Architecture for your eyes / Architecture to look at
On Wesley Meuris’s architectural sculptures

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Ever since sculpture broke away from architecture, the relationship between the two disciplines has remained problematic. Architects tend to envy artists for their (artistic) freedom; artists often react against the dominant presence of the space that has been created for their art. The works of the Flemish artist Wesley Meuris (°Lier, 1977) are often characterised as ‘deconstructing installations with an architecturally-critical dimension.’ He does not so much deconstruct architecture as our conditioned way of looking at it. With his work, he teaches us how to look at architecture – obviously critically, but above all without prejudice, with an open mind and with pleasure.

Of course, Wesley Meuris is not an architect; he does not have a profession with legally determined technical, legal and social responsibilities. Using the artist’s freedom and lack of obligations he does not create architecture to live in, but to look at. In doing this, he is in good company: for Le Corbusier, “construction serves to keep the building standing, architecture stirs our emotions”, and according to Ruskin, “looking at architecture should contribute to health, strength and spiritual enjoyment.”

Wesley Meuris’s work includes installations, sculptures and drawings – both design sketches for objects to be constructed and drawings of imaginary architecture. Originally, Wesley Meuris made models, but soon his projects grew into life-size objects. His earliest works were sanitary constructions and swimming pools. At the NICC in Antwerp he built a Urinal (2002) and in the medieval village Ename (near Oudenaarde) he constructed a Trench Latrine (2004). A footbath reconstructed from wood and glass tiles (Footbath, 2002) measures 2.25 m x 7.2 m x 15 cm (7.4 ft x 23.6 ft x 6 in) and holds 350 litres. Two years later, in Willebroek, he renovated a Swimming Pool (2004) measuring 12.5 m x 25 m x 3 m (41 ft x 82 ft x 9.8 ft). In a corridor of the Kortrijk university campus he built seventeen blue-green changing cubicles. Wesley Meuris’s architectural shapes are both highly recognisable and yet alienating. At first sight they seem to be a good illustration of the simulacrum theory that has become trendy in the arts since the 1980s. A simulacrum is a copy of reality that has lost its relation with the reality it represents. In spite of – or maybe thanks to – the perfect similarity, the object becomes an independent phenomenon. Postmodernists have used simulacula to point out the artificial character of reality. Under the influence of the media, reality is being defined to fit the way in which it is being represented. As such, reality is defined as that of which an equivalent representation can be made. Thus the difference between reality and its representation becomes less clear-cut; the same happens to the difference between reality and fiction, between original and copy, between ‘true’ and ‘false’. Art disappears into reality, becoming nearly invisible.

At the same time, the works of Wesley Meuris fit neatly into the discourse of modern and contemporary sculpture. His ‘sculptures’ evoke associations with the 1960s environments, Marcel Broodhaers’ 1970s Décors and the 1980s furniture sculptures by Artschwager, Schütte, Mucha or Jan Vercruysse. The fact
that he created a ‘urinal’ early in his career can hardly be a coincidence. It is only a small step from ready-made to simulacrum.

Among his most well-known works are the so-called animal enclosures we all know from zoos. Their function is not only to lock up the animals in the best possible conditions, but also to exhibit them. Inspired by the way man looks at nature and the way in which man literally tries to catch nature, to colonise and domesticate it, these cages in themselves provide a beautiful image of the age-old conflict between nature and culture – a conflict that also rages in the arts. Yet at the same time we also look at ourselves and ask ourselves the question to what extent the architecture in which we have to live is artificial, and whether it is comfortable (as cages are supposed to be) and actually meets our needs.

Some authors see these cages as a metaphor of present-day architecture and its limitations; others see them as a metaphor of the museum and of looking at art. Indeed, zoos are not only constructed for the comfort of the animals, but even more for the observation comfort of visitors. As the animals’ comings and goings are carefully checked, so the movements of the visitors are conditioned by this carefully controlled architecture, and their observation is guided.

For years Wesley Meuris worked on his Zoological Classification (2006). It is an inventory of the animal kingdom, relating every animal to the specific ways and conditions in which it can be exhibited in enclosures. Each animal is given an enclosure with specific measurements (surface area, volume, water surface area, ...), made in specific materials (stone, bamboo, water, ice, ...), provided with a specific atmosphere (temperature, humidity, light, air, ...), special care (food, drink, treatment, cage hygiene, ...) and a specific relationship with the public (visibility, distance, interaction, danger, smell, sound, ...). This inventory led to a series of drawings of enclosures and aquariums, some of which later got life-size realisations.

He made his first enclosure for Galago crassicaudata (2005), a kind of monkey from Southeast Africa. Later, there were enclosures for the Arctic fox (Alopex lagopus, 2006), Doria’s tree kangaroo (Dendrolagus dorianus, 2005), the okapi (Okapi johnstoni, 2007) and the Pygmy Hippo (2007). At the Freestate exhibition in the former military hospital in Ostend, he showed a day enclosure for Bolivian squirrel monkeys (Cage for Saimiri Boliviensis, 2006) and a Nocturnal enclosure for Red-Legged Pademelon (2006). In an enclosure for nocturnal animals, the pattern is reversed: during the daytime, when the zoo is open to the public, the cages are dark so that the visitors can see the animals move about in a simulated dusk; at night, when the visitors have gone, the lights are switched on and the animals can go to sleep. For Australian animals, however, there’s a double reversal: when it’s daytime in their native country, it is night in Europe. The day enclosure created for the squirrel monkeys is situated in the same time-space as the observer, whereas in the night enclosure of the pademelon, the day/night pattern is reversed, separating time and space. Also in the museum, the time-space of the work of art is not always the same as the visitor’s.

