

Nana Last. *Wittgenstein's House: Language, Space, and Architecture*. New York: Fordham UP, 2008, 207 pp. ISBN 978-0-8232-2880-5

Nana Last's *Wittgenstein's House: Language, Space, and Architecture* is an attempt to read the design of the house Ludwig Wittgenstein produced for his sister, Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein, by means of his two principal philosophical texts, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Philosophical Investigations, 1953). Margarethe Stonborough first approached the young architect Paul Engelmann, a close friend of Wittgenstein's, to work on a design for a villa on a large lot she had purchased in Vienna's third district. Engelmann completed the preliminary designs by the spring of 1926. The previous year, Wittgenstein, who was then teaching at a primary school in a small mountain village in Lower Austria, had written to Engelmann about his interest in the project. He began to collaborate with Engelmann the following summer. The two completed the design by late autumn and submitted the drawings – signed by both men – for the building permit in October. Soon, however, Wittgenstein, by sheer force of personality, took over the design and construction of the house. The final drawings bear his name alone.

Wittgenstein's sister, Hermine, who later produced a memoir about his role in the building of the house, cited his 'grosse technische Interesse' and his need to find some diversion from his tortured mental state after the war as the reasons he became involved in the project. But Last argues that it was not solely technical and personal concerns that drove Wittgenstein to participate, but the ways in which these interests 'not only intermingle with or even pervade his philosophy but may *play an active and formative role in his philosophy*' (p. 84; emphasis in the original).

Last's principal argument is simple and direct: Wittgenstein's work on the house, which extended from the summer of 1926 through the end of 1928, did not, as most previous commentators have asserted, constitute a break in his philosophical probing, but instead provides an important bridge between his early and late work – an essential moment in the evolution of his thought.

For Wittgenstein, she insists, architecture was not a separate endeavour but an indispensable part of his thinking. 'It is my belief,' she writes, 'that the practice of architecture played such an influential role in his philosophical development not because it was unrelated to his previous work or presupposed an entirely separate set of issues, but rather, in proffering and demanding a new but associated way of thinking, it forced the reconceptualization of his philosophical practice because he was already concerned with related and shared issues'

(p. 84). Not only did the confrontation with the problems of building alter Wittgenstein's thinking, she contends, but some of the problems he confronted while working on the villa resurfaced in his late philosophical writings.

These are bold claims, and they raise myriad questions. What makes this line of inquiry especially difficult is the uncommunicative nature of the house. Engelmann, who had been decisively influenced by Adolf Loos's teachings, produced a design that relied on highly simplified interlocking cubic masses. Wittgenstein made a few small changes to the building's exterior, but, overall, the design of the outside stems from Engelmann. Asymmetrically arranged, it does indeed superficially resemble Loos's villas, though closer inspection reveals that Loos's ideas of spatial planning on multiple levels – his *Raumplan* concept – is absent. What sets the house apart are its interiors, and it is here that Wittgenstein's interventions are most apparent. Earlier scholars, including Bernard Leitner and Paul Wijdeveld, stressed the 'unique' details of their construction and arrangement, and it is undoubtedly true that Wittgenstein's interiors are a singular product. Almost every detail – from the framing of the rooms and supports to the door hardware – is unmatched in modern architecture. On the one hand, an almost oppressive monumentality is manifest in these spaces, but it is paired with a persistent and palpable austerity. Certain features, such as the tall glass-and-steel doors, repeat in multiple variations. Yet there is very little in the design that speaks about either intention or meaning, and Wittgenstein never wrote directly about his ideas for the house. Consequently, interpreting the building in the light of Wittgenstein's earlier and later philosophical writings is fraught with uncertainties.

Much of Last's text is taken up with the search for passages in the *Tractatus* and *Philosophische Untersuchungen* that either might illuminate Wittgenstein's aims or seem in some fashion to be informed by his experience of architecture. Two examples may suffice. Writing of the villa's central hall, for instance, she notes that '*as a distributor of both space and spatial concepts*' (emphasis in the original), it 'acts to allow Wittgenstein to create a series of intermediary connections and cases later averred in the *Investigations* as the necessary activity by which philosophy may achieve clarity' (p. 107). Or: 'Movement through space destroys that single, fixed image and reveals it as an idealized condition that gives way to the vicissitudes of movement and space. This is an important product of the design of the central hall; in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein distinctly associates movement through space with everyday language, in contrast to a fixity resulting from the *Tractatus's* collapse of language and logic that restricts language and our ability to navigate within it' (p. 108).

The inherent difficulty in reading a building in this fashion – particularly one that is so ‘reticent’ – is that there is no way of assuring that the interpretation has validity. What one ‘sees’ may equally be coincidence or a misreading. In any case, one is forced to rely to a large measure on conjecture and supposition. And one must recognize that even those features of the house that do appear to express directly Wittgenstein’s philosophical outlook may not have been the result of a conscious decision. From a scholarly point of view, this methodological approach involves skating on vast expanses of very thin ice.

Often, Last ventures out very far in her attempt to find textural passages that support her claims, and not all of her assertions about Wittgenstein’s intentions or the villa’s meanings are plausible. It may be that her larger argument – that Wittgenstein’s engagement with architecture was not a deviation but very much a part of the trajectory of his philosophical pursuits – is correct. His work on the house came precisely at the moment when, after turning his back on philosophy in the wake of the *Tractatus* and undergoing a deep personal crisis, he began to trace a new path to understanding. A short time after completing work on the villa, he returned to Cambridge and to his philosophical work. It seems unlikely, given his commitment to merging life and thought, that the time Wittgenstein spent on the house was a mere ‘interlude’.

Yet Last’s insistence on trying to link Wittgenstein’s later writings with the design of the house – despite a lack of strong textual evidence – undermines her larger argument. The key to her contentions rests with her claim that architecture and philosophy both include linguistic and spatial practices. Such an assertion, as she writes, ‘lays the foundation for a fluid territory through which to discuss the relationships between philosophy and architecture, language and space’ (p. 8). What emerges from this new view she describes as a ‘double promise’: the possibility of reconceiving the interrelationship of spatial and visual metaphors in Wittgenstein’s writings and his architecture.

The proposition that architecture and philosophy both include linguistic and spatial dimensions undoubtedly has implications for a new interdisciplinarity. But whether this also allows one to make specific claims about the impact of Wittgenstein’s architecture on his later philosophical work – absent any other evidence – remains an open question. Last is probably correct that the nearly two and a half years that Wittgenstein spent working on his sister’s villa marked a turning point in his thought. She is also right to point to the relationship between Wittgenstein’s interest in – or perhaps better, obsession with – the question of spatiality in the house and his later ideas concerning the spatial configurations of language. Indeed, one of the striking features of *Philosophische*

Untersuchungen is his stress on the inseparability of the verbal, visual, and spatial. But that unfortunately is not enough to prove her case.

There are other problems with this text: there are many repetitions of thought, and some of Last's writing is unnecessarily fustian. Still, even with its problems, this is an interesting and thought-provoking work, one that adds to the corpus of writings on Wittgenstein's ideas about architecture and aesthetics.

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