



Book reviews

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The Architect and The Housewife

By Frances Stark

Book Works, 1999

ISBN 1-870699-40-8, £4.95

Paperback, pp. 39 with illustrations.

Pillow talk

The review of a slim 39-page, pamphlet-like, A5-sized book with the odd image hardly seems onerous. However, having read Frances Stark's 'The Architect and The Housewife' three times, each time with greater attention than the last, the prospect of producing an unequivocal architectural review becomes considerably more complicated.

Summarily, Stark's book recounts the exploits of a thirty-something artist who works alone, sometimes at home, and is under pressure to knit together home life and professional integrity. Significantly, 'The Architect and The Housewife' is not a standard architectural text but an artist book published through Book Works, a London-based non-profit commissioning organisation, which collaborates with artists to produce books under a variety of inventive and purposefully challenging circumstances and themes. Book Works promotes writing, which is normally viewed as an introverted and secondary activity in comparison with more tangible practices such as painting, drawing or sculpture, as a primary creative endeavour. It attempts to thrust writing not only to the forefront of artistic production but also to secure its position as a creative practice in and of itself, at par, for example, with painting, making and sculpting.

To achieve this purpose, attention is drawn not only to the content of the text but, significantly, to its structure and context.

The context for architectural discourse is seldom discussed since it is widely assumed that such discourse operates exclusively within the discipline. However, in the case of Stark's 'The Architect and The Housewife', the disciplinary limits, contexts and subjects of architectural discourse are displaced into another creative practice, that is, art. Here, architecture is cast as part of a complex constellation of practices, relationships, objects, habits and spaces. Architecture is not just the product of architects, but is conveniently re-produced by the arrangement of furniture, or by the nature of a couple's relationship, or by one's fetish for throw pillows, scented candles and a predilection for modern Danish pieces. These acts of displacement, re-appropriation and juxtaposition are disorientating because the familiar ground on which the architectural subject is conventionally founded starts to wobble. How is architecture interpreted and used outside of architecture? How does an architecturally savvy reader negotiate this old-yet-new terrain? In this case, the context for Stark's architectural production and its repercussions for architectural discourse and thinking offer valuable insights.

'The Architect and the Housewife' is a semi-autobiographical, first-person narrative about an artist, who is thirty-two years old, single and not a wife, musing over her position and public influence while firmly sequestered with her cat in her rented one-bedroom flat in Los Angeles. The artist, we

may assume, is someone fictitious and not Stark herself since the former is conscious about the limited mileage of autobiographical information as a means to interpretation, post-'death of the author' (p.33). The tone of the book is chatty, irreverent, conversational and perhaps burdensome for one who is searching for the academic 'point' behind it all. Instead, the book digresses, almost methodically, by purposefully interweaving a series of inter-related texts, circumstances and personalities which are incidentally brought together by the artist (who is a single woman), the nature and scale of her work (mostly solitary and consisting of writing) and her studio (which is also her living room). If there is a 'point' to be made, surely the title has given the reader prior notice. It is the old notion of gender played out in a wholly different context, that is, drawn out from its safe position in academic debates and discussed as subject matter equally inherent in something as banal as pillows and home decor, as it is poised between writing and making, the personal and the public, and hovering between domestic and professional realms.

Stark's protagonist finds plenty of resistance and contradiction in juggling the dual personality of artist as homebody, or as she says, in trying to be an architect and a housewife at the same time. Architecture is drawn into this narrative metaphorically and literally. Stark wants the reader to conceptualise the artist-as-architect with the idea that the architect is someone involved in mammoth productions, 'with elaborate extensions, disruptions and transformations into, and of material reality' (p.12). Conversely, the housewife's productivity bears no evidence of impressive scale. Instead it

is time-intensive maintenance labour, which is ironically effective only insofar as it remains unseen since she 'will stay and maintain the home, decorate, arrange, rearrange, prepare, wash, put things away, bring them out again' (p.12). The two figures are also defined by their particular spatial settings — the architect is free to create space from a clean slate and is acknowledged by the public, while the housewife buries herself in space already designated to her, creating eventually invisible routines with household gadgets and decorative accoutrements.

