

THE_GLASS_DREAM

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'Wir leben zumeist in geschlossenen Räumen. Diese bilden das Milieu, aus dem unsre Kultur herauswächst. Unsre Kultur ist gewissermaßen ein Produkt unsrer Architektur. Wollen wir unsre Kultur auf ein höheres Niveau bringen, so sind wir wohl oder übel gezwungen, unsre Architektur umzuwandeln. Und dieses wird uns nur dann möglich sein, wenn wir den Räumen, in denen wir leben, das Geschlossene nehmen. Das aber können wir nur durch Einführung der Glasarchitektur, die das Sonnenlicht und das Licht des Mondes und der Sterne nicht nur durch ein paar Fenster in die Räume läßt - sondern gleich durch möglichst viele Wände, die ganz aus Glas sind - aus farbigen Gläsern. Das neue Milieu, das wir uns dadurch schaffen, muß uns eine neue Kultur bringen.'

(Paul Scheerbart, Glasarchitektur, 1914)

Hortus conclusus

Paul Scheerbart's glass dream did not come true. Although our cities are filled with crystalline structures that sparkle in the setting sun, our lives do not take place in total visibility. The contemporary house turns away from the street: patios, back gardens, closed-in courtyards form the domain of semi-public life, and even the famous Dutch aquarium style, in which openness and orderliness together seemed to bear witness to a life that had absolutely nothing to hide, is a thing of the past. This inward movement seems to be the counterpart to the exorbitant exhibitionism of private life that characterizes media culture. The more things become visible and debatable, are shown and discussed, the greater the tendency to lock ourselves up in an environment turned away from the outside world and replete with sensory aids. Home cinema systems, perfect sound reproduction and broadband connections make it possible to shape reality through a digital filter tailor-made to suit our needs. Seclusion and secrecy play no role at all in this: they are taken for granted. The ubiquity of perversion means it is no longer necessary to protect the inside from intruding eyes. The screening mechanisms solely serve to maintain private aberrations through the illusion of an outside world that is indeed violent but nevertheless controllable and under control.

At the workplace, however, Scheerbart's world seems to have been achieved; total visibility has unrelentingly taken hold there. Open-plan offices, interconnected spaces with through views, large glass walls only screened with a hint of green: any attempt to still maintain the semblance of private space is doomed. Visibility is a more crucial factor in this system than audibility. While sound mainly causes annoyance, and employees often sit behind their computer screens wearing headphones to immerse themselves in their own environment, at

least auditively, the eye is imperceptibly present at all times. At first glance, it seems to concern a primitive form of surveillance: a return to the large halls filled with employees fanatically typing, sewing, tightening screws or working in some other way, watched over by a supervisor who literally surveyed them. But this kind of policing is redundant today: the contemporary employee is easily monitored by means of the amount of information that he feeds into the system. In this case, visibility rather seems to aim for a reality effect. Precisely because people are hammering away almost inaudibly at their keyboards, and barely any screw-tightening or wood-shaving is taking place, because all these busy activities hardly make any visual impression and employees mainly stare blankly at their screens, the collective visibility has to make clear that work is still concrete, that there is a physical presence involved that is absent in the data traffic itself. The work itself, incidentally, is put in the context of leisure: the open-plan office, where until recently semi-dead plants served to illustrate the idea of a garden, has made way for the office jungle that consists of interior spaces filled with swamps, prairie landscapes and coniferous forests. It is an exercise comparable to the screening off occurring in the private domain: the severe visibility of the work floor is compensated by an idealized nature that has to create the perfect ambience of a literally better world. The office systems suggest an eco-awareness that does not project this better world into the future but seems to realize it in the here and now. In this way, work reclaims its natural status. Both cases concern virtually closed systems that want to justify themselves especially to themselves, that seek confirmation in their own image. Both also concern the concealment of an external reality, and not an internal secret: the ubiquity of aberration and chaos must be hidden in order to allow the idea of self and personal significance to endure.

The glass utopia from the beginning of the century represented the hope of a better world: more beautiful, more open, more honest. Walter Benjamin: "Scheerbart, however, to revert to him, attached the greatest value to housing his people – and following their example also his fellow citizens – in accommodations that suited their type: in glass houses with sliding, moveable elements, like Loos and Le Corbusier had already built. It's for a good reason that glass is such a hard and smooth material, to which nothing adheres. A cold and down-to-earth material as well. Things of glass have no 'aura'. Glass is by definition the enemy of secrecy. It is also the enemy of possession."

