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Hacia una arquitectura industrial: La influencia del artículo *But today we collect ads* de 1956 en la arquitectura de posguerra de Alison y Peter Smithson

// Towards an industrial architecture: The influence of the 1956 article *But today we collect ads* on Alison and Peter Smithson's postwar domestic architecture.

En junio del año 1955 los arquitectos Alison y Peter Smithson escribían un primer borrador de lo que pocos meses más tarde, en noviembre de 1956 y de la mano del número 18 de la revista ARK, se convertiría en su célebre artículo *But Today we Collect Ads*. Comprendido por muchos autores como el manifiesto a favor de una nueva arquitectura pop, deudora de la reciente fascinación del mundo de la cultura por los objetos de consumo de la posguerra, *But Today we Collect Ads* iba a significar, sin embargo, el primer alegato realizado por los Smithson a favor de una arquitectura verdaderamente industrializada. Así este artículo, que complementa su texto con la publicación de los mecanografiados originales del artículo, busca no solo acentuar la importancia que este tuvo en la obra de sus autores, sino llevar a debate la certeza ampliamente asumida de que el Movimiento Moderno fue un movimiento profundamente industrializado.

Ablinger works are played with many different formats, including concerts, installations, performances, operas for natural and urban environments, conceptual music, etc.

In June 1955, architects Alison and Peter Smithson wrote a first draft of what a few months later, in November 1956 and in issue 18 of ARK magazine, would become their famous article *But Today we Collect Ads*. Understood by many authors as a manifesto in favor of a new pop architecture, indebted to the recent fascination of the world of culture with post-war consumer objects, *But Today we Collect Ads* was to be, however, the first plea made by the Smithson in favor of a truly industrialized architecture. Thus, this article, which complements its text with the publication of the original typescripts of the article, seeks not only to emphasize its importance in the work of its authors, but also to bring to debate the widely assumed certainty that the Modern Movement was a profoundly industrialized movement.

Smithson, objetos, Pop, industrialización, prefabricación, anuncios

Smithson, objects, Pop, industrialization, prefabrication, ads



"Gropius wrote a book on grain silos,
Le Corbusier one on airplanes,
And Charlotte Perriand brought a new
object to the office every morning;
But today we collect ads."

ALISON y PETER SMITHSON. But today we collect ads.¹

1*

Introduction

In November 1956, architects Alison and Peter Smithson published in issue 18 of ARK² Magazine what would undoubtedly be one of their most famous and at the same time misunderstood articles of their entire literary production. Promoted by Reyner Banham –at the time one of the leading figures of the Independent Group³ alongside the Smithsons– as a "manifesto for a new Pop architecture", the article But Today We Collect Ads would represent, on one hand, the synthesis of the British couple's experience as part of the aforementioned group and, on the other, the authors' vindication of an architecture paradoxically distanced from Pop, definitively built around the values of post-war industrialization, and eager to incorporate the consumer objects massively imported after the end of the conflict from the United States to Europe.

"The transformation of every-day (sic) object to fine art manifestation happens in many ways. The object can be rediscovered – object-trouvé or l'art brut – the object itself remaining the same: a literary or folk myth can arise and again the object itself remains unchanged; or the object can be used as a jumping off point and is itself transformed."⁴

A synthesis of some of the principles most widely shared by all the members of the group, the text of no more than three pages in length (figs. 4, 5 and 6) represented first a plea for the conceptual use of consumption as a new source of artistic inspiration. Understood as a symbol of a society to which art and architecture had to learn to listen again, the images of magazine advertisements from the United States such as Look, Life or Ladies Home Journal, showing the influence of the new mass culture in 1950s America, seemed to encourage the Smithsons to take the initiative in the construction of new discourses. In this sense, and in the same way that the Modern Movement had used automobiles, airplanes and ships as model objects for its new approaches, the new post-war movement seemed to choose a collection of color advertisements.

"Advertising has caused a revolution in the popular art field. Advertising has become respectable in its own right and is beating the fine arts at their old game. We cannot ignore the fact that one of the traditional functions of fine art, the definition of what is fine and desirable for the ruling class, and therefore ultimately that which is desired by all society, has now been taken over by the ad-man."

