



Temples to the Domestic

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David Ben White interviewed by Victoria Walsh

David Ben White was Winner of the Clifford Chance/University of the Arts Sculpture Award 2012 and was selected for the Bloomberg New Contemporaries show In the Presence 2011.

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ABSTRACT *In his project Temples to the Domestic, David Ben White aimed to explore the dynamic between the utopian idealism of modernist architecture and the everyday, domestic decorative designs that have fed into the subconscious. This interview with Victoria Walsh discusses the lines of critical and creative inquiry that have informed his work and this exhibition.*

KEYWORDS: Temples to the Domestic, modernist architecture, domestic design

David Ben White studied at Central St Martins and Chelsea College of Art and in 2011 was selected for the Bloomberg New Contemporaries show In the Presence. In 2012 he was winner of the Clifford Chance/University of the Arts Sculpture Award 2012 for which he created the exhibition Temples to the Domestic at the London offices of Clifford Chance in Canary Wharf. As White has written:



Figure 1
Temple 1, David Ben White. Photograph by Angelo Plantamura 2012. © DBW.

For Temples to the Domestic, I attempted to address and contrast the architectural language of corporate modernism, which the Clifford Chance building embodies, with that of the decorative domestic. For me, the domestic location is a strangely powerful location. Like a theatre set, or work of fiction, the home is a place in which we, as consumers, define our own aspirations and taste. Televised design shows, shop windows enacting domestic interior configurations, interior decorating and furniture magazines all elaborate a familiar language of nostalgic possibility, which we, in turn, aspire to surround ourselves with. In this dialogue, the domestic space becomes a familiar, but also alienating location.

With this project, White has set out to explore the dynamic between the utopian idealism of modernist architecture and the everyday, domestic decorative designs that have fed into the sub-conscious and in this interview with Victoria Walsh discusses the lines of critical and creative inquiry which have informed his work and this exhibition.

Victoria Walsh: It's hard not to experience this enormous perpendicular space as a kind of cathedral to high modernism, with all its architectural aspirations to inspire a sense of awe and reverence in the visitor as they make the grand ascent up the escalator. But to then be confronted by your first installation with its distinctly domestic character and scale by comparison and the lamp creating a striking moment of intimacy, it's quite a provocative start to your exhibition. Why did you choose this particular space to start the show?

David Ben White: When I came to see this space it was very clear that this was a defining architectural moment within the building – with the large glass window I was thinking about the idea of an inner/outer conversation, and about this space being like the external part of the building. So, in that moment that it became the external, I thought about it in terms of a park, or a garden, or a vista. In parks and public gardens, you might find the Greek folly sitting in the landscape alluding to classical history. I was interested in bringing this idea into a present tense and the domestic mode allowed for all sorts of different things to occur at the same moment. I wanted the expected conversation between the viewer and the space to become disturbed, opened up. In constructing this temple here, in this ephemeral space, it becomes a point of change. I wanted to put something static in a non-static moment. And I thought, wouldn't it be great if you could stop and sit here and actually watch the sunset? It's a very beautiful view. In fact it's far more beautiful in my opinion than anywhere else that I've seen in terms of Canary Wharf. I love sitting here and watching the sun going down.

VW: Was this an act of subversion or is it a starting point of a conversation as you just described it?

DBW: I don't think the idea of subversion is necessarily the driving force. The driving force was much more of an investigation of where two different languages of design meet and what occurs when that happens. And in some ways I was thinking about how two self-enclosed, constructed realms would respond to each other when they intersected. So it was immediately apparent to me that this space was problematic and exciting because of that. I'm much more interested in creating a conversation with the viewer than enforcing a didactic language, which is one of the reasons why I am fascinated by modernism. I see it as a very didactic, formal language and it's interesting to be able to open that language up and maybe access it from a more vulnerable and open-ended position. Which is where the Temples come in as I see modernism and domesticity as mutually oppositional. In a way it's looking at what's the Achilles heel here and how can I really question and connect to it.

