Full House

Rachel Whiteread's Postdomestic Casts

As we have seen, the notion of architecture as comprised of "space," rather than of built elements like walls and columns, is a relatively modern one; it first emerged with any force at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of German psychological theories of *Raum*—one thinks of Schmarsow, Lipps, and their art historical followers Wölfflin, Riegl, Frankl, et al. Space, indeed, became one of the watchwords of modernist architecture from Adolf Loos to Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, rapidly emerging as a primary critical term for the definition of what was "modern." Space, more even than function, became a limit term for modernity, not least for its connection with time both before and after Einstein. Space moved; it was fluid, open, filled with air and light; its very presence was a remedy for the impacted environments of the old city: the modern carrier of the Enlightenment image of hygiene and liberty. For most modernist architects, space was universal, and was intended to flood both public and private realms equally. Space in these terms, at least after Frank Lloyd Wright, was even politically charged; the Italian critic Bruno Zevi argued insistently after the Second World War that Wrightian space was synonymous with democratic space, as against a previous and undemocratic "Fascist" inattention to space.

With hindsight, the specific kinds of politics embedded in the idea of modernist space have inevitably become more ambiguous, as the trumpeted beneficence of modern architecture and its attendant "space" for contemporary living has all too clearly demonstrated its shortcomings, and as the alliances of modernist architects and unsavory patrons in the thirties have been revealed by historians. But the notion that space itself is good has hardly been erased from our mental vocabularies. This might well be a result of what one might call space's historical pedigree. As a product of theories of psychological

extension—either of projection or introjection—space naturally and early on became a cure for the twin phobias of late nineteenth-century urbanism, agoraphobia and claustrophobia. To open up the city would, in Le Corbusier's terms, and in much post-CIAM rhetoric, rid it of all closed, dirty, dangerous, and unhealthy corners; and, in the absence of dramatic contrast between open and closed spaces, would rid metropolitan populations of any spatial anxiety they might have felt in the first wave of urbanization.

13. Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993–1994.
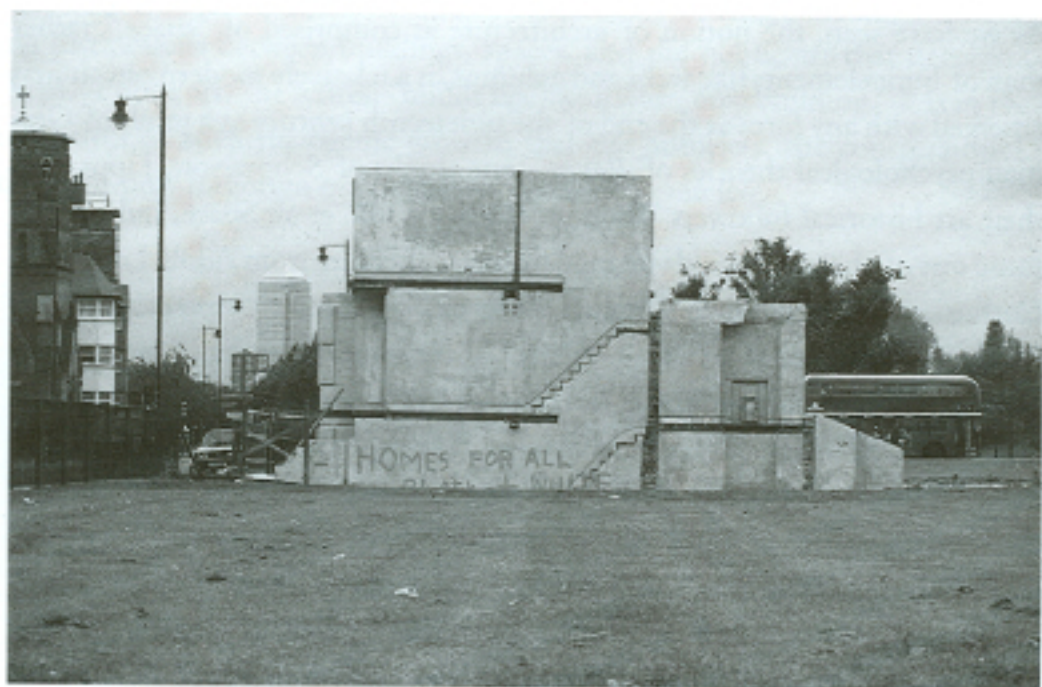
Perhaps the residue of this attitude partly accounted for the virulence of London County Council attacks on Rachel Whiteread's *House*. This cast of the interior space of a soon-to-be demolished terrace house was accused of standing in the way of slum clearance, of blocking the planting of healthy greenery, of making a monument to an unhealthy and claustrophobic past. On another level, that of the "house," the simple act of filling in space, of closing what was once open, would naturally counter the received wisdom of a century of planning dogma that *open* is better if not absolutely good. The "house" of Rachel Whiteread was on the surface a clear enough statement, and one carefully executed with all the material attention paid by a sculptor to the casting of a com-

