

Lecture, as read in Witte de With, Rotterdam, Saturday April 17, 2004

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## **Home call. A case in architectural storytelling.**

### **Reflections on the work of Lieven De Boeck**

Upon entering the exhibition “Making things public” of Lieven De Boeck, one is confronted with a quite austere presentation. I happened to visit the *Content* exhibition of Koolhaas’ OMA-AMO a few hours ago, and I must say that there’s probably no greater distinction possible. In contrast to the visual terror and documentary perplexity that one undergoes in the Koolhaas’ exhibition, De Boeck’s presentation is rather sober and ascetic. White is the color that dominates. We don’t get sensational graphics, but a collection of rather integer objects, such as a restrained white model of a storage structure, an enigmatic white flag and 7 glass-boxes with sober certificates. At first sight you wouldn’t expect it to be the work of an architect.

In comparison to the work of his colleagues that recently more often decorate the walls of art institutions – which Rem Koolhaas literally did in his contribution to the Documenta X in 1997, by gluing the wall full of color Xeroxes, presenting his Pearl River Delta Project – the work of Lieven De Boeck initially looks rather modest and unpretentious. It doesn’t make big statements on ‘the future of the city’, be it European, Asian or African.

We don’t get flashy diagrams, nor elaborate schematics, nor a astounding proliferation of images, nor big slogans which should capture his attitude towards reality, nor thrilling Photoshop-wizards imagery, nor impressive three-dimensional computer animations. It’s a public joke that when architects present their work and ideas – and whoever visited an Architecture Biennial knows what I am talking about – they always loose themselves in visual bigotry and multitude. An Architecture Biennial unquestionably contains a hundred times more images than an art Biennial, while the latter may already be causing nausea. Architects just worship images, an adoration that our digital era has only increased. Now that we all have digital cameras, the amount of images in architectural discourse has nothing but multiplied.

That also explains why books on contemporary architecture have grown incredibly fat these years. Again Koolhaas was the first to head for overweight. Since his collaboration with Bruce Mau on the massive *S,M,L,XL*, architects prefer to publish obese books: from the chubby *Farmax* of MVRDV, the plump *Zone* of Van Berkel & Bos, the colossal *Natural History* of Herzog & De Meuron, to the oversized *At Work* of Neutelings-Riedijk Architects. Hal Foster rightly claims in his book *Design and Crime* that “these are not coffee table books, they are coffee tables.”<sup>1</sup>

Lieven De Boeck’s recent book *housing*, however, doesn’t exactly fit within this trend. It’s almost a dwarf.<sup>2</sup> It’s not fat at all, neither glossy, nor does it contain an exhaustive amount of images, diagrams or schemes; it’s rather thin and small, fairly Spartan in its lay-out, and endowed with a very precise amount of drawings, essays – or stories to be precise – and pictures or images. But the term picture doesn’t really fit either to describe the visual part of the book: in the hey-day of the digital camera, Lieven De Boeck has

the courage, simply dares to publish a book with not one digital picture. I think this almost amounts to arrogance. And, probably one of the most important visual qualities of the book, you can read it!

After several years of visual dread in architectural magazines such as *Archis*, and more recently *Domus* and in Koolhaas most recent discursive product, this book you can at least *read*. You don't need to decipher it, look through all kind of shrieking visuals and willfully dirty lay-out, before you can start exploring the 'content' of it.

So, would it be likely to argue that Lieven De Boeck isn't as ambitious as many of his angry contemporaries? Or just the opposite? Does his willful abstinence from architectural rhetoric serve to distinguish him? But if so, how and where can we then situate his work? How would we define his 'position' in the contemporary architectural debate?

