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YES BOSS! THE 8 HOUSE: TOWARDS A PROJECTIVE CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

Seductive, famous and published to the point of saturation, the 8 House in Copenhagen, designed by Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) and completed in 2010, is a paradigmatic example of an architecture that is oriented towards the reproduction of its own image and thus of its own "project." From the initial marketing video and press photography to amateur post-occupancy photographs shared online, we trace the ways in which a seemingly simple project ("happiness") begins to sprawl, positioning its users as fans, and thus as co-producers of a pre-determined narrative. Temporarily inhabiting the positions of visitor and critic, we explore the risks and potentials of giving oneself up to an architectural project, mining that experience in order to arrive at a proposal for the development of a "projective critique." Ultimately, we conclude, an architecture that requires unconditional surrender (however pleasurable) is incompatible with positive societal transformation. In place of happiness, we therefore suggest the development of an architectural project of hope.

BIOGRAPHIES

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Writing of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson locates the (postmodern) desire for architecture in its image.¹ Alloy-like, the architecture of the early twenty-first century amalgamates image and material structure and in so doing sprawls simultaneously across the spaces of media and the city. From concept diagram to post-occupancy photograph, the building is now both preceded and augmented by a distributed array of high-resolution images. A brand from the moment of inception, the “distributed form” of the contemporary architectural project in fact seems carefully designed to facilitate its on-going dissemination. It is this relation – that of architecture to its image – which this essay critically addresses, exploring what it is that such projects actually project, and how we might – as architects and critics – critically engage with that content.

THE PROJECT

The 8 House sits alone in a field, bracketed on two sides by man-made bodies of water: a very narrow and very straight canal that traces the line of the 225-metre long eastern façade of the building, and a shallow and rather square lake which abuts the 100-metre long southern site boundary. To the west, groups of row houses have been scattered, as if by an infant giant, across the (artificially-induced) undulating terrain. To the north, open-air sports facilities clad the undeveloped plots between the 8 House and the Bella Centre. Beyond the canal, a row of nondescript residential, commercial, and car parking structures attempt the impossible task of mooring (in plan) the enormous structure of the 8 House – which

otherwise floats, zeppelin-like, in its field – to the adjacent spine of the city’s driverless metro system. The station of Vestamager, some 300 metres east of the site, is the last stop on the M1 line, linking the site to central Copenhagen. Vestamager marks the southernmost tip of Ørestad, a “maturing neighbourhood” (read: construction site) that has been grafted onto the Danish capital’s famous finger plan of 1947.²

Viewed for the first time in that field, on the first of our four visits to the building in 2013, the high-contrast black-and-white patterned stone walkways, the metallic cladding, the transparent glass balustrades and the curtains wall of the lower commercial floors all appear strangely unreal. They resist the patina of use, reflecting back the winter sun and producing a dull (but still high resolution) shimmer that comes close to the kind of “interference” that usually reveals the conceit of a rendered visualisation. Standing at the highest point of the southern loop and looking out across the fields of Amager, the view – sharply framed by the impossibly straight, angular twin roofs – is breathtaking.

Since its public debut the 8 House has always, to some degree, shimmered.

If we are to trace its lineage correctly the 8 House first inhabited a tabletop, not a field. In 2009 a short video of the building appeared on social media.³ The video was popular with architects, planners and other subscribers to the then-hegemonic cult of Danish sustainable urban design; we were all somewhat impressed at the time by the sight of a rather young-looking Bjarke Ingels

performatively conjuring the 8 House into being in front of our eyes. The video shows the Danish architect standing in front of a model-making table, in a messy office. Like a magician, Bjarke pulls a fluorescent layer cake of programme from the surface of the table, and with the flick of a hand conjures into being the recognisable “bow-tie” form of the 8 House.⁴ In the background, a sultry pop duet purr: “Yes boss.” A breathy female singer intones: “I’m on the mic. I’ll try to give you what you like. I can be soft, I can be hard, let me do the b-part. Please, please.”⁵ The digital model, resembling an oversized Liquorice Allsort, is replaced by a physical model. A red figure dashes around the newly formed “building,” negotiating a public realm so packed with colourful model pedestrians that the level of “intense metropolitan desirability” represented would have made Koolhaas blush. All the while, ‘Yes Boss’ plays in the background.

