

Discomfort Zones: Double Lives in Art and Architecture

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INTRODUCTION

“... when separate aspects of history are treated in disciplinary isolation, counterevidence is pushed to the margins as irrelevant. The greater the specialization of knowledge, the more advanced the level of research, the longer and more venerable the scholarly tradition, the easier it is to ignore discordant facts. . . . Disciplinary boundaries allow counterevidence to belong to someone else's story. . . . if certain constellations of facts [emphasis added] are able to enter scholarly consciousness deeply enough, they threaten not only the venerable narratives, but the entrenched disciplines that (re)produce them. For example, here is no place in the university in which the particular research constellation 'Hegel and Haiti' would have a home.”

Susan Buck-Morss (2001: 42)

The unexpected constellation, 'Hegel and Haiti', produces a tension sufficient to allow Buck-Morss, in a brilliant essay, to explore the discrepancy between Enlightenment political thought—with its valorization of “freedom”—and the concurrent “economic practice of slavery”, a practice that, by the “mid-eighteenth century came to underwrite the entire economic system of the West, paradoxically facilitating the global spread of the very Enlightenment ideals that were in such fundamental contradiction to it” (2001: 42).

This paper does not take on as significant a discrepancy or paradox. It does, however, take inspiration from her method: to set up a constellation or pairing that disturbs disciplinary structures and narratives, setting into motion a host of speculations and insights. Pairing the work of an architect whose formal language refines and resolves the strictures of minimalism and bare-

bones self-build, with the work of an artist who spins the lumpen bricolage of shanty towns into sculptural agitprop for the gallery circuit, takes us into disciplinary discomfort zones, outside the narrow range prescribed for practice and interpretation. In the process one may be able to trace the contours of a particular issue or problem.

Disciplinary frameworks and practices need, in a sense, to be continually held up against those of other disciplines, if only to de-naturalize them, and to expose the way they frame, partition, bracket, shape, and silence issues and knowledge. Concepts in common may lead very different double lives within disciplinary confines.

The poly-valency of globalized cultural production today also requires a double-framing, a dual disciplinary lensing. To make sense of much of contemporary art and architecture (not to mention fashion, media, music, etc.), for example, one needs to parse the multiple, simultaneous, and distributed contexts (geographical, social, disciplinary) in which production, consumption, and reception take place.

This disciplinary double-framing, one that recognizes the multiple, and simultaneous, *locations* of a cultural artifact or practice, does not see cross-disciplinary traffic in reductive terms: as either 'contributing' to or 'confusing' disciplinary integrity. Rather it sees it as crucial to a more nuanced understanding of work that would otherwise vanish into disciplinary blind spots. The work of both architect Jae Cha, and artist Marjetica Potrc, requires such multiple unpacking.

LIGHT, LIGHTNESS, LIGHT CONSTRUCTION: SHADOW-BOXING WITH THE WORK OF JAE CHA

Jae Cha is a Yale-educated Korean-American, principal of Light Inc., a one-person Washington DC-based non-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO), design practice. In 2000 and 2001 Jae Cha won two consecutive *ar + d* Awards for Emerging Architects (www.arplusd.com), perhaps the most impressive venue for spotlighting a thoughtful modernism.

The two projects, for a church in Urubo, Bolivia (2000), and a community center in Marcovia, Honduras (2001), are modest, deft, and very much part of the communities they are designed and built for. Both use the cheapest materials, the simplest techniques, and a combination local and volunteer labor to build “public” buildings in communities where there are none. The church and the community center are open to multiple uses that encourage community strength and interaction.

The church at Urubo is a structure-in-the-round, shaded but open to the breezes. The planning for this 113 square meters’ structure took eight months, with Jae Cha spending much of the time trying to conjure up materials and skilled labor. Actual construction took only ten days, with congregation members, local skilled laborers, and volunteers from the United States using pressure-treated timber to build and frame the two concentric circular structures. The variegated pattern for the panels, made up of sheets of corrugated translucent polycarbonate, was determined on site, in response to the movement of the sun across the site, and the overlapping patterns of silhouette and shadow that the two rings created.

The community center cum prayer hall in Marcovia, 324 square meters, was an even greater challenge. Literally miles from nowhere, this community did not have water and electricity to facilitate construction. Using generators, stored rainwater, communal labor, and donated materials, construction took three summer months to complete.

