

Bulandrová, Amálie

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Exhibiting Architecture: The Architecture of an Exhibition

Amálie Bulandrová

Haus der Wohnirrtümer [Building of residential mistakes]. 12 Feb 2016 – 9 Apr 2016, Berlin.

[events]

One of the final projects of the former director of the Czech Centre Berlin, Monika Štěpánová, was an exhibition of Czech artist Dominik Lang, prepared in cooperation with German curator, Bettina Klein. The exhibition, titled *Haus der Wohnirrtümer* (Building of Residential Mistakes), was predominantly inspired by the Czechoslovak brutalist architecture. The exhibition took place in the Gallery of the Czech Centre, Berlin (*České centrum v Berlíně*) and ran from February 12 to April 9, 2016.

Since 2012, the Czech Centre (including the gallery), has been located in the Czech embassy, Berlin. The embassy, housed in a building designed by Czech architects Věra and Vladimír Machonin, was constructed from 1974–1978 and opened in 1979. Specific architectural features of the building and exhibition spaces of the Gallery of the Czech Centre Berlin became the point of departure of Lang's installation, which incorporated hidden creative elements and functional spaces of the building and buildings similar to this one. The title of the exhibition alludes to a building in Prague designed by Věra Machoninová, named *The Building of Residential Culture* (*Dům bytové kultury – DPK*), which centralized the sale of furniture and home accessories in one location.

The two buildings mentioned above (the Gallery of the Czech Centre and The Building of Residential Culture) are the

main inspirational sources for the exhibition. The visual parallels, in particular, are apparent – the architectural layout of Lang's installation, materials used and temporary 'formed-in-place' spaces. However, the motif of 'Machonin' architecture, and similar architecture of the 1970s and 1980s, is revealed to a greater extent in the content of the exhibition, which discreetly points to the current manipulation and use of these buildings. It is demonstrated through examples of 'hidden' artistic elements – through which Dominik Lang poses questions about functionality – and discusses via the integration of decorative elements into the architectural whole. Lang's 'hiding of artistic elements' serves as the cornerstone of his installation, which turns the usual 'exhibition perspective' upside down: the viewer is exposed to mostly empty space at the first installation, emphasising the absence of any artwork (see Fig. 1 below). But this is merely a first impression – after investigation, the viewer finds that exhibited objects are present. They are hidden in the surrounding space, or are presented as partial constructions.

For the exhibition, Dominik Lang divided the one-room space of the gallery into several separate units which he worked into the complicated structure of the gallery floor plan (see Fig. 2 below).

The unit represents a semi-circular 'on-the-spot' plaster column – stretching from



Fig. 1: The exhibition space (with the plaster column in the centre, without any additional objects) © Šárka Lenertová



Fig. 2: The exhibition space (complete) © Šárka Lenertová

is made more sophisticated by viewer inevitably having to pass the *real* concrete column to get into the gallery (which is also supported by similar columns but in the square ground plan). Despite all this, the main purpose of the plaster column is not to expose the architectural elements of the building of the Czech embassy. The viewer finds out, having walked around the object, that the column is not complete –

samples of textiles, wooden boards, along with roles of paper, textiles and metal materials.

The connection between the described space and The House of Residential Culture (DBK) by architect Věra Machoninová is clear: on the 8th floor of DBK there was a department of interior designers who designed custom-made adaptations and bespoke furniture sets.



Fig. 3: The exhibition space (detail of the real columns, square ground plan, and the red reliefs) © Šárka Lenertová



Fig. 4: The drawing-board © Šárka Lenertová



Fig. 5: The empty chipboard racks
with the artistic objects behind © Šárka Lenertová



Fig. 6: The room – view from the street (viewers right) © Šárka Lenertová

Or at least this was the original idea, which in fact only stressed the paradoxical pointlessness of the existence of a department store in the everyday reality of so-called real socialism with its total lack of materials on one hand and the limited offer of ready-made furniture in the stores on the other. Lang managed to transfer the idea of the ‘emptiness’ of the period – in which the building was created – into his installation, thanks to the above-mentioned reinvention of the planning-and-consulting office. It gives the impression of a disturbing memento of ambitious construction activity within an intentionally minimalistic space – that is, at first sight, nearly empty. Lang’s exhibition also includes free-standing reliefs which were originally located in DBK. The reliefs, made from wood and red polychrome, were designed by Václav