VW: What this Temple also signals is a reintroduction of the subjective and embodied individual to the space. I mean the lamp itself automatically reminds us all that we can turn the lamp's switch on and

off, as opposed to the invisible centralized controls of the corporate building's lighting. And perhaps in that sense this is also an attempt to humanize, what you described I think as the "depersonalised corporate machine modernist aesthetic"?

DBW: I think it's fair to say that I am personally critical. But I'm also appreciative of the formal language and the aspirations of modernism. I'd like to think that this intervention works as a conversation rather than as a lecture and somehow this Temple makes the space more beautiful and I think there's a vulnerability that's interesting about that. I don't quite know why, but maybe it's to do with something as simple as the lamp being on that's giving us a sort of warm domestic light in the middle of what is cold, or could be perceived as a cold, corporate light. Lighting is really important to my work, that idea of using a light that is synonymous to a particular experience of space and the warm tones of domestic lamps help to reframe institutional lighting and that's very useful.

VW: Temple 2 is the first pavilion one encounters walking into the space, can you describe the history of this particular pavilion?

DBW: This was the last pavilion that was designed and built and it came out of a number of different points of thinking. Fundamentally, I didn't want to follow the floating nature of Temple 1 and Temple 3. They appear like islands, but I wanted Temple 2 to actually be more grounded, built into and off the architectural structure of the building. Also, I wanted it to appear unfinished, so one of the walls has just



Figure 2
Temple 2, David Ben White. Photograph by Angelo Plantamura 2012. © DBW.

the undercoat painted on and in the doorway the wooden structure is revealed, so there's areas in the temple that show it as being under construction. The main exterior wall, which is the first thing you see, has a shelf sitting with two objects on it. One which is a vase and the other being a painting. When I first built it I was intending it as an exterior wall, but as soon as the shelf went on, I started thinking about Corbusier's Beistegui Apartment in Paris where fitted into the rooftop space was an interior fireplace and so this idea of internal elements being put onto the external context seemed enticing. I was also thinking about the Pueblo, which doesn't seem so obvious but I was interested in connecting with a Mediterranean style of design, maybe, in hindsight, with the influence of Louis Barragan. And anyway, each temple was attempting to articulate a different formal design. So in my own sort of vulgar way I was trying to deal with these temples within an architectural language that was polymorphous rather than united by one particular style.

VW: But the overall aesthetic, if somebody walked into look at this particular vignette, it's around 1950s, 1960s, it conjures up a kind of a particular moment of taste perhaps, would you agree?

DBW: I tend to think of this structure as having a multiplicity of references. So maybe I would disagree in the sense that it incorporates certain objects and bits of furniture that connect to a certain time, but actually when I start to really interact with the installation I find that I'm out of time as well. For instance, the structure on the wall hints at a modernist aesthetic, but then the lampshade throws that into some sort of difficulty. The photograph presents a *mise en scène* within the vignette of the temple, so it's actually addressing the constructed space and its set-up by referencing the two Painting Pavilions sitting within a constructed false space. I think if you took out the yellow lamp the feel of the space might be quite different, the lamp has such a strong personality. One thing that's relevant here is the language of kitsch; there is a conscious interplay with the language of kitsch, which is very important for me.

VW: When I said the 1950s and 1960s what I suppose I'm saying is there isn't a coherent aesthetic, there isn't an overt stylization yet, you are playing with different elements that are signaling all sorts of different vernaculars that people might have going in their domestic space, pre the arrival of IKEA or Habitat. You've also made reference in your writings to your reading of Greenberg and his emphasis on modernist painting in relation to kitsch. But how consciously are you playing out theories and ideas of modernism within an aesthetic debate, or is it more in relation to architecture, or are you also questioning the language of modernism in painting and sculpture?