Besides the polemical views of architect and housewife in relation to their roles in society as well as the limits or opportunities associated with their spatial settings, Stark is also concerned about the medium and scale of creative work. Can the housewife ever be creative or does she only consume? Can the artist who works from home and desires rugs and pillows be taken seriously? More crucially, can the artist who uses words as an artistic medium, who occupies very little space and uses minimal materials, who is introverted and agonises in private, hope to compete with the artistic giants of twentieth century art? Stark's protagonist lumbers along with this dilemma. She hints that there is hope for reaching the super league as one of her drawings, which we are told is made out of words, hangs in a show with the likes of 'Cy Twombly no less!' (p.36).

Interestingly, through its iconic figures of architect and housewife, Stark's narrative expediently unpicks architecture's many frayed ends. It unravels, amongst others, the limits of gender in architectural practice, the relationship between ornament and

structure, kitsch and good taste, feminine and masculine norms, work and play, the frivolous and the functional, but more urgently for architectural discourse, the definition and scale of an architectural creative practice, as well as the place of the architectural text and the role of the historian, theorist or critic in relation to the architect and the building. In the last two categories, the constitution and location of 'architecture' and 'creative work' are relentlessly contested, albeit with almost the same intensity and resistance as the artist who tries to make art out of words, in private, and at home.

There is a tradition of architectural historians and theorists, such as Mark Wigley, Beatriz Colomina, Catherine Ingraham, Jennifer Bloomer, Katja Grillner and Jane Rendell, who argue that architecture is continually re-located and re-constituted through its representations in texts and images, through use, experience and occupation, and through modes of bodily consumption, movement and imagination.¹ These theorists and historians destabilise the context of architectural production by shifting it from the hermetic and heroic control of the architect as individual genius to the production of architecture via use, representation and consumption. In each case, there is an unspoken caveat that architecture is equally produced through small-scale writing and discourse as it is generated through the big gestures of the built environment. But this alternative mode of production through writing is not usually enacted without a shared scaffold of architectural assumptions, themes and meanings. In this sense, 'The Architect and The Housewife' is intriguing precisely because it operates without the security of a similar disciplinary scaffold.

The problem with Stark's book, which when probed begins to beguile and confound the conscientious architectural reader more and more, is its calculated ambivalence with the architectural context. By context I mean the specific intellectual framework, terms, characters, plots, sub-plots, narrative voice and themes one steadfastly expects of any architectural discussion. With Stark's text, we encounter the same familiar terms, which include a familiarity with canonic architects, their influences, intentions and important buildings, as well as any existing or past discourse associated with these subjects, but with a fundamental difference that these terms are distinctly cast and developed outside the customary architectural boundaries which traditionally give these matters meaning and weight.

For instance, a cursory glance through its pages shows architects like Le Corbusier, R.M. Schindler, Charles and Ray Eames, Mies van der Rohe and Adolf Loos located next to IKEA, American furnishing chain store The Pottery Barn and the artist's urge (and accompanying guilt) for acquiring a baby blue angora throw-pillow case and a summery two-tone green silk pillow, and for daytime soap operas such as 'The Brady Bunch' and 'I Love Lucy'. Stark even introduces her narrative as metaphorically comparable to 'a triple-decker sandwich' (p.4). Here, architecture acquires a strange bedfellow as we consider, upfront, the architect in relation to the housewife.

The reader should heed this coupling seriously. Stark substantiates her point with anecdotes of architectural and artistic couples who, we are reminded, 'have rolled around naked together on some pillows or some equivalent thereof' and

whose relationships are complemented or compromised by specific architectural habits (p.16). An example is Schindler and his wife Pauline, who eventually parted ways, divided up the house and lived separately: that is, Schindler comforted by his ideals of 'integrity of structure' and Mrs. Schindler by her love for wallpaper, carpets and all things pink (p.16).

Structurally, the narrative meanders. It has nooks and corners of seemingly inconsequential and dusty details. It babbles a lot. Somewhat like housework, it takes time and patience to plough through the text, weighed down as it is by confessions, anecdotes, gossip and unabashed opinion. At points, the reader, depending on his/her expectations, may experience impatience and frustration with minutiae about how and why the artist acquired her pillows, her blistering headaches, her prescribed diet of no cold cuts, her thwarted encounter with a hypnotist, or her embarrassment about preferring to go shopping for a rug or a candle rather than having the discipline to face a difficult problem alone at her large chocolaty-brown, fake wood-veneer table. Yet, the patient reader is also rewarded with erudite references to Oscar Wilde, E.H. Gombrich, Virginia Woolf, Gaston Bachelard and Ludwig Wittgenstein, albeit cleverly laced into mundane concerns about loneliness, creativity, financial independence, partnership, marriage, compromise, consumerism, where we live, love and mourn, as well as the pressure of societal expectations.

