

Material Dialectic. Donald Judd and Philip Johnson

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To leave aside any dependence on handicraft, any allusion to historical forms, any massiveness derived from traditional constructions materials, in order to open the path to an architecture based on new construction systems, and the immateriality and transparency characteristic of the new man; these assertions of the architecture originated at the beginning of the XX century had as a result a broad ensemble of works built in any part of the world that became the dogmas of modern architecture. Critics of the next decades concentrated their attacks on these works, although even their more radical detractors did never questioned that that architecture was a fact with no return. Nevertheless, modern architecture was often forced to use certain strategies to soften its positions of extreme renouncement and austerity, what many theoreticians of modernity called the new poverty. This fact is evident, for example, in the way architects respond to the necessity of eliminating any rhetoric associated with a building entrance, especially in housing buildings, using secondary or service elements, such a curved stairs or cantilevered balconies, to emphasize that particular place now deprived of its own symbolic means. A similar strategy is used when the absence of matter does not allow the most favourable conditions of comfort and habitability, then adding some service quarters that could make use of traditional materials or handicraft techniques. In this way, the so called main architectures make a sort of delegation of their qualities over secondary or subsidiary constructions, these less strictly compromised with the figurative and technical demands of modern architecture.

This question affects to the autonomy of the architectural object and suggests the existence of a sort of dialectic in which a balance is established between different entities in order to shape a particular work. The aim of this writing is to examine how this dialectic appears in the ensemble called la Mansana de Chinati, built by the sculptor Donald Judd in the city of Marfa, Texas, from 1974 onwards, when compared with the two houses built by the architect Philip Johnson in his New Canaan state, Connecticut, around 1950.

The origin of la Mansana de Chinati can be fixed at the beginning of the seventies, when the sculptor Donald Judd bought two useless aircraft sheds in the city of Marfa, in western Texas, to be converted into a showroom for permanent exhibition of his own works and the works of others. Shortly before that, Judd had hired a house to spend the summer, although he knew the area since his military service there in 1946 and later in some trips at the end of the 1960s. His first work at Marfa was an adobe wall enclosing the property where the sheds were located in order to isolate it from the passers by and the existing railway tracks. This enclosed area was the starting point of a complex that will become later his home and working place, and also a space for the permanent exhibition of his sculptures. After renovating the existing buildings, some new buildings for housing, office or service were set up at la Mansana de Chinati. Furniture, bookshelves, tables, chairs, or beds for the children, was also designed as well as the outdoor spaces between buildings, an interior courtyard, a pergola, a water basin and some areas for plantations. In the 1980s, two artillery sheds were added as well as some barracks to become a library, an engraving workshop, an infant school and lodgings for guests and resident artists. Lately, the Chinati Foundation, which still exists, is the owner of most land surrounding the city of Marfa, where big scale works have been settled, as well as some other buildings, shops or stores, to be provided with new uses.

Donald Judd carried out in Marfa mainly a work of renovation of some existing architectural structures, those that he chooses, y refers to this work as a purification act, as when a new utilitarian purpose arises, the individuality of the buildings and the architectural tradition they represent assume a new form, although without completely erasing the traces of their original

function. The main purpose of the buildings of la Mansana de Chinati, the exhibition Donald Judd's sculptures which should guide any architectural intervention reduces this work to eliminate and clean the existing structures in order to make them essential envelopes for a particular content. Columns and iron trusses, copper roofs or concrete floors in sheds and barracks were carefully uncovered and their interstices filled to make visible its original constitution. Only when strictly necessary, partitions and doors were added and window voids were closed or opened, but most frequently he adapts the characteristics of the old constructions to the most suitable functions considering their spatial organization, whether a small shop with some rooms or a big diaphanous shed. In very rare occasions Donald Judd builds new structures, most of them small scale constructions with a subsidiary use, but in these cases his architectural option is the most remarkable.

To build the adobe wall enclosing the property and later a small house for his two kids, Judd had to hire legal Mexican workers in order to find specialists still capable of producing the tradition-rich material. The choice of adobe as the material for his new buildings, when the existing ensemble was characterized by iron or concrete structure used in industrial architecture, introduced some domestic character and comfort among the bareness and strict functionalism of the sheds converted into exhibition places. Adobe architecture, on the one hand, alluded to a nearly forgotten local tradition, and on the other hand, it exhibited the same qualities of simplicity and economy found in the abandoned industrial structures of the showrooms. Nevertheless, the fact that specialized labour force could not be found in the area and that it was necessary to look for Mexican workers to build with adobe indicates that Judd's aim was not immediacy and easiness, but to bring back a material architecture already disappeared, much more difficult to materialize at that time than that made with conventional materials and techniques. Judd demanded a disappeared handicraft and craftsman, or at least disappeared at a big scale, and tries to rescue those few workers still capable of working with such material. So his adobe architecture is as rare as sophisticated. In this way, both the cleaning process of industrial sheds and the new construction of adobe buildings and walls try to accomplish a marginal architecture, as the content of the art works should be more important than the container, but at the same time the purpose is to build an architecture characterized by its material poverty and a strict suitability to its proper functions.

