



A short Encoun- ter with a Chair

by Katerina Pertselaki

“...[he who] sees the beauty of earth is transported with the recollection of the true beauty...; and he is therefore thought to be mad”

Plato, Phaedrus (249)

I recently revisited a photograph I took during a short trip to Cuba. Unlike the often explored images of the vibrant Havana streets, the picture preserves a silent moment, a muteness almost indifferent to its context. In fact, without the knowledge of its place one could easily be misled to identify a Mediterranean setting or a colonial town in Africa. Looking at the photograph

again in the distance of time, I recognise the same intensity that made me pause and take the picture at first place.

I had wandered for some time in the streets of Havana and I was now able to reconcile the abstract representation of the map, I had quickly studied beforehand, with the built reality of the city. The unfolding of the topography from the Cathedral to the square to the open living rooms selling pizza, gradually built a coherent structure by which I freed myself from the struggle of the basic orientation and began to appreciate secondary elements of the urban decorum. Precisely at that moment I recognized the chair as an urban object awaiting representation.

Nothing had announced the chair's presence as I turned into the narrow street other than the wide dark inte-

rior in which it was placed, contrasting with the bright building façades hit by the midday sun. Lured by the anticipation of what this darkness might reveal my walk focused towards the opening. Once in front of it, I realised the double wooden doors opened to nothing more than an ordinary lobby of a residential apartment block. The room was shallower than I expected. The stone floor tiles betrayed a cool interior, comforting against the exterior heat. A staircase with an ornate steel balustrade was leading to the upper floors, whilst in the background some half-broken fixed seats alluded to a waiting room, perhaps of what was a former use of the building, or of a doctor's practice behind one of the closed doors...

The chair is placed at the threshold and the few sun beams penetrating the interior cast its shadow on the floor. A heavy, 'streamlined' cross-base on wheels holds a thin steel tube that supports the mechanism of adjustment. The leather seat seems in good condition and one wonders whether it is still the original one or use had required replacement. The wooden back frame with its rounded edges is elegantly bent and the arms are supported by sculptural wooden pieces curving in the other direction. At a second glance one guesses that the chair is more the product of coincidence and amateur carpentry than a faithful reproduction of an artist's design.

There is an almost uncanny absence of activity, yet, in a manner similar to de Chirico's piazzas (though lacking the artist's intentional wit), the emptiness veers between vacuity and anticipation for the appearance of actors –the slow footsteps of the old guy walking towards or away still resonate and the movement of light enhances the drama to which the passer-by is invited to participate. Far from sublime however, the ambiguity of the setting just abandoned or yet to be fulfilled becomes the tool by which one is offered the opportunity to recognise oneself as more than a transient being. The banal encounter with the chair signals its relatedness to the rest of life as a receptacle of memory and meaningful present moments.

In this enigmatic setting the social, cultural and political context in which the chair exists constantly reappears; the density of living in the centre of Havana, the narrow streets, the lack of extensive vehicular traffic, the rich public life (in which streets are appropriated as an extension of the private residence), coupled with

the necessities for adaptability, unity (even ethics) nurtured by socialism, and the hot climate, provide the conditions by which such situation is at all possible. In a sense one escapes the grounding physicality of the place.

By means of analogy and association the iconographical elements of the setting act as a referent to spatially and temporarily distant places. From the reservoir of personal memory and experience to the history of furniture, from the ergonomic, adopted form of the chair to the architectural details of the threshold and balustrade, numerous different images are called forth: a private study room, after-depression advertising, a detective story, summer family holidays, all fashions that to the western traveller's eyes seem no longer relevant. Yet, once again, the referential discontinuity is reconciled by the immediate urban context and depth of Cuban culture. In this way it gains credibility that its analogous, say in the City of London, would not have. In this overlay of a domestic piece of furniture upon street life the chair embodies the conditions of praxis of its specific place, (and to this extent the chair is also different from a street bench).

In this reading of a short encounter with a chair one appreciates that the setting's meditative strength lies more in its ability to communicate between concreteness and imagination than in an inherent, deeper integrity of its own. I would like to argue that the beautiful in architecture and in urban environments resides precisely on this dialogical structure as the capacity of the background to open-up the horizon of freedom and possibilities. As such, the beautiful is only subjective insofar as one differentiates and prioritises amongst the milieu of encounters.