(...)

"They are good images and their technical virtuosity is almost magical. Usually have involved as much effort for one page as goes into the building of a coffee-bar. And this transient thing is making a bigger contribution to our visual climate than any of the traditional fine arts."⁵

2*

The object

Assumed the value with which consumption and its graphic representations contributed to the making of new postulates, the article thus focused its narrative on the analysis of the concept of the object not only through its social variables but also as an argument through which to analyze and construct domestic space. The text should not be interpreted in any sense, as Banham claimed, as a manifestation in favor of a new pop architecture⁶ -the Smithsons had symptomatically crossed out the word pop from the original typing of the text⁷, not including it in the article finally published- But Today We Collect Ads was to be, on the contrary, and as we will see below, a plea in favor of a truly industrialized architecture built from an *objet-trouvé* found within the world of industry.

This analysis, far from the fascination with which Banham and other members of the Independent Group were observing the consumerist phenomenon, was therefore going to focus its gaze on the inevitable and necessary acceptance of such consumption as the building organism of a new domestic space. Thus, the new consumerist object, symptom of an effervescent world but also indicative of a new industrial and industrialized reality, emerged in the Smithsons' minds as an opportunity to incorporate an infinite capacity of industrial products -preexisting, preconceived and predesigned- into a new spatial reality far removed from the tabula rasa of the Modernism, and close to the idea of a collage composed of existing objects.

"Already the mass production industries have revolutionized half the house – kitchen, bathroom, utility room, and garage– without the intervention of the architect, and the curtain wall and the modular prefabricated building are causing us to revise our attitude to the relationship between architect and industrial production".⁸

Thus, through the idea of "appropriation" inherited from the *objet-trouvé*, the Smithsons were to begin to move away, at least partially, from some of the principles most firmly rooted in pre-war architecture¹. In this respect, and while it was true that for architects such as Le Corbusier the reference to the existing object -automobiles, airplanes, and ocean liners- was obvious, it was no less true that this reference had until then been fundamentally metaphorical.

f indeed architecture had come close to considering the "foreign object" as a source of inspiration, this consideration had so far been nothing more than allegorical.⁹

Traditionally the fine arts depend on the popular arts for their vitality, and the popular arts depend on the fine arts for their ~~value~~ respectability. It can be said that things hardly "exist" before the fine artist has made his use of them, they are simply part of the unclassified background material against which we pass our lives. The transformation from everyday object to fine art manifestation happens in many ways, the object can be discovered - objet trouve or l'art brut - the object itself remaining the same; a literary or folk myth can arise and again the object itself remains unchanged; or, the object can be used as a jumping-off point and in itself transformed.

Le Corbusier in Volume I of his Oeuvre Complete describes how the "architectural mechanism" of the Maison Citrohm 1929, evolved. Two popular art devices - the arrangement of a small zinc bar at the rear of a cafe with a large window to the street, and the close vertical patent-glazing of the suburban factory - were combined and transformed into a fine art aesthetic. The same architectural mechanism produced ultimately the Unite d'habitation.

The Unite d'habitation is a good example of the complexity of an art manifestation, for its genesis involves :-

popular art stimuli,
historic art seen as a pattern of social organization
not as a stylistic source (observed at the Chatreux d'Ann 1907),
and ideas of social reform and technical revolution
patiently worked out over forty years, during which time the social
and technological setup, partly as a result of his own activities,
met Le Corbusier half-way.

Why certain folk art objects, historical styles or industrial artifacts and methods become important at a particular moment cannot easily be explained.

Gropius wrote a book on grain silos,
Le Corbusier one on aeroplanes,
And Charlotte Perland brought a new object to the office
every morning.
But today we collect ads.

Advertising has caused a revolution in the popular art field. Advertising ~~is~~ ^{has} become ^{res} respectable in its own right and is beating the fine arts at their old game. We cannot ignore the fact that one of the traditional functions of fine art, the definition of what is fine and desirable for the ruling class and therefore

different type.

ultimately that which is desired by all society, has now been taken over by the Ad-man.

