

## Zvi Hecker's Jewish School in Berlin

### Sir Peter Cook

*House of the Book*, texts by Cook P., Hejduk J., Hecker Z., Black Dog Publishing Ltd., London, 1999; photographs: Helen Binet.

We are in the presence of a simultaneously overt and covert object. The school appears to declare its preoccupations immediately, the plan being perceptible as a whirling flower. Yet it demands an analysis that bypasses both the traps of preoccupation with the historical and the moral; the significance of reinvesting a Jewish presence in Berlin and the quite different trap of quizzing Hecker's formal and generic mannerisms. It is a tantalisingly difficult building for the late 20th-century eye: for we have become conditioned (unwittingly?) by the televisual image that carries with it any number of homogenisations and distillations so that the visual language of architecture is often found wanting. No wonder that architect-intellectuals attempt to bypass the issue by selling out the visual tradition as inferior to that of "content", "meaning" or non-visual language. Unfortunately for them, Hecker's school is thrusting, accosting even, refusing to let you rest upon some easy explanation of the plan figure: for its obvious richness lies in the moments when this exploding gyrotory system allows incursions, flicks-across or shavings-away to happen.

Yet in the televisual post-wall period, Berlin itself is beginning to move in the same direction as Adelaide or Mannheim: the city street taking on the character of middle-income clothing stores where the fashions send out reassuring signals, "I'm a respecter of old values but I'm efficient" ... or "I'm friendly but just a little bit trendy too". Meanwhile, its suburbs crave their own place in this "sitcom" situation. Fun and games you may have within, but respectability at all costs, please, towards the street. In the days of the divided city an embarrassing game of ideologies, cultures and economies was tossed back and forth across the divide. A piece of "look no hands!" roof on one side, and a piece of pious social responsibility on the other, has now been replaced in the newly rebuilt centre by a series of grim, rigid grids and stony nostalgia. Yet there is still something of the old, experimental Berlin in the air: occasional wit seen in competition projects; the continual seeming and being of gurus and bright young observers -a factor that has contributed to Hecker's marvellous "second wind" as a designer. In Tel Aviv, his other city, he was generally treated as an eccentric and an artist, a perfectionist in an architectural culture of the cut creative corner. Added to which, he perhaps instinctively craved the presence of a serious peer group: other architects and talkers-about-architecture with whom he could debate the nuances and implications of a design, rather than just its politics or symbolism.

The attention to detail in the Jewish School is the result of this rediscovered climate: where to discuss the position of the window frame, the degree of "cut" in a "cut", the necessity (or otherwise) of an articulated edge. The syncopation of a consistent run of, say, openings. Are these things mannerist issues, or are they the stuff of architecture? In comparing the school with the spiral housing in Ramat Gan, Israel, you can of course attribute them both to the same author. In Berlin, the sunflower explodes across the ground, whereas the house has to climb upwards as it explodes. The power of horizontal shards is common to both: equally skilful strokes that many architects would be too afraid to posit.

In both cases they act as giant "clips" or as exploded architraves. Yet in each context, they have a virtuoso ability to both attack and underscore the dynamics of the building. In matters of content and rhetoric the two buildings have some fascinating overtones. The Ramat Gan site is opposite Hecker's own home, which is no mere professional's suburban villa-he lives in the Dubiner Apartments that he designed together with Alfred Neumann and Eldar Sharon in 1961, a successful essay in interlock geometry that is able to leap across space and simultaneously hover over its hillside site. The spiral is the unruly child opposite, hairy and jagged, whereas Dubliner is made of more consistent material:

concrete, of course. A geometric system initiates them both, but the heroics are quite contrary: for the first building, a demonstration of logic, commodity and evenness; 22 years later the need is for freedom, the chance to delight in the power of architecture to not only capture space, but also leap into it. The chosen surface material is now a “cheapo” stone appliqué used more often by local Arab builders and having quite kitschy overtones, in itself enough to raise the eyebrows of a bourgeois suburb. The implications are of glass and mosaic, as well as the proliferation of displaced “frame” conditions, and all this before we come to the power and originality of the plan itself.

What is this man about? How did he simmer away in Tel Aviv, making one building every few years, talking mostly to painters and sculptors, with an enviable library that kept him aware of explosions elsewhere?