DBW: I tend to think of my work as playing with a bricolage sensibility, bringing different ingredients together and seeing what happens. I find ingredients that may connect to kitsch, may connect to



Figure 3
Temple 2, David Ben White. Photograph by David Ben White 2012. © DBW.

decorative, that somehow join up and open the conversation with modernist formalism. So when I go and see work that seems as if it's rigidly connected to and holding forth within a sort of Greenbergian abstraction and all of that, I'm immediately aware of the skill in which that sort of area of expertise is defined, but to me that's not interesting. As a sensualist and troublemaker, I would say that this is about the interplay of apparently inharmonious ingredients and that hopefully it does follow a sense of questioning that seems appropriate to this physical location in which we find ourselves.



Figure 4

Temple 2, wall mural and painting by Justin Hibbs, painting by Clare Goodwin and other work by David Ben White. Photograph by Angelo Plantamura 2012. © DBW.



Figure 5

Temple 3, David Ben White, wall mural and painting by Justin Hibbs, painting by Clare Goodwin. Photograph by Angelo Plantamura 2012. © DBW.

VW: Given the title of the show, *Temples to the Domestic*, the domestic has not only perhaps a problematic but historically quite a trivial relation to the notion of modernist art per se. I suppose the time when the domestic and the decorative came together very forcibly was in the late nineteenth century, and there was Bonnard and the Nabis with Vuillard painting interior scenes and the domestic became a moment of protective individualization at a time when social relations were being transformed as modernity unfolded. But your interest in the relation between the domestic and modernism also has a personal history for you?

DBW: Yes absolutely, it's a really interesting point. My grandmother, Elizabeth Benjamin, was a modernist architect and in a way for me this relationship with the domestic is, as you say, autobiographical. She designed two houses, one of them has been pulled down, the "Kaufman House" in Wimbledon, but the house in Gerrards Cross called the "George and the Dragon" is still there, and it's a really beautiful house. But what was interesting about this for me was when the owners repainted the front room. They painted it brown, which for any modernist must have been problematic, but in so doing, they made the fireplace less important within the cohesive design of the room and my grandmother was fiercely judgmental. The fireplace was a really important design feature that had become, in her eyes redundant, but for me, I thought what was interesting was that these people had managed to instill some of their own DNA into the building. To me there is something problematic about the way in which modernism affected this sort of utopian grand aspiration, but purely through self-declared, didactic governance.

VW: For the Bloomberg New Contemporaries exhibition at the ICA last year (2011), where you also had the photographs of these types of settings [Figure 8] you also organized an artists' event with performances, walking tours, and a panel discussion. In relation to your work you chose a visit to Alison and Peter Smithson's Economist building in nearby St James's and you've also made reference to the Ideal Home Exhibition, which of course the Smithsons also participated through their "House of the Future" in 1956. I wondered whether you could say something about your interest in the Smithsons or that period of the 1950s/1960s. Is there something going on for you amongst the architects of the time?

DBW: The beauty of that period was the sheer multiplicity of ideas. What I love about the Smithsons' "House of the Future" is that I think it was probably one of the key British installation works of the twentieth century – it somehow captures so many different elements, the pathos of excitement of the future with the awkwardness of the way it was constructed. There was something about the way in which this future domestic space, according to the Smithsons, withheld art from its walls, leaving the home naked and austere. It's a sort

of perverse fascination I have for it because on one level the house foresees the death of a domestic context for art (which fits with an austere, modernist sensibility) and yet it is in itself a complete work of art. Most importantly, there is the Independent Group, of which the Smithsons were members, which offers me a way of thinking about the discourse between art and design and architecture. There's something about all of these connections that the Independent Group helped reveal that feels significant and excitingly generative.

VW: Although a lot of these works are playing with the history of modernist painting and abstraction your juxtaposition of these works within the kind of installation settings of the pavilions means they collectively stand as very strong social gestures, as invitations for the social interaction of the viewer. You particularly pursued this it seems through your commission of the performance group [Foreign Affairs] (*sic*) to enact scenes from various historic plays using the installations as stage-sets ...

