Oslobađajuća arhitektura

Liberating Architecture

POLIVALENTO KAZALIŠTE LE GRAND SUD, LILLE, FRANCUSKA

LE GRAND SUD POLYVALENT THEATRE, LILLE, FRANCE
There is something fascinating in the work of Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal. Regardless of the program, site and of the conditions in which they develop a project, in each of their projects they manage to display their panoply of incongruous elements, such as greenhouses, polycarbonate and corrugated aluminium sheets. And each time we are surprised by the intelligence and clarity of the project which is as much functional as it is architectonic. In their recent project, a polyvalent cultural centre situated in a park in the suburb of the city of Lille, Lacaton and Vassal have once again demonstrated their ability to address the constraints that they encounter while working on a project (one of which, in this particular project, implied burying the building underground, leaving only two façades facing the exterior). The Lille project is yet another example of their successful combination of functionality and architectural lightness. Behind the long façades (composed of narrow greenhouses made out of ETFE cushions), underneath the layer of greenery stretches a place unique in its flexibility and in the diversity of programmes and activities that it can accommodate simultaneously. Various events such as symphony concerts and wedding receptions can be held at the venue, and the following day the entire building can be used to host a roller skating championship. This specific public space that unifies cultural and social activities is also commonly known as Le Grand Sud; soon after it had been put into service, the centre became an important reference point for this type of polyvalent structures. Le Grand Sud has been regularly visited by architects (architects from American studio Diller Scofidio + Renfro have recently paid it a visit) as well as by those appointed to develop similar facilities. This has been achieved without an architectural tour de force. The building’s interior is a system of concrete beams, mobile partitions and telescopic seating. On the exterior, the long façades of Le Grand Sud give it an impressive appearance,
yet at the same time the structure blends effortlessly into the surroundings, engaging in brief dialogue with the park. It would be easy to summarize and to explain the work of Lacaton and Vassal as the continuous use of simple techniques and industrial materials and elements. Their architecture is indeed...
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oblikovanju. Dakako, vode računa o estetskom aspektu, što se vidi u pažnji koju posvećuju odabiru materijala i načinu na koji te materijale povezuju i smještaju u prostoru. No, konačni cilj ovih arhitekata nije izgraditi čudesne i savršene objekte, nego ostvariti određene rezultate. Kakvom rezultatu teže Anne Lacaton i Jean-Philippe Vassal? Spomenuli smo ga ranije u ovom tekstu, a to je postizanje što veće moguće površine u odnosu na unaprijed zadane ograničenja, osobito što se tiče budžeta, no i to je samo jedno od sredstava kojima se ovi arhitekti služe. Njihova prava ambicija je da svaki projekt pruža slobodu. A za Lacaton i Vassal takva se sloboda najbolje može postići ponudom veće površine. Veća površina pruža veću slobodu korisnicima određenog prostora, bilo da je riječ o privatnom stambenom prostoru ili javnim građevinama. Razlika je još vidljiva u odnosu na pristup koji u prvi plan stavljaju istraživanje forme i koji (nažalost, prečesto u posljednje vrijeme) može rezultirati zatvorenim objektima koji ostavljaju mlađa mjesta za improvizaciju i promjene. Potpuno oprečno onome što Lacaton & Vassal nastojte ostvariti u svojim projektima. Ne možemo u potpunosti razumjeti njihovu arhitekturu ukoliko ne vjerujemo, poput njih, da arhitektura također može imati oslobađajuću funkciju. Upravo kako bi omogućili tu slobodu, Lacaton & Vassal ne grade tek objekte, nego inteligentno razvijaju tzv. arhitektonске uređaje. Pritom se referiramo na profoundly characterised by these elements, to the extent that we could consider them as their distinctive feature, a kind of architectural signature. However, this term is truly unsuitable to describe the work of Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, as their professional and ideological worldview is completely opposite to the notion of starchitects. These elements, of course, are essential for obtaining the desired characteristics of a project, notably surface enlargement — another distinguishing feature of their practice. Although essential, these elements are but a means for Lacaton and Vassal: in their work we should focus more on the way in which they contemplate the final purpose of a certain building. As we look at their completed projects, the absence of formal architectural intentions is the most surprising. Naturally, they care about the aesthetic aspects, which we notice in their focus on the choice of materials and in the way in which they combine and position them. However, Lacaton and Vassal do not aim to produce magnificent and perfect objects, they strive to produce concrete results. What result do these architects strive to achieve? As has already been mentioned, their aim is to enlarge the surface as much as possible in regard to strict constraints, notably in terms of budget, but even the surface enlargement serves them as yet another means. Their true ambition, in each of their projects, is to offer freedom, and for Lacaton and
Vassal the best way to offer freedom is by creating more surface. The larger the surface of a place, the greater the freedom of its users, whether it involves a private residential space or a public building. The difference becomes even more obvious in regard to an approach where the focus is placed on the investigation of shape and form, an approach that (unfortunately, too often as of late) has resulted in closed forms, leaving little space for improvisation and change: the exact opposite of what Lacaton & Vassal search for in every project. We cannot understand their architectural practice if we do not believe, as they do, that architecture can also have a liberating function. In order to create that liberty, Lacaton & Vassal do not produce mere structures: they develop architectural devices. 1 Here we refer to the notion of device as Alain Guiheux, a French architect and theoretician of architecture.

