

Ori Gersht

The Knowledge Factory

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Untitled from the series *The Knowledge Factory*, 1999-2001

Ori Gersht's latest work perpetuates his concerns with nationalism, modern architecture and European societies in the aftermath of war. Modernist architecture first surfaced as a motif in a show at the Andrew Mummery Gallery in 1999. Towering blocks of shell-damaged flats, built outside Sarajevo in the 'international style', supplied Gersht with a powerful ready-made metaphor. The shell-blasted edifices, once the proud manifestation of Tito's Communist ideology, now stood as its indictment; yet, perversely, they persisted to function as dwellings.

In his recent book, Richard Hill argued that modern architecture's great project has been to negotiate between aesthetics and use. One way of thinking about Ori Gersht's work with architecture is as an extended engagement with the tensions between the designers of buildings and their inhabitants.

Gersht continues to photograph the most unloved modernist buildings. The new pictures, taken in Kent, focus on 'prefab' schools which were hastily erected during the years following the Second World War. The series title, *The Knowledge Factory*, comes from the headline of one of many articles in the architectural press that exhorted young architects to help rebuild Britain's schools. Under the Butler Education Act of 1944, local education authorities were faced with large building programmes for new schools during a time of significant material and labour shortages. In the London area alone, out of 1,200 schools in use in 1939, 1,150 were damaged or demolished.

The term knowledge factory evokes modernism's fateful passion for mass production and systemisation (perhaps best summed up by Le Corbusier's suggestion that the home should be "a machine for living in"). The theoretical/aesthetic case for the use of prefabrication and industrial materials had, of course, been argued from the 1920s. "Construction has discovered its methods," wrote the utopian Le Corbusier, "which in themselves mean a liberation that earlier ages sought in vain."

Now, as if to parody this misplaced glorification of machine culture, Ori Gersht employs a systematic style of photography which gives a generic styleless look to all subjects. The framing has the effect of

re-presenting these buildings (perhaps ironically) as self-contained art objects. The pictures allude to the idealised representation of the architect's plan.

In the catalogue to his current exhibition Gersht has imposed a certain rigidity and repetition in the display, which signifies the schematic nature of the original design and building of the knowledge factories. Most photographs are straight-on views but some offer more general prospects of the schools – set behind brick walls, or situated near other dull cuboid buildings. The sheer lack of variation within the type and the limited relationships between buildings and their surroundings reminds us that these were the lowliest progeny of the great masters. In one picture water can be seen lying on a flat roof. The architect Rod Hackney once observed that flat roofs, though crucial to the overall modernist aesthetic, were inappropriate for the wet British climate, and tended to leak, causing misery.

Photography inevitably makes us all passive viewers of architectural façades. Yet Gersht's pictures of architecture also engage us with the human lives inside. They do this by setting up a contrast between 'flawed' people and 'perfect' idealised surroundings. The visible traces of any inhabitants will always appear 'subversive' and quirky, which acts as a trigger for possible narratives.

The Danish architect, Arne Jacobsen, is reported to have pestered owners of homes he designed by knocking on their doors to ask them to remove curtains which he thought spoiled the effect of the façade. In Sarajevo the people who insist in making a life among the burnt-out balconies still appear to be involved in subverting the hated Stalinists who designed their surroundings.

Gersht's new pictures are eerily depopulated, so evidence of human presence is minimal, understated and consequently 'typical' of English culture. Conflicts about order and subversion undoubtedly play themselves out in these surroundings, yet the only evidence is the rakish angle of a half-hitched venetian blind through a classroom window. For Gersht, as for other contemporary photographers, modern architecture is rich with meanings. He sees his role as activating these associations.