plicated figure piece. But seldom has an event of this kind—acknowledged as temporary, and supported by the artistic community—evoked so vituperative a reaction in the popular press. It was as if we had been transported back in time to the moment when Duchamp signed the *Fountain*. Since its unveiling, Whiteread's house has been portrayed in cartoons, and in the critical press, with varying degrees of allegory and irony, even its supporters resorting to punning headlines—on the order of "the house that Rachel built," "home work," "house calls," "a concrete idea," "the house that Rachel unbuilt," "home truths," "no house room to art."

But from another viewpoint Whiteread's *House,* far from undermining modernism's spatial ideology, reinforces it, and on its own terms. For, since the development of Gestalt psychology, space has been subject to all the intellectual and experiential reversals involved in the identification of figure and ground, as well as the inevitable ambiguities between the two that were characteristic, as critics from Alois Riegl to Colin Rowe have pointed out, of modernism itself. Thus many modernists have employed figure/ground reversals to demonstrate the very palpability of space. The Italian architect Luigi Moretti even constructed plaster models in the 1950s to illustrate what he saw as the history of different spatial types in architecture. These models were cast, as it were, as the solids of what in reality were spatial voids; the spaces of compositions such as Hadrian's Villa were illustrated as sequences of solids as if space had suddenly been revealed as dense and impenetrable.[1] Architectural schools from the late 1930s on have employed similar methods to teach "space"—the art of the impalpable—by means of palpable models. By this method, it was thought, all historical architecture might be reduced to the essential characteristics of space, and pernicious "styles" of historicism might be dissolved in the flux of abstraction.

In these terms, Whiteread's *House* simply takes its place in this tradition, recognizable to architects, if not to artists or the general public, as a didactic illustration of nineteenth-century domestic "space." To an architect, whether trained in modernism or its "brutalist" offshoots, her work takes on the aspect of a full-scale model, a three-dimensional exercise in spatial dynamics and statics. A not accidental side result of this exercise is the transformation of the nineteenth-century *realist* house into an abstract composition; Whiteread has effectively built a model of a house that resembles a number of paradigmatic modern houses, from Wright to Loos, from Rudolph Schindler to Paul Rudolph.

In this sense her *House* would arouse the ire of the entire postmodern and traditionalist movement in Britain and elsewhere, dedicated to the notion that "abstraction" equals "eyesore."

