



School of Architecture, Design and Civil Engineering
Institute for Constructive Design

RE-DOMESTICIZING STEEL

International Summer Workshop

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with

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International Reflections on Re-Domesticizing Steel

University of Minho, Francisco Ferreira and Carlos Maia

What is it that makes steel homes, so different, so appealing?

Some considerations on Architecture and the Winterthur Summer Workshop, Re-Domesticizing Steel

In his 1960's text *Stocktaking*¹, Reyner Banham re-addresses architecture and its foundations as both historical discipline and pragmatic activity through the confrontation of the two terms that may somehow contain and exhale an identity: Tradition and Technology become, for Banham, conceptual and basic instruments of acknowledgement of the role of architecture in and towards society, and, above all, of its relevance either as discipline or service. In fact, Banham's text is composed as a representation of the ever-ongoing conversation between the significance of such Tradition - understood as a body of knowledge, assembled through history and practice, which becomes a disciplinary and cultural ground for the making of architecture - and the impact of Technology - as the ultimate scientific instrument made to push said knowledge towards the path of exploration - within the consideration of what in fact architecture may actually mean.

So, if on the one hand Banham dwells - albeit critically - on the lore of the operation² - an expression taken from a conference given by Charles Eames at Riba - on the other hand he pursues - quite enthusiastically - the idea of an Other Architecture³, an architecture in which spacial composition ceases to be of essence, an architecture redefined as a provision of fit environments for human activities⁴. For Banham - an eternal critic to both the stylisation and fashion of modernity or any attempt at its supposed antithetical revivalist movements - architecture should not be afraid of its own ambiguity as discipline or practice, but rather embrace its radical sense of neither being a static and presupposed structure, nor a mere or neutral technical endeavour, but rather an ongoing aesthetic, cultural and technical experience and discovery.

What Banham's text and argument may bring to the realm of the debate initiated in the Re-Domesticizing Steel Workshop held in Winterthur, then, is the fact that any attempt on discussing architecture's materiality should lead, inexorably, to a questioning of its fundamental disciplinary purposes. For while being a sort of literal translation of what architecture most purely is - a construction -, it is in the historical exploration of its materialisation that an ethos is usually found. From the study and interpretations of Horta's Hôtel Tassel and Chareau's Maison de Verre to the Eames' Eames House during the workshop, we were thus able to address the use's of steel from a structural, decorative or industrial statement, through to a matrix-like infrastructure, a system to accommodate space as an environmental kind of gizmo, an ineffable space made only apparent by the ability of the material which actually sustains it to hide in plain sight, as in the Eames House - indeed, a Home is not a House...

It is interesting then, to recall the fact that steel - and first iron - entered the architectural debate as both a promise for a new style and a means to spatial unification or continuity, one that, however, brought along with it the sense of architecture's tectonic disappearance - from Gottfried Semper's harsh categorisation of the Crystal Palace as a glass-covered vacuum, or his own definition of iron as an invisible material to Gottlieb Bötticher's belief that such a material could indeed place architecture outside the realm of the world of perception, thus creating a working independence⁵... how ironic then, that it would be matter - albeit a specific and special kind of matter - that which would contaminate architecture's self with a sense and fear of dematerialisation... because we believe that it is in this sense, also, that steel is first and foremost a modern material - hence

¹ Reyner Banham, *Stocktaking*, in *Design by Choice*, Academy Editions, London, 1981, pp. 48-55. Originally published in *Architectural Review*, February 1960.

historical-, one pertaining and emerging from the industrial process of production, one that is rooted on the radical shift within the scientific and artistic *modus operandi* of modernity, from a discourse based on symbolism and representation to a technique that rather privileges abstract and conceptual based systems of organisation leading to the subsequent fluidity of space and the transparency of its limits.

To look at steel in the present today - after modernity and its critique and still within post-modernity's continuous paradoxes and operative clashes - as both a building material filled with *zeitgeist* - even if it carries with it certain *avant-garde* nostalgia -, and one to be re-engaged on the construction of domestic environments, brings forward the *lore of the operation*, - a tradition⁶ - together with the mandatory consideration of architecture as also a rather complex and hugely regulated field, where the poetics of experience is more and more restricted by security and safety measures that go hand to hand with the ever increasing processes of standardisation and norm, should be to paradoxically understand it as both an aesthetic and a technology. It is in this context also, that, if we allow ourselves to - at least a bit conservatively - follow Banham's dictum of *Une Architecture Autre*, steel may still re-enact an impact on what a home tectonics could come to represent - more on the way of the indiness of Martin Bühler's *House with Thin Walls*, much, much less on the way of Christian Kerez's *House with a Missing Column*, to mention two examples that we visited during the workshop...

What is it then, that could make today's steel homes, so different, so appealing?

² There were demands to get back to architecture - a classic response, closely resembling that which Charles Eames described in his 1959 *Discourse* at the RIBA as a reliance on 'the *lore of the operation*'. Whether or not this situation brings with it the dangers to which he also referred - 'The danger of this procedure is that operational *lore*, being an integration of experience rather than apparent intelligence (i.e. available information). sacrifices sensitivity in order to gain stability' - whether or not this is true, it has happened, and constitutes one of the two major pressures to which architecture has been subjected in the last decade., *ibid.*, p. 48

³ It appears always possible that at any unpredictable moment the unorganized hordes of unco-ordinated specialists could flood over into the architects' preserves and, ignorant of the *lore of the operation*, create an *Other Architecture* by chance, as it were, out of apparent intelligence and the task of creating fit environments for human activities., *ibid.*, p. 55

The reference within this text to an *Other Architecture* is naturally a remainder from Banham's text *The New Brutalism*, published in 1955, in which he introduces the french term *Une Architecture Autre*, withdrawn - although quite indirectly - from Michel Tapiés art concept *un Art Autre*. See Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism*, in *Architectural Review*, December 1955, pp. 354-361

⁴ To which Banham, provocatively adds: The word 'fit' may be defined in the most generous terms imaginable, but it still does not necessarily imply the erection of buildings., *ibid.*, p. 48

⁵ Both quotes from Sokratis Georgiadis, Introduction, in, Siegfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*, The Getty Center for the History of Arts and the Humanities, Santa Monica, CA, 1995, pp. 1-78. Originally published as Siegfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton*, Klinkhart & Biermann, Leipzig, 1928

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