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EXHIBITION REVIEW

A Review of *Das Architekturmodell: Werkzeug, Fetische, Kleine Utopie / The Architectural Model: Tool, Fetish, Small Utopia*

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Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main

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In the summer of 2012 the German Architecture Museum (DAM) in Frankfurt was filled from top to bottom with models. Three hundred of them, give or take a few, clamored for visitors' attention, asking them to shift their thinking about architecture from buildings to the artifacts of the design process. The models came from museums near – one-third were from the German Architecture Museum's own collection – and far, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York; they came from private collections and architect's offices in Germany and abroad. Models of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, Louis Kahn's Meeting House at the Salk Institute, OMA's design for the Parc de la Villette, Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower, and O.M. Ungers's building for the German Architecture Museum itself were interspersed among less familiar examples. These included Sergius Ruegenberg's series of collaged models of houses, Gottfried Böhm's plasticine models, Wolfgang Döring's Space-Music Theater, Walter Jonas's Intrapolis, and Conrad Roland's elegant model of a Spiral Skyscraper from the 1960s, which welcomed visitors to the exhibition after having spent twenty-four years in a storage facility.

But the exhibition was not only about modern models and their successors.[1] In turning its visitors from buildings to models, the exhibition brought the museum itself as well as the design process into view. According to curator Oliver Elser, the exhibition was conceived from the start as an opportunity to understand more about the DAM and to explore its collection. While it may be easy to understand how collecting models is central to this museum's role as a guardian of architecture's material culture, the exhibition went further and showed how the consequences of assuming such a responsibility are often difficult and always complex. Texts in the exhibition as well as in the generous catalogue gave each model a history. Individually, many of these read like adventure stories of neglect and disappearance, survival and rescue. Together they pointed to the general difficulty of finding models, of col-

lecting them if and when they are found (because of their size, fragility and their sheer number), and of integrating them into museum collections, which value objects that are exactly what many models are not: well-crafted and authentic. This predicament defines the architecture museum.

The models' challenge to the well-worn standards of craft and authenticity was portrayed in all its richness by a presentation that pointed to the tension between the appearance of the models and their stories. On the ground floor, visitors immediately noticed the roughness of the study models for Herzog and De Meuron's Prada Store in Tokyo and then learned that these were at the heart of the design process, shaping what became a carefully crafted building. On the top floor of the museum, visitors saw the exquisite plaster model of Otto Bartning's Sternkirche and were informed that it only played a secondary role. It was a photo-model, a rarely discussed category of objects that served the making of photographs, in this case, photographs at least as exquisite as the model. And on one of the floors between, a dazzling row of models of famous office towers of the 1950s and 60s, including the Seagram Building and Lever House, announced the emergence of professional model-making after World War II, a specialization at considerable remove from the design process.

However enticing the general issues and the individual stories, neither one was sufficient for navigating an exhibition containing so many artifacts. The curators offered a middle ground by organizing the exhibition with a series of classifications and themes. The three categories, tool, fetish, and small utopia, classified the models with the factors that shape them: "tool" associated a model with the design process and, where relevant, its function as a representation of a building; "fetish" indicated a model's identity as a discrete object and all that this entails; and "small utopia" focused on a model's content, specifically one distinct from an actual building. Although each object was identified with one of these terms, it was immediately apparent that many of the models could have been labeled with two of them, almost as many with all three. As a result, the terms appeared confusing. Why, for exam-

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ple, were Schultes and Frank's illuminated models classified under "fetish" but the large model of the Nazi Government's project for a publishing house under "tool"?

But the confusion also signaled the exhibition's openness to questioning and doubt, making an important and ironic point about the nature of models: the way they are viewed can change, superseding a fixed identity for the individual object. Rather than simply frustrating visitors, the questioning could be seen as a provocation that engaged visitors more effectively than a seamless explanation would. This view is consistent with Elser's goal to avoid being didactic; one only wishes that the curatorial team had abandoned their openness for a moment in order to communicate the suggestive, not definitive, nature of the labels.

The themes gathered the objects into small groups that structured the exhibition's layout. Some of the strongest themes welcomed visitors into the exhibition. "Convincing and Lying" portrayed the model as rhetorical device, "Dissecting and Moving" put the material character of the model – in this case, its mechanics – on display and "Work on the Model" proudly paraded the often scrappy models that come right off the architect's desk. The most prominent object in "Convincing and Lying" was one at the center of the German Architecture Museum's history: Charles Moore's model of the Piazza D'Italia, the first object that Heinrich Klotz acquired for the museum's collection in the mid-1970s. Opposite it was a series of models of the Museum for Modern Art in Frankfurt. Accompanying the large model of Hans Hollein's winning design were a series of small scale models of other entries. The display illustrated the persuasive power of models in the context of a competition, highlighting the comparison so important to the selection process. In addition, both examples were local, the familiar projects providing a way into the exhibition for the non-specialist. Other models completed the group. Conrad Roland's model of a Spiral Skyscraper joined the local examples to show another version of "convincing and lying"; its long and lean proportions made a formal spectacle of the vision of an architect during the 1960s, while Norman Foster's model of an Indoor Athletics Stadium displayed a structural spectacle that was, as visitors discovered, only for the miniature figures sitting inside.