To understand the advertisements which appear in the "New Yorker" or "Gentry" one must have taken a course in Dublin literature, read a "Time" popularising article on Cybernetics and to have majored in Higher Chinese philosophy and Cosmetics. Such ads are packed with information/- data of a way of life and a standard of living which they are simultaneously inventing and documenting, Ads which do not ~~try to sell you the product~~ try to sell you the product except as a natural accessory of a way of life. ~~They are~~ ^{usually} good "images", and their technical virtuosity is almost magical. Many have involved as much effort for one page as goes into the building of a coffee-bar. And this transient thing is making a bigger contribution to our visual climate than any of the traditional fine arts.

~~The fine artist underestimates what his patron is being sold by other people.~~ The fine artist is often unaware that his patron, or more often his patron's wife who leafs through the magazines, is living in a different visual world. The pop-art of today, the equivalent of the Dutch fruit and flower arrangement, the picture of the second rank of all renaissance schools, and the plates that first presented to the public the wonder of the machine age and the new territories, is to be found in today's glossies/- bound up with a throw-away object.

As far as architecture is concerned the influence on mass standards and mass aspirations of advertising is now infinitely stronger than the pace setting of avant-garde architects, and it is taking over the functions of social reformers and politicians. Already the mass production industry ^{has} revolutionised half the house - kitchen, bathroom, utility room, and garage - without the intervention of the architect, and the curtain wall and the modular pre-fabricated building are causing us to drastically revise our attitude to the relationship between architecture and industrial production.

By fine art standards the modular pre-fabricated building, which by its nature can only approximate ~~even~~ to the ideal ~~shape~~ shape for which it is intended, must be a bad building. Yet generally speaking the schools and garages which have been built with these systems lick the pants off the fine art architect operating in the

the field. They are especially successful in their modesty, the way with which they fit into the built hierarchy of ~~a~~^a community.

In theory the curtain wall too cannot be successful, for the building is wrapped round with a screen whose dimensions are unrelated to ^{its} ~~the~~ form and organisation. But the best post-war office block in London is one which is virtually all curtain wall. As this building has no other quality ^{apart from} ~~except for~~ its curtain wall, how is it that it puts to shame other office buildings which have been elaborately worked over by respected architects and by the Royal Fine Arts Commission?

THESE / JAPANESE / IN THE / TWENTIES "JAPAN" WAS THE JAPANESE
house of the prints and paintings, the house with its roof off, the
plane bound together by thin black lines. (To quote Gropius "the whole
country looks like one gigantic basic design course.") In the thirties
Japan meant gardens, the garden entering the house, the tokonoma.

For us it would be the objects on the benches, the piece of paper blowing about the street. the throw-away object and the package.

For today we collect Ads.

Ordinary life is receiving powerful impulses from a new source. Where thirty years ago architects found in the field of the popular arts techniques and formal stimuli, today we are being edged out of our traditional role by the new phenomenon of the popular arts - advertising.

Mass production advertising is establishing our whole pattern of life - principles, morals, aims, aspirations, and standard of living. We must somehow get the measure of this intervention if we are to match its powerful and exciting impulses with our own.

3*

The industry

In this sense, the step proposed by the Smithsons through *But today we collect* Ads started from a consideration of the object as something “real” and directly usable. Escaping from its allegorical variables, the object was interpreted for the first time as a material capable of forming by itself a new architectural strategy, this time based on the objects provided by the new mass culture. In its most obvious version, represented by furniture, household appliances and prefabricated construction elements, the object was appropriated by the domestic space from its industrial nature, anonymous and far from that old need of the Modern Movement to achieve the absolute design and the total work of art. Unlike these assumptions in which the furniture and the gadget were understood either as equipment - that is, as an element belonging to the building - or as an element exclusively designed for a specific place, the Smithsons' object was born from an intentional loss of status¹⁰ and design, from which it could be used in its anonymous, standard and, in short, prefabricated version.