This is not to devalue subjective judgement. After all, no matter how difficult one finds to argue for the beautiful, as everyone recognises an ugly –or bad-building there is a claim to concrete experience as a foundation to which value adheres. Rather, through individual judgement one relates to the common world of Erfahrung. Instead of allusions to 'other' or even 'parallel' realities the practice of everyday life exposes the dialogue from ordinary to sacred, from particular to universal. The continuity of self-understanding prevails through casual dialogues at the counter, drinking coffee, remembering, forgetting, as much as it does

through attending a funeral, studying or giving birth; in other words, the whole spectrum of events by which life becomes meaningful.

Furthermore, the apparent objectivity by which the beautiful remains relevant is not to be mistaken for the instrumental objectivity that characterises processes of organisation and planning. Rooted in the Enlightenment concept of urbanism as a utopia of rationalised space, planning, as an instrument of liberation of culture transformed into a project directed towards the future, with the plan –grid- offering a passage from the architecture of ideology to the possible realistic paradigm as ‘paradise on earth’. Statistical analysis, coordination and systematisation became the key elements by which order could be imposed upon the chaotic reality. Under these methodologies of accuracy and determination the objective refers to the reduction of culture into fundamental aspects of a man’s life claiming wholeness and leading thus to further abstractions. The ‘plural’ refers no more to intensity and situational depth but to a multitude of apparently contradictory representations of liberal thinking. The post-modern efforts –exemplified by Venturi- in their adopted arbitrariness as an aesthetic principle –in which the ‘messy vitality’ is examined from a distance and the need for beauty and truth is replaced by a search for the ‘interesting’- the claim to the real is an illusionary and misleading escape from reality as it seeks meaning beyond it through aesthetic construction. They arrived then to an ‘absence’ of space, equal to the austere modernists’ landscapes against which they argued.

In this light, beauty cannot enter the architectural discourse without claims to idealisation, on the one hand and without being reduced into categorical abstractions of aesthetics, foremost and always serving those in control, on the other. Past examples of city beautification have exposed the social engineering and cultural mobilisation hidden behind the advocacy of moral order, pretence to urban progressivism and intramundane salvation, by which consumption of iconography becomes the ticket to citizenship. The lesson, however, lies not so much in the failures and discrepancies of such movements by now widely criticised, but in the insight that, in fact, had such efforts not claimed redemption and had they been empty of promise of reform, they would not have been deemed plausible and therefore they would never have been realised. More akin to an art-

ist’s work, ‘beauty’ in this case would not –and could not- be consumed. What is at hand is the fundamental state of cultural remorse in the face of our inability to come to terms with technology (planning) as it proves inadequate to describe the depth of human phenomena. To compensate for this, past architectural efforts have opposed the different spheres of technology and beauty –as ‘aesthetics’- in which the more humane and ecological morale is expected to redeem the progressive and estranging technologically advanced equipment, as the dialectics between gentleness (with its allusions to a primitive aesthetic) and the motif of progress; in fact, both become the project of cultural abstraction and engineering. More recently ‘concepts’ such as ‘sustainability’, ‘inclusion’, ‘diversity’ and the ‘mixed-use’ are often employed to reinstate faith in planning, more associated however to governmental policies on economic patterns and migration flows.

Amidst all these, the call for ‘beauty’ as neither that which describes the project of moral didacticism (applicable by technology) nor that which is absolute (aesthetics), but as what really matters (everyday life) is inherently paradoxical, as it fails to understand that beauty itself resists such analysis. If ‘true’ beauty has seized to lead architectural discourse it is less so because of our inability to agree on what is beautiful and more because beauty denies the rationalised rhetoric of systematic ‘agendas’ that has already transformed the city to a matrix of fragmented institutions, from happiness to justice to respect, easily exchangeable –at a cost. The beautiful, a value so profoundly human, requires no explanation, no research and no methodology.

Beauty is then encountered on the accidental gaps that the oneiric (or ‘neat’, or ‘simple-lined’ or ‘contemporary’) austerity of planning leaves behind. Analogous to a lonely chair, beauty makes a claim upon the autonomous temporality of encounters and acquires the character of thought itself as the drama of correlation between structure and meaning.

Katerina Pertselaki has studied architecture in Kingston University - BA(Hons) and Dip.Arch- and also completed a masters degree in Cambridge University (UK) -MPhil in History and Philosophy of Architecture. For the last 2 years she lives and works in London.