1 Alain Guiheux: Architecture est un dispositif, in AMC, issue 99, February 1999
pojam uređaja koji je francuski arhitekt i teoretičar arhitekture Alain Guiheux definirao na nekoliko ambijenskih primjera, taj nam pojam omogućuje bolje razumijevanje specifičnosti rada arhitekata Lacaton & Vassal. Alain Guiheux suprotno arhitektonske uređaje arhitekturna koja je više usmjerena prema realizaciji plastičnih, formalnih objekata. Arhitektura kao uređaj odstupa od formalnih preokupacija i nastoji stvoriti različite aktivnosti i događanja, ono što Alain Guiheux naziva pozitivnim aktivnostima. Prema Guiheuxu, arhitektura kao uređaj povezuje tehniku i kretanje kako bi stvorila nove veze funkcija i uporaba. Kao paradigma takve arhitekture navodi La Maison du Peuple u Clichyju, gdje se tržnica može transformirati u veliku dvorani za predstave i koncerte. Time lako uočavamo kako se rad arhitekata Lacaton & Vassal nadovezuje na genijalno rada Jeana Prouvé u Vladimir Bodianskog. Takvi arhitektonski uređaji mogu biti vrlo sofistirani, poput mobilnih

1 Alain Guiheux, L'architecture est un dispositif, AMC, broj 99, veljača 1999.

defines it in some examples of emblematic projects. His definition enables us to understand better the specificity of Lacaton and Vassal’s work. Alain Guiheux distinguishes architectural devices from the type of architecture that is directed more towards the creation of plastic, formal structures. Architecture as a device puts aside formal preoccupations, preferably focusing on creating various activities and events, which Alain Guiheux considers as positive activities. According to Guiheux, architecture as a device is a kind of architecture that combines technique and movement so as to create new correlations between functions and uses. He points out the project La Maison du Peuple in Clichy, where a market place can be transformed into a venue for shows and concerts, as a paradigm of such architecture. Therefore we can easily notice how the work of Lacaton & Vassal is a continuation of the brilliant work of Jean Prouvé and Vladimir Bodiansky. Such architectural devices can be very sophisticated, similar to mobile elements. Guiheux, for instance, cites Rem Koolhaas’s family house in
Alain Guiheux navodi primjer obiteljske kuće u Bordeauxu, Rema Koolhaasa, gdje uvodenjem pomične plafonde nije samo omogućen prostor slobode vlasniku kuće (tetraplegičaru), nego se njome transformirala i percepcija prostora. No, arhitektonski uređaji također mogu biti i statični. Dojmljiv primjer statičnih rješenja nedavno su predstavili belgijski arhitekti 51N4E. Instalacija jednostavne čelične ploče koja okružuje tipičnu seosku kuću u potpunosti je izmijenila odnose unutarnjeg i vanjskog prostora, povećavši mogućnost korištenja prostora. Drugi, također značajan primjer, obiteljska je kuća koju je projektirao Xavier de Geyter u kojoj su svi pregradni zidovi pomični, čime je moguće varirati prostorne konfiguracije. Originalna pozicija koju u arhitektonskom svijetu drže Lacaton & Vassal rezultat je njihove odluke da od samih početaka svoje prakse slijede princip arhitektonskih uređaja te ih interpretiraju na svoj, nesofisticirani način. Poznata Kuća Latapie u blizini Bordeauxa izvanredan je primjer arhitekture kao uređaja; zimski vrt nije samo povećao ukupnu površinu, Bordeaux, where a mobile platform not only creates more freedom for its resident (a quadriplegic), but also transforms the perception of the space. These architectural devices can also be static, as it was remarkably demonstrated in a recent project carried out by Belgian architects 51N4E: a simple steel panel that surrounds an ordinary country house entirely transforms the relations between the interior and exterior thus increasing the possibilities of use. Another remarkable example is the individual house designed by Xavier de Geyter in which all partitions are mobile and thus create a possibility for various space configurations. The original position that Lacaton and Vassal hold in the world of architecture is a result of their decision to follow the principle of architectural devices and to interpret them in their own, unsophisticated way. The famous project of the house in Latapie near Bordeaux is an excellent example of architecture as a device: the winter garden multiplies not only the surface area, but also the possibilities of its use. Such a system of composing various elements
gradually became more technical and controlled in projects that followed, introducing the use of greenhouses, which are regularly found in the housing projects in Mulhouse and Paris (see Oris 41). Another example is the School of Architecture in Nantes, where interventions such as the multiplication of interspaces, a ramp accessible to lorries, and a roof terrace that can support a substantial weight, have transformed this school into a remarkable place of architectural education and experimentation. By doubling the existing industrial hall in the Dunkerque project, additional space that can be used for various activities and events is gained (see Oris 90). Their project in Lille follows the same concept. During the development phase, following the end of the competition, the final solution was agreed upon in direct consultation with the future director of the centre. The consultation process imposed numerous restrictions. The new centre was envisioned as an integral part of a major urban renewal project for a sensitive neighbourhood in the north of Lille. The key element was the park that covers 4 hectares and that was already equipped with various cultural, social and sports programmes. Authors of the master plan, architect Nicolas Michelin and landscape architect Pascal Cribier, envisaged the centre that would slide under a layer of greenery so as to preserve the continuity of the park. Furthermore, the competition terms imposed conditions to accommodate a substantial programme in a limited volume. We can imagine that Lacaton and Vassal, as well as other entrants, had to be very careful not to exceed these limits. Nevertheless, as soon as they were pronounced the winners, Lacaton and Vassal presented the plan B, their alternative project that they had been contemplating parallel to the competition phase. The plan B proposed expanding the programme along the entire length of the site by separating the main hall and adding the remaining spaces on either side. This proposition increased the surface area from 2400 m² to 3800 m² without changing the principle of the entire structure. The new plan offered multiple advantages. It enabled a softer insertion of the building into the ground. The ceiling in the main hall gradually descended in twelve-metre ranges (the distance between concrete beams) from one part of the hall with the highest point measuring twelve metres to the opposite part where the ceiling was three metres high. The new proposition also included a hundred-metre-long façade, which also contributed to the project's overall appearance and visibility. These improvements in functionality and versatility played a decisive role of the plan B. The project realisation was conducted in direct consultation with Laurent Poutrel, future director of the centre, who was also one of the programme's developers.
Duge fasade sastavljene su od uskih staklenika iz kojih se pod biljnim pokrovom širi prostor jedinstven po svojoj fleksibilnosti i raznolikosti programa

