

TREES AND BUILDINGS. ON THE TREE SCULPTURES BY JAN MEYER-ROGGE

Buildings and trees have always been difficult to harmonize. That was and is because of the completely different structure of what grows and what is built. The former is, in Josef Beuys' terms, a plastic mass. A kind of matter which, even where it appears to solidify into a fixed form, retains an aspect of the flowing: the embodiment of a thrust against the force of gravity; a tree, however it may have grown, is an upright and never overbearing phenomenon and this in turn enables it to act as a symbol of the living. The built, in contrast, represents that what is created with gravity, a heavy, deadweight structure which is - to use Beuys' terms again - cold form.

The difference between what grows and what is built, between structure and form, is irreconcilable. This is well demonstrated in Laugier's hypothetical "primitive hut" which was intended to help neutralize the difference. In fact, this idea is Utopian for, like all architecture, the intention is to arrive at an ultimately static form, whereas trees continue to grow as long as they live, thus breaking through every attempt at formal definition. The difference is also made clear by the fact that, whenever it was a question of making an impression with a building, architects have tried to avoid the comparison with that which grows: whether by the choice of a site at an exposed, treeless place, or the attempt to impose their form concepts on growth, or simply through the quantitative outbidding of nature, that is by constructions which tower over the trees. But even then, the tree retains a decisive function. For whether in plan or reality, whether employed to bind together a design or to elevate it — the tree is always that element against which architecture is measured. For the people, the tree does not only represent large size, stability, individuality and history but also a living thing which transcends their own life. In this sense, as at once architectural element and its opposite, the tree - or better, the treatment of it - informs about whose spiritual child the architect (and building contractor) is.

Aldo Rossi's "Progetto per la piazza del municipio a Segrate" from the year 1965 draws attention to the special relationship between trees and buildings in an exemplary manner. For Rossi did not plan with nature but formulated the eventual relationship between the grown and the built as an antagonism between tree and building. He took this as his program for a public square, that is for public life. Of particular significance here is that Rossi does not bring nature and architecture into an abstract dialogue but grants nature just as much individual character as that which he thinks should be built. In his project the grown and built appear in the form of a great single tree and a rigorously constructed edifice which, while they stand in opposition, do not bear a direct relationship to one another. The square divides and combines them, opening up a field in which their relationship can be freely thematized but nonetheless suggesting that tree and building can be brought into equilibrium with one another, indeed are in equilibrium. But therein lies the Utopian character of this plan. For a balance between nature and architecture can only be achieved at the expense of the recognition of the enmity between nature and architecture, as between nature and technology more generally.

This point can be best appreciated by considering certain works of art which themselves represent only a few of the many art works which take the tree as their theme (mostly as a metaphor). At least three different approaches can be distinguished here, which will be elucidated in the following: analysis of the tree as a living and social organism (I), reflection on the special properties of what grows (II), and lastly, probing of the relationship between the structure of what grows and the form of what is built or constructed (III).

I.

In the last few years, the tree as a living and social organism has been celebrated above all through the work of Josef Beuys, especially in his project "City Afforestation" ("Stadtverwaltung" Kassel 1982). A brief reminder will suffice here. An important aspect of this project was that the relationship (between grown and built) was defined in so far as the citizens of Kassel actually participated in newly defining it, and could be read off from the changing state of the sculpture. Here one should not overlook the fact that Beuys - like Rossi - assumed an antagonism between nature and architecture and in no way propagated their reconciliation. Rather, he conceived his sculpture - as Rossi his architecture - as an attempt to mediate between grown and built, and between past and present.

II.

A programmatic example of another group of tree-sculptures in which the grown is thematized as a specific material is Giuseppe Penone's "Albero", 1970, a thick, approximately five meter long board out of which the young tree has been prepared along the annual growth ring. The whole in the part, life in dead material, history in the present, structure in form are realized in this unpretentious work, without, however, making any direct reference to the built.

Turned inside out, as it were, and based on a construction idea, this problem is formulated in Meyer-Rogge's "Pyramid" created in 1977 in Neuenkirchen. Other than constructivist artworks which are based on a principally indifferent relationship between idea (form) and material, in this work the material is principally different from the form into which it is shaped. Although it is not difficult to recognize the "Pyramid" as form and in turn as the product of a rational method, to the extent to which the regularity of the construction is apprehended, so the irregular properties of the materials of which it is made, namely the grown in the form of birch trunks, become thematic. It is thus not the form of the "Pyramid" which is of interest but its construction with nature: as a sculpture whose construction idea is thrown into question by the very material of which it is made. In showing nature subordinated to a rational idea, the sculpture points to that quite other, the organically grown, and thereby takes up a critical position to the constructed, to architecture altogether.

In contrast to this, the sculpture "Trunk Cut Open" ("A beech trunk: from product of the saw back to landscape"), 1978, also created in Neuenkirchen, withdraws altogether as form and construction from an idea which could be defined independently of it in advance. The form and construction of this sculpture are there rather in the service of the materials and are to be explained by the intention of demonstrating the beech trunk as a unity of unlike parts. The form of the sculpture, an architecture made up of thick planks, upsets all predetermined expectations as to the formal unity of a beech trunk, and causes the viewer to undertake a task of reconstruction on viewing the materials: the various planks lying one under the other. The structure of the sculpture, dissociating form and material, does not only capture in the present the process to which the trunk is subjected - its making to material through being sawed - but also brings to fruition as architecture that which is characteristic of everything which grows: namely the identity of form and material.