Thus, certain equivalence exists between the accumulation of matter characteristic of traditional adobe construction, closed and with only a few voids connecting the interior with the exterior, and the elimination of matter to accomplish the pure skeleton construction of an industrial architecture. They are the two faces of poverty, one is material accumulation and the other bareness and deprivation, both equally pursued when poverty is assumed as an ethical attitude. Donald Judd thinks that architecture only has to have space and so it must be easy to construct and when sufficient space is available in existing buildings is no need to conceive new ones. This is his position as an artist, as a sculptor who wishes to show his work in the best way. But when he chooses to erect the walls and small buildings at Marfa in the old tradition of adobe construction, being compelled to hire emigrant Mexican workers, he looks for an alternative to the houses of the oil millionaires built in the outskirts of Marfa. Outdoor spaces are designed in the same local tradition, including a pool, a pergola and when plants are incorporated, he prefers local vegetation as the most appropriate to retain humidity in a desert climate. And for these outdoor areas, to provide shade and humidity to those wandering among his sculptures, Judd also makes furniture of solid wood, benches, tables, staircases or flower pots.

A similar attitude to Judd's choice of adobe bricks to construct the small domestic buildings and the

enclosing walls of la Mansana de Chinati could be found when Philip Johnson builds a small brick pavilion as a guest house beside his Glass House in New Canaan. In opposition to the transparency and openness of the main house, built with steel structure and big glass panes, this brick pavilion seems to be a solid with very few window openings. As in Donald Judd's case, in contrast with a steel skeleton construction, light and transparent, there is another building with bearing and solid walls. So we are simultaneously faced with two opposite situations, that of material accumulation and that of renounce and elimination of anything that is unnecessary. It is evident that an architect as Philip Johnson in 1950 and a sculptor like Donald Judd nearly thirty years later work from radically different positions, so one must be very careful when establishing any sort of parallelism. In la Mansana de Chinati, Donald Judd does not build in any case with the usual techniques of his time, but simply tries to preserve and renew some existing industrial structures and bring back an old construction technique for the new buildings, an almost forgotten technique, demanding a very hard work. On the contrary, Philip Johnson uses industrialized elements and expensive materials in his Glass House and chooses to build the guest house also with a sophisticated technique, although in this case allusive to the traditional brick construction.

Let us now consider the discourse accompanying the presentation of the Glass House in 1950. Philip Johnson offers a set of cultural references for the project, beginning with the evident similitude with Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House of 1947, but including some other influences as disparate as Ledoux, Schinkel, El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg or even Le Corbusier. These references have to do mainly with the shape of the plan of the Glass House – a service circle floating in a rectangular space – with the structural and constructive system used in the house – the steel skeleton and the big glass panes – and lastly, with the setting of the two residential buildings and the oblique paths between them. In relation to this last aspect, it is important to remind that Philip Johnson carried out nearly twenty previous schemes before that in which the small brick house, the guest house, was finally considered an independent building. This opaque and solid construction, with only three round windows and one entrance door, becomes at this point an essential part of the ensemble, both because of its position over the ground and because of its constructive characteristics. The two buildings depend on each other as they are both antithetical and complementary, functionally and in their composition and plastic form. The materials used to build one and the other, glass and brick, will play a fundamental role to establish this complementary character.

At a first sight, we find in Marfa more or less the same, one or some small service buildings are constructed with traditional techniques, while industrial materials are used for the main buildings. The former are closed and opaque, while the later are light, diaphanous and transparent and the making of space, that is the main purpose in the big exhibition sheds, becomes a secondary aim in the small constructions. On the other hand, these subsidiary buildings would have a domestic character, while domesticity had nothing to do with the main buildings where transparency, lightness and openness to the exterior are their dominant features. But the fundamental difference between New Canaan and Marfa estates is that in the first case we are faced only with architecture, or architectures, while in the second case the sculptural works are the most important element to which any architecture must be subordinated. An this difference still persists even when we consider that Philip Johnson also placed a sculpture between the Glass House and the Guest House, as a third element in the mutual confrontation of these domestic structures.

The essential point is that Donald Judd does not consider architecture substantial in Marfa, as soothing upon which

risky or transcendental decisions should be made, but as a subrogate element depending on sculptural works, and in particular, on his own sculptural work. In this way, the architecture needed to show the sculptures and for the domestic and work uses of Judd and his family and collaborators did not require a distinctive character, but should be a container as neutral as possible to make possible those uses or functions. The sculptor then prefers renovating the industrial sheds found in the place while reproducing with a handicraft technique the domestic adobe constructions existing in Marfa in past times. His sculptural works, that wish to have no reference other than themselves, avoiding any allusion or dependence from other works or the place where they stand, demand a neutral and strange architecture presenting itself without any spatial or material mediation. This fact explains the suitability of the sheds – strictly functional structures and with no additional material than that necessary for its stability and insulation – as a framework for the exhibition of the sculptures, as they share with them the absence of spatial hierarchies, being the identical repetition of the same form. In the sheds, industrial architecture almost disappears when it has only to resound with the objects shown there, infinite series of the same form.

