

Knud Lonberg-Holm: The Invisible Architect

Lonberg-Holm was the first architect in my knowledge to talk about the ultimately invisible architecture. In 1929, when I first met him, he said the greatest architect in history would be the one who finally developed the capability to give humanity completely effective environmental control without any visible structure and machinery. Thus we have in our day an unsung Leonardo of the building industry, whose scientific foresight and design competence are largely responsible for the present world-around state of advancement of the building arts.

Buckminster Fuller, 1968

The historical documents in this collection represent a hitherto unexplored aspect of the influence of European modernist architects - specifically, those who emigrated to the United States early and voluntarily, before the rise of fascism necessitated the wholesale evacuation of the European avant-garde. The seemingly disparate archive of photographs, drawings, diagrams and correspondence can be grouped around a unifying theme: the realization of the avant-garde ambition of integration and control of architectural production through industrialization; and around a central figure: the architect Knud Lonberg-Holm. The documents bear witness to a complex history that is not easily tracked elsewhere. This is due, in part, to the fact that they bridge two continents, and in part because they unveil processes of reform, such as the scientific conversion of the institutions of architectural practice and the transformation of the project, that were aimed at the most mundane level of building, not at exceptional structures. Moreover, the documents show this professional and anonymous destiny together in line with inversely artistic and revolutionary origins. Thus, the archive documents a phenomenon of cultural disappearance, bringing missing substance to the link between the Americanism of the European avant-garde and the history of modern architecture in the United States.

A native of Denmark, which he leaves in 1923 for the United States, Knud Lonberg-Holm (1895-1972) is the emblematic figure of this disappearance. Initially considered a "pioneer of modern architecture" by the anthropologists of the 1920s, and even held representative of "the space-time

conception" by Henry Russell Hitchcock, his true contributions will be ever more unacknowledged as they become more fundamental. First of the modernist émigrés in the United States, he becomes the obliged correspondent for the European avant-garde, in particular for the De Stijl group and also the Berlin Constructivists, with whom he was closest. He was a contributor to both *ABC* and *i10*, a member of ASNOVA, a collaborator of Buckminster Fuller, and also the American delegate to CIAM with Richard Neutra. His experiments with photography in the early 1920s (diffused widely by J.J.P. Oud, Moholy-Nagy, Erich Mendelsohn, and others) were received with critical success in Europe and the USSR. This is due as much to the revolutionary use of extreme viewpoints from below and above, as to the renewal of the iconographic sources of modernism: the substitution of the imagery of the grain elevators and the "balancing of the masses," for an aesthetic of structure and tension gleaned from the metallic skeletons of unfinished skyscrapers. In Lonberg-Holm, this aesthetic schism is accompanied by a renouncement of the project — a sort of Duchampian abandonment of the traditional identity of the architect, which intervenes at the moment he arrives in his work at a controlled resolution of the opposing influences of rationalism and neo-plasticism, for example in the McBride Residence project of 1926.

Lonberg-Holm's institutional itinerary begins at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1924-1925, where he introduces a basic design course similar to that of the *Soviet Vkhutemas*. Moving to New York in 1929, he enters the organization of the F.W. Dodge publishing corporation, initially at the journal *The Architectural Record*, where he devises both content and format, and then as the head of the research department of Sweet's Catalog Service, the indispensable architect's handbook of building products. The reorganization of Sweet's Catalog, perhaps Lonberg-Holm's most tangible contribution to modern architectural production in America, gives substance to his doctrinaire activity of the 1930s, concerned with urban obsolescence, cycles of production, and information theory. In collaboration with Czech designer Ladislav Sutnar, Sweet's Catalog becomes a complete oeuvre of industrial and plastic organization. Its critical and enduring importance in the process of architectural production makes it an implemented avant-garde project, at an appreciable scale, and testament to Lonberg-Holm's heretofore-unacknowledged influence on the development of a truly modern American architecture.

Marc Dessauce, 2003

Marc Dessauce (1962-2004) was an architectural historian who lived and worked in NYC and Paris. His research, exhibitions, and writings focused on the foundations of both American and European avant-garde architecture in the twentieth century. Marc assembled this archive between 1986 and 1995 when he was a PhD candidate at Columbia University in the department of Art History. His book *The Inflatable Moment: Pneumatics and Protest in '68*, was published by Princeton Architectural Press in 1999.

For more information, please contact Caitlin Suarez at 212 753 4444 or suarez@ubugallery.com