UNPREDICTABLE SPACES. FOR A NONDOMESTICATED USE OF WOOD

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In recent years, wood has been the object of revived attention devoted by the architecture industry as a climate-friendly construction solution: a renewable resource, a sustainable material. with a low carbon impact and low embodied energy. Moreover, wood is light, cheap, and easily accessible: timber construction systems are adaptable and simple to design and realize. This double message conveyed by wood - sustainability and accessibility – is clear and easily marketed by the architectural industry, which exploits in a broad range of projects wood's physical features channeling its use, into productive, repetitive paths, shaped by building regulations. This recurring use of wood interests building systems as well as the codified meanings timber can convey: warmth, simplicity, practicality, and a simplistic reference to "nature" as a salvific counterpart to the unsustainability of urban lifestyles and industrial production. However, the use of wood in the construction domain bears broader meanings. The choice of wood, as well as how wood is employed, is often, more or less explicitly, referred to its potential to evoke the primeval forest and its many implications: an archaic refuge, a primigenial accord to nature that is, the original environment of human stock and many of most valued social concepts^{*}, but also "a space for non-normative relationships, not informed in cultural terms and therefore anarchic, without (human) law" 2, where non-accepted behaviours and inner pulsions are expressible.

Outside the market, where architecture is considered "an expert's art", wood is the primary means of individual expression through the act of building: a cheap, omnipresent resource, easy to manage and use by "untutored builders" A. Indeed, wood is the chosen material for primigenial huts, pioneers' log cabins, children's treehouses, and homeless' shelters: enclaves that accommodate alternatives rules to the environment, time to time the hostile nature, the codified world of adults, the civil society. In many cases, this outsiders' architecture - makeshift dwellings, individual "forts," hideaways - comes from the necessity for a shelter; in others, it is the answer to an expressive urgency of creation and self-definition, the obsession for an alternative. personal ordering principle that finds a way out through architecture. Sometimes, these conditions coincide, and architecture becomes a metaphor for aversion to societal rules, in the form of works that are "too unclassifiable to leave the margins of the classical history of architecture" 1: huts, megastructures, gardens in between architecture and playgrounds, "environments" taking shape day by day, following the evolution of builder's life and mind, in a never-ending accumulation and form-shaping project diverging from the original design—when existing *. Builders fol-

Pilpalossi, built by Vaike Lubi near Suure-Jaani in Viljandi County, Estonia, 1980s. EAM Fk 3729, Estonian Architecture Museum, http://www.muis.ee/museaalview/2632585 (CC0 1.0).

low creative paths led by personal obsessions for shapes, materials, never appeased manias, dreams and childish reminiscences of fairy tales \(\). These environments often propose a non-domesticated use of wood, employed in unexpected, casual, unorthodox systems, on which the action of natural elements, water and wind, intertwines with human work, giving life to "unpredicta-the limit between architecture and nature blurs: human creation handles natural bodies and forms, and nature digests artefacts. This blend is especially evident whenever the builders realize these environments in forests, where they find isolation and can recreate the archetypical hut in the woods as a refuge from society and control, as identification as part of the wild nature in opposition to the hostile city. Through the different use of building materials they make, and the out-of-ordinary creative paths they follow, these builders overlook construction regulations and the rules of cohabitation, in a proclamation of their right to exercise control over their life; consequently, they usually undergo similar patterns of rejection and, time after time, are labeled as fools, weirdos, witches * ↑ − despite being often rehabilitated after their death. Their artefacts raise mistrust among neighbours and are targeted, damaged or destroyed by vandals; the law opposes them as dangerous or illegal; they are forcefully abandoned as a result of injunctions, or left in decay after the death of the master, being slowly reabsorbed by nature. At the same time, these "minor" architectures, as well as their creators, are often surrounded by a mythical aura and attract visitors who, seduced by the forms of an alternative world conceived and built by an "undisciplined" [↑] individual, recognise these environments as free areas, where the suspension of control allows "freer action, as well as free mental reconstruction" ¥ ↓.