The easiest way to classify it would be to call it 'art'. Now that De Boeck presents his work within the framework of an art institution, it seems very obvious to say that he has left architecture for a liberated practice in the artistic domain. But then De Boeck would undergo the same fate as his former employer and mentor Luc Deleu. Deleu, unquestionably one of the most important Belgian architects, is often – I would say – *disqualified* as an artist, as he regularly presents his work in art institutions. For many it seems to be impossible to keep considering someone as an 'architect', when he presents his work in an exhibition space, unless one presents realized or 'realistic' projects, projects that are meant to be built. Because of the hypothetical and conceptual nature of Deleu's, and also De Boeck's projects, it seems easier to denounce, almost condemn them as 'art'. In comparison to the straight-forward and pragmatic nature of 'real' architecture, projects such as those of Lieven De Boeck are regarded as dreamy, unrealistic, intangible or abstract. A qualification that is even easier to apply on De Boeck's work, as it often starts from his personal environment, his experiences and feelings. But, by classifying De Boeck's work as 'art', one is confronted with another problem. Because, how does it then relate to the fact that ever more contemporary artists are making 'architecture' and practicing 'urbanism'.

On contemporary art exhibitions, one meets an ever growing amount of 'architectural' and urbanistic 'projects', ranging from the models of canopy's and garages of Rita McBride, to the polyester caravans, modular units and furniture of Joep Van Lieshout, the dwelling vehicles of Andrea Zittel, the interior designs of Jorge Pardo, the 'baraques' of Marjeta Potrc, de skeletons of building materials of Pedro Cabrita Reis to the wooden *Denkmäler* of Jan De Cock. Urbanistic designs, projects or so-called 'proposals' are to be found in the mappings of Stalker, the participatory city and neighborhood projects of Jeanne Van Heeswijk, or the artists-architects of Schie 2.0. Architecture seems to be extremely popular with artists, both as *medium* and as *subject*. Artists develop work that doesn't only tell something about architecture, but often involves actual 'building' – albeit in the most diverse ways. Architecture is considered as a metaphor for the position of artistic intervention in the world. For Portuguese artist Pedro Cabrita Reis, "the practice of architecture is the only possible way to make the world comprehensible".<sup>3</sup> This statement of Reis however signals a major paradigm shift.

Whereas architecture in the 1960s and 1970s was considered as the discipline and practice that represented and enforced the system – its institutions and the social order – it has come to occupy a completely different ideological position and to receive a totally different interpretation. Nowadays, architecture is no longer considered as an instance to fight against, to pierce, to cut, to break down or to tear apart, but something artists want to embrace, to appropriate, and even to enjoy! In the present era of globalisation, architecture is no longer something you resist; it has become the most exquisite *medium de resistance* or tool for struggle. Because of its inherent materiality, architecture is invoked to resist the total virtualisation, disjunction, estrangement, deracination of contemporary life.

The broad spectrum of architectural objects and settings – interiors, shelters, living units, survival modules, even total villages – that we encounter on contemporary art exhibitions, seem to share the ambition to make ‘a place of their own’, to define a proper territory, even to (re)create or recover our – lost – identity. Shortly said, they all try – in one way or the other – to substitute the home that modernity has deprived us of. In their shared interest in the installment of such things as ‘home’ or ‘community’, they express the seemingly irresolvable yearning for domesticity in our present age of excessive mobility.

With modernity, the concept of home – and attached values such as tradition, identity, history, etc... – has lost its safety. The question of home in modernity is released, and maybe irresolvable. Modernity promises a sense of the present which is open, encourages mobility over stability, promotes difference as the stimulus for novelty, and prefers the dynamism of change. Modernity involves a revolution against the traditional notions of being and belonging, and therefore regards the significance of place always as secondary. It’s not important where you are, but where you’re heading at. However, while modernity swept away the remnants of tradition, it nevertheless displayed a degree of “dialectical hesitancy” when it came up against the home.<sup>4</sup> Modern man wanted to leave home for good, but where to go afterwards? There had to be a new mode of ‘living’ – of being and belonging – invented. Identity was no longer considered to be bound to a specific past or a particular place – the fact that you’re coming from ‘somewhere’, that you have ‘roots’. How can you have a destiny if you don’t have an origin, a beginning or a starting point? Therefore the self-made man of modernity needs a new home after all. But what it should be like? The concept of home is nested in traditions – spatial and temporal – and therefore incompatible with modernity. Tradition is something the modern subject has freed himself or herself of. Therefore the modern home can be read as the greatest oxymoron of our age. Although ‘leaving home’ is nowadays considered as the first sign of independence, were as anxious to get our ‘proper place’, or, in other words, to feel ‘at home’ where we install ourselves, to have the feeling that we ‘belong’ somewhere. There’s nothing as painful as to have the feeling that you don’t belong somewhere, whether you are a new pupil in a class or a political refugee in a foreign country.

