

Scharoun. From refined composition to violent ugliness

Antón Capitel

1. It could be said that the first approach by young Hans Scharoun to expressionism implied the search of an aesthetic and formal alternative both to the academic and classical tradition and to its modern sequel, the "New Objectivity". And this is how his career was born; that is, supported by expressionism. From that time (1919-1921), some drawings without an exact function and some competitions are well known, such as the square for the Cathedral in Prenzlau (1920) and the cultural center of Gelsenkirchen (1920), among others. In all these works, Scharoun used an intense eclecticism of Gothic nuances and a new language that seemed to follow the path of Bruno Taut. In a following competition, the Königsberg Stock Exchange (1922), an exaggerated biologist floor plan was combined with an outside

appearance that seemed to align with the moderate approach of Mendelsohn. In the famous competition for the office building in Friedrichstrasse (1922) Scharoun seems to align now with the organic and sculptural manner of his friend and teacher Haring, or, if you like, he begins to develop now his own, more mature approach. In any case, Scharoun was researching a lot, as it was demonstrated by the fantastic drawings of 1922 and 1923. A new shape, a new aesthetic; in short, a new architecture which aims to take expressionism forward, in a personal way, confronting it directly with tradition and rationalism.

However, relatively soon, in 1927, when confronted with the commission that Mies van der Rohe gave him for the *Weissenhofsiedlung* in Stuttgart, Scharoun designed a hybrid house, which adopted to a certain extent the language of what would later be called the International Style. Still, he did not adopt its more generic and systematic features –those of what we might call a new classicism, but he filled instead the work with details, nuances and organic elements. In his following work, the model home for the exhibition Garden and Industry (1928), the approach to rationalism was even greater, even if the organic and expressionist nuances did not entirely disappear. It can be said that the realistic attitude maintained on these two occasions was similar to the one adopted by Mendelsohn when he gave up his formal fantasies. These fantasies were displayed in the Einstein Tower in Potsdam (1920-1921), but then Mendelsohn began to work in a mixed, more practical manner, closer to the opportunities given by client commissions. This approach began with the Berliner Tageblatt Building (1921-23) and gave birth to one of his masterpieces in the "*Schocken*" department store (Stuttgart, 1926-28). Mendelsohn's way of doing spread largely throughout the Western world, generating almost a style in itself, although it was certainly something intermediate between expressionism and rationalism.

The first heyday in Scharoun's work (1928-1933) happened immediately after the early works described above and it precisely preserved this hybrid style, although in a bright and personal way. Scharoun applied this style to works as important as the Wohnheimasylum in Breslau (1929), the residential buildings in Kaiserdamm (Berlin Charlottenburg 1928-1929) and in Hohenzollerndamm (Berlin Wilmersdorf, 1929-1930) and a housing estate in Siemensstadt (Berlin, 1928-31). To these projects we may add the Schminkehouse (Löbau, Saxony, 1930-1933). These works are all of very good quality, so a thorough analysis would be very long and tedious. We will therefore only look at an important formal and stylistic feature common to them all: their highly refined formal realization, very successful and beautiful. Scharoun achieves in these works, in the opinion of the author of this text, one of the most sophisticated linguistic niceties of modern architecture. Such refinement shines in all of them, but its verification is easier to appreciate on the facades of two housing estates, those of Kaiserdamm and Siemensstadt.

The compositional and even volumetric variety shines on them with an extremely intense light and both the originality of the composition and the refinement of the different elements and the house as a whole achieve a extreme value. Let us note down for later this important feature; or this great achievement, as it could also be defined.

2. In 1933, the Nazi triumph began to complicate Scharoun's career. His position worsened –like that of many others– in 1937, with the “*Degenerate Art*” exhibition held in Munich and with the Nazis’ mockery of the *Weissenhofsiedlung* in Stuttgart. Consequently, Modern architecture was condemned, affecting both official and private commissions.

This phobia is extremely curious. Why was it thought that modern architecture could be an enemy of National Socialism, a regime that precisely boasted of modernity? Was it only due to the decadent and petit bourgeois taste of Hitler and some others, which was to be imposed and ended up, rather stupidly, condemning modern architecture? It is clear that modern architecture was largely protected by Mussolini, although he did not renounce to classicism, which either pure or hybrid, was much more qualified than the German version. More often than architects, lay men have tried to assign ideological labels to architecture, and still do so, supported by certain historians and critics, not informed enough. The truth is, that all this seems quite ironic and even quite ridiculous.

In fact, it can be argued that Gropius and Mies, as well as some others, did not go into exile for political but for architectural reasons. They did not care about becoming great architects of the regime, as it has been fairly proven. According to Blundell Jones (an expert on the topic and his biographer), Scharoun was not exiled because he had few contacts abroad, because he did not know English and because he still had several commissions for individual houses. Nevertheless, the Nazi regional authorities only approved vernacular or classicist projects, which encouraged the generation of extremely curious hybrids by Scharoun, completely different to the above mentioned architecture.

