

Block masonry and its architectural Potential

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The complexity of the ordinary - Context as key to architectural strategies

"(...) What is complicated is often doing quite well without being complex, and vice versa what is complex often appears without being complicated – even with big advantages."¹

An increasing tendency towards technically quite complicated solutions for the main substance of the building seems to dominate the creation of architecture. Energy is spent on arranging the separate layers of the building construction and hide away traces of the complicated process that has led to the building. Strikingly this effort is in general part of a strategy trying to give the impression of a minimalist idiom in the final building.

In my research project entitled *Block masonry and its architectural Potential*, I am focusing on an unpretentious and minimal way of building. The aim is not to erase or avoid complexity, just the opposite. The ambition is to unfold how working with a straight-forward building technology tends to mobilise the ability to create a hierarchy of refinement able to respond to the given context. It is a search for directness while avoiding too much 'design'.

According to the book *Architecture is not made with the brain – the labour of Alison and Peter Smithson*², context is described as a complex set of organizational resistances and possibilities that the office seeks to find architectonic answers to. This tiny book leaves a strong impression of an office determined to steer free of prejudice, going directly towards the matter "as found" and daring to ask small questions in the expectation of finding big answers.

Connie Occhialini, a former employee at Smithsons office describes their strategy: "We learned to look at things from a

different angle: to give meaning to that which was not usually considered important or simply not noticed. We learned how to smile at ourselves and others – not to take ourselves too seriously, while at the same time being extremely focused and concerned about our actions and their consequences”.

It was a search for the magical within the ordinary, which might in turn stimulate and increase awareness of, and sympathy with, the physical environment. Peter Smithson argued: “a building today is only interesting if it is more than itself, if it charges the space around it with connective possibilities, especially if it does this by a quietness that until now our sensibilities could not recognise as architecture at all”.

A thoughtful pragmatism is central to the Smithson’s approach and I find their emphasis on concrete experience and action most relevant to the focus of this conference.

The point of departure of my research project is my own house made in cooperation with my husband, architect Kåre Rønne in 2003.

We confronted the first sketches with various building materials and decided on a monolithic wall construction stacked in tile block masonry. This unit (248x365x249) inserted a fruitful resistance to the process; it offered a mean for examining and developing the building in relation to the notion of its context in the broadest sense of the word.

Building in tile blocks comes very close to the moulding up of clay. These blocks are not raised with classical mortar in between, but “glued” together with a thin mortar in the horizontal joint. The homogeneity of this building technique is astonishing – almost primitive. As an architect you can not hide behind a complicated system, you have the load bearing and the insulating capability integrated in one.

The cross-section of each block is mirrored over the centre meaning that there is no specific inner or outer site of the block. Further more placing the blocks in perpendicular formations and making corners and displacements as a natural

generic potential of this homogeneous building element, create the basis for a plastic and organic way of accumulating space.

As such material can be added or subtracted from this homogenous wall till the very end of the construction period. I am not agitating for an intuitive ad hoc way of shaping buildings, but would like to emphasise that even the most skilled architect experience ambivalent feelings when confronted with the 1:1 manifestation of the underlying drawings.

Louisa Hutton, former employee at Smithson's office describes how Peter Smithson "saw the act of building as an accumulative process in which mistakes are integrated into the final product in an organic way".

What I am heading at is that the simplicity of block masonry enables you as an architect to concentrate on the crucial characteristics; being the spatial inner and outer relationship, the meeting and exchange with the ground, the syntax and the shape of the openings in the wall, the exchange between façade and roof etc.

One such approach is familiar with the strategy of 'economy of means' as an aesthetic tool also known from the Smithson's work – that is to say, a decision to spend the money on the parts that the inhabitant touch in the building. This offers a radical understanding of the space. It generates a hierarchy of meaning and emphasise the fact that some parts are more important than others.

In the book *Fenster.Fassade* about the work of Annette Gigon and Mike Guyers, 3. Arthur Rüegg describes how the office develop their projects from the 'action zone' of the façade being a subtle treatment of its punctuations. This strategy originates from Heinz Ronner, who worked as a teacher in building construction at the ETH Zürich from 1960 till 1991. He argued that this zone between inside and outside was a three dimensional space and it was to be reckoned as the real crucial „action space of the architect.“

"The choice of building technique represent a certain strive for an ontological anchoring. One has to recognize this strive for a "sincerity" rooted in the construction as a reaction against the architecture production of the eighties. At that time a new building grammar was developed on the basis of the important acknowledgement of the new discipline of building physics. But this chance was based thoroughly on a dogmatic separation of autonomous layers each with specific properties".

As I have stressed before block masonry combine each of this properties in one - besides a weatherproof surface! Up until now this represents the Achilles' heel in a Danish context. It has to be covered with a protecting layer. A straight forward treatment of the surface is a thin layer of plaster being also far the most dominating solution abroad. But in Denmark we have a strong preference for uncovered masonry. We have a single-minded agenda claiming a so called 'true' expression in the façade.

David Leatherbarrow & Moshen Mostafavi elaborates on this discussion in *Surface Architecture* 4. "The progressive substitution of thin, lightweight, and transparent elements of enclosure for thick, heavy, and opaque walls would seem to have completed itself in our time, were it not for the fact that many of the opportunities for figuration in architecture especially those associated with thick-wall construction remain unexplored within the context of modern building. The victory of thin over thick would be a hollow one indeed if it marked the end of the building's role in mediating private and public life, or interiors and their surroundings, for this is one way, perhaps the most important way, in which architecture gives durable dimension to the patterns of our culture.

From our point of view, to require a choice between a lightweight and a heavy architecture, or between an abstract and a figurative one, is both misleading and unacceptable. Instead, we choose to describe how architecture can perform its cultural role while being variously thick and thin, transparent and opaque, and to envisage an architecture that acknowledges this performance as one of its roles."

In a presentation I would like to reveal some examples of Danish block masonry and elaborate on its seemingly anonymous but at the same time often radical expressions.

Block masonry obviously has a strong appeal to do-it-yourself builders as well as artists fascinated by its universal qualities; I would like to discuss the influence of this 'architecture without architects'.

Notes

1. Karl Christiansen: "Dodekáthlos", Aarhus
2. Moshen Mostafavi: "Architecture is not made with the Brain", London 2005
3. Arthur Rüegg, Jürg Rehsteiner & Toni Wirth: "Fenster.Fassaden – Annette Gigon / Mike Guyer" Zürich 1998
4. David Leatherbarrow & Moshen Mostafavi: "Surface Architecture", Massachusetts 2002