

4.

A short
explanation on
the assemblies
at play in the design
of the tent.

WHAT DOES THE TENT DO?

WHAT DOES THE TENT DO?

The work done so far follows the notorious 80/20 rule. The 80 per cent (or more) of the words that were written, amounts to 20 per cent (or less) of the useful result of the process, a possible pragmatic agenda for architecture. After having made the case for pragmatism and anchored this word to a context of intellectual stimulation and concern, I discussed the "cracks" through which the implementation of some sort of pragmatism can occur. The main "crack" is obviously design, a practice that never starts from scratch, and that I have profiled in its links to a collection, a case-by-case knowledge of mediation, and its context of the "word", a statement of intent.

The ultimate ancestor lies somewhere in between, asking questions to the word from the point of view of the collection; it is a memo for design, summarizing all the multifarious knowledge that is required for the radically cautious/ cautiously radical reiteration of solutions that good design is about. The ultimate ancestor is a memo, as well as a rough road map through the field of *Techne*. This is how Kenneth Frampton extracted *Techne* from Heidegger: "*techne*, (is) derived from the Greek verb *tikto*, meaning to produce. This term means the simultaneous existence of both art and craft (...). It also implies knowledge, in the sense of revealing what is latent within a work(...). This revelatory concept returns us to -Giambattista-Vico's *verum, ipsum, factum*, to that state of affairs in which knowing and making are inextricably linked."¹ The ultimate ancestor is thus a rare point within the "knowing" argument of the word and the "making" gradient of the collection where the link between them is explicit enough.

#1

Cava, John, Kenneth Frampton, and Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. *Studies in Tectonic Culture : The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995. p.23.

This brings us to what the tent is supposed to be doing here. The answer is hopefully explicit already through the bandwidth of the collection, a collection of projects that most often aren't tents themselves and haven't been designed with the tent in mind. If it is important to examine the tent as such, this can



WHAT DOES THE TENT DO?

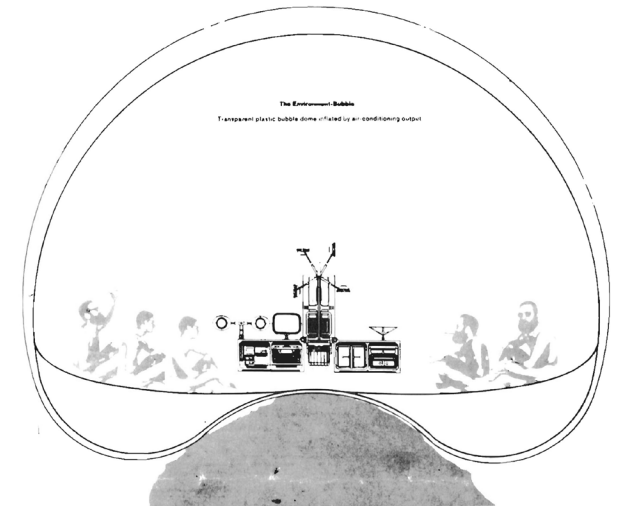
only be the result of a much slower and necessarily collective process. But the word so far only appears in the mist of ideas that were presented as "a case for pragmatism" and "the ultimate ancestor", so I will shortly and simply attempt here to put it in the clear as a thesis.

There has been some amount of tent-architecture in the past, but it was mainly involved with the technological ideal of the membrane, the utopia of total dissolution and ambientization of life supports. Another take at the tent views it in its tradition, usually via Saharan nomads etc. while disregarding completely its inherently technological scope as an ultra-light, optimal assembly. Both these definitions represent purification attempts, from the point of view of the *idiotes* and their obsession with transcendent culture, or the point of view of the technicians with their transcendent nature/ science and their obsession with "more" and "better". I understand the tent much more as an imbrication of perimeters rather than as a unique all-encompassing membrane.

Carefully positioned, as a result of its movability that implies constant repositioning as well as skill thereof, it formalizes negotiations that are fractal in scale. The tent is just a middle point, a designed platform where all this giving and taking between life supports takes form. This form participates in a "doll within the doll within the doll" of three main levels, each with their own perimeters to be combined.

First, you have the above-scale mediation, in which the tent complies to wider conditions. These are related to the environment in the mainstream understanding of the term, with the need for the tent to embody questionings such as "where is the wind blowing from", "is this tree solid enough" "where is the closest source of water" or "how can I use this rock"? Added to those we need to factor in the questions

Myth.



