

Architecture is not made with the brain

The labour of Alison and Peter Smithson

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“‘As found’ is a small affair, it is about being careful’

Thomas Schregenberger



'Parallel of Art and Life' installation at the ICA, 1953

'As found' is an interdisciplinary movement, an attitude in British architecture and art from the 1950s. It encompasses 'new brutalism' and the 'independent group' as well as 'free cinema' and the 'angry young men' and 'kitchen sink' movements. It's an attitude, an interest, an approach to architecture and art. 'As found' is about the here and now, about truthfulness and reality, about the common and the ordinary. It is not about visions and remote ideals. It means carefully observing everyday life, to discover its qualities, to follow the traces of what's already there and to use it as a basis for new insights and new forms.

Some thoughts about 'as found':

Firstly

'As found' is the tendency to engage with what is there, to acknowledge the existing, to follow its traces with interest. The justification for this interest lies in the knowledge that this can lead to new insights and 'forms'. Ultimately, the term means taking note of things in a radical way. Maybe it is the exact opposite of the 'disinterested pleasure' of the Enlightenment. It determines its entire area of concern only within relationships. In that sense it is aesthetic within a realistic approach to the world. It is ethical in its deep respect for what is. The aesthetic is not only the beautiful; the ethical is not only the good; the truthful is not only the true. The 'as found' attitude is anti-Utopian; its form is specific, raw and immediate.

Secondly

'As found' is not an approach that lends itself easily to an assertive will: it calls on the will to question. Here the difference between the 'as found' and the 'found' becomes important. Finding can be at random. If something is 'as found', however, the finder has already given it meaning. 'As found' marks the pivotal point between being active and being passive. As an approach to design it relies on the second glance. It is an approach that first neutralises and then starts again. It has to do with attentiveness, with a concern for that which exists, with a passion for the task of making something from something, rather than pretending to make something from nothing. It is a technique of reaction. It is 'about wanting what you got, rather than going out and getting what you wanted', in the words of Karel Reisz.

Thirdly

The word 'image' connotes something that the word 'picture' does not. In contrast to picture, which tends to apply to something external and objective, an image exists more in one's head. This makes it not simply subjective but also, above all, active. The distinction is important: it points to a fundamental difference between aesthetics and poetics. The former is perception; the latter, production. 'As found' lies on the threshold between the two. The approach leads from the static object of the mere picture to the dynamic process of imagining. This process of imagining is a conscious one and goes beyond simply looking at something. Working with images involves a specific revaluing and devaluing.

Allowing that which already exists to provide stimulus and produce new insights is quite liberating. It emancipates us from all outside prompting which may contribute to reshaping our emotions. 'As found', by contrast, means the autonomous discovery of that which is supposedly unimportant and the gift of making something important from it. It facilitates a subversive but friendly – perhaps even aggressive – questioning of the conventional system of values.

Stanislaus von Moos writes in *Minimal Tradition* (1996):
There are obvious differences in perception between Max Bill and the Smithsons. But these shouldn't keep us from understanding the analogies in their respective intentions of design... Both have chosen an architecture of straightness and pragmatism, an architecture without Utopia. Both look upon modernity not as a goal that needs to be reached, but as an established reality that needs to be interpreted.

And further on:

Each time Bill develops his forms from the conditions of the specific task at hand, the method and the materials used. This is another analogy to the work of the Smithsons as well as to the work of some of his younger Swiss colleagues, particularly to that of Herzog & de Meuron.

In their architecture, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron try to build relationships and relate to what already exists. One early example is the indentation in their plywood house in Bottmigen, Switzerland, which fits around an existing tree, a fully grown Paulownia. There at the outset, it became a central element of the project. It shapes the slightly indented plan and in places its roots dictate the off-ground construction: a relationship is established to the situation and to the existing tree.

'As it is we are interested in architecture as a kind of tool to perceive and come to grips with reality.'

In a presentation Jacques Herzog said in 1988: 'We see the moral and political content of our work in this quizzical state of mind. Not only during the design process but also as a quality that remains...' That is, 'as found', understanding that there is something in everything, if only you look more closely. 'As found' is about reconsidering opinions, about rethinking conventions. It has a subversive aspect. Something personal, something binding. Maybe that's why Peter Smithson's closing remark after our exhibition in 2001 appealed to me so much. He said: "As found" is a small affair, it is about being careful.'

