

MATT TURNER

HOUSING

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“I think there’s optimism about cities again but most of what’s still being built is pretty depressing: inhumane towers facing each other, shadow and light indiscriminately being blocked.” —Moshe Safdie, 2017

Enthusiasm is one of the few pleasures that architecture affords. When I lived in Beijing I found myself constantly interrupting simple foot-errands to pause and marvel at all the architectural details from the past. In Old Beijing I’d stop and notice a gable, a stairwell, or another insignificant detail, and wonder to myself about the period of construction. There was little purpose in it, aside from enthusiasm. If I had wanted more than that, then I would have needed the wherewithal to rent an inexpensive, run-down “apartment” in the center of the city — a unit in a re-purposed *siheyuan* courtyard subdivided into a warren of tiny living spaces without private plumbing. Or, if I could have afforded to buy, then I’d have paid out the nose to rewire a *siheyuan* with modern conveniences.

Owning is the province of rich businesspeople. They dream of a Beijing lifestyle as realistic as a *Washington Square* lifestyle is to most New Yorkers — as if life consists of drawing room appearances amongst droll witticisms. In both cases, the lifestyle and architecture of privilege would be the concrete expression of what’s perceived as the literature of privilege. In the case of the so-called Beijing lifestyle, it’s usually a sanitized version of the *laobeijing* stories of Lao She (featuring salt-of-the-earth poor people), Lin Yutang (featuring cultured rich people), and, most ridiculously, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (featuring nearly everything under the sun as well as beyond it).

People hate concrete structures. Their famous exemplar, Brutalism, is shorthand for austerity measures and an immovable bureaucracy. Never mind that that’s not the case: the Boston Government Center represents the progressive Boston city government, and Montreal’s Habitat 67 represents upwardly mobile lifestyle consumers. The belief that Brutalist structures represent failed social welfare projects stings. But, as commonly noted, many housing projects are at least inspired by Brutalist structures’ low-cost materials. The most famous example is St Louis’ Pruitt-Egoe housing project, built by popular World Trade Center architect Minoru Yamasaki. Both projects were certainly inspired by architectural modernism’s managerial rejection of the occupant.

Concrete is the fullest representation of architecture. On a trip to Wuhan, I passed some concrete structures in a tourbus. I noticed how the sunlight illuminated the walls. The effect made the buildings appear nearly white — except for where the mildew or shade had crept in (Wuhan is a humid city). Wherever there was mildew or shade that clashed with the bright white, a small drama or competition for space unfolded. But those were small residential and commercial structures on the street. When I later saw the same effects play across massive Brutalist structures, the light-and-shade drama looked like a manichean god.

Buildings don't deliver ethics. They don't deliver the poor from servitude through heroic gestures of design. Rather, they are about the play of light and dark. Buildings are as ephemeral as light and dark, where all housing is as ephemeral as refugee housing, where pretending otherwise is to play make believe.

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Refugee and disaster shelter is an important project for architects, and the Toyo Ito-led Home for All in Rikuzentakata, Japan, comes to mind as one of its more interesting expressions. Built as a community center for survivors of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, the structure utilizes refuse wood, and opens itself up to the elements. It submerges itself in its landscape with open scaffolding, and exposed beams project its multiple tiers beyond the landscape. The structure isn't a political project — the usual frame for disaster shelter. The conversation between inside and outside, and useable and unusable materials, is sensual. Because of its refusal to acknowledge difference as anything other than temporal (the time of its construction a response to direct human needs), one even suspects a phenomenological strain running through it, where “structure” is no longer the appropriate word.

Jeremy Corbyn has demanded temporary “requisition” of vacant homes owned by the rich, as housing for victims of the recent Grenfell Tower fire. If a requisition happens, it's easy to imagine the owner of a write-off home reluctantly saying “welcome, but don't touch.” Tenants will be viewed as occupiers, and given few supplies. Furniture, electricity and plumbing will need to be purchased by tenants with obviously little financial means. The home, advocated by architect Kazuo Shinohara as “a work of art,” is precisely what Grenfell Tower's residents did not have and will not have. Diminished economic and architectural means (in other words, diminished material realities) lead to minimal sensual experiences.

The demands of requisitioning are the demands of refugee and disaster shelter. The prerequisite economic accessibility to structures demands either an economic re-structuring of the world, or a re-evaluation of what accessibility and structure mean (and these are nearly the same thing). This applies to everyone, if indirectly. Questions of cost and value walk together with questions of experience (deprivation and delight) and creation, for lack of a better term. Creation meaning the objecthood achieved through experience, i.e.: “you’ve made your home into a work of art.”

Commentary

Unlike solutions from architects who can assume the support of a functional welfare system in their own countries, many build refugee housing at an international level. Like Shigeru Ban, whose Paper Emergency Shelters for UNHRC, following the Rwandan civil war, or his Hualin Temporary Elementary School, in China, provided temporary functional shelters. Not supplying an alternate metaphysics of architecture, they nevertheless recognize the contingent status of housing and learning. They do not propose any distance from the immediate needs of their users.