But it seems also true that this project touched another nerve entirely, one not dissociated from those we have mentioned but more generally shared outside the architectural and artistic community, and deeply embedded in the "domestic" character of the intervention. Whiteread touched, and according to some commentators mutilated, the house, by necessity the archetypal space of homeliness. Article after article referred to the silencing of the past life of the house, the traces of former patterns of life now rendered dead but preserved, as it were, in concrete if not in aspic. To a cultural historian, this commentary, pro and con, was strangely reminiscent of the accounts of the discovery, excavation, and subsequent exhibiting of Herculaneum and Pompeii. These disinterred cities, which had been preserved precisely because they had been filled up like molds by lava and ashes, seemed, when excavated, to have been alive only shortly before, their inhabitants caught by the disaster in grotesque postures of surprise as they went about their daily work. Much travel and fantasy literature of the nineteenth century circled around this point: the life-in-suspension represented by the mummified traces of everyday existence. A cartoon of the Whiteread *House* by Kipper Williams fed on just this fear, that of being trapped inside a space filled so violently, the space and air evacuated around a still-living body.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers and literary critics, from E. T. A. Hoffmann to Henry James, subsumed this horror of domestic interment/disinterment in the popular genre and theory of the uncanny, a genre often evoked in the discussion of Whiteread's project. This characterization would have it that the very traces of life extinguished, of death stalking through the center of life, of the "unhomeliness" of filled space contrasted with the former homeliness of lived space (to use the terminology of the phenomenologist-psychologist Eugène Minkowski) raised the specter of demonic or magical forces, at the very least inspiring speculation as to the permanence of architecture, at most threatening all cherished ideals of domestic harmony—the "children who once played on the doorstep" variety of nostalgia so prevalent among Whiteread's critics. Robin Whale's cartoon of the negative impression of Whiteread's "cast" body in the wall of *House* echoes this sensibility; unwittingly it stems from a line of observations on the uncanny effects of impressions of body parts beginning

with Chateaubriand's horrified vision of the cast breast of a young woman at Pompeii: "Death, like a sculptor, has molded his victim," he noted.

Added to this was what many writers saw as the disturbing qualities of the "blank" windows in the *House;* this might again be traced back to romantic tropes of blocked vision, the evil eye, and the uncanny effect of mirrors that cease to reflect the self; Hoffmann and Victor Hugo, in particular, delighted in stories of boarded-up houses whose secrets might only be imagined. The abandoned hulk of Whiteread's *House* holds much in common with that empty house on Guernsey so compelling for Hugo's fantasies of secret history in *Les travailleurs de la mer.*

Psychoanalysis, however, and especially since the publication of Freud's celebrated article on "The Uncanny" in 1919, has complicated such romantic reactions by linking the uncanny to the more complex and hidden forces of sexual drives, death wishes, and Oedipal fantasies. Taking off from the difficult formulation hazarded by Schelling in the 1830s that the uncanny was "something that ought to have remained secret and hidden but which has come to light," Freud linked this sensation to experiences of a primal type—such as the primal scene witnessed by Little Hans—that had been suppressed only to show themselves unexpectedly in other moments and guises. Joined to such primary reactions, the causes of uncanny feelings included, for Freud, the nostalgia that was tied to the impossible desire to return to the womb, the fear of dead things coming alive, the fragmentation of things that seemed all too like bodies for comfort. Here we might recognize themes that arose in some of the responses to *House,* including the literal impossibility of entering into the house itself, as well as the possibility that its closed form held unaccounted secrets and horrors. In psychoanalytical terms, Whiteread's project seems to follow the lead of Dada and surrealism in their exploration of "unhomely" houses precisely for their sexual and mental shock effect: the "intrauterine" houses imagined by Tristan Tzara, the soluble habitations delineated by Dalí, the "soft" houses of Matta offer ready examples, against which in post-avant-garde terms the *House* seems to pose itself as a decidedly *non*-uterine space, a *non*-soft environment. As critics have noted, Whiteread's notion of "art" as temporary act or event similarly takes its cue from Dada precedents.

But Freud's analysis seems lacking precisely when confronted with terms that imply a non–object based uncanny—an uncanny generated by space

rather than its contents. Freud, despite a late recognition that space might be less universal than Kant had claimed, remained singularly impervious to spatial questions, and it was left to phenomenologists from Minkowski to Binswanger to recognize that space itself might be psychologically determined and thereby to be read as a symptom, if not an instrument, of trauma and neurosis. Tellingly, Minkowski writes of "black" or "dark" space, that space which, despite all loss of vision—in the dark or blindfolded—a subject might still palpably feel: the space of bodily and sensorial if not intellectual existence. It is such a space that Whiteread constructed, a blindingly suffocating space that, rather than receiving its contents with comfort, expelled them like a breath.

