48,3 meter

Blasted building

Entering Erling Viksjø´s iconic government building, Høyblokken 32 months after the devastating terrorist attack, I find myself standing on a territory charged with strong emotions and political controversy. But more significantly, I am immersed in empty, raw and misty space. The rough concrete ceilings, the colossal pilotis, the abstract sandblasted, wall-fixed art and the Conglo-concrete floor evoke images of a recently discovered Roman villa. The blast from the bomb, which exploded only a few meters from where I stand, and the subsequently clearance of 4400 tons of waste, has removed evidence of former use and destabilised the building's position in time. We are left with pure structure. The building has turned into an abstraction of itself, more in line with the intentions of the architect and truer to the principles of modernism than ever before.

Høyblokken appears now as it did in 1957, at a certain time during construction: no windows, partition walls, flooring, fixtures, air-ducts, furniture, equipment, office supplies and people. What is revealed is a textbook example of the open plan and the load-bearing grid-façade. This "prenatal" version of the building, being disentangled from function and use, appears like a rough working model of a building-project in process.

The bomb left a crater in the ground, exposing the subterranean level connecting the different government buildings in the area. This "secret" underworld helped save Høyblokken, since the main force of the blast was allowed to go downwards. It revealed the fact that the buildings are hovering above underground pathways, busy streets, a fire station, storage spaces and parking garages, a fact that destabilises the relationship between building and ground.

The only part of the building that is relatively intact, still furnished and heated, is the two set-back, non-original top floors from 1990. While the architect wanted to connect old and new in a seamless structure, the bomb tore them apart: the top portion, now resembling a free-standing, modernist pavilion, seems critically disconnected from the lower floors.

The destruction of the glass wall of the ground floor lobby re-establishes the original open public passage under the building, in accordance with the prevailing ideals of the inclusive democracy. Since the bomb also destroyed the interior walls of the lobby-spaces, the principle of the open ground floor plan is pushed even further, suggesting a scenario where anyone can walk unhindered in under the building, push the elevator button and be transported directly up to the Prime Minister´s office.

The empty upper floor plans leave few traces of how the spaces were divided. It evokes the original layout of the architect, with movable wall-elements mounted on top of linoleum floors, correlating to the repetitive window pattern and the positions of the columns. What we see today is a game board for a flexible architecture not yet set in play. The building is a diagram of itself.

The flexible wall elements were probably all abandoned in the 1990 renovation, and the new fixed walls inserted were being placed in an inconsistent relationship to the columns, partly hitting them and partly sliding on either side of them, obscuring the structural principle of the building. The purging that has taken place has cleared ground for Viksjø´s original blueprint.

All flooring, including the original linoleum from 1958 as well as the new surfaces from 1990, has been removed, exposing the raw concrete slab stained with glue and spills of uncertain origin. A condition of symmetry thus prevails between the concrete floor and the concrete ceiling. Taking into account the straight, non-articulated columns and the floor-to-ceiling window-openings, the space can be imagined flipped upside-down still maintaining its original appearance.

The "flipping" properties of the building makes it less contextual than the architect could possibly have planned, being suspended in air, disconnected from ground.

The absence of technical infrastructure, like air-ducts, radiators, electrical wires, lighting fixtures, alarms, sprinklers and water pipes, makes the building appear archaic. This "pure" condition, so cherished by architects of the 20th century, can be described as the ideal state of any modern building. According to this logic, any implementation of infrastructure will distort this primal condition. There is a paradoxical relationship between appearance and function taking place: what makes the space appear rational is what makes it dysfunctional. Erling Viksjø solved this problem by installing a suspended ceiling between the beams of the generous hallway at the centre section of the building, enabling a concealed entry of infrastructure on either side. The relatively low ceiling height of the office floors, reduced from 3,5 to 3,25 meter during the design process of the 1950s, did not allow for a concealed system of air-distribution when introduced in 1990.

The blast, exposing all the "secret" spaces of the building, challenges the ideals of the "pure" space.

The peeling paint reveals the board-form pattern of the cast-in-place concrete slabs and beams, never meant to be exposed. Also revealed is the fact that the only interior walls left standing on the office floors are made of concrete, a fact Viksjø explicitly wanted to conceal behind white paint. In his project text published in the journal Byggekunst in 1959 he states; "it is not enough that a building is correctly constructed. It is equally important that it appears correct, and it might be necessary in architectural terms to "erase" some constructive parts that confuses the building´s static appearance." What we encounter is an architect interested in the aesthetics of structure rather than the dogma of structural honesty. The destructive forces of the bomb has exposed the "tricks" of the architect, but more importantly, it has disclosed an attitude of ambiguity which seems to be present throughout the building.

The famous technique of "naturbetong" invented by Erling Viksjø, is being implemented on exterior and interior walls and columns, both as an over-all surface-technique and as a strategy for incorporating artworks onto the building. There is a fascinating ambiguity imbedded in his moralistic denunciation of stone cladding (originally proposed for Høyblokken) on one hand, and his introduction of decoration on another. In his text "Fasadebetong" from 1951 Viksjø describes the result of one of his experiments: "It occurred to me that where the cement-sludge membrane dissolved and the aggregates appeared, the true structure of concrete was disclosed". He uncovers what can be described as the essence of the material, the river-gravel hidden under the layer of sludge. But on a more fundamental level, the technique seems to blur the structural properties of the elements rather than clarifying them. The river gravel is shiny, and the walls can at times, under special light conditions, be perceived as being made of a shimmering fabric. The numerous artworks in the lobby and the main stairway, resembling tapestries, woodcuts and canvas art typical for the modernist era, contribute to a "flattening" of the wall. Viksjø equates his technique with that of the artist, comparing the sandblasting machine to a pencil or an engraving needle. The pilotis of the ground floor lobby are being "engraved" with a pattern of L-shaped figures. The nearly equal amount of untreated and treated surfaces, and the thinness of the sludge membrane being exposed by the process, suggest that the pilotis consist of thin, fragile layers, risking to crack or being unveiled.

Viksjø is trying to uncover the underlying essence of a material by the act of blasting. Strangely enough, the blast of the bomb is performing the same act on a grander scale: uncovering the essence of the entire building. Paradoxically the destruction of the building helps construct a clearer picture of it.

It is interesting how the blasted building corresponds to Viksjø´s perception of the it, as described in his project-text from 1959. Viksjø describes his building merely as an efficient office building, possessing no symbolic properties or programmatic specificities. He does not mention why this building is especially suited to house the Government, or how it accommodates a specific user. He spends almost the entire text describing the principles of structure and materials. One could argue that the building today has returned to its origins, being a pure manifestation of space ready to be re-inhabited by unknown residents.

With the ambiguous properties of the building in mind, what principles of preservation should we employ when restoring the building? Should we be guided by the principles of authenticity and re-establish the 1958 version, should we re-establish the 2011 pre-bomb version, should we take into account the technical requirement of today, should we commemorate the incident by preserving the scars left by the bomb, or should we conserve the blasted building.

Why is Høyblokken worth preserving? Maybe the building has proven worthy solely by resisting the bomb. And maybe what is worth preserving is what is being left after the blast. The blast has exposed the structural and material qualities of the building, removing all the removable and non-original elements, turning it into an abstract version of itself. The act of blasting, mimicking the blasting techniques of the architect, but securely disassociated with the horrific terrorist attack, can possibly act as a preservation-device, exposing the primal qualities of any building.

Blasting employed as a method for preservation challenges the common practise of preservation based on visual properties rather than physical realities. Maybe this new mode of action can be instrumental when taking on the complex task of preserving architecture of "the recent past".

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