Following the release of this teaser, early visualisations of the project began to appear, firstly on the architects’ website and subsequently on various blogs.⁶ The most iconic images, however – the ones that marked the entry of the project into the mainstream architectural online press, and onto the fields of Amager as a built, material “fact” – were the architectural photographs produced by Danish photographer Jens Markus Lindhe to accompany the official press release announcing the completion of construction. Lindhe’s photographs were published alongside excerpts from the press release text in a rash of articles on sites like ArchDaily, Dezeen, and Architizer, as well as the project’s own Wikipedia entry and numerous articles on development industry sites like the World Property Channel.⁷ Often cropped in order to emphasise the V-shaped angles of the south-western corner of the monolith, Lindhe’s photographs of the 8 House tend to play up the contrast between the grassy green setting and the crisp, angular, metallic form of the building. Pre-occupancy but post-construction, the 8 House shines invitingly.

Both the BIG video and Lindhe’s photographs have clearly been doctored in post-production. Just as the 3D volumes extruded by Bjarke in composing his colourful “layercake of programme” do not constitute a physical model on a tabletop but a digital augmentation through film, so too the clarity of the building’s reflection in the canal, the rainbow-coloured skies and the impossibly deep green of the fields are augmentations which play up the metallic shimmer and sharp angles of the completed

building. When read together, Bjarke’s video and Lindhe’s photographs describe “the project” of the 8 House – not only the design process followed but the “spirit” upon which the 8 House seeks to attract actors and capital. In this sense, we deploy the term “project” both in terms of the architectural project (and its corollary in *projective architecture*), but also in the sense used by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in relation to their study of management practices in the “new economy.” Boltanski and Chiapello describe “the project” in this broader sense as:

precisely a mass of active connections apt to create forms – that is to say, bring objects and subjects into existence – by stabilizing certain connections and making them irreversible. It is thus a temporary pocket of accumulation which, creating value, provides a base for the requirement of extending the network by further connections.⁸

The project of the 8 House, as described in BIG’s video, Lindhe’s images and the press release text celebrating the 8 House’s arrival in a forever-amended post-construction existence, relies strongly on a sense of Utopian promise, the potential of a future that awaits us. As a project, the 8 House is both rational (“each function has found its optimal niche,” explains Bjarke) and sensual (without blushing Ingels describes his design strategy as resulting in “an orgy of spatialities”). This “brand new city erected in a bare field” awaits the arrival of its brand new inhabitants, to whom – the project promises – it will restore a lost past (returning to them the “plazas, courtyards, stepped stress and mountain paths” of the historical city), whilst at the same time promising them The Future. This is an architecture that will make them, that will make all of us, happy.

AFTERIMAGES

And arrive those brand new people eventually did. On the four occasions that we visited the building in 2013, its stepped streets and mountain paths were, if not to the extent portrayed in the 2009 video, populated with various publics. To borrow Bob Somol’s term we might even describe these “new collectives” that “emerge from the design” as “fans.”⁹ Ignoring the newly erected “private property” signs various figures scaled the building, SLR cameras slung around their necks, tracing its contours with their feet and caressing its surfaces through their viewfinders. In 1991 Fredric Jameson posed that the postmodern appetite for architecture “must instead be



01:
Walking The 8 House, May 2013.



02:
Walking The 8 House, April 2013.

an appetite for something else”¹⁰ – namely, photography. Our experience of the building and a basic visual content analysis of photographs taken by visitors to the 8 House subsequently posted online appears to reinforce Jameson’s suspicion: the 8 House certainly incites an itchy shutter-finger in its visitors, transforming them first into admirers and eventually, perhaps, fans.