The models in the "Material Fetish" group could not help but be a highlight of the exhibition, especially because the group contained a number of significant objects: Peter Eisenman and Richard Serra's model for the German Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, Mies van der Rohe's model of the Resor House, and Peter Zumthor's Kolumba Art Museum. Next to this group the display of Hans Hollein's Schullin Jewelry Shop attracted attention due to both its fetishized subject and its telescopic presentation: a small model of the shop accompanied a mock-up of the front façade, which was composed of a full-scale model of the most important detail inserted in a photograph replicating the experience of standing in front of the store. Other highlights in the exhibition included a series of engineering models by Frei Otto, the "Peepshow", which

offered an intimate look at interior space; the portable models in "Dissecting and Moving", which included not only Ungers's "exploded" model of the German Architecture Museum but also Elia Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas's Checkpoint Charlie "model in a box" and the German Concrete Association's 1932 model of the Stadium Café in Nuremberg, an old chestnut from the German Museum in Munich depicting the construction phases of a concrete building all in one object.

By occupying the entire museum, the exhibition was able to exploit the character of the building itself, and it did so in some clever ways, using the core on the upper floors as a counterpart to what was shown in the surrounding galleries. Schultes and Frank's illuminated models transformed the fetishized objects in the gallery outside into a play of light in the first floor core. The exhibit also quite literally revealed what lay behind the well-known colored images of the projects: carefully crafted objects rather than software and a computer. On the floor above, a diverse little collection of "X-Ray models", including Eisenman's House II and Makato Sei Watanabe's "Wing", was nested within the museum's permanent exhibition: a series of models depicting the history of architecture. A photograph of the 1935 "Glass Woman", a celebrity in the world of German museums, introduced visitors to the exhibit, its legibility making an important gesture toward the non-professional audience that normally frequents this floor. Indeed, it was the convergence of the professional and non-professional agendas that made this one of the most significant moments in the exhibition. Not only did the X-Ray models invert the realistic presentation of buildings in the permanent exhibition and expand the general public's notion of what an architectural model can be, but they integrated the permanent collection – revered by the public but dismissed by most architects - and made it worthy of serious professional attention.

The exhibits on the top floor brought the exhibition to a close by destabilizing any remaining fixed notion of the model. Two plaster models, among the exhibition's most precious objects, were revealed to be secondary players not stars of the show. Or were they indeed the stars? The model of the Sternkirche only existed for the sake of a photograph, and the one of Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower was exposed as a copy. But both were occasions for offering bold insights about models, whether this concerned an unexpected way of using them or emphasized a model's own history separate from that of the building it depicts. While these two examples depicted the possible paths a model's life can take, the core on this floor was the site of the model's birth. Here, the model workshop took up the theme of the copy by putting it into production. One side of the space was lined with a case containing prototypical model details, casting molds and other ready-made parts used to expedite the construction of the hand-crafted model. On the other, Andreas Kretzer and Dennis Röver from the Technical University in Kaiserslautern put the process of creating digital models on display with a clever do-it-yourself printer that dutifully produced miniature

models of … the Einstein Tower … to fill the case lining the opposite wall.

Despite the number of models that converged on the museum for this occasion, the issues that models raise may have been the most significant aspect of the exhibition. Such a conclusion makes the uneven selection of models in the exhibition less important than the interesting reasons for it; it makes showing a precious collection of objects less important than stimulating a rich discussion surrounding it. The conclusion also points to the great lesson of the exhibition: that models are characterized by paradox. So, it only seems right that the greatest paradox was reserved for the very end of the exhibition, where the last model challenged our basic assumption about the close relationship between models and buildings. What else could the final model tag have identified but the "building within a building": the physical and conceptual core of the museum itself?

Notes

[1] As Oliver Elser points out in his catalogue essay, the emergence of modern architecture was accompanied by "the widespread use of models" as well as new techniques for constructing them and new contexts for their use. In addition, a limited commitment to the attributes of buildings – combined with the view that the model was an end in itself – opened up possibilities for model-making practices after 1920, which appear to distinguish them from their predecessors, such as those in the Renaissance that produced the models shown in two spectacular exhibitions in the mid-1990s.

Related Publication

Elser, O and **Small, P C** (eds.) 2012 *Das Architekturmodell: Werkzeug, Fetisch, Kleine Utopie / The Architectural Model: Tool, Fetish, Small Utopia.* Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Architekturmuseum and Zurich: Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess AG. Bilingual edition. ISBN 9783858813466.