In "Experience and Poverty", Benjamin articulates the expectation that the new human being might be a barbarian that no longer believes in the wide range of passed-on experience: "Poverty of experience: we should not interpret that as if people are pining for new experiences. No, they yearn to be liberated from experiences, they yearn for an environment in which they can absolutely and clearly stand up for their poverty, both the external and ultimately also the internal one, so that something decent emerges from it."¹

Glass, however, has been given the opposite function. It does not divulge secrets, but has to conceal that they do not exist. It is not the enemy of possession but has to suggest that something still exists that we can call our own. The layer of glass that covers everything has indeed allowed visibility and information to predominate, but at the same time also serves as a filter for preserving old experiences, for enabling virtual reality to continue to exist. Modern man lives in a glass case.

Realized utopia

Untitled Space is at a very acute angle to this small cosmology of complacency. Its reflecting openness denies the possibility of secrecy, and the inhabitants, of whom we only observe staged traces – more about that later – are perhaps absent because in a true utopian sense they still have to be created. It seems to concern virtual architecture for use in a virtually better world. Bruno Taut's ideals return, as well as the ideals of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*. In that design, glass forms revolve in a large spiral-shaped structure around their own axis: they could be the transparent forms for a new world order. However, the openness and equality expressed by the glass did not get a chance in the Soviet Union either.

The utopia of the glass ideal is implicitly present in a film script, called *The Glass House*, on which Sergei Eisenstein worked in the thirties and which he wanted to film in America. Eisenstein wrote a large number of notes for the film – which was to take place in a completely transparent apartment building – that are in part concerned with the effects that the film camera can produce in this environment: the contrasts between the transparent walls and the nakedness of the non-transparent objects and people in the rooms, the sudden eclipsing that occurs when someone on a higher storey lays down a carpet on the glass floor, the contrast between a room that is blue with smoke and the room next door, filled only with transparent purity. But more important to him than these optical contrasts was the metaphor for human existence in a capitalist society that can be shown here, and the psychological effect that would be created in this situation. In a transparent environment such as this, contrasts become extremely stark: while a lavish ball is taking place on the ground floor, through the floors the camera sees paupers sitting in the dark in the highest apartment. But glass represents openness and honesty to Eisenstein as well, which is why the glass house does not suit the system in which the people live: "People's indifference towards each other is evident from the fact that the characters do not see each other through the walls and floors, because they *don't look* – it has been drummed into them 'not to pay attention'. And in the background: someone is going crazy because he is the only one who has any consideration for his environment and actually looks."

When subsequently the other inhabitants become increasingly aware of the visible presence of others, this does not lead to solidarity or anything like class consciousness. On the contrary, the voyeuristic opportunities are fully exploited,

so that blackmail, espionage and murder ensue. "The theme is always isolation and individualism as inseparable companions of capitalist competition. Collectivism is unthinkable; inevitably, people in the capitalist world devour each other." In the end, nothing remains but a destroyed glass house. Seeing others in a system of exploitation does not lead to reflection but only to destruction.²

Eisenstein too departs from the fundamental antithesis between the severity and honesty of glass and the evil deception of the ruling system. And that while he should have known that the glass house was not only becoming popular in council housing but, moreover, was given a chance in the new villas the dishonest rich were having built and in the offices where they amassed their fortunes behind glass curtain walls. The myth of glass was apparently more powerful than the application of it in daily practice. For instance, the traces of it are still to be found in Constant's New Babylon, whose models from the fifties and sixties suggest a similar openness and accessibility and also an eternal waiting for the new man. Constant's spaces, however, are interior spaces, in which openness already averts itself from the exterior and a regime of the variable interior holds sway.³ The ultimate development towards a closed vitrification, in which the walled space of the shopping mall or amusement park served to better enable the design of the new experience, was already programmed by Constant. In fact, they form the blueprint upon which work and living is increasingly based: separation from the outside world in a glass interior world to make the illusion real.