Of the 178 photographs of our analysis set – all the images published on the website *flickr* under a creative commons license and tagged “8 house” in English or “8-tallet” in Danish on 25 September 2013 – 12% show a view from the interior of the courtyard looking out of the V-shaped south-western corner of the building. This view – which captures a panoramic glimpse of the horizon line and surrounding fields framed by the strong diagonals of the building’s sunken corner – is more than twice as likely to be photographed as any other angle. The second most common view frames the same sunken corner, however from outside the block looking in; this accounts for 5% of the photographs. Notably, one of the photographs of the view from the interior, uploaded by the user “adamgreenfield” carries the caption: “Bjarke, you magnificent bastard, Works better than it has any right to.”¹¹ This view, taken from the position (marked with an “x” in plan) where the two loops of the bow-tie-shaped volume intersect – is clearly the money shot.

Like Lindhe’s photographs a number of images within the flickr set appear to have been altered in post-production with the application of filters to emphasise the glossy, metallic qualities of the architecture – its shimmer, its newness, its contrast to the flat green field in which it has landed. In other words as well as re-presenting the building these “afterimages,” independently produced/published, post-construction/post-occupancy photographs made by “fans,” faithfully reproduce and re-enact the *very project* of the 8 House.

INTERFERENCE

Whether seen through a camera viewfinder, on a computer screen, or even through the sensory apparatus of the retina, the 8 House is *always experienced as if a digital render*. As renders attempt to approach photographs, photographs here attempt to approach renders; even the materiality of the building as experienced in the flesh seems to refer back to the images that marked its own

pre-construction marketing campaign. In this sense the 8 House proves remarkably consistent; it always “shimmers.” While this shimmer of interference, we would argue, evidences the hold that the project of the 8 House has over how the building is experienced (the hold that the project has over the afterimage) this reproduced shimmer can also be interpreted as symbolising the hold that “the ideal” has over “the real.”

In his *Architecture* series, Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto sought to identify the qualities of what he refers to as a “superlative” architecture.¹² By setting the focal length of his camera to “twice-infinity” the iconic buildings that Sugimoto photographs become blurred, soft-edged, but still recognisable. Sugimoto claims that only architecture that survives this “erosion-test” and remains recognisable in this format may be considered “superlative.” The short video accompanying this essay shows an experiment that takes Sugimoto’s erosion test and sets it in reverse. By coding the 178 photographs according to viewpoint, superimposing and aligning all similarly coded images (moving and scaling but not warping them), tracing their contours, and finally reducing their opacity, a blurred (but perhaps not blurred enough) figure emerges: the 8 House is still clearly distinguishable in the “distributed” lens of a flickr array. In this simple operation the clarity of the superimposed images of the building, which results from the homogeneity of the photos produced by multiple independent photographers, highlights the control exerted over the fan-photographer by the project (both building and media campaign) to reproduce the same, consistent series of ideal images. Rather than seeking to discern and foreground the ideal building from the background mess of the blurred “real” (as in Sugimoto’s work), these images reveal the persistent sharpness of the ideal image, reproduced with ease by its fans, and traced by us for emphasis. Here, we pose, the hold of the ideal over the real becomes clearly apparent.

The palpable distanciation advanced by BIG’s 8 House – the sense that one is always confronted with a render rather than a physical, material piece of architecture – can perhaps be read as the product of a carefully managed oscillation between *the real* and *the ideal*, whereby the real and the ideal continually change places. Like the contamination of a water table, the ideal (a thought figure that aligns with Ernst Bloch’s concept of the realm of the Not-Yet and the utopian impulse, but which here can also be used to stand for the project of the 8 House)¹³ inevitably

leaks into the real, pre-determining it and revising it after the fact. In this oscillation (we could say imposition), the 8 House's distributed form encapsulates "architecture's image problem" – a problem that Reinhold Martin locates in the reciprocity of the relationship between the ideal and the real – in the realisation that, under late capitalism, "images were real and not mere ideological decoration applied to utilitarian sheds."¹⁴

In this capacity, the 8 House can also be seen to act as an "image-machine," a concept used by Martin to describe the way in which "media such as architecture, as well as the signs and images circulated through them, become in effect technologies of organisation, image-machines in which structure and ornament, form and function, base and superstructure, time and space continually change places in a hall of mirrors."¹⁵ If we agree with Martin's definition (which we do) and place this capacity at the heart of the 8 House's architectural project, the core question, a question we will endeavour to respond to below, therefore becomes: beyond itself, what does the architectural image-machine of the 8 House produce?

