

Buildings Are Not Enough

by David Bostanashvili

The series of sentences that can be inspired from the phrase “buildings are not enough” is probably endless. If we leave the field of language and consider images, videos, and physical objects as signs, we will see that this phrase can produce not only linguistic statements, but also objects, images, and videos. In this article, I will only be sampling a few texts. Apart from one, they are all remindful of Le Corbusier’s Dom-ino house (bare frame, or “black carcass” in Georgian).

N003: “Buildings are not enough” – Society suffers from a lack of constructed spaces. Buildings cannot be constructed in sufficiency, and a large part of society is still living in improvised shelters.

N004 “Buildings are not enough” – Buildings are enough, everyone has a defined space, but not a home. Buildings are not enough to provide people with an “existential foothold” in the world.

N005: Humans dwell in the environment, and not in buildings. Therefore, buildings are not enough.

N006: “Buildings are not enough” – architectural thinking is broad and covers many aspects, and focusing it on buildings alone leads to great loss.

N003

French industrialist François Coignet is known as a pioneer; in 1855, he became the first person to use reinforced concrete for the construction of a building. As for French gardener Joseph Monier, he is known by one and all as the inventor of reinforced concrete, for which he got a patent in 1877. All this was followed by technical progress, and reinforced concrete soon became an intrinsic part of the construction industry. Its architectural conceptualization demanded a different style of thinking.

In the years 1914-15, Le Corbusier would not only turn reinforced concrete into a new paradigm of architectural design, but also create a sort of mechanism that would fully define the fate of urban production. In his “Dom-ino House”, which was built as a two-story bare frame, he neglected traditional categories of architecture (bearing walls, hatches and their proportions, or the façade). It is paradoxical, but even the most fundamental notion of function itself lost its importance, and became “liquid” in essence: the radically utilitarian character of a bare frame offers the possibility to endow it with any function, and therefore also none at all.

The Dom-ino House isn’t a mere innovative construction scheme, or the presentation of a new technique of construction. The Dom-ino House represents the transformation of the notion of house. And this very fact illustrates the radicalism of modernity.

The idea that a house is a “machine for living in” went beyond the framework of house production, and led to a whole new mechanism, which includes the planning process, production, consuming, buying and selling, mortgage, distribution, renting, taking over, lodging, and reprogramming.

Dom-ino is pure architecture, it is not (or is no longer) a mere building. To tell it as a metaphor: the bare frame (Dom-ino) is potential energy, while the

building is a kinetic one. Buildings are not enough. We need something that is less than a building – a bare frame (or black carcass, as it is called in Georgian). The buildings can come later. Bare frames will remain forever.

Nobody can remember why the whole city was transformed into one large bare frame. In the seventh row of the fifth zone of the southern sector, I have my own bare frame. The people living around it have left it the way it was. Many of them simply stretched curtains between the two surfaces of concrete. They live like that. If the curtains are drawn, their lives are presented like on a theater stage – with items and furniture scattered here and there. One can still guess what could fill the concrete surface, and where – a sleeping room, reading room, kitchen. It is always like that in our zone. In the eighth zone, people appear to be more determined, as they have done their best to make their bare frames look like buildings. Some have arranged some kinds of wall imitations with old bricks, metal sheets, and plywood.

They say that the northern sector is inhabited by gifted people. They very well understood the economical games that could be played with bare frames – they gather them, multiply them, lose or win them as stakes, buy them to resell them... As for us, we don’t want to play. We miss having a home, and get satisfied with our simulacrum. Some people even say that you wouldn’t be able to recognize the bare frames in some places – their inhabitants have transformed them in wonderful homes, with decorated walls and proportional windows. But if you ask me, this beauty is a lure to the eye, and they are also spending their lives in a bare frame. The building is transient; the bare frame is eternal.

In the beginning, everything was going well. The decision of the Order brought true equality. Every newborn was provided with a bare frame. This was self-evident the unalienable right to live, to be free, and to have one’s own area.¹ And bare frames were providing everybody equally with life under a ceiling, isolation, and floor area. The number of bare frames was increasing in correlation to that of the population. The Order was sternly controlling the production of bare frames – they didn’t want to make the same mistake as their ancestors – excessive production, or when more bare frames are constructed than are needed. The main right of citizens consisted in having a space equivalent to one Dom-ino. No more, no less.

The Order marked the end of buildings. It wiped out the building itself, as an unachievable economical dream and as a cult. They say that there used to be people who claimed to have the knowledge of buildings. They say they were always coyly going to each other – “Look what a beautiful building I have drawn”. They would exhibit these pictures and choose a winner. And they would torment young people, teaching them that they should draw buildings in this way, and not another. But in reality, the building was only an advertisement – a dream. The item it was actually selling was floor area. The words “apartment”, “house”, and “room” have naturally disappeared from the vocabulary of people who never had a place to call home... Everything was transformed into floor area, and its visual hypostasis has become the picture of a building.