(...) To both purism and Bauhaus, furniture was “equipment”. But for us, looking back over 30 years, it is obvious that it was realm “anonymous equipment” but furniture as in any other period. It was in the same aesthetic and carries the same idea as the architecture”.

(...)

“For the architects of the twenties real anonymous hardly existed. On the one hand, things they selected like the sink, and white tiles, were craft objects retaining something from the unself-conscious phase of the industrial revolution. On the other hand, the appliances they chose – cooker with plain “functional” shapes were an accident in the industry, as much due to naïveté and disorganization as to any desire of clean lines.”¹¹

“One of the fundamental tenets of the old Modern Architecture was the industrialization of building, and in the absence of genuinely industrialized building techniques the architects of the twenties concerned themselves primarily with creating a formal language in the spirit of the machine. This language was no child of real technology ”. ¹²

4*

House of the Future + Appliance Houses

In this sense, the first examples provided by the Smithsons in favor of this new truly industrial architecture were to emerge precisely in 1956, the year of the publication of *But today we collect* Ads. Headed by the House of the Future of that same 1956 (fig. 4) and the Appliance Houses drawn between 1956 and 1959, this series of projects would be the beginning of a way of doing whose

theoretical framework had been established in the article that has motivated this analysis. Thus, in the first place, The House of the Future -understood in a certain sense as the predecessor of the Appliance Houses- was based on a unique concept: the household appliance as an industrial object generating architectural space. By rejecting any element that was not considered a machine, the house completely eliminated the distinction between traditional furniture and equipment and conceived itself as a homogeneous assembly - similar to a boat, a car or a submarine- where the movable and fixed elements were fused. From this point of view, even the most characteristic objects of domestic life, such as the bed or the table, were transformed into simple household appliances, giving rise, at least metaphorically¹³, to Le Corbusier's dream of a true living machine.

Secondly, the first projects of the so-called Appliance Houses, apparent heirs of the House of the Future, nevertheless managed to introduce revealing changes. Thus, The Snowball Appliance House (1956)(fig. 5) replaces, in a symbolic and significant way, the space destined to the garden in the House of the Future by an open, free area without specific planning. The movable objects, now encapsulated in forms similar to prefabricated caves, are no longer fixed to the perimeter and acquire the capacity to occupy the central space of the floor plan. Even more eloquently, the 1958 Strip Appliance House (fig.6) moves the prefabricated cubicles completely away from the perimeter, allowing some functional capsules to be dispersed in intermediate areas. The proposal therefore starts with the grouping of appliances and other prefabricated elements in cubicles (called Appliance Cubicles by the Smithsons), which leave an open and available space around them. The residual, along with everything that Western culture used to associate with concealment, thus became the central axis of a floor plan design strategy whose main objective was to preserve flexible space.

These floor plan layouts would be accompanied by their respective proposals in section, as well as their constructive approaches. Regarding the section, the project description included in the article The Appliance House¹⁴ specified the need for general, zenithal and artificial lighting that would reach each of the spaces in the house, including the storage cubicles. This statement, which could not be cross-checked with any section as these were not provided in the project documentation, nevertheless led to the assumption that these cubicles did not reach, at least for the most part, to touch the roof slab. This hypothesis, which clearly accompanies the idea of a continuous house -of "loose" cubicles in the middle of a free floor- would be confirmed when analyzing the construction system of the house. In it, the resolution of the roof slab by means of a single slab, responsible for resolving the existing light between the lines of support (facades and party walls) allowed maintaining absolute independence between the envelope of the house and its interior cubicles. As Nieves Fernández Villalobos¹⁵ points out, this independence ensured that two of the essential principles of the project - flexibility and prefabrication - were consolidated.

This self-sufficiency made the cubicles, prefabricated pieces of white Formica, the true replaceable and obsolescent elements of the project. Thus, if in the House of the Future it was the entire house that, in an obvious concession to consumerist principles, was understood as a disposable object, it was now the cubicles, those great accumulators of server spaces, that bore witness to the influence that prefabrication and the consumer society were having on the Smithsons.

