust from rubble¹⁰
or blood that contaminated us, we now
recognize. It was oil paint, chromed
and rusty steel plates, extravagant forms
designed by computer algorithms, diamonds
that have fallen off of human skulls, high-
definition video art pixels, real emotion sold
by performance artists, post-internet irony,
and *Your Emotional Future* (2011)

https://www.google.de/search?q=saadiyat+island&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:de:official&client=firefox-a&channel=sb&gfe_rd=cr&ei=HhcVNCfLIGm8weq9oGAAg¹¹

expansion and occupation – armored, that is, with an arsenal of artworks, Barcelona chairs and ‘culture’, ready to shoot at any living target, leveling the death strip of a bourgeois void.

The hot-ironed cube in Brno is somewhat of a historic model house exhibit for Western expansion, an early example of how this type of starchitecture works, updated to become a contemporary walk-in for marveling at the clinically tidy architectural war machinery of an appealing colonialism, the fortresses and tanks, announcing, promoting and testifying a steady conquest. In the Moravian hills you can physically enter the starchitecture expansion plot and watch it unfold, a narrative literally expanding by means of land grab. Hostile to human life, the architecture animates itself – all prosopopoeia – to allude to and give accounts of the front lines, bridging time and space as a cool (Tadao Ando), playful (Frank Gehry), sly (Norman Foster), glitzy (Jean Nouvel), literally and paradoxically out of this world (Zaha Hadid) demarcation of the brutal and uncompromising Real, staged by a high-brow sanitizing industry.

“Ironically”, we can conclude, trying to catch our breath after this rollercoaster ride, lifting our by now completely spattered specs, looking down on our besmirched, torn and contaminated protective gear¹⁰, “this starchitecture as a weapon of neo-colonialism may look like a model or a toy or an awfully over-the-top comedy but as a matter of fact, it is as real as it gets and bridges not only time but also space and thus creates a direct link, a wormhole between Saadiyat Island¹¹ and Brno. Speaking with Charles Jencks – to rip yet another quote from the lucid guts of postmodern thought: Here, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s architecture indeed has turned from farcical to highly dangerous.”

And now it is finally time to give away the source of the quote from the opening section: Eyal Weizman wrote this sentence in his publication for dOCUMENTA (13) “100 Notes – 100 Thoughts”, No. 062, *Forensic Architecture: Notes From Fields and Forums*