THE FOUNDATIONS OF ALL POSSIBLE BUILDINGS: THREE HOUSES FOR A SISTER

Christophe Van Gerrewey

"Even today the social feelings arise in the individual as a superstructure founded upon impulses of jealousy and rivalry against his brothers and sisters. Since the enmity cannot be gratified there develops an identification with the former rival."
Sigmund Freud

"I am not interested in erecting a building, but in perspicuously presenting to myself the foundations of all possible buildings."
Ludwig Wittgenstein

The fateful episode in his life is probably as well known as some of his philosophic aphorisms.[1] In April 1926, Ludwig Wittgenstein holds a teaching position in a primary school in one of the poorer areas of Lower Austria. It has been five years since his most recent book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, was published, and he has chosen a solitary, modest and ascetic life, refusing every ounce of the fortune he inherited after his father's death in 1913. One of the things he wants to teach his pupils is how to draw Corinthian columns. The results are not to his liking; the students do not succeed at depicting columns the way Wittgenstein has imagined it. He becomes angry and seizes a student by his hair; all drawing stops. Wittgenstein boxes the ears of one of his pupils, a sickly boy, and forces him to stand in a corner of the classroom. Subsequently, the pupil faints. Hearing about the incident, the boy's father attempts in vain to have Wittgenstein arrested. Despite being cleared of misconduct,

1
See, for example, Paul Wijdeveld, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Architect* (Amsterdam: The Pepin Press, 2000), 35–37.

Wittgenstein resigns his position and returns to Vienna. He takes up a position as a gardener's assistant in a monastery, where he performs strenuous physical labour in the open air, trying to restore his inner peace. He considers becoming a monk, but he is advised that he will not find what he is seeking in monastic life.

Therefore, an offer from his elder sister Margaret Stonborough comes as a temporary relief. She has been thinking about building a house in Vienna. Contact has been made with the architect Paul Engelmann, and Ludwig is permitted to take part in the preliminary design of the house. Soon enough, however, he is the one in charge. His eldest sister Hermine describes the construction process in her memoirs: "Ludwig designed every window and door, every window-lock and radiator, with as much care and attention to detail as if they were precision instruments, and on a most elegant scale. And then, with his uncompromising energy, he ensured that everything was carried out with the same meticulous care."[2] The house comes together as a pact between Ludwig and his sister Margaret. When it comes to details and construction matters, Hermine writes, "Time and money were never allowed to matter, and I admire my sister for giving Ludwig a completely free hand in this respect. Two great people had come together as architect and client, making it possible to create something perfect of its kind. The same attention was devoted to the most inconspicuous detail as to the main features, for everything was important. Nothing was unimportant, except time and money."[3] Not surprisingly, the building process takes two full years. At night, Ludwig is exhausted; the only thing that somehow helps him wind down is a visit to the cinema, where he sees American motion pictures. In 1928 the construction is finished, and Margaret moves into the Palais Stonborough on Kundmanngasse in Vienna.

In later years, after the death of the architect-philosopher, the house will be referred to as the Wittgenstein House; for many architects it becomes the most radical example of a minimalist architecture in which the extreme premises of the modern movement are given expression: as an architect, Wittgenstein was as modern as Loos wanted to be in his writings but was unable to be in his own architecture. For many theoreticians, on the other hand, it becomes the total embodiment of "negative thought"; Massimo Cacciari wrote in *Oikos* that in the house "there are no means of escape or 'withdrawal' into the 'values' of the interior".[4] This mythic position in the history of architecture can be confronted with the *story* of the house – that is to say, with the ways

2
Ibid., 37.

3
Ibid.

4
Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 129.

in which the architect wrote and thought about the existential task of building a house for his own sister. Three small fragments of text, and in particular their combination, are therefore important: a postscript in a letter from Wittgenstein to his sister Margaret (the commissioner and inhabitant of the house); a letter from Wittgenstein to one of his other sisters, Hermine (the Wittgenstein family chronicler); and finally a brief remark in Wittgenstein's *Vermischte Bemerkungen*.