Pilpalossi, built by Vaike Lubi near Suure-Jaani in Viljandi County, Estonia, 1980s. EAM Fk 3729, Estonian Architecture Museum, http://www.muis.ee/museaalview/2632585 (CC0 1.0).

she bundled up, up to eight meters \$\frac{1}{2}\$, wood logs, planks, caissons, rods, cartwheels as rose windows * L, wooden ladders and scraps in an ensemble anything but casual: each of the towers "was intended as living spaces and bore a semblance of an architectural style. One looked like a contemporary barn; the other, a functionalist summerhouse; the third, a chalet" ** Existing pictures document Pilpalossi in the Eighties, and, regarding the taller tower, they convey an evident study of the elevations, divided in vertical canvases from the ground to the roof; the identification of a recurring rhythm in the division of such canvases, evoking the façade of a multistorey building; the manufacturing of portions of cladding, in the form of weaved panels of branches; fine control of the proportions of the construction, which plays on different orders in a compact, tall object that looks out of scale but reveals, in the details of the façade, a constant reference to the human size. This allusion to a double proportion seems to refer to a bigger order, a greater system understood just by Lubi and coherent with her "folk deity" I aura, to which she gave shape employing wood and the space of the forest according to personal, indecipherable paths. Thermal performances were a special interest of Lubi, who named her projects Kalorifeerkütte (calorific heating) project and Thermospudel (thermos bottle) project * \(\Lambda \) and is reported mentioning her houses had thermal heating $\hat{\mathbf{x}}$ I, despite the sparse walls of alder. Furthermore, she employed a butterfly roof – made of a tin sheet – particularly suitable in cold climates, as it allows daylight and heat to penetrate the building better. These features, and her knowledge of construction terminology ♀ ¼, corroborate the rumor that Lubi studied Architecture at the University of Riga. The local community was highly interested in Pilpalossi, often visiting Lubi's for social gatherings. She had opponents too: in the Eighties, the local fire department and foresters wanted to tear down the building as a potential fire hazard, but the then renowned forestry minister H. Teder understood the importance of Pilpalossi as a tourist attraction and saved the place from destruction $\hat{\mathbf{x}}$. Later, the municipality issued an injunction to Lubi, forcing her to liquidate Pilpalossi as dangerous for people and polluting the environment \(\hat{\Pi}\). After being accommodated by the municipality in a social apartment – from which she constantly left, going back to the forest, escaping "normalization" $\Re \Lambda$, – living a homeless life and, eventually, returning to Suure-Jaani to live with her relatives, Lubi died in 2019. After her death, Pilpalossi was left in decay and is now destroyed, laying in the forest as a pile of wood and scraps, slowly digested by the soil, the winds, and the rain.

Lubi is a local character slowly getting recognition from the



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architectural domain as a valuable representative of the opposition to the so-called "trained thinking" and as part of the Estonian postmodernist architecture, reconciling the new and the old in a "paradoxical, surprising and interesting way" 21. The Kreisi Foundation – an Estonian family foundation supporting architecture - issues a yearly award devoted to "acknowledge noteworthy phenomena, alternative practices and versatile creators who have remained on the margin of the mainstream Estonian architecture" X t; in an interview called "Acknowledging unnoticed architecture", the board of the Foundation states how built architecture has become "primitive", in the sense that contemporary buildings follow market rules and therefore are all identical: "posts, boards and something around them". "Nutcases" such as Vaike Lubi, whom they consider a hypothetically eligible recipient of their award, are relevant to stress architecture as an intellectual activity: they deviate from the mainstream and practice innovation and divergence in thinking $\hat{\times}$ *.