'I TRY TO GIVE YOU WHAT YOU LIKE.'

When the ideal collapses into the real, the two become, to all intents and purposes, indistinguishable; when the ideal and the real are indistinguishable we should, by all definitions, be happy.

In her 2010 book *The Promise of Happiness*, cultural theorist Sara Ahmed describes a world where happiness, as a function of "positive thinking," has become both a means and an end. As Ahmed puts it: "Happiness becomes... a way of maximising your potential of getting what you want as well as being what you want to get."¹⁶ It is here that the distinction between the ideal and the real starts to blur significantly, and a realignment of the criteria for happiness becomes not only feasible but also desirable. According to Ahmed, the promotion of happiness is now so prevalent that it is appropriate to speak of a "happiness turn" in science as well as politics. A significant feature of this turn lies in the way that happiness has been established as the ultimate performance indicator for governance, even if it is quantified through rather unscientific means (who really believes that the Danish people are the Earth's happiest?).¹⁷ It is this realignment of objectives rather than

the transformation of reality that produces what Ahmed, following Engels, identifies as "false consciousness." Happiness breeds happiness, and thus if happiness is synonymous with success, it becomes both normative and a duty for all – normative in the sense that the majority model of happiness is imposed by society (the majority defines what makes an individual happy), and a duty as being unhappy becomes immoral.

By being 'happy', we make a perceived ideal visible in everyday life.

Written in 2002, Bob Somol and Sarah Whiting's polemic essay *The Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism* sets out an agenda that is based on affective resonances, an architecture that emerges from the interplay between diverse "inputs." "Rather," they pose, "than isolating a singular autonomy, the Doppler focuses upon the effects and exchanges of architecture's inherent multiplicities: material, program, writing, atmosphere, form, technologies, economics, etc."¹⁸ Instead of hotly telling us about its own processes of production, the "cool" architecture proposed by the duo resonates synthetically, producing affects and effects that ripple outwards, across multiple registers. Under the aegis of this "cool" architecture, all inputs effectively become part of the oscillation producing this resonance, and by extension these inputs are implicated in the building's own resulting performative effects and affects. This proposal for a "cool" architecture, emanating from the first decade of the current century, is in fact akin to what we have termed "distributed form," an architecture that disseminates its project through the reproduction of its own image. In a sense, though, just as all architecture has a "project," all architecture produces affects and effects (outputs) in relation to the socio-material world it occupies. All architecture produces ripples; all architecture, to some extent, "shimmers" as the afterimage of a project. The critical question therefore lies in the content, in the implications of the project itself: of the value of happiness as a project.

Of the 'layercake' diagram which first debuted in BIG's 2009 video for the 8 House, an image that, we argue, undergirds all of the metallic surfaces of the building, Bjarke Ingels notes: "each function has found its optimal niche in relation to needs and wishes – as an architectonic symbiosis."¹⁹ The offices, which "are not too crazy about sunlight," have had their demand for north-facing

windows met; the courtyard has been allowed to “bathe in the afternoon sun.” Just as each of the functions accommodated by the expansive building, we argue that the desires of the subjects of the 8 House (its visitors and occupants, its fans) are first produced, and then subsequently sated by this architecture, an architecture that they *choose* to inhabit. In order to become happy with and through the architecture of the 8 House – to quote the sultry pop song in the background of BIG’s video, in order for the building to “give us what we want” – we must therefore accept the definition of “happy” delimited by an ideal (an ideal defined by the project). We must want what the project wants us to like. Only after a (Yes Boss!) moment of acquiescence can we live in this best possible of all worlds. In this, we all – residents, visitors and critics (all fans now) – become what Koolhaas long ago referred to as the “voluntary prisoners of architecture.”

