

We Work In A Fragile Material
We Built This City
2009

Think of London, small city Dark in the daytime
People sleep in the daytime If they want to I'm
checking them out I got it figured out Some good
points; some bad points But it all works out Find a
city - find a city to live in I will find a city - find a city
to live in
- Talking Heads

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Gottfried Semper postulated that all architecture is descended from a "primitive hut," a simple framework of sticks hung with textiles. The memory of patterned hangings, he thought, lingered in every decorated brick or stone wall, while the basic joint of a hut - the meeting between upright post and horizontal beam - was still the core of architectural technique. Every idea about making a building, he argued, was necessarily a variation on this essential theme.

Ever since, narratives about craft and architecture have tended to be about getting back to basics. Heidegger famously wrote about this in his essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*. For him the vernacular architecture of Black Forest peasants was an ideal instance. These human beings built unselfconsciously, in a cyclical manner both organic and practical: "A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse." In the 1980s Kenneth Frampton, an architectural historian strongly influenced by Semper's and Heidegger's thought, has offered the concept of "critical regionalism" as a cure for the late capitalist disease of chronic inauthenticity. He prescribed a "tectonic" method (architekton means "master craftsman" in Greek) in which the specificity of a given site, local materials

and organically evolved building process support one another in a tightly bounded system. And more recently, ecological imperatives have brought a new political urgency to the task of designing architecture in a craftsmanlike way, so that structures are responsive to the availability of materials and are built to last.

But maybe there's another way of seeing the craft of building. And here is where the Swedish art group We Work in a Fragile Material come in. They are a band of assorted designers, potters, sculptors, all trained at in the ceramics and glass department at Konstfack in Stockholm. All have individual studio practices, and only occasionally drop everything to come together and do a project. The best way to understand the group, then, might be to think of them as nine very smart people on vacation from their own cleverness. In the words of one member, the ceramist Pontus Lindvall, "we don't have a manifesto - we have some kind of feeling or having a view of the world in common, but it's not in writing or even agreed upon." Their secret weapon is a headlong collision between great technical competency and utter silliness. So their projects always have an absurdist quality - building a giant troll puppet in New York City as a way of announcing their arrival from Scandinavia; inventing occult rituals atop a mountain in Norway; writhing on their studio floors to the strains of Kylie Minogue's pop song "Slow"; and now - for their first visit to London - building a city in four days.

The chosen material will be papier mâché. None of the group has worked extensively in this medium before, but it suits them well: it is impermanent and impulsive stuff, hard to take too seriously. (When I asked Lindvall whether the group was interested in its association with children's crafts, he replied, "working in ceramics is not really for grownups anyway. Maybe we're immune.") While it would be foolish to try to predict the outcome of this experiment - WWIAFM is all about making it up as you go along - the mere proposition of "dwelling" in a gallery, far from home, in a manifestly unlivable jerry-built pseudo structure, suggests that the result will be a long ways off from Heidegger's solemn essentialism. Maybe it will be closer to the

postmodern spirit of the 1979 Talking Heads song "Cities," which voiced the pervasive homesickness, and also the excitement and curiosity, of an age of expatriates. David Byrne sang about London as one choice on an endless shopping list; it seems likely that the papier mâché city, too, will seem distinctly optional.

We Work in a Fragile Material is sometimes tarred with the brush of "relational aesthetics," which is already stiff from overuse, and it would be tempting to say that for them building is actually only a pretext to create social interactions. But this is slightly off the mark. They don't involve members of the public in their constructions, and when it comes to the interpersonal effects of their work they aren't idealistic or utopian. They really are interested in their projects while they are doing them. In this case, the fascination lies in the building: in learning a new technique, and in the forms that will be developed over the course of the four days. In this way, like Semper, they want to observe architecture evolving before their eyes, as if from scratch. So they do have in mind a kind of primitivism. What differentiates their project from most encounters between craft and architecture, though, is that they do not think of craft as something rooted. They see their skills are infinitely portable, and architecture as a technique of dislodgment. Over the course of an uncertain, inventive four day period, they'll need to rely on nothing but their own skills, and on one another. Their material may be fragile, and the results of their labour will be in the rubbish bin a week from now. But for a few days at least, they will be able to stand proudly self-reliant, despite the fact that like all of us they are (as another notable song about cities had it) "knee deep in the hoopla."

- Glenn Adamson