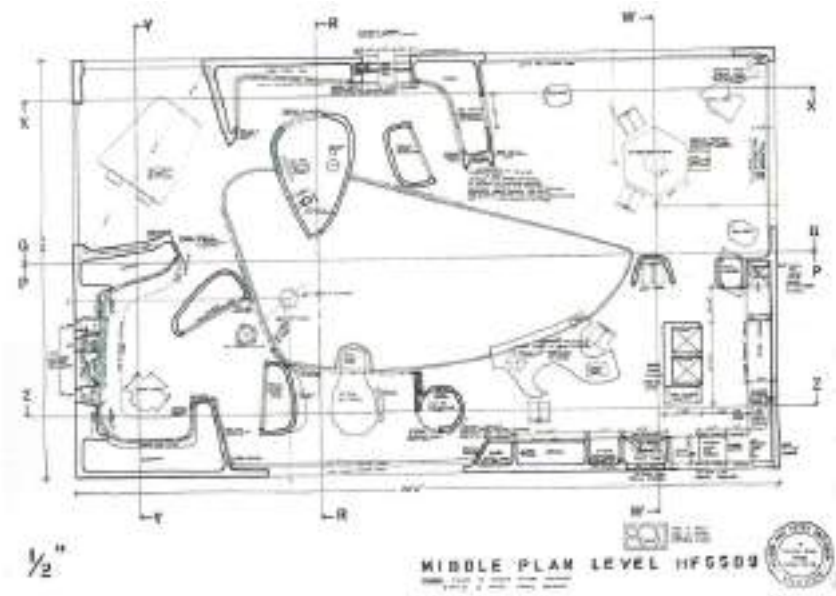


FIGURA 4 » House of the Future. Alison and Peter Smithson. 1956



FIGURA 5 » Snowball Appliance House. Alison and Peter Smithson. 1956

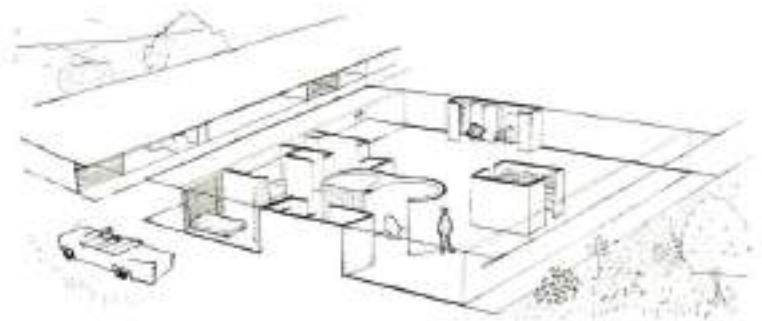


FIGURA 6 » Strip Appliance House. Alison and Peter Smithson. 1958

Towards a definitively industrial architecture

In conclusion, it is necessary first of all to emphasize the importance of a text in whose essence we find not only an interesting reflection on the influence of the consumer society on the architecture of the 1950s, but also some of the fundamental principles that were already governing the architecture of Alison and Peter Smithson and that would govern an important part of postwar domestic architecture. These principles were built as this text has tried to convey around an object or collection of objects that the Smithsons had simply called ads. In this sense, ads were, for the British couple, nothing more than those new products (household appliances, light mass-produced furniture, standardized construction solutions, etc.) in whose combination it was possible to imagine a new, truly industrialized architecture.

This new architecture would not be a pop architecture, at least from the aesthetic and conceptual point of view imagined by Banham, but pop in terms of the pictorial method used, the collage, which had in its *raison d'être* the grouping of existing objects. These, integrated into the architecture through standardized elements and above all autonomous to the envelope, as had occurred in the House of the Future and in the Household Appliance Houses from 1956 to 1958, allowed the birth of a spatial strategy in which the configuration of objects -especially household appliances- would be able to create a new spatial order independent of the usual hierarchy made up of partitions and walls. As Professor Juan Herreros¹⁶ points out in this regard, it would be this transformation -the one caused by the independence of the movable from the immovable- the one responsible for opening a new path that would transform the traditional typological system governed by partitions into a topological system governed by the association of objects.