The first fragment is addressed to Margaret not long before Ludwig's death: "Yesterday I thought, I don't know why, of the Kundmanngasse & how delightfully you furnished it & how comforting. In these matters we understand each other."[5] The second letter, to Hermine, is written shortly after the completion of the house on Kundmanngasse, in November 1929. In it, Wittgenstein expresses his profound concern about the upcoming Christmas party: he fears that celebrating Christmas *exclusively* with the five Wittgenstein siblings (himself, Paul, Hermine, Margaret and Helene) will turn out to be a disaster, no matter in whose house the party takes place: "We are simply five rather rude and rough creatures for whom it is hard just to nestle close to each other. – But it all goes well if friends are present, for they bring to our company a happier atmosphere and all the other things that we lack."[6] The third fragment, from Wittgenstein's *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, reads as follows: "Within all great art there is a WILD animal: *tamed*. . . . All great art has man's primitive drives as its groundbass. . . . In the same sense: the house I built for Margaret is the product of a decidedly sensitive ear and *good* manners, an expression of great *understanding* (of a culture, etc.). But *primordial* life, wild life striving to erupt into the open – that is lacking. And so you could say it isn't *healthy* (Kierkegaard). (Hothouse plant.)"[7]

The important reference to Kierkegaard is clearly a reference to one of his later works, *The Sickness unto Death* (1849): the unhealthy life is the *despairing* life; despair is the real "sickness unto death". According to Kierkegaard, an individual is in despair if he is not able to align himself with the natural, primordial plan that is intrinsically interwoven with (his or her) human life. Although Kierkegaard's existentialism is surely of a Christian nature, in Wittgenstein's case (and in the case of the Wittgenstein House), it must be interpreted as radically modern: the *despairing*, unhealthy life is the life that cannot transcend its origins, that cannot autonomously decide what to do, what to ignore, what to say or where to go. So when Wittgenstein writes to Margaret that "in the matters of the house in Vienna" they truly understand each other,

5
Quoted in Wijdeveld, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 72.

6
Joachim Leilich, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Brieven* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2000), 113–115 (present author's translation).

7
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen / Culture and Value* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 37–38.

what he means precisely is that they have found a common goal, an occupation and a project to share – but not a *real* project, since there is no objective and healthy or rational reason for members of the same family to have something in common or "to do" something together, let alone the building of a house. The unique "project" of the family has such a totalitarian nature that it immediately absorbs and deafens the founding of all other projects. The second letter to Hermine explicitly underscores this: "When friends are present on Christmas Eve, it will be totally different: they will be happy with their gifts together with us, and we will have a real reason to be together." The combination of the two letters and the fragment from the *Vermischte Bemerkungen* indicates that it is nearly impossible for a modern architect-philosopher to build a house for his own sister.

Architecture can only be conscious, modern and *real* when it enables all subjects involved to become a subject. Architecture does not start from a fixed set of meanings, rules or principles. It provides a way to leave behind everything that one cannot bring into accordance with the conscious, autonomously written, designed and executed project that one has chosen to regard as one's own life – or as the best way, for no matter whom, to *live*, hence the famous dictum of Wittgenstein quoted earlier: "I am not interested in erecting a building, but in perspicuously presenting to myself the foundations of all possible buildings." Architecture has this generalizing and totalitarian characteristic: it is particular in its environment and its execution, but its scope is wide enough to attract, interest and involve every modern thinker. "Architecture", wrote Paul Valéry in his *Cahiers* of 1911, "has to visualize the qualities in which it deviates from one human being, but agrees with the workings of the mind – of the virtual movements." In the stories that Wittgenstein and his siblings constructed around the Wittgenstein House, a hindrance to the potentiality (of architecture) keeps appearing: *the house was built by the architect for his own sister.* This knowledge remains irreconcilable with the intrinsic mental project of modern architecture.

On the other hand – and this is another important characteristic – architecture as *matter* will always be stronger than theory, philosophy or psychology, which is to say that Wittgenstein can write and think about his difficulties with the Wittgenstein House (or I can reconstruct and conceptualize these difficulties) and neither he, nor his sister, nor her house will turn into plaster and crumble to pieces because of these problems. The life of matter and the life of the body go on.

The famous dictum of Le Corbusier (and of the modern movement in general) – "La vie sera toujours la plus forte" – has signed the contract between architecture and life: together they are always stronger than despair; they overcome the deadlock that is eventually presented by every mental construction. Neither life nor architecture can show the extremities of thought.

That is why, in order to see the extreme consequences or the fantastic results of the meanings and intricate relations and realisations that constitute modern life, next to architecture there is *literature.* Literature shows what would have happened if thoughts and stories could have had their way with life and architecture; only in literature can life and architecture truly become *text* – extreme, fantastic and entirely consequential. Parallel to the house in Vienna that was built and (partly) designed by Wittgenstein, there is the novel *Korrektur,* which the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard wrote in 1975.[8] *Korrektur* is the story of Roithamer told in two chapters by a nameless narrator. In the first chapter, entitled "Hoeller's Garret", the narrator visits an attic in which Roithamer spent the last months of his life before committing suicide. In this garret, Roithamer designed the Cone, a house for his sister in the very centre of the Kobernausser forest, and wrote the bulky manuscript *About Altensam and everything connected with Altensam, with special attention to the Cone.* Altensam was the estate where Roithamer spent his youth together with his beloved sister. Unfortunately, Roithamer's sister, as the narrator writes, was not happy after she moved into the Cone: "Roithamer's sister had been doomed, that splendid creature, who simply couldn't bear the fact of the Cone, that her brother had made his idea come true, to build the Cone for her, meaning *for her alone and particularly in the middle of the Kobernausser forest,* Roithamer himself had fully realized, when he came back to England after the Cone was finished and presented to his sister, that the perfected Cone could not actually be the greatest, in fact the supreme happiness for her, as he had believed, could have believed, but that it actually meant her death, because there can be no doubt whatsoever that Roithamer's sister was destroyed by the creation of the perfect Cone; from the moment the Cone was finished, when it was presented to her, she was suddenly a different person."