Reality.



WHAT DOES THE TENT DO?

that stem from the environment in its wider sense, such as "where is the closest house", "what are the paths around", "do I want to be seen or hidden", "does anyone else needs what I want to use" or "am I in someone's property"? Any tent is a formal position on some or all of these questions, which can be found on a wide site plan/map, represented somewhere between the 1:10000 and the 1:500 scale.

To exemplify this consciousness we could think of Japanese architecture in densely populated areas. In an anti-haussmanian logic, the hype contemporary Japanese dwellings uphold the importance of this dimension and represent intricate answers to this kind of questioning in a context where it doesn't belong. The city was long regarded as a sufficient critical mass of built matter, infrastructure and regulation, in order to address the above-scale questioning top-down, through collective and abstract rules. Even if this is sometimes true, the overdone (and often plainly bad) efforts of hype Japanese houses are a very clear reminder that this search for negotiation with the bigger scale is current even in a world which is a great interior. This might also be the answer to why people, often from places where this kind of experimentation is simply forbidden, like Japanese architecture so much.

The particular flair of the Japanese house, traditional this time, brings us to the second scale of mediation, which happens on the scale of the tent as a whole. This mediation is the one between *Bekleidungskunst* (the art of dressing) and *Raumgestalterin* (the creation of space).² On the one hand you have the tent as an artefact, "how is it mounted", "what color is it", "how many layers of fabric are there" "is there a mosquito net" or "why is one pole red and the other one yellow"? On the other, you have the tent as a container, slightly wider than itself. The questions here are "how many people can you put inside", "is there a covered entrance", "where can we make the

#2

Terminology from August Schmarsow in Harry Malgrave's introduction to Gottfried Semper's "Four Elements". From Cava & Frampton, Ibid. p.18.



WHAT DOES THE TENT DO?

fire” “is the entrance wide” or “how do we connect our two tents”? Architecture is often thought to answer just this kind of questions, in which case they are inadvertently entangled with all the others, in the hybrid object of the contemporary house that we are trying to see as such for the first time.

Lacaton and Vassal are an architecture duo who displays with exceptional clarity the duties of the architect facing these questions. Working in France, one of the weirdest, most constrained and regulated environments in which to produce domestic architecture, they have devised, especially in their older projects, an extremely powerful and yet prodigiously economical approach. Instead of answering the typified demands of the T1/2/3/4 etc. the set typologies of housing, they change the question, by doubling down on *Raumgestalterin* and doubling up on *Bekleidungskunst*. They achieve this by integrating both of the components on a feedback, where Mies meets the African hut; it consists of using space as insulation, and extremely cheap (cautiously radical) details to provide for more floor surface.

Finally, speaking of floor surface, the tent is entirely dependent upon what lies on this surface, all the smaller things that inhabit it and make it livable. There is no tent without a complex set of smaller apparatuses, literal life supports destined to make it livable and inhabitable. Livable in the sense of “how can I keep myself warm”, “how can I store my water and keep it clean”, “how can I cut my food” or “how can I see at night”, so in the sense of the modern-day appliance and installation. Inhabitable in the sense of “does this look good”, “can I read something to forget the strange noises before I sleep”, “where is my teddy bear” or “how do I think of others”, so in the sense of modern-day decoration and gadget.

Hans Hollein has managed to make a large part of his architecture out of an extreme care for this third



WHAT DOES THE TENT DO?

sub-tent scale. In this manner he won a dedicated volume for his drawings in the following collection. He employed very clearly, to an absurd extent sometimes, the potential of hot air, a lamp, a marble post, a couch with painted birds on it, a different panel, a fake palm tree or, better, many of these and more assembled together with radical caution. Admittedly he is over the top with irony sometimes but I hereby argue for his thorough exculpation, on the grounds of his painful loneliness in dealing with things.

I believe this threefold understanding of the tent will be clearer through the following collection. It's structure is kind of intuitive, based on whatever information is immediately available on the page and partially relieved from the burden of too complex ideas and intellectual links. However all the projects belong to a world which is both a great interior, it can no longer depend on any externality, and devoid of center, so uninhabitable by naked humans. The tent arguably does much better than the temple in such a world. Even if the temple has still a lot to teach us, the tent really opens up the agenda of pragmatism, radical caution or cautious radicality, which I have argued for as the best option in our time of hybrids.