The artist is clearly anxious about where she is located, both professionally and privately. Does a yearning for soft flowery pillows and a household routine of dusting and cleaning contradict a professional ambition to create art or to write a

good paper? Can the two concerns ever come together without causing a rift? In posing these rhetorical questions to the reader, Stark is determined that the reader encounters a circuitous route riddled with multiple associations, which promiscuously relate rather than separate the housewife and the architect. Instead of posing them as oppositional ideologies, the text deftly marries these bedfellows, intertwining the abstract with the specific, the avant-garde with the mundane. This line of argument is reflected in the scene of the artist's living room-as-studio. Here, the artist who once harboured an ambition to become an architectural critic and thus, has a tattoo of a Louis Sullivan drawing (significantly, a drawing made after Sullivan stopped making buildings), continues to dry dishes, watch sitcoms and fluff pillows at the same time as she busily makes art, talks theory and wonders about how gender tensions are played out within the spaces which hold her. Here, domesticity is forwarded as a complex construction inseparable from the transgressions of the avant-garde and the attractions of mass culture.²

Ultimately, what is the relationship between the architect and the housewife?

Stark's narrative does not give the reader a ready-made answer. Yet, these words are perfectly capable of making big moves since architectural reasoning bolstered by the usual notions of the architect-as-genius, the definition of large-scale architectural work and the exclusivity of architectural production, are momentarily deflated and challenged by the equally essential roles of the user, the routine, the small and the mundane. Furthermore, as the text carries the reader to multiple locations, for

example, the artist's flat, her rented studio in Chinatown, the Pottery Barn, IKEA, to Taiwan where she writes and exhibits, to the rhetorical spaces of Bachelard's dream dwelling, and to the iconic households of the Schindlers, the Eameses, and Virginia Woolf, Stark demonstrates the breadth of writing as a spatial construct, as a powerful tool for imaginary occupation. In doing so, the text revisits Victor Hugo's admonition: 'This will kill that.' The book will overcome the building. At least in this instance, perhaps, this admonition is not too far off its mark.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1995); Beatriz Colomina, 'The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism', in, Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality and Space* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 73–128; Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993); Jane Rendell, 'Doing It, (Un)doing It, (Over)doing It Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse', in, Jonathan Hill, ed., *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User* (London, Routledge, 1998), pp. 229–246; Katja Grillner, 'Writing and Landscape — Setting Scenes for Critical Reflection', *The Journal of Architecture*, 8 (2003), pp. 239–249; Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998).
2. See Hilde Heynen, 'Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions', in, Hilde Heynen and

Gulsum Baydar, eds, *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (London, Routledge, 2005), pp. 1–29; pp. 4–5.

Hampstead Garden Suburb: Arts and Crafts Utopia?
By Mervyn Miller
Phillimore and Co. Ltd, 2006
ISBN 978-1-86077-404-1, £30
Hardback, pp. 288 with illustrations.

This year marks a key milestone in the urban history of Britain. 2007 is the centenary anniversary of the founding of the original 'suburb salubrious', Hampstead Garden Suburb (HGS), a community in North London once described by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as being 'the most nearly perfect example of the unique English invention... the Garden Suburb'. Now in its centenary year, HGS is widely acknowledged as being a practical paradigm that moulded British town planning in its formative years through confirming the low-density planning ideal, providing fetching perspectives of attractive cottage-style buildings, initiating modern principles of road junction design and protecting a well-known rural environment, Hampstead Heath. As an estate of a superior quality to those built under by-law regulation, HGS's immediate success as a new form of community development led to Garden City principles being extensively applied to suburban schemes in Britain and its overseas territories, and elsewhere, in the early twentieth century. HGS inspired new living and planning arrangements that adroitly merged architecture and planning with social concerns in countries ranging through Australia, France,