DBW: One of the highlights for me, from this experience, was the opening night's performance, when in Temple 2 we had this intense scene from Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, with the break-up between the husband and wife. At the moment of greatest emotional intensity a group of businessmen entered the space from one of the offices, clearly excited from some contract signing and this extraordinary collision took place between these two worlds. Between the intense, break-up love scene and this excited, adrenalin-filled group of businessmen, the unexpected collision of these two worlds served as a fantastic metaphor for the whole project.

VW: But say more about why you invited the theater group [Foreign Affairs].

DBW: Well I'm a huge fan and I'd seen them performing a few times and what was interesting to me was the way in which they were slipping between texts. So you would go and see them and they would be jumping between different plays, from different scenes as if somebody had put an iPod Shuffle mode into the performance. You never knew quite where you were, continually in-between points, but every moment was poignant. You had this intense emotional set of connections, but they were so open-ended and exciting and I was a real fan of the group and my wife happens to be a member of the group, so there's obviously that as a connecting point.

VW: Did you choose the texts?

DBW: I had a number of meetings with the directors and from our conversations they made the decision on what texts to use, but the key thing was they had to be out of copyright. But it actually worked out beautifully to use texts from the nineteenth century. Among others, Chekhov, Ibsen, and Wilde were performed. What is fascinating about Chekhov was that he was the first playwright

to really communicate a psychopathology between the owner of the property and the property itself. It seemed brilliant to me that they opened up with *The Proposal* which uses landownership as a backdrop to a proposal of marriage and they finished with Wilde's *The Ideal Husband* and Wilde was, you know, famous for going to America and giving this series of talks on Ruskin's ideals about craft in the home. So, actually, what was great was that these texts really connected the audience through a very particular theatrical heritage into themes relating to the domestic construction.

VW: As a spectator of these vignette performances in the space the multi-layering of associations was extraordinarily rich, but equally you could just look to the left and then you have the Millennium Dome right there in the background. And that kind of both constellation and expansion of what I can only describe as the kind of spatiotemporal relations of the performance, the pavilion, this space of Clifford Chance, the Millennium Dome outside ... all these numerous interactions happening simultaneously make the viewers equally present in what was happening.

DBW: Yes that's a hugely important point. I completely agree. I mean it was a gamble that both [Foreign Affairs] and myself took, and also Clifford Chance in terms of funding ... It could have been terribly



Figure 6

Temple 3, David Ben White. Photograph by Angelo Plantamura 2012. © DBW.

kitsch. We could have really fallen on our faces, but now I feel like it is an ingredient with which I'm keen to return and work with again.

VW: There's also a whole set of arguments and relations going on between architecture, design, photography, art and, building on what you just said before, also the whole idea of sculpture. But maybe you could say something about the place of the photographic image in your work. I mean the ICA show was a series of photographs, which assume a kind of iconic relation to your installations, while also existing autonomously?

DBW: The photographs help connect to a very particular mode of media that I was interested in. When I was thinking about the domestic interior I kept on thinking about interior magazines and that sort of domesticated photograph. The way in which the photograph would articulate space and fetishize space and fetishize the object and so you had all of these things going on, where the photograph was really organizing this information in a way that was very particular to its agenda. And I really wanted to use that language in my practice as a way in which I was addressing the system, that particular mode of display. I enjoy collecting interior design books and interior magazines, but I was really informed by Louise Lawler's work, in particular the photographs of collectors' homes and this wonderful



Figure 7
[Foreign Affairs] in Temple 2. Photograph by David Ben White 2012. © DBW.



Figure 8
Painting Pavilion 1, David Ben White. Photograph by
David Ben White 2011. © DBW.

way in which works of art were contextualized thematically and sort of theatrically within the different collectors' homes.

So the photograph is a really important mode of communication for me and I was thinking how can I bring that into my work. When I started making the Painting Pavilions what was interesting to me was that they managed to connect formal languages of modernism with domestic furniture and interior decoration, so they were articulating all of these different elements and that inconsistency came across in

their physical presence. They looked somewhat awkward, but when I photographed them in these very particular, stylized settings, they became this fetishized and aestheticized object, giving them this other status again that was really useful. Throughout this installation I have sited photographs of the pavilions near or fairly close to the actual pavilion, which creates this interplay between the mediated image and the object. And what is interesting is that the object might appear rather dowdy and homemade, awkward in its bricolaged sensibility, but within the photograph, it radiates.