III.

The sculpture "Re-erected Tree Trunk" created in 1978 and now displayed in Neuenkirchen/Soltau also thematizes material in a dissociating structure. But here the unity of the tree trunk is not recreated, because its erection through an organic process is negated. The result is an "architecture" which appears to question itself because its constructive elements seem to be diverging to the same degree that they are converging: The "Re-erected Tree Trunk" is a trunk from a beech which has been turned

upside down and is held by thirty-two cables in such a way that a conical inner-space is formed: If one follows the 'logic' of this support construction to the tip of the sculpture, one arrives contrary to all expectations at the base of the tree trunk, and the eye, following the normal direction of growth of the tree, is led back to the ground. Thus, in "Re-erected Tree Trunk" the static of the organically grown and that of the constructed are brought into contradiction with one another. Perception is thereby given a not resolvable task. For it is no longer possible to distinguish clearly whether the trunk is held by the cables or vice versa.

Finally the hostile relationship between nature and technology is made visible in a dramatic manner by the sculpture "Fallen Trunk" from the year 1983. This sculpture is to be found in one of the three atriums of the Carl von Ossietzky City and University Library in Hamburg. One could not think of a more telling contrast to the current fashion of integrating living trees into a building: namely the attempt to colonize nature once and for all. It consists of an approximately twenty-five meter high, variously chopped oak trunk devoid of its bark, mounted on about 100 fixed steel cables attached at 25 points. It is held in such a way in the atrium - hanging freely with its crown pointing downwards on a diagonal from the upper story to the main floor - that have been recombined to its original, naturally grown form. Although the atrium is not open to the public, the sculpture gives the viewer a lasting shock. For the users of the library - a cool building designed with rational criteria in mind - are necessarily confronted with it when they go up the steps to the main level of the building. As one mounts, following in part the continuation of the diagonal taken by the tree trunk, one comes to the crown of the tree which, seen from behind a glass front, appears to be falling towards the viewer through the atrium from the roof. Not only here but also from other standpoints, the sculpture develops an extraordinarily dynamic-aggressive impetus: a still-there whose overturn into no-longer - in the destruction of the building by the tree-trunk - seems to be prevented only by the complicated support construction. It is just this dynamic-aggressive impulse which gives shock-value to this sculpture and which stimulates interest in it.

Jan Meyer-Rogge is also not interested in any kind of definite reconciliation between nature and architecture or - to put it more generally - nature and technology. For Meyer-Rogge - as for Beuys and Rossi - it is much more a matter of an essential antagonism between nature a technology and of opening up possibilities for a redefinition of their interrelationship. Nonetheless, the "Fallen Trunk" is conceived as a concrete mediation between them: as itself both part nature and part technology, and being inserted as a tertiary link between them, this sculpture demonstrates their antagonistic relationship.

The sculpture is part of nature in its organically grown material and its organically grown form, that is a trunk with branches, though dead and worked over: a chopped up trunk devoid of its bark. The sculpture is part of technology as a trunk reconstructed under architectural conditions, that is as a technical construction which makes use of the given formal and static possibilities of architecture, but without paying any attention to the latter's own form canons. The sculpture "Fallen Trunk" offers an appreciation of the trunk as organic material just as the atrium is to be appreciated as a space constructed according to certain principles and built with particular materials. Both systems, the organic and the architectural, although they are formally and technically connected through the support-cable, remain recognizable in their characteristics as a grown and a constructed system respectively. But not only this: through this mediation, they are brought into an extremely tense antagonistic relationship. For just because their respective formal and material characteristic values are retained and remain recognizable, so these appear reciprocally from the perspective of the other, to be the absolutely other. This constellation has a visible correlation in the support-cables which follow both the organic and architectural systems and in this functions underpin a rationally constructed system, which is however highly informal and which varies in appearance according to the position it is viewed from.

If Rossi's "architecture" can be understood as the interrelationship of the grown and the built - in his "Progetto per la piazza..." that would be the tree, the building and the square -, so in the sculpture "Fallen Trunk" the chopped trunk, the atrium and the support-cable are similarly related: a particular part of nature reconstructed under given technical conditions using technical means. The sculpture can thus neither be accounted for using the architectural system alone, since it quite clearly relates as a construction to nature; nor can it be analyzed in terms of the organic system alone, for its reconstruction involves architectural factors. Nor can it be primarily categorized as belonging to one or other system. Far more, both systems are equally thematized within it, and both are equally subordinated to a principle which takes each of them beyond themselves while they remain present as that which has been transcended. This principle is, as in Rossi's work, the intentional confrontation of both systems with the aim of bringing them into equilibrium with each other, here, however, in an open antagonism - without illusion, realistic: an aggressive structure. The shock caused by Meyer-Rogge is a shock of recognition. For other than Rossi's use of the living tree, Meyer-Rogge shows exclusively dead material, equilibrium being attained only because of the fact that the trunk is dead and chopped, and, like the building, pieced together.

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