Different from Lubi's posthumous recognition has been the reception of Elemér Zalotay's self-built house in Switzerland, which obtained appreciation from the architectural community well before the Hungarian architect's death, in 2020. The house was a "certified" architecture, realized by a professional based on a building permit; these characteristics have played an essential role in this recognition, which is being renewed in recent years. Elemér Zalotay fled his country in 1973 and started to build his house in Ziegelried, near Bern, in 1978, developing it until 2017, when he moved to a retirement home. Zalotay's house project integrates many of the ideas on which the architect had been working since the beginning of his career in Hungary: he had mainly focused on elaborating experimental solutions to the housing crisis that arose in Hungary after the Second World War. He devised an ambitious plan for a one-kilometer-long, 30-50 stories-high strip house system, based on Le Corbusier's Unité with an "environmentalist spin" \hat{x} , to concentrate an entire neighborhood in a single housing structure. The strip house would have been located along the Danube, surrounded by woods and hills so that people would benefit from both urban and "wild" living conditions. In Zalotay's words: "one can enjoy the advantages of urban living – if he wishes – but he can also withdraw when he needs quiet as all inhabitants would feel as if their flats were a single unit on a wooded hilltop of the Pilis" \(\hat{\lambda} \). The structural principle is a dwelling suspended on a high-strength but lightweight frame, cost-effective and conceived to have future inhabitants restore or set apartments up by themselves. A successive version of the strip house was equipped with a green façade: "a curtain of



creeper plants hanging in front of the balconies and functioning as a *brise-soleil*, climate control" \[\mathbb{T}\]. When in Switzerland, where no housing crisis was ongoing, Zalotay developed his ideas in the projects of his own home. The lightweight module system on which the house's structure is based is strictly related to the strip house's \[\mathbb{T}\], and the overall process was conducted following a self-building process; a single person could easily transport all the components employed in the house. The two-storey villa is made of a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen/dining room, two bathrooms, a roof terrace overlooking Jura massif, and an atelier. The living room can be separated into two additional bedrooms, with beds built into the ceiling and can be lowered through a mechanical device \[\mathbb{X}\].

The construction of Zalotay's house was never really concluded: after the realization, the villa entered an "open-ended process" \ \ \ \ due to the need to solve several weak points of the building, which the architect, lacking finance, tackled employing scrap materials and unorthodox techniques, in a continuously evolving recycling operation, embracing "accident" and "dissonances" ▮ N. He built an unauthorized ▮ L glass shield on two sides of the house to protect it from overheating and heavy rains; "sewed" breakages with pebbles and cement; included copper and wood additions: "the character of the house slowly but steadily shifted" \$\frac{1}{2}\$ \text{ L}. The outer concretions started to cover the house's interior, following Zalotay's imagination, in an "apparent anarchy and fragmentation"↓ *: a landscape of small stones, objet trouvé, debris recreating inside the house the randomness of the densely overgrown vegetation outside. The architect let this vegetal layer blend with his work, an unplanned synthesis of living wood and architecture enabling the profound need for retirement in the wilderness.

resurgent spirit of enquiry, a renewed interest in space and movement, in the use of real materials – steel, concrete, timber, stone, even plastic, appearing as itself – in a stripping-back towards the essentials of architecture and, most importantly of all, in the dynamism of asymmetry, the very genesis of freedom. A

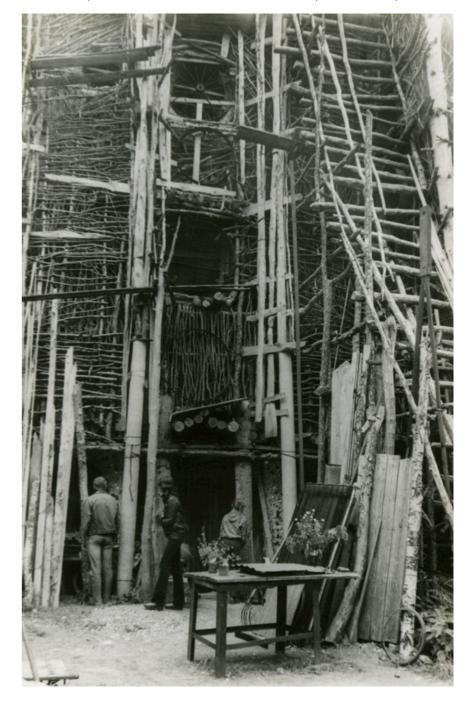
In 1992, Zalotay's house in Ziegelried was placed under pro-

tection for forty years, for its "architectural uniqueness and special approach to material recycling" M*; since August 2022, the house is not under protection anymore, in a state of decay and with an uncertain destiny.