VW: Well you constantly play with the semiotic relations of the photographic image, the sculptural object and its representation ...

DBW: What I find fascinating is that as soon as you have an institutional space and a domestic space and an institutional code and a domestic code it sets out this sort of strange interconnecting, interlocking, and combative set of registers. There are all sorts of things going on and the photograph is really useful because in a way the photograph acts or appears as the institutional stand in. So it works as a connecting point to the institutional framework. It's framed, it sits quite self-consciously as a sort of iconic moment and I like that, I like it because it's ...

VW: It's also an act of ownership?

DBW: Absolutely, so it plays into all of those elements. So the question is what am I owning here? Am I owning the object or am I owning the image of the object and somehow that's all part of the agenda.

VW: I wonder since you just raised a moment ago about mediated images and magazines of homes, you've talked a lot about the domestic, but what is the relationship between the domestic and the notion of home?

DBW: Well I can tell you very clearly what I'm interested in. I'm very interested in Matisse and the way in which he theatricalized the domestic space within his paintings and created this sort of decorative, heightened language that was very theatrical but really served to convey this extraordinarily potent, decorative mix of avant-garde and conservatism. What I mean by conservatism is that he's developing this avant-garde language within an intensely conservative mode of representation, that of the genre painting of domestic scenarios. So in our minds, the domestic is tied to paintings of the seventeenth-century Dutch Masters and we think about Peter de Hooch or Vermeer; there's something about this intense language of the domestic as being a world within a world. It's a language with which we're familiar. It's the realm of the wealthy, self-absorbed liberalized society at play. It's packed full of cultural identity and yet at the same time it's fiercely problematic, perceived as being thoroughly bourgeois, it also appears antithetical to contemporary institutional art values and that's really interesting.

VW: But if one does think about the works of Peter de Hooch or Vermeer these are also spaces of private ritual, it's the everyday, it's the rituals, the routine. And the spaces are places of work but also retreat; they are spaces where the performance of the everyday is a very private activity ...

DBW: I would say they're voyeuristic spaces. I would agree with you that they're private, but they play off from the voyeurism of that experience. So in us being able to see those spaces and to experience those people within that space we are empowered by that voyeuristic experience. And there's something interesting about the potential that comes out of that sort of implicit understanding. I think that in particular, Vermeer creates the domestic as the female domain, but in our being able to look at the woman within that world, something happens. There's something about the power play that's going on in Vermeer that's problematic and exciting at the same moment. In essence, he's constructing and reflecting a female domain, but one which is viewed by the patron's – male – gaze. So the domestic space may be feminine, but the ownership is male and there is something important in that power play and that connects to Matisse as well.

VW: So what power play would you think you might be acting out in the creating of these vignettes of these pavilions?

DBW: I don't think I would be necessarily playing out a power as much as calling a power into question. The pavilions set out to act as vignettes within a space that is forcibly its own. And being a foreign body within that type of space it sets up a different set of questions. Instead of power-play, I think there's a delicate balance being played out in the installation, that by their quoting the vernacular language that surrounds them but also being sufficiently different, it manages to call this dominant space into question. It's like the intersecting point in a Venn diagram; the points of intersection are close, which highlights the particular parasitic/symbiotic relationship being played out, which is not obvious and straightforward. And maybe the strength in the installation is that it sets up this awkward set of connections that keep on disconnecting and reconnecting and in that sense it's about a state of relationship and what is happening in that state of relationship.

VW: If you were generically trying to describe the pavilions, how do you describe them, as sculpture, as installation, mixed media, how would you describe this total exhibition?

DBW: I'm less sure now than I ever was because I used to think about it as being expanded painting and I would define it quite easily as such. Now I'm very aware that that is not the case, that it currently seems more installation based. I'm at a point of not trying to define it, but more willing to allow the conversations to grow and continue.