To live with his works, the sculptor Donald Judd pursues a sort of architectural degree zero to which he refers alternatively as pure functionalism or pure space. An this unqualified architecture is found in the simplest industrial architecture, that of the ordinary shed, which has not even been constructed for a particular use, but that can be reused from former uses. For domestic or auxiliary functions, the regression towards the most primitive ways of local construction will also guarantee an unqualified architecture that alludes, as the sheds do, to no longer existing times and activities, a timeless architecture only tied to that place chosen by the architect to settle his work.

Philip Johnson's will to charge his project at New Canaan, and especially his Glass House, with the broadest possible set of historical and cultural references contrasts with the Judd's giving up any cultural mark for his architectural intervention, that would act against its desired neutral and timeless character. While Philip Johnson tries to state a personal position, with his actualization of some architectural traditions within this particular work, while defining at the same time the architecture characteristic of his time and his country, Donald Judd, with his recurrence to an eventual local tradition and the reuse of some existing buildings, intends to put apart any building task from any conscious intention to make a culturally relevant architecture for its own time. Marfa's architecture has a place, but it has no time, as it only tries to be settled as a ruin or the remains of the ancient inhabitants of the region. Judd rejects novelty, as the very idea of novelty is close to richness or even equivalent to it when there is an exhibition of power, and intends to emulate through constructive regression the values of poverty.

Besides that, we must consider the role of handicraft, manual labour, in the works built at Marfa. To be forced to recur to uncommon and foreign labourers in order to build the small domestic pavilions at la Mansana de Chinati shows that the rejection of the newest and quickest construction techniques existing in that moment has an evident intentionality. There is no place for building exhibition, technical perfection or artistic beauty when one tries to be hidden under the forms of the old local craft and turning its imperfections and limitations into the main qualities of the buildings. These buildings show a strong contrast with the material and technical characteristics of Donald Judd's sculptures, industrially produced works which seem not to be touched by human hand, that pursue an extreme perfection in their geometric, chromatic and volumetric qualities. That way, there is an opposition between the industrial perfection, the industrial repetition of a sculpture that is not directly manipulated by man and a handicraft architecture, imperfect and

manual, which reproduce new object being always subtly different from their precedents. The dialectic that Judd's sculpture refuses to accept, as it does not involve internal relationships or oppositions to be concentrated within the identity of the object, occurs between sculpture and architecture. The latter would be hand-made while the former is industrial, one would be close and poor while the other is remote, rich and sophisticated. Besides this, sculpture is flat and bright, while architecture is rough, material and dependent of man's hand, both the hand of its makers and of their inhabitants.

In spite of the perfect brick work exhibited by Philip Johnson's Guest House, this building acts as the dialectic opponent to the Glass House technical perfection, that of the industrial materials such as steel and glass, and the architect assumes this role of the guest pavilion as a counterpoint to the main house and its spatial, functional and technical qualities. Nevertheless, considering the different solutions carried out along some years, some doubts arise on whether the brick house is really a part of the main house, which has been detached from it to become an independent entity, or it is a different object. So the guest house could be thought of as a subrogate element that must assume some qualities that, although desired for the main house, can not be attained in it because of its particular material qualities. A house entirely built of steel and glass that intends to be an emblem of a transparent way of life, in short, a building which exhibits itself as a symbol of modern times, has to delegate the signs of domesticity and even material poverty on some other architecture. Brick construction would be the antithesis steel and glass architecture, although the former would also be executed with the highest perfection. Both in New Canaan and in la Mansana de Chinati we find a dialectical opposition between industrial and handicraft architecture, both broadly considered and with all their obvious particularities. Both Philip Johnson and Donald Judd, whether in a house or a showroom, consider that there is a main architecture, where material and industrial techniques are used, and a subordinate or service architecture which is built with adobe or brick and handicraft techniques. This latter architecture will embody all the qualities associated with poverty, as material abundance or spatial closure, while it has very few voids relating the interior with the exterior. Nevertheless, the exhibition of poverty has not as its definite aim the domestic handicraft buildings, built with adobe or brick, but it will be at the service of that other architecture, built with industrial techniques, that has to give up comfort and wellbeing or at least conceal them in the form of radical austerity. The local and singular qualities of handicraft buildings contrast but at the same time throw into relief the generality of industrial forms and at the same time their eventual irregularities and imperfections heighten perfection of the near by steel and glass constructions. Consequently, the architectures existing at New Canaan and Marfa will not behave as mere dialectic opponents, but they respond to the necessity of having a subrogated or subsidiary representative for what any modern architecture, machinist and austere, is incapable of possessing but tries eagerly to achieve, the image of poverty.

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INDUSTRY
HANDICRAFT
MATERIAL DIALECTIC
COMFORT
AUSTERITY