Zalotay's name is raising renewed interest thanks to the work of valorization carried on through research and exhibitions by Bálint Nagy, Júlia Őry, Lóránt Perényi and Elemér Nagy at the FUGA center in Budapest, as well as to the efforts by Tibor Joanelly, who curated the exhibition *Elemér Zalotay: Manic Modern* at BALTSprojects gallery in Zurich in 2021 and at f'ar - forum d'architecture in Lausanne in 2022 \(\hat{R} \). The same scholars are also looking for viable solutions for the preservation of the house in Ziegelried; the latest opportunity has been presented by the Denkmalpflege des Kantons Bern, which is planning to deconstruct the house and rebuild it in another location, possibly at the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne or at the Fachhochschule in Biel \(\hat{M} \).

The cautious recognition accorded in the last years by the architectural community to these works and less controllable, less predictable uses of wood is a sign of needed attention to the formless, the uncertain, the unexpected. In the framework of the environmental crisis, wood is looked at with renewed attention as a sustainable material, able to respond to contemporary instances in a sharper way than heavier materials. In the current condition of instability, however, the idea of sustainability - always intended as environmental, economic, social, and cultural - should involve diversity and flexibility, in order to adapt systems, products, and processes to unknown future conditions and guarantee a complex vision, inclusive of different perspectives, hidden urgencies, alternative lifestyles to a failing status quo. Works such as Lubi's towers or Zalotay's house show how a non-domesticated use of wood in architecture can enable unforeseen ways to inhabit the city and the wilderness, establishing new balances between cohabitation and isolation, weaving new relationships between humans and nature, embracing new temporal dimensions for shelter. Even in mainstream architecture, through the mesh of market and building regulations, some works go beyond the norms ruling the use of wood, giving space to latent needs and potential, uncontrollable deviations from the original design. The 95 Degrees Restaurant by Alexander Brodsky in Pirogovo, near Moscow, stands on a wooden grid with columns slightly inclined – 5 degrees above the vertical – following the pattern of the surrounding trees, in a formal intuition of the author M. Slabs serve as terraces and, here and there, closed volumes appear in a disordered arrangement. Wooden pillars maintain their appearance as tree trunks; knots, scratches, and gnarls are visible in the columns, left raw and untreated as if they were found in the surroundings and put together by a resident, realizing their rickety jetty above the water of the Kljaz'ma, in the Klyazminskoye Nature Reserve. The reference of this project is a kind of structure widespread in Russia 1: temporary, hybrid waterfront structures, with an unclear purpose. When these structures are not used anymore, they are left in decay, decay that Brodsky froze in time in this building in the 5-degree inclination of the load-bearing columns, giving shape to a precarious, but familiar building. A hybrid, referring to the forest and the water, a refuge alluding to an archetype. Like many of Brodsky's works the restaurant was temporary, conceived to last a couple of summers ∧ E; however, it is still standing and in use. Recent pictures show an entirely different visual character from the ephemeral images of the restaurant widespread in the media. An imperfect, low-key, unpolished use of wood allowed a temporary architecture to last, creating the space for it to be light-heartedly adjusted to changing needs, free from the rules of the architectural establishment. In the framework of the contemporary global crisis, in front of the inadequacy of fixed norms to the current unstable conditions, a non-domesticated use of wood in architecture can create the space for the unpredictable, for "the first weak forms of some new thing, a new religion, a new politics" \(\mathbb{\psi} \), protected by the rigid borders of total control.

Pilpalossi, built by Vaike Lubi near Suure-Jaani in Viljandi County, Estonia, 1980s. EAM Fk 12908, Estonian Museum of Architecture, http://www.muis.ee/museaalview/2638539 (CC BY-SA 4.0).



