

Alison and Peter Smithson

(1928-1993; 1923-2003)

Alison Margaret Gill was born in Sheffield on 22 June 1928 and Peter Denham Smithson was born in Stockton-on-Tees on 18 September 1923. They met at the school of architecture of the University of Durham in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. They married in 1949. After working a short period at the London County Council they started their own practice after winning the competition for the Hunstanton Secondary Modern School (1949-54). Competition entries such as the ones for Coventry Cathedral (1951), Golden Lane (1952) and Sheffield University (1953) did not result in actual commissions, but established their reputation as the most radical of British architects.

In 1953 they became younger members of the British CIAM-group MARS and participated in the ninth CIAM congress at Aix-en-Provence. From then on they would be part of the core of the later Team 10 until its very end. The Smithsons claimed that Team 10 was more important to them than to anyone else. They would define the themes for the meetings, and Alison Smithson became the unofficial chronicler of the group through her publications about Team 10, including the Team 10 Primer (1962, re-edition 1968).

Issues addressed by the Smithsons ranged from mobility, individual and group identity to strategies for growth and change. Especially in the early years their contribution evolved around the concepts of 'cluster' and 'human association', by which they aimed for a more adequate redefinition of the collective dimension of architecture and urban planning. Diagrams used to visualize this argument are the 'Scale of Association', an adapted version of Patrick Geddes's Valley Section, and the 'hierarchy of association' (house-street-district-city) that was developed with Bill and Gill Howell and that was intended to replace the four functions of The Athens Charter (dwelling, work, recreation and transportation).

Other concepts coined by the Smithsons are 'the New Brutalism' and 'As Found'; these concepts and others came out of their involvement with the Independent Group, set up by the London Institute of Contemporary Arts. Photographer Nigel Henderson and sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi were also members of the Independent Group, as was the critic Reyner Banham. With Henderson and Paolozzi the Smithsons produced two now famous exhibits: 'Parallel of Life and Art' (1953) and 'Patio & Pavilion' (1956). Although the Smithsons would not agree with Banham on the exact definition of the New Brutalism, Banham became its main advocate.

The Smithsons's buildings production remained rather limited. The Hunstanton school was followed by, among others, The Economist Building (1959-64), the Garden Building at St Hilda's College in Oxford (1967-70), and Robin Hood Gardens (1966-72). Designs for private houses gave them the opportunity to elaborate their theories on dwelling and consumerism, such as the House of the Future (1956), the Sugden House (1956) and their own weekend home in Fonthill (1959-82). In later years two chief clients were the University of Bath, for whom the Smithsons designed various buildings, including the school of architecture (1982-88), and Axel Bruchhäuser, director of the German furniture company Tecta, for whom they designed a series of additions and renovations to both Bruchhäuser's private home and the Tecta factory building (1986-2003).

Alison and Peter Smithson published numerous articles, reviews, comments and books. They had a special relationship with Monica Pidgeon, editor of *Architectural Design*, who published special issues edited by the Smithsons on CIAM and Team 10. Their books were mostly compilations of articles, regrouped thematically, sometimes also rewritten; these include *Urban Structuring* (1967), *Ordinariness and Light* (1970) and *Without Rhetoric* (1973). In the first half of the 1970s the Smithsons reconsidered the notion of collectivity by way of the 'Collective Design' series of articles; another seminal essay of that period is Alison Smithson's 'How to Recognize and Read Mat-Building' (1974), investigating the Team 10 legacy after the Berlin and Rotterdam meetings.

Other activities that led to publications were lectures and professorships. Peter Smithson taught at the AA-school and at the Bartlett school of architecture. He was a professor at the University of Bath from 1978 until 1990. In the 1980s the Smithsons also taught in Delft, Barcelona and Munich. A special series of publications came out of the visits of Peter Smithson to De Carlo's ILAUD. These publications (*Italian Thoughts* 1993, *Italianische Gedanken* 1996, *Italianische Gedanken, weitergedacht* 2001) evolved around the idea of Conglomerate Ordering, a reformulation of many of the Smithson's early concepts such as the New Brutalism and *Without Rhetoric*. Apart from this Alison Smithson wrote a few novels, of which only *A Portrait of the Female Mind as a Young Girl* (1966) was published. Other publications slightly out of range of architectural issues were *AS in DS* (1983) and *Imprint of India* (1994); the Smithsons called them 'sensitivity primers'. Their final publication, *The Charged Void*, is a series of three publications of their complete work, of which two are published.

Alison Smithson died in London on 14 August 1993. Peter Smithson died in London on 3 March 2003.

source:

<http://www.team10online.org/>

Striving to adapt the progressive ideas of the pre-war modern movement to the specific human needs of post-war reconstruction, Alison and Peter Smithson were among the most influential and controversial architects of the latter half of the twentieth century. As younger members of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) and as founding members of Team 10 they were at the heart of the debate on the future course of Modern Architecture. Their polemics and designs - addressing issues such as the rising consumer society and the orientation of urban planning - laid the foundations for New Brutalism and the Pop Art Movement of the 1960s.

An important adaptation made by the Smithsons and their generation was the rejection of modernism's machine aesthetics. The new notions of place and territory were juxtaposed to Le Corbusier's machine à habiter. To the Smithsons a house was a particular place, which should be suited to its location and able to meet the ordinary requirements of everyday life and to accommodate its inhabitants' individual patterns of use. This exhibition examines the evolution of the Smithsons' approach to this everyday "art of inhabitation." It does this by extensively documenting most of their designs for individual dwellings, especially their optimistic House of the Future of 1956 and the series of renovations of and additions to the fairy-tale-like Hexenhaus in Germany from the late 1980s onward.

The Smithsons' interest in the everyday and ordinary originated from various circumstances, such as their experience of wartime and the poverty and scarcity during the post-war reconstruction period. More or less forced by circumstances, the Smithsons were determined to make the most out of what little there was available. They called this approach "As Found:" aiming at a revitalization of the ordinary and the most humble of things. The ordinariness of inhabitation, its triviality and self-evidence, was a constant source of amazement, inspiration and energy for the Smithsons. They wished to look at "ordinary life and ordinary objects with an eye that sees the ordinary as also magical." It often set them thinking about bigger issues. Singing the praises of cabinet doors could therefore easily result in an exemplification of the house-town correlation.

Current interest, in both the everyday and the magic of the ordinary, stems from a quite different situation. In the Western world, most people now live a life of unprecedented plenty. The society of the spectacle and the consumer culture that were just remote prospects in the 1950s have become our everyday reality. The everyday and its earthiness function as a critical moment, breaking down the illusions and desires produced by the media industry.

Besides being a site for possible resistance, the everyday and the ordinary offer an alternative approach. First, by providing a space into which one can retreat; a refugium, a place for calmness and reflection, a breathing space. Secondly, by providing the opportunity to once again reconsider the relations between media, consumer society and inhabitation. The point at issue in both cases is the construction of new places for dwelling. Emphatically, the everyday neither provides an idyllic spot nor regains us our lost innocence. On the contrary, it constitutes a site of contestation of values, where new relations between realism and idealism may be established.

source:

Alison and Peter Smithson

From the House of the Future to a house of today

Editor: Max Risselada Editor: Dirk van den Heuvel