

Wittgenstein the architect

Bernhard Leitner, *The Architecture of Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Documentation*. London: Studio International; Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1973. Eng./Ger. text. 128 pages, 88 reproductions. \$9.95. Distributed in Canada by artscanada, 129 Adelaide W., Toronto 1; in U.S. by Jaap Rietman Inc., 157 Spring St., New York, NY 10012.

The hagiographies of Wittgenstein now reach solemnly and resolutely far beyond his philosophical career, and *The Architecture of Ludwig Wittgenstein* may look to be a further attenuated product of the dubious industry. It is not: the author rightly has not allowed himself to be impressed by the enigmas of the philosophical genius, and the architecture which he presents has a compellingness which does not merely derive

from its being Wittgenstein's.

In 1926, Paul Engelmann, Wittgenstein's architect friend, was contracted to design the Vienna family home for Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein (an elder sister of Wittgenstein). But during the two years which it took finally to realize the project, Wittgenstein himself increasingly came to provide the dominant influence, and, indeed, by 1928, was signing himself "Architekt". Leitner's study concerns Wittgenstein's two-year enthusiasm, and usefully presents reproductions of the ground plans and elevations for the house, together with many photographs of the interior.

The "hausgewordene Logik" as it was described by another Wittgenstein sister, Hermine, has two special fascinations. In the first place, the severe and ingenious technical demands made by Wittgenstein were a constant challenge to the skills of the craftsmen employed in the actual construction. Wittgenstein would insist on the finest tolerances, even in the most minor details, and responded sharply to the locksmith who imprudently suggested that one millimetre could not really be so important in a keyhole; similarly radiators which were designed to fit the corners of the breakfast room - an idea which, while extremely functional, produced surprisingly elegant objects - had to be engineered outside Austria. Second, and more significantly, the total conception of the house reveals Wittgenstein's unflinching aesthetic sensibility. European architecture of the 1920s was increasingly influenced by Cubism (Engelmann himself was a student of the early cubist architect Adolf Loos), but Wittgenstein's aims indicate something deeper than mere discipleship, for his house can be seen as an anticipation of the Suprematist forms which later came to modify the linear repetitiveness of Cubism. (Malevich, the original Suprematist, had aroused much interest in Suprematist theory with his 1922 exhibition in Berlin.)

The Architecture of Ludwig Wittgenstein includes a splendid and elegantly written extract from Hermine Wittgenstein's "Family Recollections", and the picture which she presents of her brother during this period has tones of perceptiveness and authenticity which, one hopes, will be utilised in B.F. McGuinness's forthcoming official biography. The extract contains a charming story of an early meeting between Wittgenstein and Russell, at which Russell informed Hermine, "We expect the next big step in philosophy to be taken by your brother." It is doubtful that even Russell's faith in the twenty-three year old extended, however, to the belief that one day a house which his pupil had designed should be designated of national interest by the Vienna Landmark Commission.

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