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See R. Banham, Is There a Substitute for Wood Grain Plastic?, in E.A. Anderson, G.F. Earle (eds.), Design and Aesthetics in Wood, State University of New York, New York 1972, reprinted and published in "GAM 17: Wood. Rethinking Material," 2021, p. 58. In this article, Banham writes that "the use and experience of wood is an essential and basic part of the cultural inheritance of all northern, non-Mediterranean peoples" (p. 60) referring to North-Americans as well as to North-Europeans. Due to globalization and the free circulation of ideas and cultural products, the experience of wood is a cultural trait than, even if not shared, is understood also by those referring to a culture "carved in stone [...], the dominant material of the Mediterranean basin – poor in wood in all historic time – from which our conscious culture derives" (p. 58).

PRIN Sylva, Project, 2017, available at: https://sites.google.com/iuav.it/iuav-prin-sylva/

B. Rudofsky, Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture, The Museum of Modern Art; Doubleday, Garden City NY 1964, p. 6.

J. Choppin, N. Delon, Indisciplinés, in Id., Matière Grise. Matériau, réemploi, architecture, Pavillon de l'Arsenal, Paris 2014, p. 111 (my translation).

The word "environments" is commonly employed to define these works, as stated in H. van Es (ed.), Outsider Environments Europe, blog, available at: https://outsider-environments.blogspot.com, meticulously collecting outsider environments case studies in Europe and former USSR countries.

These works fall into different definitions: art brut, outsider art, outsider environment, outsider architecture. Many well-known examples exist, such as the Ideal Palace by Postman Cheval, a rural postman living in Hauterives, in the South of France, who in 1879, on the wave of curiosity for the sculptural skills of nature, started to collect "odd or fanciful" stones in the surroundings of Hauterives and building, using just rudimentary tools and along thirty years, a complex architecture, 26 meters-long, and 10 meters-high. A "peasant's handiwork," the palace has an encyclopedic character, "a fantasmagorical world of plant and animal life." M. Thévoz, Art Brut, Rizzoli International, New York 1976, p. 25.

Postman Cheval wrote in his autobiography about his obsession for stones and the struggles of re-use architecture: "As for the plans and figures to be adopted, they have at the same time absorbed my attention and disturbed my sleep," J.-P. Jouve, C. Prévost, C. Prévost, Le Palais idéal du facteur Cheval. Quand le songe deviant la réalité, Árie éditions, Hédouville 1994, quoted in J. Choppin, N. Delon, op. cit., p. 111, (my translation). The forms of Cheval's palace stem from his memories, reminiscences, and dreams, "not governed by the same principles of affiliated forms as See A.-M. Rannamäe, *op. cit.*

architecture in general. [...] They stem from the same mechanism of association and condensation as dreams do." M. Thévoz, op. cit., p. 25. Similarly, anarchitect Richard Greaves' work is described as "a dream that never ends," S. Lombardi, V. Rousseau, Richard Greaves: architect of the possible, in Id. (ed.), Richard Greaves. Anarchitecte / Anarchitect, 5 continents, Milan 2005, p. 78, and he declared, about his work: "Everything I do here is to sleep better," in Id. (ed.), Richard Greaves,

Some works by Richard Greaves have names inspired by tales, such as The Sugar Hut or The Three Little Pigs' House; see Id. (ed.), Richard Greaves. op. cit. Vaike Lubi's wooden castles, described ahead in the text, were called "witch houses;" see https://foorum.perekool.ee/ teema/kas-keegi-oskab-maletuse-jargi-oelda-miskohaga-tegu/ (my translation).

J. Wines, L'architecture verte, Taschen, Cologne 2000, p. 64, quoted in S. Lombardi, V. Rousseau, op. cit., p. 79.

Throughout the building of his Ideal Palace, Cheval was labeled "just a poor fool who fills his garden with stones." M. Thévoz, op. cit., p. 25. About the postman, it is stated: "it was not, he says, because he was crazy that he built his Palace; it was because he built his Palace that he was called crazy." Ivi, p. 26. The Palace found later recognition and was praised by Breton and Picasso, before being classified as a historical monument by André Malraux in 1969, see J. Choppin, N. Delon, op. cit., p. 111 (my translation).