It is quite ironic that the Order has taken advantage of a tendency that was already existing. Everything was ready for floor area, which was formerly associated with the image of a building, to be embodied by bare frames. They only removed the ad-

vertising image.

It would be difficult to understand who came up with such a cynical social project (or where this Order came from, or where it went). After all, isn’t living in a bare frame the same as living on an asphalt surface under a bridge? But on the other hand, my “neighbor” reminds me that it’s a thing you call mine. He even has his own aesthetic theories: “And the chaos finally came to an end... All the designers of buildings were doing what they wanted. A bare frame is the ideal aesthetic form. A Cartesian structure in which life flows, with little constructions being added to it – direct representations of life.” He is right on one aspect – the concrete frame is poured in an ideal way, and time cannot take anything away from it. Each line and surface is a direct incarnation of a geometrical ideal. You won’t find one hollowed out centimeter, and it is totally in vain if the rain tries to form puddles.

Nobody can remember when the Order was created, and nobody knows if it still exists today. Today, everything is different. Dom-ino is our kind of currency, a quantity of space made from a frame of concrete – a two-story construction, 6x12.

The whole city is playing with bare frames. They say that this game was allowed by the Order itself, for life to return from the swamps to the current of the river. When everybody has an equal space, any kind of activity ceases. The interdiction to attempt to obtain more space has turned the whole city into isolated ghosts rotting in their frames. Many years after its introduction, a crack appeared in the Order itself: if area to live is the right of every citizen, then it means that attempting to obtain and appropriate a floor area was an innate human need – a sect was stating. Nobody knows whether the sect won or the Order disappeared by itself. After a few decades, nothing was hindering the human desire to try to gain more floor space anymore. But the inheritance that was left from the Order was that buildings had died for good.

Today, everybody owns various quantities of Dom-inos. Last year, I used to own up to 20 Dom-inos myself. I was hoping to gather a hundred of them soon after. But I was wrong. The numbers of the market always change. The price of the Dom-inos change according to the sector of the city. Almost the whole city plays with the bare frame market.²

Right now, I have two Dom-inos left. I am “dwelling” in one, and I am leasing the other one. In the latter, an “industrialist” has now opened a dairy products’ shop. We mockingly call “industrialists” the representatives of the caste which uses space for business. They give up sleep and rest for their activity. The members of this caste ban all trading involving floor areas, saying that work is the natural human condition. And that trading spaces is a mere game. I don’t know their rules very well. Some people say that they miss the times when people were making buildings. A priest was heard stating that without that caste, the trade game would be impossible to play. In order for many to play, a few should work, he said.

N004

“Buildings are not enough” – this is a phrase depicting the chaos in Europe following the Second World War. Especially in Germany, where the whole country was experiencing a lack of apartments. Wohnungsfrage – “the housing question”, is not only the problem that Germany experienced during that period. Nowadays too, one of the most

important matters at hand could be the fact that “buildings are not enough” – which was translated in Georgian as “we don’t have enough floor spaces”, “we need to expand”. This is precisely what Martin Heidegger³ was talking about, when he wrote that being homeless didn’t necessarily mean that there was a lack of buildings. Whatever the number of new buildings being constructed, and to whichever extent their technical-economical parameters are improved, homelessness will remain the main problem. Because buildings are not enough. What we are lacking is not buildings, but the disappearance of the meaning of dwelling and home.

Buildings are a set of technological connotations. They have only one dimension – the physical one. We cannot add another dimension to buildings. The more architecture tries to speak about the conceptual dimension of buildings, the more it will cause irritation, both among consumers (they don’t really own buildings, do they? Or they want more, or they wish to improve them) and professional circles, because with this understanding, buildings are the result of a logical planning process. They are simple. Let’s not accuse them of flirting with concepts.

Instead of taking buildings to conceptual dimensions, it would be better to boldly negate them, in order to return to them later. Heidegger puts forward a phenomenological experience to that purpose. “Back to the things themselves” – these famous words by Edmund Husserl could be rewritten as “back to the buildings themselves”. In order to return to the buildings themselves, we have to distance ourselves from them, so that we can have a fresh look at them (as if it were the first time we saw them), and see buildings completely unencumbered by any kind of technical or design component.

Heidegger thought about the way subjects and physical things are linked to one-another, about the way physical things and humans live in nearness and in interrelationship with one another. Ultimately, for Heidegger’s nearness is a fundamental aspect of human experience. Experience of nearness may be appreciated through the tactile, cognitive and sociological familiarity of things. A thing is enmeshed in existence, bound with intricacies of life’s daily experiences. For Heidegger, the definitive characteristic of a thing is its possibility to bring people nearer to themselves, to help them engage with their existence.