And it was this final reversal that seems in retrospect to have been most pointed. For what was the modern house, if not the cherished retreat from agoraphobia—that "housewife's disease" so common in suburbia, and so gendered from its first conception in the 1870s? Thrust so unceremoniously into the void, the domestic subject no longer finds a shell, clinging, as if to Géricault's raft, to the external surface of an uninhabitable and absolute claustrophobic object, forced to circulate around the edges of a once womblike space. Therein lay an origin of the uncanny feelings that arose when such desires, long repressed, suddenly reemerged in unexpected forms. In Whiteread's world, where even the illusion of return "home" is refused, the uncanny itself is banished. No longer can the fundamental terrors of exclusion and banishment, of homelessness and alienation, be ameliorated by their aestheticization in horror stories and psychoanalytic family romances; with all doors to the *unheimlich* firmly closed, the domestic subject is finally out in the cold forever.

And if *House* constitutes itself as a memory trace of former occupation and a traditional notion of dwelling, her most recent project, the winning entry for a Holocaust Memorial on the Judenplatz in Vienna (1998), takes this to a public conclusion. This project has been described by critic David Thistlewood as "a closed windowless double-cube of a building with a flat roof, and beneath a plain parapet what would appear from a distance to be vertically striated concrete walls," which on closer inspection prove to be the cast impressions of a vast library of books inside, the voids behind books "described by their gathered edges and the containing shelves," a move anticipated in *Untitled (Shelves)* of 1996. For Thistlewood, "the lost presence of the books projects outwards towards infinity, interacting with the world of real events in which the work is sited," standing for

the entire archive of Jewish history.[2] In the context of the discussion of *House* the memorial does not simply, as Thistlewood notes, turn sculpture into architecture, but rather it transforms both. The interior as exterior, the "cast" of a building *as* building, with its own interior, and a cast, further, that is made of a building that never existed except in imaginary and typological form—the ark, the Temple— here intersects sculptural and architectural norms to constitute something else, a "neither-nor" of both. This crystallization of a type form, a manifestation in iconographic terms of the purely imaginary image, brings it into contact with the everyday, and with a haptic, almost felt relationship with the viewer, now become a potential toucher of books, an opener of truths, substituted for a distanced vision of monumental form.

A comparison with another submission for the same competition, the Vienna Holocaust memorial of Peter Eisenman, will clarify the point. In the Eisenman project, as in Whiteread's, the concern seems not so much to iconically represent "memory" as to emulate its processes. But where Whiteread inserts her work into the processes of everyday experience, acting on and within a subject/viewer's own memory work, Eisenman emulates those processes of remembering and forgetting in the generation of the architectural object itself, leaving traces of this generation as clues wherein the subject/viewer, attempting to reconstitute the process of generation, will by analogy, so to speak, exercise its memory. Whiteread, so to speak, turns to the memory of life, Eisenman to a figurative emulation of that memory in the parallel memory of the architectural object. But it would be a mistake to relegate Whiteread too quickly to the realm of the "realist" as opposed to Eisenman's more abstract procedure. For the Whiteread memorial is after something different from architecture— or at least from that architecture of which the Eisenman project speaks. Her project looks to the always uneasy status of the monument within architecture, its wavering between art and use. As Adolf Loos recognized, and Hegel had theorized, architecture's symbolic role at once constitutes its "essence"—art turned to symbolizing life in three-dimensional form—while its use role entirely undermines this primal symbolism—architecture defined not in terms of idea but of function. Whiteread undermines this binary problem by deliberately confusing sculpture and architecture, and by developing a kind of mutant object that cannot be defined in either set of terms, that asks to be defined indeed by this very refusal.