The square plan was given shape and structure by columns made of u-shaped concrete blocks reinforced with ordinary steel bars. The columns demarcated the periphery, as well as the interior where they fell along three rows. The rows were spaced to produce four spaces of different widths. Removable screens of polyethylene monofilament fabric (used for agricultural shading) were stretched between the columns to produce potentially numerous spatial and elevational arrangements.

The screens and panels in both the projects capture and thicken the tropical light, transforming these basic shelters into essays on the process of perception worthy of Robert Irwin: a “sculptural response that draws all its cues from its surroundings” (Wight 1971) but one that plays them out in a site worlds apart from the venue of Irwin’s installations.

Any attempt, however, to place Cha’s work in a single discourse or disciplinary take reveals, instead, its multiple registers of meaning and reference. The *ar + d* juries justly admire the simple poetics, the socially inflected intentions, the careful place-making. Yet what is remarkable is how many modernist conversations and narratives the work lends itself to while escaping definitive definition by any one of them:

- the traditions of socially progressive NGO-led community projects and volunteer-based design-build projects
- the minimalist aesthetics of Robert Irwin (especially the recent installations at the Dia: Prologue: x18 (1998) and Excursus: Homage to the Square (1998-00), both of which were installed around the time Cha’s projects were being designed and built)
- the metaphoric currency of “lightness”, whether in Terence Riley’s curation of the idea of “light construction”, the eco-ethic of “touching the earth lightly”, or the strategy of minimal, temporary, tensile structures

While all these help ‘map’ her work, the mappings stay out of registration, none quite squaring with the other. Hearing her present her work in person, other readings emerge. First, the dissonance of seeing *Commes des Garçons* and Issey Miyake share screen time with NGO spreadsheets.

Next, a slow realization that the work, its formal currency notwithstanding, uncannily reproduces and updates the proselytizing spirit of early Modernism’s social do-goodism in a mirror image. That the exquisite, restrained, site-specific design-build, minimalism of these enchanted projects is in the service of a Korean Evangelical Christian church’s outreach mission in dirt-poor, rural, Catholic, Central and South America. And that the “Light” referred to is not just the poetics of lightness but the “sweet Light” of Ecclesiastes 11.7.

While Jae Cha’s presentation of her work at the Odysseys Conference (ACSA Southeast Region Conference, February 2002) did not foreground her faith-based practice, the language of ‘mission’, of ‘service’ to

the poor, and of church-supported humanitarian work in undeveloped countries, made some in the audience of architectural academics, professionals, and students visibly uncomfortable.

When she showed the typical Catholic churches built in the area — iconographically correct but hot, enclosed, masonry constructions with pitched roofs and aisles — one sensed that some in the audience were ready to pounce on the double imposition of her Protestant faith *and* her aesthetic style, on these desperate campesinos. Yet no one could quite articulate or ignore the disturbing *déjà vu*: of a Euro-american modern architecture that had been there before, with an emancipatory stylistics more forceful than Cha's ethereal, thoughtful, site-specific, installations.

WON'T YOU TAKE ME TO, SHANTY TOWN: OUTSIDER ARCHITECTURE ON THE INSIDE

The work of artist Marjetica Potrc is as complicated in its appeal as the work of Jae Cha. Trained as an architect and as a sculptor, the Slovenian-born artist won the Guggenheim Hugo Boss Prize in 2000. For the past few years her work has concentrated on "grassroots architectures": the individual strategies for shelter and survival found in favellas, townships, and squatter settlements in third world metropolises.

In recent years she has documented examples of both make-shift housing solutions in the 'informal' sector, and a more wide-ranging selection of self-build experimentation: from the Barefoot Village community in India to Sam Mockbee's Rural Studio in Alabama, from Turkish 24-hour constructions to the Burning Man temporary settlements in Nevada.

Her project, as it were, is to foreground efforts where individuals and communities actively participate in the design, building, and implementation of their architecture and infrastructural systems: examples of bottom-up invention and initiative in opposition to centralized, modernist, top-down planning methods.

Potrc recreates examples of these shelters/constructions in galleries and museums, complementing them with photo-documentation of the original context and photomontages. For the Guggenheim show after her Boss Prize, she showed two structures or 'pavilions': A minimal skeleton frame: a roof, a floor, and plumbing connections based on the basic shelter distributed by the Johannesburg city government; and a shed/hut 'assembled' out of construction site detritus: a stack of brick and vinyl sheeting.

