

Katherine Lapierre: Singular Meanings and the Madness of Reason

text by Nicolas Reeves

Consciousness constantly besets us with impossible questions, invariably hinging on the one, fundamental to our survival, of the meaning of things. They would be deafening but for the many coping mechanisms the mind develops to deal with them. Among the latter, reason holds pride of place in the West. It categorizes the world into a series of reasoned objects and connects events in endless sequences of cause and effect, all-too-often substituting “how” for “why.”

The principle applies to large and small endeavours alike, and operates on every architectural scale. Powerless to give meaning to the world, and terrified of an open-ended meaning it associates with chaos, rationalist architecture itself becomes terrifying. It signals a world in which cities and human behaviour are governable, predictable, arrayed into a system that sets architecture in a fabricated teleology. It organizes life according to set objectives, the means invariably confused with the ends. In a methodical Cartesian inversion, it hopes to reconstitute a complex world through the sum of elementary operations from which the significance of its computerized scenarios might emerge, as by some strange semantic alchemy. It doesn't realize that meaning springs precisely from that impossible hope; and that reason's initial folly – and therefore its first outlet – is to obstinately believe, contrary to all expectations, that the infinite accumulation of discrete, explicable, graspable and controlled operations will eventually generate the unknown, mystery, life.

Diametrically opposed to an architecture raisonnée, other, much more unassuming architectural practices emerge, cities much less grandiose, grounded in networks of meaning, arborescences of significations that serve as structure, raison d' être, and identity, and in which every element of form, volume, material is imbued with meaning and purpose. All, to be brief, tell and retell the stories and histories of ways of life transmitted through time and space, from man to man, woman to woman, in forms of communication much nearer the tale than the technical drawing. Eschewing contemporary dictates of structure and aesthetics, they never become a movement because they are outside any movement. They will have no descendants, for each is an end in itself. While they may be the initiative of lone women and men, and may not always be stable, or even habitable, they conjure homes that come remarkably close to those we have all dreamt of – tree houses, subterranean houses, spherical bubble-shaped houses, houses as high as towers, homes populated with little gods to ensure their safety, houses of which every square inch is inhabited and imbued with images that are born by the one who created it, who knows, consciously or not, that he must transmit them so that nothing should ever be lost. And on those rare occasions when they transgress the limits of official architecture, they provoke, disturb, and fascinate. Sometimes they even achieve greatness, as in the works of Gaudi and the postman Cheval. They have few followers, however. Despite their success with the citizens of Vienna and Louvain-la-Neuve, Hundertwassers and Krolls appear as true singularities. The mere idea of an after-Gaudi or an after-Cheval is perplexing. The likelihood of applying the lessons learnt from their work to official architecture is all but hypothetical. Yet their cargo of dreams, of inextinguishable and inalienable poetry, of unabashed freedom, of imaginary vistas, induces in each of us a re-enchantment with the home, the city, and the world.

Engaging an insightful investigation of the place of rationality in contemporary architecture, Katherine Lapierre's diminutive constructions are un-reasonable objects, the direct outcome of a precise, sensitive, and profoundly poetic vision of the works of outsider architects. Will this provide new ways of giving architectural objects the flesh and meaning that were stripped away by the rational, the systemic, and

the normative? Studied by several architects in recent decades, this question has become all the more decisive in view of the explosive growth of urban development across the planet. Katherine is one of the few architects of her generation to be concerned with the issue. This first exhibition introduces the tools with which she initiates the investigation: a measured, skillful, and perpetually exploratory application of a rich and lively reflection, informed by first hand investigations of the terrain. Here she sets the milestones for an extended process that it will be well worth our while to follow very closely. As suggested by one of her first works – a 2:1 scale model of a stone she found in a park, then triangulated, digitally modelled, and reconstructed on transparencies –, she may well bring the rudiments of an answer through a conscious oscillation between meaningful architecture and one that takes oblique paths to go beyond its constitutive rationality and express the rapturous poetry of *surrationality*.

Katherine Lapierre studied architecture, she is now conducting researches on the question of outsiders and self build architectures. Her work was shown on collective exhibitions at Axénéo7, the SAT and Centre de design de l'UQAM.