Visible blindness

The return of the glass dream in *Untitled Space* is astonishing: the dream has long been shattered. In order to understand these spaces, we will have read them more carefully. Perhaps it is a good idea to turn our focus away from the glass surface and look for traces of its use: after all, they will reveal the purpose of this intervention, what illusion is being created or what commentary is being made. It is immediately apparent that the design views ideals with indifference: it makes no attempt to formulate new ideals, nor does it mourn the loss of established ideals. The glass does not reveal anything, and nothing is screened to create one's own reality. The illusion of labour is not evoked because there is no trace of work, only that of living and leisure time. A ball, a couple of helmets, a piece of wire, a bicycle, a cistern: they suggest presence and activity, but the inhabitants never enter the picture. The traces seem emphatically staged; they have been put there to guide our gaze. They recall the photographs Le Corbusier took of his villas. Lying there, spread across the interior and terraces, are the symbols of fashionable life: the hat, the pack of cigarettes, the sunglasses. Food is ready in the kitchen, but the cook and the eaters are absent. The protagonists have abandoned the stage and we only see the traces that turn us into voyeurs or detectives.⁴ The traces in *Untitled Space* also make us feel like Peeping Toms. But that feeling is immediately contradicted by the fact that all this glass has invited our gaze: there is nothing surreptitious about the

fact that we are looking. In fact, we don't really have much choice; everyone can see what we see and that we are seeing. The traces do not evoke embarrassment in us but only curiosity. What's it like living here, so visible and stripped of privacy? The two helmets suggest at least a couple; the football reveals the presence of a child, but the intimate life that these things evoke can hardly take place here. If utopia is not the issue, then we can not expect the advent of the new man either. And the remnants that are present only reveal ingrained patterns. But the inhabitants are not there. In Beatriz Colomina's analysis, the occupant in Le Corbusier's work is nothing more than a guest, a temporary presence that has to depart in time in order to leave the house to its own devices. In Le Corbusier, the entire house has become an image machine, a camera that guides the gaze towards modern paths. The horizontal window, in this instance, serves as a lens or as a guideline for the camera movement: living becomes the staging of being.⁵ But in *Untitled Space*, windows and walls are absent, the gaze is sooner scattered than focused. The view can take any direction, but in the process, any gaze is wholly or partly reflected. The fragmentation and scattering of the gaze is consequently reinforced to the extent that the thinking model using the gaze as a starting point to be able to interpret the position of the design's subject becomes immediately redundant. Here, the gaze is so general it can no longer see itself. The photographs consequently lack a registering eye: everything is reflected, but there is no sign whatsoever of our curious gaze anywhere. We are not confronted by our own observing eyes anywhere in the pictures; even the shadow of a camera is nowhere to be found in these reflections.

In 1964 Robert Smithson created a structure with mirrors placed in a corner that he called *Enantiomorphic Chambers*. They are reflecting spaces in which the viewer can not spy on himself. No matter which corner he views from, his own gaze is totally absent. In 1966, Smithson wrote a short text about this work in which he cryptically notes: '6. To see one's own sight means visible blindness'.⁶ What Smithson intends to express has to be derived from his work, and in particular from the way in which he uses mirrors. In a well-known work dating from 1969, when he was traveling through Yucatan, he set up mirrors in various places in the area. It concerned an almost literal connection to a specific place: by sticking mirrors in the ground, the sky is directly connected to the earth. By partially scattering earth on the mirrors, the perfect reflection is upset and the fusion enhanced. But what also matters to him here is the inexplicable effect of the mirror itself: "Such mirror surfaces cannot be understood by reason. Who can divulge from what part of the sky the blue color came? Who can say how long the color lasted? Must 'blue' mean something? Why do the mirrors display a conspiracy of muteness concerning their very existence? When does a displacement become a misplacement? These are forbidden questions that place comprehension in a predicament. The question the mirrors ask always falls short of the answers. Mirrors thrive on surds, and generate incapacity. Reflections fall onto mirrors without logic, and in so doing invalidate

every rational assertion. Inexpressible limits are on the other side of incidents, and they will never be grasped."⁷ Yucatan is far removed from the position of *Untitled Space*, and the partial reflections differ greatly from the fundamental reflections that Smithson was searching for, but the link lies in the relation that the reflections establish with their environment and in the way in which Narcissus is kept at bay. The link becomes clear when we confront these spaces with Robert Morris' *Mirrored Cubes*. There, in the semi-high, mirrored cubes, the observer could mainly watch himself, see himself as an observer, recognize his meanderings as meanderings. There, too, it is impossible to see anything different, and everything is subservient to the gaze that studies itself. There we are the visible blind.