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and a member of the competition jury. As Poutrel recalls, the artistic and functional aspects of the project directly followed the architectural design. The new plan allowed multiple purposes to be integrated, such as a dance studio and a music recording studio. The acoustic features of the main hall were improved as well, making it suitable for concerts of any musical genre. 24 metres of open façade, 40 metres in depth and 10.8 metres of height, with a maximum seating capacity for 800 people (theatre plays, classical music concerts) and capacity for 2500 standing places (rock concerts), the hall is a very subtle device. If necessary, the hall can be divided in order to simultaneously accommodate two separate events. In addition, the hall can be isolated or made to disappear by means of mobile acoustic panels: once the panels close up like an accordion and the telescopic seats retract, a vast space of 2400 m² opens up, thus being suitable for various social events. We should also mention a desire expressed by the director of the centre to accommodate events in the entire venue. To make it possible, the electricity was distributed throughout the entire building (instead of being available only in certain points, as in theatres, for instance) and a grid of mounts for projectors and sound systems was installed under the ceiling. These interventions allowed the structure and to attain its true dimension; it was no longer a mere polyvalent centre, it transformed into a venue that can simultaneously accommodate various activities and events. Le Grand Sud kept its promises: it serves as a cultural centre for the city of Lille.
We cannot understand their architectural practice if we do not believe, as they do, that architecture can also have a liberating function and the surrounding area and at the same time it responds to the needs and expectations of the people living in the neighbourhood. Of course, these new elaborations were reflected in the budget, which increased from eight million to ten million euros. Nevertheless, fully aware of how much the entire project would profit from the new proposition, the city of Lille decided to shoulder the additional financing costs. If the truth be told, an amount of 2700 euros per m², which also included the cost of burying the structure underground, seems to be a reasonable cost for such an experimental building. The structural principles are very simple: Lacaton & Vassal use concrete retaining walls, concrete structural frames and concrete elements with a T profile are used for the ceilings. The ceiling in the twenty-four-metre-long main hall is an exception: due to its span and the weight of the layer of greenery above the hall, a metal truss 2 meters high was added to its structure. The polished concrete floor, mobile panels and several fixed walls complete this architectural device whose two long façades are its most distinguishing feature. As the structure disappears underground, the long façades form and define its visual identity. They consist of narrow greenhouses where a rich variety of flowers and climbers are in bloom. The greenhouses are equipped with natural ventilation, watering and shading systems that are also used in professional greenhouses. The façade on the right side of the main hall is movable. It is quite spectacular to suddenly see ten-metre-high façade move, revealing the main hall. There is no sophisticated mechanism, the façade is manipulated by a simple handle. Very simply, by means of a drive system, the façade can be moved within several minutes, thus establishing communication between the main hall and the park. And suddenly, we witness a new dimension of liberty. Indeed, Le Grand Sud is a magnificent example of what this type of architecture can offer.