Heidegger frees buildings from architecture. Architecture always passes judgment according

to aesthetic or technological principles, and often ignores humans, which are the dwellers of these places. To Heidegger, the term “architecture” itself is a problem, which is why he uses the words to build and to dwell. In his language, “buildings are not enough” would be rewritten as “buildings as seen and built by architecture are not enough”. We should strip buildings from architecture (as an ideological, rational system) and transfer them to the phenomenological experience of human being. Architecture depreciates the dimension of the latter. For him, one can occupy buildings daily but not feel at home in them or near to them. The philosopher chose his words carefully to outline the sorts of dwelling he found wanting, highlighting technocratic words of which he was critical. He implied that notions such as ‘well planned’, ‘easy to keep’ and ‘attractively cheap’ were missing the point of dwelling. He drew attention to terms like ‘residential’ and ‘housing’ which emphasize production systems over the priorities of human inhabitation. For Heidegger, this contemporary language offered a revealing commentary: it indicated a systemized building industry whereby a distant professional procures buildings for a market of unknown consumers. Heidegger challenged this notion of buildings as products for consumption. It is precisely in this understanding that buildings are not enough. Dwelling means being in a peaceful unity with the world. The term “building”, as used in the fields of construction and architecture, is completely dispossessed of this meaning. Therefore – “buildings are not enough”.

In Heidegger’s writings, the Todtnauberg hut in which he lived for many years holds significant importance. And here too, I was reminded of the Dom-Ino. Both are something different than buildings. Like a hut, a bare frame is a primitive construction. This is what makes its charm. Likewise, the Dom-Inos of Georgia aren’t industrial products; they are works made by the hand of someone, who learned the skill through experience. Both are kind of primeval, and direct. The concept of primitivism brings the Dom-Ino and Heidegger’s hut together. Buildings are completely sloughed down in design, consumerism, and the financial cycles of the market. The hut and the Dom-Ino are completely free of any aesthetic concern. The hut and the Dom-Ino belong to the world of “things themselves”.

In this imagination (#004), the grey surfaces of the bare frame (“black carcass” in Georgian) have resurfaced yet again. Right in front of me, there is a newly poured object of concrete – a Dom-Ino. The bare frame is resting on a green meadow. It doesn’t seem to belong here. If you open eyes at this object, following dreams may come: “I want this. Not to add a beautiful façade to it, to wrap it up warmly, to renovate it, to dwell in it, to lease it. Rather, I want it for what it is. Exactly the way it is. This is already my place.” A bare frame is an object, and it can bring as much joy as a new colorful plastic tractor would to a child. Dom-Ino is that kind of toy.

N005

A building (and its project) can be understood as a whole package. It is a self-contained and complete product. It has concrete boundaries. A concrete purpose. Concrete average consumer. In reality, setting apart buildings from non-buildings (yards, streets, signs) is a vain endeavor.

The concept of “environmental design” has become fashionable in architecture about half a century ago. It is clear that we are dealing with a continuous field of living environment, where it would be impossible to draw borders between the building and the non-building. The environment is a whole, continuous experience. This vision is illustrated in some way in the planning of the Gldani district. A highway, bridge, building, ramp... – they create one giant environment together; the whole neighborhood could be compared to a giant organism. If we listen to that part of the city, we will probably discover exactly that: buildings do not exist. The environment of Gldani exists, as does people’s experience in this environment.

N006

Buildings use almost the whole 100% of architectural energy. Even the energy spent in the theoretical part is ultimately a justification of the mechanism of building production. Creative energies of architecture should be directed towards breaking the established boundaries of architecture. According to the romantic tradition, only art can accomplish a real breakthrough.

Buildings are not enough. Making buildings by fixating thought on building is a foredoomed cycle. The only field that is constantly renewing itself is art. Only by taking a leap into this realm is it possible to return to buildings.

Buildings are not enough – we need images of the buildings. Buildings are not enough – we need to transform buildings into performative acts. Buildings are not enough – we need to narrate buildings.

Premise: if we remove the non-building part from a building, we will be left with a bare frame. In turn, this remainder can become an object for artistic operations.

Script: a sculptor is pouring a bare frame of concrete. The supervision service argues that he is building without a permit. The artist argues that it is an installation. After some time, a homeless person finds refuge in this installation. And we return to the beginning: architecture has always been an installation to live in. A gigantic Folly. The mad thing about this is that Folly is not simply an absurd construction – from one perspective, it is purely a sculpture, and from the other, it is for pure use. There is no synthesis between the two. We could compare this to a person hiding in an enormous cake for a birthday surprise. The aspect of madness lies in the radical dissociation between the cake and the hideout, between the giant sculpture and an eternal resting place, between a bare frame and dwelling. Buildings create the illusion that these two sides are in some way related. To break this illusion – buildings are not enough.

N007

Endnotes:

1. In Georgia home buyers and real estate investors refer to the property as ‘Parti’ – literally translated as area and meaning Net internal area. ‘Parti’ has supplanted from usage words such as house, home, room, dwelling and so on.
2. It is not possible to guess why Dom-Ino’s (speculative) prices are changing, or why they sell, from the narrative
3. Heidegger, Martin. ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ and ‘...Poetically man dwells’ (1951)

