

Houses that breath

by Bergur Thomas Anderson



Installation view of *Los Angeles Models* at Museum M, Leuven

A middle-aged woman greets me as I enter the performance/installation piece *Los Angeles Models* by Jean-Pascal Flavien during the Playground festival in Leuven, November 2015. She is wearing white gloves and a formal outfit, embodying a caretaker of precious things. Surrounding us are a couple of minimalistic shelves, tables and benches. Within the shelves are numerous shoeboxes containing Flavien's work. There must be around fifty shoeboxes here and each one has a small note on the front of it with a description and drawing of its own content.

The shoebox is something I relate to immediacy and memory, recalling my own collection of “memory-boxes” where I store photographs, letters, catalogs and memorabilia from my travels. Immediately the appearance of an archive or a backroom is apparent. A personal archive of journals, perhaps each box contains a jumble of notes, collected papers. To my surprise, each box contains a small house, or an idea for a house – I have walked in to an archive of architectural proposals, where each model contains a description of its use and with it, a new concept of living.

“Although they are posed as characters, the houses are not to be understood as p s y c h o l o g i c a l beings but rather as conceptual entities, representing ideas, locations, and events in which the architectural conditions can determine the behavior of its inhabitants (and vice versa). Jean-Pascal Flavien’s work explores how architecture shapes our experience of space but also how it can more fundamentally determine our experience of ourselves and of others.”¹



Close-up of a model being presented by the performer. Museum M, Leuven.

Flavien uses cheap materials like cardboard, aluminum foil, hot glue and acrylic paints. Asking impractical questions is a central motive in the often humorous, intuitive structures. As their materials and motives suggest, the models are conceptual fantasies rather than models of something necessarily real. Instead of including convenient architectural measurements (the amount of private space or comfort), each proposition here is modeled to a specific emotion, function or behavioral pattern (or all of these features). Their shapes vary, I remember one looking like a cactus and another looking like a cube shaped modernist building. For me, Flavien’s approach lets you escape the real in to an imaginative territory. The diversity of the models makes me contemplate views on shared space, private space and our day-to-day experiences of living. Could you live in a house with booming speakers on opposite sides of the apartment? Could you live in a cactus-shaped house with no obvious entrance but encapsulates you nonetheless within its structure?

The performer introduces you to each concept and invites you to re-imagine your surroundings for that moment, placing you within the box and its fictional landscape. In a relaxed manner a dialog opens up with each shoebox. The function of the house, its desire to explain itself

1 <http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/2014/10/jean-pascal-flavien-at-esther-schipper/>

through existing and the regulations one must respect in order to dwell within the given concept of the house. One of the great things about Flaviens work is that it celebrates unpracticality and attempts to rationalize every notion made from such an enquiry. The performance engages the installation as a museum within the museum of Leuven. Having someone within the installation as a guide within this exhibition gives a layer of an archive being present, even a kind of naive institutionalization. Creating each work of art so that it fits a shoebox (rather accurately also) shows the artists determinacy to keep his mini-museum as a portable, self-contained phenomenon.

The performer narrates you through each space offering more than an entry point in to the houses, but also in to the artist's mindset. The ideas presented often resemble those found in films, in particular fantasy or sci-fi. One of Flaviens proposals that have been realized, *Viewer*, was built near the Rio de Janeiro and thought of as a science fiction film – with long shots of the futuristic house along with an appropriate soundtrack (I could imagine Tangerine Dream). From what documentation can tell, the glowing red house stands in the middle of nowhere with its industrial yet scientific appearance. The scenery recalls a landscape where a space shuttle might land. The structure is posed up against nothing but the blue sky and a deserted earth, leaving our imagination to question its origin and function. The house in *Viewer* appears from nowhere, has its own function and is only applicable to itself or those who have knowledge of it. Again, humor here is of great importance – the film is labelled as a sci-fi film. We are thus immediately able to see the subject as a foreign object, something alien and indecipherable.



Still from *Viewer*, 2007.

Robert Smithson argued that the museum is a void, a time-warp in to a place where remote pasts meet far away futures. Flaviens' shoeboxes each contain their own portal to another space and time. By opening each box, the performer opens a portal in to architectural scheme which recalls something from the past, present and future combined with the fantasy narratives passed on from Flavien to our guide. I feel as I am situated in a foundation based on the life and work of Jean-Pascal Flavien. He is the maker of these models and a mystic, a person you don't get to see but is thoroughly explained by the woman who takes us through his work. Flavien is absent during the opening hours of his museum within a museum while his oeuvre is present. Institutionalized in an untimely manner, the museum's keeper is responsible for maintaining and mediating the artists body of work. The performance becomes a tour through hypothetical reality, a dream-scape of urban planning and architecture. A collection of proposals, models and ideas made in the artists studio. The institutionalization of renaissance painters' studios comes to mind, creating an attraction from the artists archive, sketches and other works in progress. When asked about her role in the work, she said that she got acquainted with all of the models over a course of two days prior to the opening. During the course of the festival there we're apparently two or three other people performing, taking shifts as guards of Flaviens archive.

“Jean-Pascal Flavien acknowledges the impracticality of the question yet asks anyway – how can one make a house that describes what it is? Here is a house that is making a statement. It is a mechanism constantly making its plans visible. It is a confusion of the idea of the plan and the planning process as inextricably intertwined. The exhibition and the house as separate entities are themselves confused together. It is a mixing of plans; architectural, organizational, practical... and trying to grasp onto a particular plan places one akin to a character in a Buster Keaton film constantly failing to catch the ball that is supposed to be caught.”²

Distant, remote architectural schemes descend from the imaginative territory of Flaviens work to what we encounter as a possibility of how we could see our future habitual environment. Re-evaluating such spaces and reducing them to single ideas seems to be of a great concern as many of the titles of Flaviens work suggests; *Breathing House, Free Jail, Fire Exit House...* The titles suggest autonomous structures which have a logic of their own. It is the one inhabiting the house that must catch on to it, follow its guidelines and keep re-locating himself on a psychological level. The inhabitant according to the models proposed here could possibly be living in a structure which fits his/her own personality. The work evokes awareness of interior space that has thus far been thought of as a template, parameter or commodity for anyone to enter. The models suggest that the private interior space – like the space which I am sitting in right now, could be exteriorized.

² <http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/2014/03/jean-pascal-flavien-at-catherine-bastide/#more-108852>

Exteriorized up to the point where our desires or dream-states would become visible to the outside world. Yes, a world of chaotic architecture and urban planning, but a world where identity and character is potentially mirrored on to the exterior surface of our residence. Where architecture becomes a force of self-expression and self-referentiality, our inner visions become visible to any passer-byer. The experience of the work led me in to a territory of a distant future and fantasy. These models aren't really meant to be realized before our civilization is ready to embark on such radical habitual development. Flaviens desire is present in each work and asks to a certain extent when will we be able to habit spaces which mirror our every emotions and functions?

Flaviens positivist approach to architecture as a thing-in-itself and a mode of contemplating our habitual space opens up many questions. Using the simple and tactile mediums of miniature making and narration, his museum within the Museum M of Leuven is our first gateway to actual realization of differential planning. This gateway suggests we start accounting for our ability to adjust to houses that prioritize their existence over ours and whether or not we could accept that as the future of architecture.