

Title: Inspiring Elephants. Zoo is architecture...

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“The elephants of the London Zoo must be very inspiring creatures.”

Modern architecture has been a programmatic architecture. It put forward principles first and found its persuasiveness in rational, not to say, rationalist considerations. In fact, these were nothing more than the expressions of a few great personalities who were able to provide it the constancy behind which to safeguard. But once proposed as principle, such considerations also have a tendency to degenerate into an absolute and simplistic set of rules. As with all doctrinal systems, from modern architecture one was also handed the hidden predominance of a few superiors, whose law was imposed by an anonymous army of “appropriators” through easy to manipulate requirements. That time is now past. Today we experience only a few late offshoots of it.

The architecture of today, the living architecture, is no longer dominated by a few greats who can be counted on the fingers of one hand. It is made up of a relatively large number of both younger and older people with modest but distinctly free and engaging personalities. The question of who is the greatest among them is no longer posed. All of them contribute in their own way, in order to expand the architecture of the sixties into an extraordinarily fascinating panorama. Beyond any doctrine or preconceived program, they are inspired by the concrete assignment. Though that is only an elephant cage.

The cage for elephants I’m thinking of is in the zoo in Regent’s Park, London. It was built by the estimable British architecture firm of Sir Hugh Casson and Partners. “Cage” is barely an appropriate word for this architecture. And this very linguistic unsuitability of the traditional word is an important indication of the originality with which the architects set about realizing their commission. It was not an easy task: build a home for animals in captivity (that must eliminate the impression of imprisonment as much as possible). And what animals these were! Elephants and rhinos, two species that are quite removed from the ordinary human scale, having retained something of prehistoric proportions.

For a fundamentally modern architect—I use the word “modern” here in its historical sense—it would in itself already be problematic to build for animals in captivity. This is not compatible with his rigorously humanitarian position. He should, if he possessed the resolution and courage, have strived to send the elephants back into the wild. The architect of now—I already mentioned that he is not as principled—no longer feels called upon to be a social reformer. He stands in the midst of everyday life and everyday people, and is primarily inspired by these things. For example, he can also observe elephants (in captivity) with a certain degree of curiosity, and his gratification will derive from the enclosure in which they reside, as well as from how people experience their visit.

Now, the latter is not so simple. Even if one does not fundamentally oppose animals being kept in captivity, the fact remains that these animals find themselves in an unnatural situation and that the relationship with those who come there obviously need not be mentioned. I have already spoken of the difference in scale. We must also remember that a safe distance between humans and animals—for the mutual benefit of one another—must be preserved out of necessity. And finally, the most decisive emphasis for the architecture: in what proportion the visitor to the zoo stands relative to the animal observed. The relationship between man and animal in the jungle is clear. It remains clear

even in the case of the maharaja, who rides around on an elephant's back. It remains in the circus as well, where humans and animals fraternally contribute to the show. In a zoo that relationship suddenly becomes much more complex. The elephant in the zoo is not from the circus, and the audience is also not the same.

These few evidences may suffice to grasp the mindset of the contemporary architect, which is no longer oriented a priori on a formal system that hands him immediate solutions for every case, but by the concrete human approach to a phenomenon—it also has something in common with phenomenology—the form gives rise to the new in each case. This will of course also be a personal form. Surely one can give more than a single formal response to phenomenological questions. Mies van der Rohe, for example, would also be able to build a fine elephant cage. It is not particularly about the final shape in these observations, but rather the attitude of the architect with respect to his commission.

Now that I have let slip anyway the name of Mies van der Rohe, I would like to expand upon this rather unexpected association of Mies with an elephant cage. After all, it very clearly points out the danger to which architecture such as this, that which is under discussion, is exposed. Let us introduce a Miesian elephant cage. I will not describe it here, yet one thing is beyond doubt: it would allow the elephant to fully be an elephant. It would not enter into competition with the animal, and even beyond that, it would perhaps make the enclosure a measure higher than normal, but the scale would not be adapted. That is to say, in other words, that the architecture of Mies van der Rohe has already solved the problems of the commission in advance, and that simply by fundamentally ignoring them.

Mies van der Rohe is not aware of the problems that Casson's architecture surmises. Architecture is, for him (in its most extreme refinement), a screen upon which life can be projected that is as neutral as possible. Sir Casson and his many associates all over the world, however, want to make a very specific individualized environment through architecture. An elephant cage in a zoo in London has nothing in common with a flat in Kensington. And this applies not only to the level of the program, but also to that of the form. Individuality must be presented externally in an impressive, easily legible representation. Whether such individualization will not ultimately lead to a greater uniformity and anonymity is the primary question.

In this particular instance we can put forward several objections. I will summarize only a few, along with the answer that can in turn be given:

1. The adaptation to scale of the architecture for the most part takes away from the imposing nature of the animals living within it. By contrast, one could suggest that the building itself makes this very impressiveness manifest for the visitor.
2. Apart from the increase in scale, whereby the proportions of the animals are reduced, the visitor's attention is in part turned away from the animals and transferred to the architecture itself. But this implies that a stronger emphasis is also placed on the exceptional nature of these species through the compelling architecture.
3. More pointed is the criticism against the theatricality of the indoor cages, which is particularly accentuated by the skylight that contrasts so sharply with the perpetually muted walking space for visitors. The architect might here argue that such lighting from above was part of the commission. Moreover, we must recognize that the theatrical aspect with which we have issue nonetheless always retains great dignity, and is partly inherent in the unnatural situation that a zoo in itself entails.
4. A criticism for which I find no response is the equalization that the service areas—the accommodations for human beings—undergo in this architecture with respect to the animal

enclosures. One expects, from the very spirit of the architecture, a clearer differentiation somewhere.

Thus far, the criticism of this magnificent building. The formulation of criticism is more important than pointing out qualities. After all, these speak for themselves. From the overall silhouette in Regent's Park to the last detail of the finish, the same rich fantasy prevails, the same mastery of technical means, a total homogeneity of vision. As J.M. Richards wrote in his critique of this building, here the functional and the fantastic are no longer set apart. The fantastic is once again an element of the everyday. It blossoms suddenly, a perhaps surprising yet natural element.

The design, moreover, even if never entirely dictated by the program, remains consistently functional within its pointed individuality. Nowhere it is gratuitous. For instance, the silhouette gets its strange shape through the elaboration of the skylights. The ventilation shafts are incorporated in a natural way as light openings, geometric centers of the beautiful wooden roof structure and hubs around which the circulation is organized. All functional requirements are concealed with exceptional ingenuity as interesting architectural elements. The ability to do so has its deepest rationale in the readiness to take hold of the commission outside of every presupposed formal system. Precisely therein lies the essential freedom that this architecture breathes. Not a freedom to follow random personal urges, but an absolute and discerning faith to realize the reality of life. But such faith finds its boundedness precisely in the insistence with which it tackles it, whereby an elephant cage becomes something of a temple. We are willing to make a compromise, however, for a building with such a rich and intrinsic existence. The elephants of the London Zoo must be very inspiring creatures.