Thus, how are we to read and interpret this trend what we could call ‘the anxiety over the status of the home’, the yearning to ‘be and belong’ somewhere, as expressed in the most diverse ways in contemporary art? Is it a nostalgic retreat to a familiar past or a defensive reaction to the brutalities of the

present? Now that modernity has reached a global scale and our home is replaced by an extensive network of places and spaces in which we operate, reside and take on multiple identities?

I want to argue that the work of Lieven De Boeck forces us to think about this very important question – the question of being and belonging – by approaching it from an architectural point of view, or, to be more precise, from the position of an architect. The work of Lieven De Boeck operates on both extremes of the paradigm shift within contemporary art that I just described, but it does so from the particular vantage point of the architect. I will argue that this paradigm shift from architecture as a *target* towards architecture as a *companion* is explored and elaborated within the work of Lieven De Boeck, not as an artist, but deliberately and explicitly from the position of the architect. He stays true to his professional training and, as is also the case with Luc Deleu, he never ceases to be, to act and to work as an *architect*. Architecture is not only his *subject* and *medium*, but above all the *discipline* he works, or should I say *doomed* to work in. His ‘practice’ is architectural by definition, and therefore forces us to look at and most of all *read* his projects as *architecture*. They tell us – both literally and metaphorically – something about how to make up one’s home. If home is where your heart is, than Lieven De Boeck let you peak inside his.

When Lieven de Boeck is accepted as a researcher at the Jan Van Eyck Akademie, the first project he embarks on, is quite ruthless. He starts a personal reflection on what is regarded as one of the most brutal terrorist actions at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the most violent act of urbanism the world has ever seen: the revolting events of 9/11, when two Hijacked jetliners hit the World Trade Center in New York and made both towers completely collapse. De Boeck however does not follow the misplaced appreciation of figures like Philippe Montebello, who called the remains of the towers “a masterpiece,” or Karlheinz Stockhausen, who declared the attack to be “the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos.” De Boeck doesn’t glorify or celebrate the aesthetics of this act of terrorism, based for example on what Michael Sorkin has labelled as “the somber beauty of the twisted steel surrounded by the smell of death.”<sup>5</sup> Quite the contrary, De Boeck offers a distant reading of the event: he analyzes it as an architectural enterprise, as an act that gains significance from an architectural point of view, regardless of its potential aesthetic appeal.

The work entitled *Fireworks II, Le Bleu du Ciel* comprises the following – traditional – architectural documents: the classical Cahier de charge, but also sections, plans, elevations and a site plan. The only outlandish document is a perspective that presents a personal ‘afterview’. De Boeck rightfully reads the attack on the Twin Towers as an *architectural* project, as an architectural performance. This interpretation becomes ever more valid, once you know that the pilot who flew the first plane, American flt. 11, into the North Tower, Mohammed Atta, was an architect. After graduating as an architect in Cairo, he went to Germany to study urban planning and preservation at Hamburgs technical University. His master thesis was titled “The conflict of Islam and Modernity,” and studied the renewal of the old quarter of the Muslim