The Berlin building owes much to Ramat Gan: those detached frames reappear, but as elegant and finely-tuned markers, without which the flat flanks would remain too diagrammatic. It reminds one of his continual ability to set “stages”, conditions in which the appearance of people -a terrible bore too many abstractionist architects-are positively desirable. There are innumerable crevices, stages “off”, shadow flanks and hidden layers from which kids or visitors can suddenly emerge. His delight in creating the snake-ways that interfere with the central sunflower theme is the delight of a designer who is completely in control of the situation. The snakes have an ironic quality, appearing to be anarchic elements, but quite immaculately placed, having their own system and logic, appearing and disappearing quickly, needing in this building to be deft and neat.

It could all be the playing-out of a long cycle of rediscovery. The young Hecker arrived in Israel as a second-year student from Krakow into an energetic Haifa Technion during the period of Alfred Neumann: not only his teacher, but his first partner. A scenery of jagged concrete knives appearing out of the scrub lands of the Eastern Mediterranean: some contrast indeed to the nervous and pared down paranoia of Catholic-Socialist interplay that he had left behind. The fascination with the geometries and the repetition of geometric elements (often pre-cast) is an undeniable inheritance that cannot entirely be explained away by the fascination of Eastern patterning meeting single-edge constructability. Wolfgang Pehnt suggests that Zvi Hecker, Alfred Neumann and their third partner, Elder Sharon “fought geometry, the simple norm with the complicated one”. Having watched Hecker scraping away on his plans, I would add that he can now fight geometry with that craft-associated process of “honing”. The silvers, tweaks and pats that he gives to the stated thrusts lead on to the process of incursion and the deliberate planting of alien elements that in the end serve to strengthen the audacity of the original thrust. Hecker sits on the site, endlessly producing more drawings, wandering round the building cogitating upon possible tweaks that will clarify the communication of the idea. Only Gunther Domenig in his “B Bank” period has come close to this degree of involvement.

What we see at this site on the edge of Grunewald is therefore a building that can neither play the set game of urban heroics of modern Berlin (although it is a large building) nor play the coy suburban decorum of many school buildings. It suggests that though children are sweet, they are adventurous too, they need a “place, not just a well-meaning set of boxes. All the classrooms are at (east slightly different. The stairs are easy to find, but where they lead will always have local idiosyncrasies. Certain pieces of wall will be unfinished, certain paths of light will come from unexpected sources, certain window sills will reveal themselves to be secret balconies.

Hecker has moved a long way from his colleagues from the Technion who seem to be content to set up a geometrical gambit and then let it run “clack, clack, clack, clack” down to the end of the building and then stop, somewhat startled. He has a passionate fascination for the formative act, so he interferes with the generic sunflower motif and produces a building (the Palmach Centre in Tel Aviv) where a climbing rampart system is attached geometrically only once and in the new Jewish Cultural Centre at Duisburg the “frame” members have graduated to the category of primary “carriers” of the building. It is an architecture in full flight: creating and “recreating itself from the confident observation of form, as it both seduces and attends space. Helene Binet’s photographs of the school are the first

that seem to understand the complex three-dimensionality of the building. It is not dependent on its (fairly obvious) challenging “shapes”. It is more than a series of “A-B-A-B” shards and recesses and the naughtiness have to be seen referentially in scale with the total building.

Coming through is a final piquancy: for the Mediterranean experience is there, too. It is not a European building; even if its manners are. The urbanism - and it is surely a piece of urban design in its complexity, hierarchies and the linguistic range of its spaces - is that of a village or even a small town. The left flank, which abuts a straight edged path, has all the wit of a defended or seaside town peeking out from time to time towards the hostile world and allowing occasional (rather diagonal) incursion. This is my own favourite stretch - but then, I'm English.

Village aspects are declared towards the street and, again, a blue-skied day can give the composition a remarkable transportation to those same scrub lands and hillsides upon which his earlier buildings hovered. But it is just a moment reminder. Hecker's language and very considerable sophistication reaches the level of the best Japanese contrivers, but with more originality and dare. With this building, he has become an essential part of that coterie of architects who are answering back both “the televisual and the abstracted world.