The narrator makes no doubt about it: Roithamer knew what was coming. He knew that living in the Cone would lead to his sister's death – to her self-chosen death, her suicide: "Roithamer so deeply knew his sister, and never ceased from deeply understanding her *anew,* that it

8
Thomas Bernhard, *Korrektur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975). The English translation quoted from in this essay is *Correction*, tr. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

was unimaginable that he should not have foreseen the effect upon her of his finishing the Cone and presenting the Cone to her. A man of such equally far-ranging and deep vision should not have overlooked this, that perfecting and presenting the Cone to his sister must result in her death." And indeed, as the narrator, in the second part of *Korrektur*, entitled "Sifting and Sorting", examines and quotes extensively from the manuscript of Roithamer, it becomes clear that Roithamer had known exactly what would happen, and succeeded in following his sister in death by committing suicide himself.

The life of Roithamer, in all kinds of details, is clearly based on the life of Wittgenstein – with one important difference: the building of the house for his sister is a very important event in both the lives of Roithamer and Wittgenstein, but for Roithamer, this very meaningful act of construction becomes entirely consequential, for it leads to his sister's suicide and to his own. "We always went too far", writes Roithamer in his manuscript, "so we were always pushing toward the extreme limit. But we never thrust ourselves beyond it. . . . We can exist at the highest degree of intensity as long as we live."

This "highest degree of intensity", the "push" towards the extreme limit, is only accessible to Roithamer in the textual domain of fiction, while for Wittgenstein, in the reality of life and architecture, it is not. What both architect-philosophers have in common, however, is their deeply rooted knowledge that the construction of a house for a sister is an exemplary existential (or rather non-existential) act precisely because it proves impossible to use it as a foundation for their lives. It is possible to go even further: the futility of every human existence which becomes apparent under the scrutinizing gaze of a clear, conscious and critical mind can only lead to the end of that existence. Under the veil of what seemed to be a natural act of brotherly and innocent love, Roithamer has prepared both his sister's suicide *and* his own by building a house that was ultimately an act of existential despair, incestuous violence and far-reaching identification. Wittgenstein, too, could only enact his particular foray into the realm of architecture by building a house for his own sister, because the unexplainable and absurd blood bond that lies at the core of it is the inexplicable, "unthinkable" and inexpressible core of human existence itself.

These two lives and two houses are, on the one hand, like the real and visible side of the moon as seen from the earth, and on the other, like the dark side of the moon, which can only exist in thought and imagination. Together, they show that modern domestic architecture – just

like every other project or occupation – remains irreconcilable with unconscious mechanisms that are just "there" without being "made". The house that the Japanese architect Toyo Ito built for his sister can be added as a postscript to this dual story. The design of the White U started in 1975 for Ito's elder sister. At that time she was in her late thirties, and she and her daughters, who were both still of primary school age, lost her husband and their father, who had struggled with illness for many years. Toyo Ito wrote about the construction in his text "About the Death of Domestic Dwellings": "It is said that a house is the portrait of the family. This house was associated with a family which had just been confronted with death and withdrew from the world outside behind a concrete wall. The roof, which was inclined towards the courtyard, the inner garden which was laid out only with black soil, constituted the image of an introverted family."[9] After twenty years, Ito's sister knew that she could no longer go on living inside of this house. It was designed under and for particular circumstances; it was a gift for a grieving family, for a mother and her two daughters in despair, but it was, just as in the cases of Roithamer and Wittgenstein, a house built by an architect for his own sister. A house that is imagined and designed for someone who is so near to the origin and the start of the architect's own life – but for a life that is not *exactly* the same as that of the architect, as it is both that of another and that of a very similar person – can simply not serve as the foundation of an entire life. In 1998 the White U was demolished. It was inconceivable that anyone else would even consider inhabiting it. "There is always emptiness at the outset of architecture", wrote Ito. It is precisely this complete initial emptiness that is lacking in these three stories about a house for a sister.

9
Toyo Ito, "About the Death of Domestic Dwellings", in id., *Blurring Architecture* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1999), 80.