A PROJECTIVE CRITIQUE

But what happens if we resist “liking what we get,” thus short-circuiting the possibility of “getting what we like”? What, in other words, is the status of critique when critique itself can be counted as a form of “afterimage,” thus equal to post-occupancy fan photography, spun by a highly calibrated image-machine into yet another fine thread of “cred”? It is important that we address the status of this essay in relation to that which it attempts to describe and criticize.

It is easy to speculate upon the acquiescence and fidelity demanded by the projects of distributed forms like the 8 House from a distance; these qualities can be readily identified and are even possible to describe through visual analysis, representation and theorisation – they can be given a name (architecture’s “Yes Boss’ capacity,” for instance). Objective distance, however, is an illusion and this pretence must, we pose, like Donna Haraway’s “God trick,” be forgotten.²⁰ In the present attempt to describe and define, to catalogue and critique, the persuasive sprawl of a seemingly new ‘turn’ in architecture’s relation to its image, we were equally seduced by the architecture of affect curated by the 8 House. We acquiesced. We were persuaded. We have tried to write these affective turns, the oscillation between adoring and detesting that building in that field, into this essay. Beyond that documentation though, buildings like the 8 House clearly demand new modes of criticism, new ways of constructing

and posing critique. By mining our unstable trajectory through this study, a series of possible ways forward can be identified, which we feel may have the potential to side-step, in part, the absorptive capacities of distributed form, thereby working as an alternative to the after-image. We term this mode of practice “projective critique.”

PROJECTIVE CRITIQUE, MOVE 1: LOCATE THE PROJECT WITHIN THE REAL.

This first move in such a practice lies latent in architectural theorist Reinhold Martin’s proposal for “derealising the real,” set out in *Utopia’s Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again*. Ernst Bloch squarely locates the ideal as hidden within the real; the ideal continually seeps from our unconscious, or the Not-Yet-Conscious, into the material world.²¹ Accordingly, the real invariably, to some extent, refers to the ideal. As such, in addressing practices oriented toward producing “real-images-approaching-the-ideal” – the subject of the visual content analysis above – we are reminded that the ideal that these images attempt to approach is *itself a real image that can be located in the real*. In other words, the ideal (here, the architectural project) also resides in the real – in artefacts and media fragments, in images and words, that still resonate and that may in themselves offer up an object for criticism. As such, following Martin, we might propose a way forward that stages a confrontation with the “images of the 8 House as an image,” a confrontation with the project located within the realm of the real.²²

PROJECTIVE CRITIQUE, MOVE 2: INHABIT THE PROJECT, FEEL ITS EDGES.

The suggestion that we do indeed live in “the best of all worlds” is an alluring prospect, materialised in the real through a seductive dream: you’re already here, you have a perfect view, there’s no need to travel any further. Shaking off the palpable, flickering shimmer, the hold that the ideal has over the real (“it looks like a render!” we exclaim, one after the next), the architecture of the 8 House suggests to the resident, the visitor and the critic alike that resistance to its ideal (resistance to it *as the ideal*) is perhaps not impossible so much as deeply *undesirable*. This is because, much like Venturi’s Main Street, the 8 House is, really, “almost alright.”²³ Arguments against happiness would, as Sarah Ahmed points out, on the surface

be perceived as absurd – who could possibly oppose happiness?²⁴ However, in order to be able to critique distributed form we must be able to make the double move of both inhabiting the project and the material reality of the architecture, and subsequently (with sympathy, and hopefully some generosity) questioning our own and collective responses. In the case of the 8 House this might require that happiness be felt and inhabited, but also critically questioned, even if this risks seeming absurd. Projective critique is not, in this sense, a “disinterested” practice; it actively encourages the establishment of vested interests.

PROJECTIVE CRITIQUE, MOVE 3: BLUR.