city of Aleppo, Syria, reputed to be the oldest continuously inhabited city. For Atta, architecture was a double target in his strike against the Twin Towers: both *object* and *subject*. The Twin Towers represented capitalistic, Western development schemes, the architecture of a modern world of global trade. Moreover, similar monoliths are adopted all over the world as symbols of modernity, from Asian, African to Arab cities. And, for many like-minded people as Atta, this development is experienced as a direct assault on local, traditional urban patterns of living and working, some of which are closely tied to religious beliefs and practices. These forms of architecture represent the annihilation of the hitherto protected forms of 'being and belonging.' The attack on the Twin Towers can therefore be read as a symbolic assault on those forces that 'corrupt' the motherland, a land of 'origin' that is however long lost. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that Al-Qaida's crusade is somewhat hypocritical. An attack on that scale and of that extreme precision would not have been possible without the fulfilments of precisely that phenomenon that they targeted and both buildings represented: the present face of modernity that is globalisation. As Michael Sorkin has indicated, the responsible terrorists are not simply the dark side of something we have predicted, but of something we have advanced: "Al Qaida – undeniably a "global network" – is just one tick away from our own global business as usual."<sup>6</sup> Bin Laden is nothing but an extreme example of globalisation.

By reading the attack against the Twin Towers as an architectural project, De Boeck first of all reveals both the *final* and the *preemptive* character of the strike for the artistic practice. After 9/11, every future 'attack' on architecture, the more when it is of a nihilistic and destructive nature, has simply become inappropriate and irrelevant. Whereas Gordon Matta-Clark – an artist that took the modernist project of architecture as the core of his practice – could in 1974 still propose the 'anarchitectural' act of 'erasing all the buildings on a clear horizon', the execution a has achieved that every like-minded suggestion has lost its significance and impact.<sup>7</sup> No artistic project is ever able to compete with the abhorrent grandeur and repulsive magnitude of 9/11. Or, it would amount up to attacking a figure who's already slaughtered. The murder has been effectuated with such a frightening precision and criminal effectivity, that every other 'artistic' retake or attempt would come off as ridicule. Moreover, De Boeck forces us to investigate to what extent the avant-garde conception of architecture as one of its prime targets has to rethought, and ultimately left behind. By reading and exposing the attack as an architectural project or 'performance', De Boeck on the other hand points to the dramatic changes it has brought forward for the practice of architecture & urban planning. After 9/11 it is clear that architects and planners can no longer identify with the skyscraper. We all now since that the reputation of the skyscraper has waned, if not altogether bled to death. It may once have been the leading architectural icon of global capital, after 9/11 the icon has lost its mirroring innocence. Atta and his accomplices have made it terribly clear that the typology of the skyscraper has become nothing but an empty sign, a hollow emblem. So, Koolhaas rightly points out that architects await a considerable task. As their criminal colleagues have already literally 'killed the skyscraper', the honorable ones need to invent new types of buildings that intensify density, buildings that try to be imaginative in representing the modernity and globalisation they inevitably embody.<sup>8</sup> It's up to

architecture to leave the typology of the tower behind and to invent more potential forms for organizing urban life. It's again up to architecture to develop typologies where we can be and belong, where the contemporary citizen can feel 'at home'.

In the introduction of his book *housing* we can read that Lieven De Boeck, during five years, has lead the paradigmatic life of the citizen of a globalised world: a nomadic existence. During these five years, Lieven De Boeck had no place of his own, and therefore he lived in the houses of friends for short periods of time. The only permanent address he had – because Belgian law forces you to – was his parental house. There he kept his domicile. His mail was sent to a p.o. box in Brussels. De Boeck however offers no unconditional glorification of his nomadic experience. Quite the contrary, he transforms his experience as a tool to investigate architectural possibilities to overcome and to sweeten the absence of 'a home' and ultimately develop a new typology. So, Lieven De Boeck recounts that the only thing he missed during the 5 itinerant years, was "a fixed storage space for his personal belongings".<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the absence of these belongings, the things that made up his 'being', was simultaneously an advantage. It made possible to act with different identities. Depending on the type of neighbourhood, the type of house, and ultimately the interior in which he stayed – which could of course be stuffed with all kinds of things – he could adapt another identity. This ended up becoming a game: when the identity didn't fit him in a particular situation, he could always blame it on the bad taste of the original housekeeper. After all, the things that would make up *his* identity were missing: his belongings, and ultimately, a home to keep them. This absence of storage forms in a way the central theme of the *housing* book and especially within his current exhibition here in Witte De With.