J. Choppin, N. Delon, op. cit.

K. Lynch, Wasting Away, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco 1991, p. 25.

See M.D. Shrayer, *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 2013,

See M. Jürgen, Visiit külageeniuse juurde, in "Eesti Ekspress," March 15, 2015, available at: https://ekspress.delfi.ee/artikkel/73945125/visiit-kulageeniuse-juurde, accessed December 22,

See A.-M. Rannamäe, Mälestuskilde Lubi Vaikest, in "Leole," n. 8 (233), August 2019, p. 9, available at: https://dea.digar.ee/article/ leole/2019/08/01/32, accessed December 22,

M.D. Shrayer, op. cit., pp. 72-73.

Ivi, p. 73.

T. Kukk, Pilpalossi perenaine, in "Leole," vol. 14, 5, May 2001, p. 6, available at: https://dea. digar.ee/page/leole/2001/05/01/6.

See Ibid.

See Ibid.

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See T. Kukk, op. cit.

S. Saarep, Kui süsti asemel antakse pintsel ja värvid, in "Sirp," July 27, 2018, available at: https:// sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c6-kunst/kui-susti-asemel-antakse-pintsel-ja-varvid/ (my translation).

T. Kukk, op. cit. (my translation).

Kreisi Fond, in M. Karro-Kalberg, Acknowledging unnoticed architecture. The foundation of the Kreisi family, in "MAJA," n. 98, autumn 2019, available at: https://ajakirimaja.ee/en/ acknowledging-unnoticed-architecture/.

E. Urbel, in M. Karro-Kalberg, op cit.

V. Molnarr, From Constructivism to "Routinized Modernism": The Zigzag Trajectory of Radical Utopianism in Postwar Central Europe, in "Laboratorium," vol. 1, 8, 2016, p. 21.

E. Zalotay, *A difficult man*, letter to Károly Valentiny published in "Új Írás," 6, 1965, in M. Major, J. Osskó (eds.), New architecture, new society: 1945-1978. A selection of the architectural debates and documents of the past decades, Corvina, Budapest 1981, p. 252, in Z. Fehérvári, J. Őry, ".. not talking to the wind, even if I'd like to build on them" - portrait of Elemér Zalotay (1932-2020), on FUGA website, December 22, 2020, available at: http://en.fuga.org.hu/ not-talking-to-the-wind-even-if-id-like-to-buildon-them-portrait-of-elemer-zalotay-1932-2020/.

V. Molnarr, op. cit., p. 21.

See Z. Fehérvári, J. Őry, op. cit.

#2 See A. Krafft, Villa 3054 Schüpfen/ Ziegelried/BE, in "Schweizer Architektur," 79, October 1987, p. 79.29 (my translation).

Z. Fehérvári, J. Őry, op. cit.

E.M. Farrelly, The New Spirit, in "Architectural Review," vol. 180, 1074, August 1986, p. 11.

See Z. Fehérvári, J. Őry, op. cit.

E.M. Farrelly, op. cit., p. 11.

See F. Principe, L. Ambrosi, Save the house!, in "Domus," 656, 1984, p. 31.

See E.M. Farrelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-16; Zalotay is mentioned here alongside Moser and Goodwin, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Itsuko Hasegawa, Richard Leplastrier, Eduard Samsó, Alfredo Vidal among others.

Ivi, p. 10.

M. Andina, A home made of recycled materials, in SwissInfo website, June 3, 2012, available at: https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/ not-wasted_a-home-made-of-recycled-materials/32796812.

A careful record of the valorization activities carried on to promote Zalotay's work has been drafted and updated until 2020 by Júlia Őry. See: J. Őry, The Zalotay story. Status report and plans, in Epitesz Forum website, November 3rd, 2020, available at: https://epiteszforum. hu/a-zalotay-sztori-helyzetjelentes-es-tervek.

 \mathbb{A} See Ibid.

See F. Moral Andrés, Alexander Brodsky: del papel al desvanecimiento, in M.A. Chaves Martín (ed.), Arquitectura, Patrimonio y Ciudad, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid 2015, p. 262.

See A. Brodsky, Everything is Temporary, in "Digital Architectural Papers. After Crisis," 1, July 2012, available at: https://www.architecturalpapers.ch/docf723.pdf?ID=10.

ΛŁ See Ibid.

K. Lynch, op. cit., p. 135.