As Tahl Kaminer points out in his historical excavation of the real in architecture, much like its corollary “everyday life,” the “real” represents a condition and matrix of practices inseparable from historical processes and thus from the logics of late capitalist production itself.²⁵ The real is, we argue, thus also endowed with the latent possibility of resistance to those logics. It follows that within the “real,” which the ideal of the 8 House so skilfully infiltrates, lies the possibility of deviant afterimages, images that challenge the ideal of that project. To return to Sugimoto’s architectural photography the search for such afterimages might be thought of as a search for a focal length of *negative double-infinity*. At what point, we might ask ourselves, can we find the blurred mess of the real lurking within the high-resolution ideal? The point of the blur, here, is to transform the fans’ perspective in order to be able to differentiate between each fan’s photograph (their unique qualities; their “mess”) and between the project and its built material form.

In the case of the 8 House one moment of “blur,” of the real, might be located in the background – in that impossibly empty field. The project of the 8 House is in fact heavily reliant on that emptiness: one way to blur the 8 House would be to insist on the foregrounding capacities of the field. As Keller Easterling notes:

In love with the *tabula rasa*, architects are the perfect moderns, the perfect believers in the purification and obsolescence of successively immanent ideas. Whether the deletion of ruthless moderns or the ‘healing’ and ‘stitching’ of their descendants who profess to be more gentle, the *tabula rasa* is a seizure or conquest usually accompanying utopia.²⁶

The empty field purportedly situates the project outside time, outside change, outside the world, reaffirming the illusion of an architectural essentialism. As a point of entry for a projective critique, the field surrounding the 8 House represents a territory that might be considered in terms of its own image-generating capacities, the alternate projects that it accommodates – both the hidden projects of future expansion and the surface stories of pastoral use.

A FINAL RECALIBRATION: THE PROJECT OF HOPE

Beyond not “getting” what we “like,” though, what if other criteria – like getting what we “need” – were instead to be fed into the finely tuned machinery of tomorrow’s architectural image-machines? Taking the seductive, sprawling form of BIG’s 8 House in Copenhagen as archetypal of a mode of contemporary architectural production which we have termed “distributed form,” this essay has attempted to get to grips with the “project” of the 8 House. Here, we conclude by outlining an alternate project – a critical methodology of hope, rather than happiness – which we suggest might be fed into the gleaming mechanics of a future distributed form.

We have, in our analysis of the 8 House, posed that when the ideal and the real are identical, we should by all definitions be happy. Conversely, however, it may also be argued that when there is a gap between the real and the ideal, a gap that is not perceived as insurmountable, there is hope. Of course, such a juxtaposition of happiness and hope is artificial – one could indeed argue that the two are intertwined – however the two can be set in a specific oppositional relationship. If “hope” denotes a belief in the prospect of transformation then hope is incompatible with a condition of sated desire (the “Yes Boss” happiness of the 8 House). Hope has recently, in part through Shepard Fairey’s election poster for President Barack Obama’s 2008 election campaign, come to be associated with positive transformation. As in Obama’s campaign strategy it no longer matters that the specific aspiration (hope for what?) is never specified; purposive hoping rather than purposeful aspiration perhaps represents a significant characteristic of our present “real” state: hope without end. Happiness, in contrast, is not only non-transformative but actively opposes transformation, as change might well result in the loss of that happiness. In short, then, we might say that when there is no gap

between the ideal and the real, fear of change becomes a principal drive; happiness reigns and the ideal is reduced to the status quo.

In point of contrast we might compare the affective happiness imposed by the project of the 8 House to the collective happiness of the architecture of post-war Europe as described by Cor Wagenaar in his introduction to *Happy: Cities and Public Happiness in Post-War Europe*.²⁷ Wagenaar's interrogation of the rebuilding of cities reveals an architecture of affect aimed at restoring faith in the collective future of war-torn Europe, using a similar affective register to build up the image of a better tomorrow. The fundamental difference here is this: if the collective project of that era was the promise of a better tomorrow, that is, hope and a belief in the prospect of a positive future, the happiness produced by the 8 House is one where we are already there, where the hope is that tomorrow is a spitting image of today. It is, in other words, a counter-transformative hope.

By way of a conclusion, and in a critical tone, we might thus level one final question at the 8 House, its project and its architect: What would this image-machine look like, if it were recalibrated toward the notion of hope, rather than happiness?

Bjarke, you magnificent bastard, could you do that? Could anybody?

NOTES

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FIGURES

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