In the book, Lieven De Boeck subsequently scrutinizes the use of space in the two pivotal 'homes' of his former and recent life, namely his parental home – the undeniable metaphor for the place of origin – and his apartment in Liege – his first real 'place of his own'. Most of the attention goes to the space that is allocated to storage. This results in all sorts of figures, percentages, ratio between total volume of space and the volume occupied by storage, etc. This research is then used to develop a new typology, which, strangely is not named a 'new typology for a house', but simply 'typology house'. De Boeck's design offers no new and particular typology. It suggests a new way of living, through an architectural organisation. So, we don't get a fixed organisation of space, but a formula of spatial organisation that proposes a new type of home. And if we were to hang a saying in the middle of the living space, it would undoubtedly be: "home is where your belongings are." This may remind us of the story goes about Mies van der Rohe, the champion of the modernist idiom of universal space. Mies always took along his long travels around the globe a small painting of Paul Klee. Whenever he occupied a hotel room, he took all the paintings of the wall, and installed 'his' painting of Klee on the wall. His tool to feel 'at home', his device to transform a generic hotel room into a place of its own, was one important personal belonging, packed in his suitcase, the most elementary form of storage. For Mies, a painting of Paul Klee was his personal way of belonging somewhere.

De Boeck's design starts from a structure based on an ideal storage system – from small objects to larger objects in the middle. Out of this labyrinth of storage the different rooms of a house are cut: living spaces are carved out of the storage structure. By making space through storage, De Boeck strips architecture to its uttermost basics: a structure of racks and shelves. De Boeck's house is no longer a machine to live in, but a shelf to live in. In De Boeck's house, architecture is in the racks. But, by taking the organisation of storage in his personal 'homes' as the standard, de Boeck immediately undermines the universal qualities of characteristics that may be attributed to his proposal. Everyone has different belongings, and most of all, different amounts of belongings. Some keep little stuff, others keep tons. But, most of all, the space these belongings occupy in ones mind, is even more relative. The suitcase of a refugee may contain all he needs, while people with a house full of objects never feel satisfied. The same is valid for the way someone feels at home, and the 'stuff' he needs to make him feel so: one may only need a picture of his or her lover, while the other needs a whole set of teddy bears, a watch, etc.

De Boeck's housing book underscores the undeniable 'personal' interpretation of one's sense of being and belonging. Although he designs a typology house, the typological determination is immediately undermined by the several 'stories' that flank the proposal for the typology house. These stories, written by Jannah Loontjes, tell us about how people live, by looking at the ceiling or by cleaning up and ordering their belongings. These stories are sometimes very touching, to such an extent that, and according to Lieven De Boeck, some people started to weep while reading them. As far as I know, De Boeck may claim to have made the first architecture book that brought someone to tears. But what these stories achieve us to convince us of, is that such notion as *house*, and the feeling of being *at home*, is not reducible to a prescription, to a typology. Lieven De Boeck doesn't tell us what housing *is*, how one can have the feeling of belonging somewhere. He explicitly does not equate the housing with other notions. The question what housing precisely is, remains open. As such De Boeck is able to avoid the presumptuous attitude of many architects, pretending to know how people live nowadays. Although he has tasted and in a way still 'enjoys' the ultimate life of the globalised citizen – Lieven stills wanders between Brussels, London, Rotterdam, Maastricht, Liege, etcetera – he doesn't pin it down to one definition. What we get is his idea of living, his story of being and belonging. And, that story reveals that such notions as home, house, or identity, and activities as being, belonging and living are continuously shifting, unstable and open to many interpretations and significations. But, this doesn't mean that Lieven is seduced by the sometimes all too romantic identification with the idiom of the nomadic or itinerant being. His emphasis on his personal experience – that pops up through all of his work, not only in the reproduction of his personal belongings – shows that he's more than aware of the insecurity, instability, ambiguity and impermanence that go along with a wandering live. And, most of all of the vulnerability that this position sometimes implies for other parts of the world population. Being condemned to travel is not always a privilege, on the contrary. The glorification of the estrangement en fragmentation of modern life – that is only increased by contemporary globalisation and the ever more growing communication technologies – sometimes amounts up to perversity and narcissism. Mobility is a privilege to a happy few, or as Homi Bhabha once stated: "The