In a recent show at Max Protetch Gallery, she reproduced two examples of community-based solutions; the low-tech/high-tech shelters built by Barefoot Architects in Tilonia, India; and the 'service core unit' for Aranya Community Housing in Indore, India. The former combines rain-water harvesting and solar panels with traditional construction methods; the latter plays out the basic building block potential of a 'sites and services' strategy.

Potrc's work sits astride a number of recent art strategies without quite mapping any of them; from the documentary impulse of socially aware art practices, to the objects of minimalism, the untutored fabrications of 'outsider art', and the assemblages of installation art. Her objects are emphatically sculptural; discrete three-dimensional artifacts in-the-round that invite close study of their dirty materiality in the white world of the gallery.

At the same time, their relation to the architectural constructions they reproduce is complex and conflicted. Certainly there is more than a passing resemblance; the proportions, materials, shape, and size are quite similar to the model 'out there'. However the gallery reproduction edits out all information extraneous to the constructed artifact. Potrc produces just the shelter, excised from its site and its context: the sights, smells, and sounds of the slum. What's more, there is only one 'model' unit, now housed in the gallery.

Yet even as it loses the power it had in its aggregate complexity, it gains another through its objectification in the gallery. Like ethnographic, or cultural objects, in museums — once powerful objects rendered powerless through their decontextualization — Potrc's sculptures too regain power in their new assigned role as representatives of a particular culture or condition; in Potrc's case, standing in for the ingenuity and initiative of the desperate poor fending for themselves.

Her procedures sponsor a range of excited responses. Some examples give the flavor of the reactions, both ecstatic and critical:

"Potrc will construct a sculpture in the Max Protetch Gallery based on housing created by a community in India that utilizes natural elements to generate electricity and therefore autonomy. It is a rather heady political statement that threatens state sanctioned urban development with invention born of the necessities inherent to poverty". (Charles Chambers, www.nyartsmagazine.com)

"Potrc reconstructs architectural archetypes from urban waste in an almost literal sense and presents them in galleries and museums without any added social commentary. It is precisely this absence of a critical positioning of the work of art vis a vis a desolate and desolating urban reality that provokes debate". (Fernando Quesada in *Arte y Arquitectura*).

Potrc's is a "semi-visionary practice in which she is both storyteller and a kind of virtual social worker". (Francesco Bonami, in the Guggenheim catalog of the 2000 Hugo Boss Prize).

With his qualifications — "semi" and "virtual" — Bonami appears to hedge his bets, both endorsing and handicapping her practice, the artist as social worker. Quesada, on the other hand, is more sure of his, and his profession's, resistance to Potrc's constructions/reproductions. They, he suggests, index the difference between the practices of art and architecture: between making propositions and the resolution of problems, between the production of representations and of 'real' shelters.

That Potrc's objects "romanticize poverty" or "exploit" the architectural turn in recent art production, are rather obvious verdicts. Certainly Potrc's sculptures risk romanticizing poverty; but one could argue that they do that *and* then go beyond a simple romanticization by problematizing our desire to 'romanticize' and/or 'aestheticise'.

Out in the world, from a distance, or up close, the informal sector's organic order or spontaneous colorful exuberance do invite a formal appreciation without danger of reproach. Observing Potrc's re-creations in the gallery, however, one is made critically aware that, even though formal appreciation is the currency of the space of the gallery, one ought to resist, that one should, perhaps, try and look at these somewhat differently than other, more conventional, art objects.

A comparative analysis of Potrc's work with that of other artists using architecture as their raw material is outside the scope of this essay at present. It is, however, an important discursive space that, in its accommodation of both architectural and art artifacts, requires elaboration.

What is more interesting is what Potrc's sculptures, our experience of them, and their critical reception, reveal about the way the 'architecture' of the informal sector is structured by the discipline of architecture.

Pairing for a moment Potrc's work with Cha's sets into motion a disciplinary disturbance, one that reveals the partitioning of knowledge, the hierarchy of concerns, and the conventional approaches to these issues.

