THE HOUSE AS MISTRESS OF THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE

On a private house in Germany, by David Chipperfield

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Like the music of Schoenberg. This is how it is or how I would wish to read this house by David Chipperfield. Because I belive that this is the way in which this house, as well as all of this stupendous English architect´s work, can be studied rather than read. Just as Schoenberg´s music is not immediately pleasing, we need to analyse and study this house in Germany, because its complex architecture is not easy to read and appreciate at first sight. Like the deep sea, which beneath the dark mantle of its serene surface disguises the turbulence of its utmost depths, Chippperfield´s architecture, so tranquil in appearance, contains in its interior a rich complexity. After having studied – or better, lived and experienced it – the house manifiests itself with an intense and wise beauty.

A number of critics have unhesitatingly included Chipperfield amongst the so-called minimalists. No sooner do they see more or less naked spaces configured by bare walls than they reach for their labels.

There are the critics who have only to see a cake of yellow to mistake soap for margarine, as the Russian-British architect Berthold Lubetkin remarked with his proverbial irony in a provocative speech to the RIBA, when that prestigious British institution awarded him its gold medal in 1982, shortly before his death. And he was right. The critics are still getting it wrong. If Chipperfield's architecture is far removed from anything, it is from any Kind of minimalism. On the contrary, it might serve as the paradigni of complexity. That complexity so demagogically preached by Venturi in his book Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture. So deserving of endorsement is the text by that Attila the confectioner of the corner of Trafalgar Square that I myself subscribe to it (as Lubetkin perceptively remarked in the speech referred to above, ornamental confectionery is a form of art of which architecture is a minor branch). This stupendous complexity, defined by some as “more with less”, is what we find here as we do in all of Chipperfield's works. It is the complexity inherent in all profound culture. A complexity that would be endorsed by Mies van der Rohe himself.

If we consider the words that Chipperfield has written about this house, we begin to understand that this is a “villa” in the strictest sense of the term, which the architect reinforces with the concept of “solidity”. But a “villa” ultimately responds in one way or another to a typology to which the mechanisms of frontality, axiality and, in short, a certain isotropy is not alien. The house moves with greatest freedom in a mode of destruction of the type. This deconstruction of the type performed by Chipperfield, is very ably identified by Joseph Rykwert in his foreword to Theoretical Practice. I would add that, at the same time as he destroys the type, Chipperfield alsocreates a new one with his own ingredients, so readily recognisable in all of his works, both built and unbuilt. In every one of them, and most patently in this house, we detect what I will call “dynamic continuity”.

Dynamic continuity bears little relation to that horizontal spatial continuity of the free floor plan proposed by the Modern Movement, which found its clearest exposition in certain

works by Mies van der Rohe. Nor does it bear relation to the continuity that a more classical architecture derived from its axial mechanisms. This is a continuity that, with a faster, more dynamic rhythm, makes it possible to traverse the spatial sequences of which this house -like all of Chipperfield's works- is composed in a rather musical perpetuum contínuum.

This is a house that one could continually enter and exit in an unending up and down, in and out, out and jn. In order to temper these velocities, the architect has nuanced the two entrance sequences with two subtle mechanisms: an Italian-style ramp that descends from the garden facade at the rear, and the stairs with steps on platforms in the skilfully accomplished access from the street. These are strategies for the creatíon of a “lento maestoso” which, slowing us down, makes us conscious of time atthe points of entrance.

If Chipperfield speaks in his project report of this use of materials as “materials not as products”,and engages in a highly effective play of contrasts between them. I would note something else that is equally manifest in the same way, although here in relation to the space. A spatial contrast that we might, if we continue to take Venturi as our basis, read in terms of contradiction, in the most positive sense of the word.

To appreciate this, you need only study the main room on the piano nobile with its two sequences: one opening onto the garden with a great north-facing picture window, the other open to the south and the sunny private patio. And in order to equitably balance the light, to prevent it from overflowing, he creates a kind of partition of sufficient dimensions to ensure that this does not happen. In spite of this, the passage remains free and fluid. Complexity? Contradiction? Wisdom.

We continue to encounter a play of similar contrasts throughout the house, as in all of Chipperfield's houses. What Kenneth Frampton has described in a study of his work as “ambiguous unity”. I prefer to call it simply complexity. We then come to understand why Rykwert speaks of the section as the generator of Chipperfield's work. Again, I consider that this is not the section in the classical sense, applied in linear, static continuity. This is a dynamic section which the architect sets about changing and articulating in a continuous musical movement. In an astute strategy of addition, he goes on concatenating spaces which turn to look at ane another, articulating themselves in all three directions into a kind of diagonal composition.

Complexity, contradiction, dynamic continuity, spatial contrast, diagonal compositions are thus original components of this new typology that we might observe as being very much characteristic of Chipperfield's architecture. It is certainly no revelation if we say that this typology has its roots in the Raumplan that gives absolute priority to the quality of interior space and invites us to situate Chipperfield and his architecture in relation to Adolf Loos. The spirit of the Moller house, which Loos built in Vienna in 1928, the same date as the Villa Savoye, is latent here, together with the whole essence of British 19th-century domestic architecture.

In his book Theoretical Practice, Chipperfield intersperses the text with a series of delightful and by no means innocent literary references, the effective leaven for the elaboration of his architecture.

“We are what we do, and the best of what we do is to change what we are." The quote from Eduardo Galeano, a surprising and evocative Uruguayan writer, takes us back to that circular, Borges-like character of continuous musical “perpetuum” inherent in all of David Chipperfield's architecture, with a cultured complexity in which everything fits together perfectly.

Galeano himself, in another fascinating book The walking words, writes: “Things are mistresses of the masters of things". In paraphrasing this as “houses are mistresses of the masters of houses”, one might imagine the master of the house in Germany as possessing and possessed by his house, continually moving through it. As we all do with our own houses. Except that in this case, thanks to Chipperfield's work and grace, he is able to take pleasure, every day, every hour, every minute, in a new house. So many and so beautiful are the houses within the Chipperfield house.