He thus returned to expressionism, even more intensely than before, and combined it - or juxtaposed it - with traditional architecture. Scharoun generated some monsters with this mixture; and I use this word without any kind of contempt, quite the opposite, I only try to define with it some architectural products that would have probably delighted Robert Venturi, or at least would have been good examples of his most famous and important book. I am referring to some cases as bizarre, monstrous and interesting as Furth house (Weidhaas, 1938-1944), Moll house (Berlin Grunewald, 1936-1937), Pflaum house (Falkensee, 1935), Mohrmann house (Berlin-Lichtenrade, 1939), or Möller house (Zermützelsee, 1937). All these projects were disguised as vernacular towards the outside, especially around the access and those parts that could be seen from the road, with their pitched roofs and traditional elements. But at the same time, they were all invaded by an

intense and incisive expressionism, present in the distribution and interior space and sometimes, at the back of the building. This is a peculiar and interesting collection, in which Scharoun used ugliness in a conscious way and for the first time, and which demonstrated that humor can be included in architecture and political resistance. Scharoun's formal skills and creativity were able to overcome administrative problems, and perhaps started a new way of seeing and a personal vocabulary that brought expressionism up to date, it would have a major influence after World War II and the defeat of Nazi Germany.

3. During the war years (1939-1945) Scharoun did another series of fantastic drawings, which gave free rein to a late, attractive and personal expressionism. It can be said that these drawings were closer to ugliness than to compositional exquisiteness. But it would be a little later, during a long period of time (1956-1965), when Scharoun's work on open blocks of collective housing would cause a drastic change in the aesthetics of his residential projects. At least if we compare them with the elegant compositions of buildings in Berlin from the end of the 20s, to which we have referred above.

Did Scharoun try to represent the world in a more adequate way than the brutalities and political and military tragedies? We do not know. However, looking at the plans of North Charlottenburg (Berlin, 1956-61) it would be tempting to assure that the *feísmo* practiced in collective housing during that time responds to the intention of transferring organic ideas to buildings, more than a representation of the world. And the ugliness exhibited in the external volumes was above all about transferring a figurative field that was already greatly present in Scharoun's expressive floor plan design. However, this ugliness from the external volumes also took other intense nuances; for instance, those of architectural realism, never practiced before, and that could be related to the coetaneous Italian neo-realism. In this sense, there are interesting similarities between the ugliness of Scharoun and Ridolfi, for example.

The twists and curves that the open block should have, according to Scharoun, were already present in Siemensstadt, as it was mentioned before. Although we notice how these geometries, including straight and conventional lines, were exploited as an expressive material, with extremely refined results of great elegance.

However, the twists that are now intensified in North Charlottenburg do not aspire exactly to define the urban space in general, as it happened in Siemensstadt. Belonging to a generic type, the open blocks display two different and rather convoluted configurations, defining two series of smaller scale urban spaces. It seems that these buildings are almost like living things, rather than architecture, because their floor plans have edges like fish scales, light inclinations between sectors, complex ends... They are organic, in sum, and their abstraction seems to have moved from geometry to the animal kingdom. They are even different among each

other because of that, in order to manifest the similar nature of the species and the difference that characterize each individual.

Still, the blocks are certainly less radical if we read them as volumes, since they absorb many architectural conventions, those which had precisely made us talk before about realism. They exhibit a harsh look, with few formal resources. They seem to display the ugly and not too orderly condition that corresponds to functional requirements. They seem to claim that they are not beautiful and useless, or beautiful but full of disadvantages, but on the contrary, that they are ugly and effective. This is an exaggeration, but it explains well what the author wants to communicate.

Many other housing states are similar. The Romeo and Juliet complex, in Stuttgart (1954-59) is also composed of two different organisms, this time a tower and a curved block that nearly form a courtyard. The floor plans remain radical; disorder shines in them, just as much as the absence of pure geometry normally assigned to the functional aspects. The terraces are projected outward in an aggressive way. Volumes accept the most banal conditions for the position and shape of the openings. Further linked to a diversity of colors, elements and end profiles, these openings seem to return to the search for a highly expressive volumetric condition, but at the same time extremely rough, even close to the unpleasant. Today we have already ‘tamed’ these images, but I remember well their violence and rarity when I first saw them, as a student, still close to their original birth. I found them so unusual and provocative, very surprising indeed.

The truth is that in these and other works Scharoun sought and achieved a new style, extremely personal, based on organicism and on its derivative *feísmo*, as if he was seeking a change that would definitely ridicule the compositional conventions of refinement and elegance of so many European architects, rationalists or not, from a previous or contemporary time. In this regard some other examples could also be mentioned, the Salute Tower (Stuttgart-Fasanenhof, 1961-1963), the Zaber-Krüger-Damm complex (Berlin-Reinickendorf, 1966-1970), the Orplid in Böblingen (Stuttgart, 1971-73), and the Rauher Kapf, also in Böblingen (1965). The compilation is just as complete as unique and expressive.