DOUBLE LIVES

Jae Cha's elegant, minimalist projects for dirt-poor communities. Marjetica Potrc's installations that reproduce shacks found in dirt-poor third world slums, in first world galleries. Is Marjetica slumming, romanticizing poverty? Is Jae condescending, imposing an aesthetic?

Certainly, the site/siting of their work is crucial to the disturbances they set up: Jae in the jungle, Marjetica in the gallery. Their trajectories, moving in opposite directions, follow parallel paths: Cha from the boutique formalism of minimalist aesthetics to the hurricane-devastated jungles of Honduras; Potrc, from the shantytowns of the urban third world to the galleries and art-biennial circuit of the first. Along the way, they trip many switches, toggling between first/third, high/low, formal/social, architecture/sculpture, architecture/installation, and architecture/vernacular construction, to name a few.

Both trouble our expectations of an architecture of, or for, the poor, pointing to the narrow space the discipline of architecture assigns to such an architecture. It is an arena that, by and large, has been left to the planners, the sociologists, the policy-makers, the bureaucrats, the community activists. The problems have been considered too big for architecture to address, let alone solve, given the scales of operation that architectural design usually privileges.

When this issue has had some architectural attention, the focus has been on rationalizing the design for mass production; a system that could be easily repeated, with individuation deferred to small acts of resistance or defiance by the users. Think of Pessac as the ur-site for this narrative of systematization and resistance.

An alternative narrative has mined vernacular traditions, finding in the folk forms and motifs of 'traditional' construction methods a source language for buildings for the poor. Hassan Fathy and Paul Oliver, and the whole cottage industry of vernacular architecture studies that they inspired, are examples of this approved disciplinary source for architectural recipes for housing the poor.

Over the last twenty five years, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (www.akdn.org), has, with its ecumenical

emphasis on architecture, community development, restoration, conservation, and the environment, created a new discursive space where private houses, public buildings, community empowerment, and slum improvement schemes are all eligible for review and reward. Each cycle of the awards has increased awareness of a broader set of issues and responses: from micro-credit lending to self-help infrastructural schemes, from rehabilitation of old neighborhoods to the provision of sites and services for new ones. It comes as no surprise that, the narrow remit of the Award (which restricts it to the Muslim world) notwithstanding, at least three of the projects Potrc documents and re-presents have won Aga Khan Awards for Architecture.

Bonami's description of Potrc as a virtual social worker may be useful. Unlike the community activists the Aga Khan Award for Architecture recognizes — activists and organizers who live in the communities they are involved in — Potrc operates as a courier, smuggling into the highly visible and formalized space of the gallery, examples both abject and full of life. Potrc as *coyote*, smuggling into the first world not the economically disenfranchised, hidden in truck trailers and shipping containers, but the slums and shelters from which they are desperate to escape.

Objectified in the gallery, we can no longer ignore these structures even if we manage to make disappear, from our view and our conscience, the economic migrants who make it across the border. In the gallery, we are forced to look, as if for the first time, at the material language of their bricolage, at the specific materials and their connections, at the absolute poverty of resources that discipline their making.

Potrc's objects, in their material presence and in their makeshiftness, both recall and overturn the object/material fetishism of Judd's boxes. In the slowed space and quiet time of the gallery, we may even fall

into aesthetic reverie, making comparisons, in the case of the Guggenheim show, between the tectonic of the skeleton and the chthonic of the hut. Then, with a shock, we shake ourselves out of this contemplation, only to realize the disciplinary strictures that have disallowed us to think about aesthetics when considering low-cost constructions.

Potrc's project can also be seen as a disciplinary rescue mission: to bring back to visibility the self-help initiatives of "spontaneous settlements" (a forgotten euphemism of the seventies' research into the viability of self-motivated human settlement initiatives), the figurative power latent in the abstraction of the sites and services' "core unit", indeed a whole vocabulary of architectural activism, and to introduce it to a wide cross-section of people.

Certainly her work should not be seen as relabelling architecture as art; in fact the architecture she rehabilitates barely merits recognition within its own discipline. What she is doing is 'art', sanctioned as such by the discipline, its circuits and contexts, its precedents and practices.

What she has not managed to transfer, through her reproductions and her photomontages, is what is integral to architecture and to living: the act of construction and the process of weathering; and the narrative of incremental improvement that inspires the daily struggle to improve one's living conditions.

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