Down the drain

If *Untitled Space* opens our eyes because we are not saddled with our own view, then the question is what does it show us. The traces of the absent inhabitant(s) reveal that movement and connections to networks determine their lives. The helmets, bicycles, exercise machines, the wires and connections – in this interior things are rarely idle. This explains the absence of inhabitants: they are busy elsewhere. The house is not a camera, a device that registers the surroundings, as with Le Corbusier. If we want to see it as a medium, then it's more of an interface: a link between innumerable possibilities. But with the model of the gaze, the metaphor of the medium also has to be abandoned. Media that pretend to relay information and open up the world serve as our own little dream factory. The closed filter system, the circulation pump of dreams in which the glass house has become submerged, and into which the open-plan office will disappear, is not present here. Because this is not a question of narcissistic vitrification, because the *Untitled* spaces continuously bring the outside to the inside and turn the inside to the outside, the closed circle cannot materialize. Just like Smithson's mirrors, the glass interiors of *Untitled Space* continuously connect with their environment. Again, the point is not that they are transparent, that they choose seeing above, for example, hearing and feeling, the point is that they simultaneously do and do not occupy a place. Unlike Scheerbart's glass dream, these spaces are not special, they do not create a new living environment for a new kind of person. They therefore cannot collapse into a mirror palace for the contemporary glass person. They do not show the inside as a revelation of the secret, but they admit the outside without restriction. One is almost inclined to say that they conform to the context, were that word not so completely misplaced. That term raises the expectation that a text is already present to which this space reacts. The effect, however, is the opposite: this glass house decontextualizes. The entire environment, the constructed and the natural, can be found in the house, is suddenly present, and is therefore no longer environment. Just as in Smithson's mirrors the blue of the sky becomes inexplicable, in the same way *Untitled Space* makes its environment incomprehensible. We see everything anew through the windows of this glass house.

A cistern appears in one of the designs. It is a somewhat harsh reminder of the bodily functions that we normally keep out of our speculations. The part of the house that in Dutch more or less euphemistically is called a 'wet cell' is shamelessly present here. The question of use also irresistibly imposes itself upon us. But here too, the reflections confuse the established context. The bathroom has become environment, the need natural. Here, the unnameability of the reflected also makes itself felt. And with that we encounter the last consequence of *Untitled Space*: its spaces have no name, and no purpose. They have no place. Where glass architecture previously pursued location and designation, as in the case of Constant who named his sectors, so that the roamings of new inhabitants would be maintained by spelled-out promises, there the movement that is initiated by these spaces is indeterminable and vague. As a result, they relate to the architecture of this moment in a specific way. Just like much other contemporary architecture, they turn away from the arranged spectacle, from the glass box that would expose life but in doing so renders everything a commodity. The glass curtains, which initially served as a showcase for desirable objects and later as a conveyor of desired images, are increasingly substituted by closed or reflecting panels with a barely comprehensible logic. The non-existent form has made its advent into architecture in an attempt to allow it to play a role again. The result is often nothing more than a new variation of the spectacle. That is not the case in these spaces. The difference becomes easily visible when we compare them to the designs of Herzog and De Meuron. There they concern closed, detached objects, which often, with the help of artists, claim a separate place of their own. The *Untitled* spaces, however, are not part of a thing, their boundaries are difficult to define and their existence only seems to have been granted a virtual destiny. They do not make use of art, although they closely tend towards it in their non-existence. Their indeterminateness is precisely what removes them from categorization. *Untitled Space* is in the true sense of the word utopian: it predicts the impossible moment when architecture makes the world become visible, not as a commodity or dream, but as something incomprehensible, a phenomenon that can only be captured in semi-visible reflections.

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Ervaring en armoede", (1933) in: *Maar een storm waait uit het paradijs* (Nijmegen, 1997) 136-141 (translated from Dutch).

² Naoem Klejman, "De geschiedenis van een idee. Over Het Glazen Huis van Sergej M. Eisenstein", *Raster* 25 (1983), 159-186 (translated from Dutch). In that sense, Eisenstein's script foreshadows Lars von Trier's *Dogville*.

³ See also Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon. The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (Rotterdam 1998).

⁴ Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity* (Cambridge Mass., 1994), 283-289.

⁵ *Ibid*, 301-335.

⁶ Robert Smithson, "Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers", in *Robert Smithson. The Collected Writings* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1996), 39-40.

⁷ Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan", *ibid*, 124.