Ultimately, these objects, the product of a consumer society whose essence was the industrialization longed for by the Smithsons, were to be, as we have stated, the spur towards an architecture that, unlike that proposed by the Modern Movement, would finally be built around a process of true industrialization. In this sense, and accompanying Alison's previously mentioned words, we can understand *But Today We Collect Ads* as a manifesto in which, far from being associated with the fascination for pop and consumerism, the Smithsons bet definitively on a truly industrial architecture. Compared to it, the architecture built by the Modern Movement could be interpreted as a pre-industrial movement, with artisanal roots, conceptually belonging to the beaux arts, and for which the use of technology had been only an allegorical phenomenon. A movement in which metaphorical objects were to give way to industrial objects and in which Le Corbusier's dwelling machine would finally transcend the world of connotation to become a tangible reality. A movement that the Smithsons needed to understand as heir to the architecture of the late nineteenth century, in order to build, at last, an architecture consistent with the industry of the twentieth century.

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1 SMITHSON, Alison; SMITHSON, Peter. "But today we collect ads". ARK. Nº. 18 (1956)

2 Ibid.

3 The Independent Group was founded in 1952 by some of the most promising artists and architects of the new post-war generation in the United Kingdom. Among them were Reyner Banham, Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson and the Smithsons themselves. Between 1952 and 1956, the year of its dissolution, the group's artistic production would be represented through various manuscripts, paintings, drawings, collages and above all through two temporary exhibitions: *Parallel of Life and Art* (1953) curated by Alison and Peter Smithson, Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson and *This is Tomorrow* (1956) in which a group already practically dissolved would participate in two separate teams. We can consider the artistic contribution of the Independent Group as the first manifestation of pop art in European history.

4 SMITHSON, Alison; SMITHSON, Peter. "But today we collect ads". ARK. Nº. 18 (1956)

5 Ibid.

6 In relation to this concept, the theorist Dirk Van den Heuvel expressed: "In later years, the Smithsons themselves expressed discontent at being classified as promoters of Pop Art. They disapproved of complete submission to this new consumer and its technological innovations, the likes of which boy band Archigram would propagate in the not-too distant future. Even *But Today we collect Ads* reveals a sense of reservation rather than unconditional acceptance." See: VAN DEN HEUVEL, Dirk; RISSELADA, Max. *From the house of the future to a house of today*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2010. p. 78.

7 As can be seen in the penultimate paragraph of page 3 of the original typescript of *But today we collect ads* the phrase "We are looking to the pop art more urgently and with less assurance" is written and in turn crossed out by the authors. The version published in November 1956 does not include it (fig. 3).

8 SMITHSON, Alison; SMITHSON, Peter. "But today we collect ads". ARK. Nº. 18 (1956)

9 Proof of this distancing was the CIAM X, held in Dubrovnik in August 1956, the same year the article was published, in which the Smithsons led the critique of the postulates promoted by the masters of the Modern Movement.

10 On this subject, see: BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *Le système des objets*. París: Éditions Gallimard, 1968.

11 SMITHSON, Alison; SMITHSON, Peter. "The future of furniture". *Architectural Design*. (1958)

11 SMITHSON, Alison; SMITHSON, Peter. *Changing the Art of Inhabitation*. Mies pieces, Eames dreams, The Smithsons. London: Artemis, 1994.

13 In a metaphorical way since the house is actually a very handcrafted house. Unable to build it in plastic as planned, the House of the Future is actually a handcrafted wooden construction.

14 SMITHSON, Alison; SMITHSON, Peter. "The Appliance House". *Architectural Design*. (1958). P.177

15 FERNÁNDEZ VILLALOBOS, Nieves. *La Casa del Futuro de Alison y Peter Smithson*. Barcelona: Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, 2012.

16 HERREROS, Juan. "Espacio doméstico y sistemas de objetos". *Otra mirada*. Posiciones contracrónicas (1993).

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