Markupa created his reliefs for the building due to the ‘four percent art’ law. This state law (instituted in the 1970s and effective until 1991) insisted that each state institution invest from 1 to 4 percent of their overall budget in the ‘decoration’ of public spaces. These pieces of artwork then created aesthetically dominant objects in the public space around arising housing estates, health centres, department stores and other buildings. Examples of art created for this purpose are the reliefs by Adriena Šimotová and many others which are housed in the Czech embassy building in Berlin. This subject is explored in detail by Pavel Karous in his project *Vetřelci a volavky* (Intruders and Herons). Nowadays, these artistic objects are in most cases half-forgotten, which is often due to the impossibility of accessing them. Unfortunately, this is also the case with the Šimotová relief – which is currently hidden



Fig. 7: The room – view from the street (viewers left) © Šárka Lenertová

under unused furniture in front of the elevators in the Czech embassy building.¹

A parallel to this relief and its ‘hiding place’ under layers of scrap material can be found in another unit of Lang’s exposition, which is created by two chipboard racks (see Fig. 5 above).

The racks are built to the side of the gallery space in full-height as with the plaster divider. In the ‘overturned’ logic of the exhibition, the racks and shelves are empty at the front. Two plaster reliefs by Jiří Lang (sculptor and father of the author of the exhibition, Dominik Lang) are fastened on the back sides of the racks. Both of Jiří Lang’s reliefs are hidden in a heap, one on top of the other, along with non-artistic objects, such as a reclined stepladder, a row of wooden boards and laths. These

¹ The space in front of the elevators was originally intended to be also included in the exhibition, but is missing in the actual concept.

two installations refer to the fate of many artworks created in the 1970s and 1980s which lay neglected in the buildings of Czech state institutions.

The last separate unit of the exhibition is a bedroom from a fictional apartment, created in the side area of the gallery. This is part of the gallery has a windowed wall looking out onto to the street. Only the back wall (in chipboard) of the room is newly-created, by which Dominik Lang isolated the space from the rest of the gallery. The side walls and the glazed front wall are part of the original architectural disposition (see Fig. 6 & 7, above).

The resulting installation (including decorative furniture from the embassy and tapestry from DBK by Alice Kuchařová), is oriented to the street, but paradoxically feels intimate at the same time (see Fig. 8 below).



Fig. 8: The room – view from the room (daylight) © Šárka Lenertová

On the one hand it gives the impression of privacy and separation from the rest of the exhibition, and thus also the building, on the other hand this small simple tidy room creates a shop window. The bed can be used for visitors wishing to become part of the installation. The windowed wall of the room raises another interactive element of the installation; when people on the street outside, observe the room; back-dropped by their own reflections. Moreover, the glass wall of the gallery is situated close to metal gateway leading to the adjoining parking area of the embassy. The gateway is from time to time automatically opened and closed during arrivals and departures of cars, which is also reflected on the front wall of the room, adding to the feeling of an observed and exposed space. Last but not least, this fake room connects the whole exhibition with the building where

this it takes place (Czech embassy in Berlin) – noticeable building of squared ground plan with concrete construction and with noticeable elements of exposed concrete, where in upper floors were situated housing units for employees, which are mostly empty and unutilized today.

As the majority of rooms in the building of the embassy are variable in layout thanks to wooden movable partitions, Lang's exhibition gives the viewer a feeling of certain space-variability. Thanks to its geometric structure into partial units there arises a feeling about a building ambition, which as if fell asleep and was not finished. In the spirit of an overturned logic of the exhibition perspective and lesser space playthings, which meets with bureaucratic practices, the viewer can also carry off certain understanding of this incompleteness and an aftertaste of the period of second half of the last century.

Czech artist Dominik Lang (b. 1980) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, and is in charge of the Sculpture Studio at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. In 2013 he won 'Jindřich Chalupický Award for Young Artists', and was granted a scholarship by the Academy of Arts in Berlin in 2015.

Dominik Lang became known to the international audience primarily thanks to his installation *Sleeping Town* at the 54th Biennale di Venezia (2011), and the exhibition called *Expanded Anxiety* (2013), which was presented in the Pavilion Secession in Vienna. While *Sleeping Town* simulated the

space of an artistic atelier, where Lang lived up a landscape made from furniture and showcases by his father's sculptures (Jiří Lang 1927–1996), the exhibition in Pavilion Secession in Vienna referred to the artworks of the Czech cubist Otto Gutfreund. Lang repeatedly contests the mechanisms of art production, and the ways his works are perceived, taking into account the current social-political circumstances. Fragments, ready-mades, and their re-contextualization through different forms of exhibiting and exhibition. Architecture is the central theme of Lang's sculptural artwork.