In Scharoun's school buildings and projects (Darmstadt, 1951; Geschwister, and Marl-Drewer 1958-1962, 1960-1971) a biologist and functionalist approach is preserved, as well as the use (and abuse) of diversity for formal elements, and even the picturesqueness and assimilation of the building to a town built over time. But despite all this, and although these schools may be considered relatively homogeneous in stylistic and purely formal aspects regarding the housing states mentioned above, it can be said, however, that ugliness and figurative violence have almost disappeared. It seems as if the increased complexity required by a school, when building a more comprehensive and complete formal vocabulary, had found a consistency

that makes things less harsh, less violent, but still even more plastic.

4. There would be only one question left: auditoriums and theaters, true masterpieces that either built or not, allowed Scharoun to perpetuate expressionism with boldness and good fortune. The second version of Kassel Theatre (1952-1953) took to the extreme a biological, functionalist condition, composed of many different elements, formally incoherent and not unitary, however it did not exploit ugliness that much. In this project, in Mannheim (1953) and in Wolfsburg (1965-73, built), Scharoun's formal talent and originality, as well as the successful relationship with the context, outstand more than formal extravagance or violence, although we are still moving among architectural products very closely related to the previous group.

In the great masterpiece that made him become part of history, the Berlin Philharmonic (1956-64), things are more complex and therefore, more interesting. The great music hall, free as a boat, stranded on screeds and supported by posts, has one of the best interior spaces of modern architecture, if not the best. The great expressionist cathedral was built at last, and its space seems to sail towards the sky. The experience of music inside this hall is the best representation of the sublime. Gothic or Renaissance cathedrals went just as far, but no more. The influence of this auditorium was made evident very soon after and will probably never disappear.

But the outside is different. As in housing, the exterior face of a building is the rear side of the interior, and thus especially hard to tackle. And it is here where Scharoun's *feísmo* emerges, in a bright way: formal chaos, material chaos... The bright expression of the interior space is translated without any intermediary to the outside and hence the *feísmo* is established as its only defense.

Something similar happened with cathedrals and in general, with churches. The interior space of the church is pure, but it needs a facade, an external volume, and many times this need has generated a fake addition, a juxtaposition of varied quality. Churches were disguised to appear as churches from the outside, and they did so by adding porticoes, towers, façades...

Auditoriums and theaters are just as churches, a pure interior. But Scharoun did not want to use intermediary elements here to solve the outside (that is, its particular and strong formal requirements), as it often happened in the religious buildings and theaters. In the Berlin Philharmonic, Scharoun tries to reflect the interior towards the exterior in an almost pure way, and thus inconsistency and ugliness are presented as the only possible tool to achieve such goal.

Between interior and exterior it can be said that the morphological world is the same, or nearly the same. However, as explained above, the character changes, due to the fact that the exterior must be conceived as something

derivative, dependent on the interior, the latter of which stands as the main actor that determines everything. And since the interior is the great cathedral of music, the complex expressionist language is not transmuted into ugliness, but on the contrary, into refinement. A common language produces in this case an opposite effect. The ugliness is outside, in an image that appears to be somehow temporary, random, as if it could be no matter how. And to a large extent, this is true.

5. There are still more things to be said about Scharoun, above all, about the great Library at Berlin Kulturforum (1964-1979), built in front of Mies' Museum and Scharoun's own works, the Philharmonic and the Chamber Concert Hall. This building is extremely and voluntarily complex. Scharoun seems to be proving that geometry and order are hardly necessary, that formal unity is useless, and that aesthetics can do without conventional canons... Can we find ugliness here? It is not entirely clear.

Perhaps this building, even more than the Philharmonic, transcends the present dilemma completely, having more important things to worry about. Among his most appealing lessons: being inserted in a city of open blocks while creating an intensely urban building. The grand facade to the south, slightly broken, along with the west facade, shape a convex element that encloses a concave piece, the latter of which opens towards the street, almost like a courtyard. This South facade, the simplest of all, is very compositional and, in this sense, highly refined. The concave part proudly exhibits chaos, inequality, disunity, linguistic collage, a direct relationship with the functional program and its diversity... but also makes the access possible, opening towards the city. The powerful urban gesture – order and subordination to the limit, on one side, and freedom and disorder on the other – seems to follow Alvar Aalto's lessons. Perhaps Scharoun, even if rather older and so confident, looked up to Aalto, I do not know. Aalto, of course, did look in the opposite direction. King of refinement, Aalto was not tempted by ugliness, but, observing Scharoun, he did ventured to look into the abyss.

Composition, at last. Fancy or ugly. And all its intermediate levels and alternatives. But composition in the end, a completely unavoidable word and action, still feared by so many. Could decomposition exist, an attractive term made up by Eisenman that he never managed to clarify? In that case, wouldn't it be actually a variation of composition, the same way that ugliness is nothing more than a variant of beauty?

Composition
Refinement
Ugliness
Beauty
Scharoun