Signposts with didactic information (species, origin, geography, behaviour, diet, ...) and diagrams with a scientific look to them – in his Nocturnal Light System for Night Cage the amounts of light, humidity and heat necessary for the animal in question at certain times of the day and the year can be read from graphs – stimulate the imagination and increase credibility. Nevertheless, these cages are still desolate constructions, with not a single animal in sight, nor any leftover food or droppings. For lack of animals we end up watching the ‘architecture’. 
By definition, art is autotelic, always referring to itself. As such, the animal enclosures can also be seen as autonomous sculptures; the stress is on aesthetic qualities transcending any form of referential anecdote, such as form, colour, volume, composition, material, balance or relationship with space. As is the case with the drawings, the formal language of the sculptures is pretty strict, allowing the artist to create a certain distance towards the subject, making it more abstract. Is this work about the animal, the cage, the sculpture, the architecture, the art, the artist or the audience? In form, these enclosures remind us of constructivist sculptures from a period in which art as utopia had an important value for society. Here, this utopian architecture becomes a symbol of captivity.

In texts about Wesley Meuris’s work, the name of the German architect Ernst Neufert is often mentioned. This should hardly be surprising, as Wesley Meuris is fascinated by standard measurements and Neufert gained notoriety with his 1936 Bauentwurfsllehre or Architects’ data. This publication on rationalisation by standardisation and prescriptive rules in architecture remains a standard work within the rational-technical development of modernist architecture. In its index, we find both models for theatres and museums and for swimming pools and installations for animals.

Seventy years later, this amazing book is in its thirty-fifth edition. Because of its clear concept and rational intent, its urge for exhaustiveness, its both didactic and professional set-up – qualities that may also be ascribed to Meuris’s work – it remains a useful book today in spite of its somewhat naive approach to architecture. The fact that Neufert worked with both Walter Gropius and Albert Speer situates his work at the same time in a modernist and an ideological framework. The consequences of the modernist ideology remain a thorny issue, which also occupies Wesley Meuris.

Neufert called his work a doctrine based on a continuous evolution in the service of progress. Meuris questions exactly this progress. The elements of the project described by Neufert are, just as with Meuris, consciously reduced to their essence, schematised and abstracted. Neufert did not intend to push the user into copying his models, but rather to make this user give them form and content. Similarly, Meuris also forces us to give meaning to his work. His most recent drawings lead towards a taxonomy of architecture. After the classification of animals, which in itself was already a classification of their habitats, Wesley Meuris now focuses on the classification of architecture. As such, the science of arranging, collecting, archiving, classifying and coding does require some imagination.

Both zoos and museums are part of the ‘show society’ and the ‘entertainment industry’. Their design fits the ‘entertainment architecture’ criticised by Wesley Meuris in his recent work. Titles such as The Incredible Nightlife in the Tropical Forest (Stuk, Leuven, 2007) serve to focus our attention on the spectacular aspects of exoticism. Visit the world in one hour and observe the creatures in their artificial biotope, announcing his World Enclosure (Graz, 2006), in which nine different biotopes were presented (mountains, prairies and savannahs, tropical forest, coast, seas and oceans, polar regions, cities and suburbs, deserts and northern woods), seems to come straight from a tourist brochure.

Recently, under the title We believe in our idea that an exhibition could be fun for everyone, he exhibited a series of design drawings in Antwerp, of buildings with a high entertainment value, such as King Waldo’s Castle, the kingdom of pleasure, The Golden Coat of Mail, the ultimate gambling hall or Damoralli’s Bordello, a
luxury brothel where – according to the accompanying text – members of the royal family, politicians, writers
and artists are regular customers.

The title of the exhibition was inspired by a quote attributed to Walt Disney: “We believe in our idea: a
family park where parents and children could have fun together”. The result is a virtual funfair for adults,
warmly recommended in the accompanying texts. The romantic architecture, modelled after Ludwig II of
Bavaria’s castle Neuschwanstein, is an easy sales pitch. It is the same castle as the one used by Walt Disney both
for the logo of his multi-million enterprise and as the model for the castle of Sleeping Beauty.

The entertainment architecture of Wesley Meuris is a golden cage. With his borrowings of nineteenth-
century castles – which in turn go back to medieval fortresses with battlements, moats and drawbridges – he
evokes impregnable fortresses in which we feel protected from the dangers of the evil world outside. His ‘ideal’
architecture is anything but ideal. His entertainment architecture shows the same ambiguity as the zoo. We lock
away animals because we love them, for the protection and preservation of the species, but also for our own
entertainment. Just like the zoo, Wesley Meuris’s entertainment architecture is both funfair and Garden of Eden,
but also ghetto and prison. It is an implicit compromise between absolute freedom and the freedoms we have to
give up in order to preserve it.