globe shrinks for those who own it.”<sup>10</sup> The recent resurrection of nationalistic ideas only point to the hidden desire to connect a national, racial, religious or cultural identity with a particular geographic place. The task architecture awaits is to be inventive in resolving the tension between the nostalgic desire for the recovery of a rooted and geographical identity on the one hand, and the anti-nostalgic identification with the nomadic and fluid notion of subjectivity, identity and space on the other hand. Therefore the hybrid position that Lieven De Boeck occupies becomes ever more significant. It doesn't purport a nihilistic attack on architecture, neither is it characterised by a blind or unlimited belief in the potential of architecture to prescribe how one is supposed to live, nor does it lapse into an escapist appliance of it. De Boeck's work does not, as in many contemporary art, use architecture as the medium par excellence to design capsules, cellular units or enclaves that are supposed to allow you to 'escape' or to resist contemporary society.

Lieven De Boeck's architecture offers multiple narratives of contemporary life, starting first of all with his own. The combination of his projects and stories succeed to make us conscious of the fact that living – being and belonging somewhere – is not the product of practical descriptions, of definitions nor of typologies, but of *storytelling*. You can't make up a theory about contemporary living, not to mention a suitable architectural typology. Nowadays, housing is a too complex issue to be put into rules. The only thing you can do is tell about how you are living. You cannot tell people how *they* need to live; you can only tell them how *you* are living. And this is precisely what Lieven De Boeck's architectural projects do. They are made of an architecture that does not tell us how we need to live. Lieven De Boeck's architecture tells us how he has lived, and lives for the moment. The dream house that he draws at the end of the book is a drawing that wants to be read as a collection of stories. You don't get an overall view of De Boeck's Dream House, as there's no plan, nor section; it wants to be read as a narrative perspective. This is not 'speaking architecture' or 'architecture parlante,' but architectural storytelling. And, speaking at least for myself, Lieven De Boeck's stories are fascinating, just as architecture is supposed to be.

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster, *Design and crime and other diatribes*, London / New York, Verso, 2002, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Lieven De Boeck, *Housing*, Maastricht, Jan Van Eyck Akademie, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Adrian Searle, *Interview with Pedro Cabrita Reis*, in: Michael Tarantino, *Pedro Cabrita Reis*, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Home in Modernity*, in: Alex Coles (red.) *Ex-cavating Modernism; de-, dis-, ex-*. (vol. 1), London, BACKless Books / Black Dog Publishing, 1996, pp. 95-110.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Sorking, *Collateral Damage. Assessing the cultural and architectural aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>*, Lecture At Cooper Union, September 25<sup>th</sup> 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> Sketch of Matta-Clark as printed in: Corinne Diserens (red). *Gordon Matta-Clark*, London, Phaidon, 2003, p. 154-155.

<sup>8</sup> Rem Koolhaas, *Kill the Skyscraper*, in: Rem Koolhaas OMA / AMO, *Content*, New York, Taschen, 2003, pp. 470-477.

<sup>9</sup> Lieven De Boeck, op. cit. (note 2), n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Homi K. Bahba, *Minority Culture and Creative Anxiety*, Lecture at the Conference *Re-inventing Britain*, The Arts Council, London, Friday 21 March 1997. (see: [http://www.britishcouncil.org/studies/reinventing\\_britain/bhabha\\_1.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/studies/reinventing_britain/bhabha_1.htm))