

Amateur Architecture

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Here, I will not speak of “architecture,” but only of “houses.” A house is *Amateur Architecture*.

Amateur Architecture is architecture that only does what architecture can do;

Amateur Architecture is beginning, but without yet knowing what it is that is beginning;

Amateur Architecture attempts to leave to the users of the house those acts of building that architects once believed they could fully control, but that are in fact both arbitrary and impractical: repairs, patching-up, and trivial adjustments. This is, of course, not a concept concerning perfect architecture. To stress that a certain view of architecture is *amateur* is, in fact, to stress that freedom has greater value than rules, and to welcome the little disorder brought about by questioning an authority whose credibility has collapsed;

Amateur Architecture attempts to shed the weight imposed on architecture itself by various external factors. It recognizes that both people and architecture depend on social norms, yet it seeks to preserve the right to use architecture as a means of temporarily withdrawing from that same society, and to defend freedom through architecture;

Amateur Architecture is anti-symbolic architecture, because it has no other referent beyond architecture itself. The architect merely provides a hypothetical form, a condition in which different kinds of events might erupt, but does not determine them;

Amateur Architecture is anti-systematic; for it, there can be no predetermined architectural dictionary;

Amateur Architecture is contradictory, and necessarily partial, even trivial, just as life itself is contradictory and trivial. Yet it absorbs into itself a kind of architectural language with no preconditions, an experimental language;

Amateur Architecture is restrained architecture. Neither exaggerated nor excessive, because it can never coincide with, or be verified against, the image of architecture produced by professional architecture. It may be so ordinary that it goes completely overlooked;

Amateur Architecture is not artistic architecture, as it doesn't need to define itself through any external force, including art;

Nor is *Amateur Architecture* anti-art architecture; rather, it constantly reminds architects that non-architectural artistic discourses do not simply inspire architecture, but change in nature once they enter architectural language.

Amateur Architecture is architecture that comes infinitely close to spontaneous order. This is why, within its field of vision, spontaneous building, unauthorized building, and temporary assemblage have a status equal to that of professional architecture. I call all of this the “present of the past”, or, one could say, the “tradition of the present”;

Amateur Architecture is not an architecture that leaves this world behind to revolve around the central image of monumental architecture. It is an architecture that shatters the center. It often appears in the form of small architecture, like a heap of rough fragments in the real world. This does not mean that it is merely a practice of building small architecture. Rather, it continually attempts to break down the symbolic megastructures of the twentieth century into non-structural structures, and to reconstruct them as contradictory mixtures of small architectures. It relies on the contact between body and architecture, not on the frenzy of the retina. It is concerned with events that may erupt at any moment, not with grand narratives formulated in advance or retrospective explanations produced after completion;

Amateur Architecture is not concerned with a unified scene. It is more concrete, more specific, and more targeted. It is able to split apart certain clichés. Professional architects rarely consider how their design activity lacks specificity: a design is merely a professional commission, and apart from the habitual order through which they understand things, they see nothing, hear nothing, and know nothing.

Amateur Architecture is merely unimportant architecture. One of the problems of professional architecture is that it takes architecture too seriously. Invested with too many desires, architecture has acquired an undue power.

Amateur Architecture is architecture that uses technology appropriately and patiently refines its construction. It does not pursue the symbolic expression of the technological age, nor the indiscriminate abuse of technology. Rather, it attempts to present architecture in an appropriate, restrained, and technically intelligible form. In fact, it attempts to leave, at the technical level of construction, a certain margin for building to continue. Its ideal users are those who are interested in continuing to build. *Amateur Architecture* is never completed, but always in the process of being so, always old and new at the same time;

It is precisely in this sense of “holistic building,” of *yingzao*¹, that we continue to experiment with the tradition of Chinese architecture; it would otherwise be difficult to understand why modern architecture so quickly decays from newness, while Ming and Qing buildings around us have already stood for two or three hundred years. To continue building is to continue living;

¹ *Yingzao*: a Chinese term traditionally associated with the act of building and “practicing architecture,” with implications that go beyond the Western notion of architectural design. In Wang Shu’s thinking, the term evokes a cultural and artisanal practice of building, rooted in historical continuity, a relationship with materials, and local building traditions.

Amateur Architecture only builds the most basic things in life. Its formal uncertainty mirrors the uncertainty of its function. To fill it, to use it, and to continue experimenting with it: this is the gift handed over by the architects to the users;

Amateur Architecture may be nothing more than a small detail hardly worth mentioning, yet it is the detonator of every established rule. It is always in an unfinished state; the idea of *yingzao* introduces process into the former structural model, delivering an explosive and fatal blow to all the distinctions on which professional architecture rests: those between spontaneous building, model language, theoretical metalanguage, and project language.

For *Amateur Architecture*, form-making is secondary;

Amateur Architecture is not an architecture of knowledge, but an architecture of knowledge-seeking. If the theories we are used to are always established, fixed, explanatory, and pre-designed, then amateur architecture is resolutely anti-theoretical architecture.

Before design begins, *Amateur Architecture* has no method. It enters architecture and finds its method as it works. One by one, each step appears as an autonomous fragment: there are no low points, no climaxes, no center, no depth, no ending. It may begin from any place chosen on impulse. It has no origin;

As *Amateur Architecture* comes infinitely close to a certain spontaneous order, it also implies the disappearance of what we usually call architecture. Along with it, is the disappearance of the architect: the architect who, in theory and in professional terms, seems to know everything. To regard the *yingzao* once again as an ideal is also to restore the architect to a role closer to that of a craftsman: someone who does not discuss ideas, but works within life itself in response to specific situations. A skilled innovator within everyday life;

Amateur Architecture is a conceptual activity. It opens up architectural questions ignored by orthodox architecture, opening them not only to architects, but also to users of architecture. In order to make use of *Amateur Architecture*, one must rethink the familiar habits of everyday life;

Amateur Architecture is simple complexity;

Amateur Architecture is not cultural architecture. The cultural perspective is merely the product of a certain learned cultivation;

Amateur Architecture is not anti-cultural architecture, because it recognizes that, ultimately, it cannot place itself outside culture;

Amateur Architecture is architecture that pierces culture. It is the study of all the architectural questions that orthodox architecture has cast aside as impure factors. This activity gathers together the impurity of architectural language, the waste products of professional architecture, and all the disintegration, ruptures, and sudden mutations of information in the lifeworld. It may not be entirely new, but it resolutely emphasizes the value of difference;

Amateur Architecture is not marginal architecture, nor alternative architecture, for it does not recognize any center of power. It continuously makes certain assertions of life through

architectural means: a suspension of doubt, while insisting that these assertions remain provisional in their validity. If it contains a form of criticality, I would say that it is a renunciatory form of criticism. It is an effort, an effort that does not attempt to become any new orthodoxy.