

PHOTOGRAPHER'S STUDIO

In 2006 the french photographer Frédéric Lefever moved with his family into a modest 1970s suburban villa in Montreuil sur Mer, near the coast of Northern France. This summer they completed a studio extension designed by the artist/architect Didier Faustino, founder of Paris-based Bureau des Mésarchitectures, whose work, (G)host in the (S)hell recently featured in a solo show at the Storefront for Architecture, New-York. The extension, a multi-faceted module, in the counterbalance to the anonymity of the original villa, an improbable rupture of avant-gardism in the back garden. Faustino's work is the alien other to the architectural fabric of suburbia, yet the extension is also a precise act of site-specific architecture, responding to its immediate physical landscape and historical context. It also subtly engages with Lefever's own architectural photography.

Lefever's interest in Faustino's work was initially aroused by an art work called Corps en Transit (Body in Transit), a moulded body container in epoxy resin designed for the air transport of illegal immigrants. Faustino describes this piece as an extreme and violent object, a critique of immigration that gives form to the unacceptable. For Lefever, the piece also demonstrates Faustino's wider capacity for design in response to the dimensions of the body on a micro level. This was an important factor in the studio commission, as the family were legally limited to extend the property by only 20sq m. Prioritizing the body as a spatial component in design also requires, as Faustino remarks, an openness to how the body might activate its architectural context to generate new social and spatial situations. Faustino thus defines his constructions as «works in progress», open to adaptation.

The structure of the studio is timber frame, clad internally in plywood, with an external skin of galvanized steel. To keep costs to a minimum, Faustino agreed to supply drawings but to relinquish responsibility for overseeing the construction process. Lefever then worked with a local contractor, returning to Faustino for advice when problems arose. Adjustments to the original design did ensue, and were embraced by the architect as a positive process of negotiation between client and architect and a pragmatic response to circumstance. These included changing the position of the stairwell from the studio to the garden and the addition of a kennel space for the family dog at the base of the extension.

Lefever's career in photography has two major strands, both of which needed accommodating in the new studio. His own photography comprises colour portraits of banal or vernacular buildings, uncelebrated B-road architecture, which he often divides into categories - such as shop fronts, suburban houses and small town grandstands - for exhibitions. He also prints the archival work of his wife's grandfather, Kasimir Zgorecki who, from the mid-1920s, documented the life of the Polish immigrant community in Northern France.

The studio incorporates these two aspects of Lefever's practice in the two wings that project from the main body of the extension. One contains desk space and computer equipment for the color photography, while the other is a dark room for printing Zgorecki's black and white photography. At the core of the extension is a shower unit, naturally lit from above. Circulation space around the shower provides access to the two wings and a central library space, a circulatory loop that Faustino defines as a fluid continuation of the original interior.

Appropriately, the steel surface of the studio is reflective and, like the camera apparatus, captures images. However, Faustino's intention for the treatment of the facade was not to make a direct reference to the photographic image as such. Rather, he sought to accentuate the studio's condition of duality, as an object that is both foreign and provocative to the architectural tastes of contemporary Montreuil, but also meticulously assimilated to other aspects of its context. As Faustino says, the metal surface promotes an effect of absorption and porosity towards its surroundings while it introduces visual complexity and disruption.

The steel skin also anticipates the arrival of another reflective surface, floodwater. The underside of the studio is supported 700mm from the ground, so that it can double as a refuge during the regular floods from the nearby Canche river, which creates areas of permanent marshland in the neighbourhood gardens. The necessity for independent bathroom facilities in the studio thus becomes apparent, as does the table in Lefever's color photography studio that converts into a bed.

The design of the studio/refuge playfully references the architecture of defence and the military history of Montreuil. Lefever likens the building to an observation post, and it is a plausible hybrid of the coastal bunker and the beach hut. The complexity of the building's geometry, its faceted form, also pays homage to the rempart and ravelin system of Montreuil fortifications by Vauban, the chief military engineer to Louis XIV. As Lefever remarks, the intricacy of the extension made photographing it a challenge, and he found that he could not resort to his usual methods of architectural portraiture. In his photographs of suburban curiosities, Lefever isolates individual buildings, positioning the camera directly opposite and central to the subject, so that the viewer is presented with a single, flat facade. The great value of this strategy is that it renders the details of the facade acutely visible. Idiosyncratic acts of customization, ornament, stains and patina become as significant as the original design and features, revealing the buildings as evolving artefacts, embedded within distinct socio-cultural and environmental contexts.

The new architectural curiosity in Lefever's own back garden, however, actively resists this pictorial method. From no position can a single facade of the studio be isolated, and its surfaces are still pristine, offering none of the traces of inhabitation that characterize Lefever's usual subject matter. It is evident from his photographs that in documenting his own home, Lefever has adjusted his usual compositional strategies to include figures, namely portraits of his family.

Through this new departure of image-making, Lefever echoes Faustino's concern for the body in design, and begins to explore new ways of representing the inhabitation of architecture. In the images of the new studio, an intimate record of gesture, stance and gaze replaces the physical traces of time and use, towards a portrait of architecture as the frame, support and container of everyday life.

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